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The Maslakov mutiny and the Makhnovists on the Don, 1921

Nick Heath

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“Beside me on the big bay horse raced Brigade Commander Gregory Maslakov. This was a man of great physical strength and desperate courage. There were in his behaviour major shortcomings, but courage in battle, the ability to win over the soldiers by personal example to achieve victory atoned for them.”
Budyenny’s Memoirs

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Gregory Savelievich Maslakov was born in 1877 in the Stavropol province into a poor peasant family. He worked in the Sal district in the Don region as a breaker-in of horses on a stud farm. He is described as having a cheerful personality and being fond of a drink. During World War one he served in the artillery in the Russian Army. At the end of 1917, he organized a Red partisan group that fought against the counterrevolutionary Whites led by Krasnov and Denikin in the river Manich area. In 1918, his unit was integrated

with a division led by Dumenko and he became a cavalry commander. In 1919 he operated under the command of the Red general Budyenny. He was promoted to commander of the First Brigade of the Fourth Division of the First Cavalry. It was his unit that participated in suppressing the mutiny by the Red Cossack leader Fyodor Kuzmich Mironov on September 13, 1919, capturing him without a fight (on the fascinating story of Mironov see a forthcoming biography on libcom). However because of expressions of discontent and insubordination he was demoted from Divisional Commander to Brigade Commander.

The First Cavalry Army was stationed in Ekaterinoslav province. At that time there was famine in the Ukraine. According to Budyenny the situation was catastrophic: people and livestock were dying from malnutrition. He reported that in winter 1921 several thousand horses died; although he fails to go on to say how many soldiers might have died too. Budyenny implored the Bolshevik leadership to relocate the Red Cavalry to the grain areas of the Northern Caucasus and the Kuban, but Trotsky was adamant that they should not move. As a result it became more and more difficult to maintain discipline in the Red Army. One of the first to break with Red Army discipline was Maslakov. In December 1920 the 4th Division was deployed against anarchist leader Nestor Makhno. But in January 1921 Maslakov and his detachment refused to attack the Makhnovists who they saw as fellow revolutionaries. On February 8th 1921, he unexpectedly called upon the people to revolt against Soviet rule and declared himself a partisan and a supporter of Makhno. In the same area, near Pavlograd, he merged with the Makhnovist detachment of Batko Brova who later becomes an ideologist of the Maslakov rebel detachment. In leaflets distributed among the population, Maslakov wrote: *“Comrades!.. We do not go against the Soviet regime, but fight for it... We do not go against the Communist comrades who are on the right path and are workers*

... but against the Communist commissars. We gave a word of honor and vow not to abandon our weapons, but will destroy these vermin ... Long live the free soviets, but such soviets to be properly chosen by the people rather than appointed from above. Down with all dictators, no matter who they were! “To this was appended the slogan “*true Soviet power without the Communists.*”

In February 11th the Revolutionary Military Council of the First Cavalry outlawed Maslakov as “*a traitor to the republic*” who “*on the grounds of drunkenness and demagoguery*” had *ensnared a large number of combatants and had “betrayed the revolution”*.

At the end of February 1921 the 15,000 strong Makhnovist Insurgent Army, left the Donbas region and tried to break into Gulyai Polye, but was encircled by the Red Army and returned to the Donbass area of Mariupol. The Makhnovists decided to change tactics. At a meeting of the various units it was proposed to divide the insurgents into a few large units and attempt to spread an uprising among the masses throughout Southern Russia and the Ukraine. Large columns were sent to Tambov, Kharkov, Saratov, and Voronezh. A special unit led by Maslakov and Brova was sent to the Don on March 10th. It was given the grand name of the Caucasian Makhnovist Insurgent Army. Apparently, the Maslakov group also included former soldiers of the Second Cavalry of Mironov, who had defected to Makhno in December 1920.

In the second half of March, the Red Army conducted a series of successful operations against insurgent groups in southern Russia and Ukraine; in the Tambov forests they routed a large force led by Antonov who then with a hundred horsemen, went into hiding; the Makhnovists suffered a serious defeat in the Ukraine. After unsuccessful confrontations with government troops in the Stavropol region Maslakov headed north-east beyond the Don region. On March 12th the rebels attempted to break through the Red lines and suffered

heavy casualties in a battle on March 16th. They retreated, divided in three directions. The Maslakov detachment then streamed into the Kalmyk steppe. Here the Maslakov detachment was enthusiastically joined by locals so that its forces increased from 1,000 to 4,000 in the course of a short time. The Bolsheviks saw this as a threat to their supply lines. In a telegram of March 19, Lenin commanded Trotsky: "We must push hard and break Maslakov". On March 23rd near the village of Roguli, on the border of Kalmykia, the guerrillas were encircled and completely routed. Remains of the Maslakov detachment in "*disarray fled to the east in the direction of the Kalmyk villages...*" 200 guerillas were taken prisoner. In early April, the remnants of the Maslakov unit operated in the Ikitsokhurovsky steppes (50–60 miles east of Elista), and in Tsaritsyn province. Here the unit was joined by Kalmyk rebels under the command of Goryvanya, bringing the numbers up to 200. The combined rebel detachment captured Elista, where they shot 100 Bolshevik officials and commissars.

According to the Astrakhan Cheka, Maslakov trying to gain a foothold in the area and liaise with Antonov, head of the Tambov rebellion with the detachment of the anarchist Marussia (this Marussia is not the fierce anarchist Marussia Nikiforova, but one Marussia Kosova, who led a large Antonovist detachment. In January 1921 her group and a Makhnovist unit operated together in the steppes of Donbass steppes. On July 14–15, she was separated from Makhno and went to Taganrog county. On July 22nd the Bolshevik leader Eideman insisted on her execution).

Maslakov appears to have attempted to rejoin the main Makhnovist body but was repulsed three times. In mid-May Trotsky finally heeded the pleas of the Red Army leaders Budyenny and Frunze and sent the army to the Kuban and Northern Caucasus, but with the condition that it destroys the Maslakov-Brova detachment. On their way through the

Don region, Budyenny suffered an ignominious defeat by the Makhnovists.

In early July 1921 Maslakov moved to the Don to join up with a large detachment led by Makhno. On the night of 26th to 27th July in the vicinity of the village of Kazan the two groups met up after a five-month separation, finally merging into one unit of 450 cavalry, and together moved in a northwesterly direction. But on August 2nd the detachment was attacked by the Red Army and again Maslakov and Brova separated from Makhno. Makhno moved off northwest to eventually be forced to cross into Poland. The Bolsheviks had concentrated huge forces and carried out mass shootings against the insurgents to defeat the Maslakov uprising.

The end of Maslakov is contradictory. According to the first version, detachments of the Cheka put them in the foothills of the North Caucasus. Here in the mountains of Chechnya and Ossetia in late September 1921 amnestied rebels treacherously killed their commanders Maslakov and Brova (although it is also asserted that these were Chekists infiltrated into the detachment). Documents from the State Archives of the Volgograd region tell a different story. In late August 1921 Maslakov with a detachment of 150 cavalry, with a wagon train of 30 wagons, appeared in the Ust-Medveditsk District and was still operating there in late September.

Isaac Babel gives him much attention in his collection of short stories Red Cavalry. In the story Afonkina Bida the writer describes this "*incorrigible partisan*", but paints a picture of a bloodthirsty adventurer, in line with the Soviet regime's view of him as a traitor to the Revolution. Babel served in the First Cavalry and would have known Maslasov (incidentally in two other tales in the collection Makhno is the unsympathetically described subject). Readers can decide for themselves whether Maslakov was a traitor or whether in fact he was a defender of the real revolution of the masses.