

# **“Destroy the Makhno movement”**

**The Bolsheviks’ secret war against Nestor Makhno and his insurgents**

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It is hard to say precisely what kind of relationships the well-known peasants' otaman Nestor Makhno had with the communists, because they were much too complicated and contradictory. On the one hand, Makhno and his insurgents were the Bolsheviks' allies several times (four, according to our estimates). On the other hand, their alliance was inevitably replaced by the cruel bloody confrontation between the Red Army and Makhno's forces, which was an important element of the civil war in Ukraine.

The history of this confrontation is familiar to our readers. But there also was a secret war that the communists waged against Makhno and Makhnovites that is not so well-known.

## **AN ALLY AND AN ENEMY**

It is quite obvious that the Bolsheviks would never have started either an open or a secret war against Makhno and his insurgents if they had not perceived them as enemies. So let us try to answer the tough question: When did the communists start viewing Makhno not as an ally but an enemy that had to be removed at any cost and as soon as possible?

We know that in December of 1918, when Makhno jointly with the Bolsheviks fought against Skoropadsky's forces, Petliurites, and the White Guards, some of the Bolsheviks began to view Makhno and his men as ordinary bandits who did not care about the real interests of the working class. However, I think that the highly familiar image of Makhno as a counterrevolutionary began to take shape later in February–March of 1919. Ironically, it all began when Makhno's brigade, which was a part of the Red Army at the time and was subordinated to the division commander Pavlo Dybenko, achieved a series of stunning victories over the White Guards in the south-west.

In the Bolsheviks' periodicals at that time there were many articles about the military successes of Makhno and his army. Despite their sincere respect for the brigade commander, the communists developed genuine anxiety over Makhno, who had already become a widely-known military leader. They were primarily concerned about the fact that neither Makhno nor the Red Army men under his command did not fit with the state system of a new, communist Ukraine, which was being created by the Bolsheviks.

In February 1919 in his speech at the 2<sup>nd</sup> Congress of Peasants and Insurgents Makhno plainly said that he totally accepted the communists as allies but at the same time he rejected any of their attempts to monopolize Ukraine, i.e., their intention to establish the dictatorship of the Communist Party. Later on March 7, 1919, the Military Revolutionary Council in the Makhno-controlled region clearly defined the principles of social organization there: a multiparty system, Cheka-free zone, and self-government. This type of approach practically ruled out the guiding and leading role of the Communist Party in the large territory controlled by Makhno. That was the time when the communist leaders of Ukraine and Russia realized that Makhno was not so much a heroic division commander as a dangerous political rival who could cause serious trouble in the future.

## **THE BEGINNING OF THE SECRET WAR**

One day in March 1919 in the city of Berdiansk in southern Ukraine a meeting between the brigade commander Makhno and his immediate superior, the division commander Dybenko, was to take place. However, a few days before the meeting Makhno's counterintelligence

warned him that Dybenko was going to Berdiansk to arrest and maybe even kill the commander. Makhno heeded the warning and took every security measure. The Makhno-controlled garrison of Berdiansk was on red alert, while Makhno's personal guardsmen received a special-alert order.

The meeting, however, had a peaceful and friendly mode. Makhno even held a military parade in honor of Dybenko when he arrived. But before Dybenko had to leave, Makhno asked him point-blank whether he had any evil intentions against the Makhno movement. Dybenko assured Makhno that he was his true friend and if there would be any plot against the brigade commander and his people, he would be the first to let Makhno know about it.

Soon after that the division commander had to go from Berdiansk and Makhno was left with uneasy thoughts. Maybe his counterintelligence agents had made a mistake when they reported that Dybenko conspired against him. Or maybe the division commander indeed had such a perfidious plan but for certain reasons he decided not to carry it out. Makhno was unable to answer this complicated question then.

In my opinion, Dybenko indeed had this kind of intention (Makhno's agents were extremely good at gathering reliable information), but decided against it when he found out through his secret agents in Makhno's milieu, that Makhno knew about his plan and had prepared well for their meeting.

However, the episode with Dybenko was only the first phase of the communists' secret war against Makhno, which then started escalating rapidly. Within a month a new Bolshevik plot against Makhno emerged. The Bolshevik Padalka, a commander of one of the big Makhno-led detachments, became the key figure of the plot. Practically all of the Bolshevik commissars who were in Makhno's brigade became Padalka's fellow conspirators.

According to their plan, Padalka's detachment was to attack Huliai-Pole from the side of the village of Pokrovske and rout Makhno's forces, which were concentrated there. At the same time, the commissars had to strike from the rear to capture Makhno and his closest comrades-in-arms. There is evidence that the mastermind behind this plot was the Soviet government of Ukraine and, in particular, People's Commissar for Military Affairs Mykhailo Podvoisky.

When Makhno's rivals started fulfilling their plan, Makhno was away from Huliai-Pole, directing his soldiers' actions on the Denikin front. Nevertheless, his faithful counterintelligence agents again managed to warn him about the danger. Without the slightest delay Makhno used the airplane that he had to his disposal to get to Huliai-Pole. With his quick response he nipped the insurgency in the bud and the commissars were arrested. Later, however, they were released on the urgent requests of the Soviet Army commander in Ukraine Volodymyr Antonov-Ovseienko.

Incidentally, Antonov-Ovseienko managed to stop the mechanism of the Bolsheviks' secret war against Makhno and his soldiers for a while. He personally met Makhno in Huliai-Pole and after that he reported positively on Makhno and his brigade. Lenin played a certain part of his own in this affair, calling on his comrades-in-arms to be diplomatic with Makhno's army. Surely, the lull on this secret front could only be short-lived. Soon a new player entered the anti-Makhno group — Lev Trotsky, head of Russia's Revolutionary Military Council.

## BEGIN LIQUIDATION!

It should be mentioned that Trotsky's had an ambiguous attitude to the peasant insurgent movement in general and to the Makhno movement in particular. On the one hand, he acknowledged the revolutionary character of the insurgent movement of the time, when insurgents fought against various counterrevolutionary regimes. On the other hand, he made a straightforward statement that after the working class and its party would come to power, the insurgents and their leaders would transform from a revolutionary into a counterrevolutionary power. Considering the fact that by the late May 1919 the Bolsheviks controlled the greater part of Ukraine, Makhno and his people fell into the category of counterrevolutionaries, who had to be destroyed, the sooner the better.

As a person who is convinced that only the communist Bolsheviks were able to represent the interests of workers and peasants, Trotsky couldn't think any different. The Makhno-controlled region, which was free from the Communist Party dictatorship, surplus appropriation system, and the Cheka, was an eyesore to the head of the Revolutionary Military Council. In the second half of May 1919, under the influence of Trotsky and his supporters, the Leninist leadership passed a secret resolution to destroy the Makhno movement.

On May 25, 1919, the same kind of a resolution, also a secret one, was adopted by the government of the Ukrainian SSR. The first paragraph read: "liquidate the Makhno movement as soon as possible." This required several measures: forced incorporation of the Makhnovites into the Red Army; immediate destruction of anyone who mounted resistance, and, above all, Makhno's commanders; arresting and court-martialing Makhno and his closest aides.

It was clear that to carry out this large-scale punitive campaign, a fairly big military force was needed. It did not take the Bolsheviks long to realize that at time when the Red Army was fighting against numerous enemies inside and outside the country, from Admiral Kolchak to otaman Zeleny, they were unable to muster this kind of force. Soon, the Red Army strategists came up with an original plan to give the leading role in the liquidation of the Makhno movement to the White Army.

Our readers may have a reasonable question: Did the Soviet army and division commanders realize that getting rid of Makhno's brigade would lead to a turnaround on the front in favor of the White Army? They were certainly aware of this. But in order to understand the logic of the decision they made, we need to take into account that by the time the Bolshevik leaders and military commanders had learned to differentiate their enemies.

Denikin's army was, no doubt, a powerful rival, but their position of defending the interests of landowners and capitalists would sooner or later lead them to an utter defeat. In contrast to this, the Makhno movement, which relied on ordinary people and became a mass movement, was definitely socialist (this becomes clear from an unbiased study of Makno's political programs) and had every chance to become an alternative to the communist power. The Makhnovites, just like the Zaporozhian Cossacks in the past, created in southern Ukraine a social order, which could become popular and appealing not only to the workers in Ukraine, but also to the workers in Russia.

Trotsky and other Bolshevik military commanders, who can be called the secret allies of the White Army, took concrete measures in order to increase the latter's chances of pulling off a quick and complete defeat of the Makhno movement. Soon afterward the Soviet regiments invaded the Makhno-controlled region from the east and the west, forcefully incorporating the

Makhnovites and shooting those who disobeyed on the spot. Naturally, this campaign greatly weakened Makhno's army. Moreover, the Bolshevik authorities received the strictest order to discontinue the weapon, ammunition, and food supplies to the Makhno brigade.

It should be added that even before the liquidation campaign started communist were not too generous in providing Makhno's men with everything they needed. The Makhnovites often acquired weapons and ammunition in battles, because they knew only too well that they could not count on getting extra machineguns, cannons, or even rifles from the Bolsheviks. And yet the Bolshevik command used to give the Red Army Makhnovites at least something. Now any supplies to Makhno's brigade were cut off.

No matter how desperate Makhno and other leading anarchists were in their requests for help wired to various Soviet authorities, they were inevitably met with silence. Because of these patently treacherous actions of the Bolsheviks Makhnovites had to fight against Denikin's army, which greatly surpassed them in size, ammunitions, and all the other important aspects. This definitely sure left its mark on the military developments.

In late May 1919 the Makhnovites began to lose one battle after another. Thousands of them were killed, wounded, and taken prisoner. The White Guards very quickly drove Makhno's soldiers out of Berdiansk, Hryshyno, Huliai-Pole, and other localities. Regiments led by Shkuro, Vynohradov, and Denikin's other military commanders were advancing without having a slightest idea about who helped them achieve their victories. The Bolshevik periodicals were covering the events as if it was a blatant treason of the Makhnovites and their commander, who opened the way for Denikin's Army. However, it was, in fact, opened by the Red Army strategists and their hunchmen.

At the same time, the Bolsheviks were looking for Makhno in order to arrest him. Kliment Voroshilov expressed a desire to be the one would capture the counterrevolutionary Makhno and was appointed head of the liquidation campaign on May 31, 1919. In early June 1919 he personally came to Huliai-Pole to present Makhno with the Order of the Red Banner, surprising as it was.

Makhno, no doubt, deserved the high Soviet reward, but Voroshilov real mission was not to honor Makhno's talent of a military leader and his great personal courage. Voroshilov knew that it would be extremely hard to capture Makhno in his headquarters, so by presenting this prestigious decoration he hoped to win Makhno's trust and later use it to arrest him without much fuss.

This maneuver by Voroshilov was only partially successful. After a few days the Bolshevik military commander invited Makhno to the station of Haichur purportedly to discuss some urgent military issues. Makhno decided to go there even though his counterintelligence agents warned him about Voroshilov faul play.

When Makhno was already there, not far from the train car where the headquarters were, a Red Army soldier, who obviously liked the Makhnovites, told him that he and his army were essentially placed outside the law by the Soviet government. Makhno quickly realized that he was trapped, so he ran away from the railway station, shooting one of the Voroshilov guards with his revolver. The members of Makhno's staff were less fortunate—they were soon seized by Cheka agents. Then they were transferred to Kharkiv and, after a symbolic trial, were executed by firing squad as "enemies of the revolution."

Around mid-June 1919 Makhno left Red Army for good, and his people began to fight on two fronts, against the White and Red Armies. Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks were actively searching

for Makhno. Among those who were hunting after Makhno were the division commander Dybenko and the experienced Cheka agent Dmitry Medvedev, who was later arrested and shot by the Makhnovites. Dybenko found Makhno near Nikopol, where the latter was fighting against Denikin's army. Dybenko invited his former subordinate to his headquarters in order to restore their alliance against the White Army. This time Makhno was again warned by his counterintelligence agents about Dybenko's plan to kill him, and so he didn't go to meet with Dybenko, avoiding another trap.

## COMMUNIST POLONSKY'S PLOT

In October 1919 the insurgent army led by Makhno reclaimed almost all of southern Ukraine, which had been conquered by the White Guards. That was the time when the Bolsheviks hatched one of their most powerful and dangerous plots against Makhno and his people. The key part was played by Mykhailo Polonsky. In autumn 1919 Makhno's army was a political motley crew, consisting of anarchists, Petliurites, and Red Army men, who were all united by the common desire to fight against the Denikin occupation. In the summer of 1919, under pressure from Denikin's army, entire Red Army regiments joined Makhno's troops, which was essentially a restoration of the alliance between the Red Army and Makhno. According to some historians' estimates, nearly 40,000 Red Army men, almost the entire army, joined Makhno's forces. Among them was the 3<sup>rd</sup> Crimean Cavalry Regiment, which was led by Polonsky. His cavalymen were good at fighting Denikin's army, which is why one day Makhno personally awarded Polonsky with a high reward—the black anarchist flag. This was why some Bolsheviks thought that Polonsky had betrayed the proletarian revolution and deserted to Makhno for ideological reasons. However, the ensuing events proved these thoughts to be false.

In the autumn of 1919 many of Makhno's friends and enemies were amazed at the military successes of his forces. The Bolshevik newspaper Pravda had published fairly objective accounts, and even Trotsky, an irreconcilable opponent of the Makhno-led insurgents as he was, acknowledged their achievements. At the same time, both Russian and Ukrainian communists realized again that, despite all their efforts, the Makhno movement was still there, and the Makhnovites were still serious rivals in the fight for control over Ukraine.

In October of 1919 members of the Katerynoslav Gubernia Bolshevik Committee, which was operating semilegally, devised with another anti-Makhno operation. The goal was to physically destroy Makhno's top commanders and force the Makhno-controlled detachments to join the Red Army, which was then advancing to the south.

Polonsky, a communist and at the same time a popular commander in Makhno's army, was the best person to carry out this plan. Moreover, as Makhno's ideological opponent, he took steps of his own accord to join the conspirators. The Bolshevik organizations in the south soon sent a group of trustworthy people to join Makhno's army, and then Polonsky and his comrades-in-arms began to form Bolshevik units among the Makhnovites in order to spread ideological and organizational influence. With time these units were set up in the majority of Makhno's military units except for the cavalry led by the otaman Fedor Shchus and the machinegun regiment headed by Foma Kozhyn, who had extreme anti-Bolshevik sentiments.

The more communist units appeared, the greater their influence on the insurgent masses was. Even though Makhno's commanders knew from their informers about nearly every step made

by underground communists, they did not do anything about it for a long time. On the one hand, Makhno and his military commanders tried to stick to the principle of political liberty for all left-wing political parties. On the other hand, they clearly underrated Polonsky as their opponent. Later, in November 1919, they began to take the communists' activity more seriously. In order to get more inside information about the gubernia committee's plans, they sent an experienced counterintelligence agent to one of the committee's meetings who introduced himself as a CC CP(B)U emissary Zakharov.

Unsuspecting committee members briefed Zakharov on all the details of the anti-Makhno plot. This was a critical mistake on the part of the communists that led to the complete failure of the entire conspiracy. A bit later Makhno learned not only about Polonsky's intention to make him a general without an army, but also about their plan to poison Makhno and his commanders at the celebration of Polonsky's common-law wife's birthday in early December 1919.

The secret information gathered by Makhno's personal agents proved to be true. Polonsky really invited all the top commanders of Makhno's army to his wife's birthday, but instead of Makhno and his commanders, Makhno's counterintelligence agents showed up there and arrested Polonsky and some other participants of the conspiracy. Polonsky was taken to the Dnipro under escort and, without any trial, was executed by a firing squad. However, Polonsky's efforts were not entirely fruitless. In late 1919 and early 1920 about 35,000 Makhnovites, a considerable part of the insurgent army, joined the Red Army troops that had entered the Makhno-controlled region.

## **THE HULIAI-POLE ODYSSEY OF CHEKA TERRORISTS**

In January 1920 Makhno let his insurgents take some rest, considering that his army had been nearly constantly battling against various enemies. This was when the Makhno movement, strictly speaking, came to an end. If it had not revived, no one, of course, would have waged either open or secret wars against Makhno, and various Bolshevik structures would have been unlikely to plot new attempts on his life. However, in the summer of 1920 he had a new large army that delivered painful blows to the Bolshevik rear. N. Martynov, a top Cheka official in Ukraine, set the task before his subordinates in Katerynoslav — organize in the near future a terrorist act to kill Makhno. In June 1920 two young men, Yakiv Kostiukhin and Fedir Hlushchenko, left for Huliai-Pole armed with revolvers and bombs. Nicknamed Yashka the Fool in the criminal circles, Kostiukhin was an inveterate criminal who stepped on this path back in tsarist times. Judging from his sobriquet, he did not achieve much in the criminal world, although he did spend nine months in tsarist prisons. Later he was arrested by the Cheka on criminal charges, and agreed to work for the secret police in exchange for a pardon. On numerous occasions Kostiukhin participated in the destruction of anarchist organizations in various cities in Ukraine before he was tasked with something a lot more important in June 1920. Hlushchenko was a different person. Despite his young age, he had been involved in the creation of Makhno's special units but later found himself in the Bolshevik captivity. Under the threat of death by firing squad, he agreed to join the Cheka's Katerynoslav branch. However, it was unlikely that he became a true Cheka man. In my opinion, in Katerynoslav he was the same as before — a Makhno counterintelligence agent. Knowing the Cheka plot, he decided to thwart this attempt on Makhno's life. On his own initiative the Cheka appointed him one of the two terrorists to be sent to Huliai-Pole.



Leaving Yashka the Fool near Makhno's headquarters, Hlushchenko immediately met with the otaman and told him everything. Makhno sent him to Kurylenko, one of his trusted men. After a few minutes Kurylenko, unnoticed, came up to Kostiukhin and professionally stripped him of his weapons in the matter of seconds. The Makhno tribunal sentenced Kostiukhin to death by firing squad. Ironically, the same sentence was handed to Hlushchenko — Makhno did not forgive him his cooperation with the Cheka and he died praying for the Makhnovites.

Makhno's counterintelligence agents did not seem to know about this plot. However, later, in November 1920, they were again on the top of things. Following their input, the Makhnovites were able to neutralize several groups of Cheka saboteurs numbering 50 in total. One of them had been tasked with destroying Makhno's headquarters using hand grenades. The decisive role in this operation was played by the extremely experienced counterintelligence agent and anarchist Mirsky, who had managed to penetrate the Cheka and even become Martynov's personal aides.

## **ABROAD**

In August 1921 the remnants of Makhno's units under his personal command crossed the Dniester and surrendered to the Romanian authorities. It would seem that Makhno would have a more peaceful time abroad. But peace was illusory, because the Bolshevik special agents were still seeking him there, just like they had done in Ukraine. At one point, a group of well-armed Cheka men led by Dmytro Medvedev crossed the Romanian border. They changed into Romanian military uniforms and headed for in B l i, where, according to their data, Makhno was in a safe apartment at the time. They killed several Makhnovites there but failed to find the otaman. History ordained that during their secret war against Makhno and his followers the Bolsheviks failed to reach the set goals. The initiators and executors of the secret plans were unable to stamp out the Makhno movement or kill the otaman. However, in the last years of his life Makhno was not the primary target of the Soviet secret agents, primarily because he was no longer a serious threat to the USSR. At the time Makno was dreaming of something else — how he would return to Ukraine and live the peaceful life of an ordinary peasant with a young wife. This was a different Makhno altogether.

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