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# Alessandro Stanziani, Bondage, Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries

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## REFERENCES

Alessandro Stanziani, *Bondage, Labor and Rights in Eurasia from the Sixteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries*, New York – Oxford : Berghahn [International Studies in Social History, 24], 2014, 258 p.

- 1 For a long time, Russia and Eastern Europe have formed the negative counter-example of historical developments in the West. It was conveniently fitted to any aspect desired : “modernization,” “civilization,” economic development, civil society etc. The contemporary political and social basis for this traditional view has significantly eroded after 1989 (although it does recur in the wake of political crises, such as the present one). Since, historians have not only thoroughly analyzed traditions leading to this “othering” of Eastern Europe in the first place, but also increasingly offered alternative readings of a more integrated and comparative view of historical developments in the European context.
- 2 Alessandro Stanziani’s book fills a still significant gap with regard to this task, as it aims to do away with the view that contrasts “free labor in the West” with “serf labor in Russia and Eastern Europe” (p. 1). Two central claims underpin this idea : “Russian peasants were much less bound and unfree than usually held” and “in most Western countries labor was similar to service” (p. 1). With regard to recent approaches that criticize ideas of a European economic “dualism” between Western and Eastern Europe, Stanziani advances a step further, as he sets his study in the context of the global

historical discussions on (North-West) European exceptionalism and its critics who advocate a relatively late “great divergence” of the “rest” (or of China, for that matter).

- 3 The book’s first chapters present eighteenth-century concepts of labour control and images of serfdom and bondage. It confirms and extends Larry Wolf’s conclusions about the decisive impact of the enlightenment’s construct of Russia and Eastern Europe and the lasting effect on later generations of scholarship. Revising earlier interpretations of the work of the Bentham Brothers in Russia, Stanziani shows that their proposals were designed to control wage labour. Indeed, the contemporary image of wage labourers often was similar to the verdict eighteenth-century legal scholars casted of “serfs”: poor, lazy, uneducated, with a high tendency of shirking or causing trouble if not closely supervised or kept at work by force or by low wages.
- 4 The second part, Chapters 3-5, offers a revision of the existence of bondage and slavery (*kholopstvo*) and the characteristics of serfdom and its economic effects for proto-industrial and industrial development in Russia. The third part, Chapters 6 and 7, sets the Russian case in a European (British/French) and global context (indentured labour in the Indian Ocean).
- 5 Chapters 4 and 5 form the core with regard to the re-interpretation of Russian “serfdom” and economic development. As noted also by other authors, there was no formal establishment of “serfdom” in Russia. Stanziani dismisses as exaggerated traditional interpretations of population scarcity and crisis as the background for the famous *Ulozhenie* of 1649. Rather, he puts the law, which does not refer to “serfs” or to establishing “serfdom,” into the broader context of enforcing state rules and regulating competition among landowners (rather than restricting peasants’ rights). Contrary to the labour scarcity argument, Russia’s experience of the early modern period was one of continuous and strong expansion, territorially and demographically. Population rose three- to fourfold between 1600 and 1800. Legal changes and actions, changes from private to state estates and mutual agreements between lords and villagers emancipated the majority of the peasantry already before 1861. “Serfdom,” for Stanziani, was not “slavery,” but “a set of legal constraints on labor mobility” caused by the strong labour demand of Smithian growth processes induced by domestic market integration of agriculture, increasing participation in international trade and the rise of proto-industries and manufacturing. His results draw on and support conclusions of previous studies that labour rents and the demesne economy could not prevent market integration and proto-industrialization, but that they formed an integrated economic system.
- 6 For specialists of “Western” labour and industrialization history, Chapter 6 develops the core argument that servant work relationships lasted long into the industrial age in Britain and France. It is Stanziani’s view that industrialization processes were of a more labour-intensive nature than previously acknowledged. This created greater contradictions between intensifying agriculture and expanding manufacturing. As a result, legal constraints on workers or on changing work were strong and became stricter. Besides the fact that “the barrier between freedom and bondage was [...] movable” (p. 164), there was also no shortage in different forms of bonded labour in the West, ranging from slavery, indentured service, convict labour to workhouses. One might add men forced into the commercial or Royal Navy. In general, “free and unfree forms of labor were [...] far more concurrent than opposed to one another” and

coercion “was not incompatible with market and capitalism, rather it was fully integrated into it” (p. 165).

- 7 This leads Stanziani to the conclusion that labour institutions were more similar between the West and Russia than previously assumed. Free and unfree labour are essentially historical notions and the problem of those historical studies that advocate a contrast between Western and Eastern Europe in this respect essentially rely on an ahistorical conception (p. 56).
- 8 It is fully understandable and reasonable that the book focuses on the similarities of work relations across Europe and on the misrepresentations of “free” labour in the West. One should not forget, however, that Eastern European historiography already extensively dealt with the question of the character of forced labour and its prevalence in the early modern period as early as in the 1950s and 1960s. This resulted from the opinion that high levels of labour services were regarded as the major element of a “second serfdom.” While it is clear that the early modern demesne economy never relied solely or primarily on forced labour and used wage labour to a significant and increasing proportion – as indicated by the concepts of *Eigenbetrieb* and *Teilbetrieb* developed by Eastern German economic historians –, it was the result of these debates that forced labour cannot always be automatically regarded as purely bonded and wage labour as purely free. “From time to time wage labour was [...] burdened by the chains of extra-economic coercion, sometimes labour service was interwoven with threads of wage labour relations.”<sup>1</sup> Some of this research was highly critical of Kula’s and Wallerstein’s rather extreme positions. This discussion, which is not referred to in the volume, strengthens Stanziani’s case against the two authors.
- 9 One of the major advances achieved by the recent historiography on early modern demesne lordship and bondage in East-Elbian Europe lies in its increasing reliance on comparative approaches, improving on previously neglected comparisons within Eastern European territories, but particularly also across the allegedly structural divide between Western and Eastern Europe, the river Elbe. The book under review presents a strong case for moving one step further, i. e. from a European to a global comparison of bonded labour. It succeeds in demonstrating its analytical potential for future historical research.
- 10 In the long debate about the relationship between bondage and market development, Stanziani takes the side of those who say that *corvée*/labour services and the development of proto-industrialization and, ultimately, capitalism, were not mutually exclusive. His case rests on the arguments that the relationship between “free” labour and industrialization has been exaggerated before the second industrial revolution (as servant wage relationships were far more common) also in the West and that market integration in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Russia progressed strongly and could not be prevented by “serfdom.”
- 11 The book’s results stress the similarities between British, French and Russian labour before and during the Industrial Revolution. Most likely, this will not meet everyone’s sympathy. While the current reviewer welcomes this fresh interpretation, one can vividly imagine other scholars rather shaken by the approach to compare the Master and Servants’ Act and the Poor Law “as a system of recruitment” (p. 4) of the English industrialization with Russian bonded labour. Yet, if accepted as an analytical approach, this would bring the debate a major step forward towards a more integrated and balanced view of European economic history. It would result in an understanding

that there were institutional differences in degrees rather than incomparable structures, of which one was allegedly progressive, good and “liberal” (the “Western” model) and the all others simply “backward” (the “rest”).

- 12 For Alessandro Stanziani, “Russia looks like an extreme variant of the European model instead of its opposite” (p. 167). The renowned specialist of Russian and Eastern European History, Andreas Kappeler, wrote that concepts of “Eastern Europe” or “Eastern European History” would be regarded as integral part of European History and lose their “special” status, “when Eastern Europe is no longer regarded as the alien other, constantly on the journey towards civilization out of which Western Europe defines itself.”<sup>2</sup> It seems that this important book has brought us a significant step closer to this desirable point.
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## NOTES

1. Zsigmond Pal Pach, *Die ungarische Agrarentwicklung im 16.-17. Jahrhundert. Abbiegung vom westeuropäischen Entwicklungsgang*, Budapest : Akadémiai kiadó, 1964, p. 30.
  2. Andreas Kappeler, “Die Bedeutung der Geschichte Osteuropas für ein gesamteuropäisches Geschichtsverständnis,” in Gerald Stourzh, ed., *Annäherungen an eine europäische Geschichtsschreibung*, Vienna : Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2002, p. 43-55, quote p. 55.
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