

Book Review: Anarchy's Cossak

By Alexandre Skirda, Published by AK Press 13.00str

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This was a much awaited book. Published originally in French back in 1982, its English version was advertised for a couple of years by AK Press, until it finally saw the light of day, and the wait was well worth it. This fine edition includes the interesting photographs of the original edition, plus a new appendix to discuss the state of the research around the Makhnovist movement after the date of its first edition. It constitutes an invaluable document in anarchist history, and provides a vivid glimpse of the anarchist principles in action and of a number of good lessons to be drawn for tomorrow's revolutions. Needless to say, we're very glad to have such a book available in English.

For those who are not familiar with the subject, the Makhnovists were a libertarian movement, deeply rooted in the traditions of anarchist-communism, that developed an experience of revolutionary changes in the economic and political structures of the backwarded Ukrainian society – its name coming from Nestor Makhno, a remarkable militant who remained the main figure of the movement. To defend the gains of the Social Revolution, they launched a guerrilla warfare in Ukraine against a number of enemies: foreign troops, Nationalists, Whites, different warlords and Bolsheviks. Finally defeated treacherously by the Bolsheviks, the book tells the story of the movement from its very origin, contradicting the traditional view of it as appearing literally from nowhere.

The movement sprung from the rebellious history of the peasant and cossack revolts of the region, and the ground for anarchist ideas was well prepared for more than 10 years before the 1917 revolution by the agitational activities of the Gulyai Polye anarchist-communist group, founded by the Semenyuta brothers and V. Antoni. Thus, anarchism had a local tradition among the local population and it was this advantage that made it fertile soil for the Makhnovist experience. At the same time, it gives a very fine description of Makhno's own life. To understand the radicality of its revolutionary convictions: the serf origins of his family, his hard life as a child labourer, his brief schooling years, his experiences of early revolt against unfair treatment given by landlords, his activities in the Gulyai Polye anarchist-communist group, the terrorist years and his imprisonment in the different dungeons of the Czar.

The bulk of the book is dedicated to the revolutionary period between 1917, when Makhno gained his freedom with the February revolution, to 1921, when the Bolsheviks won complete control over Ukraine. It depicts, with first hand information and using a wide range of sources,

the Makhnovist campaigns, the difficulties of revolutionary warfare and the political struggle for the triumph of the “free soviets”. Well informed, it brings together valuable accounts that discredit most of the usual charges of the Bolshevik historical mythomania against him and his movement: banditry, anti-semitism, his alleged alcoholism and their self-indulgence in orgies (!). All these are systematically exposed as utter lies, with no factual evidence, but the intention of discrediting the movement. It is important to take into account that even the sacrosanct “official anarchist historian” of the Russian Revolution, Volin, echoes these false accusations — presumably, as part of a personal vendetta against Makhno, with whom they clashed over a number of issues, mainly when in exile in Paris. Thus, by way of repeating a lie again and again, many ended up accepting it as truth. This book is a healthy way of putting the record straight on the movement.

The other merit of the book, is showing the absurdity of the claim that the exile in Paris was a period of complete decadence for Makhno in terms of his activity as an anarchist militant. Quite the opposite: it’s this time that proved to be the richest in terms of his literary and theoretical contributions to the anarchist movement, mainly through the paper *Dyelo Trouda*, despite all of the difficulties of life in exile. It was here that he started writing his memoirs, that he had time to draw the conclusions from his own experiences in the Revolution and that he takes part in drafting the famous “Platform”. Thus, his active participation into the debates of the time on organisation and what way to follow for the anarchist movement, that shaped in one way or another the international anarchist movement for decades to come, have still a resounding importance, and give enough material for thought and practice even in our times.

Only people that were hostile to the thesis of the Platform, their organisational approach and their revolutionary class-struggle anarchism, could have depicted his exile as unproductive, in order not to deal with this most important legacy to the movement and try to silence it. It is easier to accept the figure of Makhno only as part of the anarchist “folklore” of somewhere far away, on the Ukrainian steppes, than to let him expose the historical failures of our movement. All in all, self-criticism has never been a strong feature of anarchists.

We can’t leave unnoticed, though, certain aspects of the book that seriously undermine its value, specially to the eyes of the non-anarchist reader: first of all, we have Skirda’s style that is full of adjectives and too obviously takes sides. We all know that absolute objectivity in history is nothing but a myth, but a historical book (in opposition to a political diatribe, or a historical-political polemic) shouldn’t go as far as Skirda does in terms of using nicknames for the side that doesn’t happen to be in the author’s grace: there’s no need to say things like “*blotting paper revolutionaries*”, “*supreme guide*” (referring to Lenin) or to resort to ridicule everytime one is to mention the Bolsheviks, no matter how justified the indignation of Skirda against them might be. In that point of view, it reminds me of an inverse sort of “Bolshevik” history, were anarchists were usually depicted as “bandits”, “dreamers”, “individualists”, “petty-bourgeois” and so on. Immediately, one has a ground to doubt the “objectivity” of the author -understood as a respect for historical and factual accuracy. And when one suspects that the bias is too much, the natural reaction is to leave the book aside and entertain yourself with some other book. Instead of writing history, sometimes it appears he’s just bitching.

His tendency, as well, to blame the Bolsheviks for absolutely every evil in the Civil War, makes his genuine complaints about them appear less credible to the non-anarchist reader. For example, blaming the Bolsheviks for the emergence of the Whites, as Skirda insinuates in some parts of his book, is inaccurate and naive: “*(Shkuro) had begun to fight the Bolsheviks (...), having tasted their*

summary methods of justice” (p144) or “(*The Kuban Cossacks*), at first neutral, (...) they had quickly been persuaded of the danger inherent in the Bolsheviks who abruptly abolished their traditional rights and, moreover, brutally commandeered their foodstuffs and belongings” (p70). He seems somehow to be justifying not the revolt against the Bolsheviks, but white revolt against the Bolsheviks — Makhno, who wasn’t a pro-Bolshevik at all, agreed that the worst catastrophe for Russia would be the triumph of the whites. It is naive to explain the side taken by reactionary militaries, indoctrinated in their distrust for the riff raff, in terms of the “excesses” of Lenin’s government, as we can explain many of the workers’ and peasants’ revolts of the time — rather, they can be explained by their fear to lose the privileges they enjoyed in the former regime. Every revolution faces opposition from reactionary quarters, that are not particularly motivated by the “excesses” of the revolutionaries, as the very excesses of all these counter-revolutionaries show. This undermines claims, that have a factual ground — like the military mistakes and actual sabotage of the southern front by the Bolsheviks as the main reason for Denikin’s successful offensive in mid 1919.

The same could be said about the support of the Allies to the Whites: “*Discovering its perilous consequences (of the Soviet regime and its truce with the Central Empires, ed.) in the shape of German offensives on the French front, Paris, London and Washington were forced to make a stand*” (p73). Skirda seems to forget the fact that this was a time of violent proletarian upheavals in most of Europe and the example set by the Russian Revolution was sparking flames everywhere! This was the main reason why the reactionaries in the West wanted to see the revolution smashed, not for secondary military tactical matters; in fact, after the end of the WWI, they kept supporting the whites -so “forced” they were to take a stand!

His anti-Bolshevism as well, can lead sometimes to ambiguous positions like his defense of the Constituent Assembly (pp. 43–44, 72). He forgets that the defense of the Constituent Assembly was the defense of the bourgeois concept of representative and parliamentary democracy, of the “liberal” State, in opposition to the direct democracy and the organic workers’ and peasants’ society being formed from below through the Soviets and Factory Committees, and the whole network of rank and file organisation that flourished in Russia during 1917. It’s true that Bolshevik opposition to the Assembly was not progressive at all: they attacked the liberal State (where they were a minority) for the sake of the dictatorship of their sole party, but they were not alone in their criticisms and many quarters, with different arguments, did criticise it; indeed, he doesn’t mention the fact that he surely knows, in the face of his deep knowledge of Russian anarchism, that the Assembly was dissolved actually by the detachment of the anarchist Anatoli Zheleshniakov! But again, he’d still blame the Bolsheviks.

I think it is time to move beyond the history of “goodies” and “baddies”, of “marxists” versus “anarchists” and try to see the underlying forces operating in society as a whole. Skirda’s anarchist point about the State as a reactionary institution to be abolished is seriously undermined by his moralistic and simplistic approach to the Bolshevik strategy of seizure of power: “(Lenin) had merely played upon these (popular) aspirations for the sole purpose of ensconcing himself in power; once at the controls, he was to devote himself primarily to consolidation of his tenuous authority” (p43).

Thus, it could be understood the treason of the revolution due to the Bolshevik’s greediness for power, instead of the unavoidable logic of the bourgeois division of powers in the form of Statist institutions. No matter how genuine Lenin or other Bolsheviks were as revolutionaries (and certainly many weren’t) the results couldn’t have been any different, and that is the main

strength of anarchism as a revolutionary alternative: it's not about who's in power, is about how we control the power from below.

Finally, Paul Sharkey's translation, also, is a bit difficult to the reader, full of twists and turns, literal translations and words in French, that give a certain elegance to the edition, but seriously make the reading quite difficult at points, even to the extent of making the reader unsure of the real meaning behind some paragraphs. This is noted in others of Sharkey's translations as well (like *Facing the Enemy*, for instance).

These flaws that are commented upon don't invalidate the work at all; but they make it more directed to an anarchist public, than to a non-anarchist one; and unfortunately, the information provided here is quite strong and well researched, and would be very valuable to discuss with a broader leftist audience, but the language make it a bit difficult, as it sounds sectarian. We are still waiting for a further history on the Makhnovist movement that is done in such a fashion that allows us to start that discussion around the methods of the revolution under the light of this historical experience.

We want to finish the review thanking the people of AK Press for the fantastic work they've done in providing us with so many interesting books and documents, certainly filling many gaps in anarchist history and theory in English speaking countries. In particular, to thank them for providing us with this jewel of anarchist history that is Skirda's work on the Makhnovist movement, a book that definitely will make any libertarian militant vibrate.

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