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Russian Schools of Maria A. Cherkasova in Beirut: The Formative Era (1887–1897)

Abstract

The purpose of this article is to provide a detailed reconstruction of the history of the establishment of the network of Russian schools of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS) in Beirut between 1887 and 1897 – a topic that has not yet been the subject of a focused analysis in historiography. The relevance of the study stems from the need to critically reassess the «anniversary myths» that have become entrenched in later historiography. The empirical foundation of the research consists of materials from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire, introduced into scholarly circulation for the first time. The study of this phenomenon makes it possible to reveal the complex and contradictory nature of the Russian educational mission in the Orthodox East. The main focus of the article is on the missionary and pedagogical activities of Maria A. Cherkasova, known as «Mama Moskobie». Sent to Beirut in 1887, at a time when the leadership of the IOPS lacked both a detailed work plan and scholarly assessment of the region, she encountered a low level of education and the



dominance of heterodox influences within the local Orthodox community. On her own initiative, she founded the first Russian school for girls. The article provides a detailed account of the opposition she faced from corrupt dragomans of the Russian consulate, the peremptory demands of the Society's leadership in St. Petersburg that conflicted with local conditions, the shortage of qualified personnel, the indifference of representatives of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, and threats to security from the surrounding Muslim environment. The phenomenon of Maria A. Cherkasova's uninterrupted thirty-year teaching career in Beirut has no parallel in the history of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society and is unique in its nature. The significance of this work lies in substantiating the thesis that the successful and lasting development of the IOPS's educational activity in the region was ensured not by systematic institutional support, but solely by Maria A. Cherkasova's personal energy, sincere faith, and self-sacrifice.

Keywords:

Patriarchate of Antioch, the Orthodox Arabs, Russia and the Orthodox East, Syria, Lebanon, Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society, Orthodoxy, M.A. Cherkasova, V.N. Hitrovo, Elisaveta Fedorovna.

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Unable to develop fully in Palestine, the educational activities of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society (IOPS) were forced to shift to Syria and Lebanon. Within the canonical territory of the Church of Antioch there lived more than

200,000 Orthodox Christians, largely belonging to the prosperous strata of society¹. The local hierarchs, who were financially independent of the Greek Patriarch, wielded considerable influence, and Russia's position there was significantly stronger. The most authoritative among them in the final third of the nineteenth century was the Metropolitan of Beirut, Gabriel (Shatila). Between 1861 and 1869 he served as head of the Antiochian Metochion in Moscow², spoke fluent Russian, and was a staunch advocate of close ties with Russia; he aspired to the patriarchal throne twice, in 1885 and 1891. With his blessing and, above all, owing to the energy of the missionary Maria A. Cherkasova (1841–1918)³, the first steps of the Society in the educational sphere within the Patriarchate of Antioch were taken.

A quarter-century later, official documents of the Society described the founding of the schools in dry bureaucratic language:

“The school activities of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society in Syria began twenty-three years ago, in 1887, when the first Russian school of the Prophet Elijah was established in the Mousaitbeh quarter of Beirut by a Russian teacher dispatched by the Society. Three years later, when this school gained the trust and sympathy of the local population, three more schools were opened during 1890 and 1891: one in the Mazraa quarter, two in Rumeli Hisari, and finally, two years later, in 1893, a school was opened in Ras Beirut. <...> The rather rapid and successful development of the Russian urban schools in Beirut attracted the attention of the

¹ Unlike the Jerusalem Patriarchate, whose poor and ignorant flock did not exceed 20–25 thousand (Хумпово В.Н. Православие в Святой Земле. СПб., 1881. С. 122.) and was likely even smaller — 16.7 thousand according to K. Karpat. (*Karpat K. Ottoman population. 1830–1914. Demographic and social Characteristics. Madison, 1985. P. 128–129.*)

² Knight of the Order of St. Anna, 2nd Class. Awarded at the petition of Innocent Metropolitan of Moscow on April 12, 1870 1870 г. (Российский государственный исторический архив (далее — РГИА). Ф. 797. Оп. 39. 3 ст. 2 отд. Д, 67. Л. 73).

³ Despite the significant number of publications devoted to M. A. Cherkasova, N. N. Lisovoy was compelled to note: “The biography of this unquestionably remarkable woman [...] has not yet been written”. *Лисовой Н.Н. М.А. Черкасова и школы Императорского Православного Палестинского Общества в Бейруте / Всмотриваясь друг в друга... Россия и арабский мир: взаимное восприятие (Сборник статей). Сост.: Н.Г. Романова, И.М. Смилянская (отв. ред.), А.О. Филоник. М.: Институт востоковедения РАН, 2013. С. 440.*

*Orthodox communities and clergy of the entire Patriarchate of Antioch ...*⁴ The triumphantly monotonous tone of this narrative was far removed from reality. Unfortunately, its stylistic template was inherited by later historiography⁵. Among the most attentive studies of recent years, the article by P.V. Fedotov⁶ deserves mention; nevertheless, the formative period of the Russian school network in Beirut has not yet become the subject of detailed examination in Russian scholarship. Reconstructing, on the basis of newly introduced materials from the Archive of Foreign Policy of the Russian Empire, the complex history of the emergence of the Beirut schools of the Palestine Society is of considerable significance. In this phenomenon, as in a microcosm, the very character of the Russian presence in the Orthodox East is reflected.

First steps on the Syrian shore

At the beginning of 1887, following interviews with M.P. Stepanov and V.N. Khitrovo, Maria Cherkasova was sent to Syria. It should be noted that the dispatch of Cherkasova to Beirut was in many ways accidental. Instead of the future capital of Lebanon, Maria Aleksandrovna (Cherkasova – translator) might easily have found herself in any other locality along the Levantine coast. The leadership of the Society had no well-developed instructions for her future work.

On 20 February 1887, V.N. Khitrovo wrote the following in an accompanying letter addressed to the General Consul K.D. Petkovich⁷:

“...Mikhail Petrovich (Stepanov – E.K.) wrote about our intention to send, in addition to a male Russian teacher, also a Russian woman teacher at your disposal. We have a very suitable person for this, and we would be glad

⁴ Отдел рукописей РНБ. Ф. 253. Оп.1. Д. 36. Л. 1.

⁵ See: Лисовой Н.Н. Русское духовное и политическое присутствие в Святой земле и на Ближнем Востоке в XIX – начале XX в. М., 2006. С. 160–253.

⁶ Федотов П.В. Бейрутские школы Императорского православного палестинского общества (1887–1914 гг.): религиозно-политический проект М.А. Черкасовой (по материалам Архива внешней политики Российской империи) // Российский журнал истории Иерусалима. 2022. № 3(2). С. 50–65.

⁷ Konstantin Dmitrievich Petkovich (1827–1897) – Consul General in Beirut in 1869–1896.

to put her to good use. Initially she could simply teach the Russian language in the girls' school in Beirut, and within six months of such teaching she could look around and familiarize herself sufficiently to determine mainly how to organize her own girls' school, should there prove to be a need for it. Where? In Beirut, Acre, Haifa, or Jaffa — time will tell"⁸.

It would be difficult to imagine a plan more detached from reality. The letter vividly illustrates how distant the St. Petersburg leadership was from understanding its next steps in the region, whose local social and economic conditions appeared to them rather hazy. Alongside Beirut — “the bride of the sea”, as contemporaries called it — Khitrovo entertained the possibility of opening a school in cities such as Acre, Haifa⁹, or Jaffa, which were utterly unsuitable for that purpose.

By late spring of 1887, when most well-to-do residents, fleeing the heat and humidity, moved to their summer houses in the coolness of the Lebanese mountains, M.A. Cherkasova arrived in Beirut. The “Paris of the East” “stretched like an amphitheater along the seashore, with numerous gardens on the outskirts of the city; a narrow stone embankment separated the city from the sea; the houses were fairly tall, with flat roofs over which several Christian churches rose; in the background, the chain of the forested Lebanese mountains extended...”¹⁰.

Overcoming the oppressive climate, the missionary began her work, striving “to spend every day in a way beneficial to the cause and to the glory of God, as far as my strength allows...”¹¹ The IOPS assumed that she would become a teacher of the Russian language at the “celebrated” — in A.E. Krymsky's words — School of the Three Holy Hierarchs (a secondary-level institution)¹². However, thanks to Maria Aleksandrovna's percep-

⁸ *Дмитриевский А.А. XXV-летие русских школ в Бейруте и служение в них М. А. Черкасовой // Сообщения ИППО. 1912. Т. 23. Вып. 1. С. 76–88.*

⁹ They were secondary settlements with a predominantly Muslim population, administratively dependent on the capital of the Coastal Vilayet of Beirut (from 1888) and located at its southern borders, far from both the consulate and the central authorities.

¹⁰ *Коптев А. Воспоминание о поездке в Константинополь, Каир и Иерусалим в 1887 году. СПб., 1888. С. 268.*

¹¹ Архив внешней политики Российской империи (далее — АВПРИ). Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 3 об.

¹² *Крымский А.Е. Письма из Ливана (1896–1898). М., 1975. С. 76.*



View of Beirut from the residence of the Society of Jesus toward
the Gemmayzeh–Surssock–Medawar district.
Les petites écoles du Mont-Liban: Joseph Delore, s.j. (1873–1944).
Beirut: Presses de l'Université Saint-Joseph, 2003

tiveness, this error was avoided. Having familiarized herself with “the great school’s” organization¹³, she reluctantly concluded that “the girls’ school, in which I was expected to teach, like Kezma, has such teaching staff that joining it would mean ruining the whole matter from the very start, for one does not enter Rome and not behave as the Romans, yet following their rules is not permitted by any reasonable understanding of education”¹⁴.

She was particularly outraged by the school’s faculty: “some Greek women who had failed in trade, imported from Marseille”¹⁵. “Clearly, they can offer nothing serious; the very spirit that reigns in the school shows the corruption of children’s hearts through the methods of these teachers... Their manners and affectations are improper for ordinary people of decent society, let alone for educators. All this, of course, is transmitted to the children. And the Arab girls under their rule are unkempt, incapable, and behave improperly”¹⁶, Cherkasova concluded. On the level of a well-known Arabic proverb — “a stick for the disobedient” (العصا لمن عصى) —

¹³ *Al-madrasat al-kubraa* as the School of the Three Holy Hierarchs in Beirut (also known as the Three Moons School) was called.

¹⁴ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 5.

¹⁵ Ibid. Л. 5.

¹⁶ Ibid.

stood the school's pedagogy as well: "The children's faces are dull, they recite their lessons by rote; altogether, it is distressing"¹⁷. "Unfortunately, here especially in the Orthodox schools there exist methods of teaching that are more likely to stifle children's abilities than to develop them"¹⁸, she lamented.

The reason for such a sharp rejection of the school, which the Arab scholar A.E. Krymsky described as "celebrated"¹⁹, must likely be sought in the religious atmosphere to which the missionary was acutely sensitive. "In the boys' school, where Kezma previously taught <...> what struck me most was that the Law of God is taught from a Jesuit French textbook, and the teacher of the Law of God himself is a Latin or a Uniate"²⁰. A characteristic figure of such a teacher was Najib Nasim Trad, "undoubtedly a good and educated man"²¹, as the anti-clerical A.E. Krymsky judged him, who had studied with the Jesuits and taught French at the same school, though "local society disliked him for his engagement with philosophy"²². But what suited A.E. Krymsky and the local *nahḍawī* intellectuals of the Arab Renaissance was unacceptable to the missionary Cherkasova. Combating the corrupting influence of the West – whether Catholic or positivist – was a central idea in the work of *Mama Moskobie*.

"Greek, or rather Arab, schools seem to exist only to instill in children a disgust for learning and to develop all sorts of illnesses", the teacher summarized her first impressions²³. Entering the Three Moons School, as Khitrovo wished, would have meant assuming responsibility for the existing order and compromising the Society from the outset in the eyes of the Orthodox population, which regarded all "Russians as saints"²⁴.

With this challenge, thrown down by Lebanese reality, begins the history of *Mama Moskobie's* schools – the most vivid and original phenomenon in the entire educational activity of the IOPS. With characteristic en-

¹⁷ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 7 об.

¹⁸ Ibid. Л. 14 об.

¹⁹ *Крымский А.Е.* Письма... С. 76.

²⁰ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 7 об.

²¹ *Крымский А.Е.* Письма... С. 76.

²² Ibid. С. 79.

²³ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 6.

²⁴ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 8 об.

ergy and initiative, M.A. Cherkasova decided not to join the Three Moons School but to open her own.

“An experienced and energetic woman”²⁵, she held a meeting with General Consul K.D. Petkovich and, on 13 June 1887, not very diplomatically — *post factum* — informed the Society’s Council of its outcome: “Taking all this into consideration, we decided with Konstantin Dmitrievich to simply open a Russian-language class for day girls in my apartment, at least as a beginning”²⁶. There was no facility, no teaching materials, no support from high officials. But there was also no direct prohibition.

On 11 July 1887, the office of His Imperial Highness Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich sent an approving, though not uncritical, reply from M.P. Stepanov²⁷: “Open your class with God’s help, as you write; I think it would be better and more convenient to open a small Arabic class jointly with it <...> I fear that for Russian alone not even two pupils will come to you. However, you know best”²⁸.

His concern proved justified. A week later, only one pupil came to Cherkasova to study Russian — the teacher at the local Orthodox Arab school of the Three Holy Hierarchs, Afife Abdo, “a 22-year-old young woman, very modest, of good conduct and morals, so that she might even serve as an assistant if only her knowledge and pedagogical methods corresponded somewhat to that role”²⁹. In July 1887, few could have foreseen that the sole visitor to the Russian class would become Cherkasova’s loyal companion until the final days of her life. Afife herself considered her encounter with *Mama*, as she called her, a miracle foretold by a prophetic dream two years earlier³⁰.

²⁵ Дмитриевский А.А. XXV-летие русских школ.... С. 80.

²⁶ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 5 об.

²⁷ Mikhail Petrovich Stepanov (1853–1917) — Major General (1891), Secretary of the Orthodox Palestinian Society in 1882–1889; in 1889–1917 Assistant to the Chairman of the IOPS.

²⁸ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 12.

²⁹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 14 об.

³⁰ She dreamed of a star shining in the west, under which “in large letters in a foreign language” something was written. “I was confused and amazed when I saw this. Then I said to myself: ‘If you do not know the meaning of these letters, do not know in what language this is written, then why did the Lord show you all this? Surely He wants me to learn this meaning’”. (Абдо А.Д. Краткая история жизни Мамы — Марии Александровны Черкасовой,

Such a far-from-triumphal beginning of the Russian class exposed the entire complex of problems inherent in Russia's presence in the Middle East. A predominantly agrarian country with a largely peasant population and a late-starting industrial transformation (typologically similar to the Ottoman Empire), the Russian Empire at the end of the nineteenth century could not withstand competition with Britain, France, and the United States. Rapid economic changes influenced the life choices of young people in the Middle East: knowledge of European languages was becoming a daily necessity for Levantines. As the Russian general consul in Beirut noted, "parents prefer schools in which foreign languages are taught"³¹. Educational institutions (mostly missionary) that offered mastery of the "new" languages, French and later English, enjoyed particular popularity. These languages displaced Italian as the *lingua franca* of the coastal cities of the Eastern Mediterranean in the second half of the nineteenth century. French, as the language of commerce, industry, the postal service, telegraphy, railroads, navigation, and higher education, was indispensable for life in Syria; English gained importance with the rise of emigration from the Syro-Lebanese region, opening "the doors to the American 'fabulous' earnings and profits"³².

On 18 July 1887 Cherkasova wrote to M.P. Stepanov:

*"Public opinion demands from a school, above all, the French language... There are very few persons wishing to study Russian; Russia, they say, is far away, we have no commercial ties with it, and in general no one in society speaks Russian, not even the Russians themselves, who seem ready to prefer any language to their own"*³³.

In addition to French, a girls' school was expected to teach skills necessary for a future wife and mother: "the ability to embroider and generally to sew, and partly music and singing, for those who are able"³⁴.

главы и основательницы русских школ Российского Императорского Православного Палестинского общества в Бейруте / Всмотриваясь друг в друга... Россия и арабский мир: взаимное восприятие (Сборник статей). Сост.: Н. Г. Романова, И. М. Смилянская (отв. ред.), А. О. Филоник. М.: Институт востоковедения РАН, 2013. С. 420).

³¹ АВПРИ. Ф. 208. Оп. 819. Д. 322. Л. 110 об.

³² АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 434. Л. 119 об.

³³ Ibid. Д. 425. Л. 15.

³⁴ Ibid.



St. Elijah Girls' School in Beirut with headmistress M.A. Cherkasova.
*Russian Institutions in the Holy Land and Deceased Figures of the Imperial
Orthodox Palestine Society. Vol. XXV (1882–1907).*
St. Petersburg, Kirschbaum Publishing. 1907

Thus, the stumbling block for the teacher became the question of the Russian language and, more broadly, the role and place of Russia in the life of the Middle East. An answer to what distant Russia could offer to Orthodox Syrians had to be found within the shortest possible time and taken into account in preparing to open the school.

From a Russian-language class to a school of her own

On 22 September 1887 the first school of M.A. Cherkasova opened its doors in the Mousaitbeh quarter of Beirut. A quarter-century later, in 1912, A.A. Dmitrievsky described this event as follows:

“...M.A. Cherkasova began insisting that by the beginning of the next academic year an independent Russian school be opened, and this was done by K.D. Petkovich... After long searches and efforts, on 22 September 1887, the late Metropolitan Gabriel of Beirut, who had lived for a long time in Russia <...> consecrated, in the lower part of the city <...> the first Russian school in Beirut. And since then, for twenty-five years Maria Aleksandrovna, ‘for the glory of God,’ despite her advanced age and serious infirmities, has labored

tirelessly for the benefit of the Syrian Church and for the glory of her fatherland in the field of education"³⁵.

On closer examination, it becomes clear that this account was a jubilee myth skillfully constructed by Dmitrievsky, who deftly assigned a significant role to the consul and highlighted the activity of the metropolitan. This deferential panegyric to official diplomacy and the Society's leadership was later adopted by N.N. Lisov, acquired new "details"³⁶ (cf. N. Laguzova³⁷), and became entrenched in contemporary historiography — representing a clear schematization and simplification³⁸.

The Mama herself wrote of those intense days of the early Lebanese autumn in far less ceremonial tones:

*"Our school opened in haste; at that time, we had nothing, not even furniture. The divan in my room was nailed together from a travel crate, and I still keep it as an object of dear remembrance..."*³⁹

A house had been rented for her beginning on 17 September 1887 for one year at 4,500 piastres, "which sum", she wrote to Stepanov, "I paid to the owner out of my salary so as not to postpone the opening of the school until

³⁵ Дмитриевский А.А. XXV-летие русских школ... С. 76–88.

³⁶ Лисовой Н.Н. М.А. Черкасова и школы... С. 446.

³⁷ "Initially supported by the Consul General in Beirut, K. D. Petkovich (italics mine — E.K.), the school was handed over (sic! — E.K.) to M. A. Cherkasova..." (Лазузова Н.А. Школьная деятельность Императорского Православного Палестинского Общества в 1905–1914 гг. // Иерусалимский Православный семинар. Вып. 3. М., 2012. С. 125).

³⁸ Interestingly, the text by Afife Abdo, created for the same purpose, was written in a distinctly hagiographic genre and presented an opposite kind of schematization. It treated the person of Maria Alexandrovna herself and the distant Holy Rus', but scarcely mentioned the Palestinian Society. These emphases reflected the strained relations between the Society's leadership, M. A. Cherkasova, and the Abdo family (the Society's members are but thinly veiled when Afife declares that slander was spread against her by "wicked, dishonest people", wishing to separate her from Maria Alexandrovna). She was not far from the truth; N. M. Anichkov wrote directly in his report: "It seems to me that the Society must carefully and skillfully remove the Abdo family from the schools supervised by M. A. Cherkasova... But especially Afife Dmitrievna must not remain in the St. Elias School or assist Maria Alexandrovna, because she interferes absolutely in everything..." Аничков Н.М. Учебные и врачебные заведения императорского Православного Палестинского Общества в Сирии и Палестине. Ч. 1. Учебные заведения Сирии и Иудеи. СПб., 1901. С. 117–118.

³⁹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 195. Л. 107–111 об.

I received money from you"⁴⁰. A characteristic touch is added by her next remark: "Not wishing to complain and lament, I did not write to you until circumstances allowed me to convey something pleasant"⁴¹.

Only on 30 September 1887 could Cherkasova, with relief and joy, finally report to St. Petersburg:

*"Glory and thanks be to the Creator! The school for day girls was opened on this 22nd day of September"*⁴².

It must be stressed that the school was opened by the teacher at her own personal expense and risk, and until early October 1887 the Society's board had had no idea it existed.

The 'dragomania'⁴³ syndrome

The house for the school had been rented on the recommendation of "an Arab, an honest man, one Selim Raies, whose uncle is a metropolitan in Lebanon in Tripoli, and who received his education in Russia, having lived there for twenty-five years"⁴⁴. He also sent "a large icon of the Tikhvin Mother of God for the school; Selim is in general a man of a Russian soul"⁴⁵.

There could be no assistance from the Russian consulate or its dragomans:

*"The most obstruction in opening the school and in renting the apartment came precisely from those who should have assisted me; but God is stronger than all, and... when the opportunity to prevent me from renting this house had passed – and to force me to rent another unsuitable one (perhaps allowing them to receive a bribe from its owner) – then all of them began to praise and consider the house I chose the best of all"*⁴⁶.

⁴⁰ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПЮ. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 32 об.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПЮ. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 32.

⁴³ The term introduced by David Urquhart, denoting the unhealthy dependence of European diplomats on local dragoman intermediaries. *Cunningham A. The Dragomans of the British embassy at Constantinople. / Eastern Questions in the 19th century: collected essays / by Allan Cunningham; edited by Edward Ingram. Vol.2. London 1993. P. 1.*

⁴⁴ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПЮ. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 37 об.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid. Л. 36 об.–37.

Here, for the first time, Cherkasova encountered the system of relations existing within the following triangle: the Russian consulate — the Shahade family — the Arab society. The consular dragomans from the Shahade family were “hated by almost all Arabs, yet all fear them and therefore ingratiatingly bow to their slightest wish”⁴⁷. Selim Shahade “is known here to all as a Mason, an atheist, and a man who openly lives with the wife of an Orthodox photographer (whom she now keeps as a lackey, and Shahade as her husband), a Catholic woman who manages all the affairs of the Consulate through Shahade (the son), taking bribes from those who come to her and appropriating the money (salary) of Shahade, whom she has under her heel. And this is known openly to all; everyone knows it, and everyone is afraid”⁴⁸.

The general consul himself understood the power of his dragomans (father and son), telling Cherkasova that “he had long known them to be swindlers, but that he could not dismiss them...”⁴⁹ “It seems even the consul fears them”, Cherkasova concluded, “and here they say: ‘the consul lies in a cradle; one (of the Shahades) rocks him, the other (the son or the father) listens at the door to hear whether he has fallen asleep, in order to set his machines in motion’”⁵⁰.

The sources permit an independent verification of these unflattering descriptions. A decade later, the anticlerical A.E. Krymsky, who never met Cherkasova, called her in private letters a “sanctimonious prude,” and never visited her “little schools”⁵¹, left the following comments on the relationship between K.D. Petkovich’s successor and his all-powerful dragoman. In November 1896, Prince A.A. Gagarin⁵², together with Krymsky,

⁴⁷ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 36 об.

⁴⁸ Ibid. Л. 37–37 об.

⁴⁹ Ibid. Л. 36 об.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ *Крымский А.Е. Письма...* С. 92. These were A. E. Krymsky’s personal views. Another orientalist, the son of an alumnus of St. Petersburg Theological Academy, Arabist and RAS member I. Yu. Krachkovsky, visited her schools every Sunday in 1908–1910. (*Крачковская В.А. И.Ю. Крачковский на Ливане и в Палестине. /Палестинский Сборник. Вып. 1 (63), 1954. С. 113.*) “During my two-year wanderings through Syria, I greatly enjoyed visiting the schools of the Russian Palestinian Society”. (*Крачковский И.Ю. Над арабскими рукописями. М., 1965. С. 75.*)

⁵² Alexander Alexandrovich Gagarin — Russian Consul General in Beirut from 11 (24) November 1905 to 16 (29) May 1911. Later Consul General in Genoa.

dreamed of “establishing justice here in Beirut, prosecuting bribery, and, to begin with, driving out the dragoman who traffics in Russian justice”⁵³. The eminent Orientalist fully confirms Cherkasova’s view:

*“When I found out what goes on here, in Turkey, my hair stood on end. Among other things, I discovered that the dragoman conceals from the Prince the names of guilty Muslims from whom he receives bribes”*⁵⁴.

Such a convergence of assessments speaks both to their authenticity and to the perceptiveness of the teacher. Cherkasova’s version of female influence over consular affairs is likewise fully confirmed by Krymsky:

*“Shahade still maintains close relations with his former mistress, from whom he had separated after marrying a respectable young woman... In the house of this mistress, as earlier, various transactions between Selim and the persons needing the Russian consulate take place”*⁵⁵.

Looking ahead another ten years, it must be sorrowfully noted that the situation had changed little by 1906. During an inspection of the South Syrian schools, P.I. Ryazhsky wrote to the vice-chairman of the IOPS, N.M. Anichkov, about S. Shahade:

*“Being the consul’s right hand owing to his indisputable abilities and knowledge, he makes use of and trades on Russian influence not without benefit to his personal aims, though not always to the benefit of the Russian cause”*⁵⁶.

Agreeing with this appraisal, Anichkov, who had earlier visited Beirut himself, underlined the final words in red pencil and wrote beside them: “yes, yes, yes”⁵⁷.

Despite all obstacles, the school, as M. A. Cherkasova reported on 30 September 1887, opened “quietly, modestly, and meekly, that is, without unnecessary fuss and noisy celebrations; **neither the Consul nor the Metropolitan were present** (boldface mine – E.K.); the local priest performed a short service, and the nearby parishioners prayed”⁵⁸. K. D. Petkovich, like Gabriel (Shatila), diplomatically avoided attending the ceremony so as not to incur difficulties either with the Ottoman government

⁵³ Крымский А.Е. Письма... С. 60.

⁵⁴ Крымский А.Е. Письма... С. 60.

⁵⁵ Ibid. С. 259.

⁵⁶ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 434. Л. 21.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 32.

(the Society did not possess authorization to open schools, and they were not officially recognized by the government until 1902) or with the ecclesiastical authorities in the person of Patriarch Gerasimos (Protopapas) (1885–1891).

As we see, the school was not “supported” by the diplomatic mission, let alone “handed over” to the instructress; it owed its very existence solely to the energy and determination of “Mama Moskobie”.

The establishment of the Russian Orthodox school was received with enthusiasm by the local population, which led to an influx of pupils far exceeding Cherkasova’s expectations: “more than two hundred girls from the very first days, during the first week”⁵⁹. As a result, the house of Abdu Said proved “insufficient for such numbers; yet unwilling to turn away those who came, so as not to give them cause to return to heterodox schools, I accepted them all, arranging a tent in the courtyard for the younger ones”⁶⁰. Cherkasova embarked on a determined struggle against child homelessness, illiteracy, and Protestant proselytism. Of her early steps on this missionary path she wrote enthusiastically to M. P. Stepanov:

*“...I rejoice at your intention to make religion the foundation of the school, for this has always been and remains my constant desire which, with God’s help, I strive to carry out. On Sundays we have already begun holding lessons — for now simply an explanation of the liturgy, prayers, the Gospel, etc.”*⁶¹.

Afife Abdo reported that in the year of Cherkasova’s arrival in Beirut, the Protestants had achieved great success in Mousaitbeh, “where, as a result of their activity, the girls did not even know the meaning of the sign of the cross. This is why Mama considered it necessary to instruct the girls first and foremost in the Orthodox faith, and only afterward in other subjects. At that time, religious debates arose between the Protestants and our pupils. The girls turned to Mama with numerous questions, and she taught them how to answer properly, refuting the Protestants”⁶². Cherkaso-

⁵⁹ Ibid.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid. A. 34.

⁶² Абдо А.Д. Краткая история жизни Мамы — Марии Александровны Черкасовой, главы и основательницы русских школ Российского Императорского Православного Палестинского общества в Бейруте. / Взаимная дружба... Россия и арабский мир: взаимное восприятие

va's missionary work led to the fact that "the local Protestant school was nearly emptied, and having dismissed most of the teachers, left only two"⁶³.

In addition to the inadequacy of the rented premises, the question of faculty that would meet the headmistress's requirements arose with equal urgency. These requirements consisted in the combination of mastery of the subject and readiness to serve the Orthodox Church. As N. M. Anichkov emphasized in his report:

*"The elementary school founded by M. A. Cherkasova rests on the firm assimilation of the Word of God, and young girls are brought up not only in the awareness of the necessity of unwavering faith, but also in the strict observance of ritual practice, with the headmistress of the school serving as an example of the most sincere religiosity"*⁶⁴.

Cherkasova had to admit that it was "very difficult to find Orthodox women teachers here, meaning those truly able to teach"⁶⁵. The absence of trained pedagogical personnel did not disconcert her. "A lady of small stature"⁶⁶, as Afife Abdo described her, she energetically set about training instructors.

*"During the day Mama herself taught the first class, and when finished there, she instructed the teachers. ... We teachers stayed awake half the night, rising at five in the morning, for at that hour Mama gave us lessons in teaching as well as in the art of managing a school. She did all this in French, since she did not know a word of Arabic, and at that time I did not know a word of Russian. Therefore, the learning process was difficult both for her and for us. We worked tirelessly, unaware when the day ended and the night began"*⁶⁷.

Such an approach sometimes induced discouragement and despair even in the eldest of the four young Syrian teachers⁶⁸, who at the time had scarcely turned twenty-two: "Sometimes I despaired; life seemed too hard;

(Сборник статей). Сост.: Н. Г. Романова, И. М. Смилянская (отв. ред.), А.О. Филоник. М.: Институт востоковедения РАН, 2013. М., 2013. С. 425.

⁶³ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 35 об.

⁶⁴ Аничков Н.М. Учебные и врачебные заведения... С. 108.

⁶⁵ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 35.

⁶⁶ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 423.

⁶⁷ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история...С. 423.

⁶⁸ Rosa Smat, Emilia Smat, Emilia Abdennur, and Afife Abdo.

I wanted to give everything up and return to my family home”⁶⁹. But after moments of despondency came renewed hope. Afife Abdo “again submitted to that call which commanded me to continue bearing my cross”⁷⁰. Their spiritual affinity and shared convictions concerning the work ultimately predetermined the success of the long collaboration between Abdo and “my lady, my beloved Mama”⁷¹.

The language issue and notes of Orientalism

It was not only everyday difficulties that caused Cherkasova anxiety. As mentioned above, the key issue was the language of instruction. Her first practical experience made it clear that Russian was in no demand. Nevertheless, the Society’s Council categorically prohibited instruction in French, which they regarded as the language of Catholic propaganda.

Caught between the ultimatum-like demands from St. Petersburg and the no less rigid conditions of Beirut’s reality, Cherkasova was forced to maneuver. “With the French language one must contrive in every possible way. For now I have announced that during the first month I will begin exclusively with Russian, which has already been done — the French will come later...”⁷² As an explanation — not entirely sincere — Cherkasova declared to parents that she was “dissatisfied with the local textbooks, that it was necessary to order them from Russia, etc. This was for those who did not understand the matter and who demanded French at all costs, and those were almost all of them. For the understanding minority it is quietly explained that French is not only useless but harmful, as it demoralizes the girls, accustoming them to French novels and fashions, and as a means enabling them to read Voltaire, etc.”⁷³ It is hardly an exaggeration to say that such tactics had little chance of success: the working population of Mousaitbeh demanded French not in order to read Voltaire but as a vital means of earning a livelihood in St. George Bay.

⁶⁹ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 423.

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Ibid. С. 420.

⁷² АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 34.

⁷³ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 34.

Yet Cherkasova's concerns found no understanding on the banks of the Neva. The Society demanded in no uncertain terms a ban on French in the school: "regardless of everything, even if everyone leaves, that is, an unconditional prohibition of teaching this language"⁷⁴. Having done nothing to establish the school, it was prepared with ease to destroy it. V. N. Khitrovo's position was utterly uncompromising: "We must not teach our Arab wards a language that facilitates access to the Catholic literature of Jesuit propagandists. And for their broader education the Arabs will certainly find everything in Russian, in the richest, world-renowned Russian belles-lettres..."⁷⁵ The hypocritical ambiguity of the situation was underscored by the fact that both members of the Society and Russian diplomats spoke French among themselves. The Orientalist A. E. Krymsky noted that in the household of Consul A. A. Gagarin conversation "quite often switched to French"⁷⁶, and that "such a rather chauvinistic Russian patriot as V. N. Khitrovo spoke with us about Russia's tasks in the East in excellent French, not Russian"⁷⁷. When in October 1897, in the drawing room of the Russian General Consulate, Krymsky attempted to object that "indeed here the three of us are conversing not in Russian but in French, and we are not turning into Catholics", Khitrovo replied conclusively: "We are another matter", and changed the subject⁷⁸.

For her part, Cherkasova's closest assistant, Afife Abdo, regarded her knowledge of French as the "inspiration" of the Lord. After two and a half years of "severe torment" under the instruction of the Lazarist sisters, she alone among the four Abdo sisters had mastered it well. It was the French language that later became for her "the only means of becoming acquainted with Mama"⁷⁹.

For the sake of saving the nascent school, Mama Moskobie resorted to direct disobedience to the Society's leadership. No announcement was made to pupils regarding the prohibition of French. In discussion with M. P. Stepanov she justified her decision thus:

⁷⁴ Ibid. Л. 34 об.

⁷⁵ *Крымский А.Е. История новой арабской литературы. XIX — начало XX в. М., 1971. С. 311.*

⁷⁶ *Крымский А.Е. Письма... С. 61.*

⁷⁷ Ibid. С. 241.

⁷⁸ *Крымский А.Е. История новой арабской... С. 311.*

⁷⁹ *Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 418.*

*“As for your supposition that knowledge of French will ease their entrance into higher Jesuit schools, first, no such higher schools for girls exist; second, those who know local customs say that depriving them of French instruction will force almost all of them to leave us in order to obtain this desired knowledge in heterodox schools. In view of all this, I hesitated to declare...”*⁸⁰

Fully aware of the local situation but also of the futility of open conflict with the leadership, Cherkasova in conclusion placed responsibility for the school’s imminent closure upon the Society’s Council: “For my part I only stipulate that in such a case I not be blamed if all leave because of this”⁸¹.

At the Consular threshold

The first month of the school’s existence nearly became its last. Meanwhile, in the lukewarm reality of the imperial consulate everything appeared quite serene. There were neither worries nor apprehensions. On 28 October 1887, Petkovich reported to Khitrovo that the school was doing well and that many pupils were studying Russian. The lack of concern was easy to explain: it is difficult to worry about something to which one has practically no connection.

The attitude of the consul is illustrated by an incident at the end of September 1887. “Before leaving for Jerusalem, I went to him (Petkovich — E.K.) to ask where to store my belongings; he forestalled my request, saying ‘My house does not exist for the purpose of storing things’⁸². ‘I am not speaking of the house; I am referring to the consular yard.’ But this miserliness so struck me that I left my things in the boys’ school”⁸³. As might be expected, the teacher’s belongings were stolen.

“But what astonished me most of all”, she wrote to Stepanov, “was that the consul disavowed to my face the very words he had earlier spoken about the house not being for (storing) things, as though it had not been to me, to my very face, that he had said them. I looked at him, listened, and could

⁸⁰ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 34 об.

⁸¹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 34 об.

⁸² Ibid. Л. 38.

⁸³ Ibid.

not believe my ears! Yes! Our consuls are the glory of Russia, yet they do not merely fail to give help to the Russian cause, but anyone sincerely wishing to serve the Russian Orthodox Church must above all beware of the hidden reefs lying right at the consulate's threshold. <...> But God be with him; we rarely call at his house. I have lived here in Beirut for five months and have not yet had the honor to drink even a cup of tea in his household, not to mention breakfast. You understand, dear M. P., that I do not need his bread; the Lord feeds me, glory and thanks be to Him, and I believe that He will not abandon me in the future. It's the sympathy that is precious..."⁸⁴ A stark and uncompromising characterization, to which little can be added.

Shortly after Petkovich's optimistic report, Cherkasova's worst fears were realized. The problem of the undesirability of Russian again manifested itself. On 22 November 1887 the headmistress was forced to report to the Society's Council that "half the school has left, seeing that French is not being taught, and some because I did not teach them from an alphabet with pictures as the Protestants do, but immediately gave them the Gospels to read. Note: now there are about 150 people in the school. But their number changes daily"⁸⁵.

"Moskob is a magical word": popular diplomacy in Mazraa

Yet within a month, philological problems receded into the background, giving way to matters of life and death. The small Mousaitbeh found itself at the center of high politics. January 1888 was marked by an upsurge of interconfessional violence: dozens of Christians were wounded in Beirut.

On 22–24 January 1888, large-scale clashes between Christians and Muslims erupted in the southern part of Beirut, in the quarter of Mazra'at al-‘Arab, which bordered directly on Mousaitbeh.

*"In the evening we were all terribly frightened. I heard screams and wailing and at first thought it was a fire <...> Not seeing flames or smoke from any side, I asked: but where is the fire? — What fire! Not a fire, but killing; they are fighting, shooting, wounding, torturing, murdering..."*⁸⁶

⁸⁴ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПИО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 38 об.–39.

⁸⁵ Ibid. Л. 45.

⁸⁶ Ibid. Л. 62–62 об.

The immediate cause of the conflict was the hostile attitude (stemming from smuggling-related issues) of the Christian population toward the guards of the tobacco tax-farm, “who are recruited exclusively from among Muslims”⁸⁷. As a result of the disturbances and the subsequent actions taken by soldiers and gendarmes to suppress them, it was primarily the Christian population that suffered: more than thirty people were wounded, two of whom died from their injuries⁸⁸. On the morning after the pogrom, instead of two hundred pupils, only 5–10 girls came to school, “all with frightened faces <...> and evidently some of the older girls came today only to talk about it, to express their regret and sympathy that I am here alone, that they are afraid I might be killed, etc. ‘If only the Russians would come and protect us; write to them, let them come and rule over us...’”⁸⁹ Lessons were disrupted, for “all were in fear and terror. The children asked me to teach them to sing ‘God Save the Tsar’ instead of holding class. This served as a kind of consolation”⁹⁰.

The clashes occurred under evident connivance by the Ottoman authorities. As one mother of a pupil recounted: “At night soldiers burst into our homes on the pretext of searching for those in hiding, and take from us our last piece of bread, eating the cooked food and breaking the dishes afterward...”⁹¹ Under the influence of Beirut’s qadi, Ramiz Bey, Mutasarrıf Nesukhi Bey presented the affair as a Christian uprising against legitimate authority⁹².

⁸⁷ АВПРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1336. Л. 53.

⁸⁸ Ibid. Л. 53 об.

⁸⁹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 62 об.

⁹⁰ Ibid. Л. 63.

⁹¹ Ibid. Л. 69 об.

⁹² In a broader context, these (quite ordinary for Lebanon) clashes in 1888 had special significance against the background of the political struggle connected with attempts to make Beirut into a separate vilayet. The hopes of influential circles of the local elite gained new strength with the appointment of Kamil Pasha (Kibrisli) as Grand Vizier, who, they hoped, “had not forgotten his time in Beirut”. European diplomats believed that the clashes were connected with the Ottoman government’s decision to divide the provinces of Damascus and Beirut. In the situation of a “Christian revolt” against the authorities, the Syrian governor-general Rashid Nashid Pasha argued to the Porte that the creation of a coastal vilayet would deliver it to foreign powers. However, Rashid Nashid Pasha lost this battle. He died of a heart attack on the day he received the notice of his dismissal, and the sultan’s decree on the creation of the coastal vilayet was proclaimed on March 7, 1888.



M.A. Cherkasova at the Archangel Michael Mixed School (Mazraa).
“Moscow Schools” of Lebanon, 1887–1914. Beirut; St. Petersburg, 2012

In February 1888 the unrest still profoundly affected the school’s life. According to Cherkasova, “nearly half the children do not come, since their fathers are in prison or sentenced to death: five are to be hanged <...>, and 80 have been sentenced to 15 years’ imprisonment. And all these children, together with their mothers, remain hungry and cold, and it is known that a hungry belly has no ears; they are not up to study when they are starving and cold. Those who do come try and do well and make progress in the Russian language; it is only a pity they come irregularly, two or three times a week; one today, another tomorrow”⁹³. Deprived of the means to live, “women with small children incessantly” burst into the doors of the St. Nicholas school, which “at certain hours are opened for the children, imploring help”⁹⁴. “And what do I do? – the headmistress exclaimed. – Marvel at my cruelty: my heart is breaking, yet I drive them from the door without giving them even alms. Alas, sinful me, I do this for fear of attracting a crowd and, God forbid, arousing suspicion. And so I send the poor away with nothing, telling them: ‘It is not my affair; my affair is the school, and you may apply to the consul.’ At this advice they

⁹³ АВГРИ. Ф. РИГПИО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 77–77 об.

⁹⁴ Ibid. Л. 70.

fall almost into despair, crying out: everyone sends us away: one consul to another, and that one to the Metropolitan, and you too, and we have nothing to eat; the little children ask for bread, and we have no flour; our day-laborer husbands, up to seventy men, are thrown into prison, and if in some family a man remains, he is either lying exhausted from wounds, or hiding somewhere in the house, afraid to go out and fall into the hands of the Turks”⁹⁵.

In January–February 1888, entirely without intending it, Cherkasova became Russia’s representative in Mousaitbeh and Mazraa. “*Moskob* is a magical word. When I walk through the streets, adults whisper ‘Moskobia,’ and the children shout ‘Moskobia’ until I disappear from sight. And some cross themselves and say: We are Moskob, that is, Orthodox, which is identical in meaning for them”⁹⁶. On the one hand, Cherkasova wrote enthusiastically, “my Russian Orthodox heart cannot but rejoice at seeing such goodwill toward the Russians”, yet on the other, she was made to feel personally the distance between the idealized image of Russia and the actual state of affairs.

During the days of the crisis, the question of protecting the Orthodox population by the Russian diplomatic mission intensified. The parish clergy of Beirut actively criticized Petkovich for passivity: “Although the Russian (the consul – E.K.) assures us that he is doing everything he can, we know that he is doing nothing, and he added words which are not suitable for writing...”⁹⁷ These displays of freedom of speech placed the teacher in an “extremely delicate and awkward position”⁹⁸.

Driven to despair, she wrote to the consul requesting that he visit the school. When Petkovich arrived, A. Abdo addressed him on behalf of the quarter’s residents: “Send a telegram to Russia – let them dispatch a squadron; will you send a telegram? If we all, including the men, gather at your door and ask you to send a telegram to the Russian Tsar?”⁹⁹ The general consul, who had earlier advised Cherkasova “not

⁹⁵ Ibid. А. 69 о6.

⁹⁶ Ibid. А. 71 о6.

⁹⁷ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. А. 70 о6.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid. А. 71 о6.

to listen”, “fell into the trap himself and could not silence her”¹⁰⁰. Quite rightly fearing that these conversations, “retold and embellished by the southern imagination”, might reach the Ottoman authorities and bring harm, the Society demanded that Cherkasova cease “such manifestations absolutely”¹⁰¹.

Stepanov proposed an exhaustive solution to the consular problem: “We cannot allow any gossip or talk in our school concerning our General Consul Petkovich. To the parents who permit themselves such conversations, you may simply forbid it, pointing out how improper it is to permit such abuse of a representative of the Russian government in a Russian school”, and also to hang his portrait “in a prominent place in the school”¹⁰². Simple solutions — prohibiting criticism and hanging the consul’s portrait¹⁰³ — do not always work well. As a result, in order not to “hear such conversations and complaints”¹⁰⁴, Cherkasova was forced to stop receiving even the parents of the pupils.

The gap between theory and practice becomes evident when comparing Stepanov’s working instructions with the programmatic text of the Society’s Vice-Chairman, V. N. Khitrovo. In 1879 he declared: “As for political interests, I will point out only that we are the natural heirs of the Greeks wherever Orthodoxy exists, and that one can beat the Turks not only on the Danube and not only by supporting the Orthodox Slavs, but also on the Euphrates and on the shores of the Mediterranean, relying on the Orthodox Arab population”¹⁰⁵. It is clear that Khitrovo’s theses were tailored to the tastes of the highest circles of St. Petersburg society and to domestic political tasks, whereas in the reality of the Ottoman Empire, the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society followed far more moderate guidelines.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. Л. 79–79 об.

¹⁰² АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 79 об.–80.

¹⁰³ It is important to note that from the very moment the school opened, K.D. Petkovich’s portrait was hung “under the portraits of Her Majesty the Empress Maria Feodorovna”.

¹⁰⁴ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 74 об.

¹⁰⁵ Хитрово В.Н. Неделя в Палестине. Из путевых воспоминаний В.Н.Хитрово. СПб., 1879. С. 60–61.

Images of Russia

The real danger of the incident of 1888 lay in the specific circumstances of the moment (though it is unlikely that anyone in St. Petersburg suspected this), connected with the administrative division of the vilayets. Yet the very notions (“why do the Moskobs not come to rule us?”) that the crisis brought to the surface were entirely traditional and stereotypical within the Orthodox Arab milieu. In 1897 A. E. Krymsky described the following dialogue with a local woman in the village of Tabisha in Lebanon: “When will the Russians come to take over us?” she asked me cheerfully. <...> ‘Why on earth would the Russians come to do this?’ I asked her. ‘But we are Russian subjects, Moscow people,’ she replied with the same care-free tone, scarcely grasping the meaning of her words, uttering them as a memorized phrase...”¹⁰⁶

Here we encounter directly the image of “the other” that circulated in Beirut’s society at both macro- and microlevels. On the one hand, there was the historically formed notion of a great power, the protector of the Orthodox in the Ottoman Empire; on the other, a specific image of Russian people. “Here in the East, which sees of Russians only pilgrims, the conviction has formed that there is no more devout nation in the world than the ‘Moskobs’; they are ‘*abrār*’ (the righteous)”¹⁰⁷, wrote Krymsky. And he added ironically: “I suppose that by the plentiful crossings of myself I helped sustain this reputation”¹⁰⁸.

He himself belonged to a different type of Russian, about whom Maria Aleksandrovna repeatedly said: “Oh! Woe to us! I always remember the late Innokenty (Innocent) Metropolitan of Moscow, who said to me: ‘I, you know, mother, used to tell the natives on the Aleutian Islands about visiting Russians: “These are not real Russians; the real Russians are far away”, for I was ashamed to acknowledge them as Russians from whom the natives might take an example of Christian life”¹⁰⁹. Krymsky, who did not attend church and did not fit the image of the *Moskob abrār*, produced a

¹⁰⁶ Крымский А.Е. Письма... С. 175.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. С. 181.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid.

¹⁰⁹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 155–155 об.

public sensation: “My landlady made me cross myself before her to be sure that I was a Christian”¹¹⁰. Matters reached such a point that even small children began to reproach Krymsky, calling him “yahudi” (Jew)¹¹¹. It was of such “not real Russians” that Cherkasova complained to I. P. Yuvachev in March 1900, saying that she “had many times been forced to blush” when they “showed inattention or negligence toward the divine service and the church”¹¹². Cherkasova herself, from the perspective of Orthodox Arabs, represented the ideal type of Russian.

At the macro-level, Russia was perceived as a formidable opponent of Turkey and a protector of the Orthodox Christians of the East. In situations where idealized images did not coincide with reality, as in 1888, disappointment and protest arose. When Consul Petkovich, acting fully in accordance with the instructions of the embassy in Constantinople, recommended that the headmistress avoid arousing Ottoman suspicion, the Orthodox residents of Beirut, with Eastern ardor, traversed the short distance from love to hatred. Accordingly, if Russia’s representative in Mousaitbeh and Mazraa, Cherkasova, was called *Mama Moskobie*, yet people asked whether Petkovich was a “Moskob” at all, and they made Krymsky cross himself and called him a Jew, reluctantly acknowledging in him a hitherto unknown type of Russian.

In 1897 a crisis arose in the popular consciousness of the Orthodox similar to the one described above. Due to Russia’s support of the Ottoman government in the Thirty Days’ War, the image of Russia as protector of the Orthodox noticeably faded. Nevertheless, in ordinary times, the notion of the Orthodox empire as a friendly country persisted on the streets among both Muslims and Christians. “The Muslims know that Turkey now survives only thanks to Russia, and the Orthodox Arabs know that Orthodoxy survives thanks to Russia”, Krymsky wrote to his family. “The name ‘Russian’ became for me, as for all those she [Cherkasova] had educated, sacred and full of love, for it belonged to the one who left everything dear to her out of love for our people and our nation”¹¹³,

¹¹⁰ Крымский А.Е. Письма... С. 41.

¹¹¹ Ibid.

¹¹² Ювачев И.П. Паломничество в Палестину ко Гробу Господню. СПб., 1904. С. 44–49.

¹¹³ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 423.

recalled Abdo later. In spring 1900 Yuvachev added his own impression: “One could judge the friendly trust with which the inhabitants of Beirut relate to Maria Aleksandrovna and to her schools by observing the group of Arabs who accompanied her from the church to her home”¹¹⁴.

Thus, amid anxieties and the struggle for survival, passed the first year of the Holy Prophet Elijah Russian school in Mousaitbeh.

In June 1888, the Vice-Chairman of the Society, V. N. Khitrovo, arrived at the school for an inspection. “It was eight o’clock in the morning; Maria Aleksandrovna was in the church; the door to the house was locked, in the yard there were two or three girls, early pupils; we also sat down in the shade on the bench. New girls began to arrive; in the hands of one I noticed a familiar binding with a cross. Excellent: we shall not waste precious time. I open the book — it is the Russian Gospel. I ask the girl: ‘Can you read?’ She replies that she can, and without hesitation reads an entire page *a livre ouverte*. I was truly astonished. [Meanwhile Maria Aleksandrovna arrives. While we were drinking coffee, we quarreled, that is, she expressed her *griefs*¹¹⁵, and I expressed mine.] *They rang the bell for prayer, meaning that all the children had gathered. We proceeded to the classroom. I asked Maria Aleksandrovna not to conduct examinations, but to teach her lessons as on an ordinary weekday. The number of children reached 119. I will not describe in detail either the touching common prayer or the classes*¹¹⁶; *it is enough to say only this: out of 120 girls, 20 read in Russian and translate from Russian into Arabic and back — of course with pauses, but insignificant ones; the others, divided into 4 classes, are at all stages — from being taught how to make the sign of the cross and to learn Arabic prayers, up to the senior class mentioned above. Their only guidebook is the Gospel, in Russian and Arabic. That is what they use to learn reading and writing. In addition, arithmetic is taught. And all this in 9 months*”¹¹⁷.

Noting the children’s delight at his visit to the school, M. A. Cherkasova wrote to V. N. Khitrovo: “For me, perhaps no less than for them, your tear was

¹¹⁴ Ювачев И.П. Паломничество в Палестину... С. 44–49.

¹¹⁵ Grief (Fr.) — “grievance”, “complaint”.

¹¹⁶ A. Abdo recalled Khitrovo’s impression of the Russian language in Beirut: “The late Vasily Nikolaevich Khitrovo burst into tears of joy when he heard the girls praying in Russian. After examining the pupils, he was surprised by their progress”. Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 424.

¹¹⁷ Аничков Н.М. Учебные и врачебные заведения... С. 109–110.

*the best encouragement, as an expression of sympathy for the cause to which I am devoted with all my soul — and behold: this cause is now our common child. Forgive me, Vasily Nikolaevich, that I could not restrain myself from expressing these feelings to you, such is my nature: I am glad to share a thought and a feeling*¹¹⁸. *The success of the pupils so inspired the leadership that Luiza Bhamduni, Asma and Afife Abdo, together with their mentor, were invited to Jerusalem to a meeting of school administrators to demonstrate their achievements*¹¹⁹.

Imperial inspections and the delineation of the Russian presence

Not limiting herself to the school, “on Sundays Mama gave lessons to the families of the girl students”¹²⁰. Close interaction with the community produced unexpected fruit. Residents of the quarter persistently requested “that an evening class of the Russian language be established for adult men”¹²¹. According to the assurances of the parents, “up to 30 people will come; we will soon understand, only teach us a little”¹²². Cherkasova replied that “as much strength as God grants me, I am ready”¹²³. Commenting on this request, she noted that “the Orthodox Syrians constantly pray to God that they may be under the authority of the Russian Sovereign; when, they say, a school opens and they sing in church, we shall have a Little Russia in Mousaitbeh; they translated into Arabic *O Lord, Save Thy People* (the prayer for the Tsar) and pray for our Father-Monarch Alexander III, whose portrait, together with that of the Empress, is in almost every home”¹²⁴.

Let us repeat that under conditions of constant threat to the Beirut Christians from the Muslims, the head of the Russian schools involuntarily became the representative of Russia — the protector of Orthodox Christians. Portraits of the august personages, the school, and the Russian

¹¹⁸ АВГРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 102.

¹¹⁹ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 425.

¹²⁰ Ibid. С. 423.

¹²¹ АВГРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 425. Л. 39 об.

¹²² Ibid.

¹²³ Ibid.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

language constituted symbolic elements intended visibly to demonstrate belonging to the Orthodox community and to signify that these people were under the protection of one of the Great Powers.

The attention of the Imperial patrons of the Society contributed to reinforcing these views. On 21 September 1888, Beirut was visited for one day by august pilgrims: the chairman of the IOPS, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, Grand Duchess Elizaveta Feodorovna, and Grand Duke Pavel Alexandrovich. At 9:30 in the morning, having disembarked from the steamship *Kostroma*, Their Highnesses, accompanied by the consul general, proceeded “first to the church”, where a short service was performed in Church Slavonic by Beirut Metropolitan Gabriel (Shatila)¹²⁵, and from there to M. A. Cherkasova’s school in the quarter of Mousaitbeh. As K. D. Petkovich reported:

*“On the way the people everywhere greeted the Russian August travelers with expressions of lively, genuine enthusiasm, especially in the Christian Orthodox quarters, where our co-religionists, men and women, raised their hands to heaven, sent blessings, shouted ‘Allah insur’ (may God grant victory to the Russian Tsar), threw flowers and palm branches, and fired their rifles in defiance of strict prohibition”*¹²⁶.

The Turkish police tried in vain to stop the shooting and the singing. In the school itself active preparations were underway for the visit of the IOPS chairman: “They made uniforms for the teachers — there were only four at that time — from which all the schools of the Society later took their model, thanks to the visit of Their Imperial Highnesses; the clothes of the poor children were covered, over their motley and scruffy garments, with white blouses and sashes of various colors: each class had its own color, and headscarves of the same color”¹²⁷.

On the square in front of the school, M. A. Cherkasova, together with the teachers and children, greeted “Their Highnesses by singing in Russian: *God Save the Tsar* and *Save, O Lord*, the prayers which Their Highnesses listened to reverently, standing and making the sign of the cross, as well as the address that followed, spoken by my assistant, an Arab woman”¹²⁸. During

¹²⁵ АВГРИ. Ф. 180. Оп. 517/2. Д. 1336. Л. 209 об.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ АВГРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 195. ЛЛ. 107–111 об.

¹²⁸ Ibid.



M.A. Cherkasova with students of St. Nicholas School (Hay Rmeil).
“Moscow Schools” of Lebanon, 1887–1914. Beirut; St. Petersburg, 2012

the two-hour visit, Elizaveta Feodorovna was accompanied by Afife Abdo, while Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich conversed with Cherkasova, asking about relations between Arabs and Russians. As M. A. Cherkasova writes: “I was deeply happy to have the opportunity sincerely and truthfully to testify to Him about the unfeigned love of the Orthodox Arabs for their Protectress, the Great Russian Church”¹²⁹. Sergei Alexandrovich personally listened to the children’s reading and answers, asked them questions, pointed out passages in the Gospel for reading, and interacted with the pupils with extraordinary simplicity. Unexpectedly for M. A. Cherkasova, Sergei Alexandrovich and Elizaveta Feodorovna wished to visit the teacher’s room, where they had to sit on the very divan that “had been knocked together out of a travel crate”¹³⁰. From a temporary witness to early hardship it was destined to become a school relic, which the missionary cherished “as a token of dear memory”¹³¹. After a rest and their official calls, the grand dukes visited the Russian Consulate General. That same evening M. P. Stepanov congratulated M. A. Cherkasova on “the delightful impression that your excellent school made on Their Highnesses. <...> May the

¹²⁹ Ibid.

¹³⁰ Ibid.

¹³¹ Ibid.

Lord God bless your holy work in the future for the support of the Orthodoxy so dear to us. From me personally, endless thanks”¹³².

Summarizing the visit, it is important to note the formation of the Beirut triangle and, in a broader sense, the Antiochian or Syrian one: the Russian consulate, the Russian school, and the Orthodox church with elements of Slavonic liturgy. These three points would become the foundation of the Russian presence in the Orthodox East at the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century.

Faculty-related issues

In the next academic year, 1889–1890, attempts were made to strengthen the faculty with teachers from Russia. In June 1889, by decision of the Society, A. S. Dubenskaya and A. F. Klementovskaya were appointed to Beirut.

The experiment ended in fiasco. Soon after arriving, A. S. Dubenskaya requested¹³³ a transfer “from this den to anywhere you choose”¹³⁴. “We want to escape back to Russia”, she wrote to V. N. Khitrovo; “we do not want to ruin our health because of this penal servitude. Here the heart has not a minute’s peace; however strong it may be, it will burst from the great grief”¹³⁵. The source of “grief” and the imagined loss of health of the two friends was Maria Aleksandrovna: “Never in my life have I seen a person so pious and with such a ferocious character. <...> She treats us like ten-year-old girls; anyone’s self-respect would burst...”¹³⁶ Afife Abdo also came in for criticism in this “report”: “We were never kitchen-maids, and here we have taken on that rank; how painful it is for the heart to do and see all this when everyone sits at the table, and we must wait upon some girl who, because of her youth, should be serving us”¹³⁷. She was not accustomed to “performing the duties of a servant under the title of teacher

¹³² Ibid.

¹³³ “A denunciation by a scatterbrained woman”, as V.N. Khitrovo described it.

¹³⁴ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 71.

¹³⁵ Ibid.

¹³⁶ Ibid. Л. 71–73 об.

¹³⁷ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 73.

for 50 rubles”¹³⁸. “But sooner or later”, A. S. Dubenskaya concluded, “I will pack my things and go. I am not accustomed to humiliation”¹³⁹. On 18 October 1889 she submitted a request for a transfer from Beirut, and on 1 November A. F. Klementovskaya followed suit.

Later, when the Society raised the question of a possible assistant from Russia, M. A. Cherkasova confessed that “fear seizes me at the very thought that she might turn out to be another Savelyeva, Bakunina, or Dubenskaya... You must agree, it is not a desire to judge that prompts these words, but the sad and painful tale of the attempts to bring teachers from Russia and their subsequent return”¹⁴⁰. The young women, who, as A. E. Krymsky wrote, referring to the IOPS teachers, “always suffer terribly from the lack of entertainment”¹⁴¹ in the East, clearly did not suit M. A. Cherkasova. To give an objective assessment of the important Dubenskaya–Klementovskaya case, it is useful to turn to the experience of sending Russian teachers to the Bakurat al-Ihsan boarding school in 1896–1897, of which A. E. Krymsky was a witness. Although he personally disliked M. A. Cherkasova, the orientalist nevertheless agreed with her assessments and noted that despite the “great demand for Russian teachers”, they are “difficult to find in Russia. <...> Every two years they are entitled to travel expenses for vacations in Russia; but they usually, having returned to Russia, do not want to go back under any circumstances”¹⁴². The Russian faculty members of the boarding school hated Beirut with all their hearts, calling Syria, as M. A. Kamenskaya did, the land of “palm trees, cactus, and *khubz* (flatbread–E.K.)”¹⁴³, or, like O. I. Malinina, who exclaimed pathetically: “When I leave here, I will close my eyes, throw my head back, and try to ensure that the happy moment of departure is not darkened by a glance at this vile Beirut”¹⁴⁴.

It would be no exaggeration to say that A. S. Dubenskaya and A. F. Klementovskaya thought in approximately the same terms and left in the spirit described above.

¹³⁸ Ibid. Л. 72 об.

¹³⁹ Ibid. Л. 73 об.

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. Л. 117.

¹⁴¹ *Крымский А.Е. Письма...* С. 95.

¹⁴² Ibid.

¹⁴³ *Крымский А.Е. Письма...* С. 57.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. С. 98.

On the mission of the Palestine Society

The faculty shortage was felt acutely within the Society. In 1889 the question arose of opening a women's teacher training boarding school, which was intended to be headed by M. A. Cherkasova. "It was enough for me to become acquainted with you and your school to say to myself: if this is not the absolute ideal (where does such exist in human affairs?), then this is my ideal. Once I arrived at this conviction, it is natural that the desire arose to realize it, by placing you not at the head of the Beirut school alone, but of the one that will be the nursery of our future female teachers"¹⁴⁵, the secretary of the Society wrote to Beirut on 22 March 1889. According to his plan, the teacher seminary was to be located in Beit Jala near Bethlehem. The children of the Mousaitbeh school were to be sent to the boarding school of Labiba Jahshan, and M. A. Cherkasova was to be transferred to Palestine. "All that remains is to determine when?" V. N. Khitrovo concluded peremptorily¹⁴⁶.

On paper, this plan appeared smooth. Yet, being familiar with the local realities, M. A. Cherkasova raised objections. She counter-proposed that the boarding school be opened in Beirut.

"It is not without reason that the Catholic Jesuits, the wisest of their kind, chose Beirut as the center of their propaganda, establishing here both the lower and the higher educational institutions, and from here sending out teachers to all the Palestinian schools. Here the people are somewhat cleaner and more intelligent than the Palestinian fellahin. This conviction is universal, so that a teacher arriving from Beirut is regarded with respect and presumed to be competent; whereas the Beirutis will never accept a teacher from Palestine, looking upon them with contempt"¹⁴⁷. Things have been arranged this way for decades – the Protestants have been here for fifty years"¹⁴⁸.

¹⁴⁵ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 25 об.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. Л. 26.

¹⁴⁷ This prediction was not tested in Beirut, but in Damascus women's school it was fully confirmed: parents in the capital did not want to accept teachers from Palestine, preferring Greeks.

¹⁴⁸ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 15–15 об.

“Given the inherent realities of the Arab people, their teachers must come from Beirut”¹⁴⁹, M. A. Cherkasova concluded.

In the unfolding debate, V. N. Khitrovo’s sole argument was money. In his opinion, the boarding school “must be located in the Holy Land without fail, for it is by the Holy Land that we live, and we have no right whatsoever to expend funds collected in its sacred name on other Orthodox countries...”¹⁵⁰ Guided by three years of experience in the Syro-Lebanese region, M. A. Cherkasova did not yield: “To regard this school as a portal to Palestine, as you put it, is, I will say at the least, incomprehensible to me; I repeat, I know that the Society is Palestinian, not Syrian, but on the other hand, in terms of the size and quality of its population, it is not without reason that Beirut is regarded even from Palestine as the center”¹⁵¹.

This discussion touched upon a far more significant issue — the mission of the Palestinian Society in the Orthodox East. Reflecting on the quantitative and qualitative differences between the patriarchates of Jerusalem and Antioch, M. A. Cherkasova unintentionally raised the question of the meaning of the Palestinian Society’s existence: “I know that your goal is Palestine, **but it is not the land, after all, but the living Church** (boldface mine — E.K.); and here the members of this Church are being devoured by wolves”¹⁵². Yet the “living Church”, that is, the Christians of Syria, did not interest V. N. Khitrovo from a missionary standpoint. Here the worldview gulf separating M. A. Cherkasova from Khitrovo became clear: he viewed the Arab schools as an “portal” to Palestine and a means of securing Jerusalem.

The School of Archangel Michael

With no candidate available to replace M. A. Cherkasova in Beirut, it was decided to postpone the opening of the seminary until 1890. During this time Maria Aleksandrovna remained in deep reflection: “I struggled

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. A. 81.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. A. 26.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. A. 16–16 о6.

¹⁵² Ibid. A. 17 о6.

greatly with the thought as to whether remain here or to depart; in this inner strife, not relying on myself, I prayed to the Lord to accomplish in us His Will”¹⁵³. In May 1890, an event occurred that determined the missionary’s decision to refuse Beit Jala. Three years after her arrival in the East, a School of Archangel Michael was opened.

In spring 1890, in Mazraa, the Protestants dismissed “an Orthodox teacher who had served them”¹⁵⁴. As A. Abdo writes: “One day this teacher came to the church of the Holy Archangels Michael and Gabriel, lit a candle, and began to pray near the altar”¹⁵⁵. The headmistress of the Protestant school, upon learning of this, fired the teacher, sternly remarking to her: ‘If you light candles and pray before idols (as they call our Orthodox icons), then you cannot teach in our school.’ And they cast her out”¹⁵⁶. Being a poor widow, she came to M. A. Cherkasova and, “flooded in tears, begged her to open a school in Mazraa and to employ her there”¹⁵⁷. Upon learning that the Protestants were left for several days without a teacher, “with God willing and helping”, and “having reflected and asked the Metropolitan’s advice (for it is his eparchy)”, M. A. Cherkasova decided “to take advantage of their confusion”¹⁵⁸. Gabriel (Shatila) advised her not only not to delay, but himself offered to come and consecrate the school.

Taking advantage of Mazraa’s reputation as an unsettled district, from which “former residents had moved out, fearing a repetition of massacres”¹⁵⁹, Maria Aleksandrovna and her assistants found “a fairly decent little house (much better than the American school), a detached building surrounded by a garden, for only 11 francs (600 piastres) per year¹⁶⁰, under 6 Napoleons”¹⁶¹.

“We hired a poor woman to stand guard, to sleep in the kitchen at night, and by day to bring water for the children, give them drinks, and in general

¹⁵³ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 83.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. Л. 83 об.

¹⁵⁵ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 426.

¹⁵⁶ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 83 об.

¹⁵⁷ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 426.

¹⁵⁸ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 84.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid. Л. 84 об.–85.

¹⁶⁰ 1 Napoleon equals 108 piastres and 10 para.

¹⁶¹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 85.

keep the little house clean and orderly, which would cost about 5 francs a month. Then we bought boards, and partly used old boards by taking down a partition <...> We hired a carpenter, who worked under my supervision, arranged the other little necessities, and all of this (we did) quietly and quickly, so that within a week the school was opened”¹⁶².

On 19 May 1890, Metropolitan Gabriel celebrated the liturgy in the church of the Archangels Michael and Gabriel (the parish in which the school was located), and “then, on foot, through deep sand, came to the school, performed a service of supplication with the blessing of water, sprinkled the school, and blessed the children and their mothers who surrounded him; then again on foot (for it is difficult for horses) through the hot sand under the scorching sun, he walked half an hour to our main school, refreshed himself with food at my house, and remained the whole day until four o’clock in the afternoon”¹⁶³. Such attention from a hierarch encouraged the Orthodox and contributed to the success of the undertaking, and considering that the elderly “metropolitan hardly ever visits this quarter, so far from the city, the celebration was a great one...”¹⁶⁴ M. A. Cherkasova did not hide her delight: “our joy is still greater, for on the very first day 40 children came, on the next 85, on the third day 101, and today 116 children. In the Protestant school there remained on the first day only three little boys, in front of whom sat their newly hired teacher”¹⁶⁵. “Thus”, concludes A. Abdo’s account of the opening of the school in Mazraa, “instead of a Protestant school there appeared an Orthodox one, because all the girls of this quarter came to Mama to study, and the Protestants were forced to close their school”¹⁶⁶. By August 1890, the number of pupils in the school had reached 220. The faculty of the two schools, headed by Afife Abdo, increased to six teachers.

Diplomatic involvement in the opening of the second school was minimal; the Beirut consul was absent, “he was on leave in Constantinople”¹⁶⁷.

¹⁶² Ibid.

¹⁶³ Ibid. Л. 85 об.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. Л. 86.

¹⁶⁶ Абдо А.Д. Краткая история... С. 426.

¹⁶⁷ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 84.

The role of the Society's leadership was lesser still — they were informed of the newly established school (as in 1887) *post factum*.

Acting at her own risk, the missionary did not doubt for a moment the correctness of her decision: “and if I had begun to wait until my letter reached you and an answer was received, then surely this matter would have been covered with an icy crust”¹⁶⁸. Perhaps this was the only correct path. As A. E. Krymsky quite rightly noted: “in Russia everything is done very slowly, and in the Palestine Society especially”¹⁶⁹.

“Strike the iron while it is hot. And so we struck”, M. A. Cherkasova explained to the IOPS secretary, “and if now you should intend, for the alleged self-will, to put the smith herself under the hammer on the anvil, well then? I shall only rejoice, like the apostles, that for spreading the Word of God and serving His Church it has been my lot to suffer”¹⁷⁰. As expected, she received a “friendly expressed” reprimand from V. N. Khitrovo for her independent action. More severe measures were averted by a telegram from M. P. Stepanov containing thanks on behalf of the chairman of the Society, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich. “Personally, after this, I can scarcely have any opinion”¹⁷¹, the IOPS secretary summarized with pointed dryness.

However, the impossibility of expressing official opinions did not prevent V. N. Khitrovo from commenting sarcastically on M. A. Cherkasova's successes: “yes, it is undoubtedly excellent, if you were pursuing a personal undertaking; but this is a public matter... It requires a great deal of presumption to suppose that every undertaking you carry out is necessarily the work of God's hands or an inspiration from above”¹⁷².

The lack of support, the dry tone, and the complete opposition in outlook between the “toadstool” (in A. E. Krymsky apt term) Khitrovo and the passionate missionary led M. A. Cherkasova to a nervous breakdown and several days of “burning fever”: “I am not without feeling, Vasily Nikolaevich, <...> and I grieve deeply that I earned all the reprimands so ‘friendly’ expressed by you in your letter; having received it, I was so upset

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. А. 84–84 об.

¹⁶⁹ Крымский А.Е. Письма... С. 139.

¹⁷⁰ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. А. 84 об.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. А. 103 об.–104.

¹⁷² Ibid. А. 104 об.

after reading it that I could not close my eyes, straining to think through the mad mistake I had made”¹⁷³.

The result of her sleepless nights was the decision that she communicated to V. N. Khitrovo: “To correct my mistake I shall return the 1,200 francs allocated for this school and take it upon my personal means, according to your just remark”¹⁷⁴. “Indeed I had this in mind when opening it: that if it did not fall within the aims and plans of the Society, I would assume it at my own expense. In future, rest assured, I do not intend to render you such a disservice again”¹⁷⁵. This proposal was not supported by the Society.

Cold war with the Consulate

By 1890, Actual State Councilor K.D. Petkovich had the opportunity to report to the embassy in Constantinople on the state of Russian school affairs:

*“In two schools in Beirut, maintained at the expense of the IOPS, girls are taught to read and write both in Arabic and in Russian. They are made to memorize and sing various prayers and to translate the Gospel from Russian into Arabic. Of academic subjects, they are taught only the basics of Orthodox catechism, geography, and arithmetic. The headmistress of the schools is Russian, while all her assistants are local Orthodox Arab women”*¹⁷⁶.

Over the course of three years, M.A. Cherkasova’s relations with the consulate did not improve; on the contrary, they approached a state akin to a cold war. A minor conflict escalated into a sharp confrontation in the autumn of 1890. The headmistress requested consular protection from the attacks of her Arab landlord, who had rudely threatened to evict her, but she was told that such matters were “of no concern to the consul”¹⁷⁷.

Reporting this to the Society’s Council, M.A. Cherkasova described typical attitudes of diplomatic staff toward their compatriots¹⁷⁸:

¹⁷³ Ibid. А. 119.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid.

¹⁷⁶ АВПРИ. Ф. 208. Оп. 819. Д. 322. А. 110 об.

¹⁷⁷ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. А. 123.

¹⁷⁸ А.Е. Krymsky found himself in a similar situation with K.D. Petkovich’s successor at the consulate, Prince A.A. Gagarin (from December 5, 1896, to De-

*“In general, he has the habit of complaining that I do not visit him, and even invites me to lunch, or says that he invites me. Yet I have several times, exhausted from the city, gone to see him and found him sitting down to breakfast. And what do you think? Not only did he not invite me, but even remarked: ‘Do you not know I have breakfast at 12?’ and shut the door in my face. And this happened more than once: delayed by affairs in the city, I would stop by for a moment, and if he was at the table, I would have to stand in the corridor for an hour, where the guards looked on in surprise, wondering who this lady is, kept outside while the gentlemen eat...”*¹⁷⁹

As an experienced diplomat, K.D. Petkovich framed the issue in political terms, effectively accusing M.A. Cherkasova of unreliability and lack of loyal sentiment:

*“You show no respect for the Consul General. You have been here for four years, yet have never attended the service on August 30 for the Sovereign’s Day with the girls, nor congratulated me, whereas the teachers of the local Arab schools have always done and do. That year, the Patriarch himself descended from the mountains. I do not know whether your institution can be called Russian in this case”*¹⁸⁰.

Analyzing the situation, M.A. Cherkasova drew broader conclusions:

*“It is not painful when a semi-wild Arab yells; God be with him; that would still be nothing, but what is painful is the long-established awareness of the defenselessness of Russian subjects in Asia Minor; all nations have their consular defenders, all are protected so that no one dares to treat them roughly, knowing imprisonment awaits any abuse, all except Russians”*¹⁸¹.

*“So it is not the Muslims we fear here, but the Consul and his drago-
mans”*¹⁸², she summarized¹⁸³.

ember 20, 1897, head of the Beirut consulate, later appointed secretary of the general consulate in Morocco), which, however, did not prevent them from establishing good relations later (the prince needed a translator from Arabic).

¹⁷⁹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 133–133 об.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. Л. 123.

¹⁸¹ Ibid. Л. 130 об.

¹⁸² Ibid. Л. 132 об.

¹⁸³ The gap between the official and the real history of the Society can be judged from the following episode. In 1888, Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, planning his visit to Palestine, asked the Minister of Foreign Affairs N.K. Girs for the Order of St. Anna, 1st Class, for K.D. Petkovich, who, he said, “never

These descriptions likely reflected a general dysfunction in Russian foreign institutions. In the same years, the distinguished physician and publicist N.A. Belogoloviy in Geneva described a similar situation. His testimony illustrates the universality of the trials faced by the headmistress in Beirut:

*“If for any educated nationality <...> the embassies of their homeland serve abroad as a home away from home, where one can receive advice in difficult situations or protection from unlawful oppression, our embassies for Russians are a kind of high authority, a kind of sanctuary, whose entrance is difficult for the ordinary mortal”*¹⁸⁴.

Although “not a consul’s daughter, but a hereditary noblewoman”¹⁸⁵, the schoolmistress was primarily concerned not with her own wounded pride, but with the effect such treatment had on the local population, undermining the prestige of Russian initiatives. She wrote to Khitrovo:

*“You always hold up Catholic and Protestant missions as examples. My God! But here I see firsthand the respect accorded to headmistresses of non-Orthodox schools: they travel in their carriages, have guards <...> Only in relation to my position does it act extremely unfavorably on the Arabs, who always ask why Moscovites do not treat their schoolmistresses as Catholics and Protestants do”*¹⁸⁶.

Thus, quite unexpectedly, the social practices accepted within the country (and described many times in Russian literature of the democratic tradition) revealed themselves beyond its borders.

For obvious reasons, M.A. Cherkasova could find no support in V.N. Khitrovo, who wrote: “We cannot replace K.D., nor do I have the right to reprimand him; in conclusion, trust my experience — he is the best of our representatives in the East”¹⁸⁷.

refuses his enlightened assistance to the activities of the Orthodox Palestine Society. The existence of the Society’s schools in Syria and their proper direction owe much to the participation and care of K.D. Petkovich...” (Россия в Святой земле: документы и материалы. Т.1. М., 2000. С. 456). We consider it necessary to give the reader the opportunity to assess for themselves the degree of justification of this award.

¹⁸⁴ Белоголовый Н.А. Наши посольства и консульства. Посвящается русским путешественникам. Сароуге (Geneve), 1894. С. 4.

¹⁸⁵ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 130.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. Л. 134 об.–135.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. Л. 141.

Moreover, she was explicitly instructed that attendance at the “ceremonial service in the cathedral on Imperial Days and congratulating the representative of the Imperial Government on such festive occasions was mandatory (underlined by V.N. Khitrovo – E.K.)”¹⁸⁸. Khitrovo’s assistance was limited to a courteous invitation to spend the following spring holidays in St. Petersburg¹⁸⁹, “to rest and refresh,” and a “friendly” piece of advice: “remain calm, and also do not judge”¹⁹⁰. Subsequently, M.A. Cherkasova’s relations with the Russian consulate ranged from tense to openly hostile. Only after K.D. Petkovich’s death (1897, Odessa) and the transfer of K.N. Lishin¹⁹¹ in February 1898 (Lishin’s favorite pursuits were history and archaeology¹⁹²) from Adrianople to Beirut, did a thaw occur. As N.M. Anichkov wrote, K.N. Lishin treated the missionary’s work with great respect and made “every effort to support the esteemed M.A. Cherkasova; he not only visited St. Elijah School, but even gave a lecture to the teachers on St. John of Damascus once”¹⁹³.

On September 17, 1891, in the mountain village of Rmeil, near the suburban gardens, Metropolitan Gabriel consecrated the third school, dedicated to St. Nicholas. M.A. Cherkasova had demonstratively informed V.N. Khitrovo of her desire to open it as early as the autumn of 1890, immediately after the Mazraa controversy, and requested that the Society Council discuss it, which resulted in a positive decision. The school accommodated 400 students with 10 teachers, all “Mama’s alumnae”¹⁹⁴. In 1893, in the distant suburb Ras-Beirut, a school dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary was founded, with 75 students¹⁹⁵.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. Л. 141 об.

¹⁸⁹ During all her service in the Society until her death, M.A. Cherkasova never once made use of the leave to which she was entitled.

¹⁹⁰ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППО. Оп. 873/1. Д. 426. Л. 142.

¹⁹¹ K.N. Lishin (1851–1906) — 1887–1897: consul in Adrianople. November 27 (December 9), 1897 — March 23 (April 5), 1902: general consul in Beirut. 1902–1906: minister-resident in Abyssinia. Member of the Russian Archaeological Society, numismatist.

¹⁹² *Крымский А.Е.* Письма... С. 270.

¹⁹³ *Аничков Н.М.* Учебные и врачебные заведения...С. 162.

¹⁹⁴ *Абдо А.Д.* Краткая история... С. 426.

¹⁹⁵ *Аничков Н.М.* Учебные и врачебные заведения... С. 132.

On September 15, 1897, at the request of Metropolitan Gabriel, a mixed school, dedicated to St. George's, was opened in the al-Jumayzeh quarter. With 150 students (during the inspection by N.M. Anichkov on March 16, 1899, there were 80 students present)¹⁹⁶, it became the fifth school in Beirut. Its consecration by the metropolitan occurred without the missionary's participation, as she was seriously ill at the time. By autumn 1897, her condition worsened to the point of a life-threatening situation, requiring urgent surgery, successfully performed by English doctors. By 1899, the city schools comprised 852 students under 21 teachers¹⁹⁷.

Not thanks to, but despite...

In Russian historiography, largely through the work of A.A. Dmitrievsky and N.N. Lisovoy, the history of the entire Russian enterprise in the Patriarchate of Antioch has been reduced to the leadership of the Society, primarily V.N. Khitrovo, and the officials of the diplomatic corps. However, this perspective requires reconsideration: Khitrovo in St. Petersburg and Mama Moskobie in Beirut, at best, had no direct contact, and at worst, were in opposition.

M.A. Cherkasova's independence irritated the Society's leadership. In his official report, N.M. Anichkov complained that over time, Cherkasova had ceased correspondence with Khitrovo and did not write "detailed letters or reports to anyone in the administration of the Council of the Orthodox Palestine Society"¹⁹⁸. In his view, what she did send were "queries filled with reproaches, complaints, and marked by extreme irritation of the author"¹⁹⁹. All responsibility, he argued, lay with the difficult temperament of the now middle-aged headmistress. Yet, in a personal letter to V.N. Khitrovo dated May 9, 1900 (at the same time when a revision report was being prepared for publication), the emphasis shifts entirely. Anichkov cites excerpts from Cherkasova's letter to the Society's office:

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. C. 126.

¹⁹⁷ *Аничков Н.М. Учебные и врачебные заведения...* С. 109.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. C. 115.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid.

“...for a whole year we maintained two teachers without having funds. You do not permit extraordinary expenses without your authorization. Meanwhile, for years you force me to write you the same thing, without seeing fit to respond, while the matter cannot wait: children lie on the floor, exposed to winter rains and summer heat, without books, without school supplies, etc.”

In a far more diplomatic tone, Anichkov added:

“To verify this, work must be done under special assignment and authority of the Society Council to determine who is at fault”²⁰⁰.

That Cherkasova’s grievances were entirely justified was well known to Anichkov (even down to a shortage of pens)²⁰¹, but he dared not act against the omnipotent Khitrovo.

In June 1897, on the eve of the opening of the Jumayzeh school, when Cherkasova was between life and death, A.E. Krymsky, equidistant from the conflicting parties, reported the following characteristic details about the educational activities of the IOPS in Beirut:

“Khitrovo has completely lost his mind... Four Russian teachers of the institute refused to serve in Syria. Khitrovo, without bothering to look for replacements, decided for no reason to hand their annual salaries (12,000 francs, i.e., 4,500 rubles) to Amelia Sursuq for school improvement, where by the fall there would barely be any Russian element left — to place it at her uncontrolled disposal. What will come of this is easy to guess. The actual headmistress, Labiba, now does not conceal her hostile intentions toward Russianness... She now assures all parents that Russian will be eliminated, and instead two Frenchwomen will be brought from France”²⁰².

Furthermore:

“When M.A. Cherkasova asked Khitrovo to add a few francs to the wages of one of her Beirut teachers of Russian, who received a tiny salary and worked very diligently (she was an Arab), Khitrovo replied: ‘The Palestine Society has no funds for this.’ One must not forget that the funds of the Palestine Society, which Khitrovo squanders, are collected from ordinary

²⁰⁰ ОР РНБ. Ф. 253. Оп. 1. Д. 43. Л. 84 об.–85.

²⁰¹ In his diary during the inspection of St. Elijah School on March 18, 1898, he noted: “Cherkasova’s St. Elijah School in Mousaitbeh. Poor environment; few supplies, even pens are insufficient” (ОР РНБ. Ф. 253. Оп. 1. Д. 774. Л. 10)

²⁰² Крымский А.Е. Письма.... С. 146.

people, their meager earnings. By Khitrovo's command, they go to the uncontrolled disposal of Beirut Arabs to combat the Russian element. What an absurdity"²⁰³.

It seems that in 1897 everything was conspiring toward the destruction of the schools along with their headmistress. Thus, if the schools survived, it was solely due to the sincere faith, dedication and incredible self-sacrifice of the team assembled by Mama Moskobie.

The value of the Society leadership's criticism and nitpicking of Cherkasova was revealed by time. The results of the 1906 audit of southern Syrian Society schools, conducted by inspector P.I. Ryazhsky, allow for an assessment of her work. While in Damascus for the election of the majority of metropolitans, he collected the opinions of the hierarchs of the Church of Antioch, headed by Patriarch Gregory (Haddad), regarding the main shortcomings of the Society's Syrian schools.

The general opinion of the hierarchs was that instruction should include not only French, which had been excluded as a language of non-Orthodox propaganda, but also "even English in urban and large rural schools". Ryazhsky himself could not disagree:

*"I am now fully convinced of the error of that exclusion, although in my early years here in Palestine I supported it... The most active and successful propaganda, and the most dangerous for us, comes not in French, but in Arabic"*²⁰⁴.

Thus, in the dispute with the Society leadership regarding the French language, life confirmed the correctness of Cherkasova's approach²⁰⁵.

Another major shortcoming in the organization of schools was the absence of secondary institutions for the urban population. Metropolitan Gerasimos (Mesarra) of Beirut noted that "Orthodox schools, both Arab and Russian, work for Catholic and Protestant boarding schools..."²⁰⁶ As seen, in 1906 the hierarchs raised the same issue Cherkasova had in 1889. However, for objective reasons, she could not resolve it independently,

²⁰³ Крымский А.Е. Письма... С. 147.

²⁰⁴ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. №434. Л. 118–118 об.

²⁰⁵ By the time of the inspection, French had already been unofficially taught in St. Elijah School in Beirut for several years.

²⁰⁶ АВПРИ. Ф. РИГПО. Оп. 873/1. №434. Л. 120–120 об.

and the IOPS chose the remote Palestinian towns of Beit Jala and Nazareth as locations for teacher training seminars²⁰⁷.

Regarding the curriculum in girls' schools, the "broadest possible inclusion of handicrafts" was deemed highly desirable so that graduates could not only support themselves and their families but earn a living"²⁰⁸. The only Society schools where sewing and tailoring were taught — the subject of particular pride for their founder — were the Beirut schools.

The hierarchs also addressed the behavior of the faculty and staff of the Society. According to the inspector, "there are unanimous complaints that Russian employees, especially teachers, and also some Arabs with Russian education imitating them, avoided local residents, did not establish personal contacts, and rarely visited them socially or formally"²⁰⁹. Russian teachers "behave proudly, often arrogantly and contemptuously toward parents... thus lowering the school's popularity in the eyes of the local population"²¹⁰. Metropolitan Alexander (Tahan), the future patriarch, added that they "learn little Arabic, are distant from Arab teachers, give little guidance, and, instead of heartfelt engagement, are satisfied with formal and dry requirements of professional discipline, failing to instill in their faculty a lively love and interest in the work"²¹¹. It goes without saying that deep and selfless commitment to the community and to the students distinguished the entire activity of missionary M.A. Cherkasova.

The cause and consequence of this alienation between teachers, students, and parents was the language barrier. As P.I. Ryazhsky noted, "the rapprochement of Russian teachers with the local population is largely

²⁰⁷ This led to entirely predictable results. In 1896, the women's school in Damascus refused to accept teachers from Palestine, which caused unrest in the community. (АВПРИ. Ф. РИППЮ. Оп. 873/1. №393. Л. 107–107 об.) Only in V.N. Khitrovo's mind was Syria "the portal to Palestine"; in the eyes of the clergy and population everything was quite the opposite. Cherkasova warned that Beirut would never accept a teacher from Palestine. It fell to Damascus to prove this prediction.

²⁰⁸ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППЮ. Оп. 873/1. №434. Л. 123.

²⁰⁹ Ibid. Л. 123 об.–124 об.

²¹⁰ Ibid.

²¹¹ АВПРИ. Ф. РИППЮ. Оп. 873/1. №434. Л. 124 об.

hindered by poor knowledge of Arabic; but this is no excuse in the eyes of locals, as American and generally Protestant teachers, through close contact with residents, learn the language faster and consider such learning absolutely necessary”²¹². Cherkasova provided a model of this approach. Without awaiting admonitions from the metropolitans, she considered it her duty to begin learning the language from the first day in the East, and within three years had mastered conversational speech. This was largely possible due to constant immersion in the linguistic environment and her overall approach to the mission as a lifelong calling rather than a short-term Oriental adventure.

It can be asserted that the only schools meeting the expectations of the population and clergy were the Beirut institutions, which did not follow IOPS requirements. Typical problems of the Russian education system in the region included the indifference of the Foreign Ministry (with rare exceptions such as K.N. Lishin and A.A. Gagarin), contradictions between the Society leadership and local staff, and a chronic shortage of personnel. Of particular note was the low level of regional expertise among the IOPS leadership. All these problems were exacerbated by the near-total absence of Russian economic influence in the region, which limited the potential impact of spiritual and educational work.

Against this background stands the missionary feat of M.A. Cherkasova, who spent over three decades of teaching in Beirut schools without ever returning home on leave. If Protestants and Catholics justly take pride in their long-serving missionaries such as Cornelius Van Dyck (53 years in the East) and Joseph Delore (over 40 years in schools of Mount Lebanon), then the figure embodying Orthodox Russia was the Mama – Maria A. Cherkasova. Her dedicated life became embedded in the collective memory of the Orthodox community in Beirut. 138 years after she first set foot on Syrian soil, one can now reach the Church of St. Elijah in the Mousaitbeh district on Mama Street, named in honor of the founder of the Russian schools.

Conflict of interests

The author declares no relevant conflict of interests.

²¹² Ibid.



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