THE ISTANBUL FUR MARKET IN THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

Markus Koller*

The Muscovite/Russian-Ottoman Fur Trade—The Trade Routes

The Istanbul narh defteri of 1640 lists a large number of different furs that were available in the Ottoman capital. Among them were sable, Cercassian marten, beech marten, ermine, squirrel, fox from Azov and jackal from Karaman or Algeria.¹ The fur trade between the Maghreb or remote provinces in the Balkan peninsula such as Bosnia² and Istanbul still remains to be researched in depth. But contemporary Ottoman and non-Ottoman sources provide scholars with considerable information about the Muscovite/Russian-Ottoman trade in this luxury good that had existed since the fifteenth century.³

Primarily in the 1970s a number of articles dealing with this topic were published in the journal Cahiers du Monde russe et soviétique. Alexandre Bennigsen and Chantal Lemercier-Quelquejay used the mühimme defterleri to describe the activities of Ottoman merchants engaged in the fur trade in the second half of the sixteenth century.⁴ The traders involved in this line of business were mainly Armenians, Jews and Greeks.⁵ It was the time when the old “Tatar route” of Caffa

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² In the sixteenth century most of the furriers working in the Ottoman palace were Bosnians. See H. Tezcan, Furs and Skins owned by the Sultans, in: S. Faroqhi and C. K. Neumann (eds.), Ottoman Costumes. From Textile to Identity, Istanbul 2004, pp. 63–79, pp. 71–72.
³ Different kinds of fur are mentioned in a regulation concerning the customs of Istanbul and Galata dating from 1453. See N. Beldiceanu, Les actes des premiers sultans conservés dans les manuscrits turcs de la Bibliothèque Nationale à Paris, I, Paris 1960, pp. 116–118.
⁵ H. Inalcık, An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire, Vol. 1, Cambridge 1994, p. 278.
or Azov-Kiev-Lwow had lost its importance in favour of the “Moldavian route” between Akkermann and Lwow. Caravans left Istanbul via Edirne, crossed the Danube at Isakçı and reached Smolensk by passing through Kamenez Podolsk, Lwow and Minsk. The south-north trade over the Bursa-Istanbul-Caffa or Akkerman routes by sea and overland by Edirne-Kilia-Akkerman were dominated by Muslim merchants. The final destination of many merchants was Moscow where they had the opportunity to stay for some years in a kervansaray reserved for the merchants of the Sublime Porte.

Traditionally the Polish-Lithuanian town of Lwow had received oriental goods through the “Tatar route” but its merchants were not able to accumulate enough capital to enable them to engage in this trade. This situation changed when the “Moldavian route” attracted more and more the caravans and it was mainly the Germans and Armenians of this city that transported oriental goods from Pera to Akkerman and Lwow in the second half of the fifteenth century. Jewish, Levantine and Italian merchants began to concentrate on Lwow which saw a prosperity that also resulted from the rights of staple which forced the merchants to stop there. Quite regularly the “Polish caravan” passed through Lwow on its way to Istanbul. This caravan had been always led by an Armenian bearing the title of a kervanbaşi. Many of the merchants travelling on the “Moldavian route” on their own initiative or with this caravan may have done most of their trade in Kamenez Podolsk and Lwow. In the latter town there was a large and prosperous guild of furriers working sable and other furs brought from Russia. This leads one to assume that, in contrast to scholars like Bennigsen, Lemercier-Quelquejay or Berindei, the “Moldavian route” is not only to consider in terms of the Russian trade.

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7 Inalcık, An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire… cit., p. 278.
9 Inalcık, An Economic and Social History of the Ottoman Empire… cit., p. 287.