

# Russia

<b>Response to Information Request Number:</b>	RUS99002.ZHN
<b>Date:</b>	27 August 1999
<b>Subject:</b>	Russia: Cossacks and their role in Sochi (Krasnodar Krai)
<b>From:</b>	INS Resource Information Center, Washington, DC
<b>Keywords:</b>	Russia / Kuban' Cossack / Krasnodar Krai / Cossack Revival / Nationalism / Ethnic-Russians / 'Armenophobia'

## Query:

- 1) Do Cossacks appear openly, armed and in uniform, in the streets of Sochi?
- 2) Do Cossacks persecute members of the Sevan Organization?

## 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 14<sup>th</sup> and 15<sup>th</sup> 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)

In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, Zaporozh'e Cossacks, who were expelled from the territory of modern-day Ukraine, settled along the Kuban' river near the Black Sea. Hence, this new Cossack community was called either the Kuban' or Black Sea Cossack Host. (Boeck, 1998) Today, descendants of the Kuban' Host are found in the Krasnodar region of the North Caucasus, and are generally of Russian or Ukrainian ancestry.

### 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> 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 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Tsarist Russian government used Cossack troops to perpetrate pogroms against the Jews, and many Cossacks today still have a reputation for having anti-Semitic beliefs. (Conflict Studies Research, 1997, 15)

In the early 1900's, *inogorodnye* (immigrants) began to settle in the Kuban' lands that the Cossacks had won from the Circassians after nearly a century of warfare. Shortly thereafter, Cossacks campaigned for the recognition of a sovereign Kuban' not only to preserve the land, but the Cossack way of life. The Cossack national identity was formed during this period, and is still present today as Cossacks rally to "transform Krasnodar Krai back into the Kuban' region they view as historically and rightfully theirs". (Boeck, 1998)

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. In the book, *Ethnicity, Nationalism and Conflict After the Soviet Union*, Valery Tishkov explains:

#### 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. (Cornell, 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.

However, 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. According to Human Rights Watch, "Part of the Cossack ideology is virulently anti-ethnic migrant and its expression often degenerates into a general hatred towards all ethnic minorities, especially Chechens, Armenians and also the Jews." (HRW, 1998)

#### Cossacks in Krasnodar Krai

The Associated Press reports, "The local Communist Government in Krasnodar and the Cossacks have found a common language: a proud nationalism that thrives on the insecurities of an impoverished populace and targets minorities." (Charlton, 1999) In fact, Krasnodar's leaders have imposed residency rules that restrict immigration, indirectly favoring ethnic-Russians, and Cossack militias have been given the power to maintain order and monitor dozens of minority groups. (Charlton, 1999)

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 this aggressive behavior. (Krichevsky, 1997, 1) A certain 'Armenophobia' is widespread among Cossacks and other Russians living in Krasnodar, and the anti-Armenian feelings have deepened because of the huge influx of ethnic Armenian. In fact, in 1992, one hundred Cossacks, backed by two armored personnel carriers, seized the town hall of Kurganinsk in Krasnodar to protest the refusal of the local government to expel all ethnic Armenians from the region. (Arutiunov, 1997)

#### Conclusion

Angela Charlton writes, "When five uniformed Cossacks boarded the tram, conversations hushed mid-sentence, passengers' backs stiffened and the air seemed to chill." (Charlton, 1999) In Krasnodar, the Kuban' Cossacks now have government authority to conduct passport checks jointly with the police as well as perform quasi-military duties. Unfortunately, there have been numerous accounts in newspapers, academic journals, and NGO publications, reporting that Cossack units abuse this power regularly by harassing and targeting ethnic minorities.

No information could be found on the Sevan Organization despite extensive research using the Internet, Westlaw and Lexis-Nexis, as well as consultation with representatives from the State Department and Doctors Without Borders. The rest of this response was

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

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