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Holy places, desecration, 1948.

July 1948

MEMORANDUM

DESECRATION OF HOLY PLACES IN PALESTINE

by EBH

In the light of the propaganda from Arab and pro-Arab sources on the question of the holy places in Jerusalem, which tends to present a distorted picture of the situation, the following dispatches and reports from Palestine may help to establish the facts with regard to the holy places and their ruination and desecration.

Who Is Responsible for the Destruction of the Holy Places?

What has actually happened during the Arab-Jewish War in Jerusalem and who is directly responsible for the subjection of the Holy City with its religious shrines to destruction and desecration is admirably stated by a British missionary in Jerusalem, Mr. W. L. Hull, in a letter to the Editor of the Manchester Guardian of June 1st. We quote the letter verbatim:

"Sir: A few months ago, when no danger existed, there was a great outcry by the Archbishop of York and some other Church leaders concerning the protection of the holy places in Jerusalem. Now that that danger actually exists they are strangely silent.

"Day after day shells are being poured into Jerusalem by Arab Legion troops. The arms, uniforms and wages of this force are paid for by British taxpayers, and no one acquainted with the situation in Palestine doubts that these troops are there by the tacit consent of the British Government. The shells from these British 25-pounder guns and mortars are devastating that city and bringing ruin to places both holy and unholy.

"Yet the Church is silent; no outcry is made either by the Archbishop of Canterbury or the Archbishop of York. No meetings of protest have been called by Church leaders; the Church is silent. Are we to judge from this that political expediency means more than veneration? Is the British public aware that the British guns, firing British shells, paid for by British taxpayers, are dug in on the Mount of Olives by the very spot from which our Lord ascended to Heaven? Is the British public aware that those shells fired from the Mount of Olives are passing directly over the spot where Jesus knelt in agony of prayer that fateful night before Calvary?"

Haganah Opens King David's Tomb to Christians

For 500 years the King David tomb on Mount Zion in Jerusalem was tightly closed by the Moslems to any Christian visitors. Not before the Israeli Army took over the place could any Christian enter the tomb. The first visit of a Christian dignitary to the tomb after 500 years is described by Julian Louis Meltzer in the New York Times of July 5:

"Jerusalem, July 4 -- Msgr. Gustavo Testa, Roman Catholic Apostolic Delegate, entered the Tomb of David on Mount Zion last week. He was the first Christian dignitary to go inside this Moslem-guarded chamber in 500 years.

"The Tomb of David was closed to non-Moslems by a decree of Caliph Ed-Daher but pilgrimages to the Room of the Last Supper on an upper floor were permitted. King David is regarded by Moslems as a saint.

"Msgr. Testa is papal administrator of the Latin Patriarchate pending the appointment of a new patriarch. He came to inspect the damage to religious edifices. If he had entered the tomb early in the Twentieth Century under the Ottoman regime in Palestine Moslem zealots might have attacked the Christian community, charging desecration of the tomb.

"... Haganah troops retained possession of this area after being ejected from the Old City by the Transjordan Arab Legion May 20. Churches, monasteries and convents were respected by the Haganah, which posted guards to keep intruders away.

"The first Christians to enter the tomb in 500 years were Benedictine and Franciscan priests, who went in last month. They found damage from shelling. Part of the tomb's covering was broken off.

"Msgr. Testa was accompanied by the Jewish Agency's Liaison Officer to Churches, Dr. A.J. Braver, an authority on ancient churches. Differing religious rituals were observed. The Christians went bareheaded into the building, while their Jewish companions donned headgear in deference to the holy spot."

What the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem Has to Say

The Right Reverend Western Henry Stewart, the Anglican Bishop in Jerusalem, arriving in London early in July for the World Anglican Conference, made the following statement (as quoted from a dispatch by Bernard Minns for the New York Star, datelined London, July 6):

"... So far as I have seen, the holy places in the Old City have suffered little damage, with the exception of the two ancient synagogues, which were destroyed by the Arabs. One of them had been occupied by Haganah forces, and was shelled after the Arabs had sent them a 24-hour ultimatum to quit. The other was filled with unarmed people taking shelter from the fighting."

The Bishop said that while the Arabs had intentionally shelled and later destroyed synagogues, the Arab mosques were respected by the Jewish forces. The largest mosque, Dome on the Rock, remains untouched. "After Haganah had captured the northwest sector of the New City, I saw a mosque marked in Hebrew letters, 'This is a holy place.'"

The Bishop confirmed reports that British officers and men were still serving with Arab forces. He said deserters from the Palestine Police and the British Army have joined the Arab Legion.

He concluded: "Though I have for many years been opposed to partition in Palestine, it is now a fact and will have to be accepted."

Loot and Desecration by Arab Armies

During the first week of April 1948, armed Arabs broke into the Franciscan Abbey convent in Bethlehem and stole 2,087 pounds (\$8,348) in cash and a check for 4,000 pounds (\$16,000), a ll of which was earmarked for charity, the Arabic daily, Falastin, of Jaffa reported.

On April 26 monks were maltreated and valuable religious articles carried off as war spoils by the Iraqi "Liberation Army" in a surprise swoop on the Greek-Orthodox monastery Marsabah, near Jerusalem. In Safad on the same day a Protestant church was blown up by Arabs.

In a much-publicized anti-partition statement made in March by a newly organized Committee of the Christian Church Union of Palestine, Palestine's Christian community was said to be "in complete agreement both in principle and in deed with the Moslems." The statement was protested by the Anglican

Bishop of Jerusalem, who stated that the Anglican Church did not associate itself with it. He also said that the Arab Christian body affiliated to the Anglican Church signed the statement without consulting the head of the Church. The dissociation of the Anglican Church is not surprising in view of the fact that its own congregation, which had worshipped at Christ's Church inside the Walled City, was obliged to leave there at the outbreak of the disturbances because its worshippers were in danger. Its services are now being held in the Street of the Prophets, in the heart of the Jewish Quarter.

Heavy Destruction of Jerusalem's Synagogues

In a dispatch from Jerusalem dated June 7, the following report is given in the New York Times of the indiscriminate destruction of Jewish synagogues in the Old City of Jerusalem:

"Twenty-two of the 27 synagogues in the Jewish Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City were destroyed before the community surrendered to Arab forces May 28, Isaac H. Herzog, Chief Rabbi of Palestine, said today. The five others probably were demolished after the Jews' departure, he added.

"More than 500 Torahs (holy scrolls), many sacred vessels and books and manuscripts of historic value were burned and looted, the rabbi declared, and other Jewish property was burned after the Jews had left."

Arabs Fighting from Christian Churches

Christian churches and religious foundations in Palestine have been widely used by the Arab armies as military headquarters and as fortified positions from which fire was directed at the Jewish sections of Jerusalem.

Here are some facts:

On May 14 the Convent of Ste. Claire, belonging to the Sisters of the Clarine Order, was occupied by Arab troops and from it fire directed on the Jewish Talpioth Quarter and the German colony occupied by Jews.

On May 16 the Armenian Orthodox Cathedral of St. James in Jerusalem was occupied by Iraqi troops, who plundered the church and the Armenian

Quarter around it. A strong protest on the part of His Beatitude, the Armenian Patriarch, was of no avail.

On May 17 an Arab mortar position was established in the Syrian Orthodox Church, Deir Surian, in the ~~Armenian~~ Quarter. Mortars shelled the Jewish Yemin Moshe (Montefiore) Quarter.

On May 17 a similar mortar position was established in the Greek Orthodox Church of St. George in the Armenian Quarter.

On the night of May 17-18 an Arab machine-gun position was set up in the French Convent of Ste. Claire, from which fire was directed against Talpioth.

On May 19 the Arab command in the Old City set up its headquarters in the above-mentioned Armenian Cathedral of St. James. It was here that the surrender terms were subsequently accepted by the defenders of the Jewish Quarter in the Old City.

On May 18 Arab troops broke into the Convent of Notre Dame de France and committed acts of plunder and desecration against which the abbe of Notre Dame, Pere Lordre de Sion, protested most strongly. He himself was killed on May 21 when, in view of the advance of Jewish forces, the Arabs blew up parts of the building.

On May 19 the Greek Orthodox Monastery of Mar Elias was occupied by the Arab Legion, which turned it into a base for attacking the settlement of Ramat Rahel.

In the latter part of May the Trappist Monastery of Latrun was occupied by Arabs and turned into a main stronghold and an artillery base, an operation against Jewish forces that were massed there in order to lift the siege of Jerusalem.

In addition to acts of destruction and vandalism incidental to the

occupation of churches and monasteries, the following instances have been recorded of damage caused to Christian establishments by Arab shelling:

On May 16 the Abyssinian Cathedral in Jerusalem was hit several times by mortar bombs. Serious damage was caused to the building, and the clergy had a narrow escape.

On May 18 the Anglican Cathedral of St. George was shelled by Arabs from their positions in Sheikh Jarrah. The British Consul is reported to have filed a strong protest.

On May 19 the Ratisbon Monastery was shelled by Arab forces. The father superior sent a letter of protest to the delegate of the Red Cross. Three mortar shells hit the French Monastery of the Order of the Assumption.

Arab shell fire wounded three nuns in the Convent and the School of St. Joseph de l'Apparition.

On May 22 the Terra Sancta College building suffered a direct hit during Arab-Legion shelling. The college had formerly been placed under the protection of the International Red Cross as a refugee center.

On May 24 the Convent of the Soeurs Reparatrices was shelled and set on fire. Members of the Haganah saved five nuns from under the debris. An official letter of thanks was afterward received by the Jewish commander. The Convent of the Soeurs du Rosaire in the Old City was hit by Arab shell fire.

On May 26 an Orthodox church in the Russian compound was hit by shell fire.

Between May 16 and the end of the month eight shells hit the Abyssinian Cathedral and another twenty exploded in its courtyard.

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