

The Poltava uprising against the Bolsheviks, 1920



A short account of the large scale uprising against the Bolsheviks throughout Poltava province in the Ukraine.

Khristovoi, Buhovetsky and the restwith a special mention for Sergei Kirichenko

In 1920 throughout Poltava province a general insurrection began against the Reds with the formation of 200 units. In the north of Gadiach county there were units led by Alexander Koval, Krupsky, Dmitrenko and Buhovetsky. In Kremenchug county units led by Kikot, Ovdienko, and Prikhodko were set up and in Kobelyatsky county one led by Levchenko. In Zenkov county operated the units of Maxim Mandyk, Pylyp Masyuta, Stepenko, Latoha, Antonenko, Timoshenko, Turchin, Tyutyunnik and others. Masyuta had led the resistance to the White forces of Denikin, had become the Red commandant of Zenkov but had defected to the insurgents. Mandyk had served in the Red militia in Zenkov. This was indicative of the number of officers as well as rank and file soldiers who deserted to the insurgents. As was usual the Bolshevik authorities did not recognise an insurgency and referred to these units as bandits.

What were the causes of this uprising which persisted for the next two years up to the end of 1922? Well, Bolshevik documents of the period throw some light on the situation. The minutes of the meeting of the Bolshevik Revolutionary Committee of Gadyach of December 22, 1919 show that the Bolsheviks themselves were forced to condemn the actions of the food requisitioner Zamarin and that the population had turned very hostile towards their party. Another reason was the attempt by the Red Army to conscript local youth and send them to the Polish front, which was fiercely resisted.

Anarchist ideas were popular in the Poltava region, whilst the influence of the Borotbists should not be underestimated. The Borotbists were named after the paper Borotba (Struggle) founded by the Ukrainian Socialist revolutionaries in 1917. With the split in the SRs the left captured the paper. But the Ukrainian Left SRs were not completely like their comrades in Russia. They were more sympathetic towards the Bolsheviks, but criticised them for their centralising tendencies, themselves advocating an independent Ukrainian socialist republic. Following the Red abandonment of the Ukraine to Denikin, the Borotbists broke with the Bolsheviks. An order for the liquidation of the Borotbists was drafted in Moscow at this time, with Trotsky in particular being keen of removing them as a military and political threat. The Borotbists then merged with the left-wing Ukrainian Social Democrats. This now became the Ukrainian Communist Party (Borotbists). In March 1920 the Bolsheviks forced them to merge with their party. A

sizeable minority refused to accept this and walked out. The insurgent leader Alexander Koval in a letter to the Bolshevik wrote that he thought the combining of forces to drive out the Denikinists would have led to the establishment of a Soviet Ukraine on a federal basis with Soviet Russia. "The programme of the Borotbists Party (Communists) completely answered my aspirations." He went on to say that the autonomy asked for by the Borotbists was not granted and that they were ordered to merge with the Communist Party. Koval strongly objected to this. He had hoped that co-existence with the Bolsheviks was possible but became convinced that the Bolsheviks needed to be fought physically. Panas Keleberda and Dimitrenko also appear to have been influenced by Borotbism, although it appears from what Savinkov says that they moved towards anarchism.

In Zenkov units armed themselves with rifles and hunting rifles, as well as scythes, pitchforks, sticks and axes and defeated the local requisitioning squad on May 24th. All those captured were released with the understanding that they would not return to plunder the peasants. They elected Lev (Levko) Ostapovich Khristovoi as their commander. Khristovoi announced at the gathering that decided this to launch a mobilisation in the area so that the small unit, according to the local Cheka, organised themselves into a "large organized force."



Levko Khristovoi.

Levko Khristovoi, unlike many of the insurgent commanders in the region, came from a rich and old Cossack family. He was born on June 29th 1898 on a farm of seventy acres near Skazhenykovomu. His father also owned a shop. He had three other brothers and a sister (one of these, Vasili, was shot by the Denikinists in 1919 whilst another, Nikolai, died in the Gadiach prison maintained by the Reds). Soviet agents described him as of average height, clean shaven and good looking, with brown hair and as energetic, stubborn, brave and clever. He had served in the World War in the cavalry, briefly in the army of the Ukrainian National Republic, had organised local Red Guards as a squadron commander and subsequently was chair of the Zenkov Cheka. He had joined the Nabat Confederation of Anarchists in January 1919, which had begun to organise in the area from autumn of the previous year. Khristovoi deserted from the Reds in May 1919 hiding in the Liutenka woods with dozens of deserters and peasants. In September-October 1919 Khristovoi's detachment fought the Denikinists alongside the unit of Masyuta. In mid-October his unit affiliated to the Makhnovists and had a force of 1500 combatants, 10 machineguns and 1 cannon. Makhno hoped that these forces would expand into the Poltava Makhnovist

corps with up to 10,000 insurgents. According to Savinkov the local insurgent leaders began to set up a coordinating structure, the Federation of Anarchist Insurgents. It was supported by Koval, Piotr Shuba, Bibik, Ogarkov, Diabol, Honta, Khristovoi, Buhovetsky and Panas Keleberda. These detachments announced their support for the Makhnovists.

In December Khristovoi's detachment contributed towards the defeat of the Whites in Poltava. Two weeks after the collapse of the Whites thanks to joint action by the Makhnovist and other insurgent units the Reds arrived and the Cheka began to arrest insurgents. As a result in January 1920 Khristovoi had to hide in the woods again in the Zenkov and Gadiach areas. On February 16th he launched a new uprising in the Gadiach area. In Gadiach itself the Red Army garrison revolted. An army was created led by Koval and Buhovetsky.

Fedor Buhovetsky (or Butovetsky) appears to have been a member of the Polish minority in the Ukraine. He was born in Grodno (now in Belarus) and subsequently was a worker (or teacher according to Savinkov) in Mirgorod. An anarchist communist, he was one of the first to join the Nabat Confederation of Anarchists and in January 1919 was secretary of its Mirgorod branch. In summer of the same year he joined the Makhnovists. On the 1st October 1919 he served on the GHQ of the Makhnovists and was appointed Makhnovist commissar in Poltava province. Savinkov says that in spring 1920 Buhovetsky controlled a large area between the Psel and Sula rivers which was known as a "zone of freedom" or "Sich". In summer 1920 he established contact with Khristovoi. In September the detachment had 125 combatants. In early October the units led by Krupsky and Koroli united with it. In November the detachment led by Kucera which operated in Lebedinsky county united its forces with those of Buhovetsky. In October-December 1920 he took part in the guerrilla struggle against the Whites in Mirgorod. With the arrival of the Red Army in January 1920 he was declared an outlaw. He hid in a cellar and began to organise underground insurgent units in Mirgorod. He united his units with Khristovoi in August 1920 (300 infantry, 300 cavalry and artillery). In autumn of the same year his units fought the White forces of Wrangel.

Meanwhile The Liutenka detachment led by Khristovoi gathered together 500 combatants in June and July and subsequently was to affiliate to the Makhnovist movement. It sought to combat all the apparatus of repression against the peasants that the Bolsheviks had launched: the food requisition squads, the so called Unions of Poor Peasants, and the "Revolutionary Committees".

On July 26th local Bolshevik officials in Gadiach alerted the Poltava executive committee that bands were rising everywhere, some numbering as many as 3,000. That month Buhovetsky, Koval and Khristovoi captured the town, defeated the Red garrison and held it for three days. During this period they declared for free soviets and for support of the Makhnovists, trying to call a peasant congress (uezd). However they were only able to arrest local Bolsheviks and after two days and the announcement about the free system they were forced to quit Gadyach.

On August 7th 1920 Khristovoi and Koval captured the whole of Gadyach county gathering together 1500 insurgents. Between August 12-16th a large detachment under the command of Nestor Makhno moved into the counties of Gadiach, Zenkov and Mirgorod. The Makhnovist operation in Poltava was to have major consequences as it invigorated the local insurgent units. The Makhnovists had met up with the units of Zhivoder (see [libcom biography](#)) and Andrei Levchenko. Zenkov town was captured at lunch time on August 9th. The local Red battalion was captured and disarmed. The Bolshevik apparatchiks fled in a panic, with the members of their revolutionary tribunal which was in session leaving their documents and clothing behind. Prisoners were freed from the three story prison which was burnt down and 22 million roubles were taken from the county treasury. The Bolshevik food stores were opened and distributed amongst the local population. No pogroms and looting took place. One Makhnovist was shot in the town centre for molestation of Jewish women. A meeting with Khristovoi and Fedor Buhovetsky and

other leaders of local detachments took place. Khristovoi was given a mandate to form a special unit of the Insurgent Makhnovists, signed by Makhno, the Chief of Staff Petrenko and the head of the Operations Division, Marchenko. He was given the instructions that a horse could be taken from local peasants only if the household has at least four working horses, and replaced where possible. By now Khristovoi and Buhovetsky had units of 3,000 partisans and possessed 20 machine guns and two cannons. Makhno and the Nabat anarchists had already conceived of a project to create a free area in Poltava province which would conduct the ‘ “world’s first experiment in building an anarchist society” ’ (Savinkov). This was never accomplished as vast numbers of Red Army detachments began to surround the area. Before they moved on, the Makhnovists supplied the local insurgents with several hundred rifles captured from the Reds, ammunition, money and 14 of its own combatants to provide them with a skilled advisory force. They left a small number of units in the area numbering between 50-60, which had the task of uniting with local insurgent leaders, to promote the ideas of anarchist communism and the Third (social) revolution. 100 cavalry from the units led by Kotsur were left in the Mirgorod region. In Kremenchug county Makhno re-established contact with Zhivoder and with the units of the Don Cossack Dimitri Molchanov, as well as with units led by Petrenko and Keleberda. They received military assistance from the Makhnovists. In Kobelyatsky county the local groups were greatly influenced by anarchist communism. The largest units were led by Roman Matias with 700 combatants and Levchenko with 500 combatants. However they could not agree on joint action and at a meeting in Kitaygorod Zhivoder was appointed commander in the area. Levchenko refused this order because he did not want his units to leave the local area. Under sentence of death he and his unit fled towards the Dnieper. Zhivoder was to die later in fighting with the Reds.

Another commander in the Poltava region was Ivan Bloch, who in 1920-1921 organised a Makhnovist detachment. In spring and summer 1921 his unit and that of Kamenyuk operated jointly in Poltava. On the 18th June of that year his detachment was annihilated by the Red Army, although other accounts say that he was executed by the Chekist Medvedev on June 25th at Baranovka in the Lugansk region.

After the main Makhnovist forces left the area on the 16th August 1920 the Bolsheviks sent in huge numbers of troops against Zenkov and Liutenka. Zenkov was only held by Khristovoi and Buhovetsky for twenty four hours before they were forced to retreat into the woods. In Liutenka the Red Army forces entered the town and began executions. Petrol was poured over buildings and many set alight. Those shot included women and the elderly. Some, it appears, were thrown into the flames alive. Ten days later the Bolshevik squads returned, carrying out more executions and burning of buildings. The Bolshevik central government was alerted to the danger and Lenin ordered the complete burning of the town and the eviction of the population to eastern areas of the country. Eight hundred family farms were burnt on August 19th. Local people who were terrified by this sent a delegation to Kharkov demanding pardon from a Bolshevik supremo in the Ukraine, Petrovsky. This was granted.

Meanwhile Khristovoi divided his large forces into mobile units on horses and carts which made sudden attacks against the Bolsheviks. Unit commanders included the teacher L. Stepovoi and Lisovsky. They had notable successes against the Bolsheviks. But in early September during a raid near the village of Ostapovka the main body of Khristovoi, together with a detachment led by Dmitrenko were ambushed and suffered heavy losses and were forced to retreat towards Liutenka. This differs from the account given by Savinkov where he states that the units of Koval and Khristovoi with 500 cavalry joined the main Makhnovist forces at Iziium to combat the White forces of Wrangel and that together with Makhno they entered into alliance with the Reds. Savinkov goes on to say that from mid-October to mid- November 1920, the Khristovoi-Koval detachment fought as part of the Makhnovist forces against Wrangel in southern Ukraine. He asserts that Khristovoi returned to Poltava province in mid-November whilst Koval with 100 cavalry took parts in raids with Makhno throughout the Ukraine into summer 1921. He then goes on to say that Koval returned to the ‘Sich’ to fight against bandit units which were plundering the local peasants and that he was killed in a fight with them. After his death a new insurgent leader oriented

towards the Makhnovists emerged. This was Ivan Krupsky,(1) son of a narodnik and a former “free Cossack”. According to Savinkov, Buhovetsky carried on a guerrilla struggle until March 1921 in the forests near Nadrigailov.

Other accounts assert that after the defeat at Ostapovka Khristovoi dismissed half of his decimated unit, paring it down to 300 combatants. There was the old problem of lack of ammunition among the insurgents, with each being rationed to a dozen rounds, as well as lack of food. The Red forces were increased by the day, with garrisons being set up in the towns and villages of the area and the establishment of a special mobile unit. In mid-November, after unsuccessful negotiations for the surrender of the Khristovoi detachment they were surrounded in the meadows near the village of Lyutenskie Mills. The operation was personally directed by Voronin, head of the Red Army in the province. Many insurgents threw themselves onto the thin ice of the Psel river and drowned. Pylyp Masyuta, Chief of Staff of the insurgents was one of those who died. Only the heroic actions of one of the Makhnovists who had been placed with Khristovoi’s unit, Sergei Kirichenko, enabled Khristovoi and the remainder of the unit to cross the river and escape. He operated a Maxim gun keeping back the Red forces right up to his last bullet. He was then fished out of the icy water and captured by the Reds. He was shot later “whilst trying to escape”.

After this battle there were only 50 combatants left in the unit. Khristovoi continued the guerrilla struggle making unexpected attacks against the Soviet authorities and then disappearing into the forest. In response to these actions the Bolsheviks launched a red terror, shooting 10 hostages in the Liutenka area. Despite this, the Bolsheviks were unable to collect the surplus in the area for a year.

Savinkov says that Khristovoi was able to build up his forces again in December 1920 and renewed the struggle against the Bolsheviks. He says that in January with the entry of the main Makhnovist forces into Poltava province they attempted to meet up with the local insurgents. The Makhnovists met the Khristovoi detachment on January 15th at the village of Borka. The Khristovoi forces only united with those of Makhno for a few days. Makhno wanted to break through into southern Russia to join up with Kolesnikov and Antonov whilst Khristovoi wanted to protect the local area from the Cheka and the food requisition squads. The same happened at Nadrigailov when Buhovetsky rejected the offer to join the raid into southern Russia.

The Makhnovists attempted to meet up with the forces of Khristovoi and Buhovetsky again in June 1921 when they again came through Poltava province. But the latter’s units were already decimated and dispersed. In this month Khristovoi’s forces united with the unit led by Antonenko.

Only on July 15th 1921 did a Bolshevik secret agent manage to locate the hiding place of Khristovoi and his unit. At Zagrunovka in Zinkovsky county the insurgents were wiped out. He was only 23 years old at his death. Savinkov differs from these accounts, saying that Khristovoi and Ivan Krupsky only demobilised their units in autumn 1921 with the NEP reforms, the amnesty, and the crossing over into Romania of Makhno. He gives the much later date of the beginning of March 1922, saying that Khristovoi, his wife and another insurgent were located by a mobile unit and died during a firefight). However, legends continued to circulate that he had survived, with sightings of him in his native village, the Donets basin and east of the Urals even into the 1960s!

A Red Terror and forced collectivisation was launched in the region by the Soviet authorities. The first Communist cell at Liutenka was established at the beginning of 1921 but there were only 8 members of the Communist youth in the region in January 1925. Because of its insurgency Liutenka was entered on the black list of villages and small country towns by the Soviet authorities. Repressive measures continued in the next few decades against its inhabitants and it had a high rate of mortality during the great famine engineered by the Soviets.

(1) Krupsky joined the Red Army at 17 and joined the Makhnovists at the age of 19. In autumn 1921 he disbanded his unit and then went illegally to Moscow, on to Kharkov, and then finally settled in Gadyach. However, he was soon identified and arrested. He managed to escape. Under false documents he moved to Poltava and worked as a Soviet policeman! He was again identified and arrested in April 1923. After his arrest he served ten years in prison, some of them in the far east of the Soviet Union. After his release he worked as a building worker and factory worker. He had five children. His great grandson, Nikolai Ridny, an Ukrainian filmmaker, has made a film based on Krupsky's life called Gray Horses.

Nick Heath

Sources

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Many thanks to Malcolm Archibald for supplying the Savinkov biography of Khristovoi (Savinkov would appear to have access to sources not available to others but fails to reference them)

Note: the sources are often contradictory, giving different dates and different chains of events. I have attempted to make sense of this confusion.