Restraining/encouraging violence: commerce, diplomacy, and brigandage on the steppe routes between the Ottoman Empire, Poland- Lithuania, and Russia, 1470s–1570s

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This chapter examines the large-scale non-state violence on the trade routes in the buffer zone between the Grand Duchy of Lithuania,¹ the Grand Duchy of Moscow,² the Ottoman Empire, and the Crimean Khanate. Though the rulers constantly declared their will to maintain the diplomatic contacts and protect the caravan trade between these states, execution of their orders was entrusted to those who actually committed the violent attacks – the Cossacks and the local dignitaries.

The violence on the steppe roads was not haphazard but well-coordinated. It was encouraged or, at least, tolerated by the local dignitaries who benefited from it and who provided the brigands with the necessary patronage. To avoid an open war with a powerful neighbouring state, these dignitaries sometimes detained and executed some perpetrators but never tackled the underlying causes of the brigandage (*qazaqliq*). Even the occasional imprisonment of the dignitaries themselves failed to stop brigandage since its preconditions remained in place: the frontiers were not fixed and guarded, the roads were not patrolled, the officials and servicemen were not paid or underpaid, and the rulers lacked tools to curb raiding and instead continued this hybrid war, simply shifting responsibility onto the so-called ‘nameless’ or ‘master-less men’.

Social bandits or governors’ henchmen? Two approaches to brigandage

The Zaporozhe and Don Cossacks are among the best-studied topics in Ukrainian and Russian historical writing. Nineteenth-century Romantic and populist historiography represented them respectively as brave defenders of the Christendom

against the Tatar-Ottoman menace and as communities of freedom-fighters who welcomed runaway serfs.³ Two discourses were further developed by Soviet Marxist historiography which emphasized the class struggle and stressed the leading role of the Cossacks in the great 'anti-feudal uprisings' and 'peasant wars' from the 1590s to 1770s.⁴

These romanticized Cossacks are close to Eric Hobsbawm's *Primitive Rebels* (1959) and *Bandits* (1969). Hobsbawm defined social bandits as peasant outlaws whom the lord and state regarded as criminals.⁵ Anton Blok criticized Hobsbawm's approach, pointing out that all outlaws require protection to operate as bandits. Blok argued that they were protected by local rulers with whom they shared the booty.⁶ The links of bandits to wider society, and particularly to central and local authorities, have been diligently examined in some case studies.⁷

The early Cossacks lacked many important features necessary to be identified with Hobsbawm's *social bandits*. In the early stage, between the 1470s and 1570s, they mainly appear in the sources when they attacked merchant caravans and ambassadorial trains. The contemporary sources interpret the very word 'Cossack' (*kazak* or *qazaq*) as 'outcast', 'freebooter', 'vagabond', or 'expellee'.⁸ Though the early Cossacks were outcasts from the Tatar Hordes, they included princes, noblemen, and ordinary nomads,⁹ not the runaway serfs as later in the seventeenth century.¹⁰ The Cossacks were hired by the states of East Central Europe for various tasks, but frequently brought their employers to the brink of war through their behaviour. By exploring their activity, this chapter examines in turn the scale of violence, the diplomatic discourses of sovereignty and (ir)responsibility over the steppe routes, management of violence, and formation of the networks assisting the brigandage.

The scale of violence

The Golden Horde's khans benefited from the long-distance trade and protected the merchants in their domains.¹¹ The disintegration of the Golden Horde in 1420–80 caused the rise of brigandage on the steppe.¹² The Ottoman conquest of the Genoese colonies in the south Crimea (Caffa, Soldaia, Chembalo) in 1475 changed the balance of power in the region.¹³ Mengli-Giray, the khan of Crimea, accepted Ottoman vassalage and with the sultan's blessing allied in 1480 with Muscovy against Lithuania, making annual incursions into Lithuanian domains until 1505. Lithuania, in turn, allied with the Great Horde against Muscovy and Crimea. In the next decades, the region's contested status opened it to the Cossacks of Muscovy, Lithuania, Crimea (Perekop), Azov, Astrakhan, and the Great Horde who attacked the caravans and ambassadorial trains. This complicated situation allowed each ruler to blame others for these assaults.

The Crimean khan shifted his loyalty after 1507 and henceforth the Tatar raids devastated the southern provinces of Muscovy.¹⁴ Raiding proved so destructive that Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy sent yearly gifts (*упоминки*) across the next two centuries to the Crimean khan for him to desist.¹⁵ On the other hand, the governors of Polish and Lithuanian frontier castles frequently raided the Ottoman settlements and Tatar encampments between the rivers Dnister and Dnipro.¹⁶ And the Cossacks were involved in these raids too.¹⁷

Sixteenth-century commercial, diplomatic, and military communication between Moscow and Crimea ran along several routes between the rivers Dnipro and Don.¹⁸ The westernmost led from Moscow via Chernigov, Oster, Kiev, Kanev, Cherkasy, the ferry of Tavan', the isthmus of Perekop, and finally to the main seaport of Caffa.¹⁹ A second route led from Moscow to its border town Putivl',²⁰ from where travellers crossed the Dnipro river at Kanev, Cherkasy, or another suitable place downstream, then once again at the ferry of Tavan' to reach Perekop. The third route went from Putivl' through the steppe on the left (east) bank of the Dnipro to Perekop. In these three cases the travellers crossed the areas under Lithuanian control. A fourth route led through the Muscovite border town of Kursk, then down the Severskiy Donets and Don rivers to the Ottoman city of Azak (Azov), and then by the Sea of Azov to Caffa. On the fifth easternmost route, travellers sailed down the Don to Azov. The same area was crossed by several routes (called *shlakh* or *sakma*) used by the Crimean Tatars for their incursions into lands to the south of Moscow. The most important, the *Muravsky shlakh*, had merged with the so-called 'great ambassadorial road' along the hilly watershed divide between the Dnipro and Severskiy Donets.²¹

The attacks on the caravans were committed in the forest-steppe and steppe zones between the Dnipro and Don, particularly between the Dnipro and Severskiy Donets – that is, in the areas of the present-day Ukrainian oblasts of Kharkiv, Poltava, and the eastern part of Dnipropetrovsk oblast. This area was a buffer zone between Lithuania, Muscovy, the Crimean Khanate, and the Great Horde, and had a dubious legal status.

The merchants only dared to travel through the steppes organized into big, well-armed parties or convoys (*caravans*). Michalon Lituanus,²² in his treaty written c.1550, estimated the size of caravans circulating between Caffa and Kiev as up to a thousand men each.²³ The caravan robbed in 1545 by the Cossacks of Kiev, Cherkasy, and Kanev certainly fits Michalon Lituanus's description.²⁴ That scandalous case was considered at the ducal court in Vilnius in the presence of the Crimean ambassador and twenty-seven merchants,²⁵ whose names were mentioned in the records.²⁶ Without question they were wealthy merchants, but the caravan also included less prosperous merchants ('with other our companions'),²⁷ factors, assistants, servants, wagon drivers, and a military escort. In March 1489, Ivan III, the Grand Duke of Muscovy, complained to the Polish king, Kazimierz IV, about a caravan of Russian merchants from Moscow, Tver', and Novgorod that

Map 7.1 Trade routes between Moscow and Caffa in the 1470s–1570s.

had been plundered on the Tavan' ferry. The charter names six main merchants 'with companions, many people, all together 120 men, besides their people'.²⁸ In total, there were 120 merchants in this caravan besides the assistants. An ambassadorial instruction names six merchants from Moscow who, 'with companions all together 45 men', were plundered on the Severskiy Donets on their way to Azov

in 1495, by local Tatars who killed twenty-two and injured twenty-three others.²⁹ Jan Chrzonowicz, the governor (*starosta, capitaneus*) of Kanev, mentioned 'a big caravan of about hundred wagons' in November 1551.³⁰ The Nogai embassy that arrived at Moscow in 1549 consisted of seventy members of the ambassadorial train accompanied by 200 merchants with 3,000 horses.³¹

The brigands were equally numerous. The Muscovite embassy of Prince Fedor Romodanovsky was attacked and robbed on the steppe in 1501 by the joint force of the Tatars of Azov, the Great Horde, and Turks of Azov, together numbering 140 men.³² Several Ottoman and Crimean caravans were attacked in 1545 by the Cossacks of Cherkasy, Kanev, Bratslav, Vinnitsa, and other Lithuanian border towns who together fielded 800 men on the steppe near Cherkasy.³³ The brigands were well organized. Their leaders (*golovy, starshie, atamany*) were recognized by the victims and frequently mentioned in complaints and diplomatic correspondence. In many cases, the freebooters were well informed about the approaching caravans and embassies and coordinated their actions to mount ambushes on several routes simultaneously.³⁴

To minimize risk, merchants frequently joined an ambassadorial train, thereby increasing the defensive force of a convoy and hoping to benefit from the diplomatic immunity and military escorts provided by the ambassador's master and host. However, this frequently proved counterproductive, because brigands specifically targeted ambassadorial trains more than the sole caravans because of the double booty of merchants' goods and diplomatic gifts. Eight Muscovite embassies were plundered in the area between the Dnipro and Don in just ten years, from 1493 to 1503.³⁵ The journey across the steppe became so dangerous that the Muscovite ambassador Ivan Oshcherin waited more than a year in 1503–04 in the border town Putivl' until the Crimean khan provided him with a military escort.³⁶

A sad fate befell the Russian merchants travelling from the Crimea in company with the Polish ambassador in 1488–89. The ferrymen at the Tavan' crossing over the Dnipro, on the border between the Tatar and Lithuanian domains, refused to take the merchants across the river. Abandoned on the wrong side, they were attacked by 'the people of Kievan governor Yuri Patsovich' (Jerzy Pac) led by certain headmen – Bogdan, Golubets, and Vas'ko Zhila.³⁷ The merchants were beaten, some killed, others captured, and their merchandise stolen.

Though the governor did not take part in the assault, Ivan III demanded on 20 March 1489 that the Polish king, Kazimierz IV, investigate the case, punish offenders, and offer compensation for the damage and murder.³⁸ At that time, Lithuania and Muscovy were in a state of undeclared war (1487–94) and were making mutual military incursions into the borderlands. Nevertheless, Kazimierz IV at least replied to the Muscovite ambassador in 1490, but claimed that the investigation revealed that only the Turkish merchants with the caravan had been robbed, while the Muscovite subjects had received their merchandise back and had

even been given some of the Turkish goods.³⁹ Referring to Ivan III's claims that individual Muscovite subjects had been robbed by Jewish toll collectors in the well-populated Lithuanian domains, Kazimierz IV explained that the Russian merchants deliberately avoided the custom offices of Smolensk and Minsk by choosing the 'new roads'. It was no surprise, according to the Polish king, that these merchants were detained and forced to pay tolls in Lithuania, just as his own subjects were required to do when travelling in Muscovy.⁴⁰

Pillage, responsibility, and compensation: a case study

While Kazimierz disputed Muscovite claims, it was clear that the authorities recognized that their subjects were often involved, as is illustrated by a case from 1546 when Lithuania and the Crimean Khanate were once again on the brink of war. Khan Sahib-Giray wrote to King Sigismund August that the Cossacks of Kiev, Kanev, Cherkassy, and other border towns had plundered some caravans of Ottoman and Crimean merchants travelling between the Crimea and Moscow in 1545.⁴¹ The Tatar ambassador was sent to Lithuania, accompanying the twenty-seven merchants who had been affected. Initially, Sigismund August intended to reject the merchants' complaint, but changed his mind primarily because most of them were Ottoman subjects and the king was afraid to provoke the powerful sultan, Suleiman the Magnificent, who had just defeated the Habsburgs in 1544.⁴² The fifteen merchants from Constantinople were most probably purveyors of the sultan's court.⁴³ Secondly, Sahib-Giray claimed that four of the Tatar merchants had been heading to Moscow with his money, and estimated their losses at 862,000 coins.⁴⁴ The khan threatened the king with possible military intervention by posing the rhetoric question: 'whom should attack my Tatars if they can't make war against Muscovy?'⁴⁵ A compromise was found and the merchants were paid compensation.

Sigismund August's reply to Sahib-Giray and the merchants' acknowledgement letter are important sources helping us to reconstruct the event, examine both sides' discursive strategies, and illuminate contemporaries' understanding of what constituted 'trade routes.' The king opens his letter with the promise to send gifts (*поминьки*) to the khan, as it was done before for maintaining the friendship between two states.⁴⁶ Then Sigismund August states that, even before Sahib-Giray's complaints arrived, he had initiated the investigation following reports from his borderland governors. Based on its results, the king declares that the attacks on the khan's domains and subjects were made by Muscovite Cossacks from the border castles of Putivl', Chernigov, and Novgorod-Severskiy, who had falsely put the blame on the king's own Cossacks.⁴⁷ According to Sigismund August, the Muscovite Cossacks attacked the caravan on the steppe when it crossed Sanjary ford on the Vorskla River, a left tribute of the Dnipro.⁴⁸ The king's Cossacks were in the same area pursuing their traditional economic activities (*входахъ*) of fishing

and hunting, and with no knowledge of the approaching caravan. According to their own testimony, these royal Cossacks were attacked without provocation by the caravan merchants, along with some Tatars – probably the military escort they hired in the Crimea. Other royal Cossacks arrived and attacked the Tatars to free their comrades. They found that the caravan was being pillaged by Muscovite Cossacks, who had probably been captured by Tatars during previous incursions, and were now being led to Moscow for ransom or exchange. The Muscovite captives liberated themselves, stole the merchandise, and fled to Moscow, while the king's Cossacks only obtained small booty.⁴⁹ The apologetic headline of this story is evident: the blame is put on the Muscovite Cossacks in the same way as, according to the king's statement a few lines above, the Muscovite Cossacks put the blame on the king's subjects.

The key point in the king's letter is that 'those merchants are guilty themselves because they left their customary old roads and went with their goods, not in accordance with the old habit through the castles of His Grace – Kiev, Cherkasy, and Kanev – as it was before, but by other new unc customary roads where is great insecurity'.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, the king, because of his friendship with the khan and 'despite the custom', did 'what he should not do' and ordered the investigation, compelled the Cossacks to return the goods to the merchants, and paid them considerable cash compensation for the remainder of their lost merchandise. At the same time, Sigismund August noted that if the merchants 'would apply to the law court they will never get the same [favourable] legal resolution because they left the old roads'.⁵¹ The idea that the merchants were themselves guilty because they took a new unc customary road to evade toll payment was repeated several times in the king's letter, as well as in other documents. The king thereby emphasized that the compromise reached in 1546 was something exceptional, and not to become a precedent for future cases.

Finally, Sigismund August added instructions explaining the sequence of actions the merchants needed to follow in future to escape pillage. The khan was to order that they follow the old roads. 'In accordance with the old habit', merchants approaching the Tavan' ferry were to notify the voivode of Kiev and governor (*starosta*) of Cherkasy and Kanev that they were going to Lithuania, or through it to Moscow. The voivode and governor were then to send an escort. After paying the toll, merchants were to be convoyed to the border with Muscovy 'without any obstacles' (*зачепицьки*). If the khan's merchants or Turkish caravans used 'the new and unc customary roads, sending no news to the voivode and governor', the king disclaimed any responsibility for their security 'and whatever damage will happen to them he shifts responsibility on his brother the khan and wants to know nothing and *nihil debet* to his brother and the merchants'.⁵²

In their acknowledgement letter, the merchants accepted the king's version of events and recognized their primary responsibility for bypassing the royal castles to avoid the tolls and going 'not by the road, but through the virgin steppe where

neither our ancestor merchants, nor we ourselves ever travelled'.⁵³ The merchants' acquiescence is unsurprising, since they recovered their goods and money. On the other hand, they acknowledged in future that 'His Grace the Sovereign does not want to consider such complaints, because it is not the Sovereign's obligation to safeguard the virgin and desert steppe where no customary road ever passed'.⁵⁴ The king's message is evident: no tolls, no protection.

On the surface, it looked as if the Cossacks were simply given *carte blanche* to pillage caravans which avoided the tolls, but that was not the case. As the merchants refused to leave Vilnius without receiving their full compensation in cash, it was paid from the state treasury.⁵⁵ The two quittances issued by the king and Senate to the treasurer are revealing here since they were written for domestic use only. First, there is no mention of the Muscovite Cossacks. The whole responsibility is put squarely on the king's Cossacks whose unprovoked assault risked military conflict with the Ottomans and Tatars.⁵⁶ Second, the king expressed the belief that the Cossacks roamed the steppe and pillaged caravans on the instructions of some borderland governors (*державъцы Украинные*), and he held both them and the governors responsible for the royal expenses. Therefore, the king and Senate ordered that 'the governors who sent the Cossacks to the steppe and got their share of booty as well as their officials, captains, sergeants, landlords, burghers, Cossacks, or any other subjects ... all of them must pay the sum of money ... to the Royal Public treasury without exemption and postponement in order to hold them from doing such damages in the future'.⁵⁷

This case raises some important issues requiring further examination: 1) the legal regime on the trade routes; 2) discursive strategies – formal replies and false statements – made by rulers and high officials to shift responsibility; 3) compensation paid for damages and punishment of the highwaymen; and 4) engagement of the borderland governors and large groups of the population in the 'raid economy'.

Translation of violence in diplomatic terms: the steppe routes as a discursive and legal category

The court records and diplomatic correspondence reveal that the trade routes – particularly the steppe roads – were considered by contemporaries as special traffic streams with their own legal regimes and conditions of use and responsibility. The distinction between 'customary/public' and 'uncustomary/hidden' roads was widespread in the diplomatic correspondence, as well as interstate treaties. For instance, the capitulations sent by Sultan Murad III to the Polish king, Stefan Batory, in 1577 read:

When Armenians and other infidel merchants living under the royal hand [i.e., the subjects of the Polish king] want to come to Moldavia and my other well-protected

dominions and practice trade, they should not travel through deserted and wild areas or use hidden roads, but they should come by the direct public road which has been customarily traveled by merchants.⁵⁸

Public roads in the Ottoman domains were well-travelled, frequently patrolled, and consequently safer. Unlike the Ottomans, the rulers of Eastern Europe absolved themselves of the responsibility for security on the steppe roads. The Nogai prince Yusuf complained in 1549 that his merchants were robbed on their way back from Moscow by Russian bandits on the Don river.⁵⁹ Ivan IV replied that

your merchants may come to us with no fear. When going by road they must safeguard themselves since, as you know yourself quite well, on the steppe there are always many villains from different states. Who can identify these villains? No one robber ever reveals his name. So, your merchants must defend themselves during their journey. And we are not able to protect them on the steppe, but only in our domains.⁶⁰

At the same time, rulers held their counterparts responsible if an assault was committed in their section of the steppe route. When the Muscovite embassy to the Crimea was pillaged and captured by Tatars of the Great Horde in 1501, Ivan III wrote to the Crimean khan Mengli-Giray that 'you, brother, know better how to liberate them because they were captured on your route'.⁶¹

The authorities sometimes used the dangers of the steppe routes to extort money from foreign merchants. For instance, in 1500 Mengli-Giray used the pretext 'that there are Cossacks of the [Great] Horde on the road' to refuse a permit to Stepan Vasiliev, a Russian merchant returning from the Ottoman domains to the Crimea where he wanted to join the merchants of Kiev to go together to that city. Vasiliev complained to Ivan III, who in turn wrote to Mengli-Giray disputing the khan's claim. The khan replied personally to Ivan III that he let Vasiliev leave the Crimea after the merchant had paid him 2,000 silver coins 'with no coercion and harassment'. Ivan III replied sarcastically to his Tatar ally: 'Once you took two thousand coins, the road became free and there were no Cossacks on the steppe. Could it be more coercive and harassing if our merchant was overtly forced to pay?'⁶²

These quite sophisticated formal replies were elaborated in state chancelleries which regarded the steppe as a neutral buffer zone and a field of operations for diverse Cossacks, rendering it impossible to identify the actual perpetrators of specific crimes. When the Nogai prince Kel-Mahmet complained in 1538 to Ivan IV about the evil deeds committed by Muscovite Cossacks, the latter replied that:

you know quite well that the villains are everywhere. There are many Cossacks roaming the steppe – the Cossacks of Kazan', Azov, Crimea and other troublemaking Cossacks. And those from our borderlands mix with them and likewise go to the steppe. These men are thieves and villains for you as well for us. No one instructs them to commit the crimes. And after committing some crime, they return to their lands.⁶³

In August 1549, Ivan IV responded to the Nogai prince Yusuf that the Don Cossacks were beyond his control, 'and these villains are living on the Don without our permission because they are runaways. We have often sent our men to capture them. However, our men could not catch them ... And if your men will catch some of the villains, then send them to us and we will order them executed.'⁶⁴ Interestingly, that June, Ivan IV had already written to another Nogai prince, Kasay Mirza, that 'owing to the friendship between us, I sent my Cossacks to attack the Crimean domains'.⁶⁵

Such excuses were employed to deny responsibility and consequently escape obligations to make recompense to those affected. For example, King Alexander blamed 'nameless men' in a letter to Mengli-Geray when merchants from Caffa, travelling with the envoys of the Crimean khan and the sultan of Caffa, were plundered by Cossacks on the Tavan' ferry in 1504.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, the king persuaded the khan that he had already sent to Kiev and Cherkasy to investigate the case, suggesting that he well knew who could commit the assault. Alexander promised that if the Crimean ambassadors arrived at Kiev, the captured perpetrators would be executed in their presence and any plundered items would be returned to the merchants, who in any case had already received reimbursement for their lost merchandise.⁶⁷

These cases indicated that merchants were most likely to be reimbursed if they were subjects of a powerful ruler who might otherwise retaliate, as exemplified by Poland-Lithuania's concern to maintain peace with the Ottomans and to prevent Tatar raids. The formal replies and excuses were employed if the plundered merchants were the subjects of minor rulers, as it was in the case of Muscovy and the competing Nogai princes, or if a ruler was dependent on the military alliance with his counterpart, as illustrated by the relations between Muscovy and the Crimean Khanate in the 1480s–1500s.

Networks of plunder: the management of violence and the social benefits of brigandage

This formal system of official routes and protection relied on local officials who were often directly engaged in brigandage or benefited from it in many ways. Michalon Litanus noted around 1550 that various residents of Kiev – toll collectors, merchants, moneychangers, boatmen, wagon drivers, innkeepers, tavern keepers – were profiteering equally from the caravans going through Kiev by the old road, as well from those plundered in 'the pathless steppe' (*campis inviiis*) or entombed there under the snowdrifts in winter. He believed these practices were the true source of the abundance of precious silks, zibeline furs, and spices sold at low price in the kiosks of Kiev.⁶⁸ However, he did not mention the local dignitaries who were the main beneficiaries.

As early as 1499, Grand Duke Alexander stipulated in a charter that Cossacks

returning from Cherkasy or the steppe were obliged to give a tenth of their booty to the voivode of Kiev.⁶⁹ This practice of granting border dignitaries the right to maintain themselves by levying tribute was known as *kormlenie* (provender rent) and was widely used in Lithuania and Muscovy.⁷⁰ Moreover, many dignitaries organized and led freebooter raids into the Ottoman and Crimean domains employing Cossacks as their henchmen.⁷¹ The Crimean envoy saw merchandise plundered from caravans for sale in Cherkasy in 1545.⁷² Armenian merchants, who were Ottoman subjects, complained to the Polish Diet (*Sejm*) that they had been plundered in 1568 on the Lithuanian–Muscovite border by Cossacks from Kiev, who delivered the stolen goods to the voivode of Kiev.⁷³

It was the same picture on the opposite side of the steppe. Muscovite–Tatar diplomatic correspondence reveals the networks of dealing in stolen goods in the Ottoman cities of Caffa and Azov. In 1500, Yushko, the Muscovite clerk in Caffa, discovered that two Tatar merchants were trading zibeline furs looted from the embassy of Ivan Oshcherin.⁷⁴ The latter was sent by Ivan III, in 1497, to Moldavia, and plundered by the Tatars somewhere in Polish Ukraine.⁷⁵ Yushko petitioned the Ottoman governor (*paşa*) of Caffa, who ordered the merchants to be imprisoned and delivered the furs to the local chief of police (*subaşı*). The governor told Yushko that the Crimean khan would personally interrogate the merchants when he arrived in Caffa, but when Mengli-Giray appeared, the governor and police chief claimed that the suspects had been released on bail, but had fled along with the bailsmen. They delivered the furs to the khan, who refused to give them to Yushko under the pretext that they were moth-damaged.⁷⁶ One can suppose that the Ottoman officials were either bribed by the merchants or patronized the whole network.

An even more confusing case occurred in Moscow in 1502. There, two Turkish merchants from Caffa and Tokat sold goods stolen from the Muscovite embassy of Ondrey Kutuzov, who had been killed by Azov Cossacks the year before. The goods were recognized by some merchants and officials who had been members of the embassy. The two merchants were interrogated in the presence of the Ottoman and Crimean ambassadors, who were in Moscow at that time. They claimed to have received the stolen goods from Ottoman officials in Azov – a supervisor of bazaars and trade (*muhtesib*), and a janissary officer (*mukhzir*). Two pounds of silk were confiscated, sealed by the Ottoman ambassador Alakoz, and given to the Muscovite ambassador Olesha Golokhvastov, who was going to Caffa.⁷⁷ According to his instructions, Golokhvastov was to speak to the sultan of Caffa and governor, claim back the pillaged goods, and demand punishment of the perpetrators. A note in the instructions unravelled the whole network: ‘all the officials of Azov are helping the Cossacks of Azov and of the [Great] Horde. The officials let the Cossacks go to the steppe and what the latter loot they split with the former.’⁷⁸

The last sentence corresponds with Mengli-Giray’s letter to Ivan III in 1500 when the Muscovite and Crimean ambassadors were robbed on their way on the steppe by the Azov and Astrakhan Cossacks, and sixty-four of the party were captured.

The Cossacks sold the captives, merchandise, and diplomatic gifts, valued at 3,985 roubles, to the Turkish merchants in Azov.⁷⁹ Mengli-Giray advised Ivan III to raise the matter with Sultan Bayezid II's ambassador, who was on his way, and to 'tell him about the chiefs of police (*subaşı*), fortress commandant (*vizdar*) and merchants of Azov; all the evil is because of them, they are instigating the evil-doers and sending them to Rus' and sharing [the spoils] with them'.⁸⁰

Finally, in 1503 the sultan of Caffa sent his troops and official investigators to Azov where they destroyed the whole network of freebooters and dealers in stolen goods. The Azov officials, who had protected this network in return for a cut, were imprisoned in Caffa, while the Cossacks were defeated on the steppe and executed.⁸¹ However, the effects of this punitive action were only temporary, and already in 1515 Muscovite envoys in Azov could not get any escort because all the Cossacks were away raiding.⁸² Much later, in 1570, Ivan Novosel'tsev, the Muscovite ambassador, on his way back from Istanbul to Moscow, noted in Azov that most of the local Ottoman officials who greeted him before were now absent. Novosel'tsev discovered that they had joined Tatars to form a 1,200-strong party led by the raider-voivode (*вылазной воевода*) to ravage the southern provinces of Muscovy. When Novosel'tsev addressed the governor (*sanjak-bey*) of Azov, the latter replied that the Tatars were acting despite his orders.⁸³

The merchants' choice of 'new/uncustomary/hidden' roads was perceived by the Cossacks – and their patrons – as a fair excuse to plunder the caravans. But caravans were more often plundered at the Tavan' ferry on the 'old habitual' road. According to evidence from 1456–57⁸⁴ and around 1550,⁸⁵ there had once been a customs house in the time of Grand Duke Vitautas (1392–1430), which was now described as an abandoned building. All the attacks on the caravans examined in this chapter were committed at the main fords. One can suppose that there had been customs houses at these points under the Golden Horde, but that these were abandoned after the collapse of this state. Memories of these custom houses, sometimes reinforced by the buildings themselves, survived until the late sixteenth century.⁸⁶ Probably, the Cossacks pretended to collect 'the old tolls' from the caravans. When their claims were rejected by merchants accompanying ambassadorial trains or with a hired military escort, the Cossacks considered plunder an appropriate response. Nonetheless, the frequent attacks on caravans indicate that, by the sixteenth century, foreign merchants considered Cossacks as having no right to claim tolls. Much later, when the Zaporozhe Cossack Host was well-institutionalized, foreign merchants paid the tolls at the fords, as well as to the obligatory Cossack escort imposed on them.⁸⁷

From the 1570s, both Poland-Lithuania and Muscovy tried to establish central state control over the Cossacks and, thereby, reduce violence on the steppe. King Stefan Batory recruited 600 Cossacks in 1578 to patrol a frontier on the Lower Dniro. The king and his successors sent a banner to the Cossacks. Since the number of these 'registered Cossacks' never exceeded 10 per cent of the host, the

former were paid by the king to prevent the latter from raids against the Tatars and Ottomans. Muscovy reformed its defence of the steppe frontier in 1571 after Ivan IV, for the first time, paid a subsidy of money, fabrics, saltpetre, and lead to a group of the Don Cossacks for escorting Muscovite and Ottoman ambassadors to Azov the year before. The tsar also promised a subsidy to all the Don Cossacks if they assisted his ambassador during the trip.⁸⁸ In 1594, Tsar Fedor sent a subsidy of fabrics, saltpetre, sulphur, lead, and grain to the Don Cossacks for their raids against the Tatars of Crimea and Azov and Nogais. He also promised more subsidies if the Cossacks escorted his and the Ottoman envoys to Azov and kept peace with the 'people of Azov' until the Russian envoy returned from Istanbul.⁸⁹ Thus, one can suppose that the rulers of Muscovy abandoned efforts at direct control and instead paid the Cossacks for safe conduct of its ambassadors across the steppe, while the tsar's subsidy supplied the foodstuffs and materials they needed to produce gunpowder and bullets, thereby encouraging their raiding economy.

Ultimately, all these measures proved ineffective, and the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries witnessed the spread of Cossack brigandage. The Zaporozhe and Don Cossacks started naval raids in the Black Sea during the 1580s.⁹⁰ The Don Cossacks also spread their brigandage to the Volga region and the Caspian Sea. The Zaporozhe and Don Cossacks devastated many provinces of Russia during its Time of Troubles (1604–18). The Polish crown's prohibition on Zaporozhe Cossacks' raids 'in the steppe and sea', imposed in 1638, was among the main reasons for their great rebellion in 1648–54, and resulted in the Host's secession as the *de facto* state of the Hetmanate. The great Razin's rebellion started with the pillaging of a merchant caravan in the Volga region in 1667 that belonged, in part, to the tsar and patriarch.

Nonetheless, central state control was finally established in the early eighteenth century and the violence on the steppe was ultimately restrained. The key factors behind this were the development of Russian military colonies through the building of fortified lines with soldier-settlers, and the establishment of fixed borders between the states, as well as between the Cossack Hosts. Roadblocks were erected in frontier districts to check the flow of refugees to the steppe and control Cossack movement to the borderland towns. Finally, the regular tsar's subsidies and shipment of military materials made the Cossacks dependent on central state control.⁹¹ By promoting border patrols, migration control, bureaucratic regulation of cross-border contacts, and deportation of dissidents, Peter I accomplished the delegitimization of non-state violence in the steppe and accepted responsibility for trans-border violence emanating from his territory.⁹²

Conclusion

A sovereign providing letters of 'safe conduct' to merchants and other travelers was regarded as the main guarantor of secure travel in his domains. Many

merchants had good connections with the ruling elite; some of them were suppliers to the court. The luxury commodities they transported between Moscow and the Black Sea ports, such as furs, silk fabrics, spices, and decorated arms, were consumed exclusively by the upper-classes as symbols of social prestige. Thus, plunder of these items immediately prompted diplomatic correspondence. However, the absence of stable central control over the means of violence in the buffer zone rendered preventive measures largely ineffective. The rulers preferred to avoid awkward responsibility by relinquishing their sovereignty over the steppe routes.

This too, was ineffective, since the equivocal rhetoric used in the interstate correspondence failed to persuade the addressees, who were in a similar situation. Rulers frequently employed Cossacks to raid their neighbours' domains during both peace and war, depopulating whole provinces. The permanent hybrid war in the desert steppe made the Cossacks an indispensable, effective, and inexpensive military force for the rulers. Thus, the plunder of a caravan was regarded as a lesser evil when employing these poachers turned gamekeepers to restrain large-scale violence.

The growth of the brigandage on the steppe routes continued because of the patronage of the local authorities and the support of networks of assistance. Violence on the steppe, including borderlands raids and plundering along the trade routes, was a profitable business for those who managed, protected, and assisted it in various ways. The local governors provided the brigands with necessary patronage. While some merchants bought stolen goods from the freebooters, others provided the Cossacks with a livelihood and military ammunition. The alehouse keepers and ransom-brokers were also in the list of profiteers.

Notes

- 1 Henceforth referred to as Lithuania.
- 2 Henceforth referred to as Muscovy.
- 3 See, for instance: V. Bronevskiy, *Istoriya Donskogo voyska* (St Petersburg, 1834), pp. 38–9; N. Kostomarov, 'Dve russkie narodnosti', *Osnova*, 3 (1861), p. 64; N. Kostomarov, 'Bunt Sten'ki Razina', in *Istoricheskie monografii i issledovaniya* (St Petersburg, 1903), p. 409 (originally published in 1863); D. Yavornytskyi, *Istoriya zaporizkikh kozakiv*, vols 1–3 (Lviv, 1990) (originally published in 1892–97).
- 4 See, for instance: V. A. Golobutskiy, *Zaporozhskoe kazachestvo* (Kiev, 1957), pp. 48–9, 58, 61; A. Pronshteyn and K. Khmelevskiy, 'Donskoe kazachestvo v sovetskoy istoriografii', *Voprosy istorii*, 1 (1965); A. Pronshteyn and N. Mininkov, *Krest'yanskie voyna v Rossii XVII–XVIII vekov i donskoe kazachestvo* (Rostov-na-Donu, 1983); N. Mininkov, *Donskoe kazachestvo v epokhu pozdnego srednevekov'ya: do 1671 g.* (Rostov-na-Donu, 1998).
- 5 E. J. Hobsbawm, *Bandits* (London, 1969), p. 13.
- 6 A. Blok, 'The Peasant and the Brigand: Social Banditry Reconsidered', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 14:4 (1972), pp. 497–8.

- 7 K. Barkey, *Bandits and Bureaucrats: The Ottoman Route to State Centralization* (Ithaca, NY, 1994); P. Sant Cassia, 'Banditry, Myth and Terror in Cyprus and Other Mediterranean Societies', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 35:4 (1993), p. 774; I. Koliopoulos, *Brigands with a Cause: Brigandage and Irredentism in Modern Greece 1821–1912* (Oxford, 1987); N. A. Curott and A. Fink, 'Bandit Heroes: Social, Mythical, or Rational?', *The American Journal of Economics and Sociology*, 71:2 (2012).
- 8 *Sbornik Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva* (148 vols, St Petersburg, 1867–1916), XLI, [hereafter *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41]: Pamyatniki diplomaticheskikh snoshenij Moskovskogo gosudarstva s aziatskimi narodami: Krymom, Kazaniu, Nogaitsami i Turtsiey. Chast 1 (gody s 1474 po 1505) (St Petersburg, 1884), p. 14; J. Dlugossii, *Annales seu Cronicae incliti Regni Poloniae*, vol. 12 (1462–1480), ed. Jerzy Wyrozumski et al. (Cracow, 2005), pp. 243–4; M. Bielski, *Kronika Polska* (Sanok, 1856 ed.; originally published 1554), pp. 990–1; M. Miechowski, *Tractatus de duabus Sarmatiis*, ed. and trans. S. Anninsky (Moscow, 1936; originally published 1517), p. 152.
- 9 M. Khodarkovsky, 'Taming the "Wild Steppe": Muscovy's Southern Frontier, 1480–1600', *Russian History*, 26:3 (1999), p. 248; J.-Y. Lee, *Qazaqliq, or Ambitious Brigandage and the Formation of the Qazaqs: State and Identity in Post-Mongol Central Eurasia* (Leiden, 2015).
- 10 A. Stanislavskiy, *Grazhdanskaya vojna v Rossii XVII v. Kazachestvo na perelome istorii* (Moscow, 1990), p. 36.
- 11 D. Ostrowski, *Muscovy and the Mongols: Cross-Cultural Influences on the Steppe Frontier, 1304–1589* (Cambridge, 1998), p. 118; V. Ciociltan, *The Mongols and the Black Sea Trade in the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (Leiden, 2012); N. Di Cosmo, 'Mongols and Merchants on the Black Sea Frontier (13th–14th C.): Convergences and Conflicts', in R. Amitai and M. Biran (eds), *Mongols, Turks and Others: Eurasian Nomads and the Sedentary World* (Leiden, 2005).
- 12 The fragmentation of the Golden Horde created the six competing khanates of Crimea, Kazan, Astrakhan, Siberia, the Great Horde, and the Nogai Horde.
- 13 M. Berindei and G. Veinstein, 'La présence ottomane au sud de la Crimée et en mer d'Azov dans la première moitié du XVI^e siècle', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 20:3–4 (1979).
- 14 Khodarkovsky, 'Taming the "Wild Steppe"', pp. 259–64. A. Khoroshkevich, *Rus' i Krym: ot soyuza k protivostoyaniyu (konets XV–nachalo XVI vv.)* (Moscow, 2001).
- 15 M. Dovnar-Zapol'skiy (ed.), *Litovskie upominki tatarskim ordam: Skarbovaya kniga Metriki Litovskoy 1502–1509 gg.* (Simferopol, 1898); A. Lyubaya, 'Tatarskie "pominki" v kontekste vzaimootnosheniy Pol'skogo korolevstva i Velikogo knyazhestva Litovskogo s Krymskim Khanstvom v XVI v.', *Studia Historica Europae Orientalis*, 1 (2008).
- 16 A. Dziubiński, 'Polsko-litewskie napady na tureckie pogranicze czarnomorskie w epoce dwu ostatnich Jagiellonów', *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 103:3 (1996); D. Kołodziejczyk, 'Slave Hunting and Slave Redemption as a Business Enterprise: The Northern Black Sea Region in the Sixteenth to Seventeenth Centuries', *Oriente Moderno*, 86:1 (2006).
- 17 G. Veinstein, 'Prélude au Problème Cosaque: à travers les registres de dommages ottomans des années 1545–1555', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 30:3–4 (1989).
- 18 For more details, see V. E. Syroechkovskiy, 'Puti i usloviya snosheniy Moskvys s Krymom na rubezhe XVI veka', *Izvestiya Akademii nauk SSSR, Otdel obshchestvennykh nauk*, VII seriya, 3 (1932).

- 19 Capha or Caffa, present-day Feodosiya in the Crimea.
- 20 Putivl' fell under Muscovite control in 1500.
- 21 Syroechkovskiy, 'Puti i usloviya', p. 213.
- 22 Michalon Lituanus is usually identified with either Michal Tyszkiewicz, a Lithuanian ambassador to the Crimean khan in 1538, or Michal Vasylevych, a scribe in the Lithuanian embassies to the Crimea in 1511–13.
- 23 M. Lituanus, *De moribus Tartarorum, Lituanorum et Moschorum* (Basel, 1615), p. 35.
- 24 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 25 Fifteen Turkish merchants from Constantinople, eight Armenian and Turkish merchants from Caffa, and four Tatar merchants from Kirkel (Kyrk-or in the Crimea).
- 26 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, p. 29.
- 27 *Ibid.*
- 28 *Sbornik Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*, XXXV [hereafter *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 35]: G. F. Karpov (ed.), *Pamyatniki diplomaticheskikh snosheniy Moskovskogo gosudarstva s Pol'sko-Litovskim*, part 1 (s 1487 po 1533 god) (St Petersburg, 1882), p. 26.
- 29 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, p. 298.
- 30 M. Vladimirovskiy-Budanov (ed.), *Arkhiv Yugo-Zapadnoy Rossii*, part 7, vol. 1, *Akty o zasedanii Yugo-Zapadnoy Rossii* (Kiev, 1886), p. 96.
- 31 N. M. Rogozhina (ed.), *Posol'skie knigi po svyaziam Rossii s Nogayskoy Ordoy 1489–1549 gg.* (Makhachkala, 1995), p. 292.
- 32 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, p. 349.
- 33 M. Obolenskiy and I. Danilovich (eds), *Kniga posol'skaya Metriki Velikogo knyazhestva Litovskogo*, vol. 1 (s 1545 po 1572 god) (Moscow, 1843), p. 20.
- 34 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, p. 52.
- 35 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, pp. 194–5, 240, 332, 349, 388, 433, 477. *Polnoe sobranie russkikh letopisey* [hereafter PSRL], vol. 11 (St Petersburg, 1897), p. 227.
- 36 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, pp. 482–516.
- 37 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 35, pp. 23, 26.
- 38 *Ibid.*, pp. 23, 24, 26–31, 38, 42.
- 39 *Ibid.*, p. 46.
- 40 *Ibid.*
- 41 Obolenskiy and Danilovich, *Kniga posol'skaya Metriki*, pp. 20–1.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 43 The Ottoman sultans regularly sent their court merchants to Moscow to buy the furs there. A. Bennigsen and C. Lemerrier-Quelquejay, 'Les marchands de la Cour ottomane et le commerce des fourrures moscovites dans la seconde moitié du XVIe siècle', *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 11:3 (1970); G. Veinstein, 'Marchands ottomans en Pologne-Lituanie et en Moscovie sous le règne de Soliman le Magnifique', *Cahiers du monde russe*, 35:4 (1994).
- 44 Obolenskiy and Danilovich, *Kniga posol'skaya Metriki*, pp. 22–3.
- 45 *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 25.
- 47 *Ibid.*, p. 26.
- 48 *Ibid.*, p. 23.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 26.

- 50 *Ibid.*
- 51 *Ibid.*, p. 27.
- 52 *Ibid.*
- 53 *Ibid.*, p. 30.
- 54 *Ibid.*, p. 32.
- 55 The total was 350,000 Lithuanian silver coins (*zpour*).
- 56 *Ibid.*, pp. 33, 34, 35.
- 57 *Ibid.*, p. 36.
- 58 D. Kołodziejczyk, *Ottoman–Polish Diplomatic Relations (15th–18th Century): An Annotated Edition of ‘Ahdnames and Other Documents’* (Leiden, 2000), p. 278.
- 59 Rogozhina, *Posol’skie knigi po svyazyam*, p. 295.
- 60 *Ibid.*, p. 298.
- 61 *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, p. 349.
- 62 *Ibid.*, pp. 304–5.
- 63 Rogozhina, *Posol’skie knigi po svyazyam*, pp. 230–1.
- 64 *Ibid.*, p. 298.
- 65 *Ibid.*, p. 291.
- 66 K. Pułaski (ed.), *Stosunki Polski z Tatarszczyzną od połowy XV wieku* (Cracow; Warsaw, 1881), pp. 269–74. *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, p. 542.
- 67 *Ibid.*, p. 269.
- 68 Lituanus, *De moribus*, pp. 35–6.
- 69 I. Grigorovich (ed.), *Akty, odnosyashchiesya k istorii Zapadnoy Rossii*, vol. 1: 1340–1560 (St Petersburg, 1846), p. 170.
- 70 B. Davies, ‘The Politics of Give and Take: *Kormlenie* as Service Remuneration and Generalized Exchange, 1488–1726’, in A. M. Kleimola and G. D. Lenhoff (eds), *Culture and Identity in Muscovy, 1359–1584* (Moscow, 1997).
- 71 C. Lemerrier-Quelquejay, ‘Un condottiere lithuanien du XVI^e siècle le prince Dimitrij Višneveckij et l’origine de la Seč Zaporogue d’après les archives ottomanes’, *Cahiers du monde russe et soviétique*, 10:2 (1969).
- 72 Obolenskiy and Danilovich, *Kniga posol’skaya Metriki*, vol. 1, p. 23.
- 73 M. Dovnar-Zapol’skiy (ed.), *Arkhiv Yogo-Zapadnoy Rossii*, part 8, vol. 5, *Akty ob Ukrainskoy Administratsii XVI–XVII vv.* (Kiev, 1907), pp. 173–5, 187–90 [complaint from 1570].
- 74 It was written on the fur bundle – probably on the back-cloth – that it was sent from Olena, daughter of Ivan III, to Alexander, son of Moldavian prince Stefan the Great. *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 41, p. 310.
- 75 *Ibid.*, pp. 240, 304.
- 76 *Ibid.*, p. 310.
- 77 Both ambassadors – Golokhvastov and Alakoz – along with the fellow merchants were robbed by the Tatars of Astrakhan on the Don river in 1502. *Ibid.*, p. 433.
- 78 *Ibid.*, p. 404.
- 79 *Ibid.*, p. 332.
- 80 *Ibid.*, p. 329.
- 81 *Ibid.*, pp. 469, 470–1, 473, 475–6, 480.
- 82 *Sbornik Russkogo istoricheskogo obshchestva*, XCV [hereafter *Sbornik RIO*, vol. 95]: G. F.

- Karpov and G. F. Shtendman (eds), *Pamyatniki diplomaticheskikh snoshenij Moskovskogo gosudarstva s aziatskimi narodami: Krymom, Kazaniu, Nogaitsami i Turtsiey*, Chast 2 (gody s 1508 po 1521) (St Petersburg, 1895), p. 142.
- 83 'Posol'stvo Ivana Novosil'tseva v Turtsiyu', in N. I. Prokof'ev (ed.), *Zapiski russkikh puteshestvennikov XVI–XVII vv* (Moscow, 1988), pp. 217–18.
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- 88 A. Lishin (ed.), *Akty, odnosyashchiesya k istorii Voyska Donskogo* (3 vols in 4 parts, Novocherkassk, 1891–94), I, pp. 1–2.
- 89 *Ibid.*, pp. 4–5.
- 90 V. Ostapchuk, 'The Human Landscape of the Ottoman Black Sea in the Face of the Cossack Naval Raids', *Oriente Moderno*, 81:1 (2001).
- 91 B. Davies, *Warfare, State and Society on the Black Sea Steppe, 1500–1700* (London, 2007), pp. 40, 198–9.
- 92 B. J. Boeck, *Imperial Boundaries: Cossack Communities and Empire-Building in the Age of Peter the Great* (Cambridge, 2009), chap. 9.