



The Palestine Society: Cultural Diplomacy and Scholarship in Late Tsarist Russia and the Soviet State

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The Holy Land has been a crossroads of interests from Christian countries since the Crusades. In the nineteenth century, it became a centre of concurrence between the European great powers and an important object of the so-called Eastern Question. Till the 1910s Russia was one of the most powerful agents in the Holy Land, thanks to its Orthodox faith, shared with the local population, well organised mass pilgrimage, and network of institutions supported by regular donations. The history of the Russian presence in Palestine goes back to the Middle Ages, when pilgrims started visiting the Holy Land.¹ After the fall of the Byzantine Empire the Russian princes and tsars regarded themselves as supporters of Orthodoxy in the East and donated big sums of money to the Eastern churches and monasteries.² The donations

¹Theofanis Stavrou and Peter Weisensel, *Russian Travellers to the Orthodox East from the Twelfth to the Twentieth Century* (Bloomington, IN: Slavica Publishers, 1986).

²On the tradition of donations in the seventeenth century see: N. F. Kapterev, *Kharakter ottnoshenii Rossii k pravoslavnomu Vostoku v XVI I XVII stoletiiakh* (Sergiev Posad: M. S. Elov editions, 1914); V. G. Chentsova, *Ikona Iverskoi Bogomateri (Ocherki istorii grecheskoi tserkvi s Rossii v seredine XVII v. po documentam Rossiiskogo Gosudarstvennogo arkhiva Drevnikh Aktov)*

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were regulated in the eighteenth century, but the Russian government still did not have any permanent representative in Palestine to control their distribution; this function was partly carried out by the consul in Beirut. Till the 1830s the Russian government did not see any difference between the Orthodox Greeks and other nations of the Orient, classifying all of them as “Eastern Orthodox”.

PORPHYRII USPENSKII AND THE FIRST RUSSIAN MISSION IN JERUSALEM

The first attempt to gather systematic information about the Orthodox Church in the Middle East was made only in the early 1840s, when the learned archimandrite Porphyrii Uspenskii was delegated there. According to the instructions, received from the Ministry of Foreign affairs, the task of Porphyrii’s mission was more political than ecclesiastical: he had to exercise control over the spending of Russian donations to the Holy Sepulchre, and to influence if possible, the activities of the Patriarch. One of the central targets was supporting Orthodoxy in Palestine and counteraction to Catholic and Protestant proselytism.³

Summarising the results of his first journey to the East Porphyrii addressed the Ministry of Foreign Affairs a note (January 7, 1844) where he stressed

(Moscow: Indrik, 2010); N. P. Chesnokova, *Khristianskii vostok I Rossiia. Politicheskoe I kul’turnoe vzaimodeistvie v seredine XVII veka* (Moscow: Indrik, 2011).

³A general review of Russian activities in the Palestine region: Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843–1914: Church and Politics in the Near East* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1969).

Most of Porphyrii’s papers are published: P. V. Bezobrazov, ed., *Materialy dlia biographii episkopa Porphyrija Uspenskogo*. Vol. I. Official Papers; vol. II. Correspondence (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences Editions, 1910); N. N. Lisovoi, ed., *Rossija v Sviatoj Zemle. Dokumenty I materialy*, vol. I, II (Moscow: Mezhdunarodnye otnosheniia, 2000); N. N. Lisovoi, ed., *Rossija v Sviatoj Zemle. Dokumenty I materialy*, vol. II (Moscow: Indrik, 2017). About Porfirii’s activities in the Holy Land see: A. A. Dmitrievskii, *Episkop Porphyrii Uspenskii, kak initsiator I organizator pervoi russkoi dukhovnoi missii v Ierusalime* (St. Petersburg: Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, 1906); Idem, *Russkaia Dukhovnaia missiia v Ierusalime* (Moscow, St. Petersburg: Oleg Abyshko, 2009); Archimandrit. Innokentii (Prosvirnin), “Pamiati Episkopa Porphyrija Uspenskogo, pozbertvovannykh im v Imperatorskuiu Akademiiu nauk po zaveshchaniuu (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences edition, 1891). See: Lora Gerd and Yann Potin, “Foreign Affairs through Private Papers: Bishop Porfirii Uspenskii and His Jerusalem Archives,” in *Open Jerusalem. Vol. 1. Ordinary Jerusalem. 1840–1940. Opening New Archives, Revisiting a Global City*, eds. Angelos Dalachanis and Vincent Lemire (Leiden-Boston: Brill, 2018): 100–117.

that a Russian mission in Jerusalem should be established, aiming at: (1) real intercommunion between the churches of Jerusalem and Antioch with the Russian Church; (2) inspection over the using of the money donated from Russia; (3) inspection over the Russian pilgrims; (4) supplying all churches of Syria and Palestine with icons, and organisation of a school of icon painting at the mission. Finally, in 1847 he was sent to Jerusalem as head of the first Russian ecclesiastical mission. Porphyrii's participation in the reorganisation of the Holy Cross school and the starting of an Arab typography can be regarded as main results of cultural diplomacy in this period.⁴

The ideas and projects elaborated by Porphyrii during his stay in the Orient were taken as a basis for the future Russian activities in Jerusalem and Palestine. In fact, Porphyrii's main idea was the creation of an "Orthodox House" of all East Christian nations, a kind of commonwealth, where Russia would take the first place as the only Orthodox great power, able to support politically and materially the Ottoman Christians.

Russian Institutions in Jerusalem After the Crimean War

After 1856, the religious policy and shared Orthodox faith with the Christians of the Near East were regarded by the Russian government as a priority lever of influence in the region, and a measure against growing Catholic and Protestant proselytism. The diplomatic and material support of the Arab majority of Christians in Syria and Palestine as opposed to Greek domination, and organising schools for the Arab Orthodox Christians were an essential element of the "Russian presence", the so-called "soft power" in Syria and Palestine until WWI.

In the frames of this general trend, several new Russian organisations were founded: the Russian Shipping and Trade Society (1856); the Palestine Committee (1859); the Russian consulate in Jerusalem (1858); the Palestine Commission (1864–1889).⁵ Before 1882, these organisations, along with the ecclesiastical mission and the Russian consulate in Jerusalem, represented Russian interests in Palestine. Their combined activities were focused more on strengthening the positions of Russia in the region and promoting Russian pilgrimage than at cooperation with the Arab population and clergy (Fig. 1).

⁴Porphyrii Uspenskii, *Kniga bytiia moego. Dnevnik i avtobiograficheskie zapiski episkopa Porfiriia Uspenskogo*, Vol. I (St. Petersburg: Imperial Academy of Sciences editions, 1894), 359–360.

⁵N. N. Lisovoi, *Russkoe dukhovnoe i politicheskoe prisutstvie v Sviatoj Zemle i na Blizhnem Vostoke v XIX-nachale XX veka* (Moscow: Indrik, 2006), 109–126; O. V. Anisimov, *Rossia i Napoleon III: bor'ba za Sviatye mesta Palestiny*. (Moscow: Indrik, 2014); Ja. E. Zelenina and J. G. Belik, *Pervye russkie khramy v Ierusalime. Troitskii sobor i cerkov' muchenicy Alexandry. Istoriia sozdanii. Khudozhestvennoe ubranstvo* (Moscow: Indrik, 2011); Elena Astafieva, "Fonder et acheter, étudier et s'appropriier, construire et reconfigurer. Les trois temps de la transformation du «domaine copte» en église Saint Alexandre Nevsky à Jérusalem (1856–1896)," *European Journal of Turkish Studies* 22 (2016): 1–21.



Fig. 1 The Russian hospital in Jerusalem. Beginning of the twentieth century (<https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/vozvrashchennoe-nasledie-v-v-simakov-201657>)

The Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (1882–1914)

A new period of Russian-Arab contacts started with the foundation of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in 1882.⁶ A non-state organisation, it nevertheless enjoyed the direct patronage of the Tsar's family, and the membership of many high officials, starting with the Tsar himself. At first, the Palestine Society was supported by private donations, and only after 1912 did it receive financial support from the state budget. According to its regulations, the Society was founded for scientific and philanthropic purposes, principally: (1) research work concerning Palestine and the Near East, mainly in history and archaeology, edition of sources, and popularising this information in Russia; (2) supporting, organising and promoting pilgrimage in the Holy Land; (3) supporting Orthodoxy in the East, i.e. organisation of schools and hospitals for the local population and providing material assistance to the local churches, monasteries and clergy.⁷

This third objective was an implementation of Porphyrii's projects concerning the support of the Orthodox Arabs of Palestine (Fig. 2).

⁶Lisovoi, *Russkoe dukhovnoe*, 160–224; L. A. Gerd, "Zadachi Palestinskogo Obshestva (Neizdannaja rech V. N. Khitrovo na pervykh chtenijah Poltavskogo eparkhial'nogo otdela IPPO)," in *Pravoslavnyj Palestinskij Sbornik* 106 (Moscow: Indrik, 2008), 288–297; Elena Astafieva, "La Russie en Terre Sainte: le cas de la Société Impériale Orthodoxe de Palestine (1882–1917)," *Christianesimo nella storia* 1 (2003).

⁷A. A. Dmitrievskii, *Imperatorskoe Pravoslavnoe Palestinskoe Obshestvo I ego dejatel'nost' za istekshuju chervet' veka, 1882–1907* (St. Petersburg: Kirshbaum typography, 1907).



Fig. 2 The Russian school in Beit Jala, 1892 (<https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/shkolnaya-deyatelnost-ippo-v-palestine-nn-lisovoy-200369>)

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Palestine Society was maintaining about 100 schools in Palestine, Lebanon and Syria (rising from 84 in 1902 to 101 in 1917), where more than 11,100 children (both girls and boys) studied. They were divided into three categories: (1) seminaries for teachers (in Nazareth and Beit Jala); (2) primary schools where the Russian language was taught; (3) schools in villages with one Arab teacher. The programs of the schools more or less followed that of the Russian primary schools; the teachers were both Russians and locals. The education was in Arabic, and the best Russian manuals were translated into Arabic (Fig. 3).

Arab literature and history were also among the subjects. The Russian educational institutions did not aim at creating Arab nationalism, but at raising cultural self-consciousness.⁸ For this reason, the effect of the Russian educational system was reciprocal: the best pupils later became teachers in Russian and Arab schools, translators from Russian and writers, deeply influencing their genuine culture. One of them was Khalil Baydas, who translated Pushkin's works into Arabic.⁹ The Arab students of the Russian seminaries and later teachers Klaudia Ode-Kulsum (Vasilieva), Panteleimon Zhuze and Taufik Kezma moved to Russia before the First World War. Later they worked as

⁸A. G. Grushevoi, *Iz istorii russkikh shkol na Blizhnem Vostoke* (St. Petersburg: Kontrast, 2016).

⁹Spencer Scoville, *The Agency of the Translator: Khalil Baidas' Literary Translations* (inedited dissertation, University of Michigan, 2012). See also: Id., "Reconsidering Nahdawi Translation: Bringing Pushkin to Palestine," *The Translator* 21 (2015): 2.



Fig. 3 The pupils of a Russian school of the IPPO (<https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/aggrushevoy-o-proektah-preobrazovaniya-shkol-pales-402141>)

professors of Arabic language and literature in the universities of Kiev, Baku, Moscow and Leningrad. One of the favourite sentences of Klaudia Ode-Kulsum (Vasilieva) was the following: “The Arabs need Russia, and Russia needs the Arabs”. One hospital in Jerusalem and six outpatient clinics for the local Palestinian population were also organised and maintained by the Society.

The organisation and promotion of pilgrimage was, however, the primary task of the society. Annually more than 6000 Russian pilgrims, mainly peasants, could visit the Holy Land thanks to the subventions from the Palestine Society (Fig. 4).

The research work of the Society, meanwhile, put it on a par with the strongest European schools of Palestine studies (such as the British Palestine Exploration Fund, or the Deutsche Palästinaverein). The excavations in Jerusalem near the Holy Sepulchre in 1882–1883 resulted in the discovery of the Judgement Gate and the foundations of the basilica of Constantine the Great. Supported by the society, Professor A. A. Tsagareli carried out research in Palestine and Sinai and published his book “Monuments of Georgian Antiquity in the Holy Land and Sinai”.¹⁰ In 1886, the Society organised excavations

¹⁰A. A. Tsagareli, *Pamiatniki gruzinskoi stariny v Sviatoi Zemle I na Sinai* (=Pravoslavnyi Palestinskii sbornik, vyp. 10) (St. Petersburg: Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society Editions, 1888).



Fig. 4 Russian pilgrims in Jerusalem (<https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/byt-i-nuzhdy-russkih-pravoslavnyh-poklonnikov-na-s-201684>)

at Jericho and in 1891 an expedition to Syria, Palestine and Transjordan was equipped, exploring old Christian monuments; this work resulted in an exhibition and a fundamental edition with many photos. In 1898, another expedition to Palestine and Syria took place, this time in cooperation with the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople. In 1901, the society financed research in Sinai and Jerusalem by Nicolai Marr, later its active member. The editorial work of the society embraced a series of academic editions of sources (lives of saints, descriptions of pilgrimages, documents, catalogues of manuscripts). The prominent Greek scholar Athanasios Papadopoulos-Kerameus arrived in Petersburg in 1890 on the invitation of the society and worked for it for 22 years. A book on the Old Testament Temple was published by Professor A. Olesnitskii; research on Palestine under the Arabs—by N. A. Mednikov. Since 1886, the society edited a Journal, called “Soobshcheniia Imperatorskogo Pravoslavnogo Palestinskogo Obshchestva”, with both scholarly articles and reports on the practical work of the Society in Palestine.¹¹

¹¹A. Olesnitskii, *Vetkhovzavetnyi khram v Ierusalime*. (St. Petersburg: Imperial Palestine Society editions, 1889); N. A. Mednikov, *Palestina ot zavoevaniia ee arabami do Krestovyykh pkhodov po arabskim istochnikam* (St. Petersburg, Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society editions, 1897) (=Pravoslavnyi Palestinskii Sbornik, vol. 17, 2). On the scientific work of the Palestine Society see: Lisovoi, *Russkoe dukhovnoe i politicheskoe prisutstvie*, 206–224; A. G. Grushevoi, “Imperatorskoe Palestinskoe Obshchestvo (po peterburgskim arkhivam),” in *Arkhivy Russkikh vizantinistov v Sankt-Peterburge*, ed. I. P. Medvedev (St. Petersburg: Dmitrii Bulanin, 1995), 134–156.

It would be a simplification to claim that the Russians in all cases supported the Arabs against the Greek clergy of the Holy Sepulchre and other Patriarchates of the East. In fact most documents demonstrate a flexible Pan-Orthodox imperial concept of Russian policy in the Near East during the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. The policy was in general aimed at reaching a balance, pacifying the Orthodox Church of the Orient and preserving the *status quo*, which coincided with Russian interests in the Near East. Moreover, many diplomats and ecclesiastics doubted the practicability of promoting Russian pilgrimage and investing huge sums of money in institutions outside of Russia; some of them even found it harmful for the spiritual state of the Russian people. There were diplomats and statesmen who proposed to invest money in churches and monasteries inside Russia instead of sending it abroad and purchasing estates which could be lost one day.

THE PALESTINE SOCIETY AND RUSSIAN MISSION DURING WWI AND IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

World War I

Turkey started hostilities against Russia in October of 1914. Already at the beginning of 1915, the success of the Allies and the first months of the Gallipoli operation brought an incredible rise of patriotism and dreams about an imminent and successful end to the war. A great number of articles in journals and separate editions, full of nationalistic hysteria and fantastic messianic dreams of unification of the Christian East under Russian dominance, were written.

Two questions were mainly under discussion: (1) the future political status of Palestine and in this regard the administration of the Patriarchate and the Holy Places; (2) the administration of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem itself and the Greek-Arab controversy. The third item, closely connected with the first one, was the future of the Russian real estates in Palestine. Discussions took place in the press, one of them in the popular newspaper "Birzhevy Vedomosti". In the beginning of 1915, it published an interview under the general title "The Liberation of the Holy Sepulchre". Among the interviewees were the rectors of the Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant theological academies, professors and diplomats. Most of them leaned towards the neutralisation of the Holy Land under the condominium of the Allies; others claimed the desire that the Holy Sepulchre should be administrated by Russians. Some also expressed doubts concerning the possibility of peaceful coexistence of different confessions in Palestine. The discussions were picked up by the public speech of Senator Eugenii Kovalevskii to the Slavonic Benevolent Society on 9 February, 1915. The main idea of his speech was the necessity of granting equal rights to all Orthodox peoples—Arabs, Greeks and Russians—in worship at and administration of the Holy Places.

In March 1915, a secret treaty between Britain and France on one side, and Russia on the other was signed, intended to activate the Russian navy in the Black Sea towards the Bosphorus. Russia was promised that she would receive Constantinople and the adjacent territory. During the spring months of 1915, along with nationalistic claims, a number of serious analyses were written. It was in these secret notes, composed as political suggestions for the government and the Palestine Society, where the questions under discussion received a comprehensive study. The most detailed and reasoned among them was authored by Pavel Riazhskii, who had spent 11 years in Palestine as an inspector of the schools of the Palestine Society (his final report was dated May 1915).¹² He supposed that the question of granting greater rights to Russia in possessing the Holy Places was very complicated. In his opinion this breach of the status quo, the balance of relations between denominations and powers in the Holy Land, which had been established after years of struggle, was not possible. Riazhskii informed his readers that the Palestine Society possessed 28 land plots, 26 of them situated in Palestine; on most of them buildings had been constructed. One-third of these estates were officially confirmed as Russian property, while the rest were regarded as private plots, the property deeds having been issued in the names of Russian or Ottoman subjects.¹³ After the end of the war, he continued, Russia should secure its right of patronage over the Orthodox church in the East, regardless of nationalities. The second condition of the programme presented by Riazhskii was the practical implementation of the principle of religious tolerance, proclaimed by the Ottoman constitution of 1908. Third, was the restitution of capitulations, and recognition of the autonomy of the Palestine Society in administering its institutions. The most difficult question, according to Riazhskii, was how to solve the problem of Greek-Arab opposition within the Orthodox Church and to defend Russian interests at the Holy Sepulchre and other holy sites in Palestine. Only by creating a strong union of all Orthodox nations could the church oppose the Catholic and Protestant offensive. The best solution was that the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre become a pan-Orthodox institution without serving the national interests of Hellenism or using Russian donations for anti-Russian propaganda. Thus local communities could receive their desired autonomy, the Russian donations would be better used for the needs of the local Arab Christians and, finally, the Holy Liturgy at the Holy Sepulchre could be administered not only in Greek, but also in Arabic and

¹²Several printed copies of this document are preserved: Archives of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire (AVPRI), fund Russian Imperial Palestine Society (RIPPO), op. 873/1, d. 6; Russian National Library (further after: RNB), Manuscript department, f. 253, d. 62.

¹³On the Russian dependencies in Palestine during WWI see: V. Jushmanov, "Russiie uchrezhdeniia v Palestine I Sirii pered nachalom voiny s Turtsiei," *Soobshcheniia Imperatorskogo Pravoslavnogo Palestinskogo Obshchestva* 25 (1914): 436–464; Id., "Russkie uchrezhdeniia v Palestine I Sirii vo vremia voiny s Turtsiiei," Ibid. 26 (1915): 147, 181, 373–408; (1916): 267–288. See also: M. Palma, "Russian Landholdings in Palestine 1917–1948" (Diss., University of Arizona, 1992).

Slavonic. The final subject of the text presented concerned the rights, privileges and economic and juridical position of the Palestine Society.

Among the numerous topics discussed in his next note (the future territorial division of the Near East, the Greeks and the Catholics, etc.), Riazhskii paid special attention to the Arab question. As the final target of the Arabs was replacing the Greeks in administration of the Holy Places in Palestine (as they had managed in Syria), Russia should be ready to express positions on a number of topics. These included whether the Arabs could be supported in organising their national hierarchy, i.e. creating their national church in Palestine; whether they could be admitted to the incomes and the treasury of the Holy Sepulchre; and finally, whether they should share with the Greeks the administration of the Holy Places.¹⁴ In fact, here Riazhskii puts forward the question of whether the principle of international church organisation in Palestine (like the Catholic one) was more advantageous for Russia.

Another paper of the Palestine Society, dated 1915, takes us once more back to the main questions concerning Palestine, those of whether the political status quo antebellum would be preserved and, if not, whether a condominium of the Allies (Britain, France, Russia and Italy) could be established, and what the place of Russia as a supporter of Orthodoxy in Palestine would be. Alongside these were the questions of how Palestine would be related to the Sultanate of Egypt or the Sultanate of Arabia; how Russian institutions in Syria would be preserved if it came under a French protectorate; whether the head of the Russian mission in Jerusalem should be a bishop, equal to the heads of other churches; and finally whether the status quo in the Holy Places would be preserved. In all cases the question of the Russian institutions and their rights was the Society's main concern.

The last pre-revolutionary years brought new trends in the research work of the society and its perspectives in Palestine. Previously, the image of the Palestine Society as a church and royalist organisation kept many intellectuals who did not want to identify themselves with the political mainstream of Tsarist Russia apart from it. In 1914–1915, a group of Petersburg academics and officials with Senator E. P. Kovalevskii at its head started discussing the creation of a special Committee on Palestine, either at the Academy of Sciences, or at the Palestine Society. After the end of the war, this Committee could be transformed into a Russian Archaeological Institute in Jerusalem (similar to the one in Constantinople and the existing American and French institutions in Palestine). This idea found support from some Palestine Society members, such as the archaeologist Vasilii Latyshev. The secretary of the Society Alexei Dmitrievskii wrote a detailed outline of the future institute.¹⁵ On the eve of the February Revolution of 1917, the head

¹⁴RNB, f. 253, d. 64.

¹⁵“Russian Historical-Archaeological Institute in Jerusalem”. RNB, f. 253, d. 61.

of the old regime board of the Society, Alexei Shirinskii-Shikhmatov, invited Feodor Uspenskii, the ex-Director of the Russian Archaeological Institute in Constantinople, to participate in its sessions.¹⁶ In case this project had worked, surely wider cooperation between the Russian scholars and the local intellectuals could have been reached in the region.

Some new ideas are expressed in that years even by the most conservative Society leaders. On 2 March 1915, its secretary, Alexei Dmitrievskii, delivered a long public speech at the Slavonic Benevolent Society in Petrograd, where he tried to summarise Russian activities and policy in the Holy Land and Russia's new tasks during and after the war.¹⁷ After an ample excursus into the history of the Western European and Russian presences in Palestine, he focused on the future of the Holy Land. With some elements of romance he described a future for Palestine in which Russian interests and the integrity of Russian estates would be preserved. Dmitrievskii envisioned all the possible outlooks, one by one: that of a protectorate of the three powers (Russia, Britain and France, in his mind doubtful), and then of each of the powers separately. As a pure Russian protectorate did not seem very realistic either, he viewed the possibility of a French protectorate, and found it quite unfavourable for the Orthodox, taking into account the sharp competition between Catholic and Orthodox institutions in the Holy Land. Compared to the French, a British protectorate was, in Dmitrievskii's opinion, preferable. He reminded his listeners of the cautious and respectful attitude of the Anglican bishop towards Orthodox locals. The Anglicans, he continued, were not inclined to convert Orthodox Arabs to Protestantism, especially taking into account that the reasons for such conversion might be just temporary and not serious. Concerning the policy of the Palestine Society, he openly claimed that it had been a mistake to have supported for years only the Arab population. More attention should be paid in the future to establishing a good relationship with the Greek clergy, who had been the keepers of Orthodoxy in the East during centuries of alien rule. In fact in this speech Dmitrievskii does not go beyond the frames of the traditional colonial conception: he is still discussing the variants of French or British domination without taking into account any possibility of a Zionist state in Palestine.

Another Byzantologist, Professor of St. Petersburg Theological Academy Ivan Sokolov, was less optimistic about a future British rule in Palestine. He supposed that only a Russian protectorate could put an end to the competition between nations. Sokolov was known for his neo-Byzantine political romanticism and sympathies towards the Greeks and in his note from March 1915 he took the opportunity to express his admiration for the Brotherhood of the Holy Sepulchre and stressed its merits in preserving Orthodoxy.

¹⁶Letter from January 2, 1917. Archive of the Institute of Oriental manuscripts (furtherafter: Arkhiv vostokovedov), f. 120, op. 1, d. 169.

¹⁷RNB, f. 253, d. 37.

All these opinions and projects, though written by serious professors and experienced employees of the Palestine Society, did not go beyond the notions of traditional imperialistic colonial ideology; none of the authors could imagine a different organisation of the Near East in the twentieth century. Against this background, fresh ideas were expressed by the professor of mathematics from Kazan, Nikolai Bobrovnikov. Raised in the family of Nikolai Il'minskii, who had worked for years to organise schools for the Tatars and other non-Russian peoples of the Volga region, Bobrovnikov was familiar with the needs of modern Muslim society. After analysing a range of points of view on the future of Palestine, he stressed that Russia should not create obstacles to the independent Arab states which would be formed out of the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. Palestine, he continued, should not be regarded as a special territory, separate from the rest of the Arab world. The schools of the Palestine Society, instead of being Russian-centric, had to meet the needs of the developing Arab culture and social movement. Integration into the life of the Arab population should be the first task of the educational activities of the Society. Concerning scientific perspectives on the Near East, Russia, in his opinion, should go beyond its narrow orientation of research exclusively to church history, and the development of Oriental Studies inside Russia should be promoted by the Ministry of Education. Bobrovnikov proposed the creation of a Russian Institute of the Arab World, based in Beirut and not in Jerusalem.

These progressive views of a person living in an area with a large Muslim population, however, did not find much understanding among people swept up by nationalist enthusiasm. Professor Sokolov was dreaming about the restoration of the Byzantine Empire and wrote projects on Russian Constantinople, and the famous theologian, Bishop Antonii Khrapovitskii, was convincing himself and his audience that Syria and Palestine could become Russian territory as well.

Once it is done, in ten years all Palestine and Syria will turn into Vladimir and Khar'kov provinces. Our people will rush to install themselves in the country where our Lord, as well as His Most Pure Mother, the Apostles, Prophets and Martyrs, lived. There will be a place for pure Russian culture, for the Russian language, for Russian trade and industry; the last two branches will freely float along the Volga and Caspian through the Caucasus and back. The desert will flourish again, as "a flowing and honeyed land".¹⁸

While experts in Russia discussed their various utopias, the situation for the Russian properties in Palestine and the people associated with them was undergoing dramatic change. Contacts with them were interrupted in

¹⁸Antonii Khrapovitskii, Archiepiskop "Chei dolzhen byt' Constantinopl'? (Khar'kov, 1915) (=N. N. Lisovoj, ed., *Russkaja tserkov' i patriarchy Vostoka (Tri tserkovno-politicheskie utopii XX v.)*, in *Religii mira. Istoriia i sovremennost'* (Moscow: Institute of Russian history RAN, 2002): 204.

October 1914. Most employees of the Palestine Society, as well as pilgrims, left Ottoman territories by the end of 1914. The Russian properties were entrusted to the Italian consulate, and the remaining Russian subjects, particularly the men, were arrested as prisoners of war. As the expected end to the war did not come during the spring of 1915, on 12th May, the secretary of the Society Alexei Dmitrievskii sent a request for information on the current state of affairs to the Russian consul in Alexandria, Alexander Petrov. A detailed answer followed on 23rd June. First, Petrov reported receiving a sum of 100.000 francs from the Society and transferring it via the American consulate to its Russian employees in Jerusalem and Damascus. Already at the end of 1914, the male employees had been deported from Jerusalem, first to Damascus and on 18th May, to the town of Urfa near Diyarbakir. There they were kept in awful conditions, 12 persons in one room, and some had to sleep in the open air, in the Armenian cemetery.

The Russian nuns and female pilgrims who had remained in Jerusalem during the first months of the war received supplies from the Greek Patriarch; for reasons of safety they were installed in the Elisabeth dependence (*podvor'e*). The Sergius, Mariinski and Nikolaevski dependences were used as military hospitals and military headquarters, as well as the building of the Beit Jala seminary. Some of the buildings were sealed by Italian diplomats before being occupied by the Turkish authorities.¹⁹ At the end of November 1915, eighty-five Russian nuns and pilgrims were transported from Jerusalem to Alexandria and installed in a house rented by Consul Petrov with money sent by the Palestine Society.²⁰ Some of the women found jobs in private houses in Alexandria; the money sent from Russia obviously was soon finished, as we can judge from two letters of the chief of the mission, Archimandrite Leonid Sentsov, addressed to Dmitrievskii (October 23, 1916, from Alexandria, and November 22, 1917, from Moscow).²¹

After the failure of the Dardanelles operation, the discussion on Palestine disappeared from the Russian press. In 1916, it again attracted the attention of the deputies of the Duma (the Russian Parliament). Deputy Markov repeated the same idea that after signing the peace treaty Palestine should become neutral, a condominium of the three Allies. A few weeks before the February Revolution of 1917, a conference on the Russian cause in the

¹⁹ Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 97. More information can be found in the letter of the secretary of the Italian consulate Senni to A. Dmitrievskii, dated 25 August, 1915 and written immediately after leaving Jerusalem. He reported sealing part of the Russian buildings and the poor state of the pilgrims and nuns. The 4000 francs given to him by Dmitrievskii were left with the American consulate. At least 20,000 francs more were needed to support the Russians. "Palestine is completely out of resources, and Jerusalem being under terror and starving, looks worse than a dead town", he finished his letter (RNB, f. 253, d. 615).

²⁰ "The Holy Land and Our Compatriots in Syria and Palestine During the Present War". Speech delivered by Alexei Dmitrievskii before the Slavonic Benevolent Society in April 1916. Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 168.

²¹ RNB, f. 253, d. 510.

Holy Land after the end of the war took place. Alexey Dmitrievskii gave one more speech about the tasks of the last, Fifth Crusade. Other speakers still expressed the hope that Greek Orthodoxy in the Holy Land would be absorbed by the Russian variant.

The October Revolution of 1917 put an end to both practical projects and messianic dreams. In fact, already in March 1915 the Russian government had agreed to give way to British and French aspirations concerning Palestine and Syria in exchange for the acquisition of Constantinople. This was confirmed by the Sykes-Picot agreement (May 16, 1916), signed also by Sergei Sazonov, the Russian minister of foreign affairs, when Russia was promised the Eastern Turkish territories as well as Constantinople and the Straits in exchange for relinquishing any territorial interests in Syria and Palestine. Only the so-called “brown zone” of Palestine remained a subject for future discussions. With the collapse of the tsarist regime in Russia in February 1917 and the Bolshevik revolution of October the same year, Russia lost its position in the division of the Ottoman heritage. A few days before the October Revolution, Dmitrievskii wrote a text concerning Russian interests in the future Zionist state which the British were planning in Palestine. The Russian government, he stressed, should insist on the ex-territorial rights of all its properties, not only on free pilgrimage.²² Meanwhile in December 1917, British troops entered Palestine (Fig. 5).

The Russian Palestine Society, which by that time had already lost its first two titles, “Imperial” and “Orthodox”, was not slow to respond to the turbulent changes. An undated letter (probably from the beginning of 1918) addressed to the British embassy in Petrograd, reminded the British about the Russian properties in Palestine, expressing at the same time the hope that their rights would be respected by the new authorities.²³

The Russian Mission during World War I

As soon as the Soviet government was recognised by the European states, it attempted to state its claims for the Russian properties in Palestine. On 18 May, 1923, the Russian ambassador in London, Leonid Krasin, handed Lord Curzon a note in which all properties of the former Russian institutions in Palestine, Syria and elsewhere were designated as belonging to the Russian government. The British side, however, did not hurry to recognise these claims, and for many years the question of the properties remained unresolved. The main reason of the British authorities’ intransigence was that the religious and philanthropic character of the Russian institutions did not correlate with the atheistic policy of the Soviet government. As the old regime Russian institutions did not exist anymore, the British preferred to deal with the Russian Church Abroad.

²²RNB, f. 253, d. 38.

²³Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, d. 94.



Fig. 5 The parade of the British army in front of the Russian St. Trinity church in Jerusalem. March 1917; image courtesy of The Library of Congress, <https://www.ippo.ru/news/article/sergievskoe-podvore-imperatorskogo-pravoslavnogo-p-201667>

During the 1920s the Russian properties were constantly at risk of confiscation. However, the Russian Church Abroad, being in strict opposition to the Soviet government and the Patriarchate of Moscow, managed to preserve the real estates of the Ecclesiastical mission in Palestine and even received in 1934 from the British authorities 10.000 square metres at the right bank of the Jordan river.²⁴ Very little was known in Russia about that

²⁴See more details on the economic situation of the Russian properties, and of the Russian mission during the 1920s in: L. I. Aliekhina, "Kogda net bole pravoslavnoi Rossii, osobenno tiazhel krest nachal'nika missii," in *Sviataia Zem'ia. Istoriko-kul'turnyi illustrirovannyi al'manakh. K 165-letiiu Russkoi dukhovnoi missii v Ierusalime* no. 1 Part 2. (Jerusalem: Russian ecclesiastical mission, 2012): 6–29; A. K. Klement'ev, "753 dn'a Arkhimandrita Kipriana: Dni I dela nachal'nika Russkoi dukhovnoi missii v Ierusalime: 1928–1930," Ibidem: 50–54; T. A. Bogdanova, "Nas 2-4 cheloveka, b'emsia kak ryby ob led," Ibidem: 76–84. Detailed report (with publication of documents) on the damage caused to the Russian properties during WWI see: Ibidem: 29–36; Report on the state and finances of the mission in the second half of the 1920s: Ibidem: 63–67. Andrei Psarev, "Vladienie Russkoi Zarubezhnoi Tserkov'u dorevoliutsionnym tserkovnym imushchestvom: iuridicheskii i moral'nyi aspekt" ("The Pre-Revolutionary Church Estates in the Hands of the Russian Church Abroad: Juridical and Moral Aspects"), *RPCZ: Obzor* <http://www.rocorstudies.org/2012/02/22/a-v-psarev-vladienie-russkoj-zarubezhnoj-cerkovyu-dorevolucionnym-cerkovnym-imushchestvom-yuridicheskij-i-moralnyj-aspekt/?fbclid=IwAR3SYKIWKsUAETH7G8gkujGJbSG31YpccumL0z5xr6BktlbazS8Cs9Pyu0A> (appeal: 2 December 2019).

state of affairs. Some information was received via private letters addressed to Alexei Dmitrievskii, who, after returning to Petrograd in 1923, retired from the work of the Palestine Society. In a letter, dated 6th December, 1926, Ivan Ivanovich Spasskii (former inspector of the schools of the Palestine Society, at that time an employee of the British administration in Jerusalem), gave a detailed report on his work on systematising the papers of the Russian Mission. Spasskii complained that the documents were completely mixed and it took him several months to classify them. Between August and November 1925 he managed to organise the papers into about 1000 files; 2 or 3 months more would have been needed to finish the work. The letter was sent from a ship heading to America: Spasskii was delegated by Archbishop Anastasii Gribanovskii (chief of the Ecclesiastical Mission 1924–1934) to go to New York for approximately a year to gather money for the needs of the Mission.²⁵ Suffering from lack of money and having lost their political significance, the Russian institutions in Palestine in the interwar period could not have any significant cultural influence on the local Arab population.

The estates and buildings of the Palestine Society, meanwhile, were rented out by the British authorities and the money was used mainly for supporting of the Russian monks and nuns who were living in Palestine. While composing an answer to the claims of the Soviet government, the British appealed to Article 13 of the Mandate on Palestine, which enhanced all the administration of the religious foundations to the British authorities. Article 14 of the same document, however, called for the creation of a special commission which should have determined the rights over the properties. This commission was never created.²⁶ With the crash of the Tsarist regime, Russian ambitions in the Middle East were neutralised, and thus the old aim of the British policy in the frames of the Eastern Question was achieved. The refusal of the British to hand assets to the Soviet state was on one hand, based in their general opposition to Communism, and on the other hand, excluded any claims of the old rivals for possessions in Palestine. The British official

²⁵RNB, f. 253, d. 630. See an edition of some letters of Spasskii sent from the US: Inokinia Magdalina (Kornilova), “Missiia neotstupno prosit vas vsekh priiti ei na pomosh: Pis'ma I. I. Spasskogo iz Ameriki”, in *Sviataia Zeml'a. Istoriko-kul'turnyi illiustrirovannyi al'manakh*: 36–49. The relationship between the Society members who remained in Palestine and the Russian ecclesiastical mission during the Mandate period remained rather difficult, mainly for property and financial reasons. See the letter of the chief of the Mission Archimandrite Kiprian Kern addressed to the President of the Palestine Society Prince A. A. Shirinskii-Shikhmatov from 1929 or 1930, where he demanded that the Society shares its incomes with the Mission: *Sviataia Zeml'a. Istoriko-kul'turnyi illiustrirovannyi al'manakh*: 67–71. Due to these complications and the split of the Society in the mid-1980s the Jerusalem archives of the Palestine Society are still inaccessible for researchers.

²⁶Steven Batalden, “Sud'ba russkogo zemlevladieniia v Ierusalime vo vremia Palestinskogo mandata” (The Russian Land Properties in Jerusalem during the Palestine Mandate), *Palestinskii Sbornik* 94 (1992) <https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/sudba-russkogo-zemlevladieniya-v-ierusalime-vo-vremia-201658> (appeal 2 December 2019).

propaganda stressed the liberating role of their army as a Crusader. In the San-Remo conference Lloyd George proclaimed that the UK had undertaken the patronage over the Orthodox Patriarchate instead of Communist Russia.²⁷ The British thus appropriated the function of Tsarist Russia and at the same time eliminated the claims of the Russian Church Abroad and its representatives, who tried to rent out the buildings on their own.²⁸ For decades the real estate of the Palestine Society were still of uncertain status (Fig. 6).



Fig. 6 The Russian St. Trinity church in 1946. A view from Jaffa street; image courtesy of The Library of Congress, <https://www.ippo.ru/news/article/sergievskoe-podvorie-imperatorskogo-pravoslavnogo-p-201667>

²⁷E. B. Yosef, "The Last Crusade? British Propaganda and the Palestinian Campaign, 1917–1918," *Journal of Contemporary History* 36, no. 1 (January 2001): 87–109; K. Papastathis, "Finances in the Colonial Age: The Orthodox Patriarchate of Jerusalem under British Control, 1921–25," *Middle Eastern Studies* 49 (2013): 724.

²⁸The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission (subordinated to the Russian Church Abroad) remained the only active Russian institution in Palestine in the interwar period. On its complicated relationship with the Greek Patriarch and the Mandate authorities see: Archimandrite Nikodim Rotov, *Istoriia Russkoi Duchovnoi missii v Ierusalime. Zakliucheniie*, <https://rusdm.ru/history/38> (appeal 5 December 2019); Archimandrite Kiprian Kern, *Vospominaniia o mitropolite Antonii (Khrapovitskom)*, https://azbyka.ru/otechnik/Kiprian_Kern/vospominaniia-o-mitropolite-antonii-hrapovitskom-i-episkope-gavriile-chepure/1 (appeal 5 December 2009). See also the general overview of the history of the Russian institutions in Palestine after WWI: Alexander Zanemonets, *Sviataia Zemlia I Russkoe Zarubezh'ie* (St. Petersburg: Aletheia, 2019).

In 1948 the Soviet government managed to reclaim part of them with the support of the Israeli state. Some of the properties passed to the Patriarchate of Moscow, and the majority of them were sold by the Soviet government to Israel in 1964.²⁹

THE RUSSIAN PALESTINE SOCIETY IN THE INTERWAR PERIOD

Compared to the history of the Society before the revolution, this period is less known.³⁰ From the Russian side there are two archive collections, that of Alexei Dmitrievskii (in the manuscript department of the Russian National Library in St Petersburg) and of the Archives of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in Petersburg (Archiv Vostokovedov), in which the protocols of the sessions and other documents between 1918 and the mid-1930s are preserved.

In the years after the revolution the Society completely changed its profile: already in 1918 it was clear that it could survive only as a purely scientific organisation, concentrated on research in the history of Palestine. Many new members joined the Society, mainly specialists in the Christian East, who regarded it as an important institution with glorious traditions in which scientific work could be continued. At the same time, the board of the Society did not abandon the hope that it could coordinate its activities with state interests and return to at least some of its research work in the Middle East. The post-revolutionary history of the Palestine Society embraces three main topics, namely the organisational and administrative efforts focused on its survival as an official institution; the research work and editions it continued to produce; and attempts aimed at the reacquisition of its possessions abroad.

During 1918, with the Russian civil war followed by ruin and hunger, no sessions of the Palestine Society took place. The first one after the revolution was held on 26 January, 1919. After a commemoration of those members who had died during the revolutionary years (Jacob Smirnov, Pavel Bezobrazov, Nikolai Mednikov, Chrysanth Loparev), the members submitted their proposals for further research work. This work however did not last very long. From the participants in this session some died during the 1920s (Ivan Troitskii, Boris Turaev, Ivan Pal'mov), others emigrated abroad (Alexander

²⁹The so called "orange deal", the agreement No. 593 "About selling of the properties belonging to USSR by the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics to the government of the state of Israel", signed on October 7, 1964 by Golda Meyr and Pinhas Sapir on one side, and Ambassador Mikhail Bodrov on the other. 22 real estates were sold for the sum of 3,5 million Israeli lyras (4,5 million US dollars). The money was partly paid out by Israel in oranges and knitwear. The building of the Ecclesiastical mission, St. Trinity church and Sergius dependence were not sold. <https://www.ippo.ru/historyippo/article/apelsinovaya-sdelka-201663> (appeal: 3 December 2019).

³⁰See: A. G. Grushevoi, "Imperatorskoe Palestinskoe obshchestvo," 134–156.

Vasiliev, Nikolai Glubokovskii), and only one survived the communist terror and continued working in the 1930s, Nikolai Marr (linguist and creator of the theory of Japhetic languages, popular in the Stalin period). Already at this session a project to draw up new regulations for the Society was presented to the Commissariat of Education through the Academy of Sciences.

The membership of the Society radically changed; unsurprisingly, in the protocols of the 1920s no officials from the former regime can be found. With the passing of many of the old members, new ones were invited. Little by little, the Society became a concentration of the best scholars of the 1920s. In its papers, we see the names of prominent academics: the specialist in Classical archaeology Boris Farmakovskii (since 1920), the Orientalists Pavel Kokovcev and Vasilii Struve (joined on December 9, 1921), the Assyriologist Vladimir Shileiko (since May 1922), the Byzantinists Dmirii Ainalov and Alexander Vasiliev. An active member of the Society, and one of its secretaries, Vladimir Beneshevich was a specialist in Byzantine canon law and professor at the university. In 1921, academician Feodor Uspenskii was elected President of the Society, and it was his authority that saved it during the 1920s. Judging from the list of the active society members made in December 1922, there were still 47 scholars who wanted to take part in its work.³¹

According to the new strategy elaborated by the administrative board of the Society, it should have embraced research not only in history and culture, but in the geology and the natural history of Palestine as well. In 1921, academician Alexander Fersman, the famous geologist, was invited to join and at the end of the 1920s a professor of botany, V. Markovich, was invited, and reported on his expedition to the Middle East in 1926–1928, showing a collection of pictures depicting the life of the inhabitants of Palestine.³²

The Soviet government seems for a long time to have had no certain opinion on the Palestine Society. On one hand, for them it was a relic from the Tsarist past, an extreme right-wing royalist and ecclesiastical organisation, potentially dangerous for the new regime. On the other hand, protected by influential academics and declaring itself as a purely research institution, it could not be liquidated just by one announcement. In fact one has the impression that the Society, like some other relict institutions inherited from the Tsarist regime, was regarded by the Soviet officials as an annoying hindrance, moreover it was clear that it could not help at all in the issue of the real estates in Palestine. As a result time passed, and the official status of the Society remained uncertain. In December 1921, after long discussions, the Society was transferred to the patronage of the Academy of Sciences.³³ At the same time, the Soviet authorities pretended to confiscate its building at 10 Mytninskaia Street under the pretext that it was not used. Already in

³¹ Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, d. 182.

³² Ibid., d. 42.

³³ Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 182.

December 1921, the rooms of the Society, including its library, archive and collections, were sealed, and for some months the sessions were held at the Academy of Sciences.³⁴ On 3rd May, 1922, the seals were removed from the rooms of the Society, and the session of May 15 took place in its building. But just a few days later, on 22nd May, the next offensive was undertaken by the authorities. The secretary of the Society, Vladimir Jushmanov, was arrested, the archive confiscated, the collections and library again sealed. A few months were needed before Academician Feodor Uspenskii managed to achieve a favourable decision from the courts.³⁵ Nevertheless, the building was confiscated and the archive was never returned to the Society. It was later transported to Moscow, where it joined the Archives of Foreign Affairs, and the rooms were finally lost. Some church items were offered to the Metropolitan of Petersburg and were probably transported to the lavra (monastery) of St Alexander Nevskii. After this attack by the authorities, the Academy of Sciences “for financial and other reasons”, as was officially stated, refused to protect the Society any longer. From November 1922 onwards, its sessions took place in the rooms of the Academy of Material Culture (the future Institute of Archaeology of the Academy of Sciences), at that time located in the Marble Palace. By that time the library and museum of the Society had also been moved there.³⁶ All this “misunderstanding” between the Society members and the Soviet governmental authorities clearly demonstrates that the Soviet state did not see any perspectives in cooperation with them for influencing the society and politics in the Middle East. First, any religious policy was completely denied by the Communist state; second, the Society members were regarded as ideologically unreliable persons in view of their “bourgeois” background. Thus, their services could not be used even in establishing pure scientific links with Palestine.

Meanwhile, the struggle for survival continued. In his report, read at the session of the Society on May 19, Professor Beneshevich clearly stated the urgent need to reorganise it according to the new conditions, to elaborate new regulations and elect a new administrative board. Thus the Society, officially recognised by the Soviet authorities, would have authority in the eyes of foreign scientific organisations as well as politicians in Palestine. Under its President Feodor Uspenskii, the board was completed by Boris Farmakovskii and Nikolai Marr, with secretaries Akimov and Jushmanov.³⁷ In June 1922, Beneshevich was delegated to Moscow to meet senior officials in the ministries of foreign affairs and education, as well as at the Academy of Sciences,

³⁴Ibid., d. 45

³⁵Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 180.

³⁶About five hundred volumes of the library of the Palestine Society are preserved in the library of the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, other part in the Museum of the History of Religion. The collection of coins was brought to the Hermitage. The fate of the rest of the museum is unknown.

³⁷Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 179.

to plead for the defence of the society. He was well received, and some promises of support were given; in practice, however, this did not change anything. On 20 June, 1923, the Society was officially closed by a rescript of the Commissariat of Internal Affairs. The reason was probably the note of the Narkom (Minister) of Foreign Affairs Georgii Chicherin to the British Foreign Office from 18 May, 1923, declaring that all properties in Palestine belonged to the Soviet State. In Autumn of 1925, the Society was restored, but still did not receive any definite official status.

The Question of the Properties: Contacts with Palestine

Its isolation from Palestine and a lack of information about what was happening there was a matter for discussion at almost all sessions of the Society. Regular contact with the members and employees who remained in Palestine were cut in the Autumn of 1914. The administration of the Russian properties was left to the doctor of the Russian hospital, V. Severin, and after his departure from Jerusalem in 1915, to Cornilii Petropoulo (an Ottoman subject, former accountant of the dependencies) and Nikolai Seleznev. It was known that before leaving Jerusalem, Severin made an inventory and converted some of the money into gold currency, but after this the Society did not have any information about the state of affairs. It was also known that in November 1918, the Russian consul in Alexandria, Petrov, obtained a sum of about 10.000 rubles (belonging to the Society) to support Russians who remained in Turkey. Since then the Society had no information about this money. In 1922, a letter from Nikolai Seleznev (dated March 8) was received from Jerusalem, asking for instructions. The outline of an answer was prepared by May 1922, but after the state's attempt to liquidate the Society at the end of May, the letter was postponed and a new redaction of the text was made by August of 1922.

In the nearest future, (*crossed out*: after securing a certain and stable position in the Soviet Republic) the Society intends to delegate a member (*crossed out*: commission) for acquaintance with the state of the Russian estates in the East and for establishing contacts with those persons who could have information about the Russian properties in Jerusalem and Palestine between 1914 and 1922 (*crossed out*: from this commission you will receive direct instructions concerning your further activities for defending the Russian interests in Palestine).

For the moment, the Society will be very grateful to you if you find an opportunity to write in details about everything which is connected with its interests in the East (*crossed out*: equally present a report on the state of finances and administration from 1919 to 1922).

On behalf of the President,
Secretary of the Palestine Society,
Afanasii Akimov.³⁸

³⁸ Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 165.

As no delegate from the Society arrived in Jerusalem, Seleznev was not called upon to present any report on his work. Three years later (in 1925) in a letter to Dmitrievskii, Seleznev gave some more information:

I returned to my service in 1919, and since then I stay in Jerusalem, defending myself from “friends” who are stretching their arms from all sides towards the properties of the Society. All buildings are safe, repaired from the outside and partly from the inside. The movables have been plundered, their remains have been gathered and preserved. The order in the Society is restored, we are paying taxes and helping the poor. We are living from the rent of the properties (...) The libraries in Jerusalem and Beit Jala are saved, in Nazareth it has been plundered. The book storage in Jerusalem is safe, but very poor in terms of the editions of the society.³⁹

At the end of his letter, Seleznev informed Dmitrievskii about sending 70 dollars, for him and for Professor Ivan Sokolov. Nikolai Seleznev, who regarded himself representative of the Palestine Society and at the same time tended to keep close to the Russian Church Abroad, as seen, was rather critical about the claims of the “friends” (the Mandate authorities and the Russian ecclesiastical mission) to handle the Russian properties.

In his answer, dated 16th May, 1925, Dmitrievskii gave information about the editions of the Society, which had survived after the confiscation of the properties of the Society in Petrograd in May 1922. Most of the scientific library was saved, though part of it, as well as the popular brochures, were destroyed. In the same letter, Dmitrievskii expressed little hope about the restoration of the Society in Russia: the initiative belonged to people who had nothing in common with the old members.⁴⁰ This letter was returned: Seleznev had died that year.

The political situation in Palestine was one of the first worries of the Society’s members. This is why, despite the extreme difficulties of the year 1922, on the 15th May, Uspenskii, instead of a traditional scientific paper, delivered a report on the current state of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem. The financial crisis and the permanent discord between the Greek and Arab parties forced the British authorities to appoint a special commission on the affairs of the Patriarchate. Selling part of the Patriarchate’s estates was seen as the only way out of the financial crisis. In religious affairs, the commission was inclined to support Hellenism against either Catholicism or Moscow Orthodoxy, Uspenskii concluded.⁴¹ Indeed, after the cutting of incomes from Russia after the revolution of 1917, by the start of the British Mandate the Patriarchate of Jerusalem had gone bankrupt. The two possible ways to receive a loan (either from the Greek government, or from Britain) were rejected for political and

³⁹RNB, f. 253, d. 612.

⁴⁰RNB, f. 253, d. 317.

⁴¹Arkhiv vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 45.

economic reasons. The only way out remained, that of selling of the church real estates to the Zionist state. This was strongly opposed by the Arab party, and could not be favoured by the Mandate authorities who avoided any reasons to create instability in the country. In this deadlock a commission under Sir Anton Bertram and Harry Charles Luke started its work in September 1921. As Konstantinos Papastathis wrote, "it was a 'give and take' agreement through which Damianos consolidated his authority within the church", allowing the commission to handle all the affairs of the Patriarchate.⁴² The further course of events led to the enhancing of a list of demands to the British authorities by the Congress of the lay community in Haifa (1923) and the establishing of a new commission, of Bertram-Young in March 1925, which was expected to elaborate regulations towards the "Arabisation" of the Patriarchate.⁴³

A project of an expedition to Palestine was discussed at many sessions of the Palestine Society. Alongside scientific research, the expedition would observe in situ the state of the Society's properties (Session of March 10, 1926). At the session on 14 April, 1926, three society members were appointed for this expedition: Vladimir Beneshevich, Pavel Riazhskii and Leonid Korobov.⁴⁴ Riazhskii, who at that moment was in Riazan province, agreed with enthusiasm, though he expressed some doubts whether they would receive British and French visas and be allowed to visit all the places where Russian properties were situated. He himself would have liked to find his personal objects (books, documents, etc.) which he had left in Palestine in 1914. A budget for this expedition (4000 dollars, for a period of at least two months) was made, and a detailed application sent to the authorities.⁴⁵ Under the circumstances, it is not surprising that it was refused. Beneshevich's visit to Moscow in June 1926 also brought no serious results. He could not meet with the head of the Central Political Administration Evgenii Tuchkov and received nothing but some more uncertain promises about financing from the Academic centre. Trying to attract the attention of the Soviet government to the Russian properties in Palestine, the Society made a detailed list of them, including 26 areas of estates (154,972 square m and 11 dunums) as well as property in Bari in Italy.⁴⁶

Still regarding itself as responsible for the estates in Palestine, in 1925 the board of the Society authorised a lawyer at the Ministry of Foreign

⁴²Papastathis, "Finances in the Colonial Age," 715.

⁴³See: K. Papastathis and R. Kark, "Colonialism and Religious Power Politics: the Question of New Regulations within the Orthodox Church of Jerusalem during the British Mandate," *Middle Eastern Studies* 50, no. 4 (2014): 589–605.

⁴⁴Arkhir vostokovedov, f. 120, op. 1, d. 43. The third personality seems a bit strange: he was the only Communist Party member in the society, without carrying out any research. Probably he was included in the list in the hope that his presence would make the expedition easier for the authorities to approve.

⁴⁵Ibid., d. 44.

⁴⁶Ibid., d. 174.

Affairs (Semen Chlenov) to intercede on behalf of the Russian properties in Palestine. The procuration was officially prolonged in 1928.⁴⁷ This misunderstanding, so to say, continued for some years: the board of the Society did not stop sending letters and petitions to the government, explaining the importance of the properties for Russia, and no reaction from the government followed. The uncertain status of the Society's properties in Palestine lasted for several more decades, while in Italy it was resolved in the 1930s. After a long trial, in 1933 the Soviet government decided to relinquish its ownership of the plot in Bari. As the Italian authorities still recognised the Palestine Society as a legal owner, two official papers were drafted indicating that the Society was granting its rights to the Soviet commissioner in Italy.⁴⁸ On the 31st October 1933, the society drafted a procuration to the French agent in Hebron, Raoul Ginzbourg, to observe any estates and properties in that region. It is not clear why it was needed at that moment; probably it was made at the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, trying to negotiate with the British authorities.

Research Work of the Palestine Society, 1919–1930

The most fruitful aspect of the Society's work in the 1920s was its scientific research. At every session (they were regularly held once every month or two) a serious paper was presented. More than 20 titles of these are preserved in the papers of the society, among them: "El — the name of the God of Sun" (V. Shileiko, 1922); "Israel in Egypt according to Hebrew sources" (S. Lourie, 1923); "The culture of the Philistines according to the latest excavations" (A. Zakharov, 1926); "The latest excavations in Mesopotamia and Palestine" (N. D. Flittner, 1928).

Constantly suffering from a lack of finance, the Society could hardly continue its editorial activities. For 10 years, only one volume of the Journal (No. 29) was published; No. 30 was fully prepared, but never edited. At the session of 22 April, 1929, the question of the liquidation of the Society was put forward for discussion; it was postponed for some months thanks to a grant of 1000 rubles given by the Academic centre.

At one of the last meetings, on 1st July, 1929, a resume of the decade was made.⁴⁹ For 15 years the Society had been cut off from its object of research, and was forced to use only written or secondary sources. It therefore lost its place among the leading institutions in exploration of Palestine, which it had maintained for 40 years. The lack of money and isolation did not allow the society to buy books from abroad; the exchange with foreign academic institutions was also profoundly difficult after the establishment of the Soviet state. The old members of the society were gone: in 1929 Feodor Uspenskii

⁴⁷Ibid., d. 42.

⁴⁸Ibid., d. 42

⁴⁹Ibid., 42.

and Ivan Gavrilovich Troitskii died, in 1928 Beneshevich was arrested. Given the difficulties listed, attracting younger researchers to Palestine studies was hardly possible.

At the close of this period we have two more documents. The first is a brief note on the history of the Society composed in 1927 by a young member, Prozorov, and a project of research in Arabic sources written by Julian Krachkovskii and dated 3 December, 1930. After a sad preface about the inaccessibility of Palestine for Soviet scholars, Krachkovskii called upon his colleagues to concentrate on written texts, first of all to continue Mednikov's *Palestine from its conquest by the Arabs till the Crusaders*, which needed a serious update using newly discovered and published sources. The second task he envisaged was the preparation of a database of the Arab language and folklore. Finally, the third task was exploring modern Arabic culture and social life. Here Krachkovskii hoped to cooperate with those Arabs among the Society's members who lived in the territory of the Soviet Union: Vasilieva in Leningrad, Kezma in Kiev and Zhuze in Baku.⁵⁰ Against this sombre background of complete decline, suddenly the visit of a foreign fellow took place: on 4th July, 1930, Robert Blake, a professor from the United States and a former student of Marr at Petrograd University, made a report about his expeditions to Jerusalem in 1923 and Sinai in 1927 and 1930. The last scientific session of the Society was held on 18 January, 1931, with a paper by Klavdia Ode-Vasilieva on the events of 1929 in Palestine.⁵¹

The Palestine Society was restored in 1952 on the initiative of the Orientalists Nina Pigulevskaia and Karen Juzbashian as part of the Leningrad Institute of Oriental Studies of the Academy of Sciences; it edited a scientific journal, and organised sessions where papers were read. After 1990, it was revived in Moscow, shifting its activities to archival research on nineteenth century papers.

CONCLUSION

From the mid-1840s Russia established organisations in Palestine: the ecclesiastical mission, the Palestine Committee, the consulate and the Palestine Society. All of them were aimed at strengthening Russian political and cultural influence in the Holy Land. Supporting the local Arab population, transferring donations to the Greek Patriarchate, organising schools and pilgrimage—these were the elements of a complicated system of political “soft power” of Russian imperialism, as well as cultural and religious diplomacy. The Revolution in Russia put an end to these activities, and the few remaining Russian institutions in Palestine lost their political significance.

⁵⁰Ibid., 172.

⁵¹Ibid., 42.

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