

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

THE KARAITES OF CZARIST RUSSIA, 1780–1918

Philip E. Miller

From the end of the seventeenth century, when the European powers perceived a potential weakness in the Ottoman Empire, Imperial Russia began to expand eastward and southward. In order to protect her new southeastern border and its pioneer citizens from incursion and attack by Tatar forces, Russia needed to neutralize the Crimea, a vassal state of Ottoman Turkey. The first monarch with the skills to realize Russia's imperialist goals was Catherine the Great, who expanded Russia's borders westward into the moribund Polish Empire and eastward deep into the Ukraine and toward Ural Mountains. To that end, Catherine incited a civil war between factions in the Giray Clan, which had ruled the Crimea for several hundred years. After a protracted fratricidal conflict, Russia annexed the Crimea in 1783. During and after the conflict many of the Muslim Tatar residents opted to repatriate to Ottoman Turkey, rather than live under a Christian ruler. Precise numbers are not available, but it is obvious that after the conflict and depopulation, much of the Crimea was devoid of population and resembled a moonscape.¹

There had been a Jewish presence in the Crimea since time immemorial, and at the time of Russia's annexation, there were Rabbanite and Karaite communities of approximately equal size. Both were farmers, minor skilled tradesmen, or petty merchants, although the Karaites may have had an upper hand socially and economically as Karaites had been the Giray khans' mint masters for many years, and may have also been their tax collectors as well.²

The Russians shifted the administrative capital of the Crimea from the Tatar capital of Bakhchisarai to Simferopol (formerly known as Akmeçid, literally, "White Mosque"). Consequently, the center of

¹ See Fisher, *The Russian Annexation*, pp. 17–25; idem, *The Crimean Tatars*, pp. 145–148.

² For further detailed discussions on the history of the Karaites in the Crimea → Shapira, *Beginnings*; → Akhiezer, *History*; → Kizilov, *Chufut-Kale and Mangup*.

Karaite life seems to have shifted away from Chufut-Kale, the mountainside fortress-town outside Bakhchisarai to Eupatoria, the only developed port (albeit not deep-water) on the Crimea's west shore.

Traditional Karaite sources (and subsequent European scholars)³ portray Benjamin b. Samuel Aga (d. 1824) as the nominal head of the community, living the first forty years of Russia's administration of the Crimea in Chufut-Kale. It is altogether likely that Benjamin remained a figurehead leader. For Chufut-Kale was increasingly marginal to Russia's interests, whilst Eupatoria was a vital commercial and military link, as witnessed by the massive refortification of Eupatoria undertaken by the Russians during the 1780s. It is likely, therefore, that the real political power resided in the hands of a merchant, Solomon b. Naḥamu Babovich (d. 1817), whose economic network within the Karaite community assisted in the provisioning of the Russian military in the Southern Command. At the time of his death, Solomon Babovich controlled three commercial houses: Eupatoria, Odessa, and Feodosia, making him one of the wealthiest men in South Russia.

In 1794, after the Third Partition of Poland, in which hundreds of thousands of Jews came under the rule of Catherine the Great, the delegation of Karaite leaders went to St. Petersburg in order to petition ostensibly for relief from the double-taxation imposed on the Jews. The delegation consisted of Benjamin Aga, Solomon b. Isaac (Benjamin's scholar-scribe amanuensis), and Solomon Babovich. In a rescript issued just weeks after the delegation's arrival, the Karaites were released from the double-taxation, and were granted two other privileges: exemption from billeting soldiers in their private homes during the winter, and the right to bequeath and inherit land.⁴ These last two concessions have special significance, for they were not granted to Rabbanite Jews. Moreover, later Karaite historical writing referred to this mission as the first attempt by the Karaites to establish an identity separate and apart from the Rabbanite.⁵ The only other group exempted from billeting troops and permitted to bequeath and inherit land was the nobility. Just after the annexa-

³ See, for instance, Fuerst, *Geschichte des Karäerthums*; Sinani, *Historia vozniknovidenia*; Pigit, *Iggeret*.

⁴ See *Polnoe sobranie*, Second Collection, no. 17,340; Levanda, *Polnyi khoronologicheskii*, no. 46.

⁵ See Sinani, *Historia vozniknovidenia*.