K. P. POBEDONOSTSEV AND THE HARMONIUS SOCIETY

Konstantin Petrovich Pobedonostsev has usually been portrayed as a tsarist bureaucrat who relied heavily on unrestricted government power to protect the Russian imperial order against the liberation movement. He has become a symbol of fierce reaction, in both political and academic circles, a man out-of-step with a changing world and a firm believer in the illusion that Petrine Russia could be defended by imperial edict, church censorship and legerdemain. In fact, some quite respectable historians have even suggested that the stubborn resistance he put up throughout his long career as Ober Procurator of the Holy Synod (1880-1905) actually helped to bring about the revolution in Russia. As to the legal and cultural aspects of his thought, critics have been no friendlier, having paid them little more than lip service, or in some cases dismissed them completely as nothing more than evidence of a rear guard action typical of late nineteenth century conservative politics.¹ In brief, Pobedonostsev has been comfortably fit into an interpretation of history that snubs his own efforts to emphasize the particularity of Russian traditions and the monumental role played by tradition in the life of a people.

This brief article describes my initial efforts to look at Pobedonostsev

¹ A recent review of criticism on Pobedonostsev can be found in Georgii Mironov, Gosudari i gosudarevy liudi (Moscow: Mart, 1999), pp, 156-62. The best biography is by Robert F. Byrnes, Pobedonostsev: His Life and Thought (Bloomington: Indiana Univ. Press, 1968), who sees his subject primarily as an uncreative state bureaucrat; this same interpretation was put forth earlier by Arthur E. Adams, “Pobedonostsev’s Religious Politics,” Church History, 22, no. 4 (Dec. 1953), 314-26. Gerhard Simon, Konstantin Petrović Pobedonoscev und die Kirchenpolitik des Heiligen Sinod 1880-1905 (Göttingen: Ruprecht, 1969), emphasizes Pobedonostsev as a religious intellectual and comes closest in efforts to understand the Ober Procurator by something other than just a political standard. Wolf Giusti, L’ultimo controrivoluzionario russo: Konstantin Pobedonoscev (Rome: Abete, 1974) describes a hopeless figure caught between the pressures exerted from one side by a Western style reform movement and from the other side by the barbarism of radical revolution.
according to his own standards and to present his arguments in the light that guided him. It asks why he believed he acted as he did rather than what others considered to be the accomplishments of his many years in high government service. This is certainly not an exercise in revisionist history. It is an attempt to discover if the justification Pobedonostsev gave for his own tactics and opinions can be described in a systematic way without references to the progress versus reaction category used by so many of his detractors. It is also a preliminary study in European conservative ideology, which stressed the crucial place of unbroken tradition as a living teacher of the duties and rights that protected people from the chaos threatened by abstract idealism.

There are two specific elements in Pobedonostsev's essays and letters on legal and cultural affairs that immediately attract a reader's attention. One is positive and the other negative. Firstly, Pobedonostsev assumed that a strong unifying force had drawn together the population of Russia, and, he believed further, that this collectivity had evolved within both a pronounced national and religious setting.² The settled cohesion in itself, moreover, was the brightest light guiding Russia in a purposeful direction and toward social harmony. A succession of events had taken place over the centuries, he surmised, which marked the gradual formation and practical functioning of this tight and vital bond and that similar if different developments had also marked the character of non-Russian peoples.³ According to Pobedonostsev, the popular acceptance of the Orthodox Christian faith was the original source of this precious possession, and by the late nineteenth century the results of its power could be seen clearly in the widespread admiration of certain art forms, expressions of loyalty toward royal family, acceptance of the basic state system of law and justice, and, of course, the strongly supported bond between the church and the state.

³. Even before Pobedonostsev fully developed his conservative outlook, he wrote essays that showed how a peoples' past had determined their present circumstances. Istoricheskiia izследovaniia i stat' i (St. Petersburg: A. Berke, 1876). Pobedonostsev did not believe, moreover, that observers from outside the Russian tradition could expect to understand what they saw when travelling in Russia or what they read in books and newspapers. In putting forth this hypothesis, Pobedonostsev came close to the conclusions reached by some contemporary radical anthropologists. Isabel Hapgood Papers at the New York Public Library (Manuscript and Archives Division, Box 3).