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Nestor Makhno

Anarchist revolutionary and commander of a peasant
army in southern Ukraine

Serhii Plokhy

2015

The only Ukrainian warlord who tried, though with mixed success, to restrain his troops from conducting pogroms and fought anti-Semitism in the ranks of his peasant army was Nestor Makhno. A short, frail man with a moustache and long hair, he was the charismatic commander of the largest “private” army in the former Russian Empire, which numbered 40,000 at its height. A peasant by origin and an anarchist according to his political views, Makhno was the most ideologically driven of the warlords. His home base and area of operation was the town of Huliaipole in southern Ukraine—a peasant heartland between the coal mines of the Donbas and the iron mines of Kryvyi Rih. At the turn of the twentieth century, a railroad that crossed the Moscow-Sevastopol line in the city of Aleksandrovsk (today’s Zaporizhia), not far from Makhno’s hometown, linked the two regions. The location of the railroads placed Makhno and his army at the center of the fighting.

Makhno’s peasant fighters shared few of his anarchist principles and dreams and looked down on the ideologically motivated anarchists around their *bat’ko*, or father, as they referred to him

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in the tradition of peasant paternalism. The peasants hated state control of any kind—an attitude that appealed to Makhno's anarchist ideologues—and wanted expropriation and redistribution of land. Like the Zaporozhian Cossacks of the early modern era, Makhno's army, which operated on the former Cossack-Tatar borderland, kept its distance from the Ukrainian governments to the north and often fought with them. While the absolute majority of Makhno's fighters were ethnic Ukrainians, and the Ukrainian national agenda was not entirely foreign to Makhno—his teacher wife actively promoted it—the warlord's vision of anarchist revolution was basically internationalist.

Of all the forces that fought over Ukraine, Makhno regarded the Bolsheviks alone as potential candidates for an alliance, but they turned against him immediately after he helped them defeat their main enemy, General Petr Wrangel's White Army, whose remnants had turned the Crimea into their last bastion. Wrangel's was the eighth Crimean government in less than three years. The Crimean Tatars had established the first as the Crimean People's Republic on December 25, 1917. After two major waves of emigration to the Ottoman Empire, the Tatars constituted close to 30 percent of the peninsula's population (the rest were Russians, Ukrainians, Greeks, Bulgarians, Jews, and representatives of other nationalities). Their republic represented one of the first attempts of any Islamic group to build a secular state—a result of the cultural and educational activities of the previous generation of Crimean Tatar activists, led by Ismail Gaspirali, the father of the modern Crimean Tatar nation. But the Crimean People's Republic was short-lived. In January 1918, power on the peninsula passed to the Bolsheviks, who declared an independent Taurida (Crimean) Republic but were soon overrun by Ukrainian and German forces.

Under German rule, the Crimea remained independent of Ukraine, but in September 1918 Hetman Skoropadsky declared an economic blockade of the peninsula and forced the Crimean government to join the Ukrainian state as an autonomous region.

This arrangement did not last long, as the German retreat brought to power a new government led by a liberal politician of Karaite origin, Solomon Krym. His minister of justice was Vladimir Nabokov, father of the famous writer. But the Bolsheviks were already on the march. They executed Emperor Nicholas II and his immediate family in the Urals in July 1918. On April 7, 1919, surviving members of the Romanov imperial family left their mansions near Yalta and were brought to the safety of the West by the British dreadnought *Marlborough*. From June 1919, the Crimea was under the control of the White Army, first under the leadership of General Denikin and, once he resigned in April 1920, then under General Wrangel.

Wrangel claimed to lead the government of southern Russia, but in fact he controlled only the Crimean Peninsula and a strip of steppeland north of it. He and his ministers wanted to recover the whole Russian Empire, which was easier said than done. Despite the support offered by the Entente, Wrangel was losing the war with the Bolsheviks. On November 8, 1920, the Red Army and allied detachments of Makhno's forces began their attack on the Crimea from the mainland, marching in freezing weather through the shallow waters of the Syvash lagoon and storming the White Army's fortifications on the four-mile-wide Perekop isthmus connecting the peninsula with the mainland. On November 17 they entered Yalta. General Wrangel evacuated the remnants of his army to Istanbul. Those who stayed behind—close to 50,000 officers and soldiers—were massacred in the largest mass killing of the war. It turned out to be not only the last slaughter of the bloody revolutionary war but also a prelude to the no less bloody rule of the Bolsheviks over a vast country, of which most of Ukraine was forced to be a part.