

Anti-Zionist Demography

DAVID NIRENBERG

The Invention of the Jewish People

by Shlomo Sand, trans. Yael Lotan
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Everyone has heard of Attila and his Huns, who fought their way on pony back from the northern borders of China to the lands today called France, where they were defeated in 453 CE. Theirs was only the first of a series of migrations from central Asia that repeatedly reshaped the Christian and Islamic world over the next thousand years, and the conquests of their successors, though less famous, were more enduring. Akatzirs and Avars; Bulgars, Khazars, and Kök Türks; Ogurs, Onogurs (with their allies the Hungarians), Quturgurs, and Uturgurs; Polovtsy, Pechenegs, Qumans, and Sabirs; and of course, the Mongols: these and many other of the diverse peoples whom scholars today assign to the semi-geographic, semi-ethnic, and semi-linguistic category of Altaic or Turkic, all left Central Asia for destinations that eventually encompassed vast expanses of Europe, Asia, Asia Minor, and even Africa (the Mamluks of Egypt).

The Khazars rank among the more obscure of these peoples. They left no records in their own language and few in other languages. We do not know when they first entered the world of Late Antiquity or when they disappeared. From Greek, Armenian, Muslim, and Jewish writers, we learn everything we know about the polity, called the “qaganate,” that they established. It seems to have stretched, at its height, from Kiev in the North East to Crimea in the South West. It lasted more than three hundred years, gradually falling to the Rus after 965 CE. We do not know the exact location of its capital, Atil, somewhere near the lower

Volga—a tent city, apart from a few ceremonial buildings, because the Khazars clung to their steppe ways. They gathered in cloth yurts during the winter, dispersing for war and pastoral activities in summer. This textile architecture disintegrated after their disappearance, foiling archaeological attempts to discover material traces of the qaganate’s glory.

If the Khazars are scarce in ancient sources, they are wildly overrepresented in modern ones. Unlike their contemporary rivals the Alans, Bulgars, or Pechenegs, the Khazars have been the subject of two modern bestsellers—first Arthur Koestler’s *The Thirteenth Tribe* (1976), and now the book under review. On the World Wide Web they are far more populous than they ever were in their own time—ninth-century Muslim geographers estimated their fighting force at around ten thousand—peopling half a million sites like the “Illuminati Conspiracy Archive” and “christusrex.org.” (The latter has put Koestler’s book online, with a preface suggesting that his suicide in 1983 was in fact a murder by the Mossad.) Why should this obscure Turkic tribe be so interesting today?

The answer lies in the intersection of late antique and postmodern geopolitics. The Khazars, like other steppe nomads, entered a world divided between two religious superpowers—the Christian Roman Empire (Byzantium) and the new Islamic caliphate—both competing to draw them into alliance. Such alliances took many forms, from the military to the matrimonial. In 732, for example, the Byzantine emperor Leo III married his son Constantine to the daughter of a Khazar qagan. A generation later, the caliph al-Mansur ordered his governor of Armenia to marry a Khazar princess, which he dutifully did. Turkic polities were promiscuous in their loyalties; their chief goal was to secure their independence. And this same goal seems to have governed their decisions about another

form of alliance: that of religion.

Invading nomads confronted complex cultic choices in their new lands. They could cling to their ancestral paganism, thereby separating themselves from their conquered subjects and from the surrounding powers with which they were contending. Or they could associate themselves with one side or the other through conversion. The choice was not always a free one. After the Muslim general Marwan chased the Khazar qagan up the Volga in 737, the qagan capitulated and agreed to become a Muslim. Among the Bulgars—the Khazars' rivals and relatives—Khan Boris tried to pursue a more deliberate strategy in the early 860s. He sent Pope Nicholas I a list of more than one hundred questions about the Catholic faith, to which the pope carefully replied. Boris calculated that the Christianity of a distant pontiff promised more autonomy than that of a hegemonic neighbor. But when the Byzantines heard of the plan, they invaded Bulgaria, persuading Boris to accept baptism from the Orthodox patriarch.

At more or less the same time, a Byzantine cleric named Constantine was participating in a religious debate at the Khazar court. Constantine would later win fame and sainthood as St. Cyril, "apostle to the Slavs," but the battle he was fighting at Atil in 861 had already been lost. Sometime earlier in the century, after a debate between representatives of Christianity, Islam, and Judaism, the Khazar qagans had rejected the religions of the two empires to their south and made the highly unusual choice to become Jews.

So much for ancient geopolitics. What about the postmodern? Even the more paranoid pages of the Web can help us here, for some of them point to the 1947 meetings of the United Nations' "Ad Hoc Committee on Palestine" at Lake Success, New York, where on October 18 Jamal Husseini, vice-president of the Arab Higher Committee,

took up the question of the racial relationship of the East European Jews to the Khazars. He quoted at some length from the Jewish Encyclopedia...to support his contention that the Jews of Eastern Europe—who, he said, were the creators of the Zionist movement—were descended from the Khazars, a people

of Turkish origin, without any connection with Palestine. Mr. Husseini also stated that... whether the present non-Jewish inhabitants of Palestine are of Arab origin is irrelevant. They are there, he said, in actual possession of their country since remote periods of time, and they need have no other association to establish their claim thereto...

Chaim Weizmann, Husseini's respondent in these debates, did not take up the topic. He merely replied that the justification for a Jewish homeland in Palestine was not race but "the facts and urgencies of life itself." Husseini's argument suggests that already by 1947 the Khazars had made one more migration, this time into the heart of the modern debate over the establishment of a Jewish state in the Middle East.

Shlomo Sand does not mention Husseini's speech, but his book takes up its theme. Its thesis is three-pronged. There exists a conspiracy of "traditional Zionist historians." Those historians tell "lies" about the Jewish past. These lies underwrite the creation of a uniquely racist state in Israel. Sand wants to convince us that from the very origins of Jewish historical writing, and especially since the beginnings of Zionism, the "authorized historians" have peddled an essential untruth about the Jewish people, in order to suppress an essential "truth." The lie is that all the world's Jews are descendants of people exiled from Judea when the Romans destroyed Jerusalem in 70 CE and crushed the subsequent revolts. The truth is that the vast majority of the Jews of the Diaspora are descendants not of Judean exiles but of converts from other times and places: most important, the Khazars, whom Sand thinks of as the progenitors of most of the Central European (Ashkenazic) Jews who migrated to Palestine and Israel in the twentieth century.

According to Sand, the lie is essential because it casts the establishment of a Jewish polity in Palestine as the rightful restitution of an ethnic inheritance. This ethnic myth in turn enables the racism that Sand sees in many policies of the Zionist state, such as those on citizenship, regularly denied to the descendants

of Palestinians who fled or were expelled during the war of 1948, but granted to claimants from the Diaspora who can show that they were born of a Jewish mother or establish (regardless of parentage) that they have been persecuted as Jews. Conversely, Sand's truth is essential because he believes that if the Jews of Israel are indeed descendents of converts rather than of biblical Judeans, then the "Jewishness" of the state is nothing but an illegitimate fantasy. Once that fantasy is exposed it will be easier to see why the state must abolish all distinctions between Jews and non-Jews. Until that happens, Israel will remain a racist state. In short—unlike others who have embraced the Khazars—Sand's effort to "dream" Jewish history anew is not intended as an indictment of Israel's existence but only of its existence as a Jewish state.

Unlike Sand, I don't believe that training as a historian qualifies me (or anyone else) to pass judgment on the legitimacy of states, but it does give me grounds for doubt about Sand's historical arguments. Some of my worries are merely constitutional: I tend to agree with Johan Huizinga's warning, issued from the ruins of Europe in 1919, that "there is no more dangerous tendency in history than that of representing the past as if it were a rational whole and dictated by clearly defined interests." Other doubts have to do with Sand's assumptions. Why should we believe that the need for a Jewish state was predicated on fantasies of racial identity rather than on Weizmann's "facts and urgencies of life," such as the urgent (in 1948) sense that without a refuge, Jews could not be secure from persecution? Still other doubts arise from the lingering racism in Sand's own logic. Is he suggesting that ethnic nationalism is legitimate when the genealogies that justify it are sound? If Diaspora Jews really were primarily descended from Judeans, would an Israeli "ethnos-state" be ethically unimpeachable? (This problem is not trivial, given the weakness of Sand's historical arguments for mass conversion.) But let us leave all these vague worries aside. The book's contents, judging from its reception, are clearly fascinating and deserve to be engaged. Are most Jews descended from converts? Has a Zionist

conspiracy replaced the true history of the Jewish people with a false one? And is the purpose of this conspiracy the production and perpetuation of a racist state?

First the converts: Sand's search for them does not quite begin at the very beginning—as Edward Said did when he invoked theories of Moses' Egyptian origins to negate Jewish claims to ethnic or religious distinctiveness. His starting point is ancient Judea: a dry and hilly place, unfit for intensive agriculture. This inhospitable terrain could not, he argues, have produced all the Jews who ended up in the Diaspora. Even before the Roman destruction of Jerusalem in the first century, many Jews lived in places like Egypt, Syria, Rome, and Spain. Population growth rates in the ancient world were not very high, and if we assume that those growth rates were constant and consistent, then how could a region as small and poor as ancient Israel have produced enough Jews to account for all those found outside it? Sand pokes fun (sometimes well deserved) at some of the attempts of nineteenth- and earlier twentieth-century scholars to explain the phenomenon, such as the higher fertility of the Jews, their religious commitment to reproduction, or their refusal to practice the infanticide so common as a means of family planning in the ancient world. His conclusion: the many Jews dispersed throughout the ancient world cannot have been descended from Judeans. They must have been converts.

This basic demographic logic provides both spring and escapement for *The Invention of the Jewish People*. But the assumptions that underlie it, and the deductions it produces, should be tested against what we know of the real world. At the level of assumptions, for example, no demographer would deny that the population growth rate of the ancient world was much lower than that of the modern. But neither would any serious demographer deny that there could be wide variations within that growth rate. Measured from the third century BCE to the first century CE, a surplus-extracting city like Alexandria in Egypt grew much more quickly than the vast surplus-surrendering rural areas whose taxes built the metropolises of the Hellenistic and Roman world. Is it such a surprise, then, that the Jewish population of Alexandria burgeoned as well? Philo of Alexandria, writing in the early first century,

estimated the Jewish population of Egypt at the wildly implausible figure of one million. Whatever the actual figure, it was clearly high. Some of that population was drawn from converts, but the evidence does not allow us to speak with any conviction about proportions. On the contrary, Egyptian sources say little about converts, though they often tell us about Jewish immigrants from Judea.

My point is not that the majority of Egypt's Jews were descendants of Judeans: the evidence is too frail for such claims. I am simply trying to convey the flavor of Sand's methodology, which consists in imposing a spurious demographic logic on the past, one that often flies in the face of the surviving evidence. Some of his case studies—such as his claim that the Sephardic Jews of North Africa and Spain are descended from Berber converts—strike me as scandalously weak, perhaps because that field is my specialty. Others, such as his arguments about the Jews of Yemen, seem more defensible. But in every case, his goal is not to make sense of the past through the sources, but rather to reduce the past to his will.

Consider once again those remarkable Khazars, whose conversion to Judaism provides Sand with his most important arguments. The sources tell us that their leader, the qagan, converted to Judaism circa 800, and that henceforth qagans could only be chosen—the office was not hereditary—from among those notables who were Jews. But the sources do not suggest that all the Khazars converted. As the geographer Ibn Rusta wrote in 903, “their supreme chief professes the Jewish faith, as also do the war lords and nobles who are with him, and the rest of the Khazars profess a religion similar to that of the Turks.” Moreover, the Khazars were a small minority ruling over a loose confederation, and the peoples under their dominion remained what they were: Muslim, Christian, and pagan. In 912, according to Ibn Masudi, when the qagan allowed a troop of northern Rus to pass through his realms on their way to attack the Muslim ports on the Caspian, his Muslim subjects (which included his body-guard!) rebelled and wiped out the Rus. Clearly the Khazar polity had not heard the early modern dictum of *cuius regio, eius religio*. The

religion of the qagan tells us very little about the religions of the peoples he ruled. To make matters worse, some documents describe the migration of “many Jews... from all the Muslim cities and from Byzantium” into Khazaria. I suppose someone might try to argue, on the basis of such documents, that most Khazar Jews were actually descended from Judeans.

Such an argument would be disingenuous, but no more so than Sand's preference for the claim that the “bulk of the great Khazar tribe” converted to Judaism. In his zeal to discover a non-Jewish genealogy for the Jews of Eastern Europe, he imposes modern conceptions of state religion on the fragile evidence left behind by an early medieval Turkic tribal confederation. A decade ago, Tony Judt described a similar argument (Arthur Koestler's) as “a bizarre, misguided attempt to demonstrate that the Ashkenazi Jews of Europe are descended from Khazar tribesmen of the Caucasus, and thus need feel no special affinity for, nor obligation toward, Israel and the traditional Jewish heritage.” Judt's endorsement on the front cover of Sand's book suggests he finds this version less misguided, but from a historical point of view I can't see why. I don't object to demystifications of the foundations of Israel or any other modern nation. But if those demystifications are achieved by mystifying the past, we should not call them “history.”

Perhaps this criticism is beside the point, for what is original about this book is not the history. As Sand puts it himself, “much of the information in this book has always been known.” Even the book's essential argument—that the world's Jews are a mixture of many peoples, not a “Chosen People” descended from Abraham—has been made by countless authors, from the ancient world to the modern. Medieval Christian polemicists—eager to maintain the truth of Scripture while debunking the claims of the rabbis—focused on the Diaspora, explaining that the Roman conquerors of Jerusalem put no women aboard the ships that carried the survivors into exile, so the males had taken Muslim or pagan women as wives. Their living descendants were therefore not real Jews but bastards, without any ongoing claim to the covenant. The Enlightenment was more thoroughly skeptical, and since Voltaire the number of reputable

historians willing to defend the historical existence of Abraham—let alone the descent of the Jews from his lineage—has rightly dwindled to zero.

In short, Sand is tilting at a very tattered straw man. The endurance of that straw man as a credible target for critiques of Jewish identity raises troubling questions, but even more disturbing is the technique Sand adopts to make his arguments seem bold and novel: his adoption of conspiracy as narrative mode. Interviewed by Andrew Marr on the BBC, Sand was quick to correct Marr's use of the word conspiracy:

Marr: "In some sense would you say that therefore there has been a conspiracy to hide what you have..."

Sand: "No, not a conspiracy, we have to be careful."

Yet his book constantly invokes the vocabulary of conspiracy, if not the word itself. On the one hand there are the "authorized" historians, the hard core of the "corps of intellectuals who control the nation state," "high priests of memory," clerics of the "chosen 'history.'" These historians are the "agents of culture," "Israeli memory-merchants," "memory agents": undercover enforcers of the false memories that underpin the racist Jewish State. A rogue historian is needed to unravel the unreality these agents create (think Neo in *The Matrix*, or Sarah Palin). "Unfortunately, few of my colleagues—the teachers of history in Israel—feel it their duty to undertake the dangerous pedagogical mission of exposing conventional lies about the past." Shlomo Sand has accepted the mission.

Although Sand doesn't justify (or apparently even acknowledge) his choice of genre, I can think of good reasons to adopt conspiracy as a mode of narrating the past. There is a deep structural affinity between conspiratorial theories of knowledge, with their dynamics of repression and revolutionary emancipation, and the cannibalism so characteristic of the cult of Clio, in which each generation of historians devours its parents. And for consumers, conspiracy translates reading into revelation, an induction into liberating knowledge in defiance of censoring power. These attributes make

conspiracy a powerful tool with which to destabilize our sense of the past. *The DaVinci Code* provides a good example: its account of Jesus' canonical adult life as the product of two millennia of ecclesiastical suppression did more to defamiliarize the history of early Christianity than any number of scholarly studies on New Testament apocrypha and pseudepigrapha.

Sand obviously intends his deployment of conspiracy to achieve a similar defamiliarization of Jewish history, but the effect is rather the opposite. The problem is not that Sand's conspiracy is so contrived (have Jews ever stopped writing about the Khazars since Hasdai ibn Shaprut first discovered them in the tenth century?); nor that the conclusions Sand comes to in his quest for "historical truth" are so suspect. Accuracy has never been a prerequisite for shattering the illusions that the present holds about the past. The problem is that instead of asking us to become reflective about our myths of Jewish identity, Sand simply reinforces another myth long on offer—that of Jewish obsession with genetic chosenness. Instead of encouraging reflection, his method favors projection and fantasy, a danger heightened by his efforts to align Jewish myths of identity with the most discredited forms of nationalism available. He repeatedly uses German vocabulary (*völkish*) to describe Zionist historiography and compares the Jewish historians he criticizes to the academic architects of National Socialism. He sees, for example, "ironically" no difference between the "imaginary idea of nationhood" of Yitzhak Baer, the first professor of history at the Hebrew University, and the racist and nationalist assumptions that led Baer's German professors to welcome Hitler.

Similarly in the life sciences, Sand implicitly aligns the laboratories of the Jewish "race-nation" with those of Nazi racism. Israel's scientific establishment is, according to his last chapter, a "puppet" manipulated from within by the "racist hunchback" of Jewish theology. His arguments are gleaned from the silliness of the popular press; about the science itself his claims are few and misleading. He sees racism in Israeli biologists' preference for comparing genetic material from known population groups—for example, comparing haplotypes of Ashkenazic

Jews with those of Yemeni ones—rather than “random sampling of genetic material whose ethnic origin is not known in advance.” But geneticists everywhere, even in unimpeachably democratic Scandinavia (a leader in behavioral genetics), look first for alleles where they most expect to find them, searching, say, for genes associated with breast cancer in women that suffer from it. This is not a racist plot, but the universal scientific practice. No matter, Sand does not need to worry about the details of science, for what he really argues is that Israeli research is racist simply because it takes place in a Jewish state: “in a state which the law prevents marriage between a ‘Jew’ and a ‘non-Jew’... Jewish-Israeli research cannot be entirely free from crude and dangerous racism.”

And what about this law of marriage? To a historian of race it looks rather peculiar, for it is not a law but an absence of law: there are no civil unions in Israel. Jurisdiction over marriage and divorce is assigned to the clergy (Jewish, Christian, and Muslim), who refuse to bless the union of individuals from different faiths, thereby impeding intermarriage between Jew and non-Jew—and Muslim and non-Muslim. The state does not forbid such marriages, and registers them when they are contracted elsewhere. (Cyprus is the routine choice for interfaith couples.) This surrender of jurisdiction over marriage to the clergy constitutes, to my mind, a dangerous abridgment of marriage rights. But it does not look much like the völkish racism of the Nüremberg laws, the anti-miscegenation statutes of the U.S. South, or South Africa’s apartheid laws, with which Sand’s rhetoric tries to associate it.

The other pillar of Sand’s “race-nation,” the Law of Return, certainly lies at the heart of whatever it means for Israel to be a Jewish State. It applies to (1) any Jew living in the Diaspora or (2) a child and a grandchild of a Jew; the spouse of a Jew; the spouse of a child of a Jew; and the spouse of a grandchild of a Jew, except for a Jew by birth who has voluntarily changed his religion. This second clause (as amended in 1970), suggests that it is susceptibility to persecution as a Jew in the Diaspora, rather than fantasies of racial identity, that motivate the law. Sand does not pay much attention to this clause, because he sees persecution as an artifact of the past. Anti-Semitism,

he says, is no longer a serious threat. He focuses his criticism on the right of return of every Jew, and on the key question it raises: who is a Jew? The simple answer, according to rabbinic law, is (1) anyone born of a Jewish mother and (2) anyone who converts to Judaism in accordance with rabbinic law. We might think of an analogy here with citizenship by birth and by naturalization. Of course, the simple answer does not do justice to a complex world, and a number of important cases touching on these issues have come before Israel’s Supreme Court. But although Sand would have us believe that, when faced with such complexities, Israelis yearn for “some genetic marker to reveal a person’s Jewishness,” neither rabbinic nor secular law allows any place to phenotype or genotype. There is no genetic evidence to support the claim of some seven thousand members of the Kuki-Chin-Minzo peoples (from Northeastern India) that they are descendants of the lost tribe of Manasseh, but the Sephardic rabbinate recognized them as Jews, and many have since become citizens of Israel.

My critique of Sand’s argument is not a defense of the Law of Return. The law certainly privileges one religious classification over others in the multi-religious state, with an explicitness that sharply distinguishes Israel from most Western liberal democracies. (An interesting exception: Spanish law grants citizenship to anyone who can prove descent from Jews exiled in 1492, but not to descendants of exiled Muslims and Moriscos.) There may be reasons for such a law—such as the belief that Jews require a refuge from persecution—and there may be dangers associated with it, including the danger of resonances with racism. No matter where we live, we will be called upon to think critically about questions involving citizenship, religion, and race—as in the case currently before the British courts, about whether the definition of Jewishness used by state-funded Jewish schools in admissions violates the Race Relations Act of 1976. But Sand is not trying to encourage critical thought. On the contrary, he wants to short-circuit reflection by painting every aspect of the Jewish state in the same flesh-tones of racism.

Some readers will feel that none of these

quibbles matter. After all, Israel's Law of Return does privilege Judaism within the state. Its lack of civil unions does impede intermarriage between Jew and non-Jew. These and other laws deploy religious classification to discriminate among Israel's citizens. If these discriminations produce sufficiently grave injustice, then doesn't the fight against them legitimate itself, regardless of historical or conceptual error? Why not adopt as our own some version of the words with which a twelfth-century Christian biographer of the prophet Muhammad (Gautier de Compiègne) dismissed the significance of any mistakes he might have made: "One may safely speak ill of a man whose malignity transcends and surpasses whatever evil can be said about him."

I do not think this willingness to divorce moral certainty from a commitment to knowledge can lead to either ethical or historical justice (I leave open the difficult question of what such justice might be). We seem caught in an epistemological Catch-22: everyone wants to speak in the name of historical truth, but few believe in the tools by which that truth is claimed. History therefore proceeds as vilification, each side attempting to associate the other with unquestionable evil: the Zionist can only be a Nazi racist, the anti-Zionist a Nazi sympathizer, Holocaust denier, and anti-Semite. This must be why *The Invention of the Jewish People* makes no attempt to think critically about the questions it raises, preferring to offer readers familiar fantasies to facilitate their projections. This is a shame, because the book's subject—the interplay between citizenship, biology, religion, and other forms of imagined identity—is one of fundamental importance not only to Israelis and Palestinians but also to the citizens of every modern state, for these remain the tools by which all nations maintain their cohesion.

It should shock us that the most important variable determining the life chances of all human beings in the world today remains the citizenship into which they are born, a citizenship largely defined in terms of biological descent. If this does not bother those of us in

Western democracies as much as it might, it is perhaps because we have learned to turn a blind eye to the exclusions and discriminations that our own polities systematically wreak in defense of sovereignty, prosperity, and common culture. But we live in an age when questions about the inter-relationship of citizenship, religion, and bio-politics loom ever larger, even in enlightened Europe (witness the passing of a Swiss constitutional referendum to strip its Muslim citizens of religious rights their co-religionists enjoy daily in Israel). The case of Israel—an ostensibly liberal democracy founded as an explicitly Jewish state and maintained with frequent violence—poses these questions with a sharpness that is easier to recognize. We are right to recognize those questions, and to ask them of Israel, but we need to do so in ways that make us more, rather than less, reflective. This then is the real failure of *The Invention of the Jewish People*: it teaches us too little about the "imagined identities," biological and religious among many others, that produced the state of Israel and even less about those that produced and reproduce the states we all live in. This book could not be more timely nor its topic more important, but it is only a symptom of the disease, not its cure.

David Nirenberg is the Deborah R. and Edgar D. Jannotta Professor at the University of Chicago, where he teaches in the Committee on Social Thought and the History Department.

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