

Alexander III, Russian in full Aleksandr Aleksandrovich, (born March 10 [Feb. 26, old style], 1845, St. Petersburg, Russia. Died Nov. 1 [Oct. 20, O.S.], 1894, Livadiya, Crimea), emperor of Russia from 1881 to 1894, opponent of representative government, and supporter of Russian nationalism. He adopted programs, based on the concepts of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and narodnost (a belief in the Russian people), that included the Russification of national minorities in the Russian Empire as well as persecution of the non-Orthodox religious groups.

The future Alexander III was the second son of Alexander II and of Maria Aleksandrovna (Marie of Hesse-Darmstadt). In disposition he bore little resemblance to his softhearted, impressionable father and still less to his refined, chivalrous, yet complex granduncle, Alexander I. He gloried in the idea of being of the same rough texture as the great majority of his subjects. His straightforward manner savoured sometimes of gruffness, while his unadorned method of expressing himself harmonized well with his roughhewn, immobile features. During the first 20 years of his life, Alexander had no prospect of succeeding to the throne. He received only the perfunctory training given to grand dukes of that period, which did not go much beyond primary and secondary instruction, acquaintance with French, English, and German, and military drill. When he became heir apparent on the death of his elder brother Nikolay in 1865, he began to study the principles of law and administration under the jurist and political philosopher K.P. Pobedonostsev, who influenced the character of his reign by instilling into his mind hatred for representative government and the belief that zeal for Orthodoxy ought to be cultivated by every tsar.

The tsesarevich Nikolay, on his deathbed, had expressed a wish that his fiancée, Princess Dagmar of Denmark, thenceforward known as Maria Fyodorovna, should marry his successor. The marriage proved a most happy one. During his years as heir apparent—from 1865 to 1881—Alexander let it be known that certain of his ideas did not coincide with the principles of the existing government. He deprecated undue foreign influence in general and German influence in particular. His father, however, occasionally ridiculed the exaggerations of the Slavophiles and based his foreign policy on the Prussian alliance. The antagonism between father and son first appeared publicly during the Franco-German War, when the Tsar sympathized with Prussia and the tsarevich Alexander with the French. It reappeared in an intermittent fashion during the years 1875–79, when the disintegration of the Ottoman Empire posed serious problems for Europe. At first the Tsarevich was more Slavophile than the government, but he was disabused of his illusions during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, when he commanded the left wing of the invading army. He was a conscientious commander, but he was mortified when most of what Russia had obtained by the Treaty of San Stefano was taken away at the Congress of Berlin under the chairmanship of the German chancellor Otto von Bismarck. To this disappointment, moreover, Bismarck shortly afterward added the German alliance with Austria for the express purpose of counteracting Russian designs in eastern Europe. Although the existence of the Austro-German alliance was not disclosed to the Russians until 1887, the Tsarevich reached the conclusion that for Russia the best thing to do was to prepare for future contingencies by a radical scheme of military and naval reorganization.

On March 13 (March 1, O.S.), 1881, Alexander II was assassinated, and the following day autocratic power passed to his son. In the last years of his reign, Alexander II had been much disturbed by the spread of nihilist conspiracies. On the very day of his death he signed an ukaz

creating a number of consultative commissions that might have been transformed eventually into a representative assembly. Alexander III cancelled the ukaz before it was published and in the manifesto announcing his accession stated that he had no intention of limiting the autocratic power he had inherited. All the internal reforms that he initiated were intended to correct what he considered the too liberal tendencies of the previous reign. In his opinion, Russia was to be saved from anarchical disorders and revolutionary agitation not by the parliamentary institutions and so-called liberalism of western Europe but by the three principles of Orthodoxy, autocracy, and narodnost.

Alexander's political ideal was a nation containing only one nationality, one language, one religion, and one form of administration; and he did his utmost to prepare for the realization of this ideal by imposing the Russian language and Russian schools on his German, Polish, and Finnish subjects, by fostering Orthodoxy at the expense of other confessions, by persecuting the Jews, and by destroying the remnants of German, Polish, and Swedish institutions in the outlying provinces. In the other provinces he clipped the feeble wings of the zemstvo (an elective local administration resembling the county and parish councils in England) and placed the autonomous administration of the peasant communes under the supervision of landed proprietors appointed by the government. At the same time, he sought to strengthen and centralize the imperial administration and to bring it more under his personal control. In foreign affairs he was emphatically a man of peace but not a partisan of the doctrine of peace at any price. Though indignant at the conduct of Bismarck toward Russia, he avoided an open rupture with Germany and even revived for a time the Alliance of the Three Emperors between the rulers of Germany, Russia, and Austria. It was only in the last years of his reign, especially after the accession of William II as German emperor in 1888, that Alexander adopted a more hostile attitude toward Germany. The termination of the Russo-German alliance in 1890 drove Alexander reluctantly into an alliance with France, a country that he strongly disliked as the breeding place of revolutions. In Central Asian affairs he followed the traditional policy of gradually extending Russian domination without provoking a conflict with Great Britain, and he never allowed bellicose partisans to get out of hand.

As a whole, Alexander's reign cannot be regarded as one of the eventful periods of Russian history; but it is arguable that under his hard, unsympathetic rule the country made some progress.

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