THE STORY OF A EUPHEMISM:
THE KHAZARS IN RUSSIAN NATIONALIST LITERATURE*

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The history of the Khazars is still obscure; their large state, which encompassed up to the half of Eastern Europe more than a thousand years ago, has completely disappeared leaving no precise legitimate heirs. Historical data on the Khazars are scarce and fragmentary permitting very different interpretations. Over the last few decades all the new data on the Khazars were provided by archaeology, the materials from which made it possible to build up various reconstructions. The latter are often in conflict with each other and with those based on the written sources. As a result, scholars have developed very contradictory views of the Khazars, their political structure and culture, as well as their role in Early Medieval Eastern Europe. Those beliefs nourish by no means the minds of scholars alone. Over the last few decades, they have been profitably used by Russian chauvinists for geopolitical and historiographic constructions aimed at discovering a would-be negative Jewish role in the development of many peoples of the world. To put it another way, they manipulate the very scarce and obscure historical and archaeological data as well as doubtful and poorly based hypotheses in order to confirm a priori reasoning and conclusions, which might have far-reaching ethnopolitical consequences today. In this respect one should talk of the anti-Semitic “Khazar myth” being developed by our contemporaries, both scholars and amateur authors, picked up by mass media, and purposefully imposed upon the general public. This paper focuses on various aspects of this multi-faced mythology.

When in the early 1990s I began my studies of contemporary Russian nationalism, I was amazed at the frequency of references to the Khazars in literature produced by the Russian radical politicians. Soon I realized that I was not alone. The American analyst Walter Laqueur was also

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surprised to learn that in the very late 1980s Russian nationalists were fixated on the “Khazar episode.” For them the Khazar issue seemed to be a crucial one. They treated it as the first historically documented case of the imposition of a foreign yoke on the Slavs, drawing a close analogy with the “foreign yoke” imposed on Russia from 1917 on. They were especially alarmed because the Khazars ruled the southern part of Eastern Europe before the Kievan Rus’ state had emerged, i.e. before the Eastern Slavs developed their own state organization. Even worse, the Khazar nobility converted to Judaism. Those historic facts provided an appropriate pretext for arguing that Jewish intrigues and dominance were to be found from the very beginning of Russian history. In this context the term “Khazars” became popular as a euphemism for the so-called “Jewish occupation regime.” It is the problem of the power of euphemisms, or the covert language of hatred, that I would like to address.

The Soviet epoch was rich in euphemisms, allegories and equivocal statements, which, on the one hand, provided the interlocutor with necessary information, and on the other hand, permitted him to avoid being persecuted for saying things that could be interpreted as a crime. Euphemisms were extensively used by the dissident authors including the Russian nationalists. During the period of Perestroika, state anti-Semitism disappeared from the USSR. At the same time, abolition of censorship and the new freedom of speech made it possible to express dissident or radical thoughts openly. The anti-Semitic movements, which had developed underground previously, went public and were able to carry on their propaganda legally. At the same time, in the new, liberal environment only a few people and groups dared associate themselves openly with anti-Semitism. First, such an attitude was not approved by the mainstream of Russian society; second, one could be taken to court for an “attempting to stir up national discord and religious intolerance” with respect to the relevant article of the Russian Criminal Code. Even though this article was rarely invoked and few were sentenced for this

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