

Reforms of Alexander II

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Background

Alexander II became tsar during the Crimean war in 1855. Russia had been regarded as the greatest military power in Europe in the beginning of the Century and the defeat was humiliating. The State Council had warned Alexander II in January 1856 that the war would bankrupt Russia since the other European powers had more military and economic strength. Nicholas I had prevented the country from progress and Russia was in desperate need of reforms.

Analysis

Alexander's reform affected daily life of all Russians.

The emancipation has been accused for creating more problems than it solved. However, one has to remember that the emancipation affected more than 90 per cent of the population. It was a genuine attempt to change things for the better but with opposition from every part of the society - conservatives resented their loss of influence and privilege; liberals became frustrated at what they considered lack of action; the peasants were aggravated with 50 per cent decrease in income - a policy approved of by everyone must be seen as an impossibility. Yet, the emancipation did create new opportunities for the serfs. Earlier unable to move, marry, to be educated, the emancipation created immense liberties.

The Zemstvos (1864) were not ideal with nobility in majority but it created a forum where common people for the first time could witness and practise democracy. Primary education, public health, poor relief, local industry and elections were important every day aspects where people could feel involved. Just six years later the equivalent was created in the cities.

There were substantial reforms of the Russian legal system. According to Seton-Watson "the courtroom was the one place in Russia where real freedom of speech prevailed". In a strict autocracy as Russia it must be considered a huge reform to let everyone get equal treatment in court and to let people on trial speak their true meaning.

As a result of the significant increase of railways export increased, especially grain. Tariffs were abolished and simplified. Also industrial output increased.

The military reforms had help and Russia defeated Turkey in 1878. She had resumed her place as a great power even if not as the greatest power on the European mainland.

The number of university students was allowed to raise, lectures on "European government" and philosophies were permitted and finally universities were given more autonomy. Censorship was reduced.

It has been argued that the assassination of Alexander II indicates that he had failed to satisfy the demand for reform. However, it could also show that Alexander had provided the country with so many liberties that by 1881 the population was educated enough to demand even more reforms. If you give them the hand they will take the whole arm.

The tsar's reforms were important and some even survived the rule of his son Alexander III. Alexander II showed Russia the way towards modernization. He created new liberties for the peasants, built the foundations for the Russian industrial success story in the early 20th Century. For a man whose reign lasted 26 years one cannot expect to transfer a country of the size of Russia from a backwards autocratic state to a liberal democracy. Not even Rome was built in one day.

Bibliography:

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To determine whether Alexander II was a liberator, one has to look at the situation he inherited briefly. After the Crimean War, the Russian image of a great European power, which had an enormous amount of military strength was realised for what it was—a fake. No longer could Russia hold her head high like she had done for the previous hundred and fifty years. There was little morale, and they did not keep up with military advances that were achieved by the British and the French. They did not have an adequate infrastructure to challenge the new dominant European powers, for example, south of Moscow there was no railway. Also the war brought to the surface many discontentments towards political stability, for instance that of the freedom of the Serfs. Its international standing was severely damaged and over the next half-century had to deal with a modernisation of European politics and the emergence of new rivalries i.e. Germany. They did not have a healthy economic situation which meant that if they had to go to war—as a superpower should be prepared to do—then, internally, there would be an overburden on the states finances.

There was a general feeling among statesmen that radical reform was needed. However could Alexander II carry out this, as he was inherently a conservative man. It was thought, even by Nicholas I in 1842, that serfdom was the key to many of the problems. Boris Chicherin claimed: "*Someone bound hand and foot cannot compete with someone free to use all his limbs. Serfdom is a shackle which we drag around with us, and which holds us back just when other people are racing ahead unimpeded*". What was occurring within Europe was that of the creation of the nation-state and this meant that Russia would have to embrace the change. The Russians saw what they had to do was to create a new sense of 'belonging' to Russia and to strengthen the internal institutions.

Alexander's first task it appears was that of freeing the Serfs. However to dismantle something which had been a kind of social cement for two centuries was going to be difficult and as a result meant that the necessary reforms were never going to satisfy everyone. The emancipation of the Serfs should have meant a degree of equality i.e. citizenship, right to have legal representation, trade on the market or be involved with politics. However the edict of 19 February 1861 certainly did not accomplish these things and most policies such as the tax system and passport reform were postponed. On the other hand they were now to a certain extent free and not answerable to landlords. Also they had a plot of land to carve out a survival on. However, how was one to develop a new system after years of the same routine? It was here the Slavophiles come into their own and decided that the village commune was the ideal replacement. What this meant was basically a compromise: that of still having the government control but also the aspect of empowerment. The negative side to this though was that the peasants were not really integrated into the rest of society—they still remained segregated, and were not connected to any economic or social change. In reality Alexander may have brought about a degree of progress to the peasants but to be called a liberator is not entirely accurate.

What emancipation did raise however was that the political institutions were in need of reform, and the nobles wanted to be included in any cabinet which was to be created. Alexander in-turn refused this proposal stating that when concerned with an empire this large it could result in its disintegration. What Alexander did permit though in terms of local government reform was that of representative governing at the intermediate administrative level. These consisted of the *uezd* and the *guberniia*. *Zemstvos* (assemblies) were created by a voting system based on property qualification and *soslovie*. What this system of government was reliant on though was that of Russians constituting the main social groups. This was ensured because Alexander still wanted overall control with no disintegration of provinces; consequently when municipal councils were set up in 1870 they were not introduced into provinces where Russians were a minority i.e. the Baltic, Poland or the Caucasus. What was emerging though from within these *zemstvos* though was that of an "*educated and politically aware society*" (*obschestvennost*). They believed that they were more in-tune with the ideas that were pushing the rest of Europe forward into industrialisation and therefore were equipped to serve Russia as it should have been advancing too. Nevertheless, Alexander still held most of the power when it came to politics therefore he cannot justifiably be called a liberator in this circumstance.

In 1864 there was judicial reform that gave independence to the judiciary from the administration. What it did was to create the view of equality within the legal world. This development should be highlighted because Alexander certainly handed over a considerable amount of control to the judges—once appointed they could not be dismissed. A decision that did not always please Alexander in the future, but one that to his credit he respected. The *advokat* were established as well due to the legal reforms and became a place where freedom of speech and the rule of law applied at the same time. Also unqualified attorneys were given a

license to plead before courts. One may argue that this created an unprofessional atmosphere and undermining within the legal profession but in doing so one would find that it actually led to the emergence of new attitudes towards gender, property and the family. For example views, that could be associated with enlightenment thinking, were raised that marriage should be more than just an exchange of dowries but more to do with affection and their offspring were not inferior to them. Also they recognised the legal right for marital separation, three decades before it became common law. The rights of the individual were what really received the largest boost-away from that of family control of assets. Alexander should therefore be given credit for bringing about a change in the legal profession that benefited a vast range of the population.

In 1864 the ability to open schools became less stringent and as long as they obliged certain moral and religious guidelines as well as being constantly inspected by the uezd school council then admission was granted, allowing little social discrimination. However the question that became evident was how do you educate people under a system that had an inbuilt suspicion of the West? Could they therefore really achieve the standard of education that was being practiced in the rest of Europe if they didn't accept their views? Nevertheless former Serfs and other peasants with poor backgrounds could engage in higher education with fewer restrictions than previously. As an attempt to increase the 'total world view' that was being discussed by the Western World, the authorities decided to ease the harsh restriction that had been imposed on different publications over the years. However it was not that liberal as the Ministry of the Interior still retained the authority of censorship. But it can be argued that on the other side of the coin the media could use all sorts of literary devices that the government were frightened to fight back against in case the public thought it was being too overbearing. Problems that they found easy to highlight were social issues for example peasant problems, crime, prostitution etc. What this did was to actually give Russians a sense of patriotic identity and the authorities were incapable of stopping this without public outrage. However is that really enough to describe Alexander as a liberator? As seen there were still a large amount of control held by those in power and to be accurately described as a liberator would mean an easing of such control.

The one reform of Alexander's that was really disputed was that concerning the military. Conscription was introduced to all adult males in 1874 as the war minister; Dmitrii Miliutin believed that every man had a duty to protect his country. Military schools replaced the Cadet Corps and gave those of a less fortunate background a chance to succeed alongside those of a fortunate one.

The Orthodox clergy had by the late eighteenth century become a very separate and closed-off organisation. There were many things that made it this way for example monetary, if you entered it and you were a noble you would lose your social standing, and that accounted if you were a clergyman's son too. Therefore it would really stay within the family.

What this presentation has hopefully highlighted is that Alexander II realised that reform was needed in order to carry his country through into the changing world, but could this have been successfully done by a man who was still very traditional at heart? As the Western World evolved at a startling pace Russia still had an inbuilt distrust for foreign influences and it was this that severely limited their need for reform, as well as Alexander's own personal beliefs. He was apprehensive that too much reform too quickly could actually do more harm than good, and therefore did not always carry through new policy changes to the full extent that they could have been done.