

A Letter of Protection for Debrecen from Devlet Giray, Kalga Sultan (1690/91)

Mihály Pokorni

Author:

PhD Student, Doctoral School of History, University of Szeged, Hungary
Teaching assistant, Department of Altaic Studies, University of Szeged.

pokmisko@gmail.com

ORCID: 0009-0001-9738-3903

Keywords:

Second Long Turkish War (1683–1699), Ottoman Hungary, Debrecen, Crimean Tatars,
Devlet Giray Kalga Sultan, 17th century

Cite this article:

Pokorni, Mihály. “A Letter of Protection for Debrecen from Devlet Giray, Kalga Sultan (1690/91). *Keshif: E-Journal for Ottoman-Turkish Micro Editions* 4/1 (Winter 2026): 50-55.

Available under <https://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-26-01-07>.

Article DOI [10.25365/kshf-26-01-07](https://doi.org/10.25365/kshf-26-01-07)

Published online March 23, 2026

© 2026 Mihály Pokorni, published by *Keshif: E-Journal for Ottoman-Turkish Micro Editions*.

This is an Open Access article licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0. International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Context

In the winter of 1690–1691, the market town of Debrecen¹ received a remarkable document. Devlet Giray, Kalga² Sultan of the Crimean Khanate, granted a letter of protection to the town's inhabitants. In it, he recognized the services that Debrecen had rendered to his “glorious and victorious army” and strictly forbade his troops from troubling its citizens in the future.³ What makes this charter unique is that, among the 143 charters⁴ issued by Ottoman authorities during this century and a half of domination over the city, it is the only one that came from the Tatars.

The protection letter issued by Devlet Giray can only be understood within the wider context of the Second Long Turkish War. In 1683, the Ottomans under grand vizier Kara Mustafa (1676–1683) made their final, ill-fated attempt to lay siege to Vienna. In the years that followed, the Habsburgs and their allies launched a vigorous counteroffensive which, by 1689, had forced the Turks back beyond northern Serbia and western Bulgaria, well to the south of the Kingdom of Hungary.⁵ That same year, a new grand vizier — Köprülü Mustafa (1689–1691), a leader of formidable stature — rose to power. By October 1690 he had already regained the lost territories of Bulgaria and Serbia, culminating in the reconquest of Belgrade. Soon after, he dispatched a 10,000-strong corps under the command of the Kalga Sultan to relieve the besieged fortresses

¹ Today situated near Hungary's eastern border, the city found itself in a precarious position throughout the 16th and 17th centuries, caught in the buffer zone between the Habsburgs, the Ottoman Empire, and the Principality of Transylvania. Although formally under Transylvanian authority, in 1555 it voluntarily submitted to Ottoman suzerainty as well. Until its liberation at the close of the 17th century, it was classified as an imperial *hâşş* estate, obliged to pay an annual tax to the Ottomans. In return, the town was supposed to be exempt from the burden of military billeting during wartime. In reality, however, this privilege was often disregarded, and the Tatars repeatedly used the city as winter quarters (Fekete 1926, 43–44).

² Within the Crimean Khanate this was the second most important office after that of the khan himself. After his election, the khan usually appointed his eldest brother or nephew as kalga (co-ruler), commander of the right wing and, in the khan's absence, of the entire Tatar army. Sometimes, however, he bypassed the senior brother and gave the office to his own son (Ivanics 1994, 27).

³ Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Hajdú-Bihar Vármegyei Levéltára (MNL HBML). *Document no. XV-21-c-00078-1*. HU_MNL_HBML_XV_21_c_00078_1. Archival manuscript. Devlet Giray, Kalga Sultan – Letter of protection for Debrecen, 1690/91.

⁴ The collection is today held in the Hajdú-Bihar County Archives in Debrecen.

⁵ Pálffy, 2021. 219–221.

of Várád. Once these strongholds had been secured, the Tatars, under the Kalga Sultan's command, pushed their raids as far as Debrecen and Kálló⁶.

Devlet Giray, who led the raid, served as Kalga Sultan from 1683 to 1699.⁷ As vassals of the Ottoman Empire,⁸ the khan and his kalga had, since the days of Süleyman the Magnificent, regularly joined the Ottomans in their campaigns in Hungary.⁹ Because most of their warriors received neither regular pay (*'ulūfe*) nor revenue lands (*ze'āmet*), warfare for them was not only a military duty but also an economic enterprise. They made up for the lack of wages through plunder and the taking of captives. From time to time the Tatars protected the villages and towns of the Ottoman domains that paid tribute to the sultan,¹⁰ but the lands of subjects who had broken faith with the sultan were open to their raids.¹¹

When the allied armies first tried to recapture Várád, the citizens of Debrecen withheld the sultanic tax from the fortress garrison. Their act of defiance cost them dearly: the *beg* of Várád made no move to protect the town when Tatar troops arrived to relieve the fortress. The ordeal of Debrecen is described in the memoirs of János Pósalaki, a contemporary notary and senator of the town. He recounts how the Tatars seized the city's leaders and carried them off to Várád, where the Kalga himself threatened to destroy Debrecen if his demands were not met. The Tatar envoys pressed for a "gift" of 10,000 gold coins, while at the same time subjecting the townspeople to constant harassment, seizing food supplies and draft animals. To avoid utter devastation, Debrecen ultimately offered both gold and payments in kind, after

⁶ Bánlaky, 1940. 393–406.

⁷ Ivanics, 1991. 210.

⁸ The Crimean Khanate was one of the most important vassal states of the Ottoman Empire. Although formally under the authority of the sultan, it enjoyed considerable autonomy: its ruler minted coins (*sikke*) in his own name, his name was included in the Friday prayer (*ḥuṭbe*), and he maintained diplomatic relations with foreign rulers (Królikowska 2013, 43–66).

⁹ Ivanics, 1994. 52–53.

¹⁰ In 1596, at the start of the Fifteen Years' War, Feth Giray, the Kalga, issued a Hungarian-language letter instructing the citizens of Debrecen to bring guards from Szolnok to protect the town from roving Tatars (HU_MNL_HBML_XV_21_c_0000113).

¹¹ Ivanics, 1994. 190–192.

which the Kalga Sultan withdrew peacefully to the plains of Kálló,¹² from where he sent the letter in question.

Transcription

hüve el-mu 'in

Devlet sultān bin Selīm ḥān sözümüz

[1] *bā 'is-i taḥrīr-i yarlıḡ-i şerīf-i sultānī ve mūcib-i taştīr-i belīḡ-i sa 'ādet-i teblīḡ-i ḥākānī oldur ki işbu dārende-yi emr-i şerīf-i vācibü t-teşrīfüm oraş-ı¹³*

[2] *Döbreçin ehālisi işbu biñ yüz iki tārīḡinde ordu-yı hümāyūn-i zafer-şi 'arīmuza 'alā ḡadri l-imkān ḡidmet idüb*

[3] *bundan aḡdem devletlü ve şecā 'atlu aḡacalarımızuñ [!] viregeldükleri emr-i şerīfleri üzre işbu emr-i şerīfümü virdüm ve buyurdum ki*

[4] *ba 'de l-yevm 'askerimüzden kim kimesne ta 'addī vü rencide eylemeyeler ve-l-ḡaşıl efrāddan ferd-i aḡadıñ ta 'addisine rızā '-yi şerīfüm yoḡdur*

[5] *şöyle bilüb emr-i şerīfüm ile 'amel eyleyeler taḥrīren fī māḡ-i Rebī 'ül-evvel*

Devlet Girāy sultān bin Selīm [Girāy] ḡān bi-yurt-i şaḡrā-yi Ḳālō temme

Translation

He is the Helper

Devlet Sultān son of Selīm ḡān, our word:

The reason for issuing this noble sultanic decree and for composing this exalted imperial notification is the following: the bearer of this noble decree, the inhabitants of the market town of Döbrecin, served our victorious imperial army to the best of their ability in the year 1102 [1690]. Based on the noble decrees formerly issued by our glorious and valorous ancestors, I too have issued this noble command and ordered that, from this day forward, none of the members of my army shall assault or harass anyone. In short, I do not grant my noble consent to any act of aggression against even

¹² Balogh, 1987. 37–39.

¹³ A word of Romanian origin, meaning “city”.

Bibliography

- Balogh, István. *Pósalaki János Debrecen siralmas állapotának megvilágosítása 1683–1696* (*An Illumination of the Lamentable State of Debrecen, 1683–1696*). A Hajdú-Bihar Megyei Levéltár Forráskiadványai 17. Edited by István Gazdag. Debrecen: Hajdú-Bihar Megyei Levéltár, Alföldi Nyomda, 1987.
- Bánlaky, József. *A magyar nemzet hadtörténelme. Magyarország felszabadítása a török uralom alól 1683–1699. 17. rész* (*The Military History of the Hungarian Nation. The Liberation of Hungary from Turkish Rule, 1683–1699. Part 17*). Budapest: Grill, 1940.
- Fekete, Lajos. "Debrecen város levéltárának török oklevelei" (*Ottoman Documents in the Municipal Archives of Debrecen*). In *Levéltári Közlemények*, vol. III, edited by Csánki Dezső. Budapest, 1926.
- Ivanics, Mária. *A Krími Kánság a tizenöt éves háborúban* (*The Crimean Khanate in the Long Turkish War*). Edited by Ildikó Ecsedy. Körösi Csoma Kiskönyvtár 22. Szeged: JATEPress, 1991.
- Królikowska, Natalia. "Sovereignty and Subordination in Crimean-Ottoman Relations (Sixteenth–Eighteenth Centuries)." In *The European Tributary States of the Ottoman Empire in the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries*, edited by Gábor Kármán and Lovro Kunčević, 43–66. Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2013.
- Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Hajdú-Bihar Vármegyei Levéltára (MNL HBML). *Document no. XV-21-c-00078-1*. HU_MNL_HBML_XV_21_c_00078_1. Archival manuscript.
- Magyar Nemzeti Levéltár Hajdú-Bihar Vármegyei Levéltára (MNL HBML). *Document no. XV-21-c-00078-1*. HU_MNL_HBML_XV_21_c_0000113. Archival manuscript.
- Pálffy, Géza. *Hungary between Two Empires 1526–1711*. Indiana: Indiana University Press – Center for Hungarian Studies and Publications, 2021.