The Damascus Affair of 1840 and Great Britain: Humanitarianism and The Emergence of International Human Rights Policy

By Jacob Forbes

Hunter College

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The growth of the British Empire coincided with the growth of international humanitarian concerns. By the middle of the nineteenth century the British Empire had defeated Napoleon, expanded its overseas colonial territories, and successfully abolished the slave trade in its own lands, first by outlawing the slave trade in 1807 and then outlawing slavery itself in the British Empire in 1837. Additionally, the British Empire had, with the use of treaties, persuaded other major slave-trading countries to curb their own slave trade practices. Over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, these successes had expanded the scope and tenor of the British imperial mission: evolving from localized debates about slaves in Britain proper, outwards towards its colonial possessions, and finally to an explicitly articulated duty in the mid-nineteenth century to uphold universal standards of morality and humanity around the world.

But the British moral crusade on behalf of "humanity" and "civilization" did not stop at the institution of slavery. Jewish emancipation had been a major topic throughout European politics since the grant of full citizenship in France in the wake of its revolution. Consequently, British Jews and their allies fought hard throughout the nineteenth century for equal status and citizenship. But while this battle for religious liberty was taking place within Great Britain, the nature of British concern for the rights of Jews in foreign countries, with the Damascus Affair of 1840, changed drastically.

The Damascus Affair began an era of humanitarian concern in Britain for foreign Jews and was undertaken with the confidence that imperial Britain had gained by successfully fighting against slavery around the world during and after the Napoleonic Wars. Legal scholars have connected the antislavery effort in Britain to the "dawn" of international human rights,[1] and I argue that Jews were the next target for imperial concern in the nineteenth century, and that a history of

[1] See Jenny S. Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law* (Cambridge, Oxford University Press, 2012).

the rise of international human rights must consider the Damascus Affair as the inauguration of an expansion of humanitarian possibilities for the British Empire and the beginning of an expansion of the very idea of international human rights.

Moreover, despite the complex web of legal and diplomatic language used to enforce its anti-slave trade measures in international waters, Britain's fight against the slave trade was mostly a lone and aggressive undertaking with the Royal Navy's forces. 1840 marked a shift in British humanitarian tactics that involved diplomatic negotiations and deal-brokering in European capitals; a new kind of carrot-and-stick method whereby minority rights, thus Jewish rights, became a measure of broader, domestic reforms for foreign governments in the sphere of European influence.

Nineteenth-century Jewish relief then, essentially coming after Britain's fight against slavery, was not just a concern for Jewish-led activism within Britain—with Moses Montefiore often its literal and symbolic figurehead. Jewish relief was also connected to a broader movement in Britain for enforcing abroad what some, especially liberal Britons thought to be universal or natural. By aiding the Damascene Jews charged with blood libel in 1840, the British Empire continued its push for a globalization of its moral authority and consequently redefined and refined the role of a European power in enforcing what would later be termed international human rights. Moreover, the pursuit of Jewish relief abroad in the Middle East, which began with the Damascus Affair and then moved on to other populations of Jews in the Ottoman Empire, in the Balkans, and Northern Africa throughout the nineteenth century, became one aspect of the pursuit of British economic, political, and imperial interests in areas directly beyond European control.

As this paper touches upon various aspects of British history, Jewish history, and the history of international politics in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, there is no

simplified way to understand the Damascus Affair in the context of international human rights. This complication reflects my own process of understanding and discovery as I originally set out to research the Damascus Affair and consequently found myself embroiled in the perennial conflict between France and Britain, between a liberalizing Ottoman Empire and influence-hungry European powers, between Jews and their oppressors, between academics on the legacy of the Damascus Affair, and so on.

The structure of my argument here will reflect my prior efforts during my research to contextualize the Damascus Affair and thus will begin with a description of the principal events and actors of the Damascus Affair and subsequently dive into the histories prior to 1840 that came to bear upon its events. These are short histories within the post-Napoleonic era such as the Jewish emancipation movement in Britain, Britain's abolitionists movement and antislavery practices in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the rise of a moral bent to British foreign affairs that would greatly influence the decision making of Britain's government officials as they learned of and reacted to the plight of the Jews in Damascus in 1840. After situating the Damascus Affair within the world prior to 1840, I will then explain the legacy of the deeds of the British government in 1840 as the nation continued to grow in confidence in enforcing a doctrine of human rights in foreign countries, especially through the persons of foreign Jews in need of relief.

As an addendum to this largely nineteenth-century focus, I will conclude with a longer look at the international human rights movement and discuss how it cannot be separated from the ascension of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, despite the violence and exploitation that imperial regimes inevitably practice on colonial subjects. I argue that the discourse of universal human rights, especially international human rights, was, prior to the nineteenth century,

essentially spoken in the "subjunctive mood";[2] that before the ascent in the modern era of a nation or empire with enough hard and soft power to influence the decisions of other foreign countries, universal rights and the rights of others outside of the individual purview of a nation's boundaries were a pipe dream of Enlightenment thinkers. What came to matter most in the nineteenth century, and has continued to matter into the twenty-first century, was the ability of any nation to *enforce* what it thought to be morally appropriate and to use military, diplomatic, and economic means to obtain desired outcomes.

The outcome of the Damascus Affair was a small victory in terms of Jewish relief, but was, as will be shown, impossible without the British warships that loomed in the port of Alexandria at that time. British imperial power can surely be commended for its success in the antislavery movement and in its later campaigns for Jewish relief that began with the Damascus Affair, but how are historians, or concerned citizens in general, supposed to reconcile the justness of international humanitarian intervention with imperial/post-imperial might? It is not the purpose of this paper to answer that thorny question—it is perhaps best dealt with privately or within the contemporary debates on the foreign policies of powerful nations—but rather to complicate the narrative of the "invention" of human rights in order to include within its already multifaceted history the pivotal roles played by the British Empire,[3] the Jewish people (in Great Britain and abroad), and, especially, the Damascus Affair of 1840.

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[2] This is adapted from a phrase borrowed from Carlos Eire, who, in his survey of the early modern era of reformations wrote "religion speaks in the subjunctive mood." Carlos M. N. Eire, *The Reformations: The Early Modern World, 1450–1650* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 62. Ironically, Eire's version was itself adopted and borrowed from an anthropologist who wrote that rituals speak in the subjunctive mood. See Eire, *The Reformations*, 393. This conversion of human rights, religion, and ritual all speaking subjunctively, as it were, is, I believe, no coincidence but rather arising from a common, quite human need to imagine the perfectibility of society in the context of a higher, metaphysical, or basically unreachable ideal.

[3] Lynn Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights: A History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2007).

Part I: Blood Libel, 1840

On February 5, 1840, a Capuchin Monk and his servant went missing in the Egyptian-controlled Syrian city of Damascus.[4] The French consul of Damascus Count de Ratti-Menton, who had consular jurisdiction over the fate of Roman Catholic clergy in Syria, took the lead in the investigation of the disappearances. By the end of February Ratti-Menton had submitted the report of his investigation to his superior in France, French Marshal General Jean-de-Dieu Soult, in what would become the first of many versions of what had happened to Father Thomas and Ibrahim Amara.

Beginning with the ominous claim that an alleged double murder had been motivated by "an anti-human idea," Ratti-Menton then went on to relate some of his key findings. Most significantly, Thomas (or Tommaso) and Amara were last seen in the Jewish quarter of the city. Suspicions had been quickly raised by the local Christian population, whom Ratti-Menton had heard "shouting that Father Tomas has been slain by the Jews."[5] With this evidence in mind, Ratti-Menton then reports how he informed the governor-general of Syria, Sherif Pasha, of his suspicions against the "Jewish sect" and requested the authorization to conduct house searches and make arrests. Ratti-Menton then admits that "the range to be covered by the investigations had narrowed" to include only local Jews.[6]

What became the first series of arrests, tortures, and interrogations of the alleged Jewish perpetrators took no less than ten days. Two ended up dying under torture, but some that survived had confessed to knowledge of the murders, even providing a religious motive. This fictitious

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[4] There has been a sizable literature on the subject, but here I am mostly aided by the richly detailed work of Jonathan Frankel's *The Damascus Affair: "Ritual Murder," Politics, and the Jews in 1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).
[5] Cited in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair,* 20.
[6] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair,* 22.

murder scheme, which took numerous interrogations to construct and the input of both the accused and the accusers, was, to use Jonathan Frankel's assessment, created by "groping their way toward" a "fully coherent tale of ritual murder."[7] This ritual murder (or blood libel) accusation would spur Ratti-Menton to make more arrests and torture more local Jews,[8] but before moving on to the second stage of his investigation he had to conclude his report to Paris.

Ratti-Menton indignantly concluded that the Jews of Damascus had made an "outrageous assault on humanity" by daring "to attack people under the direct protection of the consulate" and that no less than a "salutary terror" was required to punish the Jews for their "hideous prejudices."[9] Although he would have no way of knowing it then, the same language of "humanity" would be used against Ratti-Menton when Jews and their allies from all around the world became outraged by the results and implications of his work.

A second report on the events in Damascus and Ratti-Menton's investigation was penned by a former Jew and Protestant missionary named George Wildon Pieritz. By mid-March of 1840, Jewish communities throughout the Middle East were aware of the blood libel accusation against their co-religionist in Damascus and were taking action to both help the Damascene Jews and protect their own communities from the blood libel charge.

Pieritz was a member of the Jerusalem chapter of the London Society for Promoting Christianity Amongst the Jews (also known as the London Society) and in March he was approached by a delegation of Jerusalem's Jews to "go with them to Damascus" and, as was written in a fellow missionary's diary, "rid them of this calumny."[10] Pieritz embarked for Damascus, alone,

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[7] Cited in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 28.
[8] In its basic form, this antisemitic charge proposes that Jews use the blood of a Christian, often although not always a boy, for the making of Passover bread. For recent histories of the blood libel accusation, see Magda Teter, *Blood Libel: On the Trail of an Antisemitic Myth* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2020) and R. Po-Chia Hsia, *The Myth of Ritual Murder: Jews and Magic in Reformation Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1990).
[9] Cited in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 25.
[10] Cited in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair* , 82.

on March 18th, arrived on March 30, and by May 13 had his report ready to be sent back to London. The work of Pieritz "would prove a most effective weapon in the battle of words raging in Europe over the ritual-murder issue" because of its descriptions of the torture and murder of the arrested Jews and Ratti-Menton's exceptional malice.[11]

In his "Narrative of the Cruel Treatment of the Damascus Jews," Pieritz provided an accurate timeline of events from the disappearance of Father Thomas and his servant to the end of Ratti-Menton's dubious investigation process. Significantly, Pieritz listed the various torture techniques that the Jews in Damascus were subjected to, such as flogging, "having candles lit under their noses, so that the lame arises up into the nostrils," and "the head machine, by which eyes are pressed out of their sockets."[12] The subsequent reaction in Europe to the mistreatment of the Jewish prisoners will be discussed below, but the major result of the public outcry was the London Jewish community's eventual decision to send a delegation of two prominent, though quite dissimilar Jewish leaders—Sir Moses Montefiore of London and Adolphe Crémieux of Paris.

These men, each travelling with their own spouses and entourage, were tasked with a journey to the Middle East in order to intercede on behalf of their unjustly treated co-religionists. Crémieux and Montefiore made their way east in June of 1840 and reached Alexandria on August 4. A little over a month later, on September 6, the Egyptian pasha Muhammad Ali, who had recently warred against his Ottoman sultan over the rule of greater Syria, sent orders to free the Jewish prisoners in Damascus, and two months later the sultan granted a *firman* that denounced

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[11] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 167. Pieritz in his outrage could not resist venturing a guess on the upbringing of Ratti-Menton. The French consul must have had an "education in Spain" under the tutelage of "those ministers of a wicked system, who, in the last days of the 'Holy Inquisition,' probably grew fat on the blood of their victims. If so, he certainly has proved himself an apt and docile pupil." Quoted in David Salomons, *An Account of Recent Persecutions*: *With Reflections Thereon; and An Appendix, Containing Various Documents Connected with the Subject.* (London: Longman, Orme, Brown, Green, & Longmans, Paternoster Row, 1840), 45.

[12] Salomons, *An Account of Recent Persecution*, 46–47. What comes across as most incredible is that some of the victims resisted, even under such torture, the sham confession of blood libel.

the ritual murder charge as "pure calumny."[13] This "happy ending" for the Jews was celebrated by Crémieux and Montefiore,[14] both of whom took the opportunity to claim the lion's share of credit. It has since then been a primary point for historiographical attention in the nineteenth century, especially in the field of Jewish history.

Before moving on to interpret the meaning of the blood libel accusation and the six-month campaign in Europe to support the Jews in Damascus, two separate comments from 1840 about the events in Damascus, both from British citizens, should be pointed out. The first came from Montefiore in the immediate aftermath of the granting of the *firman*. After achieving what Frankel calls "a remarkable coup" of diplomatic savvy, Montefiore wrote in a letter to the correspondence committee for the delegation in London that the *firman* granted in November of 1840 was "the Magna Carta for the Jews in the Turkish dominions."[15]

The second and in no way unrelated comment was written by David Salomons who, together with his own observations, edited and published Pieritz's report in *An Account of the Recent Persecution of the Jews at Damascus*. Salomon's book was released in London in July of 1840—thus he had knowledge of the diplomatic mission but was unaware of its outcome—and concluded with a reminder, in light of the diplomatic mission, that it was "Englishmen['s]" particular duty to "exert their powerful influence" and "promote the principle of equal, entire, and impartial, civil and religious liberty all over the world."[16] The question of why such statements could be confidently made, about a Magna Carta for foreign Jews and the British duty to bring liberty to the world, is the subject of the remainder of this study.

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[13] Quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 377.
[14] Feldman, "The Damascus Affair and the Debate on Ritual Murder in Early Victorian Britain," 131.
[15] Quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 377.
[16] Salomons, *An Account of Recent Persecutions of the Jews at Damascus*, 91.

Part II: Jewish Communities, East and West

The historical significance of what would become known as the "Damascus Affair," outside of the history of antisemitic myths and their usage, lay in the various reactions that the calumny solicited around the world. From March through September of 1840, a relatively great deal of attention throughout Europe, especially in newspapers, diplomatic offices, parliaments, and Jewish and non-Jewish civic organization in Britain, was paid to the plight of the Jews of Damascus. Frankel insists that, for the Jews of Europe, the Damascus Affair felt like a "sudden appearance on the center stage" of European public attention, and, as will be shown below, this appearance had actually been preceded by the decades-long strengthening of humanitarian ideas in Great Britain that enabled the Jews and the idea of Jewish relief to emerge so swiftly into the "limelight" in 1840.[17]

Much scholarship, including this paper, is focused on studying the variety of responses to the Affair from Anglo-, Dutch-, French-, and American-Jewish populations,[18] but it is important at the outset of this section to briefly cover the organized Jewish response in the Middle East to the plight of their co-religionists, even if it was "ill-coordinated and slow."[19] As noted above, the Jewish community in Jerusalem responded to the blood libel accusation in Damascus in mid-

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[17] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 6.

[18] For Anglo-Jewish responses see David Feldman, "The Damascus Affair and the Debate on Ritual Murder in Early Victorian Britain," in *Judaism, Christianity and Islam: Collaboration and Conflict in the Ages of Diaspora*; Abigail Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question, 1840–1878," in *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*; C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics: Extraordinary Movement*, esp. 57–88; and Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*. For Dutch-Jewish responses see Bart Wallet, "Dutch National Identity and the Jewish International Solidarity: An Impossible Combination? Dutch Jewry and the Significance of the Damascus Affair (1840)," in *The Dutch Intersection: The Jews and the Netherland in Modern History*, ed. Yosef Kaplan (Leiden: BRILL, 2008), 319–330. For American-Jewish responses see Joseph Jacobs and John Forsyth, "The Damascus Affair of 1840 and the Jews of America," in *Publications of the American Jewish Historical Society* 8, no. 8 (1900): 141–145; and Karine V. Walther, *Sacred Interests: The United States and the Islamic World, 1821–1921* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2015), esp. chap. 3. For French-Jewish responses see Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*; and Julie Kalman, "Sensuality, Depravity, and Ritual Murder: The Damascus Blood Libel and Jews in France," *Jewish Social Studies* 13, no. 3 (Spring-Summer 2007): 35–58.

[19] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 79.

March because they understood the greater danger of such charges in the "troubled and fast-changing times" that were "ripe" with antisemitic charges.[20]

Edward W. Lane had observed earlier in the 1830s that "the Jews of Egypt [were] under a less oppressive government in Egypt than in any other country of the Turkish Empire," but they still "scarcely ever dare[d] to utter a word of abuse when reviled or beaten unjustly by the meanest Arab or Turk; for many a Jew has been put to death upon a false and malicious accusation."[21] This loss of Jewish prestige in Muslim society was accompanied by the growing influence and prominence of Arab Christian populations in the Ottoman Empire. As noted earlier, it was the Christians in Damascus that Ratti-Menton had heard shouting about the Jewish murderers.[22]

With their precarious position in the Middle East in mind, Jews sent various letters to Istanbul and Europe from the Middle East in February and March of 1840, many of them writing not to Jewish organizations like the Central Consistory in Paris or the Board of Deputies in London (though they would soon be involved), but rather to prominent Jewish families like the Rothschilds.[23] This tactic of privately appealing to politically powerful Jews was reminiscent of the medieval structure of Jewish communities that formed a vertical alliance with their rulers, who were directly appealed to by leaders of the community when times of crisis occurred.[24] As one letter to Baron James de Rothschild in Paris put it, the Baron had "the power to save [the Jewish community's] brethren suffering persecution…Here was a chance to prove [himself] the guardian

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[20] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 68.
[21] Quoted in Jane S. Gerber, "Anti-Semitism and the Muslim World," in *History and Hate*, (New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1986), 85.
[22] Gerber attributes the popular re-appearance of blood libel charges in the Middle East in the nineteenth century to the growing influence of Western powers in the area and the Muslim appropriation of the West's "anti-Semitic baggage of the Christian intellectual tradition." Gerber, "Anti-Semitism," 87.
[23] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 79–85.
[24] For more on the "vertical alliance," see Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi, "Servants of Kings and Not Servants of Servants: Some Aspects of the Political History of the Jews," in *The Faith of Fallen Jews: Yosef Hayim Yerushalmi and the Writing of Jewish History*, ed. David N. Myers and Alexander Kaye (Waltham: Brandeis University Press, 2014), 245–276.

angel of the oppressed."[25] But as the subsequent events of 1840 would demonstrate, this older system of private solicitation amongst Jews was not equipped to levy the appropriate power to stop the persecution of Jews in Damascus.

The powers that would eventually come to the aid of Damascene Jews were an unprecedented combination of interests, and while Frankel insists that there were, in the West, "no existing institutions designed to respond to such crises,"[26] there was in actuality a tradition of humanitarian intervention in Great Britain that was mobilized in 1840. What was unique about the Damascus Affair was how, in a situation where "the Jews both in the Middle East and in the West were caught completely off guard,"[27] two traditions of humanitarianism were joined—the one inaugurated by the British Empire since the Napoleonic Wars in fighting the slave trade and the other the longer tradition of Jewish relief on behalf of Jews. The Damascus Affair thus saw the initial testing of a developing network of political and social influence—a kind of technology of political mobilization—between Jews and their allies in Great Britain that would be integral to the successful campaigns for Jewish emancipation in the decades after the Affair. Two important British figures in this campaign were Sir David Salomons and Sir Moses Montefiore.

The statements made by these two men in 1840 are returned to later, but it is first instructive to compare the year of their appearance with the rights of Jews in Great Britain at that time. For prominent Jews such as Salomons and Montefiore, "the achievement of equality meant the ability to hold office—local, municipal, and national—by swearing the requisite oaths as well as equalizing the status of communal institutions,"[28] and by 1840 there had been considerable strides

[25] Quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*. 84.
[26] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 79.
[27] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 79.
[28] David Sorkin, "Western Europe," in *Jewish Emancipation: A History Across Five Centuries* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2019), 210. The following paragraphs draw much from Sorkin's work.

made towards that goal with much remaining to be fought for. Two acts passed by the British Parliament—the Test and Corporations Act of 1828 and the Catholic Emancipation Act of 1829—marked the legal beginnings of the end of the "confessional state" and the opening up of British public life to members of faiths outside of the prevailing Anglicanism in Britain. However, it would take eighteen more years for Jews in Britain to attain actual equality in British parliamentary politics when, in 1858, Lionel de Rothschild was elected and finally able to take his seat in Parliament without giving an oath "on the true faith of a Christian."[29] Rothschild's triumph, and the later acquisition of full emancipation for British Jews, had prevailed due to "a combination of alliances" with various social groups in Great Britain at that time, including British Evangelicals.[30] And it was the earlier versions of these alliances that came into play in March of 1840.

But before British Jews allied themselves with their powerful Christian neighbors, a significant change in Jewish attitudes towards antisemitism had to take place. The blood libel charge was centuries-old by 1840, but the emancipation movement inaugurated a new kind of anxiety around such charges, especially among upper-class Jews, who were the greatest initial beneficiaries of the emancipation movement. To the Jews across Europe who were entering into a higher social sphere during the era of emancipation, their public image became an object for their protection.[31] Thus, the charges against the Damascene Jews in the Middle East threatened the gains of Jews who were striving to live a modern life untainted by medieval hatreds. The initial European newspaper reports covering the Affair seemed to confirm these anxieties from Jews in Britain and France, and consequently spurred them to respond and take action.

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[29] Sorkin, "Western Europe," 212. A more nuanced description of the demise of the confessional state can be found in David Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews: Social Relations and Political Culture 1840–1914* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994). In his introduction Feldman insists that "Jewish emancipation was part of, and contributed to, the decomposition of the confessional state in England. Its tardiness suggests that Jewish integration was attended by more friction than is often allowed." Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 4.
[30] Sorkin, "Western Europe," 212.
[31] Todd M. Endelman, "Comparative Perspectives on Modern Anti-Semitism in the West," in *History and Hate*, 103.

It should be noted, however, that while the social and political consequences for European Jews in the face of a resurgence of the blood libel charge were quite palpable, it was Jews in the Middle East who perhaps faced the strongest physical threat to their safety because of these charges. In the words of an Arab Christian in Alexandria in March of 1840, "the fury in Damascus and all the cities of Syria is at its height, and it needed all the firmness [of the authorities]… to prevent the extermination of the entire Jewish race at Damascus."[32] It was with similar worries for the safety of their community that the Jews of Jerusalem asked George Pieritz to investigate the situation in Damascus, as noted above. What had changed in 1840 and set it apart from early instances of the ritual murder charge, which always threatened the safety of the Jewish community accused of such acts, was the new formation of alliances in Jewish communities in Britain by the mid-nineteenth century and their heightened sensitivity. These characteristics played a principal role in bringing the plight of Middle Eastern Jews into the sphere of British foreign politics.

The very first report of the Affair in the European press came on March 13, when the *Sémaphore de Marseille* wrote of Father Thomas's disappearance and claimed that "a number of Jewish families are suspected," and also that "the Jews are subjected non-stop to torture in order to force them to name the authors of a crime which revolts everybody."[33] By early April of 1840, the same newspaper published an article, "New Details on the Disappearance of Father Thomas: the Discovery of the Murderers," which described the alleged facts of the crime in lurid detail and emphasized the ceremonial aspects of the murder. The alleged Jewish perpetrators "cut deep into the throat" of their Christian victim, "finished him off," then "held a tub to collect the blood while the other two [perpetrators] applied pressure to facilitate the flow. Then, once the source of blood

[32] "Nouveaux Détails sur la Disparition du Père Thomas," *Gazette de France* (April 7, 1840), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 65.
[33] *Sémaphore de Marseille* (March 13, 1840), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 74.

had dried up, all of them, maddened, threw themselves on the corpse, cutting it to bits."[34] Adolphe Crémieux's own initial efforts in 1840 were to counter these reports with his own impassioned articles in the *Journal des Débats* defending the Jews in Damascus against the blood libel charge while also attacking Ratti-Menton. And by mid-May, perhaps sensing the difficulty of his position in France, he wrote, "if I were to think that my presence would be of use in London or Alexandria or Damascus I would drop everything in order to save so many unfortunate people."[35] Crémieux would eventually travel to London and then to Alexandria, and the unique position and organizational power of Jews in Britain turned out to be the most important factor in inaugurating this new era of international humanitarian intervention and imperial British moral power.

Part III: London, 1840

The depictions of the Damascene Jews in the newspaper reports in London were initially no better than their counterparts in France. The *Times* clumsily attempted a neutral stance in reporting the events. Despite its declared goals, it reprinted questionable details about Father Thomas's alleged murder from the French press without editorial comment and provided its own ominous statements whereby the Affair became "one of the most important cases ever submitted to the notice of the civilized world, and upon which the very existence of the Jewish religion, and of the Jews as a separate class of the community, may be said to depend."[36] Such declarations only hindered the emancipationist cause of European Jews, with a blood libel charge against their co-religionists in the Middle East serving to "buttress old hatreds" from the opponents of emancipation in Britain and France.[37]

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[34] *Sémaphore de Marseille* (April 2, 1840), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 76.
[35] À. M. le Rédacteur," *Univers* (May 16, 1840), quoted in Frankel*, The Damascus Affair*, 119.
[36] *Times* (June 25, 1840), quoted in C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics: Extraordinary Movement*, 65.
[37] C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics*, 60.

But while the French government in 1840, led by Adolphe Thiers, allowed the "case to drag on" in the press without taking a stance on the charges or taking action against its own agent Ratti-Menton,[38] the British government, with Lord Palmerston as Foreign Secretary, was swift to take up the defense of the Jews in Damascus. Why this was this case, and why Britain came to have a different historical trajectory from its continental neighbors in the nineteenth century, is a limitless subject of historiographic debate. What will be emphasized here however, in relation to actions taken by the British government in defense of the Jews in Damascus, are four important factors: the contemporaneous "Eastern Question" that had been plaguing British foreign policy,[39] the Jewish emancipation movement in Britain, as noted above, the confluence of Jewish and non-Jewish interests 1840, and, historically related to that confluence and also significant for the history of humanitarianism and international human rights, the anti-slave trade and abolitionist movements in Britain.[40]

On May 25, 1838, the Pasha of Egypt, Muhammad Ali, announced his intention to rule independently from his Ottoman superior, Sultan Mahmud II. This declaration set off a wave of reactions from Western European powers who "were immediately and unanimously hostile to this alteration of the New Eastern status quo."[41] This status quo was admittedly an ad hoc balance of power, moving towards an inevitable crisis, that had been established almost a decade before. Ali had gained Syria in the Egyptian-Ottoman war of 1831–1833, and his later wish for his own

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[38] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 136.
[39] For British foreign policy during this period, I have relied on M.S. Anderson*, The Eastern Question 1774–1923: A Study in International Relations* (London: St Martin's Press, 1966); Sir Charles Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston 1830–1841: Britain, The Liberal Movement and the Eastern Question* (New York: Humanities Press, 1969), 2 volumes; Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*; and the articles by Abigail Green cited below.
[40] For the history of British anti-slave practices and abolitionism, I have relied on David Brion Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984); Christopher Leslie Brown, *Moral Capital: Foundations of British Abolitionism* (Chapel Hill: Omohundro Institute, 2006); Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707–1837* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992); and Martinez, *The Slave Trade and the Origins of International Human Rights Law*.
[41] Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, 94.

suzerainty outside of the Ottoman Empire threatened the already limited power of the Ottoman Empire and thus the influence of the Ottoman government's powerful ally in Europe: Great Britain.[42]

In the Middle East during the mid-nineteenth century, as in many previous centuries, France and Britain had contrary interests, and these differences were pivotal in influencing France and Great Britain's responses to the "Eastern Crisis" and the Damascus Affair in 1840. Adolphe Thiers saw Egypt and Muhammad Ali as a vehicle for preserving the commercial and cultural influence of France in the Middle East, and his unwillingness to sanction his subordinate Ratti-Menton demonstrated that "diplomatic calculation took precedence over humanitarian considerations" in France.[43] In Great Britain, as Abigail Green has argued across multiple texts, the sympathetic response from Lord Palmerston to the Jews in Damascus was both the product of a "religiously inflected humanitarianism in British political culture" and the savvy choice of an "attractive client group" by a British politician trying to deepen ties to the Middle East.[44] In this way, Lord Palmerston was choosing to become a *de facto* protector of Jewish communities in the Middle East, which inevitably challenged France's official status as protector of Catholic minorities within the Ottoman Empire.

Even prior to the Damascus Affair, Palmerston had stated his commitment to the protection of Jews in the Middle East. Before sending the first British vice-consul to Jerusalem, W.T. Young, Palmerston informed him in January 1839 that it was a part of his "duty…to afford protection to

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[42] Outside of the obvious need to protect the unity of a fragile empire, another reason for Ottoman and thus European alarm came from the fact that with Ali independent, "[the Ottoman Sultan] would no longer be sovereign of the Holy Cities on which to some extent his whole claim to rule the Ottoman Empire depended." Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston*, vol. 1, 608.

[43] Abigail Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question, 1840–1878," in *Humanitarian Intervention: A History*, ed. Brenden Simms and D.J.B. Trim (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 142.

[44] Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question," 143; Abigail Green, "The British Empire and the Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?" *Past & Present* 199 (May 2008): 181.

the Jews [in Palestine] generally."[45] Thus, when the events in Damascus in the spring of 1840 became known to the British government, Palmerston was ready to react with appropriate ire and worded his dispatches to his consul-general in Egypt with both the protection of Jews and the disparagement of Muhammad Ali's rule in Syria in mind. Consul-General George Lloyd Hodges was to make clear

> the extreme disgrace which the barbarous enormities perpetrated at [Damascus] reflect upon [Ali's] administration…and…the astonishment which Europe will feel at finding that under the rule of a chief who had prided himself upon promoting civilization…atrocities such as these have been committed…not [as] the acts of an ignorant rabble…but [as] the deliberate exercise of power by the pasha to whom the…city of Damascus has been entrusted.
>
> Her Majesty's Government can entertain no doubt that Muhammed [*sic*] Ali will…not only make immediately the most ample reparation in his power to the unfortunate Jews…but [will] also dismiss and punish those officers who have so greatly abused [their] powers.[46]

Later in 1840, when on his mission in Alexandria with Crémieux, Montefiore lost no time in appealing to Palmerston when negotiations with Pasha Ali were going nowhere. He wrote to the correspondence committee of the Board of Deputies to ask them to

> immediately see Lord Palmerston—inform him of the state of affairs, and not leave his Lordship until he promises to write to Monsieur Thiers, urging him to give instructions to his consul here to use all means to

[45] Bidwell to Young (January 31, 1839), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 127.

[46] Palmerston to Hodges (May 5, 1840, no. 9), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 128–129. It should be noted that at this point in the spring/early summer of 1840, Palmerston had already responded to another ritual murder charge against Jews in the Ottoman-controlled territory of Rhodes. That the Rhodes Blood Libel became a less politically charged event in the realm of European politics was primarily the result of two factors. First, rather than a French consul torturing and imprisoning the local Jewish population, a British consul in Rhodes was responsible for these atrocities, and thus was quickly reprimanded by Palmerston, who also demanded that the Ottoman government intervene in the blood libel investigation. Second, the Ottoman government, in the spirit of its new *Tanzimat* reforms, was quick to comply with European demands for a guarantee of equal treatment and legal protection for non-Muslims. See Olga Borovaya, "The Rhodes Blood Libel of 1840: Episode in the History of Ottoman Reforms," *Jewish Social Studies: History, Culture, Society* 26, no. 3 (Fall 2021): 35–63.

> forward the object of the mission…I feel that as much can be done in Paris, through Lord Palmerston's interference, as can be done at Alexandria, while the French interest is opposed to ours.[47]

Thiers would of course not come to the help of the British Foreign Secretary, but an ultimatum from Britain, Austria, Russia, Prussia, and the Ottoman Empire delivered to Muhammad Ali on August 16 threatened war with Egypt if the Pasha chose not to accept their terms dictating his return to the Ottoman domain.[48]

In what became a fortunate confluence of events for Crémieux and Montefiore, the political and military pressures exerted on behalf of the European powers finally loosened the knot of the Pasha's reticence to grant the Jewish delegation any of their requests regarding the Jews of Damascus.[49] After weeks of deadlock with the European and Ottoman powers, Muhammad Ali granted the release of the Damascus prisoners over the weekend of August 28–30. This act was not based on genuine concern for the treatment of his Jewish subjects, but rather it can be seen "as a logical extension of his decision to begin, however tentatively, to distance himself from France and to ascertain whether it was still possible to reach an accommodation with the other European powers."[50] Muhammad Ali's cat and mouse games with European powers would eventually secure his family's hereditary rulership over Egypt until well into the mid-twentieth century. But the limited diplomatic victories he granted to Montefiore and Crémieux (only the Ottoman Sultan was willing to grant a *firman* clearing the Jews of their charges) remain imbedded in the ability of British Jews and non-Jews to reach Lord Palmerston.

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[47] Montefiore to correspondence committee (5 A.M., August 7, 1840), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 342.
[48] See Anderson, *The Eastern Question*, esp. 100–103; and Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, esp. chap. 13.
[49] This tense situation was most eloquently put by Montefiore in one of his letters to the correspondence committee: "Here, we are hourly expecting a command to embark. From all we can learn the pasha is determined not to give in. The English admiral is already here with his fleet cruising off the port together with some Austrian ships of war…We are on all sides surrounded by warlike preparations, and night and day are our ears assailed by the drums and trumpets and the noise of troops performing their exercises before our door." Montefiore to correspondence committee (August 25, 1840), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 348.
[50] Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 353.

Palmerston had been initially encouraged to intervene in the blood libel investigations by a deputation from the Board of Deputies in London on April 30, which, among others, included David Salomons, Moses Montefiore, and Lionel Rothschild. As noted above, David Salomons would be responsible for printing a definitive report of the Damascus Affair in London written by George Pieritz, Lionel Rothschild would eventually take his seat in Parliament, and Montefiore would undertake a deputation with Adolphe Crémieux later that year to intervene on behalf of the Damascus Jews.

Crémieux and Montefiore's journey to Alexandria in July of 1840 was a grand gesture of promise that reflected the culmination of both British Jewish and non-Jewish interests in the Middle East. Although it is clear that the two men would have accomplished little vis à vis Muhammad Ali without the threat of British warships, the organizational novelty of their backing-parties in London, what I called earlier their technology of political mobilization, has sparked considerable interest in the fields of Jewish history. C.S. Monaco has even argued that the parties involved in Britain created a favorable environment for "a resurgent Jewish rights movement,"[51] but what I want to emphasize here is the entanglement of this resurgence with what Monaco calls the "humanitarian discourse" in Great Britain.[52] The connection between the Damascus Affair and Jewish rights will be taken up in a later section.

As noted above, the Board of Deputies of British Jews in April asked the British government to intervene in Damascus, which was novel in its "remarkable attempt, especially in light of the Board's legacy of inaction,"[53] to try and wed the interests of the British government with the interests of British Jews. In May, British Evangelicals also made their own bid to

[51] C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics*, 67.
[52] C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics*, 58.
[53] C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics*, 65.

Palmerston to intervene in Damascus. The London Society, whose own missionary agent in the Middle East, George Pieritz, was asked to investigate the situation in Damascus on behalf of the Jews in Jerusalem, sent a party to Downing Street who shrewdly downplayed their pre-millenarian interests in returning Jews to the Holy Land and instead emphasized "the political and commercial advantages that would be gained" from intervention.[54] What followed from these private meetings in Britain was an unprecedented public display of support for the Jews in Damascus.

First, a public meeting was organized on June 23 at the Great Synagogue at Dukes Place in London which had requested the "heads of all Jewish families in the metropolis" to attend.[55] The speeches that night stressed the unity of the British Jewish community in the face of the "slanderous lie" of blood libel that was occurring with alarming frequency in the Middle East. One speaker argued that it was not "merely for the sake of humanity–not only for the sake of our oppressed brethren that we are called on to act; it is our own battle that we fight…We must crush the spirit that is rising in the East lest it should travel westward."[56] Montefiore was also in attendance, and he took the opportunity of the meeting's wide publicity to announce his agreement to go to the Middle East with Adolphe Crémieux.

The second significant public meeting occurred on July 3 at the Mansion House of the City of London (the official residence of the Lord Mayor of London). Whereas all the speakers at the Great Synagogue had been Jews, the Mansion House meeting boasted Christian speakers from the upper echelons of London politics, including the Irish-Catholic politician Daniel O'Connell, who asked rhetorically that evening if there "was a human being so degraded as to believe that [the Jews] made human blood a part…[of] their ceremonies? Was not the Hebrew exemplary in every

[54] C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics*, 67.
[55] "The Jews in Damascus," *Times* (June 25, 1840), quoted in C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics*, 68.
[56] Speech by Barnard Van Oven, quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 221.

relation of life?"[57] Other speakers expressed shame that those responsible for the persecution in Damascus were Christians, rather than "those who bowed down to idols of wood and stone,"[58] but such sentiments did not dampen the effect that this meeting had, in tandem with Great Synagogue meeting, in generating public outcry around the world on behalf of the Jews in Damascus.[59]

These two meetings served to solidify the commitments of a powerful swath of nineteenth-century London society to international Jewish relief and, with Montefiore's departure for Alexandria occurring just days after the Mansion House meeting (he was picking up Crémieux in France), it also provided a salutary amount of press coverage that sent the Jewish delegation off with great expectations and no little fanfare.

This conversion of interests in 1840 has been rightly viewed as a new chapter in the history of humanitarian intervention, where both Jews and Christians arose in a "solidarity movement" that focused on a "human rights incident abroad–one that involved grievous acts of wrongdoing toward Jews."[60] Moreover, it was the inclusion of Jews in this movement, both as concerned citizens and as the targets of relief, that marked the beginning of the integration of Jewish relief into a longer history of British international humanitarian and human rights concern.

In 1833, in a separate context from Damascus, Lord Palmerston declared that "whatever affects the general condition of Europe, or of any important part of it, is a legitimate object of solicitude to England, and a proper subject for the exercise of her moral influence in the first place, or even for her armed interference if she should think the occasion required it."[61] By 1840 it was clear that the plight of Jews in Britain and abroad, not Ottoman or Greek Christians as in previous

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[57] "Persecution of the Jews in Damascus: Great Meeting at the Mansion House," *Times* (July 4, 1840), quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 223–224.
[58] "Persecution of the Jews," quoted in Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 223.
[59] For more on the reactions to the Damascus Affair outside of Great Britain, see note 18 above.
[60] C.S. Monaco, *The Rise of Modern Jewish Politics*, 59.
[61] Webster, *The Foreign Policy of Palmerston*, vol. 1, 358.

decades, was finally deemed important enough as to be able to "affect the general condition of Europe." To borrow a phrase from David Feldman, 1840 marked the beginnings of "the alignment of the Jewish cause with the Protestant nation" and the broadening of the British imperial humanitarian mission to include a formerly excluded, let alone persecuted, population in Britain.[62]

That this development occurred in tandem with foreign policy concerns, the rise of Jewish emancipationist politics, and the conjunction of Christian and Jewish interests has been laid out above, but what remains to be explained are the movements in Great Britain prior to 1840 that would create a national sense of moral influence or, to quote Christopher Leslie Brown, "moral capital." The international humanitarian concern finally granted to the Jews in 1840 would, broadly speaking, connect Britain's human rights concerns of the second half of the nineteenth century with the first half's efforts. The latter are of course the abolitionist and anti-slave trade movements that began to take root in the eighteenth century.

Part IV: The Cause of "Humanity" Prior to Damascus

Why, in 1840, could Moses Montefiore and David Salomons speak of a "Magna Carta for Jews" in Ottoman lands and of a specifically British "principle of equal, entire, and impartial, civil and religious liberty" to be enforced all over the world, respectively? Clearly, these two men both suggest a positive Jewish interest in British institutions and a form of liberal nationalism. In the nineteenth century where, as some scholars have argued,[63] nationalism eventually became incompatible with the spirit of Jewish rights and even human rights, there is nevertheless an evident

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[62] Feldman, "The Damascus Affair and the Debate on Ritual Murder in Early Victorian Britain," 148.

[63] For example, Lynn Hunt argues that "between 1789 and 1815, two different conceptions of authority warred with each other: the rights of man on one side and traditional hierarchical society on the other…By definition, the rights of 'man' repudiated any idea that rights depended on nationality." Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 117. Within the study of antisemitism, David Berger writes that "anti-Semitism in the modern West came to be associated with other ideological issues that in large measure replaced Christianity as the focus of European concerns. The first of these was nationalism." David Berger, "Anti-Semitism: An Overview," in *History and Hate*, 9.

broadening of the idea of nationally inflected humanity and human rights in Great Britain that progressively included slaves, Catholics, and Jews inside and outside of the Empire. Rightly enough, those arguments that focus on the negative effects of nationalism tend to weigh the limited success of the liberal "egalitarian spirit of the French revolution" against the rise of antisemitic and racist political movements in the late nineteenth century, especially in France and Germany.[64] However, such an emphasis on the continental experience of nationalism tends to undervalue the richly complicated history of Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

In the matter of Jewish emancipation, Montefiore and Salomons' statements exemplify the success of what David Feldman describes as a battle "about the nature of English national identity" that was inseparable from the emancipation debate.[65] In addition to acquiring rights, emancipated British Jews were also "allowed access to a positive community—the nation" and were thus able, in 1840, to understand their efforts on behalf of the Jews in Damascus not only within the context of international Jewish relief, but, more significantly, within an overarching framework of a specifically British Christian humanitarianism.[66]

At this point, it is useful to outline the pre-1840 history of British humanitarianism in order to contextualize the Christian, humanitarian ethos that threads through the late eighteenth century abolitionist movement, the Damascus Affair, and ends some forty years later. The longer history of British humanitarianism that, in this paper, roughly spans from the late seventeenth century to the Treaty of Berlin in 1878 then serves as a backdrop to this paper's closing section on the historiographical debates about the legacy of British humanitarian efforts in the nineteenth century and their relation to

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[64] Berger, "Anti-Semitism: An Overview," 9.
[65] Feldman, *Englishmen and Jews*, 47.
[66] The attainment of full emancipation for Jews in Great Britain came of course decades after the Affair. However, what I aim to demonstrate here is that the integration of Jews into the framework of British national identity was not dependent on decisive legal measures like the Jews Act Amendment Bill of 1860 or the Parliamentary Oaths Acts of 1866. Rather, it was already present in the statements of solidarity and commitment to relief from British Jews in 1840 because of their joining of *British* humanitarianism with Jewish relief, in general.

the origins of international human rights and international humanitarian aid. Moreover, if Jews were "a test case for humanitarian intervention in the nineteenth century,"[67] then how are we to understand the plight of Jewish relief, indeed the origins of international humanitarian ideals in general, within the context of Christian-inflected imperial power?

Modern humanitarianism in Britain has its origins in Protestant distress over the welfare and souls of enslaved Africans and Indigenous Americans in British Colonies.[68] In the late seventeenth century, preachers like Richard Baxter and Morgan Godwin called out the inhumanity in not allowing the enslaved a knowledge of the Christian religion, asserting that slaveholders were in "rebellion against God" and that the slave trade was "one of the worst kinds of Thievery in the world."[69] Significantly, these initial dissenters were not interested in the individual rights of slaves, but rather the moral character of the slave trade, and they were unorganized.

This early era of humanitarian and antislavery rhetoric, which roughly lasted until the American Revolution, was without concerted efforts. In this initial period, "the concerned pursued disparate objectives…each of which reflected ambitions that extended beyond the problem of slavery and often originated in more parochial agendas,"[70] but the American Revolution drastically shifted the perception of slavery across Britain, from a minority cause to a question of national honor that threatened the "moral state of the British Empire,"[71] as one Briton wrote in 1781. Britain's war with its American colonies "produced an environment in which organized opposition to slavery, for the first time, could seem worthy of praise,"[72] and with such a sentiment came the opportunity for the British government to refashion its imperial mission. It could re-energize this mission with the Christian, "moral capital" of

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[67] Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question," 139.
[68] In this section, I am greatly indebted to the work of Christopher Brown's *Moral Capital*, Linda Colley's *Britons*, and David Brion Davis', *Slavery and Human Progress*.
[69] Richard Baxter, *A Christian Directory*… (London, 1673), quoted in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 57.
[70] Brown, *Moral Capital*, 2.
[71] Samuel Stennett, *National Calamities the Effect of Divine Displeasure…,* quoted in Brown, *Moral Capital*, 258.
[72] Brown, *Moral Capital*, 458.

antislavery, in order to buttress its weaknesses in the wake of the loss of its colonies and thus reinterpret the British imperial purpose with a new cause in mind: humanitarianism.

As a result of this national concern over the question of slavery, the antislavery crusade had its first major victory in the passing of the Slave Trade Act on March 25, 1807.[73] From this day onwards, British imperialism was legally intertwined with a Christian moral cause, which already complemented its decidedly Protestant identity. As Linda Colley has shown, Protestantism was a central pillar of British national identity at least since the Glorious Revolution in 1688,[74] and, despite the regional and religious differences inherent to the British Isles, it was "more than anything else," Protestantism that "permitted a sense of British national identity" and that "was the foundation on which [Britons'] state was explicitly and unapologetically based."[75]

Additionally, the Slave Trade Act arrived at a pivotal moment in European politics. The defeat of Napoleon in 1815 inaugurated a new era of world history, with Great Britain holding a formidable place due to its economic, imperial, and moral might. The victory of the antislavery cause thus combined with the military victories of Britain to give the island nation a "reputation for moral integrity" throughout Europe and, of course, in Britain itself.[76] Indeed, "successful abolitionism" was one of the "vital underpinnings of British supremacy" in the nineteenth century,[77] and would continue on, after the scourge of slavery had been fought by Britain to its limits, to influence the understanding of this imperial power as a protector of humanity; as a nation dedicated to humanitarian causes

[73] It is outside of the scope of this paper to detail the pivotal years in Britain between the American Revolution and 1807, but the antislavery movement was, certainly, set back because of antislavery's association with revolutionary France and Haiti. On the other hand, within the movement's Evangelical wings there were "greatly intensified" feelings of "guilt, alarm, and perplexity" that would eventually propel many Evangelicals into Parliament in the early nineteenth century. Hilton Boyd, *The Age of Atonement: The Influence of Evangelicalism on Social and Economic Thought, 1785–1865* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 205.
[74] If not since the publication of the *Book of Common Prayer*. I am thankful to Professor Benjamin Hett for this insight.
[75] Colley, *Britons*, 18.
[76] Colley, *Britons*, 359.
[77] Colley, *Britons*, 359.

and the protection of certain fundamental rights. A nation thus equipped with an ideology and national history could, and indeed did, help foreign Jews from 1840 and after. In the nineteenth century, while its former American colonies grappled with their own growing crisis with slavery, Great Britain found, through its antislavery campaigns, a Christianity-inflected confidence and rhetoric for its "mission to liberate and save the world."[78]

With Catholic emancipation in 1829, the Great Reform Act of 1832, and the emancipation of slaves throughout the British empire in 1837, Great Britain was entering into an era considered "the high-water mark of humanitarian politics."[79] And the efforts by British citizens and their government to relieve the Jews of Damascus in 1840, preceded by decades of humanitarian activism, did not lose momentum after the *firman* was granted by the Ottoman Sultan in November of 1840. The British government was only getting started, in a way, and Lord Palmerston had his eyes on the Ottoman Empire.

Abigail Green has argued that the Damascus Affair was the first of such interventions on behalf of foreign Jews, and moreover that this combination of interests from Jewish activists, Christian humanitarians, and, especially, British *Realpolitik*, created an "imperialism of human rights," reflected in that era's middle-class British rallying cry of "Civil and Religious Liberty."[80] The humanitarian mission founded in the anxieties of the eighteenth century thus continued forward, with Jews as the new targets for a British effort that was interwoven with humanitarianism and political acumen, especially in so far as foreign Jews became a useful population for continuing British economic interests in the Middle East and northern Africa.

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[78] Davis, *Slavery and Human Progress*, 122.
[79] Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question," 143.
[80] Green, "The British Empire and the Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?" 178. I am indebted to this article, and others by Green cited throughout his paper, for their descriptions of various Jewish relief efforts in the nineteenth century.

As stated above, the plight of Damascene Jews was part of a larger struggle that the British government waged against France and its ally, the Egyptian Pasha Muhammad Ali. Becoming *de facto* protectors of the Jews in 1840 was the initial step towards a more formalized relationship with foreign Jews in British imperial territories throughout the Middle East in Morocco, Iraq, and Persia, whereby "Jews emerged as key intermediaries for the British in these areas—both as local partners for British merchants and as employees of the growing consular corps."[81] A letter that Lord Palmerston wrote to his British Consuls in the Ottoman Empire is representative of the emerging attitude of the British government as a whole in this period. He told his agents in the Ottoman lands that they should

> upon any suitable occasion make known to the Local Authorities that the British Government feels an interest in the welfare of the Jews in general, and is anxious that they should be protected from oppression; and that the Porte had promised to afford them protection, and will certainly attend to any representations which Her Majesty's Ambassador at Constantinople may make to it on these matters.[82]

Consequently, the British government intervened, or allowed a British Jewish emissary like Moses Montefiore to intervene, on behalf of Jews in a variety of places: the Don Pacifico case in Greece (1850), the Mortara Affair in Italy (1858), and a *dahir* from the Sultan of Morocco and a similar document from the Shah of Persia, both obtained by Montefiore (1864 and 1865), just to name a handful.[83]

This era of active European interest in the plight of Jews was formally crowned with two different treaties involving European powers and Ottoman lands. The Treaty of Paris (1856) and the Treaty of Berlin (1878) both, among other goals, involved guarantees of religious equality in

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[81] Green, "The British Empire and the Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?" 179.
[82] Palmerston to the British Consuls and Consular Agents in the Turkish Dominions (April 21, 1841), quoted in Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question," 145.
[83] Green argues that "in both cases, Montefiore's success owed a great deal to British influence – and was greeted as a triumph for British humanitarian values." Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question," 153.

the Ottoman Empire and in the newly formed independent Romania, respectively. Whether or not these treaties effectively combated anti-Jewish practices is a separate matter, but they can be viewed as the diplomatic bookend to an almost century-long practice of British humanitarian activism.

This British humanitarian ideal was originally formed in the debates over slavery within the British Empire, but, as we have seen, the rhetoric and practice of humanitarian relief continued to evolve after the emancipation of slaves in the British empire and, beginning with the Damascus Affair, took on different foreign populations for its active interest. The Damascus Affair was a great pivot point in the direction of the practice of British humanitarianism. Foreign Jews quickly became a primary object of British efforts to spread a doctrine of humanity and civilization and were integrated into the grander plans of the British government for economic and political influence in the Middle East.

The relevance and legacy of these interventions within the longer histories of international humanitarian aid and international human rights will be taken up in the next and final section, but it is important to end here by reemphasizing that much of this humanitarian relief, beginning in 1840, was the result of Jewish efforts on behalf of fellow Jews. While Jews within this story can be considered "proxies for British imperial interests,"[84] there are also here the beginnings of a modern international Jewish lobby that from 1840 onwards promoted Jewish rights, Jewish education, Jewish self-defense, and, of course, a Jewish homeland in the Middle East.[85] This significant growth of an interest in internationally negotiated Jewish safety and rights was of course the product of a longer battle for Jewish emancipation in many European countries. In

[84] Green, "The British Empire and the Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?" 178.
[85] Crémieux himself had a key part in founding the *Alliance Israélite Universelle*, which was established in 1860 so that Western Jews could give diplomatic and educational support to Jews in Eastern Europe and the Ottoman Empire. See Frankel, *The Damascus Affair*, 5, 434–435.

Britain, it bears repeating, the right timing of interests also occurred between an ecumenical assortment of Britons and the foreign policy goals of the British government.

It is well known that by the end of the nineteenth century, continental Europe was embroiled in the rise of another thoroughly modern and politically driven ideology: antisemitism. This movement would characterize and dominate the relations between Jews and non-Jews throughout the world and would end up greatly, if not tragically, influencing the religious, political, legal, and social makeup of twentieth-century Europe, up to the present day. With such events in mind, it is incredible to witness, in the story of the Damascus Affair and its large cast of concerned parties, a modern, non-violent ethic of political and humanitarian action that sought to reckon with hundreds of years of anti-Jewish practice and develop, paternally or otherwise, a global sense of concern for others within European society.

Part V: The Legacy of the Damascus Affair

At the beginning of her recent book, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History*, Priya Satia cites the provocative results of recent studies and reports made by Britons regarding their assessments of the former British Empire and the current place of Great Britain in a post-Brexit political world. One study in 2016 found that "43 percent of Britons believe the empire was a good thing, and 44 percent consider Britain's colonial past a source of pride."[86] The title of a Guardian article, "UK More Nostalgic for Empire Than Other Ex-Colonial Powers,"[87] sums up another study quite well, and, in the political sphere, Britain's Ministry of Defense released a report in 2020,

[86] Priya Satia, *Time's Monster: How History Makes History* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2020), 4.
[87] Robert Booth, "UK More Nostalgic for Empire Than Other Ex-Colonial Powers," *Guardian* (March 11, 2020).

reasoning that "because of its imperial past, Britain retains a tradition of global responsibility and the capability of projecting military power overseas."[88]

With such sentiments coming from multiple levels of British society, Satia paints a picture of a post-colonial British society that has inadequately grappled with Empire's "morally bankrupt foundation in racism, violence, extraction, expropriation, and exploitation,"[89] and specifically cites the legacy of British humanitarianism for submerging "the record of British inhumanity" and encouraging the blandly nostalgic idea of a "well-meaning liberal empire."[90] In light of the above story told about the Damascus Affair and British humanitarianism, this point is well taken, and it is worthwhile to note that there has been an encouraging amount of recent scholarship from historians deconstructing the colonial myth-making that has been so influential in shaping contemporary opinions, British or otherwise.[91]

But nevertheless, a question remains: what is the value of studying British humanitarianism and, without trying to downplay or submerge the violence and horror inherent to its encounters with societies around the world, trying to understand its part in the longer history of salutary, if imperfect and flawed, processes? This is not to get into apologetics—to claim that British imperialism was merely "flawed" or "misguided" at times and was buoyed by its commitment to liberal causes in certain communities. Rather, what I believe is important to discuss briefly here is the paradoxical relationship between worldly power and freedoms; between the British Empire's

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[88] Paul Cornish, et al, "Interests, Ethics and Rules: Renewing UK Intervention Policy," quoted in Satia, *Time's Monster*, 4.
[89] Satia, *Time's Monster*, 4.
[90] Satia, 4.
[91] Some recent publications that I am aware of are Padriac X. Scanlan, *Slave Empire: How Slavery Built Modern Britain* (London: Robinson, 2022); Sathnam Sanghera, *Empireland: How Imperialism Has Shaped Modern Britain* (London: Viking, 2021); Caroline Elkins, *Legacy of Violence: A History of the British Empire* (New York: Knopf, 2022); and Satia, *Time's Monster*.

position of global power in the nineteenth century and its commitment to the rights and freedoms of certain target populations throughout the world: African slaves and, of course, Jews.

It is the relevance of these British pursuits in the nineteenth century—pursuits that involved Christian Evangelicals, Jews in Britain, France, and the Middle East, sea captains, journalists, European, Ottoman diplomats, and politicians—to the histories of international human rights and international humanitarian intervention that will be illuminated here. These efforts and connections are put forth with no desire to overshadow the violence of colonial encounters, but rather to offer a more complicated history of what makes the granting and protection of human rights and the easing of human suffering possible. In a current political landscape filled with international organizations aimed at confronting and relieving human suffering and human rights abuses, not to mention the efforts of the United Nations and various other government bodies, questions about earlier eras of activism in the name of "humanity" and "civilization" remain important to examine for what they reveal about the enforcement of rights in modern society.

The Damascus Affair was a small triumph in the alleviation of an injustice done to Jews in the Middle East, and as discussed above, a continuation of the British humanitarian ethic that had begun in the eighteenth century and found its stride in the antislavery movement's successes of the early nineteenth century. In 1840, the Affair marked an advent of a new phase of humanitarianism that included, as its actors and figureheads, prominent members of the Jewish community intent on protecting and expanding upon their own British liberties and eventually spreading those liberties abroad. Confident in their British identity, there was nevertheless a self-protective stance that British Jews held towards their fragile freedoms. This encouraged a palpable fear of the negative effects that a blood libel accusation in the Middle East could have on British Jews, and,

in the spring and summer of 1840, consequently spurred an unprecedented amount of political organization in London and throughout the world.[92]

Before discussing the relevance of the Damascus Affair in regard to *international* human rights, it is important to note the gains within the domestic, British Jewish community that the Affair produced. As evidenced in their statements above, Moses Montefiore and David Salomons saw the fate of the Damascene Jews within a matrix of their own British liberties and a duty to spread them beyond the British Isles. Salomons, in exhorting his fellow Englishmen, also waxed prophetic about the new opportunities for his countrymen abroad, in "a new scene that is opening for British humanity; a new field is prepared for the display of those generous qualities which have thrown a halo round our sea-girt isle, and elevated its inhabitant beyond those of any other land."[93] Such optimism is indeed the domestic precedent of the Jewish "proxies" for the British imperial mission that Green describes, and if "it is in the realm of domestic politics that the battle to stop genocide is lost,"[94] then, in a similar way, the success of the Damascus Affair was gained in London. It is also important to note the evident confidence in a Jewish man claiming Englishness and the ability to spread English liberty abroad. This is in a country that, almost a century earlier in 1754, had repealed a Jewish naturalization act.

Despite Jewish disabilities that would not be fully overcome until 1858, the Jewish community in London was characterized from 1840 onwards with greater political organization and weight. Their ability to choose to enter into political struggle without coercion from above and with non-Jewish allies is related to a central tenant of what Hannah Arendt has described as an individual's positive experience of freedom. "We first become aware of freedom and its opposite

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[92] See note 18 above.
[93] Salomons, *An Account of Recent*…, 92.
[94] Samantha Power, "*Problem from Hell: American and the Age of Genocide*," quoted in *Freedom's Battle*, Gary J. Bass (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2008), 28.

in our intercourse with others, not in intercourse with ourselves…only in the realm of politics and actions" is this freedom found.[95] If one transposes the terms of Jewish community experience vis à vis the non-Jewish members of the community, non-Jews/themselves, onto Arendt's individualist binary of others/ourselves, then it becomes clear that Arendt's thesis can also be used to describe how a distinct community can find freedom in political action.

In 1840, the Jews of London demonstrated that they could look inward for allies and collaborators, but, more significantly, they also found an "intercourse with others" in the evangelical London Society, the politically influential crowd at the Mansion House, and Lord Palmerston with his deputies abroad. This ecumenical assortment of interested parties in the Damascene Jews demonstrated the new place that Jews in London had in British society, and as such it is hardly a surprise that, early that year, Salomons praised the British Isles for their almost sacred quality and Montefiore, after receiving a *firman* from the Ottoman Sultan, claimed a Magna Carta for Jews in Ottoman lands.

Thus, the Damascus Affair demonstrated that British Jews experienced freedom before full emancipation when, armed with newspapers, thoroughly British identities, and their allies throughout non-Jewish London society, they successfully engaged in political activism for a cause outside their immediate sphere of influence. However buoyant the domestic climate for Jews in Great Britain was, we must now turn to the question of this so-called Magna Carta in a land outside of British territory, and to the final study of the connections between the Damascus Affair and the histories of international human rights and international humanitarian aid.

Before jumping into the current historiographical debate over the relationship between the British Empire, human rights, and humanitarianism, it is necessary to clarify these terms that have

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[95] Hannah Arendt, "Freedom and Politics, A Lecture," in *Thinking Without a Banister: Essays in Understanding, 1953–1975*, ed. Jerome Kohn (New York: Schocken Books, 2018), 220.

been used throughout this paper. What are, then, human rights and what is humanitarianism? Without wishing to be too general, contemporary human rights organizations attempt to first coerce governments into stopping human rights abuses and then encourage legal and policy changes to keep these abuses in check for the longer term. For these organizations, universal notions of human rights are often useful for understanding the relative success or failure of their encounters with human-rights-abusing governments or regimes.[96] Humanitarianism, broadly defined, is viewed as a non-political act; palliative action in areas of conflict and crisis that seeks to provide necessary medical, nutritional, or emergency care without addressing the broader issues causing such problems, like a civil war. A recent scholarly attempt to define the differences between these two separate but related terms is found in *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A World of Differences?*, and the majority of the contributors here concur, *mutatis mutandis*, with editor Michael Barnett, who writes in his introduction that "for most of their lives, human rights and humanitarianism have been distant cousins" and that they "largely kept to themselves" until the 1990s and the end of Cold War.[97] However useful such distinctions are when considering contemporary practice, such clear separations between the purposes of human rights and humanitarianism did not yet exist in the actions of the British government toward foreign Jews.

It is not within the purview of this paper to discuss humanitarianism and human rights in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. But certainly, within the context of the Damascus Affair and the British Empire's humanitarian efforts in the nineteenth century, we seeing a muddying of the clarity between these two terms in the likes of statements from Montefiore who cited the Magna Carta, a medieval legal document that has been called "the foundation of the freedom of the

[96] For one such example, see the website of Human Rights Watch. https://www.hrw.org/about/about-us.
[97] Michael N. Barnett, introduction to *Humanitarianism and Human Rights: A World of Differences*, ed. Michael Barnett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 1.

individual against the arbitrary authority of the despot,"[98] and thus, deliberately linked Jewish relief in the Middle East to the transfer of foundational British rights to others. Moreover, Salomons' book, together with his own notes and Pieritz's report, combined the seemingly separate techniques of humanitarianism and human rights cited in Barnett's introduction: "name and shame" practices (towards Matti-Renton) and the encouragement of "diplomacy" for the spread of British liberties.[99]

Outside of the statements of these two men in 1840, there were efforts from the British government to secure "Jewish rights" in Ottoman territories in the wake of humanitarian concern.[100] As quoted above, Palmerston's statement to his diplomatic agents in 1841 makes clear the connection between British foreign policy interests, Jewish relief, and longer-term efforts towards the protection of Jewish rights in Muslim lands. An ironic turn of events would occur when, in 1856, the *Hatt-ı Hümâyûn* issued by the Ottoman government emancipated Ottoman Jews and "created a precedent in the Muslim world and raised the stakes in Christian Europe, where most Jews still lacked political rights."[101] Indeed, it had been the British government who had for years pushed the Ottoman government in the direction of liberal reforms, eventually called the *Tanzimat* reforms, which began in 1839.[102]

Evidently, whatever separation that scholars of human rights currently demand between the terms humanitarianism and human rights was not apparent in the actions and statements by various Britons important to Jewish humanitarian causes. Some legal scholars have recently argued that this

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[98] Danny Danziger and John Gillingham, *1215: The Year of the Magna Carta* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 268.
[99] Daniela Santos Nascimento, "The Inclusion of Human Rights in Humanitarian Assistance," quoted in *Humanitarianism and Human Rights*, 2.
[100] Green, "The British Empire and The Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?" 178.
[101] Green, "Intervening in the Jewish question," 149.
[102] See Frederick Stanley Rodkey, "Lord Palmerston and the Rejuvenation of Turkey, 1830–1841," *Journal of Modern History* 2 (June 1930). I am grateful for Abigail Green's work for providing such a thorough bibliography of these events and others in the nineteenth century.

was especially the case in Britain's anti-slavery measures in the first half of the nineteenth century, which have been linked to the origins of international human rights law.[103] These efforts, grounded in the culture of British humanitarianism, used a combination of admiralty law, diplomatic negotiation, municipal law, and, significantly, bilateral and multilateral treaties like the Treaty of Vienna (1815) to enact measures and legal action against slave traders in international waters.

Fabian Klose has recently objected to this argument on the basis of the British government's lack of "principles of equality and universality," that he claims are synonymous with the modern idea of human rights, when prosecuting slave traders.[104] There is no room in this paper for a more thorough treatment of the arguments for and against the inclusion of British slavery into origins of human rights, but we will conclude here by coming back to the case of Jewish relief in the nineteenth century, a cause thoroughly integrated into the ethos of British humanitarianism and inaugurated by the Damascus Affair in 1840.

Abigail Green has termed this British activism in nineteenth century on behalf of foreign Jews an "imperialism of human rights,"[105] and her pairing of these two terms quite rightly raises the question of how such a salutary idea as human rights can be related to the evils of colonialism and imperial domination. What is the relationship between worldly power and freedom, empire and rights? Klose rejects the pairing of nineteenth century humanitarianism with the history of universal human rights because of its "close entanglement" with "nineteenth century colonialism and imperialism,"[106] but such a sentiment throws out the limited, tangible victories of this period because the British government did not subscribe to a "universal" idea that has, to date, yet to fulfill its great ambitions.

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[103] See Martinez, *The Slave Trade*. For a different view, see Lauren Benton and Lisa Ford, *Rage for Order: The British Empire and the Origins of International Law, 1800–1850* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2016).
[104] Fabian Klose, "Humanitarian Intervention as an Entangled History," in *Humanitarianism and Human Rights*, 133.
[105] Green, "The British Empire and the Jews: An Imperialism of Human Rights?" 188.
[106] Klose, "Humanitarian Intervention as an Entangled History," 133.

Additionally, the seeds of such "universal" notions were planted in British humanitarian actions in the nineteenth century. It deserves repeating that the Damascus Affair was not just a continuation of the humanitarian impulse. It was also a new phase of humanitarian techniques recognizable in later international institutions. While Britain had pursued anti-slave trade measures in the first half of the nineteenth century mostly through the strength and reach of its Royal Navy, 1840 marked a new kind of diplomatic maneuvering that characterized British foreign policy in second half of that century, a grand era of *Realpolitik*.

The enforcement of British humanitarian interests, after 1840, became a matter of soft power and negotiation; of binding the interests of Britain, its European allies, the Ottoman Empire, and the emerging Balkan states with liberal, political reforms, such as the *Tanzimat* reforms and Romania's constitution, that promised rights for Jews in exchange for a seat in the Concert of Europe and a diminution of the threat of Russia in the Middle East. It is this "Era of Internationalism," begun in the wake of Napoleon's defeat, whose spirit continued on into the next century with post-war international political undertakings such as the League of Nations after the First World War and the United Nations after the Second World War.[107]

Moreover, despite an actual "Universal Declaration of Human Rights" made by the United Nations in 1948, events in many parts of the world since then have underscored the practical weakness of such a declaration. As Lynn Hunt admits, "it turned out to be easier to accept the natural quality of rights than their equality or universality. In many ways, we are grappling still with the implications of the demand for equality and universality of rights."[108] Additionally, no matter the transnational or global spirit of such universalism, our current international order, in the opinion of some legal scholars,

[107] See Mark Mazower, *Governing the World: The History of An Idea* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2012).
[108] Hunt, *Inventing Human Rights*, 21.

"remains grounded in murky international law principles and deeply influenced by the municipal legal strategies of hegemonic powers."[109]

With such a palpable difference between the ideal and the real then, the idea of human rights in the nineteenth century can certainly be granted if one is able to jettison the expectation that the procurement of these rights is wrought without undue harm to others. This is not to downplay or minimize the violence of imperial systems. This is not to say that in the twenty-first century we should ignore the lessons of the imperial past or ignore the voices crying out for justice and reparations. But it is to grant the prerogatives of power.

What mattered to the Jews of Damascus in 1840 was not the promise of universal rights, but rather the combined influence of a nationalistic humanitarian identity possessed by their British co-religionists and the real threat of British warships floating in the port of Alexandria. Moses Montefiore and Adolphe Crémieux were quite lucky, in a way, because of an auspicious alignment of interests. Although the warships were not sent to Egypt for the sake of the Jews in Damascus, their presence said plenty about the willingness of the British government to enforce its own concerns, and by extension Crémieux and Montefiore's as well. After the Affair, the British government continued to pressure the Ottoman government for equal protection of Jews under Muslim law and would later enact two treaties that guaranteed this equal protection in writing.

All of these measures were inevitably tied to British imperial, religious, and economic interests, and even to a larger "international state system that was increasingly governed by Western norms."[110] But despite what we now know and admit, in the twenty-first century, of the violent effects resulting from the imposition of these norms around the world, the British government's humanitarian

[109] Benton and Ford, *Rage for Order*, 119.
[110] Green, "The Limits of Intervention: Coercive Diplomacy and the Jewish Question in the Nineteenth Century," *The International History Review* 36, no. 3 (June 2014): 484.

interventions on behalf of foreign Jews in the nineteenth century should be seen as a limited but beneficial outcome of British imperial power and part of the, as yet to be fully realized, procurement of human rights for individuals all around the world.

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