

## Conference Paper

# The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem: History and Perspectives

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## Abstract

Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem is the oldest representation of the Russian Orthodox Church abroad. Acting since 1847 in the Holy Land, the representation of the Russian Church in Jerusalem has been an eyewitness of the change of several forms of political structure in Palestine. The fate of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem is marked by seven decades of prosperity, when its property and Russia's authority in the Middle East grew. Seven decades replaced its expansive presence, which associated with the loss of many infrastructure facilities, the attenuation of previously large-scale activities and the reduction of main tasks to preserve the remaining property, which had been looked after by the pilgrims since the prerevolutionary time. The collapse of the Soviet Union freed the church from the shackles of constant supervision, made travelling abroad unhindered. The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem received new life, expressed in the previously unknown influx of pilgrims and the expansion of its responsibilities. The traditional duties, connected with prayers for Russia and the organization of pilgrimage, were supplemented with care for the Russian-speaking population permanently residing in Palestine, who came to Israel as immigrants or created families in their new homeland. Thus, at present time, the main tasks of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem are activities, aimed at preserving the property left after the deprivations of the Soviet era, organization of pilgrimages at a qualitatively new level, and spiritual nourishment of Russian-speaking Christians. The article considers the author's reflections on the existing phase of the Arab-Israeli confrontation and its correlation with the religions in Palestine, and on the necessary intensification of the activities of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem in the most promising areas: cultural, religious, and tourist.

**Keywords:** The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, Holy Land, Israel, Palestine, Jerusalem, repatriation, Arab-Israeli conflict, Russians in Israel

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## OPEN ACCESS

Since 1847, the Russian Orthodox Church has been represented on behalf of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem on the Holy Land. Created in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the representation of the Russian Church in Palestine was to fulfill several cardinaly important tasks that had begun to declare their importance since the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The growing pilgrimage became more and more massive, that made Russia's ties with the Middle East intensive. In order to meet the requirements of the time, when the number of pilgrims within the canonical territory of the Jerusalem Patriarchate grew with every year, it was indicated to maintain a permanent representation of the Russian Church in Jerusalem – the city of Christian pilgrimage streams.

The ecclesiastical presence of Russia in Palestine has more than 170-year history. The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem is the oldest organization, which in every possible way represents the interests of the Russian Orthodox Church abroad. For the years of its existence, it has acted as a benefactor of the Russian Church, caring for Russian-speaking pilgrims, who arrive from many corners of the globe. Help and brotherly love for the Christian population of the Holy Land has been considered a duty, a sacred duty of pilgrims and the members of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem.

Currently, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem is experiencing a period of its second birth. The number of pilgrims increases with every year, but except the traditional types of serving, new ones appear, which are connected with the need of diplomatic communication with the representatives of the state authorities of Israel, Palestine and Jordan. The value and prestige of the Russian Church presence in Palestine is growing. This demands a high educational qualification in the clergymen training, which should be based on the concept of a modern service, which requires its creation. The formation of a high potential of church service in Palestine is to become the prerogative for the Russian Orthodox Church in the following decades.

It is time to reconsider the attitude towards the tasks and opportunities of Russian Church presence on the Holy Land. The numerous church infrastructure in Israel and Palestine is to become more sought-after and more independent within the Russian Orthodox Church as a full-fledged subject of international relations.

## 1. The Service Development in 1847-1918

The main purpose of the establishment of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem was to take care of the pilgrimage of numerous Russian admirers of holy

places. The major service of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem was supplemented with the obligation to carry out official contacts with the Jerusalem Patriarchate, acting on behalf of the Russian Church. The consequence of the creation of the Mission was the formation of numerous churches and sending permanent representatives of the Russian Church to the sacred place to perform of divine services, which were also charged with praying for a long-suffering homeland. Thus, "The Mission was meant to solve issues related to the security of passageways and passage through populated areas and territories where local residents were stealing, robbing and cheating, aiming to profit from confiding Russian people. In addition to these tasks, the Mission was to help to strengthen fraternal relations with the coreligionist Jerusalem (Greek) patriarchy" [7].

Before the tragic events of the 1917 revolution in Russia, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem had been expanding its presence in Palestine from year to year. On the eve of World War I, Russia owned more than 65 plots of land in Palestine with a total area of about 150 hectares, on which 11 churches were built (six of which are in Jerusalem), 16 shelters and farmsteads (eight in Jerusalem), one hospital and four dispensaries, seven monasteries (two in Jerusalem). In general, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission's property was fifth higher than the property of the Imperial Orthodox Palestinian Society, which was 23 hectares (Foreign Policy Archive of the Russian Federation).

The rich history of Russia on the Holy Land is marked by the periods that have been variously considered in the scientific literature and special studies. The pre-revolutionary phase of the Mission's activities has been extensively studied and presented not only in numerous monographs, but also in dissertations that touch upon many aspects of the Mission's existence and the service in the Ottoman Empire.

## 2. Lack of Connection with the Moscow Patriarchate in 1918-1948

The first Soviet decades were marked by a lack of connection between the Russian Church and Jerusalem, beginning from 1918 up to 1948. The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem stopped its activities, and all infrastructure was under the control of emigrant church movements. The period from 1918 to 1948 year requires its study in the context of the Russian Orthodox Church's activities outside Russia, which associated with sharp rejection of the Moscow Patriarchate.

### 3. The Resumption of Activities in 1948

The Soviet period, divided into the time of the cessation of the activities of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in 1918-1948 and the period of its function in 1948-1991 under the Soviet ruling, is practically not studied or studied fragmentarily in several articles. The peculiarity of that period lies in the fact that the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem had to learn to build relations with the Jewish government and coordinate its actions not only according to the Moscow Patriarchate, but also with the Soviet Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church under the Council of Ministers of the USSR. The total dependence and absolute absence of independence made the Russian presence in Israel disenfranchised and influenced by the USSR leaders' anti-church sentiments.

After 30 years pause in the activity, the decision of the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church was to restore the activity of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem. The resumption of the Mission's activities was largely possible thanks to the actions of the Soviet government, aimed at diplomatic and military support of the functioning of the young Jewish statehood. Recognition of the fact of proclaiming the independent existence of Israel in the Middle East by the USSR was a significant act to the resumption of Russian ecclesiastical presence by the Israeli authorities.

Firstly, Israel expressed its full support for the re-establishment of the Mission and the return of its disposed property, the temporal control of which was taken by the Israeli Government. The Mission got its formerly owned objects in the Israeli part of Jerusalem back. Numerous plots of land, temples, and monasteries were subordinated de facto to the jurisdiction of the Moscow Patriarchate. The actual transfer took place, but the legal consolidation of the return of the church infrastructure for many years has been the subject of discussion between the Mission and the Moscow Patriarchate, who practically tried to obtain legal registration of property from the Israeli government.

For Israel and the USSR, the actual transfer of the Mission's property was an exchange of political actions, significant for both sides. It was important for Israel to enlist the support of the victorious country in World War II; to have the support of one of the most powerful states; for the USSR, the recognition of Israel was not so important, as Russia had already been present in the Middle East for a quite a long time. The voice given at the meeting of the UN General Assembly for the British Palestine division and the creation of Jewish and Arab states on its territory was a step towards establishing friendly contacts with both peoples of Palestine.

The administrative building of the Mission in Jerusalem was adopted along with 14 other land plots. The 30-year suspension of any connection with Russia affected the condition of the property. In September 1948, after an inspection of the buildings of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission by the Secretary of the Soviet Mission in Israel (the Embassy), its condition was found satisfactory, despite the fact that the Arabs were raking the Jewish part of Jerusalem using mortars and light weapons at that time, which resulted in damaging of the walls and the destruction of the windows of church buildings (State Archives of the Russian Federation).

This estimation was radically different from that seen by Archimandrite Leonid (Lobachev) at the end of November of 1948, when he arrived in Jerusalem. A few months later the church buildings' condition was horrifying in its appearance and was reflected in the messages sent to Moscow by the first head of the Mission during the Soviet period [5].

Arisen in November 1948 question of the status of more than 100 Russian women, former pilgrims, who arrived in Palestine before the First World War and who lived in the buildings of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission and the Palestinian Society, seems interesting. They were registered as persons without citizenship. All of them admitted the jurisdiction of Patriarch Alexey and Moscow's right to Russian property in Palestine. They got a possibility of acquiring the citizenship of the newly created state of Israel, but the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission itself and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR raised the question of the registration of these pilgrims as the citizens of the USSR. The church authorities feared that if they got the citizenship of Israel, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission might have difficulties in registering the rights to the property of the Russian church. Obtaining by the pilgrims, who had stayed for some reason or other since the pre-mandate period, of Israeli citizenship, could complicate the activities of the Head of the Mission, for whom it was important to have a certain staff to justify the need for such extensive property. In February-March of 1949, the Council for the Affairs of the Russian Orthodox Church at the Council of Ministers of the USSR, in conjunction with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the USSR, supported the suggestion to give the citizenship of the USSR to 115 women pilgrims, which subsequently allowed to use it in the interests of the Mission, and obliged Moscow to pay each nun a cash allowance every month (State Archives of the Russian Federation).

## 4. Service in Israel and under the Soviet Power in Russia in 1948-1991

The recreation of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem in 1948, followed by the restoration of the patriarchate, became somewhat a thaw in the relations between the Church and the state. The Soviet government allowed the Mission to exist not only because it wanted to put pressure on the Church. It was believed that a significant area of the land property, located in Israel should not be hopelessly lost, as its loss could affect the Moscow Patriarchate authority, and thus the international prestige of the Soviet Union could be shaken. The Land and the real estate could always be used to their advantage.

Formally being owned by the Church, the property meant influence that positively affects the foreign policy of the USSR. The Church representation of the USSR in Israel was a good political and diplomatic tool. The diplomatic department of the USSR was disturbed by the Israeli attempts to violently requisite the church property. In the terms to the foreign church property, the politics was exactly the opposite of that which existed in the USSR. It was believed, that the real estate and the land, acquired in the period of Imperial Russia, is extremely important to keep as the property of the Russian Church. Despite the fact that many ecclesiastical land plots were sold, it is necessary to pay tribute to the USSR in that it managed to preserve for the church the right to own many foreign infrastructure objects.

During the Soviet period, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem carried out various activities related to the reception of pilgrims and the maintenance of close ties with representatives of the Jerusalem Patriarchate. The Mission had both friends and detractors from the side of the Svyatogrobsky Brotherhood. The description of friendly Greek visits and of a wary attitude as well, is can be seen in the reports of the members of the Mission, which were sent to Moscow. The mission had favorably placed clergymen and bishops, who regularly visited and were a source of information about the events in the life of the Jerusalem Patriarchate. They told about the existing groups of influence in the patriarchy environment, about the mood of the brotherhood members to the Israeli authorities, to the Mission, the Moscow Patriarchate.

Communication at various levels was conducted with the Israeli government represented by the Ministry of Religions. Sometimes, representatives of the highest level

of the Israeli political apparatus visited the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission. They contributed to the registration of property, sometimes they expressed support or disagreement with the actions of ordinary Israelis, who acted with an initiative of different kinds towards the Russian presence.

For decades of the activity in Soviet years, the Mission had friends, who were, somehow or rather, connected with power. They paid regular attention to the Mission's life, tried to delve into the essence of its activities, expressed formal support in conflict situations, externally supported in every way and declared good intentions for providing various assistance.

The Soviet embassy in Israel, the Finnish embassy after 1967, took part in solving current problems [Palamarenko, 2017], therefore the representatives of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission had to have good relations with Soviet diplomats and always take into account the opinion of diplomatic missions. The Soviet embassy actively counteracted to infringement of the Mission's rights, expressed disagreement with the manifested harassment or violent expropriation of the land fund. The Mission consulted with the ambassador on question of the sale of land and before any official treaties with representatives of the Israeli government. In Soviet years, there was a strong dependence on the Soviet foreign policy department on personnel, property, economic and financial issues. In addition, various kinds of ecumenical contacts with heterodox confessions were frequently noticed, which contributed to the maintenance of inter-confessional communication at the level of mutual visits on the most significant events and holidays.

There is no need to speak about any independence in the Mission's activities, because the heads and members of the Mission were constantly supervised and controlled by the Soviet diplomats, and the failure of the Chief of the Mission to deal with emergencies could provoke a sharp reaction from Moscow. For example, the authorities considered the fact that in 1951 the Head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission, Bishop Vladimir (Kobets), for a week did not inform the Mission of the USSR in Israel (the Embassy) that his personal driver, a citizen of Israel, had hit an Arab woman, who perished, to be a serious violation and it became the reason of his leaving Israel (State Archives of the Russian Federation).

Relations with the schismatics, representatives of contemporary ROCOR, throughout all the years of the Soviet period has never been easy. The preserved correspondence contains evidence of mutual accusations and a severe rejection of reciprocal activities. Against this background, both sides had sympathizers, mostly the residents of Gornensky or "schismatic" convents, who were friendly to each other. The latter should

be considered an exception, rather than a rule. There was such an intransigence that personal interactions were impossible because of the existing dissidence.

## 5. The Contemporary Period

The last years of the USSR existence and its subsequent liquidation, were marked by the unhindered departure of Jews from the Soviet republics, which proclaimed their sovereignty.

The immigration of Jews, living practically in all the former Soviet Union republics, to Israel, was so massive that in its early years it reached up the number of about 200,000 people annually, gradually decreasing to several tens of thousands in the early 2000s. The Russian-speaking community has been enriched with millions of immigrants to Israel, having formed a unique phenomenon, when the number of those who speak Russian reached 20% of the total population. Such a ratio does not find examples in other countries, with the exception of the former Soviet republics.

Natives of the USSR were to abandon not only Russian or other citizenship to live according to the conditions of their new homeland, but also to change the language of communication, to move on to new categorical images of the Middle Eastern thinking, and to accept and absorb the existing religious and cultural diversity of Palestinian life. But socialization is practically more difficult, often painful, when Russian-speaking people have to learn the language and get the Middle East mentality, so as A.F. Fedorchenko claims: "the Russians in Israel keep on preserving their identity in many ways – speaking Russian, supporting cultural traditions of the country of origin and adhering to the Soviet mentality" [1].

Israel is a Jewish state, but Judaism de jure is not a state religion in it, since Israel does not have any constitution, which could fix such a point. In modern Israel, more than three quarters of the country's population (ranking to nine million) are Jews or are attributed to them as a result of repatriation; one-fifth are Arabs, most of whom are Muslims; several hundred thousands refer themselves to numerous ethnic groups. The attitude to religious freedom was declared in 1948, when the Declaration of Independence did not distinguish between Jews, Christians and Muslims, who were citizens of Israel (*Svoboda religii v Ierusalime*, 2002).

It is the latter that allows religious representations to exist on Israeli territory, where the Christianity is not abolished owing to the power of law. It is obvious that for the local Jewish population the Christian religion in their state is an undesirable rudiment of the period of dispersion. For Islam, Christianity can be an ally in the fight against the

expansionist policies of the Jewish government. The dominant influence of Judaism negatively affects the condition of Christian communities, which during the years of the Jewish state existence were subjected to numerous harassment and violation in territorial rights to their holy places. The absence of an Arab-Israeli confrontation settlement has in some way a positive impact on Christianity in the region. Israel seeks to maintain friendly relations with Christian communities, to which Palestine and its Islamic authorities also gravitate, in order to have an ally in the face of Christians in confronting Israel. Therefore, the existing conflict, to some extent, conceals the degree of antagonism towards Christians who have become an allogenic element in the region. Moreover, the world community, which is about to express its indignation, is also a deterrent tool in the eradication of Christianity in Palestine.

The newest period that began in 1991 requires studying, when the Mission's activities acquired a completely new, previously unknown qualitative character. At that time, a new page of Russian ecclesiastical presence in Palestine was opened.

The Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem faces three fundamental tasks, the significance of which was somewhat leveled in the Soviet years: the organization and conduction of pilgrimage; activities aimed at preserving Russian property; spiritual nurturing of Russian-speaking immigrants. If the first two directions for the Mission are custom, the ecclesiastical care for believers, permanently residing in Palestine, is an unknown part of the Russian Church service, which is presented with the church mission in the canonical territory of the Jerusalem Patriarchate and is namely aimed to care for pilgrims.

Being interviewed, the Head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, Archimandrite Alexander (Elisov), on the anniversary of the Russian ecclesiastical presence in Palestine celebrated in 2017, recalled the history and tasks of the Mission in the Middle East region. The main idea, which was announced almost for the first time, is the 'new side of the service' of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, "which was added at the end of the 20th century and continues to this day". The presence of Russian-speaking Orthodox believers, who have Israeli citizenship and arrived in the country as immigrants, who regularly visit temples of the Mission in Jaffa, Haifa, Jerusalem, the number of whom the Head of Mission estimates in several thousand people, distributing in such a way: "in Jaffa, (...) on Easter days two thousand or more people pass up. In Haifa – a little less. In Jerusalem we have up to 800-1000 people. In Ein Karem, the Mountain Monastery, there are also up to 500-700 people" (Russkoi dukhovnoi missii v Ierusalime ispolniaetsia 170 let, 2017).

Next to the Head of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem, it should be noted that tens of thousands of people live in Israel, who position themselves as Christians in Israeli society. These data are taken from the sociological research conducted by the Israeli experts, whose sympathy to Christianity would be exaggerated. For example, the work by V.Z. Khanin's "Religious Identity of Immigrants from the Former USSR in Israel" [3] and Rajiman R., Pinsky J. "Non-Jewish and Christian: Perceived Discrimination and Social Distance Among FSU Migrants in Israel" [8] are be the best confirmation.

## 6. Perspectives

The number of Christians in Israel, immigrants from the CIS countries, significantly exceeds the number of parishioners of the temples of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem at present. The potential for increased pastoral care for Palestinians living in Israel and Palestine is underestimated, which means that the number of Orthodox believers attending the temples of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem can be increased not through missionary work, but because the Mission's activities can become more ambitious. Intensification of the efforts of members of the Mission and the Russian clergy in Israel is required to make the Mission's activities as transparent and understandable as possible. Moreover, changing the understanding of the meaning and goals of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission's Service is required not only for pilgrims, but also for the permanently resident population of Israel, who is somehow identified with Christianity or Orthodoxy.

It can be permissible to assume that the first and second generation of returnees will be turned to Christianity, just as the Russian language, concerning fears of the first immigrants of the 90s about it, continues to be assimilated by the third and fourth generations of immigrants from the countries of the former Soviet Union [4]. The formation of a new Orthodox community in Israel, based on the persons, who came to the country as repatriates, became understandable in the first decade of the immigration wave [12].

The members of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem are to be aware of the contemporary Middle Eastern agenda. It is important to understand that the Mission for the first time in all its years of existence has its own community, which personifies itself with the Russian Orthodox Church. The merit of the Mission is that these people turned to Christianity and church on the Holy Land – almost not, which requires awareness of the deep trust shown to the activities of the Mission by several thousand parishioners. Establishment of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in the

middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century was caused by the need to increase Russia's influence on the Arab population, but was in no way connected with the ecclesiastical nourishment of permanently resident Russian-speaking citizens. In this regard, additional comprehension of the Mission's tasks is required now, in order to preserve the believers who identify themselves with Orthodoxy. There is always the possibility of their turning to Catholicism, which also has a Russian-speaking clergy in Israel; turning to Judaism, if the believers' ecclesiastical demands are not satisfied in Russian churches; or simply can be reflected in the loss of their faith and desire to attend temple, which may be caused by the lack of the Mission's proper attention.

The Russian language continues to be actively used in Israel by immigrants from the USSR and CIS countries in everyday communication, but the second, third and subsequent generations of repatriates gradually lose not only their language skills but also the ability to think in it. In this situation, it is no necessity to talk about good understanding of the Service in the Church Slavonic language. The next stage in the formation of the concept of the modern ministry of the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem means the translation, possibly partial, of worship and rite of the church rituals into Hebrew, which will allow liturgical actions to become clear not only to Russian-speaking, but also to other Israelis. Inclusion into the Mission staff of Hebrew native speakers can be a way out of the situation when there is an acute shortage of staff who can speak Hebrew. The periodic worships in Hebrew for Israelis and returnees are important for the formation of the concept of modern service.

Besides, Mission representatives' good command English and Hebrew will allow the Mission to become an equal participant in Israeli scientific and academic life. Participation in conferences of Israeli universities, wide coverage of their activities in the press, participation in Russian radio programs, the large-scale inclusion in the interfaith and interreligious Israeli dialogue, and presentation of the current activities of the Mission on international scientific and political bases should become a starting point for the Mission leadership at modern stage. Nowadays, the Russian Ecclesiastical Mission in Jerusalem has all the necessary resources to expand its service, but to continue the colossal work of seventy years of its existence, the initiative and qualified personnel policy should become the basis for modern services.

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