

Nestor Makhno

The Man Who Saved The Bolsheviki: Personal Recollections

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In the Tenon hospital at Paris there recently died a man poor and forsaken by almost every one of the millions that had once hailed him as liberator and hero. His name was Nestor Makhno. Great personalities are the cameos of life, standing out in bold relief on its canvas and giving us a clearer understanding of the social background. History itself often sculpts such significant figures that even the passage of time cannot obliterate. They personify the genius of their people, and their lives and deeds illuminate the past and cast a prophetic light on the future. Such a figure was Nestor Makhno. True child of a revolutionary epoch, his life and activities were imbued with the spirit of a dominating purpose, and it is more than probable that but for him and his insurgent army of Ukrainian peasants Soviet Russia might now be only a memory.

It was in 1920 while traveling in Russia that I first heard of Nestor Makhno. The stories circulated about him were so romantic, his exploits so fantastic, and the estimates of him so contradictory that he seemed a legendary figure. "Who is this Makhno they talk so much about?" I asked a prominent Bolshevik. "A bandit," he replied with irritation, "a dangerous counter-revolutionist who is giving us much trouble." "I've heard people call him a revolutionary hero," I said. "He's a bandit," he repeated angrily. "There is a big prize on his head and he will be shot on sight." It was not till I came to Ukraina that Makhno began to assume more definite form. Yet there too his personality proved elusive for a while, and I gathered the true facts about him and his activities only when chance threw me in contact with men that knew him at first hand. In the pursuit of my work of collecting material on the history of the Revolution, I called one day on the Chairman of the Communist Party in Kharkov, as was my wont in every city I visited. The Soviet Government had not yet firmly established its rule in Ukraina at that period, and Kharkov resembled a military camp. It was difficult to secure admission to Bolsheviki in high position, but my credentials from "the center," as Moscow is called in the provinces, soon overcame all obstacles. I was in conversation with the Secretary when a tall young man in military uniform passed through the room. He glanced at me cursorily, looked again and approached me. "Pardon me, tovarishch," he said, "but are you not Berkman?" I admitted the identification. "Alexander Berkman? Really?" And before I knew what he was about, he had thrown his arms around me and kissed me three times in the traditional Russian fashion. It was my old friend Leo, of America, Chief of the Commissary Department of the Red Army stationed in Kharkov. The delicate, slender youth I had known in new York many years before had become a strapping fellow of assured military bearing. A deep

scar on his face, evidently a sword cut, added resolution to his appearance. "Well, I'll be damned!" he cried, "who would have ever dreamed of meeting you here! I didn't know you were in this country heard you were in prison. Say, there's a thousand things I'd love to talk over with you and..." Suddenly interrupting himself he asked "Perhaps on a secret mission?" "Not at all," I said. "Well, then, I want you to look me up, and there's a bunch of fellows with me who'd be wild to see you." He scribbled an address on a slip of paper and left.

I had some difficulty in finding Leo's place. It was outside the city limits, a small camp occupied by the officer and his family. Among those present I recognised several men from the States; one of them, called the Emigrant, I had known in Detroit. "You're late, old boy, not at all American-like," Leo chided me good-naturedly. He waived my excuses aside: "It's all right we're a bit out of the way. But it's quiet here and we can talk!" We talked of old times, everyone eager to know what was going on in the world and particularly in America. Russia was blockaded, and they felt cut off from the rest of mankind. But before long the conversation turned to the Revolution. Ukraina was still in a state of war the Whites had started a new offensive, and fighting was going on in different parts of the South. Leo had been active in the Revolution from its very beginning; he had served on various fronts and he was thoroughly conversant with the situation. "You'll find conditions different here than in Petrograd or Moscow," he said. "There things are more or less settled, but here we're still in the midst of revolution. You see, victory in Russia proper was comparatively easy, but Ukraina is not Russia. We are a country of 40 millions, of different stock, with our own language and culture. The Revolution did not follow the same lines here as in the North. There the Bolsheviki easily got into power after the fall of Kerensky, but here we've had fourteen different governments in the last two years..." "And no government at all," the Emigrant put in. "He means Makhno," Leo explained. "You must have heard of him, haven't you?" "I have. In Moscow I was told that he is a bandit who is to be shot on sight." "They'll have to catch him first," the Emigrant laughed. "Oh, they told you that, did they?" Leo cried, suddenly jumping to his feet. "You see this?" He pointed to the scar on his face. "That's what I got for believing Makhno a bandit!" "Don't talk in riddles," the Emigrant said. "Why don't you tell it straight you're ashamed of it, are you?" "Yes, I'm ashamed," Leo retorted. "Ashamed of having been such a damned fool! You see," he continued, turning to me, "I also believed Makhno a bandit. I was in Budenny's cavalry then. Several detachments of our 19th Division were stationed in a village in the Gulyai-Pole district the Makhno region, you know. Well, one day we received orders to attack a band of Greens operating in the neighbourhood..." "But he doesn't know who the Greens are," the Emigrant interrupted. "That's so," Leo admitted. "The Greens are bandits, so called because their headquarters are always in the woods. Well, we surrounded the forest and we were sure we had the entire band when we saw clouds of dust rising from the valley. Some horsemen were approaching there wasn't more than fifty of them. Budenny shouted something and my company, over two hundred strong, fired a volley right into the bunch. They had evidently not seen us and were taken by surprise. I saw the men in the first line fall and their horses run wild. We prepared to pursue them we were sure they'd turn and flee we outnumbered them five to one. Well, before we knew it they had galloped straight into us, slashing right and left with their sabres and shouting 'Liberty or death'. Their attack was so unexpected, so incredibly reckless that our men became panicky. We fled." Leo stopped, his hand raised to his scarred cheek as if in recollection of the pain. "We knew no Greens could fight like that," he began again. "Budenny had lied to us they were Makhno men." "He got a taste of Makhno without ever seeing him," the Emigrant teased. "Served him right, too!" "They were not bandits?" I asked. "Bandits hell!"

Leo cried angrily. "Don't you believe such rot! Makhno a bandit! He and his forces were part of the Red Army then!" Evidently reading the amazement in my face, he added: "You have a good deal to learn before you'll understand what has been going on here." "He'll learn all right, don't you worry," the Emigrant commented cheerfully; "no better school than the Revolution." "He'll never learn it in Moscow," Leo persisted, "but if he stays long enough here, and if you..." He hesitated a moment, looking questioningly at his friend. "Can I tell him?" he asked. "Of course. Go right ahead," the Emigrant said. "Well, Alexander, he can tell you things that will be eye-openers all right. He's worked with Makhno, you know." I remembered the Emigrant as a quiet, serious youth interested in social problems. He was of a studious rather than military disposition, and I could not conceive of him in the role of a bandit or dare-devil under any flag whatever. I wondered what his "work" with the redoubtable Makhno might have been. "Speaking of eye-openers," the Emigrant remarked genially, "how about a drink, boys? It's fearfully hot." The home-made Russian kvass, distilled from apples, tasted cool and refreshing. It was a typical Ukrainian mid-summer night: not a breath of air stirred; the sky, star studded, hung low but clear, and all was quiet save for the monotonous murmur of the spring nearby and the occasional trill of a bird in the woods. In the distance lay the wide steppe and the voluptuous fields, majestically silent and indifferent to human strife. We talked far into the night. The Emigrant proved a veritable encyclopedia with a phenomenal memory for names, dates and events. He sketched for me the story of the Revolution since its inception with the illuminating insight into cause and effect that marks the creative historian. He seemed familiar with every phase of the great struggle, and he had the habit of punctuating his story with: "It's my document Number so and so of such and such a date signed by so and so..." He was apparently a non-partisan collector, and when later I had opportunity to examine his historic treasure, I found rare and valuable documents in it, proclamations and decrees issued by Lenin and Trotsky, by the German occupational forces, by Makhno, as well as by Denikin, Wrangel and other White generals. It was from the Emigrant that I first heard the story of Makhno. To my amazement I learned that far from being a bandit, as the Bolsheviki had assured me, he was an old "political" who had been condemned to death for revolutionary activity under the Tsarist regime. Because of his youth the sentence had been commuted to life imprisonment, and Makhno spent 10 years in the Butirky, the Central Prison at Moscow, where for 9 years he was kept chained hand and foot till he was liberated by the February Revolution. The Emigrant lived in Ukraina at the time and he met Makhno soon after the latter had returned to Gulyai-Pole, his native village in the province of Ekaterinoslav. Makhno, then less than 30 years old, was slightly under medium height, of strong build, with piercing steel-grey eyes and determined expression. The son of an Ukrainian peasant, there flowed in his veins the blood of Cossack forebears famed for their independent spirit and fighting qualities. Though weakened by long confinement, during which his lungs had become affected, Makhno astonished every one by his vitality and energy. Soon he became talked of as the leader of small insurgent bands against the Austro-German invaders of Ukraina who had become the rulers of the country after the Brest-Litovsk peace. It was apparently a hopeless struggle against tremendous odds that Makhno and his handful of rebel peasants undertook; but their extraordinary daring and fantastic exploits quickly won for them popular admiration, and within a short time Makhno had a considerable force generously supplied with provisions and horses by the grateful peasantry. He waged merciless guerilla warfare against the native masters and the foreign oppressor, and fought every counter-revolutionary general who sought to subdue the rebellious peasantry and take away from them the land they had expropriated from the big landlords. Entire armies were

sent to "catch and punish Makhno," as the phrase went, but he always proved elusive, attacking the enemy at the most unexpected time and place and spreading terror among them. Invariably at the head of his light cavalry, he seemed to have a charmed life. He was reputed never to have lost a battle and never to have been wounded, though his favorite method was a hand-to-hand fight with a sword or saber. His fame spread far and wide, and before long the Ukrainian peasantry grew to believe that Makhno was "immune to bullets and safe from the sword." It was due mainly to the leadership and unique generalship of Makhno that by the end of 1918 Ukraine was freed from the foreign invaders. But the rebel chieftain was not content with military victories. He undertook to put into practice the unrealised ideals of the October Revolution and to protect his Gulyai-Pole region against domination of any kind, political or military. He exchanged the sword for the pen and the platform, and became the adviser and teacher of his people. Soviets of Peasants and Workers were organized throughout Southeastern Ukraine, differing from the Bolshevik Soviets in that they were entirely independent of political parties or governmental authority. Moscow looked askance at the new social experiment attempted by Makhno. The Bolshevik press began to attack him and presently it denounced him as an enemy of the Communist Party. The peasant movement led by Makhno, called Makhnovshchina, was labeled as banditry and counter-revolution. But Makhno continued his work in spite of the Kremlin, and whenever the Revolution was in danger he hastened to the aid of the Bolsheviks. Thus, in the fall of 1919, when Denikin had succeeded in reaching Orel and was threatening Moscow and the very existence of the Soviet Government, it was Makhno and his peasant army who attacked the Tsarist General, defeated him in several important battles, cut the Whites off [from] their base of supplies and forced Denikin to beat a hasty retreat. Yet notwithstanding the great services Makhno gave to the Revolution, the Bolsheviks kept denouncing him and finally Trotsky outlawed him.

What I heard from the Emigrant and Leo greatly disconcerted me. I knew how sincere and devoted to the Revolution my friends were both had suffered and bled for it yet I could not, would not, credit what they had told me. It seemed too monstrous to believe. I determined to learn the whole truth. Perhaps it was all due to some misunderstanding resulting from the storm and stress of the time, I thought, and may be I could help in some way to clear up the situation. My work called me away from Kharkov to other parts of Ukraine. The further I went South the more conflicting and fantastic became the stories about Makhno and his doings. I visited places his forces had occupied at one time or another and met people in various walks of life soldiers, workers, peasants, among them some who had fought with or against Makhno. Strange to say, even his bitterest enemies, while denouncing him as a counter-revolutionary and pogromshtchik (Jew baiter) could not hide their secret admiration of the man who with a mere handful had faced whole armies and always came out victorious. His exploits were so unusual that even the Communists in Ukraine gave him credit for extraordinary courage and military genius. It was a Bolshevik who related to me how Makhno, planning to attack a town occupied by Denikin, arranged a peasant wedding to be celebrated in the public square. Masquerading as merry-makers, Makhno's men distributed generous portions of vodka among the soldiers of the garrison. At the height of the drunken orgy Makhno suddenly appeared at the head of a small band of horsemen. Overwhelmed by the unexpected and savage attack the entire garrison, a thousand strong, capitulated without a fight. Makhno had the reputation of frequently resorting to similar strategy, as when he took the city of Ekaterinoslav where Petlura had concentrated a large contingent of his army. Protected by the river Dniepr, all the approaches strongly guarded, the Whites seemed safe from attack. But nothing could dissuade the reckless leader of the povstantsy, as the insurgent

peasants were called, from his determination to take Ekaterinoslav. Singly and by twos inoffensive looking peasants began gathering in Nizhne-Dneprovsk, a village on the opposite side of the river. Then one morning at dawn the men, carrying large packs of provisions, filled the train connecting the village with the city. Straight into the railroad station the train steamed, and suddenly there poured from it a thousand men armed with machine guns. A desperate battle took place in the very heart of the city, and in the evening Ekaterinoslav was in the hands of Makhno. The nearer I came to the Makhno region the more I was struck by the reverence with which the peasants spoke of Makhno. Once, while talking to an old mouzhik, a veritable patriarch with long white beard, I was surprised by him taking off his peasant cap with a reverential gesture when Makhno's name was mentioned. "A good, great man," he said, "may the Lord preserve him. It's two years now since he was here, but I can see him before me now as he stood on a bench in the square and talked to us. We are dark people and we could never make out those Bolsheviks orating to us. But he spoke our own tongue, and his speech was simple. 'Brothers', he said, 'I've come to help you. We've driven the landlord and his soldiers away and now you are free. Divide the land among yourself, justly and like brothers, and work for the good of everyone'. A good, holy man," he concluded earnestly. He stepped to the icon hanging in the corner of the hut, bowed and crossed himself, and then turned to me in all majesty of pious conviction. "Pugatchev's prophesy has come true, God be thanked!" he exclaimed. "One hundred and fifty years ago, as the great rebel lay on the rack, he said to Tsarina Ekaterina, 'I've only frightened you, but before long there will come an iron broom that will sweep all you tyrants off our holy Russian earth'. That broom is here it's BATKO Makhno!" "Batko?" I wondered. "Yes, Batko Makhno. He is not our commander, not our general he's our friend, our 'Little Father', our beloved Batko, the most honored title we could give him. I paid dearly for it, but he deserves the name." I looked at him questioningly. "Last year Shurko came here, Denikin's bloody general," he continued. "He gave back our land to the old masters, took everything away from us and forced our young men into his army. We resisted. Ivan, my oldest boy, was taken out and shot; many others, too. We sent word to Makhno. He came only with a few hundred and Shurko had 3,000 men in the village. We felt we were doomed. But that same night Makhno cut his way through the enemy outposts, attacked the Whites and then rode into the very center of our village. We all rushed to his aid with pick and axe and by dawn we had driven Shurko and his cut-throats out of the village, Makhno pursuing them across the river." He paused for a moment, then said solemnly: "My son, it was a miracle. In the morning peasants from the whole district gathered in our square. Old Vassily, my neighbor, was their spokesman. 'Little Father', he said to Makhno, 'you are our liberator. Henceforth you will be our Batko, and we swear to follow you unto death!'" The old man's voice trembled. "I lost my other boy that night," he said brokenly, "but that is how Makhno became our Batko."

Some time later I visited Kiev. One evening, as I was about to retire, there came a knock at my door. I wondered who the late comer might be. Severe fighting was going on in the environs and the city was under martial law. Being out after dark was forbidden under pain of death except by special permission of the military authorities. Perhaps the Ccheka, the dreaded secret police, I thought. They always operated at night and a call from them in those days boded no good. But my relations with the Bolsheviks were still of the friendliest. An arrest was hardly probable. I opened the door cautiously. The hallway was dark and deserted, but suddenly a small figure stepped out from a niche in the wall. It was a woman, apparently a peasant, with a basket on her arm. A large shawl, covering her head and wrapped high above her neck, almost completely

hid her features. "I want to see you," she said. She spoke Russian with a touch of the Ukrainian accent. I led her to a chair. She took off her shawl and to my astonishment I beheld a young woman of striking beauty. "I am Galina, Makhno's wife," she said in a low mellow voice. "I bring you a message from him." The very mention of that name, under the circumstances, was fraught with danger. It suddenly came to me that it was probably Makhno who at the very moment was fighting the Bolsheviki. The rumble of artillery could be heard in the distance. "Makhno here?" I cried. Warningly she put her finger to her lips. "He's not very far off," she said. "But how could you run such danger?" I asked in alarm. "You know what it means." "I do," she replied quietly. "But Nestor has been waiting for you he hoped you would find a way to come. He is very anxious you should know what is going on." "And for that you risked your life?" "Perhaps you do not realise how important it is. Nestor wants you to know that he is your comrade, your true comrade," she emphasised. "I don't approve of his fighting the Bolsheviki," I said. "You still believe in them?" she asked, and in her tone there was a touch of bitter sadness. "I disagree with them in many things," I replied, "but they are beset by enemies on every side and I think everyone to whom the Revolution is dear must help them defend it..." "It's Makhno who is defending the Revolution," she interrupted heatedly. "By fighting the Bolsheviki?" "As long as the Bolsheviki fought for the Revolution, Makhno was with them," she said gravely. "He and our povstantsy were part of the Red Army. We fought Hetman Skoropadsky, Petlura, Grigoriev, Denikin and every other White enemy. When the Bolsheviki were in trouble they always appealed to Nestor for help, and he never failed to respond. But as soon as the danger was over, Moscow turned against us. They denounced us as bandits and counter-revolutionists, they put a price on Nestor's head and even tried to murder him..." "But that's incredible," I cried; "I can't believe that Lenin or Trotsky..." "Nestor knew it would be hard for you to believe such treachery on the part of the old revolutionists," she retorted. "I have brought documents to convince you." "But what have they got against Makhno?" I demanded. "There must be some very good reasons..." "Very good reasons," she replied. "That is just what Nestor sent me to explain to you." With clear, bold strokes she sketched for me the story of Makhno and the movement he headed. He had organized communes in the Gulyai-Pole district, and a large part of Ukraine, covering hundreds of miles, with millions of population, live a free life and refused to submit to the domination of any political party. The Bolsheviki sought to impose their authority on the peasantry, but the latter ignored them. Finally Moscow decided to liquidate Makhno, and Trotsky issued an order suppressing the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Makhno region and outlawing all its members. "Here," she said, handing me a document, "you can read it for yourself." It was a general order of the Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic, dated June 4, 1919, and marked Number 1824. It read in part: "The Soviet session called by the Executive Committee of Gulyai-Pole and the Staff of the Makhno Brigade for June 15th is hereby prohibited and will not be permitted to take place under any circumstances. Participation in it will be regarded as treason to the Soviet Republic and will be dealt with accordingly..... The present order goes into effect at once, by telegraph. TROTSKY Chairman, Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic VATSETIS Commander-in-Chief ARALOV Member, Revolutionary Military Soviet of the Republic KOSHKAREV Regional Military Commander, Kharkov."

"It was a declaration of war against us," Galina continued. "At the same time Trotsky gave secret orders for the capture of Nestor, his entire staff and all the members of our Cultural Department..." "Cultural Department?" "Yes, of course. We have a special bureau in our army which issues papers, pamphlets and leaflets to explain our ideas and aims to the people. You know the

Emigrant? Well, he works with me there, and he is a most valuable man, too," she smiled brightly. "We have won over the greater part of Grigoriev's army by our propaganda. Nestor is very anxious to have you see what we are doing there. But I was telling you about Trotsky's order. Well, you know Trotsky he means what he says. Five days later the Red forces attacked Gulyai-Pole, our headquarters. Several members of our Soviet and of the Military Staff were captured by a ruse and executed. Trotsky knew that at that very moment Nestor was fighting a new Denikin offensive, but he refused to supply us with ammunition. He declared that Makhno was a greater menace than Denikin. And he was right," she commented bitterly, "our free ideas are more dangerous to Moscow than the Whites." "But you said that Makhno belonged to the Red Army?" "Yes." "Then how could Trotsky refuse him supplies?" "He did worse than that. He removed several Red Army regiments from our north-eastern front, and that gave Denikin's cavalry a chance to attack Makhno's left flank. Without ammunition, our men were forced to retreat, the first time it ever happened. And what do you think Trotsky did then?" "What?" I asked breathlessly. "He charged us with deliberately opening the front to Denikin!" She paused a moment to control her emotion. "Nestor was in a terrible situation," she presently continued. "He realised the sinister conspiracy against him, but he refused to turn his arms against the Bolsheviki. The cause of the Revolution was too dear to him. He decided to resign his command in the Red Army and he notified Moscow about it. He issued a call to the povstantsy to keep on fighting the Whites and then he withdrew." "Entirely?" "You must have heard what happened. The Red Army kept retreating before Denikin. The latter reached Orel and was threatening Moscow. The Bolsheviki were in a panic. It meant the defeat of the Revolution and the return of Tsarism. Then Nestor threw himself into the breach again. He collected his forces and gave battle to Denikin. He attacked his flank and cut him off his artillery base. Denikin turned back, and Nestor drove him toward the Don River. It was the end of Denikin." "Surely the Bolsheviki must have appreciated Makhno's help," I said. "You don't know them yet," she retorted impatiently. "When they didn't need him any more they outlawed him again, just as they had done when he saved them from the Ataman." "What Ataman?" "Ataman Grigoriev, a Tsarist officer who had gone over to the Bolsheviki." She picked up the bundle of documents and handed me a paper. It was a Bolshevik telegram, dated May 12, 1919, and addressed to "Gulyai-Pole, Batko Makhno, wherever found." It was signed by the Commander-in-Chief of the Southern Red Army who informed Makhno that "Ataman Grigoriev betrayed the front and turned his arms against the Soviets." The telegram urged the povstantsy leader "immediately to issue proclamations against the traitor and suppress the mutiny." "It did not take Nestor long to liquidate the Ataman," Galina continued. "Grigoriev had a strong army, but it consisted mostly of peasants drafted against their will. Nestor wanted to avoid shedding their blood. He directed our Cultural Department to publish a proclamation, accusing the Ataman of counter-revolution. Then he called a meeting of several detachments of Grigoriev's force. The Ataman was invited to deny the charges against him, and he came with his whole staff. Nestor publicly charged him with treason to the Revolution. Grigoriev grew furious and drew his gun. I saw him point at Nestor who stood with his back to the Ataman, facing the audience." She stopped, turning pale at the recollection. "Did he shoot?" I asked anxiously. "He was shot himself and more than half of his army went over to us." "But Moscow did not give up its plan of destroying Nestor," she began again after a while. "When the country was cleared of the counter-revolutionary generals, Trotsky ordered Makhno into the Polish campaign. It was contrary to our military agreement which provided that the Makhno army should be kept on the anti-Denikin front. Nestor realised that it was a scheme to eliminate him from Ukraine and destroy the povstantsy movement. He

protested against the order and Trotsky outlawed him again. Moscow declared war on us and sent a whole army into our region. The Red commanders avoided open battle with us, but they trained their artillery on our unprotected villages and shot the peasants by the thousands. We had to resort to guerilla tactics again, as in the days of Skoropadsky and the German invader."

I felt overwhelmed. I could not believe that Lenin and Trotsky, who had from their youth devoted their lives to the cause of the people, could be guilty of treachery to the Revolution, as Galina charged. Yet there were the facts and documents, and they corroborated everything that Leo and the Emigrant had told me. "Galina," I said, "I know Lenin and Trotsky personally. May be something could be done to straighten things out an understanding be brought about..." She looked at me skeptically. "You mean well, Comrade Alexander, but it is out of the question. It's too late for that." "I wish I could talk it over with Makhno himself," I pursued, "though I know it's impossible..." "Perhaps not so impossible as you think," she said earnestly. "It's what I've come to see you about. Nestor is planning to meet you..." "But my work is official my movements are known..." "If the mountain can't come to the prophet, you understand?" she smiled brightly.

Makhno's plan was very simple, she explained. He was aware that the least attempt on my part to reach him would have the most serious consequences and might even prove fatal to me. He therefore proposed to capture the train on which I would be traveling to my next destination. He would take me "prisoner of war" and later give me safe conduct to Bolshevik territory. Such a manoeuvre would clear me of suspicion of deliberate dealing with the prescribed "bandit." It was a bold and daring plan, but I had heard enough of Makhno's exploits not to doubt his ability to carry it out. "What do you say, comrade?" Galina asked. "On one condition," I replied, "there must be no bloodshed." "Agreed," she said eagerly.

I was waiting impatiently for word from Makhno, but the days passed without a sign from him. The city grew more peaceful, its appearance less military: the fighting had evidently been transferred to some other place. Before long I left Kiev, my work taking me toward Odessa. The train was speeding me away from the povstansy region, and I wondered what had happened to prevent Makhno from carrying out his scheme of "kidnapping" me. At a village station along our route I noticed people crowding around a large poster on the wall. There was much shouting and excitement, and I heard some one cry, "Another front, God help us!" I hastened over. In large black type the poster announced that General Wrangel had started an offensive against the Soviets. He was advancing northwest from the Crimea and laying waste the country on his way. Suddenly the words BANDIT MAKHNO caught my eye. "Turned traitor" the poster read "fighting on the side of Wrangel." I was staggered. Could it be true, I wondered. Was Makhno really fighting on the side of the counter-revolution? Yet somehow it seemed incredible... Rumors of Makhno pogroms also began to increase. We were in the zone of the former ghetto, the old Jewish Pale, and on every hand I saw the terrible effects of destruction and slaughter. I met Pogrom survivors, victims of fiendish torture, mutilated almost out of human shape. Some of the Jewish places, such as Fastov, Belo-Tserkov, Lisyanka and others, had been pogromed repeatedly by every army that passed through them, including Denikin, Petlura, Grigoriev and the Greens. Here and there I came upon Jews who asserted that their villages had been attacked by Makhno bands. Later on, in Odessa, I met representatives of various Jewish organisations for the investigation of excesses against Jews, as well as the secretaries of archives covering one thousand pogroms, but not a single case could be substantiated as a Makhno pogrom. Jew baiting by individual Makhno povstansy there had undoubtedly been, as also by detachments of the Red Army. But Makhno no less than the Bolsheviks was merciless in suppressing such manifestations of racial persecution

and hatred. Makhno's determination to stamp out pogroms was well known in South-eastern Ukraina, and I collected many of his proclamations against Jew baiting. Moreover, I knew that a number of Jews were working with Makhno and that several of his nearest friends and advisers were Jews. Repeatedly I had the curious experience of people telling me of a "Makhno pogrom," relating every detail of it and minutely describing the Batko's appearance, only to learn upon investigation that Makhno had never been within a hundred miles of the pogromed district. It was an established fact that the Greens and other marauders, aware of the terror inspired by Makhno among the enemy, often masqueraded as Makhno men when descending upon a village. My next destination was the Caucasus. On my way there I hoped to learn something about the real activities of Makhno and perhaps even come in contact with his army. Our expedition was about to leave Odessa when we were informed by the Bolshevik military authorities that all roads eastward were cut off. Wrangel had defeated the Soviet forces in several engagements and was advancing toward Rostov-on-the-Don. We were compelled to change our itinerary and proceed northward. Arriving in Moscow, I was surprised to find the city in festive attire and the people jubilant. The walls were covered with posters announcing the complete rout of Wrangel. Still greater was my astonishment when I glanced at the Bolshevik newspapers. They were full of praise for Nestor Makhno! They called him the Nemesis of the Whites and recited how his cavalry was at that very moment pursuing the remnants of Wrangel's army across the Crimean Peninsula. Some time later, while walking along a crowded street in the capital, I was hailed by a black-bearded man wearing heavy dark spectacles. "Don't recognise me in Moscow, do you?" he said in a bantering tone that immediately recalled to me the Emigrant. "What's happened?" I asked in bewilderment, realising that he was in disguise. "Haven't you heard?" he demanded. We retired to a quiet place. My Detroit friend, usually so quiet and collected, was evidently laboring under great excitement. "Just escaped with my life," he began abruptly. "From Kharkov. The whole Congress arrested, several of our men executed..." "Executed? Why? What Congress?" I cried in horror. "Don't you know? Where the devil have you been anyhow? Why didn't you answer Makhno's wire?" I looked at him blankly. "Oh, that's it, is it?" he broke out. "Now I understand they didn't give you the telegram they didn't want you to serve on the Agreement Committee. Oh, what a rotten crew!" I learned that the Bolsheviki had appealed to Makhno for aid against Wrangel and made a military-political agreement with him. The hounding of Makhno and his men was to be stopped, arrested members of his organisation were to be freed, and the Makhno region left its full autonomy. Makhno had sent me a wire, care of Tchicherin, at the Foreign Office (where I was at the time receiving my mail) requesting me to act as one of his representatives on the Agreement Committee. Upon Makhno's return from the Wrangel campaign, there took place a Congress in Kharkov, to which delegates of Makhno and the Left wing radicals came from every part of the country. At the first session of the Congress (on Nov. 26, 1920) every delegate was arrested and a number of them executed. "On the same day Makhno's headquarters at Gulyai-Pole were attacked by Soviet artillery," the Emigrant continued. "Several companies of his cavalry, returning from the Crimea, were treacherously surrounded by the 4th Soviet Army and destroyed almost to a man. Semyon Karetnik, our Crimean commander, was captured by a ruse and executed together with his Chief of Staff and several members of the Soviet." "And Makhno?" "Shot in battle may be dying now. Galina and some peasant friends are taking care of him." His head sank on his chest and his shoulders twitched with suppressed sobbing. Presently controlling himself, he rose to his feet. "I'm leaving tonight for Gulyai-Pole," he said. "It's war to the knife now."

There began a life-and-death struggle. Rarely had a military genius been put to a severer test than was Makhno that fateful year of 1921. With a force of only 3,000 sabers, surrounded by a Soviet army of 150,000 men, he and his men were apparently doomed. Yet for nine months he kept up the unequal combat, fighting almost day and night. Again and again he broke through the ring of death, gave battle right and left, and continued, unconquered, to lead his handful of fighters to safety. In a letter to a friend Nestor Makhno related the end of that heroic episode in the history of the Makhnovshchina: "The Bolshevik infantry was hard on our heels, Budenny's cavalry ahead of us the situation was desperate. But you know the quality of our fighters. We suffered great losses, but we kept right ahead without changing the plan I had mapped out. Daily our men demonstrated that they were indeed the army of the Revolution and of the people. All the conditions were against us and it seemed inevitable that our forces should soon melt away. But our great cause held them together. In fact, we grew in numbers and equipment. Repeatedly Bolshevik detachments refused to fight us and joined our ranks, as did for instance the entire First Brigade of the 4th Division of Budenny's cavalry who went over to us together with Maslak, their commander. Daily fighting developed wonderful heroism and defiance of death, our boys galloping straight into the enemy, crying 'Liberty or death!'... In one such engagement I was shot off my horse. The men thought me dead and retreated, carrying me unconscious for 12 versts. The next day we were attacked by the 9th Cavalry Division. I lay in a fever, too weak to mount my horse. My machine-gun men surrounded me. 'Batko', they said, 'you're needed for the cause, and we mean to die right here to save you!' I felt some one press his lips on my cheek, and then I was lifted up and carried away. I heard a great rattle and I knew my gunners were sacrificing themselves for me. Not one of them remained alive... On August 13th, with only a hundred horsemen, we fought our way toward the Dniepr. That day I was wounded six times. A week later we were headed off by a strong Red force, but we broke through again..." Suffering from numerous wounds, his forces decimated by continuous fighting, and wishing to end the bloodshed in the hopeless struggle, Makhno decided to leave Russia. On August 28th, 1921, he crossed the border to Rumania. The Soviet Government demanded his extradition and made no secret of its intention to execute him. But Rumania considered Makhno a political and as such not subject to the death penalty according to her laws. She therefore refused Moscow's demand. After many adventures Makhno succeeded in reaching Poland where he was arrested and imprisoned. Later he was interned in Danzig, whence he managed to escape to Germany. It was in Berlin that I met him, in 1922, with his faithful companion Galina. "It's a different meeting I planned, comrade Alexander," he greeted me with a sad smile, "but that very night I was called a hundred miles away from Kiev. Too bad things might have been different." I was shocked at his appearance. The storm and stress of his year-long struggle, physical and mental suffering had reduced the strong, stockily-built povstantsy leader to a mere shadow. His face and body were scarred by wounds, his shattered foot made him permanently lame. Yet his spirit remained unbroken and he still dreamed of returning to his native land and taking up again the struggle for liberty and social justice. Life in exile was insupportable to him; he felt torn out by the very roots and he yearned for his beloved Ukraina. "Alexander, let's go back to Russia," he would often say; "we are needed there." But he realised that return was impossible. Grey and humdrum existence, want and petty cares above all, the longing to help his people, made living a constant torture to Makhno. He was visibly wasting away, and I feared that his hours were numbered...

Some day history may relate the full story of the tempestuous rebel who played such a significant part in the Russian Revolution the man of whose powerful personality and passionate love

of liberty there now remains only a handful of ashes marked Urn Number 3934, in Pere Lachaise. But even in death Batko Makhno remains close to his brothers in spirit, the heroic Communards of Paris.

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Alexander Berkman
Nestor Makhno
The Man Who Saved The Bolsheviki: Personal Recollections
1935

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