

Memories of a Makhnovist Partisan

Ossip Tsebry

1950

Contents

EARLY LIFE	3
THE OCCUPATION AND LANDOWNER RESTORATION	3
THE RESISTANCE	4
THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE HETMAN AND THE POLES	6
THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE ATTEMPT TO LINK UP WITH THE MAKHNOVISTS.	7

EARLY LIFE

The village of Tartaki, 220 families strong, lay on the banks of a tributary of the river Bug, in the western Ukraine. Located two kilometers outside Zhmerinka, it was separated from that town by the forest belonging to the local lord and cut off by the river and the forested common. A little way outside the village the seigniorial domain of Prince Ralli, given over to agriculture, covered something like 1600 hectares in 1917. It was managed by a steward and his helpers.

My father, Vassili Grigoryevitch, had a good name among the people of the village and the region. He was held in high regard and loved as much for his custom of lending a helping hand to anybody who was facing difficulty or misfortune. After lobbying from him, the post trading in wine and alcohol had been shut down and replaced by a consumer co-operative. Moreover, he was very strong physically and wore a splendid beard, which had led to his being proposed for the post of district manager by the Brailovsky district and its inspector. To which my father had replied that he had no desire for high office, wishing neither to rule nor to be ruled by anybody else. Later I discovered that he had done his military service in a Petrograd regiment where he had come under the sway of a volunteer soldier first class, of Bakuninist-anarchist beliefs, who had spent his spare time educating his fellow-soldiers, my father among them. Discreetly along with the lessons, the anarchist imparted his ideas.

When the revolution of 1917 came, the local peasants swooped on the long coveted seigniorial estates. They set about looting, burning and destroying everything. Within a week, most of the estates in the district had been reduced to cinders. When it came to dividing up the lands, there was even greater confusion and brawling. In Tartaki village, things were different. A general assembly was called and a leader, my father, chosen from its ranks. He promptly addressed the gathering: "What should we do and what is going to be our line regarding the local seigniorial estates?" As he saw things, if they were to ape the ways of the neighboring villages, destroying everything while proclaiming it was all ours. That would be senseless. If it all belonged to us, then we ought to preserve it intact, then work for it collectively, which would bring benefits to all. There were lengthy discussions, and then it was decided that the estate should be worked collectively.

The assembly elected four assistants to help Vassili Grigoryevitch. All five went in search of the steward and his team and invited them to clear out within the next two days. Then on the basis of the decisions taken at the general assembly, they gathered together the estate laborers and Vassili Grigoryevitch explained to them that all who wished could stay and live and work on the estate, and the villagers would make them welcome. On the other hand, any who were unwilling were invited to clear out along with the master's lackeys some time in the next two days. Nearly all of the laborers readily agreed to stay.

THE OCCUPATION AND LANDOWNER RESTORATION

At the beginning of 1918 the Austro-Hungarian-German army occupied the Ukraine. Trailing in the wake came the big landowners and former dignitaries, with the hetman, Skoropadsky at their head, these satraps set enthusiastically to work. A huge punitive army some forty thousand strong was raised. It established its main headquarters in Vinnitsa and its mission was to bring the province of Podoloya to heel.

The chief steward of the Braikovsky estates also returned. Since his home had been razed, he moved into the mansion of Prince Ralli, which had been preserved unscathed by the inhabitants of the district who had planned to open a secondary school there. This chief steward, Ivanovsky, demanded a force of 150 gendarmes be placed at his disposal. He summoned the local kulaks and from them got the names of those responsible for the depredations on thirteen large estates. These did not include the village of Tartaki, which had preserved its seigniorial estates unscathed, albeit now working them collectively. Ivanovsky knew the Tartaki leader, Vassili Grigorevitch, well, as an uppity peasant but honest worker. He sought him out, with his punitive detachment for escort.

“Vassili Grigoryevitch, what has become of the steward?” he asked him.

“The village assembly asked him and his aides to clear out, they left. As to where they went, I couldn’t say,” my father answered him

“Vassili Grigorevitch, I am delighted that the estate has not been pillaged and I would like it to go on being worked collectively by the village which can have a third of the harvest.”

In other villages Ivanovsky let himself go when it came to repression. Rebellious peasants were horsewhipped, and he perpetrated all sorts of outrages, so much so that folk fled en masse to the forests.

A little after that visit from Ivanovsky, my father went to pay a visit to his godfather, who worked in the railways in Zhmerinka. From him he learned that there was a wagon load of Russian munitions in a siding in the railway station and that its presence had not been reported to the German command. His godfather told him, “If the villagers are on the look-out for weapons, we railwaymen can lend you a hand in that good cause.” That very evening, they both attended a meeting of the town’s railroad workers’ revolutionary committee. It was determined there that Vassili Grigorevitch would muster the men from his and from surrounding villages to carry off the available weapons by night.

THE RESISTANCE

In the common forest of Tartaki, a kilometer outside the village proper, there was a huge ravine with numerous caves that in bygone times had harbored Slav partisans fighting against the Turks. Taking three stonemasons with him, Vassili Grigoryevitch went to inspect these caves, with an eye to turning them into dumps for the weapons. The following evening there was an assembly of the entire village at which eighty volunteers were commissioned to look to the defense of the community. These elected me as commander of the detachment.

The village headmen, Vassili Grigoryevitch, decided to send four members of our self-defense detachment on a tour of the adjoining villages to invite reliable persons to gather in secret at Dry Ravine the following evening. The next day we tipped off the railwaymen that our people, five hundred of them, would make the rendezvous on the date agreed. On arrival at Zhmerinka, we all set to work and over that night we shipped nearly a thousand rifles, ten machine guns, a hundred revolvers, two hundred hand grenades and twenty thousand cartridges to the caves. An armed detachment of two hundred men was set up to mount night raids into Zhmerinka, only to scatter when daylight came, with its members continuing to do their share of work in the village.

Under the leadership of Vassili Grigoryevitch, five more partisan detachments were formed in the neighboring villages of Slomaki, Liudavia, Gamarnia and Krivoi Rog. Each of these numbered

about one hundred and fifty men, placed under the command of a seconded commander. Each detachment would have freedom of action, but in the event of something big, and at a signal from Vassili Grigoryevitch, all five detachments would come together under his command. All of these detachments were armed from the dumps in the 'Grottoes,' where a hospital had also been set up. They operated only by night, attacking troop convoys and goods on their way out to Germany, wiping them out and capturing them. They also attacked the garrison in Zhmerinka as well as the hetman's Varta forces, before dispersing to their homes as morning was breaking.

At that time of the wheat harvest, the partisans used to take their machine guns along, hiding in the corn. Small Varta detachments or Austro-Hungarian-German occupation troops passed close by the fields. The partisans would lay ambushes for them and cut them all down with sudden, heavy bursts of machine-gun fire. On each occasion they would immediately seek out the local commander of these troops to report that unknown partisans, emerging from the forests, had wiped out one of their detachments not far from their village or hamlet, and they used to point them in a phony direction allegedly taken by these fictitious partisans. In this way the villagers diverted suspicion away from themselves. One day, shortly before the threshing of the wheat, chief steward Ivanovsky and Kumanovsky, the commander of his punitive detachment, were killed by a grenade thrown in as they were sitting down to dinner in their mansion.

All the wheat had been gathered into sheaves and it was now time for the threshing. Now the thresher had been dismantled, the drum being in need of repair. Furthermore, Taratki's was the only thresher to have escaped the widespread destruction of the thirteen neighboring estates back in 1917. The villages in the region were in a sorry predicament, because not only had their seigniorial estates been put to the torch, but the livestock and poultry had likewise been destroyed. How had that come about? Very simply. Whoever was strongest and had the most sons to help him had seized the best animals and the finest lands from the lord's estates. Plainly these were mostly kulaks, whilst the bednyaks (poor peasants) got only the crumbs. Even when a bednyak had managed, say, to grab a calf, he generally would not have had the feed it needed, nor a pen to hold it, in so he had no choice but to butcher and eat it. Moreover, in most cases, he would have received only a plot of the poorest land and did not have the tools to work it. So it very often happened that he would ask the kulak to plough his holding, in return for which he would commit himself and his family to laboring for the kulak. It was above all the kulaks who had welcomed Ivanovsky, the chief steward, most cordially upon his return and they who reported the bednyaks to him as being in their eyes, the source of all evil. The bednyaks had to pay dearly for these accusations, which sometimes cost their very lives.

All of the neighboring villages came to regret that they had not done the same as had been done in Tartaki, where everybody had food to eat and clothes to wear, and there were neither kulaks or bednyaks.

My father regularly used to ask, "Where are the anarchist intellectuals?" As he saw it, it would have been a vital necessity to have had two or three anarchist propagandists in a centrally located town like Zhmerinka, yet there was not one. In the entire province of Podolya, I was the only person with the slightest glimmering of knowledge about anarchism, and I had picked that up from my father.

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE HETMAN AND THE POLES

In October 1918, on the orders of the Hetman Skoropadsky, the foundations were laid for an Ukrainian army of the Black Sea. Its main headquarters were established in the Lissaya Gora barracks in the town of Berdichev. This army was to have been made up of 'volunteers,' but likely volunteers had fled into the forests to escape the punitive detachments from the Zhmerinka, Vinnitsa and Berdichev districts. Be that as it may, upwards of fifty thousand men had been assembled within a fortnight by the end of October. Most came with their own weapons and provisions. Among the officers, over half were sympathetic to the policy of Petliura and Vinnitchenko (Ukrainian nationalist leaders). As for the rank and file, they were ready to make a deal with the devil himself just so long as he would drive out the Austro-Hungarian-German occupation force and Skoropadsky's police.

At the beginning of December Skoropadsky was warned that this Black Sea army was not to be relied upon: from Kiev he promptly ordered its disbandment. That order reached the army in Berdichev in the evening and was scheduled for implementation the next morning. Capitalizing upon the delay, the Ukrainian army, under the command of Petliurist officers, attacked the garrison of Austro-Hungarian-German occupiers by night, disarmed them and seized artillery in Lissaya Gora. They decided then to march upon Vinnitsa in the morning to face down the forty thousand strong punitive detachments based there. That same night, Vassili Grigoryevitch was briefed on developments by a special envoy from Berdichev.

At 2:00 a.m. the tocsin sounded the alarm in Tartaki and within the hour five detachments had formed up, ready to move out. My father announced that at daybreak a Revolutionary Army was due to march against the occupiers and their puppet Skoropadsky, and he proposed to all his volunteers that they come together under his command and join that Revolutionary Army in Berdichev. Almost everybody agreed. I was appointed acting headman of the village Tartaki and placed in charge of a detachment of one hundred men left behind to guard the village.

At dawn, at the head of a detachment of six hundred and fifty men, Vassili Grigorevitch set out for Vinnitsa where he met up with the Revolutionary Army and saw action in the battle that inflicted defeat on the forty thousand men of the punitive detachment. After this initial success, the Revolutionary Army marched on Kiev, near which it was joined by a further detachment of Galician nationalists. At this point Vassili Grigoryevitch told his men: "There ought to be anarchist propagandists right here and right now for all things are possible with these masses."

Of course, Petliura and Vinnitchenko capitalized upon the situation and recruited the masses to their cause. The Bolsheviks were not dozing either and pulled out all the stops with their own propaganda. By the time they reached the outskirts of Kiev, the force had concluded that there was not a lot of difference between Petliura and Skoropadsky. Once Kiev had been captured, friction with the Bolsheviks led to the Revolutionary Army splitting into three factions. One went to the Bolsheviks, one group made its way homewards and the kulak and bourgeois elements stuck by Petliura.

In mid-January Vassili Grigoryevitch returned to Tartaki with his men. At the assembly which followed the homecoming, he announced that the detachment had done its job. "We drove out the worst foe of the toiling people and now we will be able to commit ourselves to peaceable work. At least until they such time as a new enemy appears." The latter was not long in putting in his appearance, in the shape of Deniken and his followers. Fighting ensued, then calm was

restored. In the meanwhile the corn was harvested and threshed, then distributed in equal shares for all.

Towards the end of 1919 the Bolsheviki appeared in the Zhmerinka area and, whilst keeping a low profile, carried on intense propaganda. "Only the Bolsheviks can bestow an earthly paradise upon the people! Only they can see to it that the landowners and their hirelings will not dare to show their faces again in the Ukraine!" In short, they promised the earth.

The peasants' reasoning went like this: "These guys are promising the same thing as the Petliurists and what did we ever get from these? The land no longer belongs to the lords but to the State. For the time being, we will go on working quietly, and getting on with our lives. As for these parasites, they can all go hang."

At the start of 1920 it was the turn of the Poles to put in an appearance, led by Pilsudski, in the company of his pal Petliura. Having occupied the Ukraine, the Poles were forever telling the population: "This region belongs entirely to Poland and you Russian muzhiks are going to work for us." The populace heard this without a word but carefully scrutinized the French equipment of these troopers.

In the autumn of 1920 the Polish-Petliurist armies fled in blind panic, driven out by the rural partisans who thus afforded the Bolsheviks the chance to occupy Kiev, Vinnitsa, Zhmerinka and the entire province of Podolya. At this point Vassili Grigoryevtich decided to dispatch me and a small detachment of men to give the Makhnovists a helping hand. As I took my leave of him, he told me with tears in his eyes that the Makhnovists movement could not hold out, for our men even then had no doubts about what fate the Bolsheviks had in store for them.

THE STRUGGLE AGAINST THE BOLSHEVIKS AND THE ATTEMPT TO LINK UP WITH THE MAKHNOVISTS.

The detachment of partisans from Tartaki passed through the village of Yaroshenko, where it was reinforced by local volunteers, swelling its numbers to 350 men. Henceforth, it was known as the 'Anarcho-Makhnovist Combat Detachment.' The command was taken over by comrade Korshun (a pseudonym) with comrade Matchouliak as adjutant and Bali as clerk.

At the end of August 1920 the detachment set out for Kharkov, having had word that the core of the Makhnovist army was there. The detachment set itself the task of carving a passage through to the Makhnovist army. Outriders stationed in the village of Dashevo informed us that a battalion of Bolshevik infantry was headed for the area, we immediately deployed along the edge of the village forest, overlooking the road leading into it.

A fine drizzle was falling. As the Bolshevik infantry approached, rifle and machine-gun erupted, putting them to flight. The partisans attacked with fixed bayonets and then, as it was getting hard to recognize one another in the increasing gloom, we broke off the engagement and made it to the village of Tarrasch. Drenched and exhausted, we took a head count in the early hours of the morning: twelve missing and ten wounded. Korshun dispatched a scout to the scene of the night battle. Once they learned that ours was a Makhnovist detachment, the local peasants were very pleased and promptly set about finding billets for the wounded who were shared among several homes. The entire district was profoundly hostile to the Bolsheviks.

Pressing on with its journey, the detachment disarmed the militia from the village of Piatigory. The locals gave it the warmest of welcomes. Korshun decided to sit out the winter in the village

of Tetiev, which was fortified for the purpose. His fighters were shared around the village homesteads: they were to lend a hand with the chores and, in the event of the alert being sounded, to muster immediately at an agreed spot to confront the enemy. Thirteen small villages were organized along these lines, each with its own detachment and commander. A five hundred strong Red detachment happened past. All the local partisan detachments swooped on it, encircling and annihilating it in half an hour, moreover, the Bolsheviks did not have the time to crack down on the rebellious peasants, for they were forever having to contend with Nestor Makhno's huge army, as well as numerous partisan detachments.

Korshun managed to establish contact with Makhno's central headquarters. He was issued with the following instructions: "All detachments using my name should operate with complete independence. You are not isolated; numerous other detachments are fighting all over the Ukraine. The time will come when we will all amalgamate into one great army and then we will defeat the enemy."

Throughout the winter, the Bolsheviks tried to winkle out the partisans dug-in in Tetiev, but on each attempt they were repulsed with heavy losses.

In the spring of 1921, our detachment, five hundred strong, set out for Znamenska. Along the way, it repeatedly had to confront Red units and suffered heavy losses as a result. At the end of the summer, we linked up with Belash's Makhnovist detachment in Tatievka. This was soon smashed in Znamenska. Along with two companions I crossed into Poland, and then via Austria and Yugoslavia reached France.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



Ossip Tsebry
Memories of a Makhnovist Partisan
1950

Retrieved on 19th May 2021 from dwardmac.pitzer.edu
First published in Dielo Truda No. 31 (December 1949, pp. 17–19) and No. 32 (March–April 1950, pp. 13–14). Translated by Paul Sharkey. ISBN 9781873605455

usa.anarchistlibraries.net