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In Sochi and Crimea, Cossacks Seek to Define Role in Society

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Cossacks attended a rally supporting the annexation of Crimea to Russia in the Russian city of Stavropol on March 18. Many Cossacks went to Crimea to support the pro-Russian government.

Dimiter Kenarov, a freelance reporter working in Crimea, was surprised to see a group of uniformed Cossacks hastily carrying cables and video equipment out of an Associated Press television studio.

When he and another photographer attempted to document the incident, they found themselves attacked and robbed at gunpoint, news reports said, one of a series of incidents of intimidation involving Cossacks in Crimea.

While traditionally thought of as historical figures more appropriate to novels by Gogol and Lermontov than the present day, Cossacks have taken the world stage both in the crisis in Crimea and at the Sochi Olympics.

As these bearded reactionaries have taken more airtime on international news networks, many observers abroad have found themselves wondering where they came from, and what official role they have in Russian government and society.

Indeed, the Cossacks themselves seem surprised by their sudden resurgence into the public view, and are unclear as to what exactly their role should be in modern Russian society.

Aiming to clarify matters, Cossacks and Russian Orthodox priests gathered last week at a conference dedicated to the 95th anniversary of Decossackization, or "Raskazachivaniye," the Soviet persecution of the Cossacks, and discussed the past and future of Cossack groups.

State Duma Speaker Sergei Naryshkin, in a statement read aloud to those assembled, described the conference as an opportunity to "open a new page in the history of Cossacks, who have always served the glory and good of the fatherland."

Origins of Cossacks

While the origins of Cossacks are hotly disputed, many modern historians believe that the military societies known as Cossacks first formed in the sparsely populated regions between the Dnieper and the Don river, on territory that is now part of Ukraine, in the late 14th and 15th centuries.

In this period, eastern Ukraine was a border region, fought over between Russia — then known as the Grand Duchy of Moscow — the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Crimean Khanate. The lack of central authority led locals to form militarized groups for self-protection, calling themselves "Kazaky" from the Turkic word "Kazak," meaning a free person.

As both the Polish and the Russians hired Cossacks as scouts and mercenaries in their wars with each other, the Cossacks became an increasingly influential force and grew swiftly as serfs fled feudal servitude in Western Ukraine to become free Cossacks. Eventually, different groups of Cossacks unified to form a group known as the Zaporozhian Host, named after their capital at the town of Zaporozhska Sich. After rebelling against the Poles in an uprising led by Bohdan Khmelnitsky in 1648, the Zaporozhian Host briefly existed as an independent state before swearing allegiance to Russia in 1654.

The assimilation of the Cossacks into the Russian state was a slow process, and not always a voluntary one — the original Zaporozhian Host rebelled against Russia several times and was finally disbanded in 1775, with Cossacks split up into smaller groups and resettled across the country, leading to the formation of separate Cossack hosts in Kuban, Kalmykia, Orenburg, and Siberia, among other locations.

While the initial Cossack hosts in Ukraine had been multi-ethnic and multiconfessional, including Christians, Jews, Muslims, and even Roma, the later Cossack hosts created within the Russian empire because increasingly Orthodox and Slavic.

The Cossacks were instrumental in the eastward expansion of the Russian empire and played an important role in the Russian military, achieving a privileged position in society. Cossacks helped to preserve order and quash dissent throughout the Russian Empire — their role

in repressing nationalist movements in the Caucasus and their participation in pogroms against Jews resulted in lasting feelings of enmity against the Cossacks from these ethnic groups.

When the Revolution came in 1917, Cossack groups overwhelmingly supported the pro-tsarist forces leading the unsuccessful civil war against the Bolsheviks. As a result of their role in fighting against the revolution, the Cossacks were singled out and targeted for elimination by the victorious Bolsheviks. The Soviet policy of Decossackization, adopted by a secret order in 1919, directed local parties to target wealthy Cossacks for elimination.

Historians estimate that 300,000 to 500,000 Cossacks were killed by the Bolsheviks, while other Cossack groups were split up and forcefully deported to other regions of the Soviet Union. Though the cossacks enjoyed a brief revival during World War II, for the most part their traditional culture was discouraged and gradually declined throughout the Soviet period.

Cossacks in Putin's Russia

Since the Soviet collapse, Cossacks have enjoyed a startlingly rapid revival. While the Cossacks seemed on the brink of extinction in the late Soviet era, their hosts reformed in the late 1980s, and more than 140,000 people identify as Cossacks in Russia today.

As Cossacks have grown again in numbers, they have reclaimed their old role as protectors of Russian tradition, and have also cultivated increasingly close ties with the Orthodox church, which also suffered under Soviet rule. Last week's conference was sponsored by the Orthodox church, and numerous priests and bishops were in attendance.

"The business of Cossacks today is to go to church and live by the Bible," said priest Timofei Chaikin, secretary of the Orthodox church's synodal committee for Cossack relations. "When a Cossack is in church, everything is in its place."

However, not only spiritual authorities have found a place for the Cossacks — local governments, especially in Russia's south, have taken to using Cossacks as unofficial extensions of law enforcement. In the southern Krasnodar region, which includes Sochi, Governor Alexander Tkachyov announced in September 2012 that 1,000 Cossacks would be hired as government employees to maintain public order amid public worries about the influx of Caucasus natives.

"What you can't do, the Cossacks can," Tkachyov told regular police officers in a speech. Cossack patrols later appeared in Moscow, though their lack of clear legal authority proved to make them largely ineffective in the capital.

More recently, Cossacks had a prominent role in the impressive array of security checks set up in Sochi for the Winter Olympics and Paralympic Games; uniformed Cossacks patrolled the Olympic facilities and got media exposure for publicly whipping members of the Pussy Riot protest group when they attempted to perform.

In the recent turmoil in Ukraine, Cossacks have appeared on both sides of the conflict: Some of the Euromaidan protesters called themselves Cossacks and used Cossack costumes and symbolism, while actual Russian Cossacks appeared in Crimea, where they were accused

of harassing journalists and suppressing opposition to the referendum on secession.

The Cossacks seem to possess a special significance due to the fact that they are not an official government force and thus can be used as auxiliaries of the Russian government without requiring the state to take full responsibility for their actions.

Cossacks at last week's conference expressed pride at their role in recent events at a hope for more influence in the future, a position supported by government officials at the event. "Putin has already formulated a plan to revive the Cossacks," said Nikolai Konstantinov, secretary of the presidential council on Cossack affairs.

In the foreword to a 2002 book by O.V. Agafonov on Cossacks in modern Russia, President Vladimir Putin wrote that "not only the ancient, but also the current history of Russia is unthinkable without Cossacks." Whatever role Cossacks do choose to take in modern Russia, one can be confident that they will only be more visible in years to come as their numbers continue to grow and their traditions revive.

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