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The Ukrainian utopia that almost existed

Recalling the forgotten history of the Makhnovshchina movement allows us to imagine new and different ways forward

Kristen R. Ghodsee

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The Ukrainian counteroffensive has begun, and every day we read the names of cities unknown to most Americans until the invasion: Kherson, Kharkiv, Mariupol and Mykolaiv. After more than 15 months of fighting, large swaths of southern and eastern Ukraine remain under illegal Russian occupation.

Both sides in this conflict advance competing arguments about history to justify their sovereign rights over the territories in question, but they make these arguments within a context that considers the traditional nation-state as inevitable. These parts of Ukraine have long been contested, but there was a time when their inhabitants attempted to establish an autonomous zone independent of Russia, Ukraine — or any central government at all. Recalling a forgotten utopian history can allow us to imagine new and different ways forward, including those that push beyond our contemporary political realities.

Instead of being subsumed within a sprawling empire or incorporated into a ethnonational republic, many peasants in this region once aspired to create a voluntary confederation of independent agricultural communes. Their utopian dream of a stateless and classless society flourished briefly between 1917 and 1921. This movement was known as the Makhnovshchina, after the name of its leader, Nestor Makhno.

Born in 1888 in Tsarist Russia, Makhno spent his youth hungry and angry. The official abolition of serfdom in 1861 had emancipated his parents, but they eked out a miserable existence despite their de facto liberation from servitude. The crushed 1905 revolution radicalized Makhno. He joined the Union of Poor Peasants, which deployed desperate terrorist tactics against the landlords. He was arrested and sentenced to a life of hard labor in 1910.

In prison, Makhno began reading the work of Pyotr Kropotkin, the Russian prince-turned-anarchist. Kropotkin proposed the idea of a decentralized communalist society free from the authority of all economic elites and whatever form of central government they chose to protect their property, be it monarchy or parliamentary democracy. Instead, peasants and workers would self-manage their own cooperatives and enterprises to meet their basic needs.

"That we are utopians is well known," Kropotkin wrote in 1892. "So utopian are we that we go the length of believing that the revolution can and ought to assure shelter, food and clothes to all."

As World War I ravaged Europe, Makhno embraced Kropotkin's principles of mutual aid and voluntary association. After the February 1917 revolution and the abdication of the Tsar in Russia, Makhno was released and returned to his hometown of Huliaipole, where he hoped to test these anarchist ideals in practice. After the formation of the Central Council of Ukraine (Central Rada) in March 1917 — which served as the first of three governments for the short-lived

Ukrainian People's Republic — Makhno and his fellow peasants in southeastern Ukraine had their chance to seize large estates, socialize the land and property and organize their self-governing communes.

This initial attempt to build a utopia floundered after the October 1917 revolution. The Russian Provisional Government in Petrograd (now St. Petersburg) had recognized the regional autonomy of Ukraine, but Vladimir Lenin mistrusted what he considered the bourgeois character of the Central Rada and decried their nationalist aspirations. For their part, the members of the Central Rada disparaged what they regarded as a Bolshevik putsch and declared their full independence from Russia in January 1918.

Although wary of the Bolsheviks, Makhno also harbored suspicions of the new Ukrainian government, especially after it signed an independent peace treaty with the Central Powers (then still at war with Russia), and invited the Germans and Austro-Hungarians to occupy and protect a now neutral Ukraine. April 1918 brought both a right-wing coup d'état that overthrew the Central Rada and the violent subjugation of Huliaipole by Austro-Hungarian troops who imprisoned, tortured or killed many of Makhno's communards, including two of his brothers.

Furious at this turn of events, Makhno traveled to Moscow, where he hoped to engage Bolshevik assistance for a counteroffensive. There he conferred with Kropotkin and other anarchists as well as with Lenin. Many years later, Makhno recreated their conversation in his memoirs.

> "The anarchists are always full of self-denial, they are ready for any sacrifice. But they are blind fanatics, they ignore the present and think only of the distant future," Lenin allegedly told Makhno. "You, comrade, I think, have a realistic attitude towards the problems of our times. If only a third

of the anarchists in Russia were like you, we the communists would be prepared to collaborate with them under certain conditions for the purpose of the free organization of producers."

Assured of Bolshevik support, Makhno returned to Ukraine. By raiding supply depots, he armed and trained a ragtag peasant force, which managed to retake Huliaipole in November 1918. The end of World War I saw the defeat of the Central Powers and the collapse of their puppet Hetman in Kyiv. The Red Army retook the major Ukrainian cities, but gave the Makhnovists a second opportunity to establish their rural communes in the south.

The Makhnovshchina's self-managing cooperatives and enterprises multiplied. The peasants shared resources, ate their meals in common, determined their own work schedules and attempted — amid war and revolution — to build a free society where people worked together to meet their own needs without bosses or masters of any kind. To them, an ethnic Ukrainian landlord was no better than a Russian one.

In the chaotic years that followed, Makhno took temporary command of a newly formed Revolutionary Insurgent Army of Ukraine, a scrappy guerrilla force of peasants that initially integrated with the Red Army. Together they fought against a third Ukrainian nationalist government, led by Symon Petliura, as well as against the counterrevolutionary Russian White Army of forces gathering to the south.

But Makhno bristled at Bolshevik authoritarianism and mutinied against the Red Army command. Now independent, he recruited ever more peasants and a growing number of Red Army deserters as the Bolsheviks retreated from Ukraine in the face of the White Army advance in the fall of 1919. But the peasants proved poor soldiers against well-trained generals. Falling back and taking heavy losses, the Insurgent Army sought an alliance with Petliura's Ukrainian People's Army.

Their joined forces routed the Whites. For a brief instant it looked as if Ukraine might be free.

Instead, the Bolsheviks invaded once more, deposing Petliura, installing a new Bolshevik-friendly government and creating the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (SSR). When the regrouped Whites launched another attack, the Makhnovists signed the Starobilsk Agreement in October 1920, which meant renewed cooperation with the Red Army. Makhno believed the Bolsheviks would honor the Makhnovshchina's desire for regional autonomy when the fighting ended.

Immediately following the decisive victory over the Whites, however, the Red Army invaded Huliaipole, rounded up and shot the Makhnovists, and incorporated the whole region into the Ukrainian SSR. Betrayed, sick and wounded, Makhno barely escaped. He spent the rest of his life in exile, still writing and agitating in favor of the ideals of worker and peasant self-rule. He died of tuberculosis in Paris in 1934.

But utopians' visions never die. The Makhnovist impulse for radical democratic self-government has re-emerged over and over in the past century: in Republican Spain, among the Indigenous Zapatista movement in Southern Mexico and with the Kurds of Rojava in North and East Syria, to name a few. As the missiles continue to fly over Ukraine today — with two nation-states fighting for sovereignty over a disputed territory and its population — we should pause to remember those who once dreamed of a world where ordinary working people might have real sovereignty over how they want to organize their own lives. Revisiting these utopian experiments of the past, even if they failed, can help us better understand the contingency of the present and broaden our horizons to consider radically different possibilities for an always uncertain future.