6 A medieval trade in female slaves from the north along the Volga

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Abstract

This article explores evidence of the medieval slave trade in the trade networks that had evolved from the Viking Age 'Eastern Route', linking the Baltic Sea to the Middle East. These trade networks were fundamental to the development of later Slavic states in Russia and also to the spread of Christianity. The focus is on the type of slaves referred to as *nemci*, which in some languages became specifically used for white, blonde slaves of northern or Scandinavian type, who were sold at remarkably high cost as luxury items in the south. This study contextualises trade in 'nemci' slaves within the context of the spread of Christianity through the north and the extending power of Christian states.

Keywords: Russian slave trade, child slaves, Russia

1 Introduction

The trade in non-baptised *nemci* ('German' or 'foreign', understood as 'northern European') formed a luxury business and was profitable even over long distances. This kind of slave trade did not start only in the sixteenth century along Russian rivers, as appears in written sources, but is continuous from the age of the Vikings. The reason for the expansion in the written records is merely state formation and the growth of administration, which produced new kinds of written material. In fact, this process led to prohibition of the old business. The prominent role of *nemci* in the slave trade did not mean that Germans or Swedes had some special qualifications that were especially in demand in the Middle East. The concept only distinguished blonde slaves from others in the trade on the Volga. 'White' (i.e. fair-coloured) slaves

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were especially expensive in the southern markets. Baptism formed one restriction in the business from the perspective of a rising state power. The concern was not religious, but baptised people were the ruler's taxpayers and so part of his wealth, according to the thinking of mercantilist economists.

2 *Nemci* girls for sale

When the Nogai ruler Izmail-bek sent a delegation headed by the high-ranking diplomats Temer and Bek-Cüra to Moscow in the late summer of 1561, one of the things he ordered Bek-Cüra to buy for him was two *nemci* girls (*Gramoty*: 174). The Persian delegation of Kaya and hadži Hosrev was ordered to buy three girls and three *nemci* slaves in Moscow for Safavid Šah Abbās in 1592-1593 and a further 30 *nemci* slaves in Kazan' on their journey home. The next winter, the Safavid ambassador hadži Iskender had a long shopping list from the Šah to request in Moscow, including 20 slaves in addition to various kinds of furs, wax, birch bark, and many other items. In this case, the Muscovites allowed hadži Iskender to buy five 'more *nemci*' slaves on his way home (Veselovskij 1890: 165, 170, 190, 204, 213-214).

Such stories are many in the diplomatic documents of these years and it is clear that Nogai, Tatar, Persian, Caucasian, and Turkmen nobles and tradesmen were interested in *nemci* slaves, especially female ones, who were a very expensive luxury. Izmail-bek gave for his envoys Temer and Bek-Cüra 400 rubles for two girls, whereas according to Novosel'skij the average price for a good slave in Crimea was 40-80 rubles (*Gramoty*: 178, Novosel'skij 1948: 434-436).

Muhammad-Ali, ambassador of the Buhārān Khan Abdallāh, was allowed to buy *nemci* slaves in 1589 but forbidden to take baptised ones, while the Muscovite officials refused to sell hadži Iskender baptised slaves and insisted that he should buy unbaptised ones. The authorities even followed the delegation of Andi-bek, Ali Hosrov, and hadži Hussein along the Volga to ensure that no baptised *nemci* slaves were taken to Persia. Likewise, in 1600, the Moscow authorities allowed the trader Muhammed to buy only unbaptised *nemci* (girl) slaves for Šah Abbās (*Materialy*: I, no. 12; Veselovskij 1890: 214, 306, 310, 312; 1892: 57-58).

The eastern European trade in slaves was old and big business. The water routes of the area formed the core of the Vikings' long-distance trade routes. Slaves were one of their main trading items. This business is documented in many Byzantine, Near Eastern and West European sources. Young girls were a special item in this business, according to many sources. After the Viking Age, this trade did not stop but only took on new forms, and the

trade in young females along the Volga is documented in Russian chronicles (Korpela 2014b: 60-66, 126-128; 2018: 57-83).

From late medieval and early modern sources, we know that tens of thousands of prisoners were transported yearly from Crimea and Kazan'/Astrakhan to the markets of Central Asia, Asia Minor and the Mediterranean area, and finally even to India. Most slaves originated from the Russian-Ukrainian lands, but some prisoners were transported even from northern European forests, because of their exceptional qualifications. The wars of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries increased the number of northern slaves in the Muscovite/Volga markets (Korpela 2014a: 85-86, 104-106; 2014b: 75-76, 78-83, 92-96; 2015; 2018: 83-108).

The slaves in the trade were divided into two main categories. First there was ordinary cheap manpower and secondly there were extraordinary cases, who were bought for the harems for noble families and as a luxury. The luxury slaves were young, because they had to be trained for their duties. Skin colour mattered too (Michalonis Litvani 1854 [1615]: 22; Korpela 2014a: 93-99). The blonde or white colour was especially important in the markets of the south. According to Ibn Battuta and Afanasij Nikitin, white female slaves were expensive and valuable in the Indian markets. They were more expensive in the Italian markets than black ones and white slaves were more highly valued than others in Egypt, too (Ibn Baṭṭūṭa 1993-2000: 595-596; Kozlov *et al.* 2003: 102-103, 106, 109-110; Gioffré 1971: 185-326; Imhaus 1997: 120-121; Marmon 1995: 26, 39, 126n.48, 133n.103). The markets for white slaves were mostly in eastern Europe. Such exceptional cases were worth transportation even over long distances. When in the Karelian isthmus a kidnapped girl cost five altyn in the mid-sixteenth century and the price level in Moscow was 200 rubles, as in our example above, the business was profitable and sound, as 200 rubles is equal to 6666 altyn. This made for big business (*Patriaršaja*: 7064 [1556]; Filjushkin 2008: 147; Korpela 2014a: 94-95, 114). There are, however, some strange aspects to this. Firstly, was the trade in blonde girls only a novelty of the sixteenth century, as the sources suggest? Secondly, what difference did baptism make to this business? Thirdly, what kind of special qualifications did the *nemci* have?

3 *Nemci* in Muscovite society

The term *nemci* in the Old Russian language refers basically to a people whose speech is not understandable. In early medieval times it referred especially to western Europeans (Germans). After the late twelfth century Scandinavians were also called *nemci*, and from the fourteenth century onwards, Finns under

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the rule of the king of Sweden were *nemci*. Estonians, Latvians, and other Baltic people were *nemci* after they had joined the Roman Catholic Church. Thus, in late medieval usage the concept simply meant Western Christians. Siberian and northern pagans were called by ethnic names and Slavic Orthodox Christians Rus'. The only exception in this respect were Roman Catholic Slavic speakers, who were called by ethnic names (Korpela 2008: 42-55). The ambassador of Tsar Feodor, Prince Andrej Dmitrievič Zvenigorodskij, explained to Šah Abbās on 15 January 1594 what a rich land Siberia was and what development efforts had taken place there. According to the prince, there were also many Lithuanian and *nemci* inhabitants (Veselovskij 1890: 265; Burton 1997: 79-80). The register of townspeople in Kazan' compiled in 1565-1568 contains some *nemci puškar*, i.e. gunmen and mercenary soldiers (*Piscovye knigi*: 21-22, 183). At the beginning of the seventeenth century there were already other *nemci* people. The persons named Griška and Ondrjuška in Korotaj and Isengil'dejko in Nižnjaja Aiša were from Livonia (*latyš*), Griška and Isengil'dejko being referred to with the epithet *prihodec* ('newcomer'), while Anca Kutlejarov and Danilko in Ursek, Matyš in Starye Menger, and Khristofor Kondrat'ev in Unba were *nemci*. The *nemci* Anca Sontaleev and *latyš* Jakuško Derbyšev were both living in Ursek (*Piscovaja* 1978: 1030b., 104, 109, 1320b., 138, 1380b., 177, 1800b., 2200b.).

The sources also mention a few *nemci* slaves. The Tatar civil servant Bek-bulat Begišev had a *nemeckoj* (*latyš*) *polon* on his estate in the region of Svijažkoj, near Kazan', who had escaped with his wife and children in 1621 (Mel'nikov 1856: no. 7). *Nemci* are no longer recorded in the register for Kazan' by the mid-seventeenth century, but some family names refer to *nemci*, e.g. Ontoška Prokof'ev Nemcin, and there was a village called Nemčino on the *Nogajskaja doroga* ('The Road to Nogaj Tatars') (*Piscovaja* 2001: 162, 3870b.).

Records for Nižnij Novgorod are available only after the 1620s. A village called *Staraja Nemeckaja sloboda* ('Old Village of *Nemci*') and a burial ground *nemeckoe kladbišče* ('The Graveyard of *Nemci*') were located on the River Oka, and there were several people referred to as *nemeč* living in the area, some of whom were *novokreščen* ('newly baptised') and had typical Russian names, such as Ivan Jakovlev. Further along the River Oka, there was a village described as *Sloboda nižegorodckih nemec i litvy* ('the village of Nemci and Lithuanians from Nižegorod'), with an explanation that it was inhabited by *inozemci* ('foreigners'). These foreigners were also called *nemci* even though their names were mostly Russian, with certain exceptions, such as Ganko Prokoev, Tomilko Ostaf'ev, Adam Svideretckij, Adam Ivanov, and Indrik Miller. These people were from Livonia or Sweden and may have been free migrants, prisoners of war, slaves or a combination of all of these (*Piscovaja* 1896: 173-178).

The tax books of the region of Staraja Russa contain little material from the late fifteenth century but much more from the early seventeenth century. The registers contain few ethnic references, but those that do exist are family names such as Ivaško Nemčin, Mikhal Litvin, Jakim Koreljanin, Jakim Latyš and Bogdan Latyš (Ankudinov *et al.* 2009: 4 [l. 140 ob.], 4 [l. 141], 26 [l. 94 ob.], 35 [l. 4], 36 [l. 7], 43 [l. 29], 52 [l. 63], 104 [l. 285], 136 [l. 60], 151 [l. 93], 254 [l. 348ob.]). The expression *nemci* is used in these registers exclusively to denote the foreign troops who devastated the area in the early seventeenth century (see e.g. Ankudinov *et al.* 2009: 146, 151, 164, 169, 170). The documents of the city of Novgorod from the early seventeenth century do not alter this picture. There were western tradesmen such as Grigorij Grigor'ev, who was a house owner in the Sofia district, and a *galanskie zemli nemčin*, a Dutchman, but otherwise the ethnic references to *nemci* concern the devastation of the city by Swedish troops (Ankudinov and Bulanin 2003: 1-65, references on pp. 6, 10-11).

The copybook of Novgorod *d'jak Aljab'jev* opens up a perspective on the roles of slaves of various kinds (debt, voluntary, service, prisoners) in local society. The book was compiled in the late sixteenth century but contains documents (appeals, administrative decisions, court orders) starting from the end of the fifteenth century.

The local society in the territory of Novgorod consisted of free farmers and slaves (*holop*). There were also a lot of children who had been born while one of their parents was a slave and were therefore slaves themselves (*Zapisnaja kniga* 1898: col. 3). This slave population included some people who were prisoners from Sweden or the Baltic region. Marinka, mentioned in 1588, was a *kholop* and a Lithuanian prisoner, Palagijca, the daughter of Petrov, was a Livonian taken prisoner in 1578, and Jurka a Western Christian and prisoner abducted from Vyborg in 1593. Ovdokimko, mentioned in 1597, was a *nemčin* and a prisoner from Tartu, while Ofimka was a Livonian girl taken prisoner in 1565. Another Ofimia was a Livonian girl prisoner captured in 1566, and Oleško a prisoner from Polock in 1565. Mitka, mentioned in 1595, was a prisoner from Pärnu (*Zapisnaja kniga* 1898: col. 14 [no. 41], col. 18 [no. 54], col. 18-19 [no. 55], col. 101 [no. 284], col. 104 [no. 292], col. 165 [no. 449], col. 195 [no. 526]).

The register of *Aljab'jev* and other similar source collections (*Akty zapisanye* I: 1-3; III: 1-3; IV: 10, 12, 20, 21; IX: 1, 3) confirm the picture obtained from the tax registers. Prisoners were sold in the countryside and became workers and servants there. They were like all the other ordinary people: free peasants, immigrants, and debt slaves. They married and had families; they joined the local society. The memory of their origins must have eventually disappeared after a few generations and a language shift, and they became ordinary Russians.

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All in all, there were many and various kinds of *nemci* living in Russia. Thus such persons were available for the trade in slaves. The term *nemci* in connection with the Muslim trade documents is, however, something extraordinary.

The concept is mentioned in this connection only in the sixteenth-century Russian sources. Probably somebody had translated the request of a Persian trader into Old Russian with deficient language skills; these were often criticised in official documents (Korpela: 2014b: 29-30). The basic meaning of the word may have been completely obscure for the Persians and Caucasians, as we can conclude from the use of national terminology by the Ottoman travellers in eastern Europe (*Evlija čelebi kniga*: 48, 301n.10; Korpela 2014b: 169; 2018: 203-207).

In any case, in the Tatar slave trade, the term *nemci* seems to have acquired a special meaning that differs from its everyday use in contemporary Russian. It was a special type of slave, who was very expensive and valuable in the world of the Central Asian traders. It is certain that these exceptional qualifications had nothing to do with the native language or factual ethnicity of the trading object, because none of the trading partners understood any northern languages. According to the stereotypic description of Ibn-Khaldūn, we could imagine white or blonde prisoners, who naturally came mostly from the North (Ibn Khaldūn 1980 I: 170-172).

Nemci was a trademark for qualifications that were unusual and highly valued in Central Asian markets. There were not, however, any *nemci* slaves in the Central Asian registers, and therefore we can assume that the concept was only used in the trading context in Russia. These slaves were re-categorised in the east using other terminology, most probably as Russians (Korpela 2014b: 170; cf. e.g. Fitrat and Sergeev 1937: no. 15, 17; Morgan and Coote 1886 I: 95). Nor is the word used in Crimean sources. On the other hand, there were lots of blonde northern slaves available. Most probably these traders did not need this kind of national definition, but only used colours, which were the real point in the trade (Korpela 2014b: 170; 2018: 203-207, 220-222). The reason for the use of the term *nemci* may lie in the legal framework of the business. The Russian tsar tried to prohibit the selling of his own subjects into slavery, but foreigners formed a 'borderline case'. The terminology was used only in the Volga trade, because it was already a part of the Muscovite economic system, while the Crimean trade was based on kidnappings, war, and raiding. Along the Volga, the trade was legal and subject to rules, while the business in Crimea was pure criminality from the Muscovite perspective.

4 The baptism

Religion was an issue in the slave trade. Since Islam did not permit the enslaving of Muslims, the Islamic realms were forced to buy Christian or pagan slaves. On the other hand, as Christians were similarly barred from selling other Christians into slavery, Jewish traders and Muslim corsairs played an active role in this business in the Mediterranean. Although these regulations were bypassed in many ways and there were many Christian as well as Muslim slaves for sale in the markets, these rules directed the trading more towards Africa and the Russian steppes, because there were in any case suitable people available there (pagans, heretics, etc.) (Heers 1961: 69-72; Verlinden 1979: 158-161; Rotman 2009: 42-43, 57-58, 62, 64, 66-67; *Régestes* I: 468, 683; III: 2956; Korpela 2014b: 67-68; 2018: 66-68, 218-22).

Table 2 Numbers of ethnic denotations in the Kazan' region tax register of 1602-1603[1]

Newly baptised	Cheremis	Chuvash	Tatars	*Nemci*	Others	Total
180	10	204	139	10	537	1080

A newly baptised category is to be found here and there in the registers up to the northern territories of Karelia, Dvina, and Kola. The registration of a person as newly baptised may indicate a non-Orthodox prisoner, an immigrant, or equally well a Tatar who had integrated into Muscovite society.

It was common all over the Christian world to rebaptise and rename slaves (Imhaus 1997: 37, 435-562; Heers 1961: 98-103; Gioffré 1971: 185-326). Islamic societies also practised the renaming of slaves (Mukminova 1985: 122). The documents tell directly of some Finnish and Baltic prisoners who were rebaptised into Orthodox Christianity. The Baltic prisoner Indrik was renamed Ivaško in 1544, and the Vyborg prisoner Feklitsa became Avdotija in 1597. Matts Manuelsson and Anna Michaelsdotter became Lev and Olenka in 1591. Piritka (Birgitta) from Vyborg likewise came to be known as Solomanitka after an Orthodox baptism in 1593 (*Zapisnaja kniga* 1898: col. 37 (no. 109), col. 63-64 (no. 177), col. 142-143 (no. 388), col. 165 (no. 448)).

Forty Armenian businessmen appealed to Tsar Aleksej in 1666. They explained how they conducted business in the lands of *qizilbāş* (Persia), in

1 The numbers are collected from the index of the edition and therefore only approximate figures.

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the Ottoman empire, India, and in the lands of the *nemci* (western Europe). Everywhere they were able to follow their Orthodox Christian Armenian faith except in Moscow. Here they were not allowed to go to church and no priest would visit a dying Armenian and pray with him (Parsamjan 1953: no. 9, pp. 42-43). Indeed, at least after the Makarian reforms in the mid-sixteenth century, the Muscovite church regarded all other Christians except the members of the Moscow Orthodox church, including other Orthdox, as non-Christians.

Therefore, many of those who arrived freely at the service or for a more permanent stay in Muscovy usually undertook a rebaptism. Thereafter they were *novokreščen,* like the Armenian Serkis Avanesian, who arrived from Crimea in 1632 and received a new name, Kirill Avanesov (Parsamjan 1953: no. 2, p. 4). In the central areas of the slave trade there were even villages of *nemci* where large numbers of newly baptised people were living (*Piscovaja* 1896: 173-178).

A large group consisted of those Tatars who took baptism. Partly it may have been easier in local society to be a peasant among other Christian peasants; partly they were Tatar nobles who joined the Muscovite service and were eager to be promoted in the hierarchy. Some of the baptised had Tatar names, such as Vasilij Hasanmurzin, and sometimes Tatars and newly baptised people were put into the same group, for example 'the 40 houses of newly baptised, translators, and service Tatars', or 'the villages of the people of the archbishop, monastery people, newly baptised, Tatars and Chuvash' (*Piscovye knigi*: 18, 20, 28, 29, 35, 51, 61, 196).

The Muscovite church did not separate the newly baptised and rebaptised from each other. All former Western Christians, Muslims, and Animists belonged to the same group. From the perspective of prisoners of war and other immigrants, an Orthodox baptism was a security measure that was worth taking. Besides gaining the protection of the church, the people became subjects of the ruler. As the Swedish peace delegation was told in 1556, the Livonian chronicler, Balthasar Russow, recorded in 1560 and the Danish ambassador, Jacob Uhlfeldt, noted in 1578, many prisoners were sold directly to the land of the Tatars, where the Muscovite regulations were not in force, and thus the supply and demand matched perfectly when the priests had no time to baptise the prisoners (Lihačev and Majkov 1910: 41, 104; Russow 1857 [1584]: 49a; Jacobi 2002 [1608]: 203, 207-208).

This phenomenon belongs only to the late sixteenth century. State formation had created the baptism as a criterion for being a subject of the ruler ('a primitive citizenship'), and, as a side product, protection against the slave trade.

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5 The limits of the trade

The Safavid Šah Abbās ordered his envoy Kaya to buy in Moscow 'clean' (*rabjat čistyh*) female and girl slaves. The term obviously refers to legitimate slaves (Veselovskij 1890: 165, 170). As mentioned at the beginning, several delegations from Central Asia and Persia received only limited permission to buy *nemci* slaves, unbaptised ones, and sometimes the Muscovite administration even set some escort troops as convoys to the delegations to ensure that no baptised and unlicensed slaves were exported (*Materialy*: I, no. 12; Veselovskij 1890: 214, 306, 310, 312; Veselovskij 1892: 57-58).

New rules are visible in the letter of Nogai Khan Izmail to Tsar Ivan IV. The khan's servant Yanbulat had bought a slave girl in Šigaleev (Kasimov), but the Muscovite authorities confiscated the slave, because Yanbulat did not have an export licence (*Gramoty*: 52, 65). The English trader Anthony Jenkinson also faced customs problems in Kazan' in the 1560s (Morgan and Coote 1886 I: 321).

A modern sovereign ruler started to control his realm, which meant that he claimed ultimate rule over all resources, land, and people within a geographical area. For this purpose the ruler organised a modern permanent administration, army, and legal system. The ruler standardised processes and started an active economic policy that is described by the term mercantilism. As a part of this the export of strategic and valuable goods was limited and foreign trade was regulated (Brezis 2003: 482-485; Kotilaine 2004: 143-144). The prohibited items were referred to in Muscovy as *zapovednye tovary*. The lists of these goods changed but among them were falcons, arms, furs, spices, wines etc. (Burton 1997: 463, 469-470, 473-475, 489-490, 495-496; Šumilov 2006: 209-211; Fehner 1952: 69, 75-76, 134-135).

The grand prince (tsar) of Muscovy had expanded his control and power over the eastern Slavs after the late fourteenth century. The Hanseatic League was closed down in Novgorod after its conquest in 1494, and the Baltic trade submitted to the control of Moscow. The Crimea was put under an embargo in the 1490s and direct contacts established with Constantinople. Vasilij III started to restrict the trade to the Volga, which started to have an impact step by step (Dollinger 1981: 402-403; von Herberstein 1571: 157; Tiberg 1995: 63-66, 134; Bogorodickaja 1979: 179). The next step was to issue privileges for certain traders to conduct business with specified goods and areas and to restrict trade by foreign traders in certain places (von Herberstein 1571: 57-58, 78; Muljukin 1909: 194-197; Fehner 1952: 62-63, 119-129, 135-136; Šumilov 2006: 187-196, 209-211; Romaniello 2012: 56).

Mercantilism had the most serious impact on the slave trade. Medieval rulers were not much concerned about human kidnappings. Now the rulers

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started to regard the humans – free as well as unfree ones – as their own resources as taxpayers and workers of the economy. Moreover, the late medieval food crises even encouraged the ruler to organise the production of food, which required manpower. The Muscovite administration started to buy the freedom of slaves from Tatar markets and realms, and slave matters were organised under one administrative body in the central administration (Hellie 1982: 292-294). Thus, the export of 'baptised *nemci* slaves' became totally prohibited and the trade in 'unbaptised *nemci* slaves' was limited with export licences after the mid-sixteenth century.

The rise of the modern realm resulted in the decline of the slave trade and its marginalisation to remote areas. In Siberia trade in taxpayers (*yasak*) was prohibited, but forest dwellers remained trading objects still in the late seventeenth century (Gataullina *et al.* 1959: no. 12; Burton 1997: 469-470, 483-484, 489, 533). The difference between luxury and ordinary slaves may have become most clear with the export restrictions, and therefore the trade in the former disappeared first. The kidnapping of ordinary people from forests and during wartime and transporting them even from Finland to Persia continued until the eighteenth century (Burton 1997: 493-496; Korpela 2014b: 193-194, 198; 2018: 236-238).

This rise of the administration, however, inaugurated the production of our sources concerning the trade in female slaves along the Volga. Earlier chronicles describe it in general but not in detail. The restrictions and export licences recorded the individual facts, and although it limited, prohibited, and finally stopped the business, it made the earlier invisible trade visible.

6 Summary

The points to take away from the preceding discussion are:

1 The slave trade in blonde (*nemci*) girls must have been a significant issue throughout the whole of the Middle Ages, because the trade in girls and females along the Volga is described in general terms in the sources on Viking trade and later in Russian chronicles. Its manifestation in the sources of the sixteenth century reflects its significance, but the reason for the records is that there was no such system of recording earlier.
2 The religion of the objects of trade was a theological concern but there were many ways to bypass the problem.
3 State formation in early modern Europe also restricted the slave trade, because the government considered people of the territory as royal resources: they were taxpayers, soldiers, and manpower.

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4 Because religion became a criterion in state formation, it accidentally also became a qualification of the slave trade.

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