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A Survey of the Anarchist Movement in the Ukraine

(1987–1994)

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INTRODUCTION: This piece provides an insight into the encouraging growth of the anarchist movement in the Ukraine in the perestroika years and its decline soon afterwards as the USSR collapsed and the Ukraine became independent (late 1991). Since then the movement has been slow to re-grow. This sequence of development parallels that of the anarchist movement in other parts of the former Soviet Union (primarily in Russia). The article is full of interesting references and helps puts the development of the anarchist movement in context. The names of towns and cities have been given in keeping with common English usage which generally prefers the Russian form to the Ukrainian.

Translated with financial assistance from the Institute for Anarchist Studies

One of the most remarkable features of anarchism — as an ideology which rejects authority and strives for the liberation of the

individual from all forms of oppression — is that the ideas have found adherents at all times and in all countries, whatever punishment this may have brought with it. We can bravely say: anarchism is indestructible! Anarchism can be driven underground, all the activists can be liquidated, but new fighters will arise in their place.

That's how it was in the former USSR — after the crushing of the last anarchist groups in the late 1920s it seemed anarchism had finally departed from the socio-political stage. But isolated anarchist individuals and even small groups emerged again in the late 1950s. The eldest anarchist in the Ukraine was and is Nikolai Ozimov from Cherkassy who was imprisoned in the Soviet regime's camps for 15 years in the 1960s and 70s. In 1979 at the State University in Dnepropetrovsk an attempt was made to set up the "Communist League of Anarchists"; Vladislav Strelkovsky, who was arrested for this affair, was also accused of being a member of an anarchist group which had been active there in 1977. One of the activists of what is now the Anarcho-Communist Revolutionary Union (AKRS) was luckier than most — he distributed pro-Makhno leaflets in the villages around the Dibrivsky Forest (a famous base of the Makhnovists in 1918) and seems to have avoided the watchful eyes of the "red" police apparatus.

Thus by the mid 1980s there were anarchists in a number of Ukrainian cities: Dnepropetrovsk, Cherkassy, Zaporozhye... They were not in contact with each other, even those of them who lived in one and the same city, but almost all of them were under observation by the KGB. They had no-one to learn from because the red terror of the 1930s had interrupted any continuity between them and the older generations. Contacting comrades in the west was beyond their wildest dreams. Therefore the experience of European syndicalism in the 1920s, the Spanish Revolution of the 1930s, "Red May" in Paris in 1968, and the new directions in anarchism in the 1960s and 70s remained practically unknown. A. Dubrovsky gives a mosaic impression of this period: "A cult of freedom; Polish "Solidarnosc" of 1980–81 with its inspiring and challenging impulses;

of the 1989–90 “generation” to conduct systematic, goal-oriented propaganda of anarchist ideas — putting forth anarchist alternatives based on people’s solidarity and self-organization to replace the conventional political forms of problem-resolution in society. A further problem was the significant obstruction caused by people who found themselves in the movement more or less by chance and were not very committed. But the most fundamental problem was that anarchism in the Ukraine didn’t really manage to find a social base. Not one of the social groups or strata in Ukrainian society embraced the ideas of solidarity and self-management as its own, as a direct expression of its vital interests. Without such a social base the negative factors mentioned above were able to operate unimpeded.

In 1993–94 the Donbass region became the epicentre of anarchism in the Ukraine. The working class in the Donbass, which is very active in fighting the class struggle, provided the right environment for the Anarchist Federation of the Donbass (FAD) which placed its work on a sound ideological and organizational basis was able to achieve significant successes. Small anarchist groups in Dnepropetrovsk, Nikolayev, Kharkov and Kiev are continuing their work. After two years of inactivity the IRA in Dnepropetrovsk transformed itself from a small circle with just a few members into an association of several dozen self-employed craft workers.

After their severe crisis of 1991–93 anarchists are rectifying their previous mistakes and re-thinking their accumulated experience. They continue to work against authority, oppression and violence, striving, as before, for the ideals of freedom, equality and fraternity. Will there soon be a revival of the Ukrainian anarchist movement?

working to rehabilitate Makhno and the Kronstadt uprising; reading the books of the classic writers (Bakunin and Kropotkin) — these were the starting points of the theory and practice of the anarchist generation of the first half of the 1980’s.”

In 1987 the politics of glasnost introduced by the reformist leadership of the Communist Party of the USSR, despite their inconsistency and half-heartedness, allowed the anarchists to express their views and begin agitation openly for the first time. For example, at an open Party meeting (compulsory for all workers) at one of the big factories in Dnepropetrovsk in September 1987 it was suggested to the Communists that they conduct their political education sessions (also compulsory for all) in the form of discussions with anarcho-syndicalists. The party meeting replied with unanimous storms of indignation. But a public challenge had been made, and after 6 whole months of procrastination the Party Bureau at the factory decided to allow such discussions, after having received the direct sanction of the Organization Section of the Industrial District Committee of the Party.

In 1988 the anarchist movement in the Ukraine began an active process of regeneration. Isolated individuals came together to form groups and circles, contacts were established to like-minded people in other cities. Anarcho-communists were active in Dnepropetrovsk and Cherkassy, devoting their efforts primarily to studying the experience of the Makhnovist movement and carrying out appropriate propaganda; syndicalists, above all in Dnepropetrovsk, tried to agitate in workers’ collectives, penetrating the structures of the official unions and striving to turn them into a tool for the struggle against the authorities. Anarcho-individualism flourished extravagantly and bore strange fruit in the youth scene in Kiev whose members cultivated their bohemian lifestyle and appearance and thrived on shocking the straight-laced Soviet citizens. (Later, however, the Kiev anarchists were to take part in the memorable students’ hunger-strike and also a range of environmentalist campaigns). At around this time the dissident V. Kirichenko from

Zaporozhye began elaborating theories of mystical anarchist bio-cosmology. Anarchist publications began springing up, such as the samizdat papers “Makhovets” (The Makhnovist) in Cherkassy and “Dyelo Truda” (The Cause of Labour) in Dnepropetrovsk. These were typed and thus had a limited circulation but were very rich in terms of their content. Probably the Ukrainian anarchists’ first mention in the official mass media was a range of publications in the local Dnepropetrovsk Communist Youth League paper “Prapor Yunosti” (The Banner of Youth) in autumn 1988 about how management at one of the factories was trying to suppress anarcho-syndicalist agitation among the workers with the help of the District Committee of the Party and the Regional Committee of the official unions.

A major role in spreading anarchism in the USSR was played by the Federation of Socialist Social Clubs (FSOK), renamed the Union of Independent Socialists (SNS) in mid 1988. This organization brought together anarchists, social-democrats, Trotskyists and leftist Greens. Under the influence of the Moscow group “Obschchina” (Community), which in 1987 began publishing a magazine of the same name, many members of FSOK and later SNS moved towards anarchist positions, and in January 1989 the SNS conference declared its transformation to the Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists (KAS). Almost all the active anarchists in the Ukraine joined KAS, as did many non-anarchist FSOK members, albeit not without some hesitation. At the founding congress of the KAS held in Moscow in May 1989 the Ukraine was represented by delegates from Dnepropetrovsk, Kharkov, Cherkassy, Zaporozhye and the Donbass region.

Such a vigorous return of anarchism from a state of total dormancy could not but produce a reaction from the powers that be. Active anarchists had to come to terms with slander, harassment and threats from the authorities. There was also moral and material pressure — at workplaces Party and union bureaucrats presided over “unmasking” meetings which struck

racy and who decided to pursue propaganda to gain acceptance for the idea of “a new October Revolution”. Unfortunately this step had little influence on the sad state of anarchism in the Ukraine. In October 1992 at one of the big enterprises in Dnepropetrovsk there was a strike organized and headed by one of the most seasoned anarcho-syndicalist activists in his capacity as president of the strike-committee. After the defeat of the strike the administrative reprisals of the oppressive system of police-like personnel departments, which were still very much in place in the Ukraine, deprived him of the possibility of working in industry for a whole year. With this blow anarchism lost its direct link to the industrial workers of Dnepropetrovsk.

The crisis of anarchism in the Ukraine was on the whole deeper than that in Russia. The congress of Eastern European anarchists held in summer 1992 near Kaliningrad serves as illustration — of the 22 cities of the former USSR represented there, only five cities in the Ukraine were represented (Zaporozhye, Donetsk, Lugansk, Kadiyevka and Kharkov). Not only was there no longer an anarchist movement in the Ukraine, but with the exception of Donetsk there was no longer a single organized group — there were only individual anarchists who contact each other sporadically.

What are the reasons for this decay and collapse, for what amounts to the total disappearance of the Ukrainian anarchist movement from the socio-political stage in 1993?

The anarchists coped with their first tasks: declaring their revival, celebrating their existence and “rehabilitating” anarchism to a significant extent in the public mind — in a society permeated with the idea of authority it was a great breakthrough to deflate the bugbears of Soviet propaganda which portrayed anarchists as unbridled, drunken hooligans. But what came after that?

There were several basic reasons for this problem. One was the lack of a firm programmatic basis, in other words of an elaborated system of goals and means by which to achieve them. Another was by all means the inability and simple lack of desire of most

victory was somewhat overshadowed by the putsch in Moscow⁶ — the factory management received a call from higher up in Kiev and started production again for a certain time. But after the campaign in Zaporozhye closer ties were established between Ukrainian and Russian anarchists. New, albeit small, ADA groups sprang up in Kharkov, Kiev, Zaporozhye and Donetsk. Many Ukrainian anarchists took an interest in ecological campaigns and direct action.

KAU, on the other hand, held two last congresses (in Zhitomir in May 1992 and September 1992, both with a minimal number of participants) before finally folding. In early 1992 there were anarchist propaganda groups in Kharkov, Zaporozhye, Dnepropetrovsk, the Donetsk region, Nikolayev, Sevastopol and several other cities and towns, mainly in the Eastern part of the Ukraine.

In Cherkassy an Anarchist Youth League started propaganda work but ran into serious resistance from nationalist “Cossacks” — and several serious clashes occurred as a result.

In Kiev the happening-oriented “orange” anarchists continued to have fun, now they were known as the anarchist faction of the Leftist Youth Association (LOM). At the same time several of the Kiev ADA activists took part in organizing ecological protests campaigns in Russia similar to the one in Zaporozhye: protest camps were held near St Petersburg (against a nuclear power plant), in Lipetsk (against a factory being built by a Swedish firm), and in Cherepovets (against the massive plant there — a monster of Soviet metallurgy). Anarchists from Zaporozhye, Kharkov and Donetsk also took part.

A conference was held in Dnepropetrovsk in January 1992 to found the Federation of Revolutionary Anarchists (FRAN). This organization brought together anarchists from all parts of the former USSR who rejected the norms and values of bourgeois democ-

⁶ On 19 August 1991 in Moscow top government and military officials staged a coup d'état against Gorbachev with the aim of reversing many of the changes that had been introduced under perestroika, but within three days pro-Western reformers restored Gorbachev to power.

anarcho-syndicalists from elected positions for “denying the leading role of the Communist Party”, as it was termed; activists of the anarchist movement were ordered to the Interior Ministry and the Office of the Public Prosecutor for “prophylactic” interrogation in an attempt to intimidate them. The distribution of anarchist publications was suppressed by the police, public meetings and pickets were broken up, and corresponding fines were imposed. In Kharkov, where the anarchists attained great influence among tertiary students, the police conducted special night-time operations — extra street patrols, ambushes, run-ins and arrests — to counter anarchist postering. People’s flats were also searched. In March 1989 at one of the industrial plants in Dnepropetrovsk the official union’s Factory Committee -evidently having lost all sense of reality and elementary decency — decided to pass on material to the KGB about anarcho-syndicalist O. Dubrovsky’s “anti-Party agitation and demoralizing the workplace collective”! In August of the same year the Ideology Section of the Dnepropetrovsk Regional Party Committee sent the Party Committees at the factories and enterprises an operational report on anarcho-syndicalism. It included a short historical survey of the development of the movement and recommended how to conduct counter-propaganda and compromise it in the eyes of the workers.

But the development of Ukrainian anarchism was not be stopped. In several cities in the Ukraine anarchists were involved in initiatives to set up the society “Memorial”¹. Along with work in the official unions in their own enterprises, anarcho-syndicalists took part in attempts to set up an independent union movement. This was a focus of work in 1989 in Dnepropetrovsk and Zaporozhye. New groups emerged and periodicals were set up, the print-runs of papers such as “Nabat” (Alarm Bell) in Kharkov and “Predtecha”

¹ An organization set up in the late 1980’s to document and commemorate the suffering of political prisoners in the USSR and rehabilitate those of the victims still alive. It also serves as an umbrella for various grass-roots organizations promoting civil society.

(Forerunner) in Zhitomir were in the thousands. Anarchist publications from Russia were also distributed in the Ukraine, the most significant of which being “Obshchina” from Moscow and “Chornoye Znamya” (Black Flag) from Leningrad.

The main task facing Ukrainian anarchists in 1989 was that of “rehabilitating” anarchism, in other words of destroying the stereotypes which the Stalinists had created in mass consciousness. The average citizen had grown used to the cinematic image of drunken anarchist bandits and trembled with fear and loathing at the very mention of the words “anarchy” and “anarchists”. The sight of an anarchist black flag affected them in the same way as a red cape does a bull, or a mouse a housewife in the old sexist stereotype.

In October 1989 the second KAS conference was held in Zaporozhye to mark the centenary of the birth of Nestor Makhno. (For a whole month prior to the congress the local press whipped up hysteria, calling on parents to keep their children indoors because, apparently, the anarchists were coming from every corner of the USSR and had sworn to sacrifice one hundred infants to mark the centenary of their “Batko”²). On the whole the conference went well, but amidst the euphoria of growth and upswing divisions could be seen which were to mark the boundaries of future splits in the organization. No understanding was possible between the pro-market KAS members in Kharkov and the anarcho-communists in Dnepropetrovsk in particular in terms of anarchist tactics, but also in general due to divergent points of view on the process of capitalization in the USSR, which was then in its initial phase. The disagreement went so far that leading members of the Kharkov organization declared they would disrupt the distribution of the AKRS paper “Chornoye Znamya” in Kharkov, describing its class-struggle approach as “fascism”.

The aggravation of the contradictions led to a split in KAS at its second congress in March 1990 in Moscow. This was the most rep-

² A term of reverence basically meaning “father”.

Proletarian Cells (RPYa). “Anarcho-Trotskyism” was given a theoretical base by Ilderkin who penned a series of articles entitled “Workers’ Power — An Instrument of Revolution”. One after another Dnepropetrovsk anarchists were forced to leave “Sotsprof” and “Ukrsotsprof” — prototypical trade-union bodies modeled along Western lines. In January 1991 they established their own anarcho-syndicalist union “International Workers’ Association” (IRA)⁵. The IRA had local groups in several cities in the Ukraine and Russia. Initially the IRA was unable to expand beyond the narrow circles of committed anarcho-syndicalists, and by mid 1991 activity had practically ceased. By the end of that year the regular weekly meetings in Dnepropetrovsk had stopped and a large proportion of the people who had become active anarchists in 1989–90 were lost to the movement. However, a core of devoted members remained.

Ukrainian anarchism experienced a slight revival when an environmental protest campaign was carried out in Zaporozhye in August 1991. It was organized and conducted by ADA members from Moscow and Saratov who had gathered experience in campaigns of this kind since 1989. The actions of the anarchist ecologists were effective — they occupied the management offices of the Zaporozhye coke and chemical plant and didn’t flinch from direct clashes with the police. Some of them also went on hunger-strike, even refusing liquids. (After the fourth day one of the hunger-strikers from Dnepropetrovsk ended up in the intensive station of the hospital.) The ecologists achieved their goal — the local authorities agreed to close down the most harmful parts of the plant until they were re-equipped at a higher standard; the workers at the plant were guaranteed their pay for the duration of the reconstruction work. This

⁵ This “International Workers’ Association” (“Internatsionalnaya Rabochaya Assotsiatsiya”, IRA) should not be confused with the anarcho-syndicalist International of the same name (English initials IWA, Spanish AIT). In Russian the latter is called MAT (Mezhdunarodnaya Assotsiatsiya Trudyashchikhsya). The IRA applied to join the IWA in 1992 but was turned down.

Novikov⁴ and Yuri Dokukin for whom anarchism was purely a means of self-aggrandizement. First they set up a “Committee of Ukrainian Anarcho-Nationalists”, later the ‘ultra-radical’ “Anarcho-Revolutionary Avant-garde Front” (FARA). For a year the lads were everywhere with loud manifestos from FARA declaring “the start of the international anarchist revolution” or declaring a death sentence on various politicians: from the Ukrainian parliamentarian Khmara to U.S. President Bush.

In late 1990, however, a new local group came into being — the Zhitomir Anarchist Union (ZhAS). They also set up an information service called “Nestor” and a bulletin of the same name, which they published in the name of KAU. A total of 300 issues of “Nestor” were published. The heart and soul of all the projects to emanate from Zhitomir was the go-getting freelance journalist Yuri Anisimov, who as time went by increasingly shifted towards commercialism.

The situation in Dnepropetrovsk was more stable — there were no spectacular successes but no catastrophic failures. A large quantity of anarchist literature was systematically distributed in workers’ suburbs and at factories in the industrial district of the city. At one of the big enterprises the anarchists succeeded in maintaining a presence and resisting the arbitrary power of the management while at the same time fully demoralizing the ideological opponent — the Workplace Organization of the Communist Party. Several of the Dnepropetrovsk activists tended towards cooperation with Trotskyists, so together with anarchist literature they also distributed the writings of Trotsky and the publications of various Trotskyist tendencies. This tendency found fullest expression in the person of AKRS activist L. Ilderkin who at the same time was a member of the Trotskyist organization Revolutionary

⁴ In 1996, after this article was written, O. Novikov was one of the figures at the centre of an ugly scandal which polarized the ex-Soviet anarchist movement and also affected anarchists in Germany.

representative of all anarchist congresses in the USSR, there being over 200 participants from 26 different cities (almost half of them from the Ukraine). The authoritarian tendencies of the Moscow leaders³, the refusal of the majority at the congress to depart from a position of so-called market socialism, decision-making on matters of principle by majority vote — thus imposing the will of the majority on a minority — forced many activists to leave the congress, including many veteran Ukrainian anarchists. The minority which left decided to hold a congress of their own, which led to the foundation of a new organization of Soviet anarchists in the autumn of that year — the Association of Anarchist Movements (ADA).

Amidst all the verbal abuse and confusion at the congress in Moscow the Ukrainian anarchists held a meeting of their own in the foyer of the conference building and decided to meet in Kharkov on 1 May to re-constitute their own Ukrainian anarchist association — the Confederation of Anarchists in the Ukraine (KAU) “Nabat”. The specific socio-political situation in the Ukraine, its increasing withdrawal from the disintegrating USSR and what many activists at the time saw as the necessity of closely cooperating with the Ukrainian national-liberation movement were the primary factors which brought about the formation of a separate organization of Ukrainian anarchists within the anarchist movement of the USSR as a whole. The split in the KAS, the creation of ADA and KAU, and the dissociation of the left wing of the KAS-AKRS led to a significant intermeshing of the anarchist groups in the Ukraine which were already fairly amorphous. A large number of the KAU groups continued to consider themselves part of KAS, others affiliated with ADA (at first only very few), and in the ranks of KAU there were active AKRS members said to have “more than a pinch of Trotskyism”.

At around this time the Kharkov local group of KAS/KAU had over 100 members, making it the strongest in the Ukraine. The re-

³ In particular Andrei Isaev & Alexander Shubin.

search assistant I. Rassokha played a leading role, as did the students Ye. Solovyov and V. Radchenko and the Afghanistan war veteran V. Fidelman. In early 1990 when there were rumours of an anti-Jewish pogrom being planned Fidelman set up the Militant Anarcho-Revolutionary Union (BARS); veterans of the war in Afghanistan, young workers and students came together to organize resistance. They readied themselves for self-defense and in the most uneasy nights they conducted patrols on the streets — but in the end there was no pogrom. When the immediate danger had passed BARS didn't disband, however, but continued training its members and remained in a state of readiness so it could react if provoked.

The Kharkov anarchist paper “Nabat” became quite well known in the independent Ukrainian press and with a print-run of 3,000–5,000 was quite large for an anarchist paper

The KAU was founded in Kharkov on 1 May 1990, bringing together anarchists of all tendencies from 20 towns and cities in the Ukraine. At the Mayday demonstration the Kharkov anarchists and KAU congress delegates marched in a 200-strong block of their own with black and red-and-black flags. All in all there were about 500 anarchist activists in the Ukraine, and in the opinion of journalists, “in 1990 the KAU was the largest and most popular of the leftist organizations in the Ukraine” (if we leave out the Soviet Communist Party, which can hardly be considered to be left).

But in autumn 1990 the rot set in. The process of formation and growth of new local groups slowed down and then stopped altogether. In the course of just two months a series of scandals shook and destroyed the Kharkov organization of the KAS/KAU. The Kharkovites could also not resist the allure of the national question. “If Kharkov is made a Ukrainian town, we'll make it a new Ulster!” This and similar utterances by the ambitious Kharkov “leaders” served only to speed up the process of disintegration. The publication of “Nabat” was stopped, and by the winter only a shadow was left of the organization's previous strength. BARS found no

real practical tasks and dissolved. The leading anarchists of 1989–90 drifted further and further away from anarchism. In early 1991 the Kharkov organization of KAS/KAU finally folded. Its leaders — members of the pro-market intelligentsia, found side entrances to the corridors of power. Quickly they forgot “the sins of their youth” and joined forces with the minority of oppressors who until just recently had been their object of criticism. Deputies of the Regional Council, Consultant to the Speaker of the Ukrainian Parliament, candidates for election to the Supreme Soviet — this is how far some young people made it into the system after “making a name for themselves” under the black flag in the alternative political scene of the Eastern Ukraine.

The dissipation of the anarchist movement proceeded at a similar pace to its growth in 1989–90. The publication of “Predtecha”, “Dyelo Truda” and “Makhovets” was stopped due to material and technical problems. The local anarchist groups dissolved one after another without a trace. The second KAU congress held in Kiev in December 1990 was a clear indication of this general crisis. Representatives came only from Kharkov and Zaporozhye. At around this time there was a regional Confederation of Independent Trade-Unions in Zaporozhye, headed by KAS member Artur Grigoryan, which brought together several thousand workers and published the paper “Chornaya Subbota” (Black Saturday). But having gone with the KAS majority of the time, this Confederation drew continual accusations from the anarcho-communists and the good old-fashioned syndicalists that it was in fact anarcho-capitalist.

In Kiev so-called “orange actions” were very popular — street theatre and happenings which shocked onlookers but as rule were only of real interest for the participants. Some of the Kiev anarchists were more interested in collective drink-ups than in spreading anarchist ideas. “Orange” ideas found their most vibrant expression in two new-come young anarchists Oleg