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The Role of the Cossacks in Putinist Russia

Dr. Richard Arnold

Russia and Ukraine can both lay credible claims to be heirs of the Cossack legacy in Eastern Europe.¹ In Russia, there is a divide between those who consider “Cossack” to be an ethnic label and those who believe it a military estate such as the Samurai. Those of the (numerically smaller) latter position are known as the registered Cossacks- and this is the form that has rightly attracted the most attention from Western scholars.² The registered Cossacks play a broad role in Russian society. Today, the registered Russian Cossacks are split into 13 different hosts (or *voiska*) with some degree of central coordination provided by Kremlin-aligned outfits. This paper outlines the different roles played by the registered Cossacks in terms of being a paramilitary movement, an ideological *gendarmarie* for the Putin regime, internal security for Russia’s regions, and an educational force throughout the regions. It concludes by offering future implications. First, however, the paper identifies who the Cossacks are.

WHO ARE THE COSSACKS?

Cossacks first emerged in the sixteenth century on the lands around Zaporozhe and Rostov. There are at least two accounts of the origin of the Cossacks- one, that they were the descendants of slaves freed from the Crimean Khanate; two- that they resulted from the mingling of the Golden Horde with the indigenous Slavic peoples. Regardless, by 1648 Bogdan Kh’melnitskii had established the Hetmanate, the first proto-state structure in that Ukraine and the forerunner of the modern state. Faced with war with the Ottoman Empire, the Hetmanate accepted the suzerainty of Moscow in the 1654 Treaty of Pereiaslav, the memory of which is at the center of

¹ Arnold, Richard (Forthcoming) “Between Russia and Ukraine: The Cossack As Boundary” *Europe-Asia Studies*

² Van Herpen, Marcel (2014) *Putin’s Wars*

today's war, evidenced by Putin's references to the Cossacks in his speech before the declaration of war. The Zaporozhian Cossacks lived with greater freedoms under the Tsars- before Catherine the Great razed their fortress in 1774 and resettled them in Russia's Krasnodar region.

Throughout the 19th Century, Cossacks in other parts of Eurasia worked as sentinels on the imperial frontiers and even oversaw the brief expansion into California. As most of the Cossacks sided with the White forces in the Tsarist Civil War, the Bolsheviks embarked on a *razkazachen'ye*, or "decossackization"³ which today some Cossack activists remember as genocide- the anniversary of which they celebrate every January 24th. While Stalin revived Cossack memories for use in the Second World War, most Cossack presence in the later Soviet Union was cultural and limited to folklore circles.

It was in the post-Soviet era that hopes emerged for a *vozhzhdeniye*, a rebirth of the Russian Cossacks. A "big circle meeting" in Moscow in 1990 tried to lay the foundations of that rebirth.⁴ Although Cossacks fought variously in Abkhazia, Chechnya, and some of the other early 1990s conflicts, the rebirth appeared to be stillborn due to the fractured nature of the movement. Cossacks argued over whether "Cossack" was an ethnic or estate identity, whether Ukraine or Russia was the homeland, and whether there should be a Cossack republic in the North Caucasus- with some even supporting the notion of independence from Russia. These latter outlandish ideas were personified in the figure of Ataman (Cossack chief) Nikolai Kozitsyn⁵ who signed an agreement with Chechen separatist leader Dzhokhar Dudayev in 1993. Possibly to defuse the potential time-bomb of Cossack separatism in the North Caucasus, the Kremlin instituted the Cossack register in 1995.

Historically, the register had been a feature of Polish history rather than Russian. Nonetheless, the register established an institutional means for Cossacks to serve the state and thus answered one of their pleas. At the same time, the register ossified the division between those who conceived of Cossacks as a military estate, *soslovie*, and those who thought of the label as an ethnic group, *ethnos*. As a way of forestalling secession, this certainly worked, as now the idea

³ Holquist, Peter in Suny & Martin [Eds] (2001) A State of Nations

⁴ Derlugian & Cipko, 1997

⁵ Agafonov & Trut, 2019; Rvacheva, 2008

is almost extinct and lives on mostly through exiles.⁶ At the same time, the government has tried to commandeer the movement and there now exists a national organization (the *Vserossiskoe Kazach'ye Obshchestvo*, VSKO- led currently by Vitaly Kuznetsov but formerly by Nikolai Doluda) and 13 regional *voiska*, or hosts (see below).

Although the register was created under Boris El'tsin, service was not to be most common activity for the Cossacks under his rule and it took until 2004 and the aftermath of the Orange Revolution for Putin really to harness the potential of the group. In certain regions,⁷ the Cossacks were already established in many of the roles described in this paper, until Putin decided to nationalize those roles. As others have documented, Putin's use of the Cossacks has evolved and increased over time, to the point where we can distinguish four distinct roles: as soldiers, ideological standard-bearers, providers of internal security, and educators.

SOLDIERS IN THE WAR / PARAMILITARIES

The most attention-grabbing role the Cossacks play in Putin's Russia is as volunteer-soldiers in the current war. Figure 1⁸ below shows the self-disclosed number of Cossack warriors who have been rotated through the "Special Military Operation." The Cossacks have contributed around 30,000 soldiers as of February 2024 and have been an increasing number of members since the beginning of the operation, with a sharp increase after the Wagner mutiny of 2023. While no one to my knowledge has assessed Cossack casualties in the war, Krasnodar the region with the largest Cossack host, is the overall leader in numbers of casualties.⁹ Further, the Don, Stavropol, and Orenburg regions which each have sizeable Cossack *voiska* are also high up on the list of casualties.

⁶ See, for example, Paul Goble (2023) [Window on Eurasia -- New Series: Search results for Cossack \(windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com\)](https://windowoneurasia2.blogspot.com)

⁷ Arnold, Richard 2014

⁸ Data points from VSKO posts [April 2022](#), [October 2022](#), [December 2022](#), [March 2023](#), [April 2023](#), [July 17 2023](#), [October 2023](#), [December 2023](#), and [February 2024](#).

⁹ See the Mediazona project: [Russian casualties in Ukraine. Mediazona count, updated](#) accessed May 20th 2024



The force structure of the Cossacks reflects a variety of roles performed by the group. Organized through the BARS organizations (the Russian acronym for combat reserves), the Cossacks constitute some 20 battalions.¹⁰ Performing a variety of roles, the Cossacks work in reconnaissance, drone operation, assault squadrons, and infantry detachments. Some Cossacks are also included in other paramilitary structures such as Rosgvardiia. It is unclear what the criteria for joining as a volunteer under a specifically Cossack banner are- or even whether there are any criteria at all- but it is at least plausible that people sign up as Cossacks who might have no genuine affiliation with the movement.

There is some indication, too, that the Cossacks overlap with the more expressly commercial Private Military Companies (PMCs; *ChVK* in Russian). The head of the Konvoy PMC, for instance, Konstantin Pikalov, is a member of the Black Sea Cossacks and has used the Cossack image on Telegram channels to recruit members. Pikalov was also a member of Wagner where he operated under the call sign 'Mazai.'¹¹ Some have speculated that the reason the Prigozhin mutiny first seized the town of Rostov-On-Don was because the mutineers hoped to rally Cossack fighters to their cause- and the Don Cossacks are one of the most numerous *voiska*. Further, there are indicators that the Cossacks have been working together with the former members of Wagner- even being trained by them. Regardless, the contribution of the Cossacks to Russia's war is substantial and has been mostly overlooked by analysts in the West.

¹⁰ See Arnold (2024) [Cossack Fighters Replace Wagner Forces in Ukraine - Jamestown](#)

¹¹ See Arnold (2024) [Cossack Fighters Replace Wagner Forces in Ukraine - Jamestown](#)

IDEOLOGICAL STANDARD-BEARERS

Another important function performed by the Cossacks is as standard-bearers for Russian “imperial nationalism.”¹² With their history as guardians of Empire and frontier settler-communities, not to mention presence in former Soviet countries outside Russia, Cossacks exemplify Russia’s neo-imperialist ethos and present a familiar, if frightening, face to the outside world. It goes without saying that the Cossacks are also exemplars of turbo-patriotism and a highly militarized version. While the exact nature of Putin’s vision for Russia may be unclear, he clearly supports the re-establishment of Russia as a Great Power in the international system and some version of the Russian Empire. For this project, the Cossacks embody the ideology of the regime, and nowhere more so than in terms of religion.

While Cossacks were not historically of just one religion or one ethnic group, the official registered movement has cast itself an Orthodox equivalent of the Knights Templar. Cossacks routinely employ comparisons to soldiers of Christ and invoke the rhetoric of Patriarch Kirill. Similarly, the imprimatur of religious sanctification is often added to mundane Cossack events, such as the taking of the Cossack oath by members of the Terek Cossack brigade in a Luhansk church on April 6th 2024.¹³ For its part, the church has since 2012 maintained a vehicle for influencing the development of the Cossacks- known as the Synodal Committee for Interconnections with the Cossacks¹⁴- and performs rituals designed to bind individual Cossacks into the hierarchy.

So too has the regime sought to elevate the position of the Cossacks in Russia’s public historical narratives. This is discussed in more detail in the education section below. However, the Russian authorities are opening a “Central Museum of Russian Cossackdom” in Moscow sometime in 2024 and for now those interested in the phenomenon can use an interactive site.¹⁵ In numerous regions- Krasnodar, Rostov, Stavropol, Orenburg, and even Kamchatka,¹⁶ the Cossack-as-symbol

¹² Pain, 2016

¹³ See [Terek Cossack brigade in a Luhansk church on April 6th 2024](#)

¹⁴ See [Synodal Committee for Interconnections with the Cossacks](#)

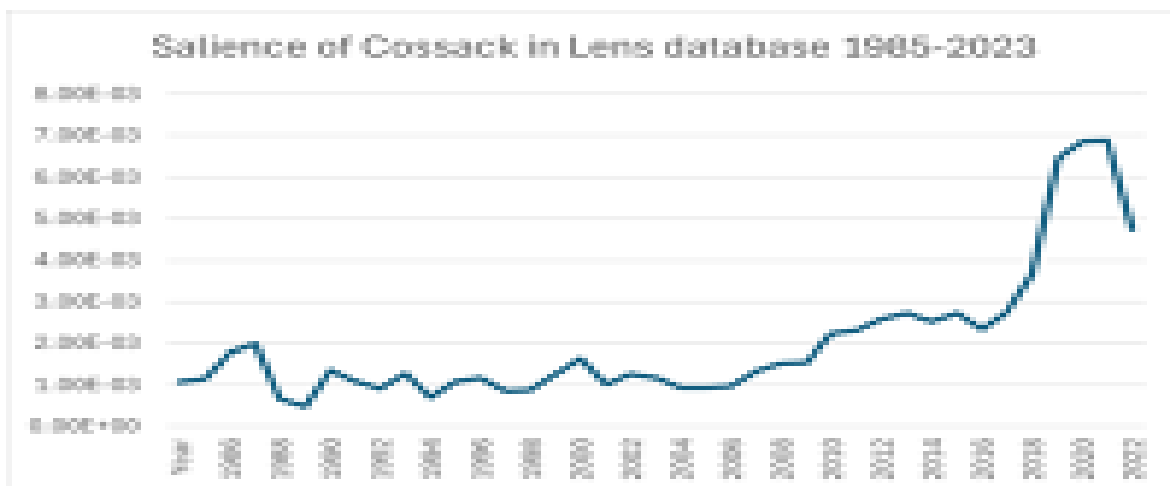
¹⁵ See <https://cs.shm.ru/> accessed 20th May 2024.

¹⁶ See [«Дорожный фестиваль: Казаки. Камчатка. Русь» стал победителем Президентского фонда культурных инициатив \(nia-rf.ru\)](#)

is being used to adorn memorials, festivities, and public events. It is not an overstatement to suggest the Cossack will be an integral component of an emergent ideology for the regime.

Similarly, Cossacks are establishing a presence in all regions of the Russian Federation as well as in the new territories. In 2006 there were ten *voiska* (Kuban, Don, Terek, Orenburg, Volga, Siberian, Irkutsk, Far Eastern, Zabaykalsky, and Yenesei), all on lands which could credibly claim Cossack ancestry. In 2007, however, the regime created the Central Cossack host for the area around Moscow which ostensibly sought to serve those who had been displaced by modernization and industrialization. Following the annexation of Crimea, the Black Sea Cossack host entered into the register of Cossack societies in 2015. The *Vserossiskoe Kazach'ye Obshchestvo*, VSKO itself was created in 2018. More recently, there has been a flurry of Cossack activity with the announcement of the North-Western Cossack host encompassing St. Petersburg and Kaliningrad in February 2024 as well as the creation of Cossack *voiska* in Luhansk, Zaporozhe, and Kherson, respectively.

Accordingly, the Russian Cossacks have recently become a subject of intense academic interest. Figure 2 shows the salience of the Russian terms Cossack and Cossackdom (*kazak/kazachestvo*) in the epistemic record on the Lens database which tracks and consolidates academic publications. The numbers are normalized as a percentage of the entire database to ensure that the ever-increasing quantity of publications does not create a false picture. As shown in Figure 2, the sharp spike in salience occurred after the annexation of Crimea. The decline in 2022-23 may be attributed to a lag in reporting data.



This is not to mention Kremlin attempts to reconcile ‘registered’ and ‘unregistered’ Cossacks themselves. For instance, services to commemorate the Cossack ‘genocide’ have increasingly involved the registered Cossack movement whereas the only people with authentic blood ties to the historical Cossacks are the [ethnic] unregistered (or “public”). There is evidence that the war itself is promoting this reunion between the two branches, with Vitaly Kuznetsov saying¹⁷ that “on the front lines there is no difference between registered and unregistered... The priority is the unification of the Cossacks.” Just as of old the Cossacks stood for Russia’s imperial domains, so too now they embody the same.

PATROLS AND SECURITY

The third role Cossacks play in modern Russia is in the provision of domestic security. Cossack patrols began appearing in Russia around the turn of millennium, although for a long time they would remain organized only at the regional level and mainly in Krasnodar and Rostov.¹⁸ In Krasnodar, armed Cossack formations made life very difficult for the Meskhetian (or Ahiska) Turk minority, which had been relocated across the Soviet Union following pogroms in Uzbekistan in 1989. At times, this also included violent attacks. Eventually, around half of the Meskhetians located in Krasnodar were given asylum by the U.S. government- although more are coming and claiming asylum, given the war and the predilection of the Russian government for using ethnic minorities as cannon fodder.

Patrols began spreading throughout the country after the Orange revolution. Patrols sprouted in Moscow, Kaluga, and Kirov in 2005, Samara, Tambov, and Lipetsk in 2007, the Karachay-Cherkess Republic, Sakha-Yakutia, Siberia, Magadan, and the Altai region in 2009, and Adygeya, Murmansk, and Moscow Oblast in 2010. More recently, Cossack patrols have expanded to Magadan, Primorskiy, and even Birobidzhan in the Jewish Autonomous Okrug. Throughout the country, the patrols have been testing the claim of Krasnodar governor Tkachyov that “what [the police] can’t do, a Cossack can.” Nor are the above-listed regions the extent of all the patrols,

¹⁷ See [Большое интервью атамана Всероссийского казачьего общества Виталия Кузнецова - Российское казачество, 18.12.2023 \(kazachestvo.ru\)](https://kazachestvo.ru/2023/12/18/bolshoe-intervyuu-atamana-vserossiyskogo-kazachyego-obshchestva-vitaliya-kuznetsova-rossiyskoe-kazachestvo-18.12.2023/)

but there are too many to list here: by October 2020, there were more than 500 Cossack vigilante patrols.¹⁹

Moreover, they have proven at least somewhat effective- or, more accurately, are reported as being somewhat effective. A 2004 article reported that “for three years, the municipal Cossack squads showed themselves well. During this time, the vigilantes made more than 20 thousand raids and over 10 thousand measures to identify and seize weapons, ammunition, and narcotic substances. More than 7 thousand crimes were solved on the Don with the help of Cossack vigilantes.”²⁰ After the introduction of Cossack patrols in Komi, “the quantity of household offenses has decreased, children do not walk alone after ten in the evening, and youth ‘tries to abstain from illegal behavior.’”²¹ These and many other examples testify to the perceived effectiveness of the patrols.

EDUCATION

The final role played by the Cossacks that will be discussed in this paper concerns their impact in education. It is no exaggeration to say that an entire subculture of Cossack education has emerged in Russia at all levels of the educational system. Predictably, such education feeds its recipients a diet of patriotic propaganda and, at younger ages, involvement in pre-military training. This section discusses the variety of ways in which Cossack education manifests itself at the adolescent, young adult, and professional levels.

While there is a system of Cossack kindergartens and children’s centers, Cossack education begins in earnest during the teenage years. First amongst such organizations is the Cossack Cadets Corps (known by its Russian acronym, KKK) where children learn military skills and detailed accounts of Cossack history plus compete in sporting competitions against each other. As of May 2024, there are 31 KKK organizations,²² each with about 500 participants, offering a very prestigious entry to a career. There are plans to develop more KKK organizations, including in the occupied territories. Cossack-themed classes at high schools ensure a broader reach and

¹⁹ See Arnold & Neeman (forthcoming) “The Last Push From the South”

²⁰ Orientier, 2004

²¹ Arteev, 2010

²² See [Казачьи кадетские корпуса | Всероссийское казачье общество \(vsko.ru\)](https://vsko.ru)

315 schools have a Cossack affiliation. Between Rostov and Krasnodar regions alone, this means over 185,000 children are enrolled in some form of Cossack education.

Likewise, there is a tertiary level of Cossack-themed education. The “first Cossack University named for Razumovsky’ is in Moscow and 26 Universities from throughout Russia have agreed to enter into a league of Cossack universities.²³ It is unclear what distinguishes a Cossack University from any other kind of university, but there are presumably different career paths open (such as in the “intellectual special forces”²⁴) as well as grant competitions for students to receive financial support. The universities are designed to help with creating the next cadres of Cossack elites.

Finally, there is also a program of continuing Cossack education for professionals. There is a system of further education for all postgraduates, including the introduction of Cossack Master’s and possibly doctoral degrees. Furthermore, there is an Academy of State and Cossack Service²⁵ which provides training at a minimum to those wishing to lead future KKK endeavors. The academy itself is in Ekaterinburg, but the training appears to be modules designed for delivery through the internet. Other, smaller programs designed to promote Cossack education also exist at the regional level as well. The system of Cossack education is thus designed to cover an individual’s entire career and to reproduce the values of the registered Cossacks.

FUTURE IMPLICATIONS

This paper has addressed four of the main roles played by Cossacks and Cossack organizations in modern Russia- and substantiated the claim that they are a group whose star is rising in Putin’s new, more bellicose Russia. It outlined the contribution Cossack volunteers are making in the war with Ukraine, the ideological role performed by the Cossacks, the security provided by Cossack patrols, and finally the contribution to education made by Cossack-themed structures. In all, the Cossacks have come a long way since the discussion of the “archipelago state” in the early 1990s.

²³ See [Список образовательных организаций высшего образования, давших согласие войти в Ассоциацию | Всероссийское казачье общество \(vsko.ru\)](#)

²⁴ See [Казачий бакалавриат МГУТУ: как стать частью интеллектуального спецназа - Российское казачество, 30.01.2024 \(kazachestvo.ru\)](#)

²⁵ See <https://xn--80agpi9a.xn--p1ai/> accessed May 20, 2024

The paper did not have time to go into the perceived “rebirth” of the Cossacks coming out of the war in Ukraine. Both the current leader of the VsKO, Vitaly Kuznetsov, and the main Duma representative Viktor Vodolatskii (who has responsibility for FSU affairs, Eurasian integration, and connections with compatriots) have lauded the war as helping lead to the unification of the ethnic and estate variants of the Cossack movement. Should that happen, it will massively increase the number of people eligible to join the ranks of the Cossacks- and perhaps obligate some. The Cossacks are back. May the hills tremble.

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