

Two Friends

By Freddy Gomez

I have two friends. One is named Petro. Without warning, he left Paris and his job as a construction worker to return to his native Ukraine. This was a few days before Putin's "special operation." He went just like that, to be with his family, in case they needed him. The other friend is named Oleg. An older student in his spare time, he earns his living as a waiter in a Russian restaurant in Paris. I learned from him that Petro had left. Worried, he wanted to know if I had heard from Petro. I didn't have any news.

I had put Oleg and Petro in contact with each other a few years ago. Oleg was working on a doctoral thesis on Nestor Makhno and the Revolutionary Insurrectionary Army of Ukraine,¹ and Petro had distant origins in the Zaporizhyya region, where some of his ancestors had joined the ranks of the Makhnovtchina. I had introduced Petro to Oleg— in 2018, I believe - during a showing and discussion of H  l  ne Ch  telain's film, *Makhno, paysan d'Ukraine*.² Their fraternization had been immediate. The Russian and the Ukrainian had liked each other until they became friends.

Against the backdrop of uncertain times and overwhelmed by the news of the day, Oleg's visit left a sour taste in my mouth. We had talked about this and that, the news he received from Moscow, the thesis that he intended to abandon, the Russophobia he felt rising – the restaurant where he works, rather deserted at this troubled moment, had just been tagged with an angry and stupid “Putin’s Accomplices!” I asked if he had seen Petro before he left; he had only received a telephone message: “When the idea of freedom passes for anecdotal, we’ve most likely lost it through distraction. I can only be with my own and my people.” I learned that their relationship had deteriorated as the danger of war developed and that at their last--furtive-- meeting they had both insisted on positions that, as far as Oleg is concerned at least, since he told me about it, he had never expected to take. Clearly, the venom was already in the wound. When we parted, I found myself on my doorstep with this sentence: “One must never speak the language of the state.” Oleg looked at me with a shrug as if I was offside. The war had already taken over people’s consciousness, even people who one might think had been vaccinated against the ravages of militarized thought.

History is most often the product of the unexpected. In this case that is not exactly what happened. Putin's logic being what it is, the unexpected is always to be assumed with him. What is shaping history on this occasion is that the way in which Putin decided to invade Ukraine, with the use of massive means--crappy ones, given the immediately observable result, the Ukrainian population’s resistance to aggression--has plunged the world, and in particular Europe, into a major crisis whose effects no one yet knows. If the operation succeeds, the czar risks screwing everything tighter. If it doesn’t work out, as is more likely in the medium term, even if there is a military victory, the man in his bunker, wounded in his malevolent pride, might well act (as is logical) in a really unexpected way. Whether he’s gone crazy or not doesn’t really matter. He is at the helm of a country that is collapsing and where he may be playing his last hand.

That's basically what, a few days later, I said to Oleg, who listened to me without really reacting. I sensed that he was lost, at the cafe where he had arranged to meet me. I questioned him. He hesitated. I encouraged him to tell me what he was thinking, unfiltered, sincerely. He hesitated again: “To tell the truth, nothing. Nothing that takes the form of an idea, a line of explanation. My emotion is probably too great to think. In truth, I hate Putin as much as Zelensky, the pro-Russian nationalist as much as the pro-Ukrainian nationalist. That’s why today I am from nowhere. And it's quite uncomfortable.”

Deep down, I understand Oleg. I have learned that a few Ukrainian anarchists enlisted, as volunteers, in patriotic fighting units, apparently autonomous but under the aegis of the Ukrainian army, while others, pacifists, prefer to work for solidarity between the Russian and Ukrainian oppositions to the war. "Have you ever wondered," I said to Oleg, "what Makhno would have done in such a situation?" "What he did," he replied straight away, "when he understood, on August 28, 1921, that he had to escape historical fate by taking refuge in Parisian anonymity to die of sadness."

And then the days went by without my friend Oleg calling me back. One evening, I went to the restaurant where he works to find that it was "closed for renovations" with no reopening date. In the same week, through an acquaintance, I learned that one of her Russian friends--a singer and an anti-Putin activist who had taken refuge in France--had had all her concerts canceled because she had the bad taste to sing ... in Russian, at a time when you had to choose between Good and Evil. It would certainly be all around us. Enough!

On the evening of a day at winter's end, the idea came to me to watch H  l  ne Ch  telain's film about the legendary Ukrainian peasant. There it was, on one of my shelves, as if waiting for me. I knew what it had to say to me, but I wanted to be sure, just to clear my mind of the weariness of this viral and militarized present. Why is it that, in the chaos of an out-of-control topicality that swallows us up, thinking about the old fights for human emancipation always reactivates the principle of hope? It is because that this past has never quite passed; it is there--defeated, crushed, unfinished, but always ready to serve--if we pull ourselves together, to feed our imaginations of resistance to imperialisms of all kinds and the nationalist impulses they invariably arouse. The history of the Makhnovtchina shows us that, while alliances may be necessary to defeat the main enemy of the moment--in Makhno's case, the "whites," Denikin, Wrangel, and Co.--it is always in the end the most cynical ally who wins. The Makhnovists could not refuse alliance with the Bolsheviks, but it is hard to believe that they thought for a single moment that they had won the day, that their idea of the revolution, so different from that of the Red Army, had triumphed. They allied themselves with the Bolsheviks out of necessity, but fully aware that circumstances were against them, until the final defeat, theirs.

So Oleg is undoubtedly right to refuse to join one camp or the other, to want to be from nowhere. I know him well enough not to doubt the detestation he has for Putin and his clique and to be sure that he is resolutely on the side of their most convinced opponents. I also know that he carries within him something of the weight of Russian misfortune, the sense that, whatever happens, the worst is always the most likely. It will be said that this idea of misfortune is rooted in the Slavic soul, in the active melancholy that it secretes, but I am wary of this kind of obscurantist generalization. In the case of my friend Oleg, illusion has no more future than the enthusiasm that generates it. At forty, any inclination of this kind seems to be forbidden to him, even temporarily. In other times, his grandfather, judged an "enemy of the people," then his father, declared a "foreign agent," were imprisoned. He is the bearer both of this personal story--in which he takes pride--and of the other story, the great, infinitely crushing one of Russia--"cursed", he calls it--which, from the first free soviets of Petrograd to the Kronstadt revolt and Makhno's fight in Ukraine, drowned in the blood and tears of the poor all their dreams of equality and freedom by destroying for a long time the very idea of communism.

Of course Oleg knows that the war Putin has declared is a war of pure aggression, but he also knows--because he doesn't like half-truths--that the Ukrainian "servant of the people," this President Zelensky who is taking the West by storm, would be ready, with the subsidies of the European Union and under the protection of NATO, to deliver Ukraine to the camp of Good, the devastating neo-liberalism that we fight every day as well as we can. As he knows that there are as many ultra-nationalists, fascists, neo-Nazis, red-browns in both camps. Everyone is free to challenge this logic of equivalence, on condition that they do so on the basis of good arguments and not solely on the basis of war propaganda emanating from both sides. I understand that Oleg chose secession, separation, to listen only to his conscience. I see it as an honorable choice.

To recount a life, starting from fragmentary and isolated sensory impressions, is to discover or give it a unity--an interior unity, which can be a unity of opposites. A life is like a city before its destruction, a

territory that adapts by force to uneven terrain, unevenness, contingencies. Its ups and downs are intimately intertwined, some existing only in relation to others, most often confusedly, in a kind of permanent tension between ebb and flow. Vitality arises from this journey. A human being can only be defined in relation to what he loves. You must therefore have frequented that being closely, but also accessed some of its secrets and pierced some of its mysteries.

On the twentieth day of this dirty war, Oleg called me from Barcelona, where he apparently decided to withdraw and stop his wanderings. His voice was white. He had just learned from Petro's partner of his death in confused circumstances. He seems to have lost his life in a suburb of Kyiv, while shopping. From a stray bullet, just for him. Grief-stricken, Oleg asked me what he could do. I had no answer. I only knew how to tell him to stay in touch with his girlfriend, which he intended to do. I asked him one last question: "Do you know if he was a fighter?" His response rang out: "Fighter for life. He wanted to get his people out of that hell, no more."

Of Petro I still have an impression and a memory. The impression: that of a being who turned his gaze more inward than outward. This was for personal convenience, but also because he thought that the present would teach him nothing. Quite different from the past, and even the distant past ... The memory: the long embrace he gave H  l  ne Ch  telain after the screening of her film on Makhno. With a broken voice, he said: "Thank you for them, the Makhnovists; thank you for us, their heirs." "You're welcome, you deserve it," H  l  ne replied in Ukrainian, her mother's language.

On this sad evening, it is of Petro, so present in my memory, and of Oleg, so alone in his misfortune, that I think and to them that I dedicate this extract from the will that the Makhnovtchina left to the proletarians of the world and that Voline published in *The Unknown Revolution*: "Workers of the world, descend into your own depths, seek there the truth, create it yourselves! You won't find it anywhere else. Cursed be war!"

CONTRIBUTOR

Freddy Gomez edits the website for social critique, libertarian in sensibility, *A contretemps*—successor to the journal of that name published on paper from 2001 to 2014—in which this essay first appeared. He is also the author of several books, including *  clats d'anarchie*, *passage de m  moire* (2015) and *D  dicaces* (2018), both published by Rue des Cascades (Paris).

[Translated from the French by Paul Mattick Jr. for "Brooklin Rail".]

¹ For information, *Rail* readers may want to consult Voline's *The Unknown Revolution*: <http://www.ditext.com/voline/unknown.html>.

² For information about H  l  ne Ch  telain and her film, see "Nestor Makhno, les images et les mots," <http://acontretemps.org/spip.php?article907>.