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Makhno's Black Cross

Kate Sharpley Library

1997

On July 19th 1968, thirty-two years after the beginning of the Spanish revolution, the first issue of the Bulletin of the Anarchist Black Cross was published. We reprint here the first page examining the formation of the Black Cross in the Ukraine in 1918.

It is fifty years since Nestor Makhno organised units of the Black Cross, originally intended as field-working units similar to those of the Red Cross (as used elsewhere in Russia, described in this issue). The Black Cross units in various cities of the Ukraine were for purposes of workers' self defence as well as for purely "ambulance" type activity. The use of Cossacks, the prevalence of White Guards, pogromists, as well as the growing Red Army, made it necessary for city-dwellers to be able to protect themselves in the streets.

They wore no particular uniform except that, to enable themselves to be recognised at times of violence in the streets, they wore denim overalls with a recognisable armband. Their job was to organise resistance to sudden pogroms, whether the conventional type Czarist pogrom, or action by the police, or the sudden onslaught of Red or White Guards.

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Those who think of movements for self-defence purely in terms that we think of them in the West today (largely legalistic, like the Council for Civil Liberties, excellent though such a body is for its specific function) will find it surprising that a body organised solely for defence of prisoners, and for the protection of workers in their homes and factories, should have become one of the major adjuncts to the fighting forces of Makhno's peasant army. It was, indeed, the first urban army to be formed in the Ukraine; by 1920, when the Whites were an organised body aided by foreign intervention, the city Makhnovistas, the Black Cross, was the only force in the towns that could organise military self-defence along with the peasants. They faced three enemies, Petliura in the West, the Bolsheviki in the North and the monarchists in the East and South. But they were able to defend the cities, though they were never a mobile force like the peasant army.

Most certainly, in a revolutionary situation such as existed in Germany when the Nazis were rising to power, it is highly necessary to have a movement that is able to resist. The mere provocation of the State by protest, when one can only be crushed by the full powers at the disposal of the State, is not enough. It is necessary, when fighting dictatorship, to be able to oppose a monolithic force to it so that it can fight back when attacked.

The Ukrainian "Black Cross" arose out of purely defensive needs, in order to protect workers occupying their places of work, to defend demonstrations in the streets, and so on. Its form of organisation might have been that of the Red Cross (even that of the Salvation Army, as one observer sneered') but it was able to adapt that form of organisation into a fighting force.

The Anarchist Black Cross is still active internationally in defence of anarchist and class struggle prisoners. ABC: 121 Railton Road, London, SE24 0LR. The Bulletin of the ABC later became 'Black Flag', and is due to celebrate its 30th next year. Black Flag: BM Hurricane, London, WC1N 3XX