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# THE RUSSIAN EMPIRE 1847-1917

*A LOOK BACK AT THE ORIGINS  
OF RUSSIA'S NEAR EASTERN POLICY*

Russia's conflict in Ukraine and recent diplomatic and military involvement in the Middle East have brought the country back to the forefront of the news. In order to understand Russian policies on Ukraine or the Arab world, we must place them in a long perspective. A look back at their origins will allow us to take a fresh look at the issues referred to as the "great imperial questions" during the tsarist period – the "Eastern question," the "Ukrainian question," the "Jewish question," the "Muslim question" – and get a better grasp on Russia's current interests outside its borders.

If we look back on the Arab dimension of the Russian "Eastern question," which emerged in the 1840s, we can comprehend Russia's global strategy in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. We can also understand how Russia sought to exert influence over local – Christian, Jewish, and Muslim – populations in territories in which all religions coexisted and the leading European powers vied for

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dominance. Last, we can understand how this policy interacted with Russian imperial construction in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.

## RUSSIA IN PALESTINE: BETWEEN RELIGIOUS IMAGINATION, POWER POLITICS, AND THE POLITICS OF THE POWERS

Russia's presence in Palestine started in 1847 with the creation of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem. It had something to do with the leading powers' European and Near Eastern policies as well as to the internal evolutions of the Russian Empire. The creation of the first Russian institution in Jerusalem was part of a larger process: the large-scale installation of the leading European powers – Prussia, Great Britain, France and Austria – in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. What Henry Laurens has called the “invention of the Holy Land” (1) took place after the 1839 Syrian-Egyptian War and the first plan for the internationalization of Jerusalem under the aegis of the main European powers. This process also appears as a reaction to the emerging secular ideologies – liberalism, socialism and nationalism – that challenged the religious values of western societies. Starting in the 1840s, the Holy Land shifted from a “celestial place” transcending the world and history into an “earthly place.” It was also at that time that Palestine, situated in the Arab periphery of the Ottoman Empire and host to three religions, became a battleground for the leading European powers' conflicting religious and political interests.

However, Russia's installation in Palestine also responded to logics specific to the political and religious developments of the Empire itself: at the time, Russia was less secularized than western countries, be they Catholic or Protestant. In the nineteenth century and particularly after the Crimean War (1853-1856), the idea of “Holy Russia,” conceptualized in medieval texts and presenting Russia as the Second Jerusalem or the Third Rome, was revived and given new expression.

The view that Muscovite Russia was the center of the Orthodox tradition inherited from the Byzantine Empire and that the Russian people was “God's new chosen people” emerged at the time when Martin Luther formulated his 95 theses and the countries of today's Western Europe entered the modern age. It was precisely in the sixteenth century that Russian political and ecclesiastical authorities undertook the task of making the Holy Land visible in “Holy Russia” by building the Cathedral of the Resurrection in the Kremlin, on the model of the Holy Sepulchre, or the New

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(1) Henry Laurens, *La Question de Palestine*, vol. 1, 1799-1922. *L'invention de la Terre Sainte* (Paris: Fayard, 1999).

Jerusalem Monastery near Moscow. These large-scale constructions were intended to emphasize the central place of Muscovite Russia in the Orthodox world after the fall of the Byzantine Empire in 1453. Russian religious imagination remained focused on Jerusalem and the holy places until the end of the tsarist period. Attachment to the Holy Land did not prevail solely among the clergy and the people. The imperial family and the tsar also felt it – this was particularly true of Nicholas I (reigned 1825-1855) (2) and Alexander III (reigned 1881-1894). Recent historical research has shown that Nicholas I's religious fervor – he felt strong personal attachment to Jerusalem and the Holy Sepulchre – played a decisive role in the outbreak of the Crimean War (3). Under the reign of Alexander III, when the idea of "Holy Russia" became a key element of imperial ideology and politics, the themes of the Golgotha and the resurrection of Christ and the image of the holy city of Jerusalem lay behind what Richard Wortman has called the "scenarios of power." (4). These political and religious representations of Jerusalem and the Holy Land could not but affect the Russian Empire's actions in Palestine vis-à-vis the other European powers.

#### SIMILAR INSTITUTIONS, DIFFERENT POLICIES

Throughout the nineteenth century, tsarist Russia was busy creating institutions in the Middle East similar to those of England, France and Prussia/the German Empire. The 1830s-1840s were an era of missions and religious institutions (for Russia, it was the above-mentioned Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem). The 1850s saw the creation of secular Palestine committees (the Palestine Committee was created in St Petersburg in 1859). Last, learned societies flourished in the years 1865-1880 (the Orthodox Palestine Society, founded in 1882, became the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in 1889). However, while Russian institutions were a priori similar to their European counterparts and their representatives took much of their inspiration from the experiences of foreign countries, features specific

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(2) On the people's and clergy's attachment to Jerusalem, see Elena Astafieva, "Imaginäre und wirkliche Präsenz Russlands in Nahen Osten in der zweiten Hälfte des 19. Jahrhunderts," *Europäer in der Levante. Zwischen Politik, Wissenschaft und Religion (19.-20. Jahrhundert)*, ed. Dominique Trimbur (Munich: Oldenbourg, 2004), 161-186.

(3) David Goldfrank, "The Holy Sepulcher and the Origin of the Crimean War," *The Military and Society in Russia, 1450-1917*, eds. Eric Lohr and Marshall Poe (Leiden: Brill, 2002), 502-505.

(4) Richard S. Wortman, *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. 1, *From Peter the Great to the Death of Nicholas I* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995); *Scenarios of Power. Myth and Ceremony in Russian Monarchy*, vol. 2, *From Alexander II to the Abdication of Nicholas II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

to the Russian Empire's development – such as the central place of religion in the country's self-perception, the relations between the state and religions, between the Orthodox Church and science, and above all, the country's economic and technological backwardness – greatly affected the action of Russian institutions in Palestine. This action differed from those of France, Great Britain and the German Empire in three respects: a proactive policy of purchasing land in Palestine, attempts at reconfiguring Near Eastern Orthodoxy and above all, organization of mass pilgrimages in the Holy Land.

Gaining the right to access the Holy Sepulchre and owning more real estate than other leading European powers was a major issue for Russia, particularly after the Crimean War. Starting at the end of the 1850s, under Grand Duke Constantine's patronage, the Palestine Committee launched a policy of large-scale land purchase in and around the holy city. The Orthodox Palestine Society further reinforced this policy, leading, among other things, to the building of the Russian Compound "Moscobia" near the Old City in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This "miniature Russia" was composed of several buildings and the Church of the Holy Trinity, which long remained a landmark in Jerusalem. Russian constructions inside and outside the Old City had a significant impact on further urban development in Jerusalem.

Some of the land acquired by Russia, particularly in the Old City, was a stake in the scientific competition between the different European learned societies working on Palestinian antiquities. In 1883-1884, the Russian diplomatic mission and agents of the Orthodox Palestine Society organized archaeological excavations on the "Russian estate" adjoining the Holy Sepulchre. These were undertaken under the leadership of "priest-archaeologist" Antonin Kapustin with funding from the imperial family. We have shown in a previous study of this enterprise that Russia intended symbolically to appropriate the most sacred shrines of Christendom, the Way of the Cross and the Holy Sepulchre. The finishing touch was to be the erection of a Russian Orthodox cathedral next to the Tomb of Jesus Christ, supported by donations coming from throughout "Holy Russia." This project was embedded in Imperial Russia's strategy to occupy the religious and political space in Jerusalem, the Holy Land and the Near Eastern region – an area coveted by the leading powers and religions (5). Basically, while medieval Russia sought to transfer the Holy Land to "Holy Russia," nineteenth-century Russia exported "Holy Russia" to the Holy Land. The project also responded to Russia's will to weigh in the balance of power in the Near Eastern Orthodox world. In 1890, the Orthodox Palestine Society supported the Arab Orthodox clergy against the Greek ecclesiastical hierarchy,

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(5) Elena. Astafieva, "La Société Impériale Orthodoxe de Palestine: Entre savoir, pouvoir, concurrence, 1882-1917," *Voisinages fragiles: Relations interconfessionnelles dans le Sud-Est européen et la Méditerranée orientale 1854-1923*, ed. Anastassios Anastassiadis, *Mondes méditerranéens et balkaniques Series*, vol. 5 (Paris: Editions De Boccard, 2013), 121-134.

which headed four eastern patriarchates. This attitude triggered a quarrel between the three (Greek, Arab, and Russian) Orthodox churches while earning Russia the sympathy of the local Christian and Muslim populations. It played a major role in the "Orthodox revival," which, in turn, boosted the development of Arab nationalism in the region.

In order to consolidate the Russian Empire's position in the Middle East, the agents in charge of "Palestinian affairs" mobilized not only the Arab population but also the Russian Orthodox pilgrims, who were presented as a religious and political force in the region (6). Indeed, at the end of the nineteenth century, Imperial Russia sent up to 7,000 pilgrims to the Holy Land every year, greatly outnumbering the 800-1,000 Catholic pilgrims coming yearly from France, Austria and Italy (7). Orthodox pilgrims wishing to go to the Holy Land also served as an instrument in Russia's domestic policy. Our analysis of reading reunions on the Holy Land organized in Russia by the Orthodox Palestine Society has shown that the society's leaders sought to arouse strong emotions generating a sense of belonging to a religious, political national or imperial community.

In addition, Russian actors were committed to taking advantage of the religious diversity of the Empire, in which the four major universalizing religions, Christianity, Islam, Judaism and Buddhism, coexisted. In order to understand how imperial Russia mobilized its non-Christian subjects, particularly Muslims and Jews, one must study the extent to which the "Eastern question" related to the "Jewish question" and the "Muslim question," two other key issues of the Russian Empire's domestic and foreign policies.

We have placed the evolution of Russia's Near Eastern policy in a long perspective and discerned lines of force, constants and continuity in the Russian perception of the area and its populations beyond immediate geopolitical interests. Analysis of the impact of Russian actions conducted in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire has also given us a better comprehension of how these actions fashioned the political evolution of the Middle East.

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(6) Elena Astafieva, "Das Selbstbild und das Bild des Anderen in den Veröffentlichungen der Kaiserlichen Orthodoxen Palästina-Gesellschaft (1882-1917)," *Europa und Palästina 1799-1948: Religion - Politik - Gesellschaft / Europe and Palestine 1799-1948: Religion - Politics - Society*, eds. Barbara Haider-Wilson and Dominique Trimbur, *Archiv für Österreichische Geschichte*, vol. 142 (Vienna: Verlag der Österreichischen Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2010), 157-180.

(7) Elena Astafieva, "La Russie en Terre Sainte: Le cas de la Société Impériale Orthodoxe de Palestine (1882-1917)," *Cristianesimo nella storia* 1 (2003): 41-68. On the number of West European pilgrims in the Holy Land in the nineteenth century, see Bertrand Lamure, "Les Pèlerinages catholiques français en Terre sainte au XIXe siècle. Du pèlerin romantique au retour des croisés." Doctoral dissertation, Lyon II University, 2006.

This in turn has made for a deeper understanding of the politics of France, Great Britain, Germany or even the United States, which today as yesterday, jostle for influence with Russia in the Middle East as well as in other regions of the world.