

Chronicles of a Birth

Early References to the Bábí and Bahá'í Religions in Spain (1850-1853)

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Introduction

The beginnings of the Bábí-Bahá'í movement would have probably been unknown to the West were it not for the bloody and dramatic episodes that accompanied its birth and development. The brilliant growth it experienced from its inception, its doctrines – profoundly heretical to the Shí'a clergy – and the influence it exerted across all of Persia's social classes caused ecclesiastic and government authorities alike to fear a force capable of putting an end to the former's influence and the latter's despotic power. From government circles to pulpits, all efforts were focused on eliminating the “misguided sect.”

The tragic beginnings of the nascent Faith did not go unnoticed in a Europe that, at the time, was entering the closing stages of romanticism. From Persia issued forth testimony from Western travelers, missionaries, merchants, diplomats, and government officials who, directly or indirectly, had witnessed the earliest days of the Bábí and Bahá'í religions. Their accounts, though not always accurate and at times based on distorted information or even rumor, helped to introduce the term “Bábí” to the West.

Reaction in the old continent on the part of those that did not remain indifferent to the existence of a new religious movement in Persia may be classified, in general terms, into two categories. On the one hand were those moved by the tragic circumstances surrounding the emergence of the new religion, who, as a result, perceived it as a religious and progressive movement falling victim to the intransigence and fanaticism of a society deeply rooted in its reactionary ways. On the other hand were those that saw the new movement as a local problem, one political in nature, threatening the stability of a weak and fragile kingdom – of geostrategic importance to foreign powers – being shaken constantly by domestic convulsions. In either case, interest was aroused to the degree that some intellectuals embarked on academic research into the new religion and the Bábí Faith was granted an audience in the European press, inspired works by several artists – both in literary and theatrical circles – and opened the floodgates of diplomatic dispatches issuing from several Western delegations stationed in Central Asia, Asia Minor, and the Near East.

The Bahá'í Faith is, undoubtedly, the

religion offering the largest trove of documentary materials for its study. Professor Moshe Sharon, holder of the Chair in Bahá’í Studies at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, referring to the challenges facing his department, affirmed without exaggeration:

The work ahead is tremendous, the material awaiting the researchers is staggering. At least a century will be needed only to study the enormous quantities of the literary texts and other documents.¹

For example, of the sacred Bábí-Bahá’í literature, only a portion of which has been translated and published, there are thousands of manuscripts extant. The number of sources available to researchers to document Bábí and Bahá’í history is equally copious and not merely limited to the great many accounts handed down by those connected to the historical facts themselves, but rather, as mentioned earlier, include the contributions of numerous external eyewitnesses.

Bahá’í historiography has made extensive use of these latter types of sources, which, though not free from inaccuracies, have served to complement and contrast Bahá’í-based historical accounts and shed light on Western perceptions of the new religion at the time.

Surely Shoghi Effendi was the first Bahá’í author to make systematic use of this type of documentary source. In his translation and adaptation of Nabíl-i-Zarandí’s chronicle known as *The Dawn-Breakers*, for example, he made use of numerous references to the well-known accounts of Comte de Gobineau, E. G.

Browne, A. L. M. Nicolas, and Lord Curzon, works that he himself researched and studied during his enrollment at Oxford. He also used references to the Faith from non-Bahá’í authors in his history of the first century of the Bahá’í Era, *God Passes By*. As editor of the *Bahá’í World* yearbooks, he should probably also be credited for including the section titled “References to the Bahá’í Faith.” The Guardian, moreover, expanded and consolidated the collection of newspaper accounts from the time of ‘Abdu’l-Bahá. Today, this collection includes over 47,000 press clippings covering practically all the relevant facts and events pertaining to Bahá’í history from the declaration of the Báb until the present day.

Now-classic Western accounts of Bahá’í history have also availed themselves of non-Bahá’í authors to document events; one notable example is H. M. Balyuzi’s trilogy about the central figures of the Bahá’í Faith. Especially noteworthy, too, is Dr. Moojan Momen’s *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions, 1844-1944*. Today required reading for any scholar of Bábí-Bahá’í history, the latter volume represents the most comprehensive collection of non-Bahá’í historical sources in the English-speaking world.

With the conviction that the Bábí and Bahá’í religions would have aroused in Spain, a curiosity comparable to that which swept through other European countries, in mid-1996 began to search for references made in the country to both religions from the period between

1844 and 1947.² This research project has so far unearthed over 180 references in the daily press, in more than thirty books, and in assorted journals and manuscripts.

The many references found in the daily press cover the years 1850, 1852, 1853, 1873, 1882, 1883, 1889, 1896, and 1903. In addition to these, references have been found in variety, political, scientific, and religious magazines and journals.

In the literary field, references of varying lengths have been found in the works of several Spanish authors such as philologist Francisco G. Ayuso; diplomat, politician, and writer Juan Valera; and writer and aristocrat Emilia de Pardo y Bazán; among others, in addition to translations of foreign authors such as Ernest Renan, Arminius Vambery, and Eliseo Reclus, to cite a few. Also worthy of special mention are dictionary and encyclopedia entries of the period, the oldest of which dates back to 1854.

Furthermore, interesting contributions from Spanish clerics stationed in Palestine, North Africa, and Spain itself, as well as a consular dispatch from Turkey, have been discovered.

This article will present a cursory overview of the earliest references found to date, focusing on documents pertaining to the years 1850 through 1853. Research relating to subsequent periods will be presented in future occasions.

1850: Earliest References

Undoubtedly, 1850 was the most tragic

year in the short life of the Bábí dispensation. Government and religious authorities allied themselves to relentlessly deal their most vicious blows aimed at stemming the then burgeoning religious community.

One such blow was the savage massacre of a good number of the people of the city of Zanján. Led by the principal ‘ulamá of the city, Mullá Muḥammad-’Alí, surnamed Ḥujjat (The Proof), between three and five thousand Bábís, according to sources, resisted during several months the royal troops’ barrage while under siege in a section of the city.

The brutal military attack ordered by the youthful monarch Násiri’d-Dín Sháh – for whom, in the second year of his reign, the progress of the newborn religious community signified a disturbing development, one of many crises he had had to confront since ascending to the throne – and the dramatic heroism and courage demonstrated by the besieged believers did not fail to attract the attention of certain Westerners stationed in Persia.

On 24 October 1850, three Madrid newspapers – *El Católico*, *La Esperanza*, and *La Nación* – published the following story almost verbatim:

News reports arriving from Teheran on 30 August describe Persia as being absorbed in a state of anarchy difficult to describe. The reforms the youthful Shah has attempted to introduce in the country have generally met with resistance and, in the end, have not produced the results that had

been hoped for. The government, nevertheless, has struck back forcefully on repeated occasions, and it appears that it will pursue vigorously the enemies of law and order.

The last remaining Bábís have succumbed in a city in Azerbaijan named Zongan, which has been utterly leveled by the royal troops. The high priest of Tabris has been arrested and taken to the capital, under heavy escort, for having fueled the Bábí rebellion. [sic]

Two points here deserve elaboration. First of all, Zanján was still under siege when the dispatch from Persia used as the source of information was issued. In fact, the Sháh’s troops could not have forced the surrender of the final stronghold of besieged Bábís until sometime between late-December and early-January 1851.

News of the arrest and deportation to Tehran of a high-ranking cleric in Tabriz has no parallel in the history of the Faith. An article published in the 12 September 1850 edition of the *Gazzetta Ufficiale di Venezia*, which uses dispatches from Tehran dated 31 July as sources and, moreover, contains firsthand accounts of the disturbances in Zanján, may shed light on the subject. The newspaper reports the following:

The Sheik Al Islam from Aderbigian (a large province the capital of which is Tabris), a very influential person and one of the great dignitaries of the Empire, was arrested and led to Teheran by order of the Emir Nizam. He is

accused of having conspired together with his son in order to increase the power of the clergy to the prejudice of the State.³

We can infer from the clues offered by this separate account that the “high priest of Tabris” referred to by the news item published in Madrid is none other than Hájí Mírzá ‘Alí-Asghar, the Shaykhul-Islám, who in June 1850 was deported to Tehran, together with his nephew, not because he had any connection whatsoever to the Bábís, but rather because of his involvement in the showdown then between the clergy of Tabriz and government officials.⁴

On 6 November 1850, *El Barcelonés*, a Catalonian newspaper, devoted, as was customary among most Spanish dailies of the time, a brief section to international news. A meeting of the Council of Ministers of the French Republic, hostilities between Austria and Prussia, and Russian troop movements were some of the news items offered that day. The following was published alongside:

Dispatches from Tehran report that the head of the Bábí religion, together with twelve of his followers, has been executed by firing squad in Tauris. One of the religion’s principal dogmas is the proclamation of women’s fundamental rights, and the number of converts it is daily acquiring from among the ranks of the fairer sex is rather considerable. Of those that engaged the Sháh’s troops in one recent battle, over one thousand were women, who fought with admirable courage.⁵

Little could readers back then suspect that “the head of the Bábí religion” mentioned in the brief article was none other than the “Exalted Word,” “the Primal Point,” that Inaugurator of a New Era promised in former religions.

The details concerning the Báb’s execution are sufficiently well known that they require no further elaboration here. As is common knowledge, the Báb was not executed together with twelve followers but only one, Mírzá Muḥammad-‘Alí-i-Zunúzí, surnamed Anís. The report then makes reference anew to the conflict in Zanján and mentions the high proportion of women that fought against the royal troops. It is rather interesting to note how in 1850 the Báb’s doctrine concerning equality of the sexes eclipses all others.

1852-1853: Assassination Attempt against the Sháh of Persia

On 15 August 1852, the Sháh of Persia, Náṣiri’d-Dín, became the target of an assassination attempt in which several Bábís were implicated. Gobineau describes the incident:

In the morning, the king went out for a horseback ride. Before him, as usual, went equerries carrying long lances, grooms leading horses with embroidered saddle cloths, and a group of nomad riders with their rifles slung over the shoulder and their swords hanging from their saddles. This vanguard preceded the king in order that he might not be annoyed by the dust raised by the cavalry, and the king

followed along slowly, a little distance from the retinue of the great lords, chiefs and officers who accompanied him everywhere. He was near the palace and had barely passed the small door of the garden of Muḥammad-Hasan, Sanduq-dár or treasurer of the Savings, when he noticed, at the side of the road, three men, three gardeners, standing two on the left, and one on the right side, seemingly waiting for him. He did not suspect danger and rode on. When quite close, he saw them bow very low and he heard them cry out together, ‘We are your sacrifice! We make a request.’ This is the traditional formula, but instead of remaining aloof as is customary, they rushed on him repeating, ‘We make a request!’ Surprised, the king shouted, ‘Rascals, what do you want?’ At that moment, the man on his right took hold of the bridle of the horse and fired upon the king. In the meantime, the two men on the left fired also. One of the shots cut the collar of pearls adorning the horse’s neck, another riddled with buckshot the right arm and back of the king. Immediately, the man on the right pulled on the leg of His Majesty and would have unsaddled him, had it not been that the two assassins on the left were pulling on the other side. The king was striking his assailants on the head with his fists, while the jumping of the frightened horse paralyzed their efforts and delayed their aggression. The royal retinue, at first dumbfounded, hurried towards their master. Asadu’lláh Khán, the grand equer-

ry, and one of the nomad riders killed the man on the right with their swords. In the meantime, several lords threw down the other two men and bound them.⁶

Even though the Bábí community as a whole had no involvement in the foiled regicide and the perpetrators – between three and six in number, according to sources – had acted independently, still the attempt served to fan the authorities’ hostility toward the Bábís and vindicated those that would portray the new religion as a movement fundamentally political in nature.⁷

News of the attempted assassination of the Persian Monarch and the consequences it had on the Bábí community was widely reported by several European and American newspapers.

The earliest reports of the unfortunate incident began to reach Spain by mid-October 1852. On 11 October, *El Diario de Cataluña* published what is known to be the earliest news report in Spain concerning the event:

PERSIA. News arriving from Smyrna reports grave disturbances in Persia. Four men, assuming the most humble demeanor, approached the Schah while he was out on a hunting expedition. One of the men handed the Schah a petition, which he took. Suddenly, the petitioner’s companions each fired their pistol at His Majesty at nearly point-blank range. One of the weapons misfired; the other two each wounded the monarch. Reports of his death having spread following the event, the Kurds and

other nomadic tribes of the region and the mountain areas revolted. The number of rebels belonging to the tribe of the Bab, an avowed enemy of the reigning Kaggia dynasty, has increased. Ahmet Weffyle-Effendi, Ottoman Ambassador who at the time was in the little village of Karamdera, lost his luggage in the ensuing chaos, though, they say, it was returned to him a few days later.⁸

Although the news does not explicitly implicate the Bábís in the assassination attempt, it nevertheless makes them out to be an enemy tribe of the reigning dynasty. On 12 October, the daily *El Correo de Barcelona* published the same story almost verbatim, identifying *L’Impartial de Smyrne* as the source of information.

In the days that followed, other Spanish dailies continued publishing new information on the attempt, which was then circulated by the various news agencies. On 13 and 14 October, several Madrid and Barcelona newspapers published a news item that had been reported one week earlier in the *Standard* based on reports received from Constantinople by way of Tabriz and Erzerum. The news item, as published by *El Diario Español*, reads as follows:

PERSIA

The Shah has nearly become a victim of religious fanaticism. On 13 September, two men opened fire during an assassination attempt that left him wounded, though not critically, according to the medical examination.

The following account, which we have copied from an English daily, details the events that transpired:

The Emperor, accompanied by his Prime Minister and a sizeable entourage, had gone out that morning on a hunting party. Upon reaching the edge of a forest near Maceranda, six poorly dressed men approached the Shah bearing assorted petitions, bringing his horse to a standstill. It is customary in that nation for the Sovereign to proceed alone some distance ahead of his retinue. Having delivered their requests, the petitioners, of the Babi sect, surrounded the Shah and, in a threatening manner, began to demand redress for the harm caused their religion by the murder of their leader. The Shah boldly ordered them off, but before his retinue could catch up, two of the ruffians opened fire, injuring him in the mouth and thigh, respectively. The zealots immediately tried to escape; two were captured and brought to Tehran. The Shah's wounds were so slight that the next day he proceeded with great pomp to the mosque to offer his thanksgiving over having been spared. On his return to the palace, the Ministers of Prussia and England, and the Chargé d'Affaires of the Porte, came to offer him congratulations.

Joy swept through the entire city, which was lit up at night. Two more of the assassins were rounded up on the 16th

of the month. They had hid in a well from which they were pulled out by order of the Prime Minister.

Another dispatch, also reporting about the attempt, closes with the following paragraph:

Doctor Cloquet has extracted two of the bullets embedded in the Shah; removal of a third bullet has proven elusive. It is believed, however, that the Shah's life is not in danger.⁹

On 22 and 23 October, some newspapers reproduced information published in *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi'-i-Ittifaqíyyih* about the attempt against the life of the Sháh of Persia:

PERSIA. The *Official Gazette* of Teheran gives the following account of the attempt against the Shah, of which our readers are already aware:

"We have already spoken of the horrible attempt against the person of the Sovereign by several criminals belonging to the Babi sect. All we can hope for is to allay the fears of the Prince's faithful subjects by announcing to them that their beloved Sovereign is perfectly well. Nevertheless, following are the details of the plot:

On 28 Shawwal, H.M. left the city on a hunting party to the outskirts of Tihiran; His Excellency the Prime Minister, Mustapha el-Mawalek, and the King of Arms, Assad-Oulaud-Klau, along with other dignitaries of the realm, accompanied H.M. on foot out of the

city, whereupon the Prince gave a hand signal granting them permission to mount.

Right then, one of the plotters rushed the King, screaming at the top of his voice that he wished to hand H.M. a request. [‘]I am a poor and wretched soul,[’] he exclaimed. The entire retinue, which was some distance away, was unaware of the man’s criminal intentions. Instead, they admired the boldness with which he had approached H.M.’s horse and advanced their steeds to stop him. He then removed a pistol from his waistband and fired upon H.M., who, fortunately, was uninjured. A second Babi appeared and, like the first, shot at the King, but missed his mark thanks to the quick action of the King of Arms, who, grabbing the assassin by the arm and stabbing him with his sword, warded off the attack, with bullets flying over H.M.’s head. The attacker, realizing that his attempt had failed, still had the nerve to wield his sword and fling himself upon the Monarch attempting to wound him. Several members H.M.’s retinue hurled themselves at the ruffian and tore him to shreds in the King’s presence.

It was then that a third Babi ran hurriedly toward, and opened fire on, the Shah, who was injured slightly. Finally, the Kavasses captured the wretched plotters and took them to the city prison, where

they were interrogated about the motives behind so colossal a crime.”¹⁰

While the Spanish press was publishing news about the attempt against the Sháh, First Secretary of State Manuel Bertrán was receiving reports from the Spanish legation in Constantinople by way of a consular dispatch dated 24 September 1852 signed by José Nebiet.¹¹ The information contained in the dispatch is identical to that published by the *Journal de Constantinople* on 19 September. On 19 October, Manuel Bertrán made reply to the Minister Plenipotentiary of Spain in Turkey as follows:

Having conveyed to Our Lady the Queen the contents of H.M.’s dispatch no. 193, dated 24 September of the present year, pertaining to the attempt made against the Chah of Persia and the outbreak of cholera in Persia, Her Majesty acknowledges the news.

Thus Isabel II, Queen of Spain, was directly notified of the attempt against the Sháh and, as a result, of the Bábís’ existence.

Following the attempt on his life and the ensuing confusion, Násiri’d-Dín did not hesitate in taking action. Roused by his mother Mahd ‘Ulya, terrified at the prospect that the alleged Bábí conspiracy might have relied on the support of members of his court, and inflamed by his thirst for vengeance, the Sháh resolved to launch a campaign of persecution against the Bábís in Tehran. His I‘timádu’d-Dawlih, Mírzá Naṣru’lláh-i-Núrí, also known as Mírzá Áqá Khán-i-Núrí,

took great pains to concoct a plan that would leave the Bábí community leaderless, test the loyalty of the Sháh's subjects, and, while at it, eradicate any possible doubts concerning his own allegiance to the monarch.

So began the hunt for any persons suspected of being Bábís. The prisoners were divided among assorted dignitaries and professional guilds in the capital, who would then arrange for their execution. In this manner they would demonstrate their loyalty to the monarch while sharing with him the burden of responsibility for the massacres. For months the streets of Tehran were the scene of grotesque exhibitions in which the Bábís were heinously martyred.

Several weeks after news about the attempt against the Sháh had broken, reports began circulating on the persecution of the Bábís. The following news item, initially published on 14 October by the *Journal de Constantinople*, appeared simultaneously in numerous European newspapers, among them several Spanish dailies:

PERSIA. A foreign daily offers some details concerning the execution of the conspirators in the plot to assassinate the Shah.

"From a dispatch from Tauris dated 27 September, which arrived yesterday from Trebisonda, we have received extremely important news from Persia. While disavowing the events in question, still we cannot remain silent in the face of the dispatch's contents.

The execution in Teheran of near-

ly 400 Babis, alleged coconspirators in the assassination attempt against the Shah of Persia, which we reported in a previous issue, has been carried out with extraordinary spectacle; it appears they have been subjected to the most extreme forms of torture. Sources maintain that the Shah has been gravely perturbed by the Bábís' attempt on his life."¹²

On 6 November, the Madrid daily *El Católico* published the following:

PERSIA. From Teheran we are receiving reports that the Bábí sect, some of whose members had attempted to assassinate the Shah, continues to be persecuted in a manner that inspires horror. We already reported the day before on the mass execution by firing squad of 400 of its followers.

Other executions have followed. More recently, the Shah has banished his 13-year-old younger brother, Abbas Mírzá, expressly decreeing that he not return to Persia. Reports comment on how it was feared that he would order his execution, as it seems that Abbas Mirza is the protector of the Babis, who on repeated occasions have wanted to proclaim him king.¹³ [sic]

Abbás Mírzá was the son of Muḥammad Sháh and one of his wives, Khadijah, and therefore Náṣiri'd-Dín's half brother. Though not himself a Bábí, his guardian, Siyyid Ḥusayn-i-Mutavallí-i-Qumí, was.¹⁴ The plot against the Sháh of Persia not only provoked the attempted extermination of the Bábís, but also served as a pretext to purge all possible

pretenders to the king's throne. Linking the young prince to the Bábí Faith was probably the best justification he had for eliminating him.¹⁵

On 11 November 1852, several dailies published the following:

PERSIA

The letters and newspapers we are receiving from Teheran, dated 1 October, provide chilling details of the retributions being exacted in that city following the assassination attempt against the Shah by, as our readers are already aware, several followers of the Babi sect. During the inquest, the culprits, whether actual or alleged, refused to make any statement, and the court, therefore, was unable to ascertain any new facts other than that several persons had plotted the assassination. As a result, some were condemned to the galleys, others to death. The details from the daily official record on the manner of execution are so horrifying that our pen dares not describe them. Suffice it to say that the convicts were beaten senseless, then skinned alive, and finally hacked to death and quartered. Princes, high-ranking dignitaries, ministers, clergy, generals, even the meekest of the city's inhabitants, all had their share of the torture sessions and stained their hands with the victims' blood. The dead corpses were ripped to pieces at the hands of sabers, spears, mallet blows, and stoning of unbelievable ferocity. The barely recognizable remains resulting from such savage butchery were finally left to

hang on the city gates.¹⁶ [sic]

The information provided by this news story was based on that published in the 27 August 1852 issue of *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi'-i-Ittifaqíyyih* concerning the first believers executed in connection with the attempt against the Sháh. It was also published, with some modifications as to length and content, in other European dailies. The article mentions how some of the culprits "were condemned to the galleys" instead of life in prison, as reported in the original account. This discrepancy might indicate that the text of the news story is a summary of J. B. Nicolas's translation of the account contained in the Persian official gazette, which his son published years later in *Siyyèd Ali Mohammed dit le Bab*, where the same discrepancy has been noted.¹⁷

Bahá’í bibliography covering this time frame traditionally ends the narrative concerning the persecutions of 1852 with Bahá’u’lláh’s liberation from the Síyáh-Chal and His subsequent banishment to Baghdad on 12 January 1853. The persecutions in Tehran, however, had not ceased; to the contrary, they would persist several months more. On 7 July 1853, *El Clamor Público* published the following:

PERSIA. The latest dispatches from Teheran, dated 30 May, report on the government's renewed harsh treatment of the Babis, a fanatical sect that has on several occasions attempted to assassinate the Shah. To dispel rumors of his death, the Monarch

rode through the capital accompanied by his ministers, his general staff, and his bodyguards. Any Bábís rounded up along the way were condemned on the spot to suffer cruel tortures, with nary a shred of evidence presented to prove their guilt.¹⁸

This news item is of great importance, for if it is true – and apparently there is no reason to doubt its authenticity – it indicates to us that the persecutions were ongoing even almost into June; moreover, it portrays a Náṣiri'd-Dín Sháh who personally participated in and witnessed the punishments meted out against the Bábís. We will now devote a few paragraphs to the exact number of Bábís executed following the attempt against the Sháh.

While Shoghi Effendi characterizes the executions carried out in Tehran as “the darkest, bloodiest and most tragic episode of the Heroic Age of the Bahá’í Dispensation,”¹⁹ some Bahá’í historical works published in the West, however, furnish lists of martyrs not exceeding forty-some names.²⁰ This apparent contradiction has been the object of criticism on the part of some authors.²¹ Though determining the exact number of victims is impossible, the use of European historical sources could help us to fathom the actual extent of the persecutions of Tehran in 1852.

First, it must be pointed out that one of the sources used to calculate the number of martyrs in Tehran relies on the list published in the 27 August 1852 issue of the above-cited *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi'-i-*

Ittifaqíyyih, which contained only the names of those executed in the eleven days immediately following the assassination attempt. News published in various parts of Europe in late-October and early-November reporting that over 400 Bábís were executed is based on dispatches from Tabriz dated 27 September; that is, exactly one month after *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi'-i-Ittifaqíyyih* had published its list. Thus, in principle, no contradiction exists between the two accounts.

Additionally, *Rúznáma-i-Vaqáyi'-i-Ittifaqíyyih* includes only the names of adult males. We know of at least one woman killed at the time, however, and that is Táhirih, whose name does not figure in the above Persian newspaper’s list, although it does in several news stories published in Europe. We can credit Comte de Gobineau for an account describing the manner in which some Bábís were executed, and which demonstrates how women and children were also martyred, though their names had not been recorded:

The people saw marching, between executioners, children and women with deep holes cut into their flesh in which lighted wicks were inserted. The victims were dragged with ropes and goaded on with whips. Children and women went forth singing this verse: ‘In truth, we come from God and unto Him do we return.’ Their voices were raised triumphant above the deep silence of the crowd. . . . Some of the children expired on the way. The executioners would throw

their bodies under the feet of their fathers and sisters, who proudly walked over them without giving it a second thought. When the cortege reached the place of execution near the New Gate, the victims were given the choice between life and abjuration of their faith. . . . One of the executioners conceived the idea of saying to a father that, unless he yielded, he would cut the throats of his two sons on his very breast. The sons were quite young, the oldest about fourteen. Covered with blood, their flesh scorched, they were listening stoically to the threats. The father replied, while laying himself down, that he was ready and the older of the boys, claiming a prior right, requested to be the first to die.²²

A document published by A. L. M. Nicolas provides another clue about the number of dead at the time. It is a letter from an eyewitness to the events, according to whom four hundred Bábís were arrested, three-fourths of them being divided up between assorted persons of prominence and officials overseeing their execution. His account mentions, in addition, killings and attacks perpetrated by the populace itself.²³

Bahá’u’lláh Himself attests, further-

more, that during His imprisonment in the Síyáh-Chál, which began sometime between 15 and 26 August and lasted about four months, executions were being carried out daily: “Every day Our gaolers, entering Our cell, would call the name of one of Our companions, bidding him arise and follow them to the foot of the gallows.²⁴

Given the above, and going by the news published in Spain in July 1853, if we bear in mind that the persecutions continued at least until June of the same year, it would stand to reason that the number of Bábís murdered in Tehran exceeds the traditionally reported figures.

Surveying the presence of Bábísm in the Spanish Vox Populi: 1850-1853

References found in the Spanish daily press of the 1850s could offer us, in addition to the particulars contained in the news stories themselves, information about the degree to which Spanish society then was familiar with the existence of Bábísm.

The following table shows the list of all of the total number of news stories, that we know of today, published in Spain during the period under consideration.

	Year/Title	City	Date
1850			
1	<i>El Avisador Barcelonés</i>	Barcelona	6 November
2	<i>El Católico</i>	Madrid	24 October
3	<i>El Clamor Público</i>	Madrid	7 November
4	<i>La Esperanza</i>	Madrid	24 October
5			11 November
6	<i>La Nación</i>	Madrid	24 October
1852			
7	<i>La Actualidad</i>	Barcelona	22 October

Chronicles of a Birth

8	<i>El Ancora</i>	Barcelona	13 October
9			15 November
10	<i>Correo de Barcelona</i>	Barcelona	12 October
11			4 November
12	<i>Diario de Barcelona</i>	Barcelona	13 October
13			5 November
14	<i>Diario de Cataluña</i>	Barcelona	11 October
15	<i>El Presente</i>	Barcelona	5 November
16	<i>El Católico</i>	Madrid	13 October
17			22 October
18			4 November
19			6-7 November
20			12 November
21			23 November
22	<i>El Clamor Públco</i>	Madrid	13 October
23			4 November
24			11 November
25	<i>El Diario Español</i>	Madrid	14 October
26			4 November
27	<i>La Epoca</i>	Madrid	12 October
28	<i>La Esperanza</i>	Madrid	14 October
29			23 October
30			4 November
31			11 November
32			23 November
33	<i>La España</i>	Madrid	13 October
34			4 November
35	<i>La Gaceta Militar</i>	Madrid	26 October
36	<i>La Nación</i>	Madrid	13 October
37			4 November
38			6 November
39			27 November
40	<i>Las Novedades</i>	Madrid	14 October
41			5 November
42			13 November
43	<i>El Observador</i>	Madrid	13 October
44			4 November
45	<i>El Genio de la Libertad</i>	Palma de Mallorca	27 October
46			15 November
47		Valencia	7 November
	1853		
48	<i>El Católico</i>	Madrid	8 July
49	<i>El Clamor Públco</i>	Madrid	7 July
50	<i>La Esperanza</i>	Madrid	7 July
51	<i>La Nación</i>	Madrid	8 July

The reader will glean that the majority of references were published in Madrid and Barcelona — the country’s two largest cities — although others originate from medium-sized cities such as Valencia and Palma de Mallorca, as well as Vilanova i la Geltru, then a small municipality.

Although newspapers published in Barcelona were essentially distributed in Catalonia, those published in Madrid had subscribers throughout all of Spain and its colonies and therefore enjoyed wider circulation.²⁵

It is possible to ascertain, with a reasonable margin of error, the total number of copies issued by each daily during the period in which it published stories making some reference to Bábísm. With knowledge of the newspaper’s number of pages, its size, and the postage paid by newspaper publishing houses then (information published regularly in the *State Official Gazette*), it is possible to estimate each paper’s total print run. In other cases, it is possible to determine, on the basis of postal office records, the total number of each publication’s subscribers.

Information thus obtained could give us a rough idea of the number of readers that might have learned about Bábísm’s existence from the daily press.

In the case of Barcelona, the median number of subscribers to newspapers making references to Bábísm is as follows:²⁶

1850	<i>El Avisador Barcelonés</i>	197
		197
1852	<i>Diario de Barcelona</i>	648
	<i>El Áncora</i>	388
	<i>El Barcelonés</i>	182
	<i>Diario de Cataluña</i>	181
	<i>El Correo de Barcelona</i>	126
	<i>El Presente</i>	90
	<i>La Actualidad</i>	60
		1675

We also have available numbers on the average print runs of some Madrid dailies. Thus we know, for example, that *Las Novedades*, Madrid’s most widely circulated newspaper in the 1850s, printed on average 13,000 copies daily during 1852 and 1853.

In the near future, data on the number of copies in which information pertaining to Bábísm in Persia was published in 1850, 1852, and 1853 will have been compiled, thereby making it possible to estimate the number of readers that potentially could have learned about the new religion. In the meantime, and on the basis of the data now at our disposal, we can speculate, for example, that news published in Madrid between October and November 1852 might have reached some 35,000 persons.

The persecutions carried out against the Bábís in Persia were the vehicle that helped to transport the name of the new Revelation to so distant a place as Spain. Such an accomplishment would not have come about as a result of the Bábís’ own efforts. Not for nothing, above and beyond the sidelines of history, this

effect is the most visible and at the same time miraculous result of the persecutions attending all religions at their inception. "Behold how in this Dispensation," Bahá'u'lláh affirms, "the worthless and foolish have fondly imagined that by such instruments as massacre, plunder and banishment they can extinguish the Lamp which the Hand of Divine power hath lit, or eclipse the Day Star of everlasting splendor. How utterly unaware they seem to be of the truth that such adversity is the oil that feedeth the flame of this Lamp!"²⁷

Little more than a decade later, with the publication in France of Comte de Gobineau's *Les Religions et Philosophies dans l'Asie Centrale*, did the Spanish public — above all, its intellectual circles — have the opportunity to learn in greater depth about the religious movement that years earlier had captured the headlines. The Báb's biography and teachings; events such as those taking place at Shaykh Tabarsí; and figures such as Táhirih, Quddús, and Mullá Husayn; as depicted by Gobineau's pen, motivated some Spaniards to mention and spread anew the existence of Bábísm in their writings. We will explore these in greater detail on a future occasion.

Notes

* The author is indebted to Mr. Francisco Díaz for his excellent rendering from Spanish into English of this article.

1. The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, *Proceedings of the Dedication of the Chair in Bahá'í Studies*, Jerusalem, 2000, p. 8.
2. Year in which the Bahá'í Faith was officially established in Spain.

3. *Gazzeta Ufficiale di Venezia*, 14 September 1850.

4. Sheil describes the episode as follows:

A struggle between the government and the priesthood relative to the right of asylum in shrines, mosques, and other places of sanctity, has been long going on; one party seeking its overthrow, the other its maintenance for the preservation of their own influence over the people. Intelligence has just arrived from Tabreez [sic] of an extraordinary device adopted by the moollas of that city for restoring the right of bast, or sanctuary, to its ancient vigour. A cow being conducted to the slaughterhouse, in passing by a noted shrine in the middle of the city, twice took refuge in the holy spot. On the third repetition of the disregard of this appeal to the power of the defunct saint, the butcher was struck dead. How this portion of the miracle was effected I know not. The news spread in a moment through the city, and all the zeal of the Moslems was roused. In general it finds a vent in the pillage of the Armenians or the Jews; but on this occasion it took a different direction. Miracles in abundance were performed. The blind saw, the lame walked, maladies innumerable were healed. A pitch of enthusiasm was raised which was described to be "frightful" illuminations on an unheard-of scale took place during three successive nights; the shrine was exalted into an inviolable sanctuary, and gamblers and drunkards who should dis honour its precincts were to be slain. But the government was strong in the hands of the Ameer e Nizam, the Prime Minister. I may as well now anticipate events, and mention that, before many months had elapsed, some of the principal instigators of these prodigies were brought to Tehran, where they remained in much discomfort, and were only released on promising to work no more miracles.

Sheil, Mary. *Glimpses of Life and Manners in Persia*. London: John Murray, 1856. pp. 165-166.

5. The same information was published with minor variations in two Madrid journals: *El Clamor Públlico*, on 7 November, and *La Esperanza*, on 11 November.
6. Gobineau, Comte M. A., "Les Religions et

Philosophies dans l’Asie Centrale.” In *Translation of French Foot-notes of The Dawn-Breakers*, Emily McBride Perigord. Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1996.

7. From the facts that Bábism [sic] in its earliest years found itself in conflict with the civil powers, and that an attempt was made by Bábís [sic] upon the life of the Sháh, it has been wrongly inferred that the movement was political in origin and Nihilist in character. It does not appear from a study of the writings either of the Báb or his successors, that there is any foundation for such a suspicion. The persecution of the government very early drove the adherents of the new creed into an attitude of rebellion; and in the exasperation produced by the struggle, and by the ferocious brutality with which the rights of conquest were exercised by the victors, it was not surprising if fanatical hands were found ready to strike the sovereign down. At the present time the Bábís are equally loyal with any other subjects of the Crown.

Lord Curzon, “Persia and the Persian Question,” quoted in Nabíl-i-A’zam, *The Dawn-Breakers*, Wilmette, Ill.: Bahá’í Publishing Trust, 1970.

8. *El Diario Catalán* (Barcelona), 11 October 1852, p. 1310.
9. *El Diario Español* (Madrid), 14 October 1852, p. 2.
10. *La Actualidad* (Barcelona), 22 October 1852, p. 3.
11. When this communication was written, the Spanish legation in Constantinople was composed of: José Nebiet (Acting Minister Plenipotentiary), Manuel de Castillo y Rivadeneyra (Secretary), Bernardo de Souza (First Interpreter), Francisco Radovani (Second Interpreter), Salvador Rizo (Translator’s Apprentice).
12. *La Nación* (Madrid), 4 November 1852, p. 3.
13. *El Católico* (Madrid), 6 November 1852, p. 3 (1275).
14. The earliest accounts we have about Siyyid Ḥusayn-i-Mutavallí-i-Qumí place him at the Fort of Shaykh Tabarsí. There

he betrayed Quddús and his companions. Following the attempt on the Sháh’s life, he was imprisoned together with other Bábís and Bahá’u’lláh in the Síyáh-Chál (see Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 384, 398, and 632). He was deported, along with ‘Abbás Mírzá, to Baghdad, where he eventually aligned himself with the Azalís. In Baghdad, Bahá’u’lláh revealed the Shíkkár-Shíkán-Shavand for him. See Taherzadeh, *Revelation*, Vol. I, pp. 147-151.

15. On the relationship between Násiri’d-Dín and ‘Abbás Mírzá before and after the attempt on the life of the Sháh, see Amanat, *Pivot of the Universe*, pp. 138-142 and 219-222.
16. *La Esperanza* (Madrid), 11 November 1852, pp. 1-2.
17. See Momen, *The Bábí and Bahá’í Religions*, George Ronald: Oxford, 1981, pp. 138-142.
18. *El Clamor Público* (Madrid), 7 July 1853, p. 3. Similar news was published a few months later on September 1853 in several Italian journals.
19. *Messages to the Bahá’í World*, p. 39.
20. See, for instance, Nabíl’s *The Dawn-Breakers* and Balyuzi’s *Bahá’u’lláh: The King of Glory*.
21. I am referring to Denis MacEoin’s article titled “From Babism to Baha’ism: Problems of Militancy, Quietism, and Conflation in the Construction of a Religion,” originally published in *Religion*, Vol. 13 (1983): 219-55, and which can be downloaded at bahai-library.org/articles/babism.maceoin.html
22. Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, p. 612.
23. Letter of prince Kemal-u-Dín Hindustani included in A. L. M. Nicolas’s *Massacres de Babis en Perse*, Adrien-Maisonneuve: Paris. 1936. pp. 35-42.
24. Nabíl, *The Dawn-Breakers*, pp. 632-3.
25. Thus, for example, Madrid newspapers would sell approximately 34,552 copies in

- 1852, 48,738 in 1852, and 51,048 in 1853 to the rest of Spain (including the Philippines and the Antilles). See Cabrera, Elorza, Valero y Vázquez, *Datos para un estudio cuantitativo de la prensa diaria madrileña (1850-1875)* in *Prensa y Sociedad en España (1820-1936)*, Edicusa, Madrid, 1975, M. Tuñón de Lara, A. Elorza, and M. Pérez Ledesma, Eds.
26. Martí Casimir, “L’Església de Barcelona 1850-1857,” in *200 anys de Premsa Diària a Catalunya*, Barcelona: Fundació Caixa de Catalunya, 1995.
27. *Gleanings from the Writings of Bahá'u'lláh*, rev. ed. (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1983), sec. 29, p. 72.

