THE PLACE OF KABBALAH IN THE DOCTRINE OF RUSSIAN FREEMASONS*

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Masonic lodges first made their appearance in Russia in the mid-18th century and, by the end of that century, probably involved several thousand people1. Members of lodges were for the most part statesmen, aristocrats and intellectuals: dignitaries, career soldiers, officials, writers and scientists, churchmen, etc. Masonic views are known to have had a considerable influence on the ideology of that time but, although the history of Russian masonry has been well studied2, masonic ideology has until now received little scholarly attention. There is a long tradition in Russian science of scepticism concerning the main constituents of masonic tradition: mysticism, alchemy and Kabbalah. During the late 19th–early twentieth centuries, Russian scholars paid little attention to this topic, mainly because of their extreme positivistic views. In the Soviet period, the topic was taboo.

Moreover, there are a number of objective difficulties in studying masonic teachings. Most masonic texts have not yet been published. Significant parts of masonic documents were destroyed by the masons themselves, or were lost as a result of government persecution. In addition, the masons themselves often masked their involvement in Kabbalah and alchemy3. Thus the available materials are scarce and often encrypted. There are many rough copies of masonic texts without any consistent description of the topic. All this has im-

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1 At present, more than 3100 eighteenth-century Russian masons have been identified. It is suggested that the ca. 150 masonic lodges of the Catherinian age contained no less than 8000 members (A. I. Serkov, personal communication). For detailed biographical data on Russian masons see A. Serkov’s Lexicon Russian Masonry. See also Vernadsky, Russian Masonry in the Reign of Catherine the Great, 124-26, 375.

2 See, for example, Vernadsky, Russian Masonry in the Reign of Catherine the Great, 44-70, 94-98; Pypin, Masonry in Russia; Longinov, Novikov and the Moscow Martinists; Serkov, The History of Russian Masonry in the 19th century; Melgunov and Sidorov (eds.), Masonry in its past and present. See also Smith, Working the Rough Stone.

3 See, for example, materials of the Novikov case (1792): Longinov, Novikov and Moscow Martinists, 478-518, esp. 517.
peded study, so that some researchers insist that Russian masons were not concerned with Kabbalah and alchemy at all.

In a thorough investigation of manuscripts in Moscow archives\(^4\) we discovered dozens of texts related to Kabbalah, including both translations from different languages (probably including Hebrew) and original compositions. This paper is an analysis of the kabbalistic constituent of masonic teaching. Special attention is paid here to individuals interested in Jewish mysticism; we describe some Russian masons who have read, translated and used in their practical life not only the texts of the Christian kabbalists but also original Jewish writings. In addition, we attempted to find possible intermediaries who participated in transmission of this knowledge to their Russian masonic brothers.

In our view, the question of the role of Kabbalah in masonic tradition is extremely important\(^5\). Below we try to describe the kabbalistic concepts which were especially interesting to Russian masons and contributed greatly to their social and political thinking.

**Historical introduction**

Three main periods are normally discerned in the history of Russian freemasonry during the 18\(^{th}\) century. In the first, from the 1740s to the enthronement of Catherine the Great in 1762, freemasonry was ‘merely a fashionable thing borrowed from the West without any criticism’. In the second period, which lasted up to the early 1780s, freemasonry was ‘the first moral philosophy in Russia; three first degrees of “St. Jones”, or “symbolic” freemasonry prevailed’\(^6\). The third period, when the “higher degrees”, especially the Rosicrucians, dominated in Russia, covers the 1780s\(^7\). The government per-

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\(^4\) We refer mostly to the MS documents which are contained in the Division of Manuscripts (DMS) of the Russian State Library (RSL), in the Russian State Archive of Ancient Acts (RSAAA), and in the Russian State Historical Archive of Moscow (RSHAM). For further details, see: Burmistrov and Endel, ‘Kabbalah in Russian Masonry’; Burmistrov, ‘Kabbalistic Exegetics and Christian Dogmatics’.

\(^5\) By “Masonic tradition” we have in mind a complex system of theological, philosophical and mystical ideas which penetrated masonic teaching, propagated among the masons according to their rules and traditions, and was used in practice when carrying out masonic works. Thus this notion includes not only a set of concepts but also a specific system of their treating, learning and interpretation. For a review of the Russian mason’s practices, see Smith, *Working the Rough Stone*, 30-52.

\(^6\) That is these lodges comprised only three Masonic degrees, accepted in the Craft from the very beginning: Pupil, Apprentice and Master.