

# **Solidarity Without Submission: Nestor, Ulysses, Ukraine and the Glory of Heroes**

**How can anarchists fight for national resistance without condoning  
nationalism?**

Roderick McMillan

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# Contents

|                                                                            |    |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|----|
| The elder who sees both behind and ahead. . . . .                          | 4  |
| Nestor of the steppe . . . . .                                             | 5  |
| Solidarity without submission . . . . .                                    | 7  |
| Always outnumbered, never outgunned . . . . .                              | 8  |
| Nestor's odyssey . . . . .                                                 | 10 |
| Nestor, who remembers past battles . . . . .                               | 11 |
| Those who learn from history are forced to watch others repeat it. . . . . | 13 |
| Nestor's Lessons Learned . . . . .                                         | 13 |
| Solidarity without simplicity . . . . .                                    | 15 |
| Guilt by association? . . . . .                                            | 15 |
| Solidarity without submission . . . . .                                    | 16 |

Greek epics make us all Cassandra, the scenes are set in divine prophecy, but their acts are only understood in hindsight, the most human tragedy.

“National consciousness, which is not nationalism, is the only thing that will give us an international dimension.”

— Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*<sup>1</sup>

Huliaipol, Zaporozhye oblast, Ukraine in 2022. Nestor Makhno sits behind sandbags holding the blue-and-yellow flag of Ukraine, while soldiers take selfies with him.

Not the man, but a concrete statue and, as with most things in Ukraine, the statue has suffered in the war. Russian shelling decapitated it in May 2024.<sup>2</sup> Even with the strained resources of war, and in a city whose population shrunk from 19,000 to - by one estimate - 500, it was repaired, returned and reinforced. Ukrainian, and Ukrainian-aligned soldiers have posed beside it, some carrying flags or wearing patches inspired by Makhno and his Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine.

An anarchist who fought against states standing guard over one.

A man who rejected Ukrainian nationalism as strongly as he resisted external imperialism, apotheosis-ed into a symbol of Ukrainian national resistance.<sup>3</sup>

From the ivory tower of the Western left, that may appear to be a contradiction. It is more useful to see it as a question.

- Why should resistance to an invading empire, to colonialism, always be nationalism?
- Can't people defend a 'homeland' without worshipping a nation state?

Can anarchists, socialists and internationalists take up arms in pragmatic solidarity alongside a spectrum of nationalists whose politics they oppose – defend the 'state' without betraying their own principles?

“It is unusual to see anarchists supporting state structures, but they say taking action against Russia is necessary for their survival. “We are fighting to protect the more or less free society that exists in Ukraine,” said an activist, Dmytro. “Without which there would be no space for activism or underground movements.”

Isobel Koshiw - *The Guardian*<sup>4</sup>

These questions of what we should set aside in solidarity are not new.

More than two millennia ago, according to Homer, the mythological Nestor tried to hold together in solidarity a fracturing alliance that ego, rage and hierarchy were tearing apart. Over a century ago, Nestor Makhno defended Free Soviets of Anarchist Ukraine from an encircling

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<sup>1</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963). Originally published 1961.

<sup>2</sup> Sonya Bandouil, “Monument Honoring Ukrainian Revolutionary Nestor Makhno Destroyed by Russian Missiles,” *The Kyiv Independent*, May 24, 2024, <https://kyivindependent.com/monument-honoring-ukrainian-revolutionary-nestor-makhno-destroyed-by-russian-missiles/>

<sup>3</sup> Aleksander Laniewski, “Nestor Makhno in the Culture of Remembrance of Modern Ukraine,” trans. Malcolm Archibald and Sean Patterson, *The Anarchist Library*, 2025, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/aleksander-laniewski-nestor-makhno-in-the-culture-of-remembrance-of-modern-ukraine>

<sup>4</sup> Isobel Koshiw, “‘Putin’s Terror Affects Everyone’: Anarchists Join Ukraine’s War Effort,” *The Guardian*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/may/26/putin-anarchists-join-ukraine-war-effort>

siege of threats – variously from Ukrainian nationalists, European Central powers, joining in solidarity with Bolsheviks to finally defeat White Russian Tsarists before, ultimately, betrayal from Moscow and exile.

Parts of the Western left have been lukewarm, or even opposed to practical solidarity with oppressed Ukrainians, citing elements of far-right nationalism even while recognising Russian claims of ‘de-nazification’ as propaganda. Opposition to NATO, Western militarism and the arms industry is justified, so is criticism of the Ukrainian government, oligarchic power, nationalism, corruption, restrictions on labour rights and any attempt to use wartime necessity to suppress political opposition. but focus on them can reduce Ukrainian people to chess pieces on a board in a proxy war.

But some in the west have made ideological purity into Achilles’ tent. They withdraw solidarity from those resisting invasion because helping them might appear to align them with institutions they distrust.

Their principles remain uncontaminated. Other people do the dying.

## **The elder who sees both behind and ahead.**

Homeric Nestor, King of Pylos and the oldest of the Achaean commanders, was known for his age and for his ‘wise counsel’. The same is said, by Menelaus, when calling for Priam of Troy, not his sons, to discuss truce.

“Always it is that the hearts in the younger men are frivolous, but when an elder man is among them, he looks behind him and in front, so that all comes out far better for both sides.”

Menelaus

Homeric Nestor’s authority comes earned from experience and long memory. Becoming king after Hercules had killed his brothers, he was granted additional lifespan, and has already lived three generations by the time of the Trojan war. He has known earlier generations of heroes –He has fought in earlier wars, witnessed victories and disasters that the younger commanders know only as stories. Does he treat those two impostors just the same? He is continually reminding them that the present conflict is not the first war, that they are not the first heroes and that courage without judgement can become another form of stupidity.

Achilles presenting the prize of Wisdom to Nestor during the funeral games, painting by Charles-Philippe Larivière

When Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel they endanger the survival of the entire Achaean expedition. Nestor counsels them both. He does not pretend that both men are equally right. Within the morality of their time and culture Agamemnon should not have seized the enslaved and raped Briseis from Achilles. Achilles should recognise Agamemnon’s kingly authority. Nestor attempts to preserve their focus on their common struggle without concealing, or trying to first solve, the injustice within it.

Neither man listens.

Achilles, in his rage and ego, withdraws from the fighting and allows his comrades to suffer so that Agamemnon will understand his importance.

Nestor's advice drives key parts of the story. He advises Patroclus on how to get Achilles to fight and, fatefully, to take up Achilles armour and fight himself should he fail to do so. This advice indirectly leads to Patroclus' death which, along with Nestor's advice to Agamemnon, brings Achilles back.<sup>5</sup>

The lesson of Nestor: recognising the failings of your allies does not relieve you of responsibility for what happens when the common defence collapses.

The Iliad is often treated as an epic of military glory, the will of gods and goddesses, of kleos, courage and heroic destiny. Yet it is a poem about the vanity of commanders and the price paid by everyone beneath them. Agamemnon's pride and Achilles' rage produce no victory. They produce corpses. They produce grief. Set already a generation past the true golden age of heroes, the form it has come down to us now was already - we can tell from anachronisms - coming from a post-collapse Dark Ages looking back to a time of Bronze Age Mycenaean glory.

Greek epics make us all Cassandras, the scenes are set in divine prophecy, but their acts are only understood in hindsight, the most human tragedy.

Simone Weil calls the Iliad the 'great poem of force' because it reifies. It turns human beings into things. Sometimes before it kills them, but ultimately when it leaves their bodies lying on the ground. Homer does not allow military glory to conceal what force does to human beings, families, animals and landscapes. His horses mourn when they drag empty war chariots across the battlefield, grieving the drivers whose bodies now lie on the earth.<sup>6</sup>

## Nestor of the steppe

"There was no personal egoism in the communes; they relied on solidarity, at the local as well as regional level."

Nestor Makhno

Nestor Ivanovych Makhno was born in Huliaipole in 1888. Thirty years later, amid revolution, foreign occupation and civil war, he emerged as the best-known commander of Револуційна Повстанська Армія України - the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine.<sup>7</sup> The Makhnovshchyna was connected to an attempt to organise political and economic life through local congresses, communes and free soviets, federating without submitting to a centralised party-state.

Its institutions were imperfect, improvised and inseparable from the violence of civil war. Makhno was not a saint, and neither he nor the movement should be insulated from scrutiny. But Trotsky's caricature of the Makhnovists as apolitical bandits concealed both their popular roots and the political threat their alternative social project posed to Bolshevik authority.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray, Book 1 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924), Theoi Classical Texts Library, <https://www.theoi.com/Text/HomerIliad1.html>

<sup>6</sup> Simone Weil, "The Iliad, or the Poem of Force," in *Simone Weil: An Anthology*, ed. Siân Miles (London: Penguin, 2005). Originally published 1940. Online translation available at The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/simone-weil-the-iliad>

<sup>7</sup> Wikipedia contributors, "Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine," Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, accessed August 7, 2026, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary\\_Insurgent\\_Army\\_of\\_Ukraine](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Revolutionary_Insurgent_Army_of_Ukraine).

<sup>8</sup> Aleksander Łaniewski, "Nestor Makhno in the Culture of Remembrance of Modern Ukraine," trans. Malcolm Archibald and Sean Patterson, The Anarchist Library, 2025, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/aleksander-laniewski-nestor-makhno-in-the-culture-of-remembrance-of-modern-ukraine>.

This was a movement born in Ukraine, shaped by the Ukrainian countryside and dependent upon Ukrainian peasant support. Its full military name explicitly identified it as the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine. Ukrainian historian Vladyslav Verstiuk argues that while the Makhnovshchyna was a specifically Ukrainian phenomenon, it was not a nationalist one. It was multinational and anti-nationalist, anarchist Ukrainians fought alongside Jews, Greeks, Russians, Germans and members of other communities.<sup>9</sup>

That distinction between the national and the nationalist is essential. Pan African Frantz Fanon alludes to it when he concerns himself with the psychopathology of colonisation.

Makhno himself developed on the national question. In exile, Makhno recognised the importance of Ukrainian language, culture and national consciousness, even when there were many among the anarchists who were Russian speaking and emigres. He continued to oppose a Ukrainian nation-state, to oppose ANY nation state, but increasingly recognised that an anarchism which regarded Ukraine as merely a southern region of Russia could not communicate with the people it hoped to organise.

“While he never became a nationalist, he did to a degree become a Ukrainian anarchist.”

Frank Sysyn<sup>10</sup>

This is not a minor historical distinction. It runs directly through the present war.

The Makhnovist movement was founded on the deep feeling of fraternity which characterises only the most oppressed. During its entire history it did not for an instant appeal to national sentiments. ...Each one of these invasions represented for them essentially a threat to the workers, and the Makhnovists had no interest in the national flag under which they marched.”

Peter Arshinov<sup>11</sup>

A struggle can be patriotic because it is conducted by a people defending their homes, culture and collective existence. It becomes nationalist when it treats the nation as sacred, excludes those who do not conform to it or claims a right to dominate others. A people can take a stand in a place with a shared culture, without making an idol of the nation-state.

Orwell makes a semantic distinction between patriotism and nationalism -

“Nationalism is not to be confused with patriotism. By ‘patriotism’ I mean devotion to a particular place and a particular way of life.”

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<sup>9</sup> Verstiuk’s comments are reproduced and discussed in Aleksander Łaniewski, “Nestor Makhno in the Culture of Remembrance of Modern Ukraine,” trans. Malcolm Archibald and Sean Patterson, *The Anarchist Library*, 2025, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/aleksander-laniewski-nestor-makhno-in-the-culture-of-remembrance-of-modern-ukraine>

<sup>10</sup> Frank E. Sysyn, “Nestor Makhno and the Ukrainian Revolution,” in *The Ukraine, 1917–1921: A Study in Revolution*, ed. Taras Hunczak (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, 1977), 271–304. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/frank-sysyn-nestor-makhno-and-the-ukrainian-revolution>

<sup>11</sup> Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement (1918–1921)*, trans. Lorraine and Fredy Perlman (Detroit: Black & Red, 1974), 210, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-arshinov-history-of-the-makhnovist-movement-1918-1921>

George Orwell, Notes on Nationalism.<sup>12</sup>

The Makhnovists more explicitly made clear that while they fought to protect Ukraine from external oppression, it was still ‘no war but class war’, and they would fight internal oppression when needed. Many of the Makhnovists, and much of their literature was in Russian. They did free the people from the Russification laws of the language, but not in order to impose ‘Ukrainification’, instead stating

“The question of the language to be taught in the schools cannot be solved by our army, but can only be decided by the people themselves, by parents, teachers and students.”

Cultural-Educational Section of the Makhnovist Insurgent Army<sup>13</sup>

Nationalism, and populist Nationalism especially, often casts the nation as under attack, by created or exaggerated enemies to be scapegoated, to create a ‘rally round the flag’ mentality. Immigrants and refugees are cast as ‘invaders’. Frightened people in dinghies are described as ‘military age males’.

That can, and must, be condemned and exposed as propaganda and disinformation.

But does that make Nationalism valid when you are literally under military invasion? The term Socialist Patriotism as the doubleplusgoodthink alternative to nationalism now carries a lot of dogmatic baggage, presented as a laudable commitment to culture and community, but inevitably degrading into a tool demanding fealty to a centralised state. Is it anything more now than an irregular verb?

- I am a patriot
  - You are a nationalist
  - He / She / It is jingoistic
  - They are xenophobes
  - We are socially patriotic
- But national resistance is not always statist.

## Solidarity without submission

Solidarity can be reciprocal, but it is not transactional. We stand in solidarity because of who we are, as much as we recognise commonalities with those we stand in solidarity with. One episode captures the internationalism of the Makhnovists better than almost any declaration. At the beginning of 1919, after driving back White Russian forces, the Anarchists captured approximately one hundred railway wagons of wheat. Their own territory was poor and war-ravaged. They nevertheless sent the grain north to the starving workers of Moscow and Petrograd. A Makhnovist delegation accompanied it and was welcomed by the Moscow Soviet.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> George Orwell, “Notes on Nationalism,” Polemic, no. 1 (October 1945), reproduced by the Orwell Foundation, accessed August 4, 2026, <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/notes-on-nationalism/>.

<sup>13</sup> Iain McKay et al., “Why Does the Makhnovist Movement Show There Is an Alternative to Bolshevism?,” An Anarchist FAQ, accessed August 2, 2026, <https://www.anarchistfaq.org/afaq/append46.html#app11>.

<sup>14</sup> Peter Arshinov, History of the Makhnovist Movement, 1918–1921, The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-arshinov-history-of-the-makhnovist-movement-1918-1921>.

In a time of tension between nations, ideologies, Ukrainian agrarian peasants fed the Russian industrialised proletariat without recognising the right of a centralised government in Moscow to rule them. They refused to deny Russian workers' humanity on the grounds that their state was behaving imperially.

It was solidarity without submission.

The same distinction should be possible today.

Supporting Ukrainians resisting conquest does not require hostility towards Russian people, indifference towards Russian (or North Korean) conscripts or approval of every action carried out by the Ukrainian state. It doesn't mean backing NATO or ignoring the far right, particularly the AZOV regiment, and politicians with a far-right history who are becoming sanitised and rehabilitated.

It does require recognising which population is being subjected to occupation. In Gaza civilians are being murdered in a genocide, targeted - as they are in Ukraine. If solidarity isn't with both, then is it solidarity?

Worse, perhaps, is the idea from some that recognition of oppression in Ukraine somehow invalidates recognition of genocide in Palestine. Solidarity is not mutually exclusive.

Eastern European writer Radical dumping asks

"...what is the actual goal of telling people they can't support Ukraine because they also support Palestine? Who does that convert? What is the material benefit for anyone involved in this? Why is your own terminally online purity testing more important than advocacy for people actually experiencing occupation?"

Similarly Terrell Jermaine Starr, a Black American reporter in Kyiv, can recognise Lindsay Graham's support for Ukraine while condemning his other views

"Senator Lindsey Graham's final days were spent supporting democracy here in Ukraine, but allowing Donald Trump to dismantle it in his home country...

As an independent reporter and advocate for Ukraine who has been living here since 2009, I respect any lawmaker who advances the security interests of this country...

...As a Black man, I cannot sit in Ukraine's capital city and write the same tributes and well-wishes as other white foreign policy professionals who aren't the targets of his Islamophobia, xenophobia, anti-Blackness and anti-LGBTQ rhetoric and policies."

Terrell Jermaine Starr - A Black Man's Eulogy For Lindsey Graham<sup>15</sup>

## **Always outnumbered, never outgunned**

The Makhnovists fought everyone who attempted to impose external power structures over their region: the Austro-German occupation, the Hetmanate of Pavlo Skoropadsky, Ukrainian na-

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<sup>15</sup> Terrell Jermaine Starr, "A Black Man's Eulogy for Lindsey Graham: 'Pro Ukraine.' Anti-Black," Terrell J Starr Official, July 28, 2026,

Terrell J Starr Official

A Black Man's Eulogy For Lindsey Graham: 'Pro Ukraine.' Anti-Black

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tionalists, White Russian armies seeking to restore an indivisible Russian Empire and, eventually, the Bolsheviks.

Their relationship with the Bolsheviks was the most consequential. It was never plain sailing. Imprisoned for Anarchism in Russia from 1910 until political prisoners were freed in the February Revolution, Nestor returned to Ukraine and gained prominence redistributing agricultural lands from aristocrats.

When Germany invaded Ukraine, the Anarchists were unable to hold them off, and Makhno travelled back to Moscow where he met with both Kropotkin and Lenin. Lenin stated his opposition to Anarchy, but recognised that in Makhno here was a man of action, not just a thinker.

“The majority of anarchists think and write about the future without understanding the present. That is what divides us Communists from them... But I think that you, comrade, have a realistic attitude towards the burning evils of the time. If only one-third of the anarchist-communists were like you, we Communists would be ready, under certain well-known conditions, to join with them in working towards a free organisation of producers.”

Lenin - according to Makhno<sup>16</sup>

The two forces repeatedly cooperated against White armies, broke with one another and co-operated again when the military situation demanded it. The final alliance was directed against General Pyotr Wrangel's forces in Crimea in 1920. Once Wrangel had been defeated, the common enemy no longer held the alliance together. On 26 November 1920, Red forces moved against Makhnovist formations and anarchist organisations.

The Bolshevik government claimed that the insurgents had failed to obey orders and constituted a threat behind the front. Makhnovist accounts described a planned betrayal undertaken as soon as their fighters were no longer needed against the Whites. Whatever interpretation is placed on the preceding conflicts, there is little dispute that the Bolshevik leadership renewed its attempt to destroy the independent Makhnovist movement immediately after the common victory in Crimea.<sup>17</sup>

The Makhnovist project represented more than a troublesome thorn in the Russian side. Lenin and Trotsky reportedly briefly debated some accommodation - perhaps allowing Ukrainian Soviets autonomy in return for a blockade on accepting Red army deserters.

Trotsky was vehemently against this - on narrative grounds - autonomous peasant organisation and a revolutionary army retaining its independence challenged the Bolshevik claim that revolutionary survival required one vanguard party, one state and one centralised chain of command. They needed monopoly, not the diversity of competition.

“Makhno and his closest co-thinkers consider themselves Anarchists, and on this basis they 'reject' state power. So then, they are enemies of the Soviet power? Obviously, since Soviet power is the state power of the workers and working peasants.”

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<sup>16</sup> Paul Avrich, “Nestor Makhno: The Man and the Myth,” *The Russian Review* 27, no. 2 (1968): 117–118. Avrich draws here on Nestor Makhno, *Under the Blows of the Counterrevolution: April–June 1918*, trans. Malcolm Archibald, *The Anarchist Library*, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/nestor-makhno-under-the-blows-of-the-counterrevolution>.

<sup>17</sup> Alexandre Skirida, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy's Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in Ukraine, 1917–1921*, trans. Paul Sharkey (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alexandre-skirida-nestor-makhno-anarchy-s-cossack>.

Leon Trotsky<sup>18</sup>

Had these autonomous revolutionary institutions survived in Ukraine, an area that was bringing together industry and agriculture, they would have provided a competing answer to the question of “What is to be done” to follow the collapse of the old order.

The 1920 betrayal in Ukraine did not prove that centralised party rule was historically necessary. It just helped ensure that no large-scale alternative remained to disprove it immediately.

Makhno later wrote in 1926

“It has come to pass in history that the workers have defeated capitalism, but the victory then slipped from their grasp, because some state power emerged, amalgamating the interests of private capitalism and those of state capitalism for the sake of success over the toilers.”

Nestor Makhno<sup>19</sup>

This is not an argument that Bolshevism, White restoration and Putinism are identical. But they are connected in the repeated insistence that Ukraine’s independent political life must be subordinate to a Moscow Centre, and that resistance to this centralisation is either banditry, fascism or manipulation by foreign powers.

White Russia described the empire as one and indivisible.

Bolshevik Russia centralised power in the name of proletarian revolution.

Putin’s Russia, shaped by Dugin’s plan, invokes history, security and the supposed indivisible unity of the Russian and Ukrainian peoples.

Different prophecies of inevitability to predestination—violent adherence to a centralised Russian state.

## Nestor’s odyssey

The Odyssey is a poem of νόστος - nostos; the attempt to return home, and this is also the etymology of Nestor. Nestor, in leaving Troy promptly, was one of the Achaeans who made it safely home – perhaps protected by nominative determinism. Odysseus (spoilers!) eventually reaches Ithaca.

When Telemachus, Odysseus’ son whose name means ‘Far from War’, visits the kingdom of Pylos in the Odyssey, searching for news of his missing father, he meets an even older Nestor. The war is over. The task is no longer to hold the coalition together but to remember what happened to the men who fought. He is still Nestor who remembers past wars, and the more experience he gains, the more grief it seems to cause him.

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<sup>18</sup> Leon Trotsky, “The Makhno Movement,” June 2, 1919, originally published in *En Route*, no. 5, in *The Military Writings of Leon Trotsky*, vol. 2, 1919, “The Southern Front,” [https://www.struggle.ws/russia/replies/trotsky/makhno\\_movement\\_1919.html](https://www.struggle.ws/russia/replies/trotsky/makhno_movement_1919.html).

<sup>19</sup> Nestor Makhno, “The Struggle against the State,” 1926, in *The Struggle against the State and Other Essays*, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/makhno-nestor/works/1926/struggle-against-the-state/chapter-11.html>.

“My friend, you recall a time of much sorrow to my mind, for the brave Achaeans suffered much.”

Nestor, to Telemachus<sup>20</sup>

But Nestor Makhno never returned to Huliaipole. Defeated, wounded and pursued, he crossed into exile in 1921 and eventually reached Paris.

There was no ‘νόστος’, no heroic homecoming - the term in Greek epic means much more than physical return, but to be changed by the return, to come home and be psychologically healed of the trauma of what has happened while you were away.

He lived in poverty, worked when his health permitted, wrote, and suffered from tuberculosis and the accumulated effects of his wounds.

He died in Paris in July 1934, aged 45.<sup>21</sup>

But his survival for over a decade depended upon the same international solidarity he had practised in Ukraine. Western anarchists and sympathisers established a Makhno Solidarity Committee in 1929, assisted by May Picqueray. Michael Malet records that Makhno’s small regular income was largely contributed by the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist CNT, whose members held him in considerable admiration.<sup>22</sup>

## Nestor, who remembers past battles

“My friend, you recall a time of much sorrow to my mind,  
for the brave anarchists suffered much”

On 21 July 1927, Makhno attended a gathering in Paris celebrating the release of the Spanish anarchists Buenaventura Durruti (later to form the Anarchist ‘Durruti Column’ in the Spanish Civil War), Francisco Ascaso, and Gregorio Jover. Afterwards, Durruti and Ascaso met Makhno in his cramped room, where they talked for several hours through an interpreter.

Nestor took on the mantle of the Nestor who remembers wars, and who can, like Priam, look back and forward, to offer counsel. Marx had believed revolution would come first in a developed country, not an agrarian one. Makhno believed that Spain offered stronger prospects for a libertarian revolution than Russia had. Spanish anarchism had deep roots among both workers and peasants, together with mass organisation such as in the CNT.

He urged his comrades to learn from the organisational failures and political defeat of the revolutionary movements in the former Russian Empire. He said that, if he remained alive when their struggle began, he would join them, having never backed down from a fight.

In 1931, he addressed an open letter to the Spanish anarchists. He urged the CNT and FAI to organise workers and peasants together, to develop institutions of economic and social self-management and to prepare to defend revolutionary gains. He also warned that parties seeking

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<sup>20</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, Book 3, trans. A. S. Kline, *Poetry in Translation*, <https://www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Odyssey3.php>.

<sup>21</sup> Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy’s Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in Ukraine, 1917–1921*, trans. Paul Sharkey (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alexandre-skirda-nestor-makhno-anarchy-s-cossack>.

<sup>22</sup> Michael Malet, *Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War* (London: Macmillan, 1982), online edition, *The Anarchist Library*, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/michael-malet-nestor-makhno-in-the-russian-civil-war>.

a monopoly of political authority would eventually turn against autonomous workers' and peasants' organisations.<sup>23</sup>

Makhno was not making a Delphic prophecy of what would happen in Spain, but he was identifying a structural danger from his own experience.

A centralising political party may tolerate autonomous revolutionaries while it needs their fighters. In his experience, once their military usefulness has passed, their political independence can make them appear more threatening than the defeated common enemy. As it was in Spain, solidarity began to fail even before the military need was gone – and Stalin's machinations were driven more by his foreign and trade policy considerations.

As in the east, Autonomous revolutionary forces cooperated with centralising Communists against a deadly right-wing enemy. Military necessity was invoked to concentrate authority. Anarchist militias faced the contradiction of adopting ranks, discipline and conventional military structures in order to survive a modern war.<sup>24</sup>

In Ukraine the anarchist free soviets had tried to square this circle with an administrative wall - the army could elect their leaders, but then orders must be obeyed in battle, and the army could take part in government - when places were liberated the army did not enforce a government, but stated it was now for the people to rule themselves.

After the May Days, the POUM - not Anarchists, but anti-Marxist socialists who Orwell fought with, and Eileen O'Shaughnessy administrated - were suppressed. Ironically by now Trotsky had fallen out of favour enough that the Stalinist controlled Spanish Communists were convinced to condemn the POUM and others as

“...enemies of the USSR, Fascist spies and Trotskyist agents”

Paul Preston - The Spanish Civil War<sup>25</sup>

The organisational power of the anarchists, without whom there might have been no resistance in time, was progressively weakened more by their allies than their enemies, as communists, republicans vied for centralised control of military resources.

Makhno himself did not reach Spain, but some of his comrades from the Steppe did - At least two former Makhnovists later fought and died with the International Group of the Durruti Column.<sup>26</sup>

American anarchist Emma Goldman drew parallels in 1937 writing to Max Nettlau

“Your contention that the comrades in France or Bernrei have caused the tragic events in the first days of May in Barcelona is on par with the charges made in Russia against Makhno and the Russian anarchists who had dared to point out that the

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<sup>23</sup> Nestor Makhno, “Letter to the Spanish Anarchists,” 1931, The Anarchist Library, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/nestor-makhno-letter-to-the-spanish-anarchists>.

<sup>24</sup> Howard Brown, “The Anarchist in Uniform: The Militarisation of Anarchist Culture during the Spanish Civil War, 1936–1939,” *Contemporary European History* 33, no. 1 (2024): 305–322, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/contemporary-european-history/article/anarchist-in-uniform-the-militarisation-of-anarchist-culture-during-the-spanish-civil-war-19361939/53393A2AC37970D60B75E181DC29ED61>.

<sup>25</sup> Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Reaction, Revolution and Revenge*, updated 80th anniversary ed. (London: William Collins, 2016), 254.

<sup>26</sup> Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy's Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in Ukraine, 1917–1921*, trans. Paul Sharkey (Oakland, CA: AK Press, 2004), <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/alexandre-skirda-nestor-makhno-anarchy-s-cossack>.

Revolution was being emasculated by the Communist state. Lenin also considered it the height of treason to be criticized by his political opponents.”

Emma Goldman - Vision on Fire<sup>27</sup>

## **Those who learn from history are forced to watch others repeat it.**

Homer’s Nestor could remember previous wars but could not force younger commanders to learn from his experience. Yet Makhno’s warning to the Spanish anarchists was understood; it was debated, heeded by some even - and they still found themselves caught by many of the forces he had described.

Russian propaganda, repeated by useful idiots and willing collaborators in the West sometimes describes the invasion as a war of “Denazification”.<sup>28</sup> The claim depends upon reducing the whole of Ukrainian political life to its most convenient and objectionable elements.

Ukraine, like all European countries and many others, including Scotland<sup>29</sup>, has a real far-right problem. It includes organised groups with histories of violence, military connections and influence outside electoral politics. Those forces should not be minimised merely because Russia exploits them. But their existence does not make the Russian invasion anti-fascist.

A combined electoral list containing most of Ukraine’s significant far-right parties received 2.15 per cent of the vote in the 2019 parliamentary election.

Research by Andreas Umland describes the Ukrainian far right as electorally weak while warning that some organisations retain extra-parliamentary influence – and, of course, as in many countries, the authoritarian, the violent and the far right are attracted to the military.<sup>30</sup>

The far right should be opposed in Ukraine as it should be opposed everywhere, but Ukrainians do not first have to eliminate every reactionary current in their society before acquiring the right not to be invaded. Demanding political purity from an occupied population, or a resisting force, is not anti-fascism. It is a way to avoid solidarity.

## **Nestor’s Lessons Learned**

“That’s no lie, old man – a full account you give

Of all my acts of madness.

Mad, blind I was!”

Agamemnon to Nestor

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<sup>27</sup> Emma Goldman, *Vision on Fire: Emma Goldman on the Spanish Revolution*, ed. David Porter (Edinburgh: AK Press, 2006), 295.

<sup>28</sup> Clara Apt and Viola Gienger, “Tracking Russia’s Eliminationist Rhetoric Against Ukraine,” *Just Security*, February 24, 2026, <https://www.justsecurity.org/81789/russias-eliminationist-rhetoric-against-ukraine-a-collection/>.

<sup>29</sup> Judith Sijstermans, “Beyond the Protests: Tracing Scotland’s Far Right Activism,” University of Glasgow Centre for Public Policy, September 18, 2025, [https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/publicpolicy/news/headline\\_1212875\\_en.html](https://www.gla.ac.uk/research/az/publicpolicy/news/headline_1212875_en.html).

<sup>30</sup> Andreas Umland, *Ukraine’s Far Right Today: Continuing Electoral Impotence and Growing Uncivil Society*, UI Brief no. 3 (Stockholm: Swedish Institute of International Affairs, 2020), <https://www.ui.se/globalassets/ui.se-eng/publications/ui-publications/2020/ui-brief-no.-3-2020.pdf>.

The memory of Makhno in modern Ukraine is unstable and contested. He is claimed by anarchists, local communities, soldiers, nationalists and state institutions. Some emphasise the free soviets and social revolution. Others lionise him into a conventional national hero or military genius. Russian narratives attempt to detach him from Ukraine altogether and absorb him into the mythology of Russia's imperial south.<sup>31</sup>

History is never clear cut. Some anarchists and others today wear patches based on what was claimed to be a Makhnovist flag, with the motto "Death to all who stand in the way of freedom for the working people" based on an attributed photo below.

Sean Patterson convincingly deconstructs this myth-making in "Anarchy's False Flag" on the anarchist studies blog. It was originally connected to Makhnovists in propaganda linking them to anti-Semitic pogroms, and Makhno personally disavowed it.<sup>32</sup> But the purpose of a symbol is what it does and now, a century later, it is an anarchist symbol of resistance against oppression.

"The Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists – N. I. Makhno (Револуційна конфедерація анархо-синдикалістів ім. Н. І. Махно), was established in Ukraine in 1994. It was consciously modeled after the Makhnovist movement of the Russian Revolution and Civil War (1917-1921), adopting a "Platformist" approach as advocated by Nestor Makhno, Peter Arshinov and other survivors of the Makhnovist movement. Many anarchists have been critics of Platformism as an attempt to create, in essence, an anarchist political party demanding ideological uniformity and "organizational discipline"

Robert Graham's Anarchism Weblog

The historical contradictions are visible in his monument. An anti-state revolutionary sits beneath the Ukrainian flag of a country he didn't think should exist. Soldiers serving in a national army pose beside the figure of a man who opposed permanent armies and central authority.

The contradiction belongs to the reality, not to the statue.

Ukrainian anarchists and socialists did not choose between resisting the Russian invasion and retaining their criticism of the Ukrainian state. Many are attempting to do both while seeing the practical need to prioritise.

Solidarity Collectives ( A registered non-profit organisation "Колективи Солідарності" ) is a network of Ukrainian anarchists and anti-authoritarians supporting comrades fighting Russian imperial aggression and civilians affected by the war. The people within its wider networks include anarchists, trade unionists, feminists, environmental activists, human-rights defenders and political refugees from Russia and Belarus.<sup>33</sup>

Their decision to support - militarily and with humanitarian support - does not amount to endorsing every policy of the government under which they live, or of the parties with enough representatives to be deemed a faction. And legally and morally - from the individual level upwards there is a world of difference between a fight of aggression and a fight of self-defence.

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<sup>31</sup> Aleksander Łaniewski, "Nestor Makhno in the Culture of Remembrance of Modern Ukraine," trans. Malcolm Archibald and Sean Patterson, The Anarchist Library, 2025, <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/aleksander-laniewski-nestor-makhno-in-the-culture-of-remembrance-of-modern-ukraine>.

<sup>32</sup> Sean Patterson, "Death to All Who Stand in the Way of Freedom for the Working People': Anarchy's False Flag," AnarchistStudies.Blog, June 30, 2022, <https://anarchiststudies.noblogs.org/death-to-all-who-stand-in-the-way-of-freedom-for-the-working-class-anarchys-false-flag/>

<sup>33</sup> Solidarity Collectives, "About Us," accessed August , 2026, <https://www.solidaritycollectives.org/en/about-us/>

“Based on our anti-authoritarian values, we decided to actively resist Russian aggression... Full support of the Ukrainian people in their struggle (which doesn't necessarily mean supporting the government's policies) is the only consistent stance for anarchists and leftists worldwide... Our goals are incompatible with Putin's authoritarian regime. But we're ready to fight for them in post-war Ukraine too opposing authoritarian tendencies in our society.”

Solidarity Collective Manifesto

It reflects the sound judgement that Russian occupation would not create a freer space for anarchism, socialism, feminism or trade unionism. Indeed, just as they are suppressed in Russia, we can see that it would destroy much of the political and physical space in which those struggles can exist.

## **Solidarity without simplicity**

This view is not uncontested, including among anarchists. Critics argue that the comparison with the Makhnovists has limits. Makhno's forces entered temporary alliances while retaining their own command, institutions and political programme. Contemporary anarchists serving in Ukraine's armed forces operate within a state military hierarchy have far less control over the units, commanders and political symbols around them.

The parallel lies in the dilemma of co-operation under military necessity, not in identical forms of organisation.

## **Guilt by association?**

There are legitimate concerns about proximity to the state and the far right right in particular. Some anarchists and anti-fascists have seemingly served in, or alongside, formations with nationalist and far-right histories. Other anarchists have accused parts of the Ukrainian anti-authoritarian movement of minimising these relationships. People in impossible situations are making political and personal choices inside a compromised military environment, and those choices remain open to criticism.

Nor does recognising the legitimacy of armed resistance create a universal duty to enlist. Ukrainians who flee, resist conscription, claim conscientious objection or pursue non-military forms of resistance do not necessarily belong in Achilles' tent. People living under invasion may reach different defensible conclusions about what solidarity, survival and resistance require of them, or what is compatible with sincere anti-militarism.

These objections expose the dangers of over-simplification, co-option, militarisation and political compromise. The choice is not between a pure anarchist resistance and an impure one.

The criticism of such purity checks is practically no pure option exists.

Cosmopolitan Solidarity without submission to central power must therefore include solidarity with those who fight, solidarity with those who refuse, and continued scrutiny of the institutions and alliances formed in the process.

Ukrainian left-wing activists serving in the armed forces have described their disillusionment with Western organisations that understood opposition to NATO in theory but could not understand why people under invasion needed the means to defend themselves in practice.<sup>34</sup>

As to Ukraine's reliance on arms from a US whose administration only sees them as something to be exploited, or to be negotiated away to curry favour with Trump's preferred Strongman Putin; and this must go doubly for leftists and anarchists in the ranks, ironically it is perhaps the anti-Makhnovist Trotsky who laid out these calculations of necessity a century ago.

"...the Makhnovite 'army' needs cartridges, rifles, machine-guns, artillery, trucks, railway-engines and money. All these things are concentrated in the hands of the Soviet power, being produced and distributed under its direction. Therefore the Makhnovites have to turn to that very power which they do not recognise, in order to ask for money and cartridges."

Leon Trotsky

This is the challenge that the Western left must answer: to listen to the Ukrainian resistance as political actors, not recognise them only when they repeat conclusions already reached in London, Berlin, Paris or New York.

Too much anti-imperialist analysis grants agency only to empires.

'Washington acts.'

'Moscow dictates.'

'NATO expands.'

Or only to great men of history: "Trump snubs Zelenskyy", "Putin manipulates Trump". Ukraine becomes terrain, a proxy, a borderland, and its people only pieces on somebody else's board.

Ukraine is not merely the place where Russia meets NATO. Where East meets west.

## **Solidarity without submission**

Solidarity with Ukraine does not require uncritical support for NATO. It does not require silence about the Ukrainian government, compulsory state power, oligarchy, capitalism, the far right or restrictions on workers' rights. It does not require pretending that weapons arrive without political interests and profits attached to them.

It does require recognising people's right to resist conquest – whether they are Ukrainian, Palestinian or Urghars. For the Western left, that should mean listening to, publishing and materially supporting Ukrainian anarchists, socialists, feminists and trade unionists and defending labour and social rights during the war and through reconstruction and supporting mutual-aid networks and those protecting communities from occupation.

It should mean refusing to use Ukrainians as passive evidence in arguments whose real subject is the United States. Or as the lesser of two or more deserving causes. Cosmopolitan solidarity must see us all in a big tent, not isolated into an Achilles tent of purity tests.

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<sup>34</sup> Commons, "Solidarity Is Our Weapon: What Left-Wing Activists in the Army Think About," 2022, <https://commons.com.ua/en/solidarnist-nasha-zbroya-pro-sho-dumayut-livi-aktivisti-v-armiyi/>.



For anarchists, it should mean abandoning the idea that resistance becomes corrupted into nationalism whenever the people resisting have adopted a pragmatic pseudo-national identity from tactical necessity.

The Makhnovists sent grain to Russian workers while rejecting rule from Moscow. Bolsheviks helped Makhnovists expel Czarists; Spanish anarchists kept Makhno alive in Paris; Stalin's foreign policy and Republican centralists undermined Anarchists in Spain.

So it goes.

Today, Ukrainian and aligned anti-authoritarians ask for solidarity from movements that once celebrated resistance but often refuse to recognise theirs – and so do Russian anti-authoritarians.

“Russian anarchists in Autonomous Action (Автономное действие), for example, continue to criticise states, nationalism, militarism, and capitalism, yet they have also argued that a Russian victory in Ukraine would further consolidate an increasingly fascist regime and leave even less space for anarchists, trade unionists, and anyone else trying to organise inside Russia. They haven't abandoned their principles. They've recognised that principles become impossible to defend if the conditions needed to practice them disappear.”<sup>35</sup>

Makhno wrote:

“Only the man who has successfully rid himself of the chains of oppression and seen all the horrors being perpetrated against the human race can be persuaded that his freedom and that of his neighbour are inviolable, as are their lives, and that his neighbour is his brother.”

Nestor Makhno - The ABC of the revolutionary Anarchist<sup>36</sup>

Makhno the man never returned to Huliaipole, but Nestor, the one who remembers, has returned. He sits behind sandbags, bearing witness beneath the flag of a state he would never have worshipped, to a city being destroyed by an empire - and which has now once again come under occupation.

His presence does not resolve the contradiction between anarchism and national defence. It reminds us that history rarely offers any of us the luxury of acting without contradiction. The Stoic Sage can act in black and white, with the wisdom to recognise how to act perfectly with Temperance, Courage and Justice. But we are more wretch than Sage, and each must take the personal responsibility to make the best decisions we can.

We must look both behind us and ahead.

Behind us are revolutions defeated after centralised powers used and then suppressed their independent allies; before us is the possibility that an invaded people will be abandoned because

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<sup>35</sup> “echo chambers won't save you,” radical dumpling, August 1, 2026,  
radical dumpling  
echo chambers won't save you

Since 2022, my mornings have usually followed a pretty predictable routine. I crawl out of bed and make coffee on autopilot, even now when Prague is already unbearably hot and my apartment feels like a little bit of micro-dosing hell before most people are awake. Against my better judgment and to the detriment of my constantly dysregulated nervous system...

<sup>36</sup> Nestor Makhno, “The ABC of the Revolutionary Anarchist,” 1932, Marxists Internet Archive, <https://www.marxists.org/reference/archive/makhno-nestor/works/1932/02/abc.htm>.

their resistance does not fit a pure ideological category. Waters are more often muddied than pure. Sometimes national, and international resistance against the greater evil is what keeps open the possibility of a politics beyond nationalism.

They say never meet your heroes - they say that because heroes are humans, flawed.

National resistance is not always nationalism.

Solidarity is not always submission.

Героям слава.

Free Palestine.

“Our fate, I tell you, stands on a razor’s edge”

Nestor of Pylos

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Roderick McMillan

Solidarity Without Submission: Nestor, Ulysses, Ukraine and the Glory of Heroes  
How can anarchists fight for national resistance without condoning nationalism?

August 7th 2026

<https://morewretchthansage.substack.com/p/solidarity-without-submission-nestor>

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