

# **Letters on Anarchism and Marxism**

Anarcho

June 23, 2009

# Contents

First Letter . . . . .	3
Second Letter . . . . .	4
Third Letter . . . . .	6
Fourth Letter . . . . .	7
Fifth letter . . . . .	9
Sixth Letter . . . . .	11

## First Letter

Dear *Weekly Worker*

I read Joe Wills letter in reply to Richard Griffin with interest. Wills dismisses Richard's comments on liberal electoral democracy as a "nihilist world outlook" that suggests "the working class have not improved their lives one iota since the dark days of feudalism." I was under the impression that working class direct action had improved our lives, not paternalistic actions by liberal parliaments. Obviously I was wrong to think that reforms were a product of working class self-activity (and the fear it provoked in ruling circles). Thanks for clarifying that – I now know where the real power to change society lies.

Looking at "democratic centralism" Wills argues that "if there is one thing revolutionaries learnt in the 20<sup>th</sup> century it is this: decentralisation or survival." Strange. That century suggests the opposite: centralisation leads to minority rule, not socialism. Wills claims that "democratic centralism" is "not necessarily in conflict" with popular democracy yet his own example ( the Russian Revolution) shows this is false. He states that the Bolshevik slogan was "All power to the soviets." Indeed, it **was** a slogan – and nothing more. Lenin in 1917 made it clear that the Bolsheviks aimed for party power, not soviet power. And that is what we got. Wills claims that what "disrupted" the power of local soviets was "the civil war conditions created by the white terror of the internal and external armies of counterrevolution." Sadly, this often repeated claim is false. The Bolsheviks had been disbanding soviets elected with non-Bolshevik majorities from the spring of 1918, i.e. before the civil war started (see Samuel Farber's **Before Stalinism**). Faced with the choice of soviet power or party power, the Bolsheviks picked the latter. Unsurprisingly, given Lenin's politics.

Wills argues that "if there had been no central authority, the revolution would have been instantly strangled." Yet this "central authority" strangled the revolution. It had started to do this *before* the start of the civil war with attacks on soviet democracy, workers' control and opposition groups. Anarchists are not surprised by this, of course, as the state is designed for minority rule.

Then there is the stark contradiction in Wills argument. According to Lenin revolution inevitably involves civil war. Now, if civil war makes soviet democracy impossible then Leninists should come clean and rip-up Lenin's "*State and Revolution*" (as Lenin did once in power). You cannot have it both ways.

Anarchists argue that centralism kills popular democracy. This is because it centralises power into the hands of a few leaders (not so much "all power to the soviets" as "all power to the central committee"). Instead we argue for bottom-up federalism based on mandated and recallable delegates to co-ordinate decision making and the defence of the revolution. Wills makes no mention of this fact, instead implying that anarchists reject co-ordination by quoting Engels on the Spanish uprising of 1872–3. But this seems ironic, as he uses an example of *lack* of federation to refute federalism. He generalises by pointing to Argentina today where factory occupations are being defeated one by one by the police. What a surprise. That is why anarchists have been stressing, from the start, that the factories must federate together (see "*From Riot to Revolution*", **Black Flag** no. 221).

Wills argues that "the only guarantee of defence against counterrevolution is the centralised dictatorship of the proletariat." This is false. Firstly, as noted, this system in Russia destroyed the revolution before the civil war started. The Bolshevik leadership held power, not the proletariat

— as Bakunin predicted it was the dictatorship **over** the proletariat. Secondly, the example of the Makhnovists in the Russian Civil War shows that it is possible to defend a revolution without centralised power in the hands of a few leaders. Operating in as bad conditions as the Bolsheviks, the Makhnovists called soviet congresses, protected soviet, workplace and military democracy as well as freedom of speech and association. Unsurprisingly, the Bolsheviks slandered and betrayed them (slanders Leninists today repeat parrot-like, incidentally).

Wills states that “‘pure communist’ alternatives” are “ahistorical.” Not true. They are rooted in a clear understanding of the events of the Russian Revolution (and better rooted in historical fact than the Leninist accounts). He asserts that we anarchists “seem to provide no viable alternative except to slam every organised attempt by revolutionaries to defend their revolution.” The facts are different. From Bakunin onwards anarchists have argued that a revolution required a federation of workers councils to succeed and that this would organise the defence of the revolution by means of a workers militia. Exactly the approach of the Makhnovists in the Ukraine and the anarchists in Aragon during the Spanish revolution.

Now, perhaps Wills will explain why such a system cannot work. Is he arguing that working class people are incapable of self-organisation? That power needs to be centralised into the hands of a few leaders simply because the masses cannot govern themselves? If so, then let him say so clearly. If he claims that the masses govern themselves when they elect leaders to govern on their behalf, then he is playing with words. As the Russian Revolution shows, a “revolutionary” government centralises power into a few hands and definitely does **not** empower the many. Such a situation can only spell the death of a social revolution, which requires the active participation of all if it is to succeed. It also exposes the central fallacy of Leninism: claiming to desire a society based on mass participation it favours a form of organisation – centralism – that precludes it.

It is no coincidence that the ruling class prefers centralism. It empowers the few, not the many. Bolshevism shows that applying this system in the name of socialism does not work. We need to organise in new ways to build a new world.

For more information about the points raised, visit [www.anarchistfaq.org.uk](http://www.anarchistfaq.org.uk)

yours sincerely

Iain McKay

## Second Letter

Dear *Weekly Worker*

I notice that you chopped by letter in half (issue 497). I’m sure you will say that this was because of space, however I feel that you removed many of my key arguments and examples. Here is the removed section:

‘Anarchists argue that centralism kills popular democracy. This is because it centralises power into the hands of a few leaders (not so much “all power to the soviets” as “all power to the central committee”). Instead we argue for bottom-up federalism based on mandated and recallable delegates to co-ordinate decision making and the defence of the revolution. Wills makes no mention of this fact, instead implying that anarchists reject co-ordination by quoting Engels on the Spanish uprising of 1872–3. But this seems ironic, as he uses an example of **lack** of federation to refute federalism. He generalises by pointing to Argentina today where factory occupations are being defeated one by one by the police. What a surprise. That is why anarchists have been

stressing, from the start, that the factories must federate together (see *“From Riot to Revolution”*, **Black Flag** no. 221).

‘Wills argues that “the only guarantee of defence against counterrevolution is the centralised dictatorship of the proletariat.” This is false. Firstly, as noted, this system in Russia destroyed the revolution before the civil war started. The Bolshevik leadership held power, not the proletariat – as Bakunin predicted it was the dictatorship *over* the proletariat. Secondly, the example of the Makhnovists in the Russian Civil War shows that it is possible to defend a revolution without centralised power in the hands of a few leaders. Operating in as bad conditions as the Bolsheviks, the Makhnovists called soviet congresses, protected soviet, workplace and military democracy as well as freedom of speech and association. Unsurprisingly, the Bolsheviks slandered and betrayed them (slanders Leninists today repeat parrot-like, incidentally).

‘Wills states that “‘pure communist’ alternatives” are “ahistorical.” Not true. They are rooted in a clear understanding of the events of the Russian Revolution (and better rooted in historical fact than the Leninist accounts). He asserts that we anarchists “seem to provide no viable alternative except to slam every organised attempt by revolutionaries to defend their revolution.” The facts are different. From Bakunin onwards anarchists have argued that a revolution required a federation of workers councils to succeed and that this would organise the defence of the revolution by means of a workers militia. Exactly the approach of the Makhnovists in the Ukraine and the anarchists in Aragon during the Spanish revolution.

‘Now, perhaps Wills will explain why such a system cannot work. Is he arguing that working class people are incapable of self-organisation? That power needs to be centralised into the hands of a few leaders simply because the masses cannot govern themselves? If so, then let him say so clearly. If he claims that the masses govern themselves when they elect leaders to govern on their behalf, then he is playing with words. As the Russian Revolution shows, a “revolutionary” government centralises power into a few hands and definitely does **not** empower the many. Such a situation can only spell the death of a social revolution, which requires the active participation of all if it is to succeed. It also exposes the central fallacy of Leninism: claiming to desire a society based on mass participation it favours a form of organisation – centralism – that precludes it.

‘It is no coincidence that the ruling class prefers centralism. It empowers the few, not the many. Bolshevism shows that applying this system in the name of socialism does not work. We need to organise in new ways to build a new world.

‘For more information about the points raised, visit [www.anarchistfaq.org.uk](http://www.anarchistfaq.org.uk)”

Lastly, Terry Sheen account of the events in 1930s Spain leaves a lot to be desired. For example, he fails to note that the CNT argued for a “united front from below” based in the factories. The UGT ignored these appeals. As for having “little practical political policy to propose” in 1936, the fact is that the CNT did (namely a federation of workers’ councils). The tragedy of Spain is that the CNT (except in Aragon) embraced the Marxist policy of the UGT in the name of anti-fascist unity rather than stick to their libertarian policy. Why? Fear of isolation and, perhaps, the knowledge that the UGT, like good Marxists, would not co-operate on any terms bar their own and to secure their domination (as they had from 1933 onwards).

yours sincerely

Iain McKay

## Third Letter

Dear *Weekly Worker*

Joe Wills asserts that “*Anarchist ideology ... with its rejection of authority, opposes trade unions completely ... and thereby rejects a major portion of the history of working class struggle.*” What nonsense. “*Anarchist ideology*” says no such thing. We **do** reject bureaucratic and hierarchical trade unions but we do so in favour of self-managed workplace organisations. To generalise, anarchists are divided on the question of trade unions. Some argue that revolutionary unions are possible and others argue that workers’ councils, not unions, are the way forward. In both cases, we do not reject collective struggle and organisation in the workplace, far from it.

Nor do the anarchist positions on trade unions have anything to do with the “*rejection of authority.*” Rather, they are based on an analysis of the role of unions in society and their actual activities. Indeed, it can be argued that the “*major portion*” of the history of trade unionism shows it to be reformist, at best, and subject to bureaucratic betrayal, at worse. This suggests our analysis has validity and that the workers movement needs to fundamentally change in order to be effective, never mind revolutionary. Anarchists, including those active in their trade unions, are trying to encourage such a change in favour of rank-and-file control of struggle and the use of direct action and solidarity as the means of achieving real change.

So Wills’ summary of “*Anarchist ideology*” on the unions is so flawed that when he writes “*we Marxists take a different view*” anarchists can only smile at the straw man arguments he presents.

Turning to the Russian Revolution, Wills argues that it happened “*in a void.*” Far from it. As an anarchist I am aware, like Bakunin and Kropotkin, that any revolution breaks out “*in a hostile bourgeois world.*” As such, “*counter-revolution*” is taken as inevitable and does not cut it as an excuse for Bolshevik authoritarianism.

Now, he argues that by “*civil war*” Lenin meant “*the conquest of power by the proletariat.*” So Wills is arguing that Lenin defined “*civil war*” to mean something else than what everyone else on the planet thought it meant! Does that mean Marxists invent the meaning of words as and when it suits them? But assuming that Wills is correct, what does that imply? That Lenin thought that a revolution would happen without a civil war, counter-revolution and imperialist intervention? If so, then Lenin was extremely naive, which I doubt, suggesting that by “*civil war*” Lenin meant what most people mean by the term.

Wills asserts that he stands by his “*original claim that the ‘civil war’ disrupted soviet democracy*” and ignores the facts I raised in favour of quoting Stephen Cohen from 1973. Yet quoting an opinion made long before the research I summarised does not hold much water. To repeat, it was **not** in the civil war period “*that much of the popular control exercised by local soviets and factory committees was lost.*” Soviets were disbanded, the factory committees undermined, soviet democracy destroyed, as I indicated, prior to the civil war and was the result of deliberate Bolshevik actions. Ignoring these facts will not make them go away, sorry.

Given this, to state that “*centralism was essential in Soviet Russia to defeat the whites*” is simply not good enough. Centralism in Russia saw the de facto dictatorship of the Bolshevik Party arise before the start of the civil war. Centralism destroyed popular democracy, as anarchists predicted. Why repeat the same old mistakes?

Wills states that “*Anarchists never explain, in manifest terms, how without a state it is possible to defeat imperialism and internal counterrevolution.*” His comments are ironic, given that I did

discuss this in my original letter and, moreover, provided an example (the Makhnovists). But my letter was chopped. Here is the relevant bit:

“From Bakunin onwards anarchists have argued that a revolution required a federation of workers councils to succeed and that this would organise the defence of the revolution by means of a workers militia. Exactly the approach of the Makhnovists in the Ukraine and the anarchists in Aragon during the Spanish revolution.”

As for the other aspects of revolution he thinks anarchists do not explain, well, does he expect me to expound on them in a letter? Particularly when the part of my previous letter on defence of the revolution was not printed due to space considerations? But if anyone is interested, visit [www.anarchistfaq.org.uk](http://www.anarchistfaq.org.uk) for details.

Wills then asserts that “*the anarchists have supported all revolutions except the ones that actually succeed.*” Sorry, which Marxist revolutions succeeded? Where did one result in socialism rather than state capitalism, popular democracy rather than party dictatorship, workers’ control rather than controlled workers? With “successes” like these, we do not need failures! And anarchists **have** supported all revolutions, until Marxists monopolised power. Then we supported the **real** revolution, the working class in its struggle against the new boss class. Needless to say, we paid the price for defending what socialism is really about.

Wills finishes his own inaccurate diatribe by quoting another, namely Engels’ “**On Authority.**” This appeal to authority hardly impresses. We can see why by looking at the quotes provided. Engels states that a revolution is “*the most authoritarian thing there is*” because “*one part of the population imposes its will upon the other part.*” Yet in class society this happens all the time — the capitalist class oppresses the working class. Therefore, revolution is an act of **liberation** for the working class. Stopping someone oppressing you (by force of arms, if necessary) is **not** “authority,” it is exercising and defending your liberty. As such Engels does not look at revolution (or society) from a working class perspective. That Marxists like to parrot this warmed up liberal nonsense without thinking is sad, if not surprising.

I will end with a chopped part of my original letter:

“As the Russian Revolution shows, a ‘revolutionary’ government centralises power into a few hands and definitely does **not** empower the many. Such a situation can only spell the death of a social revolution, which requires the active participation of all if it is to succeed. It also exposes the central fallacy of Leninism: claiming to desire a society based on mass participation it favours a form of organisation – centralism – that precludes it ... We need to organise in new ways to build a new world.”

yours,  
Iain McKay

## Fourth Letter

Dear *Weekly Worker*

Mike MacNair suggests that I take an “ideological” date for the start of the civil war. Instead of May 1918, he prefers December 1917. Yet either date confirms my argument, namely that Leninist’s should come clean and admit that workers’ democracy and revolution do not go together. He lets the cat out of the bag when he talks about the Bolsheviks holding “the reins of power” — I thought in a “workers’ state” the workers were meant to hold power? And no matter the

date picked, the fact is that the Bolsheviks gerrymandered and disbanded soviets in the spring of 1918. What does Mike have to say about that? Nothing. Worse, sounding like a Leftist Kissinger he argues that the Russia workers should not be allowed to vote Menshevik or SR. So much for workers' democracy.

He states it would be "unlikely" that the anarchists could "defend themselves against the White terror," ignoring the fact that the Makhnovists did just that. Then he smears the Makhnovists, comparing them to Pol Pot's Khmer Rouge ("as the architects of a policy of destruction of the cities"). What nonsense. The Makhnovists were not anti-city. For example, when the Makhnovists liberated towns the first thing there did was to encourage the workers' to organise their own class organisations (free soviets and unions). In contrast, the Bolsheviks banned such bodies and imposed "Revolutionary Committees."

Moving on, Joe Wills yet again distorts the anarchist position on trade unions. He talks of "red" unions and that this "has historically proven to be self-isolating, sectarian disaster." Yet I made no comments on building "red" unions. He states that "Marxists seek not to reject reformist unions, but transform them into organs of revolution." Yet this has historically failed. If he wants to repeat history rather than learn from it, that is his business but please do not inflict assumptions onto us anarchists! He then contrasts "an organised, democratic workers' party to guide the struggle" to "autonomous 'direct action' by unelected cliques and individuals." Really, another straw man argument! Direct action means any form of immediate struggle by workers, such as the strike or occupation. Is he really arguing that rank and file trade unionists are an "unelected clique" who should not make their own decisions (i.e. be autonomous)?

Wills comments on Bakunin and Kropotkin are just puerile and an attempt to hide weak arguments rather than address the issue (i.e., he attacks the failings of individual anarchists rather than anarchism). He then tries to raise a serious point by mentioning "the anarchists who led the botched 1872-73 uprising in Spain that was crushed ... due to the rebels' lack of centralised coordination." I had addressed this issue in my original letter which was chopped in half ("But this seems ironic, as he uses an example of *lack* of federation to refute federalism"). Suffice to say he confuses centralism with co-ordination, a common Marxist failing. It seems he cannot tell the difference between bottom-up and top-down decision making. Wills states that "the anarchists, in seeming violation of their own ideology, did not rely on the direct administration of the people, but set up ruling juntas in all the regions they took." There is no contradiction as "junta" is Spanish for "council." As long as the workers' council is made up of elected, mandated and recallable delegates then the people do govern themselves.

Wills then turns to the Makhnovists, noting that they were not "exempt from using authoritarian means." No one said that a revolution was easy and so we would expect the difficult circumstances of civil war to result in some arbitrary decisions. Yet the differences between the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks are clear. While Makhno sometimes violated libertarian principles in the heat of war, the Bolsheviks turned the "dictatorship of the party" into a key ideological principle. While the Makhnovists tried their best to encourage soviet democracy and freedom of speech, the Bolsheviks crushed both. Which shows the failure of Bolshevism cannot be put down to purely objective factors like the civil war, the politics of Marxism played their part. Wills summarises that "anarchism has never succeeded in surviving for any length of time in an 'intact' anarchist form" yet compared to Marxism, the anarchist record of "betrayal of principle" is far less than for "power-hungry reds." The empirical record is clear, so why do "scientific" socialists seem so keen to ignore it?



Wills argues that Lenin thought that “civil war following the revolution is by no means inevitable.” Yet Lenin stated in late 1917 that “not a single great revolution ... has escaped civil war.” The so-called “workers’ state” was meant to defend the revolution, was it not? Yet it was this very state which destroyed workers’ democracy in Russia. Feel free to blame the civil war on this, if you like, but logic is against you. If Marxism cannot handle the inevitable without “degenerating” then it should be avoided.

Finally, he states that “the central contradiction of anarchism” is that “the working class can achieve anything, but they cannot exercise democratic control and accountability over their leaders.” Firstly, why should the working class delegate its power to a handful of “leaders” (i.e. the Bolshevik central committee)? Can we not make our own decisions? Secondly, in Russia the workers did try to “exercise democratic control and accountability over their leaders.” Their “leaders” simply disbanded the soviets, and subsequent worker protest, by force. This was to be expected, as the state centralises power into the hands of the few and disempowers the many. That is why anarchists are anti-state.

Wills asserts that “anarchism’s absolute hostility to any form of state is misplaced and a barrier to achieving revolution.” Yet this hostility has been proven to be valid, every state has been an instrument of minority class rule over the masses. The Marxist state was no exception – as anarchists had correctly predicted!

Yours,  
Iain McKay

## **Fifth letter**

Dear *Weekly Worker*

Joe Wills says I let “the cat out of the bag when he talks of how the Makhnovists “liberated” the towns.” This is because he “thought anarchists believed liberation was achieved by the workers themselves and not by bands of self-proclaimed revolutionaries.” Incredible! Does he not believe in solidarity between peasants and workers? Does he think that the Makhnovists should have left the workers of the cities to the Whites? Or weaken the struggle against counter-revolution by ignoring its occupation of the cities?

Even more incredibly, he argues that I accept “that Makhno used dictatorial tactics during the civil war and [do] not contest the fact that the ‘Regional Congress of Peasants, Workers and Insurgents’ was undermined and belittled.” He says this is in “contradiction” to the Makhnovists encouraging soviet democracy and freedom of speech. However, he fails to note that I said that in the heat of battle, grassroots democracy was *sometimes* ignored. The point is not whether violations of principal occur, it is whether such violations are occasional or whether they are built into the new system. He argues that this “a mirror argument” of what I criticise Marxists for, “namely relying on the paternalistic and benevolent attitudes of one’s leaders rather than the inherent and spontaneous revolutionary nature of the working masses.” This is, of course, a total distortion of my argument and the facts.

He claims that I simply repeat what he “argued in the first place and the point McKay has been rebutting in all his responses.” What nonsense. The Makhnovists occasionally violated libertarian principles while, in the main, implementing and encouraging them. The Bolsheviks violated them from the start, moreover raising party dictatorship to a key ideological position. The Makhnovists

called soviet congresses, the Bolsheviks disbanded them. The former encouraged free speech and organisation, the latter crushed both. But, apparently, both are the same because Makhno made a few arbitrary decisions! Incredible.

Wills argues that “the politics of Marxism are no more to blame for Bolshevik Jacobinism than the politics of Bakuninism are for the bureaucratic degeneration of the Makhnovshchina.” Bakuninism? Anarchism is not “Bakuninism.” As for “bureaucratic degeneration,” well, clearly Wills knows little about the Makhnovist movement. Nor logic, if he equates party dictatorship, one-man management and the repression of working class protest with a few arbitrary decisions by Makhno (which, incidentally, the Regional Congresses held the army accountable for).

He tries to answer this issue by arguing that the Bolsheviks “led a popular insurgency against the state after building up huge support in the local soviets.” Yet he fails to note that by the spring of 1918, they had *lost* “the support of the majority of the organised working class” across Russia. In response to this, they gerrymandered soviets and disbanded, by force, any which were elected with non-Bolshevik majorities. This was *before* the start of “the appalling conditions of ‘civil war;’” which therefore cannot be blamed for it. The working class protested this usurpation of power. Mass strikes waves took place throughout the civil war. The Bolshevik response was simple: state repression (including shooting strikers, arresting “ringleaders,” lockouts and martial law).

Nor did the Bolsheviks change from a “libertarian profile” to “rigid authoritarianism.” Lenin’s stated aim was party power. This was achieved. To maintain their authority, the Bolsheviks had to use authoritarian methods. They may have talked about (some) libertarian ideas before taking power, but, as Marx said, we must judge people by what they do, not what they say. Moreover, is Wills implying that Bolshevik ideology played *no* role in the decisions made? That seems unlikely, particularly seeing that leading Bolsheviks justified their policies in ideological terms. Or that the (statist) institutional framework the Bolsheviks operated in also had no effect on the evolution of their practice and ideology?

Wills blames Bolshevik authoritarianism on “the failure of social revolution in Europe,” yet the Bolsheviks were disbanding soviets and imposing one-man management long before this happened. He absolves the Bolshevik leadership for responsibility for its own actions by stating “the real cause” was “the failures and betrayals of the workers’ movement in Europe and elsewhere.” If all else fails, blame the workers, eh?

Wills says my comments on workers’ councils does “not differ from Marxism or early Bolshevism” and seem “rather to be the beginning of a break with anti-statism.” Funnily enough, I was paraphrasing comments Bakunin made *before* the Paris Commune applied the idea of imperative mandates. (which Marx praised). So my comments signify consistent anti-statism, not a “break” from it. As for “early Bolshevism,” surely Wills knows that the Bolsheviks initially *opposed* the soviets in 1905 (the logic of that opposition was distinctly anti-democratic, although it helps explain what happened in 1918!)? And that the anarchists not only supported the soviets, but saw them as the framework of the free society (unlike the Bolsheviks)? Unsurprisingly, given Bakunin’s ideas. Which means that when they talk of workers’ councils, Leninists are only repeating Bakunin — the difference being, as the Makhnovists and the Bolsheviks show, anarchists mean it!

Finally, Wills says that popular self-management “is not a consistent argument against the state or authority,” so showing his ignorance of anarchism. He suggests that this “seems to imply the break-up of the national state into lots of smaller, autonomous states.” He obviously cannot

tell the difference between libertarian organisation (power to the base and decision making from the bottom-up) and the state (centralised power in a few hands and top-down decision making). Which helps explain why the Bolshevik revolution was such a failure. The confusion of working class power with party power is one of the root problems with Bolshevism. Let's learn from history, not repeat it.

yours,  
Iain McKay

## Sixth Letter

Dear *Weekly Worker*

It is ironic that Joe Wills (*letters*, 505) accuses me of “revisionism,” given the utter lack of historical truth in his own claims.

He asserts that the Makhnovists “occupied a single town, Ekaterinoslav, for one day.” In reality, they liberated numerous towns. Even his own example is false. Ekaterinoslav was held for “for six weeks” at the end of 1919, without the negative affects he claims (Michael Palij, “The Anarchism of Nestor Makhno”, p. 200). In Oleksandrivsk, they organised “a meeting of workers ... and ... asked them to organise the management ... of industry by their own means and under their own control.” A Fifth soviet Regional congress was also called. (pp. 196–7)

Wills claims that the Makhnovists were a “marginal force” which “numbered no more than 6,700.” In reality, in May, 1919, they numbered over 22,000, peaking at about 40,000 in late October (p. 111, p. 198). Wills’ figure derives from Darch’s “The Makhnovshchina 1917–1921” and are soviet estimates for early 1919. I can see why he uses this source, given Darch’s uncritical use of Soviet histories on the subject. Nice to know that Wills considers Stalinist accounts not suffer from “revisionism”! As for “marginal,” well the Whites would dispute that: “the Denikin troops came to regard Makhno’s army as their most formidable enemy.” (Palij, p. 202) Indeed, their role in the defeat of Denikin and Wrangel were key.

Wills asserts that the Makhnovists failed “to understand the needs of urban workers.” While predominantly a peasant movement, they did urge workers to organise themselves and run their own workplaces (with some success). The Bolsheviks, in contrast, imposed one-man management and militarisation onto the workers. Presumably, for Wills, the latter expresses “the needs” of workers better than the former!

He claims I think “principles are not important — just the degree of violation.” Can he not see that a movement which applies most of its proclaimed ideas most of the time is fundamentally different to one which violated them all, from the start? He claims that if “grassroots democracy” can be ignored then “both hierarchy and bureaucracy must have existed.” Delegates *can* ignore their mandates (that is why anarchists argue for instant recall) but that does not imply hierarchy. It implies hierarchy is beginning, unless the grassroots act. Which, in the Makhnovist movement, it did. So, yes, the Makhnovists were not perfect but they stood for and implemented workplace, army, village and soviet self-management.

Unlike the Bolsheviks. The facts are that whenever faced with a functioning soviet democracy before, during and after the civil war, they preferred party power. Wills absolves the Bolsheviks disbanding soviets in the spring of 1918 because this “was well after the outbreak” of the civil war. Yet Lenin stated in March 1918, that “the Soviet Government has triumphed in the Civil

War.” In April, he said “one can say with certainty that the Civil War in its main phases has been brought to an end.”

Even assuming Wills *is* factually correct, the logic of his argument is clear: working class democracy and revolution are incompatible. This can be seen from his defence of the Bolsheviks banning the Makhnovist’s Fourth Regional Congress. His account of the Third is derived from Darch, and so from Soviet accounts. He claims that “Makhno denied the legitimacy of the All-Ukrainian Congress of Soviets,” as if Wills did not know that it was a creature of the Bolshevik dictatorship. Indeed, the conflict between party dictatorship and soviet democracy had been a theme of the Second Congress (Palij, pp. 153–4) As for “agitation against state socialism,” is Wills arguing against free speech?

Wills justifies Bolshevik authoritarianism as “all this as the revolution fought for its survival”! Which, ironically, was exactly the reason why the Fourth Congress was called, to discuss the problems facing the revolution. Obviously Wills disagrees with Makhno that it is “*an inviolable right of the workers and peasants, a right won by the revolution, to call congresses on their own account, to discuss their affairs.*” Is Wills really arguing that the masses should have no say in their revolution?

Wills argues that accounts of the Makhnovists cannot be trusted, quoting a historian who bases his case on *soviet* accounts. It is hardly *our* fault that “empirical data” is hard to find. Any one who was lucky enough not to be shot or imprisoned by the Cheka was subject to Bolshevik dictatorship. This, naturally, means most first hand accounts were by “committed anarchists” in exile. Significantly respected historians like Palij have managed to produce histories of the movement based on numerous sources which tally with the anarchist ones.

Finally, Wills denies that I express “consistent anti-statism.” He notes that Bakunin “describes his organisation as a ‘new revolutionary state.’” He did so, in 1868, but not in later, similar, descriptions. Why? To quote Daniel Guerin, initially Bakunin used such terms “as synonyms for ‘social collective.’ The anarchists soon saw, however, that it was rather dangerous for them to use the same word as the authoritarians while giving it a quite different meaning. They felt that a new concept called for a new word and that the use of the old term could be dangerously ambiguous; so they ceased to give the name ‘State’ to the social collective of the future.”

Anarchists argue that the state is structured to ensure minority rule and, consequently, a “workers’ state” would be a new form of minority rule over the workers. For this reason we argue that working class self-management from the bottom-up cannot be confused with a “state.” The Russian Revolution showed the validity of this, with the Bolsheviks calling their dictatorship a “workers’ state” in spite of the workers having no power in it.

It is simple really, either the class organisations of the working class are in charge or the party leadership is. Wills’ arguments just reaffirm that, for Leninists, it is most definitely the latter. Little wonder, then, his distortions about the Makhnovists and anarchism.

Iain McKay

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)  
Anti-Copyright



Anarcho  
Letters on Anarchism and Marxism  
June 23, 2009

Retrieved on 29<sup>th</sup> January 2021 from [anarchism.pageabode.com](http://anarchism.pageabode.com)  
A series of letters sent to the **Weekly Worker** on anarchism and Marxism. Most were printed as they were sent, although letter one was cut in half (letter two, which aimed to include the material cut when the first one was published was not if I remember correctly). The letters end up, as usual, discussing the Russian revolution and the Makhnovists).

[usa.anarchistlibraries.net](http://usa.anarchistlibraries.net)