

Medieval slave trade routes in Eastern Europe extended from Finland and the Baltic Countries to Asia

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The routes of slave trade in Eastern Europe in the medieval and pre-modern period extended all the way to the Caspian Sea and Central Asia. A recent study completed at the University of Eastern Finland suggests that persons captured during raids into areas which today constitute parts of Finland, the Russian Karelia and the Baltic Countries ended up being sold on these remote trade routes. There was a particular demand for blonde girls and boys who were seen as exotic luxury items, and it was financially beneficial to transport them to the far-away markets. The study by Professor Jukka Korpela was published as a General Article in *Russian History*, which is a leading journal addressing the history of Russia. The journal publishes only four peer-reviewed General Articles per year.

The numbers of northern people who finally reached the southern markets were not large. The study indicates that out of the thousands of persons kidnapped in the north, only a few hundred – at most – ended up in the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia via the Volgan and Crimean slave markets. Otherwise, slave trade in the Crimea and Volga regions was extensive, and tens of thousands of people were sold into slavery every year. However, the existence of the trade route shows that it was possible, even under primitive conditions, to distribute information about the demand for blonde girls in the far-away markets. The network of those involved in slave trade included men who participated in raids, slave traders and customers representing the leading class of society.

Raids into the north were launched especially from Novgorod, which was well connected to the Crimea and, from there on, to the Caspian Sea and the slave markets of Central Asia. Raids were done by private warlords and princely troops, and they extended all the way to the coasts of the Gulf of Bothnia and Lapland.

The material used in the study consists of chronicles, travelogues and various administrative documents such as tax and land registers, as well as diplomatic reports.

Slave trade in Eastern Europe gradually faded, as the control exercised by the emerging structure of European states became stronger. The spreading of Christianity also caused a decline in slave trade during the medieval period. Slave trade within Europe declined already in the early medieval period, but in regions bordering on Islamic countries, [slave trade](#) continued up until the pre-modern period.

More information: Korpela, Jukka. The Baltic Finnic People in the Medieval and Pre-Modern Eastern European Slave Trade. *Russian History* 41 (2014) 85-117. [DOI: 10.1163/18763316-04101006](https://doi.org/10.1163/18763316-04101006)

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