

## The Cossacks: A Cross-Border Complication To Post-Soviet Eurasia

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*"The Cossacks are back, and the issues are land, power and the restoration of a lost way of life."* (Grau, 1993: 592).

The revival of the Cossacks (*Kazaki*) reflects the identity crisis at the heart of the new Russian nation, and is a case study of the essentially artificial and problematic nature of most borders within the former Soviet Union (fSU). The Cossack culture itself dates back to the 1400s, although the word, derived from the Turko-Tatar 'free adventurer', predates the Russian state.

*"Originally little more than bands of runaway peasants, criminals, misfits and adventurers living on the borders of the Russian Empire, the Cossacks evolved into a distinct sub-culture with a highly developed (and largely autonomous) social structure and a special relationship to the tsars, whom they served as elite shock troops and security forces."* (Oxford Analytica, 1994).

Although nominally Russian, linguistically, ethnically and religiously, these freebooters intermarried with various Tatar and Turkic people and thus evolved their own distinct culture. Nevertheless, there were significant differences even between Cossack groups. The Don Cossacks of south-western Russia and the Ukraine lived well and free, closely allied with their Kalmyk neighbours. The Bug Cossacks, by contrast, who settled along the river of the same name, were Moldavian and Wallachian Christians who had rebelled against and then fled from Turkish rule. The Terek Cossacks of the north Caucasus remained military frontiersmen and never adopted the peaceable agrarian lifestyle of their Don cousins (Parker, 1968).

In the 17th and 18th centuries, the Cossacks were brought under central control by war and by treaty. Living in militarised communities, the Cossacks traded service to the tsar for pay, land and privilege. By 1917, there were some four and a half million within the Russian Empire, divided into eleven Hosts along the southern and eastern

borders. During the Bolshevik Revolution, Cossacks fought on both sides, but most resisted the Reds. For this they paid dearly. During the 1920s and 1930s, the Hosts were abolished, the traditional elders (the *atamans* and *hetmen*) denounced as counter-revolutionaries and *kulaks* (rich peasants) and most aspects of their culture relegated to folklore museums, as Stalin's purges culled perhaps a third of the entire Cossack population.

Cossack culture did not quite disappear, though. One symptom of the disillusion rife in 1980s Soviet society was a reinvention of tsarist folklore, including the revival of Cossack traditions. At first, this was essentially a cultural phenomenon. Enthusiasts researched their family trees to prove Cossack ancestry or rediscovered the tricks of Cossack horsemanship. As the very fabric of the state also began to collapse, though, people were forced increasingly to fend for themselves. These Cossack identities thus became political communities. By the beginning of 1991, Cossack Hosts were being re-established across the USSR. Most importantly, they were coming to acquiring a political profile by their very existence. In a time of nationalism, they were forced to take sides in growing inter-ethnic disputes. In a time of lawlessness, communities and local authorities looked to them to provide vigilantes to help maintain order. In a time when all the old certainties seemed to be collapsing, they joined other communities in laying claim to rights and territories traditionally theirs.

### The Cossacks Today

Today, the perhaps six and a half million self-proclaimed Cossacks of the fSU are especially strongly represented in the Don and Kuban regions of southern Russia (and eastern Ukraine), Enisei and Irkutsk in Siberia and Chita and Ussuri in Russia's Far East. This 'Brotherhood' (*zemlyachestvo*) is divided between 13 Hosts and 63 regions, the largest being the Don Host, with 1,800,000 members (of whom more than 10,000

actively participate in Host activities). Some two million of the total live outside Russia's borders (BBC SWB, 20 March 1993).

#### Cossack Hosts, 1995

Amur	Semirechiye
Don	Siberian
Enisei	Terek
Irkutsk	Urals
Kuban	Ussuriisk
Orenburg	Zabaikalsk

In 1991, the Hosts banded together loosely in the *Union of Cossack Forces in Russia* (later re-named the *Union of Cossacks*), while regular *Councils of Atamans* have become the fora in which they can meet with the leaders of Cossacks living outside Russia (especially from north and east Kazakhstan, where there are over 70,000). In 1992, Boris Yeltsin's Decree 632 on the rehabilitation of the Cossacks, paved the way for a closer alliance between Cossacks and state. It triggered a new mood of confidence and assertiveness amongst the Cossacks which culminated in an abortive bid for autonomy from Rostov Region by the Don Host (BBC SWB, 27 March 1993).

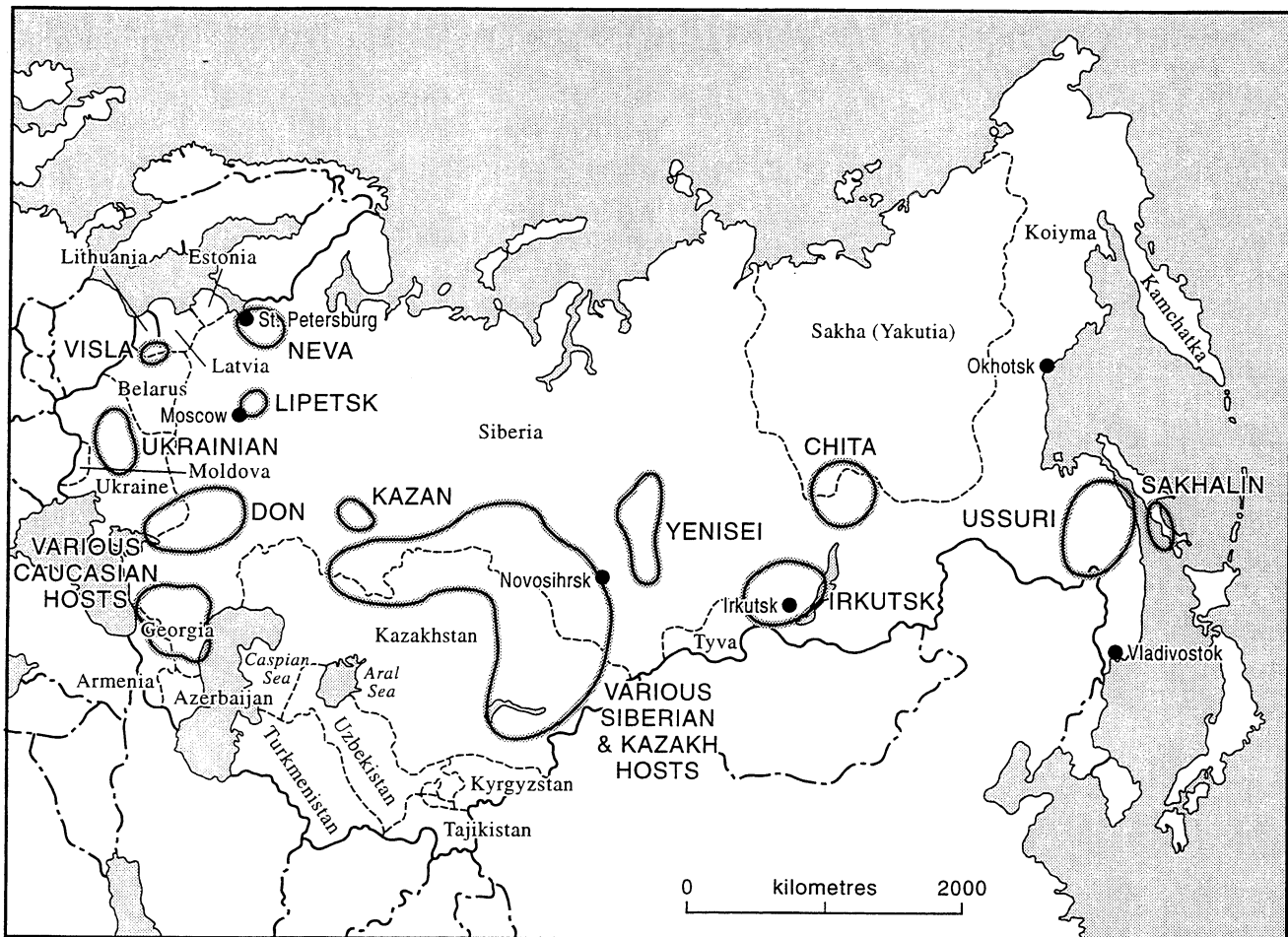
This crisis was defused, but it proved a catalyst. Boris Yeltsin began devoting more and more of his energies to wooing the Cossacks. In July 1994, he issued Decree 1389 establishing a Council for Cossack Affairs, a body with no precedent within the Russian government. At the end of the year, he went still further and supported a new Law on the Cossacks which would give them a guaranteed status as an "*archipelago state*" within Russia, made up of 12 Federal Cossack Regions (each broadly analogous to a Host) united by a *Council of Atamans* responsible not to the government so much as the person of the President. In many ways, this parallels their historical relationship with the tsar.

Like the tsars, today's Russian leaders have turned to the Cossacks for internal and external security. Since 1990, Cossack vigilantes have patrolled the streets of many Russian cities, armed with clubs, sabres and *nagaykas* (traditional whips). The regional administration in the southern Russian region of Krasnodar went further, in 1992 hiring armed Cossack units to patrol the countryside on horseback and in armoured vehicles (BBC SWB, 4 September 1992). The section on law enforcement

in the Law on Cossacks - drafted by the Interior Ministry - formalises this role, establishing the dubious precedent of giving full police powers of search and arrest to untrained, armed vigilantes responsible to their elders rather than the authorities. They have also begun to regain their traditional role as guardians of Russia's borders and, over the protests of the Defence Ministry, as soldiers. In 1992 Boris Yeltsin decreed the reformation of Cossack regiments (Galeotti, 1993). Although the company established in the Transbaikal Military District's 'Port Arthur' Motorised Infantry Regiment in 1992 has hardly proved an outstanding success, the new law envisages a regiment being drawn from each of 12 Hosts. What is not clear is quite where they would fit within the chain of command. They would be funded from the national defence budget, but would be subordinated to Cossack *atamans* and thus, by extension, directly to the President.

Cossacks are not necessarily only important as agents of the state. Many have also turned to crime, as enforcers, dealers and racketeers. In particular, the network of the 'Cossack Brotherhood' facilitates cooperation between different groups of criminal Cossacks. In Khabarovsk, for example, the Ussuri Host has close links with the *Edinstvo* ('Unity') organisation, itself widely seen as a front for the dominant consortium of local criminals. In northern Kazakhstan, Cossack gangs use the *zemlyachestvo* as a structure through which to establish alliances with organised crime in Russia. In particular, the *Semirechiye* Association of Almaty stands accused of running a smuggling ring in cooperation with Cossacks from Ekaterinburg in Russia (Oxford Analytica, 1995).

While by no means a monolithic unity, the Cossacks thus represent a powerful economic and political force, at local, national and international levels. In Chechnya, for example, they proved a significant lobby for intervention, as the Terek Host has an historical interest in parts of the region. More generally, Cossacks are present in, or have claims to, many volatile and disputed regions of the FSU. In some cases, they seem to have been acting as political or even military actors without any effective national control. The Cossacks are not necessarily always mavericks, though. From the times of Ivan the Terrible in the 16th century, they were used to launch raids against rival states which the tsar could then disown. Today's relationship between the Cossacks and the Russian state is equally complex.



### Cossacks in the Caucasus

There are Cossack populations in all the North Caucasian regions and states, the result of a migration dating back to the latter 16th century. The Kuban Host is based in the southern Russian regions of Stavropol' and Krasnodar, and has not shown particular radicalism. The traditional territory of the Terek Host, by contrast, sprawls across Osetia, Daghestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia. Both as a result of the greater opportunities presented by the chaos in the region and as a response to local pressures, the Terek Host has adopted an aggressive stance in support both of the maintenance of Russian control over the region and the return to the Cossacks of their old lands. In Chechnya, they lobbied strongly for the invasion, drawing on their connections with Nationalities Minister (and later Presidential proconsul in Grozny) Nikolai Yegorov, a man hailing from Krasnodar.

Even in relatively quiet Daghestan, the Host has warned that it would fight any movement advocating local autonomy both politically and militarily. Embattled and radicalised, the Terek Host advocates the creation of a 'Cossack

Republic' uniting Kizlyarskii district (*raion*) from Daghestan, Prokhladnenskii district from Kabarda-Balkaria, Mozdokskii district from North Osetia and the Terek region of Chechnya (*Izvestiya*, 12 August 1993). Such claims carry with them the potential for inter-ethnic wars and cleansings akin to those of Yugoslavia.

Not that the region is a stranger to internecine conflicts. In the defence of their co-religionists, Cossack volunteers have fought alongside Armenians in their war with Azerbaijan and Osetians and Abkhazians against the Georgians. Indeed, the more than 12,500 Sunzha Cossacks in Northern Osetia threatened to migrate to Stavropol' region in late 1991, but most ended up staying, many to defend Osetian interests against Georgia.

### Cossacks and The Far East

There are more than 24 Cossack organisations in the Khabarovsk and Maritime Territories, dominated by the Ussuri Host. Here they have mainly concerned themselves with rediscovering their traditions of border service and criminal activity. In 1991, the Transbaikalian Border District commander granted the Cossacks territory along

the frontier which they would then police, and similar deals have been struck near Khabarovsk and Ussuriisk in the Far East. While in part this reflects a rational exchange, it has also left the Cossacks open to the manifold temptations of smuggling. As discussed above, through their links with the *Edinstvo* movement, local Cossacks have worked their way into the world of organised crime (BBC SWB, 23 August 1994).

The one political issue which has aroused the anger of the Far Eastern Cossacks has been the proposal that Russia should return the disputed Kurile islands to Japan (in return, it is understood, for generous credits). The Cossacks of South Sakhalin, Ussuri and Amur have instead launched a campaign for Cossack settlement of the Kuriles, to forestall any such a deal.

### Cossacks in Ukraine

A Ukrainian Cossack state existed in part of Ukraine in the 17th and 18th centuries. The local Cossack tradition is thus ambiguous in its relationship with Russia, something the Ukrainian government has been quick to exploit. With perhaps a million Cossacks in Ukraine, and already aware of the large ethnic Russian population in the east of the country, Kiev felt it had to pacify or co-opt them. As a result, in 1992 it decided to raise a Cossack regiment, and later that year, an assembly of Ukrainian Cossacks symbolically repudiated their 1654 oath of allegiance to the Russian crown (BBC SWB, 29 June 1992). In 1993, agreement was reached on the raising of Cossack units to guard Ukrainian borders.

Even so, the Cossacks do represent a potential problem for the Ukrainians. Some, most notably the Lugansk Cossacks, support a 'Greater Russia'. They have encouraged Russian Cossacks to lay claim to portions of Ukraine, notably those with large Russian populations. This is a particularly dangerous issue in the Crimean peninsula, where Ukrainian-Russian tensions are at their sharpest. Russian Cossack money has funded several anti-Ukrainian newspapers and groups, and armed Cossacks have been intercepted on their way to 'assist their Russian brothers.' As if this were not enough of a headache for Kiev, radical Ukrainian Cossacks have retaliated by raising claims to the Kuban region of southern Russia, albeit without any government sanction.

### Cossacks in Moldova

The politics of Moldova are dominated by the periodically hot and cold civil war between the legitimate government in Chisinau (Kishinev) and the secessionist 'Dneistr Republic', based in Tiraspol. In October 1991, Cossacks in the ethnically-Russian 'Dneistr Republic' appealed for support in their struggle against the predominantly Romanian government. The response from the Cossack Brotherhood was prompt and sizeable, with volunteers from the Don, Kuban and Terek Hosts turning up to join the secessionist cause (*Komsomol'skaya pravda*, 21 March 1992).

In mid-1993, the leader of one of the Cossack groups in the region declared that they would

*"continue to maintain the Russian empire's borders from the Pacific to the Baltic."*

(Dawisha and Parrott, 1994).

Two years on, the Cossack position remains the same. Even while the Russian 14th Army prepares to withdraw from the region, leaving behind only peacekeeping contingents, Cossacks have been reinforcing their political, military and economic presence in Moldova, while continuing to lobby Moscow to support the 'Dneistr Republic.'

### Cossacks in Kazakhstan

The revival of nationalism in the decaying USSR brought with it special problems for Kazakhstan, divided as it is between a Kazakh south and a north where ethnic Russians are in the majority. Feeling threatened by Kazakh nationalism, the Russians themselves became more aware of the roots. This led to a particular Cossack revival centred around the towns of Ust-Kamenogorsk and Uralsk. By September 1991, they were explicitly cultivating links with Cossacks in Russia, and for their celebrations of the four hundredth anniversary of the formation of the Cossacks invited representatives from the Don, Urals, Siberian, Kuban and North Caucasus regions. This gathering led to the formation of a *Union of Cossacks of the Volga and Ural*, including a large area of northern Kazakhstan. This was much more than just a piece of empty rhetoric. That same month, some 700 Cossack irregulars crossed into Kazakhstan in support of local Cossacks, and a force of 5,000 government forces and supporters had to be mobilised to repel them.

The *Union of Cossacks* and *Union of the Cossack Armies in Russia* both took steps towards establishing paramilitary arms in Kazakhstan, to the alarm of the native authorities. The 1992 New Year issue of the Russian Cossack newspaper *Stanitsa* did, after all, warn that while some Cossack land was,

*“temporarily under Kazakhstan control...a well-founded struggle is being waged for bringing about its annexation to Russia, the historical homeland. We offer our caring hands to Ural Cossacks, Siberian Cossacks and Semirecheniye Cossacks.”* (in Grau, 1993).

Since then, although Kazakh President Nazarbaev has proved a masterful manager of inter-ethnic relations, the Cossack movement has grown in size and radicalism. The Almaty-based *Semirechiye* association has acquired particular notoriety for its activities (not least criminal). Its leader, Nikolai Gunkin, was arrested in December 1994 for organising an illegal demonstration, and his subsequent release has allowed him to trade upon his martyr's status. In the light of the new Russian law, he has opened a campaign to win Russian citizenship for the Semirechiye Cossack Host. This places both the Russian and Kazakh authorities in a very difficult position. If Moscow agrees, it has sanctioned the formation of an expatriate community in a neighbouring state and by implication created a fifth column. If it denies the petition, it risks alienating the wider Cossack community. As for Almaty, it can either see parts of Kazakhstan become Russian enclaves or it risks apparently vindicating Cossack and Russian allegations of repression and discrimination.

### The Cossacks and the Future

*“They are organised, hierarchical and disciplined, and they possess substantial reserves of both weapons and men trained in their use. They are becoming increasingly wealthy as a result of their willingness to support common economic enterprises (a Cossack bank and pension fund are being formed) and, in some cases, their involvement in criminal activity, particularly protection rackets.”* (Oxford Analytica, 1994).

The Cossacks have clearly developed a power base largely beyond effective government control. They also have a symbolic role, redolent of a now-mythologised tsarist ‘Golden Age’ which ensures them a voice in Moscow. This is especially dangerous as not only does the *zemlyachestvo* cross national boundaries but it has a political agenda explicitly subversive of the existing status quo in the fSU.

When Nikolai Gunkin was arrested, for example, the Russian Foreign Ministry made a point of issuing a statement which, while full of the rhetoric of compromise, made it clear that Moscow believed it had a right and a duty to safeguard Cossack interests, even within a notionally sovereign neighbour. The Cossacks are thus encouraging Russia to revise or ignore post-Soviet boundaries, while themselves intervening abroad. Nor is this limited to the fSU. Cossack mercenaries and volunteers are fighting alongside Bosnian Serb forces in former Yugoslavia, while the *Union of Cossacks* has consistently lobbied for Russia to adopt a strong line on supporting fellow slavs in the region.

In the words of Vladimir Naumov, *Ataman* of the Cossack Union:

*“The Cossacks created Russia, they built it and assembled it bit by bit and will never destroy what was done by our ancestors.”* (BBC SWB, 18 January 1993)

Yet it is perhaps worth noting that while the Cossacks were rightly characterised as one of the tsars' most efficient and loyal servants, they also provided the leaders of most rebellions of the last few hundred years. Their distinctive blend of ethnic assertiveness, Russian nationalism, anti-semitism and martial panache will ensure that they maintain a disproportionate role in post-Soviet Eurasia, but one hard to reconcile with the region's stability.

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