

# THE PASSPORT

THE HISTORY OF MAN'S MOST  
TRAVELLED DOCUMENT

Martin Lloyd



Queen Anne's Fan

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Martin Lloyd  
Canterbury, 2008

# 1

## MURDER AT THE OPERA

The finely dressed passengers alighted from their carriages and fiacres before the Paris Opera, the line of gaslamps lighting the horses' breath as it hung in the crisp winter air. Some of the theatre-goers sought refuge from the chill by waiting inside the vestibule but many stood outside, chattering gaily under the glass awning. They provided a free spectacle of colour and vivacity for the poorer Parisians who thronged the pavements and café terraces of the rue Le Peletier.

There was a feeling of expectancy and excitement in the crowd. It was Thursday 14 January 1858 and all Paris knew that the Emperor Napoleon III and his attractive Spanish wife, the Empress Eugénie, were visiting the Opera that evening.

It was a little after half past eight when there was a stir in the crowd. *'Ils arrivent, ils arrivent.'* In a clatter of hooves the procession turned into the street. First the carriage carrying the court attendants, then the Imperial carriage itself followed by an escort of Imperial Lancers. The crowd surged forward, straining for a view. Unseen in their midst, a man lobbed an object over their heads towards the carriage. A brougham manoeuvring in the street momentarily obstructed the Imperial carriage, obliging it to slow down and at that moment, a metal globe was seen bouncing along the ground towards it. There was a deafening explosion and the street was plunged into

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darkness as the gas lights of the Opera and the windows of the buildings were shattered. The crowd screamed, the horses reared in terror, scores of people staggered and stumbled away from the carnage.

With remarkable presence of mind, the coachman, Ledoux, whipped up his horses as the escort of Lancers charged forward to surround the carriage. There was a second explosion, maiming one of his horses, and then a third, right beneath the carriage itself. The air was full of deadly shards of flying metal and glass. Those who could, ran in panic. Miraculously, the Emperor and Empress appeared untouched and were hurried into the Opera House by those of the Garde de Paris still able to stand. The question on everybody's mind was, 'who could have perpetrated such a murderous plot?'

The answer was: Count Felice Orsini, but even he could little have imagined the wider repercussions of his attempt. Apart from the hideous cost in human terms – eight people killed and over a hundred injured – his actions had a devastating influence in quite another sphere for the passport that Orsini had used to enter France brought down the British Government of the day and caused the system for issuing passports to be changed forever.

Felice Orsini was an Italian revolutionary, or more precisely, a Piedmontese revolutionary. Italy in the nineteenth century was not yet a unified nation but rather an amalgam of kingdoms and duchies. Its unity was obstructed by the different laws in each and its trade was crippled by a multitude of customs regimes levied in any one of the several currencies in circulation. The administration of Italy was subject to the varying influences of Austria, the Kingdom of Sardinia, the Kingdom of the Two Sicilies and the Papal States.

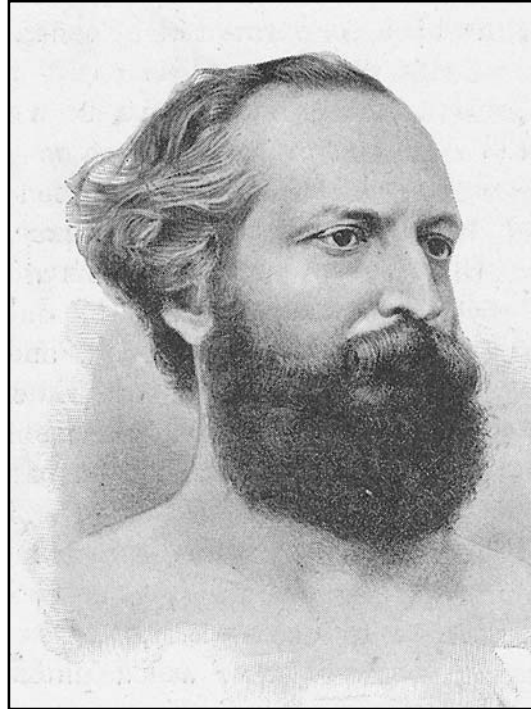
Orsini was a product of this mish-mash. His involvement in the complex politics of the Italian peninsula and the struggle for its unification was almost inevitable. At the age



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Felice Orsini,  
1819-1858.

In order to attempt the assassination of Napoleon III in 1858, he entered France by impersonating the holder of a British passport.



of nine he was already accompanying his father, Andrea, on his political excursions against authority and his imprisonment at the age of twenty five for conspiring against the governments of Italy did not divert him from his course. By the time he was thirty five, Orsini was in prison again but this time he was sentenced to death for undertaking a gun-running expedition intended to support an uprising in Parma by the revolutionary leader Mazzini. Incarcerated in Mantua jail, Orsini quietly channelled his resourcefulness into organising his own escape and early in the morning of 30 March 1856 he knotted together his sheets and clothes, removed the previously sawn bars from his cell window, and lowered himself to the moat. He fled to Switzerland and thence to England.

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Arriving in Dover on 26 May 1856, Orsini went straight to London to see Mazzini who had already taken refuge there. Orsini now found that Mazzini was less easily roused to action – he was unable to interest him in his projects but Mazzini did make a practical suggestion. Why did he not write a book about his exploits and his escape from the prison at Mantua? Orsini did so, and much to his surprise, it quickly sold 35,000 copies. With the fame of authorship came the opportunity to give public lectures and throughout that winter Orsini toured England giving talks on his adventures. These were perhaps not as illuminating as they could have been since his English was not of a particularly high standard. However, he was a handsome and striking figure and had an exciting tale to tell.

It is not quite clear at what point Orsini decided to attempt the assassination of Napoleon III, and later, at his trial, his explanation for this plan seemed to lack rationale. Whatever the reasoning, at some time before 1857 he became fixed with the idea that if Napoleon could be disposed of then the next French government would be a people's government rather than a dictatorship and the first thing that they would wish to do would be to withdraw the French garrison from Rome. Orsini wanted a unified Italy. No Italian politician could imagine such a possibility whilst a foreign army sat astride the middle of their peninsula, occupying their most important city.

Orsini began to recruit sympathisers from among the exiles in London, specifically those who were not in Mazzini's circle. Dr Simon Bernard, a French language teacher and elocutionist, had already acted as Orsini's agent for his lecture tours. Dr. Bernard had the added quality of being a proficient amateur chemist. Giuseppe Andrea Pieri, an Italian language teacher living in Birmingham, proved to have had an active past in the French Foreign Legion and the Paris barricades of 1848, the latter earning him expulsion from France. Antonio

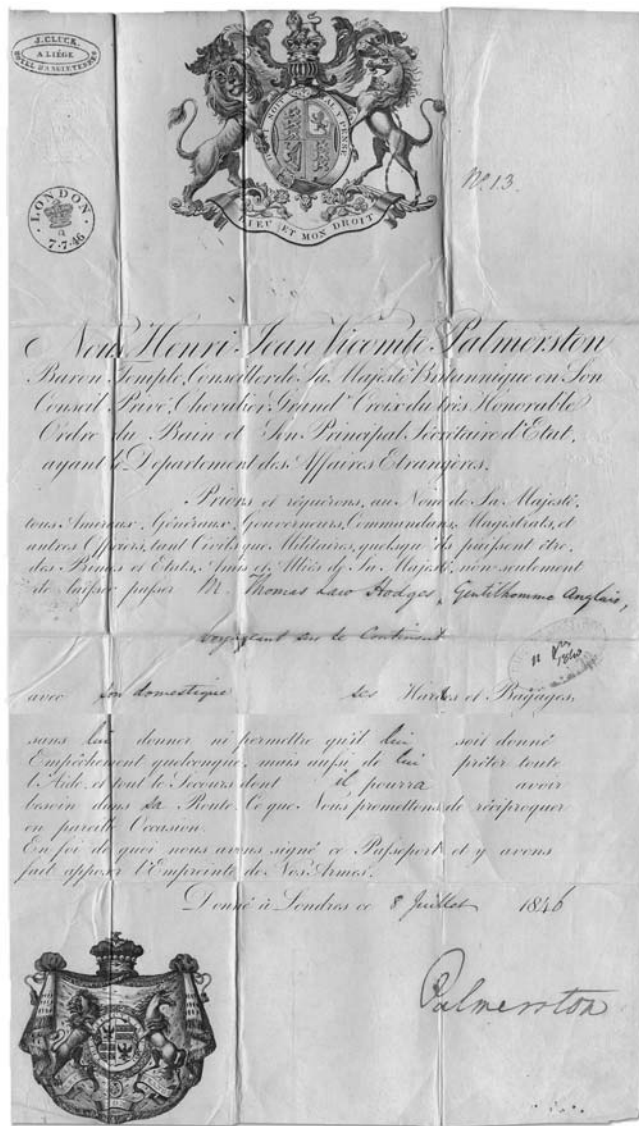
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Gomez, a young Neapolitan, was short of money and easily persuaded. And Thomas Allsop, an English barrister whom Orsini had first met in Nice. Allsop would facilitate the manufacture of the grenade casings since a foreigner placing such an order with a firm would immediately arouse suspicion. The ruse seems to have succeeded, for the engineer employed, a Mr Taylor of Birmingham, was later to assure the authorities that he had assumed Mr Allsop to be a senior official of the War Office. Finally, Giuseppe di Giorgi, an Italian restaurant worker about to take up post at the Café Suisse in Brussels. He would transport the empty grenades to the Continent where they would be collected, filled with the concoction prepared by Dr Bernard and primed ready for use by Orsini. Everything was set. All Orsini needed was a passport.

The passport of the day was not the neat modern booklet complete with photograph and description with which we are now familiar. It was most likely to be a single sheet of paper, headed by a coat of arms and printed with an ornamental script requesting in florid language that the owner be allowed to pass unhindered in the name of the monarch or state. It would be issued to any applicant who was able to provide an acceptable reference and the requisite fee. The 'Passport System', as it was referred to in the nineteenth century, had as many detractors as promoters.

In Britain, the system was generally reviled by the public. They resented the bureaucracy involved in acquiring a passport, even though it was issued usually within twenty-four hours, and they resented the affront to their dignity in holding a document whose very existence implied that the bona-fides of an English gentleman could ever be put in doubt. Britain did not require of foreigners that they provide themselves with passports in order to disembark on their shores. Unfortunately for the British, two countries through which they had to pass, Belgium and

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The earliest British passports were written in Latin. This passport, issued in 1846 was written in French and signed personally by the Foreign Secretary, in this case, Palmerston. The only description provided of the holder is 'Gentilhomme Anglais' – English Gentleman.

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France, did require passports, and so the British traveller felt himself even more disadvantaged. An illustration, perhaps, of the authorities' lack of enthusiasm for passports is that no description of an Englishman's physiognomy was required on a British passport until 1915. At the turn of the eighteenth century the lowliest Continental agricultural worker requesting permission to walk 30 miles down the road had to possess a passport describing him down to the colour of his eyebrows and shape of his chin, whereas, a century later, the traveller intending to circumnavigate the globe, could still do so on a document which would proffer such a description as, 'British Subject' or 'English gentleman travelling on the Continent with his wife and servants.'

In France, the 'Passport System' had been well established before the French Revolution of 1789. Internal passports for travel from town to town were required as well as overseas passports for foreign excursions. The system was exploited by the police for the checking and control of foreigners; it was used by the State to prevent skilled workers and capital from leaving and deterring trouble-makers from arriving. When a traveller arrived in a French port he surrendered his passport which was forwarded to Paris and he was issued with a replacement. Upon arrival in the capital, he was obliged to attend the Préfecture de Police to have his original passport viséd for the next series of towns on his journey. The bureaucracy even extended to the hotels where he stayed – the concierge had to submit the passports of his foreign guests to the local police station to be checked and entered in a register.

Orsini was born in the Principality of Piedmont, a state in the north of Italy bordering on France. It was at that time part of the Kingdom of Sardinia and so he applied to the Sardinian Consulate General at 66, Russell Square, London for a passport, giving his reason for travelling as a wish to visit his wife and daughter whom he had left in Nice.

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This pretext would ostensibly serve him to cross the Channel at Dover and travel down through France via Paris. Not surprisingly, Orsini and his exploits were well known to the Sardinian authorities. They could not afford to upset such a powerful neighbour as France by granting facilities which would permit a known revolutionary to travel through that country, so, taking the side of caution, they declined to issue him with a passport. They moderated this refusal with the suggestion that if he indeed wanted to visit Nice, which was not a French city but of the Kingdom of Sardinia, then they would issue instructions to the city authorities to admit him and he could go direct by sea from England. How much they had guessed and how much they had suspected of Orsini's intentions we can only surmise but in proposing such a solution they had ostensibly taken his application at face value which had the effect of calling his bluff.

A modern-day traveller would be scandalised to be refused a passport by his own country, especially if the passport were intended to permit him to return home to visit his family. No doubt Orsini was incommoded but this was not the only route to a passport. Strange as it may seem, it was quite legal for any person to go to the French or Belgian consulate and obtain one of their passports for travel. The applicant did not need to be a national of the respective country. The poet Robert Browning for example, when he 'eloped' with his wife Elizabeth Barrett Browning in 1846, probably did so on a French passport. Indeed, with the price of a British passport at that time costing £2 7s 6d (£2.37<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub>) and requiring the applicant to either know the Foreign Secretary personally, know someone who did, or have a recommendation from a banking house of repute, it was not surprising that many British subjects availed themselves of foreign passports, especially as these were often issued free of charge.

Whilst the British public considered Orsini's exploits to

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be famous, unfortunately for Orsini, the French and Belgian governments regarded them as notorious. There would have been no point in his applying to either of these two countries for a passport. The solution seemed obvious – a false passport.

On 26 November 1857, John Gerard, the Belgian Vice Consul was sitting in his office at 11, Bury Court, St Mary Axe, London when a man brought him a British passport for him to stamp with a Belgian visa. He did not notice the man except that he was a foreigner and that he spoke with a strong Italian accent. This was not in any way suspicious as a gentleman could easily have sent his manservant to the Consulate with the passport. He did notice, however, that the passport had not been signed by the owner and so he asked the man where he was. The man said that he was at the Jamaica Coffee House so the Vice-Consul said that he should attend in person as he could not visé an unsigned passport. ‘About ten minutes later’, said the Vice-Consul, ‘he came. He complained of the trouble he had to come to the office about this passport, stating that he had travelled with it before and never had occasion to be troubled about it.’ The Vice-Consul made him sign the passport there and then and he affixed the Belgian visa. He believed him to be an Englishman. ‘I made it my business to look at him to be sure he was an Englishman as the passport had travelled six years without being signed.’ The name the man signed was, ‘T. Allsop’.<sup>1</sup>

Two days later it was the turn of the unsuspecting French Consulate. The same passport was presented to Adolphe Wee who, in affixing the French visa, did not even check whether the passport had been signed or not. On the following day, Felice Orsini bade goodbye to his maid, Eliza Chesney and left his lodgings at 2, Grafton Street. That was the last she saw of him. He next appeared in Brussels at the Hotel de L’Europe, collecting the grenade casings from di Georgi. By 12 December he was in Paris, lodging at a hotel

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Date	No.	Name	Destination	By whom Recommended
1851				
Aug. 15	8187	Mr Neale Porter	Continent	London J. I. Bank
"	8	Mr. Oriel Vivcash	D.	Coutts
"	9	Col. Tho. M. Taylor	D.	D.
"	8190	Mr. Tho. Bowen Nees	D.	National Provincial Bank
"	1	Mr. Edw. Power	Porto Rico	Codd
"	2	Mr Edw. Taylor	Continent	Heath
"	3	Mr Henry Burton	D.	Mayer of Newport
"	4	Capt. Cha. Bowles. w. P. Hooper	India	Cox
"	5	Mr. Ned Mac Intyre	Continent	Barnard
"	6	Mr. Tho. Brooks Larkins	D.	Bath Bank
"	7	Mr. Tho. Allsop	D.	Prescott
"	8	Dr. Hallifax	D.	W. Bagnall & Co.
"	9	Mr. J. Baker	D.	Mr. Behan (Birmingham)
"	8200	Mrs. Ethelend Legrew Apple	D.	Morton
"	8201	Mr. J. B. ...	D.	...

The Passport Office Register for 15 August 1851 showing the issue of passport no.8197 to 'Thos. Allsop', who was travelling on the Continent. The application was recommended by the bank of Prescott's and the passport cost 7s 6d. This was the passport used by Orsini to enter France and attempt the assassination of Napoleon III in 1858.

in the rue du Mont Thabor under the identity of Thomas Allsop, an Englishman. He had with him his manservant who was travelling on a passport issued by the French Consul on 24 April 1857 to an Englishman called Sweeney. The servant was actually the impecunious Neapolitan, Antonio Gomez. It was he who, unwittingly, was to lead the French police to Orsini.

On the night of the assassination attempt, a remarkable coincidence occurred. Shortly before the Imperial carriage was due, Giuseppe Pieri, the former Foreign Legionnaire who had been previously expelled from France, was getting



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into position for the attack when he was recognised by a police inspector, M. Hebert. The latter immediately arrested him and took him to the police station where he was searched and his bomb was discovered. Orsini was unaware of this as he counted the explosions. The police inspector, quickly guessing the significance of the bomb, ran back to the Opera to raise the alarm. He was just in time to be injured by the third bomb.

Those who took part in the attack all made their escape during the ensuing chaos. At the pharmacies in the district, as the wounded dribbled in, the rumours ran wild. Orsini calmly queued with the other injured persons and obtained treatment for a head wound then carefully made his way back to the rue du Mont Thabor. Young Gomez was not so sanguine. He was devastated by what he had done. He went into a café and sat at the back with his head in his hands, moaning. When somebody noticed that a pistol had dropped from his pocket, a policeman was sent for and in great agitation Gomez gave his identity as Sweeney, the manservant of an English gentleman called Thomas Allsop of the rue du Mont Thabor.

At 2.30 a.m. on 15 January, Inspecteur Michel le Grange hammered on Orsini's door. When Orsini opened it, Le Grange looked over his shoulder and noticed the blood-soaked pillow on the bed. 'Who are you?' the inspector demanded in French. Orsini replied that he was an Englishman. The policeman immediately switched into English. 'Show me your passport.' Orsini handed him the British passport in the name of Thomas Allsop. 'Where do you come from?'

Orsini knew that the real Thomas Allsop lived in Clapham Common. 'Kent', he said.

'How far is that from London?'

'About thirty kilometres.'

'Ha,' said Le Grange, 'if you are an Englishman then I am a Turk. An Englishman would have said, "twenty miles".'

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Le Grange arrested Orsini and by the end of that Friday, all the conspirators had been detained. The French public were relieved to learn that none of their countrymen had been involved in the attempt but were angry to discover that the Italian exiles had plotted their conspiracy safely in England. When it later was revealed that the bombs had been manufactured in Birmingham, a great public indignation arose, as ardent as it was irrational. The feeling was that England should eject its dangerous exiles; this was avoiding the obvious question, where to? If the Piedmontese authority would not issue a passport for one of its own nationals to return home, which country would have accepted him? Where could he have been ejected to?

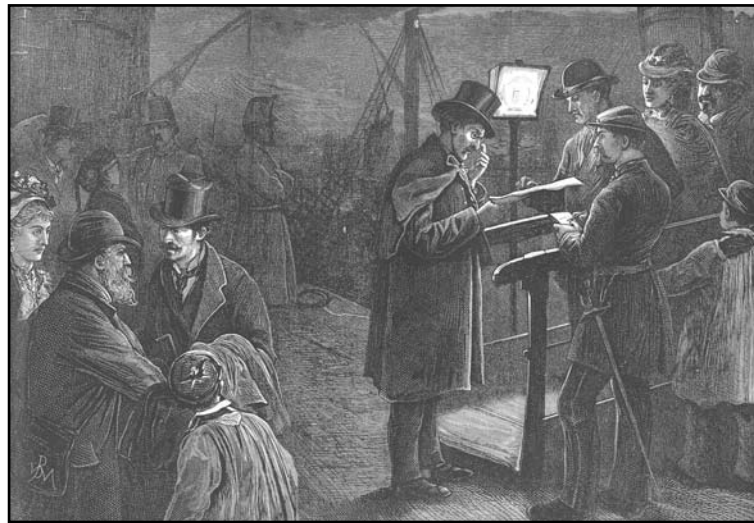
In the French press, *Le Moniteur*, which was almost the official organ of the State, published addresses from the Army implying that England was instrumental in the attack and one colonel of a regiment of the line went as far as to address the Emperor demanding to be 'led against that lair, that den, the nest of homicide,'<sup>2</sup> meaning England.

The British Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston had, in a previous administration, held the office of Foreign Secretary and was very much alive to the harm that could be done to Franco-British relations by injudicious comments. He tried to ease the British public to an understanding of the reason for the French ill will. He pointed out that had foreign exiles plotted in France, armed themselves with French bombs and French passports and then entered England and made an attempt upon the life of our Queen Victoria, then we would almost certainly feel exactly as the French do now. One of Palmerston's former duties as Foreign Secretary had been to sign the passports issued in his name and, rather embarrassingly, the Thomas Allsop passport that Orsini had used to enter France bore his signature.

Ineluctably the parameters of the debate were widened and the Passport System itself was put under scrutiny. The

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practice whereby the French and Belgian governments issued passports to British Subjects was seized upon as being tantamount to an encouragement to conspiracy and fraud. Foreign Consuls did not enquire as to the character of applicants, it was pointed out. A few months before the Orsini affair, some disreputable English characters had taken out French passports and travelled to Paris to rob various jewellers. They had been arrested at Southampton upon their return, still in possession of the jewels. On other occasions, unemployed workmen who would not normally have been able to afford a Foreign Office passport had taken the cheaper French passports and crossed the Channel in the belief that work was abundant there. They had been misinformed and it had fallen to the British Government to pay for their repatriation.<sup>3</sup> These priggish accusations implied that the propriety of an Englishman's character was established by the mere existence of his



Passengers' passports being examined as they disembark from the Channel packet at Dieppe during the Franco-Prussian War, 1871.

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Foreign Office passport. How unfortunate it was then, that Orsini had held one such passport.

The French Government announced on 5 February 1858, that it was ceasing immediately the arrangement whereby it issued passports to British subjects. The Earl of Clarendon, the British Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs, indicated that he welcomed this move and wished other countries would follow suit. Two days earlier he had enlarged the group of people who could recommend an applicant for a Foreign Office Passport to include mayors, chief magistrates of corporate towns in the United Kingdom, magistrates and justices of the peace. This was necessary to absorb the greater demand expected from the increase in the number of applicants. The charge for a passport was now six shillings (30p.) regardless of the number of people mentioned on the document.

The Foreign Secretary's contentment was short lived. Two weeks later the French Government also withdrew the 'no-passport' concession for British subjects. This was an arrangement that particularly favoured the towns of Dover and Folkestone in England and their counterpart ports in France – Calais and Boulogne. Under the system, tourists only intending to visit the town and not enter France proper, were not required to obtain a passport. There was a considerable traffic under this concession; approximately 100,000 passengers annually took excursion train trips to Calais or Boulogne at that time and both these ports had (and still have) a large settlement of British nationals. The withdrawal of the concession meant that every person disembarking was now required to hold a Foreign Office passport whether they intended visiting France or merely the quayside cafés in Calais. The results were chaotic. British subjects were refused entry to France and put back on the ship. In Le Havre, a port which received 5,000 visitors per year, the British Consul, Mr Featherstonhaugh, had to intercede when the French authorities would not

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allow a ship loaded with passportless passengers to discharge.<sup>4</sup> The packet boat companies suddenly found themselves dealing with passenger loads counted in tens instead of in hundreds. The traders of Calais and Boulogne tightened their belts and the British residents in those ports found that they could no longer travel outside the town in which they had lived for years unless they held a passport.

The campaign in the French and British press continued apace. The situation was of a legal nicety which evinced learned debate in the newspapers. A foreigner had taken exile in England and had plotted to commit a crime upon another foreigner to be perpetrated abroad. Wherein lay the criminal responsibility of Britain? Palmerston's efforts at conciliation were doomed to failure from the start by the differing administrative backgrounds of the two countries. The French people were accustomed to having to prove their identity upon demand and could not understand how such dangerous exiles and conspirators could be allowed to walk the streets freely unless there were some tacit indulgence on the part of the British Government.

In a letter to the editor entitled, 'How We Come To Have Refugees in England', one reader of *The Times* recounted an incident he had experienced in France and made a tentative but quite accurate suggestion.

'Sir,

The summer before last, while residing with my family at Boulogne, I witnessed on two or three occasions the shipment of batches of Italian refugees on board the Folkestone boat for delivery in England.

I was particularly struck by one lot who were brought down to the harbour escorted by a large body of police. Judging from the extreme attention shown them by their guardians and the number of those who were linked, in no affectionate bonds to the wrist of their conductors, I concluded that the party would form a very pretty addition to English society. Two or three of them appeared men of education, and most of

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them were of the exact type which formed, in Cassius' eyes, the perfected conspirator. Several of them had hunches of black bread in their hands. All of them were buttoned up in rags and half-famished in appearance. What I learnt of them was, that they had been passed on from police station to police station, and were not wanted in France.

I well remember the insulting gestures and coarse oaths which were flung at the gendarmerie as the boat left the quay and felt satisfied from the violence of one or two of them that had the means been in their hands they would have left with those gentry some more definite token of their opinion of France and its authorities.

Some six weeks afterwards I twice met two of these men still buttoned up in their rags, but as erect and defiant as ever, parading in Piccadilly.

Do you not think it possible that this lot might have furnished a band for the rue Lepelletier business?<sup>75</sup>

However near to the truth the observation might have been, the letter was indicative of the popular antagonism between France and Britain at the time. Palmerston was well aware of the need to smooth international relations. Believing the country to be behind him, he proposed in the House of Commons a Conspiracy to Murder bill.

...A conspiracy has been formed, partly in this country for the purpose of committing a most atrocious crime. That conspiracy has led to most disastrous consequences... the law in this country – in England – treats a conspiracy to murder simply as a misdemeanour subject to a fine and a short period of imprisonment... the conspiracy to murder is punishable on the same level and in the same manner as a conspiracy for any other purpose such as hissing at the theatre.<sup>76</sup>

Palmerston identified the public's anger at what it saw as meddling by the French government in the internal affairs of Britain. '...a disposition prevails on the Continent in general that the Government and Parliament of this

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country should take some steps which should place it in the power of the Government, on mere suspicion, to remove aliens from the UK.<sup>7</sup> Despite explaining that this was not the intention of his government and that he would not be swayed by foreign pressure, Palmerston failed to settle the turmoil. Opposition was virulent and he had miscalculated his support.

His opponents pointed out that assassination was not an English crime, it was a foreign crime. The assassins had come from England but before that, they had come to England from foreign countries run by governments whose behaviour had made their own subjects into assassins. Napoleon III had enjoyed the hospitality of England whilst plotting to take the power in France and no English king had fallen by the hand of the assassin although kings of France had. The submission of the latter observation was qualified with the rider that, of course we had occasionally executed a monarch, but that was different.

The debate ranged over two nights. The popular feeling which Palmerston had so misread was summed up in the arguments: 'If England wishes to hold her place among the nations, if she wishes still to maintain her own independent position, no solicitation of an ally, no threatenings on the part of anybody ought to lead us to alter our laws.'<sup>8</sup> and: 'The will of a foreign monarch ought not to be the standard of English Law.'<sup>9</sup>

The Conspiracy to Murder bill was defeated at the second reading by 234 votes to 215 on 19 February 1858 and Palmerston's government was forced to resign which it did on the 22nd. As a result of the Thomas Allsop passport used in the assassination attempt, the protocol for issuing passports was changed for all time; it was never to return to the situation where one state could issue a passport which claimed the authority to identify the holder as a national of another state. No longer could an Englishman travel abroad on a legally issued Belgian or French passport.

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And what of Count Felice Orsini who had caused all this trouble? Almost unnoticed in the British press, he had been committed for trial at the Assize Court of the Seine on 12 February, found guilty and executed a month later. But the final word on this affair of conspiracy and assassination, false passports and counter accusations must really go to the intended victim himself. Napoleon III had already published an appraisal of the liberty of the individual in England in one of his works. It stands as a pragmatic and perceptive analysis of the effectiveness of the Passport System:

‘In England the first of all liberties, that of going where you please, is never disturbed for there no-one is asked for passports. Passports – the oppressive invention of the Committee of Public Safety which are an embarrassment and an obstacle to the peaceable citizen but which are utterly powerless against those who wish to deceive the vigilance of authority.’<sup>10</sup>