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Andrew Flood
Can you have an anarchist army?
Anarchism, militarism and civil war
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agreement whereby in return for not accepting Red Army deserters their Soviets would be allowed to function independently of the Bolshevik state. It appears that both Lenin and Trotsky toyed with this idea.

Betrayal

But on all three occasions the alliance ended when the Whites were defeated and the Bolsheviks launched surprise attacks on the Makhnoivsts. Those Makhnovists who were seized were either executed or imprisoned, the number imprisoned went into tens of thousands. The same fate awaited the civilian delegates of the independent soviets, and at least one anarchist deported from the USA in 1919 (Bogush) was executed by the Bolsheviks when he tried to reach the Makhnovists.

The Makhnovists were finally suppressed after the Civil War when the Bolsheviks concentrated huge numbers of troops against them and stepped up brutal actions against peasants who sheltered them. This counter insurgency strategy, which the US later used in Vietnam, succeeded because of the relatively small size and isolation of the Eastern Ukraine.

However their existence did demonstrate that an anarchist organised militia could take on and defeat larger conventional forces. It was perhaps this threat of a good example that was the major reason why the Bolsheviks went to such lengths to crush them.

Further reading:

- Nestor Makhno in the Russian Civil War by Mike Malet
- History of the Makhnovist Movement by Peter Arshinov

to the Austrian army. The Austrians put down the revolution, forcing the insurgents to retreat and conduct a guerrilla war. This they did with great success and it is from this period that the army became known as the Makhnovista.

In the Makhnovista, officers were popularly selected from the ranks of the revolutionaries. It was a volunteer army - its shortage was always of weapons rather than combatants. It relied on the peasants' solidarity for support, both in terms of directly providing food and in directing them to local kulaks (wealthy farmers) who could stand the loss of "two or three sheep to make a soup for the insurgents".

It had none of the bourgeois discipline of the Red Army. The very fact that it was based on revolutionary spirit instead of fear meant it was a very effective and innovative fighting force. One of the Red Army generals who faced it later wrote "the particular composition of the army needed a completely trusted, cunning, experienced and courageous commander, and such were the Makhnovists".

Finally and most importantly the Makhnovista was not run by a central government but was answerable to the local peasants' and workers' soviets. As such it could never be a tool for repression in the way the Red Army was.

The Makhnovist army existed until 1921. In this time, the two largest 'White' (pro-Czarist) interventions of the Civil War came through the Eastern Ukraine, those of Generals Wrangel and Denkin. In both of these cases, the Makhnovists played a key part in defeating their advances.

Their militia organisation, and innovations like machines guns mounted on horse drawn carts, enabled them to avoid the major concentrations of white troops and smash through the rear of the the enemy. On one occasion they advanced over 200 miles in three days. Some historians believe that without their action Petrograd would have fallen.

In these struggles they allied with the Red Army, sometimes technically operating as part of it. They attempted to reach an

AS ANARCHISTS believe the bosses will resist a revolution, it follows that we accept the need for armed force to defend the revolution. But anarchists also oppose militarism, that includes standing armies controlled by the state with officers who have special privileges like extra rations, better quarters, saluting, etc. So what alternative do anarchists propose?

Anarchists advocate militias where officers are elected and recallable, and discipline is agreed by all in the unit. This is not simply a theory but has been put into practice by anarchists in the course of several revolutions. The Russian revolution saw an anarchist influenced force, the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army - also known as the Makhnovista &endash; who liberated the Eastern Ukraine. They provide one such example.

In his article (opposite) 'The Two Octobers', the Russian anarchist Piotr Arshinov describes how in April of 1917 "big rural landowners began everywhere to evacuate the countryside, fleeing from the insurgent peasantry and seeking protection for their possessions". Through direct action "the agrarian question was virtually solved by the poor peasants as early as June - September 1917". As the landlords fled the peasants took over the land and "all of revolutionary Russia was covered with a vast network of workers' and peasant soviets, which began to function as organs of self-management".

The decrees passed by the Bolshevik government in the months after October 'legalised' these takeovers. This was part of the process by which the Bolsheviks got rid of the power of independent organs of workers' self-management like the Soviets (elected workers' councils) and the Factory Committees. 'Legalising' what the workers had already achieved was one way of promoting the right of the central state to have the final say over the working class.

The Bolshevik attitude towards the working class is perhaps best demonstrated by Trotsky's speech to the 1920 9th Party Congress when he declared "The working class cannot be left wandering all

over Russia. They must be thrown here and there, appointed, commanded, just like soldiers". "Compulsion of labour will reach the highest degree of intensity during the transition from capitalism to socialism". "Deserters from labour ought to be formed into punitive battalions or put into concentration camps".

These quotes demonstrate the thinking when the Bolsheviks dissolved Soviets, broke up factory committees or jailed and even executed strikers. But if this is how they saw the worker in the factory, how about the 'worker in uniform' in the Red Army?

In 1917 the Czarist Army had fallen apart. Far from the army opposing the revolution, military units were often at the heart of its defence. Not of course the officers, they were for the most part opposed to the revolution. But in 1917 traditional military discipline had disintegrated as soldiers deserted the front, refused to obey orders and elected soldiers' committees. If the soldiers had obeyed their officers in October or February then the revolution would probably have been defeated. So the ending of top down (or 'bourgeois') military discipline was essential to the revolution.

This break down of the old discipline may have been essential to the revolution but once the Bolsheviks were in power it worked against them. They didn't want an army where units might refuse to carry out an order like the crushing of a peasant rebellion or the breaking up of a strike. So, in July 1918 Trotsky (the Bolshevik commander of the Red Army) re-introduced all the old methods of the bourgeois army. He even re-appointed old Czarist officers.

Alongside this the death penalty for disobedience under fire was reintroduced; as were saluting, special forms of address, separate living quarters and privileges for officers. Officers were appointed rather than elected. Trotsky argued that "the elective basis is politically pointless and technically inexpedient and has already been set aside by decree".

These changes were deeply unpopular to the rank and file of the army. This, along with the Bolshevik suppression of the revolution,

meant the Red Army had one of the highest rates of desertion of any army in history.

Large scale executions and 'Punishment Battalions' were used to compel soldiers to obey orders. In addition the Red Army's relationship with the local peasants and workers was that of an army of occupation. It seized the supplies it needed and was often used to put down local strikes and insurrections.

The revolution in the Ukraine

As elsewhere in rural Russia, the Bolshevik party had no significant presence in the Eastern Ukraine before the October revolution. Nevertheless in this period the peasants and workers of the towns had seized the land, taken over the workplaces and set up their own military units.

The most prominent figure in the regional co-ordination of all this was the anarchist Nestor Makhno, who had been released from prison after the February revolution. Working with anarchists in the town of Hulyai Pole, he had built links with the workers, peasants and even the occupying Serbian soldiers. They confiscated the landlords' deeds and set up militia units.

Immediately after October these militias left Hulyai Pole to disarm the Cossacks in nearby towns, seized the funds of the banks and distributed them to the peasants. They also arranged a food for textiles transfer with a Moscow factory. At this time the first agricultural communes were set up in the vicinity of Hulyai Pole.

A bad peace

Then, for the first time, outside intervention smashed the gains that had been made. The Bolsheviks signed the treaty of Breast Livtosk, which amongst other things handed over the Eastern Ukraine