

“The Cavalier of the Order of Judas: Chivalry and Parody at the Court of Peter the Great”

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Ernest Zitser received his Ph.D. in Russian History from Columbia University in 2000. The recent talk he gave at the Early Slavists’ Seminar represents a continuation of the research that led up to his dissertation, “The Transfigured Kingdom: Sacred Parody and Charismatic Authority at the Court of Peter the Great, 1682-1725,” which has been accepted for publication into the series *Studies of the Harriman Institute*. Zitser’s discussion of the Order of Judas was based on his argument that Petrine court culture was, in fact, much more interesting, more baroque, and more sophisticated than the average western characterization of it as “secularizing” or “westernizing” would lead us to believe.

The Order of Judas was, in simplest terms, a parody of the Order of St. Andrew. Peter I instituted the Order of St. Andrew in 1698 as a means of designating – and rewarding – both diplomatic allies and men who distinguished themselves in the tsar’s service. Although not an official monarchical order until 1720, from its inception the cross of St. Andrew signified acceptance of personal responsibility for executing the tsar’s will. In fact, this “princely pseudo-order” established a personal, informal tie between tsar and *kavaler* (knight) typical of the charismatic authority structure that was an integral part of his court organization. Two important men in the story of the Order of Judas, Alexander Danilovich Menshikov, Peter’s long-time friend and advisor, and Ivan Stepanovich Mazepa, hetman of the Ukrainian Cossacks, became *kavalery* (knights) of the Order of St. Andrew in 1703 and 1700 respectively.

The Order of Judas was created shortly after Menshikov discovered in October 1708 that Mazepa had betrayed his alliance with Peter and fled to the camp of the Swedish king, Charles XII – the tsar’s adversary in the Great Northern War (1700-21). The hetman’s act of treason was a serious blow to tsarist authority, and within a week Peter launched what amounted to a broadside campaign against Mazepa. As part of this, on November 6, Menshikov and Gavrila Golovkin, vice president of the foreign affairs chancellery and another royal intimate, gathered the remaining loyal Cossack elite to elect a new hetman, and to witness the hanging in effigy of the traitor. Mazepa was ceremonially stripped of the cross of St. Andrew, and the dummy was bound and dragged through the muddy streets of Glukhov/Hlukhiv before being hung. This dramatic symbolic act was followed by excommunication from the Orthodox Church, first by the metropolitan of Kiev, and then in Moscow by the acting patriarch, Stefan Iavorsky, in front of the political elite. Peter and his advisors sought to make clear that Mazepa had betrayed not only the Orthodox faith, but also membership in the tsar’s trusted circle of knights and disciples.

Seven months later, on 22 July 1709, nearly a month after the battle of Poltava (in which Peter’s newly-improved army defeated the Swedes), Alexander Menshikov, *kavaler* of the Order of St. Andrew, commissioned a medal of the so-called Order of Judas to be struck in Kiev. The silver medal, which hung from a rather ponderous two-pound chain, depicted a man hanging from a tree with a bag of coins at his feet. Zitser suggests that the Judas medal (and the

invention of the order it supposedly represented) served two purposes: propagandistic and punitive. First, it was effective propaganda. Menshikov originally composed an inscription that referred to Mazepa's anathematization in absentia, but that inscription was eventually replaced with a biblical quote referring to the thirty pieces of silver that bought Judas Iscariot's betrayal of Christ. Bearing this inscription, the medal served as a warning that those who "bought" Mazepa would share the fate of Christ's errant apostle – in other words, the enemies of the tsar would inherit "Potter's Field" and fall like the Swedish soldiers at Poltava.

Secondly, the Judas medal was intended as a humiliating replacement for the Cross of the Order of St. Andrew, of which Mazepa was stripped in absentia. However, if the purpose of the medal was punitive, the Russians failed to attain that end, because Mazepa died in Crimea without ever having seen the medal meant for him. Instead, the medal was first shown at Narva in the autumn of 1709 to the Danish envoy Just Juel. Juel spotted the medal with its heavy chain adorning the breast of Prince Iurii Fedorovich Shakhovskoi ('Archdeacon Gideon' in Peter's Most Comical and All-Drunken Council), who joked in the envoy's presence that Judas's price had been too low. According to Zitser, the tsar orchestrated this event with a specific purpose in mind: it was a dig at the honor of the Danish king, who had recently dropped his alliance with Peter against Sweden. But the Danish king, via his envoy, was not the only intended audience. In fact, only those members of the Russian elite who knew the troubled history of the Shakhovskoi princely clan could understand the symbolic equivalence this presentation of the medal drew between Judas's betrayal of Christ, Mazepa's betrayal of Peter, and the actions of the Danish king.

Shakhovskoi, the only man ever to wear the medal, came from a princely family with a history of rebellion against the Romanov dynasty. In the summer of 1620, several Shakhovskois staged a satire of the investiture of tsar Mikhail Romanov. The mock tsar and his retinue were only allowed to return from a fourteen-year exile in exchange for a promise of loyal service to the tsar. Thus Prince Iurii Fedorovich Shakhovskoi found himself, like his relatives before him, working his way back into royal favor. At the beginning of Peter's reign, Shakhovskoi served as a gentleman of the bedchamber.

More importantly, he was a member of Peter I's mock ecclesiastical council, which, according to Zitser, functioned as an important element of the "Transfigured Kingdom" that delineated the boundary between those who were loyal and those who were hostile to the tsar. Archbishop Gideon (Shakhovskoi) played a prominent role in the mock court, drawing up the lists of participants in the annual Yuletide escapades, and serving as the unofficial eyes and ears of the tsar, watching constantly for signs of wavering or failing loyalty. His work as Peter's unofficial spy helps to explain why Shakhovskoi was "inducted" into the Order of Judas – the order of enemies of Christ and, by extension, of Peter himself. Bearing a medal inscribed with the image of a man hanging from a tree, Shakhovskoi served Peter as 'High Lord Executioner,' responsible for military policemen and executioners, as well as executions themselves, during the Prut campaign of 1711. The line between playful parody and deadly reality proved perilously thin.

Zitser argued that the seemingly extravagant symbolic gestures of Peter's reign were in fact part of the spectacle and exercise of royal authority. The Order of Judas, a consciously

constructed parody of the real Order of St. Andrew, actually reinforced the ideals of the latter and emphasized the chivalrous and religious traditions that supposedly linked Russia to other European courts. Furthermore, by using the Order of Judas as a foil in order to establish a symbolic link between his loyal advisors, the knights of St. Andrew, and the faithful apostles of Christ, Peter himself took on the aspect of the divinely-ordained charismatic leader. By carefully manipulating the Judas medal's symbolic value in the Petrine cultural context, the tsar and his contemporaries were able to use it as a commemoration of military victory (Poltava), a token of diplomatic warning, a punitive measure, a religious parody, and a source of charismatic authority.