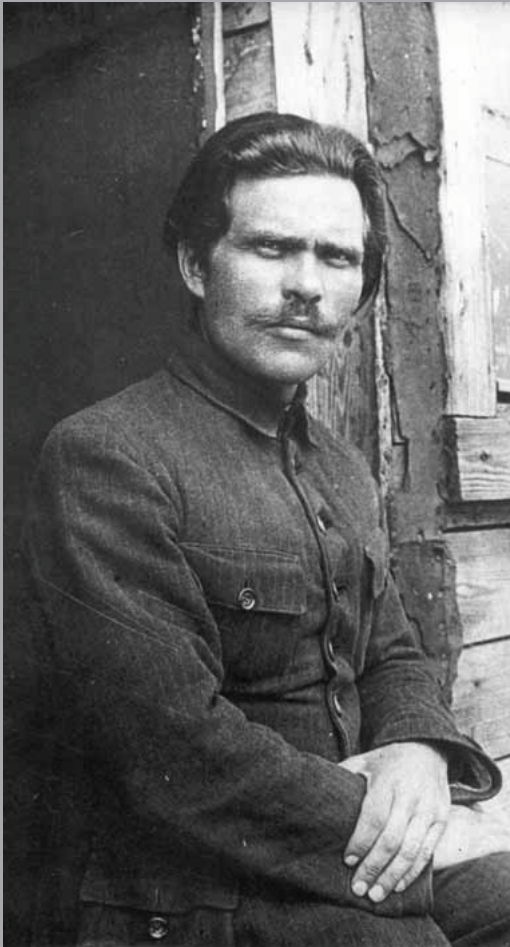


THE MAKHNO BANDITS

Revolutionary Russia (1918-1921)



Nestor Makhno was the Ukrainian anarchist leader of bandit gangs active during the Russian Civil War. Makhno was active July 1918 - August 1921, when he was exiled. He formed the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine, or Anarchist Black Army, with arms and equipment largely obtained from retreating German forces, and fought all sides.



The Makhno bandits were a terrifying crew. They swept into villages on horseback, often at night, plundered houses, demanded meals, raped women, killed heads of households. In the total breakdown of social order that civil war provided, they terrorized the people in a way that no other army did. In Mennonite accounts and histories, the Makhno bandits were the scourge of their villages during the Civil War. In Makhnovist accounts, they were the purist righters of the wrongs of the old social order, "oppressing the oppressors" of the peasants for many years.



Makhno was a charismatic leader who attracted a huge following from the peasant class. Some heralded him as a sort of Robin Hood.

СМЕРТЬ



ВСІМ, ХТО НА ПИРИШКОДІ
ДОБУТЬЯ ВІЛЬНОСТІ
ТРУДОВОМУ ЛЮДУ.

They were called the Black Army for their flag with Skull and Crossbones. The motto on the flag reads: "Death to all who stand in the way of freedom for working people!"

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Nestor Makhno (1888-1934) grew up extremely poor, the fifth child of a peasant family in Gulyai-Pole, Ukraine (today called Huliaipole). He attended school only four winters. At 11, he began driving oxen for the Mennonite Janzen family on their large estate in Silberfeld. He wrote in his memoirs: "I began to experience anger, envy and even hatred towards the landowner [Janzen] and especially towards his children - those young slackers who often strolled past me sleek and healthy, well-dressed, well-groomed and scented; while I was filthy, dressed in rags, barefoot, and reeked of manure from cleaning the calves' barn." Makhno had to quit school at 12 to work full time, nursing his hatred for social inequality.

In 1906, when he was 17, Makhno joined the anarchist organization in Gulyai-Pole. He participated in a terrorist act that killed a local policeman, and was sentenced to prison for life. In prison, a fellow prisoner schooled him in anarchist thought. He was released after nine years, more rebellious than ever. Upon his return to his village, he became chairman of a local peasant organization,



Nestor Makhno (1888-1934) was a famous anarchist, charismatic Black Army leader, and feared bandit during the Russian Civil War.

agitating rebellion and anarchy.

It was 1917, and revolutionary ideas permeated Russia's peasant population. Russian peasants had long lived in abject poverty, stripped of their rights by wealthy landholders under the Tsarist regime. It was time for the peasants to stand up and take from their oppressors what was rightfully theirs...or so Bolshevik rhetoric went. Makhno implemented these ideas through terrorist acts in August, 1917.

Killing and Banditry. Makhno's first known act of banditry was taking five men to a Russian noble's manor. There, they killed the family, several of whom were police officers. They plundered the estate, taking several rifles, horses, and police uniforms. Using these uniforms, the men found out about a ball being held by the local

gentry, snuck inside, and killed everyone present. Makhno's band faded back into the countryside, awaiting his next signal for attack.



The bandits rode into town on stolen horses, and often demanded a meal.



A group of Makhno bandits. The people feared them more than the armies, because law and order were completely absent.

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Makhno in 1919, at the height of his power.

Makhno's Army.

Makhno and his men carried out many such attacks in subsequent weeks, gaining popularity by taking from the wealthy and giving to the poor, a Robin-Hood of sorts. New recruits flocked to him, including whole bands of guerilla soldiers, which he organized into the

"Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine," also called "The Black Army," after their black flag with skull and crossbones. Gulyai-Pole, his hometown, became center of operations.

The large German-Mennonite estates in the Mennonite colonies of Schoenfeld, Molotschna and Chortitza were easy targets. The wealthiest Mennonite estate-holders earned 200,000 rubles a year, which was 3000 times a teacher's annual salary (60 rubles) and 5000 times a peasant's yearly wage. The Mennonites also were on the other side of Makhno's sympathies; they supported first the German invaders (who killed Makhno's two brothers) and then the White Army (which aimed to reestablish the old social order the anarchists wanted to overthrow).

Makhno gave his men permission to "requisition" things from the villages by robbing two days a month, but the thieving went on continually. As the Bolshevik Revolution broke out in October, 1917, Makhno's terrorist acts were seen as part of the revolutionary struggle for freedom and overturning the existing social order. "Anarchy is the mother of all disorder," was his army's slogan, and these peasant bandits were not governed by police, armies, laws or decency. They robbed, terrorized, and raped hundreds, including Mennonites, spreading STDs and a typhus epidemic through their communities.

Nonetheless, Makhno was a successful military leader. His first battles were against the Austro-Hungarian Army during World War I, and his forces were often victorious over a much larger enemy. On September 30, 1918, Makhno's 30-man band found themselves facing 1000 Austrian soldiers, armed with just one machine gun. Using a ruse and a reckless attack, Makhno and his band managed to rout their enemy. Out of respect, Makhno's men began calling him their Little Batko, "Batko" meaning "military chief," and "Little" because Makhno stood only 5 feet four inches tall. This feat caused him to become leader of the revolutionary guerrilla forces in Southern Ukraine.

The Black Army excelled at sly tactics; sometimes Makhno's soldiers would enter a city disguised as cabbage merchants. At a whistle signal, the buggies were overturned, showing mounted machine guns on their undersides, and they took the city.

In 1918, Makhno allied himself with the Bolsheviks, who were also fighting for class equality. Makhno saw Bolshevism as the first step in sweeping away the Old Russian order. Once that was completed, he hoped to take a more radical step toward freedom and equality. He served as a division general in the Red Army.

By 1918, Makhno's influence was at its peak: he had 40,000 infantry and 15,000 cavalymen under his command. In late fall, 1918, Makhno captured and controlled two large cities in Ukraine, Alexandrovsk (Zaporizhia) and Ekaterinoslav (Dnipro). One of the first things Makhno did in those Alexandrovsk was to release inmates from the prison and blow it up. The released

Makhno's Black Army and the Red Army were allies for a time, both hoping to use the other for their own ends.

Red Army commander Pavel Dybenko and Nestor Makhno, 1919.



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Map of the “Free Territory” under Makhno’s control 1919, also called Makhnovia. What the Makhnos describe as an idyllic society, the Mennonites describe as an utter reign of terror, total social chaos, and wholesale banditry.

Places: Makhno’s hometown and center of operations was **Gulai-Pole**, a poor Russian village on the outskirts of some of the wealthiest Mennonite settlements; **Ekaterinostav** (Dnipro today) and **Alexandrovsk** (Zaporizhia today) were Russian cities briefly under his control; and the **Chortitza** and **Molotschna Mennonite colonies** were plundered by his Black Army bandits.

convicts often joined his numbers. Then his followers looted the city, taking what they wanted. Later, Makhno held meetings in those cities to explain the anarchist ideas of a life based upon self-rule, without governments or political parties. Each village and district would enjoy local autonomy, self-rule, and no taxation by the central government. Workers would run their own factories; teachers would control education; factory workers and farmers would trade goods, negotiating their own deals. Both of these cities had a free press while under Makhno’s rule. White Army attacks and the outbreak of typhus caused him to lose control of both cities by January, 1918, just 4 to 6 weeks later.

Throughout the course of the Russian Civil War, Makhno survived more than 200 attacks and battles, and was hit by bullets numerous times. His troops eventually fought every other military force in the region, including the White Army, the Ukrainian nationalists, and eventually their former allies, the Red Army, too.

Mennonite Massacres. Towards the end of 1919, Makhno’s Army was at its peak. Combined with Red Army troops and numerous partisan groups, it could number 80,000-100,000. The Makhnovites occupied the Chortitza colony between October and December, 1919, and during those two months, massacred over 800 Mennonites. Some of these attacks were in retaliation for a combined White Army-Mennonite attack on a

pro-Makhnovite village called Bolshe-Mikholaivka in October, 1919, but others cannot be understood as military retribution. Historians debate whether Nestor Makhno himself ordered and participated in all these attacks or whether some partisan groups acted independently; still, they were committed by members of his army under his name.

His Demise. Leon Trotsky, commander of the Red Army, began to view Makhno as a threat. If his peasant anarchism spread too broadly, it could ruin the Bolshevik Revolution. Thus, Trotsky led a campaign to discredit Makhno, leading him to lose his position within the Red Army. Eventually, he ordered Makhno shot on sight.

Exile and Death. Makhno’s forces grew weaker because of continually fighting several armies at once, a deadly typhus epidemic, and Trotsky’s campaign against Makhno. In August 1921, Makhno fled to Romania, then Poland, and finally settled in Paris, where he remained until the end of his life. There, Makhno suffered from consumption and bitterness. He had hoped to become Ukraine’s liberator, and his campaign had failed. He worked as a carpenter and stage-hand at the Paris Opera, wrote his memoirs, contributed to a Russian anarchist magazine, and spent Saturday nights in the Russian-Jewish Anarchist Workers’ Club of Paris. He died of tuberculosis in Paris on July 6, 1934. Five hundred people attended his funeral.