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Who are the Cossacks? Are they state servitors or anti-state rebels? Are they a social group or an "ethno-cultural aggregation of people" (*kul’turo-etnicheskaia obshchnost’ liudei*)?[1] Are they Russian, non-Russian, or something in between? The answer, of course, is that different Cossacks at different times have been all of these things, which is precisely what makes Cossackdom itself so hard to define. In this engaging book, Thomas M. Barrett acknowledges these definitional complexities and -- in stereotypically Cossack fashion -- charges right into them. In the process, he dismisses the whole idea of coming up with simple summations of Cossackness and instead concentrates on explaining what in fact makes Cossacks so complicated. Barrett's elegant but simple answer is that it all has to do with location. Cossacks were people who were expected to settle on and serve on the frontier, yet the frontier was anything if not complicated. Consequently, Cossacks came out complicated as well.

Barrett's work focuses in particular on the history of the Terek Cossacks (*Terskie kazaki, Tertsy*) of the North Caucasus between the early 1700s and the 1850s. During this period, the Terekers were, as Barrett puts it, the most "Cossack" of all the Cossacks in the empire (p. 2). While every Cossack host in the empire was faced with the double challenge of frontier settlement and frontier service, the Tertsy faced this double challenge in especially trying circumstances. Over the late eighteenth and first half of the nineteenth centuries, the frontier of the North Caucasus was on the move. The Russian state was pursuing a "protracted and difficult expansion" against the "heathen of the mountains" and the Terekers -- as Cossacks "of the line" -- stood very much at the front of this expansion. As a result, conditions of Cossack service and settlement along the Terek were unlike those on other ends of the empire. In the North Caucasus, Cossacks found themselves pushed to the brink by a state-sponsored agenda of colonizing and conquering yet at the same enmeshed in a shared borderland world with non-Russian "mountaineers" (*gortsy*) who were ultimately less alien to them than the Russian state that they were fighting for. For the Terekers, in other words, being Cossack meant living in an ambiguous position. As Barrett makes clear, the
Tertsy served the state by "creating empire" but they did so as frontier people with distinct frontier economies, identities, and loyalties.

The world that the Tertsy inhabited was distinct because it amounted to what Barrett calls an "edge habitat," a zone "at the edge of states" characterized by "great cultural complexity, interchange, and creativity" (p. 7). In this "edge habitat," the Russian state and Russian society were barely present and consequently the Terek Cossacks developed in ways that were shaped -- for better and for worse -- by the exigencies of life in a frontier environment. These exigencies played themselves out in a variety of ways, which Barrett explores first by telling the story of how Cossack groups formed and settled on the Terek and then by examining key themes relating to where and how they lived.

Land, for example, was abundant but labor was scarce and service demands high, so Cossacks had enduring problems with establishing successful agricultural economies. In a similar sense, men were relatively numerous on the frontier while women were few, so Cossack societies developed pathways of gender relations that were somewhat different than those that prevailed in interior Russian communities. The fact that Cossacks were outnumbered by their non-Cossack, non-Slavic, and non-Orthodox neighbors on the frontier was also a key factor that distinguished "Cossacks" from "Russians." The Terekers, as it turns out, ate, drank, dressed, raided, and amused themselves very much like native "mountaineers." And they were also tied to the gortsy in intricate ways. They fought against them under A.P. Er- molov and other imperial generals, but they also married with them, traded with them, and occasionally thieved with them, all of which created lines of interconnection and interdependency that, as Barrett notes, tend to be underemphasized by historians. All of these factors ultimately defined the Tertsy as a people of "the edge" and made "the edge" itself into a unique imperial borderland whose uniqueness only really ended with the final conquest, colonization, and transformation of the North Caucasus in the post-1850s period.

Barrett's presentation of this original reading of Terek Cossack history is impressive. His writing is fast and engaging; his research stands atop an exhaustive reading in Russian archival and published material; and his knowledge of comparative scholarship is deep, ranging across works on frontiers from "Scythia" to colonial New England. His study has brought frontier dynamics in the Russian empire into better view and "frontierologists" everywhere should be grateful. The only thing wrong with Barrett's book is that pages 47 through 54 were somehow published upside-down, but even this glitch seems to make sense since Barrett in many ways is turning over (though not overturning) how Russianists have written about Cossacks and the North Caucasus. Barrett has moved away from a historiography dominated by military history and accounts of "holy war" towards a fuller frontier history where one still sees the reality of multi-sided cross-cultural conflict but also an equally important reality of cultural accommodation and overlapping. While Westview Press could not have planned that this book would appear against the backdrop of today's Russo-Chechen War, the timing -- unfortunately -- could not have been better.

Notes


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