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 nineteen 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 diver-
sity 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. Add-
ing 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 sup-
port 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 col-
leagues 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” rheto-
ric, 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

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