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# Russian Anarchists and the Civil War

Paul Avrich

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When the first shots of the Russian Civil War were fired, the anarchists, in common with the other left-wing opposition parties, were faced with a serious dilemma. Which side were they to support? As staunch libertarians, they held no brief for the dictatorial policies of Lenin's government, but the prospect of a White victory seemed even worse. Active opposition to the Soviet regime might tip the balance in favour of the counterrevolutionaries. On the other hand, support for the Bolsheviks might serve to entrench them too deeply to be ousted from power once the danger of reaction had passed. It was a quandary with no simple solutions. After much soul-searching and debate, the anarchists adopted a variety of positions, ranging from active resistance to the Bolsheviks through passive neutrality to eager collaboration. A majority, however, cast their lot with the beleaguered Soviet regime. By August 1919, at the climax of the Civil War, Lenin was impressed with the zeal and courage of the "Soviet anarchists", as their anti-Bolshevik

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comrades contemptuously dubbed them, that he counted them among “the most dedicated supporters of Soviet power.”<sup>1</sup>

An outstanding case in point was Bill Shatov, a former IWW agitator in the United States who had returned to his native Russia after the February Revolution. As an officer in the Tenth Red Army during the autumn of 1919, Shatov threw his energies into the defence of Petrograd against the advance of General Yudenich. The following year he was summoned to Chita to become Minister of Transport in the Far Eastern Republic. Before he left, Shatov tried to justify his collaborationist position to his fellow libertarians, Emma Goldman and Alexander Berkman. “Now I just want to tell you,” he said, “that the Communist state in action is just what we anarchists have always claimed it would be — a tightly centralized power still more strengthened by the dangers of the Revolution. Under such conditions, one cannot do as one wills. One does not just hop on a train and go, or even ride the bumpers, as I used to do in the United States. One needs permission. But don’t get the idea that I miss my American ‘blessings.’ Me for Russia, the Revolution, and its glorious future.” The anarchists, said Shatov, were “the romanticists of the Revolution,” but one could not fight with ideals alone. At the moment, the chief task was to defeat the reactionaries. “We anarchists should remain true to our ideals, but we should not criticize at this time. We must work and help to build.”<sup>2</sup>

Shatov was one of a small army of anarchists who took up weapons against the Whites during the Civil War. Others accepted minor posts within the Soviet government and urged their comrades to do likewise, or at least to refrain from activities which were hostile to the Bolshevik cause. Yuda Roshchin, a former Black Banner terrorist and an implacable foe of the

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<sup>1</sup> V.I. Lenin, *Sochineniia*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., 31 vols., Moscow, 1931–1935, XXIV, 437.

<sup>2</sup> Emma Goldman, *Living My Life*, New York, 1931, p.729; Alexander Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth (Diary 1920–1922)*, New York, 1925, pp.35–36.

protests to the delegates. She was dissuaded from doing so by her Russian friends, but soon afterward she and Berkman, profoundly disheartened by the turn the revolution had taken, made up their minds to leave the country. “Grey are the passing days,” Berkman recorded in his diary. “One by one the embers of hope have died out. Terror and despotism have crushed the life born in October. The slogans of the Revolution are foresworn, its ideals stifled in the blood of the people. The breath of yesterday is dooming millions to death; the shadow of today hangs like a black pall over the country. Dictatorship is trampling the masses under foot. The Revolution is dead; its spirit cries in the wilderness ... I have decided to leave Russia.”<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth*, p.319.

at Kropotkin's graveside, and students and workers placed flowers by his tomb. Kropotkin's birthplace, a large house in the old aristocratic quarter of Moscow, was turned over to his wife and comrades to be used as a museum for his books, papers, and personal belongings. Supervised by a committee of scholarly anarchists, it was maintained by contributions from friends and admirers throughout the world.<sup>9</sup>

At Kropotkin's funeral the black flag of anarchism was paraded through Moscow for the last time. Two weeks later the Kronstadt rebellion broke out, and a new wave of political arrests swept the country. Anarchist book stores, printing offices, and clubs were closed and the few remaining anarchist circles broken up. Even the pacifist followers of Tolstoy — a number of whom had been shot during the Civil War for refusing to serve in the Red Army — were imprisoned or banished. In Moscow a circle of leading "Soviet anarchists" known as the Universalists were arrested on trumped-up charges of "banditry and underground activities," and their organization was replaced by a new group called the "Anarcho-Biocosmists," who pledged unwavering support of the Soviet government and solemnly declared their intention to launch a social revolution "in interplanetary space but not upon Soviet territory."<sup>10</sup>

Repression continued unabated as the months advanced. In September 1921, the Cheka executed two well-known anarchists without a trial and without bringing formal charges against them. Emma Goldman was so outraged that she considered making a scene in the manner of the English suffragettes by chaining herself to a bench in the hall where the Third Comintern Congress was meeting and shouting her

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<sup>9</sup> The museum was closed after the death of Kropotkin's widow in 1938. In 1967, the author visited the house and found it being used for a purpose of which Kropotkin himself would surely have approved: it serves as a school for British and American embassy children, with a playground in the garden and an interior filled with children's books and art work.

<sup>10</sup> G.P. Maximoff, *The Guillotine at Work*, Chicago, 1940, p.362.

Marxists, now surprised everyone by hailing Lenin as one of the great figures of the modern age. According to Victor Serge, Roshchin even tried to work out an "anarchist theory of the dictatorship of the proletariat." Speaking before a group of Moscow anarchists in 1920, he exhorted his colleagues to cooperate with Lenin's party. "It is the duty of every anarchist," he declared, "to work whole-heartedly with the Communists, who are the advance guard of the Revolution. Leave your theories alone, and do practical work for the reconstruction of Russia. The need is great, and the Bolsheviks welcome you."<sup>3</sup>

But Roshchin's listeners were not impressed. Greeting his speech with a chorus of jeers and catcalls, they wrote him off as another loss to "Soviet anarchism" and a traitor to the cause of Bakunin and Kropotkin. For even in these precarious circumstances a large and militant segment of the anarchist movement would deny their Bolshevik adversaries any quarter. The Briansk Federation of Anarchists, for example, called for the immediate overthrow of the "Social Vampires" in the Kremlin who sucked the blood of the people. Translating this appeal into action, a terrorist organization in Moscow known as the Underground Anarchists joined forces with the Left Socialist-Revolutionaries and bombed the headquarters of the Communist Party Committee, killing twelve of its members and wounding fifty-five others, Bukharin among them.

In the south, where the authority of the state was completely disrupted, anarchist violence found its most fertile soil. Bands of armed marauders, operating under such names as "Hurricane" and "Death", sprang up in every quarter, ready to swoop down on town or village whenever the opportunity presented itself. The Bakunin Partisans of Ekaterinoslav sang of a new "era of dynamite" which would greet oppressors of every stripe, Red and White alike:

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<sup>3</sup> Victor Serge, *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire*, Paris, 1951, p.134; Berkman, *The Bolshevik Myth*, p.68.

Down with the noise of church bells!  
We shall sound a different alarm.  
With explosions and groans in the land  
We shall build our own harmony!<sup>4</sup>

And in Kharkov a fanatical circle of Anarcho-Futurists proclaimed “Death to world civilization!” and urged the dark masses to take up their axes and destroy everything in sight.

Anarchists of a more pacific bent denounced these groups as “Sicilian bandits” who used the cloak of anarchism to conceal the predatory nature of their activities. For the moderates, robbery and terrorism were grotesque caricatures of anarchist doctrines, which served only to demoralize the movements true adherents and to discredit anarchism in the eyes of the public. Renouncing violent action, the milder anarchists armed themselves with nothing more lethal than pen and ink and mounted a verbal attack on the Soviet dictatorship. A major theme of their criticism was that the Bolshevik Revolution had merely substituted “state capitalism” for private capitalism, that one big owner had taken the place of many small ones, so that the peasants and workers now found themselves under the heel of a “new class of administrators — a new class born largely from the womb of the intelligentsia.”<sup>5</sup> In their view, what had taken place in Russia closely resembled the earlier revolutions in Western Europe: no sooner had the oppressed farmers and craftsmen of England and France removed the landed aristocracy from power than the ambitious middle class stepped into the breach and erected a new class structure with itself at the top; in a similar manner, the privileges and authority once shared by the Russian nobility and bourgeoisie had passed into the hands of a new ruling class composed

anarchism and the danger of a peasant jacquerie would remain to haunt the unsteady Bolshevik regime. Thus, on November 25, 1920, Makhno’s commanders in the Crimea, fresh from their victories over Wrangel’s army, were seized by the Red Army and immediately shot. The next day Trotsky ordered an attack on Makhno’s headquarters in Gulyai-Polye, while the Cheka simultaneously arrested the members of the Nabat Confederation in Kharkov and carried out raids on anarchist clubs and organizations throughout the country. During the attack on Gulyai-Polye, most of Makhno’s staff were captured and imprisoned or simply shot on the spot. The batko himself, however, together with a battered remnant of an army which had once numbered in the tens of thousands, managed to elude his pursuers. After wandering over the Ukraine for the better part of a year, the partisan leader, exhausted and still suffering from unhealed wounds, crossed the Dniester River into Rumania and eventually found his way to Paris.

The downfall of Makhno marked the beginning of the end for Russian anarchism. Three months later, in February 1921, the movement suffered another major blow when Peter Kropotkin, nearly eighty years old, fell ill with pneumonia and died. Kropotkin’s family declined Lenin’s offer of a state burial, and a committee of anarchists was set up to arrange a funeral. Lev Kamenev, Chairman of the Moscow Soviet, allowed a handful of imprisoned anarchists a day’s liberty to take part in the procession. Braving the bitter cold of the Moscow winter, 20,000 marched in the cortege to the Novodevichii Monastery, the burial place of Kropotkin’s princely ancestors. They carried placards and black banners bearing demands for the release of all anarchists from prison and such mottoes as “Where there is authority there is no freedom” and “The liberation of the working class is the task of the workers themselves.” A chorus chanted Eternal Memory. As the procession passed the Butyrki prison, inmates shook the bars on their windows and sang an anarchist hymn to the dead. Emma Goldman spoke

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<sup>4</sup> M.N. Chudnov, *Pod chernym znamenem (zapiski anarkhista)*, Moscow, 1930, pp.53ff.

<sup>5</sup> *Vol’nyi Golos Truda*, September 16, 1918.

not did he care to understand them. He detested the “poison” of the cities and cherished the natural simplicity of the peasant environment into which he had been born. In any event, Makhno found very little time to implement his ill-defined economic programmes. He was forever on the move, rarely pausing even to catch his breath. The Makhnovshchina, on the words of one of the batko’s associates, was a “republic on tachanki ... As always, the instability of the situation prevented positive work,”<sup>8</sup>

At the end of 1919, Makhno received instructions from the Red Command to transfer his army forthwith to the Polish front. The order was plainly designed to draw the Makhnovtsy away from their home territory and thus leave it open to the establishment of Bolshevik rule. Makhno refused to budge. Trotsky’s response was firm and unhesitating: he outlawed the Makhnovtsy and sent his troops against them. There ensued eight months of bitter struggle with losses high on both sides. A severe typhus epidemic augmented the toll of victims. Badly outnumbered, Makhno’s partisans avoided pitched battles and relied on the guerrilla tactics they had perfected in more than two years of Civil War.

Hostilities were broken off in October 1920, when Baron Wrangel, Denikin’s successor in the south, launched a major offensive, striking northward from the Crimean peninsula. Once more the Red Army enlisted Makhno’s aid, in return for which the Communists agreed to amnesty for all anarchists in Russian prisons and guaranteed the anarchists freedom of propaganda on condition that they refrain from calling for the violent overthrow of the Soviet government. Barely a month later, however, the Red Army had made sufficient gains to assure victory in the Civil War, and the Soviet leaders tore up their agreement with Makhno. Not only had the Makhnovtsy outlived their usefulness as a military partner, but as long as the batko was left at large the spirit of primitive

of party officials, governments bureaucrats, and technical specialists.

As the Civil War deepened, the government grew less and less tolerant of such criticisms and started clamping down on anarchist groups in Moscow and Petrograd. As a result, there began an exodus of anarchists to the Ukraine, the perennial haven of fugitives from the persecutions of the central government. In the city of Kharkov a new anarchist organization, the Nabat Confederation, sprang up in 1918 and soon could boast of flourishing branches in all the major cities of the south. As might be expected, Nabat’s adherents were extremely critical of the Soviet dictatorship, yet they believed that the most pressing task of the anarchist movement was to defend the revolution against the White onslaught, even if this should mean a temporary alliance with the Communists. To save the revolution they pinned their hopes on a “partisan army” organized spontaneously by the revolutionary masses themselves.

As the most likely nucleus of such an army the Nabat leaders looked to the guerrilla band led by Nestor Makhno, whose followers regarded him as a new Stenka Razin or Pugachev sent to realize their ancient dream of land and liberty. Traveling on horseback and in light peasant carts (tachanki) on which machine guns were mounted, Makhno and his men moved swiftly back and forth across the open steppe between the Dnieper and the Sea of Azov, swelling into a small army as they went and inspiring terror in the hearts of their adversaries. Hitherto independent guerrilla bands accepted Makhno’s command and rallied to his black banner. Villagers willingly provided food and fresh horses, enabling the Makhnovtsy to travel long distances with little difficulty. Suddenly they would turn up where least expected, attack the gentry and military garrisons, then vanish as quickly as they had come. In captured uniforms they infiltrated the enemy’s ranks to learn their plans or to fire on them at point-blank range. When cornered, the Makhnovtsy would bury their weapons, make their way singly back to their

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<sup>8</sup> Voline, *La révolution inconnue* (1917–1921), Paris, 1943, pp.578, 603.

villages, and take up work in the fields, awaiting the next signal to unearth a new cache of arms and spring up again in an unexpected quarter. Makhno's insurgents, in the words of Victor Serge, revealed "a truly epic capacity for organization and combat."<sup>6</sup> Yet they owed much of their success to the exceptional qualities of their leader. Makhno was a bold and resourceful commander who combined an iron will with a quick sense of humour and won the love and devotion of his peasant followers. In September 1918, when he defeated a much superior force of Austrians at the village of Dibrivki, his men bestowed on him the affectionate title of *batko*, their "little father."<sup>7</sup>

For a time, Makhno's dealings with the Bolsheviks remained reasonably friendly, and the Soviet press extolled him as a "courageous partisan" and a great revolutionary leader. Relations were at their best in march 1919, when Makhno and the Communists concluded a pact for joint military action against the White Army of General Denikin. Such gestures of harmony, however, could not conceal the basic hostility between the two groups. The Communists had little taste for the autonomous status of Makhno's Insurgent Army or for the powerful attraction which it exerted on their own peasant recruits; the Makhnovtsy, on their side, feared that sooner or later the Red Army would attempt to bring their movement to heel. As friction increased, the Soviet newspapers abandoned their eulogies of the Makhnovtsy and began to attack them as "kulaks" and "Anarcho-Bandits." In May, two Cheka agents sent to assassinate Makhno were caught and executed. The following month Trotsky, Commander-in-Chief of the Bolshevik forces, outlawed Makhno, and Communist troops carried out a lightning raid on his headquarters at Gulyai-Polye.

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<sup>6</sup> Serge, *Mémoires d'un révolutionnaire*, p.135.

<sup>7</sup> P. Arshinov, *Istoriia makhnovskogo dvizheniia* (1918–1921 gg.), Berlin, 1923, pp.57–58.

That summer, however, the shaky alliance was hastily resumed when Denikin's massive drive toward Moscow sent both the Communists and the Makhnovtsy. On September 26, 1919, Makhno suddenly launched a successful counter-attack at the village of Peregonovka, near the town of Uman, cutting the White General's supply lines and creating panic and disorder in his rear. This was Denikin's first serious reverse in his dramatic advance into the Russian heartland and a major factor in halting his drive toward the Bolshevik capital. By the end of the year a counter-offensive by the Red Army had forced Denikin to beat a swift retreat to the shores of the Black Sea.

The Makhnovshchina reached its crest in the months following the victory at Peregonovka. During October and November, Makhno occupied Ekaterinoslav and Aleksandrovsk for several weeks and thus obtained his first chance to apply the concepts of anarchism to city life. Makhno's aim was to throw off domination of every type and to encourage economic and social self-determination. Thus, when the railroad workers of Aleksandrovsk complained that they had not been paid for many weeks, he advised them to take control of the railway lines and charge the passengers and freight shippers what seemed a fair price for their services. Such utopian projects, however, failed to win over more than a small minority of workingmen, for, unlike the farmers and artisans of the village, who were independent producers accustomed to managing their own affairs, factory workers and miners operated as interdependent parts of a complicated industrial machine and were lost without the guidance of supervisors and technical specialists. Furthermore, the peasants and artisans could barter the products of their labour, whereas the urban workers depended on regular wages for their survival. Makhno, moreover, compounded the confusion when he recognized all paper money issued by his predecessors — Ukrainian nationalists, Whites, and Bolsheviks alike. He never understood the complexities of an urban economy,