

The Return of the irrepressible

Anarchist inspired resistance in Ukraine Then and Now

Rui Preti

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“The question is always how to move from a social insurgency to an anarchistic society?”

—Voline, *The Unknown Revolution*

In early October, as the Russian military assault on Ukraine enters its eighth month, radical publications have been reporting on anarchists participating in the popular struggle against the invasion. Surprisingly, several mainstream journalists have also published articles presenting anarchists in a positive light.

In April, an article in the *International Business Times* focused on a town in Southeast Ukraine, Gulyaipole, describing the inspiration residents and refugees gain from tales of a local anarchist guerrilla, Nestor Makhno, and his band of insurgents of a century ago. From 1917 through 1921 they rallied the local population against dictatorships of all stripes. They successfully drove out German and Austro-Hungarian occupying forces, as well as right-wing and Russian nationalist troops. These fighters were able to hold off the Bolshevik Red Army for four brutal years, with strong support from local noncombatants.

However, the mainstream stories distort or leave out much of the anarchist, anti-authoritarian and anti-centralizing grassroots aspects of what was going on. Those news sources sometimes put forward highly inflated myths about Makhno and his comrades being wild anti-social outlaws. They are not interested in discussing what the social insurgents of the time considered most important in their movements, the attempts made at laying the groundwork for a new world, such as self-governing, commonly shared farmlands, factories, and schools.

They don't generally provide any perspectives on the challenges faced by the insurgents to reconcile the need to effectively oppose right-wing nationalist and Bolshevik authoritarian military forces with anarchist and anti-authoritarian principles and egalitarian decision-making. And, they don't tell how insurgents created volunteer fighting units based on election of officers from among the volunteer ranks rather than relying on authoritarian top-down discipline, as did all the armies they fought.

Those who want less myth and more in-depth information about this history need to turn to books and articles written by anarchists. Two important books by participants in the events are Peter Arshinov's *History of the Makhnovist Movement* and Voline's *The Unknown Revolution*. Both were written and published during the first half of the 20th century. They tell the history of the grassroots movements that are ignored in the top-down distorted perspectives offered by right-wing and authoritarian left ideologists.

During the last three decades, there have been newer books and articles from anarchist perspectives that further enhance our understanding of grassroots activities in Ukraine during the 20th century, as well as the challenges generally involved in opposing authoritarian takeovers of social revolutions.

One important later contribution, *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy's Cossack*, is by Alexandre Skirda, a dedicated anarchist historian fluent in Russian and Ukrainian as well as knowledgeable about the cultures of the region. Through research in a variety of archives and interviews with survivors, Skirda was able to find, translate and explain the significance of newly discovered documents. The resulting book was translated from French into English and updated in 2004 by Paul Sharkey, and recently reissued by AK Press.

Malcolm Archibald and Sharkey have also translated several additional articles by participants in the 1917 through 1921 peasant and worker insurgency in Ukraine. In 2021, a collection was published as *The Makhnovist Movement and Its Aftermath* by Black Cat Press.

In addition, several publications by the Kate Sharpley Library and makhno.info have further expanded our understanding of how anarchist networks were built and maintained despite the slowness and insecurity of communications of the early 20th century as compared with that of today.

By focusing on the grassroots social dynamics described in these publications, we can think more deeply about some important questions, such as how we might build on and adapt the positive aspects of the relationships of anarchists who lived a century ago. Another question raised is how to sustain a revolutionary movement under conditions of extreme state repression.

The flip side of that question is how to sustain an anarchist inspired revolution while faced with the need to eliminate authoritarian military forces. This might lead into a query of how differences between the past and present treatment of women and LGBTQ+ people affect overall social possibilities. Some clues are suggested in the new historical narratives being uncovered.

The Russian military defeat in its war with Japan (1904–1905), increased suffering and dissatisfaction among both rank-and-file soldiers and civilians in the countryside and cities. There were major strikes of more than a million workers in many parts of the empire, including Ukraine. Peasants drew upon their traditions of communal village assemblies and sharing the tilling of village land in common. Thousands participated in local self-governance, the establishment of workers' councils or soviets, and other projects that enabled people to learn firsthand about self-activity. There were also armed actions against the Tsarist regime from 1905 through 1907. This insurgency became known as the 1905 revolution.

The Russian government responded with brutal repression, killing hundreds, as well as arresting and imprisoning up to 70,000 people, many of whom did not survive the harsh conditions. Other insurgents escaped and went into exile. During this period, some activists found hope and inspiration in anarchist ideas shared in prison, learned in exile, carried across borders and even oceans.

World War I resulted in the disintegration of the Russian military and autocracy, as well as massive suffering among rank-and-file soldiers and civilians back home. In February-March 1917, this culminated in the overthrow of the Tsarist regime and the beginning of a new revolution.

In Ukraine, as elsewhere, anarchists revived old groups and formed new ones. They initiated struggles for self-governance of workplaces, education, housing, and access to land. Even though most peasants and workers were not anarchists, the majority found that these projects and practices fit in well with their traditions of community cooperation and sharing.

However, it quickly became clear that communities needed to organize self-defense against occupying German and Austro-Hungarian armies, various local right-wing armed groups, and eventually the Bolshevik government military.

Makhno was among the most active anarchists in southeast Ukraine who formed the Revolutionary Insurgent Army, which incorporated egalitarian principles in its functioning to a very great extent. The social movement and the guerrilla army together became known as the Makhnovshchina or Makhnovist movement. This was because Makhno was widely respected for his bravery and creative fighting ability among the majority of Ukrainian peasants and workers. However, all of the books and articles mentioned here make it clear that he did not function as an authoritarian leader. The movement was accountable to open assemblies of those involved in the struggle. Much of the fighting force often operated in smaller detachments each with their own elected leaderships.

After the Bolshevik takeover of the Russian government in October 1917, positive social projects in Ukraine were significantly inhibited by bureaucratic demands for centralization of administration by the new rulers.

Moreover, no matter how enthusiastic and determined people were, community run endeavors, such as agriculture, industry, and schools, became very difficult to maintain for more than a few months because of attacks by the various militaries seeking to subjugate Ukrainian peasants and workers.

Even after the Makhnovists played a key role in driving out the German and Austro-Hungarian troops and the local right-wing nationalists, the Bolshevik Red Army brutally crushed them precisely because their movement represented a living example of an alternative to authoritarian domination.

Several articles at the Kate Sharpley Library [katesharpleylibrary.net] and Makhno.info websites make clear that, despite the immense toll that authoritarian infiltration and severe repression took on anarchist movements in Ukraine during the first 20 years of the 20th century, thanks to many enduring relationships, anarchist-inspired groups and activities continued to emerge in the 1920s, 1930s, 1940s and beyond.

Rui Preti lives in the Pacific Northwest. They are a longtime friend of the Fifth Estate and a great believer in the value of continuous questioning and challenging the status quo.

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