



Betsy C. Perabo, *Russian Orthodoxy and the Russo-Japanese War*

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WHILE QUESTIONS related to the problem of a “just war” have received plenty of attention from scholars of the Protestant and Catholic traditions, the same question seems to have been ignored in the Russian Orthodox context. In fact, scholars within the Russian Orthodox tradition such as Paul Robinson have said that the Orthodox tradition is or should be understood as pacifist. Although Robinson has recently admitted that “Russian ideas on the justification or non-justification of violence” within the Orthodox tradition are more complicated than often assumed, he does not specifically address the topic of just war before 1914 (ROBINSON 2003, 63).

Betsy Perabo’s *Russian Orthodoxy and the Russo-Japanese War* is an historical study that sheds light on how the Russian Orthodox tradition, which is the largest Eastern Orthodox Church, developed its own understanding of war. In her book, Perabo asks how Christians ought to think about the relationship between the use of military power and the proselytizing of Christianity. In answering this question, Perabo goes beyond the parameters of the “just war” tradition, arguing that the categories of “just war” do not fully encompass the Christian conversation of war. Rather, she argues, war or “just war” rhetoric is seldom isolated from the rest of religious life and activity.

While the conclusions and results of the Russo-Japanese War (1904–1905) were studied intensively for a few years after the war, racism and national pride tainted many of its potential lessons. The war was quickly overshadowed by the First World War, and then passed into virtual obscurity with the advent of the second global conflict. Yet, in her work, Perabo explains how the Russo-Japanese War influenced the Russian Orthodox Church to develop its own understanding of war. Looking at the Russo-Japanese War through the concept of a “holy war” between a Christian and a Buddhist country, Perabo focuses on the historical person of Nikolai, the Russian missionary and leader of the Orthodox Church in Japan.

Following an introduction laying out the theory behind “just war,” the author divides the book into two sections. The first looks at the historical relationship between the Orthodox Church, the Russian Empire, and religious coercion and violence. Perabo interestingly argues that, although Russian philosophers and

theologians never seem to have developed an organized “just war” tradition, by the late nineteenth hundreds they did in fact develop a systematic way of thinking about war within a religious context. The second section looks at the effects of the Russo-Japanese War. Drawing to a great extent on Nikolai’s writings together with other Russian-language sources, Perabo offers new perspectives into the diversity of Orthodox Christian views on the Russo-Japanese War. Beginning with the church leaders who saw the war as a “holy” crusade for Christian domination of a “heathen” Japan, the narrative shifts to Nikolai, who in a time of war against his beloved homeland chose to remain with his Japanese congregation in Japan. Adding writings by ministers at the front, Russian soldiers, leaders in the missionary community, and self-proclaimed antiwar pacifists such as Tolstoy, Perabo’s book provides a rich narrative of the Russian Orthodox Church’s response to the war.

Perabo’s most interesting points come out in her writings on Nikolai’s personal experiences in Japan and his developing views on war and religion. Nikolai arrived in Japan with the first wave of Christian missionaries in 1861 and established the first Orthodox congregation in Hakodate. As a leader of the Russian Orthodox Mission in Japan, Nikolai had an evolving view of Buddhism and Christianity in Japan. Although Nikolai was critical of Buddhism and of Japanese resistance to Christianity, he did not—in contrast to the Orthodox Church—suggest that this resistance should be overcome by war. With the outbreak of the Russo-Japanese War, Nikolai was caught in the crossfire between his attachment to his homeland, his love for his Japanese congregation, and his faith in the universality of Christ. For Nikolai, the Orthodox Church’s utilizing of Christianity as a nationalistic support for the Russian war was an insult to all non-Russian Christians. In the eyes of Nikolai, the heavenly kingdom of God was granted to everyone, no matter which earthly kingdom they belonged to. This also included all the Japanese who fought against his own homeland during the war. For Nikolai the war against Japan might have been “just,” but it was, writes Perabo, “not fought for the purposes his colleagues on the home front suggested” (171).

In discussions on war, Christian theological ethics often take a narrow view on debates about the criteria for “just war,” the legitimacy of “holy war” rhetoric, or the peacemaking alternative, often at the expense of the lived theology of those caught in war’s crossfire. In highlighting the writings and experiences of Bishop Nikolai of Japan regarding the Russo-Japanese War, Perabo explores the Christian imagination on the relation between religion and war in a way that is grounded in a tradition of thinking about human communion as *theosis*—a union with God—and thus manages to provide a new perspective on the study of war and religion.

With a price of over a hundred U.S. dollars for two-hundred and nineteen pages, *Russian Orthodoxy and the Russo-Japanese War* is an expensive book to obtain. However, it is a valuable read for students and scholars of both history of

war and religion and religious ethics, as it provides an historical example of the Russo-Japanese War by looking at the war through the interesting and sympathetic person of Nikolai of Japan.

REFERENCE

ROBINSON, Paul

- 2003 The justification of war in Russian history and philosophy. In *Just War in Comparative Perspective*, ed. Paul Robinson, 62–75. New York: Routledge.

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