ENSLAVEMENT, SLAVE LABOUR
AND THE TREATMENT OF CAPTIVES
IN THE CRIMEAN KHANATE

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The Crimean Tatars founded a state in a region that had been an area for
the acquisition and marketing of slaves since Antiquity. Imposing taxa-
tion on the slave trade and on the commerce of Italian colonial towns
along the Black Sea littoral was the means of generating the reliable
income the Tatars needed for the foundation of an independent state in
the first half of the fifteenth century and for its subsequent maintenance
for approximately three hundred years. The density of the population in
the area controlled by Tatars was very low, and the agriculture there was
rudimentary. Only the coastal districts of the peninsula were suitable for
intense cultivation. Their yields, however, were insufficient to support the
multitudinous warring layers, in contrast to the Balkans which proved to
be the granary of Ottoman troops for centuries. Because of the frequent
droughts and epidemics, most of the nomadic Nogai Tatars living on the
steppe and in Bucak under the suzerainty of the Crimean khan were
compelled to pursue slave acquisition as their only sure means of
subsistence. The Tatar clans of the military élite settled in the Crimea
constantly needed slaves to work their estates. Thus, slave labour and
revenues from the slave trade were indispensable to the Crimean Khanate
for centuries.

Research into the Crimean Tatar slave trade has concentrated mainly
on raids against Polish and Russian areas, on the fate of slaves seized in
these territories and on the revenues from it that accrued to the Ottoman
treasury. A major stride has taken place recently with the publication of

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1For Russian and Polish captives, see A. A. Novosel’skij, Bor’ba Moskovskogo Gos-
sudarstva s tatarami v pervoj polovine XVII. veka, Moskva, 1948; Alan W. Fisher, “Mus-
575–594; An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, 1300–1914. Ed. by
Ottoman customs registers. Rough estimates can thus be replaced by exact figures concerning the magnitude of the Black Sea slave trade, and of the profits from it pocketed by the Ottomans after 1475, when the Italian coastal colonies were occupied and the Khanate forced into a loose dependency. In 1529, 10,000 gold coins, approximately one quarter of the customs revenue of the busiest port, Caffa, derived from slaves exported from the Crimea.\(^2\) Of total Ottoman income from the Crimea in 1577–78, 29 per cent came from the slave trade. An indication of the special value of slaves is the fact that a customs duty of 256 \(\text{akçe}\) or nearly 4 gold coins per capita was levied on them (as compared to the 4.2 per cent duty levied on ordinary goods).\(^3\) This was the equivalent to 6–12 per cent of a price ranging from 25 to 50 gold coins per capita that could be achieved in slave markets. Thus, duties on slaves were very high. Using the customs revenues of 1578 as a basis, İnalcık put the number of slaves exported over a period of 14 months at 17,502.\(^4\) The customs income of the Black Sea ports went in part to the leaders of the Khanate. Prior to 1475, the Genoese colonies paid tribute to the khan, while after that date the Ottomans gave various amounts, mostly from the customs duties levied in Caffa, to the khan, the kalga and the nureddin as annual allowances (salyane).\(^5\)

**Opportunities for taking prisoners during military campaigns**

A large number of slaves could be captured by the Tatars during their campaigns, which were directed mainly against the Russians, Poles and

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\(^4\)İnalcık, *The Customs Register*, 143 and *An Economic and Social History*, 283–285.