

# The consolidation of Russian conservatism – Alexander II 1855-81

Tsar Alexander II            1855-1881

*Continued autocracy or liberal reforms and changes under Tsar Alexander II...*

1. **Emancipation of the serfs.** The institution of serfdom recognized the ownership of one man, woman or family by another, and involved the total subjection of the serf to the will of his or her owner. In 1858, 31 per cent of Russia's population of 74 million, that is some 22.5 million persons, were serfs. In addition over 19 million were "state peasants", tied to lands owned by the crown. The authority of their owners, sometimes delegated to the elders of the peasant commune (the *mir*), was almost absolute.

Nicholas I legislation did away with some of the most inhuman aspects of the institution, forbidding the splitting up of families by the sale of individuals (1833), and banning the auctioning of serfs (1841).

By the **Edict of Emancipation of 1861**, Tsar Alexander II ended the system of serfs. The Edict freed them from serfdom and provided them with some land (usually too small). This land was initially paid for by the State (in government bonds), and the peasants then had to repay the debt. The landlords rarely hesitated to compensate themselves for the loss of free serf labor by inflating the estimated value of the land. The "*mir*" became responsible to the state for collecting the redemption dues (regularly payments over 49 years) as well as the taxes. To ensure that peasants would not escape their debts, the *mir* issued passports and until 1903 no peasant could leave his village without a passport and the consent of the *mir*. The peasants could not sell or mortgage the land to anybody outside his local *mir*. Instead of being a serf under a landlord he was now a serf under the *mir*! **Impact of emancipation:** Some historians said it had a great impact, (Hugh Seton-Watson - compares it with the less peaceful and less successful emancipation in USA) others said it was a "fraud" (Lionel Kochan). Morris claims that it would be more correct to talk about "*that serfdom was abolished rather than that the serfs had been emancipated.*" He gives four reasons for this; **1.** The process was slow, dictated by the needs of the individual landowner. **2.** The settlement made upon the ex-serfs was usually unsatisfactory. The serf got too little and the landowner saw to it that he got as much as possible. **3.** Many peasants resented the redemption payments of property that they thought belonged to them from the very beginning. **4.** As mentioned, the serf was freed from the landowner but became a serf under the *mir*. In the shorter run, emancipation did not seem to solve the twin problems of rural unrest and industrial backwardness.

2. **New local governments - Zemstvos.** One consequence of the emancipation was the need to replace the local government, consisting of serf-owning landlords before 1861. Alexander II did this in 1864 when he approved the reform of setting up "*zemstvos*" - local Parliaments, elected by an electoral college system that gave most votes to the richest citizens. The members of each *zemstvo* were to be responsible for transport, health, education, the poor, famine relief, and the encouragement of agriculture and industry in their area. *Zemstvos* only existed in European Russia. In 1870 similar assemblies were formed in the urban districts - town councils. These local assemblies could have been a step away from the old autocracy, but the system of voting and their established local reputations made it easy for the conservative nobility to dominate. At provincial level they occupied 74 per cent of all *zemstvo* seats in 1865-67. When suggestions came up to form a central, national body with delegates from different *zemstvos* the Tsar "*sharply reminded them of the limitations upon their powers*". Seton-Watson claims that this was where Alexander stood at the crossroads between autocracy and liberal reforms. Having whetted the appetite for the latter, he remained committed to the former (maybe with the exception of his last year...).

3. **Reforms of the legal system.** From 1865 a new legal system replaced the old "summary justice of the landlord." It made the legal proceedings public, included all the classes of society, introduced a common jury system and saw to it that judges were independent of the government. Seton-Watson claims that these were remarkable reforms, ensuring that "the court room was the one place in Russia where real freedom of speech prevailed."

4. **Military reforms.** The disasters of the Crimean war made apparent the need of changes within the military system. The minister of war, Dmitri Milyutin, got this responsibility. Florinsky and other Russian historians have "hailed" this man for being one of the few outstanding statesmen of imperial Russia. Milyutin 1. Reduced the term of service from 25 years ("life sentence") to a period of six years. 2. He introduced universal military service (1874) to which all males were liable at 20 years of age (no loopholes for the rich and the nobility). 3. He abolished the more brutal form of military punishment and military service as a

punishment for criminal offenses. 4 He also took away the "military colonies" an institution where the sons of long-term service men were sent to be trained as the next generation of soldiers.

5. **Educational reforms.** The numbers of university students were allowed to rise again in 1855. European government (1857) and philosophy (1860) was permitted once more. A new University Statute (1863) gave the universities more autonomy in their own affairs.

**Pan-slavism:** The slavophile movement was also going through a new phase. **Nikolai Danilyevski** wrote "*Russia and Europe*" in 1871. He rejected the Western philosophy and forwarded a more aggressive support for Russia's Slav nature and inheritance. He preached a union of all Slav nations under Russian leadership stretching from the Baltic to the Adriatic. This regeneration of aggressive, autocratic nationalism was called **pan-slavism**.

**DOMESTIC CRITICISM.** The Tsar was criticized from both sides - the conservatives resented the loss of influence and privilege and the liberals became frustrated at the Tsar's refusal to take his reforms to their logical conclusion. More radical and revolutionary forms of opposition developed as Alexander's reign progressed. In some ways the reforms created this "hot" political atmosphere.

The most important names on the Russian left in the 1850s and the 1860s were those of **Alexander Herzen** (exiled in 1848. Published a journal "The Bell" (Kolokol) from London), **Nikolai Chernyshevsky** (part of then literary radicalism of the 1850s. He claimed that reforms were impossible without a fundamental alteration of Russia's political and economical bases. His novel "*What is to be Done?*" inspired the next generation) and **D. I. Pisarev** (he advised his followers to not "*accept any single principle on trust, however much respect surrounds that principle*". This principle to accept nothing of the existing society without question was named "**nihilism**" (nihil (lat.) - nothing)).

**Populism** was a movement that dominated Russian radicalism in the mid 1870s. The basic idea was to re-educate the Russian peasantry. In 1874-75 3,000 young radicals invaded the countryside to open the eyes of the population to their plight and show them the sources of salvation This movement "*To the People*" was a depressing failure. Over 1,600 of these populists (*narodniki*) were arrested between 1873-77, often handed over to the police by the peasants! A breakaway group calling itself "*Land and Liberty*" (*Zemlya i Volya*) made some progress in the following years. Members of "Land and Liberty" also founded the first unions for Russian industrial workers in Odessa (1875) and in St. Petersburg (1878).

**Terrorism** was the more attractive alternative for those with less patience. The first attempt on the life of the Tsar was in 1866 when a student shot at him in the streets of St. Petersburg. In 1879 a split in the ranks of "*Land and Liberty*" gave birth to a group called "*The Peoples Will*" (*Narodnaya Volya*) that advocated violence as the trigger to general revolution. Although other government officials were among their early victims, their chief target was always the Tsar himself. Attempts to shoot him, dynamite the royal train and explosives in the Winter Palace came within a year 1879-80. In March 1881 they succeeded!

**Alexander II:s last year - a liberal attempt?** Alexander had during the latter part of his reign showed that he remained committed to an autocratic system, though there was maybe an attempt to go back to a more liberal system during his last years... When Alexander's first wife died in 1880, he married the much younger Princess Dolgoruky. She was the friend and patron of a number of liberal politicians. It was under this period a liberal politician; Mikhail Loris-Melikov was appointed minister of the interior. He managed to abolish the Third Section (as described before, the Third Section was a part of the Imperial Council or His Imperial Majesty's Private Chancery, and this section was in charge of state security). Loris-Melikov also managed to replace one of the most reactionary ministers - Dmitri Tolstoy (Ministry of Education). Right before Alexander II was killed he had just given his personal approval for calling in a national assembly, partly of nominated members, but also elected representatives of the **zemstvos** and the town councils. The Soviet historian P. A. Zaionchkovsky concedes that "*in the conditions of an increasingly complex situation it might have been the beginning of the establishment of a parliamentary system in Russia*". This came to a stop when Alexander was killed by the second of two bombs thrown at his sledge in a St Petersburg street.

## ***Foreign policy of Tsar Alexander II.***

**Russia and France 1856-1863.** Between 1856 (the end of the Crimean War) and the 1870's Russia came to play a more passive role in European politics. The major aim between these years was to revise the Black Sea clauses (from the Treaty of Paris 1856, undertaking to keep no navy on the Black Sea and to maintain no bases on its shores). The best way to achieve this goal was to cultivate the friendship of France. Russia accepted the formation of Wallachia and Moldavia into an effectively independent Rumanian state (Paris conference May-August 1858) and she agreed in 1859 to remain neutral in case of French actions in northern Italy (as long as it was for France protection...). Alexander II could though not tolerate the French interference with the "legitimate" regimes in Italy in the early 1860's and the French support for Poland 1863 broke the "friendship".

**The Polish revolt, 1863.** In Poland it would become clear that it was impossible to reconcile such beliefs as Polish nationalism with Tsarist autocracy. The first Polish rebellion (1830-31) had been suppressed by Nicholas I. When the "Tsar Liberator" came into office he was greeted with great optimism. After some nationalistic demonstrations in 1861 in Warsaw the link between the Agricultural Society and nationalists made the Tsar dissolve the society. Demonstration where 200 were killed became the result of this. The Tsar's brother, Constantine (reputation of being a liberal), was appointed viceroy in an attempt to defuse the situation. He was nearly assassinated during his first month! A proposal for the conscription of Poles into the Russian army made an armed insurrection break out in January 1863. It was largely a rural rebellion. It took Russia nearly a year to control it! This rebellion and the ingratitude over agrarian reforms in Poland made the Russian policy towards all the nationalities of the Empire become one of Russification. In Poland the property of the Polish Roman Catholic Church was seized (1864) and Warsaw's university was closed (1869). Russian replaced Polish as the administrative language and more and more Russians replaced Poles in the ranks of the administrators. These measures set the pattern for the policies of Russification elsewhere.

**Russia and Prussia 1863-1870:** After the Polish revolt Russia became isolated in European diplomacy, with the exception of Prussia. Prussia offered aid against the Polish rebels. Russia didn't accept it but in return for the friendly gesture Russia remained neutral during the conflict between Prussia and Austria. Prussia's war against France 1870 served Russia very well - she took the opportunity and renounced the Black Sea clauses in November 1870. The major powers condemned this action, but no retaliatory action was taken.

**The League of Three Emperors:** In 1872 Otto von Bismarck, Chancellor of the new German Empire, managed to get the three Emperors of Russia, Austria and Germany to sign an agreement between the countries. It consisted of a series of bilateral military agreements promising aid to any party attacked by a fourth power. Behind the facade Russia resented the rising German power and at Austrian pretensions in the Balkans.

**The Russo-Turkish War 1877-1878:** After the successful renunciation of the Black Sea clauses Russia came to play a more active role in the Balkans. The League of the Three Emperors though restricted the Russian ambitions for some time. She became more cautious. Under the impression of several revolts among Serbians, Bosnians and Bulgarians in 1875/1876 Russia made an agreement with Austria (Reichstadt July 1876) whereby Russia would regain southern Bessarabia, lost in 1856, and Austria would receive part of Bosnia and Herzegovina in the event of a successful Russian clash with Turkey. The war started in April 1877. Both Turkey and Russia suffered from military incompetence - L. Kochan describes it as "*a war between the one-eyed and the blind - so many errors of strategy and judgment were committed*". Nevertheless, Russia was the less incompetent and at the Treaty of Stefano (3 March 1878) she enjoyed considerable gains. Russia gained territory in Caucasus and regained the southern part of Bessarabia. Ignoring the agreement of Reichstadt Russia helped the creation of Rumania, Serbia, Montenegro and a large Bulgarian state (all open for Russian influence). The diplomatic protests and hostilities forced Russia to a revision of the treaty. At an international congress in Berlin (June-July 1878) the major powers of Europe (especially Britain) ensured that Russia would not be able to maintain the San Stefano settlement. Russia and Tsar Alexander II saw the Congress of Berlin as "a European coalition against Russia under the leadership of Prince Bismarck". The tension between Germany and Russia escalated the next year when Germany introduced protective tariffs against Russian agriculture. The League was also undermined by the installation of Austria in Bosnia and Herzegovina against the local population's will. Then in 1881 Alexander was assassinated!