

10 things that define Russian Cossacks

HISTORY JULY 01 2022 ALEXANDRA GUZEVA

Follow Russia Beyond on

Telegram

Cossacks have been known since the 15th century and they are still around today, still following the traditions of their ancestors. What is so special about them? Below, we sum them up in 10 key features of their way of life and history.

1. The Cossack



Kuban Cossacks, 1979
Boris Ushmaikin/Sputnik

characteristic features.

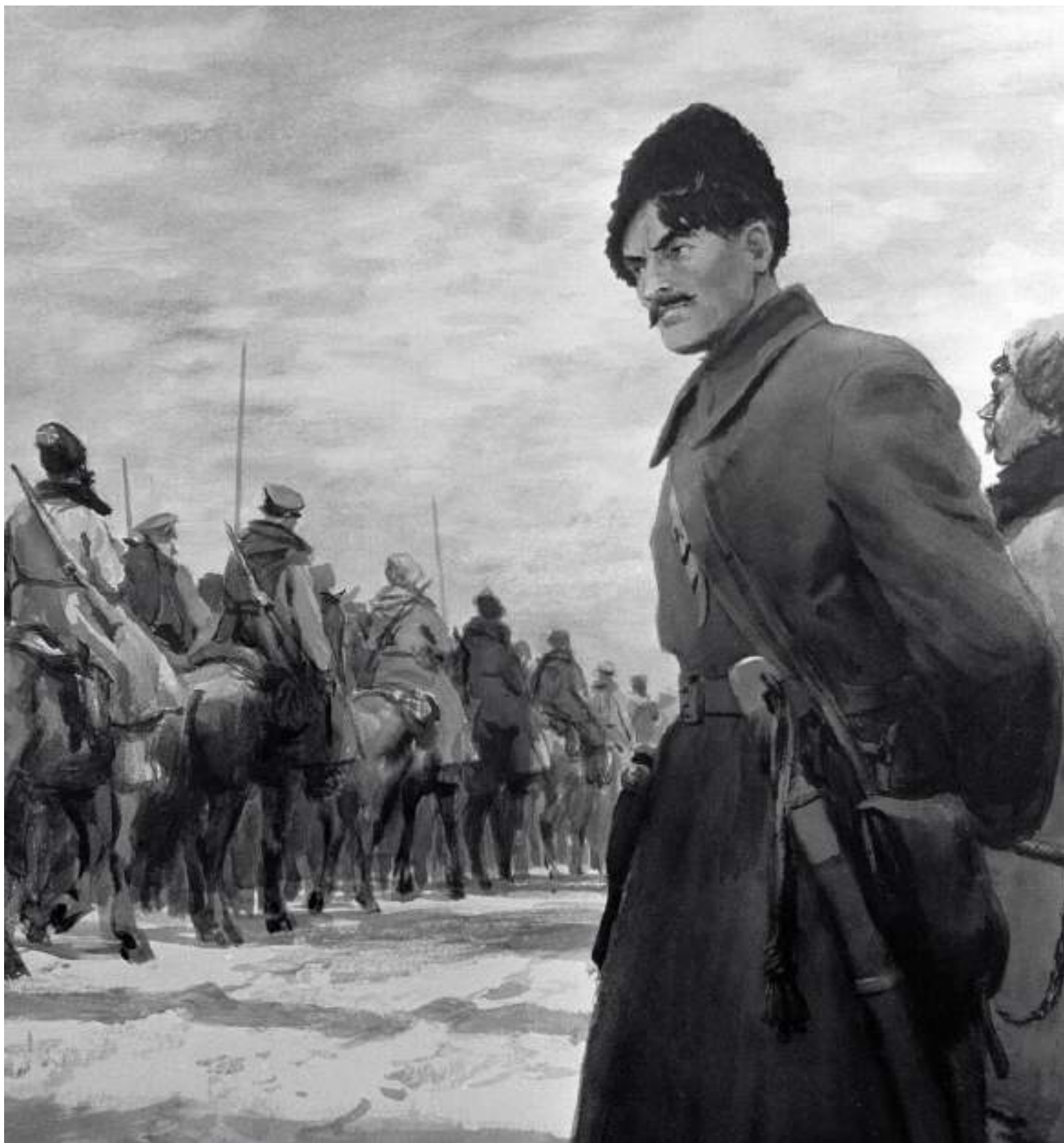
The etymology of the word 'Cossack' is not fully known. According to one theory, translated from Mongolian, it means "to guard a frontier" and the Cossacks were, indeed, a military formation that guarded the borders of the Russian Empire. According to another theory, it is a Turkic word for an "adventurer" or "free man".



Kuban Cossacks, late 19th century
Sputnik

This is how the Great Soviet Encyclopedia describes Cossacks and it is difficult to argue with this statement. Cossacks were always in the service of the state, but, at the same time, they were also freedom-loving people - hence the Cossack rebellions throughout history. The Cossacks Stepan Razin in the 17th century and **Yemelyan Pugachev** in the 18th initiated entire large-scale wars against tsarist troops.

2. The (Quiet) Don



An illustration for Mikhail Sholokhov's novel 'And Quiet Flows the Don,' by the artist Orest Vereisky
Sputnik

Don, Kuban, Zaporozhian, Siberian and Ural Cossacks all “inhabited” various parts of the country and were very diverse in their ethnic composition, but they were still Cossacks. The



A still from 'And Quiet Flows the Don' movie, 1958 / Gorky Film Studio. Directed by Sergei Gerasimov
Sputnik

During the 1917 Revolution and the ensuing Civil War, the Cossacks were divided – some supported the “Red” Bolsheviks, while others took the side of the “White” monarchists. Many vacillated, however, crossing over from one side to the other, as masterfully depicted in Mikhail Sholokhov’s best-known novel ‘And Quiet Flows the Don’. Taking advantage of some Cossacks’ inclination for rebellion, Hitler **lured** several of their formations to his side during World War II.

3. *Volnitsa*



The meeting of minor Cossacks' circle in the village of Vityazevo.

Alexei Boitsov/Sputnik

Originally, Cossacks were supposedly formed from runaway peasants seeking freedom from the state or from their masters and from the oppression of feudal service. So, Cossack settlements enjoyed a system of self-government that was unique in Russia, known as *volnitsa* (from the Russian word 'volya' - *воля* translated as 'freedom'). All matters were discussed at the so-called 'Cossack assembly' where adult men gathered to decide who should be punished or fined, who should go hunting or fishing or who should be on guard duty.

4. The *ataman*



At the head of the *volnitsa* was an *ataman*, freely elected by the adult men of the group. The *ataman* was highly respected and his advice heeded. At the same time, his power was not authoritarian. Furthermore, at any time, a new *ataman* could be elected or the incumbent himself could decide to step down.

5. A horse

A Cossack without a horse is like a soldier without a gun. A Cossack without a horse is considered a complete orphan. A Cossack can stay hungry, but his horse is always well fed. These sayings seem to amply reflect the role horses play in the life of a Cossack.



Stallion Osman, taken at the fall of Plevna, during the Russo-Turkish war 1878 - 1885

MAMM/MDF/russiainphoto.ru

Simply put, a Cossack without a horse is not a Cossack. Cossacks learn to ride from an early age. The loss of a faithful horse is mourned like the loss of a close relative. Throughout history, Cossacks joined the regular army in cavalry (mounted) units, although there were Cossack foot regiments, too.

6. The *shashka*

The shashka (saber) was as much an essential attribute of a real Cossack as his horse. It's a long, slightly curving blade designed for stabbing and hacking. A Cossack wore his saber on his belt at all times and all but slept with it next to him. A good illustration is, for instance, Ilya Repin's painting 'Zaporozhian Cossacks write a letter to the Turkish Sultan'.



Ilya Repin Reply of the Zaporozhian Cossacks (Cossacks of Saporog Are Drafting a Manifesto), 1880–1891
The State Russian Museum

The scene takes place during the Russo-Turkish war of the 17th century and, even in their relaxed mood, the Cossacks do not part with their sabers, which poke out from every part of the painting. Incidentally, in the legendary letter, the Cossacks employ the most vivid expressions to direct curses and insults at the Sultan himself and the painting shows them roaring with laughter as they think up scathing phrases (the most innocent of which is “you pig face”).

Cossacks could also perform the most improbable tricks with their sabers – in some ways, *flanirovka*, or sword spinning, resembles the stunt riding on horseback known as *dzhigitovka*, except there’s no horse involved. Without further ado, here is a video to check out.

7. Papakha

The fashion and traditions of the Cossack look and Cossack hairstyle differed in different regions and at different times: Some Cossacks left a topknot on their otherwise shaven head, others grew a drooping mustache and others still went around with unshaven beards. But, many had the fur *papakha* hat in common.





Kuban Cossacks in Krasnodar

Vladimir Velengurin/TASS

It was originally the traditional male headdress among the ethnic groups of the Caucasus and Central Asia. But it subsequently “infiltrated” the Cossack troops. In Russia in the 15th century, the southern Cossacks, or Don Cossacks, were even known as *Cherkasy*, because of confusion with the Caucasian ethnic group, the *Cherkesy* (Circassians). Find out more on the papakha [here](#).

8. Gazyrs



Kuban Cossacks on Red Square during the VIctory Parade of June 24, 1945

Alexander Kiyan (CC BY-SA 3.0)

feature impossible to imagine a Cossack being without.



A still from 'Kidnapping, Caucasian Style' movie
Leonid Gaidai/Mosfilm, 1967

One might think they were designed for holding cigars or cigarettes (as the joke went in the hit Soviet movie 'Kidnapping, Caucasian Style!', 1967), but the pockets were actually intended to hold and keep gunpowder dry. Read more about *gazyrs*[here](#).

9. *Sharovary*



Alexander Dutov, Colonel of the General Staff of the Tsarist Army, ataman of the Orenburg Cossack Army, 1920-1921

Southern Urals historical museum

The extremely baggy trousers tapering towards the shins called *sharovary* were another item of traditional dress for many Cossacks. They were frequently adorned with stripes on each side. Cossack troops also wore straight trousers, as well as the gallifet-type riding breeches that were to become a standard feature of Red Army uniform. A pair of red revolutionary *sharovary* was an honorary award in the Red Army cavalry for exceptional bravery (there is a striking scene involving this award in the Soviet movie 'Officers', 1971).

10. The *kazachok*

The *kazachok* has a lot in common with the Ukrainian folk dance *hopak* and historians can't agree on which came first. The main elements of the *kazachok* are: squat kicks in which first one leg and then the other are alternately thrust forward into the air; high leaps with legs extended in opposite directions. The most varied acrobatic turns and flips were demonstrated by dashing Cossack prowess. These moves also subsequently migrated to the Soviet sailor's dance, the *yablochko*.

Alexander Dargomyzhsky from 1864.

Dear readers,

Our website and social media accounts are under threat of being restricted or banned, due to the current circumstances. So, to keep up with our latest content, simply do the following:

- *Subscribe to our [Telegram](#) channel*
- *Subscribe to our [weekly email newsletter](#)*
- *Enable push notifications on our [website](#)*
- *Install a VPN service on your computer and/or phone to have access to our website, even if it is blocked in your country*

If using any of Russia Beyond's content, partly or in full, always provide an active hyperlink to the original material.

EDUCATION

RUSSIAN HISTORY

COSSACKS

RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

ETHNIC

Subscribe to our newsletter!

Get the week's best stories straight to your inbox

We've got more than 2,4 million followers on Facebook. [Join them!](#)

Read more

How Russian Cossacks fought for and against Hitler

Salavat Yulayev: How a rebel ended up on the emblem of one Russian republic

Papakha: Why all Caucasian men wear this furry hat (PHOTOS)

It's time to bath in a salt pit! An unusual tradition of the old Ural city of Solikamsk

TRAVEL APR 06 2024 RUSSIA BEYOND

This Ural city in the north of Perm Territory is often dubbed the “salt capital of Russia”.

Oleg Vorobyov



Lyudmilinskaya salt pit.

Oleg Vorobyov

Salt was discovered in these parts back in the 15th century and salt production has been the basis of Solikamsk's economy for centuries. The Usolka River, a Kama River tributary, runs through the city, with salt springs flowing into it.



The view of Solikamsk.

Oleg Vorobyov

At the beginning of the 20th century, near one such source, the Lyudmilinskaya salt pit was drilled to a depth of about 100 meters to study the salt strata and understand whether it was possible to extract edible salt. The research went on for several years, but, it turned out that, in this place, the salt was very bitter, with potassium impurities, so the mining was abandoned.



Springs in Solikamsk.

Oleg Vorobyov

However, the pit was not abandoned; scientists continued to study the chemical composition of the source. The pit is active and is constantly filled with salt water from the spring even today.



The former salt plant, now the Museum of history of salt.

Oleg Vorobyov

Locals believe that this water is beneficial for the body. There is a smell of hydrogen sulfide around it, like at geothermal resorts. Therefore, you can often see people taking a dip in this pit. And it is easily accessible via specially-built wooden decks.



Oleg Vorobyov

Dear readers,

Our website and social media accounts are under threat of being restricted or banned, due to the current circumstances. So, to keep up with our latest content, simply do the following:

- *Subscribe to our **Telegram** channel*
- *Subscribe to our **weekly email newsletter***
- *Enable push notifications on our **website***
- *Install a VPN service on your computer and/or phone to have access to our website, even if it is blocked in your country*

RUSSIAN REGIONS

URALS

PERM

Read more

A weekend in Great Perm: 48 hours to fall in love with the Urals

Perm: How the Ural megapolis has changed over 300 years (PHOTOS)

! [Click here](#) to share and comment