Conor McLoughlin
Review: History of the Makhnovist Movement

http://struggle.ws/platform/makhno37.html

theanarchistlibrary.org

Review: History of the Makhnovist Movement

Conor McLoughlin

Contents

A new set of chains

Above all this book is a tragic indictment of Bolshevik leadership and mis-rule. The Bolsheviks clung to the theory that the masses couldn't handle socialism. Workers and peasants proved them wrong by continually throwing up their own organs of democratic economic control. If the facts didn't fit the theory then the facts had to be disposed off. Once again impoverished theory led to impoverished practice.

Arshinov documents the re-emergence of minority class rule. He describes the Bolshevik nationalisation of production as with uncanny accuracy as"a new kind of production relations in which economic dependence of the working class is concentrated in a single fist, the State. In essence this in no way improves the situation of the working class".

The Bolsheviks did realise the political significance of the Makhnovists. Any autonomous movement posing the idea of direct economic control and management by workers and peasants was a political threat. From 1917 onwards the Bolsheviks responded to such threats in one way, physical annihilation.

This book explodes the long list of falsehoods and myths about the Makhnovists. It serves as further evidence (is any more needed?!?) of the authoritarian role of the Bolsheviks in the Russian revolution. Most of all, it serves as an inspiration to all serious class struggle anarchists. It poses clearly the need for anarchists to organise and win the battle of ideas in the working class. This is how we can finally begin to fight to make anarchism a reality.

workers liked the idea of of running their own factories, the nearness of the front and the newness of the idea made them cautious. The railway workers did set up a committee which began investigating new systems of movement and payment but, again, military difficulties prevented further advances. Ekaterinoslav, for example, was under constant bombardment from the Whites just across the river.

IVORY TOWERS

Arshinov attacks the Russian anarchists for almost totally ignoring the Makhnovists. The Bolsheviks saw them as important enough to send in 15,000 troops in 1921 to wipe them out. Too many of the anarchists "slept through" events. It is absolutely vital that this be acknowledged and learnt from.

The only significant number of anarchists to participate as a group were those of the Nabat (Alarm) Confederation. These included the famous Russian anarchist Voline who wrote the preface for this book. They worked mainly in the cultural-educational section, though some fought in the army. Unfortunately, more than few anarchists were content to remain in ivory towers of theoretical abstraction. Their sole contribution was to whine about the military nature of the movement. As we have seen the Makhnovists had no choice in this regard.

They constantly acknowledged that they were weak on theory, mainly due to lack of education. It was essential for all who called themselves anarchists to get stuck in. It is a sad reflection on the political and organisational weaknesses of Russian anarchism that they failed to do so. Though they were in a minority, well organised intervention in groups like Makhno's might have had an important influence on the course of events in the revolution. Arshinov rightly accuses them of total disorganisation and irresponsibility leading to "impoverished ideas and futile practice".

THE TREATY OF Brest-Litovsk concluded by the Bolsheviks in March 1918, which saw Russia get out of the bloodbath of World War 1, handed most of the Ukraine over to the German and Austro-Hungarian empires. Needless to say, the inhabitants were not consulted. Neither were they too pleased. Various insurgent movements arose and gradually consolidated. The Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine led by Nester Makhno, an anarchist-communist from the village of Gulyai Polye, quickly won the support of the South for it's daring attacks on the Austro-Hungarian puppet, Hetman Skoropadsky and the Nationalist Petliurists.

This book is an extremely valuable eye-witness account from Peter Arshinov - one of the main participants and editor of their paper Put'k Svobode (The Road to Freedom). Arshinov and Makhno were later to draw up the Platform of the Libertarian Communists in during their Paris exile in 1926 (see Workers Solidarity 34).

It may seem strange that the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine (its proper title) is constantly referred to as the "Makhnovists". Anarchists are the last people to engage in blind hero-worship. At its height it had 30,000 volunteer combatants under arms. While all were inspired by anarchist ideas, only a small minority had worked-out anarchist views. Through the army's cultural-educational section political discussion and learning was encouraged but the majority of combatants and supporters continued to call themselves "Makhnovists" and to this day the name has stuck.

ENEMIES ON ALL SIDES

Arshinov's book mainly consists of a blow-by-blow account of the movement along with some consideration of nationalism and anti-semitism, and short biographies of some of the main Makhnovists. It's an easy non-academic read. However the book is

an almost exclusively military account of the movement. Arshinov makes no apologies for this. Of necessity the Makhnovists spent most of their time in military engagements. Over the three years 1918-1921 they had to fight the forces of the Hetman, White Generals Denikin and Wrangel, nationalists like Petliura and Grigor'ev and, of course, the Bolsheviks.

Makhno and his commanders won against odds of 30:1 and more on occasion. One example was on September 25th 1919 at the village of Peregonovka when the Makhnovists after retreating 400 miles found themselves surrounded by Denikin's army. They succeeded in turning Denikin flank with a tiny force of cavalry and in the ensuing panic Denikin's army were routed. This action probably saved Petrograd from the Whites and was one of the most massive defeats inflicted on them.

Of course Makhno's military skill, his use of cavalry and mounted infantry to cover huge distances, isn't directly of relevance to us. What is of interest is how the Makhnovists could fight and win as a revolutionary army with deep roots among the Ukrainian peasants and workers. The insurgent army was an entirely democratic military formation. It's recruits were volunteers drawn from peasants and workers. It elected it's officers and codes of discipline were worked out democratically. Officers could be, and were, recalled by their troops if they acted undemocratically.

Wherever they appeared they were welcomed by the local population who supplied food and lodging as well as information about about enemy forces. The Bolsheviks and Whites were forced to rely on massive campaigns of terror against the peasantry, with thousands being killed and imprisoned.

The speed at which areas changed hands in the Ukraine made it virtually impossible for them to do engage in widescale constructive activity to further the social revolution. "It seemed as though a giant grate composed of bayonets shuttled back and forth across the region , from North to South and back again, wiping out all traces of creative social construction". This excellent metaphor of

Arshinov's sums up the difficulty. However, unlike the Bolsheviks, the Makhnovists did not use the war as an excuse for generalised repression and counter-revolution. On the contrary they used every opportunity to drive the revolution forward.

The social revolution

The Makhnovist movement was almost exclusively poor peasant in origin. The very existence of a revolutionary peasant movement made a mockery of Trotsky's and Lenin's conception of the peasants as automatically reactionary. Peasants who made up the vast majority of the USSR's population were seen as a brutalised and unthinking mass who could not organise collectively. When not faced with bayonets and forced requisitions they related naturally towards the workers in the towns and cities. The Makhnovists provided a unifying force encouraging and protecting peasant expropriations of landlords and large farmers (kulaks). They spread the idea of voluntary collectives and tried to make links with urban workers. Their motto was "worker give us your hand".

Around Gulyai-Polye several communes sprang up. These include the originally named communes 1,2 and 3, as well as the "Rosa Luxembourg" commune with 300 members. Several regional congresses of peasants and workers were organised. A general statute supporting the creation of 'free soviets' (elected councils of workers', soldiers' and peasants' delegates) was passed though little could be done towards it's implementation in much of the Ukraine because of the constantly changing battlefront.

The Makhnovists held the cities of Ekaterinoslav and Aleksandrovsk for a few months after their September 1919 defeat of Denikin. In both cities full political rights, freedom of association and press freedom were established. In Ekaterinoslav five political papers appeared, including a Bolshevik one. Several conferences of workers and peasants were held in Aleksandrovsk. Though