

Jews, Russians, Karaites: The Development of Karaite Nationalism in the Russian Empire at the beginning of the Twentieth Century

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Abstract

The article examines the rise and consolidation of Karaism in Tsarist Russia from the first half of the nineteenth century through the beginning of the twentieth. The creation of a specific national culture was on the one hand a consequence of the hostile policy the authorities applied towards Jews, which eventually favored Karaite's departure from the ordinary community. On the other hand, and despite the late spread of Haskalah within Karaites as compared to the larger Rabbanite surroundings, the article claims that the former ones did share Maskilic ideals, partly because Karaites already displayed in the majority of cases distinctive signs of acculturation and secularization—all predisposing elements for the formation of a new feeling of national belonging.

Introduction

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Introduction¹

In the Russian Empire Karaites were a small group within a diverse Jewish community, but they too found themselves involved in the wave of modernization and nationalism that affected the larger masses of their coreligionists—Rabbinite Jews. The concept of Karaite nationalism was recently discussed by Diana Mykhaylova in her PhD thesis on the role of Karaite studies in the development of Karaite identity,² and by Golda Akhiezer in her outstanding book, dedicated to the issue of Karaite *Haskalah* and nationalism.³ Both authors rely on the notion of Karaite nationalism, even if they define the concept differently: Mykhaylova employs a constructivist approach and compares Karaite nationalism to that of, as Miroslav Hroch would put it, small nations,⁴ thus opening a broader perspective for the analysis of Karaite nationalism. Akhiezer, on the other hand, uses the idea of nationalism as defined by ethno-symbolists, and primarily Anthony Smith, in their analysis of the Karaite case.⁵ Several studies also analyze different aspects of the modernization and emancipation process of the Karaite community during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The already mentioned study by Akhiezer describes the emergence of a Karaite *Haskalah*, demonstrating close relations between Karaite and Rabbinite thinkers. Roman Freund in his very important study was the first to examine the separation of Karaites from Jewishness and the development of their new Turkic identity, describing this process as *dejudaization*.⁶ This shift was well examined in several

¹ This article is part of the project “Development of non-Christian identity in Lithuania in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries,” funded by the Lithuanian Research Council under the state program “Dissemination of Lithuanistic research, 2016-2024” (Valstybinė lituanistinių tyrimų sklaidos 2016-2024 m. programa), contract No. S-LIP-18-33.

² Diana Mykhaylova, “A Case of Cultural Nationalism in Eastern Europe: Karaite Studies and Their Role in the Development of a Karaite Identity in the 19th-21st centuries,” (PhD diss., Helsinki University, 2018).

³ Golda Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness, Haskalah, and Nationalism among the Karaites of Eastern Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 317.

⁴ Miroslav Hroch, *Mažosios Europos tautos* (Vilnius: Mintis, 2012).

⁵ Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 308-309.

⁶ Roman Freund, *Karaites and Dejudaization: A Historical Review of an Endogenous and Exogenous Paradigm* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1991).

of studies by Mikhail Kizilov,⁷ who showed the emergence of an anti-Jewish policy and the promotion of a Turkic identity among Polish Karaites. Considered together, these studies open up a space in need of examination: the short period in the development of Karaite nationalism between the emergence of the Karaite *Haskalah* thinkers in 1840s and the development of a new Turkic Karaite identity in the 1930s and later. One of the most important questions to be addressed is based on the fact that the Russian Empire's policy towards Karaites differed from that towards Rabbinite Jews, making Karaite social status much more favorable. Francesca Bregoli's study on the modernization of Livornese Jews⁸ suggests that the privileged status of local Jews did not stimulate, but on the contrary prevented the development of other aspects of the emancipation process that took place in other Jewish communities in other regions that were not so privileged. This insight leads us to the question whether the Karaites' privileged status in Russia had any effect on their modernization process and the emergence of their own nationalism. If so, this in turn raises another question: the identification of similarities and differences between Rabbinite and Karaite *Haskalah*, which I will try to do in this study.

I will begin my article by describing Russia's legal and social policy towards Karaites in comparison with that towards Jews, in order to see what influence it had on the formation of Karaite nationalism. Then I will examine early Karaite periodicals to establish how nationalism was perceived by the Karaites themselves; what features made it similar to Jewish *Haskalah*, and what was specifically Karaite

⁷ Among others: Mikhail Kizilov, "Between the Jews and the Khazars: The Formation of the Ethnic Identity and Historical Views of the East European Karaites in the General Context of European History from the late eighteenth century until today," in *Pinkas: Annual of the Culture and History of East European Jewry*, ed. Larisa Lempertienė, vol. 2 (Vilnius, Žara: 2008), 45-64; Id., "Faithful Unto Death: Language, Tradition, and the Disappearance of the East European Karaite Communities," *East European Jewish Affairs* 36, no.1 (2006): 73-93; Id., "Karaites in North-Eastern Europe: The Karaite Community of Troki between the Two World Wars," in *Orient als Grenzberreich. Proceedings of the Deutscher Orientalistentag* (Wiesbaden: Harrasowitz, 2007), 139-155; Id., "Social adaptation and manipulation with self-identity: Karaites in Eastern Europe in Modern times," in *Karaites in Eastern Europe in the Last Generations, Proceedings of the Jerusalem Karaite Colloquium* (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute, 2011), 130-153.

⁸ Francesca Bregoli, *Mediterranean Enlightenment. Livornese Jews, Tuscan Culture, and Eighteenth-Century Reform* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014).

in its ideology. Finally, I will conclude by drawing parallels between Karaite and Jewish enlightenment, taking into account the Imperial context and its power on the formation of the discourse on minority nationalism. The development of Karaite nationalism will be traced by examining the first Karaite periodicals that appeared in the Russian Empire: the first communal journal in Russian, *Караимская жизнь* (Karaite Life),⁹ published under the editorship of Karaite publicist V. Sinani in Moscow in 1911-1912; and *Караимское слово* (Karaite Word), published in Vilnius/Vilna in 1913-1914 by local Karaites as the community's monthly magazine on history and literature.¹⁰ The publishers of *Karaite Life* represented the most progressive group of Russian Karaites, strongly affected by secular education, acculturation and integration into the dominant Russian society, while their successors in Vilna gave voice to a more conservative audience. The comparison of the national ideology supported by these two groups in the aforementioned periodicals may help define a more precise picture of Karaite national discourse in the Russian Empire.

The Russian Empire's Policy towards Jews and the Emergence of Karaite Nationalism

Small in number, weak in social and legal status and professing a non-Christian faith, the Karaite community could operate in Russian society only within the limits set up by state and society. Being identified and treated as Jews, Karaites could not expect to extend these boundaries. However, as we will see, these constraints worked as a stimulus to re-think their collective identity and the way they display it publicly.

⁹ During its two years of publication, twelve issues were released. Though published by communal leaders in Moscow, the journal was addressed mainly to Crimean communities, with a minor contribution by North Western Karaites. The fact that the first communal journal was published in Russian indicates, in my opinion, that its founders were affected by the acculturation process, accepted the language of the dominant society and were eager to integrate into the surrounding environment.

¹⁰ The analysis of the content of *Karaite word* is based on three volumes, stored at the S. Shapshal Karaim Ethnographic Museum in Trakai. During its two years of publication twelve issues were released (six in 1913 and three double issues in 1914) but I was unable to locate other issues.

The imperial policy towards Jews has been widely analyzed in recent historiography.¹¹ It is nonetheless worth mentioning that almost all measures limiting Jewish economic activities and social life were repealed for Karaites shortly after they were introduced.¹² Yet, such exceptional legal status was constantly debated by imperial bureaucrats. For example, in 1837 the governor-general of New Russia Mikhail Vorontsov visited the Eupatoria Karaite community and asked them to prepare information about their ethnic origin, as well as the circumstances and reasons of their arrival in Crimea.¹³ Two years later, a similar interest in local Karaites was shown by Tauria governor M. Muromtsev, who had sent an official query to the Tauria Karaite Spiritual Board, asking the same questions.¹⁴ The document implied that if the answers to these questions turned out to be unsatisfactory, Karaites would be treated as the rest of the Jews. This kind of attention from high Imperial officials forced the Karaite elite to represent themselves in terms other than those used for Jews, something which later became an important aspect of their national identity. The search for this information, which could cost the Karaites their social well-being—exemption from military conscription, double taxation and living in the Pale of settlement—was entrusted

¹¹ Among others: John Klier, *Russia Gathers her Jews: The Origins of the "Jewish Question" in Russia, 1772-1825* (Illinois: Northern Illinois University Press, 1986); Id., *Imperial Russia's Jewish question, 1855-1881* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995); Michael Stanislawski, *Tsar Nicholas I and the Jews: The Transformation of Jewish Society in Russia 1825-1855*, (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1983); Alexei Miller, *The Romanov Empire and Nationalism* (Budapest: Central European university press, 2008).

¹² For example, military conscription for Karaites was canceled immediately after its introduction for Jews in 1827; likewise, double taxation was canceled in 1795.

¹³ Abraham Firkovich, "Avnei zikkaron," *Karaimskaia zhizn* 5-6 (1911): 83.

¹⁴ The questions were: From what people do Karaites come and from where did they arrive [to Crimea]? Under what historical circumstances did they arrive [to Crimea]? What are their customs and occupations? Were there (or are now) outstanding people, famous for their intelligence, good deeds and merits, among Karaites? Are there any books on Karaite history? Are there any truthful stories from the ancestors, which could prove the antiquity of Karaite faith and religious rites? When and because of what reason did Karaites separate themselves from Rabbinites and what are the differences in their religious rites? See: O. Belyj, "Obzor archivnykh dokumentov no istorii karaimskoi obshchiny Kryma v pervoi polovinie 19-ogo veka (po materialam fonda Tavricheskogo i Odesskogo Karaimskogo Dychovnogo Pravlenie b GAARK)," *Krymskij muzei* 2 (1995-1996): 114; Mikhail Kizilov, "Social adaptation and manipulation with self-identity: Karaites in Eastern Europe in Modern times," in *Karaites in Eastern Europe in the Last Generations*, eds. Dan D. Y. Shapira and Daniel J. Lasker (Jerusalem: Ben-Zvi Institute-The Hebrew University, 2011), 130-153; Abraham Firkovich, "Avnei zikkaron," *Karaimskaia zhizn* 10-11 (1912): 17.

by hakham S. Babovich¹⁵ to A. Firkovich.¹⁶ He himself pointed this out: “I just want to [...] find out the truth about our establishment and life in Crimea;¹⁷ [...] I realized the importance and the particularity of the instruction given to me and was in a rush.”¹⁸ Paradoxically, this situation perfectly illustrates how the need for information about Karaite history arose not from members of the community but from the dominant society. It seems that such requirement from the Tauria governor was not only unexpected by local Karaites, but also outdated—in March 1837 a law had already been passed on the legal status of Karaite clergy.¹⁹ The preamble stated that the Karaites of Tauria governorate had asked to establish the legal position of their clergy and “grant them certain rights enjoyed by Muslim clergy” (“mahometans” in the source D.T.).²⁰ In a decision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and the Senate, the request was considered “respectable” and a law defining the rights of Karaite clergy was adopted, which essentially meant the establishment of a Karaite Spiritual Board in Tauria, thus setting up a hierarchy of Karaite officials. Karaite self-understanding as a nation was strongly influenced by the change in the community’s self-government and the establishment in 1837 of Tauria Karaite a Spiritual Board with a religious and administrative leader—the hakham.²¹ This institution served as a connecting link between remote communities, embedded in different cultural environments,²² and created, using

¹⁵ Even before the establishment of the Tauria Karaite Spiritual Board and the election of Simcha Babovich to the position of hakham, he was acting as informal leader of Karaites of New Russia. For more on Simcha Babovich see: Philip E. Miller, *Karaite Separatism in Nineteenth-Century Russia: Joseph Solomon Lutski’s Epistle of Israel’s Deliverance* (New York: Hebrew Union College press, 1993).

¹⁶ Abraham Firkovich, “Avnei zikkaron,” *Karaimskaia zhizn’* 3-4 (1911): 77.

¹⁷ Ananjasz Zajączkowski, “Życie i działalność b. p. A. Firkowicza (1785-1874). Mowa wygłoszona podczas obchodu 50-j rocznicy zgonu Abrahama Firkowicza,” *Mysł Karaimska*, t. 1, z. 2, 1925, 11-12.

¹⁸ Firkovich, “Avnei zikkaron,” 20.

¹⁹ Legal status of Karaite clergy, March 3, 1837, Vitalij Levanda, *Polnyj khronologicheskij sbornik zakonov i polozhenii, kasajushchikhsia evreev, ot ulozhenia tsaria Aleksej’a Mikhailoviticha do nastoiashchego vremeni, ot 1649 do 1873* (Saint Petersburg: tipografi’a K. V. Trubnikova, 1874), 401.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Tamara Bairašauskaitė, “Apibrėžimo ir tapatumo kolizija: Lietuvos karaimų socialinio statuso klausimu XIX amžiaus pirmoje pusėje,” *Lituanistica* 65, no.1 (2006): 31.

²² Across the vast territory of the Russian Empire Karaites experienced different cultural influences: in the North Western region: Polish, Lithuanian, Belorussian; in Crimea: Russian,

Benedict Anderson’s phrase, an “imagined community,” bounding together people without personal relationships. This sense of togetherness stimulated the emergence of a perception of themselves as a nation, as was later declared by the members of the Karaite National Congress in Eupatoria in 1910.²³ Furthermore, the existence of the Karaite Spiritual Board widened the institutional gap between the Karaite and Rabbanite communities and marked the imperial legitimization of Karaite autocephaly.

The Attitude of the Dominant Society towards Jews and Karaites

It is well known that the majority of Imperial Russian society had a negative attitude towards Jews. The Talmud was regarded as the cause of Jewish wrongful behavior and religious fanaticism. The Yiddish language they spoke was also perceived unfavorably by the dominant society and it was pejoratively called *jargon*. To make Jews potentially less harmful for the surrounding society they had to be pushed to abandon the use of Yiddish in everyday life and to abandon the Talmud. Interestingly, the criterion of the Jews’ usefulness was used by the Jews themselves; As reported by David E. Fishman, Nota Khaimovich Notkin, in his memoranda to General Procurator Alexei Kurakin of 1797 and later in 1803, referred to the desire to make Jews useful to society and the state as one of the main reasons for integration.²⁴ These were the arguments of officials and the educated members of the dominant society, but for the illiterate masses the otherness of the Jews came down to their appearance. However, such negative attitude was not shown towards Karaites. As the newspaper “News of Tauria governorate” wrote:

[Among] those [Karaites] of Lithuania only the old wear beards, but they dress like local burgers, who profess the Catholic faith, that is [in] Polish [style]. The young are shaving their beards and dress in a European

Tatar; in Lutsk: Polish, Ruthenian, Ukrainian; outside the Empire, in Halich: German-language culture, Austrian, Polish and Ruthenian, Ukrainian.

²³ Mykhaylova, “A Case of Cultural Nationalism in Eastern Europe,” 90-91.

²⁴ David E. Fishman, *Russia’s first modern Jews. The Jews of Shklov* (New York: n. p., 1995), 85-87.

manner. They are occupied mostly in horticulture, some of them in crafts or contracting. [...] they distinguish themselves by their education and politeness, similar to those of the local nobility. [...] the Karaite community in Luck [...] grows beards and side curls like Rabbinite Jews, but they dress like Lithuanians [Lithuanian Karaites-D.T.]—in Polish [style]. They are poorer, more ignorant and untidy than Lithuanians. [...] All [Karaites] of Tauria and Kherson governorates keep up the Tatar traditions: they dress in contemporary [manner] like Tatars, and, like Tatars, shave their beards until wedding and then they don't. Generally, the Karaites of New Russia can be described as rich.²⁵

This passage vividly illustrates how much attention was paid to the Karaite outfit and appearance and how much it influenced the group's general image in the eyes of the dominant society: wearing the local dress was welcomed and regarded positively. On the other hand, the text quoted above provides an insight on some markers of acculturation, as found in the Karaites' appearance in the middle of the nineteenth century.

The above cited report reflected the positive manner in which Karaites were perceived by Russian officials. This is also evident in the comparisons between the two groups, made in amid-nineteenth century article published in the newspaper of the Ministry of Internal Affairs and reprinted in the journal *Karaite life* nearly half a century later. It described the positive features of Karaites: "wearing a local suit without stubbornness," honesty, diligence, "absence of efforts to convert Muslims or Christians to their faith," for which "the Russian authorities have always shown their fair treatment against the Rabbinites."²⁶ Such positive feedback had a practical aspect as well. For example, considering whether to allow Rabbanites to settle in the town of Trakai/Troki, a place considered the cradle of Karaites in the North Western Region,²⁷ the minister of Religious and

²⁵ Appendix to *Izvestiia Tavricheskoi gubernii*, t. 4, November 4, 1843, 1.

²⁶ "Ot kuda prishli karaimy v Rossiju," *Karaimskaia zhizn'* 5-6 (1911): 51.

²⁷ The history of the prohibition for Rabbinite Jews to settle in the town of Trakai/Troki dates back to the seventeenth century, when Karaites gained such privilege from the Lithuanian grand

Educational Affairs of People of Other Faiths Mikhail Golitsyn stated that Karaites needed to be protected from Rabbanites, since the former were involved in useful crafts and even agriculture, whereas Rabbanites were parasites and should not be accepted in places where they still did not live.²⁸ State officials, rather than trying to force Karaites to change by imposing strict regulations, as they did in the case of Rabbanites, chose instead to push Karaites to prove their separateness from Rabbinic Jews, which in turn made Karaites think of themselves as an independent, unique group, and to look for non-religious arguments to prove this claim. This policy produced results quickly: already in the second half of the nineteenth century community leaders began to declare publicly their “separate Jewishness” and to distance themselves from Rabbanites. This strategy had a clear goal—to secure exemptions from restrictions imposed on Rabbanites, but at the same time it worked as a stimulus for Karaites to rethink their identity and position themselves outside the Jewish tradition. Eventually, Karaites were recognized as a separate ethno-confessional group in 1863,²⁹ with the adoption of the Karaite Statute. As a result, not only the word Jew was no longer used for Karaites, but they were granted the same rights as Russian Orthodox believers.³⁰ Both the institutional changes in the community—the establishment of Spiritual Board—and the positive treatment of Karaites by state authorities led to the official recognition of boundaries between Karaites and Rabbanites in almost every area of daily life. Karaites, having legitimized their confessional dissociation and partially satisfied the need for social separation, began to re-consider cultural links with Rabbanite Jews. One of the most pressing issues for Karaites was the connection with Jews through the ethnonym *Jews-Karaites*, which was prevalent in the public sphere and in the legal documents concerning the community. Even

duke Ladislaus IV Vasa in 1646. In the nineteenth century the matter came back because new authorities issued Jewish legislation forbidding them to dwell in the villages. Due to this prohibition, Jews needed new places to settle in and the Trakai/Troki issue was raised again.

²⁸ “Iz istorii Trokskikh karaimov,” *Karaimskaia zhizn* 2 (1911): 29.

²⁹ New editions of the law regulating the legal status of Russian Karaites were released in 1896 and later in 1904. The latter contained minor changes, including a more detailed regulation of the hakham election process, as well as several other minor changes.

³⁰ On the question of the Karaites’ legal status after 1863 see Levanda, *Polnyj khronologicheskij*, 1001-1005.

though an important study by V. Eliashevich³¹ shows that the term *karaim* was officially recognized, and included in dictionaries of the Russian language, only in the twentieth century, it was used in the nineteenth century in all the official correspondence as a specific “non-Russian” term, and the Russian officials of the New Russia and North Western Regions were well aware of it. Moreover, an association with Rabbanite Jews made it difficult for Karaites to maintain the image of a separate religious community and establish their status in society—the constant confusion with Rabbanites often resulted in applying restrictions to Karaites, which were legally exempted from them.³² In 1853 the Trakai/Troki Karaite community appealed to the Governor-General of Vilnius/Vilna to submit a request to improve the situation in the community. One of the first requests, as stated in this document, was that Karaites were not to be described as Jews, but rather be called “Russian Karaites of the Old Faith.”³³ Though this appeal was accepted and legally enshrined in the Karaite Statute adopted 10 years later,³⁴ it was not always observed in practice. The need, felt by Karaites, to be named differently—without any connotation of Jewishness—was similar to the efforts of Rabbinite Jews to get official approval to be called *evrei* (Hebrews) and not *zhidy* in the Empire’s official communication, publications etc. As Fishman has pointed out, already at the end of the eighteenth century, after a request from the Jews of Shklov, Russian Empress Yekaterina had issued a law accepting the name *evrei* as the official one. This act was celebrated by enlightened Jews, those, who sought to be accepted by the dominant society and to whom their public perception as Jews and their social status was important.³⁵ In other words, for both communities their name was important as an identity marker and an expression of their status in the society they wanted to be accepted by.

³¹ Vyacheslav Eliashevich, “Samonazvanie karaim: proiskhozhdenie, istori’a i interpretacii,” *Tsaytshrift* 6, no. 11 (2019): 85.

³² “Circular letter on the Karaite spiritual issues,” 1910, Wroblewski Library of Lithuanian Academy of Science, Manuscript Division, Collection 301, file 470.

³³ “Request of the Trakai/Troki Karaite community to the Vilnius/Vilna military governor and the general-governor of Grodno, Minsk, Kaunas/Kowno,” June 23, 1853, *Lithuanian State Historical Archive*, Collection 378 BS, index 1847, file 436, 43 v.

³⁴ Levanda, *Polnyj khronologicheskij*, 1001-1005.

³⁵ Fishman, *Russia’s first modern Jews*, 80-81.

The Idea of Nationalism in Karaite Periodical Publications

The establishment of the Tauria Karaite Spiritual Board, followed by the recognition of Karaites' equal rights with Russian Orthodox inhabitants, fostered Karaite acculturation and integration into the dominant society. These were the issues faced by Russian *maskilim* as well, with whom, as Akhiezer had convincingly pointed out, Karaite intellectuals were well familiar.

The beginning of the twentieth century, though, brought a new self-perception: Karaites began to describe themselves as a nation and act as a nation. This formed a major intellectual shift from acknowledgement with Rabbinite *maskilim*'s ideas, towards the definition of "their own" idea of communal modernization.

The role of communal printing in the study of Karaite nationalism is highly important. For centuries Eastern European Karaites lived in distant communities belonging to different states and under the influence of a variety of dominant cultures, languages and traditions. Among other functions, communal printing succeeded in strengthening the sense of unity among Karaites all over the Russian Empire. It was a tribune for the dissemination of Karaite nationalism by the community's elite to the general Karaite public, which, following Anderson, managed to create and maintain an imagined community with the help of these periodicals.³⁶ The founders of the first Karaite periodical, *Karaite life*, considered the spread of national self-consciousness as one of the main goals of their journal. Despite this, in several years of publication, there was only one article directly related to the issues of national identity, entitled "National self-consciousness," by David Kokizov.³⁷ This text may be seen as an expression of the views of enlightened Karaites, who saw acculturation, secularism and integration as the main goals of the Karaite national movement, even though it did not form any strategy of practical action. The author claimed a need to integrate into, as he called it, a universal human culture,³⁸ which was generally understood as the European

³⁶ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

³⁷ David Kokizov, "Natsionalnoe samosoznanie," *Karaimskaia zhizn* 3-4 (1911): 21-34.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 27.

civilization. Integration into it meant Karaite membership in an elite club of nations, which maintained their national culture within the framework of this civilization. In other words, enlightened Karaites felt that Russian Karaites did not fit into the standard model of other European nations, and wanted to eliminate the obstacles that kept them away from this goal. This, in fact, was not a unique feature of the Karaite national movement: Russian *maskilim*, as described by Fishman, “willingly joined European culture through intellectual activities, participation in the social and political life of the country, sharing the objective of acculturation into Russian society.”³⁹ The focus on European civilization and culture was a general characteristic of the Haskalah movement and Karaites were part of this milieu.

The journal *Karaite life* took this goal as their mission—“to examine the questions about Karaite life that are closely related to [community’s] national identity.”⁴⁰ Very much like Jewish *maskilim*, who, as Akhiezer has pointed out, thought of *Haskalah* as a pan-Jewish movement that could include Karaites despite their attitude towards the Talmud—or on the contrary, because of that⁴¹—, Karaites also tended to speak of modernization in general Jewish terms. Though the above-mentioned article “National self-consciousness” was addressed to a Karaite audience, the terms used by the author did not limit its scope solely to Karaites. This can be shown by analyzing Kokizov’s text: he always refers to “*zakon bozhiy*” (God’s law) instead of Judaism, “*svyatoye pisaniye*” (Holy Scripture) instead of the Torah, uses the phrase “*drevne-bibleyskiy yazyk*” (old biblical language), invented by the Karaites themselves, to designate Biblical Hebrew, etc.⁴² Most importantly, he uses the term *Israelites*, which had a clear religious connotation and relation with the Biblical forefathers of the Karaites but could be applied to the whole Jewry as well. These terms were commonly used by Russian *maskilim* and, no doubt, Kokizov was familiar with their texts, as it emerges from his writings, where he puts Karaites in the context of all Jewry:

³⁹ Fishman, *Russia’s first modern Jews*, 133-135.

⁴⁰ Kokizov, “Natsionalnoe samosoznanie,” 26.

⁴¹ Akhiezer, *Historical Consciousness*, 314-315.

⁴² Mikhail Kizilov, *The Sons of Scripture. The Karaites in Poland and Lithuania in the Twentieth Century* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), 91.

[contrary to Karaites], another stream of Israel—the Jewish nation—whose different groups lived among more civilized nations, earlier than the Karaites managed to refuse this [negative] influence [of religion] and to join the universal human culture, which was triumphantly approaching them.⁴³[...] They—the Jews—clearly spoke up for Enlightenment and called themselves adherents of this movement.⁴⁴

The passage clearly shows that, from Kokizov’s point of view, Karaites had to follow the Jewish *maskilim*, which, again, shows that Karaites did not form a separate or purely Karaite Enlightenment movement but tended to join the general Jewish one. However, Kokizov avoided any references to the texts of *Haskalah* thinkers and promoters in the pages of this journal.

Despite the lack of a modernization program in the pages of *Karaite life*, it seems that the seed of nationalism was planted in the minds of Karaites: the other journal under discussion, *Karaite word*, applied the term *nation* to Imperial Karaites.⁴⁵ This sense of nationhood was closely related, as it was stated before, to the institutionalization of the Karaite community and the establishment of the chair of *hakham*. This is well illustrated by two articles in *Karaite word*, on the election of a new *hakham* in 1914 after the death of predecessor Samuel Pampulov. The author of the article “On the [question of the] election of the Tauria hakham”⁴⁶ considers this election of high importance for all the Karaite nation: “the election of the hakham is of national interest, as every mistake can [...] cause harm to the nation.”⁴⁷ For the author, who wrote under the abbreviation T-ij, this was an event of great significance⁴⁸ and “national interest”. The emerging role of the hakham in Karaite nation-building was an idea that was strongly promoted in the pages of *Karaite word*. Clearly, the author of the text under discussion considered Karaites as a unified nation and it was the institution of the *hakham* that strengthened this feeling of cohesion. Moreover, he demonstrated an ambition to

⁴³ Kokizov, “Natsionalnoe samosoznanie,” 24.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 23.

⁴⁵ “K vyboram Tavricheskogo gakama,” *Karaimskoe slovo* 7-8 (1914): 1.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ “K vyboram Tavricheskogo gakama,” 2.

unite not only the Imperial Karaites but all Karaites, i.e. the communities in *Halicz* (Austria), Turkey and Egypt. The author argued that the Karaites who lived in those countries were bounded by “blood and religion [...] [which] forms the basis of any nationality—elements that most easily unite individuals into one association.”⁴⁹ Moreover: “Life itself states for us a necessity to have such a unifying center—a *hakham* for all Karaites [...], to avoid the split among our brothers.”⁵⁰

The idea of a “national leader” was rather new among Jews, and its appearance was stimulated by the idea of nation, that prevailed in the dominant imperial society, where the czar was perceived as the father of the whole nation. As discussed above, in the first half of the nineteenth century such concept was adapted for two non-Christian communities in the Russian Empire—Tatars and Karaites—by imposing the position of chief religious leader (the *hakham* in the Karaite community, and the mufti in the Muslim Tatar one).⁵¹ The growing significance of the *hakham* was a unique feature of Karaite nationalism and gained its peak in the first half of the twentieth century, when the Karaite community positioned the *hakham* as the central figure of their nationalism. It determined the nature of Karaite nationalism, which developed using the framework established by the dominant society, something that was not the case among Rabbinite Jews. Undoubtedly, this feature made Karaite *Haskalah* different from that observed among Rabbinite Jews, but this difference was not about the ideas or goals of the Enlightenment, but rather about the means to implement it.

⁴⁹ L..., “Odin hakham dl’a vsech karaimov,” *Karaimskoe slovo* 9-10 (1914): 1.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ This practice may be compared to the institution of the *hakham bashi* in the Ottoman Empire. According to a legend, this institution was established by Mehmed the Conqueror, however, as B. Lewis states in the book *The Jews of Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 126-127; at that time that figure could hardly have been the head of all Ottoman Jews. Only in 1834 was a chief rabbi appointed by the Ottoman sultan Mahmud II, and the position did not last long, since the Ottoman Empire ceased to exist less than a century later. No matter the actual scope of the *hakham bashi*’s jurisdiction, it was an important figure for Ottoman Jewish identity.

The Nature of Karaite Nationalism

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Karaite communal press identified three key elements of Karaite nationalism, as conceived by the enlightened in the community: strong secularization, national education and national language. The word “national” was used often and specifically to stress belonging to Karaite community. The constant use of this term supported the idea of Karaites as a nation and such understanding changed the previously popular self-understanding as a community united, first and foremost, by religious tradition. The emergence of a nationalistic point of view was encouraged by the Karaite elite’s conviction that the religious tradition had been corrupted over time, and had lost its primary, authentic form—and the same ideas can be observed among Rabbinite maskilim. Given the lack of specific ideas about how Karaite religious tradition should be changed in order to become “authentic” again, secularization together with a national identity was seen as a viable option.

In the pages of *Karaite life* the term “secularization” gained quite a radical connotation. David Kokizov, the author of the already mentioned article “National self-consciousness,” was convinced that it was religion that was to be blamed for the absence of national self-consciousness among Israelites. The main problem, according to this author, was that all hardships were understood as God’s punishment, which in turn brought an even stronger adherence to religion and a deeper indifference to culture, secular education etc. Kokizov stated that “as long as an oppressive adherence to the ritual part of our religion lies upon our nation, one cannot talk about any kind of national self-identity and intellectual prosperity.”⁵² From his point of view, religious restrictions prevented any chance that the nation could take up responsibility for its own existence and at the same time cherish a common feeling of national self-awareness. While criticizing adherence to religion, Kokizov did not suggest any religious reforms but saw secularization as the only way for Israelites to become a nation. However, the place of religiosity in the Karaite national project was evaluated differently among Karaites of different parts of Empire. While Kokizov represented the position of

⁵² Kokizov, “Natsionalnoe samosoznanie,” 23.

strong secularization supported by Moscow Karaites, their co-religionists in the North Western region still saw religion as one of the most important aspects of Karaite national self-consciousness. The lack of homogeneity in the opinions of Karaite leaders concerning the content of the community's national project shows how many differences existed within the community and indicates the reasons of the limited success in the implementation of this project. As Mikhail Kizilov has aptly noted, "on the verge of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries the Karaites had problems with clearly defining both their ethnic and religious affiliations."⁵³ Against this background Kokizov supported secularization and spoke up for the replacement of religious identity with a national one, leaving religious practice as an individual matter. Notwithstanding his critics, the content of the journal clearly shows that the community had already reached a turning point and the split between the conservative practitioners of the Karaite religion and the liberal part of the community was constantly growing. In this context, the journal tended to reflect the already existing situation rather than propagate new revolutionary ideas. For example, in an article dealing with the issues of the National Karaite assembly,⁵⁴ the author stressed the tension between religious leaders and the part of the community which was following the ideas of Enlightenment (liberal, well educated, secular). It seems that the latter was more influential, so that the Tauria *hakham* Samuel Pampulov decided to keep the assembly sessions inaccessible to the press—and even to Karaites, if they were not on the list of deputies—in order to avoid the potential blowback. Some participants were even forced to leave the meeting. This was a source of much distress for the liberal part of the community, which felt ignored by their religious leaders. The *hakham* himself probably tried to ensure that some discussions would remain confined to a small circle and that the final decisions would correspond to the positions of the *hakham*, but he failed.⁵⁵ The growth of secularism among Karaites was recorded by a delegate from the Moscow Karaite community to the Karaite National Assembly, A. I. Katyk, who clearly stated that some of the Karaite religious rituals had lost their

⁵³ Kizilov, *The Sons of Scripture*, 39.

⁵⁴ "Echo o pervom nacionalnom karaimskom sjezde," *Karaimskaia zhizn'* 2 (1911): 62-63.

⁵⁵ It seems that the *hakham* failed to keep the Assembly closed to the public as its decisions were announced in the journal *Karaimskaia zhizn'*. I do not have any information at my disposal on the decisions made by the Assembly beyond than those reported by the journal.

meaning and importance. As a consequence, Enlightenment was beginning to spread among young Karaites and “not only communities are scattered and distant from each other but also members of particular communities.”⁵⁶ Some of the Karaite young were strongly affected by the loss of religiosity, which had kept their forefathers together, bound to both a territory and an identity.⁵⁷ There were even examples of a radical refusal of religious tradition and rituals. For example, it appeared that some Karaite families refused to perform circumcision on baby boys, which made it impossible to get metrical documents for them. In this case the assembly firmly stressed that circumcision was to be considered an obligation in the Karaite community, and only after this procedure the birth of a child could be registered in metrical books.⁵⁸ Apparently, adherence to secularization in the circles of enlightened Karaites at the beginning of the twentieth century was strong and less nuanced than among Rabbinite *maskilim*. This was probably due to the fact that criticism of religion within the Karaite community had only begun to be publicly voiced almost a hundred years later than among Rabbinites. Secularization did not sound as a progressive idea but simply corresponded to the reality that the community had already faced and accepted. In the circles of enlightened Karaites secularization was the most important condition for modernization and nation-building. On the contrary, the Karaites in the North Western region—Trakai/Troki and Vilnius/Vilna, where the journal *Karaite word* was published—belonged to a more conservative elite, which was trying to preserve the status of religion and make it a part of modern Karaite nationalism: “[if] we will be following our [religious] teaching, educating ourselves according the principles of universal human morality, which is within this teaching, we will experience the sympathy of surrounding [people] and gain our rights.”⁵⁹ This compromise position shows that even conservative communities were well aware that modernization was an ongoing process among Karaites, and was threatening their religious tradition. Efforts to keep religion relevant in everyday life were evident in literary works like in the poem “Vospryan’, moy narod” (Rise up, my nation) by M.S. Sinani, who appealed to the Karaites: “remember the

⁵⁶ “Pervyj nacionalnyj karaimskij sjezd w Eupatorii,” *Karaimskaia zhizn’* (1911): 72.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

⁵⁸ “Echo o pervom nacionalnom karaimskom sjezde,” 62-63.

⁵⁹ L..., “Odin hakham dl’a vseh karaimov,” 2.

commandment of God/ get on the road/ [...] and do not forget the holy faith.”⁶⁰ The idea of Karaite Judaism as a source of “universal human morality” was an attempt to maintain its status, though, as the refusal of Jewishness in the twentieth century shows, it was unsuccessful.⁶¹ Among progressive Karaites another key element of their national identity was education. The prevailing educational system in traditional schools—studying the Bible and its commentaries—was critically assessed in *Karaite life*. It was accused of being not only ineffective but even harmful for the community and threatening its existence in the near future. It was argued that due to its inability to ensure teaching of contemporary subjects, Karaite children were attending Russian secondary schools and remained without, as it was called, a national education. Because of this, young Karaites were losing their connections with their communities and other Karaites.⁶² In the context of promoting Karaite national identity, the role of education cannot be overestimated. While the importance and dissemination of moral codes determined by religion was decreasing, national education was proposed as a welcomed solution. It is not by accident that the task of upbringing children was assigned to the national education and was even more important than the knowledge it was meant to provide.⁶³ The question of a national school system was addressed at the national Karaite assembly in 1910. After long discussions, the decision was made to turn the Karaite religious academy into a pro-gymnasium, with a focus on secular education and national upbringing.⁶⁴ The project was nonetheless doomed to fail because this was the only institution of “national education” and most of the Karaite youth was scattered throughout the Russian Empire, and were unable to study there. Besides, it is clear that at the beginning of

⁶⁰ M.S. Sinani, “Vosprian’, moi narod!,” *Karaimskoe slovo* 6 (1914): 3.

⁶¹ The Karaite community in Vilnius/Vilna at the beginning of the twentieth century was already quite secular. Though local Karaites made efforts to build a *kenesa* in the city and managed to complete the project successfully and open it in 1923, it was built as a monument to the Karaite nation, and adorned with secular symbols (such as the Karaite coat of arms, a symbol of Karaite nationalism). Many secular celebrations took place in this *kenesa* during the first half of the twentieth century.

⁶² Kokizov, “Natsionalnoe samosoznanie,” 27.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁶⁴ It was then decided to teach 6 lessons per week of biblical Hebrew and Karaite religion in preparatory classes, and only 4 lessons for students of the first to fourth grades. “Pervyj nacionalnyj karaimskij sjezd w Eupatorii,” 83.

the twentieth century many Karaite families were choosing to educate their children in the state's school system, ensuring their qualification in Russian language and secular subjects. Though the plan of a national school fostered national thinking among emancipated Karaites, the community was unable to set up such a system because of both financial reasons and the growing adaptation to the governmental educational system. The third important issue was the role of language in the modernization process, which was perceived completely differently by each group. If the Rabbinic *Haskalah* sought to seek enlightenment by both acculturation and the revival of Hebrew language and literature,⁶⁵ Karaites, on the contrary, saw it mainly as a process of acculturation into Russian society. The Hebrew language was never included in the national Karaite project: for example, in the article “Russkiy ili tatarskiy” (Russian or Tatar)⁶⁶ Kokizov stated that the Karaites' native Hebrew language had been replaced (voluntarily or not) by the Tatar language after Karaite forefathers found themselves under their authority. According to the author, the use of the Tatar language—which was said to be poor, uncivilized, and used by only a small number of people—should be discontinued, because “[European] Karaites have used the Tatar language for several centuries, during this period they have written no scientific work or any other work which they could be proud of in the Tatar language.”⁶⁷

In order to become a civilized nation, Karaites should adopt a civilized language in their everyday life, education, and religious services. The suggested solution—not to return to Hebrew but to use Russian—was based on rational arguments: Karaites were living in a Russian speaking society and knowing its language would open up more perspectives for them:

The answer to the question of which language [European] Karaites should replace the Tatar vernacular with should not cause any trouble, because this new language must be the language of a cultural nation, where

⁶⁵ Lital Levy, “The Nahḏa and the Haskala: A Comparative Reading of ‘Revival’ and ‘Reform,’” *Middle Eastern Literatures: Incorporating Edebiyat* 16, no.3 (2013): 302, DOI: 10.1080/1475262X.2013.891391.

⁶⁶ David Kokizov, “Ruskij ili tatarskij,” *Karaimskaia zhizn* 2 (1911): 34-36.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 35.

[European] Karaite communities currently dwell. This means that the Karaites who live in the Russian Empire should learn the Russian language.⁶⁸

This change should not be expected to occur spontaneously—the author of the article gives a list of means, that should be made compulsory by the Karaite Spiritual Board and applied to all Karaite communities: teaching children should be done in Russian and supported by textbooks, prayer books and other necessary materials, printed in Russian or in Biblical Hebrew with parallel text in the Russian language, because a significant part of Karaite community knew little Hebrew, if at all: “The translation of prayer books and holy books into Russian should also have a positive impact on the strengthening of the religiosity of [European] Karaites.”⁶⁹ Moreover, it was proposed that all official correspondence of the Karaite communities and the Tauria Spiritual Board should take place exclusively in Russian. And finally, each Karaite family should teach their children to speak mainly Russian.

It is worth noting that the movement in support of the Russian language at the beginning of the twentieth century became very extreme, as one can infer from the text discussed above, where no mention is made of any possible bilingualism within the Karaite community. The position of Hebrew was discussed only in the context of religious education, however, it was perceived as a kind of habit, which, as may be presumed, would eventually vanish thanks to extensive translations of religious texts into Russian.

The silence about Hebrew was in stark contrast to the promotion of Russian, and had another rational justification: it would make visible the cultural coherence with Rabbinite Jews, which, after the establishment of the Karaite Spiritual board and the acknowledgment of Karaite social status by the Imperial government, would be highly undesirable by most Karaites. It could even be perceived as threatening, if existing antisemitic notions within society were taken into account.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

Despite discussions on the questions of national self-consciousness in the Karaite press, it was not until the fourth decade of the twentieth century that the ideology of Karaite nationalism was elaborated. Its content, developed by the Polish Karaite hakham Seraja Szapszal/Shapshal and his colleagues,—Ananjasz Zajączkowski and others—differed strongly from the ideas presented in both journals under discussion. The newly coined Karaite national self-consciousness, though built on the basis of the secularization process that was promoted so intensely by Kokizov, brought Karaites to a self-understanding as a separate Turkic ethnicity, which had nothing to do with their original Jewishness. Paradoxically, the main argument for such change was the vernacular language used by Karaites in the former Russian Empire, which Kokizov considered as evidence of Karaite backwardness in comparison with other “civilized” nations. For S. Szapszal and his circle, on the contrary, their Turkic dialect served as the strongest evidence for a Turkic Karaite origin. This link between language and ethnicity was natural for the newly established independent states, where Karaite communities ended up after World War I: Poles in Poland spoke Polish, and the same could be said about Lithuanians. Likewise, Karaites presented themselves as a group that spoke Karaite—the newly adopted term for the language, which was earlier known as Tatar among community members⁷⁰—in an effort to fit the “standard” of nationhood that prevailed in the region. In adopting this new ethno-linguistic nationalism the Karaite community shifted away from *Haskalah* ideas.

Conclusions

As discussed above, the *Haskalah* movement within the Karaite community in most cases shared the same ideas with Russian *maskilim*, though the arguments for their adoption were specific to the Karaite community. The main ideas remained the same: integration into the dominant society, secularization and strengthening of the national self-consciousness, and overcoming their self-perceived backwardness, which was the main goal for both Karaite and Rabbinite *Haskalah* thinkers and activists. However, the analysis of Karaite periodicals has

⁷⁰ See the already analyzed article by Kokizov, “Ruskij ili tatarskij,” 34-36.

revealed some important differences between those two movements, which turned the Karaite national movement away from Jewish intellectual thought in the second and third decades of the twentieth century. As explained above, Russian Karaites enjoyed a favorable social status, which separated them from the rest of Imperial Jews. Exemption from double taxation, military conscription and other exemptions from the restrictions that were applied to Imperial Rabbinite Jews, made Karaites feel more comfortable in their everyday life, which led to a delay in the development of nationalism in the Karaite community. Moreover, being the subjects of the Empire, the Karaite elite saw themselves within the cultural and civilizational environment of Russia. It was mostly the Karaites' privileged status that made Karaite nationalism less concerned with their social—legal status within the state, a with the community's cultural revival and more with its recognition as a civilized nation by the dominant society. This may also be a reason why this movement was relevant only for a small circle of educated Karaites in the capital of the Empire and did not reach the Karaite masses.

One more important aspect, revealed by the analysis of Karaite periodicals, is that modernization was delayed in comparison with the same process in the Rabbinite community. This chronological gap between enlightenment in both communities also lay in the politics of the Empire: the Karaite social and legal status did not put them under pressure to start any modernization process. It was only when the Imperial officials began to demand arguments to prove the exceptional social and legal position of Karaites, that the process of modernization accelerated among the community's elite.

Despite sometimes radical arguments, presented in the journal *Karaite life*, the periodicals under discussion argued for acculturation and secularization, and use of the Russian language, which were already prevalent in many Karaite communities. In many aspects the Karaite press did not suggest any novel proposals but simply reflected the changes in the community that were already taking place. This could be one of the reasons why the ideas presented in the pages of the journals under discussion did not develop into a systematic ideology and a strategy of action. Despite this, the journals provided an impetus for further entrenchment of Karaite nationalism in later decades. Definitely, the Karaite

community could not stand aside from the wave of modernization that was spreading across the Europe, and the ideas presented in early Karaite press were attempts to accommodate the new reality. As in the case of other modernization movements within non-Western European ethnic groups,⁷¹ Karaites were seeking to restore the “pure,” “authentic” Karaite culture that had been corrupted over the centuries.

But the most fundamental difference lied in the attitude towards the Hebrew language and its ideological significance for the modernization of both communities. In no case Hebrew was perceived as a national language by Karaite periodicals, contrary to the opinion of many Jewish Rabbinite thinkers, and this fundamental difference shaped the content of Karaite nationalism and fostered the formation of a separate, non-Jewish Karaite identity in later decades.

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Keywords: Karaite Identity, Karaite Press, Russian Empire, Nationalism, Haskalah

⁷¹ Levy, “The Nahḍa and the Haskala,” 303.

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