

The Crisis of Religious Toleration in Imperial Russia: Bibikov's System for the Old Believers, 1841-1855

Review Number: 1950

Publish date: Thursday, 16 June, 2016

Author: Thomas Marsden

ISBN: 9780198746362

Date of Publication: 2015

Price: £60.00

Pages: 304pp.

Publisher: Oxford University Press

Publisher url: <https://global.oup.com/academic/product/the-crisis-of-religious-toleration-in-imperial-russia-9780198746362?cc=gb&lang=en&>

Place of Publication: Oxford

Reviewer: Eugene Clay

In this engaging new book, Thomas Marsden examines the repressive campaign against the Russian Old Believers [*staroobriadtsy*] launched by the conservative Minister of Internal Affairs Dmitrii Gavrilovich Bibikov (1792–1870) in 1853, just as Nicholas I's reign (1825–55) was drawing to a close. A fractured minority within the empire, the Old Believers had rejected the liturgical reforms introduced by Patriarch Nikon of Moscow (r. 1652–8) and regarded the official state church as heretical. Although intensely persecuted in the late 17th century, the Old Believers received limited toleration from Peter I (r. 1689–1725) in return for undergoing registration and paying a double tax. Catherine II (r. 1762–96) granted greater religious freedom to the dissenters and abolished their double tax burden; her grandson, Alexander I (r. 1801–25), declared this toleration to be an 'unalterable law' (p. 10). When Nicholas I ascended to the throne in December 1825, Old Believer parishes and monasteries flourished throughout the empire, from the so-called *filippony* of Poland to the Chapellers [*chasovenniki*] of Siberia, from the Vyg monastic complex in the northern region of Olonets to the cloisters on the Irgiz River in Saratov Province. 30 years later, Nicholas had devastated Old Belief, closing or forcibly converting the major monastic institutions and instituting new laws to restrict the freedom and deny the legitimacy of Old Believer families. With Nicholas's blessing, Bibikov introduced the harshest of these repressive measures in the period immediately before and during the Crimean War (1853–6). The 'Bibikov system', as the Russian revolutionary Vasilii Ivanovich Kel'siev (1835–72) called it, sought to eliminate Russian Old Belief altogether through secret police tactics. Marshalling an impressive panoply of archival and printed sources, Marsden analyzes the origins of Russia's crisis of religious toleration (1841–53) and the unfolding of the crisis (1853–5), when Bibikov used his ministerial powers to forcibly convert Old Believers (especially merchants) to the state church.

For Marsden, this repressive movement was not simply a return to the intolerance of a previous century. Instead, it resulted from the contradictions inherent in Nicholas I's modernizing policy of Official Nationality, famously summarized in Count Sergei Uvarov's formula: Orthodoxy, Autocracy, Nationality [*narodnost'*]. According to this policy, right religion, the divinely ordained monarchy, and *narodnost'* – the abstract qualities of virtue, piety and devotion that characterized the common people [*narod*] – would serve as the foundations of a strong, unified state. Nicholas wanted to use each of these elements to build a modern

Russia. Each leg of the Official Nationality triad, however, had an inherent weakness. First, the Orthodox Church by itself could not unify an increasingly multi-confessional empire. Second, the autocrat also needed help to rule his vast territory. To achieve modern control over his population, the tsar required an extensive bureaucracy, with educated cadres to run it. State-building inevitably created a class of people – the enlightened bureaucrats – who valued the rule of law and were developing a legal consciousness that subordinated even the monarch to the law. Although Nicholas believed that ‘the rule of law was compatible with unlimited autocracy’ (p. 2), the ‘Bibikov system’ demonstrated the falsity of this dubious assertion; to achieve his desired result (the eradication of dissent), Nicholas bypassed his own legal procedures. Finally, the investigative commissions of the 1840s and 1850s proved that the common people were not as pious, virtuous, or devoted as Uvarov had imagined; ‘enlightened bureaucrats’ like Pavel Mel’nikov and Ivan Aksakov discovered to their horror that dissent was far more widespread than previously believed and that the *narod* did not unequivocally support the autocrat or the state church.

In the first part of his book, devoted to the ‘origins of the crisis of religious toleration’, Marsden provides an excellent introduction to the complex denominational structure of the Old Belief. Fractured by internal theological and ecclesiological quarrels, the many different groups of Old Believers can be divided into priestly and priestless sects. For the priestless, Patriarch Nikon’s apostasy had forever destroyed the possibility of sacred orders and a full sacramental life; they regarded the Russian state church as heretical and completely devoid of grace. The priestly, by contrast, considered the official Orthodox Church merely as schismatic; in accordance with the eighth rule of the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, the clergy of schismatic churches could be received in their orders after they had renounced their heresy and embraced the true faith. Priestly Old Believers, who had no bishops of their own from 17th century to 1846, hoped for a full restoration of sacramental church life, including an episcopal hierarchy. In his first chapter, Marsden eloquently recounts how in 1846 a group of émigré priestly Old Believer monks in the Austrian empire succeeded in (re-)establishing an old-rite hierarchy by convincing the Greek Metropolitan Ambrosias (Pappa-Georgopoloi, 1791–1863) to join their church. Known as Amvrosii in Russian, the metropolitan quickly consecrated bishops for the priestly Old Believers, the forebears of the present-day Russian Old-Ritualist Orthodox Church (*Russkaia staroobriadcheskaia pravoslavnaia tserkov’*). Created with the permission (and apparent support) of the Austrian government, the new church organization provoked the wrath of the tsar, which, as Marsden rightly points out, saw the emerging hierarchy as a dangerous state within a state. The 1848 revolution, which Nicholas helped to suppress in Hungary, only underscored the potential dangers of religious dissent: Russia put pressure on the Austrian government to arrest Amvrosii, who died in prison.

Concerns about the new hierarchy also highlighted the government’s growing tensions with priestless Old Believers and spurred efforts to develop a more coherent and consistent policy toward dissent. Investigations into reports of debauchery at the Preobrazhenskoe Cemetery, an important priestless center in Moscow that had gained legal recognition in the 1770s, ultimately led to increased restrictions on the community. More ominously, in 1850, government pursuit of a gang of bandits in Iaroslavl’ province revealed their connections to a radical priestless movement, the *stranniki* (wanderers) or *beguny* (runners), who regarded the tsar as a minion of Antichrist and refused to carry passports or respect the legal authorities. Holding that a true Christian had to flee the world, the *stranniki* reserved baptism for adults who renounced earthly ties and embraced an ascetic life. The true Christians depended on a network of catechumen refuge-keepers, sympathizers who were not ready to undergo the demands of baptism. The refuge-keepers remained in the world and supported the true Christians by their labor; in return, the true Christian would baptize the refuge-keeper at the proper time. The government investigation into the *stranniki* produced over 10,000 pages bound in 23 volumes. For the ministry officials, it also confirmed the link between criminality and religious dissent. In 1852, in the wake of these revelations, the Ministry of Internal Affairs ordered a series of statistical expeditions sent to investigate the Old Belief in several central provinces (including Kostroma, Iaroslavl’, and Nizhnii Novgorod). To their dismay, the ministry agents discovered that the Old Belief, in its many forms, was far more popular and prevalent than official statistics indicated. Venal clergy and corrupt local officials accepted bribes and other remuneration to hide the real number of dissenters under their jurisdiction. Moreover, even those faithful to the official church often expressed admiration for the Old

Believers, whose zeal, asceticism, and devotion made them exemplary Christians. Contrary to the hopes of those who promoted Official Nationality, the expeditions demonstrated that *narodnost* was complex; popular piety did not always support the tsar and sometimes even portrayed the tsar as the Antichrist or his agent.

Drawing from both personal letters and official government reports, Marsden skillfully brings the 'enlightened bureaucrats' to life. In the 1840s and 1850s, the Ministry of Internal Affairs included many talented literati, such as Nikolai Nadezhdin (1804–56), who led a group of researchers to compose histories of Russian religious dissent. Nadezhdin's co-workers included Ivan Petrovich Liprandi (1790–1880), an erstwhile associate of the poet Aleksandr Pushkin (1799–1837), and Vladimir Dahl (1801–72), famous for his four-volume dictionary of the Russian language. In the early 1850s, other literary figures joined the scholarly exploration of popular religion as ministry functionaries. Lev Ivanovich Arnol'di (1822–60), one of the few privileged members of the circle where Nikolai Gogol read drafts of the (now lost) second volume of *Dead Souls*, surveyed the schismatics of Kostroma province as a collegiate assessor. His colleague in this endeavor, Petr Aleksandrovich Brianchaninov (1809–91), was the younger brother of the prolific spiritual writer St. Ignatii (Dmitrii Aleksandrovich Brianchaninov, 1807–67, canonized 1988). Marsden mistakenly identifies the leader of the Iaroslavl' expedition as I. S. Sinitsyn and so cannot say much about him; in fact, it was the state councillor Ivan Maksimovich Sinitsyn (1799–1856) who investigated the dissenters of Iaroslavl' province (Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Ul'ianovskoi oblasti, *fond* 249, *opis'* 1). These agents of the state understood their government service to be a form of nation-building; their ethnographic explorations had a profound political purpose. Believing that religion was essential to national unity, these bureaucrats did their part to suppress dissent that threatened that unity.

In sketching his portraits of the 'enlightened bureaucrats', Marsden focuses on the Slavophile author Ivan Sergeevich Aksakov and the novelist Pavel Ivanovich Mel'nikov, the two most famous and prolific of the Ministry's ethnographer-functionaries. 'Bursting to do social good' (as Aksakov's friend and fellow Slavophile Nikita Giliarov-Platonov put it), these young, idealistic ministry agents wanted to unite their nation but could do so only by using state power. Other means of mobilizing the people (through the press or popular political participation) were not available in Nicholaevan Russia. Under these conditions, conscious national unity required religious support; religious dissent threatened 'civil discord and the moral degeneration of the nation' (p. 258). Anxious to connect with the people, Aksakov and Mel'nikov nevertheless regarded Old Belief as a pathology, a deviation from the normative religiosity of the *narod*. Expressing ideas that he later developed more fully, Aksakov attributed this moral disease not to peasant ignorance, but to the Westernizing Petrine reforms: "If we turn to the time of Peter the Great and in good conscience examine his laws, innovations, and all his acts, then the schismatics' protest seems to us, if not completely just, at least natural and understandable".⁽¹⁾

Despite his evident sympathy for the dissenters, Aksakov condemned the *stranniki* for their hypocrisy and reluctantly acknowledged the need for government persecution of this dangerous form of dissent. Mel'nikov showed a similar ambivalence: in the 1850s, he oversaw the destruction of the very institutions he later romanticized in his novels published under the pseudonym Andrei Pecherskii (Andrew of the Caves).

Marsden contends that the contradictions in these intellectuals reflect the contradictions in the Nicholaevan system. On the one hand, the modernizing Russian state sought to rationalize and universalize its control over the subjects of the empire; on the other, it desired to create a national unity, built on the 'internal consciences of the population' (p. 148). In a dubious comparison, Marsden argues that the wholesale repression of Old Belief under Bibikov presaged the Soviet show trials of the 1920s and 1930s; both involved the state's effort to win over the hearts and minds of the population. In fact, Bibikov had no such desire; insofar as possible, he implemented his persecution of Old Belief in secret. The documents from the secret expeditions of the 1850s were first published only after they had been smuggled to Russian revolutionaries in England. Public show trials of Old Believers and other dissenters took place a decade later, after the promulgation of the 1864 legal reform.

The second half of the book analyzes the unfolding of Bibikov's system during the two-year period (1853–5) when it was in place. At a time of extraordinary crisis, when Russia was preparing for and engaged in the disastrous Crimean War (1853–6), Nicholas I approved a 'special temporary government [*vremennoe upravlenie*] for the execution of the affairs of the schismatics' on 21 June 1853. Attached to the Ministry of Internal Affairs led by Bibikov, the temporary government helped to repress two important Old Believer centers in Moscow (Preobrazhenskoe and Rogozhskoe cemeteries), destroyed many of the dissenters' monasteries and hermitages along the Volga, expelled Old Believer merchants from the guilds (and thus made them and their children eligible for the military draft), and prosecuted the *stranniki* for disloyalty to the regime. Fearful of an Old Believer 'fifth column' during a war ostensibly undertaken on behalf of the Orthodox subjects of the Ottoman Empire, the government went to great lengths to discover and imprison dissenters who might provide aid and comfort to the enemy. While the new measures did lead to the conversion of hundreds of prominent Old Believer merchants to the state church, they also galvanized mass protests by dissenters across the empire, who sent petitions to the emperor objecting to these violations of 'the spirit of toleration' (p. 208). The death of Nicholas I in February 1855 spelled the end of the special temporary government and its campaign of persecution; within a few months, Alexander II dismissed Bibikov and put an end to his policies. The effects of this brief but intense repression were long lasting, however: although the Old Believers communities in Preobrazhenskoe and Rogozhskoe survived, they permanently lost a substantial portion of their property, including several of their churches. In 1856, several months after Bibikov's system had been dissolved, the Russian state sealed the main altar in the Church of the Protective Veil, where the Old Believers continued to worship; it was not opened again until 1905. Mel'nikov, who had supervised the destruction of the hermitages in Nizhnii Novgorod province, became the bogeyman of Old Believer folklore, with supernatural powers of perception granted to him by his master, the devil. The autocracy continued to struggle to develop a consistent, workable policy toward religious dissent. As a separate society that was deeply rooted, popular, and widespread, the Old Belief represented a difficult challenge for the regime. After the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, Baptism and Evangelical Christianity attracted increasing numbers of Russian adherents and made the religious composition even more complex for those bureaucrats who believed that Orthodoxy was an important element of Russian statehood. Only during the revolutionary year of 1905 did the government adopt a policy of religious toleration.

The great strength of Marsden's book lies in his analysis of the government agents, their worldviews, and the inner contradictions that led these enlightened bureaucrats to advocate policies of persecution. His careful and lucid examination of archival documents in Moscow, St. Petersburg, and Kazan' clarifies the origins and ends of the special temporary government that sought to rid the empire of its schismatics. At the same time, Bibikov's system was not the only crisis of religious toleration in the reign of Nicholas I. From the beginning of his reign, Nicholas's repressive policies toward the priestly Old Believers compelled them to seek out an alternative hierarchy that could provide for their spiritual needs and the very survival of their movement; Nicholas's persecution was one of the reasons that the Old Believers in Austria established a bishopric in 1846. In 1830, long before Bibikov launched his system, Nicholas initiated mass forced deportations of Spiritual Christians (Dukhobors and Molokans) to the Caucasian frontier. In the 1830s and early 1840s, government pressure forced the flourishing priestly Old Believer monasteries along the Irgiz River to convert to the state church. In 1837, the government conducted a major inquest, which included several central provinces, to eliminate the so-called *khlysty*, or 'flagellants', whose ascetic and ecstatic mystical practices made them suspect. In the same year, Ekaterina Tatarinova (1783–1856) and several members of her mystical circle were arrested and placed in monastic confinement. Likewise, in 1839, Nicholas forced the Byzantine Catholics of most of the western provinces to join the Russian Orthodox Church. Although Nicholas developed a legal framework for 'foreign confessions', he offered no recognition for sectarians, Old Believers, or Byzantine Catholics, all of whom properly belonged in the state church. Systematic persecution of dissenters defined Nicholas's reign, and Bibikov's system did not depart from this principle.

In this monograph, Marsden has made a major contribution to understanding the history of Russian state

policy toward religion in general and the Old Belief in particular. A delight to read, this book offers an important perspective on the dilemmas that faced the modernizing Russian state and its enlightened bureaucrats in the mid-19th century. Political scientists and historians of Russia and Europe interested in the development of the secular state will find it stimulating and useful.

Notes

1. I. S. Aksakov, 'Kratkaia zapiska o strannikakh ili begunakh', *Russkii arkhiv* (April 1866), cols 627–44, here 631. [Back to \(1\)](#)

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1950>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/155544>