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A Few Words on the National Question in the Ukraine

Nestor Makhno

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In the wake of the abolition of czarist despotism at the time of the 1917 revolution, prospects of new, free relations between peoples hitherto in subjection beneath the violent yoke of the Russian State, appeared on the horizons of the world of Labor. The notion of complete self-determination, up to and including a complete break with the Russian State, thus emerged naturally among these peoples. Groups of every persuasion sprang up among the Ukrainian population by the dozen: each of them had its own outlook and interpreted the idea of self-determination according to its own factional interests. All in all, the toiling masses of the Ukraine did not identify with these groups and did not join them.

Over seven years have elapsed since, and the Ukrainian toilers' line on the notion of self-determination has developed and their understanding increased. Now they identified with it and they displayed this often in their life-style. Thus, for example, they asserted their rights to use their own language and their entitlement to their own culture, which had been regarded prior to the revolution as anathema. They also asserted their right to conform in their lives

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to their own way of life and specific customs. In the aim of building an independent Ukrainian State, certain statist gentlemen would dearly love to arrogate to themselves all natural manifestations of Ukrainian reality, against which the Bolsheviks, by the way, are powerless to fight, for all their omnipotence. However, these statist gentlemen cannot seem to carry the broad masses of toilers with them, much less mobilize them in this way for a struggle against the oppressive Bolshevik party. The healthy instincts of the Ukrainian toilers and their baleful life under the Bolshevik yoke has not made them oblivious of the State danger in general. For that reason, they shun the chauvinist trend and do not mix it up with their social aspirations, rather seeking their own road to emancipation.

There is food there for serious thought on the part of all Ukrainian revolutionaries and for libertarian communists in particular, if they aim after this to engage in consistent work among the Ukrainian toilers.

Such work, though, cannot be conducted along the same lines as in the years 1918-1920, for the reality in the country has altered a lot. Then, the Ukrainian laboring population, which had played such a significant part in crushing all of the bourgeoisie's mercenaries - Denikin, Petliura and Wrangel - could never have dreamed that, at the far end of the revolution, it would find itself so ignominiously deceived and exploited by the Bolsheviks.

Those were the days when we were all fighting against the restoration of the czarist order. There was not enough time then to scrutinize and vet all the "blow-ins" showing up to join the struggle. Faith in the revolution overruled all second thoughts about the mettle of these "blow-ins" or the questions that might have been raised about them; should they be counted as friends or foes? At the time, the toilers were on the move against the counter-revolution, heedful only of those who showed up to share their front ranks in confronting death fearlessly in defense of the revolution.

Later, the psychology of the Ukrainian toilers changed a lot: they had had the time to familiarize themselves to saturation point with these "blow-ins" to their cause, and thereafter were more critical in their accounting of what they had won through the revolution, or at least what remains of that. Behind these "blow-ins" they recognize their outright enemies, even though these Ukrainianized themselves and wave the flag of socialism, for, in actuality, they watch them operate in such a way as to add to the exploitation of Labor. They are clear in their minds that it was this caste of socialists, voracious exploiters, that stripped them of all their revolutionary gains. In short, as far as they are concerned it is something akin to the Austro-German occupation camouflaged behind all manner of Bolshevik sleight of hand.

This disguised occupation prompts from the masses a certain chauvinist backlash directed against the "blow-ins". Not for nothing do these Bolshevik gentlemen govern the Ukraine from Moscow, hiding behind their Ukrainian cat's paws: it is the growing hatred from the Ukrainian masses that has commended this course to them. It is the very nature of the Bolshevik despotism that is driving the Ukrainian toilers to search for ways of overthrowing it and making progress towards a new and truly free society. The Bolsheviks are not resting on their laurels either and are striving to adapt at all costs to Ukrainian reality. In 1923, they ended up like lost sheep: since which they have modified their tactics and wasted no time in getting to grips with Ukrainian reality. Furthermore, they have wasted no time in associating the fate of Bolshevism with that of nationalism, and they have, in pursuance of this, added specific articles to the 'Constitution of the USSR', affording every component people of that Union full rights of self-determination, indeed of secession. All of which is, of course, mere show. How is this attitude of the Bolsheviks going to develop? The next few years will tell. Anarchists' approach to the reality of the Ukraine now should take due account of these new factors - the Ukrainian toilers' hatred for the "blow-ins" of

nationalist Bolshevism. By our reckoning, their chief task today consists of explaining to the masses that the root of all evil is not some "blow-in" authorities, but all authority in general. The history of recent years will afford considerable weight to their argument, for the Ukraine has seen a parade of all manner of authorities and, when all is said and done, these have been as indistinguishable one from another as peas in a pod. We must demonstrate that a "blow-in" State power and an "independent" State power amount to just about equal in value and that the toilers have nothing to gain from either: they should focus all their attention elsewhere: on destroying the nests of the State apparatus and replacing these with worker and peasant bodies for social and economic self-direction.

In spite of everything, in broaching the national question, we should not overlook the latest developments in the Ukraine. Ukrainian is being spoken now, and by virtue of the new nationalist trend, outsiders who do not speak the local language are scarcely listened to. This is an ethnic thing that ought to be kept in the forefront of our minds. Whereas, up to now, anarchists have enjoyed only a feeble audience among the Ukrainian peasantry, that was because they were concentrated above all in the towns and, what is more, did not use the national tongue of the Ukrainian countryside.

Ukrainian life is filled with all sorts of possibilities, especially the potential for a mass revolutionary movement. Anarchists have a great chance of influencing that movement, indeed becoming its mentors, provided only that they appreciate the diversity of real life and espouse a position to wage a single-minded, direct and declared fight against those forces hostile to the toilers which might have ensconced themselves there. That is a task that cannot be accomplished without a large and powerful Ukrainian anarchist organization. It is for Ukrainian anarchists to give that some serious thought, starting now.