COMMUNIO

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17th Century Jewish Presence in Ruse and Economic Relations with the Ottoman Empire

https://doi.org/10.33993/TR.2026.2.07

Far from being marginal, Jewish actors were instrumental in the functioning of key imperial structures—especially in regions where logistical efficiency and fiscal stability were paramount.

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Introduction

Ruse, situated on the banks of the Danube River within Bulgaria, features a rich cultural tapestry, being home to Jewish, Christian, and Muslim communities. Annexed into the Ottoman territories in 1417, Ruse initially functioned as a district under the jurisdiction of Chernovi before attaining the status of an autonomous administrative unit, referred to variably as Giurgiu, Rusçuk, and Ruse in Ottoman archival records.

The presence of a harbor and castle along the Danube rendered Ruse a focal point for trade and gave it strategic importance, contributing to its rapid growth after the conquest. Historical records from 1479 indicate a non-Muslim population of 1,200 individuals, comprising 239 households and 1 *bive* (widow) while the Muslim population numbered 20 individuals across

4 households. By 1530, both populations witnessed an increase, with non-Muslims totaling 2,179 individuals, including 385 households, 189 *mücerred* (single man) and 13 *bive*, while Muslims numbered 258 individuals across 50 households and 8 *mücerred*. By 1557, the population surged further, with 3,003 Muslims and 3,697 non-Muslims recorded. Muslim households numbered 463, including 286 *mücerred* and 7 exempts, while non-Muslim households comprised 628, with 402 *mücerred*, 10 *bive*, and 35 exempts. The neighborhood counts also expanded, from five Muslim and five non-Muslim neighborhoods in 1538 to seven and six, respectively, by 1557.[1]

Petar Bogdan Bakskev, who arrived in Ruse on 8 September 1640, writes that there were 200 Christian, 200 Armenian, and 300 Muslim houses in the city. He calculates the population as 1,000 Christians, 1,000 Armenians, and 1,500 Muslims, respectively. These numbers are consistent with the jizya records of 1656/57 and 1663.

Evliya Çelebi, who came to Ruse in 1651, states that there were no Jews except those who came to the city for trade. It is said that, by 1870, there were between 1,000 and 2,200 Jews in the city. According to the 1887 Bulgarian elections, there were 1,975 Jews, as seen in the official records.

Situated on the banks of the Danube, Ruse emerged as a pivotal hub within the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century, playing significant roles in transportation, trade, industry, and military affairs.[2] The establishment of the Ruse Shipyard further bolstered the city's development.[3] By the 17th century, Ruse became the focal point of the Danube navy, echoing its importance during Roman times. A notable historical event underscores Ruse's prominence: On *23 Cemaziyelevel 1109* (7 December 1697), Constantin Brâncoveanu, Prince of Wallachia, filed a complaint to Istanbul regarding the sale of salt at the piers of Nikopol, Silistra, and Ruse, citing significant losses incurred. This incident underscores the economic significance of Ruse's piers within the region.[4] On 4 June 1576, upon his arrival in Ruse, the French traveler Pierre Lescalopier depicted the city as affluent, vibrant, and densely populated, further highlighting its flourishing status during that era.[5] As the economic vitality of the city surged, Dubrovnik and Latin merchants began to frequent Ruse for trade.[6] Evliya Çelebi, who visited Ruse in 1651, reported the organization of a bustling bazaar in the city every week. He noted the presence of three inns, a Danube-side bathhouse, and three or more shops within the city. Çelebi also observed three distinct Christian neighborhoods, with Jews primarily engaged in trade, coming and going as merchants.[7] In a report dated 3 August 1666, Francesco Soimirovic, a Bulgarian Catholic clergyman and Bishop of Ohrid, described Ruse as a splendid cathedral city bustling with people of various nationalities, highlighting its cosmopolitan character. By the 18th century, the Jews had amassed considerable wealth, particularly from mining and leatherworking. Their affluence prompted a visiting merchant in 1864 to lament: "Crowds of Germans, Hungarians, Greeks, and *Cıfıt* (a derogatory term for Jews) dominate the city's streets and control all its trade, while ours stand by hopelessly, engrossed in petty disputes." In the latter half of the 17th century, Jews, alongside numerous Christians, migrated to Ruse from neighboring villages, drawn by the city's burgeoning commercial prospects.

Four rooms of the inn, which was part of the Alanyalı Mustafa Pasha Mosque constructed in the 1850s and situated in the Bacanak neighborhood of Ruse, were leased by Jews for use as a place of worship. Bakardijeva's study, "Ruse," indicates that they formally requested permission from the Ottoman Empire to utilize the space for religious purposes, although no documentary evidence corroborates this claim.[8] However, a report by Ahmed Arif Hikmet Bey dating back to 1840 attests to the presence of Jews residing in the inn.[9] By 1870, Ruse boasted a Jewish population of approximately 1,000 individuals.[10] A report from 1897 notes the dilapidated state of the Dellâllar buildings and the Old Synagogue, indicating significant structural decay. The mosque itself met a similar fate, being entirely demolished in 1927.

In the 17th century, Ruse emerged as a bustling center frequented by merchants, predating its integration into the Ottoman Empire. Travelers from the 17th to the 19th centuries consistently depict the city as a thriving hub of commerce. However, the role and presence of Jews in Ruse during this period warrant further exploration.

Contrary to Evliya Çelebi's accounts, which suggest that Jews primarily engaged in transient trade activities in Ruse, archival records from the Ottoman Empire reveal a more nuanced picture. While Jews may not have been permanent residents of Ruse during the periods documented by Çelebi, they were indeed active participants in the city's commercial activities, often traveling for trade purposes.

The absence of Jewish residents in Ruse in the tahrir registers of 1479, 1538, and 1557 raises questions about their settlement patterns and relationship with the Ottoman Empire during that time. Historical records indicate that the Jews faced expulsion from Hungary starting in 1370, following the decree of King Louis I. Subsequently, Jewish communities dispersed, with some settling in the Vidin region after fleeing Bavaria in 1492. These diverse Jewish communities, known as *Yahudiyân-ı Budin*, *Yahudiyân-ı Alaman*, and *Yahudiyân-ı Frenk* in the Ottoman Empire, maintained connections with various Balkan cities, including Nikopol, Sofia, Pravadi, Chernovi, Tırova, Lofça, Vidin, Plovdiv, and Yanbolu, as documented in a book dated 1546. The mobility of Jews between Istanbul and Rumelia cities underscores their active involvement in regional trade networks. The 1538 tahrir record the arrival of a Jewish community from Istanbul, shedding light on the dynamic movement of Jewish populations within the Ottoman Empire during the 16th century. These historical insights prompt further inquiry into the evolving role and significance of Jews in Ruse's commercial and social fabric during the 17th century and beyond. Among the cities of Nikopol, Ruse, Shumen, and Hezargrad, referenced in the same ledger, Nikopol stands out as the only city where Jews were documented as settlers. In Nikopol, a total of 343 individuals, comprising 68 households and 32 *mücerred*, were recorded as Jews (Yahudiyân). Additionally, 52 individuals from 10 households and 2 *mücerred* were identified as Jews of Buda (Yahudiyân-ı Budin), while 153 individuals from 28 households and 13 *mücerred* were classified as Jews living with Latins (Yahudiyân maa Latiniyan).[11] It is evident that Jewish merchants visiting Ruse for commercial purposes during this period may also have resided in neighboring cities. Jews lived not only in the Nikopol sanjak but also in many regions of the Balkans and were actively involved in trade. One of these cities is Nišh.[12] This study seeks to address this gap by drawing on 21 distinct types of documents, including *Mühimme* (Important Registers), bond deeds, maps, archive and other types of documents. Furthermore, archival studies on the region have been incorporated. Notably, while the *Shar'iyye Sicilleri* (Sharia registry books) have received significant attention in previous studies, this research reveals that the Jewish refugees documented herein are not represented in the analyzed *Shar'iyye Sicilleri*. The documents under scrutiny indicate that Jews acquired the *mukataa* (tax farm) right of the Ruse region through tax farming and paid the jizya tax, underscoring their active engagement and presence in the area. Based on these studies, it is evident that the commercial interactions between the Ottoman Empire and the Jewish communities in the region commenced during this period. Notably, a decree issued in the early 18th century sheds light on the burgeoning trade dynamics. Christian and Jewish merchants, trading in gold, silver, and low-denomination coins, transported these commodities from the region to the capital through their partners based in cities across Rumelia, including Edirne, Sofia, Thessaloniki, Yenişehir, and the Peloponnese. However, interruptions in the flow of gold and silver prompted Sultan Mahmud I to issue a decree aimed at curbing the activities of bandits in the region, maintaining public order, and ensuring the safety of merchant caravans.[13] This decree, dispatched to the district centers, including the qadi of Ruse, underscores the presence and active participation of Jewish merchants in regional trade networks.

We notice that there were Jews in Ruse in the last quarter of the 17th century. This presence can be summarized in two points. Firstly, they could receive revenues through *mukataa* (i.e., the system of leasing of the annual income of the state in exchange for cash in advance in the Ottoman Economic System) and secondly, they were obliged to pay the jizya.

1. Jewish Tax Farmers

Since the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, Jewish communities had been known to actively operate as refugees, often seeking shelter and opportunities in various cities.[14] They leveraged their presence in these urban centers, as well as in cities boasting developed trade and production networks, to participate in international trade as merchants.[15] Maintaining close ties with the government, Jewish merchants endeavored to generate income and expand their trade networks.[16] Avram Galanti, a traveler of the period, noted that "almost all of the customs were given to the Jewish tax farmers."[17] In numerous locations such as Thessaloniki, Bursa, Istanbul, Izmir, and Ankara, among others, Jewish merchants acquired *mukataas* through tax farming, enabling them to exercise control over various aspects of trade and revenue collection.

In the analyzed sources, a notable aspect of the tax farming practice in the region is the involvement of Muslim refugees. The 1656 *Shar'iyye* (Sharia registry) marks the first instance where Recep Ağa received revenues from the *has* lands belonging to Beyhan Sultan in the vicinity of Tutrakan and Kula, amounting to 165,000 *akçe* (Ottoman silver coin). Furthermore, the Kantar and Bozahane in Ruse were granted to İbrahim Beşe and Recep Beşe for 70,000 *akçe*. Geographical considerations and local activities contributed to the fish caught in lakes and the Danube becoming subject to tax farming. Evliya Çelebi documented the presence of 40–50 types of fish from the waters of the Lom.[18] Maksud Ağa, who held rights over a quarter of the fish caught from lakes near the villages of Ismil, Berişlan, and Karsu in Ruse, as well as from the Danube in his own *mukataa*, lodged complaints with Istanbul regarding the perceived injustices and interference by the voivodes of *Havass-ı Humâyun*.[19]

The revenues of Chernovi and Zishtovi townships, along with their villages, were collectively granted to Hasan bin Abdullah for eighty *esedî kurus* (piasters), annually. Additionally, the crop revenues of the villages of Bergos and Yuvan in Ruse were assigned to Kara Mehmed Ağa, the Khan Chukadar, for 300 *kurus* per year. Subsequently, the revenues of these same villages for the year H. 1110/M., 1698–99, were transferred to Şaban Ağa for 1,000 *kurus* annually, while the excise taxes of Hezargrad and Ruse districts, alongside the village of Küçük Manastır, were bestowed upon Ali Ağa for 120 *kurus* yearly. Furthermore, a portion of the revenues from Ruse and Silistra was allocated to Hasan Ağa, a resident of Ruse, amounting to 480 *kurus* annually. Previously, Damad Efendi and Mehmed Ağa, a furrier, were among the refugees benefiting from similar arrangements. Additionally, it is noted that the livestock *ağnam* (sheep tax) of the village of Ablanova-yı Muslim was also collected as part of the tax farming.[20]

In the 17th century, records indicate that certain villages such as Brestovica under Ali Ağa and Küçük Manastır under Ali Ağa, alongside the excise taxes from Hezargrad and Ruse districts under Ali Ağa, as well as a portion of the taxes from Ruse, Nikopol, and Silistra, were allocated to Hasan Ağa. This distribution of revenue, totaling 480 *kurus*, was previously managed by former refugees including Damad Mehmed Efendi and Kürkçübaşı Mehmed Ağa.[21]

In the 18th century (1734–1735), the ledger records eight refugees, all of whom were Muslims. This pattern also holds true for previous refugees. Among them, Mustafa Pasha, the captain of the Danube River, and his son, who received the one-year revenues of Rahova in the Ruse district, stand out. Additionally, Seyyid Mehmed Ağa, Halil Ağa, Ahmed Ağa, Ali Ağa, and Elhac Ahmed Ağa were granted portions of the revenues from Nikopol and Ruse.[22]

An important detail concerning the Jews in the aforementioned book is the mention of 137 and a half *kurus* per *hane-i Yahudi* (Jewish household). While the book indicates that the tax was imposed in three groups as *ala* (top tier), *evsat* (middle tier), and *edna* (bottom tier), the specific amount levied per household remains unclear.[23] However, this situation corroborates the presence of a Jewish population in the city immediately following the period under study, indicating that they resided in the city as taxable residents.

In the context of the economic activities carried out by Jews within the Ottoman Empire, it is essential to discuss the tax farming system whereby private individuals undertook the collection of tax revenues on behalf of the state in exchange for an annual fee. The Jews played an active role in Ottoman society as tax farmers, particularly since the 15th century. Questions arise as to whether their commercial ventures contributed to their active involvement, whether they received favorable treatment from the Ottomans, and whether their rights were adequately protected. An illustrative document dated *14 Shawwal 1025* (25 October 1616) concerning Jewish refugees in Ruse sheds light on these dynamics. In this document, two Jews named Baruh and Arslan were given land grants for piers along the Danube coast in the region, entitling them to the income from the piers in Vidin, Nikopol, Ruse, and Silistra. They paid an annual sum of 4,000 *gurre/gourre* (kurus) to the Prince of Wallachia, with the total income from the piers amounting to 6,600,000 *akçes*. The primary issue arose when a group of Jewish refugees lodged a complaint against Baruh and Arslan. In their grievance, they demanded the granting of wharves in Nikopol, Ziştovi, Rahova, Vidin, Ruse, Tutrakan, and Silistra. Three Jews named Yasef, Mayer, and Salamon accused Baruh and Arslan of unfair practices and applied for licenses for these locations. Their requests were ultimately granted, indicating a complex interplay of economic interests and negotiations within the Jewish community and between Jews and the Ottoman authorities.[24]

The granting of income from the *mukataa* of Nikopol and Ruse to a Jew named Arslan, earmarked for the soldiers serving in the Özi guard, underscores the protection of Jewish rights within the Ottoman Empire. This grant, apparently bestowed by Vizier Hasan Pasha, one of the Özi commanders, stipulated that neither other Jews, nor other individuals should interfere with the *mukataa*. This indicates a commitment to upholding the rights of the Jews and maintaining existing arrangements. In the context of tax farming, the state demonstrated a preference for preserving the established order rather than replacing old refugees with new ones. Agreements were made, promises upheld, quid pro quo arrangements fulfilled, intermediaries identified, and order established. However, if during the term of the agreement, barring natural conditions such as climatic or health-related factors, a tax farmer breached their promise, underpaid, or engaged in fraudulent practices, they were replaced by a new tax farmer. This system ensured stability, accountability, and fairness in the administration of tax revenues and concessions.[25] In cases where tax farmers were unable to fulfil their debt obligations to the state, or if the debt couldn't be satisfied from their assets, the state would turn to guarantors to recover its receivables.[26] The state, reluctant to address the problems left by the old tax farmers regarding the reassignment of revenues, faced challenges in finding new tax farmers. In fact, the difficulty of securing new tax farmers significantly influenced this process.[27] Moreover, if a new tax farmer assumed control over the revenues of the *mukataa*, the outgoing tax farmer would collect the final taxes of their term, preventing the new tax farmer from intervening in these revenues. This practice ensured the orderly transition of tax farming responsibilities and minimized disruptions in revenue administration.[28]

2. Jizya Revenues

In Islamic states, the jizya tax imposed on the active male population with the status of dhimmi emerged as one of the most significant revenue sources for the state, particularly following the 1691 reform.[29] A substantial portion of jizya revenues originated from the Rumelia region, given its dense non-Muslim population. These jizya revenues collected from the region were allocated to various areas and utilized to support state expenditures and infrastructure development.

In the 17th-century Ottoman fiscal system, the jizya (poll tax imposed on non-Muslim adult males) emerged not only as a marker of the dhimmi status but also as a reliable and flexible financial instrument—particularly in Rumelia, where non-Muslim populations were densely concentrated. Within this context, the city of Ruse, situated on the banks of the Danube, played a significant role as a multicultural commercial hub where Christian and Jewish communities were actively taxed and economically engaged.

The case of Ruse reveals that jizya revenues collected from gebrân and Jewish communities were not merely passive income streams transferred to the imperial center; rather, they were strategically deployed for regional and state expenditures. Ottoman archival documents from 1692 to 1702 show that these revenues were systematically directed toward multiple state functions, including military provisioning, fortress maintenance, logistical supply for *Sefer-i Hümâyun* (imperial campaigns), and even the operational costs of the *Istabl-ı Âmire* (imperial stables).

What distinguishes the case of Ruse is the level of specificity and consistency in the allocation of jizya revenues. For example, a 1698 decree records the use of 108,224 *akçe* from Ruse's jizya to fund *nan* (bread) and *gusht* (meat) rations for 103 artillerymen stationed in Kerş and Taman.[30] Another document from 1699 shows that 30,709 *akçe* was allocated to cover the daily salaries of azeban guards in Belgradcık Palanka.[31] Most notably, in 1701, a payment of 171,902 *akçe* was made for the wages of 7 *sipahis* and 62 *silahdars*, reflecting the differentiated pay scales within the Ottoman military hierarchy.[32]

The fiscal architecture in Ruse also reflects the increasing involvement of Jewish mültezims (tax farmers), who not only collected taxes but were also contractually obligated to allocate portions of the revenue to military salaries—sometimes under direct imperial mandate. Such arrangements were part of the broader *mukataa* system, whereby tax farms were leased out in return for upfront payments, and income was earmarked for specific state functions. The leasing of jizya revenues, particularly to Jewish financiers like Arslan, who was entrusted with funding garrisons such as Özi, illustrates how the state ensured financial continuity while accommodating minority participation in economic governance.[33]

Therefore, the administration of the jizya in 17th-century Ruse exemplifies the Ottoman Empire's capacity to integrate its religiously diverse population into a rationalized system of fiscal-military governance. The jizya functioned as a cornerstone of public finance, enabling the state to fund its institutions without overburdening central treasuries. This multifaceted use of the tax—covering everything from military payrolls to logistical needs—reaffirms the jizya's role as a dynamic, rather than merely symbolic, pillar of Ottoman statecraft.

The jizya revenues received from Jews alone cannot be determined solely based on the available documents. Jizya collected from both Christians and Jews, termed as *gebran maa Yahudiyân*, was allocated to various regions and diverse needs. In this regard, the expenditures of jizya revenues collected from the Ruse region can be categorized into three main groups. These categories include:

- Covering the expenses incurred for the *Sefer-i Hümâyun* (imperial campaign);
- meeting the expenditures made for *Istabl-ı Amire* (imperial stables);
- the provision of salaries of officials, which include the salaries of civil servants in Istanbul, the salaries of soldiers such as janissaries, low-ranking garrison soldiers (*azeban*), artillerymen working in fortresses, and the salaries of fortress commanders.

2.1. Covering the Expenses Incurred for the *Sefer-i Hümâyun* (Imperial Campaign)

The document dated 7 January 1696 (Gurre-i Cemaziyelahir 1107) states that the freight fee for the *zahire* (grain) and the ship arriving at the Ruse pier, to be purchased for the *Sefer-i Hümâyun*, was to be covered from the compulsory services and levies (gebran) and the Jewish poll tax (jizya). A total of four loads (400,000 akçe) and one thousand four hundred and sixty gourdes were paid from the jizya revenues for this purpose.[34] Another document dated 22 February 1698 (11 Şaban 1109) stipulates the allocation of funds from the Jewish and *gebran* (Christian group) jizya for the *Sefer-i Hümâyun*. Specifically, the cost of 800 *kurus*, representing the expenses of agricultural goods to be shipped from Demirkapı and Tahtalı to Belgrade pier, was requested to be collected from this source.[35] Furthermore, in the document dated 26 February 1698 (15 Şaban 1109), it is specified that the expenses of the zahire to be shipped to Belgrade piers for the *Sefer-i Hümâyun* should be paid from the jizya revenues of Ruse and Kavacık, which included contributions from Jews and Christians.[36]

2.2. Meeting the Expenses Incurred for *Istabl-ı Âmire*

On 9 May 1701 (Gurre-i Zilhice 1112), an amount of 230,000 kurus was collected from the jizya of the Jews and *gebran* (Christian group) of Ruse for the expenses of *Istabl-ı Âmire-i Bozork*.[37]

2.3. Provision of Salaries of Officials

To pay the salaries of certain troops, the jizya revenues from Giurgiu, Shumen, Hezargrad, and Ruse districts were collected for the years 1004–5–6 (corresponding to 1692–3–4). Danube Captain Ali Pasha received a total of 22,742 gourds from Giurgiu, 3,500.5 gourds from Shumen, and 47,094.5 gourds from Ruse's jizya revenues.[38]

On 22 March 1698 (10 Ramadan 1109), a total of 108,224 gourds was collected from the jizya revenues of Ruse, Giurgiu compulsory labor (gebran), and Jews. These funds were allocated for the payment of *nan* (bread) and *gusht* (meat) expenses of the Dergâh-ı Ali artillerymen under the command of Vizier Abdulbaki in the Kerş and Taman region. This amount was intended to cover the salaries and kitchen rations for 103 soldiers.[39] On 19 March 1699 (Ramadan 1110), the salaries of the *azaben* officials of the Belgradcık Palanca *azaben* in Vidin were funded from the jizya of Ruse *gebran* and Jewish communities. The salaries were set at 347 *akçe* per day for 30 individuals. A total of 30,709 *akçe* was collected for this purpose.[40] The document dated 9 May 1701 (Gurre-i Zilhijce 1112) provides a detailed breakdown of the salaries for *sipahi* (cavalrymen) and *silahdar* (men-at-arms). A total of 69 individuals were accounted for, including 7 *sipahi* and 62 *silahdar*. The total amount collected from the jizya of Ruse *gebran* and Jewish communities amounted to 171,902 *akçe*. Specifically, 166 *akçe* was allocated for each *sipahi*, totaling 12,900 *akçe*, while 1,988 *akçe* was designated for each *silahdar*, totaling 159,002 *akçe*.[41]

TABLE 1. JIZYA REVENUES

Date	Region	Cizyedâr (Jizya Collector)	Place of allowance	Total
Gurre-i Muharram year 1104/ 12 September 1692	Nikopol, Ruse, and Shumen pier tax farm (mukataa) revenues and Jewish jizya	Danube Captain Ali Pasha		22,742[42]
Gurre-i Rajab 1106/15 February 1695	Jizya revenues from Nikopol, Ruse, Giurgiu, Silistra	Ahmet Ağa		
Gurre-i Muharram 1107/ 12 August 1695	Jewish and gebran jizya revenues from Ruse and Giurgiu	Ali Pasha (Captain of the Danube River)	Salaries of the mustahfızan, artillery, farisan, and azeban in the castle of Fethül-islam	1,288.5 kurus ve 11 pare[43]
14 Muharram 1107/ 25 August 1695	Jewish and gebran jizya in Ruse district	Hüseyin Ağa (serbevvabin-i Dergâh-ı Âlî)	For the salaries of the Janissaries of Babadagi and the guards of Kalamani-ca Castle	600,000 akçe[44]
Gurre-i Cemazi-yelevvel 1107/ 7 January 1696	Ruse gebran and Jewish jizyah	Hüseyin Ağa (ser-bevvabin-i dergâh-ı ali-i cizyedar)	Salaries of the Rikab-ı Hümâyun Ağas	8,550 ku-rus[45]

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Table—*Continued*

Date	Region	Cizyedâr (Jizya Collector)	Place of allowance	Total
17 Zilkade 1107/ 18 June 1696	Nikopol, Giurgiu, Ruse, Hezargrad and Tırgovişte (Eskicuma) gebran and Jewish jizya	Silistra dealer Ismail Ağa	Mevacibs of Babadagi serdengeçdiyan sipahi	2,750 kurus[46]
29 Dhu al-Hijjah 1108/ 19 July 1697	Ruse gebran and Jewish jizya	Danube Captain Ali Pasha		2,921,159 akçe[47]
1 Shaaban 1109/ 12 February 1698	Ruse, Giurgiu gebran and Jewish jizya	Mehmet ağa Mirahur-ı evvel-i sabık	Expenses for nan and gusht rations of Babadagi janissaries	1,112,262 akçe[48]
1 Shaaban 1109/ 12 February 1698	Ruse and Giurgiu gebran and Jewish jizya	Mehmet Ağa Mirahur-ı evvel-i sabık	Salaries of Babadagi janissaries and expenses for nan and gusht rations	6 yük (600,000) akçe 25,044 kurus[49]
Gurre-i Shaaban 1109/ 12 February 1698	Ruse, Giurgiu gebran and Jewish jizya	Mehmet Ağa Mirahur-ı evvel-i sabık	Salaries of the janissaries of Babadagi and expenses of nan and gusht	6,951.5 kurus[50]
10 Ramadan 1109/ 22 March 1698	Nikopol, Ruse and Shumen pier mukataa (tax farm) revenues and Jewish jizya	Mehmet Ağa Mirahur-ı evvel-i sabık	Nan and gusht expenses of the Dergâh-ı Âlî artillerymen appointed under the command of Vizier Abdulbaki in Kerş and Taman region	108,224 (103 nefer)[51]
17 Ramadan 1110/ 19 Mart 1699	Ruse gebran and Jewish jizya		Salaries of the azaben officials of the Belgradecık Palanca in Vidin	30,709 akçe[52] (nefer 30, yevmî 347)
Gurre-i Zilhicce 1112/ 9 May 1701	Ruse gebran and Jewish jizya		Salaries of sipahi and silahdar	171,902[53]
10 Shaaban 1113/ 10 January 1702	Ruse gebran and Yahudiyân (Jewish) jizya		Masar and Recec salaries of the janissaries in charge of the Kefe guard in the year 1113 (1701)	1,057,397[54]
29 Ramadan 1113/ 27 February 1702	Ruse gebran and Yahudiyân (Jewish) jizya		Salary of Koca Mehmet Pasha, one of the former guards of Özi Castle	100,000[55]

When collecting the jizya tax, the revenues of more than one district were collected at the same time. In the bond dated 29 Dhu al-Hijjah 1108/ 19 July

1697, the jizya tax collected from Nikopol, Silistra, Ruse, Giurgiu, Hezargrad, Tırgovişte, Çardak, and Novibazar is 2,754,000, and the jizya tax collected from Nikopol, Giurgiu, Ruse, Hezargrad, and Târgovişte is 2,921,159 *akçe*. The collected amount was delivered to Ismail Ağa, the Silistra trader, as the price of agricultural products.[56]

The allocation of jizya revenues in 17th-century Ruse illustrates a deeply integrated fiscal-military structure within the Ottoman Empire, whereby taxes collected from non-Muslim subjects—both Christians and Jews—were not only a source of imperial income but a strategic financial tool for sustaining frontier defense and bureaucratic functions. The consistent redirection of these revenues toward the payment of janissaries, azebs, sipahis, and other officials reflects the state's dependence on diversified tax bases for maintaining military readiness and administrative continuity. Furthermore, the involvement of Jewish tax farmers, who secured contracts stipulating the use of tax-farm revenues for military salaries, underscores the collaborative—yet hierarchical—nature of Ottoman fiscal governance. Thus, the provisioning of salaries in Ruse was not merely a local or logistical matter; it was part of a broader imperial strategy that combined religious pluralism, financial pragmatism, and military necessity into a cohesive system of statecraft.

Conclusions

From the latter half of the 17th century onward, particularly with the burgeoning commercial activity in Ruse, Jewish settlers began to migrate to the region at an accelerated pace. This trend is distinctly evident in the historical records of subsequent periods. Situated on the banks of the Danube near the Lom, Ruse steadily ascended in the realm of commerce. The presence of a harbor further catalyzed trade and beckoned merchants from various places. Given their active involvement in trade, it is conceivable that Jews increasingly gravitated toward the burgeoning city of Ruse. According to available documents, there is no evidence of Jewish settlement in the 16th century. Nevertheless, it is plausible that Jews residing in Nikopol, another city along the Danube, frequented Ruse for trading purposes. Those Jews who chose Nikopol as their place of residence likely persisted in their commercial endeavors there, as Ruse gained traction. The onset of Ottoman–Jewish commercial activities in the region can be traced back to the *mukataas*, or tax farms, jointly operated by Jewish refugees known as Arslan and Baruh, aligning with historical accounts of Jewish refugees settling in numerous cities. Although not explicitly reflected in the jizya records, the consistent notation of "Jew" in documents related to jizya collections, along with phrases such as "compulsory service alongside Jews" (*gebran maa Yahudiyân*) prevalent in jizya collection documents exclusively from Ruse, unequivocally underscores the presence of Jews in the region. While the scope of Jewish activity in Ruse during the 17th century appears relatively limited, their presence becomes more pronounced in subsequent periods, marking the establishment of Jewish communities during this era. Although precise figures are elusive, it is evident that the Jewish presence in Ruse continued to grow over the ensuing centuries. By the 18th century, the designation of rooms within an inn for Jewish use as a place of worship signifies their integration into social life by this time. The Jews remained actively entrenched in the city of Ruse, maintaining vibrant commercial ties with the Ottoman Empire.

Ruse, strategically situated on the right bank of the Danube, played a critical role as a military, commercial, and administrative center. Its harbor and castle, its shipyard for the imperial navy, and its position on the Istanbul–Bucharest route enabled the city to flourish as a transregional hub. This infrastructure attracted not only Muslims and Christians, but also mobile Jewish merchant networks—initially transient but increasingly rooted in the region's economic and fiscal fabric. Though not always documented in population censuses (*tahrir*), Jewish actors appear consistently in fiscal registers, court records, and imperial decrees—especially those related to tax farming (*iltizam*) and revenue allocation.

One of the central findings of this study is the active role played by Jews in the Ottoman *mukataa* (tax farm) system. As *mültezims* (tax farmers), individuals such as Arslan and Baruh secured contracts over the piers and customs posts of Vidin, Silistra, Nikopol, and Ruse, thereby participating in the empire's revenue collection apparatus. In several cases, these contracts explicitly stipulated that the revenue collected was to be directed toward military salaries, especially for garrisons stationed at strategic fortresses such as Özi and Babadagi. This practice not only reflects the trust placed in Jewish financiers but also the empire's reliance on their liquidity and regional commercial expertise.

Moreover, the jizya revenues collected from Jews and Christians (*gebrân maa Yahudiyân*) in the Ruse region provide an even more tangible picture of this interdependence. As documented in imperial financial records from the 1690s and early 1700s, these revenues were not simply hoarded or rerouted to Istanbul, but were used in real time to fund the costs of military logistics (e.g., bread and meat rations), *Sefer-i Hümâyun* (imperial campaigns), fortress maintenance, and the salaries of a wide spectrum of military personnel—from janissaries to artillerymen, *azeb* to *silahdar*. The precise sums, wage scales, and allocations (e.g., 171,902 akçe for 7 *sipahi* and 62 *silahdar* in 1701) demonstrate not only the granularity of Ottoman fiscal administration but also the embeddedness of Jewish communities in its daily operation.

This dynamic challenges traditional binaries between Muslim and non-Muslim subjects in the Ottoman world. While legal hierarchies and social limitations undeniably shaped Jewish life, the practical needs of the state—especially on the frontier—often created opportunities for economic participation and institutional recognition. The fact that Jewish tax farmers were protected by imperial decrees from interference, and that contracts emphasized continuity and the non-disruption of fiscal duties, suggests a reciprocal arrangement between Jewish financiers and the Ottoman elite, one governed by trust, performance, and mutual benefit.

The presence of Jews in the fiscal and economic records of Ruse also invites a reconsideration of Ottoman provincial life. While Istanbul, Thessaloniki, and Izmir often dominate narratives of Jewish economic activity, smaller and more peripheral cities such as Ruse emerge as key sites of mobility, negotiation, and adaptive integration. In these places, Jews operated not in isolation, but within overlapping networks that included Christian merchants, Muslim notables, and provincial administrators. This entanglement points to a form of "functional inclusion"—wherein religious minorities, while socially peripheral, were economically central to the Ottoman enterprise.

Furthermore, the gradual expansion of Jewish activity in Ruse—as evidenced by increasing mentions in court records, communal petitions, and contracts—coincides with broader shifts in Ottoman economic policy. The late 17th century was marked by prolonged military conflict, fiscal decentralization, and the expansion of *malikâne* contracts. In this volatile context, Jewish commercial expertise and credit capacity provided crucial support to imperial finance. Their ability to move across borders, manage risk, and cultivate long-term relations with the state made them indispensable agents of economic stability.

By the 18th century, the Jewish presence in Ruse becomes more visible in architectural, institutional, and communal terms. The leasing of rooms in an inn for use as a synagogue, as well as the continued participation in trade and tax collection, signals a deeper social integration. Although their population remained modest compared to other urban groups, their economic impact was disproportionately large—underscoring a broader Ottoman pattern where demographic size did not necessarily correlate with fiscal significance.

In conclusion, the 17th-century experience of Jews in Ruse exemplifies the Ottoman state's adaptive governance model, one that pragmatically incorporated diverse religious and ethnic groups into its administrative, fiscal, and commercial systems. Far from being marginal, Jewish actors were instrumental in the functioning of key imperial structures—especially in regions where logistical efficiency and fiscal stability were paramount. Through tax farming, jizya contributions, and trade networks, the Jews in Ruse helped sustain the empire's frontier presence while simultaneously carving out spaces of mobility, negotiation, and influence. Their story contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Ottoman pluralism—not as mere coexistence, but as an active, negotiated, and economically embedded phenomenon.

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Notes

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42. BOA, IE.BH. 5-435.
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Abstract

17th Century Jewish Presence in Ruse and Economic Relations with the Ottoman Empire

Ruse is a significant city in Bulgaria, situated on the right bank of the Danube River, at the mouth of the river Lom, approximately 12.5 miles east of Nikopol and 13.5 miles west of Silistra, along the road from Istanbul to Bucharest (66 miles away from Bucharest). It fell under the rule of Murad I in 1388, during the Balkan conquests of the Ottoman Empire. Following the conquest, Turkmens from Anatolia were settled here, marking the beginning of the city's transformation. Initially part of the Chernovi district of the Nikopol sanjak in the 15th century, Ruse underwent significant development and became a district center by the mid–16th century. The shipyard in the region, known as the Danube Shipyard, played a pivotal role in the construction of the Ottoman navy vessels along the Danube, enhancing the region's strategic and economic significance. The city's population, comprising Christians, Muslims, and Jewish traders, contributed to its economic prosperity, as noted by the French traveler Pierre Lescalopier, who visited Ruse in 1579 and described it in his travelogue as a thriving urban center with a large population. In summary, Ruse experienced rapid development due to its location on the Bucharest–Istanbul road, the presence of a shipyard, a strategically important castle, and its position at the crossroads of both land and water routes. In terms of significance, it came to rival other important cities along the Danube, such as Silistra and Nikopol.

Keywords

Ruse, Jew, multazim/tax farmer, tax farming, jizya