

Christoph Witzenrath, ed.. *Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition in World History*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 2016. 390 pp. \$144.95, cloth, ISBN 978-1-4724-1058-0.

Reviewed by Hannah Barker

Published on H-Slavery (May, 2017)

Commissioned by David M. Prior (University of New Mexico)

This volume arose out of a conference on “Slavery, Ransom and Liberation in Russia and the Steppe Area, 1500-2000” held at the University of Aberdeen in 2009. The resulting collection represents a broad range of scholarly perspectives, with contributors based in Turkey, Poland, Finland, and Tatarstan as well as Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Since little of the previous scholarship on slavery in Russia or Inner Eurasia has appeared in English, this well-written and wide-ranging volume is especially valuable for Anglophone scholars who wish to gain familiarity with the state of the field.

Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition consists of fourteen chapters with a substantial introduction by Christoph Witzenrath that presents background information on the history and historiography of slavery in Inner Eurasia, a region “circumscribed approximately by the sub-arctic tundra, the Stanovoy, Tien Shan, Altai and Caucasus mountain chains, the Black Sea and the western borderlands of Eastern Orthodoxy” (p. 7). Witzenrath highlights the geographical, chronological, and social range of slavery as a human institution, then turns to a set of questions arising from the Inner Eurasian context. These include changes in the practice of slavery over time, terminology used to indicate varieties of unfree status, and the relationship of slavery to religion

(Christianity receives only four pages; Islam receives thirty-two). Finally, Witzenrath suggests that the study of slavery illustrates both the interconnectedness of eastern Europe and Eurasia and the complexity of Christian-Muslim relations in the region.

The first section, “Overviews,” has two chapters. In chapter 1, Alessandro Stanziani uses legal sources to explain the various forms of unfreedom covered by the Russian term *kholopstvo*. He finds that *kholopy* tended to be men in domestic service with limited legal rights and the ability to marry, and that their status was not necessarily transmitted to their children. In chapter 2, Donald Ostrowski critiques the use of early modern Russia in three world history frameworks represented by William McNeill’s *The Rise of the West* (1963), Boris Kagarlitsky’s *Empire of the Periphery* (2008), and a world history textbook entitled *World Civilizations: The Global Experience* (sixth edition, 2011). All three struggled to integrate Russian institutions of bondage and land ownership into their narratives without significant misrepresentation.

Beginning the second section, “Slavery in the Middle Ages,” Lawrence Langer argues that taking captives for sale or ransom was a normal aspect of warfare among the Rus’. The Mongols did not introduce the Rus’ to slave-taking but did

make it a central element of their tribute system. Chapter 4, by Jukka Korpela, provides a detailed discussion of slave raids against Finnic populations based on Finnish, Swedish, and Russian sources. He links slave-taking and taxation as modes of extracting wealth from a subject population. In chapter 5, Bulat R. Rakhimzyanov argues that Russian imperial history began in 1445 with the decision to hand over several towns to the Kasimov khanate in order to ransom the tsar after a military defeat. This was the first ethnically and religiously distinct region established within the tsar's domain, a situation which required a new system of governance.

The third section, "Demographies, Locales and Groups of Slaves," begins with Zübeyde Güneş-Yağcı's chapter on the *pençik*, an Ottoman tax on slave imports, based on an Istanbul register from 1606-07. The taxable value of slaves was assessed according to gender and age. In chapter 7, Charles L. Wilkins examines the slave population of Ottoman Aleppo by comparing *sijillat*, court records, from the mid-sixteenth and late seventeenth centuries. Aleppo's slave population was small but diverse, with a preponderance of male slaves and slaves of Russian and Georgian origin during the seventeenth century. Hans-Heinrich Nolte returns in chapter 8 to the question of terminology, noting that Russian *kholopy* registers included only the Orthodox and that Orthodox people were prohibited from serving in non-Orthodox households. Non-Orthodox slaves, *iasyry*, did not receive the limited rights extended to *kholopy*, nor was their presence documented in registers.

In the fourth section, "Perceptions of Slavery," Aleksandra Porada analyzes a nineteenth-century literary trope that Polish soldiers compelled to serve in Russia's Caucasian campaigns felt sympathy for their adversaries and sometimes deserted to join them. Although she finds evidence of Polish sympathy for Circassians, she also finds Polish captives sold as slaves into Ottoman territory. In

chapter 10, Brian L. Davies suggests that seventeenth-century Russians did not produce a genre of confessional captivity narratives like the English did because Russian captives petitioned the state rather than the public for relief and because Russian martyrology did not present captivity as a form of religious witness. Christoph Witzentrath argues in chapter 11 that the liberation of captives was an important reason for the Russian conquest of Kazan' in 1552 because it bolstered the tsar's legitimacy. In chapter 12 Aleksandr Lavrov shows that it was more difficult for Russian women to arrange ransom than for men, but this was due to informal rather than formal discrimination.

Will Smiley begins the fifth section, "Abolishing Bondage," with a chapter showing that despite literary tropes to the contrary, eighteenth-century Ottomans treated their Russian and Austrian military captives with greater care than civilian captives because the return of military captives was a typical condition of peace treaties. In chapter 14, Peter B. Brown argues that Russia's annexation of the Crimean khanate in 1783 was an indirect cause of the abolition of serfdom, since it removed the last external threat which could be used to justify tying peasants to the land.

Taken as a whole, *Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition* has more coherence than many edited conference volumes. What holds it together is its focus on temporally and culturally specific forms of slavery associated in various ways with medieval and early modern Russia. While the primary audience will be specialists in Inner Eurasian history, many chapters make explicit comparisons with slavery in other contexts, some (such as Davies's comparison of Russian and English captivity accounts) more carefully substantiated than others (such as Brown's comparison of Russian serfdom and American slavery). Even those chapters that do not adopt a comparative perspective will be useful to specialists in other

areas of slavery studies looking to expand their horizons.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-slavery>

Citation: Hannah Barker. Review of Witzenrath, Christoph, ed. *Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition in World History*. H-Slavery, H-Net Reviews. May, 2017.

URL: <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=48183>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.