The Makhnovist Movement: Peasant Rebels as Anarcho-Communists in War-torn Ukraine

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The Ukrainian peasant Nestor Ivanovich Makhno is usually given an abbreviated historical mention as the leader of the rowdy Anarchist “Blacks” during the Ukrainian and Russian civil wars and beyond, from 1917 through 1921. Yet his leadership of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army, maliciously labeled a “Bandit Army” by all the combatants it opposed, was in fact a regionally based and broadly supported peasant coalition that vigorously resisted foreign domination. From Makhno and his followers’ perspective, the interests of the Ukrainian peasantry directly collided with those of Austro-German imperialism, Ukrainian nationalism, and Tsarist and Bolshevik absolutism alike.

During the bloody and-contracted Russian and Ukrainian civil wars the armies of all the protagonists could obtain superficial signs of civilian support in the towns through which they passed because of their weaponry. But, Makhno alone achieved genuine and sustained support from the Ukrainian peasantry, who were attracted to his libertarian leanings. Makhno advocated the re-establishment of local political autonomy and traditional Ukrainian homestead farming and he had an idyllic vision of autonomous rural anarchistic communities. These goals stood in stark contrast to the imperial domination favored by the Austro-Hungarians, the empowered bureaucracy promoted by Simeon Petliura’s Ukrainian nationalists, the re-establishment of Tsarist gentry hegemony advocated by the Whites, and the dictatorship of the proletariat championed by the Reds. Because these groups all ignored the Ukrainian peasantry’s political desires, Makhno found abundant support for his anarchist agenda in the fertile Ukraine.

While Makhno’s theoretical commitment to anarchism and his utopian vision remained fixed, the fluid political and military environment in which he lived forced
Makhno into a variety of unlikely alliances. Initially, for example, Makhno allied with the Bolsheviks to defeat their common White and nationalist enemies. Subsequently, when Red aggression in the region was combined with the imposition of War Communism and state farms, Makhno fought against the Bolsheviks. At different times, both the Reds and the Whites issued death warrants against him.

Makhno's complex and ambiguous pro-peasant anarchist orientation also resulted in temporary affiliation with anti-Semitic forces, incidents of brazen banditry, and acts of unexpected charity. Makhno's personal story, like that of the movement he led, thus bear supreme testimony to the turbulence of the day, a time when, depending on one's ideological vision of the future, an idealistic yet militant peasant partisan could be viewed as either a hero or a villain.

Yet, a firmly established archetype for rebel leaders increased Makhno's popularity amongst the Ukrainian populace. The peasantry had long told mythical tales and sung songs about the bravery, martyrdom, and supernatural abilities of popular revolt leaders of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Because these charismatic rebel leaders, such as Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev, had fought for the rights of the serfs and against the advances of the centralized state into the Greater Russian periphery, the peasantry continued to extoll their virtues, while disregarding their shortcomings. As adverse situations persisted, these heroic rebels of the past took on the supernatural capabilities of a messiah; they could not be held by bars and were immune to bullets. At some time in the future, they might return from hiding to save the peasantry once again. Although Makhno never equated himself directly with either Pugachev or Razin, the peasantry's collective memory of these rebel leaders, combined with their persisting
traditional grievances, led many to associate Makhno and his forces with these earlier peasant rebellions.

Makhno’s resulting broad base of support among the Ukrainian peasantry strengthened as well as limited his movement. For example, extensive peasant support allowed him to expedite his military maneuvers with a steady supply of fresh horses from noncombatant supporters. Peasant support also facilitated his very successful guerrilla tactics, in which his peasant soldiers would strike a target and then bury their weapons and resume their normal agricultural lifestyle. At the same time, however, the peasant identity of Makhno’s followers limited his movement’s potential. For instance, his peasant supporters would not sanction supplying the hungry cities with food, which precluded the possibility of gathering a large urban following, which, in turn, aided Bolshevik domination of these strategic centers. Moreover, the peasantry’s general aversion to urbanites, lofty ideology, and further self-sacrifice, persisted along the lines of more traditional manifestations like those of preceding rural revolt leaders like Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev. His reliance on peasant support thus forced Makhno, like all radical utopian theorists who try to actualize their visions and defend their communities, to depart from some of their idyllic desires in order to facilitate greater solidarity.

The aims and ideas of the international anarchist community, which Makhno encouraged, protected, and espoused, differed in fundamental respects from the temporary manifestations of “anarchy” that both Makhno and his Black supporters deemed practical and necessary. In fact, the eventual transformation of Makhno’s anarchist forces into a popularly supported regional military government that defended
local political and economic autonomy actually contradicted the purest tenets of theoretical anarchism. Put simply, Makhno and his followers found that in order to defend and preserve their movement they had to deviate from anarchist ideals.

The ambiguous character of the Makhnovist movement thus raised in stark form perennial questions about the real life possibilities of anarchism and utopian social theories in general. Is it even possible for an independent, truly pure anarchistic community to exist on this earth? What happens to utopian ideas when people try to put them into practice? Will theorists always find fault with practical attempts to put anarchist theory into practice? Anarchists of Makhno's day recognized the importance of his experiment for their movement, but they differed widely in their opinions of it. As Michael Palij explains,

Some regarded it as [an] expression of anarchism and believed that the anarchists should devote all their energies to it. Others held that the povstantsi represented the native rebellious spirit of the southern peasants, but that their movement was not anarchism, though anarchistically tinged....Several [others] took an entirely different position, denying to the Makhno movement any anarchistic meaning whatsoever.¹

This study argues that Makhno served as the voice of the otherwise silent and repressed Ukrainian peasantry at the same time that he strove to implement an interpretation of anarchism which catered to the peasantry's desires. The governmental organization, military structure and arbitrary tendencies of his movement obviously compromised the libertarian ideas espoused by the international anarchist community. They were, however, in full accord with the peasantry's conception of the valiant revolt leader, an archetype that was deeply imprinted in the peasantry’s collective consciousness.

and which was best exemplified by the rebel leaders Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev.

Within this revolutionary tradition, Makhno, like the plethora of political and social theorists both before and after him, was forced to surmount the difficulties of implementing his theories in an “impure” human environment by modifying them within a temporary manifestation. While these compromises served as fodder for endless disputes between Makhno and the theoretical anarchists of his day, they were not important to Makhno’s peasant supporters. For the average Ukrainian peasant, anarchism was merely a path to the alleviation of a plethora of grievances that had persisted for centuries. While Makhno and his fellow anarchists\(^2\) earnestly hoped to achieve true theoretical anarchy in the future, the Ukrainian peasantry saw their support of Makhno’s ideologically-benevolent movement as a means of facilitating their immediate economic and political emancipation. The peasantry’s traditional desire for land and autonomy drew them to Makhno’s banner because he protected their interests, left a great deal of autonomy in their hands, and produced the results which the peasantry desperately desired. Because it sought to establish a theoretically pure anarchist society, the Makhnovist movement subordinated its theoretical aspirations, of necessity, to those of the peasantry. The fact that Makhno defended the peasants’ agenda while simultaneously retaining his noble ideals amplifies the importance of the Makhnovist experiment.

Because the Ukrainian peasantry accepted voluntarily supported governmental and military structures to facilitate libertarian gains, the Blacks relied heavily upon the thoughts of Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, who advocated these manifestations

\(^2\) According to the Oxford English Dictionary, an “anarch” is a noun meaning a leader or advocate of revolt or anarchy.
within revolutionary anarcho-communism. The result of this symbiotic relationship
between traditional peasant aspirations, anarchist guidance, and revolutionary anarcho-
communist thought was remarkable: through their well orchestrated resistance, the
"Black" Makhnovist forces provided one of the few occasions in history when self
professed anarchists controlled a significant amount of territory for an extended period of
time.

The remarkable success of Makhno’s partisan forces, like that of other insurgent
groups, necessitated their removal by the emerging Bolshevik state. Because Makhno’s
Black forces effectively hindered and threatened Bolshevik ascendancy in the Ukraine,
the peasantry’s assimilation into the new state could only occur after support for Makhno
had been undermined and the example of his erstwhile anarchistic community had been
eliminated. The Makhnovist movement had proven itself a fearful adversary for
Bolshevik centralization precisely because it had effectively combined the peasantry’s
traditional aspirations and a widely accepted charismatic leader with an adaptable
interpretation of revolutionary Anarcho-Communism.

The Ukraine Under Tsarist Rule and Beyond

The Ukraine was only sparsely populated until Catherine the Great (1763-1796)
annexed the last non-Russian section from the Turks in 1787 and renamed it “New
Russia.” In an attempt to populate the region, Catherine had introduced a policy of
foreign colonization that was continued by her successor, Paul (1796-1801). The Tsarist
government issued its two earliest manifestos on December 4, 1762 and June 22, 1763,
approximately 25 years before the entire Ukraine was annexed. In these documents foreign settlers were guaranteed liberal terms and "the Monarchical favor." As a result, large numbers of Russian, Armenian, Bulgarian, Georgian, Greek, Italian, Jewish, Moldavian, Wallachian, Serb and German foreigners settled in New Russia. During her reign, Catherine gave the seventy-five thousand foreigners that settled in New Russia a total of four million acres and loans totaling six million roubles -- two million roubles of which was an outright gift.  

The German Mennonites were given the most generous grants and privileges. As conscientious objectors to war, the Mennonites were free from all military obligations. As preferred citizens, they were exempted from all taxation for thirty years, and given a complete monopoly over all breweries and distilleries. The tsarist government also financed the construction of their villages, and each family was given sixty-five dessiatina (a little over 175 acres) on the richest soil, along with a loan of five hundred rubles. Each German Mennonite village was also granted a large free pasture and a forest, along with the right to establish their own social, economic, educational, and political organizations.

Most Ukrainian peasants viewed the foreigners' privileged status with disgust, for, New Russia, along with the Caucasus, was the last region of the Russian Empire to be enserfed, in 1796. While Ukrainian nobles, a small number of artisans, and some peripheral peasants remained free, the majority of the Ukrainian peasantry were pushed into noncompensated forced labor. Although the Mennonites established separate colonies, and remained aloof of the Ukrainian serfs, some newcomers -- particularly more

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wealthy Russian and Polish immigrants -- became gentry serf owners. The Ukrainian peasants were being enserfed, while groups like the German Mennonite settlers were benefiting immensely through separate autonomy and special privileges.\(^4\) The serfs naturally resented this disparity.

As a result of the influx of privileged foreigners, the commercial production of landlords in New Russia increased dramatically. Alongside the fertility of the Ukraine, this fact can be explained by the character of serfdom in this region. While only forty-one percent of the serfs in the central industrial regions fulfilled their obligations to their master by noncompensated field work (*barshchina*), 99.9 percent of the recently enserfed peasants of New Russia were on *barshchina*. Because the New Russia had rich soil which was well suited for wheat production, landlords made more money by retaining the agricultural product of their land than by requiring their serfs to pay *obrok* (obligations paid in cash or kind, instead of compulsory labor).\(^5\)

When Tsar Alexander II (1855-1881) abolished serfdom in 1861, the Ukrainian peasants felt that their “liberation” was incomplete. Only a little land left the landlord’s hands, and that which was transferred to the peasantry was sold to them at an inflated price. Household servants and the serfs of small landowners were simply emancipated without any land. Moreover, the ex-serfs remained under state supervision, were tied to the land by a system of collective redemption for the land they had received, and were not allowed to attend secondary schools. The Ukrainian peasants therefore increasingly deserted their communal holdings for the rapidly disappearing frontier of New Russia.\(^6\)

In time, the situation of the Ukrainian peasantry deteriorated further, and they

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\(^4\) Palij, 47-49.  
\(^5\) Malet, xviii.  
\(^6\)
began to protest their situation. Beginning in the 1880s, the peasant population of the Ukraine increased dramatically, and as a result per capita land allotments decreased accordingly. In fact, between 1880 and 1900, the average land allotment dwindled from 3.6 to 2.3 dessiatina. Because the Gentry owners continued to have a good return on their agricultural holdings, they were reluctant to rent their pastures out to the needy peasantry. The results were forthcoming. During the 1890's Katerynoslav province alone experienced 88 uprisings involving 188 villages. Towards the end of the century, the peasant movement against the landlords became more radical and was led by the Socialist Revolutionary Party, which tried to refocus peasant grievances on political issues. In 1902, it was the issue of land reform that resulted in 160 riots in Ukrainian villages. And again in 1905, in the context of a nationwide revolution, there were riots protesting the agrarian situation in all eight provinces of the Ukraine.

Following the Revolution of 1905, Prime Minister Stolypin attempted to solve Russia's land problem by creating a prosperous and therefore conservative peasant strata. His 1911 Land Settlement Act abolished communal tenure, enclosed scattered strips within concentrated land holdings, and established individual peasant farmers on their own allotments. But because poorer peasants lacked sufficient farm equipment and other resources, the Stolypin reforms provided them with no relief. Instead, they were often forced to sell their land. This outcome, in fact had been Stolypin's goal all along; he explained to the Third Duma, that “the government had placed its wager not in the needy, but on the strong -- the sturdy individual proprietor.”

As a result of Stolypin's policy, the agrarian dilemma in the Ukraine only

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6 Palij, 49.
7 Palij, 49-50.
worsened in the years between the 1905 and 1917 Revolutions. Indeed, the observation of the Marshal of the Nobility of Katerynoslav province was as true in 1917 as it had been when he made it in 1883:

The peasants firmly declared that they would take the land they considered to be theirs away from the landlords. They reasoned that even if the land was appropriated to the landlords in the past, this was unjust because it [the land] was acquired by the blood of their parents and their peasant ancestors.

The conditions in which the average peasant lived after the fall of the Romanov dynasty continued to breed dissatisfaction. By 1917, forty percent of the Russian peasantry could not subsist on only the land they owned, an equal portion could barely survive if weather conditions were good; and only twenty percent were secure. Almost all of the peasantry desired more land, whether it would be given them directly, or distributed amongst their communes. With the dawn of World War I, peasant unhappiness was only exasperated further. Pressed by the demands of war, taxes increased dramatically. Simultaneously, peasants experienced high rates of conscription into an army that was being decimated in World War I.

Although the Ukraine had abundant military potential, and strong traditions that could have supported a nationalistic agenda, the country remained politically and nationally underdeveloped. The fact that the peasants believed their unhappy circumstances resulted from the actions of the state and its supporters only perpetuated this situation. They were quite conscious of their previous political and economic manipulation by the state, the gentry, and outsiders in general. As a result, they opposed urbanites, central bureaucracies, and foreign domination in all of its many manifestations.

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8 Palij, 50-51.
9 Quoted in Palij, 50.
Essentially self-interested, their opposition to the Ukrainian Nationalist, Hetmanite puppet, Russian Tsarist, and Russian communist governments was based upon the desire for private ownership of land, individual liberty, and freedom from "foreign" exploitation. Since no form of government had ever attempted to satisfy their deepest desires, the Gulyai Polye populace was receptive to the radical idea that the state in every form was evil and should be combated. The Ukrainian peasantry therefore came to oppose all forms of national government at the same time that they embraced revolution as a means to achieve genuine liberation.

In contrast to the oppression visited upon them by the state was the Cossack tradition of social and political rebellion and a persistent vision of freedom. Ukrainian peasants, especially in the region of Gulyai Polye, focused their attention on the issues of land ownership and human rights which had persisted since the Ukraine's annexation. The Gulyai Polye populace sought leadership from partisan leaders who were not affiliated with any of the many competing official governments, and especially from those who directly opposed government. Their conceptualization of the revolutionary spirit and the rebel leader was based on their collective memory of the 17th and 18th century peasant rebels Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev who actively resisted domination and exploitation by the tsarist government and the gentry landlords. The memory of these two courageous rebel leaders served both as an example and a call to arms for the oppressed peasantry.

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10 Malet, 117.
Historical Predecessors in the Peasantry's Struggle for Autonomy

The 1670 - 1671 rebellion under Stenka Razin was the first great popular peasant uprising against the Russian Tsarist state. As a Don Cossack, and thus a descendent of fugitives from Muscovite oppression, Razin's grievances against the state were clear. The Don Cossacks had long valued local autonomy, personal independence, and social equality amongst its members. These ideals, coupled with the Don Cossacks' "republic," naturally positioned them as a challenge to absolutist Romanov rule. The Don Cossacks refused to recognize any authority but that of their krug, or general assembly.11

The Cossacks had long had special agreements with the Tsarist government that provided them with significant autonomy in exchange for guarding Russia's Southern frontier. They valued their historic independence to such an extreme that they would not allow farming, which in Russia proper was tied to the institution of serfdom. The Cossacks rejected serfdom and farming because they believed that the presence of the Russian nobility would inevitably lead to greater centralized control, resulting in a loss of the personal freedom enjoyed by the Cossack communities. In essence, the Cossacks declared that they would guard Muscovy's borders for "the waters and grasses, but not for estates."12

The reign of Tsar Alexis was an especially difficult time for the Russian peasantry and it witnessed a major revolt by the Don Cossack Stenka Razin and a band of followers. Because the Don Cossacks maintained the basic principle that "From the Don no one is handed over," the Don region had always been a sanctuary to which serfs could

escape in order to circumvent their obligations. With the advent of the Law Code of 1649, commoners were bound to their geographic locale and obliged to take up the hereditary occupation and status of their parents. A war with Poland, which began in 1654, increased the economic and human demands on the peasantry, thereby causing a deterioration in the serfs' condition. As tax levies and military mobilizations increased, floods of serf refuges poured into the Don. The overall situation of the Russian commoners during Tsar Alexis' rule was perhaps most poignantly described by a Dutch visitor who witnessed a group of commoners petitioning Tsar Alexis. They spoke to him concerning the intolerable great taxes and contributions, whereby they were overburdened for some years...so they with their wives and children are thereby ruined; besides which the great oppressions which the boyars did lay daily upon them, and that they were not able to hold out any longer. Yea, they desired rather with their wives and children to undergo a present death than to suffer any longer in such a transcendent oppression.

Alongside these difficulties, the official Orthodox Christian Church also experienced a crisis. Religious dissenters, known as “Old Believers” because they resisted the reforms of Patriarch Nikon, viewed both the Patriarch and Tsar Alexis as the Beast of the Apocalypse. While most Russians still identified Tsar Alexis as the traditional “good tsar,” they were increasingly coming to believe that he had been deceived by the wicked boyars into oppressing the people for the exclusive benefit of the nobility. Over time, however, a good portion of the non-religious dissenting Russian populace began to see an element of the devil in Tsar Alexis.

By the time of Razin’s 1670 rebellion, the Don’s population had reached 25,000 -

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12 quoted in Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels, 61.
14 Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600 - 1800, 57.
- a full three times the level it had been before Alexis ascended the thrown. As they had before, the subjugated Russian populace, holding a variety of grievances, sought relief on the periphery of the Russian Empire, under the protection of the Cossack hosts. This dramatic population increase strained the resources of the Don and provided a powerful reason for the state to infiltrate the Don on the behalf of the distressed gentry serf holders, who were the bread and butter of the Romanov’s administrative structure.

Following the precedent set by Ivan the Terrible, he sought to increase his control over provincial administration and the military. He eliminated the traditional boyar (aristocratic) council and the Zemski Sobor (Council of the Land) and replaced them with a national assembly chosen by himself. Simultaneously the Cossacks’ local autonomy was diminished as the authority of the centrally appointed voevoda was increased markedly. The convergence of political, socio-economic, and religious grievances during Alexis’ rule provided the perfect environment for a rebellion led by a charismatic leader. It seems only appropriate that the Russian people’s protest was heard through the actions of the Don Cossack Stenka Razin. Razin’s aim was straightforward: he would replace the new bureaucratic autocracy with decentralized, Cossack-style assemblies and elected officials.

While Razin and his followers certainly engaged in freebooting and piracy, the movement never departed from its central aim: the complete liberation of the common Russian serf. In pursuit of this objective, a flotilla of Razin’s forces had journeyed along the Caspian Sea to Persia, and even sailed up the lower and middle Volga in early 1670.

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Throughout these journeys, his forces took special efforts to massacre tsarist officials and landlords while proclaiming the liberation of all the oppressed.  

Stenka Razin’s response to the widespread Cossack and peasant grievances of the late 17th century emerged from a long tradition of Cossack militancy in defense of their own autonomy and in support of the liberation of the Russian people. Because these values were commonly held throughout the Don, Razin’s movement grew exponentially. Yet, as Nikolai Kostomarov observed, Stenka Razin’s charisma and personal example also contributed to his movement’s success. Nikolai Kostomarov observed something extraordinary in Razin’s personality. He had

enormous will and impulsive activity...now stern and gloomy, now working himself into a fury, now given up to drunken carousing, now ready to suffer any hardship with superhuman endurance. There was something fascinating in his speech; reckless courage was written in his coarse and slightly pock-marked features. The crowd sensed some supernatural strength in him, against which it was useless to struggle. They called him a sorcerer...  

Such charisma, coupled with the aims of Razin’s movement, caused fugitive serfs, religious dissenters, and libertarian desiring partisans to join Razin’s movement in droves. Even after government forces defeated him at Simbirsk in 1670, Razin’s charisma and the popularity of his cause allowed him to hold out for almost a year at his home base in Astrakhan. When Astrakan finally fell in 1671, Razin was captured and shipped to Moscow where he was executed, an act that enshrined him as a popular martyr for his cause.

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18 Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600 - 1800, 117.
19 Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600 - 1800, 50-131.
20 Ibid., 69.
21 John Channon and Rob Hudson, 45, 50.
After his death, Razin's name was incorporated into a plethora of folk legends and songs as the deliverer who tried to gain freedom and justice for the Russian serfs. In his day, Pushkin was fond of referring to Razin as "the one poetic figure in Russian history." One authority even asserts that Razin was the subject of more songs and legends than any other popular hero. Following his death, Razin took on supernatural powers in these folk legends.

Bullets could not harm him, he could cast a spell over snakes, open locks by magic, and escape from prison by drawing a boat on the wall with charcoal or chalk and sailing away.

The legends gradually gave way to a belief in Razin's immortality: he had not died, but was hiding in a distant location, waiting for the proper time to return and liberate the Russian people. Some of the folk legends and songs took a different approach, voicing the notion that Razin had a son who would return to realize his father's aims. Later, during Pugachev's rebellion, this concept of a succession of saviors passed onto him. As Nikolai Kostomarov recounts, as late as the 1840's, he regularly met old peasants in the Volga region who believed that Pugachev had been the "second coming of Razin after a hundred years." A legacy had been established.

Pugachev's persistence within the peasantry's collective memory

During Catherine the Great's rule Tsarist injustices against the peasantry produced a major peasant rebellion. A variety of social, political, religious, and economic peasant grievances once again provided an opportunity for rebellion. Although

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22 Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600 - 1800, 120.
23 Ibid., 121.
24 Ibid., 122.
25 John Channon and Rob Hudson, 45, 50.
some peasants within the patriarchal peasant communities deemed Catherine an illegitimate sovereign because she was female, this was only a minor aspect of the difficulties that would peak between 1773 and 1774. The peasantry's rejection of Catherine centered on the fact that she had come to power by murdering of her husband, Peter III, in 1762.26 Prior to his death, on February 18, 1762 Peter had issued a manifesto freeing the nobles from compulsory service. Immediately following this proclamation, Peter converted Russia's ecclesiastic serfs into state peasants. Most serfs saw this emancipation as the first stage of a general emancipation. Upon murdering Tsar Peter I, Catherine and the gentry brought a cessation to this evolution. Upon gaining the throne Catherine immediately converted the newly created state peasants back into monastic serfs. For many peasants, Peter's murder at the hands of his wife and her aristocratic supporters seemed in line with the popular myth of the good tsar who martyred himself for his people. As early as 1762, the year of Peter's death, rumors began circulating widely of Peter's resurrection and future return.27

But the policies of Catherine's government also augmented peasant resentment. In 1767 she published a new code of laws that prohibited serfs from petitioning the crown against their masters on punishment of the knout and forced labor for life in Siberia. Between 1762 and 1772, Russia's war with Turkey increasingly burdened the Russian serfs with taxes and recruitment. Hordes of runaway serfs once again sought safety in the Southern borderlands.28

Objections to the Tsarist government's attempts at central domination once again originated in the southern frontier, amongst the Yaik Cossacks in 1773. In return for

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26 John Channon and Rob Hudson, 48, 52.  
27 Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 183-185.
their service to the crown as southern border guards, Tsar Michael (1613-1645) had promised the Yaik Cossacks full possession of the Yaik river and the area surrounding it. But by the 18th century, the region was increasingly being settled by runaway serfs. To make matters worse, in 1735 the Tsarist government began forcing the Yaik Cossacks to lease their rights to the Yaik river for a large annual sum. Tensions rose to a boil in 1765 when the Russian War College was given control over the region. Conscripts from the local populace were taken by force. As Old Believers and Cossacks, these commoners were profoundly offended both by their status as regular peasant soldiers and by the requirement that they, like all recruits, shave their beards. As Old Believers, the Yaik Cossacks prized their beards “almost equal to their lives.”

Nativist elements were rejecting foreign innovations and the modernization of the Russian life and state. The expanding tsarist center was once again pitted against the rapidly disappearing frontier.

Pugachev claimed that he was the “true tsar” Peter III, who had returned as the “protector of the people.” This claim positioned him as a leader to which groups with a variety of social grievances could flock. His goals were diverse and the grievances he voiced were profound: the Yaik Cossacks should retain their traditional hunting and fishing liberties; serfs should be freed; the Bashkirs (an indigenous people) should be given complete autonomy; and the grievances of the Old Believers should be redressed. As a disgruntled Cossack, an Old Believer sympathizer, a fugitive from the law, and a military deserter, Pugachev identified with the sympathies of his region. In his pursuit of the interests of the peasantry, Emelian Pugachev positioned his rebellion in opposition to gentry domination in its manifestations as landlord, recruiter, and a centralizing

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29 Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 182.
bureaucracy. Following in Razin's footsteps, Pugachev viewed the democracy of the Cossacks as the path for achieving these aims. Forced labor and serfdom would be abolished and each strata of Russian society would be freed from obligations to all but the tsar. Pugachev's proposals envisioned a dramatically different society -- one in which only the 'legitimate' tsar could demand the service of the populace. 

Pugachev's rebellion was geared toward propagation. Social and religious myths, which were carefully nurtured through propaganda, connecting Pugachev to Razin or the "true tsar" Peter III bolstered Pugachev's following. Because Pugachev's grievances and goals were almost universally held, his cause drew a large and diverse following. While the majority of his recruits were peasants or lesser Cossacks, his movement rapidly grew to include artisans and traders from the towns, peasants, lower clergy, Urals foundry workers, Volga boatmen, mountain tribesmen, and religious dissenters.

The Pugachev rebellion resulted in a series of rebellions throughout the Volga and Urals regions in 1773 and 1774, and in the winter of 1773-1774 Pugachev captured Kazan and even threatened Moscow. Pugachev's forces were internally divided and this flaw undermined their overall success. His forces were uncoordinated and they wasted a great deal of energy on pillage and destruction. Moreover, they remained on the periphery rather than attacking the center of the Russian Empire. Coupled with these strategic problems, the religious and national divisions within Pugachev's movement finally led to its demise in 1774. Betrayed by a frightened faction within his forces,
Pugachev was captured by tsarist forces, taken to Moscow, and executed. Without his leadership, the rebel forces quickly splintered, making their annihilation by Catherine’s forces that much easier.

Following Pugachev’s execution, peasant myths grew up about him, just as they had earlier about Razin. Rumors circulated amongst the Cossacks, peasants, and tribesmen that “Peter Fyodorovich” was still alive, was in hiding as an ox herder, and was waiting to once again emerge and liberate the poor. The result of such myths was apparent: from the time of Pugachev’s execution to the end of Catherine’s reign there were more than forty local disturbances made in Pugachev’s name. A common soldier hit it right on the mark when he observed that “They caught the fish, but his teeth still remain.”

These tales and myths about Razin and Pugachev continued to circulate throughout the entire nineteenth century. To his followers and sympathizers, Pugachev remained a symbol of peasant revolt. As Paul Avrich notes, the serfs believed that Pugachev, like Razin before him, was a “resplendent sun...which having set, must rise again.” Pushkin’s subsequent history of the Pugachev rebellion furthered this sentiment by connecting it to the image of a soaring bird. In his history, Pushkin presented a dialogue which took place between Pugachev and the Tsarist General Panin at the time of Pugachev’s apprehension:

Panin: “Exactly who are you?”
Pugachev: “Emelian Ivanovich Pugachev.”
Panin: “Then how dare you, a vor [brigand], call yourself the Sovereign?”

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34 John Channon and Rob Hudson, 52.
35 Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 252.
36 John Channon and Rob Hudson, 48.
37 quoted in Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 258.
38 quoted in Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 260.
Pugachev: "I am not the voron [raven], but his offspring. The raven himself is still flying."39

This dialogue, whether true or not, was remarkably accurate. For example, the following song was sung long after Pugachev's execution in the Urals.

Emelian, our own dear father,
Wherefore have you forsaken us?
Our resplendent sun has gone down.40

Avrich even notes that for many years after Pugachev's death, the peasants of Saratov calculated the date as before or after Pugachev, in place of Christ.41 Just as Pugachev had been regarded as Razin's legitimate heir, so the Russian peasantry now sought the next supernatural peasant rebel leader.

The Theory that is Anarchism

Historically, anarchy has been identified with lawlessness. Yet, we know that genuine anarchy has never truly existed on the earth because its ideal departs radically from these imputed results. The final goal of all pure anarchists is the establishment of a utopian society that accords complete and absolute freedom to each individual. Although government would not exist, such a society would be the opposite of chaotic. A society of anarchists would be founded upon the principles of the voluntary cooperation and free association of individuals and groups. It therefore would have no need for a government or formal laws.

Pure anarchism would be freer than a democracy because decision making would be surrendered by individuals themselves. Anarchy can thus only exist within a

39 Quoted in Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 260.
40 Quoted in Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 251.
41 Quoted in Paul Avrich, Russian Rebels 1600-1800, 251.
voluntarily formed, like minded group. A societal structure must exist within the anarchist society, but that structure must be compatible with each individual's desires. The individual alone has the power to remove himself from the group, and upon doing so has no obligation or affiliation with that group. No amount of duress can force the individual to abandon his right to self-determination and thus anarchists living within an anarchist society would have an obligation to defend each individual's right to abstention and independent action. Complete freedom of the individual is the only "rule" or obligation of pure anarchy. As a result, anarchists equate any form of societal structure that is not universally supported as the domination, degradation, and enslavement of the individual.

The various interpretations of anarchy passed on to Nestor Ivanovich Makhno in the Ukraine were originally transmitted from Western Europe to Russia by individual anarchist theoreticians in the 1860s. In the 1870's Russian anarchism produced only sectarian anarchist organizations which were divided over the means and temporary manifestations necessary for achieving true anarchy. These controversies proved devastatingly divisive. Differing conceptions about whether anarchy sought to liberate a class, the individual, or all of humanity eventually proved insurmountable. As early as the 1860's, three distinct groups of anarchists emerged in Europe and Russia: the Anarchist Individualists, the Anarcho-Syndicalists, and the Anarchist Communists. These three paradigms are useful in defining the parameters of anarchy.

The Anarchist Individualists maintained the most libertarian strain of anarchist theory. They focused upon the individual’s right to unlimited personal freedoms. Of

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42 Palij, 61-62.
necessity, this goal positioned its adherents in opposition to any form of state or bureaucratic authority. Of the three international anarchist groupings, the Anarchist-Individualists were the least influential. The reason for their lack of influence is to be found in the Anarchist-Individualists' central tenet—that any organization of anarchists was an oxymoron. Since from their experience members of any organization ceased to be true anarchists, anarchist-individualists necessarily undermined their own chances to proliferate.\(^4\)

On the other extreme, the Anarcho-Syndicalists sought to combine Marxism, trade unionism, and anarchism. Conceptualized in France in the middle and late 19th century, the Anarcho-Syndicalists focused their attention upon the group—more than on the individual. Anarcho-Syndicalists accorded Unions the vital role of changing working conditions, thereby laying the foundation for further social and economic change. The Anarcho-Syndicalists' final strategy was to abolish the state through a proliferation of local and industrial syndicates carrying out general strikes.\(^4\) Because of its focus on workers' unions, Anarcho-Syndicalism gained its largest following in urban centers and was less widespread amongst the rural populace. Nevertheless, it was the second most popular branch of anarchism in Russia.

The Anarchist Communists advocated a middle position that focused upon the propagation of their message. They felt that individual freedom and human potential would only develop fully within a freely and harmoniously structured anarchist society. Anarchist Communists thus envisioned a utopian society consisting of a free federation of communes with individual members contributing and provided for according to the

\(^4\) Palij, 62.
\(^4\) Palij, 62.
maxim “from each according to his ability, to each according to his needs.”

The most famous spokesmen for Anarchist Communism, in Europe as well as Russia, were Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin. Born into a Russian noble family, Michael Bakunin began his political activism as a Panslavic populist. During the Revolution of 1848 he was arrested in Dresden, Germany and spent the next twelve years of his life in European and tsarist prisons. In 1860 he escaped to Japan and then to the United States and back to Europe. In 1864 Bakunin became an anarchist and joined the First International. Rivalries within the International between the Communists, led by Karl Marx, and the anarchists led to Bakunin’s expulsion in 1872.45

Bakunin and Marx’s views were remarkably similar and at the same time profoundly different. Both of them criticized the Social Democratic concept of a “people’s state” which they feared would consist of a bureaucracy, ruling experts, and technocrats. But Bakunin and Marx parted paths over Bakunin’s demand that a revolution must be social and cultural, and not just political. To Bakunin, the creators of the future utopian society must anticipate the future structures of the anarchist society within their existing organizations.

We must demand that the International, embryo of the society of the future, must be the true image of our principles of freedom and federation and must cast out any principle tending towards authority and dictatorship.46

Bakunin’s understanding of federalism made him believe in any given region or nationality’s right to political and cultural autonomy. At the same time Bakunin’s social-


46 Michael Bakunin, Marshall Shatz, ed. Statism and Anarchy (Cambridge: Cambridge University
revolutionary anarchist orientation established a new understanding of liberty:

Without political equality there is no real political liberty, but political equality will be possible only when there is social and economical equality. 47

Bakunin supported nationalist and separatist movements on the condition that they originate with the people and not with a privileged class. 48

The main thrust of Bakunin's conception of Revolutionary Anarchism was action. To Bakunin, isolated utopian socialist projects and individual cooperatives were "all fine, very magnanimous and noble," but, for Bakunin true deliverance could only be achieved through "struggle and revolt." 49 Perhaps inspired by his early fondness for panSlavism, Bakunin held that the Slavic peasants were the ideal subjects for such a revolution. In his mind, the Slavs were noble savages, uncorrupted by bourgeois society and possessing unerring communal instincts. 50 Bakunin codified these sentiments into a coda of anti-intellectualism, about which he declared that "For the preservation of the people's liberty, strength, and passion, ignorance is preferable to bourgeois civilization." 51 For Bakunin, purity of action was more important than individual knowledge. This sentiment, along with his understanding of equality, justice, and the necessity of Revolutionary Anarchism were quite influential in Makhno's day, as, indeed, they continue to be to this day. 52

49 Quoted in Michael Bakunin, Marshall Shatz, ed. Statism and Anarchy, 213-214.
51 Michael Bakunin, Marshall Shatz, ed. Statism and Anarchy, 27.
52 Ulrike Heider, 13-15.
Peter Kropotkin and the Idea of Mutual Aid

Peter Kropotkin’s personal evolution toward anarchism paralleled that of Bakunin. From the time of his youth, when he was a page at the tsar’s court, Kropotkin developed into a populist revolutionary. He became disillusioned with the tsarist state following the emancipation of the serfs, but his sadness soon turned into resolve. Kropotkin’s commitment to his ideals led him to become a political prisoner, a nihilist, and a social revolutionary before taking over the reigns of Anarcho-Communism from Bakunin at his death.53

While he was profoundly influenced by Bakunin’s idea of Revolutionary Anarchism, Kropotkin sought new ways to strengthen and better express the concepts behind Anarcho-Communism. Perhaps Kropotkin’s most important contribution to Anarcho-Communism was his critique of Social Darwinism. In the late 19th century, Social Darwinism was often understood to provide specific evidence that Anarcho-Communism could never reach its goal. Social Darwinism professed to prove that the principle of the survival of the fittest and competition between individuals was the natural principle of life. Kropotkin responded with his principle of “mutual aid.” Observing the world around him, Kropotkin saw numerous examples of animals spontaneously helping one another — in situations directly conflicting with their own immediate self interest. A famous example that was often recounted by Kropotkin, involved a pelican which had been struck blind and was lovingly fed by other pelicans instead of being left behind to die. Kropotkin felt that humans, too, possessed this natural inclination toward social

53 Ibid., 15-18.
responsibility and mutual assistance with regard to human beings.⁵⁴

There is, in mankind, a nucleus of social habits - an inheritance from the past, not yet duly appreciated - which is not maintained by coercion and is superior to coercion. Upon it all the progress of mankind is based...⁵⁵

In effect, Kropotkin’s concept of mutual aid accomplished two things for the anarcho-communists: it effectively argued that any group of people, upon achieving anarchism, would not revert to animalistic or hedonistic tendencies, while at the same time it supported the typical anarchist view that the state’s coercion of the masses, supposedly in their own interest, was unnecessary and insulting to human nature. Anarchy would not result in widespread rape, pillage, and destruction. Instead, humanity’s natural tendency for solidarity and mutual aid would emerge and be strengthened.⁵⁶

Kropotkin called the resulting solidarity “Communism”, which he expressed in the principle “to each according to his needs, from each according to his ability.” In Kropotkin’s view, once the established state was removed, people would remain socially responsible, but they would do so of their own free will. The eventual result would be a voluntaristic Communist society in which each individual would achieve true freedom, but would naturally retain a social conscience.⁵⁷

Kropotkin saw societies everywhere evolving toward his mutual aid understanding of Communism. Like Bakunin and the Russian populists before him, Kropotkin viewed the obshchina, the traditional Russian peasant commune, as a point of initiation for social change. To Kropotkin, voluntary contracts, exchange associations

⁵⁴ Ulrike Heider, 15-18.
⁵⁶ Ulrike Heider, 15-18.
⁵⁷ Ulrike Heider, 15-18.
independent of the state, the Greek Polis, and voluntary agreements all anticipated the eventual arrival of the free society. The final stage of this evolution toward Anarcho-Communist Society would occur when the people realized that their evolution toward this utopian society was hindered by the “propertied classes”, at which point the people would “break its bonds by violence and realize itself in a revolution.” Because of their tyranny, capitalists and large landowners would be expropriated and groups of “well-intentioned citizens” would record the extent of the property and food supply and then distribute everything to the peasants through the village community.

Kropotkin, like Bakunin, objected to authoritarian tendencies in left wing revolutionary organizations. In particular, he rejected the Bolsheviks’ conception of party dictatorship as the most effective way to end the capitalist era. To Kropotkin’s way of thinking, a new socialist society could be achieved in the least painful manner through “local construction by local forces.” The market, capital, money, social classes, unions, international contact, and the division of labor would cease to exist because they would become unnecessary. For Kropotkin, technology, goodwill, and reason would guarantee human cooperation in perpetuity. Because of such theory and guidance, the program of the Anarcho-Communists was geared toward worldly propagation. In addition to seeking support from the intelligentsia, which was vital to all proponents of anarchy, the anarchist communists also sought to incorporate soldiers and peasants, like Nestor Makhno, into their movement.

Because of the appeal of the Anarcho-Communist approach, anarchist

missionaries spread their ideas throughout greater Russia from the late 19th century onward.\footnote{Palij, 61-62.} In fact, Anarchist-Communist theory spread much more rapidly throughout Russia and the Ukraine than either Anarchist-Individualism or Anarcho-Syndicalism. The anarchists, however, were always smaller than the Mensheviks, Bolsheviks, or Social Revolutionaries, in part because of the multi-faceted nature of anarchist ideology.\footnote{Nomad, 303.}

As a result of the anarchists' weakness, political parties continued to undermine anarchism's success in the Ukraine between 1905 and 1917. While urban centers were split in their Social Democratic party affiliation between the Mensheviks and Bolsheviks, in rural areas "Anarcho-Syndicalist" Socialist Revolutionaries dominated popular interpretations of liberation. Amidst this ideological intermingling, would be Anarcho-Communists drifted away from the guidance of expatriate leaders like Kropotkin and Bakunin.\footnote{Woodcock, Anarchism: A History of Libertarian Ideas and Movements (New York: The New Press, 2001).} As the populist professor Franco Venturi noted of Bakunin, one of the most prominent Russian anarchists "he was able to inspire a revolutionary spirit within Russia, but not a [vital] organization."\footnote{Venturi, "Bakunin."}

Nevertheless, the peasantry's collective memory of the libertarianism espoused during the Razin and Pugachev uprisings encouraged Anarcho-Communism's independent emergence in Russia during 1917. Moreover, the leftover military hardware from World War I gave Anarcho-Communists an opportunity to express and defend the peasantry's traditionally recurring desires through arms. All that was needed was a new charismatic leader with some military knowledge and the will to fight and lead.

\footnote{Heider, 15-18.}
Nestor Ivanovich Makhno

Nestor Ivanovich Makhno was born in the Ukrainian village of Gulyai Polye. The village had been founded in 1720 by migrants from the west Ukraine and was later enlarged by immigrant Cossacks fleeing from their homeland after Catherine destroyed the Zaporozhian Sich (self-government). In many ways, the traditions and ideals of the Zaporozhian Sich still influenced the area around Gulyai Polye. The Zaporozhian Sich had extended from Alexandrovsk southward. Prior to being destroyed by Catherine, it had refused to recognize the authority of the central government and had lived by plundering Turkish communities around the Azov Sea and the Crimea. The freedom-loving traditions of the Sich continued to influence Gulyai Polye’s inhabitants to Makhno’s day.65

There are many reasons why Makhno eventually became the regional leader of the Gulyai Polye peasant movement. One of the most important was that he shared these peasants’ identity and culture. Makhno was born on October 17, 1889 to a typically poor peasant family. When his father died within Makhno’s first year, Makhno’s mother was left without sufficient means to care for her five young children.66 Her husband’s employer, a non-Ukrainian aristocrat, even went so far as to deny their family the money he owed Makhno’s father upon his death. As a consequence, Makhno began to work at age seven as a foreign landowner’s cow and sheep herder. At twelve Makhno became an agricultural laborer, and by age fifteen he finally had risen to the meager level of a foundry shop painter.

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65 quoted in Woodcock, 400.
66 Malet, xx.
In these positions, Makhno, like most of his fellow Ukrainian peasants, nurtured an intense hatred of his privileged non-Ukrainian employers. Like most Ukrainian peasants, Makhno also lacked the means to escape his lot in life, since his entire education consisted of a mere four winters of schooling. Yet, unlike the majority of his fellow peasants, Makhno’s experiences attracted him to the message of the Anarchist-Communists at an early juncture.

Makhno’s peasant origins, regional orientation, and pro-peasant agenda would later make him the leader of a peasant revolution. As a regionalist who hated cities and urban culture, Makhno was in tune with the sentiments of Gulyai Polye’s inhabitants. Like most Ukrainian peasants, Makhno professed peasant folk legends, predicting a forthcoming golden age in which “peasant free toilers would set to work to the tune of free and joyous songs.” In mentality and outlook, Makhno was first and foremost a Gulyai Polye Ukrainian peasant.

The Gulyai Polye populace’s experiences made them receptive to Bakunin’s view that the state in every form was evil and should be combated. Essentially self-interested, the Ukrainian peasantry’s opposition to any form of government focused upon its past experiences, which produced a universal desire for individual liberty, private ownership of land, and freedom from “foreign” exploitation. Makhno understood and shared these widespread desires which eventually allowed him to extend his area of peasant support to locales outside of his immediate region.

Makhno also received a great deal of support because his interpretation of

Woodcock, 420-421.
anarchism was compatible with the concept of liberation championed in the Cossack and peasant rebellions of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially those led by Pugachev and Razin. In fact, Makhno’s movement could be seen as the continuation of these rebellions because it incorporated similar egalitarian sentiments and vociferously attacked the tyrannical bureaucratic domination of the common people by the state. Makhno’s peasants, like the earlier peasant rebels wanted title to the land, and also to be left alone by all gentry, officials, tax collectors, recruiters, and external agents of authority. The Ukrainian peasants had long desired the “society of free toilers” which Makhno had advocated. Again, like earlier Cossack-led revolts, Makhno’s movement arose in the southern borderlands and was directed against the wealthy and powerful. He expropriated the landlords, removed government officials, and sought to establish a Cossack-style “republic” on the steppe. Makhno simultaneously urged the peasants to fight to establish free soviets and communes while resisting the authority of both the Whites and the Reds, just as Razin and Pugachev had opposed tsarist authority. In short, as Alexander Berkman observed, Makhno became “the avenging angel of the lowly, and presently he was looked upon as the great liberator, whose coming had been prophesied by Pugachev in his dying moments.”

Makhno’s personal charisma and bravado also augmented this authority as a leader. For example, on September 30, 1918, a force of one thousand Austrian soldiers and special guards surrounded him at the village of Dibrivki, heavily outnumbering the Makhno partisans with their thirty men and one machine gun. Against these thirty to one odds, Makhno used a strategic retreat as a ruse and followed it with a reckless attack.

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70 Avrich, Portraits, 118.
Upon routing his opponents completely, Makhno's thankful men proclaimed him their "Batko," or "little father, military chieftain." So began the persistent myth that Makhno, like Razin and Pugachev before him, was invincible.

The connection with Razin and Pugachev augmented Makhno's support because the peasantry retained a strong cultural memory of the early rebel leaders in popular song and stories. Although Makhno never overtly declared himself a new Pugachev or Razin, he covertly encouraged the connection with the past by adopting similar platforms and playing the role of the charismatic popular rebel leader. The results for Makhno were forthcoming, as his wife recounted:

There grew up among the country folk the belief that Makhno was invincible because he had never been wounded during all the years of constant warfare in spite of his practice of always personally leading every charge.

Supported by such legends, Makhno used the peasantry's opposition to the government and its hatred of officials to facilitate a full scale movement.

Makhno's mythification increasingly positioned him as a historically recurring symbol of peasant revenge. The Makhnovist movement's birth in the southern borderlands, its opposition to the wealthy and powerful, and its pursuit of land and liberty, reinaugurated the peasantry's memory of a Cossack-style "republic" on the steppe. At the same time, Makhno's destruction of hundreds of noble manors and his murder of thousands of the peasantry's "enemies" increasingly drew other independent guerrilla bands and regional anarchist groups to his banner. Even though the peasants

71 Nomad, 307.
73 Avrich, Portraits, 119.
74 Avrich, Portraits, 118-119.
Image resized at a lower resolution.
Image resized at a lower resolution.
continued to oppose national governments, this phenomenon reinforced the common peasant perception of the Makhnovist movement as a type of societal structure.\(^7\)

Because of his desire to popularize and stabilize his movement, Makhno gradually modified his conceptualization of anarchy. He adopted the peasantry’s conception of freedom - a decentralized government with autonomous individual farms, and gave it the name “anarchy.” To his peasant constituency, this message was vastly superior to a return to noble domination or economic manipulation by Russian communists ruling from urban centers. In this way, Nestor Makhno, addressed the social oppression of the peasantry and simultaneously empowered himself as an anarch.

The Ambiguity of being an Anarch

As the leader of an Anarchist-Communist movement, Makhno was an anarch, or the leader of an anarchist community. While pure anarchism would not acknowledge the legitimacy of such a position, Makhno’s interpretation of Anarchist-Communist theory allowed for societal leadership by a vanguard. It seemed to Makhno that anarchism could only develop in the Ukraine if it had some type of internal structure and a leader to defend it militarily. The would-be anarchists were surrounded by hostile and well-armed adversaries, and they needed to defend and even extend their anarchist vision.

It was in this position as leader, however, that many of Makhno’s personal weaknesses and shortcomings became apparent. As an anarch, Makhno did not always respect other people’s individual desires. At times he became arbitrary and absolutist. Even Makhno’s admirer, the anarchist poet Voline, noted this failing:

\(^7\) Nomad, 307.
Under the influence of alcohol, Makhno became irresponsible in his actions; he lost control of himself. Then it was personal caprice, often supported by violence, that suddenly replaced his sense of revolutionary duty; it was the despotism, the absurd pranks, the dictatorial antics, of a warrior chief that were strangely substituted for the calm reflection, perspicacity, personal dignity, and self control in his attitude to others and to the cause which a man like Makhno should never have abandoned. 76

Furthermore, at times, the behavior of Makhno’s army mirrored these negative aspects of his personal character. While intoxicated, his troops would harass innocent people. And though it happened infrequently, at times his troops murdered and stole from those who opposed them.

In his day some anarchists pointed to the Makhnovists' departures from a theoretically pure form of anarchy as an indication of Makhno's corruption. To these detractors, Makhno’s anarchist rhetoric was merely a means of disguising peasant regionalism and his own growing personal authority. Guided by their ideology, Anarchist-Individualists especially rejected Makhno’s 'anarchist' organizations because they believed that propaganda was the sole acceptable technique for encouraging mass action. 77 To their thinking, Makhno’s organization, structure, and actions negated his eventual desire to achieve a utopian anarchist society founded on free communes. As a result of such sentiments, outside Anarchist-Individualist assistance from greater Russia seldom occurred.

Yet, the Anarchist-Individualists' critique of Makhno had many shortcomings. Even though he became an anarch, Makhno nevertheless remained a genuine anarchist because he perceived his leadership and his movement’s increasingly hierarchical organization as a temporary and necessary means to achieve a true anarchy. In this way,

76 Woodcock, 421.
Makhno tried to bridge the gap between worldly success and theoretically pure anarchism. While at times he did abandon pure anarchism, he did so only out of military, societal, or practical necessity. While the Anarchist-Individualists valued anarchist purity above all else and achieved little, Makhno valued revolutionary success slightly more than anarchism’s theoretical purity and accomplished one of the largest and longest anarchist experiments the world has seen to date.

Regardless of their success, several Makhnovist manifestations were profoundly ambiguous. In February 1918, Makhno’s Congress of Workers, Peasants, and Insurgents conceived a Regional Military Revolutionary Soviet (council) of Workers, Peasants, and Insurgents. While the Congress approved this group’s formation as the supreme executive of the Makhnovist movement, they had set limits on the Soviet’s authority. Specifically, the Soviet was limited to following the Congress’s instructions and was dissolvable by the Congress at any juncture. Soon thereafter, however, the Regional Revolutionary Military Soviet became an actual government run by Makhno’s closest acquaintances. In this capacity, the Soviet, and not the Congress, increasingly made the economic, political, social, and military decisions affecting the movement. Pressed by adversaries, the Makhnovist movement had adopted a primitive organizational structure.

This reality was echoed in Makhno’s Revolutionary Insurrection Army. While his army was theoretically controlled by the Congress of Peasants, Workers and Insurgents, which elected the Revolutionary Military Soviet, of which Makhno was a member, conditions at times forced Makhno to part from this ideal. While his men directly elected most of their officers, Makhno personally appointed his friends to key

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77 Footman, 80.
positions. Nevertheless, Makhno simultaneously retained the plebian character of his movement. The Makhnovist forces consisted entirely of the ordinary population of the eastern Ukrainian lands around Gulyai Polye -- between Kharkov, the Don, and the Crimea. All Makhnovist officers were peasants or factory or shop workers, and not a single officer came from the intelligentsia or the upper or middle classes.

With the advent of increased competition with the Bolsheviks beginning in 1919, the Makhnovist equestrian bodyguards became an anarchist nobility, protecting Makhno as if he were their feudal lord or Bolshevik party chief. Meanwhile, Makhno’s “Intelligence Department” became Makhno’s ‘anarchist’ counterpart to the Bolshevik Cheka. While Makhno’s ideological commitment to anarchy should have necessitated his rejection of police, prisons, and courts, his “Intelligence Department” assumed all of these functions. As a necessity of war, Makhno’s followers accepted these modifications. They understood that Makhno needed to establish a loyal chain of command amongst widely distributed rural locales.

At times referring to himself as “first amongst equals”, Makhno even ordered arbitrary executions, especially for anti-Semitic acts. Without trials, he shot a troop commander for raiding a Jewish town and he executed a common soldier for carrying a poster that read “Beat the Jews, Save Russia.” The reason was simple: Makhno’s anarchist movement risked betrayal and division if it incorporated other ideologies, whether founded on hate or possessing an alternative view of the future.

At times an excess of “warrior sentiment” resulted in the formation of a military

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79 Christopher Read, From Tsar to Soviets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 259.
80 Avrich, Portraits, 114-115.
81 Avrich, Portraits, 123, Nomad, 328, 331-332.
clique around Makhno. Moreover, this clique did in fact act without asking the opinion of the Soviet or the Congress. As Volin notes,

It lost its sense of proportion, showed contempt toward all those who were outside it, and detached itself more and more from the mass of the combatants and the working population.

This phenomenon had its roots in the stern tradition of the Cossack legions of the Zaporozhian region, who met out swift and violent punishments to their political adversaries. Nevertheless, it must be acknowledged that the Makhnovist movement’s developing authoritarianism negated some of its more libertarian tenets.

Another development that seemed incompatible with Makhno’s anarchist commitments occurred in the late winter of 1919 when White forces continued to mass in the regions of the Caucasus and the Don. With the aim of protecting their region from White domination, the February 1919 Gulyai Polye meeting of the Congress of Workers, Peasants and Insurgents declared a “voluntary mobilization” of all men under forty-eight years old. Under the spontaneously gathered de-facto representative government’s terms, those not vehemently opposed to serving would augment Makhno’s twenty thousand troops.

Yet, while the “voluntary” nature of the conscription might seem to save the purity of Makhno’s anarchist principles, White aggression made him fear that he would be unable to obtain sufficient troops voluntarily. As a result, the May 24, 1919 issue of the Makhnovist newspaper Road to Freedom clarified the term “voluntary”: through their

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82 Avrich, Portraits, 123., Nomad, 328, 331-332.
83 Woodcock, 421-422.
84 Ibid., 421-422.
85 Avrich, Portraits, 114.
86 Ibid., 114., Palij, 109., Woodcock, 421.
87 Joll, 187.
Congress the peasants as a group had *voluntarily* decided to be mobilized, and therefore no eligible individual was permitted to refuse to enlist.\(^8^9\) Makhno legitimized this interpretation of the term "voluntary" in two ways. First, he argued that it was a means of distributing the burden of military service equally and justly. Secondly, he acknowledged that the peasants would be less afraid of being captured by the Whites if they could say they had been forced to serve.\(^9^0\) To Makhno, conscription was in the peasantry's own best interest and thus mandating it did not violate anarchist prescriptions.

In a similar vein, Makhno also departed from the ideas of pure anarchy to achieve greater popularity amongst his peasant constituency by advocating policies that he knew would gain the peasantry's favor. For example, while Makhno did not issue his own currency because doing so would blatantly conflict with anarchist doctrine, he sought to augment peasant support by accepting all partisan currencies. Since all other combatants annulled opposing armies’ currencies, this approach won Makhno great favor.\(^9^1\)

Makhno likewise tried to gain additional support for his movement by reducing crime, which was commonly visited on the civilian population by the various armies which passed through the region. To this end, Makhno emphasized a concept of immediate justice in the community's interest. This approach was codified in the Makhnovists' interpretation of anarchist justice:

> We suggest as a basic principle that any rigid court and police machinery and any definitive codification of laws constitute infringements of the population's rights of self defense... True justice cannot be administratively organized, but must come as a living, free creative act of the community...[L]aw and order must be upheld by the living force of the local community and must not

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89 Nomad, 309-310.
91 Nomad, 327.
be left to police specialists.\textsuperscript{92}

In accord with this principle, the Makhnovists generally took over the administration of justice in the interest of the populace.\textsuperscript{93} In almost every small village that the anarchist insurgents occupied, prisons were burnt to the ground and the authority of the police was undermined, if not threatened to the point of ineffectiveness. A true Anarchist Communist, Makhno's political perspective required the removal of all organs of the state's tyranny over the rights of the individual. Transgressors were usually exiled from the region, but if they returned they were often killed outright.

The destruction of the police apparatus resulted in a reduction rather than an increase in crime because Makhno also imposed strict limitations on his followers' requisitions of foodstuffs. From the earliest days of their insurgency, Makhno forbid his troops from taking from private citizens more than absolutely necessary to satisfy the immediate needs of the men. The general rule of thumb used was that a soldier could requisition the only amount of food that he could carry on his person while remaining a highly mobile foot soldier. Although these abstract orders might seem to have facilitated uncontrolled looting which would subsequently have undermined the populace's support for the Makhnovists, Makhno's arbitrary and severe system of justice was an effective deterrent to crime. Depending on the circumstance, a Makhnovist could be demoted, beaten, or even shot for stealing from the peasants. The results were forthcoming. The town of Ekaterinoslav, for example, reported fewer robberies under Makhno than at any other time in the civil war.

While Makhno prohibited looting by his soldiers, he nevertheless expropriated the

\textsuperscript{92} Joll, 186.
\textsuperscript{93} Joll, 186.
rich as he moved through enemy territory. In so doing, he continued to act as a
traditional benevolent rebel leader: he readily distributed the shoes, cloth, and sugar that
he seized to the peasantry. The combination of reduced theft and beneficent distribution
of pillage produced exactly what Makhno desired: the entire peasant population formed
his "intelligence department," while all the food his forces needed were voluntarily
handed over by the peasantry.⁹⁴

Makhno’s Conflict with Anarchist Theory

Citing Bolshevik attempts to impose a dictatorship over the Ukraine, the
Makhnovists had in fact prohibited the formation of what they termed "Jacobin
revolutionary committees" in late 1919. Departing from their early guarantees not to
attack political parties, the Makhnovists began to limit the Bolsheviks’ access to the
press. Yet, Makhno legitimized his anti-Bolshevik policy change by pointing out that the
Bolsheviks had destroyed freedom of the press wherever possible in the Ukraine and had
taken part in a 'criminal' invasion of Gulyai Polye in June 1919.⁹⁵ For Makhno, it was
simply a matter of treating an opponent as they treated you. Nevertheless, the fact that
Makhno and his forces increasingly adapted formal anti-Bolshevik principles to further
their movement’s ideological success supported the objections of anarchist individualists
opposing Makhno.

Further complicating the issue, was the fact that this new lack of tolerance, which
denied the applicability of a variety of anarchist tenets, was not explicitly expressed or
acknowledged in official Makhnovist declarations. For example, a proclamation

⁹⁴ Nomad, 323.
⁹⁵ Shatz, 467-468.
published in Ekaterinoslav on November 5, 1919, proclaimed full freedom of expression
for everyone except those wishing to "impose a political authority on the working
masses."

I. All Socialist political parties, organizations and tendencies have
the right to propagate their ideas, theories, views and opinions
freely, both orally and in writing. No restrictions of Socialist
freedom of speech and press will be allowed, and no persecution
will take place in this domain.
Remark: - Military communiqués may not be printed unless they
are supplied by the management of the central organ of the
revolutionary insurgents, "The Road to Freedom."

II. In allowing all political parties and organizations full and complete
freedom to propagate their ideas, the Makhnovist Insurgent Army
wishes to inform all the parties that any attempt to prepare, organize
and impose a political authority on the working masses will not be
permitted by the revolutionary insurgents, such an act having nothing
in common with freedom of ideas and propaganda. 96

Makhno's Anarchist-Individualist detractors argued that he was using anarchism's
opposition to political parties to limit the freedom of his ideological opponents: only
groups advocating principles in line with those of the Makhnovists enjoyed true political
and social freedom. Furthermore, they argued that Makhno had established an
ideological monopoly profoundly hostile toward the Bolsheviks. In addition, many
Anarchist-Individualists objected to what they viewed to be a defacto 'anarchist'
government in the areas Makhno controlled. The Anarchist-Individualist found it
difficult to palate such an oxymoronic entity. It was with these sentiments in mind the
Greater Russian anarchist Nabat group first condemned Makhno in 1919:

While possessing many valuable revolutionary qualities, he
belongs unfortunately to that class of person who cannot
always subordinate their personal caprices to the good of
the movement. 97

96 Shatz, 466-467.
97 Joll, 187.
The sentiments of this group were partially valid. From their extreme viewpoint, Makhno’s movement, founded on libertarian ideals, did indeed have an element of hierarchical, marauding, theoretical corruption within it.98

The third anarchist conference of “Nabat,” which met in Kharkiv in September, 1920, went even further. It drew a more extreme conclusion regarding the Makhnovists’ orientation throughout their struggle:

As regards the “Revolutionary Partisan Army of Ukraine (Makhnovites)... it is a mistake to call it anarchist.... Mostly they are Red soldiers who fell into captivity, and middle peasant partisan volunteers...Through two years of struggle against different regimes...there was created in the center of the army a nucleus that assimilated the slogans of nongovernment and free soviet order.”99

This criticism illustrates the profound difference separating the views of the Individualist-dominated “Nabat” Conference and the Makhnovist movement. Essentially, Anarchist-Communism as understood by Makhno and his followers consisted of the absence of a formal government and a free soviet order. These goals fell short of what Anarchist-Individualists regarded to be worthy of the title “anarchist.” In order to gain the Anarchist-Individualists’ support, however, Makhno would have had to eliminate the very structure that buttressed his movement’s military strength, which was precisely the ingredient that allowed his anarchist experiment to exist.

The truth behind the Makhnovist movement departs from these groups’ negative interpretations. Simply put, Makhno, like Peter Kropotkin, was a utopian idealist. Because he was aware of the realities of his region at the time, however, he had to make compromises to ensure his continued peasant support alongside his movement’s military

98 Brovkin, 418.
99 Palij, 58.
efficiency. He practiced what he preached as much as conditions allowed. A common peasant at heart, Makhno was not an abstract social theorizer or a man of words. He constantly worried about the anarchist “paper revolution” going on in Russia. To his thinking, these men of books were merely mesmerized by their own words and lacked the will to fight for what they wrote. While he respected their arguments, idealism, and educational assistance, he could not join them. Far from stuffy words recorded on a page, anarchism for Makhno was an evolving vital struggle.  

Makhno saw these temporary departures as a means of facilitating the military victory that would allow him to encourage and nurture a system of purer anarchism in the Ukraine. In this aspect, Makhno’s greatest achievement for anarchism was his realization that the removal of established government necessitated anarchism’s temporary construction of an anarchist governmental structure – to defend the aims of anarchism and to guide the uneducated masses. Like Utopian idealists before him, such as Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, Nestor Makhno had to seek an intermediate stage, from which a utopia could be achieved more effectively. To Makhno, the anarchist ends justified the anarchistically impure means. While Makhno may have contradicted ideas of pure anarchy regularly, he never contradicted his own conception of his movement’s vanguard position within anarchism’s overall evolution in the Ukraine.

As Avrich observes in *Anarchist Portraits*, “Makhno’s army was more popular both in organization and social composition than any other fighting force of his day.”  

Makhno’s Insurgent Army was a self-administered people’s revolutionary army. The movement consisted of peasants and sought ways to give power to those very same
peasants. While it encouraged the establishment of communes, cooperatives, and soviets, it rejected the formation of an elite dominating group. Furthermore, as Christopher Read properly notes, the fact that Makhno was successful on a regular basis shows how fond the ordinary peasantry was of them because Makhno’s guerrilla tactics made Makhno’s men extremely vulnerable to informants. As there were very few examples of betrayal, it is safe to say that the peasantry on the whole solidly backed Makhno.102

Meager beginnings: the Gulyai Polye Anarchist Group

Makhno’s frustration with the economic and political injustices of the Russian and Polish nobility following the 1905 Revolution sparked his interest in politics. Yet, as Michael Palij observes, because the Ukrainian people were ill-prepared for statehood and because the Ukraine was a constant battleground for invading forces, “Makhno was a product of an environment that had nearly lost its national identity.”103 In practice, Russian policy had eliminated Ukrainian schools and a variety of political organizations.104 As a result, the youth of Makhno’s generation lacked strong national leaders. When the governmental forces controlling the Ukraine carried out acts of political terror during the revolution of 1905, Makhno, like many of his male peers, viewed subversive activity within partisan groups as the only means for redressing his grievances. Following the disorders of 1905 and 1906, Makhno joined the local Gulyai Polye Anarchist Communist group at the age of seventeen.105 This organization terrorized the bourgeoisie, the police, and the local government in retaliation for the

102 Christopher Read, From Tsar to Soviets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 260.
103 Palij, 249.
104 Palij, 249.
105 Nomad, 303.
increased repression of both anarchists and the Ukrainian people.\textsuperscript{106}

The Gulyai Polye Anarchist Communists lacked a firm theoretical understanding of anarchy. As Makhno himself recalled:

\begin{quote}
Our group had in its ranks not a single educated theoretician of anarchism. We all were peasants and workers. We came from school with incomplete education. Anarchist schools did not exist. The bulk of our knowledge of revolutionary anarchism came from long years of reading anarchist literature and the exchange of opinions among us and the peasants with whom we exchanged all we read and understood in the works of Kropotkin and Bakunin.\textsuperscript{107}
\end{quote}

Makhno’s actions as a member of this less learned group soon unintentionally led to the furthering of his anarchist education. In 1908 the group’s terrorist exploit took the life of a district police captain, and Nestor Makhno was condemned to death. But because Makhno was not yet nineteen, he was categorized as a minor. His sentence was reduced to a term of ten years hard labor, which took place at Butyrki prison in Moscow, a jail renowned for its subversive political criminals.\textsuperscript{108}

During the nine years he spent in Butyrski Prison, Makhno advanced his education and made invaluable anarchist contacts. Under the guidance of his sometime cellmate, Peter Arshinov, Makhno was encouraged to use the prison library, where he read works on history, unsuccessfully studied the Russian language, and absorbed military strategy. An ex-railway carpenter and editor of an illegal Bolshevik newssheet from Ekaterinoslav, Peter Arshinov was a militant and highly educated anarchist-

\textsuperscript{\textit{\textsuperscript{106}} Paul Avrich, \textit{Anarchist Portraits} (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 111.}
\textsuperscript{\textit{\textsuperscript{107}} Avrich, \textit{Portraits}, 79.}
\textsuperscript{\textit{\textsuperscript{107}} Palij, 61.}
\textsuperscript{\textit{\textsuperscript{108}} Nomad, 304., Schroeder, 215.}
As Makhno’s prison tutor, Arshinov encouraged the young Makhno to “Seek out the truth and realize it [yourself]. You will find it nowhere else.” Arshinov’s central belief was that freedom and moral self-realization were interdependent. He believed this interdependence to be the ultimate lesson of true anarchism, and he passed this tenet on to his impressionable pupil. Although he had originally been affiliated with the Bolsheviks, Arshinov now tutored Makhno in the application of Bakunin’s critique of Marxian Communism to the Bolshevik Party. To Arshinov’s way of thinking, the Bolsheviks were positioning themselves to become a new ruling class of intellectuals. Arshinov’s prison influence thus deepened the anarchism within the young anarch Makhno.

The young Nestor Ivanovich Makhno’s experiences in Butyrki prison made him a convinced anarch. Proud and vain, Makhno’s constant arguments and innumerable prison manuscripts earned him the sarcastic nickname “Skromny” (modest). Inspired by Bakunin, whom Makhno referred to as a “great” and “tireless” rebel, Makhno was conscious of the anarchist example he set. He became a serious disciplinary problem for prison officials. The result, summarized by Max Nomad, was inevitable:

Always at war with the prison guards, he was a frequent guest in the damp, unheated disciplinary cells. His lungs became affected, and the constant realization that he was doomed, anyhow, might have still added to his reckless courage and contempt of death.

The misery of Makhno’s bondage and tuberculosis furthered his lasting horror of prisons.

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109 Footman, 79-80.
110 Woodcock, 476.
111 Avrich, Portraits, 122.
112 Footman, 79.
113 Nomad, 304.
and strengthened the resolve of the young self-styled anarch.\textsuperscript{114} An Unexpected leader had been born.

While the anarchists played a relatively minor role in the February 1917 Revolution, this Revolution nonetheless had an important consequence for them: a general amnesty that freed all political prisoners, including Nestor Makhno and Peter Arshinov. The anarchist expatriates who returned to Russia in the summer of 1917 found the anarchist movement fundamentally weak. As George Woodcock observes of the Russian anarchist poet Voline’s July 1917 return, he did not see a single anarchist paper or poster, nor did he encounter any evidence of oral propaganda by “the few Libertarian groups there.”\textsuperscript{115} To anarchism, Russia was a barren wasteland.

While Arshinov’s urge for political activity led him to remain in Moscow, even though there were few anarchists in the city, a similar sentiment drew Makhno back to his childhood roots in Gulyai Polye, where the twenty-eight year old ex-prisoner sprung into political activity. Because of his prison experiences, Makhno had come to view anarchism as a way of life rather than an unrealizable theoretical ideal. He therefore viewed himself primarily as a practical revolutionary and only secondarily as a theoretician.\textsuperscript{116}

Upon returning to Gulyai Polye after his release from prison, Makhno organized a union of farm laborers and was elected chair. From here on Makhno’s reputation and charisma built upon itself. Early April 1917 he had been elected chair of the Gulyai Polye Union of Carpenters and Metalworkers and, more significantly, the Gulyai Polye

\textsuperscript{114} Avrich, Portraits, 112.
\textsuperscript{115} Woodcock, 415.
\textsuperscript{116} Footman, 79-80.
Soviet of Workers’ and Peasants’ Deputies. In August of 1917 the Russian Provisional Government was threatened by the counter-revolutionary Kornilov affair and the Petrograd Soviet issued a universal appeal for supporters to defend the Revolution. Because of the Ukrainian Provisional Government’s weakness, Makhno was able to further his growing personal authority by establishing and obtaining chairmanship of the Gulyai Polye Committee for the Defense of the Revolution. Although the anarchist movement in Gulyai Polye achieved greater organization, Makhno only had a handful of “conscious” anarchist supporters amongst Gulyai Polye’s thirty thousand inhabitants.

The variety of 1917 provincial peasant assemblies served as a focal point for the discussion of peasant grievances and desires. In these organizations, the peasantry took steps to organize and legitimize itself on a territorial level, instead of in the more traditional state organizations. When the state’s power over the provinces collapsed in 1917, political power had passed to these local assemblies, which essentially became autonomous ‘governments.’ While many of the early (March and April) peasant assemblies drafted temporary legislation regarding the land question, some local soviets converted their authority into direct action, with little concern for the time involved to officially change these laws.

In early August 1917, as head of the regional soviet, Makhno began to supervise the division of local nobles’ estates amongst the peasantry, while handing over control of Gulyai Polye’s small industries to their workers. As Malet observes, the Gulyai Polye populace, at Makhno’s prompting, was one of the first regions to begin expropriation.

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117 Avrich, Portraits, 112.
118 Woodcock, 416.
120 Malet, 117.
Through such techniques Makhno gained the loyalties of poor peasants, further aiding his organization of the countryside.\textsuperscript{121} While he continued to decry anarchism's lack of organization as preventing his movement from becoming more than the "tail of the Bolshevik-Left Social Revolutionary bloc," Makhno's actions as an anarch had in fact significantly extended the geographic area of his support to the areas surrounding Ekaterinoslav.\textsuperscript{122}

This support facilitated what Victor Serge referred to as Makhno's unsurpassed strategic ability and his peasant army's possession of a "truly epic capacity for organization and battle."\textsuperscript{123} Incorporating a Guerrilla warfare approach, Makhno achieved military advantage through the peasantry's voluntary provisioning of food, horses, and arms at any given locale. When confronted with superior forces, Makhno's mobility and plebeian support saved him. His army's light, horse drawn \textit{tachanki} (peasant carts) could retreat 40 to 50 miles a day under heavy machine gun fire, faster than any pursuing army.\textsuperscript{124} Simultaneously, local peasants would send the pursuing troops on a false trail, allowing Makhno's peasant soldiers to bury their weapons, return to their villages, resume work in the fields, and wait for the signal to unearth their buried cache of arms and spring up again in an unexpected quarter.\textsuperscript{125}

Because Makhno's "troops" were typically indistinguishable indigenous peasant farmers and laborers with some World War I experience, their support allowed for new strategies. In fact, as Christopher Read notes, Makhno's "major asset was the close

\textsuperscript{121} Woodcock, 416.
\textsuperscript{122} Footman, 77, 81.
\textsuperscript{123} Avrich, Portraits, 111.
\textsuperscript{124} \textit{tachanki} - light, horse drawn, four wheeled Ukrainian peasant carts mounted on shock-like springs to facilitate quick movement over uneven terrain. Makhno's forces often outfitted them with rear mounted swiveling machine guns for military engagements.
\textsuperscript{125} Avrich, Portraits, 113., Woodcock, 421.
relationship between his activists and the local population. Like the Russian rebels of the past, a variety of surprise attacks, quick retreats, and immediate disappearances became standard protocol for Makhno’s forces. As betrayal was extremely rare amongst Makhno’s partisans, in order to eliminate Makhno’s forces, any given opponent would have had to essentially eliminate the entire peasant population.

Furthermore, the Makhnovists’ mobility was vastly superior to any opposing force throughout their entire existence because peasant households along the way supplied them, tended to their wounded, augmented their forces, and gave them fresh horses. As Isaac Babel explains in *Red Cavalry Tales*, Makhno was as protean as nature herself. Haycarts deployed in battle array take towns, a wedding procession approaching the headquarters of a district executive committee suddenly opens a concentrated fire, a little priest, waving above him the black flag of anarchy, orders the authorities to serve up the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, wine and music. An army of tachankas possesses undreamt-of possibilities of maneuver.

Makhno’s widespread peasant support thus allowed him to be elusive at the same time that he seemed omniscient and omnipresent. This support positioned Makhno consistently as a vital opponent to a variety of enemies over three years of almost constant combat. Because of his successful approaches, years later, Mao Tse-tung himself even complimented Makhno, calling the guerrilla “a fish in water.”

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130 Christopher Read, *From Tsar to Soviets* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 259.
A Period of Common Enemies: the Red - Makhnovist Alliance

Because Bolshevik slogans like “Land to the Peasants” and “Factories to the Workers” coincided with the goals of Makhno’s peasant supporters, the Makhnovites sought further collaboration with the Russian Bolsheviks. Following the Bolsheviks’ seizure of power in October 1917, the results of this approach began to manifest themselves. In full accord with the purest of anarchist principles, Makhno successfully negotiated a direct exchange of his peasants’ grain for textiles produced by anarchist communist workers in a Moscow factory. The anarch’s preliminary ties with the Bolshevik dominated Soviet government were thus in accord with Anarchist-Communist principles.

With World War I grinding on and the advent of revolution in Russia, the Ukrainian Nationalist Party, in control of the Ukrainian Central Rada (government) at the time, saw an opportunity to create an independent Ukrainian state. Although it consisted of some Socialist Revolutionaries, the Ukrainian Nationalist Party, under the leadership of Simeon Petliura was dominated by the very Ukrainian nobles who manipulated the peasantry economically and socially. As a result, although it promised to eventually do otherwise, beginning in April of 1917, the Central Rada refused to establish any sort of concrete land redistribution program. When the threat of Bolshevik invasion became imminent, the Ukrainian peasantry grew frustrated with the Rada’s apathy and started redistributing gentry estates amongst themselves. The Rada’s response was immediate: on January 22, 1918 they released their Fourth Universal:

The commission for the settlement of the land question...has already worked out a law for the transfer of lands...without

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Footman, 80-81., Nomad, 305.
compensation; this law is based on the principle of the abolition of the right of ownership and socialization of land...every effort will be made to enable the committees to transfer the land to the toiling peasants before spring work begins.\textsuperscript{132}

The Ukrainian peasants, partisans, and workers interpreted this belated socioeconomic reform as the Rada's last ditch effort to bolster support in the face of Bolshevik aggression. The Communist nature of the proposals added strength to Bolshevik propaganda efforts, and the Ukrainian people grew increasingly hostile to the Central Rada.\textsuperscript{133} In line with both popular opinion and their own sentiment that the Rada had achieved too little, too late, the Makhnovists assisted the Bolshevik's reactionary infiltration and occupation of the Ukraine in January, 1918. In order to obtain the military power necessary to support their separation from the Russian Empire, the Ukrainian Nationalist Party sided with the Central Powers for military assistance during the early 1918 Brest-Litovsk peace negotiations.

When the treaty was finally concluded in March 1918, Soviet Russia lost its claim to the Ukrainian territory. The Central Powers were not about to let these "radical plebeians" remain in power, however. Within a few weeks, a proposal for the reinstatement of Russian and Polish landed nobles' property titles split the fragile coalition of the Ukrainian Nationalists and the Central Powers. Austrian and German military authorities immediately used the break as an excuse to isolate and liquidate most of Petliura's forces.\textsuperscript{134}

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{132} Palij, 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{133} Palij, 53.
  \item \textsuperscript{134} Nomad, 305.
\end{itemize}
Fighting Skoropadsky and Foreign Manipulation

In an attempt to legitimize their authority in the Ukraine, the Central Powers installed a semi-absolutist puppet monarchy. In the Spring of 1918, the Ukrainian-Russian puppet Pavlo Petrovych Skoropadsky assumed the Cossack title “Hetman” and announced himself to be the founder of a new dynasty. These evocative gestures were largely negated in the peasantry’s eyes, however, by the Hetman’s support of the overthrown nobles and landed gentry, who above all else wanted to regain their manorial estates, which local soviet chairs, like Makhno, had stripped away from them in 1917. In fact, on the very first day that the Hetman came to power he dissolved all the land committees and annulled the Central Rada’s abortive land law:

The right of private property, which is the basis of civilization and culture, is hereby fully restored. All [previous] ordinances... insofar as they infringed upon the right of private property, are declared null and void. Complete freedom to buy and sell land is also reestablished. Measures will be taken toward the alienation of lands of large landowners at their actual cost and toward their distribution among needy peasants.135

Like the Central Rada, however, a draft on land reform would be produced by the Hetmanite government only on the eve of its November collapse.136

If the Central Rada had proven unresponsive to the Ukrainian peasantry’s revolutionary spirit, the Hetmanite government proved even less responsive. Under this puppet government, Austrian-German forces soon dominated the military, political, and economic life of the Ukraine. While the peasants sullenly returned the nobles’ land, they objected to the appropriation of their grain by the Central Powers, who desperately needed food to feed their besieged armies on the Western front. The Ukraine’s means of

135 Palij, 53-54.
136 Palij, 54.
transportation strained under the high rate of Austro-German appropriations. In response, the peasants preferred to destroy their crops before they could be removed by the greedy German and Austrian invaders. The Austro-German occupation armies typically reacted through arms.\textsuperscript{137}

As a result of their hopes for the Ukraine, the foreign occupation forces interpreted insurrectionary groups within the region as rowdy forces terrorizing the nobles and planting subversive ideas in the minds of the otherwise hardworking peasants. In fact, groups like the Makhnovists scared the Hetmanite because they responded to the peasantry’s desire for land. Influenced by a strong Cossack tradition of freedom from government landlords and central bureaucracy, the Makhnovists distributed any land they captured to the peasantry immediately. Because of this, the Hetman’s government especially targeted Makhno’s partisan resistance, who rejected the puppet’s continuing compromises with German imperialism.\textsuperscript{138} The German and Austrian response was immediate: foreign troops massed in the Ukraine in 1918, and Makhno’s comparatively weak following was forced to flee—first to the east to Taganrog, and then northward along the Volga toward Moscow— in pursuit of anarchist support and guidance.\textsuperscript{139}

Makhno’s experiences in Moscow in July 1918 strengthened his grasp of anarchist theory, and thus were pivotal in his conversion from a village political boss into a powerful anarchist guerrilla warrior. Just prior to Makhno’s arrival in Moscow, the Bolsheviks had launched an anti-Anarchist campaign in which the Red Army raided anarchist centers in Moscow and Petrograd, arresting several hundred anarchists. The pretext for this campaign was the seizure of a Red Cross representative’s car in April

\textsuperscript{137} Arshinov, 47.; Nomad, 305-306.
\textsuperscript{138} Arshinov, 47.
\textsuperscript{139}
1918. The Bolsheviks explained that the campaign was necessary because of “the criminal activity of armed detachments of counter-revolutionary burglars and robbers [who] had taken refuge under the black flag of anarchy.” Upon seeing the aftermath, Makhno became disillusioned. In the midst of depression, he sought the advice of Kropotkin. At their private meeting in Moscow, the elder anarchist’s guidance was straightforward and determined:

One must remember, dear Comrade, that there is no sentimentality about our struggle, but selflessness and strength of heart on our way toward our goal will conquer all.

Makhno would dwell upon these words for the rest of his life. They strengthening his resolve and his willingness to endure personal self-sacrifice as he pursued his own evolving defense of anarchism in the Ukraine.

An uncomfortable private meeting with Lenin at the Kremlin finally facilitated Makhno’s return to the Ukraine. In this private interview, Lenin criticized the anarchists’ “empty fanaticism” as focusing too much attention on the present. But he maintained that Makhno himself was different, and even went so far as to propose that the Makhnovists select a region of the Ukraine and carry out secret Bolshevik revolutionary work there in exchange for limited autonomy. While Makhno rejected this proposal outright, Lenin still viewed Makhno’s return to the Ukraine favorably, perhaps because he knew that Makhno’s forces would terrorize the Whites, thus aiding the Red Army. At Lenin’s prompting an aide issued Makhno false credentials and a Ukrainian uniform, to

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139 Avrich, Portraits, 112., Joll, 185., Woodcock, 419.
140 Joll, 188; Woodcock, 416-417.
141 Joll, 185.
facilitate his train ride home through the Ukrainian frontier.\textsuperscript{142}

From the time of his return in July 1918, Makhno viewed the establishment of a strong territorial base as his foremost goal. As Arshinov notes,

For a long time he considered the idea of how to organize the vast peasant masses, in order to bring out the revolutionary energy that had been [accumulating] in them for centuries and to hurl this formidable power against the existing regime of oppression. He felt that the moment had arrived to put his idea into execution.\textsuperscript{143}

Ironically, the Bolsheviks' persecution of anarchists strengthened the anarchist movement in the Ukraine. Local Kropotkinist, Individualist and Syndicalist elements in Kharkov and Kursk established the Nabat Anarchist Confederation in order to unify the diverse anarchist movements. Although Makhno had not been directly involved, his movement benefit from the peasantry's tendency to associate his movement with those of the propagandistically active "Nabat" Confederation.\textsuperscript{144}

Another development that benefited the Ukrainian anarchists was the advent of anti-Skoropadsky sentiment amongst the peasantry. The Austrian and German troops who supported Skoropadsky continually shot or beat up and burned the villages of oppositionists. In a move typical of the Skoropadsky regime, they even murdered Makhno's crippled older brother and burned Makhno's mother's house down because they were related to Makhno. These circumstances in the Ukraine allowed Makhno to dress his increasingly militant anarchism in indigenous peasant garb.\textsuperscript{145}

His first speech at Gulyai Polye firmly positioned his movement as the supporter

\textsuperscript{143} Shatz, 453.
\textsuperscript{144} Woodcock, 416-417.
of the peasantry against outside interference.  

I returned again to you comrades so we might work together to expel the Austro-German counterrevolutionary armies from the Ukraine, to overthrow the government of Hetman Skoropads'kyi and to prevent any other regime from replacing him. We will work in common to organize this great thing. We will work in common to destroy slavery so we may set ourselves and our brothers and sisters on the road of the new order.

Because Makhno knew that the peasants were seeking the end of foreign domination he focused his movement on this issue. The Makhnovists’ new central holding now became that no foreign enemy deserved pity: all who suppressed peasant rights and exploited their labor would be summarily executed. To facilitate this militancy, Makhno established a local Revolutionary Military Unit in the summer of 1918 to guarantee freedom of action and propaganda in nearby villages and towns.

The actions of this military unit, along with Makhno’s charismatic leadership, prompted the Ukrainian equivalent of a Robin Hood myth surrounding Makhno’s name that further bound him to peasant revolt predecessors like Stenka Razin, and Emelian Pugachev. For example, when Makhno’s Revolutionary Military Unit attacked large gentry estates between the Dnieper and the Sea of Azov they returned the land to the peasants. In a similar manner, after winning a battle against Skoropadsky, they would kill all the opposing officers and free the captured soldiers, offering them libertarian literature and money to help them on their journey home. Through such techniques, Makhno’s troops made every attempt to perpetuate this positive association.

146 Shatz, 452.
147 Shatz, 456.
148 Palij, 60.
149 Shatz, 454-455.
Furthermore, Makhno presented himself as a man of action willing to sacrifice himself for his cause. He continued to reject metaphysical systems, phrasemaking, and abstract social theorizing. Within a typical early appeal to the Ukrainian peasantry, the anarch sought to press his personal militancy upon the Ukraine populace:

Conquer or die -- such is the dilemma which faces the Ukraine peasants and workers at this historic moment. But we cannot all die, for we are innumerable -- we are mankind! Therefore, we will conquer....But we will not conquer in order to repeat the errors of the past years, that of putting our fate into the hands of new masters. We will conquer in order to take our destinies into our own hands, to conduct our lives according to our own will and our own conception of the truth.

Like most of Makhno's leaflets issued when he was fighting Skoropadsky, this propagandistic appeal did not mention the term “anarchy” itself. As Max Nomad notes, Makhno avoided using the term itself and instead expressed the ideas of anarchism in simple words that voiced hostility to any form of centralized government that would try to rule from either Moscow or Kiev, either in the name of a “proletarian dictatorship” or a “bourgeoisie-democratic Ukrainian People’s Republic.” Makhno feared that the term “anarchy” would only divide his peasant support. As a result, he clung to the concept of political autonomy, which he believed would unite the peasantry. Through such astute decisions Makhno gained widespread support for his movement. His Project-Declaration of the Autumn of 1919 especially succeeded in his anarchistic aim of guiding Hetmanite resistance away from affiliation with nationalist forces:

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149 Woodcock, 489.
150 Shatz, 456.
151 Avrich, Portraits, 122.
152 Shatz, 458.
In speaking of the independence of the Ukraine, we do not mean national independence, a Petliura sort of autonomy, but the social and labouring independence of the workers and peasants. We declare that the toiling people of the Ukraine—or anywhere else—have the right to self-determination...but not in the national sense.  

While Makhno would frequently champion Ukrainian culture, as an anarchist he always held nationalism suspect and tried to guide the masses away from it.

Makhno’s plethora of guerrilla tricks likewise wore down Skoropadsky’s forces, thereby further increasing Makhno’s prestige. Although Makhno’s Revolutionary Military Unit had begun modestly, with five men attacking a Russian noble’s manor, and confiscating all the noble’s rifles, horses and police uniforms, these actions rapidly gained momentum. At the next opportunity Makhno’s newly enlarged forces, dressed in the uniforms of the Ukrainian police, the Varta, gained entrance into a ball held by the local gentry, and killed all of those in attendance. At other times, a Varta-uniformed Makhno would penetrate the enemy ranks, learn their plans and preparations, and then leave with a group of soldiers to capture ‘Makhno,’ exterminating the Skoropadsky guards on the way.

Makhno’s military vitality facilitated the destruction of Hetman Skoropadsky’s regime. Constantly nipping at their heels, Makhno’s forces even defeated entire elite German divisions. Such Makhnovist harassment drove the Hetman’s forces from Gulyai Polye by September 1918. With the German and Austrian occupation forces’ subsequent withdrawal under the November 1918 armistice, the puppet’s situation only

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154 Malet, 142-143.
155 Varta - Ukrainian police officers. Usually lesser nobles and their sons during the time of the Skoropadsky regime.
156 Nomad, 307.
157 Shatz, 456.
158 Woodcock, 419.
worsened. Hetman Skoropadsky now stood alone. The removal of the one half million foreign soldiers proved a devastating loss for the puppet government of the Ukrainian People’s Republic, and it collapsed immediately.

The resulting power vacuum plunged the Ukraine into a turbulent civil war. The Ukrainian nationalist leader Simeon Petliura once again emerged from hiding and forced the Austro-German puppet Skoropadsky to flee from Kiev. With Makhnovist aide, the Russian Bolsheviks again swept down from the north, captured Kiev, and forced Petliura to retreat. While the Petliurist and Bolshevik forces fought one another in the area around Kiev, the Germans, the Austrians and Denikin’s army exerted only a tenuous hold on the region. Because the Ukrainian commercial classes, landlords, and the bourgeois clung to the nationalist movement around Kiev, the Makhnovists were the only significant force in the region fighting for the revolution against foreigners at the time.159

Makhno decided to use his movement’s strength and the region’s fragile peace to establish a southern libertarian society to serve as a model for all of Russia.160 In a 1919 proclamation he encouraged greater economic independence and more self-determination amongst his peasant constituency when he declared:

It is up to the workers and peasants to organize themselves and reach mutual understanding in all aspects of their lives and in whatever manner they think right.161

Of course, in a fully anarchist society such a statement would not have had to have been made, as each individual would have assumed this right. But under these preliminary and fragile circumstances, the Black’s explicit permission to experiment resulted in the proliferation of free communal societies. From November 1918 to June

159 Christopher Read, From Tsar to Soviets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 259.
160 Avrich, Portraits, 113.
1919, the period during which both the Whites and Reds remained outside the area east of the Dnieper River, four “free” communes sprouted up in Gulyai Polye, with several more in surrounding districts. Each commune consisted of about a dozen extended households and between one and three hundred members. It appeared that Makhno had achieved his objective. Makhno himself even labored on a Gulyai Polye commune when time allowed and encouraged the formation of analogous societies throughout Soviet Russia. 162

Yet, in actuality these “free communes” were not genuinely anarchistic. While the peasants who lived and worked in the communes were happy with their new circumstances, most were not anarchists, although Makhno saw to it that each commune contained a few anarchist peasants. It is true that they held their land, kitchens, and dining rooms in common, and lived the Anarcho-Communists’ ideal of full equality; “From each according to his ability, to each according to his need.” 163 In fact, Kropotkin’s idea of mutual aid was their principle tenet. Thus, like Makhno’s anarchism itself, the temporary identity of Makhno’s “free communes”, departed from the theoretical ideals of pure anarchism, while maintaining the spirit of Anarcho-Communism. 164 A superficial example of the success of Makhno’s anarchism, these communes were actually temporary manifestations on the path towards the Makhnovists’ goal of establishing anarchistically pure communes at a more stable later date.

Simultaneously, the Makhnovists made the best of the absence of warfare in the Southern Ukraine, seizing substantial quantities of abandoned arms and equipment from the retreating Germans and Austrians. Thanks in part to these provisions, the Makhnovist

161 Avrich, Portraits, 119-120.
162 Avrich, 120., Shatz, 460., Woodcock, 420.
163 Avrich, Portraits, 120.
164 Avrich, Portraits, 120., Woodcock, 420.
movement grew to a substantial size, increasing to a few regiments of infantry and cavalry and even a battery of artillery. Of all of the partisans in this early phase of the Ukrainian civil war, Makhno’s forces made the most dramatic gains in military hardware.165

With the Makhnovists’ new military power and renewed Bolshevik support, Makhno’s forces assisted the Bolsheviks against Petliura’s Nationalist regime. At the end of December 1918, Makhno was able to seize the Nationalist-occupied Ekaterinoslav through a strategic military infiltration. Augmented by a number of armed Bolshevik workers, the Makhnovists boarded a freight train, crossed the Dnieper bridge, and seized the city’s central railroad station. Although Makhno’s forces fled the town when the Nationalist troops returned en mass, Petliura’s demoralized troops soon left the region when the Red Army advanced on the town. Makhnovist-Bolshevik cooperation had once again proven its preeminence in obtaining control over the urban Ukraine.166

In this first short adventure as an urban occupation force, the Makhnovists established the ambiguous governmental principles that would thereafter guide their interactions with towns. While Makhno’s forces would never use their power to dominate or influence politics, they readily channeled their energy into attacking police stations and prisons. Yet, because Makhno guaranteed freedom of speech, press, conscience, assembly, as well as unfettered political and ideological association everywhere in perpetuity, he went through extraordinary efforts to prove that he was not a dictator masquerading as an anarchist.167 A typical notice, posted by Makhno’s troops as soon as they entered a town like Ekaterinoslav, sought to retain some elements of

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165 Schroeder, 215., Nomad, 308.
166 Nomad, 308.
To all the workers of the city and its environs! Workers, your city is for the present occupied by the Revolutionary Insurrectionary (Makhnovist) Army. This army does not serve any political party, any power, any dictatorship. On the contrary, it seeks to free the region of all political power, of all dictatorship. It strives to protect the freedom of action, the free life of the workers, against all exploitation and domination.

The Makhnovist Army does not therefore represent any authority. It will not subject anyone to any obligation whatsoever. Its role is confined to defending the freedom of the workers. The freedom of the peasants and the workers belongs to themselves, and should not suffer any restriction. It is up to the workers and the peasants themselves to act, to organize themselves, to reach mutual understanding in all fields of their lives, in so far as they desire it, and in whatever way they may think right.

They must, therefore, know right away, that the Makhnovist Army will not impose on them, will not dictate to them, will not order them to do anything. The Makhnovists can only help them, by giving them opinions or advice, by putting at their disposal the intellectual, military and other forces that they might need. But they cannot, and, in any case, will not govern them or prescribe for them in any way.168

Under the Makhnovist administration normal urban life resumed and Makhno gained converts. Shops reopened, people worked, markets were held, and government administrators resumed their normal functions. Because Makhno’s occupation forces espoused popular libertarian doctrine while they allowed established societal structures to be retained, they won many new adherents.

The popularity, strength, and solidarity of Makhno’s movement rendered him a prime potential ally for any force in the civil war. Because of the Ukraine’s strong tradition of opposition to central governments, Makhno’s peasant supporters were attracted to the populist rhetoric of revolutionary Bolshevism. They supported the idea

167 Shatz, 465-466.
that political power should rest with the people and they liked the soviets, which the
Bolsheviks supported. In addition, because they associated the Whites and their landlord,
officer, factory owner, and commercial class supporters with the old regime and a
cessation of the revolution, they considered these allies to be their sworn enemies. While
living in exile after the war, General Denikin would later accurately record that “The
Makhno movement was...the most antagonistic to the idea of the White movement.”

The Makhnovists were aware of the White’s lootings and their reprisals against unarmed
commoners. These sentiments soon manifested themselves in both Makhnovist and
peasant support for the Bolsheviks as they entered the Ukraine in 1919.

In fact, when Makhno’s enlarged Insurgent Army met the Bolshevik Red Army at
Alexandrovsk in January 1919, the Bolsheviks were extraordinarily happy to agree to
common action against the Whites. Neither group wanted a return to Tsarism and the
Whites were unpopular amongst the peasantry as a whole. The stage was set for further
Bolshevik-Makhnovist cooperation.

The results were immediate. Upon capturing a hundred carloads of grain
following a February victory over the Whites, Makhno sent the booty to the emaciated
Bolsheviks in Petrograd and Moscow. The Soviet press quickly complimented Makhno
as “the heroic guerrilla leader of the south.” In this amicable atmosphere, in March 1919,
Makhno reiterated the pact for joint action against the Whites.

At the same time, however, Makhno pushed for autonomy that went beyond the
terms of the agreement. The pact stipulated that Makhno would retain his own division

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168 Shatz, 464-465.
169 Male!, 140.
170 Vladimir Brovkin, Behind the Front Lines in the Russian Civil War: Political Parties and Social
within the Red Army, complete with its own officers, structure, name, and black banner but would act under the authority of that army. In reality Makhno saw to it that Bolshevik control over his forces was only nominal.

A charismatic leader amongst his men, Makhno drew all his military power from his movement’s independence. Although he liked being allied with the Bolsheviks, he resented their attempts to incorporate them into the Red Army. In a similar manner, its likely that Makhno would have pressed for the Ukraine’s autonomy, had he not just assumed that the region would remain free from Bolshevik central interference. Makhno was unwilling to share his loyalties or to lose his independence.

The Makhnovists’ Changing View of the Bolsheviks

With time, diverging anarchist perceptions of the Bolsheviks split the Russian anarchist community. While the majority of anarchists decried Bolshevik attempts to establish strong single-party authority following October of 1917, others like Alexander Schapiro, urged to collaborate with the Bolsheviks in the hope of furthering social revolution. Moreover, while anarchists on the whole initially saw the Bolsheviks’ domination of the soviets as a genuine expression of the will of the people, some began to view the soviets as instruments of Bolshevik authoritarianism.

At the same time that Makhno’s forces were establishing themselves as a regional force opposed to the Whites, his peasant partisans were beginning to grow apprehensive

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171 Woodcock, 419.
172 Avrich, Portraits, 115., Nomad, 312.
174 Nomad, 312, 314.
of Bolshevik actions in the Ukraine. The differing conceptions of the soviets held by the peasants and the Bolsheviks proved fundamental to this rift. In ideal terms, the Ukrainian peasant volunteers understood the slogan “soviet power” as their own autonomous freedom from a centralized state. They viewed “soviet power” as equivalent to their traditional conception of freedom, and as guaranteeing their right to elect their own military leaders. The Bolsheviks’ unique view conflicted this conception. They saw the task of Soviet power in the Ukraine as one of strengthening the “dictatorship of the proletariat.” And, as a consequence of their ideology, they sought the political hegemony of both the cities and the Bolshevik party. The role assigned to the Russian and Ukrainian countryside was that of semi-passive support of the Bolshevik cause: the rural peasants were expected to supply recruits to the Red Army and food to the new regime to facilitate its victory in the civil war against the Whites.

The Bolsheviks’ attitude toward the countryside paralleled the grain requisitions implemented in Russia from 1918 onward. They failed dismally in Russia and met with even greater resistance amongst the Ukrainian peasantry because there was a national element to the universal rural-urban resentment toward Bolshevik requisitions. The Ukraine’s tradition of farming in autonomous homesteads contributed to the peasantry’s perception of the dictatorship of the city over the countryside as first and foremost a dictatorship of the Russian and Jewish urbanites over the Ukrainian peasantry. The peasantry wanted private land ownership and felt cheated when the Communist government kept the gentry’s expropriated land, essentially becoming the new landlord in

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176 Woodcock, 417.
177 Brovkin, 108.
178 Brovkin, 106.
the countryside. These chaotic and excessive Russian food requisitions to support both the proletariat and the Red Army gave the Makhnovists cause for concern. Despite promises that the rate of requisitions would remain at the 1918 level, fully twice as much grain was requisitioned from the Ukraine in 1919 as in 1918.

The export of foodstuffs to Russia without compensation generated feelings of being robbed by the non-Ukrainian Muscovites. The fact that there were several grain requisitioning agencies with overlapping jurisdictions only furthered peasant resentment. The People's Commissariat of Food Supply, based in Moscow, the Food Supply Agency of the Donbass Region, Tsentrosoiuz, the Council of Workers Cooperatives in the South, and various Red Army supply agencies issued conflicting decrees about gathering foodstuffs that always ended with the statement “in case of nonfulfillment - to be shot.” To the Ukrainian peasantry, this was nothing more than a ruthless medieval collection of tribute, and they simply gave their grain to the requisition group with the superior military force. The Ukrainian peasantry's exploitation increasingly paralleled that of earlier Imperial Russian serfs.

The militant and spontaneous response of the peasants of the Southern Ukraine began at the end of March 1919, after only two months of Bolshevik rule. Although three-quarters of the rebels were poor peasants, all strata of the countryside participated. Under the slogans “Down with the Communists” and “Soviets without the Communists” the entire region between Gomel and Chernigov rose up against the Bolsheviks. Decrying the forced delivery of grain, the Cheka, and the policy of socialist land use, the Ukrainians rebelled against Bolshevik rule ninety-three separate times in April of

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179 Brovkin, 109.
180 Brovkin, 107.
The summary of a Bolshevik Food Supply Commissar, N. Pliusnina, seems appropriate:

They reckoned that they would receive all the landlords’ lands. And when they did not get them, they began to wreck state farms in all possible ways. They stole hay and crops in the fields. They destroyed houses...it was dangerous for Communists to appear in isolated villages.\(^\text{183}\)

In this highly political climate, a Makhnovist resolution issued earlier, at the February 1919 Congress, gained the movement additional peasant support. This resolution directly opposed the Bolsheviks’ policy on expropriated gentry land:

Since the land is nobody’s and since only those who till it should have the right to use it, all land must be owned by the laboring peasantry of the Ukraine and distributed freely and equally.\(^\text{184}\)

1919 Joint Actions with the Bolsheviks Against General Denikin

Although concerned with their partner, in times of need the Makhnovists would still ally with the Reds to facilitate the defeat of the universally despised Whites. In fact, under its ambiguous status as a semiautonomous unit in the Red Army, the Revolutionary Insurrection Army held a seventy mile front to the north of Mariupol on the Sea of Azov from January to June 1919 against general Denikin of the White Army. Makhno returned to the clever guerrilla ruses which his base of support facilitated:

His boys, wearing plain peasant garb, would enter a city or other urban settlement to sell their cabbage in the marketplace. At a whistle’s blow, the buggies with the cabbage were turned upside down, the concealed machine guns were in operation, and the city was occupied before

\(^{181}\) Brovkin, 131-132.  
\(^{182}\) Brovkin, 110-112.  
\(^{183}\) Brovkin, 109.  
\(^{184}\) Brovkin, 108.
the Whites could think of organizing any defense. \footnote{Nomad, 309.}

Frustrated by such tactics, the Whites imposed draconian measures. They began summarily roasting Makhnovist prisoners alive on red-hot iron sheets. At the same time, they specifically targeted Makhno, placing a price of a half a million rubles on his head. \footnote{Nomad, 312.} As White forces continued to mass in the regions of the Caucasus and the Don, Makhno’s came to desire conscription through anarchistically pure congresses of the people. \footnote{Joll, 187.} As mentioned earlier, the February 1919 Gulyai Polye meeting of the Congress of Workers, Peasants and Insurgents declared a “voluntary mobilization” of all men under forty-eight years old, which was essentially mandatory. Makhno hoped this would give the peasants less reason to fear being captured by the Whites. After all, should they happen to be captured, they could say in all honesty that they had been forced to serve. \footnote{Joll, 186., Shatz, 462.} To Makhno, conscription was a way of protecting his peasant volunteers.

Through such successful approaches, the Bolsheviks began to perceive Makhno’s peasant movement as a powerful potential regional rival. In many ways their concern was well founded. The Ukrainian peasantry saw elements of a utopian protest against the emerging Bolshevik state in Makhno’s program. For the peasantry, support for Makhno meant nothing less than the nonpayment of the Bolshevik taxes, which they saw as supporting the unnecessary Bolshevik bureaucracy. \footnote{Joll, 186., Shatz, 462.} Makhno’s anarchist movement increasingly appealed to the entire peasant population as a powerful ideology, opposed to Bolshevism and advocating a more desirable social alternative.
The Makhnovists' Formal Break with the Bolsheviks: The April through June 1919 Regional Peasant Congresses

The Bolsheviks' fear of Makhno's potential opposition peasant government was soon legitimized by the actions of Makhno and like-minded anarchists. In a pamphlet entitled the "General Theses of the Revolutionary Insurgents Concerning the Free Workers' Soviet," the Makhnovists attacked the Bolsheviks' conception of the soviets. To the Makhnovists, a soviet should be entirely independent of political parties and should be part of an overall economic system founded on social equality. The members of the soviet should be genuine workers and peasants, not bureaucrats or politicians, who served the interests of the masses.190

The response to this pamphlet was immediate: the same peasants who were hostile to the Bolshevik-dominated soviets and state farms readily set up new soviets and free communes under Makhno. In this environment of competition between the Bolshevik and Makhnovist ideological approaches, even the usually critical Greater Russian anarchist conference of "Nabat" in Kharkiv (Kharkov) championed the Makhnovist version at their April 1919 meeting: "[We oppose] all participation in the (Bolshevik's') soviets, which have become purely political organs, organized on an authoritarian, centralist, statist basis."191

This ideological competition and growing anti-Bolshevik peasant sentiment led the Bolsheviks to view Makhno's April 1919 call for a meeting of the Congress of

189 Nomad, 317.
190 Shatz, 458.
Peasants, Workers, and Insurgents as an act of rebellion. Makhno’s military superior in the Red Army, Bolshevik Division Commander Pavel Dybenko, was curt and to the point when he prohibited the congress in a telegram to Makhno.

Any kind of congresses held by the Gulyai Polye Revolutionary Headquarters, which I have [hereby] dissolved, are considered truly counterrevolutionary. The organizers of such congresses will be subjected to most repressive measures including pronouncing them to be outside the law. I order (the Makhnovites) to take measures immediately not to allow such occurrences.192

In defiance, the Congress met anyway, on April 10, 1919. The participants viewed themselves not as an assembly of counterrevolutionaries, but as those “who first raised the banner of social revolution in the Ukraine, and have gone further to the left than the Bolsheviks.”193 The Makhnovist congress did not flinch from proclaiming their opposition to the excesses of Bolshevik rule.

The current situation in Russia and the Ukraine is characterized by the seizure of power by the Communists-Bolsheviks who do not balk at anything in order to preserve and consolidate their power by armed force acting from the center. The party is conducting a criminal policy in regard to the social revolution and in regard to the laboring masses...We protest against the reactionary habits of the Bolshevik rulers, commissars, and agents of the Cheka, who are shooting workers, peasants, and rebels, inventing all kinds of excuses, and that is confirmed by the documents we have. The Cheka which were supposed to struggle with counterrevolution and with banditry have turned in the Bolsheviks’ hands into an instrument for the suppression of the will of the people. They have grown in some cases into detachments of several hundred armed men with a variety of arms. We demand that all these forces be dispatched to the front.194

Accusing the Bolsheviks of rigging the elections to the Third Congress of Soviets

191 Woodcock, 417.
192 Brovkin, 109.
193 Avrich, Portraits, 115., Nomad, 314.
194 Brovkin, 109-110.
in the Ukraine, subsequent Makhnovist Congresses demanded the removal of all appointed commissars and the reinstallament of military and civilian elections. Moreover, they demanded that people’s cooperatives be opened, grain requisitions stopped, and complete freedom be allowed for left wing political parties. The Ukrainian peasantry increasingly followed Makhno because he voiced the practical and ideological grievances of an otherwise silenced people. The anarchist Makhnovist movement felt itself firmly enough established on the steppes of the southeastern Ukraine to make demands as the representatives of the populace.195

In response, Leon Trotsky, the head of the Red Army, initiated the covert political suppression and physical liquidation of the Makhnovists, who were still officially part of the Red Army. Implying that Makhno’s forces were common thieves, Trotsky maliciously labeled them a “Bandit army” in official documents. Makhno’s execution of two Cheka agents sent to assassinate him in May frustrated Trotsky’s agenda, however, and Trotsky turned his attention to the Greater Russian anarchist movement.196 Anarchist activities in Petrograd were suppressed, and in Moscow the Cheka raided and shut down the publishing offices of the newspaper Anarchy. Only six months after the October Revolution the Bolsheviks had found a new mortal enemy - the popularly supported anarchist military government under Makhno.197

Because the Bolshevik soldiers serving in the Ukraine were often Ukrainian peasants themselves, Makhno’s movement also threatened Bolshevik strength through troop defection. In fact, many soldiers in the Bolshevik ranks were already anarchists. Even those who were not anarchists saw the utopian visions of the Communists and

195 Brovkin, 109-110.
196 Avrich, Portraits, 115.
anarchists as remarkably similar. From the typical soldier's point of view, Bolshevism was an unavoidable first step toward the destruction of semi-feudal Russian Tsardom. Since Lenin himself had promised that state compulsion would disappear in the later phases of the revolutionary process, cooperation with the Bolsheviks seemed to the common soldiers, as well as to many anarchists, the path toward greater freedom and equality. Consequently, the anarchists and draftees within the Red Army were profoundly uncomfortable with their new position as an anti-Makhnovite force. 198

These realities drew swift response from the Bolsheviks. Because the Makhnovists continued to issue resolutions critical of the communists and the Cheka, the Bolshevik Commander-in-Chief, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseenko, sought to reorganize Makhno's brigade within the Red Army, strengthening the Bolshevik elements while neutralizing the anarchist influence. 199 Makhno resisted, forcing the Bolsheviks to increasingly employ only Russian or international units, to avoid further local troop defections. 200

When the Reds employed Ukrainian troops the results were predictable. An event from the late winter of 1919 serves as a perfect example: two thousand peasant Makhnovists with two field guns and eight machine guns attacked the city of Alexandrovsk. The Red Army sent a three hundred-man cavalry detachment to defend the city. Without firing a shot, the cavalry attachment quickly joined the rebels.

During this time period, Makhno simultaneously gained twenty thousand new civilian peasant recruits -- a full quarter of the Red Army's troops in the Ukraine. By the

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197 Woodcock, 417-418.
198 Nomad, 312-313.
199 Brovkin, 115.
200 Brovkin, 111.
spring of 1919 Makhno's known rebel forces were at forty-five thousand - fully half the size of the Ukrainian Red Army. The Makhnovists were becoming a formidable potential opposition force -- one that the Bolsheviks felt they had to annihilate.201

When the Whites advanced north toward Kharkov and west toward the central Ukraine in May 1919, the Bolsheviks saw the opportunity to exterminate their unreliable ally. Withdrawing the Makhnovists' ammunition supply and removing as many men and rolling stock from the Ukraine as possible, the Bolsheviks threw Makhno's semi-autonomous Thirteenth Division of the Red Army against Denikin's forces. Given one-sixth of the amount of ammunition necessary, Makhno's forces could do little against the superior French and British cannons and machine guns that opposed them.202 Inevitably, the Whites broke through Makhno's lines in June, threatening Kharkov and the central Ukraine. The Bolsheviks were more than willing to sacrifice Ukrainian territory to the Whites if it would facilitate Makhno's demise, for the Makhnovists' popularity made them a much more profound threat than the pro-gentry Whites, who continued to be hated by all.203

Not mentioning the lack of ammunition and other vital military support, the Bolsheviks attempted to equate Makhno's libertarian principles with treasonous military ineffectiveness. As early as June 2, 1919, three high ranking Bolshevik speakers on the Kharkov city soviet blamed the collapse of the front on the "shameful retreat of the Makhno bands."204 At the same time, a Petrograd newspaper reported that Makhno would be executed if captured because his libertarian ideology encouraged chaos within

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201 Brovkin, 111-112, 127.
202 Nomad, 319.
203 Brovkin, 115, Nomad, 319, 321.
204 Brovkin, 115-116.
nearby Red ranks. The newspaper argued that the Makhnovist movement’s libertarian mood “had embraced the neighboring (Red) army, and this predetermined the defeat of the Red Army.”\textsuperscript{205} Trotsky elaborated upon these accusations, facilitating Makhno’s removal from the Red Army:

> the opening of the front to the Whites, before whom the Makhno brigade....invariably [retreated, was a result of] the incapacity, the criminality, and... treason on the part of the leaders.\textsuperscript{206}

To further substantiate the need for Makhno’s removal, Trotsky even played up a correspondence between the White General Shkuro and Makhno that the Makhnovists themselves had satired in their newspaper \textit{The Road to Freedom}. Grossly misinformed by a prisoner seeking a pardon, General Shkuro had been told that Makhno now favored counter-revolutionary measures. Makhno’s real response had obviously clarified matters: he shot the soldier delivering the White proposal for unified action. Nevertheless, the Bolshevik press reprinted the \textit{Road to Freedom} satire as evidence of ongoing negotiations between Makhno and Shkuro.\textsuperscript{207} Trotsky moreover insisted that “no government” was a cunning anarchist device used by the Makhnovists to cover up their attempt at establishing a government of their own.\textsuperscript{208} On June fourth, Trotsky made this sentiment concrete when he once again declared that delegates to a recently elected Congress would be declared outside of the law.\textsuperscript{209}

Consequently, Makhno officially relinquished his position as Division Commander within the Red Army on June 9. Accompanied by his personal bodyguard of

\textsuperscript{205} Brovkin, 115.
\textsuperscript{206} Nomad, 318.
\textsuperscript{207} Nomad, 314-315.
\textsuperscript{208} Nomad, 317.
\textsuperscript{209} Christopher Read, \textit{From Tsar to Soviets} (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 262.
two hundred cavalry, Makhno retreated west of the Dnieper River, continuing to carry on guerrilla warfare against the Whites. Meanwhile, troops loyal to Makhno remained within the Red Army, awaiting a signal to rejoin an independent Makhnovist Revolutionary Insurrection Army. Makhno hoped that leaving these troops behind might placate the Red Army commanders so that they would leave him alone.

Persisting Bolshevik fears of Red troop desertion to Makhno soon led to the Bolsheviks' formal break with the entire Makhnovist movement, however. When the Makhnovists called for a June 15, 1919 Congress at Gulyai Polye they invited Red Army soldiers to send delegates. Because the Makhnovists continued to ignore Trotsky's prohibition on the Congress, the Bolsheviks forced the closing of all of Makhno's free communes.

Trotsky simultaneously renewed his personal vendetta against Makhno. Issuing an order for Nestor Makhno's arrest, public trial, and execution, Trotsky sent Klementi Voroshilov, the Soviet Commissar of Defense, and a Cheka detachment to capture Makhno. Warned of these events by several Red Army division generals, Makhno surprised and saved the lives of his would-be assassins at the very moment they were ambushed by a White detachment. The Bolsheviks did not demonstrate similar chivalry, however, when later that very day Voroshilov arrested and executed a large part of Makhno's Gulyai Polye regional government. The Bolsheviks officially outlawed Makhno's movement.

In retaliation, Makhno gave the signal and his troops in the Red Army simply left their commanders. These and other deserters from the Red Army provided a fresh core

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210 Nomad, 319.
211 Avrich, Portraits, 115.
of one thousand four hundred men, six hundred cavalry armed with eighty machine guns, ten pieces of field artillery, and two armored cars. In the course of their military missions, these forces increased further to twelve thousand men, two thousand five hundred of them cavalry.\textsuperscript{213} Almost all of Makhno's forces, located in every province, included a large number of Red Army deserters.\textsuperscript{214}

Makhno's augmented forces continued to attack the Bolsheviks. In their travels, the Makhnovists destroyed all signs of Bolshevik rule. They antagonized the Cheka and the various Red grain collection agencies, and killed all Bolshevik commissars in the villages through which they passed. Simultaneously, the Makhnovists took special pains to re-establish new libertarian communes as an expression of their sovereignty.\textsuperscript{215}

During this same period, Grigoriev, an ex-Red Army general and rabid anti-Semite, who was leading a variety of irregular combatants also attacked the Red Army's detachments in the Ukraine. The combined effect of the attacks by the Makhnovist and Grigoriev forces was to decimate the Red Army in the Ukraine, thus unintentionally aiding the Whites. Temporarily freed of their main Red antagonist, the White troops were revitalized. The result was devastating for the Reds; their entire Crimean Army disintegrated and the front opened to allow significant White advances.\textsuperscript{216} With the Reds offering less resistance than they had earlier, Denikin's White Army took Kharkov in the end of June, the Central Ukraine in July, and was well on the way to Kiev in August 1919.\textsuperscript{217} Outlawed by the Bolsheviks, Makhno was forced from his homebase into the area surrounding Alexandria; a region controlled by a pogromist named Grigoriev.

\textsuperscript{212} Nomad, 319-320.
\textsuperscript{213} Brovkin, 337.
\textsuperscript{214} Brovkin, 336.
\textsuperscript{215} Avrich, Portraits, 115., Brovkin, 116., Woodcock, 422.
Despite this brief alliance, in regards to Jews, the ideals of Makhno’s forces departed from the commonly held anti-Semitism of the typical Ukrainian peasant. As Avrich notes, although Makhno has since been charged with anti-Semitism by a handful of sources, these objections are “without exception...based on hearsay, rumor, or intentional slander, and remain undocumented and unproved.” In fact, a considerable number of Jews took part in the Makhnovist movement, and Jewish intellectuals such as Volin and Baron held key positions within Makhno’s Cultural-Education Commission. Makhno’s Insurgents in fact supported Jewish rights throughout its existence, at times even to the point of executing peasants professing anti-Semitic rhetoric.

Although the Makhnovists were thus not anti-Semites themselves, a brief Makhnovist alliance with Grigoriev’s anti-Semitic bandits soon followed. Trotsky made great propagandistic use of Makhno’s unfortunate alliance. Continuing his anti-Makhno campaign in the Bolshevik press, Trotsky wrote:

> Scratch a follower of Makhno and you will find a follower of Grigoriev. More often than not you don’t even have to scratch: a frantic kulak or a petty speculator barking at the Communists frankly sticks out on the surface.

Under such incessant pressure from all sides, Makhno sought to regain the purity of his movement. Upon intercepting messages that Grigoriev had exchanged with the Whites, Makhno unmasked Grigoriev at a public meeting in Sentove, while two of his men shot the general. Explaining Grigoriev’s betrayal of their forces to the Whites,

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216 Brovkin, 115, Nomad, 321.
217 Brovkin, 116.
218 Avrich, Portraits, 122.
219 Avrich, Portraits, 122-123.
220 Nomad, 316.
221 Nomad, 317.
222 Michael Maler, Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War (London: The Macmillan Press LTD, 1982), 139-140.
Makhno quickly won Grigoriev’s troops over to his side, thus augmenting the Makhnovist forces, as had been his intention from the beginning.223

**Strength Under Fire**

With his strategic use of these reinforcements, Makhno was able to annihilate the Denikinist counterrevolution in the autumn of 1919, to the immense benefit of the Reds. Surrounded by a section of the White Army at the village of Peregonovka, near Uman, the fate of the Makhnovist Army seemed sealed. Nevertheless, Makhno’s strategy burst forth on September 26, 1919 at three A.M., when a well-planned attack on a nearby White ammunition base at Berdiansk resulted in the artillery depot’s explosion. Taking advantage of the ensuing chaos, the Makhnovists completely annihilated their pursuers while escaping encirclement.

Having destroyed the Whites’ ammunition, the Makhnovists proceeded to cut the Southern Railway, thereby removing Denikin’s entire supply line. Further dividing his troops into parallel columns, Makhno pushed his forces to destroy Denikin’s rear in the southeast corner of Russia. They drove the White forces back hundreds of miles to the Sea of Azov and then north to Ekaterinoslav in less than three weeks.224

The Whites, who had expected to take Moscow in December, were forced to divert one and a half of their best cavalry divisions against Makhno. Attacked and beaten at the exact spot where their lines had been weakened, the Whites fell to the Red’s defensive onslaught, eventually pushing them to the shore of the Black Sea. Within three weeks, the weaknesses caused by Makhno’s forces had converted Denikin’s march on

223 Nomad, 316.
Moscow into a full retreat. Denikin himself acknowledged the significance of Makhno's breakthrough, stating that it "had the effect of disorganizing our rear and weakening the front at the most critical period." In his numerous accounts of the Makhnovist movement, Volin went even further -- asserting that "the honor of having annihilated the Deninist counter-revolution in the autumn of 1919 belongs entirely to the Makhnovist Insurgent Army."

The Makhnovist movement once again revitalized itself through its victory over an adversary. The success of this campaign brought an influx of one thousand machine guns and varying amounts of cannons, shells, motor lorries, and airplanes at an opportune moment. With these supplies, Makhno was able to increase the size of his movement even further - to forty thousand infantry and fifteen thousand cavalrymen. An enormous area was again free for anarchist experimentation.

The Makhnovists' Urban Failure

Empowered and secure, Makhno again attempted to create an example of anarchism for the world to see. Toward this aim the Makhnovists established no bureaucratic authorities in captured urban areas, set up soviets, chased out owners, and encouraged workers to set up co-ops. Populations were encouraged to initiate their own forms of local self-government, and voluntary agreements were made between cities and the surrounding countryside. The Makhnovists immediately founded a Russian and a Ukrainian daily paper, and likewise allowed the Bolsheviks to print their Stav, the Left

224 Woodcock, 422.
225 Nomad, 322-325.
226 Nomad, 323.
227 Avrich, Portraits, 122.
Social Revolutionaries to publish *The Standard of Revolt*, and the Right Social Revolutionaries to circulate *The People’s Power*. The Makhnovist program ran into profound difficulties in these urban areas, however. Foremost, the industrial workers resisted Makhno’s encouragement to form self-active trade unions. For example, when the railway workers of Aleksandrovsk came to Makhno complaining that they had not been paid for weeks, Makhno encouraged them to take control of the railroad and charge the passengers what they deemed to be a fair price. In this situation, as in others, Makhno’s ideas met with limited success. Urban workers were interdependent components within urban industry. Without the guidance of technical experts, any experimentation would inevitably fail. Makhno’s anarchist dilemma in regards to these workers involved the means of compensation existing within the cities. While the peasants and artisans of the countryside could barter the products of their labor, urban workers depended on wages to survive. To provide for them within the present system, Makhno would have had to give them something for nothing because urban workers did not retain the products of their labor. Although the Bolsheviks were willing to do this, by forcing the rural population to feed the cities, such a move would have discredited Makhno with his peasant supporters and betrayed Makhno’s own pro-peasant sympathies.

Because of this inherent urban economic tension, a proposal for shared Bolshevik-Makhnovist power in Aleksandrovsk drew sharp repression from Makhno in late 1919. The Bolshevik Revolutionary Committee of Aleksandrovsk proposed that it run the city’s

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229 Nomad, 321.
civil administration, while Makhno would remain in charge of the city’s defense.

Makhno refused to share power. In fact, his actions proved how clearly he resented even the suggestion of shared power: he shot a Makhnovist regimental commander who favored the project, as well as all the Bolsheviks involved in the scheme. In this turbulent climate, Makhno left both Ekaterinoslav and Alexandrovsk by December of 1919.

Voline’s excuse that “the instability of the situation (had) prevented positive work” seems valid. In the ongoing struggle for ideological and political hegemony between the Bolsheviks and the Makhnovists, the Bolsheviks held a trump card in the cities because they advocated the dictatorship of the proletariat.\(^{231}\)

**December 1919: Trotsky’s Failed Attempt to Remove Makhno**

Through their separate efforts against the White Army, the Makhnovists and the Reds had become indirect and rather unhappy allies. When they reached the south in December 1919, the Red Army acknowledged Makhno’s importance in the struggle against Denikin, but they quickly sought to remove their regional military and ideological rival. Toward this aim, the Reds ordered the Makhnovists to the new Polish front. This was a blatant attempt to open the Ukraine and to convert the Makhnovist soldiers into regular Red Army troops.\(^{232}\) Understanding these motivations, Makhno refused this request, replying that Trotsky wanted to replace Denikin’s forces with the Red Army and the displaced landlords with political commissars. Having promised to cleanse Russia of anarchism with “an iron broom” Trotsky again outlawed Makhno on January 15, 1920 –

\(^{231}\) Avrich, Portraits, 121., Nomad, 327-328.

\(^{232}\) Nomad, 329., Woodcock, 423.
this time for “betraying the revolution.”

The result was a war of attrition and carnage, during which the Makhnovists fought superior Red forces for nine months, alternating between victory and defeat. Initially Makhno had some success, principally because at times a good half of the opposing Red Army soldiers favored Makhno. On one occasion, Makhno’s forces were even able to capture an entire Red Army Division which equaled the size of his entire forces. The Reds’ reasoning was simple; in contrast to the Bolsheviks, who did not take prisoners and executed even ordinary soldiers, the Makhnovists executed only officers and Communist Party militants, while allowing privates to go free or join their movement.

Bolshevik aggression in the villages likewise increased Makhno’s popular support. Upon occupying Ukrainian villages, the Bolsheviks immediately shot all the inhabitants who showed any overt sign of being sympathetic to Makhno. Moreover, any village resisting Bolshevik grain requisitioning was labeled a “Bandit Village” and suffered a similar fate.

These reactions produced the inevitable result. Makhno’s forces enjoyed the full sympathy of the local population. The Bolsheviks themselves acknowledged that the entire province of Ekaterinoslav supported Makhno. This reality supported the guerrilla warfare at which Makhno excelled; he was able to successfully engage the Red Commander Budenyi’s elite cavalry army, and even gunned down an additional four hundred fifty cadets from Red Officers’ schools. By profoundly undermining soviet

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233 Nomad, 330.; Arshinov, 121.
234 Nomad, 330.
236 Nomad, 329-330.
power in the Ukraine, Makhno retained the organization of the Revolutionary
Insurrection Army.\textsuperscript{238} Yet, because such acts made further joint Red-Makhnovist
cooporation impossible, the White forces, under the new leadership of General Peter
Nikolaevich Wrangel, again occupied the southeastern Ukraine.\textsuperscript{239}

Attempting to undermine Makhno's movement, the Bolsheviks repeated their
early accusations that Makhno had made an alliance with the Whites. Wrangel had, in
fact, sent officers to Makhno offering him complete territorial autonomy in exchange for
cooporation with the Whites. Makhno's response, however, was the same as before: he
immediately shot Wrangel's messengers. Makhno would not tolerate his movement's
incorporation with an ideology advocating the reestablishment of a counterrevolutionary
bureaucratic state because such a situation opposed his ideals of revolutionary anarchism
and contradicted the desires of the peasantry.\textsuperscript{240}

\textbf{Amnesty and White General Wrangel's Defeat}

Because of General Wrangel's advances into the Ukraine in mid October 1920,
the Red Army simultaneously sought the Makhnovist movement's military aid to
facilitate the Whites' defeat. In order to gain assistance and time, the Bolsheviks
promised the Makhnovists the release of all anarchist prisoners, complete freedom of
propaganda, and full participation in Soviet bodies. Makhno accepted the proposal in late
October 1920. The Bolsheviks were apprehensive about publishing news about the
alliance, however, because it would reveal that they had previously lied about Makhno's

\textsuperscript{237} \textit{Nomad}, 330.
\textsuperscript{238} \textit{Nomad}, 329., \textit{Woodcock}, 423.
\textsuperscript{239} \textit{Brovkin}, 337.
\textsuperscript{240} \textit{Nomad}, 332-336.
Young 87

alliance with General Wrangel. Makhno’s persistent demands finally resulted in the
publication of the terms of the new alliance. The Bolsheviks intentionally printed the
military clauses of the agreement before the political clauses. As the political clauses
admitted that Makhno had never allied with the Whites, the reason behind the order of
publication was simple; the Bolsheviks wanted to cushion the impact of their earlier
deception.\textsuperscript{241} Such Bolshevik trickery increased Makhno’s hesitancy, as did the
Bolsheviks’ eventual denial of a clause in the treaty granting the establishment

Of free organs of political and economic
self government, their autonomous and federative connection,
based on agreements with the government organs of the Soviet
Republics.\textsuperscript{242}

Yet, the hesitant Makhnovist-Bolshevik anti-Wrangel alliance continued and once
again Makhno’s forces played a decisive role in pushing the Whites back. Within three
weeks, Makhno’s forces cleared the opposing Whites from Ekaterinoslav province.
Augmenting the Red forces, they broke through the Whites’ defensive positions on the
Perekop Isthmus. Wrangel’s resistance was inadequate. His stronghold at the Crimean
capital of Simeropol was taken on November 15, 1920, and the White Army ceased to
exist.\textsuperscript{243} Immediately upon hearing word of the victory, a Makhnovist aide was
overheard saying “It’s the end of the agreement. I’ll bet you anything the Bolsheviks will
be on us within a week.”\textsuperscript{244} Even this pessimistic prediction would soon be proven
optimistic.

After this defeat of the one remaining White army, the Bolsheviks turned on
Makhno, attempting to eradicate his movement. Their reason was not difficult to find:

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Nomad, 334., Woodcock, 423.}
\footnote{Nomad, 335.}
\footnote{Nomad, 335., Woodcock, 423.}
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the vital Makhnovist movement would obviously resist further assimilation of the Ukraine into the Bolshevik state. Makhno needed to be removed precisely because his interpretation of Anarcho-Communism had proven its success.

November 26, 1920 was a day of infamous betrayal. The Reds invited the entire Crimean Command of the Makhnovist Army to a conference. Upon their arrival, they were shot and their troops disarmed. In the malay, only one Makhnovist cavalry unit escaped, returning to Makhno in Gulyai Polye eleven days later. Of Makhno's one thousand six hundred horsemen elite before the conference, only two hundred fifty escaped with their lives. Simultaneously, the Cheka swept across the Ukraine, arresting and executing all the known anarchists they could find. A statement made by Samsonov, the head of the Cheka, highlights the Bolsheviks' preventive killing approach for both real and potential adversaries:

You consider this treachery? We knew how to use Makhno when we needed him; and when he became useless to us, we contrived to liquidate him.246

The Makhnovist movement was obliterated. Rakovskii, the head of the Bolshevik government in the Ukraine, sought to perpetuate this situation by equating any and all resistance to Bolshevik power with the recently defeated White counter-revolution.

1. All White Guards are declared to be outside the law. Anyone who renders resistance to Soviet power will be shot on the spot.
2. Closest relatives of insurgents will be taken hostage and placed in concentration camps...
3. Villages which rendered assistance to the insurgents by providing horses, carts, and reinforcements are declared to be under martial law and will be subjected to the following reprisals: (a) confiscation of food supply stocks (b) monetary indemnity (c) confiscation of property (d) bombardment of the village (e) final annihilation of the

244 Christopher Read, From Tsar to Soviets (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 262-263.
245 Nomad, 335-336., Woodcock, 423.
246 Nomad, 335.
village.
4. All chiefs of the rear and all officials of Soviet power in the localities are to draft a list of villages which are the centers of counterrevolution and to apply the measures listed above in regard to these villages.247

The Bolsheviks were determined to stamp out all signs of autonomy in the Ukrainian countryside. The Bolshevik alliance agreements had been a mere cover for covert military action against Makhno, anarchists, and all who opposed or might eventually oppose the Bolsheviks.248

Following their coup, the Bolsheviks accused Makhno of organizing a new peasant army to fight the Soviet Government and of refusing to go to the Caucus front when ordered to do so by supreme military command. Perhaps the most painful accusation was that the Makhnovists had never really fought Wrangel in the Crimea. Under Bolshevik reinterpretation, the Makhnovists were presented as traitors who had only attacked the rear of the Red Army in the Crimea.249 The fact that it was Makhno and not the Red Army who was betrayed is, however, obvious. Following the Crimean Conference, the Makhnovists captured two Red soldiers with leaflets entitled “Forward Against Makhno!” According to the soldiers’ own accounts, these leaflets were given to them on November 15 and 16 - the very day Makhno’s troops helped defeat Wrangel’s stronghold at Simferopol.250

Makhno’s Nine Month Resistance

Following the coup, Makhno’s surviving forces again benefited from popular sentiment and support among rank-and-file Red troops. Encircled at Gulyai Polye by

247 Brovkin, 346-347.
248 Brovkin, 346.
249 Nomad, 335.
250 Nomad, 336.
superior Red Army forces, Makhno broke through with a cavalry detachment of between one hundred and fifty and two hundred men. The peasant components within the Red Army facilitated Makhno’s escape. In their eyes, Makhno was their own flesh and blood, their own and only champion of their own rights. Although few Red Soldiers now deserted to his weakened forces, on two occasions Makhno took as many Red prisoners as he had men.251 As a result, even after the crushing defeat of his army, Makhno continued to win victories over his numerically superior foe.

Popular peasant sympathies also aided Makhno’s nine-month resistance. Although many of Makhno’s followers had died and his supplies were chronically low, his name still drew independent guerrilla fighters. Bolshevik atrocities proved a profound motivation for these irregulars. In Makhno’s area of operation alone, two thousand peasants were shot or mutilated by the Bolsheviks, while the same number were forced to leave the region. The entire Ukrainian countryside, along with the Don and the Kuban Cossack Hosts, rose up in armed rebellion against the Bolsheviks during the winter of 1920 and the spring of 1921. Under these conditions, Makhno’s forces quickly grew to one thousand five hundred cavalrymen and one thousand infantry.252

Confronted with a concentrated enemy fifty times stronger than his own forces, Makhno’s forces relied heavily upon sympathetic villagers for survival. A typical detachment of three hundred or four hundred core Makhnovist forces depended upon a dozen or so villages for food supplies and temporary infusions of fighters for large operations. As long as Makhno maintained his popular support among the peasantry, the Makhnovist military government would remain a vital rival to Bolshevik authority in the

251 Nomad, 334-338.
The Bolsheviks acknowledged this reality in their 1920 fifth All-Ukrainian Party Conference:

It is hard to distinguish between the kulak and the poor peasant in the Makhno movement. It is a mass peasant movement. We do not have anything in the countryside, anything we can hold onto, anybody who can be our ally in the struggle with the bandits.\(^{254}\)

Attempting to remedy this situation, the Bolsheviks sought to undermine the Makhnovists' peasant support. Accepting the failure of soviet collective farms in the Ukraine, the Bolsheviks distributed these lands amongst the peasantry. The continued failure of Bolshevik agrarian policy, however, continued to foment peasant discontent. Grain requisitions continued through the spring of 1921, when the New Economic Policy was announced. The seized grain would often rot at the railroad stations through inefficiency, lack of fuel, railroad breakdowns, or sabotage.\(^{255}\) These events only served to further enrage the peasantry.

As they had over all the other territories that they controlled, the Bolsheviks tried to bring the class war to the Ukrainian villages in order to divide Makhno's support. To create an auxiliary peasant force to assist in Bolshevik grain requisitions, the communists rapidly organized "Committees of the Poor." Because the Bolsheviks gave these poor and landless peasants a share of the grain seized from the more prosperous peasants, the necessities of survival did, to some extent, facilitate "class conflict." Mindful of where their bread came from, the landless peasants became reliable Bolshevik secret police informants, often hunting down and executing wounded Makhnovist soldiers. Makhno

\(^{254}\) Brovkin, 112.
was thrown into an awkward situation. Although he desired support from a united peasantry, he was forced to maintain the economic inequalities of the status quo. The landed peasantry refused to counter the Bolsheviks’ food bribes by sharing some of their grain with the landless peasants. Makhno's support was undermined and divided.\textsuperscript{256}

**The New Economic Policy and Exile**

The deathblow for the Makhnovists occurred in March 1921, when Lenin adopted the New Economic Policy, thereby ending the forced and often excessive requisition of foodstuffs, as well as other unpopular policies. Under NEP, Lenin substituted a Single Agricultural Tax for the hated requisitions, thereby removing the peasantry's main grievance against the Bolsheviks. The source of their discontent removed, the Ukrainian peasantry ceased to supply material and manpower for Makhno's struggle against the Soviet government.\textsuperscript{257}

The ideological understandings of Makhno's peasant partisans had never been very strong. If they could gain what they desired within an alternative ideology or societal structure, they were more than willing to adjust their orientation. The point of contention in the Makhnovist-Bolshevik struggle had gradually become which group of militant revolutionaries would achieve supreme authority in a collectivist society -- déclassé intellectuals and ex-workers, or former peasants and irregular soldiers. As the Communists modified their agrarian policies and the Makhnovists' principles remained a distant possibility, the typical peasant--who was not really an "anarchist" in principle--had to choose between supporting an empowered Lenin or a virtually defeated Makhno.

\textsuperscript{255} Nomad, 330-331.
\textsuperscript{256} Nomad, 331.
Precisely because he created a rival ‘anarchist’ regional movement while under the popular libertarian auspices of anarchy, Nestor Ivanovich Makhno’s removal was necessary for the Bolshevik assimilation of the Ukraine. Anarchist depression at this new turn of events was perhaps best expressed by Alexander Berkman on the eve of his March 1921 departure from Russia.

Gray are the passing days. One by one the embers of hope have died out. Terror and despotism have crushed the life born in October. The slogans of the Revolution are foresworn (sic), its ideals stifled in the blood of the people. The breath of yesterday is dooming millions to death; the shadow of today hangs like a black pall over the country. Dictatorship is trampling the masses underfoot. The Revolution is dead; its spirit cries in the wilderness.... I have decided to leave Russia.258

In many ways, his expressive eulogy was appropriate. Kropotkin, the elder spokesperson of Anarcho-Communism had died in February. Meanwhile, hundreds of anarchists languished in Bolshevik prisons and peasant soviets formerly supported by Makhno now became instruments of the Bolshevik party’s dictatorship.259

Although Makhno never surrendered, he realized his movement was finished. The motivations behind the Ukraine peasantry’s support had eroded and he stood virtually alone. His August 28, 1921 flight across the Dniester River and into Rumania’s relative freedom was unavoidable. With his lucky escape, anarchy as a vital force ceased to exist in the Ukraine. The path was clear for the ascendancy of the Bolshevik State.

In exile in Paris, Makhno was a miserably lonely peasant and consumptive alcoholic. This depression and misery was only exasperated by both the weakness of the French Anarchist movement and the international anarchist communities argument over

257 Nomad, 338.
258 Avrich, Portraits, 205.
259 Avrich, 222.
the ‘Platform.’ Between 1919 and 1920, many of the anarchists within the CGT (General Confederation of Labour) changed alliances and went over to the Communist Party. It only infuriated Makhno further that the CGT daily paper, *L’Humanité,* had been taken over, changed into *Le Libertaire,* and published weekly instead of daily.260

Makhno’s greatest sadness, however, came from the quarrels over and eventual failure of the “Platform.” Originally published in *Delo Truda* by Peter Arshinov, the “Platform” proposed a general union of anarchists with a central executive committee for action. Citing that anarchists’ experiences with the Bolsheviks had proven the faults of uncoordinated anarchist action, Makhno became the only prominent anarchist to support Arshinov. Volin, in 1927, was among the first group of anarchists to reject the idea of an anarchist “Platform,” arguing that the desire to establish a central committee too closely paralleled the Bolshevik state structure. As Arshinov had been a Bolshevik before he joined the anarchists, this attack carried much sway amongst the international community.261

Makhno and Arshinov attacked Volin and his supporters in response, downplaying their roles in the Makhnovist Insurrection Army. This left a bad taste in the mouths of most Russian anarchists, and the “Platform” was solidly defeated in the spring of 1930 at the 10th Congress of the Union of Revolutionary Anarchist-Communists. Although Makhno had already lost most of his friends, the fallout from the “Platform” was complete in 1932, when Arshinov rejoined the Bolshevik Party and reentered the Soviet Union in 1934. Makhno looked like a fool and subsequent publications by Arshinov, such as his 1933 pamphlet *Anarchism and the Dictatorship of the Proletariat,*

260 Malet, 190.
261 Malet, 190.
Young 95

disillusioned and hurt Makhno immensely.262

When Makhno died in Paris on July 25, 1934 the press of the Soviet Union did not print one word about his death. Perhaps the Soviet Union's fear of Makhno, even in death, revolved around its continuing concern over the example Makhno had established through his rival 'anarchist' government coupled with stubborn peasant guerrilla resistance.263 Five hundred Russian, French, Spanish and Italian anarchists attended his funeral at Pere Lachaise cemetery. Even the semi-official paper of the French Foreign Service recorded a poignant remark on Makhno's death:

> It is certain that Denikin's defeat owed more to the peasant insurrection under the black Makhnovist banner than to the successes of Trotsky's [sic] regular army. The Makhnovist bands tipped the scales in favour of the Reds, and, if Moscow may now want to forget the fact, impartial history will remember it.264

As an anarchist expatriot living in Paris, Makhno remained firmly bound to his convictions. He lived his life as a personal anarchist example. He regularly attended anarchist meetings at the Parisian Jewish Autodidact Club, and intermingled with anarchists the world over -- including Durruti and Ascaso from Spain, to whom he offered his assistance, should the day of their anarchist revolution arrive in his lifetime. The Spanish anarchists provided Makhno with financial assistance when he lay dying in bed of tuberculosis. Although Makhno died before he could follow through on this promise, several veterans of his Insurgent Army did join and fight with the Durruti column in 1936. Crippled and confined to his bed for most of the last year of his life, Makhno had continued to dream until his dying day of returning to his beloved native

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262 Malet, 190-191.
264 Quoted in Malet, 192.
land and “taking up again the struggle for liberty and social justice.”

Conclusion

This study has shown that Nestor Ivanovich Makhno strove to implement an interpretation of anarchism that consciously catered itself to the peasantry’s desires. The resulting governmental organization, military structure and arbitrary tendencies of his movement profoundly conflicted ideals of theoretically pure anarchy. These manifestations were, however, in full accord with the peasantry’s conception of the valiant revolt leader, which was best exemplified by peasantry’s collective memory of the rebel leaders Stenka Razin and Emelian Pugachev.

As a utopian revolutionist, Makhno was forced to surmount the difficulties of implementing anarchist theories in an “impure” human environment by modifying them within a temporary manifestation which was not anarchistic. Yet, these compromises did not worry Makhno’s peasant supporters precisely because they saw anarchism merely as a path to the alleviation of a plethora of grievances that had been visited upon them for centuries. Although the Makhnovists honestly desired to achieve a theoretically pure anarchy in the future, the Ukrainian peasantry supported Makhno’s movement in the hope of obtaining immediate economic and political emancipation. The peasantry’s traditional desire for land and autonomy drew them to Makhno’s anarchism because he protected their interests, left a great deal of autonomy in their hands, and produced the results that they desired. Like Makhno himself, the Ukrainian peasantry interested itself with action and success – not hairsplitting over theoretical or ideological qualms.

265 Avrich, Portraits, 124.
The Ukrainian peasantry consistently supported Makhno's rebel movement because they appreciated the gains that his interpretation of anarchism brought them. The Gulyai Polye peasantry especially accepted the thoughts of Michael Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin, whose thoughts also influenced the Makhnovists immensely. This symbiotic relationship between persistent peasant aspirations, charismatic guidance, and revolutionary Anarcho-Communist thought allowed the "Black" Makhnovist forces to carry out an anarchist experiment over a significant amount of territory for an extended period of time.

Because Makhno's Black forces effectively hindered and threatened Bolshevik ascendancy in the Ukraine, the peasantry's assimilation into the new state could only occur after support for Makhno had been undermined through the New Economic Plan and the example of his erstwhile anarchistic community had been eliminated. The Makhnovist movement worried the Bolsheviks precisely because it had effectively combined the peasantry's traditional aspirations, a widely accepted charismatic leader, and an adaptive interpretation of revolutionary Anarcho-Communism.

The Makhnovist movement thus bears testimony to the vitality and advantages offered peasant rebel groups to this day. Throughout his leadership of an anarchist movement, Makhno proved the success and desirability of orienting a pre-anarchist society towards an anarchistically impure temporary manifestation to facilitate anarchism in the future. In this way, Makhno was an anarchist and an anarch, although he carried out actions for the moment that fundamentally departed from anarchy. To judge for sure whether his movement was anarchistically pure or not, one would have to see the end result of his temporary departures from pure anarchy. We were never able to see his end
result, however, precisely because his combination of anarchism, autonomy, and peasant land desires proved so powerful and successful. The Reds had to eliminate Makhno and crush his message or they might have met with greater resistance and possible defeat in their efforts to dominate the lush Ukraine.
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Makhno and partisans. *Left*, Semen Karetynk; *center*, Makhno; *right*, Fedir Shchus'.