

PILGRIMS AND POWERBROKERS: THE RUSSIAN FASCINATION WITH JERUSALEM.

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ABSTRACT

Palestine has experienced wave after wave of conquest and colonization, with the current occupation by Israel being both the latest and the most systematic. In the land where the Bible was formed we find a complex interaction of politics, scriptures and religion. This paper will focus on Russian interests in Palestine as one significant historical expression of the desire to possess Jerusalem that has shaped Jewish identities, motivated the Crusaders, and remains at the heart of the conflict between Israel and Palestine. This ‘lust for Zion’ has a complex relationship with the Bible, which has itself been repeatedly occupied by those seeking to colonize the land and drive out the indigenous peoples.

Few places on the earth fit the criterion of “lands that bear the marks of colonization” more strongly than Palestine.¹ This phrase certainly fits with the present experience of Palestinians, as well as that ‘lust for Zion’ which has been a hallmark of Christian claims to the land in the Byzantine period, during the Crusades, and by various European powers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As a recent collection of essays indicates,² there is no lack of intersection with politics, scriptures and religions in modern Palestine and Israel.

Geography destined Palestine to serve as the great global interchange; the point where traffic from Africa, Asia and Europe converges as humanity surges back and forth like

¹ I dedicate this chapter to the people of Gaza who were under attack from air, land and sea when an early version was presented to a seminar in Sydney on 1 August 2014. May peace surprise us all with its early arrival, and may justice and reconciliation be the unexpected fruit of these bitter days.

² Naim Ateek, Cedar Duaybis, and Tina Whitehead, eds., *The Bible and the Palestine-Israel Conflict* (Jerusalem: Sabeel Centre, 2014).

waves on the beach. Adventurers, armies, merchants, and refugees have crossed the ancient land of Palestine since time before memory. In the process they have conquered and colonized. They have killed and they have settled among the natives. They have lived in houses they did not build, drawn water from cisterns they did not dig, and gathered harvests from crops they did not plant (cf. Deut 6:10–11).

They have told stories about their gods, and claimed this land was given to them – and them exclusively – by their gods, who alone are true gods. In this land some of those stories became the Bible, and from this land Torah and Gospel have been shared with other parts of the world.

For some Christians in antiquity – and specifically Byzantine Christians after the merger of Christianity with imperial Rome – Jerusalem had become the centre of the world; or, at least, the centre of their world. The beautiful mosaic map from Byzantine Madaba in modern Jordan reflects the position of Jerusalem in the religious imagination of the believer.

The city had not always been at the centre of the world, even the religious world. When it first appears in our historical records around 1,350 years before the Common Era, Jerusalem was a small settlement in the orbit of Egypt. In Amarna Letter 287 its local ruler (Abdi-Heba) wrote to Akhenaton asking for a handful of archers to help with some local disturbances involving the ‘Apiru.³

The fortunes of Jerusalem were to change following the capture of the city by David and its eventual transformation into Zion, “the city of the LORD of hosts, ... the city of our God, which God establishes forever (Ps 48:8 NRSV). It is possible to sketch a series of

³ William L. Moran, *The Amarna Letters* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), 327–28.

historical periods that have especially impacted on the fortunes of the city and its inhabitants since Jerusalem became the leading city of the Israelite – and later Jewish – communities:

Judean Jerusalem	950–750 BCE
Zion, protected by YHWH	750–600 BCE
Destruction and exile	586–539 BCE
Jerusalem in the Persian period	539–330 BCE
Jerusalem in the Ptolemaic period	300–200 BCE
Jerusalem in the Seleucid period	200–140 BCE
Hasmonean Jerusalem	140–40 BCE
Herodian Jerusalem (Early Roman period)	40 BCE–66 CE
Rebellions against Roman rule	66–73, 115–17, 132–35 CE
Byzantine Jerusalem	335–638 CE
Arab Jerusalem	638–1099 & 1187–1250 CE
Crusader Jerusalem	1099–1187 CE
Mamluk Jerusalem	1250–1517 CE
Ottoman Jerusalem	1517–1918 CE
Colonial Jerusalem	1700s & 1800s CE
British Jerusalem	1918–1948 CE
Israeli Jerusalem	since 1948

Each of these phases needs to be studied if we are to explore the significance of Jerusalem as both a location and a metaphor in world history. That will require a much longer study than is possible in this chapter. For our purposes, I will focus on the Russian interests in Jerusalem.

The New Rome

The Russian fascination with Jerusalem may not be so well known as some other parts of the story just outlined, but – as we shall see – it explains much of contemporary history, both in Russia and in Palestine. To the extent that the story is new and surprising, we must acknowledge that our own perspectives on Palestine have been shaped by Western interests. To some extent, the particular religious communities with which we have an association – even if we are not currently adherents – will also have shaped our perspectives on Jerusalem and Palestine.

As a child, my own views on Israel and Palestine were shaped British colonial interests and the dispensationalist theology of my original faith community. I was taught to see the issues through that pair of lenses, and it was never suggested to me that Catholics might have another point of view, or the Greeks, let alone the Russians. The Russians did feature in the ‘pre-millennial’ scenario of my *Scofield Reference Bible*, but only as the atheistic hordes of Gog and Magog who were expected to attack Israel from the north in a futile attempt to destroy the people of God.

Viewed from the East, rather than from London, things look different. They have looked ‘different’ for many centuries, but the cultural gatekeepers of Western Europe and its overseas colonial derivatives have often seemed unaware of this. That myopia has real world consequences when foreign policy dealing with the ‘Middle East’ is shaped without reference to longstanding cultural traditions, including historic Russian connections to Palestine.

On 29 May 1453, Constantinople fell to the Islamic armies led by Sultan Mehmed II, who would continue his campaign to unite Anatolia under Ottoman rule and expand their influence into Bosnia. The city had long been isolated from its once vast territories. After centuries of conflict with Persian and then Arab enemies, the city founded by Constantine as a New Rome in 330 CE was little more than a collection of small villages encircled by a defensive wall by the time of its capture. The flight of Eastern intellectuals to Italy and other parts of Europe before and during the final siege was to be one of the factors that sparked the Renaissance in Western Europe.

The impact of the city's capture would also trigger events in the distant north. The princes of Muscovy beyond the Black Sea saw themselves in a new light. They adopted the mantle of 'New Rome', seeing themselves as a third and final iteration of Rome. As Constantinople had preserved the imperial flame when Rome fell to the barbarians, so Muscovy would preserve the flame of Byzantine culture – and it would especially protect the Orthodox faithful living under Muslim rule; in the Balkans and all the way to Jerusalem.

The Russian princes not only adopted the double-headed eagle of the final Byzantine dynasty, but also gave themselves a new imperial title: Caesar, Tsar. The Russian empire positioned itself as the leader of an Orthodox crusade to protect the holy places and local Christian (Orthodox) communities. Orthodoxy was to be protected not just from the Muslims, but also from the Catholics and the Protestants who were increasingly influential in the Middle East during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

Before we consider the question of Russian pilgrimage to Jerusalem, we need to turn our attention to the seventeenth century. Pilgrimage to the Holy City was always a significant

financial and logistical challenge before railways and steamships ushered in the era of mass transportation. Since the pilgrims could not easily get to the holy places, what if the chief holy place was re-created inside Holy Russia herself?

Novoiyerusalimsky – the ‘New Jerusalem’ Monastery near Moscow – was founded in 1656. It is a careful replica of Church of the Resurrection (known as the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in the Western tradition) in Jerusalem, complete with a copy of the tomb (*aedicule*) of Christ from the church in Jerusalem at that time. Since that structure was destroyed in a fire that erupted inside the Jerusalem church in 1808, this element alone makes the Russian building of great historical interest.

The building has a few Russian architectural features (most notably the domes), but represents a serious attempt to bring Jerusalem to the Russian landscape. Non-Russian monks were recruited to live alongside Russian monks, in order to reflect the universal character of the Orthodox faithful.

This description of the project from a news report of a recent conservation project nicely captures the significance of the monastery:

The monastery consists of a walled-in compound set on a hill near the town of Istra. Nikon wanted the entire world to be persuaded that Russia should be the center of the Christian faith. To achieve this goal, he set about building a replica of Jerusalem's Church of the Holy Sepulchre. This is the main structure within the monastery's whitewashed walls.⁴

The site was a focus for pilgrimage in pre-Soviet Russia, and after the railway was

⁴ “New Jerusalem Monastery to be restored.” *Moscow Top News*. (2009) The text of the news report is available online at www.moscowtopnews.com/?area=postView&id=734.

connected it attracted 35,000 visitors in 1913. The monastery was closed in 1918 and the buildings served as a museum during the Soviet era. The religious community of New Jerusalem Monastery was refounded in the 1990s and since 2002 the conservation of the site has been a project of the World Monument Fund. A 2009 presidential decree on restoration promised significant federal Russian funding, and in 2010 the site received 300,000 visitors. It is clear that the site continues to play an influential role in the public imagination of the Russian state. As then President Medvedev said when announcing federal funding for the project:

“The New Jerusalem Monastery is unparalleled among the monuments of human history,” Medvedev said. “It is deservedly regarded as a cultural phenomenon and it is the only successful attempt to produce an exact copy of the Holy Land,” the president noted, adding, “By restoring our great spiritual centres, we are contributing to the revival of our roots and our values.”⁵

Pilgrims

Impressive as it was, the local reflection of Palestine at the New Jerusalem Monastery did not divert the masses of Russian pilgrims who made their way to Palestine as the transportation facilities improved. From peasant to Tsar, there was a deep attachment to Palestine and its holy city, Jerusalem. Shiploads of Russian pilgrims would cross the Black Sea on their way to Jerusalem, and for many of them it seems to have been an intensely personal journey. Montefiore describes the attachment in these terms.

⁵ Dmitry Anatolyevich Medvedev, "Speech to Trustees of the Foundation for Restoring the Resurrection New Jerusalem Monastery," *Moscow Top News*, 20 October 2008.

... every Russian believed that the pilgrimage to Jerusalem was an essential part of the preparation for death and salvation. As the poet Alexander Pushkin, the personification of Russia's soul, expressed this in 1836 ... 'Is not Jerusalem the cradle of us all?'⁶

Stephen Graham was a British adventurer and travel writer who travelled with a group of Russian pilgrims from Constantinople to Jerusalem in February 1912. He travelled incognito, aided by his excellent Russian and his rustic clothing, and he later published an account of his experiences: *With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem*.⁷

Graham's own photographs brought his prose to life for his readers, but the prose was already quite vivid as can be seen in this description of a renewal of baptism vows in the Jordan River:

In a great miscellaneous crowd the peasants began to undress and to step into their white shrouds, the women into long robes like nightdresses, the men into full white shirts and pantaloons. Those who came unprepared stood quite naked on the banks. Then the priest when he had given the pilgrims time to prepare, began taking the service for the sanctification of the water. The ikons and the cross were ranged around a wooden platform over the water.⁸

Graham's account of the Easter celebrations at the Russian Cathedral in Jerusalem is equally vivid:

⁶ Simon Sebag Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography* (London: Phoenix, 2012), 408.

⁷ Stephen Graham, *With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem* (London: Macmillan, 1913). See also the recent biography of Stephen Graham by Michael Hughes: *Beyond Holy Russia: The Life and Times of Stephen Graham*. Cambridge, UK: Open Book Publishers, 2014.

⁸ Graham, *With the Russian Pilgrims to Jerusalem*, cited in Michael Hughes, *Beyond Holy Russia*, 72.

Then at one on the morning we passed ... into the Russian cathedral, now joyously illuminated with coloured lights, and we heard the service in familiar church Slavonic. And we all kissed one another again. What embracing and kissing there were this night; smacking of hearty lips and tangling of beards and whiskers! The Russian men kiss one another with far more heartiness than they kiss their women. In the hostelry I watched a couple of ecstatical old greybeards who grasped one another tightly by the shoulders, and kissed at least a score of times, and wouldn't leave off.⁹

This devotion captured on film and described in purple prose around one hundred years ago can still be witnessed in Jerusalem. Women from across the Orthodox world—including Russia—are often to be seen blessing their own shrouds at the stone of anointing in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre. Anecdotes circulating in Jerusalem today, suggest that a high percentage of these Orthodox women die within twelve months of their pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the preparation of the shrouds for their own burial. This fits with Stephen Graham's description of the Russian pilgrims cited by Montefiore:

Russian peasants, many of them women, often walked all the way from their villages southwards to Odessa for the voyage to Zion. ... They brought their death shrouds and felt ... 'that when they have been to Jerusalem, the serious occupations of their life are all ended. For the peasant goes to Jerusalem to *die* in a certain way in Russia—just as the whole concern of the Protestant centres around *life*.'¹⁰

⁹ Graham, *With the Russian Pilgrims*, 296, cited in Hughes, *Beyond Holy Russia*, 73.

¹⁰ Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, 441.

We have already seen the description of the 1912 pilgrims by Stephen Graham. Montefiore describes the Russian presence towards the end of the nineteenth century as follows:

In Jerusalem, the streets glittered with the gold braid and shoulderboards of Russian uniforms worn, by princes and generals, while teeming with the sheepskins and smocks of thousands of peasant pilgrims, all encouraged by Nicholas who also despatched an ecclesiastical mission to compete with the other Europeans.¹¹

Long before Stephen Graham took his camera on pilgrimage from Russia to Palestine, we have precious archival images that illustrate and confirm the conspicuous presence of the Russian pilgrims in and around Jerusalem.

One such image is a photograph from the collection at the Russian Museum and Park Complex in Jericho that was opened in 2011 by Russian President Medvedev.¹² It shows a crowd of Russian pilgrims in front of the Dome of the Rock, and reflects a more relaxed state of affairs than prevails at the Haram as-Sharif these days.

A second photograph is from the Oregon State University collection. The image description, from an historic lecture booklet, reads:

This picture is taken along the Jericho road looking west toward Jerusalem. The subject of the picture 'Pilgrims' is one that has its place in all histories of religion. The present motley crowd is made up of a number of nationalities, but the majority are Russians. These have already been to the Jordon (sic) at their reputed

¹¹ Ibid., 409.

¹² https://jacksdaily.files.wordpress.com/2013/10/img_9148.jpg

places of the baptism of Jesus, and are now returning to the Holy City to partake in the festivities around the Holy Sepulchre which takes place at Easter.¹³

Powerbrokers

A convenient point to begin this section of our discussion is provided by Napoleon's military campaigns in Egypt and Palestine (1798/99). That unsuccessful military adventure was a dramatic turn in the confrontation between England and France at the time, and serves as a vivid illustration of the competition between European powers for influence in the Eastern Mediterranean. That competition in turn provides the larger context for Russian attempts to increase its own capacities to influence events in Palestine. For a detailed study of Russian interests in Palestine see the 1963 monograph by Stavrou.¹⁴ While the title indicates a focus on events between 1882 and 1914, the book includes a detailed discussion of earlier historical developments.

In the early decades of the nineteenth century we find moves by Britain, France, Germany and Russia to establish footholds in Palestine. Despite the occasional appeal to religious considerations, the competition between European powers was not primarily about religion, but more about trade routes – and access to oil supplies. The opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 was a major strategic development that greatly benefited British interests in the Mediterranean as well as other locations 'East of Suez'.

The joint Anglo-Prussian Bishopric created with the arrival of Bishop Michael Solomon

¹³ http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Russian_Pilgrims_Returning_from_the_Jordon.jpg

¹⁴ Theofanis George Stavrou, *Russian Interests in Palestine, 1882-1914: A Study of Religious and Educational Enterprise* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1963).

Alexander on *HMS Invincible* in 1841 was driven largely by English and German concerns at French and Russian influence mediated via the Roman Catholic and Orthodox religious institutions in Palestine. Likewise, the establishment of the Palestine Exploration Fund in 1865 was as much about clandestine collection of intelligence on this strategic portion of the Ottoman Empire as it was about exploration of the Holy Land. In 1844, before a formal Russian presence was established in Jerusalem, the British consul in the city observed with alarm the large number of Russians in the city at Easter time:

The British consul warned London that ‘the Russians could in one night during Easter arm 10,000 pilgrims within the walls of Jerusalem’ and seize the city. Meanwhile the French pursued their own mission to protect the Catholics. ‘Jerusalem’, reports Consul Finn in 1844, ‘is now a central point of interest to France and Russia.’¹⁵

Stravou summarises the situation at the beginning of the nineteenth century as follows:

Until the end of the seventeenth century, one may speak of the purely religious interest of Russian rulers in the subjugated Christians. By the end of the eighteenth century, the Tsars had come to realize the political possibilities of championing Orthodoxy and protecting the Christians. Constantinople, the Holy Places, salvation of the human race – all these could come, perhaps, through the Russian Christ. This idea reached its highest expression during the second half of the nineteenth century, when political and economic necessities forced Russia’s

¹⁵ Montefiore, *Jerusalem: The Biography*, 409.

close attention to the Black Sea and the Straits.¹⁶

The Crimea War erupted in 1853. The three year conflict was sparked by religious tensions in Bethlehem, but it was fueled by this long-running religious and national competition between Russia and the western powers of England and France.

The spark was the theft of the silver star from the grotto under the Church of the Nativity on 1 October 1847. The star had been a gift from (Catholic) France in the 1700s, and the theft was widely seen as an act by Orthodox clergy. Fights broke out between Catholic and Orthodox priests. So far there was nothing unusual about these ugly events, and nothing of international significance.

France claimed the right to replace the star (and also to repair roof of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem). Russia objected to this offer and asserted its traditional rights as protector of the Orthodox. The sultan was caught between opposing European powers: Russia to the North, and France to the West. Nicholas I of Russia saw opportunity to expand Russian influence as Ottoman power declined. France and Britain were opposed to anything that would give Russia a greater influence over the Middle East.

France and England declared war on Russia on 28 March 1853, following the Russian invasion of Ottoman territory in the Balkans. There were 750,000 deaths among combatants, and the war ended in a major defeat for Russia. The Ottoman Empire was granted a brief reprieve from Russian encroachments due to the intervention by the English and French, who naturally consolidated their influence and power in the Middle East.

¹⁶ Stavrou, *Russian Interests in Palestine, 1882-1914: A Study of Religious and Educational Enterprise*, 23.

We get some idea of the rising European influence in the region from the list of European dignitaries visiting Jerusalem in the final decades of the nineteenth century.

The Duke of Brabant (and future King Leopold II of Belgium) arrived in March 1855 and was the first European allowed to visit the Haram as-Sharif. He was followed just three months later by Archduke Maximilian, heir to the Habsburg Empire and a future Emperor of Mexico. Prince Edward (the future Edward VII of England) visited Jerusalem in 1862. His sons, Prince Albert Victor and Prince George (the future King George V), followed in their father's footsteps in 1882. Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, the brother of Tsar Alexander III – with his consort, Elizabeth Feodorovna, a German-born granddaughter of Queen Victoria – visited Jerusalem for the consecration of the Convent of Mary Magdalene in 1888. Finally, Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany visited for several weeks in October and November 1898.

After initially seeking to support the local Greek Orthodox clergy in the face of incursions by Western Catholic and Protestant missions, the Russians established their own ecclesiastical mission in Jerusalem. As Vovchenko has shown,¹⁷ one of the strategies adopted by the Russians as they despaired of their traditional collaboration with the Greek Orthodox clergy was to promote a sense of Arab nationalism. This created further tensions with the Greeks who resented Russian promotion of nationalist aspirations among the Orthodox Arabs.

In 1847 the Russians had made an unsuccessful attempt to establish an ecclesiastical mission, without proper diplomatic approval, prior to Crimean War. This project was

¹⁷ Denis Vovchenko, "Creating Arab Nationalism? Russia and Greece in Ottoman Syria and Palestine (1840–1909)," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49, no. 6 (2013).

naturally cut short by the outbreak of the war, and it was not until 1857 that the mission could return to Jerusalem – this time with Ottoman recognition.¹⁸ Stavrou sums up the Russian strategy following its defeat in the Crimea War:

The Peace of Paris of 1856 deprived Russia, among other things, of her monopoly as protector of Christians in the Ottoman Empire. The military defeat in the Crimea was a severe blow to Russian prestige in the Orthodox East. It was only natural that Russia would devise new methods of diplomacy to maintain her influence in the Ottoman Empire in accord with her traditional aspiration southward through the Black Sea. In this new phase of Russian diplomacy two procedures would be of use: establishment of a new Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, and building of a Russian merchant navy in the Black Sea. ... As for the second Russian Ecclesiastical Mission to Jerusalem, it was purely political in origin and purpose.¹⁹

The official task of these missions was organizing pilgrimages from Russia as well as charitable and educational work among the Orthodox Arabs. Between 1860 and 1864 the mission was able to establish a Russian Compound in Jerusalem on a prominent site opposite the Jaffa Gate. Here they established offices for the mission, the Russian consulate, a hospital, and pilgrim hostels with accommodation for 2,000 people. In time the compound would also include the Holy Trinity Cathedral, Jerusalem.

Meanwhile events in Russia would lead to an upsurge in anti-Semitism and trigger an exodus of Jews from Russia. Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in 1881, and Jews were

¹⁸ See the detailed discussion in Stavrou, *Russian Interests in Palestine, 1882-1914: A Study of Religious and Educational Enterprise*, ch. 2.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 39–40.

suspected of involvement. This led to a series of anti-Jewish pogroms, and eventually the promulgation of the highly anti-Semitic “May Laws” of 1882. Between 1888 and 1914 two million Jews left Russia. While the vast majority of them went to the USA, a significant minority went to Palestine. As a result, by 1890 Jews comprised 25,000 of a total Jerusalem population of 40,000 people. For the first time since the destruction of the temple in 70 CE, Jews were a majority in Jerusalem.

The establishment of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society by Tsar Alexander III on 8 May 1882 took place in this context of internal anti-Semitism and international competition for influence in Palestine. Alexander III appointed his brother, Grand Duke Sergei, as president. The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society especially encouraged pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but it also aimed to provide a “national character” for Russian activities in Palestine similar to the many Catholic and Protestant societies then active in the Holy Land.²⁰ A key objective for the Society was to promote “Autocracy and Orthodoxy” in order to save Holy Russia. As already noted, Sergei and his wife, Elizabeth, visited Jerusalem in 1888 for the consecration of Convent of Mary Magdalene on the Mount of Olives.

The Society acquired property throughout Palestine and launched an ambitious program of “good works” as described in detail by Stravou.²¹ Stravou comments on the achievements in the first few years of its work:

The first seven years were in many respects the most colorful of the Society’s thirty-two years of active existence. ... As an organization it grew at an amazing

²⁰ See *ibid.*, 62–63.

²¹ *Ibid.*, see especially chs 4 to 8

speed, spreading its reputation into the far corners of the Russian Empire. In research and publication about the Holy Places, it soon ranked with the leading Western European Palestine societies. The pilgrims received the Society's immediate attention, and by 1889 annual pilgrimages more than tripled. Even in the most delicate issue of all, support for Orthodoxy in the Holy land, the Society by its untiring efforts prepared the ground for a future fruitful policy.²²

One tangible expression of the Society's success was its acquisition of properties across Palestine. The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society purchased property in Hebron with the Oak of Mamre, at the summit of Mount of Olives, in Jaffa with the tomb of Tabitha, gardens in Jericho, a plot of land in Tiberias on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, the founding of the Convent at Ein-Karem, and a large site in Nazareth.

Russian activity in and around Nazareth was especially successful, and also serves as a case study for the wider program of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. A prominent site located between the Greek Orthodox Church at Mary's Well and the Franciscan compound was acquired in late 1800s. Here a substantial building (known locally as the 'Moskubiyeh') was erected 1904 with accommodation for 1,000 pilgrims. The building also included a school, a pharmacy, and a hospital.

Russian activity in Nazareth took advantage of the large Orthodox population and had some success in reducing the loss of adherents to Western missionaries. Indeed the Russian schools were so successful that providing sufficient teachers to staff them became a challenge that was eventually addressed by the establishment of the Nazareth

²² Ibid., 88.

Teachers Training School.²³ The case of the Nazareth school for girls is indicative of both the strategy and its success.

The Nazareth school for girls was a great success. It opened officially on October 3, 1885 with twenty-seven students from twelve to seventeen years of age. Nazareth was the choice for the schools, because of its strategic location to other schools of the Society and because of the opportunity to compete with other foreign mission schools there. The Russian school for girls grew at an amazing speed. A month after opening, enrollment rose from twenty-seven to ninety, and the following month it reached 120. This was largely the result of the zeal of the teachers, led by a Russian lady, Maria Semenovna, who had special pedagogical training in Moscow. Assisted by two native teachers from Beirut, the Russian teacher upset the enrolment of missionary schools in Nazareth. By the end of the first academic year, the enrollment was 283 students, and she wrote to the Society that the English schools there could not compete and had closed down, the teacher leaving Nazareth.²⁴

All this was to change with the outbreak of World War I and then the revolution of October 1917. Russian pilgrimage to Palestine stopped and the Russian institutions in the Holy Land divided between those loyal to Moscow and those associated with the Russian Church in Exile. In the case of Nazareth, the Muscovy became an administration building for the British Mandate authorities and later for Israeli civil authorities. Today it is a police station, with a post office in one corner.

Amin Saleem Jarjura (1886–1975) is a good example of the impact of the Russian

²³ Ibid., 113–14.

²⁴ Ibid., 112–13.

presence on the local population. He was born in Nazareth on 10 November 1886 and educated at the Russian School, where he would later serve as a teacher. According to the web site of the Knesset in Jerusalem,²⁵ Jarjura served in the Ottoman army during WW1 although his family do not have any memory of that military service. He studied Law in Jerusalem, and taught at El-Rashidia College in Jerusalem between 1922 and 1926. After serving as a lawyer in Haifa and Nazareth he was elected as an Arabic Member of the first Knesset (1949/1951) and served on a number of parliamentary committees. After losing his seat in the Knesset in 1951 he secured election as Mayor of Nazareth, serving in that role from 1954 to 1959. He died in Nazareth on 20 August 1975. As a child he spoke fluent Russian as well as his native Arabic. As the decades passed he will have acquired fluency in English and later in Hebrew. One of his granddaughters is my Arabic teacher.

Revival of Russian Interests in Jerusalem

Alain Gresh has argued that Russia is poised to exercise new influence in the Middle East, an area where – as we have seen already – it has strong historical links.²⁶ Gresh notes some of the factors that give Russia a “strong hand” to play in this region: Russia is a local player with a shared common interests on many issues, Russia is now freed from its former ideological alliances that constrained it as late as the 1980s, Russia is no longer seen as a “purveyor of Revolution and Atheism”, there is a large Russian immigrant population within Israel (including senior members of the current government), and

²⁵ www.knesset.gov.il/mk/eng/mk_eng.asp?mk_individual_id_t=345

²⁶ Alain Gresh, "Russia's Return to the Middle East," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 1 (1998).

Russia has a cadre of former diplomats and military advisors with excellent Arabic skills and extensive networks of contacts. Finally, like Europe, Russia is benefiting from rising anti-American attitudes in the Middle East. While this analysis was published in 1998, it still seems to ring true with current dynamics in the region.

In a more recent discussion, Yakob Rabkin has compared the different ways in which three non-Western nuclear powers (Russia, China and India) relate to the Middle East in general and the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular.²⁷ Rabkin notes the significant proportion of Russians in Israel (almost 25% of the non-Arab population) and the attention that each government has invested in the relationship since diplomatic relations were resumed only in 1991 after having been terminated following the 1967 war. Rabkin notes that one unique feature of the Russia-Israel relationship is the broad demographic in each country that values the relationship.²⁸

Meanwhile, both Russia and Israel are quietly working to establish close links of a kind Russia has not enjoyed in Jerusalem for 100 years. In Jerusalem, the Russian Compound is being returned to Russia as part of a wider set of actions to normalize relations and restore pre-1948 property rights. Indeed, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society still operates. It is now led by Sergei Stepashin, a former Russian prime minister and security-police general. This is not as glamorous as a grand duke, but he is still a high-ranking official with good connections within the Russian elite. Stepashin is quoted in *The Economist* as offering this frank assessment of the geopolitical stake: “A Russian flag in

²⁷ Yacov M. Rabkin, "Russia, China and India and the Israel–Palestine Conflict," *Holy Land Studies* 12, no. 1 (2013).

²⁸ Interestingly, a similar point was made in an opinion piece published just as this chapter was being finished. See Oudeh Basharat, "Israel's Russian-Arab Bond: Stronger Than the Politics of Hatred," *Haaretz*, 29/12/2014.

the centre of Jerusalem, in such close proximity to the Holy Sepulchre, is priceless.”²⁹

The new image of Vladimir Putin, as an Orthodox champion in the struggle against Western dominance may come as a shock to many in the West, but it resonates with historical Russian interests in the region. Indeed it has deep roots in Russia’s own sense of herself. As in ancient Rome so in its aspiring successor, we see the power of religion to act as social glue for an empire that is both multi-ethnic and multifaith. Politics, scriptures and religion intersect in the Middle East, and most especially in Palestine, as Melik Kaylan observes with not a little discomfort.

look at the Middle East now. Putin and Assad have maneuvered to become the explicit protectors of Eastern Christianity *in situ*. Moscow is back as their shield and Orthodoxy’s patron. He didn’t sidle up to the Russian church in recent years purely for domestic reasons. He knew the unforgotten historical alignments just below the surface from Moscow out through the Balkans, through the Caucasus, past Turkey to the Holy Land.³⁰

²⁹ "Where Piety Meets Power," *The Economist*, 17 December 2009.

³⁰ Melik Kaylan, "We Abandon Mideast Christians: They Fall Prey to Putin's Charms," *Forbes*, 9 May 2014.

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