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Author(s): Arthur E. Adams

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# The Bolsheviks and the Ukrainian Front in 1918–1919

ARTHUR E. ADAMS

## I

IN November 1918 the Ukraine suddenly became one of the most difficult problems that bolshevism had to face. With the collapse of the Central Powers, the demoralised Austro-German armies of occupation began their gradual retreat homewards. Hetman Pavlo Skoropads'ky's government lost its main support with their withdrawal. The Ukrainian nationalists, Volodymyr Vynnychenko and Simon Petlyura, proclaimed a republican government, summoned the peasants to arms, and marched on Kiev. In the absence of any government, the peasants sacked villages and towns, and the operations of guerrilla bands added to the chaos. Beyond the borders forces hostile to bolshevism were preparing for invasion. General Denikin had organised his Volunteer Army in the south-east and ordered his officer groups, who were already inside the Ukraine, to seize the key cities; Denikin's ally, the Cossack General Krasnov, pressed at the eastern approaches; and the Allied governments were on the point of intervening along the northern shores of the Black Sea. The enemies opposing bolshevik expansion into the Ukraine were many.<sup>1</sup>

But in their efforts to win the Ukraine, the bolsheviks' worst enemies were their own administrative and military defects and the variance of their views on how best to govern and fight. Striving to set up quickly the bureaucratic mechanism of state and army necessary for conquest, the bolshevik leaders at various levels fell into heated controversy about ways and means. Immediately the military problem became inextricably entangled in personal, political, and ideological cross-currents which crippled every attempt to move on the Ukrainian front. That these complications did not produce disaster was due largely to the indomitable courage and aggressive action of the commander of the Soviet Ukrainian forces, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko. He defied the bolshevik central apparatus and overwhelmed it with argument; he vigorously recruited support from every available source; and he eventually presented Lenin's government with a military *fait accompli* which made approval of his methods imperative.

<sup>1</sup> N. Ye. Kakurin, *Kak srazhalas' revolyutsiya*, 2 vols, Moscow-Leningrad, 1925, I, pp. 234–43; *Grazhdanskaya vojna, 1918–1921*, ed. A. S. Bubnov, S. S. Kamenev, M. N. Tukhachevsky, and R. P. Eydeman, 3 vols, Moscow, 1928–30, III, pp. 108–10; John S. Reshetar, Jr., *The Ukrainian Revolution, 1917–1920, A Study in Nationalism*, Princeton, New Jersey, 1952, pp. 197–201.

It is our purpose here to describe this little-known conflict among the bolsheviks, to identify the principal issues that influenced it, and to assess the considerable significance that the conflict had for the development of bolshevik administration in the Ukraine.

## II

A few days after the German collapse, Vladimir Antonov-Ovseyenko was called from his command of an army group on the eastern front. At the direction of Lenin's Council of People's Commissars, the Revolutionary Military Committee of the RSFSR, headed by Trotsky, gave Antonov a new mission: he was to organise an army and invade the Ukraine within ten days.<sup>2</sup>

Antonov appeared to be the right choice for this task. Ukrainian by birth, he had received military training in the St Petersburg Military Academy—training which he first put to use in 1906, when he helped to lead a revolt at Sebastopol. A menshevik until 1917, he joined the bolshevik party in April; subsequently he played a series of exceedingly important military roles. In November he was the principal organiser and leader of the comic-opera, but successful bolshevik attack on the Winter Palace at Petrograd and he personally arrested the last members of Kerensky's provisional government. Later in 1917 he acted as chief of the field staff to the Military Revolutionary Committee and served on the three-man collegium that directed the bolshevik war office—the Commissariat of Military and Naval Affairs. Early in 1918 he commanded the Red troops that invaded the Ukraine and occupied Kiev. Then, when the treaty of Brest-Litovsk opened the Ukraine to German occupation, Lenin's orders directed Antonov's withdrawal, and he joined the eastern front.<sup>3</sup> At thirty-four Antonov was an experienced and impetuous military improviser, who possessed extensive knowledge of the Ukraine and a genuine enthusiasm for his new mission.

A Revolutionary Military Committee of the Ukraine was formed and, in order to hide its real purpose, was called the 'Group of the Kursk Direction'. Its members were Antonov, Stalin, and the 'left' Ukrainian communists, Yury Pyatakov and Vladimir Zatonsky. I. I. Vatsetis, the tsarist colonel then acting as commander-in-chief of

<sup>2</sup> Vladimir A. Antonov-Ovseyenko, *Zapiski o grazhdanskoj voyne*, 4 vols, 1924-33, Moscow, III, pp. 11-12. The author wishes to acknowledge his heavy indebtedness to these abundantly documented memoirs, which have provided much of the evidence for the present study. In view of the Soviet government's failure to publish its military archives, Antonov's publication of orders, telegrams, letters, and recorded conversations in full makes his work invaluable.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, I, *passim*, and III, 7; *Bol'shaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya*, 65 vols, Moscow, 1926-47, III, pp. 96-7; Leon Trotsky, *The History of the Russian Revolution*, 3 vols, New York, 1936, III, pp. 219, 247-301.

all the Red armies, promised to send troops and supplies, staff officers and munitions. On the evening of 19 November, Antonov and his colleagues arrived in Kursk, their new headquarters, some 280 miles south of Moscow.<sup>4</sup>

Antonov's struggle with Vatsetis began almost at once. At Kursk, he and Stalin listened to a report from Glagolev, commander of a force called the 'Reserve Army', then completing its organisation in and around Kursk. This Reserve Army of some 15,000 men was undoubtedly the strongest unit in the vicinity; most important—and extraordinary in 1918—it possessed full complements of artillerymen and staff officers, i.e. specialists who might be used as cadres for new units.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately the Reserve Army was not Antonov's. On the complicated map of the civil war in November, Red battle-lines turned and twisted in such a way that Glagolev's mission clashed with Antonov's. Generally speaking, the northern boundary of the Ukraine traced Antonov's intended line of departure for the attacks he planned towards the south and south-west. But that line, after passing eastwards below Kursk and Voronezh, turned sharply north to a point just east of Voronezh, and from there it swept south and south-east in a long, jagged curve that reached the Caucasus and the Caspian. Glagolev's mission, assigned to him by Vatsetis, was to assist the southern front in the defence of Voronezh against Krasnov's Cossacks, who were attacking from the south-east. Thus Glagolev's face was turned to the south-east, while Antonov looked to the south and south-west.<sup>6</sup>

To Antonov it was immediately evident that his invasion of the Ukraine would be in great danger, if Glagolev were allowed to play an independent part. If Ukrainian troops moved against Khar'kov or Kiev without carefully co-ordinating their movements with Glagolev, Krasnov might cut into their left flank or even attack from the rear. To forestall this threat, Antonov and Stalin sent a telegram to Vatsetis, pointing out the danger and asking for the relationship to be clearly defined. They recommended Glagolev's subordination to Antonov, and Antonov apparently assumed that his telegraphed wish would be Vatsetis's command. From the very first, believing that he had been commissioned to establish a Ukrainian front, Antonov thought always in terms of a powerful Ukrainian army.

However, Antonov's picture of the situation was not Vatsetis's. The commander-in-chief's base was at Serpukhov, fifty miles south

<sup>4</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 14–15, 19. Stalin was recalled to Moscow for other business on the 20th.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>6</sup> A. N. de-Lazari, *Grazhdanskaya voyna v Rossii (v skhemakh)*, *vyпуск pervyy, 1917–1918 g.* (Prilozheniye k trudu N. Kakurina, *Kak srazhalas' revolyutsiya*, I), Moscow, 1925, Map no. 8.

of Moscow, near the centres of four great concave sectors whose outer edges were his four battle-fronts. In Vatsetis's and Trotsky's estimation the southern front, where Red armies faced Krasnov and Denikin, was one of the most menacing.<sup>7</sup> A break-through by Krasnov might bring White forces within easy range of Moscow. Therefore when Vatsetis pored over his maps his attention invariably centred on the area east and south of Voronezh, and when he found troops which he could withhold from the even more critical eastern front, he sent them south. But the Ukraine, where German and Austrian armies were in retreat and hostile guerrilla hordes were operating widely, seemed to Vatsetis to be relatively unimportant. The Ukraine could wait, and Antonov's group represented not a great new front, but reinforcements for the southern front to be used when and where the commander-in-chief might direct.

In these different interpretations of the directive that Antonov had received lies one source of the bitter struggle which hampered effective action on both the southern and Ukrainian fronts. Working feverishly at his own level, Vatsetis was constrained always to see the greater picture and to disparage the Ukrainian affair; at the lower level, Antonov, harassed and incredibly overworked from the very beginning, understood best the needs of his own area and minimised all other problems. The struggle that developed was probably the fault of neither Vatsetis nor Antonov; rather it appears to have resulted from the conditions of the civil war and the honest efforts of each man to interpret events from his own vantage point.

In the first days at Kursk Antonov worked round the clock to bring his army together. Though he had been told that he could pick up many irregular units in the area just north of the Ukraine, all too few of these were fit for active service. Two so-called 'Rebel Divisions' which he took over were in extremely bad condition, with few men (perhaps 3,000 to 5,000 in all), 30 to 50 per cent of whom were unarmed. There were cavalrymen without horses, artillerymen without artillery, units without officers. Nevertheless he vigorously collected the drifting units and filled them with peasants, deserters, and partisans.<sup>8</sup>

On 20 November Antonov dispatched orders addressed to every unit which could in any way be construed as subordinate to his command. Instructions went to local leaders who leaned towards communism or indiscriminately hated Germans, Allies, the Whites,

<sup>7</sup> Isaac Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed, Trotsky, 1879-1921*, New York-London, 1954, p. 425; Leon Trotsky, *Stalin, An Appraisal of the Man and his Influence*, trans. and ed., Charles Malmuth, New York-London, 1941, p. 291; N. Ye. Kakurin, *Strategicheskii ocherk grazhdanskoy voyny*, Moscow-Leningrad, 1926, pp. 67-8.

<sup>8</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, 15-16; Vladimir Aussem, 'K istorii povstanchestva na Ukrayne' (*Letopis' revoliutsii*, No. 5 [20], 1926, pp. 8-13); Richard Pipes, *The Formation of the Soviet Union: Communism and Nationalism, 1917-1923*, Cambridge, Mass., 1954, p. 139.

Skoropads'ky's government, or the partisans of Petlyura. Orders went to men who had only recently served Skoropads'ky and who now swelled Petlyura's forces, to workers' groups in the German-held cities, and to isolated guerrilla units far off in the Western Ukraine. According to his specific commands, the revolutionary forces near Gomel', north of Kiev, were to be mobilised for the occupation of Gomel' and 'for preventing by every possible means the movement of counter-revolutionary forces from Kiev towards Kursk or Bryansk'. Other rebel units were directed to seize particular towns in order to prevent the movement of hostile forces against Khar'kov. The people of Yekaterinoslav province were ordered to foment insurrections which would help the communist armies to move southward; simultaneously, they were 'to prevent the movement of counter-revolutionary forces from Khar'kov towards the south' and to prepare for the seizure of Nikolayev, an important city on the coast. To irregular units in the Crimea Antonov sent orders 'that measures should be taken for opposing the landing of the Allies, their organisation of bases in the Crimea, and their movement northwards'. Villages in the eastern part of the Ukraine were directed to organise partisan groups 'for the seizure of the northern areas of the Don Basin' and for the capture of 'munitions' factories'.<sup>9</sup>

Straining at the leash, yet feeling helpless to move without the supplies and troops that he had been promised, Antonov pressed the commander-in-chief with incessant demands for support. On 21 November he summed up the shortcomings at Kursk for Vatsetis. He insisted that he could 'take nothing from the two Rebel Divisions without destroying the organisation in the process . . .'. With 'only half a metre of benzine' his aviation section was useless. 'As before', he wired, 'I am without experienced staff-officers, and my staff is completely incapable of functioning'.<sup>10</sup> A day later he went over Vatsetis's head, a technique he was to use constantly during the following weeks. Telegraphing to the Military Revolutionary Committee, he warned Trotsky that immediate action against Khar'kov was imperative. He demanded an armoured train, and his message ended: 'I urgently beg your assistance. I have received nothing from you'.<sup>11</sup> But reinforcements did not arrive; weapons and units originally intended for Kursk were shunted to Glagolev and the southern front with a regularity that seemed deliberate. The promised transfer of a brigade from the Reserve Army was cancelled.<sup>12</sup>

Antonov was quick to suspect Vatsetis's motives, and there were many reasons why this should be so. Because Vatsetis was a former

<sup>9</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 17-18: Orders of 19 November, dispatched through the courier system of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Republic.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 19: Antonov to Vatsetis, 21 November 1918.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 23. <sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 14-20.

tsarist officer, it was easy to believe that he might still harbour sympathies for the monarchy and the past. Further, as a professional soldier of long standing, Vatsetis was openly contemptuous of the 'amateurs' who were botching up his war; and the men he considered amateurs—many of whom, like Antonov, had reason to believe themselves competent fighters—were quick to resent his contempt. Worst of all, Vatsetis made it only too clear that he had no patience whatever with the Ukrainian adventure.

On 21 November he issued orders that to Antonov seemed like a stab in the back. Antonov was directed to form a mobile shock force composed of a regiment of cavalry, a regiment of infantry, two batteries of artillery and Kozhevnikov's partisans. The mission of this shock group was 'to deliver a blow at the rear of Krasnov's army in the direction of Millerovo . . .'.<sup>13</sup> The direction was south-east, in the area of the southern front.

To Antonov this was a clear defiance of Lenin's directive that the Ukraine should be invaded within ten days. Moreover, Vatsetis multiplied insults in the details of his order. He referred to what Antonov already considered the Army of the Ukraine, as a 'section'. He directed Antonov to concentrate this 'section' south of Kursk, adding the unrealistic request that Antonov should take measures to give it a 'completely adequate organisation . . .'. The 'section' was to be warmly quartered, 'in order to avoid creating dissatisfaction in the units', and it was to work out its supply arrangements with the 8th Red Army stationed at Voronezh on the southern front. In effect, Antonov was ordered to subordinate himself to the southern front. A final blow was administered in the last sentence of the order: 'Concerning Glagolev's Reserve Army,' Vatsetis said, 'as I have explained to you personally, it has its own special assignment, and the verdict in this question lies outside your jurisdiction.'<sup>14</sup>

Antonov decided that Vatsetis was deliberately forcing him to disobey the centre's directive by turning him from the west towards the east. Also, it seemed to him that Vatsetis's order displayed either an insulting ignorance of the Ukrainian operation or a dangerously incompetent general-staff. It mentioned units in locations where no units existed; it assumed that the Ukrainian forces just being formed were already organised, armed, and ready for action; and it failed to make clear any demarcation lines between the southern and the Ukrainian fronts. As a final affront, it completely ignored the preparations that Antonov had already made for an attack on Khar'kov.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 20. V. Kozhevnikov was the leader of a large and well-organised group (9,000 men) then being transferred from the eastern front to Antonov, not for use in the Ukraine, but for action on the southern front.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*      <sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

Full of rage, Antonov resolved to continue his preparations for an immediate attack on Khar'kov, in spite of Vatsetis's order, and sought support for his plans from the highest authority in the land. On 22 November he dispatched a letter to Lenin:

Dear Vladimir Il'ich,

The Council of People's Commissars and, at its direction, the Military Revolutionary Committee resolved to embark on active operations in the Ukraine immediately. On 17 November the Committee of the Ukrainian front was formed, masked by the name Committee of the Group of the Kursk Direction. Its composition—myself, Comrade Stalin, Comrade Zatonsky.<sup>16</sup> Vatsetis ordered that we should have at our disposal: (1) the 43rd Workers' Regiment, the 2nd Oryol Cavalry Division (then being formed), and supply regiments which were ready—all at Voronezh; (2) the Moscow Workers' Division, which according to information from the commander-in-chief's staff was already at Voronezh; (3) the Rebel units of the Ukraine; (4) the section of Kozhevnikov from Ufa; (5) an armoured train in Moscow. For the organisation of a staff, the chief-of-staff of the commander-in-chief (according to his report) had assembled a group of five general-staff members in Kozlov.

In Voronezh the 43rd Regiment proved to be in the fighting; to withdraw it was impossible. The supply units were in the fighting or inadequately organised. The 2nd Oryol Division has hardly begun its formation—it is without quarters as well as weapons. The Moscow Workers' Division is still in Moscow; it has almost no artillery, and it is politically unreliable. . . . There is an armoured train at Yaroslavl' Station in Moscow, which however has not been transferred to me, in spite of petitions sent to Vatsetis. Another armoured train, promised by the 20th Central Armoured Command, has not yet reported to me. The same applies to three armoured cars, which were to have come out on the evening of the 20th from Moscow. (In spite of telegrams to me about their departure, they have not yet left Moscow.) Meanwhile I have only the units of the two Rebel Divisions—about 4,000 men, badly supplied, badly organised, badly disciplined, and dispersed over 200 miles. At Kursk and Oryol the 4th and 9th Rebel Divisions are being organised, but because of the absence of supplies nothing good can come of this. The Oryol *okrug* (area) has nothing and no one gives it anything. Vatsetis proposed that I should base myself on this *okrug*, that is, on a complete waste.

I have exhausted all other channels that might have helped, and [must] now disturb you. Help us. Vladimir Il'ich, they call to us from the Ukraine. The workers everywhere welcome the bolsheviks; they curse the Radists. But the Radists triumph, thanks to our inaction, and they are being quickly organised. At Kiev the Germans are pulling their forces together; according to rumour, the Volunteers are in

<sup>16</sup> Antonov apparently considered Pyatakov as a non-military colleague concerned primarily with civil and political affairs.

Yekaterinoslav; the Cossacks are marshalled on the Donets. In such circumstances I have resolved to go forward. At the moment with our naked hands (and with courage) it is possible to take what later will have to be taken with bloodshed.<sup>17</sup>

On the same day Antonov sent another letter to the commander-in-chief, reminding Vatsetis 'of the obligations laid on the Committee of the Ukrainian front to launch a decisive attack in the Ukraine within ten days (i.e. by 22 November) . . .'. He continued:

Antonov summons you: (1) Destroy the confusion of command by establishing demarcation lines between the Ukrainian and the so-called southern front. (2) Subordinate the Reserve Army to the Committee of the Ukrainian front. (3) From the units already formed in the 4th and 9th Rebel Divisions, create one division, which you must supply by extraordinary means with all necessities; and transfer the Moscow Division to the reserve of our front in Oryol-Kursk. (4) Take every possible measure for immediately supplementing the supplies of the Oryol *okrug*. (5) Subordinate all border units in the area of the Ukrainian front to the committee of this front. (6) Transfer to the disposal of the Committee of the Ukrainian front the provisioning units in North Oskola and in the Oryol province and aid their rapid formation by taking extraordinary means for their supply. (7) Put an armoured train at our disposal—the one standing idle at Yaroslavl' Station in Moscow. . . .<sup>18</sup>

Behind the subordinate's resentment at the commander and the commander's inability to understand or sympathise with the Ukrainian ambitions of his zealous subordinate, other difficulties increased friction. Among the most important of these was the difficulty inherent in the work of recruiting, organising, training, and supplying new armies while simultaneously conducting combat operations on several battle-fronts. Other fronts than Antonov's busily swept the dregs of former armies into their units; other fronts incessantly cried for more officers, armoured trains, uniforms, political agitators, cartridges, horses, and food, and all the other necessities of war. In these months no commander ever had enough. And, because of the newness of the administrative machinery, the breakdown of transport and the shortage of trained personnel, the solution of every military problem required prodigious efforts. At Moscow and Serpukhov the leaders worked day and night to make the machinery more efficient, but jerks and halts were the rule: men, supplies, and equipment got through to the most important fronts; the others went begging.

Both Vatsetis and Antonov were victims of circumstance. Few men, working feverishly during the critical hours of 1918, were able

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 25–6.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

to view their struggle with the historian's long view, to weigh up, calmly and disinterestedly, the impersonal causes of the chaos they fought. As for Antonov, he blamed Vatsetis for his troubles; and, as he was determined and articulate, he soon had his colleagues, Pyatakov and Zatonsky, presenting his arguments to the centre.

### III

Like Antonov, both Pyatakov and Zatonsky were Ukrainians; more important, they were leading members of the Communist Party of the Ukraine. As members of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Kursk Direction, it was their task to establish a provisional government which could move into the Ukraine behind Antonov's armies, take over the country in the name of communism, and perform the paramilitary work necessary to support further military advance. They established this government at Kursk on 20 November, but in the days that followed, an extremely explosive situation swiftly developed. Lenin refused to permit the Ukrainian communists to proclaim publicly the existence of their government and to declare themselves to be in full control of Ukrainian affairs.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, Lenin's party and government apparatus, guided by his overwhelming conviction of the necessity for strong central control, persistently tried to make all policy decisions for the Ukraine and required the Ukrainians to act simply as executors of Moscow's directives. This produced immediate resentment among men who believed the situation called for dispersal of authority and attention to local circumstances.

From Lenin's point of view, his strictures on the Ukrainians were well advised. He refused to permit them to proclaim their government, because, together with Trotsky and Vatsetis, he feared to plunge into a Ukrainian turmoil, which was too confused to be manageable. It seemed impossible to foretell the course of events. Petlyura's army was growing rapidly, and no one knew yet what great forces the Allies might land; therefore, although the order for quick action in the Ukraine had been issued, Lenin hesitated.

One of the chief political reasons for Lenin's ambivalence was that he neither controlled nor trusted the Ukrainian communist group, of which Pyatakov and Zatonsky were leaders.<sup>20</sup> At the risk of confusing this account, some details of the unique development of bolshevism in the Ukraine must be introduced here, if Lenin's attitude

<sup>19</sup> Vladimir Zatonsky, 'K voprosu ob organizatsii vremennogo raboche-krest'yanskogo pravitel'stva Ukrainy' (*Letopis' revolyutsii*, No. 1 [10], 1925, pp. 141-3); M. Ravich-Cherkassky, *Istoriya kommunisticheskoy partii (b-ov) Ukrainy*, Khar'kov, 1923, p. 100.

<sup>20</sup> M. Rubach, 'K istorii grazhdanskoy bor'by na Ukraine' (*Letopis' revolyutsii*, No. 4 [9], 1924, p. 164); Pipes, *op. cit.*, pp. 132-3, 135, 139-40.

is to be fully understood. This information is even more necessary for an understanding of the motives of Pyatakov and Zatonksy, the two men who did so much to help Antonov to win his fight for an effective military policy.

The historical facts are these. In April 1918, several separate groups of Ukrainian communists met at Taganrog, on the Sea of Azov, to discuss future tactics. The group led by Pyatakov and Zatonksy, the *Kiyevlyane*, or 'Kievians', called for the formation of a united communist party of the Ukraine. The Kievians argued that communist revolutionary policy in the Ukraine should not rest solely on the numerically small urban proletariat, but should extend its influence among the peasantry and the people of the villages and towns. Further, they believed that the tactics for the immediate future should include swift organisation of aggressive partisan activity designed to sap the strength of the German occupation forces. In the opinion of the Kievians, an independent Ukrainian party could best carry out the programme they advocated. The second main group at Taganrog, the 'Yekaterinoslavians', saw no reason for a separate Ukrainian party; instead, they preferred membership of the Russian party. As to tactics, the Yekaterinoslavians placed their hopes on the urban proletariat of the Ukraine. Since this proletariat was not politically well organised, and since the Yekaterinoslavians believed German occupation might last for some time, they advocated propaganda and cautious organising work which would prepare the workers for revolutionary leadership in the distant future.<sup>21</sup>

At Taganrog the Kievians won. An independent Ukrainian party was formed. Calling itself the Communist Party (bolsheviks) of the Ukraine (KP(b)U), it resolved that its relations with the Russian party should be conducted through a 'newly created international bureau of the Third International'.<sup>22</sup> Pyatakov, Zatonksy, and other Kievians won control of the administrative machinery of this new party, and in the months that followed they boldly carried out policies inimical and sometimes even dangerous to the Russian party. They systematically organised partisan forces inside the Ukraine and provoked them to action, a policy which threatened Lenin with the possible resumption of war with Germany.<sup>23</sup> Even more danger-

<sup>21</sup> Ravich-Cherkassky, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-5, 57-62.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 56-7; Reshetar, *op. cit.*, p. 223; N. N. Popov, *Ocherk istorii kommunisticheskoy partii (bol'shevikov) Ukrainy*, Khar'kov, 1929, p. 161.

<sup>23</sup> Popov, *op. cit.*, p. 175; *Grazhdanskaya voyna*, I, pp. 35-45; Ya. Shelygin, 'Partizanskaya bor'ba s getmanshchinoy i avstrogermanskoy okkupatsiyey' (*Letopis' revolyutsii*, No. 6 [33], 1928, pp. 71-81); *Krakh germanskoy okkupatsii na Ukraine (po dokumentam)*, ed. M. Gorky, I. Mints, R. Eydeyan, Moscow, 1936, pp. 168-70; *Dokumenty o razgrome germanskikh okkupantov na Ukraine v 1918 godu*, ed. I Mints and Ye. I. Gorodetsky, Moscow, 1942, pp. 144-72.

ous from Lenin's centralist point of view, the Kievians insisted that they knew best what policies should be followed in the Ukraine, and they claimed the right to make those policies.

In July 1918, when the Communist Party (bolsheviks) of the Ukraine held a conference in Moscow, Lenin's agents endeavoured to break the power of the Kievians, and, although the latter won control of the newly elected central committee, Lenin secured the right to make decisions on general policy for the Ukrainian party.<sup>24</sup> Two months later, after the Kievian executive committee had ordered a badly planned, costly, and abortive Ukrainian rebellion, Lenin's efforts to gain control of the KP(b)U were more successful. At the Second Assembly of the Ukrainian Party, held in Moscow in October 1918, an executive committee of pro-Russian and submissive Yekaterinoslavians was elected. The Kievians were too humiliated by the failure of their partisan action to take part in these elections, but Pyatakov and Zatonsky were given minor positions. Stalin, who for several weeks had been acting as intermediary between the two parties, was elected to the Ukrainian party's executive committee, where he functioned as Lenin's watchdog and liaison officer. Thus, during the months before November, Lenin had made a move to crush the independence of the Ukrainian party.<sup>25</sup>

But with the fall of the German government, Lenin no longer feared war with Germany; and because of the rapidly changing situation in the Ukraine, the cautious policy of the Yekaterinoslavians became suddenly unsatisfactory. Men were needed with personal knowledge of the intricacies of the Ukrainian environment, men with the courage and ability to rouse and lead the peasants against the foreign and 'reactionary' forces in the Ukraine. In this crisis, Pyatakov and Zatonsky were thrown into the new Military Revolutionary Committee and sent to establish the government at Kursk. But conflict with the centre broke out almost at once. Lenin's political and administrative apparatus tried to dictate all Ukrainian decisions; the new government lost its priority; and even Antonov was expected to submit to Vatsetis and await his pleasure. Within a few hours of their arrival at Kursk, Pyatakov and Zatonsky, like Antonov, were at war with Moscow. Working for the centre, they were nevertheless forced to fight it at every step for the right to act intelligently and effectively. Their outspoken and peremptory letters

<sup>24</sup> Ravich-Cherkassky, *op. cit.*, pp. 70, 81. For differing interpretations of the significance of Lenin's victory at this conference, cf. Popov, *op. cit.*, p. 176; Clarence A. Manning, *Ukraine under the Soviets*, New York, 1953, pp. 28-9; Jurij Lawrynenko, *Ukrainian Communism and Soviet Russian Policy toward the Ukraine (An Annotated Bibliography, 1917-1953)*, New York, 1953, p. xvii; Pipes, *op. cit.*, p. 135.

<sup>25</sup> Ravich-Cherkassky, *op. cit.*, pp. 34-5, 90-1, 96-8; Popov, *op. cit.*, pp. 179-80; Manning, *op. cit.*, pp. 28-9; Pipes, *op. cit.*, p. 136; Kh. Rakovsky, 'Il'ich i Ukraina' (*Letopis' revoliutsii*, No. 2 [11], 1925, p. 8).

began to travel with Antonov's to Serpukhov and Moscow, adding weight to his arguments.

#### IV

Still another factor complicated the struggle, but worked on Antonov's side. Although his role is not clearly marked, Stalin gave considerable help to Antonov and the 'left' Ukrainians. While there can be little doubt that he encouraged Antonov's opposition to Vatsetis, in order to advance his own private feud with Trotsky, one cannot accept the thesis of Trotsky and his adherents that Stalin was actuated solely by hatred, spite, and personal ambition. Indeed, this view approaches the absurd.

Stalin represented a group of important forces. As People's Commissar of Nationalities, he was more directly concerned than any other central official with Ukrainian affairs. In addition, he was a member of the central committees of both the Russian Communist Party and the KP(b)U, as well as of the Russian party's Politbureau. He was a member of Lenin's Supreme Council of Defence, a ruthlessly efficient tribune whom Lenin entrusted with missions of the highest importance, and he was an old bolshevik who had staked his whole life on communist victory in the Ukraine, as elsewhere. As regards the notorious Tsaritsyn conflict of June–October 1918, although its most striking consequence was the embittered personal rivalry between Stalin and Trotsky, it had other and far more fundamental causes and consequences. Further, the issues of the Tsaritsyn conflict were not peculiar to that area, but of great concern to all men on the Red side in the civil war. These issues—brought into the Ukraine by Stalin and the men of Tsaritsyn, who came to serve Antonov, or already embedded deep in the Ukrainian environment—must be identified if Stalin's point of view is to be understood.<sup>26</sup>

The crux of the Tsaritsyn conflict was the opposition among NCO's and old bolsheviks to Trotsky's efforts to build a regular army based on traditional models, complete with a carefully centralised hierarchy of command, rigid discipline, and former tsarist officers. Although resentment of the former officers and of Trotsky himself entered into the picture, the fierce opposition to a centralised army had its roots in several different, but related phenomena. It sprang from the conviction among utopian communists that in the

<sup>26</sup> I. Deutscher, *Stalin, A Political Biography*, New York, 1949, pp. 195–206. For prejudiced, but penetrating analyses of the Tsaritsyn conflict, see Leon Trotsky, *My Life*, New York, 1930, pp. 440–6; Trotsky, *Stalin*, p. 264. Stalin diligently found jobs in the Ukraine for his comrades from Tsaritsyn; Trotsky, ridding the southern front of its trouble-makers, shipped them to the Ukraine. Even Voroshilov was thus 'got rid of', much to Trotsky's subsequent regret.

new world there would be no need for central authority, rank, or external discipline. It came also from a frame of mind, for many old bolsheviks were rugged individualists whose habit it had become, through long years of opposition to tsarist autocracy, to regard resistance to any central authority as a virtue. These men could not shake off the feeling that Trotsky and his officers represented the 'authority' they had always fought in the past. At another level, the resistance was based on the self-sufficiency of arrogant partisan-leaders who felt no need of assistance or instruction from the centre and who fully believed in their own ability to repel any enemy. Essentially, the military opposition of the Tsaritsyn group posed larger questions that troubled all earnest communists: was the new communist world to be governed by local and self-elected soviets or was the noble dream to be jettisoned for a new autocracy, more absolute than the tsar's?

The Tsaritsyn issues found their counterparts in the Ukraine, where they were complicated by Ukrainian nationalist and separatist aspirations and by the strongly partisan and anti-communist character of the thousands who were joining Antonov's army.<sup>27</sup> For what they considered convincing reasons, former members of the Tsaritsyn group, many old bolsheviks, partisan troops, and the 'left' Ukrainians found themselves in agreement. Each of these elements believed that efficient military action and effective government could be best secured through the exercise of independent local authority. They united to resist the military centre and openly questioned the political centre's decisions.

The Ukrainian problem pulled Stalin in many directions. Characteristically, he appears to have taken, at first, a position somewhere between the extremes of absolute centralism and anarchic localism. But his own administrative experience had been gained in regions of crisis where he had acted as a tribune with plenipotentiary powers. He knew the immense value of settling problems on the spot where the demands of the situation could be felt at every moment.<sup>28</sup> He tended, therefore, to believe that a strong Ukrainian government and a united Ukrainian army offered a better solution than Trotsky's centralism, and he listened sympathetically to the Ukrainian demands.<sup>29</sup> Acting as Moscow representative for the Ukrainians and as one of Lenin's principal advisers, he influenced every move in the Ukraine. For example, the long letter which Antonov sent

<sup>27</sup> Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 280-92; Deutscher, *The Prophet Armed*, pp. 409-16, 423-8; D. Fedotoff White, *The Growth of the Red Army*, Princeton, N.J., 1944, pp. 64-73; L. Schapiro, *The Origin of the Communist Autocracy: Political Opposition in the Soviet State, First Phase, 1917-1922*, Cambridge, Mass. 1955, pp. 241-2.

<sup>28</sup> Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 293-4, 305.

<sup>29</sup> Pipes, *op. cit.*, pp. 133, 139, 141.

to Lenin on 22 November, requesting Lenin's intercession, was answered the very same day by Stalin:

To Kursk Station, the Antonov Train. To Antonov and Pyatakoy:

We completely understand your uneasiness, and I assure you that I and Lenin too will do everything possible. All your telegrams have been sent to Vatsetis with the demand that he should quickly give them his attention. Copies of his orders will be sent to the Council of People's Commissars. Copies are necessary for our inspection, and if we notice deceit, we will forgive nothing.<sup>30</sup>

Subsequently, for several weeks, Stalin relayed messages from Antonov, Pyatakoy, and Zatonsky to Lenin. Slyly he obtained former comrades from Tsaritsyn for Antonov, sending them to the Ukraine with excellent recommendations. He not only helped to determine the centre's Ukrainian policy, but he also may have issued important decisions which ran counter to the intentions of the Central Committee.<sup>31</sup>

## V

Despite the support which Pyatakoy, Zatonsky, and Stalin gave Antonov, Vatsetis's policy did not change. On 24 November the commander-in-chief summoned Antonov to Serpukhov and advised him that the Moscow Workers' Division, already on its way to Kursk, would have to be diverted to the southern front at Voronezh. Moreover, all armoured trains had been sent west to occupy stations behind the retreating Germans. Stubbornly Antonov reiterated his desire to march on Khar'kov, but Vatsetis again rejected this proposal, insisting that Antonov's main task was to assist the 8th army at Voronezh. Antonov set forth his many reasons for believing Khar'kov to be a legitimate and feasible objective for his command, but Vatsetis was adamant.<sup>32</sup> In a towering rage, determined to break down all obstructions, Antonov hurried from Serpukhov to Moscow, made his way into the offices of the party chiefs—Podvoysky, Sklyansky, Muralov, and Sverlov<sup>33</sup>—and poured out his troubles into their ears. His anger cleared a way for him and eventually that day he found himself face to face with Lenin—a Lenin who was also in an irritated and uncompromising mood.

The dictator of Russia permitted Antonov to give him a detailed

<sup>30</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, p. 27.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 38; Pipes, *op. cit.*, p. 141.

<sup>32</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 27–9.

<sup>33</sup> N. I. Podvoysky, Inspector-General of the Red Army; Ye. M. Sklyansky, Vice-Chairman of the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Republic; N. I. Muralov, a member of the Military Revolutionary Committee; Ya. M. Sverdlov, Chairman of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee of the Party.

picture of the Ukrainian situation.<sup>34</sup> He listened carefully and asked laconic questions, 'about landings of the Allies, their agreements with the Hetman, about our directives to the Rebel units . . .'. But when Antonov passed from reporting facts 'to complaints against the actions of the Supreme Commander, Lenin grew tense, and his face hardened'.

Antonov recounted the centre's failure to understand the importance of the Ukraine, the unfulfilled promises, the units diverted to Voronezh.

'There are no supplies', he told Lenin. 'We knocked together something resembling a staff, thanks only to Muralov. No planned work is possible. The decree of the government about an immediate attack in the Ukraine has been sabotaged. Vatsetis has ordered the commander of the Reserve Army not to be drawn into my adventures, but to form and train in the Kursk area. He has proposed that my group should observe Khar'kov and be prepared for action against Kupyansk. Thus, deprived of its share [of troops, etc.], it will be two or three months before our group can do anything.'

When Lenin asked about the situation at Voronezh, Antonov became eloquent about the confusion in the 8th Army. On the basis of his personal observation, he outlined 'the disorder and helplessness of this command, the complete disorder in its rear, and the near-panic situation in Voronezh itself'. He explained to Lenin: 'In this situation, the Commander-in-Chief throws directly into Voronezh the still-untrained, unblooded, and politically uneducated fresh units previously designated for us. Falling into the Voronezh uproar and semi-panic these units will quickly disintegrate.'

Lenin's temper was rising. He asked: 'What ought to be done, according to you?'

Impetuously, Antonov presented his own plans. 'If these units had been given to us and transferred as we proposed, formed into two regiments of the 9th Reserve Division, we could have formed a shock group on the side away from Voronezh. With this group we could advance on Kupyansk and from there go into Krasnov's flank. Simultaneously, concentrating the Ukrainian divisions, border units, and a couple of armoured trains we can deliver a blow at Khar'kov. Meanwhile, the Commander-in-Chief throws forces directly into the front, into certain destruction. This is either panicky stupidity, a trick of the military specialists, or—I don't even want to think this—it is treason.'

The word treason destroyed Lenin's self-control. He leaped from his chair. 'What?' he demanded. 'Where is your discipline? I shall

<sup>34</sup> The dialogue that follows was written from memory by Antonov. All material within quotation marks is from Antonov. *op. cit.*, III, pp. 29–30.

have to arrest you! Learn to subordinate yourself once an order is given. From the failure to do this comes all our disorganisation.'

Antonov stood his ground. 'I have subordinated myself, and I do,' he insisted. 'But I am obliged to report my opinion to you fully. You are responsible.'

Without very clearly perceiving that Antonov was indeed caught on the horns of a dilemma, caused by Vatsetis's refusal to execute the government's decree on the Ukraine, Lenin made his own position brutally clear.

'This is a military affair,' he told Antonov. 'Your business is to obey orders or to be arrested.'

Antonov ruefully concludes his description of this interview by saying: 'I got out with Sverdlov.'

In an 'altogether unhappy mood' he returned to Serpukhov, where he was surprised to find the commander-in-chief courteously prepared to yield a point or two. Vatsetis promised part of the Moscow Division, agreed to transfer some border guards to Antonov, and renewed an old promise to send along two armoured trains.<sup>35</sup> A little overwhelmed by the events of that day, Antonov decided to renounce for the moment any serious advance on Khar'kov. But there was to be no compromise; on the contrary, both the centre and the Ukrainian leaders girded themselves for the next phase of their struggle.

## VI

The attack launched by Pyatakov and Zatonsky had been building up for several days. Infuriated by the centre's incessant and confused interference, and its refusal to permit them to proclaim their government, they did their best to inform Moscow of its errors. In a telegram of 23 November, Pyatakov told Stalin: 'I consider it your duty to explain to Il'ich all the unbearableness of the situation created here.' And again: 'tell Vatsetis he must give troops, weapons, and uniforms; otherwise a catastrophe is inevitable. You know I never despair . . . but I must speak the truth so that you will take measures.'<sup>36</sup>

Thereafter, in rapid crescendo, critical and peremptory messages poured into Moscow. Specifically, Pyatakov and Zatonsky demanded the right to proclaim their government as the responsible political agency of the Ukraine, and so to end the chaos produced by the many central agencies that were issuing uninformed and contradictory directives. They also demanded the establishment of a Ukrainian

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 31.

<sup>36</sup> Rubach, *op. cit.*, p. 151.

front under Antonov's command; and in this regard, as they expressed themselves in a signed report to Stalin, they wanted a cessation of the commander-in-chief's 'continuous vacillations and hesitations, the continuously vague arrangements of the centre, the continuous changes in these arrangements . . .'.<sup>37</sup>

Stalin warned them: 'Take it easy there. The Old Man's getting mad.'<sup>38</sup> But they would not be silenced. In a long report to Stalin on 27 November, Pyatakov and Zatonsky detailed the ridiculous situation resulting from the conflicting orders issued by numerous central agencies, and emphatically reiterated their view of the principal cause of these exasperating difficulties: 'a Soviet centre should be proclaimed at the earliest possible moment, but this has not yet been done. . . . We consider that your ban on the publication of the Manifesto is a profound political error, dangerously crippling the concentration of forces against the Hetman and the Rada.'<sup>39</sup>

Vatsetis received a great deal of attention in the Pyatakov-Zatonsky messages, and the criticisms are strikingly similar to Antonov's.<sup>40</sup> In one telegram to Lenin and Stalin, Zatonsky said:

Explain to the strategists that the Ukraine is not simply a staging area, but an extremely tangled ball of string, where Hetman and Rada and our illegal, centreless organisations are struggling; moreover, the Germans are there. The conditions of the war are completely unique, and to resolve the question simply, as the military are trying to do, is impossible. To split the command authority of the army—is positively criminal. If you were here, the expression would probably be shorter.<sup>41</sup>

And in protest against Vatsetis's plan to make the Ukrainian army an adjunct of the southern front:

There is no reason for undoing us because of the panic on the Don front. I repeat, the Ukraine is not simply a staging area, a soulless pawn. About one more change of course—and the units will be finally torn asunder. Remember that not one company has come to such a degree of discipline as Trotsky dreams of, and to hurl units, formed with difficulty from partisan groups, into the fight with the Cossacks means to destroy them completely. It is necessary to consider the facts. Explain this to the strategists.

Save us from *mnogovlastiye*.<sup>42</sup>

By 28 November the situation had indeed become unbearable, and Pyatakov and Zatonsky announced their intention to wash their hands of the whole affair unless their recommendations were accepted. In the afternoon of that day Zatonsky, speaking over a

<sup>37</sup> Zatonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 144.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 143.

<sup>40</sup> See above, pp. 409–10.

<sup>41</sup> Zatonsky, *op. cit.*, pp. 146–7.

<sup>42</sup> Zatonsky, *op. cit.*, p. 148. *Mnogovlastiye*, the simultaneous existence of many government organs with overlapping or identical functions and responsibilities.

direct telegraph-wire to Stalin, made a final effort: 'in the name of the Central Executive Committee, I put the question to you directly: do you authorise us to act?' And he ended the telegram: 'I beg you to reply, and to reply intelligibly.'<sup>43</sup>

Apparently, Lenin and Stalin saw no alternative; for on the 28th, the Ukrainian government held its first assembly and resolved to publish a manifesto proclaiming its authority. In addition, it passed a tentative resolution concerning the military problem: the Group of the Kursk Direction should be transformed into the Military Committee of the Ukrainian Front under Antonov's command, *provided that Trotsky's Military Revolutionary Committee of the Republic approved*.<sup>44</sup>

## VII

Supported by a legitimate Ukrainian government, Antonov pushed forward on 30 November with the establishment of the Military Committee of the Ukrainian Front. Several fragments of evidence indicate that neither Trotsky's Military Committee nor Vatsetis had authorised this step. Antonov did not make his action public until 6 December, when he instructed his chief-of-staff to inform subordinate commanders that the change from the 'Group of the Kursk Direction' to the 'Army of the Ukraine' had been made 'in accordance with the decree of the Provisional Workers and Peasants' Government of the Ukraine, in agreement with the Council of People's Commissars of Russia . . .'.<sup>45</sup> And only on the 7th did he advise Vatsetis of the change. Further, when he was accused of Ukrainian separatism later in December, Antonov defended himself in a letter to Stalin by pointing out that he had insisted that Pyatakov should secure Stalin's approval before he established the Ukrainian Military Committee. It seems possible, therefore, that Stalin made the decision that properly belonged to the Council of Defence and the Military Revolutionary Committee of the Republic.<sup>46</sup>

Vatsetis had not been consulted either before the establishment of the Ukrainian government or before the formation of the Ukrainian front, and he opposed both after the event.<sup>47</sup> Although his most vital concern remained the concentration of his troops on the dangerous

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 149.

<sup>44</sup> Rubach, *op. cit.*, pp. 162-3: Protocol No. 1, Session of the Government from 28 November 1918 [italics mine]; E. H. Carr, *A History of Soviet Russia*, 4 vols, New York, 1950-4, I, p. 300.

<sup>45</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40-1, 54, 58; Lenin, in a telegram of 29 November, advised Vatsetis of the establishment of the Ukrainian government, but said nothing to suggest that a change in the command organisation was anticipated. See V. I. Lenin, *Voyennaya perepiska, 1918-1920*, Moscow, 1943, p. 47.

<sup>47</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 57-8.

fronts, quelling Antonov had become something of an obsession. In the middle of December he assured Antonov that his removal from command in the Ukraine was a foregone conclusion and he indicated that he was seriously considering the charges that others were bringing against Antonov as a separatist who would not co-operate with the Ukrainian proletariat.<sup>48</sup> Then, determined to free himself from the Ukraine and from its obstreperous commander, he issued a new order on 19 December: 'the Special Group of the Kursk Direction of Antonov, from 21 December, will be subordinate in all respects to the commander of the southern front. In view of this, it is proposed that Comrade Antonov should immediately give the command of this group to Comrade Kozhevnikov, retaining as before the duties determined by the decrees of the Provisional Workers' and Peasants' Government of the Ukraine.'<sup>49</sup>

Thus, very neatly, Antonov was superseded. The vague wording of the telegram made it appear that he had been removed from command of the whole Group of the Kursk Direction, and the Revolutionary Military Committee of the Republic immediately began to send its telegrams to the new group commander, Kozhevnikov. Antonov however preferred to assume that Vatsetis intended only the transfer of the shock group that had been organised for action against Krasnov. He summoned Kozhevnikov, made the necessary transfers, and hurried off to prepare his own attack on Khar'kov and to await clarification of Vatsetis's directive.<sup>50</sup>

But clarification did not come. Determined to force the issue and secure clear definition of the mission and competence of the Ukrainian Army, the Military Committee of the Ukraine prepared and sent a long letter, essentially a list of formal charges against Vatsetis, to the Council of People's Commissars.<sup>51</sup> A copy was also dispatched directly to Vatsetis. In summary, this letter argued that the Ukrainian Army found itself in a woeful state because of the actions of the commander-in-chief. Vatsetis, it was charged, despite repeated demands, had established no demarcation lines; although he had ordered transfers to Kozhevnikov, he had not made clear what units were to be transferred; nor had he explained how these units were to be controlled and where they were to operate. Further, the Military Committee of the Ukrainian Front had never received a general directive from Russian headquarters, apart from instructions concerning operations in a 'secondary direction . . .'.<sup>52</sup>

Specifying their complaints, Antonov and Zatonsky said:

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 40, 58.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 51.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 51, 62-3.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61-2: 25 December 1918, to the government of the RSFSR, signed by Antonov and Zatonsky, with the knowledge of Pyatakov.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 62.

The Military Revolutionary Committee of the Ukrainian Army is completely uninformed about the general plans of the Commander-in-Chief concerning the Ukraine. . . . To the question about the Kursk Brigade, promised by the Commander-in-Chief for the Khar'kov attack, came the reply of 24 December that 'this Brigade has a special assignment in connection with the general attack'. Whether this indicated attack in the Khar'kov direction or not—remains a secret. *The Military Revolutionary Committee of the Ukrainian Army has no confidence at all that it can count on any support from the centre.*<sup>53</sup>

After this brazen statement of 'no confidence', the charges that followed concerning lack of supplies and failure to answer requests for munitions were anticlimactic. Stung to action, Vatsetis hastily called a conference with Ukrainian representatives, defended the work of his staff and himself, and reported that preparations were being made for an attack on Khar'kov.

In point of fact Vatsetis had little idea how far Antonov's military operations had progressed. Indeed, on 30 December, after Ukrainian government representatives had told him that Antonov was attacking Khar'kov, Vatsetis wired: 'I ask you to say whether this is true, and what prompted your decision, which goes contrary to my directives.'<sup>54</sup> Antonov's troops were moving, yet he could honestly report that he had not yet attacked Khar'kov. The truth was that his units had been edging into the Ukraine over a wide area since early December. In some regions the Germans had withdrawn after negotiations; but fighting, with both the forces of Petlyura and the Germans, had occurred. On 20 December Antonov's troops attacked and seized Belgorod, just north of Khar'kov.<sup>55</sup> To the west, other units moved towards Chernigov and Poltava, and partisan actions deep in the Ukraine seemed to support the conclusion that thousands were waiting to join the Red Ukrainian Army.<sup>56</sup> As for Khar'kov, German occupation forces had agreed to evacuate the city by 1 January 1919, and Antonov had every intention of seizing this key city from Petlyura's troops, no matter what Vatsetis's orders might be.

Antonov's military successes and the evidence that they might continue increased the pressure on the central agencies for reconsideration of the Ukrainian problem. Other factors added to this pressure. With the landing of Allied armies at Odessa, beginning on 18 December, the need for a powerful front in this region was

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, italics mine.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 64.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 61–8; Aussem, *op. cit.*, p. 12; *Pravda*, 25 December 1918.

<sup>56</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 50–2, 56, 60; V. Primakov, 'Bor'ba za sovetську vlast' na Ukrainie' in *Pyat' let krasnoy armii. Sbornik statey, 1918–1923*, Moscow, 1923, pp. 188–9; N. Popov, 'Ocherki revolyutsionnykh sobytii v Khar'kove ot iyunya 1917 g. do dekabrja 18 g.' (*Letopis' revolyutsii*, No. 1, 1922, p. 34).

undeniable.<sup>57</sup> Moreover, the southern front had grown more threatening, and Lenin impatiently pressed Trotsky to settle the Ukrainian quarrel and prepare for a general attack on the southern front. If the truculent Ukrainians were allowed to go their own way, so Trotsky may have decided, Vatsetis would be able to concentrate his undivided attention on the southern front. Finally, the peremptory letters of Antonov and the 'left' Ukrainians, together with the machinations of Stalin, had helped to swing opinion at the centre towards establishment of a Ukrainian front.<sup>58</sup>

Vatsetis himself appears to have been too deeply embroiled in his altercation with Antonov to consider the changed Ukrainian military situation. The length of the document that he issued on 4 January indicates that he had been busy writing furious vindications to counter Antonov's charges. Vatsetis's counterblast denied Antonov's accusations with such vehemence and exactitude that in effect Vatsetis repeatedly called Antonov an insubordinate liar who was concerned only with his own problems. At once Antonov prepared an answer, defending himself and recapitulating some of the initial charges.<sup>59</sup> Apparently, if these two had had their way, the quarrel might have continued interminably.

But the time for bickering had passed. On 3 January 1919 Antonov's forces fought their way into Khar'kov and held it.<sup>60</sup> No longer able to pretend that a Ukrainian front did not exist, Moscow soberly faced that fact. On 5 January the Council of People's Commissars put an end to the polemics: Vatsetis was directed to organise a Ukrainian front, with Antonov as its commander, and Antonov's Military Committee was to be designated by the Ukrainian government. The commander-in-chief was also instructed to appoint Glagolev as Antonov's chief-of-staff and to transfer all the staff of the Reserve Army to Antonov.<sup>61</sup> On the 6th a curt telegram from Vatsetis satisfied most of the Ukrainian demands. A clear line of demarcation was established between the southern and Ukrainian fronts. The Ukrainian units to be under Antonov's command were specified, and he was directed to move against the cities he had already planned to take—Yekaterinoslav, Kremenchug, Cherkassy, and Kiev. Moreover, he was instructed to make considerable use of

<sup>57</sup> V. Margulies, *Ognennyye gody*, Berlin, 1923, pp. 6–7; F. Anulov, 'Soyuznyy desant na Ukraine' in *Chornaya kniga. Sbornik statey i materialov ob interventsii Antanty na Ukraine v 1918–1919 gg.*, ed. A. G. Shlikhter, Yekaterinoslav, 1925, pp. 88–94.

<sup>58</sup> Lenin, *op. cit.*, pp. 49–50: Lenin to Trotsky, 3 January 1919. Lenin's irritation with the Ukrainians is clearly expressed by his use of the epithet 'separatists'.

<sup>59</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, 110–15.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 100–6; Primakov, *op. cit.*, p. 189; *Pravda*, 4 January 1919, p. 4.

<sup>61</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, p. 115; M. Kiselyov, *Agitpoyezd—vospominaniya o bor'be s kontr-revolutsiyey na Ukraine, 1918–1919*, Moscow, 1933, p. 3.

partisan groups and political agitation.<sup>62</sup> At last the Ukrainian communists had their army and were free to lead it.

In the long run the victory of Antonov and his supporters was perhaps the worst thing that could have happened for Ukrainian aspirations. The bitter struggle against the centre's judgment undoubtedly helped to kill the dream of a Ukrainian autonomous government directed by Ukrainian bolsheviks. For Lenin, who had early gauged the threat of the Ukrainian desire for independence, Antonov's struggle and the support he received from Pyatakov and Zatonsky proved one point irrefutably: the imperative need for absolute and centralised control in the Soviet system. Although Lenin's character and philosophy presaged the ultimate establishment of a new autocracy, personal experience with the rampant wilfulness of men like the Ukrainian leaders could not but strengthen his convictions. For Trotsky, striving to organise a disciplined and centrally controlled Red Army, the Ukrainian affair was the epitome of the partisan rebelliousness that had to be destroyed if bolshevism were to live.<sup>63</sup> Antonov's victory convinced the centre that its power to control must be increased until open dissension from the Ukraine was impossible. But for the moment Antonov commanded his army, and during the next four months he triumphantly cleared the Ukraine for Soviet authority.

<sup>62</sup> Antonov, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 115-16.

<sup>63</sup> Trotsky, *Stalin*, pp. 295-6.