

Alexander II: an Alternative View

Readers' Forum

Controversy is the lifeblood of history; here Graham Darby takes issue with a previous article.

In his article on Alexander II in the *History Review* of December 1998, Carl Peter Watts considered that the Tsar's reforms failed and thereby paved the way for revolution. However, since the failure of Gorbachev's attempts at 'reform from above' in the 1980s, historians have come to view Alexander II's reforms in a rather different light. They are now considered to be rather remarkable; and recent research has indeed confirmed that they were more successful than had been thought hitherto. In addition, just as it might be inappropriate to blame Bismarck for Hitler, so too we need not blame Alexander for the revolution. Students are invited to consider an alternative view.

To take up a few points in the article:

1) There is no evidence to suggest that the nobles were in any way persuaded by Alexander's speech, 'it is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for the time when it begins to abolish itself from below' (p. 7). This speech was made in 1856 and it took five years of wrangling before the Emancipation Edict was passed into law. When it was issued, it was issued because the Tsar was determined to have emancipation, not because the nobles were frightened of an uprising.

2) Although there were widespread protests in the immediate aftermath of the Edict (1861-3), once the peasantry accepted their lot and made the best of it, the level of unrest declined and the countryside remained fairly peaceful for nearly 40 years.

3) The emancipated serfs proved to be remarkably successful at getting the most out of the land, adopting new crops and new techniques (the 338 per cent increase in grain exports shown on page 10 of the article would in itself suggest

that). Crop yields increased by as much as 50 per cent between 1850 and 1910 (by a greater amount in European Russia), and overall production increased by 122 per cent – which was essential given the vast increase in population, from 74 million in 1864 to 170 million in 1914 (another consequence of emancipation as peasants were now free to marry when they wished). Emancipation was in fact an agricultural success: there was an economic benefit.

4) The article rightly points out (p. 8) that Russia emancipated her serfs before the U.S.A. emancipated its slaves – but the important point to make is that the freed slave was not allocated any land; the Russian autocracy not only emancipated the peasants, but allocated them land too. This no doubt saved many from the usual dire consequences of early industrial development – vagrancy, unemployment and slum dwelling.

5) With regard to the judicial reforms, the article suggests (also p. 8) that a 'sense of fairness' can be evidenced from the Vera Zasulich case of 1878. But Vera Zasulich shot the Governor of St. Petersburg and was found 'not guilty' by the jury because all the members detested the Governor! This case in fact discredited the jury system (not unlike the O.J. Simpson trial in our own time), exasperated the Tsar and led to the increasing use of military tribunals. It was a setback for the new judicial system.

6) With regard to the effects of the military reforms (1874 rather than 1875): the Russian army did quite well in difficult conditions in the war of 1877-8. The Turks were all but expelled from Europe (this is why Britain and Austria were so alarmed) and the Treaty of San Stefano of March 1878 envisaged a Bulgaria that would not only encompass what we understand as Bulgaria today, but a considerable stretch of the Aegean coastline in Thrace as well as much of Macedonia. The comment that 'Russia's participation at the Congress of Berlin (1878) demonstrated that she had successfully recovered her international position' (p. 9) is rather deceptive as the Congress was a diplomatic defeat for Russia. Germany, Austria and Britain combined to force Russia into

a humiliating climb-down over the creation of a 'big Bulgaria' and made her scrap the Treaty of San Stefano. Of course, Russia had been in the wrong; she had reneged on a previous deal with Austria. This, among other reasons, is why the other powers were against her.

7) The article correctly points out that the reforms 'failed to create popular support for the Tsarist regime', but of course it should be remembered that this was not their purpose. Popularity was not something the autocracy cultivated, though it would not have been an unwelcome consequence.

8) And finally, the idea that the reforms in some way had 'the opposite of [their] intended effect' (p. 10) and led to revolution is to read history backwards. If, as many historians believe, the revolution was the result of Russia's failure in the First World War, then Alexander's reforms should not be assessed from that perspective. What Alexander demonstrated was that the regime needed to respond to change; it was the failure of his successors to respond, reform and adapt that should perhaps be criticised, rather than Alexander. You could argue that his reforms gave the autocracy a new lease of life, which was fatally squandered by the weak Nicholas II.

Further Reading:

Peter Gatrell, *The Tsarist Economy 1850-1917* (Batsford, 1986) – the source for statistics on agricultural output.

Maureen Perrie, *Alexander II, Emancipation and Reform in Russia 1855-1881* (Historical Association, 1989) – a brief but excellent, up-to-date analysis.

Robert Bideleux, 'Alexander II and the Emancipation of the Serfs', *Modern History Review*, September 1992, pp. 27-31; and David Moon, 'The Serf's Perspective', *ibid.*, pp. 31-33, and 'Alexander II's Great Reforms and the Modernisation of Russia', *New Perspective*, September 1995, pp. 6-10 – these are positive about the reforms, as is Graham Darby in *The Russian Revolution* (Longman 1998), pp. 7-10 and 20-24.

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