

## The Mountain Jews and the Nazi Occupation of Kabarda

*In memory of Moshe Gammer*

**Walter Richmond\***

### **Abstract**

*This paper attempts to identify the reasons why the Nazis refrained from murdering the Mountain Jews of Kabarda during their occupation of the west Caucasus in fall 1942. The Nazis knew of the existence of the Mountain Jews before the invasion, but were unclear on their ethnic composition. The local Kabardian population exploited this lack of clarity by attesting that the Mountain Jews were of Iranian extraction and teaching them Islamic customs to further confuse the Nazis. Based on multiple testimonies in the archive at the Shoah Foundation in Los Angeles, the ruse worked for several weeks. According to oral testimony, the Nazis determined that the Mountain Jews were ethnically Jewish and began preparing to murder them, but the Red Army recaptured the region just days before the Mountain Jews were to be rounded up. The limited oral testimony is insufficient to make certain conclusions, but it does point the way to further research to clarify and confirm the evidence presented here.*

**Keywords:** *Caucasus, Kabardino-Balkaria, Mountain Jews, Holocaust, Circassians*

### **Dağ Yahudileri ve Nazilerin Kabardey'i İşgali**

#### **Özet**

*Bu makale, Nazilerin 1942 sonbaharında Batı Kafkasya'yı işgalleri sırasında Kabardeyli Dağ Yahudilerini öldürmemelerinin nedenlerini belirlemeye çalışıyor. Naziler, işgalden önce Dağ Yahudilerinin varlığını biliyorlardı, ancak etnik kompozisyonları konusunda net değildiler. Yerel*

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(Received: 10.04.2019, Acceted: 28.05.2019)

*Kabardey halkı bu açıklık eksikliğinden, Dağ Yahudilerinin İran'dan çıkartıldığını ve Nazileri daha da fazla şaşırtmak için onlara İslami gelenekleri öğrettiklerine tanıklık ettiler. Los Angeles'taki Shoah Vakfı'nın arşivdeki birçok tanıklığa göre, bu hile birkaç hafta işe yaradı. Sözlü ifadelerle göre, Naziler Dağ Yahudilerinin etnik olarak Yahudi olduğunu öğrendi ve onları öldürme hazırlığına başladıkları belirlendi. Ancak Kızıl Ordu Dağ Yahudilerinin toplanmasından birkaç gün önce bölgeyi ele geçirdi. Sınırlı sayıda sözlü tanıklık, belirli sonuçlara varmak için yeterli değil, ancak burada sunulan kanıtları netleştirmek ve doğrulamak için daha fazla araştırmanın yolunu açıyor.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Kafkasya, Kabardey-Balkar, Dağ Yahudileri, Holokost, Çerkesler

In the fall of 1942, Nazi forces entered the North Caucasus on their way to the oil fields of the Caspian Sea. As they tried to sway the Caucasus peoples over to their side, the Nazis also sought to murder all the Jews of the region. As elsewhere in Nazi-held territory, large numbers of men, women and children were ruthlessly murdered in short order by the occupiers. Approximately 8000 Russian Jews living Stavropol, Essentuki, Piatigorsk and Kislovodsk were murdered in 1942 (Kovalev 249). However, one community put the invaders in a quandary. These were the Mountain Jews, longtime residents of the Caucasus whose origins even today are subject to debate. Several groups of Mountain Jews fell behind Nazi lines, and although two communities were murdered others survived. Particularly interesting is the fate of the Mountain Jews of Nalchik, the capital of Kabardino-Balkaria. There has been some research into the contradictory evidence concerning their nearly miraculous survival under direct Nazi occupation, but only some tentative conclusions. In addition to providing a fuller explanation for the Nazis' behavior towards this community, this chapter will add some details about life for the Mountain Jews of Nalchik during the occupation.

It might come as a surprise to many that a community of Jews had lived in the Caucasus for over a millennium, but as the Caucasus has been a crossroads of peoples since time immemorial

there has been practically no ethnic group that has not passed through the region at some point. Particularly the western coast of the Caspian Sea has been an essential route for anyone wishing to travel between the steppes of central Eurasia and the Middle East. As a result, the region that is now the Russian Republic of Dagestan became one of the most ethnically diverse regions in the world. Peoples speaking unrelated languages and practicing different traditions have lived side by side there for millennia and have developed their own ways of living peacefully together. Despite the rise and fall of numerous kingdoms and khanates, as well as the Russian conquest of the region in the nineteenth century, many of the Dagestani peoples succeeded in maintaining their traditional way of life. Despite linguistic and religious differences, they all saw each other simply as “mountaineers.” While there certainly were interethnic tensions in a land where life was hard even in the best of times, notions of religious intolerance and true ethnic animosity were unknown to the indigenous peoples. Newcomers were at first observed with some suspicion, but were quickly accepted as neighbors. The Mountain Jews were one such group.

The precise time of the arrival of the Mountain Jews in the North Caucasus is still a subject of debate, although most scholars agree that it was most likely no later than the early sixth century CE (Semenov 4). They were probably refugees fleeing Iranian pogroms that began around the year 400 (Rabaev). Once they settled in Dagestan they became known to their Muslim neighbors as “Juhud,” (the Jews), and simply became yet another tribe in the ethnically diverse North Caucasus. Another term frequently used to describe them, “Tat,” is something of a misnomer. A widespread term that meant different things in different parts of Eurasia, in the Caucasus it originally referred to anyone who came from Iran. Since the Mountain Jews spoke a dialect similar to the Iranians who lived in the Caucasus, the name “Tat” came to be applied to them as well. However, the Mountain Jews never used it to describe themselves, even after the Soviets officially applied the term to them in the 1950s in an attempt to dissociate them from other Jews. In fact, in post-war censuses very few declared

themselves Tats, and after the fall of the Soviet Union the term was rejected by the Mountain Jewish community (Semenov 5-6) (Gammer) (Goble). Their language is related to Middle Persian, but there is a Semitic lexical component as well (Semenov). The tribes in Azerbaijan speak a slightly different dialect than those who lived further north, and although this could have resulted from long periods of isolation in the mountainous regions of the North Caucasus it also could mean that different waves of Jews settled in the North Caucasus at different times. As for religion, they regularly practiced Judaic traditions and religious ceremonies and had their own synagogues and rabbis.

The Caucasus Wars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries disrupted the stable relations between the Mountain Jews and their Muslim neighbors. As Russia's campaign became increasingly brutal in the 1820s, local leaders began preaching the need for a *ghazavat*, or holy war, under the banner of Islam. This ultimately resulted in the ascension of Imam Shamil to the leadership of the Dagestani and Chechen resistance and the enforcement of a much more intolerant form of Islam in the region by the 1830s. Some Mountain Jews chose to migrate further west both to escape the turmoil of war and to ensure their religious liberty. One desirable destination was Kabardia, the easternmost territory of Circassia. Russia's war against the Circassians had taken its toll there: by 1830 the population of Kabarda was only ten percent of its 1790 peak of 300,000. Vacant land was quickly taken over by the Cossack conquerors, but much was still available; in addition, the town of Nalchik was quickly turning into a trading center for the region. The Russo-Circassian War had shifted westward and so the area was relatively stable and in fact was becoming rapidly incorporated into the Russian Empire. The Kabardians themselves were multi-confessional, with some practicing Christianity and some adhering to Islam, but in reality they followed the customs laid out by their traditional code of behavior, *Adyge Habze*. This code was a critical part of the reason why the Kabardians risked so much to protect their Jewish neighbors when the Nazis arrived. First, the notion of the guest as nearly sacred was an essential part of Kabardian culture. A guest could never be surrendered,

even one who had committed a crime; they were not allowed even to question the guest as to his business. This particular custom gave the Russians much heartache: in 1818 the residents of the village of Tram preferred to have their entire village razed rather than give up a few bandits the Russians were demanding. The Russians were never able to root this custom out, and it was deep in the psyche of the Kabardians when the Nazis arrived. Second, Kabardians and their neighbors had long practiced a custom whereby a boy would be sent to a different village, sometimes even a different nation, to be raised. He would only return after attaining manhood. This was intended to engender strong ties between communities. Although this tradition was eradicated by the Russians, its legacy remained, and the Nazi belief that “these nations hate each other more than they aspire for independence” was grossly ignorant (Feferman 99). In fact, as a result of their customs and the devastating war with Russia, the surviving peoples of the North Caucasus, particularly in Kabarda, felt solidarity with one another that the Russians could never break.

Once they settled in Kabarda, the Mountain Jews fit right into this web of communities and became just another tribe in what was now a dramatically ethnically diverse republic. Another group settled in nearby Mozdok, a settler community northeast of Nalchik, where they likewise became an integral part of the community. Piatogorsk and Stavropol were other centers the Mountain Jews gravitated towards; Eliagu Grossman, Rabbi of the Temriuk Jewish community who commanded the respect of many Cossacks, spent his youth in Stavropol (David 289). By 1867, there were approximately 1200 Mountain Jews in Piatigorsk *Oblast'*, the new administrative designation for Kabarda and neighboring Ossetia (Kabuzan 200). A few became pastoralists, but most found work as agents for commercial exchange between the city dwellers and the pastoralists in the mountains, as well as operating small shops in town (David 288). By 1882 these numbers had doubled in Stavropol and Nalchik, and by 1897 a community of around 700 Mountain Jews emerged in Batalpashinsk (modern Cherkessk) further west, in what is now

Karachaevo-Cherkessia, although the community subsequently seems to have disappeared (Kabuzan 200, 202-203). By the late 1800s, European Jews migrated to Nalchik as well. Although they predominantly occupied administrative and educational positions and had little in common, they were on good terms with the Mountain Jews and celebrated religious holidays with them (Asailova). They also encouraged the Mountain Jews to send their children to religious schools in Russia and especially Lithuania (Naftalieva 223). Still, significant educational and class differences kept the two groups from fully integrating with one another even by the time of the Second World War (Asailova). At the outbreak of the War, around 3000 Mountain Jews lived in areas that would be occupied by the Nazis (Feferman 99).

The other significant ethnic group in the region was a Turkic people originally known simply as “the Mountain Peoples” but labelled the Balkars by the Russian Empire. Closely related to the Karachays to the west, the Balkars lived high in the Caucasus Mountains and had little interaction with other peoples until the 1860s, when Russians began redistributing the region’s land. As they relied primarily on sheep-herding, Russian actions brought them into conflict with their Kabardian neighbors and Cossack settlers. Their small numbers (in 1940 they scarcely numbered 40,000) placed them in an extremely disadvantageous position and they became increasingly disgruntled. When the Soviets took over the region, land issues became even more complicated and distribution unfair, and the Balkars and Kabardians became increasingly alienated from one another.

Not only did the Soviets muddle the land distribution issue, they embarked on a series of actions that alienated all the peoples of the Caucasus. First, the Slavic population was chosen to be the foundation of a new industrial class in the North Caucasus, and the native peoples found it difficult to find decent employment in the new order. This new discrimination against the native peoples permeated the administration as well. Local governments were dominated by Slavs even in districts that were nominally ethnic enclaves for the indigenous peoples (Bugai 197). Second, the Soviets attempted to collectivize agriculture in the region,

violating traditional methods of land distribution (Babich 140). Entire villages were uprooted and moved to new locations, which the peasants simply abandoned at the first opportunity (Mambetov 41). Things became so bad that in 1928 the peasants of Kabardino-Balkaria staged an open rebellion (Mambetov 42). Soviet representatives visiting villages to explain the collectivization process were refused permission to speak at public gatherings and on some occasions expelled from the village under threat of death (Mambetov 39-40). Rumors spread about the consequences of collectivization: men and women would be housed together, wives would be collective property, the institution of the family would be abolished, children sent to Soviet kindergartens would be sold to the Chinese as slaves, and so on (Mambetov 46). Finally, a gradual assault on Islam culminated in the closure of mosques and arrest of mullahs in 1927. In rural areas there were an average of three to four mosques per village; by the 1940s there were only nine working mosques in all of Kabardino –Balkaria (Babich 146). Pilgrimages to the Holy cities of Mecca and Medina were forbidden (Karcha 76). Arabic language schools were closed in 1925-26 and mullahs were arrested throughout the region; of 10,000 mullahs and religious teachers in the North Caucasus in 1921 only 150 remained in 1940 (Aslanbek 41). As a result of all of these missteps, a major rebellion broke out in 1930. Hoping to unite all the North Caucasus peoples into a single force and elicit support from the Western powers, the Karachays, Circassians and Balkars formed a 15,000 man army (Aslanbek 32-33). By February Balkar rebels had captured Baksan, Chegem, and Khulam districts and sufficiently threatened Nalchik to compel the party leaders there to flee. At the same time the Karachays laid siege to Mikoyan-Shakhar (modern Karachaevsk) and Kislovodsk (Karcha 77). The Karachay-Balkars issued a declaration of independence and allegiance to Turkey on 18 March (Aslanbek 32-33). Facing Soviet tanks using air support the rebels retreated into the mountains and fought on for two months. In order to quell the rebellion the Soviets dropped fliers from airplanes placing all the blame for the ill effects of collectivization on local party leaders. The rebels were

promised that if they laid down their weapons they would be granted amnesty and that the collective farms would be dissolved (Aslanbek 33). The deception worked, and as soon as the situation was stabilized approximately 70,000 persons were either executed or exiled (Karcha 77). So when the Nazis arrived and promised to dissolve the kolkhozes and grant the indigenous peoples independence, they found the peoples there very receptive.

In addition to the Jews of Nalchik and Mozdok, two more groups moved into lands that would be seized by German forces. In the 1920s the Soviet administration invited Mountain Jews living in Pyatigorsk and Stavropol to the town of Bogdanovka, where there was an underpopulated kolkhoz (collective farm) that was over ninety percent Ashkenazi Jewish (Amiramov). As there was plenty of land, many chose to move there. A second group were moved to the Crimean Peninsula to the west of the Caucasus and placed on the Shaumian Kolkhoz with other Ashkenazis. As we will see, these resettlements had tragic consequences for the Mountain Jews.

The Nazis knew of the Mountain Jews' existence. They had already dealt with Jews from the Caucasus when a group who had migrated from Georgia to France tried to persuade Hitler's racial "experts" that they were not ethnically Jewish. After much consideration, the community was judged to be non-Jewish, although there was still a faction in Berlin that believed they were. This question came back to the forefront when the Nazis prepared a description of all the various ethnic groups in the Soviet Union they expected to encounter. Because of the diversity of opinions on the French Jews, the "experts" decided that a final determination on the ethnic background of the Mountain Jews would have to be made on the ground. However, the Germans were apparently unaware that communities of Mountain Jews had migrated out of Dagestan. So, when they arrived in Nalchik, the Nazis were taken off-guard and were unprepared to make their assessment immediately. This is one of the factors that saved the Mountain Jews there.



Unfortunately, the two groups moved in the 1920s were not so fortunate. The Shaumian Kolkhoz, which was not on any of the maps the Nazis had access to, was exposed by a local resident. The Nazis murdered all 114 Jews there in March 1942. According to Feferman, the decision was made locally and not referred back to Berlin for confirmation. Feferman postulates that because the group was settled there under the aegis of the American Jewish Joint Distribution Committee in an effort to give Jews of the Caucasus better access to fertile land, “it may have inclined Einsatzgruppe D [special groups assigned with murdering Jews] to view the Mountain Jews as participants in the same “world Jewish conspiracy” and therefore kill them along with the Ashkenazi Jews” (Feferman 104). Another possible explanation is that this group was located so far outside the area where the Nazis expected to find Mountain Jews that they simply didn’t bother to inquire as to their precise origins. The fact that the question wasn’t referred to Berlin seems to indicate that the German command in the Crimea didn’t consider this group part of the community that was still under question.

A second group was murdered at the Bogdanovka and Menzhinskoe Kolkhozes. The Nazis occupied the region at the beginning of September, 1942. Initially the Germans were unaware that there were Jews in the area, but local residents betrayed their neighbors. On September 20, the eve of Yom Kippur, the Nazis drove all the Jews of Bogdanovka into the local club. In the morning they dragged out all the healthy men and forced them to dig a pit on the outskirts of the village. Once the pit was finished, the Nazis shot the men. A few hours later they drove the women, children and elderly into the pit and shot them all. Approximately 470 Mountain Jews were murdered there. The smaller Jewish community at Menzhinskoe—approximately forty families—survived a bit longer: it was only in the middle of October that Einsatzgruppe D units arrived. The villagers got word too late, however, and were rounded up on October 19<sup>th</sup> under the pretext of being resettled (Begun 89) (Raziev). Once they were out of town, the Nazis forced them to dig an “anti-tank” trench (Amiramov). After they dug the trench, the Nazis murdered them

all (Begun 89-90). A few youths who managed to run away survived, as did five-year-old Sergei Amiramov, who was concealed by a Russian woman and carried off to safety (Amiramov). All in all, about 850 Jews were murdered at the two kolkhozes (Feferman 105).

In Nalchik, all the men were quickly mobilized to the front, leaving women, children, the elderly and infirm behind to fend for themselves. For the first year, the Mountain Jews there saw no reason to consider migrating eastward. However, radio broadcasts began telling the residents of Nalchik of city after city falling to the Germans, who would then massacre all the Jews they found. As the Nazis approached, and especially after Jews fleeing Belarus and Ukraine passed through the city telling of Nazi atrocities, they began to consider the need to flee the city. Still, most remained in Nalchik for a variety of reasons. Some had no resources and nowhere to go. Others refused to leave before they could gather all their relatives. Still others remained optimistic that Nalchik wouldn't fall. Nevertheless, as the Nazis approached the city, some Mountain Jews began to flee to other towns to hide (Bugai 50) (Asailova) (Ashurova). Before the city was bombarded, those who remained behind worked together to dig trenches to hide in. Once the Germans entered Nalchik on October 29 1942 they set about identifying Jews to be murdered. One of the first victims was Barukh Davidov, who eyewitnesses reported went out of his home to get food for his family. A German patrol arrested him to be used for forced labor, but when a passerby told them he was Jewish, he was immediately shot (Begun 90). The Nazis were unable to take the villages where many Mountain Jews were hiding immediately, but once they did they went door to door with a list of Jewish families apparently supplied to them by collaborators. The European Jews were immediately taken Nalchik's hippodrome and shot. The Mountain Jews' homes were ransacked and many of them were taken as forced laborers to dig pits (presumably where their bodies would be dumped), but they weren't immediately murdered. Mikhail Ashurov recalled, "Every morning they drove us out to work. 'Kommen, kommen, arbeiten.' They made us dig pits alongside the cemetery. They

came and collected us; they had people with them who told them, 'take those people.' Those who could, hid. They hid in the trenches they dug" (Ashurov).

Romanians seem to have comprised the majority of the Nazi force in Nalchik. Although they didn't murder all the Mountain Jews, they seem to have singled them out for particularly cruel treatment, forcing them to clean the streets and perform other menial tasks, in addition to regularly taking all the food from the families that they found (Yagudaev). "The fascist beasts took all our clothes, linens, bedding, beds, money and even the children's things," a group reported in a letter to *Kabardino-Balkarskaya Pravda* in November 1943 (Shamilov 51).] Some were able to hide when the Nazis came looking for workers, fearing for their lives on a daily basis (Ifraimova). In response to the pillaging, a certain Rabbi Amirov took the risk of moving all the religious artifacts from the synagogue. Disguising them as a body ready for burial, he had the artifacts taken to the cemetery right past Gestapo headquarters. The ruse worked, and the artifacts were safely buried in the cemetery until after the Red Army retook Nalchik (Danilova 59).

A major factor in the hesitation of the Nazis to simply murder the Mountain Jews along with the Ashkenazis of Nalchik was a relaxing of attitudes toward the non-Jewish populations of the Soviet Union by the German High Command. Officially, there was a new policy intended to "harness the discontent of the Soviet peoples to the German struggle against the Red Army" (Feferman 97). As Kiril Feferman has recently explained:

The Germans ... assumed that they would find [in the Caucasus] a pro-German public, and anticipated near universal sympathy with their aims . . . German soldiers were to be on their best behavior. The new authorities permitted freedom of worship for Christians and Moslems alike . . . The leadership understood that here an offense against one member of a people could be perceived as an affront to all (Feferman 99).

In order to prime the population, over 350 Soviet emigres living in Germany were parachuted into Kabardino-Balkaria and neighboring Karachaevo-Cherkessia in early 1942 to spread

propaganda about the Nazis' plans to establish independent states. (Bugai and Gonov 51, 164). These efforts met with some success. Large numbers of Cossacks went over to the Nazis and created the "Cossack National Movement," and Circassian leader Sultan-Girei Klych formed the so-called "dikaia diviziia" ("wild division") to combat the Soviets. The promise to disband the kolkhozes and grant independence particularly resonated with the indigenous peoples. In summer 1942 the Islamic leadership in the Northwest Caucasus declared Hitler "The Great Imam of the Caucasus" (Kovalev 101-102). On August 3<sup>rd</sup> the Karachay National Committee was created and subsequently carried out acts of sabotage and banditry on behalf of the Nazis throughout the region (Bugai and Gonov 122-123). By May 1943 perhaps as many as 28,000 residents representing nearly every ethnic group had joined the Nazis (Kovalev 103). The Nazis played their role well: they presented the Cossacks with the absurd theory that they weren't Slavs but actually the descendants of the East Goths, and in response to the honor the mullahs bestowed on Hitler General Eberhard von Mackensen accepted Islam (Kovalev 101, 465). With such a promising start, the Caucasus command certainly must have been hesitant to summarily judge the Mountain Jews as Jewish and murder them, thereby raising the possibility of alienating their neighbors.

Still, some were killed outright. Residents hid the Mountain Jews from Nazi patrols, who summarily executed at least two dozen people. Many were in the position of Bisirit Ashurova: women, children and the elderly left alone when their husbands went to the front. When the Nazis began bombarding Nalchik, they hid in their apartment until neighbors came to their aid and helped them dig a bunker. Before the Nazis entered the town a Kabardian family, who had learned that the Nazis had been murdering all the Jews they came across, came and took the Ashurovs to their home in a nearby village and hid them (Ashurova).

It was in fact their Kabardian neighbors who went to great lengths to protect the Mountain Jews. "They respected us greatly, they loved us very much," recalls Maral Asailova. However, before

the Nazis' arrival the Kabardians were able to "camouflage" the Mountain Jews:

When the Germans were here, so that they wouldn't kill us they, the Kabardians, taught us how to act like Kabardians, so that when the Germans visited us . . . we showed them our rituals, and so the Germans didn't kill us (Asailova).

The Kabardians taught them Muslim rituals and gave them their national clothing. "We dressed like Circassians, with the dagger and everything," recalled Nagdimoso Yagudaev. When the Germans visited their homes, they demanded the residents demonstrate their wedding ceremonies. Here the Mountain Jews used various methods to confuse their guests. "We put on a Gypsy wedding," Zhenia Biazrova recalled, "and so they didn't think we were Jewish!" Another story of Kabardians protecting Mountain Jews is related by Ashurova, who once stepped outside with a young girl:

I was sitting on a rock, and almost immediately three men with machine guns appeared. Germans. "Kommen, kommen kommen!" They wanted to drag the little girl from me and take me away . . . And then there were documents in my pocket that said I was receiving a pension. "Give us money," I said, "I have none." "Give us gold," I said, "I have none, where would I get gold?" . . . They pointed three machine guns right at my chest. They said, "we'll shoot your husband," and I said, "I don't have a husband . . . I'm just out for a stroll . . . and then I screamed, of course, when they grabbed the child, one grabbed the child, one took me by the arm and dragged us off toward the gate. She screamed. People started gathering, of course. "What are you doing with them? She's a young woman! You can't do this." Our Russian neighbors too, many of them looked like us Jews, and they said that we were Kabardians . . . And they didn't know what to do, so they dropped the child and left. And so we were saved.

Russians also protected their Jewish neighbors. In one case, after the Nazis murdered Rovino Ashurov's wife, pillaged his home and left him alone with his four children, [the Nazis] came to us every night and demanded money and other valuables, threatening to shoot us. Much gratitude to my Russian neighbor,

Vera Kuzminichna Makovkina, who risking her life saved us from these goons, convincing them that there were victims of contagious disease in the apartment (Shamilov 53).

Likewise, Svetlana Danilova and Biazrova report that Balkars also protected Mountain Jews when called upon to do so (Danilova). On the other hand, G. Pechersky and Kh. Pogorely, who wrote in Leningrad in 1958 that “the Balkars continually tried to convince the German command that the Mountain Jews were related to the other Jews” (Begun 93). Fenia Isakova recalled that when the Nazis first arrived both Russians and Balkars indicated which buildings were occupied by Mountain Jews. Isakova also mentioned that her Kabardian neighbors, “with whom we had good relations before the war,” identified nineteen Mountain Jews including two small children who were taken out and murdered after they themselves were terrorized by Nazi troops. Guri Motaeva claims that it was primarily Russians who led the Nazis to Jewish homes. So it seems that in addition to acts of heroism on the part of the Mountain Jews’ neighbors there were acts of treachery as well. However, the evidence clearly indicates that the vast majority of the non-Jewish population of Nalchik—particularly the Kabardians—did their best to protect the Mountain Jews, often at great personal risk.

Finally, the doomed Ashkenazi Jews of Nalchik helped conceal the Mountain Jews’ identity. For the most part the well-educated Ashkenazis lived in downtown Nalchik and were better integrated with the administrative and commercial centers of town. The Mountain Jews, most of whom had only recently had the opportunity to send their children to primary school, lived in a relatively isolated community and had little interaction with the rest of Nalchik’s population. When the Nazis came to the Ashkenazis, they tried to persuade the Germans that the Mountain Jews were of no relation to them. One fact that helped their case was that the Ashkenazis had European features—light hair and skin—while the Mountain Jews had assimilated many Caucasian features and did appear to be distinct from their European relatives (Yagudaev).

As a result, the Nazis hesitated to annihilate the Mountain Jews. The question was only seriously undertaken upon the arrival of Otto Brautigam from the Ministry for the Occupied Eastern Territories in December. Brautigam saw that the Muslims of the region considered the Mountain Jews indigenous and furthermore saw no distinction between Jewish and Muslim, and he feared that the destruction of that community might be perceived by the Muslims not as an act against Jews per se, but as a first step toward destruction of all the peoples there. The local command refused to act on his orders, and so Brautigam took the issue up with Walther Bierkamp, commander of Einsatzgruppe D. Bierkamp had visited the Mountain Jews and concurred with Brautigam that the Mountain Jews (or Tats—the natives conveniently used the Soviet appellation to further confuse the Nazis) were most likely a Turkic people (Arad 295-296). Their opinion was further confirmed by Selim Shadov, head of the Kabardian National Council, a puppet regime that nominally supported the Nazis:

When I was chosen head of the nationalist government in Kabarda I created a commission that was charged with dividing the land among the peasantry. It was at this time that a delegation of Mountain Jews came to me as head of the government with a Mr. Shabarv in charge and told me that divisions of the SS and SD were making lists of all the Mountain Jews and were telling them that they must wear the yellow Star of David, were tormenting them, and that they were afraid that they would be liquidated as Jews. I went straight to Field Marshal von Kleist and his representatives in Kislovodsk concerning this issue. He told me that special sections of the SS and SD were preparing to dine with Mountain Jews in Nalchik and the surrounding areas. I told the German command that the Mountain Jews were Tats, that they were just like us and the other mountaineers, a Caucasus people like the Kabardians and Balkars (Begun 91).

As a result, von Kleist determined that the Mountain Jews were just another Caucasus tribe and didn't force them to wear yellow stars (Ashurov).

Still, many Mountain Jews continued to be murdered by Nazi troops. Danilova reports numerous families that were murdered without any orders, and eyewitnesses report individuals being dragged off to be killed for no apparent reason. Yagudaev recalled that his family had heard the Nazis planned to murder all the Mountain Jews after New Year's their invasion of the Soviet Union might have had a more conclusive stance on the Mountain Jews' ethnicity, or perhaps the German command in the region may have been given more latitude. Such seems to be the case concerning the Krymchaks and Karaites of the Crimea. Their "ethnicity" was decided by German troops on the ground after the area was occupied. The Krymchaks were determined to be ethnically Jewish and were nearly completely exterminated while the Karaites were determined to be non-Jewish and spared. Second, the Germans were not expecting to find Mountain Jews so far west and Einsatzgruppe D forces that were to be assigned the task of reaching a conclusion were taken by surprise and probably took some time preparing their method for making a determination. Third, most of the Mountain Jews spoke Kabardian, an ability that allowed them to hide amongst their Muslim neighbors. Fourth, the Nazis were aware of the close-knit nature of Caucasian society and were unwilling to unnecessarily murder a community because of the risk of inflaming the entire population, and so they hesitated. Fifth, the vast majority of Kabardians protected the Mountain Jews to the best of their ability, hiding them, teaching them Muslim rituals, and attesting to the Nazis that they were just another Caucasus tribe. This caused Nazis such as Brautigan and Bierkamp at least initially to believe that they were not in fact Jewish. Finally, by the time the Nazis had apparently changed their opinion and made plans to murder the community, the Red Army drove them out of Nalchik.

The one question that remains unanswered is that of the Mountain Jews in Mozdok. Yitzhak Arad cites a survivor whose testimony is in the Yad Vashem archives: "Mozdok was on the front and they didn't deal with Jews on the front." Feferman disagrees with this explanation, stating "a *Teilkommando* of *Sonderkommando* 10b was stationed at Mozdok." He further



postulates that if the Nazis did become aware of the Mountain Jews' presence in Mozdok, they hesitated as they did in Nalchik pending an investigation. The advance of the Red Army precluded this, and the Mountain Jews of Mozdok escaped annihilation (106). This seems like a reasonable explanation, although further research needs to be done to obtain a definitive answer to this final question.

Perhaps the Nazis were expecting the order for the murder of all the town's Jews at any time, and felt the Mountain Jews were a safe target to take out their sadistic urges. Indeed, according to Boris Ashurov, after the partisans liberated Nalchik on January 4, 1943, a document was found in Nazi headquarters there that indicated the Germans planned to murder the town's Mountain Jews on January 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup>. If this was really the case, only a few days saved the Mountain Jews of Nalchik from complete annihilation.

So it seems a series of circumstances saved the Mountain Jews of Nalchik from destruction. First, as a result of the community in France, a debate in Berlin was partially settled in favor of declaring Caucasus Jews non-Jewish. Had this not been the case, the study of Soviet ethnicities conducted by the Nazis prior to their invasion of the Soviet Union might have had a more conclusive stance on the Mountain Jews' ethnicity, or perhaps the German command in the region may have been given more latitude. Such seems to be the case concerning the Krymchaks and Karaites of the Crimea. Their "ethnicity" was decided by German troops on the ground after the area was occupied. The Krymchaks were determined to be ethnically Jewish and were nearly completely exterminated while the Karaites were determined to be non-Jewish and spared. Second, the Germans were not expecting to find Mountain Jews so far west and Einsatzgruppe D forces that were to be assigned the task of reaching a conclusion were taken by surprise and probably took some time preparing their method for making a determination. Third, most of the Mountain Jews spoke Kabardian, an ability that allowed them to hide amongst their Muslim neighbors. Fourth, the Nazis were aware of the close-knit nature of Caucasian society and were

unwilling to unnecessarily murder a community because of the risk of inflaming the entire population, and so they hesitated. Fifth, the vast majority of Kabardians protected the Mountain Jews to the best of their ability, hiding them, teaching them Muslim rituals, and attesting to the Nazis that they were just another Caucasus tribe. This caused Nazis such as Brautigam and Bierkamp at least initially to believe that they were not in fact Jewish. Finally, by the time the Nazis had apparently changed their opinion and made plans to murder the community, the Red Army drove them out of Nalchik.

The one question that remains unanswered is that of the Mountain Jews in Mozdok. Yitzhak Arad cites a survivor whose testimony is in the Yad Vashem archives: "Mozdok was on the front and they didn't deal with Jews on the front." (Arad 295). Feferman disagrees with this explanation, stating "a *Teilkommando* of Sonderkommando 10b was stationed at Mozdok." He further postulates that if the Nazis did become aware of the Mountain Jews' presence in Mozdok, they hesitated as they did in Nalchik pending an investigation. The advance of the Red Army precluded this, and the Mountain Jews of Mozdok escaped annihilation (Feferman 106). This seems like a reasonable explanation, although further research needs to be done to obtain a definitive answer to this final question.

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