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**Power and Pride: The Mythologization of the Cossack
Figure in Russian History and Its Impact on Modern
Russian National Identity**

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Abstract

Our expedition traveled to the Don Cossack Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa to record mythologized cultural practices in the form of rituals and performances. Located on the banks of the Don and Khopior River junction, about 1,500 people reside in a village consisting of several streets of wooden and stone houses, a cultural center, school and a few small markets. Most remaining residents in the village are pensioners, who support their meager incomes with backyard gardens. The young who have finished primary school leave for the nearest city, Volgograd, to find work or pursue further studies, as opportunities for neither exist in the village.

Yelena Viktorovna Minyonok, our expedition leader, is a renowned Russian folklorist and chief curator of archives at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow. In an effort to preserve dying traditions, we tracked down members of the old village choir and recorded quintessential songs in the traditional Cossack repertoire. Through participant observation and informant interviews, we investigated the role Cossack mythology plays in dictating how Cossacks see themselves and how others view them, exploring the perceptual transformation of Cossack culture through time.

Biographical Sketch



A fresh graduate of the Anthropology department with a minor in Russian and Eastern Studies, I spent the last four years toiling as both a scholarship athlete on the Women's Soccer team and a recipient of UK's National Excellence Scholarship. This past summer I embarked on my first journey to Russia as a recipient of the US Department of State Critical Language Scholarship to live and study in Nizhny Novgorod. January marked my second trip to Russia on a scholarship from the American Friends of Russian Folklore in combination with a travel and research grant from EUREKA. Resulting from this fieldwork were a slew of ever-changing papers, which I presented in gradually improving order at the Indiana University and Ohio State University Folklore Conference, National Conference of Undergraduate Research in La Crosse, Wisconsin, UK's Undergraduate Research Showcase, and a pending exhibit at the Undergraduate Research Council's AAFCS Annual Convention in Knoxville, Tennessee with support from EUREKA's travel and research funds.

In the near future, I traipse off to a small town on the Yucatan Peninsula of Mexico to participate in an archaeological survey with UK Anthropology Professor Scott Hudson. Following this six week delight, I have secured a post teaching English this coming fall in Seoul, South Korea with the Seoul Metropolitan Board of Education. Meanwhile, I plan to continually rework the elusive perfection of my article, submitting it to both the American Folklore Society and Western States Folklore Society for hopeful publication. On a whim, I hope to submit my original research idea (which was ingeniously reduced to manageable size by my wonderful mentor Professor Rouhier-Willoughby) to an up-and-coming independent publisher as a potential book. Eventually, I will return to Russia, endless tea, the beautiful language and people, and daily vodka toasts to life, good friends and health.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank the following people and institutions: Yelena Viktorovna Minyonok and the American Friends of Russian Folklore for working tirelessly to bridge cultural gaps and preserve dying Russian traditions, my faculty mentor Professor Rouhier-Willoughby for countless editing rounds, Evie Russell and EUREKA for relentless effort to provide me with invaluable and life-altering research opportunities, Professor Koch of the Anthropology department and Professor Lee, Professor Ruder and Professor Petrone of the Russian and Eastern Studies department for intellectual stimulation, advice and support, Professor Udvardy for graciously allowing this chaotic independent study to count for actual college credit and most importantly, Mom and Dad for packing my bags and seeing me off at the airport, although neither one really knew to where they had bid me goodbye.

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This past January I travelled to the remote Russian village of *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* in the Volgograd province. The village, named after its position on the banks of the intersecting Don and Khopior Rivers, is home to about 1,500 people. It encompasses several streets of wooden and stone houses, a cultural center, a school and a few small markets. Not three kilometers away stands a much smaller village known as *Riibhnii Hopeyor*¹ with a population of about 100, considered an annex of the larger village. Our team of eight members resided with two residents of *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* for two weeks – both were retired, widowed women in their late sixties. Most remaining residents in the village are elderly pensioners who support their meager incomes with backyard gardens and a few small farm animals. Young people who have finished secondary school leave for the nearest city, Volgograd, to find work or pursue further studies, as opportunities for neither exist in the village. Russia is experiencing a simultaneous mass urban migration and gradual population decline of one million each year, and as a result, villages like *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* are slowly disappearing.

Our expedition leader, Yelena Viktorovna Minyonok, is a renowned Russian folklorist and chief curator of archives at the Institute of World Literature in Moscow. For the past twenty years she has scoured the Russian countryside, documenting all elements of folklore in an effort to preserve dying traditions. Her most recent expeditions have concentrated on the Cossack villages along the Don River, our stop at the famous *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* being the last of her trips in this region.

Collaborating with our team was Andrei Sergeievich Kabanov of the Moscow Conservatory and two of his graduate students. Andrei Sergeievich has travelled the Russian countryside for almost forty years, recording over 10,000 folklore songs. His expertise in this area is almost unparalleled: over the course of his career he has often recorded at one village numerous times at different intervals, allowing him to observe first-hand the change undergone in Russian folk tradition. He had been to our particular village in the sixties and eighties to document folklore songs, and is considered the premier scholar on the subject in Russia. In the

¹ A *stanitsa* is a village defined by the presence of a church, while a *hopeyor* lacks a church. More than one *hopeyor* may surround a *stanitsa*, and are often smaller both in population and physical size. Although each village appointed an *Ataman*, or village chief, most primary and secondary school-aged children of *Riibhnii Hopeyor* were sent to *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* to attend school, demonstrating the affiliation between the two villages.

seventies, he started his own children's choir in Moscow, using many folklore songs, particularly traditional Cossack songs, in his repertoire.

Like most ethnographical fieldwork, the majority of our time was spent developing rapport with the villagers; in essence consuming vast amounts of tea, vodka and *zakyski*, or snacks to accompany the beverages. In an effort to document the traditional Cossack song repertoire, our primary goal lay in enticing former members of the village choir popular in the seventies to perform at the cultural center. Despite the fact that the overwhelming majority of members were deceased, we managed to track down six original members and professionally record several quintessential songs. The following lyrics were transcribed after a recording session with a few assembled members of the *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* choir, and demonstrate a traditional song of the Cossack repertoire.

За лесом солнце воссияло

1. За лесом солнце воссияло,
Там черный ворон прокричал,
Прошли часы мои минуты,
Когда с девчонкой я гулял,
Прошли часы мои минуты,
Когда с девчонкой я гулял,

2. Бывало, кончу я работу -
Спешу на улицу гулять,
Теперь мне служба предстояла -
Спешу я коника седлать!
Теперь мне служба предстояла -
Спешу я коника седлать!

3. Седлаю я коня гнедого
Казачьим убранным седлом
Я сяду, сяду и поеду,
Поеду в дальний край далек,
Я сяду, сяду и поеду,
Поеду в дальний край далек,

4. И если пуля вдруг шальная
Убьет меня из-за куста,
И шашка, шашка-лиходейка,
Разрубит череп у меня,
И шашка, шашка-лиходейка,
Разрубит череп у меня,

5. И кровь горячая польется,
Польется быстрою рекой,
И сердце, сердце встрепетается,
Ой, не вернусь я в край родной,
И сердце, сердце встрепетается,
Ой, не вернусь я в край родной,

6. Прощайте, горы и долины,
Прощай, родимый хуторок,
Прощай, дечонка молодая,
Прощай лазоревый цветок,
Прощай, дечонка молодая,
Прощай лазоревый цветок.²

Beyond the Forest the Sun Shines

1. Beyond the forest the sun shines
There a black raven caws
The hours, my time has passed
When I walked with a young girl
The hours, my time has passed
When I walked with a young girl

2. I used to hurriedly finish working –
Only to meander outside
Now my fate awaits me
Hurriedly I mount the saddle!
Now my fate awaits me
Hurriedly I mount the saddle!

3. I mount the chestnut mare
Upon a Cossack's decorated saddle
I'm sitting, waiting to set off
Off to a distant, faraway land
I'm sitting, waiting to set off
Off to a distant, faraway land

4. And if suddenly a stray bullet
Kills me from behind a bush
And if a saber, a mighty-wielded saber
Cuts through my skull
And if a saber, a mighty-wielded saber
Cuts through my skull

² Lyrics transcribed by Yelena Viktorovna Minyonok on an undefined date in the month of March 2009.

5. And hot blood pours over me
Flowing like a rapid stream
And my heart, my heart gives its last shudder
Oh, and I am never to return to my native land

6. Farewell forever, mountains and valleys
Goodbye, village of my birth
Goodbye, my young woman
Goodbye, sky-blue flower
Goodbye, my young woman
Goodbye, sky-blue flower³

In this song, the Cossack man must mount his horse and embark on a raid in a distant land. The contrast between his old life of idle freedom and the new destiny that awaits him as a member of the Cossack cavalry is deliberate. By accepting his responsibilities as a member of the group, he is identified as a man, and sits upon a *kazachii ybraynii sedlo*, or a saddle that has been decorated with booty of previous raids and pillages, symbolizing the honor of a Cossack warrior. The possibility of death is described in detail and glorifies the brutality of war. The sword that kills him is honored with an ascribed name (*shashka lixodaika*), invoking the idea that any sword which could take down an invincible Cossack warrior must be legendary in its own right.

Over time, Cossacks have become mythologized as military heroes and defenders of the Motherland, alluded to in literature as rabble-rousers and often serving as the ideal masculine protagonist. Originally, the Cossacks weren't an ethnic group, but rather a hodge-podge band of the socially marginalized, those who "had run away from the political, military, economic, and penal systems of Polish Ukraine or Muscovy to live on what they hoped would be the freer frontier" (Kornblatt 1992, p.7). Several sects of Cossacks existed, all of whom developed military prowess to defend themselves against raids and adopted a nomadic lifestyle to avoid omnipresent enemies. Living in a constant state of "military preparedness", it was impossible for the Cossacks to garner subsistence through agricultural means, and instead depended on "fishing, hunting, some herding, but mostly pillage" (Kornblatt 1992, p.7). Cossack men were responsible for providing for their clan through raiding and pillage, living with their wives for only part of

³ Lyrics translated by Rachel Ulrich from the transcription by Yelena Viktorovna Minyonok, with the assistance of Professor Edward Lee, Russian and Eastern Studies department, University of Kentucky.

the year and leaving the moment duty called, embarking on raids and engaging in border skirmishes.

In this fashion, Cossack culture developed around male activities – folk songs of the Cossack repertoire, traditional Cossack dancing and the mythologized Cossack images are mainly associated with images of horse-riding, raiding, masculine displays of aggression, bravery on the battlefield, and the glorified warrior. Despite the fact that Cossacks were later employed by the tsar to defend Russia's borderlands and eventually practiced subsistence agriculture (both evils by which the original Cossack ancestors swore to never be hindered), the image of the Cossack man is frozen in time and has become larger than reality. Indeed, the Cossack man was further mythologized through nineteenth and twentieth century in Russian literature and this image of Cossacks has become well-known internationally.

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Cossack image has swollen far beyond its historical origins and become recognized as synonymous with the strength of Russia – politically, militarily and economically. As former Soviet bloc countries fragmented and communist party ideology that had once served to unite vast amounts of space and diversity became obsolete, the search for national identity again took center stage. After struggling through repeated economic failures and the disastrous Yeltsin administration, Russia's desperate need for guidance and reassurance came in the form of President Vladimir Putin. After his inauguration in 2000, Putin wasted no time in promulgating Russia's revitalization as a world power.

Shortly after coming to power, then-President Putin began systematically invoking the image of a strong and united Russia, both economically and militarily. By “positioning himself as the symbol of a resurgent nation recovering from years of humiliation and weakness” (The Economist 2008, p.4), President Putin propelled Russia onto the national plane through competition, “asserting that Russia has regained its status of a ‘mighty economic power’” and promising to “achieve economic and social development which befits a ‘leading world power of the 21st century’” (The Economist, 2008 p.6). Much reminiscent of Stalin's five-year industrial plans in the infancy of the USSR, Putin has pushed industrial development, often at the expense of the common people: “Russia is building pipelines to Europe, but much of its own country has no gas or even plumbing. Russia's ‘great leaps forward’ have rarely benefited its own people, who have traditionally been seen as a resource. Most Russians grumble about their lives, but see

‘international prestige’ as a consolation prize” (The Economist, 2008 p.6). The international image of Russia is more important than the quality of life for Russians themselves. Perhaps this is because those at the top of Putin’s bureaucracy continue to grow outrageously rich through Russia’s traditional corrupt top-down hierarchy while “the average Russian earns a mere \$700 a month” (The Economist 2008 p.6).

Despite dismal conditions for the majority of citizens, governmental corruption and bureaucratic hierarchy, nationalism amongst Russians persists. In this sense, Putin and his predecessors throughout centuries of Russian history have exploited the inherent nationalism of the Russian peoples. In May of 2008 Putin revived the Soviet-era practice of parading large weaponry during the annual May Day celebration. For the first time in seventeen years, 6,000 marching soldiers, tanks and rockets – including the new intercontinental ballistic missile – were displayed throughout the streets of Moscow and other major cities across Russia (The Guardian 2008). This isn’t the first time that Putin has invoked Soviet-era militaristic symbols to create a new Russian image of strength and unity. As Nikolay Petrov of the Carnegie Center in Moscow stated, “It’s an ideological concept. The point is to show that Russia was great before the revolution, was great during Soviet times and to say we are restoring its greatness” (The Guardian 2008).

Not coincidentally, the resurgence of these militaristic parades coincided with President Dmitry Medvedev’s election and Putin’s inauguration as Prime Minister. As the Eurasia Daily Monitor noticed, “A public display of Russian armor and nuclear might is clearly a grand way to welcome Medvedev and to commend Putin” (Eurasia Daily Monitor 2008). Putin is symbolically passing down his legacy of militaristic and economic dominance and promising the international community the same type of powerful reign in Russia’s next phase, with Medvedev as President and Putin as Prime Minister. Moscovites did not fail to take note of the irony of these military masquerades as the economy declines and food prices rise – the “Moscow daily *Moskovski Komsomolets* calculated that the cost of today’s military parade could have bought the city of Moscow 25 badly needed new nursery schools” (TIME 2008).

To consolidate this new phase of Russian identity, Putin has masterminded the adoption of Cossack traditions and rituals as Russian national identity. Through systematic revivals of Cossack singing troupes and various staged heritage celebrations, the Kremlin has associated overtly masculine Cossack culture with the idea of Russia as a force to be reckoned with –

militaristically inclined, united and nationalized. This borrowing of cultural symbols for nationalistic purposes is possible due to the fact that the Cossack embodies a fluid identity, relatable even to those lacking traceable Cossack ancestry (Kornblatt 1992, p.15). In Russia, a country constituting one eighth of the earth's inhabitable land mass and comprised of over 160 ethno-linguistic groups, the establishment of national identity is of paramount importance and a matter over which internal strife has persisted for centuries.

Cossack identity and the search for Russian national origins became integrated through the rediscovery of *The History of the Russes or Little Russia*, which “renders an idealized history of the Cossacks and is united with the history of all of Russia” (Kornblatt 1992, p.25). In it Cossacks are depicted as “freedom fighters, organically and historically united to Russia and related in some way to the origins of the Russian people as mythic heroes” (Kornblatt 1992, p.26). The establishment of national origin as synonymous with Cossack origin was later combined with the idea of Cossacks as morally ambiguous mythological figures in literature. Because Cossacks were originally nomads, raiding and pillaging the steppe, free from the ties of land and master, they became “associated with barrierlessness” and therefore “the Cossack hero could easily absorb negative traits connected with him” (Kornblatt 1992, p.15). Lack of geographical boundaries translated into a lack of character trait polarization, or the inability to define the Cossack through binary opposites. Representing an idealized whole, the Cossack is able to provide one plausible solution to the long-standing identity crisis within Russian culture that cooperates seamlessly with Putin and Medvedev's political agenda.

However, this idea of acceptance and identity with Cossack culture has failed to pervade into the everyday lives of Russian citizens, and the Cossacks themselves continue to suffer from economic hardships and marginalization. Just as the rest of the country functions in a top-down, hierarchical manner, folklore itself has been transformed from an artistic expression inextricable with everyday life to a symbol of the power of intellectuals from urban epicenters over those remaining in ‘backwards’ villages and ways of life. I was able to view this reallocation of power first-hand during our recording sessions in *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa*.

During the sessions, Andrei Sergeievich was the uncontested leader – he directed his students in setting up the recording equipment and coached the villagers in the correct way to sing traditional songs, changing the combination of people, who sat where, what lyrics were correct and the timbre and pitch of various singers' voices. In one instance a particularly low

bass, a former member of the renowned 1970s choir originating from our village, was only allowed to record individually because he decided that the man's pitch was too low and did not mix well with the women's diskant portion⁴. In another instance, Andrei Sergeievich asked the village Ataman, the traditional public figurehead of the Don Cossacks⁵ and an esteemed member of the community, to sit farther away from the microphone because he did not know the words well enough.

To an American anthropologist, the way in which Andrei Sergeievich conducted the recording sessions might provoke confusion and even anger. Concerning his methodology, Professor Minyonok contends that the villagers simply loved working with Andrei Sergeievich – they respected his abilities and trusted his judgment. Some even proclaimed that they felt they had 'returned to their youth' after working with such a master. When Andrei Sergeievich was queried as to why he wouldn't record the villagers without prior coaching, he replied that to have travelled such a long way to record a ruined tradition would have been a waste of time. The way the villagers sang before Andrei Sergeievich taught them the 'correct' way was a ruined tradition, and Andrei Sergeievich felt he was in a unique position, having recorded this village at intervals both forty and twenty years prior to the present date, to know exactly what the songs should sound like. Throughout the trip, Andrei Sergeievich and his two students sang traditional songs themselves aloud for the various villagers we met, at times asking villagers to join in even if they weren't sure of the words themselves.

My own experience and very similar experiences detailed by ethnographers conducting fieldwork in Russian villages (Olson 2004, p.207-218) suggested to me the hierarchical way in which information is interpreted in Russia. Both intellectuals from Moscow and the villagers themselves accepted folklore songs as a bounded, frozen entity, able to be performed 'correctly' in only one way. During Soviet times, brigades of urban intellectuals were sent to the villages to educate the villagers in Western ways and to promote 'progress' (Riasanovsky and Steinberg

⁴ Traditionally, Cossack songs are performed by all-male choirs – even the higher diskant portion – but due to numerous wars and the premature death of many male villagers, women began to fill in diskant portions. Now it is very rare to find a male villager with the ability to sing diskant.

⁵ This position was established during the formation of Cossack groups in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Today the position is retained mostly as a public figurehead, as much of the associated power has been lost. The Don Cossacks refer to their chief as an *Ataman*, while the Dnieper Cossacks use the term *Hetman*.

2005, p.568). The same ideologies and methodologies were employed in the way intellectuals from the Moscow Conservatory, interacted with villagers concerning their own traditions. Village traditions and folklore are no longer associated with the village – they cannot be considered folklore because folklore is imbued in everyday life, often richest when life is most difficult, and never set on a stage or viewed as a performance. Cossack songs as performed by ensembles in Moscow, such as the children's choir headed by Andrei Sergeievich, are a form of high art – a mark of prestige, intellect and power. In this sense, Cossack people have lost the power to control their own identity.

Cossack folklore ensembles and the perpetuation of Cossack identity add to this fabricated image at a cultural level, perpetuating the idea that Russia will not hesitate to defend its borders using military force, just as Cossack nomads developed a reputation as warriors and skilled horsemen while protecting Russia's borders during the tsarist era. Meanwhile, modern Cossack villagers continue to be marginalized while Russia has adopted Cossack dress, songs and traditions as national identity. Many live off pensions less than 200 dollars a month, eking out a living from individual backyard gardens. Monopolized farming conditions alienate many small farmers from their ability to sustain themselves and their families from their own land.

While visiting *Riibhnii Hopeyor*, the villagers and Ataman spoke openly concerning economic difficulties. The Ataman described his difficulties as chief of his village, because he earned no wages for these responsibilities, and was forced to run a taxi business on the side, employing fifteen drivers and using twenty-year-old vans. All of the men agreed that this was due to the onset of capitalism and economic corruption. A few years earlier there had been five smaller private farms on which the men had worked, but a larger farm absorbed all the failing smaller farms. Villagers could no longer keep animals and simultaneously make profit, but instead were forced to grow grain exclusively. The Russian government has refused to allow NGOs to assist villages like *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* in establishing economic foundations.

Despite economic dislocation, lack of government assistance, and intense pride for their own culture, Cossacks in *Ust-Khopiorskaia Stanitsa* and *Riibhnii Hopeyor* have a great deal of pride and love for Russia. In the tiny schoolhouse of *Riibhnii Hopeyor*, an entire room is devoted to the Battle of Stalingrad, a nine-month long battle in which the Russians withstood German advances during WWII. Many of the poems the villagers recited were of their own creation and dealt with heroic Cossack deeds in battle, the valor of the battlefield and village pride in Cossack

military prowess. During poetry recitations some villagers would be so overwhelmed with emotion – cracking voices and welling eyes – that they were unable to finish the poems.

One elderly village man – a pensioner – lamented his economic conundrum. Although many of his fellow villagers had migrated to the city in search of work in a struggling economy, he found himself useless in a city – holding up his hands and shaking them, he proclaimed that a man needed something to do with his hands, something to keep himself busy and productive. His government looked upon pensioners as useless citizens, despite years of dedicated service and fierce pride for their country. Today he lives off 200 dollars a month and maintains a small garden for sustenance. While the Moscow Kremlin has adopted this Cossack man's history, culture and legacy as Russian national identity, he is economically marginalized and forgotten as the country marches on. He grasps onto the promise of progress while his country maintains a unique position of cultural dissonance towards his village and traditions – simultaneously berated for their backwards image and praised for their embodiment of true Russia.

