

**To what extent was Makhno able to
implement anarchist ideals during the
Russian Civil War?**

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Born on October 26 (N.S. November 7) 1888 in Gulyai-Polye, Ukraine, Nestor Ivanovych Makhno was a revolutionary anarchist and the most well-known *ataman* (commander) of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine during the Russian Civil War.¹ Historiographical issues regarding the extent to which Makhno and the Makhnovists implemented anarchist ideals in south-east Ukraine have been noted by contemporary Russian anarchist and historian Peter Arshinov. Makhno's own memoirs and the newspaper *Put' k Svobode*, both valuable material documenting anarchist activity in Ukraine, were lost during the Civil War.² With much of the contemporary evidence impossible to reconstruct, historians have attempted to understand the nature of the Makhnovist movement and the 'social revolution' in Ukraine with surviving evidence whilst separating myth and legend about Makhno from historical fact. This essay will argue that Makhno and the Makhnovist movement were inspired by anarchist ideals in an attempt to establish a 'free and completely independent soviet system of working people without authorities' during the Civil War.³ However, the war itself hindered the political and economic development of the anarchist 'free territory' before finally being defeated and dissolved by the Bolshevik-led Red Army in August 1921.

In order to understand the context of Makhno's attempt to implement anarchism in south-east Ukraine during the Civil War, it is important to consider the inspiration and development of such ideals. Makhno himself, from a poor Ukrainian peasant background and working as an apprentice artist and iron-worker in his teenage years, had joined the Peasant Group of Anarcho-Communists in Gulyai-Polye in 1906 at the age of eighteen in response to repression from the Tsarist authorities.⁴ His early anarchist activities of robbery and terrorism had led to his arrest several times, before finally being convicted and sentenced to death in 1910; later commuted to life imprisonment and his eventual release in 1917 due to a general amnesty following the February Revolution.⁵ Makhno's own experiences as a peasant and urban worker, as well as repression from the Tsarist regime, was an important factor in motivating his attempt to implement anarchism and his virulent hatred of the ruling class and the state. In his memoirs, Makhno recounted his experiences working on a wealthy Mennonite estate at age eleven:

At this time I began to experience anger, envy and even hatred towards the landowner [Janzen] and especially towards his children – those young slackers who often strolled past me sleek and healthy, well-dressed, well-groomed and scented; while I was filthy, dressed in rags, barefoot, and reeked of manure from cleaning the calves' barn.⁶

Paul Avrich has noted that Makhno was first and foremost a peasant and worker, not a philosopher or political theorist, yet was well-acquainted with the anarchist ideas of Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin and strove for a classless, stateless, moneyless society in south-east Ukraine.⁷ The extent to which Makhno and the Makhnovists applied the theories of anarchist-collectivism

¹ Paul Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits* (Princeton University Press: Princeton, 1988), 112.

² Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement (1918–1921)*, Lorraine Perlman and Fredy Perlman (trans.) (Black & Red: Detroit, 1974), 14.

³ Cultural-Educational Section of the Insurgent Army (Makhnovist), *WHO ARE THE MAKHNOVISTS AND WHAT ARE THEY FIGHTING FOR?* (27 April 1920).

⁴ Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, 112.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 112.

⁶ Nestor Makhno, *The Ukrainian Revolution*, Malcolm Archibald and Will Firth (trans.) (Black Cat Press: Edmonton, 2011), 16.

⁷ Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, 112.

and communism in practice during the Civil War, however, is debateable and will be discussed in due course.

Makhno's return to Gulyai-Polye following his release from prison and his involvement in organising peasants' unions in 1917 led to him gaining what Edward Kantowicz considers a Ukrainian 'Robin Hood' image, with large estates expropriated from the wealthy gentry and given to the peasants.⁸ The anarchist-communist Peasant Union (or Gulyai-Polye Soviet after August 1917) led by Makhno had usurped the nominal power of the pro-Kerensky Social Committee in the local area in March 1917, and with it, executive power in political, social and economic affairs.⁹ Makhno's role as a peasant leader and organiser between the February and October Revolutions in Gulyai-Polye and the wider Ekaterinoslav province was thus a departure from the terrorist and criminal activity of his teenage years that led to his imprisonment. Until August 1917, Makhno's compliance with local and district authorities as an elected peasant representative to impose taxes can even be considered a contradiction to anarchist ideals against the state.¹⁰

The receptiveness of the peasantry to Makhno's ideals and policies in Gulyai-Polye and its surrounding rural areas can perhaps be explained by earlier resistance to the Stolypin reforms in Ekaterinoslav province from 1905-06 in defence of the *obshchina* communal system.¹¹ The expropriative policies enacted by the Peasant Union under Makhno's leadership proved to be successful, yielding greater harvests by peasants who wanted to work the land they owned and controlled and not for someone else.¹² However, whilst the platform and policies of Makhno and the Peasant Union in 1917 can be described as being influenced by anarchist-communist ideals, the political and economic conditions of expropriating land to peasants cannot be considered an anarchist society as it did not yet call for the overthrow of state and capital. Furthermore, it has been argued by Michael Palij that 'it would be a mistake to assume that the peasants in the region of the Makhno movement were anarchists; in reality, they knew and cared very little about anarchism or Marxism'.¹³ For this reason, Makhno's and the Makhnovist movement's activities in and around Gulyai-Polye between 1917-18 should be considered as a peasant movement inspired by anarchism to enact land reform, rather than anarchist-communism in practice. The popular land reforms by the Peasant Union under Makhno's leadership in Gulyai-Polye, whilst not necessarily anarchist, were indicative of what Peter Arshinov considered the origins of the Makhnovist 'mass movement' in the *volnaya territoriya* ('free territory').¹⁴ These activities of agitation would serve as a precursor to the development of the Makhnovist movement as a political, economic and military organisation and Makhno's assumption of military leadership from the summer of 1918 to 1921.

The origins of the Makhnovist movement's 'militarisation' can be found in the *Chjornaya Gvardiya* (Black Guards) established by fellow anarchist revolutionary Maria 'Marusya' Niki-forova, who returned to her native Alexandrovsk in the summer of 1917 from Petrograd.¹⁵ By

⁸ Edward R. Kantowicz, *The Rage of Nations* (Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing: Michigan, 1991), 173.

⁹ V. Danilov and T. Shanin (eds.), Nestor Makhno, *Krest'yanskoe dvizhenie na Ukraine. 1918-1921. Dokumenty i materialy* (ROSSPEN: Moscow, 2006), 38.

¹⁰ Danilov and Shanin, Nestor Makhno, *Krest'yanskoe dvizhenie*, 38-39.

¹¹ S. Kobytov, V. A. Kozlov and B. G. Litvak, *Russkoe krest'yanstvo. Etapy dukhovnogo osvobodzheniya* (Moscow, 1988), 74.

¹² *Narodne zhittya*, 17 September 1917.

¹³ Michael Palij, *The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno, 1918-1921* (University of Washington Press: Seattle, 1976), 57.

¹⁴ Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, 136.

¹⁵ V. Savchenko, *Avanturyisty grazhdanskoi voiny* (Izd-vo Folio/AST: Kharkov/Moscow, 2000), 71.

all appearances, Marusya was more radical than Makhno in pursuing anarchist goals; the former using terror against the bourgeoisie and inciting an armed Black Guard unit recruited from Gulyai-Polye to successfully attack the Preobrazhenskii regiment at Orekhov in September, much to the latter's disapproval.¹⁶ Whereas Makhno at this period of time preferred to pursue anarchist goals through peaceful means such as land reform, Marusya's anarchism of violent class struggle against the Provisional Government and local capitalists proved to have an energising effect on the workers and peasants in Gulyai-Polye. The establishment of the Alexandrovsk Anarchist Federation by Marusya in August 1917 is of particular interest due to its accusation that Makhno and the Gulyai-Polye anarchists were attempting to form a political party to seize power in the soviets and criticising their lack of direct class struggle.¹⁷ Anarchist-turned-Bolshevik writer Victor Serge argued that the origins of the Makhnovist movement's armed wing, the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine, emerged from the Black Guard detachment in Gulyai-Polye, albeit much larger and more organised.¹⁸ One could argue, therefore, that it was Marusya's return to south-east Ukraine and role in establishing armed Black Guard units during 1917 that prompted Makhno and the Makhnovist movement in Gulyai-Polye to adopt a more radical and class struggle approach to implementing anarchist ideals.

The October Revolution and the Bolshevik-dominated Petrograd Soviet's seizure of power from the Provisional Government received tacit and vocal support from many anarchists throughout Ukraine and Russia, including Makhno and the Gulyai-Polye Soviet due to the rallying calls for 'all power to the soviets'.¹⁹ However, Makhnovist support for the October Revolution soon faded in 1918 due to the Treaty of Brest-Litovsk signed by the independent Ukrainian National Republic on 9 February and the Bolshevik regime on 3 March that ceded large parts of Ukraine to Austro-Hungarian and German control.²⁰ Furthermore, much of the peasantry became disappointed at the Central Rada of the UNR's failure to implement a national land reform programme and displayed open hostility to the quasi-feudal Hetmanate regime established on the 29 April by Pavlo Skoropadskyi via a *coup d'état*.²¹ The Treaty of Brest Litovsk can be thus considered a catalyst for the Makhnovist movement in Ukraine in drawing support from the increasingly radicalised peasantry, with much of the peasantry joining either *ataman* Nikifor Grigoriev's peasant bands or Makhno's Revolutionary Insurgent Army.²² Widespread opposition to the Austro-Hungarian and German occupation of Ukraine under the auspices of the Central Rada and the Hetmanate had galvanised the peasantry in south-east Ukraine to support Makhno's army in no small part due to the political and economic activities undertaken by anarchists in Gulyai-Polye and Alexandrovsk in 1917 and early 1918.

The Makhnovist attempt to implement anarchist ideals on a wide scale in south-east Ukraine through the establishment of 'free soviets' comprising peasants and workers necessitated the

¹⁶ Alexandr Shubin, 'The Makhnovist Movement and the National Question in the Ukraine, 1917–1921', in *Anarchism and Syndicalism in the Colonial and Postcolonial World, 1870–1940: The Praxis of National Liberation, Internationalism, and Social Revolution*, Steven Hirsch and Lucien van der Walt (eds.) (BRILL: Leiden, 2010), 156.

¹⁷ Malcolm Archibald, *Atamansha: The Story of Maria Nikiforova, the Anarchist Joan of Arc* (Black Cat Press: Dublin, 2007), 6–7.

¹⁸ Victor Serge, *Year One of the Russian Revolution* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston: Chicago, 1970), 158.

¹⁹ Nestor Makhno, *The Struggle Against the State and Other Essays*, Alexandre Skirda (ed.) and Paul Sharkey (trans.) (AK Press: Edinburgh, 1996), 3–4.

²⁰ Makhno, *The Struggle Against the State*, 6–7.

²¹ Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1996), 499.

²² Orest Subtelny, *Ukraine: A History* (University of Toronto Press: Toronto, 1988), 360.

formation of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army to defend the gains made in and around Gulyai-Polye.²³ The creation of an official military branch of the Makhnovist movement also encouraged Makhno and his comrades to go on the offensive in late 1918 and spread their anarchist ideals beyond their Gulyai-Polye stronghold. The Makhnovist military strength reached its peak in late 1919 with 83,000 infantry, 20,135 cavalry, 1,435 machine guns, 118 artillery guns, seven armoured trains and several armoured cars and *tachankas*.²⁴ The nature of the army in relation to anarchist principles has been the source of contention within historiography, notably the issue of ‘voluntary mobilisation’ and conscription. Avrich has suggested that the Makhnovists, in responding to the conditions of the Civil War on several fronts, used conscription in the areas they operated in.²⁵ However, other scholars such as Michael Malet have challenged this thesis, citing evidence from both the Makhnovists appealing for volunteers rather than ordering conscripts in 1920 as well as Trotsky’s corroborating statements that the Makhnovists lacked the ability to enforce conscription.²⁶ In both theory and practice, the Makhnovists applied anarchist concepts of a volunteer militia whereby the peasants and workers were encouraged through moral sentiments of duty to support the Makhnovist cause, rather than coercion.²⁷

Despite calling for the abolition of the Cheka and other ‘compulsory authoritative and disciplinary institutions’ in their declaration on 7 January 1920, the Makhnovists have been accused of maintaining their own counter-intelligence forces during the Civil War.²⁸ From April 1919, the civilian section of the *Kontrrazvedka* operated from the cities of Maryupol and Berdyansk and was charged with the responsibility of logistics within the Makhnovist movement, such as providing provisions for the military wing.²⁹ The *Kontrrazvedka*’s activity in civilian affairs and forced requisitioning of supplies was the source of criticism from anarchists in Ukraine, with Makhno himself remarking that their actions caused him ‘mental anguish and embarrassment when he had to apologize for their excesses’.³⁰ In the context of the Civil War on several fronts against numerous enemies, the *Kontrrazvedka*’s approach to logistics was not particularly abnormal; however, they were entirely inconsistent with anarchist principles of economic free association, mutual aid and non-coercion, being more characteristic of Bolshevik *prodrazvyorstka* (grain requisitioning).³¹

One of the major shortcomings of the Makhnovist movement was its failure to successfully implement and embed anarchist ideals to civilian urban life. At its peak, the *volnaya territoriya* comprised a large area in south-east Ukraine with a population of seven million, including the cities of Berdyansk, Donetsk, Alexandrovsk, Ekaterinoslav and its unofficial capital of Gulyai-Polye.³² The Confederation of Anarchist Organisations, also called *Nabat*, developed independently of the Makhnovist movement, yet maintained close links, and developed a strong presence in southern

²³ Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy’s Cossack* (AK Press: Edinburgh, 2004), 86.

²⁴ A. V. Belash and V. F. Belash, *Dorogi Nestora Makhno: istoricheskoe povestvovanie* (Proza: Kiev, 1993), 340.

²⁵ Avrich, *Anarchist Portraits*, 121.

²⁶ Michael Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War* (MacMillan Press: London, 1982), 105-106.

²⁷ Palij, *Anarchism of Nestor Makhno*, 155.

²⁸ Revolutionary Military Soviet and Command Staff of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine (Makhnovist), *Declaration* (7 January 1920).

²⁹ Vyacheslav Azarov, *Kontrrazvedka: The Story of the Makhnovist Intelligence Service* (Black Cat Press: Edmonton, 2008), 9.

³⁰ Alexandr Shubin, *Anarkhiya – mat poryadka* (Moscow, 2005), 272.

³¹ V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*32 (Progress Publishers: Moscow, 1965), 187.

³² Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible* (PM Press, 2010), 473.

Ukrainian cities such as Kharkov.³³ The Makhnovist movement and *Nabat* worked together in Ukraine for the mutual goal of spreading anarchist ideas, with the Cultural-Educational Section of the Insurgent Army being largely comprised of *Nabat* agitators and theorists like Voline.³⁴ However, it would be incorrect to identify *Nabat* as an organ of the Makhnovist movement or vice-versa as the former would often criticise the latter's military conduct, alliances with the Bolshevik Red Army and especially the judicial and punitive actions of the *Kontrrazvedka* during the Civil War.³⁵ This would eventually lead to a break between *Nabat* and the Makhnovists in late 1920, with Aron Baron going as far to criticise Makhno's leadership as 'Napoleonic' and only Voline and a few others maintaining their support for the Makhnovist cause.³⁶ The Makhnovists' inexperience at administering urban economies was exposed during their occupation of Ekaterinoslav and Aleksandrovsk in late 1919 as their decision to make all currency legal tender, a contradiction in anarchist-communist ideals, led to confusion and inflation in the cities.³⁷ Peter Arshinov explained the failure of the Makhnovist movement to implement anarchism firstly by their preoccupation with military affairs that culminated with final defeat at the hands of the Red Army in August 1921, following Trotsky's second repudiation of the alliance.³⁸ Secondly, the 'cowardice' and purism of Russian anarchists in refusing to support the Makhnovists with the necessary educational and intellectual tools to entrench anarchism as a mass movement failed to make the Makhnovists a theoretically-coherent movement.³⁹

In conclusion, Nestor Makhno and his comrades had succeeded in laying the foundations for anarchist development during the Russian Civil War by building a peasant mass movement to challenge capital and the state. However, the preoccupation of fighting a war on almost four fronts for the entire duration of the anarchist experiment's existence plagued the economic, political and social development of anarchist ideals. Furthermore, as noted by contemporary historians, the lack of support amongst Russia's anarchist intelligentsia in providing ample theoretical structure to the Makhnovist movement was a crucial factor in the stagnation of anarchism in Ukraine and Russia, leading to the destruction of the movement at the hands of the Bolshevik regime that it never recovered from.

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³⁵ Malet, *Nestor Makhno*, 172.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Avrich, 'Russian Anarchism and the Civil War', 299.

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