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The Truth about Nestor Makhno

Libertarian groups of Toronto

1934

Nestor Makhno, for years the leader of the rebel peasantry of the Ukraina, died on July 25 in the Tenon Hospital after long months of illness. His remains were cremated in the Père-Lachaise cemetery, at Paris.

Nestor Makhno was one of the outstanding personalities of the Russian Revolution, a man remarkable in many regards. While still in his teens he became interested in the revolutionary movement and at 17 he was already an active member of an anarchist group in the Ukraina. In 1908 the Tsarist Government condemned him to death, but owing to his youth the sentence was commuted to life imprisonment. He was incarcerated in the notorious Butirki Prison, at Moscow, one of the worst hells of the Russian penal system, where the naturally rebellious spirit of Makhno earned him frequent and severe punishment. In spite of it Nestor succeeded in turning his imprisonment to good account; he spent his time in studying and improving the elementary education he had received as a boy. The February Revolution opened the doors of his prison, as it did for thousands of other victims of Tsardom.

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Makhno returned to his native Ukraina and there devoted himself to the revolutionary enlightenment of the masses. A splendid organizer and effective agitator, his work speedily showed results. He became particularly popular among the southern peasantry. During the occupation of Ukraina by the German-Austrian forces, Makhno organized very successful guerrilla warfare against the invaders. From a little handful of armed men, who had to procure guns and ammunitions from the enemy, his faithful band constantly grew in numbers and strength, till at one time Makhno's peasant army consisted of 40,000–60,000 men, including cavalry and artillery. A thorough Anarchist, Makhno waged war against all forces which sought to subject Ukraina to new tyranny and exploitation. For this reason [he fought] the Whites as well as the Bolsheviks when the latter attempted to establish an allegedly "revolutionary" despotism in the South. Makhno clearly distinguished between the interests of the revolution and of the masses as against those of Bolshevik Party rule. He and his *povstantsi* (rebel peasant) army had for their definite purpose to free Ukraina from the tyranny and government in any form, be it white or red. *Makhnovstchina*, as the Makhno peasant uprising in Ukraina was called, was a thoroughly libertarian revolutionary movement of the masses in the South of Russia, of utmost significance. Nestor Makhno was the heart and the spirit of that great movement. His great ability as a leader, his personal courage and almost reckless devotion to his anarchist ideal of liberation earned for him the trust, respect and admiration of the Ukrainian masses. His revolutionary integrity and unusual military judgment inspired his army to deeds of almost incredible heroism and self-sacrifice in behalf of the revolutionary cause. His followers christened him "Batko" Makhno (beloved little father), which was the highest expression of popular respect and affection.

But though Makhno fought against the establishment of Bolshevik rule in the Ukraina, he never hesitated to come to the

aid of the Bolsheviki when the interests of the revolution demanded it. Thus in 1919 the Makhno army practically saved Moscow from being taken by General Denikin when the latter had almost routed the Bolshevik forces. Again in 1920 it was Makhno and his *povstantsi* who helped in finally defeating Wrangel and his White armies.

The Bolsheviki always appealed to Makhno for aid whenever their own military forces failed to halt the advance of the White enemy. But in spite of being repeatedly saved from destruction by Makhnovtsi, the Bolsheviki continuously planned to annihilate Makhno and his army. True to the psychology of all despotism, the Bolsheviki Government could not tolerate the fact that a large part of Russia – practically the whole of Ukraine – refused to recognise the rule of the Bolsheviki. Fully knowing that Makhno was a true Anarchist who strove to liberate the south from every tyranny, and in spite of the great services done by Makhno's army to the revolution, the Bolsheviki denounced both Makhno and his peasant followers as bandits and counter-revolutionists. They set a price on Makhno's head, dead or alive, and even stooped to sending secret emissaries to Makhno's camp to murder him.

Notwithstanding all the dangers and difficulties of that revolutionary period, and in spite of repeated Bolshevik treachery, Makhno continued for 4 years (1917–1921) loyally to serve the revolutionary cause. He had fought the German invaders and he continued his fight against every reactionary force which sought to subjugate the people of Ukraine, including the armies of Denikin, Skoropadsky, Petlura, Grigoriev and others.

Whites as well as the Bolsheviki hated Makhno and his peasant army with a deadly and irreconcilable hatred. Justly so, for was not the very existence of the Makhno movement a challenge and a defiance to all governments and oppression? In the denunciation of Makhno the Bolsheviki went even further than the whites. Secret conspiracies and open military attacks failed to destroy Makhno and his followers, the Bolsheviki decided

to kill him morally. It was they who FIRST SPREAD THE LIE that Makhno was a pogromshtchik, a Jew baiter, and that his army was guilty of pogroms against the Jews. But the people of Ukraina knew better than that. They knew that no Bolshevik general ever protected the Jews against pogroms with the energy and zeal of Makhno. They knew that Makhno was an Anarchist and internationalist, and that he was ruthless in suppressing the least sign of racial persecution. Some of his closest friends were Jews, and a number of well-known Russian-Jewish Anarchists were his most trusted advisors and members of the educational department of the Makhno army. It is true that occasional, though very rare cases of assaults on Jews had happened in the territory occupied by Makhno's forces. But in every case it was proven that such excesses were committed by individual members of the army, and that Makhno was merciless in punishing such offenders. In this connection it is well to remember that the Bolshevik red Army was also not free from such excesses, yet no one would think of accusing the leaders of the Bolshevik army of encouraging pogroms. As to Makhno, he personally and publicly shot Grigorief, the chief of a White band of notorious pogromers, as an object lesson for his entire army and the entire people of Ukraina.

A true anarchist, a great revolutionary mass leader was lost to us by the death of Nestor Makhno. He died, poor, alone and almost deserted far away from the people he so loved and served so faithfully. But his spirit always remained with the masses of Russia, and with his last breath he confidently hoped that some day the oppressed, much-suffering people will rise in their might to sweep away forever the tyranny and despotism of Bolshevism.