

Izabela Kończak

University of Lodz

ikonczak@uni.lodz.pl

In the Name of Imperial Ambitions. The Presence of Russia in the Holy Land in the 19th and 20th Centuries

Abstract

The paper will discuss the Russian involvement in the Holy Land that started from informal actions to evolve into formal activities of religious, trading and scientific institutions related to the Russian authorities.

Keywords

Russia, Holy Land, The Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission, The Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company, The Palestine Committee, The Palestine Commission, The Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society.

Russia in the 19th century was an empire which conquered and strengthened its influence in Central Asia and the Far East. It was also interested in the areas which belonged to an ever weaker Ottoman Empire. Following the example of other empires, the Tsar's state decided that it should make its presence felt in the centre of the Christian world: Palestine. This required a certain pretext since Russia could not openly promote its own national interests in the Middle East and it could not play the role of defender of Orthodox interests – the hindrance was in the agreements of the London convention of the 13th July 1841. On the other hand, St. Petersburg could no longer ignore information about the awkward situation of the Orthodox Church in the Middle East.¹ For that reason, in 1842

¹ The issue of hostility towards Russian pilgrims not only came from the Ottoman officials, but also from the authorities of the Jerusalem Patriarchate; the poor condition of Christian temples in Jerusalem (despite financial support and gifts sent to the Middle East). It is described in the writings of Andrei Murav'ov (1806–1874) (in years 1829–1830) and Abrakham Norov (1795–1869) (in 1834). The text was published for the first time in 1838. See: Murav'ov 2006; Norov 2008. Both travellers

the situation had to be considered on the spot. An archimandrite was sent there incognito. Officially, he played the role of a pilgrim in the Holy Land to make sense of the situation.

Archimandrite Porphyrius Uspensky (1804–1885) was summoned to the capital of Russia in July 1842. The Holy Synod, when suggesting him for the job, considered his work and spiritual achievements. He was seen as ‘a man who knew not only Greek and had an experience in foreign contacts with coreligionists, but who also possessed extraordinary talents; he was an expert in Byzantine studies. He was an orientalist, a historian and an archaeologist, a bibliophile and most of all a selfless person’ (Lisovoi 2004). His task in the Holy Land was defined as ‘collecting solid information about what state the Palestine Church is in and taking a decision on the spot regarding what means should be undertaken to support it and ensure its welfare’ (Yamilinets 2003: 64). While there, Porphyrius rather quickly put forward a diagnosis about the local Orthodox church. The impressions that he acquired there must have been shocking as he allowed himself to express some sarcastic remarks:

‘The Arabs, during the second millennium, strongly upkeep the Orthodox religion. They do not pay attention to the persecution on the part of the Muslims with all the ignorance of their leaders. I am shocked by their childlike simplicity, in the way they pray in their churches, which do not resemble God’s temples. All churches are in a desperate state, and the priests are ignorant and lazy in their services. I was crying while seeing their churches. I do not blame the Arabs – they are ignorant because no-one in the world thinks about their education and their salvation from the Greek clergy’s disdain for them. They are seen as worse than smelly dogs. Everyone there forgets that the Palestinian Church has no home in the erected basilica, but in the hearts of the baptised’ (Yamilinets 2003: 64).

Porphyrius spent eight months there, and his stay resulted in detailed reports. The most important of all the issues discussed by him was the necessity of organising a permanent Russian representation outpost in Palestine. He believed that the presence there would enable control of the funds sent from Russia. The authorities in St. Petersburg were concerned with the information that the money and material goods, which were sent there for years, had disappeared ‘somewhere’. Local Orthodox churches did not have icons or liturgical vessels. It must have been a rather unpleasant experience, and indeed, the authorities were shocked by the scale of the phenomenon. The decision to set up the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission was undertaken in St. Petersburg in 1847. Russia wanted to avoid an open conflict with Greek coreligionists. The Mission was

believed that Russia should have more active policies to protect the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church in the area, and especially in the Holy Land. In particular they advocated more care about holy places and a bout holy places and safe pilgrimage.

meant to remain an unofficial project, which Russia did not want to admit to. Porphyrius became the leader of it. The project started in February 1848 in Jerusalem. The financial budget for the four-person-Mission was as little as 7000 silver rubles a year² (Rotov 1959: 113–114). Despite the lack of support from the Russian capital, Porphyrius made some successes during the seven years of the project's existence. He created a seminary at the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, which accepted Arabs as students. The school opened on 14th June 1849, and, by the Patriarchate rules, 12 Arab boys could study there (Lisovoi 2004). As a result of Porphyrius' efforts, in 1853 the Patriarchate's print-house reestablished its function. It printed books in Arabic, but also in foreign languages for local people, including the Greek language and Old Church Slavonic (Mahamid 2002: 20–21). The activity of Porphyrius enhanced the living conditions of Russian pilgrims in the Holy Land. His requests directed to the Patriarchate of Jerusalem resulted in the fact that women could use Fyodor's Monastery during their pilgrimage. Men found their accommodation in the Russian Mission – the Monastery of Archangel Michael. Russian pilgrims were provided with pastoral ministry in Church Slavonic language (Yurchenko 1999: 37).

Many of Porphyrius's significant ideas were left unrealised because of the threat of a conflict of interests between the Russian and Greek Orthodox churches. To refer to just one example, I shall recall here his attempts to build a church which would belong to the Russian Mission. It was not possible to buy a piece of land suitable to build a church. Greek Orthodox representatives were afraid of losing alms from local people and pilgrims. They were also afraid that Bulgarian and Serbian pilgrims would not use Greek Orthodox prayer houses, as it would be easier for them to go to churches in which the prayers were conducted in Church Slavonic language, not in Greek (Yamilinets 2003: 74–75). There were also other reservations. A church could pave the way for a slow expansion and strengthening of Russia's position in the Holy Land. Clearly, this represented a threat to Greek hegemony over the Palestinian Church. The Patriarchate did not assume a hostile position, but all the obstacles created for the Russian representative were explained by fear for good relations with Ottoman authorities. It was highlighted that in the case of a conflict between Russia and Turkey, the links between the Greek Church hierarchy in Palestine and the Russian Church could be used by the Turks against Greek Orthodox presence in the Holy Land. Greeks saw a danger of challenge not only to Russian coreligionists but also to the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre (Vorob'ova 2001: 53), established in the Middle East, which represented a threat to the status quo for hundreds of years.

² Boris Yamilinets claims that funds dedicated to the Mission's upkeep were three rubles higher. See: Yamilinets 2003: 69.

Greeks opposed the idea of establishing a separate place for the Russian Mission. Up until that time, the members of the Russian Mission were received by the Patriarchate of Jerusalem, who opened the Monastery of Archangel Michael for their use. However, this place did not feel like theirs. The Greeks repeatedly emphasised that the Russians were guests. For two years, the Archimandrite made attempts to buy some land to build the house for the Mission. The solution to the problem was not aided by St. Petersburg's position. The Mission could not count on Russia's help. The authorities asserted that the Tsar's state needed their building in Jerusalem; moreover, it was believed that its creation might increase the tension in their mutual relations. In the end, however, it proved possible to overcome the Greeks' opposition to some extent. Surprisingly enough, the house for the Russian Mission was built using the funds of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The design plan of Porphyrius (Vorob'ova 2001: 60–61) was used, which represented yet another concession in favour of the Archimandrite. However, Porphyrius never actually lived in the building, because he had to leave Palestine.

In 1853 the Crimean War started and it complicated the political situation in the Middle East.³ It was also a challenging period for the members of the Mission in Jerusalem. St. Petersburg stopped not only the funding but also directions for further actions. Porphyrius debated whether, under such conditions, he should leave the Mission, or whether he should stay despite the circumstances. The mission's members remained in Jerusalem until mid-January 1854. The reason was that they did not have money for a return journey to their country. The funds finally came from an Austrian consulate (Yamilinets 2003: 78). On the way back to Russia, the Archimandrite stopped in Rome where he was received by Pope Pius IX (1792–1878), a fact that would later cause problems for the archimandrite. The secular authorities and the church hierarchy in the Russian capital viewed his visit to the Vatican with caution. It is believed that it was one of the reasons for which he was not nominated for the position of the Mission's head for the second time when the Crimean War was over (Vorob'ova 2001: 61).

³ Among the reasons for its outbreak can be noted the rivalry for influence and prestige of the Churches in the Holy Land. Due to the “keys to Bethlehem,” – an event of a spiritual and symbolic dimension was translated into the politics of the superpowers at the time. In 1852, the Ottoman Empire, under pressure of French diplomacy, handed over the key to the main entrance to the Basilica of the Nativity to Catholics, while for many centuries the keys were in the possession of the Orthodox church. Possession of these keys ennobled and was the pride of the chosen Church. The change violated the eternal status quo. The Crimean War, despite its far arena of military action and its far-reaching goals, undoubtedly influenced the situation in Palestine. Moreover, it was the last attempt by Tsar Nicholas I to revive Russia's earlier position in the Orthodox East – to return previously lost exclusive rights to the care for the Orthodox subjects of the Sublime Porte. Russia demanded a specific commitment from the Ottomans, in the form of a diplomatic note, a guarantee of all the rights that the Orthodox Church had previously enjoyed and which it had lost in the meantime. See: Rotov 1959: 116–120.

After the Crimean War (1856) a new stage in the mutual relations began. In January 1858, the activity of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission was reestablished in Jerusalem. This time, it became an official agency. It was headed by Bishop Kirill Naumov (1823–1866). The Mission received double the amount of money for its upkeep – 14,650 rubles annually. New instructions were prepared, and according to them:

1. Mission members were to care for and represent Russia's interests in the region;
2. The activity of the mission was concentrated on the Arabs, to keep the Orthodox faith alive amongst them and to prevent a mass conversion to the Latin Church;
3. The Mission members were to care for Russian pilgrims, with a focus on spiritual matters;
4. The mission was to practice the liturgy in Jerusalem in grand form, characteristic of the Russian Orthodox Church;
5. Following the example of the Latin Church, the Mission was to set up and run social institutions, in particular hospitals, schools etc. for people living locally; the Mission was to support those institutions with alms;
6. The Mission was not to limit its activity to Jerusalem, but the aim was to expand it to encompass Palestine, Syria, Lebanon, Sinai and Egypt (Vorob'ova 2001: 66).

The conditions concerning daily life and finances improved. That, however, did not mean that all aspects of life and work were free from problems. The problems started in the Russian community which lived in the Middle East. The head of the Mission, Bishop Kirill, initially greeted the Russian consul in Jerusalem enthusiastically.⁴ However, when the consul embarked on developing Russian infrastructure in Jerusalem, and he considered the care of pilgrims to be one of his tasks, a conflict broke out between the Mission members and the consul. St. Petersburg was flooded with denunciations. Kirill was dismissed. His successors – Archimandrite Leonid Kavelin (1822–1891) and Antonin Kapustin (1917–1894) – also did not know how to collaborate with the diplomatic agency of the Russian state. Despite these difficulties, it is also worth noting here the biggest successes that the Mission achieved during the office of its last head (1856–85), who purchased 18 plots of land in the Holy Land. They were used to build the pilgrimage infrastructure and social facilities for local Christians (Tserpitskaya 2000: 47–62). Due to the work of purchasing and managing the

⁴ The consulate in Jerusalem was set up in 1858, and was headed by the representative of Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company, a clerk at Marine Department – Vladimir Dorgobujinov. For that reason all issues related to political representation and consular help for Russian subjects were taken away from the Mission members and were transferred to the consulate's care. See: Yamilinets 2003: 93.

land near holy places, the term ‘Russian Palestine’ was forged.⁵ The value of the goods acquired by the Russian Orthodox Church (the land and buildings) exceeded the sum of one million rubles (Vorob’ova 2001: 85).

Meanwhile, certain ideas concerning the improvement and organisational structure of the pilgrimage movement to Palestine began to develop in Russia. Before reestablishing the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem after the Crimean War, the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company was created in St. Petersburg. It was established by a first class captain, Nikolai Arkas (1853–1909), and the owner of steamers on the Volga river, Nikolai Novoselsky (1818–1898); they planned the creation of a direct water-way connection between Russia, from Odessa port, and Jaffa in Palestine. They hoped for ‘the journeys of Russian pilgrims to holy places to become a more frequent and constant phenomenon’ (Vorob’ova 2001: 70). The new organisation aimed at strengthening Russian influences in the Mediterranean region and Palestine. The company offered to cover part of the costs linked with organising the Russian consulate in Jerusalem. There was, however, a condition. The consul was to become a principal agent of the Company in the region. The Russian consulate in the Holy Land was opened in February 1858 (Yamilinets 2003: 93). The Jerusalem consul served ‘two masters’: the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company. The reason for this was that the funds provided by the Company were much greater. Therefore the consul put the interests of the Company above the interests of the State (Rotov 1959: 272).

According to Nikodim Rotov, this particular ‘personal union’, one that connected two enterprises – a private shipping company and a consular unit, which was to protect the interests of the state and its subordinates – was particularly harmful for Russian politics in the region. The introduction of the Company’s agent into the area of activity of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs allowed him to assume a position that was profitable for his employer, but also gave him the opportunity to influence official policies (Rotov 1959: 272). Of course, establishing an institution, which was in fact generously subsidised by the government,⁶ resulted in a conflict among the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission, the Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company and the Russian consul in Jerusalem. The arguments mainly concerned questions of competence, and the tasks and responsibilities of selected people. Letters were sent to St. Petersburg in which one side accused the other of activities

⁵ The term “Russian Palestine” was and is used to define land and building properties, including churches, monasteries, pilgrim houses, schools and hospitals, which were erected from Russian funds by Russians in the Holy Land. All these properties were used for both the pilgrims from Russia and the Orthodox Arabs. See: Lisovoi 1999: 73.

⁶ The government committed itself to donating considerable funds. In the following twenty years, they reached the amount of 1,5 million rubles a year. Apart from that the state budget funded the repairs of ships. This aim took 64 thousand rubles a year. See: Lisovoi 2007: 18.

that were damaging the image of Russia in the Holy Land. Bishop Kirill, who headed the Mission during this period, wrote about the situation:

‘Our mutual relations are so tense that I am afraid to leave my house, I am afraid to deal with any issue, even the ones concerning pilgrims in fear that I would touch upon something which has not been resolved, or it provides grounds for suspicion. I have been suspected of many things several times without a reason. The agent of the company, which heads the consulate, caused me such troubles that I believe that the best solution is to stay at home so that I am not forced to listen to certain remarks. I want to separate myself from any accusations of meddling in someone else’s affairs’ (Rotov 1959: 174). The consul wrote to St. Petersburg, denouncing Krill as an alcoholic who surrounded himself with Arab foolish men and women (Vorob’eva 2001: 74).

The pilgrimage traffic was aided by the direct cruise line from Odessa to Jaffa. The increase in the number of pilgrims brought to light the issue of accommodation. Travellers to the Holy Land produced reports about the rather poor state of infrastructure⁷. An idea started to grow amongst the office workers and, finally, the authorities to buy land and to erect buildings necessary for the pilgrims and the Russian representatives in Palestine: these would include accommodation, churches, hospitals and finally administrative offices for the Mission or the consulate. To realise those plans, there was a need for funding not only the purchases and investments, but also later activity in that region. Among the different notions to ensure the initiatives undertaken by Russia, the idea of organising collections, and an active search for donation bodies interested in supporting that type of activity, arose.

This was precisely the aim of the Palestine Committee, which was created by order of the emperor in St. Petersburg. The committee commenced work on 30th March 1859. Its essential task was the search for funding for the activities in the Holy Land. That activity included the improvement of the institution and state agenda, which in turn would improve the situation of Russian subjects and travellers. The budget was comprised of charity donations. According to Nikolai Vorontsov, the head of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, the organisation never received any government funding (Vorontsov 2006). The basic aim of the institution was the collecting of funds, but the Committee quickly defined its priorities and secondary aims, which focused on the organisation of pilgrimages to the Holy Land and the development of local infrastructure for Russian pilgrims.

In the six years of its activity, one million rubles were collected. The money was used to buy plots of land and to construct buildings for Russia and

⁷ This was written about by a special envoy of Duke Constantine sent to Palestine in 1857, Boris Mansurov, a clerk at Marine Ministry. See: Vakh 2011: 17–19.

the Russians, owing to which the living situation of pilgrims was improved.⁸ However, the committee focused mainly on places which were within the Holy City and its surroundings. The support did not travel further. None of the places further afield, which were also cared for by the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission, received any support. The act of establishing yet another entity, whose competencies were rather broadly defined, without a clear delineation of the fields of activity and responsibility, did not help in solving the ambition-competence conflict; moreover, it even exacerbated the problem. In such a situation, the fact that the Committee gained an honorary patron – Grand Duke Constantine Nikolayevich – seems to be rather ambitious. On the one hand, he supported with his authority the initiative so needed from the perspective of the state's interests; on the other, he reduced the impact and arguments of the clergy running similarly significant and necessary activity. As well as losing their prestige, the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission members also suffered from other losses. The donating bodies had to divide the charitable funds between two organisations if they wanted to support both. It was not surprising, therefore, that the collaboration between the Mission and the Committee – even though both organisations had similar goals – was not developing too well. Both sides of the conflict sent letters of complaint to Russia. From this we may deduce that the grounds for those disagreements were found in financial competition. What is essential to note here is that those internal arguments shook the prestige of both institutions, and indirectly also negatively influenced the prestige of the Tsar's state.

The organisational change of the Committee – an institution which was formally independent of the state's administration – to the Palestine Commission at the Foreign Affairs Ministry of the Russian Empire in 1864 neither changed in any significant way the situation described above nor improved radically the situation of Russian pilgrims (Lisovoi 1992: 5). The establishment of a new institution in place of the Committee was an administrative reorganisation, and it possibly happened due to two factors. Firstly, there was the administrative need to control the state's bureaucratic machine within an institution managing large funds; secondly, an opportunity occurred to introduce this change. The first years of the Committee's work completed most planned building investments. The main challenge was in maintaining the already existing institutions and managing the pilgrimage infrastructure in the Holy Land. This was the reason for creating the Palestinian Commission. This change can in no way be regarded as a revolutionary one. It did not subdue the already persisting disagreements. The representatives of the Mission and the new Commission were engrossed

⁸ As a result of the Palestine Committee's work the following buildings were erected in Jerusalem: the Cathedral Holy Trinity, the building the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission, a male pilgrims house, a female pilgrims house, a consul's house and a Russian hospital in Jerusalem. See: Vakh 2011: 49.

in arguments regarding competence; no-one paid attention to unfulfilled tasks, which the institutions were supposed to deal with. In the end, the institution was dissolved in 1889. All its properties – land and buildings – were given to the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society (Vorontsov 2006).

The previously discussed three Russian institutions residing in the Holy City were not able to agree on their responsibilities and the responsibilities of St. Petersburg's departments behind them. While taking into account the rather unclear instructions according to which they were functioning and the fact that there was a clash regarding their responsibilities and areas of interest, their activity may not have been destined to failure, but it suggested various problems. From the point of the state's interest, they demonstrated an inadequate effectiveness. The Mission was subjected to both the Holy Synod and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. There was also the consul – a representative of the ministry and an agent of The Russian Steam Navigation and Trading Company as its superior. Apart from this, the Mission, the consulate and quite possibly the Trading Company were all claimed by the self-righteous and independent Palestinian Committee. All these organisations did not communicate, and consequently they did not develop any plan of mutual work. Therefore they could not concentrate on the proper directions of their activity.

The establishment of a new organisation delivered expected results and partly resolved competition arguments. It was established on the 21st May 1882 in St. Petersburg under the decree of Tsar Alexander III (1845–1894). The main initiator and proponent of this establishment was Vasily Khitrovo (1834–1903). He worked for the Ministry of Finances. After his return from his first journey to the Holy Land in 1871, he began petitioning for the consolidation of Russian initiatives in the Middle East.⁹ The fact that a cultural-scientific institution was created, which dealt with the widely understood Palestinian case, was for Russia a prestige issue, especially because similar institutions existed in other European countries, including England and Germany. The institution, whose name was the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, was, from the very beginning, curated by the authorities. The Society had links with the state, and it was meant to act for the state. It was headed from 1917 by a member of the Tsar's family: initially, the Tsar's brother, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich (1857–1905), and, after his death, Grand Duchess Elizabeth Feodorovna (1864–1918).

The Society took over the tasks of the Russian Orthodox Ecclesiastical Mission, the Committee and the Palestinian Commission. According to its statutory aims, the organisation aided the local Orthodox population through

⁹ This idea gathered in the capital a group of people – more or less influential – they cared for improving even more the fate of Russian pilgrims. Those efforts were appreciated. He was appointed for a position of a secretary, which he held until his death. In an opinion of many people 'his entire life is the history of the f the Society'. See: Sokolova 2006.

the organisation of hospitals, schools, and co-participation in building Orthodox churches. In addition, it provided financial support for the missionary activity of the Russian Orthodox Church in the area by organising pilgrimages and building accommodation for Russian pilgrims. Another essential aim was the collection and publication of knowledge about the Middle East through on-going scientific and research work.¹⁰

Apart from members' fees, the budget of the organisation was supported by grants and donations from private citizens and institutions. In 1895, the Society had 3400 members, and each member contributed 25 rubles. In total, it gave 85000 rubles annually (Krymsky 1971: 308). Amongst donors, the Tsar's family was the most generous. Thanks to their help, the Society built the church of Saint Martyr Mary Magdalene near Jerusalem. A considerable amount of the Association's annual balance was a government grant of 130000 rubles in gold. It was dedicated to priority aims (Krylov, Sorokina 2007: 19), such as organising schooling in Palestine. In addition, a public collection was carried out amongst all Orthodox believers in all Russian churches twice a year (on Palm Sunday and Easter Sunday). The collected funds were used to finance day-to-day Society activity, but some investments were also made in Palestine. The visible signs of the organisation's activity were churches, monasteries, hospitals, orphanages, and pilgrims' houses. The biggest funds, however, were fuelled into schools for the Arabs living in Palestine.

In the first year of the Society's operation, four schools were opened (Starokadomsky 1965: 177; Saleh 1992: 138; Nadiradze 1974: 162). It is worth noting here that this was not an initiative of the Russians alone. In the region, there were Missions and American and French schools (Hopwood 1992: 11) (even higher education schools). The educational activity of the Society was developing so well that a quarter century from its establishment, the organisation had 101 institutions in which, according to various sources, 10000 students were educated.¹¹ It was an innovation that girls were given education in those schools. The first Orthodox institution started in Nazareth (Saleh 1992: 138). The education for students was for free; they were given free of charge materials necessary in the process of education. According to some researchers, Russian institutions acquired a particular popularity. The reasons for this may be found in the school and community policies of the Society. The atmosphere and the approach of the donating bodies towards local people enhanced the development of particular institutions as well as the entire Russian network of schools. The Society established schools, which – according to one graduate, the

¹⁰ There were several 19th century Russian scientists linked to the Palestine Society for example: A. Cagareli (1857–1902), A. Dmitrievski (1856–1929), N. Kondakov (1844–1925), P. Kokovtsov (1853–1943), N. Marr (1865–1934), N. Miednikov (1855–1918), A. Olesnitski (1842–1907).

¹¹ M. Starokadomsky gives the number 10 594, see: Starokadomsky 1965: 178, whereas A. Krylov & N. Sorokina – 11 347 students, See: Krylov, Sorokina 2007: 21.

first Palestinian professor Kulṭūm Naṣr ‘Awda – differed from those funded by the English or Americans because they did not try to convert the Muslim Arabs to Christianity. The value of the tradition and culture of the local community were not neglected or belittled. ‘In the schools of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society practice never had a place, even when they tried to teach us, the Arab-Christians, the glorious past of our nation and the history of Islam, or the history of our literature’ (Ode-Vasil’eva 1965: 175). Another graduate, Mīḥā’īl Nu‘ayma (1889–1988), appreciated the fact that the schools paid particular attention to teaching the Arabic language and arithmetic (Naimy 1980: 61). ‘Moscow’ schools, as they were nicknamed, had an educational programme that was distinctively different from other missionary schools. It paid attention to teaching the Arabic language, while the language of the donating bodies was not focused on (this was different in Western schools). Basic Russian language was a subject of the third – and least significant – grade (Saleh 1992: 138; Hopwood 1992: 12). It is not surprising, therefore, that the graduates of primary schools did not possess even a working knowledge of the Russian language. The system of education offered by the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society started between the ages of 3 and 6 years (Nadiradze 1974: 162) – in a preparatory class. It was a form of kindergarten, in which children were under the watchful care of a teacher. Her responsibility was to ‘wash, comb, feed, potty-train and engage every child in some play’ (Starokadomsky 1965: 178). The principal education started a bit later, at the age of 6–8. Russian institutions were characterised by single-classes (one level of education); the period of education lasted three years, or there were double-classes (two levels of education), in which the term lasted five years (3+2 years) (Ode-Vasil’eva 1965: 172). In the countryside or small towns, a single-class model dominated. The extended model was suggested in larger cities. After graduation, the students could apply to teachers’ college.

To supply the demand for qualified teachers, the authorities opened two teachers’ colleges: in 1890 a female college in Beit Jala, and in 1900 a male teachers’ college in Nazareth. At school students wore Arabic clothes instead of European school-wear, in contrast to other missionary institutions (Naimy 1980: 94). Initially, schooling lasted for six years; later, it was extended to eight. From the third year of education, lessons were taught in Russian only (Naimy 1980: 175). As well as basic and pedagogical subjects, future teachers learnt basic knowledge of medicine, and they were trained in hospital outpatient clinics (Kasab 1992: 69) (both seminars happened in the hospitals and pilgrims’ houses run by the Society). The additional classes in medicine were dictated by the reality in which the Society functioned. A graduate was sent to schools all across the Holy Land. Often, teachers were the only people in a local community who had any idea about first aid.

The decision to open teachers’ colleges was dictated by necessity. The growing network of Russian schools needed a constant flow of new teachers.

Basing the whole system on teachers from the mainland was unrealistic; for example, because of the insufficient level of interest among potential candidates. On the other hand, amongst those interested in working in Palestine there were many who were unfit to work there. With that in mind, the rational decision to educate on location made sense.

With time, the activity of Russian educational institutions lost a lot of its initial ‘charm’. The positive features of the schools and the educational programmes undertaken there were hindered by inertia and decreased innovation. This is Ignaty Krachkovsky’s view of the Russian educational system. He was a Russian Arabist. He visited one of the schools for the first time in summer 1909 while visiting Tripoli. From that moment, practically until the end of his time in the Middle East, he kept on visiting Russian educational institutions. As a result of those inspections, he wrote an official note on the request of the Russian consul in Damascus: Duke Boris Schakhovskiy (1870–1926). In his note, Krachkovsky presented the real state of Russian education in the Middle East. It was not an idyllic one, and it not resemble the one later depicted in the memories of Klavdia Ode-Vasil’eva (1956: 127–136; 1965: 171–176) or Vera Krachkovskaya (1954: 106–124; 1974: 10–19).

The note reveals that, according to Krachkovsky, the Russian educational system was undergoing a severe crisis. He blamed both the Russian teachers and the leaders of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society for this situation. He observed a decreased number of people willing to work in the Middle East. Even worse, the intellectual level of teachers was decreasing. Krachkovsky believed that the reason for this state of affairs was financial: salaries had remained practically unchanged for 25 years, that is, from the beginning of the organisation’s activity. It was not surprising that at the time when the note was written salaries offered to teachers were relatively small, and they did not represent any remuneration for the troubles of the journey, stay and accomplishing the educational mission in the Middle East (Dolinina 1994: 92).

Another factor influencing the situation of the Russian educational system was affected by adverse assumptions, which lay at the basis of the network of schools, and which had never been reviewed. The first of them was an obligatory Russian language education. Indeed, it was not treated as a priority, and the very idea was nothing exceptional. The French and American donating bodies also followed that idea (in terms of their respective languages). Still, learning Russian was not as attractive as learning Western languages. People living in Syria, Palestine or Lebanon did not need the language of Pushkin that much. To advance one’s career in administration, French, or English were needed. Arab parents preferred to send their children to paid schools run by Jesuits or Protestants. Krachkovsky proposed abandoning the obligatory Russian lessons in primary schools. Instead, he advocated introducing a greater number of hours for the mother tongue and one Western language (the choice would be

dependent upon the international situation). He concluded his brave proposal with an assertion that schools with obligatory Russian language lessons, but without students, would harm the image of Russia much more than schools without Russian language education, but filled with students. He noted that at that educational level, achievements in teaching Russian were rather hopeless. The Russian language was supposed to be obligatory only for those who were willing to continue their education in teachers' colleges of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, where classes were taught exclusively in Russian from the 3rd year (Dolinina 1994: 93).

The second problem, which grew from the educational system's assumptions, was the issue of fees. It was assumed from the very beginning that education would be free. And although initially Russian schools gained a lot of students, who previously studied in French or American institutions, in time the schools lost their attractiveness. They became a victim of a harmful opinion according to which the lack of fees signified a poorer level of education. The Russian Arabist suggested introducing fees, as in other missionary schools. In his opinion, everything that was free was valued less than what people had to pay for. Paid education could bring a lot of value, and not only of a financial kind. There was also the possibility that the Society's schools could stop being perceived as inferior, second-class institutions. Parents who were paying for their children's education would motivate them more to attend the classes. Perhaps it was a way of dealing with the problem of irregular attendance and constant changes in class numbers. Krachkovsky's proposal assumed a situation where children from low-income families would be relieved from paying the fees. Completely free education was supposed to be left at teachers' colleges on the condition that, upon completion of the programme, the graduates would work in the Society's institutions in the Middle East.¹²

Despite the critical opinions described aboveground, the schools of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society contributed significantly to the educational and cultural advancement of local society. For example, their activity contributed to the development of Arab literature of the 20th century, since writers including

¹² The conclusions of the young Arabist were not any great revelations. 12 years earlier, the same issues were raised by a different Arabist – Agafangel Krymski (1871–1942). During his conversation with the father-establisher of the Association, V. Khitrovo, the scientist delicately suggested that children in schools should learn French, not Russian, because the first language could be useful and the second much less so. In answer, he heard that learning French in the Association's schools would enable the Orthodox Arabs to access Catholic literature, which as a result could make them convert. The knowledge of Russian did not carry that danger, and it allowed students to gain general education thanks to rich Russian literature. See: Krymskiy 1971: 310–311. We see from later remarks of Krachkovsky that the situation did not change at all in the following several years. Russians fearing the loss of their influences and the effects of the proselytising activities of other missions, were stuck in wrong assumptions and stubbornly rejected the thought of the need for change.

Mīḥā'īl Nu'ayma, Bandalī al-Ġawzī (1971–1942), 'Abd al-Masīḥ Ḥaddād (1890–1963), Salīm Quba'yn (1870–1940s), Iskandar al-Ḥūrī al-Baytġālī (1890–1973) and Nasīb 'Arīda (1887–1946) all graduated from the Society's schools. In the process of education, they learnt not only about Russian culture and science but they had the opportunity to meet Russian Orientalist scholars, since despite their weaknesses, Russian schools – especially the Nazareth seminary – drew extraordinary individuals, albeit not in great numbers. The lecturers there included graduates from Lazariievsky Institute. They familiarised their students with literature and Arab history. According to the recollections of Lebanese writer Mīḥā'īl Nu'ayma, those subjects were presented in a different way from how they were taught in the Arab countries: they did not use a scholastic method of teaching, which was liked by the students in Nazareth. 'It is possible that the Russian teachers' college was the first institution in the Arab world which paid attention to providing lectures in the history of Arab literature, pedagogy and methodology' (Ode-Vasil'eva 1965: 172–173).

Just before the outbreak of WWI, Russia had over 70 properties in Palestine and the Holy Land. Their total value exceeded 2 million rubles. The term 'Russian Palestine' describes the dozens of Orthodox churches, monasteries and other community facilities built from Russian money. They were meant for Russian pilgrims and local Arab people practising Orthodox Christianity. Eight monastery guest houses in Jerusalem, Haifa and Nazareth could take 10 000 pilgrims a year. Over 6000 pilgrims used to come to the Holy Land during Easter time. All these people received free medical care and medicine in Russian hospitals and hospital outpatient clinics. The help was received by the pilgrims, but a large proportion of patients were local people. Those Russian institutions provided 60 thousand consultations a year (Yuzbashian 2000: 114).

Historical events – the break out of WWI, the 1917 Revolution in Russia and later WWII – put an end to the Russian institution in Palestine. The organisation itself evolved in the process of adapting to the changing reality. This may be observed in subsequent corrections of the institution's name. After the February revolution the Society stopped using 'imperial', and in 1918 the 'orthodox' was removed. In Soviet times, the Society adopted a different name: The Soviet Palestinian Society at the Academy of Science of the USSR. It functioned like any other academic organisation. The Society was deprived of the possibility of realising its basic aims – the organisation of pilgrimages to the Holy Land and direct activity in the region. The focus was shifted to scientific activity, which for was its basic form of activity for the following 65 years.

The presence of Tsarist Russia in the Holy Land and in the region of the Middle East, the initiatives undertaken, their efficiency and achievements, seem to match perfectly the general image of 'imperial' politics of the authorities in St. Petersburg. The conviction to carry out those initiatives was dictated by an awareness of its power or a vision of superpower. Even if that vision was not

entirely accurate, particular moves and initiatives allowed for the creation and sustaining of the world superpower myth. Especially since other players in the 19th century's political sphere set the stakes quite high in this respect. In the colonial race or areas of influence, Russia wanted to keep the imperial glamour (for the competition, or for its own sake while maintaining a feeling of power and distinction); therefore, it could not ignore that fragment of the globe. Indeed, the efficiency of Russian presence remains an open issue. Perhaps if the interest of the Tsar's empire in the region of Middle East had shown less ambition; if the policies had been more pragmatic; if Russia had been a real economic and military power – then after the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, along with British and French mandates, there could have been a Russian one too. The situation developed differently, however, and the events in Russia revealed the fragility of the imperial construction. In this situation, it was possible that the initiatives undertaken by the authorities in Palestine in the 19th century represented the height of the empire's abilities. Irrespective of ambitious delusions, they revealed the weakness of the country in claiming pretensions to superpower status.

On the other hand, while completely ignoring the above considerations, it is impossible to refrain from judging individual actions. Did Russia use all its assets while accomplishing the above-described initiatives? Where mistakes were made, and which ones could have been avoided? Russian presence in the Holy Land is characterised by a particular indecisiveness and caution. The initial reluctance to openly support its initiatives (to mention here the informality of Porphyrius' mission); focusing most of all on helping its subjects and travelling Russian pilgrims – without evangelical intentions or colonial distance towards the local population – stemmed undoubtedly from the weaker position of Tsar's empire in comparison to other world geopolitical players. But what was a manifestation of Russia's weakness in a confrontation with Western superpowers was simultaneously an important asset to build its position amongst the Arabs. Russians had a chance to escape the colonisers' label, which in the face of a potential gain of freedom would be a crucial asset for St. Petersburg. The failure can be attributed, with all certainty, to the miscalculation of financial needs, the isolation in a 'Russian bubble', the crisis of competence, and bureaucratic inertia. In spite of the ambitions and the prestigious character of the Palestinian initiatives, the funds seemed insufficient. It was almost as if the authorities, despite their declared superpower expectations, did not have faith in the success of the activities in the Middle East. Even if they rejected far-fetched plans of building an imperial position, the funds were too small to run day-to-day presence policies (remembering that to ensure effectiveness, keeping the wealth, it is difficult to expect savings). Besides the funds were used to finance some aims of what may be called an internal policies nature – for example providing help and infrastructure for Russian pilgrims, or carrying out activities in the Holy Land, but dedicated to local people. Additionally, the growing scope of activity of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, despite a greater

budget, dispersed the funds in its hands, which led to a reduction of investments in particular aims – it is sufficient to recall here the example of teachers' salary, which remained unchanged for years. There also seems to have been a mistake in the lack of flexibility in the initiatives for the Arabs. A peculiar attachment to imponderables and Russian-ism was understandable within an activity meant for own subjects, or local Greek hierarchy (ambition and prestige). But it made little sense in the case of local people. To the Arabs, Russians were as alien as the Europeans, and it did not matter if a Christian had more reasons to participate in Russian initiatives, or Muslims took advantage of open opportunities. This is where the persistence in teaching Russian did not make sense, it was seen as something indispensable at primary level. It was a mistake to teach a language, which was completely impractical in the region. Finally, there is the organisational side of the Russian presence in the region. Competence-based arguments between particular institutions and decision centres (up to the establishment of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society) enhanced with personal animosities and rivalry did not positively influence the effectiveness of the undertaken policies. But even the removal of those problems and establishing one organisation to represent Russian interests in the Holy Land did not eliminate all of the problems. Russian bureaucracy was neither efficient nor effective. These issues were very much part of the Society too. The best example may be found in how incidental the selection of candidates for work in the Middle East was.

In the face of chances and undeniable assets, Imperial Russia managed to mark its place in the Middle East – also in the awareness of local communities. Most importantly, the Russian presence was favourably received. This impression was not reduced by the imperfections and mistakes of Russian politics. Certainly, Russians left behind an infrastructure (sacral and secular) and inhabitants for whom the contact with the Russian language and culture represented nothing extraordinary. For some, however, Russian presence offered a window into a wider world. That chapter was closed in 1917, and it is impossible to judge how the fate of the Russian Palestinian presence would have unfolded if not for the events in Russia.

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