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Some Observations on R. G. Skrynnikov's Views Concerning the Kurbskii-Groznyi Apocrypha

Professor Ruslan Skrynnikov has now provided readers of *Slavic Review* with a brief summary of his views concerning the relationship of the first letter to Ivan IV, attributed to Prince A. M. Kurbskii, and the writings of the Ukrainian monk Isaiah.¹ Since his article seems to have been long in press, it does not mention Skrynnikov's own rather more extensive (although in places identical verbatim) article in a recent number of *Russkaia literatura*,² nor does it take account of certain other recent contributions to the discussion of the Kurbskii-Groznyi apocrypha.³ Moreover, Professor Skrynnikov makes several statements that might lead those unfamiliar with the matter to premature and, in my view, erroneous conclusions.

No one has been more assiduous in the study of the Isaiah-Kurbskii relationship than Professor Skrynnikov. But even his detailed study of Isaiah's biography and writings does not yet, I feel, permit him to imply that the matter has been resolved.⁴ On the contrary, contributions devoted to the problems of the Kurbskii-Groznyi tradition continue to appear, and more will doubtless be stimulated by the forthcoming publication of a new edition of the correspondence by Iakov Lur'e and Iurii Rykov. Two recent items are particularly noteworthy: the discovery by M. V. Kukushkina of a new copy of the "Tale"—commonly attributed to Katyrev-Rostovskii—in which Semen Shakhovskoi is named as author;⁵ and the publication of a seventeenth-century *letopisets* containing significant textual parallels to Kurbskii's first letter.⁶ Both of these discoveries tend

1. R. G. Skrynnikov, "On the Authenticity of the Kurbskii-Groznyi Correspondence: A Summary of the Discussion," *Slavic Review*, 37, no. 1 (March 1978): 107–15.

2. R. G. Skrynnikov, "K voprosu o proiskhozhdenii skhodnykh mest v Pervom poslanii Kurbskogo tsariu Ivanu IV i sochineniakh Isaii," *Russkaia literatura*, 1977, no. 3, pp. 65–76.

3. In addition to the articles cited below, see, for example, articles by G. Edward Orchard, Daniel C. Waugh, Inge Auerbach, Horace G. Lunt, and Edward L. Keenan, under the rubric "The Kurbskii Controversy," in Don Karl Rowney and G. Edward Orchard, eds., *Russian and Slavic History* (Columbus, Ohio: Slavica, 1977), pp. 209–59; and Edward L. Keenan, "Reply" in *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas*, 22, no. 4 (1975): 593–617. Among the more serious reviews or review articles, see those by D. Freydank in *Zeitschrift für Slavistik*, 21, no. 3 (1976): 415–22; Zbigniew Wójcik, "Wokół epoki Iwana Groźnego," *Kwartalnik Historyczny*, 1975, no. 2, pp. 374–403; and Zbigniew Wójcik, "Edwarda Keenana proba rewizji dziejów Rosji szesnastowiecznej," *Slavia Orientalis*, vol. 24 (1975), pp. 335–41.

4. Skrynnikov, "On the Authenticity of the Kurbskii-Groznyi Correspondence," p. 107.

5. M. V. Kukushkina, "Semen Shakhovskoi—avtor Povesti o Smute," *Pamiatniki kul'tury: Novye otkrytiia 1974* (Moscow, 1975), pp. 74–78.

6. V. I. Buganov and V. I. Koretskii, eds., "Neizvestnyi moskovskii letopisets XVII veka iz Muzeinogo sobraniia GBL," *Zapiski Otdela rukopisei*, vol. 32 (Moscow, 1971), pp. 127–67.

to support the arguments advanced in my book, as has been noted in print by the translator of Skrynnikov's article in *Slavic Review*, Professor Orchard, with regard to the first item,⁷ and by myself in the latter case.

Moreover, I find it impossible to agree with Professor Skrynnikov's statement that "a number of works of Ivan IV and Kurbskii have been preserved to the present in copies indisputably compiled in the sixteenth century, and the controversy as to whether the persons in question were the writers goes by default."⁸ The first half of this sentence is imprecise; the second is a *non sequitur*. It is true that several compositions *attributed* to Ivan and Kurbskii seem to have survived in late sixteenth-century copies ("indisputably" might be a bit strong); what remains at issue, however, is not the date of such copies, but the attributions of the works, which, as I indicated briefly in *Apocrypha*, are far from convincing. And in any case, the relationship of these works to the correspondence is ambiguous.

Skrynnikov's statement about recent discussions concerning my study—"The latest publications devoted to Keenan's discovery, namely, the articles by N. Andreev (Cambridge), J. Fennell (Oxford), A. A. Zimin (Moscow), and Ia. S. Lur'e (Leningrad), have confirmed that the debate concerning the spuriousness of the Kurbskii-Groznyi correspondence has been exhausted, and that now the discussion is focused upon the narrower question of the relationship between the texts of Kurbskii and Isaiah"—is even more misleading, and rather illogical.⁹ In the first place, Professor Andreev's review was not late but early, and although it was negative with regard to my findings, it was not based upon independent study of the materials in question. Professor Fennell's article,¹⁰ to be discussed below, comes to conclusions which Skrynnikov himself does not accept. The articles by Lur'e and Zimin, while based upon meticulous study of the manuscript tradition, deal primarily with the relationships among recensions of Kurbskii's and Ivan's first letters, and do not claim that "the debate . . . has been exhausted." Moreover, they present findings that themselves are not beyond dispute. In particular, as Professor Skrynnikov himself has noted in his recent article, Lur'e's and Zimin's argumentation concerning the Isaiah-Kurbskii relationship is unconvincing.¹¹

But it is the last clause of Skrynnikov's statement that is the real baffler: If the question of authorship is solved, how is it that the discussion must now focus on the "narrow question" of the Kurbskii-Isaiah relationship? This relationship, after all, has become one of the central issues in the continuing debate concerning the origin of Kurbskii's first letter to the tsar, and hence of the correspondence as a whole.

It is to the matter of Isaiah and Kurbskii that Skrynnikov devotes the bulk of his article, which deals primarily with Professor Fennell's views. Readers may

7. G. Edward Orchard, "Chronicle in Search of an Author: The Seventeenth-Century Book of Annals," *Russian Review*, 37, no. 2 (April 1978): 197-203.

8. Skrynnikov, "On the Authenticity of the Kurbskii-Groznyi Correspondence," p. 107.

9. *Ibid.*, pp. 107-8.

10. J. Fennell, review of R. G. Skrynnikov's *Perepiska Groznogo i Kurbskogo*, in *Russia Mediaevalis* (Munich), 2 (1975): 188-98.

11. Skrynnikov, "K voprosu o proiskhozhdenii skhodnykh mest." With regard specifically to Mr. Lur'e's views, I have prepared a new study of all versions of Ivan's first letter, which comes to quite different conclusions. I shall be happy to provide a summary of my findings to colleagues who request it.

have found this argument somewhat confusing; perhaps I can summarize its basic elements: in *Apocrypha*, I attempted to show that the “Kurbskii” text borrowed from Isaiah’s text, and that, since the latter was apparently written in prison in 1566, these facts supported my other substantial doubts about the traditional attributions of Kurbskii’s first letter. In his book, Skrynnikov agreed with my analysis of the textual relationship (that is, that “Kurbskii” borrowed from Isaiah), but he claimed that Isaiah’s text was written before 1564 and used by Kurbskii in exile. In his review of Skrynnikov, Fennell concluded that Isaiah’s text was written around 1566, but that Skrynnikov and I were wrong about the textual relationship, and that Isaiah in fact used Kurbskii’s first letter. In his review article, Skrynnikov restates his previous argument in somewhat greater detail; Lur’e and Zimin, with slight variations, share Fennell’s view.

I have only quibbling differences with Skrynnikov’s textual argument, which, as I have stated, supports my own; indeed, I am always happy to have someone at my side when facing critics as formidable as Professor Fennell and Messrs. Zimin and Lur’e. Nor does Skrynnikov’s redating of the Isaiah text change my position, although his argument here is less convincing. I do, however, find utterly speculative and unconvincing his reconstruction of the steps by which Isaiah’s *Complaint* supposedly found its way into the hands of Kurbskii, and I simply cannot agree that “such a hypothesis fits in well with the whole chain of established facts.”¹²

But whatever the date of Isaiah’s *Complaint*, readers of the *Slavic Review* should know that it is not the only text to reveal striking textual similarities to Kurbskii’s first letter to Ivan IV. As I attempted to demonstrate first in *Apocrypha*, and later (after the appearance of the *letopisets* mentioned above) in an article which Professor Skrynnikov does not mention,¹³ two indisputably (yes!) seventeenth-century texts are linked by shared text to the letter, and two compositions of Semen Shakhovskoi bear striking stylistic similarities to it. Moreover, these patches of shared text abut: where similarity with one leaves off, similarity with another begins. Since Isaiah’s text is carefully worked into this mosaic, whether Isaiah wrote in 1562 or 1566 is of little moment; the whole can be no older than the youngest fragment, that is, circa 1625, give or take perhaps five years.

There are many unresolved riddles associated with the Kurbskii-Groznyi correspondence. We have yet to come upon definite proof of authorship of any of its parts; the relationship of the several versions of Ivan’s first letter to Kurbskii’s *History* is still in doubt; most of the letters cannot be positively dated within a decade. These and many derivative questions remain quite far from resolution. But for the present, the question of whether Andrei Kurbskii had any part in the writing of the first letter to Ivan IV seems to me, in the absence of new information, most properly answered in the negative.¹⁴

12. Skrynnikov, “On the Authenticity of the Kurbskii-Groznyi Correspondence,” p. 114.

13. Keenan, “Reply.”

14. Since the submission of this note, volume 33 of *Trudy Otdela drevnerusskoi literatury* has appeared, providing new articles by Lur’e (“O vozniknovenii i skladyvanii v sborniki perepiski Ivana Groznogo s Kurbskim”), Skrynnikov (“O zagolovke Pervogo poslanii Ivana IV Kurbskomu i kharaktere ikh perepiski”), and K. S. Osipova (“Istoriia o velikom kniaze Moskovskom’ Andreia Kurbskogo v Golitsynskom sbornike”).