

The Religion of Nestor Makhno

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September 2006

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Foreword

I would like to stress that I am neither anarchist nor a religious person in any way or form. What prompted me to write this article was the fact that even after my three years of work on the movie script about Nestor Makhno, extensive research and personal experience, I could not figure out why Nestor Makhno was and remains an enigma. It seemed that neither could anyone else. Legends, misconceptions and solid facts could not be assembled together to provide a satisfying answer. The only angles that have not been explored so far appeared to be philosophical (not to be confused with ideological) and, as a consequence, the religious, all to explain the incredible affection this tiny anarchist is still able to command.

I assume that the reader has some minimal knowledge about Makhno and his time.

The New Religion

Nestor Makhno can never die. More than 70 years after his death, his personality and his legacy continue to stir up interest and controversies as much as they did during his turbulent life. There is something that seems to make this fairly minor player in the Russian Revolution and Civil War into a larger than life character.

So, what is this something? Where does Makhno's appeal lie? What makes him stand out of so many characters of his and probably any time? It would be impossible to find the answer even among the modern, self-appointed city Makhnovists, who condescendingly call him Nestor and see him as more of a rock star or buddy than anything else. No point to look for it among those, who hold Makhno responsible for the crimes committed during his leadership. A handful of writers, trying to look at the movements and the Batko himself from the military, political and economical perspectives, are unable to discover it either. His appeal is somewhere else.

He is neither a Robin Hood nor a Che Guevara nor a Jim Morrison (although they share the same cemetery). He is not as horrible as his detractors think him to be because, as a rule, they either do not know history or prefer to ignore facts, as some of the Ukrainian press is doing presently in the attempt to paint the Makhnovist movement as a particular instance of the Ukrainian national statehood. And all the analysis of his activities as a military commander or a political leader who espoused certain economic policies cannot show us the man.

That is — the man. Ecce homo! Behold the man! The secret of Makhno's charisma can be found in the way that the peasants of the Southern Ukraine in 1918, and, believe it or not, as recently as in 2005, referred to Makhno. They called him "the saint". Think about it: even the word "batko", while literally translating to 'father' and 'leader', has spiritual connotation, similar to the way in which Christian denominations refer to their priests as fathers.

But why would they perceive him so? Why him? Why bestow sainthood on someone who himself despised even a minute notion of religion?

The answer may lie in Saint Peter's description of what Jesus had done during his earthly life: "He went about doing good."

Makhno might be a revolutionary anarchist-communist, but in the eyes of the Ukrainian peasant in 1918 if goodness and justice would take a human form it would appear as the chairman of the Guliay-Pole Council. For, he brought justice and respect to the toiling masses. Only six months after appearing from the Czarist prison where he served his life sentence (what the peas-

ants saw as a return from the dead) in the September of 1917, Makhno granted land to the toilers. This was long before a similar declaration was made by the Bolsheviks and was definitely against the policies of the existing Interim Government. Yet, it was done without bloodshed. He did it at the expense of his own belief: after all he was a communist-anarchist, and his ideal was a kibbutz style community, not private personal ownership. His conviction that the struggle of ideas should never become the struggle of people was in stark contrast with the like-minded Bolsheviks' opinion that communism as an idea is worthy of immediate establishing even through a barrel of a gun. Makhno's refusal to allow any political expediency to compromise his moral position put him well above almost any political figure of the times, namely the Ukrainian socialists, who, in their quest to establish a national state at any cost, closed their eyes on the murky waters of anti-Semitism that flooded the country.

Makhno the Man, Makhno the Saint, Makhno the Prophet. Is it not interesting that the group that practiced collective leadership arguably more than any other force in history would be known and often judged by the single name? That while Lenin and Trotsky, Petlura and Denikin, Wrangel and Pilsudsky were truly the cream of the crop of their respective parties, Nestor Makhno was neither the best leader, nor organizer, nor military commander, nor administrator, not even a good public speaker. Not imposing in stature, short and thin, he was described as looking and sounding more like a woman or a boy rather than a man, hardly a threatening sight. And his own comrades, who never hesitated to criticize him or simply make fun of him any time he screwed up, recognized this. And did he ever screw up! Yet they accepted his leadership unwaveringly, sacrificing their lives for the cause of Makhnovist movement.

Why such reverence? There were quite a few leaders around, who had the programs similar to that of the ones the Makhnovists had. Yet, like Ataman Grigoriev's mutiny that took over a considerable part of Ukraine and threatened to finish the Bolsheviks once and for all, they fell apart after just a few defeats, while the Makhnovist resistance could have lasted as long as there was Makhno. It ended its military insurgency only when the Makhnovists themselves decided to end it.

The reason for such resilience is the man himself.

We live in a more arrogant and cynical time than a hundred years ago. One cannot help but feel disbelief and annoyance when reading Makhno's memoirs, encountering crying people at any turn of events on every third page. The same tough guys, who do not seem to mind taking a few hundred prisoners into a ravine and hacking them to death, break into tears during a simple public speech. This is in striking contrast to ourselves today, when we tend to get emotional through the use of visual images, most expertly provided by TV producers, and dismiss the spoken words.

But was Makhno any good as a speaker? His followers seem to think so. The rest unanimously disagree. If we are to assume that Makhno's writings are somewhat indicative of his speech his followers are wrong. He was not a very good orator: passionate, emotional but totally lacking all the qualities a good speaker must have. His constant metaphor of the river of revolution can drive anybody nuts. His accent made him sound unsophisticated to the ears of the intelligentsia from Moscow and Petrograd. It could be a big deal. The Beatles for the British ears sounded working class and seemed to be a challenge to the system. For the Americans, the British accent sounds sophisticated and the Beatles gave credence to the black music they played, once again challenging the system. So, if for the Moscow revolutionary aristocracy Makhno sounded like a country bumpkin, then for the Ukrainian peasantry he sounded like one of them, not some stuck up city dweller. The image through one's language can make or break a career, witness Bush

and Gore, or Bush and Kerry, or Bush the Elder and Clinton debates. And yet, however inept a speaker Makhno might be, the fact remains, he somehow made it count.

The best example of his power of persuasion is the most defining moment in the story of Makhno, the retaking of the village of Dibrovka. It may not fully explain to us why he became such a figure of almost religious prominence, but at least it can stress the point that his mere presence, his personality made people do extraordinary things absolutely voluntarily.

Let me remind you of the situation. The recently consolidated anarchist groups of Makhno and Schuss lose many of their members when they are easily kicked out from the village of Dibrovka by the united force of Austro-Hungarian troops, local landowners and German colonists,. The enemy's force is overwhelming, has many times more men, better-trained and equipped soldiers and determination to end the rebellion once and for all. Schuss, as a co-leader and a more experienced and successful insurgent, proposes a reasonable solution to retreat and hide out in order to recover losses. Makhno's counter-proposal borders on insanity. He wants to attack, knowing full well that it is a sheer suicide without any chance of success. Why makes him do it? Because he sees that the occupiers and allied with them local landlords use this occasion as a PR event, trying to send a clear message to the population to submit or else. For Makhno it is not a matter of military tactics anymore, it is a matter of moral principal. What happens next is nothing more than a religious moment any faith would like to have. The members of both groups agree with him against all the facts and odds! There is more. They declare Makhno the Batko, a traditional Ukrainian Cossack leader. At this moment none of them are pursuing anything personal and ambitious. They are about to die and they know it. To act so would require only one of the two things: an extraordinary personality or a military order supported by machine-guns and court-martial in the rear. I leave to you to make your own choice.

The insane attack was an unexpected success and Makhno the Saint became Makhno the Prophet. Insane tactics and insane bravery would become the trademark of the Makhnovists. And why not, if the leader himself defied the limitations of human body. The man who lost one lung to tuberculosis in prison and would probably be eligible to receive permanent disability benefits in our time, not only survived in the most inhospitable circumstances any guerrilla fighter must endure, but personally participated in hundreds of battles where he had been wounded on at least 14 separate occasions. How he managed to survive saber combat with his size and the lack of cavalry training (and it is a difficult skill to master) is beyond me. Death seemed to be unable to catch up with him. No one would invent a legend like that, so improbable it would seem.

And it was not the ideology or politico-economical program that inspired the masses. Makhno did not have many detailed programs to begin with. His ideals were not really shared by the population. But what he had amounts to a religious creed. While other political forces either bureaucratically and lawyerishly drew their complicated platforms or refused to have any, Makhno, in no way consciously, narrowed it down to the principle and the way to achieve it.

This is it. As Islam proclaimed "There is no God but Allah and Mohammed is the Prophet", Makhno proclaimed and most importantly upheld the slogan, that was his actual creed: "With the oppressed against the oppressors – always!"

You must agree that this is not a declaration of goals to be achieved. This is a declaration of a lifestyle. Oppression takes on many forms and, frankly, is a permanent feature of life. Besides the obvious monsters of political, economical, racial, religious and gender oppression, life is rife with seemingly smaller yet no less unacceptable forms of injustice. Any bullied schoolchild, any

laid off employee, any unpublished author can testify to it. This is what the religion of Makhno is all about — not to put up with any crap, however small, no matter what the repercussions may be.

The way to fight oppression is unity in action. Individuality for Makhno is important but only as a catalyst for the masses. The Makhnovist agitator tells people, in manner of a Nike slogan, ‘you shall just do it!’ with the stress on you. Not “I the fair ruler shall provide for you”, not “we, the party of the people shall represent your interests.” No, it is you yourselves who are capable of organising your life in a way you find reasonable and fair.

And the Makhnovists are very literal in what they say. There is no double meaning and fine print. If they say “Power to the local councils!” they mean it. “Power to the people!” means to them exactly that. No other explanation of details is needed. There are no other details.

In the sense, Makhno implicitly declares a covenant between an individual and the people, the society, in a manner Jews have with God. Only in his covenant the people, the society are God. Those who would not accept religious analogy can use Socrates’ reasoning in the Crito dialogue to make this comparison.

An individual makes a pact with the society by choosing to live within it. Therefore he either must work to make his point of view accepted or otherwise serve the society without compromising his moral imperatives. Makhno himself accepted the unwillingness of the masses to recognise his ideal of communal living as theirs. It did not compromise his belief in freedom of choice. The people have spoken. This is the reason he allowed the people to make him an elected official first and a military and political leader later. As long as it moved the cause of freeing oppressed from oppression what does it matter? When the people chose not to support his military struggle anymore, Makhno accepted that, too.

Since for Makhno society is all-inclusive, anyone who does not accept its ways is a mortal enemy. A thief, a bandit, a White officer, they all aim to destroy the very essence of the people’s unity and therefore must be destroyed in turn. There is no need for prisons. Prisons are used by a society, which recognises that its shortcomings create criminals and, instead of fixing itself, prefers to incarcerate people for some arbitrarily chosen time, thus removing a reason to change and treating adults as if they were children, helpless and irresponsible for own actions. Makhno respects not human life but human dignity. Imprisonment and corporal punishment are humiliating and undignified. A bullet to the head is nobler. We might disagree with this reasoning but we have been brought up with the notion that human life is sacred under any circumstances. Yet, Socrates preferred poison to exile. What does it say? None of us are Socrates.

Makhno’s writings are not very elaborate in giving any comprehensive picture of his political, social and economical programs. He does not seem to care much for them since his belief in people’s creativity allows him to trust that once they are free from oppression they will be able to solve any problem. That is why he hammers the same point over and over again, that oppression must be fought by any means available, and unity is the only way to do it.

As a political or a social movement Makhnovism has its many shortcomings. But then again so does any political and social idea or theory. As a religion it is almost ideal. It shares traits with Buddhism, Taoism, Judaism and Christianity. Not the rigidity of the established modern religious institutions but the original teachings and, most importantly, doings of Buddha, Lao Tze, the Prophets and Jesus. I doubt any of those, now very holy men thought they were in the business of establishing a new religion. They just did what they thought was righteous and called upon people to do the same. So did Makhno.

What makes a religion? Not the prophet for sure. Very often he does not bother to leave any written account of his teaching. Those who follow the prophet make a religion. All Makhnovism needs is its Saint Peter. A would be Saint Peter (Arshinov) could do it but, being an anarchist, he failed to notice the religious aspect of Makhno in his "History of the Makhnovist movement".

Buddhism shows a religion does not need God. It needs compassion. Judaism shows accepting suffering for the sake of righteousness and upholding the covenant even at the cost of your life can actually make you stronger in the long run. Christianity shows it is not the personal failure of the messenger that counts but the message itself.

Makhno fits right there. What Ukrainian peasants saw was a man who brought a new hope if not for humankind, then for them at least. The saints who insisted that only they could run their own life in a reasonable and fair way. The prophet who struck those who attempted to oppress anyone in any way. Mahatma Gandhi with a machinegun. Dalai-Lama with a sabre. The forebear of the new religion.

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