

Slavery and Empire in Central Asia. By Jeff Eden. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2018. 227 pp. (ISBN: 9781108470513). doi: 10.22679/avs.2021.6.1.013

Thinking of slavery in the Middle East, the enormous slave markets of Ottoman Istanbul or Damascus spring to mind. The slave markets of Bukhara and Khiva do not always ring a bell. However, Central Asia saw its share of slavery, as is shown by *Slavery and Empire in Central Asia* by Jeff Eden. In this monograph, Eden expertly delves into slavery in the centre of the Eurasian continent. With the content divided over seven chapters, the book is full of anecdotal evidence pertaining to the (often difficult) lives of slaves in Central Asia derived from sources rarely used, such as Kazakh and Persian archives. Eden examines the local agency of slaves, the laws and regulations concerning slaves, and finally, he nuances the abolition of slavery in Central Asia under the new Russian regime. The title is slightly misleading, however, as Eden does not focus on the regions of East Turkestan and Afghanistan, traditionally part of 'Central Asia,' but rather only on the regions around Khiva and Bukhara, which he himself acknowledges (p. 2).

This notwithstanding, his book is a welcome addition to the historiography of Central Asia, which often focuses on the 'Great Game' of Great Britain and Russia, and the struggle for dominance in the region between these two superpowers. Eden, instead focuses on the local and Central Asian side of slavery, with the primary goals of nuancing the development of an abolitionist movement under the Russian Empire and examining the local agency of Central Asian slaves. There are strikingly few studies and hardly any monographs (especially in Western European languages) dealing with this phenomenon explicitly. Quite a number of works examine slavery in the entirety of Asia and do not study Central Asia in-depth, rather focusing on the well-known slave markets of Istanbul and Damascus. Therefore, Eden's book hallmarks the first study predominantly focusing on Central Asian slavery in the two centuries running up to the Russian occupation of the region.

Eden challenges some long-held notions on the region. His first contention deals with the movement and sale of slaves. Through travel accounts from Western and Middle Eastern men, he is able to cast doubt on the largesse and importance of the slave markets of Bukhara and Khiva. He argues for a circulatory system of slave trade, in which slaves were often traded throughout the country in many distinct (and often rural) places, such as *caravanserai's*, rather than in central locations such as cities. In this, he opposes the concept of a centre (the cities) and the supplicant periphery (the pastoralists and local villages) when it comes to slavery, an idea stemming from

Khazanov's *Nomads and the Outside World*. This is a significant argument, one that could well be developed and evidenced further in subsequent research on the region. His second main point focuses on Russian abolitionism in the region. He challenges several studies dealing with this phenomenon, which argue that Russian intervention in the region definitively ended slavery in Central Asia (p. 5-6). By examining local sources, beyond the standard Russian sources or travel accounts, Eden shows that, in many cases, the slave trade continued uninterrupted, but out of sight, following the Russian conquest. Yes, there were no more public slave markets in the cities, but within the homes of merchants, and in the countryside, the slave trade persisted. Furthermore, by examining local accounts of Russian border posts, Eden shows that manumission of slaves only in a few cases led to the actual liberation of the slave. More often than not, slaves were baptised and subsequently became serfs – for which, as Eden himself points out, ‘the answer depends on whether one considers serfdom to be freedom’ (p. 162). Even more problematic is that many slaves, after manumission, were sent back to their (former) owners, who were then branded ‘foster parents.’ Eden argues, therefore, that, contrary to the historical consensus, the ‘manumission’ of slaves was not at all about liberation, but about registration. Simply put, he sees the large-scale manumission of slaves as a sort of ‘census’ (p. 162). This provides a striking, novel, and nuanced narrative for the development of slavery within Russian Central Asia.

Slavery and Empire is clearly a monograph born out of recent times, with its emphasis on bottom-up, local agency within slavery, rather than imperial, top-down enforcement. This follows many novel developments in historiography, in which local agency *vis-à-vis* top-down enforcement stands central. For example, chapter 3 deals comprehensively with the most extensive autobiographical source on slavery in Central Asia, the story of Mīrzā Mahmūd Taqī Āshityānī's ‘Ten Years of Slavery.’ Here, Eden shows how Mīrzā was able to utilise his talents, abilities, and understanding of the system of slavery to survive, and eventually thrive, in ten years of slavery (p. 111-114). His account provides valid evidence for the understanding of local agency amongst the educated slaves in Central Asia.

Here, however, is where the monograph's main methodological problem lies. The evidence for the local agency of slaves is predominantly derived from anecdotal sources, such as eyewitness accounts and interviews, which are not the most reliable types of evidence. Furthermore, the bulk of slaves in Central Asia worked in the fields as herders or farmers and were not able to describe their full life in slavery in (well-)written works. While an account such as that of Mīrzā Mahmūd is striking, it is not reliable evidence for those slaves that did not have Mīrzā's talents as a wordsmith. The argument of the book

would have been amplified significantly if more archival sources describing such slaves had been incorporated. Eden describes how interviews conducted by Russian border officials, one of the main sources for his book, were not detailed and contained little information. However, subsequently, Eden then proceeds to use only a small sample. Detailed tables of comparative narrative elements between all of these sources would surely have strengthened Eden's argument and allowed for the incorporation of more evidence. This is not to say that Eden's work is not sufficient to cast doubt upon many long-held notions about Central Asian slavery. It does not, however, do so conclusively.

Slavery and Empire is a well-researched, welcome addition to the historiography of Central Asia. It opens up many new pathways for novel research, and challenges long-held ideas and concepts on Central Asian slavery and Russian abolitionism. Although *Slavery and Empire* does not conclusively alter the historiography on slavery in Central Asia, it does nuance the historical consensus. Through this, it sets the stage for a comprehensive re-evaluation of the local agency of slaves and the role of the Russian Empire in Central Asia.

Merlijn Veltman
Leiden University, the Netherlands
tintagemusic@gmail.com