

Fate of the Makhnovist

The story of Osip Tsebriy

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On August 28, 1921, Nestor Makhno, with few remaining comrades, was forced to leave Ukraine, never to return again. The remnants of the legendary peasant army, led by anarchists, crossed the Dniester and ended up in exile. The heroic epic, which lasted about four years, ended. Among the Makhnovist partisans who found themselves abroad was Osip Tsebriy.

Osip's father, Vasily Grigorievich, a peasant in the village of Tartaki, Zhmerinsky district, Kiev province of the Russian Empire, having become a soldier, met anarchists in Petrograd and became a staunch Bakuninist. Upon coming back, he enjoyed great prestige and respect among fellow villagers. During the 1917 revolution, the villagers, at his suggestion on a general meeting, decided to unite in a commune and work the land together.

After the arrival of German-Austrian troops and the return of the landowners, the Tartaki peasants created a partisan self-defense detachment which in turn, participated in the defeat of Skoropadsky, defended their autonomy against all the authorities that tore and tormented Ukraine. In the fall of 1920, a small detachment from Tartaki under the command of Osip Tsebriy was sent to the aid of the Makhnovists. Near the village of Yaroshenko, they merged with local volunteers in the "Fighting detachment of the Anarcho-Makhnovists" under the command of Korchun. On the way to Kharkov near the village of Dachevo, the partisans fought the red infantry. With support of the local population, the detachment continued operations and disarmed police in the village of Pyatigory. They stayed for the winter in the village of Tetev. Peasants sheltered soldiers who in turn, helped them in agricultural works in the fields. The partisans once even managed to defeat a detachment of red infantry; 500 men strong. Contact was established with the main headquarters of Nestor Makhno. In the spring of 1921 the detachment, including up to half a thousand partisans, headed for Znamenka, engaging in battles with numerous red formations on the way and suffering heavy losses. At the end of summer, in Tatievka, he joined up with the Makhnovist detachment of Belash. After the defeat of the movement, Osip, along with two comrades, escaped to Poland, then to Austria and Yugoslavia.

In 1922 he ended up in Bosnia. Fate brought him to the village of Rosavats, inhabited by Rusyns — migrants from Galicia. At a general gathering of residents, he volunteered to work as a teacher; the peasants gladly accepted his offer. In November, he began teaching 85 children, and in the evenings he worked with adults for an hour and a half. After Christmas, he asked the residents to attend a general assembly and offered to help them organize their local economy.

Osip explained to the peasants that they were in poverty because everyone works alone. “Your area is very rich,” he said, “fertile land, black soil, a lot of prunes, mushrooms ..., a lot of wild hogs and fluffy foxes... Just a kilometer and a half there is a good place for a mill plus, you can even install a small turbine to generate electricity... There is a good place for a brick factory... In order for your labor not to be wasted, we must form a “communal” economy.”

Residents agreed with Osip’s proposals; as a first measure, it was decided to jointly make a bunch of cages for catching wild hogs. Osip helped the peasants to obtain documents for the land, from which it turned out that the village possessed another 850 hectares of public land.

Many peasants complained about lazy bums and drunkards. To their amazement, the Ukrainian comunard offered them a solution. He brought traps to the village for hunting foxes. “It is necessary to choose two people who would go hunting,” Osip recalled. “I suggested that the community appoint a younger guy, who loved chasing foxes, and an elderly “bum” who just sits around as his assistant. Before entrusting them with this work, I took them for 2 weeks for training. First of all, we dressed and fed them. Within two weeks I taught them how to work the traps. The young guy was taught how to handle a hunting rifle. The older man was given the responsibility to skin the animals and take carcasses to the soap factory... In three months, the hunters handed over 1,500 fox pelts and 250 kg of badger lard to the community. With the proceeds, the community acquired a steam mill and a winnowing fan.”

When a small distillery was built, Osip offered to appoint three drunks to work there. They turned out to be great workers and stopped drinking altogether. In the same way, when a thief who tried to break in at night was appointed a watchman, in the end, he fully justified the trust the community showed in him!

In just five years the commune built and/ or acquired: one-class rural school, a cooperative named “Makhno” with 80 workers, a house for the elderly and children (for the period of field-work), a restaurant – hotel for 80 people, a flour mill, a sawmill, a brick factory, a bakery, meat and sausage manufactory, a workshop for drying fruits and mushrooms, a barn for 60 thoroughbred Swiss cows, a cheese dairy, a tannery and a shoemaker, a smithy, carpentry and mechanical workshop, a large barn and a poultry house; a tractor, a thresher, a binder, and other machines were purchased. 400 people from other villages and districts joined the Rosavats’ commune. Overall it inhabited 500 people. Every week a fair was organized, which attracted people from all over the area. The community members built a 15 kilometer road connecting the village with the highway to Banja Luka; 2 trucks were purchased. The construction of residential buildings for comunards began. There were no lazy people in the commune; everyone was dressed, and well-fed. There was a public house with three rooms. On the wall, Osip Cebriy hung the saying by Élisée Reclus: “Full harmony in the life of our planet will not be established until people unite into one large family. To become truly beautiful, the earth, like a loving mother, is waiting for the moment when her children will embrace fraternally and will conclude a great alliance of free peoples among themselves.”

In 1927, Russian White Guards with their priests unexpectedly raided the village. Wrangel officers received police posts in the district. They began forcing the residents to build a church, but they refused. Then the authorities arrested Osip and took him to a prison in Belgrade. After 8 days, he was expelled from Yugoslavia, then illegally made his way to Austria, and from there, under a contract, went to France.

As Osip later found out, residents tried to protest his expulsion, but were severely beaten. The community was forced to divide property among its members and go into hiding. But from time

to time the former communards hit back at their tormentors. One fine day the priest and two monks were found dead (they “ate wrong mushrooms”), a week later the newly built church burned down. The Tito partisans finally finished off the community; the Soviet consulate invited residents to move to Ukraine ...

When Nazi troops invaded Ukraine in 1941, Osip decided it was time to act. He managed to travel to the Kiev region and here in 1942 he created a partisan detachment, independent from the Stalinist, Nazis, and from the Ukrainian nationalists. Upon arriving, he helped the Ukraine peasantry to organize their own “Green Army”, which, like the army of Makhno, fought against the German troops and against the Red Army, for their rights, for bread and freedom. Osip Tsebriy, who has always declared himself a Makhnovist, tried to revive the glorious traditions of Ukrainian anarchism.

Unfortunately, we do not know the details of the actions of his partisan detachment. It is only known that in the winter of 1943 it was defeated by the Nazis, and the peasants hid Osip for several months. In the end, he was captured, but apparently not identified. This allowed him to avoid death. He was thrown into the concentration camp. Osip regained his freedom only in 1945 when the camp was liberated by the Western allies.

In 1946 he emigrated to the United States where he lived to a ripe old age. He wrote his memoirs for magazines titled “The Federation of Russian Anarcho-Communist Groups in the USA and Canada” and “Delo Truda – Awakening” until the last year of its publication in 1958.

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