

Move Over Nestor Makhno!

Here Comes Marusya Nikiforova

Norman Nawrocki

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She was known as either Maria or Marusya Nikiforova, a fearless and feared, bad-ass Ukrainian anarchist warrior who led her own army during the Russian Civil War and peasant rebellions in the early 20th century. But few people have heard about her, either in Ukraine or elsewhere.



A contemporary of another famous Ukrainian anarchist, Nestor Makhno, Nikiforova (1885–1919), was at one point better known in parts of Ukraine than him and also considered more important. But because she was a

woman, she is mostly ignored in histories of the period, including anarchist ones. There are also few documentary sources about her life since she spent most of it underground and only surfaced in the public eye as part of the Makhnovist movement for two remarkable years from 1917 to 1919.

Malcolm Archibald, an anarchist scholar versed in Russian and Ukrainian anarchist history and publisher of the former Black Cat Press, wrote a key work in English in 2007 about her life entitled *Atamasha: The Story of Maria Nikiforova: the Anarchist Joan of Arc*. He documents the prominent role she played in the Russian Revolution of 1917 and the Civil War that followed.

Marusya Nikiforova, an anarchist and feminist, led a short but extraordinary life. At 16, she joined an anarcho-communist group and participated in multiple bank robberies and was accused of the murder of a guard. She was sentenced to death, but imprisoned because of her youth, escaped, organized and led her own army to defend the Revolution in Ukraine against the German Army, Ukrainian Nationalists, and White Guard (counter-revolutionary supporters of the former Czarist regime), and ultimately the Bolsheviks during 1918 through 1919. She also set up hospitals and schools, fed the poor, painted, and planted gardens before she was captured and executed with her husband by the Whites.

Nikiforova carried a pistol and a saber, traveling with her own armed bodyguards on either heavily armed trains or by horseback. She attended military school in Paris, helped comrades in Barcelona rob banks, and attended anarchist conferences across Europe. Unlike the anarchist Leya Feldman, originally from Odessa, who was also part of the Makhnovist movement, but who left Ukraine and continued to be active on the world anarchist scene long after, Marusya died too young.

As Archibald writes, “Marusya Nikiforova is absent from the works of Peter Arshinov, Volin, and Paul Avrich. Alexandre Skirda’s book on Makhno mentions her, but only devotes one paragraph to her in a work of 400 pages.” Also, as an anti-nationalist, she was never of interest to the academy of mainstream Ukrainian historians.

Like other Makhnovist women of that period, ones like the commanders Black Marusya or Evdokia Feodosyevna Belash-Datsyuk, or the founder of the Black Cross, Olga Ilyinichna Taratuta, Marusya Nikiforova was never acknowledged for her formidable accomplishments and her exemplary role in the history of the anarchist movement. This is changing as a new generation of Ukrainian and Russian anarchist historians continue to delve into her unknown story.

She will soon be resurrected to lead her army once again across the Ukrainian steppes on-stage in my new play premiering at the 16th annual Montreal International Anarchist Theatre Festival, May 22 to May 24, 2023: *Marusya Nikiforova: Ukraine’s legendary anarchist warrior*. Written and directed by myself, the one act play will feature a local Ukrainian actor portraying Marusya. This first version will be presented in English, but later translated into French and Ukrainian.

Norman Nawrocki is a Montreal playwright whose works include a series of plays about immigrant women workers in the 1919 Winnipeg General Strike, about anti-fascist women across Europe, and the experiences of Ukrainian immigrants in Canada.

His newest book, *Red Squared Montreal* (Black Rose Books, 2023), is a fictionalized chronicle about the massive Quebec student strike and social protest movement of 2012, the largest civil disobedience movement to ever rock Canada.

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