

Cossacks

Profile

Cossacks were a social group that had begun to develop some ethnic characteristics prior to the Russian Revolution. Closely associated with martial arts and horsemanship and fiercely loyal to the Russian state, historically the Cossacks played an important role in the colonization of frontier regions as local guardians of vulnerable borders. In 2006 there were probably 1.5-2.0 million.

Historical context

Cossack communities (hosts) were formed in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries by runaway serfs. Traditionally Cossacks guarded the frontiers of the Russian Empire and in return were granted land privileges. Cossacks were also used to repress uprisings against the Russian state. By the end of the nineteenth century, Cossack settlement stretched from southern Russia to the Pacific. During the nineteenth century the Cossacks formed the Don Cossack Republic along the lower and middle reaches of the River Don.

Under the Soviets, Cossacks were deported and repressed. The Communist regime never recognized Cossacks as a national or ethnic group and they were listed as Russians or Ukrainians.

In the late 1980s, Cossack groups began to revive and the Association of Cossacks was formed (July 1990). Cossacks have presented themselves as guardians of Russia's frontiers, especially in the North Caucasus. Cossacks fought with the separatist forces in the Transdniester conflict in [Moldova](#) in 1992.

In June 1991 President Yeltsin issued a decree marking the political rehabilitation of Cossacks, and on 11 March 1993 Yeltsin signed a further decree granting them state support. In August 1995, Yeltsin announced that Cossack units would be formed in the Border Guards of the Russian Army. In 2005 mounted Cossack units were integrated into local police forces in Rostov oblast.

While Cossack communities are keen to revive the historical tradition of their role as an elite cavalry guard, the activities of some parts of the community have attracted criticism from Russian human rights activists. Legally unregulated Cossack paramilitary and vigilante groups have engaged extensively in violence directed at immigrants and ethnic minorities in regions of southern Russia, often with tacit official support. Georgia has also accused Russian Cossacks of assisting secessionism in South Ossetia.

The Cossacks have strong aspirations for local self-government and have also sought national autonomy. The Don Cossack Grand Council has led these demands. The Terek Cossacks, whose lands encompassed the territories of North Ossetia, Dagestan, Chechnya and Ingushetia, have aggressively pursued land claims, bringing them into conflict with North Caucasian peoples.

Current issues

In May 2005 the Russian State Duma passed a presidential bill formalizing the recruitment of Russian Cossacks' into state service in police, military and border guard units. The bill was intended to legalize unregulated practices of Cossack recruitment by providing a legal framework addressing Cossacks' role in military service and in combating terrorism. It also defined as legal entities Cossack hosts and villages. The bill further granted Cossack communities the right to select members for service in designated Cossack units.

In November 2005 the Don Cossacks reiterated their demand for a territorialized form of autonomy in the shape of a reconstituted Don Cossack Republic, which would also confer upon Cossacks the status of a distinct ethnic group. Sources in the presidential administration categorically rejected any such possibility.

Divisions still obtain within the Cossack population between those who are state registered and those who are not. Only members of state-registered hosts may serve in Russian military and law enforcement units.