Alexander II's reforms CAUSES AND CONSEQUENCES, by Carl Peter Watts


Carl Peter Watts examines a set of reforms which held out the prospect of modernising Russia but whose failure paved the way for revolution.

Alexander II's `great reforms' stand out as among the most significant events in nineteenth-century Russian history. Alexander became known as the `Tsar Liberator' because he abolished serfdom in 1861. Yet 20 years later he was assassinated by terrorists. Why did Alexander introduce a programme of reforms and why did they fail to satisfy the Russian people? This article will demonstrate that the reforms were a direct response to Russia's defeat in the Crimean War. They were intended to liberate Russian society from some of its most archaic practices, improve the economic and military efficiency of the state, and preserve the existing socio-political structure by a process of modification. The essentially conservative nature of Alexander's reforms is betrayed by the continuity in policy from the reign of his predecessor Nicholas I (1825-1855). Yet this conservatism, far from guaranteeing the safety of the autocracy, jeopardised the stability of Russia because it left a 50-year legacy of social and political dissatisfaction to Alexander's successors.

Emancipation: The Fundamental Reform

The need for reform was evident well before the reign of Alexander II. The Decembrist Revolt of 1825 occurred just as Nicholas I acceded to the throne. Although it was unsuccessful, the uprising demonstrated that the autocracy could not continue to ignore demands for reform indefinitely. The condition of the peasantry was perhaps the most prominent weakness in Russian society. The Pugachev Revolt (1773-75) had served as a reminder of the threat that a disaffected peasantry could represent. Nicholas I introduced a series of minor reforms which improved the conditions of state and crown peasants and which were intended to serve as a model to the dvoriane (nobility) as to how they should treat their private serfs. Most landowners, however, took little notice of these measures and continued to extract feudal dues and labour services from their serfs without regard for their welfare. It is clear that Nicholas I abhorred serfdom; in 1842 he declared to the Council of State: `There can be no doubt that serfdom in its present situation in our country is an evil.... [It] cannot last forever.... The only answer is thus to prepare the way for a gradual transition to a different order ...'(1) However, the conservatism of the autocracy was such that it would not compel the dvoriane by abolishing serfdom unilaterally. It took the shock of Russia's disastrous performance in the Crimean War, the concomitant death of Nicholas I and the accession of Alexander II to alter this situation.

Alexander II had served on the committees of inquiry into serfdom and he was acutely aware of the weakness of the Russian state. Defeat by Britain and France now demonstrated that Russia was
lagging behind her European counterparts. In the autumn of 1856 Yuriy Samarin, a prominent Slavophile, articulated the concerns of political society when he wrote that `We were defeated not by the external forces of the Western alliance but by our own internal weakness.'(2) Criticisms of serfdom were echoing from many quarters. General Dimitry Miliutin, later Minister for War (1861-1881), advised the new Tsar that reform of the Russian army was impossible while serfdom continued to exist. Only by reforming the very foundations of Russian society could effective military capacity be restored and great power status recovered. Serfdom was also condemned as economically, inefficient. K. D. Kavelin, a liberal university professor, wrote a critique of serfdom in 1856 in which he observed that `In the economic sphere, serfdom brings the whole state into an abnormal situation and gives rise to artificial phenomena in the national economy which have an unhealthy influence on the whole organism of the state.'(3) It was argued that serfdom impeded the emergence of a modern capitalist economy because the existence of an inelastic labour force and the absence of a money economy retarded industrial development. It was further argued that serfdom was an inefficient and unproductive form of agriculture because, essentially, it was forced labour, and so the serfs had no incentive to do any more than subsist.

Despite these powerful arguments in favour of abolishing serfdom, it was still difficult for Alexander II to overcome the inertia of the dvorione on the issue. The Tsar had to conjure up the spectre of widespread peasant revolt in order to persuade his reticent nobles that there was no alternative to Emancipation. In a speech to the Tver nobility, he declared that `It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for the time when it begins to abolish itself from below.'

**Emancipation: A Flawed Measure**

The Edict of Emancipation was promulgated in March 1861. Serfs were freed from their feudal obligations and allotted land for their needs. Landlords received compensation from the state in the form of Treasury bonds. The peasants were then indebted to the state and obliged to make redemption payments to their obshchina (the village mir, or commune) over a 49-year period. Peasants were incredulous that they had to pay for the land which they thought belonged to them because they had always worked it. Many, believing that the real terms of the Emancipation had been concealed by their landlords, rioted in protest.

The Emancipation was certainly effected on extremely onerous terms for the peasantry. They lost, on average, 4.1 per cent of their pre-1861 agricultural holdings. In the more fertile regions of the Empire the situation was far worse; in the Steppe provinces, for instance, the figure was 23.3 per cent, and in the Ukraine peasants lost 30.8 per cent of their former land.(4) The fundamental problem was that there was not enough good quality land available for distribution. Even the nobility failed to benefit from Emancipation, despite the care that the government had taken to protect their economic interests. The dvoriane was so heavily indebted that the financial compensation received was in general swallowed up by the settlement of debts. There was, therefore, little investment in industry and agriculture following Emancipation, and the persistence of obsolete agricultural techniques exacerbated the central problem of low yield. Russia produced
six hectolitres per acre of cereals at this time, compared with over nine in France and Prussia, and 14 in Britain and Holland.(5)

Serfdom was a medieval method of social control upon which the autocracy and nobility had become reliant. The government sought to perpetuate a similar level of control after 1861. The terms of the Emancipation dictated that local obshchina should control the movement of peasants in their district, so that those who wanted to travel more than 20 miles required an internal passport. There has been some controversy among historians over the economic effects of these restrictions. Alexander Gerschenkron, for example, argued that it contributed towards the retardation of Russian economic development by preventing the emergence of a freely mobile labour force. Gerschenkron also observed that the economy was affected by the diminution of peasant purchasing power as a result of the redemption payments.(6) M. E. Falkus, however, suggested that because internal passports were issued in large numbers and, further, there were between 2 and 3 million peasants who did not have any land after Emancipation, there was a pool of available labour. Falkus also noted that because the redemption payments were spread over a long period, they were in many cases no higher than the rents which former serfs had paid to their landlords.(7) Nevertheless, it is clear that the abolition of serfdom did not facilitate the optimum conditions for Russia's economic advancement.

**Emancipation: A Humanitarian Reform?**

The failure of Emancipation to achieve any real economic benefit is offset by some historians who portray the Edict as a moral improvement. M. S. Anderson, for example, contended that `the grant of individual freedom and a minimum of civil rights to twenty million people previously in legal bondage was the single greatest liberating measure in the whole history of Europe.'(8)

Emancipation was certainly a significant event for the Russian serf, because as a free peasant he was able to marry without the consent of a third party; he could also hold property in his own name; he was free to take action at law; and he could engage in a trade or business. Above all, he could no longer be bought or sold -- and it should not be overlooked that it took four years of bloody Civil War in the United States (1861-65) to afford the American negro slave this dignity. Nevertheless, the morality of Emancipation should not be allowed to obscure the realities behind it. The injustice in Russian society had long been criticised by radical intellectuals like Radischev, Pushkin, Turgenev and Herzen; but such moral criticism had little impact on the autocracy. Certainly the Tsar was not motivated by humanitarian concerns. The real significance of the abolition of serfdom was the impetus that it gave to further reforms. Each of these reforms will now be considered in turn.

**The Law**

An important corollary of Emancipation was juridical reform, which became necessary as a result of the abolition of feudalism. In late-1861 Alexander II set up a committee of jurists to investigate
the general principles of legal reform. The remit of the committee was to work out "those fundamental principles, the undoubted merit of which is at present recognised by science and the experience of Europe, in accordance with which Russia's judicial institutions must be reorganised." (9) The committee identified some 25 defects in the existing system and proposed a number of radical solutions. These included the separation of judicial and administrative powers; trial by jury for criminal cases; trial of petty cases by Justices of the Peace in summary courts; the introduction of full publicity in tribunals; and the simplification of court procedure. The last of these ended the ridiculous situation where cases could sometimes last for as long as two or three decades!

The new system nevertheless suffered from numerous imperfections. There was a shortage of trained lawyers, and interference from the bureaucracy often prevented the law from being applied universally (there was no trial by jury in Poland, the western provinces or the Caucasus). Further, the existence of peasant courts negated the fundamental principle of equality before the law. Even so, the new system was far superior to the old, for there was less corruption and a sense of fairness that had been absent before the reforms, as evidenced in the famous Vera Zasulich case of 1878.

**Local Government**

The abolition of the patriarchal authority of the gentry in 1861 required that a new local government system be implemented. This was to occasion some of the greatest constitutional hopes of the nineteenth century, which were unsurprisingly dashed by the autocratic regime. A Commission, appointed to investigate the reorganisation of local government, decided upon a system of district and provincial zemstva (local assemblies). The ensuing debate over the nature and function of these organisations, however, revealed the extent of nineteenth-century Russia's backwardness. A reactionary faction of the bureaucracy headed by the Minister of Interior, P. A. Valuev, persuaded Alexander II to limit the local assemblies to being innocuous organs of the central government. Consequently, zemstva presidents were appointed rather than elected and the zemstva were not allowed to levy taxes. The preponderance of the nobility in the zemstva meant that they retained their local authority, which was by way of concession for the 'losses' they had endured in 1861. Nevertheless, the zemstva were able to operate successfully within the limited scope afforded to them, and improvements were made in the provision of local services, particularly education.

**Education and Censorship**

Alexander II's reign was notable for its achievements in education. Elementary education had, for centuries, been controlled largely by the Church, and the standard of teaching was generally poor. After 1864, however, the zemstva became an important agency in the provision of public services. They administered local primary schools through school boards. The Ministry of Education presided over a large increase in the number of primary schools, from 8,000 in 1856 to over 23,000 in 1880. The quality of teaching in these secular schools was improved significantly. The secondary education curriculum was modernised and the number of students doubled to around 800,000
during the first decade of Alexander's reign. In 1863 Alexander also approved new statutes allowing universities to exercise administrative autonomy. Preliminary censorship was relaxed and judicial procedure substituted for administrative repression, a ‘thaw’ in censorship that encouraged publishing. This liberalisation was effected by Golovnin, the Minister for Education (1861-1866), but further developments to liberalise the whole system of education and censorship in Russia were precluded by assassination attempts on the Tsar in the later part of his reign.

**The Military**

Military reform was a priority for Alexander's government, and it was military considerations which had done most to convince the bureaucracy of the need to abolish serfdom. General Dmitriy Miliutin advised the Tsar that reform of Russia's armed forces was not possible as long as serfdom persisted. Further, it was evidently desirable that the modern soldier should have at least a basic education, equipping him with initiative and intelligence in a military context. Only by introducing these measures would the Russian military be able to fight on equal terms with Western forces in any future conflict. As Minister for War (1861-1881), Miliutin introduced a series of radical reforms which were aimed at improving the efficiency and fairness of the Russian military system. The intention to create a more professional army ended the practice of using the military as a penal institution, and convicts were therefore no longer allowed to serve with the colours. In order to improve morale, the number of offences for which capital punishment could be imposed was reduced, and corporal punishment was abolished (as it was also in civilian life). The general reduction in the length of service from 25 to 15 years, of which only seven were completed with the regular army and eight with the reserve, also did much to improve morale. Miliutin significantly altered the methods of conscription. Military liability was extended to all social classes, with reductions in the length of service for volunteers and graded reductions according to the level of education attained by the individual. Miliutin encountered opposition from the nobility, who resented the infringement of their class privileges, and from the merchant class, who could no longer purchase exemption from military service. These objections were at odds with the logic of the reforms, however, and Miliutin's proposals therefore became law in 1875.

Administrative improvements included a comprehensive review of the Russian Military Code, a review of military courts procedure, decentralisation of command to regional staff, and a greater emphasis on the functions and status of the General Staff (the post of Chief of the General Staff was created in 1865). The military's fighting efficiency was augmented by a process of re-equipment with modern weapons; greater emphasis on military engineering, including the construction of strategic railways for faster mobilisation; and improvements in medical facilities. Perhaps most importantly, the officer corps now received proper training. The success of these reforms was qualified by Russia's military performance against Turkey in 1877, Although Russia defeated her adversary, it took longer than expected -- and the opponent was a decaying Eastern nation, not an industrialised European power. Nevertheless, Russia's participation at the Congress of Berlin (1878) demonstrated that she had successfully recovered her international position.
Economic Policy

The abolition of serfdom, as noted above, failed to stimulate the Russian economy on a great scale. The government, however, recognised the need for further measures and there were financial reforms during Alexander’s reign that did facilitate economic growth. Reutern, the Minister of Finance, created a unified Treasury and centralised departmental accounts to improve government audits. In 1862 a public budget was introduced, and in 1863 a system of government excise was established. Yet none of these measures managed to improve the government’s financial situation, and up to one third of its annual expenditure was consumed by debt. This was in large measure a result of the failure to achieve a successful stabilisation of the Russian currency, a problem inherited from Nicholas I’s Minister of Finance, Count Kankrin. Indeed, it was not until Witte conformed to the Western practice in the 1890s, and placed Russia on the gold standard, that the situation was alleviated.

Railway construction, financed through an increasing number of credit institutions, was a key element in Reutern’s economic policy. The growth in railways helped to link the grain producing areas with towns and cities and Russian ports, thereby contributing to the promotion of exports, as shown in the tables above and below. The government played a key role in engineering this boom in the economy, in contrast to the non-interventionism of Western governments.

Growth of Russian Railways

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Mileage</th>
<th>Freight traffic (million tons)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>3,000</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1883</td>
<td>14,700</td>
<td>24</td>
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Increase in Russian Grain Exports

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Annual volume (million poods*)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1861–1865</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1871–1880</td>
<td>257</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(*) 1 pood: 36 lbs Source: W. E. Mosse, Alexander II and the Modernisation of Russia (London:
The Impact of Alexander II's Reforms

Significant though the reforms of Alexander II were, they failed to create popular support for the Tsarist regime. In 1862, Alexander granted Poland limited autonomy, but the Poles were traditionally hostile to the Russian Empire and in 1863 they rebelled. The Polish Revolt was countered with repression, the orthodox policy of Tsarist autocracy. In 1866, Karakazov, a former student of the University of Kazan, fired a pistol shot at the Tsar. This unsuccessful attempt on Alexander's life resulted in the replacement of Golovnin, the Minister of Education, by the conservative Dimitry Tolstoy, who acted to restrict access to university education.

Russian intellectuals interpreted Alexander's reforms as an attempt to perpetuate the existing political system. Historical opinion has for the most part agreed with this assessment. Florinsky, for example, has suggested that the reforms were nothing more than 'half-hearted concessions on the part of those who (with some exceptions) hated to see the disappearance of the old order and tried to save as much of it as circumstances would allow.'(10) The response of the Russian intelligentsia was the Populist 'going to the people' in 1874. When this failed, propaganda gave way to terrorism, which culminated in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Although it did not achieve its objective of igniting a revolution in Russia, Populism was nevertheless significant. It made a start in developing the political consciousness of the people and its terrorist actions inspired later insurrectionists. The Social Revolutionaries, descendants of Populism, were the most important insurgent group at the turn of the century.

Conclusion

When Alexander II became Tsar in 1855, the Russian state was in desperate need of fundamental reform. The programme of reforms introduced by him was radical in comparison with previous Russian experience, but it did not go far enough. The government's commitment to modernise Russia through a process of westernisation was moderated by its concern to perpetuate the interests of its ruling social class. This approach alienated the Russian intelligentsia and, in so doing, undermined the stability of the regime, compelling it to rely on repression for its preservation. This strategy succeeded for some time, but in the long term it was likely to achieve precisely the opposite of its intended effect.
**Timecheck on Alexander II and reform**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Event</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1855</td>
<td>Nicholas I dies, Alexander II becomes Tsar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1856</td>
<td>Treaty of Paris ends the Crimean War. Alexander warns the Tver nobility that serfdom must be abolished 'from above'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1861</td>
<td>Emancipation of the Serfs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1862</td>
<td>Public budgets introduced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1863</td>
<td>The Polish Revolt</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1864</td>
<td>Judicial Statute; Zemstva established</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1866</td>
<td>Karakozov's assassination attempt on the Tsar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1874</td>
<td>The Populist `Going to the People'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1875</td>
<td>Universal military liability introduced.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1877</td>
<td>Russo-Turkish War (to 1878)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1881</td>
<td>Assassination of Alexander II by the Narodnaia Volia (People's Will)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Books on Alexander II and reform**

M. T. Florinsky, Russia: A History and an Interpretation (New York, Macmillan, 2 vols. 1953)


(2) Y. F. Samarin, ‘O krepostnom sostoyanii i o perekhode iz nego k grazhdanskoy svobode', in

(3) K. D. Kavelin, Sobrannye sochineniya (St. Petersburg, 2 vols. 1898). Cited in McCauley and Waldron, p. 101. Kavelin's opinions resulted in his dismissal from his post as tutor to the heir to the throne.


(5) McCauley and Waldron, p. 18.


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**Alexander II: an Alternative View, by Graham Darby**


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 percent -- 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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