

## SOME RUSSIAN ORTHODOX REACTIONS TO EARLY ZIONISM: 1900–1914

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The emergence of political Zionism provoked considerable misgivings and even hostility in different sections of Russian society – let alone the hostility within the Jewish community itself.

Russian liberals considered Zionism as a reactionary political ideology which would divert Jews from the path of general human progress and social struggle. They evidently preferred Jewish assimilation, and thought that Zionism would not solve the Jewish problem, but rather it might reinforce antisemitism. The sharpest criticism came however from the revolutionary camp where Zionism was considered as a harmful reactionary, nationalist movement directed against socialism in the class struggle. Zionism was also considered by liberals as an utopia which due to certain obstacles was unfeasible.

The right wing of Russian society was also both sceptical and hostile towards Zionism. On the one hand, they did not believe in the actuality of Zionism either. A right-wing speaker Sergei Sharapov said that a Jewish state could not exist without the importation of Christian workers. The Jews would abandon Palestine very soon since they were not accustomed to physical labour due to their social degeneration.<sup>1</sup> An influential antisemitic writer Mikhail Menshikov said that Christian

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1. S. Sharapov, "Tchto sulit nam sionistskoje dvizhenije?" (What does the Zionist movement promise us?), in the collection *Mirnije retchi* ("Peaceful speeches"), Moscow, 1901.

states would not tolerate Jewish control over Jerusalem, and the Holy Places. Besides, claimed Menshikov, the racial qualities of the Jews had changed to such an extent since ancient times, that the physical conditions in Palestine would be fatal for the Jews.<sup>2</sup>

A right-wing newspaper *Svet* (Light) gave vent to the suspicion of Zionism as a political conspiracy. "*Kagal* (the conspiring Jewish community), warned its editorial, covering itself with the mantle of Zionism and increasing its tendency to isolationism with the uproar over the acquisition of Palestine in the undefined future is growing and growing." *Svet* rejected any Jewish claim to exist as a nation at all, and demanded the Jews' complete assimilation. Zionism was for *Svet* an anti-state activity which must be suppressed as quickly as possible.<sup>3</sup> Only a few liberals or conservatives professed their sympathy for Zionism out of principle, as well as from a humanitarian point of view.

Meanwhile Zionism awoke deep interest among committed Orthodox Christians whether laymen or clergy who viewed it as a new providential development, new evidence of the truthfulness of old prophecies, and new evidence of the genuineness of the Christian historical outlook. There is insufficient information about grassroots sentiment concerning Zionism but one can point to at least one mass eschatological movement in the Russian capital St. Petersburg, which perceived Zionism as a providential sign of the coming Doomsday. This movement was created by a retired Russian colonel Feodor Van-Beiningen who since 1903 had been preaching that 144,000 Jews would return to Palestine by 1912-1913. He based his calculation on an eternal source of eschatology — the Book of Daniel. According to Van-Beiningen these Jews would soon recognize Jesus as the Messiah, and would build their first Christian house of worship in 1925-1926. Following the Jewish exodus to Palestine, Islam would fade and would shortly lose its hold. The year 1933 according to Van-Beiningen would be the year of complete Jewish absolution and redemption as well as the year when all Jewish enemies would be liquidated. Surprisingly, he found broad support.<sup>4</sup>

It is evident from Van-Beiningen's approach that the significance of Zionism was for him its expected eschatology which was inseparably linked, in his view, to the collective conversion of the Jews at the end of days. The source of his belief was St. Paul's Epistle to the Romans. It seems that was the same approach of those Russian Orthodox theologians who were interested in Zionism. Their assessment of Zionism

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2. Quoted from I. Troitzky, *O sionisme v sovremennom iudejstve*, ("Zionism and modern Jewry"), St. Petersburg, 1903.

3. "Po povodu sjezda sionistov" (As regards the Zionist congress), quoted from *Izserkovnij vestnik* ("Church Herald"), no. 36 (1902).

\*4. M. Tcheltzov, "O kontchine mira v 1932-1933." (The end of the world in 1932-1933), *Izvestija po St. Peterburgskoj eparkhii* (St. Petersburg diocesan messenger), no. 3 (1909); I. Borkov, "O vremeni vtorogo prishestvija Khrista" (The time of the Last Judgement), *Pravoslavnij sobesednik* ("The Orthodox Interlocutor"), nos. 4, 5 (1912).

completely depended on how they perceived the possibility of eschatological Jewish redemption and the way they understood it. If they thought that Zionism created such a possibility they welcomed it, but if not, they rejected it. They were not very interested in individual Jewish conversions, nor did they attach to such conversions substantial theological significance. They were primarily looking forward to collective and eschatological Jewish redemption. Without this it is impossible to understand the reasons for positive or negative attitudes to Zionism and the different appraisals of it. The reaction of Russian Orthodox theology to Zionism is extremely interesting because it poses some fundamental questions concerning the theological interpretations of history, and the attitude to the Jewish problem. We will deal here only with the early reaction of Russian Orthodox theology to Zionism which is more spontaneous, and relatively free from political overtones. Our discussion will cover the period from approximately 1900 to 1914.

From a superficial standpoint, it would seem that the majority of Russian Orthodox theologians did not believe in the practicality of Zionism. For example, a professor at the Moscow theological seminary Nikolai Rozanov thought that even if Jews would get the right to settle in the Holy Land, they would hardly manage to subsist there for a lengthy period since Palestine was not more than a country of milk and honey.<sup>5</sup> Scepticism of the same kind was evidenced also by a prolific writer on Zionism, V. Protopopov from the Kazan ecclesiastical academy. He could not understand how the Jews would adapt themselves to Palestine.<sup>6</sup> A professor of the Moscow ecclesiastical academy, the reputed Hebraist Ivan Troitzky doubted the possibility of a Jewish state mainly because of the resistance to its creation coming from the Christian and Moslem world.<sup>7</sup> An Orthodox priest S. Rozov from the provincial Poltava theological seminary did not believe in such a possibility due to historiosophical considerations. "States," said Rozov, "are not created artificially... History is not able to point out even one case when a state was established according to a carefully conceived plan."<sup>8</sup> Rozov also suggested that the opposition of Jews themselves would be one of the most important obstacles to the creation of a Jewish state.

The same point was made by St. Petersburg priest Mikhail Tcheltzov who after the Bolshevik revolution was one of the major figures of Church resistance being executed in 1930. Tcheltzov said in 1909 that Zionism is very limited because of Jewish resistance to it. It was premature to talk about the realization of Zionism. This thesis was largely developed by E. Poljansky of the Kazan ecclesiastical academy

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\*5. N. Rozanov, *Budushchnost jevrejskogo naroda* (The future of the Jewish nation), Moscow, 1900.

6. V. Protopopov, "V poiskakh zemli obetovannoj" (In search of the Promised Land), *Pravoslavnij sobesednik*, nos. 1, 2 (1908); "9 mezhdunarodnij kongress sionistov," *ibid.*, no. 5 (1910); "10 mezhdunarodnij kongress sionistov," *ibid.*, no. 9 (1912); "11 mezhdunarodnij kongress sionistov," *ibid.*, no. 3 (1914).

7. I. Troitzky, *op. cit.*; see fn. 2.

\*8. S. Rozov, "Sionizm v jego proshlom i nastojashchem" (Zionism in its past and present), *Poltavskije eparkhialnije vedomosti* ("Poltava diocesan herald"), nos. 15-17 (1903).

who predicted that even if the Jewish state could be created it would soon be destroyed by an internal struggle between socialist and Orthodox Jews.<sup>9</sup> He predicted that eventually Orthodox Jews would win but that would not stop the contest. He extrapolated this view from Jewish history. According to Poljansky, the Jews were not capable of maintaining independent political life. All these misgivings which were merely self-defensive, could not conceal the real challenge of Zionism for Russian Orthodox theology. Even the most sceptical writers became involved in serious discussions about the theological significance of Zionism.

The common point of their interest was the new and surprising phenomenon of secular Zionism which presented a theological challenge. It is no surprise that they were divided in their attitude to it, though the majority recognized the theological meaning of Zionism. Some preferred secular Zionism to religious. From their point of view, it was a popular movement which would eventually leave Rabbinical control. But others who accepted the idea of the re-establishment of the Jewish state in principle did not believe that secular Zionism could have direct theological implications. Nevertheless, some of them considered secular Zionism as a necessary stage for the later evolution towards religious Zionism which they perceived as spiritually more fruitful. Paradoxically, they even suggested that the development of secular Zionism would lead to the emergence of Jewish Orthodox Zionism. From their point of view it could eventually bring about the global eschatological conversion of the new Jewish state to Christianity. Thus the realization of the total (and not individual) conversion of Israel as nation was the main theological criterion in their assessment of Zionism. This is the reason why they preferred Jewish Orthodox Zionism since they thought that conversion was easier from a state of messianic belief than from one of disbelief. Russian-Orthodox thinking on Zionism had certainly not developed independently since it had been influenced primarily by Protestant theological attitudes to Zionism.

The preference for secular Zionism is well reflected in the very influential weekly "Church Herald" published by the St. Petersburg ecclesiastical academy. One of its editorials took a positive stand on Zionism.<sup>10</sup>

"It would be strange," the editorial stated, "if the nation which no one doubts is one of the most remarkable in history, the nation which has had an extraordinary impact on all of humanity and has always considered itself as the Chosen People would ever be satisfied by the present situation. In spite of all of the vicissitudes in its historical existence, in spite of the humiliations which it has suffered from other nations, it never stopped looking at itself as the Chosen People dedicated to lofty historical objectives. That is why the dream never faded, that the day would come when the dry bones of the nation dispersed throughout the world would come together again in a single whole organism which would demand a separate state, a separate territory where it could revive its historical and national life. And now the time may have come to realize this dream which found remarkable expression in the movement which calls itself Zionism."

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9. E. Poljansky, "Emigratzija jevreev v Palestinu i vozmozhnije posledstvija jee" (Jewish emigration to Palestine and its possible consequences), *Pravoslavnij sobesednik*, nos. 9, 11 (1911).

10. "Sionism v jego sushchnosti i stremlenijakh," (Zionism: its essence and aspirations), *Tzerkovnij vestnik*, nos. 37, 39 (1902).

The "Church Herald" did not explicitly distinguish between religious and secular Zionism but rather between the popular Zionism of oppressed Jews who according to its editorial welcomed Zionism with "great joy," and the Rabbinate. The editorial sympathized with the first category, while attacking the Rabbinate for its resistance to Zionism, equating it with the ancient Pharisees. The editorial also claimed that the Rabbinate feared the consequences of a new Exodus which could jeopardize their exclusive control over the Jewish people. The editorial concludes:

"The nation chosen for a great historical mission, the dissemination of the true faith, which to a large extent has already been accomplished by preparing the Gentiles to accept Christianity, could not quit the historical scene for good even after the great and terrible crime committed on Golgotha... Even from the highest providential point of view, what might be loftier than the sight of a nation arisen from many centuries of somnolence, shaking off the burden of slavery – political or moral – and regaining freedom on its own soil? It is not a unique sight in history when Israel, this nation of God, will sense again its own historical objective after Diaspora and captivity by aliens? And being inspired by this idea will sense itself as a nation united from all corners of the earth, and returning to the place which belongs to it according to the eternal Covenant?"

The editorial did not conceal that it saw the achievement of Zionism as the providential collective Jewish path to Christianity.

Professor Ivan Troitzky of the same academy held this attitude as well towards Zionism. The possibility that he was the author of this editorial should not be ruled out. He pointed out the positive meaning of secular Zionism. According to him secular political Zionism would awaken Jewish national identity. "Thanks to Zionism," stated Troitzky, "the Jewish nation dispersed throughout the world begins once again to consider itself as an united body – and not only as a national and religious body but also as a political one."<sup>11</sup> The same approach to Zionism can be found in a lecture delivered in Poltava by the above mentioned priest S. Rozov. He justified his interest in secular Zionism in the following manner: "Those who not only in words but also in deeds accept Zion as their spiritual homeland cannot avoid having interest in it." In comparison, other writers complained that the real theological significance of Zionism is undermined by the secular domination of the movement.

Professor Nikolai Rozanov, mentioned heretofore, complained that Zionism is not a religious trend. As an example, he refers to Herzl who said that even thinking about any religious objectives for Israel is sheer utopia. Rozanov as well as the "Church Herald" analysed this situation from the view-point of possible mass Jewish conversion. In his opinion, committed religious Jews are more amenable to conversion than secular Jews like Herzl. In addition, Rozanov revealed a considerable Protestant influence, in rejecting the traditional Christian exegesis of the Old Testament whereby all gloomy prophecies concerning Israel were attributed to Israel as a nation, and all favourable prophecies to Israel as the new Christian Church. That

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11. I. Troitzky, *op. cit.*; see fn. 2.

is why Rozanov literally accepted a prophecy concerning the eventual restoration of the Jewish state with Jerusalem as its capital. But he argued nevertheless that such a state would be militantly anti-Christian. According to Rozanov God would punish it by sending warlike hordes who, however, would be unable to subdue it.

But the most important theologian who had negative feelings towards secular Zionism was a priest from Kiev, Alexander Glagolev, who was also a professor at the local ecclesiastical academy. Being an outstanding Hebraist, Glagolev along with the previously mentioned Professor Troitzky, were invited later on to the Beilis trial as witnesses for the defense rejecting the Blood Libel. By the way, Glagolev fell victim to the anti-religious terror in the U.S.S.R. He was arrested in 1937 being the last Orthodox priest in Kiev, and shortly afterwards died in prison.

For ten years, Glagolev was recognized as a renowned authority on Zionism in the Russian Orthodox Church. His first article on the subject was published in 1905.<sup>12</sup> Glagolev was very eager to find religious elements in Zionism though he complained that they were very weak. He was even more distressed by the absence of messianic ideas in early Zionism. He regretted the deep religious indifference of Zionist leaders. Strange as it seems, Glagolev sided with Rabbis and other conservative Jewish elements in their polemics with secularists. He criticized secular Jews for their attacks on religious Jews as reactionaries. Nevertheless, Glagolev positively assessed the trend to Jewish national identity as embodied in Zionism. It reminded him of ancient Jewish national-religious movements.

Glagolev tried to find at least something worth supporting in secular Zionism. Consequently, he preferred cultural-spiritual Zionism though he did not refer to Ahad Ha'am by name. He considered the objective of this Zionist trend to be the "spiritual regeneration of ancient treasures of the ancient Hebrew culture, which was partially perverted or simply frozen." Glagolev discerned in Zionism two elements: organisational and spiritual. Stating that organizational Zionism aroused suspicion among Christians, he noticed that already the Basle program had insisted on all political forms of Zionism conforming to the laws of each country. "But what concerns cultural, and educational Zionist activity," stated Glagolev, "certainly can find only sympathy among benevolent Christians as individuals as well as in Christian states."

Glagolev viewed Zionism as a constructive Jewish approach which liberates Jews from their intolerance and exclusivity. That is why he is also quite critical of religious Jews who seek purification out of fanaticism. Such fanaticism can be ameliorated by cultural-spiritual Zionism. But his basic attitude is critical of secular

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12. A. Glagolev, "Sionistskoje dvizenije v sovremennom jevreistve i otnoshenije etogo dvizenija k vsemirno-istoritcheskoj zadatke biblijskogo Izrailja" (The Zionist movement in modern Jewry and its attitude to the world-historical objective of biblical Israel), *Trudi Kievskoj dukhovnoj akademii* ("Proceedings of the Kiev ecclesiastical academy"), (no. 4-1905).

Zionism for its religious indifference, for its disregard of what he called "the Zionism of men of prayer." Only religion and worship according to Glagolev provide "a strong yearning among Jews for Zion, awakening their consciousness to their world-historical mission." A year later commenting on the Zionist congress, Glagolev was extremely critical of the Territorialists, and especially to those who favoured a temporary shelter in Uganda:

"Under the banner of Zionism," commented Glagolev, "two entirely incompatible outlooks had united: one, idealistic with a religious and romantic gravitation to Palestine, holding a belief in the universal Jewish mission and a materialistic one which completely ignored psychologically imponderable factors and inclined to act only by material-cultural means... A sheer positivism alien to all idealism replaced the former enchanting dreams and hopes of Zionism."<sup>13</sup>

The sharpest attack against secular Zionism was made by Evgenij Akvilonov a 'chief priest' (*protopresviter*) of the military chaplaincy who sided with the Black-Hundreds movement (right-wing antisemites). The Holy Land must not be given to modern day Jews, Akvilonov argued.<sup>14</sup> The shaky Zionist utopia is not a reason for Christians to give up the Holy Land. Akvilonov speaks about what he referred to as "the genuine Zionism" without specifying what he meant. He stated that modern Zionism was not a contributor to this future Zionism. Whether it was Jewish religious Zionism or some kind of a new messianic Zionism is not clear from this writing.

As has been stated previously, the early attitude of Russian Orthodox theologians to Zionism was more or less theoretically free from political considerations. Zionism was not yet a political power. It was only a potential force which had to be discussed theoretically. Later when Zionism became a reality, non-theological elements were also introduced into the discussion. They can be seen in comments about Zionism just prior to the Bolshevik revolution. Thus E. Poljansky does not see any difference between religious and secular Zionism. Some hints were also made that Zionism is likely to be connected with the Freemasons and therefore might be dangerous. These trends had fully developed only after the Bolshevik revolution since many Russian Christians could not help regarding the new global constellation as a result of the World Jewish Conspiracy, with Zionism allegedly playing a significant role. Another reason for the disillusionment in Zionism was the lack of any evidence of a mass Christian movement in Palestine. Therefore, from this point of view, Zionism's theological significance had no further relevance for them. That is the reason why only a discussion of early Zionism presents a pure case study of the theological interpretation of Zionism in the Russian Orthodox Church.

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13. A. Glagolev, "7 v semirnij sionistakij kongress" (Seventh World Zionist Congress), *ibid.*, (no. 2-1906).

14. E. Akvilonov, "O sionisme" (About Zionism), *Khristianskoje tchtenije* ("Christian Reader"), 1903.

\* The asterisked sources may not be available in the West.