A NEW BOOK ON THE KHAZARS

by

V. Minorsky
Cambridge

Dr. D. M. Dunlop's book, The History of the Jewish Khazars, Princeton University Press, 1954, XV + 293 pp. is a welcome accession to our stock of knowledge on the Khazars. The author admits (p. XI) that "there is little new in the way of sources" used in the book, and in fact the last discovery in this field seems to be that of the so-called "Cambridge document" found by Dr. Schechter in 1912. The book, however, gives a very careful and critical survey of the existing literature and contains a useful outline of the problems connected with the history of the still mysterious people.

The addition of "Jewish" to the title of the book, as a reviewer (BSOAS, 1955, XVII/3, 619) has remarked, seems to be due to some practical consideration on the part of the publishers. The propagation of Judaism among the Khazars had but a restricted scope and concerned only the top of the social pyramid, while the majority of the people must have stuck to the old nomad practices, and in general the Khazars showed great tolerance towards the different religions and races established among them. One third of Dr. Dunlop's book (pp. 89-170) is devoted to the controversy about the time of and reasons for the conversion, but the author pays due attention to the general history of the Khazars. In recent times several scholars have taken up a similar task but their efforts have not been crowned with complete success. In 1922 J.N. Simchowitsch presented to the University of Berlin a thesis under the title Studien zu den Berichten arabischen Historiker über die Chazaren (down to Harun al-Rashid's time) which has not seen the light in printed form and is known only through a review by M. Palló in Ungar. Jahrbücher, 1922, II, 157-60. M. Kmoskó published two articles in K. Csoma

1 By way of preparation for this book the author had published 'Aspects of the Khazar problem' in Glasgow University Oriental series, 1951, XII, 33-44. Cf. also his review of A. Z. V. Togan's Ibn Faḍlān, in Die Welt des Orients, pp. 307-12.
Archivum under the title 'Araber und Chazaren', 1924, I/4, pp. 280-92, and 1925, I/5, pp. 356-68; this publication too had a restricted purview and is difficult to find nowadays. M. I. Artamonov's Sketches of the oldest history of the Khazars (in Russian), 1937, 136 pp., consist of three chapters (on the V.n.nt.r, on the Khazars and the Turks and on the origins of the Khazars) stopping short of the Arab period. Prof. A. E. Krümski (Kiev) wrote a history of the Khazars which since his death in 1941 has remained in manuscript.

As a scholar to whom Hebrew, Syrian and Arabic sources are equally accessible, Dr. Dunlop went beyond the scope of those circumscribed researches. The lasting merit of his achievement is in his new translations from Arab geographers (Mas‘ūdī, Iṣṭakhrī, Ibn Ḥauqal etc.), though it is a matter of some regret that he has strewn the quotations throughout the text, instead of giving them complete in an annex.

The main idea underlying the earlier part of the book (pp. IX, and 87) is that of the historical role of the Khazars who prevented the Arabs from extending their conquests on the Caucasian front, in the same way as the Franks of Charles Martel did on the westernmost front. Without the Khazar obstacle, the fate of Eastern Europe would have been very different. This idea seems to be constructive, though it might be argued that Eastern Europe, and the young Kiev state in the first place, should have been grateful to the Arabs for having shattered the power of the still very rough and primitive Khazars, and having thus checked at least one wave of nomad expansions across the southern Russian steppes.

The story of the Arab-Khazar wars will be a useful reminder at a time when there is a tendency to underestimate the Khazar contacts with the Slav tribes. The curtailing of the Khazar territory by the Kiev state must have proceeded gradually while the attention of the Khazars was diverted southwards to the lands of the Caliphate. The final blow dealt to the Khazars by Svyatoslav in 965 (of which Ibn Ḥauqal was a contemporary) will then appear as dictated not by a mere lust for conquest but by the necessity to eliminate a threat from the east, though the already weakened Khazars might have been of some use as a screen for stemming the fresh hordes of eastern invaders. One might recall the destruction of the buffer state of the Qara-Khitay (and their successor Küçlük the Nayman), thus opening the door to the Mongol invasion which swept away the kingdom of the Khwārazmshāh, see Juvaynī, II, 80 and 87 (transl. by J. A. Boyle, I, 347, 357).

1 Cf. what the famous Russian historian Klyuchevsky, Kurs russkoy istorii, 1904, I, 151, says of the Pecheneg infiltration about 864: "the Khazar power apparently was no longer able to protect Russian merchants in the East."