

## Konstantin Pobedonotsev, The Ideologist of Russian Reaction.

*Konstantin Pobedonotsev (1827-1907) was a legal scholar who rose through the ranks of the Imperial bureaucracy and played an important role in the writing of the judicial reforms of 1864. In 1865, he became a tutor to the Imperial family and directed the education of the future Alexander III. In 1880, he was appointed procurator of the Holy Synod, an office he would hold until 1905. With the ascent to the throne of his former pupil in 1881, he attained tremendous influence within the government. Not least of his achievements was his personal supervision of the education of Nicholas II. Pobedonotsev was viewed by Russian liberals as the incarnation of reaction, a cold and sinister presence whose ideological intransigence kept Russia mired in backwardness and oppression.*

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### On Parliamentary Democracy:

What is this freedom by which so many minds are agitated, which inspires so many insensate actions, so many wild speeches, which leads the people so often to misfortune? In the democratic sense of the word, freedom is the right of political power, or, to express it otherwise, the right to participate in the government of the State... Forever extending its base, the new Democracy now aspires to universal suffrage - a fatal error, and one of the most remarkable in the history of mankind. By this means, the political power so passionately demanded by Democracy would be shattered into a number of infinitesimal bits, of which each citizen acquires a single one. What will he do with it, then? how will he employ it? In the result it has undoubtedly been shown that in the attainment of this aim Democracy violates its sacred formula of "Freedom indissolubly joined with Equality." It is shown that this apparently equal distribution of "freedom" among all involves the total destruction of equality. Each vote, representing an inconsiderable fragment of power, by itself signifies nothing; an aggregation of votes alone has a relative

value... In a Democracy, the real rulers are the dexterous manipulators of votes, with their henchmen, the mechanics who so skillfully operate the hidden springs which move the puppets in the arena of democratic elections. Men of this kind are ever ready with loud speeches lauding equality; in reality, they rule the people as any despot or military dictator might rule it... The history of mankind bears witness that the most necessary and fruitful reforms - the most durable measures - emanated from the supreme will of statesmen, or from a minority enlightened by lofty ideas and deep knowledge, and that, on the contrary, the extension of the representative principle is accompanied by an abasement of political ideas and the vulgarisation of opinions in the mass of the electors...

Among the falsest of political principles is the principle of the sovereignty of the people, the principle that all power issues from the people, and is based upon the national will - a principle which has unhappily become more firmly established since the time of the French Revolution. Thence proceeds the theory of Parliamentarism, which, up to the present day, has deluded much of the so-called "intelligentsia," and unhappily infatuated certain foolish Russians. It continues to maintain its hold on many minds with the obstinacy of a narrow fanaticism, although every day its falsehood is exposed more clearly to the world.

In what does the theory of Parliamentarism consist? It is supposed that the people in its assemblies makes its own laws, and elects responsible officers to execute its will. Such is the ideal conception. Its immediate realisation is impossible. The historical development of society necessitates that local communities increase in numbers and complexity; that separate races be assimilated, or, retaining their polities and languages, unite under a single flag, that territory extend indefinitely: under such conditions direct government by the people is impracticable. The people must, therefore, delegate its right of power to its representatives, and invest them with administrative autonomy. These representatives in turn cannot govern immediately, but are compelled to elect a still smaller number of trustworthy persons - ministers - to whom they entrust the preparation and execution of the laws, the apportionment and collection of taxes, the appointment of subordinate officials, and the disposition of the militant forces.

In the abstract this mechanism is quite symmetrical: for its proper operation many conditions are essential. The working of the political machine is based on impersonal forces constantly acting and completely balanced. It may act successfully only when the delegates of the people abdicate their personalities; when on the benches of Parliament sit mechanical fulfillers of the people's behests; when the ministers of State remain impersonal, absolute executors of the will of the majority; when the elected representatives of the people are capable of understanding precisely, and executing conscientiously, the programme of activity, mathematically expressed, which has been delivered to them. Given such conditions the machine would work exactly, and would accomplish its purpose. The law would actually embody the will of the people! administrative measures would actually emanate from Parliament: the pillars of the State

would rest actually on the elective assemblies, and each citizen would directly and consciously participate in the management of public affairs.

Such is the theory. Let us look at the practice. Even in the classic countries of Parliamentaryism it would satisfy not one of the conditions enumerated. The elections in no way express the will of the electors. The popular representatives are in no way restricted by the opinions of their constituents, but are guided by their own views and considerations, modified by the tactics of their opponents. In reality, ministers are autocratic, and they rule, rather than are ruled by, Parliament. They attain power, and lose power, not by virtue of the will of the people, but through immense personal influence, or the influence of a strong party which places them in power, or drives them from it. They dispose of the force and resources of the nation at will, they grant immunities and favours, they maintain a multitude of idlers at the expense of the people, and they fear no censure while they enjoy the support in Parliament of a majority which they maintain by the distribution of bounties from the rich tables which the State has put at their disposal. In reality, the ministers are as irresponsible as the representatives of the people. Mistakes, abuse of power, and arbitrary acts, are of daily occurrence, yet how often do we hear of the grave responsibility of a minister? It may be once in fifty years a minister is tried for his crimes, with a result contemptible when compared with the celebrity gained by the solemn procedure.

Thus the representative principle works in practice. The ambitious man comes before his fellow-citizens, and strives by every means to convince them that he more than any other is worthy of their confidence. What motives impel him to this quest? It is hard to believe that he is impelled by disinterested zeal for the public good. . . .

On the day of polling few give their votes intelligently; these are the individuals, influential electors whom it has been worth while to convince in private. The mass of electors, after the practice of the herd, votes for one of the candidates nominated by the committees. Not one exactly knows the man, or considers his character, his capacity, his convictions; all vote merely because they have heard his name so often. It would be vain to struggle against this herd. If a level-headed elector wished to act intelligently in such a grave affair, and not to give way to the violence of the committee, he would have to abstain altogether, or to give his vote for his candidate according to his conviction. However he might act, he could not prevent the election of the candidate favored by the mass of frivolous, in different, and prejudiced electors.

In theory, the elected candidate must be the favorite of the majority; in fact, he is the favorite of a minority, sometimes very small, but representing an organized force, while the majority, like sand, has no coherence, and is therefore incapable of resisting the clique and the faction. In theory, the election favors the intelligent and capable; in reality, it favors the pushing and impudent. It might be thought that education, experience, conscientiousness in work, and wisdom in affairs, would be essential requirements in the

candidate; in reality, whether these qualities exist or not, they are in no way needed in the struggle of the election, where the essential qualities are audacity, a combination of impudence and oratory, and even some vulgarity, which invariably acts on the masses; modesty, in union with delicacy of feeling and thought, is worth nothing. . . .

...By nature, men are divided into two classes - those who tolerate no power above them, and therefore of necessity strive to rule others; and those who by their nature dread the responsibility inseparable from independent action, and who shrink from any resolute exercise of will. These were born for submission, and together constitute a herd\* which follows the men of will and resolution, who form the minority. Thus the most talented persons submit willingly, and gladly entrust to stronger hands the control of affairs and the moral responsibility for their direction. Instinctively they seek a leader, and become his obedient instruments, inspired by the conviction that he will lead them to victory-and, often, to spoil. Thus all the important actions of Parliament are controlled by the leaders of the party, who inspire all decision, who lead in combat, and profit by victory. The public sessions are no more than a spectacle for the mass. Speeches are delivered to sustain the fiction of Parliamentaryism, but seldom a speech by itself affects the decision of Parliament in a grave affair. Speechmaking serves for the glory of orators, for the increase of their popularity, and the making of their careers; only on rare occasions does it affect the distribution of votes. Majorities and minorities are usually decided before the session begins. Such is the complicated mechanism of the Parliamentary farce; such is the great political lie which dominates our age. . . .

Such is the Parliamentary institution, exalted as the summit and crown of the edifice of State. It is sad to think that even in Russia there are men who aspire to the establishment of this falsehood among us; that our professors glorify to their young pupils representative government as the ideal of political science; that our newspapers pursue it in their articles and feuilletons, under the name of justice and order, without troubling to examine without prejudice the working of the parliamentary machine. Yet even where centuries have sanctified its existence, faith already decays; the Liberal intelligence exalts it, but the people groans under its despotism, and recognizes its falsehood. We may not see, but our children and grand children assuredly will see, the overthrow of this idol, which contemporary thought in its vanity continues still to worship. . . .

## On "Freedom of the Press:"

In our age the judgment of others has assumed an organized form, and calls itself Public Opinion. Its organ and representative is the Press. In truth, the importance of the Press is immense, and may be regarded as the most characteristic fact of our time - more characteristic even than our remarkable discoveries and inventions in the realm of

technical science. No government, no law, no custom can withstand its destructive activity when, from day to day, through the course of years, the Press repeats and disseminates among the people its condemnations of institutions or of men.

What is the secret of this strength? Certainly not the novelties and sensations with which the newspaper is filled, but its declared policy--the political and philosophical ideas propagated in its articles, selection and classification of its news and rumours, and the peculiar illumination which it casts upon them. The newspaper has usurped the position of judicial observer of the events of the day; it judges not only the actions and words of men, but affects a knowledge of their unexpressed opinions, their intentions, and their enterprises; it praises and condemns at discretion; it incites some, threatens others; drags to the pillory one, and others exalts as idols to be adored and examples worthy of the emulation of all. In the name of Public Opinion it bestows rewards on some, and punishes others with the severity of excommunication. The question naturally occurs: Who are these representatives of this terrible power. Public Opinion? Whence is derived their right and authority to rule in the name of the community, to demolish existing institutions, and to proclaim new ideals of ethics and legislation?

But no one attempts to answer this question; all talk loudly of the liberty of the Press as the first and essential element of social well-being. Even in Russia, so libeled by the lying Press of Europe, such words are heard. Our so-called Slavophiles, with amazing inconsistency, share the same delusion, although their avowed object is to reform and renovate the institutions of their country upon a historic basis. Having joined the chorus of Liberals, in alliance with the propagandists of revolution, they proclaim exactly in the manner of the West: "Public Opinion-that is, the collective thought, guided by the natural love of right in all - is the final judge in all matters of public interest; therefore no restriction upon freedom of speech can be allowed, for such restriction can only express the tyranny of the minority over the will of the mass."

Such is a current proposition of the newest Liberalism. It is accepted by many in good faith, and there are few who, having troubled to analyze it, have discerned how it is based upon falsehood and self-deception. It conflicts with the first principles of logic, for it is based on the fallacious premise that the opinions of the public and of the Press are identical.

To test the validity of this claim, it is only needful to consider the origin of newspapers, and the characters of their makers.

Any vagabond babbler or unacknowledged genius, any enterprising tradesman, with his own money or with the money of others, may found a newspaper, even a great newspaper. He may attract a host of writers and feuilletonists, ready to deliver judgment on any subject at a moment's notice; he may hire illiterate reporters to keep him supplied with

rumors and scandals. His staff is then complete. From that day he sits in judgment on all the world, on ministers and administrators, on literature and art, on finance and industry. . .

This phenomenon is worthy of close inspection, for we find in it the most incongruous product of modern culture, the more incongruous where the principles of the new Liberalism have taken root, where the sanction of election, the authority of the popular will, is needed for every institution, where the ruling power is vested in the hands of individuals, and derived from the suffrages of the majority in the representative assemblies. For the journalist with a power comprehending all things, requires no sanction. He derives his authority from no election, he receives support from no one. His newspaper becomes an authority in the State, and for this authority no endorsement is required. The man in the street may establish such an organ and exercise the concomitant authority with an irresponsibility enjoyed by no other power in the world. That this is in no way exaggeration there are innumerable proofs. How often have superficial and unscrupulous journalists paved the way for revolution, fomented irritation into enmity, and brought about desolating wars! For conduct such as this a monarch would lose his throne, a minister would be disgraced, impeached, and punished; but the journalist stands dry above the waters he has disturbed, from the ruin he has caused he rises triumphant, and briskly continues his destructive work.

This is by no means the worst. When a judge has power to dishonor us, to deprive us of our property and of our freedom, he receives his power from the hands of the State only after such prolonged labor and experience as qualify him for his calling. His power is restricted by rigorous laws, his judgments are subject to revision by higher powers, and his sentence may be altered or commuted. The journalist has the fullest power to defame and dishonor me, to injure my material interests, even to restrict my liberty by attacks which force me to leave my place of abode. These judicial powers he has usurped; no higher authority has conferred them upon him; he has never proven by examination his fitness to exercise them; he has in no way shown his trustworthiness or his impartiality; his court is ruled by no formal procedure: and from his judgment there lies no appeal...

It is hard to imagine a despotism more irresponsible and violent than the despotism of printed words. Is it not strange and irrational, then, that those who struggle most for the preservation of this despotism are the impassioned champions for freedom, the ferocious enemies of legal restrictions and of all interference by the established authority. We cannot help remembering those wise men who went mad because they knew of their wisdom.

On the Nature of Power:

. . . In human souls there exists a force of moral gravity which draws them one to another; and which, made manifest in the spiritual interaction of souls, answers an organic need. Without this force mankind would be as a heap of sand, without any bond, dispersed by every wind on every side. By this inherent force, without preparatory accord, are men united in society. It impels them out of the crowd of men to seek for leaders with whom to commune, whom to obey, and whose direction to seek. Inspired by a moral principle, this instinct acquires the value of a creative force, uniting and elevating the people to worthy deeds and to great endurance...

To live without power is impossible. After the need of communion the need of power is of all feelings most deeply rooted in the spiritual nature of man. Since the day duality entered into his soul, since the day the knowledge of good and evil was vouchsafed to him, and the love of good and justice rose in his soul in eternal conflict with evil and injustice, for him there has been no salvation save to seek sustenance and reconciliation in a high judge of this conflict; in a living incarnation of the principle of order and of truth. And, whatever may be the disenchantment, the betrayal, the afflictions which humanity has suffered from power, while men shall yearn for good and truth, and remember their helplessness and duality, they can never cease to believe in the ideal of power, and to repeat their efforts for its realization. Today, as in ancient times, the foolish say in their hearts: There is no God, no truth, no good, no evil; and gather around them pupils equally foolish, proclaiming atheism and anarchy. But the great mass of mankind stands firm in its faith in the supreme principle of life, and, through tears and bloodshed, as the blind seeking a guide, seeks for power with imperishable hope, notwithstanding eternal betrayal and disillusion.

Thus the work of power is a work of uninterrupted usefulness, and in reality a work of renunciation. How strange these words must seem beside the current conception of power! It is natural, it would seem, for men to flee and to avoid renunciation. Yet all seek power, all aspire to it; for power men strive together, they resort to crime, they destroy one another, and when they attain power they rejoice and triumph. Power seeks to exalt itself, and words pass through our heads as something in no way concerning us, as Yet the immutable, only true ideal of power is embodied in the words of Christ: "Whosoever of you will be the first shall be servant of all." These words pass through our heads as something in no way concerning us, as especially addressed to a vanished community in Palestine. In reality, they apply to all power, however great, which, in the depth of conscience, does not recognize that the higher its throne, the wider the sphere of its activity, the heavier must become its fetters, the more widely must open before it the roll of social evils, stained by the weeping of pity and woe, and the louder must sound the crying and sobbing of injustice which demands redress. The first necessity of power is faith in itself and in its mission. Happy is power when this faith is combined with a recognition of duty and of moral responsibility! Unhappy is it when it lacks this consciousness and leans upon itself alone! Then begins the decay which leads to loss of faith, and in the end to disintegration and destruction.

Power is the depository of truth, and needs, above all things, men of truth, of clear intellects, of strong understandings, and of sincere speech, who know the limits of yes and no, and never transcend them, whose thoughts develop clearly in their minds, and are clearly expressed by their words. Men of this nature only are the firm support of power, and its faithful delegates. Happy is the power which can distinguish such men, appreciate their merit, and firmly sustain them! Unhappy is the power which wearies of such natures, promoting men of complaisant character, flexible opinions, and flattering tongues!

## On Education:

... Take, for instance, the phrases, repeated unto weariness among us, and everywhere: Free Education, Obligatory Attendance, the Restriction of Child-Labour During the Years of Obligatory Attendance. There can be no question that learning is light, and that ignorance is darkness, but in the application of this rule we must take care to be ruled by common-sense, and so to abstain from violating that freedom, of which we hear so much, and which our legislators so ruthlessly restrict. Inspired by an idle saying that the schoolmaster won the battle of Sadowa, we multiply our model schools and schoolmasters, ignoring the requirements both of children and of parents, of climate, and of nature itself. We refuse to recognize, what experience has shown, that the school is a deceptive formality where its roots have taken no hold among the people, where it fails to meet the people's necessities, and to accord with the economy of its life. That school alone is suited to the people which pleases them, and the enlightening influence of which they see and feel; but all schools are repugnant to them to which they are driven by force, under threats of punishment, or which are organized, in ignorance of the people's tastes and necessities, on the fantasies of doctrinaires. In such schools the work becomes mechanical; the school resembles an office with all the formality and weariness which office life involves. The legislator is satisfied when he has founded and organized in certain localities a certain number of similar institutions adorned with the inscription - School. For these establishments money must be raised; attendance is secured under penalty; a great staff of inspectors is organized whose duty it is to see that parents and poor and working men send their children to school at the established age. Already all Governments have transgressed the line at which public instruction begins to show its reverse side. Everywhere official education flourishes at the expense of that real education in the sphere of domestic, professional, and social life which is a vital element of success.

But infinite evil has been wrought by the prevalent confusion of knowledge and power. Seduced by the fantasy of universal enlightenment, we confuse education with a certain sum of knowledge acquired by completing the courses of schools, skillfully elaborated in the studies of pedagogues. Having organized our school thus, we isolate it from life, and secure by force the attendance of children whom we subject to a process of intellectual



training in accordance with our program. But we ignore or forget that the mass of the children whom we educate must earn their daily bread, a labour for which the abstract notions on which our programs are constructed will be vain; while in the interests of some imaginary knowledge we withhold that training in productive labour which alone will bear fruit. Such are the results of our complex educational system, and such are the causes of the aversion with which the masses regard our schools, for which they can find no use.

The vulgar conception of education is true enough, but unhappily it is disregarded in the organization of the modern school. In the popular mind the function of a school is to teach the elements of reading, writing, and arithmetic, and, in union with these, the duty of knowing, loving, and fearing God, of loving our native land, and of honoring our parents. These are the elements of knowledge and the sentiments which together form the basis of conscience in man, and give to him the moral strength needed for the preservation of his equilibrium in life, for the maintenance of struggle with the evil impulses of his nature and with the evil sentiments and temptations of the mind. It is an unhappy day when education tears the child from the surroundings in which he first acquired the elements of his future calling, those exercises of his early years through which he acquires, almost unconsciously, the taste capacity for work. The boy who wishes to become a bachelor or the master of arts must begin his studies at a certain age, and in due time pass through a given course of knowledge; but the vast majority of children must learn to live by the work of their hands. For such work physical training is needed from the earliest age. To close the door to such preparation, that time may be saved for the teaching of schools, is to place a burden upon the lives of the masses who have to struggle for their daily bread, and to shackle in the family the natural development of those economic forces which together constitute the capital of the commonwealth. The sailor qualifies for his calling by spending his boyhood on the sea; the miner prepares for his work by early years spent in the subterranean passages of mines. To the agriculturist it is even more essential that he shall become accustomed for his future work, that he may learn to love it in childhood, in the presence of nature, beside his herds and his plough, in the midst of his fields and his meadows.

Yet we waste our time discussing courses for elementary schools and obligatory programs which are to be the bases of a finished education. One would include an encyclopedic instruction under the barbarous term *Rodinovyedenie* (knowledge of the fatherland); another insists on the necessity for the agriculturist to know physics, chemistry, agricultural economy, and medicine; while a third demands a course of political economy and jurisprudence. But few reflect that by tearing the child from the domestic hearth for such a lofty destiny, they deprive his parents of a productive force which is essential to the maintenance of the home, while by raising before his eyes the mirage of illusory learning they corrupt his mind, and subject it to the temptations of vanity and conceit.

Source: K. P. Pobyedonotseff, *Reflections of a Russian Statesman*, trans. R. C. Long (London: Grant Richard & Co., 1898). Revised by Nathaniel Knight.