

Anarchism in Ukraine

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While anarchist movements in many countries developed as a constituent part of broader national liberation movements (e.g., Bulgaria and Georgia), the Ukrainian anarchist movement was characterized by its lack of, and widespread antipathy toward, the notion of nationalism. Long subjugated by landlords, German colonists, and repressive tsarist authorities, the nation's large peasant population tended to distrust all governments and was not nearly as enthusiastic at the prospect of installing one with a Ukrainian variant. The anarchist movement in Ukraine, best exemplified by the anarchist revolutionary figure Nestor Makhno (1889– 1935) and his Makhnovist Revolt of 1919–21, seized upon this volatile population in the political turmoil following the Russian Revolution of 1917 and World War I.

THE MAKHNOVSHCHINA

Makhno's entrance into non-nationalist, revolutionary politics is typical of many Ukrainian radicals who became active after the 1905 Revolution in Russia. Stimulated equally by the revolutionary actions in Russia and the subsequent heavy-handed suppression of political dissidents by the tsarist authorities, Makhno aligned with anarchism, believing that nationalism was essentially a bourgeois political movement aimed at incorporating the masses into a capitalist system of nation-states.

Although anarchosyndicalism found support in the larger cities and industrial centers, the face of Ukrainian anarchism was overwhelmingly anarchocommunist, with its biggest support coming from the peasants who made up the majority of the partisan movement emerging around 1917. In addition, the peasants' support of Makhno suggests they were uninterested in an abstract notion of the "Ukrainian nation" and instead merely wanted to secure land and be free from the repression of landlords, tax collectors, or the tsarist authorities. For this reason, many of the more educated anarchists distrusted the "unorganized" and "impure" anarchism of the peasants/partisans, fearing that their revolutionary exuberance would not be able to be reigned in by the enlightened revolutionary intelligentsia.

After nearly nine years in tsarist prisons, which only consolidated his anarchist beliefs (especially after meeting the Russian anarchist Peter Arshinov, 1887–1937), Makhno returned to his home town of Hulyai Pole in the spring of 1917 to begin organizing the partisan movement as an outgrowth of the anarchocommunist group that had existed there since 1905. Makhno's first objective was to organize expeditions to "expropriate the expropriators" and transfer land owned by the gentry, monasteries, and state over to the peasants who would convert this land into communal space. With the Ukrainian Provisional Government unable to exert an authority in Hulyai Pole, Makhno's early appropriation campaigns saw little bloodshed.

As a result of the German and AustroHungarian occupation of Ukraine in the spring of 1918, Makhno had to flee to Bolshevik Russia, where he met both Peter Kropotkin and Vladimir Lenin. Makhno's experience of Bolshevik Russia disturbed him, and he would later refer to Moscow as the center of the "paper revolution," where the freedoms promised by Lenin existed only as abstract decrees and proclamations rather than in actual social or political freedoms.

When Makhno returned to Hulyai Pole in July 1918, he began to organize the Insurgent Revolutionary Army of Ukraine to combat both the Provisional Government and the occupying Central Powers army. Makhno was able to capitalize on peasant discontent and the ranks of his insurgent army swelled. Using arms appropriated from his enemies, the military wing of the

Makhnovshchina organized on anarchist principles, with elected commanders and mass assemblies held in order to discuss policy and strategy. This model of democratic warfare and military organization would later be adopted by Buenaventura Durruti and the anarchists in Spain during their Revolution.

Makhno proved to be a brilliant military leader, and after military successes he was asked by the Bolsheviks to ally with the Red Army against Anton Ivanovich Denikin's reactionary White Army. The resulting precarious alliance would only last until the spring of 1919, when relations between Makhno's insurgency and the Red Army deteriorated into hostility as a result of the Bolshevik regime's suppression of Russian anarchists and subsequent crushing of them completely by the end of the summer of 1919.

One outcome of this was the influx of Russian and Jewish anarchists to Ukraine, a factor that brought intellectuals to a movement that was largely comprised of uneducated peasants. Prominent Russian anarchists like Arshinov and Vsevolod Mikhailovich Eichenbaum (better known as Voline, 1882–1945) were a part of this wave and became important figures in both the radical intellectual and partisan movements.

Formed in November 1918, and only lasting from 1918 to the end of 1920, the Nabat (Alarm) confederation was the country's largest and most significant explicitly anarchist organization that covered the whole of Ukraine. Nabat was formed at the First Conference of the Confederation of Anarchist Organizations of Ukraine in November 1918. Chapters were then established throughout the country in major cities such as Kharkov, Kiev, and Odessa, each publishing its own self-titled edition of the Nabat newspaper that dealt with anarchist theory and doctrine. Voline was one of the central ideologues within the group and believed that the Nabat was necessary to ideologically unite the Ukrainian anarchists in the contingency of eventual Bolshevik hostility. To this end, the Red Army was boycotted as an authoritarian organization and anarchists were instructed to actively resist it.

Despite worries about the increasingly centralized and authoritarian Bolshevik regime, Nabat had believed that the recent Russian Revolution was just the first stage of a worldwide revolution that was about to spread through the rest of Europe. Nabat's theorists also believed that within the Ukrainian partisan movement there was the seed of a second revolution, seeing it as a spontaneous uprising of the revolutionary proletariat. Despite this faith in the potential of the partisan movement, many within Nabat were concerned that the insurgents lacked theory or sufficient ideological purpose, so its members were then determined to get involved with the Ukrainian insurgency by joining cultural and propaganda detachments in order to maintain the movement's ideological resolve.

Although many Nabat members distrusted the "unruly" anarchism of the Makhnovist movement, by early 1919 Nabat had decided to support the Makhnovshchina, considering it to have the most revolutionary potential of any of the partisan groups. Voline would lead a cultural detachment of Nabat members to join Makhno's Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine. Other members would join combat units, but most did not stay for long, leading Makhno to label these urban anarchists "tourists."

The Nabat organization wanted Makhno to establish a permanent territorial base in order to engage in anarchist social experimentation through the creation of permanent communes. Makhno claimed that his type of guerilla warfare was premised on constant movement and that a permanent base was not only a luxury, but often made poor strategic sense as well. This would be only one among many of the disagreements between the Nabat activists and Makhno's forces.

Although the groups worked extremely well together, there remained a disconnect between the “academic” Nabat anarchists and the “soldier” Makhnovshchina.

In mid-1920, Makhno formed another alliance with the Bolsheviks against White forces led by Wrangel. This alliance with the Bolsheviks caused many within Nabat to withdraw their support for Makhnovists. Makhno, on the other hand, claimed that the writers and activists in Nabat could maintain the luxury of their ideological purity since they were not involved in combat and subject to casualties. Tactically, however, the alliance with the Bolsheviks proved to be a serious mistake, since after the defeat of Wrangel they quickly turned on the Makhnovshchina. On November 26, 1920, the Bolsheviks coordinated their attack on the Makhnovshchina power base in Hulyai Pole with a countrywide roundup of anarchists. Voline and many others were arrested at the Nabat conference in Kharkov. Although Voline would secure his release in the following months, many Nabat members and anarchists disappeared in Soviet prisons and concentration camps. Nabat was utterly destroyed by the end of 1920, and its allies in the Makhnovshchina would only hold out until the spring of 1921.

AFTER MAKHNO

Only a minor underground anarchist movement existed in Ukraine after the defeat of the Makhnovshchina. It would resurface briefly during World War II in support of the partisan units fighting both Stalin and the Germans, but, for the most part, the anarchist movement was dormant in the face of a hostile Soviet regime.

By 1987, with the glasnost-era Soviet Union relaxing its suppression of political dissidents, anarchocommunist and Makhno study groups began reviving the anarchist movement in Ukraine. Outside of simply coordinating and networking, the main task of the Ukrainian anarchists was to rehabilitate the anarchist tradition in the face of Soviet historical revisionism, which depicted the Makhnovshchina as either murdering bandits or bourgeois nihilists. Despite the support of the emerging environmentalist movement and the modest base of some 500 anarchists across the country, the Ukrainian anarchist movement largely collapsed due to internal problems only a few years later. By 1993, the “second-wave” Ukrainian anarchist movement was finished.

Despite its strong history and tradition, the Ukrainian anarchist movement has not experienced the same revival in recent years witnessed in other post-Soviet countries such as Bulgaria or Czechoslovakia. Although smaller anarchocommunist and syndicalist groups have formed throughout the country, they have yet to create the vibrant anarchist and activist scene of other countries within the region.

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