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## The Unknown Pages of the Caucasian War: Children in Circassian Captivity in 1812–1815 (based on the materials from “The Circassian Slave Narratives”)

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### Abstract

The article deals with the problem of kidnapping by Circassians on Russian territory in the period of 1812–1815.

The work “The Circassian Slave Narratives (A Documentary Collection)” was used as materials. This collection was published under the editorship of doctor of historical sciences A.A. Cherkasov in September 2020 on the pages of the Russian historical journal “Bylye Gody”. The collection consists of 1.2 thousand documents of the State archive of the Krasnodar Krai (Krasnodar, Russian Federation).

Methodologically, the statistical and chronological methods were widely used in the work. The statistical method allowed us to estimate the scale of child captivity, while the chronological method allowed us to consider this problem in its chronological sequence. Using these methods, the authors were able to calculate the percentage of people who were ransomed or escaped from Circassian captivity and to make estimates on the number of those people whose fate remained unknown.

In conclusion, the authors state that cases of kidnapping by Circassians from Russian territory were recorded from 1795 to 1862. During this time, at least several hundred children were kidnapped, only from the Russian side. The child abduction was economically profitable for kidnappers in Circassia, since the cost of children on slave markets in Circassia exceeded the cost of an adult and healthy man by three or more times. At the same time, the capture of a Cossack, for example, posed a significant danger to the attacker, since he was trained in the use of cold weapons and was a much greater burden in delivering the prisoner to the Circassian side. It is also important to note that the slave traders valued both boys and girls equally. Because of the high price of children, most of the captured children were immediately sent to the slave markets and sold to the Turks. This fate befell 78 % of children abducted by Circassians in the period of 1812–1815.

**Keywords:** children, Cossacks, Circassia, slave owners, slave traders, slave capture, kidnappings, slave traffic.

### 1. Introduction

The issue of children in Circassian captivity is a totally unexplored topic in the history of the North Caucasus in the period of the first half of the 19th century and the Caucasian War. Its present-day exploration

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has only been made possible thanks to the publication of the “Circassian slave narratives” documentary collection. The broad array of archival documents introduced into research enabled us to throw light on many issues, including the one under review. To have a closer look at the problem, we will take the period from 1812 to 1815, which was selected because the collection includes document No. 584 “Record of residents abducted by the Circassians in 1812-1815,” dated August 16, 1815 (Cherkasov, 2020: 1673-1676). Our attention to the document can be explained as it contains the names of abducted persons, part of whom were later ransomed or escaped from captivity.

## 2. Materials and methods

The work “The Circassian Slave Narratives (A Documentary Collection)” was used as materials (Cherkasov, 2020: 1415-2266). The collection was published under the editorship of Doctor of Historical Sciences A.A. Cherkasov in September 2020 in the Russian historical journal “Bylye Gody.” The collection comprises 1.2 thousand documents from the State Archive of the Krasnodar Krai, Krasnodar, Russian Federation. The collection’s timeframe spans from 1782 to 1861, and it is an unsurpassed source of information on the history of slavery, slave trade, slave capture and serfdom in the territory of Circassia at the time specified. The collection features an index of 2,787 individuals who were ransomed by the Russian side or fled from Circassia, with members of 20 ethnic groups, including Europeans and Africans, represented in the number.

Methodologically, the work widely used the statistical and chronological methods. The statistical method allowed us to estimate the scale of child captivity, while the chronological method allowed us to consider this problem in its chronological sequence. Using these methods, the authors were able to calculate the percentage of people who were ransomed or escaped from Circassian captivity and to make estimates on the number of those whose fate remained unknown.

## 3. Results

The first documented instance of child abduction by Circassians in the Russian territory took place on September 12, 1795. On this day, in an attack on a Cossack cart by 9 Circassians near the Teplensky redoubt, 10-year-old Fyodor Konovka, a son of a Kislyakovsky Kuren (an administrative unit in the Don region, combining several Cossack settlements) Cossack, was kidnapped (Cherkasov, 2020: 1451). Last incidents occurred in 1862, when Circassians plundered two Cossack stanitsas, Psemenskaya and Nizhne-Bakanskaya – 47 civilians were captured, including children, in the raids (Sbornik svedenii o poteryakh, 1901: 121-122). The overall figure for the period between 1795 and 1862 amounts to at least several hundred minor children captured by Circassians and carried away from Russia, most of whom never returned to their homeland. It is fair to say, however, that Circassians abducted children not only from Russians, but from Nogais and their own fellow countrymen as well. The traditions of kidnapping children of their fellow countrymen were rooted in the history of Circassians. For example, already the adats codified that men of a noble rank had a right to mount a hunt once a year for their fellow tribesmen’s children, who went out to fetch water. Noblemen could take even ten children captive, but according to the adat they could only carry away 2 or 3 with them and had to release the rest. Having captured children, they had to gallop off from pursuers as quickly as possible, and if they succeeded, the children became their property and were sold away. The adat law supported the financial well-being of young nobles, as well as fostered their martial ardor, and helped refine the practical methods of kidnapping.

The work does not endeavor to review all cases of Circassians’ captivating children during the Caucasian War. However, from our viewpoint, to build up a general picture, it is quite sufficient to use materials for 1812–1815, which were uncovered in “The Circassian slave narratives” documentary collection, namely document 584 “Record of residents abducted by Circassians in 1812–1815”.

So, on August 16, 1815, the office of the Black Sea Cossack Host drew up a Record of individuals abducted by Circassians in the Russian territory in the period from 1812 to 1815. The first documented incident took place on February 1, 1812, and the last one — on April 10, 1815. According to the information in the Record (calculated by us – Auth.), 96 people were abducted over the time, of whom 40 were children (1 child in 1812, 28 in 1813, 9 in 1814, 2 in the first six months in 1815). For a clearer illustration, we summarized the data arranged by years in table 1. Table 1 also provides data on people ransomed by the Russian administration and people who managed to escaped from slavery independently.

**Table 1.** Information on individuals abducted from the Russian territory in the period from 1812 to 1815, according to the Record (Cherkasov, 2020: 1673-1676)

Years	Men			Women			Children (individuals under 18)		
	Abducted	Ransomed	Escaped	Abducted	Ransomed	Escaped	Abducted	Ransomed	Escaped
1812	5	2	-	-	-	-	1	-	-
1813	28	19	2	6	4	-	28	5	1
1814	15	11	1	1	1	-	9	-	-
1815	1	-	-	-	-	-	2	-	-
Total	49	32	3	7	5	-	40	5	1

If we recount the data in Table 1, we can receive the number of all abducted individuals, broken by age, i.e. 56 adults (individuals aged 18 years old and above) and 40 children (individuals under 18 years old). Hence, children accounted for 41 % of all abducted individuals. As for ransoming captives, we identified a very interesting pattern – of the 49 abducted men, 32 were ransomed, i.e. 65 %; out of the 7 abducted women, 5 were ransomed, i.e. 71 % (out of the 56 adults, 37 were ransomed, which was almost 70 %); but out of the 40 abducted children, only 5 were ransomed, i.e. 12 %. All instances of ransoms paid for children occurred in 1813, when the number of the children captured was highest, according to the data in the Record. As for the individuals who managed to escaped the from Circassian captivity, the portion was small – there were only 3 cases among men and 1 case among children.

Nevertheless, even this Record gives incomplete information on the number of abducted individuals aged under 18. For example, we found a document “The Circassian slave narratives” documentary collection, which reports another abduction not reflected in the Record for 1812. The document tells about a boy, Ostap Dezhkalo, who was kidnapped in 1812 and ransomed in 1815 (Cherkasov, 2020: 1680). In addition, another 2 sons of the Black Sea Cossack Dezhkalo were ransomed in 1815-1816 – this information was also revealed in later documents (Cherkasov, 2020: 1680, 1682). Therefore, the total number of the children abducted in 1812–1815 reached at least 41 (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Abducted children, 1812-1815 (Cherkasov, 2020: 1673-1676, 1680, 1682, 1683)

No.	Surname, first name	Abduction date	Return date	Note
1	Zhitnaya Natalia, daughter of a Cossack	February 1, 1812	-	-
2	Dezhkalo Ostap, minor, son of a Cossack	1812	1815	Ransomed
3	Titarenko Osip, 10 years old	May 31, 1813	1813	Ransomed
4	Trukhlyanova Ulyana, 5 years old, daughter of a Cossack	May 31, 1813	-	-
5	Serdyuk Matvey, 16 years old, son of a Cossack	July 3, 1813	-	-
6	Serdyuk Karp, 9 years old, son of a Cossack	July 3, 1813	-	-
7	Serdyuk Danila, 7 years old, son of a Cossack	July 3, 1813	-	-
8	Serdyuk Evdokia, 4 years old, daughter of a Cossack	July 3, 1813	-	-
9	Seletinsky Petr, minor, son of a Cossack	August 26, 1813	-	-
10	Khil (name unknown), 5 years old, son of a Cossack	August 12, 1813	-	-
11	Khil (name unknown), 7 years old, daughter of a Cossack	August 12, 1813	-	-
12	Dezhkalo Potap, 7 years old, son of a Cossack	August 18, 1813	1815	Ransomed
13	Dezhkalo Fyodor, 5 years old, son of a Cossack	August 18, 1813	1816	Ransomed

14	Dezhkalo Irina, 3 years old, daughter of a Cossack	August 18, 1813	-	-
15	Sepanchikha Ustinya, 12 years old	August 18, 1813	-	Ransomed
16	Zavalny Yakov, minor, son of a Cossack	August 16, 1813	-	Abducted together with his mother. Mother was ransomed.
17	Petr, a son of a Cossack	August 26, 1813	-	-
18	Kalyuzhny Maksim, 2 years old, son of a Cossack	September 8, 1813	-	Abducted together with his mother. Mother was ransomed.
19	Pergatenko (Pergat) Petr, 16 years old	October 10, 1813	-	In 1816, Circassians required 1,000 poods of salt as a ransom.
20	Zhuravlenko Vasiliy, 9 years old	October 10, 1813	-	-
21	Shramikha Dmitriy, 15 years old, son of a Cossack	October 10, 1813	-	-
22	Sokolenko Mikhail, 11 years old, son of a Cossack	October 10, 1813	1813	Ransomed
23	Gerasim, 12 years old, a hand	October 10, 1813	-	-
24	Shamka Yakim, 12 years old, son of a Cossack	October 10, 1813	-	-
25	Drugal Stepan, son of a Cossack	June 17, 1813	1814	Escaped
26	Vesyolaya Agafya, 4 years old, daughter of a Cossack	September 8, 1813	-	-
27	Vesyolaya Vasiliy, 6 weeks old, son of a Cossack	September 8, 1813	-	-
28	Semyon, 13 years old, son of a Cossack	October 4, 1813	-	-
29	Kapustyan Ivan, son of a Cossack	December 30, 1813	1815	Ransomed
30	Kapustyan Emelyan, 6 years old, son of a Cossack	December 30, 1813	1815	Ransomed
31	Shved Tatyana, daughter of a Cossack	April 7, 1814	-	-
32	Cherny Nikita, son of a Cossack	June 4, 1814	-	-
33	Anisia, 12 years old, a hand	September 5, 1814	-	-
34	Natalia, 13 years old	September 5, 1814	-	-
35	Iskra Mikhail, 6 years old, son of a Cossack	September 5, 1814	-	-
36	Iskra Ilya, 4 years old, son of a Cossack	September 5, 1814	-	-
37	Iskra Sofia, 10 years old, daughter of a Cossack	September 5, 1814	-	-
38	Gladchenko Marya, 13 years old, daughter of a Cossack	May 12, 1814	-	-
39	Polulyakh Andrey, 15 years old, son of a Cossack	May 12, 1814	-	-
40	Buchak Maksim, 10 years old, son of a Cossack	April 10, 1815	-	-
41	Berezhnoy Nikita, 15 years old, son of a Cossack	April 10, 1815	-	-

Analysis of [Table 2](#) makes it clear that out of 41 children, 8 in total were ransomed in the period until 1816 inclusive, i.e. 19.5 % of the captured children were ransomed. 1 child managed to escape on his own, i.e. another 2.5 %. The fate of the rest 78 % of the abducted children remained unknown. What can explain the fact that 70 % of adult Russians were returned to Russia for a ransom, while the percentage of ransomed children never even reached 20? To uncover the reason for this, we should visit a Turkish slave-trading ship that set sail from Circassia with a cargo of slaves in 1810. The slave trader was captured by the Russian

corvette “Krym”, and 66 slaves were found on board, including Russians, Circassians and Abazins. The slaves’ average age was 14.9 years old! (Cherkasov et al., 2017: 856). It is essential to note that Turkish and Circassian slave traders preferred to buy children from various “human” commodities as they brought the highest profit. The explanation was quite simple – adults were unable to easily adapt for life in a new environment, for example, in large Turkish cities, while children made it through such adaptation almost without problems. As a result, most of the kidnapped children were transported directly to the Black Sea coast to be sold to slave traders there.

It is also necessary to give some details on the price of children. In the 1810-1820s, human commodities were traded in Circassia either for money (Russian or Turkish currencies) or exchanged for goods (cows, salt, canvas, etc.). For example, in 1814, 1 pood of salt cost to Russian tax farmers of the merchant class, 2.5 rubles. (Cherkasov, 2020: 1659). The value of salt was somewhat lower for the Black Sea Cossack Host and amounted to 1 ruble for a pood. The prices were different because some salt belonged to the state and the other one was marketed by private owners.

In 1823, following an oversight on the part of a Cossack officer, two Cossacks were taken captive by Circassians. To ransom the Cossacks, the Russian administration decided to collect the money from the officer, and the following formula was provided to this end – they gave 4 or 6 head of cattle for each captive, each head of cattle was estimated at 6.8 tops<sup>1</sup> of canvas. One top was priced at 2 levs in the Turkish currency or 1.6 rubles in the Russian currency. Based on this, the minimum average price was calculated at about 57 rubles. (Cherkasov, 2020: 1731). However, we should realize that in fact such prices never existed, and the price tag for the officer was almost deliberately set lower so as not to reduce him to financial insolvency. Let us illustrate the true picture in the pricing policies regarding captives. For example, a novice of the Nikolaevskaya Pustyn (monastery), Ivan Kagalnitsky, was ransomed for 141 poods of salt in 1816 (Cherkasov, 2020: 1686), which was equivalent to 141 rubles in state prices. However, the novice’s tax farmer was a merchant who gave away his own product, which meant the price of salt was 2.5 times higher, or about 325 rubles. In 1807, an order of Russian Tsar Alexander I instructed a large-scale ransom program for Russian prisoners (Rajović et al., 2017; Rajović et al., 2018), ransom prices were as follows: 195, 295, 236, 98, 160, 489, 202, 485, 185, 68, 75, 120, 218, 390, 200, 136 and 264 rubles. (Cherkasov, 2020: 1717). The lowest price was offered for elderly captives, who were no longer fit for agricultural work in slave-holding Circassia. The total cost of 17 ransomed captives was 3,816 rubles, and the average cost of one captive varied around 224.5 rubles. Considering the calculation, we should not forget that the group of captives could include those who were kidnapped by Circassians from their fellow Circassians. To quickly sell kidnapped people, slave traders, as a rule, had to agree to lower prices. Nevertheless, we should take note of this price set at 224.5 rubles for a captive in 1807.

We have already mentioned that the lowest price was paid for elderly people. There were cases recorded in Circassia when the oldest captives, aged 75 and above, who had completely lost their physical capability, were freed and returned to their previous place of residence. For example, in 1798, a Pole Pavel Bodva, who spent 35 years in slavery, was given freedom due to his old age (Cherkasov, 2020: 1481). The average price of 224 rubles was paid for an adult, for example a Cossack, but children were the most valuable commodity.

For example, a 6-year-old boy Emelyan, a son of a Black Sea Cossack, was ransomed in 1815 for 600 rubles, while the price of a Cossack himself was 200 rubles, the price of a Cossack’s wife – 200 rubles, and a non-combatant Cossack (unfit for service) – 100 rubles. (Cherkasov, 2020: 1661). In the same year, the price of a Circassian girl was also set at 600 rubles. (Cherkasov, 2020: 1667). The equally high price of boys and girls shows that the gender status of captives made no fundamental difference. We should also consider the maximum values of the price for children. In 1816, two Cossack boys were offered in exchange for 1.6 thousand poods of salt (Cherkasov, 2020: 1690). The final ransom sum still reached 1.5 thousand poods of salt. However, this was not the limit – prices set for children could go even higher. For example, in the same 1816, Circassians asked 1,000 poods of salt for a 17-year-old boy Petr Pergat (GAKK. F. 249. Op. 1. D. 711. L. 23), which amounted to about 1 thousand rubles even calculated in the state (reduced) prices for salt. The historical high was documented in 1834 when a Cossack maiden Pelageya Drozdova was ransomed for record 1,774 rubles. (Cherkasov et al., 2018: 1341). For comparison – the annual salary of a Russian officer was 300 rubles at the time! In the 1810s, the ransom of children was typically organized by the captive’s family, and the effort often utterly ruined the family. Turkish slave traders had a greater paying capacity (profit for a child, purchased in Circassia and resold in Istanbul, multiplied up many times), so Circassians preferred to quickly deliver booty children to the Black Sea coast and sell there or sell to one of many intermediaries inside Circassia at a lower price.

It is fair to note that the child slave trade was a line of business not only for Circassians, but for their neighbors, the Abkhaz, as well. It is known that Prince Mikhail Shervashidze, the ruler of Abkhazia, sold up to 400 boys and girls annually in the 1840s, which was equal to about 1 % of the population at the time (TsGIAG. F. 4. Op. 1. D. 3632. L. 4).

<sup>1</sup> 1 top (measure of length) equaled about 3.92 meters.

#### 4. Conclusion

Summarizing the findings, we can conclude cases of kidnapping by Circassians from Russian territory were recorded from 1795 to 1862. During this time, at least several hundred children were kidnapped, from the Russian side alone. Child abductions were a lucrative trade for kidnappers in Circassia, since the price of children on slave markets in Circassia exceeded the price of an adult and healthy man by three or more times. At the same time, capturing a Cossack, for example, posed a significant danger to the attacker, since the former was trained in the use of cold weapons, and it was much more difficult to deliver such a captive to the Circassian territory. Another important fact was that slave traders valued both boys and girls equally. Because of the high price of children, most of the captured children were immediately sent to slave markets and sold to Turks. This fate befell 78 % of children abducted by Circassians in the period from 1812 to 1815.

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