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THE DAMASCUS AFFAIR



The Mission Hospital, now the Anglican International School, Jerusalem

BY FRAN WADDAMS

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Telephone: 01623 883960

E-mail: office@cmj.org.uk

Eagle Lodge, Hexgreave Hall Business Park, Farnsfield, Notts NG22 8LS

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Section 1 - Introduction

In 1983, only 38 years since the end of World War 2, the full horror of the Holocaust had been exposed leaving the world reeling and appalled. It is at this time that Mustafa Tlass, the Syrian Defence Minister of the period, published his book “The Matzah of Zion” which was aimed at an Arabic readership. The cover illustration is disturbing. It shows Jews holding a non-Jewish man down as his throat is cut and his blood collected in a bowl. The 1986 second edition has a menorah slashing the man’s throat on its cover instead. The depiction of the Jews could have come straight from the pages of Der Sturmer. Tlass’ book purported to record the events of what became known as The Damascus Affair of 1840 in which the ancient blood libel against the Jews was revived following the murder of a Roman Catholic priest and his Muslim servant in Damascus.

The Middle East Media Research Unit (MEMRI) have translated some key passages which give a flavour of the book.¹

“ .. the priest Tomas Al-Kaboushi [the Capuchin] fell victim to a group of Jews who sought to drain his blood to prepare baked goods for their Yom Kippur holiday [sic].”

“The West had known many similar crimes, as had Czarist Russia.”

“And, as happens today, the Jews carry out a crime, after which they stir up a storm in the world and do not settle for acquittal but even exploit the opportunity to gain profit.”

This, together with other antisemitic publications and comments, made Tlass arguably the highest, anti-Semite, Arab profile of his day. His book has been translated into several European languages, including English, and in 2003 Egyptian film producer Mounir Radhi was reported to be considering adapting the story for a movie.² The film would, according to Radhi, have been an Arab response to “Schindler’s List”, Stephen Spielberg’s film of the book “Schindler’s Ark” by Thomas Keneally. “Schindler’s Ark”

told the story of Nazi persecution of Europe's Jews against the background of Oskar Schindler, a businessman who first tried to make money from the plight of Jews in Krakow, then engaged in a campaign to save them from Nazi death camps.³ Not a story of destruction, but one of transformation.

Horrifyingly, the past 40 years have seen a huge upsurge in some of the crudest forms of antisemitism in the Middle East. Hitler's "Mein Kampf", which attacks Jews on racial grounds, and "The Protocols of the Learned Elders of Zion", a fraudulent Russian 20th Century document which purports to describe a Jewish plot to take over the world by stealth, are both best sellers in Arab speaking countries.

The Blood Libel contained in "The Matzah of Zion" is another pernicious form of Antisemitism, which has nurtured Christian antisemitism for 700 years or more.

Section 2 – The Church's Blood Libel of the Jews

Shortly after the Norman conquest, there was a significant migration of Diaspora Jews into England. Their success, despite draconian laws forbidding them access to land, guilds and other means of income, was soon followed by envy and hostility from their gentile fellow citizens. The Catholic Church, fed by the hate-filled teaching about Jews from theologians such as Justin Martyr, John Chrysostom and St Augustine, had already institutionalised antisemitism in the Church. Crusaders rampaged through Jewish communities in Europe on their way to 'defend' Jerusalem, slaughtering and pillaging as they went. They believed they were carrying out God's judgement on the 'Christ killers' in their midst.

¹ <https://www.memri.org/reports/damascus-blood-libel-1840-told-syrian-defense-minister-mustafa-tlass>

² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2003/jun/22/religion.guardiancolumnists>

³ <https://www.nationalreview.com/2004/04/passover-hate-steven-stalinsky/>

It is from this fetid atmosphere came the first examples of the Blood Libel. In this expression of Christian antisemitism, Jews were accused of kidnapping Christian children around the time of Pesach, and draining their blood to incorporate in the unleavened bread used during the seven days of the springtime festival. Little Sir William of Norwich and Little St Hugh of Lincoln (whose shrine exists to this day in Lincoln Cathedral) are two famous examples of the blood libel.

In the case of Little Sir William, there are various tales told, but most agree that a 12 year old boy was found murdered and mutilated in woods near Norwich around Easter time in 1144. There was no evidence to suggest who had carried out the murder, but soon, Jews were blamed for the mutilations, accused of draining the child's blood for use in Passover matzah. At the time, the Norwich Jewish community enjoyed some protection from the King's sheriffs, but a monk, Geoffrey of Monmouth, 'investigated' the crime, and some 30 years' later published "The Life and Passion of Saint William of Norwich" in which William's death was laid firmly at the door of the Jewish community. A few decades later, the death of Little St Hugh of Lincoln, who also died tragically young in mysterious circumstances, was also laid at the door of the Jewish Community centred on Steep Hill in Lincoln.

Despite some official resistance to these preposterous fabrications, pogroms against Jewish communities spread throughout England. Increasing persecution, and pressure to provide money for the King eventually resulted in the forced expulsion of the Jews (without their accumulated property!) by Edward I in 1290.

The blood libel reappeared sporadically in Europe after this time, but although persecution of Europe's Jews continued, it was not until 1840, when it re-emerged, in Damascus, this time amongst Christians who introduced it to the Muslim Arab community. As

a result, the Blood Libel enjoyed a revival in some of the finest homes and largest newspapers in Europe and has circulated in much of the Muslim world ever since.

Section 3 – Jews under the Ottoman Empire

There have been thriving Jewish communities across the Middle East and North Africa for thousands of years. Ancient communities in Iraq and Syria date from the Babylonian exile 2500 years ago. Though distinctive in culture, dress, food, and customs, Jews were engaged and established within their societies. Jews generally lived in urban communities around their synagogues, and as such Syrian synagogues contained some of the finest and most historically reliable manuscripts of Hebrew scriptures and the Talmud. Their schools, Rabbis, and Scholars were renowned. Under Ottoman rule Jewish communities survived and often flourished. They, like Christians, were regarded as Dhimmis – non-Muslims who though subject to certain taxes and disadvantages, were nevertheless under the protection of the Muslim authorities. Restrictions for Dhimmis, could include

- A special tax (the jizya),
- Forbidden to bear arms,
- Not allowed to ride horses,
- Forbidden to build new houses of worship or repair old ones,
- Restrictions on public processions and worship,
- Not permitted to make converts (which affected Christians more than Jews),
- In some places, dhimmis had to wear distinctive clothing,
- Forbidden to build homes or places of worship higher than Muslim ones.

These regulations were not always enforced, though there was persecution from the authorities at times, it very much depended upon the whim of the individual ruler. Economically, Ottoman

authorities normally encouraged Jewish communities to do business because they were so successful. They brought trade and revenue to the cities where they lived and they did not cause trouble to the authorities.

During the late 18th and early 19th Centuries, the Ottoman Empire's fortunes began their long decline which ended in its demise after World War 1. The industrial revolution was spreading from Britain throughout Europe. Some European countries were reclaiming territory taken by the Ottoman Empire, using both military and growing economic strength. For example, France had taken control of Algeria and both Russia and Austria-Hungary had taken back land around the Black Sea. As Ottoman power faltered, there was no shortage of other powers eager to fill the void they left.

Indigenous Christian communities had always been an important minority within the Ottoman Empire, sharing the dhimmi status of Jews. There were also significant numbers of European Catholic communities of monks and nuns living particularly in and around sites associated with Christian history in the Holy Land, Egypt and Syria. Emerging European powers now began to use this Christian heritage as leverage to extend their influence over Ottoman territory, imposing diplomatic relations – and pressure – upon the weakening Ottoman powers, in the name of protecting Christians and Jews.

In Damascus, for example, Austro-Hungarian and French delegations represented both their nations' interest, and claimed protection over Jewish and Christian communities respectively. They used that position to take up questions of their treatment with the Ottoman Muslim authorities in Damascus.

Damascus in the 1830s and 40s was under the rulership of Pasha Sharif, adopted son of the Vizier of Egypt, Mehmet Ali. France was attempting to forge an alliance with Mehmet Ali,

without reference to the Ottoman government in Constantinople, indicating not only French ambitions but also the weakness of the central Ottoman Authorities.

It was against this background of a weakening Ottoman power and European nations hungry to exert their authority over lucrative Ottoman lands and trade routes that the Damascus affair of 1840 unfolded.

Section 4 – The Damascus Affair

Friar Tomaso, an Italian who may also have had French citizenship, had lived as a Capuchin Friar in Damascus for some years. On 5 February 1840, he disappeared together with his Muslim servant Ibrahim ‘Amāra. Albert Hyamson, researched the incident and wrote a paper, *The Damascus Affair – 1840*, on the Centenary which was read before the Jewish Historical Society of England in June 1940. According to Hyamson, Friar Tomaso was well known to many Jewish families because he undertook medical work on local children.⁴

The Friar and his servant had last been seen in the Jewish quarter. Arab witnesses testified that a few days before the disappearance, they saw Friar Tomaso quarrelling with some Arab Muslim merchants, one of whom apparently threatened the monk’s life. However, following his disappearance, his fellow Capuchins immediately claimed that Jews had murdered both men in order to use their blood to make matzo for Passover – a blood libel which was not unknown within the Ottoman empire which had not previously been taken seriously by any Ottoman authorities.

The French Consul in Damascus, Comte de Ratti-Menton, was a man well known for his anti-Jewish views. He was described by *The Times’* Paris correspondent as ‘an instigator of atrocities

⁴ Albert Hyamson ‘The Damascus Affair – 1840’ A paper read before the Jewish Historical Society of England, 4 August 1940

and arch-persecutor of the Jews.¹⁵ Ratti-Menton, discovered that shortly before their disappearance, Friar Tomaso was putting up notices of a sale of goods in the Jewish quarter. Acting to 'protect' the Christians of Damascus, he decided to have several leading local Jews arrested, imprisoned and tortured as part of an 'investigation' into the disappearance of the two men. A Jewish barber, Solomon Negrin, eventually gave a 'confession' to the murder under torture.

Unfortunately, there was some support for Ratti-Menton's actions amongst the local European population, including the British Consul, Nathaniel Wherry, who was content to leave his French counterpart's actions unchallenged, and actually suggested that there was some truth in the appalling allegations of blood libel. In a dispatch of 30th March 1840 sent to Lord Ponsonby, British Ambassador in Constantinople, despite knowing the confessions had been obtained under gross torture, Wherry wrote;

'It has been immemorially the received opinion and belief of the Christian population throughout Turkey, and several instances have been brought to light, by the local Governments in different parts that, the Jews scattered throughout the Country, immolated clandestinely Christians, to obtain their blood, to celebrate their feast therewith in their religious ceremonies, this fact has been proved here.'¹⁶

He goes on to describe the events of the murder of Friar Tomaso by seven Jews in the house of prominent community member David Harari, in blood-curdling detail.

By this time, most of the prominent members of Damascus's 3,000 strong Jewish community, along with other less influential Jews, were in prison and under threat of torture. Among those imprisoned were scores of young Jewish boys who were under pressure to confirm that the Torah and Talmud prescribed the use of Christian blood for Jewish rituals.

When some bones were found in a sewer in the Jewish quarter, the accusers proclaimed that they were those of Tomaso, and buried them accordingly. The inscription on the tombstone stated that it was the grave of a saint tortured by the Jews.

However, one of those arrested, Isaac Levi Picciotto, was an Austrian citizen from a distinguished family that boasted Austrian Diplomats in its ranks. As a result, he was under the protection of the Austrian consul, Giovanni Merlato. Picciotto's Austrian citizenship eventually led to the intervention of Austria, England and the United States in the affair. On discovering that the 'confessions' to the murder of Friar Tomaso had been extracted by tortures so appalling that they had even led to the death of one prisoner, Merlato began his own investigations and came to very different conclusions to those of Wherry and Ratti-Menton. Due to Merlato's protestations to Austrian Chancellor, the great Prince Klemens von Metternich, torture of the Jewish prisoners was suspended and the Vizier of Egypt, Mehmet Ali Pasha, was persuaded to restrain Pasha Ali's actions against the Jews of Damascus.

However, much damage had already been done. Apart from the arrest and torture of leading members of the Jewish community, the Jobar Synagogue, the oldest and finest synagogue in Damascus, had been sacked and Jewish homes and businesses ransacked. Worst of all the genie of the blood libel was now well and truly out of the bottle and had, for the first time, been prosecuted by the Ottoman authorities.

CMJ intervention in the Damascus Affair

In his 1997 paper "Ritual Murder in the Modern Era: The Damascus Affair of 1840" Jonathan Frankel, whose book "The

⁵ Albert Hyamson op cit

⁶ Hyamson op cit

Damascus Affair” is arguably the definitive work on the subject, comments;

Probably the most cogent and powerful rebuttals of the blood accusation were written by Anglican missionaries committed to the proposition that the Second Coming or Advent of Christ was dependent on the conversion of the Jewish people to Christianity. A crucial role was played in the ritual-murder affair, for example, by one such missionary, a British (originally German) Jew converted to Christianity, who in March hastened from Jerusalem to Damascus in an effort to save the condemned men. His subsequent report, detailing the forms of torture used, received world-wide publicity and proved to be a devastatingly effective defence of the Jews.⁷

The “Anglican missionaries” to whom Frankel referred belonged to the London Society for the Promotion of Christianity Amongst the Jews (the London Society), forerunner of today’s CMJ, and we now turn to their interventions in the Damascus Affair.

The London Society had established a presence in Jerusalem as early as 1836. Christian clergy were forbidden by the Ottoman authorities to settle in Jerusalem, so the earliest of the Society’s representatives, Dr Albert Gerstmann and Melville Bergheim a doctor and pharmacist respectively, were sent by the Society to Jerusalem as medical personnel. In 1837 they were joined by a clergyman, Reverend George Wildon Pieritz, who helped in the clinic Gerstmann and Bergheim established that year, in treating the very poor Jewish community of Jerusalem.

George Pieritz was born into a Jewish family in 1809 in Klecko, now Poland, then Prussia, and showed such promise as a scholar of Judaism that he was ordained as a rabbi at the age of 18 in 1827. He became a believer in Jesus and was baptised in 1835 under the sponsorship of the King of Prussia and the great Jewish believer Neander.⁸ His missionary zeal to his people was such

that he joined the London Society and was dispatched by them in 1837 to the Society's Jerusalem medical mission.

Shortly after the arrest of several leading Jews following Friar Tomasi's disappearance, the Jews of Damascus began sending messages to Jewish communities in Europe and the United States, pleading for their help in stopping further persecution. The London Society Mission in Jerusalem was approached in February or March 1840 by the Jewish community in Jerusalem who asked for their help and intervention in having the arrested men released.

As a result, the London Society sent George Pieritz to Damascus where he arrived on 30th March 1840, with a brief to investigate and report back on the affair to the Society and to British officials in the region. After conducting extensive enquiries both within the Jewish and Arab communities, and amongst European diplomats, Pieritz presented his findings to British Officials in Alexandria in a report dated 19 May 1840, entitled 'Persecution of the Jews at Damascus'.

Pieritz's account begins with a brief description of the disappearance of Father Tomaso and his servant, and the subsequent accusations of ritual murder made by the friar's Capuchin community. Pieritz records the actions taken by the authorities in Damascus, then tells in harrowing detail the methods used to extract information about the alleged murder. The tortures used are appalling, but perhaps the worst aspect was the imprisonment of dozens of Jewish children for 28 days, undergoing questioning every day until, as Pieritz records, "One of the dear little ones, however, is persuaded to answer a seductive question in the affirmative. He said his father killed the monk and then threw the body into a certain pit in the court-yard of his

⁷ Ritual Murder in the Modern Era: The Damascus Affair of 1840, Frankel 1997

⁸ https://www.ssmjchurchyard.org.uk/pieritz_family.php



Werry's Grave



Little Sir William of Norwich



Metternich

Shrine of Little St Hugh,
Lincoln Cathedral



A view over 19th century Damascus



Jews worshipping at the 'Wailing Wall'
in the 19th Century when LSPCAJ
began its Holy Land Ministry.



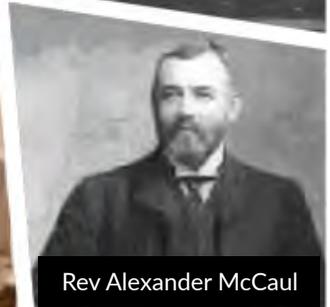
Sir Moses Montefiore

Jewish girl



The Mission Hospital, now the Anglican
International School, Jerusalem

Christ Church Jerusalem



Rev Alexander McCaul



13th century manuscript showing the expulsion of Jews from England under Edward 1

Mehmet (Muhammed) Ali Pasha of Egypt



Ottoman Sultan Abdulmejid 1



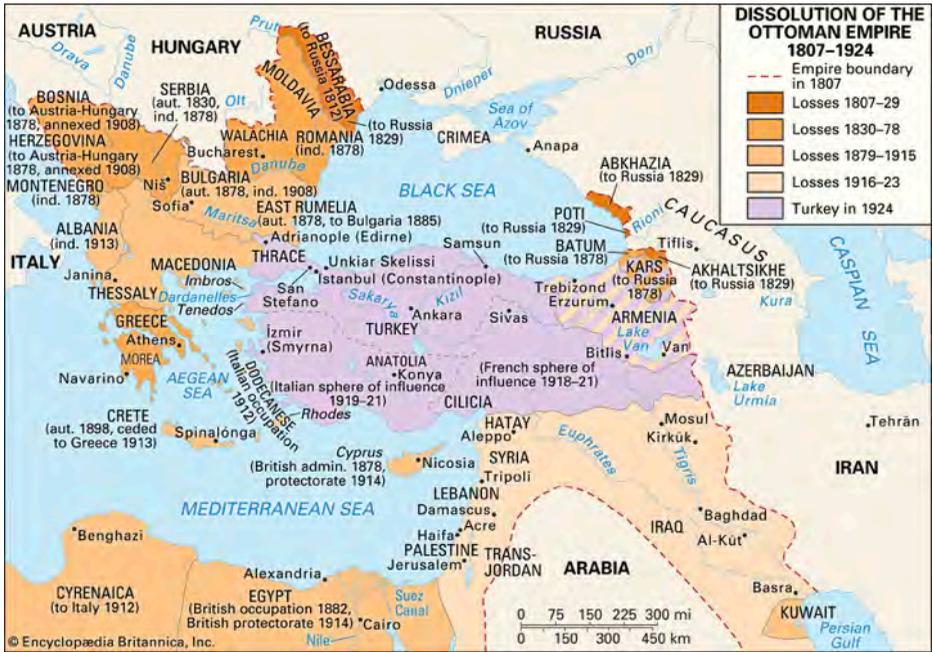
Father Tomaso and his Muslim servant Amara



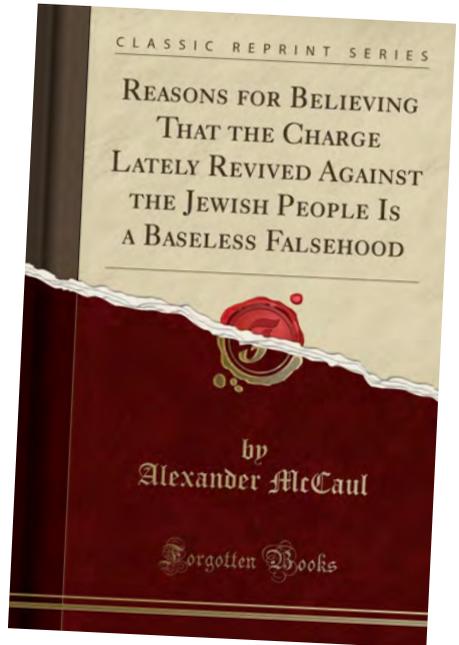
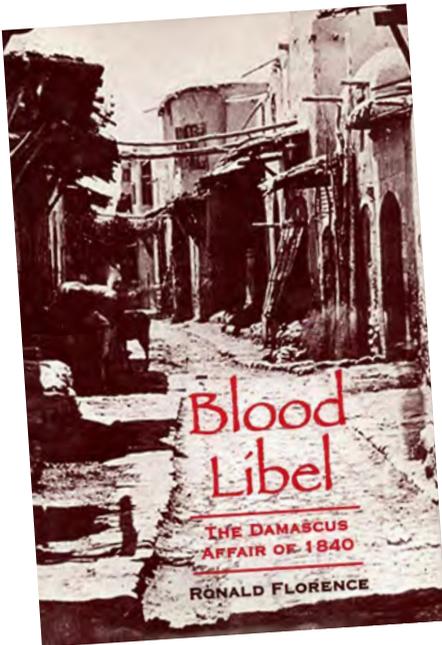
Lord Palmerston



Jobar Synagogue after Syrian civil war



Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840
by Ronald Florence



Reasons for Believing That the Charge Lately Revived Against the Jewish People is a Baseless Falsehood – Alexander McCaul

schoolmaster.”⁹ A search of the place the child spoke of yielded nothing.

According to Pieritz, further ‘confessions’ were then extracted from the imprisoned Jews by torture until finally one of the Rabbis was forced to sign a paper to the effect that Jews required human blood to make the Passover Matzo. The circle was complete. Seven Jews were subsequently accused of the murder of Friar Tomaso and his servant.

In his report, Pieritz expresses contempt for the behaviour of the French consul, Le Comte de Ratti-Menton and other French officials who not only encouraged belief in the nonsensical blood libel throughout their handling of the affair, but pursued evidence to substantiate it. For instance, Pieritz records that on one occasion in the course of his investigations;

*The French Consul rushes into the house (of a Jewish family) with a curbage (possibly cravache – a riding crop), and flogs a young woman in it. I have it on good authority that the Prussian consul lodged a formal complaint in the proper quarter against the French Consul for this outrage.*¹⁰

He also records another assault perpetrated by the French Consul, this time against a suspect and his wife. Pieritz writes, “The French Consul (...) like a madman, began to beat both Abulafia and his wife. He laid a rope around his neck, threatening to strangle him. (...) Not satisfied with this, he dragged him about the courtyard by the rope around his neck.” However, Pieritz commends “the constancy of the poor female Mohammedan slave of David Arari (one of the accused she was examined almost daily and also mostly tortured, but nevertheless she remains as firm as a rock in the assertion of her master’s innocence.”¹¹

Hyamson reports that Pieritz’s dispatch concluded “I found the whole charge against the Jews (at Damascus) a vile fabrication,

and that all means and right of legal defence was denied them: while the most cruel tortures were employed to extort from them false confessions of guilt.”¹²

In June 1840 Pieritz's report was printed in *The Times* and was published as a pamphlet by Sir David Salomons, the first Jewish Mayor of London, under the title "An account of the Recent Persecution of the Jews at Damascus with Reflections Thereon." It had a wide readership and a profound effect on *Times* readers, who had previously been treated to *The Times's* articles and letters which were highly ambiguous in their approach to the blood libel. The reaction to Pieritz's report was one of outrage at both the torture used against the Jews of Damascus and the hostile attitudes of the French and British ambassadors toward the wronged Jews and their community.

Alexander McCaul, was a leading figure in the London Society, a missionary and later principal of the Hebrew College (founded by the London Society) and professor of Hebrew and Jewish Literature at King's College London. He was well acquainted with Judaism and the Torah, and took up his pen to defend the Jews against the accusations of the blood libel. His "Reasons for believing that the charge lately revived against the Jewish People is a baseless falsehood" was dedicated on 1 July 1840 and with her permission, to HM Queen Victoria, who took a personal interest in the Damascus Affair.

After stating that, "A remnant of the old superstition, however, has again revived the most foul and most pernicious calumny with which (Jews) have ever been vexed, and rekindled the spirit of

⁹ An Account of the Persecution of the Jews in Damascus. G W Pieritz 1840 p 8

¹⁰ Pieritz op cit P 11

¹¹ Ibid P 20

¹² Hyamson, op cit

persecution”¹³ McCaul launches into a defence of Jews and the Jewish faith that is both passionate and scholarly. He concludes;

*Nineteen years of intimate acquaintance with Israelites, and the study of their literature, have produced in me a profound respect for their genius, their kindness of heart, and their preference for learning and literature before wealth and luxury. Never was a people more misunderstood and misrepresented than the Jews. I confess that from the Bible I had learned to regard them with awe. A nearer approach has taught me to look upon them with respect and affection.*¹⁴

McCaul's book launched a scholarly riposte to the insinuations raised in, amongst other places, *The Times*, that there might be some truth in the blood libel. After all, if none other than the British Consul was prepared to entertain the possibility that, on the basis of there being 'no smoke without fire', widespread rumours of atrocities committed by Jews for their religious rituals might have some basis in fact, so might others. McCaul's robust rebuttal of the blood libel informed and encouraged those who deplored the actions of the Damascus Authorities, as it enabled them to rebut the charges based on sound knowledge of the principles of Judaism that outlawed such practices.

The great evangelical reformer and supporter of the London Society, Lord Shaftesbury also played his part. He was one of a London Society deputation (which also included the Bishop of Ripon and banker Sir Thomas Baring) who visited Foreign Secretary Lord Palmerstone on 28th May 1840. Hyamson describes the earnest appeal made to the Prime Minister by his visitors to intervene in the affair in which "inoffensive people of Israel, suffering under unmerited and cruel torment for a crime as abhorrent to the character and religion of the Jews as it is revolting to the feelings of Christians ..."¹⁵ The delegation brought with them a motion passed at the London Society's Annual Conference expressing their "deep sympathy with the Jewish

nation” and pressing for the Foreign Secretary to use his influence and take action to stop further “atrocities”.

Palmerstone, it should be said, had responded to British Consul Wherry’s suspicions with scorn. On reading Wherry’s dispatch to Lord Ponsonby of 30th March 1840, Palmerstone commented, “I am sorry to find Mr Wherry entertains opinions so un-English about Torture and Justice. He has been too long in the Levant and must come home and spend a year in England ...”¹⁶

Moreover, Palmerstone was not unaware of the foreign policy potential for undermining French influence in the Middle East, and promoting Britain’s influence in the region where the Ottoman Empire’s decline was creating a power vacuum. His views were highly influential with Queen Victoria, and he had already interested her in Shaftesbury’s suggestions for a Jewish homeland for Jews to return to in Ottoman Palestine.¹⁷ Doubtless this helped influence Queen Victoria’s decision to allow McCaul to dedicate his book to her.

Palmerston’s response to the delegation was to assure them that the British Government was indeed making efforts to ensure that the persecuted Jews would be released and that amends would be made to them for their suffering. Furthermore, British Government officials were to be instructed to press for assurances that no such event would happen again.

¹³ Alexander McCaul: Reasons for believing that the charge lately revived against the Jewish People is a baseless falsehood. 1840 p 1

¹⁴ Ibid P 54 f

¹⁵ Hyamson, op cit

¹⁶ FO minute 78/140 23 March 1840 as quoted by Hyamson op cit

¹⁷ Lord Palmerstone and the Protection of the Jews in Palestine 1839-51. Isaiah Freedman Jewish Social Studies Vol. 30, No. 1 (Jan., 1968)

Eventually an Anglo-Jewish mission, paid for by London's Jewish community and led by Sir Moses Montefiore left London for Egypt in July 1840. Prior to departing, Montefiore had had a meeting with Palmerston, and been received by the Queen herself.

In early August, Montefiore was received by Egyptian Pasha Mehemet Ali, with courtesy, but with little prospect of progress in freeing the prisoners or preventing a recurrence of such events. However, in an extraordinary turn of fortune, by the end of that month, a firman (decree) had been issued by the Sultan in Constantinople agreeing not only to the release of the prisoners but also to an undertaking that such a blood libel was never to be repeated in the Ottoman Empire. Subsequently Mehemet Ali ordered his adopted son to release all Jewish Prisoners from custody in Damascus.

Section 5 – Results of the Damascus Affair

Jonathan Frankel, author of the book "The Damascus Affair" claims that whilst belief in the blood libel had largely died away in Europe, it still had a strong hold within Christian communities in the Ottoman Empire. He writes, "That the Jews practiced human sacrifice was, it turned out, a belief endemic amongst many, perhaps most, of the huge indigenous Christian populations throughout the Ottoman Empire."¹⁸ Frankel notes that even though such rumours were not uncommon when Christian children went missing, the Ottoman Authorities had not pursued the allegations, seeing no merit in supporting the Christian community against the Jewish community.

The difference in approach by leaders in Damascus and Alexandria in 1840, might, he suggests, be explained by their desire to reach out to the West, over the heads of the Ottoman court in Constantinople. Perhaps they felt that adopting the narrative of the Christian monks against the Jews would win them favour amongst influential Europeans, particularly the French. Initial

reactions from local representatives of European countries and even the US Consul might have justified their belief.

Sadly, the Ottoman rejection of the blood libel was not reflected in Catholic Europe. Three years later an account of the Damascus affair was compiled by the French newspaper *L'Univers*, and it was eventually put into a 400 page volume called "The Damascus Protocols".¹⁹ Published in several languages including; French, German, and Arabic, its quasi-judicial, investigative tone meant that its assertion – murder rituals were part of Jewish religious worship and that these practices were still carried out in the Ottoman Empire – served to buttress beliefs that underpinned the original blood libel in Catholic Europe.

In Britain and the US, however, the blood libel met with little popular or scholarly approval and, thanks to the efforts of evangelical Christians, not least those from the London Society, the Jewish Community found that they had significant support among the British public, with accusations of Blood Libel against the Jews being given the despised label of 'Witch-hunt'.

The Damascus Affair also the marked first time that Jewish Communities worldwide rallied to the cause of defending a Jewish community abroad from antisemitism. Money was donated and petitions to governments on behalf of the Jews of Damascus were raised not only in Britain, but also in the United States, France, and other European countries. This campaigning spirit and the realisation that Jewish communities could influence their governments on behalf of their fellow Jews resulted in the establishment of committees and community newspapers such as the *Jewish Chronicle* which was founded in London in 1841.

¹⁸ "Ritual Murder" in the Modern Era: The Damascus Affair of 1840 J Frankel, *Jewish Social Studies* New Series, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Winter, 1997)

¹⁹ J Frankel op cit

Section 6 – Resurgence of Modern Antisemitism and the Blood Libel

How many of us could have believed, just a few decades after the Holocaust, that the world would once again witness the rise of antisemitism? Antisemitism has never really left the thinking of the far Right, yet today some of the crudest expressions of antisemitism can be found on the political Left, in Muslim majority countries, and Muslim communities in the West. As mentioned before, Hitler's "Mein Kampf" and "The Learned Protocols of the Elders of Zion" have been best sellers in some Middle Eastern, North African countries, and Turkey for years.

Likewise, in the UK and Europe, antisemitism is not confined to the traditional preserve of the far Right. Here's the father of Communism, Karl Marx (himself a Jew) writing in his book "On the Jewish Question", written in 1843, just after the Damascus Affair;

Let us consider the actual, worldly Jew – not the Sabbath Jew, as Bauer does, but the everyday Jew. Let us not look for the secret of the Jew in his religion, but let us look for the secret of his religion in the real Jew. What is the secular basis of Judaism? Practical need, self-interest. What is the worldly religion of the Jew? Huckstering. What is his worldly God? Money. Money is the jealous god of Israel, in face of which no other god may exist. Money degrades all the gods of man – and turns them into commodities.... The bill of exchange is the real god of the Jew.²⁰

Contemporary left-wing antisemitism in the West has coalesced around attitudes towards Israel. Since the mid-1960s Israel has increasingly been framed by the political Left as a European colonialist project, in which European settlers have conspired to displace and dispossess indigenous Palestinian inhabitants of the Holy Land. As the Left generally views colonialism as the Greatest Evil, Zionism – which is in reality the aspiration of Jews to self-determination in their ancient and historic homeland – is believed

to epitomise the worst of Western Europe. The policies and actions of the Israeli government are subjected to minute scrutiny, and amongst NGOs, Charities and world bodies such as the Human Rights Council, Israel's guilt is taken for granted. The only country to have a standing motion against it at every UN Human Rights Council Session is not North Korea, or Iran or China, but – you guessed it – Israel.

Since 2016 this far Left view of Israel has gone mainstream in sections of the UK Labour party, where “Zionism” and “Zionist” are used as ultimate insults to damn politicians and party workers alike. In this world view, no Zionist can be a decent, moral person. A Zionist supports “child murder” “apartheid” and “ethnic cleansing”. A Zionist is beyond decency, capable of all kinds of evil. Blood libels form part of this narrative as Israeli soldiers are repeatedly accused of deliberately targeting and murdering Palestinian children, despite substantial evidence that the Israel Defence Force goes to extreme lengths to avoid casualties among civilians, measures unheard of from the armies of other nations. At the same time, those who hate Israel and Jewish national aspirations turn a blind eye to Palestinian organisations such as Hamas and Fatah who openly use children as human shields and as cover for terror operations. Their one-sidedness speaks volumes.

As well as Palestinian leaders and media, western government-funded NGOs sometimes use blood libel themes. Israeli ‘settlers’ are accused of grubbing up Palestinian trees and poisoning Palestinian wells. In 2002, Oxfam used a picture of an orange running with blood for juice to encourage its donors to boycott Israeli goods.²¹ Oxfam withdrew the advertisement after extensive protest, but the damage was done. Christian charities such as Embrace the Middle East, the Amos Trust and Christian Aid

²⁰ The Jewish Question Karl Marx 1843

²¹ NGO Monitor https://www.ngo-monitor.org/ngos_and_antisemitism_oxfam_s_blood_oranges_christian_aid_s_bethlehem_s_child_and_hrw_s_indiscriminate_killings/

have used Christian festivals to promote anti-Israel themes, for instance suggesting that Israelis play the part of King Herod or the Romans to the Palestinian Jesus or that Mary and Joseph would be prevented from entering Bethlehem by an Israeli checkpoint. This continues the Christian antisemitic concept of Jews as ‘Christ killers’.

No country, government or people is perfect, but the obsessional focus of Israel’s opponents on Israel’s Jews goes way beyond reasonable criticism into distortion and lies. Worse still, the truth is that it is not so much Israel’s **actions** that infuriate Israel’s opponents and enemies so much as Israel’s very **existence**.

Even after the damning findings of the Equalities and Human Rights Council of culpable antisemitism by officers in the Labour Party in late 2020, some Labour MPs and party members still complain that accusations of antisemitism made by Jewish party members, MPs, and officials are nothing but a smear and a smokescreen to silence criticism of Israel. Apparently it is essential for freedom of speech that Israel’s opponents may compare the Jewish State to the Nazi regime, and her Jewish citizens to Nazis. No matter that any other country’s citizens have so much cause to hate Nazism. No matter that comparisons to the Nazis cannot cause such pain anywhere as among Jews both in Israel and in the Diaspora. No matter that such comparisons are demonstrable lies.

In 2021 it doesn’t appear that this state of affairs will change very much in the immediate future.

Section 7 – The Blood Libel in 2020

As this booklet was being prepared an extraordinary resurgence of the blood libel occurred in Jerusalem and was spread throughout the world via the social media accounts of prominent Palestinian, UK, and US politicians.²²

On the afternoon of Friday 24th January 2020, 7 year old Arab boy Qusai Abu Ramila was sent by his family living in Beit Janina, Jerusalem, to buy bread.²³ When he did not return, the alarm was raised and rescue services, Arab and Israeli, began to look for him. Some of Qusai's relatives tweeted a link to a video of a child seemingly being dragged reluctantly to a car by an adult. The family then issued a statement, "We demand the police check security footage. If he was kidnapped by settlers it would set the entire neighbourhood on fire ..." from the streets. As it turns out, this naturally raised the suspicion that the boy had been kidnapped by Israeli Jews.

Tragically, the child was found next day in an unfenced cistern, full from recent heavy rains. It appears that he slipped and fell, unnoticed, into the water and drowned.

However, in the short time it took to find the child's body, one twitter account had gone full 'Blood Libel' on the story. In a tweet that eerily echoed the story of Little St Hugh of Lincoln, a tweeter, '@RealSeifBitar' wrote, "7 year old #Palestinian child Qusai was kidnapped by a Herd of violent #Israeli settlers, assaulted & thrown in a water well, was found this morning frozen to death in Beit Hanina, #Jerusalem after #Israeli forces assaulted search teams".

The child's father admitted in vain that the child in the video released by his family was not his son. Palestinians armed with rocks and stones advanced on a nearby Jewish neighbourhood and hurled stones at people and property. Meanwhile, RealSeif Bitar's tweet had been retweeted by veteran anti-Israel Palestinian politician Hanan Ashwari with the comment "No

²² Jerusalem Post <https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/The-death-of-a-Palestinian-boy-shows-blood-libels-are-born-615458>

²³ Haaretz 24.01.2020 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/eight-year-old-boy-drowns-in-a-flooded-ditch-in-east-jerusalem-1.8442509>

Words”. Ashwari’s tweet was retweeted in turn by self-identifying Palestinian/US politician Rashida Tlaib to her 900,000 followers. The blood libel, of Jews murdering non-Jewish children, though completely untrue, went global within hours.

In Britain, anti-Israel politician, George Galloway tweeted “This child aged 7 has just been fished out of a well in Jerusalem. Murdered by illegal Israeli settlers.” It was still on his twitter feed days after the story had been corrected. Chris Williamson, former Derby MP commented “The tragedy continues” beneath a tweet containing the lie that the child had been kidnapped.

Ashwari later gave a half-hearted apology for tweeting something that may not have been accurate. Tlaib deleted her retweet, but without an apology or retraction. Galloway merely advised his followers to “Block Israeli trolls” because they were being “paid by Israel”.²⁴

Here is a present day example of the way blood libels have always worked. In the past, it was word of mouth. In the 20th Century Nazi propagandists used film and newspapers to disseminate hateful lies about Jews. Nowadays, hatred of Jews and their state is spread on social media. Fortunately, Jews are no longer at the mercy of mobs or hostile governments. Israel, the Jewish nation state, provides a haven for the world’s Jews – which may be why some are so keen to end its existence.

Friends of Israel and the Jewish people must follow in the footsteps of Pieritz, McCaul, Shaftesbury, and others who have stood with Jews in both Israel and in the countries where they live.

The time to do this is now. It has never been more important.

²⁴ Jewish Press 25.01.2020 <https://www.jewishpress.com/news/us-news/rashida-tlaib-retweets-blood-libel-against-jerusalem-jews/2020/01/25/>

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