

Bolotnikov's Rebellion, 1606–1607

Yury V. Bosin

Russia suffered considerable economic and political upheaval in the early seventeenth century

as raids by Crimean Tatars and the protracted Livonian War (1558–82) with the Polish-Lithuanian Confederation destabilized Russian society. The agricultural crop failure of 1601–2 caused a great famine: in Moscow alone, 127,000 people starved to death. Against this backdrop of struggle and crisis, Bolotnikov's Rebellion was the first of four peasant wars that shook Russia in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The reign of Tsar Fyodor from 1584 to 1598 marked the end of the Rurick dynasty and ushered in the "Time of Troubles" denoting economic crisis and a political power vacuum. Following Fyodor's death, the crown was turned over to Boris Godunov (1598–1605), then to False Dmitry, an impostor claiming to be the son of Ivan the Terrible and true heir to the throne. This political volatility accentuated rumors that spread quickly to the masses, leading to popular ferment and dissension. When Vassiliy Shuysky ascended to the throne following False Dmitry's assassination in 1606, the foundation for a vast uprising had already been built in southern and southwestern Russia, where Russian fugitives typically fled for asylum. Ivan Bolotnikov, a nobleman who became a serf, fled to the Don River to join Cossacks to organize an insurrection against the tsar. He was captured by Tatars, sold to Turkey, and escaped to Venice, returning to Russia through Hungary, Germany, and Poland where he initiated the movement against Shuysky, otherwise known as Vassiliy Ivanovich, who was tsar from 1606 to 1610. Bolotnikov, seeking control over Moscow, formed an army of 180,000 that controlled 70 towns, and defeated Shuysky's army in two battles in October 1606.

To prevent the onslaught, Shuysky purchased the services of Bolotnikov's closest commanders who assisted in defending Moscow from the approaching troops. Bolotnikov was defeated and retreated to the towns of Serpukhov and Kaluga. The war was not over. In 1607, Bolotnikov captured the large town of Tula and sent reinforcements to defend the settlement from a siege by Shuysky's army of 150,000 through October of that year. Bolotnikov was taken into custody in a remote northern town of Kargopol, and a year later blinded and drowned in an ice hole.

SEE ALSO: Bulavin's Rebellion, 1707–1708; Decembrists to the Rise of Russian Marxism; Pugachev's Rebellion, 1773–1775; Razin's Rebellion, 1670–1671

References and Suggested Readings

- Avrich, P. (1976) *Russian Rebels, 1600–1800: Four Great Rebellions Which Shook the Russian State in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries*. New York: W. W. Norton.
- Peasants' Wars in Russia in the 17–18th Centuries* (1966) Moscow and Leningrad (in Russian).
- Smirnov, I. I. (1951) *Bolotnikov's Rebellion of 1606–1607*. Moscow (in Russian).