Christoph Witzenrath

Slavery

Slavery in the Black Sea region in its extremities from the Roma to the female regents of the Ottoman Empire has been a multifaceted phenomenon with many shades and hues since the onset of recorded history.[1] It has attracted criticism from Atlantic abolitionists giving rise to the defensive notion of "mild" Ottoman slavery. Although slavery has been defined in many ways, the core definition of chattel slave revolves around the hereditary loss of personal rights, or the lack of penalties for murdering slaves, and their status as property, thing or animal which can be sold or otherwise alienated by the owner, who has complete control over their day-to-day and domestic life, including their children.[2] Religions, states, and communities have sought to lessen the threat posed by slaves, as they increased the power of their marginal owners, and defined rules for treatment or manumission. Close to the Black Sea, new forms of rule evolved between 500 BCE and 1500: In monarchy, rulers of expansive empires realized the loss of taxpayers due to imperial overstretch, consequent growth of transaction costs, and indebtedness to merchants on the part of taxpayers. Some reclaimed those former taxpayers by inventing a personal relation of the ruler to every subject, requiring liberation, which did not exist in early empires.[3] Haphazardly enacted in historical time, such measures resulted in the multifarious blurred edges of slavery. The broad varieties of asymmetric dependency in which slavery was thus embedded were characterized by control of resources or actions on the part of the superior person in the relations.[4] In many cases, such relations were determined by the more or less clearly defined status which manumitted, ransomed, or liberated slaves obtained, or by slaves themselves through their agency. They could be aligned in scarcely defined continua or in incrementally ordered scales of asymmetrical dependencies.[5] Since the interagency

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1 Felicia Roşu, ed., *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, C. 900–1900: Forms of Unfreedom at the Intersection Between Christianity and Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

2 Suzanne Miers, "Slavery: A Question of Definition," in *Critical Readings on Global Slavery*, ed. Damian Alan Pargas and Felicia Roşu (Boston: Brill, 2017), 186.

3 Joseph Calder Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History: A Global Approach* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

4 Rudolf Stichweh, "How Do Divided Societies Come About? Persistent Inequalities, Pervasive Asymmetrical Dependencies, and Sociocultural Polarization as Divisive Forces in Contemporary Society," *Global Perspectives* 2, no. 1 (2021); Rudolf Stichweh, "Values, Norms, and Institutions in the Study of Slavery and Other Forms of Asymmetrical Dependency," *Dependent*, no. 1 (2022): 6.

5 Maryna Kravets and Victor Ostapchuk, "Cossacks as Captive-Takers in the Ottoman Black Sea Region and Unfreedom in the Northern Countries," in Roşu, *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, C. 900–1900.*

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of dependents relies on the resources they can mobilize, whether material, social, or symbolical, the institutionalization of status was a ready incentive.[6] Many forms of dependency[7] mixed institutionalized features on an incremental scale with the threat of falling from favor, an element of ambiguous, continuous dependency often observed in privileged elite slavery. Unlike the epitome of "slavery" everybody seems to know, Southern US plantation slavery, these dependencies often came without an emphatic antonym of freedom, voting rights, individual rights, or privileges. Virtually all groups and cultures know an emic notion of freedom, as perceived from the internal of a given language or culture rather than in analytical, outward, or etic terms, and often contrasted to captivity and enslavement. However, in most cases this went hand in hand with acceptance of hierarchies and elite political privileges, something which today is seen as at least defective freedom, if as freedom at all.[8] In systems that employed elite slaves and manumitted, or rather, elite asymmetrical dependents enjoying great power and clearly defined privileges, high office below the ruler was constituted by socially mobilizing, motivating forms of ambiguous, continuous asymmetric dependency, which also might instill crippling fear of the ruler's caprices. However, where, as in later Mamluk Egypt, the sultan was a manumitted military slave or descendant, the mamluk networks became entrenched, weakened the sultan's power, and constituted an institutionalized elite group.[9]

Since the measures to increase tax payer numbers took slaves and workers from the market, they created new demand which resulted in additional slaving activities, preferably in areas outside the group thus defined. In those slaving areas, which could be defined by territory, religion, language, taxpayer status, gender, race, or political exigency, extraneous demand for captives and slaves was created.[10] Such areas could spread everywhere, but there are spaces in which historically such conditions existed more often than elsewhere. Supply had to meet demand, and in historical terms, anarchy or polytheistic religion are only partial criteria of eligibility, especially as even monotheism did not automatically guarantee protection of believers against enslavement, as in early Christianity; nor did a strong state such as the early Mongol Empire, Nazi Germany, or the Soviet Union. Various markers of discrimination inter-

6 Juliane Schiel, Isabella Schürch, and Aline Steinbrecher, "Von Sklaven, Pferden und Hunden: Trialog über den Nutzen aktueller Agency-Debatten für die Sozialgeschichte," in *Neue Beiträge zur Sozialgeschichte/Nouvelles contributions à l'histoire sociale*, ed. C. Arni, M. Leimgruber and S. Teuscher (Zurich: Chronos, 2017), 17.

7 For accessibility, "dependency" in this text excludes mutual symmetric dependency, a logical if counter-intuitive corollary, unless expressly stated.

8 Miers, "Slavery: A Question of Definition," 186.

9 Stephan Conermann, ed., *Everything is on the Move: The Mamluk Empire as a Node in (Trans-)Regional Networks* (Göttingen: V&R Unipress, 2014).

10 Jeffrey Fynn-Paul, "Introduction. Slaving Zones in Global History: The Evolution of a Concept," in *Slaving Zones: Cultural Identities, Ideologies, and Institutions in the Evolution of Global Slavery*, ed. Jeff Fynn-Paul and Damian A. Pargas (Leiden: Brill, 2018).

sect in a given person, increasing the likelihood of strong asymmetric dependency or alienable slaves, given legitimizing worldviews, institutions, and practices.[11]

Slaving in the Black Sea region is at first glance perennial, with booms and slumps stretching back eons. Myths presented to legitimize this trade include the notion that locals sold their own children.[12] Since antiquity, the trade has given rise to prejudiced notions of barbarians seen as uncivilized and un-cultured by predominantly sedentary historians because they did not cultivate the land as proper agriculturalists did and were therefore legitimately enslavable. Yet this is precisely the reason why it is mandatory to historicize these phenomena, to place them within their premodern and early modern social, economic, and practice contexts. Extreme forms of social asymmetrical dependency such as slavery were a matter of differentials of power and control. Since antiquity the steppe remained the main area of slaving in the Black Sea trade. A historical analysis of underlying causes and conditions of supply from this zone, moreover, primes the multifarious and widely divergent forms of dependency in the Black Sea and connected spaces. The Atlantic trade demonstrates this principle in an extreme case, as on the other side of the ocean, access to resources such as localized social relations ended, a new condition made possible primarily by new types of ships sailing on the open seas at the disposition almost exclusively of slave traders. The Black Sea and connecting rivers and straits were more shipping lanes one might circumvent than dividing oceans. Fugitives might return on their own feet, and some did, influencing the level of inclusiveness of dependency.

1 Slaving in Steppe and Littoral Interactions

Backgrounds to power differentials in the Eurasian steppe are less obvious or less well-known, but even more extensive. With respect to slavery, the last 4,000 years before c. 1800 CE are marked as one period, yet historically richly structured. Wide-ranging genome studies using archaeological material of horse bones show that the genome to which all modern horses relate quickly spread from ca. 2200 BCE within just a hundred to two hundred years to most of Eurasia and Northern Africa, starting in the Black Sea steppe. This could only happen because horse and human teamed up, learning to use their combined power to herd other animals and, finally, humans.[13] Mounted warriors from the steppe, armed with the powerful and expensive composite reflex bow re-

11 Bernadette Brooten, "Enslaved Women in Basil of Caesarea's Canonical Letters: An Intersectional Analysis," in *Doing Gender, Doing Religion*, ed. Ute Eisen, Christine Gerber, and Angela Standhartinger (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2013); Youval Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard College, 2009).

12 Hannah Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise: The Mediterranean Trade in Black Sea Slaves, 1260–1500* (Pennsylvania: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2019), 125–28.

13 Pablo Librado et al., "The Origins and Spread of Domestic Horses from the Western Eurasian Steppes," *Nature* 598, no. 7882 (2021): 634–40.

mained the superior military force in open field battle until the rifled, and finally repeating gun became widespread from the late eighteenth century.[14] This broad period of four millennia correlates with changes in the supply of slaves from the steppe: After the Russo-Ottoman War of 1768–74 saw the last reported outlier slave raids of the Crimean Tatars, in 1774 the Khanate was formally neutralized but dependent on Russia. Catherine II dispersed the Zaporozhian Cossacks, another consistently, though less extensively slaving group guarding the frontier yet causing trouble in foreign relations.[15]

In studies of the Black Sea trade, the steppe is often treated as a blank, a terra incognita with low socio-economic development and bellicose character scarcely appearing in the main extant sources on the transaction and demand sides of the trade, namely outside Italian and Ottoman registers and Mamluk chronicles, or the Greek and Roman authors.[16] In slave supply, steppe social relations figure as a main agent. The rich black earth soils of the Western Eurasian steppe grew vast amounts of grass feeding large herds. Yet the unsteady climate in these areas meant frequent years of famine. Pastoral nomads found additional sources of income in transcontinental trade in luxury items predominantly directed east-west. Herds moved seasonally south to north, at an angle of almost ninety degrees, and there was frequently tension between these movements: Nomadic guards secured caravans from nomads who tried to rob them, conflicts might lead to founding steppe empires securing the routes, ruling in rogues,[17] and dormant steppe laws waited to be enforced by charismatic leaders like Genghis Khan.[18] Penalties were the destruction of rival groups and confederacies, with either integration into one's army and confederacy, or selling the victims into slavery. When the Mongols founded their empire, they sent a stream of captives sold in the Genoese and Venetian harbors of the northern Black Sea.[19] It was equally in keeping with the purpose of clearing the trade routes that tax arrears could result in selling the debtor into slavery, although this practice was not limited to the steppe. Civilization, and not just the worst aspects of it, as much as the often stressed anomy and mutual infighting of fragmented slaving areas brought about conditions of mass enslavement.[20]

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14 Donald Ostrowski, "The Replacement of the Composite Reflex Bow by Firearms in the Muscovite Cavalry," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 11, no. 3 (2010), 513–34.

15 Kravets and Ostapchuk, "Cossacks as Captive-Takers in the Ottoman Black Sea Region."

16 Danuta Quirini-Popławska, *Włoski handel czarnomorskimi niewolnikami wo późnym średniowieczu* (Cracow: Wydawn. Uniwersytetu Jagiellońskiego, 2002), 284–86. See, however, Brian L. Davies, *Warfare, State and Society on the Black Sea Steppe, 1500–1700* (London: Routledge, 2007), chapter 1.

17 Nancy Shields Kollmann, *The Russian Empire 1450–1801* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 25–27, 32–33.

18 Lhamsuren Munkh-Erdene, "The Rise of the Chinggisid Dynasty: Pre-Modern Eurasian Political Order and Culture at a Glance," *International Journal of Asian Studies* 15 (2018): 38–39.

19 Lawrence N. Langer, "Slavery in the Appanage Era: Rus' and the Mongols," in Witzenrath, *Eurasian Slavery, Ransom and Abolition in World History, 1200–1860* (Farnham, Surrey, UK: Ashgate, 2015), 150, 153–54.

20 Quirini-Popławska, *Włoski handel czarnomorskimi niewolnikami.*

Cooperation and competition, moreover, characterizes the links between nomads and sedentary agriculturalists. Nomads needed exchange with the latter, offering horses and hides for grain and products of the forests. However, burgeoning agricultural expansion periodically ate into the grazing grounds, so from the nomadic perspective it made sense to use their skills as herdsmen and warriors and treat some agriculturalists, especially those allied to their rivals, as another form of animal husbandry.

2 Antiquity

The Black Sea trade and communication link reveals some of the earliest evidence in this respect. Slaves were among the few goods available in numbers and at a price advantageous to the Greek traders. They had to be, since the long voyage to the northern shores was dangerous.[21] Not only is the Aegean island emporium of Chios renowned for early and extensive trade in slaves channeled through the Greek colonies on the northern Black Sea board since the seventh century and, due to the high density of its slave population, for one of the first known slave rebellions; among Classical authors it also enjoyed the dubious honor of being the first to express the notion of the chattel slave. In Chios, which founded no colony of its own, they were mainly traded in exchange for Chian wine, which was much in demand among the leaders of the Scythian nomads and Greek colonists.[22] The Greek language knew a revealing metaphor for slaves, *andrapodon*, "man-footed animal," with obvious analogies to animal husbandry (*tetrapodon*) and the cattle market alongside metaphors stressing monetary transactions.[23] Reducing humans to the status of animals or objects traded was therefore first recorded in proximity to the transactions of steppe and maritime forms of transport.

Most data on ancient Greek slavery derives from Athens, the emporium and imperial center in which laws prohibited enslavement of citizens—although in principle everyone could become a slave—while slaves had no rights. Slaves were considered appropriate targets of humor, but most of the relevant comedies have not been copied

21 David Braund, "The Slave Supply in Classical Greece," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 1, *The Ancient Mediterranean World*, ed. Keith R. Bradley and Paul Cartledge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 114.

22 Heinz Heinen, "Schwarzmeerraum," in *Handwörterbuch der antiken Sklaverei*, ed. Heinz Heinen (Stuttgart: Steiner, 2012), 74–90; Paul Cartledge, "The Helots: A Contemporary Review," in Bradley and Cartledge, *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, 1:80, 115, 121. Wine against slaves, fur and other hides as the driving force of exchange in the Greek Black Sea colonies, rather than grain: Nadiia O. Havrylyuk, "The Graeco-Scythian Slave Trade in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BC," in *The Cauldron of Ariantas: Studies Presented to A. N. Sceglov on the Occasion of His 70th Birthday*, ed. Pia Guldager Bilde (Aarhus: Aarhus University Press, 2003), 75–85; on the economy of the Scythians: Nadiia Oksentiivna Havryliuk, *Istoriia ekonomiki Stepnoi Skifii VI–III vv. do n.e.* (Kyiv: Inst. Arkheologii NAN Ukrainy, 1999).

23 Tracey E. Rihill, "Classical Athens," in Bradley and Cartledge, *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, 1:51.

and are no longer extant. Killing humans in peaceful conditions was considered to offend the gods and this principle was also applicable to slaves. Apart from the colony of Tana (today: Azov) at the estuary of the Don, Thrace provided many slaves, especially female servants whose tattoos are visible on the red-figured vases, attaining new meaning. On the Peloponnese, in a situation shared more widely throughout the region and pre-modern history, helots were subjugated neighboring groups working the fields in their own communities, under the supervision of the war-like Spartans.[24]

Roman and Byzantine slave laws combined a trading emporium's commitment to clear-cut laws with expansionist slaving. Slaves (*servus*, *ancilla*) were alienable property without legal capacity. Children shared the status of their mother. Manumission was granted by the owner and used as a motivator. Only by legal construction of the *peculium*, a limited liability device, could owners entrust duties of a manager or business representative to slaves.[25] While this was widely shared practice until at least the middle Byzantine period, agricultural and domestic slaving were far more widespread. Facing the pressure of Muslim expansion, which employed the liberty of the believer as a propaganda instrument, Byzantine emperor Leo VI ("the Wise," 886–912) promulgated the Novella, allowing slaves to dispose freely of their property, including by bequest. Protection of Christian marriage, church asylum, and direct access to courts of law made the slave more subject to higher spiritual or imperial authority but reduced the law of property and rights of free persons.[26] Moreover, in a move typical of reformers of slavery facing external competition, he made concessions to private slave owners, the Byzantine elite, leaving to their discretion the application of the law among their own slaves, but encouraging them to do so.[27] Given the lack of sources on social history as opposed to laws, it remains difficult to gauge the effects. A rise in the number of slaves in the tenth century was followed by decline and reduced numbers in productive labor in a shrinking empire.[28] The Church was split between humanization of slavery and the multitude of slaves toiling on monastery estates. Increased frequency of captured citizens led to the obligation of the parish and bishop to ransom.

24 Peter Hunt, "Slaves in Greek Literary Culture," in Bradley and Cartledge, *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, 1:30; Braund, "The Slave Supply in Classical Greece," 127–28; Rihill, "Classical Athens", 50–51; Cartledge, "The Helots," 73–90.

25 Neville Morley, "Slavery Under the Principate," in Bradley and Cartledge, *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, 1:265–86.

26 Rotman, *Byzantine Slavery and the Mediterranean World*, 166–79.

27 Daphne Penna, "The Role of Slaves in the Byzantine Economy, 10th–11th Centuries: Legal Aspects," in Roşu, *Slavery in the Black Sea Region*, 63–89.

28 Alexander P. Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium*, 3 vols. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 3:1915.

3 Medieval Slavery

Slavery was common in the medieval Palatinates of Rus, leaving the greatest cache of business documentation at Novgorod's slave corner of the main street market, written on birch bark preserved in a swamp. Inter-princely competition, cooperation with nomadic pastoralist groups, and external raids produced many captives ceded as a tribute to the Mongols since 1237, traded or used in agriculture, domestically, or at the court, as bailiffs or administrators.[29]

Scythian nomads left kurgans, burial mounds containing evidence of the quantities of wine traded by the Greeks, and gold treasures. The archaeological record of later Black Sea steppe societies is much broader, representing the immobile part of the nomadic-settled interaction. The urban sprawls and commercial hubs—including the human trade—of the Ulus of Jochi—emic for "Golden Horde"—extended for over ten kilometers at various sites along the lower Volga. The power of the steppe empire did not require fortifications, until it broke down after civil war in the 1360s–70s and downscaled transcontinental trade following the ouster of the Mongol Yuan dynasty in China.[30] Local level, transimperial agents and brokers inserted themselves into regional raiding economies reconfiguring steppe empires, often with the help of Tatar concubines, whom even the Latins allowed to inherit in analogy to Muslim custom. Slaves found new roles in the transmission of knowledge and served as universally accepted currency and in gift exchanges.[31] Breakdowns of steppe confederacies, re-stabilizations, and the ensuing slow disintegration sent yet more waves of captives through the Black Sea, their origins indicative of internal instabilities, which were likely as causal to the trade as the marketized demand especially to the south of the steppe and Black Sea that destabilized and destroyed the social fabric of the steppe and neighboring societies.[32]

Late medieval slave trade between the northern Black Sea ports, Egypt, and Italy mainly revolved around mixed goods. It was almost monopolized after wars in the first half of the fourteenth century against Venice and Byzantium by Genoa from its hub Caffa (today: Feodosiia) on the Crimean Peninsula. To a lesser degree, Venetians traded at Tana under the oversight of the Tatar representative. These trades carried from ca. five hundred to several thousand documented slaves through the Bosporus each year.[33] Despite papal restrictions on the slave trade with Christians, enslavement of heterodox

29 Langer, "Slavery in the Appanage Era."

30 Recent Russophone literature is covered in Christoph Witzenrath, "Rezension von: Aleksandr Vladimirovič Pačkalov: Srednevekovye goroda nižnego Povolž'ja i severnogo Kavkaza, Moskva: Knorus 2018," *sehepunkte* 19, no. 9 (2019).

31 Juliane Schiel, "Tatort Tana: Die Rolle Lateineuropas in der Sklavenökonomie des Schwarzmeerraums (ca. 1300.1500)," *Historische Zeitschrift* 313, no. 1 (2021): 32–60.

32 Hannah Barker, "Egyptian and Italian Merchants in the Black Sea Slave Trade, 1260–1500" (PhD diss., Columbia University, 2014); Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 121–51.

33 Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 138, 153, 155–56.

was considered just punishment and, in the case of Slavonic Christians, a case of natural law.[34] Attempts to use the geopolitical bottlenecks of the Northern ports, the Bosporus, and the Anatolian-Syrian frontier as means to control the trade in a crusading spirit led to diversions and transferal from sea to land connections. The Mamluk sultans made access to the spice trade in their harbors conditional on strategical supply with slaves and paid generously. After the collapse of the competing Ilkhanate in 1335, treaties with buffer states in eastern Anatolia, such as Armenia, guaranteed unimpeded slave trade along the Simisso (today: Samsun)–Sivas–Aleppo land route. From a perspective of the balance of power, rules against enslaving co-religionists might be just as important when observed in terms of their breach as with respect to compliance. Increasing Genoese competence in controlling the trade since the 1380s went hand in hand with Ottoman expansion.[35]

A minor wave of new slaves came from Circassia resulting from Khan Tokhtamysh's re-stabilizing the Ulus of Jochi in 1380. The Circassian nobles had supported the losing side during the preceding civil war, and were barred from redistributed revenue and spoils in Sarai. They raided local northwestern Caucasian peasant settlements and competing princes for exchange to obtain unprecedentedly rich grave goods found in elite burials, imported from the lower Volga and the wider Mediterranean. These minor shifts led to larger consequences, as Circassian slaves were the new mamluks after Tatar sources dried up and the Circassian Barquq became the Egyptian sultan.[36]

The Roma in mainly southeastern Europe are a case of outright chattel slavery in Europe. Their ethnonym in Romanian, *ţigani,* was a synonym for slave, whereas terms like *rob*—slave in local Slavonic chancellery language—were used in parallel and only later. In the Romanian principalities, where the source material and study situation is better than in other countries, they could be sold, bequeathed, gifted, and used as collateral. All had to pay taxes and dues to the state, monasteries, or boyar masters, on whom they were personally dependent. However, passing death sentences was the preserve of the prince. Originally nomadic, many Roma settled to a sedentary life according to their professions, from highly-sought blacksmiths to a majority of agricultural workers and female domestic workers as well as some itinerant peddlers and street artists keeping, for example, dancing bears. Occupations determined to which self-organized "band" they belonged, along with partly differing cultures and dialects. Owners' obligations were limited to feeding the settled. The itinerants were excluded from this, inducing them to top up uncertain income by occasional thievery, to meet obligations. Those who crossed into the Ottoman Empire were free there, but without rights; on return, they would become slaves of the prince again, as did all Roma who had no

34 Quirini-Popławska, *Włoski handel czarnomorskimi niewolnikami*, 39.

35 Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 135–50, 161–63.

36 Hannah Barker, "What Caused the 14th-Century Tatar-Circassian Shift?," in Roşu, *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, C. 900–1900,* 339–64; John Latham-Sprinkle, "The Late Mamlūk Transition of the 1380s: The View from the North Caucasus," *Al-Masāq* 35, no. 2 (2022): 1–21.

owner. Some fled to join the prince's—or princess's—slaves due to worse conditions under their other owners. Their origins are shrouded in silence, although they seem to have arrived as slaves of the Tatars. They first appeared with some captured Tatars in an already existing asymmetric dependent status in the Romanian principalities founded in the fourteenth century. The slavery of Roma was abolished in Romania between 1843 and 1856.[37]

Muscovite *kholopstvo* was slavery in the sense that *kholopy* could be sold or otherwise alienated in dowries, donations, or inheritance. It was one term for a whole array of different, often contractual arrangements. Few were inherited full slaves; most were temporary debt slaves who legally could not be bequeathed although in practice they were, within the family. Temporary service contract *kholopy* sold themselves to the owner, initially for a year, often repeatedly and from 1586 onwards, not for longer than the life of the owner. Tension between these arrangements stem from the harsh conditions of life on the edge of agricultural viability, exchanges with and depredations from the steppe, and the Muscovite striving to limit, fortify, and mobilize against the latter, an effort imposing additional austerity on ordinary Muscovites. Steppe and wider Iranian practices were transferred by the widespread occupation as military slaves accompanying the owner during campaigns. Others were employed in the household and a few in agriculture. The owner's main obligation was to feed and, by implication, maintain them. It was impossible to abolish the institution due to its social functions, so rulers and the Church, aiming to limit its threat to the tax base and communities, tried to protect *kholopy*, upholding honor and marriages, although someone who married a *kholop*, male or female, also became one. The unique *kholopy* chancellery centralized obligatory registration and settling disputes. By the same token, no urges to protect have been observed regarding heterodox captives.[38] The latter were mostly exchanged for Muscovite captives, for which purpose a dedicated prison was set up in Sevsk near the steppe.

4 Early Modern Slave Raiding and Trade

Demand for labor was high in the economically thriving Ottoman Empire and raiding nomads' access to human resources easy, fast, and ugly. After acquiring the northern harbors in 1475, the Ottomans took over the trade from the Italian sea powers, while volume had slumped since the 1440s. After reaching the Mamluk border in 1480, the

37 Viorel Achim, "The Gypsies in the Romanian Lands During the Middle Ages: Slavery," in Pargas and Roşu, *Critical Readings on Global Slavery*, 991; Viorel Achim, *The Roma in Romanian History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2004), 103–12.

38 Hans-Heinrich Nolte, "Iasyry: Non-Orthodox Slaves in Pre-Petrine Russia," in Witzenrath, *Eurasian Slavery*, 247–64; Richard Hellie, *Slavery in Russia, 1450–1725* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982); Alessandro Stanziani, "Slavery and Bondage in Central Asia and Russia: Fourteenth–Nineteenth Centuries," in Witzenrath, *Eurasian Slavery,* 81–104.

Ottomans used their hold on the bottlenecks to halt the Black Sea slave trade and curb Mamluk power until surrender in 1517. However, under Ottoman aegis, Mamluks were again imported and continued to hold local power in Egypt.[39] Demand for slaves in the burgeoning Ottoman Empire and the collapse of expansion in the Balkans contributed to a new upswing in the Black Sea trade. Estimates rely on patchy, but in global historical terms fairly reliable sources, mainly Ottoman tax records and Muscovite governors' and Polish *starostas*' incomplete reports on losses. Accordingly, some 1.5–2 million people were taken by raiders and merchants through the harbors and the Caucasus from 1475 to about 1700. Almost annual slave raids of various sizes across the steppe, often several per year, yielded large numbers of slaves: Eastern Europe from the Caucasus to Poland was second in numbers only to sub-Saharan Africa as a source of slaves in this period.[40] This surge was fed by the decomposing steppe confederacies, as conflict in Central Asia further reduced transcontinental east-west trade and nomads sought extra income in raiding the emerging northern powers, first Poland-Lithuania, and from the early sixteenth century Muscovy.[41]

Connectivity was central to this nomadic extra income: Muscovite and Ruthenian slaves may be found in numbers in places as far removed as Aleppo, Istanbul, or the center of silk and carpet production, Bursa. For most captives, this was a one-way trip, as they never returned. They did not necessarily remain in their new places against their will due to the attraction of the cosmopolitan Ottoman Empire, although efforts are needed to prove this in individual cases. However, the power of the holding areas to retain them, such as the danger of being recaptured in the steppe, contributed to the larger numbers who did not return.[42]

39 Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*; William G. Clarence-Smith and David Eltis, "White Servitude," in *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, vol. 3, *AD 1420–AD 1804*, ed. David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 147.

40 Christoph Witzenrath, "Introduction. Slavery in Medieval and Early Modern Eurasia: An Overview of the Russian and Ottoman Empires and Central Asia," in Witzenrath, *Eurasian Slavery*, 1–77; Ian Wilkinson, "The Problem of Suffering as a Problem for Sociology," *Medical Sociology Online* 1, no. 1 (2006): 113–21; Charles Wilkins, "A Demographic Profile of Slaves in Early Ottoman Aleppo," in *Eurasian Slavery*, 221–46.

41 Davies, *Warfare, State and Society on the Black Sea Steppe.*

42 Ehud Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent: Bonds of Enslavement in the Islamic Middle East* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007), 38–47; Ehud Toledano, "Enslavement in the Ottoman Empire in the Early Modern Period," in Eltis and Engerman, *The Cambridge World History of Slavery*, 3:25–47; Brian L. Davies, "The Prisoner's Tale: Russian Captivity Narratives and Changing Muscovite Perceptions of the Ottoman-Tatar Dar-Al-Islam," in Witzenrath, *Eurasian Slavery*, 279–94; Aleksandr Lavrov, "Captivity, Slavery and Gender: Muscovite Female Captives in the Crimean Khanate and in the Ottoman Empire," in Witzenrath, *Eurasian Slavery*, 309–19; Aleksandr Lavrov, "Rapatriement, genre et mobilité sociale: La liste des captifs rapatriés de Crimée par Timofej Hotunskij (1649)," *Cahiers du monde russe* 57, no. 2/3 (2016): 667–85.

5 Muslim Slavery

As Islam came to be the dominant religion in one of the world's most developed and culturally advanced regions, the Middle East, Central Asia, and the Mediterranean, it inherited whole sets of institutions and customs. They were not always easily compatible with what had taken root in the mind of Mohammed in an impoverished peninsula inhabited by herdsmen and some townspeople. Connected to civilization but remote in the desert, early Muslims combined an ancient local identity with a universal, monotheistic truth to create a momentum that kept them both apart from and linked to the cultures they conquered.[43] In these regions and beyond, one of the main institutions of the ancient world, slavery, proliferated and soon obtained its own Muslim cultural vector. The tensions inherent in the adaptation of nomads to the remnants of antiquity lived on and may still be discerned in various forms in early modern Muslim perspectives on slavery.[44] There is consequently no one Muslim take on slavery: The various schools of religious law, laws promulgated by Muslim rulers, the locally strong admixtures of customs or regional, pre-Islamic laws and the diverse Sufi orders as well as individual Islamic scholars, all contributed to a rich and variegated patchwork of views. The tensions created by these overlapping texts, practices, and customs could be exploited by slaves to some degree; therefore, the study of Muslim slavery presupposes a great deal of attention to details of law.[45] From early on in its history, Islam called for the humane treatment of slaves.

Scholarly claims that Muslim slavery was "milder" than the chattel slavery in the New World have to be weighed against the backdrop of continuing enslavement in remote areas and recent sexual enslavement of Yazidi women, and the more methodically bottom-up perspective of the latest scholarship on the early and middle periods of Ottoman history. Students of Muslim slavery are now less prepared to accept unquestioningly the good treatment thesis created as a defensive concept by the late Ottoman elite in the face of Western abolitionists.[46] Considering the extant archival sources, studies have barely scratched the surface.

In Islam, slavery had a special edge because of the very egalitarian ideals and high social mobility.[47] However, concomitant military successes brought the creation of dominant social groups. Such broad enfranchised groups before long refused to serve in the military. Before industrialization, the only other source of military power were slaves

43 Robert Brunschvig, "'Abd," in *Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1960), 1:24–40.

44 Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), 18–26.

45 Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 16; William G. Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition of Slavery* (London: C. Hurst & Co., 2006).

46 Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 17.

47 Marshall Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, vol. 2, *The Expansion of Islam in the Middle Periods* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 355.

brought in from abroad.[48] Some rulers gave nomadic warriors the *usus fructus* of agricultural surplus to guard frontiers from raids of their brethren from the steppe, as had already been the case under the pre-Islamic Sassanids. As these local potentates acquired hereditary rights, rulers found themselves on a par with them, in a disintegrating polity. Garrisoned military slaves provided loyal power to the ruler, as they had no local stronghold.[49] The ubiquity of slave labor, drawn mostly from captives of wars or bought abroad, was a response to the inadmissibility of serfdom and forced labor by Muslims and tax-paying heterodox.[50]

The definition of slavery was straightforward, except for the areas in which customary law was strong, which created numerous complex and conflicting gradations. According to the holy law of Islam, the Sharia, slaves were chattels which could be resold, akin in many respects to livestock. However, unlike livestock, they possessed certain cautiously marked-out rights, as their humanity was incontestable.[51]

The clear legal definition obscures a perplexing variety of social roles putting obstacles in way of solidarity between those under the sway of slavery.[52] Rulers became dependent on household and military slaves, on eunuchs and concubines to such a degree that slaves sometimes seized power.[53] Singing girls could become influential at court and they received an education in elite households.[54] A concubine who bore a son to a powerful man wielded immense power herself, especially as a widow. If the son was recognized, she had to be manumitted and her status was legalized. The early seventeenth-century Ottoman Empire was dubbed the "sultanate of the women," many arriving from inner Eurasia as slaves.[55] Some female slaves successfully sued for mistreatment, especially if they were sold while pregnant.[56] Slavery itself contributed to upward social mobility—characteristics that set Muslim societies apart from the increasing social rigidities of European medieval social estates.

The harem system of the Ottoman court was extreme in comparison with other elite households. Recent studies have cast doubt on the notion of concubinage comply-

48 Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition*, 19.

49 Kamran Matin, "Uneven and Combined Development in World History: The International Relations of State-Formation in Premodern Iran," *European Journal of International Relations* 13, no. 3 (2007): 419–47; Kurt Franz and Wolfgang Holzwarth, eds., *Nomad Military Power in Iran and Adjacent Areas in the Islamic Period* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2015).

50 Fynn-Paul, "Introduction. Slaving Zones in Global History."

51 Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition*, 2; Brunschvig, "'Abd," 1:26–30.

52 Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*.

53 Tōru Miura and John Edward Philips, *Slave Elites in the Middle East and Africa: A Comparative Study* (London: Kegan Paul International, 2000).

54 Günnaz Çaşkurlu, *Osmanlı sarayında sanatçı cariyeler IV. Mehmed dönemi* (Istanbul: Ötüken Neşriyat, 2020). I am grateful to Veruschka Wagner for providing this information.

55 Ehud Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition in the Ottoman Middle East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1998), 44. On Roxelane/Hürrem: Leslie P. Peirce, *Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Basic Books, 2017).

56 Liubov Kurtynova-D'Herlugnan, *The Tsar's Abolitionists: The Slave Trade in the Caucasus and Its Suppression* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 42–43; Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition*, 59–67.

ing with the ideal of good treatment in the intimacy of the home, family, or household depicted in late Ottoman defenses of slavery and much of Western literature; these newer studies tend to privilege the view from within and bottom-up perspectives of the enslaved.[57] The inclination to stay, especially among female slaves, has questionable value as an argument for the "good treatment" hypothesis, as decisions were influenced by the "horrors of the return journey," which were worse for non-military captives, females, and those who could pay less.[58] Moreover, women in many societies were socialized to obey men unquestioningly and reproduction yielded new personal bonds in the receiving society—factors that tended to make them stay but are not connected to treatment.[59] However, court cases show female slaves and manumitted were granted a voice to various degrees according to social roles and concomitantly increasing agency.[60]

Yet this was not the lot of the vast majority assigned to menial tasks or who ended up as "cannon fodder." The lives of ordinary soldiers were cruel, brutish, and short.[61] Slavery was also common on small and medium-sized landholdings, in irrigation, mining, transport, public works, proto-industry, and large-scale construction.[62] Nomadic raiders made their slaves "watch the flock, prepare the food, make felts and weave carpets".[63] Singing girls were prostitutes and courtesans.[64] Sexual access and exploitation of female slaves was commonly accepted for owners in Italy, Egypt, and elsewhere.[65] Prostitution of slaves was plainly forbidden in the Qur'an.[66] However, the legal fiction of short-term sales concealed its practice in Ottoman lands and elsewhere.[67]

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57 Jay Spaulding, "Slavery, Land Tenure, and Social Class in the Northern Turkish Sudan," *International Journal of African Historical Studies* 15, no. 1 (1982): 1–20; Toledano, *Slavery and Abolition*, 14–19; Kurtynova-D'Herlugnan, *The Tsar's Abolitionists*, 39–40. However, see Çaşkurlu, *Osmanlı sarayında sanatçı cariyeler*), on artist education.

58 Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*, 43.

59 Claire C. Robertson and Martin A. Klein, eds., *Women and Slavery in Africa* (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1983), 6, 8–9.

60 Veruschka Wagner, "Slave Voices Represented in the Ottoman Court Records: A Narrative Analysis of the Istanbul Registers from the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries," in *Narrating Dependency, Dependency and Slavery Studies,* ed. Elke Gymnich and Marion Brüggen (Berlin: De Gruyter, forthcoming).

61 Daniel Pipes, *Slave Soldiers and Islam* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1981); Crone, *Slaves on Horses*.

62 Ehud Toledano, "Preface," in Roşu, *Slavery in the Black Sea Region, C. 900–1900*, vii–xvii.

63 Duncan Cumming, ed., *The Country of the Turkomans: An Anthology of Exploration from the Royal Geographical Society* (London: Oguz Press, 1977), 68.

64 Kurtynova-D'Herlugnan, *The Tsar's Abolitionists*, 39; Leslie P. Peirce, *The Imperial Harem: Women and Sovereignty in the Ottoman Empire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 138, 141–42.

65 Barker, *That Most Precious Merchandise*, 77–80.

66 Brunschvig, "'Abd," 1:25.

67 Y. Hakan Erdem, *Slavery in the Ottoman Empire and Its Demise, 1800–1909* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1996), 34–35; James Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony 1581–1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 67–68, 73.

Generalizations about treatment are risky, since reports by slaves have commonly been removed from the historical record. The Sharia banned the molestation of wards, but control of such rules was restricted because the household fell under the private sphere. Less formal sources convey both vigorous exhortations for good treatment and alternative modes of operation, such as approval of corporal punishment.[68] This whole area of study is tainted by implicit comparison, so an appropriate, albeit in this context unanswerable, question remains: Was life in Christian countries better for comparable functional groups, and if so, from which time on?

While there are several reports about mild-mannered masters, and some slaves, female as well as male, enjoyed contractual agency in specific areas (*mukateba*), these are offset by less agreeable treatment that included social marginalization through frequent resale.[69] Court records from the Crimean Khanate tend to support reports by local Dominican missionaries about abusive treatment of slaves; in cases of the killing of a slave, the owner might be compensated, but there was no punishment. Prices for slaves were low in Crimea and slaves might have been considered dispensable.[70] Crimean Tatars are unlikely to have kept many slaves, since local economic structures did not support it.[71] However, the ransom business was profitable and at the same time lacked information about the rank and means of captives. Absent other means to overcome uncertainty about what price they could demand, owners and brokers resorted to inducements as well as torturing captives and witnesses.[72]

Enslavement depended on vicious raids, harrowing forced marches, dismal sales of the disenfranchised, and perilous maritime voyages; this also holds for earlier Italian activities.[73] The recently studied Ottoman slaves who sought agency in multiple everyday acts of petty self-assertion and resistance give every indication that Muslim slavery,

68 Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition,* 4.

69 John Hunwick and Eve T. Powell, *The African Diaspora in the Mediterranean Lands of Islam* (Princeton, NJ: Markus Wiener, 2002), 124. For example, Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Drevnykh Aktov, f. 210 (Razriad) d. 617, p. 5; ibid., d. 773, pp. 183, 185, ibid., d. 1194, p. 52, ibid., d. 1355, pp. 33, 34; Toledano, "Enslavement in the Ottoman Empire," 37–38.

70 Alan Fisher, "Chattel Slavery in the Ottoman Empire," *Slavery and Abolition* 1, no. 1 (1980): 36–37; Fırat Yaşa, "Desperation, Hopelessness, and Suicide: An Initial Consideration of Self-Murder by Slaves in Seventeenth-Century Crimean Society," *Turkish Historical Review,* no. 9 (2018): 203–5.

71 Valerii Evgenevich Vozgrin, *Istoriia krymskikh tatar: Ocherki etnicheskoi istorii korennogo naseleniia Kryma,* 4 vols. (Simferopol: Krymuchpedgiz, 2013), 1:440–54; Mária Ivanics, "Enslavement, Slave Labour and Treatment of Captives in the Crimean Khanate," in *Ransom Slavery Along the Ottoman Borders: Early Fifteenth – Early Eighteenth Centuries*, ed. Géza Dávid and Pál Fodor (Leiden: Brill, 2007); Leszek Podhorodecki, *Chanat Krymski i jego stosunki z Polska w XV–XVIII w* (Warsaw: Książka i Wiedza, 1987), 62–64; Paul Robert Magocsi, *A History of Ukraine: The Land and Its Peoples* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 186–87.

72 Brian J. Boeck, "Identity as Commodity: Tournaments of Value in the Tatar Ransom Business," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 35, no. 9, 3–4 (2008): 259–66.

73 Robert Dankoff, ed., *An Ottoman Traveller: Selections from the Book of Travels of Evliya Çelebi* (London: Eland, 2011), 338–40; Davies, *Warfare, State and Society on the Black Sea Steppe.*

despite the apparently broader spectrum of occupations and roles, was recognizably related to parallel phenomena in other cultures.[74]

Imperial law initially exacerbated slavery but began to rein in the institution from the sixteenth century. Once confronted by the strong and popular Atlantic challenge to slavery in the nineteenth century, responses were still ambivalent. Mystics and millenarians explosively increased rates of enslavement when they chose the way of the sword. However, subversive millenarians who claimed the right to abolish the law and reshape society might oppose slavery and did much to integrate former slaves into Islam. Some of the earliest cases of abolition of slavery occurred in the northern Caucasus khanates, on the border of the Russian Empire.[75]

Overall, a paradox calls for further research: Islam was precocious in regulating slavery and encouraging the faithful to engage in manumission, and yet Muslim conservatives generally lagged behind those of other faiths in approving complete emancipation.[76] Yet as strategic choices, such gradualism made sense, as it allowed the integration of slaves in rather clearly defined scales of asymmetric dependency, curtailing the power of marginal slaveholders in favor of the community of believers.[77]

6 The Slave Trade and Serfdom in the Russian Empire

Another result of the dominance of mounted steppe warriors in open field combat until the late eighteenth century was Muscovy's and the Russian Empire's increasing drive to conquer the steppe. In the early modern period, as the musket and early guns were yet no match for the composite reflex bow, apart from being less high-tech and cheaper, field defenses and earthwork along with forts helped to level the military disparity. The strategy proved successful and from the 1570s to the late acquisition of Central Asia, one consecutive fortified border line after another spread into the steppe, each covering hundreds and even thousands of kilometers. They helped keep raiders out and mobile peasants inside the empire. Muscovy fittingly adapted a liberationist worldview according to which it was the "New Israel" and Ivan IV was like Moses God's instrument leading the Muscovite slaves out of the new Egyptian slavery in Tatar Kazan on the middle Volga. The tsar and all Orthodox believers were obliged to ransom Orthodox slaves and captives. Muscovy used this worldview to justify the conquest and deportation of Tatars from the city, occupying the fortress. This was achieved

74 Toledano, *As If Silent and Absent*; Lavrov, "Rapatriement, genre et mobilité sociale"; Miers, "Slavery: A Question of Definition."

75 Kurtynova-D'Herlugnan, *The Tsar's Abolitionists.*

76 Clarence-Smith, *Islam and the Abolition*, 19–21.

77 Miller, *The Problem of Slavery as History*; Kravets and Ostapchuk, "Cossacks as Captive-Takers in the Ottoman Black Sea Region."

with the help of loyal Tatars, lauded as greater liberators than the Russian boyars themselves, both being portrayed much in the way of Arab and Ottoman *gazi*s. Yet unlike the Ottoman prohibition on enslaving and enserfing believers and taxpayers, it was permitted to subjugate Orthodox peasants to masters as long as they were Orthodox, a phenomenon which became more widespread as the empire expanded and, initially, grain remained scarce and had to be stocked.[78]

Growing taxes and military service meant that peasants became indebted, fled from smaller estates towards larger ones, to monasteries, abroad, or to the new fortified lines in the steppe promising measures of privileges. Muscovy answered flexibly to these challenges, but the 1649 code of laws finally ended legal liberty of mobility. In legal terms, serfdom mainly meant that serfs enjoyed less access to courts beyond landowners and required their assent for mobility. While most serfs, especially those on the fertile black earth close to the Black Sea, were peasants delivering work dues, many engaged in diverse trades, often as absentees or providing replacements for tilling the land and recruitment into the army. Especially complex asymmetrically dependent relations evolved between household serfs and masters. In the late seventeenth and eighteenth century, serfs were increasingly sold, bought, and used as collateral for credit granted by the bank of the nobility. First inconclusive attempts at rebalancing social relations in the then prosperous empire occurred during the first half of the nineteenth century, while numbers of serfs abated.[79] The lost Crimean War of 1853–56 against the maritime powers translated into Russia's awareness of lagging economic and social dynamism, attributed to outmoded serfdom by the government and elites. Abolition in 1861 meant for many former serfs continuing burdens from "redemption" payments to former owners extending into the early twentieth century. Moreover, all peasants were placed in the constraints of the peasant community replacing the landowner, which was meant to uphold order and redistribute the land to those who could till it. It proved a major lost opportunity to make agriculture more efficient, although the reformers could not have foreseen the growth of the rural population, social pressures woven into the backdrop to Russia's revolutions.[80]

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78 Christoph Witzenrath, *The Russian Empire, Slaving and Liberation, 1480–1725: Trans-Cultural Worldviews in Eurasia* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2022), 6. On later uses of this worldview for imperial aims: Kurtynova-D'Herlugnan, *The Tsar's Abolitionists*; Lucien J. Frary, "Slaves of the Sultan: Russian Ransoming of Christian Captives During the Greek Revolution (1821–30)," In *Russian-Ottoman Borderlands: The Eastern Question Reconsidered*, ed. Lucien J. Frary and Mara Kozelsky (Madison, Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 101–30.

79 Roger Bartlett, "Serfdom and State Power in Imperial Russia," *European History Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2003): 29–64; Peter B. Brown "Russian Serfdom's Demise and Russia's Conquest of the Black Sea Littoral: Was There a Link?," in Witzenrath, *Eurasian Slavery*, 335–66; Steven Laurence Hoch, "Serfdom and Social Control in Nineteenth Century Russia: Petrovskoe, a Village in Tambov" (PhD diss., Princeton University, 1983); Tracy Dennison, *The Institutional Framework of Russian Serfdom* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Elise Kimerling Wirtschafter, *Russia's Age of Serfdom 1649–1861* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2008).

80 David Moon, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia, 1762–1907* (Harlow: Longman, 2001).

Despite their own colonial history, the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union became the major power linking up with the decolonized against former colonizers during debates about the abolition of slavery at the Congress of Vienna, the League of Nations, and the United Nations.[81] President Putin still aimed to mobilize these global links when he spoke of liberation and slavery during his September 2022 speech which legitimized annexing four Ukrainian regions, televised worldwide by Russia Today (RT), claiming that the duplicity of the "West" was clearly seen in the Atlantic slave trade and colonialism.[82] Obviously, such a propagandistic statement also applies in reverse and deserves some background analysis. Muscovy already exemplifies how liberation may end in subjection to the self-proclaimed "liberator." Imperial power politics encourage a fine balance in attitude towards the conquered, say, bombing Chechnya or Syria, and towards powers such as India reliant on Soviet and Russian weapons deliveries, engendering different subtexts in the message. To the latter, it is a poisoned promise, to the former a disguised threat; polemically that may be called duplicity. Putin's autocratic Russia has left not a shred of doubt that it actively suppresses dissent; moreover, the current war of aggression on a democratizing Ukraine is accompanied by a mounting debate about genocidal intent. Nevertheless, some Russian actors still seem to misinterpret such signs, not least notoriously Evgenii Prigozhin in his last viral swagger: "Wagner [Group] is making Africa even freer." Misunderstanding the imperial practice of renegotiating personal links on which the elite customarily relies as some kind of peculiar freedom remains risky, as Prigozhin's dramatic last months, whistleblowing, mutiny, and end in an exploded aircraft suggest, despite the Russian refusal to launch an investigation in accordance with international standards.[83]

Freedom usually comes at a price, to be paid every now and then, everywhere. In some areas it has so far proven too expensive, deceptive, or not sustainable. Moreover, there are different ways of thinking about freedom and asymmetric dependency from which people choose or which they inherit. The local conditions of freedom and dependency deserve close inspection, as they rest on the interaction of historically contingent factors—ecological, economic, cultural, and political, to name but the most general categories. Studying these conditions helps us understand diversity as much as it teaches us to be alert. However, the current official approach to strong asymmetric de-

81 These debates are traced in: Miers, "Slavery: A Question of Definition," 198–200.

82 In Western media, the reception of this and further speeches covering the subject of slavery ranged from disbelief to misunderstanding: Hans Monath, "Putins bizarre Rede: 'Unsere Werte, das ist die Liebe zum Menschen, Mitgefühl': Russlands Präsident rechtfertigt die Annexion von vier ukrainischen Regionen. Seine prekäre Lage versucht er mit Attacken auf den Westen zu überspielen," *Tagesspiegel*, September 30, 2022, https://www.tagesspiegel.de/politik/putins-bizarre-rede-liebe-zum-menschen-mitgefuhl-8703613.html. Full text of Putin's speech on Interfax: "Tekst obrashcheniia Vladimira Putina," *Interfaks*, September 30, 2022, https://www.interfax.ru/russia/865716.

83 Tatiana Stanovaia, "Prigoshins Aufstand gegen den Kreml: Was war das?", *dekoder*, June 26, 2023, https://www.dekoder.org/de/article/prigoshin-aufstand-wagner-kreml. For emphasis on special deals as a core factor in establishing and running empire: Kollmann, *The Russian Empire*, 4.

pendency in the Russian Federation is very far from the emphatic perceptions of institutionalized freedom and power sharing prevailing in democratic countries.