

Empress of the East: How a European Slave Girl Became Queen of the Ottoman Empire. By Leslie Peirce. New York: Basic Books, 2017. viii, 360 pp. Notes. Bibliography. Index. Illustrations. Tables. Maps. \$32.00, hard bound.
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This book has two sides to it. On the one hand, it is an eminently readable historical narrative of a most prominent and fascinating female figure of the Ottoman imperial era against the background of the principal developments of her time. Haseki Hürrem Sultan, or Roxolana/Roxelana as she was known, the consort of Suleiman the Magnificent (1520–1566), has been subject of scholarly attention, but this would be her definitive contextual biography. Drawing on her vast knowledge of the period, Leslie Peirce reconstructs in minute detail Hürrem Sultan's career as a slave girl, favorite concubine, monogamous wife, and imperial mother, and uses her protagonist to shed light on the experiences of the topmost tier of Ottoman women.

With a warm and sympathetic approach, Peirce recreates the precarious and terribly circumscribed existence of the Ottoman female elite: slaves by law and custom, subject to the absolute authority of the monarch, struggling to make the best of their lives to the extent that the rigid Sunni Muslim religious and socio-political system allowed them. Peirce mobilizes the very few direct facts about Hürrem Sultan, a figure all but invisible to most contemporary eyewitnesses, actually and figuratively secluded, within a wide welter of contextual evidence, to argue that a strong-willed, spirited, intelligent woman could, indeed, leave her stamp on the imperial establishment. In Peirce's argument, Suleiman's favorite's steadfast devotion to and emotional manipulation of her imperial master and husband, personal intelligence, lucky reproductive capacity, diplomatic involvement, and public munificence made Haseki Hürrem Sultan the model of female royal authority that persisted until the dissolution of the empire in 1922 and engendered a creative modification of Ottoman political structures. Through the life and deeds of her heroine, Peirce traces the circumstances of female slave recruitment in the imperial family, the details of life and training in the harem and the sultan's household, the vagaries of the Ottoman inheritance custom, the extent of female political agency, and the tragic predicament of imperial mothers, totally dependent on the reigning monarch and destined to see their male offspring ruthlessly murdered by their fathers or victorious siblings in the struggle to determine the heir to the throne.

On the other hand, this masterfully composed account, which will surely enthrall the general public, may leave the professional reader scratching their head, more than once, and throughout. We are never told why Hürrem is called "Roxelana" as all cited western sources use the form "Roxolana." In terms of style, identical sentences and phrases are repeated verbatim more than once. The easy-going prose blurs the distinction between historical fact and authorial invention to an annoying degree. Peirce uses endnotes, but rarely do they indicate where we are dealing with fact and where with figments of Peirce's imagination, or uncritical repetition of a source's exaggerations. The meager source base forces the author to deploy "perhaps," "apparently," and "conceivably" in almost every other sentence. Conjecture trumps evidence overwhelmingly; indeed, so little do we know about the chief protagonist that almost anything goes. More importantly, baffling, occasionally absurd claims and conclusions are made in direct opposition to what the just quoted sources state (98–99) or the course of events suggests (314). The author does not have command of Italian and Greek and blunders such as *condottiero*, "Trevisano," "Dimetoka," or "Strongyla" as a Jewish name don't lend credibility to the account.

The book's central argument, Hürrem's deep and enduring imprint on the subsequent Ottoman political system is, to put it mildly, questionable. Just how much

political agency, and for what purpose, besides hers and her offspring's sheer survival, did Hürrem exercise is quite unclear. The one work, which would provide a corrective to Peirce's lofty claims of Haseki Hürrem's political role, Baki Tezcan's *The Second Ottoman Empire: Political and Social Transformation in the Early Modern World* (2010), is strangely missing from the bibliography. The unfortunate impression is that Peirce has an agenda to push and to that end all means are good.

Are we then dealing with a rich, professionally rigorous reconstruction of a great personage's life and struggles or a rosy, popular interpretation on a par with the Turkish TV soap opera series *The Magnificent Century*? Fans of both varieties of history will doubtlessly take something away from *Empress of the East*; perhaps (to echo Peirce), this is what ultimately matters.

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Women as Essential Citizens in the Czech National Movement: The Making of the Modern Czech Community. By Dáša Frančíková. Lanham: Lexington Books,

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Dáša Frančíková's book examines the various roles that early nineteenth-century middle-class Czech women were assigned, and that they fashioned for themselves, during the early stages of the Czech national movement for linguistic, literary, cultural (and later also political) independence. The author's focus on the 1820s through the 1850s is particularly welcome since this historical period remains still fairly unexplored in the English-language scholarship on nineteenth-century Czech women's lives and work.

Frančíková sets out to explore how the "earlier nineteenth-century members of the Czech community strove to create and naturalize [the definition of] 'woman' who they thought could best serve the purpose of the Czech nation and community" (xv). In chapter one, she outlines the role of women such as Antonie Bohuslava Rajská or Honorata Zapová in the production of this construct. Likewise, she traces some of the ways in which Czech women at the time negotiated, stretched, and re-shaped the construct as they lived their lives and as they worked to produce the sensibility and reality of the Czech national community.

Particularly notable in this context is Frančíková's reading, in Chapter 3, of the story "Kateřina Maršalová, amazonka česká" (Kateřina Maršalová, the Czech Amazon). This story, published in 1845 in the weekly *Květy*, was brought to light through Frančíková's archival research. It celebrates the life of Maršalová, an eighteenth-century Czech woman (whether fictional or historical) who—disguised as her brother—took up the life of a dragoon in the Austrian army. Maršalová was successful in her disguise and in her career for years, the story asserts, and after being finally discovered, she was invited to the imperial court and (rather than rebuked) she was praised and rewarded by the empress Maria Theresa. In Frančíková's reading, the story challenges the accepted assumptions about the period image of ideal Czech womanhood, since Maršalová, who does later in the story marry and bear children but whose husband and children all die prematurely, is here represented sympathetically.

Chapter 2 of the book, which focuses on several romantic friendships between renowned Czech women, including the friendship between Božena Němcová and Sofie Rottová, is equally fascinating. Researching the book, Frančíková conducted