Evil Genius and Guardian Angel:
The Image of Constantine Pobedonostsev in Russian Historiography

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He was the “evil genius” of Russia,¹ “one of the most sinister government reactionaries,”² who on account of his “evil influence” was “the most hated man in Russia.”³ “His fellow officials compared him to a venomous snake or spider, while the intelligentsia and progressives saw in him the devil incarnate.”⁴ Since he “dominated the mind and actions of Alexander III,”⁵ he became the “most powerful man in Russia,”⁶ and since he “refused to come to terms with the

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³Alexander Howard and Ernest Newman, Pictorial History of Russia from Rurik to Stalin: 1,000 years of Russian History in Pictures (New York: Hutchinson, 1943), 117.


⁵Wren, Course of Russian History, 413.

modern world,”7 he became a “pillar of ultra-conservatism”8 and the very symbol of “stubborn, blind reaction.”9 Even his motives were despicable; he was “narrow and selfish,”10 a “crafty chief procurator” who deliberately fostered the false impression that he represented the common people.11 While everyone suffered from his ill-will, some did more than others, especially Jews; indeed, he was the “apostle of anti-semitism,”12 and the first pogroms came about “because of him.”13 Yet despite his ability to rise to the pinnacle of power and stay there for a quarter of a century, and despite his ability to produce countless political, legal, and literary writings that became widely read, studied, and translated, he “was neither an original nor an interesting thinker.”14

The subject of these remarks by a number of historians of Russia is Constantine Petrovich Pobedonostsev. The vituperative language used by contemporaries to describe him was a


8Florinsky, Russia: A History, 996.

9Wren, Course of Russian History, 413.

10Kirchner, Outline-History of Russia, 117.

11Florinsky, Russia: A History, 1088.


reaction to the way his political activity directly affected them, and a reflection of those emotions persists in many later historians’ writings for similar reasons. To the present day Pobedonostsev remains a lightning rod for political debate not just about the past but about the present, and historical evaluations of him tend to reflect the historians’ political views. Historiography with a political agenda is nothing new, but Pobedonostsev is an especially clear example of this phenomenon. The near absence of politically neutral attempts at a sympathetic understanding of the man and his work is the single most important characteristic of the historiography about him.

Pobedonostsev’s political power in late nineteenth and early twentieth century Russia was not a family inheritance. Born in 1827 in Moscow, he was the grandson of a priest and the son of a university professor. He graduated from law school in St. Petersburg in 1846 and moved up the ranks of the state Senate’s bureaucracy, ultimately becoming a Senator himself in 1868. He played a part in the Great Reforms of Alexander II, helping to draft the legal reform of 1864. In 1861, in part due to his government work and some treatises he had written advocating judicial reform, he was noticed by the tsar and invited to become the tutor in legal matters for the heir to the throne. In 1865 Pobedonostsev’s appointment as tutor of the future Alexander III began a lifelong relationship that would account for much of the political power he would wield later. Long known for his piety as well as his conservatism, in 1880 Pobedonostsev was appointed as over-procurator of the Holy Synod, a position created by Peter the Great to provide for governmental oversight of the church’s activities. Pobedonostsev arranged to have the authority of the office of over-procurator enhanced by getting its holder designated an ex-officio member of the State Council of Ministers, and for the next 25 years it was as over-procurator that Pobedonostsev became one of the most influential men in Russia, exercising authority over the government as well as the church. By various means he invested the office of over-procurator with a degree of power it never had before, but the main source of his power throughout this
period came through his personal relationship with the tsars. That continued through the accession of Nicholas II in 1894 in part because he had been Nicholas’ tutor as well as Alexander III’s.

He opposed any form of representative or even consultative governmental institutions; aggressively persecuted religious minorities; supported Russification policies for the borderlands; heightened the severity of press censorship; severely limited autonomy of universities and church academies and seminaries; and in general supported policies intended to impose his conception of Russian Orthodox and nationalist values upon the widest possible range of Imperial Russian society. When historians attempt to cite positive accomplishments for him, they usually refer to his creation of “parish schools” – tens of thousands of new grammar schools attached to rural churches which taught children reading and writing along with church prayers and songs. The 1905 “revolution” finally led to Pobedonostsev’s downfall, and he spent the last two years of his life in scholarly endeavors, dying in 1907.

In the historiography about Pobedonostsev from the time of his death through the end of the Soviet era there were few positive or dispassionate evaluations either of his thought or his political activity. During his lifetime and immediately thereafter his oppressive policies inspired strongly negative emotional reactions among those who suffered from them, and after 1917 the Soviets considered him representative of the evil tsarist regime. Outside the USSR he was also equated with the worst of the old regime, and criticism of him continued during the Cold War, for tsarist oppression came to be seen as a precursor to Soviet oppression. The Russian monarchist political camp which opposed both Western democracy and Soviet communism did produce some literature defending Pobedonostsev. And there have always been a few cautious
voices relatively unaffected by political considerations or emotional reaction, but only in the post-Soviet era has relatively dispassionate analysis become predominant, and then only in mainstream scholarly publications.

In part because this slow process of gaining historical perspective has had such a profound effect on studies of Pobedonostsev, a review of the historiography is better served by a primarily chronological, rather than thematic, approach. To provide a working framework, four distinct periods may be identified: 1) the period from Pobedonostsev’s death through the 1940’s produced an initial flurry of obituary-like publications followed by the sporadic appearance of articles in scholarly publications; 2) during the 1950’s numerous articles appeared in English-language publications, many of them reflecting Cold War ideological divisions; 3) the 1960’s and 1970’s were marked by several major publications devoted to Pobedonostsev or containing important sections devoted to him, most characterized by a noticeably less polemical tone; and 5) from the 1980’s until now there has been a major renaissance in Pobedonostsev studies, especially by Russian scholars attempting to understand why the “great national tragedy” of 1917 came about. As with any periodization scheme this one cannot be applied too rigidly, but it helps make evident the real changes in historiography that have developed over time, while still permitting a cohesive and comprehensive focus on those major themes that span some of these admittedly artificial temporal barriers.

From 1907 Through the 1940’s

An excellent example is Petr Zaionchkovskii, *Krizis samoderzhaviia na rubezhe 1870-1880 godov* (Moscow, 1964) and *Rossiiskoe samoderzhavie v kontse XIX stoletiia* (Moscow, 1970). Zaionchkovskii refrains from attacking or criticizing Pobedonostsev, producing instead
In a sense, to die is to “become history,” and obituaries are thus the first “historical” writings about the deceased. But scholarly “history” aspires to a relatively disinterested and dispassionate analysis that would understand a historical personage in the context not only of his own past but also the continuing history after his death, which he helped mold. Obituaries, then, even if relatively long, written by scholars, and placed as articles in scholarly journals, straddle the line between historiography proper and primary sources. Most of the mass of articles that appeared in the Russian press immediately after Pobedonostsev’s death in 1907 fall into the latter category.16 From then until the 1950’s, Pobedonostsev was largely forgotten, with only sporadic articles about him or specific aspects of his work being published either in the Russian or the foreign press, plus one Soviet Ph.D. dissertation devoted to a party-line class-conflict analysis.17

an even-handed factual account of his participation in political affairs during this period.

16 For a thorough review of these sources, see I. V. Preobrazhenskii, Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev, ego lichnost' I deitale'nosti v predstavlenii sovremennikov ego konchiny (St. Petersburg, 1912).

17 One of the more valuable articles is Iurii V. Gotie, “K. P. Pobedonostsev I naslednik Aleksandr Aleksandrovich, 1865-1881,” Publichnaia Biblioteka SSSR imeni V. I. Lenina. Sbornik 2(1929)107-134. The dissertation was by S. L. Evenchik: Reaktsionnaia deiatel'nost' Pobedonostseva v 80-kh gg. XIX-go veka (Moscow University, 1939). A version of it was published later as a 300-page journal article: “Pobedonostsev I dvoriansko-krepostnicheskaia liniiia samoderzhaviia v poreformlennoi Rossii,” Uchenye zapiski moskovskogo gosudarstvennogo pedagogicheskogo instituta, 309(1969):52-338. Neither version has had a significant impact on later historiography. Its approach can be seen in its final paragraph: “In this way, the policy of Pobedonostsev, expressing the politics of autocracy over the expanse of a long time and determined by historical conditions, did not and could not forestall the revolution. [The revolution] was called forth not by some personal mistakes of Pobedonostsev, as bourgeois historiography tries to suggest, but by fundamental changes in economic and socio-political
Nevertheless, much of this material — as could be said as well about sources from Pobedonostsev’s lifetime — already focuses on themes that would be common in later historiography.

Continuing a tradition begun before Pobedonostsev’s death are severe condemnations delivered with exaggerated and emotional language. As Boris Glinskii points out in an article that remains valuable today, the over-procurator’s contemporaries were rarely indifferent to him; they either venerated him as a “guardian angel” or vilified him as an “evil genius.” The vast majority were in the “evil genius” camp, yet some of them were able to say positive things about his personal life. Glinskii himself calls Pobedonostsev a “simple, good, and humble” man, and observes that even his sharpest critics would occasionally observe that he was at least “sincere” and “unhypocritical” in his religious faith and his faith in autocracy.

conditions in the country at the beginning of the twentieth century.” (338)


The more “popular” in orientation a periodical was, the more likely diatribes against Pobedonostsev would soar to heights of rhetorical excess. This is true in English and as well as Russian sources, an excellent example being the obituary by A. Rappoport in the London journal *Fortnightly*. Here Pobedonostsev is “the best hated man” of Russia, “one of many mediocrities,” another proof that “the Russian Slavs have produced no original minds, no great creators.”21 As “Grand Inquisitor of holy Russia” he was responsible for every bad government policy, his only redeeming feature being that he didn’t condone pogroms. He had nothing but contempt for the common people and was effectively an atheist and a nihilist, and this “champion of obscurantism was tottering to his grave” just as “the people whom he had kept in darkness” finally saw a light coming from the West.22

After 1917, such negative evaluations would be bolstered by a new interpretive conclusion: by delaying reforms in Russian government and society for 25 years Pobedonostsev was more than any other individual responsible for setting the stage for the Bolshevik revolution. This idea has been repeated many times ever since, often with sighing and lamentations, in scholarly works originating outside the USSR, and from within Russia after the Soviet Union’s demise. (Within the USSR that idea was avoided, not so much because the Revolution was seen as a good thing but because it was officially considered a historical necessity, so there was little need to find particular causes for it.23)

in Firsov, *pro et contra*, 416-22; 287-93. English translations of Berdiaev’s article can be found posted on various internet sites; search for “Pobedonostsev” and “Berdiaev.”


22 *Fortnightly*, 81(1907):878.

Another common theme during this period is that of Pobedonostsev as “all-powerful” during his reign as over-procurator, the best example of this being an article published in *Slavic and East European Review* in 1928 devoted to explaining the “vice-emperor’s” power by analyzing his relationship with Alexander III.\(^{24}\) The anonymous author pointed out not only Pobedonostsev’s authoritative position vis-a-vis Alexander III as the latter’s tutor, but also their close personal friendship arising out of common interests and beliefs. Because the tutor and the heir on many points disagreed with, or disapproved of, the heir’s father, they developed a relationship that was particularly intimate because it was of necessity secretive and “conspiratorial.”\(^{25}\) Then, when Alexander III took the throne, Pobedonostsev not only had the authority of a tutor, he had the authority and access only a bosom friend could have, and he was not reluctant to use that advantage.

As for positive overall evaluations of Pobedonostsev, few are to be found in any period, including this one, and those few come from strongly nationalistic and pro-autocracy camps. Even so, when such authors praise the over-procurator’s work — or when others find something positive in it — they generally point to Pobedonostsev’s creation of parish schools rather than “negative” accomplishments such as press censorship as his most important legacy. A very

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\(^{24}\) *SEER* 7(1928):31-54. This is one of the earliest published works to propose the “Pobedonostsev caused 1917” interpretation.

\(^{25}\) Some of the specific instances cited: both were interested in making contacts with Slavophiles; both thought Alexander II should more strongly endorse Orthodoxy by, for example, attending the funeral of Metr. Philaret of Moscow; and both were disgusted by Alexander II’s adultery and by his foreign policies. Both also worked together in a merchant marine effort called the Volunteer Fleet.
positive 1911 article by V. Dobroslavskii about parish schools is representative of this group, and it is no accident that the churchman whose eulogy to Pobedonostsev it quotes is the conservative monarchist hierarch Archbishop Anthony Khrapovitskii.

Few during this period attempt in-depth analysis of Pobedonostsev’s thought or the inner motivations and rationale for his policies. Most commonly he is accused of unthinking reactionary conservatism not based on any serious thought worthy of analysis. Not until the 1960’s would his philosophical and theological thought come under careful scrutiny, but in this early period two of the most famous Russian Orthodox theologians of the twentieth century wrote insightful article-length examinations of Pobedonostsev’s thought that remain influential to the current day. The first was by Nicholas Berdiaev and appeared in the journal Vek in 1907; the second was a chapter in Georges Florovsky’s magnum opus Puti Russkogo bogosloviia (Ways of Russian Theology) that appeared 30 years later.


27For example, Dmitry S. Mirsky in Russia: A Social History (London: Cresset Press, 1942), 258: “The principal inspirer of extreme reactionary doctrines, which dominated the bureaucracy from 1881 to 1904, was Pobedonostsev, ober-prokuror of the Holy Synod, whose tenure of office marks the lowest degradation of the Orthodox hierarchy. The essence of Pobedonostsev’s conservatism was an intense fear of change, and the conviction that if a stone was touched the whole edifice would fall. It was thus one of the aspects of the degeneracy of the monarchic power, and a sign of growing impotence.”

28Berdiaev, Nigilizm.

29Puti russkogo bogosloviia (Paris, 1937), 410-24. This chapter is reprinted in Firsov, pro et contra, pp.487-501. The book is also available in English translation as Ways of Russian
In 1907 Berdiaev was a former Marxist who had only recently converted to Christianity. Even as a Christian he never converted to “Orthodoxy” in the sense of accepting theological views of church officialdom. He is known for his emphasis on the central importance of personal freedom, including freedom of conscience, and his constant exercise of that freedom left him at odds with the government both before and after his conversion. In his obituary of Pobedonostsev he coined the term “historical nihilism” to describe the ideology of this over-procurator known for his unrelenting efforts to restrict freedom of conscience. The term itself does not survive in later historiography, but much of the idea behind it does. The conception is rooted in an analysis of Pobedonostsev’s “religious faith,” which Berdiaev suggests was not religious at all; it was not faith in God but in the state, and specifically in the state’s essential role as the best means for restraining people’s inherent tendency toward evil. This view of the role of the state arose out of a complete lack of belief in the goodness of people; indeed, Pobedonostsev’s most fundamental characteristic was “disbelief in the power of good” in general,\(^{30}\) and this was not even moderated by a faith in the afterlife or by any thought that the Kingdom of God could be built on earth. “Like Marx, Pobedonostsev looked on human society as a mechanism of forces (mekhanika sil),”\(^{31}\) and therefore he was effectively an atheist. But unlike Marx, Pobedonostsev’s only goal for earthly life was the negative one of restraining evil, and this lack of any creative impulse in him justifies the label “nihilist”:

Pobedonostsev considered his whole task on earth to be only to stop, cut off, [and] freeze ... there were no creative tasks. Everything rots and disintegrates on earth, but the state in the higher nature of its authority is not subject to this process, it stops the rotting and disintegration. For everything [else]

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\(^{30}\)Berdiaev, *Nigilizm*, 287.
there is no faith; for the state there is faith.\textsuperscript{32}

Berdiaev goes on to assert that this kind of “nihilism” was actually characteristic of Russian society and the Russian church as a whole in this period, for it was neither unique nor original with Pobedonostsev; the over-procurator just applied the principles he was raised in more consistently and rigidly than anyone else.

While Berdiaev recognizes some positive lines of character, such as sincerity, in Pobedonostsev, this in no way prevents the author’s indulgence in rhetorical excesses of criticism, an ambivalence characteristic of this period:

... he was a living corpse. In his veins flowed not blood, but another deathly liquid, and he did not believe that within other people flowed blood; he did not value human blood. Pobedonostsev’s body was terrifying in its death-like and parchment-like character, and one could not believe that it could be resurrected, so foreign was the resurrection to this person.\textsuperscript{33}

Georges Florovsky abstained from such language, but despite a different theological outlook and some differences in terminology, his analysis is essentially similar to Berdiaev’s. The epithet “free-thinker” sometimes attributed to Berdiaev can by no means be attributed to Florovsky – the latter is primarily interested in “Orthodoxy” rather than “freedom.” His Orthodoxy is not what was propounded by Russian church leadership of his day, however. He seeks an Orthodoxy that was clearly and accurately expressed only in the early centuries of the church, one that somehow got lost in Russia since the earliest times. As John Meyendorff succinctly explains, Florovsky’s \textit{Ways of Russian Theology} was written “to show that in Russia there were no theologians at all until the nineteenth century, and that the entire medieval Russian

\textsuperscript{31}Berdiaev, \textit{Nigilizm}, 288.

\textsuperscript{32}Berdiaev, \textit{Nigilizm}, 291.
religious literature was at best a pale imitation of Byzantine models and at worst an uncritical copying of Western, heterodox prototypes. Pobedonostsev is presented as a villain in this book because he stifled the theological debate that might otherwise have been able to re-establish true Orthodoxy in Russia. Though comments on Pobedonostsev are limited to one chapter of this book, the book itself has been extremely influential, and nearly all major historical works about Pobedonostsev from the 1930’s until today cite Florovsky either to confirm or refute him. Where Berdiaev had stressed the word “nihilism,” Florovsky prefers “positivism,” using that word to express the idea that for Pobedonostsev “faith” takes precedence over “reason.” “Faith” here is the faith of the narod (the common people) rather than the faith of the church; any conflict between folk beliefs and the church’s doctrines Pobedonostsev adjudicated in favor of the former. What the over-procurator loved about the church, then, was its outward forms rather than the content of its faith. This was reflected in new rules he introduced for Orthodox seminaries and academies, such as: no theses were allowed to say anything that might discredit a popular tradition or belief; no developments in church history could be explained as the result of merely natural phenomena or the actions of impious people or impious intentions; and in descriptions of pious people, nothing could be said about any dark side of their characters.

33Berdiaev, Nigilizm, 290.


35Pobedonostsev uses narod as a technical term, so merely translating it could be misleading. It means basically “the people” but more specifically “the common people” as opposed to the elites. Its actual meaning as Pobedonostsev used it becomes a major issue in historiography and is discussed below.
Florovsky observes that rules of this sort not only forestalled any open debate about theology in the academies but also cut off publication of the best historical and theological works by the best scholars such as Nicholas Kapterev and Eugene Golubinskii, and resulted in a pervasive false and insincere style in ecclesiastical publications. From these and similar rules sponsored by Pobedonostsev, Florovsky concludes that the over-procurator considered “truth” powerless to act as its own defense, thereby echoing Berdiaev’s criticism but labeling it “poisonous disbelief” (*iadovitoe bezverie*) rather than “nihilism.” To Pobedonostsev he attributes “a new wave of moralism, sentimentalism, [and] pietism” that arose in the 1880’s.

**The 1950’s**

In the 1950’s some Western scholars tended to relate the perceived evils of tsarist Russia to the perceived evils of Soviet Russia. This is occasionally explicit, as when Berdiaev in a book published in 1955 draws a comparison between Pobedonostsev and Lenin as essentially the same type of person.\(^{36}\) In other cases similar intent can be deduced from choices of subject matter and use of otherwise surprisingly polemical language. One author whose works reflect the spirit of the time is Arthur E. Adams. Adams placed a trio of articles in 1953 in three different American and British academic journals, following his 1951 doctoral dissertation at Cornell. One of these examines Pobedonostsev’s attempts at “thought control” exercised mainly by means of

\(^{36}\) *Istoki i smysl russkogo kommunizma* (Paris: YMCA Press, 1955). Portions reprinted in Firsov, op cit., 294-96. He notes that neither trusted their lieutenants, both were “soft” and gentle in private life and with their immediate neighbors but fierce to those afar; neither believed in the goodness of man but rather in necessity of coercion and state power; both thought society was corrupted by “sin” though Lenin would have called it exploitation; for both the life of this world was empty and evil. And he concludes that both represent a corrupted form of ascetic orthodoxy. For another direct comparison with Soviet Russia see P. P. Schilovsky, “Reminiscences of K. P.
censorship; one chronicles his support of “firmness,” meaning authoritarianism, in Russian government; and one shows how only political motives rather than religious ones guided the over-procurator’s “religious” policies.\(^{37}\)

That Pobedonostsev supported autocracy and censorship no one had ever doubted, but where even the over-procurator’s severest critics had often believed in his (misguided) sincerity, Adams imputed to him a high degree of hypocrisy because political considerations would induce him to “bend and twist the doctrines of faith to serve the needs of the state.”\(^{38}\) The over-procurator “hid his true motives behind a façade of religious principles,” and thus his “cloak of sanctity actually covered and concealed a man of politics.”\(^{39}\) The evidence supporting this broad conclusion is drawn solely from Pobedonostsev’s policies in the Baltic provinces and is based on Russification policies there, plus some anti-Catholic, anti-Lutheran, and anti-Semitic remarks that identify such groups as enemies of the state rather than as perishing souls needing salvation in Orthodoxy. The facts reported here are not new, but Adams’ relatively narrow and individualistic view of “religion” as the search for “salvation of the soul” allows him to sharply differentiate “politics” from “religion” and thereby find in Pobedonostsev a hypocrite of the blackest sort. This involves imposing upon Pobedonostsev’s thought a distinction that Berdiaev and Florovsky had already shown to be unnecessary: rather than imputing to him a religious

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faith like their own which he hypocritically subordinated to political considerations, they recognized in him a consistent and sincere thinker whose religious faith — though it might be essentially atheistic — was fundamentally different from their own.

Adams chose to use polemical and emotionally charged language to characterize Pobedonostsev in the most negative terms possible, and this is a common thread running through all three articles: Pobedonostsev “grimly” opposed representative institutions\(^40\) and was the “bitter enemy of the hope” that such institutions might some day develop;\(^41\) he was the “self-appointed defender of firmness,”\(^42\) “arrogating to himself” that responsibility;\(^43\) his era was “a grim twenty-four years”;\(^44\) under him the church was “more slave than servant” and religion was “a dishonored agent of political stability”;\(^45\) his “thought control” was accomplished by “misusing his powers,” and he did that “with a calculating and deadly persistence”\(^46\) involving “malevolent persecution” by which he “crushed” many people “mercilessly.”\(^47\) Despite their polemical bent and the fact that much better English-language scholarship has long since

\(^{40}\) Adams, “Rule of Firmness,” 132.

\(^{41}\) Adams, “Rule of Fairness,” 134.

\(^{42}\) Adams, “Rule of Fairness,” 132.

\(^{43}\) Adams, “Rule of Fairness,” 135.

\(^{44}\) Adams, “Rule of Fairness,” 136.


\(^{46}\) Adams, “Thought Control,” 241.

\(^{47}\) Adams, “Thought Control,” 243.
superseded them, these articles have continued to exert some influence on historiography even in recent years.\footnote{G. P. Camfield, for example, cited “Religious Politics” in a 1990 article (“The Pavlovtsy of Khar’kov Province, 1886-1905: Harmless Sectarians or Dangerous Rebels,” SEER 68:4:694).}

A more moderate view was represented by Robert Byrnes, who in three articles published in the 1950’s engaged in dispassionate analysis of Pobedonostsev’s thought and recognized some of his positive accomplishments.\footnote{“Pobednostsev’s Conception of the Good Society: An Analysis of His Thought after 1880,” \textit{Review of Politics} 13(1952):2:178; “Pobedonostsev as a Historian,” in \textit{Teachers of History: Essays in Honor of Laurence Bradford Packard}, ed. by Henry Hughes (Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 1954), 105-21; “Pobedonostsev on the Instruments of Russian Government,”} These were all superseded by his 1968 biography of

Pobedonostsev, so his views will be examined in more detail below.

If Adams represents the critical extreme and Byrnes a middle ground, N. D. Tal’berg in a pair of articles also published together along with some supplemental material in booklet form in 1957 clearly stands alone at the opposite end of the spectrum. After 1917, monarchist Russian prelates who left Russia formed an offshoot church under the leadership of the aforementioned conservative hierarch Anthony Khrapovitskii. This church continued to lobby for restoration of autocracy in Russia, and its presses published the works by Tal’berg. Insofar as Pobedonostsev was known for his support of autocracy, he is a hero to this group, and this is clearly represented

*Continuity and Change in Russian and Soviet Thought*, ed. by Ernest Simmons (Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1955), 113-28. Byrnes has written about a wide range of topics in Russian history over his long academic career, and he has consistently approached them in an even-handed and dispassionate manner. While some of his colleagues would consider him a political conservative, he himself would reject any such label along with the implication that it has a bearing on his scholarly work. In his view a person’s political views should not dictate the content of his or her scholarly writings, and he laments that this is increasingly common in academia. Recalling Cold War days when he worked for the CIA and even there people engaged in dispassionate analysis, he asserts: “I did not know then, and do not know even now, the political views of men such as Langer and Robinson, under whom I worked and whom I came to know well. On the other hand, I know very well the political views of almost all our Soviet specialists today, because of the politicalization of the academic community.” (*A History of Russian and East European Studies in the United States*, Lanham, MD: American UP, 1994, 262.) Byrnes does show himself to be sympathetic to Christianity and critical of leaders such as Peter the Great and Catherine the Great who hindered the religion’s natural tendency to encourage civil behavior in its adherents (see “Between Two Fires’: Kliuchevskii on Religion and the Russian Orthodox Church,” *Modern Greek Studies Yearbook* 6[1990]:157-186). Pobedonostsev comes in for some criticism of this nature in Byrnes’ writings, but it is carefully analyzed and expressed and in no way overshadows the biographical portrait of the man.
in the booklet’s title, “A man of faithfulness and understanding.”\textsuperscript{50} Tal’berg praises Pobedonostsev for his defense of “Orthodox Autocratic monarchy,”\textsuperscript{51} describes those who “hated” him as the ones whose support of representative institutions made them “grave-diggers of Russia” (i.e., those whose actions effectively drove Russia into its grave), and mentions Witte as “the creator of a Russian ‘constitution,’ so hated by the clear-sighted mind of Pobedonostsev.”\textsuperscript{52} Between preaching autocracy and denouncing the current “criminal godless power” in Russia, Tal’berg cites examples from Pobedonostsev’s letters showing his devotion to God, nation, and autocracy. Tal’berg’s work continues to be published by the conservative ecclesiastical press\textsuperscript{53} but has had little impact on scholarship. Indeed, in a book review published in 1970 the celebrated scholar of Russian history Marc Raeff revealed his own ignorance of Tal’berg’s writings by remarking that “Pobedonostsev was universally hated and condemned, and this reviewer is unaware of any sympathetic or positive appreciation of the man.”\textsuperscript{54}

\textsuperscript{50}Muzh vernosti i razuma: k 50-letiiu konchiny K. P. Pobedonostseva (Jordanville, NY: Izd-vo Sv.-Troitskoi dukhovnoi seminarii, 1957). The booklet includes one new article and two reprints: “Muzh vernosti i razuma” (pp.41-77) is original, while “Podlinnyi Pobedonostsev” (pp.1-40) is from Pravoslavnyi put’ 3(1957):46-73; and “Shirokoe serdtse K. P. Pobedonostseva” (pp.78-88) is from Pravoslavnaja Rus’ 8(15/28 April, 1957).

\textsuperscript{51}Tal’berg, Muzh vernosti, 4.

\textsuperscript{52}Tal’berg, Muzh vernosti, 40.

\textsuperscript{53}Pobedonostsev : ocherki istorii imperatorskoi Rossii (Moscow: Izd-vo Sretenskogo monastiria, 2000); Sviataia Rus’ (Moscow: Izd-vo Pravoslavnogo bratstva Sviatitelia Filareta moskovskogo, 2002).

\textsuperscript{54}Tal’berg, Muzh vernosti, 528.
The 1960’s and 1970’s

It is in the 1960’s that in-depth scholarly examinations of Pobedonostsev and his thought first begin to appear. The chapter devoted to Pobedonostsev in Edward Thaden’s book, *Conservative Nationalism in Nineteenth-Century Russia*\(^{55}\) remains today one of the most perceptive analyses in print, much of which has become standard fare in later works. Thaden observes that Pobedonostsev was a “historicist” in the sense that he believed institutions and cultural norms were the natural product of the historical development and national spirit of a people. Thus, Russia developed autocracy because that was the natural development for its people. England developed a constitution because its very different historical development led it in that direction. To attempt to impose on any people something not historically appropriate — or simply before the natural progression of history would make it appropriate — would have destructive results. This line of thinking Thaden considers to be influenced by the German school of Savigny. Pobedonostsev in any case is thus no “unthinking reactionary” but a thinking conservative who opposed any weakening of autocracy on rational grounds.

Having made this point, however, Thaden goes on to show how inconsistently Pobedonostsev applies his own fundamental beliefs: the same principle should hold true for any nation or people, including for instance, Baltic Germans, but Pobedonostsev supported Russification of such peoples in order to force them into a Russian mold. This represents not merely inconsistency, however, but a kind of intellectual dishonesty that is characteristic of Pobedonostsev throughout his life, as Thaden shows by reference to numerous examples of plagiarism and even publication of entire works written by others under Pobedonostsev’s own

Ideological inconsistency is even found in one of Pobedonostsev’s most famous accomplishments, the one most often cited as a positive one — the creation of parish schools. Here too, Pobedonostsev’s political efforts conflict with his own stated belief that institutional change must follow a nation’s “natural historical development” rather than be imposed from above based on abstract theory. Thaden argues that it was the zemstvos, peasant communes, and municipalities that took the initiative to develop local education in the decades before the 1880s, and thus such schools had “evolved naturally” while the parish schools resulted from Pobedonostsev’s “arbitrary efforts to replace these schools with the unpopular and unsuccessful parish schools.”

Thaden also points out that Pobedonostsev’s schools, though ostensibly intended to prepare people for life in industrialized society actually did not do that: they provided only the most basic level of literacy, and most of the students’ time was taken up by church singing, learning of prayers, and Bible reading. Direct quotations from Pobedonostsev verify that their real purpose was essentially negative: to isolate common people from liberal or radical ideas they might get from zemstvo teachers or the radical intelligentsia. Moreover, these schools did not even do a good job of serving Pobedonostsev’s own purpose by inculcating a nationalist ideology. While the over-procurator thought of Orthodoxy itself as essentially Russian and nationalist, Orthodox Christianity contained within itself seeds potentially destructive of nationalist thought:

\[\text{\ldots}\]

\footnote{For similar reasons the charge of dishonesty was earlier leveled by Byrnes in his 1950’s articles and in his 1968 book.}

\footnote{Thaden, \textit{Conservative Nationalism}, 191.}
What is more, the inculcation of Christian principles and virtues in the mind of a child may not be the best way to teach him nationalism, for religion tends to transcend and even to be in conflict with nationalism. This point is illustrated in nineteenth-century Russia by the difficulty honest thinkers like Vladimir Solovev and Leontiev had in reconciling nationalism with many of the traditional teachings of Orthodox Christianity.\footnote{Thaden, \textit{Conservative Nationalism}, 194.}

Inconsistencies, “intellectual dishonesty,” and the actual negative effects of his policies all worked together to make Pobedonostsev’s main accomplishment, in Thaden’s view, be the discrediting of the original Russian conservative nationalists in the eyes of the generation that was reaching maturity in 1905. As for intellectual history per se, Pobedonostsev “contributed little to conservative nationalism in Russia as an intellectual phenomenon.”\footnote{Thaden, \textit{Conservative Nationalism}, 202.}

Just four years after Thaden’s book appeared, the first — and to date the only — biography of Pobedonostsev was published, authored by Robert Byrnes.\footnote{Byrnes’ book offers the best account of Pobedonostsev’s life available in any language, one that includes even extensive background information on Pobedonostsev’s parents, childhood, and student years.\footnote{No version of the dissertations by Adams (mentioned above) and Thomas Calnan Sorenson (\textit{The Thought and Policies of Konstantin P. Pobedonostsev}, University of Washington, 1977) has been published.}} All of the other book-length works about Pobedonostsev have a relatively narrow focus on specific aspects of the over-procurator’s thought or his politics, and no other book about him in English has been published to this day.\footnote{\textit{Pobedonostsev, His Life and Thought} (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1968).} Byrnes’ book offers the best account of Pobedonostsev’s life available in any language, one that includes even extensive background information on Pobedonostsev’s parents, childhood, and student years.

In addition, many issues that were addressed earlier in articles both by Byrnes and others
are developed here in much greater detail and with greater chronological scope. An example is the question of Pobedonostsev’s influence over Alexander III, which Byrnes believes has been exaggerated greatly by other historians.62 While he recognizes that “Pobedonostsev acquired practical mastery over the mind of Alexander III”63 when he served as the latter’s tutor, Byrnes finds that as a practical matter Pobedonostsev’s influence did not last throughout his pupil’s reign, and later in Alexander’s reign Pobedonostsev did not get always his way even in the narrow fields he was particularly interested in, the church and education. Byrnes notes a precipitous decline in Pobedonostsev’s authority with the tsar beginning around 1890 and accelerating around 1896 under Nicholas II. The kind of absolute power usually attributed to the over-procurator Byrnes finds only at the very outset of Alexander III’s reign; after that it was minimal outside his own special sphere (censorship, civil rights, national and religious minorities), except for a few key appointments.

Also new in Byrnes is a glimpse of what one might call Pobedonostsev’s private life that helps explain his public actions. The issue of “intellectual dishonesty” first mentioned in Byrnes’ 1950’s articles and taken up by Thaden later is here fleshed out with numerous examples illustrating his lack of inhibition in lying either in person or in print.64 Rarely mentioned


63 Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev*, 75.

64 For example, he lied in order to engineer his coup against Loris-Melikov (he convinced Alexander III to cancel a project to initiate some quasi-representative institutions that had been
elsewhere is Pobedonostsev’s habit of publishing — often anonymously — vicious criticisms of named individuals, some of whom were even among his closest colleagues at the time he attacked them.65 Byrnes goes so far as to describe Pobedonostsev’s lack of warmth and affection for other human beings, and his plain, colorless, humorless personality. Yet the portrayal is not one-sided; it also gives sympathetic personal glimpses, including accounts of how Pobedonostsev supported numerous individuals such as priests’ widows on his own salary and worried about what would become of them after his death. Pobedonostsev’s well-known personal friendship with Dostoevsky is also examined, in more detail than is found in most biographies of Dostoevsky.66

As would be expected, the book is also an excellent source of information about governmental policies initiated and influenced by Pobedonostsev, with extensive details about his persecution of non-Russian minorities and his anti-Semitism. Some of this, especially his coverage of ecclesiastical policies and the means used for investing the office of over-procurator with autocratic power, has been superseded by recent works in Russian.67

Byrnes has been criticized for not analyzing Pobedonostsev’s thought as well as he might initiated by his father just before his assassination) in 1880 (Byrnes, Pobedonostsev, 160) and engaged in numerous distortions and fabrications in printed materials (288-290).

65He attacked Minister of Justice Panin via an anonymous article in Herzen's Kolokol in 1859 (Byrnes, Pobedonostsev, 52); another anonymous article in 1873 attacked law school faculty and graduates (Byrnes, Pobedonostsev, 71).

66This has been revisited in recent years: see Tzvetan Stoyanov, Le gânie et son maTtre : les relations idâologiques entre Dostoievski et Pobedonostsev : une page inconnue de l'histoire du paternalisme” (Paris: L’Esprit des Péninsules, 2000).
have,68 but he at least touches upon all of the major issues. Byrnes interprets Pobedonostsev’s conservatism in much the same way Thaden does but emphasizes that “Pobedonostsev’s system was not so well organized or traditional as it appeared.”69 By “untraditional” Byrnes means that Pobedonostsev’s ideal government was a bureaucratic one run by middle-class technical experts rather than gentry. As for its lack of organization, one could hardly distinguish between concepts such as “Orthodoxy” or “Russian” in Pobedonostsev’s system of values: “The state, power, good, and the narod were ... all connected in one indissoluble and blurred unity.”70 Nevertheless, Pobedonostsev always knew beyond the shadow of a doubt exactly what would best serve this conglomerate. And whenever he needed to persuade the tsar of the appropriateness of some action, the narod aspect of the conglomerate would come to the fore and Pobedonostsev would stress that he was giving not just his own opinion but was authoritatively speaking for the narod as a whole.71

The issue of precisely what Pobedonostsev thought about the narod became the

67See especially A. Polunov, discussed below.

68Raeff, “Pobedonostsev,” 529.

69Byrnes, Pobedonostsev, 315.

70Byrnes, Pobedonostsev, 311.

71A book by the German scholar Gerhard Simon which appeared shortly after Byrnes’ also discusses at length Pobedonostsev’s “romantic veneration” for the narod (Konstantin Petrovic Pobedonoscev und die Kirchenpolitik des Heiligen Sinod 1880-1905, Gottingen: Vandenhoek und Ruprecht, 1969).
centerpiece of a 1977 Ph.D. dissertation by Thomas Sorenson. Sorenson’s thesis is that Pobedonostsev’s “conception of the narod was at the heart of his conservative philosophy,” and that because modern scholars do not recognize this, they misunderstand him. He attributes to Florovsky the inspiration for this interpretation, and in fact much of Sorenson’s analysis amounts to bringing a vastly greater amount of evidence to bear on the subject in order to reach virtually the same conclusions propounded by Florovsky.

On the question of Pobedonostsev’s religious faith, Sorenson concludes that it “was not theocentric. He believed in God and Christ, but they were not the most important elements of his approach to religion.” The church’s liturgical life was the most important:

Pobedonostsev loved the service of the Orthodox Church more than any other aspect of Russian life. We can differentiate between three different aspects of his love of the Church’s service. Firstly, Pobedonostsev associated the service with an incomparable feeling of joy, a joy and enthusiasm which were lacking in other aspects of his life. Secondly, the service was for Pobedonostsev a refuge from a reality he detested, an uncorrupted asylum in a venal and banal world. Thirdly, the church was the only institution which brought him into any direct contact with the narod.

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72 The Thought and Policies of Konstantin P. Pobedonostsev (University of Washington, 1977). Though it was never published, some later authors, mainly American (e.g., Gregory Freeze, The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth Century Russia: Crisis, Reform, Counter-Reform, Princeton: Princeton UP. 1983), show awareness of it.

73 Sorenson, Thought and Policies, 5.

74 Sorenson, Thought and Policies, 230.

75 Sorenson, Thought and Policies, 231. He quotes numerous writings by Pobedonostsev to illustrate these attitudes. An extract from one example, written about the Eastern service: “O holy songs, known and dear to everyone! What Russian does not know and does not sing you
The first two of these explanations present a relatively positive view of what an Orthodox theologian such as Florovsky would criticize as an interest in form rather than content. The third is taken by Sorenson to be a result of genuine interest in content, but in a way that equally reflects a disinterest in official church theology. Direct contact with the narod was vital because it functioned as Pobedonostsev’s arbiter of content of the faith; even a belief Pobedonostsev himself recognized as superstitious he would consider a vital part of Orthodoxy if it came from a long tradition of popular belief.

The narod is so important partly because only it is fully and purely Russian. Implicit in Pobedonostsev’s conception of the narod according to Sorenson is an opposition between it and obshchestvo (society), the upper classes corrupted by Western culture. Only the narod, the

and does not respond to your sounds with all his heart. Even the child, hearing you for the first time, feels a trembling of festive joy, and the old man who has passed through Easter many times in his years becomes as it were a child again and celebrates Christ with a childish joy. Whenever my ear hears you, whenever I imagine the bright night of Easter and the church celebrating, a festive feeling blooms and is fragrant in my soul. And my dear childhood, my long passed childhood, is seen and reflected in [my soul], and in it are heard again those same hopes and promises by which my soul lived and rejoiced in that blessed time. ... Be gone bitter cares! ... Oh, if only this minute would remain! Oh, if only we could hold in our soul this harmony and begin to live and not stop living with this word alone: ‘Christ is risen! Christ is risen!’” (234)

Outside the church, reality is always disappointing: “The kingdom of absurdity and feebleness which I see around me and a member, a citizen, of which I recognize myself to be, is leading me into a kind of torpor. The events and sensations of the day seem in truth a bad dream filled with absurd apparitions. But this dream, to my sorrow, is the reality in which we live and move. My soul refuses to recognize this reality. I find it [reality] now only in my native Church and nowhere else ...” (236)

76For an in-depth analysis of attitudes and actions toward these two groups on the part of
lower classes, preserved genuine Russian values; so they now should set the standard for everyone else to follow. Based on this interpretation Sorenson calls Pobedonostsev a populist (narodnik):

The narodnik believes that society must attempt to lead the narod in the direction desired by the narod and not according to some theory which it desires to impose on the narod from above. The narod is seen as morally superior to society. All the efforts and talents of society must be directed toward service of the narod.  

This presumes that someone can understand and speak for the narod, and as Byrnes already pointed out, Pobedonostsev often presented himself in that role when promoting his policies. Pobedonostsev did not consider the narod capable of speaking for itself, as through representative institutions, because democracy presupposes “the complete ability of the masses to comprehend the fine points of political doctrine clearly and distinctly present in the consciousness of its advocates.” The narod neither wants involvement in, nor is capable of, politics; it just wants a strong government. Few people from the narod would vote anyway, and those who would, could not understand the trickery of the politicians. As a result, parliaments never represent the will of the people; instead they act against that will. And so someone — like Pobedonostsev — must speak for them.

Sorenson considers Pobedonostsev to be a “conservative” as well as a “populist,” and the former word he uses in basically the same sense as Thaden and Byrnes. He finds Western influences behind Pobedonostsev’s philosophical outlook, and repeats Florovsky’s assertion that


Sorenson, Thought and Policies, 188.
Pobedonostsev is rooted firmly in the conservative tradition of Edmund Burke. He goes to great lengths to show the parallels, though lamenting that he cannot show that Pobedonostsev ever actually read Burke. The Western writers he is able to show that Pobedonostsev knew are Carus and Carlyle.

A major point of emphasis in Sorenson’s work is that Pobedonostsev was consistently a conservative throughout his life — including his younger years when he took part in the Great Reforms of Alexander II. In this he takes a stand against other historians who have suggested Pobedonostsev was originally a liberal who underwent a conversion to conservatism.79 Instead, when Pobedonostsev supported reforms in his earlier years, Sorenson argues that it was not as a “liberal” or “progressive” but as one who merely wanted to make technical improvements to an existing system, to allow the existing system to work more efficiently; and when he later opposed those reforms it was after realizing that they didn’t work.

As a whole, Sorenson’s treatment of Pobedonostsev is far more sympathetic and positive than his predecessors, including Byrnes, who had set a whole new standard for sympathetic treatment. That positive tone is anchored by an examination of Pobedonostsev’s achievement in

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79 Sorenson mainly criticizes Byrnes on this point, but Byrnes’ viewpoint is not clearly that much different from Sorenson’s. Interestingly, one who did adopt this idea of a liberal-to-conservative conversion just four years earlier was Donald Treadgold (in *The West in Russia and China: Religious and Secular Thought in Modern Times. Vol. 1: Russia 1472-1917*, Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University, 198, 248) -- Sorenson’s own dissertation advisor. In a 1995 article, the German scholar Rainer Lindner also argued for Pobedonostsev’s continuity in conservatism (“К. П. Победоносцев и die Russische Reformburokratie: ein Beitrag zur Rectsgeschichte des Spaten Zarenreiches,” *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas* 43(1995):1:34-57), perhaps unaware the idea was already advocated in an American dissertation.
the creation of parish schools. He argues that it was a move in the right direction, in opposition to those who criticize the same accomplishment because the parish schools emphasized religion so heavily:

[Pobedonostsev] had, however, identified one of Russia's major social problems, and he attempted to formulate a realistic solution to that problem which could be expected to succeed and which the country's meager economic resources might be able to support. Such an effort should perhaps not be dismissed so lightly.80

The “major social problem” is literacy, but Sorenson does not in fact show that solving literacy was ever Pobedonostsev’s major goal. As Thaden and Byrnes point out and Sorenson never refutes, this could have – and more easily would have – been accomplished by expanding the zemstvo schools. The parish schools were created not to much to teach people how to read as to help maintain the political and social status quo.

**From the 1980’s to the Present**

From the early 1980’s, and especially since the fall of the Soviet Union, there has been a remarkable resurgence of interest in Pobedonostsev, primarily in the Russian press.81 It has been spurred by a nearly universal desire in Russian society to reexamine and reinterpret the 1917 Revolution, to try to understand how what most now consider as the “great tragedy” could have happened. Pobedonostsev’s central role in the reactionary policies that many believe made the


81There has also been relatively recent interest outside Russia. See Rainer Lindner, “K. P. Pobedonoscev und die Russische Reformburokratie: ein Beitrag zur Rectsgeschichte des Spaten Zarenreiches,” *Jahrbucher fur Geschichte Osteuropas* 43(1995):1:34-57. Lindner argues that Pobedonostsev “can be considered not as an arch-reactionary, but as a prototype of a Russian rational conservative, whose works evidenced a strong continuity from the early to the later periods of his life.”
move toward representative institutions come too late has rather suddenly made him a uniquely fascinating figure. On the other hand, his treatises on the evils of those representative institutions have become required reading among those displeased with Russia’s current political direction. Besides the increase in secondary literature, this period has seen many new editions of Pobedonostsev’s works, some with introductions expressing positive appraisals of his pro-autocracy and anti-democracy ideas.82

By far the most important scholar in this period — and arguably for any period — is Alexander Polunov, author of numerous articles and book reviews that not only present a level of historical detail not attempted since Byrnes but also offer new and perceptive interpretations.83

82 An example is the reprint of some of Pobedonostsev’s works in Velikaia lozh’ nashego vremeni (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1993), discussed below. The introduction to this volume by A. P. Lanshchikova expresses approval of the Pobedonostsev’s anti-democracy views. In a continuation to that volume published 8 years later, the editor T. F. Prokopov is disinclined to blame Pobedonostsev for what went wrong in Late Imperial politics and clearly relates what did happen to current events and when he suggests Alexander III really had no alternative to a reactionary course of action: “was he not forced to do so? was he not constrained by the bombs of terrorists?” (Tainyi pravitel’ Rossii, 3) An edition of Pobedonostsev’s letters laments that everyone criticizes him and paints him as “the folkloric villain” (O. Maiorova, “... pishu ia tol’ko dlaia vas ...’ Pis’ma K. P. Pobedonostseva k sestram Tiutchevym,” Novyi Mir 3[1994]:195-223). Much of the important secondary literature about Pobedonostsev that appeared before 1996 can be found in Firsov, op cit. See also Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev i ego korrespondenty : vospominaniia, memuary (Minsk: Kharvest, 2003). The Russian Bible Society also republished an edition of a New Testament translation by Pobedonostsev, along with an introduction sympathetically recounting the over-procurator’s scriptural translation work: Novyi Zavet v perevode K. P. Pobedonostseva (Moscow: Rossiiskoe bibleiskoe obschestvo, 2000).

83 “Politicheskaia individual’nost’ K. P. Pobedonostseva,” Vestnik Moskovskogo
Polunov is definitely not a fan of Pobedonostsev’s. He sometimes engages in mildly polemical language, as is especially evident in a review he wrote of one of the new editions of Pobedonostsev’s writings. The lead article in this collection, which gave the volume its title, was *Velikaia lozh’ nashego vremen* (The Great Lie of Our Time), one of Pobedonostsev’s main philosophical works criticizing democratic institutions. (The very idea of democracy is the great “lie” in the over-procurator’s view.) The introduction to this volume is very positive toward Pobedonostsev, and Polunov sharply rebuts a long series of the author’s assertions. However, Polunov is simply a scholar with a well-defined political viewpoint rather than a polemicist, and he backs up his own assertions with solid arguments and facts.

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84 Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 1993. This volume was followed 8 years later by another containing Pobedonostsev’s correspondence and other writings, edited by T. F. Prokopov. *Tainyi pravitel’ Rossii : K.P. Pobedonostsev i ego korrespondenty : pis’ma i zapiski, 1866-1895, stat’i, ocherki, vospominaniia* (Moscow: Russkaia kniga, 2001). Here the “conservative” course of action followed by Alexander III is not attributed to Pobedonostsev personally but to Bolshevik and other terrorists: “was he [i.e., Alexander] not forced to do so? was he not constrained by the bombs of terrorists?” (p.3)

85 With rare exceptions. While he makes use of English-language sources, his understanding of them at times seems less than exemplary. Thus, he summarizes Byrnes as bearing “the stamp of neoliberal ‘technocratic’ winds of the 1960’s” and says the book is mainly interested in “technology of administration” (*Pod vlastiu ober-prokuror*, 7) This is so far afield from the main themes of the book that one cannot help but wonder if there was a difficulty for
His book *Pod vlast’iu ober-prokuror* (*Under the Power of the Over-Procurator*) covers a wide range of subjects substantially better than any of its predecessors. Sometimes this involves simple, yet insightful observations that either escaped his predecessors or were downplayed by them. For instance, Polunov stresses that Pobedonostsev is so often called a “reactionary” not because of his devotion to conservative principles but because he always tried to implement them by force and coercion. At other times, examining the historical record in greater detail makes the difference. The inconsistencies in Pobedonostsev’s actions and thought, some of which reveal the darker side of the over-procurator’s character, and which many other historians point out only in passing, Polunov examines at length. While Byrnes and others mention instances when Pobedonostsev viciously attacked his associates anonymously in print, Polunov points out also his habitual practice of privately criticizing people he publicly praised. While Sorenson frames his entire thesis around the idea of the *narod* as the foundation of Pobedonostsev’s thought, yet waits practically until his final page to consider whether perhaps the *narod* might not after all have been exactly what Pobedonostsev thought it was, Polunov zeroes in on precisely that discrepancy. He contrasts numerous examples of disdain for individuals from the lower classes with Pobedonostsev’s supposed exalted feeling for the *narod*, and he shows how whenever Pobedonostsev discusses peoples’ involvement in political matters, the word “*narod*” suddenly metamorphoses into words with negative connotations such as “mass” or “crowd.”

Polunov offers the most detailed study of the power struggle between Pobedonostsev, the Holy Synod, and the church hierarchy. He relates numerous and often ethically questionable techniques used by Pobedonostsev to gain control over all levels of church hierarchy and administration, revealing him to be a rather unscrupulous politician. Pobedonostsev dismissed from the Synod less powerful hierarchs who disagreed with him; those he could not dismiss he him in understanding the English; he could only reach a conclusion like this by reading certain portions of Byrnes’ own conclusion out of context.
sent on “summer vacation,” staffing the synod with other — carefully chosen — hierarchs during the summer. Church organizations were then instructed to defer to the summer synodal staff in all controversial matters. He instructed hierarchs to sign measures without reading them, or set their schedules so there would be no time for either reading or debate. The picture of a man determined to get his way by any means fair or foul becomes much clearer here than in any other works about him.

Also more complete here compared to previous accounts is the discussion of the varied ways in which Pobedonostsev managed to enforce his own “rules of piety” in the public sphere, besides his well-known censorship work and publishing activities. To cite just a few, he helped implement rules prohibiting theatrical productions during Lent, prohibiting instrumental music at funerals, warning priests not to address any real-life issues in their sermons, and excluding the public from any court cases that involved discussion of apostasy, heresy, or any topic for which open discussion would “run counter to the needs of morality and offend religious feeling.” In these and similar cases Polunov does not merely report the facts but shows how the oppressive measures did not attain their intended goal: prohibiting theater merely drove people to other amusements; attacks on sectarians who otherwise would have remained merely religious dissenters drove them to political dissent; making the divorce law stricter merely drove people to find ways around it; closing down theological journals eliminated not just “harmful” theological discussion but all honest discussion; and the list — a long one — goes on.

All this leads to a set of interpretive conclusions that reflect on Pobedonostsev’s relevance for current affairs in Russia. Polunov concludes that the over-procurator’s measures effectively weakened the church to the degree it could offer nothing constructive to society which might have helped forestall the events of 1917. More specifically, Pobedonostsev

86Ibid., 79.
deliberately fostered splits among the clergy as part of a “divide and conquer” tactic to gain power, and in so doing he exacerbated the split between black and white clergy that prevented the convocation of an all-Russian church council after 1905. Such a council had it convened could have implemented reforms that would facilitate the peaceful renewal of Russia itself, not just the church. And it was the “official coldness” of Pobedonostsev’s Orthodoxy that led Nicholas to the folksy holy man Rasputin which also contributed in no small part to the disaster of 1917. Finally, history proved correct Karamzin’s prediction that the death of the church would lead to the death of the state, but the experience of Pobedonostsev’s reign also teaches the lesson that church and state should be separate, for the union of the two helped create the greatest tragedy in the history of Russia.

Aside from Polunov, the most original and noteworthy treatment of Pobedonostsev is by A. B. Zubov. Zubov is a Russian who argues — not always persuasively, but enough so to make him provocative — that Western scholars in general have misunderstood Pobedonostsev

87Polunov, Pod vlast’iu, 128. Polunov does not specify the character of such reforms, but most likely one he has in mind is changing the liturgical language from Slavonic to modern Russian in order to make the liturgy comprehensible to contemporary parishioners. The idea that Pobedonostsev prevented spiritual renewal of the Russian church is also common in Western literature, as seen in a relatively recent work by John Binns: "It was one of the tragic elements of nineteenth-century Russia that a man of such talent and ability, but of such conservative convictions, should have dominated the Church during a critical period of its history and frustrated every attempt to restore and renew it." (An Introduction to the Christian Orthodox Churches, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002, p.192).

because they live in a society in which reason reigns supreme, while Pobedonostsev was raised in a society in which faith was paramount, and he remained faithful to that paradigm even as the society around him abandoned it. As with so many of the scholars who tackled this subject before him, a political agenda drives his analysis. Zubov is strongly anti-Communist but also rejects the view that Russia should simply adopt Western-style democracy. He argues that Russia cannot build a new society from scratch, that everything from 1917 on was an awful mistake that should now be rejected, and that the only way for Russia to move forward would be to return to the political order of its pre-1917 roots. To support this argument it is essential to show that those pre-1917 roots were not entirely negative, or better yet, were in many key ways positive, something genuinely worth returning to.89  

Pobedonostsev was a key representative of the pre-1917 political order, and so it is no coincidence that Zubov’s account is sympathetic to Pobedonostsev, attempting to see both his personal life and his written legacy in a more positive light (his political activity is not reviewed). He asks: if, as historians claim, Pobedonostsev added nothing original to conservative philosophical thought and was basically a boring thinker, why have so many of his books been published and translated into so many languages and in numerous editions? And regardless of what one thinks of his political policies, he was not personally power-hungry; indeed, he saw authority as an awesome duty, something that had to be accepted as a cross to bear by those such as himself and the tsar, people to whom power has been given without their ever having sought it. Pobedonostsev considered the acceptance of the duty of wielding political power to be a sacrifice on his own part to God who willed it. Whatever Pobedonostsev did, he did out of a sense of duty and responsibility.

89Zubov is a founding member of the “Social Committee for the Continuity and Revival of Russia” (Obshchestvenyi komitet - Preemstvennost’ i Vozrozhdenie Rossii); see the web site
Zubov presents one of the best explanations of Pobedonostsev’s defense of autocracy against representative institutions. In the first place, Pobedonostsev disputes the idea that political power comes from the people; as he points out, scripture says all power comes from God. The early Slavic civic institution of the veche — something like a town council — Pobedonostsev argues was never intended to represent the will of the people: it functioned more like a church council in which the goal was to find the will of God. Later forms of representative institutions abandoned that idea, replacing it with a virtual equation between “the will of the people” and “the will of God.”

But “the will of the people” cannot be a basis for government. Even considering the issue from a practical standpoint, people are not capable of understanding complex issues. If they could develop a strong moral sense based on a strong religious faith, they could choose good, strong leaders who could handle such matters for them. Without that, they need guidance, much as children incapable of choosing their own guardians. Pobedonostsev likens the state to a family, and if Byrnes finds this ironic because the people are forever children, Zubov points out that Pobedonostsev’s view reflects the Christian understanding that Christians are supposed to trust in God’s care as children. Zubov believes this image of the state as a family is what makes Pobedonostsev particularly hard for Western scholars to understand and accept.

Also of interest in Zubov’s article is his mention of similarities between Pobedonostsev’s ideology and that of the Slavophiles. Most other historians discuss the personal links between the over-procurator and the Slavophiles but consider their ideology fundamentally different. Zubov sees several similarities. He asserts that both believe political power must come from above as long as people cannot themselves act according to truth, and that both profess a philosophy of tselostnost’ (“wholeness,” a concept popularized by Ivan Kireevskii). The Slavophile concept of sobornost’ (conciliarity) Zubov finds reflected in Pobedonostsev’s

at www.pvr.ru, and especially various articles by Zubov in the archive section of this site.
enjoyment of church services and his desire to disappear within a crowd of church-goers. Such assertions are not developed at length and ultimately are not very convincing since it is far from clear that tselostnost’ and sobornost’ in this context bear the same meaning that they do in Slavophile philosophy.

Zubov sees Pobedonostsev’s love of church services as something positive and defends it against Florovsky’s charge that it reflects an interest in form over content. He acknowledges that Pobedonostsev praised the Russian people’s piety in spite or apparently because of their near complete lack of theological understanding, citing a quotation that Florovsky himself uses:

What a sacrament is the religious life of such a narod as ours which has been left to itself, untaught! Ask yourself, where does it [the religious life] come from? And when you try to get to the source, you find nothing. Our clergy teach little and rarely – they serve in church and fulfill needs. For illiterate people the Bible does not exist. ... And it still happens that in some obscure places the people understand absolutely nothing in the words of the church services, not even in the “Our Father” which is repeated often with omissions or additions that remove all sense from the words of the prayer. And yet in all these uneducated minds arises – as in Athens – unknown by whom, an altar to the Unknown God. For them all the real presence of Providence in all events of life is a fact so undebatable, so firmly ensconced in the consciousness, that when death comes these people, to whom noone ever spoke about God, open their door to Him as to a well-known and long-awaited Guest.90

Clearly this is something that would cause discomfort for anyone who takes the church’s theology seriously, but Zubov suggests Pobedonostsev did not intend to say he was happy with, or wished to perpetuate, the peoples’ ignorance. To substantiate that claim he offers another quotation Florovsky overlooked, in which the over-procurator praises the Orthodox liturgy for containing the entire content of the faith in its liturgy and laments that people do not understand it:

Our Orthodox Church possesses ... a priceless treasure ... There is not a single dogma, not a single great or important person or event of Old Testament or Gospel history, that does not find itself – and not just
an echo but a living image – in the composition of our divine services. A reflection of everything is found here in the stikhiras, dogmatiks, antiphons, canons, psalms, and paremias... But this treasure we use so poorly (skudno) that many are not familiar with it, so that many of the parts that are most substantial, most valuable and instructive for the people are ignored (prenebregaiutsia)...

In this case, as was true in the analysis of Pobedonostsev’s political theory, Zubov does a creditable job of arguing that earlier negative assessments of the over-procurator’s thought may have been somewhat one-sided.

The Future

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90 Zubov, Politiko-pravovye vozreniia, 194.

91 Zubov, Politiko-pravovye vozreniia, 193-194.
Thanks primarily to the scholarship of the last three decades, the biggest gaps in our knowledge about Pobedonostsev have already been filled. Many of the epithets applied to him by earlier historians, of which the opening paragraph of this article contains so many examples — no longer appear justified. The consensus now would rather be that Pobedonostsev was a “reactionary” but not in the simplistic sense of a person unthinkingly determined to preserve or recreate the past. He had a coherent, if not always internally consistent, philosophy which governed his actions. There is some disagreement over the character of that philosophy, but all agree Pobedonostsev was a product of his environment rather than the inventor of something new. What made him unique, and what earned him the fear and hatred of his fellow citizens, was his lack of scruples in using coercion and lies to implement his policies. There are also disagreements about how much political power Pobedonostsev had and for how long, but all agree that it was sufficient for him to profoundly affect the development of Russian government and society. Those modern Russian historians who lament that Pobedonostsev made the Bolshevik revolution possible offer a defensible evaluation of the longer-term impact of Pobedonostsev’s politics.

There is still room for more work to be done. Despite Byrnes’ biography, we do not have a very complete picture of the personal life of the powerful over-procurator. This should be possible because he so carefully preserved all of his personal correspondence and ensured that it was saved in the appropriate archives. Such investigation could lead to a better understanding of both his thought and his policies. For example, many historians mention that Pobedonostsev was frequently depressed: a closer examination of the character of that depression could suggest that it was biological or pathological in nature based on better knowledge available today about such disorders.\footnote{Others mention also his ability to work 21 hours a day for long stretches at a time — if}
thought and reflected in his policies could have been fostered in part by a biological disorder.

While his accomplishments have been described in some detail, there is still room for more thorough analysis of the short- and long-term effects of those accomplishments on Russian society, especially in the sense of specifically how they affected people’s attitudes toward church and state. Alexander Blok has written a brief description of this effect in his poem titled “Revenge”:

In those mute and distant years
A dull gloom filled all hearts.
Pobedonostsev had unfurled
His owlish wings over Russia.
There was neither day nor night,
Only the shadow of giant wings.

Further investigation of Pobedostsev’s legacy will help clarify to what extent the giant owlish wings were a product of the Russian religious, social, and political environment versus a factor molding that environment. Studies of Pobedonostsev inevitably shed as much light on Russia itself as on the man vilified as its “evil genius” and revered as its “guardian angel.”

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this could be shown to alternate with the depressions it would not be too far out of line to consider a diagnosis of bipolar disorder.

For example, two major accomplishments of Pobedonostsev that everyone agrees are uniquely and personally his are the creation of parish schools and the political coup of getting Alexander III to renege on the Loris-Melikov proposal for creating consultative representative institutions, which Alexander II had signed the very morning of his assassination in 1881. The effect of the latter has been discussed at length, but the actual effect of the parish schools has received far less attention and discussion of it is often limited to pointing out the character of their curriculum.