

ALEXANDER II

Alexander II, Russian in full Aleksandr Nikolayevich, (born April 29 [April 17, Old Style], 1818, Moscow, Russia—died March 13 [March 1], 1881, St. Petersburg), emperor of Russia (1855–81). His liberal education and distress at the outcome of the Crimean War, which had demonstrated Russia's backwardness, inspired him toward a great program of domestic reforms, the most important being the emancipation (1861) of the serfs. A period of repression after 1866 led to a resurgence of revolutionary terrorism and to Alexander's own assassination.

Life

The future Tsar Alexander II was the eldest son of the grand duke Nikolay Pavlovich (who, in 1825, became the emperor Nicholas I) and his wife, Alexandra Fyodorovna (who, before her marriage to the Grand Duke and baptism into the Orthodox Church, had been the princess Charlotte of Prussia). Alexander's youth and early manhood were overshadowed by the overpowering personality of his dominating father, from whose authoritarian principles of government he was never to free himself. But at the same time, at the instigation of his mother, responsibility for the boy's moral and intellectual development was entrusted to the poet Vasily Zhukovsky, a humanitarian liberal and romantic. Alexander, a rather lazy boy of average intelligence, retained throughout his life traces of his old tutor's romantic sensibility. The tensions created by the conflicting influences of Nicholas I and Zhukovsky left their mark on the future emperor's personality. Alexander II, like his uncle Alexander I before him (who was educated by a Swiss republican tutor, a follower of Rousseau), was to turn into a "*liberalizing*," or at any rate humanitarian, autocrat.

Alexander succeeded to the throne at age 36, following the death of his father in February 1855, at the height of the Crimean War. The war had revealed Russia's glaring backwardness in comparison with more advanced nations like England and France. Russian defeats, which had set the seal of final discredit on the oppressive regime of Nicholas I, had provoked among Russia's educated elite a general desire for drastic change. It was under the impact of this widespread urge that the tsar embarked upon a series of reforms designed, through "*modernization*," to bring Russia into line with the more advanced Western countries.

Among the earliest concerns of the new emperor (once peace had been concluded in Paris in the spring of 1856 on terms considered harsh by the Russian public) was the improvement of communications. Russia at this time had only one railway line of significance, that linking the two capitals of St. Petersburg and Moscow. At Alexander's accession there were fewer than 600 miles (965 km) of track; when he died in 1881, some 14,000 miles (22,525 km) of railway were in operation. In Russia, as elsewhere, railway construction, in its turn, meant a general quickening of economic life in a hitherto predominantly feudal agricultural society. Joint-stock companies developed, as did banking and credit institutions. The movement of grain, Russia's major article of export, was facilitated.

The same effect was achieved by another measure of modernization, the abolition of serfdom. In the face of bitter opposition from landowning interests, Alexander II, overcoming his natural indolence, took an active personal part in the arduous legislative labours that on February 19, 1861, culminated in the Emancipation Act. By a stroke of the autocrat's pen, tens of millions of human chattels were given their personal freedom. By means of a long-drawn-out redemption operation, moreover, they were also endowed with modest allotments of land. Although for a variety of reasons the reform failed in its ultimate object of creating an economically viable class of peasant proprietors, its psychological impact was immense. It has been described as "*the greatest social movement since the French Revolution*" and constituted a major step in the freeing of labour in Russia. Yet at the same time, it helped to undermine the already shaken economic foundations of Russia's landowning class.

The abolition of serfdom brought in its train a drastic overhaul of some of Russia's archaic administrative institutions. The most crying abuses of the old judicial system were remedied by the judicial statute of 1864. Russia, for the first time, was given a judicial system that in important respects could stand comparison with those of Western countries (in fact, in many particulars it followed that of France). Local government in its

turn was remodeled by the statute of 1864, setting up elective local assemblies known as zemstvos. Their gradual introduction extended the area of self-government, improved local welfare (education, hygiene, medical care, local crafts, agronomy), and brought the first rays of enlightenment to the benighted Russian villages. Before long zemstvo village schools powerfully supported the spread of rural literacy. Meanwhile, Dmitry Milyutin, an enlightened minister of war, was carrying out an extensive series of reforms affecting nearly every branch of the Russian military organization. The educative role of military service was underlined by a marked improvement of military schools. The army statute of 1874 introduced conscription for the first time, making young men of all classes liable to military service.

The keynote of these reforms—and there were many lesser ones affecting various aspects of Russian life—was the modernization of Russia, its release from feudalism, and acceptance of Western culture and technology. Their aim and results were the reduction of class privilege, humanitarian progress, and economic development. Moreover, Alexander, from the moment of his accession, had instituted a political “thaw.” Political prisoners had been released and Siberian exiles allowed to return. The personally tolerant emperor had removed or mitigated the heavy disabilities weighing on religious minorities, particularly Jews and sectarians. Restrictions on foreign travel had been lifted. Barbarous medieval punishments were abolished. The severity of Russian rule in Poland was relaxed. Yet, notwithstanding these measures, it would be wrong, as is sometimes done, to describe Alexander II as a liberal. He was in fact a firm upholder of autocratic principles, sincerely convinced both of his duty to maintain the God-given autocratic power he had inherited and of Russia’s unreadiness for constitutional or representative government.

Practical experience only strengthened these convictions. Thus, the relaxation of Russian rule in Poland led to patriotic street demonstrations, attempted assassinations, and, finally, in 1863, to a national uprising that was only suppressed with some difficulty—and under threat of Western intervention on behalf of the Poles. Even more serious, from the tsar’s point of view, was the spread of nihilistic doctrines among Russian youth, producing radical leaflets, secret societies, and the beginnings of a revolutionary movement. The government, after 1862, had reacted increasingly with repressive police measures. A climax was reached in the spring of 1866, when Dmitry Karakozov, a young revolutionary, attempted to kill the emperor. Alexander—who bore himself gallantly in the face of great danger—escaped almost by a miracle. The attempt, however, left its mark by completing his conversion to conservatism. For the next eight years, the tsar’s leading minister—maintaining his influence at least in part by frightening his master with real and imaginary dangers—was Pyotr Shuvalov, the head of the secret police.

The period of reaction following Karakozov’s attempt coincided with a turning point in Alexander’s personal life, the beginning of his liaison with Princess Yekaterina Dolgorukaya, a young girl to whom the aging emperor had become passionately attached. The affair, which it was impossible to conceal, absorbed the tsar’s energies while weakening his authority both in his own family circle (his wife, the former princess Marie of Hesse-Darmstadt, had borne him six sons and two daughters) and in St. Petersburg society. His sense of guilt, moreover, made him vulnerable to the pressures of the Pan-Slav nationalists, who used the ailing and bigoted empress as their advocate when in 1876 Serbia became involved in war with the Ottoman Empire. Although decidedly a man of peace, Alexander became the reluctant champion of the oppressed Slav peoples and in 1877 finally declared war on Turkey. Following initial setbacks, Russian arms eventually triumphed, and, early in 1878, the vanguard of the Russian armies stood encamped on the shores of the Sea of Marmara. The prime reward of Russian victory—seriously reduced by the European powers at the Congress of Berlin—was the independence of Bulgaria from Turkey. Appropriately, that country still honours Alexander II among its “*founding fathers*” with a statue in the heart of its capital, Sofia.

Comparative military failure in 1877, aggravated by comparative diplomatic failure at the conference table, ushered in a major crisis in the Russian state. Beginning in 1879, there was a resurgence of revolutionary terrorism soon concentrated on the person of the tsar himself. Following unsuccessful attempts to shoot him, to derail his train, and finally to blow up the Winter Palace in St. Petersburg itself, Alexander, who under personal attack had shown unflinching courage based on a fatalist philosophy, entrusted supreme power to a temporary dictator. The minister of the interior, Count Mikhail Loris-Melikov, was charged with exterminating the terrorist organization (calling itself People’s Will) while at the same time conciliating moderate opinion, which had become alienated by the repressive policies pursued since 1866. At the same

time, following the death of the empress in 1880, the tsar had privately married Yekaterina Dolgorukaya (who had borne him three children) and was planning to proclaim her his consort. To make this step palatable to the Russian public, he intended to couple the announcement with a modest concession to constitutionalist aspirations. There were to be two legislative commissions including indirectly elected representatives. This so-called Loris-Melikov Constitution, if implemented, might possibly have become the germ of constitutional development in Russia. But on the day when, after much hesitation, the tsar finally signed the proclamation announcing his intentions (March 1, 1881), he was mortally wounded by bombs in a plot sponsored by People's Will.

It can be said that he was a great historical figure without being a great man, that what he did was more important than what he was. His Great Reforms indeed rank in importance with those of Peter the Great and Vladimir Lenin, yet the impact of his personality was much inferior to theirs. The tsar's place in history—a substantial one—is due almost entirely to his position as the absolute ruler of a vast empire at a critical stage in its development.

Legacy

The modernization of Russian institutions, though piecemeal, was extensive. In Alexander's reign, Russia built the base needed for emergence into capitalism and industrialization later in the century. At the same time, Russian expansion, especially in Asia, steadily gathered momentum. The sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867 was outweighed in importance by the acquisition of the Maritime Province from China (1858 and 1860) and the founding of Vladivostok as Russia's far eastern capital (1860), the definitive subjugation of the Caucasus (in the 1860s), and the conquest of central Asia (Khiva, Bokhara, Turkestan) in the 1870s. The contribution of the reign to the development of what was to be described as Russia's "cotton imperialism" was immense. Here also, the reign of Alexander paved the way for the later phases of Russian imperialism in Asia.

Alexander's importance lies chiefly in his efforts to assist Russia's emergence from the past. To some extent, he was, of course, the representative of forces—intellectual, economic, and political—that were stronger than himself or, indeed, any single individual. After the Crimean War, the modernization of Russia had indeed become imperative if Russia was to retain its position as a major European power. But even within the context of a wider movement, the role of Alexander II, through his position as autocratic ruler, was a highly important one. The Great Reforms, both in what they achieved and in what they failed to do, bear the imprint of his personality. Unfortunately, however, by placing great power in the hands of the influential reactionary minister K.P. Pobedonostsev—whom he appointed minister for church affairs (procurator of the Holy Synod) and entrusted with the education of his son and heir, the future Alexander III—Alexander II, perhaps unwittingly, did much to frustrate his own reforming policies and to set Russia finally on the road to revolution.

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