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Turkish Women and Children in Russian Captivity in the 18th and Early 19th Century

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Series of wars between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire in the 17th–19th century was accompanied by capture not only of Turkish combatants, but of also numerous civilians, including women and children. In this regard, however, Russo-Turkish Wars 1735–1739, 1768–1774, 1787–1791 and 1806–1812 in particular stand out, when the Russians captured a total of up to 20,000 women, girls and boys under 15 years of age1, which accounted approximately 30 percent of the total number of Turkish prisoners of war (about 60,000 pers.).

Regrettably, historians both in Turkey and in Russia still pay insufficient heed to the above-cited categories of prisoners of war (POWs), and that is why the present article aims to provide a contribution to fill this gap. At the very outset, it is important to make the reservation that we often are forced to use only approximate data on the gender and age composition of the POWs. Most of these materials contain only general information. For example, “the three hundred Turks, including men, women and children, were taken prisoner”2. However, even accurate figures tell us very little as these figures cannot always be generalized. For example, Turkish women and children formed 48.7 percent of captured in Girsov in 1809 (567 persons out of 1,164); 26.7 percent of captured in Ochakov in 1737 (1,200 persons out of 4,500); 12.7 percent of captured in Bender in 1770 (1,500 persons out of 11,800); 5.1 percent of captured in Perekop in 1738 (60 persons out of 1,178) and only one percent of captured in Anapa in 1791 (25 persons out of 2,451)3.

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1 And these are ethnic Turks and Muslims only (i.e., without taking into account Arabs, Bulgarians, Moldovans, Romanians, Tatars et al.)


3 Rossiyskiy gosudarstvennyy arkhiv drevnikh aktov (RGADA, Russian State Archive of
At the same time, Russian archival materials (operational logs, official records of the Russian military commanders and other similar documents) contain a great deal of eloquent figures. For example, “There were captured 78 Turks, including 24 men, 20 women and 34 children”; “There were captured 86 Turks, including 28 men, 26 women and 32 children”; “There were captured 267 Turks, including 88 men, 85 women and 94 children”; “There were captured 818 Turks, including 238 men, 235 women and 345 children” and the like.

But be that as it may, now we must ask ourselves the question: under what circumstances Turkish women and children were captured? Of course, there was a range of circumstances. However, they all may be categorized four types, under which women and children can be divided into the four following groups:

1) The first group (about 45 percent of the total) are the women and children who were captured during the assault on Turkish fortresses. In particular, in Ochacov in 1737 were captured 1,200 pers.; in Bender in 1770 – 1,500 pers.; in Ochacov in 1788 – 1,500 pers.; in Izmail in 1790 – 3,000 pers, etc. The Russian military command in such cases substantiated the capture of civilians as a preventive measure for securing both rear lines of the Russian Army and Turkish individuals. In our view, this substantiation seems wholly convincing, especially since taking a fortress by assault usually was coupled with destruction of homes, looting of property and mass death of males. It is pretty obvious, that the women and children could have quickly perished of cold and starvation in such circumstances.

2) The second group (around 30 percent of the total) are the women and children who lived in minor localities and rural areas located in the war zones. These people were interned in Russia with the same purposes as the ones referred to above. We believe, these measures of the Russian military command also were reasonable and necessary especially since the Russians had burnt down

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Turkish villages to deprive the Ottoman troops of their sources of supply. This group’s share reached 30 percent of the total number of captured women and children. For example, in one week alone (from 12 to 18 August 1810) 6,537 Turkish POWs were transferred to Tiraspol. Of this total 27.1 percent (1,771 pers.) were women and 40 percent (2,612 pers.) were children (including 275 suckling babies).

3) Third group (around 20 percent of the total): women and their children, who have gone to Russia voluntarily, unwilling to be apart from their husbands and fathers. For example, in accordance to the terms of Khotin’s capitulation (August 31, 1739), all women and children were given the right to leave for Turkey. Nevertheless, all of them wished to go to Russia together with their relatives. Eventually, the Russian military command had to evacuate to the point of internment (the city of Glukhov) 2,050 individuals instead of the 763 ones. No doubt, the moral choice of the Turkish women deserves respect. This choice, however, had come at a high price both those women and their children, because by the spring 1740 there were only 1,270 survived, of the 2,050 people. (Unfortunately, we could not reveal accurate figures on the women and children mortality rate).

4) The last group (about 5 percent of the total) unite women and children, who have been captured by the Russians in any other case, for instance, in the course of capturing of Turkish vessels in the Black Sea and in the Mediterranean Sea; during army operations behind the Turkish line and so on.

As can be seen from the above, capture of female and children was unavoidable consequences or collateral damage of the war. Similarly, it should be borne in mind that women, girls and boys under 15 years have never been used for forced labor in Russia. From here, it becomes obvious, that Russia’s political leadership considered these people as a “burden”.

Since 1806, nevertheless, all Turkish women and children were granted “prisoner
of war” status and therefore wholly State-financed. However, in the eighteenth century, there was a completely different approach to the problem, as all women and children were divided into two groups. One group consisted of those persons who had recognized as “prisoners of war” and financed by public resources. They were mostly women (children) who were remained with their husbands (fathers) i.e., they have not lost male relatives in the chaos of the war. This group was very small. Thus, for instance, there were 1,187 Turkish POWs in the cities of Narva, Revel and Riga in 1739, but there were 25 women and 10 children only among them, i.e., less than 3 percent of the total number of POWs. On the other hand, there were 3,660 Turkish POWs in the cities of Belgorod, Voronezh and Rostov-na-Donu in 1771, but there were 835 women and 138 children among them, representing already 26.6 percent of the total number of POWs. On average, however, proportions of women and children were barely 15 percent of total number of POWs.

Lastly, as for the remaining women and children (about 85 percent of the total), they were mostly widows, unmarried women, girls, children who have lost their parents etc. All those people were passed down to private individuals and are truer to Russian military personnel (to generals, officers, even non-commissioned officers). These servicemen were bound to maintain Turkish women and children at their own expense and with the end of the war to ensure the return of Turks to their homeland. It is in this way that, the Russian authorities were reduced the cost of maintaining the POWs.

Those women and children worked as servants of Russian servicemen. More often, however, servicemen had sent Turks to their estates back home, where women and children worked as domestic servants or agricultural workers. The living and working conditions of these persons were largely the same as those for Russian serfs.

As for living conditions of the women and children from among the POWs, they may be broadly characterized as follows:

The Russo-Turkish War of 1735–1739. Every captive, including child, was provided with rye flour and various cereals of the same quantity as a Russian soldier. Furthermore, each person was received 2 kopecks per day to buy meat, vegetables, herbs, etc. There was no supplying for suckling babies. Women were provided men’s clothes only (caftans and the like).

The Russo-Turkish War of 1768–1774. There was a tendency of improving the captives’ nutrition. Petersburg refused to provide the POWs with food and replaced the issuance of rations with compensation allowance. Thus, the Turks were given the opportunity to purchase food in their discretion. The captives began to receive 3 kopecks per day. In 1770, by order of Catherine the Great, the newborn children of captives began to be funded to the same extent as adult POWs (3 kopecks per day per man). (It is obvious that Catherine the Great took this decision because she was a woman). Finally, women were provided the women’s clothes since 1772 (skirts, stockings, shoes, etc.).

The Russo-Turkish War of 1787–1791. Women were started to receive funds equally with their husbands, and the children - equally with their fathers.

The Russo-Turkish War of 1806–1812. Payments for children under the age of 10 were completely lifted. Other changes did not occur\(^\text{15}\).

Naturally, all the above is general in nature. But reality was more complex. In 1808, for example, a three-bunchuk Pasha’s widow was received 1,000 rubles every month. However, it is exceptional case, of course\(^\text{16}\).

In the interior regions of Russia, the women and children were accommodated in military barracks or barracks-type facilities, together with males. They were provided with normal peasant carts in situations of internal displacement. In some cases, however, children were provided with carriages, which were much more passenger-friendly (for example, in relocating of POWs from Tsaritsin to Voronezh in March 1774)\(^\text{17}\).


Women and children were received medical care on an equal footing with men. It is also known that women were sick less frequently than males (at least formally, if not always in practice). For example, in Narva, in February 1739, 42.6 percent of men applied for medical help, while only 10 percent of women did so\textsuperscript{18}. At the same time women died more frequently than males\textsuperscript{19}. Thus, in the Ekaterinoslav Province during the 1810, died 7.5 percent of men, 9.9 percent of women and 10.2 percent of children\textsuperscript{20}. Nevertheless, Turkish women were free to carry out reproductive functions, including caring for children. For example, 2,115 women and 1,649 children, including 435 suckling babies had repatriated from various provinces of Russia by November 1812. In other words, one in every five women over the age 14 years left the country with an infant and it is clear that most of these children, if not all, had conceived in Russia\textsuperscript{21}.

With regard to the attitude of the Russians towards Turkish women and children were mixed. The few preserved evidence is mutually exclusive. The Russians in some cases showed compassion towards Turks, in other instances, captives were humiliated and verbally abused\textsuperscript{22}. In some cases, the Russians divided the Turkish families, in other instances, conversely, united ones. In this connection, an interesting case took place in May 1738 near the city of Staritsa, Novgorod Province, when a Turkish woman named Fatima, who had been living in the house of the landowner Darya Norovleva for 12 months, unexpectedly had seen her brother Ibrahim, as he was walking among a group of Ottoman POWs escorted by Russian soldiers. At the same day, the brother and sister reunited both upon their request and upon agreement between the military escort commander and Darya Norovleva\textsuperscript{23}.

In this context, would like to emphasize that we were unable to find any formal complaint of Turkish woman during many years of work in the archives of Russia

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and Ukraine. We aware of only one case a Turkish woman had tried to escape from captivity. Moreover, this case is very eloquent. In May 1773, near the city of Epifan Tula Province, a Turkish woman named Ayshe, ran away from landlord Ignat Timofeev. We know that she was 30 years old and she did not speak Russian. In the immediate wake of the escape, Ayshe joined a group of the Russian women who marched toward Tula to pray at Blagoveschenskaya church. Russian women were sympathetic Ayshe and fed her all the way. They had walked together about 100 km before the police detained Ayshe.

With regard to repatriation of the captives, in accordance with the peace agreements between the Russian Empire and the Ottoman Empire, Turks, who had converted to Orthodoxy voluntarily, could not be transmitted to the authorities of Turkey. Accordingly, Muslims, unwilling to convert to Orthodoxy, were due for repatriation. However, in Russia this requirement, to put it mildly, not always practiced, especially with regard to “private captives” and especially in the 18th century. Of course, many Muslims were repatriated. For example, on 3 November 1741, Russian officer Yakov Zubatov brought a Turkish woman named Emine to the Kiev Governor. In doing so, Yakov Zubatov explained that Emine would need to be repatriated, because she had refused to convert to Orthodoxy. At the same time, Yakov Zubatov paid Emine salary for the four years that she spent in his home, and a premium of 1 ruble.

In any case, careful statistical analyses of archival materials on Turkish captives indicate, that throughout the 18th century had been naturalized in Russia:

- 72 percent of children (of the total number of children captives);
- 24 percent of women (of the total number of female captives);
- 4 percent of men (of the total number of male captives).

These figures demonstrate that the Russians sought to leave women and, especially, children in Russia. Sometimes the captives faced crude psychological and

physical pressure aimed at to get them to renounce their religion. However, in the vast majority of cases, the Russians acted more gently. And the Turks showed little resistance to conversion. Moreover, it must be borne in mind, that near the end of any Ottoman–Russian war many Turkish women accepted their situation and did not see the point to be repatriated. For example, in 1775 Turkish officer Ibrahim Tokush asked the Russian authorities to find his wife and his two sons (Gassan and Guseyn), had captured by the Russian in 1771. The Russian police found Tokush’s wife in St. Petersburg and she gave the following testimony: “… My name is Mariya Efimova. I am 39 years old. I have two sons. Their names are Nikolay and Vasily. My husband’s name is Ibrahim Tokush. In 1771, the Russian forces captured my kids and me near Bender. In 1772, all three of us converted to Orthodoxy in Kiev. At present, my children and I are living in the household of General Ushakov. Nikolay and Vasily study at the Academy of Fine Arts…” But most importantly, this woman did not show any interest in her husband’s life.

Turkish widows and girls, who remained in Russia, had intermarried with Russian nobles, merchants, handicraftsmen, peasants, “meshchans” (townspeople), Cossacks, as well as with military personnel (both soldiers and officers). Nonetheless, it is clear from the archive materials, many were not able to marry and start a family. This is particularly so for those, who were captured aged 14-15 years or over. Anyway, we often see old documents containing information about Turkish women, who converted to Orthodoxy. They are at least 30 years old; they live in Russia for like 15 years. However, these women have never married.

Turkish women and girls, who had converted to Orthodoxy, were considered the best domestic service in Russia. In this context, it is interesting to note that the Russians believed that all these women and young girls had raised in the noble families of Turkey. The Russians called them “exceptionally honest and respectable people”. Therefore, it is no coincidence that Turkish women and girls worked at the houses

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of generals and admirals, governors and vice-governors, as well as other Russian senior officials. Turkish female domestic workers were in house of the Prince G.A. Potemkin-Tavricheskiy and even within the palace of Empress Catherine the Great. Thus, for instance, Turkish woman Taisiya Nikolayeva joined the Imperial Palace in 1774. As she was marrying, Catherine the Great gave her a dress from her wardrobe and the sum 1,350 rubles (By the way, it was an annual salary of Russian General).

In general terms, we come at the following conclusions:

1. The living conditions in Russia of Ottoman women and children in 18th and early 19th century we view as quite acceptable. (Anyway, they were in line with its own times).

2. At the same time, this subject is too complex, multidimensional and sensitive to be investigated in this article.

3. The scholars in both Turkey and Russia will need to focus on the questions regarding to the retaining of Turkish women and children in Russia during the late 18th and early 19th century Ottoman–Russian Wars. Historical veracity demands that we carefully examine this topic in all its varied aspects. After all, it was our POWs that the source interpenetration of our cultures, and it was our POWs that greatly aided confidence-building and laid the foundations for today’s cooperation between our countries.


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