

Nestor Makhno and Rural Anarchism
in Ukraine, 1917–21

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Contents

<i>List of Maps</i>	viii
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	ix
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	x
1. The Deep Roots of Rural Discontent: Guliaipole, 1905–17	1
2. The Turning Point: Organising Resistance to the German Invasion, 1918	20
3. Brigade Commander and Partisan: Makhno's Campaigns against Denikin, January–May 1919	39
4. Betrayal in the Heat of Battle? The Red–Black Alliance Falls Apart, May–September 1919	54
5. The Long March West and the Battle at Peregonovka	73
6. Red versus White, Red versus Green: The Bolsheviks Assert Control	91
7. The Last Act: Alliance at Starobel'sk, Wrangel's Defeat, and Betrayal at Perekop	108
8. The Bitter Politics of the Long Exile: Romania, Poland, Germany, and France, 1921–34	128
9. Why Anarchism? Why Ukraine? Contextualising <i>Makhnovshchina</i>	147
10. Epilogue: The Reframing of Makhno for the Twenty-First Century	164
<i>Notes</i>	167
<i>Index</i>	231

1

The Deep Roots of Rural Discontent: Guliaipole, 1905–17

Nestor Ivanovich Makhno was born far from the centres of power, in the provincial Ukrainian town of Guliaipole, in Aleksandrovsk district, Ekaterinoslav province, probably in 1888, the fifth child in a family of former serfs.¹ We know little for certain about his childhood and adolescence, and what we do know comes not from contemporary documentation but from later testimonies,² including Makhno's own. Some may have fed into each other, and some are the objects of condemnation,³ while Makhno's own account was written in exile long after the events. The outline of the story of his youth is known but does not help us to understand how this half-educated provincial rebel, with no experience of soldiering, was able to become both an anarchist revolutionary and a successful commander within as well as apart from the Red Army.

After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861 his father, Ivan Mikhnenko, continued to work for his former master. When his wife was pregnant with Nestor, their fifth child,⁴ Ivan got a job with the Jewish merchant Kerner, who owned a factory, a shop and nearly 500 hectares of land.⁵ Before Nestor was even a year old, Mikhnenko died.⁶ The family lived in a shack near the market square, on the edge of town. They were too poor, in a semi-rural community, to afford to keep pigs or chickens, and Makhno's earliest memories were of deprivation and struggle.⁷

Guliaipole, a provincial town like many others, was located on the river Gaichur, near the railway line to Ekaterinoslav.⁸ After the Stolypin agrarian reforms of 1906,⁹ the number of estates in the area grew to around 50, many owned by German colonists.¹⁰ Facilities included banks, a post and telegraph office, churches, a police station, a hospital, the *volost*' administration building and several schools. Small-scale industrialisation had created a semi-proletariat, peasant workers at most a generation away from the land. Millworkers came seasonally from Poltava or Chernigov in the north, to live in barracks outside the town. Others laboured in factories, foundries or flourmills, or worked as domestic servants.¹¹ German settlers, Jews and Russians lived in the area, but the population remained overwhelmingly Ukrainian.¹²

Makhno's childhood and adolescence seem to have been unexceptional in this peri-urban provincial environment. When he was eight years old, he

attended elementary school in Guliapole for a couple of years and held a series of jobs as a farm boy, and then as an apprentice in a dye factory. By the time he was 14, according to one testimony, he had become a skilled dyer,¹³ and he later worked in the Guliapole iron foundry.¹⁴ His contact with foundry workers may have had some influence on the formation of his political outlook and union activism, for metal-workers were known for their political militancy.¹⁵ Years later Makhno admitted that growing up poor fuelled his resentment against the better-off:

... I began to feel a kind of anger, of malice, even of hatred, for the landlords and above all for their progeny; against the young idlers who passed me by, all plump, hale and hearty, well-dressed, smelling of perfume, whereas I was dirty, in rags, barefoot and stinking of the dung heap ...¹⁶

Aleksandr Shubin has pointed out that these circumstances were ‘almost ideal’ for fostering resentment: ‘poverty and a desire to escape it, to assert himself so as to take revenge on those who were responsible ...’¹⁷: the later rapid growth of the insurgency that Makhno led is at least partially explicable in such terms. Makhno’s attachment to his mother, Evdokiia Matveevna, was strong, and her struggles fed into his anger towards the privileged. For years he harboured a grudge against a policeman who had once slapped her, and after his release from prison in 1917 he came close to shooting the man.¹⁸ The question remains, however, why it was that Makhno, out of the millions of youths in similar circumstances, went on to seize the historical moment between 1917 and 1921 and lead a massive uprising of the rural poor?

It seems probable that differences in the narratives around Makhno’s youth are determined to some extent by political positioning. He was supposedly hot-tempered,¹⁹ and there is anecdotal evidence that as a youth he was considered indolent and surly, qualities that led, in at least one case, to his losing a job.²⁰ Indolence and surliness, of course, are plausible manifestations of resentment towards the wealthy. What is certain is that by his late teens, after the revolution of 1905 and irrespective of the psychological or personal circumstances that led him to it, Makhno became politically active. He seems initially to have been sympathetic to Menshevik ideas, and helped to distribute their literature. Despite this initial sympathy for the Mensheviks, he soon joined an anarchist-communist group – his older brothers were already members²¹ – and quickly became a participant in insurrectionist actions of ‘propaganda of the deed’, such as an attack on a post office, and robberies or ‘appropriations.’²² The anarchist-communists wanted a society organised around loose confederations of producers’ associations, in which agricultural and industrial labour would co-exist. Distinctions between inferior and superior work, between workers by hand and workers by brain, would vanish. This disappearance of the division

of labour would result in a communal society in which all would work from free will.²³

The conditions in which anarchist-communist ideas took root were by no means static, even in the Ukrainian provinces. Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in the Russian Empire in the late 1800s and early 1900s were driving social change in both the cities and in the countryside. It has elsewhere been argued that government policy and institutional obstacles to easy movement into large cities meant that much industrialisation remained strongly linked to the countryside.²⁴ Hence, the provincial city of Ekaterinoslav experienced massive population growth in this period: there were 47,000 people living there in 1885, around the time of Makhno's birth, but by 1897 this had more than doubled to 113,000, and in 1910, before the outbreak of war, had again doubled to 212,000 inhabitants.²⁵ Similar social and economic transformations took place in the rural areas generally, affecting the outlook of the peasantry in important and complex ways.

In the early twentieth century, the majority of Russian peasants were still organised around the *dvor* (household), a loose family unit that was the nucleus of peasant society in the sense that the family's lives were integrated with the farming enterprise that provided food and even a surplus.²⁶ In Teodor Shanin's words:

The family provides the essential work team of the farm, while the farm's activities are geared mainly to production of the basic needs of the family and the dues enforced by the holders of political and economic power.²⁷

The other key social structure was the *obshchina* or peasant commune, a mechanism for distributing strips of land to families according to capacity and need. This was done through a 'patriarchal village assembly' called a *skhod*, made up of male heads of household and some village elders, who would decide when 'repartition' had become necessary, as well as when it was time for planting and harvesting. Most peasant farmers neither hired labour (which was provided by family members) nor worked for hire (as their needs were met by family production). Despite its democratic deficiencies, the *skhod* controlled many aspects of social and economic activity, as well as providing some security for the *obshchina's* members.²⁸ However, architects of the emancipation of 1861 were concerned not to prejudice the interests of landowners, so liberated serfs were required to purchase allotments from their former oppressors, sometimes losing as much as a quarter of their land in the process.²⁹ Despite the romanticism about the character of the commune in the writings of some Slavophiles, they were far from being static and could also become centres of conflict: they were far from being 'rustic haven[s] of equality, stability and brotherly love'.³⁰ In times of unrest and revolution, violent clashes over land and other issues were

frequent, particularly between peasants who had remained in the communes (*obshchinniki*), and peasants who had left in order to engage in private commercial farming (*otrubshchiki*), who were seen as exploiters.³¹

Access to schooling, access to transport networks, a growth in male labour migration,³² and military service for young men all began to impact on the so-called traditions of rural life, including the *obshchina* itself. Rural people could buy clothes and books, as well as manufactured goods.³³ They engaged directly with the state through the judicial system, pursuing justice and resolving conflicts through the courts in diverse ways.³⁴ Through the networks established by these processes, radical political ideas spread quickly among the younger members of the community, although the older generation – in positions of relative power as members of the local administration, the police force, or the bureaucracy – supported ‘tradition’, including the subjugation of women.³⁵

Revolutionary unrest broke out in January 1905 all over the Russian Empire, and continued intermittently until 1907. In Ukraine it was most marked by peasant revolts on the right bank, although there were also strikes and violence in Khar’kov and Ekaterinoslav, and by the end of 1905 soviets had appeared in many Ukrainian cities. In the context of these revolutionary events, the varied processes of modernisation, and the state’s resistance to them during the so-called ‘Stolypin reaction’ from 1906 to 1910, the Guliaipole anarchist-communists saw their immediate task as a violent struggle against the police, the most obvious local manifestation of state violence. This was a continuation of tactics adopted during 1905. Southern anarchist groups such as the *Chernoznamentsy* (followers of the Black Flag) had energetically bombed, robbed, blackmailed and sabotaged, but with little impact. Many such activists were youths of Makhno’s generation: few were members of the intelligentsia. All the groups were numerically tiny, probably totalling less than 6,000 people for the whole Russian empire.³⁶ After the defeat of the 1905 revolution, the sectarianism and pressure from the state significantly weakened the anarchist movement. Many militants were dead, in jail, or exiled, and survivors were isolated.

The Guliaipole organisation called itself the ‘Peasants’ Group of Anarchist-Communists’, and through a propagandist named Vol’demar Antoni maintained links with an anarchist-communist group in Ekaterinoslav.³⁷ The dozen or so core members were mostly peasants, with a larger fringe of hangers-on. They held political classes in each other’s homes or in the open air. They used code-names and had a probation period for new members. They were tactically and organisationally unsophisticated, but appear to have been genuinely driven by political conviction in the notion of freedom for the people.³⁸ Relations between the Guliaipole and Ekaterinoslav groups were close, influenced by an army deserter called Aleksandr Semeniuta. Most of their expropriations and assassinations were carried out between September 1906 and July 1908.³⁹

According to one account the other members did not trust Makhno because he was habitually drunk, aggressive and talkative, often picking fights.⁴⁰ Some testimonies claim that he was careless: a saucepan that he used to mix explosives once blew up on his mother's stove.⁴¹ On the other hand, Aleksei Chubenko says Makhno attended meetings daily, and carried out missions efficiently and selflessly.⁴²

The first robbery took place on the evening of 5/18 September 1906,⁴³ when three armed men appeared at the home of a local merchant called Pleshchiner and demanded money. He handed over cash and jewellery. On 10/23 October, another group carried out a similar robbery, demanding 'money for the starving'.⁴⁴ They spent the money on a duplicating machine, producing leaflets and tracts attacking the Stolypin reforms, and calling for mass struggle against the *kulaki*. The third expropriation targeted the manufacturer Mark Kerner, the 'Croesus of Guliaipole' and the former employer of Makhno's father. He was robbed by assailants who got away with cash and a silver ingot. Kerner later testified that there were seven members of the gang and that they seemed nervous, for he noticed that their hands were shaking. Two days later, on 15/28 November 1906, the expropriators sent Kerner a letter expressing regret that they had taken so little money from him. The 'detachment of armed workers', as they styled themselves, told Kerner that they knew he had informed the police and warned that if investigations continued his home would be bombed.⁴⁵ Makhno was certainly under police surveillance by this time – in 1917, when Makhno gained access to the police archives of Guliaipole, he discovered that at least one member of his anarchist group had been a police spy.⁴⁶ In late 1906 he was arrested for the first time, on suspicion of the murder of a rural police constable, but was released immediately.⁴⁷

After the attack on Kerner the anarchist gang lay low for the rest of winter and through spring. In August 1907 they attempted a fourth expropriation, this time in the Gaichur settlement, a suburb of Guliaipole near the railway station. Four armed men with their faces covered burst into the house of a merchant named Gurevich late at night. They demanded money in the name of the anarchist-communists – the first time the group had identified itself during a robbery. Unfortunately for the expropriators, Gurevich's nephew refused to be intimidated and raised a hue-and-cry. The four seized a post-office wagon near the railway station and galloped away, shooting as they went.⁴⁸ Undeterred, on 19 October/1 November 1907 they tried again, this time ambushing a post-office cart which they raked with gunfire, killing a postman, a village constable, and a horse.

The local police failed to identify the robbers, but immediately after the last ambush the anarchists' luck turned for the worse. A prisoner in Ekaterinoslav jail told the police that he knew the names of the ambushers – a fellow-prisoner had confided that he had taken part in the attack. The assault had been the

brainchild of Vol'demar Antoni, who had provided the assailants with weapons. The witness Zuichenko later denied that he had participated, but did admit that he was an anarchist and an agrarian terrorist, and that he had in the past set fire to the properties of *pomeshchiki* (landlords).⁴⁹ Makhno and Antoni, claimed Zuichenko, knew and trusted him and had confided in him.⁵⁰ More evidence was soon forthcoming with witnesses confirming that Makhno, Anton Bondarenko and Prokopii Semeniuta had all taken part in the ambush and that Semeniuta had been involved in the earlier robberies.⁵¹ In late 1907, the police arrested Makhno again on suspicion of having committed political murders and expropriations. Again, they could prove nothing, and soon released Makhno, this time – ironically enough – on the surety of a local factory-owner.⁵²

Recklessly, the anarchists continued their activities. On 10/23 April 1908 Ivan Levadnyi, Naum Al'tgauzen,⁵³ and two or three others set off from Guliapole towards Bogodarovsk settlement in Aleksandrovsk district, 40 kilometres away. Later in the day a merchant called Levin was robbed of cash and gold by five armed men with soot-smearred faces. On 13/26 May another merchant was the victim of an attempted robbery, during which his daughter was shot and wounded. The expropriators escaped but with no loot. On 9/22 July the group attacked the government wine-shop in Novoselovke, near Guliapole, and shot and killed a shop-assistant.

By 28 July/10 August the police were ready to move. They raided a meeting at Levadnyi's house, and shots were exchanged. Prokopii Semeniuta and a police constable were killed.⁵⁴ The police subsequently arrested six anarchists, who were all sentenced to administrative exile.⁵⁵ Antoni served a one-month prison term.⁵⁶ The detective in charge was a local named Karachentsev. To expose the group and its activities, he resorted to the standard weapon in the armoury of the Tsar's security forces, the *agent provocateur*, infiltrating the group with his men, who played an active part in the assaults and robberies. The anarchists exposed and executed at least one of these agents. From information provided by the others, Karachentsev compiled a list of members, identifying the leader and supplier of weapons as Vol'demar Antoni.⁵⁷

Karachentsev lacked hard evidence against other members of the group and decided to take direct action. He had heard that Aleksandr Semeniuta was in hiding in Ekaterinoslav and tracked down other anarchists hiding in the city, arresting Lisovskii, Levadnyi, Zuichenko and Al'tgauzen. Levadnyi broke under interrogation and described the whole series of robberies and killings, starting with Pleshchiner and continuing through the ambush of the postal wagon up to the shooting of the police constable. Al'tgauzen confessed to having participated in the robberies of Shindler and Kerner.⁵⁸ Much later Makhno held Al'tgauzen responsible, as an *agent provocateur*, for the downfall of the group, but at the time he was indicted with the others.⁵⁹ Zuichenko confessed and

Karachentsev then arrested more anarchists, including Shevchenko and Mariia Martynova, Lisovskii's lover.

Zuichenko's testimony provided Karachentsev with the evidence he needed to bring the suspects to trial. Antoni, the group's first leader, had fled to Belgium but had maintained his contacts with the group, acting as a supplier of weapons and explosives. After Antoni's flight, Aleksandr Semeniuta had become the dominant figure in the organisation. Zuichenko described the group's meetings, which took place most often at Levadnyi's house, where they planned the expropriations. He revealed that they had planned to assassinate Karachentsev, and to shift their centre of activity to Ekaterinoslav, which was why Semeniuta had moved there.

After this success, Karachentsev telegraphed Guliaipole with instructions to arrest Nestor Makhno along with four other anarchists. Throughout August 1908 a series of confrontations, confessions, accusations and counteraccusations took place as group loyalty dissolved and individuals tried to save themselves by betraying others. Through it all Makhno – who seems by the sparse evidence available to have been committed and principled – refused to admit anything.⁶⁰ On 1/14 September the police intercepted a note from Makhno to Levadnyi, telling him to 'take the matter into [his] own hands'.⁶¹ The prosecutor later made much of this. Makhno explained it simply as an exhortation to Levadnyi not to attempt to shift his guilt onto the shoulders of others. The authorities produced another note from Makhno at the trial, referring in guarded terms to the planning of a possible escape attempt.⁶² But by now the police had found more witnesses in Guliaipole. Shevchenko's brother was willing to testify that he had been hiding bombs in the courtyard, and that the group had held meetings at his house. He claimed that he had seen them in possession of sums of money as well as weapons.⁶³

By this time Semeniuta had escaped abroad and sent Karachentsev a letter, addressing him as a 'spotted devil', and inviting him to come to Belgium, 'where there is freedom of speech, and one can talk freely'.⁶⁴ In the autumn of 1909 Semeniuta came back to Guliaipole to seek revenge for the death of his brother Prokopii, and ambushed Karachentsev outside a local theatre, shooting him dead and escaping.⁶⁵ Later on, in 1911, he returned again, accompanied by a young anarchist woman. An informer spotted the pair and told the police, who surrounded the house. In the gun-battle that followed Semeniuta refused to surrender and shot himself; the young woman was wounded.⁶⁶

At a preliminary hearing three of the accused retracted their earlier statements, alleging that they were made under duress. Makhno denied membership of any kind of association and repeated his explanation of the note to Levadnyi. But Zuichenko again confessed to everything and betrayed them all. One of the accused was hanged on 17/30 June 1909 by order of a court martial and another died of typhus in the prison barracks.⁶⁷ Antoni and one of the others

had escaped abroad. The arraignment accused Makhno and some others of several expropriations, under articles of the penal code that carried the death penalty. The prisoners stayed in custody in Aleksandrovsk for a year while investigations were completed. During the winter they managed to contact comrades who were still at large and planned an escape during a transfer to Ekaterinoslav. The attempt was abandoned in freezing sub-zero conditions.⁶⁸

Makhno's case was heard by the Odessa District Court Martial,⁶⁹ convened in Ekaterinoslav in March 1910, and he was found guilty and sentenced to death by hanging. He lived as a condemned prisoner for fifty-two days, until the authorities commuted his sentence, partly thanks to his youth (he was not 21 until October), and partly thanks to his mother's efforts on his behalf.⁷⁰ Of all these anarchist comrades who took part alongside Makhno in the post-1905 insurrectionist actions, the only one who survived to assume a role in the Makhno insurrection after 1917 was Nazarii Zuichenko.⁷¹

In July 1911 Makhno started a term of twenty years hard labour in Butyrka Prison in north-west Moscow.⁷² The years that Makhno spent in prison changed his life. It was in jail that he met Petr Arshinov, the man who was to 'confirm him in the faith of Bakunin and Kropotkin', support him throughout the civil war and follow him into exile.⁷³ A native of Ekaterinoslav, Petr Andreevich Arshinov was two years older than Makhno, and had been a Bolshevik before his conversion to anarchism in 1906. He had worked as an itinerant metal-worker on the railways, and had contributed to the Bolshevik newspaper *Molot*. Arshinov received a death sentence for his anarchist activities, but escaped to France, and subsequently to Austria-Hungary. The Austrian police caught him trying to smuggle subversive literature into Russia and extradited him. After a second trial he was sentenced to hard labour, and in 1911 joined Makhno in Butyrka.⁷⁴

When the two men met, Arshinov had already experienced the hard life of the professional agitator and political exile. A resourceful man, he had gone to some lengths to improve his education, and he now worked to improve Makhno's. His younger fellow-prisoner, commented Arshinov, 'showed great perseverance, and studied grammar, mathematics, literature, cultural history and economics. Prison was the school where Makhno learned the history and politics that were to help him in his subsequent revolutionary activity'.⁷⁵ He concentrated especially on three subjects – history, geography and mathematics. He used the prison library, and devoured both illegal and legal literature, reading Kropotkin, the poet Lermontov and many others. Nor was he above picking the brains of better-educated fellow-prisoners.⁷⁶

In 1912, Makhno wrote later, he experienced a 'deep inner crisis'. This convinced him that he must find his salvation through individual effort and that socialist intellectuals mostly only wanted to be 'masters and leaders':

In the end ... I no longer felt the slightest respect for the so-called 'distinguished politicians' or their opinions. I reached the conclusion that as far as vital, concrete problems were concerned these men were nothing but children like me.⁷⁷

He decided that everybody was equally deserving of respect, and that 'those who consider themselves superior do not deserve the attention that they receive'.⁷⁸

Makhno was neither an easy companion nor a model prisoner and was often in trouble. He spent time in irons, or in the solitary confinement cells, where he contracted the pulmonary tuberculosis that eventually led to his death in exile.⁷⁹ He had already spent time in the prison hospital in Ekaterinoslav with typhoid fever, and in Moscow his health continued to deteriorate. Despite his illness, however, he was always on the lookout for opportunities to escape.⁸⁰ His fellow-inmates, with whom he argued constantly about politics, sarcastically dubbed him *skromnyi*, or 'the modest one'.⁸¹ The years in Butyrka left Makhno with an enduring hatred of prisons, and later, at the height of his power, when his forces captured a town he would release the prisoners and blow the jail up or set fire to it.⁸²

Two major events marked the years that Makhno spent in prison. The outbreak of war in 1914 divided the political prisoners in Butyrka, as it divided their comrades outside, into two camps. Makhno read in *Russkie Viedemosti* that Kropotkin had taken a pro-war position, and despaired.⁸³ He conducted vigorous polemics from the defeatist position, opening one tract with the words, 'Comrades! When will you stop being such scoundrels?' Some of the Socialist Revolutionary Party (SR) prisoners were indignant enough at this to want to hold an enquiry into the authorship of the anonymous pamphlet.⁸⁴ The second event was the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, and the assumption of power by the reformist Provisional Government. This led in March, under pressure from the Soviet of Workers' and Soldiers' Deputies, to a declaration of general amnesty for all agrarian, military or terrorist crimes.⁸⁵ Both Makhno and Arshinov were released under this amnesty. Makhno's sudden liberation after more than seven years in prison seemed to him to be as sudden as a 'crash of thunder'⁸⁶ – and this is the key moment, the moment when the real story begins, when the story of a single dissatisfied, semi-urbanised peasant youth starts to become the story of a revolutionary mass movement seeking a form of political democracy that would challenge top-down decision-making to give those without power or property, in the hinterlands of empire, control over the governance of their lives.

At the time Makhno was a penniless 28-year-old, newly released from jail, and without professional skills.⁸⁷ His eyes had been damaged by the years in prison, and he wore dark glasses in sunlight.⁸⁸ Arshinov stayed in Moscow, where he was briefly active in the Moscow Federation of Anarchists, but

Makhno was persuaded by his mother and his remaining anarchist comrades in Guliaipole to come home.⁸⁹ He lacked experience in practical politics, but his prestige in Guliaipole as a returning political prisoner was high, and according to his own account the local anarchists and their sympathisers greeted him enthusiastically.⁹⁰ The handful of published documents from this early period show him convening a meeting of a local committee, asking that the value of food rations for families of serving soldiers be publicised, reporting on the theft of a horse, attempting to organise the collection of statistical data on population and land, and dealing with issues of soldiers in reserve regiments released for fieldwork.⁹¹ Makhno became ‘a completely ordinary Soviet functionary’⁹² working in an office and dealing with bureaucratic questions.⁹³

Vasilii Golovanov, who is a sympathetic and imaginative chronicler, argues that at this moment it is possible to see Makhno as a tragic figure, a man who sacrificed his chance of happiness to struggle for a political ideal.⁹⁴ The interlude between Makhno’s arrival in Guliaipole in February or March 1917, and his flight from the town a year later, in April 1918, offers us a glimpse of the paths Makhno might have followed had he not chosen – or been compelled to choose – to become a guerrilla commander. It is a period that has (still) attracted relatively little scholarly attention, as Timoshchuk pointed out in 1996.⁹⁵ To begin with, it seems, Makhno even hoped to settle down and live a peaceful domestic life. He went back to work at the Kerner factory,⁹⁶ and after a few months, in November 1917, he married a young local woman, Anastasia Vasetskaia, apparently at the insistence of his mother.⁹⁷ According to one account, Vasetskaia had written ‘warm letters’ to him when he was in prison, and they soon had a child. But Makhno’s chances of domestic happiness were short-lived: his comrades in the ‘Black Guards’ threatened Vasetskaia and forced her to leave Guliaipole with the baby.⁹⁸

The February revolution – the abdication of the Tsar and the coming to power of Kerensky’s Provisional Government in Moscow – had released the pent-up energy of the Ukrainian masses. Makhno was returning to a country that was undergoing a massive realignment of forces. In late March a group of intellectuals led by Mykhailo Hrushevs’kyi⁹⁹ formed the *Ukrains’ka Tsentral’na Rada* (Ukrainian Central Council). Its initial, modest objectives were to coordinate the national movement and to demand from the Provisional Government the right to print books and newspapers in Ukrainian and to teach it in schools.¹⁰⁰ It later supported the idea of a federal framework (while more radical left parties, including the communists, worked for revolutionary transformation). However, with the *Rada*’s unilateral declaration of Ukrainian autonomy in June 1917, ‘the genie’ in Plokhyy’s words ‘was out of the bottle.’¹⁰¹

In Guliaipole, some of Makhno’s old comrades had survived, but there were many faces that he did not know.¹⁰² He decided that he was not going to miss an opportunity to help create, as he put it, ‘...the means whereby to do away with

the old regime of slavery and to conjure up a new one wherein slavery would not exist and wherein authority would have no place.¹⁰³ Police persecution had decimated the original anarchist group, but the handful of remaining members had reconstituted themselves as a new organisation in May 1916, and Makhno's return saved the group from collapse.¹⁰⁴ He frequently spoke at rallies, helped to print leaflets and organise public demonstrations, and agitated for 'Free Soviets' and for the non-recognition of Kerensky's government.¹⁰⁵

Makhno understood that the group lacked structure and spoke vigorously in favour of coordinated action. One speech, quoted in full in his autobiography (presumably from memory) summed up the development of his political ideas, and attacked sectarianism within anarchism. He referred to the 'destructive phase' of the revolution and argued that coordination was required to get rid of government institutions, as well as all forms of private ownership. This included taking over factories in the towns. At the same time, it was necessary to 'draw closer to the peasant masses so as to assure ... the constancy of their revolutionary enthusiasm'. 'Our group', he claimed, 'is the only one which has remained in contact with the peasant masses' since the 1905–6 revolution. The anarchists in Aleksandrovsk and Ekaterinoslav had been decimated, and were unreliable. The first task, therefore, was to organise a Peasant Union, and to elect an anarchist at its head.¹⁰⁶

Makhno's political positions were accompanied by rudimentary preparations for armed struggle – he had learned harsh lessons from the 1906 events. He believed that the best chance of success lay in forging close connections with the peasant masses, in seizing control of non-revolutionary organs and in establishing institutions to exercise power. Political isolation would be fatal, as it had been during the Stolypin reaction: the old anarchist 'insurrectionist' tactics would not work:

I determined to jettison different tactical requirements assumed by the anarchists in the years 1906–1907. During that period in fact, the principles of organisation were sacrificed to the principle of exclusiveness: the anarchists huddled in their circles which, removed from the masses, developed abnormally, were lulled into inactivity and thus lost the chance to intervene effectively in the event of popular uprisings and revolutions¹⁰⁷

Some purists, to whom any form of organisation that was not spontaneous was anathema, objected to this position, arguing that propaganda was the only legitimate activity. Makhno believed, however, that peasants would understand that the anarchists did not want to impose opinions, but merely to present them.¹⁰⁸

At the time the effective government of Guliaipole was military: a Serbian regiment, supported by a Russian machine-gun detachment, was garrisoned there. One of the officers had been elected president of the '*obshchestvennyi*

komitet' (the communal committee), an organ of the Provisional Government that could not enforce its will in the provinces. Makhno quickly realised that he had an excellent opportunity to step into the power vacuum before the SRs¹⁰⁹ or other parties. At a meeting of the *skhod* Makhno attacked the idea that the Social Committee could be chaired by someone from outside the community, unaccountable for his actions. He proposed that the different sections of the town should choose representatives to study the question.¹¹⁰

At the end of March representatives reconvened to discuss the election of a new structure. An SR proposed the formation of a Committee of the Union of Peasants and Makhno seized on the suggestion as a pretext for presenting a proposal of his own. He contemptuously dismissed the political parties for gambling with the future,¹¹¹ and urged the peasants to concern themselves with the immediate consolidation of revolutionary gains through communal ownership of land, mills and factories. On this basis they could build a new life for themselves without worrying about such irrelevancies as the Constituent Assembly.¹¹² The meeting set up a Union of Peasants, with 28 members, and chose Makhno to chair it – he later claimed that his unanimous election to the chair happened ‘despite my pleas to the contrary. In point of fact I was extremely busy at that time, setting up the office of our group’.¹¹³ Within a few days the Union had enrolled all the peasants in Guliaipole except for landlords. Makhno and the secretary of the Union toured the district, setting up branches in nearby villages. Impressed by the revolutionary mood of the peasantry, Makhno returned determined to channel the impulse for social change into an anarchist direction.

The period from Makhno’s release in early March until the end of May was critical. He saw the weaknesses in past tactics adopted by anarchist-communist groups and persuaded many of his comrades that his heterodox ideas on organisation were not only essential in practice but justifiable in theory. After he had established a broad base of support in the Union of Peasants, and had neutralised the *obshchestvennyi komitet*, he became the most powerful political figure in Guliaipole. His analysis of the situation and the measures it demanded were accurate. He worked unceasingly to recruit new members into the Union, and at propagating anarchist ideas. He was not above using force to attain his ends. At least one of his opponents died violently, and when the anarchists gained access to local police archives and discovered the names of informers and provocateurs, they planned several executions.¹¹⁴

This was a period of political confusion, with the old institutions, in Trotsky’s telling phrase, awaiting only a swish from the broom of history,¹¹⁵ and events in a small Ukrainian town attracted little interest in Moscow. It was unlikely that local news would have reached the capital in time for any action to be taken. It was difficult enough for the Provisional Government to keep abreast of developments in the major cities of European Russia, and impossible to control

them.¹¹⁶ The local bourgeoisie was too weak to prevent Makhno from consolidating power or to stop him guiding the revolutionary enthusiasm of the peasants. The processes of modernisation and the impact of war had rendered the old social and political structures obsolete, and they were collapsing. In Guliaipole at least, Makhno was ready to hand with a plan for a new edifice, and at first he met with little opposition from other left parties such as the SRs, who accepted the broad outlines of a revolutionary strategy based on the Union of Peasants.

In Kiev, several developments took place that affected Makhno's chances of success in the aftermath of the fall of the autocracy. By April the *Rada's* demands had grown: they wanted national autonomy within a federation of Russian republics, and summoned an All-Ukrainian National Congress to discuss it.¹¹⁷ Conferences and congresses followed, as new Ukrainian newspapers and political parties emerged. A numerically small group of Ukrainian liberal intellectuals in Kiev dominated most of this activity.¹¹⁸ Although the *Rada* was reformist in its social policies – and included in its membership Social Democrats such as the writer and intellectual Volodymyr Vynnychenko – it was at this point only a government-in-waiting. It had little support and still believed in a federal solution via a Constituent Assembly. The *Rada* had few supporters in the villages, and peasants were indifferent to the nationalists and their organisations, understanding that the *Rada's* objective was to replace the Russian and foreign bourgeoisie with a more liberal Ukrainian one. 'Get off the rostrum! We'll have nothing to do with your government!' they shouted at one unfortunate nationalist who tried to arouse their feelings against the *katsapy* in Guliaipole.¹¹⁹

Makhno knew that he needed to mobilize not only the peasantry but also the proletariat in support of his idea of an autonomous regional revolution. Throughout May he worked feverishly to consolidate his political position in the various committees and unions of Aleksandrovsk and Guliaipole. The significance of what Aleksandr Shubin has termed 'Makhnovist syndicalism' should not be ignored when characterising the Makhno insurgency as primarily a peasant movement.¹²⁰ Between March and December 1917 Makhno led the local Union of Metalworkers before handing over to a deputy, Mishchenko. During this period he organised the supply of goods for factory workers, made union membership compulsory, negotiated wage increases at the Kerner metallurgical plant and pushed for an eight-hour working day – all in conditions of capital flight and economic collapse.¹²¹ Makhno regarded trade union organisation as an essential step towards anarchist self-government and as a tool for solving complex social problems, and at the beginning of June he turned his attention to the workers, concentrated in a few small factories in the towns. He received an invitation to a meeting at which the Aleksandrovsk anarchists hoped to form a single federation for their area.¹²² Makhno seized