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## Volodymyr Pilat – the creator and leader of the Fighting Hopak style. Contribution to the modern history of Ukrainian martial arts

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### Volodymyr Pilat – twórca i lider stylu bojowego hopaka. Przyczynek do współczesnej historii ukraińskich sztuk walki

#### Streszczenie

Wiele narodów promuje dziś swe historyczne sztuki walki i sporty walki. Może to wynikać z potrzeby zaakcentowania własnych narodowych tradycji i kulturowego dziedzictwa. Dzięki wybitnym postaciom, pasjonatom i ludziom z poczuciem misji dochodzi do powstania lub restauracji tradycji częściowo zaginionych. Przykładem takiego człowieka jest Wielki Mistrz Volodymyr Pilat (Włodzimierz Piłat) – twórca systemu pod nazwą *boiovyi hopak* (bojowy hopak). Autor niniejszego artykułu, na podstawie bezpośredniego wywiadu i dostępnych publikacji, przedstawia drogę Volodymyra Piłata do stworzenia tej sztuki walki, będącej także sportem walki, oraz powołania międzynarodowej federacji, co wskazuje na zaawansowany już rozwój instytucjonalny. Zastosowano analizę źródeł, w tym materiałów filmowych i zdjęć (antropologia wizualna). Ukazano specyfikę tej sztuki walki – *boiovyi hopak* powstał na bazie tradycji kozackich i doświadczeń „drogi wojownika” Włodzimierza Piłata. Historyczny *hopak* to taniec, często praktykowany z towarzyszeniem muzyki.

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W trakcie ćwiczeń używa się tradycyjnych broni, są to: długi kij, szabla, a także szczupak, kosa, sierp, buzdygan, cep i czekan.

**Słowa kluczowe:** sztuka walki, *hopak*, Wielki Mistrz, wojownik, droga.

## Abstract

Many nations today promote their historical martial arts and combat sports. This may result from the need to emphasize their own national traditions and cultural heritage. Thanks to outstanding figures, enthusiasts and people with a sense of mission, traditions that are partly lost are being created or restored. An example is Grand Master Volodymyr Pilat – the creator of the system called *Boiovyi hopak* (Battle / Combat hopak). The author, based on a direct interview and available publications, presents his path to the creation of this martial art, which is also a combat sport, and the establishment of an international federation, which indicates an already advanced institutional development. An analysis of sources was also used, including film materials and photos (visual anthropology). The specificity of this fighting art is shown, which is strongly related to the experiences of Master Pilat's "way of the warrior". *Boiovyi hopak* was created on the basis of Cossack traditions and the experience of Volodymyr Pilat's "way of the warrior". The historical *hopak* was a dance. It is often practised with music. Among the traditional weapons there are a long stick, sabre, pike, scythe, sickle, mace, flail and ice axe.

**Keywords:** fighting art, *hopak*, Grand Master, the warrior, the pathway.

## Introduction

Coming from East and Southeast Asia, martial arts have become known and popular on a global scale. The example of these Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Thai martial arts, their institutionalization and popularization, is followed by leaders and organizations of many Asian countries, as well as some European ones. This may result from the need to emphasize their own historical, national traditions in the field of martial arts or combat sports.

Occasionally, national traditions in martial arts and combat sports are invented and labelled national in order to promote the country's culture and economy. Externally, they are to function as a trademark and export commodity, a means of soft political influence and a contribution to the development of tourism. In other countries, on the other hand, participation in patriotic and military education is an important component of physical culture and constitutes an element strengthening national identification. This policy is served by sport, film/cinema, cultural events, scientific research and the activities of many different state and social institutions. This invention of one's own national traditions/martial arts heritage serving strictly commercial purposes may refer to different cultural traditions.<sup>1</sup> Undoubtedly, it enriches the areas of physical culture

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. E.J. Hobsbawm, T.O. Ranger (eds.), *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge University Press, New York 1983.

and sports culture (as long as a given martial art enters international competition as another discipline of the multiform phenomenon of combat sports).

IMACSSS congresses are an opportunity to present them, meet and exchange scientific research results, where the traditions of Malaysian *silat*, various styles of Chinese *kung-fu*, Japanese martial arts, *taekwondo* and *Muai Thai* meet the Polish hussar sabre and the Ukrainian *hopak*. This last of the listed martial arts is still little known.

The Combat *hopak* combines the pursuit of spiritual and physical improvement. Thus, it meets the definition of a traditionally understood martial art adopted in the General Theory of Fighting Arts. The techniques of this martial art were passed down from generation to generation in the Cossack tradition and through folk dances, especially the dance called *hopak*. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, Grand Master (GM) Wołodymyr Pyłat / Volodymyr Pilat undertook to recreate this martial art based on the knowledge passed on by his grandfather and other teachers who had knowledge of the old martial art. He and his students are mainly the authors of previous research and publications on the history of this martial art (*vide* - Literature).

## Problem and method

The purpose of this short study is to show the profile of Grand Master Volodymyr Pilat from Ukraine – the master of the *Combat hopak* (Ukrainian martial art) – and his path to mastery. How did this influence the shape of the martial art he created?

The author relies mainly on information obtained through direct, uncategorized interviews. Existing publications - literature on the subject - were also taken into account.

## A few words about the Chief Master

So who is the creator and Chief Master – **Volodymyr Pilat** [photo 1]? This surname is written in several ways - Polonized as Piłat, Pyłat, but also Pilat and Pylat.<sup>2</sup> The author believes that Pilat, as a family name with the *Nowina* coat of arms assigned,<sup>3</sup> is the best form of transliteration into the Latin alphabet. This is

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. W.J. Cynarski, *Leksykon sztuk walki. Mistrzowie i ich szkoły* [Lexicon of fighting arts. Masters and their schools], Rzeszow University Press, Rzeszów 2021, pp. 129–130.

<sup>3</sup> V. Pilat, E. Sidoruk, M. Kurak, *Master Volodymyr S. Pilat – organizer of the revival of the Cossack martial art and his life's work – Boiovyi hopak*, [in:] W.J. Cynarski, P. Pawelec, P. Świder, J. Kulas (eds.), *11<sup>th</sup> IMACSSS International Conference, 5<sup>th</sup> World Scientific Congress of Combat*

a family of the nobility of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, probably descending from the Ruthenian nobility before the first Polish-Lithuanian Union. V. Pilat states that he comes from a knightly family with the indicated coat of arms – from 1121.<sup>4</sup> As a person coming from a noble family and implementing noble, knightly ideals in life, GM Pilat was admitted to the exclusive group of the European Nobility Club in 2022 and was awarded the Knight's Order of *Homo Creator Nobilis*. However, his family tradition today refers more to the heritage of the Cossack culture.

Volodymyr Pilat was born in 1955 and lives in Lviv. Here, in the so-called Galicia, i.e. in the lands of the Austrian partition / Eastern Lesser Poland / Western Ukraine, his ancestors lived for at least several generations. His grandfather – Andrej Gidej – was a personal security worker for the Austro-Hungarian Emperor Franz Joseph. He was also injured during this work and received a pension for the rest of his life - first Austrian, then Polish. In turn, Volodymyr's father – Stepan Pilat – was a militiaman.<sup>5</sup> This was a circumstance that facilitated practising martial arts in a situation where in the Soviet Union, apart from the military and guard divisions, something similar could only be practised clandestinely.

The athletic build and strength inherited from his grandfather helped Volodymyr succeed in sports and in contact sports, but it also required great courage to pass several serious tests of the fight for life. Volodymyr successively trained gymnastics, boxing (Soviet and Cuban, under the guidance of a Cuban trainer), knife fighting, *Kyokushin* and *Goju-ryu karate*, *Sone* (?), *Tsunami karate*,<sup>6</sup> experimented with the use of two Cossack sabres [Photo 1 ], learned the traditions of Ukrainian / Cossack martial arts. He also fought bare-knuckle fights, and in self-defence he had to fight with a knife when attacked by a dozen to one.<sup>7</sup> Hard training enabled him to win full-contact fights.

In order to learn about various martial arts and combat sports, he visited the area of the former Soviet Union. At that time, trips abroad were limited and extremely difficult. In order to learn about Cossack traditions, he travelled to Kuban, Odessa and Sumy in Ukraine and to Minsk (Belarus). This is how he realized his tourism of martial arts.<sup>8</sup> Volodymyr trained fighting arts since 1968,

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*Sports and Martial Arts, October 13–15, 2022, Rzeszów*, Rzeszow University Press, Rzeszów 2022, pp. 14–18.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. S. Okolski, *Orbis Polonus*, Officina Typographica Franciscus Imperator, Kraków 1641; V. Pilat, *History of the school „Boyovyi Hopak”*, [in:] W.J. Cynarski, A. Nizioł (eds.), *3<sup>rd</sup> IMACSSS International Conference Abstract Book*, Rzeszów University Press, Rzeszów 2014, p. 76.

<sup>5</sup> According to direct interview with V. Pilat, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> R. Murat, *Karate for Beginners and Advanced*, Atlantic, New Delhi 2006.

<sup>7</sup> Quoting the direct interview with V. Pilat, too.

<sup>8</sup> W.J. Cynarski, *Sztuki walki i sporty walki. W kierunku ogólnej teorii [Martial Arts & Combat Sports: Towards the General Theory of Fighting Arts]*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, Gdańsk 2019, p. 26; W. Blach, P. Swider, L. Sieber, *Tourism of martial arts: the inspiration for Prof.*

when it was still illegal in the USSR. Formal legalization took place in 1978, but in the 1980s the KGB organized mass arrests of instructors.<sup>9</sup> From 1986, the KGB counteracted the teaching and development of the Combat Hopak, for example, setting fire in the apartment where the training materials were located.<sup>10</sup>

Currently, however, he teaches mainly in Lviv, where he trains instructors. He also deals with massage and natural medicine, based on the folk message according to the Ukrainian tradition and on methods from Asia. The leader of the Ukrainian *Combat hopak* also conducts scientific research and publishes in the field of history, theory of sport, training methodology and health.<sup>11</sup>

## Cossack martial arts traditions

*Boiovyi hopak* (Battle hopak, Combat hopak, or Fighting gopak in English) has been developed by V. Pilat since 1985. The same Grand Master appears with his students at the IMACSSS Congresses organized every four years in Rzeszów.<sup>12</sup> He was also an active participant in the same event in 2022.<sup>13</sup> Here, together with his students, he presented the characteristics of this martial art during the Panel of Grand Masters, organized a show at the Gala of Martial Arts and personally conducted workshops.

The Ukrainian traditions explored by GM Pilat cover quite a wide spectrum. *Rukaposhnyi boy*, also known as Alexey A. Kadochnikov's *Sistiema*, was – according to Pilat – created for the army and uniformed services of the USSR on the basis of Cossack combat techniques. V. Pilat visited Kadochnikov in Kuban. He also practised under the guidance of high-ranking Cossacks.<sup>14</sup> He led to the re-activation of the Cossack movement, being the organizer of the first congress after 250 years. He himself finally obtained the historical titles of ataman and hetman of the Cossack Region.

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*Cynarski's new book*, "Ido Movement for Culture. Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology" 2020, vol. 20, no. 3, pp. 47–52; doi: 10.14589/ido.20.3.7; and according to the direct interview.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Y. Zhykov, *Karate and the Kremlin*, „Black Belt” 1979, vol. 17, no. 6, pp. 6–7; V. Pilat, E. Sidoruk, M. Kurak, *Master Volodymyr S. Pilat...*, op. cit., p. 15.

<sup>10</sup> According to direct interview with V. Pilat; and V. Pilat, E. Sidoruk, M. Kurak, *Master Volodymyr S. Pilat...*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>11</sup> Cf. E. Pristupa, V. Pilat, *Tradicii ukrainskoj nacionalnoj fizycznej kultury*, Troyan, Lviv 1991; V. Pilat, *Boyovyy Hopak. Sokil skill level*, Logos, Lviv 1999; idem, *Asgarda*, Lviv 2007; idem, *History of the school „Boyovyi Hopak”*, [in:] W.J. Cynarski, A. Nizioł (eds.), *3<sup>rd</sup> IMACSSS International Conference Abstract Book*, Rzeszów University Press, Rzeszów 2014, pp. 76–78; V. Pylat, *Boyovyy Hopak. Жобтяк*, Spolom, Lviv 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Vide: P. Rut, *Gala & Congress: IMACSSS 2014* (documentary film), Rzeszów 2014; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fxHr46IKRXo> [accessed: Nov. 19, 2022].

<sup>13</sup> V. Pilat, E. Sidoruk, M. Kurak, *Master Volodymyr S. Pilat...*, op. cit.; and photos 2–4.

<sup>14</sup> According to direct interview with V. Pilat, 2022.

V. Pilat's late friend, Colonel Anatoli Popowicz, created an educational system called *sobor*.<sup>15</sup> Together, the two developed the "Cossack biathlon" as a sport. In addition, the creator of the *Combat hopak* learned *spa* – the martial art of the Zaporozhian Cossacks (training especially with Oleksandr Besklube), „belt fighting”, *krest*, *nawkrest* (fight to death), *nawkułaczki* (deadly hands), *nawszpinky* (fight fought on the fingers), *arcan* (fight of the Carpathian highlanders). These are folklore studies for the restoration of partly lost cultural heritage.<sup>16</sup>



**Photo 1.** Volodymyr Pilat – President of the International Federation of Boiovyi Hopak

Source: Private collection of W.J. Cynarski; photos – no pagination.

## His Martial Art

***Boiovyi hopak*** (Battle / Combat hopak) was created on the basis of Cossack traditions and the experience of Volodymyr Pilat's „way of the warrior”. The historical *hopak* was a dance.<sup>17</sup> Here, exercises and figures of this highly efficient

<sup>15</sup> W. Tkaczuk, A. Popowicz, „*Sobor*” – *ukrainskaja sistiema bor'by, fizycznego i moralnego wospitania młodzieży*, [in:] A. Dąbrowski, T. Jasiński, R.M. Kalina (eds.), *Sporty walki w edukacji dzieci i młodzieży – perspektywa metodyczna*, SWPW, Płock 2002, pp. 37–42.

<sup>16</sup> According to the direct interview with V. Pilat, too.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Y. Pivtorak, *Ukrainian Hopak: From Dance for Entertainment to Martial Art*, Congress on Research in Dance Conference Proceedings, 2016, vol. 2016, pp. 299–305; doi: 10.1017/cor.2016.40.

dance are used.<sup>18</sup> „The techniques of hand-to-hand combat and the use of various weapons are taught. [...] It is often practised with music – patriotic songs.”<sup>19</sup> Among the traditional weapons, techniques of a long stick, saber, as well as pike, scythe, sickle, mace, flail and ice axe are practised. Training takes place in the traditional Ukrainian costume: an embroidered shirt, salwarpants (wide Cossack trousers [Photos 1–4]) tied with a decorative belt, and high folk boots.

Practitioners also wear a specific hairstyle, in particular Cossack tops [Fig. 1], which is an echo of an ancient tradition. Proto-Slavic “*golva*” (shaving) is a word for the ancient custom of “shaving heads leaving only a tuft of hair on the crown,”<sup>20</sup> which concerned Proto-Slavic and perhaps also Scythian warriors. This hairstyle has survived in the Cossack tradition as the so-called Cossack crest. Thus, the Cossack and Ukrainian traditions are adjacent here to an even older, almost archetypal pattern.<sup>21</sup>

Like Popowicz’s *sobor*, *Combat hopak* is not only a training programme and a set of combat techniques, but a relatively complete educational system, which corresponds to the definition of martial arts in the General Theory of Fighting Arts.<sup>22</sup> This is because it is a psychophysical practice, where the values and issues of spirituality result from the living tradition of Ukrainian Orthodoxy. Together, it constitutes physical, moral and patriotic education at the same time.

The *Combat hopak* also entered the path of sport. On May 18–19, 1996, the first sports competition was held in Lviv in *Combat hopak*. In 1997, this combat sport was raised to the rank of a national sport. The Central Combat Hopak School was also registered. In 2001, the International Federation of Boiovyy Hopak, whose president is GM Pilat, was founded.

Outside Ukraine, a strong Bojowy Hopak centre operates in Warsaw. The outstanding instructors from this centre are Elias Sidoruk and Michał Kurak.

<sup>18</sup> Vide: P. Rut, *Gala & Congress...*, op. cit.

<sup>19</sup> W.J. Cynarski, *Lexykon sztuk walki. Mistrzowie i ich szkoły [Lexicon of fighting arts. Masters and their schools]*, Rzeszow University Press, Rzeszów 2021, p. 64. More: V. Pylat, *Boiovyy Hopak, Жобтяк*, Spolom, Lviv 2010; idem, *Boiovyy Hopak. Жобтяк*, Spolom, Lviv 2018.

<sup>20</sup> K. Moszyński, *Pierwotny zasięg języka prasłowiańskiego [Original reach of the Slavonic language]*, PAN, Ossolineum, Wrocław 1957, p. 251.

<sup>21</sup> Cf. T. Bureychak, *In Search of Heroes: Vikings and Cossacks in Present Sweden and Ukraine*, “Nordic Journal of Masculinity Studies” 2012, vol. 7, no. 2, pp. 139–159; W.J. Cynarski, *Propinquity of Scythians and Slavs. Remarks on the state of knowledge of Slavic ethnogenesis*, „Ido Movement for Culture. Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology” 2018, vol. 18, no. 1, pp. 1–7; doi: 10.14589/ido.18.1.1; V. Pylat, *Boiovyy Hopak. Жобтяк*, Spolom, Lviv 2018.

<sup>22</sup> W.J. Cynarski, J. Skowron, *An analysis of the conceptual language used for the general theory of martial arts – Japanese, Polish and English terminology*, “Ido Movement for Culture. Journal of Martial Arts Anthropology” 2014, vol. 14, no. 3, pp. 49–66; doi: 10.14589/ido.14.3.7; W.J. Cynarski, *Sztuki walki i sporty walki. W kierunku ogólnej teorii [Martial Arts & Combat Sports: Towards the General Theory of Fighting Arts]*, Wydawnictwo Naukowe Katedra, Gdańsk 2019.

Both are actively involved in promoting this martial art and combat sport on an international scale [Photos 2–3].

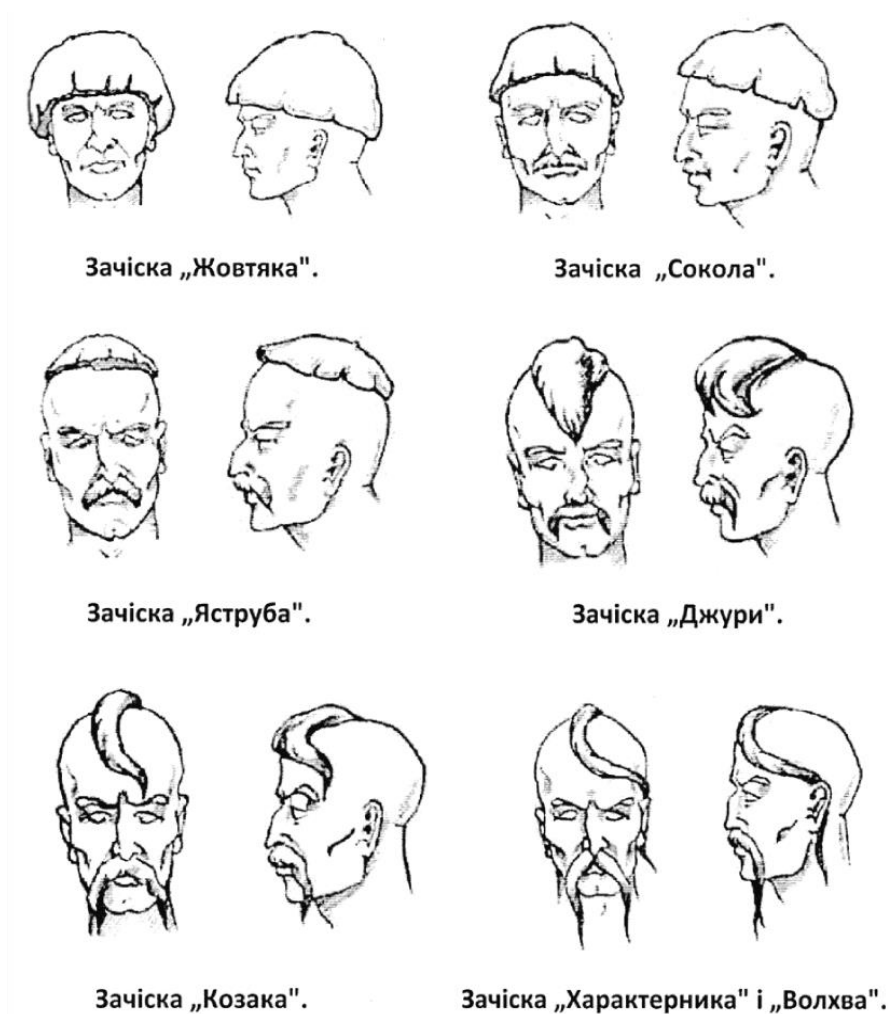


Figure 1. Various types of Cossack hairdo

Source: V. Pylat, *Войовуу Норах. Жобтыак*, Spolom, Lviv 2018, p. 69.





**Photo 2.** A group from the *Combat hopak* show at the Martial Arts Gala in Rzeszów, Oct. 14, 2022. From the left: E. Sidoruk, Ruslan Dmytrenko (Winnica, Ukraine), M. Kurak, GM V. Pilat

Source: Private collection of W.J. Cynarski; photos – no pagination.



**Photo 3.** Representation of the Combat Hopak at the IMACSSS 2022 Congress in Rzeszów with the president of this Scientific Society

Source: Private collection of W.J. Cynarski; photos – no pagination.



**Photo 4.** After the Congress – E. Sidoruk, Prof. W.J. Cynarski, GM V. Pilat, GM Z. Sawicki, E. Sawicka with the IMACSSS flag, hall of the Institute of Physical Culture Studies of the University of Rzeszów, October 15, 2022

Source: Private collection of W. J. Cynarski; photos – no pagination.

## Summary

Grand Master Volodymyr Pilat is the founder of *Boiovyi hopak* (Combat hopak), the system of fighting art. His path to the creation of this martial / fighting art, which is also a combat sport, led to the establishment of the curriculum. This was followed by further stages of the institutionalization process like the establishment of an international federation, which indicates an already advanced institutional development. The specificity of this fighting art is shown, which is strongly related to the experiences of the “way of the warrior” of Master Pilat.

*Boiovyi hopak* was created on the basis of Cossack traditions and the experience of Volodymyr Pilat. Because the historical *hopak* was a dance, it is often practised with music. Among the traditional weapons a long stick, sabre, as well as pike, scythe, sickle, mace, flail and ice axe are practised.

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### DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author declared no potential conflicts of interests with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of the article *Volodymyr Pilat – the creator and leader of the Fighting Hopak style. Contribution to the modern history of Ukrainian martial arts.*

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