



## ЮЖНОЕ ПОГРАНИЧЬЕ РОССИИ, ЧЕРНОЗЕМНЫЕ ЗЕМЛИ И БЕЛГОРОДСКАЯ ЧЕРТА

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### **Аннотация**

**Введение.** Статья посвящена изучению процесса строительства Белгородской черты. Авторы отмечают, что большую роль в этом процессе сыграл почвенный фактор. Именно плодородная черноземная почва обеспечила возведение мощных оборонительных сооружений. Почвенный фактор помог первым колонизаторам закрепиться в этих опасных местах. Они начали постройку серии отдельных сооружений. **Материалы и методы.** Изучение документов показывает, что нет оснований для деления истории Белгородской черты на три этапа. Линия возводилась в тот момент, когда государство использовало традиционную оборонительную деятельность населения для колонизации новых плодородных земель юга. **Результаты.** За небольшой промежуток времени (1646-53 гг.) были построены основные линии, объединившие разрозненные оборонительные пункты. Вложенные средства дали хороший эффект: на дикой и пустынной границе стали развиваться рынки, увеличивались пахотные земли, быстро росло число городских торговцев. В контексте этих преобразований на юге России реформа должна была привести к появлению торгового слоя, важной основы экономического развития регионов Белгородской черты и их быстрой интеграции в общерусскую экономику. **Заключение.** К концу XVII века многие из этих крепостей действительно стали важными экономическими центрами. Однако это произошло бы раньше, если бы Москва продолжала финансировать оборонительную линию и начатое в 1646 г. строительство дошло до своего логического завершения. Но война с Речью Посполитой не позволила этому произойти. Оборонительная линия не была достроена, а царь Алексей Михайлович отказался продолжать военную и городскую реформу. Даже в эпоху Петра Великого Белгородская линия по сути своей была военной: городское население (ремесленники и торговцы) было развито слабо. Армия и реформы на южном пограничье были обеспечены огромными ресурсами, которые давала плодородная черноземная почва.

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**Ключевые слова:** чернозем, почва, Белгородская черта, оборонительные сооружения, «почвенный фактор»

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## SOUTHERN BORDERLAND OF RUSSIA, BLACK EARTH LANDS AND BELGOROD LINE

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### Abstract

**Introduction.** The article is devoted to the study of the process of construction of the Belgorod line. The authors note that the soil factor played a major role in this process. It was the fertile black soil that ensured the construction of powerful defensive structures. **Materials and methods.** The soil factor helped the first colonizers to gain a foothold in these dangerous places. They began to build a series of separate structures. Studying the documents reveals that there is no basis for dividing the history of the Belgorod line into three stages. **Results.** The line was erected at a moment when the state was using the traditional defensive activities of the population in order to colonise the new fertile lands of the south. In a small amount of time (1646-53), the basic lines were constructed, uniting scattered defensive points. The means invested had a good effect: on the wild and empty frontier, markets began to develop, arable land increased, and the number of urban tradesmen grew rapidly. **Conclusion.** In the context of these transformations in Russia's south, reform should have led to a mercantile stratum, an important basis for the economic development of the regions in the Belgorod line and their rapid integration into the general Russian economy. By the end of the seventeenth century, many of these fortresses had indeed become important economic centres. However, this would have happened earlier if Moscow had continued to finance the defensive line and if the construction begun in 1646 had reached its logical conclusion. But war with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth did not allow this to occur. The defensive line was not completed and Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich refused to continue military and urban reform. In sum, even in the era of Peter the Great, the Belgorod line was still essentially military in character: the urban population (craftsmen and tradesmen) was weakly developed. The army and reforms on the southern border were provided with enormous resources from the fertile black soil.

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**Keywords:** chernozem, soil, Belgorod line, defensive structures, "soil factor"

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## 1. Introduction

Russia's first civil war (1604-1613, the 'Time of Troubles') had a great influence on the country's development in the seventeenth century. This period was a true catastrophe for Russian society: severe economic crisis and internal conflict threatened the country with the loss of its political independence, especially after Sweden and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth began military activities against Muscovy. In 1613, the new Romanov dynasty assumed the throne and the crisis was overcome. The political situation normalised, but Russia had changed considerably [22, p. 443-461]. Now Russians understood their state as a common cause, a single community in which each person bore responsibility for defending the integrity of 'Holy Rus'.

After the Time of Troubles, the population began to actively participate in political life. In Moscow, an advisory organ, the *zemskii sobor*, convened regularly, while various elected positions arose in the provinces: problems were resolved collectively and provincial populations organised taverns, customs, and prisons in their towns. Collective assemblies of the various social groups resolved important economic issues on the spot [6]. By the middle of the seventeenth century, the rapidly developing bureaucratic machine had partially supplanted these traditions of local self-administration. Nonetheless, society remained a hierarchical system of numerous servitors joined together by a whole range of horizontal links and contacts [23, p. 470-471].

The essential task of the new state had not changed – guaranteeing the realm's defence by building up its capabilities. The motive that drove it forward was the need to protect society and to conserve it as a system. The Russian state that arose after the civil war was considered a panacea against the woes of the Time of Troubles. It was both established and supported by universal consensus. Russians remembered the civil war well. The population developed the habit of working together for the sake of the common good, placing collective interests above individual ones.

The defensive impulses of the reborn state were very strong and manifested themselves particularly on the borders. The energy with which Russians began to master the Siberian forests and the Volga steppes was astonishing. The new Russia's most visible achievement on the southern border was the creation of a long defensive line, the Belgorod line, in the middle of the seventeenth century. This was the largest, most complex military engineering project in Russian history. The Belgorod line was a well-guarded complex of structures, including fortress towns, stockades, ramparts, ditches, and other fortifications. The fortified line covered 600km (800km if we include its twists and turns). The line went through the modern regions of Sumy (Ukraine), Belgorod, Voronezh, Lipetsk, and Tambov (Russia).

## 2. Materials and methods

The Belgorod line has not been studied in sufficient detail. Currently, many questions remain open about this grandiose project. Before the appearance of V. P. Zagorovskii's book in 1969, the term 'Belgorod line' was not used: historians instead wrote about the general development of the southern border's defensive system against Tatar invasion in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Ivan Beliaev, the first researcher to work on this theme, remarked that at the end of the sixteenth century 'there already existed a long chain of fortified towns' [2, c. 46]. From this moment began the process of strengthening the border. The first towns were scattered and were not connected into a single line: inside these towns were placed military garrisons for defending nearby lands. Beliaev argued

that the most important steps in organising this defence were made during the reign of Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich (1613-45).

Dmitrii Bagalei argued that the construction of military fortifications on the southern border began in 1571 and continued uninterrupted throughout the entire seventeenth century [1, c. 36-135]. He noted that this was a form of colonization by Russians and Ukrainians (*Cherkasy*) of this fertile region. The settlers did much to defend this land from Tatar raids. Aleksandr Iakovlev wrote a book on the defence of Russia's southern border [19]. He paid attention to the significance of the construction of military fortifications up until 1648. His book consists of essays and observations, and so lacks an interpretive system and concepts. Iakovlev proposed that the construction of fortifications on the southern border was continuous, thereby avoiding the identification of particular periods in this process.

A great contribution to the study of Muscovy's defensive policies on the southern border was made by Aleksei Novosel'skii [14]. He studied Russia's relations with the Crimean Khanate and the Ottoman Empire in the first half of the seventeenth century. He analysed social and military processes on the southern border in their international context. Novosel'skii argued that it is important to study the political situation in Muscovy in order to understand the particularities of the defensive military activities on the southern border. With his work, he showed the importance and promise of such an approach. His study is important for its methodology, but he did not study the history of defensive fortifications on this frontier.

Vladimir Zagorovskii wrote a monograph especially about the Belgorod line [7]. He can thus be called a pioneer in the study of this historical phenomenon. In his book, he identifies particular periods in the defence of the southern border – he defined the period when the Belgorod line was constructed as being between 1635 and 1658. Zagorovskii was a Soviet army officer for ten years: perhaps this is why he was interested in the construction of defensive lines, systems for strengthening the frontier, and the particulars of military engineering. Studying blueprints and discussing the social composition of the local population, he attempted to provide a precise chronological framework for the construction work. In total, Zagorovskii presented the history of the Belgorod line as a sequence of three stages of systematic defensive construction from 1635 to 1658.

For a long time, no especial study on the Belgorod line was conducted. Nor were there any broad Russian-language works on this theme. In 1995, Carol Belkin-Stevens published a book about social transformation on Russia's southern border in the second half of the seventeenth century [20]. She justifiably remarks that the reform of the Russian army in defensive terms began as early as the 1630s. (Belkin Stevens, 1995: 158). Belkin-Stevens shows the difficulties and problems that existed on the southern frontier in the 1630s and 40s (when the construction of fortresses began) and the path to their resolution in the second half of the seventeenth century [20, p. 24-25, 41-75]. In 2004, Brian Davies published a book on the situation in the fortress town of Kozlov from 1635 to 1649. Touching on the subject of the Belgorod line, the author considers the history of Kozlov rampart and fortress as part of the Belgorod line's system of military fortifications [21, p. 72-73].

The Belgorod line continues to attract a great deal of interest in today's Russia. From 2017, an annual almanac entitled *Belgorodskaiia cherta (The Belgorod Line)* has been published in Belgorod: this is dedicated to various questions about the defence of the south in the seventeenth century. Some articles in this publication directly touch on the history of the defensive line. In 2020, a new book authored by Andrei Papkov, Nikolai Petrukhintsev, and Dmitrii Khitrov on the Belgorod line was published (Papkov, Petrukhintsev, Khitrov, 2020). This general work has rich illustrative material, tables, and blueprints. The authors managed to gather and systematise a great deal of information about the fortifications on the southern border. However, in theoretical matters, they follow Zagorovskii [16, c. 80-140].

So, prior to Zagorovskii's book, historians studied the long process of constructing defensive projects over the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, but did not write about the Belgorod line as a topic in its own right. Zagorovskii was the first to do this, although he concentrated his attention only

on military activities taking place on the border. His chronology of the Belgorod line's construction is not connected with the political situation in the Kremlin. Zagovorskii also artificially isolates this fortification from the general history of defensive projects on the southern border. This approach requires critical evaluation.

What is the essence of Zagovorskii's conception of the Belgorod line's construction? He argues that this project was built in three stages [7, c. 73]. The first is the period from 1635 to 1645. During this time, two large earthen ramparts and nine towns were built. There was no unified logic behind the construction: it was spread across various parts of the southern frontier. The second stage, 1646 to 1653, was characterised by the appearance of a logic and unity of action, as well as consciousness of the importance of increasing the military contingent in this region. 10 large fortresses were built, along with a multitude of smaller forts (*ostrogi*) and other military facilities. At this stage, the government made Belgorod the military centre of the new line. The third stage in the line's construction was from 1653 to 1658. Large-scale work ceased during this period – only one town was built. In 1658, the government created the '*Belgorodskii razriad*', a military administrative structure that joined the service population of the line together in order to manage it effectively. Such is, in Zagovorskii's opinion, the history of the Belgorod line.

This periodisation does not reflect Moscow's policies or the situation in the Kremlin at this time. However, war was always connected to the plans of the country's leadership. Consequently, analysis of defence construction on the southern frontier should always be placed in the context of political events. To artificially separate the stages of construction is a very provisional and formalistic approach. Fortresses were built on the southern border before 1635 (the beginning of the 'first stage') and after 1658 (the end of the 'third stage'). Following this 'military logic', it is possible to identify many different periods in the construction of defensive projects in Russia's south. For instance, the towns of Voronezh and Belgorod, important military points on the Belgorod line, were built at the end of the sixteenth century, long before Zagovorskii's first stage. This is precisely why earlier historians avoided distinguishing stages in the construction process.

### 3. Results.

The history of the Belgorod line is the history of Muscovy's policies on the southern border, which were defined by the situation in the Kremlin. Tsar Ivan the Terrible was forced to take operative measures to defend the southern borders after the devastating raid of the Crimean Tatars in 1571. His political interests were directed towards the West and actions in the south were forced (perforce, compelled). Moscow created a defense system to the south of the Oka River (Tula Region), and began to build a defensive line (*zaseka*) along the Oka River. But nothing grand (grandiose, ambitious) was done.

At the end of the sixteenth century, Russians living on the River Oka were resettled to the southern border. Livny (1585), Voronezh (1585), Elets (1592), Staryi Oskol (1596), Kursk (1596), Belgorod (1596), Tsarev-Borisov (1599), and Valuiki (1599) were built (Zagovorskii, 1989: 90). These were true outposts of Muscovy – fortresses whose environs were settled with petty service gentry (*deti boyarskie*). Here, one did not find civilian personnel like peasants and craftsmen, only soldiers. This was a dangerous steppe border, dominated by unfamiliar climatic conditions. Life was very hard: Tatars conducted regular raids, but people nonetheless stubbornly settled these wild steppe lands. They had to take care of themselves, ploughing their land and defending their homes from Tatar riders.

Concerned about their personal security, the settlers built fortifications around their villages, defending their plots with wooden palisades [11, c. 53-89]. Moscow's economic support was inconsiderable, so the new forts remained small outposts in the vast, hostile steppe [9, c. 195]. Sometimes the state did hand out grain and money to its servitors, and also sponsored local churches and fortress repairs. However, in 1604 the Time of Troubles began: residents on the borders were left alone with their problems. They did not abandon the land, perhaps because the situation in central Russia was even more dangerous. The settlers strengthened their forts, built new defensive structures, resolved

important questions collectively, and defended their property from the raids of Tatar horsemen and bandits. They gained much experience in managing their collective economy in dangerous wartime conditions [5].

Once the Time of Troubles had ended, the fortification of the borders continued. Peace did not bring help from Moscow, however: the country was economically weak. Those surrounding the new tsar Mikhail Fedorovich, who was sickly and weak-willed, increased their own wealth without thinking about the country's future. In their hands were the most important responsibilities, civilian offices, and military posts: they did not even think of paying taxes to the treasury.

In 1632, Patriarch Filaret, the tsar's powerful father, unleashed war against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth (the Smolensk War) [3, c. 134]. This conflict did not bring success: the Russian army was incapable of sustaining a long-term fight. Mikhail Shein, the army's commander, was indecisive and capitulated upon encountering the main enemy force. In 1633, Filaret, the war's initiator, died. Failure in the conflict was connected with problems on the southern frontier [14, c. 167-222]. In 1632, a large-scale steppe war developed with the Tatars, who acted with the direct support of the Turkish sultan. As a result, the southern districts sustained heavy losses: hundreds of people were taken into slavery, hamlets and villages were destroyed, and arable land was abandoned. The weakness of Russia on the southern border was linked to the reduction in the number of serving people, many of whom had been sent to the war with Poland [14, c. 205].

In such awful conditions, those in the Kremlin started to think about assisting the southern population. But the treasury did not have enough to do anything significant. From Moscow came recommendations and promises, but not much real help. However, the local population had considerable experience in defending their land from the Tatars. In total, nine fortresses appeared on the border by 1645. This cannot be accredited to Moscow: their construction was undertaken as a result of local initiative.

People on the border took care of themselves, as they were already accustomed to doing. In August 1632, the governor (*voevoda*) of Livny complained to Moscow that residents had not obeyed his order to hide in the fortress upon Tatar raids: instead, people fortified themselves in their villages and prepared to defend themselves. The governor wrote: 'the local people do not come to the town upon attack, they fortify their households in the hamlets and villages in many places'. The governor of Lebedian lamented about another such refusal: the locals told him, 'we will not come to the fortress, we have our own little forts' [14, c. 222]. Petty landowners in Voronezh in the 1620s had special fortified landholdings for Tatar incursions.

When things got especially difficult, the locals asked the authorities in Moscow to build fortresses for them. An example of this is a request from the residents of Kursk and Belgorod districts regarding the construction of the Oboian' fort in 1638. The locals turned to Prince Petr Pozharskii, the governor of Belgorod, with a request for a small fort to protect their lands. They pointed out that there was an appropriate place on the River Baia 70 km from Kursk and 70 km from Belgorod, alongside the Tatar road. The units patrolling the steppe rarely came here due to the distances involved, even though there were large meadows, fields good for agriculture, and an old forest, the wood from which would be suitable for building work. The locals assured the governor that they were ready to build the fort and settle the land as soon as the tsar permitted it. Moscow blessed the initiative and ordered the governor to outline a blueprint of the new fort. Not awaiting permission from Moscow or even agreement from the governor, service people in Orel district in 1635 themselves built four forts so as to defend their land and the population [15].

In 1635, the initiative to create Kozlov and its fortifications came from local servitors [21, p. 72-73]. They wanted to defend the left bank of the Don and expressed their preparedness to build a new fortress. Moscow supported the initiative. In 1640, locals in the northern part of Voronezh district sought to fortify lands ravaged by the Tatars: they turned to the tsar for help, requesting permission to organise a military patrol. In 1644, they wrote a new petition, asking for permission to build a fortress.

This request was approved: dispatched from Moscow, Governor Stepan Vel'iaminov successfully oversaw the construction of the new fort, which was named Usman' [10, с. 26-40].

Thus, Moscow's policies before 1645 were to support the initiatives of the population on the southern frontier: there was no plan to build a single line. Those living on the border wanted only to defend their land and asked for help to do so. The state had various problems, but helped when it could [20, p. 24]. The period from 1635 to 1645 cannot be considered a part of the Belgorod line's construction. Through the joint efforts of local people and the authorities, nine fortresses and two earthen ramparts were constructed in the Kozlov and Iablonov regions. In many ways, this was connected with the particular culture of the population on Russia's southern border [21].

The situation in the Kremlin was not propitious for the realisation of large-scale projects. Those surrounding Tsar Mikhail Fedorovich were not interested in the colonization of the south, since such would require much money and energy. Of course, in Moscow it was understood that the southern borders had to be defended, so they helped the population build defences and provided recommendations and advice. The tsar permitted the erection of new forts when the local population began to complain frequently about Tatar invasion. The construction of such fortresses did not require a lot of money from the centre, since the locals, who suffered from hostile raids, were interested in the construction. As such, we do not see a clear, single logic in defence construction before 1645. On each occasion, the builders thought about defending their village and its environs, not about the affairs of the state.

The situation changed in 1645. In this year, a new tsar ascended the throne – Aleksei, the young son of Mikhail Fedorovich Romanov. By 1646, the composition of the government had changed: at its head sat Boris Morozov, the mentor of the new tsar. This man had great plans for Russia's future. He understood that the country was lagging behind Europe: a weak economic system and an old-fashioned army were the main problems. Muscovy might be defeated again, lose its independence, and become a colony. Reform was necessary, but there was no money in the state coffers [13]. As such, Morozov began a stringent financial policy: collecting debts from taxpayers, developing trade, and undertaking economizing measures. In 1647, there was even an attempt to place an indirect tax on salt.

Between 1646 and 1648, Morozov was thus able to improve Russia's economic position. As such, a military reform connected with the creation of new army divisions in the south was successfully undertaken. The colonisation of the Volga region, Siberia, and the southern borderlands began [24]. For the first time since Boris Godunov, we see real action being taken by Moscow on the southern borders: at this time began the systematic and planned erection of fortifications with the aim of creating a single defensive line. Now people had to construct defensive buildings in those places where they were needed for strategic general tasks, for the region's colonisation, rather than according to their own whims [21, p. 73].

It is from this moment that the real history of the Belgorod line begins. In 1646-47, large-scale building works unfolded. To organise the defence, noble cavalry regiments were moved to the south for the first time: mass resettlement of Russian servitors and immigrants from Ukraine began, while the local peasant population was militarised. Never had the wild steppes seen anything like this. The southern border resembled a large construction site where life was always in full swing. Gradually, a single defensive line took shape.

What aims was Morozov pursuing? It is probable that the head of the government reckoned the building of a single defensive line would make the border region economically self-sufficient and capable of defending the southern frontier. Moscow spared no expense in the building work, aiming to master the steppe through war with the Tatars. However, building fortresses, ramparts, and ditches was insufficient when it came to creating a new fully-fledged region. What was needed here was the formation of a sustainable economic system.

On Morozov's initiative, a significant social reform was launched in the towns. It consisted of two parts: 1) the territories of private landholders were ceded to the state and taxes were gathered

from them (earlier, they did not pay taxes); and 2) all the population occupied with trade and crafts were to be joined into a single estate that would have a monopoly on these economic activities [18, c. 123]. The importance of this reform for the fortresses of the Belgorod line was vast: this created the conditions for the development of entrepreneurship and markets. A new group of traders appeared, capable of providing the region with goods and paying stable levels of tax. In the future, these conditions would turn the military points of the steppe frontier, and especially those protected by the defensive line, into real towns.

However, Morozov's harsh economic policy caused discontent. This was used by the opponents of the influential courtier; those old aristocrats he had removed from power. The authorities began to be discredited. Then, in the summer of 1648, a revolt broke out in Moscow, beginning a political crisis. The rebels acted under false rumours that Morozov was a traitor. It was said that Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich was not in control of the country and was asking for aid. On 2-3 June 1648, some members of the government were killed by an enraged mob: Morozov fled from the capital and resigned. The courtiers surrounding the tsar were changed. However, Morozov returned and remained close to the throne: although he did not occupy any office, he wielded great influence on Kremlin policies [25, p. 189]. Il'ya Miloslavskii, the new head of government and the tsar's father-in-law, was a figurehead and decided nothing himself [12, c. 152-153]. As such, the Kremlin's policies did not change: the intensive settlement of the southern border continued, simultaneously with the systematic erection of a single defensive line. At the cost of great efforts, ten new fortresses were built and old citadels considerably strengthened. Thus, a grandiose defensive line was erected – the Belgorod line [7, c. 72-74].

However, the construction was not yet finished: it was necessary to extend the defensive line to the west, to defend some southern regions, and to increase the number of peasants and traders. However, Morozov began to lose his influence and power: he was often ill and was rarely present in the Kremlin. He was 63 years old and suffered from gout and dropsy, which 'summoned him to his bed' [12, c. 152]. From 1653, important decisions in the Kremlin were taken by the young Aleksei Mikhailovich himself. He believed that it was necessary to start a war in the west with the aim of conquering the Ukrainian and Belarusian lands of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth. Aleksei thought that these were the primordial lands of his ancient ancestors, the medieval princes of Kiev. In 1652, the tsar lost interest in both southern colonisation and the Belgorod line. In 1654, large-scale construction ceased, with the local populations returning to an independent life. However, this was now a well-fortified region occupied by many service people capable of defending their lands.

At the tsar's behest, a new Russo-Polish War began in 1654. The initial successes of the tsarist army were impressive, but by 1658 Moscow had many problems on the warfront and dreamt of peace. The conflict was dragging on, and neighbouring states were being drawn into it. Confronting great problems (the army suffered one defeat after another), Aleksei Mikhailovich decided to use the population of the Belgorod line for military operations in the west. A special Belgorod regiment was organised in 1658, bringing together the region's service population into one group: large numbers of people were quickly dispatched to the Russo-Polish War.

As such, the defensive potential of the Belgorod line was weakened: colonisation stopped, new fortifications were not built, traders were exposed to danger, and their monopoly over trade was continually violated. These factors primed the grounds for a great catastrophe. In 1658-59, Crimean Tatars bypassed the Belgorod line and inflicted large losses on the local population. During the Tatar raid of 1659, 27,000 people from 21 regions were either killed or captured: 10,000 households were burnt down [3, c. 46]. Judging from approximate data in the preserved documents, a number of regions lost up to 20 per cent of their population. For example, more than half of all villages in Yelets region were devastated [17]. This was a great blow to the locality's economy, slowing down the quick tempo of development. As such, in 1661 the Kremlin took the decision to continue the construction of fortifications and the extension of the Belgorod line. In total, five more towns were built thanks to the efforts of the local population [11, c. 54-55].



#### 4. Conclusion

Thus, the history of the Belgorod line has the following form. The Time of Troubles taught Russians to take care of themselves and to place collective interests over individual ones. This helped residents on Russia's southern border to adapt to the difficult conditions of local life. The settlers took care of themselves: they defend their homes from Tatar raids while ploughing the virgin southern lands. The colonisers through mutual efforts built defensive fortifications around their settlements, erecting towers and digging ditches. Between 1630 and 1634, mass Tatar attacks took place: the government began to participate in the construction of defences. Thus appeared the first fortresses, but there was no systematic programme of construction. Only in 1645 did Moscow's policy begin to change. Boris Morozov, the new head of government, began a policy of systematically colonising the southern lands and fortifying these territories. It was precisely in this period that the Belgorod line was created. With the beginning of the Russo-Polish War in 1653 and in connection with Morozov's illness, active government intervention in Russia's south ceased. The line was not fully complete, but it nonetheless existed as single defensive ensemble.

Studying the documents reveals that there is no basis for dividing the history of the Belgorod line into three stages. The line was erected at a moment when the state was using the traditional defensive activities of the population in order to colonise the new fertile lands of the south. In a small amount of time (1646-53), the basic lines were constructed, uniting scattered defensive points. The means invested had a good effect: on the wild and empty frontier, markets began to develop, arable land increased, and the number of urban tradesmen grew rapidly. In the context of these transformations in Russia's south, reform should have led to a mercantile stratum, an important basis for the economic development of the regions in the Belgorod line and their rapid integration into the general Russian economy. By the end of the seventeenth century, many of these fortresses had indeed become important economic centres. However, this would have happened earlier if Moscow had continued to finance the defensive line and if the construction begun in 1646 had reached its logical conclusion. But war with the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth did not allow this to occur. The defensive line was not completed and Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich refused to continue military and urban reform. In sum, even in the era of Peter the Great, the Belgorod line was still essentially military in character: the urban population (craftsmen and tradesmen) was weakly developed. Another very important factor is the soil. Only thanks to this, Russia managed to gain a foothold in the new southern territories: a large harvest supplied the army with grain. Then this army moved further to the Black Sea.

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### **Authors' contribution**

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