

Anarchy in the Ukraine

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The revolution in the Ukraine of 1917 to 1921 is an understudied period of history. While the Bolsheviks consolidated their bureaucratic grip over the workers of Russia, another model of socialism was experimented with in the Ukraine. While largely influenced by anarchism, socialists from many parties struggled alongside workers and peasants to find a more libertarian direction, where self-management and organisation meant a chance at actual socialism from below. Anarchists would build a national federation to co-ordinate their political and cultural efforts, and they would also be instrumental in forming the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine. Often known as the “Makhnovists”, the movement’s nickname derived from Nestor Makhno. A union organiser during 1917, by 1919 he would become an important partisan and commander in the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine (RIAU) during the revolution. The insurgents would fight alongside the Bolsheviks against counter-revolutionaries, then against the Bolsheviks as the regime degenerated. They would even attempt to aid the workers’ uprising during the Kronstadt rebellion.

Anarchists in the Ukraine

Compared to anarchism in Russia, the anarchist movement through the late 1800’s and early 1900s had much deeper roots in the Ukraine. Cities such as Odessa and Kiev had large and active anarchist presence. The anarchists made up the leadership of a number of large unions, including the metalworkers, bakers, shoemakers, woodworkers and millers. Anarcho-syndicalists in particular had a large base amongst the Donbass miners. According to the diaries of the anarchist Gorelik ‘Workers demonstrations of up to 80,000 people would often be led by a procession of black flags’ (Skirda, 2004). In the more rural areas, smaller anarcho-communist groups proliferated. Thought not yet formed into a national organisation, rural groups would form larger regional federations. The anarchist movement was largely influenced by the writings of the Russian anarchists Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin.

During the 1917 period of the Russian revolution, anarchists would establish ‘Black Guards.’ (Makhno, 2007) These were armed groups that were the equivalent of the revolutionary ‘Red Guards’ in Russia. Based on village, union and factory, they would defend workers from hostile forces, protect strikes, expropriate funds, etc. The first Black Guards in the Ukraine were established by the anarchist militant Maria Nikiforova in the city Alexandrovsk, soon to be followed by Odessa, Nikolaev, Kamensk, Nikopol, and others. (Shubin, 2010). Maria’s Black Guards joined forces with the Bolsheviks to overthrow the local bourgeois government and establish workers Soviets. Anarchists from the Guilay-Polye region mobilised in assistance. The early Soviets of Left-Bank Ukraine were dominated by Bolsheviks, Left Socialist-Revolutionaries and Anarchists. However when the Bolsheviks government in Russia signed the Brest-Litovsk Treaty the Ukraine was overrun by German military occupation. The basis of the Black Guards partisan resistance would form into the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine.

In November 1918, an initial conference was called to organise a ‘National Confederation of Anarchist Organisations of the Ukraine.’ This federation became known as the “Nabat!” (meaning Alarm) and was officially formed at the second conference, in April 1919. The Nabat had its headquarters in Kharkiv. In Ekaterinoslav its regional offices were in the same building and on the same floor as the Bolshevik headquarters. The Nabat was the first national anarchist federation to operate during a revolutionary period, and its chair, the intellectual Voline, wrote a mammoth

history of the Russian revolution; “The Unknown Revolution.” Many of the organisers of the Nabat were anarchists who had fled Russia due to Bolshevik persecution, and anarchists returned from as far abroad as England and the United States to participate (Skirda, 2004). The Nabat had branches in nearly every city in the South East of the Ukraine. (Avrich, 1973)

Throughout the revolutionary period in Ukraine, anarchists had two main focuses: developing the ‘free soviets’ alongside trade unions and co-operatives; and the defense of the revolution, through the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine.

The Free Soviets

As in Russia, the Ukrainian workers and peasants used the same model for the new organisation of society, the Soviet. These Soviets were based upon unions, workplace committees, farm-labourers committees and mass assemblies, usually drawn along the geographical lines of townships. The Ukrainian revolution was more rurally based than in Russia, however it’s rural proletariat were relatively well developed, and though poor, the Ukrainian peasantry were often more educated than its Russian counterpart (Shubin, 2010).

The anarchists believed the Soviets really should represent the interests of the workers and peasants, rather than operate as rubber stamps for the Party or bureaucracy. Hence the term ‘Free Soviets’. The first congress of Free Soviets occurred on the 25th of September, 1917, in the local Guilay-Polye district. After this first smaller local congress, there were larger congresses representing many regions of Ukraine.

Despite the initial retreat from revolution following the Brest-Litovsk Treaty, with liberation from German occupation by the RIAU, workers, peasants and revolutionaries began to organise new Soviets. Between the 23rd of January and the 20th of October 1919 there were four major congresses. The congresses made plans for dividing and collectivising land and agriculture, dealt with economic questions, and defense of the territory. Each congress elected a Revolutionary Military Soviet, whose role it was to administer the decisions of the congress between conventions. Theoretically this soviet had authority over the RIAU, although the realities of war made this difficult. The civilian congress could however overrule the military organisation. (Malet, 1982) The makeup of the Soviet represented workers, peasants, soldiers and the revolutionary parties. Dissident Bolsheviks participated in many roles in the Ukrainian revolution, until ordered by higher party bodies to withdraw. During the military collapse of 1920 the RMS was dissolved and replaced by another Soviet elected from the RIAU. It had seven members, including Left SRs.

The peak of the Soviet experiment was at the third congress on 10th April, 1919 in Aleksandrovsk. Over 2 million workers and peasants were represented, with delegates from 72 regions. There were another two congresses planned, but both were cancelled by Bolshevik oppression. The Bolsheviks were not willing to tolerate an experiment with workers’ control that they did not have a monopoly over. As the historian Malet puts it,

“No government can long tolerate an independent or autonomous area within its borders, and of none is this more true than a highly centralised authoritarian state such as that headed by Lenin. There was no room even for mild concessions to federalism, especially where areas of vital strategic importance were concerned.”

Malet, 1982

Bolshevik suppression would be ruthless. A congress was set for 15th of June, 1919 but made illegal by Trotsky under punishment of death. The last attempt at a free congress was due in early 1920, but the Red Army had over-run the majority of the Free Territory by this time. All independent workers and peasant organisations were banned.

The Insurgent Army

The other key organisation that anarchists participated in was the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine. The Insurgent Army was formed in 1919 by bringing together several guerrilla partisan bands operating in the Ekaterinoslav region. The first to join forces were the units under the command of Nestor Makhno and Fedir Shchus, just outside the village of Bolshe-Mikhailova. When the town was liberated from German-Austrian occupation the peasants of the liberated town gave the movement the nickname “Makhnovist” (Makhno, 2011). After bringing together numerous partisan groups that had grown out of the Black Guards movement, a more formal military apparatus was formed.

In contrast to the supposedly spontaneous nature of the organisation, the reality is the Nabat had put forward theories of partisan warfare for the defense of revolution. The anarchists were extremely aware that any armed body separate to the population had the potential to become a new ruling force over the working class. As the Nabat Youth put it ‘*No... Red Army... can be the genuine defender of the social revolution. By its very nature every such army must... become a reactionary force and threat to the revolution.*’ (Avrich, 1973) The defense of the revolution rested on the people themselves in arms. The anarchists also understood that unless the revolution spread internationally, it could not succeed.

The RIAU kept a number of principles that had disappeared quickly in the Red Army. Officers were elected and subject to recall. This included the highest levels of command. During ‘peace times’ partisans, including officers, were expected to return to their communities and workplaces. True to the anarchist conceptions of leadership, even officers must fight on the frontline. Makhno was famously shot in the neck and the legs, commanders like Schuss would die in combat against the nationalist armies and Dmitry Popov (a Left-SR) would be executed by the Bolsheviks.

The RIAU had a newspaper ‘The Road to Freedom’, and a cultural section that concentrated on educating partisans. They also worked to establish schools in the territory they liberated. (Shubin, 2010) The cultural section would be largely staffed by members of the Nabat and the Left-SR party.

The RIAU would reach a peak of roughly 40,000 members and defend a territory of several million inhabitants (Skirda, 2004). The RIAU made two military alliances with the Bolsheviks, and together they fought against counter-revolutionary forces. Both of these alliances were betrayed by the Reds when the Bolsheviks felt they had the upper hand. The most despicable betrayal was on the 26th November, 1920. RIAU commanders were invited to a joint congress with the leadership of the Red Army. Unbeknownst to them, it was a trap planned by Trotsky himself. When they arrived, they were surrounded and most executed on the spot. The victims included Simon Karetnik, who was at the time in command of the RIAU. (Azarov, 2008).

The RIAU would continue the fight for free socialism into 1921. During the Kronstadt revolt, the RIAU even attempted to get supplies to the revolutionaries. Unfortunately, due to the short timeframe of the revolt, the uprising would be over before meaningful aid could be supplied. When the RIAU was eventually destroyed by the Red Army the survivors fled the country, most

ending up in France. Underground resistance by partisans reportedly continued into the 1930s (Azarov, 2008).

Key achievements of the RIAU would include the breaking of Denikins advance on Moscow, thus saving the Russian revolution itself. Joining the defeat of Wrangle, and helping maintain political freedom in Ukraine so the experiment in self-managed socialism could go on.

Conclusion

The Ukrainian revolution is important for libertarians as it was the first time anarchist leadership had significant influence on a revolutionary process. The revolutionaries involved learnt many lessons that would have ramifications for the development of the anarchist movement. For example, without a committed, formalised national organisation, the Ukrainian anarchist movement would have been rendered as ineffective as its Russian counterpart. The anarchists came to understand how important it was to live and struggle alongside the masses. It was the reflection on the Ukrainian experience that led some of the anarchists involved to write The Platform years later. Ukrainian revolutionaries would go on to contribute to the Spanish revolution and the fight against fascism.

Most importantly though, while limited by concrete circumstances, the anarchists would prove that alternatives were available to the choices the Bolsheviks made. The complicated relationship between the workers and peasants' economic organisations, the political organisation of the anarchists and the partisan army are worthy of deep analysis. Hardly idealistic dreamers, the actions of the Ukrainian anarchists attempted to bring together the workers and peasants of the Ukraine and encourage them towards the creation of a society free from capitalism and state. They were aware that socialism could not be imposed, only achieved by the self-directed struggle of the workers.

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