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BY MATTHEW STEVENSON

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## ***Letter From Crimea: Yalta, Putin and the Cossacks***

*This is the eighth in a series about a journey, by train and bicycle, across Russia to Crimea shortly before the war began.*



The Cossack city of Novochoerkassk near the Don River in southern Russia, not far from Rostov, which was one of the staging areas for Russia's invasion of Ukraine. In the background is the Ascension Cathedral. In the foreground is statue in honor of Yermak Timofeevich, a Cossack leader who began Russia's conquest of Siberia in the 16th century. Photo: Matthew Stevenson.

Between Volgograd and Crimea, I decided to break my journey in Novochoerkassk, a city that has the distinction of being at the center of what was once the Don Cossack nation. I wanted to know more about the Cossacks—were they loyal Russians or rebellious

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[afgazad@gmail.com](mailto:afgazad@gmail.com)

outliers?—and thought that maybe by spending a day in their capital, I might later be inspired to read Leo Tolstoy's *The Cossacks* or Alexander Pushkin's account of the Pugachev rebellion in the late 18th century (which might well have been the first Russian revolution in modern times).

I knew that at times the Cossacks, best imagined as dashing soldiers on horseback and living astride the Don River, had bailed out various tsars from Ottoman encroachments along Russia's southern borders. Later, however, I learned that the independence of the Cossack nation became a threat to the established order in Moscow, and that after World War I Joseph Stalin—to use a more modern expression—ethnically cleansed Russia of many Cossacks, scattering them to the Soviet winds.

Following World War II, during which some Cossacks fought on the German side (either by enlistment or after having fallen prisoner), Stalin liquidated thousands of Cossacks who between 1945-48 had been forcibly repatriated to the Soviet Union.

These were the so-called “victims of Yalta,” as it was at the 1945 Crimea conference that the Allies, notably Great Britain, agreed to return Soviet soldiers that for whatever reason had ended up in Allied territories, even though it was clear that many did to want to go back and that Stalin would execute many as traitors.

### **The Confusion of Cossack Identity**

When I think now of my day in Novocherkassk, I realize that many confusions about Cossack identity are now at play in the war between Russia and Ukraine.

To many, the Cossacks are Ukrainians, who established the (unhappy) precedence of an independent nation within the Russian tsar's kingdom. To others, the Cossacks are Russians who often fought in the tsar's armies and wars. Finally there is the nomadic side of the Cossacks—horsemen of the steppe—who believed only in their independence from established government, which may explain why Stalin marked them down for extermination.

What does Putin think of the Cossacks? I am sure he views them as one of many ethnic groups of the former Soviet Union who now owe allegiance to Russia. As an heir of Stalin (and eager to cash in his inheritance), he would also view them with suspicion for the role some played in World War II, if not during the Russian Revolution. As we are learning, Putin enjoys nothing more than fighting past wars.

In a day and night in Novocherkassk, I might not get all the answers about Cossack nationality, but the stop would spare from a two-night train ride to Simferopol (the capital of Crimea), and besides, while on my bicycle around Novocherkassk, I could go in search

of the labor riots that in 1962 saw the Soviet government of Nikita Khrushchev shoot down dozens of labor demonstrators in what became known as “Bloody Saturday”—the Haymarket of the Soviet Union.

### **General de Gaulle Visits Stalingrad**

My train to Novochoerkassk departed after midnight. I had paid for another night at the Hotel Volgograd so that in the evening I would have a place to idle and read before the train left, but I didn’t dare go to sleep, fearing that I would wake up hours after the train had departed.

I ate dinner in the hotel dining room (in Soviet times there would have been a band playing dance tunes) and read William Craig’s *Enemy at the Gates: The Battle for Stalingrad*. It’s what I would call a conventional history—regiments and divisions on the march, generals with the habit of command—but at one point in the book I came across the bizarre visit that the French General Charles de Gaulle made to Stalingrad in 1944, more than a year after the fighting had ended.

In 1944, de Gaulle was not a president in exile, but a general-on-the-make who was doing everything in his power to come across as the leader of the warring nation (which was then divided between those living under German occupation, those under the thumb of Vichy, the Resistance, Communists, and Free French fighting alongside the British, Canadians, Poles, and Americans).

It did not help de Gaulle’s cause that Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill despised him. For example, on D-Day in June 1944, when the Allies landed in France, they wanted de Gaulle well away from the Normandy beaches, not to mention the celebratory press conferences that were to follow.

Maybe to tweak his erstwhile allies, Stalin invited de Gaulle to Moscow for “talks” on Franco-Soviet relations, and to get there the general flew to Baku, Azerbaijan, and took the train north to Moscow, which afforded him the chance to stop over in Stalingrad and view the city that had saved Russia, if not the free world.

In describing the whistle-stop visit, Craig writes:

In 1944, Gen. Charles de Gaulle visited Stalingrad and walked past the still-uncleared wreckage. Later, at a reception in Moscow, a correspondent asked him his impressions of the scene. “Ah, Stalingrad, c’est tout de même un peuple formidable, un très grand peuple,” [“Ah, Stalingrad, this is all the same a formidable people, a very great people...”] the Free French leader said. The correspondent agreed. “Ah, oui, les Russes ...” [“Ah, yes, the Russians...”] de Gaulle interrupted impatiently. “Mais non, je ne parle pas des Russes,

je parle des Allemands. [“No, I am not speaking of the Russians, I am speaking of the Germans...”] Tout de même, avoir poussé jusque là.” [“That they should have come so far.”]

No wonder de Gaulle never won over either Churchill or Roosevelt. The British prime minister thought him “vain, and even malignant,” while Roosevelt believed his beliefs were closer to fascism than democracy, saying: “...de Gaulle is out to achieve one-man government in France. I can’t imagine a man I would distrust more.”

### **Russian Railways Run On Time**

My train did not depart Volgograd until close to 1 a.m. Around midnight, with my bags secured to the frame of my bicycle, I rode to the station (traversing the old Red Square, which now feels like mall parking), so that I would have ample time to deal with unforeseen hassles, such as a wait at security barriers.

Actually I was through security within minutes—the state security apparatus wasn’t interested in deconstructing a folded bicycle—and all I could do to pass the time was souvenir shop at station kiosks and read my book in the half light of the cavernous waiting room.

Some time after 12:40 a.m. the train slid into the station. I realize that Russia is now a pariah state bent on world domination (or some form thereof), but at least when it comes to sleeping cars, Russia is light years ahead of the United States, which has lost the art of passenger railroading.

My train ticket (which I had printed at home from my computer) had my car and berth numbers clearly marked, and for about \$80 I had a comfortable bed on an overnight train. (When I went this May from New Orleans to Chicago, Amtrak wanted \$847 to wedge me into what would have felt like a rolling coffin.)

Admittedly, the Russian train was crowded; seventy percent of Russia’s intercity travel goes by rail (in the U.S. the figure is less than one percent, which in my mind partly explains why the climate is on a slow boil), but the sleeping cars were new and well maintained, and the bed was comfortable.

I am not saying that on my night train to Novocherkassk I saw the future and it was working; but I can say that on my recent Amtrak train from New Orleans to Chicago, I saw the present, and it is broken.

### **Quiet Flows the Don**

Searching online I didn't find many hotels in downtown Novochoerkassk that appealed to me or my modest price range, but I did spot a rural inn near the train station—along the lines of an Airbnb—and it was wonderful.

The hot water was plentiful, and the owner/receptionist/chambermaid/ waiter/chef could not have been more welcoming. She let me park my bicycle on the front porch (high walls surrounded the property), and served me a late breakfast, as what I had eaten on the overnight train was from the stale bun food group. Then I biked up the long hillside between the station, tucked into a valley, and the town center, a shining city on a hill.

After riding around Moscow and Volgograd—where the traffic can replicate splintering atomic particles, and be equally deadly—I was enchanted with Novochoerkassk's small-city vibe. Yes, there was a soaring cathedral, dignified main streets, and stately music halls and museums, but cars were almost non-existent, and I spent a lot of my time riding along bike lanes that snaked through city parks and under arching trees.

### **The Don Cossacks**

Sadly, the Museum of Don Cossacks was closed for renovations. I could not quite believe it, and badgered some workers laying bricks in the sidewalk, hoping that only the main entrance was closed and that magically a side door would allow me inside. (Of my many personal flaws, one is that I assume things will be open when I arrive.)

In my frustration, all I could think about was the line in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall* in which Alvy Singer says: "My grammy never gave gifts; she was too busy getting raped by Cossacks."

I have since looked online at the museum's collection, and it has everything I was searching for in Novochoerkassk—maps of the Don Cossack region (a large wedge of land north of the Caspian Sea), regimental banners, lots of swords, paintings of battles won and lost, piles of cannonballs, and the sense of a lost nation (Stalin deported many to the gulags across Russia and Siberia).

### **The Tsars' Guest House**

To get my taste of local Cossack life, I went instead to the Ataman Palace on a shaded square in the center of Novochoerkassk. The *ataman* was the leader of the Cossack *host* (as the community was called), and I learned on my walk through the well-appointed rooms, that the palace was not only the home of the local leader of the Cossacks but served as the guest house whenever a Russian tsar came to the Don region.

On the walls there were numerous *ataman* portraits—stern men in formal military attire—and at one end of the large reception room a replica banquet was laid for a visiting tsar, featuring plastic models of a fish and pig.

Even on a brief stroll around the palace, I came to understand how the iconography of the Cossacks had become the source of so much confusion in Russian history.

Some times they were the light cavalry of tsarist imperialism, as if riding to the hounds of Romanov expansion, and they were compensated with tax-free income and all sorts of noble favors and titles.

At other times, the devolved independence of the Cossacks put them at odds with the central administration, and that led to rebellion and civil conflict in which the Cossacks looked more like freebooters than protectors of the realm.

### **Horseman of the Tsars**

During the 19th century, when Russia was desperate for political reforms that never came (save for the abolition of serfdom), the Cossacks served the tsars with distinction in all sorts of imperial wars, including many against the Turks, Persians, and various Asian enemies of the Russian state. And when the Japanese defeated Russia in the 1904-5 Russo-Japanese War, which touched off the revolution of the 1905, it was the Cossacks, among others, who put down that rebellion.

In World War I the Cossacks again rode to the standards of the imperial colors, although in the mechanized slaughter of modern warfare the presence of agile horsemen brandishing swords added little to the campaigns other than the symbolic associations of earlier charges. Nor could the relatively small Cossack nation, spread all across Russia in their *host* enclaves, make up the losses that followed any time cavalry formations dashed into heavy machine guns.

Come the tsar's abdication and the 1917 October Revolution, the Cossacks became a dashing formation without a country.

Loyal to the Romanovs (including Nicholas II, who in 1918 was executed in an Ekaterinburg basement), the Cossacks sided with the White Armies during the Russian civil war, and after the Red victory many Cossacks sailed into exile, which further dispersed an already fragmented nation.

At one point, early in the establishment of the Soviet Union, émigrés had promoted the creation of what they called Cossackia, which would have given national status to a displaced population of some three million persons.

It was consistent with President Wilson's Fourteen Points (Georges Clemenceau quipped: "*God only needed ten...*"), which advanced "a strict observance of the principle that in determining all such questions of sovereignty the interests of the populations concerned must have equal weight with the equitable claims of the government whose title is to be determined."

The Bolsheviks, however, remembered the Cossacks' service to the tsars and their counter-revolutionary zeal, and well into the 1930s Stalin did his best to scatter the Cossacks, if not the idea of Cossackia, to the ends of the proletarian earth.

### **Hitler Drafts the Cossacks**

Perhaps the most controversial period of Cossack identity occurred during World War II, when Adolf Hitler's Germany invaded western Russia and Ukraine in June 1941 and advanced to the banks of the River Volga, in part through the homelands of the Don Cossacks and other Cossack settlements.

Suddenly, if you were a Cossack living in Novocherkassk, there was another central government in your life, and it flew the colors of Hitler's Nazi Party.

Until the battle of Stalingrad (August 1942 to February 1943), the winner of this conflict looked to be Germany, and that perceived advantage drew many Ukrainians and Cossacks (plus other conquered peoples in their path) to the German side.

There was also the fact that in 1941 many Russian soldiers either surrendered to the invading Germans or were captured, and that in captivity one of the few ways to survive the enriching Nazi Holocaust was to wear the uniform of the German army.

It meant that in World War II, millions of former Russian soldiers, including Cossacks, took up arms for the Nazis, such that there were several divisions in the German army largely composed of Cossack men and officers (although some had left Russia at the time of the Civil War and in 1941 were living in the West).

To entice these regiments to its colors, Germany made hopeful noises about Cossackia rising from the embers of a conquered Soviet Union—all of which vanished into broken dreams when the Russians made their stand at Stalingrad, and then over the next two years pushed the Germans back to Berlin.

Among the casualties of war was a homeland for the Cossacks, who at war's end surrendered by the thousands to the victorious western allies, hopeful that their anti-communism might count for something in the adjudication of post-war claims. It did not, just as it did not for those Ukrainians in 1945, and again today, who sought independence from Russia.

*Next: More from Novocherkassk: Bloody Saturday in the Soviet Union, 1962. Earlier installments can be found [here](#).*

*Matthew Stevenson is the author of many books, including [Reading the Rails](#), [Appalachia Spring](#), and [The Revolution as a Dinner Party](#), about China throughout its turbulent twentieth century. His most recent book, about traveling in France and the Franco-Prussian wars, is entitled [Biking with Bismarck](#).*

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