The Karaites are a schismatic Jewish sect which severed itself from the Babylonian Jewish community in the eighth century C.E. The Karaites contended that the Rabbinites (adherents of the Rabbinic tradition of Judaism) had perverted the Torah (written law) by superseding it by the Talmud (compendium of oral law). Originating in Iraq, the Karaites established communities in: Palestine, Egypt, Turkey, and the Crimea. In the fourteenth century, a group of captive Crimean Karaites were settled in Poland by Grand Duke Witold of Lithuania after his victory over the Crimean Tatars.

In 1795, Czarina Catherine the Great of Russia declared that the Karaites living in the Russian empire were to be exempt from a double tax which was imposed on the Jewish community. The Karaites were also permitted to purchase land unlike the Rabbinic Jews. The Karaites legitimized their distinction based on the fact that they had been living in the Crimea since the time of the First Temple and were not in Palestine when the Jews had committed deicide. During the nineteenth century, the Karaites were granted many rights and privileges which were denied to the Russian Jewish community. In 1827 and 1828, the Karaites were exempted from military service, whereas the Rabbinite Jews were burdened with supplying troops to serve in the Czar's army. In 1863, the Karaites were granted full Russian citizenship; a right which the Russian Jews did not receive until the Russian Revolution of 1917. Many of the Karaites were wealthy merchants, government officials and military officers. Due to their vested interests in the czarist regime, many of them were forced to flee to the West after the Bolshevik takeover in 1917.

Sometime in the late 1930's, a group of Russian Karaites living in Berlin petitioned the German government to be exempt from the anti-Jewish legislations which were introduced by the Nazis after their ascension to power in 1933. Their petition led to an investigation, undertaken by German scholars, resulting in the acceptance of the Czarist distinction between Jews and Karaites. On January 5, 1939, the Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung declared that the Karaites were not to be
considered Jews and were, therefore, to be exempted from all anti-Jewish legislation.\textsuperscript{3} This ruling was to serve as a precedent and was responsible for saving the lives of approximately 12,000 Karaites living in Germany, France, Poland and the Soviet Union during World War II.

The Nazi racial policy towards the Jews can best be seen in the Crimea where members of Einsatzgruppe D (mobile killing units which were in charge of eliminating any opposition to German rule in the Soviet Union) under the command of SS Major General Otto Ohlendorf confronted three distinct “Jewish” groups: Ashkenazim, Karaites and Krimchaks. The Yiddish speaking East European Ashkenazim were immediately exterminated. Ohlendorf was uncertain about what action he should take concerning the Karaites and Krimchaks. They both spoke Turkic dialects written with Hebrew characters. They both had acquired many “Asiatic” features through intermarriage with the indigenous population. The groups differed in the area of religion; the Krimchaks practiced Rabbinic Judaism where the Karaites had shucked off the yoke of Rabbinic authority centuries earlier. Ohlendorf wired his superiors in Berlin requesting instructions concerning the fate of these two “Jewish” groups. He received orders in the Fall of 1941 that he was to eliminate the Krimchaks because they possessed “Jewish” blood. He was not to harm the Karaites. Between November 1941 and January 1942 the Einsatzgruppe troops executed approximately 2,500 Krimchaks.\textsuperscript{4} Philip Friedman, a noted scholar and Holocaust researcher, explained that the directive which Ohlendorf received from Berlin concerning the Karaites and Krimchaks was probably also sent to the respective commanders of Einsatzgruppe A, B and C.\textsuperscript{5}

During the course of my research, I have uncovered an incident when the Decree of January 5, 1939 was not enforced. A. Anatoli (Anatoli Kuznetsov) relates in his historical novel Babi Yar that a group of Karaites were included among the 33,771 Jews of Kiev who were executed by members of Einsatzgruppe C, Sonderkommando 4A under the command of SS Colonel Paul Blobel on September 29-30, 1941:

\ldots It was said that the Karaim had passed somewhere (I had never heard the word before, but I realized that they must have been some sort of sect) old men in loose garments reaching their heels. They had spent the night in their synagogues. In the morning they had come out chanting, “Children, we are going to our deaths. Prepare yourselves! Let us meet death bravely, as Christ did.”\textsuperscript{6}
Anatoli’s account of the deportation of the Kieven Karaites is very disturbing because it contradicts all previous actions taken by the Nazis towards the Karaites.

We know from scattered reports that the Karaite community in the Ukrainian city of Kiev had been in existence for some time. In the 1897 Russian census, 327 Karaites were reported to have resided in the city of Kiev. In 1929, the Soviet newspaper, Bezbozhnik reported that the Knessa (Karaite house of worship) in Kiev was closed down by Soviet officials and converted into a cinema during the wave of anti-religious persecutions of the 1920’s and 1930’s. If Anatoli’s account is correct, then the Kenessa may have been reopened or a new one established at some later date. The “old men” referred to in Anatoli’s account may aptly describe the condition of the once favored Karaite community after 24 years of Soviet rule.

Zvi Harkavy, an Israeli rabbi, has done extensive research on the fate of the Karaites during World War II. In his article titled, “HaKaraim beTekufat haShoah beEyrope” (“The Karaites During the European Holocaust Period”) published in the Hebrew journal Gesher (Number 4, 1969), Harkavy takes issue with Anatoli’s account of the consolations by the hoary schismatics, “...Let us meet death bravely, as Christ did.” Harkavy’s criticism of Anatoli is based on his reading of the Hebrew translation of Babi Yar written by Shlomo Even-Shushan. I find Harkavy’s criticism problematic due to Even-Shushan’s improper translation of the Russian word, Christos (“Christ”) as Mashiakh (“Messiah”):

S. Even-Shushan omitted “Jesus” in his translation because he understood that Kuznetsov made a “gentile’s error” in his connecting the Karaites to the faith of Jesus. It is known that the Karaites hated Christianity no less than the Jews did. This is testified by Isaac of Troki’s book, Hizzuk haEmunah (“Strengthening of the Faith”).

It is true that Isaac of Troki (1533-1594) wrote Hizzuk haEmunah as a rebuttal to the Christian contention that Jesus’ coming was prophesied in the Old Testament. In the modern period, however, Karaite theology had undergone a dejudaeization process which evolved into an ecumenical form of “Mosaism”. One aspect of Russian Karaism was a recognition of the divinity of Jesus and Mohammed. In a pamphlet published by the
Polish Karaite community in 1938, the topic of the relationship of Karaism to Islam and Christianity was discussed:

Karaites view Christ and Mohammed as prophets. The Arab historian, Makrisi reported that Anan (founder of the sect) had much respect for Jesus Christ and that he (Anan) acknowledged that Mohammed was the prophet of the Arab people.¹⁰

In an interview in 1936, Sheraya Szapszal, Hacham (religious leader) of the Polish Karaite community, explained to the French journalist, Abel Moreau, the relationship of Karaism to Christianity.

Szapszal: Sir, the Karaites existed at the same time as Jesus Christ. Our religion is Judaism in its primitive purity, before the Talmud which we do not recognize as a holy book.

Moreau: And Christ?

Szapszal: We call him Yeshu haTzadik, that is the “Just”. For us Christ did not modify the Old Testament. On the contrary, he affirmed it. He was opposed to the Pharisees, the falsifiers of the Law. Many of us believe that Christ was a Karaite. Moreover, the fundamental principle of the Bible, to love God above all (most dear), is not understood by Karaites and Christians in the same way? Christ is for us a great prophet but not the messiah. The Gospels are historical books, not the law. Like the Jews, we wait for the coming of the messiah. When he does finally arrive there will be universal peace on earth.¹¹

From the various communiques, reports and testimonies investigated in the course of my research, no mention was ever made of massacres of Karaites in Kiev. From German sources, the Decree of January 5, 1939 was strictly enforced in all areas which fell under German domination. It is, therefore, doubtful that an exception was made in the Ukraine. Further research will undoubtedly “enlighten” us on the perplexing “Karaite passage” found in Anatolîs Babi Yar.
1. Simon Dubnow, the noted Jewish historian commented that, “it is interesting to observe that at the solicitation of Count Zubov, the Governor-General of New Russia, the Karaites of Tavrida (Crimea) were released from the double tax. They were also granted permission to own estates, and were in general given equal rights with the Christian population. ‘on the understanding, however, that the community of Karaites should not be entered by the Jews known by the name of Rabins (Rabbanites), concerning whom the laws enacted by us are to be rigidly enforced’ (ukase of June 8, 1795).” S.M. Dubnow, History of the Jews in Russia and Poland, Vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1916), p. 318.


4. For further information concerning the history and traditions of the Krimchaks see Rudolph Loewenthal, “The Extinction of the Krimchaks in World War II”, The American Slavic and East European Review 10, 1951.


6. Anatoli Kuznetsov, Babi Yar, trans. Jacob Guralsky (New York: Dial Press, 1967), p. 61. Kuznetsov defected to the West in 1969; he eventually expanded his book to include passages which were omitted by Soviet censors. The revised version of Babi Yar was translated by David Floyd and published in 1970. Floyd’s translation of the deportation of the Karaites differs slightly from Guralsky’s translation. “A rumor went around that some Karaimes had passed through (it was the first time I had heard this name, which is apparently given to a small Semitic people) very old men wearing robes reaching right down to the ground, who spent the whole night in their synagogue, then emerged and declared: ‘Children, we are going to our deaths; prepare yourselves. Let us meet it courageously as Christ did.’ A Anatoli Babi Yar, trans. David Floyd (London: J. Cape, 1970), p. 95.


