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The Many Lives of Max Chernyak

Malcolm Archibald

April 2011

Maxim Matveyevich Chernyak¹ belongs to the generation of Russian anarchists who took part in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, defended the new revolutionary society against its reactionary enemies, and then were crushed by their erstwhile allies the Communists. It is not easy to piece together his life story because he spent most of his life underground, in a state of illegality. In Chernyak's case an exacerbating factor is that in the historical literature he is often confounded with people with similar names.

He was born in 1883 in Grodno, a city located in the Russian "Pale of Settlement", into a poor Jewish family. Chernyak was trained as a barber, a trade which seems to have been a family tradition. Throughout his life he practiced this trade, when not otherwise engaged as a terrorist, secret agent, or military commander.

¹ Chernyak is the transliteration from Russian. Max Tcherniak or Max Cherniak is transliterated from Yiddish. Czerniak is the Polish spelling. Charnik appears to be an Americanization of the name; possibly from an immigration official mangling it on paperwork (which was common).

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Retrieved on 19th May 2021 from
www.katesharpleylibrary.net

Published in *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* No. 66,
April 2011

theanarchistlibrary.org

Chernyak first became active in the anarchist movement in the nearby city of Bialystok in 1904–1905, joining the **Chernoje Znamia** [Black Banner] group which carried out “motiveless” terrorist attacks on the bourgeoisie. Chernyak worked closely with one of the leaders of the group, Vladimir Striga. The group was composed mainly of young people and its membership reached the hundreds. The charismatic Striga would on occasion address crowds as large as 3,000 to 5,000. The Bialystok anarchists established close contacts with similar groups in Ukraine, especially in Odessa and Yekaterinoslav. In the subsequent tsarist repression, most of the militants of the group were martyred. Striga fled abroad to Paris, but stumbled while carrying a homemade bomb and blew himself up.

Chernyak also found shelter in France in 1907, but soon moved on to the U.S.A. where he took part in organizing the Russian section of the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW published newspapers in a dozen languages aimed at immigrant workers). During his time in the U.S. Chernyak resumed his trade as a barber and lived with his wife Rosa and two children in New York and, later, Chicago. In the latter city the whole family would attend events organized by the Russian anarchist emigrant community.

But Chernyak was not ready to settle down. In 1917 he returned to Russia with his family and immediately threw himself into revolutionary work. He went to the Donbas industrial region of Ukraine and organized a detachment of the Black Guard based in the city of Makeyevka. In the first part of 1918 many Black Guard detachments sprang up all over the former Russian Empire to defend the Revolution against its enemies. In the case of the Makeyevka detachment the enemies were the nearby Cossacks of the White Don. While not denying the military effectiveness of this unit, the Communist authorities repeatedly accused it of engaging in banditry and harbouring criminal elements. In May 1918 they disarmed the detachment

but then quickly had to re-arm it again to throw it into battle against the menacing White Guards.

Later in 1918 Chernyak's detachment was re-organized as a regiment of the Red Army, just being formed. Chernyak caught on with a unit led by the anarchist sailor Anatoly Zheleznyakov, famous for dismissing the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. Chernyak organized the kontrrazvedka (counter-intelligence section) of this detachment and it was here that he first formed an association with the Donbas anarchist Lev Zadov, a huge man of unusual strength acquired hauling slag for blast furnaces.

Zheleznyakov was in constant conflict with the Communist authorities, and in September 1918 Chernyak left his post in good standing to engage in underground work in the Donbas against the German occupying forces and the puppet Hetman regime. When German power in Ukraine collapsed, Chernyak's partisans helped the Communists to capture Kharkov in December. The anarchist Boris Yelensky, also a returnee from the USA, described an encounter with Chernyak at this time:

“I noticed one man who was draped with weapons from head to foot and who hurled commands to the partisans. He looked so familiar that I was certain I had met him previously. ... he approached us, called out my name and threw his arms around me. I had to peer through his long beard for a moment before I recognized him as Max Cherniak, the barber from Chicago.... None of us could have dreamed that he possessed the capacity to lead a partisan band and wage battles against well-organized units of the White Army. I asked him how all this had come about and he replied simply that, in revolutionary times all kinds of miracles occur.”

Around the same time he joined the Confederation of Anarchists of Ukraine, generally referred to as the Nabat confederation after the name of its printed organ (“nabat” means “alarm” or “tocsin”). This urban-based organization was created at a conference in the Russian city of Kursk in November 1918 and has been little studied in comparison to the mainly rural Makhnovist movement. It aimed to unite all Ukrainian anarchists: anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, and individualists. Eventually branches were established in a number of Ukrainian cities, most of which issued their own editions of *Nabat* (for a time there was a Gulai-Polye *Nabat*, which was distinct from the Makhnovist press). The organization had as many as 2,500 members at the height of its influence, but for most of its existence had to operate under illegal, or quasi-legal conditions, under the Whites, Reds, or Nationalists. Unlike the Makhnovshchina, it never carved out any territory in which to carry out social experiments and concentrated on propaganda work.

The Nabat confederation provided the Makhnovist movement with valuable resources in terms of cultural- educational workers and propagandists. It also supplied hardened veterans of the anarchist underground like Chernyak, who found a natural home in the Makhnovist secret service.

In January 1919 Chernyak ran into Makhno’s adjutant Viktor Belash in Kharkov, where Belash had been sent to negotiate with the Bolsheviks. When Belash returned to Gulai-Polye, he brought along Chernyak, as well as Lev Zadov and the latter’s younger brother Danilo. Chernyak proceeded to organize the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka making use of the Zadov brothers and other experienced anarchist militants. He also took on other responsibilities, being elected to the Military-Revolutionary Council for the Gulai-Polye region, and a delegate to the 2nd Congress of Soviets in Gulai-Polye in February 1919. At this Congress he expressed his view of the Communist dictatorship as follows:

- V. Danilov and T. Shanin, eds. **Нестор Махно. Крестьянское движение на Украине. 1918–1921: Документы и материалы.** [Nestor Makhno. Peasant movement in Ukraine. 1918–1921: Documents and materials]. Moscow, 2006.
- R. Drinnon and A. M. Drinnon, ed. **Nowhere at Home. Letters from Exile of Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman.** New York, 1975.
- V. Savchenko. **Авантюристы Гражданской Войны.** [Adventurers of the Civil War]. Moscow, 2000.
- V. Savchenko, **Махно** [Makhno]. Kharkov, 2005.
- L. D. Yarutsky. **Махно и махновцы.** [Makhno and the Makhnovists]. Maryupol, 1995.
- B. Yelensky, **In the Social Storm: Memoirs of the Russian Revolution**, accessed at libcom.org

But Chernyak was still not willing to give up revolutionary work. He opened a barber shop in Warsaw in 1924 and established contact with the revived Nabat confederation, now functioning underground in Ukraine. Chernyak made trips into the Soviet Union as a courier for the anarchist movement there, but his last trip ended prematurely when he was arrested by the Polish police near the border. By this time the anarchist underground was thoroughly infiltrated by Soviet (and probably Polish) spies but Chernyak himself seems to have been incorruptible.

Despite facing serious charges in Poland, Chernyak managed to extricate himself again and made his way to Paris, to the Russian anarchist émigrés grouped around the journal *Delo Truda* who included, notably, Makhno and Peter Arshinov. Chernyak did not agree with the controversial “Platform” developed by this group and soon fingered one member of its members as a GPU (Soviet secret police) agent. By 1930 Chernyak had emigrated to Buenos Aires with his family. At this point he disappears from the historical record, although there is evidence his children eventually returned to the U.S.A., where they born.

Chernyak may have outlived all his known associates in the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka, who either perished in the Civil War or, if they survived that long, in Stalin’s purges. As a result of his sentence in 1923, Max Chernyak, who waged an implacable war of terror against several different regimes, enjoys the official status in Russia today of a “victim of political terror in the USSR”.

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V. M. Chop and I. I. Liman. **Вольний Бердянськ**. [Free Berdyansk]. Zaporozhye, 2007.

“A handful of people seized power and oppressed an entire nation.”

Drawing on his experiences of fighting the White Cossacks in 1918, Chernyak exercised duties as a military commander of units which reached the brigade size.

In the first months of 1919, the Makhnovist armed forces became part of the Red Army as the result of the alliance with the Communists. The two parties to this alliance did not trust one another in the least and only the common threat from the Whites armies approaching from the south and east held them together. In March – April 1919 the Makhnovists broke through to the Azov coast in the south, seizing the important ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol. Chernyak set up shop (literally, it turns out) in Berdyansk from where he directed the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka .

When the German-Austrian armies occupied Ukraine in 1918, the landowners and other bourgeois elements who had fled in 1917 were restored to their former properties. But with the collapse of German-Austrian power in the region later in the year, these people had to flee again. For many in Left Bank Ukraine, the only escape route was to the south, to the sea ports where they could catch a steamer that would take them to safety. But the Makhnovists captured the Azov coast so swiftly that many of these wealthy refugees were left cowering in their hotel rooms. A White survivor left a lurid description of Chernyak:

“... he was a person of slight build with a perpetually smiling face, a scruffy little beard, and crafty-looking eyes. Despite his mild-appearing demeanour, he was ruthless towards merchants and officers. Since he was a barber, he loved... to shave and clip. This love for his trade he was able to put into practice in these port cities... He set

up his own barber shops in the first class hotels where, disdainingly his shaving instruments, he pulled out beards with his stubby fingers. Instead of applying soap, he lathered his victims with a shompol [flexible rod used for cleaning rifle bores].... Those who visited his shops did not return. After torture these people were transported to the harbour and put under the cold waves.... As a barber he was a hero to the workers and a terror to the bourgeoisie and officers.”

But Chernyak had more to worry about than tracking down counter-revolutionaries. Berdyansk had a system of dual power, for although the Makhnovists had captured the city, the Bolsheviks set up their own Revkom (revolutionary council) with a branch of the Cheka (secret police) in competition with the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka. In April 1919 Chernyak went to Gulai-Polye to complain to Makhno in person (the conversation is reported in detail by Belash):

“I don’t know what to do about the Bolsheviks,” said Chernyak. “The Cheka is operating alongside my kontrrazvedka. The worst thing is, they have recruited some of our old staff! They carry on like hooligans and they try to interfere with our work in every possible way. They’re arresting our own people who disappear without a trace. The Bolshevik cell in the city is ruling by this means.”

“What swine! I told you – don’t mess around with those people. Get rid of them – for good!” responded an exasperated Makhno.

Makhno’s superior in the Red Army was the Bolshevik Pavel Dybenko, whom Makhno was in the habit of referring to as “that damned sailor”. Dybenko left memoirs of the Civil War which have never been published and even today are not readily accessible. The Ukrainian historian Victor Savchenko was able to consult these memoirs and discovered

that in March-April 1919 Dybenko was constantly scheming to murder Makhno and his commanders. Thanks to his kontrrazvedka, Makhno was well aware of Dybenko’s intentions and countered this menace by forming a secret army headed by Chernyak. This unit, not mentioned in official documents, included as many as 1400 Makhnovists and protected the anarchist “liberated zone” from Bolshevik intrusions from the north.

When Makhno was declared an outlaw by the Red authorities in June 1919 most of the outsiders left the movement, at least temporarily. Chernyak joined a commando squad organized by the inveterate anarchist Marusya Nikiforova. Experienced at underground work herself, Nikiforova divided the squad into three groups of about 15 each: one group was to go to Kharkov and try to free the Makhnovist commanders imprisoned there by the Reds; one group was to go to Rostov and assassinate Denikin; the third group was to go to Siberia and assassinate Kolchak. Nikiforova, like Chernyak, had graduated from being an underground anarchist terrorist to commanding military units. Rather than abandoning the Makhnovist movement, it is more likely they decided to pursue its goals by other means. None of their schemes were successful. Chernyak was part of the group which took off for Siberia and may have taken part in the partisan movement there; the Reds shot Kolchak themselves without any help from him.

According to one source, Chernyak returned to the Makhnovist movement and resumed his post as head of the kontrrazvedka in early 1921. In any case Chernyak was arrested by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd in the same year, the first of a series of arrests. On May 11 1923 he was sentenced to two years exile in the Narym region of Siberia (near Tomsk) which he considered virtually a death sentence. In protest he went on a 28-day hunger strike and gained a release of a few months. Suffering from ill health due to mistreatment in prison, he and his family were finally permitted to go abroad.