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The Greek Makhnovists

A short account of the role of the Black Sea Greeks
in the Makhnovist movement.

Nick Heath

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Greeks had settled along the north coast of the Black Sea in what is now Ukraine and Crimea from at least the 5th Century BC. At the time of the Revolution of 1917 there were around 180,000 of these Pontic Greeks in the region. When the Austrian and German military backers of the puppet Hetman Skoropadsky withdrew from the Ukraine in 1918, the White forces of Denikin attempted to enforce conscription on the local Greek population of the Mariupol area and met with armed resistance from them. The Greeks resisted the Denikinist requisitioning of food and other materials and were appalled by the rape of local Greek women and the high handed comportment of the Whites. They had not originally wanted to be involved in the strife but were forced to organise self defence units in spring 1919.

Isaac Teper, alias Ilya Gordeev, was a militant of the Nabat Confederation of Anarchists and fought with the Makhnovists. He had edited Golos Makhnovtza (Voice of the Makhnovists) at Kharkhov. He was captured by the Reds and recruited to the Cheka, then carrying out espionage activities for it among

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the Makhnovists. In 1924 at Kharkhov he wrote a scurrilous booklet on the Makhnovist movement, most likely under the supervision of a Chekist supervisor (he at least still had enough integrity left to state that Makhno was neither an anti-Semite nor a nationalist). The novel of Alexei Tolstoy (no relation to the great Leo, and a veteran supporter of Tsarism before becoming a slavish devotee of Stalin) which slanders Makhno is based on the Teper booklet. Teper makes the claim that the Makhnovist movement originated among the Black Sea Greeks. Far fetched as this at first seems, it is true that twenty per cent of the Makhnovist forces were Greek and that according to Arshinov some of the best Makhnovist commanders were Greek. The Greek units were noted for their strong self-discipline, organisation and durability. One Greek Makhnovist commander Papadopoulos was celebrated in a Makhnovist song and was renowned among the Pontic Greeks for decades.

The Bolshevik and anarchist renegade Dybets remarked favourably on the Greek Makhnovist units saying that they were the most stable and reliable units of the Makhnovists and that Makhno had great respect for their courage and fighting ability and that they were often in combat in the most dangerous areas. Lev Yarkutsky in his book on Mariupol (1993) says that the Greeks in this region were the first to respond to the appeals of Makhno.

In spring 1919 Greeks organised guerilla groups in several villages of the Mariupol region against Denikin. These units had commanders like Vladimir Feofanovich Tachtamisev and Tsoumparev (Tachtamisev is the Russified version — which was only used on official documents — of a Tatar name Tokhtamysh that he had started using). The capture of Mariupol from French and Denikinist forces on March 29th that year was partly due to the 9th (Greek) division led by Tachtamisev alongside the Makhnovist 8th division of Kurilenko. Tachtamisev was awarded the Order of the Red Banner by the Bolsheviks for this, pinned on by the Kronstadt

sailor and Bolshevik Pavel Dybenko in April. Ivan Chubarev in his *The Guerilla Movement in Mariupol 1918–1919* refers to Tachtamisev operating in Stary Kermenchik, Novy Petrikovka, Novy Karata and Yanisol whilst near Maly Yanisol, Cherdakly, Kellerovka and Makedonivka operated the detachments of Sprutsko, Tsololo and Bohadytsi.

Makhno in his *Memoirs* recalls that he planned a raid in the south-eastern region of Berntiansk-Mariupol-Iouzovka to stimulate the revolt of the population. After a battle fought at Bolshoi Mikhailovka when the insurgents decided to make Makhno their leader, the Greek village of Komar was invaded and a unit of the Ukrainian National Guard driven out. Following this Makhno and another anarchist of Gulyai Polye, Alexei Marchenko, who had worked as a train driver, addressed the local population with revolutionary speeches. Many local Greeks immediately joined the Makhnovist forces with their own horses. Makhno then proceeded to Bogatyr, the village occupied by Urum Greeks (who spoke a Greek-Tatar language) and on to the villages of Veliky Yanisol and Maly Yanisol which were also Greek. So the Mariupol Greeks were the first to respond positively to the call of Nestor Makhno.

1500 Pontic Greeks were initially organised in combat units. A Greek Makhnovist regiment fought alongside a Jewish one in a battle against the Whites in June 1919. The Mariupol area was a safe place for the Makhnovists. It was to the village of Veliky Yanisol that the Makhnovist commander Lashkevich went when he managed to escape from the Bolshevik encirclement of Gulyai Polye with the Makhnovist treasury of thousands of roubles. Here he was sheltered by a Greek grandfather. Unfortunately so much money disoriented him, and he began to spend it lavishly. This not only alienated the local people but brought down the wrath of the Makhnovists on him. He was shot for embezzlement in the main square of the village in summer 1920.

In the final phase of the Makhnovist movement another rally was held in Komar on February 24th 1920. Unfortunately the local population was perturbed by the thought of Bolshevik repression and there was no major impulse to join the combatants from among them. In March a Bolshevik punitive detachment arrived in the area shooting 7 people in Komar, 10 in Bogatyr and 12 in Konstantinovka. Further reprisals followed over the next few years. Hundreds of Pontic Greeks had been killed by the forces of Denikin, now the Bolsheviks went to work. In the Stalin period the local Greeks suffered further massacres and deportations from the region.

Tokhtamysh-Tachtamisev, a native of Veliky Yanisol, had always, it appeared, had some sympathy for the Bolsheviks. He had first come to prominence when he first organised a small unit in his village. He later moved over to the Bolsheviks and later still was involved in the construction of a fish canning factory at Mariupol and became its first director. He died in 1935 of a congenital disease.

Other prominent Greek Makhnovists include the Mavrodi brothers from the Greek village of Kermenchik. They are mentioned by Belash in his testimony to the Cheka. One was a Makhnovist battalion commander. According to Belash, after the collapse of the Makhnovist movement he joined the Communist Party and worked in the Volnovaskyi area. His younger brother was still an anarchist according to Belash and was disgusted by the NEP of the Bolsheviks which he felt made the rich peasants richer and the poor peasants poorer. He had been involved in the Makhnovist cultural-educational section, popularizing the setting up of anarchist communes. He was, again according to Belash, aware of the need to carry out anarchist propaganda amongst the Greek population but did not want repression to come down on him, although he was discreetly engaged in the organisation of communes with local official approval. He was apparently able to organise such communes in Veliky Yanisol, Stary Kermenchik and Novy

Kermenchik and Konstantinovka. Mavrodi (it is not clear which brother this was) was secretary of the Revolutionary Military Council (RMC) of the Makhnovist movement on April 10th, 1919 alongside the Jewish anarchist Kogan (pointing to the thoroughgoing internationalism of the Makhnovists).

Another key factor in the Greeks rallying to the Makhnovists was the latter's proclamations on the rights of different national minorities to their own language, costume, dress and culture whilst strongly denouncing nationalism and explicitly taking an internationalist position. The Makhnovist ability to attract contingents of these national minorities (apart from only small units of the German speakers) is to their eternal credit.

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Sources: ngnm.vrahokipos.net section (in Greek) on the Greek Makhnovists

www.makhno.ru Vladimir Chop on the Greek Makhnovists

www.makhno.ru Viktor Belash's testimony to the Cheka where he mentions the Mavrodi brothers