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A Siberian Makhnovschina?

1900–1923: Anarchism in Siberia

Frank Mintz

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Summer 2004

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Contents

Exile	6
Soviets	7
Suspicions	9

including the editor of the paper Black Flag and the irregular partisans Khanienko and Ustimenko. 38 more, again including Maximalists, Left Socialist-Revolutionaries and anarchists, were arrested in Blagoviestchensk on April 10th. A “White Guard” plot was fabricated by the Cheka at a trial of those arrested who were arraigned at Chita. Eight were shot and ten others sentenced to long prison sentences. As an opponent of the Bolsheviks wrote in a letter: “backed up by the Left Socialist-revolutionaries and the Anarchists, the workers and peasants put up during the elections to the Soviet their own independent revolutionary but non-partisan ticket and refused to vote for the Communists”.

Academics like Paul Avrich, along with militants like Voline, Gorelik and Archinov, have given us only a sketch of anarchism in Siberia. The important role of anarchism there has remained obscured.

Now the work of Anatoli Shtirbul has cast a spotlight on this region and its anarchist history.

His work ‘The anarchist movement in Siberia in the first quarter of the 20th century: Anti-statist revolt and non-statist self-organisation of the workers’ has been published by Omsk University in 1996 but as yet has not appeared in any translations in Western European countries. His two-volume work contains many documents from the archives of both the Cheka (the Bolshevik secret police and chief arm of repression) and the Communist Party, as well as eyewitness accounts from different sources.

Shtirbul is certainly no anarchist, let alone sympathetic towards anarchism, but he has painstakingly demonstrated its influence on both revolutionaries and general population of Siberia.

Shtirbul links up the anarchist tradition with the secular traditions in Siberia. He instances the tendency towards anti-feudal autonomy of the Cossack groups, the strong links of solidarity between the peasants and bandit groups, the anti-statism of dissident Russian Orthodox groups and the influence of Protestantism in the region in the 19th century, and the existence of cooperative practices among both peasants and workers. Bakunin has often been ridiculed, including by Marxists, for his support for bandit groups within the Russian Empire. This work gives some credence towards his recognition of the social importance of banditism and its radical possibilities. In fact Shtirbul, basing himself on the work of Lojdikov, believes that Bakunin deepened his libertarian convictions whilst exiled in Siberia. This was certainly the case with Kropotkin, who admitted as such in his memoirs.

Exile

The presence of anarchists in the prisons as well as in exile in Siberia as the result of their activities against the Tsarist regime must count as one of the foundations of Siberian anarchism.

The first specific anarchist groups appeared in 1902, and their social appearance date from the first Russian Revolution of 1905–1906. Very much in a minority, anarchists concentrated on oral or written propaganda. The failures of the reformist parties and the repression that followed the revolution, coincided with a worsening economic situation and fall in the standard of living. This pushed a section of politically active workers towards anarchist positions. The Tomsk anarchist group, meeting in 1907, decided to spread propaganda through spoken and printed word, agitation in the armed forces to prepare an insurrection, legal activity via co-operatives, unions and solidarity funds, expropriation of the State banks and private rich individuals, terrorism against certain individuals. In collaboration with the Social-Democrats, the Social-Revolutionaries, and non-party revolutionaries various armed actions took place: an aborted uprising in 1907 at Omsk, and one in 1911 at Tchita, with the desertion of 30% of a regiment. Acts of expropriation and terrorism were equally numerous.

In 1914 a conference of anarchist communists took place in a village in Irkutsk province. 30 people participated and established a double line, anarchist propaganda and terrorism against the representatives of power. At the same time there developed the splitting of the anarchist movement into three currents, anarchist communism, anarcho-syndicalism and anarchist individualism. Shtirbul estimates 100 anarchists compared to 3,000 Social-Democrats and 1,000 Socialist-Revolutionaries for the period 1906–1907. In 1917 Shtirbul estimates 46 anarchist groups and clubs with 800 militants.

The Russian Revolution of 1917 turned rapidly in favour of the Bolsheviks, who quickly got control of all the apparatus of government. Occupied with resisting the counterrevolution of the Whites,

sparked a new insurrection in the Tomsk region, grouping 2,500 to 3,000 fighters.

Defeated, Lubkov attempted to negotiate a truce with the Bolsheviks before vanishing into the taiga with some of his partisans. In January 1921 Novoselov participated in a new insurrection at Julianikh. His peasant army gathered together 5–10,000 combatants. In an extremely desperate situation, he attempted to form an alliance with anti-communist forces, including the Whites. He hoped to turn against them once victory over the Bolsheviks was gained (the Makhnovists in the Ukraine refused such an alliance on political principle and actually went into military alliance with the Reds, though the latter turned on them). Both the stances of the Novoselov and Makhno movements point to a lesson of the need for complete autonomy from any anti-anarchist current). Novoselov was quickly crushed. Shtirbul believes that the “Siberian Makhnovschina” was a contributory factor in the adoption by the Bolsheviks of the New Economic Policy (NEP).

The Bolsheviks continued their war against those who had heroically fought in the underground resistance against Kolchak’s Whites. In 1923, in another onslaught against revolutionary forces outside the Bolshevik Party, the staff of the irregular units at Nikolayevsk on the Amur were shot — these included the Maximalist Nina Lebedieva and the anarchist Triapitzin (the Maximalists were a split from the Socialist Revolutionary Party, who came to adopt positions very close to anarchism). These irregulars had defeated the Japanese invading forces. Also shot were members of the local soviet, the Communist Party member Sasov and others who had questioned the setting up of the Far Eastern Republic as an artificial buffer state by the Bolsheviks. Between February and April of that year mass arrests of anarchists, Maximalists and Socialist-Revolutionaries took place. Worst of all were the actions in Vladivostok on February 26th when members of the underground workers organisations and of irregular units were rounded up. These included 8 Maximalists and 4 anarchists

control. When this clashed with the centralizing tendencies of the Bolsheviks, growing antipathy resulted.

Resistance to the incorporation of partisan units was organised around the units commanded by the anarchists Novoselov, Rogov, Lubkov and Plotnikov, in the Altai, Tomsk and Semipalatinsk regions. The anarchists led a campaign for the creation of self-organised peasant collectives and the freeing of Rogov, which they achieved in April 1920. On 1st May that year, there was a massive anarchist meeting in the village of Julianikh, 120 km northeast of Barnaul, where speakers paid their respects to the victims of White terror. A thousand partisans took part and several thousand peasants attended, flying red and black flags. Two days later an insurrection broke out. A thousand people gathered.

Novoselov, who had commanded a unit of one hundred anarchist fighters which had ranged nearly one thousand kilometres in the Altai and Kuzbas regions, from December 1918 to December 1919, proposed the creation of an Anarchist Federation of the Altai (AFA) which was supported by Rogov and seven other commanders.

The military detachment grew to one thousand and received the support of thousands of peasants from the Pritchensk region. This insurrection grew thanks to the activities of the AFA in the Red Army, the militia and the Cheka (the last extremely significant as it was the armed wing of repression of the Bolsheviks and indicates the level of disaffection). Anarchist partisans occupied the north-east region of Barnaul and the Biiski, Kuznetskov and Novonikolaev regions.

Despite orders from the Moscow centre, the local Bolshevik authorities held their fire, probably because they feared that disaffection would spread to other army units. Once the Red Army began to attack, the Rogov units split into small units which dispersed throughout the taiga.

In June 1920 Rogov was captured and committed suicide (?) Novoselov continued the struggle up to September 1920, before going into hiding with his partisans. At the same time Lubkov

the other revolutionary groups attempted nevertheless to establish popular bodies opposed to the Bolsheviks.

During this process, the anarchists split into pro-Soviet and anti-Soviet tendencies. In Siberia, the anarchists started a constructive activity, notably organising among the miners of Keremovo. This was despite internal problems linked to the presence of “criminal elements” in its ranks.

In September and October, workers seized the factories and workshops. Shtirbul refers to a “spontaneous anarchism” without apparent link to the anarchist organisations. This explains Lenin’s anxiety that the situation was getting out of control of the Bolsheviks. At Irkutsk, where the reactionary general Kornilov was in control, there was a failed uprising of the garrison in September 1917, but equally there was anarchist agitation among the garrisons at Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Tcheremkhovo, Semipalatinsk, Tchita and among the fleet on Lake Baikal. Whilst the activity of the Socialist-Revolutionaries and the Mensheviks rapidly decreased, that of the Bolsheviks and the anarchists grew. The anarchists were strongly implanted in the regions of Tomsk, Krasnoyarsk, Irkutsk and around Lake Baikal. These 4 regions covered nearly three and a half million square kilometres, 12.7 per cent of Siberia.

Soviets

Anarchist books — Kropotkin, Reclus, and Malatesta — began to be published by Novomirski Editions as well as the appearance of newspapers like Sibirskiy Anarkhist (The Siberian Anarchist) in Krasnoyarsk and Buntovnik (The Insurgent) in Tomsk. Conflicts began to develop between anarchists and Bolsheviks.

During the winter of 1917–18 the Krasnoyarsk anarcho-syndicalists declared themselves opposed to the “the taking of power in the Soviets” and affirmed that they were prepared to

struggle against the parties that left no place for “proletarian revolutionaries”. In spring 1918, the Tomsk anarchists defended an organisation of soviets that truly expressed the interest of the workers. In the course of 1918 there could be traced an anarchist presence at different congresses of soviets: 7 delegates out of 104 for West Siberia, at Irkutsk in January. Beyond these figures, certain details indicate an anarchist influence in these structures. At the all-Siberia congress of soviets, which took place in February at Irkutsk, there were 8 anarchist delegates out of 202. The congress elected to its direction 25 Bolsheviks, 11 Socialist-Revolutionaries, 4 Maximalists, 4 anarchists and 2 Internationalist Social-Democrats (just over 45% of the direction were therefore non-Bolshevik).

Shtirbul recognises the growing influence of the anarchists among railway workers and peasants, reinforced by the soldiers of anarchist persuasion sent to Siberia.

Interestingly, he comes to the same conclusions as Makhno and Arshinov – it was the lack of coordination and an absence of tactical unity that hindered the development of anarchism comparable to that of the Bolsheviks on the level of Siberia and Russia.

The Bolsheviks moved against the anarchists in spring 1918, using the Cheka to attack them and imprison them. But the disarming of anarchist units in Siberia by the Bolsheviks was hindered by the attack by the Whites led by Kolchak in March 1918. These units, as well as units organised by the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries, fought too efficiently for the Bolsheviks to allow themselves to destroy them. They were in the first rank of the underground resistance when the Whites occupied Siberia. In autumn 1918 anarchist peasant guerrilla groups appeared in the regions already mentioned. Novoselov was commander of a group of tens of combatants singing The March of the Anarchists and flying red and black flags inscribed with the slogan “Anarchy is the Mother of Order” (a sentence from Reclus also used on

Makhnovist flags). Other anarchist detachments elected their commanders.

Shtirbul considers that a significant number of the 140,000 revolutionary combatants in Siberia were under anarchist influence. Like the Makhnovist detachments who contributed in a decisive fashion to the defeat of the White general Denikin in the Ukraine, the Siberian anarchist partisans (Novoselov and Rogov) contributed to the pushing back of Kolchak. From a strictly military point of view, the support of the anarchists in the struggle against the Whites was indispensable. This explains why, despite orders from Moscow, there were severe problems with the crushing of Siberian anarchism, as local Bolsheviks regarded the anarchists as honest revolutionaries.

Suspicions

The Communist Party had problems in Siberia with the designation by Moscow of leaders from outside the region and the nomination of ex-Tsarist officers as Red Army leaders. These circumstances gave validity to anarchist suspicions about the Bolsheviks and their proposals that the revolution be controlled by the masses themselves. Within the Fourth Army of Peasant Partisans led by Marmontov, the commander M.V. Kozyr proposed that the soviets be organised without the Bolsheviks. The Communist Party leadership had him removed and had a Bolshevik put in his place. Immediately a mass assembly of the garrison voted through the following resolution: “The revolutionary committees of the military elected by us have no power... no-one can dismiss our representatives and replace them with people that we do not know...”.

Kozyr himself said that “Let us name the best among us choose those who merit our confidence and who understand our needs.” A report of January 1920 for the Altai region by the government noted that the peasants had expected the development of regional