THE CRIMEAN KARAITES AND THE CRIMEAN WAR

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The Crimean War (1853–56) is a prime example of war as an extension of politics; it was also a massive waste of resources and human lives for questionable ends. The name itself is a misnomer, for the Crimean Peninsula, although a principal theater of operations, was by no means the only front. Indeed, battles related to the War in its broadest also occurred in the Baltic, the White Sea, and even in the Pacific.1

Before 1945, the European War of 1914–18 was commonly called the Great War. World War II led to the Great War being renamed World War I. Yet there is ample evidence that had the Crimean War continued for only another six months, this war, which involved not only the five major European powers, but even the smaller countries of Europe as well, the war now called “World War I” would have occurred sixty years earlier. In its savagery, the Crimean War has the distinction of being the precursor to 20th century warfare. While military tactics were still post-Napoleonic and technology firmly rooted in the 19th century, it would take the introduction of electricity, aviation, and other innovations, such as in chemistry (explosives) and weaponry (the machine gun) to make World War I surpass the Crimean War. The Crimean War did have its own innovations: massive trench works and trench warfare; the introduction of iron-clad naval vessels, and the mining of sea-waters. It saw the involvement and suffering of non-combatant civilians to a degree previously unknown. And it has the distinction of being the first war photographed, in all its gory detail.

The Crimean phase of this war began in September 1854, with the invasion of the Crimea and, the battle of Alma. The primary target was Sevastopol, the

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1 Much has been written about the Crimean War, especially from the view of military history. One recent work which focuses on causes and factors away from the battlefield is Baumgärt 1999. See also Edgerton 1999, and Royle 2000. For a more “civilian” view of the conflict, see Markevich 1994. A special word of thanks goes to Mikhail Kizilov, who helped me research this article.
Russian naval base at the bottom of the peninsula, and because of its exposure on three sides, it was aptly considered the Russians’ Achilles Heel. The first naval siege of Sevastopol was unsuccessful, and the front shifted inland, with the involvement of foot soldiers and cavalry. The Battle of Balaklava (October 25, 1854) was inconclusive, and while the Allies won the Battle of Inkerman (November 5, 1854) the cost was Phryric, a sign of things to come on an even larger scale.

Coincidentally, in September of 1854 the Allies successfully seized Eupatoria, the major commercial seaport on the western shore of the peninsula. But the victory was hollow, as the Allies passed a disastrous winter there, plagued by bad weather, disease, and failed logistics. In February, 1855, the Russians launched a major operation to re-capture Eupatoria, but failed. It must be pointed out that besides the French and English forces, the presence of Turkish troops at Eupatoria was an important factor in the Russian defeat. Moreover, given the history of Russia’s chronic state of war with the Ottoman Turks, the notion that the Turks might actually re-capture the Crimea (which Russia had annexed in 1783) weighed heavily in St. Petersburg.

Eupatoria had always been an important port, and during the time of the Tatar Giray dynasty, it was the Khan’s chief source of personal income. Eupatoria was not, however, a deepwater port, and ships laden with goods had to be off-loaded onto smaller vessels. As Russia’s commercial needs on the Black Sea required a deep water port, Odessa was constructed at the end of the 18th century. But Odessa did not overtake Eupatoria in tonnage until the first quarter of the 19th century. After that, Eupatoria became a secondary port, but for local commerce never lost its primacy.\(^2\)

At the time of the Crimean War, its population was approximately several thousand souls, either scattered in numerous villages or concentrated in the major towns of Eupatoria (northwest), Simferopol (the administrative seat, in the center of the peninsula), Sevastopol (the naval installation, at the south), Feodosia (in the east), and Perekop (in the north).

Of the general population, the Karaites were a distinctive minority. Although few in number, this close-knit community controlled much of the region’s major commerce, especially military provisioning. Karaites were also active in local administration: Moses b. Benjamin Tongur (d. after 1856) was its mayor of Eupatoria at the time of the War’s outbreak; after Tongur, Samuel b. Aaron Pampulov (1833–1913) served as mayor, and he, in turn, was succeeded by Simhah b. Ezra Duvan (1870–1957); Mikhail Fodorovich Fuki (b. 1806) and his son Arslan (1829–1908) served as Civilian Administrators of the garrison town of

\(^2\) For a general history of Eupatoria at this period, see Miller 1993a.
Sevastopol for much of the 19th century. That the mayor of Eupatoria was also from a successful merchant family was no accident, for commerce was Eupatoria’s life-blood. Eupatoria was also the spiritual center of the Karaite community that inhabited the Crimea. It had the largest concentration of Karaites, whose major communal bodies regulated the affairs of the entire community, including the smaller, scattered communities, as well the center of commerce which propelled the vast wealth of the community’s elite. The main Karaite synagogue in Eupatoria was dedicated with much pomp and pageantry on 17 Kislev 5644, the early winter of 1853. Little did the community know how overturned its life would be in just one year.

Of life in Eupatoria during the War, little primary documentation of civilian life is extant. Tentative conclusion must be derived from scattered sources. One of the well-documented events of the occupation of Eupatoria was the cholera epidemic which decimated the British forces and which spread to the civilian population. In my article, “Prayer Book politics: An attempt to print the Karaite Siddur in 1866 that was cancelled”, I pointed out that 1855 was a disastrous year for the Crimean Karaite leadership in Eupatoria. Gathered to their fathers that year were Simhah Babovich, the head of the community and the wealthiest man in the Crimea, Abraham Lutski, the primary religious functionary, and David Kukizow, a noted sage. What I neglected to do was to point out specifically the coincidence of their deaths and the Crimean War.

While we do not possess the precise dates of their passing, it is highly likely that these prominent figures died during the cholera epidemic. Another possibility is that they died away from Eupatoria, having taken refuge in another city. A third possibility is that one or many may have fallen into the hands of the Ottoman Turks, who occupied the city. One can only imagine what the reaction of the Turks might have been to discover a Turkish-speaking minority in Eupatoria, one whose leaders were wealthy and highly loyal to the Emperor of Russia. Until proven otherwise, their deaths, from disease in captivity or by execution, cannot be ruled out.

An important matter also yet to be determined was the disposition of the Karaite civilian population of Eupatoria. It is known that Vladimir Pestel, the Russian governor of the province, ordered the evacuation of Muslim Tatars from

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3 The achievements of Samuel Pampulov and Mikhail and Arslan Fuki are chronicled in Fuki 1993. Concerning Duwan, the last Mayor of Eupatoria before the Bolshevik Revolution, see Szyzsm 1980: 106, note 9.

4 A poem for the dedication of the synagogue is found on Leaf 125 recto of Hebrew Manuscript B-239 of the Institute of Oriental Studies, the ST. Petersburg Branch, of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

5 Miller 1993b.
coastal settlements for “security reasons”, resettling them in-land. Was the migration of those Karaites of means to the north, beyond the Crimea, and of those Karaites without means to the south, to Chufut-Kale, part of a formal evacuation and re-settlement plan as was done with the Muslim Tatars? Again, there is no evidence either way. Given the relatively small number of Karaites, in comparison with the Tatars, their unquestioned loyalty to the Crown, and the relatively short distance from Eupatoria to Chufut-Kale, it is likely that the Karaites’ evacuation from Sevastopol and Eupatoria was unorganized flight.

A number of significant facts can be found within an autobiographical sketch written by Samuel b. Shemariah Pigit (1849–1911), found as the introduction to his collected writings, 'Iggeret niddehe Yiśra'el, St. Petersburg, 1894; see Appendix I). Pigit admitted that he was only a small child when the War broke out, but his few and scattered memories are significant. Especially interesting is the Kulturkampf, the clash of cultures, between the traditional, “oriental” Karait manner of living of the indigenous inhabitants of Kale and the “European” ways of the refugees from the North. Pigit was born in 1849 in Chufut-Kale to a pious and scholarly family. At that time, Chufut-Kale was a shadow of its former self. Situated only a short distance from Bakhchisarai, the former capital of the Crimea while it was a Tatar vassal of the Ottomans, Chufut-Kale had been an entirely Karaites settlement and remained the center of Karait life in the Crimea until the late 1820s, at which time the center of power passed to Eupatoria. The settlement had many vacant buildings as the majority of the population had drifted away to the larger towns where economic opportunity was greater. Yet Chufut-Kale, high in the mountains, was within earshot of the artillery exchanges that shook Sevastopol, which rattled the windows in the mountains.

Pigit reported the arrival of refugees from Eupatoria and Sevastopol, which can be assumed to be in the early autumn of 1854, shortly after the hostilities began. The refugees, which he numbered a hundred families or so, took up settlement in the otherwise abandoned houses. He described them as coming from the lower and middle-classes. The wealthy, he reported, had fled to another province altogether. (Pigit could not recall any of the names of the wealthy, which seems unlikely, for as a ritual functionary, Hazzan, he had to tread lightly, depending on the largesse of the children of those who had fled outside the Crimea for safety.)

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7 Pigit received a traditional education at the feet of his grandfather, Moses Koilu, himself a grandson of Solomon b. Isaac (1755/56–1826), a major Karait sage. Coming from a poor, but learned family, Pigit was destined to be a religious functionary, serving as the Hazzan at Karasubazar from 1868 to 1879, the Hazzan at Simferopol from 1878–1882, and the Hazzan at Ekaterinoslav from 1882 until his death in 1911.
The Hazzan of the community was, according to Pigit, a “westernized” individual named Beim. This would have been Isaac b. Abraham Beim (1828–1892), son of the noted Hazzan of Odessa and leader of the Odessan Karaite community. Among his “westernized” features were his European garb (instead of the traditional “country” dress), the presence of tables and chairs at his Beth Midrash (whereas Pigit’s grandfather, the elderly leader of the indigenous community, sat on the floor and used a stool to keep his holy books off the ground), and a relative laxity in his religious observance (in comparison with his grandfather’s orthodoxy). According to Pigit, Beim was in close contact with the civil and military authorities, and he was regularly called away for consultations. Beim, whose religious practice was not as strict or rigorous as Pigit’s grandfather’s, publicly violated the Sabbath and even the Day of Atonement in order to be at the beck and call of the Russian authorities.

When precisely Isaac Beim came to Chufut-Kale, under what circumstances, and how long he remained there are not known. The spiritual leader and primary religious functionary in Chufut-Kale from the late-1820s had been Mordecai b. Joseph Sultanski (c. 1772–1862), who was appointed to succeed Isaac b. Solomon (1755/56–1826), who was the last pre-eminent sage of Chufut-Kale in its glory days. Sultanski later succeeded Abraham Lutski as Hazzan at Eupatoria after his death in 1855. (Pigit made no mention of Sultanski’s tenure in Chufut-Kale before Beim.) Given his relative age and his family connections, Sultanski might have been able to emigrate to another province and, hence, evade the sufferings of the War.

By 1857, after the cessation of hostilities, the refugees returned to their homes in the north, leaving Chufut-Kale in an even greater condition of deterioration. Pigit described how the decrepit buildings were razed, thus effacing forever the character and flavor of the Karaites’ chief settlement at the time of the Giray Khans’ rule. (In all fairness, however, it must be pointed out that the Russian authorities had already done much to efface the architectural presence of the Tatars.) By 1861, there were perhaps only ten Karaite families remaining in Chufut-Kale.

Information about those who fled northward is neither great nor substantial, yet the few pieces that are extant indicate the suffering underwent by all. Wealth and prestige may have permitted them to live in relatively greater comfort than those who fled to Chufut-Kale, but it did not spare them disease and misery. Jacob b. Ezra Babadjan was born in Eupatoria in 1828 to a prominent merchant family. At some point in his life he collected into a common-book letters, sermons, poems by himself and others which is now Hebrew Manuscript B-239 of the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences. See Appendix II.
On leaf 102 verso, Babadjan preserved the tombstone inscription in verse he composed in memory of his mother, Biknesh b. Simhah, who died on 2 Tammuz 5615 (summer of 1855) in Elizavetgrad, a town in the southern Ukraine. On leaf 103 recto Babadjan transcribed a threnody for one Sarah, wife of Elijah, composed by Abraham Yefet (1833–1896), a young religious functionary who would in 1862 succeed Sultanski as Hazzan in Eupatoria. And on leaf 103 verso and following is a threnody for one Bubush b. Elisha, the wife of one Abraham Cherkez, who died in the southern Ukrainian city of Kherson on 28 Tamuz 5615. Another poem memorializes Isaac b. Moses Michri, who died in Kherson on 2 Adar Sheni 5606 (late winter of 1856).

These poems describe the trials and suffering individuals and families suffered during the Siege of Eupatoria. Granted, there may be elements of poetic license in the descriptions. But the deprivation and fear people underwent is undeniable.

Hebrew Manuscript D-47 of the Institute of Oriental Studies, St. Petersburg Branch of the Russian Academy of Sciences, is a bridal register whose entries are for the most part date from around 1840 to 1845. The register itself must have been transported away from Eupatoria during the Crimean War, for on the verso of several leaves there are recorded the marriages of several women in Elizavetgrad during the autumn of 1855. The officiant is Aaron b. Abraham Altioka (1795–1865), who served as a teacher of religious subjects in the community and an assistant to Joseph Solomon Lutski and his son Abraham during the 1840s and 1850s, during their tenures as Hazzan. Altioka often added the words ‘the pathetic and sad’ after his name as a sign of his distress during the War. From these few documents one can cull some of the family names of those who found refuge in this Ukrainian city: Aga, Bashyachi, Katyk, Kefeli, Kuman, Maksimadji, Oksiuz, Sanjak, Suluk, Tanatar, and Turshu. It is not known how many Karaite civilians fled, how many perished, or how many returned after the War. An examination of subscription lists printed in most Karaite books before and after the War, as well as commercial directories, reveal that either new settlements of Karaites were to be found throughout New Russia and the Ukraine, or that their numbers were greater than before the War, and individuals enjoyed greater personal wealth. Among the “new” settlements were Elizavetgrad, Ekaterinoslav, Kiev, Kremenchug, Melitopol, and Poltava.9 The suffering and misery notwithstanding,

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9 It is possible that there was a small Karaite community in any of these places before the Crimean War, but their absence from the places listed in the subscription lists in books from the 1830s and 1840s might indicate that the individuals there did not have the financial resources. After 1860s, however, the number of persons in these subscribing to the publication of a holy book is impressive. The wealth of prestige of individuals and families continued to grow, such that one finds subscribers to Pigit’s book (1894) in Moscow and St. Petersburg,
the Crimean War had the effect on the community overall of a large rock thrown into a pond. The splash sent droplets in all directions, and a continuous wave emanated from the center. A sizeable number returned to Eupatoria after the War, but many, once exposed to economic opportunity outside the Crimea, chose to remain or re-settle. One area in New Russia where the Karaites excelled was tobacco. Much of the tobacco industry in Tsarist Russia in the last half of the 19th century was in the hands of Karaites, from managing farms, agronomy, manufacture, and distribution.

The Crimean War marked a critical juncture in the institutional life of the Karaite community. The deaths of so many communal and religious leaders in this small community left a vacuum, and the persons who filled it did not have the same degree of ingenuity and originality. Simhah Babovich was succeeded by his brother, Nahamu (1799-1882), and while the community prospered, there is no evidence of great leadership. Indeed, if anything, the leadership of the Karaite community copied the conservatism of Russia’s autocratic ruling class. Although there were several younger men available to serve as Hazzan of the spiritual capital, the position was given to Mordecai Sultanski, who was in his eighties, solely by dint of his seniority.

When Nahamu Babovich died in 1882, there was an attempt to wrest control of the community out of the hands of the Babovich family. David b. Joseph Djigit (1839-94), himself a tobacco magnate, was almost selected as the community’s Hakham. But the position fell to Samuel b. Moses Pampulov (1843-1912), a member of the extended Babovich family. One can speculate that such a major change may have reflected the short-lived “opening” of Russian society during the reign of Tsar Alexander II.

The Crimean Karaites’ collective experience was ultimately the same as other Russian civilians. Many suffered, some perished. In the aftermath, some who were high were made low, and some who were once low were made high. Their experience was, then, rather unremarkable in the grander scheme of things. Yet hardship and deprivation leaves their mark, and one can only wonder if the opposite of the opening words of Tolstoy’s Anna Karenina is not more true:

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10 The most famous Karaite in the years following the Crimean War was Abraham b. Samuel Firkovich (1787-1874). Firkovich apparently spent the war years in Lithuania, where he continued to “research” Karaite origins in manuscripts and archival records which he “borrowed”. Hebrew Manuscript B-239, folios 178-179, contains a letter Firkovich wrote from Trakai to the “community in exile” in New Russia, complaining that the Lithuanian Karaites were unable (or unwilling) to pay him the salary promised by Simhah Babovich. Firkovich eventually settled in the nearly deserted Chufut-Kale, surrounded by his manuscripts.
Unhappy families resemble one another; each happy family is happy in its own way.\textsuperscript{11}

BIBLIOGRAPHY


\textsuperscript{11} The article is based on a paper read at the Seventh Scandinavian Congress of Jewish Studies, Järvenpää, Finland, May 14, 2000.
APPENDIX I

From 'Iggeret niddehe Yišra'el by Samuel b. Shemariah Pigit (St. Petersburg, 1894)

(1894)

From Samuel Pigit's 'Iggeret niddehe Yišra'el' published in St. Petersburg in 1894.
Afterward, the opportunity to travel and explore new places was always present. I found myself in a constant state of exploration, always seeking new adventures. The past few years had been filled with a sense of excitement and discovery, as I traveled to new territories, learning about the cultures and people who inhabited them.

But as I continued on my journey, I began to realize that the true value of travel lay not just in the places I visited, but in the experiences and connections I made. I found that the most meaningful journeys were those that challenged me in new ways, that forced me to confront my own fears and limitations. It was these experiences that truly defined my travels, and I knew that I would return to them time and time again.

As I stood on the edge of the unknown, I felt a sense of excitement and anticipation. I knew that the journey ahead would be filled with challenges, but I was ready to face them, ready to discover what lay beyond the horizon. And with that, I set out, ready to explore the world once again.
APPENDIX II
Hebrew B-239

102 verso

The Crimean Karaites and the Crimean War
תרומת זמני Conveyor תשבץ
אם ומעורר מוכך ומשתתף
ונושע לציונות גם לכל הגאון
קריא במרח ומקהל צהריים
נמצא בכל יבין הברה ולברך
אם הגוף וס PriorityQueue זה
אישה אפלק בית נמק בובים
אם היא אטרקט טג דפנה
בזכות בותרים הנס עשת פריז
שיה בהבר עלייה דוע שמח
בל אוכלים הפוך בכסף הולודות
אפקד המאות אץ ברובים
בפר האמת עם המורים הוא
תשיב אתショップבר רופים

103 verso

דרש לדרו insists על דבר
ಪִּיקי זְרוּת כַּכָּל בָּדַר
הַמַּסְפוּדְתָהּ והַשְׂדָהָהּ
אֵיך לַיְלִיהַהּ חַסְמִישָּׁהּ
פָּסַם יִדְרִיכָה אָיש על במהו
פָּסַם שֵׁימָלָה ארֵיך וְצַבָּא

בַּת נִגְדוֹמָה בַּף מִשְׁכָּחַ
נָשָׁתָה לַלֵּדֶר עִנְיָר הָבַכָּה
בֶּבֶאָרֵי חֲדָרִי דַּלְחָל עִלְּיָא אָבָה
גַּם בֵּיתָהּ לְלֻמַּלְמָר
רוּחַ חֲמָר אַלְּוֹ אֶרְּא הַרְּבָּר
בָּכָה מִשְׁתָּעֲשָּׁהּ רָפָהָנָהָ נֶבֶר

נֶבֶר קָשָׁה וְמִזְאָנֶה לְעִיר
לֹא הַלתְּנַחַנְתָה לַשְׁמוּאֵל לְעַרְשׁ נָו
רֵק לַכְּבָדִים הָּבָה בַּמַּעֲנָה שָׁמוּאֵל
רָאוּיָו אָמְרֶה אָשְׁרִי הָלְגַנְב
אֲמַרְתִּי רֵעֵב וְלֹא אֶרְעָא שֶׁבֶר
אֲהֻנַּת בְּעָלַת! רֵק בִּנְדֵלֵי אוּתָה

בעת פֶּשֶׁת וַדְּדֵי בָּאָר שְׁמִי
כָּאָשֶׁר עַל אֶבֹאַל יִשְׂעֵי קְדָם.
The Crimean Karaites and the Crimean War