Basic Features of the Ukrainian Cossacks’ Paramilitary Life in the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries

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ABSTRACT: In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ukrainian Cossacks dominated in the Kuban Cossack army (the largest of the Cossack units of the Russian Empire). A longterm military service and constant military training had contributed to the maintenance and development of the Cossack military and martial arts. Besides teaching military values and the Cossack way of life, various paramilitary contests were organized to maintain high-quality military training. These contests were held both in the front line military units and in the Cossack settlements (with both adult and child contestants). The Cossacks’ long-term and hard military service became the basis for certain socio-economic, societal, legal and military privileges. In the places of their compact residence, the Cossacks implemented the principles of military democracy and paramilitary way of life.

Keywords: Cossacks, the Kuban Cossack army, tradition, cavalry, infantry, contest, martial arts, military democracy

In the history of European privileged communities, a special place belongs to Cossack units which in the course of several centuries not only had significantly influenced the fate of their own country as well as of neighbouring states, but also had developed their own peculiar military way of life and corresponding cultural traditions.

It is necessary to remember that the history of the Ukrainian Cossacks did not end with the events of the late 18th century when the tsarist power was doing away with major Cossack centres: Zaporizhian Sich and the remnants of Cossack autonomy – hetmanates «гетманщины» - i.e. autonomous units created under the rule of ataman Bohdan Khmelnytsky in the mid-17th century in the territory of the Central Ukraine and called the Zaporizhian army «Войско Запорожское».

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, there were several independent Ukrainian Cossack units. None of these, however, had as dominant impact on the history of the Ukraine, Russia, Poland or other European countries as those stated above. Yet special attention was attracted by the Kuban Cossacks «Кубанское казачество» who where in fact direct successors of Zaporizhian Sich and hetmanates.

It should be stressed that the Kuban Cossack army «Кубанское казачье войско» had survived up to 1920 and its representatives kept affecting the events in the northern Cossack region long after its liquidation. The Black Sea (later Kuban) Cossacks played a significant role in conquering Caucasus by Tsarist Russia as well as in all important military conflicts in the 19th and early 20th centuries in general. In addition, they played an important part in the process of national-cultural and national-political development in the whole region from the mid-19th century up to the early 1930’s. Therefore, scientific research aimed at various aspects of the history of the Kuban Cossack army is very urging.

It should be remembered that the special military privileged status of Cossack existence in the Russian Empire and the military traditions of previous Cossack military units require deeper study of the peculiarities of the Kuban Cossack life on the eve of their liquidation in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Only thus we can achieve desired results in depiction of the life of the Cossack community that constituted a compromise between the imperial unification and the Ukrainian military Cossack heritage itself.

A special place in this issue belongs to the military system, peculiarities of the Cossack military service as well as to the paramilitary (“militarized”) elements «военизированные элементы» in their everyday life. It should be emphasized that there is still dearth of scholarly works on the foregoing aspects of Cossack life.

In the 19th and early 20th centuries, the Ukrainian scholars attempted to give a brief account of the resettlement and functioning of the Ukrainian Cossack units in the region of Kuban «Кубань» in the north Caucasus or they tried to provide general histories of the Black Sea and Kuban Cossacks (in 1860 the Black Sea Cossacks were renamed to the Kuban Cossacks). In the Soviet period, there were even fewer opportunities for research in the field of history of the Ukrainian Cossack armies in the north Caucasus. Therefore, only one relevant monograph on the social economic aspect of the above mentioned unit was published in that time (“The Black Sea Cossacks” by Vladimir A. Golobucky).

The contemporary Ukrainian historiography is also falling behind in studying this issue. So far, there have been just several attempts to research the history of the Black Sea and Kuban Cossacks. In this context, special attention should be paid

3 АВРАМЕНКО, Козацьке військо на Кубані, pp. 393-402.
6 АВРАМЕНКО, Козацьке військо на Кубані, pp. 364-414; БАЧИНСЬКА, Олена. Козацький стан та одинічні козацькі формування у першій половині ХІХ ст. В АВРАМЕНКО, Анатолій - ФРОЛОВ,
to Dmytro D. Bilyi’s monograph on the formation of social and national identity of the Ukrainian population in Kuban from the late 18th to the early 20th century.7

The author of this paper systematically explores the paramilitary aspects of history of the Ukrainian units in the north Caucasus. Up to nowadays, however, all sides of Kuban Cossack military history have still not been examined. The same applies to the impact of everyday life and surrounding environment on the mentality of their personalities as well as the whole community.8

In the present-day Russian historiography one can note an increased interest in the military history of Cossack armies, including the Kuban military.9 Special attention should be paid to the work by Alexander A. Shakhtorin on various aspects of the military training in the Kuban Cossack army.10 However, the peculiarities of paramilitary elements in their everyday life (not just during compulsory military service but also after it) are still beyond scholarly interest. The same applies to the aspects of Cossack martial and military training, their martial art and individual trends of their military art.

Polish historians also took interest in the issues related to the formation and military political development of the Ukrainian Cossack units, but only until the late 18th

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8 ЗАДУНАЙСЬКИЙ, Вадим Васильович. Бойове мистецтво та військова спадщина українських козаків в кінці XIX – на початку XX ст. Донецьк : Норд-Прес; ДонНУ, 2006, 335 pp.; the same: Козацькі учбові збори початку ХХ ст. – центри вишколу з козацького військового та бойового мистецтва. Випуск 5. Укл. А. М. Авраменко. Краснодар; Київ : ЕДВІ, 2011, pp. 221-235;
There is, however, one exception. Zigniev Karpus’s monograph on this topic points to the participation of individual Cossack military units (including Kuban units) in the fight against Soviet Russia in 1920, side by side the Polish army. Thus, the peculiarity of the Kuban Cossack military system and its impact on Cossack life during their compulsory military service as well as after it, besides important peculiarities of Cossack martial and military training, have still not been sufficiently explored neither in domestic nor foreign historiography. This fact had affected the selection of the topic of this paper as well as its goals.

Prior to the writing of this paper we had carried out research in the State Archives of the Krasnodar region (former Kuban region) of the Russian Federation. We also studied relevant published documents and materials. All this can be considered a guarantee of sufficient plausibility of our research results. Before the very dealing with the selected issue it is necessary to give a brief account on the formation, distribution and number of the Kuban Cossack army.

After the liquidation of Zaporizhian Sich in 1775 and the hetmanate in 1764–1781 by the tsarist power, the heavy conditions of the Russian-Turkish War in 1787–1791 led to the partial re-establishment of the Ukrainian Cossack units. The latter were first called the Military of Faithful Soldiers «Войско верных казаков». For their successes in the fight against the Turks they were named the Black Sea Cossack Army «Черноморское казачье войско» and in 1792–1794 they were forced to resettle to the north Caucasus, the territory north of the Kuban region.

After many relocations of a great number of Ukrainian Cossack families from the Central Ukraine and Northern Azov region to the Kuban area, the Black Sea Cossacks became one the biggest in Tsarist Russia. In 1860 this Cossack unit was partly supplemented with the Cossacks of the cancelled Caucasus Border Cossack Military «Кавказское линейное казачье войско» (most of these Cossacks had Russian roots) and was named the Kuban Cossack army.

Prior to the World War I, the number of Kuban Cossacks was approximately 1,400,000. They inhabited both banks of the lower and middle reaches of the Kuban River, from the eastern shore of the Azov Sea up to the Stavropol Highlands. One should remember that in the late 19th and early 20th centuries the Cossacks in Tsarist Russia commanded a privileged military status. They enjoyed a range of socio-economic, societal, legal and military privileges.


АВРАМЕНКО, Козацьке військо на Кубані, pp. 364-366.

Ibid., pp. 366-368.

КАБУЗАН, Владимир Максимович. Народы России в первой половине XIX в. Численность и этнический состав. Москва : Наука, 1992, p. 23; ПОПКО, Черноморские казаки, pp. 31-32.

БИЛИЙ, Українці Кубані в 1792–1921 роках, pp. 290-291.

The basic Kuban Cossacks’ socio-economic, societal and legal privileges were as follows:

1. Cossacks possessed considerable land and each male member of the Cossack community was granted a large tract of land at his birth (not only men in the army but also those living in obshchinas had the right to certain land).

2. Members of the Cossack community paid limited state tax amount and they could determine tax assessment for their own internal needs.

3. Cossack obshchinas in the stations (villages) and granges (farmsteads) were largely independent and were administered on the basis of military democracy. Those serving Cossacks and Cossack “veterans” who had their own families and farms could take part in the administration. On the other hand, women and those not belonging to the Cossack community were excluded from it.

4. In compliance with the old Cossack tradition there were annual elections of the obshchina’s leaders (led by the hetman of station) and of the court of station. Only those Cossacks who had ever succeeded in fight could aspire to these posts.

5. The authority of the leaders elected by the Cossacks themselves was also recognized by the tsarist power. Hetman (ataman) received a due pay and in case of his repeated election he got Cossack naseka «казачья насека» (a kind of bulava «булава», a traditional hetman’s symbol of power. In addition, on the basis of highest tsarist military authorities’ decision, hetman was commissioned officer’s rank (if he had not been an officer before).

6. Based on their own concept of justice (they relied on the social tradition), Cossacks serving under the leadership of station leaders oversaw the abidance by law and order in Cossack settlements and they compared their values with the new reality of the tsarist legislation. In other words, instead of police and judicial system there were Cossack guards and Cossack court, deciding all but exceptionally serious cases.

7. Cossack families in Cossack settlements maintained their traditional way of life. They were supported in their effort by the Cossack community both in everyday life and in extreme situations.¹⁸

On the other hand, in exchange for these social-economic, societal and legal privileges the Cossacks had to agree with a long-term military service and with providing military ammunition, riding gears, uniforms and cold steel at their own expense.¹⁹ Furthermore, the Cossacks in their units were expected to maintain high combat readiness both in time of military service and after it.

All this, along with ancient military Cossack traditions was determining the paramilitary character of life of both the individual and the whole Cossack community.

As to the military service of the Cossacks, it is necessary to emphasize that until 1915 it had lasted 18 years: one year of preparation, twelve years of active service and five years in the reserves.²⁰ The twelve-year active service was divided into three periods. In the first phase, the Cossacks served in first degree Cossack troops

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¹⁸ ЗАДУНАЙСЬКИЙ, Бойове мистецтво, pp. 41-45, 51-52.
¹⁹ АВР АМЕНКО, Козацьке військо на Кубані, p. 112.
²⁰ ЗАДУНАЙСЬКИЙ, Бойове мистецтво, p. 84.
out of their troops. Most of the second and third periods, however, they spent in more advantaged conditions. In time of peace, they were spread in the houses with compulsory military training in the stations and nearby Cossack camps.\footnote{ЗАДУНАЙСЬКИЙ, Бойове мистецтво, pp. 84-85.}

In the early 20\textsuperscript{th} century, the first degree troops of the Kuban Cossack army consisted of eleven cavalry regiments (eight regiments constituted the base of three Caucasian Cossack divisions, two regiments were part of the Transcaspian Cossack Brigade and one regiment was at the 2\textsuperscript{nd} Cossack Division’s disposal), of six infantry battalions (they formed the troops of the Kuban Infantry Brigade), of five Cossack artillery batteries (they were part of three Caucasian Cossack divisions and Transcaspian Cossack Brigade), of two companies of the escort of His Tsarist Majesty, of the Warsaw Cavalry Division (consisting of two companies) and of several individual companies and troops.\footnote{ЗАДУНАЙСЬКИЙ, Бойове мистецтво, pp. 97-98; <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/1-Кавказская_казачья_дивизия> <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/2-Кавказская_казачья_дивизия> <http://ru.wikipedia.org/wiki/Закаспийская_казачья_бригада>; Государственный архив Краснодарского Края (hereinafter ГАКК). Ф. 439, оп. 1, д. 11, л. 1-14.}

By the way, the presence of infantry battalions among the above mentioned troops and the division of the Kuban Cossacks was a direct consequence of the maintenance of Ukrainian military Cossack traditions. In that time, other Cossack units in Tsarist Russia did not have a full-fledged Cossack infantry.\footnote{Государственный архив Ростовской области. Ф. 46, оп. 1, д. 3667, л. 3.}

The aforesaid troops of the Kuban Cossack army had about 20,000 people (one third of the total number of those serving in the military were Cossacks in the reserves). It was thus a rather large contingent of Cossack soldiers who were out of their army as well as of their homes for four years. At the same time, everyday Cossack life had significantly paramilitary character, as proved by related materials from the research institutions.

We would also like to point to the fact that in contrast to regular army units, in the system of Cossack troops there were Cossacks of one army. In addition, the aforementioned troops were formed from particular districts with Cossack settlement (stations and granges). For instance, in the 1890’s there were twenty-seven stations in the Tamar regiment district.\footnote{ГАКК. Ф. 418, оп. 2, д. 47, л. 2.} Each station provided several dozens of Cossacks of the same age. Similar situation was not only in the Kuban Cossack cavalry troops but also in their infantry battalions. Obviously, the same applied to second and third degree troops. Thanks to this, in the Cossack troops there were not only neighbours and friends from stations but also relatives and often even brothers.

Thanks to all aforesaid peculiarities, unusual compatriot relationships had developed in the Cossack units. As a result, they were famous for a special atmosphere of military brotherhood and they also fostered and maintained individual military traditions inherited from the previous Ukrainian Cossack units. This was typical not only for the four-year service in first degree troops and for a certain period of the service in second degree troops, but also for the reserves.
A long-term study of relevant materials has allowed us to reveal the most intensive period of military values in Cossack life. It was a period of service in the Cossack military troops.

For example, in early 1906, in the 2nd Kuban Infantry Brigade’s infantry battalions (here the Cossacks of the second degree served) there were four military lessons every day (from 9.00 to 11.00 a.m. and from 2.00 to 4.00 p.m.). The themes varied but collective and individual military-practical disciplines prevailed (tactics training, study of military legislation, mastering weapons, military gymnastics, etc.).

A similar attitude was applied in the cavalry troops. For instance, in the 1st Poltava Regiment of the Kuban Cossack military, the Cossacks were trained in special military disciplines (horse riding, tactics, study of military laws, mastering firearms and cold steel, military gymnastics, etc.). In contrast to Cossack infantry, they devoted much time to practicing horse riding and fighting with a sword (шашка, shashka), which was typical for cavalry troops’ combat operations. The presented schemes of military preparation timetable secured combat readiness of individuals as well as of the whole Cossack body.

What is important for us is the fact of intensive and long-term stay of the Cossack (per day) in the military community (at least 4-year service in first degree

25 ГАКК. Ф. 404, оп. 1, д. 46, л. 7.
26 ГАКК. Ф. 396, оп. 1, д. 8563/2, л. 434.
it should be underlined that as early as in the childhood and adolescence, future soldiers acquainted themselves with Cossack military and martial traditions and martial art, either in their families or among their peers. This was also helped by the “militarized” gymnastics «военизированная гимнастика» that became compulsory in the Kuban Cossack army’s station schools on 22 December 1910. According to the schedule, it was practiced on a daily basis, thirty minutes prior to and after education. The gymnastics focused on the overall physical development of the youth as well as on the fundamentals of Cossack military service and individual aspects.
of Cossack martial and military arts. Only male members of the Cossack community attended the training.

In shaping the paramilitary way of life of the Cossack community, an important part was played by various festivals as occasions for miscellaneous military reviews and military-sport contests. There were at least five such festivals during the year. They included major religious holidays – Easter, the Holy Trinity, saint patron’s holiday, but also anniversaries of the establishment of army or station. Of a similar character were also individual sport contests with strong paramilitary influence that complemented individual holidays. During these celebrations, a special military status of the Cossacks was emphasized. They demonstrated their military skills and art before the eyes of all inhabitants of the station or grange. In addition, it was an opportunity for strengthening friendships and comradeships among the peers as well as those of different age categories.

Important was also the fact that not only serving Cossacks at the age of 20-33, but also older Cossacks and youth younger than 22 years old took part in individual military-practical competitions, such as horse racing, military horse riding («джигитовка на конях»), mastering cold steel, shooting, etc. It should be noted that those young Cossacks who, unlike the Cossacks from the preparation group, did not yet learn the basics of the compulsory military-practical preparation in the stations and training camps, also actively participated in individual contests. In addition, there was a tradition of “observing” age groups. In horse riding it became a rule that there competed small Cossacks of the same age from 10 to 20. They were divided into groups as follows:

- children until 10 or 11 years of age;
- children until 13 years of age;
- children until 15 years of age.

For instance, in 1904, at the contest in the Nizhny Bakon station of the Kuban Cossack army the competitors included kids aged 11 to 13. Interestingly, the prizes were of the same value, regardless of age category. They most often were Cossack martial weapons (swords or kindjals), parts of Cossack uniform, watches, etc.

In our opinion, the diversified practices of attracting small Cossacks to military-sport competitions suggest the existence of a special tradition of training future soldiers in the Cossack environment, particularly in their families or through the authority of their parents. Thanks to this, since early childhood the Cossacks had shaped the ideas and values that determined the status of the Cossack soldier in the particular military-privileged community and they had also shaped their stereotypes and mentality.

It is necessary to note that various military-sport contests were also held during the stay of Cossacks in the military units, especially in first degree troops. These
competitions were compulsory as part of the preparation of all Cossacks and officers serving in individual troops and units. Notwithstanding the obligation of the competitions, the winners received awards. For instance, in the 1st Ataman Sidor Belyi’s Poltava Regiment («1-й Полтавский кошевого атамана Сидора Белого полк»), the winners were awarded silver cups and watches, sizable amounts of money, and parts of Cossack weaponry and uniforms. On the basis of the analysis of different kinds of Cossack military contests and of the value of prizes, it can be concluded that the most important were the competitions in fighting with cold steel on horses and on foot as well as shooting. It should be noted that the Cossack officers and their assistants-corporals who trained ordinary Cossacks were often the winners of contests. In other words, the teachers really mastered what they taught. For example, in the competitions held in May of 1904 in the 1st Poltava Regiment, one of the winners was officer Borisenko (assistant commander of a training group in the regiment) who, as early as during his studies in the Nikolaev Military Academy, had been awarded for his combat preparation and his name was inscribed in the marble board among the best riders of the academy.

The aforementioned facts suggest that the Cossacks were provided with a very good military training. The skills gained were checked out in many paramilitary contests. All contestants competed in similar paramilitary disciplines. The winners were awarded valuable prizes (e.g. weapons and parts of equipment as well as higher sums of money). All this contributed to the graveness of the contests, welded the famous Cossack community together and attracted the Cossack youth. In other words, the overall concept of the competitions was a real manifestation of respect towards Cossack military values. At the same time, it preserved and cultivated traditions of the Cossack paramilitary community.

When dealing with the “militarized” way of life of the Cossack community, we cannot omit the peculiarities of Cossack martial and military arts. While the martial art means mastering weapons, the military art should be understood as a collective action on the battle field (including tactics and strategy). As to Cossack military art, it should be noted that at the late 19th and early 20th centuries only tactical (otherwise operational) actions were possible because the Cossack troops could perform independent actions only at the level of brigade-division. At higher levels, there were other adequate tsarist general military structures.

Cossack military art included the following tactical disciplines, different from the general military ones:

1. lava «лава» (special principle of fighting on horseback, accompanied by constant changes of penetration structure, with transition to pedestrian system and vice versa);
2. trap «вентирь» (a specific element of luring attacking enemy into encirclement, with a surprising attack by reserve troops);
3. sketch «кроки» (special way of controlling a territory by reconnaissance);

38 ГАКК. Ф. 396, оп. 1, д. 8563/1, л. 165-166.
39 ГАКК. Ф. 396, оп. 1, д. 8563/1, л. 162-166.
40 ГАКК. Ф. 396, оп. 1, д. 8563/1, л. 165, 259.
41 ЗАДУНАЙСЬКИЙ, Бойове мистецтво, р. 86-92.
4. *batovka* «батовка» (special ways of controlling the battlefield behind cavalry in infantry and cavalry armour, connected with leading the horses holding their reins).\(^{42}\)

The above mentioned Cossack tactics elements had been inherited from the former Ukrainian Cossack units, as evidenced by corresponding Ukrainian terminology (лава, кроки, батовка). These forms of tactics were rather sophisticated and required a long-term training and constant practice, which was possible only in the Cossack environment. Therefore, the Cossack cavalry «казачья кавалерия» surpassed the regular Russian tsarist cavalry. When speaking of Cossack martial art it should be remarked that in its very basis it was connected with the elements of mastering cold steel in man-to-man fight. At the same time, the maximum unification of firearms, in line with the scientific progress in the field, did not mean the emergence of atypical Cossack way of shooting.

The main weapon of the Kuban Cossack cavalry was a “shashka” – a sword with a slightly curved blade, i.e. a Caucasian sort of sabre. Another, less often used weapon was a kindjal – a long Caucasian dagger.

Under the influence of the tsarist unification of fighting at the early 20th century, a basic level of mastering cold steel was introduced – several blows and manoeuvres with a sword, a few blows and hits with a bayonet and gunstock and protection with a sabre and rifle. This was compulsory for all Cossack soldiers.\(^{43}\)

In addition, in that time the higher level of a particular martial art, often inherited from older Ukrainian Cossack units, was not generally prescribed and much depended on the personal qualities of the Cossack (or those of his teachers) as well as on the environment in which the soldier was trained.\(^{44}\)

It should be emphasized that besides teaching military values and the Cossack way of life and in addition to the welding the military Cossack community togeth-

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\(^{42}\) ЗАДУНАЙСЬКІЙ, Бойове мистецтво, р. 120-125.


\(^{44}\) ЗАДУНАЙСЬКІЙ, Володимир Васильович. *Володіння холодною зброєю*, с. 35-36.
er, the above mentioned contests contributed to the maintenance and development of Cossack military and martial arts. We would also like to underline that the existence of these special military and martial arts in the Cossack environment represented a complementary factor in the forming and maintaining of paramilitary values in the life of the Cossack community.

Of course, the above mentioned peculiarities of the Cossack community were not ideal. In addition, not all Cossacks inclined to this way of life. This kind of preparation was, however, effective. Such a reality was shaping peculiar values and stereotypes of the awareness of military status both in the individual and in the whole Cossack community at the level of the farmstead, station, district and army. It was strengthened and maintained by compromises with the central power by means of particular socio-economic, societal and legal privileges guaranteed by the Russian Tsar as a compensation for a long-term and hard military service.

In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the Kuban Cossack army (mostly composed of the Ukrainian Cossacks) had a clearly defined military system and an adequate complex of military training and serving Cossacks (strengthened by specific martial and military arts). There was also a paramilitary character of the local Cossack community. At the same time, there were Ukrainian military Cossack traditions and the influence of the tsarist unification, necessary in case of war.

This paper is not expected to cover the selected topic in greater depth. Its aim is to stimulate further research on this issue in the domestic and foreign institutions.

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