

# The Islamic Trade in European Slaves

by Emmet Scott (December 2016)



**I**t is common knowledge that, for over a thousand years, Arab and Muslim slavers took enormous numbers of men, women and children from sub-Saharan Africa. What is not so well known is that they took equally large numbers of people from Europe. As with Africa, Arab slave-taking in Europe began in the seventh century – shortly after the rise of Islam – and continued virtually without interruption into the modern epoch.

Modern Western culture, with its Anglo-centric world-view, has an almost obsessive preoccupation with the European trade in African slaves, a trade which commenced in the late fifteenth century and ended in the mid-nineteenth, but seems to have little knowledge of or interest in the equally intense Muslim trade in European slaves during the same epoch. This is a strange state of affairs, given the fact that, in general, the Europeans enslaved by the Muslims between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries, were treated appallingly, and the trade had a long-term and devastating impact upon large areas of the

continent.

As noted, Muslim slave-taking from Europe commenced almost immediately after the arrival of Islam on the world stage. These early slave raids had an immense impact upon European civilization and, as I have argued in some detail in *Mohammed and Charlemagne Revisited*, turned the entire Mediterranean into a war zone, broke the unity of the eastern and western branches of Roman civilization and Christendom in general, and essentially gave birth to the medieval world. With the Christian counter-attack, which commenced in the eleventh century with the Reconquista in Spain and the Crusades, Muslim slave-raiding abated somewhat, though it never actually ended. But following the emergence in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries of the Ottoman Turkish Empire, Islam was once again on the offensive; and with this renewed aggression came a vast expansion of the slave-trade.

It is impossible to be precise or anything approaching it when talking about the number of slaves taken from Europe in the five centuries following the rise of Ottoman power. However, what is clear is that three main theatres of slave-raiding emerged. The first and by far the most important of these was in south-east and central Europe, where Ottoman armies engaged in annual assaults upon Christian territories. As the Turkish armies moved ever northwards and westwards they captured and enslaved great numbers of Europeans, the vast majority of whom were sold in Constantinople and Anatolia. Raiding Christian territories was incessant and we hear that, "The primary aim of the [Ottoman] raiders was the acquisition of booty. The most important booty was humans who could be sold at the slave markets for a high price. After a successful attack thousands of prisoners of war were driven to the Ottoman markets. ... No one was safe in the endangered areas – nobles and serfs could equally become slaves." (Eniko Csukovits, "Miraculous escapes from Ottoman captivity" in Geza David and Pal Foder (eds.) *Ransom Slavery along the Ottoman Borders (Early Fifteenth – Early Eighteenth Centuries)* (Leiden etc. Brill Academic, 2007) p. 5) As in other parts of the world, the Muslim slavers preferred young women and boys and these offered the highest price in the Turkish heartlands. Most of the boys were castrated and served as eunuchs, whilst the girls and women were destined for the harems of the Ottoman nobility.

It must not be imagined, as some might, that once a Christian territory was conquered and under tribute to the Ottomans that it was then immune from the attentions of the slavers. Unfortunately, this was not the case. Under sharia law the position of Christians was never secure, and Christian girls were regularly kidnapped by Muslim raiders and sold into the harems of Constantinople and Anatolia. In addition to this, Ottoman policy was to recruit Christian boys into the army and these youths formed the elite core of Janissaries. But they were "recruited" by force, essentially kidnapped from their families and never again seen by them. So, although the Janissaries cannot, strictly speaking, be described as slaves, they were the victims of kidnap and forcible conversion to an alien faith. We should note too that rebellion against Ottoman rule, a common enough occurrence in Europe, was invariably met with savage reprisal, involving massacre, torture and enslavement; so that the total number of Europeans enslaved by the Ottomans grew, over the centuries, to enormous proportions. How many, it is impossible to say, mainly because no reliable records are available. However, it is beyond question that the number ran into many millions, with estimates ranging anywhere from ten to forty million.

The next most important theatre of the Ottoman slave trade was a vast swathe of eastern Europe incorporating all of modern Ukraine and stretching into Russia proper almost as far as Moscow and the Lithuanian/Polish border. From the middle of the fourteenth centuries these territories were raided incessantly by Islamicized Tartars from the Crimea (the Khanate of Crimea) and from present-day Kazakhstan and eastern Russia (the Nogai Horde). The worst of the raiding in Russia occurred from 1441 onwards when the Crimea, or Crimean Khanate (a kingdom much larger than the Crimean Peninsula), became independent. According to historian Alan Fisher, up to three million Slavic peasants were enslaved by Tartar raiders operating from the Crimea between 1441 and 1774, when the Russians conquered the territory. (Alan Fisher, "Muscovy and the Black Sea Slave Trade," *Canadian American Slavic Studies*, Vol. 6 (1972), pp. 575-94) Almost all of these were sold into the Ottoman Empire as eunuchs, harem women and galley slaves. These raids, virtually unknown among Westerners, are recognized by historians as playing an enormous role in retarding Russia's economic and cultural development. They prevented the settlement and peopling of the

Ukrainian steppe lands, a vast area which eventually was to become the breadbasket of Russia.

The slave-raids occurred on an annual basis, and reading contemporary accounts of them is harrowing. Consider for example the words of S. Herberstein, ambassador from Emperor Charles V to Muscovy in the 1520s, when he describes Mehmet Ghirey's slave-hunting expedition of 1521:

“He took with him from Muscovy so great a multitude of captives as would scarcely be considered credible; they say the number exceeded eight hundred thousand, part of whom he sold Kaffa to the Turks, and part he slew. The old and infirmed men, who will not fetch much at a sale, are given up to the Tatar youths, either to be stoned, or to be thrown into the sea, or to be killed by any sort of death they might please.”

Mikhalon the Lithuanian wrote around 1550 in his book *De moribus Tatarorum Litanuorum et Moscorum*, “The Crimean Tatars have much more slaves than livestock. Therefore they supply them also to other lands. Many ships loaded with arms, clothes and horses came to them one after another from beyond the Pontus and from Asia, and left always from them with slaves. ... So these plunderers always are in possession not only of slaves for trade with other people but also have slaves for their own estates and to satisfy at home their cruelty and waywardness. In fact we often find among these unfortunate people very strong men, who, if not castrated, are branded on the forehead or on the cheek, and are tormented by day at work and by night in dungeons.”

It was to counter this incessant predation that the Cossacks, mounted peasant warriors, were originally formed; and indeed the Cossacks formed the vanguard of the resistance to the raiders over three centuries.

As we have seen, Alan Fisher and other historians estimate that during the three centuries of Tartar raiding about three million Slavic peasants from Russia, Poland and the Ukraine were captured and sold to the Ottomans. But even after

the Russian conquest of the Crimea, the trade in European Christians from the east did not cease; the Ottoman slavers simply directed their attentions further south, where the ancient Christian peoples of the Caucasus, Georgians, Ossetians, Circassians and Armenians, now became the prime objects of their predatory attentions. From this region a further one million slaves, at the very minimum, were transported into the Turkish heartlands between the seventeenth and late nineteenth centuries.

The third theatre of Ottoman slave-raiding against Europe was the Mediterranean and Atlantic coasts of the continent. Muslim pirates had of course raided southern Europe continuously from bases in North Africa from the seventh century, but things took a turn for the worse in the sixteenth century when the whole of North Africa came under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Empire, either as directly administered provinces or as autonomous dependencies. Spurred by the demand for white-skinned slaves further to the east, North African pirates intensified their activities, capturing thousands of ships and rendering, within a few decades, long stretches of coast in Spain and Italy almost completely uninhabited. From the sixteenth to the nineteenth centuries, it is estimated that the Barbary pirates captured and enslaved anything between 800,000 and 1.25 million Europeans. Their predation extended throughout the Mediterranean and even, on one occasion at least, as far as South America. They also on occasion raided far into the North Atlantic, taking slaves from the coasts of France, the Netherlands, Britain, Ireland, and even Iceland. But their main theatre of operation was the western Mediterranean, where islands such as Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica, and the Balearics suffered intensely. And their raids inflicted severe damage upon coastal towns and villages in Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal.

Whilst such depredations continued into the early nineteenth century, there was a little improvement towards the end of the seventeenth century, when European navies commenced regular patrols of the western Mediterranean and launched retaliatory raids against the pirates' strongholds in North Africa. However, the ships and coasts of Christian states without such effective protection continued to suffer until the early years of the nineteenth century, and it was only after the Napoleonic Wars and the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 that the European powers agreed upon action to suppress the Barbary corsairs entirely. After this

several punitive attacks against Algiers and Sale in Morocco were launched by the British navy which almost, but not entirely, destroyed the slavers' ability to raid. Nonetheless, so deeply ingrained was the freebooting tradition among the inhabitants of the region that even then there were occasional further incidents until the French invasion and conquest of Algiers in 1830.

At the height of their activities the Barbary States were so powerful that nations including the United States of America paid tribute in order to stave off their attacks.

It is important to note the impact of these activities upon Europe's Mediterranean communities. The Christians of the islands, in particular – Sicily, Sardinia, Corsica and the Balearics – had to live with the perennial threat of surprise attack, and there can be no doubt that such conditions left an indelible impression. The paranoid culture of feuding, assassination and vendetta, for which Sicily and Corsica, in particular, were to become famous, has to be viewed in light of the persistent violence inflicted upon these lands by Muslim corsairs. By way of comparison, one has to imagine the probable impact upon the peoples of the British Isles and northern Europe had the Viking raids lasted a thousand years. And in this context it is perhaps worth noting that the word "Mafia" seems to be of Arabic origin.

What then of the total number of Europeans enslaved by the Ottoman Turks and their allies between the fifteenth and nineteenth century? By mainstream estimates around 1 million were taken by the Barbary pirates; around 3 million by the Crimean Tartars from Russia/Ukraine; about 1 million by the Tartars and Turks from the Caucasus, and about 10 million (by the most conservative estimate) by the Ottomans themselves from central Europe and the Balkans. This gives a grand total of 15 million – far more than European slave-traders took from Africa in the same period. Yet this is a fact quite hidden from the public and unknown to almost everyone in Western Europe and North America. And the conditions endured by European captives in the Ottoman Empire were infinitely worse than those experienced by Africans in the Americas. The latter generally worked on plantations and were permitted, and even encouraged, to marry and have families. By contrast, the Europeans in the Dar al-Islam suffered a terrible

fate. Able-bodied men were generally branded and put to endless back-breaking labour, either as galley-slaves or as miners. They were not permitted to marry and were denied all semblance of family life or female companionship. Young boys were invariably castrated – and raped – whilst women were consigned to the sex-slavery of the harem.

The great humanitarian impulse to end slavery, from the late eighteenth century onwards, came entirely from the Christian West, and by the mid-nineteenth century it was stamped out completely in most Christian lands. That slavery no longer exists (officially at least) in the majority of Muslim territories is due entirely to the efforts of Westerners, and in fact Muslim societies vigorously resisted all attempts by Europeans to stamp out the slave trade in Africa during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was not until the second half of the twentieth century that slavery was finally abolished in the Gulf States and the Arabian Peninsula – after intense Western pressure. Is it not about time that some of this information got through to students in our schools and colleges?

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