The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright

May Picqueray
The Makhnovist Movement
1967

Retrieved on 10th September 2021 from
forgottenanarchism.wordpress.com

theanarchistlibrary.org

The Makhnovist Movement

May Picqueray

1967

Paris, March 14th, 1967

Dear Sir,

I have received, over a month ago now, your letter, and I wished I could have answered it sooner. A stupid incident, a fall, a broken kneecap, and annoying care are the causes of this delay.

You will find attached an excerpt of Nestor Makhno's life. Pardon me if I let myself give some details in some places, but if I hadn't stopped myself I would have given you even more details, as passionate as I am about Makhno's life. Please excuse me, and I remain at your disposal if you need any precision.

I am too glad to have been able to please you, I pray you to accept, Sir, my best wishes.

May Picqueray

Nestor Makhno

Nestor Makhno was born on October 27th, 1889, in Goulai-Pole, a district of Alexandrovsk, in the Ukraine, in a poor peasant family.

He was about 1m65 high; when I met him, in 1923, he weighed no more than 60 kilos. In good health, he must have weighed more, because he had large shoulders and must have been stocky. His hair was brown, his eyes light, clear, deep set in their sockets; precocious lines marked his face, as well as the scar from a bullet which had entered the back of his neck and had exited through his cheek. He had many injuries all over his body, sabre wounds, bullet wounds, one of which had shattered his ankle, which gave him a slight limp.

He was 10 months old when his father died and left him with his 4 brothers in the care of his mother. At the age of 7, he worked as a shepherd in his village. At 8 he went to school, but only during the winters. In the summer, he had to look after sheep. At 12, he left school to work as farmhand for German kulaks who owned many rich farms in the Ukraine. Already at that time he professed his hatred for exploiters. He then worked as a foundry worker in a factory in his village. He had no political creed at this time. It was the 1905 revolution which made him leave the circle of peasants and workers of his village. He met political organisations and joined the ranks of the anarchists where he became a tireless militant.

In 1906, he fell into the hands of the tsarist authorities which condemned him to hang; because of his young age, his sentence was commuted into life in prison. In the prison of Boutirki, where he did his time, in Moscow, he learnt grammar, literature, mathematics, and political economy. To tell the truth, prison was the school where Makhno gained the historical and political knowledge which helped him greatly in his revolutionary work. But it is also in prison that Makhno compromised his health. As he couldn't stand the crushing of his personality which all forced labour convicts were subjected to, he rebelled against the penitentiary authorities and was perpetually in isolation, where, because of the cold and damp, he contracted tuberculosis. During 9 years in detention, he was always in irons because of bad behaviour. He was freed

not wish for a new campaign to be led among the workers at that time.

May Picqueray

in 1917, like all the other political prisoners, by the insurrection of the Moscow proletariat on March 1st.

He went back to his village, gathered the peasants, founded a farmhands' trade union, organised a free commune and a local peasants' soviet. When the Austro-Germans occupied the Ukraine, he formed battalions of workers and peasants to fight against the invaders. The local bourgeoisie put a price on his head and he had to hide for a while. German and Ukrainian military authorities burnt his mother's house and shot his older brother, a war invalid.

Then there was the fight against Petliura, in September and October 1918 (the Petliurovschina was a movement of the Ukrainian bourgeoisie), the peasants were enrolled by force, and often deserted to join Makhno. Petliura was very hostile to the organisation of free communes, federalist soviets, and, as he hadn't been able to convince Makhno of his "error", he engaged in armed struggle against him, but he was faced with a very strong army and his troops were soon killed.

The statists fear a free people, the mortal enemy, the "authority" soon manifested itself, and from both sides at once. From the South-West, Denikin's army was moving up, and from the North, the communist state army was coming down. Denikin arrived first. He was not expecting such resistance and his troops were soon defeated.

Statists fear a free people, and its mortal enemy, the "authority" soon showed up, and from two sides at once. From the South-West, Denikin's army was marching up, from the North, the communist state army was marching down. Denikin arrived first. He was not expecting such resistance and had to retreat towards the Don and the Azov sea, where his army established a 100 km front. For 6 months, the battle raged; the hatred of Denikin's officers took awful proportions, they burned and massacred everything on their path. Denikin was offering half a million roubles for Makhno's head. In January 1919, Makhno seized a convoy of 100 wagons of wheat belonging to the Denikin's supporters, he decided to de-

liver them to the workers in Moscow and Petrograd; a delegation of Makhnovists accompanied it and were warmly welcomed by the Moscow soviet.

Bolsheviks appeared in the territories of the Makhnovtchina in March 1919, under a benevolent guise; an ideological struggle then started; Makhno saw in them a great danger for the freedom of the region, and thought it was mainly necessary to concentrate all forces to fight the common enemy; it is for that purpose that the junction of the Makhnovist and Red armies was made. But the bolsheviks wanted to install their authoritarian regime, by arresting thse who refused to submit to it. They tried to assassinate Makhno several times. A campaign of slanders was launched and led by Trotsky himself at a time when the White danger was becoming huge, as Denikin was receiving reinforcements in the Makhnovist sector thanks to the massive arrival of Caucasians. Trotsky wanted to let Denikin crush the Makhnovists and push him back afterwards; he made a cruel mistake and underestimated Denikin's forces. Bolsheviks opened the front in front of Denikin, and Makhno saw himself be bypassed by Denikin's armies. The situation was tragic, because even though Makhno received many volunteers, he had nothing to arm them with, since the bolsheviks had cut all supplies and sabotaged the region's defences. The peasants defended their region with axes, piques, old hunting rifles; almost all of them were massacred. The bolsheviks abandoned the Ukraine, and Makhno had to face Denikin's hordes on his own. A few Red regiments joined Makhno's cause along with their equipment. Red regiments from Crimea also joined with him. An uninterrupted battle lasted for over two months, with advances, setbacks, lack of ammunition, encircling movements, lightning advances of the Makhnovists, and the annihilation of Denikin's counter-revolution by Makhno's forced in the Autumn of 1919. Bolsheviks then came back to the Ukraine and Makhno received Trotsky's order to leave for the Polish front with his troops. He refused. Makhno and his fighters were declared outlaws. For 9

I knew Trotsky personally, in Paris, before the revolution, at the café La Rtonde, where revolutionary students such as myself met. I considered him as someone bright but machiavellian, ready to do anything to reach his goals. I saw him again in 1923, at the 2nd syndicalist congress in Moscow, where I was a delegate with a mandate of opposition to joining the 3rd International. I had contacted, in Berlin, A. Berkman and E. Goldman, who had come back from Russia and gave me many addresses of comrades who had gone underground. I managed to contact some of them, others were in prison. Among those, Mollie Steimer and her partner, Senya Fleshin, interend in the camp of Archangelsk, and condemned to life deportation on the Solovietsky islands. I decided to take advantage of my mandate as a delegate to ask an audience from Trotsjy and obtained it after 8 days. I went to meet him at his Kremlin office with a comrade who wouldn't let me go alone, since the result of the last delegation: our friends Lepetit, Vergeat and R. Lefebvre had disappeared. We later learned that they had drowned while trying to reach France, in rather mysterious circumstances. Trotsky received me with much warmth, he walked towards me smiling, and holding out his hand, but I ostensibly put my hand in my pocket. He asked me why and I couldn't help myself and told him that I could not shake hands with the person who had Makhno's troops massacred, and who was also responsible for the events in Kronstadt. To my surprise he did not get angry, or at least he did not show it. It was not very diplomatic of me, since I came to ask the liberation of Mollie and Senya, but my impetuous character at that time made me act this way. I exposed my objectives to him, asked for the liberation of my friends, the right to visit them in Archangelsk, and told him I was firmly decided not to leave Russia until they were freed. I was granted all of my demands, I had the joy to see my friends free and welcomed them to Paris not long afterwards. He didn't do this by kindness, because he was a hard, even a ferocious man, but the Lepetit-Vergeat affair had made a lot of noise in the syndicalist and anarchist milieus, and Trotsky did

they were arrested by the Gestapo and deported. We never heard from them again.

Among Makhno's companions, I have known Volin very well, who fought alongside Makhno in the Ukraine, was arrested by the bolsheviks and was freed by an anarcho-syndicalist delegation in 1922. He lived in Paris with his family and died in 1945. He rests next to Makhno at the Père-Lachaise. I also knew Arshinov, but I saw him less, we didn't always agree on anarchist principles. He went back to Russia, not only because he was home sick, but because he rallied himself to bolshevik ideas, which was quite surprising for a former Makhnovist companion. Makhno had violent discussions with him on this subject. On the other hand, he got along well with Volin. Arshinov did not drink.

Makhno was not involved in Petliura's death, but it was another Ukrainian, Schwartzbart, who killed him. We were having lunch in a Russian restaurant on the street of the School of Medecine in Paris, with Schwartzbart, Alexander Berkman, Mollie and Senya Elechine, when Petliura got in the restaurant and was recognized by Schwartzbart. Livid, he made no comment, but he came back alone the next day and killed him. He was acquitted by the Assize Court in paris.

About Trotsky, the "superman" as his accomplices now call him in France and beyond, he was excessively proud and nasty, a good polemicist and orator, he became thanks to the confusion of the revolution an "infallible" military dictator, he was not liked by Makhno and with reason: this man could not stand a people being free in his vicinity, organised along Proudhonian and Kropotkinian principles, in perfect disagreement with K. Marx's principles. And because of this, he did not hesitate to have hundreds of thousands Ukrainians killed, men, women, and children, using the most perfidious weapons to lose Makhno in the eyes of the people and soldiers, branding him a bandit, an antisemite, etc. Lenin was in perfect agreement with Trotsky on this issue.

months there was a ruthless struggle. Over 200 000 peasants and workers were shot by Trotsky; as many were taken prisoners or deported to Siberia. A monstrous campaign of slanders against Makhno was led by the soviet authorities. On top of this, a typhoid epidemic hit the Ukraine. Wrangel showed up in the Spring of 1920, and Makhno's troops then marched and fought for several months until the final defeat of Wrangel in November 1920.

Makhno came back to his village and started his work of education and organisation, but all this creative drive was broken by a new and sudden attack from the bolsheviks, furious at Makhno's success in this domain, as well as at his military success.

On November 26th, 1920, Goulai-Pole was encircled, Makhno was there with 240 horsemen. Makhno was only just recovering from an illness and was suffering from his crushed ankle; they launched an attack and knocked over the red cavalry regiment, escaping the enemy's grasp. He regrouped his troops (around 2000 men) who fought like devils, on the left, on the right, to break the encirclement by four army corps: two cavalry and two infantry, launched after him and his men (over 150 000 men). He rushed like a Titan of the legends, towards the North, where workers warned him that a military roadblock was waiting for him, then towards the West, taking fantastic paths of which he alone knew the secret. Hundreds of miles, through fields and plateaus covered with snow and ice. This unequal fight lasted several months, with unceasing battles day and night. In Kiev, in a rocky and hilly country, in full frost, the Makhnovists had to give up their artillery, food and ammunition. Two cavalry divisions of the Red Cosacks Divisions joined the mass of armies launched by the bolsheviks against Makhno. They couldn't escape. No one hoped to get out of it alive. But no one thought of fleeing in shame. They all decided to die together. Makhno escaped this trial with honour. He advanced to the borders of Galicia, crossed the Dniepr again, went up to Koursk, found himself outside of the enemy's circle: the attempt to capture his army had failed. But the unequal duel still did not end. The red

divisions in all of the Ukraine marched to find and block Makhno. The vice tightens again, and the fight to the death resumed. Highs and lows, attacks, victories, setbacks, at the cry of "live free or die fighting". Makhno was shot through his thigh, another through his crotch; carried in a horse cart he regained consciousness and was bandaged: he was losing a lot of blood. He continued to give orders, to sign them; small detachments went here or there. On March 16th, only a small unit was left near Makhno. Enemy cavalry forces charged them, the fighting was fierce. Makhno could not ride, lying on the horse cart, he had to witness this massacre. Five machine gunners from his village told him: "Batko, your life is useful to our cause, this cause which is dear to us, we are going to die soon, you must live, if you see our parents again, give them our farewell." They took him in their arms and carried them in a peasants' car which was passing through, they kissed him and went back to their machine guns which started to fire to prevent the bolsheviks from crossing. The car drove across the fording of a river, Makhno was saved. He started riding again despite everything and renewed contact with his troops in Poltava. He grouped around 2000 men; they decided to march on Kharkov: once again, battles, advances, setbacks against an important army, during the whole Summer of 1921.

In early August 1921, it was decided that because of the severity of his injuries, he would leave the country with a few companions in order to receive a serious treatment. On August 17, he was once again injured 6 times; on the 19th, a new battle with the 17th red cavalry division which camped along the Ingouletz river. Makhno was trapped like a rat; he fought like a lion and lost 17 of his companions. A new injury: bullet went into the back of his neck and came out through his cheek. Once more lying on a cart on august 22nd, on the 26th, a new battle, new loss of old comrades in-arms. On August 28th, Makhno crossed the Dniepr; he never saw his country again; the Ukraine was occupied by the Red Army who imprisoned and killed without mercy.

Makhno arrived in Romania, he was interned with his comrades. He escaped and got to Poland. Arrested, put on trial, he was acquitted. He came to Danzig where he was once more put in jail, escaped with the help of his comrades and settled definitely in Paris.

From time to time, he tried the hint of an action. He mainly used his leisure to write the history of his struggles and of the Ukraine revolution, but he could not finish it. It ends in late 1918. Three volumes were published, the first in Russian and in French; the second and third only in Russian, after his death. He worked in a factory for a while, but, very seriously ill, suffering from his many injuries, not knowing the language of this country and adapting badly to a different atmosphere than what he had known, he lived in Paris a very painful existence, materially and morally. His life abroad was but a long and pitiful agony against which he was unable to fight. His friends helped him to carry the burden of these sad years of decline.

His health was worsening quickly. Admitted in the Tenon hospital, he died there in July 1935. He was cremated at the Père-Lachaise Crematorium, where the urn containing his ashes can be seen.

As an anarcho-syndicalist militant, I had constituted a sort of mutual aid service for foreign comrades: I welcomed them, put them up at mine or with comrades who could do it, I received their mail, they found at my place shelter, meals, in the measure of my limited means, but also comfort. I received Makhno when he first arrived in Paris, along with his wife and daughter, who was then 4. I directed them to some friends in the countryside where they stayed a couple of days, then we found them a small flat in Paris. I then founded with my friend, Louis Lecoin, a Makhno committee, I appealed to comrades in Paris, in the rest of France, internationally, in the US especially, and I could ensure him a daily allowance, not very important, but enough to ensure material needs. And this, until he died. His wife and his daughter opened a small grocery store in Vincennes; during the war, they disappeared. We believe