

Panic at Peregonovka

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The hinge of fate is muffled. The powers that be don't want us to hear its telltale squeak. If we did, we might see where it is actually located and to what it is actually attached. Pivotal events, events which shape our lives, are often concealed from us by forces which are themselves concealed. This is done for a very sound reason. If we knew the truth, we might stop underestimating ourselves. When we stop underestimating ourselves, even the most ordinary of us become capable of the most extraordinary things.

One grim afternoon in 1919, near a small town in the Ukraine, a couple of hundred ordinary peasants decided the fate of the rest of the twentieth century, and most people never even heard of the place, let alone of them. It's too bad, it would make a hell of a movie. The shadow that the battle of Peregonovka cast upon history can only be compared to that cast by Tuetonberger Wald, or the siege of Tenochtitlan. Though it was the deciding move in the vast chess game of the Russian Civil War, the Bolsheviks were nowhere to be found. No surprise, and no problem, either. People have always been better off with out opportunists. Opportunists are worse than useless; they're in the way. Had the people of Russia not demanded bread, land, and peace, no one would have ever heard of Lenin. Our own bosses would have us believe that if it had not been for Lenin and his bourgeois cronies, the people of Russia could have demanded as loud as they liked and all it would have gotten them was cut down by Cossacks, as they were during the previous centuries, and no one would have ever heard of them, either. Aspiring Lenins concur.

Nothing could be further from the truth. For one thing, it turned out the Cossacks weren't all they were cracked up to be. For another, the Russian revolution was not a Bolshevik revolution. It was a spontaneous, simultaneous uprising of the Russian and subject peoples against a variety of intolerable conditions. It took a variety of courses. They compounded on each other, complicating the situation no end. The Russian empire disintegrated. Six months later the Bolsheviks usurped the revolution, declaring themselves the "government" of Russia when in reality they controlled only two cities out of an area that amounts to a sixth of the earth's land mass. They were a distinct minority, as their very name itself belies.

At Brest-Litovsk the Bolsheviks made "peace" with the Central Powers by giving away the Ukraine. This treaty was negotiated by Trotsky. The Ukrainians themselves were not consulted first. This didn't go over so well with the Ukrainians. The Bolsheviks opened the line and the Austro-German army poured into the Ukraine. They set up a puppet government under Hetman Skorapadsky, and commenced looting, pillage and rape. This didn't go over so well with

the Ukrainians either. They rebelled en masse, spontaneously forming partisan units throughout the Ukraine. Many of these units united under the leadership of the “Ukrainian Zapata,” Nestor Mahkno. They called themselves the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine.

Mahkno was one of the most sympathetic yet most reviled figures in the Russian Revolution. Among a mass of power seeking psychopaths and thugs and all sides, he stands out as one who asked nothing for himself. What he got instead was shot at and slandered. Slander is part of war, too. Get used to it. Mahkno has been denounced as a fanatical anti-Semite, a rapist, and an ignorant peasant. Yet he could inspire the confidence of huge numbers of ordinary people as have few others in history. While anti-Semitism was rife in the Ukraine, and pogroms were frequent, Mahknovists punished such attacks with death. The late Leah Feldman, one of the last of the Mahknovist partisans, was sarcastic over remarks by latter-day bourgeois feminists that Mahkno, being a peasant, must have been a rapist. “Did he change when he became a railway worker in Paris?” she asked, “Who in Russia is supposed to have raped? His wife was always riding on a horse beside him, and she soon would have put a stop to that.” Her name was Galina. She is said to have been pretty good with a machine gun.

Had Mahkno and Zapata never existed, the movements which bore their names would have born others. It is history that makes movements, not individuals. Though some individuals have more talent than others, none are indispensable. This is good because none lack flaws. Mahkno was not without flaws, either. He could be reckless when on his own, which engendered a number of mistakes, starting when he was nineteen. He let himself get busted, and condemned to death. This is seldom the best move, even for a nineteen year old. He made the best of it. This was a lot easier to do once his sentence had been commuted to life at hard labor. Who could imagine that life at hard labor would ever look good? On the other hand, had he taken greater caution, he could have spent the next decade at home in the Ukraine, educating people, organizing, and laying the groundwork for successful revolution. Instead, he had to labor for the Czar. Oh well, live and learn.

Once he got out of prison, released in a general amnesty of 1917, Mahkno was a little less reckless. He was no less resolute. He was older and wiser, and had plenty of sound advice. But he was still young. He was easily distracted by vodka and women. He totally lacked formal military training. He hadn’t been on a horse for ten years. Never the less, he became one of the great cavalry generals of history. His brilliance at tactics and logistics has few if any rivals. As a tactician he was a sort of a cross between Crazy Horse and the Gray Ghost. Now you see him, now you don’t. All that trying to chase him got you was trapped in the open with him at your back.

Mahknovist logistic innovations rank with Giap’s. Foremost among them was the transport of infantry in two horse carts on springs called tachankii, one man in front driving, and two, some times (in a pinch) four in the back. Sometimes they’d mount a machine gun in back. For it’s time and place, the tachanka was the equivalent of the modern American pickup truck. They were very common. The traditional way to move mounted infantry was as dragoons, that is, one man to a horse. Tachankii gave to the Insurgents the dragoon’s tactical maneuvering advantage over foot propelled infantry, but at 50% to 150% greater efficiency in horse power. Furthermore, they relied on cart horses, which is sort of like what we would call “running on regular.” This was an important advantage. Horses were getting to be in short supply in the Ukraine. The Eastern Front of the “War to End Wars” was not trench bound like the West. The cavalry horse was still a major factor. War gorged on horseflesh. Fortunately for the Ukrainians, there were still cart

horses left in the Ukraine when the war finally showed up on their doorstep. There were plenty of carts. The peasants made do. Poor people generally know how to make do. It's part of being poor. Those that don't, die.

What appears at first glimpse to be an apparent weakness at strategy on Mahkno's part, actually stemmed from political conviction, not lack of military prowess. At the crucial moment he yielded to the will of his army, a true people's army, an army that had elected him. As people go, they were exemplary. They were true to their ideals. They were true to each other. They didn't let fear distract them. They kicked butt like all-stars. But they had no sound concept of geo-political strategy. They were semi-literate peasants, from out in the boondocks. The world was far away. They were overly fixated on their own turf. They couldn't see the big picture. They didn't look far enough over the horizon.

Mistake.

The Insurgent Army of the Ukraine drove the Germans out. During the struggle they innovated a truly revolutionary method of dealing with prisoners. Officers were shot. Enlisted prisoners were asked to vote whether their non-comms should be shot. Good non-comms were spared. Bad non-comms were shot. Enlisted men who had molested civilians were shot. The remaining prisoners were then given money, food, and literature on the aims of the revolution, and sent home to make their own revolution in Germany. This they did. Germany came apart at the seams. Fifty years later this strategy was used with great success by the Angolans against the Portuguese, giving rise to the "Armed Forces Movement" which overthrew the Portuguese dictatorship in 1975.

The Mahknovisti were an explicitly Anarchist army. Officers were elected, just as they were in the America's own revolutionary army before Washington took over. In the vast area that the Anarchists controlled, land was not distributed to the peasants by their army. The peasants were the army. They distributed the land to themselves. Landlords were shot. Collectives were started, farms, factories, and schools. More than the imperialist invaders had been driven out. The peasants' traditional willingness to submit had been driven out with them. A new day had dawned. The future looked bright for the first time in memory. Then the Anarchists made a blunder of epic proportions. They trusted the Bolsheviks to actually supply them with the ammunition that they had been promised.

Mistake.

In the first of many subsequent "contra" wars, the Tsarist "Whites," with support from England, America, and France, tried to take back the Russian Empire with mainly Russian troops. The largest and best armed White army drove north from Crimea toward Moscow, under the command of General Denikin. It was a long way to Moscow. First they had to get past the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine, who were ready and waiting and armed to the teeth. The recent success against the Austro-Hungarian/German invasion had honed the Insurgents to a fine edge. Their moral was high. The available pool of general fighting skill had been greatly enhanced by the influx of experienced veterans, home from the Great War, sadder but wiser. What ever you're up to, war or peace, it always pays to have veterans around. They're especially handy to have on your side in a scrap. The Anarchists had more than courage, honor and experience working for them. Their style of organizational structure made the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine immune to a decapitating strike. Shattering its formations only made it a more dangerous. Imagine trying to stab mercury with a fork.

Though undoubtedly gifted, Mahkno was in no way alone in his talents. A great deal of talented leadership had emerged. This always happens when leadership is needed. Volunteers always step forward. Of course some volunteer leaders always prove to be better than others, but this is true of professionals as well. The ability to lead is not all that extraordinary. Extraordinary times draw out the extraordinary from ordinary people. The Anarchist peasants rose to the occasion. They had ordinary names, names like Schtuss, Marchenko, Kalashnikov, Rybin and Karetnik. They were names you could have heard spoken aloud in the streets of any village, back before things changed utterly. Karetnik often replaced Mahkno as supreme commander of the army. Mahkno spent a lot of time away from staff headquarters. He liked to keep moving. While he was gone, Karetnik did his job just fine.

Flamboyant Schtuss was nearly as popular as Mahkno. He wore a loud mismatched set of various military uniforms of various services and ranks. This made him appear “out of uniform” to any government soldier he encountered. It was an AWOL sailor’s ultimate fashion statement. People liked him a lot. Popularity did not determine who made the best plans. Schtuss recognized Mahkno’s greater gift at first sight. Their units merged, with Schtuss as second in command.

Rybin the lathe worker had returned from America where he and his “comrade and friend” Dvigomiroff had been active in the exiled Russian revolutionary movement. Rybin dressed very plain. He wore a battered fedora. His work in the field of reorganizing transport was very popular. At first he had worked with the Reds. Then he figured out who they really were and came over to the Anarchists, subordinating himself to Mahkno. Dvigomiroff worked as a propagandist among the peasants of the Tchernigov region.

Rivalry is not a factor in the Anarchist decision making process. The whole staff participated in the process. Officers were elected. Mahkno once resolved an impasse in the decision making process by demoting himself, rather than blocking consensus. Initiative and innovation make even the smallest and most isolated band of partisans capable of functioning on its own. They give them the ability to disperse without losing cohesion and direction. Partisans differ from regular soldiers. They know how to do more than take orders. They know how to think for themselves. There are few greater advantages in war or peace.

The Ukrainian Anarchists were a force to be reckoned with. This fact was not lost on the Whites. The Reds were by no means what the Whites feared the most. If they could just crush the Anarchists, the Ukraine was theirs. After that, taking Moscow would be a piece of cake. As always, crushing the Ukraine was going to be easier said than done. Then the calculus changed. The treacherous Reds cut off ammunition supplies to the Anarchists. They hoped the White army would rid them of this growing menace to their own very precarious hold on Moscow and St. Petersburg. The Whites were not what the Reds feared most. As the old Russian proverb says, “A bad example can be contagious.” The Anarchists of the Ukraine were clearly setting an example for all peasants. This was the last thing the Reds wanted to have happen. Enemies were not the Anarchist’s worst problem. Enemies are predictable. It’s allies you have to watch out for. Friends come and go. Enemies accumulate.

Denikin sent the Cossack general Schkuro around the Sea of Azov to outflank the Anarchists. They arrived just as the ammo dried up. Schkuro had gathered about him a band of fanatically loyal Cossacks from the Kuban region. He affectionately called them his “wolves.” He promised them loot, and was very clear that he didn’t much care where it came from, though he did prefer that they also kill Bolsheviks whenever possible. He didn’t pay his officers because he saw no reason they should ever lack for money. Predictably, his soldiers attacked with savage ferocity.

The ill supplied Anarchists were forced to undertake a grueling retreat through the dry, blazing heat of the Ukrainian summer. Forty thousand of them, men, women and children, in wagons and on horseback, with cows, goats, chickens in tow, and all fell back slowly to the west. They fought every inch. Some were partisan soldiers, most were refugees, family and friends. The refugee contingent grew steadily. Most of them lost their homes and belongings forever. Many lost their lives. It was more of a folk migration than a military campaign. People called it a “kingdom on wheels.” They were using the same strategy, in the same place that the Scythians had used to defeat the Persians more than two millennia before (see Heroditus). They sought to wear down their pursuers. They wore down themselves, too.

Typhus raged throughout the Ukraine. Food was as short as ammunition. The summer was particularly dry that year. The dust swirled in clouds over open ground where wheat would have grown had the war not been on. Three out of four engagements were Anarchist raids on the Cossacks for food and ammunition. It’s a hard way to make a living, raiding Cossacks for food, but, hey, ya gotta eat somehow, right?

Eye witness Voline recalled,

“ ... this long series of days as if it were an interminable nightmare.

Those summer nights, which only lasted a few hours, hardly allowing a brief rest to the men and the horses, vanished suddenly with the first glimmer of daylight, the rattle of machine guns, the explosion of shells and the gallop of horses! It was the Denikinists who, attacking from all sides, sought once again to enclose the insurgents in a vise of iron and fire.

Every day they began this maneuver again, pressing Mahkno’s troops always closer together, drawing the circle always tighter, leaving the insurgents less and less space in which to move.

Every day savage combats, going as far as atrocious hand-to-hand fighting, took place on the flanks of the Mahknovist army, and did not end until nightfall. And every night the army found itself forced to retreat, barely escaping through an increasingly narrow passage, so as to not let the Denikinist vice close on it completely. At sunrise, it had once more to face the implacable enemy which again sought to encircle.

The insurgents lacked clothing, shoes, and sometimes also food. Through torrid heat, under a leaden sky, and a hail of bullets and shells, they went further and further away from their own country toward an unknown destination and fate.”

Against the Anarchists, Denikin had assigned a whole army corps, consisting of 12 to 15 regiments of cavalry, infantry, and artillery. The odds boded ill. Denikin offered a half million rubles for Mahkno’s head. This was not a war only against the Mahknovist army. Nearly every village which was occupied by Denikin’s troops was the scene of fire and bloodshed. Peasants were plundered, violently abused, and killed. A favorite torture was to roast prisoners alive on sheets of red hot iron or on railroad flat cars. women were particularly maltreated. Nearly all the Jewish women, who were fairly numerous in the Ukrainian villages, were raped, notably at Mahkno’s home town, Gulyai-Polye. This was the officers revenge against the revolution. The Jewish population, which had lived for a very long time in special colonies of the Azov region suffered horribly. The Denikinists massacred Jews at every opportunity, seeking to provoke a popular

anti-Jewish movement which would have facilitated their movement. It didn't work on Anarchists. It just made them mad. Two decades before the Warsaw ghetto uprising, Anarchist Jews fought back the pogromists with saber and cannon. Goyim fought by their side.

The troops Denikin sent against the Anarchists distinguished themselves by their energy and obstinacy. The regiments of officers were particularly remarkable for their bravery, especially the First Simferopol and the Second Labinski regiments. Entering into battles with them, the Anarchists could not help but admire their courage and defiance of death. In addition, Denikin's troops were quite numerous and very well supplied by their noble and foreign friends. They could not be ignored.

Anarchists were hard put that summer, very hard put. In early August, they finally halted to regroup near Odessa. Volunteer troops streamed in from all sides to reinforce them. Four infantry and cavalry brigades, an artillery division, and a regiment of machine-gunners formed up there, consisting of 15,000 soldiers. They were all volunteers. One artillery battery consisted entirely of Jews. It was their own idea to form a segregated unit. They liked being able to speak Yiddish in the heat of battle and not to have to take the time to remember Ukrainian. Most Jews were in integrated units. Most of the army, and all of the movement was integrated. One machine gun detachment spoke Greek. Greeks have been in the Ukraine a long time. Heroditus was a Greek who lived many years in the Ukraine. The Ukraine is a place, not just one people. People don't need to live alike to get along or to fight side by side. They don't even need to speak the same language.

For centuries the Ukraine had been a magnet for lovers of freedom. They had gathered there from all corners. One bunch stands out in particular. A special cavalry squad of 150 to 200 always accompanied Mahkno. This is their story you're reading here, about how something they did one day affected your life. If you want a history of the movement itself, you can start by reading *History of the Mahknovist Movement* by Peter Arshinov, and *The Unknown Revolution* by Voline.

Once the Anarchists regrouped, they went on the offensive with great vigor. What else could they do? To hesitate would have been fatal. During the offensive, the Anarchists captured three or four armored trains, one of which was enormous — the "Invincible." They were formidable weapons, commanding great swaths of heartland. But they weren't enough. Denikin had overwhelming superiority in numbers. In addition the Anarchists had to battle some Bolshevik troops who bumped into them while fleeing Odessa. It was the time of year usually spent getting ready for harvest and planning what to wear to the festival afterwards, and who to dance which song with.

Denikin's sent his very best cavalry against the Anarchists. It was excellent cavalry, the cream of the White's crop. As Mahkno himself declared, it was a cavalry that justified its name. The very numerous Red cavalry, organized later, was a cavalry in name only. It was never able to carry on hand-to-hand combat, and engaged in combat at all only when the enemy was already disoriented by the fire of cannons and machine guns. During the entire Civil War, the Red cavalry always avoided a confrontation with the Anarchist cavalry, even though they always had superiority in numbers. Their leader Budenny himself once had to flee at full gallop. Denikin's Cossacks and Caucasian cavalry regiments, on the other hand, always accepted combat with sabers and charged at full speed, without waiting for the enemy to be disorganized by cannon fire. But even these elite troops succumbed more than once in combat against the Anarchists. The commanders of Denikin's regiments said in their papers, which often fell into Anarchist hands, that nothing

in their entire campaign had been as difficult or more horrible for them than these fierce battles against Anarchist cavalry and artillery.

From the middle of August 1919, Denikin's army began to exert powerful force on the Anarchists, seeking to encircle them on all sides. Mahkno saw that even the smallest error on his part could be fatal for his entire army. Denikin's goal was not only to defeat, but to liquidate the Anarchists altogether. This is why Mahkno carefully sought the moment when, taking advantage of some mistake on the enemy's part, he could deliver a decisive blow against them. It was a matter of life and death.

By the end of August, supported by new reinforcements, Denikin's troops once again were pushing the Anarchists westward. The situation worsened. The Anarchists blew up the armored trains. The retreat continued on back country roads, from village to village, away from the rail lines, across the immense steppe. By September the Anarchists found themselves near a one factory town of 5,000 called Peregonovka. The main body of Denikin's fresh, well armed, troops were hot on the trail. Elements were within easy striking distance of Peregonovka, far too close for comfort, a hell-bent on murder, rape and rapine. The Peregonovkans were terrified. They fully expected to be brutally savaged by Denikin's contras. They had no reason to believe otherwise.

On September 24, 1919, the Anarchists, seeing themselves about to be caught in Denikin's vise, wheeled, turning suddenly east. They saw only one hope, to break through his lines. Denikin thought the move was a feint or reconnaissance. His principle forces, concentrated near Peregonovka, continued chasing Mahkno westward, thinking the Anarchists were still in retreat. Never did Denikin's staff dream that Mahkno would turn to attack the bulk of the White army. Suddenly they found the town had been occupied by the concentrated Anarchist forces. They were taken completely by surprise. The Anarchists had stolen a march on them. The Peregonovkans welcomed the Anarchists with open arms. They opened their cupboards, their homes, and their hearts. They rolled up their sleeves. They threw in their arms. What else could they do? Better to die on your feet.

And where was the Red Army, that weeks before had been collecting taxes and telling Ukrainians what to do, in the name of the so-called "government" in Moscow? They offered no protection at all. They were running north as fast as they could, tails between their legs.

Though their sudden turn to the east had taken Denikin unaware, it was now the Anarchist's turn for an unpleasant surprise. Near by Peregonovka, and also retreating, was a small force of proto-fascist bandit/pogromists, led by a would-be hetman named Petlura. Petlura was a rival of Denikin as well as an enemy of the Anarchists. The Petlurists had proposed a temporary neutrality between themselves and the Anarchists, in view of the immediate danger of the overwhelming White force. After all, they were both at war with the Whites. What to do? What to do? A debate had ensued. The Anarchists, backs to the wall, accepted reluctantly. They were just trying to buy a little more time to maneuver their way out of doom's teeth. They knew who Petlura was. They fully expected betrayal. They just thought it wouldn't be so soon.

Mistake.

Serious mistake.

A capital blunder, of the first order and the highest degree.

On September 25th the Petlurists sold out to Denikin and opened their part of the line. The Whites poured through unopposed, and by the next evening, had surrounded the Anarchists completely. The Anarchists were heavily outnumbered and completely encircled. There was no escape, no room to maneuver.

Voline relates,

“A order issued by the Denikinist command, which found its way to the Mahknovist staff, read as follows, ‘Mahkno’s bands are surrounded. They are completely demoralized, disorganized, starving, and without ammunition. I order that they be attacked and destroyed within three days.’ It bore the signature of General Slatstchhoff, commander-in-chief of the Denikinist forces in the Ukraine (he later went over to the Bolsheviks).”

Sooner or later, it always comes to this. End game. Denikin felt certain that victory was his. The main force opposing him was worn down and cornered. His troops were fresh and well supplied. He had the initiative. He gloated and bragged of “Christmas in Moscow.” After this, mopping up the Red army would be like taking candy from a baby. How his gut must have jiggled as he giggled with glee.

Mistake.

The battle commenced at 3 AM, on September 26, 1919. Peregonovka awoke to the rattle of Lewis and Vickers. Mahkno himself, with his cavalry escort of 150–200 men, had disappeared at nightfall, seeking to turn the enemy’s flank. During the whole battle that ensued there was no further news of them. The battle reached its peak at 8:00 AM. By 9:00 AM the outnumbered and exhausted Anarchists had begun to lose ground. They fell back to the very outskirts of the town. The fighting was hideous, gory, and fierce. Its sheer manic fury beggared description. The smoke and the dust of it blotted the sun. The rich black Ukrainian earth soaked up blood like a Greek sponge. It was good earth to die for, breadbasket earth, joy of the peasant heart. Heart’s blood it soaked up, this year’s like that’s. Nothing new about that. This was the steppe, birth land of horse war. Good earth soaks up blood anywhere on the planet.

Eye witness Peter Arshinov described the scene from his position at staff headquarters. Arshinov and Mahkno had done time together in the Butyrki prison in Moscow. They were close friends. In 1910, when he was twenty one, Mahkno’s death sentence had been commuted to life. They threw him in with Arshinov. Arshinov was a metal worker by trade. He was the son of a factory worker, and a self educated man. He had edited an illegal newspaper. It cost him a twenty year sentence. It was he who had been primarily responsible for Mahkno’s education. When both were freed in the revolutionary amnesty, in March 1917, Mahkno headed for Gulyai-Polye in the eastern Ukraine. Arshinov stayed for awhile in Moscow. In April 1919, he went to Gulyai-Polye, to join his friend. He scarcely left the Ukraine at all until 1921, when he barely escaped with his life.

Arshinov speaks,

“The staff of the insurrectionary army as well as everyone in the village who could handle a rifle, armed themselves and joined in the fighting. This was the critical moment when it seemed that the battle and with it the whole cause of the insurgents was lost. The order was given for everyone, even the women, to be ready to fire on the enemy in the village streets. All prepared for the supreme hour of the battle and of their lives. But suddenly the machine gun fire of the enemy and their frantic cheers began to grow weaker, then to recede into the distance. The defenders of the village realized that the enemy was retreating and that the battle was now taking

place some distance away. It was Mahkno who, appearing unexpectedly, at the very moment when his troops were driven back and preparing to fight in the streets of Peregonovka, had decided the fate of the battle. Covered with dust and fatigued from his exertions, he reached the enemy flank through a deep ravine. Without a cry, but with burning resolve fixed on his features, he threw himself on the Denikinists ...”

They came at full gallop, a thunder of hooves. The earth shook beneath them. Dust plumed above. In front of them gun deafened ears perked in wonder. An army of sweat stung eyes turned as one. As one the raw, parched throats of that burning hot morning gasped in surprise.

What the hell was that?

Both sides strained to see through the swirling haze of the battle. Everyone was thinking the same thought. Who were they, fondest dream or worst nightmare? Actually, as it turns out, they were both. It just depended on your point of view. They were just common folks really, country folks, folks from the heartland,. We’d call them “rednecks.” They’d come to work. There was a job to be done, and hands used to work had showed up to do it. Peasants, at harvest time, they’d come to reap.

Could they be real? Could this be happening? Or had battle’s fatigue played tricks with the mind? Time froze. Then they struck. Points lowered; nostrils flared. They struck as one, an avalanche of steel, guts and horseflesh. Now it was clear to all who they were. The enemy panicked. The Anarchists rallied.

“Mahkno is here!” they cried, “Mahkno is fighting with his saber!”

Arshinov tells us,

“All exhaustion, all discouragement disappeared from among the Mahknovists.

And with redoubled energy they all pushed forward, following their beloved leader who seemed doomed to death. A hand-to-hand combat of incredible ferocity, a ‘hacking,’ as the Mahknovists called it, followed... During the entire pursuit, the Denikinists had had no thought except to exterminate the insurgents... Even the women who supported the Mahknovist army or fought alongside the men would not have been spared.

The Mahknovists were experienced enough to know this.”

Now it was their turn.

It was a very small avalanche as such avalanches go, but it was exceedingly ferocious, and it fell exceedingly fast. It fell right on top of the First Officers’ Regiment of Simferopol, who at first tried to retreat in good order, but soon, simply ran.

Pawn takes knight.

At this the other regiments were seized by the panic and followed them. The White army staggered back, stunned, reeling, and confused. They routed and scattered, each man for himself. They tried to save themselves by swimming across the Sinyukha River.

Mistake.

They were cut down like wheat.

After sending his cavalry and artillery in full pursuit, Mahkno himself went at the head of his best mounted regiment, by way of a shortcut, that would enable him to catch the fugitives from behind. The pursuit continued eight to twelve miles. The last two miles were strewn with corpses. At the critical moment when Denikin's troops reached the river, they were overtaken by the Mahknovist cavalry. Hundreds perished in the river itself. Most of them, however, had time to cross to the other bank, but there Mahkno himself was waiting. His second vice had closed. In addition, the Denikinist staff and the reserve regiment that was with it were taken completely by surprise and made prisoners.

Arshinov tells us,

“Only an insignificant part of these troops, who had raged for months in stubborn pursuit of Mahkno, managed to save themselves. The First Simferopol Regiment of officers, and several others were cut down completely.”

Pawn takes queen, check.

Ukrainians know how to reap. “Make hay while the sun shines,” they say. It can be done. That day the Anarchist peasants with their callused, peasant hands, cut to the ground the counter-revolution's best hope of ever taking back Russia's empire with Russian troops. Denikin's fist was broken. “Hope dies last,” says the old Russian proverb. This hope drowned in Cossack blood. Twenty years later the Whites tried again with German troops that they had helped finance but found they couldn't control. That didn't work either.

Every contest of wills, has a turning point, a moment when the tide turns. In war it is usually at the peak of a particular battle. In the American Civil War it was at Gettysburg. At Gettysburg it was Pickett's charge. In the Russian Civil War, it was at Peregonovka. At Peregonovka, it was Mahkno's charge. One failed. One succeeded. Both defined decades of subsequent history. History is like that. It's course can change utterly, one single moment. Fate can swing wide on a very small hinge. Had that single squad of Anarchist cavalry not turned Denikin's flank with that single, decisive blow, that grim day in September at Peregonovka, Denikin would have had his “Christmas in Moscow.” There was no one else to stop him. The Red Army, such as it was, was in total disarray. It would have been slaughtered. Lenin & Co. would have hung by their necks. Your and my lives would have been much, much, much, different. Consider the “Fall of Communism” in 1919. Consider no Stalin, no Cold War, no Soviet Union, perhaps even, no Second World War. Different world, huh? You betcha.

Consider the difference a handful can make, even a tiny handful. In the immense, raging, maelstrom of this furious battle, where tens of thousands were fighting, one tiny handful, in one brief moment, in the right place and time, made a whole world of difference.

Denikin himself was nowhere around. He was not a “front line general;” he was a private rail car general, who kept a private orchestra around to amuse him should he become bored while about on his travels. He liked caviar. He drank French champagne. He got away.

Pawn blunders.

Rather than driving north and finishing off the real enemy of revolution, the Reds, the Anarchists turned without resting, and pushed to the east, driving panic stricken Cossacks before them like chaff. After all, they reasoned, the east Ukraine was their home. They should liberate and protect it. What happened in Moscow was none of their business. The Muscovites had apparently failed to convince them otherwise. The Insurgents were Ukrainians, not Muscovites. They

weren't even Russian. They didn't like outsiders telling them what to do. They'd had enough of that to last a life time. They paid Moscovites the courtesy of leaving Moscow for the Muscovites to sort out. The principle of paying each other such courtesies is, at first glance, very appealing.

Mistake.

Pawn blunders again.

The Moscow Anarchists and most of their friends were dead or in prison. Their names had been on a list. The list got around. One thing led to another. Fate can swing closed on a very small hinge, too.

Eventually, isolated and surrounded, the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine succumbed to Red terror and treachery. The Greek machine gunners were wiped out in a rear guard action that enabled Mahkno and eighty others, including Galina and some of his family to cross the Rumanian border. After great hardship, which included a year of internment in Poland, Mahkno settled in Paris where he drank himself into oblivion. He died in 1935, just when his talents were most needed in Spain. Back home in the Ukraine, six million Ukrainians died in the ensuing Red holocaust. Some were shot. Some froze. Most simply starved when the Reds stole everything edible.

Still they echo, those fatal mistakes, those grim days that September. In life as in chess, the move of the greatest importance, isn't take, check, or mate. It's the blunder. It is most exceedingly difficult to maneuver out of a really good blunder, but it can be done.. It can even be done by a pawn. It can even be done with style. But don't bet the farm on pulling it off three times in a row. Better to learn from the mistakes of the past, and eschew the blunder altogether. There are always better moves. All moves compound on each other, blunders especially. Don't bemoan the blunders of the past. Look on the bright side. At least now we know some more of what don't work. This is always handy to know.

It's too bad in a way; it would have made a great movie, blunders and all. But it didn't.

Switch to plan B.

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Nessie
Panic at Peregonovka
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