ARTICLES

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Judaizers and the Image of the Jew in Medieval Russia: A Polemic Revisited and a Question Posed

Specialists in medieval Russian history often have to contend with an aggregate source base of such paucity that it is quite understandable that they should devote relatively massive amounts of time to articulating principles of source criticism and to evaluating interpretations of specific texts as sources about particular problems. Sometimes—more cautiously one might say rarely—such an obsession with sources entails too narrow a definition of historical problematica. In at least one case with which this article will be concerned, stepping outside a narrow debate about sources to pose a broader but unasked question induces an uneasy emotion hyperbolically described as akin to insisting that the emperor has no clothes.

In 1965-1966 the Harvard University journal Kritika published a polemic between John V. A. Fine and the Leningrad specialist in Old-Russian literature Ia. Ė. Lur’e over the presence of Jewish influence among the so-called “Judaizers,”—a group of fifteenth to early sixteenth-century heretical group in Novgorod and Moscow. In his Ideologicheskaia bor’ba v russkoi publitsistike kontsa XV-nachala XVI v., Lur’e had argued that the charge of Judaizing against the heretics was no more than a propagandistic fiction. During the earliest phase of the heresy in Novgorod the heterodox were accused primarily of messianism, i.e., Bogomilism; implications of Jewish practices had been clearly secondary in the epistles of the Novgorod archbishop Gennadii. Only a quarter of a century later, Iosif of Volokoamsk, in his writings against the Moscow wing of the heresy and in his history of the heresy, had elevated the cry of Judaizers to the main crime of the heretics. In his Prosveitel’ (The Illuminator), Iosif had doctored his sources from the earlier period to accentuate and exaggerate the Jewish elements so as to justify convicting the heretics of apostasy, meriting capital punishment. According to Gennadii the heresy had originated through the efforts of a Jew, who Iosif gave the name Skharia, who had entered Novgorod in 1470 in the suite of Prince Michael Olek’kovich of Kiev; Lithuanian rabbis were supposedly later summoned to strengthen the movement. Lur’e dismissed this “official” account as legendary; in his opinion all attempts at identifying this Skharia with known personages were unconvincing. The Zachariah in the Crimea with whom Ivan III corresponded was an Italian Catholic; the only similarity to a Kievan Jewish scholar Zachariah was a rather common name. Lur’e suggested that the charge of apostasy to paganism, Judaism or Islam was a frequent one in medieval theological polemics. In this particular case the appellation was substantiated only in sources written after the heretics could no longer respond on their own behalf, not during a genuine debate in which the opponents of the heresy would have had to deal
seriously with the views of the accused. From this analysis of the sources, Lur’e asserted that the Judaizers were a rationalist-humanist group of purely Christian heretics; he found no evidence of Jewish beliefs or practices.¹

Lur’e’s revisionist interpretation of the Judaizers aroused serious objections in Fine’s Kritika review. Lur’e had admitted, Fine pointed out, that Gennadii raised the Judaizer issue in the 1480’s, even if that aspect of the heresy became paramount only in the works of Iosif of the early sixteenth century. Fine, proceeding directly from the relevant documents, whose publication is owed to Lur’e and Kazakova,² saw undeniable evidence of Jewish practices during the earliest period of the heresy, as admitted by both its adherents and antagonists:

Gennadius attributed the heresy’s beginnings to a “heretical Jew” in Mikhail Oleł’kovich’s suite (p. 375); the heretic Naum in 1487 stated that the heretics prayed according to Jewish custom (p. 310); they used a Jewish calendar (p. 311); they made use of Jewish wisdom (p. 316); in 1490 Metropolitan Zosima said they slandered Christianity and praised Judaism (p. 314); and the Council of 1490, among its many charges, accused all the heretics of celebrating the Lord’s Day on Saturday and accused some of them of opposing the Christian faith and Divine Law in Jewish practices (p. 383).³

Lur’e’s “ingenious theory” that the name of the heresy was a polemical falsehood to implicate the heretics in apostasy, Fine wrote, overlooked the fact that Ivan, who ultimately had to sanction their suppression, “well knew what the beliefs of the heretics were. Having this knowledge in his possession, he would not have fallen for such a scheme if the heretics were not in fact Judaized. One can explain Iosif’s great emphasis on Judaism more convincingly by saying that he felt Judaic ideas were the most evil feature of the heresy.” ⁴ Fine’s own view, which he promised to document in the future, was that although the Judaizers were not converts to Judaism, “the evidence pointing to the great influence of Jewish ideas is too significant to be ignored.”⁵

Lur’e, in a letter to the editors of Kritika, attempted to refute Fine’s critique. He found Fine guilty of the “consumer’s approach to sources,” of forgetting that only anti-heretical sources survive, and of disregarding the distinction between sources representing a genuine polemic and those written after the accused had been deprived of the possibility of responding. Naum’s testimony, which Fine cited so heavily, had been extracted under torture and was therefore

¹. 1a. S. Lur’e, Ideologicheskaia bor’ba v russkoii publitsistike kontsa XV-nachala XV veka (Moscow-Leningrad, 1960), pp. 106 ff (on the accusation), 122 ff (principles of source criticism), 129 ff, especially p. 132 n. 2 (on Skharia).
⁵. Ibid., p. 17.