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The End of the Volunteer Fleet: Some Evidence on the Scope of Pobedonostsev's Power in Russia

Konstantin P. Pobedonostsev was long considered the real power behind the throne during the reigns of the last two emperors of Russia. He was said to have determined the reactionary policies of the 1880s and 1890s.¹ Robert Byrnes has recently demonstrated that Pobedonostsev's influence was in fact considerably less than had been assumed. Byrnes quite properly maintains that Pobedonostsev had very little power under Nicholas II, that his importance for Alexander III began to decline after 1890, and that even at the height of his power Pobedonostsev could not always persuade Alexander to adopt his point of view. However, although Byrnes concludes that his influence was limited, he still attributes to Pobedonostsev considerable power in "his own special spheres of interest."² Evidence exists, nevertheless, that even this assessment of Pobedonostsev's power needs to be reconsidered. An event occurred in March 1883 which demonstrates that he was not always in a position to determine policy at will even in matters of vital interest to him.

The event in question concerned the fate of the Volunteer Fleet.³ The Society for the Volunteer Fleet was an organization founded in 1878 by a group of Moscow merchants to purchase and operate a fleet of ships which could be used in trade in time of peace and converted to warships in case of war. The Society was placed "under the protection of the Lord Heir Tsesarevich," the future Alexander III. Byrnes describes his relation to the Fleet as that of honorary chairman.⁴ Alexander designated Pobedonostsev to look after the affairs of the Fleet for him, and Pobedonostsev became vice-chairman of

1. Arthur Adams, "Pobedonostsev and the Rule of Firmness," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 32, no. 78 (December 1953): 132. See also "Pobedonostsev and Alexander III," *Slavonic and East European Review*, 7, no. 19 (June 1928): 30.

2. Robert F. Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev, His Life and Thought* (Bloomington, 1968), p. 358. See pp. 161–62 for Byrnes's discussion of the limitations of Pobedonostsev's power in the early 1880s. The Baranov incident which Byrnes emphasizes does not appear to have been as significant as the events discussed in this paper, primarily because Pobedonostsev did not attempt to influence the tsar's decision in that case with nearly as much energy and determination as he did for the Volunteer Fleet. See K. P. Pobedonostsev, *Pis'ma Pobedonostseva k Aleksandru III*, 2 vols. (Moscow, 1925–26), 1:350–51, for the single piece of evidence cited by Byrnes.

3. Byrnes refers briefly to this incident but assigns no importance to it (*Pobedonostsev*, p. 135).

4. *Ibid.*, p. 76.

the Society. Pobedonostsev was originally suspicious of the Society, fearing that some persons behind the organization were concerned only with their own selfish interests and would misuse the privilege of associating Alexander's name with their enterprise.⁵ He apparently overcame his misgivings, however, because he was soon busily working to establish and run the Volunteer Fleet and forwarding reports to Alexander about its progress. Right up to the time Alexander became tsar, Pobedonostsev's letters to him dealt in large part with the Volunteer Fleet.⁶

When Alexander came to the throne in March 1881, his connection with the Volunteer Fleet was temporarily severed. The Fleet had been under the protection of the heir, but when Alexander ceased to be the heir, that designation simply lapsed. But Pobedonostsev's association with the Fleet continued. He sent reports to the new tsar on its affairs just as before.⁷ Pobedonostsev had apparently developed an interest in the Volunteer Fleet quite independent of Alexander. His official duties no longer required that he inform the tsar of the affairs of the Fleet, yet he continued to do so.

Alexander himself did not abandon all support for the Volunteer Fleet immediately upon becoming tsar. In December 1881 Pobedonostsev wrote to Alexander to tell him that the Fleet was in financial trouble and could not raise sufficient capital to continue operations. He asked Alexander to take the Fleet back under his protection as it had been when he was the heir, since such an association would help their fund-raising efforts.⁸ Alexander agreed to this proposal, and the Volunteer Fleet was placed "under the Highest protection," that is, under the protection of the tsar.⁹ He was still well disposed toward the Fleet, or at least he was still willing to follow Pobedonostsev's advice concerning it.

That situation changed abruptly in March 1883. The first evidence in Pobedonostsev's letters to Alexander III of a crisis involving the future of the Volunteer Fleet is a letter of March 16, 1883.¹⁰ Because of the financial difficulties referred to above, the Fleet had applied for a subsidy from the state.

5. Pobedonostsev to Katherine Tiutcheva, May 30, 1878, as quoted in "Pobedonostsev and Alexander III," pp. 51–52. In this letter Pobedonostsev announced his intention of separating Alexander from the Volunteer Fleet altogether.

6. *Pis'ma k Aleksandru III*, vol. 1, letters for 1880. In this year thirty-five of the forty-nine letters deal wholly or in part with the Volunteer Fleet. For assessments of the role of the Volunteer Fleet in the development of the relationship between Alexander III and Pobedonostsev see "Pobedonostsev and Alexander III," p. 51, and Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev*, p. 138.

7. See, for example, *Pis'ma k Aleksandru III*, letters of Apr. 17 and May 6, 1881, 1:326, 339–40.

8. *Ibid.*, letter of Dec. 24, 1881, pp. 358–60.

9. *Ibid.*, letter of May 1, 1882, p. 378.

10. *Ibid.*, 2:13–20.

The director of the Naval Ministry, I. A. Shestakov, proposed that rather than pay a subsidy to the independent Volunteer Fleet the government should simply transfer all the ships of the Fleet to the regular navy. Pobedonostsev heard of this proposal from Shestakov only after Alexander had already agreed to it. In his letter to Alexander, Pobedonostsev argued at length and with much emotion for the continued independence of the Volunteer Fleet.

Pobedonostsev began by attempting to strengthen his argument in defense of the Fleet, using what is clearly a tactical ploy. Shestakov's solution, he said, would relieve him and the Society of the "moral responsibility for its consequences," and it would free him personally "from the heavy burden which I have borne now more than five years solely from a feeling of duty to your Majesty and Russia." His next sentence makes his true concern apparent: "But at the same time there is no doubt that the cause which the Volunteer Fleet serves will perish with its transfer to the Naval Ministry." He wanted to preserve a cause he believed to be good for Russia.

Pobedonostsev moved quickly in his letter from this slightly offensive striking of poses to a presentation of the factors which he believed justified the continued existence of the Fleet as an independent organization. His argument consisted of a combination of substantive issues and the kind of personal attack typical of bureaucratic in-fighting. He pointed out that it was not at all unusual for governments to subsidize their long-distance trade, referring to the example of the society "Messageries" in France, which, he said, received an annual subsidy of 15 million from the French government. The Volunteer Fleet was not asking for that much, and Pobedonostsev claimed that the Fleet had actually saved the Treasury money by the services it had provided. He stressed that the Fleet had been privately financed, saying that the only reason for destroying it was because that was what the Naval Ministry wanted: "The Society itself has in no way shown that it is incapable of serving that goal for which it was founded, *exclusively by private means*, sacrificed for a state purpose."

Aside from questions of finance, Pobedonostsev pointed out the value of the work the Fleet had done, calling that work a "matter of first importance for the state." It had helped open up Sakhalin Island to Russia and led Russians to recognize its significance. The ships of the Fleet had transported to the Far East not only prisoners but school books and church supplies as well. (The transportation, under contract to the government, of convicts to exile on Sakhalin was one of the Fleet's main activities.) Pobedonostsev was afraid these activities would not be continued if the ships were transferred to the regular navy.

In his letter Pobedonostsev also defended the Fleet against some of the more important accusations made against it, including charges that it demoral-

ized the regular navy by hiring away its best officers, that the Fleet's ships were useless as cruisers, and that the Fleet was run by incompetents. He replied that it was the navy's own fault if it could not keep qualified men; that the Fleet's ships were as good as the navy's and that their specifications had been worked out in conjunction with the Naval Ministry; and that the Fleet's men were better than those of the Ministry. He was trying to defend the Fleet from all possible attacks, desperately attempting to change Alexander's mind and reverse the decision ending its independence.

Although Pobedonostsev was fond of condemning bureaucrats and their incessant squabbling, in this case he was not above resorting to that kind of *ad hominem* attack himself. He aimed a number of barbs directly at Shestakov, his principal rival in this conflict. He expressed regret that Shestakov had not discussed his proposal with him before taking it to Alexander, and accused him of attempting to prevent the State Council from granting the requested subsidy by spreading the rumor that the tsar was about to dissolve the Fleet. Pobedonostsev questioned Shestakov's knowledge of the facts of the case as well as his methods, pointing out that Shestakov was unaware of the cooperation between the Fleet and the Naval Ministry in working out the specifications of the Fleet's ships. Pobedonostsev's most serious attack on Shestakov was made rather obliquely. He reported to Alexander that he had told Shestakov that he could not understand how a good Russian like him could oppose a "Russian patriotic matter" like the Fleet. The implication is clear that Shestakov was more concerned with personal considerations than with what was best for Russia.

This letter is remarkable in a number of respects. The most striking characteristic is its length. In its published version it covers seven pages. Most of Pobedonostsev's letters to Alexander are no more than one or two pages long. The complexity of its argumentation is also unusual. Pobedonostsev tried every possible line of approach, from denial of selfish motives to presentation of factual information to personal attacks on his principal opponent. He attempted to defend the Fleet from every conceivable criticism. The conclusion is inescapable that Pobedonostsev cared passionately about the Volunteer Fleet and exerted all his influence to preserve its independence. It is this fact which makes his defeat significant.

The crisis over the future of the Volunteer Fleet continued the following day, March 17, 1883. Alexander wrote to Pobedonostsev, apparently in response to Pobedonostsev's letter of March 16, explaining his decision to agree with Shestakov's proposal.¹¹ The tsar made clear that the decision to transfer

11. "K. P. Pobedonostsev i ego korrespondenty," *Pis'ma i zapiski*, vol. 1: *Novum Regnum* (Moscow and Petrograd, 1923), pp. 302-4.

the Volunteer Fleet to the Naval Ministry was his alone and that he, not Shestakov, was responsible for it. He said that Shestakov had specifically told him that although he was unalterably opposed to granting the subsidy to the Volunteer Fleet, he would "yield to my decision and would not object to the government subsidy" if it were granted. It was thus made clear to Pobedonostsev that he was involved in more than just another bureaucratic squabble and that his real opponent, if he continued his fight, was Alexander himself.

The tsar then explained why he had decided to accept Shestakov's proposal: "I was absolutely convinced that the antagonism between the Naval Ministry and the V.F. is so strong that there is no other solution, and that the matter not only will not improve but, on the contrary, will all the more degenerate and worsen." His consideration was one of bureaucratic harmony. As tsar, he had to be concerned with the smooth functioning of the existing state institutions, a concern which Pobedonostsev, operating within a narrower perspective, did not necessarily share. Alexander did not deny the value of the Volunteer Fleet, admitting that it was a "pity to abandon this useful matter, the more so since the Society did much good for the government and Russian trade." Unlike Pobedonostsev, however, this was not his principal consideration, and he decided to sacrifice the Volunteer Fleet.

In his letter of March 17 Alexander did not express displeasure or lack of patience with Pobedonostsev. He attempted, if only briefly and somewhat perfunctorily, to soothe Pobedonostsev's feelings. In concluding his letter he said that he understood "how sad and difficult it is for you to abandon this matter, which, thanks to your energy and good will, proceeded and developed so successfully." Such sentiments did not, however, affect the finality of his decision: "The matter as it now stands cannot continue and willy-nilly must be ended."

Pobedonostsev wrote to Alexander again on that same day, March 17, 1883.¹² It is not clear whether Pobedonostsev's letter was written before or after he read the tsar's explanation of the situation, but in either case this letter is quite significant in light of Alexander's statements. Pobedonostsev said that the whole matter was being handled very badly. The Fleet was not being allowed to die of its own shortcomings. It was being destroyed by the tsar himself, who must therefore take direct responsibility for its failure. Pobedonostsev said that he was amazed at the "blindness" of those who had convinced Alexander to take this step. Alexander, of course, had taken the responsibility for the decision willingly, and he must have felt that Pobedonostsev's remark about "blindness" was directed at him personally. This letter could not have made a very favorable impression on the tsar.

12. *Pis'ma k Aleksandru III*, 2:20-22.

Two days later, on March 19, Pobedonostsev wrote two letters to Alexander.¹³ The first is significant only because it contains a request for a personal meeting with the tsar to discuss the future of the Volunteer Fleet. The second letter is more important, because it is Pobedonostsev's admission of defeat in this struggle. In it he complained that he was so busy that his nerves could not stand the added strain of overseeing the liquidation of the Fleet and asked to be relieved of his duties in that regard. It cannot be said that he bowed graciously to the desires of his sovereign. Rather, he decided that if things were not going to suit him, he would have nothing to do with them. He could not bring himself to supervise the consummation of his opponent's victory. Pobedonostsev's tone is rather peevish and temperamental, and he sounds generally like a very bad loser.

Alexander seems to have been somewhat irritated by Pobedonostsev's attitude, as is evident in his letter of March 21, 1883, the last in their correspondence regarding the future of the Volunteer Fleet.¹⁴ Alexander reaffirmed his decision in no uncertain terms: "It seems to me that there is absolutely nothing to prevent the beginning of the liquidation of the affairs of the Society at once." Although he conceded to Pobedonostsev that "given the extent of your own affairs, you cannot personally be occupied with this liquidation," he did not completely agree to Pobedonostsev's request that he be relieved of his duties toward the Fleet. He asked Pobedonostsev to select people to conduct the transfer of the Fleet to the regular navy. Alexander apparently did not understand why Pobedonostsev was so upset: "This matter does not seem so horrible to me, and all will be for the best." The clearest indication of Alexander's displeasure with Pobedonostsev is his rejection of Pobedonostsev's request to see Alexander personally about his decision: "In principle this matter is decided, and there is no possibility of discussing the details, because I do not have the time." Pobedonostsev usually had no trouble gaining access to the tsar to discuss whatever he wanted, but in this case Alexander dismissed his request out of hand. He wanted the affair taken care of, and he did not want to be troubled with it any longer. Pobedonostsev's last avenue of appeal was cut off. His defeat was final.

The decision to end the autonomy of the Volunteer Fleet and to transfer its ships to the regular navy was in itself only a minor incident in Russian history. Its importance lies in the light it sheds on the scope of Pobedonostsev's power early in the reign of Alexander III. Pobedonostsev attempted with all the means at his disposal to preserve the Volunteer Fleet as an independent organization. Although he originally was not at all enthusiastic about the Fleet

13. *Ibid.*, pp. 22–24 and 24–26.

14. *Pis'ma i zapiski*, p. 304.

and administered it only at Alexander's request, he developed an interest in it quite separate from Alexander's. He valued the work of the Fleet very highly and zealously defended it from all attacks. The length of his letters on this matter, the passionate tone of his defense, and the bitter attitude he adopted when he lost his fight all testify to the importance he attached to the Fleet. Nonetheless, he was not able to convince Alexander to preserve its autonomy against the attacks of the Naval Ministry. His defeat was total, and he was treated rather shabbily throughout the crisis. He was informed of the tsar's decision only after it had been made and not by Alexander himself but by Shestakov, his principal rival. His request for a meeting with Alexander to discuss the matter was brusquely denied, and his desire to be relieved of his duties in regard to the Fleet was, at least in part, ignored. His defeat was not only total but ignominious as well.

It is therefore clear that at least as early as March 1883 Pobedonostsev was far from able to exert decisive influence even in a case of special interest to him. Although the Holy Synod, education, and jurisprudence are usually thought to be the subjects of most concern to him, and he did have considerable power in these areas, Pobedonostsev clearly did not consider the Fleet to be a matter of secondary importance. Nonetheless, he could not win his fight. In light of this evidence, we must conclude that Pobedonostsev's influence during the reign of Alexander III, even in some matters in which he was passionately interested, was less than previously has been assumed.