

Russian religious thought in the 19th century



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The 19th Century was a defining moment in Russia which saw views on the Russian Orthodox Church, due partly, if not mainly, to its ties to the tsar-run government, sour tremendously among the Russian people. The Russian Orthodox Church became to be seen as nothing more than a government institution overseen by the tsar, and the 19th Century saw tsardom become less and less revered, to say the least, among the Russian populous. Despite many different heads of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as Nicholas Protasov, Dmitry Andreyevich Tolstoy, and Konstantin Pobedonostsev, attempting to grow the church's influence on society throughout this period, their undeniable support and ties to the tsar-run government led to an ultimate distaste for and abandonment of religion among the Russian people during the 19th Century.

Russian religious thought in the 19th Century is important to know about because, put simply, it shows what can happen when you have a state-run church that's run by a state that the citizens despise. From 1721-1917, the Russian Orthodox Church was run by the Ober-Procurator, or Attorney General, appointed by the tsar rather than by patriarch's (as seen before and after this almost 200-year long period). The three Ober-Procurator's during this period that will be focused on in this paper all used their position as a means to try to suppress the voices of those wanting to change or critique both the Russian Orthodox Church and the government, and this suppression led to civil unrest and distrust in the church. The events of 19th Century Russia are ultimately what gave way to the Russian Revolution and the rise of communism in the 20th Century, which saw a Marxist-Leninist government, implemented by the Bolsheviks, attempt to topple the “

corrupt” Russian Orthodox Church and attempt to eradicate the religion which had been forced on the people by the tsars for centuries via murdering the leaders and members of the church in Russia.

Nicholas I, also known as “ The Iron Tsar,” was a dutiful, determined ruler who flexed Russia’s military might and believed strongly that each and every citizen should love and trust the Russian government as well as the Russian Orthodox Church. In fact, Nicholas I had the government he ran formulate an “ Official Nationality,” which was run based off of its three key principles: Orthodoxy, autocracy, and nationality. It must be noted that Orthodoxy, referring to the official church of Russia and its doctrine, is the first and foremost principle of the “ Official Nationality.” Nicholas I couldn’t even fathom where one would even get the idea to question the government or the validity of the church, and he sought to punish any and all who stepped out of line (such as The Decembrists as well as potential revolutionaries). While the government of the Soviet Union a century after the reign of Nicholas I thought those who believed in God were enemies of the state, Nicholas I thought the exact opposite: those who didn’t believe in God were enemies of the state.

During the thirty year reign of Nicholas I, Nicholas Protasov was Ober-Procurator for the entire final nineteen year period (1836-1855). Nicholas Protasov, like almost all of the other heads of government agencies and institutions during the reign of Nicholas I, was formerly in the military. His background, combined with his lack of theological training and biblical knowledge, led many Russians to dislike and distrust the Russian Orthodox Church even more than they already did, due to the fact that this cemented

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their view that the Russian Orthodox Church was just run by pawns of the tsar.

Nicholas Protasov's "battle" against native Russian dissenters was one event in particular which led Russians to believe that he wasn't a God-fearing theologian at all, but rather a government head focused on punishing non-believers because they were a threat to the state. Protasov categorized these dissenters as "less pernicious," "pernicious," and "most pernicious" depending on whether they accepted or rejected the state and the church, which was primarily based off of whether they prayed for the tsar and their views of the sacraments and marriage. Those labeled "most pernicious," meaning they didn't pray for the tsar and rejected the sacraments and the church, were taken to Transcaucasia or Siberia. It was actions such as these which led the Russian populous to view the Russian Orthodox Church as more of a policing mechanism than a holy institution. Protasov, it seemed, was more focused on finding dissenters against the church for the tsar so he could expel them to Siberia than on trying to strengthen the faith of the Russian populous in the Lord and His church.

While Nicholas I, with the help of Nicholas Protasov, might have tried to expand the influence of the Russian Orthodox Church on society, in actuality, thanks to their harsh and authoritarian measures, they ended up pushing more people away from the church. It's this anti-government, anti-church sentiment which spread throughout Russia and led to writers such as Nikolay Gogol, Ivan Turgenev, and Mikhail Lermontov publishing works opposing the way the country was being run, and these works gaining massive popularity. While Alexander Pushkin, one of the greatest Russian writers of all time, <https://assignbuster.com/russian-religious-thought-in-the-19th-century/>

inspired The Decembrists with his political writings to try to take over the Russian government before Nicholas I came into power, its novels such as *The Government Inspector* by Nikolay Gogol which really turned the spark lit by Pushkin into a wildfire. Gogol, the proverbial “the head of Russian literature” after Pushkin’s death, absolutely panned Nicholas I and his regime throughout the entirety of *The Government Inspector*, and he followed this novel up with his all-time bestseller *Dead Souls*. In *Dead Souls*, which was read widely throughout Russia, depicted serfs as being bought and sold like animals, even after death, by repugnant landowners. Both of these works attack everything from the social structure, to the government, to the church in Russia, and they were novels loved and adored by the Russian populous.

After the death of Nicholas I in 1855, Alexander II took over as Emperor of Russia. Unlike Nicholas I, Alexander II was less of an authoritarian and more of a populist leader. He installed a number of reforms to domestic programs which were popular among the people, and he was also the one who finally emancipated the serfs. While these actions could have led to the Russian populous once again having faith in their government and their Russian Orthodox Church, Alexander II prevented this by appointing Dmitry Andreyevich Tolstoy as Ober-Procurator for fifteen years, fourteen of which he also served as Minister of Education, which was followed by a seven year stint as the Minister of Interior. While serving in these positions, Tolstoy, like Protasov, acted more like a corrupt government official than a man of faith. While he was leading the Russian Orthodox Church, he used his additional title as Minister of Education to crackdown on “politically and morally criminal propaganda” among teachers and students in Russian schools.

Furthermore, he censored what teachers could say in schools as well as the textbooks which they taught from. After his time as Ober-Procurator/Minister of Education, he successfully cracked down on the press and made it so that all newspapers and periodicals had to submit their articles to the government to be approved/censored before being published. It goes without saying that Tolstoy's work both as the leader of, as well as the former leader of, the Russian Orthodox Church didn't exactly instill in Russians a yearning to develop a personal relationship with God.

After the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, Alexander III began his reign over Russia. To say that Alexander III and his Ober-Procurator Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev left the Russian Orthodox Church in a state of disrepair due to the path they took it down wouldn't be too much of an overstatement. The relationship between Alexander III and Pobedonostsev, however, begins far before either of them take office. When Alexander II took office in 1865, Alexander III became the heir apparent and started studying the laws of Russia and the ins and outs of the government administration. His studies carried on from 1865-1881 under none other than political philosopher, and later his Ober-Procurator, Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev. Throughout these years of study, Pobedonostsev instilled in Alexander his detestation of representative government and the idea that every Russian, whether they like it or not, be a member of the Russian Orthodox Church in the name of religious unity. Pobedonostsev also believed not only that liberal and democratic movements to be evil and against the state, but that anyone outside of the Russian Orthodox Church, such as Baptists, Lutherans, Jews, Catholics, and the Old Believers were enemies of

the state as well due to being enemies of the state's church. These were also beliefs Pobedonostsev successfully instilled in future Emperor Alexander III.

After Alexander III came into power and made Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev Ober-Procurator, Alexander III made it his goal for his nation to have one language, one nationality, and one religion. Alexander III and his goal of one religion, which Pobedonostsev spearheaded, was undoubtedly the most controversial of the three, and the way in which it was attempted to be achieved was appalling. Pobedonostsev saw to it that the " May Laws" be implemented, which barred Jews shtetls and rural areas. Shortly afterwards, Jews were deported from large cities and kicked out of public schools. It should also be noted that Pobedonostsev was quoted saying, while leading the Russian Orthodox Church, mind you, " A third of Jews will be converted, a third will emigrate, and the rest will die of hunger." Put simply, if someone couldn't be converted to believe in and become a part of the Russian Orthodox Church, Pobedonostsev wanted them either to die or be expelled from Russia.

Ultimately, however, Pobedonostsev's policies unsurprisingly incited violence and dissension in Russia, and these policies can also be attributed to the ultimate fall of the Russian Empire and the resulting Russian Revolution of the 20th Century which saw the communist Bolsheviks come into power and completely and utterly dismantle the church. Although Pobedonostsev wanted to unify the church in Russia, he ended up doing just the opposite. By the year 1900, twenty years into Pobedonostsev's twenty-five years as head of the Russian Orthodox Church, the church was divided and completely embroiled in bureaucracy. Virtually all faith had been lost in the

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church among the Russian populous, the only reason there was still membership was due to the fear of being punished for not being a member. The Russian Orthodox Church, by the end of Pobedonostsev's twenty-five year reign over the institution, had become as distrusted and reviled as the Russian government had been, and there seemed to be a general consensus across the country by the end of the 19th Century that everything the government touched was corrupt, and the only way to root out said corruption was to topple the government. A revolution would occur, the only question was when.

If one thing is to be learned from 19th Century Russia its that people need to have the freedom to choose what they believe in. Once a belief system is forcefully imposed on citizens it restricts their right to think for themselves, and inevitably leads to a retaliation by the populous. When the corrupt Russian government forced its citizens to become members of the Orthodox church or otherwise be labeled enemies of the state, they weren't doing Christianity any favors. This only led people to hate the government even more and to a revolution a few decades later, which would see its atheist leaders take over the Russian government and do away with religion entirely in the country. The corrupt Russian state's brash handling of the state-run church in the 19th Century ended in millions upon millions of people disavowing Christianity, and eventually to a Bolshevik-run government which stamped out religion altogether. Had Russian citizens been given the freedom to choose what to believe in, less people would've loathed the church and atheism would've never taken a hold of the country.

Another thing to be learned, which goes hand-in-hand with citizens needing the right to choose what to believe in, is that the marriage of church and state doesn't always work out well for the church. While the combination of church and state can be fantastic for the church in certain scenarios (the Catholic Church and Vatican City, the Eastern Orthodox Church and the Athonite States, Islam and Iran, etc.), it can also work out terribly for the church and lead to its dissolution. If the state that's running the church, as in 19th Century Russia, is corrupt, the church will inevitably be viewed as corrupt right along with it. Right now in the United States, for example, Evangelical church leaders have welcomed Trump and have loved the publicity the Trump administration has given to them and their churches. They've been welcomed into his government and have been able to push their agenda further than they otherwise would've been able to. The Evangelical Church now, however, has gone on the record as supporting, loving, and endorsing a man who has committed sexual assault, adultery, tax evasion, fraud, arguably treason, and who's on his third marriage. Furthermore, he's called all Mexicans rapists, he's denied refugees seeking shelter, he's gone on the record saying all immigrants from Haiti have AIDs, and he's defended and embraced white nationalism (ex. his endorsing and campaigning for Senate candidate Roy Moore who once called slavery a positive occurrence, his hiring of Steve Bannon who wrote in support of white nationalism extensively while head of Breitbart, and his pardoning and praising of Joe Arpaio in Arizona who was sanctioned due to his outright racial profiling of Latinos). The credibility and morality of the Evangelical Church, and of all Protestant denominations, have rightly been called into question by many due to this, and its alignment with Donald Trump will be

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remembered for generations to come. Just as the Orthodox Church was aligned with the corrupt Russian tsars who controlled the government, the Evangelical Church has become aligned with the Trump administration.

The last thing to be learned from 19th Century Russia is that the marriage of church and state inevitably leads to discrimination. Countries and states are no longer, and haven't been for awhile now, homogenous. The United States doesn't consist solely of white protestants anymore. Japan doesn't consist solely of shintoists and buddhists anymore. Every country on earth has diversity in some way, shape, or form due to immigration and people seeking refuge, and by combining church and state you automatically discriminate against those living in the country who aren't members of the state-run church. It leads to an "us versus them" mentality, which was seen in Pobedonostsev's twenty-five year stint as the head of the Russian Orthodox Church. His actions and statements against the Jewish people of Russia were caused due to this combination of church and state and the "us versus them" mentality it brought forth. This was seen in the United States as well, not even sixty years ago, in the 1960 presidential election. Many Americans saw Protestantism as the unofficial religion of the country, and the attacks against Kennedy throughout his campaign due to his Catholic faith were appalling to say the least. Had Protestantism actually been the official religion of the country he very well could've been barred from running for office altogether. The entire reason the Catholic school system is as prolific and widespread as it is today is due to the fact that Protestantism was being taught in public schools as part of the curriculum and was being forced on the nation's youth. If Protestantism were the official religion of the country

today and it was being taught in our public schools, there would not only be Catholic schools but Muslim, Jewish, Buddhist, Bahai, Mormon, Hindu, Orthodox, and many more school systems in order for parents to keep their children from being forced to become Protestants in the classroom. This would inevitably lead to our country becoming even more hostile and combative than it already is.

In conclusion, the 19th Century was a time in Russia which saw the Russian Orthodox Church become a reviled, corrupt institution due to its ties to the tsar-run government. It was used as a weapon by the tsar-appointed Ober-Procurators against their own people, and led to incredible tension in the country between the government and anyone who lived in Russia and didn't belong to the Russian Orthodox Church. Although Nicholas Protasov, Dmitry Andreyevich Tolstoy, and Konstantin Pobedonostsev each tried to grow the Russian Orthodox Church and enhance its influence on society, their close relationships to the corrupt tsars who appointed each of them Ober-Procurator and the harsh measures they took while serving in their position led to many Russians despising, loathing, and leaving the church.

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