

Karaites in the Soviet Union

A historical review and the current situation

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The Karaite sect appeared in the eighth century among the Jews living in the Persian/Babylonian part of the Arab Caliphate, at the time when the Talmudic tradition was taking root. Its early members were known as Ananites, after the founder of the movement, Anan ben-David, a Jewish scholar who did not accept the authority of those who collected and propagated the oral law — the Talmud. By the 12th century, the Karaite movement had adopted its present-day form as a truly Biblical movement (hence the Karaites' name, taken from the Hebrew word *mikra* — writings) characterised by: a complete rejection of the Talmud; non-belief in the Messiah; and rejection of the dogmas on the resurrection of the dead and judgement after death.

However, the Karaites observed all the basic Jewish traditions: *kashrut* (observing Kosher diet — *Ed.*), observing the Sabbath and the holidays, circumcision; their basic prayers differ very little from the traditional Jewish prayers. In the tenth and 11th centuries, in some of the larger cities of the Byzantine and Muslim countries, the Karaite communities were almost equal in number to the communities of the rabbinite Jews, as the followers of traditional Judaism were known in order to distinguish them from the sectarians. However, from the 14th century onwards the number of Karaites fell steadily, due partly to assimilation and partly to the return by many to traditional Judaism. Today the Karaites number about 18 or 19 thousand, of whom about half are in Israel, several thousand are in Turkey and Iran and 3,300 are in the USSR.¹

Historical and social circumstances in Eastern Europe have led to an interesting paradox: among the Karaites in these parts there has developed a clear distinction between religious and ethnic identity. Although they consider themselves as belonging to the Jewish religion, they do not see themselves as ethnic Jews, neither are they viewed as such by the local population or by the authorities. They are considered to be a separate national group and are defined accordingly under the section "nationality" on all their forms and documents. They are not affected by

any anti-semitism in official policies, nor by the prejudiced attitude of ordinary people towards the Jews. Among the 180,000 Soviet Jews living in Israel today there is not one Karaite who has emigrated from the USSR, and to the knowledge of the author, there has not been one attempt to emigrate by a Soviet Karaite. From my personal contacts with Karaites in Lithuania, I find that even the older members of the community do not in the least identify themselves with Israel, and have no sense of connection with it, even though the words "Jerusalem" and "the land of Israel" fill their prayers.

All this is in striking contrast to the Karaites from the Muslim countries, a large proportion of whom now live in Israel, having gone there at the time of mass emigration from Turkey, Egypt, Iraq and Iran. The oriental Karaites do not distinguish themselves as a separate ethnic group — they consider themselves to be an integral part of the Jewish race. This is shown by the role played by Karaites in the Zionist underground movement in the Arab countries, which by far exceeded their numerical proportion of the Jewish community as a whole.² It should also be said that marriages between the oriental Karaites and the "rabbinite" Jews in Israel have become commonplace, although for at least two hundred years the East European Karaites struggled with all their might against such marriages. Moreover, even nowadays, when mixed marriages quickly diminish their numbers, they prefer to take an entirely non-Jewish partner.

How did the Karaites come to be in Eastern Europe? It is a little-known fact that the eviction of the original population of the Crimea began long before the conquest of the region by Catherine the Great, and certainly long before Stalin ordered the repressions of the Crimean Tatars, deprived of their homeland. Back in the 14th and 15th centuries, when there were constant wars between the Lithuanian princes and the Crimean Khans, two ethno-religious groups appeared on the territory of the Grand Duchy of Lithuania. These groups were the progeny of the prisoners-of-war and the Crimean civilians abducted in successful raids by Lithuanian armed units into the territory of the peninsula. Their descendants still live today in the homeland of their ancestors, the Belorussian Tatars and the Karaites. The former group were Muslims, the latter, Jews of Karaite persuasion.

There are two theories on the appearance of the Karaites in the Crimea: one theory, put forward by Dr Brutskus and the famous Jewish scholar Alexander Garkavi,³ claims that the European Karaites are descendants of the Jewish Karaites deported to the Crimea from Byzantium and Persia. Dr Brutskus further argues that the new settlers in the Crimea mixed with the ruling Khazar peoples who, under the influence of the more civilised and educated incomers, converted from their traditional rabbinism to the Karaite form of Judaism.

The other theory claims that the European Karaites are descendants of the Khazar peoples, who adopted (Karaite) Judaism in the tenth century.⁴ This theory, though only a hypothesis in the opinion of the greatest scholar of Karaite history, Meir Balaban, was accepted as the indisputable truth by the spiritual leaders of the Karaites, who thus felt justified in speaking of their “non-Jewish” origins, and consequently were saved from the persecutions suffered by the Jews. The “Khazar theory” is the one officially accepted in the Soviet Union; it appears in the section on Karaites in the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*,⁵ and also by implication, in other sources.⁶ It is well known and proven that among the Khazars only the aristocracy and the upper echelons of the urban population converted to Judaism.⁷ Later, when at the end of the tenth century the Khazar kingdom was destroyed and its lands seized by the nomadic peoples from distant parts of Asia, the remnant of the Khazar Jews were forced to seek refuge in the Crimea where ancient Jewish communities had flourished under Muslim rule. These communities were adherents of rabbinist Judaism, which effectively prevented a mingling between them and the Khazar Karaites; perhaps some hostility on the part of the proselytes of doubtful origin also had an effect. However, in all respects — in terms of language, way of life, social structure — the divisions between the Karaites and the “original” Crimean Jews (known to Jewish ethnographers as *krymchaks*) became less pronounced under the mutual influence of the two groups, and due also to the influence of the Tatars.

This did not happen in Lithuania, where over the course of the centuries the cultural and linguistic distinctions between the Karaites and the Ashkenazi Jews remained. However, as a result of the richness of Jewish spiritual life in mediaeval Lithuania, there was a brief flowering of Karaite theology. In 1589-90 in Vilnius there were even disputes between traditional Jewish and Karaite scholars. It is recorded that together they solved problems relating to the religious calendar, and that while the Karaites studied rabbinist chronicles and philosophical writings, the rabbinists also consulted Karaite literature.⁸

It was at this time, between the 15th and 17th centuries, that the social structure of Karaite communities established itself, on the basis of fundamental Jewish principles: general education for boys, philanthropy, a special funeral association and the unification of secular and spiritual authority in the hands of the *kḥakham* (as the Karaite leader was called in order to distinguish him from a rabbi). The Karaites in mediaeval Lithuania generally used Hebrew, not only in religious contexts, but also in their personal and business correspondence. In those days they still retained their close links with the land of Israel and with the Karaites in Muslim countries; in the 15th century there were regular collections of aid for their co-religionists in the Holy Land.⁹ Relations between the Jews

and the Karaites were indeed strained, but they had not yet become irreconcilable, as happened when at the end of the 18th century, after the partition of Poland and the annexation of the Crimea, the Karaites, together with the mass of Polish and Lithuanian Jewry, became subjects of the Russian Empire.

The Karaites who thus became subjects of Russia almost immediately requested the authorities not to confuse them with the Jews, but to regard them as a separate ethnic group. A partial separation was brought into effect in 1795 when the Karaites were exempted from the double taxation imposed on the Jews. However, it was not until 1863 that all the anti-Jewish laws and restrictions fully ceased to apply to the Karaites.¹⁰ This came about after prolonged and determined action on the part of the Karaite leaders, who went to great lengths to show that their people had no ties with the Jews. Since Russian anti-semitism was directed against Jews as a religious, and not as a national, group, the arguments put forward by the Karaites were based on the differences between their faith and rabbinist Judaism. Thus, in 1859, in a letter to the Imperial Senate on behalf of the Karaites in Trakai (Lithuania) *Khakham* Firkovich wrote:

The Karaites do not have the defects that distinguish the Jews. They do not believe in the Talmud; their ancestors were sent to the Crimea long before the birth of Christ and had no part in his crucifixion.

In the same missive they asked to be described as "Russian Karaites" on official documents; attached to the letter was an explanation from the office of Vilnius *guberniya* (province) that the Karaites were really not Jews.

In 1892 the Karaites petitioned the government to allow them to change their "Karaite synagogue" into a "Karaite cathedral".

As far as the local population were concerned, they did not see the Karaites as Jews. So the Karaites were not victims of the pogroms which broke out in Russia in 1881-82, and they used this fact in their requests to be excluded from the "provisional laws on the Jews". In 1881 the Imperial Senate announced that the "provisional laws" did not in fact apply to the Karaites.

The Karaite social structure was almost the same in the years preceding the Revolution as it had originally been in mediaeval Lithuania. In 1837 a law was passed which granted the same rights to the Karaite spiritual leadership as were enjoyed by the Muslim leadership. In 1850 a Karaite spiritual governing body was formed in Tavria province (Crimea) with a membership representing the Crimean Karaites, and in 1863 a similar body was established in Trakai for the Karaites of the north-western provinces. These institutions were run according to the instructions of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, who also approved the *khakhams* who

functioned both as elders and as teachers for the boys. In 1894 a five-year school for the training of *khakhams* was founded in Yevpatoriya (Crimea).

The break in their relations with the Jews and with their co-religionists abroad led to a complete hiatus in the spiritual life of the Karaites. Their small numbers, the fact that they were not allowed to marry their second cousins or nephews and nieces, together with the equality under the law which enabled young people to leave the communities for the cities of central Russia, led to rapid assimilation. While historians cite the Karaite population in the territory of the Empire at the beginning of the 19th century as twenty thousand, by 1897 they numbered 12,894, and in 1910, only 12,207 people. The attempt at a "national revival" by a group of Karaite students at Moscow university in 1911 who founded a (Russian-language) journal, *Karaimskaya zhizn'* (Karaite Life) was a failure. The journal lasted less than a year and its circulation never exceeded eighty subscribers. However, it is interesting that the ethnographical research which appeared in the journal argued in support of the "Khazar theory" on the origin of the Russian Karaites.

Between the two world wars, the centre of East European Karaitism was under Polish rule. In 1932, Khadzhi-Serai Shapshal, a *khakham* and historian, and a proponent of the "Khazar theory", was elected as head of the Polish Karaites; he lived in the Lithuanian city of Trakai. During this period in Poland, the Karaites, living separately from the Jews, enjoyed the same rights as the Christians, and many occupied important posts in the civil administration. The burgomeister of Vilnius, for instance, was a Karaite.¹¹

At the beginning of the Second World War all the Karaites who had found themselves at one time in the Russian Empire and at another in the Austro-Hungarian, became citizens of one state — the Soviet Union. This happened through the annexation by the USSR of western Ukraine (in September 1939) and Lithuania (in July 1940). The unification of the countries under one flag did nothing to strengthen the Karaite community. There were two reasons for this: the anti-religious policy of the government and the increased cultural differences between the different groups of Karaites. Those in Lithuania and Galicia, like many other ethnic minorities, had adopted the respective cultures of their host nations, whereas the Polish and Crimean Karaites were almost entirely Russian-speaking. And of course there was no question of any unification process that was not sanctioned by the totalitarian regime. However, the 18 months which fell between the Soviet occupation and the German occupation were not sufficient for complete secularisation, and very little changed for the Karaite believers. Religious services continued to be held, the *khakham* of Trakai was not arrested, nor even were his possessions confiscated.¹² His religious functions, as under Polish rule,

extended to the Lithuanian and Galician Karaites, but not to those in the Crimea. This situation changed with the German occupation, when the Trakai *khakham* became *de facto* and *de jure* the head of all East European Karaites.

The Germans' policy towards the Karaites was based on their racial theory, which regarded religion and culture as only secondary factors.¹³ On 2 January 1939 the German Ministry of Internal Affairs issued a circular stating that the Karaites had no racial relation to the Jews. This decision was taken nine months before the invasion of Poland, as part of a general plan of racial policy to be implemented in the occupied territories. But when they invaded the Soviet Union, the Germans came across compact groups of Karaites, and then, despite the existence of the circular, doubts began to occur to the Nazis, probably due to the fact that during their invasion of the Crimea they had encountered a small community of Krimchak Jews whose language and culture were very close to those of the Karaites.¹⁴ The people from Rosenberg's Eastern Department addressed the question to the three leading Jewish historians, Meir Balaban and Itsak Shipper from Warsaw and Zelik Kalmanovich from Vilnius: were the Karaites Jews, or were they not? The three scholars came up with a unanimous response: the Karaites were descendants of the Khazar nation. Not one of these three outstanding scholars had hitherto been a firm supporter of the "Khazar theory", which they viewed as pure hypothesis; one is led to conclude that their unanimous reply to the German authorities was an attempt to save the Karaites from extermination.¹⁵

The members of this Jewish sect therefore suffered no repressions by the Nazis, with the exception of the occasional desecration of their cemeteries, which the Germans mistook for Jewish ones. The institute of the Karaite leaders and the Trakai *khakham* survived; the teaching of religion and the observance of religious customs were permitted. For this reason, many Jews acquired Karaite passports and were thus able to survive in occupied Vilnius. However, according to many witnesses, the leaders of the Karaite communities gave the Gestapo lists of their members, which enabled the Nazis to identify those using false passports. It is not known whether the initiative for this action was taken by the Nazis or by the Karaite leaders themselves.¹⁶

It is known, on reliable evidence, that in a letter to Alfred Rosenberg the Trakai *khakham*, Shapshal, explained the ethnic differences between the Karaites and the Jews, though he was bold enough to write in conclusion:

The commandments of Moses are even now the basis of world civilisation. This universal service to mankind by the Jewish people should not be forgotten or erased.¹⁷

The present situation of the Karaites

Soviet sources throw little light on this ethno-religious group. Anti-religious propaganda pays no attention to the Karaites' Jewish tendencies, probably because of the small number of their adherents. The following are the official statistics on the Karaite population in the USSR: 1959, 5,700; 1970, 4,600; 1979, 3,300. Out of the present total of 3,300, about 1,200 live in the Crimea; today, due to the expulsion of the Crimean Tatars, they form the only remaining original ethnic minority in the region. About 1,600 Karaites still live in Lithuania (Trakai, Ponevezh), and the rest are in Ukraine (Galich, Lutsk).

The Karaite language, one of the Turkic group, has three main dialects: Trakaian, Galician and Crimean. According to the latest official reports, only 16 per cent of Karaites use these dialects and consider them their mother tongue, which shows a slight increase in comparison with the 1970 figure of 12.8 per cent. This increase, bearing in mind the decrease in the Karaite population, is indicative of the growing proportion of elderly people, rather than of a strengthening of national consciousness. It is interesting to note that the Jews and Karaites are the only people in the USSR among whom linguistic assimilation has reached such an advanced point. A comparison with the percentages of other minorities with no national territory in the USSR, who use their mother tongue, yields the following figures: Koreans, 55.1 per cent; Bulgarians, 68 per cent; gypsies, 74.1 per cent; Assyrians, 54.9 per cent; Jews, 14.2 per cent.

The Karaites' religious life centres round the prayer house, or *kenisa*, as they call it, avoiding the word "synagogue". Today there remain four such prayer houses in the Soviet Union: two in the Crimea, one in Trakai and one in Galich. There is no central body to unite the Karaites and no training for potential religious leaders or teachers of the law. The former five-year theological school for training *khakhams* in Yevpatoriya was closed in the early 1920s, and the Trakai Karaite religious body was liquidated following the liberation of Lithuania from the Germans. The fate of the last leader, Khadzhi-Serai Shapshal, is not known. The present author obtained most of this information from conversations with Karaites in the course of visits to Trakai in 1975-76. In my discussions with them, these people emphasised, whenever we spoke of their ethnic origin, that they are not Hebraic Jews, but of Karaite Judaic persuasion. And there was no outwardly visible resemblance to the Lithuanian Jews: the broad cheekbones and rather slanting eyes spoke of an Asiatic ancestry. I twice attended the Sabbath service at the *kenisa* and the number of worshippers on either occasion was no more than 15, all of whom were old men. On week-days the *kenisa* is closed as it is impossible to gather the ten men required for prayer. There is no contact with Karaites abroad, but this is not because it is officially forbidden; such contacts were broken off long ago, in the 19th century, because the

foreign Karaites thought of themselves as belonging to the Jewish people, while the Russian Karaites, as we have seen, denied any such affiliation. In Trakai castle there is a museum of Karaite history, housing examples of clothing, domestic tools, and weapons, all in a very oriental style; but there are no books, nor are there any religious objects which could bear witness to an affiliation to Judaism. The only article on the Karaites that appeared in the journal *Sovetskaya etnografiya* (Soviet Ethnography), was one in No. 1/1949, devoted to this museum, which outlines the material culture and folklore of the Karaites.

To judge by the rate of decline in the numbers of this ethno-religious group, it will have practically disappeared in twenty or thirty years time. A propos of this one could ponder on the words of the rabbi and mathematician, Adin Steinsalz, who said of the significance of the Talmud for the Jewish people:

It has happened in the course of Jewish history that certain groups have for different reasons broken off contact with Talmudic scholarship and writings. Despite their efforts to preserve the truth of the laws and ancient customs, the same fate has overtaken them all . . . in time, assimilation has swallowed up even the memory that Jews ever existed in those parts.¹⁸

Translated from Russian by Carolyn Burch.

¹Shpazhnikov, G. A., *Religii stran zapadnoi Azii*, Moscow, 1976, *Naseleniye SSSR, Spravochnik*, Moscow, 1983, and *Narodonaseleniye stran mira*, Moscow, 1984.

²Ben-Zvi, Itzhak, *The Exiled and the Redeemed*, Philadelphia, 1957, pp. 129, 132-33.

³"Jewish-Lithuanian cultural society", *Lite*, Vol. 1, 1953, pp. 193-94. See also A. Garkavi, "O proiskhozhdenii karaimov", *Yevreiskaya starina*, St Petersburg, 1909.

⁴Balaban, Mayer, *History of Polish Jewry*, New York: Shulsinger Bros. Inc., 1976, p. 301.

⁵*Bolshaya sovetskaya entsiklopediya*, (second edition), 1953, Vol. 20, p. 110.

⁶Isayev, M. I., *O yazykakh narodov SSSR*, Moscow, 1978, p. 145.

⁷Did the Khazars adopt rabbinite or Karaite Judaism? There are differing opinions on this matter in mediaeval Jewish sources. Thus in a letter from the Khazar king to Khadzhai ibn Shaprut (a Jewish scholar from Baghdad) the king stresses that his people accept the Talmud "and all that is said in it". However, in the journal *Yevreiskaya mysl'*, St Petersburg, 1911, there are extracts from the list of purchases in trade with the Khazars, where the opposite is maintained. The author of the article states that it is more probable that the Khazars adopted the Karaite form of Judaism. In support of this contention he cites the following facts: the closeness of the Khazars to the (geographical) centre of the Karaite movement; the missionary activity of the Karaites, which distinguished them from the traditional Jews: the difficulty of understanding the Talmud for this nomadic people which in terms of spirituality was very immature. For these reasons the author concurs with the Khazar theory of the origin of the Karaites.

⁸H. H. Ben-Sasson, *Trial and Achievement*, Jerusalem, 1974, pp. 155, 171.

⁹*Lite*, *ibid.*

¹⁰"O polozhenii karaimov v Rossiiskoi Imperii, zdes' i daleye", *Yevreiskaya entsiklopediya*, St Petersburg, Vol. VI, pp. 295-96, and Vol. IX, p. 290.

¹¹*Lite*, *ibid.*; p. 203-208.

¹²The situation of Karaites after the annexation of Lithuania by the USSR is known to the author from conversations with the Karaites.

¹³Thus, after the occupation of Thessaloniki in Greece, the Germans decreed the extermination of the "denme" descendants of the Jews, who had adopted Islam in the 17th century, because they belonged to "the Jewish race".

¹⁴The *Krymchaks* were almost completely obliterated during the occupation of the Crimea.

¹⁵Dworecki, Mark, *Jerushalayim D'Lita in Kamf um Umkum* (Yiddish), Histoire du Getto de Vilna, Paris, 1948, p. 332.

¹⁶*ibid.*, p. 332.

¹⁷Nekrits, Alexander, *Nakazaniye narody*, New York, 1978.

¹⁸Steinsalz, Adin, *Talmud Lecol*, Jerusalem, 1977, p. 192.

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