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The Brothers Parkhomenko

a tale of the Russian Civil War

Nick Heath

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Alexander Parkhomenko is known to older Russians through the pages of the novel by Vsevolod Ivanov and the 1942 film of the same name. He was paraded as one of the great heroes of the Russian Civil War, alongside other partisan leaders like Chapaev (who also had a book and film dedicated to him). He led a Red Army detachment against the Makhnovists and eventually was killed by them. He is portrayed in the film as dying a hero's death at the hands of Makhno who is seen playing a harmonica and singing a jolly tune. Also portrayed in the popular movie are the Ataman Grigoriev (killed by the Makhnovists) and the Makhnovist commander Maksiuta.

In Soviet propaganda of the period, Parkhomenko is depicted as a model Bolshevik. Like Makhno from a peasant background, he is built up as the anti-Makhno, the Bolshevik antidote to the anarchist reprobate. However as we shall see, there was a black sheep in Parkhomenko's family, a very black one indeed!

Alexander Parkhomenko, born in 1886, was the son of the poor labourer Yakov S. Parkhomenko from the village of Yar

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Makarov in Slavyanoserbbsk County in the province of Ekaterinoslav. He was one of three sons and two daughters. The eldest son Ivan went at an early age to the nearby town of Lugansk where he worked in the Hartman locomotive plant. Alexander managed to finish only two grades of elementary school when his mother, collecting firewood in a forest of the Donets (the territory of the Don Army) was caught by Cossack foresters, and beaten so badly that she could barely get home, where soon after she died. As a result Alexander had to start working at the age of ten years as a shepherd, a water boy, and then in a mine.

In the first version of the novel by Ivanov in 1939 we see Alexander's first moves to the in working-class and revolutionary movement under the influence of his brother Ivan. With his help and advice in 1900, Alexander entered the Hartmann plant, and in 1904 joined the Bolshevik Party. But this accurate account is changed in the second edition in 1950. It did not meet with the approval of the censors and the role of Ivan in Alexander's political development was minimised.

There was deep-seated discontent among the workers in the Donbas basin and this erupted in 1905. On February 16th, a strike broke out, turning into a demonstration. The authorities at first made concessions, but then started a clamp-down. In 1906 the two brothers were sacked from the factory and to escape arrest returned to their village. But the flames of revolt had spread to the countryside and in July in the villages of Slavyanoserbbsk County a peasant uprising broke out. The big landowner Ilyenko agreed to all the demands of the peasants, but then called in the Army. The brothers were forced to go underground, working under aliases at factories in Lugansk, Yuzovka, and Bakhmut. The elder brother became Ivan Kritsky, and the younger Lavrushey. They were both arrested on various occasions, with Alexander being released from a last arrest on the eve of the First World War.

forces in February 1921 Parkhomenko went to Gulyai Polye. A report from the Bolsheviks in the Lugansk region noted that on the night of February 23rd in the village of Bugaevka the Parkhomenko band was situated and was engaged with. In March reeling under the heavy blows inflicted by the forces of the Red Army, who were vastly superior in numbers, the Makhnovists dispersed their units. Parkhomenko returned to the Voronezh region (prior to this he was operating with the forces of Maslakov and Brova in the Caucasus and then in March –April leading an independent guerrilla struggle against the Red Army in Bogucharsky county), Kurilenko's forces moved to Mariupol, Ivanyuk's to the Kharkov region, and Moskalevsky's units went to Yuzovka.

In early May Parkhomenko was instructed to link up with the remaining forces of Kolesnikov whose main units had been defeated near Krinichnaya in April. Apparently Artem Parkhomenko was killed in July in fighting with Red Army units.

In 1916 a new strike broke out in Lugansk. This was crushed by Cossack forces. Ivan was exiled to Siberia, and Alexander was drafted to the front. In February with the revolution the Bolsheviks organised in Lugansk with Ivan on the executive committee of the small Party branch. Meanwhile Alexander had organised a workers squad from the ammunition factory. This was the nucleus of other such groups which came together into the Red Guard, headed by Alexander at Lugansk by June. He was then involved in fighting against the forces of Hetman Skoropadsky and his backers the Austrians and Germans. However the Red Army was forced to retreat. At Tsaritsyn, where Alexander joined the command of 10th Army, he met Stalin, who commissioned him to go to Moscow to talk with Lenin.

After the Ukraine's liberation from the Germans in early 1919 Alexander Parkhomenko was appointed provincial military commissar and chief of the garrison of Kharkov. He was then involved in campaigns against the forces of the Ataman Grigoriev. The Red general Skachko fled from Ekaterinoslav in May 1919 with the advance of Grigoriev's army. In the unrest and chaos that followed Maksiuta(1), a Makhnovist commander who had been imprisoned by the Bolsheviks in Ekaterinoslav prison, was released and began to organise a detachment. Unlike Skachko, the local Party chief Averin had not lost his nerve and ordered the shooting of Maksiuta, which was carried out by Alexander Parkhomenko who had recently entered the city with his unit. According to the legendary account, Parkhomenko stood in the path of the car in which Maksiuta, surrounded by four of his combatants, was proceeding. He called out "Who are you? " to which came the response " A. E. Maksiuta, anarchist commander. And who are you?" (Parkhomenko is then said to have opened fire with his revolver on Maksiuta and his men. For his killing of Maksiuta and his actions against Grigoriev Parkhomenko received his first Order of the Red Banner.

In November 1919 the famous 1st Cavalry Army led by Budyenny was created. One of its commanders was Parkhomenko. In January 1920, after the capture of Rostov from the Whites, Parkhomenko's men went on a drunken rampage and launched a pogrom against the Jews. Parkhomenko was unable to resist this and as a result was sentenced to death by a Bolshevik revolutionary tribunal, who blamed him for all the atrocities that were carried out in Rostov. This was carefully airbrushed from later biographies of Parkhomenko. Parkhomenko was saved by the intercession of Stalin and Ordzhonikidze. Parkhomenko then led the 14th Cavalry Division, succeeding Grigori Maslakov who had mutinied against the Bolsheviks. This division began a campaign against the Makhnovists. However the Makhnovists retreated towards Mariupol and Parkhomenko began using terror against the peasants in the region that had supported the Makhnovists. For these depredations Parkhomenko received a second Order of the Red Banner on May 16th, 1920. He then engaged in battles against the Poles and Wrangel. After the defeat of the last White General the 1st Red Cavalry was deployed again against the Makhnovists and other bands operating independently from the Bolsheviks.

Here at the village of Buzivka near Uman on January 3rd, 1921 Parkhomenko came into contact with the Makhnovists for the last time. According to the various novels and the film Parkhomenko fought bravely, gunning down many Makhnovists before being dispatched by Makhno himself. However accounts from Soviet archives tell a totally different story. Parkhomenko mistook Makhno's forces for a Red Army unit (the Makhnovists were very good at thus surprising their enemies) and surrendered without much of a fight. Parkhomenko begged for his life, giving the Makhnovists all the information he had on Red Army logistics and whereabouts. He produced a letter from his pocket from his younger brother, an anarchist who was fighting with Antonov, in which he implored Alexan-

der to reconsider his position, saying that "it was not too late". Alas for Alexander it was. Makhno remembered the gunning down of Maksiuta and Parkhomenko was shot, although Viktor Belash was to write that Makhno later regretted the killing of Parkhomenko, saying that he could have forgiven the shooting of Maksiuta!

As we know from the testimony of Viktor Belash Alexander had a terrible secret — the great Bolshevik hero had a brother who was not only an anarchist, but who had fought on the other side with Makhno!! this was Artem, the youngest of the three brothers, born in 1892. In 1917 he became an anarchist militant and the following year joined the Nabat Anarchist Confederation in the Ukraine. He fought in the detachments commanded by the anarchist Cherednyak in the Kharkov region. In May 1919 he joined Makhno, and became a regimental commander. So in spring 1920, Alexander was leading attacks on forces that included his own brother. In October 1920, when the Makhnovists agreed to an alliance with the Bolsheviks against the forces of the White general Wrangel, some rebel commanders -Kamenev, Fomin, Bondarenko — opposed the agreement and started operating independently. Among them was Parkhomenko, who led a regiment of 2,000 combatants. He went to Russia, where the Antonov uprising raged in the Tambov region. Parkhomenko did not join the main Antonovist forces but linked up with the units led by the former commander of the Red Army Kolesnikov, who had launched a mutiny and uprising in the southern counties of the Voronezh region. In fact Parkhomenko, as an anarchist, disagreed with Antonov's views on the re-establishment of the Constituent Assembly. Parkhomenko's unit increased to 12000 combatants by the end of 1920 and was known as the 9th Infantry Regiment. Perhaps this was the period when the letter to his brother was written. Parkhomenko led the Novokalitvensky regiment of the Kolesnikov forces and fought against the Bolsheviks. After a defeat of the Kolesnikov