

Makhno: the impressions of a French journalist

Stéphane Roger

1919

Always true to their own lying system of propaganda, the bourgeois and estate-owning Menonites from the German colonies of Ukraine have for several months now carried on a deceitful campaign of slander with the goal of vilifying the reputation of Comrade Makhno. Only those without the slightest acquaintance with our Brigade Commissar Makhno could take seriously their perfidious insinuations.

I, as a French journalist who has seen Makhno and his detachments with my own eyes, am entitled to tell those who don't know the real story what these soldiers stand for and what sort of person their commissar is.

After I deserted from the French Army on February 12 1919, I succeeded (after a month of adventures described by me in an earlier article) in coming upon communist units. On March 12 1919 I came in contact with the vanguard of the Bolsheviks, which turned out to be a unit of soldiers from one of Makhno's detachments. I was aware of the danger of my situation: I was bearing arms, and I came from the same direction whence the defeated White Guards had fled. All it would take was a sudden impulse from some soldier, intoxicated with the fighting and the victory. What was the value of the life of an unknown soldier, quite possibly an enemy, when so many of your own comrades had just fallen while defending your revolutionary ideal?!

Nothing awful happened. These soldiers, who not long before had been fighting like lions, remained remarkably composed after their victory.

In response to a question, I declared that I was French and that I was a deserter; they responded by crowding around to shake my hand and welcome me; one of them offered me something to eat, another asked what I needed – to sum up, they accepted me with enthusiasm and with evident warm feelings.

The commissar of the 9th Ukrainian Regiment, Malerenko, based in the settlement of Molochansk, greeted me in as kindly a manner as the soldiers when I was presented to him in order to surrender my weapons and ammunition. A bundle of energy, Comrade Malerenko was also easy to get along with, which allowed him to gain the respect of all those around him. After the necessary interrogation, in which my identity and the circumstances of my desertion were clarified, he kept me around for supper and provided a set of clothes for me from head to toe,

for my own garments were in a pitiable state. He suggested that I make myself at home in his quarters, but I preferred to stay with my comrade soldiers.

Never will I forget the enthusiasm of these detachments. They were people who were really grinning with joy, and when I talked to them about their splendid victory, they said: "We're not afraid of anything because with Makhno we always seem to be victorious. He leads us forward – he's as brave as a lion, and we smash all the capitalists and the bourgeoisie." These soldiers told me that unlike the commanders of the old regime, who directed military operations from the rear, possibly a hundred miles from the battlefield, Makhno was always up front, encouraging the troops and setting an example with his outstanding courage.

On the following day, at tea time, I had the opportunity to see Comrade Brigade Commissar Makhno for the first time. He came into the headquarters of Comrade Malerenko's regiment and greeted us from the threshold: "Good afternoon, friends!" He shook hands with everyone present, at which time Malerenko introduced me to him. He presented me as a French comrade who had deserted from Sevastopol. Makhno's smile became wider, we shook hands, and I realized how pleased he was to meet me. He wanted me to sit opposite him and we drank tea and then he kept me around for dinner, so that I left him only around 2 a.m.

Makhno is of medium height with a slender, supple figure, unusual in a person not a professional athlete. Dressed in a simple blue uniform, he seems both approachable and dignified. He has lively, penetrating eyes in which one discerns unlimited courage and extraordinary intelligence. He combs his hair back from his forehead, which makes his appearance all the more attractive and at the same time imposing.

We were engaged in conversation for hours, thanks to Comrade Chernov, Makhno's adjutant. Chernov, a veteran revolutionary, spent many years in exile. He lived for a long time in England and America and travelled around the whole of Europe, acquiring in the course of his journeys considerable experience in communicating with people as well as knowledge which makes him a valuable person to have around. He knows most of the European languages, so he was able to serve as a translator between Comrade Makhno and myself. I was amazed at how up-to-date Makhno and Chernov were regarding current affairs in France. Makhno asked me about all the Paris revolutionaries, as he is familiar with their works; he also knows most of the ideas of the writers of France, and I'm pleased to acknowledge that his appraisals are both accurate and just.

On the following day, Makhno decided to address the people. The whole population of Molochansk gathered in the square in front of the church, for when it comes to personal merit and popularity, Makhno has no equals. When he arrived on horseback, applause immediately resounded on all sides. Makhno is an accomplished equestrian, who spends more time in the saddle than sleeping. As he greeted everyone with a smile on his lips, it was apparent that this intelligent person with leadership qualities is first and foremost a proletarian like the rest of us, and that he is our true friend who is inspired by a great love for those who are suffer and by a burning hatred for the oppressors.

He ascended to the tribune and began to speak. He spoke at length, often interrupted by ovations. His eyes sparkling from his convictions and his enthusiasm, emphasizing his points with gestures, he spoke for about an hour. Although I did not understand the content of his speech, I was amazed by his facility with words and his inflammatory eloquence. I was fascinated by his demeanour and facial expressions, for they indicated that he walked the talk which was coming from his lips. He was able, of course, to find incendiary words which sent the audience into ecstasy; at the moment when he descended from the tribune, a frenzied chant began from all sides:

“Long Live the Revolution! Down with the Bourgeoisie! Long Live Makhno!” Then I understood how great and deserved the popularity of Makhno was in Ukraine.

A leader of enormous stature, he is above all a proletarian and a revolutionary, beloved by his soldiers and by the whole population. This is the Makhno I saw, the one who is known to thousands of people who recognize him as one of the best fighters of our revolution.

Translator’s note:

Stéphane Roget’s impressions of Nestor Makhno were published in the Paris newspaper *La Vague* between March 12 1919 and May 9 1919. The exact date is unknown because this is a translation of a Russian version prepared for the Bolshevik leadership which ended up in Lenin’s archive.

During the period in question, the Makhnovists were allied with the Bolsheviks in driving the White forces out of southern Ukraine. The large village of Molochansk (actually a complex of villages previously dominated by Mennonites) was occupied by the Makhnovists in March 1919.

Regarding Makhno’s reading habits, the Russian editors who reprinted this article note that he frequently wrote on his orders to the Insurgent Army the slogan “One for all and all for one”, suggesting he was familiar with Alexandre Dumas.

Although possessed of at most two years of formal schooling, Makhno describes himself in his memoirs as a voracious reader. As a teenager, he apparently got through the full two volumes of *Don Quixote*, recommended by the anarchist group he belonged to. But most of his reading was done during the six years plus he spent in Moscow’s Butyrki Prison, where he had to wear shackles the whole time. His favourite subjects were history, geography, and mathematics. In his *Autobiography* he writes:

*“Once I settled in to my cell, I immediately committed my time to reading. I devoured book after book; I read all the Russian classics from Sumarokov to Lev Shestov, with particular attention to Belinsky and Lermontov, whose works I found enthralling. These books were in the prison thanks to the long succession of political prisoners who had created a remarkable library, better-stocked than the libraries of many of our provincial cities. In particular, I studied Russian history according to Kluchevsky’s **Course**. I also familiarized myself with the programs of the socialist parties and even with the reports of their underground conferences. Later I got hold of Kropotkin’s book **Mutual Aid**. I found it entirely absorbing and kept it with me at all times in order to discuss it with comrades.”*

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