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## SOCIO-CULTURAL PROCESSES IN THE FORMER COSSACK REGIONS OF SOUTHERN RUSSIA

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### *Abstract*

The purpose of the article is to analyze the socio-cultural processes in the Cossack regions, the objectives are to review the policies of the Communist Party in relation to the Cossacks and identify factors that prevented the dissolution of Cossacks in Soviet society. The status and life activity of Cossack communities in southern Russia during the post-war decades have not yet been subjected to a special study by scientists. The study showed that the changing policy of the Soviet leadership reflected on the status and position of the Cossacks in Soviet society. The focus on "exposure to peasantry" of the Cossacks was determined by a number of factors: distrust of the party bureaucracy to the Cossacks, collaboration of some Cossacks during the war, a change in the military significance of the cavalry. The authors established and analyzed the most important factors of preservation of socio-cultural identity of the Cossacks in the second half of the 1940s and early 1960s, which included traditions, culture, and social (corporate) memory. It was concluded on reasoned grounds that if in the second half of the 1940–1950s the Cossacks of Southern Russia still represented a visible ethnographic community, then from the 1960–1970s the dissolution process of Cossacks in the rural and urban population proceeded at a very rapid pace. However, by the mid-1980s assimilation has not been completed yet, which created conditions for the revival of the Cossacks in the traditional Cossack regions and territories of Southern Russia.

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**Keywords:** Assimilation, Don cossacks, Kalmyks, decossackization, social identity.



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## **1. Introduction**

In the late 1980s, an ambiguous and contradictory revival process of Cossack communities as public organizations began. Several legislative acts of the 1990s led to the expansion of the Cossack revival process. Cossack organizations were granted the state status, the right to perform public service, including military, customs, and environmental protection. But the problem of adapting the reviving Cossacks to modern conditions is still very relevant.

The revival movement of the descendants of the Cossacks was formed under the influence, primarily, of social and cultural reasons: the search for a new social identity, the desire to return the lost past. It developed in many regions of Russia, but was especially active in the south of Russia, in the territories of traditional residence of the Cossacks, which at the beginning of the 20th century were part of the Don, Terek, Kuban and Astrakhan troops.

An analysis of historiography allows us to confidently assert that the study of the life of Cossacks in the South Russian region during the post-war decades, the dynamics of their social attitudes, and the transformations of their culture and life is an urgent scientific task. In particular, the results of such studies allow us to judge, with considerable understanding, the nature and trends of the revival process of the Cossacks, which began from the second half of the 1980s. In this regard, in the context of this publication, we attempted to give an overview of the post-war decades of the life of the Cossacks, limiting the chronological framework from 1945 to the beginning of the 1960s.

## **2. Problem Statement**

In the scientific literature devoted to the past of the Cossacks, the post-war period is among the least studied. In Soviet historiography, issues concerning life of the Cossacks in the South of Russia (Don, Steppe Pre-Caucasian region and the North Caucasus) in the post-war period were steadily ignored, since this subject of study was no longer relevant in the eyes of both government officials and scientists in connection with the dissolution of Cossack communities in the mass of collective farm peasantry. In post-Soviet historiography, there were no cardinal changes in relation to the topic of interest to us. In fact, this was described in the innovative works of Dronov (2016, 2019), Matishov, Savelyeva, and Slyunina, (2019), Ochirov (2006), Maksimov (2016), Ryblova (2013), Skorik (2012) and other researchers. However, they can be considered as the first real steps towards a thorough scientific analysis of the historical trajectory of the Cossacks of Southern Russia from the mid-1940s to the end of the 1960s of the XX century. A special place here is occupied by a fundamental work – a collective monograph in 3 volumes "The History of Kalmykia from Ancient Times to the Present Day" (Maksimov & Ochirova, 2009), where special chapters and sections are devoted to the ethnic and military-political history of the Don Kalmyk Cossacks, "buzavy"; however, the problems of preserving their socio-cultural status are only just outlined.

## **3. Research Questions**

The subject of this article is the position and life of the Cossack communities of the South of Russia during the post-war decades.

Back in the second half of the 1930s a political campaign "for the Soviet Cossacks" was launched. In the first post-war years, the inertia of this campaign was still strong enough, which made it possible to designate the "Soviet Cossacks" as a special group of the collective farm village population, which no longer had any socio-economic privileges, but had the right to preserve its unique ethnographic appearance and propagandize traditions and culture.

However, subsequently, a radical change in the attitude of the Soviet party leadership to the Cossacks during the 1950s led to a turn in politics as well – a course was held for "exposure to peasantry", that is, the dissolution of the Cossacks in the collective farm peasantry. But, as the study showed, the assimilation process of Cossacks was hindered by a number of circumstances, for example, the stability of their traditional culture, which gave rise to the revival of the Cossacks in the future.

#### **4. Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the article is to analyze the socio-cultural processes in the Cossack regions, the objectives are to review the policies of the Communist Party in relation to the Cossacks and identify factors that prevented the dissolution of Cossacks in Soviet society.

#### **5. Research Methods**

In the analysis of information collected empirically, general scientific methods of analysis, synthesis and generalization were used. The source-study method of working with historical sources, in particular with the testimonies and memoirs of contemporaries, helped in the search and identification of factual material. Comparative-historical and problem-chronological methods made it possible to reveal the essence of the processes that took place in the Cossacks environment in the period under study and to connect them with modern processes. In addition, the methodological tools of historical anthropology are used, for example, when studying the mentality of the Cossacks, which helps to understand their social behavior.

#### **6. Findings**

The choice of temporal boundaries of our work is due to the following considerations. It is obvious that throughout the Soviet era the leading trend concerning Cossack communities was their assimilation in a socialist society devoid of class partitions. However, in the second half of the 1940s – early 1950s still retained the inertia of the political course developed since the mid-1930s (the campaign "for Soviet Cossacks"), according to which the Cossacks should be separated from the collective farm peasantry, to keep up their culture and traditions, etc. Although in the 1950s governmental authorities decided to abandon this political course and not prevent the dissolution of the Cossacks in Soviet society until the early 1960s the assimilation of the Cossacks progressed slowly and did not become irreversible. All this gives the marked period an independent character, allows us to consider it as a separate stage of socio-cultural processes in the Cossack regions of Southern Russia.

Since 1945, the bulk of the Cossacks lived within the borders of the Rostov and Stalingrad (since December 1961 – Volgograd) regions, the Kalmyk ASSR, the Stavropol and Krasnodar territories, the

Chechen-Ingush ASSR. It is not possible to determine the exact number of Cossacks in these areas in the post-war decades due to the lack of relevant information in the sources and official statistics. We can only assert with a certain degree of certainty that the number of Cossacks in the post-war period was lower than in the mid-1920s when they passed the only census in the Soviet era. Thus, according to the census of 1926, in the Salsky District and neighbouring areas of the North Caucasus region, 10.3 thousand representatives of the Kalmyk population (including from the former Cossack families) were recorded living in 100 settlements and 36 village councils.

The establishment of a special Kalmyk region on the territory of the Salsky district in April 1929 facilitated the consolidation of the Kalmyks, their relocation to a compact region, where previously the majority (13) of Kalmyk Cossack villages and hamlets were traditionally located in the Province of the Don Cossack Host. As a result, in 1930 the population of the district increased to 8.5 thousand, and the ethno-cultural traditions of the Buzavy Cossacks were preserved. But, after the Nazi occupation of the Rostov Region and the Kalmyk Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic, the Soviet government decided for a number of well-known reasons to relocate the Kalmyks to Siberia and Kazakhstan (Campaign "Khanates"). In March – April 1944, more than 700 families (about 3 thousand people) were deported from the Kalmyk region, and the national (Kalmyk Cossack) region was liquidated. An even more difficult situation was observed in the Republic of Kalmykia, after the repressions of 1943–1945. However, during the "thaw", rehabilitation of repressed peoples began, since 1956 the Kalmyk Autonomous Region was restored as part of the Stavropol Territory, and on July 29, 1958 – the Kalmyk Autonomous Republic. Quite often, Kalmyk Cossack families returning from deportation areas, arriving to the places of former residence in the Rostov and Volgograd regions, did not find the opportunity to stay there and gradually moved to the KASSR, finally breaking with ethno-social traditions.

The heavy losses during the Great Patriotic War, deportation and resettlement, and, most importantly, – the elimination of class restrictions by the Soviet government and increased social mobility, all this inevitably led to a steady reduction in the number of Cossacks. Since the class isolation of the Cossacks was eliminated, representatives of the Cossack communities often ceased to consider themselves Cossacks and joined the ranks of workers, collective farmers, intelligentsia, etc.

Nevertheless, at the end of the Great Patriotic War, Cossack communities still retained a special status as part of the collective farm peasantry, which they were given in the second half of the 1930s, as part of the political campaign "for the Soviet Cossacks" developing at that time. In the first post-war years, the inertia of this campaign was still strong enough, which made it possible to designate the "Soviet Cossacks" as a special group of the collective farm village population, which no longer had any socio-economic privileges, but had the right to preserve its unique ethnographic appearance and propagandize traditions and culture.

However, during the 1950s the political course towards the Cossacks changed dramatically. In the governmental circles of the USSR, the prevailing opinion was that there was no need to separate the Cossacks from the mass of the village population and that their fate was to dissolve into the collective farm peasantry. One of the most important motives for this decision is the logical incompatibility of Cossacks events, on the one hand, and desire of the Communists for social unification of the rural population — on the other. From the development of complete collectivization, it was taken for granted

that the vast majority of the population of the Soviet countryside should be the collective farm peasantry. The existence of the Cossacks, albeit collective farm, was contrary to the spirit of social engineering of the Bolsheviks.

Among other factors in change of the state policy regarding the Cossack communities of Southern Russia, let us single out the mistrustful and hostile attitude towards the Cossacks that had existed among the party-Soviet bureaucracy since the Civil War and only intensified due to the collaboration of a certain part of the Cossacks during the period of Hitler aggression. It was also determined by the fact that after the Second World War, which demonstrated the inefficiency of cavalry in modern combat conditions, the preservation of the special status of the Cossacks as a reserve of professional cavalymen no longer made any practical sense. After 1952, the Cossacks gradually disappeared from the rhetoric of officials of the Soviet Union.

However, the assimilation process of Cossacks was hindered by a number of circumstances. Among such factors we note the following: glorification in the scientific and fiction literature and cinema of the Cossacks as defenders of the Motherland and fighters for the freedom of the people; preservation of traditional Cossack culture elements; the stability of the collective memory of the Cossacks about their origin and special socio-cultural image.

A serious obstacle to the dissolution of Cossack communities was their traditional culture. In the historical period under consideration, the cultural traditions of the Cossacks were still relatively strong. In particular, the folklore tradition was preserved, which found expression, first of all, in choral singing. As rightly noted by Rudichenko and Ryblova (2014), "in the post-war period, folk choirs still existed in Cossack settlements" (p. 36), in which, given the gender-related demographic changes caused by the war years, women played the main role. In the villages and hamlets, one could often hear singing: as noted in one of his novels in the mid-1960s the famous Don writer Kalinin (1981), in summer in the evening time they sing songs around the village – Cossacks cannot live without songs.

Traditional culture was also subject to dissolution and was losing ground, but not rapidly. Rostov journalist and writer Varenik (2010) figuratively described it, recalling how

Cossack songs sounded on the bank of the Don. And not just songs, but many-voiced old chants – the dream of a folklorist. In the sixties they sounded on the bank in chorus, in the seventies voices were heard, lonely singing something intricately old. In the eighties they also fell silent. (p. 157)

Despite the weakening of traditional culture as generations changed, Cossack traditions were preserved thanks to the activities of enthusiastic researchers and folk groups. In the Soviet era, the development of amateur art was encouraged, the organizing centers of which in the village were the cultural centres, village reading rooms, village halls. During the post-war decades, along with national ensembles on the Don and in the North Caucasus, there were old and new folk Cossack choirs and ensemble of folk singing and dancing. The functioning of amateur groups contributed to the preservation and popularization of traditional culture. In turn, the sustainability of the cultural tradition in the second half of the 1940s – mid-1980s contributed to the preservation of the Cossacks of Southern Russia and the North Caucasus as an ethnographic community.

In addition, the memory of their Cossack origin was preserved in many families, which was another important factor in preserving the socio-cultural identity of the Cossacks. Fomenko (1966) in his

novel "Memory of the Earth" about the resettlement of the Cossacks in connection with the construction of the Tsimlyansk dam. Although from the time of collectivization, Don Cossack communities have lost their former isolation and cohesion, according to Fomenko, though, in the villages and hamlets

... there lives ... a special, stanitsa spirit." It is easier to work here for the newly arrived secretary of the district committee or the director of the viticulture farm if he is a Cossack. You cannot even determine how they will find out, but some local workers of the stockpiling base or seed stock will surely come to him in a day or two and meantime they will ask: "Is this your father – Petro Ilyich Gurov — a teacher in the Bogatyrev farm? .. And is your mother from Lower Ternovka?" And, having learned that it is true, that the new director has Cossack roots, visitors cheerfully exclaim: "Aha! And we think: what kind of man is that Gurov who has arrived here? Well, that means that we, actually, so ... And in a week the whole district knows what kind of man Gurov is, and everyone struggles not to fail him. "Our!.. (p. 48)

These literary statements are confirmed by the testimonies of his contemporaries. Thus, the famous researcher of the history of the Don Cossacks Venkov (1988) recalls that in the 1960s – the time of his childhood, "in our stanitsa [Veshenskaya], the Cossack or non-Cossack origin was treated jealously, although they did not voice it demonstrably"; once, "in the fourth grade, the fat and impudent Seryozha Melnikov invited us to visit him and proudly showed on the wall a portrait of his grandfather, the "sotnia commander". Then our guys told me that Seryozha classified which of us is an ethnically pure Cossack, who is not ..." (p. 34).

At the same time, the memory of the Cossack origin was most firmly held in those families whose senior members had issues with the Soviet government due to the fact that they or their parents (relatives) faced reprisals or dekulakization. The descendants of the Cossacks, who supported the Soviet regime, calmly reacted to the dissolution of the Cossacks in the mass of the rural and urban population of the USSR. To a certain extent, this circumstance led to the fact that, when in the second half of the 1980s the revival of the Cossacks began, the motives of not only the revival of traditions, but also anti-Soviet revenge were prevalent.

However, there is no reason to exaggerate the resistance of Cossack communities to assimilation. By the mid-1980s, the dissolution process of the Cossacks in Soviet society had made significant progress. It is revealing that even in the context of the ongoing Cossack revival, there is no rapid increase in the number of Cossacks, but there is still a process of "dissolution of the rural Cossack population". In the course of the All-Russian Population Census of 2002, only 140 thousand citizens of the Russian Federation indicated their belonging to the Cossacks, including 87.5 thousand in the Rostov Region and 20.6 thousand in the Volgograd Region (1.99 % of the total population in these areas) (Masalov, 2014).

According to the 2010 census, only 29,682 people (0.71 % of the population) in the Rostov region ranked themselves as Cossacks (Dronov, 2016, 2019). In the Volgograd region, 18.5 thousand people called themselves Cossacks, in the Republic of Kalmykia – 65 (0.02 % of the population) (all-Russian census 2010).

## 7. Conclusion

Thus, it should be noted that in the post-war USSR the Cossacks of the South-East of Russia and the republics of the North Caucasus gradually transformed along the process of assimilation in the structures of Soviet society. This process was ideologically and politically motivated by the Soviet Communist regime, mainly by non-Cossack and another nation environment; at the same time, it was also objectively reasoned. In the conditions of social partitions collapse, increased social mobility, urbanization, strengthening the collective farm system, the Cossacks could no longer exist in its traditional form. Therefore, if in the second half of the 1940–1950s the Cossacks of Southern Russia still represented a visible ethnographic community, then from the 1960–1970s the dissolution process of Cossacks in the rural and urban population proceeded at a very rapid pace. However, by the mid-1980s assimilation has not been completed yet, which created conditions for the revival of the Cossacks in the traditional Cossack regions and territories of Southern Russia, in the Republic of Kalmykia and several territories of the North Caucasus republics.

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