

Russia

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Query:

Information on Terek Cossacks

Are Terek Cossacks at risk for persecution in Russia?

Response:

Background

Most historians trace the origin of the Cossacks to migrant serfs who established wheat-growing and stock-raising communities in the valleys of the Dnieper, Don and Ural rivers in the 14th and 15th centuries. The name Cossack derives from the Turkish word *kazak*, which means 'free person'. "Originally the Cossacks were free mercenaries who resided in a no-man's land. They eventually became a part of the Russian irregular military with the main objective of defending Russia's borderlands. As such, they were identified by their area of residence." (*Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, 1992, 103).

Terek Cossacks are considered an offshoot of the Don Cossacks and, like the Dons, are of Russian or Ukrainian ancestry. However, it is important to note that, today, many ethnic-Russians have "converted" to the Cossack way of life without being direct descendents of the Cossack Hosts of old (McAuley, 1997, 171). Further, while most Cossacks in the 19th century were either Russian Orthodox or Old Believers (an earlier form of Russian Orthodoxy), Cossacks today generally do not practice any religion, although the majority still consider themselves to be Christians (*Encyclopedia of World Cultures*, 1992, 107).

19th and 20th Century

Cossacks were usually considered to be loyal to the Tsar and were used as a special military or police force for the suppression of internal unrest. In the later part of the 19th century, the Tsarist Russian government used Cossack troops to perpetrate pogroms against the Jews; many Cossacks today still have a reputation for having anti-Semitic beliefs (Conflict Studies Research, 1997, 15).

During the Russian Revolution, the Cossacks sided with the White armies; as a result, when the Bolsheviks came to power, they extracted a harsh retribution. "Repression against the Cossacks started in 1919 and approximately 1,250,000 people suffered. Their property and livestock were confiscated, and their institutions, laws and customs were abolished. In April 1921 alone, 70,000 Cossacks were forcefully deported from the North Caucasus. By the end of the 1920's, the Cossack brotherhoods had ceased to exist." (Tishkov, 1997, 36).

The Cossack Cultural and Political Revival

During the last years of the USSR, Cossack organizations experienced a sudden revival. Initially, the goals of the renewed Cossack associations were cultural and historical in nature – to revive Cossack traditions and promote historical accuracy of Cossack lifestyles. However, in 1991, spurred by the slaying of five Cossacks in the North Caucasus, Cossacks became involved in politics and armed conflicts (Encarta, 1993, 2). That same year, the 1991 Law on the Repressed Peoples, which envisioned giving territorial and other compensation to ethnic groups repressed by the Bolsheviks, covered the Cossacks.

Today, Cossacks have been granted status as an ethnic group by President Boris Yeltsin, and have once again taken on the role of protectorate of Russian borders. In addition, despite extensive controversy, Yeltsin also agreed to arm the Cossack groups in order to protect ethnic- Russians from repression and to help stabilize the situation in the North Caucasus, like Chechnya.

As several Cossack associations, (Dons in particular but less so the Tereks), have taken on more radical nationalist views, many politicians and human rights activists are concerned about the consequences of armed Cossack units. The 'mobilization activities' pursued by Cossacks in border areas where large non-Slav populations exist, could actually incite a civil war rather than diminish conflict in the area. In an article on "Conflicts in the North Caucasus, Svante E. Cornell states:

According to human rights reports, Cossacks regularly persecute non-Russians, such as Armenians and Chechens, living in southern Russia, and authorities are doing little to restrain the aggressive behavior of Cossacks (Krichevsky, 1997, 1).

Conclusion

Clearly, the Cossacks had to face extensive repression and persecution in the early 20th century. However, in the late 20th century, it would seem that some Cossacks may more likely be found in the role of persecutor rather than the persecuted. Nevertheless, descendants of Cossacks (who are not involved with the nationalist Cossack movement) may encounter a backlash from non-Slavs in the Caucasus.

In fact, after the ataman (leader) of the Great Don Host suggested that the Union of Cossacks change their name to the Union of Cossack Armies, Yevgeny Martynov, head of the All-Russia Cossack group noted, "the name 'army' will be our funeral!" Unlike other Cossack leaders and associations, Martynov has encouraged Cossack groups to concentrate on reviving Cossack culture and building civic organizations, not armies. However, many Cossacks by birth, who are not involved in the Cossack movement, have fled the Caucasus to settle in areas with a more homogeneous, ethnic-Russian population to avoid a possible backlash (Mashtakova, 1996, 2).

This response was prepared after researching publicly accessible information currently available to the RIC and on the World Wide Web.

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