

## Whose Cossacks Are They Anyway?

### A MOVEMENT TORN BY THE UKRAINE-RUSSIA DIVIDE

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Most headlines about the conflict in Eastern Ukraine do not normally mention either the role of the Cossacks or the use of the Cossack image, but both are, in fact, central to developments there. As both Russia and Ukraine have Cossack movements and count the Cossack as a historical archetype, one might be forgiven for thinking they would be a source of unity between the two countries. Both can credibly claim to represent the people whose descendants had once populated the vast Eurasian plains. Yet instead of a source of unity, the Cossack image has become an important source of division between Russia and Ukraine. The repercussions are two-fold. First, even if a lasting peace agreement can be negotiated, the conflict will persist in the minds of those on both sides that have mobilized the Cossack image. Second, Moscow's recruitment and use of Cossack paramilitaries keeps afloat the delicate issue of recognition and potential secession of Russia's ethnic minority groups.

#### **The Cossacks in History**

Estimates suggest that there are up to 26 million people in the former Soviet Union who identify or could identify as "Cossacks," split primarily between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Ukraine. Yet most of the people claiming to be ancestral Cossacks today have little way of verifying their claims. After the Civil War of 1917-21 where some Cossacks sided with the White armies of Tsarist forces, the Soviets pursued a policy of "de-Cossackization" where buildings, records, and elements of Cossack culture were destroyed. Many people were also killed, leading some Cossacks to remember this campaign as genocidal. In any case, 75 years of Soviet industrialization rendered the Cossack traditional way of life ersatz and lineage became difficult to verify. The *stanitsas* (Cossack villages) that exist today are projects of historical imagination and often bear little resemblance to the actual *stanitsas* of Cossack history. A somewhat useful comparison might be to Civil War or Renaissance Fair reenactors. For this reason, the

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term “Cossacks,” when used in this memo, is shorthand for “people who define themselves as Cossacks,” and what is more precisely being discussed is the Cossack image or the “Cossack as an historical archetype.” This lack of definitive ownership means that both Russia and Ukraine lay claim to the legacy.

Historically, a major division between the Cossacks has been whether they are from left-bank Ukraine or the right-bank (the Dnieper river nearly bisects the country). By the late 16<sup>th</sup> century, Cossacks of the right-bank had been hired so often as mercenaries for Moscow’s expansion of the Russian Empire that there was a state register of Cossacks who could be called on to go and fight. On the other bank, the other “free” Cossacks—most notably those of the Zaparozhian *Sich* (Cossack fortress) who lived independently of Moscow—were forced to turn to Moscow for protection following a war against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Catherine the Great razed to the ground the Zaparozhian *Sich*, thus destroying the last vestiges of Cossack independence. The Cossacks themselves were moved to the Krasnodar region, which at that time was Russia’s southwestern frontier. It is from this split historical legacy that both the Russians and the Ukrainians today claim to be the true heirs of the Cossack historical archetype.

When the Bolshevik revolution occurred in 1917, some Cossacks sided with the White forces. In Rostov-on-Don, consciousness of Cossack claims to nationhood was sufficiently high to warrant the establishment of the Don Cossack Republic, which lasted from 1918 until 1920. Many of these Cossacks were forced to leave the country upon the victory of the Red Army and fled into exile in Europe. When Soviet forces liberated countries in Eastern Europe toward the end of World War II, Stalin took revenge on exiled Cossacks as traitors, even though they had never formally been Soviet citizens. The somewhat mythical realm of “Cossackia” was added to the Captive Nations Week in the United States in 1959. In the Soviet Union itself, some “Cossack” units had been drafted into the Soviet army during World War II as the regime sought to harness Russian nationalism in the service of the war effort. The lifting of Stalinist repression allowed Cossacks to preserve folklore societies and local history groups. This was to change, however, in the post-Soviet period.

### **The Post-Soviet Renaissance**

The post-Soviet reinvigoration of the Cossack image occurred more or less simultaneously in Russia and Ukraine. In Russia, Yeltsin [signed](#) a 1991 law recognizing the Cossacks as one of the “repressed peoples” in the Soviet period (their status in official Soviet historiography was as a “social estate”). Certain regional governments, especially those of Rostov-on-Don and the Krasnodar region, played an important role in assisting Cossack mobilization, funding youth schools and the restoration of notable Cossack monuments. Following pleading from the *Atamans* (chieftains) of Cossack movements in southern Russia, in the early 1990s Boris Yeltsin officially created a state

register of Cossack organizations, such as had existed in Tsarist times, and in 1994 decreed the establishment of the Presidential Council for Cossack Affairs, which was to oversee the rebirth of the Cossack movement and consult with the president on how to support it. Cossack irregulars played an important role in the unruly North Caucasus in the late 1990s, sometimes acting as a vigilante police force and policing migration. There have been some efforts to promote Cossack as a “nationality” (*natsional’nost’*), including [attempts](#) to have people note their ethnic identity as Cossack on Russian censuses, or even found a Cossack ethnic republic similar to those seen in the ethnically distinct regions of the North Caucasus.

After Vladimir Putin came to power, the Russian state began to support the Cossacks to a much greater extent, most notably by [expanding](#) the duties of registered Cossacks. With their heritage of fighting to expand the frontiers of the state, the Cossack image was an excellent means of promoting the new ideology of patriotism. Cossacks began patrolling the streets of Russian cities, engaging in ceremonial activities of state, and assisting with humanitarian projects such as fighting forest fires. Cossack paramilitaries were a prominent component of “volunteer” forces used by the Russian state to [lead](#) “anti-Maidan” protests on Moscow’s Red Square in 2015 and [whip](#) Pussy Riot demonstrators at the Sochi Olympics. In foreign policy, supposedly “native” Crimean Cossack forces played an important role in the popular rallies for a referendum on annexation by Russia in Crimea in 2014 and in Donbas. Pro-Russian Cossacks led demonstrations in Donetsk and Luhansk and have provided many troops for the combat in these regions.

In Ukraine, the Cossack image was also of great importance to the new nation which set out to create its own identity in 1991. Ukrainian history featured two sources of Cossack institutions: the 17<sup>th</sup>-century Hetmanate founded by Bogdan Khmelnytskii and the Zaporozhian *Sich*, or fortress. The Ukrainian national anthem, for instance, calls the Ukrainian people “brothers of the Cossack nation” and Cossacks are popular images in children’s stories. The Cossack image is at the center of national identity-building movements and represents an ideal usable past in a way that the alternative legacies of Russian, and then Soviet, imperialism in which the Ukrainians are portrayed as one of the “little Russian peoples” do not. Thus, roads in Kyiv are named for Khmelnytskii (of whom there is also a statue), the 1700s Cossack chieftain Ivan Mazepa is remembered as a national hero, and throughout the country “Cossack” youth organizations exist (including with their own supposed Cossack styles of fighting). At the 2014 protests at the Maidan in central Kyiv, many people who dressed as Cossacks acted as groups of guard-volunteers who stood watch over the protestors to ensure they were unmolested.

The quasi-ethnic portrayal of the Cossacks can be seen in the stylized way they are presented in Ukraine. The archetypical Cossack is depicted with a shaven head apart from a single lock of hair which originates at the apex of the crown, known as an *Osoledits*. Ongoing ethnographic projects in southern Ukraine seek to uncover the

remains of Cossack *sichi* and the regional government in Dnipro has [rebranded](#) Communist-named streets after notable Cossacks. Indeed, there is a proposal to change the name of the region from Dnipropetrovsk (named after Gregorii Petrovsk, the leading Communist responsible for the Ukrainian famine in the 1930s that killed an estimated five million) to *Sicheslav* (glory to Cossack fortresses). Such symbolic battles can have important political consequences, as the argument over the correct name of the former Yugoslav republic of Macedonia, which Greece used to prevent this country from joining the EU, illustrates.

### **The Donbas Conflict**

In terms of the conflict in Donbas, there are people who claim to be Cossacks fighting on both sides, who also try to harness the Cossack image. On the pro-Russian side, Cossack irregular formations such as that [led](#) by Mykola Kozitsyn have fought against Ukrainian forces. Kozitsyn is one of the individuals sanctioned by the United States and other countries for, among other things, his involvement with the downing of Malaysian Airlines flight MH17. Transcripts of audio [intercepted](#) by the Ukrainian Security Services show that Kozitsyn was aware that a Cossack unit had shot down the passenger plane.

There are also Cossacks on the Ukrainian side, fighting against separatism. Pro-Ukrainian Cossacks style themselves as defenders of the people and the vanguard of popular resistance to foreign *agents provocateurs*. The author's discussions with people who have been on the front lines in Donbas provide testimony that some Ukrainian soldiers cut their hair into *osoledits* after their first battle. One hero of the revolution, for instance, went from defending protestors on independent square to trying to organize a [Cossack battalion](#) to fight against Russia in Ukraine's eastern regions. I also observed the Cossack image being used to boost morale amongst soldiers when I visited Ukrainian barracks in 2018.

Harnessing the Cossack image plays an important role in Crimea and for the separatist governments of Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics. In Crimea, for instance, the Cossacks symbol is [used](#) in education and for instilling patriotism. In Luhansk, Cossack youth groups played an important role in [honoring](#) those who fell in Russia's Great Patriotic War against Nazi Germany and in fulfilling other symbolic functions for the de facto statelet. In Donetsk, Cossack activities have played an important role in giving the aspirant state the [appearance](#) of cultural ambassadors and the semblance of a foreign policy. Sources known to the author suggest that LNR and DNR ideologists do indeed reference the heritage of the region when arguing they should be with Russia and a [1901 map](#) showing the historic lands of the Don Cossacks does indeed overlap with much of the conflict zone. The Cossack image is invoked, in other words, to provide distinction from a nation which identifies itself with the Cossacks.

## Conclusion

Far from being a potential source of unity, the Cossacks are a source of division between Ukraine and Russia and one which the current conflict makes even more yawning. The presence of Cossacks on both sides of the divide implies two consequences. First, even if a lasting peace agreement can be negotiated between Kyiv and Moscow, the conflict threatens to persist in the thoughts and feelings of ordinary people. Russian and Ukrainian Cossacks are likely to refute the claims of each other's genuine ownership of the Cossack image and legend (as indeed, some of the author's Ukrainian sources already have). The proximity of identities often characterizes longstanding ethnic conflicts.

Second, whatever the original stakes for Moscow when it stoked the Donbas conflict, its recruitment and use of Cossack paramilitaries in that arena have created new risks. Russia cannot afford to be humiliated in Donbas lest it inflame Cossack nationalists bent on [autonomy](#) for the Don region or even outright secession. Already, there is a bone of contention as to whether "Cossack" can be entered as an ethnic identity on the Russian census (as 7 million people did on the 2002 census). Yet even slight moves by Moscow to recognize the Cossacks as a distinct ethnic group separate from Russians could be [followed](#) by other groups, such as Siberians and Pomors, clamoring for equal recognition and possibly secession.

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