

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

## *Introduction*

“Cossacks have made the entire history of Russia,” declared the illustrious Russian writer Leo Tolstói in 1870. He continued: “Not for nothing do the Europeans call us Cossacks. The Russian people all desire to be Cossacks.”<sup>1</sup> This quote highlights a historical relationship that was central to the course of Romanov empire-building and pervasive in the literary image of Russia, but which problematically straddled Russian conceptions of self and other.<sup>2</sup> If Cossacks truly represented in Geoffrey Hosking’s term “an alternative Russian ethnos,” what prevented Russians from realizing their desire to acquire a Cossack identity? Imperial boundaries barred their way. While Peter the Great decreed the divide, Cossacks embraced and patrolled boundaries between their communities and Rus’, and identity documents made distinctions legible and permanent.

This book explores how the Don Cossacks negotiated the closing of the frontier that cradled the creation of their community and connects their social history to the rivalry of the Russian and Ottoman Empires in the Black Sea basin. In contrast to several comparable raiding communities such as pirates, uskoks, and buccaneers, which briefly flourished, then vanished, in the no-man’s lands beyond the jurisdiction of established states in the early modern period, the Don Cossacks survived by changing.<sup>3</sup> In the age of Peter the Great the Don Host transformed from an open, multi-ethnic fraternity dedicated to raiding Ottoman frontiers into a closed,

<sup>1</sup> Tolstói was just one of several major Russian writers to view Cossacks as central to Russia’s historical identity. The quote is from Judith Deutsch Kornblatt, *The Cossack Hero in Russian Literature: A Study in Cultural Mythology* (Madison, Wis., 1992), p. 13.

<sup>2</sup> In his extensive survey of how Russian empire-building trumped nation-building, Geoffrey Hosking declared: “Both for imperial expansion and frontier defense the Cossacks were indispensable. . . . In a sense they were an alternative Russian ethnos, the embryo of a potential Russian nation with a quite different social structure.” Geoffrey Hosking, *Russia: People and Empire 1552–1917* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997), p. 12.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Wendy Bracewell, *The Uskoks of Senj: Piracy, Banditry, and Holy War in the Sixteenth-century Adriatic* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1992); Marcus Rediker, *Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea: Merchant Seamen, Pirates, and the Anglo-American Maritime World, 1700–1750* (Cambridge, 1987).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

2

*Imperial boundaries*

ethnic community devoted to defending and advancing the boundaries of the Russian Empire.

## RUSSIAN EMPIRE-BUILDING

The Don region, which in the early modern period comprised over 160,000 square kilometers (roughly the size of Illinois or Greece) of land along the Don River and its tributaries in southern Russia and eastern Ukraine, provides a crucial case study for understanding the mechanics and methods of Russian empire-building. The region's relationship with its Romanov overlords defies many stereotypes of Russia as inherently eager to acquire land, hostile to local autonomy, and ideologically inflexible. Even as Russia consolidated its position in the steppe and incorporated the region into its imperial borders, the Don Cossacks maintained a separate juridical existence within the Russian body politic for centuries.<sup>4</sup>

Most studies of Russian empire focus on imperial policies of conquest or highlight non-Russian strategies of resistance. This is in line with the theory of empire advanced by Michael Doyle who has defined empire as “a relationship . . . in which one state controls the effective political sovereignty of another political society.”<sup>5</sup> Ronald Suny placed “inequitable relationships” between core and periphery and perceptions of exploitation at the center of his recent discussion of Russian empire. Without discounting the importance of the colonial paradigm for later periods and other territories within the vast expanses of the Russian imperial experience, in the first part of this study we will witness a reluctant empire which worked with limited resources, frequently displayed tactical flexibility, preferred compromise to conflict, and even in the face of insubordination acted as a reliable partner and patron of its Cossack clients. In this case the “inequitable relationship” inherent in empire worked in favor of the tsar's Cossack clients, who enjoyed more rights and privileges than almost anyone in Russia save the tsar.

<sup>4</sup> The other two major cases of separate deals were the Hetmanate (central Ukraine) and Baltic German territories (Livonia and Estonia). On the Baltic region see Ia. Zutis, *Ostzeiskii vopros v XVIII veke* (Riga, 1946) and Edward C. Thaden, *Russia's Western Borderlands, 1710–1870* (Princeton, 1984). For a model study of imperial integration, consult Zenon Kohut, *Russian Centralism and Ukrainian Autonomy: Imperial Absorption of the Hetmanate 1760s–1830s* (Cambridge, Mass., 1982).

<sup>5</sup> Michael W. Doyle, *Empires* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1986), p. 45. For extensive consideration of this concept applied to Russia, see Ronald Grigor Suny, “The Empire Strikes Out: Imperial Russia, ‘National’ Identity, and Theories of Empire,” in Suny and Terry Martin, eds., *A State of Nations: Empire and Nation-Making in the Age of Lenin and Stalin* (Oxford, 2001), pp. 23–66. For emphasis on “inequitable relationships” see pp. 25–26.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

3

Although Don Cossacks have often been portrayed as daring Russian knights or intrepid Orthodox crusaders, this study presents them as a complex community that eludes simple categorization.<sup>6</sup> Their story defies the binary dichotomies that characterize much of the western literature on Russian imperial expansion: Russians vs. non-Russians, Orthodox vs. others, conquerors vs. resistance fighters, agriculturalists vs. nomads, colonists vs. captive nations.<sup>7</sup> They present the paradox of a Russian-speaking group that was central to the course of empire-building, but which ultimately rejected a Russian identity. As such the Don Cossacks were a living embodiment of Russia's conflicted self-identity as both a nation and an empire.<sup>8</sup>

Drawing upon documentation from six Russian archives, this study suggests that the Don region became a part of Russia as a result of a complex series of *ad hoc* decisions, diplomatic opportunities, and decisive actions by both metropolitan and local actors between 1667 and 1739. It eschews monolithic models of aggressive Russian expansion that have dominated numerous previous discussions.<sup>9</sup> Instead it argues that no master plan guided Russian actions in the region, examines cases in which different branches of the government issued contradictory decrees in the name of

<sup>6</sup> Most recently this view has been advocated in an encyclopedic overview of early Cossack history by N. A. Mininkov, *Donskoe kazachestvo v epokhu pozdnego srednevekov'ia* (do 1671 g.) (Rostov-na-Donu, 1998).

<sup>7</sup> Cold War western historiography of the "captive nations" tended to stress such stark dichotomies in response to the crude Soviet paradigm of "voluntary submission" of various peoples to Russia. For an excellent critique of the Soviet paradigm, see Lowell Tillett, *The Great Friendship: Soviet Historians on the Non-Russian Nationalities* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1969). Alexandre Bennigsen served as the doyen of a number of scholars of anti-colonial resistance to Russian imperialism. For an example of his approach applied to this region see "Peter the Great, the Ottoman Empire, and the Caucasus", *Canadian-American Slavic Studies* 8 (1974), 311–18. For recent studies and bibliography, consult Marie Bennigsen Broxup, ed., *The North Caucasus Barrier: The Russian Advance Towards the Muslim World* (New York, 1992).

<sup>8</sup> For an extensive analysis of East Slavic identity projects in the early modern period, consult Serhii Plokhy, *The Origins of the Slavic Nations: Premodern Identities in Russia, Ukraine, and Belarus* (Cambridge, 2006). Also important are Ladis K. D. Kristof, "The Russian Image of Russia: An Applied Study in Geopolitical Methodology," in C. Fisher, ed., *Essays in Political Geography* (London, 1968), pp. 345–87, and Paul Bushkovitch, "What is Russia? Russian National Identity and the State, 1500–1917," in Andreas Kappeler et al., eds., *Culture, Nation, and Identity: The Ukrainian-Russian Encounter (1600–1945)* (Edmonton, 2003), pp. 144–61.

<sup>9</sup> For an influential statement of unlimited expansion, see Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (New York, 1974) pp. 84, 118–19. John LeDonne has recently attempted to identify a push for hegemony in the heartland as the monolithic driving force behind early imperial Russian expansion, John P. LeDonne, *The Grand Strategy of the Russian Empire, 1650–1831* (Oxford, 2004). Important critiques of expansionism can be found in Hugh Ragsdale, ed., *Imperial Russian Foreign Policy* (Cambridge, 1993) and for an excellent introduction to Russian expansion see the article in the volume by Alfred Rieber entitled "Persistent Factors in Russian Foreign Policy: An Interpretive Essay," pp. 315–59.

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

the tsar, and explains why Cossacks were at times both advocates for and opponents of imperial expansion.<sup>10</sup>

One of the major themes of this book is the social construction of Don Cossack identity.<sup>11</sup> While initially anyone leading a freebooting life style in the steppe could claim a Cossack identity, over time group boundaries consolidated, then closed. Don Cossack identity ceased to be an acquired identity akin to categories such as “pirate” or “cowboy” and instead became an ascribed (blood or birth-based) identity. In only a few generations a community that was once heavily comprised of refugees and fugitives closed its ranks to outsiders and came to consider itself a distinct people.

The first half of *Imperial Boundaries* explores the complex connections between the Cossacks and their frontier world. Four thematic chapters introduce the factors that shaped the life of the Don steppe frontier before 1700. Relying upon gunpowder and grain from the Russian metropole, the Cossacks advanced the cause of empire by contesting Ottoman control of the Black Sea steppes. Cossacks derived subsistence from a delicate balance between raiding, trading, ransoming, and government subsidy. The early social history of the Don region forms a close parallel to heterogeneous pirate communities in which martial exploits and “liberty, equality and brotherhood were the rule rather than the exception.”<sup>12</sup> The unstudied administrative boundary between Muscovite metropole and Cossack frontier marked a Mason-Dixon like dividing line between liberty and autocracy, recorded/enslaved populations and free individuals, privileged military clients and weaponless subjects of the tsar.

On the subject of autocracy, Chapters five, six, and seven of *Imperial Boundaries* provide a chronological analysis of the period from 1667 to 1695, arguing that the Cossacks were neither unwavering agents of imperial policy nor hapless victims of autocratic writ.<sup>13</sup> The *Donskie Dela*, thousands of

<sup>10</sup> My emphasis on pragmatic policies of empire-building is inspired by Andreas Kappeler, *The Russian Empire: A Multi-Ethnic History*, trans. Alfred Clayton (Harlow, England and New York, 2001).

<sup>11</sup> Richard Jenkins, *Social Identity* (London, 1996); Fredrik Barth, *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (Oslo, 1969). On Russia, see Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Social Identity in Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, Ill., 1997).

<sup>12</sup> David Cordingley, *Life Among the Pirates: The Romance and the Reality* (London, 1995), p. 117.

<sup>13</sup> This study supports those who have argued that autocracy provided Russian society with more *de facto*, but not *de jure*, political agency than it has usually been credited with. For a classic re-articulation of the European view of Russia as a patrimonial state in which the autocratic, all-powerful tsar rules over a docile elite and a debased populace deprived of rights, see Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime*. Edward L. Keenan questioned many of the assumptions of autocracy as it was traditionally projected to outsiders and understood by later historians. See “Muscovite Political Folkways,” *Russian Review* 45: 2 (1986), 115–81. For more extensive elaboration on the concept of

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

5

pages of documents and reports preserved in Moscow, perforate the façade of autocracy to reveal that Cossacks possessed considerable autonomy of action and often forced compromises on the Ambassadorial Chancery (*Posol'skii Prikaz*), the Russian foreign office that interacted with them in the name of the tsar. In this unique region compelling cross-border considerations often forced Russian rulers to negotiate, not dictate.

The second half of *Imperial Boundaries* argues that the Russian conquest of the Ottoman fort of Azov in 1696 forever altered the relationship between people and power in the Don region. In Chapters eight, nine and ten analysis of the Russian conquest, administration, and cession of Azov reveals that Tsar Peter's ambitious objectives of turning the frontier into a borderland did not completely blind him to the concerns of his Cossack clients. A decade of smoldering conflicts sparked by local clashes, contradictory decrees, political uncertainties, and bureaucratic exigencies ignited an imperial conflagration, a total war fought on the middle ground between the Don and Russia. During this era thousands of ordinary people were uprooted from their homes in order to actualize the tsar's dreams of sailing ships in the Black Sea and thousands more died or deserted the Russian Empire in abortive attempts to resist a new imperial order in the steppe.<sup>14</sup> Although Peter I personally signed decrees demanding the destruction of nearly half of the communities in the Don region, he patronized the reconstitution of the Don Host in the decades after the Bulavin rebellion of 1707–08. Chapters eleven through fourteen propose that Peter I became the inadvertent destroyer of the old steppe and the creator of a new imperial Cossack order.

## HISTORIOGRAPHY

Cossacks and Tatar nomads have often been portrayed as agents of empire in a great struggle by Romanov and Ottoman rulers to control the north

autocracy, see Nancy Shields Kollmann, *Kinship and Politics: The Making of the Muscovite Political System, 1345–1547* (Stanford, 1987), and Valerie Kivelson, "Merciful Tsar, Impersonal State: Russian Autocracy in Comparative Perspective," *Modern Asian Studies* 31: 3 (1997), 635–63, "The Devil Stole His Mind: The Tsar and the 1648 Moscow Uprising," *American Historical Review* 98 (1993), 733–56, and *Autocracy in the Provinces: Russian Political Culture and Gentry in the Seventeenth Century* (Stanford, 1997). For discussions of ideology see Daniel Rowland, "The Problem of Advice in Muscovite Tales About the Time of Troubles," *Russian History* 6 (1979), 259–83, and "Did Muscovite Literary Ideology Place Any Limits on the Power of the Tsar?" *Russian Review* 49 (1990), 125–56.

<sup>14</sup> For related case studies of migration and colonization, see Nicholas B. Breyfogle, Abby Schrader, and Willard Sunderland, eds., *Peopling the Russian Periphery: Borderland Colonization in Eurasian History* (New York, 2007).

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Black Sea coast, but this study will instead focus on the life and death of a common frontier world that both were dependent upon.<sup>15</sup> The Cossack and Tatar communities commingling in the grassland prairies and deltas of the lower Don River basin represented local clients of the Russian tsar and Turkish sultan, but were central for the developing patterns of relations between the two states. They owed their existence and maintenance not so much to a holy war or incessant fighting among “clashing civilizations” but rather to the uneasy coexistence between the two distant empires.

Previous studies have neglected patterns of interaction between these frontier communities. In most Russian accounts the Don Cossacks are depicted as Russian patriots and guardians of Russian borders against attacks by bloodthirsty Turks and nomads.<sup>16</sup> Soviet historians tried to justify Russian southern expansion as a purely defensive move against “Turko-Tatar” aggression.<sup>17</sup> The few studies in Turkish have almost nothing to say about this region and likewise emphasized war, competition, and struggle.<sup>18</sup> A discordant note was sounded by Alan Fisher who emphasized the peaceful nature of Russian–Ottoman state interaction at Azov until 1696, when Peter I took the city from the Ottomans.<sup>19</sup>

In contrast to more conventional treatments of the age of Peter the Great (1672–1725) and his immediate successors, this study seeks to integrate macro and micro historical approaches and provide a mosaic of both central and regional perspectives.<sup>20</sup> Most scholarship, after all, focuses primarily

<sup>15</sup> For a more traditional view, see A. A. Novosel'skii, *Bor'ba Moskovskogo gosudarstva s tatarami v pervoi polovine XVII veka* (Moscow, 1948).

<sup>16</sup> The principal English-language study of Peter's policies towards Russia's southern flank is severely outdated and is heavily based on secondary sources, see B. Sumner, *Peter the Great and the Ottoman Empire* (Oxford, 1949). For a more detailed discussion of historiography, see Boeck, *Shifting Boundaries on the Don Steppe Frontier: Cossacks, Empires and Nomads to 1739* (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 2002), pp. 560–69.

<sup>17</sup> Novosel'skii, *Bor'ba Moskovskogo gosudarstva*; N. A. Smirnov, *Rossia i Turtsiia v XVI–XVII vv.* (Moscow, 1946).

<sup>18</sup> Haluk F. Gürsel, *Tarih Boyunca Türk-Rus İlişkileri* (Istanbul, 1968); Ali Kemal Meram, *Türk-Rus İlişkileri Tarihi* (Istanbul, 1969); Tahir Tamer Kumkale, *Tarihten Günümüze Türk Rus İlişkileri* (Istanbul, 1997). A recent overview stresses similar themes, but musters new primary sources. M. Sadık Bilge, *Osmanlı Devleti ve Kafkasya* (Istanbul, 2005).

<sup>19</sup> Alan W. Fisher, “Muscovite-Ottoman Relations in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries,” *Humaniora Islamica* 1 (1973), 207–17. Several significant studies by the same author have recently been united under a single cover. See *A Precarious Balance: Conflict, Trade, and Diplomacy on the Russian-Ottoman Frontier* (Istanbul, 1999).

<sup>20</sup> For a comprehensive survey of the Petrine era that includes extensive discussions of both Peter and his people and provides an exhaustive synthesis of published documents and secondary sources, consult Lindsey Hughes, *Russia in the Age of Peter the Great* (New Haven, 1998). On Peter's court, cultural changes, and reforms, see Ernest Zitser, *The Transfigured Kingdom: Sacred Parody and Charismatic Authority at the Court of Peter the Great* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004); Paul Bushkovitch, *Peter the Great: The Struggle for Power, 1671–1725* (Cambridge, 2001); James Cracraft, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian*

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

7

on Peter and the ruling elites surrounding him.<sup>21</sup> Although Peter I is central to the Cossack story, he appears in this study as an imperial, occasionally imperious, interloper rather than a constant, hands-on commandant. He delegated to confidants and multiple branches of the government the authority to negotiate the boundaries of imperial control over Cossack lands, liberties, and forms of livelihood.

As a rule, studies originating in southern Russia have tried to mold the region's history into the nation-state paradigm, depicting Don Cossacks as conscious and willing agents of Russian expansion. The most insightful study of relations between the Don and the Russian state was published in 1924 by the émigré historian Sergei Svatikov, who represented the region as an independent “republican colony” of Russia that gradually lost its statehood and autonomy to the mother country.<sup>22</sup> In the Soviet era the Don region above all merited scholarly attention as the perceived staging ground for a series of “peasant wars” that threatened the Russian state in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.<sup>23</sup> Scholars of the region have produced some impressive archive-based surveys of the socio-economic history of the Don Cossacks, but their studies overlooked cross-cultural interaction, identity politics, and imperial boundaries.<sup>24</sup>

Although the Don region has featured in several studies in English, this is the first extensive, archive-based study to explore its transition from a frontier contested by two empires to a borderland of the Russian empire.<sup>25</sup>

*Culture* (Cambridge, Mass., 2004), idem, *The Petrine Revolution in Russian Imagery* (Chicago, 1997) and *The Church Reform of Peter the Great* (Stanford, 1971); Evgenii V. Anisimov, *The Reforms of Peter the Great: Progress Through Coercion in Russia*, trans. John T. Alexander (Armonk, N.Y., 1993).

<sup>21</sup> For an introduction to the extensive Russian historiography on Peter, consult Nicholas V. Riasanovsky, *The Image of Peter the Great in Russian History and Thought* (New York, 1985). For recent Russian works on Peter see Ernest A. Zitzer, “Post-Soviet Peter: New Histories of the Late Muscovite and Early Imperial Russian Court,” *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 6: 2 (2005), 375–92.

<sup>22</sup> S. G. Svatikov, *Rossia i Don, 1549–1917: issledovanie po istorii gosudarstvennogo i administrativnogo prava i politicheskikh dvizhenii na Donu* (Belgrade, 1924).

<sup>23</sup> See A. P. Pronshtein and N. A. Mininkov, *Krest'ianskie voiny v Rossii i donskoe kazachestvo* (Rostov-na-Donu, 1983). Paul Avrich's book on popular rebellions also gave extensive coverage to the Don region. Paul Avrich, *Russian Rebels 1600–1800* (New York, 1976).

<sup>24</sup> A. P. Pronshtein, *Zemlia Donskaia v XVIII veke* (Rostov-na-Donu, 1961); S. I. Riabov, *Donskaia zemlia v XVII veke* (Volgograd, 1992); Mininkov, *Donskoe kazachestvo*.

<sup>25</sup> The most recent popular synthesis devotes a whole paragraph to the Don region in the Petrine period. See Shane O' Rourke, *The Cossacks* (Manchester, 2007), p. 112. Philip Longworth has written two important studies on Cossack history. See Philip Longworth, “Transformation in Cossackdom: Technological and Organizational Aspects of Military Change, 1650–1850,” in Bela K. Kiraly, ed., *War and Society in East Central Europe* (Brooklyn, N.Y., 1979), pp. 393–409, and Philip Longworth, *The Cossacks* (New York, 1969). Bruce Menning's dissertation on the socialization of the Don region provides a competent broad outline of events in the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries based upon published documents and secondary treatments. Bruce William Menning, “The Socialization of the Don Cossack Host Prior to the Reign of Nicholas I” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1972).



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

World historian William H. McNeill's *Europe's Steppe Frontier* presented the conquest of the steppe as a major event in European history, but he relied heavily on secondary accounts.<sup>26</sup> In an ambitious and extensive recent survey Michael Khodarkovsky chronicled Russia's efforts over three centuries to "wrest control over the steppe from its nomadic inhabitants."<sup>27</sup> In presenting the history of the steppe frontier as a single overarching story of Russia's "unstoppable expansion" and Christian "manifest destiny" he side-stepped the unique dynamic of the Don steppe frontier. In an innovative study of how Russian empire-building, state-building, and nation-building coincided, Willard Sunderland effectively demonstrated that Russian actions produced "not one steppe but several, but each with a particular set of meanings and appearances that changed over time."<sup>28</sup>

Rather than view the Don steppe exclusively through a Russian prism, *Imperial Boundaries* stresses connections to global patterns of cross-cultural interaction and empire-building. The sea of grass separating the Don region from central Russia was as conducive to political innovation and pragmatic accommodation as any trans-Atlantic frontier.<sup>29</sup> Intertwined processes of land-taking, community-making, and identity-shaping converged to create a Cossack cultural landscape that was unlike any region in central Russia.<sup>30</sup>

Secondly, in telling the story of how a non-state space became an imperial place, I propose that cutting-edge practices of statecraft originated along this edge of empire. New studies have enriched our understanding of how important aspects of international law emerged at the intersections of European empires.<sup>31</sup> Unfortunately, Russia's innovative solutions to characteristically modern problems of governance have been ignored. This empire initiated forms of territorial sovereignty and documenting individual identity that previous studies have unambiguously claimed as

<sup>26</sup> William H. McNeill, *Europe's Steppe Frontier 1500–1800* (Chicago, 1964).

<sup>27</sup> Michael Khodarkovsky, *Russia's Steppe Frontier: The Making of a Colonial Empire, 1500–1800* (Bloomington, Ind., 2002). For "unstoppable expansion" consult p. 8 and for notions of manifest destiny see pp. 34 and 36.

<sup>28</sup> Willard Sunderland, *Taming the Wild Field: Colonization and Empire on the Russian Steppe* (Ithaca, N.Y., 2004), p. 224.

<sup>29</sup> For model regional studies, see James H. Merrell, *Into the American Woods: Negotiators on the Pennsylvania Frontier* (New York, 1999) and Jane T. Merritt, *At the Crossroads: Indians and Europeans on a Mid-Atlantic Frontier* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 2003).

<sup>30</sup> These themes, along with new property systems, new social relationships, and new political institutions, are emphasized by William Cronon, George Miles, and Jay Gitlin in "Becoming West: Toward New Meaning for Western History," in Cronon, Miles, and Gitlin, eds., *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America's Western Past* (New York, 1992), pp. 7–9.

<sup>31</sup> Janice E. Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns: State-Building and Extraterritorial Violence in Early Modern Europe* (Princeton, 1994).



Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)*Introduction*

9

prerogatives of the nation-state, the French Revolution, and the modern international system. Russia advanced notions of “territorial sovereignty and inviolability of political boundaries” long before most European states began to actively demarcate and patrol their borders.<sup>32</sup> Russia delegitimized non-state violence and “accepted responsibility for trans-border violence emanating from its territory” two centuries before this became a dominant principle in international law.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, this study will demonstrate that by the mid-eighteenth century such markers of modernity as identity documents, universal male military service, registers of birth and death, and deportation of undocumented migrants became regular features of life in the Don region.

Thirdly, this investigation proceeds from the premise that partisanship and partition obliterate middle grounds. Frontiers became borderlands by arrangement, not default.<sup>34</sup> Russian boundary maintenance policies deserve comparative attention because they both harkened back to earlier imperial efforts to restrict the mobility of nomads and foreshadowed the functional role of modern borders in managing and controlling the movement of goods and people. In global history various sedentary powers have attempted to create artificial barriers to impede the mobility of nomadic societies and non-state raiders. Like the Roman strategists who built Hadrian’s wall and the Ming politicians who constructed an even greater wall north of Beijing, Russia’s rulers looked to create limits that they could live with.<sup>35</sup> The Belgorod line, a system of earthworks and fortifications constructed in the mid-seventeenth century as a deterrent against Tatar raids, initiated a process of territorialization of state sovereignty. By 1671 the Russian authorities had implemented an imperial boundary regime with the Don region that was more rigorous than the border between the emerging nation-states of Spain and France, which has been proclaimed the first “modern” border.<sup>36</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Peter Sahlins, *Boundaries: The Making of France and Spain in the Pyrenees* (Berkeley, 1989), p. 3.

<sup>33</sup> Thomson, *Mercenaries, Pirates, and Sovereigns*, p. 19.

<sup>34</sup> On the concept of the middle ground, see Chapter one of this study. In a survey of the situation in North America, Adelman and Aaron seem to suggest that borderlands can arise by default (p. 836). They nonetheless highlight an important “shift from inter-imperial struggle to international coexistence” that preceded attempts to enforce borders (p. 816). Jeremy Adelman and Stephen Aaron, “From Borderlands to Borders: Empires, Nation-States, and the Peoples in Between in North American History,” *American Historical Review* 104: 3 (1999), 814–41.

<sup>35</sup> David Divine, *Hadrian’s Wall: A Study of the North-West Frontier of Rome* (Boston, 1969); Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: From History to Myth* (Cambridge, 1992).

<sup>36</sup> See Thomas M. Wilson and Hastings Donnan, eds., *Border Identities: Nation and State at International Frontiers* (Cambridge, 1998). On the first modern border, see Sahlins, *Boundaries*. No satisfactory historical survey of Russian border infrastructures exists. On border treaties, but not

Cambridge University Press

978-0-521-51463-7 - Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great

Brian J. Boeck

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Finally, the Don steppe frontier cannot be fully understood apart from its connections to larger processes and patterns in Inner Asian history.<sup>37</sup> Though just a small chapter in the story of how the steppe was won, forceful winds of change first felt here would eventually sweep across Eurasia. The decision of tsars and sultans to restrict raiding and enforce international borders in the early eighteenth century marked the beginning of the end of the Inner Asian steppe arena that had contributed to the emergence of both polities.<sup>38</sup> For over a millennium political entrepreneurs could simulate imperial loyalties while seeking outside opportunities, knowing that they could find refuge in the vast expanses of Eurasia.<sup>39</sup> By partitioning the steppe, shrinking the scope of non-state space, and mandating that people on the move carry government-issued papers, eighteenth-century bureaucrats initiated a process of policing that would herald the twilight of the nomadic era. It is sadly appropriate that Russian and Ottoman diplomats erected kurgans to serve as boundary markers. For centuries such mounds had served as symbols of nomadic power and prestige, now they signified subordination of the steppe to sedentary rulers in distant capitals.

## SOURCES

For most of the period under consideration here, the Russian government interacted with the Don Cossacks in the foreign policy realm rather than the domestic policy sphere. In order to deliver news on events in the steppe and Black sea region, Don Cossack delegations journeyed to Moscow several times a year. Upon arriving in the capital they filed written reports and provided oral testimony in response to questions posed to them by Russian officials responsible for foreign affairs. These records, called the *Donskie dela*, form the backbone of sources utilized in the present study.

enforcement, see M. A. Chepelkin and N. M. D'iakova, *Istoricheskie ocherk formirovaniia gosudarstvennykh granits Rossiiskoi Imperii* (Moscow, 1992). For a recent survey produced for contemporary border guards, see A. I. Nikolaev, ed., *Na strazhe granits otechestva: istoriia pograničnoi sluzhby* (Moscow, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> For broad surveys of Inner Asia, consult David Christian, *A History of Russia, Central Asia, and Mongolia* (Malden, Mass., 1998); Svatopluk Soucek, *A History of Inner Asia* (Cambridge, 2000). For an innovative study of Chinese expansion, see Peter Perdue, *China Marches West: The Qing Conquest of Central Eurasia* (Cambridge, Mass., 2005).

<sup>38</sup> Cemal Kafadar, *Between Two Worlds: The Construction of the Ottoman State* (Berkeley, 1995); Donald Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier 1304–1589* (Cambridge, 1998).

<sup>39</sup> See Owen Lattimore, *Inner Asian Frontiers of China* (New York, 1940).