

Razin's Rebellion, 1670–1671

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Razin's Rebellion occurred in 1670–1 along the lower Don River in southern Russia in a heterogeneous community dominated by Cossacks, but also including runaway serfs who were considered fugitives. The Cossacks did not practice agriculture but lived off tribute levied on merchants passing along the Volga. The Russian government was interested in the Cossacks as a military force to guard the southern frontier, tolerating their freedom and *de facto* independence in the Don River region and even providing economic assistance and financial allowances.

From 1650 to 1660 during the Russian wars with Poland and Sweden, the rise in epidemics and crop failures led to the impoverishment of the Russian masses, and serfs fled in large numbers to the Don region. When the Russian government insisted on searching for and returning the serfs to their masters, the Cossacks resisted, provoking a major conflict. When the government cut food supplies and allowances, the Cossacks as professional warriors organized a fierce opposition that threatened to spill beyond the Don boundaries.

Stepan (Stenka) Razin was a 40-year-old Cossack from an upper-class family whose

godfather was Kornila Yakovlev, the *ataman*, or high commander, of the Don regional army. A tall imposing man, Razin traveled extensively with the Cossack diplomatic mission throughout Russia, visiting Moscow, Astrakhan, and other Russian towns. Due to his popular influence in the Don region, in 1667 Razin successfully organized a regiment of 800 Cossacks to counter the embargo imposed by the Russians. In mid-May, Razin and his army ambushed and pillaged a merchant caravan in the Volga region that belonged in part to the tsar and Patriarch Nikon. Incensed by Razin's daring robbery, the Russian Duma in Moscow denounced him as a criminal. Since Razin did not intend to engage in a battle with the government, he looted Persian settlements along the Caspian shore instead. By the fall of 1669, when Razin returned to the Don, his popularity became legendary, and he organized 7,000 rebels to advance the rights of peasants throughout Russia. Razin was determined to attack Moscow to "eliminate nobles and officials who obstructed common people." Some argue that Razin sought revenge for the killing of his elder brother Ivan, who was executed by the Russian government in 1665.

In May 1669, Razin seized Tsaritsin and Astrakhan, two large urban centers on the Volga River. In both cases townspeople opened the gates and Russian officials, noblemen, and officers were killed in the ensuing attack. After their initial success, Razin's forces moved to Simbirsk, where Cossacks entered the town but could not take the Kremlin (the local fortress). Meanwhile, popular uprisings of some 200,000 people spread the rebellion throughout the vast southern and southeastern Russian territories. Peasants formed bands and attacked landowners and government officials.

Tsar Alexey appointed Duke Baryatinskiy, a ruthless military commander, to suppress the rebellion, and by early October he defeated the Cossack rebels near Simbirsk, where Razin was wounded but escaped by boat on the Volga River. Baryatinskiy's victory was followed by bloody government reprisals against peasants, including mass executions in the Nizhny Novgorod region, some 250 miles east of Moscow; in all, more than 100,000 insurgents were killed. By early 1671 the uprising was suppressed. Razin was captured on April 14 and executed by quartering in front of St. Basil's Cathedral in Moscow on July 6, 1671.

Razin remains a symbol of a free and courageous spirit and his life and acts are invoked in Russian folklore, songs, and legends.

SEE ALSO: Bulavin's Rebellion, 1707–1708; Decembrists to the Rise of Russian Marxism; Pugachev's Rebellion, 1773–1775

References and Suggested Readings

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