

Phi Alpha Theta Pacific Northwest Conference, 8–10 April 2021

Zion G. Flores, Eastern Washington University, undergraduate student, “Practical Anarchism: The Makhnovist Movement in the Ukraine, 1917–1921”

Abstract: Anarchism was one of the most prominent revolutionary left-wing movements in 19th and 20th century Europe, even contending as a philosophy with Marxism in many socialist circles. However, anarchism is generally believed today to be unrealistic and impractical as a political ideology. When looking at the modern historical record though, this does not always seem to be the case. I plan to explore whether the Makhnovist movement in the Ukraine from 1917-1921 provides an exception to the idea that anarchist movements are never viable. This movement, guided in large part by anarcho-communist Nestor Makhno, was one of the first to take modern anarchism from theory into practice. Although its existence was brief and its ability to fully realize anarchist ideals was limited by the circumstances of the time, the question must be asked: does the Makhnovist movement serve as an example of practical anarchism?

Practical Anarchism

The Makhnovist Movement in the Ukraine, 1917-1921

Zion G. Flores

Eastern Washington University

zflores3@eagles.ewu.edu

Undergraduate

On March 2, 1917, Nestor Makhno took his first steps outside the Butyrki Prison of Moscow in over eight years. As Russia was being delivered from the chains of Tsardom, so too was Makhno delivered from his imprisonment as a part of the emancipation of prisoners during the February Revolution.¹ His body emerged weak and weary from the debilitating conditions of his imprisonment.² His commitment to anarchism, his rebellious spirit, and his fervor to emancipate toiling people from “slavery under the yoke of State and Capital” however had only grown stronger despite the seemingly hopeless prospects. In one of his memoirs, Makhno wrote of his steadfast commitment to anarchism:

“The eight years and eight months I spent in prison, during which I was shackled hand and foot (as a ‘lifer’) and suffered from a serious illness, failed to shake my belief in the soundness of anarchism... in many ways my term in prison helped to strengthen and develop my convictions.”³

Makhno’s anarchist convictions had been with him even before his imprisonment. The 1905 Revolution spurred Makhno into revolutionary politics where he eventually joined the anarcho-communist group in his hometown of Gulyai-Polye at the age of seventeen. He was an active participant, even being deeply involved in the group’s terrorism against the Tsarist government. As a result, Makhno was arrested and sentenced to death by hanging, but his youth led to his sentence being commuted in favor of a life sentence of hard labor. The crushing despair that naturally follows from such a sentence didn’t crush Makhno’s rebellious spirit however. Peter Arshinov, an anarchist whom Makhno met in prison, wrote of Makhno’s continued rebellion against Tsarist authority, even to the detriment of his health:

“Stubborn and unable to accept that complete extinction of personality that those condemned to forced labor underwent, he was always insubordinate to the prison

authorities and was continually in solitary confinement, where, because of the cold and damp, he contracted pulmonary tuberculosis.”⁴

Makhno used his time in prison to dedicate himself to his education where Arshinov—also condemned to a life of hard labor for his anarchism—guided him in his studies.⁵ Makhno studied a range of subjects including mathematics, Russian literature, political economy, history, and undoubtedly anarchist works. Having been the first time where Makhno was able to seriously educate himself, Arshinov wrote that “prison was the only school in which Makhno acquired that historical and political knowledge which was a great help to him in his subsequent revolutionary activity.”⁶

Upon his release, Makhno quickly threw himself back into the fold of anarchist political organization. He joined the Lefortovo Anarchist Group in Moscow before being compelled to return to Gulyai-Polye where he hoped to establish the beginnings of a popular anarcho-communist revolution.⁷ Imprisoned in conditions which Arshinov described as “without hope and very difficult for [Makhno] to bear,” Makhno found strength in principles of “liberty, equality, and solidarity.” It were these principles—undoubtedly inspired by the French Revolutionary motto of “liberté, égalité, fraternité”—of which he said “sustained me through the long years of suffering in prison,” and which he hoped would be the thread that made up the fabric of human society.⁸

Many today might respect such ideals, but they would nonetheless reject anarchism as nothing more than a pipe dream. Anarchism today is often thought of as disorder and chaos which naturally leads to many deeming anarchism as unrealistic and impractical rather than the sophisticated political philosophy it is. Take the example of Merriam-Webster’s definitions of anarchy. These definitions include “a state of lawlessness or political disorder due to the absence

of governmental authority,” “a utopian society of individuals who enjoy complete freedom without government,” and “absence of order:disorder.”⁹

But such criticisms aren’t restricted to those today who are only familiar with its popular image. Even the Marxists of the 19th and 20th century—whom anarchists regularly interacted with and debated—criticized anarchism as an impractical ideology. For example, Vladimir Lenin referred to the aims of anarchists as merely “dreams” in contrast to the aims of Marxists in his 1917 work, *The State and Revolution*. Lenin, giving a bad faith interpretation of anarchism, states that “[Marxists] are not utopians, we do not ‘dream’ of dispensing at once with all administration, with all subordination.”¹⁰

These notions of anarchism fail to truly understand what it is though. Although it’s true that anarchists oppose the state, this doesn’t necessarily mean they reject all forms of organization. For example, Russian anarchist Mikhail Bakunin, who heavily influenced Makhno, puts forth a clear form of organization:

“[Society] should reorganize itself, not from the top down... The future social organization should be carried out from the bottom up, by the free association or federation of workers, starting with the associations, then going on to the communes, the regions, the nations, and, finally, culminating in a great international and universal federation.”¹¹

The point is further made in the words of the philosopher Bertrand Russell who notes that the anarchist “does not wish to abolish government in the sense of collective decisions: what he does wish to abolish is the system by which a decision is enforced upon those who oppose it.”¹² What can be seen then is that anarchists only oppose hierarchical organization, rather than all organization. They desire an alternative system in which people are free and voluntarily associate

with each other, usually involving some form of democracy. It's for this reason many anarchists reject characterizations of it being chaotic and disorderly. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon—the father of modern anarchism—in fact argued that “As man seeks justice in equality, so society seeks order in anarchy.”¹³ Furthermore, it's worth noting that this conception of anarchism as order inspired the famous circled ‘A’ symbol of anarchism often seen in graffiti, with the circle being an ‘O’ for order.¹⁴

This opposition to unjust hierarchy leads anarchists to another conclusion: capitalism likewise needs to be abolished and replaced with some variant of socialism. In the words of another Russian anarchist, Peter Kropotkin:

“In common with all socialists, the anarchists hold that the private ownership of land, capital, and machinery has had its time... all requisites for production must, and will, become the common property of society, and be managed in common by the producers of wealth.”¹⁵

The socialism advocated here is that in which the workers and peasants seize the means of production. Kropotkin further advocates for communism, but makes sure to differentiate his communism, i.e. “free communism”, from the authoritarian communism of Marxism.¹⁶

These were the principles guiding Makhno, and the ones he sought to take from theory to practice. This was the farthest thing from a simple task however. Ukraine greatly suffered from the destruction of World War I, but this was just the beginning. The Russian Revolution brought great political turmoil, and the ensuing Russian Civil War further prolonged the destruction of war upon Ukraine. These years saw Germany and Austria-Hungary, Ukrainian nationalists, the Bolsheviks, the Whites, and anarchists all fighting within Ukraine. Such destruction and seemingly insurmountable obstacles failed to deter Makhno's revolutionary vision however.

Upon arriving in Gulyai-Polye, “[Makhno] immediately devoted himself to revolutionary work... he founded a farm-workers’ union, organized a workers’ commune and a local peasants’ soviet (council).”¹⁷ Makhno’s vision and ability to organize the peasants allowed him tremendous influence in the region. In the late summer of 1917, Makhno made a report to the regional congress of Soviets where the land and livestock of the pomeshchiks (landed gentry) and kulaks (wealthy peasants) were redistributed equally, both among the peasants and the pomeshchiks and kulaks. Arshinov writes that in this time, Makhno became “the soul of the peasants’ movement.”¹⁸

From here, the movement continued to grow and Makhno further organized. Throughout 1918 and 1919, communes emerged in the region. The first of these communes was organized near the small village of Pokrovskoe and was named after the Marxist Rosa Luxemburg. Although initially small, the commune grew to over three hundred members, mostly made up of the most destitute in the region. Although named after a Marxist, this shouldn’t be mistaken for an endorsement of Marxism or the authoritarianism that comes with it. Instead, it should be understood that the peasants respected Luxemburg’s commitment to revolutionary struggle, even if they disagreed with her Marxism. More communes popped up in the region: Commune No. 1 about five miles from Gulyai-Polye, and Communes No. 2 and 3, both located about thirteen miles away. There were other communes in the region, but Arshinov admits they weren’t numerous and only encompassed a small portion of the population. Nonetheless, Arshinov contends that these communes are still noteworthy:

“...what was most precious was that these communes were formed on the initiative of the poor peasants themselves. The Makhnovists never exerted any

pressure on the peasants, confining themselves to propagating the idea of free communes.”¹⁹

Details regarding what commune life might’ve specifically been like are difficult to come by. Most of the anarchist authors who’ve written about the subject refrain from specific details, choosing instead to emphasize that these communes were based on principles of equality and solidarity. These accounts further paint an overwhelmingly positive picture of the communes, a picture which requires the bias of the anarchist’s to be taken into careful consideration in conjunction with the accounts.²⁰ Makhno himself even goes so far as to describe the peasants literally “singing happy songs” as they worked.²¹ But, there are details to be picked out from these accounts which are likely to give some sort of vague picture of commune life. Arshinov writes that because of the needs of the region, “Everyone — men, women and children — worked according to his or her abilities.”²² But it’s Makhno who gives the greatest amount of details. According to Makhno, “The program of work of the whole commune was worked out during meetings of all the members. Each of the members knew exactly what was expected from them.” The peasants worked typical agricultural and domestic chores and duties. There were common kitchens and dining halls, and Makhno also claims that the peasants could absent themselves from work as long as they notified their work partners so that a replacement may be found. Education in the communes was organized along the principles laid out by Spanish anarchist Francisco Ferrer, principles which gave tremendous liberty to the learners instead of forcing them to conform to a rigid and disciplinary system. Makhno also claims that “On days of rest (Sundays) members took turns going on excursions.”²³ Again, these claims should be approached with a healthy skepticism given the bias anarchists would treat the subject with. But these are some of the few details available to us.

The theme of returning land to peasants and workers however can be further seen in the Declaration of the Revolutionary Insurgent Army of the Ukraine (Makhnovist) issued in early January, 1920:

“The lands of the service gentry, of the monasteries, of the princes and other enemies of the toiling masses, with all their live stock and goods, are passed on to the use of those peasants... Factories, workshops, mines and other tools and means of production become the property of the working class as a whole, which will run all enterprises themselves...”²⁴

This declaration also designates that the peasant and worker organizations organize into “free worker-peasant Soviets” whose representatives were limited to the “laborers who are contributing work necessary to the social economy,” specifically excluding political representatives. This was very much in response to Bolsheviki having permeated throughout the soviets in Russia, which the Makhnovists saw as an ultimately corrupting force of the soviets.²⁵

As much as the Makhnovists were concerned with the economics of the region, they were equally as concerned, if not more so, with its politics. Unlike the economic systems which Arshinov notes as having grown “slowly and gradually... the political situation demanded from the peasants immediate and general attention.” They sought to replace institutions of hierarchy and authority with federative systems of free association like those described by Bakunin. Arshinov describes the establishment of such systems:

“It was indispensable to establish institutions which unified first a district composed of various villages, and then the districts and departments which composed the liberated region. It was indispensable to find general solutions for

problems common to the entire region... And the peasants did not fail to create them. These organs were the regional congresses of peasants and workers.”²⁶

Several such congresses were convened throughout 1919 to discuss issues affecting the whole region, and they encompassed vast amounts of the region. The second regional congress held on February 12 consisted of 245 delegates representing 350 districts, soviets, unions, and front-line units.²⁷ According to Arshinov, the third regional congress held on April 10 consisted of delegates from 72 districts representing some two million people, and a fourth regional congress convened at Aleksandrovsk on October 20 drew more than 200 delegates.²⁸

Although the Makhnovists made significant strides to put anarchism into practice, the movement faced significant limitations—namely, constant war and outside threats—which affected the extent to which it could implement these ideas. For example, many parts of the region continued using money as a means of exchange, and the Makhnovist army, although unique in that it was largely organized in a democratic fashion, nonetheless retained features of hierarchy which the Makhnovists sought to ultimately eliminate.²⁹ These limitations and their effects on applying anarchism have been noted even by participants of the movement such as Arshinov and Voline. Arshinov recognized that:

“The conditions of contemporary life encircle the workers on all sides, surround them, like water surrounds fish in the sea. The workers are not able to escape from these conditions. Consequently it is natural that the struggle which they undertake inevitably carries the stamp of various conditions and characteristics of contemporary society.”³⁰

Voline further expanded upon this by noting one of the most prominent limitations of the movement being “The almost continual necessity of fighting and defending itself against all kinds of enemies, without being able to concentrate on peaceful and truly positive works.”³¹

But, to discredit the movement’s anarchism would be a mistake. As Arshinov reiterates, “The working classes do not act within a world of wishes, but in the real world where they are daily subjected to the physical and psychological blows of hostile forces.”³² Although the movement was limited in many ways, what’s important is that it aimed at achieving the anarchist ideal to the greatest extent possible. Arshinov makes this point clear:

“In the Makhnovshchina we have an anarchist movement of the working masses — not completely realized, not entirely crystallized, but striving toward the anarchist ideal and moving along the anarchist path.”³³

There were two basic characteristics of the movement which Arshinov saw as “striving toward the anarchist ideal”: it being a popular movement organized from below, and its emphasis on anarchist ideas of worker autonomy and self-management as well as the organization of society without a hierarchical state.³⁴ Thus, it’s seen then that the Makhnovist movement should be considered anarchist.

Common perceptions of anarchism treat the ideology as one of disorder and impracticality. But, anarchists aren’t oblivious to the needs of a society following an abolition of state and capitalism. As such, they’ve developed and laid out in writing the systems which they think society should operate under. They weren’t content with remaining in the realm of theory however, and throughout history, multiple attempts have been made to take anarchism from theory to practice. The Makhnovist movement was one of the most notable, and arguably most successful, attempts to put anarchism into practice. The Makhnovists weren’t allowed the fertile

soils of peace and tranquility in which anarchism could easily flourish, but they instead had to struggle and fight in the harsh climate of war and destruction. Despite this, the movement was able to establish itself throughout a section of Ukraine with around seven million inhabitants.³⁵ They replaced a hierarchical government with a federative and democratic system. Furthermore, they were able to redistribute the means of production to the peasants and workers, allowing them to manage themselves, free from the dictates of a higher authority. Although not an anarchist society in the purest form, the movement struck at some fundamental principles of anarchism and aspired to more. In the Makhnovist movement then, it is seen that anarchism is a practical ideology.

Endnotes

1. Nestor Makhno, *The Russian Revolution in the Ukraine (March 1917-April 1918)*, (Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2007), 7. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/nestor-makhno-the-russian-revolution-in-ukraine-march-1917-april-1918.pdf>.
2. Alexandre Skirda, *Nestor Makhno—Anarchy’s Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine 1917-1921*, trans. Paul Sharkey (Oakland: AK Press, 2004), 32.
3. Makhno, *Russian*, 7.
4. Peter Arshinov, *History of the Makhnovist Movement (1918-1921)*, trans. Lorraine Perlman and Fredy Perlman (Detroit: Black & Red; Chicago: Solidarity, 1974), 36-37. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/peter-arshinov-history-of-the-makhnovist-movement-1918-1921.pdf>.
5. Voline, *The Unknown Revolution 1917-1921*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), bk. 3, pt. 2, chap. 1.
6. Arshinov, *History*, 37.
7. Makhno, *Russian*, 7-8.
8. Arshinov, *History*, 37; Makhno, *Russian*, 8.
9. *Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary*, s.v. “anarchy,” accessed February 6, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anarchy>.
10. V.I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, vol. 25, *June-September 1917*, ed. Stepan Apresyan and Jim Riordan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974), 430. <https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lenin/state-and-revolution.pdf>.
11. Mikhail Bakunin, *Bakunin on Anarchy*, ed. and trans. Sam Dolgoff (New York: Vintage Books, 1972), 270. [https://libcom.org/files/Bakunin%20on%20Anarchy%20\(1971\).pdf](https://libcom.org/files/Bakunin%20on%20Anarchy%20(1971).pdf).
12. Bertrand Russell, *Proposed Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919), 116-117. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Proposed_Roads_to_Freedom/lhQNAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.

13. Pierre-Joseph Proudhon, *What is Property?: An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*, trans. Benjamin R. Tucker (New York: Dover, 1970), chap. 5, pt. 2, sec. 2. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/pierre-joseph-proudhon-what-is-property-an-inquiry-into-the-principle-of-right-and-of-governmen.pdf>.
14. Peter Marshall, *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*, (London: Harper Perennial, 2008), 558.
15. Peter Kropotkin, *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets: A Collection of Writings by Peter Kropotkin*, ed. Roger N. Baldwin (New York: Dover, 1970), 46. <https://libcom.org/files/Kropotkin%20-%20Kropotkin's%20Revolutionary%20Pamphlets%20-%20A%20Collection%20of%20Writings%20by%20Peter%20Kropotkin.pdf>.
16. Kropotkin, *Pamphlets*, 61.
17. Arshinov, *History*, 37.
18. Arshinov, *History*, 38.
19. Arshinov, *History*, 62-63.
20. Arshinov, *History*, 63-64; Makhno, *Russian*, 111-112; Voline, *Unknown*, bk. 3, pt. 2, chap. 2.
21. Makhno, *Russian*, 112.
22. Arshinov, *History*, 63.
23. Makhno, *Russian*, 111-112.
24. Arshinov, *History*, 196.
25. Arshinov, *History*, 196.
26. Arshinov, *History*, 64.
27. Skirda, *Makhno*, 86, 363.
28. Arshinov, *History*, 72.

29. Arshinov, *History*, 70, 196.
30. Arshinov, *History*, 177.
31. Voline, *Unknown*, bk. 3, pt. 2, chap. 2.
32. Arshinov, *History*, 177.
33. Arshinov, *History*, 179.
34. Arshinov, *History*, 178-9.
35. Voline, *Unknown*, bk. 3, pt. 2, chap. 2.

Bibliography

- Arshinov, Peter. *History of the Makhnovist Movement (1918-1921)*. Translated by Lorraine Perlman and Fredy Perlman. Detroit: Black & Red; Chicago: Solidarity, 1974. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/nesstor-makhno-the-russian-revolution-in-ukraine-march-1917-april-1918.pdf>.
- Bakunin, Mikhail. *Bakunin on Anarchy*. Edited and translated by Sam Dolgoff. New York: Vintage Books, 1972. [https://libcom.org/files/Bakunin%20on%20Anarchy%20\(1971\).pdf](https://libcom.org/files/Bakunin%20on%20Anarchy%20(1971).pdf).
- Kropotkin, Peter. *Kropotkin's Revolutionary Pamphlets: A Collection of Writings by Peter Kropotkin*. Edited by Roger N. Baldwin. New York: Dover, 1970. <https://libcom.org/files/Kropotkin%20-%20Kropotkin's%20Revolutionary%20Pamphlets%20-%20A%20Collection%20of%20Writings%20by%20Peter%20Kropotkin.pdf>.
- Lenin, V.I. *Collected Works*. Vol. 25, *June-September 1917*. Edited by Stepan Apresyan and Jim Riordan. Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1974. <https://www.marxists.org/ebooks/lenin/state-and-revolution.pdf>.
- Makhno, Nestor. *The Russian Revolution in the Ukraine (March 1917-April 1918)*. Edmonton: Black Cat Press, 2007. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/nesstor-makhno-the-russian-revolution-in-ukraine-march-1917-april-1918.pdf>.
- Marshall, Peter. *Demanding the Impossible: A History of Anarchism*. London: Harper Perennial, 2008.
- Proudhon, Pierre-Joseph. *What is Property?: An Inquiry into the Principle of Right and of Government*. Translated by Benjamin R. Tucker. New York: Dover, 1970. <https://theanarchistlibrary.org/library/pierre-joseph-proudhon-what-is-property-an-inquiry-into-the-principle-of-right-and-of-governmen.pdf>.
- Russell, Bertrand. *Proposed Roads to Freedom: Socialism, Anarchism and Syndicalism*. New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1919. https://www.google.com/books/edition/Proposed_Roads_to_Freedom/lhQNAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&printsec=frontcover.
- Skirda, Alexandre. *Nestor Makhno—Anarchy's Cossack: The Struggle for Free Soviets in the Ukraine 1917-1921*. Translated by Paul Sharkey. Oakland: AK Press, 2004.

Voline. *The Unknown Revolution 1917-1921*. Oakland: PM Press, 2019.