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Shalom Yisrah

By FITZROY MACLEAN

There are few more fertile fields for controversy than the ethnic background and makeup of European Russia, though for true connoisseurs of academic mayhem I can also strongly recommend the Caucasus. In his latest book Arthur Koestler plunges into both these professorial battlegrounds with great courage and an astonishing measure of success. Aided by much careful research and a penetrating intelligence, he successfully dispels the prevailing aura of scientific (and ideological) humbug and emerges from the fray with a new, tenable and highly intriguing theory.

THE THIRTEENTH TRIBE

The Khazar Empire and Its Heritage. By Arthur Koestler.

For centuries what is now Eastern Russia served as a stamping-ground for a kaleidoscopic succession of tribes, who, as a result of their own nomadic and aggressive tendencies and the absence of any serious natural barriers, overran each other and were, in turn, overrun in a constantly shifting pattern of races. "Their names," wrote Edward Gibbon, with evident distaste, "are uncouth, their origins doubtful, their actions obscure."

How, one feels bound to ask, did the Russians ever emerge from this unpromising racial tangle? It is in seeking an answer to this question that most of us first encountered Mr. Koestler's Thirteenth Tribe, the Khazars. They appear, in succession to the Huns, as overlords of the East Slavs in about the fifth century of our era.

But, as we learn from Mr. Koestler's excellent book, there is much more to the Khazars than that. Turkish by race, they came originally from a good deal further east. Having established themselves in a strategic position to the north of the Caucasus between the Black Sea and the Caspian or Khazar Sea, they built up a considerable empire which at one time included Kiev. In the seventh century they effectively blocked the advance westwards and northwards of the Arab conquerors, while 200 years later the Byzantine Emperors were glad to claim them as allies against the Vikings or Varangians who, having succeeded them as overlords of the East Slavs, now emerged aggressively with the latter under the new name of Russians.

Meanwhile, towards the middle of the eighth century, a curious thing had happened to the Khazars. They had been converted to Judaism. Despite a special

messenger from heaven, who enabled them to claim that they, too, were Chosen, it is hard to resist Mr. Koestler's conclusion that their decision was also politically motivated. As Christians, they would have become dependent on Rome; as Mohammedans, on the Caliphs. As Jews, they were dependent on no one.

The Khazars remained independent for several hundred more years. The end came when they were overrun by the Mongols towards the middle of the 13th century. It is at this point that Mr. Koestler produces his startling new theory. The Khazars, he claims, cannot just have disappeared. Most of them, he argues, must have been absorbed in what is now the Soviet Union, others in Hungary and Poland. Nor, after 500 years, were they likely to abandon their Jewish faith and traditions.

Though Turkish by race, they almost certainly remained Jews, greatly outnumbering the racially Jewish Jews who had reached these areas by other routes and at other periods of history. From this it would follow, first, that racially the great majority of Eastern European Jews were not Jews at all, but Turko-Khazars, and second that, as most Western Jews came from Eastern Europe, most of them are not Jews either, that in fact there are probably very few truly Semitic Jews anywhere. The conclusion is as disturbing for racially-minded Jews as for racially-minded anti-Semites, though, as the author wisely points out, it in no way invalidates Israel's claim to statehood.

Mr. Koestler's book is as readable as it is thought-provoking. Nothing could be more stimulating than the skill, elegance and erudition with which he marshals his facts and develops his theories. It is filled, too, with unusual and pleasing scraps of knowledge. For my part I shall always be grateful to him for at last elucidating to my satisfaction the provenance of that improbable tribe, the Dagh Chufuty or Mountain Jews of Daghestan, who, I am glad to be able to report, were, only this summer, reasonably well and still living in Daghestan.

Fitzroy MacLean is the author of the "Concise History of Scotland" and "To Back and Beyond," a narrative of a journey through Central Asia.

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