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Sons of Abraham or children of Attila? The oxymoron of anti-Semitism

By Hari Heath

One of the most challenging subjects to write upon is the Jews. Demonizers like the Anti Defamation League (ADL) and their minions in the media will firebrand any author or journalist with the "anti-Semite" brand if they give anything but praise for the Jewish race. Ingrained in our social programming is the notion that anti-Semitism— Jew-hating or Jew bashing—is something only bigots and racists engage in. Our moral instincts incline us to support the downtrodden and oppressed, but is the "anti-Semetic" programming we are indoctrinated with accurate? More importantly, who are these demonizers and what is their offensive protectionism trying to protect?

We have been taught that the Jews were forced out of their homeland in Jerusalem; these descendents of Abraham were scattered to the wind and, on occasion, treated horribly. The horrors of the Nazi holocaust against the Jews are ingrained in the minds of those who didn't sleep through history class, or can, at least, find the *History Channel* with their remote.

Is the history we have been taught the real history of the Jewish people? Are modern day European Jews descendents of a Semetic people? Is the term "anti-Semetic" an oxymoron?

Arthur Koestler published *The Thirteenth Tribe*
in 1976, in which he postulates an entirely different thesis for the origins of modern-day European Jewry. Using extensive historical references, he documents the Khazarian Empire and the conversion of these non-Semetic people to Judaism in approximately 740 AD, as the probable roots for most of European Jewry.

Our Euro-American centered historical perspective often overlooks the Khazars. But their dominance in a certain moment of history has substantially affected the outcome of our world today. And, if Koestler's thesis holds true, the Khazarian remnant remains a potent force still shaping our world today—Zionism.

The Khazars

The Khazarian Empire only lasted from the 7th to the 10th
centuries, but the real estate held by the Khazars during that time kept Europe from becoming Moslem territory and turned the tides on the Viking conquest of the western world.

The Khazars held a territory from the Caucasus Mountains to the Urals, between the Black Sea and the Sea of Aral, including at least the northern portion of the Caspian Sea, reaching north into the Volga River and west to Crimea. A people of Turkish stock, their empire afforded protection to Byzantium (Turkey) from the barbarian hordes on the northern steppes. The Khazar armies and the formidable terrain they inhabited were also an effective block against the early attempts of the Moslem invasion of Eastern Europe, as Professor Dunlop of Columbia University describes it:

"*The Khazar country…lay across the natural line of advance of the Arabs. Within a few years of the death of Muhammad (AD 632) the armies of the Caliphate, sweeping northward through the wreckage of two empires and carrying all before them, reached the great mountain barrier of the Caucasus. This barrier, once passed, the road lay open to the lands of Eastern Europe. As it was, on the line of the Caucasus the Arabs met the forces of an organized military power, which effectively prevented them from extending their conquests in this direction. The Wars of the Arabs and the Khazars, which lasted more than a hundred years, though little known, have thus considerable historical significance…It can…scarcely be doubted that but for the existence of the Khazars in the region north of the Caucasus, Byzantium, the bulwark of European civilization in the east, would have found itself out flanked by the Arabs, and the history of Christendom and Islam might very well have been very different from what we know*."

The Khazars lost their last battle with the Arabs in 737, but the Caliphate [the chief Islamic civil and religious ruler; successor to Muhammad] was suffering from internal strife, the Muslim Holy War lost its steam, and the Arabs retreated without establishing a dominance of Khazar territory.

A non anti-Semetic state

Koestler describes what happened soon thereafter: *"A few years later, probably AD 740, the King, his court and the military ruling class embraced the Jewish faith, and Judaism became the state religion of the Khazars. No doubt their contemporaries were as astonished by this decision as modern scholars were when they came across the evidence in the Arab, Byzantine, Russian and Hebrew sources."*

Koestler quotes Dr. Antal Bartha:

"*Our investigations cannot go into problems pertaining to the history of ideas, but we must call the reader's attention to the*

matter of the Khazar kingdom's state religion. It was the Jewish faith which became the official religion of the ruling strata of society. Needless to say, the acceptance of the Jewish faith as the state religion of an ethnically non-Jewish people could be the subject of interesting speculation. We shall, however, confine ourselves to the remark that this official conversion—in defiance of Christian proselytizing by Byzantium, the Muslim influence from the East, and in spite of the political pressure of these two powers—to a religion which had no support from any political power, but was persecuted by nearly all—has come as a surprise to nearly all historians concerned with the Khazars, and cannot be considered as accidental, but must be regarded as a sign of the independent policy pursued by that kingdom."

Roots of another tree?

That the Khazars converted to Judaism is well established by many sources in the historical record, but what is less clear is what happened after their empire fell apart, as Koestler explains:

"*What is in dispute is the fate of the Jewish Khazars after the destruction of their empire, in the twelfth or thirteenth century. On this problem the sources are scant, but various late mediaeval Khazar settlements are mentioned in the Crimea, in the Ukraine, in Hungary, Poland and Lithuania. The general picture that emerges from these fragmentary pieces of information is that of the migration of Khazar tribes and communities into those regions of Eastern Europe—mainly Russia and Poland—where, at the dawn of the Modern Age, the greatest concentrations of Jews were found. This has led several historians to conjecture that a substantial part, and perhaps the majority of eastern Jews—and hence of world Jewry—might be of Khazar and not of Semetic origin*."

Mediaeval Jewish History Professor, A. N. Poliak, at Tel Aviv University, was an early propounder of the Khazarian origins of Jewry hypothesis. He published *"Khazaria"* in 1944. His introduction to the second edition (1951) states that the facts demand *"a new approach, both to the problem of the relations between the Khazar Jewry and other Jewish communities, and to the question of how far we can go in regarding this [Khazar] Jewry as the nucleus of the large Jewish settlement in Eastern Europe…. The descendants of this settlement—those who stayed where they were, those who emigrated to the United States and to other countries, and those who went to Israel—constitute now the large majority of world Jewry."*

Koestler explains the importance of what "the facts demand":

"*If so, this would mean that their ancestors came not from the Jordan but from the Volga, not from Canaan but from the Caucasus, once believed to be the cradle of the Aryan race; and that genetically they are more closely related to the Hun, Uigur and Magyar tribes than to the seed of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Should this turn out to be the case, then the term 'anti-Semetic' would become void of meaning…. The story of the Khazar Empire, as it slowly emerges from the past, begins to look like the most cruel hoax which history has ever perpetrated*."

Khazarian empire

Khazaria, as an empire, marks the transition of a people. What began as a tribe of nomadic warriors, progressed into a nation of "farmers, cattle-breeders, fishermen, vine growers, traders and skilled craftsmen."

Soviet archaeologists have found evidence of Khazarian villages extending over several miles with well-crafted artifacts, livestock pens and stables. They lived in round houses in a semi-settled existence, wintering in the villages, then come spring they left their houses, packed the tents and livestock and went camping either near grazing areas or their farms and vineyards.

During the eighth and ninth centuries the Khazars developed a chain of fortifications around the core of their empire. The transition to agriculture didn't mean they abandoned their warrior past, as Koestler explains:

"*At the peak of their power they controlled or exacted tribute from some thirty different nations and tribes inhabiting the vast territories between the Caucasus, the Aral Sea, the Ural Mountains, the town of Kiev and the Ukrainian steppes. The people under Khazar suzerainty included the Bulgars, Burtas, Ghuzz, Magyars (Hungarians), the Gothic and Greek colonies of the Crimea, and the Slavonic tribes in the northwestern woodlands. Beyond these extended dominions, Khazar armies also raided Georgia and Armenia and penetrated into the Arab Caliphate as far as Mosul*."

Towards the end of their empire, Khazaria became a civilized center surrounded by the many tribes who still lived the Khazar's former nomadic life. The principle Khazar city, Itil, near the mouth of the Volga River, was a multi-cultural center. The Khazar King had his fortress on one bank of the river, while Moslems, Christians, Jews, Pagans and a variety of foreigners lived with relative cultural autonomy in the various sectors on the other side of Itil. It became an oasis of culture and commerce amid the semi-barbarous tribes of the steppes and a refuge for the oppressed, such as Byzantine Jews.

Origins

But who were the Khazars before they created such an empire? A Georgian chronicler identifies them with the hosts of Gog and Magog—"wild men with hideous faces and the manners of wild beasts, eaters of blood."

An Armenian writer refers to them as the "horrible multitude of Khazars with insolent, broad, lashless faces and long falling hair, like women."

An Arab source identified two kinds, "The Khazars do not resemble the Turks. They are black-haired, and are of two kinds, one called the Kara-Khazars [Black Khazars] who are swarthy verging on deep black as if they were a kind of Indian, and a white kind [Ak-Khazars], who are strikingly handsome."

Another Arab chronicler wrote, "they are to the north of the inhabited earth…their land is cold and wet. Accordingly, their complexions are white, their eyes blue, their hair flowing and predominately reddish, their bodies large and their natures cold. Their general aspect is wild."

For the most part, these accounts come from the Khazars' enemies and tribes they have subjugated. Koestler says that such accounts are, "based on hearsay and legend; and we are none the wiser regarding the Khazars' physical appearance, or their ethnic origins. The last question can only be answered in a vague and general way."

Koestler explains that the Huns, Alans, Avars, Bulgars, Magyars, Bashkirs, Burtas, Sabirs, Uigurs, Saragurs, Onogurs, Utigurs, Kutrigurs, Tarniaks, Kotragars, Khabars, Zabenders, Pechenegs, Ghuzz, Kumans, Kipchacks and other tribes have, "at one time or another in the lifetime of the Khazar kingdom passed through the turnstiles of these migratory playgrounds."

Even the origins of the better-known Huns are uncertain. Their name apparently comes from the Chinese, "Hiung-nu," a designation for warlike nomads in general. Beginning in the first century AD, the Chinese drove these "Huns" westward. By the fifth century these forcibly emigrated tribes became known as the "Turks." According to modern ethnologists, the term primarily refers to a language group rather than a race.

In AD 448 the Byzantine Emperor sent an embassy to Attila [the Hun], which included a rhetorician Priscus. Priscus' detailed accounts include a record of a subjugated tribe under Attila, the Akatzirs, who were likely the Ak-Khazars or "White" Khazars.

Koestler states, "*Priscus' chronicle confirms that the Khazars appeared on the European scene about the middle of the fifth century as a people under Hunnish sovereignty, and may be regarded, together with the Magyars and other tribes, as a later offspring of Attila's Hordes*."

After Attila's death in 453, the Hun Empire collapsed. By the latter half of the sixth century the Khazars became the dominant tribe north of the Caucasus. The Sabirs, Samandars, Balanjars and other tribes were subdued and absorbed by the Khazars. The Khazars defeated the Bulgars in 641, splitting the Bulgar nation in two, with some fleeing to present-day Bulgaria on the Danube, the rest remaining under the Khazars.

During this time the Khazars served another apprenticeship in empire building, under the West Turkish or Turkut kingdom (550-650). A ruler, the Kagan or Khagan, held this short-lived confederation of tribes together. The later Khazarian Empire would adopt some of the features of the Turkut kingdom.

The emergence of empire

The middle decades of the seventh century saw many changes in and around Khazaria.

Mohammed began the first 20 years of the Hegira in 622. Eventually, Egypt, Syria, Mesopotamia and Persia would be conquered.

In 627 the Khazars sent 40,000 horsemen in an alliance with the Roman Emperor Heraclius. Together they attacked and defeated Persia, leaving it in chaos and ripe for Muslim conquest.

The confederation of the Turkut kingdom dissolved back to its tribal foundations, leaving the Khazars as the dominant force in the "Kingdom of the North."

The first phase of the Khazar-Arab wars lasted from 642 to 652, as the Arabs attempted to get through "The Gate of Gates," the fortified defile of Darband around the Caucasus and along the Caspian shore trying to secure a foothold on the other side of the Caucasus for further expansion of the Moslem conquest into Europe, but the Arabs were repeatedly driven back. By 652, they were finally forced to give their attempted incursion into Khazar territory a rest for 30 or 40 years.

During this respite the Khazars expanded their empire west into Crimea and the Ukraine. Unlike their earlier nomadic tribal era, when raids were merely to acquire plunder and slaves, these new conquests brought the conquered into the empire, paying tribute and taxes to an administration organized under the Khazar's Khagan.

The Second Arab-Khazar War lasted from 722-737. It was primarily a series of raids and counter-raids, where each side would penetrate well into the other's territory, claim a victory, and return to their homeland without maintaining possession of their newly conquered terrain. While seemingly futile in the hindsight of history, these occasionally massive battles served to keep the Muslim conquerors occupied, affecting the outcome of our world, and the Khazar's place in history as Dimitry Obolenski, a history professor at Oxford explained:

"*The main contribution of the Khazars to world history was their success in holding the line of the Caucasus against the northward onslaught of the Arabs*."

Civilized warriors

Their place in world history may be holding the line of the Caucasus, but they also developed a civilization in the midst of plundering nomads. Their system of government was by dual rule of the Great Khagan and the Khagan Bek, or Bek. The Khagan lived in seclusion in his fortification with his reportedly 25 wives, sent as tribute from the tribes under his suzerainty (a "suzeraine" is a feudal lord; suzerainty would be his dominion) and his 60 concubines and other servants of the royal household. The Khagan was the "spiritual" leader of his people and held counsel with the Bek and a few other dignitaries in Khazaria. The Bek was the "civil" ruler, having the duties of administrating the nation and commanding the military.

The Khazar farms and vineyards, sometimes stretching continuously for 60 or 70 miles in fertile regions, evidence a significant transition from their former status as tribal raiders. Settlement in villages and cites, even if they were only wintering sites, signals the process of civilization. But the hallmark of such cultural "progress" was the transition from the raid and plunder existence to actual commerce and taxation.

Koestler states the main source of income for the empire was a tax of 10 percent on all goods in transit through the empire. Textiles, dried fruit, honey, wax, furs and slaves were common goods shipped and packed along the several trade routes through the Caucasus, down the Volga and through the Khazar Sea. The Khazars introduced silverware to the northern peoples. Khazarian jewelry, clasps and buckles have been found as far away as Sweden. Caucasian winemaking was developed into a fine art.

Many Khazars were artists and craftsmen especially as gold and silversmiths. Even after conversion to Judaism, the main city of Itil had an Arab sector with numerous Mosques and autonomous courts and clergy for Muslims, Christians, Pagans and, of course, Jews.

Conversion

Why would the Khazars adopt the relatively obscure, disempowered and somewhat oppressed Judaic faith? Koestler postulates the motives for the Khazars conversion: "*At the beginning of the eighth century the world was polarized between the two super-powers representing Christianity and Islam. Their ideological doctrines were welded to power-politics pursued by the classical methods of propaganda, subversion and military conquest. The Khazar Empire represented a Third Force, which had proved equal to either of them, both as an adversary and an ally. But it could only maintain its independence by accepting neither Christianity nor Islam—for either choice would have automatically subordinated it to the authority of the Roman Emperor or the Caliph of Baghdad*.

"*There had been no lack of efforts by either court to convert the Khazars to Christianity or Islam, but all they resulted in was the exchange of diplomatic courtesies, dynastic inter-marriages and shifting military alliances based on mutual self interest. Relying on its military strength, the Khazar Kingdom, with its hinterland of vassal tribes, was determined to preserve its position as the Third Force, leader of the uncommitted nations of the steppes*.

"*At the same time, their intimate contacts with Byzantium and the Caliphate had taught the Khazars that their primitive shamanism was not only barbaric and outdated compared to the great monotheistic creeds, but also unable to confer on the leaders the spiritual and legal authority which the rulers of the two theocratic world powers, the Caliph and the Emperor, enjoyed. Yet the conversion to either creed would have meant submission, the end of independence, and thus would have defeated its purpose. What could have been more logical than to embrace a third creed, which was uncommitted towards either of the two, yet represented the venerable foundation of both?*"

How did the Khazars come to consider Judaism as a potential state religion? How did their geographically isolated enclave encounter this faith? Since at least the Roman sacking and destruction of Jerusalem in 70 AD and continuing with the various Christian and Moslem conquests over time, the Jews have been persecuted, oppressed and banished frequently in history. Koestler explains one of the results:

"*The only mercy shown by history to those [Jews] who took to flight, or were driven to it, was the existence of Khazaria, both before and after the conversion. Before it was a refugee haven; after, it became a kind of National Home. The refugees were products of a superior culture, and were no doubt an important factor in creating that cosmopolitan, tolerant outlook which so impressed the Arab chroniclers quoted before. Their influence—and no doubt their proselytizing zeal—would have made itself felt first and foremost at the court and among leading notables. They may have combined in their missionary efforts theological arguments and messianic prophecies with a shrewd assessment of the political advantages the Khazars would derive from adopting a 'neutral' religion*."

The Khazar King Bulan first initiated the state conversion to Judaism in approximately 740 AD. He may have at first adopted the Karaites fundamentalist, primitive form of Judaism. Whatever form it may have began as, Bulan's grandson, King Obadiah, instituted a revival, building synagogues and schools and funding scholars and sages to interpret and teach the Judaic faith in Khazaria.

Koestler concludes, "Thus the Judiazation of the Khazars was a gradual process which, triggered off by political expediency, slowly penetrated into the deeper strata of their minds and eventually produced the Messianism of their period of decline. Their religious commitment survived the collapse of their state, and persisted, as we shall see, in the Khazar-Jewish settlements of

Russia and Poland."

Northern threat

The turn of the ninth century brought several decades of peace to Khazar history, "the southern frontiers of their country had been pacified; the relations with the Caliphate had settled down to a tacit nonaggression pact; relations with Byzantium were definitely friendly," Koestler notes.

But a new threat was looming. With the help of the Romans under the Emperor Theophilus, the Khazars began to build a fortress at Sarkel, as Koestler explains:

"*The potential enemy against whom this impressive fortress was built…were those formidable and menacing newcomers on the world scene, whom the West called Vikings or Norsemen, and the East called Rhous or Rhos or Rus*.

"*Two centuries earlier, the conquering Arabs had advanced on the civilized world…Now, during the Viking Age, history seemed to create a kind of mirror image of that earlier phase…the Muslim wars of conquest took place in the southernmost region of the known world, the Arabian desert. The Viking raids and conquests originated in its northernmost region, Scandinavia. The Arabs advanced northward by land, the Norsemen southward by Sea and waterways. The Arabs were, at least in theory, conducting a holy war, the Vikings waged unholy wars of piracy and plunder; but the results, as far as the victims were concerned, were the same*."

As Sarkel was built, the western Vikings had already penetrated into central Europe, raiding Paris and Germany; they conquered Normandy and half of Ireland, overtook Iceland and attacked Constantinople through the Mediterranean. Koestler explains how the eastern Rus were only slightly less active:

"*For a century and a half after the fortress of Sarkel was built, trade agreements and the exchange of embassies alternated with savage wars. Only slowly and gradually did the Northmen change their character by building permanent settlements, becoming Slavonized by intermingling with their subjects and vassals, and finally, adopting the faith of the Byzantine Church. By that time, the closing years of the tenth century, the 'Rus' had become transformed into the Russians*."

This era of Khazar history marked a decline in the strength of the empire. The push of one tribe under the Khazars into the lands of another, who was then pushed into the lands of another, and another, weakened the Khazar defenses. Rus trading missions into Moslem lands sometimes became raids, even massacres, on both sides. To maintain peace with the Arabs, the Khazars had to stop the Rus traders/raiders from passing through Khazar territory. The historical record is unclear regarding the battles the Khazars fought to force the Rus out of their territory, but it appears they were successful from 943 onwards.

The Rus prince Svyatoslav successfully attacked and defeated the Khazars and destroyed Sarkel in 965, which some historians consider the end of the Khazars. Somewhere near the same time the Khazars main city Itil was destroyed, probably by the Rus. It was reportedly rebuilt and destroyed again, but no clear record exists to determine the cause of Itil's fate.

Shifting alliances caused further decline of the empire. Byzantium, never before an enemy and often an ally, became allied with the Rus when Vladimir, the son of Svyatoslav, the destroyer of Sarkel, eventually converted to the Byzantine Church. The 11th and 12th
century historical records have little mention of the Khazars proper. The various tribes formerly under the Khazars often changed places in this period of conflict and migration. The Rus and the Byzantines were at times allies, occasionally enemies and sometimes just neighbors.

The Khan, chaos and the Khazars

In A Social and Religious History of the Jews, *S. W. Baron wrote that,* "*In general, the reduced Khazar kingdom persevered. It waged a more or less effective defence against all foes until the middle of the thirteenth century, when it fell victim to the great Mongol invasion set in motion by Jenghiz Khan. Even then it resisted stubbornly until the surrender of all of its neighbors. Its population was largely absorbed by the Golden Horde which had established the centre of its empire in Khazar territory. But before and after the Mongol upheaval the Khazars sent many offshoots into the unsubdued Slavonic lands, helping ultimately to build up the great Jewish centres of eastern Europe*."

Before this, Khazar tribesmen, the Magyars and the Kabars, migrated to Hungary. A second wave of Khazars was invited to join them in the 10th
century by Duke Taksony. Two and three centuries later, history records "Jews" fighting in the Hungarian army and the "Golden Bull." Hungary's "*Magna Charta*" decreed in 1222 that "Jews were forbidden to act as mintmasters, tax collectors and controllers of the royal salt monopoly."

Poland also had many Khazarian Jews. The Karaite sect (which may have been the first source of the Khazar's encounter with Judaism) had many communities in Poland and in Lithuania. Historians estimate that 500,000 Jews lived in the Polish-Lithuanian kingdom by the 17th century. Polish Historian Adam Vetulani reported, "Polish scholars agree that these oldest [Jewish] settlements were founded by Jewish émigrés from the Khazar state and Russia…"

Often desired for their skills and acumen in financing, taxation and social administration, European Jews were repeatedly invited then expelled. The European Jewish population suffered considerably from the successive invitations and then banishments. Forced migrations and segregated living became the Jewish norm during the late Middle Ages. As Baron reports, regarding William the Conqueror's Jewish invitation:

"*They were subsequently converted into a class of 'royal usurers' whose main function was to provide credits for both political and economic ventures. After accumulating great wealth through the high rate of interest, these moneylenders were forced to disgorge it in one form or another for the benefit of the royal treasury. The prolonged well-being of many Jewish families, the splendor of their residence and attire, and their influence on public affairs blinded even experienced observers to the deep dangers lurking from the growing resentment of debtors of all classes, and the exclusive dependence of Jews on the protection of their royal masters…Rumblings of discontent, culminating in violent outbreaks in 1189-90, presaged the final tragedy: the expulsion of 1290. The meteoric rise, and even more rapid decline of English Jewry in the brief span of two and a quarter centuries (1066-1290) brought into sharp relief the fundamental factors shaping the destinies of all western Jewries in the crucial first half of the second millennium*."

Khazars to Khazionism

Can we say definitively that the Khazars are the origins of all modern day European Jewry? No. Were other, long established, Sephardic Jewish settlements scattered throughout Europe, with their roots in Palestine? Yes. Does the historical record suggest a strong likelihood that a significant portion of European Jews are, in fact, the remnant of Khazarian, Ashkenazi Jews? Yes. Could the Khazar Jews be a majority of the stock of European Jewry? Possibly. Is anti-Semitism an oxymoron?

DNA testing and geno-cartography may someday answer such questions definitively. But for now, the historical record strongly suggests there was a people who began as a tribe under the suzerainty of Attila the Hun; their warring nomadic existence transitioned to a civilized, well-administered center of culture and commerce.

They successfully defended against and occasionally offended some of the greatest military forces of their time: the Muslim armies and the Vikings (or Rus).

Even after the defeat of their empire, their skills in the set up and administration of taxation and usury schemes and the organization of nations, became useful to many European courts. Behind the scenes, their influence in the "civilization" of our age is greater than what the history books have yet to record.

And if the "Khazarian-origins-of-European-Jewry" thesis of Koestler and others holds true; and if we consider the scope and gravity of the present influence of Zionism in our world today, including the elite banking fraternity and the perpetrators of global economy and governance, perhaps our language needs a new word—"Khazionism."

From the Eurasian Steppes and Attila, to the Caucasian stronghold of Khazaria, to the courts of Europe, to the halls of Congress, to the State of Israel: The empire of taxation and tribute is alive and well.