

KHAZAR KHAGANATE IN THE REALMS OF SOVIET ACADEMIA: FROM M. I. ARTAMONOV TO L. N. GUMILEV AND RUSSIAN NATIONALISTS

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Abstract

This paper deals with the reception of M. I. Artamonov's (1898–1972) and L. N. Gumilev's (1912–1992) works focused on the history of Khazar Khaganate and their position in the context of Soviet academia. The paper is based on the prosographical approach to the topic and comparative analysis of primary texts published by Gumilev and Artamonov, mainly in the 1960s and 1970s. The main aim of the study is to analyze and reflect on their findings in the broader context of the Soviet academic discourse and intellectual milieu of Russian nationalists. I argue that Gumilev's radical revision of the history of Khazar Khaganate far exceeded previous Artamonov's findings and attracted the attention of Russian nationalist groups of the post-Stalinist era mainly due to its antisemitic narrative. Furthermore, despite the ever-present ambivalence of Gumilev's contact with Russian nationalists during the 1970s, he was heavily affected by the unstable relationship between Russian nationalists and the official Soviet regime. During that time, Gumilev faced strong censorship of his texts, and his most radical revisionist study focused on the Khazaria was eventually published only posthumously in 1993.

Keywords

Khazar Khaganate; Soviet academia; Russian nationalism; antisemitism; M. I. Artamonov; L. N. Gumilev

Resumo

Este artigo analisa a aceitação dos trabalhos de M. I. Artamonov (1898-1972) e L. N. Gumilev (1912-1992) centrados na história de Khazar Khaganate e na sua posição no contexto da academia soviética. O artigo baseia-se na abordagem prosográfica do tema e na análise comparativa de textos primários publicados por Gumilev e Artamonov, principalmente nas décadas de 1960 e 1970. O principal objectivo do estudo é analisar e reflectir sobre as suas conclusões no contexto mais amplo do discurso académico soviético e do meio intelectual dos nacionalistas russos. É defendido que a revisão radical da história de Khazar Khaganate por Gumilev excedeu em muito as anteriores descobertas de Artamonov e atraiu a atenção dos grupos nacionalistas russos da era pós-estalinista, principalmente devido à sua narrativa anti-semita. Além disso, apesar da sempre presente ambivalência do contacto de Gumilev com nacionalistas russos durante a década de 1970, ele foi fortemente afectado pela relação instável entre os nacionalistas russos e o regime soviético oficial. Durante esse período, Gumilev enfrentou uma forte censura dos seus textos, e o seu estudo revisionista mais radical centrado na Khazaria acabou por ser publicado apenas postumamente em 1993.



Palavras-chave

Khazar Khaganate; academia soviética; nacionalismo russo; antisemitismo; M. I. Artamonov; L. N. Gumilev

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M. I. Artamonov in the context of Soviet research of the Khazar Khaganate

Artamonov's academic work in the interwar period

The Khazar Khaganate or Khazaria was a state that existed from the second half of the 7th century until the mid-10th century, with a territory that approximately included Crimea, the coast of the Caspian Sea, and what is now the Dagestan Republic of the Russian Federation to the north¹.

As recently pointed out by Victor Schnirelmann, the current academic approach to the topic still holds an extensive number of contradictions related not only to the state border of Khazaria but also to its core political, economic, and religious aspects (Schnirelmann, 2012b: 11). Yet, due to its general geographical location, the study of Khazar history has naturally been of interest mostly to Russian and Soviet historians, since it was directly related to the history of other peoples in Central Asia and around the river Volga and the history of successor states in the geopolitical area.

One of the key and essential aspects of the soviet historiography of the Khazars has been related to its alleged state religion – Judaism. This topic has regularly led to heated discussions, particularly during the 20th century, and has been a key factor in determining views on the history and overall importance of the Khazar Khaganate in the realms of the Soviet intellectual milieu.

M. I. Artamonov, an archaeologist and historian, became a leading Soviet expert on the Khazars in the 1930s. According to Peter Golden, the publication of Artamonov's monograph *Outlines of the ancient history of the Khazars* (*Очерки древнейшей истории Хазар*) in 1936 marked the beginning of modern research into Khazar history (Golden, 2007: 28).

Artamonov's publication focused on clarifying the circumstances in which the Khazar Khaganate emerged and explaining the role it played in the formation of medieval Russia. In the preface to his book, Artamonov criticized the marginalization of the topic of his

¹ Maps depicting approximate borders of Khazar Khaganate from 600 c. e. to 850 c. e. were published in 2002 in monograph by Felix Kitroser (Kitroser, 2002). Digital reprints by Richard Burd are also available online at *Bibliotecapleyades.net* website (see Burd, R. *Maps of the Khazar Kingdom*. *bibliotecapleyades.net*, https://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/sociopolitica/esp_sociopol_khazar03.htm).



monograph and the shortcomings that pervaded the historical research on non-Russian Soviet nations in general (Artamonov, 1936: 4). One of the principal tenets of his text was his argument that the Khazar Khaganate played a significant role in shaping the Kievan Rus' in its early days. Artamonov's publication also stressed the high level of political organization and independence of the Khazar Khaganate and its tight political and economic connection with the surrounding states (Artamonov, 1936: 4).

As noted by Mark Bassin, Artamonov's 1936 monograph was quite clearly a reflection of the general Soviet political tendencies at that time. To a large extent, it conformed to the internationalism embraced by the Bolsheviks and the criticism of tsarist Russia (Bassin, 2016: 85). However, regardless of the political connotations of the text, it was first and foremost a foundation for a much more extensive historiographic and archaeological study of the Khazars (Artamonov, 1936: 5).

This attracted the attention of the young L. N. Gumilev (1912–1992), who enrolled at the Leningrad university in 1934. Since both his parents were prominent poets in prerevolutionary Russia, Gumilev regularly faced the persecutions of the new regime, which had a highly detrimental effect on his future academic career. In 1938 he was accused of anti-Soviet activities and sentenced to five years imprisonment for the first time. A second conviction followed in 1949. As a result, Gumilev spent more than ten years in Soviet labor and correctional camps, and his academic and professional career did not officially begin until the second half of the 1950s, shortly after his return to Leningrad (Bassin, 2016: 15).

Gumilev and Artamonov met in 1935 on an archaeological expedition to the valley of the Manych River. Under the lead of Artamonov, Gumilev joined another expedition in the summer of 1936, which aimed to excavate the supposed site of the Khazar town of Sarkel (Beljakov, 2012: 351). However, their collaboration was interrupted in 1938 due to Gumilev's first sentence. (Kozyreva, 2012: 835). Gumilev eventually returned to Leningrad at the end of 1945 (Kozyreva, 2012: 835). However, during that time, WWII put a stop to many of Artamonov's activities as well. As his archaeological research was suspended, he focused his energy on topics surrounding the history of the Slavs and the Scythians (Plenteva, 1998: 206).

M. I. Artamonov's academic work after WWII

Artamonov resumed his research on the Khazars in the second half of 1949. His new archaeological expedition continued in the footsteps of the research started in the 1930s; again, he focused his attention on the area situated left of the lower course of the Don (Pletneva, 1998: 207). Gumilev briefly joined this expedition, only to be rearrested for the second time in November 1949. This time, he received a 10-year sentence (Beljakov, 2012: 836). In the meantime, Artamonov continued his archaeological research, while continuing to work on his key monograph on Khazar history.

The situation changed radically in late 1951 when a December issue of *Truth (Правда)* featured sharp criticism of the existing historiographic view of the Khazars (Ivanov, 1951: 3). When viewed in a broader context, the publication of this article clearly reflected the marked change in the discourse of internal Soviet politics. This had been characterized



since the second half of the 1940s by a renewed war on cosmopolitanism, which was viewed as undesirable in the Soviet environment. Stalin oversaw the closure of a number of Jewish institutions, while the publication of some Jewish periodicals was restricted (Zubov, 2010: 253). This antisemitic campaign intensified in May 1948 with the declaration of the independent state of Israel and culminated in the early 1950s. Famously, the campaign included the so-called doctor's plot, a fabricated case designed by Stalin to eliminate several elite Jewish doctors and start a new purge of the Communist Party. Due to his sudden death in March 1953, the campaign eventually tapered off (Malia, 2004: 315).

The criticism of the then-current research of Khazar history came at the height of the anti-Semitic campaign. The attack was directed explicitly at the research of Artamonov, who began to publish the results of the resumed archaeological expeditions at the end of 1949. The author of the article also criticized Artamonov's 1936 monograph and accused him of attributing too much importance to the Khazar Khaganate and too little to the independent development of medieval Russia. The article concluded that Artamonov's approach was completely wrong and unacceptable (Ivanov, 1951: 3). The archaeological part of Artamonov's research also came under scrutiny, since it allegedly failed to uncover tangible evidence to substantiate Artamonov's claims about the size and the level of development of the Khazar Khaganate (Ivanov, 1951: 3).

The effect of these events on Artamonov's future academic activities was profound and the devastating criticism of his papers caused several years of delay in the publication of his monograph on the history of the Khazar Khaganate, even though it was almost completed at that point. Moreover, these events led to a radical reassessment of the whole Khazar historiography.

The critical article clearly drew new boundaries from 1951, which gave an unequivocal answer to the questions about the origin and importance of the Khazars (Ivanov, 1951: 3). This new trend in research into Khazar history quickly found its way into mainstream Soviet academia. In 1953, the journal *Soviet archeology* (*Советская археология*) published a paper by B. A. Rybakov, which again challenged the results of Artamonov's archaeological expeditions and focused on criticising his overestimation of the Khazarian territory (Rybakov, 1953: 146). The article also repeatedly highlighted the parasitic nature of the state and claimed that the Khazar economy was wholly dependent on exploiting the important trade routes of East Europe (Rybakov, 1953: 131).

Artamonov eventually resorted to rethinking his theses and reworked a large part of his monograph to avoid the threat of censorship. Gumilev, who returned to Leningrad in May 1956, again appeared on the scene. Shortly after his return, Artamonov offered him a job in the State Hermitage Museum, and Gumilev joined him in his work on the monograph as an editor. Between 1959 and 1962, Gumilev also led a series of archaeological expeditions, whose findings were included in Artamonov's monograph (Beljakov, 2012: 357).

Artamonov's *History of the Khazars* (*История Хазар*) was eventually published in 1962. In an attempt to stay within the recently set boundaries of the historiographic discourse, he admitted to having erred and revised many of his previous conclusions. Artamonov shifted his focus to Judaism, the Khazarian state religion, and postulated that the spread



of Judaism had had a profound negative impact on the further development of the Khaganate. In particular, Artamonov questioned the idea that the Khazar leaders of the mid-8th century were able to freely convert to Judaism, arguing that the very nature of Judaism forbade proselytism (Artamonov, 1962: 273).

According to Artamonov, as a result of these events, the Khazar elite became dissociated from their people, and the chasms between the various classes of the religiously and ethnically diverse Khazar Khaganate widened. Judaism was allegedly promoted by Obadiah, a Khazar ruler who did not belong to the original line of Khazar khagans, but whose Jewish ancestors probably held important positions in the administration of the ruling family (Artamonov, 1962: 280). Artamonov argued, that with their help, Obadiah gradually took control of the whole state and founded a new dynasty, creating dualism within the state's ruling classes. The original Khazar nobility lost all power and fell under complete control of the new Jewish elite (Artamonov, 1962: 282).

Artamonov also claimed that adherence to Judaism also provided the new Khazar rulers with a large degree of independence and reduced the religious pressure exerted by the Byzantine Empire and the Arabic Caliphate (Artamonov, 1962: 281). However, Artamonov's assessment of the broader historical connotations of this move was far from favorable (Artamonov, 1962: 457).

In a nutshell, Artamonov revised his view of Khazar history mostly in a way that would fit the predefined narrative. However, he maintained a degree of objectivity despite the enforced changes. While the final chapter of Artamonov's book stressed that his previous idealisation of the Khazars and the undue emphasis he had placed on their cultural significance was wrong, it also contained sharp criticism of Rybakov's ideas, particularly his unsubstantiated effort to completely discount the historic role of the Khazar Khaganate (Artamonov, 1962: 458).

Artamonov's monograph concluded an important chapter in Khazar's historiography. His long archaeological research brought the topic to the attention of the next generation of Soviet academics; and in the 1960s, Gumilev became the most widely known representative of this generation.

A radical revision of Khazar history in the works of L. N. Gumilev

L. N. Gumilev in the context of Soviet academia

L. N. Gumilev was undoubtedly one of the most remarkable and controversial Soviet intellectuals of the second half of the 20th century. There have been many papers, particularly since the 1990s, that studied his ideas and often reached contradictory and ambiguous conclusions.

One of the ideas that has always attracted significant interest, academic and otherwise, is Gumilev's proclaimed adherence to Eurasianism. While some see Gumilev as an important representative and proponent of the original Eurasianist movement, with its roots going back to the interwar Russian émigrés (Lavrov, 2007: 216), many experts are wary of such sharp distinctions and are extremely critical of Gumilev's alleged Eurasianist theses (Laruelle, 2001: 459). Despite all the contradictory in the current research, it is



without any doubt that Gumilev's view on Eurasianism was formed mainly by P. N. Savitsky and G. V. Vernadsky – two important representatives of the inter-war Eurasianist movement, with whom Gumilev maintained a long-lasting personal correspondence which started shortly after Gumilev's return to Leningrad (Beisswenger, 2013: 107).

Another frequently discussed topic is Gumilev's concept of ethnogenesis, described in his key theoretical monograph *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere* (*Этногенез и биосфера Земли*), officially published only in 1989, where he attempted to make the conclusions of his previous, less abstract papers more generally valid in a much broader theoretical context. To describe the process of ethnogenesis, he drew on his knowledge of history, geography, archaeology, biology, and several additional disciplines. It was this unorthodox approach that has made his arguments subject to many heated interdisciplinary debates, past and present (Zilbet, 2012). Indeed, a key example of Gumilev's interdisciplinary synthesis and the following generalizations related to his ethnogenesis theory can be precisely tracked in his Khazaria research.

Moreover, in the 1960s, some of Gumilev's ideas began to gain traction among the Russian post-Stalinist nationalists. In the decades that followed, their attitude to Gumilev's research would often shift from positive responses to sharp criticism (Bassin, 2016: 177). However, the first theme of Gumilev's research that strongly resonated with the Russian nationalists was his view of the history of the Khazar Khaganate.

Gumilev's revisionist approach to the history of the Khazar Khaganate

Considering that Gumilev was a long-time colleague of Artamonov, it was only natural that he followed in his footsteps and took on Artamonov's research on Khazar history. The archaeological expeditions that he began to organize in 1959 generated supplementary material for Artamonov's monograph published in 1962. However, the expeditions under Gumilev's leadership continued and he regularly published his findings in a series of papers titled *Landscape and ethnos* (*Ландшафт и этнос*).²

In 1966, Gumilev published a summary of these expeditions in his book *The Discover of Khazaria* (*Открытие Хазарии*). As a historian, Gumilev clearly followed in Artamonov's footsteps, reiterating the same arguments that Artamonov made, highlighting the wide chasm that arose between the ruling Jewish elite and the Khazar people. Like Artamonov, he viewed the Jewish rulers as usurpers who seized power in a coup (Gumilev, 1966: 107). However, historiography did not encapsulate the whole of Gumilev's research, and he emphasized that his book was a "biography of a discovery", as he called it, rather than a traditional academic text (Gumilev, 1966: 181).

Gumilev's research was a synthesis of several disciplines, taking advantage of archaeological findings as well as geographical and climatological data, which he carefully compared with written sources. As a result of this synthesis, he reached novel and surprising conclusions. Gumilev argued that, contrary to all existing presumptions, Khazars were mostly sedentary or semi-nomadic people. This was supposedly caused by

² This is an extensive series of 14 papers published on a regular basis in the journal *Nature* (*Природа*). The last of these was published in 1973. (Kozyreva, 2012: 842–860).



the level of the Caspian Sea, which had been much lower during the 6th century than it was at the time of Gumilev's expeditions in the early 1960s. Much of the Khazar population at that time lived in the natural delta of the Volga River created by the lower sea level. However, major climate changes led to a rise in the Caspian Sea level by several dozen meters during the 10th century and the Khazar settlements disappeared under the sea surface (Gumilev, 1966: 92). In Gumilev's opinion, Khazar Khaganate was the 'Caspian Netherlands' (Gumilev, 1966: 92) that gradually became the 'Russian Atlantis' (Gumilev, 1966: 127).

Examined within the wider context of its time, Gumilev's innovative historiographical and geographical analysis of Khazaria can be as well understood as the beginning of Soviet environmental history (Bassin, 2016: 135). Moreover, his paper describing the marine transgression of the Caspian Sea was published just as its level was beginning to fall again (Beljakov, 2012: 359). In the 1960s, this phenomenon led to a suggested 'project of the century', which was supposed to turn the direction of the natural flow of several Russian rivers and divert it towards the shrinking sea. The project was never fully implemented, mainly because the level of the Caspian Sea began to quickly rise again towards the end of the 1970s (Beljakov, 2012: 360). However, from the very beginning, starting in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Gumilev actively criticized the absurdity of such megalomaniac projects and pointed out their negative environmental impact (Bassin, 2016: 135).

In the relatively encouraging political atmosphere of the post-Stalinist era, his criticism of the Russian environmental policy soon found a sympathetic audience and the first supportive voices came from among the Russian nationalists. In those early days, environmental protection quickly became an important part of their program and one of the few 'positive' aspects of the new movement (Shlapentokh, 1990: 277). The Russian nationalist movement then began to show a more profound interest in Gumilev's environmental views in the early 1970s, when it enjoyed the surprising strong support of the then Soviet authorities.

Gumilev and the new wave of Russian nationalism

The first intellectuals to support the pro-Russian nationalist idea had close ties to the Village Prose literary movement, whose authors became actively involved in the new direction of official Soviet politics shortly after Stalin's death. In the early 1960s, their works strongly influenced the budding liberal and conservative factions of the Russian nationalist movement. The two factions were later joined by a third, radical faction (Brudny, 1998: 17).

As pointed out by Brudny, until the end of the 1970s, the representatives of all three nationalist factions were given relatively free rein (Brudny, 1998: 18). Although surprising, this freedom was the direct result of the so-called inclusive politics that prevailed in the USSR at the time. While ideas connected with the liberal opposition were strongly suppressed, the nationalists seemingly enjoyed the official support of the Soviet regime. However, inclusive politics was primarily a mechanism to suppress the undesirable reform activities started by Khrushchev in the second half of the 1950s. Nationalist groups, while critical of the government, were viewed as easier to control,



which made them a particularly useful tool for Khrushchev's successors (Brudny, 1998: 16).

In the mid-1960s, the supporters of Russian nationalism began to form so-called Russian clubs backed by two journals: *Our contemporary* (*Наш современник*) and *Young Guard* (*Молодая гвардия*). Both journals served as their main publishing platforms. Some nationalist authors also published in the Leningrad journal Russian literature (*Русская литература*) founded in 1958 under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences of the USSR (Brudny, 1998: 173).

The debate in nationalist circles revolved mostly around the position of ethnic Russians in the Soviet Union. One faction in particular, the statistс (государственники) highlighted the unfavorable status of ethnic Russians compared to the non-Russian nations of the Soviet Union and claimed that it had a significant detrimental effect on Russian statehood and national awareness (Shlapentokh, 1990: 212). Very soon, the Jewish community became the main target of this criticism. While Khrushchev's criticism of Stalin's cult of personality put a temporary stop to xenophobic domestic policy, and the official campaign against the threat of cosmopolitanism ended with a public disclosure that the 'doctors' plot' was fabricated, antisemitism never completely disappeared from the Soviet political discourse (Brudny, 1998: 42). It resurged in the mid-1960s; this time, under the guise of fighting against world Zionism (Bassin, 2016: 187).

In this political atmosphere, Gumilev's revised version of Khazar history from 1966 received a warm welcome among the nationalists, as Gumilev's carefully substantiated arguments laid the groundwork for their own anti-Semitic activities (Bassin, 2016: 189). Their interest in his work grew in the following years with Gumilev's rather theoretical papers, which aimed to give more general validity to his previous historiographic arguments.

In 1974, Gumilev successfully defended his second dissertation called *Ethnogenesis and the Biosphere* (*Этногенез и биосфера земли*) (Kozyreva, 2012: 838). However, he was unable to publish it as a monograph under the same name, and until 1989, it was only accessible through one deposited copy (Beljakov, 2012: 505). Despite this difficulty, the individual chapters of Gumilev's major theoretical work achieved almost a cult-like status among the Russian nationalists (Bassin, 2016: 182).

Gumilev's next major opportunity to expand on his historiographic and theoretical arguments came in 1976 when he was asked to contribute to a series of popular-science compilations titled *Prometheus* (*Прометей*). The books were published by *Young Guard* (*Молодая гвардия*), a publishing house that also published the eponymous nationalist journal (Gumileva, 1993: 6).

Gumilev was asked to contribute a rather long paper on the history of the Khazar Khaganate and its contact with other political entities in the area. The resulting text was a culmination of his views on Khazar history. In many aspects, it went further than Artamonov's forced revision as well as Gumilev's previous work on the topic – as in this case, he used Khazar history to illustrate important aspects of his complex theory of ethnogenesis.



Gumilev's zigzags of the history

Gumilev began his text with a description of the general geography of the Eurasian continent, noting its diversity and changeability. In his opinion, geography had a significant impact on the genesis and formation of almost all the ethnic groups (referred to as *ethnos*)³ in Eurasia, including the Khazars.

According to Gumilev, the Khazar people arrived in the flooded Volga Delta in the 3rd century. They found sufficient natural resources in the area, and the delta also served as natural protection against the dangerous nomads that lived in the surrounding steppes (Gumilev, 1993: 378). Gumilev describes this time in idyllic terms and remarks upon the balance between the Khazar ethnos and its environment. Using Gumilev's terminology, the Khazars (descendants of previous ancient inhabitants of the western part of central Eurasia) were in the homeostasis phase, one of the last stages of ethnogenesis (Gumilev, 1993: 380).

The situation changed dramatically in the late 6th century with a conflict between the Khazars and the Göktürks (*tīūrkiūty* in Gumilev's terminology), who used the Khazar territory as a base for their military incursions and mingled with the local inhabitants (Gumilev, 1993: 384).

Passionarity (пассионарность) is a central concept within Gumilev's theory of ethnogenesis. It refers to the increased capacity of an individual to take action. Those who are endowed with this special energy (*passionaries*) can exert a strong influence over other people and drive radical social changes (Gumilev, 2001: 303). In the case of the Khazars, it was their long-term contact with the Turks that resulted in a new wave of passionarity. Their influence strengthened in the early 7th century, as the Turkic Khaganate dissolved into several separate territories. From the mid-7th century, the Khazar Khaganate was ruled by Turkic khans and the biracial descendants of the two ethnoses became known as Khazars.

Gumilev presented the contact between the Khazars and the Göktürks in overwhelmingly positive terms and credited the nomadic Göktürks for the subsequent political and cultural progress of the Khazars. He described the relationship between the two ethnoses as symbiotic, and this symbiosis lasted over a hundred years. In Gumilev's classification, both the Khazars and the Göktürks belonged to the same Eurasian superethnos, which allowed the Khazars to spread their influence quickly without the need for destructive military campaigns (Gumilev, 1993: 388).

Each of the above-mentioned ethnoses in Eurasia (including the Slavic ethnos) occupied its own ecological niche. Any conflict within this environment could have been caused only by a change in the level of passionarity. Gumilev maintains that such a change occurred in the 9th century and was caused by the activities of the Jewish community within the Khazar Khaganate. In Gumilev's system, the Jewish people are a superethnos composed of individual groups that inhabit the entire Eurasia, from Germany to Iran.

³ In Gumilev's terminology, *ethnos* refers to a population group with specific behavioural stereotypes, which arise primarily as a reaction to biological and geographical factors. However, the use of this term is not entirely consistent throughout Gumilev's works (Gumilev, 2001: 201-260).



Despite obvious external differences, such as culture and ideology, these groups maintain certain internal unity and characteristic features. Of these, Gumilev highlighted the lack of their own territory, centralised government and a permanent army (Gumilev, 1993: 390).

According to Gumilev, two branches of the Jewish superethnos shaped the Khazar Khaganate: the Persian (Mazdakite) Jews and the Byzantine Jews. The former group arrived in Khazar territory during the 5th century. These people allegedly forwent many of the teachings of the Talmud and co-existed peacefully with the Khazars for the next 200 years (Gumilev, 1993: 402). In the first half of the 8th century, the Persian Jews joined the Khazars in their fight against the Arabic Caliphate. Supposedly, the success of the Khazar offensive was, to no small degree, due to the Jewish leader Bulan, who later led the conversion of his people back to Jewish traditions and abandoned Mazdakism, which was originally practiced by this group. Importantly, Bulan was a proponent of Karaite Judaism, rather than Rabbinic Judaism (Gumilev, 1993: 403).

After establishing this strict division of the Jewish peoples in Khazaria, Gumilev presented each group as having different characteristics. According to Gumilev, the Persian Jews did not pose any threat to the indigenous Khazar population. This Jewish community subsisted on the natural resources that were available to them, primarily on herding, and their interests were identical to the interests of the Khazars (Gumilev, 1993: 402). However, the arrival of Byzantine Jews in the 8th century caused serious problems. Gumilev was doubtful about the reasons for their emigration and challenged the information that the Jews left the Byzantine Empire due to the onset of forced Christianisation. He was in no doubt about the circumstances of their arrival (Gumilev, 1993: 404).

According to Gumilev In the mid-8th century, these Jewish traders (or Radhanites as they were called by Gumilev), gained control of the trade routes between China and Europe, while a new northern route opened from Iran to the River Kama (Gumilev, 1993: 407). The Khazar Khaganate was at the crossroads of these two routes and soon became an important center for Jewish traders (Gumilev, 1993: 409). These traders subsequently settled in all the major towns of the Khazar Khaganate and eventually took over diplomatic and economic control. The naive assumptions of the local Göktürk khans made it easy for them to become part of the ruling elite (Gumilev, 1993: 409).

Based on the above thesis, Gumilev presents the most crucial idea of his study and another term of his ethnogenesis theory: the concept of the Jewish-Khazar chimera, which laid the groundwork for the descriptions of the many negative consequences of Jewish activities in Khazaria.

In Gumilev's terminology, a chimera (химера) is a form of contact between two ethnic groups, which results in a parasitic relationship between the indigenous and the newly arrived ethnos. In the case of the Khazar Khaganate, the Byzantine Jews played the role of the parasitic ethnos: they planned a coup, distanced themselves from the Khazar people, and resorted to violence to seize power in the Khaganate. These events disrupted the further development of the Khazar ethnos. This is what Gumilev's *zigzag* – a term he used in the title of his study – refers to: a disruption of the natural course of history (Gumilev, 1993: 413).



However, Gumilev's revised version of the Khazar history went even further. Building on his concept of an ethnic chimera, he devoted the second part of his text to an analysis of the relationship of the chimera with the surrounding states. He challenged the existing written sources; in particular, he attempted to reinterpret the information contained in Nestor's *Tale of Bygone Years*. He proposed that the author of the chronicle purposely adapted the content to suit the political situation of his time and misrepresented many key historical events (Gumilev, 1993: 439).

In this context, Gumilev paid particular attention to the arrival of the Varangians in Kievan Rus', an event which he described in remarkably negative terms. In his opinion, the actions of the new Varangian rulers in the late 9th century were the direct cause of a prolonged war with the Khazar Khaganate. To fill in this time gap, Gumilev used several Arabic sources from that time. In his interpretation of this material, he arrived at another controversial argument (Gumilev, 1993: 441). Gumilev describes the late 9th and early 10th century as the peak of the Jewish-Khazar dominance in Eastern Europe. The local Slavic inhabitants were controlled by Varangian intruders, who in turn were forced to pay a regular tax to the Khazar Khaganate (Gumilev, 1993: 447). In Gumilev's opinion, the Varangian rulers brought political turmoil to the Kievan Rus' while failing entirely in all their military incursions (Gumilev, 1993: 457).

The situation changed only in the second half of the 10th century when Princess Olga and her son Svyatoslav appeared on the political scene and reestablished - according to Gumilev - the previous Slavic tradition interrupted by the Varangian invasion (Gumilev, 1993: 461). Another war between the Kievan Rus' and the Khazar Khaganate broke out soon after, probably in the late 950s, when Olga converted to Orthodox Christianity and established a close alliance with the Byzantine Empire. Svyatoslav followed in his mother's footsteps and conquered Atil in a victorious military campaign in 965. According to Gumilev, this was the end of the local ruling elite and the Jewish-Khazar chimera was obliterated from Eurasia (Gumilev, 1993: 469).

Publication of Gumilev's findings

Gumilev's highly controversial and revisionist study brought him remarkably close to the then-current interests of Russian nationalists. While his interpretation of the Khazar history was, on the surface, entirely dissociated from modern politics, it clearly reflected the anti-Semitic mood that escalated during the 1970s. Norman theory, which was another hotly debated topic at the time and was criticized by many nationalists, was also involved (Bassin, 2016: 196).

Gumilev's study sided with nationalists and provided them with a number of new arguments. In short, Gumilev completed his assignment with care. The text he submitted to the *Young Guard* (*Молодая гвардия*) was innovative and grounded in his own research, which combined a number of disciplines. Nevertheless, it was never published in the series as intended. Although Gumilev completed the text in 1976, the production process dragged on until 1979 when it was officially rejected, although Gumilev received the promised payment (Belajkov, 2012: 573). Eventually, a shortened version of the study became part of his monograph *Ancient Russia and the Great Steppe* (*Древняя Русь и великая степь*) published in 1989. The original version of the *Zigzags of history* (*Зигзаг*



истории) was first published only posthumously as a part of a compilation titled *Ethnosphere: the history of people and the history of nature* (Этносфера: история людей и история природы) (1993). Furthermore, both *Young Guard* (Молодая гвардия) and another nationalist journal, *Our contemporary* (Наш современник), refused to publish other articles by Gumilev that focused on the Khazars during the 1970s (Bassin, 2016: 188).

Mark Bassin concludes that Gumilev's contributions were rejected due to their anti-Semitic nature, which was found to be too radical (Bassin, 2016: 188). His controversial revision of Khazar history has been sharply criticized by Viktor Shnirelman (Shnirelman, 2012a: 515) and other contemporary researchers (Rossman, 2002: 34). Although some experts claim that Gumilev's alleged anti-Semitism is simply a misinterpretation of his ideas, the negative depictions of Jews in his works are difficult to miss (Saraev, 2012: 933). However, Bassin's argument is somewhat paradoxical since Gumilev's negative portrayal of Jews perfectly matches one of the main ideas that unified the individual nationalist factions in Russia. As noted by Vladimir Shlapentokh in the early 1990s:

"For many Russophiles, particularly 'patriots', hatred of the Jews has become the most important element of their credo, a sort of shibboleth that allows them to recognize one another. This hatred is, for them, a most significant social phenomenon in which they are deeply involved at an emotional level, and which could probably push them to do things against their personal interests. During the 1970s Jews, their activities, and their innumerable abject flaws were by all accounts the main topic of private communication among these Russophiles, who also tried to raise the Jewish issue at all public gatherings, either directly or indirectly" (Shlapentokh, 1990: 221).

An additional description of Gumilev's relationship with the Russian nationalists was formulated by Brudny. However, Brudny sees Gumilev as being associated with the nationalists mainly since the 1980s and, accordingly, focuses on Gumilev's writings on other topics, which were published to mark the 600th anniversary of the Battle of Kulikovo (Brudny, 1998: 186). Nevertheless, Brudny's detailed analysis of Soviet inclusive politics is particularly useful for shedding light on Gumilev's position in the 1970s. At the time Gumilev finished his study, the attitude of the Soviet regime to the activities of the Russian nationalists underwent a major change (Brudny, 1998: 114). The growing nationalist opposition to Brezhnev's policies was met with a sharp rebuke from the regime and the nationalists received several clear warnings during the second half of the 1970s. *Our contemporary* (Наш современник) and several other nationalistic periodicals were particularly criticized for their publications.

The push against the Russian nationalists was escalated by Yuri Andropov, who succeeded Brezhnev in November 1982 and remained in the office of the General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party until his death in February 1984. In April 1981, he initiated the persecution of Sergei Semanov, a prominent member of the Russian club; Gumilev was personally acquainted with him (Beljakov, 2012: 582). However, Andropov's ambitious plans were never fulfilled, and the repression of Russian nationalists only deepened their dissatisfaction with official Soviet politics (Brudny, 1998:



126). In other words, the rejection of Gumilev's study in 1976 and the subsequent systematic obstruction of his other papers were closely related not only to the antisemitic narrative of his texts but also to the latest developments in the complicated, obscure, and often counterproductive efforts of the USSR to control Russian nationalist groups at the time when Gumilev focused his research on Khazaria.

Conclusion

In the context of Soviet academia, the history of Khazar Khaganate always represented a highly contradictory topic. During the 20th century, academic view on the subject was repeatedly altered by the official regime, which led to significant discourse transformation – in the forefront of these shifts stood primarily two soviet historians: M. I. Artamonov and L. N. Gumilev.

Already in the 1930s, Artamonov published several crucial texts focused on Khazaria and eventually became the leading Soviet expert on the topic. Although in the first half of the 1950s, Artamonov was accused of overstating the historical significance of the Khazaria, and his earlier works were discredited entirely by the official Soviet academia. Under regime pressure, the historian carried out a rigorous revision of his earlier studies and in 1962 published a seminal monograph entitled *History of the Khazars (История Хазар)*. However, despite the forced revision, his work on the topic has created solid ground for further research and strengthened academic interest in the topic.

In the 1960s Artamonov's works were followed and further developed mainly by Leningrad's historian L. N. Gumilev. In the circumstances of the new Bolshevik regime, Gumilev was forced to interrupt his university studies at Leningrad University several times and eventually spent several years in Soviet gulags and labor camps. Even though his academic career practically began only in the late 1950s, in the following years, Gumilev elaborated a vast body of work overarched by the complex theoretical concept of ethnogenesis backed by his field research initially explicitly related to the history of Khazaria. Gumilev's interdisciplinary approach to the issue brought many new, although controversial, conclusions.

Although Gumilev's most controversial study focused on the history of Khazaria was officially published only posthumously in 1993, the resonance of his overall radical revisionist approach to the topic significantly overshadowed the previous findings of Artamonov. At the same time, Gumilev's questionable assessment of the influence of Judaism on the overall development of Khazaria soon attracted significant attention from the newly emerged movement of Russian ethnic nationalists supported by post-Stalinist changes in the soviet academic and the overall soviet intellectual milieu. Although Gumilev never entirely endorsed the Russian nationalist movement, and his relationship with the movement representatives remained very ambivalent, his persona and work significantly influenced the overall direction of the movement. Besides his Khazar research in the 1960s and 1970s, it became apparent especially in the early 1980s when Gumilev shifted his academic focus to 13th and 14th century Russia: this time, the Russian nationalists reacted with an assault on his 'dangerous' Eurasianism concepts, which eventually led to significant internal disruption among individual representatives of the movement and further escalated in parallel with the collapse of the Soviet Union.



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