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## Contested Histories of the Ashkenazi Jews

Shalva Weil discusses how scholarship arguing that Ashkenazi Jews are descended from a semi-nomadic Turkic people has provoked anti-Semitic responses in some quarters.

By Shalva Weil for ISN

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In 2008 Professor Shlomo Sand published a book in Hebrew titled *The Invention of the Jewish People* with an English translation following soon after; it became an international bestseller. In the book, Sand argues that the Jews are not a 'pure' race. The Ashkenazi (Western) Jews, according to Sand, are in fact descendants of the Khazars, a semi-nomadic Turkic people who ruled in the north Caucasus and who were forcibly converted *en masse* to Judaism in the eighth and ninth centuries. He thus portrays Judaism as a militant religion, which expanded through proselytization and conquest (although traditionally Judaism is opposed to missionizing). By this account, North African and other Sephardic Jewish communities (originating in Spain) were also conquered and converted to Judaism as the religion spread along the Mediterranean coast of North Africa. Of course, some of the converts to Judaism were later converted forcibly to Christianity or even Islam. By debunking the "myth of the exile" Sand claims that today's Jews were not in fact expelled from ancient Palestine; they have no historical claim over the territory. Those who do possess historical rights are the Palestinians, who according to Sand have inhabited Palestine continuously. The implication of Sand's proposition is that Jews today have no historical claim to support the existence of the Jewish state of Israel.

### Not so far-fetched

The theory that Ashkenazi Jews were intermingled or are descended from Khazars is well-known to scholars throughout history and is not original to Professor Sand. Tombstones on the Crimean peninsula are replete with Jewish symbolism, such as the shofar (the Jewish horn blown on the High Holy days), the Menorah (candelabra), and staff of the High Priest Aron, as well as Turkic tribal symbols. One of the best-known Jewish texts studied by every Israeli schoolchild is the philosophical treatise *The Kuzari*, originally written in Arabic by the medieval Spanish philosopher Rabbi Yehuda Halevi in 1140, and later translated into Hebrew and other languages. The five chapters of the book are a dialogue between the pagan king of the Khazars and a Jew who was invited to teach him about Judaism. The book is not considered a historical account of the Khazar conversion to Judaism, but many believe it is based on fact.

A well-known proponent of the Jewish-Khazar theory was Arthur Koestler, who wrote in *The Thirteenth Tribe: The Khazar Empire and Its Heritage*: "It would of course be foolish to deny that Jews of different origins also contributed to the existing Jewish world-community. The numerical ratio of the Khazar to

the Semitic and other contributions is impossible to establish. But the cumulative evidence makes one inclined to agree with the consensus of Polish historians that 'in earlier times the main bulk originated from the Khazar country'; and that, accordingly, the Khazar contribution to the genetic make-up of the Jews must be substantial, and in all likelihood dominant." In fact, most Jewish historians have endorsed this view. In one of the most famous books, *The Myth of the Jewish Race*, authors Raphael and Jennifer Patai wrote: "...one should remember that the Khazars were described by several contemporary authors as having a pale complexion, blue eyes, and reddish hair. Red, as distinguished from blond, hair is found in a certain percentage of East European Jews, and this, as well as the more generalized light coloring, could be a heritage of the medieval Khazar infusion."

Despite the common knowledge of the possible Khazar extraction of the Jewish people, Sand's book has resurfaced as something new. Opposition to the theory is furious. It is said that genetic tests have not proved the Khazar origins of the Jews, that there are no Khazar words in Yiddish and that, according to Jewish law, a convert to Judaism is a Jew in every respect. Critics of Professor Sand point to King David himself: his grandmother was also a convert to Judaism.

### **Delegitimizing Israel**

However, supporters are more numerous: In some circles, Sand has been hailed as a "guru" who espouses the delegitimacy of the state of Israel. He has become a sought-after lecturer, particularly in Europe, but also in the United States, where he repeats his claims of the impurity of the Jewish people. On the internet site [PalestineRemembered.com](http://PalestineRemembered.com), which gives details of Palestine refugee camps all over Israel, the major theme is that the Jews are in fact Khazars and therefore implicitly are not entitled to reside in the modern state of Israel.

Not only has Sand become a popular figure in anti-Zionist circles, but he has also fanned a fair amount of blatant anti-Semitism. The [Daily Bell](#), published by The Foundation for the Advancement of Free-Market Thinking (FAFMT), is a free internet-based publication for committed free-market thinkers promoting *laissez-faire* economics. In a review of Sand's book in October 2011, the author wrote: "There is evidently and obviously a group of powerful central banking families that, along with religious, military and political enablers, want to create world government. The seat of this world government may even be Jerusalem. Certain aspects of Jewish theology are surely utilized to provide a degree of cohesion for this secretive effort." The conclusion of the review was as follows: "Is the new world order a "Jewish" movement, or even a Zionist one? To ask that question and answer in the affirmative is to play right into the trap that has been set by those who hide behind a Jewish identity and use charges of anti-Semitism to distract critics from the real issues and problems of the continuing globalist conspiracy."

It is amazing to ponder how some books –especially those based on shaky historical facts and unoriginal scholarship -- become popular and generate extreme reactions, while most are doomed to oblivion.

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