CHAPTER TWO

CHRISTIANS IN HETERODOX CAPTIVITY: THE HISTORICAL ROOTS OF RUSSIAN ABOLITIONISM IN THE CAUCASUS

“He is dressed rather handsomely in red, blue and gold,” replied the priest promptly with decision, “and in this striking, even showy costume he entered Himalaya Mansions under eight human eyes; he killed Smythe in cold blood, and came down in the street again, carrying the dead body in his arms . . . unseen by anyone.”

(G.K. Chesterton, The Invisible Man)1

The Case of an Invisible Slave Trade

For a long time the Caucasian slave trade escaped the attention of the European abolitionists in spite of its large volume and ancient roots. While the trans-Atlantic trade in Africans fueled prolonged and heated political debates in the European parliaments and in the press, Georgian, Circassian, Slavic and other Ottoman slaves purchased in the Caucasus were usually regarded just as another exotic detail of the mysterious Oriental life. Accounts of the traveling Europeans undoubtedly formed the foundation for such an outlook and later served to support it. This impression was further maintained by the fact that, for the most part, travelers encountered only the elite slaves, both white and black, who could, to a certain extent, be considered better off than many of the freeborn Muslim poor. A seventeenth-century traveler described the living conditions in the Sultan’s harem the following way:

Now, in the Women’s lodgings, they live as Nuns do in great Nunneries: for these virgins have very large rooms to live in, and their bedchambers will hold almost a hundred of them apiece […]

Now, those who are shut up for their beauties, are all young virgins taken and stolen from foreign Nations: who, after they have been instructed in good behaviour, and can play upon instruments, sing, dance and sew curiously; they are given to the Grand Signor as presents of great value: and the number of these increaseth daily, as they are sent, and presented by the Tartars, by the Bashawes and the other great men to the King and the Queen.

This Englishman saw no difference in the position of the palace slaves and the rest of the population of the Empire:

First then I say that all they, which are in the Seraglio, both men and women, are the Grand Signor’s slaves (for so they stile themselves) and so are all they, which are subject to his Empire. For, besides that he is their Sovereign, they do all acknowledge that whatsoever they do, possesse or enjoy, proceedeth merely from his good will, and favour: and not onely their estates, but their lives also are at his dispose, not having respect either to the cause, or manner.

Most Europeans continued to regard Ottoman slaves as no different from ordinary servants and, in some cases, indeed, as a privileged estate. Tales of slave girls who became mothers of Sultans, or of slave boys who became Grand Viziers, abounded and were duly recorded by the fascinated Europeans. Needless to say, such cases provided food to the romantic imagination rather than a real picture of the slaves’ condition. Besides, the European guests were allowed to see only the carefully selected slaves of their hosts, the ones that could make their master proud by demonstrating their grace, talents or craftsmanship. These were, indeed, elite slaves, and, like all elites, they were very visible, but few in number.

But even for the fortunate few who did end up in the service of great ladies or members of the Ottoman court, life in slavery was far from easy and happy. The wife of Kibrizli Mehmet-pasha, Melek-hanum, who had first-hand knowledge of the matters of the harem and slave trade, wrote in her memoir: “There is no doubt that the position of the slaves is not a very happy one.” She admitted, that for the poor Circassian girls life in their homeland must have been very hard because Circassian women

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2 Most likely, pashas—high-ranking military commanders or governors of provinces.
3 John Greaves, A Description of the Grand Signour’s Seraglio, or Turkish Emperor’s Court (London, 1653), 36–37.
4 John Greaves, A Description ..., 34.