

The Russians in Jerusalem

[Educational Resources](#)

[Teacher Training](#)

[School Debating](#)

Over 10,000 Russians went on pilgrimage to Jerusalem for Easter in 1911. Jerusalem only had 35,000 residents. The city's population increased by a third for one week, and all for a scheme to maintain the authority of the Russian Monarchy- a monarchy that would fall six years later anyway. Most of those pilgrims were sincere in their 'desire to fulfil the dream of praying at the Tomb of Jesus Christ', to quote the handbook of the Imperial Orthodox Palestine Society. Many of them would walk all the way from their homes to Jerusalem. Nevertheless the royal family financed the hostels the pilgrims stayed in, the churches they worshipped in. These buildings were an attempt to build 'Holy Russia' in Jerusalem. They are still standing. The Holy Russian Empire that built them is not.



THE SERGEI GUESTHOUSE

The Russian Compound is a ten minutes walk from the Old City. The buildings in this once walled compound, display a rigid adherence to neo-classical principles. The clean, symmetrical buildings, all grand columns and simple features, convey a sense of order, even peace, away from the rest of the restless city. This impression of grandeur can only have been more manifest when the buildings were the only ones on this hill, above the Old City. Nearly all the compound was built between 1860 and 1890 and the purpose of the buildings was to be hostels for pilgrims. The only exceptions to the neoclassical style serve to enhance the dignity of the compound. A renaissance-style tower breaks the neoclassical order of the Sergei Guesthouse, built for aristocratic pilgrims in the 1880s. Nevertheless the luxury of the building reinforces the grandeur of the compound. The other exception is the Cathedral of the Holy Trinity, consecrated in 1872. Its baroque domes add some drama to the Compound without distracting from its order. The other two major Russian buildings in the city continue this theme of making a statement. The gold, onion-shaped domes of the Church of Mary



The Russians were late to the party in Jerusalem and so they set about establishing their presence systematically and at speed.

The Russian royal family were overcompensating. The Crimean War was a shock to a royal house and it could have been avoided if the Russians had got people on the ground to play the game of religious politics in Jerusalem. The trigger for the war had been the theft of a silver star from the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. The French demanded the right to replace the star, and to make changes to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre: all the normal stuff of religious politics in Jerusalem. Lacking an official presence on the ground, Tsar Nicholas escalated the conflict by threatening to invade Ottoman lands, if the Ottoman government granted the French demands. Before long, the three major European powers- Britain, France and Russia- were at war and Russia ended up humiliated. The loss of military prestige, and the loss of territory in the peace negotiations, broke Nicholas and he died shortly after. His successor, Alexander II, began the overcompensating, sending



Parallel Histories is a UK charity - registration number 1174481
By using this website, you agree to our use of cookies. We use cookies to provide you with a great experience and to help our website run effectively.