

An Historic Injustice

Nestor Makhno

June 30, 1926

It's not the first time that the revolutionary Makhnovists have been accused of organizing pogroms in Ukraine.¹ At the moment, in the wake of the murder of Semyon Petlyura, leader and hero of semi-bourgeois Ukraine, this accusation is being renewed more aggressively and more obnoxiously than ever.

The Jewish community, and the Jewish socialists especially, should, in my opinion, consider this fact very seriously. It's even more important that the Jewish people as a whole concern themselves with this matter. Because it is only by doing so that they would be able without hesitation, without demeaning themselves, honestly name the true perpetrators of the pogroms that have caused the deaths of tens of thousands of people among the peaceful Jewish population of Ukraine. In this manner those men who consider themselves progressive would be forearmed against the danger of committing a gross injustice by formulating a shameful slander against the revolutionary insurgent peasants, the Makhnovists. If the Jewish socialists and political men generally were to take a serious look at these deceitful slanders, they would not allow to appear in the columns of the Jewish press lies as flagrant as those which I read in the article entitled: "Ten years in prison for the organizers of pogroms" (published in the newspaper "Pariser Haint" [Paris Today], June 13) and in the newspaper "Volkszeitung" [People's Daily] published in Poland (June 14). There one finds: "A Ukrainian court has condemned the two Karetnik brothers to death

¹ Cherikover on Makhno's attitude to pogroms

'In his book, Voline quotes the conclusions of Cherikover, a specialist investigator of persecutions and pogroms against the Jews in the Ukraine:

"Makhno's attitude is not to be compared to that of the other armies which operated in Russia during the happenings of 1917-1921. On two points I can offer you absolutely formal assurances:

1. It cannot be gainsaid, that of all these armies, Red Army included, it was Makhno's army which behaved best toward the civilian population generally and the Jewish population in particular. I have plenty of irrefutable testimony to that. Compared with the rest, the proportion of justified complaints against the Makhnovist army is insignificant.

2. Let us not speak of pogroms supposedly organised or encouraged by Makhno himself. That is calumny or error. Nothing of the sort occurred."

Source: *Nestor Makhno: Anarchy's cossack* by Alexandre Skirda (p339) The quote from Cherikover can also be found on page 699 of Voline's *The unknown revolution*. The only significant difference is that the equivalent of the first line quoted above says 'But I am glad to be able to say with certainty that, on the whole, the behaviour of Makhno's army cannot be compared with that of the other armies which were operating in Russia during the events of 1917-21.' [KSL]

...² The elder was the favourite of the famous ataman Makhno, who appointed him commandant of Zaporozhye³. He was one of the perpetrators of the bloodiest pogroms of Ukraine ... ” etc. But all this is a tissue of lies.

The elder of the Karetnik brothers, Semyon, was shot by the Bolsheviks in November, 1920, for having refused to sign an order that was offered to him to sign without the knowledge of either myself or the Revolutionary Council of the Makhnovist insurgents. **This order directed the main army of the insurgents to lay down their arms before the Bolshevik Red Army.** Thus it's impossible that the Bolshevik court has passed judgment on him now, in 1926.

The two brothers Karetnik always fought honourably in the first ranks of the Makhnovist insurgents, side by side with working class Jews, of whom there were many in the revolutionary peasant army of the insurgents. Together they fought for liberty and the independent of all workers, regardless of nationality.

The elder, Semyon Karetnik, was my direct associate from the end of 1919; before that, he held various important command posts. And there is not a soul among the Ukrainian Jews who knew him who would call him a perpetrator of pogroms. (An exception, of course, would be those Bolsheviks who, in slandering the Makhnovists, are deliberately following the policy of their party.) On the contrary, Semyon was one of those who struggled against pogroms not only in words, but in deeds, exterminating antisemitic looters and assassins. It was in this capacity that his name was known not only among the insurgents, but well beyond—in the vast expanse of Ukraine.

In the future, the world will learn the story of the struggle against antisemitism and pogroms in Ukraine that was led by the Makhnovist insurgents. Then the workers will also learn of the role in this struggle of the two Karetnik brothers, the elder one especially, and they will tell their slanderers what I am telling them now: only an irresponsible bastard or a deliberate liar can treat Semyon Karetnik as a pogromist.

² The youngest brother was Khariton (born 1904), so he may have been too young to be active in the Makhnovist movement. Panteleimon was born in 1898 and held important posts in the Insurgent Army. It should be noted that although Makhno writes the family name as “Karetnik,” and it is so found in much of the literature, the correct version is “Karetnikov.” Panteleimon and Khariton were arrested in 1925 and charged with robbing a mill (stealing grain) in the fall of 1921 along with three other “band” members (including Panteleimon’s wife). Upon being found guilty in 1926, the two brothers were sentenced to “the highest measure of punishment.” As a result of an amnesty, this was later commuted to 10 years imprisonment for Panteleimon and six years for Khariton (because of his youth). In fact Panteleimon was released on parole in 1928. His wife did not have to serve time because as an illiterate with small children, she was not considered a danger to society. Panteleimon was shot in 1937. [MA]

³ Region of Ukraine.

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Retrieved on 19th May 2021 from www.katesharpleylibrary.net
Published in *Le Libertaire*, August 27 1926, p.2. Translated by Malcolm Archibald.

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