

Transformative Identities of the Cossacks: Past and present social organisation, and interaction with the state of the people that call themselves Cossack

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Introduction

The ethnic identity of the Cossacks in contemporary Bulgaria is one aspect of the complex relationship between the international Cossack diaspora and Russia. It is the result of identity politics in the past combined with present information warfare. The Russian governmental push for the 'revitalization' of the Cossacks at home in the Russian Federation (Putin, 2005, 2011, 2014) corresponds with the increasing political intervention of the Russian Federation abroad. In my research I was interested to understand how the international Cossack diaspora is related to what happens in the Russian state and whether it still negotiates its ethnic identity with the Russians. I wanted to see whether Russia attempts to project its image of the Cossacks in Russia on to those that have migrated in the past, those that have settled in Bulgaria.

Russian Cossack studies do not go beyond historical analysis of Russian Empire state-formation processes in the 15th century. Past and present historians and anthropologists argue that Cossacks are a distinct mix of Mongol steppe men, and originally Russian defecting serfs who try to escape their feudal overlords. For my first year of study, I conducted an ethnographic approach to understand what and who the Cossacks are, moving away from the traditional historical debates that saturate the Russian academic literature. I asked how Cossacks build their community, whether they see themselves as Russians, or as a distinctive Cossack ethnic group.



Учредяване на Бургаска Казашка станица, 1932 г.
Establishment of Cossacks stanitsa in Bourgas, Bulgaria 1932

Methods

Ethnographic data collection in village Kazashko, Bulgaria (19.08. - 21.08.2018)

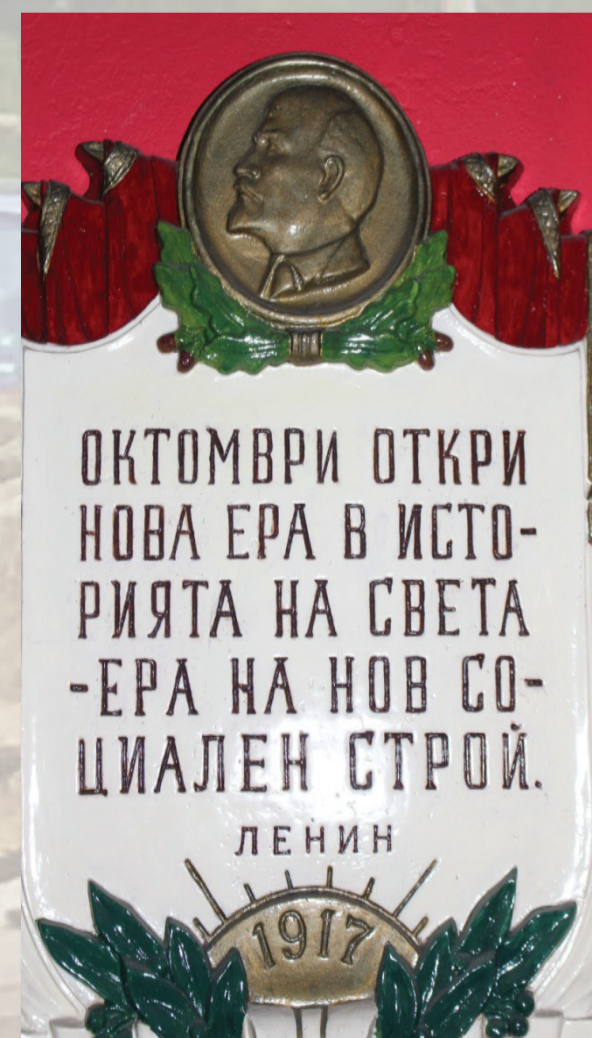
Attended Annual Village Gathering of the village commemorating 110 years since the official establishment. - Interviewed Cossack second generation diaspora activists from the One United Cossack Union in Bulgaria about what do they perceive as Cossack and what do they do as such in their Cossack communities.

- Archival primary data-collection from the Dossier Commission in Bulgaria about the first generation of Cossack immigrants in Bulgaria, researching their life-histories and seeing what they could tell.
- Policy-research of Russian Federation's legislation on the Cossacks 'registered service' in the state and abroad.
- Press and popular representation of the Cossacks in Russia and abroad.
- Analysing the International Agenda of the Russian Federation by reading Russian Foreign Ministry press releases.
- Reading Marxist thinkers of the Bolshevik Party like Stalin and Lenin and seeing how their intellectual effort on the National-Colonial question and how that corresponded to Russian and Western anthropological theory (Gumilev, 2001) (Barth, 1998) about ethnicity within the state.

Results

Cossack identity abroad fluctuates for personal, not historically defined reasons

1. personal interactions with the Bulgarian or Russian state define the ethnic identity of Bulgarian Cossacks.
2. A Marxist historical narrative still influences Russian policy making, in the field of ethnic minorities, and still affects how some Bulgarians think about ethnicity.
3. As a result of Russian ethnic policy there is now a clear distinction between Cossacks-in-Russia (where they have become a distinct professional group - police officers) and Cossacks abroad.
4. The Cossack abroad, however, is a target of Russian propaganda via NGOs to give the impression that Russia still cares for the Cossack diaspora.



'October founded a new era in history - an era of new social order' Lenin, 1917



'Cossack, who are you with: with us, or with them?' Bolshevik poster 1918



Representatives of the 'Society of the Cossacks in Romania' and me



Summary of findings

Cossack ethnic identity is unstable and there are various notions of what is to be a Cossack abroad.

There are two broad types of Cossacks:

- 'registered' Cossacks who associate themselves firmly with Russia and are officially recognised by the Russian state as Cossacks.
 - Cossacks who define themselves as such because they relate to a deceased ancestor who told stories about a Cossack ethnic community that was living in Russia, but was prouder than the Russians and in a way unique.
- Past and present education helps to influence ethnic identity of the Cossacks.

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