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Karaites in Russia

von John D. Klier*

Responding to the claim that his co-religionists totally rejected the Mishnah and the Talmud, the great Karaite leader Simha Isaac ben Mose Lutschik (d. 1766) declared: "God preserve us from such an injustice and a crime". These sentiments were expressed at a time when Karaites and Jews were still on correct terms, and still considered themselves part of the same people. It was a consensus that was soon to disappear.

What was the origin and nature of the people known as the Karaites (*Karaimy*)? A number of fanciful genealogies were put forward for them: that they were the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel, military servitors of a Persian king who had given them the Crimean Peninsula as a gift, or the descendants of the Khazars, a Turkic people who had inhabited the steppes of southern Russia in the ninth century and who had converted to Judaism.

The least controversial statement that can be made of the Karaites is that their religious beliefs are characterized by the recognition of the Old Testament as the "sole and direct source of religious law". As such they represent a tradition in Judaism with a long pedigree, at least as old as the Sadducees, with whom the Karaites have been compared. As such, they rejected the development of tradition and the oral law, exemplified by the Talmud. The putative founder of Karaism as a distinct movement was Anan ben David (c. 790 AD), a religious leader of Babylonian Jewry. The major developmental role in Karaism was that of the Persian Benjamin ben Mose Nihawendi (c. 830) who stressed the need for the free and independent study of the scriptures. As is inevitably the case with groups who take such an individual

* Dieser Aufsatz ist das Exposé einer grösseren Abhandlung, die Prof. John Doyle Klier, Professor of Modern Jewish History am University College London, für die JUDAICA zu schreiben vorhatte. Am 23. September 2007 ist Prof. Klier unerwartet gestorben. So erscheint das Exposé hier im Gedenken an den Kollegen, Freund und langjährigen Wegbegleiter auf jüdischen und karäischen Spuren in Mittel- und Osteuropa (Stefan Schreiner, Tübingen).

approach to the original religious canon, the Karaite movement in its early stages was characterized by schism, rupture and fragmentation.

The Karaites were also widely settled. There was a colony in Erets Israel, and a significant settlement in the Crimea by the twelfth century AD. At the end of the fourteenth century the Grand Duke of Lithuania, Witold, carried settlements of Tatar prisoners of war to Troki (Trakai), Lutsk (Łuck) and Halicz (Galič). Karaites were found among these settlers, and the three towns slowly emerged as the cultural strongholds of the Karaite movement.

The Karaites were well-known in the Middle Ages for their polemical struggles with rabbinic Judaism and with Christianity. Both religions were equally vulnerable to charges of distorting the original message of the scriptures with false interpretations. One of the foremost critiques of Christianity, the book *Chizzuk Emunah* (*strengthening the faith*) was composed by the Karaite Isaac ben Abraham Troki (1533-1594). It became known to the Christian world through a Latin translation, the “Tela Ignea Satanea”, published [by Johann Christoph Wagensel (1633-1705)] in Altdorf in 1681. The Polish state, which negotiated privilege charters with the Karaites also knew them well, but they were totally unknown to Russian authorities charged with governing them after the partitions of Poland and the annexation of the Crimea.

This paper will focus on the dissimilar legal treatment accorded the Karaites and rabbinic Jewry by the Russian state in the period from 1794 to 1914, its origins and consequences. The simplest description of the policy of the Russian state towards the Karaites is that they were exempted from all the restrictions placed upon rabbinic Jewry. The rationalization of this policy, advanced by both government officials and the Karaites themselves, was that the Karaites were judged innocent of the flaws ascribed by the Russian state to Jews, and best summarized by the two categories “religious fanaticism” and “economic exploitation”.

The initiation of a separate policy for the Karaites dates to 1794, when the government of Catherine II. imposed a system of double taxation upon Russian Jewry, and promptly exempted the Karaites of the Crimea. The double tax, although often presented as an act of religious persecution, was primarily a revenue producing measure designed to fill Russian coffers depleted by war. Since the Russian state had not yet come to a collective condemnation of Jewish faults, the double tax should not be viewed as a collective punishment. Any explanation for

the exemption of the Karaites is problematical. The exempting measure itself noted that it was in response to an initiative by the Governor-General of the Tauride (The Crimea), Platon Zubov (1767-1822), a former lover and favorite of the Empress Catherine. It explicitly warns that those enforcing it must be alert that rabbinic Jews not pass themselves off as Karaites to gain the exemption.

It is known that the mechanism for the exemption was a lengthy visit to the capital by two Karaite leaders, with the encouragement and support. We do not know what arguments the Karaites used, but the nature of the exemption implies that it was granted as a favour to Zubov, who presumably was well-compensated by the Karaite community. The small number of Karaites insured that the exemption entailed no substantial loss to the Russian exchequer. Not only the Crimean Karaites benefited: the exemption was extended to their co-religionists in Lithuania, too.

Thus, at an early stage in Russian rule, Karaite *shtadlanim* (elite intermediaries) showed themselves adept at approaching the corridors of power, and getting results. That was sufficient for the moment, since all the initiatives of the Russian state for the next thirty years were directed specifically against the Jews of Old Poland. But 1827 was the fateful year in which Tsar Nicholas I. (1825-1855) required the Jews to provide military recruits in person, rather than purchasing a collective exemption. This was a tragic moment of almost apocalyptic proportions for Russian Jewry. How did the Karaites fare?

Another delegation was sent to St. Petersburg by the Crimean Karaites, consisting of Simha ben Solomon Babovich (1790-1855), son of one of the petitioners of 1795, and Joseph Solomon ben Mose Lutskij (1770-1845). They soon secured the intervention of Count Victor Kochubey (1768-1834), the former viceroy of Russian Poland, who must have provided valuable advice. The delegation emphasized to the Tsar's government the special treatment which they had received from Catherine II, thus placing precedent on their side. They also stressed their difference from rabbinic Jewry. Again, the underlying motivation for the exemption which the Karaites received is unclear. Ostensibly the dispensation was allowed to the Karaites because the Tatars of the Crimea were not obliged to provide recruits. Yet in 1828 the exemption was extended to the Karaites of Lithuania and Volynia provinces. Well might one of the intercessors title his account of this feat "The Saving of Israel".

The family name of one of the delegates of 1827, Joseph Solomon Lutskiy, is significant. His father, a great Karaite scholar and religious philosopher, had emigrated to the Crimea in 1751 from Lutsk in Volynia province. The influx of Polish Karaites into the backward Crimean community had an invigorating influence, in both the intellectual and political spheres. Polish Karaites were a major force in transforming Evpatoria into a center for Karaite book publishing. The dual role of scholar and partisan introduced by the immigrants found its ultimate expression in the career of another Lutsk Karaite, Abraham ben Samuel Firkovich (1786-1874), of whom more later.

Events surrounding settlement rights in Troki, outside Vilna in Lithuania, gave the political activities of the Karaites a new orientation. In the pre-partition Polish state, Karaites had enjoyed an ancient monopoly on settlement in Troki, a privilege that presumably lapsed with the Russian annexation. In 1805 Jews, expelled from the countryside under provisions of the Jewish Statute of 1804, began to settle without incident in Troki. By 1809 the Karaites had become alarmed, and began a desultory campaign to have the Jews expelled. The case dragged through the Russian bureaucracy for decades until 1830, when the Troki Karaites undertook a new initiative. Their spokesmen clearly realized that an appeal to old privileges was insufficient, so a new petition was far more critical of the Jews, and emphasized the differences between Karaites and rabbinic Jews. The latter, the petition contended, were universally dishonest in their economic undertakings, refused all incentives to engage in agriculture and pursued tavern keeping. The Karaite spokesmen were well-informed: these were the essential ingredients of the government's indictment of Jewish "economic exploitation". Just as the Karaite petition was about to be accepted, the Jews of Troki made a last-ditch appeal to the Tsar himself, Nicholas I, in which they repaid the Karaites in kind, indicting them for the same sort of exploitative activities. They also played a trump card. They observed that while the Karaites had sought to evade military service, "the Rabbanites with reverence and gratitude provide personal military service on equal terms with the other estates of the state".¹ This wild exaggeration – resistance to military service was literally tearing the Jewish community asunder – was precisely the sort of argument to

¹ IU. GESSEN, "Bor'ba Karaimov g. Trok s Evreiami", in: *Evreiskaya Starina* 3 (1910), pp. 569-579, here p. 577.

appeal to Nicholas, who ordered the case re-opened. The hopes of the Jewish petitioners were ultimately undone by a negative report on the Rabbanites submitted by the Governor-General of Vilna. In 1835, the expulsion was ordered.

The lessons of this episode were not lost on a recent emigrant to the Crimea from Lutsk, Abraham Firkovich. Firkovich had begun to send memoranda on the Karaites to the Russian government as early as 1825. After a trip to Palestine he settled in Evpatoria and began to collect Karaite antiquities. In the course of travels about the Pale of Settlement he also developed an aversion for rabbinic Jewry, which he expressed in a number of polemical pamphlets. Soon a greater opportunity presented itself for the blackening of the Jews and the exalting of the Karaites.

In 1839 the newly formed Odessa Society for History and Antiquities approached the leader of the Evpatoria Karaites, Simha Babovich, through the Governor-General of The Tauride, Muromtsev, with a request for information on the Karaites. The Society posed six questions: (1) When and how did the Karaites settle in the Crimea? (2) From what nation were the Karaites descended? (3) What were their characteristics, customs and occupations? (4) Were there to be found among the Karaites famous men of outstanding accomplishments? (5) Did they possess documents which would show how ancient their beliefs were? (6) For what reason did the Karaites differ from rabbinic Jews, and what were their differences in belief?

Babovich assembled delegates from all the Karaite communities in the Crimea, but they were at a loss as to how to proceed. They were rescued from their dilemma by Firkovich. He proposed to undertake an expedition to recover Jewish and Karaite antiquities in the Crimea, contingent upon a special commission. Firkovich received both a commission and a salary from the president of the Odessa Society, the Governor-General himself, Mikhail Semyonovich Vorontsov (1782-1856). He now had the power of the Russian state behind him.

What subsequently transpired is under dispute to this day. There is no question that Firkovich was able to expropriate a large collection of Jewish antiquities from such sources as the *genizah* (depository for old manuscripts) of the Krimchaks, a tatarized community of Jews who lived in Karasubazar. The Krimchak *genizah* contained Hebrew works dating to the tenth century AD. Firkovich claimed that the oldest of these materials came from an ancient Karaite synagogue in Chufut-

Kal'e. His credibility now established as a result of this remarkable find, Firkovich began to collect antiquities and tombstone inscriptions throughout the Crimea and eventually throughout the Middle East as well. Few of these materials could be connected directly to the Karaites, and Firkovich has since been accused of falsifying his inscriptions and dates. His ultimate objective was to establish the antiquity of the Karaites in the Crimea. In fact, he asserted that a colony of Medes had been established here by the Persian king Cambyses (529-21 BC), reinforced by settlers from the Kingdom of Israel. In other words, the forefathers' of the Karaites were the Lost Ten Tribes of Israel. Firkovich was not shy in spelling out the implications of this "discovery". It meant that the Karaites had an ancient claim to the Crimea that they had already departed Palestine before the Jews crucified Christ, and they were untouched by the subsequent development of the Talmud by the Jews. In orientation and outlook, they were closest to the Sadducee sect of Hellenistic times. Consequently, the Karaites were a pristine sect of Judaism, displaying none of the negative features of the mass of Russian and Polish Jewry. In a report written in 1859, Firkovich rejected the very name of "Jews" for his people, recommending that they be called "Russian Karaites" instead. Among the other extravagant claims of Firkovich was his contention that the Karaites provided the missionaries who converted the Khazars to Judaism, and that they were the representatives of Judaism who approached Grand Prince Vladimir of Kiev when he was choosing a higher religion to which to convert the Rus.

Firkovich's collection of antiquities from the Crimea and the Middle East were later purchased by the Imperial Russian Library in St. Petersburg, where they today comprise the core of the St. Petersburg National (State) Library's renowned Oriental Collection. Firkovich's discoveries were widely announced and accepted throughout the scholarly world during his lifetime. Questions of veracity did not arise until after his death.

It did not take Firkovich's claims long to reach a general audience in Russia. In 1843 the *Journal of the Ministry of Internal Affairs* published a highly favourable description of the sect, based upon Firkovich's findings as interpreted by Dr Bezalel Stern, the Director of the Odessa Jewish School. The essential outline of the Karaite myth was already in place: the antiquity of Karaite settlement, their conversion of the Khazars, and their moral superiority. Thus, Stern proclaimed the Karaites free of the "moral and civil degeneration" which afflicted

rabbinic Jewry. Consequently they did not attract the enmity of either Christians or Jews, while they conducted themselves with greater humaneness, sense of community, and openness to the outside world. The Karaites clearly deserved the privileged treatment which they received from the state.²

A survey of Jewish religious sects in Russia, published by the same *Journal* three years later, made the break complete. The author argued that the language and physiognomy of the Karaites was so different from the “narrow Jewish national type” that they could not be racially Jews at all, but must be descendants of the Turkic Khazars. Their “pure biblical teaching”, the author observed, protected them from “talmudic stupidity and rabbinic fanaticism”.³

In particular the alleged Karaite disdain for the Talmud worked to their advantage during this period. It was only in the reign of Nicholas I. (1825-1855) that Russian bureaucrats “discovered” the Talmud as the source of Jewish alienation from gentile society and as the wellspring of the negative, anti-social features thought to characterize Jewish life. These assumptions are particularly associated with the career of Fr. Luigi Chiarini (1789-1832), a faculty member on the Faculty of Oriental Languages at the University of Warsaw. He received a commission from Tsar Nicholas to translate the Talmud into French so that its pernicious doctrines might be laid bare for the Christian world to see. Chiarini’s interpretations of the Talmud are heavily influenced by the famous anti-talmudic work of Johann Eisenmenger (1654-1704). Russian Talmudophobia flourished for the duration of Nicholas’ reign, colouring the assumptions of the principal officials who had authority over the Jews. Official efforts to reduce “Talmudic fanaticism” prompted the government’s famous creation of a state-run Jewish school system in 1844.⁴ The celebrated statesman of the Nicholine era,

² “Evrei-Karaimy”, in: *Žurnal Ministerstva Vnutrennykh Del* 1 (January 1843), pp. 263-84, here, pp. 278-84. Stern’s willingness to denigrate rabbinic Jewry as contrasted with the Karaites may perhaps be explained by the fact that he was a partisan of the Haskalah, the Jewish Enlightenment movement, which waged war against the traditionalism of the Jewish community. Moreover, the full implications of Firkovich’s claims for Russian Jewry were not yet apparent.

³ “Evreiskie religioznye sekty v Rossii”, in: *Žurnal Ministerstva Vnutrennykh Del* 15 (September 1846), pp. 30-48.

⁴ MICHAEL STANISLAWSKI, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews*, Philadelphia 1983, pp. 64-69.

Count Pavel Dmitrievich Kiselev (Kiselyov) (1788-1872), appointed to head a Jewish reform committee in 1840, identified the Talmud as a chief obstacle to the government's desideratum of acculturating and merging the Jews with the rest of the population.⁵

Against this background the status of the Karaites could only improve, especially because their leaders now recognized the utility of distancing their community from rabbinic Jewry and of petitioning the central government for favours. This course can be charted from 1835, when a new statute for Russian Jewry was introduced. It established the principle that everything was permitted to the Jews unless specifically denied them by special enactments, setting the stage for the promulgation of hundreds of such restrictions. The Karaites were classified as Jews, albeit with the proviso that only advantages, not restrictions associated with the Jews were to be applied to them. For the rest of the Nicholine era the Karaites were increasingly favoured over the Jews. The privileges and exemptions which they received demonstrated that the government trusted them in precisely those areas where it distrusted Jews. Thus, Karaites were permitted to hire Christian servants (1838), swear oaths in a non-insulting way (1842), and participate in the liquor trade (1850), all areas where the state developed special initiatives against the Jewish community. The residence restrictions of the Jewish Pale of Settlement, including bans against residence in the strategic ports of Nikolaev and Sevastopol, were not enforced for Karaites.

If the Karaites fared thus under Nicholas' iron rule, how better was their position in the reform era of his successor Alexander II. While Alexander's government cautiously and slowly extended the rights of Russian Jewry – culminating in the right given to skilled artisans to settle outside the Pale in 1865 – the Karaites were granted the equivalent of full civil emancipation. On 8 April 1863 a decree announced that "the Karaites, under the protection of the general laws, enjoy all rights given to Russian subjects, depending on the estate (*sostoyanye*) to which they belong" (*VPSZ*, XXXVIII: 39,460). Such a clear and unambiguous emancipation was never granted to Russian Jewry as a whole until the fall of the monarchy.

The religious affairs of the Karaites were placed in order even earlier. In response to the lobbying efforts of Simha ben Solomon Babovich, and following the model of Islamic institutions in the Cri-

⁵ Ibid., p. 43.

mea, the Russian government created in Evpatoria in 1837 the Karaite Religious Administration, which was charged with overseeing the religious life of the Karaites. They were thus independent of any association with the system of autonomous self-government, the *kahal*, still operational for Russian Jews. This freed them from the numerous special taxes, especially those on kosher meat and candles, which the Jews paid to the state. The first head of the Religious Administration, the “Hakham”, was Babovich himself, although he was not a learned man. Consequently the office tended to acquire a political character, and to provide the Karaites with an officially sanctioned lobbying body. Russian Jews, in contrast, lost their limited system of autonomous self-government in 1844. A so-called Rabbinical Commission was founded by the government in 1848 for rabbinic Jewry “to supervise and render opinion on questions related to the laws and customs of the Jewish faith and affairs of the rabbis”. This was a still-born institution, which failed to meet regularly and never provided the Jews with lobbying power equivalent to that of the Karaites.⁶

Local officials were prone to confuse Karaites and Jews and to deny the former their rightful prerogatives. Thus, in 1875 the Karaites approached the government with the request that they no longer be called “Jews”.⁷ While this particular request was refused, the Russian state continued to be solicitous of the Karaites. In 1881 the Minister of the Interior, Nikolai Pavlovich Ignatiev (1832-1908, issued an instruction to all local officials reminding them that the Karaites fully enjoyed the rights of Russian subjects, and were not to be confused with Jews. The timing of this instruction is significant, for at that precise moment Ignatiev’s ministry was in the process of devising sweeping restrictions on Jewish residence and occupational rights, the infamous “May Laws” of 1882. Not unexpectedly when a court case on the applicability of the May Laws to the Karaites finally reached the Senate ten years later, that body quickly found that the May Laws did not apply to the Karaites.

In general the 1880s were a good time for the Karaites. They largely escaped the anti-Jewish pogroms of 1881-2, and this merely confirmed the government’s estimation of their moral superiority, which had

⁶ ELI LEDERHENDLER, *The Road to Modern Jewish Politics*, Oxford 1989, pp. 73-74.

⁷ *Evreiskaya Encyklopediya* vol. IX, p. 294. In 1892, the Karaites of Troki requested that their places of worship be designated “churches” (*sobory*), rather than “synagogues”.

preserved them from the “people’s wrath” which was vented against the exploiting Jews. While Karaites were included in the ban on persons of a non-Christian faith being called to the bar without the specific approval of the Minister of Justice in the 1890s, it was a blunt arrow, since there were no Karaite assistant lawyers who might have been eligible for such promotion. They were more than compensated by a contemporaneous exemption from a ban denying non-Christians the right to act as brokers on the Nikolaev Stock Exchange. In short, the Karaites succeeded in preserving their privileged legal position in the Russian Empire up to the Revolution of 1917.

Given the government’s sharp differentiation of Karaites and Jews, and the former’s repeated assertion of their own moral superiority, it is not surprising that a degree of bitterness entered Karaite-Jewish relations. This was especially so in the early years of the reign of Alexander II. The worst rigors of the Nicholine censorship were abolished, the periodical press was increasingly open to topical polemics, and a cadre of Russian-Jewish litterateurs published articles on aspects of the Jewish Question. Since the government was known to be considering the amelioration of the Jews’ legal status, there was ample motivation for attempts to rehabilitate the reputation of Russian Jewry vis-à-vis the Karaites. There was a specific pretext as well. In 1858, the prestigious St. Petersburg weekly *Illustratsiya* published editorials and columns which presented an extremely unflattering portrait of the so-called “West Russian Talmudists”, and compared them unfavourably to the Karaites. A number of Jews rushed into print in response. Typical was an article by Faddei Berezkin, published in *Odesskij Vestnik* (no. 117, 18 October 1858). Berezkin’s own observations in Odessa prepared him, he announced, to refute the myth that the Karaites were more enlightened, less alienated from the Christian world, and more fluent in the Russian tongue. For example, there were 200 Jews in Odessa’s secondary schools, and one Karaite. While numerous Jews played important roles in the civil life of the city, the Karaites could boast only one prominent individual, Abraham Firkovich.

Karaite voices were soon raised to challenge this foray, with two articles published in *Odesskij Vestnik* in February of 1859. They offered what was to become the standard Karaite defence in these exchanges, emphasizing the antiquity of Karaite settlement, their reputation as model subjects of the Tsar, and the speed with which they were integrating into Russian society. They reminded critics who totalled Jewish

and Karaite students that the Karaites were outnumbered by several million souls. Karaites seemed to be very successful in communicating this message, but then they appear to have been preaching to a converted audience. Thus, in 1874 the St. Petersburg religious periodical *Tserkovno-Obshchestvennyi Vestnik* carried a three part series on the Karaites which was gushingly positive – and no wonder, since the principal source of its information was the Karaite leader Babovich. Inevitably, by stressing the lack of enmity of the Karaites towards the Christian world, such works presumed hostility from rabbinic Jews, centered on the preachments of the Talmud. Karaite spokesmen had one additional device which they employed to good effect against Jewish criticism. Since most attacks questioned the special legal status of the Karaites, they could be dismissed as jealousy at best, and at worst as a spiteful effort to sabotage the well-deserved privileges of the Karaites (*Novorossiiskij Telegraf*, no. 2080, 30 December 1881).

Faced with a united front of Karaite spokesmen and Russian public opinion, Jewish anti-Karaite polemics were often reduced to unseemly sniping. A preferred technique was to attribute to Karaites exactly those negative traits which were commonly associated with the Jews. A critic writing in 1879 stressed the mutual support which marked the economic operations of the Karaite community, and which enabled them to dominate and control local markets. This was, of course, a Karaite version of the old complaint against Jewish “economic exploitation” (*Novorossiiskij Telegraf*, no. 1420, 7 December 1879).

On another front the Karaites were accused of moral rigidity, which was reinforced by an ignorant clergy. If Karaim had once been characterized by an openness in their interpretation of the scriptures, they were now irredeemably rigid. The pettifogging of their teachers turned the sabbath into a day of torture and inconvenience. Unlike the rest of the world, which valued the moral significance of the Bible while ignoring its civil institutions, the Karaites did just the reverse. In this way the Karaites were saddled with the anti-Jewish charge of “religious fanaticism” (*Novorossiiskij Telegraf*, no. 65, 22 March 1870). These attacks did no more to discredit the Karaite position in official eyes than gibes at their claim of an ancient past, although one critic aimed a telling blow with his public mystification at the incongruity of the Karaites, allegedly the descendants of the fierce and warlike Khazars, continually running to St. Petersburg in order to seek exemption from military service (*Den*, no. 4, 22 January 1871).

The final chapter in Karaite-Jewish relations is tinged with irony. On 9 January 1939 the Ministry of Interior of the German Reich issued a finding that the Karaites did not belong to the Jewish religious community, nor was their “racial psychology” such as to classify them as Jews. Matters of life and death hung on this bit of Nazi science. When the Germans invaded the Soviet Union in 1941 and the Einsatzgruppen began the liquidation of Jews, they were instructed to spare any Karaites who came under their control. Yet nagging doubts remained. To still them, the Germans queried three Jewish experts in the Warsaw ghetto, Zelig Kalmanovich (1885-1944), Meir (Majer) Balaban (1877-1942) and Itzhak (Ignacy) Schipper (1884-1943). These respected scholars well understood the significance of their answer. No, they replied, the Karaites were not Jews. The Karaites were spared.