

Research Article

# On the Folk Martial Arts of the Kuban Cossacks in the Russian Empire in the Mid-19th - Early 20th Centuries

Spartak Gennadievich Aleksandrov\* 

Department of Corporate and Public Administration, Krasnodar Branch of the Plekhanov Russian University of Economics, Krasnodar, Russian Federation

## Abstract

Favorable conditions have been created in Russia for the restoration of the distinctive culture of the Kuban Cossacks, including traditional games, competitions, and martial arts. Scientific research into this issue within the framework of specialized historical, pedagogical, and ethnographic research is becoming a prerequisite for the development of a concept for traditional means and forms of physical culture and sports in Kuban. This study is based on a historical and ethnographic framework and examines the content of traditional martial arts among the Kuban Cossacks in the second half of the 19th and early 20th centuries. The study draws on works on the history, culture, and ethnography of the Kuban Cossacks, documentary evidence, pre-revolutionary periodicals, field observations, and folklore. It presents a description of individual means and forms of training in striking and wrestling among children and youth of the Kuban Cossacks at the family and community levels. The methods of conducting combat battles, the strategy and tactics of Cossack martial arts, including elements of game power wrestling with wild animals (bears), are specified. It explores the history, characteristic features of the content, and specific factors in the formation of martial arts traditions among children, youth, and adult Cossacks.

## Keywords

Kuban Cossacks, Traditional Culture, Fist Fighting, Wrestling, Folk Games and Competitions, Stick Fighting

## 1. Relevance

There is currently a pressing need for an in-depth study and scientific description of the full wealth of traditional martial arts of the Kuban Cossacks as universal means of physical education and specialized military training.

The research materials will contribute to the enrichment of the history of physical culture and to addressing pressing issues in the modern theory and practice of ethnopädagogy, physical education, and military training of the younger generation of Cossacks.

The purpose of the study is to identify the focus, content,

and characteristics of the traditional martial arts of the Kuban Cossacks (mid-19th - early 20th centuries).

*Research methods:* retrospective analysis and synthesis of scientific and historical literature and archival materials, ethnographic sources, and periodicals from the period under review; structural and functional analysis; comparative historical method; direct observation and synthesis of ethnographic material.

The research methodology included activity-based, organizational-logical, and structural-functional approaches.

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\*Corresponding author: [spartak-2010@mail.ru](mailto:spartak-2010@mail.ru) (Spartak Gennadievich Aleksandrov)

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*Organization of the study:* the factors of formation of traditional martial arts of the Kuban Cossacks in the pre-revolutionary period (mid-19th – early 20th century) were examined; the types of martial arts, their features, the composition of the techniques and elements used, and the forms of their development were identified, analyzed and systematized.

## 2. Research Results

The systematic organization of mass martial arts events by Kuban Cossack communities, involving participants of all ages, contributed to the development of combat skills in real-life conditions, demonstrating physical strength and endurance, agility, and courage.

Belonging to their native village or hamlet created an atmosphere of unity and socialization among the fighters, and the highly emotional atmosphere of the event contributed to their active recreation and enjoyment.

The large number of participants and spectators made the fistfights a significant event.

Belonging to their native street, hamlet, or village strengthened interpersonal ties and a sense of community among the Cossacks.

The high emotional atmosphere made fistfights a captivating spectacle, serving not only as entertainment but also as a means of socialization and military-physical training.

In Kuban, cultural traditions in physical education and military training had already taken shape and acquired the characteristics of a system by the second half of the 19th century.

At the same time, distinctive Cossack martial arts developed within the East Slavic heritage.

Among other things, the criteria for young men's inclusion in the youth community were their demonstrated physical, moral, and volitional qualities.

"In the village of Kavkazskaya in Kuban, at Christmas and other holidays, the girls would organize a communal dance in the street, while the boys would engage in fistfights, with the entire village population divided into two groups. The fight continued throughout the dance; as soon as the singing stopped, the boys would retreat one by one from each side of the dance, and the fighting would subside..." [1].

Systematic fistfighting, or "kulachki," was an important component of the physical training of the Kuban Cossacks. Fighters were divided into two opposing sides: one-on-one, wall-to-wall, Cossacks vs. non-residents, edge-to-edge, village-to-village, and village-to-village.

Fistfights were held in three stages: the "initiation," the main stage, and the final stage. Children aged 6-7 and teenagers traditionally initiated the fight.

Young men fought in the main stage. The final stage involved the adult Cossacks entering the fray. The basic stance was frontal, with one leg slightly forward. The chin was slightly tilted downward, and the left (or right) shoulder was

extended forward.

The hands were clenched into fists, with the arms extended forward in a semi-bent position in front of the chest.

In winter, a Kubanka or papakha hat was pulled down over the ears and forehead, the fur collar was raised, and mittens were worn.

Fights were primarily conducted in a single, solid "wall" formation.

Strikes were delivered "crosswise": straight and sideways, upward, backhand, downward, under the side, under the ribs, and to the chest [2].

The rules of the fights were strictly observed. It was forbidden to use blows "below the belt," kicks, and elbows, to attack from behind, to attack a man lying down, or to use "tucks" in mittens.

Each "fist" could regulate his participation in the fight individually. If someone was unable to continue the fight due to a number of factors (significant superiority of the opponent, fatigue, injury, bleeding), he could sit down, after which he was considered out of the fight. Elders supervised the fights. Following custom, at the conclusion of the competition, the opponents shared a meal, during which they analyzed the progress of the fight and their tactics, assessing each other's strengths.

This allowed them to clarify contentious points, thoroughly analyze all stages of the match, identify weaknesses, and improve their tactical preparation.

"Kulachki" were most active in winter, during Christmas-tide and Maslenitsa.

Often, the fights took place on the river ice or in the village square. "About a thousand men and boys gathered on the ice of the Kuban... The young men (aged 15 to 18) formed two walls facing each other... they rushed, one wall against the other... and a melee began. One wall was already retreating. "Tropic men" of 20-25 years old rushed from the weaker side. Then, from both sides, not young men, but respectable men rushed in: some had gray hairs clearly visible in their thick beards. With furious faces, rolling up their sleeves and clapping on their sheepskin hats, the fighters rushed into the very center of the battle" [3].

Fighting on ice became significantly more complex and required the participants to demonstrate complex motor coordination: maintaining a stable position while simultaneously delivering powerful and accurate blows.

Practice in ice fights contributed to the development of vestibular stability and more effective preparation for fighting under standard conditions. There are known facts about the ability of fighters to fight multiple opponents: "...there were 'fist fighters' who couldn't be knocked down by 5-6 men," confirming their ability not only to "take a punch" but also to avoid intense blows on various planes.

In turn, outstanding fighters could knock an opponent down with a single blow. There is also evidence of 'fist fighters' who "would hit you in the side, your beshmet would burst." Moreover, the participants "were not angry with each

other" [4].

According to one Kuban periodical correspondent of the time, "It's remarkable that anyone who can skillfully deliver a punch to the chest, side, or face of a fellow fighter, so that the latter immediately falls to the ground, is considered a fine fellow and enjoys the respect and great honor not only of those fighting, but also of all the other residents of the village" [5].

Hardened in the folk fistfights of "wall to wall," many participants, even without mastering boxing techniques, posed a serious threat to the professional boxers of that era. Moreover, it's worth emphasizing that the most talented Russian fighters, alumni of "wall to wall" fights in the 1920s, had a significant influence on the formation of the national boxing school.

One publication from the early 20th century noted that "kulachki" (fist fights) trained "the courage and bravery of marching in formation against the enemy, the resourcefulness to figure out who to rescue and who to crush in a melee. Just before the start, the opposing sides stand peacefully, joking, lighting cigarettes from the same tobacco pouches".

Children's voices can be heard in the distance, mocking their opponents; for three or four miles, a roar, shouting, and hubbub—the 'start' has begun. If one side presses hard and the other retreats, two or three older boys join the latter, and the same thing happens after a while on the opposite side.

Gradually, the older men replace the younger ones in the wall, and, rolling up their sleeves and slapping on their papahas, the most experienced, including gray-bearded elders, rush into the center of the battle. The ataman and members of the stanitsa government also participate. They enter the battle on the side of the people of their region.

The village chieftain, Sergeant Fyodor Kobazev, smashing into a wall of opponents, showed the young Cossacks how to knock people down without killing them. The chieftain bravely swept his head left and right, muttering, "Like this! Like this! Why hit them on the head—better under the ninth rib... On the neck... On the damned neck, with a holy fist!" After the battle, those who had just been locked in fistfights would gather, smoke, drink, laughingly discuss who had landed the better blow, and ridicule the clumsiness of one or the other." [6].

During Christmastide, all types of work were prohibited. Time was freed up for rest. The most popular entertainment was "public festivities," an important component of which were fistfights between the village residents, "Cossacks," and "out-of-town peasants." Ice fights actively developed vestibular stability, requiring the demonstration of complex coordination actions – maintaining balance and delivering strong and accurate blows.

According to the memoirs of F. I. Eliseev, a Kuban Cossack in exile in the early 20th century, a master of Cossack horsemanship, and the author of works on the history of the Kuban Cossack Host, "out-of-towners, living in the Kuban, seemed to 'become Cossacks,' participating in bachelor ad-

ventures and fistfights."

"Worse and more brutal were the fights in the Black Sea stanitsas between Cossack parubki and 'gorodovykyvy,' even with 'kiyami,' that is, sticks with iron nuts on one end. This 'nurtured' in them a spirit of courage, a desire to fight, and a hatred of the Cossacks, which was caused by their lack of civil rights in the stanitsas and envy of Cossack land. Out-of-towners in the stanitsas not only had no vote, but were considered 'strangers here,' uninvited" [7].

This tendency was most pronounced in urban areas. Here is how an eyewitness describes a mass fistfight between young men from different districts of the city of Yekaterinodar in the Russian Empire: "... a special day was declared between these and other young men, usually a holiday, on which... young men from both districts would gather. Both parties, facing each other, would engage in fistfights, and a real brawl would begin between them" [8].

A whole layer of folklore arose associated with the original Cossack martial arts. The following were valued in a fighter: strength - "Who is stronger, he is the master", "If someone is not strong, then their sword is not sweet", "He strikes like a steelyard", "A fist is like a steelyard"; speed and dexterity - "He is not a Cossack who has won, but he is one who has wriggled out"; courage - "Fight loves courage", "Backwards, crayfish climb"; compliance with the rules - "It is not the one who is right who is stronger, but the one who is more honest"; collective interaction - "Gurtom and Dad are doing better"; readiness for combat - "Let the father ataman, let us go to the towers... Don't let us with shabels, let us with our fists, don't let our glory go down to the Cossacks." During the battle and after it, the participants "were not angry with each other." There was a saying: "Fight, fight, while you wash yourself" [9].

Wrestling competitions, involving individual one-on-one and group "sloboda" combat, were somewhat widespread among Cossack children and adolescents.

These included "sloboda" (a game of "matchmaking" or "consensus"). Participation in these combats alternated with games. For example, the youth Cossack game "Circassians" involved grappling and throwing [10].

The published manuscripts of the prominent pre-revolutionary Kuban historian, ethnographer, and public figure F. A. Shcherbina detail the practice of Cossack bear combat. "Savostoy Khablak wrestled bears and emerged victorious through his agility, resourcefulness, and ingenuity. The gypsies, the bear's owners, were obliged to muzzle the bear to "protect" Khablak from its teeth; "to hold a chain passed through the bear's nostrils, preventing it from attempting to 'put its claws into action'; 'not to incite' the bear to fight with encouragement and orders."

The fight went like this: "Khablak stood opposite the bear and spread his arms to fight. The bear did the same and, rising on its hind legs, pulled the gypsy toward Khablak. The opponents met and grappled. The bear... immediately tried to knock him to the ground, but Khablak deftly dodged the op-

ponent's advance and began to circle and toss the opponent in different directions, which put Mishka in an unstable position. After performing several gaits in this manner, Khablak put out his leg and so deftly pushed the bear through it that it fell to the ground, and Khablak quickly pressed on him and thus decided the fight" [11].

Along with fistfights and wrestling, stick fighting between two teams of fighters, primarily young men, became quite widespread in Kuban. It involved a confrontational confrontation (strikes and blocks) with wooden sticks approximately 1.5-2 meters long. In addition to specially made equipment, stick fighting also involved the use of improvised materials, primarily wattle stakes.

Fighters armed themselves with sticks called "kyyki." Generally, a stick for a Cossack was a multifunctional item, including a means of protection against packs of stray dogs from the village [12].

One variation of "stick fighting" was the teenage game "Peretuzhka." Two participants, grasping opposite ends of a stick, attempted to wrest it from the hands of their opponent or pull him across a line drawn between them on the ground to their side [13].

### 3. Conclusion

Traditional Cossack society exalted the strong and courageous, the agile and fair-minded, while condemning the weak and cowardly. The individual Cossack villager felt the constant influence of the community. Hand-to-hand combat served as an effective means of military training.

Cossacks regularly participated in hand-to-hand combat and observed other "fist fighters," mastering the tactical and technical nuances of martial arts.

The village community organized the fights, ensuring the regularity of these collective competitions. The primary purpose of these unique Cossack martial arts was to ensure opportunities for "fair combat," prevent injury, and treat opponents humanely. By the beginning of the 20th century, social contradictions had arisen, caused by the intensification of migration processes and the growth of the non-resident population in the Kuban region. There was a leveling of individual Cossack traditions, which led to non-compliance with the rules of hand-to-hand combat.

### Author Contributions

Spartak Gennadievich Aleksandrovis the sole author. The author read and approved the final manuscript.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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