

‘That the progress of the Word be not hindered’: William Nicolson and the British and Foreign Bible Society in Russia, 1869-1897¹

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Introduction

In 1897 a Russian reporter in St Petersburg covered the farewell to William Nicolson, who was retiring from his work for the British and Foreign Bible Society. The reporter stated:

Pastor Nicolson arrived at St Petersburg in 1869 as the representative of the Bible Society. His activity is well known here, and in the course of these long years, without sparing his health and strength, he has travelled the length and breadth of Russia to distribute the Holy Scriptures.²

Nicolson, said the report, was respected for his ‘highly humanitarian work’.³ The detailed history of the transdenominational British and Foreign Bible Society (BFBS) from its beginning in 1804, written early in the twentieth century by William Canton, described the arrival of Nicolson in St Petersburg to assume leadership of BFBS activities across a wide geographical area as heralding a ‘new chapter in Russian Bible history’. Canton notes that in 1869 ‘a native Russian Bible Society was established with the direct sanction of the Czar’.⁴ According to Stephen Batalden, in his work on the BFBS in Russia, Nicolson made a crucial contribution to ‘the efficient transformation of the Petersburg agency into a modern Eurasian center for multi-lingual biblical translation and dissemination’.⁵ Despite many pressures, which will be examined, the BFBS was able to expand its work. Batalden argues that Nicolson deserves much of the credit for the Society’s position in Russia in the later nineteenth century, and notes he has

¹ I am grateful to Dr Toivo Pilli, Director of Baptist and Anabaptist Studies at the International Baptist Theological Study Centre, Amsterdam, for the opportunity to present this material at a conference in April 2018.

² *The Bible Society Monthly Reporter*, January 1898, pp. 10-11. BSA G1/3/28. BSA references are to the Bible Society archive in Cambridge University Library. I am grateful to Dr Onesimus Ngundu, the Society Librarian, for his help.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ William Canton, *A History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Vol. III (London: John Murray, 1910), p. 343.

⁵ Stephen K. Batalden, ‘The BFBS Petersburg Agency and Russian Biblical Translation, 1856-1875’, in Stephen Batalden, Kathleen Cann and John Dean, *Sowing the Word: The Cultural Impact of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1804–2004* (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2004), pp. 182-3.

had no published biographical treatment.⁶ This examination seeks to begin the process of understanding Nicolson's place in 'Russian Bible history'.

From Shetland to St Petersburg

William Nicolson was born on 18 October 1827, on the island of Unst, which is the furthest north island of the Shetlands, the most northerly islands of Scotland. He was the eldest of nine children. His father was a merchant seaman. Education in Unst was limited in this period, and one of William's contemporaries, the daughter of the local medical doctor, spoke of William as 'self-taught, self-made'. She continued: 'I remember how our father's bookshelves [Laurence Edmondston, the doctor] were ransacked to provide him [Nicolson] with reading. He had a great gift of languages and our father was amazed at the progress he made.'⁷ Laurence Edmondston himself spoke several languages and was evidently impressed by someone whom he saw following in his footsteps.⁸ From Shetland, William Nicolson moved to the Edinburgh area, where he worked in a bookseller's business. He became a member of a Congregational church, where George Cullen was minister. Cullen had close links with the Bible Society of Scotland, and so Nicolson was introduced to aspects of Bible Society endeavours. Another minister in the church was William Swan, who from 1818 to 1841 had served with the London Missionary Society in Russia. Swan was one of the translators of the Bible into the Mongolian language.⁹ In this period, therefore, Nicolson, then in his early twenties, was hearing about life in Russia.

Perhaps as a result of the preaching of the ministers in his church, Nicolson felt a call to Congregational ministry. He entered the Congregational Theological Academy, Glasgow (later Theological Hall, Edinburgh), in 1854. Alongside the Congregational training, Nicolson was a student at Edinburgh University, gaining an MA. He served for one year in the Congregational church in Peterhead, Scotland, and his first settled pastorate was in the north of England, in Amble, where he remained for ten

⁶ Stephen K. Batalden, 'Colportage and Distribution of Holy Scripture in Late Imperial Russia', in Robert P. Hughes and Irina Paperno, eds., *Russian Culture in Modern Times: Christianity and the Eastern Slavs*, Vol. II (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), p. 88, and p. 92, fn 19.

⁷ Jessie M.E. Saxby, 'Stray Notes from Unst', *Shetland Times*, 6 April 1907, p. 5. I am grateful to my sister and her husband, Sylvia and Monty Georgeson, who live in Shetland, for their help.

⁸ Margaret Stuart Robertson, *Sons and Daughters of Shetland, 1800-1900* (Lerwick: The Shetland Publishing Company, 1991), p. 41. See also J. Laughton Johnston, *Victorians 60 Degrees North: The Story of the Edmondstons and Saxbys of Shetland* (Lerwick: Shetland Times, 2007).

⁹ William D. McNaughton, *Early Congregational Independency in Lowland Scotland*, Vol. I (Glasgow: Congregational Federation in Scotland, 2005), pp. 336-337, 585; cf. *Scottish Congregational Magazine*, 1876, p. 626. For more on Swan and his contemporaries in Russia, see Charles R. Bawden, *Shamans, Lamas and Evangelicals: The English Missionaries in Siberia* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1985).

years.¹⁰ As well as being a dedicated pastor, Nicolson found time for academic interests. He submitted an essay on ‘Science and the Gospel’ to an Anglican and International Christian Association connected with ethics and science and was awarded a prize of fifty guineas for the best essay.¹¹ Nicolson also began to explore whether his ability in languages could be put to good effect. In July 1869 the main Committee of the BFBS discussed a letter they had received from Nicolson applying for the post of BFBS Agent in Berlin, where there was a vacancy. His letter outlined grounds which led him to believe he possessed ‘the needful qualifications for such an office’. He spoke of knowing German, French, Danish, Swedish, and Icelandic.¹² The BFBS Committee replied to ask if Nicolson would consider going to Russia, and after several interviews Nicolson was given high recommendations and appointed to the BFBS Agency based in St Petersburg, initially on a trial basis. His position was soon made permanent and his wife, Mary, with their children, moved to Russia.¹³

Prior to Nicolson’s arrival, BFBS activity in St Petersburg had been overseen mainly on a part-time basis by people who had other responsibilities. Some, such as Richard Knill (responsible, 1826-1833), were ministers of the Congregational Chapel in St Petersburg. Others – Archibald Mirrieles (responsible, 1853-1857), William Mirrieles (1857-1865) and Andrew Muir (1860-1869) - were well-connected businessmen. Archibald Mirrieles and Muir were entrepreneurial Scots who moved to St Petersburg and set up the Muir & Mirrieles Trade Company, an import-export business which produced the Central Universal Department Store. Adalbert Eck (1865-1869) was a full-time BFBS agent, and it was when he died suddenly that there was a vacancy, which Nicolson filled.¹⁴ Andrew Muir and William Mirrieles served on a local BFBS Agency Committee in St Petersburg, which gave Nicolson support and guidance. They were also members of the Congregational Chapel (the British and American Chapel), which the Nicolson family joined. Two children came with William and Mary to Russia and four more were born in St Petersburg. The Nicolsons had a house on

¹⁰ James Ross, *A History of Congregational Independency in Scotland* (Glasgow: James MacLehose & Sons, 1900), p. 260; *The Story of the Scottish Congregational Theological Hall, 1811-1911* (Edinburgh: Morrison & Gibb, 1911), p. 5; Harry Escott, *A History of Scottish Congregationalism* (Glasgow: Congregational Union of Scotland, 1960), p. 369; William D. McNaughton, *The Scottish Congregational Ministry, 1794-1993* (Glasgow: Congregational Union of Scotland, 1993), p. 120; Annie Phillips, *A Hundred Years of Congregationalism in Amble* (Amble: Congregational Church, 1948), p. 7.

¹¹ ‘Prize Essay’, *Newcastle Journal*, 12 January 1870, p. 3.

¹² Minutes of the Committee, 5 July 1869. BSA/B1/60.

¹³ Minutes of the Committee, 19 July 1869; 2 August 1869; 4 October 1869; 7 March 1870. BSA/B1/60-61.

¹⁴ Batalden, ‘The BFBS Petersburg Agency and Russian Biblical Translation, 1856-1875’, pp. 174, 182-3; Stephen K. Batalden, ‘Revolution and Emigration: The Russian Files of the British and Foreign Bible Society, 1917-1970’, in Janet Hartley, ed., *The Use of British Archives in the Study of Russian History* (London: Mansell Publishing, 1986), p. 162.

Vasil'evskii ostrov, an area (an island) where most of the British business community lived.¹⁵ The 1870 BFBS *Annual Report* noted that Nicolson had settled and was 'showing much diligence in making himself acquainted with the responsibilities of his new office'.¹⁶

The responsibilities were enormous. Nicolson had oversight of BFBS activity in central Russia, including Moscow, through the valley of the Volga, into Siberia, and in Finland and the Baltic countries. Odessa was a separate centre of BFBS work. The task did not seem daunting, however, to the newly-arrived Nicolson. He wrote letters to the two joint Secretaries of the BFBS in London in late 1869 and early 1870 describing 'excellent prospects as regards the circulation of the Scriptures in this vast Empire'. He anticipated 'a pretty large purchase of Russian Scriptures' from the Holy Synod, the governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church. He had in mind about 15,000 New Testaments and other portions of Scripture.¹⁷ The BFBS had adopted in 1862 the Holy Synod's New Testament translation and the St Petersburg Agency became the Synod's largest purchaser of Scriptures, largely the New Testament, in the last half century of the Russian Empire.¹⁸ Nicolson knew that in order to relate to the Orthodox Church, to translators of Scripture and to BFBS 'colporteurs' who sold the Scriptures, he needed to speak Russian, and with the help of a Russian tutor he gained a command of the language. As early as February 1870 Andrew Muir was able to report to Samuel Bergne, BFBS joint Secretary, about Nicolson's 'conscientiousness and plain dealing', although Muir had also become aware that Nicolson might be 'deficient in tact'.¹⁹ Perhaps in response, Nicolson wrote to Bergne later in 1870 to assure him that 'I shall be the last man to place the Society in an ambiguous position by trespassing knowingly any ordinance of the [Russian] Empire either civil or ecclesiastical'.²⁰ Nicolson was becoming aware of some of the sensitivities of his position as an Agent of a foreign religious enterprise.

¹⁵ Marie-Louise Karttunen, 'Making a Communal World: English Merchants in Imperial St Petersburg' (Helsinki: University of Helsinki PhD Thesis, 2004), p. 143. For Muir and Mirrielees, see Harvey Pitcher, *Muir and Mirrielees* (Cromer: Swallow House Books, 1994). See also Thomas Flynn, *The Western Christian Presence in the Russias and Qājār Persia, c.1760–c.1870* (Boston: Brill, 2016), p. 465. Flynn confuses Archibald and William Mirrielees.

¹⁶ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1870, Vol. XXIV p. 104. BSA/G1/1/24.

¹⁷ William Nicolson to Charles Jackson, 23 December 1869, and to Samuel Bergne, 7 January 1870. Agent's Book. BSA D 1/7 No. 125.

¹⁸ Batalden, 'The BFBS Petersburg Agency and Russian Biblical Translation, 1856-1875', pp. 179, 191.

¹⁹ Andrew Muir to Samuel Bergne, 17 February 1870. Agent's Book. BSA D 1/7 No. 125.

²⁰ William Nicolson to Samuel Bergne, 4 October 1870. Agent's Book. BSA D 1/7 No. 137.

Part of a ‘Great Drama’

As Nicolson settled into his role in St Petersburg, he was concerned about misconceptions in Britain regarding Russia. Nicolson noted that there had been an article in *The Scotsman* newspaper in October 1869, and picked up by other British newspapers, headed ‘Expulsion of the Bible from Russia’. The author gave the impression that the Russian government was putting obstacles in the way of the BFBS and Nicolson believed such a negative perception could hinder BFBS work.²¹ The article accepted that Bibles were being published in Russia, but stated that the BFBS was not to be allowed to introduce Bibles into Russia ‘because the right of publishing the Bible for the use of the Orthodox is enjoyed by the Holy Synod alone’.²² Nicolson wrote to *The Scotsman* and his letter was published in November 1869. He alleged that the article had ‘put an entirely false colouring on the state of the case’. It was true that the Orthodox Holy Synod possessed in Russia an exclusive right to print the Scriptures. But this, he noted, was similar to the situation that had prevailed until recently in Britain, with certain firms and public bodies having the vested right to print Bibles. The BFBS had been purchasing Scriptures from the Synod for distribution. Nicolson said he would like to see greater freedom, but it was a perversion of the situation to say the Bible had been ‘expelled’ from Russia.²³

Clearly the monopoly by the Holy Synod was a limitation. A BFBS-sponsored translation of the Old Testament into Russian was at an advanced stage as Nicolson took up his post and the text was submitted to a committee of the Holy Synod to seek permission for printing. The Synod had itself been working on an Old Testament translation into Russian. Nicolson considered it ‘a sort of hodge podge between the Hebrew and Septuagint’.²⁴ But Nicolson was determined to stress the freedom that he was experiencing to do his work. His published BFBS report in 1871 emphasised that the authorities in Russia were ‘well disposed’ and that he had experienced ‘the utmost courtesy from the Holy Synod’. Nicolson also spoke of local co-operation, for example with Bible organisations under Lutheran auspices in Russia and with the Russian Bible Society. These bodies were drawing most of their supplies from the BFBS in St Petersburg at 20% discount. With his interest in languages, Nicolson was eager to place on record that in one year over 90,000 copies of parts of Scripture had been distributed from the St Petersburg depot in about thirty languages.²⁵ As an indication of his vision,

²¹ William Nicolson to Samuel Bergne, 25 September 1869 and 5 Oct 1869, and to Charles Jackson, 20 November 1869. BSA D 1/7 No. 125.

²² ‘Expulsion of the Bible from Russia’, *The Scotsman*, 11 October 1869, p. 6.

²³ William Nicolson to the editor, ‘The Bible in Russia’, *The Scotsman*, 20 November 1869. From St P.

²⁴ William Nicolson to R.B. Girdlestone, BFBS translation department, 3 December 1870. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 8.

²⁵ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1871, Vol. XXV, pp. 134-136. BSA/G1/1/25.

he wanted to print 10,000 copies of the New Testament in Estonian.²⁶ He was to make significant progress with translation into Estonian dialects. Similar optimism was displayed a year later. Having overseen the circulation of 145,000 parts of Scripture, Nicolson concluded his 1872 report by suggesting that Russia was 'destined in God's providence to play some important part in the great drama of the world's history'.²⁷ The BFBS was part of that drama.

This optimism also characterised Nicolson's letters to the BFBS Secretaries. He wrote:

I have great hopes of doing great things, if the Lord will, in 1872. I think that I see the light of God's Truth dawning upon this great Empire, and if changes go forward as rapidly as they have done for the last 10 years, we may live to see a mighty Reformation.²⁸

At the same time, he urged 'due caution and circumspection'. He had an aim: 'that the progress of the Word be not hindered'.²⁹ Nicolson was pleased that he was in touch with some of the Russian aristocracy. Count Modest Korff was buying copies of the gospels from the BFBS in thousands. In some cases, Nicolson was gifting copies, where he felt there was particular need, such as for prisons or hospitals. Korff thanked Nicolson for a gift of 180 New Testaments to be distributed to women 'about to be liberated from prison'. Korff had informed Princess Eugenia Maximilianovna of Oldenburg about the gift, and the Princess, who was active in care for women prisoners, expressed her 'sincere thanks' to the BFBS.³⁰ Among other early contacts made by Nicolson were Hermann Dalton, pastor of the German Reformed Church in St Petersburg, and Maria G. Peuker, who took an interest in recruiting and training colporteurs, and whom Nicolson described as someone who had 'done much in the way of evangelical effort for St Petersburg'.³¹

Soon Nicolson began to travel more extensively. Within Russia his journeys took in the Volga region and parts of Siberia. In Kazan, for instance, a major centre for eastern Russia, he met with translators and other academics.³² Nicolson took the view in 1873 that 'in the whole range of the [Bible] Society's operations' there was no country in which developments in its work had equalled that in Russia for 'breadth and rapidity'.³³ Batalden speaks of how the mass publishing of Scripture in Russia, a phenomenon

²⁶ Minutes of Committee, 21 August 1871. BSA/B1/64.

²⁷ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1872, Vol XXVI, pp. 105-7. BSA/G1/1/26.

²⁸ William Nicolson to Charles Jackson, 19 January 1872. Agent's Book. BSA D 1/7 No. 137.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ William Nicolson to Samuel Bergne, 20 January 1872. Agent's Book. BSA D 1/7 No. 137.

³¹ William Nicolson to Charles Jackson, 4 October 1870. Agent's Book. BSA D 1/7 No. 125.

³² Canton, *History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Vol. III, pp. 349-50.

³³ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1873, Vol. XXVII, pp. 138-9. BSA/G1/1/27.

which he argues has been largely overlooked, ‘served as a powerful mechanism for the expansion of literacy and popular piety’.³⁴ Nicolson’s expanding work was connected not only with the spread of literacy in Russia, but also with the advance of the evangelical movement. In April 1874 he reported to the BFBS in London on the preaching in St Petersburg of Lord Radstock, an Englishman who, said Nicolson, was ‘labouring here amongst the Russian nobility with a considerable measure of success’. Count Alexei Bobrinsky, noted Nicolson, was willing to finance distribution of Scriptures.³⁵ Through Bobrinsky, Russian Minister of Transport at the time, the BFBS also secured free passage on the expanding rail network for colporteurs.³⁶ A month later Nicolson wrote again about ‘Lord Radstock’s labours’, and ‘the consequent increased attention’ to the Scriptures.³⁷

The BFBS-sponsored translation of the whole Bible into Russian was completed by 1874, but permission was not granted for it to be circulated in Russia. The Holy Synod was about to complete its translation, which included the Apocrypha, and in part the embargo on the BFBS translation, which did not include the apocryphal books, was because of dispute about this issue.³⁸ However, when Grand Duchess Marie, daughter of Emperor Alexander II, married Alfred, son of Queen Victoria, Nicolson was one of a delegation that presented the couple with a special copy of the BFBS edition of the Bible in Russian.³⁹ Robert Girdlestone, head of the BFBS translation department in London, encouraged Nicolson to use appropriate opportunities to inform visiting dignitaries about the BFBS in Russia, but warned the enthusiastic Nicolson that ‘a wedding is not the time for any lengthy address on Biblical statistics’.⁴⁰ On the day after the presentation Nicolson wrote to Girdlestone to reassure him that all had gone well, with the Grand Duchess ‘very much interested’ in the Bible.⁴¹ Nicolson later drafted a memorandum which was presented to Alexander II by A.C. Tait, the Archbishop of Canterbury, and other church leaders, when the Emperor was in England. It stated that the BFBS was aware of the Synodal translation of the Old Testament and that it might seem ‘needless, if not an act of presumption’ for the BFBS to offer its translation. But the memorandum expressed the belief that the BFBS’s contribution would be ‘a boon and a blessing’. Mention was

³⁴ Batalden, ‘Colportage and Distribution of Holy Scripture in Late Imperial Russia’, pp. 83, 85.

³⁵ William Nicolson to Samuel Bergne, 24 April 1874. BSA D 1/7 No. 149. For more on this see Edmund Heier, *Religious Schism in the Russian Aristocracy, 1860-1900* (The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1970).

³⁶ Batalden, ‘Colportage and Distribution of Holy Scripture in Late Imperial Russia’, p. 85.

³⁷ William Nicolson to R.B. Girdlestone, 21 May 1874. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 10.

³⁸ William Kean, *The Bible in Russia* (London: BFBS Centenary Pamphlets, No. VII, 1904), pp. 12-13.

³⁹ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1874, Vol. XXVIII, pp. 82-3. BSA/G1/1/28.

⁴⁰ R.B. Girdlestone to William Nicolson, 6 January 1874. BSA E3/2/4. In 1877 Girdlestone became the first Principal of Wycliffe Hall, Oxford.

⁴¹ William Nicolson to R.B. Girdlestone, 29 January 1874. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 10.

made of the fact that the BFBS was circulating over 350,000 copies of the Scriptures in the Russian Empire.⁴²

Conflicting Convictions

It did seem in the second half of the 1870s that religious toleration was increasing in Russia. An item appeared in *The Scotsman* which suggested the influence of Nicolson. It reported:

Lord Radstock conducted services during the spring in the English Congregational Chapel in St Petersburg, and in connection with these there was indicated an amount of religious toleration in high circles which was unexpected, and bids fair for more extended religious toleration.⁴³

In February 1875 Nicolson wrote to Samuel Bergne to say that the Holy Synod had again ruled that the BFBS translation of the Old Testament was not going to be allowed to be distributed in Russia. Nicolson advised Bergne not to be too optimistic about any change as 'the Synod and the [Orthodox] Priesthood are very strong' and the Emperor was not known to move 'against these powers'.⁴⁴ It was against this background that Nicolson asked advice from Bergne about a request from the very wealthy Colonel Vasily Pashkov, an aide-de-camp of the Emperor, who had embraced evangelical spirituality through Radstock. Pashkov had told Nicolson that he hoped there could be a printing of parts of the New Testament with 'the verses which refer to the method of salvation underlined in red'. Nicolson wondered if the BFBS would want their colporteurs distributing those.⁴⁵ The question was discussed in the BFBS Editorial Committee in London. They concluded they could not support Pashkov's scheme.⁴⁶ Girdlestone wrote to Nicolson to ask him to decline Pashkov's suggestion 'with every mark of respect'.⁴⁷ A core conviction of the BFBS was that Bibles must be without additional note or comment. This was seen to include underlining.

Nicolson hoped to reconcile differing convictions, but this was not easy. He wrote to the BFBS Secretaries in April 1876 to report that Count Korff had been to see him and had argued that BFBS should buy the Synod's version of the whole Bible. Nicolson was not convinced.⁴⁸ The BFBS Editorial Committee discussed Nicolson's letter. The Synod's version, with

⁴² BFBS *Annual Report*, 1875, Vol. XXIX, pp. 102-3. BSA/G1/1/29.

⁴³ 'Russia', *The Scotsman*, 14 July 1874, p. 2. For a wider discussion, see Paul W. Werth, *The Tsar's Foreign Faiths: Toleration and the Fate of Religious Freedom in Imperial Russia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

⁴⁴ William Nicolson to Samuel Bergne, 10 February 1875, BSA E3 1 /4, No. 11. Canton, Vol. III, pp. 347-8.

⁴⁵ William Nicolson to Samuel Bergne, 23 March 1875. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 11.

⁴⁶ Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 31 March 1875. BSA C17/1/11.

⁴⁷ R.B. Girdlestone to William Nicolson, 8 April 1875. BSA E3/2/4.

⁴⁸ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 5 April 1876. BSA E3 1 /4, No. 12.

the Apocrypha, was described in Russian official circles as ‘more adapted to the requirements of Orthodox Russians’.⁴⁹ This apparent set-back for the BFBS was included in its 1877 *Report*.⁵⁰ The result was that emphasis continued to be placed by Nicolson on distributing the Synodal New Testament. Despite the disagreement with Colonel Pashkov over underlining texts, Nicolson was in close touch with him, as the Pashkov circle was involved in large-scale evangelistic and social endeavours.⁵¹ Nicolson reported in 1877 on the Society for the Encouragement of Moral and Religious Reading, established in the previous year with Pashkov as President, to circulate Scriptures, books, and tracts. The BFBS was offering Pashkov a substantial discount on Scriptures and Nicolson hoped the Society ‘might do something towards solving the great unsolved problem of Bible work in Russia’ – reaching the widely-scattered ‘mass of the people’.⁵² Heier saw in the Society unparalleled potential for religious and ethical change.⁵³

Over the course of several months in 1877-78 Nicolson wrestled with what to do about the restrictions placed on him by the Holy Synod. His hope was that a version of the Synodal Bible without the Apocrypha could be printed by the Synod.⁵⁴ He was also keen to find out what Russian scholars of Hebrew had to say about the Synod’s translation and he reported to the BFBS Secretaries in January 1878 about a scholarly article on this in the *Orthodox Review*. The author, Mikhail Nicolsky, compared the BFBS Russian version of the Old Testament with the Synod’s version. The article was severely critical of the BFBS version and in the light of this Nicolson suggested significant revision might be needed. However, the article also suggested the Synodal version was no better.⁵⁵ Nicolson translated the article into English and passed it to the BFBS Editorial Committee.⁵⁶ In the meantime Nicolson was receiving sometimes contradictory advice from his St Petersburg circle. Count Korff continued to be in favour of simply buying the Synod’s version, but Nicolson told the BFBS Secretaries in May 1878 that Korff, while ‘earnest and eager as to the furtherance of God’s work’, did not always combine ‘the necessary judgment with eagerness’. In the same month Radstock spoke what he understood was a tentative offer by the Synod

⁴⁹ Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 31 May 1876. BSA C17/1/12.

⁵⁰ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1876, Vol. XXX, p. 77. BSA/G1/1/30.

⁵¹ See Sharyl Corrado, ‘The Gospel in Society: Pashkovite Social Outreach in Late Imperial Russia’, in S. Corrado and Toivo Pilli, eds., *Eastern European Baptist History: New Perspectives* (Prague: International Baptist Theological Seminary, 2007), pp. 52-70.

⁵² BFBS *Annual Report*, 1877, Vol. XXXI, p. 109. BSA/G1/1/31.

⁵³ Heier, *Religious Schism in the Russian Aristocracy*, p. 118.

⁵⁴ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 20 September 1877; 8 January 1878. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 13.

⁵⁵ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 31 January 1878. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 14.

⁵⁶ Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 6 March 1878. BSA C17/1/12.

to print the Bible without the Apocrypha and hoped the BFBS would quickly act on this 'as the offer may soon be withdrawn'.⁵⁷

During the summer of 1878 Nicolson was seeking to make direct contact with Nicolsky, the author of article in the *Orthodox Review*.⁵⁸ Nicolson had ascertained that Nicolsky, who was a Professor at the Orthodox Moscow Theological Academy, was well acquainted with Hebrew and Syriac. Contact was made, and Radstock was enthusiastic about the possibilities, but Nicolson felt too much British evangelical involvement might be a hindrance. However, Nicolson was disappointed that it seemed no-one at the BFBS in London saw the significance of the article.⁵⁹ The Moscow Theological Academy, especially under the influence of Professor Kudriavtsev, was significant in this period for its commitment to 'enlightened' Orthodox theological education.⁶⁰ As Batalden notes, on more than one occasion Nicolson was frustrated by the inability of the London BFBS office to understand the Russian context.⁶¹ In this case, as well as their apparent failure to take an interest in Nicolson's connections in the academic community, those in London seemed to have little understanding of the power of the Holy Synod. There had been a suggestion from London that Nicolson could explore the possibility of a joint revision of the Russian Old Testament by the BFBS and the Synod. Nicolson explained that the Synod was a government ministry and had no interest in a joint venture with the BFBS. Also, the possibilities for dialogue were threatened by political tensions, with what Nicolson called 'the Slavophiles here' and 'the Jingoese in Britain' intent on bringing Russia and Britain 'into a white heat of mutual hostility'. He agreed, however, that he would make enquiries with government officials. He was aware that Maria Peuker had a nephew who was assistant Minister of Public Instruction.⁶²

While these debates were going on at a higher level, Nicolson was also overseeing the work of the colporteurs in Russia, Finland, and the Baltic countries. He had been able to open a full-scale BFBS depot in Moscow. Mariia Andreeva was perhaps the best known of those who sold Scriptures there. During one visit, Nicolson had an interview with the Moscow Military

⁵⁷ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 15 May 1878; 20 May 1878. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 14; Minutes of the Committee, 29 May 1878. BSA/B1/72.

⁵⁸ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 12 June 1878, 17 July 1878. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 14. Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 26 June 1878, 31 July. BSA C17/1/13.

⁵⁹ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 30 August 1878; 16 September 1878; 21 November 1878. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 14.

⁶⁰ Sean Gillen, 'V. D. Kudriavtsev-Platonov and the Making of Russian Orthodox Theism', in Patrick Michelson and Judith Kornblatt, eds., *Thinking Orthodox in Modern Russia: Culture, History, Context* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 2014), p. 111.

⁶¹ Batalden, 'The BFBS Petersburg Agency and Russian Biblical Translation, 1856-1875', p. 194.

⁶² William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 21 November 1878. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 14. Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 27 November 1878. BSA C17/1/13.

Governor, who said he wanted several thousand copies of Scriptures for his men.⁶³ There had been a tradition of colportage in Russian villages, but Nicolson also wanted to reach industrial sites. These could be challenging: one colporteur went to a large cloth mill near Moscow and had to respond to workmen who said: ‘Why do you bring your books here? Bring us rather a large cask of brandy, which we would soon drink, and you should be paid.’⁶⁴ On occasions Nicolson had to draw on influential friends where there were serious difficulties. The governor of Tula refused BFBS colportage because of the circulation of ‘publications of a socialist or revolutionary character’. In this case Count Bobrinsky was asked by Nicolson to intervene.⁶⁵ Others who were involved in Scripture distribution included Princess Natalie Lieven and Henry Lansdell, an Anglican clergyman who became well known for his adventurous travels. He went to hospitals and convict settlements across Russia (especially Siberia) and distributed Scriptures. Nicolson was eager for the BFBS to give grants for these activities.⁶⁶ At the end of the 1870s, despite conflicting convictions on some issues, BFBS work in Russia seemed to be steadily advancing. Major opposition was, however, in store.

Responding to Orthodox Opposition

The opposition was principally led by Konstantin Pobedonostsev, who became the director, or Ober-Procurator, of the Holy Synod in 1880. He had previously been a lecturer in Moscow University, a tutor to the sons of Emperor Alexander II, both later Emperors, and he became a member of the Russian Council of State. His post in charge of the Holy Synod gave him ‘enormous influence in Russian political life’.⁶⁷ The Holy Synod included other Orthodox leaders, but Pobedonostsev’s rule was virtually absolute, especially when (as was the case from 1881 with Alexander III and then Nicholas II), the tsars were open to his philosophy, which embodied a determination to ensure that Russia and the Russian Orthodox Church was preserved from foreign religious ideas.⁶⁸ When Pobedonostsev was appointed, Nicolson began to enquire about meeting him. This soon became urgent. Nicolson had received assurance from the Holy Synod about supplying the BFBS with at least 10,000 copies of the Synodal Old

⁶³ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1878, Vol. XXXII, pp. 85, 88. BSA/G1/1/32.

⁶⁴ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1875, Vol. XXIX, pp. 105. BSA/G1/1/29.

⁶⁵ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1877, Vol. XXXI, p. 115. BSA/G1/1/31. Bobrinsky was consistently supportive, but because of political sensitivities Nicolson sometimes asked that the Count’s name be kept out of reports.

⁶⁶ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1880 Vol. XXXIV, pp. 104, 109. BSA/G1/1/34. Lansdell’s journeys were published in *The Times* in 1880 and he subsequently published a book: Henry Lansdell, *Through Siberia*, 2 vols. (London: Sampson Low, 1882).

⁶⁷ Robert F. Byrnes, *Pobedonostsev: His Life and Thought* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1968), p. 165.

⁶⁸ For an evangelical view, see Hans Brandenburg, *The Meek and the Mighty: The Emergence of the Evangelical Movement in Russia* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 114-130.

Testament without the Apocrypha.⁶⁹ The BFBS in London, welcoming this decision, appreciated 'the excellent manner in which Mr Nicolson had conducted the negotiations with the Holy Synod'.⁷⁰ But when news came through that printing of the Old Testament had been stopped on the orders of Pobedonostsev, Count Korff suggested to Nicolson that an approach be made through the Archbishop of Canterbury and Lord Shaftesbury, as President of the BFBS, to Prince Lobanov-Rostovsky, the Russian Ambassador in London. Korff also suggested having a reporter from *The Times* present.⁷¹ The intention was to exert a degree of political pressure on the Russian government.

Nicolson was cautious about too public a protest, although he accepted this might be necessary. His preference was quieter diplomacy and he asked for and was given an interview with the Ober-Procurator. Reporting afterwards to the BFBS Secretaries, Nicolson described Pobedonostsev as a 'somewhat sickly looking man'. Pobedonostsev said he spoke little English – which was not the case – and conversation proceeded in Russian. In view of the case Nicolson presented, Pobedonostsev agreed to a single printing of the Synodal Bible without the Apocrypha. He pronounced, however, that it was 'dangerous' to have two versions, and that the version for the BFBS would not have 'with the blessing of the Holy Synod' written on it. There would also be an Appendix which listed the apocryphal books.⁷² Nicolson's previous optimism about evangelical advance in Russia gave way to concern. Pashkov's meetings, Nicolson reported in 1880, began to be disrupted by the authorities.⁷³ In May 1881 there were interruptions in printing the Old Testament for the BFBS. Alexander II, who had supported the BFBS, had been assassinated two months previously. Nicolson wrote to the BFBS Secretaries to say there was a complete political reaction and the 'Philo-Slavs and Old Russia Party appear for the moment triumphant', with Orthodox Church leaders taking the view: 'right or wrong, what is national must be upheld'. He hoped the 'stupidity of this party' would 'bring them to grief'. He was now open to approaching the Russian ambassador.⁷⁴

⁶⁹ Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 8 January 1879; 2 April 1879. BSA C17/1/13. Pashkov had hoped for 20,000 copies and this had been a possibility: Minutes of Committee, 26 May 1879. BSA/B1/73.

⁷⁰ Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 17 September 1879. BSA C17/1/14.

⁷¹ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 18 September 1880. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 15. Minutes of the Committee, 20 September 1880. BSA/B1/60.

⁷² William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 16 October 1880. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 15. Minutes of the Committee, 18 October 1880; 1 November 1880. BSA/B1/75.

⁷³ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1879, Vol. XXXIII, pp. 91-2. BSA/G1/1/33; Minutes of the Committee, 21 June 1880. BSA/B1/75.

⁷⁴ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 23 May 1881. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 16. Minutes of a Meeting of the Editorial Sub-Committee, 1 June 1881. BSA C17/1/14; Minutes of the Committee, 4 July 1881. BSA/B1/76. BFBS *Annual Report*, 1881 Vol. XXXV, pp. 82, 86. BSA/G1/1/35.

Over the course of the next four years, Nicolson had various meetings with Pobedonostsev and also with Count Tolstoi, the Minister of the Interior. In May 1882, after an interview with the Ober-Procurator, Nicolson stated that the printing of the Bible for the BFBS would go ahead. He remarked that there was benefit in ‘obstinate hoping and waiting’.⁷⁵ The Committee in London thanked the St Petersburg BFBS Agency Committee, one of whose members was J.W. Foster, the American Ambassador to Russia, and especially Nicolson for his ‘patience and skill’ in the ‘protracted negotiations’.⁷⁶ By 1883 Nicolson was happy to report that the Bible which had been promised was printed and was being sold. It is clear that in his dealing with the Holy Synod Nicolson was receiving strong back-up from the BFBS Committee in St Petersburg.⁷⁷ In this period Nicolson was also seeking to make continued progress with translations into other languages spoken in the area for which he had responsibility. Nicolson began Arabic studies and hoped to print the Tatar Four Gospels in Arabic script. However, Nicolson’s contact, Nikolai Il’minskii, the leading specialist in Arabic and the Turkic languages (who was influential in the Theological Academy and the University at Kazan), was becoming more committed to using the Cyrillic script.⁷⁸ There were parallel problems in Lithuania about whether the BFBS should use the Latin script, favoured by Catholics in Lithuania, or the Cyrillic, favoured by Orthodoxy.⁷⁹

In July 1882 Nicolson had an interview with Count Tolstoi to ask about setting up a new BFBS depot in Tashkent, and the Count gave his assurance that he would do what he could to further this project.⁸⁰ The pioneer of this move was Johann Bartsch, who emigrated with fellow Mennonites to Turkestan. He was a colporteur and when he joined the Mennonite ‘great trek’ he resigned from BFBS work in Saratov, which was a great loss to that region, but as a result of the move he and his brother Franz developed Tashkent as an important BFBS centre.⁸¹ In 1883 Nicolson reported after visiting Tashkent that the BFBS premises were excellent.⁸² Nicolson was also pleased in the same year to welcome two representatives

⁷⁵ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 14 September 1882. BSA E3 1/4 No. 17.

⁷⁶ Minutes of the Committee, 8 May 1882; 22 May 1882. BSA/B1/77. Minutes of Editorial Sub-Committee, 18 October 1882. BSA C/17/1/15.

⁷⁷ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1883 Vol. XXXVII, pp. 96-7, 100. BSA/G1/1/37.

⁷⁸ Alison Ruth Kolosova, *Narodnost` and Obshchechelevochnost` in 19th century Russian missionary work: N.I.II`minskii and the Christianization of the Chuvash* (2016), p. 169. Durham theses, Durham University, available at Durham E-Theses Online: <<http://etheses.dur.ac.uk/11403/>> For Nicolson, see pp. 166-73.

⁷⁹ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1882 Vol. XXXVI, p. 128. BSA/G1/1/36. William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 14 November 1883. BSA E3 1/4 No. 18.

⁸⁰ Minutes of the Committee, 17 July 1882. BSA/B1/77.

⁸¹ Canton, *History of the British and Foreign Bible Society*, Vol. III, pp. 354-5. See Fred Richard Belk, *The Great Trek of the Russian Mennonites to Central Asia 1880-1884* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1976).

⁸² BFBS *Annual Report*, 1883 Vol. XXXVII, pp. 108-9. BSA/G1/1/37.

from the BFBS in London, John Sharp, an Anglican clergyman, and F.J. Wood, a lawyer. Sharp had become a BFBS Secretary, having been a missionary in India and then a lecturer in Telugu and Tamil at the University of Cambridge. Nicolson made sure that they saw a range of BFBS activities in St Petersburg, Moscow, and other cities. He also took them to Orthodox services, where they were struck by 'the reverent prominence given to the Holy Scriptures' and by the message of the Bible presented through 'pictures and frescoes'. Nicolson arranged meetings with Orthodox leaders, including a meeting at the Holy Synod. Sharp and Wood spoke of being 'well received by representatives of the Orthodox Church', some of whom 'manifested considerable acquaintance with English theological books, and a large-hearted spirit of Christian tolerance'.⁸³

Within the course of the next few months any semblance of 'large-hearted spirit' had disappeared. In April 1884 Pashkov and Korff hosted a conference in St Petersburg which brought together evangelicals from different parts of Russia. It was, however, almost immediately suppressed. Pashkov and Korff were exiled. They had been told that they must sign an undertaking not to preach or to organise meetings, and must cut off contact with religious communities seen as sectarian. This they refused to do.⁸⁴ The fear on the part of Pobedonostsev was that the social and evangelistic activities of the Pashkov circles, including popular literature being distributed, for example *The Russian Workman* (edited by Maria Peuker and later her daughter Alexandra), would lead people to question the established order and in particular Orthodox allegiance.⁸⁵ Just before these events, Nicolson was quite outspoken in a letter to London: 'I am not disposed to sit in harmony with the iniquitous conduct of the Russian government in keeping the poor people in ignorance and degradation.'⁸⁶ However, in his public statements he continued to seek to be positive. In his 1884 BFBS Report he spoke of the way the Russian people as a whole were receptive to the Scriptures and emphasised that the BFBS was working with Orthodox missionaries on Scripture distribution.⁸⁷ An Orthodox group, the Brotherhood of St Gurii, was involved in translation and distribution of Scriptures. Nikolai Il'minskii, who directed their translation committee, wanted an alternative to the BFBS.⁸⁸ But Nicolson's aim was to seek common ground with faith as expressed in Russia.

⁸³ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1884, Vol. XXXVIII, pp. 110-11. BSA/G1/1/38-

⁸⁴ Brandenburg, *The Meek and The Mighty*, pp. 112-13. See also R.S. Latimer, *Under Three Tsars: Liberty of Conscience in Russia, 1856-1909* (London: Morgan and Scott, 1909), pp. 134-40.

⁸⁵ Corrado, 'The Gospel in Society', p. 68.

⁸⁶ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 11 March 1884. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 18.

⁸⁷ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1884, Vol. XXXVIII, pp. 109-111. BSA/G1/1/38-

⁸⁸ Kolosova, *Narodnost' and Obshchechelovechnost' in 19th century Russian missionary work*, p. 361.

The Scriptures Alone

In June 1885 Nicolson had an interview with Pobedonostsev in which the Ober-Procurator made clear that there would be no further printing of the Old Testament without the Apocrypha.⁸⁹ A year later Nicolson held out no hope for change as long as Pobedonostsev was in office.⁹⁰ The good news in 1885-86 was that a printing of 100,000 copies of the New Testament which Nicolson had ordered had sold out and it had been agreed by the Holy Synod that a further 100,000 would be printed.⁹¹ By now Nicolson had nineteen colporteurs working for him in Russia and a new and larger warehouse and offices for the BFBS in St Petersburg had to be found. The new premises were near the great Cathedral of St Isaac. But the background was one of growing suspicion, with the government, as Nicolson reported in 1886, taking the view that the BFBS was ‘aiding the evangelical movement’ and that its colporteurs ‘circulate tracts along with the Scriptures’.⁹² In various parts of Eastern Europe colporteurs were doing precisely this, despite such activity being contrary to BFBS policy.⁹³ Nicolson could see that there was the possibility of the BFBS work being stopped completely. After an interview with the police inspector in St Petersburg he argued that the BFBS ‘Scripture alone’ rule should be given more prominence. In his eighteen years in Russia he had not previously seen the level of hostility that now existed within the Orthodox Church to the Protestant movements.⁹⁴ In response, the BFBS in London urged Nicolson to keep open the channels of communication with the Synod. William Wright, editorial superintendent, said to Nicolson in October 1886: ‘We have much faith in your tact and diplomacy.’⁹⁵

From this point on, for the remaining ten years in which he was in Russia, Nicolson was continually aware of the need to distinguish the BFBS from religious movements which seemed to challenge Orthodoxy. In December 1886 he wrote to the BFBS Secretaries in London about how Pobedonostsev, was ‘waging a fierce warfare with the Protestant sects of South Russia’ and was accusing the BFBS of being ‘aiders and abettors of those same sects’.⁹⁶ On occasions colporteurs in Russia were dismissed by the BFBS for failing to adhere to the Society’s policies. Ivan Zhidkov, for example, was dismissed in 1885 for seeking to evangelise and spread Baptist

⁸⁹ Minutes of the Committee, 15 June 1885. BSA/B1/81.

⁹⁰ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 28 September 1886. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 21.

⁹¹ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1886, Vol. XL, p. 116. BSA/G1/1/40.

⁹² Minutes of the Committee, 7 June 1886. BSA/B1/82.

⁹³ See I.M. Randall, ‘Nineteenth-Century Bible Society Colporteurs in Eastern Europe’, *Journal of European Baptist Studies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (May 2012), 5-25.

⁹⁴ Minutes of the Committee, 7 June 1886. BSA/B1/82.

⁹⁵ William Wright to William Nicolson, 21 October 1886. BSA E3/2/8.

⁹⁶ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 31 December 1886. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 22.

convictions.⁹⁷ In some regions in which Nicolson was involved there was much less pressure. Considerable freedom was enjoyed by the six BFBS colporteurs in the Baltic region. There were variations, too, across Russia. In Omsk the local governor – whose wife spoke fluent English and was interested in the BFBS – agreed that a new BFBS depot could be opened. But in the Tula region some BFBS colporteurs, as Nicolson reported in 1887, were 'driven to despair' by persistent refusals to grant the licences. Some had 'migrated elsewhere'.⁹⁸ Possible options for fresh initiatives by the BFBS were raised with Nicolson in correspondence from London, but Nicolson took the view that independent action would reduce the authority of the BFBS in Russia to 'zero'. The society was, he insisted, 'well within the stroke of the Bear's paw'.⁹⁹

The circulation of Scriptures through Nicolson's colporteurs was the largest it had ever been in 1889, at 311,000 copies.¹⁰⁰ This was achieved against a background of threats by Pobedonostsev, in meetings he had with Nicolson, to introduce new rules as a way of further 'regulating' colporteurs.¹⁰¹ William Wright wondered whether 'the prospect of considerable sums of British gold flowing into the coffers of the Holy Synod', as Scriptures were purchased by the BFBS, might assist Nicolson in his discussions with Pobedonostsev.¹⁰² This showed a misunderstanding of Pobedonostsev's outlook: he was driven by principles in which he believed, not by pragmatism. In a further interview Nicolson had with Pobedonostsev in early 1890, it was clear that every move by the BFBS was being watched. Pobedonostsev insisted that preaching was taking place under BFBS auspices; Nicolson replied that 'colporteurs did not teach but simply circulated the Scriptures'. The atmosphere was such that Nicolson asked the BFBS Home Committee to abandon unrealistic expectations. He hoped the committee would 'give me credit that I know the difference between the practicable and the impracticable in the circumstances in which I am placed'.¹⁰³ The degree of caution Nicolson felt to be needed was indicated in 1890 by his response to requests for Scriptures from F.W. Baedeker, an evangelical from England who travelled widely in Russia, with government approval, distributing Scriptures in prisons. The BFBS had been happy to cooperate with him and also with a Russian evangelical, Ivan Kargel.¹⁰⁴ But

⁹⁷ Batalden, 'Colportage and Distribution of Holy Scripture in Late Imperial Russia', p. 87.

⁹⁸ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1887, Vol. XLI, pp. 125-6. BSA/G1/1/41.

⁹⁹ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 15 April 1887. BSA E3 1/4 No. 22.

¹⁰⁰ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1890, Vol. XLIV, p. 93. BSA/G1/1/44.

¹⁰¹ Minutes of Committee, 13 August 1888; 19 November 1888. BSA/B1/86.

¹⁰² William Wright to William Nicolson, 21 November 1889. BSA E3/2/9.

¹⁰³ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 1 April 1890. BSA E3 1/4 No. 26.

¹⁰⁴ Minutes of Special Sub-Committee, 24 October 1889. BSA C/1/2/3. For Baedeker see R.S. Latimer, *Dr Baedeker and his Apostolic Work in Russia* (London: Pickering & Inglis, 1907); for Kargel see G.L. Nichols, *The Development of Russian Evangelical Spirituality: A Study of Ivan V. Kargel (1849-1937)* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2011).

in 1890 Nicolson was worried that Baedeker was known as ‘an earnest evangelical propagandist’ and that too close an association with him might harm the BFBS.¹⁰⁵

By the 1890s Nicolson was a well-known and respected figure in religious circles in St Petersburg and far beyond. In 1890 he completed a PhD through the University of Helsinki and this was published in 1892.¹⁰⁶ He had built up the St Petersburg BFBS team to six people. In addition, one of his daughters was assisting him. Nicolson reported in 1891 on an edition of the Russian New Testament available from the Synod. It contained forty-one references to the Apocrypha in added notes and his daughter had prepared a tabulation showing the character of each.¹⁰⁷ More widely, features associated with Nicolson’s work included his efficient management of colporteurs and BFBS finances, his extensive travels through which he fostered relationships, his prolific correspondence, his knowledge of the academic world in relation to translation and translators, and his sensitivity to the position of Orthodoxy. The relationship between the BFBS and Orthodoxy was raised at an All-Russian Orthodox Missionary Conference in Moscow in 1891, with Nicolson reporting his concern that it had been stated there that all BFBS colporteurs were Baptists, when in reality this was so with only a few. Some conference delegates wanted to ban the BFBS from Russia. Others said all colporteurs should be Orthodox and licenced by local priests. There were no firm conclusions on some points, but recommendations were for increasingly repressive measures.¹⁰⁸ To try to clarify matters, Nicolson had yet another interview with Pobedonostsev, who was himself under pressure because of misconceptions he had fostered about Protestantism. These had recently been challenged effectively by Hermann Dalton.¹⁰⁹ Nicolson was willing to take seriously any evidence that individual colporteurs were intentionally undermining Orthodox life.¹¹⁰ He spoke warmly in 1896 of some of the missionaries of the Orthodox Missionary Society.¹¹¹

In a number of areas Nicolson saw continued advance in the years up to his retirement in 1897. The BFBS Report which he wrote in 1894 stated

¹⁰⁵ Minutes of the Committee, 2 June 1890. BSA/B1/87.

¹⁰⁶ William Wright to William Nicolson, 20 June 1893. BSA E3/2/11. The PhD was published: William Nicolson, *Myth and Religion* (Helsinki: Press of the Finnish Literary Society, 1892).

¹⁰⁷ Minutes of Editorial Sub-Committee, 25 February 189. BSA C/17/1/20.

¹⁰⁸ Nicolson to Directors, 10 August 1891. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 28. Albert W. Wardin, *On the Edge: Baptists and Other Free Church Evangelicals in Tsarist Russia, 1855-1917* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2013), p. 211.

¹⁰⁹ Minutes of the Committee, 5 October 1891. BSA/B1/89. See Hermann Dalton, *On Religious Liberty in Russia* (London: Asher & Co, 1890). This was an open letter to Pobedonostsev, published in three languages.

¹¹⁰ Minutes of the Committee, 16 September 1895. BSA/B1/94.

¹¹¹ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 9 October 1896. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 35.

that the BFBS in Russia had purchased over half a million copies of the Scriptures from the Synod in 1893.¹¹² A year later he was surprised in a conversation with Professor Troitsky, who was Russian Orthodox and Professor of Hebrew in St Petersburg University, to be told that the BFBS Russian translation of the Old Testament was 'decidedly better than the Synod's, less wordy, simpler, and more idiomatic'.¹¹³ This encouraged Nicolson in his involvement in fostering good translations. He noted in 1896 that his Agency was by then distributing Scriptures in 72 languages and dialects.¹¹⁴ Among these, Nicolson made a substantial contribution to Turkic translation work: in the Volga region, for example, a translation of the gospels into Chuvash was issued in 1895 as a result of Nicolson's cooperation with Ivan Iakovlev, a prominent Chuvash teacher and Bible translator.¹¹⁵ At the farewell to Nicolson and his family in 1897, held in the British and American Congregational Church, the large audience present heard various speeches, including from Alexander Francis, pastor of the church and a well-connected figure in St Petersburg, who described the high esteem which Nicolson's 'learning, his courtesy, and his Christian character had won for him from all those with whom he had come into contact'. Nicolson and his family were presented with a beautiful 'silver tea-service of Russian pattern and make', so that they could offer a glass of *tchai* (tea) when entertaining friends in Scotland.¹¹⁶ In 1898, in recognition of his work in Russia, Nicolson was appointed an honorary governor of the BFBS.¹¹⁷

Conclusion

When William Nicolson arrived in Russia in 1869, he was ready to embrace the challenge of seeking to build on what had been done before in Russia and to initiate significant advance. In a letter to the BFBS Secretaries in London in October 1896, he could report that circulation of Scriptures in Russia had gone from 30,000 in 1869 to 500,000 in 1896.¹¹⁸ The BFBS saw Russia as having become the most important of the BFBS Agencies, having one-seventh of the world-wide circulation of the Scriptures under the auspices of the BFBS.¹¹⁹ This growth had taken place against the background of both opportunities and difficulties. Problems intensified with the appointment in

¹¹² BFBS *Annual Report*, 1894, Vol. XLVIII, p. 103. BSA/G1/1/48.

¹¹³ William Nicolson to BFBS Secretaries, 7 June 1894. BSA E3 1/4 No. 32.

¹¹⁴ BFBS *Annual Report*, 1896, Vol. L, p. 97. BSA/G1/1/50.

¹¹⁵ Batalden, 'The BFBS Petersburg Agency and Russian Biblical Translation, 1856-1875', p. 194; Kolosova, *Narodnost` and Obshchechelovechnost` in 19th century Russian missionary work*, pp. 169-72.

¹¹⁶ 'Retirement of the Rev. Dr. Nicolson', *The Bible Society Monthly Reporter*, January-December 1897, p. 214.

¹¹⁷ Minutes of the Committee, 28 March 1898. BSA/B1/97.

¹¹⁸ 'Retirement of the Rev. Dr. Nicolson', *The Bible Society Monthly Reporter*, January-December 1897, pp. 214-15.

¹¹⁹ *Monthly Reporter*, October 1897, p. 193. BSA G1/3/27.Canton, Vol. V, p. 51.

1880 of Konstantin Pobedonostsev as director of the Holy Synod. Although Nicolson tried hard to achieve a working relationship with Pobedonostsev, his private opinion in 1886 was that if Pobedonostsev were 'raised to a loftier sphere' (whatever that meant), the BFBS would find its difficulties disappearing.¹²⁰ There was a persistent dilemma for Nicolson. He was sorry Pobedonostsev connected the BFBS with the Protestant and evangelical influences which the Ober-Procurator opposed so strenuously.¹²¹ Yet the BFBS was a product of those influences. Given this tension, Batalden argues that BFBS work in Russia survived only because of the 'vigorous efforts' of Nicolson, who consistently sought 'to disassociate the British and Foreign Bible Society from any proselytising'.¹²² The work of the BFBS was distributing Scripture alone. As Nicolson retired, he referred to the Holy Synod and said he had 'nothing but the most friendly remembrance of his lengthened intercourse with the officers of this great institution'.¹²³ This was a drastic re-interpretation of history, but it represented something of Nicolson's aspiration as he sought during his years in Russia to ensure the progress of the Word.

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¹²⁰ Nicolson to Directors, 31 December 1886. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 22.

¹²¹ Nicolson to Directors, 15 April 1887. BSA E3 1 /4 No. 22.

¹²² Batalden, 'Colportage and Distribution of Holy Scripture in Late Imperial Russia', pp. 88, and p. 92, fn 19.

¹²³ BFBS Report, 1897, Vol. LI, p. 101. BSA/G1/1/51.