The serious student of Judaica has long recognized the importance of the study of Karaitica. In spite of its significance as a key to understanding Jewish history and literature, the study of Karaitica has stagnated. The decline is apparent in the scarcity of researchers in this field. My interest in Karaite studies was kindled when I found myself to be ignorant of post-tenth century Karaite history. Superficial research revealed that after the supposed decline of the Karaites during the lifetime of the medieval Jewish religious leader Saadia Gaon, the Karaite movement was able to survive and establish vibrant communities in Turkey, the Balkans, Crimea, Poland and Lithuania. In the eighteenth century, a group of Crimean Karaites requested that Empress Catherine exempt them from any legislation affecting the Jews; they claimed they had lived in the Crimea since the sixth century B.C. and that their ancestors were not in Palestine when the Jews crucified Jesus. This argument was accepted and the Karaites were exempted from paying the double tax imposed on the Russian Jewish community and were permitted to purchase land.\(^1\) During the nineteenth century, the tsarist regime continued to show them special favour by exempting them from military service and by granting them full Russian citizenship.

Subsequently, the Nazi regime accepted the tsarist ruling and recognized the Russian Karaites as a non-Jewish group. Thus the Karaites living in Germany and other territories under its administration were exempted from all anti-Jewish legislation and persecution.

* I would like to thank the Memorial Foundation for Jewish Culture for enabling me to conduct this research.
The Nazis’ treatment of the Karaites during World War II seems to be of prime importance if one is to fully comprehend the enormity of the Jewish tragedy during this period. What is known about the fate of the Karaites during the war is derived from scattered news items and personal accounts published during and after the war. In addition, research on this topic has been undertaken by a few Jewish scholars whose findings appeared in the Yiddish and Hebrew press. The most prolific of these scholars were Professor Philip Friedman, Rabbi Zvi Harkavy and President Yitzhak Ben Zvi. I feel that my research is a complement to their earlier studies. I have made extensive use of Captured German Documents which are available in the US National Archives (Washington) YIVO (New York), and the Centre de Documentation Juive Contemporaine (Paris).

From my research, it is clear that the Nazis’ benevolent treatment of the Karaites was an integral part of the policy they adopted when dealing with the non-Slavic ethnic groups of the Soviet Union, a context lacking in earlier writings.

The pronounced anti-Russian and anti-Soviet sentiments voiced by the leaders of the various Turkic and Caucasian emigre groups were well received by several high-ranking Nazi leaders. This shared anti-communist sentiment prompted a tenuous alliance between these minority peoples and the Nazis during the German occupation of the Soviet Union. In return for military and economic assistance, the Germans made certain concessions in their racial policy. Thus, groups of “Jewish extraction”, such as the Georgian Jews, Judeo-Tats and Jugutim, were spared the fate of their European co-religionists and were not exterminated. It is only within this context that the Nazis’ attitude towards the Karaites can be understood.

The Russian Revolution precipitated the mass immigration of an unknown number of Crimean Karaites to Poland, France and Germany. These Karaites were forced to leave Russia because of their vested economic and political interest in the tsarist regime. The newly formed Karaitic communities in Central and Western Europe had close ties with the various Russian emigre communities which had also been formed after the Bolshevik takeover.

Hitler’s rise to power and the introduction of anti-Jewish legislation prompted the German Karaitic community, which consisted of 18 Karaites who had served as officers in Wrangel’s White Army, to submit a petition to the Reich’s Ministry of the Interior requesting that they not be identified as Jews. The Karaites most probably justified this distinction by citing tsarist legislation and the findings of scholars who attempted to prove that the Karaites had few historical and religious ties with Jews and Judaism.

The efforts of the German Karaites came to fruition on 5 January 1939 when Serge von Douvan, leader of the German Karaitic community, received a letter from the Leiter der Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung. The letter stated:

Concerning your submissions of 5 September and 10 October 1938 to the Reichsminister of the Interior, we inform you of the following.

The Karaitic sect should not be considered a Jewish religious com-
munity within the meaning of paragraph 2 point 2 of the First Regulation to the Reich’s Citizenship Law. However, it cannot be established that Karaites in their entirety are of blood-related stock, for the racial categorization of an individual cannot be determined without further ado by his belonging to a particular people, but by his personal ancestry and racial biological characteristics.4

Though the issue of the Karaites’ racial composition remained undecided, they were viewed by the Germans as a distinct religious group of non-Jewish origin. The letter from the Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung was of much value both in Nazi Germany and, later, in the conquered territories of Poland, Lithuania, the Soviet Union and France. In the above mentioned countries, the exemption of 5 January 1939 was applied. All attempts to identify the Karaites as Jews were rejected. Thus, the lives of approximately 12,000 Karaites were saved while their Rabbinical brethren were exterminated.

At the outbreak of World War II, the major Karaites settlements in Poland and Lithuania, located in Troki, Vilna, Halicz, Lutsk, and Panevezys, all came under Soviet rule. During the Soviet occupation Karaites’ community life was destroyed. The condition of this community took a turn for the better after the German invasion of the Soviet Union. The decision of the Reichsstelle für Sippenforschung of 5 January 1939 was recognized. In spite of the adoption and application of this ruling, the German authorities in the occupied territories wanted to investigate the situation in order to draw their own conclusions on the status of this unique group. A delegation of three German officials from the office of the Generalkommissar of Kovno was sent to Troki in August 1941. The officials met with Seraya Szapszal, the Polish Karaites Hakham, and his assistant, Szymon Firkovich. The Karaites leaders explained the tenets of their faith, outlined the history of the Polish Karaites settlement and showed the Germans historical artifacts and documents. Their purpose was to convince the Germans of their identity as a non-Jewish group and to illustrate their services to Poland in earlier times, including the inter-war period. The German officials were impressed by the testimonies of the Karaites leaders and submitted a very favourable report to Dr. Adrian von Renteln, Generalkommissar of Lithuania.6 Based on their recommendations, von Renteln issued an order on 1 September 1941 to his Gebietskommissaren in Kovno, Vilna and Siauliai and to his Stadtskommissaren in Kovno and Vilna, stating that the 1,200 Karaites living in their respective areas were not to be regarded as Jews.

In order to determine the Nazis’ consistency, we must now examine the Nazi racial policy in the Crimea. In autumn 1941, Einsatzgruppe D, under the command of SS Standartenführer Otto Ohlendorf, encountered the perplexing problem of differentiating three distinct “Jewish” groups: the Ashkenazi Jews, the Krymchaks and the Karaites. There was no doubt about the “Jewishness” of the Yiddish-speaking European Jews, who suffered the same fate as Jews in other territories under German domination. The Germans were, however, baffled as to the course of action they should adopt vis-à-vis the Karaites and the Krymchaks. Both of these groups had resided in the Crimea for many centuries and had
culturally assimilated into the Muslim-Tatar population. Both groups had adopted the Tatar language which they wrote in Hebrew script. The Karaites spoke Karaim and the Krymchaks spoke Jagatai, both belonging to the north-western group of the Turkic languages. These two groups had developed distinct Turkic-Mongolian features as a result of intermarriage with the native populations. The two groups differed in one area—religion. The Krymchaks were adherents of Rabbinical Judaism, whereas the Karaites had repudiated Rabbinical authority in the eighth century."

On 5 December 1941, Ohlendorf decided to exempt the Karaites and the Krymchaks from registering as Jews until a further investigation could be undertaken. He wrote to Berlin requesting information on the policy that should be adopted in dealing with these two groups. Shortly afterwards, he received a reply from Berlin stating that the Karaites "have nothing in common with the Jews except the confession." Ohlendorf received further orders that Einsatzgruppe D was to eliminate all the enemies of the Reich by Christmas 1941. In December 1941, the majority of the 8,000 Krymchaks were rounded up and executed. By January 1942, a German communiqué was able to boast that "in Simferopol, in addition to the Jews, the Krymchaks and Gypsy question were also solved."8

The German policy in Poland, Lithuania and the Soviet Union shows that the 5 January 1939 decision served as a precedent: the Karaites were not to be identified and persecuted as Jews. This ruling, however, only stressed the fact that the Karaites differed from the Jews in the area of religion. The Karaites leadership and their German supporters felt it was not sufficient to be considered religiously distinct in view of the fact that race was the determinant of Nazi policy; exemption on racial grounds was felt to be a more secure guarantee of the Karaites’ protected status. For this reason, a concerted effort was made to research their racial origins. Scholars of various disciplines and backgrounds were called upon to voice their opinion on the subject of the Karaites’ relationship to the Jews.

Much of the German research on the Karaites originated from the offices of Alfred Rosenberg’s Reichsministerium für die besetzten Ostgebiete. Among the staff members who concerned themselves with the Karaites’ question were Dr. Fritz Steiniger, Dr. Michael Kowschalny and Dr. Johannes Benzig.9 The exotic history and culture of the Polish Karaites also captured the interest of German journalists, who published several articles about the group. Similar research was taking place in Western Europe where the Russian Orthodox Metropolitans Seraphim and Eulogius as well as Monsignor Beaussart the Archbishop of Paris issued statements in support of the Karaites’ claim that they were a non-Jewish group.10

In addition to conferring with “Aryan” scholars, the Nazis also utilized the knowledge of Jewish scholars to help solve the riddle of the Karaites’ racial origin. Wartime research on Karaites’ history was conducted simultaneously in the Vilna, Warsaw and Lvov ghettos. From postwar reports, it is clear that the respective Jewish scholars were working independently and were unaware of their colleagues’ research. The most detailed account of this project comes from Vilna because Zelig Hirsch Kalmanovitch, an historian associated with YIVO, left a diary describing life in the Vilna Ghetto. Sometime in 1942,
Kalmanovitch was ordered to collect and translate material pertinent to determining the origins of the Polish Karaites community. Kalmanovitch and his staff collected, read and translated hundreds of articles, books and manuscripts related to Karaites history. In an entry dated 15 November 1942, Kalmanovitch commented:

I continue to translate the book of the Karaites hakham. (How limited is his horizon! He is proud of his Turkish-Tartar descent. He has a better understanding of horses and arms than of religion, although he is religious in the Christian sense).11

In Warsaw, Professor Meir Balaban and Dr. Yitzhak Schipper were ordered to prepare research papers on the racial origins of the Karaites. Their respective studies concluded that the Karaites were not of Jewish origin and had little in common with the Jews. The Germans also asked Professor Philip Friedman, Dr. Leib Landau and Dr. Jacob Schall in the Lvov Ghetto to voice their opinion on the subject. In their study, they explained that the Karaites’ racial origins were a subject of much debate. Their report outlined the different arguments, but placed more emphasis on the scholars who argued that the Karaites were of Turkic-Tatar descent and, therefore, were not racially related to the Jews. The report was then handed over to the German official for inspection. It is, however, unclear how much, if any, weight the Jewish research had in influencing the Nazi policy towards the Karaites.12

From the varied studies it is clear that the Karaites were viewed as a distinct ethnic group. For this reason the Ostministerium issued a memorandum re-stating the German government’s official policy on the status of the group. This communiqué, dated 13 June 1943, was signed by Dr. Georg Leibbrandt, head of the Political Division of the Ostministerium. The communiqué read:

The Karaites are religiously and nationally different from the Jews. They are not of Jewish origin, rather they are viewed as being people of Turkic-Tatar origin closely related to the Crimean Tatars. They are essentially a Near Asian-Oriental race possessing Mongolian features, thus they are aliens. The mixing of Karaites and Germans is prohibited. The Karaites should not be treated as Jews, but should be treated in the same fashion as the Turkic-Tatar peoples. Harsh treatment should be avoided in accordance with the goals of our Oriental politics...13

During the course of the war, members of the Karaites community continued to toil at their traditional occupations of gardening, farming, crafts and commerce. German documents also reveal that a number of Karaites were recruited into the German ranks. From a letter dated 27 September 1944, from Gerhard Klopfer, Staatssekretär in the Party Chancery, to SS Standartenführer Dr. Karl Brandt, we learn that an estimated 500-600 Crimean Karaites were serving in the Wehrmacht, Waffen-SS, and Tatar Legion! These Karaites most probably served with the 8,000-20,000 Crimean Tatars who served in the six German-officered Tatar battalions. Klopfer writes in this communiqué that “in respect to the close relations between the Crimean Tatars and the Crimean Karaites, no steps should be taken against the latter because it would upset the Tatars.” Klopfer asked that until the racial origin of the Karaites was conclusively decided, the behaviour of Karaites
serving in the German forces be watched and reported.14

The Karaites' cooperation with the Germans is revealed in another 
communiqué dated 24 November 1944. SS Obergruppenführer Gottlob 
Berger informed SS Standartenführer Dr. Karl Brandt that the Karaites 
should be handled like all other Türkic peoples:

Their Mosaic religion is unwelcome. However, on grounds of 
race, language and religious dogma, they are absolute opponents 
of Talmudic Jewry. Discrimination against the Karaites is un-
acceptable, in consideration of their racial kinsmen (the Türkic 
peoples). However, so as not to infringe the unified anti-Jewish 
orientation of the nations led by Germany, it is suggested that 
this small group be given the opportunity of a separate existence (for 
example, as a closed construction or labour battalion) and that their 
existence be kept secret from the public as far as possible.15

The Karaites also served the Germans in the capacity of interpreters. 
In the city of Lutsk, the local Karaites acted as liaisons between the 
Germans and the Lutsk Judenrat. Jacob Eilbert, a survivor of the 
Lutsk Ghetto, testified to the Karaita anti-Jewish activity. He recounted 
that the Karaites would enter the ghetto and beat up women and 
children. On other occasions they would extort huge sums of money 
from the Lutsk Judenrat. Eilbert also testified to the fact that the 
Karaite assisted the Germans and Ukrainians in the liquidation of the 
Lutsk Ghetto in August 1942.16 My research, however, indicates that 
the strained Karaite-Jewish relations described by Eilbert appear to be 
an exception. In truth, the general reaction of the Karaite community 
to the Jewish tragedy can more aptly be described as apathetic.

In spite of the fact that members of the Karaite community made 
no special effort to save Jews, we find that an unknown number of 
Jews took advantage of the fact that a Karaite and Tatar community 
resided in Poland and Lithuania. These Jews were able to save them-

selves from an inevitable death by assuming the identities of Polish 
Karaite and Tatars. Both the Karaites and the Tatars practised the 
custom of circumcising the male members of their respective communi-
ties. The Germans went so far as to distinguish Karaite from Jewish 
circumcision. Jewish circumcision was viewed as a ritual custom, 
whereas Karaite and Tatar circumcision was considered an hygienic 
measure.17 This means of escape is best exemplified by the exploits of 
Mordechai Tenenbaum, a pre-war Polish Zionist leader and organizer 
of resistance activity in the Warsaw, Vilna and Bialystok ghettos. 
While a student at the University of Warsaw, Tenenbaum studied 
Turkic languages. With the outbreak of war, he was able to obtain 
forged documents that identified him as Jozef Tamarof, a Polish Tatar 
from the Vilna region. With these papers, and the protection of the 
Karaite and Tatar minorities, Tenenbaum travelled freely throughout 
German-occupied Poland carrying out resistance activities. Until his 
death in the Bialystok Ghetto revolt, Tenenbaum and other members 
of his resistance group were able to save an unknown number of 
Jews by forging papers certifying that the holder was of Karaite or 
Tatar descent.

We learn from survivors that this means of escape was used exten-
sively in the Vilna area. Many such "Karaite" escaped from the
Vilna Ghetto and lived in the Aryan section of the city untouched by all the persecutions which affected the Jews in the ghetto. In order to put an end to this state of affairs, the Germans instructed that a list of all Karaites in Poland be compiled:

It was in the ghetto that the Karaite Hakham, Seraya-Szapszal, had sent a list of names and addresses of all the known Karaites to the Gestapo. All Karaites not on the list were considered to be false.¹³

In this manner, hundreds of Jews posing as Karaites were rounded up and executed.

While conducting my research, I met a couple, living in New York, who escaped death by posing as Karaites. During the war, Nechemiah and Ida Glezer who were originally from Vilna, assumed the identity of the Karaites Jakob and Ema Adryowicz. For a short time they lived in a relative state of security until they were caught in a police raid. The police imprisoned them and sent them to Warsaw for further interrogation. During their internment, they were questioned by Ananiasz Zajaczkowski, a noted Karaite Turkologist who was serving as a liaison between the Polish Karaite community and the Germans. Zajaczkowski told the couple that he knew their true identity, but that they should not worry because he was not going to reveal it to the Germans. He made one request—that they disappear immediately after their release.¹⁹

One must not have the impression that the benevolent German treatment of the Karaites was universally accepted. Serious criticism of this deviation from the Nazis’ racial policy was raised by the racial theoreticians of the Commissariat Général aux Questions Juives. The French scholars convinced the Vichy government to consider the 250 Karaites living in Vichy France as members of a Jewish sub-group and to define them as Jews. The French Karaites, who were organized into a group called the Association des Carâmes en France, contested this ruling by citing the German decision of 5 January 1939. In spring 1941, the Karaites enlisted the support of Misha Kedia, a leader of the Georgian emigré community. Kedia had many connections with high-ranking German officials and had already negotiated the German recognition that Georgian Jews and Juggutim (Central Asian Jews) should not be defined and legislated against as Jews. Kedia promised to intervene on behalf of the Karaites.²⁰ Rivalry between the German occupation administrators and French officials, however, delayed the recognition of the Karaites in France. Quite the contrary, in June 1941, the Commissariat decided that the Karaites were to be regarded as Jews and were to register as such in a census which was to be conducted that month. The Karaites in Vichy objected to this and refused to register as Jews.

On 26 September 1941, a delegation from the Association visited the Commissariat’s Headquarters in Paris in order to plead their case. They submitted documents and research papers in substantiation of their claim that in such countries as Russia, Romania and Hungary, they were never viewed by the respective civil governments as part of the Jewish community.²¹ In spite of their erudite presentation, the Commissariat refused to grant them an exemption.
On 29 November 1941, Simon Kasas, president of the Association, petitioned the Commissariat director Xavier Vallat to reconsider his position. Kasas outlined how and why his group differed from the Jews. The Karaites raised several major points:

1. Karaism is a sovereign, independent faith which respects the Old Testament, the corner-stone of Judaism;
2. Karaites never accepted Jews into their communities and never mix with Jews;
3. The status of the Karaites was recognized by Islam, the Orthodox Church and the Imperial Russian, French and Reich governments;
4. The Karaites were of Tauro-Cimmerian (Turkic) origin, not of Semitic racial origin;
5. Historically, there was a mutual animosity between the two groups;
6. The Karaites possess a different mentality from the Jew;
7. The Karaites were a most loyal people and inimical to subversive movements, in particular Bolshevism. They were never incarcerated except in the Soviet Union.22

All of these efforts were of no avail; Vallat refused to rescind the orders.

In autumn 1942, the French racial authorities began a re-evaluation of their Karaite policy. This turn of events can be attributed to mounting German pressure. The Nazi Karaite policy adopted in Germany, Poland, Lithuania and the Soviet Union dissuaded the French from continuing a policy which was so diametrically opposed to the German racial programme. From the files of the Commissariat, we learn that many of the field reports and racial studies discussed earlier were also studied by French racial scholars. This turn of events is similar to the Commissariat's reconsideration of the status of the Jugutim, who were originally classified as Jews. German pressure similarly persuaded the Commissariat to re-classify the 150 members of this Central Asian group as non-Jews. The concerted efforts of the Karaites and their German and Russian supporters proved successful. In January 1943, the Commissariat acquiesced to pressure and retracted their earlier stand on the Karaites. In a letter dated 13 January 1943, it was explained that

according to a recent decision, the Karaites are no longer considered to be of the Jewish race, on the condition that they carry Karaite identification cards.23

Similar directives were sent to the Commissariat's headquarters in other parts of France.

In spite of the Commissariat's acquiescence to German policy, murmurings of discontent were still found among various segments of the French racial bureaucracy. According to the available sources, these murmurings fell on deaf ears. The German decision was final; the French Karaita community lived unmolested during the German occupation and escaped the persecutions which were the fate of the French Jews.

The preferential treatment accorded the Karaites should not be viewed as an isolated incident. In the course of my research, I have uncovered no less than six documented cases of exemptions being granted to groups of "Jewish" origin. In all cases, spokesmen for these communities argued
that they were not of "Jewish" origin and that in the past they had had little contact with the Ashkenazi Jews. These groups, which originated in Southern Russia, Central Asia, Eastern and Western Europe included the Judeo-Tats, Georgian Jews, Jugutim, Subbotniks, Judeo-Celts and the Nahomine. The Germans consciously tempered their racial zeal in deference to military and political considerations. As a result of this acquiescence to political expediency, an estimated 70,000 such persons were theoretically exempted from extermination.

The Nazi exemption of selected ethnic and religious sub-groups should not be viewed as a phenomenon unique to the Jews. Research reveals that the Germans also favoured certain Slavic ethnic groups and Gypsy tribes. Cossacks, who were of Slavic ethnic, linguistic, and cultural origins were deemed by Nazi racial theoreticians to be of non-Slavic origin when it was understood that the Cossacks would join the Germans in their war against the USSR. Similarly, Gypsy tribes such as the German Sinti and Lalleri were conceived to be of "purer" racial stock than the rest of the Gypsy populations of Europe. For this reason, the above mentioned Gypsy groups were exempted from the many persecutions which befell the European Gypsies.

As is evident, the Nazi exemption of the various religious and ethnic groups casts a new and different light on the Nazi racial policy. Hopefully, this material will not be ignored because of its importance in obtaining a better understanding of the theory and application of Nazi racial thought.

4 YIVO, New York, Berlin Collection, Occ E, 3, Box 100, letter dated 5 January 1939.
5 Berlin Collection, 1 September 1941.
6 Ibid.
9 Their studies include: Fritz Steininger, "Bilder von Karamen und Tartaren im Osten", Natur und Volk, vol. X, January 1944 and March 1944; Michael Kowschalny, "Zur Frage über das Auffauchen und die Kolo...