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The Many Lives of Max Chernyak

Maxim Matveyevich Chernyak belongs to the generation of Russian anarchists who took part in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917, defended the new revolutionary society against its reactionary enemies, and then were crushed by their erstwhile allies the Communists. It is not easy to piece together his life story because he spent most of his life underground, in a state of illegality. In Chernyak's case an exacerbating factor is that in the historical literature he is often confounded with people with similar names.

He was born in 1883 in Grodno, a city located in the Russian "Pale of Settlement", into a poor Jewish family. Chernyak was trained as a barber, a trade which seems to have been a family tradition. Throughout his life he practiced this trade, when not otherwise engaged as a terrorist, secret agent, or military commander.

Chernyak first became active in the anarchist movement in the nearby city of Bialystok in 1904-1905, joining the **Chernoie Znamia** [Black Banner] group which carried out "motiveless" terrorist attacks on the bourgeoisie. Chernyak worked closely with one of the leaders of the group, Vladimir Striga. The group was composed mainly of young people and its membership reached the hundreds. The charismatic Striga would on occasion address crowds as large as 3,000 to 5,000. The Bialystok anarchists established close contacts with similar groups in Ukraine, especially in Odessa and Yekaterinoslav. In the subsequent tsarist repression, most of the militants of the group were martyred. Striga fled abroad to Paris, but stumbled while carrying a homemade bomb and blew himself up.

Chernyak also found shelter in France in 1907, but soon moved on to the U.S.A. where he took part in organizing the Russian section of the Industrial Workers of the World (the IWW published newspapers in a dozen languages aimed at immigrant workers). During his time in the U.S. Chernyak resumed his trade as a barber and lived with his wife Rosa and two children in New York and, later, Chicago. In the latter city the whole family would attend events organized by the Russian anarchist emigrant community.

But Chernyak was not ready to settle down. In 1917 he returned to Russia with his family and immediately threw himself into revolutionary work. He went to the Donbas industrial region of Ukraine and organized a detachment of the Black Guard based in the city of

Makeyevka. In the first part of 1918 many Black Guard detachments sprang up all over the former Russian Empire to defend the Revolution against its enemies. In the case of the Makeyevka detachment the enemies were the nearby Cossacks of the White Don. While not denying the military effectiveness of this unit, the Communist authorities repeatedly accused it of engaging in banditry and harbouring criminal elements. In May 1918 they disarmed the detachment but then quickly had to re-arm it again to throw it into battle against the menacing White Guards.

Later in 1918 Chernyak's detachment was re-organized as a regiment of the Red Army, just being formed. Chernyak caught on with a unit led by the anarchist sailor Anatoly Zheleznyakov, famous for dismissing the Constituent Assembly in January 1918. Chernyak organized the kontrrazvedka (counter-intelligence section) of this detachment and it was here that he first formed an association with the Donbas anarchist Lev Zadov, a huge man of unusual strength acquired hauling slag for blast furnaces.

Zheleznyakov was in constant conflict with the Communist authorities, and in September 1918 Chernyak left his post in good standing to engage in underground work in the Donbas against the German occupying forces and the puppet Hetman regime. When German power in Ukraine collapsed, Chernyak's partisans helped the Communists to capture Kharkov in December. The anarchist Boris Yelensky, also a returnee from the USA, described an encounter with Chernyak at this time:

"I noticed one man who was draped with weapons from head to foot and who hurled commands to the partisans. He looked so familiar that I was certain I had met him previously. ... he approached us, called out my name and threw his arms around me. I had to peer through his long beard for a moment before I recognized him as Max Cherniak, the barber from Chicago.... None of us could have dreamed that he possessed the capacity to lead a partisan band and wage battles against well-organized units of the White Army. I asked him how all this had come about and he replied simply that, in revolutionary times all kinds of miracles occur."

Around the same time he joined the Confederation of Anarchists of Ukraine, generally referred to as the Nabat confederation after the name of its printed [pto]

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organ (“nabat” means “alarm” or “tocsin”). This urban-based organization was created at a conference in the Russian city of Kursk in November 1918 and has been little studied in comparison to the mainly rural Makhnovist movement. It aimed to unite all Ukrainian anarchists: anarcho-communists, anarcho-syndicalists, and individualists. Eventually branches were established in a number of Ukrainian cities, most of which issued their own editions of *Nabat* (for a time there was a Gulai-Polye *Nabat*, which was distinct from the Makhnovist press). The organization had as many as 2,500 members at the height of its influence, but for most of its existence had to operate under illegal, or quasi-legal conditions, under the Whites, Reds, or Nationalists. Unlike the Makhnovshchina, it never carved out any territory in which to carry out social experiments and concentrated on propaganda work.

The Nabat confederation provided the Makhnovist movement with valuable resources in terms of cultural-educational workers and propagandists. It also supplied hardened veterans of the anarchist underground like Chernyak, who found a natural home in the Makhnovist secret service.

In January 1919 Chernyak ran into Makhno’s adjutant Viktor Belash in Kharkov, where Belash had been sent to negotiate with the Bolsheviks. When Belash returned to Gulai-Polye, he brought along Chernyak, as well as Lev Zadov and the latter’s younger brother Danilo. Chernyak proceeded to organize the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka making use of the Zadov brothers and other experienced anarchist militants. He also took on other responsibilities, being elected to the Military-Revolutionary Council for the Gulai-Polye region, and a delegate to the 2nd Congress of Soviets in Gulai-Polye in February 1919. At this Congress he expressed his view of the Communist dictatorship as follows:

“A handful of people seized power and oppressed an entire nation.”

Drawing on his experiences of fighting the White Cossacks in 1918, Chernyak exercised duties as a military commander of units which reached the brigade size.

In the first months of 1919, the Makhnovist armed forces became part of the Red Army as the result of the alliance with the Communists. The two parties to this alliance did not trust one another in the least and only the common threat from the Whites armies approaching from the south and east held them together. In March – April 1919 the Makhnovists broke through to the Azov coast in the south, seizing the important ports of Berdyansk and Mariupol. Chernyak set up shop (literally, it turns out) in Berdyansk from where he directed the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka .

When the German-Austrian armies occupied Ukraine in 1918, the landowners and other bourgeois elements who had fled in 1917 were restored to their former properties. But with the collapse of German-Austrian power in the region later in the year, these people had to flee again. For many in Left Bank Ukraine, the only escape route was to the south, to the sea ports where they could catch a steamer that would take them to safety. But the Makhnovists captured the Azov coast so swiftly that many of these wealthy refugees were left cowering in their hotel rooms. A White survivor left a lurid description of Chernyak:

“... he was a person of slight build with a perpetually smiling face, a scruffy little beard, and crafty-looking eyes. Despite his mild-appearing demeanour, he was ruthless towards merchants and officers. Since he was a barber, he loved... to shave and clip. This love for his trade he was able to put into practice in these port cities... He set up his own barber shops in the first class hotels where, disdaining his shaving instruments, he pulled out beards with his stubby fingers. Instead of applying soap, he lathered his victims with a shompol [flexible rod used for cleaning rifle bores]... Those who visited his shops did not return. After torture these people were transported to the harbour and put under the cold waves... As a barber he was a hero to the workers and a terror to the bourgeoisie and officers.”

But Chernyak had more to worry about than tracking down counter-revolutionaries. Berdyansk had a system of dual power, for although the Makhnovists had captured the city, the Bolsheviks set up their own Revkom (revolutionary council) with a branch of the Cheka (secret police) in competition with the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka. In April 1919 Chernyak went to Gulai-Polye to complain to Makhno in person (the conversation is reported in detail by Belash):

“I don’t know what to do about the Bolsheviks,” said Chernyak. “The Cheka is operating alongside my kontrrazvedka. The worst thing is, they have recruited some of our old staff! They carry on like hooligans and they try to interfere with our work in every possible way. They’re arresting our own people who disappear without a trace. The Bolshevik cell in the city is ruling by this means.”

“What swine! I told you – don’t mess around with those people. Get rid of them – for good!” responded an exasperated Makhno.

Makhno’s superior in the Red Army was the Bolshevik Pavel Dybenko, whom Makhno was in the habit of referring to as “that damned sailor”. Dybenko left memoirs of the Civil War which have never been published and even today are not readily accessible. The Ukrainian historian Victor Savchenko was able to consult these memoirs and discovered that in

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March-April 1919 Dybenko was constantly scheming to murder Makhno and his commanders. Thanks to his kontrrazvedka, Makhno was well aware of Dybenko's intentions and countered this menace by forming a secret army headed by Chernyak. This unit, not mentioned in official documents, included as many as 1400 Makhnovists and protected the anarchist "liberated zone" from Bolshevik intrusions from the north.

When Makhno was declared an outlaw by the Red authorities in June 1919 most of the outsiders left the movement, at least temporarily. Chernyak joined a commando squad organized by the inveterate anarchist Marusya Nikiforova. Experienced at underground work herself, Nikiforova divided the squad into three groups of about 15 each: one group was to go to Kharkov and try to free the Makhnovist commanders imprisoned there by the Reds; one group was to go to Rostov and assassinate Denikin; the third group was to go to Siberia and assassinate Kolchak. Nikiforova, like Chernyak, had graduating from being an underground anarchist terrorist to commanding military units. Rather than abandoning the Makhnovist movement, it is more likely they decided to pursue its goals by other means. None of their schemes were successful. Chernyak was part of the group which took off for Siberia and may have taken part in the partisan movement there; the Reds shot Kolchak themselves without any help from him.

According to one source, Chernyak returned to the Makhnovist movement and resumed his post as head of the kontrrazvedka in early 1921. In any case Chernyak was arrested by the Bolsheviks in Petrograd in the same year, the first of a series of arrests. On May 11 1923 he was sentenced to two years exile in the Naryn region of Siberia (near Tomsk) which he considered virtually a death sentence. In protest he went on a 28-day hunger strike and gained a release of a few months. Suffering from ill health due to mistreatment in prison, he and his family were finally permitted to go abroad. But Chernyak was still not willing to give up revolutionary work. He opened a barber shop in Warsaw in 1924 and established contact with the revived Nabat confederation, now functioning underground in Ukraine. Chernyak made trips into the Soviet Union as a courier for the anarchist movement there, but his last trip ended prematurely when he was arrested by the Polish police near the border. By this time the anarchist underground was thoroughly infiltrated by Soviet (and probably Polish) spies but Chernyak himself seems to have been incorruptible.

Despite facing serious charges in Poland, Chernyak managed to extricate himself again and made his way to Paris, to the Russian anarchist émigrés grouped around the journal *Delo Truda* who included, notably, Makhno and Peter Arshinov. Chernyak did not agree

with the controversial "Platform" developed by this group and soon fingered one member of its members as a GPU (Soviet secret police) agent. By 1930 Chernyak had emigrated to Buenos Aires with his family. At this point he disappears from the historical record, although there is evidence his children eventually returned to the U.S.A., where they born.

Chernyak may have outlived all his known associates in the Makhnovist kontrrazvedka, who either perished in the Civil War or, if they survived that long, in Stalin's purges. As a result of his sentence in 1923, Max Chernyak, who waged an implacable war of terror against several different regimes, enjoys the official status in Russia today of a "victim of political terror in the USSR".

Malcolm Archibald [corrected version 24/4]

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KSL note on names

Chernyak is the transliteration from Russian. Max Tcherniak or Max Cherniak is transliterated from Yiddish. Czerniak is the Polish spelling. Charnik appears to be an Americanization of the name; possibly from an immigration official mangling it on paperwork (which was common).

[This issue of *KSL: Bulletin of the Kate Sharpley Library* produced in April 2011. Thanks to those who helped with the tracking down of Max Chernyak, more information welcome. Thanks also to comrades who sent in donations, which makes the 10% hike in postage prices slightly less frightening.]

Max Chernyak – Book Reviews

A Letter from Max Chernyak

Dear Comrades:

Don't be surprised if suddenly you get a letter from me. Many times I thought of writing to you, to tell how we are getting along and what we are doing in Russia. I didn't write because while I was free there was no way of communicating, and when there was a way I was in jail.

Especially did I long to write to you because I still remember your last letter to me in Chicago, the time you sent me the credentials from the M. E. It was just before I left for Russia, which was in May, 1917. You envied us because we were Russian born and that we were lucky that we could go to a country where there would be freedom for the working class. We all thought the same. Yes, it was the time of enthusiasm we were to be envied, because we bravely fought the battles for freedom on the Russian fields: but my dear friend, the lucky ones are not those who come to Russia – o no!

I went through a lot of fighting, was wounded many times, and how I am paid for all I went through – jail, jail and jail again.

Since 1919 I am hunted for like a wild beast, spied after and frame-ups made. The last arrest was the most cruel, though the most foolishly fabricated one, and when I proved it to them, I was plainly told that I was arrested because I might be active in the future.

A verdict was brought against me. I was to be exiled to one of the worst places in the world called "Narimsky Baise." In protest against this sentence, I hungered 28 days, and then at the end of the 28th day they started to feed me by force artificially. I preferred to die in a Moscow jail than to die on the way to the wilderness.

After five days of artificial and forcible feeding, I was finally, in a dying condition, brought home on the guarantee of a high government official. He took the responsibility to get me back after three months to the authorities to be sent away to the "Narimsky Baise."

My left side from the toes up to the arm is paralyzed, but this will not stop their sending me away as soon as the 3 months will expire.

I am home, but materially very badly off. I am short of food, necessary medicines, and care of doctors. Rose and Esther are also invalids of the struggle for freedom. Rose is left with a stiff leg and swollen arteries on both legs – she must undergo an operation. Esther can't obtain work because she doesn't know Russian well enough. The boy is only 11 years old, they only depend on my earnings, but my present condition is terrible, as jails and only jails took my health away, and as that is not enough, I am to be sent away, never to see the white bright world again.

Immediate help is needed. Do for me what we used to do for others.

I remain fraternally yours. M. C.

From *Behind the bars*, 1, January 1924. Reprinted in *Letters from Russian Prisons* and *The Guillotine at Work*.

The Russian Revolution in Ukraine (March 1917-April 1918) and Under the Blows of the Counter-revolution (April-June 1918) by Nestor Makhno [Review]

Nestor Makhno is the best known face of the Ukrainian peasant anarchist movement which fought for free soviets against both the Whites (aiming to restore the old regime) and the Bolsheviks' new state. These two volumes of memoirs (there's a third one on the way) give Makhno's account of his life between being released from prison by the February revolution and his return to the Ukraine to fight the German/Austrian occupiers, and of the roots of the Makhnovist movement.

Unlike some primary sources, they're not disappointingly familiar (from being quoted so often you know most of it already). Nor are they full of anecdotal descriptions. Makhno probably wasn't spending time writing a diary. While more descriptions of the places he went and the people he saw would be fascinating, that's not the aim of the book.

These are writings, from exile, boiled down and intensely political. They contain their fair share of bitterness and hindsight: hardly surprising, looking back on four years of fighting, dead friends and comrades, and ultimately defeat: freedom snuffed out and new ruling class in the saddle.

Unsurprisingly, he's no fan of the Bolsheviks:

"Since this revolutionary [Bolshevik-Left Socialist Revolutionary] government shows no egalitarian tendencies, since on the contrary it is consolidating police-like institutions, then in the future we can expect, instead of advice, only the peremptory orders of the bosses. Anyone thinking independently and acting contrary to the orders received will be faced with death or deprived of their freedom, which we value above all else." The toilers offered this analysis which, although vague in details, expressed the truth that by means of their sacrifices events had taken place in which one evil system was overthrown and another installed in its place under various pretexts.' (v.1, p105.)

Yet his main criticism is of the failure of the anarchist movement to defend the spontaneous libertarian achievements of the revolution:

'The direct actions of the toilers during the Great Russian Revolution clearly reflected their anarchist tendencies. And it was these tendencies which alarmed

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the state socialists of the Left the most [...] If the toilers of the cities and villagers had received effective organizational assistance from revolutionary anarchists, they would have been able to achieve their aspirations and would have drawn all the active forces of the revolution to their side.’ (v.1, p188-9.)

Makhno has few good words for the bulk of the movement’s activities:

“Sixty to seventy percent of those comrades who call themselves anarchists are diverting themselves by seizing the gentry’s fancy homes in the cities and nothing gets done among the peasantry. Their way is the wrong way. They can’t influence the course of events sitting in those mansions.” (v.1, p117.)

‘I nevertheless realized it wasn’t fair to blame individual anarchists for creating this situation. It wasn’t their fault that, like startled crows, they flew aimlessly from one place to another, often with the flimsiest of excuses, simply on that basis that, “in such-and-such a city our people are doing something, so I’m going there”... Such individuals would travel round for weeks and months and it would never occur to them to stay in one place and try to strike a blow on behalf of our movement. [...] The moment demands the ideological and, especially, the tactical unity of the Anarchist forces, for only tactical unity helps us to make an impression on those who have an interest in the success of the revolutionary toiling masses.’ (v.2, p77-8.)

Volin, in his notes to volume 2 takes the exact opposite view, that repression was solely to blame for the defeat of the anarchist movement. Makhno can’t accept that idea. As a poor peasant, it is lack of education he thinks will hold him back: ‘One thing oppressed me – my lack of the necessary education and practical preparation in the area of the social and political problems of anarchism.’ (v.1, p2.) Thinking that you did you best is obviously no cure for the bitterness of defeat when you feel let down by better-educated members of the movement (which I think is one of the factors in the split between Makhno and Volin in exile).

The original Russian text has been translated into North American English which leads to the odd jarring note (not getting a passport on time was ‘a sort of a downer’, v.2, p151) but you also get lively touches like ‘crowbar hotel’ for prison (v.1, p124).

These volumes make vital reading for those who want to study the Russian Revolution. In terms of anarchist tactics, the underlying questions about what anarchists want, how to get it and where to look for allies feel very current.

Bookunin.

The Russian Revolution in Ukraine (March 1917-April 1918) Translated from the Russian edition of

1929 (in consultation with French edition of 1928).

Black Cat Press, 2007. ISBN 9780973782714

Under the Blows of the Counter-revolution (April-June 1918) First published in Russian in 1936. Black Cat Press, 2009. ISBN 9780973782752. Both volumes have a glossary. Volume 2 has an index and chronology.

Forthcoming from Black Cat Press:

The Ukrainian Revolution (Third volume of Makhno’s memoirs, covering the period to December 1918, first published in Russian in 1937). Due in 2011.

A Rebellious Youth (First published in Russian in 1925 as *My Autobiography*) a memoir of Makhno’s life up to the February Revolution.

The Makhnovshchina and Its Erstwhile Allies (1928) by Nestor Makhno

see www.blackcatpress.ca

Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892

by Nunzio Pernicone [Review]

After this reprint, the fascinating story of Italian anarchism will be better known. In fact, it’s a shame it stops and only mentions the twentieth century in passing.

It’s a pleasure to read someone who’s writing about anarchism and really knows their stuff. For example, the famous quote ‘Everything is good for us that is not legal’ which usually gets credited to Kropotkin actually comes from Carlo Cafiero (p187). Also, Pernicone notices and criticises Kropotkin’s ‘revolutionary fatalism’ (p242.)

The main thrust of the book is to deplore the anti-organisational tendencies in Italian anarchism, encouraged by repression, which led to isolation.

As Malatesta discovered, the peasants didn’t need to be told about exploitation, but weren’t up for heroic self-sacrifice either (p126). The question of revolutionary tactics make this a book worth reading alongside Chris Ealham’s *Anarchism and the City*, to see what a difference it made when the anarchist movement was embedded within working class life.

It would’ve been nice to have a map to find the different Italian regions, and maybe even an afterword on what’s been written since the hardback came out in 1993. But even without them, this is full of information and thought-provoking.

Italian Anarchism, 1864-1892 by Nunzio Pernicone
AK Press, 2009. ISBN 9781904859970

New title: A Critique of State Socialism by Michael Bakunin; illustrated by Richard Warren.

A reprint of the classic cartoon history of Marxism, words by Bakunin (with some direct quotes from the likes of Lenin) and wonderful art by Richard Warren. From Christiebooks. ISBN 9781873976456 £12/\$8

Valeriano Orobón Fernández

New pamphlet:

Valeriano Orobón Fernández: Towards the Barricades

by Salvador Cano Carrillo, translated by Paul Sharkey

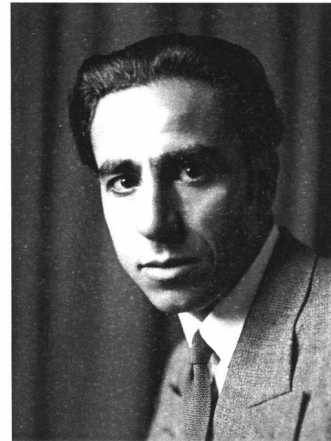
Valeriano Orobón Fernández was a Spanish anarcho-syndicalist activist, speaker and author. In Spain, and in exile in France and Germany, he laboured to prepare the CNT (National Confederation of Labour) for the revolutionary battles to come.

“The revolution Orobón looked forward to was not one that could be carried out by any one trade union organisation or political party... No, the revolution he had in mind was more expansive. In Spain he saw it as being headed by the two great trade union associations the UGT and the CNT and being supported by well-meaning intellectuals. A social revolution that would sweep away bourgeois institutions and their system of exploitation of the working class. And he threw himself into this task with all of the tremendous potential that he could muster.”

While advocating this workers' alliance, he fought to keep the CNT free of Communist control. He was also the author of the anarcho-syndicalist anthem *A las barricadas!* (*To the Barricades!*) and died of Tuberculosis just weeks before the Spanish Revolution erupted on the 19 July 1936.

Cano Carrillo, Salvador (1900-1991) was a Spanish anarchist whose activities date back to 1919. He was a rationalist schoolteacher based in N. Africa and Valencia and wrote a lot for the libertarian press as a correspondent for *CNT* and *Solidaridad Obara*, and as staff writer for *Fragua Social*.
ISBN 9781873605394 Anarchist library #22

VALERIANO OROBÓN FERNÁNDEZ: TOWARDS THE BARRICADES



BY SALVADOR CANO CARRILLO

A las Barricadas!

Negras tormentas agitan los aires
nubes oscuras nos impiden ver.
Aunque nos espere el dolor y la muerte
contra el enemigo nos llama el deber.

El bien maspreciado
es la libertad
hay que defenderla
con fe y con valor.

Alza la bandera revolucionaria
que llevara al pueblo a la emancipacion
En pie obrero a la batalla
hay que derrocar a la reaccion.

A las Barricadas!
A las Barricadas!
por el triunfo
de la Confederacion.

Dark storms convulse the air
Dark clouds blind our eyes.
Though pain and death await us
Duty summons us against the enemy.

The most cherished prize
is freedom
It needs defending
with conviction and courage.

Hoist the banner of revolution
that will bring the people emancipation
Stand up, working man, to battle
The reaction must be ousted.

To the barricades!
To the barricades!
For the triumph
of the Confederation.

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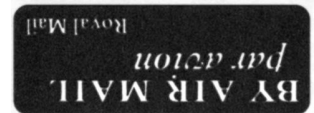
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