

Jonathan Frankel. *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840.* Cambridge, U. K.: Cambridge University Press, 1997. xiv + 491 pp. \$27.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-521-48396-4; \$75.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-521-48246-2.



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More Than a Trial

The Damascus Affair of 1840 is one of the long-recognized signposts of modern Jewish history, overshadowed in current memory by the even more dramatic and influential affairs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In brief outline, this affair involved charges of ritual murder by Jews of a Capuchin monk, Father Tomaso, and his servant in Damascus. The first news reports to reach the west were that the Jews charged with the crime had confessed, providing separate investigators with detailed accounts that confirmed one another, leaving no doubt as to the guilt of those charged. Moreover, western observers in Damascus, including the French and English consuls—ostensibly not the kind of men to accept charges of ritual murder lightly—concurred that the evidence was overwhelming and that Jews were guilty beyond a shadow of a doubt.

These reports, as well as the acceptance of them in the west, were the cause of astonishment and profound consternation by Jews in Europe, who had believed that ritual murder trials were a thing of the past, or at least that a belief in them by Europe's educated population was no longer to be expected. Eventually a different story

emerged: The confessions were the result of torture, the corroborating accounts produced by collusion among the investigators. Similarly, it turned out that the information provided so confidently by the French and British consuls was tainted. As the case unraveled, much was revealed about Jewish consciousness at this time. And much, too, was revealed about non-Jewish attitudes to Jews—much of it not pretty.

As with the famous trials and antisemitic affairs associated with them in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Tiszaeszlár, Dreyfus, Beilis, Frank, Polna), it was not finally the anti-Jewish charges, however sensational, that made the Damascus case come alive but rather the special meaning of those charges to contemporaries. All of these cases became “more than a trial,” to borrow a felicitous phrase from the title of a recent book on the Dreyfus Affair.

Readers familiar with Jonathan Frankel's previous work, in particular his magisterial *Prophecy and Politics: Socialism, Nationalism, and the Russian Jews, 1862-1917*, will not be surprised to learn that this volume, the product of more than eleven years' labor, is another extremely

impressive piece of scholarship, based on extensive use of archives and primary sources in many languages. What Frankel terms an “embarrassing” length of time in gestation is certainly understandable, given the prodigious research that went into the book. Inevitably one opens a book of 500 pages devoted to a single year wondering if such an expansive treatment is justified, but for the most part this book’s focus is anything but narrow; its conclusions as well as its details should be of interest to readers in many disciplines.

No full-length modern historical study has been devoted to the Damascus Affair, although of course most general histories of the Jews or of antisemitism have included a discussion of it. Frankel is not dealing with matters as widely known as the Dreyfus Affair, to which hundreds of volumes have been devoted, presenting often radically different interpretations. He has then not written a revisionist history, in the sense of offering a substantially new understanding of the Damascus Affair. Clarifications and corrections of various sorts are to be found in this volume, to be sure, some of them fascinating, but our understanding has been broadened and deepened rather than substantially altered.

Frankel offers ample and sometimes appalling evidence, based on a wide reading of the press of the day, of the extent to which the charge of ritual murder was accepted in Europe. How was it possible that so many were willing to believe these absurd charges in this supposedly enlightened age? Frankel is not entirely satisfied with the thesis that has recently gained much attention and seems to have much popular support, that it was the ever-present, mystical power of antisemitic ideology. More precisely, he pays unusually careful attention to the range and quality of anti-Jewish feelings, and to their ambiguity. Frankel seems as free as humanly possible of the temptation to force evidence into preconceived molds, and he is not content with easy, widely-accepted, or even plausible answers, and thus much of what he writes may appear to some readers perplexing and full of paradoxes.

Some sense of the surprises and subtlety of his account may be gained in looking at the case of Lord Palmerston. Plausibly described as a philosemite, he thought it proper that the British Empire offer protection to Jews in the Middle East, in part because the British lacked significant numbers of Protestant minorities there to protect, as the French had Catholic minorities or the Russians Orthodox, providing them an excuse to intervene in the area. When the Damascus case became known, Palmerston saw an opportunity to strike a high

moral stance as well as forward British national interests. He was then taken aback to learn that the British consul in Damascus reported that there was no doubt of the guilt of the Jews in Damascus and, more than that, various Talmudic injunctions explained that guilt. The consul went further to declare that the French representatives and ruling authorities in Syria, with whom those representatives had worked closely, deserved great praise for the way that they had pursued the case, while the Jewish community there, in combating this blood libel was trying to defame honest and honorable men. Palmerston in fact remained unpersuaded by his consul’s reports, but his resolve was weakened. Others, including the editors of *The London Times* again, hardly known as an anti-Jewish journal, published the news that the Jews were unquestionably guilty.

Even more unlikely, and unsettling, was the case of Adolphe Thiers, both premier and foreign minister of France in 1840. His moderately liberal position was one widely recognized by Jews in France as favorable to them, and of course France was at this time considered by Jews as the most modern and tolerant state in Europe, the first to offer Jews civil equality (1791), long before other states, most of which still retained major civil disabilities for Jews in 1840. While seeming at first sternly suspicious of the reports of the French consul, Count de Rattimenton, about the guilt of the Jews, Thiers later informed his close friend James de Rothschild that Jews in the Middle East were fanatical, at a stage of development comparable to Jews in the Middle Ages, when they too had undoubtedly committed ritual murders.

In short, leaders of the two major European states known to be the most progressive and most friendly to Jews—and least likely to accept charges associated with a dark and superstitious European past—by no means immediately or wholeheartedly came to the rescue of the Jews in Damascus.

Even more unexpected, it was Metternich in Austria, known as an arch-reactionary, and Nicholas I of Russia, notorious for his right-wing stance and hostility to Jews, who expressed doubts about the charges in Damascus, as well as the general validity of the charge of ritual murder by Jews, whether in the Middle East or in Europe, in the nineteenth century or in the more distant past. The press in both Russia and Austria followed a line favorable to the Jews in Damascus (and when certain editors appeared to falter, they were brought sharply back into line by the authorities).

In attempting to explain how a belief in the guilt of

the Jews in Damascus spread as far and as fast as it did, earlier accounts of the Damascus Affair have stressed the role of Ratti-Menton. His initial and then stubbornly unmovable support of the charges, engaging French prestige, made it difficult for the French to back off and admit error, especially since such a move might have soured their relations with the Syrian authorities (who were being cultivated by the French, as part of French foreign policy in the area). But the evidence Frankel has found is again paradoxical: Ratti-Menton did not appear to have been hostile to Jews in the past, nor were his relations with the Jewish community in the area previously marked by notable tension. To be sure, he was no shining example of integrity, intelligence, or competence, and once he had committed himself in favor of the guilt of the Jews, his record was simply appalling. His case calls to mind that of officers in the Dreyfus Affair, in that some of them were not notably antisemitic before the Affair exploded, but once they had committed themselves to a belief in Dreyfus's guilt, and had associated that belief with considerations of national security, they were capable of the grossest irregularities in trying to prevent the "dishonor" that would result from the unfortunate captain's being found innocent. For Ratti-Menton as well as these officers, of course, a lack of active, militant antisemitism did not mean that they had much sympathy for Jews or worried much about injustice done to them, especially when measured against what they perceived as the sacred interests of their *patrie*—or their own skins, if they had to own up to making terrible mistakes.

In the Dreyfus Affair, as well as a number of others (Tiszaeszlár, Polna, Frank), the supposed existence, in the very beginning of the case, of incontrovertible evidence against the accused, attested to by respected authorities, clearly played a decisive role. Such seems to have been true even more in the Damascus Affair. To an important degree, this widely accepted "evidence" explains why these trials became "affairs," while scores of others remained of local importance, easily dismissed as unworthy of serious interest by the rest of the world. But also decisive in all of these affairs was the way that historical accident—e.g., the unexplained disappearance of a friar in Damascus—meshed with important trends of the day. Also crucial were initiatives, the responses to those accidents, taken by key historical actors. In this regard, Frankel, while recognizing the role of Ratti-Menton, turns a more serious scrutiny on Thiers. He concludes: "If any one man was responsible for turning the Damascus case into a prolonged dispute of major proportions it was Adolphe Thiers. He stood at the pinnacle of the hierar-

chy that led upward, rung by rung, from the chancellor-dragoman (Beaudin) via the consul (Ratti-Menton) on to the consul-general (Cochelet) (p.190)." Frankel argues that Thiers could have put a stop to the case in April, but he did not, and a fully satisfactory explanation for his conduct remains elusive to this day. He was usually cautious in his public statements as the affair developed but in private repeatedly stated that the Jews were guilty.

If Thiers may be called an antisemite—and that is a reasonable conclusion, based on some of his private comments—he did not fit into familiar profiles of Jew-haters (the term "antisemite" did not yet of course exist), who are usually described as uneducated, lacking in intelligence, chronically dishonest, frustrated in their careers, unfamiliar with Jews, afraid of modern trends—none of which fit Thiers. He was a successful politician with important Jewish contacts, at the height of his career, a noted historian—in short a man who did not seem to "need" antisemitism. Moreover, there is little in his career before or after 1840 to suggest a deeper or lasting hatred of Jews. If he was then not an antisemite (or if we propose a more rigorous, restricted definition of antisemitism), a satisfactory explanation for his actions becomes a more challenging matter. One such explanation, forwarded by most previous historians and supported by Frankel, is that he allowed a narrow conception of French national interest to prevail over what he knew, or at least must have strongly suspected, to be the case, that the Jews in Damascus had been brutally tortured into confessing crimes of which they were innocent. It became for him an issue of *raison d'état* or *Realpolitik*, a belief that mere individuals count little in the calculations of those in charge of the destiny of millions. Thiers had a profound belief that triumphs abroad helped assure domestic stability, while foreign policy humiliations were sure to have dire domestic implications. His overriding goal was to retain Muhammed Ali as a French ally in control of Syria. And given those goals, the emerging affair in Damascus represented a potential threat to the status of his two key diplomats in the Egyptian territories, Cochelet and Ratti-Menton. That innocent people had been tortured and were to be put to death was apparently of only secondary importance. But, on the other hand, if one concludes that there was a moral failure—a conclusion that is nearly impossible to avoid—it is not apparently one that was the result of a raging hatred of Jews on Thiers's part.

Thiers's character and his ultimate motivations are by no means the only enduring mystery associated with this case, to say the least, and many untidy details remained

after the affair was considered more or less over. The Jews accused in Damascus, although finally freed, were never given a re-trial or declared innocent by the authorities. The now legendary intervention of Sir Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Cremieux turns out to be much less decisive than most accounts have recognized. Frankel comments that “only Lady Judith Montefiore ... gave a realistic appraisal of the events, explaining Muhammed Ali’s conduct [in releasing the Jewish prisoners] as the result of ‘political exigencies, nothing else,’” and certainly not the international power of the Jews or Muhammed Ali’s belief in it (p. 354). Frankel further shows how Montefiore and Cremieux made the most of the limited amount of influence they could command, but had it not paralleled the national interests of the British and other major powers in the area, it would have had no effect. One is reminded of the debate about the founding of the state of Israel; there too it was much less the international power of the Jews than the confluence of Jewish and British interests, as well as the ability of Jewish leaders to make the most of the fleeting windows of opportunity they encountered.

Even the characters of Montefiore and Cremieux, on one level heroic and inspiring, had some rather uninspiring aspects. The two men, representing traditionally hostile countries and cultures—and themselves apparently almost caricatures of English and French national types—started off with much mutual suspicion. That feeling soon developed into an intense dislike of one another. Cremieux cursed the day that he sought Montefiore out to go to the Middle East, and at one point blurted out “You want to be the absolute master; your vanity knows no bounds.” Montefiore replied, “You counted for nothing here ... neither you nor your friends.” Cremieux wrote despairingly in his diary, “what kind of a rogue is this that I am chained to? (p. 358).” Their wives were equally at odds, and the two couples quarreled bitterly over such matters as who should get the best cabin on the boat to Egypt.

Such details add to the liveliness of Frankel’s volume, although in places the non-expert reader may find the narrative heavy going, especially in the first 150 pages or so, where the importance of the details provided is not always immediately clear. The challenge is a little like the opening chapters of a Russian novel, where unfamiliar names and complicated changes of scene can bog one down. Frankel’s decision to place much of his interpre-

tive material in the final chapters contributes to the problem; readers unfamiliar with the basic outlines of the case are well advised to consult the final chapter and the Conclusion first. Frankel writes cleanly and clearly, but he does not appear particularly concerned to make his account accessible to a non-scholarly audience. Other aspects of the way that he has organized his material may leave some readers puzzled or frustrated. For example, what actually happened to Father Tomaso is a question any reader will be wondering about, but not until page 139 does Frankel mention alternate theories about the murders, if indeed murder it was, and he relegates to a footnote (no. 89) mention of an article “on the possible identity of the actual murderers.” Similarly, even expert readers may feel that Frankel might have stated more explicitly or amply in the opening pages what he believes the scholarly contribution of the work is (something that, to be sure, becomes clear later).

But these may be considered “nitpicking” observations about a volume that deserves the highest praise. If any work of history might be termed “definitive,” this one is. It is difficult to imagine another study of the Damascus Affair appearing for many years, unless new archival sources turn up, especially any that reveal what finally happened to Father Tomaso and his servant. The story has much to it that is inherently fascinating and colorful; Frankel has allowed us to feel confident about knowing as much as humanly possible about its often sordid details, but he has also provided us with much to ponder about the nature of antisemitism, how it can find expression in the world of politics, and the way that subliminal attitudes toward Jews, even on the part of those considered most friendly, can play an unsuspected role, given the proper context. He has also offered a richly textured account of the dilemmas of Jewish self-defense. Relying on the benevolent instincts of the non-Jewish world, while no doubt justified in some instances—and at any rate sometimes the only option—can in certain contexts turn out to be very dangerous indeed. That lesson would be amply reaffirmed in the years to follow, to put it mildly, and it no doubt continues, in kaleidoscopically complex ways, to color Jewish action and Jewish thought to the present day.

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