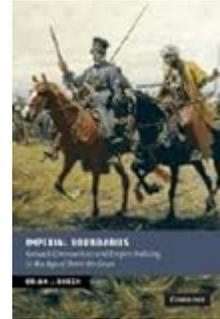




Brian J. Boeck. *Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great.* New Studies in European History Series. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009. xi + 255 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-51463-7.



Reviewed by Guido Hausmann (Institute of History, University of Freiburg)

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Commissioned by Eva M. Stolberg (University of Duisburg-Essen, Germany)

Russia: A Reluctant Empire

This book, by Brian J. Boeck, offers the first comprehensive Western study of the Don Cossacks from their formative years in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to their incorporation into the Russian Empire in the age of tsar Peter I. This is itself remarkable given the fact that the Don Cossacks and their choirs are one of the few more popular people and topics of historical Russia in Western modern mass culture. The book aims not at explaining why and how the culture of the Don Cossacks became popular—their name does not even surface in the its title—but intends more to make an original contribution to the growing number (yet still very small number for the early modern period) of studies of frontiers, peripheries, and boundaries in the process of Russia's formation as an empire since the sixteenth century.

The geographical focus of the study lies on the Don region as a common frontier world of the Romanov and Ottoman dynasties, where complex Cossack and Tatar communities lived and interacted, sometimes as agents of empires, at other times more autonomously following their own needs and interests (p. 6). Prior to the eight-

teenth century, the region was part of the open steppe and as such a frontier of two empires, and since Peter's reign it became a borderland of Russia. Boeck applies—in particular in the first half of the book—the disputed term *“middle ground”* to stress the complexities of relationships and encounters between the Cossacks and their pastoral neighbors and to avoid depicting them in simple binary oppositions. In my view the study benefited from this approach.

The author outlines the history of a region and its people in fourteen chapters showing vividly the complex social and political relations between the Don Cossacks and their neighbors. The first chapters analyze their emergence in the sixteenth century; define their initial role between the empires, in particular their service and supply relationship with the Russian tsars; and stress the newness and (ethnic) diversity of the various Cossack communities that made their living from raiding and trading goods and people. Relations with the Russian tsars were shaped for much of the seventeenth century by a special status that set them apart from their

nomadic neighbors. The study, which is based in large part on archive materials from Moscow's Archive of Ancient Acts and from other Russian archives, points to the informal rules that regulated the Cossacks's relations with their neighbors in a period when Russia and the Ottoman Empire avoided direct military conflict. At the same time, processes of territorial exclusions were intensified by boundary demarcations, most important by the new Belgorod line.

Chapters 5 through 8 describe a change in Cossack relations to Russia. Most important, Boeck sees 1696 as the decisive year of change, the year Russia conquered the Ottoman fortress Azov. In his view, Russia's politics toward its southern frontier had begun to change since the middle of the century, particularly with the Pereiaslav agreement of 1654. Boeck integrates here in a convincing manner Moscow's policy toward the Don Cossacks into its more general policy toward its southern frontier. The famous Razin revolt led to a rift among the Cossacks, and Boeck points here in particular to the formation of an explicit loyal (to the Russian tsar) group. Chapter 6 focuses on important changes in the social makeup of the Don host in the 1680s. The host closed ranks from peasant fugitives from Russia seeking liberty from autocracy and serfdom, and Don Cossacks began constructing at the same time a new social identity separate from "Russians." Old believers presented another challenge to the host; some were handed over to Moscow, while others fled to the Caucasus or turned violent against Cossack groups. With the conquest of Azov in 1696 and the subsequent creation of the new post of gubernator and a military garrison at Azov, the territory of the Don Cossack host was de facto incorporated into Russia's territory. The imperial government began to follow a new policy toward the Cossacks.

Chapters 9 through 14 proceed to analyze the new borderland of Russia. Chapter 9, on the demarcation of the border in the steppe between Russia and the Ottoman Empire (and between the territories of the Don Cossacks and the Crimean Tatars) in the years after 1696 as well as on the negotiations on cross-border conflicts, is probably one of the best chapters of the book. It is very illustrative

and almost entirely based on primary sources from various Russian archives. Muscovite officials implemented a "new order," which led to territorial squabbles between the Cossacks and the government (p. 159). Chapter 11 does not shed much new light on the Bulavin uprising of 1707-1708 itself but it is very informative on what Boeck calls "the total war against the Don region" (p. 181). In the aftermath of the crushing of the rebellion, whole settlement regions were annihilated, with the death toll exceeding ten thousand. The study proceeds with a chapter on the new order which was characterized by personal patronage and the unlimited power of the ataman. Peter interfered arbitrarily into Don Cossack affairs by installing and reinstalling their leaders. Practically universal military mobilization became an almost typical feature of Cossack life in the following decades, particularly in the 1730s when Cossacks were deployed in various frontier regions and borderlands of Russia, especially in the Caucasus. In the same period, Boeck observes, another important new process developed: the formation of a Cossack ethnic identity separate from "Russian," a result of imperial politics as well as of Cossacks who still enjoyed some privileges Russians did not know.

With this book Boeck brings an original perspective in the historiography of Russia as empire. It is particularly important for our understanding of the formation of center-periphery relations in Russia's history. Boeck underlines that imperial policy toward the Don region had no "master plan" but acted by "a complex series of ad hoc decisions," thus inherently defying the existence of a grand strategy or the colonial paradigm for Russia (p. 3). He also emphasizes that important changes in its policy took place, referring to seventeenth-century Russia as a "reluctant empire" and describing it under Peter a few decades later as a violent and aggressive empire subordinating its periphery at all costs (p. 2). Furthermore, Boeck alerts us not to succumb to the temptation to apply simple characteristics to Russia. The book not only makes an important contribution to our understanding of Russia as empire, but also tells us much about a particular region and its population, especially about the shift of social identities in early modern Russia. This welcome achievement should not be underestimated.

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