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**A LIVE BORDER:
COSSACK MANEUVERS IN THE CONTEXT OF COLONIZATION
(THE LATE SIXTEENTH TO THE EARLY SEVENTEENTH CENTURY)***

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Abstract. The Cossacks personified a “live border” in the southern Russian periphery (*ukraina*), one that maneuvered between the Muscovite state, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, the Crimean Khanate, and the Nogai Horde. In the Field (*Pole*), where free and servant (*sluzhilye*) Cossacks came into contact, Russian military colonization moved south along Tatar routes (*sakma*) as part of an “expansion of defense” waged by Cossack bands, cordons, and fortresses. In the Time of Troubles in the early seventeenth century, Cossacks turned their expansion back toward Moscow, and the “live border” struck the capital. By sponsoring and supporting false tsars, Cossacks both disrupted and compelled the Muscovite state from 1605 to 1611. They played a key role in Mikhail Romanov’s election, though a remarkable status reversal immediately occurred as a result: by swearing an oath to Romanov, the free Cossacks found themselves in the tsar’s service.

Keywords: Cossacks, border, colonization, false tsar, Moscow Tsardom, *ukraina*, Crimea.

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**ЖИВАЯ ГРАНИЦА:
КАЗАЧЬИ МАНЕВРЫ В ПРОСТРАНСТВЕ КОЛОНИЗАЦИИ
(РУБЕЖ XVI–XVII ВВ.)**

Аннотация. Казаки олицетворяли «живую границу» на южнорусской Украине, маневрируя между Московским царством, Речью Посполитой, Крымским ханством и Ногайской ордой. В Поле, где сталкивались вольные и служилые казаки, русская военная колонизация продвигалась на юг вдоль татарских дорог (*сакм*) как «экспансия обороны» силами казачьих станиц, сторож и острогов. В Смуту начала XVII в. экспансия казаков повернула вспять, и «живая граница» захлестнула столицу. Выдвигая и поддерживая самозванцев, казаки за семь лет (1605–1611 гг.) разрушили и подчинили Московское царство. Они же сыграли ключевую роль в избрании Романова на царство, но тут же произошла статусная метаморфоза — присягнув своему избранныку, вольные казаки оказались на государственной службе.

Ключевые слова: казаки, граница, колонизация, самозванство, Московское царство, Украина, Крым.

In Russian, there still exists the old meaning of the word *kazachit'* ("to cossack"): to live and serve on the side. For example, in the Pomor dialects, "to go to the Cossacks" means to go into seasonal labor, which does not exclude servitude. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries robbers of the *ukraina* (borderland), Tatars in the Russian service, homeless workers, runaway slaves, strangers, and others, were referred to as Cossacks. Cossacks of the Field implied freedom and willfulness. Some Cossacks were called "thieves," others "servicemen," although in fact their roles usually took turns. Since the rule of Tsar Peter, Cossacks formed a regular army and became faithful servants to their sovereign, often performing police functions. As we can see, the range of the Cossacks' activities is impressively extensive, requiring high mobility and adaptability. The Cossack way of life does not only include war and robbery, but also a host of activities to ensure security, rapid exchange of information, livelihood, and, at times, prosperity. The Cossacks' ability to perform a variety of independent and decisive action developed in the turbulent borderlands made them an efficient tool of Russian colonization.

Tatar Trail

The Turkic word *Cossack* originally had the meaning a “runaway or wild horse” (Blagova 1970, 144–145). The Kipchak verb *cazacia* (to wander, to live freely, to be a Cossack) meant the “temporary status of a swashbuckling fellow, seceded from his kin, who lived a warrior’s life in the wilderness” under the command of *ataman*, an “organizer of raids on close neighbors and campaigns to distant lands” (Kliashpornyi, Savinov 2005, 58). Even khans who lost the struggle for power and were deprived of their lands could “go Cossack;” many khans and sultans had their “Cossacks days.”

The first mention of the Cossacks in the *Polovets Codex Cumanicus* dictionary (1303) and *Sugdan Synaxarion* (1308) characterize them as “guards.” In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries Armenians and Turks were listed among the Cossacks (guard troops) of Tana and Kaffa in Crimea, while Russian Cossacks appeared later (Karpov 2012). In the fifteenth century “Horde Cossacks” referred to Tatars who wandered regardless of the khans and made independent raids on Moscow’s domains (Gorskii 2005, 180). Cossacks (probably Tatars) are mentioned in the Crimean horde since 1474, in the Volga horde since 1492, in the Kazan khanate since 1491, in Astrakhan khanate since 1502, and in Azov since 1499 (Sukhorukov 1903, 3). “The Tatars referred to as Cossacks the third and the lowest division of their army, which consisted of lancers, princes, and Cossacks” (Solov’ev 1989, 305).

Since the time of Karamzin and Boltin it has been commonly believed that Russia borrowed the word Cossack from the Horde tax collectors, who rode across “Russian ulus” accompanied by Cossack guards. Tatar stems are found in Cossack military vocabulary: *ataman* (leader), *esaul* (assistant ataman), *karaul* (guard), *ertaul* (reconnaissance unit), *seunch* (news of the victory), and others. Cossacks are mentioned for the first time in Russia in 1444, when they, along with the princely troops, drove Tatar Sultan Mustafa from Riazan’. These Cossacks could be Tatars from Sultan Qasim’s entourage. In the Duchy of Moscow, “Gorodets Cossacks” were in the Kasimov princes’ retinues. In the fifteenth century Cossacks are mentioned more and more often, including the service of the Tatar nobility (for example, Satylgan, son of the Crimean Khan Meñli I Giray).

N. M. Karamzin presented Don Cossacks as “people who speak our language, profess our faith, and whose countenances are a mixture of European and Asian features” (2003, vol. 2, 149–150). Among their atamans were Tatars who fit the Tatar-Russian tradition of “hordism” (see Golovnev 2015, 231–81). For example, in a 1549 letter to Ivan IV, the Nogai Prince Iusuf mentions Saryazman: “Thy serf, a certain man called Saryazman, built forts on the Don in three or four places, and he ambushes our ambassadors and other people who go up to you and back, captures them, and beats some to death... That same year our people,

after trading in Rus', were returning back, and on the Voronezh one of thy people—named Saryazman—thy rogue, came and took them." The Tatars were a part of the Don Cossacks even later. For example, in 1589 a baptized Crimean Tatar went to the Don and served the sovereign of Moscow there for fifteen years: "... the people of the Crimea he defeated and to the Crimean people and ulus brought war with the Don Cossacks, then from the Don went to Putivl'" (Kliuchevskii 1988, 100).

It is paradoxical that the Russian border against the Tatars was being constructed by the Tatars themselves. While the actions of some Tatars (Horde, Crimean) sparked the need for greater defense, other Tatars (Moscow, Kasimov) helped to construct this defense. The first barrage on the Oka was established by Tatar princes under Vasilii the Dark and supplemented by regular mounted reconnaissance (*ertaul*) under Vasilii III. Initially it was technically mobile and mounted, which resulted in the appearance of the frontier Cossacks. Cossacks represented a "live frontier," which they guarded, inhabited, crossed, violated, and, ultimately, personified. The steppe borderland was so extensive and politically tense that every once in a while an independent polity arose (horde, principality, sich). To some extent, these border communities copied the foundations of surrounding powers and mixed them in their practical use.

The main factor in the formation of the Muscovite borders in the south was Crimea, which raided Muscovy and in parallel encouraged her independent policy.¹ It was largely Crimea that created the Field as a large and restless borderland, and it was the confrontation with Crimea that gave rise to the "live border" of Russia: Cossacks. In the sixteenth century Crimean Tatars raided Muscovy with meticulous regularity, considering steppe and forest steppe between the Dnieper and the Don their summer camping grounds. Protection against the Tatars was mainly reconnaissance along major roads, especially the Muravskii Trail that led from the Crimean Perekop to Tula. The growth and movement of the "live border" can be seen in the tactics of defending Moscow from the Horde raids.

Cossacks and servicemen at the border settlements and outposts kept watch over Tatar trails in the sixteenth century. They guarded the ridge (prairie watersheds), roads, river crossings, and also raided the steppe and seized "tongues," i.e. captives who could reveal valuable information (Liubavskii 1996, 297). The deeper the Cossack exploration, the more alarming were the Tatars' own raids, for skillful reconnaissance could turn their raid into a roundup, the only thing that seriously scared the nomads.

Unlike the nomadic hordes producing fast patrols around it, Russian military organization was territorial, and Russian patrols needed fortified

¹ According to N. M. Karamzin, friendship between Ivan III and the Crimean Khan Meñli I Giray, "hastened the death of the Grand, or the Golden Horde and distracted the forces of Poland, clearly contributing to the greatness of Russia" (Karamzin, 2003, vol. 1, 693).

outposts. Each new fort, with its network of villages and watchtowers, was a step toward a more profound defense, and the consistent promotion of forts along the trails toward Tatars marked the advance of military colonization. Reconnaissance patrols prepared the grounds for a new fort, which became an outpost of defense and support for further movement along the high road. In the middle of the sixteenth century the advance of military colonization marked itself on the upper Oka along the Muravskii Trail by Dedilov (1553), Bolkhov (1556) and Orel (1566) fortresses, and in the upper reaches of the Don along the Nogai Trail by Shatsk (1553) and Dankov (1563) fortresses. At first a newly made fort served as a military camp, which had a stockade, a rampart, and a moat. Within a few years, after subduing the neighborhood, the fort developed into a town of log buildings. The fort's garrison was commanded by a *golova* (warchief), the town garrison by a *voevoda* (warlord). A. I. Papkov followed the sequence of the synchronous events in the Field and in Siberia in the 1590s (2004, 81).

Thus, initially the colonization of the southern Russian borderland had defensive motives. This tactic of increasing defense was largely spontaneous, as each fort immediately released a network of outposts. In turn, these outposts, in controlling the new sites of the Field, found advantageous positions for more supporting points where they prepared places for new forts. As a result, through moving the outposts toward the enemy, military (mostly Cossack) colonization of the Field carried on. Step by step, following the reconnaissance units, the live border crept south, widening and strengthening its rear with new settlements.

However, the expansion of the borders of Muscovy was not a mere involuntary "expansion of defense." Ivan III already claimed to return the possessions of Riurik, including Novgorod and Lithuanian lands, and Ivan IV considered himself the heir of the king's (khan's) right to possess the Tatar lands. Cossacks as a live border were very responsive to the monarchy's condition and mood, at times pulling away from her, at times protecting her, at times paving her way.

A Precarious Ukraina

After the Mongol invasion, the world turned upside down. The southern borders of Russia became the northern edge of the Horde. Borderland steppe and forest remained an edge, but of another metropolitan area. In this era, the Tatars possessed the ukraina (borderland), using it as pastureland for their herds with small agricultural inclusions (e.g. Bolokhov land), thus provisioning the Horde. With the collapse of the Khanate, ukraina became a territory of rivalry and contention, claimed in one way or another by not only the nomadic hordes, but also Lithuania, Moscow, Poland, Hungary, and Moldavia. The surrounding powers tried to include the South-Russian borderland in their

orbits, not as an independent country, but as a field of competitive strategies and cross colonization.

Essentially the South-Russian borderland represented the converging margins of neighboring countries, and the diversity of this borderland (ukraina) communities reflected these cross-border contacts. For example, Galicia was predominantly a Lithuanian-Polish region, Transcarpathia—Hungarian (the so-called Hungarian Ukraine), Budjak—Turkish (Budjak Cossacks served Turkey up to 1808), Sloboda—Russian (though with a heavy Circassian component). In 1546 the governor of Putivl' Prince Mikhailo Troekurov informed the Grand Duke: "Now, sire, there are a great many Cossacks and Circassians and Kiyans in the Field, and your people, sir, went to the field from all of the ukrainas" (cited in Sukhorukov 1903, 3). The composition of the Cossacks shows the dominance of one or another state in the Field: in the fifteenth century Tatar Cossacks dominated, while in the sixteenth century they were ousted by Ukrainian (Lithuanian) and Russian (Moscow) Cossacks. Geographically, the Cossacks who filled the steppes between the Carpathians and the Altai with the decline of the Horde can be divided into three distinct ethnic areas: (1) Russian on the Don; (2) Ukrainian on the Dnieper; and (3) Turkic in Crimea, Azov, the Kipchak steppe, and Transoxiana. The first formed the Russian Cossacks, the second—the Zaporizhian and Ukrainian, and the third (between Aral and Balkhash)—the Kazakhs. Terek and Greben Cossacks, who appeared in the late sixteenth century, joined Kabardians, Chechens, Kumyk, Nogai, Georgians, Armenians, and Circassians (see Blagova 1970; Averin 2003, 118–119).

Cossack community only looked monolithic, but inside was a melting pot of different mannerisms, interests, and ideas. With its outcast and rebellious origins, Cossack freemen often provoked conflicts. Due to their border location, the Cossacks focused on conflict in their outside affairs, delving into the controversy and intrigue between neighboring powers, turning to one side, then to another, or even to multiple sides at a time. This turbulence formed a sort of borderland mentality, in which maneuver prevailed over consistency. The Cossacks could serve several rulers at once, easily changing allies and enemies. This did not reflect a precariousness in their views, but rather the realities of border life.

According to A. I. Papkov, in the late sixteenth century Russians and Ukrainians, "collided in the Field as the subjects of warring states." These two streams of the Field's colonization, Russian and Ukrainian, were distinguished by the fact that "Russian colonization was predominantly governmental and relied on government-built town-forts and armies forming in the region," while its Ukrainian counterpart was spontaneous, in part supported by Polish landowners, with the state involved primarily to prevent the resettlement of Circassians (Papkov 2004, 91, 109).

Other habits and actions of Russian and Ukrainian Cossacks complemented rather than contrasted with each other. This also applies to the particular Cossack business of freelance service to the rulers of neighboring countries, including Moscow, the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth, Turkey, Crimea, and the Nogai khanate. This service provided income and conveniently allowed them to use the name of the ruler for their own robbers' profits. At the same time Cossacks created a kind of circular threat, being both their defender and assailant: while one branch of the Cossacks indulged in robbery in the steppes of the Dnieper, the Don, and the Iaik, and was dubbed "thieves," another part was listed as "servicemen" and chased the thieves.

In the borderline colonization of Muscovy, robber soldiers engaged in "plowing" other states' boundaries, after which the sovereign's people settled the area, bringing their own orders and forcing the Cossacks and Circassians to distant "virgin" borders (e.g. Siberia). Muscovy used Cossacks for crashing borders, while professing her noninvolvement in the robberies of her good neighbors: the Porte, the Crimean Khanate, and the Nogai Horde.

Adventurism, daring, agility, and marginality of "borderland people" together gave a strong impetus to colonization. Cossacks, even as outcasts and rebels, were a kind of byproduct of the country and communicated with her. The more rogues the country expelled, the vaster borderline territories they assimilated. Crossing the border, "the odd men" made way for the state to follow. Thus the internal tensions in the country stimulated expansion. At the same time, another tendency developed: the sprawling frontier harbored seeds of turmoil.

Time of Troubles

By the seventeenth century the Cossack border surrounding Muscovy on all sides was not just live, but also swollen. The freemen on the Dnieper, the Don, the Volga, and the Iaik significantly expanded the geography of their raids. In the 1580s Volga and Iaik Cossacks pressed the Nogai Horde, founding the town of Uralsk in 1584. Meanwhile, part of the Don Cossacks moved to Terek, forming the Terek army, while a portion of the Volga Cossacks moved to the Stroganovs Urals and then to Siberia. On the southern Russian borderlands the freemen formed a powerful Cossack zone bonded by steppe roads, including Hetman Trail between the Dnieper and the Don.

Under Boris Godunov, Cossacks were forbidden to appear in Russian towns and cities, especially in Moscow, and those who violated the "commandment" were put in jail (Sukhorukov 1903, 64; Stanislavskii 1990, 16). Cossacks posed a threat for both the state and the state's enemies. Some independent quasi-polities developed in the Field among the Cossacks and the Don people, who gained some experience in raids on

neighboring countries and “smelled power.” Cossacks of the Dnieper, the Don, and the Urals were tied to Muscovy and to each other through Orthodoxy, but they still clearly separated themselves from the Muscovites and would not abjure robbery of Russian villages and Orthodox monasteries.

Borderland freemen had freedom of maneuver, including in politics. Cossacks gained experience in alternate or simultaneous service in Muscovy, Poland, Turkey, and the Horde. Contrasting themselves to the state, they learned to play with authority and power. However, they regarded the game of power as a kind of adventure full of excitement and daring. Hence, it is no mere coincidence that Cossacks were the main players in the impostors’ game.

Historians have long paid attention to the special role of Cossacks in the nomination and support of impostors. According to A. L. Stanislavskii, “one of the most active estates that participated in the social struggle of the Time of Troubles, was the Cossacks” (1990, 2). R. G. Skrynnikov has noted “the importance of the participation of the Zaporizhian Cossacks in the initial stage of False Dmitrii’s campaign against Moscow” (1997, 389–400). According to A. I. Papkov, “the population of the borderline supported the impostor.” He writes, “Circassians, as a rule, were the soldiers of the Pretender or of the Commonwealth” (2004, 111–114, 129). According to I. O. Tiumentsev, “the local Cossacks stood at the origins of impostors’ intrigue in the northwest, southwest, and south.” He notes that “False Dmitrii III, as well as False Peter, False Dmitrii II, etc., was a typical ‘Cossack pretender’” (2010, 120–121). Hungarian specialist in Russian studies D. Svak is the most resolute about the relationship between imposture and the Cossacks: “I argue that the phenomenon of imposture was not only supported by the Cossacks in the course of its operation, but was a primarily Cossack invention at the time of its occurrence... The bulk of the social base for the impostors was always the Cossacks, who themselves were willing to put forth their false prince... The Cossacks needed the impostors... and did not hesitate to promote from their own ranks” (2010, 47–52).

Imposture is considered a historical curiosity and a painful reaction to the tyranny of Ivan the Terrible by the people of Muscovy. K. V. Chistov sees it as a fulfillment of a people’s utopia, the myth of the return of the king-deliverer (1967, 29). However, we can also look at it as a trick of the borderland people. If Muscovy subjects were inclined to believe in the absurd, the borderland people were the generator of this absurdity, which turned the idea of ghost kings into a technique.

Future False Dmitrii I, after escaping from the capital, was met with enthusiasm in the borderline. Prior to this moment the impostor had unsuccessfully sought support from the head of the Polish Orthodox Party Prince K. Ostrog, then with the chief of the Arians Pan G. Goiskii, and finally in liaisons among the Ukrainian and Don Cossacks. It was the

Cossacks who saw Grigorii Otrep'ev as "the red sun," the true tsar returning like risen Christ. During its march to Moscow, False Dmitrii's army grew through the addition of Cossacks. At Sevsk he was joined by a unit of 12,000 Don Cossacks. In an emergency, after suffering a defeat by Muscovy troops, the impostor took refuge behind the walls of Putivl', and it was again the Ukrainian and Don Cossacks who kept him from fleeing to Poland. However, False Dmitrii entered Moscow with a retinue of boyars and the Poles, awarding and releasing the Cossacks back home. Lingering Cossacks "irritated Muscovites" with their arrogance: "they showed a clear contempt and referred to the locals scornfully as Jews [zhydy]."²

"Emperor Demetrius" (Demetreus Imperator) did not forget the ukraina's merit and canceled taxes for a decade in southern Russia, which caused grumbling in other areas of Muscovy, Cossacks in their own way patronized the impostor, taking care of his family and giving birth to the tsar's "nephew" Peter (a never existing son of Fedor Ivanovich).³ False Peter was more an elect of the Cossack circle than an impostor. For the role of the false prince, Terek Cossack ataman Fedor Bodyrin had his eye on two young *chura* Cossacks (servants): the son of a Murom townsman Ileika and the son of an Astrakhan strelets Mitia.⁴ The circle selected Ileika Muromets because he had been in Moscow and had an epic nickname. Prior to joining the Terek Cossacks Ileika was the runaway serf Korovin, an illegitimate orphan, a cook on merchant ships, and a seller of apples and shoes at the Astrakhan market. Ataman Bodyrin's trick, according to interrogations, was intended to summon Cossack payment assigned by the merciful tsar and detained by wicked boyars: "And so it was said among Cossacks: 'The Sire, he wished to grant us, but the evil nobles, they spend our payment, so they do not give us our earnings'" (Perri 2010, 69). The circle notified False Dmitrii about his "nephew Peter" and in response received the order for the "nephew" and his mates "to go to Moscow in haste." En route, at Sviiazhsk, the Cossacks caught news of the murder of the pretender in Moscow on May 17, 1606. False Peter himself assured that he arrived in Moscow the day after the death of False Dmitrii, on May 18.

Ataman Bodyrin's statement provides a motive for the march to Moscow "for the tribute." Apparently, it was not even the delayed payment (although the Cossacks "incessantly" demanded it), but claims to participate in managing the affairs and wealth of Muscovy. False Dmitrii, who was obligated to the Cossacks for his accession, left them behind,

² Sukhorukov 1903, 68; Stanislavskii 1990, 20.

³ According to the Terek Cossacks, Tsar Fedor and Tsarina Irina had a son, Peter, who at birth was changed for daughter Feodosiia (see Sukhorukov 1903, 68).

⁴ The word "chura" was adopted by Cossacks from the Tatar word for "servant" or "junior mate" (Stanislavskii 1990, 8).

indulging instead in relationships with the Moscow nobility and the Poles. The Cossacks needed Prince Peter to remind Tsar Dmitrii of his “kinship” obligations and gain access to Moscow.

With the death of False Dmitrii, Ilekha-Peter again became an orphan. The former scenario exhausted, the group around Vasili Shuiskii seized power in Moscow and cursed the impostor. Ataman Bodyrin remained out of the game, and False Peter was picked up by a new group of conspirators, “thieving nobles,” who were in opposition to Shuiskii. Putivl’ voivode Prince Grigorii Shakhovskoi spread the word that Tsar Dmitrii escaped, sheltered False Peter, and let the Terek and Volga Cossacks who rushed to his aid into town. Ivan Bolotnikov’s army also began to form in Putivl’, while in Poland, the search for another False Dmitrii continued.

Meanwhile, the Cossack borderland continued to spawn new false princes. Only three “princes” showed up in Astrakhan in summer 1606: Ivan Avgust, Lavr, and Osinovik, but by spring 1607 their number increased to a dozen (the Don, the Volga, the Terek and Zaporozh'e settlements saw “princes” Fedor, Klementii, Savelii, Semen, Vasili, Eroshka, Gavrilka, Martynka). The “children and grandchildren” of Ivan the Terrible seemed even more numerous as imposture became a trend among the Cossacks. “False kingdom” was not just a fun, but also a new business for the Cossacks at that time; now the bordermen made predatory raids in the name of the tsar. In addition, the Cossack “polyarchy” ideologically became the token of their superiority over the kingdom. In fact, what Cossacks claimed was not the “legitimacy” of false princes, as some law-abiding historians have argued, but rather the establishment of the Wild Field law in lawless Muscovy.

The Don ataman Ivan Zarutskii, by faking the Putivl’ oath (with the participation of Starodub) to the next pretender, False Dmitrii II, accompanied him to Moscow (Tushino). The price of this Cossack triumph “was the fact that the Polish-Lithuanian and Cossack bandit gangs virtually divided the empire among themselves” (Svak 2010, 44). Cossack “princes” (first Fedor, then Ivan Avgust and Lavrentii) hurried to join their “uncle,” who at first welcomed them, then “ordered them whipped,” “thrown into jail” and executed. Later the same fate befell seven other borderland impostors. Hetman Prince Roman Rozhinskii exposed and executed the “princes” and passed their troops to Cossack voivodes Ivan Zarutskii and Aleksander Lisovskii.

By the end of his reign, False Dmitrii II almost completely relied on the Cossacks, unleashing the massacre of Polish prisoners, who were drowned according to the Cossack tradition in bags “in sack and in water.” At the same time the Cossacks were scattered throughout Muscovy, receiving villages and towns from the impostor “to feed on.” In October 1608 ataman K. Miliaev collected wine from the royal villages near Pereiaslavl’; in January 1609 “Volodimer was given to Cossacks to feed on;” and in 1611 many taverns in Riazan’ uezd were leased to Cossacks,

and Solovetskii monastery accepted the service of seventy “martial Cossacks” led by two atamans (Stanislavskii 1990, 27, 30, 47, 82).

Shortly after the death of False Dmitrii II, False Dmitrii III, “the thief of Pskov,” appeared, this time in the north of Russia, but under the same Cossack scenario. “The new delusion” was started by a Cossack (or the son of a deacon, bound to the Cossacks) Sidorka, who traded knives in Velikii Novgorod, and in spring 1611 entered the city with “a hundred mounted mates in debauchery,” “thieves and rogues like himself,” and declared himself once again “the miraculously survived Tsar Dmitrii.” The people of Novgorod reacted to the miracle rather coldly and the party of “Novgorod Cossack scum” moved to Ivangorod, where they were “regaled with salute and celebrations for many days” (Tiumentsev 2010, 119–120).

Thus, in seven years (1605–1611) free Cossacks conquered Muscovy, promoting and supporting impostors and subjugating the country. In the Time of Troubles the Don was depopulated; all the Cossacks moved to Moscow. As noted by M. K. Liubavskii, Don freemen “poured into the Muscovite state as long as sovereignty there decomposed and the Troubles began. Cossacks dispersed across the inland areas of the country and the Don... lay empty” (1996, 314). Advancing and supporting false tsars and princes, Cossacks marched across Muscovy. Under False Dmitrii I they entrenched Putivl’, under False Peter they entered Tula, under False Dmitrii II they came to Moscow, and under False Dmitrii III they reached Pskov.

Return to the Borderland

Romanovs owe their elevation to the Troubles. Filaret became Metropolitan in Rostov under False Dmitrii I, and the patriarch under False Dmitrii II. S. F. Platonov did not rule out the possibility that Filaret Romanov, along with his brethren and relatives, was no stranger to the intrigues of imposture. Not without reason at the time G. Otrep’ev “lived in the Romanovs’ estate” (1910, 233–234). The “Tushino patriarch” led the embassy, which offered Muscovy to the Catholic Wladislaw. The patriarch’s son Mikhail Romanov was among the boyars who swore allegiance to “Tsar Vladislav.”

The election of Mikhail to the throne was another triumph for the Cossacks. It was the Cossacks who surrounded Moscow with encampments and who rejected applicants of royal blood, such as the Polish Prince Wladyslaw (already proclaimed as the Russian tsar) and the Swedish Duke Charles Philip (advocated by Prince Pozharskii). After the murder of Procopii Liapunov on July 22, 1611, Cossack troops captured Moscow. On the eve of the Zemskii Sobor there were far more of them in Moscow than the nobility (over ten thousand). “Cossacks walked in Moscow in crowds,” according to “The Story of the Zemskii Sobor in 1613.” On the day of the election, February 21, 1613, the Cossacks set a

“maidan” in Moscow, burst into the Council Hall, and insisted on the election of Mikhail: “the Cossacks and the mob did not depart from the Kremlin until the Duma and zemstvo officials swore allegiance on the same day.” On April 13, 1613, Swedish scouts reported from Moscow that the Cossacks elected Mikhail Romanov against the boyars’ will, forcing Trubetskoi and Pozharskii to consent to the nomination after a siege of their households. Jacques Margeret wrote to King James I in 1613 that the Cossacks chose “this child” to manipulate him and that the majority of Russian society would be pleased to welcome the English army, as it had been living in constant fear of the Cossacks (see Stanislavskii 1990, 84–89). The Poles had every reason to call Mikhail Romanov a “Cossack protégé.” Essentially Mikhail was the same type of a “Cossack tsar” as False Dmitrii, except for the fact that he was approved by the Sobor.

The election of Mikhail Romanov was the peak in power for the bordermen in Muscovy. However, it was also the moment of metamorphosis in the status of free Cossacks. Sworn to their chosen one, they suddenly found themselves “at the service of the sovereign.” Mikhail called for the liberators of Moscow to show their “initial service and zeal” and promised to endow them “according to... their service.” In 1613 the Cossack order was created and the Moscow government began to convert the free Cossacks into “instrumental” servicemen with permanent residence, for example in Putivl’ or Oskol. The tsar’s charter was sent to the Don, “brimming with tenderness and praise,” which encouraged the Cossacks “to stand up for tsar, country and Orthodox faith.” The tsar’s banner was soon sent to the Don Cossacks to approve “their zeal for Russia.”⁵

The decline of the Cossack freedom is delineated in the fate of ataman Ivan Zarutskii. Ally of the three “Tsar Dmitriis”, he came to Moscow with the False Dmitrii I, served as a voivode to False Dmitrii II, and swore allegiance to the False Dmitrii III. According to R. G. Skrynnikov, Zarutskii possessed all the qualities of the popular leader, impressing contemporaries with his handsomeness, intelligence, and courage (1987, 198). It is not clear, however, what people he was the leader of. Zarutskii was born in Galicia, spent his childhood in Turkish slavery, and became an ataman on the Don, voivode and boyar in Muscovy. Russian historiography describes him as vacillating, if not politically omnivorous (due to his switched loyalties from False Dmitrii II to Żółkiewski, then to Liapunov, False Dmitrii III, and hetman Chodkiewicz). However, in the chaos of the Troubles the previous government was gone and its confused and scattered “people” was tormented by different leaders. Zarutskii headed and represented the Cossacks as a military leader and a strong force during the Troubles, and was a consistent supporter of the Cossack idea of imposture. Faithful to this idea, he

⁵ Sukhorukov 1903, 76–82; Stanislavskii 1990, 8, 19, 91–96.

considered it “service to the people.” In this sense, he did his duty responsibly. He took under his guardianship (and to his bed) the widow of two False Dmitriis Marina Mniszek and her baby son Ivan (the “Little Thief”).⁶ As one of the leaders of the first militia Zarutskii, on the behalf of the Cossacks, opposed the zemstvo, and defeated and killed its leader Liapunov. As the second militia leader, he lost his position to Prince Dmitrii Pozharskii and then the Sobor election of the tsar, where he unsuccessfully supported the Little Thief in opposition to Mikhail Romanov. However, no one knew at that time that Romanov’s fate would be very different from that of the other “Trouble elects” (Godunov, Shuiskii, False Dmitrii, Wladislaw). Chased by Riazan’ troops under voivode Miron Veliaminov and the Tatar army under Sviiashsk Prince Aklym Tugushev, the ataman retreated to the ukraina, losing Cossack villages behind him. Hiding first in Astrakhan, then on the laik, Zarutskii counted on continued Cossack unrest and support from Nogai. However, Moscow returned to power, and ataman Zarutskii remained in limbo. In the summer of 1614 he was captured, brought to Moscow, and impaled; and Little Thief was hanged.

The defeat of ataman Zarutskii signaled the retreat of the Cossacks, or rather their return to normal. After the death of False Dmitrii III and disappearance of False Dmitrii IV, imposture seemed exhausted, or rather subsided together with the Cossacks to the borderline from which it had come from.⁷ In the following decades impostors appeared infrequently and outside Russia. In the 1630–40s Ivan Luba and Ivan Vergun, both under the name of “Prince Ivan” (son of False Dmitrii II and Marina Mniszek) showed up in Poland and Turkey; two “sons” of Vasiliu Shuiskii also appeared abroad, and so on (Perri 2010, 72, 85).

In world history, Russia probably holds the first place in imposture. However, not only Muscovy was affected by this at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. False kings showed up on the other side of Europe: False Sebastians in Portugal, false hospodars in Moldova (Svak 2010, 48–49). Nowhere else, however, was the avalanche of imposture so strong and devastating as in Muscovy, and a major role in this drama was played by Cossacks. The collapse of central power sowed confusion among the subject people, while untying the hands of independent people, and the Cossack anarchy turned into quasi-monarchy. In the turmoil of a political

⁶ Malicious rumors suggested that the father of the “prince” was Zarutskii himself. According to other rumors, the ataman famously combined eroticism and politics, at a difficult time offering the widow to the harem of Nogai murza Iashterek.

⁷ Another “Tsar Dmitrii” appeared in 1611 in Astrakhan, the fourth in the row of false tsars; he was accepted as the tsar in the lower Volga, but disappeared in early 1612.

crisis rogues always take the advantage of law-abiding citizens due to self-organization, even in its “rogue” form. In the Troubles of the early seventeenth century, the Cossack expansion turned inland, and the “live border” swept the capital.

In political terms, a large borderland is pregnant with great turmoil. In colonization bordermen sometimes exhibit unexpected ambition. Cossacks, recent rogues, in the Troubles felt themselves the arbiters of the fate of the metropolis, creators of new kingdoms, and conquerors of new spaces. “The live border” became a quasi-monarchy, spawning a polyarchy. Cossacks invented kings for Muscovy and played with power far beyond its borders. We can only guess who they pretended to be in the Siberian and Iaik yurts. However, large gains are impossible without big ambitions, and imposture syndrome did not only become a satellite of the Troubles, but also the stimulus for expansion.

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