

Caucasian Connection

THE THIRTEENTH TRIBE

by ARTHUR KOESTLER

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The unblinking eye of Eastern mysticism, the dark side of Western technology, the enigmas of order and chance, the uncharted rills of the brain—no subject has been too forbidding for Arthur Koestler's exuberant curiosity. Now, at

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70, he is the intellectual's Robert Ripley, presenting sideshows of believe-it-or-not facts and controversial speculations.

This time out, Koestler offers what he clearly intends to be an astounding fact—that the majority of the world's 14 million Jews are not Semites. Most European and American Jews, he advises, should not trace their origins to the tents of Jacob but rather to the yurts of 7th century Caucasian nomads known as Khazars. With their fair skin, reddish hair and blue eyes, the Khazars were not what is usually regarded as Semites. They spoke a kind of old Turkish, but their origins remain hidden.

Two Monotheisms. Yet the Khazars and their relationship to Judaism are not news to scholars and historians. There is general agreement that during the early 7th century these pagan tribesmen established a kingdom between the Black and Caspian seas. Their capital was Itil, near present-day Astrakhan, at the mouth of the Volga.

The historical stage center during this period was held by the Christian Byzantine Empire and the followers of Mohammed, who burst out of the Arabian peninsula after the prophet's death in 632, overran Persia and eventually extended their empire from northern Spain to the frontiers of China. The pagan Khazars successfully resisted Christian and Moslem arms. The power of the two monotheisms seems to have driven the Khazars to seek a god of their own. The problem was, which one?

The Khazars chose Judaism, an odd historical fact that Koestler and others are at pains to explain satisfactorily. According to one ancient Jewish legend, the Khazar king, Bulan, was in the mar-

ket for a monotheism to replace his old tribal idolatry. He asked the emissary from Christian Byzantium which faith he would choose if the only option was between Judaism and Islam. The Christian chose Judaism because the Jews—though sinners—at least worshiped the same god.

King Bulan then asked the caliph's representative to pick between Judaism and Christianity. The Arab also selected the Jews because Christians ate pork and knelt before man-made images. The choice was clear: If the two opposing superpowers could agree on the Old Testament god, who was Bulan to argue?

Unfortunately, Koestler omits the charming details of this conversion by comparative shopping. Instead, he offers the politics of Third World neutralism, arguing the possibility that a Jewish Khazaria could better deal with both Christians and Arabs. Such *Realpolitik* has a certain commonsensical appeal, but it also leaves out the less rational motives for human behavior—those motives that seem to be responsible for most of history.

In addition, Koestler offers a blizzard of information but not enough hard facts to support his thesis. As in the past, he is a master of the conditional assertion ("This would be added evidence ..."). Unfortunately, the approximately four-century history of Khazaria is thin in primary source material. The kingdom seems to have flourished as a crossroads of East-West trade. Persecuted Jews from Byzantium are believed to have flocked to Khazaria, where they intermarried with their Caucasian co-religionists. When Genghis Khan's Mongols swept westward in the 13th century



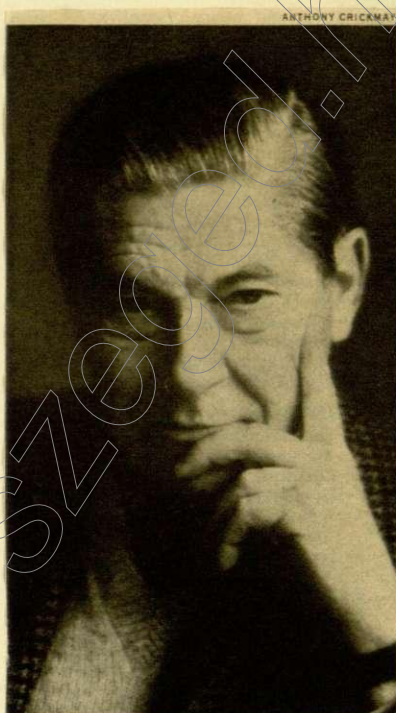
Khazaria's Jews fled to Eastern and Central Europe. These fugitives, Koestler suggests, were part of a second Diaspora that became the Ashkenazim, or European Jews of Russia and Poland. True Semitic Jews, he says, are descendants of the Sephardim, that small group whose exile wanderings can be traced from the ancient Middle East through North Africa, Spain and Portugal.

Stamped Kosher. Given the complex genetic blending that has occurred during Europe's history, Koestler's position is all too facile, despite the obvious effort and time the author spent on his study. It is not that he is unaware of the subtle traps and deadfalls of racial theory. In fact, he does his usual imitation of a Renaissance man by including mathematical formulas derived from a biochemical blood index. But Koestler's enthusiasm for the idea of a non-Semitic Jewry threatens to drown his own carefully drawn qualifications.

This conflict between sense and sensationalism causes some problems. Koestler is fearful, for example, that his book might be used to undercut the foundations of Israel. If most Israelis are really descended from Caucasian nomads who stamped themselves kosher 1,200 years ago, how can they claim

Israel as their rightful ancestral homeland? Yet he is quick to counter himself with the argument that Israel's legitimacy is based on the 1947 United Nations mandate that partitioned Palestine into an Arab and a Jewish state. Of such stuff are authentic non-issues concocted.

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Sense and sensationalism.

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