

THE UNKNOWN REVOLUTION: 1917-1921 BY VOLINE

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Revolutions are inherently attractive in their romantic sense of adventure and possibility. They are also the most common victims of historical oversimplification. In the case of Russia's 1917 Revolutions, and the Civil War from 1918-1921, this has resulted in the diverse forces on the revolutionary side of the conflict being homogenized into the singular force of the 'Reds', typically represented by the Bolshevik led Red Army. Narratives of Red forces duelling across two continents with equally monolithic counter-revolutionary 'White' armies, have thus drowned out some of the revolution's most important voices. Indeed, while Nestor Makhno and his anarchist Black Army are acknowledged as an important component of the military defeat of Anton Denikin's southern White Army, their broader program of social and economic innovation in southern Ukraine's "Free Territory" are either omitted, or drastically oversimplified as a glorified supply network incapable of any real long-term sustainability.¹ The question of how anarchist theorists and activists impacted the wider revolution is even more woefully underrepresented, and most often completely ignored.

As such, Vselovod "Voline" Eichenbaum's *The Unknown Revolution: 1917-1921* provides a critical perspective on one of the most fascinating and tumultuous turning points in world history from one of its least studied factions. A committed anarchist and active participant in both the 1905 and 1917 revolutions, Voline traces the history of the revolutionary age of the Russian state from the Decemberist revolt of 1825, to the collapse of Makhnovist Ukraine and the fall of the Kronstadt rebellion in 1921. The book serves as a combination of historical analysis, political theory, and memoir for Voline's own experiences; from Petersburg in 1905, to his work with the Ukrainian Makhnovists from 1918 to 1920.² Supported by a wealth of historical evidence, excerpts from periodicals and letters, and autobiographical recollections of Russia and Ukraine during the revolutions and civil war, *The*

¹ Eric R. Wolf, *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*. New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1969), 95-97.

² Rudolph Rocker, "Voline", in *The Unknown Revolution: 1917-1921*. (Oakland CA: PM Press, 2019), 9, 11-13.

Unknown Revolution is a unique, readable and engaging history that does not shy away from critical reflection and analysis of the anarchists and their failures in the period.

Voline combines scholarship and firsthand experience in the first 'Book' of *The Unknown Revolution*, covering the events leading to the October revolution in 1917. His anarchistic lens on historical and ideological development in Russia from 1825 (the year of the Decembrist revolt against the coronation of Tsar Nicholas I) to 1905, make excellent comparative reading with more mainstream accounts, such as Bolshevik Leon Trotsky³ and democratic socialist Alexander Kerensky⁴. Voline then provides a firsthand account of Russia's first popular revolution in 1905, including the formation of the 1905 Petersburg Soviet - Russia's first, albeit short lived, revolutionary government - in the wake of the Putilov factory strike.⁵ The rest of Book One provides a summary and appraisal of the political dynamics at play in the inter-revolution period between February and October of 1917. Book Two shifts to the events of the October Revolution and Civil War, with Voline's account of Russia's anarchist revolutionaries and their attempts to navigate and promote their ideology under the increasingly repressive Bolshevik regime. Given the often detached and statistical ways that Bolshevik suppression is discussed, even by its critics,⁶ Voline balances emotive passion for his beliefs with composed academic rigour in detailing the revolutionary landscape and forces he documents. The result is a book of excellent historical and political value in academic study of this period.

The final - and perhaps most important - book focuses on two key moments in the Revolution that are commonly understudied: The Kronstadt Uprising of 1921, and the Ukrainian Makhnovists from 1918-1921. While not present himself, Voline makes the case that Kronstadt, its people, and their rebellion against Bolshevik hegemony were fundamentally anarchist in action. Citing the tensions that grew throughout the revolution between Kronstadt and the Bolsheviks, Voline offers an effective refutations of the worst Bolshevik lies about the sailors and their reasons for revolting, even if his ideological claims are overly enthusiastic. The history of Nestor Makhno's anarchist Black Army in Ukraine, combining both direct accounts and later research, paint one of the most complete pictures of the Makhnovists available. Far from being uncritical of Makhno and his forces, Voline offers context and analysis of their failings and short comings, but also insight as to why the shadow of anarchism continued to haunt the Bolsheviks in Ukraine well into the

³ Leon Trotsky "The Motive Forces of the Russian Revolution", in *The Basic Writings of Trotsky*, ed. Irving Howe (New York, NY: Schocken Books, 1976 [1922]), 43-61.

⁴ Alexander Kerensky, *Russia and History's Turning Point* (New York NY: Meredith Press, 1965), 37-114.

⁵ Voline, *The Unknown Revolution: 1917-1921* (Oakland: PM Press), 89-101.

⁶ An example: Arthur Koestler, "Soviet Myth and Reality," in *The Yogi and the Commissar* (London, Johnathan Cape LTD, 1945), 136-200.

New Economic Policy (NEP) period in 1924-1925, long after their supposed 'liquidation'.⁷

Thus, *The Unknown Revolution* is a worthy edition to any bookshelf, in particular those who want a greater understanding of the real diversity at play in the Russian Revolutionary period of 1917-1921. This review is based on the 2019 PM Press edition, which also includes an extensive 87 page introduction by anarchist researcher, author and editor Iain Mackay, as well as original appendices that include summaries of the parties of the period, a bibliographical sketch of the era, and a particularly enlightening encounter between Voline and Leon Trotsky in April of 1917.⁸ Mackay's introduction is an excellent companion to the original text, expanding Voline's account with recent historical information and broadening its context within the wider revolution and history. His research and ideological credentials are well utilized in sophisticated counters to both Trotskyite and Leninist attacks on Voline and the anarchists that help to clear away any preconceptions the reader may have.⁹ That said, while useful for historians and political scientists, Mackay's academic style may be detrimental for those who are unfamiliar with the basic history of the revolution and its key players. Luckily, the appendices and Voline's own writing are extremely approachable for any reader, making Mackay's introduction a helpful - but not necessary - addition for advanced readers that does not detract from a more casual reader's experience.

The full text is also available online from several anarchist sources. Regardless of the edition, there are few books that will so thoroughly enlighten a reader on the Russian Revolution as Voline's.

⁷ Viktor Savchenko, "The Anarchist Movement in Ukraine at the Height of the New Economic Policy (1924-1925)." *East/West Journal of Ukrainian Studies* 4, no. 2, (2017): 176-177, 179, 184.

⁸ Voline, 713-715.

⁹ Ian Mackay, Introduction to *The Unknown Revolution: 1917-1921*, (Oakland: PM Press, 2019), lviii-lxv, lxxiv-lxxix.

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