

Origins of the Jews

THE 13TH TRIBE. *By Arthur Koestler.*
255 pages. Random House. \$8.95.

Most Jews alive today trace their ancestry to Eastern Europe, to the so-called Ashkenazic Jews of Poland and Lithuania. But where did those Jews come from? Usually, historians say that the Ashkenazim descended from Biblical Jewish stock, emigrated to Western Europe and then moved eastward. Arthur Koestler, the novelist ("Darkness at Noon") and essayist, himself by origin a Hungarian Jew, pursues a minority opinion. He argues that the Ashkenazim were not originally Jews at all. They were, he says, Khazars, a Turkic people once pow-



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Polish Jews: Khazars, not Semites?

erful in the land between the Black and Caspian seas, who converted to Judaism in the early Middle Ages.

The Khazars were survivors. Caught between powerful Muslim and Christian neighbors, they opted for Judaism rather than give offense by choosing one religion over the other. Judaism, they could say diplomatically, was a part of both Islam and Christianity. When their kingdom finally fell apart in the tenth or eleventh century, the Khazars migrated northwest and, according to Koestler, evolved into the Ashkenazim.

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Disappearance: Koestler marshals the complex evidence for this theory in a clear and convincing way. He tells a good story, pulling together materials from medieval Muslim and Jewish travelers, scholarly controversy and the mysterious lore of the Khazars. Then the trouble starts. "Two basic facts emerged from our survey," he writes. "The disappearance of the Khazar nation from its historic habitat, and the simultaneous appearance in adjacent regions to the northwest

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THE THIRTEENTH TRIBE, by Arthur Koestler (Random House). "All we can say with safety is that the Khazars were a 'Turkic' tribe, who erupted from the Asian steppes, probably in the fifth century," says Mr. Koestler. These warlike nomads settled north of the Black and Caspian Seas and established an empire that ran, roughly, from the Carpathians to the Caucasus. In about 740, the Khazars converted to Judaism. Their civilization survived on its home ground until the thirteenth century, when the Mongols destroyed southern Russia and sent the last of the Khazars into Eastern Europe—into Hungary, Poland, Lithuania, and the Ukraine. Mr. Koestler argues that European Jewry is, for the most part, of Khazar origin. He calls upon both demography and linguistics to demonstrate the non-Semitic origin of the Jews of Northern and Eastern Europe, and to prove that, whatever they are, Jews are not a race in the scientific sense—that is, not descended from a common gene pool. His book is engaging, and is particularly useful to readers of Western European and American backgrounds, who do not ordinarily learn much about the great medieval kingdoms of Eastern Europe, to whose growth and affluence the Khazars made considerable contributions.

new Yorker, 1976 Sep. 20.

of the greatest concentration of Jews since the beginning of the Diaspora."

He then proceeds to show that the large Jewish populace in Poland and Lithuania could not have immigrated from the West, because there were simply not enough Jews in all of Western Europe to account for the Ashkenazic multitude. The Khazars, on the other hand, were an entire populous nation. Koestler also points to the "Eastern" style of dress among Polish Jews: kaftans and skull caps. And he speculates that sedentary Western Jews would not have gravitated into "semi-nomadic" trades such as cart building, which became a specialty with Polish Jews.

The heart of Koestler's argument, however, is demographic, and the demographic evidence is notably weak. To believe Koestler's theory one must trust extrapolations from the very scant data available pertaining to Jewish populations in medieval times. One must also credit similarly unpersuasive documents that are supposed to show that the conversion of the Khazars was not limited to the ruling elite, but extended in some authentic and lasting form to the entire Khazar nation.

Patterns: Whether the conversion theory holds up under expert scrutiny or not, Koestler's motives for adopting it with such zeal are undoubtedly peculiar. If East European Jews were genetically Khazars and not Semites, then, he writes, "the term 'anti-Semitism' would become void of meaning, based on a misapprehension shared by both the killers and their victims."

Does he really imagine that anti-Semitism springs from a purely genetic antipathy? Surely, even Hitler's hatred of Jews was more complex than that. Koestler's statement is, however, consistent with his feeling that Jews today "have no cultural tradition in common, merely certain habits and behavior patterns derived from social inheritance." Few Jews believe in their religion or practice it, he says. This is an extreme point of view at best, which Koestler matches with an equally extreme proposal for a solution (one almost hears him saying the final solution) to the paradox: "emigration to Israel or gradual assimilation to their host nations." All that prevents this is the illusion of "Judaism's racial and historical message." If only the Khazar theory would prevail, Koestler implies, then Jews would lose their last excuse to remain "Jews." Most of the world would be Jew-free at last and Koestler could relax.

—RAYMOND SOKOLOV