

# The Makhnovists and the Mennonites: war and peace in the Ukrainian Revolution



This is a story about massacres that occurred in Southern Ukraine between 26th October and 7th December, 1919. The victims, avowedly-pacifist German Mennonites, included several women and elderly people; in Eichenfeld, almost one third of the village population was killed, including a 65 year-old blind woman. All the massacres occurred in the vicinity of the Makhnovist army. And then, after six weeks, they stopped.

This is also the story of an émigré community whose members invented an anarchist bogeyman to justify having betrayed their pacifist principles. It's about estate owners who earned 3000 times what they paid their labourers, landlords who conscripted soldiers to protect their wealth, and pacifists who fought for an army that killed tens of thousands of Jews. This is about myth and history, and the possibility of rapprochement between two versions of the past. Most of all, perhaps, this is a reminder that those who wish for peace tomorrow must work for equality today.<sup>1</sup>

## **The Manichean histories of the Makhnovists and the Mennonites**

In 1924, Nestor Makhno was arrested in Danzig, charged with having persecuted German settlers in the Ukraine (Skirda, p-408). He escaped before trial, and the alleged terrorisation of pacifist Mennonites is now the most serious stain on the Makhnovists' reputation.<sup>2</sup> The Russian Mennonite diaspora recall the 'uncontrolled terror' inflicted by the Makhnovists as they slaughtered hundreds of men, women, and children (Huebert, H.T. & W. Schroeder, p-138);<sup>3</sup> 'Driven by mad violence' (Toews, p-252) the bandits displayed 'the bestiality of men who had become raging animals' (Toews, p-142); 'Helpless and defenseless, [the Mennonites] were exposed to the horrible reality of an unprecedented, bestial anarchy that expressed the basest human instincts' (Dick, p-137); 'This part-targeted, part-random horror lives on in the Mennonite imagination as a kind of ultimate Manichean abomination' (Dyck, n.d.); etc. 'By the time of the German withdrawal,' writes one memoirist, [Makhno] had an army of 100,000 followers, all criminals, all hostile to humanity, their hatred directed against everybody (...) Having stolen most of the horses in the countryside, they exemplified terror on horseback as they carried out their program of plunder, rape and murder with a vengeance.'<sup>4</sup> The story of this 'terrible, hated man' has become a centrepiece of Mennonite identity and a historical truth passed between generations; here is a representative example from a young Mennonite: 'In Muensterberg, Makhno beheaded a whole family and set all the heads on display on tables' (Schroeder, n.d.).<sup>5</sup>

How are we to reconcile these accounts with other histories of the Makhnovists? Can these monsters be the same people who decided, upon forcing the militias and occupying armies from Gulyai-Polye, to tackle the problem of illiteracy? Can these monsters be the same people who gave 'Special attention (...) to the organisation of a theatre' (Palij, p-152)? Not many bogeymen encourage adult

education, or display an interest in the arts. Yes, there is another history of the Makhnovists, one that Mennonite children may not encounter. For, while the Makhnovists' enemies publicly slandered them as bandits, they privately bemoaned their enormous popular support. They conceded that 'Attacks on Makhno infuriate the local population' (internal document reproduced in Butt et al, p-88) and complained that while the peasantry refused to help the Bolsheviks, and often actively misled them, they aided the Makhnovists in whatever way they could: 'Spies and informers of the Makhno partisans were in each village, in each grange, roamed all the time and everywhere, appearing as beggars, Red Army men seeking their units, workers from mines exchanging coal for bread, seemingly repentant deserters, or even former Communists, injured women, widows, and orphans' (see Palij, pp-236/7). Can we be dealing with the same Makhnovists? At first glance, these opposing histories appear incommensurable.

### Meet the Makhnovists

Let us start by considering some historiographic problems particular to the Makhnovist movement. First, the chaos of the times and the plethora of warring parties make it sometimes difficult to attribute responsibility for a particular crime.<sup>6</sup> In addition to the White Army, the Red Army, Petliura's Nationalists, and the Makhnovists, there were various independents: isolated peasant insurgents, gangs of bandits, mobs of deserters, paramilitary bands of Cossacks, pro-White militias, and the armies of independent war lords – including that of Nikifor Grigorev, whose notorious troops in 1919 operated in the same area as the Makhnovists.<sup>7</sup> 'The number of less important green armies,' writes Felix Schnell, 'may be estimated in the thousands and the ataman armies in the hundreds' (p-203). To add to the confusion, 'there were a number of independent groups that called themselves Makhno partisans to increase their prestige' (Palij, p-110); it was, as Alexander Berkman noted, 'an established fact that the Greens and other marauders, aware of the terror inspired by Makhno among the enemy, often masqueraded as Makhno men when descending upon a village.'<sup>8</sup> Most confusing of all, but of great significance for our subject, late in the Autumn of 1919, the armies of Petliurist Ataman's temporarily joined the Makhnovists as semi-autonomous allies (Azarov, p-23; Schnell, p-204). According to Victor Azarov, 'these atamans included Matyazha, Melashko, Gladchenko, Ogiya, and others' (p-23); at least two of these commanders, Matyazh and Levchenko, were later executed by the Makhnovists, apparently for encouraging pogroms (Azarov, p-24).

Second, all the non-Bolshevik contemporary accounts were written by former Makhnovists (e.g., Arshinov, Belash, Voline, and Makhno himself); while Voline's memoir is often critical, and Belash's was supervised by the OGPU, these accounts obviously have a vested interest in defending the reputation of the Makhnovist revolution. The Bolshevik victory and resulting dictatorship meant that for the duration of most eyewitnesses' lives, the ruling party had a monopoly on what could be published. Most of the anti-Makhnovist propaganda produced during this period by Marxist-Leninists in the Soviet Union and beyond has no more historical credibility than a confession presented at a Moscow show trial. It has, however, inspired cultural representations that portray Makhno as a diabolical savage: Joseph Kessel's bizarre *Makhno et sa Juive* remains in print today, and at Russian cinemas anti-Makhnovist blockbusters included *Little Red Imps* (1923) and *Wedding at Malinovka* (1967).<sup>9</sup> These conditions have contributed to a complex Makhno mythology. In Sukhogorskaya's 'eyewitness' accounts (2002a; 2002b), for example, Makhno is cast as the Devil: he hacked up thirteen prisoners of war, 'purely for his own enjoyment'; his 'anti-Christ' child was born with teeth (Sukhogorskaya says the child died before she could gauge the truth of this story); and he was accompanied by a personal assassin: a mute who always wore a sailor's uniform and would kill anyone to whom Makhno took a dislike – if needs be, by biting their throats. What's interesting is that along with these fantasies appear fragments of the other type of Makhno legend: Makhno the 'brave and daring' partisan; Makhno strolling about enemy territory 'disguised as an old woman nibbling sunflower seeds'; Makhno getting married in a church, 'skilfully disguised as the bride.' Sukhogorskaya's accounts sound crazy, but it takes only a little archaeology to uncover foundations we recognise: Makhno did have a still born child; the Makhnovists did use weddings as cover for operations; Makhno did have a

close associate – Fedor Schuss – who was famed for wearing a sailor's uniform (though he wasn't mute, and nor was he a vampire). Schuss was a renowned womaniser, incredibly brave, a brilliant cavalry commander, an eccentric dresser, an avid attention seeker (one suspects – though this may be unfair – a bit of a prat); he is always in the centre of photographs, pulling the most dashing and valiant pose. Between the real Schuss and the legend of the mute assassin there is an intermediary story, a tale presented by the Bolshevik Dybets, who describes Schuss staying 'silent and motionless as a statue,' and informs us that Schuss was an expert in jiu-jitsu, who could kill a man with a sudden grip (Skirda, p-315). Makhno legends (a separate phenomenon from political smears) reflect the hopes and fears of different sections of the population at a particular historical moment.

Now, the Mennonite tradition is not immune to such mythologising. Consider, for example, the story of Heinrich and Elisabeth Wiebe (Toews, pp-252/3). One of their Russian servants promised to warn them if the Makhnovists were raiding with 'a shrill whistle.' At this point, the Wiebes were to come down to the river where the servant would row them to safety. The servants hid Mr. Wiebe in a pile of chaff, and when the Makhnovists arrived they repeatedly bayoneted and sabred the chaff; Wiebe escaped because though he was stabbed several times he didn't make a sound. This requires us to believe that not only was Wiebe able to stay silent while being repeatedly stabbed, but that the Makhnovists were incapable of noting the different levels of resistance offered by a pile of chaff and a human body. Fortunately, the Makhnovists were finally driven away 'by an unusual light in the Heavens.'

Similarly, Isaak Dyck recalls a group of 'bandits' searching for his father, I.G. Dyck. When the bandits spotted Dyck, he ran behind a barn. A bandit gave chase but somehow couldn't see Dyck though staring right at him. At this point, Dyck senior 'distinctly heard a voice saying "Don't speak. I have blinded his eyes."' Dyck junior continues to explain that his father 'later related that the eyes of the bandit were rolling about crazily like those of a wild animal' (ibid, p-72).

Of course, a few unreliable testimonies should not discredit others; but these, like all the positive stories surrounding Makhno – the villagers who claimed Makhno helped free their horse from the mud; the railway passengers who swore Makhno gunned down a group of would-be robbers; the peasants who believed him invincible (see Skirda, p-297) – must be treated sceptically.<sup>10</sup> For example, the claims that at Eichenfeld Mennonites were mutilated or 'hacked into pieces' were, as Mennonite historian Theodore Regeher informs us, 'lurid rumours' that largely emerged retrospectively: 'In this, as in some other similar cases, those closest to the events reported less evidence of mutilation than did accounts by those further removed.' To an extent, one can understand such embellishment as typical of Makhno mythology: just as Russo-Ukrainian peasants embellished Makhno's very real heroics (he survived more than 200 attacks and battles, bullets went through his hat, his hand, his ankle, his thigh and his appendix, his nape and his right cheek – but he wasn't immortal), so Mennonites embellished their very real suffering. But the nature of their faith may also have driven them to falsely present themselves as overwhelmingly the *objects* of violence.

### **Meet the Mennonites**

The history of the Mennonites, like the history of the Makhnovists, begins with a peasant uprising. Their story starts during the Radical Reformation, when hundreds of thousands of peasants fought their feudal rulers in a war both theological and economic. Readers of Luther Blissett's historical novel, *Q*, will be familiar with such figures as Thomas Münzer, who sought a Christian commonwealth of total equality, and also with the role of the Anabaptists, who believed Christianity necessitated living ethically as well as professing faith. But while some Anabaptists participated in violent uprisings such as the Münster rebellion, others opposed the use of force. Many of the latter group followed the teachings of a preacher called Menno Simmons – after him, this group was later named the Mennonites. One of the central tenets of their theology is therefore 'the avoidance of the sword'; i.e. a strict commitment to non-violence. As we shall see, this principle was abandoned by many of those

who established colonies in the Ukraine; indeed, by the 1930s, a minority of exiles from Bolshevism (Heinrich Schroeder, for example) were involved in pro-Nazi anti-Semitic agitation (Martens, 2008). In 1917, 50,000 people inhabited seventy Mennonite villages in Eastern Ukraine (Loewen, p-63). It is worth considering the origin of these settlements. By the eighteenth century, used to persecution and displacement, the Mennonites had acquired a reputation as hard workers able to cultivate marginal lands. In 1768, Catherine the Great bequeathed them Steppe land from which her armies had recently forced the indigenous Nogai and Cossack tribes-people (Enns, 2011). The terms of this settlement were generous: the costs of transport and building were paid by the government; each family was granted around 175 acres of land and a loan of five hundred rubles; each village was granted a forest and large free pasture; and the colonists were exempted from taxation for thirty years (Palij, pp-48/9). Unsurprisingly, they prospered. After 1817, Mennonites were allowed to buy land in addition to that provided in their original settlement grants. Some became successful entrepreneurs, and at the outbreak of WW1 there were 500 additional Mennonite estates in Southern Russia. The largest estate, which belonged to Wilhelm Martens, is reputed to have covered 300,000 acres (Loewen, p-60). A typical Ekaterinoslav estate owner had an income of over 200,000 rubles per annum; the average salary for a qualified teacher was about 600 rubles per annum; and the average salary for a female Russian peasant was about 40 rubles per annum (Loewen & Prieb, 1996, pp-23/24).

Those who laboured on these estates included Russo-Ukrainian peasants and landless Mennonites; in their treatment of labourers (and serfs) the Mennonite landlords were indistinguishable from their Russo-Ukrainian peers. A representative incident: a Mennonite landowner caught a Russo-Ukrainian labourer stealing grain, so he pushed the labourer into the grain bin and nailed down the lid. He waited two days and then called the mayor to have the captive flogged (Loewen & Prieb, 1996, p-21). Many Mennonite landlords practised collective punishment; when theft was suspected 'all the potential suspects were flogged, so as to teach a lesson to both the guilty and the innocent' (Loewen, p-53). The principle of pacifism had therefore been abandoned by wealthy Mennonites long before the Russian Revolution.

From the spring of 1918, Mennonite colonies (though not all individual believers) abandoned any pretence of pacifism and began to establish an armed force, which they refer to as the Selbstschutz. For those who participated and their descendents, this resort to violence presents a problem of conscience: for four hundred years, through various persecutions and martyrdoms, Mennonites had – to an extent, at least – renounced the sword; now, gangs of men armed themselves in zealous support of the invading Austro-German armies. It is worth observing the sort of logical contortions that were necessary to defend this course of action: 'It was thus argued by Heinrich Janz and Aron Toews, for example, that one must differentiate between the principles of the Kingdom of God and the principles of this worldly kingdom. In matters of the former one must remain nonresistant, of course, but with respect to the latter one is also obligated to support law and order' (Klippenstein, p-4).

Understandably, Mennonite memoirists and historians have expended much energy justifying the Selbstschutz, or at least emphasising the desperate horrors in response to which it emerged. B.J. Dick, for example, worried that those readers of his account 'born decades after those terrible events' would struggle to 'understand fully [the Mennonites'] situation,' to empathize with their 'anguish', 'and to judge this matter fairly' (p-142). '[T]he temptation to form an emergency Selbstschutz,' he states, 'did not arise suddenly overnight but grew gradually through months of unbearable and catastrophic experiences and unprecedented terror' (ibid, p-136).

### **The Revolution of 1917**

It is imperative that we are clear about chronology. In late 1917, as the Russian Revolution spread to the Ukraine, there was an explosion of long-repressed popular anger. In some villages, groups of

peasants burned the landowner's estate while shouting 'All this belongs to us! All this belongs to us!' (see Tsebry, p-7). But in Gulyai-Polye, Makhno demanded the local pomeshchiks (wealthy rural landowners) produced all the documentation relating to their estates, and then he drafted inventories of everything they owned. Then the soviet divided the land so that the pomeshchiks had exactly the same resources as the poor peasants (see Arshinov, p-60). Doubtless this was a frightening time at which to encounter servants one had previously whipped, and doubtless these dethroned tyrants were in many places beaten and insulted, but it is important to be clear that during this revolutionary upheaval there were few deaths among Mennonites. The most thorough tabulation of Mennonite deaths that I have seen is the preliminary report by Mennonite historian Peter Letkemann, entitled 'Mennonite Victims of Revolution, Anarchy, Civil War, Disease and Famine, 1917-1923.' In the three months following the revolution, Letkemann identifies only nine violent deaths, and these all occurred in the far-Eastern Terek settlement, where Mennonites were attacked by 'Muslim mountain tribes' (p-2). Then, on 25th January 1918, five members of the Aron Thiessen family were executed in the Schönfeld region (ibid).<sup>11</sup> I have no more information about this incident, but there are good reasons to suspect that the executioners were Makhnovists *avant la lettre*: first, the Schönfeld region was near to Makhno's home town of Gulyai-Polye; second, it contained some of the most prosperous estates in the whole region. These estates were not part of the original Mennonite colonies but were built on land purchased in the mid-nineteenth century, from a Tsarist officer, who had won it in a game of cards (Toews, n.d.). In the years before WW1, it was a region of such prosperity that several people owned chauffeured automobiles and one man even bought a private airplane (ibid). As we shall see, later in the year, the wealthy Mennonites of Schönfeld, supported by other local landlords, fought the first Selbstschutz battle without Austro-German support.

What was Nestor Makhno doing during the spring of 1918? In addition to his political work, he was based on a collective farm, working a type of plough called a bukker (Makhno, 2007, p-185). His co-workers at this time, he states, included German colonists and former landowners who had accepted the redistribution of land (ibid, p-187). Makhno's memoir describes the administrative and political machinations of the Ukrainian Revolution with a detail that suggests veracity.<sup>12</sup> 'Under the direction of the Revkom,' he explains, 'ex-soldiers from the Front began moving all the implements and livestock from the estates of the pomeshchiks and large farms to a central holding area' (ibid, p-183). The idea was not to exact revenge upon the wealthy, but to equitably distribute wealth. Landlords and wealthier farmers 'were left with two pairs of horses, one or two cows (depending on the size of the family), one plough, one seeding machine, one mower, one winnowing machine, etc.' (ibid, p-183). Needless to say, this equitable redistribution was not voluntary; however, in the whole of Russia, the only Mennonites known to have been killed during this process were the above-mentioned residents of Schönfeld and another five men executed by the Bolsheviks in Halbstadt, in February 1918 (Letkemann, p-2). In fact, even when Makhno began guerrilla actions against the Austro-German occupation, his forces did not necessarily have hostile relations with the landowners whose properties they temporarily commandeered. While writing his scathing biography of Nestor Makhno, Mennonite historian Victor Peters appealed for eyewitnesses among Ukrainian emigrants in North America; a letter to him from Mrs. H Goerz (nee Neufeld) describes the redistribution of wealth in the Ukraine at this time. Peters writes: 'One of the first landowners to "host" Makhno was a Mennonite farmer, Jacob Neufeld, who had a khutor at Ebenfeld, near Gulyai-Polye (...) [Makhno] made every attempt to establish a friendly basis and when Neufeld offered him a key for his room for greater safety, Makhno refused to take it, saying that he felt safe enough among friends. When Makhno moved to the next khutor, belonging to another Mennonite by the name of Klassen, Makhno invited Klassen to take his turn, that is, claim some of his possessions for himself' (p-32).<sup>13</sup> In fact, the evidence Peters cites against this stage of the anarchist revolution is concerned more with alleged vulgarities of taste than any revolutionary terror; according to a newspaper article published in the 1930s, one eye witness recalled that Gulyai-Polye was 'like a painting by Repin: exotic, gaudy, unusual. The Makhnovists wore colourful shirts, wide pants, and wide red belts, which reached down to the ground. All of them were armed to the teeth...' (quoted in Peters, p-32/3). To this quote Peters adds (based on the same

source?) that there were 'prisoners and public interrogations' and 'all night there was music and dancing, mixed with the shrieks of gay women' (p-33).<sup>14</sup>

So, let us be clear about the chronology. The executions of Mennonites overwhelmingly occurred in 1919 (see Letkemann, p-2). The guerrilla insurgency against the Austro-German occupation began in the fall of 1918, and the term 'Makhnovist' was first used at the battle of Dibrivka on 30th September 1918 (see Arshinov, pp-65-67).<sup>15</sup> According to Klippenstein, 'Makhno's initial attacks against the German-Austrian army units shifted to include local Mennonite farms and villages at least as early as October, 1918' (p-6). But the Molotschna Selbstschutz was established as a military force on 23rd April 1918 (Klippenstein, p-6); and by the time of the July 1918 general conference at Lichtenau, armed Mennonites were 'obsessed with thoughts of vengeance' (Dick, p-138).

### **Origins of the Mennonite Selbstschutz**

If the Selbstschutz was not born to defend Mennonites from 'unprecedented terror', how did it originate? Its initial role was to enable landlords to violently reclaim land and property from those who had (in most instances, peacefully) collectivised it. B.J. Dick acknowledges that 'Not always and not in all cases was the conduct of (...) German soldiers commendable and inoffensive,' but he describes the Austro-German occupation as 'a breathing space sent by God' – the Old Testament God, presumably. Consider, for example, the testimony of John Xydias, a Russified Greek capitalist then resident in Odessa: 'The reprisal expeditions were marked by hangings and shootings. Executions dispensed with any sort of proceedings; the venom of the landlords cared not a jot for it, and the German officers gladly washed their hands of any show of a trial. They shot and hanged without any pretense of trial, often not even bothering to check the identity of the 'defendant.' The landlord or his agent had merely to declare that such and such a peasant had been involved in confiscation of his estates for the 'culprit' to be summarily executed' (Quoted in Skirda, p-55). Victims of this Austro-German repression included Makhno's mother, whose house was burned, and his invalid brother, Emilian, who was executed in front of his children (ibid). While thousands were shot or hanged, others, such as the Jewish activist Lioba Gorelik, were beaten to death (ibid).

Mennonites acted as guides for punitive German missions to execute or beat peasants suspected of confiscating property (Klippenstein, p-2). Several Mennonite historians acknowledge that the initial aim of the Selbstschutz was to reclaim material wealth confiscated during the revolution. For example, Loewen & Prieb recount how 'Mennonites armed themselves under Austro-German army tutelage, and together with other estate owners organised posses that attacked and sought to retake estates seized by rebels. Interrogating those they captured, they sought out the rebel leaders, whom the occupation army then executed summarily' (Loewen & Prieb, 1997, pp-136/7; see also Loewen, p-62). One Mennonite eyewitness recalled the behaviour of Abram Loewen (no relation to the above-cited authors), who brutalised peasants suspected of theft and executed four of them personally (Rempel & Rempel Carlson, p-210). He was later executed by the Makhnovists (ibid, p-229).

We must be clear that this was not a conflict between bad German settlers and oppressed Russo-Ukrainian natives; these divisions were based on class, not on nationality or religion. Many poor Mennonites had participated in the revolutionary redistribution of land; thus Mennonites, too, were executed by the Austro-German repression (for the names of some victims, see Letkemann, p-2). Indeed, 'Many residents of both the Chortitza and Molotschna settlements recall other Mennonites participating in bandit raids' (Rempel & Rempel Carlson, p-242). In a commendably honest and thoughtful article, Elaine Enns, a descendant of the Russian Mennonites, has recently analysed the situation from the perspective of restorative justice: 'Many landless Mennonites became servants on wealthy Mennonite estates, and some became so disillusioned that they joined the Communists and Anarchists to fight for a more just society. So the same social fault lines that led to the Russian revolution ran right through my grandmother's yard. In most cases, our people were not targeted because they were Mennonite, but because they were wealthy' (Enns, 2011).

Needless to say, it was the prosperous Mennonites who pushed for the Selbstschutz, not their landless and poor employees (Klippenstein, p-2). As B.J. Dick recalls, 'the more prosperous farmers were generally more in favour of the Selbstschutz than the landless and the poor' (p-138). This was reflected in the demographic of the initial Selbstschutz units, which, as John Urry notes, 'consisted of young Mennonites from wealthy backgrounds' (Wiens, p-40). The aim of these landlords' militias was to 'restore the pre-Revolution community patterns as completely as possible' (Klippenstein, p-2). Thus the Selbstschutz did not start as a defensive organisation but as a militia that aimed to use violence to restore the inequalities of Tsarist Russia. The hawks in the Mennonite camp coerced, intimidated, and assaulted the doves: those many Mennonites who opposed the Selbstschutz, whether for reasons theological or economic or both, were subject to scorn and derision and in some cases were beaten by their Christian brethren (Klippenstein, p-8; see also, Dick, p-136).

When the Austro-Germans retreated from the Ukraine following the end of WW1, the landlords' militias were temporarily without support. Klippenstein mentions a battle fought at Schönfeld, the wealthy Mennonite settlement north west of Gulyai-Polye, in which a 'band of about 120 men of the area along with about fifteen Russian landowners equipped only with small arms was quickly routed' (Klippenstein, p-6).<sup>16</sup> Survivors of this battle and other refugees retreated to Molotschna, where they described the horror of the anarchist hordes, and amalgamated with the larger Selbstschutz. By this time the Selbstschutz was reliant on a new ally: the White forces led by General Denikin. According to Krahn and Reimer (1989), late in 1918, the Selbstschutz went on the offensive: 'Aided and abetted by the White Army, the Molotschna Selbstschutz took the field with a successful attack against Makhnovite forces at Chernigovka (6 December 1918).' B.J. Dick describes it as 'unfortunate' that the first acts of the Selbstschutz 'were outright attacks and not mere defensive actions' (p-138). Trained and armed by the Austro-Germans and Whites, the Selbstschutz was a credible fighting force. According to a contemporary Mennonite source, in three months they killed 750 people (Klippenstein, n.58, p-25). Another estimate, provided by a Selbstschutz participant, Gerhard Wiens, claims that in three days of fighting at Blumenthal, the Selbstschutz was responsible for 3000 Makhnovist casualties. Wiens' estimate is likely exaggerated, but the military importance of the Selbstschutz should not be underestimated. It contained 300 cavalry and 2,700 infantry divided into twenty companies (of which seven were non-Mennonite Germans from Prischib) (Krahn and Reimer). One participant described repeated military successes against the Makhnovists, explaining 'We had been well-trained by our German officers in shooting, bayoneting, the throwing of hand grenades, the quick digging of trenches, etc.' (quoted in Klippenstein, p-10). By January 1919, the Selbstschutz held a front at Blumenthal, twenty miles north of Molotschna. On the other side of their lines, twenty-thousand armed Makhnovists defended a 550 km front around an anarchist-communist 'free territory' (Skirda, p-80).

### **The Makhnovist Free Territory**

While some of their troops were directed against the Petliurists around Aleksandrovska, the Selbstschutz and Imperial Guardsmen towards the south-west, and General Mai-Maievsky's disintegrating army to the South, increasingly their force was on the east side of the territory, blocking the Denikinist advance. At this time the Makhnovista was a democratically-structured volunteer army, even though all its enemies, including the Selbstschutz, employed conscription.<sup>17</sup> Within the free territory that the Makhnovists defended, there were some fledgling attempts to develop a revolutionary society: around Gulyai-Polye, factories were collectivised, and previously landless peasants worked large estates as communes. The Makhnovists insisted that 'Freedom of speech, press, assembly, trade unions and the like is an inalienable right of every worker, and any limitation on this right represents a counter-revolutionary act' (the full proclamation is in Avruch, pp-133-5).<sup>18</sup> They developed a libertarian education system based on the ideas of Francisco Ferrer; classes were organised to promote literacy and to discuss, among other topics, the history of political economy and the French Revolution. A May 1919 internal Bolshevik report conceded that Gulyai-

Polye was 'one of the strongest cultural centres in New Russia' (in Butt et al, p-88). They arranged exchanges with collectivised factories and anarchist workers in cities, and on one occasion they railed 100 wagons of wheat to Moscow (Skirda, p-88). In Gulyai-Polye on February 12th, the Second Regional Congress was attended by delegates from 350 districts, soviets, unions, and front-line units (ibid, p-362). The congress expressed its opposition to 'plunder, violence, and anti-Jewish pogroms' (Palij, p-155). Later that year, the Makhnovists even acquired an air force: a single plane built from the abandoned parts of five damaged Farman-30s (Chop, 2008).

### **The Selbstschutz defeated**

Throughout this period, the Makhnovists' numbers increased as conscripted peasants deserted to them from Mai-Maievsky's army. Makhno had been in treaty with the Bolsheviks since January 26th and having repulsed the Denikinists from Gulyai-Polye and stabilised the Southern front, in early March the Makhnovists turned their attention to the West. The Selbstschutz was forced to retreat and many of these men joined Lieutenant Hohmeyer's Jäger Brigade in the Crimea. Recognising the imminent collapse of the White Army in the south, Hohmeyer opportunistically switched allegiances, placing his troops under the command of the Bolsheviks. After three weeks, the Bolsheviks disarmed them.

According to Klippenstein, a Bolshevik tribunal at Melitopol for a time executed 100 people per week, among whom 'were many Mennonites who had taken part in the military defense of the colonies' (p-13). And here we confront a problem in understanding the scale of the 1919 massacres: Letkemann states that 827 'murder victims' were killed in 1919 (p-2), but later tells us that this figure includes forty-five who died in the service of the White Army and eight – yes, eight – who died while serving in the Selbstschutz (p-9). Even if we assume he's discounting those who took up arms in Schönfeld, this latter statistic still seems especially unlikely. 3000 men fought for three months against a fearsome enemy, they allegedly killed 750 people, and they lost; if you can do that and sustain only eight casualties, then maybe God really is on your side. Of course, avowed pacifists would prefer their relatives remembered as religious martyrs than as slain or executed soldiers.

The point is this: it is not controversial that the Makhnovists killed military officers and all those who voluntarily took up arms against revolution (though they released conscripted soldiers after subjecting them to nothing more onerous than a political lecture); the question here is how many neutral Mennonites were subjected to atrocities – brutally murdered – and how many were killed for having participated in the counter-revolution? By this time, the execution of prisoners was already the norm rather than the exception: after the Makhnovists were defeated in Mariupol, a white officer boasted to a British journalist that they had executed 4000 Makhnovist prisoners in one day (Williams, 1991). This seems a suitable point at which to introduce the next army to see significant Mennonite participation.

### **The Volunteer Army of General Denikin**

By summer 1919, General Denikin commanded 55,500 well-armed troops (Denikin, p-233), including Cossack horsemen whom even Makhno respected (see Arshinov, p-142).<sup>19</sup> In June they broke the front: the Bolsheviks were routed north of the Don River, and the Makhnovists were crushed near Gulyai-Polye (see Denikin, pp-233-235). Trotsky, after briefly promising the 'liquidation' of the Makhnovists (Skirda, p-119), decided to abandon the Ukrainian front altogether, withdrawing his troops to Central Russia. At this point the Denikinists advanced west, occupying the free territory and the Mennonite colonies. It is unclear how many Mennonites enlisted in Denikin's army, but Klippenstein acknowledges that Mennonite recruits numbered 'hundreds' (p-13). Some were conscripted; some tried to resist or asked to perform non-combat roles; others joined armed units voluntarily: 'Voluntarily and otherwise, a sizable number of Mennonites did respond to Denikin's call, not only as drivers, but as gunners and infantry-men as well. Several found assignment in the Dmitrii Donskoi armoured train. A diarist of the period, Anna Baerg, noted the taking over of Gross Tokmak

by “300 Mennonites and 200 Cossacks with two tanks” (Klipperstein, p-13). Another formation, the ‘Chortitza Otrjad’, was charged with defending the railroad between Dnieper and Nikopol: it consisted of 100 Mennonite men supported by White officers (ibid, p-14). Gerhard Wiens served with other Mennonites in Colonel Zagreba’s Kuban Cossack Regiment, a German contingent commanded by Colonel Sweringen, General Visentiev’s personal guard, and the Drozdov Division (see Wiens, pp-40-52). John Kühn recalled that among the ‘large group of Germans’ in General Wrangel’s army ‘many were young Mennonite men’ (p-260).

In so far as the Denikinists had a political programme it was based on the restoration of landlords and the re-establishment of a single Russian state incorporating the Ukraine. This brought them into conflict with the local population, and even one of their own commanders, General Wrangel, described ‘pillage and speculation (...) debauchery, gambling, orgies (...) looting, violence and arbitrary acts’ (quoted in Skirda, pp-148/9). Otherwise sympathetic chroniclers are scathing about the White’s abuses in the Ukraine: Richard Lockett (somewhat carelessly in the context) describes ‘Something near to anarchy,’ bemoaning the ‘casual brutalities of the Cossacks,’ the regular pogroms (p-327), and other ‘appalling acts of barbarism’ (Lockett, p-391). They issued proclamations encouraging Russo-Ukrainians to rise up against the ‘Jew-communists’ (Mayer, p-520) and were responsible for hundreds of pogroms and the deaths of tens of thousands of Jews (see Mayer, pp-519-526). ‘Many of their victims were beaten, mutilated, raped, hanged, burned, dumped into wells or thrown from rooftops, and buried alive (ibid, p-519). Arshinov states that in the former Free Territory, ‘Peasants were plundered, violently abused, and killed (...) Almost all the Jewish women of [Gulyai-Polye] were raped (p-138).

A member of Denikin’s Special Council, N.I. Astrov, stated that the main features of the Denikin regime were ‘Violence, torture, robberies, drunkenness, odious behaviour (...)’ (quoted in Palij, p-189). The counterintelligence service ‘carried its activities to an unlimited wild arbitrariness (ibid),’ creating, as Denikin put it, ‘a painful mania, all over the country’ (quoted in Palij, p-190). According to General Wrangel, at this time the White Army hunted down anybody suspected of any contact with opposition groups, even if that contact had been involuntary – a policy that he denounced as ‘insane and cruel’ (Palij, p-188). They especially victimised the wives and girlfriends of known insurgents: according to diaries attributed to Makhno’s partner, Galina Kuzmenko, in summer 1919 the Denikinists’ victims included the wife of Makhno’s elder brother, Savva: ‘they beat her, stabbed her with their bayonets, cut off one of her breasts and only then did they shoot her’ (Skirda, p-313). Since revolutionaries and others were killed without trial or record, it is impossible to quantify the executions and murders committed by the Whites, but their victims certainly numbered tens of thousands (Mayer, pp-311/2). It is not clear if those Mennonites who collaborated with the Denikinists at this time helped to identify targets for the Whites, as they had done for the Austro-Germans one year earlier, but it is impossible that they were ignorant of the widespread slaughter with which they were complicit.

### **The Battle of Peregonovka**

During this time the Makhnovists retreated west, followed by thousands of refugees fleeing the Denikinist advance (Arshinov, p-138). As they retreated, they fought battles with the pursuing Denikinists, as well as against the Bolshevik Fourteenth Army, which was escaping the British naval bombardment of Odessa. They also achieved the execution of the pogromist warlord Grigorev; significantly, many of Grigoriev’s notoriously undisciplined and violent troops were at this time incorporated into the depleted Makhnovist army. By September, the Makhnovists were 600km from Gulyai-Polye, near Uman. Exhausted, lacking arms, and burdened by eight-thousand sick and wounded, they found themselves surrounded by Denikinists and Petliurists. At this point, Makhno counter-attacked. First, he agreed a truce with the Petliurists: whatever Petliura’s opinion of anarchists, the Makhnovists were all that stood between him and Denikin’s marauding Cossacks.<sup>20</sup> Thus, Makhno could persuade Petliura to shelter his eight-thousand invalids. With this sorted, Makhno gave his army the greatest team talk ever. The entire long retreat, he claimed, had

been nothing but a tactic to over-extend Denikin's forces, and now, hundreds of miles to the west of their homes, they had outwitted the enemy. When he had finished his speech, he turned his exhausted men and women to face the Denikinists, and with a cry of 'Liberty or Death', he and his famished troops attacked the centre of Denikin's position (this account is largely from Arshinov, pp-144-148).

Denikin's First Officers' Regiment of Simferopol began to retreat. And then they just ran. Contagious panic seized Denikin's forces, and in the ensuing rout hundreds were ruthlessly slaughtered on the banks of the Sinyukha River – Voline and Arshinov describe corpses strewn for miles. While Makhno may have exaggerated in claiming 'complete annihilation' – Denikin's sources suggest they lost 637 men (Palij, p-195) – this was a decisive moment in the twentieth-century. The Denikinist officer Sakovitch understood this: 'In a sky blanketed in autumn cloud, the last puffs of artillery smoke exploded then... all was silent. All of us ranking officers sensed that something tragic had just occurred though nobody could have had any inkling of the enormity of the disaster which had struck. None of us knew that at that precise moment nationalist Russia had lost the war. "It's over," I said, I know not why, to Lieutenant Rozov who was standing alongside me. "It's over," he confirmed sombrely' (Quoted in Skirda, pp-136/7).

The Makhnovists charged east covering 660km in eleven days (Denikin, p-281). In town after town they destroyed regiments that knew nothing of the White's defeat at Peregonovka and were unprepared for battle (Palij, p-196). As Denikin himself recalled: 'Makhno's bands, sometimes numbering as many as thirty thousand men, roved far behind in the vast territory between the Dnieper and the Sea of Azov, disorganising our rear and on one occasion even threatening Taganrog, the seat of G.H.Q.' (p-254). Denikin had to withdraw troops from the northern front, effectively halting the march on Moscow; the Makhnovist revolt 'had the effect of disorganizing our rear and weakening our front at the most critical period of its existence' (ibid, p-282). It was on this basis that Max Nomad labelled Makhno 'the bandit who saved Moscow' (1939).<sup>21</sup>

### **Revenge of the revolution**

The Makhnovist advance may have changed the course of the twentieth century, but for those who had welcomed and supported Denikin, it brought sudden and unanticipated terror. In the Makhnovist blitzkrieg, all 'known to be active enemies of the peasants and workers were condemned to death. Pomeschchiks and major kulaks perished in great numbers' (Arshinov, p-148), and, presumably, the testimony of the peasantry was sufficient evidence on which to execute a kulak as an 'active' enemy. In every town the Makhnovists captured they also executed enemy soldiers, police, Denikinist mayors, and priests (Arshinov, p-148). In every town, they also recruited new soldiers, many of whom could have known little about the Makhnovist movement. In several instances, they incorporated into the Makhnovtchina whole armies – independent militias and forces led by Petliurist atamans – some of whom were subsequently executed for pogroms and self-motivated banditry (see Azarov, pp-23/24). Then they rode on, their anger further fuelled by the evidence of the Denikinists' rampage.

To an extent, the massacres of Mennonites at the end of 1919 can be understood as part of the Makhnovists' revolutionary violence. Dozens of Mennonites were executed in the Yazykovo-Chortitza region: four adult males were killed at Adelsheim; eleven adult males at Franzfeld; ten adult males and one adult woman at Neuendorf; seven adult males at Burwalde; one adult male at Kronstal; six adult males and one adult woman at Neuenberg; and three adult males at Osterwick (Mennonite Historical Society of Alberta, 2010). However, the village that suffered most was Eichenfeld: one month after the Battle of Peregonovka, on October 26th, Makhnovist Kontrrazvedki (counter-intelligence agents) and local villagers killed eighty-three people out of a population of just over three hundred.

Sean Patterson is perhaps unique in having pursued a scholarly study of these events using Makhnovist as well as Mennonite histories, and I am indebted to him for having shared his

forthcoming research. According to Patterson, Eichenfeld was singled out because of the success of its small but robust Selbstschutz. The leaders of the Eichenfeld Selbstschutz were a wonderfully named local man, Heinrich Heinrich Heinrichs, and a former German soldier, Peter Von Kampen. Under their leadership, 'the Eichenfeld group gained a measure of notoriety,' writes Patterson, 'successfully repelling bandit attacks throughout the spring of 1919. In one incident the Selbstschutz feigned an arms turnover to local bandits. At the arranged spot of exchange the Mennonites turned their guns on the bandits forcing a retreat. A number of prisoners were tried and executed.' In response to this, Soviet troops occupied the Yazykovo-Chortitza region and demanded the surrender of all German weapons. Although the majority of armed Mennonites acquiesced, the Eichenfeld Selbstschutz kept their weapons. According to Patterson's source, in July 1919 fourteen Eichenfeld Selbstschutz men defeated 300 Red Army troops. In an attempt to control the region, the Bolsheviks established a village Soviet led by Commissar Snissarenko, but after their identities were exposed to the Soviet by Daniel Hiebert, a traitorous Selbstschutz man, Heinrichs' militia decided to liquidate the Soviet. According to a participant, Kornelius Heinrichs, "the group decided to clean up these men. Heinrich Heinrichs was the leader – they decided they would kill everybody, take no prisoners and not one person would utter a word" (quoted in Patterson). Even before the region was conquered by the Denikinists, Hiebert, Snissarenko, and one other had been executed. So when the Makhnovists recaptured the region, the Eichenfeld executions were 'a warning to Mennonites throughout the region that Makhno would not tolerate resistance' (Dyck et al, 2004, p-34). The Makhnovists' first target was the leader of the Selbstschutz, Heinrich Heinrich Heinrichs, but, according to Patterson, the man they killed was actually Heinrich Heinrich's father, Heinrichs senior.<sup>22</sup> They then executed all landowners and all their adult sons. Patterson notes that landless Mennonites were unharmed (p-16). The dead also included five travelling tent missionaries (verbally aggressive preachers unpopular with the Russo-Ukrainian peasantry), who were led to a storage shed and upon entering 'were fatally injured by a swift sword or sabre blow to the back of the neck' (Regeher, n.d.). The manner of these executions suggests the work of the Kontrrazvedka, Makhno's feared counter-intelligence service. Further south, there were similar executions in Molotschna: twenty adult males were killed at Blumenort; eleven adult males at Altonau; six adult males at Ohrloff; one adult male in Tiege (Klippenstein, p-16). The executions were triggered by the assassination of four Makhnovists who had been attempting to arrest Jacob Epp (ibid, pp-15/16). Klippenstein explains, with detail suggestive of accuracy, that those who killed the Makhnovists had in fact come from outside Blumenort: he describes a band of twenty-two Mennonites and White soldiers led by a German officer named Gloecker. However, when the Makhnovists arrived to investigate, a Russo-Ukrainian woman denounced Epp, who was then executed along with fourteen men believed to have been his co-conspirators.<sup>23</sup> The dead included at least one strict pacifist, a teacher called Schmidt (Toews, 1995, p-64). Again, these executions seem typical of the hasty retributive violence then being practised by the Makhnovist forces in general and by the Kontrrazvedka in particular. However, the intention was military: as J.B. Toews puts it, 'the ongoing Selbstschutz-White Army alliance still functioned amid the 1919 anarchy' (ibid, p-54).

### **Six weeks of anarchy**

While these executions were taking place, delegates from local villages and factories were meeting in Aleksandrovsk, at the Makhnovist-organised Regional Congress of Workers and Peasants. In Voline's fascinating account of this congress, he mentions that a delegate reported 'arbitrary and uncontrolled' actions by the Makhnovist Kontrrazvedka. Contrary to their image as rampaging bandits, the Makhnovist movement took civilian complaints seriously. For example, a few weeks later in Ekaterinoslav, a student from the Mining Institute was among those delegated to approach Makhno to complain about the flogging of an intellectual alleged to have been a Denikinist spy. The student recalled approaching Makhno's office with trepidation and being surprised at Makhno's friendly and attentive audience: after explaining that no Makhnovist should ever use the lash, for his army either shot people or released them unharmed, Makhno promised to look into the matter personally. In this discussion he also confessed the difficulties he experienced in preventing abuses by those who

professed allegiance to his command (see Skirda, p-295). Similarly, the report of Kontrrazvedka abuses led the Aleksandrovsk congress to pass resolution number three, establishing an investigative committee chaired by Voline (Azarov, pp-29/30).

There are two sides to the few weeks of anarchy that followed the Battle of Peregonovka. On one hand, the Makhnovists held to their libertarian principles with an almost naïve disregard for the impermanence of their revolution. A draft declaration of their Military Revolutionary Soviet, adopted on 20th October 1919, insisted on democracy from below and demanded the total freedom and independence of all peasant and worker soviets. On the issue of civil liberties, the document advocated 'freedom of speech, of the press, of conscience, of worship, of assembly, of union, of organization, etc.' (quoted in Skirda, pp-368-380). Ekaterinoslav, with a population of 190,000, was the largest city the Makhnovists ever controlled. When the White Army recaptured Ekaterinoslav, their investigative organs could identify only seventy victims killed by the 'extra-judicial organs' of the Makhnovists (Azarov, p-31). Even under the bombardments of Denikinist shells, to the Makhnovists in Ekaterinoslav it was a point of principle that all those who outwardly respected democratic self-organisation were permitted to publish their newspapers. Thus, during these weeks, more than half-a-dozen political organisations were represented in print, including the Bolsheviks, whose *Zvesda* was fiercely critical of the Makhnovists (Skirda, p-159; Azarov, p-32). The city would not see such freedom of press again until after Glasnost.

On the other hand, we have seen the extent of reprisals in some outlying villages, and how inadequately and chaotically the Kontrrazvedka identified the 'active' enemies of the revolution. Even Makhno, who was clearly no pacifist, admitted that the activities of the Kontrrazvedka caused him 'mental anguish and embarrassment' when he had to apologise for their excesses (quoted in Azarov, p-30).

### **Wild savagery**

One month after the Eichenfeld executions, a second wave of killings occurred over an eight-day period, to the West of the Dnieper. Less has been written about these slaughters, but they account for a quarter of all violent deaths suffered by Russian Mennonites in the years 1917-1923. Between November 29th and December 2nd, a series of attacks on villages in the Zagradovka region killed around 200 people. Then, a few days later, there was a prolonged shoot out at the tiny village of Ebenfeld, around 100km north of Zagradovka (see Bergen, p-41). This village and the neighbouring village of Steinbach were by December 7th annihilated. Around 100 people were killed in attacks of an exceptionally brutal and indiscriminate nature. In these incidents, the manner of attack and the selection of victims appears inconsistent with the usual pattern of Makhnovist violence: in Muensterberg, which was not a wealthy settlement, there seems to have been no attempt to target adult males, and the attacks were characterised by a cruelty that could in no way have contributed to a military or political goal (see Huebert, p-159; Klippenstein, p-17). It is, of course, a misconception to think that Nestor Makhno rode into Muensterberg and personally 'beheaded a whole family and set all the heads on display tables'; even if we think him morally capable of such an act, he was at the time 200km away in Ekaterinoslav, where, in one of the Civil War's stranger incidents, Chekist agents were plotting to assassinate him with strychnine-poisoned cognac (see Azarov, pp-33-40). One rare account of the Steinbach and Ebenfeld massacres was produced by Abram Enns (2000).<sup>24</sup> Enns narrates events with a problematic omniscience – he describes with certain detail events that he could not possibly have witnessed – but while his account must be treated with suspicion, it is rare in that it identifies the perpetrators by name: according to Enns, the massacres were the work of 92 men under the leadership of Alexander Grigorev, a Cossack from Orenburg. He also mentions an 'executioner': a man from Nikopol called Ivan Schwajko. These men are at present unknown to me.

But even if we could place a particular unit of Makhnovists or renegade Petliurists or other independent bandits at the scene of these crimes, the matter would not be resolved. In many incidents of violence against Mennonites, there is evidence of widespread participation by the victims'

Russo-Ukrainian neighbours. Deirdrich Neufeld, a Mennonite eyewitness, whose father and two brothers were killed in the Zagradovka attacks, 'suggested that the Muensterberg attack had been especially brutal because of the general resistance of the Mennonites to land distribution, and the particular arrangements which had finally been worked out for the area' (Klippenstein, p-29). By the end of 1919, years of oppression and the hardships and tragedies of civil war had engendered hatreds that were local and personal as much as ideological. It is necessary, as Arno Mayer argues, to distinguish between 'wild' and 'intentional' savagery. 'By nature without rules of engagement and retaliation, civil war is a cauldron of wanton and unpremeditated violence with little, if any, ideological leaven. There is, to boot, the calculated and coordinated violence which is ideologically driven and centrally directed' (p-312).

### **Myths of revolutionary chivalry and Mennonite martyrdom**

There is little prospect of imminent rapprochement between Mennonite and Makhnovist histories of the Russian Civil War. Makhnovist historians will need to abandon the fairy tale of unfailingly firm-but-fair revolutionary chivalry and acknowledge the undeserved violence endured by some Mennonites. Quite simply, it is beyond the realms of possibility that an army of this size in this situation could have avoided committing abuses and atrocities. In October 1918, Makhno commanded about 150 men; one year later, his forty thousand soldiers briefly conquered a region the size of England in which lived more than seven million people (approximate troop numbers from Palij, pp-110-112; Bradley calculates that Makhno 'could easily muster 60,000', p-122). Many of these soldiers joined the Makhnovists having previously fought in other armies, including those of Tsar Nicholas II, Vladimir Ilyich Lenin, General Mai-Maievsky, and Nikifor Grigoriev. They came from the poorest classes of Russian society and were not exempt from the effects of poverty. They carried diseases and the burden of alcoholism: some of them had survived the Great War drinking anti-freeze. They had received little education and many had been beaten by their employers since childhood. Their numbers included bullies and rapists and men desensitised to violence, but also dedicated anarchists, heroic women, men who dreamed of peace, respected village delegates and their beloved sons, peasant boys who woke screaming in the night, who wouldn't have needlessly hurt even their horses. They witnessed unimaginable horrors and carried with them their traumas and madnesses and nightmares. They were often hungry and under-clothed. They slept in their clothes on beds of straw or dirt. In the eyes of their wealthier German neighbours, they were 'dirty', 'rough', 'gruesome', 'coarse', 'dissolute', 'bestial,' 'vile', 'stinking,' 'disgusting', 'filthy scum.' When they fell sick with typhus and were left behind, their enemies dragged them from hospitals and hung them from trees. They had fathers who'd been shot and sisters who'd been raped. Most of them would be dead within a year. They wanted an equal share of the wealth they helped to produce. They promised war to the palaces and peace to the cottages. They raised the flag of freedom in the heart of darkness. The Makhnovists, more than their enemies, valued free speech and democratic criticism; those who wish to honour their memory should address their failures as well as their successes.

The Mennonites, too, were a mix of characters. They were landowners who earned more than whole villages. They were landless peasants, *anwohner*, who fought for the revolution. They were estate managers who whipped their workers but adored their sons. They were women who had the generosity of spirit to nurse those sick and dying Makhnovists who occupied their homes. They were bullies and thugs. They were pious Christians who resisted all military service. They were militia men who wept in church and begged forgiveness for the lives they'd taken. They were girls who lived in fear of rape. They were wealthy young adventurers who loved the smell and feel of guns. They were victims buried in mass graves. They were poor farmers in isolated villages caught in a war they didn't understand. They were proud patriarchs. They were soldiers who killed for the counter-revolution. They were pacifists. If there's to be any rapprochement between Makhnovist and Mennonite histories, the latter will need to abandon the myth of the Mennonite community's special martyrdom. The Mennonites' Civil War losses were in percentage terms far lower than those of the Russian population

as a whole, and Mennonites were no less likely to deploy violence than members of any other ethnic group.<sup>25</sup> It is a historical fact that many more Mennonites took up arms against the revolution than were killed by it, and there is no ethical defence for those who used violence to protect wealth produced by forced labour on stolen land.

### **The end of hostilities**

One further question deserves our attention: why did the mass executions of Mennonites stop in December 1919? The immediate answer is that they stopped because the Makhnovist Army was plagued with typhus and scattered by Bolshevik and Denikinist counter-offensives. But Makhno's troops regrouped and throughout 1920 and into 1921, the Makhnovists continued to field over 10,000 men. They roamed the Ukraine, eluding the Bolsheviks, like a professional footballer teasing a swarm of primary school children, and in the Crimea they destroyed General Wrangel's military campaign just as they had destroyed General Denikin's. Their military exploits became legend, and they remained an important enough force that in 1920 the British attempted, unsuccessfully, to negotiate an anti-Bolshevik alliance (Bradley, p-129). But despite regularly passing through Mennonite settlements, there was no repetition of 1919's large scale killings. Why?

In part, the Makhnovist Army may have been more disciplined and politically committed than in 1919 when their numbers were swelled by partisans recruited during the long retreat west. But the main reason is surely that in 1920 and 1921 the foremost enemy of the Russo-Ukrainian peasantry was the Bolshevik government, and the Mennonite community was not politically and militarily involved with the Bolsheviks as it had been with the Austro-Germans and Denikinists. According to Viktor Belash, in the spring of 1921, 'the insurgents were helped by the heretofore hostile German colonists. Embittered by the repressions of Soviet power, they allowed the Makhnovist underground to make use of their colonies and carried out reconnaissance themselves, informing the Shtarm [staff of the insurgent army] about the movements of Red forces' (Azarov, p-61). But by then it was too late.

### **The Bolshevik victory**

From this point on, the situation deteriorated for both the Makhnovists and the Mennonites. Unable to end the Makhnovist revolt, the Bolsheviks initiated a premeditated and systematic terror, executing all Makhnovist sympathisers and the families of suspected partisans. It is impossible to know the numbers of Ukrainians who at this time were executed or deported to Siberia: Arshinov described 200,000 'shot or seriously injured,' with an equivalent number deported, as a modest estimate (p-165). Arshinov's figures are probably too high, but the relentless executions of Makhnovist partisans, sympathisers, and their relatives reduced the movement to a scattering of displaced guerrillas. A few fled towards the Kuban. Others hoped to disappear amidst the population of Kiev. But most were killed. Makhno himself was shot through the thigh and appendix. Then a bullet entered his nape and came out through his cheek. On 28th August 1921, he crossed into Romania with eighty-three remaining partisans.

As the Bolsheviks consolidated their power, the suffering in the Ukraine continued. While some Mennonites escaped to Canada (some of them reinventing their ignominious histories), others remained to face the horrors of the Holodomor: killing by hunger. In the mass famine that killed five-million Ukrainians, the Mennonites' suffering was alleviated by relief supplied by their émigré brethren and other international Mennonite communities (some generously shared this food with their starving Russo-Ukrainian neighbours). But other ravages of the Soviet State were inescapable: ten-thousand Mennonites entered the Gulag system or were executed, another ten thousand were forced into exile, mainly to Kazakhstan.

Throughout these dark years, a few Makhnovists dreamed of reigniting the revolution, but the insurgents' success had always been based on regional support and familiarity with the local terrain. Makhno and other former Makhnovists struggled with life in exile. A few survived to fight in the

Spanish Civil War – at least two died with the Durruti Column near Zaragoza and others fought with the Tierra y Libertad Brigade – but Makhno never recovered from his injuries, and in 1934, at the age of forty-four, he died alone in Paris (Skirda, p-286). In his last days, he frequented the Vincennes racetrack: some say he went there to drink and gamble; others maintain it just lifted his heart to see the horses run.

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- 1. Before we begin, I owe you a note on terminology: when transliterating Ukrainian and Russian names into the Roman alphabet I have tried to use consistent spellings (usually the variation I happen to have encountered first) and have changed some spellings in quotations without notification. By 'Mennonites' I refer to the ethnic group rather than to those who practised that religion. When differentiating the native population from German colonists I have designated them 'Russo-Ukrainians', for our action is set where today is Ukraine, where before was Russia, and where in 1919 was neither of the above.
- 2. For much of the twentieth-century, the Makhnovists were slurred as an anti-Semitic organisation; in fact, Jews were prominent in the Makhnovtchina, as they tended to be in all Russo-Ukrainian anarchist groups, and opposition to anti-Semitism was one of the Makhnovists' strongest principles: despite having a shortage of armaments, Makhno made a point of arming Jewish self-defence groups (see Skirda, pp-338-341). Recently, Jewish historian Arno Mayer, Professor emeritus of Princeton University, has written that 'among the Greens – and Ukrainian nationalists – Makhno stands out for having stood against the torment and victimization of Jews' (p-525). The evidence on this question has been established since the 1920s, but it has often been smothered by Stalinist propaganda (Yaroslav's *History of Anarchism in Russia*, for example) and sensationalist fiction (Joseph Kessel's *Makhno et sa Juive*, for example). The Jewish scholar Elias Tcherikover, who headed the historical section of YIVO (Jewish Scientific Institute), exhaustively researched anti-Semitic atrocities in the Ukraine: 'It is undeniable that, of all these armies, including the Red Army, the Makhnovists behaved best in regard to the civilian population in general and the Jewish population in particular. I have numerous testimonies to this. The proportion of justified complaints against the Makhnovist Army by comparison with the others is negligible. (...) Do not let us speak of pogroms alleged to have been organised by Makhno himself. This is a slander or an error. Nothing of the sort occurred.' (quoted in Voline, p-699). This is not to say that no pogroms occurred in areas where the Makhnovists operated – Makhno's memoirs reveal his wariness of, and struggle to control, the anti-Semitism endemic throughout the Ukraine.
- 3. I have seen the names of twelve women (four killed at Eichenfeld, seven at Orloff, and one, Susana Bergen, killed at Neuendorf, Chortitza). However, the lists I've seen – mainly from the Mennonite Genealogy Data Index – cover less than a third of all violent deaths among Russian Mennonites in 1919. I have information on only 223 deaths: twelve women, one male aged fifteen at time of death, and 210 adult males. According to Mennonite history, one month after the Eichenfeld massacre, in Zagradovka and Borosenko, children were among the victims, but I'm unaware of figures or numbers (Huebert, p-159). An academic analysis of relations between Makhnovists and Mennonites is currently being pursued by Canadian scholar Sean Patterson, whose work presents a more thorough investigation.

I have taken the difficult decision to avoid discussing the rape of Mennonite women in this essay. In my opinion, to discuss this usefully one would need to be in possession of more information than I have. That it happened seems certain, but it is impossible to say to what extent and at what times and in which places. As Peter Letkemann notes, 'No contemporary reporter ever attempted a tabulation of rape victims' (p-2), and both Mennonite and Makhnovist histories are unreliable with regard to this subject. The Makhnovist memoirists have an obvious interest in defending the reputation of their army (though Voline's comments on coercive sex have provoked much discussion); meanwhile, Mennonite memoirists have often relied on this most affective crime to justify their resort to violence. A quote that appears in various forms in various apologias recalls 'someone' or 'many men' or 'some men' explaining that they wouldn't fight over property but would take up arms to defend their wives and daughters. For example, Bernhard Dick recalled 'Quite often we heard men saying: "To rob my possessions is one thing – but they won't touch my

wife or my daughter. Then I'll grab the axe I keep handy for that purpose" (p-135). These comments are supposed to have been made in 1918, before the guerrilla war against the Austro-Germans: it's unclear to what incidents they supposedly refer (Mennonite eyewitness B.B. Janz claimed that in Molotschna, at least, the Makhnovists had 'stopped short of murder and rape' up until four of their soldiers were killed by a German White Army unit in November 1919). Finally, a serious discussion of rape in the Civil War would necessitate confronting the sexual violence endemic across Russia at this time; it would need to consider how the new ideologies of sexual liberation were interpreted in traditionally patriarchal communities ravaged by poverty and violence; it would need to consider cultures of male entitlement evident in the Komsomol and other socio-political groups, and attendant ideas that saw female sexuality as a resource to be shared like any other, and female resistance to sex as bourgeois philistinism; it would need to consider the incorporation of female sexuality into a black economy, as another item to be bartered for goods and services; etc. As Skirda puts it 'women were obliged to give themselves imply to get past Chekist checkpoints or to secure passage on a train, or to obtain a morsel of food. In view of this situation, there was a terrible upsurge in venereal diseases and rampant demoralization among the female population' (p-313). A study of sexual politics, sexual violence, and women's participation as combatants and non-combatants in the Makhnovtschina would be welcome, but will not be attempted here. However, one incident that may be illustrative was recounted by Isaak Teper, who spent some months with the movement: when the Makhnovist commander Puzanov was found guilty of raping a nurse, Makhno wanted to shoot him on the spot but was defeated by a majority vote of the tribunal. Puzanov's only punishment was to be relieved of his command – he was killed at the front shortly afterwards (Skirda, p-306).

- [4.](#) This quote is from an anti-Semitic autobiography by a neo-Nazi, Russian Mennonite émigré called Ben Klassen. Surprisingly, the book has failed to find a major publisher, despite explaining how the Jews are to blame for everything, and promising such exciting chapters as 'Hawaiian Holiday.'
- [5.](#) In Helmet Huebert's version, the heads of children were on chairs and also on windowsills 'as if they were flower pots' (p-159).
- [6.](#) A crude outline of the warring factions gives some sense of the general confusion. Following the October Revolution in Russia, the newly formed Ukrainian People's Republic declared independence from Russia and the newly-formed West Ukrainian People's Republic declared independence from Austro-Hungary and Poland. By mid-1919 Poland had occupied the whole West Ukrainian People's Republic; but we shan't focus on the horror germinating in Western Ukraine as it was on the opposite side of the country from the Mennonites and Makhnovists. Similarly, we shall ignore the Komancza Republic, which wanted to join with the West Ukrainian People's Republic, and the Russophile Lempko Republic, which wanted to join with the autonomous province of Carpathian Ruthenia. (All these territories appear to have existed for the sole purpose of exciting future generations of stamp collectors.) The Bolsheviks, meanwhile, initially forced out of Kiev, established the north-eastern border town of Kharkov as the administrative capital of their Socialist Soviet Republic. But soon they were marching on the capital, pushing the Ukrainian Nationalist forces south. Unable to stall the Bolshevik advance, the Ukrainian Nationalists concluded a treaty with the Central Powers (i.e., Germany, Bulgaria, and the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian empires), who sent troops into the Ukraine and forced the Bolsheviks across the Russian border. The Austro-Germans et al installed a puppet government led by Hetman Pavlo Skoropadsky, whose regime restored feudal property rights and whipped, shot, or hung peasants suspected of rebellion. After the Allied victory in WWI, the power base of Skoropadsky's Austro-German-backed regime disintegrated, and it was replaced by a new version of the Ukrainian People's Republic, soon led by the Ukrainian Nationalist Symon Petliura (hence 'Petliurists'). The new regime faced an aggressive Romania and an invading Poland, while the French seized Odessa and General Mai-Maievsky's Don Cossack and Chechen White Army pushed north from the Crimea. At the same time, Petliura's disillusioned peasant soldiers were deserting to independent militias or just going home. Then, in December 1918, the Bolsheviks reinvaded from Kursk, while General Denikin's force consolidated its base in the Kuban, preparing to march on Kiev and Moscow.
- [7.](#) Often fiercely anti-Semitic, some of these independent war lords had armies big enough to threaten the capital. For example, 'Hetman Klimentyev, who had a considerable following

in the district between Uman and Kiev, led an attack on the Ukrainian capital in which local citizens joined his partisans in thundering “Death to the Jews! For the Orthodox Faith!” (Mayer, p-518). The most notorious of all these war lords was Nikifor Grigoriev, whom the Makhnovists eventually executed. His 23,000 soldiers controlled a territory to the East of Uman. Like Makhno he was renowned for his bravery and adept at partisan warfare, but he had no political direction, fighting first with the Petliurists, and then with the Bolsheviks, before he became vehemently anti-Semitic and prepared to side with Denikin (see Palij, pp-160-174). In May 1919 he launched a pogrom in Elisavetgrad, recounted here by Arno Mayer: '[S]ome 400 Jews were murdered, and hundreds were injured. Many of the dying victims were abused, defiled and mutilated. Here-after, and through July, there were scores of minor pogroms not only in nearby provinces where Grigoriev had considerable sway, but beyond as well. It was at this point that Grigoriev had his fatal encounter with Nestor Makhno' (p-518).

- [8.](#) In less careful Mennonite histories there is a tendency to attribute all perceived crimes to 'the bandits' and to equate all bandits with the Makhnovist 'anarchist hordes'. For example, Bernhard Dick recalls that after the Whites were forced from the area in the spring of 1919, Mennonite representatives visited the Bolsheviks to explain they had no wish to oppose the government and sought only to defend themselves against bandits. Meanwhile, 'The bandits, rough, gruesome fellows, now flooded our villages and furiously robbed, killed, and raped, for their leaders had given them three days' leave for that purpose' (Dick, p-141). I don't know if there ever was such an order, but the original source attributes it to General Pavel Dybenko (see Klippenstein, p-12). Due to the temporary alliances then in place, Dybenko at that time commanded forces from the armies of Lenin, Makhno, and Grigoriev. Dybenko was an old Bolshevik who later led the suppression of the Kronstadt Rebellion.
- [9.](#) As Richard Stites notes in his excellent monograph on Russian popular culture: 'The cultural fate of Makhno was ironic, since if any epic ever deserved romanticized and sympathetic treatment in fiction and cinema, it was that of his Ukrainian insurgent horse army that outwitted both Reds and Whites for years before being subdued. Their story is closer to the legends of Stenka Razin and other folk rebels than anything in the Bolshevik hagiography, including Chapaev. But since the Bolsheviks feared having the Makhnovists treated as underdogs, they enshrined them for decades as sadistic and degenerate bandits' (1992, pp-57/59).
- [10.](#) When confronting the Makhnovist movement, writers too often accept or dismiss evidence according to the requirements of their argument. Felix Schnell, for example, writes like a man who has a theory and is determined to fit it to his subject. He presents the spurious argument that 'Even if some stories are simply fairy tales they nevertheless give an image of the Batko that suggest the behaviour and actions of the real Nestor Makhno' (p-214). This 'no smoke without fire' argument is inadequate because there are, of course, opposing 'fairy tales,' and, like too many others, Schnell simply ignores the stories that don't concur with his argument (e.g., he cites one unpublished manuscript to support his claim that 'inhabitants of Ekaterinoslav lived through a six week nightmare' (p-210) and doesn't mention any of the extensive contrary evidence).
- [11.](#) I write 'executed' though the source says 'brutally murdered.' All Mennonites who were killed during the Civil War, even those who are known to have killed multiple people (e.g., Abram Loewen) are described by Mennonite historians as having been 'brutally murdered'; in contrast, 'bandits,' of course, are always 'executed.' Similarly, 'bandits' 'loot', 'rob', and 'plunder'; whereas 'groups from several Mennonite villages attacked Chernigovka to *requisition* a good deal of liquor and other goods' (Klippenstein, p-24, my emphasis). To avoid repeating or reversing this bias, I shall – in absence of unequivocal information – attempt to use consistent language throughout.
- [12.](#) Makhno had many talents but a flair for narrative was not one of them. Oddly, however, the procedural, often pedantic (sometimes irate) tone of his memoirs makes them more illuminating than many other accounts. Who else would feel compelled to note that, later, in the first days of the Insurgent Army, an advance was held up because nobody knew in which box were packed the panoramic sights for the cannon? (2007, p-312)
- [13.](#) It's often stated that Makhno had a personal grudge against German colonists because as a child he was treated cruelly by employers of that nationality. In fact, there's nothing in his writings or the memoirs of his acquaintances to suggest he had any particular interest in Germans as an ethnic group. If anyone had a grudge, perhaps it was Fedor Schuss:

according to a former Makhnovist, Aleksei Chubenko, during the early fighting at the end of 1918, Makhno arrested Schuss and threatened to shoot him for cruel treatment of German settlers (Shubin, n.d.).

- [14.](#) Peters' book *Nestor Makhno: The Life of an Anarchist* deserves mention for it promises much and delivers little. The book is one-sided (according to one story, related to me by Sean Patterson, when Peters was presenting his book at the University of Manitoba in the 1970s, he was confronted by an angry Orthodox priest who had previously fought in the Makhnovist army), but the list of sources to which he had access is exciting. According to his preface, Peters received responses from dozens of correspondents, who represented all sides of the debate, but disappointingly little of this material is referred to in the book. Instead, Peters mainly bases his story on the previously published accounts of Makhno's political friends (Arshinov and Voline) and enemies (the Bolshevik agent Gerassimenko, the misinformed novelist Joseph Kessel, and, especially, the pro-Petliura Ukrainian Nationalist Meleshko). The heart of the book is a seven-page account by Mr. H.B. Wiens, a former inhabitant of the wealthy Mennonite settlement of Schönfeld (pp-49-56). Wiens describes his experiences in the winter of 1918/19, while the settlement was occupied by the Makhnovist Simeon Pravda. Pravda was a former beggar who had lost both his legs in an industrial accident. Possibly a morphine addict, he sounds from Wiens account to have been a violent, damaged, and unstable individual. Wiens recalls being invited to join Pravda in drinking bouts but then on another occasion being severely beaten on Pravda's orders. Peters says that Wiens' account goes on to describe a visit by Makhno, with whom Wiens was invited to have tea (p-56), but Peters doesn't share this episode with the reader (a rather strange decision given his book is, ostensibly, a biography of Makhno not Pravda). With this exception, however, the eyewitness evidence mentioned in the preface is mostly absent from the text or referred to inadequately. For example, Peters mentions in the preface that, for some unstated reason, he was 'unable to use' a manuscript sent to him by a Reverend N. Pliczowski, and mentions only that 'it was a defense of Fedor Schuss (and Makhno)' (p-10). Another potentially interesting source, pseudonymised as Mr. Ivan Topolye at the correspondent's request, was an army deserter who for a time became a Makhnovist partisan; Topolye does make the main text of the book, but this interesting material is rendered historically useless by the manner in which it's presented: only in a footnote do we learn that this first person account is in fact a 'story (...) based on fifteen pages of notes by the author' (p-45). Given the arbitrariness of Peters' methodology, it's perhaps appropriate that the book ends with a lengthy description of a prose fiction by a writer called Oless Gonchar. However, I am defeated as to why Peters thought this literary synopsis more deserving of space than the testimonies of those who had taken the time to contact him. Fortunately, at least some of Peters' research and correspondence has been deposited at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute in Massachusetts; those able to visit the Institute may, perhaps, find more enlightenment in the memories (emotional, biased, and distorted by time though they might be) of those who witnessed the Makhnovists' violence and revolution, than they will find in a fictional story about Makhno wanting to drink from 'the elixir of life.'
- [15.](#) The force sent to kill Makhno and his comrades numbered 500 men (Palij, p-102), or 680 men (Skirda, p-62), or a thousand men (Arshinov, p-67) – basically, a lot of men however one counted them. This punishment battalion – which was defeated by sixty peasants – was comprised of Austrian troops, state police, Russo-Ukrainian landlords, and German colonists. As revenge for their defeat, these concerned agents of law and order allegedly burned 500 houses in Dibrivka (see Palij, pp-102/3).
- [16.](#) The Schönfeld militia was led by Gerhard Toews, who had been a lieutenant in the Tsarist army. He survived this battle and later fought for the Whites (Wiens, p-47)
- [17.](#) In Chortitza, at least, the Selbstschutz conscripted all males aged twenty to thirty-five (Krahn & Reimer, 1989). In October 1919, the Makhnovists introduced the curious policy of 'voluntary mobilization,' which, however one interprets it, diluted the army's previous commitment to non-compulsion.
- [18.](#) In theory, the press was free so long as it wasn't used to agitate for an authority that would oppress the workers and peasants. However, after a Bolshevik newspaper slandered the Makhnovists in successive issues, insurgents complained to the editor, and then, since their protests were unheeded, they smashed the plates of the new issue (Skirda, p-92).

- [19](#). Britain backed Denikin's boys with 250,000 rifles, twelve tanks, 1,685,522 shells, 160 million rounds of ammunition, and about 100 aeroplanes (Palij, p-184).
- [20](#). Militarily, the Petliurists weren't great: when Denikin captured Kiev, the only casualties were an over-turned ice cream cart and a plaster statue that lost one ear (see Lockett, p-291). Their record of atrocities, however, was appalling. Today, when Ukrainian nationalism has re-emerged as a dominant ideology, there is discomfort or denial regarding the catalogue of pogroms perpetrated by Ukrainian Nationalists during Petliura's rule (and, of course, during the Second World War). A number of historians (Magocsi, for example) have forcefully claimed that Petliura and his government attempted to stop the pogroms and were not themselves anti-Semitic, but this defence arrived too late for Petliura: in 1926, while in exile in Paris, Petliura was assassinated by Samuel Schwarzbard, a Jewish Ukrainian anarchist comrade of Nestor Makhno. At a sensational trial, Schwarzbard pleaded just cause, and was eventually acquitted. Bulgarian anarchist Kiro Radeff claimed that Makhno had, like Magocsi, defended Petliura against the charge of anti-Semitism and had attempted to dissuade Schwarzbard on the eve of the attack (see Skirda, p-275).
- [21](#). According to Le Temps correspondent Pierre Berland: 'There is no doubt that Denikin's defeat is explained more by the uprisings of the peasants who brandished Makhno's black flag, than by the success of Trotsky's regular army. The partisan bands of "Batko" tipped the scales in favor of the Reds and if Moscow wants to forget it today, impartial history will not' (Quoted in Palij, p-208).
- [22](#). According to Patterson, Heinrichs junior fought for Denikin and later emigrated to New York.
- [23](#). The details of the incident vary slightly with each telling. Toews states that Abram Berg's account is 'unique insofar as it establishes Makhno's personal presence in Blumenort' (p-53), but Berg was seven in 1919, and he wrote his account more than half-a-century later, and Makhno was more likely 200km north in Ekaterinoslav (for this and other accounts, see Toews, 1995).
- [24](#). Once again, I am grateful to Sean Patterson for bringing this source to my attention.
- [25](#). The human cost of the Civil War was perhaps seven to ten million lives (Evan Mawdsley discusses various estimates, p-287), which is to say approximately six to eight percent of the population. Letkemann estimates that around three percent of Russian Mennonites died as a result of the Civil War. If we had figures for all deaths in the Makhnovist region, then the relative safety of Mennonites would likely be even more pronounced, as the catastrophic violence in Central and Eastern Ukraine meant this area suffered a far greater proportion of deaths. For example, the population of Makhno's home town halved between 1917 and 1926 (Skirda, p-358).