

Dmitriï V. Sen', *Kozachestvo Dona i Severo-Zapadnogo Kavkaza v otnosheniyakh s musul'manskimi gosudarstvami Prichernomoriya (vtoraya polovina XVII v. – nachalo XVIII v.)* [The Cossacks of the Don and of the North-Western Caucasus in Their Relations with the Muslim States of the Black Sea Region (Second Half of the Seventeenth Century – Beginning of the Eighteenth Century)], Rostov-on-Don, 2009, Izdatel'stvo Yuzhnogo Federal'nogo Universiteta, 280 pp., bibliog.

A valuable impact of postmodernism on historiography has been the ennoblement of views once expressed by dissident or marginal groups versus the 'mainstream' views, long deemed as representing the 'genuine historical progress'. Not by accident so many studies on 'renegades' have been published in the recent decades.<sup>1</sup> The new trend has influenced not only the historiography of absolutist states in Europe, but also the historiography of Euroasian empires. For instance, numerous scholars studying the Ottoman Empire have abandoned the once dominant centralistic perspective, offered by the central archives in Istanbul and representing the views of the Ottoman central bureaucracy. Instead, much more attention has been paid to local chronicles, court registers, private letters and diaries, or even tombstone inscriptions. Today we know much more about the mentality and internal

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<sup>1</sup> To give just one example, see the already classic monograph by Bartolomé Bennassar and Lucile Bennassar, *Les Chrétiens d'Allah. L'histoire extraordinaire des renégats XVI<sup>e</sup>-XVII<sup>e</sup> siècles* (Paris, 1989).

world of individuals, Muslim as well as non-Muslim, male as well as female, who once inhabited the domains ruled by the Ottoman sultans.

Now this wave seems to approach one of the last bulwarks of state-oriented historiography, namely the historiography of tsarist Russia. Admittedly, any scholar who has worked in the Russian archives must be fascinated with the amount of material produced and amassed by the Russian bureaucratic machine. Both the admirers of Petrine reforms and Russia's military prowess and those who maintain that Stalinist genocidal tyranny was rooted in the autocratic tradition of old Muscovy<sup>2</sup> will share a belief in the effectiveness of the Russian state and the high level of state control over the Russian subjects, reaching back to the early modern, if not medieval era. Yet, the very same Russian archives, both central and provincial, contain material that – if carefully studied – gives one access to the mental world of Russian individuals<sup>3</sup> and dissidents, demonstrating that the tsar's authority was by far not unquestionable to many a Muscovian subject.

In his monograph Dmitrii Sen' focuses on two massive Cossack migrations to the domains of Muslim rulers, effected at the end of the seventeenth century and in the first decade of the following century. The first wave of migration resulted from the conflict between the Old Believers, who had escaped religious persecutions in central Russia and found shelter and massive support among the Don Cossacks, and those Cossacks who chose to obey the tsar's orders by embracing Patriarch Nikon's religious reforms and assisting military expeditions sent by the government to suppress the 'schism'.<sup>4</sup> In

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<sup>2</sup> In the cold war era, such view was popularised in the West by Karl Wittfogel's classic: *Oriental Despotism: A Comparative Study of Total Power* (1st ed. New Haven, 1957).

<sup>3</sup> A fascinating glimpse into the individual identities of Russian subjects has been recently offered by Aleksandr Lavrov, who has studied the petitions of the tsar's subjects, both male and female, who had been asking for material support having returned from captivity in the Ottoman Empire or the Crimean Khanate; see *idem*, 'Voennyi plen i rabstvo na granicakh Osmanskoi imperii i Rossiiskovo gosudarstva v 17 – nachale 18 veka', in <[http://www.perspectivia.net/content/publikationen/vortraege-moskau/lavrov\\_kriegsgefangenschaft](http://www.perspectivia.net/content/publikationen/vortraege-moskau/lavrov_kriegsgefangenschaft)> [Accessed 25 June 2011]; *idem*, 'Captivity, Slavery and Gender: Muscovite Female Captives in the Crimean Khanate and in the Ottoman Empire', paper read at the conference: 'Slavery, Ransom and Liberation in Russia and the Steppe Area, 1500–2000', held in Aberdeen on 15–16 June 2009 (to be published soon). I wish to thank the author for letting me quote this text before publication.

<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, the Cossack dissidents accused Nikon of having infected the Orthodoxy with Latin Catholicism, which they identified with Poland ('v cerkvyakh gde nyne stala Pol'sha'; pp. 110–11). Strangely enough, their repulsion towards the Polish Catholicism did not deter the Don Cossacks from favourably receiving in 1685 the agents of the Polish King John III Sobieski, who tried to recruit them

result of the civil war that culminated on the Don in the years 1688–9, the defeated Old Believers, accompanied by their families and clergymen, chose to escape persecution and established settlements in Daghestan (on the Kuma river and on a branch of the Sulak river named Agrakhan) and in Kuban. The refugees compared their migration to the Biblical Exodus and referred to contemporary Russia as the domain of anti-Christ (*udel antixrista*), accepting at the same time their subjection towards the Muslim rulers.

The second wave occurred after the failed Cossack insurrection of Kondratii Bulavin (1707–8), after whose death the command over the rebels was taken over by Ignat Nekrasov, a charismatic leader who led the defeated Cossacks to Kuban and accepted a shared Ottoman-Crimean patronage. His followers, thereafter known as *Nekrasovcy* (Nekrasov Cossacs), participated in the Ottoman-Russian war of 1711–13 on the Muslim side and, after the Peace of Edirne (1713), were reconfirmed in their new holdings on the two sides of the Kuban river. After these lands had been lost to Russia, the *Nekrasovcy* were resettled by Ottoman authorities to Anatolia and Dobrudja, where they survived as a separate community until the twentieth century. Interestingly, during the Crimean War, a Polish émigré turned Ottoman general, Michał Czajkowski (after conversion to Islam he adopted a new name Sadik Pasha), recruited the *Nekrasovcy* along with Polish emigrants to his corps of Ottoman Cossacks in order to fight against Russia at the side of the allied coalition.

In spite of their unruliness, epitomised by the rebellion of Stepan Razin (1670–1), the Don Cossacks have been traditionally viewed in historiography – both Russian and foreign – as the tsar’s ‘natural’ subjects, speaking the same language and sharing the same religion as ‘ordinary’ Russians. In common view, the Cossacks’ allegiance towards Russia was further strengthened by their folklore and collective identity, in which the struggle against Muslim ‘infidels’ played a dominant role.

Yet, the narrative provided by Sen’ questions some of the established truths. The author gives examples of Muslim Turks and Tatars, who lived among the Don Cossacks, as well as Cossacks, who lived among the Muslims. He also challenges the view that the ultimate Christianisation of Kuban and the North-Western Caucasus occurred through the policy of the Russian state, seeing the process as resulting rather from spontaneous settlement and proselytising activity of individuals, whose allegiance towards the Muscovian patriarchy was more than questionable (p. 102).<sup>5</sup>

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for the Holy League at the time when the tsar was still at peace with both the khan and the sultan (pp. 81–2).

<sup>5</sup> A distant, though striking, analogy can be provided by the process of Islamisation of Bengal, in which individual settlers and dervishes played a much more important role than the official policy of the Great Moghul court in distant Delhi; see Richard Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760* (Berkeley, 1993).

According to Sen', having settled in Kuban, the Cossacks formed decent relations with neighbouring Nogays and displayed a striking loyalty towards their new Muslim lords. As late as in 1860, a traveler who encountered former Kuban Cossacks living in Anatolia, recorded their statement: 'in whichever master's domain we live, we serve him with our Cossack faith and oath, according to our honor, without any fraud or treason' (*u kakogo tsarya zhivëm ... tomu i sluzim, veroï i pravdoï kazatskoï, po chesti, bez lzhi i izmeny*; p. 256). In return, the khans and the sultans granted their new Christian subjects religious and social autonomy, and even provided for their spiritual needs. For instance, in the 1690s, a group of Kuban Cossacks asked the Ottoman governor of Azov to send them a 'Russian priest' (*ruskogo popa*; p. 176).

The author argues that the rapprochement between the Don Cossacks and the Crimean khans in the late seventeenth century resulted from Moscow's centralising policy, which endangered the Cossacks' traditional way of life. Since their establishment on the lower Don, the Cossacks had provided for their needs by raiding neighbouring territories. Consequently, they were perceived as a nuisance by their Muslim neighbours, but this hostility does not need to be depicted in purely religious terms. In result of the first formal peace treaty between Istanbul and Moscow (1681–2), followed by new treaties and border demarcations after each successive Russo-Ottoman war, the Cossacks felt endangered by Moscow's strict prohibitions of further raiding the Muslim territories, measures limiting their traditional herding and fishing rights, and garrisoning their lands with regular Russian soldiers.

In result, a number of 'nonconformists'<sup>6</sup> among the Don Cossacks chose to shift their allegiance in order to preserve their traditional way of life. Notwithstanding their initial reluctance to extend their patronage onto the Cossacks, the Crimean khans finally conceded and in return gained valuable supporters against both Russian troops and domestic opposition. A similar policy was adopted by the Ottoman sultans, whose position on the northern Black Sea shore was endangered by the advance of Russia. In fact, this policy was not as unprecedented as it might appear. Since the mid-seventeenth century, Bakchisaray and Istanbul not once extended their patronage over the Ukrainian Cossacks, even though they had also been earlier perceived as the Muslims' mortal enemies.<sup>7</sup> It is curious that precisely in the same period, the khans and the sultans faced constant opposition of their own Muslim subjects, the Nogays, who finally chose to side with Russia and in 1770 declared 'independence' under the patronage of the Russian empress.

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<sup>6</sup> The author himself refers to them as *kozaki-nonkonformisty*; see p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> Cf. Dariusz Kołodziejczyk, 'Tertium non datur? Turets'ka al'ternativa v zovnišniï politytsi kozats'koji derzhavy', in: *Hadyats'ka uniya 1658 roku* (Kiev, 2008), 67 Great Moghul 80.

Sen' proposes to view these events within the theoretical framework of frontier studies, once inspired by Frederick Jackson Turner and further developed especially in American historiography. Living in similar ecological conditions of the Black Sea steppe shores, the Cossacks, Tatars and Nogays adopted similar modes of life and mutual borrowing became commonplace. Facing destruction of their traditional ways of life in result of the process of the 'frontier closure', accelerating since the late seventeenth century on, local communities adopted similar pragmatic strategies. Shifting political allegiance between different rulers, or even entering the patronage of an 'infidel' monarch, was perceived in this milieu with greater ease than in the more settled societies, and certainly with a greater understanding than in the later era of nationalism, where such moves performed by either groups or individuals would be branded as 'national treason'.

It is regretful that the author does not directly refer to either William McNeill or Michael Khodarkovsky, in whose footprints he steps, even if he does so unconsciously.<sup>8</sup> In fact, by invoking their studies he would strengthen some of his arguments and provide a broader theoretical as well as geographical framework for his own study. Nevertheless, both the archival and the published material used in his book is impressive. Dmitrii Sen' is to be congratulated on finding new interesting sources and stirring a provoking discussion, which can be equally useful if applied to perennial debates of Ukrainian and Polish historians regarding the ethno-religious identity and political consciousness of Zaporozhian Cossacks in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

Dariusz Kołodziejczyk

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<sup>8</sup> Cf. William McNeill, *Europe's Steppe Frontier 1500–1800* (Chicago, 1964), and Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, 2002); for a recent Polish translation of the latter book, see *idem*, *Na granicach Rosji. Budowanie imperium na stepie, 1500–1800* (Warsaw, 2009).