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1999, Summer

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It appears that anarchists in the U.S. are not alone in facing attempts to turn our anarchist heritage into support for the state and capitalism. In Ukraine in December some academics and local authorities held a conference and ”people’s party” to honor the memory of the anarchist Nestor Makhno; well, not exactly. Members of the Revolutionary Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists (RKAS) relate what went on:

On December 9-10, 1998 the State University of the city of Zaporozhye together with the local authorities organized a celebration in honor of the anarchist revolutionary Nestor Makhno in his birthplace Gulyai-Polye. It consisted of a scientific conference organized by the university and a ”people’s party” organized by the local authorities.

We arrived in the evening of the first day and found the participants in a fine restaurant, anarchists (from Russia and Ukraine) and ”scholars” duly separated. Among the anarchists we found our RKAS comrades from Dnepropetrovsk.

In the morning we took our flags and went to the square in front of the Palace of Culture in the center of the city. When we arrived the square was already full of people, music played, the "people's party" was on. Loudspeakers made it impossible not to hear the results of concentrated efforts of members of the local guild of poets to paraphrase the word of the day: "Makhno is our Tsar, Makhno is our God." On the flagpole before the square flew the yellow-and-blue flag of the state.

Our bewilderment became indignation when cossacks from Zaporozhye appeared with their banners duly decorated with christian symbols. Their high command—the atamans—arrived in ostentatious foreign cars. The square became the square of the war mob, and the war mob, together with the local authorities, the center of the "people's party."

Against this background the arrival of a delegation of local teachers and school children carrying yellow-and-blue flags looked almost pastoral.

Ten of us anarchists sat together on our own with our anarchist flags. People came to see us and some voiced their agreement: "Well done! Makhno flags: well done!" Some wanted to know what anarchism was about and took literature. A few young cossacks came too: "What are you doing here?" A good question, to which we answered: "And what are you doing here?" Discussion and they left.

What a day: those self-satisfied faces, those golden shoulder straps, those Petlyura and Gaidamac uniforms, those flags of the enemies of Nestor Makhno! All that had cost the lives of so many in the Makhno movement had surfaced again to smear, foul and debase the memory of Makhno-the-anarchist. Whereas we, a miserable total of ten anarchists, were sitting on the side, too weak and too few to take over the platform and the microphones and denounce those unbridled lies and proclaim Makhno's historical truth and anarchist ideals.

After all the representatives of the local authorities and of the cossacks had cheerfully spelled out Nestor Makhno's merits as a fighter for the independence of the state of Ukraine, with not a single word about his role as anarchist and revolutionary, the cossacks, in formation, and the civilian groups went to the regional museum for the opening ceremony of an exhibition. What a disgrace: a day that should have been an anarchist day turned into a state day.