ARTICLES

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THE ROLE OF JEWS IN EARLY RUSSIAN CIVILIZATION IN THE LIGHT OF A NEW DISCOVERY AND NEW CONTROVERSIES*

We have very few indubitable facts concerning medieval Jewish settlements in Eastern Europe.¹ The presence of a Jewish community, as well as the existence of syncretic beliefs influenced by Judaism, is attested on the northern shores of the Black Sea, in the Bospor kingdom, in the first centuries A.D.² Another fact which implies the existence of a considerable Jewish community is the conversion to Judaism of the rulers of Khazaria, the empire that preceded Rus’ in its dominance over Eastern Europe. The conversion happened perhaps at the end of the eighth or beginning of the ninth century; however, the extent of Judaism’s dissemination in the Khazar people is subject to dispute.³ Finally, Russian⁴ and Hebrew⁵ sources contain some few and vague notions of the presence of supposedly pre-Ashkenazic Jews or rather a Judaic element in Rus’ in the eleventh and twelfth centuries (as well as in late medieval Crimea and Caucasus). Yet there is an established opinion

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1. For a general survey see the chapter on “Eastern Europe” in Salo Wittmayer Baron, A Social and Religious History of the Jews, 2 ed. 3 (New York: Columbia Univ. Press, 1957), 173-222. Among the more valuable older works is I. Berlin’s Istorieckie sud’by evreiskogo naroda na territorii Russkogo gosudarstva (Petrograd: Evreiskaia istoricheskaia biblioteka, 1919).


3. See notes 14-15 below.


neither on the racial origin of this element and the language they spoke, nor on the kind of Judaism they professed.

The links between the data on Bosporan, Khazar, and Russian Judaic elements are unclear. However, given the importance of the theme in light of the later growth of East European Jewry and their relations with Ukrainians, Russians, and other peoples of the region, these data were used as a base both for more serious hypotheses and for various fantastic constructions, which often served the political purposes of their authors. B. Weinryb showed how the emerging identity of Russian Jews in the nineteenth century helped to develop legends about their continuity with presumably large ancient and medieval Jewish communities in the region. In present-day Russia, with the relative freedom of expression, the old ethnogenetic theories have been revived. It is an amazing coincidence that almost at the same time a new document became known, which seems to shed light on at least some problems of the early history of Eastern European Jews but which has also been applied to the development of ethnogenetic myths.

The present article consists of the following sections. In the first section the main developments in the Soviet “pre-perestroika” studies of East European Jewish history are discussed. The second section deals with particular aspects of interpretation of the new discovery, the so-called Kiev letter, from the standpoint of medieval Russian and Khazar history. The third section is devoted to the revival and creation in the Soviet Union of various theories involving the origins of East European Jews and their role in the beginnings of Russian civilization.

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Judaic studies for various reasons have not been a flourishing discipline in the Soviet Union during recent pre-perestroika decades (if the huge amount of popular “anti-Zionist” literature is excluded). Traces of perhaps the last officially sponsored attempt to write a history of East European Jews can be found in the archives of the Institute of History of the USSR in Moscow. This is a 93-page long verbatim report of a meeting which was held 8 July 1938 and which criticized a paper, “Jewish Self-Government of the Sixteenth-

9. Institut istorii SSSR, Nauchnyi Arkhiv, fond 1 (Institut Istorii), delo 6d (Zasedanie sektora istorii SSSR).