THE MAKHNOVIST MOVEMENT AND THE NATIONAL QUESTION IN THE UKRAINE, 1917–1921

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Social and ethnic foundations

The Makhnovist movement of 1917–1921 represents the clearest and most powerful manifestation of anarchism in Ukraine. However, it is essential to bear in mind that this movement reflected the particular features of only one part of the very heterogeneous Ukraine, which to this day is still distinctly divided into the West (Galicia), the Central part of the country (the northern part of the Right Bank of the Dnepr), the South (including the Crimea), the Left Bank, and the Donbass.

The territory in which the Makhnovists held sway primarily encompassed Priazove (the region close to the Sea of Azov), the southern part of the Left Bank, and the eastern Donbass. The Makhnovists also operated on the Right Bank, mainly in Ekaterinoslav, as well as in the Poltava region and the Chernigov region. The Makhnovist movement—the Makhnovische or “Makhno movement”—was named after the anarchist Nestor Ivanovich Makhno “1888–1934.” It had its roots in a quarter of the small town of Gulyai-Pole in the Aleksandrov District.

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The history of this area is associated with Cossack outlaws, agricultural struggle and nomadic culture. However, by the beginning of the 20th century only the memory of the Zaporozhe Cossacks remained. New people with a new way of life had settled in the local steppe.

Marxist historiography maintained that this was a kulak area (that is, dominated by prosperous landed peasants who employed labour), and that kulak farms accounted for 22 percent of all agriculture in the region. But this figure can be arrived at only by counting as kulaks peasants who had at their disposal more than 10.9 hectares of land, a view that even in the Marxist historiography is regarded as “extreme”. Large estates and peasant farming still constituted the basis of agriculture in the area. Kulakism was concentrated primarily in the German farms—an alien phenomenon within the local peasant milieu. The attempt during the Stolypin reforms to destroy the peasant commune, or obshchina, met with great resistance in the Ekaterinoslav province.

The territory in which the Makhno movement was to develop was one of the most market-oriented in the whole of the Russian empire. By the early 20th century, the Ukraine was the empire’s richest farming region in the empire: it accounted for 40 percent of cultivated land, and, by 1914, produced around 20 percent of the world’s wheat and nearly 90 percent of the empire’s wheat exports. The proximity of the ports and the well-developed rail network stimulated the development of the grain market.

In 1913, for example, the Ekaterinoaslav province produced approximately 1,789 metric tons of wheat. Of these, 860 metric tons were exported outside the province. This is to leave out of account the intra-provincial market, which was also quite extensive, as the province had numerous industrial centres that required bread. The peasants remained the most active force within the Ekaterinoslav bread

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3 Or 10 desyatins in terms of the pre-1924 imperial measurements. See M. Kubanin, Makhnovshchina, Leningrad: n.p., 1927, 19.
5 See, for example, S. Kobytov, V.A. Kozlov and B.G. Litvak, Russkoе krest’yanstvo. Etapy dukhovnogo osvobozhdeniya, Moscow, 1988, 74.
7 109,806 pudi in terms of the pre-1924 imperial measurements.