

The Rehabilitation of Makhno

Alexandre Skirda

1989

Contents

Frontmatter	3
Introduction	3
Trotsky's responsibility in the rupture with Makhno	4
Anti-Makhnovist stereotypes	4
The real Makhno	5
The anti-peasant policy of the Bolsheviks	9
Trotsky's disastrous role	10
Between the Reds and the Whites	12
Free soviets: totalitarian party	13
An advance towards historical truth	14

Published in *The Raven* #8 (1989)

A Russian joke asks ‘who can tell what is going to happen yesterday’. It is more than a joke. Last year’s secondary school leaving examination in history had to be cancelled because, with the arrival of glasnost and perestroika, and the message from above that the official version of the Soviet past consists of distortions, omissions and lies, new school histories have to be written. They can’t be written yet because the amount of historical truth it is permissible to teach keeps on expanding.

This article appeared in the issues of the French anarchist weekly *Le Monde Libertaire* for 6 April, 13 April and 20 April 1989.

Alexander Skirda is the author of a biography Nestor Makhno: *Le cosaque de l’anarchie* (1982) and editor of a collection of Makhno’s writings *La lutte contre l’état et autres écrits* (1984).

In accordance with Gorbachev’s *perestroika* decree, Soviet historians have set about a profound revision of the regime’s historical past. Until now they have had to confine themselves to the 1930s and the Stalinist nightmare. Western public opinion has been sensitive to the posthumous rehabilitation (juridically though not politically) of the principal opponents of Stalin *within* the party: Bukharin, Zinoviev, Kamenev, Radek and Trotsky, as well as tens of thousands of party members ‘purged’ by revolver shots in the back of the neck in 1936–1938, and ‘reintegrated’ posthumously into the bosom of the party.

Soviet opinion itself has been far more aroused by the rediscovery of the ‘final solution’ applied to the peasantry — nearly eleven million deaths from an artificial famine and from political repression between 1929 and 1934, the ‘holocaust of the century’. Inevitably this has provoked a demand for research into the roots of the evil. Until now the death of Lenin in 1924 has served as the crossroads after which everything went wrong. This has been found to be a totally insufficient explanation, and we must start much further back, if we can judge from a current article in the influential weekly published under the direction of the Writers’ Union of the USSR, the *Literary Gazette*, of which several million copies are printed. Its issue of 8 February 1989 has this article on ‘Batko Makhno or the “Werewolf” of the Civil War’.

The strange and provocative title has to be understood in the context of the article. Makhno, presented until now as a wolf, has now been rediscovered with a human face. The author, Vassily Golovanov, draws a portrait which is distinctly positive, even elegiac and idyllic in terms of revolutionary hagiography. Even though it is embellished with many factual or biographical errors, the article stresses equally the errors of the communist party leadership of that time both with regard to Makhno and towards the revolutionary peasantry in general.

Given the importance of this first historical revaluation, and indeed, rehabilitation, and considering all the rubbish published in the USSR on this subject right up to the present day, it seems important to make known to French, and Western readers generally, the overall tenor of this text and to translate the essential passages in extenso, and to follow them with some analysis and comment on the significance of this event.

Trotsky's responsibility in the rupture with Makhno

Golovanov's article, although it appears in the history section of the Gazette, is presented in a journalistic way, in that it has almost no bibliographical references. All the same, to give it official status, a guarantee of seriousness and some kind of undeniable historical certification, it is preceded by a foreword by N. Vasetsky, doctor of historical sciences, presented here in its entirety:

The editors of the Literary Gazette have asked me to write some kind of preface to a text dedicated to a man most of us know under the name 'Batko Makhno'. When this name is mentioned what appears before our eyes is a half-comic, half-tragic figure we have all seen in films dealing with that period. But in spite of all this, Makhno, by now, deserves a more serious consideration. In fact, it is very important to be able to produce a reply to the question of why movements like those of the makhnovists found themselves on the other side of the barricades?

This article rightly reveals that this was due to an under-evaluation of the peasantry — allies of the proletariat not only in the struggle against the great Russian land-owners, but equally in a society newly liberated from all exploitation. The author of the article sees in an absolutely factual way that the main cause of Makhno's tragedy was due to the anti-peasant attitude of Trotsky, president of the revolutionary military Soviet of the republic, and above all, in his direction of operations. The original character of Makhno seems to me to have been appropriately caught in this article: the conflicting programmes that obliged him to struggle against both the forces he faced in the revolution — the whites and the Reds — are well illustrated.

We will see how far Golovanov's article justifies Vasetsky's opinion.

Anti-Makhnovist stereotypes

Golovanov begins by recalling the circumstances of Makhno's return to his native Ukraine, then occupied by Austrian and German armies, in July 1918, disguised as a teacher and supplied with false papers by the Kremlin, which is how, three months later, he was able to launch the formidable peasant insurrection, and on 22 September 1918, disguised this time as a captain of the **Varta** (the Ukrainian 'national guard' formed by the occupying forces), intercepted a punitive detachment aimed against the peasants. On this occasion Makhno revealed his true identity as 'the revolutionary Makhno'. Golovanov goes on to enumerate the many rumours and legends which have followed this 'figure, unique in the revolution because of his obscure and contradictory aspects'.

Among these are the story that when he was baptised, the priest's hood caught fire, a clear omen of his future as a bandit. Another tells how he was sent to prison for killing his own brother. Yet another explains that, having duped and robbed the peasants of his own locality in the first months of the 1917 revolution, he went to live a life of luxury in a private hotel in Moscow. Even though this last story emanated from the Austro-German authorities at the time when Makhno was mounting a partisan action against them, Golovanov writes that, alas, it is 'facts' of this kind which until now have dominated the Soviet view of this already mythological figure.

Moreover, and this may give the reader a certain pleasure, Golovanov declares that 'there has never been any serious historical study of the Makhnovist movement in the USSR'. Everything published until now has been nothing but empty lies. This reveals, Golovanov concludes, 'the bias and the methodological weakness of the Soviet school of history between the 1920s and the 1930s, retrospectively presenting history in black and white'. Only the review *The war and the revolution* which paid careful attention to 'the tactics of partisan war brought almost to perfection by Makhno' finds grace in the view of Golovanov. He goes on to say that no other work has seen the light of day in the Soviet Union which analyses the Makhnovist movement as a social phenomenon.

It is astonishing to read such a *mea culpa* in an official Soviet organ, the more so since Golovanov drives home the point even more forcibly in declaring that Soviet scholarship has been 'content to stick the label "bandit" on Makhno and to relegate him to the archives in the hope that time would efface from the memory of future generations the image of the storm-centre of the peasant war in the Ukraine'.

The author also cites the ambiguous or unfavourable presentation of Makhno in Soviet literature, like the work of the poet Bagritsky which attributes to him bestial traits. Alexis Tolstoy (the 'proletarian count' and one-time émigré who returned to place his pen at the service of Stalin) also distinguished himself in his Stalin Prize-winning novel *The Road to Calvary*, with its 'unflinching' depiction of Makhno which attributes to him the words, 'In the Tsar's prison they swung me, sometimes by the head and sometimes by the feet, before throwing me on to the concrete floor ... That is the way that popular leaders are forged'.

After these specimens of the edifying and ridiculous stories on which the Soviet reader is fed, Golovanov moves to serious matters and traces the biography of Makhno, this time in conformity with the main historical outlines as already known in the West, even in the absence of serious documentation. (See below).

The real Makhno

Golovanov gives a brief account of Makhno's origins in the poor peasantry, his childhood of toil, his membership at the age of 16 of an anarchist group in Gulyai-Polye, his participation in 'expropriations' from the local rich in the name of 'the starving', his attack on a mail-coach, during which people were killed, his arrest in 1908, the accusations against him by four 'repentant' accomplices, his resistance to interrogation, and the sentence of 20 years in a convict settlement, commuted to detention in the Butyrki, the political prison in Moscow. In passing, Golovanov rectifies the legend of Makhno as a 'teacher'. We must correct him too: it was the death penalty which, in view of his youth, was commuted to 20 years of imprisonment, and it was his political convictions that made it desirable to send him to the Butyrki, where the three thousand prisoners considered the most dangerous in the country were concentrated.

Arshinov¹ is considered by Golovanov as Makhno's intellectual mentor, even though Makhno later rejected him, just as he sees Makhno wandering aimlessly around Moscow for a week after

¹ Editorial note: On the jacket of the first English edition of Peter Arshinov's *History of the Makhnovist Movement 1918–1921* (Freedom Press 1987, £5.00), the publishers comment that 'Until the Russian archives are available to historians, Arshinov's history of the Makhnovists is undoubtedly the most important source work available'. The article above indicates that the archives are beginning to open.

his liberation in February 1917 whereas the Ukrainian anarchist was delaying his return in spite of the pressing desire to do so, the better to breathe in the free air of revolutionary Moscow, and trying to seize the chance to be useful. Golovanov jumps too rapidly from these facts to the conclusion that Makhno 'neither liked nor understood urban life'. It is much more likely that he understood all too well the deleterious and sectarian atmosphere of the big cities he disliked, by comparison with the small towns and villages of the Ukraine. (We shouldn't forget that at that time Gulyai-Polye was a town of between fifteen and twenty thousand inhabitants.)

Putting this aside, Golovanov is correct in writing that his years in prison had turned Makhno into 'a fanatical anarchist', something which, paradoxically, didn't stop him from being elected at Gulyai-Polye as president of the peasant union, or to the social committee, or from being the delegate to the soviet of peasant deputies. (Makhno himself writes in his *Memoirs* that this was to avoid these places being taken up by the representatives of authoritarian or political parties and organisations).

Briefly he describes Makhno's revolutionary activities in a way that has never, ever, been presented to Soviet readers:

As an anarchist, a partisan of extreme revolution, Makhno took up a stance for radical and immediate transformation, well before the convocation of the Constituent Assembly. On the first of May 1917 an envoy was sent from Gulyai-Polye to demand the removal from the provisional government of the six capitalist ministers in June, workers' control was installed in the factories of Gulyai-Polye, (Makhno proposed to the workers that they should discipline the bourgeoisie by expropriating the local bank, but this they refused to do for fear of attracting repression). Besides the soviet of workers' and peasants' deputies a committee of poor peasants was born, directed against the big landlords and local kulaks.

In August, at the time of General Kornilov's march on Petrograd, Makhno organised a committee for the defence of the revolution which disarmed the bourgeoisie and the landlords in the region. At the regional congress of soviets the anarchist group from Gulyai-Polye called to the peasants to ignore the inclinations of the provisional government and of the Ukrainian central Rada and proposing 'the immediate seizure of the lands of the church and of the big proprietors, there to organise free communes, allowing the possibility of participation to these same big landlords and dispossessed kulaks'. By October this redivision of land had been accomplished, and the land was being worked, in spite of threats from government agencies.

Golovanov cites the intimidatory threats by an agent of the provisional government following the disarming of the local bourgeoisie. Makhno raised the matter before the committee for the defence of the revolution and 'gave him 20 minutes to get out of Gulyai-Polye and two hours to get out of the whole revolutionary territory'. It was thus that this 'foreign soviet region' (in the language used by Golovanov) was able to live peacefully until the German invasion several months later.

He goes on to describe Makhno's journey to Moscow and his meeting with Lenin who was interested in his account of the agrarian transformations at Gulyai-Polye. Three times Lenin asked him to describe how the peasants had understood the slogan 'All Power to the Soviets!'

Makhno replied that the soviets elected by them had been entirely responsible for the path taken by local political events. 'In that case', Lenin told him, 'the peasantry in your region has been contaminated by anarchism'. 'What's so bad about that?' asked Makhno.

'That isn't what I want to say', Lenin replied. 'On the contrary, it is a matter for rejoicing, since it hastens the victory of communism over capitalism and its power', and he went on to say that he thought peasant anarchism to be a passing malady, quickly healed.

Here, in its entirety is the revealing commentary by Golovanov on the impressions Makhno brought back from Moscow:

Makhno left Moscow with contradictory feelings. He had been a specifically 'soviet' anarchist (other anarchists were opposed, not only to the soviets, but to all other hierarchical structures), but his conception of the revolution was strongly distinct from that of the Bolsheviks, Makhno not recognising any political party, whatever it might be. For him the basic regional soviet was a self-sufficient organisation through which alone the will of the people could be expressed. The hierarchy of soviets was an absurdity; proletarian government a dangerous fiction, just as Arshinov wrote: 'The State is embodied by its functionaries: they become everything while the working class remains nothing'.

Golovanov goes on to describe Makhno's experience as a member of the Commission of Inquiry of the revolutionary commission of Alexandrovsk, charged with the task of examining the cases of people arrested at the end of 1917 (after the October coup). 'Meanwhile' Golovanov comments, 'this work was little to the taste of Makhno. More than this, when the Mensheviks and Social Revolutionaries were arrested, Makhno decided to open the gates of the town jail.' He was

equally irritated by all the fuss that surrounded the elections for the Constituent Assembly, which he described as a card game among the political parties. 'It is not parties which serve the people, but people who have to serve the parties. Already today ... they don't talk about names any more, it is only parties that decide', he prophesied to his new comrades. But, not having been supported by them, he left the revolutionary committee of Alexandrovsk and returned to Gulyai-Polye, far from 'the temptations of big politics'.

Back in his own town he took part in a commune set up in a former landed estate taken over by landless peasants and workers. Golovanov is interested in the efforts of the Gulyai-Polye Soviet to establish a direct exchange with the town: they sent flour to the workers of the Prokhorov and Morozov factories with a request for textiles in return. The consignment from the factories was blocked by the organs of the Soviet state, as the 'authorities repudiated it as too "petite-bourgeoisie" a solution to the problem of provisioning the towns'.

According to the author, the accumulation of experiences like this contributed a heightening of the contradictions between the proletarian model of socialism and its peasant alternative, which could have been managed with some kind of compromise, a sort of advance version of the New Economic Policy. The German invasion allowed no one to see how this contradiction could have been resolved.'

The author thus reaches the question that seems to him to be essential: 'Why did Makhno separate from the Bolsheviks? To this absurd question there is no simple answer, since there was a time when his alliance with the Reds was not only openly declared, but seemed to be durable'.

According to Golovanov, Makhno returned from Moscow in July 1918 extremely disenchanted with those groups of his ideological comrades who had slept through the revolution. Lev Cherny, a well-known anarchist, had been given the task by the Bolsheviks of maintaining the furniture and halls of their palace, and had become for Makhno a symbol of the decline of anarchism. While not sympathising with Bolshevism which had 'monopolised' the revolution, Makhno understood that 'none of the opposition parties, including the left Social Revolutionaries had leaders of the calibre of Lenin' nor sufficient strength to 'reorganise the direction of the revolution'. Taking this into account he concluded an agreement with the Bolsheviks when they arrived in the Ukraine, where he had organised an insurrectionary army and liberated most of eastern Ukraine. Meanwhile it was 'details' which were to render this alliance precarious: for example the 'famous partisan spirit which was dominant among the insurgents (election of commanders, a not very certain "self-discipline" and a not very coherent anarchism'.

We must, at once, correct these false and hasty conclusions. In the first place it was not Makhno personally who took decisions on his own, but the general assembly of the rebels, and the revolutionary military soviet of the movement in the case of military decisions. Political decisions had been taken by the council of workers and peasants in the region. The military accord reached with the Bolsheviks was not a 'political alliance' as Golovanov presents it, it was undertaken for urgent reasons: the lack of weapons and ammunition. (There was one rifle and six cartridges for one in four of the rebels, consequently they had to refuse to accept thousands of volunteers.) This agreement did not envisage any political dependency: the front held by the Makhnovists extended over 150 kilometres. Finally, that 'famous partisan spirit' belonged to local Cossack traditions: the selection of regimental commanders (corresponding to the places of origin of particular insurgent groups) in the light of their ability and of the confidence that they inspired.

Furthermore, the insurrectionary army depended upon its voluntary nature and had nothing in common with the Red Army, composed of soldiers who were forcibly 'mobilised' and run by former Tsarist officers doubled with Bolshevik political commissars. There lies the whole difference from the 'coherence' of Makhno and his comrades.

Golovanov is nearer the truth when he specifies how, with the agreement of the Red Army command in March 1919, the Makhnovist forces retained their name, their black flags and their own principles of internal organisation. All the same, they had to accept political commissars and were provided with arms (very few in fact), and were obliged to operate under the directives of the Red Army command in the struggle against Deniken. 'After four months' the author writes, "this idyll came to an end: according to the generally accepted version, Makhno opened the front to the Whites'.

Here Golovanov is depending on the testimony of an ex-anarchist, Teper, who wrote a denigratory work against Makhno (to be precise, he may have had a revolver in his back) which attributed responsibility for the break between Makhno and the Reds, to the 'common law' elements mixed up with the anarchists, when, after October 1917, it seemed that the whole of Russia had joined Makhno. It is said that they flattered Makhno endlessly, calling him 'the second Bakunin', and that this turned his head, enabling him to cover up his own misconduct, drunkenness and plundering. Golovanov thinks that here are the reasons, never precisely explained, why Makhno, turning against the Bolsheviks, hadn't 'rejoined' the Whites. And he asks why Makhno was thus obliged to fight on two fronts.

The anti-peasant policy of the Bolsheviks

To explain this sudden antagonism, Golovanov reminds us that the Makhnovist movement was essentially a peasant uprising. From this point of view the Bolsheviks had brought them nothing that they hadn't already conquered for themselves in 1917. In spite of this the Bolsheviks issued their land nationalisation decree, set up 'committees of poor peasants', sent out forced requisitioning detachments, and tried to found *Sovkhozh*es or State Farms. The peasants responded by cultivating all the land, leaving no space for these *Sovkhozh*es. 'Conflict became latent between the capital, Kharkov and the countryside.'

The attempt to inaugurate a new society from the Marxist point of view led to the necessity of applying state control to every sphere of economic activity, right down to the exploitation of individuals. For this reason many communists in 1919 saw the peasantry as a 'bourgeois class', raw material expendable as the proletariat realised its historic mission. Alexandra Kollontai realised at that time that the 'petit bourgeois peasantry was entirely hostile to the new principles of the national economy preached by the communists'.

Thus Golovanov explains the 'severity' of the policy of agrarian confiscations, and the tendency for all peasants who opposed them to be called 'kulaks'. A whole series of peasant insurrections followed right across the country, and it was only after three years that the Bolsheviks began at last to understand that they had to take into account the interests of the 'petit bourgeois class' of peasant farmers. Above all they were chastened by the Kronstadt Revolt with its slogans of 'Free Soviets and Freedom of Commerce', coming no longer from 'poorly armed regiments of peasants but from regular units of the Red Army'.

In consequence Makhno sabotaged the government's agrarian measures, not allowing the requisitioning detachments into the region and not permitting the 'committees of poor peasants' to be set up. Three congresses of several dozen Makhnovist districts, representing the 'liberated region' were held between January and April 1919, with Bolsheviks and Left Social Revolutionaries present. But, Golovanov notes, there was an overwhelming majority of anarchists and non-party people. These Congresses confirmed the mobilisation of the insurrectionary army, and expressed a lack of confidence in the soviet government of the Ukraine 'which had in no way been chosen by the people'. The position the congresses took up was of 'equal exploitation of the land, on the basis of personal labour'.

All this was obviously not to the liking of the Bolsheviks. Eminent party figures were despatched to visit Makhno, among them Bela Kun, Antonov-Ovseenko and Lev Kamenev. They expressed to him their dissatisfaction with the way the insurgent revolutionary military soviets were 'elected as the executive organ of the local congress' and 'did not subordinate themselves to the central Soviet power'.

Having set the scene for everything that could separate Makhno from the Bolsheviks, Golovanov discusses the responsibility of the latter. To this end he cites an astonishing report from the commander of the 2nd Red Army, Skatchco:

Little local Chekas are undertaking a relentless campaign against the Makhnovists, even when they are shedding their blood at the front. They are hunting them down from the rear and persecuting them solely for belonging to the Makhnovist movement... It cannot continue like this: the activity of the local Chekas is deliberately ruining the front, reducing all military successes to nothing, and contributing to the creation of

a counter-revolution that neither Deniken nor Krasnov (Hetman of the Don Cossacks) could have achieved.

Note that this indictment supports everything that the Makhnovists themselves denounced at the time about the crimes of the Cheka. Golovanov does not stop there: he recounts that for Antonov-Ovseenko, commander of the front,

a fragile alliance would have been far preferable to a rupture with Makhno. His standpoint justified itself amply when the Hetman Grigoriev, until then an ally of the Reds, turned against them and abandoned the front, while on the contrary, Makhno not only gave his troops orders to regain those positions, but also published a denunciation of Grigoriev, holding him responsible for an anti-Jewish pogrom at Elisavetgrad.

And he adds, after this weighty affirmation that 'Makhno ordered that anyone involved in a pogrom was to be shot'. This contradicts the most precise among all the diffuse accusations against Makhno in the regime's official records until now. This revision of history goes still further concerning the personal responsibility of Trotsky, at that time the top man responsible for the Red Army.

Trotsky's disastrous role

To go back to Golovanov's words:

In the evolution of relations with Makhno it was Trotsky who played a disastrous role. Being an enemy of the 'soft line' of coalitions with 'fellow-travellers', and holding colossal power in his hands as president of the republic's military soviet, Trotsky was a supporter of extreme measures against those who were hesitant or unruly. Arriving in the Ukraine and learning that Makhno had summoned a fourth congress of various peasant soviets which were independent of the Bolsheviks, Trotsky saw in this an open appeal for rebellion. External events showed that neither Makhno who had convened the congress, nor Trotsky who had decided to 'finish off this 'anarcho-kulak debauch', were able to envisage the vast force of troops that Deniken was, at that moment, concentrating at the front.

Not content just to show Trotsky's hostility to Makhno, to the peasants and to their independent congress, Golovanov enumerates the 'extreme measures' Trotsky adopted with these hesitants and malcontents, and the catastrophic results that followed.

On the 4th of June 1919, the 2nd Ukrainian army, of which Makhno's two brigades were a part was disbanded. The same day the Kharkov Isvestia published a violent article by Trotsky attacking the 'Makhnovchina'. On the 5th of June there was an editorial 'Once more down with the Maklmovchina!' with an appeal for the use of the 'Red Fire'. At that moment the red front was already being driven back, Makhno's troops were bled white and half encircled.

Communications with Makhno himself were broken. Trotsky's order of the 6th of June on the liquidation of the Makhnovists, the interdiction of the congress, its delegates arraigned before field courts-martial, turned Makhno into an outlaw. The White cossacks over-ran the liberated region and, not far from Gulyai-Polye pinned down the peasant regiment hastily formed by B. Veretelnikov, a worker from the Putilov Works (in Petrograd, who was a native of the area). On the 7th of June the Reds sent Makhno a message via an armoured train, urging him to hold out to the last. On the 8th of June Trotsky issued his order number 133, 'Whoever rejoins Makhtio can expect execution!' On the 9th of June, finally hearing of Trotsky, Makhno sent a telegram to him, and also to Moscow, indicating his wish to leave his post as brigade commander, 'in the light of the insupportable and absurd situation that has been created'. He explained, 'I believe in the inalienable right of workers and peasants to organise their own congresses to make their own decisions both in general and in particular'.

That same day several Bolshevik regiments invaded the 'liberated region', attacking and sacking the Makhnovist soviets and communes. On the 11th or 12th of June, in the armoured train in which the general staff of the Makhnovists and that of Voroshilov, commander of the 14th army had once collaborated, the members of the Makhnovist staff were arrested, and on the 17th June were charged as traitors at Kharkov. It was precisely in these days that the papers published a communiqué about Makhno's 'opening' of the front, and even of his agreement with Chkouro (Cossack general from Kuban allied with the Whites). It was thus easy to attribute the lack of military success to this 'treason'.

In support of this astonishing denunciation of Trotsky and the Bolsheviks, Golovanov cites the opinion of Antonov-Ovseenko, master-mind of the seizure of the Winter Palace in October 1917, who had become the commander of the Southern front before being demoted by Trotsky for his 'indulgence' towards the partisans. Analysing, in July 1919, the reasons for the lack of military success, Antonov-Ovseenko wrote:

Above all, the facts witness that the affirmations about the weakness of the most contaminated region — that from Gulyai-Polye to Berdiansk — are without foundation ... It is not because we ourselves have been better organised militarily, but because those troops were directly defending their native place...Makhno stayed at the front, in spite of the flight of the neighbouring 9th division, followed by the whole of the 13th army... The reasons for the defeat on the southern front do not rest at all in the existence of 'Ukrainian partisans' above all it must be attributed to the machinery of the southern front, in not having kept its fighting spirit and reinforced its revolutionary discipline.

The indictment concludes with an accusation: it was Trotsky and his machine' who deliberately provoked the collapse of the Southern front against the Whites! To complete the tale it is' necessary to recall that Trotsky declared at the time that he preferred to hand over the region to Denikin and the Whites rather than to Makhno and the 'independent' soviets, because he thought it would be possible to eliminate the first later on, while the second seemed to him more dangerous and difficult to push out of the way. Golovanov goes no further than this, certainly for lack of information, but all the same this is the first time that an official Soviet journal has underlined the 'disastrous' responsibility of the man whom the Kronstadt sailors were later to nickname *The Field-Marshal*.

Between the Reds and the Whites

The author assumes that Makhno's subsequent 'anti-Soviet' period is more or less well-known. Indeed, he writes, 'many details are omitted'. For example the 'role of Makhno in the struggle against Deniken has not yet been clarified', even though the Makhnovists had been alone in confronting him after the Red Army's evacuation of the Ukraine, when their numbers rose considerably — from fifty to eighty thousand as well as the residue of the 2nd Red Army and the Red Army of the Crimea, at the same time as soldiers of the Hetman Grigoriev, himself unmasked before an insurgent congress on the 27th of July, and shot because he had betrayed the revolution.

Golovanov goes on to describe the long retreat of the Makhnovists, followed by the White elite troops, as far as their victorious turning-point at Peregonovka and their deadly raid on Denikin's rear. These are 'omitted details' even though Lenin and the Bolshevik power structure were ready to evacuate Moscow because of the advance of the Whites.

Finally he discusses the encounter between the Makhnovists and the Reds towards the end of 1919. He cites, in particular, a telegram from Ordjonikidze to the central committee of the communist party, where Stalin's compatriot and friend foresaw that 'the popularisation (in the press) of the name of Makhno, still hostile to Soviet power, attracts undesirable sympathy towards him in the ranks of the Red Army.

When the revolutionary military soviet of the 14th Red Army ordered Makhno to go back to the Polish front, the similarly named Makhnovist soviet refused, since their ranks were ravaged by typhus, and Makhno himself was a victim. Beyond this, Makhno feared being cut off from his own region' and preferred to 'help' somewhere 'closer'. The Makhnovists were thus declared 'outlaws'. Makhno demobilised his army and disappeared.

In the spring of 1920 the reorganised Makhnovists, numbering six to eight thousand, submitting to a 'hard' discipline, mounted some audacious attacks against the Red troops, annihilating their supply lines (and their Chekas, another omitted detail). The Reds devoted great efforts to repulsing him. Makhno had the advantage of being able to move rapidly throughout the region, changing horses. (An interesting 'detail' here: the Makhnovists changed three weary horses for one fresh horse among the peasants.) In spite of everything, the peasantry was grimly determined to continue fighting on two fronts, and this was why an agreement was concluded between Frunze, the Red Army commander on that front as well as Jacovlev, representing the Ukrainian Soviet government, and the Makhnovists.

According to Golovanov this agreement had many advantages from Makhno's point of view, sustaining the autonomy of his 'liberated region' in which Makhno 'believed fanatically'. But, according to the author once more, this was nothing more than a 'political ruse' by the Reds, aiming at making use of Makhno in the capture of the Crimea. (There is an inexactitude here: the author affirms that the Makhnovists entered the Crimea following the Red Army troops across the Sivash Strait, while it is well-known that it was they who forced this passage against powerful White opposition). Having served this purpose 'they were surrounded and disarmed under some pretext or other'. To sustain this hypothesis, Golovanov recounts how after the capture of Simferopol by the Crimean Makhnovist army, in violation of the autonomy' offer, they were 'ordered to disperse and disarm'. The 'commanders who had been at their head were arrested and shot', with the exception of Martchenko and two hundred horsemen who were able to force their way across the Perekop isthmus, eventually rejoining Makhno. He, encircled in Gulyai-Polye, and

knowing nothing about the order by Frunze which provoked this 'massacre' succeeded 'as much through a miracle as through his own fury' in escaping the 'trap'.

The treachery of the Bolsheviks in their relationship with the Makhnovists is already well-known to us, but it is here spelt out in detail by Golovanov, for the very first time in an official publication. It all casts a dark shadow on the Soviet leaders of the period, but Golovanov leaves this issue to his readers. In an inconsequential way he characterises Makhno's subsequent actions against the Bolsheviks as political banditry', even though this term, according to his own analysis is more applicable to the Bolsheviks!

Makhno pursued his struggle against the Reds with 'the sang-froid of a madman: with neither fear nor hope'. He threatened Poltava (an important town in the northern Ukraine) with a detachment of 600 cavalry in January 1921, until Frunze's command succeeding. in 'unravelling the logic, at first sight chaotic, of his strategy' and attacked on a broad front. Pursued relentlessly for three months, wounded for the twelfth time, he and a small group escaped across the frontier and took refuge in Romania.

Free soviets: totalitarian party

The author believes that 'one day the historians will reconstruct the details of the episodes in the civil war connected with Makhno'. But the whole affair cannot be limited to 'details'. It brings to light far more important questions like the 'degeneration' of popular power, because Makhno had acted, from the beginning, as a convinced anarchist, adopting the position of 'self-management', of 'free soviets', and for political liberty. He cites here the case of the occupation of the town of Ekatarinoslav in the autumn of 1919, where the Makhnovists, as well as their own organs, allowed the publication of those of the social revolutionaries, of the left social revolutionaries and even those of the Bolsheviks. According to him this expression of 'popular power' later changed to a 'military dictatorship', which moreover was 'all the more clumsy since the Makhnovists recognised no law limiting the exercise of power', since they 'considered nothing to be an exercise of power, but simply as the execution of the will of the people'.

This is absolutely true, historically, but it applies to the Bolsheviks rather than to the Makhnovists! There is nothing wrong about his observation, but we have to add in deploring Golovanov's lack of comprehension, that it must be the result of seventy years of Lenin-Stalinist brainwashing! The 'degeneration' seen everywhere in the exercise of so-called 'soviet' power, was the result of the totalitarian dictatorship of a party convinced that it was 'following the path of history'.

The author concludes his study by attributing the situation created by the Bolsheviks to the 'intoxication' of society after the violence of the civil war period. This situation consisted of 'the almost complete suppression of previously proclaimed revolutionary political liberties, the creation of an unseen but powerful repressive apparatus, the institution of total controls in the interests of solving economic problems, the creation of a gigantic State machine (four million civil servants in 1921), the marginalisation of any democratic institutions'.

Soviet society was obliged to forget 'for a long time the priority of generally accepted human values' ... 'replacing them by the concept of class. This generated a whole stratum of mutants, people who used ideology as a justification of their own moral misconduct.' These were the *mutants* upon whom 'Stalin later depended'.

An advance towards historical truth

After taking careful note of this long and exhaustive study of Makhno, let us repeat the main points. First that everything said about Makhno in the Soviet Union until now has been fantasy or plain lies. Secondly that his real personality was that of a revolutionary anarchist; as such his activities began in 1905, culminating in 1917 and 1918.

Thirdly that in 1919 and 1920, he was allied with the Reds, who every time treacherously broke the agreement that had been concluded. On the first occasion it was Trotsky who took on the role of betraying and destroying the 'independent soviets'. On the second occasion the responsibility lies collectively with the Bolsheviks. Finally, and overwhelmingly, Makhno was a 'fanatical' partisan of free and autonomous soviets, direct organs of popular wishes.

Despite this, we now have a clear and precise rehabilitation of the Ukrainian anarchist. Foreseeably this first study is only a prelude to other analytical revisions of the history of the founding years, 1917–1921 of the regime. It must be stressed once more that this sensational article appeared in a journal with millions of readers — a sign of its importance — not in a local paper or a confidential historical review. Despite important reservations and disagreements on many points, we must, none the less, welcome this important advance towards historical truth.

The Anarchist Library
Anti-Copyright



Alexandre Skirda
The Rehabilitation of Makhno
1989

Retrieved on 30th July 2020 from <nestormakhno.info/english/rehab.htm>
See the original French in *Le Monde Libertaire* for 6 April here:
<ml.ficedl.info/IMG/pdf/ml0746_1989-6-avr.pdf>

theanarchistlibrary.org