

The Reforms of Alexander II

There can be no doubt about the importance of the period 1855–81 in modern Russian history. The ‘Tsar Liberator’ presided over an ‘era of great reforms’ which finally dragged Russia into the nineteenth century and provided the background to further changes under Nicholas II (1894–1917). Indeed, the scope of Alexander II’s achievement has been compared by some historians with that of Peter the Great or Lenin.

At the same time, his measures were not intended primarily to innovate, but rather to inject new life into a flagging system. Hence there must be at least some reservations about their real effectiveness. This chapter will, on the one hand, point out the extent of change while, on the other, show the continuity between Alexander’s ideas and methods and those of his predecessor, Nicholas I. It will also show the limited impact of some of the reforming edicts. The final section will deal with another, but related, duality: is it possible to divide the reign chronologically into two distinct periods, one dominated by reforming zeal, the other stagnating under dreary reaction?

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Alexander was not by nature, or upbringing, a radical. He had a combination of progressive and traditional views, the result partly of the mixed education which he received from a liberal tutor, Zhukovsky, and a stern father. Although tolerant and always well-intentioned, he imbibed at an early age the autocrat’s inherent

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pessimism about humanity, once admitting to having ‘a very low opinion of the human race in general and in particular’. Inevitably, therefore, he had a limited view of the potential for progressive change. According to D. Field, ‘it is hard to find in Alexander the reformer’s breadth of vision and harder still to find the strength of will’. Furthermore, ‘his autocratic will did not manifest itself in bold strokes, but in passive tenacity’.¹

When dealing with nineteenth-century Russia, it is worth bearing in mind that the term ‘reform’ can be given two meanings. First, it can be understood as action against the whole system of autocracy and a modification of the basis of Russia’s political institutions; this was certainly the hope of the liberal constitutionalists on the accession of a new and less repressive Tsar in 1855. But clearly Alexander had no intention, at any stage in his reign, of breaking with past political practice. Nicholas I is usually seen as the embodiment of tsarist despotism, yet it was Alexander II who insisted that ‘all legislation takes its authority from the unified autocracy’.² There was also continuity in their attitudes to parliamentary government and in their desire to uphold the social hierarchy; Nicholas, for example, had affirmed that ‘the landowner is the most reliable bulwark of the sovereign’,³ while Alexander similarly regarded the nobility as ‘the mainstay of the throne’.⁴ The non-Russian fringes of the Empire were also unlikely to experience any radical concessions. To give Poland autonomy and a liberal constitution would only incite demands for similar privileges elsewhere and, in any case, Alexander saw no need to change Nicholas I’s policy. When he visited Warsaw in 1856 he told the disappointed Poles: ‘I will not change anything; what was done by my father was done well’.⁵ He added, in what could be taken as an expression of intent for the whole of Russia: ‘My reign will be a continuation of his.’

A second approach to ‘reform’, however, puts a much more favourable construction on Alexander’s achievements. Autocracy would not be undermined, but it would be made to work more efficiently by modernizing and rationalizing the range of social and administrative institutions over which it presided. It was obvious that, by 1855, Russia was in desperate need of overhaul. Alexander had come to the throne at a time when Russia was in grave internal disarray; Nicholas had admitted that ‘I am handing you command of the country in a very poor state’.⁶ Defeat in the Crimean War showed the structural weakness of the army, the inefficiency of the financial

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administration and, above all, the dangerously archaic features of serfdom. Alexander was therefore impelled to take action, although what he had in mind was not a break with the past but controlled surgery to save the whole hierarchical body. There is, perhaps, too great a tendency to see Alexander as a tragic, potentially heroic figure struggling to break away from the grip of the tyrannical influence of Nicholas I. Although clearly the more progressive of the two, Alexander had no desire to revolutionize his inheritance. In fact, at times he even made use of the groundwork provided by various projects of reform initiated, but not completed, by Nicholas I.

The first and most important of Alexander's measures, and the one which earned him his unofficial title 'Tsar Liberator', was the emancipation of the serfs, carried against a protesting nobility by the 1861 Edict. From one viewpoint this can be seen as a monumental achievement. (M. S. Anderson states that 'the grant of individual freedom and a minimum of civil rights to twenty million people previously in legal bondage was the greatest single liberating measure in the whole modern history of Europe'.⁷) Peasants could now regulate their own private lives, own property, bring actions through courts and engage in trade. The 1861 Edict accomplished for Russia what had been done in France in 1789, in Prussia in 1807 and in Austria in the 1780s and again in 1849. Its lateral impact was also considerable, for the end of seigneurial jurisdiction necessitated reforms in the entire system of justice, local government and military service. The emancipation of the serfs was therefore the force behind a series of reforms which followed between 1864 and 1881.

From another viewpoint, however, the Edict of Emancipation can be seen as a major reform carried out in a traditional, even cautious, way. Alexander's own intention was to introduce a controlled measure in order to forestall the possibility of more sweeping changes extracted by violence. Hence he told the nobility in 1856: 'It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait until the serfs begin to liberate themselves from below'.⁸ Moreover, the whole project of emancipation had deep roots within the previous reign. Nicholas I had also disliked serfdom, considering it 'the indubitable evil of Russian life'. He had established a secret committee, consisting of leading reformers like Speransky and Kiselev, to examine the feasibility of gradual liberation. When this committee reported, Nicholas went ahead with the freeing of the state

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peasantry (about one half of the total) and, in 1835, added a Fifth Section to the State Chancellery to implement future changes. He placed this under the authority of Kiselev and allocated to it about 1.2 million roubles, the largest sum received by any department except war. From this time onwards, however, obstacles to complete emancipation became increasingly serious so that, in 1843, Nicholas felt obliged to reassure the nobility that no further changes were being contemplated. Alexander derived considerable experience from his service on the committee system and also made extensive use of the surveys which had been carried out on Nicholas's orders. In a sense, therefore, the 1861 Edict was the culmination of a long but intermittent campaign.

The aftermath also illustrates the cautious nature of emancipation. The details of the terms were drafted by the bureaucracy and the main aims were, as always, to uphold the social and economic status of the nobility and to prevent the emergence of a mobile and individualistic peasantry. Hence emancipation was hedged with restrictions and qualifications like redemption payments, which many of the ex-serfs found crippling and far in excess of the value of the small plots which they worked. In addition, the government vested responsibility for peasant affairs in a traditional commune system which, in most areas, organized the payment of taxes and allocated land on the complex principle of repartitional tenure rather than on the more straightforward hereditary basis. The overall result was a peasantry which was still bound, if not by the constraints of serfdom, at least by a system which would not allow the development of simple free enterprise in the rural areas.

What of the changes which followed in the wake of emancipation? The legal system needed a complete overhaul now that the central government could no longer delegate judicial responsibility to the nobility as part of their feudal power. The reforms of 1864 were far-reaching: they introduced key concepts of western jurisprudence like equality before the law, trial by jury and the separation of criminal and civil cases. They also reduced the appalling level of bribery which had affected the courts in the previous reign and did much to modify some of the more savage forms of corporal punishment. Again, however, there were signs of continuity as well as change. Nicholas I, although hardly renowned for his knowledge of judicial procedure, had shown some concern about the extent of corruption and therefore appointed a committee under Bludov,

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which struggled in vain to reorganize the courts. Alexander's reform may have transcended the narrower vision of earlier administrators and jurists like Bludov and Speransky but it cannot be seen as an entirely new departure. When it came to implementing the change the forces of tradition once again became apparent. The older ecclesiastical and township courts continued to deal with a variety of cases, while the military courts were given considerable powers to deal with cases involving threats to 'public safety'. The 1864 Statute also ensured that the government departments retained the means of initiating proceedings outside the normal court system.

Changes in the structure of local government were also a priority. The emancipation of the serfs broke the hold of the aristocracy on administration and policing and necessitated the emergence of new institutions. The formation of the *zemstvos* in 1864 has been seen as the first step in the evolution of representative institutions in nineteenth-century Russia. This was followed by the Statute of 1870, notable for the establishment of the *dumas*, the urban counterpart of the *zemstvos*. Chapter 18 explains the significance of the latter institution in later constitutional developments, and it is clear that Alexander's reign was an important formative period. Nevertheless, it should also be said that the future uses of the *dumas* and *zemstvos* were not anticipated by Alexander, who tried, as far as possible, to circumscribe their powers and keep them under the supervision of the central government departments. He left them in control of uncontroversial functions, such as the provision of primary education and the improvement of medical facilities, which they discharged with unprecedented zeal and efficiency.

There were two areas in which reforms were less inhibited by tradition, mainly because there was no point at which these reforms could become a threat to autocracy. The first concerned the army. As Minister of War between 1861 and 1881, Milyutin applied the lessons of the Crimean War and also of the Edict of Emancipation; the former showed the need for a chief of general staff and an effective system of regional commands, while the latter forced a complete review of the haphazard and appallingly harsh method of recruitment. Milyutin's reforms paid off more quickly and obviously than any other, with Russia's spectacular victory over the Turks in 1877. Meanwhile, Reutern had come to grips with some of the financial problems which had afflicted Nicholas I and had dragged Russia down during the Crimean War. He ended the wasteful

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administration of revenue by separate government departments, introducing, instead, the principle of overall control by the treasury. He also reduced incompetence and corruption by more systematic auditing and a regular budget. The economy as a whole was given a much-needed boost by the import of capital from Western Europe. The main beneficiary was railway construction, and the overall mileage was increased from 660 at the beginning of the reign to 14,000 by the end. But some financial deficiencies, inherited from Nicholas I, were not remedied until much later in the century. Perhaps the most important was the continuing problem of the currency, which had collapsed during the Crimean War and did not recover fully until Witte put Russia on the gold standard in 1896.

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There has always been a school of thought which has divided the reign of Alexander II into two distinct phases, the first dominated by reform, the second by reaction. The transition from one to the other, it is argued, occurred during the 1860s, with the actual turning point located at 1866, the year in which the ex-student, Karakozov, tried to assassinate the Tsar. It can certainly be shown that attitudes stiffened in response to the Polish Revolt and also to the growing unrest throughout Russia during the early 1860s and the 1870s. Alexander II and his ministers were affected psychologically by the emergence of radicalism, whether in the form of the *raznochintsy*, led by journalists like Chernyshevski, or the violent revolutionary societies of the 1870s, like *Narodnaia Volia* (People's Will). Hence, from the mid-1860s some progressive ministers were being replaced by arch-conservatives. Golovnin, for example, lost the Ministry of Education to Count Dmitri Tolstoy, who cancelled many of the earlier reforms, made sweeping changes in the curriculum of secondary schools, interfered directly with the appointment of university staff, and restored censorship on books, newspapers and pamphlets. Some ministers, who had once been liberal, changed with the times and moved conspicuously to the Right; thus Katkov, who had supported the emancipation of the serfs and the legal and local government reforms, became an important spokesman for reaction. Underpinning the whole edifice was Shuvalov who, from the time he became head of the Imperial Chancellery's notorious Third Section in 1866, did whatever he could to secure the appointment to the bureaucracy of anti-progressives. D. A. Milyutin

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complained in 1873 that there was a 'devastating and disgusting contrast with the atmosphere in which I entered the government thirteen years ago'.⁹

On the other hand, such changes in attitudes and personnel did not necessarily mean that the whole base of the regime shifted from enlightened reform to unyielding reaction. There are too many threads running through the reign as a whole to allow for such an unqualified break. There is evidence, for example, of the enormous influence of conservative bureaucrats in boiling down the proposals for emancipation before 1861, resulting in widespread discontent with the actual conditions of freedom. There was also a lack of effective co-ordination between the various sections of the unreformed central government, especially between the Departments, Chancellery and Council of State; this tended, from the beginning of the reign, to impede the full implementation of the edicts. The counterpart to reaction in the so-called era of reforms was reform in the phase of reaction. Obvious examples were the Municipal Statute of 1870 and Alexander's decision in 1881 to accept Melikov's plan for a limited consultative assembly of elected representatives of public opinion. The latter, in fact, was cancelled only because of Alexander II's assassination and the imposition of a far more reactionary regime by Alexander III.

A. J. Rieber has emphasized another type of continuity between the beginning and end of the reign. Alexander II's main concerns, the argument runs, were always military and fiscal; these provided the original impetus behind emancipation and continued to dominate all aspects of domestic policy throughout the period. Serfdom, Alexander realized, had 'spawned an outmoded army' and 'crippled the treasury'.¹⁰ Emancipation was therefore a prelude to a more efficient army and a more modern fiscal system, the achievement of which were always given priority throughout the 1860s and 1870s. This argument, while drawing attention away from the value of some of the legal and social changes, does provide the period with a degree of stability and consistency. In any case, like his two immediate predecessors, Alexander II realized that effective autocracy must depend ultimately on sound financial management and military strength. This was a traditional Romanov approach and had as much to do with Alexander's reforms as any enlightened theories.