Khazar Studies locked between scarcity of Research Sources and Contemporary Policy Concerns.

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The Khazar Turks established an early medieval era state—the Khazar Khaganate—and is generally discussed as one of the longest surviving ‘empires’ in the history of Eurasian nomadic peoples. The majority of scholars consider the Khazar Khaganate as a continuation of the Western Turkic Khaganate tradition after its disintegration and final collapse circa 631-658 AD. In the available primary sources the linking event between two state chronologies is the rule of the offspring of the Ashina (Ansa) dynasty of the Western Turkic Khaganate in Khazaria. We should, however, notice that Vladimir Monorsky, the translator of the original Persian text into English, later confessed to having a hesitation due to the confusion about the term Khazar ruler (shad) and the origin of the Ashina dynasty. Nevertheless, besides the textual analysis, the scholars of Khazar studies collected a number of historical comparisons of khagan institutions.

1 ‘Khazar king or ruler’ is translated as khagan.
2 A map showing the territory of the Khazar realm, Khazaria, circa 850 AD is available here: Bibliotecapleyades.net. http://www.bibliotecapleyades.net/imagenes_sociopol/khazar03_01.jpg accessed 21 March 2013.
which allow us to understand the dynastic transfer from the Western Turkic Khaganate to the Khazars.\(^5\)

Disagreements exist about the date of the demise of the Turkic Khaganate. This debate originates in the discrepancy about the dating of two important milestones in the history of nomadic states in the region: (1) the end date of the Western Turkic Khaganate and (2) the starting date of independent rule by the Khazar Khagan. In my opinion the date could be more precisely set by those scholars who accept Khazar khagans as descendants of the Ashina dynasty. This has been discussed by Russian historian Mikhail Artamonov, who persuasively argued that the Ashina dynasty offspring could not get the title of Khazar khagan before the final defeat in Central Asia and the last khagan, presumably, Irbis Shegui-Khagan in 651 AD.\(^6\)

Thus the emergence of the Khazar state coincided with two significant events in the history of the Middle East and Eurasia—the fall of the Western Turkish Khaganate (552-651 AD) and the rise of Arab-Muslim Caliphate, which had started advancing northwards and the eastwards after the notable military defeat of the Persian Sassanid army at Nehavend in 642 AD. Arabs superseded the Persian Sassanid ‘superpower’ in the region and were even more ambitious, going beyond the borderlands of Persian empire. The Arab vis-a-vis China resulted in the battle of Talas in 751 AD, when the Chinese expansion was set back as the Islamic civilization expanded and started converting the peoples of Central Asia (the Turkic nomads and the Iranian sedentary population). The Arab struggle in the north with Khazaria was tense. Since the Arab advancement until the end of eighth century ferocious confrontations presumably brought to a stand by peace treaties made the enemies into ‘economic partners’; especially in a lucrative international trade on Silk Road routes. Stability and abundant incomes from the trade routes made the Khazar Khaganate a powerful state, keeping in check borderlands incursions from nomads incursions. Three major superpowers delimited between themselves the zones of


influences in Eurasia and the Middle East: the Muslim Caliphate, the Christian Byzantine emperor, and the king of Khazaria. At this time the latter professed the ancient Turkic religion of Tengri.

Missionaries armed sent by monotheistic Abrahamic doctrines from both Byzantium and Caliphate rulers inevitably worked to promote their beliefs and values amongst the indigenous population of Eurasian steppe lands. We have a report about famous Constantine the Philosopher’s mission in 861 AD, and at least evidence of two Muslim missions to the Khazars, both taking place under the caliphate of Al-Wasiq (842-847 AD), that is to say, a little bit earlier than emperor Constantine’s mission.

There were supposedly intensive religious debates in Khazaria between adherents of Christianity and Islam, triggering the creation of so called ‘religious choice legends’ about the Khazar’s eventual conversion to Judaism. Whatever was the reality of those disputes it was evident that the ruler in Khazaria had made the decision to adopt Judaism. He was influenced by the Jewish community and merchants living in Khazaria and most importantly by Khazar elite’s own political will to sustain themselves against the ideology of their Christian and Islamic counterparts, and to constitute a third conversion alternative. It was noticed that the growth of nomadic states and their domination over the sedentary population generated a demand to adopt one or another of the regional established universal religions. Why? Perhaps vernacular beliefs provided a divine mandate to conquer and rule, but could not serve for the needs of empire building, which embraced numerous ethnic groups, nomads and settler communities.

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9 Артамонов, *История Хазар.* p. 264.
Thus we might say that the emergence of the Khazar state established in mid-seventh century (600 AD) by people of an ethnic Turkic origin, and had adopted Judaism, contested the two neighbouring superpowers: the Muslim Caliphate and the Christian emperor of Byzantium. However, this was soon followed by the disintegration and disappearance of the Khazar state. And this left behind an enigma of the ‘Jewish Khazars’, their heritage and descendants. These are still debated issues within the context of Khazar history. Such ‘historical mysteries’ include speculations of later generations. And quite consequently the history of the Khazar state continued to be subject to clashing interests throughout history and international policy planning.

A few examples can demonstrate how closely related to contemporary challenges the history of the Khazars is, and how controversially it is interpreted by different groups of scholars and political actors. It is worthwhile starting from the Israeli scholarship perspective as they might be more interested in insightful research of the early adherents of Judaism from people of non-Jewish ethnic origins. However, on the other side, the fact of the adoption of Judaism by an ethnic Turkic people apparently generated a kind of contradiction with the dominating Rabbinic doctrine of Judaism that does not provide for the possibility of Jewish proselytism. That is why until recent times Jewish scholarship has only approached the issue of Khazar Judaism from the view point of theological debates with Christian and Moslem opponents and also the internal dogmatic contest with Karaite doctrine, which only accepts the authority of Tanakh (Biblical texts) and do not consider themselves bound by oral traditions and their written sources of Mishnah and Talmud.

The above mentioned tradition of Jewish scholarship starts with celebrated Jewish scholar of Middle Ages, born in Muslim Spain in 1075 AD just 100 years after the extinction of the Khazar Khaganate. Judah Halevi wrote his book Kitab al-Khazari in Arabic, in which he argues against religious opponents of Rabbinistic Judaism in the form of theological dispute arranged by a legendary Khazar khagan. The book was translated into Hebrew, and in 1905 AD
an English translation from Arabic version was published.\textsuperscript{11} This has influenced the views of Jewish scholarship of Khazar Judaism and the history of the Khazars. Only after the establishment of the Israeli state after the Second World War was there a gradual and growing interest in the history of the Khazar Turks. The first international Khazar colloquium hosted by the Ben Zvi Institute in Tel-Aviv, 1999 was an important milestone for Israeli scholars of Khazar studies. Haggai ben Shammai, one of organizers of the colloquium, in his opening remarks recognized that Khazar studies had not received much attention in Israel, and for a number of reasons Jewish scholarship was focused upon Yehuda Halevi’s book that was written soon after the end of Khazaria.\textsuperscript{12} Indeed in the following decades the Israeli authorities sponsored a number of initiatives in Khazar studies such as conferences, publications and development of web resources.

Curiously enough the above mentioned Karaite Jewish scholarship has been most enthusiastic in the promotion of Khazar studies. Karaite scholar and community leader Abraham Firkovich (1787-1874 AD) was an eminent collector of Jewish literature and the person who found and presented the so called complete edition of Khazar King Joseph’s letter to Khasdai ibn Shaprut, the Jewish \textit{vazir} of the Umayyad rulers in Muslim Spain. The letter is the lengthiest narration preserved as an primary source concerning the Khazars. In the historical turbulences of emerging anti-Semitism in Russia and Europe, Karaites turned to Khazar heritage to separate themselves from the other Jewish communities and justify their early coming to the land of ‘Russia’. According to Firkovich’s theory, the Khazars were not Rabbinic, but Karaite Jews and their ‘glory’ was an evidence of historical presence and magnificence of Karaite Judaism in Eurasia and Europe.\textsuperscript{13} Scholars of both Karaite and even of non-Jewish origin further developed the assumption of the Khazar roots of Jewish community in Eastern Europe into a comprehensive concept of non-Semite ancestry of Eastern European Jewry, particularly in Poland and Germany. That was also an argument to escape the tragedy of Holocaust under the

\textsuperscript{11} Judah and Hartwig Hirschfeld, \textit{Sefer Ha-Kuzari = Book of Kuzari} (New York: Pardes Pub. House, 1946). This is the reprint of the year 1905 publication.
\textsuperscript{12} Golden et al., \textit{The World of the Khazars : New Perspectives.}, p. 5.
Nazi occupation. Well known Jewish scholar Abraham Poliak has made the theory of non-Semite roots of European Jewry a central place in his post-war monograph published in Hebrew in Israel in 1948.  

Poliak’s book was not enthusiastically accepted in Israel, but it did well amongst Arab nationalists and their views about Palestinian historical rights on the land of Palestine. If one accepts that the majority of European Jews are not of Semite origin, but descendants of the Khazar Turks, the considerable part of the Israeli population should have no rights for the settlement in Palestine in spite of their arguments. And it is not surprising then, that these type of arguments are found on the internet as part of the ideological struggle. This topic continues attracting Muslim scholars nowadays.

On the other hand, the assumption of Khazar Turkish ancestry has got more popularity and acceptance in post 1945 European Jewry. The limits of this space do not allow me to present the key sources of such scholarship. However the best samples belong to widely known work by British Jewish author Arthur Koestler and the American writer and the scholar Kevin Brook. Curiously enough the development of DNA testing research brought about outcomes which might be interpreted in favour of the Eurasian (Khazar) roots of the East European Jews. E. Elhaik has come to the conclusion that the genome of European Jews is a tapestry of ancient populations including Judaized Khazars, Greco–Roman Jews, Mesopotamian Jews, and Judeans and their population structure was formed in the Caucasus and the banks of the Volga with roots

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14 Ibid., pp. 43-44.
stretching to Canaan and the banks of the Jordan. Unfortunately such research has not been completed by scholars, partly because of a lack of historical knowledge, or relevant linguistic and social science understanding. However the outcomes of their efforts require further research by the academics of Khazar studies and the history of Eastern European Jewry. The first responses to E. Elhaik’s publication have already come out, indeed from his colleague, a genetics expert.20

In the Republic of Turkey the interest in the Khazars was associated with particular political situations, for example, in the early twentieth century at the dawn of Turkish nationalism, and after the 1990s, when the breakdown of the Soviet Union gave a birth to shared ethnic aspirations of the Turkic nations of Central Asia and Azerbaijan. The uniqueness of the Azerbaijani situation was the traditional historiography in this Turkic country was used to oppose the overwhelming trend of neighboring Armenia scholarship which asserted the Armenian origins of the heritage of Caucasian Albania – the country and the state located on the territory of contemporary Azerbaijan since presumably the second century BC and continued in existence almost to the Arab conquest in mid seventh century AD. Arab advancement in the Caucasus faced Khazar Khaganate as a form of organised resistance. Local rulers were maneuvering between contesting powers. And concepts of national identity and historiography during the Soviet time and after independence in 1991 were about the sufficiency of Albanian statehood. However the Azerbaijani scholar Ziya Bunyadov postulated a view point of almost complete Khazar control over the Albanian lands through almost 150 years since the first clashes

20 Danielle Venton, "Highlight: Out of Khazaria--Evidence for "Jewish Genome" Lacking," ibid., pp. 75-76.
21 Rulers of the Caucasian Albanians–tribes of the Caucasian origin that inhabited the territory of contemporary Azerbaijan-adopted Christianity in fourth century. The language of Albanians has left actually no monuments except a few inscriptions still not sufficiently deciphered. The Arab conquest promoted the adoption of Islam and consequent enlargement of the significance of first Arabic, then Persian and Turkic languages. The remnants of the Christian population of Albania started getting assimilated mostly by Armenians, although a small community of Albanian descendants still survived in the north-west of Azerbaijan. Azerbaijani and Armenian national scholarships are contesting about the existence of Albanian identity and literature. While Armenian scholars assert the common origin and traditions for both Albanians and Armenians, Azerbaijani scholarship stands for the independent ethnicity and heritage.
with Arabs.\textsuperscript{22} This did not comply with either Soviet or post Soviet priorities of nation-state construction and history of Azerbaijan, and it contradicted the dominating approaches of Soviet Russian historiography of the Khazars.

Khazar history has been closely related with the history of Eastern Slavic statehood and more precisely the history of Kiev.\textsuperscript{23} Considerable academic literature exist concerning their interrelationship and in a wide range of the Khazar origins of Kiev\textsuperscript{23} to a denial of any role the Khazars could have played in the history of early Russian State. It is not possible to provide a survey of vast academic literature, which has started emerging in Russia since first publications of nineteenth century.\textsuperscript{24} There always used to be two trends in Russian studies of Khazar history, firstly, a purely academic one which aimed to collect and analyse written sources, and introduce the findings of archaeological excavations, and the politicized responses to a discourse of the Khazars’ role in the history. Among the works from the first group, the frequently cited monograph by Mikhail Artamonov should be mentioned as the founding work of contemporary Soviet Russian historiography of the Khazars. However his work was affected by the pressure of political leadership as well, which later was disclosed by his student and colleague in the second edition of his History of Khazars.\textsuperscript{25} The latest comprehensive research of the history of the Khazars in Russian scholarship belongs to A.P. Novoseltev, and his review of the past studies. But even at the time of its publication he could not reconcile all controversies of Russian historiography of the Khazars.\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{24} Part of Russian and international literature about the history of Khazars could be found here: А.А. Астайкин. Библиография по истории Хазарии (А.А. Astaykin, Bibliographya po istorii Khazarii) http://gumilevica.kulichki.net/Rest/rest0600.htm accessed 18 March 2013
\textsuperscript{25} М.И. Артамонов, История Хазар, Изд. 2. ed., Классика Эрмитажа (Санкт-Петербург: Государственный Эрмитаж (Россия) 2002)., p. 16.
\textsuperscript{26} А.П. Новосельцев, Хазарское Государство И Его Роль В Истории Восточной Европы И Кавказа (Москва: "Наука", 1990).
The second trend in Russian literature has got a fresh breath due to the growing nationalist aspirations in contemporary Russia, somewhat closely associated with Orthodox Church. It considers the relationship between ancient Russia and Khazaria as a struggle between Christianity and Judaism, good and evil.\textsuperscript{27} In general one can sum up that political groups, movements, or ethnic entities which have strived to challenge the Russian domination in the south and south-east of the Eurasian territory, used to declare their links with Khazars and emphasize the domination of Khazaria over the early Russian state. Some related concepts and views of Russian scholarship and political movements in Russia have been reviewed in a special article.\textsuperscript{28} A special niche in Russian historiography of Khazars is occupied by Russian historian L.N. Gumilev. While having been a contributor to the struggle against prejudices concerning nomadic people and states in the history of Eurasia, he has been limited, and influenced by circumstances and anti-Israel rhetoric of the Soviet political space. His view points to the history of the Khazar statehood and its role in the history Eurasia and are scattered in a considerable number of his publications, but most comprehensively were solidified in his book \textit{The Ancient Russia and the Great Steppe}. The role of Judaism and the Khazars', and the adoption of the Judaism by the Khazars were presented as a negative factor in the development of ‘nomadic statehood’ and the relationship of Khazaria with their neighbours.\textsuperscript{29}

The subject of political circumstances and the environment, in which the Khazar studies have always been developed and have ended up until now in the twenty-first century has produced a specialist field of study.\textsuperscript{30} The well respected expert of Khazar studies, Peter Golden shared a sobering reflection about specifics of Khazar studies with his readers: ‘\textit{Any presentation of the achievements of Khazar studies, I might add, is necessarily idiosyncratic, inevitably

\textsuperscript{29} Л.Н. Гумилев. Древняя Русь и Великая Степь (L.N. Gumilev. Drevnaya Rus i Velikaya Step). Москва, 1989.
\textsuperscript{30} Шнирельман В.А., Хазарский Миф: Идеология Политического Радикализма В России И Ее Истоки. (Москва: Мосты культуры-Гешарим, 2012).; Kizilov M., "The Khazar Kaganate and the Khazars in European Nationalist Ideologies and Scholarships."
reflecting personal interests, languages, political and cultural education etc."  

Responding to this well-known concern, the two Russian scholars, it was suggested that in the twenty-first century when totalitarian regimes fade away ‘Khazar Studies will be less subjected to ideological pressure of political currents.’  

Indeed what the historiography of Khazars lacked was the respectful and careful insight into their heritage without the interests of political contestation taking place. And this can only happen when the historiography puts value upon human needs and wants in the centre of the research project, as a democratic alternative to the interests of political elites and ideologies.

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