

Russian Schools and the Holy Synod

Pëtr Kropotkin

1902

If the September number of the NORTH AMERICAN REVIEW, which contained a rejoinder by the Procurator of the Holy Synod to my article on "The Present Crisis in Russia," (North American Review, May, 1901) was allowed to enter Russia, my compatriots will surely feel most grateful to the Editor for having obtained that rejoinder. For nearly twenty years, almost every paper and review in Russia, with the exception of the subsidized Moscow Gazette and The Russian Messenger, has been bitterly criticizing both the system of schools inaugurated by the Procurator and the highly-colored reports about them which have been made every year to the Emperor. These papers have received "warnings" — three warnings meaning the suppression of the paper; but their criticisms have never been answered. It is now for the first time that the Procurator condescends to speak on terms of equality with one of his critics.

I may point out that M. Pobiedonostseff does not contradict the statements of fact, which I made in these pages, concerning the origin of the students' disturbances and the events connected with them. My account may be taken, therefore, as substantially correct. The report which nobody in America wished to believe — namely, that a large number of students had been sent to the army, merely for having held students' meetings, is thus confirmed by the Procurator. Nor does he object to my strong condemnation of the Government's policy in this case. On the contrary, he mildly corroborates my views in the following sentence:

"What is unfortunately true is, that the measure in question was applied at once to one hundred and eighty students, which gave it a peculiarly rigorous character; whereas the law was meant to apply only to a few exceptional cases."

The Procurator of the Synod disputes only the part which I ascribed in this measure to the Emperor and to himself; but of this more will be said presently.

For every Russian, the main point of interest in M. Pobiedonostseff's reply is his treatment of the great question of popular education. It is not surprising, perhaps, that he should represent refugees as being ignorant of Russia and unable to understand their mother country. But whether M. Pobiedonostseff or myself knows Russia best, is, I believe a matter of little interest. As to which of us, in writing about Russia for Western Readers, is more reliable, that is another question which can be settled at once. In his rejoinder M. Pobiedonostseff describes Russia as follows:

"There are no roads, and the people live on steppes, in the woods, in the marshes; their dwellings are sometimes separated by five to eight hundred versts (330 to 530 miles) of uncultivated and impassible country; and the inhabitants themselves, without culture, here and there

even barbarous, gain a scanty living far from all means of communication and the necessities for industry and commerce.”

Now, it is positively certain that if a schoolboy, even in a primary school, had thus described Russia, he would surely have got a bad mark. Such conditions as the Procurator describes undoubtedly prevail in the barren lands of Siberia, and in the far North of European Russia — in the Petchora Land and the Kola peninsula. But, when one speaks of the schools of Russia, one surely does not have in mind these remote parts of the Empire, any more than one who speaks of the schools of Canada has in mind the barren lands round the Hudson Bay. As a matter of fact, in Middle Russia, which constitutes a population of over fifty million people, the average distance between villages is only from two to five miles. Moreover, in Russia, the peasants live in villages of from 200 to 2000 inhabitants, seldom of 100, and occasionally of 5000 to 10,000 souls; and even the smallest village in Russia, with its thirty children of school age, offers better facilities for opening a school than a population of fifty farmers scattered on their ”quarter sections.” Poor though Russia undoubtedly is, she is still not so poor as Finland by far; and yet, the coefficient of education” — that is, the number of children going to school, in proportion to the total population— is thirty per cent. in Finland, as against three to four per cent. in Moscow, Vladimir, Kursk, Tamboff, and other provinces belonging to the fertile or to the industrial belt of Central Russia.

It is not the poverty of Russia that has prevented the Russian peasants from learning to read and write since they became free, nor her steppes and forests, and still less the distances between her villages. From 1863 to 1883, it was the general policy of the Government and, above all, of the successive ministers of Public Instruction; and, since 1883, it has been the influence which M. Pobiedonostseff enjoyed in the councils of the Czar, and his use of that influence for preventing the opening of any schools, except those which would be under the control of the Synod. Having begun by pleading the necessity of opening parish schools, were they only of the lowest grades, in such remote parts of the Empire as those which he has described in this REVIEW, he gradually developed the policy which has characterized his administration: ”Better to have no schools at all, than allow any one by the village clergy to start primary schools in any part of the country; let all the money which the state and the local governments can spare for that purpose flow in that channel.”

In order to establish this policy, highly-colored reports have been made to the Emperor every year about the wonderful activity of the village clergy in opening new schools. The accuracy of these reports has always been contested in Russia itself, all the ”warnings”, notwithstanding. Furthermore, the efforts of all those who have honestly worked for spreading education in our country have been belittled and misrepresented. Nay, ”the Schools’ Council of the Holy Synod” did not hesitate even at open falsification of figures. The proof of this may be found in an official publication, which I have before me on my table. I mean the work issued in Russia, in 1896, by order of the Ministry of Public Instruction, under this title: Popular Education at the All-Russian Exhibition of Nijni Novgorad, published by the Head of the Education Department of the Exhibition, E Kovalevsky.”

The School Department of the Synod exhibited on this occasion a number of costly maps, intended to show to the visitors the wonderful progress achieved by the synod with its schools, as against all other schools, since 1884. An explanation pamphlet, issued by the same Department, was distributed at the same time, free, in immense numbers of copies to all visitors, who were assured by the writer of the pamphlet that within the last ten years the number of Reading

Schools of the Synod had increased eighteen times. It appeared, however, that this was a gross exaggeration, the number having increased in reality less than twice. To quote from the official publication issued by the Ministry of Public Instruction (p. 123):

”Thus, to give one instance, in the map which illustrated the numerical growth of the Reading Schools [of the Synod], and which was intended to prove to the visitors that these schools had very rapidly multiplied, an important misstatement was introduced. It was said in the table that in 1884 there were only 500 to 1000 such schools in Russia, while in 1893 their number had reached 18,000. . . . As soon as the Educational Department of the Exhibition was opened, rectifications began to pour in. It appeared that in the province of Moscow alone there were 300 such schools, 400 in Vladimir, and altogether there were more than 10,000 of them. . . . The numbers of schools under the Ministry of Public Instruction were shown on the maps as being considerably smaller in numbers than they actually were. Official statements came in, both from functionaries of the Ministry and from the Zemstvos, asking that these inaccuracies be rectified.”¹

As to the above-mentioned pamphlet, E. Kovalevsky remarks:

”It was most regrettable that the anonymous author of this pamphlet found it necessary, while pointing out the qualities of the Synod schools, to depreciate those of the Ministry of Public Instruction, and to assure his readers that they were quite strange to the Russian people.”

I certainly do not mean to suggest that the Procurator of the Synod was personally responsible for the fabrication of those maps or of that pamphlet; yet there are plenty of sycophants everywhere, and they know what will please their masters. I am even ready to admit that the Procurator never verifies the figures which he gives in his ”Yearly Reports.” He can have no time for that. He tells us, thus almost repeating my very words, that ”the parish priest, engaged in his professional duties, cannot efficiently carry out school teaching”; and it is scarcely probable that the Procurator himself, also engaged in his professional duties, can carry out his assumed duties of organizing schools all over Russia. But if he has no time for that work, why in the world should he undertake it, and obtain from the Emperor an arrangement by which the poor yearly allowance inscribed in the state budget for primary schools goes to the very people who, according to their own confession, cannot efficiently carry out teaching”?

Over and over again it has been pointed out in the Russian press—very often detailed proofs being in hand—that the statistics given in the Synod’s Reports as to the children who are supposed to receive instruction in the Parish and the Reading Schools of the Holy Synod (910,760 boys and 205,730 girls) are grossly exaggerated, and that if the real attendance were given, these figures would dwindle to much less than two-thirds. Why has not an honest investigation been made in the matter?

Things appear still worse when we consider the composition of the teaching staff of these schools and the results obtained in them. The children, after one year’s instruction at one of these schools, cannot even spell; although, Russian being a phonetically spelt language, we used, in our Sunday schools, to teach pupils to spell and read in fifteen lessons—sometimes even in nine. The slowness of progress is explained in Russia by the very low standard of most of the teachers of the Synod schools.

What, then, would be the proper way of meeting such criticisms? To ask an investigation, or, failing that, to publish at least, an exact statement of the teaching qualifications of the teaching

¹ In the province of St. Petersburg 391 schools were shown, instead of 900; in Kursk, 300 instead of 592, and so on.

staff, and to give tables showing the progress achieved by the pupils. But that is precisely what has never been done. All I can gather from the last available reports of the Procurator is, that the teaching staff of the Holy Synod schools was as follows in 1898:

Parish
 Schools | Reading
 Schools |

Priests 561	642
Deacons 2,145	1,245
Cantors 1,903	2,329
Hired teachers 11,211	11,776
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Total 15,829	15,992

Granting that the deacons and the cantors are now better educators than they were thirty years ago, I vainly try to ascertain from the Reports, of what sort of men and women the odd twenty-three thousand hired teachers were composed. What proportion do they contain of trained teachers, and what proportion of soldiers whose sole education was got at a regimental school during their three years' service in the army? Nor do they find such figures in the Procurator's rejoinder. All he says on this point is this:

"What Kropotkin says about the incapacity of the Village Clergy is certainly unjust. Perhaps in his time the ignorant schoolmasters of whom he speaks, often recruited from pensioned soldiers, were only too common. To-day we have a regular system of seminaries and training colleges for the education of schoolmasters and schoolmistresses."

Yes, we have a few, a very few, training colleges; but how many, or rather how few, trained teachers are employed in the Synod Schools we are not told, and the reader is left to wonder whether this proportion is not as small as the proportion of Russian villages which are separated from each other of distances of "from five to eight hundred versts."

In my opinion, the whole question of primary education in Russia is too important a subject to be treated in such an offhanded way. Leaving aside the laudable efforts which the Ministry of War, Agriculture, and Finance are making in this direction, we have in Russia three bodies which are directly responsible in matters of primary schools: the Ministry of Public Instruction, the Provincial and District Councils (the Zemstvos) and the Holy Synod. Now, for forty years, and especially since 1883, we have seen the most extraordinary spectacle of the two governmental bodies using all their power to prevent the Local Governments from doing their duty with regard to popular education and then fighting among themselves for the money allowance for primary schools which is inscribed in the State budget, as well as for all the moneys which can be scraped together from the already overtaxed village communities and the Zemstvos—at the same time excluding the two latter from any control of the ways in which these moneys are spent. To achieve this end, a decisive blow was struck under Alexander III. at the local self-government institutions, so as to make them mere tax-collectors who provide money for schools, but have no voice in their management. Consequently, I only express the opinion of every educated man in Russia when I say that it is high time that this state of affairs should come to an end.

The idea of the Procurator is that of the Roman Church. What he seeks for in Russia—and successfully, in great measure—is to introduce the system which was instituted in France in 1849, and prevailed especially under Napoleon III., under which

Primary education was entirely handed over to the clergy, and a "letter d'obédience," delivered by the Bishop, was all the certificate one required to become a teacher. The Russians know how this system very nearly brought France to ruin, when she came into armed conflict with her better educated neighbor. Consequently, all educated Russia most anxiously desires now that a serious reform should be made in the whole system of primary education, and that the present system which was introduced at a time when, to use the Procurator's own expression, "prohibition had gone mad," should come to an end. I will only add, as regards secondary and University education that all I have said concerning it in this review, far from having been "biased" or exaggerated, has received most striking confirmation in Russia itself since last May. Committees are now at work, and the Universities are sending in elaborate reports, with a view to obtaining reforms in the very directions which are indicated in the May number of this Review. And I will add that in this I have nothing to boast of, because I only summed up what Professors of the Universities and educators of all grades have been saying in Russia for years, without being listened to, until the late University riots ended in such a tragical way.

The second part of M. Pobiedonostseff's rejoinder deals with the responsibilities for the abominable measure that was taken against the students—a measure that has led to massacres at St. Petersburg and has done more to discredit the government among all classes of society than all that that the revolutionists have ever written. At the outset, as was only natural in a country placed under absolute rule, public opinion at St. Petersburg attributed a large share of responsibility for all this to the Emperor, and my article reflected that state of opinion. Now M. Pobiedonostseff tells us that I was wrong: that the absolute ruler of Russia "had no share" in this misdeed of his ministers, and I am very glad to acknowledge it. I will even add on my own behalf that the information which I got from St. Petersburg, soon after my return from America, was to the same effect. But, the Emperor having no share of the blame for the Kieff affair, whose fault was it?

M. Pobiedonostseff writes:

"The decree regarding the military service of students guilty of creating an agitation against the university was published independently of any initiative on the part of the Emperor. The ministers in a cabinet meeting that had been called in consequence of these university disorders, deemed it necessary to have recourse to this punishment, and their resolution was submitted for the Emperor's approval. A regulation was published according to which the application of the penalty in each case was made to depend on a special committee comprising the ministers whose departments were concerned, and the decisions of this committee were to be valid in law without needing an imperial sanction. The Kieff affair, therefore, was settled in this way, and the will of the Emperor had no share in it."

And the Procurator adds:

It should be remembered that our emperor never issues such orders on his personal responsibility. He contents himself with confirming the decisions of the various executive councils and the resolutions of his ministers in cases prescribed by law."

As for his own responsibility in the matter, M. Pobiedonostseff says:

"I was totally ignorant of this Kieff affair, which concerned two ministers only, Bogolèpoff, and the Minister for the Interior."

The Council of the Ministers, in which M. Pobiedonostseff has a seat in his capacity of Procurator of the Holy Synod—in a "Cabinet meeting," as he writes— had thus prepared a law which gave to two ministers the power of imposing military service as a punishment for acts of civil disobedience towards the University authorities, and themselves to appoint special committees, or rather Courts nominated ad hoc, for the purpose of applying that most extraordinary punishment just as they liked. This astounding law—which, as circumstances have now proved, was too bad even for Russian forbearance—was submitted to the Emperor, who gave it his approval and issued it in the form of a decree signed with his hand. He did so, we are now told confiding in his cabinet, probably without realizing what power for mischief he was thus giving to Bogolèpoff and Sipyaghin, nor how they would misuse it; just as he never seems to have realized to what a violation of his own oath to Finland he was recently led by another of his ministers.

It thus appears that the ministers may take action which will incite disturbance all over Russia, leading to the effusion of blood and to general discontent, and that when you ask, Who is to blame for it all? There is nobody to take upon himself the responsibility.

The Emperor is out of the question, we are told; he must trust somebody, and he trusts his Cabinet. One member of his cabinet now repudiates publically all responsibility for the consequences of this decree. The other members of the Cabinet will probably say that they are not responsible either, because it was the Emperor who signed the decree, while he might have refused to sign it if it were contrary to his views. The Minister of Education and of the Interior have only used the powers which the Cabinet gave to them; and the committees they have nominated to act as judges, in sending 183 students to the army, have only done what they were authorized to do by their superiors. Everyone was right, and there was nobody to blame!

There is one point which the Procurator seems to have overlooked. He has developed in this Review the theory of a Constitutional Monarchy in Russia. The Emperor, he writes, only confirms the decisions of his Cabinet, and consequently is not responsible for their mistakes. This is certainly a quite new construction of the relations which prevail in Russia between the three law-making authorities of the Empire: the Council of the State, the Committee of the Ministers, and the Emperor. It only confirms the idea which I have expressed in these pages—namely, that the conception of a responsible ministry is rapidly growing up in Russia. Very well, let it be so. Nobody in Russia, I am sure, will object if the Emperor prefers to be treated as an irresponsible constitutional sovereign. Only the institutions of the country will have to be altered to suit this new condition. So long as the choice of the ministers depends entirely upon the good pleasure of the ruler, and so long as the country has no means whatever of controlling the actions of the ministers, the sovereign will always be considered responsible for their misdeeds, even though he may personally disprove them; and M. Pobiedonostseff will agree with me that his way of disentangling the responsibilities is, to say the least, not practical at all.

Perhaps, he will also agree—and if he does not—all Russia is now telling it loudly enough—that there is something extremely abnormal in the conditions which he is anxious to maintain. The Cabinet, trampling under its feet a fundamental law of the Empire, and giving to two ministers such formidable and uncontrolled powers, has made a grave blunder. But for repairing this blunder, and for securing the abrogation of this law (virtually it has been abrogated), no other means were available but a general revolt in all the universities, street demonstrations which have led to the killing of a number of students in St. Petersburg, the shooting by court martial of two students in the army, the killing of a minister, and the exile of nobody knows how many students

and of aged, generally respected persons, who were only guilty of sympathy with the victims of the irresponsible Cabinet. Russia does not want more of that.

If I speak of the coming Constitution, it is not because I see it as a panacea. My personal ideals go far beyond that. But, whether we like it or not, it is coming. The colossal blunders of the ministers, and their increasingly frequent assumption of the right, under the shelter of the Emperor's signature, of modifying by mere decrees the fundamental laws of the Empire, render it unavoidable.

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"Russian Schools and the Holy Synod," *North American Review*, Vol 174, No. 454, April 1902, pp. 518-527, online source RevoltLib.com.

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