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"Showered with Privileges by Our Government:" Russian Self-Presentation to Muslim Communities in Ottoman Syria

Paul du Quenoy

Introduction

Traditional scholarship of Russia's involvement in the Middle East has focused on confessional politics, usually arguing that Russian policies were designed to support the region's minority Orthodox Christian populations to build pro-Russian constituencies among them.[1] Important as this work is, it has devoted relatively little attention to Russian interaction with the region's other confessional communities, including, oddly, its Muslims. Following the work of Edward Said and other theorists of "Orientalism,"[2] some work on that relationship has argued that Russians looked down upon Middle Eastern Muslims, finding them in some contexts inferior and primitive, in others similar enough to provoke unsettling challenges to the assumption by Russians of a "Western" identity, and in still others simply uninteresting.[3] More recent studies, however, have argued that this interpretation is neither consistent with the

1 Examples include Theofanis Stavrou, *Russian Interests in Palestine, 1882–1914: A Study of Religious and Educational Enterprise* (Thessaloniki: Institute for Balkan Studies, 1963); A. L. Tibawi, "Russian Cultural Penetration of Syria-Palestine in the Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Royal Central Asian Society* 53:2 (1966), pp. 166–182 and 53:3 (1966), pp. 309–323; Derek Hopwood, *The Russian Presence in Syria and Palestine, 1843–1914: Church and Politics in the Near East* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1969); David M. Goldfrank, *The Origins of the Crimean War* (New York: Longman, 1994); and B. F. Iamilinets, *Rossiia i Palestina. Ocherki politicheskikh i kulturno-religioznykh otnoshenii (XIX – nachalo XX veka)* (Moscow, 2003).

2 Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon, 1978), p. 1, opens his well known analysis by listing Russia among other powers that engaged in "*Orientalism*, a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (original emphasis). For similar theoretical frameworks guiding this literature, see Mary-Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992) and David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993).

3 For the most recent work of this type, see Sara Dickinson, "Russia's First 'Orient:' Characterizing the Crimea in 1787," *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History* 3:1 (2002), pp. 3–25; Svetlana Kirillina, "Islam and Its Adherents as Represented in Russian Pilgrims' Reports of the Eighteenth Century," in Nelly Hanna and Raouf Abbas, eds., *Society and Economy in Egypt and the Eastern Mediterranean, 1600–1900: Essays in Honor of André Raymond* (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 2005), pp. 217–245; and Elena Andreeva, *Russia and Iran in the Great Game: Travelogues and Orientalism* (New York: Routledge, 2007).

Russian Empire's treatment of its own large domestic Muslim population[4] nor uniformly accurate in its interactions with Muslims beyond its borders.[5]

Finding much value in this newer view, this article will address Russia's self-presentation in the Middle East with an unusual emphasis on the Muslim populations of "Greater Syria," the geographical expression roughly encompassing modern Syria and Lebanon, as well as the territories constituting modern Israel and Palestine. Instead of operating as a "typical" European imperialist power, Russia pursued a policy designed to court the trust of Muslims and other non-Orthodox Christian religious populations while protecting long-term strategic interests and addressing newer economic and cultural concerns. By posing as an agent of benevolent influence, a well-meaning friend to Muslims within the Russian Empire and abroad, and a powerful potential advocate or ally, Russia labored to distinguish itself from more actively "imperialist" powers held in suspicion by both the Ottoman government in Constantinople and the local political and religious authorities in the region.

Although the importance of Orthodoxy in Imperial Russia's official, cultural, and popular thinking is not in dispute, a more nuanced approach reveals that the Empire did not limit its strategic opportunism to Orthodox concerns or Ottoman Christians generally. Instead, Russian diplomats and other officials courted many of Greater Syria's diverse religious communities, including Jews, monophysitic Christians, Armenian and other Eastern rite Catholics, and the Druze, in addition to Muslims.[6] Mirroring the Empire's approach to its own multiethnic and multi-religious populations and domains, its representatives' interactions with these communities in the Ottoman Levant represented a highly flexible strategy designed to pursue any opportunity to advance Russian interests. Rather than betraying incoherence, as often seemed the case to regional

4 See for example Thomas Barrett, *At the Edge of Empire: The Terek Cossacks and the North Caucasus Frontier, 1700–1860* (Boulder: Westview, 1999); Nathaniel Knight, "Grigor'ev in Orenburg, 1851–1862: Russian Orientalism in the Service of Empire?" *Slavic Review* 59:1 (2000), pp. 74–100; and Robert D. Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar: Islam and Empire in Russia and Central Asia* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2006).

5 Works advancing these arguments include Robert Crews, "Empire and the Confessional State: Islam and Religious Politics in Nineteenth-Century Russia," *American Historical Review* 108:1 (2003), pp. 50–83; Eileen M. Kane, "Pilgrims, Holy Places, and the Multi-Confessional Empire: Russian Policy toward the Ottoman Empire under Tsar Nicholas I, 1825–1855," Ph. D. dissertation (Princeton University, 2005); Paul du Quenoy, "The Russian Empire and Egypt, 1900–1915: A Case of Public Diplomacy," *Journal of World History* 19:2 (2008), pp. 214–233; and "Tidings From A Faraway East: The Russian Empire and Morocco," *International History Review* 33:2 (June 2011). Soviet historians also made this argument to appeal to solidarity with Third World nations. See for example T. L. Musatova, "K istorii russko-marokkanskikh otnoshenii kontsa XIX v.," *Sovetskie arkhivy* 6 (1984), pp. 54–59; "Sviazi Rossii i Marokko v XIX v.," *Aziia i Afrika segondia* 1 (1987), pp. 97–103; and "Pervoe Marokkanskoe posol'stvo v Rossii," *Aziia i Afrika segondia* 9 (1988), pp. 48–50.

6 For the best single work to date dealing with all of these categories, see Kane, "Pilgrims, Holy Places, and the Multi-Confessional Empire."

Christian leaders and communities, Russia's efforts can best be understood as part of a wider attempt to ingratiate Russia with the peoples of its southern and eastern peripheries. The Orthodox Christian communities seem to have been only one axis along which Russian "soft power" oozed into Ottoman domains.

EARLY RUSSIAN CONTACTS WITH THE MIDDLE EAST

Russian pilgrims had traveled to the Holy Land since at least the eleventh century, and throughout their histories both Muscovy and Imperial Russia supported its Orthodox monasteries and other religious institutions. The reigns of Peter the Great (1682–1725) and especially Catherine the Great (1762–1796) saw determined efforts to expand Russian power in the region. In addition to the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji's (1774) provisions allowing for a Russian role in protecting Ottoman Orthodox Christians, Catherine's reign witnessed temporary alliances with Egypt's rebellious governor, Ali Bey, the Druze warlord Yusuf Shihab in the Lebanese mountains, and Russian military action in support of them. After Russia's massive naval victory at Cheshme in July 1770, its warships raided Haifa, Acre, and Beirut. In 1773–1774 a Russian landing party occupied Beirut for five months.[7]

A tentative Russian diplomatic presence emerged after Catherine's first Turkish War. Along with the well known clauses that purportedly allowed Russia to protect Ottoman Christians, the Treaty of Kuchuk Kainardji accorded Russia consular privileges throughout Ottoman territory. Although the first such consul, dispatched to Alexandria in 1783, met a bad end a few years later,[8] Egypt was the initial focus of Russian diplomatic activity. In 1820 the Foreign Ministry opened a subsidiary consulate in the Palestinian port of Jaffa, through which most Russian pilgrims entered the Holy Land on their way to Jerusalem. In the 1820s and 1830s additional consulates and lesser diplomatic agencies appeared in most of the region's major commercial centers: Jerusalem, Acre, Haifa, Sidon, Tripoli, Latakia, Damascus, Aleppo, Alexandretta, Tarsus, Homs, Hama, and Cyprus. Mostly staffed by Europeans in Russian service, all of these offices initially fell under the authority of Russia's consul-general in Alexandria, who was in turn subordinate to the Russian ambassador in Constantinople.

7 Paul du Quenoy, "Arabs under Tsarist Rule: The Russian Occupation of Beirut, 1773–1774," *Russian History/Histoire Russe* 41:2 (2014).

8 The appointed consul appears to have been strangled on the orders of Egypt's ruler Ismail Bey, who was displeased with Russia's lackluster commitment to Egypt during Catherine the Great's second Ottoman War of 1788–1792. See P. Perminov, "Tri epizoda iz istorii russko-arabskikh sviazei v XVIII veke: epizod tretii, pervyi russkii konsul v Aleksandrii," *Aziia i Afrika segodnia* 9 (1987), pp. 51–54.

Russian Diplomatic Representation in the Ottoman Levant

In 1838 the consul-general in Alexandria recommended the establishment of a new consulate in Beirut, which had become an important commercial *entrepôt* and absorbed most of Russia's Levantine trade. Foreign Minister Karl Nessel'rode approved this recommendation in connection with a renewal of the Egyptian ruler Mohammed Ali Pasha's campaign against the Sultan, which saw Egyptian armies move into Syria. Since Britain and France supported the Ottomans against this insurgency, the new Beirut consulate also served as a post to monitor the evolving strategic situation and seek out opportunities to balance or confront West European influence. Konstantin Bazili, appointed to head the consulate in Jaffa in 1838, became the first Russian consul in Beirut a few months later. In 1843 he was named a consul-general in his own right and entrusted with diplomatic authority for all of Greater Syria and Palestine, independently of Russia's general consulate in Egypt. Bazili held this position until 1853, when the Crimean War forced his departure.

Bazili arrived in Beirut in November 1839. The opening of his consulate received a 21-gun salute.[9] Bazili was an excellent choice to be an intermediary between the Russian Empire and the diverse religious communities of Greater Syria. Born to a prominent Greek-Albanian family in Constantinople in 1809, his antecedents had been deeply involved in Greece's national independence movement. His grandfather, a large landowner, had been deprived of his property and sentenced to death for treason against the Ottoman government. Bazili's father found employment as a banker in Constantinople, where he got involved with Greek nationalist organizations. When violent anti-Greek riots swept Constantinople in 1821, he barely escaped with his life before fleeing to Russia. Young Konstantin, then aged twelve, attended a secondary school that trained boys from impoverished noble families for state service and made an effort to enroll the children of Orthodox immigrants from the Ottoman Empire. He later moved on to Odessa's Richelieu Lyceum, where he taught Greek while still enrolled as a student. Bazili's education brought him into contact and lifelong friendship with the young Nikolai Gogol, among other future literary and cultural figures. Bazili learned Russian to fluency, as well as Turkish and French. He came to regard Russia as his "homeland" (*rodina*) and never abandoned that conviction. After completing his schooling in 1830, Bazili traveled back to the Ottoman Empire and to Greece, which had won its independence the previous year. Rejecting an invitation to remain and join the Greek civil service, he instead accepted a job as a *dragoman* (interpreter) for the local Russian naval forces before joining the Russian Foreign Ministry. In 1834, after a short stint in St. Petersburg, he began a long-term assignment as an aid to the chief of the commission charged with establishing Russian governing institu-

9 Arkhiv vneshnei politiki Rossiiskoi Imperii (AVPRI), f. 131, d. 56, op. 820, l. 68.

tions in the Caucasus.[10]

Bazili's initial instructions in Beirut were to defend what the Foreign Ministry called the "lawful demands" of the Orthodox population of Greater Syria and monitor the free exercise of their rights of worship, nominally guaranteed by the reformist Ottoman government's declaration of full religious toleration in 1839. Despite this decidedly pro-Orthodox mandate, once on the ground Bazili found himself confronted with his posting's multi-confessional population. His consular residence in Beirut became a kind of cultural center, where he welcomed representatives of the region's diverse population and interesting guests from abroad (his classmate Gogol visited in 1848). Bazili learned Arabic (which seems to have become his young family's language at home), collected Arabic manuscripts for Russian libraries, and garnered so much historical and economic information about the region that he wrote one of its first empirical political histories[11] He recalled his fifteen years in the Levant, which included his first marriage and the birth of four children, as "the best years of my life."[12]

Bazili quickly saw the wisdom of expanding his diplomatic activities beyond his posting's Orthodox communities and interests. Writing the newly appointed Ottoman governor of Jerusalem in December 1840, Bazili included Russian Muslim pilgrims, who often stopped there as they ventured south from Damascus, in a list of "protected" faiths in which he expressed his country's official concern. He claimed to the governor that Russia's "several million" Muslim subjects were "showered with privileges by our government and live in harmony with the Christians." Alluding to the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi, the Russo-Ottoman defense treaty in effect from 1833 to 1841, Bazili hoped "that enlightened Muslims in this country will also recognize the rights of [Russia], which is a loyal ally of the Sublime Porte."[13] The following June he thanked the governor of Damascus for his efforts on the behalf of Muslims pilgrims from Russian-ruled Daghestan, who asked him to intercede in order to help them recover money Bedouin bandits had stolen from them on the way to Mecca.[14] Six weeks later he wrote the Ottoman governors of Tripoli and Latakia

10 I. M. Smilianskaia, "K. M. Bazili—Rossiiskii istorik i diplomat," *Ocherki po istorii russkogo vostokovedeniia* 4 (1959), pp. 52–78. After retiring from state service in 1860, Bazili became a prominent landowner in Kherson province and developed an interest in agriculture and the *zemstvo* (elected local government) movement. He died in Odessa in 1884. On the subject of Ottoman refugees, see Theophilus C. Prousis, *Russian Society and the Greek Revolution* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 1994), pp. 3–25.

11 Smilianskaia, "K. M. Bazili," pp. 58–60. The work is K. M. Bazili, *Siriia i Palestina pod turetskim pravitel'stvom* (Moscow, 1962). Written in 1846–1847 but not cleared for publication until 1862, it is still consulted as a text in regional political history. A Hebrew translation appeared as recently as 1983. The initial delay in publication was caused by Bazili's advocacy of land reform in Greater Syria, a subject uncomfortably close to Russia's still unresolved serf question.

12 Bazili, *Siriia i Palestina*, 17.

13 AVPRI, f. 208, op. 819, d. 319, l. 1840.

14 Ibid., d. 318, l. 1841. See also Eileen Kane, *Russian Hajj: Empire and the Pilgrimage to Mecca* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2015), pp. 29–35.

to request benevolent treatment for other groups of Russian pilgrims, "both Christians and Muslims."[15] Although Bazili also asked Ottoman authorities to protect Orthodox Christians against proselytizing by Roman Catholic and Protestant missionaries, his routine work clearly portrayed Russia as a friend to its own Muslim population and favorably disposed toward Muslims in the region. As Eileen Kane has pointed out, "Bazili was trying to ingratiate himself with the local Ottoman authorities and Muslim clergy, who, he hoped, would appreciate Russia's liberal attitude toward Islam, and be more inclined to favor Russian demands over those of Britain or France."[16]

Since Muslims comprised nearly half of the population of the territory for which Bazili was responsible, he believed that a conciliatory policy toward them would naturally benefit Russia. His conviction only deepened as he realized that many of the local Muslims resented French support for the region's Maronite Christians and British support for the Druze community that dominated the mountains south and east of Beirut. Both groups controlled economically important administrative enclaves following Mohammed Ali's expulsion in 1840, which edged Muslims out from access to valuable resources, markets, and trade routes.[17] By carefully guarding at least a pretense of neutrality among the region's sects, Bazili hoped to win political capital with all sides. Tellingly, he routinely ignored the demands of local Orthodox Christians that he work on their behalf to undermine Maronite and Druze autonomy.[18] As the Egyptian crisis subsided in the early 1840s, Bazili argued that the best solution for the Lebanese mountains would be the appointment of a strong Muslim governor responsible to Constantinople.[19] According to a British consular report, Bazili summarized his attitude by exclaiming "I hate the English influence. I hate the French influence. I hate all influences."[20] Yet by taking such a position, he could naturally expect Russia's influence to increase.

SHIFTING FROM ORTHODOX CHRISTIAN TO MUSLIM CONSTITUENTS

In 1843, the same year Beirut became the center of all Russian diplomacy in the Ottoman Levant, the arrival of a parallel Foreign Ministry agent complement-

15 AVPRI, f. 208, op. 819, d. 319, l. 1841.

16 Kane, "Pilgrims, Holy Places, and the Multi-Confessional Empire," p. 70.

17 For Bazili's impressions see Bazili, *Siriia i Palestina*, pp. 240–265. On the political settlement of 1842, see Engin Deniz Akarli, *The Long Peace: Ottoman Lebanon, 1861–1920* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), pp. 14–15. On the dissatisfaction of Muslims with it, see Caesar E. Farrah, *The Politics of Interventionism in Ottoman Lebanon, 1830–1861* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1, 2000). To a strong degree, the Maronite and Druze areas remain under those groups' de facto control to this day.

18 Smilianskaia, "K. M. Bazili," p. 69.

19 James Alan Tabor, "In the Service of the Russian Tsar: The Life and Work of Konstantin Mikhailovich Bazili, 1809–1884," Ph. D. dissertation, University of Michigan (2003), p. 76.

20 Quoted in ibid., 78. Ironically, he said it in French.

ed Bazili's efforts at what was now the Beirut general consulate. Representing the Foreign Ministry's Asian Department, Archimandrite Porfirii Uspenskii's instructions were to collect information on the condition of the Orthodox community in Jerusalem, assess the circumstances of the region's other Christian communities, and propose ways to address their concerns that would benefit them as well as the Russian Empire.[21] His natural first contact in the region was Bazili.

One of Uspenskii's most significant findings as he toured the region in the last three months of 1843 was that its Orthodox communities were impoverished, geographically dispersed, politically "insignificant," and relatively small in number. He discovered that there were only some 66,000 Orthodox Christians in Syria, out of a total population of 432,000, and a total Christian population of about 223,000, or slightly more than half the total.[22] The Orthodox communities, counting for only about one in every seven inhabitants, spread out, and considerably weaker than almost all of their neighbors, struck Uspenskii as a weak hope for building Russian influence in the region, regardless of their religious commonalities with Russia. As an Orthodox clergyman, Uspenskii did recommend supporting local Orthodox clergymen over Greek-speaking clerics from Constantinople, the establishment of a Russian ecclesiastical protectorate over the Orthodox Church in Syria, and an ecumenical union of the local Uniate Christian population with the Orthodox.[23] But for practical reasons he agreed with Bazili that Muslim communities, particularly those including the 85,000 "heterodox" Muslims (e.g. Alawites, Ismailis), found in the region might be promising new constituencies for Russia. Leading Druze families whom Uspenskii encountered also suggested that they might be willing to join the Orthodox fold in exchange for Russia's official protection.[23]

One of Uspenskii's formative discoveries in Jerusalem was the poor condition of the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, which sits on the site of Jesus Christ's crucifixion and burial. More recently, a Muslim sheikh had constructed a harem on its roof, inflicting both physical and spiritual damage on the holy site. Uspenskii advocated official intervention to remedy the situation, strongly recommending that any diplomatic approach to this unpleasant problem appeal to Russia's tolerance of Muslims at home, specifically "to the inviolability of mosques in the Russian Empire," to reach an equitable and mutually respectful solution. No immediate action was taken, but in 1850 he restated the problem and suggested that Russia purchase the sheikh's harem outright.[25]

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21 Hopwood, *Russian Presence*, p. 36.

22 Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi istoricheskii arkhiv (RGIA), f. 797, op. 87, d. 57, ll. 1, 22–23.

23 Ibid., ll. 23–31. There were about 37,000 Uniates, according to Uspenskii's statistics. Uniates living within the Russian Empire had been forcibly reintegrated into the Orthodox Church in the 1830s.

24 Ibid., ll. 23–28. Yusuf Shihab had offered such a relationship in the 1770s. See du Quenoy, "Arabs under Tsarist Rule."

25 AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517, d. 3605, 1843–45; P. V. Bezobrazov, ed., *Materialy dlia biografii episkopa Porfiriia Uspenskogo*, 2 vols. (St. Petersburg, 1910), I, p. 348.

When Uspenskii learned that the structure was technically the property of an Islamic religious endowment (*waqf*) and could therefore not be sold for commercial purposes, he proposed purchasing the harem specifically to convert it into a rest house for Muslim pilgrims.[26] Both Bazili and Vladimir Titov, the Russian ambassador in Constantinople, endorsed this idea, once again observing the desirability of stressing Russia's fair and benevolent treatment of Muslim populations at home rather than expressing righteous indignation over the treatment of a prominent Christian site.[27] Along with Uspenskii, they believed that such a sensitive approach to solving the immediate problem would only benefit Russia's public image among Muslims everywhere.

None of these exchanges discounted the primacy of Orthodoxy in Russian official thinking or undermined its desire to influence Orthodox Christians when and where possible. In the reign of Nicholas I (1825–1855), whose government was governed by Education Minister Count Sergei Uvarov's famous slogan "Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and 'Official Nationalism' [*narodnost'*]," religion and purposes of state became virtually synonymous. Bazili and Uspenskii—the former an Orthodox Christian refugee from deadly ethnic and religious violence in the Ottoman Empire and the latter a high-ranking Orthodox clergyman—undoubtedly understood their jobs and the interests of their Empire in these terms. The whole point of Uspenskii's fact-finding mission was to gather information that would help Russia promote its regional influence through Orthodoxy, even if the practicalities of the situation he encountered led him to identify other possible communities for that purpose as he went about his work on the ground. Bazili's engagement with Muslims and other non-Christian groups did not contradict his 1843 report on "The Religious and Moral Influence that Russia Exerts on Her Co-Religionists in the Orient," in which he argued that Russia should still try to use the local Orthodox clergy to promote what he called its "unique position" in Greater Syria.[28] Bazili's wildest dream was a grand Orthodox domain stretching "from Solovetsk [the monastery in the White Sea] to the desert of Sinai, from the rivers of California [site of Russia's Fort Ross settlement north of San Francisco] to the seas of Zante [Zakynthos, one of the Greek Ionian Islands Russia occupied during the Napoleonic Wars]."[29]

Nevertheless, in real terms official Russian support for Greater Syria's Orthodox Christians proved "episodic at best" and remained open to pragmatic reinterpretation in "instances where [Russia] stood to gain more from the loyalty of non-Orthodox groups."[30] Both Bazili and Uspenskii spent much of their time in the Holy Land arguing that reaching out to other religious com-

26 Bezobrazov, ed., *Materialy*, pp. 340–348.

27 A. Popoff, *La question des lieux saints de Jérusalem dans la correspondence diplomatique russe du XIXme siècle* (St. Petersburg, 1910), I, pp. 350–355.

28 AVPRI, f. 161, op. 233, d. 2, l. 1843.

29 Ibid., l. 1843.

30 Kane, "Pilgrims, Holy Places, and the Multi-Confessional Empire," p. 95.

munities, particularly Muslims, could further the goals of the Russian state. As they gained greater experience of the actual conditions on the ground, they acted on this more flexible and, at the risk of using a clichéd North American collegiate term, "interfaith" understanding with Muslims, Druze, and other communities. Along with Bazili's long tenure in Beirut, Uspenskii's return to the region in 1848 as the first head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem spoke to the validity of their actions and recommendations.

Russia's effort to ingratiate itself with the regional Muslims bore some fruit, though the specter of the Crimean War prevented a full ripening. When the diplomatic tension between Russia and the Ottoman Empire veered toward conflict in the summer of 1853, Bazili reported that his local Muslim contacts in Beirut "were accusing the Western powers of pushing the Sultan into a war against Russia." The local Muslim clergy (*ulema*) offered him their moral support and insisted that there would be no war if only the Ottoman government were better informed about the "real" situation in the Holy Land. According to Bazili, they even seemed to believe that Nicholas I's demands, delivered in a deliberately heavy-handed fashion by his emissary to Constantinople Prince Aleksandr Menshikov, expressed nothing more than "the sincerity and good intentions of the Emperor with regard to the prosperity of the Ottoman Empire."[31]

Local Druze leaders assured Bazili that they knew "Russia does not wish any kind of harm to Muslims, millions of whom prosper under her government." This had, of course, long been a mantra of Russian diplomacy in the Levant; now the Russians heard it repeated back to them almost word for word. The Druze leaders based their claim on positive interactions between their communities and Russian Muslim pilgrims who had traversed their territory. The Druze even seemed to view the prospective war as a separate Russian conflict with the Turks rather than with the Arabs, suggesting that they believed differences of ethnicity rather than religion were its true cause, or at least the only cause that interested them.[32] Bazili played to these sentiments by actively discouraging enthusiasm for the war among the local Orthodox community when some of its members expressed excitement about it.[33] This stood in marked contrast to the local French diplomats, representing one of Russia's major strategic antagonists, who, he claimed, fanned the flames of sectarian strife by scaremongering about the "fanaticism" of the regional Muslims and making a great show of their concern for the local Christian population.[34] Bazili's efforts did not, however, allay official Ottoman fears, which, as Selim Deringil claims, included well justified suspicions that certain foreign officials

31 AVPRI, f. 180, op. 517, d. 746, l. 1853.

32 Ibid., l. 1853.

33 Ibid., l. 1853.

34 Roderic Davison, "Turkish Attitudes Concerning Christian-Muslim Equality in the Nineteenth Century," *American Historical Review* 59:4 (1954), pp. 844–864.

were rapidly winning the allegiance of non-Christian groups, including "the Muslim population."[35] In this, they could only have meant the Russians.

CONTEXTUALIZING RUSSIA AND THE LEVANT

Although the Crimean War obliged Bazili and other Russian officials to leave the Holy Land (Bazili would later serve as a Russian negotiator at the peace conference), Russia's delicate approach to the Ottoman Levant did not unfold in isolation from its general approach to the Muslim world. Twenty years earlier, as the Eastern Question flared during Mohammed Ali Pasha's campaign against the Ottomans, Europe was rife with rumors of Russia's alliance overtures to the Egyptian ruler despite its defensive military obligations to Constantinople under the terms of the Treaty of Unkiar Skelessi.[36] In 1845 the Egyptian ruler was so delighted by Russia's reception of an engineering team he sent to study in the Urals that he expressed "such joy and pride that I do not have the words to express them" and engaged Russian engineers as technical advisers. This measure quickly resulted in an expansion of formal relations and trade agreements signed directly by Russia with the Egyptian government rather than its nominal Ottoman overlords.[37] The relationship eventually facilitated an expansion in trade relations and cultural ties, which endured after Egypt's occupation by Britain in 1882 and lasted up to the time of the Russian Revolution of 1917.[38]

Even earlier, France's conquest of Algeria in 1830 had stimulated one young Russian diplomat, the future Foreign Minister Prince Aleksandr Gorchakov, to recommend the establishment of formal relations with another Muslim realm, Morocco, with himself as the chief of mission. The idea did not materialize for several decades, but in 1897 a Russian consulate opened in Tangier. Along with some minor economic arguments, the major rationale was to position Russia as the only great power without obvious self-interest in the Sultanate so that it could benefit from playing the role of an intermediary.[39] To any student of Russian policy in the Ottoman Levant, this was a familiar approach. Vasilii Bakherakht, the first Russian diplomat to head the Tangier consulate, was instructed to emphasize "the charm that [Russia] justly employs in the entire Muslim East" and demonstrate that "many followers of Islam are living with the benefit of every blessing under the banner of the Russian state."[40] Bazili could have pronounced the very same words during his posting in the

35 Selim Deringil, "The Invention of Tradition as Public Image in the Late Ottoman Empire, 1808–1908," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 35:1 (1993), p. 13.

36 Khaled Fahmy, *All the Pasha's Men: Mehmed Ali, His Army, and the Making of Modern Egypt* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 300.

37 AVPRI, f. 161, I–1, op. 781, d. 22, 1. 133; II–3, op. 782, d. 1, 11. 13–18.

38 du Quenoy, "The Russian Empire and Egypt," pp. 218–227.

39 AVPRI, f. 151, op. 482, d. 2729, ll. 30–68.

40 AVPRI, f. 151, op. 482, d. 2731, ll. 40–70.

Levant. It is probably not coincidental that his son Aleksandr, born in Beirut in 1846, was serving as the head of Foreign Ministry's Asian Department (broadly responsible for North Africa as well as Asia) at exactly the time Bakherakht received his orders. Meeting Morocco's Foreign Minister upon arriving in Tangier, Bakherakht presented his Tsar as "a monarch under whose benevolent radiance millions of Muslims have for centuries lived in peace and prosperity, loving and honoring him as do all of his other subjects."[41] Bakherakht's successor P. S. Botkin received explicit instructions to hold Russia's image "especially high in the Muslim world." In this case Russian diplomacy resulted in highly favorable diplomatic relations, trade agreements, Moroccan assistance with provisioning Russia's Baltic Fleet on its long sail to doom during the Russo-Japanese War, and hopeful thinking about the future of Russia's influence in the Sultanate, either alongside or despite the establishment of France's protectorate in 1912.[42]

In another similar case, Persia, the Russian diplomat E. V. Sablin, who had previously served in Tangier, prudently observed upon his arrival in Teheran in 1907 that "the single and natural law of the land, the *shari'a*, is very advantageous for us, especially when all formalities demanded by the *shari'a* are observed at the completion of agreements."[43] In other words, respecting Muslim laws and customs blazed the trail toward building Russian influence in that country, too. Sablin could not have been more correct, for Russian pretenses of religious tolerance and political benevolence resulted in major commercial concessions, control over northern Persia's transportation infrastructure, an influential role on the side of the government in the country's civil war of 1906–1909, and the establishment of Russia's sphere of influence in the northern part of Persia as a term of the Anglo-Russian Entente of 1907.[44] By 1916 Russia held exclusive rights to oil exploitation in its sphere, and, in John LeDonne's words, Persia's "most populous provinces were being integrated into the inner frontier of the Russian Empire."[45]

Courting the sympathies of Muslim societies abroad thus certainly built on existing trends in official Russian thinking and matched forms of imperial governance at home.[46] In his political history of Greater Syria, Bazili wrote at some length about them in relation to earlier Russian diplomacy in the Middle East. The strategy was to emphasize—or if necessary invent—commonalities linking Russia favorably to the peoples of its southern and eastern borderlands, all of which were identified in official thinking with the traditionally defined "East."

41 AVPRI, f. 151, op. 482, d. 1368, ll. 5–6.

42 du Quenoy, "Tidings from a Faraway East."

43 Quoted in Crews, *For Prophet and Tsar*, p. 348.

44 Firuz Kazemzadeh, *Russia and Britain in Persia, 1864–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1968), pp. 148–240, 272–279, 439, 470, 675.

45 John P. LeDonne, *The Russian Empire and the World, 1700–1917: The Geopolitics of Expansion and Containment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 148.

46 See Kane, "Pilgrims, Holy Places, and the Multi-Confessional Empire."

This included positive portrayals of Russia's engagement with its own Muslim populations, rhetoric that Russian officials from Tangier to Teheran used to establish their country's credibility with Muslim hosts. As Russia's leading modernizer Sergei Vitte put it at the turn of the twentieth century, "our internal policy on the Muslim question is an important factor in foreign policy." Vitte strongly advocated "avoiding any measures toward Russian Muslim subjects that could open Russia to the accusation of intolerance of Islam and create an unfavorable attitude toward [Russia] throughout the Muslim world."[47] Nikolai Charykov, who served as Russia's ambassador to the Ottoman Empire in the years leading up to World War I, went a step further to argue that the "deep racial and confessional roots" that he supposed linked Christian peoples to what he called "their Muslim colleagues" should be exploited for geopolitical gain.[48]

The strategy advocated by these personalities had firm precedents in Russian consular activity in Greater Syria two generations earlier. Naturally, much of the diplomatic nature of what turned into the Crimean War—and most subsequent historiography of the era—rested on the assumption that Russia's inflexible support for Orthodox interests made it a dangerous rival for the loyalty of the Holy Land's Christians. By showing well meaning impartiality and constructive engagement, however, Russia succeeded in building ties with the local Muslims, among other groups, a pattern they would repeat all over the Muslim world for the rest of the imperial era and reprise with some success both during and since the Cold War. Looking back on his own career as a Soviet and post-Soviet Middle East specialist, the late Russian Prime Minister Evgenii Primakov waxed that "there is perhaps no other state with a Christian majority and a Muslim minority that can serve, in the way Russia does, as an example of peaceful cohabitation, of sharing and adopting each other's cultures and creating a very special kind of community."[49] One could easily contest this point of view in light of Russia's wars in the Caucasus and Central Asia, but there can be little doubt what message Primakov would have liked to have conveyed to Muslims of the Middle East on behalf of his government.

CONCLUSION

Russia's approach to Muslim populations in the Ottoman Levant reveal a great deal about the priorities of Empire as Russia sought axes of expansion while simultaneously confronting the limitations of its military power to impose rule in strategic areas beyond its frontiers. Russian engagement in Greater Syria

47 Rossiiskii Gosudarstvennyi Istoricheskii Arkhiv (RGIA), f. 821, op. 150, ed. khr. 409, l. 14.

48 Dmitrii Arapov, "Russkii posol v Turtsii N. V. Charykov i ego 'zakliuchenie' po 'musul'manskomu voprosu'," *Vestnik Evrazii* 2 (2002), p. 155.

49 Yevgeny Primakov, *Russia and the Arabs: Behind the Scenes in the Middle East from the Cold War to the Present*, trans. Paul Gould (New York: Basic Books, 2009), p. 384. The Russian-language edition appeared in 2006.

dwelled heavily on finding allies among regional peoples who might be well disposed toward cooperation with Russia, or who could be successfully courted by Russian policies to conduct local politics in Russia's interests. Apart from the local Orthodox Christian communities, these included other religious sects that inhabited the Levant, including Muslims. Russia emphasized what it presented as its benevolent rule of Muslims within its borders, ideas of a shared faith community and "Eastern identity," and practical politics of diplomatic and legal support to convince Levantine Muslims that it was an impartial player in what was increasingly becoming an imperial contest in the Middle East.

Russian successes in the 1830s and 1840s laid the groundwork for an expansion of Russia's presence in the Middle East after the rupture of the Crimean War and also served as a model for Russian approaches to other Muslims societies as far away as Morocco and Iran in the decades leading up to World War I and, indeed, for Soviet and post-Soviet approaches to Muslim lands. The policy nexus also informed domestic approaches to Muslim populations within the Russian Empire. Despite other reversals in global affairs, Russia enjoyed considerable strategic successes that built on these policies, which reverberate in Russia's approach to the Middle East today.