
Chaos and Utopia

The Anarchists in the Russian Revolution and Civil War

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Visionary utopians, the anarchists paid scant attention to the practical needs of a rapidly changing world; they generally avoided careful analysis of social and economic conditions, nor were they able or even willing to come to terms with the inescapable realities of political power.

—Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*

The extraordinary achievement of the Bolsheviks lay in checking the elemental drive of the Russian masses toward a chaotic utopia.

—Paul Avrich, *The Russian Anarchists*

Paul Avrich's assessment of the role of the anarchists during the Russian Revolution and Civil War has been more or less dominant ever since he published his classic work *The Russian Anarchists* (1967). Avrich concluded his study by arguing that the inability of the different anarchist factions to reconcile their differences ultimately left them defenseless against the Bolsheviks, who eventually succeeded either in co-opting, killing, or exiling the anarchists and destroying the movement.

The (admittedly small) body of scholarly work on the subject has followed a similar line of argument. Interestingly, even during the revolution and civil war, many Russian

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anarchists themselves recognized (and decried) their lack of unity and incessant infighting. The anarchists were very good at assisting the Bolsheviks, the Socialist Revolutionaries, and other leftist, radical elements in their fight against the Provisional Government and later the White armies, but they were utter failures when it came to carrying out or even articulating plans for a future reorganization of Russian society along anarchist lines.

An important research question that has developed out of this history is whether these weaknesses among the Russian anarchists grew out of anarchist ideology itself or if there was something idiosyncratic about the way the Russians interpreted anarchist theory. Or, to put it another way, why were the anarchists unwilling or unable “to come to terms with the inescapable realities of political power” (Avrich 1967, 253)? Although it is easy to locate this allergy to power, especially organized political power, in anarchist theory itself, Avrich himself seems largely agnostic on the point as to the importance of anarchist political philosophy in the anarchists’ impotence. About two decades after Avrich’s book was published, John W. Copp, like Avrich, argued in his masterful dissertation on the Russian anarchists that “because they eschewed both hierarchical and charismatic authority, [they] were almost always unable to act in concert” (1993, 25). Yet he maintained that the problems the Russian anarchists faced were not the result of anarchist ideology: “In other words, the Russian anarchists were not disorganized merely because they were anarchists” (26 n. 21). As part of his argument, he pointed out that a decade after the end of the Russian Civil War the Spanish anarchists were able to organize themselves into highly effective, well-disciplined groups that during the Spanish Civil War played a tremendously important political and military role.

Copp did not need to travel as far afield as Spain to find a counterexample, however. In fact, the history of the Russian Civil War itself provides an interesting case of an anarchist movement that built a highly effective military and political organization in the Ukraine: the Makhnovshchina, a movement organized and led by the Ukrainian anarchist Nestor Makhno (1889–1935). Makhno and his movement represent an intriguing case, for there was and continues to be debate about whether they were anarchists at all. Much of this argument also involves different understandings of the place of power and authority in anarchist theory.

Makhno was able to build up a unified and robust movement, so the existence of the Makhnovists backs up Copp’s thesis that the Russian anarchists’ relative impotence was not due simply to the fact that they were anarchists. However, I do not think that it can be denied that the highly ambivalent attitudes and even definitions of authority and power in anarchist theory did in fact present important problems for the Russian anarchists to solve. Although Copp discussed the Makhnovists in his dissertation, he (like Avrich) did not seem to see them as offering an alternative account of anarchists in the Russian Revolution and Civil War. Indeed, he, like many others, was dubious as to the anarchist credentials of the Makhnovist movement (1993, 49 n. 7).

This brief paper suggests some ways in which we might see the Makhnovist episode not only as complicating our understanding of the experience of anarchists during the tumultuous time of the Russian Revolution but perhaps also as providing an opportunity to ask some questions about what anarchist theory really says about power and authority.

The Russian Anarchist Movement on the Eve of Revolution

This is certainly not the place for a detailed examination of anarchist theory or the history of the Russian anarchists before 1917, but a few brief comments are probably in order.

All of the various Russian anarchist groups were heavily, indeed overwhelmingly, influenced by the writings of the two great anarchist thinkers of the nineteenth century, both of whom happened to be Russians: Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76) and Peter Kropotkin (1842–1921). Of the two, Kropotkin was the more systematic thinker and theorist, whereas Bakunin championed the idea of spontaneous action on the part of naturally freedom-loving individuals. Both argued against the necessity (or, indeed, desirability) of coercive power of any kind, envisioning a future society of freely organized and cooperating individuals. Bakunin and Kropotkin also argued that private property, as the foundation of all coercive structures of power, needed to be eliminated. In their theories, authoritative institutions, especially the state, exist solely to protect the owners of capital. Thus, the abolition of private ownership of capital would eliminate the very *raison d'être* of the state and other forms of authority.

Crucially, neither Bakunin nor Kropotkin was very clear about what an anarchist socioeconomic system would actually look like or how it might be constructed. Indeed, they seemed to believe that people freed from the tyranny of authority and the burdens of private property would spontaneously cooperate and build a new order. As Marshall Shatz summarizes Bakunin's ideas, the "new society [would be] organized 'from below upward,' [and be] composed of small, voluntary communities federating into larger associations for larger purposes" (1990, xxxiii).¹

Anarchist currents had been growing in Russia for some time during the nineteenth century, but they burst into the open during the revolution in 1905. Following the end of this revolution, the anarchists were immediately subjected to a wave of severe repression, during which most of them found themselves either in exile or in czarist prisons or penal colonies. Following the February Revolution in 1917, those anarchists still in Russian territory were released from their long periods of incarceration as part of the Provisional Government's general amnesty, and those in exile hastened back to

1. Bakunin wrote that "the revolution should be and should everywhere remain independent of the central point, which must be its expression and product, not its source, guide, and cause" (qtd. in Copp 1993, 181).

Russia to participate in what they imagined to be the beginning of the great “Social Revolution” foretold by Bakunin.²

Anarchists, Bolsheviks, and Red October

Despite the initial momentary elation after the February Revolution, most of the anarchists rapidly soured on the Provisional Government. As far as they could see, the institution of the Provisional Government meant exchanging one set of masters for another. Rather than an immediate dismantling of the state and a spontaneous seizure of factories and farms by workers and peasants, the Provisional Government on the contrary seemed to be setting up a system to perpetuate the tyranny of central-government control and the reign of private capital.

In this context, most anarchists found themselves increasingly drawn to their old enemies, the Bolsheviks. The anarchists had always been suspicious of or even downright hostile toward the Bolsheviks with their talk of “intermediate stages to the stateless society” and the “dictatorship of the proletariat” (Avrich 1967, 19). Yet Vladimir Lenin’s own change of tactics, especially his famous “April Theses” and *State and Revolution* (published in August 1917), seemed to suggest a renewed interest in the “withering away of the state” following the proletarian revolution, an interest that many anarchists interpreted as representing an anarchist turn in Bolshevik thinking.

By October 1917, when the Bolsheviks mounted their coup d’état against the Provisional Government, many anarchists were firmly committed to working with them, and the Bolsheviks were eager and willing to use the anarchists to help them. The Military Revolutionary Council, the armed group led by Leon Trotsky that actually engineered the overthrow of the Provisional Government, numbered sixty-six members, four of which were anarchists.

Almost immediately after the overthrow of the Provisional Government, however, the anarchists began to have misgivings. Rather than moving to dismantle the apparatus of the central government and turn power over to the soviets, or the local revolutionary councils of workers or peasants, and to the other urban and rural councils, committees, and communes that were emerging throughout Russia, the Bolsheviks moved immediately to establish a new government, which Trotsky christened the Sovnarkom (Council of People’s Commissars).

The anarchists (and others, of course) were likewise alarmed at the establishment of a state security organization called the Cheka (an abbreviation for Chrezvychaynaya Komissiya, or All-Russian Emergency Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage) in December and the draconian economic policies of “war communism”

2. The anarchists did not organize parties or other hierarchical organizations, so it is very difficult to guess their numbers in Russia during the time of the revolution. The most widely used estimate is from Paul Avrich, who says that there were “in the neighborhood of 10,000, a figure augmented by many thousands of close sympathizers” (1967, 173–74 n. 7). This estimate, interestingly, does not include Makhno’s followers.

instituted by the Bolsheviks. These policies included the establishment of the *Vesenkha* (Supreme Economic Council), which set about nationalizing and centrally regulating the Russian economy, in the process absorbing or dissolving the autonomous anarchist workers' committees (Avrich 1967, 166). By January 1918, the Bolsheviks had introduced their policy of forced food requisitions from the peasants in order to provision the cities, which led to tremendous resentment in the countryside while not appreciably improving the urban food situation. Although, importantly, some anarchists, dubbed the "Soviet Anarchists," continued to support the Bolsheviks, the relationship between the Bolsheviks and the anarchists continued to worsen and reached a new nadir in April 1918 when the *Cheka* shut down many of the anarchist clubs and newspapers in Moscow and Petrograd and jailed many of their members (Avrich 1967, 184–85). The next three years saw a number of vicissitudes in the relations between the Bolsheviks and anarchists, but the two groups never regained the warm relationship they had enjoyed during Red October.

The Makhnovshchina

Nestor Makhno was a peasant born in the town of Gulyai-Polye in the southern Ukraine in 1889. As a teenager, he got involved with a small group of self-declared "anarchists," though it is not clear how deep their understanding of anarchism actually was. In 1910, he was sentenced to life at hard labor and spent the next seven years in prison, frequently in ill health (Skirda 2004, 28–29). While there, he made the acquaintance of Peter Arshinov, whom the authorities had arrested for smuggling anarchist literature into Russia. Arshinov was much better acquainted with anarchist ideology than the peasant boy Makhno, and it was from Arshinov that Makhno got his education in the classics by Bakunin and Kropotkin. They also became close friends.

After the amnesty of the February Revolution, Makhno immediately headed back home to Gulyai-Polye, and by late March 1917 he had already been instrumental in the establishment of several peasants' and workers' unions (Avrich 1967, 209–10; Skirda 2004, 34). Through the rest of 1917, he helped bring about a social revolution in the southeastern Ukraine, centered in his home town of Gulyai-Polye. Peasant cultivators refused to pay their rents to the big landowners, and in some cases landless laborers and their families occupied the great estates. Makhno played an active part in such actions and helped to facilitate the communes that evolved among the peasants (Skirda 2004, 36).³

For the next four years, the Ukraine was in a near constant state of turmoil, when Makhno's movement faced a host of different enemies. During the course of battles

3. Because Makhno's social revolution played out in the context of almost constant warfare, and because of the lack of any hierarchical political direction, the exact boundaries of "Makhnovia" are difficult to establish. I have, in fact, been unable to find any numbers in the secondary literature. Makhno himself referred in a speech in 1920 to "occupying" an area "200 kilometers deep by 300 kilometers broad" with "millions of peasants" (qtd. in Skirda 2004, 331).

against the German occupation army, their various puppets, and other counterrevolutionary forces, Makhno's partisan army, eventually named the Insurgent Army of the Ukraine, grew very quickly. His daring and personal bravery became legendary and inspired an almost fanatical devotion from his followers, who called him "Batko," Little Father.

The Makhnovists managed to establish control over a large region in the south-eastern Ukraine, centered on Gulyai-Polye. During the first five months of 1919, there was a brief period of relative calm, and the outlines of the society Makhno had in mind began to emerge. During January, February, and April, a series of regional Congresses of Peasants, Workers, and Insurgents met to discuss the tasks of organization and defense. "Although Makhno's intention in setting up these bodies was to do away with political authority, the Military-Revolutionary Council [a kind of overarching, coordinating body], acting in conjunction with the Regional Congresses and the local soviets, in effect formed a loose-knit government in the territory surrounding Gulyai-Polye" (Avrich 1967, 214).

We should, however, be careful not to overstate this description. A hostile, Bolshevik observer had this to say about the organization of "Makhnovia":

These organs of power [i.e., the Free Soviets] were very primitive. There was no central organ of government: there was only the Military Revolutionary Soviet which was at once a sort of parliament and central military agency dealing with both military and civil matters. This agency had a wide range of functions, but in performing these, it presented itself only as a steering body and had no rights of its own, all power being vested in the local organs. Everything boiled down to each village and each district directing itself with complete independence. (qtd. in Skirda 2004, 333)

Besides this organizational work, this period also witnessed some interesting connections between other anarchist organizations and the Makhnovshchina, who found their way to Gulyai-Polye, where they tried to help with cultural and educational matters, founding a journal, *Put k Svobode* (Road to Liberty), and organizing the Cultural-Educational Commission (Avrich 1967, 215). Interestingly, it is worth noting that although Makhno and most of his closest associates openly described themselves as anarchists, they did not name any of the organizations they set up as such. One could argue that this omission actually bolsters Makhno's anarchist credentials (he welcomed any who wished to participate in his Bakuninite Social Revolution), it also ended up confusing many of his potential supporters in the broader anarchist movement (Skirda 2004, 332).

Even while Makhno and his friends were engaged with building a new society, the Ukraine was turning into one of the main theaters in the growing civil war between the counterrevolutionary White armies and the Bolsheviks. Despite his misgivings, Makhno decided to throw in his lot with the Red Army. The tenuous alliance held, with some ups and downs, until the last major White offensive collapsed in November 1920, immediately after which the Cheka and Red Army units systematically arrested and shot most of Makhno's field commanders and closed down his headquarters in Gulyai-Polye,

imprisoning or shooting the staff. Makhno himself and a small remnant of his once mighty army managed to evade capture but were subject to constant harassment by and skirmishes with Red Army patrols. Suffering from unhealed wounds, he and a small number of his followers made a daring escape across the River Dniester and into Romania on August 28, 1921. What was left of his army in the Ukraine gradually disintegrated and was finally wiped out by the fall of that year.

The Destruction of the Anarchist Movement

The moves made by the Red Army and the Cheka against the Makhnovists were harbingers of the final end of the anarchists in Russia. Ironically, perhaps, their fate was sealed not by any move of their own but by a mutiny of the sailors on the naval base of Kronstadt in the Gulf of Finland just outside of Petrograd.

By the end of February 1921, a wave of strikes had swept through Petrograd. The strikers were joined by sympathetic citizens and eventually by delegations of sailors from the nearby naval base of Kronstadt. Though there were many anarchists among the striking workers and the Kronstadt sailors, the rebellion was not led by anarchists or even necessarily dominated by them. The anarchists nevertheless hailed the growing insurrection at Kronstadt as their long-awaited “Third Revolution” that would finally usher in the stateless society (Avrich 1967, 229–30; Copp 1993, 87 n. 43).

On March 1, the sailors formed the Provisional Revolutionary Committee and made some attempts at reaching out to the Bolshevik regime and the Petrograd Soviet, but Lenin and Trotsky were not interested in negotiations or compromises. On March 5, Trotsky issued his famous ultimatum to the sailors to surrender or be “shot like partridges.” The assault on the base began on March 7 with an aerial bombardment followed by several assaults by Red Army troops across the ice. The sailors continued to hope for an uprising in Petrograd, but in fact the strikes there had been put down just as the insurrection began. Given the circumstances, the insurgents were doomed, and their revolt was finally crushed on March 16.

The Bolsheviks pinned the blame for the Kronstadt uprising squarely on the anarchists, and in the weeks following the suppression of the rebels they moved quickly and decisively to crush what was left of the anarchist movement once and for all. Those anarchists who happened to be at liberty at the time were arrested, and the remaining anarchist bookstores and printing houses were closed. Even the Soviet Anarchists and those who had gone so far as to join the Communist Party were eventually executed or, more commonly, vanished into the maw of the Soviet labor-camp system.

In the midst of this anarchist armageddon, Peter Kropotkin died on February 8, 1921. He had returned to Russia after the February Revolution and had initially supported the Bolsheviks, though he quickly came to oppose them and became an outspoken critic of their increasingly authoritarian rule. The Bolsheviks were “aliens, enemies of Russia, robbers and gangsters, set upon looting and destruction” (qtd. in

Copp 1993, 238). Yet “he refrained from working actively against the Bolshevik government” (Copp 1993, 238). Interestingly, he demonstrated a similar attitude in June 1920 during an interview with Makhno, who had made an arduous journey from the Ukraine to Moscow to meet with him. In his memoirs, Makhno records a pleasant, friendly meeting with his idol, but it also seems that Kropotkin refused to provide Makhno with any specific guidance or advice about what he should do. Later, writing in the unfinished pamphlet *What to Do?* just a few months before his death in February 1921, Kropotkin seems to have adopted a fatalistic attitude toward the future. Although acknowledging that the revolution was “perpetrating horrors,” he also noted that it “will advance in its own way, in the direction of least resistance, without paying the least attention to our efforts” (1968, 258).

Perhaps because Kropotkin’s rage seemed so ineffectual, or perhaps because his international fame protected him, he was spared any direct or overt censure by the Communist Party. Upon his death, his family refused Lenin’s offer of a state funeral, and a committee of anarchists, the various clubs and factions momentarily putting aside their differences, was organized to arrange the funeral instead. The Moscow Soviet temporarily released a few imprisoned anarchists for the day to take part in the ceremony. Altogether, about twenty thousand people turned up in the bitter cold to lay to rest the man who had been the inspiration for the movement now under siege by the dictatorship of the proletariat.

Conclusion

The year 1921 was the *annus horribilis* for anarchism in Russia, with Kropotkin’s death in February and Makhno’s flight into Romania in August bracketing the Kronstadt massacre. What are we to make, after all, of this story?

Writing years after the end of the civil war in Russia, Peter Arshinov reflected that the Makhnovshchina made up “an anarchist mass movement of toilers, not fully formed nor [*sic*] quite crystalized, but striving towards the anarchist ideal and treading a libertarian path.” He contrasted the concrete achievements of the Makhnovists, who were men of action, with the “theoretical abdication and passivity” of most anarchists at the time, which he blamed on “a measure of theoretical confusion, and the climate of chronic disorganization” among them. Anarchy, for Makhno and his followers, stated Arshinov, was not “some cherished utopia of the intellectuals who, while waiting for the advent of the age of happiness, snugly occupy their cozy little niches in the existing system of alienation, but rather a practical and immediate social ideal” (qtd. in Skirda 2004, 333, 334).

Emma Goldman, a kind of anarchist superstar at the time, though clearly sympathetic to the Makhnovists, was skeptical of their anarchist credentials and of the degree of support anarchists were bound to give them. Even so, she asserted, many anarchists felt obliged to support Makhno. “But,” she concluded, with no apparent

irony, “the bulk [of the anarchists] stayed away [from Makhno]; they had their larger cultural, educational, and organizing work to do” ([1923] 1970, 67). Later, when she was actually in Kharkov, Ukraine, meeting with local anarchist groups, Goldman declared to some of the pro-Makhnovists present, “Important as the Makhno movement might be, it was of a purely military nature and could not, therefore, be expressive of the Anarchist spirit” (Goldman [1923] 1970, 110).

This statement brings us back to the crux of the matter—the problem of power and authority. Makhno led the Insurgent Army in a clearly hierarchical fashion (though its officers were elected by the enlisted men), whereas the Military Revolutionary Council seemed to lack any hierarchical or directional powers. As Alexandre Skirda puts it, the organization Makhno helped to establish presents “the notion of free soviets as an ‘anarchist’ power, some sort of ‘anti-authoritarian authority,’ which is to say one restricted to a purely executive and non-decision-making role” (2004, 334).⁴

Although the anarchists during the Russian Revolution and Civil War seemed to think that Makhno’s project was too authoritarian, one wonders what would have happened if they could have rallied around that project. And it is also interesting to speculate about whether Makhno’s unique combination of tremendous personal charisma and apparent refusal to organize any bodies exercising hierarchical political power might have offered a way out of the ideological straightjacket into which the Russian anarchists seem to have so eagerly buckled themselves.

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4. Of course, we do not want to push this interpretation too far. The Military Revolutionary Council operated within a clearly anarcho-Communist framework and made no room, for instance, for the liberties of landlords or factory owners who might have wanted to maintain ownership of their private property.

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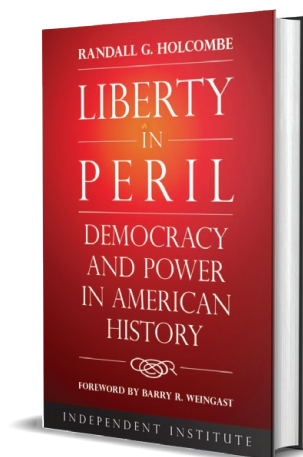
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