

Alexander III: An introduction

Alexander the man



- Alexander was the second son of Alexander II and in natural disposition he bore little resemblance to his soft-hearted, liberal minded father, and still less to his refined, philosophic, sentimental, chivalrous, yet cunning grand-uncle Alexander I.

- Considered Russia's last true autocrat, Alexander III was the epitome of what a Russian Tsar was supposed to be. Forceful, formidable, fiercely patriotic, and at 6' 4" towered over his fellow countrymen and was known within his family as 'Little Bulldog'. He was the embodiment of the fabled Russian bear. He dressed simply and would wear his clothes until they were threadbare. He loved the simplicity of Russian life and had little taste for anything western.

- Alexander III was not born heir to the Russian throne. His older brother and heir to the throne, Nicholas, died in 1865. On his deathbed, his elder brother had expressed a wish that his affianced bride, Princess Dagmar of Denmark, should marry his successor, and this wish was realized on November 9, 1866. The union proved a most happy one and remained unclouded to the end. After her conversion to Orthodoxy, she took the name of Marie Fedorovna. Together, Alexander III and Empress Marie had five children. Their first child, Nicholas, was born in 1868 and would be the last Tsar of Russia.

- Alexander was therefore not educated or prepared in his youth to be Emperor. He was greatly influenced by his tutor **Pobedonostsev** who instilled into him conservative fundamentals of autocracy, Orthodoxy and nationalism that were required to govern the Russian Empire. Pobedonostsev believed that all opposition to the government be ruthlessly crushed and viewed liberal ideas as constitutions and free press as a threat to the state. It was also Pobedonostsev that taught Alexander III to be anti-Semitic and view the Jewish community of the Empire as "Christ Killers".

- To many westerners he appeared crude and not overly intelligent. Queen Victoria commented that she thought him as "a sovereign whom she does not look upon as a gentleman". But what he lacked in style he more than made up for in his conviction of his position, his love for his country, and an understanding of the importance he could play in shaping his country's future.

The start of the reign

- He came to power at a critical point in Imperial Russian history. The Industrial Revolution had finally come to Russia and capitalism was taking root. Foreign investment within the country was at an all time high. His Father, Alexander II was within hours of granting the country its first constitution.
- The reign of Alexander III began in tragedy. One cannot fault Alexander's reaction to his father's death. One can only imagine the rage he felt as they watched the Tsar bleed and die in a St Petersburg palace. This event would solidify the reactionary tone of his 13-year reign.
- The police rounded up those involved in the assassination of Alexander II and five were hanged. Censorship became more repressive.
- In his Accession Manifesto, he declared his intention to have "full faith in the justice and strength of the autocracy" that he had been entrusted with. His motto was the half-forgotten motto of the reign of Nicholas I, "autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality," which is the Russian version of the old principle "one king, one law, one faith." Any liberal proposals in government were quickly dismissed. Alexander was determined to strengthen autocratic rule as a God given right. He tightened censorship of the press and sent thousands of revolutionaries to Siberia. His reign is often referred to as the Age of Counter Reform.

Questions

1. "In terms of both personality and policies, Alexander III did not possess the qualities necessary for a successful ruler of late 19th-century Russia" – to what extent do you agree with this judgement?
2. Use any sources available to you to find out 5 key points about Pobedonostsev.