

Xenophobic Youth Groups in Krasnodar/Sochi Russia: Cossacks

Abstract

This case study considered the role of xenophobia within Cossack movements in the Krasnodar region of Southern Russia. In contrast to existing literature which primarily considers the institutional dimension of Cossack organisations and their impact on the political scene, this research focused on issues of grassroots support of the Cossack movement, especially among young people in regional urban centres. The research revealed the importance of Cossack movements as both a space for youth activism as well as a “resource” – economic, cultural and institutional – that young people in the region could draw upon in negotiating their transitions to adulthood.

Keywords: Cossack, xenophobia, drug use, youth, subculture

Introduction

The main body of literature on contemporary Cossacks and Cossack ethno-cultural revival in the Russian Federation focuses on the institutional level of this movement and the role it plays on the political scene of post-Soviet, provincial Russia (Boeck, 1998; Derluguian, 1996; Laba, 1998; Markedonov, 2003; Tutsenko, 2001). The issue of Cossack identity construction has been investigated in the context of identity politics in the Russian regions as a response and challenge to policies of regional citizenship regimes under conditions of social, economic and political transformations (Derluguian & Cipko, 1997; Skinner, 1994; Toje, 2006).

The discussion and critical analysis of “Cossack renaissance” have brought to light growing nationalism and xenophobia among Cossacks as well as their paramilitary activities in local conflicts in the post-Soviet space and former Yugoslavia. Human rights activists routinely list in their publications the different Cossack hosts and unions among radical nationalist organisations (Verkhovskii, Mikhailova & Pribylovskii, 1999, pp. 18-49). Research has been especially concerned with violence

against ethnic minorities perpetrated by Cossack organisations in southern Russia (Osipov & Cherepova, 1996; Osipov, 1999; Verkhovskii, Mikhailova & Pribylovskii, 1999, p. 54).

At the same time, apologists of the Cossack ethno-cultural revival tend to concentrate on historical and ethnographic evidence of the particularity of the Cossacks as a distinct (sub) ethnic group drawing heavily in their analyses upon folklore data and historical documents (Matveev, 2000). In these publications, Cossacks are represented as a core and consolidating element in establishing a “single ethno-cultural space” (*edinnoe etnokul'turnoe prostranstvo*) on the territory of such historically Cossack regions as Krasnodar Krai (Bondar', 1998, p. 38; Matveev, 2002, p. 4; Rakachev & Rakacheva, 2003, p. 94). The Krasnodar Krai administration stimulated the development of the Cossack movement and was able to influence its internal processes by establishing contact with the leaders of the Cossack organisations and offering them financial and administrative-legislative assistance in exchange for the Cossacks' support of the regional political regime. As per the Krasnodar Krai regional regime's ideology, Cossacks are allocated a role similar to that of “titular nationality” in national/autonomous republics of the former Soviet Union.

However, neither critics nor apologists of Cossack revivalism raise issues of grassroots support of the Cossack movement or the motivations bringing “ordinary citizens” to these organisations, especially young people in regional urban centres among whom Cossacks recruit their new members. This research has thus added a significant new dimension to the scholarly field.

Methods

Two six-week periods of fieldwork were conducted in 2007 studying Cossack groups as per:

- Ethnographic observations
- Interviews with respondents [recorded]
- Diary-keeping
- Photos including giving cameras to respondents to take photos of the group themselves
- Video recordings
- Researcher reflections on fieldwork
- Walking tours of the city with respondents

A total of 26 interviews and three fieldwork diaries were transcribed and analysed using Nvivo7 software.

Results

Intra-group relations

The Cossack informants in this study were not a coherent and united group but a network of acquaintances and friends who shared an interest in the Cossack cultural/ethnic revival. These networks brought together young people who participated in official (“registered”) Cossack organisations and those who were members of informal clubs which were often critical towards Cossack officialdom. The research in Krasnodar Krai was focused on young Cossacks (15-30 years old) although it also involved some people of older generations who participated in Cossack organisations and historical reconstruction movements in the region together with younger informants (one of the key Cossack informants was in his fifties). The network character of the researched group led to the extension of the initial focus of the study of Cossack youth through the inclusion of a historical reconstruction movement in the thematic scope of the research since, in Krasnodar and Sochi (the two main sites of the research), there was evidence of growing mutual interest and collaboration between the Cossack revivalist movement and historical re-enactment clubs. Several of the key informants in both settings were members of “registered” Cossack organisations and engaged in activities of different re-enactment clubs which focused on the medieval history of the Russian and Steppes regions.

Group-society relations

Many people in Russia, and in the region (Krasnodar Krai) in particular, are very sceptical about the authenticity of contemporary Cossacks especially when these “Cossacks” – as in the case of the majority of informants in this case study – were actually young city dwellers. The word *riazhennii* (masquerading) was often used by people to refer to contemporary Cossacks implying that these were people donning attire which did not belong to them. People were especially outraged by the fact that many contemporary Cossacks wear Russian pre-revolutionary medals as part of their Cossack costume. Moreover, by calling a modern Cossack *riazhennii*, people inferred that this person did not adhere to what the dress he wore actually represented. In this second sense, the Cossack costume again had a strong association with the memory of old Cossack communities.

Our participants were aware of this contradiction between memories of the past and the current revival of the movement and were conscious of sceptical and ironic attitudes towards them from the majority of the population. Thus Danil’ (born 1984), who worked in the Cossack ceremonial guard (*pochetnii karaul*) and wore a Cossack uniform at “work”, told us that he would not go around in his Cossack attire when he was off duty because he would not be treated normally by other people, even his

friends. Those informants who showed their Cossack identity “externally” (through their hairstyle, moustache or uniform) almost always faced negative attitudes or misunderstanding from the “general public” as in the case of Georgii, who was a Ph.D. student at the Kuban State University and an active member of the Cossack movement from 2004:

[People have ironic attitudes] Well, how can I put it, because they don't see any practical reason for this [Cossack identity]. Traditionalism, which I perhaps promote by my appearance, although I am not a good proponent [because] I don't persuade anybody – I just choose certain principles for myself. [For me traditionalism] is non-pragmatic. [They] don't understand. Well, [if they] don't understand, I don't seek to persuade anybody. I know what is meaningful for me and try to live accordingly. (Georgii, born 1982, Krasnodar)

Cossackdom as activism

The ethnographic data from the case study suggest that young Cossacks are, in general, receptive to the ethnicist interpretation of Cossack identity. However, by reproducing ethnicist discourse in their interviews, they assume their active roles in choosing to “revitalise” their Cossack “roots” in order to achieve something and, in this way, change themselves. Thus Andrei, who is seventeen and an active member of the official Cossack organisation in one of Krasnodar's suburbs, stated this point very clearly in his answer to my question about his motivations for joining the Cossacks:

Why? Well, because I am in general an impulsive person; if I didn't make myself busy, without some kind of activity, I wouldn't be myself. I try to find myself in something, find something for myself, some activity. But generally, [my] kin (*rod*) is a Cossack one. [...] So, traditions need to be revitalised; the Kuban is, at the end of the day, a Cossack territory [with a] rich history. Well, what else, [there is a desire] to revitalise traditions and unwillingness to follow the mainstream of our youth. At least we are doing something; we have physical training and military training, other things. There are many opportunities other than sitting in courtyards drinking beer by the fence like the majority of young people. We are more united albeit at the micro level of our *stanitsa*. [I want] young people to stick together so that there is always somebody to support you in difficult times. (Andrei, born 1990, Krasnodar)

Some of our informants think it is worth revitalising Cossackdom only if it could have some function in contemporary society. Thus, one of our Sochi participants, Comandor, despite his Cossack origins, was hesitant about joining the local Cossack organisation where his friend and fellow historical reconstruction enthusiast was an active member. At the time of our interview he was very enthusiastic about the Sochi Cossacks' plan to organise a Cossack volunteer patrol unit (*kazach'ia druzhina*) because it served an important function in the maintenance of social order.

Enacting Cossack identity

Young people become Cossacks by acting as Cossacks including such bodily activities as martial arts, military training or mastering Cossack skills of horse riding and sword fencing. Even when young people talk about their Cossack heredity, they do not take their Cossack identity for granted but rather “do” it. Through their military and sporting activities in the Cossack organisations, they enact their Cossack identity:

[My] great-grandfather... This is why I started to do fencing; he turned out to be very skilful with the sword. I even found proof of this. They lived then in the village (*stanitsa*) of Medvedovskaia. I asked relatives there, [they told me that] he apparently was very good at sword fencing. Therefore I decided to do [fencing]. (Sergei, born 1985, Krasnodar)

Cossackdom as a resource

Many informants spoke about their motivations for joining Cossack organisations as being a strategy for negotiating their conscription to the military service, since the military training of future conscripts was a key activity in many Cossack organisations in the region. Here the link between Cossack identity and territory was especially evident, since many young people believed that the Kuban University Cossack Host had an official agreement with the Ministry of Defence according to which conscripts from Cossack organisations would be sent to serve only in those military units which were based on the territory of Krasnodar Krai. In fact this was a myth; some Cossack organisations did have informal agreements with some regionally-based military units to which they might try to direct their young members but they were not able to provide any guarantee that a young soldier would not end up in a remote Siberian garrison. Nevertheless, young people found the military training provided by Cossacks free of charge a useful and valuable activity:

... I was studying in the vocational school when a head of staff from our *kuren'* (small Cossack organisation - AP) came and asked whether we wanted to join the official Cossacks. There they have sports trainings free of charge and other such things. And I went, [because I have] Cossack roots – my grandfather and great-grandfather were Cossacks. I went to the army, served for two years in the internal forces (police forces staffed by a conscript soldiers - AP). Of course [it helped me a lot] that we had military training before the army – we learned military marching and had tactics classes which were not bad. It helped later in the army. ... (Sergei, born 1985)

Conclusions

This research suggests that some young Cossacks are receptive to the ethnicist interpretation of Cossack identity. However, the reproduction of ethnicist discourse for its own sake was not appealing; rather young Cossacks saw the significance of the revival of Cossack “roots” in terms of the social role it could play especially, for example, though the role of Cossack organisations in maintaining social order. Members of some organisations also employed Cossack roots as a resource either in negotiating military conscription or through engagement in economic activities linked to the historical reconstruction movement. Thus young people’s engagement with the Cossack revivalist movement should be understood first and foremost as a means of adopting an active social position and seeking control over their own lives rather than as a primarily ethnic movement.

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Ksenofobinės jaunimo grupės Krasnodaro regione, Sočyje (Rusijoje): kazokai

Santrauka

Šis tyrimas nagrinėja ksenofobijos reikšmę kazokų judėjimo dalyviams Krasnodaro regione, Pietų Rusijoje. Skirtingai negu dabartinėje mokslinėje literatūroje, kurioje daugiausia analizuojama kazokų organizacijų gausa ir jų įtaka politikai, šis darbas buvo sutelktas į problemas, kylančias dėl jaunimo susidomėjimo kazokų judėjimu pagrindiniuose regionų miestuose. Tyrimas pagrindė kazokų judėjimo svarbą jaunimui kaip veiklos erdvę bei ekonominius, kultūrinius, institucinius išteklius, kurie padeda jaunimui, artėjančiam prie pilnametystės, integruotis į socialines veiklas, spręsti užimtumo ir bendravimo problemas. Tyrimas pagrįstas integruoto 12-kos savaičių stebėjimo, atlikto 2007 m. Krasnodaro regione, ir 26 giluminių interviu duomenimis.

Raktažodžiai: kazokai, ksenofobija, narkotikų vartojimas, jaunimas, subkultūra.