

A Makhnovist in Africa

Shalom Schwartzbard

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One of the lesser-known heroes of the Ukrainian Revolution 1917–1921 was Shalom (Samuel) Schwartzbard, whose name is alternately given as Sholem Shvartsbard. Hailing from Bessarabia (Moravia) where he was born in 1886, Schwartzbard worked periodically as a watchmaker. He became a revolutionary during the Russian Revolt of 1905 that affected all Russian-occupied territories like Bessarabia — and Poland, where the political prisoner-support organisation the Anarchist Red Cross (later renamed the Anarchist Black Cross, ABC) was founded in that year.

He fled Bessarabia in 1906 following the collapse of the revolt and moved to France in 1910, joined the French Foreign Legion in 1914 on the outbreak of the First World War, was wounded and honourably discharged.

He returned to Odessa, Ukraine, in 1917. Although it is not known whether or not Schwartzbard was a convinced Anarchist, after the outbreak of the revolution he put his legionnaire experience to good use as a guerrilla in the anarchist communist Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine (RIAU) — known as the Makhnovists. The RIAU liberated some 7 million people in the southern Ukraine and controlled large swathes of territory in a battle on five fronts: against the Ukrainian bourgeois nationalists; the Austro-Hungarian invaders; the counter-revolutionary White Armies; the Bolshevik Red Army; and roving bandit gangs.

Some historians claim that Schwartzbard was rather a member of the Red Army, which may either be the usual communist tactic of claiming key activists as their own, or may in fact have been partially true, because many Red Army members deserted to the RIAU which boasted equality among its guerrillas.

In 1919, 14 members of Schwartzbard's family were slaughtered in an anti-Jewish pogrom allegedly initiated by Symon Petliura, chairman of the bourgeois Ukrainian National Republic between 1918 and 1920 — one of the Makhnovists' primary enemies.

As many as 60,000 Ukrainian Jews lost their lives in pogroms at this time. Schwartzbard was involved as an RIAU guerrilla in organising the self-defence of Jewish rural communities against attack, much the same work that the ABC did in the cities.

Historians differ over whether Petliura was personally responsible for the pogroms, but he certainly did little to stop them. In contrast, the RIAU was sternly anti-pogromist, numbered many leading Jewish anarchists in its ranks and publicly assassinated those — including any of its own guerrillas — that it found responsible for having conducted pogroms.

Schwartzbard returned to Paris in 1920. The RIAU was finally defeated by the Red Army in 1921 and the Ukrainian Revolution was crushed by red reactionaries — and red revolutionaries who were lied to by the Bolshevik bureaucracy that the RIAU was a white, pogromist bandit force.

Many RIAU survivors, including the brilliant guerrilla warfare strategist Nestor Makhno, also settled in Paris. Makhno went on to co-author the “Organisational Platform of the Libertarian Communists”, which re-emphasised the anarchist mass organisational tradition by calling for them to be ideologically and tactically unified in their organisations. The “Platform” has inspired numerous anarchist organisations across the world, including the ZACF here in southern Africa.

Meanwhile, Petliura, who had struck up a friendship with Polish leader Jozef Piłsudski (who later staged a coup d’état in May 1926), fled Poland in disguise in 1923, travelling via Budapest, Zurich and Geneva to Paris where he settled in October 1924.

There, in the Latin Quarter, he headed up the UNR government-in-exile and published the paper “Tryzub” (Trident). Schwartzbard gained French citizenship in 1925.

Schwartzbard became aware that Petliura was also living in Paris and he began to stalk the UNR leader. On 26 May 1926, Schwartzbard assassinated Petliura in broad daylight as he was walking in the street, proclaiming loudly as he fired his fatal shots that he was avenging the pogroms. Schwartzbard waited quietly at the scene for the police to arrest him.

He was put on trial for murder and defended by the famed North African leftist lawyer Henri Torres. Described by one of his enemies as “a communist, an anarchist... who is never indifferent”, Torres had previously successfully defended the famous Spanish anarchist guerrillas Buenaventura Durruti, Francisco Ascaso and Gregorio Jover, plus the Catalan separatist Francisco Macia, during the Primo de Rivera dictatorship. He later went on to defeat a charge in 1951 against CNT-in-exile secretary-general Jose Peirats (author of the anarcho-syndicalist CNT’s “official” account of Spain, “Anarchists in the Spanish Revolution”) and two other CNT leaders despite Torres having joined the French Communist Party.

The prosecution suggested that Schwartzbard was actually acting on behalf of Soviet intelligence, and that he knew OGPU agent Mikhail Volodin. OGPU was the Unified State Political Administration, Stalin’s restructuring of the notorious Bolshevik Cheka death-squad/political terrorism organisation that had been responsible for the murder and detention of so many anarchists during the Bolshevik counter-revolutions in Russia and Ukraine.

The prosecution alleged that Schwartzbard was a pawn in a Stalinist plot to prevent the resurgence of Ukrainian nationalism by assassinating the UNR leader. But Schwartzbard’s origins make this seem unlikely. In any case, the assertion of an OGPU link was never proven and Schwartzbard was acquitted by a French jury on the grounds that he had committed a “crime of passion”.

The sensational trial and acquittal was covered in the world’s major newspapers and Schwartzbard became famous. But he preferred obscurity and it was as a travelling salesman for a Yiddish encyclopaedia that he visited Cape Town in 1938.

By this stage, he was well-known in Yiddish-speaking circles for his poetry and his writings, notably: “*Troymen un Virklikhkayt*” (Dreams and Reality), 1920; “*In Krig — Mit Zikh Aleyen*” (At War — With Myself), 1933; and his autobiography “*In’m Loyd Fun Yorn*” (In the Course of Years), 1934.

He had only been in South Africa for a month when he suffered a heart attack and died. He was buried with great ceremony at the Maitland Jewish Cemetery in the largest public funeral held in Cape Town to that date.

Schwartzbard had previously applied for the right to settle in British-occupied Palestine, but had been refused. So in 1967, a committee established in Israel arranged for Schwartzbard's remains to be disinterred and reburied in the Heroes' Acre at Natanya, a resting-place for Jewish military heroes. But his original grave-stone can still be visited at Maitland where every year, the local Jewish community performs a ceremony in remembrance of him.

In May 2000, South African anarchists visited the place in the Père Lachaise cemetery in Paris where Makhno's ashes are interred and inserted a Zulu-language anarchist pamphlet into the flower-holder in honour of how far afield Makhnovist ideas have spread since the 1930s. In similar fashion, we honour the memory of Shalom Schwartzbard for the direct action he took against racist oppressors.

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