The Fate of the Crimean Jewish Communities: Ashkenazim, Krimchaks and Karaites

by Warren Green

A thorough examination of the fate of the Jewish people under Nazi rule uncovers the surprising fact that no fewer than four cases of exemptions were granted by the Nazi Germans to groups of "Jewish" origin. In all cases, spokespeople for these communities argued that they were not of Jewish racial origin and that in the past they had little if any contact with the more numerous Eastern European Ashkenazic Jewish community. These groups which originated in Southern Russia and Central Asia or lived in emigré communities in Western Europe included Russian Karaites, Judeo-Tats, Georgian Jews, and Bukharan Jews.

From German documentation found in the archives of the National Archives, YIVO, Bundesarchive, Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine and Yad Vashem, it is clear that the Nazi's benevolent treatment of these groups was an integral part of the policy which they adopted when they dealt with the non-Slavic nationality groups of the Soviet Union. The pronounced anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiments voiced by the leaders of the various Turkic and Caucasian groups were well received by many high ranking Nazi officials. These shared anti-communist sentiments prompted a tenuous alliance between the Russian minorities and the Nazis during the German occupation of the Soviet Union. This alliance was viewed by the leaders of the nationality groups as a means toward their goals of defeating communism, regaining control of their respective homelands, and establishing independent republics in Russia. Thus, the Germans consciously tempered their racial zealoussness in deference to military and political considerations.

As a result of this acquiescence to political expediency, an estimated 85,000 people were theoretically exempted from being defined, legislated and murdered as Jews. One should, however, note that the actual number of people actually affected by these exemptions was considerably less since the Germans never conquered the southern part of the Caucasus and Central Asia where most of these Jewish groups resided.

A study of the Nazi's racial policy in one of these occupied territories, the Crimea, sheds light on this area of history and thus enables one to obtain a more complete understanding of the Holocaust.

A preliminary survey of the history of the Russian Karaites in the modern period is necessary in order to examine the reason for these exemptions and how they affected the lives of an estimated 74,000 "Jews" living in the Crimean Peninsula during the German Occupation.
The Karaites were a schismatic Jewish sect which severed itself from the Babylonian Jewish community in the eighth century C.E. The Karaites contended that the Rabbinites, the adherents to the Rabbinic tradition of Judaism, had perverted the Torah by superseding it with the Talmud. As a result of this theological argument, the Karaites adopted a fundamentalist approach to scriptural exegesis. Originating in Iraq, the Karaites established communities in Palestine, Egypt, Turkey, the Crimea and in Poland-Lithuania. Until the end of the eighteenth century, the Karaites considered themselves, and were considered by the larger Jewish community and the respective host nations, as a religious minority group within the larger Jewish community. Thus, Karaites were affected by the laws and taxes imposed on the Jewish community and also shared their lot in times of persecution. This situation, however, changed in Russia when thousands of Jews became Russian subjects as a result of the Russian conquest of the Crimea in 1783, and the three partitions of Poland in 1772, 1793 and 1795. On 8 June, 1795, Tsarina Catherine the Great accepted a petition from a Crimean Karaite delegation requesting that they be exempted from any legislation affecting the Jews. They claimed that their ancestors had been living in the Crimea since the sixth century B.C.E., when King Sennacherib of Assyria brought them to that region after conquering the Kingdom of Israel. They also argued that their ancestors were not in Palestine when the Jews crucified Jesus. This theological argument was accepted, and the Karaites were permitted to purchase land and were exempt from paying the double tax imposed upon the Russian Jewish community.

During the course of the nineteenth century, the tsarist government continued to recognize the Karaites as a unique ethnic-religious group and granted them rights and privileges which were denied to the Russian Jewish community. In 1827 and 1828, the Karaites were exempt from military service whereas the Russian Jews were burdened with the responsibility of supplying troops for the tsar's army. In 1863, the Russian Karaites were granted full Russian citizenship, a privilege which the Russian Jews did not receive until the Russian Revolution of 1917.

The Bolshevik Revolution precipitated the immigration of Crimean Karaites to Poland, France, and Germany. These Karaites were forced to leave Russia because of their vested economic and political interests in the tsarist government. Both Hitler's ascension to power and the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation prompted the Karaite community in Germany (which consisted of approximately eighteen Russian Karaite emigrés who had served as officers in the various pro-tsarist White Armies), to submit a petition to the Reich's Ministry of Interior requesting that they not be identified and legislated as Jews. These Karaite emigrés justified this distinction by citing tsarist legislations and the findings of scholars who attempted to prove that the Karaites had few historical, religious, and/or cultural ties with Jews and Judaism.

The efforts of the Karaite emigrés came to fruition on 5 January 1939 when Serge von Douvan, the representative of the Russian Karaite emigré community received a letter from the director of the Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung (Reich’s Department for Genealogical Research). The letter stated that, the Karaites sect should not be considered a Jewish religious community within the meaning of paragraph 2 point 2 of the First Regulation to the Reich's Citizenship Law. However, it cannot be established that Karaites in their entirety are of blood-related stock, for the
racial categorization of an individual cannot be determined without further ado by his belonging to a particular people, but by his personal ancestry and racial biological characteristics.

Though the issue of the Karaite's racial origin remained a question, they were nonetheless viewed by the Germans as a distinct ethnic group of non-Jewish origin. The letter from the Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung was of much value both in Nazi Germany and the soon-to-be conquered territories of Poland, France and the Soviet Union. In the abovementioned countries, the exemption of 5 January 1939 was extended and recognized as valid. All attempts to identify and legislate the Karaites were rejected. Thus, the lives of approximately 12,000 Russian Karaites were saved.

In order to determine the sincerity of the Nazi's policy toward the Karaites, one must examine this policy when dealing with larger groups of people, which was the case in the Crimea. As will be seen, the Nazi policy in the Crimea will illustrate the most perverse application of Nazi racism during the entire war period.

On 25 September 1941, the German Eleventh Army under the command of Field Marshall Erich van Manstein invaded the Crimean Peninsula. By the end of the year, almost the entire peninsula was under German control. As agreed upon in meetings held in the Spring of 1941, Einsatzgruppe D under the command of SS Major General Otto Ohlendorf was assigned to operate in the same territory as the Eleventh Army. After the war, Ohlendorf was brought to trial in Nuremberg. During his trial, he testified in a most candid fashion to the fact that approximately 90,000 civilians were executed in operations under his command. The thrust of the activities of Einsatzgruppe D occurred during the Winter of 1941-1942. It was reported that

During the first nine months of Ohlendorf's year in command, this force destroyed more than 90,000 human beings. These thousands, killed at an average rate of 340 per day, were variously denominated Jews, gypsies, asiatics and undesirables. Between 16 November and 15 December 1941, this Einsatzgruppe killed an average of 700 human beings per day for the whole 30 day period . . . .

As recounted in Ohlendorf's trial, Einsatzgruppe D encountered the perplexing problem of differentiating three distinct "Jewish" groups: Ashkenazim, Krimchaks, and Karaites. The 1926 Soviet census reports that the "Jewish" population of the Crimea consisted of approximately 60,000 Ashkenazic Jews, 6,400 Krimchak Jews and 8,300 Crimean Karaites. The exact number of Ashkenazim, Krimchaks, and Karaites, who remained in the Crimea after the Soviet retreat in 1941 is, unfortunately, unknown. The Einsatzgruppe officials had no question about the "Jewishness" of the Yiddish-speaking Ashkenazic Jews who suffered the same fate as Jews in other territories under German domination. The Germans, however, were baffled by the course of action which they should adopt vis-à-vis the less familiar Krimchaks and Karaites. Both of these groups had resided in the Crimea for many centuries and had culturally assimilated into the Muslim Tatar population. Both groups had adopted the Tatar language for everyday use. The Karaites spoke Karaim and the Krimchaks spoke Jagatai which were both traditionally written with Hebrew characters. Through intermarriage with the native populations, these two "mosaic" groups developed distinct Turkic-Mongolian physical features. The two groups, however, differed in one area — religion. The Krimchaks were adherents to the Rabbinic tradition of Judaism and not as some scholars mistakenly contend, either "Islamized Jews" or a "tribe long separated from the main...
body of Jewry.”12 The Karaites, on the other hand, were Old Testament Fundamentalists who had thrown off the yoke of Rabbinic authority in the eighth century.

On 5 December 1941, Ohlendorf decided to temporarily exempt the Karaites and the Krimchaks from registering as Jews until a further investigation could be undertaken. He then sent a letter to Berlin requesting information concerning the policy that should be adopted in dealing with these two groups. German documentation reveals that as early as 22 November 1941, inquiries were made concerning the safety of the Crimean Karaita community. In a letter addressed to Alfred Rosenberg, head of the Ostministerium für die Besetzen Ostgebiete (the Ministry of the Eastern Occupied Territories), a request was made by Sheraya Szapszal, the Hakham (spiritual leader) of the Polish Karaita community that the Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung exemption be recognized by the German authorities in Southern Russia.13 In another document mention of the Krimchak and Karaita settlements in the Crimea can be found. This report, dated 15 December 1941, was entitled Vorläufige Angaben über die Krim (“Preliminary Statements Concerning the Crimea”) and was prepared by researchers from the Reichskommissariat für der Festigung deutscher Volkstum (Reichscommission for the Strengthening of the German People). The report explained that the Krimchaks were Jews who spoke the Tatar language and had intermarried with the native populations. This assimilation was apparent from the relatively high percentage of Asiatic features found among the Krimchaks. The authors of the report considered the Karaites to be distinctly different from the Jewish Krimchaks. Their uniqueness as a non-Jewish group was recognized by the tsars who granted them many rights and privileges.14

It is, however, unclear how much, if any, influence these communiqués had in determining Nazi racial policy. In any case, one learns from Ohlendorf that some time in December 1941 he received a reply from Berlin stating that the Karaites, “have nothing in common with the Jews except the confession.”15 Ohlendorf was also informed by his superiors that the elimination of the enemies of the Third Reich was to be completed by Christmas 1941.

As seen, the communiqué which Ohlendorf received sealed the fate of the Krimchaks. The preparations for the deportation of the Ashkenazim and the Krimchaks was described by Benjamin West in his book, be-Hevlei Kiliya (“Pains of Destruction”). He recounts that,

On 11 December 1941, a decree was posted on the streets of Simferopol stating that all the Jews whose names were listed were required to assemble near the medical center. The Krimchaks were to assemble at some other place. Another decree declared that the Jews were to be expelled from the city and that they should prepare food for eight days. And so began the depressing wandering; they walked singly or together with their families, old and young together. One cannot forget a march such as that one.16

The killing process was described in detail by Werner Braune, commander of Einsatzkommando IIB which was a subdivision of Einsatzgruppe D. At his trial in Nuremberg, Braune was asked,

Q. Who carried out the execution itself?
A. The execution commandos were, as far as I recall, furnished mostly by the police company, but here I cannot give any specific details as to who was used for transport, who was used to block off the area, and who was used to do the shooting. I believe
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the people rotated.

Q. Witness, did you supervise the execution?
A. Yes, I did. It took place under my responsibility. Once I was at the place of execution with Mr. Ohlendorf and there we convinced ourselves that the execution took place according to the directive laid down by Ohlendorf at the beginning of the assignment. I personally was there several times more and I supervised.

Q. In these executions were the Krimchaks shot also?
A. Yes. On this occasion the Krimchaks living in Simferopol were shot.¹⁷

The fate of the Krimchaks was briefly described in two German field reports, Report No. 150 dated 2 January 1942, “... from 16 November thru 15 December 1941, 17,645 Jews, 2,503 Krimchaks, 824 Gypsies and 212 Communists and partisans have been shot.”¹⁸ A second report, No. 153, dated 8 January 1942 concluded with the terse remark that “in Simferopol, apart from the Jews also the Krimchak and Gypsy question was solved.”¹⁹

Surprisingly one learns from various German communiqués that a substantial Ashkenazi and Krimchaki population continued to live in the Crimea after the mass executions of Christmas 1941. In a German report dated 16 April 1942, the entire Crimea was declared “judenrein,” although it was acknowledged that perhaps a few hundred Jews were still in hiding.²⁰ A field report covering the period of 1–15 July 1942 revealed that 1,029 Jews, 11 Communists, 18 Krimchaks and 2 partisans were caught and interned.²¹ A dispatch dated 15 July 1942 reported that 1,099 Jews drowned off the coast of Bakhchasarai.²² These somewhat contradictory reports concerning the Jewish communities in the Crimea after the massacres of Christmas 1941 must be clarified by further research.

The fate of the Crimean Karaites after the decimation of the Crimean Jewish populations is described in scattered military communiqués which originated from the offices of the Ostministerium. As explained earlier, the preferential treatment accorded to the Crimean Karaites must be seen within the context of the relatively benign policy which the Germans adopted when dealing with various non-Slavic nationality groups of the Crimea, the Caucasus, and Central Asia.

Now one can see how racial theory confronted by the realities of a decimated German army was modified. During the war, concessions to the Nazi German standards of racial purity were made in regard to those admitted into the Wehrmacht and the Waffen SS. The Osttürkische Waffenverband which consisted of Turkestaní, Caucasian, Crimean and Idel-Uralian battalions, was created as a special military formation within the Waffen SS. These special military formations were created partially because of the man power shortage and partially as a propaganda device in order to gain popular support from the indigenous nationality groups. It is roughly estimated that between 150,000–200,000 people from these non-Russian minorities “volunteered” for service in the various German military formations. Most of these soldiers were recruited from the millions of imprisoned Russian prisoners-of-war who were languishing in German prison camps. Hundreds of thousands of prisoners were given the choice of remaining in prison and facing certain death or possibly surviving by enlisting the the German military; many chose the latter. As is evident from German documentation, the Karaites were viewed by the Germans as one of the many Soviet-Turkic nationality groups. The affinity between the Crimean Karaites and the Crimean Tatars was especially stressed. From a letter dated 27 September 1944 writ-
ten by Party Chancellor Gerhard Klopfer to SS Major General Karl Brandt, one learns the astonishing fact that an estimated five to six hundred Crimean Karaites were serving in the Wehrmacht, Waffen SS and Tatar Legion. These Karaites most probably were recruited at the same time as the estimated eight to twenty thousand Crimean Tatars who served in the six German officered Tatar Battalions. Klopfer writes in this communiqué, "that in respect to the close relations between the Crimean Tatars and the Crimean Karaites, no steps should be taken against the latter because it would upset the former." Klopfer asked that until the racial origin of the Karaites could be conclusively decided, a list of Karaites serving in the German forces be compiled. From a list of one hundred and fifty names of such Crimean Tatar recruits, this author has been able to identify a few names of non-Tatar origin. Names of such prisoners included Osman Kokosow, Bari Tomalak, Ibrahim Karabasch, Jakub Tabak and Dadeli Karai who possessed common Karaite and in certain cases common Krimchak names. It is quite possible that these released prisoners-of-war were among the five to six hundred Crimean Karaites mentioned by Klopfer.

The German's relationship with the Crimean Karaites is revealed in another communiqué dated 24 November 1944. SS Major General Gottlob Berger informed SS Major General Karl Brandt that the Karaites were to be handled like the other Turkic nations. Though their mosaic faith was unwelcome, discrimination against the Karaites was considered to be intolerable because of the past services which they had rendered to the Reich in the capacity of builders and as members of labor battalions.

In another dispatch dated 13 July 1944, the Ostministerium ordered the inclusion of Tatars and Karaites in the German evacuation from the Kaunas region. This communiqué stressed the point that it was felt to be politically advantageous to include these two groups in the evacuation. From existing documents it is unclear if these were Tatars and Karaites from the Crimea or if they were members of these communities who had resided in this area for centuries.

From a handwritten memo dated 12 February 1945, written by Michael Kowschanly, a Crimean Karaite in the Ostministerium, one learns that the Karaites and Tatars who were evacuated by the German army upon their retreat from the Soviet Union and Poland had formed an organization called the Vereins der Tataren und Karaimen zu Wien (Association of Tatars and Karaites in Vienna). As explained in the organization's constitution, it was established to cater to the economic, social, cultural, educational, and religious needs of the Tatar and Karaite communities in the Danube and Alpine regions.

Those Tatars and Karaites who remained in the Crimea and did not join the retreating German Army during the evacuation of the Crimea, had to face the wrath of the victorious Red Army which reconquered the Crimea in April 1944. Shortly after the liberation, the Soviets began the systematic deportation of the Crimean Tatars from their homeland. The Tatars, along with other Turkic and Caucasian nationality groups, were accused of collaboration with the Germans during the Occupation. In a short period of time, May through June 1944, an estimated 200,000-250,000 Crimean Tatars were forcibly resettled in Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and other areas in Central Asia and Siberia. So closely had the Crimean Karaites been identified with the Crimean Tatars, that in certain cases the Soviet authorities included Crimean Karaites
in the deportation operations.\textsuperscript{31} The overwhelming majority of the members of the Crimean Karaite community, however, were not affected by these deportations.

The absurdity of Nazi racism is best illustrated by the fact that even during its final hours, German bureaucrats were still seriously pondering the question of the racial origins of the Crimean Jewish communities. In a fourteen-page memorandum entitled, \textit{Zur Frage über das Auftauchen und die Kolonisation der Juden auf der Crimea} ("Concerning the Question of the Origins and Settlement of the Jews in the Crimea"), Michael Kowschanly, a Crimean Karaite who authored the report, concluded that the Ashkenazim and Krimchaks were racially Jewish, whereas, the Crimean Karaites and the \textit{Bergjuden} (Judeo-Tats or Mountain Jews) were racially of non-Jewish stock.\textsuperscript{32} One must bear in mind that this report was dated August 1944. By this late date, the Crimean Ashkenazi and Krimchaki Jewish communities had been murdered, the Germans had retreated from the Crimea, and the Soviet authorities had reasserted their authority over the Crimea by deporting the Crimean Tatars to Central Asia and Siberia.

\section*{NOTES}


3. The 1926 Soviet census reports the following statistics: 25,974 Judeo-Tats (Daghestani Mountain Jews); 27,471 Jewish Gruzians (Georgian Jews); 18,698 Central Asian Jews; 8,324 Crimean Karaites and 6,383 Krimchaks; see Frank Lorimer, \textit{The Population of the Soviet Union} (Geneva, 1946), p. 55. It is estimated that 20,000 Soviet Oriental Jews were actually affected by these German exemptions.

4. For more details on the tenets of Karaism, refer to: Philip Birnbaum, \textit{Karaite Studies} (New York, 1971); Leon Nemoy, \textit{The Karaite Anthology} (New Haven, Conn., 1952); Ananiaz Zajaczkowski, \textit{Karaims in Poland} (Warsaw, 1961); and Zymon Szyszman, \textit{Le Karaisme} (Lausanne, 1980).


6. According to the Italian researcher, Corrado Gini, the following is the numerical breakdown of the post-Russian Revolution Crimean Karaite emigration: Constantinople 42; Syria 1; Egypt 7; Rumania 46; Bulgaria 35; Yugoslavia 4; Italy 4; France 268; Germany 8; New York 23; and Switzerland 9. Corrado Gini, "I Caraimi di Polonia e di Lituania," \textit{Genus}, 14 (1936), 28.


8. YIVO, Archives, New York, \textit{Berlin Collection}, Occ E, 3 Box 100, letter dated 5 January 1939.


10. The 1926 Soviet census reports that 6,383 Krimchaks and 8,324 Karaites were living in the Crimea, according to Lorimer, \textit{Population of the Soviet Union}, p. 55. There were approximately 60,000 Ashkenazim...
living in the Crimea at the outbreak of the War, according to the *Encyclopedia Judaica* (Jerusalem, 1971), V, 1,107.


16. Benjamin West, *be-Hevlei Kiliya* [Pains of Destruction], (Tel Aviv, 1963), p. 139.
21. *Captured German War Documents* (Alexandria, Va., National Archives), T-501 233/233 424 (hereafter called *German War Documents*).
30. Anne Sheehy, *The Crimean Tatars and the Volga Germans* (London, 1970). In addition to the deportation of the Crimean Tatars, the Soviet government also deported other nationality groups based on the similar charge of collaboration with the Nazis. These groups included: Karachis, Kalmuks, Chechens, Ingushis, Balkars, Meshketians and Karbardinoss.