

Tsar Alexander II

Liberator or Traditionalist?

Alexander II, Tsar of All the Russias, has been a puzzle for historians. He ascended the imperial throne in 1855 and was greeted with enthusiasm as an antidote to his martinet father, Nicholas I, the so-called 'Gendarme of Europe'. Five years later an imperial *ukase* (edict) liberated the peasants in Alexander's vast empire, when he appeared to have earned the title of 'Tsar Liberator'. Twenty years after that, in 1881, Alexander was assassinated by a terrorist group, the 'People's Will', and few Russians mourned his passing.

His reign seems to be a paradox. On the one hand, the contemporary French diplomat Maurice Paléologue could say that Alexander was

a great tsar and deserved a kinder fate ... His was not a great intellect but he had a generous soul, very upright and very lofty. He loved his people and his solicitude for the humble and the suffering was unbounded.

On the other hand, the historian W. L. Mosse, writing in the 1950s, commented somewhat harshly:

Alexander proved himself not only a disappointing 'liberal' — if indeed that term can be applied to him — but more seriously an inefficient autocrat.

By raising the hope of reforms, and then failing to deliver them effectively, Alexander was himself as much 'the Great Disappointment' as was his incomplete emancipation of the serfs.

Alexander's background

Alexander was much better prepared for the imperial throne than his father had been. Nicholas I was the youngest of three brothers who came to the throne in 1825 only because the Grand Duke Constantine had married a Catholic, effectively eliminating himself from the imperial succession. Nicholas I had been intended for a military career, and was well aware of his inadequate experience of the affairs of state. His son was therefore appointed to the Council of State, and other government committees, so that he could be prepared for succession. Unlike his father he also knew his empire, having travelled widely through it in the years before 1855.

In the words of J. N. Westwood, this wider education and experience meant that, although he

'inherited from his father and his tutors an honesty of character and loyalty to subordinates ... he was milder, more sensitive and more patient than his father'. This patience was certainly needed in the early years of Alexander's reign. He was faced with both the problems of an unsuccessful war in the Crimea (from which he extricated Russia in 1856) and rising levels of peasant violence and dissatisfaction in the countryside.

Was Alexander a reformer?

The land question was the single most serious problem that the new Tsar faced in 1855. Most Russians were peasants, either state-owned or privately-owned, with everyday lives akin to that of peasants in medieval England. Freedom of movement, and the right to marry — basic freedoms in the West — were denied to the Russian peasant in the nineteenth century. The privately-owned peasants were known as 'serfs' while the government-owned peasants, who were somewhat better off, made up slightly more than fifty per cent of the total peasant population.

The serfs were really little more than slaves, who could be bought and sold at the whim of private landlords. This was the system created by tsars such as Peter the Great (1696–1721) and Catherine the Great (1762–96). The nobility would support the tsar in exchange for the power of life and death over the unfortunate

Tsar Nicholas I



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Chronology

- 1855** Alexander II becomes Tsar.
- 1856** Treaty of Paris; end of the Crimean War. Alexander speaks of need to abolish serfdom from above.
- 1861** Emancipation of the Serfs.
- 1862** Publication of Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* and Chernychevsky's *What is to be Done?*
- 1863** The Polish Revolt.
- 1864** *Zemstvo* reform introduced.
- 1866** Karakozov's assassination attempt on the Tsar; Emancipation extended to state peasants.
- 1874** The 'Going to the People'.
- 1878** Vera Zasulich case.
- 1881** Alexander II assassinated by the 'People's Will'.

Tsar Alexander II



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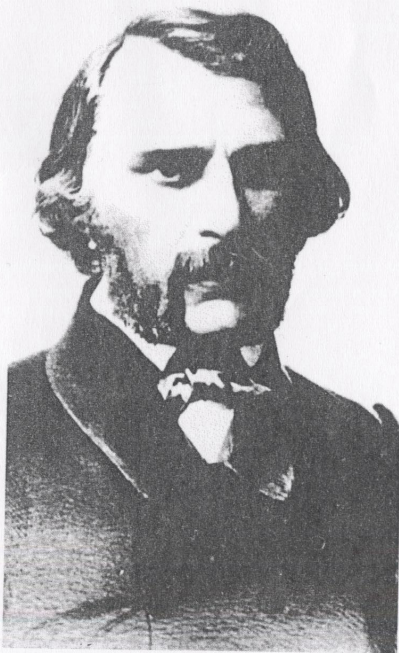
serfs. Their expensive town houses in St Petersburg or Moscow, and their beautiful country mansions, were bought on the backs of these so-called 'dark people', the vast masses of illiterate, overworked serfs, whose welfare the ruling élite ignored.

In fairness to Nicholas I, it has to be conceded that he did recognise serfdom as 'the indubitable evil of Russian life'. But he did nothing about it! The problem was that the abolition of the institution of serfdom, and with it a redistribution of land, could undermine the alliance between the tsar and the nobility. Would Alexander II have the courage to grasp this nettle?

Alexander at least showed good intentions, and he realised that peasant disturbances had significantly disrupted the war effort in 1855. In 1856, therefore, he made his famous statement to an assembly of the nobility, that it would be better for serfdom to be abolished from above than from below. Committees were set up to examine the question of serfdom and in 1861 the Emancipation edicts were issued.

The difficult problem with which Alexander had to contend was whether the serfs were to be freed from their slave status with or without land. In practice, the landowners already allowed them to work small plots of land, whose produce could be used to feed their families. But if serfs were to be given land, two problems arose. Firstly, there wasn't enough land to go round. Secondly, the peasants' conception of land ownership clashed with that of the government. This was because the peasantry believed in the old slogan: 'We are yours, but the land is ours.' Legally, however, the land belonged to either the government, the Church (which owned some peasants too) or private landowners.

Turgenev's great novel, Fathers and Sons, was published in 1862.



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The result was a fudge. Most peasants were given land, but they had to pay landowners compensation for it over a period of 49 years. Many felt betrayed; they considered that Alexander had issued instructions which the landowners would ignore, even though he and his ministers had agreed this compromise with the landowning nobility. The 1861 Settlement was complemented in 1866 by another, which gave state peasants either the right to buy their land, in the same way as the serfs, or to remain tenants of the state.

The bitterness felt over this system of 'redemption' payments meant that the 1861 Emancipation of the Serfs came to be known as 'the Great Disappointment'. Ultimately the system proved to be unworkable, and was abolished in the reign of Alexander's grandson, Nicholas II. Alexander's reputation as the 'Tsar Liberator' never recovered.

Social and judicial reforms

The central drama of Alexander's reign was undoubtedly the land question, but he also attempted to reform other aspects of Russian society. The best known of these reforms was the introduction of the *zemstvo*, or local government councils, which were given responsibility for public education, public health and welfare, road-building, and other aspects of local government. Westwood observed that the local knowledge of the *zemstvo* 'enabled them to do a good job, where a St Petersburg official would have failed'. But Alexander refused to take the next step and introduce a *duma* or national parliament. When petitioned by the Moscow *zemstvo*, the Tsar replied tartly that these were 'senseless dreams'.

Another important area of reform was the judicial system. The judicial reform of 1864 brought in trial by jury, separation of powers, and public and oral proceedings (where previously all proceedings and evidence had been written and secret). The new system also instituted provincial courts and made the senate the final court of appeal. The *zemstvo*, too, were empowered to elect justices of the peace, to deal with minor cases locally.

Church and military courts still lay outside the jurisdiction of the reforms but, nevertheless, the new system was generally deemed a success. Even Lenin later approved most aspects of the reform of the courts.

The turning point in Alexander's reign, as identified by many historians, was the attempt on the Tsar's life by 'an emotionally unbalanced student', Dmitrii Karakozov, in 1866. In that year the reactionary Count Dmitrii Tolstoy became Minister of Education and introduced controls on the universities and school curricula. Later, as a result of the notorious Vera Zasulich case in 1878 (when a revolutionary activist who had murdered a tsarist official in full public view was acquitted), trial by jury was suspended in Russia. Restrictions were also placed on the press and the powers of the *zemstvo*.



DAVID KING

What is to be Done? asked Chernychevsky.

Poland

There is a case for saying that Alexander's essentially conservative agenda was already evident before Karakozov's attempt on his life. In Russian Poland, acquired by Catherine the Great, he had also begun with liberal intentions. In 1862 Poland was given back much of the autonomy it had enjoyed during the reign of his grandfather, Alexander I. But in January 1863 there was a serious uprising against the hated Russian occupation.

Alexander faced the choice of repression or conciliation; he chose the former. A policy of 'Russification' was imposed, making the Russian language compulsory in schools. Strenuous efforts were also made to reduce Polish influence on Russia's border, by banning the use of the Polish language and seizing the property of the Catholic Church (Poles were overwhelmingly Catholic in religion).

This draconian response to the uprising underlined the essentially coercive nature of tsarist power. Seen in this context, Karakozov's assassination attempt, and Alexander's response to it, seems less significant. When faced with opposition, Alexander retreated into repression.

Opposition

As is so often the case with autocratic regimes, Alexander found that concessions invariably produced a demand for more. The intellectual climate of the 1860s was challenging (Turgenev's great novel *Fathers and Sons* appeared in 1862) and encouraged a reaction against the rigidities of the reign of Nicholas I. The phenomenon of Nihilism (literally 'Nothingism') had a great appeal to the educated young, with its rejection of religion and school and family discipline. Following the trend in the West, young intellectuals worshipped the natural sciences and looked forward to 'a society based

on knowledge and reason, rather than ignorance, prejudice, exploitation and oppression'.

More seriously for Alexander II, revolutionary violence became more and more of a pattern as his reign went on. In 1862 Chernyshevsky wrote his influential book, *What Is To Be Done?* which focused on the emancipation of women — but also promoted idealistic socialism. This influenced generations of revolutionaries in Russia, including Lenin, but its utopianism was reflected also in the *narodnik* (populist) movement of the 1870s. In 1874 the *narodniki* staged their famous 'Going to the People' crusade, when thousands of well-intentioned young intellectuals and students went out into the peasant villages to educate the inhabitants and raise their political consciousness.

The result was a disappointment. Unsurprisingly, many peasants were suspicious of these youngsters, with their soft hands and strange ways. They were too busy earning a living to have much time for political utopianism. Foolishly, the tsarist authorities tried to crush the *narodniki*, spawning Alexander's nemesis — a terrorist movement called the 'People's Will'.

Conclusion

By 1881 Tsar Alexander II had become a discredited figure. Even his family life had fallen

under a shadow, as a result of a long-standing, scandalous affair with Princess Catherine Dolgorukaya. Frequent attempts to assassinate him by the People's Will (on occasions blowing up a wing of the Winter Palace and the imperial train) culminated in success on 13 March 1881.

The first attempt on his life failed that day and Alexander, a humane man for all his failings, decided to check whether an exploding bomb, which missed its target, had caused any other casualties. He got out of his carriage to investigate, whereupon a second assassin threw a bomb, which blew off the Tsar's legs. He died an hour and a half later.

The important reforming ethos of the 1860s had, it seemed, been lost by the 1880s. Yet, in the final paradox of his eventful reign, Alexander had been considering some reform proposals from Count Loris-Melikov. On the day of his death, the Tsar indicated that he would be willing to consider further administrative and financial reforms. Would he have gone through with them, or would he have reneged on them as he had done earlier in his reign? Was he, as one historian has suggested, really 'an autocrat rather than a leader'?

Of the importance of Alexander's reign, there can be no doubt. Some Soviet historians have seen the 1861 Emancipation as a conspiracy between the Tsar and the landlord class; but

others saw the abolition of serfdom as the moment when capitalism replaced feudalism as the dominant socio-economic structure in Russia.

For Alexander personally, as for the serfs, his reign must have been a 'great disappointment'. He came to the throne in 1855 on a wave of popular enthusiasm. By the late 1870s, however, to quote Mosse again, Alexander II was 'isolated from the Russian people, unpopular with the educated public and cut off from the bulk of society and even the Court'. When the Tsar belatedly turned his attention again to reform, it was too late.

Further reading

- Kochen, L. and Abraham, R. (1983) *The Making of Modern Russia* (2nd edn), Penguin Books.
Mosse, W. N. (1958) *Alexander II and the Modernisation of Russia*, English University Press.
Riasanovsky, N. (1992) *A History of Russia* (5th edn), Oxford University Press.
Westwood, J. N. (1993) *Endurance and Endeavour: Russian History 1812–1992* (4th edn), Oxford University Press.

Peter Neville is senior lecturer in history at the University of Luton and an A-level examiner. His book on the Holocaust will be published by Cambridge University Press in 1998.

Hard labour: a gang of peasant women haul a raft up river in Nizhny Novgorod.

