

Ukrainian was the Official Language and Predominant Identity in the Kuban until the 1930s

Culture

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A new article on the Russian7 portal says: "Why was the Kuban joined to Russia in 1924?" a question that the site answers in a way that explains why there is more reason for Ukrainians to view this area as Ukrainian than there is for Russians to view the Donbass as Russian.

By Paul Goble for Window on Eurasia: April 17 – Moscow becomes outraged by any Ukrainian suggestions that the Kuban has more in common with Ukraine than with the Russian Federation, suppressing the fact that until the 1930s Ukrainian was an official language there, alongside Russian, and that many Kuban Cossacks considered themselves to be ethnic Ukrainians. Indeed, as a new article on the Russian7 portal says, all this raises the question: "Why was the Kuban joined to Russia in 1924?" a question that the site answers in a way that explains why there is more reason for Ukrainians to view this area as Ukrainian than there is for Russians to view the Donbass as Russian (russian7.ru/post/pochemu-kuban-v-1924-godu-prisoedinilas/). The Kuban Cossack host arose in 1696 when a group of Don Cossacks took part in the occupation of Azov. Later, in 1708, this group was singled out with its current name. In the 18th century, as Russian forces moved south, the Kuban was Russianized but not entirely Russified and the Kuban Cossacks retained their distinct identity, the Russian historical site says. That identity reflected both their Ukrainian and their Russian roots, although "until the beginning of the 20th century, a social stratum consciousness dominated over an ethnic one in the Cossack milieu. That began to change at the end of the 19th century when the Russian military ministry decided to eliminate this stratum. But another force at work, Russian7 says, were the attitudes of the growing number of people in the Kuban Cossack milieu who were not connected with military service but rather were involved in intellectual work like newspapers, schools and so on. Influenced by the nationalizing forces around them, this group began to articulate the idea of "a Cossack nation." A shaky balance between the two was maintained until the Bolshevik revolution which the Kuban Cossacks did not accept. "The Kuban Rada declared the formation of an independent Kuban Peoples Republic," declaring that they were prepared to join Russia but only on a federal basis. The question remained open as to what Russia they had in mind. "This wasn't clear." In March 1918, the Kuban Rada had to withdraw from Yekaterinodar and join forces with the Volunteer Army of General Lavr Kornilov who soon died and was replaced by Anton Denikin. The two sides signed a cooperation agreement, but as neither yet had significant forces, this remained more a statement of intent than a description of reality. The situation changed later that year when the Volunteer Army occupied most of the Kuban. As a result, the Kuban Cossacks became the most important rear force of Denikin's forces. But very quickly conflicts arose because the Cossacks viewed Denikin's force as a representative of the old order and Denikin's people viewed the Cossacks almost as Ukrainians. These attitudes reduced the chances for cooperation, and there were only overcome when it was too late, when the Red Army was pushing into the Kuban and driving the White Armies into emigration. In the first months of 1920, the Kuban governing institutions were "in fact liquidated" by the Bolsheviks and the

region included within the RSFSR. But for the first 12 years of Soviet power there, the Ukrainian language remained official alongside Russian, and Kuban Cossacks continued to identify largely as Ukrainian in ethnic terms. In 1924, Moscow included the Kuban in the North Caucasus kray "which made possible the further Russification" of the Kuban Cossacks. In 1932, Ukrainian lost its official status there. Thus, the Russian site says, "over the first quarter of the 20th century, the Kuban evolved from a region of the Russian Empire with the special status of a Cossack stratum into a subject of the RSFSR, passing through specific periods of Cossack statehood and the experiment of Ukrainian national-cultural self-determination within the framework of Soviet society." This history does not mean that the Kuban should be annexed to Ukraine any more than the ethnic resettlements Stalin sponsored after the Holodomor in the Donbass mean that that region should be detached from Ukraine. But what it does mean is that Ukrainian arguments should be taken seriously rather than dismissed out of hand as they all too often are.

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The commentary above is from Paul Goble's "Window on Eurasia" series and appears here with the author's permission. Contact Goble at: paul.goble@gmail.com

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