

H-France Review Vol. 5 (July 2005), No. 78

Ronald Florence, *Blood Libel: The Damascus Affair of 1840*. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2004. viii + 257 pp. Bibliography and index. \$35.00 US (cl.). ISBN 0-299-20280-1.

Review by Thomas Kselman, University of Notre Dame.

In February of 1840, Father Thomas, a Capuchin monk from Italy, and his servant Ibrahim Amara, disappeared on the streets of Damascus. With the active support of the French consul, Ratti-Menton, the governor of Syria, Sherif Pasha, conducted an investigation that included horrific tortures that left at least two men from the Jewish community dead and many others maimed for life. As a result of the torture, leading rabbis and merchants were accused of having murdered the two Christians in order to collect their blood for use in Jewish rituals. The Damascus affair thus marks an important stage in the increasingly important role played by the blood libel in the history of anti-Semitism in the nineteenth century. It marks as well, however, the emergence of a European-wide Jewish movement that intervened actively to refute such charges and defend Jews against the persecution they provoked. In July 1840, Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Crémieux were sent by the Jewish communities of England and France as delegates to Alexandria, where their intervention with Muhammad Ali, the viceroy of Egypt, along with pressure from the governments of England and Austria, helped to win the release of the prisoners.

Ronald Florence's study of the Damascus affair does not alter the basic outline of this story, which has been studied most recently by Jonathan Frankel.^[1] Florence generously acknowledges the work of Frankel, which explores in detail European political and diplomatic reactions to the affair, and the battle for public opinion over it. Florence acknowledges, as well, the important work of David Kertzer on the reemergence of the blood libel in the nineteenth century.^[2] Florence's book is nonetheless valuable, for it provides a concise and gripping narrative, told from the perspective of contemporary actors—the Jews of Damascus and of Europe, the European community in the Middle East, and politicians and statesmen in both regions, all of whom had different interests in the affair.

In the first half of *Blood Libel*, Florence concentrates on Damascus, emphasizing its relative isolation, and the increasingly tense relations between the Christian and Jewish minorities. Local politics had recently been dramatically altered by the seizure of power in Syria by the Sultan's viceroy in Egypt, Muhammad Ali, who sent Sherif Pasha (his adopted son) to govern the province. Florence sees this change as setting off reactions at both the local and international level. In Damascus, Christians were favored by the new regime in the 1830s, displacing Jews as tax collectors and other official agents of the state. This situation was threatened in 1840, when England and Austria sided with the Sultan in his attempt to regain his lost province from Muhammad Ali, who was in turn supported by the French. Christian fears that the Jews might be restored to their positions of influence help explain the timing of the affair in 1840. Equally important in Florence's view, however, was the intervention of the French consul Ratti-Menton, who encouraged Sherif Pasha to pursue the rumors of the blood libel. In the second half of his work Florence shifts his focus to the international arena and, in particular, to the mission of Montefiore and Crémieux. Here he provides details on their voyage, emphasizing more than Frankel their mutual dislike and frequent disagreements. In the end, their mission succeeded primarily because it coincided with the intense pressure on Muhammad Ali to back down in his attempt to retain control of Syria. The decision to release the prisoners came just one day after Muhammad Ali's decision to surrender his claim to hereditary rule in Syria. It is typical of Florence's storytelling style to include

in his narrative an account of the Egyptian viceroy's perianal abscess (a boil on the buttocks!) as an additional factor in his surrender to the multiple pressures he faced in late August 1840.

In a brief epilogue Florence argues that the return of the Sultan's power did not heal the wounds opened during the period of Egyptian rule. The visibility of Greek Catholics during the 1830s angered Muslims and created an enduring resentment that increasingly defined communal relations in the region. For Jews, the Damascus affair ended successfully in a narrow sense, for the prisoners were released, but it marked the reentry of the blood libel into the mainstream of European social discourse, and contributed to the demonization of Jews and Jewish ritual that had disastrous consequences in the twentieth century.

French public officials were at the center of the Damascus affair, and both Jewish commentators and subsequent historians have been puzzled by the motives that drove them. The behavior of Ratti-Menton in Damascus remains mysterious, for while it makes sense that the French representative in Damascus would support Sherif Pasha, why would the French consul go out of his way to push the local ruler into a vigorous pursuit of a case that did not fit clearly with French national interests? Florence cannot fully explain Ratti-Menton's actions, but his portrayal of the consul as a feckless and unprincipled opportunist who misread the situation is plausible. The behavior of Adolphe Thiers is in a sense more troubling, for in pursuit of a foreign policy that sought greater French influence in the Middle East and favored Mohammad Ali's claims over Syria, Thiers firmly and publicly defended Ratti-Menton, and thus provided an implicit sanction for the blood libel that the consul insisted was at the source of the crime.

Florence's choice of a narrative method allows us to see the role of personalities in the events as they unfolded, but the ways in which communities exerted collective pressure is not always clear in this account. Florence is particularly strong in his presentation of the Jewish leaders as they struggled to defend themselves against the charges of murder. Individuals such as Rabbi Abulafia, who converted to Islam in the face of repeated beatings, and the Rabbis Antabi and Salonikli, who refused to confess, emerge clearly in his story. The Christians, however, who were chanting "The Jews sacrificed the father!" within a day of the disappearance, remain anonymous, and their role in the affair seems murky. Ratti-Menton responded in part to the crowd's pressure, but who were its leaders, and how important was such a movement in pushing events along? The Muslim community also remains very much in the background of this account. After his conversion Rabbi Abulafia, who took the name Muhammad Effendi, engaged in a series of formal disputations on the Talmud with Rabbi Antabi, overseen by Sherif Pasha. What do his conversion and this event tell us about Muslim-Jewish relations in Damascus, and how they were changing in the course of the affair? It may be the evidence available doesn't allow answers to such questions. Florence, like Frankel, draws on archival sources from England and France, which leaves me wondering how the story might be told if materials were available from Constantinople, or Alexandria, or Damascus.

The history of religious conflict in the Middle East and its complex links with local politics and international diplomacy is self-evidently a topic of great contemporary significance. In *Blood Libel* Florence retells with verve and style a story that helps illuminate current passions and hatreds, in part because it played an important role in fomenting them.

NOTES

[1] Jonathan Frankel, *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

[2] David Kertzer, *The Popes against the Jews: The Vatican's Role in the Rise of Modern Anti-Semitism* (New York: Random House, 2002).

Thomas Kselman
University of Notre Dame
Thomas.A.Kselman.1@nd.edu

Copyright © 2005 by the Society for French Historical Studies, all rights reserved. The Society for French Historical Studies permits the electronic distribution for nonprofit educational purposes, provided that full and accurate credit is given to the author, the date of publication, and its location on the H-France website. No republication or distribution by print media will be permitted without permission. For any other proposed uses, contact the Editor-in-Chief of H-France. ISSN 1553-9172