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In 1904-5, the Russian Empire conducted a losing military campaign against Japan, its fiercest contemporary competitor in East Asia. Often analyzed in relation to Russia’s revolutionary period or early twentieth-century geopolitical reconfigurations, this war has rarely been considered in religious terms. Betsy Perabo, professor of religious studies at Western Illinois University, has pursued this latter line of examination, probing the fascinating rhetorical and experiential histories of this interreligious conflict.

Insightful for specialists but accessible to readers of any background, Perabo’s monograph sheds new light on “the Russian Orthodox tradition” of moral military conflict that “both supplements and challenges the Christian moral language of war used in the Western just war tradition” (p. 4). Perabo also incorporates the Buddhist and civilization lenses through which the Japanese public viewed this war, providing a holistic context of the conflict. H-Net War readers should therefore consult this volume to sharpen their understanding of the variegated religious elements informing this consequential moment in Russian and Japanese history.

Readers seeking in-depth treatment of Orthodox Christian approaches to war—both theological and experiential—will find much to absorb in the first half of the book. Eschewing an abbreviated introduction that would relegate the under-studied subject of Orthodox war traditions to a few paragraphs and footnotes, Perabo develops the vital historiography, theoretical issues, and methodologies over four chapters. To develop the ancient roots of Christian war traditions, Perabo draws especially on George T. Dennis’s work on Byzantine understandings of war and holy war. The discussion then turns to James Turner Johnson’s theory of Christian holy war in the West, providing a comparative context for how Catholic and Protestant thinkers broached the moral qualms of inciting violence in the Lord’s name. Notably, Perabo underscores that Orthodox Christianity—in keeping with its limitations on introducing or standardizing doctrine—never crystallized a “canon” of just war tradition. Despite this absence of established church conventions surrounding warfare and the relative paucity of scholarship on the subject, Perabo deftly weaves together militaristic themes that permeated biblical and patristic texts, saints’ lives, and important parts of the liturgical cycle, especially the *panikhida* (memorial service) for Orthodox warriors. Additionally, Perabo identifies two key elements in the Russian Orthodox tradition: the “Christ-loving” military and believer's dual allegiances to their earthly and heavenly fatherlands. Both under-
girded Russian Orthodox perceptions and actions in the Russo-Japanese War.

Over the final six chapters that constitute the second half of the book, Perabo surveys the inter-religious Russo-Japanese War. Church periodicals, including *Tserkovnya Viedomosti* and *Missionerskie obozrenie*, provide a sense of how Russian Orthodox Church clerics articulated their views of the war and actively participated in it. Sermons and opinion pieces alike buttressed the Russian military’s “Christ-loving” status. Priest’s blessings to soldiers departing home for the front lines publicly reaffirmed the church’s support for the war. Meanwhile, the *Japan Weekly Mail*, a Tokyo-based English-language paper that ran translations of Japanese news and editorials, offers insights on views from Russia’s opponent. Importantly, Perabo’s juxtaposition of these Russian and Japanese periodicals reveals competing civilizational claims that were often mutually bound up in Christian-centered language. Notwithstanding broad public interest in Japanese culture, the Russian Church press tended to understand the war as part of God’s larger plans to bring Christianity to the island nation. While the military would not forcibly convert the civilian population, its eventual victory would underline Christ’s triumphant power such that the defeated would naturally come to accept the Lord. In stark contrast, Japanese publicists—especially those featured in the *Weekly Mail*—flipped the script by latching on to religious images intelligible to Western audiences. One article, for instance, emphasized that even without confessing the faith, Japanese soldiers and the Japanese government behaved “in a Christian way” (p. 109). Such discursive choices not only established a sense of shared morals with foreign powers, but also played on Catholic and Protestant prejudices against the “empty forms” of Orthodoxy and the absence of religious liberty in Russia (the latter especially mattered prior to Czar Nicholas II’s edict of toleration in 1905). Moreover, Perabo strikes upon Japanese participation in global constructions of race through this war.

Buddhist Rev. Seiran Ouchi, in particular, drove home this point when he insisted that “we Japanese are a white race with a yellow skin” while “Russians are a yellow race with white skin” (quoted, p. 121). Such rhetorical claims emerged from the broader anti-Western pan-Asian and pan-Islamic conceptions of the war and Japanese victory.

Occupying a space between these two clashing worlds, Nikolai, archbishop of Tokyo and Japan, emerges as a central figure of Perabo’s narrative and one who readers will find provides through his life experiences ample food for thought. Born Ivan Dmitrievich Kasatkin, Nikolai had an enduring career in Japan that extended from his appointment as a priest at the Russian consulate in Tokyo in the early 1860s through his death in 1912. Throughout his half-century in Japan, Nikolai developed a strong command of the language and local culture that earned him the esteem of his parishioners and non-Christian Japanese alike. Relying mostly on his own wits and resources, Nikolai built a strong toehold for the church in Japan by establishing a men’s seminary, ordaining indigenous ministers, and seizing on relative liberalization under the Meiji government to draw new converts. Sympathetic to his parishioners and his adopted homeland, Nikolai endeavored to reach a tenable stance on the war. In the end, he rested his position on the divergence between earthly and heavenly fatherlands. In other words, he found ecumenism and patriotism eminently compatible. Nikolai publicly approved his flock’s support for the Japanese army, partially deflecting conspiracies that he or other foreigners acted as spies. The heavenly kingdom to which Nikolai and his community belonged transcended the war and, in fact, had no bearing on their earthly political allegiances. Still, the archbishop privately wept for his native country, writing in his diary at war’s end that God had surely punished Russia for its “frenzy” of atheism. Only the promise of the “little ship” of coreligionists he
Published in 2017, *Russian Orthodoxy and the Russo-Japanese War* will undoubtedly stir readers' thoughts about Russia’s ongoing war on Ukraine. Steeped in its own inter- and intrareligious conflicts, today’s war possesses a different context than the early twentieth-century Far East, but it involves the same qualms with which Nikolai and his contemporaries battled: What does Orthodox Christianity have to say about war? How and when can it be justified? When patriotism and faith collide, which triumphs? With these and related questions in mind, readers will finish the book yearning to learn more about Nikolai and Orthodox clerics like him who operated in foreign and politically fraught contexts. We hope that Perabo and others might therefore address these subjects in future projects.

**Note**


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