Cossacks and the southern frontier of Muscovy played principal roles in the Time of Troubles (1598-1613). Southern provinces were the main center of the rebellions against the central government, and cossacks provided the main fighting force of the rebels. Russian historians have long emphasized the primary role of cossacks in the Time of Troubles. V. O. Kliuchevskii and S. F. Platonov popularized the idea of the Time of Troubles, and especially the Bolotnikov rebellion, as a social struggle of the masses (including cossacks) against the development of serfdom. Early Soviet historians emphasized this class war interpretation of the Time of Troubles and came up with the idea of a “peasant revolution” or “cossack revolution.” In the Stalin era, I. I. Smirnov rejected the idea of a “cossack revolution,” de-emphasized the role of the cossacks, and came to view the Bolotnikov rebellion as Russia’s first “peasant war.” Subsequent Soviet scholars greatly expanded the definition of the “First Peasant War” to include the main events of the Time of Troubles from 1603 to 1614. In doing so they returned to greater emphasis on cossacks as principal players—D. P. Makovskii even returned to the earlier Soviet view of “revolutionary cossacks.” According to V. D. Nazarov, the cossacks actively fomented, ideologically formulated, and to a

considerable degree actually organized an "open class struggle." Recent publications by R. G. Skrynnikov and A. L. Stanislavskii continue to place great emphasis on the role of cossacks in the Time of Troubles but question basic assumptions about the "First Peasant War" model and the cossacks themselves. Both authors preferred to view the complex events of the Time of Troubles as a civil war rather than a peasant war, and both have raised serious doubts about the revolutionary agenda of the cossacks. Partly inspired by their work, I have argued elsewhere that there was no "First Peasant War" and that the Bolotnikov rebellion was not a social revolution. What does this mean for the longstanding view of the cossacks as social revolutionaries and champions of the dispossessed? The answer is not simple and requires, first of all, a closer look at how cossacks and the southern frontier came to play such an important role in the Time of Troubles.

Russian cossacks, students of Tatar freebooters, began to appear in the dangerous no-man’s land between the forests of Russia and the steppe in the fifteenth century. Gathering together in gangs for self-protection, these wandering soldier-adventurers often spent part of the year "cossacking" (hunting, fishing, and banditry) and part of the year in Russian border towns. As Muscovy expanded south some cossacks were recruited as frontier guards. In response to the Crimean Tatar attack on Moscow in 1571, within a few years Muscovy established a line of dozens of fortified frontier watchposts manned primarily by cossacks who had settled down as state-employed, permanent border guards. These individuals became "service" (or "fortress/town") cossacks. Many more “free” cossacks, who admitted no lord over them, continued to operate beyond the frontier watchposts in the steppe in bands of up to sixty or more. Mostly former peasants and slaves, the free cossacks were often a nuisance to Muscovy. However, in the struggle against the Crimean Tatars they proved useful. By the 1570s the government began to encourage cossacks from the Don and Volga to send contingents to serve as scouts and