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Title: Tracing the Stories of Russian Fugitive Slaves in 16th Century Üsküdar

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Abstract

In the 16th century, Üsküdar Law court registers were filled with hundreds of brief and standardized entries concerning the Russian fugitive slave cases, in a way that was rarely seen in other districts of the empire or historical periods. In order to interpret this anomalous historical phenomenon, this study examines the historical context of the 16th-century Black Sea slave trade, and it categorizes and analyzes the most common case types through nearly identical hundreds of records. The article seeks to find answers to why almost all of the runaway slaves were of Russian origin and were caught in only the Üsküdar district. In the study, I try to situate the dramatic boom of Russian fugitive slave cases within the broader context of the Black Sea slave trade, emphasizing the importance of the Crimean Khanate as the major supplier of slaves into the Ottoman markets. The socio-economic conditions of the 16th-century Crimea made the Khanate's finances almost dependent on slave raids into today's Ukraine and Russia, and the slave raids were seen as a profitable enterprise that involved numerous investors, traders, and military gangs. The article argues that the enormous magnitude of the Black Sea slave trade and 16th-century Üsküdar being the pivotal transit hub between Istanbul and Asia explain why these fugitive slaves were dominantly Russian and captured in Üsküdar. By examining court entries, the study shows glimpses of how the Ottoman legal mechanisms both regulated and perpetuated slavery. Almost all escaped and captured slaves ended up with the court returning them to their former owners, leaving them for alimony, or selling them at auction. The article traces and sheds light on the tragic stories of the Russian fugitive slaves of 16th-century Istanbul.

Keywords: The Ottoman slavery, the Black Sea slave trade, the Crimean Khanate, Russia and Ukraine, fugitive slaves, 16th-century Istanbul



*“A man who had not seen this market, had not seen anything in this world. A mother is severed from her son and daughter there, a son—from his father and brother, and they are sold amongst lamentations, cries of help, weeping and sorrow.”*¹

Evliya Çelebi described with these words how a family of Russian origin was sold in the slave market in Karabısar, which was a typical port city of Crimea, center of the Black Sea slave trade. This trade, which lasted for centuries, brought the largest number of people to the slave markets in the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century compared to other geographies where slaves came from. The magnitude of this trade and the nature of slavery in the Ottoman Empire can be researched in the kadi registers, which contain tremendous insights into economic and social life.

For instance, a striking trend can be followed through *Üsküdar Kadi Sicilleri* in the 16th century which we do not see in other law court records in other districts or periods. There are hundreds of records about fugitive slaves who were mainly of Russian origin, and nearly all of them lack personal information about slaves, they were written in very standardized brief sentences. My questions have emerged from this trend, in this article I try to understand the socio-economic phenomenon of Russian fugitive slaves and the reflection of this phenomenon in law court records. In order to understand the explosion of "runaway slaves of Russian origin" cases in the 16th century Üsküdar court records, it is necessary to first examine the Black Sea slave trade and then ask why runaway slaves were always caught in Üsküdar.

¹ Mikhail B Kizilov, “The Black Sea and the Slave Trade: The Role of Crimean Maritime Towns in the Trade in Slaves and Captives in the Fifteenth to Eighteenth Centuries.” In *Critical Readings on Global Slavery*, edited by Damian Alan Pargas and Felicia Roşu, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 971.



The Black Sea Slave Trade

The story in this article begins with the Black Sea slave trade since the significant portion of the slave cases we see in the registry records in 16th century Istanbul were Russian slaves. With its rich and vivid port cities, the history of the slave trade in the Crimean Peninsula dates back to the medieval age. Especially after the Genoese started to form its colonies in the peninsula in the 14th century, the slave trade began to become the largest economic business in the region, as it would continue in the following centuries. Before the Ottoman conquest of the Genoese colonies on the peninsula and vassalization of the Crimean Khanate, the slaves were mostly Tatars and Circassians who were sold to the Middle East, and mainly used as military slaves, mamluks and gulams, which were the backbone of political military system in the Islamic world after Caliph al Mutasim. By the 16th century, although the story seemed to have changed greatly, the basic socio-economic patterns for the region still existed. The city of Caffa which Turks called Kefe, and Russians changed it as Theodosia after their take over,² was still the center enriched by the slave trade. The Ottomans controlled the city instead of the Genoese, and the slaves sold were no longer Tatars but Slavic origins kidnapped from the territories of the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth and the Tsardom of Moscow. Armenians and Jews in the region continued to act as negotiators and commercial intermediaries between different powers. Although it did not fully comply with Sharia law, these non-Muslim communities participated in the slave trade and the process of employing slaves in different enterprises both in the Crimean geography and in the Ottoman mainland. The main specialty was their ability to make ransom payments for captives thanks to their networks spread over a wide geography.

In order to understand why the Black Sea slave trade was seemingly economically larger than other slave trades in frontier regions like Hungarian-Ottoman border or the Mediterranean, it would be helpful to examine economic situation of the Crimean Khanate. Except for a small amount of land along the coastline, the lands ruled by the khanate were almost completely unsuitable for agriculture. Considering the frequent famines, slave trade and taxes earned from trade were essential for the continuation of the political and military existence of the Crimean Tatars and other nomadic communities in the region.³ Although it was a common practice on the Hungarian border to raid from both sides during wartime and to hold captives for ransom or enslave them, when compared to the Black Sea trade, where entire Tatar armies with the Khan raided to collect slaves, it can be seen that the focus was more on war and gaining loot through ransoms

² Kizilov, "The Black Sea and the Slave Trade", 959.

³ Maria Ivanics, "Enslavement, slave labour and treatment of captives in the Crimean Khanate," In *Ransom Slavery along the Ottoman Borders: Early Fifteen–Early Eighteenth Centuries*, edited by Géza David and Pál Fodor, (Leiden–Boston: Brill, 2007), 193.



rather than making it the main economic activity. Evliya Çelebi says that the size of a typical raider army directly led by the khan was around 80,000 cavalry,⁴ although it is a known fact that Evliya generally exaggerates the numbers, these numbers may give us a clue to understand how large these slave raids were. Apart from these major military expeditions, smaller Tatar raids called "*akın* or *çapul*", which took place approximately twice a year during harvest times and winter, also brought many slaves to Crimea.⁵

Tatar cavalry moved very quickly, kidnapping as many people as possible and burning settlements. At the end of the campaigns, the khan would receive 1/5 of the slaves, similar to the penchik system in the Ottoman Empire. In addition, taxes were collected from sales made in all port cities of Crimea. Considering that slaves were supplied to the entire Ottoman geography from the Crimean ports, a very serious wealth was obtained through centuries. Although this process diminished as the Russians grew stronger and began to fortify their southern border, it never ended until the Russian Empire annexed Crimea in 1783. What the Russian Tsardom could do in the 16th century was to establish an institutionalized ransom payment system; Tatar merchants were encouraged to bring slaves to Russian lands and sell them for ransom. In addition, those who somehow managed to escape from slavery or whose relatives had been kidnapped but survived the raids submitted petitions to the tsar.⁶ Thanks to some Jewish and Armenian intermediaries, it was possible to reach the slaves and save them from slavery by paying a ransom. But it is clear how unlikely this is, considering the conditions of the period. The fate of kidnapped captives in Crimea was generally to be sold at the slave market in a port city such as Kefe and brought to Ottoman territory. Although many of them were caught and the chances of success were very low, we also encounter cases of escaped slaves in Crimea. Most of the slaves who tried to escape tried to go to the nearest Christian country during harvest times with the financial support of local Christians, and there were also rebellions of slaves after some serious military campaigns that brought too many slaves.⁷

The prices of the slaves brought to the island in such large raids were naturally low because there were so many slaves offered to the market, which meant that the treatment against them also became harsher. Besides the slaves working in the fields and workshops in Crimea, the most important way to exploit them was prostitution. In particular, the right to return the slave to the seller within 3 days if a fault was found caused female slaves to be used for prostitution and sent back to the slave market again and

⁴ Kizilov, "The Black Sea and the Slave Trade", 969.

⁵ Ivanics, "Enslavement, slave labour and treatment of captives in the Crimean Khanate," 195.

⁶ See for an interesting case when an Ottoman greek petitioned the Tsar to save his family: Christoph Witzenrath, "Agency in Muscovite Archives: Trans-Ottoman Slaves Negotiating the Moscow Administration." In *Slaves and Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Stephan Conermann, Sevgi Ağcagül, and Gül Şen, 87-131. (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2020)

⁷ Kizilov, "The Black Sea and the Slave Trade", 977.



again.⁸ Of course, sexual exploitation of slaves was not a situation faced only by female slaves; male slaves were also subjected to prostitution as a *ghulam*.⁹ It seems possible to make predictions that sexual exploitation was high in the case of Russian slaves. For example, Mustafa Ali, an Ottoman bureaucrat who wrote texts on etiquette in the 16th century, says the following when explaining the characteristics of slaves according to their ethnic origin: “And it is utterly impossible for a *cariye* of Russian origin not to be a whore, or for a beardless page (*sade-ru gilman*) of Russian origin not to be a catamite.”¹⁰

However, it should be underlined that this situation or the number of concubines was not as large as the European travelers of that time or the orientalist perspective fantasized.¹¹ Since in this article I examine the Russian slaves who were brought to Istanbul in the 16th century and tried to escape, I cannot examine what would happen in the following processes, such as the integration of the slaves into society and their release through manumission. The first part of the story of the Russian slaves we have examined ends with them being sold in Crimea and brought to Istanbul.

⁸ Joshua M White, “Slavery, Manumission, and Freedom Suits in the Early Modern Ottoman Empire.” In *Slaves and Slave Agency in the Ottoman Empire*, edited by Stephan Conermann, Sevgi Ağcagül, and Gül Şen, (Göttingen: Bonn University Press, 2020), 336.

⁹ Kizilov, “The Black Sea and the Slave Trade”, 972.

¹⁰ Douglas Brookes, “On Servants and Slaves” in *The Ottoman World: A Cultural History Reader*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2021), 84

¹¹ Ehud R Toledano, “Shifting Patterns of Ottoman Enslavement in the Early Modern Period.” In *Critical Readings on Global Slavery*, edited by Damian Alan Pargas and Felicia Roşu, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 896.



Abd-ı Abık: Fugitive Slaves in Üsküdar Law Court Registers

For Christian slaves, being sent to Constantinople was terrifying as their chances of escaping or returning would be greatly reduced, and kidnappers on the Hungarian border would even threaten to send them to the Ottoman capital to increase the ransom amount.¹² Slaves brought from Crimea to Constantinople were sold here again, there was a noisy slave market in Üsküdar, and started to work alongside artisans or merchants as well as in agricultural regions near Istanbul. Considering that at that time a woman could not go out without a male companion and that female slaves lived in indoor spaces, it is obvious why almost no women were encountered in the cases of runaway slaves. In addition, Ottoman society was seriously open to integrating slaves, and integration of a slave had even started long before manumission of that slave, with practices such as marriages or conversions to Islam. After manumission, slaves enter into a different clientage relationship with their former masters and work in the lines of business they previously worked in. This experience was not experienced this way for all slaves, and some slaves wanted to gain their freedom and return to their hometown at all costs. The cases of runaway slaves, which we see at very high rates in the 16th century Üsküdar law court records, also show this fact.

The main reason why we see cases of runaway slaves almost exclusively in the Üsküdar registry and not in other districts is that these slaves were caught in the ports of Üsküdar, the only transit point between Constantinople and Anatolia. The population living in Üsküdar consisted of Muslims, Armenians, Greeks and Jews, as well as many former slaves who had gained their freedom, and the slave-owning masters here did not necessarily come from the *askeri* class, the slaves and masters working in the workshops even wore similar clothes. For all these reasons, it was possible for runaway slaves to hide for a certain period of time in Üsküdar without being caught. Slaves who escaped, usually in groups and armed, hid in the surrounding vineyards and gardens while waiting for an opportunity to cross into Europe.

This does not mean that the people in the region were tolerant towards runaway slaves, on the contrary, slave hunters called *yavacı* and local people would hand over the slaves they caught to the authorities and receive a fee of 90 silver coins per slave which was a half price for buying a house in the district.¹³ The reason why some slaves ran away was to find a legal voice in the courts rather than returning

¹² Géza Pálffy, "Ransom Slavery along the Ottoman–Hungarian Frontier in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries." In *Critical Readings on Global Slavery*, edited by Damian Alan Pargas and Felicia Roşu, (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 924.

¹³ Yvonne J Seng, "Fugitives and Factotums: Slaves in Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient* 39, no. 2 (1996): 153.



to their hometowns. Especially in rural areas far from the city, slaves who suffered from rights violations such as denial of manumission could use this method.¹⁴

We do not know how many of the escaped slaves were successful in getting away from Ottoman lands, but we can learn in detail what happened to the captured slaves from the law court records. When the kadı registries in Üsküdar are examined, it is seen that a significant portion of the cases in almost all of them begin with "Fugitive slave from Russian origin...". For instance, in the Üsküdar Mahkemesi 5 Numaralı Sicili, 222 of the 688 total records consist of fugitive slave cases. In these records, it is seen that the court outcome mostly consists of decisions such as returning the slave to his owner, leaving him for alimony and selling him.

This is why it was recorded:

From Veli Çelebi b. Alagöz, young male slave named Ahmed, of medium height, blond, Russian origin, with twinkling eyes, wearing an old cardigan and white trousers, came to the court and confessed to his slavery and escape, and was recorded in the registry.

He was surrendered to Alagöz Bey and it was written down.

Recorded on 9 Shaban 971.

Witnesses: Pazarbaşı Ahmed Çelebi, Şaban b. Hamza, Sinan Çelebi b. Abdullah, Hasan b. Abdullah, Mustafa Muhzır, Muhzır Ali¹⁵

Here we see a very classic case result with hundreds of others in the same format. The same monotonous narrative, without any details or people's statements, was used in all cases of runaway slaves. Since the clothes worn and ethnicity were the only markers for identification, these were written one by one in each record. Since a slave was a very valuable asset, owners whose slaves escaped would definitely travel long distances to find their slaves, looking for runaway slaves in Üsküdar's dungeons or for sale at auctions. It is obvious that Ahmed was a converted slave, but since no other details are given in the records, nothing can be understood about the reason for his escape. Probably because there were so many cases, those who registered the courts created a special legal language for these cases and did not see the need to go into detail. Unfortunately, it is not easy to find cases that contain details about the hundreds of other fugitive slave cases.

¹⁴ Seng, "Fugitives and Factotums: Slaves in Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul," 162.

¹⁵ Üsküdar Mahkemesi 26 Nolu Sicil, 984 [94a-2]



Another classical type was the assignment to alimony (*nafakaya teslimi*):

From Mustafa b. Abdullah, a blond, bright-eyed, dark-haired, of medium height, of Russian origin, fugitive slave became a confessor of his slavery and his escape. Two coins per day were decided for his alimony and protection.

On Thursday, in the month of Rebiülahir, in the year 954.

Witnesses: Mustafa b. Mehmed, Ramazan b. Hüseyin, Kara Yusuf b. Abdullah and Abdullah¹⁶

The assignment for a *hifz ve nafaka* (upkeep) meant that the runaway slave would remain in prison until his owner came and found him or until he was sold at auction, and he would be kept alive by paying an alimony of 2 coins during this period.¹⁷ Slaves were generally kept in prison for about 100 days, called *müddet-i örfiyye* (customary period), and the alimony money given during this period was taken from the slave's owner or the new owner who bought him. Another possible outcome was that slaves who were imprisoned would escape again or die in prison where they were already injured.

Here is an example of what was happening after 100 days in prison:

The said slave's term was completed according to custom and he was sold to Hüseyin b Abdullah for 850 silver coins at auction among those who requested it.

Muharram, year 954.

Witnesses: Süleyman b. Şaban, Ahmed b. Hasan¹⁸

Fugitive slaves were seen as spoiled goods because they were not obedient, so their sales prices were cheaper than normal slaves. Considering that Tatar raids in the north of the Black Sea constituted the majority of slaves coming to the Ottoman Empire and that often tens of thousands of people were sold in the slave market at a time, it is natural that the prices of Russian slaves were lower. It is a fact that can be understood from the court records that the majority of the fugitive slave cases in this period were Russians, with thirty-nine percent.¹⁹

¹⁶ Üsküdar Mahkemesi 14 Numaralı Sicil, 635 [83a-2]

¹⁷ Seng, "Fugitives and Factotums: Slaves in Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul," 154

¹⁸ Üsküdar Mahkemesi 14 Numaralı Sicil, 643 [84a-3]

¹⁹ Seng, "Fugitives and Factotums: Slaves in Early Sixteenth-Century Istanbul," 157.



Finally, the case of a person who gained his freedom by proving that he was not a slave could be examined as a different outcome:

This is why it was recorded:

A fugitive slave named Mehmed, of Bosnian origin, with red eyes, a light blue fabric on his back, a red shalwar on his back, and boots on his feet, was captured by someone named Ali and handed over to Mustafa Bey, the officer of Üsküdar. His alimony was valued at 22 silver coins and recorded.

It was written in the month of Zilhicce in 940.

Witnesses: Sinan Halife b. Turud and Dede b. Hasan et al. And since the person described in question was not a runaway slave, he was released from prison.²⁰

It was possible for freed slaves to fall into court on the grounds that they were suspected fugitives, or for slaves who were promised to be freed but were not freed to somehow apply to the court and gain their freedom, as seen in this example.

²⁰ Üsküdar Mahkemesi 9 Numaralı Sicil, 643 [84a-3]



Conclusion

We do not know how many of the Russian runaway slaves made it to the territory of present-day Ukraine and Russia. However, we know that most of the captured slaves were put in prison with alimony paid, and if the owner came within 100 days, they were handed over to their owners or sold at auction. There are also cases of slaves who died in prison or managed to escape again. Questions such as why the cases of runaway slaves are only seen in Üsküdar and why they mostly consist of slaves of Russian origin can be answered in the light of the information examined.

The Black Sea slave trade was the most vital economic activity ensuring the existence of the Crimean Khanate, and especially in the 16th century, neither the Russian Tsardom nor the Polish-Lithuanian commonwealth had the power to protect its southern borders from Tatar raids. This caused countless captives of Russian origin to flow into the Ottoman slave markets. Since the route for runaway slaves was generally to cross from Anatolia to the European side, the slaves were generally caught at the ports in Üsküdar. For this reason, fugitive slave cases that we do not see in the records of other districts constitute the majority of Üsküdar's records.



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Appendix:**1. Üsküdar Mahkemesi 26 Numaralı Sicil (H. 970-971 / M. 1562-1563). 984 [94a-2] Rus asıllı kaçak kölenin Alagöz Bey'e teslim edildiği**

Vech-i tahrîr-i hurûf budur ki

Veli Çelebi b. Alagöz yedinden orta boylu sarışın Rûsiyyü'l-asl şehîlâ gözlü üzerine ak aba ve içine eski aba ile ve ak çakşır ile Ahmed nâm gulâm meclis-i şer'a gelip rıkkıyyetine ve ibâkatine mu'terif olup kayd-ı sicil olup sicil olundu Alagöz Bey'e teslîm olundu sebt olundu.

Tahrîren fî 9 Şa'bânü'l-mu'azzam sene 971.

Şuhûdü'l-hâl: Pazarbaşı Ahmed Çelebi, Şaban b. Hamza, Sinan Çelebi b. Abdullah, Hasan b. Abdullah, Mustafa Muhzır; Muhzır Ali

2. Üsküdar Mahkemesi 14 Numaralı Sicil (H.953-955/ M. 1546-1549). 635 [83a-2] Rus asıllı kaçak köleye nafaka tayini

Vech-i tahrîr-i sicil budur ki

Mustafa b. Abdullah yedinden bir abd-i âbık asferü'l-levn, efrakü'l-hâcibeyn, eşhelü'l-ayneyn, kösecil, evsatü'l-kad, Rûsiyyü'l-asl Şîrmerd [nâm] abd-i âbık ibâkatine ve rıkkıyyetine mu'terif olup nafakası ve hıfzı için yevmî ikişer akçe takdîr olunup

fî yevm Pençşenbih min şehri Rebî'ilâhir sene 954.

Şuhûdü'l-hâl: Mustafa b. Mehmed, Ramazan b. Hüseyin, Kara Yusuf b. Abdullah ve Abdullah.

3. Üsküdar Mahkemesi 9 Numaralı Sicil (H. 940-942 / M. 1534-1536). 1028 [136b-4] Kaçak köle olmadığı anlaşılan Mehmed'in serbest bırakıldığı

Sebeb-i tahrîr-i sicil budur ki

Bir abd-i âbık uzun boylu, ala gözlü, eğninde âsumânî çuha ve kızıl şalvar ve ayağında edük ve papuç Bosneviyyü'l-asl Mehmed nâm kulu Ali nâm kimesne tutup Üsküdar subaşı olan Mustafa Bey'e teslîm olunup nafakası için yevmî iki akçe takdîr olunup tescîl olundu.

Tahrîren fî evâili Zilhicce li sene erba'in ve tis'a mi'e.

Şuhûdü'l-hâl: Sinan Halîfe b. Turud ve Dede b. Hasan ve gayruhüm. Ve mezkûr mevsûf abd-i âbık olmayıp hapisten utlâk olundu.



4. **Üsküdar Mahkemesi 14 Numaralı Sicil (H.953-955/ M. 1546-1549). 643 [84a-3] Kaçak kölenin satıldığı**

Mezkûr-ı mevsûf abdin müddet-i örfiyyesi tamâm olup beyne't-tâlibîn mezâd olup Hüseyin b. Abdullah'a sekiz yüz elli akçeye karâr edip bey' olundu. Muharrem sene 954. Şuhûdü'l-hâl: Süleyman b. Şaban, Ahmed b. Hasan.

