

What would Nestor Makhno do?

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One hundred years ago the Donbas region of Ukraine was not the bastion of pro-Russian nationalism it is today. By contrast, it was the stronghold of the Makhnovshchina — a radical peasant movement and army led by the remarkable Nestor Makhno. Between 1917 and 1921 Makhno's forces and anarchist ideas held sway over a population of around seven million. Makhno spent most of that time fighting off a succession of enemies — the First World War army of Germany and its allies, the reactionary Russian White Army, the Kyiv Government and finally the Red Army who vanquished the Makhnovshchina and forced Makhno into permanent exile.

His enemies may appear bizarrely diverse but as far as Makhno was concerned they had one thing in common — a love of hierarchical power. They may have differed in what they regarded as utopia but an ultra-conservative Prussian, a Tsarist aristocrat or a revolutionary Marxist all agreed that they had the right to submit others to their will.

Makhno and his followers (although he would have hated that term) believed it was up to local communities to determine their own fate free of external authority. He embraced, for example, the Bolshevik fondness for the Soviet — effectively an elected local council made up of workers, soldiers and peasants — but utterly rejected the attempt by Lenin to place the Soviets under the control of the Russian Communist Party. Soviets should represent the genuine will of local people, he argued, not commissars based hundreds of miles away in Moscow.

That hatred of concentrated power extended not just to politics but also economics. The Makhnovshchina detested the wealthy landowners that lauded it over the peasantry. Indeed, Makhno's army spent much of their time seizing land and redistributing it to peasants. They were also deeply suspicious of the new, super-rich industrialists creating cities of polluting factories and impoverished workers. (And unusually for the time and place, Makhno was also extremely hostile to anti-semitism — executing at least two soldiers in his army for harrasing Jews and spreading anti-semitic propaganda.)

It is impossible not to ask, of course, what Makhno might make of Ukraine today. I think he would be unsurprised by Putin. A man no different to the Kaiser, Lenin or Kolchak he battled against — men utterly convinced of their right to exert absolute power to make the world in their own images. He would be deeply shocked though by the way such figures had been able to accrue concentrated power well beyond that held by Makhno's enemies, notably in the form of weapons of mass destruction.

Most importantly, he would urge us, I think, to view the Ukrainian invasion through a somewhat different lens. While he would undoubtedly have fought furiously alongside the Ukrainian army to expel Putin, he would have been under no illusions about the concentrated power represented by the West. Infinitely preferable to Putin's autocracy, of course, but still bristling with nuclear weapons, still centred on hugely powerful states, still serving the interests of enormously wealthy corporations rapidly destroying the planet. Makhno would not see Putin and the West quite as the opposites they are presented as today but as different expressions of a global system that is built around a massive over-concentration of power.

I like to think that were Makhno alive today he would eagerly set about destroying the Russian military machine using the clever tactics for which he was well-known while simultaneously trying to carve out a bit of Ukraine guided by radical ideas of decentralised freedom and equality free of the grip of either Russia or the West.

In sad reality, Nestor Makhno died in Paris in 1934 at the age of 45, his body wracked by TB and the numerous wounds he had suffered in battle. His brand of rural anarchism may seem antiquated today. But in a week when we have been reminded of the existential threat to humanity posed by concentrated military power in the form of nuclear weapons and concentrated economic power in the form of climate change, it may be well beyond time to give people like Nestor Makhno a second look.

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