

H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

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.

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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.

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