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The Semirechye Cossacks in the Imperial Space of Russia

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The article describes the history of the ethno-social group of the Russian people: the Semirechye Cossacks. The author analyzes emerging of the Semirechye Cossack host, its role in the conquest and economic development of Central Asia. The article also considers participation of the Semirechye Cossacks in the struggle of Russia for the control over Central Asia and its confrontation with the Islamic world, China and the West (the British Empire) in the region. Special attention is paid to interaction of the Semirechye Cossacks and the native Turkic population.

Keywords: ethno-social group, Cossacks, interethnic relations, international relations, geopolitics, Central Asia, China, Islamic world.

Point

The phenomenon of the Cossacks, the original class that appeared in Russia at the end of the 15th – beginning of the 16th centuries, is quite complicated. The Cossacks are peculiar, while a Cossack was both a warrior and a landowner-farmer at the same time. First of all, a Cossack was a medieval type warrior. Simplicity in everyday life, good knowledge of the area, cultural and military features of the enemy allowed the Cossacks to act independently from the bases, often in severe natural and climatic conditions. At the same time, a Cossack was capable of adapting to any conditions and could build an economically profitable household in any part of Eurasia from Transpolar Siberia to the deserts of Central Asia. All these features of the Cossacks were demanded by the Russian state for centuries.

Russian and international researchers traditionally pay significant attention to the Cossacks as a specific social group. Participation of the Cossacks in conquering and developing the territory of Central Asia, the role of the Cossacks as the keepers of the eastern regions of the Russian Empire are quite interesting. Among the main publications of Russian and international authors in the past the following should be named first of all: B. Bezsonov, N.V. Ledenyov, N. Konshin, N.E. Bekmakhanova, E. Tettau, Ph. Longwort, and a series of works of the general and reference type¹.

Among the research of modern authors continuing the study of the Cossack host and its role in the conquest and development of Central Asia and Semirechye the most outstanding are the works by D.A. Sapunov, Yu. G. Nedbai, E.N. Lechshev, as well as the works of international

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researchers D. Hosking, M. Khodorkovsky and V. Martin².

Considering the Cossacks in general, it is necessary to distinguish between those Cossack hosts that had arisen independently and by the administrative will of the state. The first ones include, above all, the Don and the Zaporozhian hosts, and their derivatives – the Terek, the Ural, the Volga, the Siberian and the Kuban Cossack hosts, the second ones – the Ussuri, the Amur and the Transbaikal hosts. The Semirechye Cossack host occupies a special place among them. The Semirechye host was established by the state in 1867 after the rest Cossack hosts. However, in this case we do not deal with artificial formation. The Semirechye Cossack host emerged as an isolated part of another Cossack host, the Siberian one.

The Cossacks were universal warriors, having brilliantly demonstrated this feature, in particular, in the era of the Napoleonic wars. However, they integrated better in the Asian regions of the Russian Empire. Having appeared in the 15th- 16th centuries during the confrontation between the Slavs and the Turks, and mostly as a result of this confrontation, the Cossacks ideally adapted to the fight against the steppe nomads. Gradually, from the defenders of the southern and the eastern borders of the Russian state the Cossacks became the main force of the Russian Empire in the East – Russian conquistadors. From the middle of the 16th century until the middle of the 18th century the eastern regions of Europe, located between the Volga and the Urals, Siberia, the Far East and the north-western regions of America were incorporated into Russia. Then, in the middle of the 18th century conquering of the north-eastern regions of Central Asia began. In 1731 with the construction of Orenburg, the Russian Empire began to advance deeper into Central Asia, winning the Kazakh proto state formations – the Junior, the Middle and the Great

jüz formations – and later the Turkic states that emerged from the remains of the Golden Horde: the Emirate of Bukhara, the Khanates of Khiva and Kokand. The spoils of war and labour of slaves captured mainly during regular attacks on Russia and Iran played a prominent role in the economy of these countries. The Khiva troops, in particular, raided on Russian lands until the middle of the 19th century. Until the middle of the 18th century Russia took a defensive position, but with the beginning of the reign of Anna Ioannovna a gradual advance into Central Asia began. The main force in this struggle, of course, was the Cossack host.

The Cossacks lived on the border of the Turkic steppe since the end of the 15th century. During this time they were in the continuous military confrontation with the local peoples, and learned well the Turkic population during their campaigns to the steppe: characteristics of its economy and way of life, mentality, methods of war fighting. The Cossacks also knew the area well: places for camps and routes of nomadic movements, pastures, wells, fords, etc. The Cossack household, life, military skills and traditions of the Cossacks ideally suited local conditions.

During active movement deeper into the Steppe, when in 1731 the lands of the Junior jüz (modern Northern Kazakhstan) were incorporated into Russia, it appeared to be at the border with Semirechye, a unique region, which had a key position in the whole Central Asia.

Semirechye or Zhetysu (in Turkic languages) was a geographic area in Central Asia with the Balkhash lake as its border in the north and the west, the Tian Shan Mountains as its southern border and lakes Sasykol' and Alakol' and the Dzhungarian Alatau Mountains as its border in the east. The region got its name from the seven main rivers that flowed on this territory: Ili, Aksu, Lepsa, Karatal, Bien, Baskan and Sarkand. Often

in historical references the Chu river valley is also referred to Semirechye. Nowadays the territory of former Semirechye is occupied by modern Kazakhstan, China and Kyrgyzstan.

For a long period of time Semirechye was one of the key regions in Asia³. After the Iran Saka tribes were forced out of there by the Turkic peoples at the beginning of the 1st millennium of the New Era, the region was a part of the Turkic states of the Turkut, Turgesh, Karluk, Kara-Khanid and Kara-Khitai. In the 13th century Semirechye was incorporated into the Mongolian state. Approximately in the middle of the 16th century a proto state Kazakh union was formed at the territory of Semirechye – the Great jüz, which was the dominating political power for the two other Kazakh territorial-political formations – the Middle and the Junior jüz formations. These three territorial-tribal unions of the Kazakhs occupied a large territory from the Caspian Sea in the west to the Dzhungarian borders, and later China in the east, from Siberian taiga in the north to the states of Central Asia: the Khanate of Khiva, the Khanate of Kokand and the Emirate of Bukhara in the south.

Occupying Semirechye allowed Russia to control the states of Central Asia, establish trade relations with Eastern Turkmenistan, protect its southern borders from the potential expansion of England and China, and get closer to the borders of British India. The Cossacks were supposed to become the main power for both conquering this region and establishing control over it, and providing its further economic development.

Example

Beginning of Semirechye colonization by Russians refers to 1831, when Ayaguz settlement was established with positioning of the Siberian Cossack garrison. The Cossack units were regularly sent to Semirechye to demonstrate the power of Russia.

Colonel of the General Staff A. Butovsky, who was sent in 1834 to visit Kyrgyz steppe by the order of the Minister of War, presented the “Draft of Commercial and Economic Development of Semirechye and Lake Balkhash in Order to Develop and Strengthen Trade Relations with Asian Countries”. Admitting the significant role of Semirechye he called this region “an important point in the heart of Asia”. Colonel Butovsky considered that establishment of the control of Russia over Semirechye would give an opportunity to establish good trade relations with Tibet, Hindustan and other “Asian states”. A. Butovsky thought to use the Siberian Cossack hundreds in development of the region, thus making expenditures for colonization “paltry in comparison with upcoming profits”⁴.

In 1847 the Emperor Nicholas I approved the plans of occupying Semirechye region and “migration of the Cossacks from the [Siberian – M.T.] line to this region”.

In 1849, 25 Cossack families settled down 65 km from the headwaters of the Syr-Dar’ya river. In 1854 the Russian military expedition founded Zasil’skoe fortification, later renamed into Verny fort (future Alma-Aty, modern Almaty). From 1854 till 1867 Semirechensk, Ayaguz and Trans-Ili territories were included into the Semipalatinsk region. In 1857 the 9th and the 10th regiments of the Siberian Cossack host were transferred to this region. Not only Cossacks, but hundreds of peasant families were sent there from Siberia. They were given land and were classed as the Cossacks⁵. During the period from 1847 till 1867 the authorities managed to transfer to Semirechye a significant number of the Cossack families from the Siberian Cossack host and form 14 large Cossack villages and settlements. It is noteworthy, that the peasant colonization, which was more economically efficient in comparison with the Cossack colonization, was firmly restricted by the authorities from the first steps of Semirechye

conquest and development by Russians. The Cossack colonization was obviously the priority (Galuzo, 1965: 162). On July 13, 1857, by the order of Alexander II the Semirechye Cossack host was established with its military centre in Verny city basing on the 9th and the 10th Cossack regiments with the staffs in Verny and Kopal. The following objectives were set for the Semirechye Cossack host at its establishment: consolidation campaign at the conquered territory, colonization of the territory, its development and protection of the borders. Traditionally the Cossacks also fulfilled the policemen functions. The new host included two mounted regiments of six hundred warriors – the 1st and the 2nd Semirechye Cossack regiments renamed correspondingly from the 9th and the 10th Siberian Cossack regiments. At the moment of the host's establishment its number amounted 1, 768 people (Ledenyov, 1909: 88). Simultaneously with the Semirechye Cossack host the Semirechye region was established as a part of Turkmenistan Governorate General. The region included not only the territory of Semirechye itself, but also the Chu river valley and mountain areas of the Tian Shan Mountains. In the north the Semirechye region bordered with the Semipalatinsk region, which was well explored by Russians at that moment. In the south and in the east the borders of the region coincided with the Russian-Chinese border. In the west the Semirechye region neighbored with the well explored Akmolinsk region and the Fergana and the Syr-Dar'ya regions inhabited mostly by the Uzbeks. The total area of the established region exceeded 400,000 square kilometers. The administrative centre of the Semirechye region was Verny city, future Alma-Ata. The appointed chieftain of the Semirechye Cossack host was the Commander of the Semirechye region army. Locally the Cossack villages were managed by the villages' chieftains being under command of the appointed chieftain.

Thus, at the time of its establishment the host was under command of the Semirechye Governor General G.A. Kolpakovsky (Sapunov, 2001: 145-146). For the protection of trade routes to China (Xinjiang), he founded three new villages of the Semirechye Cossack host: Nadezhdinskaya, Lyubavinskaya and Sofiiskaya, which were named in honour of his daughters. Initially, these villages were inhabited by the Siberian Cossacks, who were on temporary service in the region and with time began to settle here permanently and formed the basis of the Semirechye Cossacks. In turn, the administration of the Semirechye region strongly supported and encouraged this process. As the Semirechye Cossack host was based on the Siberian Cossack host, later in 1903 the Semirechye host was given precedence, the same the Siberian Cossack host had from 1582, i.e. from the beginning of Yermak expedition to Siberia (Kazin, 1912: 286).

In 1879 the "Statement about the Semirechye Cossack Host" was issued according to which the units from the 1st and the 2nd regiments were detached for the formation of the third Semirechye Cossack regiment (Kazin, 1912: 286). This was done to have one regiment in service, while two other Cossack regiments could do farming in the place of residence. Thus, the Semirechye Cossack host in the late 19th – early 20th century in peacetime should have put one cavalry regiment of four hundred warriors, and in wartime three cavalry regiments of four hundred warriors and 12 independent hundreds. Since 1906 the guard platoon of the Semirechye Cossacks served in the 3rd (integrated) hundred of the Imperial guards of the integrated Cossack regiment (Kazin, 1912: 286). During the First World War all three regiments of the Semirechye Cossacks were fully mobilized and 4,167 people out of 6,107 Cossacks liable for military service were in service by January 1917.

According to Colonel Khoroshikhin by 1880 there were 24,398 people in the Semirechye Cossack host, both male and female, among them 23,409 Orthodox Christians and 809 non-Christians (*Kazach'i voiska... (Cossack hosts ...)*, 1881: 151). The latter were the "Kalmyks" (the Dzhungars, Western Mongols – M.T.) out of those 400 Mongols and their families enrolled at the highest command as of May 29, 1869, while they remained loyal to the Chinese emperor during the Muslim rebellion in Uyghuristan and had to flee from China.

It should be noted that the period of active Cossack colonization finished in the late 1870's. The government's policy regarding colonization of Semirechye depended on its strategic plans in Central Asia, where there was a war and the troops advanced into Turkestan. During 53 years of colonization 29 Cossack settlements were founded. After 1880 and until the end of the 19th century the rates of the Cossack colonization significantly decreased. The last 20 years of the 19th century the Cossack population actually increased only due to natural growth. The Cossack settlements were distributed unevenly in Semirechye. There were no Cossack settlements in the whole northern Kyrgyzstan. They were concentrated in Verny, Dzharkent and Kopal counties at strategic communications between Siberia and Turkestan military districts (Sapunov, 2001: 192).

According to the 1897 census out of almost 988,000 people inhabiting the region, there were only little more than 85,000 of Russians and Ukrainians, i.e. just 9.7 %. The main part of the region's population were Kyrgyz-Kaysaks (Kazakhs) and Kara-Kyrgyz (Kyrgyz), almost 795,000 people (80.4 %). Moreover, the region was home to 56,000 Taranchi (Uyghurs) (5.7 %), 15,000 Sarts (Uzbeks) (1.5 %), 14,000 Dungans (1.4 %) and more than 8,000 Tatars (0.8 %).

Only in the late 19th – early 20th century the Government took some measures to strengthen the established host. It continued to transfer the Siberian and the Ural Cossacks to its territory. As a result by 1906 there were 34,468 Cossacks in the region, representing 25% of Russian and 4% of the total population of the territory. At that time the host had almost 600,000 dessiatins of land in its ownership⁶. It should be noted that by 1902 there were 703,879 dessiatins of irrigated land in Semirechye, of which 186,241 dessiatins, or 26.4%, belonged to the Cossacks. The Cossacks seeded only 18.9% of all their irrigated land, while the Russian peasants – 46.6 %, the Kazakhs – 58.5 %, and the Uyghurs and Dungans – 77.6 %. Inefficient use of land by the Cossacks caused by the need to be in long military service, according to some officials had a negative effect on the development of agriculture in the region. This led to the fact that with the approval of Governor General Kaufman the Semirechye authorities, which strove to defuse the situation in the region, in 1870 – 1880's began to return some Cossack lands to the Kazakhs and partially transfer them to cities. Even though such reduction of the Cossacks' ownings in the territory was declared illegal and the resettlement area was offered to transfer to the Cossacks 213 thousand dessiatins of land, which was seized from them and handed over to the Kazakhs, this was not done (Sapunov, 2001: 195). However, the amount of land of the Semirechye Cossack host grew steadily and by 1916 was estimated at 744 thousand dessiatins. The Semirechye Cossacks were second only after the Ural Cossacks in provision with land and even that gap was extremely small, and they were far superior to the Cossacks of all other Cossack hosts. Thus, in 1904, the land per male of the Semirechye Cossack host was 95.3 dessiatins, while for the Ural Cossacks it was 94, 4 (*Istoriya kazachestva Aziatskoi Rossii (History of the Cossacks of the Asian Russia ...)*, 1996a: 37).

In 1870's the ideas of "archaic character" of the Cossacks in general and the need to abolish the Semirechye Cossacks in particular began to appear in St. Petersburg government circles. These ideas, however, did not find approval of the senior management. The Russian authorities in Turkestan especially opposed to such plans, and, in particular, the military governor of Semirechye, General Freede, who believed that "the Cossacks are a peculiar, an irreplaceable and an extremely valuable military element... such as light cavalry ..., reconnaissance service, protection and guerrilla actions". The plan of uniting the Semirechye and the Siberian Cossack hosts, which arose in 1887, was also rejected. On the contrary, in 1909 the Turkestan Governor-General A.V. Samsonov suggested "to develop the Semirechye host into the size... of the Siberian one" (Sapunov, 2001: 194, 195). This plan, however, was not fulfilled for the objective reasons – primarily because of the lack of people and because of the soon outbreak of World War II.

Despite the fact that the Semirechye Cossack host was significantly outnumbered by many Cossack hosts, throughout the 2nd half of the 19th century the growth of the Cossack population was observed in the Semirechye region. This was a result of not only high natural increase of the Cossack population, but also artificial inclusion of peasants into the Semirechye Cossack class. Thus, according to the data of 1871 there were 14,369 Cossacks in Semirechye, and already in 1880 – 19,791. In 1916, the Semirechye Cossacks host amounted to 45,307 people of both sexes, living in 34 Cossack settlements – 19 villages and 15 "vyseloks" (settlements). After the powerful "Kyrgyz" anti-Russian rebellion in 1916, in the suppression of which the Semirechye Cossacks played an important role, three villages of the Semirechye Cossacks were established in the key points of the region. At the end of 1918, at the territory controlled by

the leaders of the Semirechye Cossack host four more peasant villages received the status of the Cossack villages due to voluntary inclusion of the Russian peasant old-timers into the Cossack class. (*Istoriya kazachestva Aziatskoi Rossii* (History of the Cossacks of the Asian Russia), 1996 b: 37, (*Istoriya kazachestva Aziatskoi Rossii* (History of the Cossacks of the Asian Russia), 1996v: 15).

It should be noted that the Cossack population of Semirechye, which was continuously growing in numbers and joining more and more land to its allotments, did not act against the local Muslim population only as a hostile force. The development of Russian and, in particular, Cossack farming allowed most of the poor indigenous population to get an additional source of income and, as a consequence, a source for survival at the expense of employment as farmhands to the Cossacks. Only Russian (Cossack) households needed so many farmhands out of the representatives of local people. The Cossacks spent almost all time in the military service and, therefore, were not able to farm at their large land allotments. Moreover, the specificity of agriculture in the region due to the necessity of land irrigation and use of specific (southern) crops (cotton, melons, fruit trees) forced the Russian Cossack population to use the services of the local population, who had the skills to work in such conditions. However, the local people under the influence of the Russian and, in particular, the Cossack population, learned to use complicated agricultural equipment (plows, seeders, winnow mills, threshers, etc.) and borrowed a number of crops brought by Russians (Pravilova, 2009). Moreover, in the areas with predominantly nomadic population the appearance of Cossack farms stimulated the local population to agriculture. Indigenous people borrowed from the Cossacks advanced methods of breeding: mowing, breeding of improved cattle breeds in comparison with the traditional

ones (fine-wooled and Merino sheep, Angora and Pridonsky goats, and more productive livestock) (Tsentralnaya Aziya v sostave rossiiskoi imperii (Central Asia in the Russian Empire, 2008: 226)). A beneficial effect of advanced life skills spread by Russians among the local Muslim population should be also noted (Brusin, 2001: 38).

Considering the role of the Cossacks in strengthening of the geopolitical position of the Russian Empire in Central Asia it should be noted that the emergence of a special Cossack host in Semirechye was not a coincidence. Semirechye was a region where the interests of several civilizations crossed: Russia, the West, the Islamic world and China. The Semirechye Cossack host became a barrier that protected the expanding borders of the Russian Empire from the threat of the foreign enemy.

The Siberian Cossacks, who lived in Semirechye and became a special host in 1867, took active part in the Russian military expedition to Turkestan in the 50's and 80's of the 19th century until the establishment of the stable Russian control over the territory of the Muslim states in Central Asia: the Emirate of Bukhara (until 1868 – 1870), the Khanate of Khiva (until 1873) and the Khanate of Kokand (until 1876). Thus, in the summer of 1860 the Cossacks took part in the military expedition of Colonel Zimmerman in the Issyk-Kul valley, during which the fortress Tokmak was stormed and destroyed. In 1862 the Semirechye Cossacks took part in the campaign against the Kokand Khanate, occupied the fortress Pishpek and the fortification Merke. In 1864, under the command of General M.G. Chernyaev they stormed and occupied the fortress Chimkent, in the summer of 1865 they were involved in the conquest of Tashkent, in the summer of 1871 they participated in the Gulja campaign, in 1873 they took part in the Khiva campaign, and in the Kokand campaigns in 1875 and 1876 (Bachner, 2001: 53, 5b, 67).

The Semirechye Cossacks served as a reliable barrier against Afghanistan and the states that existed in 1860 – 1870's during anti-Chinese rebellion of Muslims in Eastern Turkestan: Yettishar, the Khanate of Kashgar, the Gulja (Taranchi) Sultanate and the Dungan Union of cities. A significant part of the population of these state entities along with the overall population of the region represented by the Uyghurs and the Dungans (Chinese Muslims) included the Kazakhs, the Uzbeks and the Kyrgyz. The fall of Beijing authorities in Eastern Turkestan in the mid-1860's and the emergence of independent Muslim states presented a serious threat to Russia. Realizing the possibility of existence of sovereign Muslim states in the region, the Great Jüz Kazakhs began to make numerous attacks on Russian settlements in Semirechye and also sought to migrate from Russia to the territories of the new Muslim states.

According to the administration of Turkestan up to 10 thousand Kazakh families left for Xinjiang⁷. It was dangerous for Russia both because of the appearance of the Islamic fundamentalism source at its borders, and reduction of the tax base. The Semirechye Cossacks in these circumstances were protecting the Cossack and other Russian settlements in Semirechye, carried out the blockade of the border, and in 1871 took part in the military campaign to Eastern Turkestan, where the Gulja sultanate was abolished (Moiseyev, 2003: 124 – 125). Strong presence of Russia in Semirechye due to the presence of the numerous Cossack host there in 1881 allowed Russia to consolidate in a part of Chinese Turkestan (the Ili territory) after the suppression of the rebellion of the Muslim population (*Granitsy Kitaya* (Borders of China) ..., 2001: 157-158). The Semirechye Cossacks along with other Russian units were in Eastern Turkestan after the suppression of the rebellion as well, until 1883, controlling the situation and

protecting Russian interests (Moiseev, 2003: 213).

The presence of the Cossacks in Semirechye was also necessary to protect the Russian Central Asia from the threat of Qing China. Thus, China was also claiming Semirechye, while its largest part belonged to it until 1850. Only after long-term negotiations on the demarcation of the border, which began in 1860 with the conclusion of the Beijing agreement, and protracted until 1869, China took back its claim (Moiseev, 2003: 64).

From that time and until the beginning of World War II the hundreds of the primary regiment of the Semirechye Cossack host and the hundreds of two regiments of the Siberian Cossack host were securing the borders of the Russian Empire with China. The Cossack post was the main tactical unit, which was directly responsible for the protection of the state border of the site. Depending on the situation in the Chinese territory and the situation in the Russian border regions, taking into account geographical conditions, there could be up to a platoon of the Cossacks at the post. Hundreds of the Semirechye Cossack host guarding the Russian-Chinese border were positioned at the Naryn fortification and at Tokmak, Balykchy and Przhhevsk (Leshchev, 2004: 166).

It is no exaggeration to say that the Semirechye Cossacks had become a strong barrier against the expansion of the British Empire in Central Asia. Anglo-Afghan War, 1838-1842 and 1878-1880 led to the establishment of the British control over Afghanistan. Britain turned Afghanistan into a base for their anti-Russian activities in Central Asia trying to protect their possessions in India from the Russian threat. In turn, the Russian military leaders after the Crimean War of 1853 – 1856 and the Russian-Turkish War of 1877 – 1878 realized that the only way to inflict unacceptable damage to England was the invasion into India. In

this regard, the ability of the Cossacks to interact with the Muslim population, the ability to wage a guerrilla war, to act in isolation from supply bases, etc., were of particular importance.

In fact, until 1907, when Russia and Britain delimited the spheres of influence in Asia, the presence of numerous Cossack units in close proximity to the borders of the British India served as a certain constraining factor for the British Government and ensured the interests of Russia in the region (Dempsey, 2010).

Resume

The events that happened in the region after the October Revolution of 1917 evidence the key role the Semirechye Cossacks played in the policy of the Russian Empire in Central Asia.

The majority of the Semirechye Cossacks did not approve of the October Revolution, and during the Civil War they were on the side of the White movement. This led to disastrous consequences for them after the Bolsheviks occupied the region. With the establishment of the Soviet government in Semirechye in April 1920, the Semirechye Cossack host was abolished. A significant part of the Semirechye Cossacks fearing reprisals by the Bolsheviks went to Western China, where they founded a colony in Gulja. The attempts of the Cossacks to return home usually ended with their execution by shooting. The Cossacks, who left for China in the early 1920's, tried to continue the armed anti-Soviet struggle, however, without the support in the foreign country, they were defeated (Shustov, 2005: 236-240).

The Cossacks who remained in the region had become the victims of the policy of "the Cossacks class abolishment". A significant part of the Cossacks, especially the officers, the Cossacks, who served in the armed formations of the White movement and occupied official posts, were repressed: shot or sent to the camps. The Cossacks were denied the right to serve

in the army, they were not allowed to wear a Cossack uniform, and Cossack villages were renamed into villages. As “colonizers”, the Cossacks were deprived of a significant part of the land they owned, which was returned to the local Turkic population. The Cossacks, like most of the Russian population, lost their right to be elected to the local government, which was formed in accordance with the Soviet policy of “indigenization” of the authorities’ representatives from the local Turkic population. The policy of indigenization got particularly intensified after the withdrawal of Kazakhstan from the RSFSR in 1936 and the establishment of the Union Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic.

Repressions of the Semirechye Cossacks, lowering of their social and financial status, and especially living in the hostile relations with the local authorities and the indigenous population led to the mass “abolishment of the Cossack class”. This process was not only the rejection of traditional Cossack privileges, but also the extinction of the Cossack identity. Since the second half of the 20th century the Russian population (including the Cossacks) began to leave for the RSFSR. The exodus drastically increased after 1991. In the first years of existence of the sovereign Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the authorities of these countries, obviously perceiving the Russian and especially the Cossack population as the “fifth column” of Russia, started the policy of persecution of the reviving Cossack societies. All this contributed to the outflow of the Russian Cossack population from Semirechye.

The sharp decrease of the Cossack population in Semirechye significantly weakened the positions of the new states in the region.

Semirechye remains the key region of Central Asia, being of considerable interest to the leading players at the global political arena. The establishment of the American military base “Manas” (“Hansi”) in 2002 and, of the Russian base “Kant” in 2003, speak for the fact, that Russia and the West are aware of the importance of this region. China also demonstrates active interest to Semirechye. Kazakhstan in 1994 – 1999 and Kyrgyzstan in 1999 were forced to transfer a part of the Semirechye territory to China, while they obviously did not feel the strength to resist the claims of its eastern neighbour⁸. From the first half of the 19th century the Cossacks, who effectively protected the Russian-Chinese border, were not involved by the leaders of the sovereign states in this process. It was caused both by political reasons, and the fact that the Cossacks in the result of purposeful struggle against the Soviet regime, were no longer a significant military force. For these reasons Russia seeking to consolidate in the region can neither rely on the Semirechye Cossacks.

The authorities of Kazakhstan have actually stopped the anti-Cossack policy, which took place in 1990. This is the consequence of understanding of the potential threat from half billion China by the Kazakhstan leaders (Belotserkovsky, 2010). Despite some improvements in its position, the remaining Cossack population in Semirechye has significantly decreased and amounts only to a few thousand people. The Semirechye Cossacks organizationally split into several parts have almost completely merged with the rest of the Russian population. If current trends continue, the Cossack population of Semirechye will completely disappear by the middle of the 21st century.

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Семиреченское казачество в имперском пространстве России

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Статья посвящена истории этносоциальной группы русского народа – семиреченскому казачеству. В статье анализируется процесс формирования семиреченского казачества, его роль в завоевании и экономическом освоении Центральной Азии. Также в статье рассматривается участие семиреченского казачества в борьбе России за контроль над Центральной Азией и её противостоянии в регионе с исламским миром, Китаем и Западом (Британской империей). Особое внимание уделяется взаимодействию семиреченского казачества с коренным тюркоязычным населением.

Ключевые слова: этносоциальная группа, казачество, межэтнические отношения, международные отношения, геополитика, Центральная Азия, Китай, исламский мир.
