

“The End of the Russian Slave Trade in the Black Sea”

Oleksandr Halenko (Shklar Fellow, Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute; National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine)

Early Slavists’ Seminar, March 8, 2002
Davis Center for Russian Studies, Harvard University

Summary by Kelly O’Neill, PhD candidate in History

Oleksandr Halenko, of the National Academy of Sciences of Ukraine, and currently a Shklar Fellow at the Harvard Ukrainian Research Institute, recently addressed the problem of Russian native involvement in the Black Sea slave trade. Halenko’s main source base constitutes Ottoman, Arabic and Italian sources: in particular, the tax registers and notary books that indirectly document the traffic in humans in the Mediterranean world. Despite the existence of such documents, the slave trade in Eastern Europe has received comparatively little attention from historians.

For his part, Halenko focused on the area that became, after 1475, the Ottoman *sancak* of Kefe (It. - Caffa, Rus. - Feodosiia), where Genoese and Venetian merchants had maintained colonies since the late thirteenth century. Halenko’s talk centered around the question of how slaves were procured in the period preceding Ottoman rule – the era of Mongol domination. The procurement and sale of slaves, after all, required a relatively stable infrastructure, economic resources, and markets, as well as merchants prosperous enough to undertake the high-risk venture.

It is clear that those merchants were, for the most part, Italian (although in 1307 the khan of the Golden Horde expelled the Genoese from Crimea as punishment for selling Tatars into slavery). The question remains, however, how did Mediterranean merchants acquire the Russian (and other native) slaves they sold in Pera and beyond? Did they themselves venture beyond the walls of the port cities to capture natives? According to Halenko, individuals conversant in both Slavic and Mediterranean languages must have passed their knowledge of the interior – and its potential slave populations – along to the Italians; in all likelihood, this was done by Russian merchants involved in the slave trade themselves. Russian personal names, widely spread among slaves throughout the Mediterranean provides good evidence of this.

Proving the Russian facilitation of the slave trade is no easy task, and Halenko explored a variety of sources in order to provide the evidence for his argument. Genoese trade documents, for example, usually identify merchants by their city of origin. However, it is linguistically difficult to differentiate between merchants of Russian origin and Italians known informally as “red-hairs.” Moreover, although the notary books of Caffa also tend to use local place names to identify traders from those cities, merchants complicated the historian’s task by renaming their slaves with the city of their own (the merchant’s) origin. Thus, Russian slaves sold by a Greek from Major (in the Caucasus) would be identified in the notary books as Majorian, not Russian, slaves. But when one Rubeus (“red-hair”) offers a slave of Russian origin for sale, i.e. another Rubeus (“de proienie Rubea”), one may safely assume that the merchant himself was Russian.

In addition to such complications in identifying the origins of slave merchants and their slaves, there is some degree of resistance among contemporary scholars to incorporate the slave trade – which often involved the sale of members of the merchant’s own family – into the mainstream historical narrative. Acknowledging the challenges of his source base, Halenko argued that there is indeed sufficient evidence to speak of Russian merchant involvement in the

slave trade, from Crimea and the Caucasus to Anatolia, from the late thirteenth to the middle of the fifteenth century. He concluded that the Russian slave trade – and the local social and economic conditions out of which it developed – must be addressed and understood within its own historical context, and not judged according to modern standards of morality and nationalism. Accordingly, it should be understood that the usage of the term “Russian” in this presentation does not imply a connection to modern Russians, especially since Muscovite merchants did not have permanent residence in the Southern Crimea.