

An unsolved mystery: the "diary of Makhno's wife"

V.N. Litvinov

1990

In recent times the mass media have been paying more and more attention to the history of the Makhnovist movement, often displaying a lack of competence in its efforts. Thus, in one of the March episodes of the popular television program "Vzglyad" ["Point of View"] the so-called "Diary of Makhno's Wife" was mentioned as a valuable source for the history of the Makhnovshchina. The article below is devoted to the origin of this document.

First off, let's take a look at the content of the "Diary". Almost two thirds of it is dedicated to a description of Makhno's "drunkenness". Typical is the passage from March 7: "While still in Novoselya the Bat'ko began to drink. In Varsarovka he continued drinking along with his deputy Karetnik. In Varsarovka the Bat'ko began to act foolish – he swore indecently at the whole street, screamed like a madman, and even cursed women and small children in a hut. Finally he got on a horse and rode to Gulyai-Pole. Along the road he almost fell into the mud... . We arrived in Gulyai-Pole. Here, under orders of our drunken commanders Karetnik and the Bat'ko, we began to act insufferably. Our cavalry troops began to beat any former partisans they ran into on the street, with whips and rifle butts." [All citations from the "Diary of Makhno's Wife" are given according to R. P. Eideman's book "The Struggle with Kulak Insurgency and Banditism", Kharkov (1921).] Most of the other passages are written in the same key. This creates the impression that during the period of time covered by the diary (February 19 – March 29), an intoxicated Makhno spent his time roaming about a small region of the insurgent territory: Gulyai-Pole – Velikaya Mikhaylovka – Gavrilovka, harassing the peaceful population and shooting prisoners of war and Soviet civil servants.

In reality, this diary is very far from the truth. In fact, beginning in early February 1920, Makhno and his army carried out a series of raids throughout Ekaterinoslav, Aleksandrovsk, and Donetsk gubernias [see D. Lebedev, Conclusions and Lessons from Three Years of the Anarcho-Makhnovshchina, Kharkov (1921), p. 27]. All through February the Makhnovist region was inundated with Red troops, including the 42nd Rifle Division and the Latvian & Estonian Division – in total at least 20,000 soldiers. Returning from a raid at the end of February, Makhno really did spend the month of March in his own territory. However he had no possibility of going on a drinking binge as the diary suggests since the Insurgent Army was being pressured by twice as many Red troops as in February. The Reds packed around six brigades into this

region. The Insurgent Army carried on incessant battles with the enemy. And since Makhno, as a rule, directed military operations himself it is doubtful that under such stressful conditions he could still go on "binges" for whole days. But this is not the whole story, for the diary entries are not in accord with the stringent rules concerning drunkenness which were in effect in the Insurgent region. We can make reference to a quite unambiguous document – Order #1 of the Revolutionary-Insurgent Army of August 5, 1919. Thus, in paragraph 5 of this order it is directly stated: "Drunkenness is considered a crime. An even worse crime is for an insurgent of the Revolutionary Army to be seen in a non-sober state in public." (P. Arshinov, History of the Makhnovist Movement, p. 214). Such an attitude towards drunkenness goes back to a tradition which took root among the Zaporozhian Cossacks of this region, for whom there was no more shameful offence than drunkenness during military operations. Could Makhno really brazenly ignore his own orders during the developments of 1920?

And the diary entry for March 7, cited above, is really quite improbable. As a matter of fact, March 7 was nine days after the death of his dearly beloved brother Savva, a date which is especially sorrowful for relatives of the deceased. Even people who have sunk to the lowest level of human existence would be unlikely to get drunk on this day. It's also highly unlikely that Makhno, who wasn't an alcoholic and, moreover, possessed an iron will, would taunt fellow-villagers. Thus both as to form and content the notes about Makhno's "drunkenness" are an attempt by the author of the so-called "Diary" to blacken the name of Nestor Makhno which is why it could not have been written by Makhno's wife, a dedicated and active Makhnovist of that time.

The same applies to Makhno's "war crimes". According to the logic of the "Diarist", it follows that in the Insurgent region mass shootings of Soviet civil servants and Red Army soldiers were carried out on a wide scale without any kind of trial or investigation. A prime example is the entry from March 17: "We were told that our troops had captured 40 prisoners. We went into the village and saw a bunch of people sitting on the ground; then some of them stood up and got undressed. These were the prisoners. They were getting undressed for the shooting... . When they had taken off their clothes and shoes, they were ordered to tie one another's hands. They were all young, healthy-looking Russian boys. We moved back a bit and stopped. When the prisoners were all undressed, they started to lead them away one by one to be shot. After several of them had been shot in this way, the rest of them were lined up and mowed down by a machine gun. One fellow tried to run, but he was overtaken and cut down with a sabre." (R. P. Eideman, op. cit.) Could this really have happened?

Being quite familiar with the peculiarities of the Makhnovist "justice system", I boldly assert that this diary entry is a falsification. On this matter Makhno himself made a definite statement in 1925: "In the Makhnovist movement shootings were not the norm. And if, nevertheless, they did find their repugnant place in the scheme of things, it was not on the basis of my orders only. There were cases, for example, when a committee of inquiry investigated the activities of a prisoner who was a counter-intelligence agent, a commissar, or a commander from either the Red or White forces and against whom there was evidence that they had belonged to one of a punitive detachment of these armies. Such detachments followed us and inflicted reprisals on the population which supported us. When the commission had doubts about the evidence, they would ask for the opinion of the staff of the Movement, and sometimes they would ask for my personal opinion... ." (see the Chicago Russian newspaper "Dawn", No. 480 for December 1925 – article by Makhno "Concerning Yelensky's 'Reponses' about the Makhnovist Movement").

This statement is not just empty rhetoric. In the Makhnovist region, actually, there was no system of mass shootings and, if there were isolated cases they were, as a rule, preceded by a serious investigation carried out by a specially created Commission for Anti-Makhnovist Activities. According to Victor Fedorovich Belash, chief of the Operations Section of the Insurgent Army who was taken prisoner by the Reds in the spring of 1921, "This Commission was set the following task: to investigate and punish in a fair manner persons of the other camp, i.e. anti-Makhnovists. Red Army soldiers and commanders taken prisoner had to pass through the hands of this Commission, which was associated with the cultural-educational section. Members of that section spoke at meetings and agitated among the prisoners. Concerning Soviet employees, the Commission took the initiative to win over the accused." [Archive of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Ukraine (Kiev), Fond 5, 1/332/156]. This same Belash noted that even in the worst time for the revolutionary army, namely at the beginning of 1920, "In the majority of cases rank-and-file Red Army soldiers were set free" (ibid). Of course Belash, as a colleague of Makhno's, was likely to idealize the punishment policies of the Batko. However, the facts bear witness that Makhno really did release "in all four directions" captured Red Army soldiers. This is what happened at the beginning of February 1920, when the insurgents disarmed the 10,000-strong Estonian Division in Gulyai-Pole [A. Buysky, "The Red Army on the Internal Front", Gosizdat (1927), p. 52]. And so it was in the autumn of the same year near the village of Andreyevko of the former Berdyansk uyezd, when the Makhnovists took at least 1,200 Red Army soldiers prisoner [Ashakhmanov, "Makhno and His Tactics", Red Commander (1921), No. 24-25, p. 4-5].

To me, as an historian of the Makhnovist movement, not one case is known when Makhno deviated from this general rule. Concerning those events which have passed into the official historiography, for example, the "annihilation" by the Makhnovists of the whole staff of the Berdyansk Cheka in the autumn of 1920 or the security officers of the Petrograd division of military students at the Levitsky khutor in the December of the same year, upon investigation it turns out that a completely obvious distortion of the facts has occurred. In both cases the Red soldiers died in battle mainly because they did not want to give themselves up as prisoners. The real wife of Makhno was herself a member of the Commission for Anti-Makhnovist Activities and, naturally, knew about the existing procedure of investigation. And she could hardly depict in her diary the shooting of 40 Red Army soldiers by the Makhnovist Kontrrazvedka without any kind of inquiry.

But who then was the real author of the diary?

Doubts about the authenticity of the diary of the "wife of Makhno" are transformed into complete certainty once we begin to familiarize ourselves with the history of its appearance in the Soviet press and with whom the Soviet authorities originally "pronounced" to be the wife of Makhno...

At the beginning of 1921 a brochure by R. P. Eideman was published in Kharkov, entitled "The Struggle with Kulak Rebellion and Banditism". Starting in the autumn of 1920 and all of the following year, Eideman was commander of the rear area of the Southern Front, in other words, he was assigned responsibility for the struggle with insurgency and "banditism". As a matter of fact, the timely brochure was actually a comprehensive manual on fighting the Makhnovists. And it was here that the notorious "Diary of Makhno's Wife" made its first appearance in print. "On March 29," wrote Eideman, "during the destruction of the Makhnovist band in Gulyai-Pole by units of the 42nd Division, Feodora Lukyanovna Gayenko, the wife of Nestor Makhno, was

killed... . In her knapsack was found a diary in which she had made entries from February 19 to March 28, 1920... ” [Op. cit., p. 46.] However, it was well known to anyone with the slightest acquaintance with the insurgent movement (and one assumes it would be part of Eideman’s job to know this) that Makhno’s wife was Galina Andreyevna Kuzmenko, and not Feodora Gayenko.

The contemporary Soviet historian S. N. Semanov considers that a simple ”error” occurred here [”The Makhnovshchina and Its Downfall”, *Voprosy istorii* (Questions of History), No. 9, (1966), p. 53]. However, this version of Eideman’s strange ignorance is by no means proven by Semanov. It seems to me that what we have here is not an ”error”, but a deliberate deception. It’s obvious that the higher-ups in the Ukrainian Communist government very much desired the author of the diary to be Feodora Lukyanovna Gayenko. And this desire was so persistent that even in 1928, when no one had any more doubts that Makhno’s wife from the summer of 1919 was Galina Andreyevna Kuzmenko – even at this time there were Soviet historians who, without batting an eye, affirmed that Makhno’s wife was F. Gayenko and G. Kuzmenko was simply a frontline mistress [V. V. Rudnev, *The Makhnovshchina, Kharkov* (1928), p. 18]. Clearly it is rather difficult to explain this doggedness by a simple error of memory, not to mention the fact that the ”Diary of Makhno’s Wife”, although it was discovered, according to Eideman, at the end of March 1920, saw the light only a whole year later, in February 1921. It’s also curious that in December 1920 Eideman published an extensive article with the same title as his brochure in the journal *The Revolutionary Front*, the organ of the Southern and Southwestern Fronts (Nos. 15-16). And what do you know, in this work there isn’t a word about the ”Diary of Makhno’s Wife”! Why did Eideman several months later ”remember” the diary and ascribe it to Gayenko? We can find the answer if we look at the personality of Makhno’s real wife and, moreover, how she shed light on these questions when she was asked about them.

Galina Andreyevna Kuzmenko was born in 1896 in the city of Kiev, into the family of a village police constable. Soon after her birth the family moved to the village of Peschanye Brody, Elisavetgrad uyezd, Ekaterinoslav gubernia, where her father had been transferred. Shortly before the beginning of World War I, Galina Andreyevna graduated from high school and completed the program at a teachers’ college in Kiev. She was then sent to teach Russian and history at the Alexander II High School in Gulyai-Pole. The scope of the cultural-educational work carried on by the insurgents fascinated her and already in the spring of 1919 she saw in the insurgent movement the possibility of the spiritual renewal of Ukraine. Kuzmenko played a rather important role as a member of the collegium of the Makhnovist Kontrrazvedka (counterintelligence service). She was chosen for this position because of her strong character, decisiveness, organizational abilities, penetrating mind and, last but not least, her personal relationship with Makhno who was very attached to her. In 1921 Galina Andreyevna left with Makhno’s detachment for Rumania. Then, after Makhno’s escape from a Bucharest prison, she lived for some time with her husband in a refugee camp in Poland. It was here in 1923 that a daughter, Elena, was born to the couple. In December 1923, together with a group of Russian anarchists, Galina appeared before a Polish court on a charge of preparing, along with Makhno and organs of the Cheka, a military conspiracy against the Polish government. But the court vindicated the Russian anarchists, and Galina together with her husband moved on to the free city of Danzig. In 1926 they arrived in Paris. From this time on they withdrew from political activity, and after the death of her husband in 1934 Galina made attempts to return to her native land. Working as a librarian in the Slavic Department of the French National Library, she, according to some sources, collaborated with secret services transmitting information to the USSR. During World War II Galina together

with her daughter were forcibly conveyed to Germany to work. After the end of the war, Galina and her daughter were handed over to the Soviet government as displaced persons, and in 1946 they were tried in Kiev together with Shkuro and Krasnov. Galina was charged with "counter-revolutionary activity" during the civil war, and Elena with collaborating with the Germans. At that time there appeared in the Soviet press news about the trial of Krasnov and Shkuro. It was decided not to publicize the trial of Makhno's family. Relatives who were living at that time in Gulyai-Pole learned about their fate only after Galina was released in 1963. From that date until her death in the early 1980's she lived with her daughter in Dzhambul, Kazakh SSR. In 1977 she paid a visit to Gulyai-Pole.

To the question about the authorship of the "Diary of Makhno's Wife" she answered as follows. When in the winter of 1920 units of the Red Army carried on warfare with the insurgents, Nestor Makhno assigned to her and a teacher from Tsarekonstantinovka, Feodora Gayenko, the task of keeping a careful record of all the facts of the Red Terror in relation to the local population. In such a way, according to Makhno's thinking, this diary would be his own bill of indictment against the punitive politics of the Reds in the insurgent region. Galina carried out this order, regularly making entries in the diary of information which was of interest to the Bat'ko. Concerning diary entries of the contrary sort, i.e. about Makhnovist terror and the moral degradation of the Bat'ko, she expressed herself very cautiously: she said she didn't remember (!) what she wrote in the diary. And she immediately added that it was completely possible that such notes were made by Fanya (Gayenko), but she herself was unable to say anything definite about this. If she could see the actual diary, then it would be easy to determine by the handwriting what had been written by her, and what by Feodora Gayenko.

According to the testimony of eyewitnesses, Galina, despite her 83 years, possess a very sharp memory, so it's hard to imagine that she didn't remember what she had written in the diary. Furthermore, let's remember that already in the early 1920's there were stormy debates raging about the authenticity of the diary, debates which she, of course, was well aware of. Such things, especially if they happen when one is young, are not forgotten.

This "gap" in Galina's memory can be explained very simply: having spent 20 years as a convict, in old age she obviously did not want to complicate her own life and that of her daughter¹ by telling stories which contradicted the official historiography.

Most probably the "Diary of Makhno's Wife" was fabricated inside the walls of the All-Ukrainian Cheka, albeit in a terrible rush which is why the falsification is very crude.

Above all, the "Diary" published in the Soviet press is completely out of sync with the goal set for Galina and Feodora by Makhno. Instead of data about the Red Terror we have before us an indictment of the insurgent movement. The material was chosen in such a way and set forth with such a mass of details calculated to "embroider" the story that suspicions naturally rise as to its genuineness.

Well, judge for yourself, could Makhno's wife, set the task of writing a collective diary really compose the words "Nestor got drunk and violently forced himself on me!". In order to write these words about such an intimate matter it would be necessary to discard feminine dignity once and for all, as if the writer was not Makhno's wife but some camp follower! At the same time it could not have been written by Feodora Gayenko because the diary, (a) was kept in common

¹ In 1977 Galina had to petition the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR with a complaint about the persecution at work of Elena Nesterovna.

with Makhno's real wife, G. A. Kuzmenko, and (b) could easily be accessed by the Bat'ko himself because the "Diary" was written openly and stored in Gayenko's knapsack. It's not hard to imagine how he would have reacted to such an entry.

In light of all that has been said Galina's statement that she didn't remember what she had written in the "Diary" but that if the original was shown to her she could determine what she wrote acquires special significance. This makes sense because in our publications there has never been one photograph of the original of this "Diary" with which it would be possible to carry out a graphological analysis.

It's possible that the author of the published part of the "Diary" was Feodora Gayenko which would explain why the historians of the 1920's insisted with such stubbornness that she was the wife of Nestor Makhno. In this case the handwriting in the "Diary" would have to be Gayenko's. But then the questions immediately arises: under what conditions did she make her entries?

It's quite clear that it would be impossible to write this diary openly under the conditions of campaign life when everything took place in full view of Makhno and his wife. It would also be impossible secretly because the risk would be too great of getting caught with material which compromised Makhno, especially since the "Diary" was stored in an accessible location.

Consequently we must assume one of two possible variants of events:

1. Gayenko was not killed on March 29, but was wounded or in some other way was captured and turned over to the Special Section of the 18th Division;
2. Gayenko really was killed and in her knapsack was found the "Diary" with her and Galina's entries about the Red Terror in the insurgent region.

If Gayenko was killed, then the "Diary" is exclusively a creation of the Cheka and can hardly serve as a reliable source for the history of the Makhnovshchina. However there is a serious basis to assume that Gayenko was not killed but was captured and collaborated with the Cheka, not immediately, but at the beginning of 1921 when she was finally convinced in the downfall of the Makhnovist movement.

This would clearly explain the fact that the propaganda organs refer to the "Diary of Makhno's Wife" only from the spring of 1921 although the need for such a reference was also more than sufficient in 1920. Let us recall M. V. Frunze's injunction in the autumn of 1920 to discredit the heroic myths surrounding Makhno and depict him as a drunkard and debauchee. Persistent rumours circulated in the former insurgent region about Gayenko – that she was lived quietly in Kamish-Zare where she was often sighted into the mid-1960's.

It's quite possible that some entries of the "Diary" actually reflect real facts about the Makhnovist terror but one must acknowledge that under contemporary conditions of source study it is practically impossible to determine which of the entries are genuine. But even if it were possible to do so, there is no doubt that the diary entries depict Makhnovist terror with an extraordinarily biased slant because the entries completely ignore the practice of Red Terror in the insurgent region. It's obvious that thoughtful historians recognize little in the way of informative significance in the "Diary of Makhno's Wife" because, in analyzing the problem of Makhnovist Terror, they must attempt to view it objectively. Here it is relevant to mention the book of the Leningrad historian I. Ya. Trifonov, "Classes and Class Struggle in the USSR at the Beginning of NEP" (published by Leningrad State University, 1964, Part 1). The author tries to apply a statistical method

to the investigation of Makhnovist terror and introduces data according to which in the course of two months in Zaporozhya and Poltava gubernias the Makhnovists killed up to 250 food requisitioning agents, 117 policemen, and over 190 nezamozhniks (members of the Committees of Poor Peasants) [p. 127].

Such an approach is, of course, more objective than simply appealing to the readers' emotions by introducing isolated, picturesque examples. However, despite its scientific trappings, this approach also does not solve the problem.

Disgraceful storage practices and World War II caused irreplaceable losses to Ukrainian archives so that now it is hardly possible to recreate a complete statistical picture of the Makhovist terror and compare it with the Red terror. Trifonov himself mostly refers to official summaries of various kinds issued in the 1920's. Such a method is, of course, not very scientific.

We have just mentioned Trifonov's figures which he gives for a two month period. If we extrapolate them for a whole year we come up with a figure of around 3,500 victims for a whole year. And now here is Arshinov's data about the victims of the Red terror only through the institution of hostage-taking in the course of 1920: "According to a very conservative calculation during the time of this practice by the Bolshevik authorities in various parts of Ukraine, up to 200,00 peasants and workers were shot and maimed." (P. A. Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement*, p. 160).

This figure is for the whole of Ukraine and if we apply it proportionally to Ekaterinoslav gubernia we come up with a figure of not less than 20,000 victims. One could object that Arshinov has his own axe to grind. But no more so than those people who drew up the summaries about the Makhnovist terror.

It must be emphasized that with contemporary state of the source base for the Makhnovist movement, any statistical summary is a sterile exercise with unconnected figures. A different approach is necessary in principle, namely we must first of all review the problem of terror, firstly, from the point of view of its socio-economic content and, secondly, from the point of view of those goals and methods which comprise its essence.

The Anarchist Library (Mirror)
Anti-Copyright



V.N. Litvinov
An unsolved mystery: the "diary of Makhno's wife"
1990

<https://libcom.org/library/unsolved-mystery-diary-makhnos-wife>
First published in the journal Obshchina [Society], Confederation of Anarcho-Syndicalists,
Moscow (1990), No. 43, p. 6-9.

usa.anarchistlibraries.net