

The Reforms of Tsar Alexander II

Carl Peter Watts examines a set of reforms which held out the prospect of modernising Russia but whose failure paved the way for revolution.

Alexander II's 'great reforms' stand out as among the most significant events in nineteenth century Russian history. Alexander became known as the 'Tsar Liberator' because he abolished serfdom in 1861. Yet 20 years later he was assassinated by terrorists. Why did Alexander introduce a programme of reforms and why did they fail to satisfy the Russian people? This article will demonstrate that the reforms were a direct response to Russia's defeat in the Crimean War. They were intended to liberate Russian society from some of its most archaic practices, improve the economic and military efficiency of the war and preserve the existing socio-political structure by a process of modification. The essentially conservative nature of Alexander's reforms is betrayed by the continuity in policy from the reign of his predecessor Nicholas I (1825-1855). Yet this conservatism, far from guaranteeing the safety of the aristocracy, jeopardised the stability of Russia because it left a 50-year legacy of social and political dissatisfaction to Alexander's successors.

Emancipation: The Fundamental Reform

The need for reform was evident well before the reign of Alexander II. The Decembrist Revolt of 1825 occurred just as Nicholas I acceded to the throne. Although it was unsuccessful, the uprising demonstrated that the autocracy could not continue to ignore demands for reform indefinitely. The condition of the peasantry was perhaps the most prominent weakness in Russian society. The Pugachev Revolt (1773-75) had served as a reminder of the threat that a dissatisfied peasantry could represent. Nicholas I introduced a series of minor reforms which improved the conditions of state and crown peasants and which were intended to serve as a model to the *dворяне* (nobility) as to how they should treat their private serfs. Most landowners, however, took little notice of these measures and continue to extract feudal dues and labour services from their serfs without regard for their welfare. It is clear that Nicholas I abhorred serfdom: in 1842 he declared to the Council of State: 'There can be no doubt that serfdom in its present situation in our country is an evil...[It] cannot last forever ... The only answer is thus to prepare the way for a gradual transition to a different order...' However, the conservatism of the autocracy was such that it would not compel the *dворяне* by abolishing serfdom unilaterally. It took the shock of Russia's disastrous performance in the Crimean War, the concomitant death of Nicholas I and the accession of Alexander II to alter the situation.

Alexander II had served on the committees of inquiry into serfdom and he was acutely aware of the weakness of the Russian state. Defeat by Britain and France now demonstrated that Russia was lagging behind her European counterparts. In the autumn of 1856 Yuriy Samarin, a prominent Slavophile, articulated the concerns of political society when he wrote that 'We were defeated not by the external forces of the Western alliance but by our own internal weakness.' Criticisms of serfdom were echoing from many quarters. General Dimitry Milutin, later Minister for War (1861-1881), advised the new Tsar that reform of the Russian army was impossible while serfdom continued to exist. Only by reforming the very foundations of Russian society could effective military capacity be restored and great power status recovered. Serfdom was also condemned as economically inefficient. K. D. Kavelin, a liberal university professor, wrote a critique of serfdom in 1856 in which he observed that 'In the economic sphere, serfdom brings the whole state into an abnormal situation and gives rise to artificial phenomena in the national economy which have an unhealthy influence on the whole state 'organism of the state'. It was argued that serfdom impeded the emergence of a modern capitalist economy because the existence of an inelastic labour force and the absence of a money economy retarded industrial development. It was further argued that serfdom was an inefficient and unproductive form of agriculture because, essentially, it was forced labour, and so the serfs had no incentive to do any more than subsist.

Despite these powerful arguments in favour of abolishing serfdom, it was still difficult for Alexander II to overcome the inertia of the *dворяне* on the issue. The Tsar had to conjure up the spectre of widespread peasant revolt in

order to persuade his reticent nobles that there was no alternative to Emancipation. In a speech to the Tver nobility, he declared that 'It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for the time when it begins to abolish itself from below.'

Emancipation: A Flawed Measure

The Edict of Emancipation was promulgated in March 1861. Serfs were freed from their feudal obligations and allotted land for their needs. Landlords received compensation from the state in the form of Treasury bonds. The peasants were then indebted to the state and obliged to make redemption payments to their *obshchina* (the village mir, or commune) over a 49-year period. Peasants were incredulous that they had to pay for the land which they thought belonged to them because they had always worked it. Many, believing that the real terms of the Emancipation had been concealed by their landlords, rioted in protest.

The Emancipation was certainly effected on extremely onerous terms for the peasantry. They lost, on average, 4.1 per cent of their pre-1861 agricultural holdings. In the more fertile regions of the Empire the situation was far worse, in the Steppe provinces, for instance, the figure was 23.3 per cent, and in the Ukraine peasants lost 30.8 per cent of their former land. The fundamental problem was that there was not enough good quality land available for distribution. Even the nobility failed to benefit from Emancipation, despite the care that the government had taken to protect their economic interests. The *dvoriane* was so heavily indebted that the financial compensation received was in general swallowed up by the settlement of debts. There was, therefore, little investment in industry and agriculture following Emancipation, and the persistence of obsolete agricultural techniques exacerbated the central problem of low yield. Russia produced six hectolitres per acre of cereals at this time, compared with over nine in France and Prussia, and 14 in Britain and Holland.

Serfdom was a medieval method of social control upon which the autocracy and nobility had become reliant. The government sought to perpetuate a similar level of control after 1861. The terms of the Emancipation dictated that local *obshchina* should control the movement of peasants in their district, so that those who wanted to travel more than 20 miles required an internal passport. There has been some controversy among historians over the economic effects of these restrictions. Alexander Gerschenkron, for example, argued that it contributed towards the retardation of Russian economic development by preventing the emergence of a freely mobile labour force. Gerschenkron also observed that the economy was affected by the diminution of peasant purchasing power as a result of the redemption payments. M.E. Falkus, however, suggested that because internal passports were issued in large numbers and, further, there were between 2 and 3 million peasants who did not have any land after Emancipation, there was a pool of available labour. Falkus also noted that because the redemption payments were spread over a long period, they were in many cases no higher than the rents which former serfs had paid to their landlords. Nevertheless, it is clear that the abolition of serfdom did not facilitate the optimum conditions for Russia's economic advancement.

Emancipation: A Humanitarian Reform?

The failure of Emancipation to achieve any real economic benefit is offset by some historians who portray the Edict as a moral improvement. M.S. Anderson, for example, contended that 'the grant of individual freedom and a minimum of civil rights to twenty million people previously in legal bondage was the single greatest liberating measure in the whole history of Europe'. Emancipation was certainly a significant event for the Russian serf, because as a free peasant he was able to marry without the consent of a third party; he could also hold property in his own name; he was free to take action at law; and he could engage in a trade or business. Above all, he could no longer be bought or sold – and it should not be overlooked that it took four years of bloody Civil War in the United States (1861-65) to afford the American negro slave this dignity. Nevertheless, the morality of Emancipation should not be allowed to obscure the realities behind it. The injustice in Russian society had long been criticised by radical intellectuals like Radischev, Pushkin, Turgenev and Herzen; but such moral criticism had little impact on the autocracy. Certainly the Tsar was not motivated by humanitarian concerns. The real significance of the abolition of serfdom was the impetus that it gave to further reforms. Each of these reforms will now be considered in turn.

The Law

An important corollary of Emancipation was judicial reform, which became necessary as a result of the abolition of feudalism. In late-1861 Alexander II set up a committee of jurists to investigate the general principles of legal reform. The result of the committee was to work out 'those fundamental principles, the undoubted merit of which is at present recognised by science and the experience of Europe, in accordance with which Russia's judicial institutions must be reorganised. The committee identified some 25 defects in the existing system and proposed a number of radical solutions. These included the separation of judicial and administrative powers; trial by jury for criminal cases; trial of petty cases by Justices of the Peace in summary courts; the introduction of full publicity in tribunals; and the simplification of court procedure. The last of these ended the ridiculous situation where cases could sometimes last for as long as two or three decades!

The new system nevertheless suffered from numerous imperfections. There was a shortage of trained lawyers, and interference from the bureaucracy often prevented the law from being applied universally (there was no trial by jury in Poland, the western provinces or the Caucasus). Further, the existence of peasant courts negated the fundamental principle of equality before the law. Even so, the new system was far superior to the old, for there was less corruption and a sense of fairness that had been absent before the reforms, as evidenced in the famous Vera Zasulich case of 1878.

Local Government

The abolition of the patriarchal authority of the gentry in 1861 required that a new local government system be implemented. This was to occasion some of the greatest constitutional hopes of the nineteenth century, which were unsurprisingly dashed by the autocratic regime. A Commission, appointed to investigate the reorganisation of local government, decided upon a system of district and provincial *zemstva* (local assemblies). The ensuing debate over the nature and function of these organisations, however, revealed the extent of nineteenth-century Russia's backwardness. A reactionary faction of the bureaucracy headed by the Minister of Interior, P. A. Valuev, persuaded Alexander II to limit the local assemblies to being innocuous organs of the central government. Consequently, *zemstva* presidents were appointed rather than elected and the *zemstva* were not allowed to levy taxes. The preponderance of the nobility in the *zemstva* meant that they retained their local authority, which was by way of concession for the 'losses' they had endured in 1861. Nevertheless, the *zemstva* were able to operate successfully within the limited scope afforded to them, and improvements were made in the provision of local services, particularly education.

Education and Censorship

Alexander II's reign was notable for its achievements in education. Elementary education had, for centuries, been controlled largely by the Church, and the standard of teaching was generally poor. After 1864, however, the *zemstva* became an important agency in the provision of public services. They administered local primary schools through school boards. The Ministry of Education presided over a large increase in the number of primary schools, from 8,000 in 1856 to over 23,000 in 1880. The quality of teaching in these secular schools was improved significantly. The secondary education curriculum was modernised and the number of students doubled to around 800,000 during the first decade of Alexander's reign. In 1863 Alexander also approved new statutes allowing universities to exercise administrative autonomy. Preliminary censorship was relaxed and judicial procedure substituted for administrative repression, a 'thaw' in censorship that encouraged publishing. This liberalisation was effected by Golovnin, the Minister for Education (1861-1866), but further developments to liberalise the whole system of education and censorship in Russia were precluded by assassination attempts on the Tsar in the later part of his reign.

The Military

Military reform was a priority for Alexander's government, and it was military considerations which had done most to convince the bureaucracy of the need to abolish serfdom. General Dmitry Miliutin advised the Tsar that reform

of Russia's armed forces was not possible as long as serfdom persisted. Further, it was evidently desirable that the modern soldier should have at least a basic education, equipping him with initiative and intelligence in a military context. Only by introducing these measures would Russian military be able to fight on equal terms with Western forces in any future conflict. As Minister for War (1861- 1881), Miliutin introduced a series of radical reforms which were aimed at improving the efficiency and fairness of the Russian military system. The intention to create a more professional army ended the practice of using the military as: a penal institution, and convicts were therefore no longer allowed to serve with the colours. In order to improve morale, the number of offences for which capital punishment could be imposed reduced, and corporal punishment was abolished (as it was also in civilian life). The general reduction in the length of service from 25 to 15 years, of which only seven were completed with the regular army and eight with the reserve, also did much to improve morale. Miliutin significantly altered the methods of conscription. Military liability was extended to all social classes, with reductions in the length of service for volunteers graded reductions according to the level of education attained by the individual. Miliutin encountered opposition from the nobility, who resented the infringement of their class privileges, and from the merchant class, who could no longer purchase exemption from military service. These objections were at odds with the logic of the reforms, however, and Miliutin's proposals therefore became law in 1875.

Administrative improvements included a comprehensive review of Russian Military Code, a review of military courts procedure, decentralisation of command to regional staff, and a greater emphasis on the functions and status of the General Staff (the post of Chief of the General Staff was created in 1865). Military's fighting efficiency was augmented by a process of re-equipment with modern weapons, greater emphasis on military engineering including the construction of strategic railways for faster mobilisation, and improvements in medical facilities. Perhaps most importantly, the officer corps now received proper training. The success of these reforms was qualified by Russia's military performance against Turkey in 1877. Although Russia defeated her adversary, it took longer than expected – and the opponent was a decaying Eastern nation, not an industrialised European power. Nevertheless, Russia's participation at the Congress of Berlin (1878) demonstrated that she had successfully recovered her international position.

Economic Policy

The abolition of serfdom, as noted above, failed to stimulate the Russian economy on a great scale. The government, however, recognised the need for further measures and there were financial reforms during Alexander's reign that did facilitate economic growth. Reutern, the Minister of Finance, created a unified Treasury and centralised departmental accounts to improve government audits. In 1862 a public budget was introduced, and in 1863 a system of government excise was established. Yet none of these measures managed to improve the government's financial situation, and up to one third of its annual expenditure was consumed by debt. This was in large measure a result of the failure, to achieve a successful stabilisation of the Russian currency, a problem inherited from Nicholas I's Minister of Finance, Count Kankrin. Indeed, it was not until Witte conformed to the Western practice in the 1890s, and placed Russia on the gold standard, that the situation was alleviated.

Railway construction, financed through an increasing number of credit institutions, was a key element in Reutern's economic policy. The growth in railways helped to link the grain producing areas with towns and cities and Russian ports, thereby contributing to the promotion of exports, as shown in the tables above and below. The government played a key role in engineering this boom in the economy, in contrast to the non-interventionism of Western governments.

The Impact of Alexander II's Reforms

Significant though the reforms of Alexander II were, they failed to create popular support for the Tsarist regime. In 1862, Alexander granted Poland limited autonomy, but the Poles were traditionally hostile to the Russian Empire and in 1863 they rebelled. The Polish Revolt was countered with repression, the orthodox policy of Tsarist autocracy. In 1866, Karakazov, a former student of the University of Kazan, fired a pistol shot at the Tsar. This unsuccessful attempt on Alexander's life resulted in the replacement of Golovnin, the Minister of Education, by the conservative Dimitry Tolstoy, who acted to restrict access to university education.

Russian intellectuals interpreted Alexander's reforms as an attempt to perpetuate the existing political system. Historical opinion has for the most part agreed with this assessment. Florinsky, for example, has suggested that the reforms were nothing more than 'halfhearted concessions on the part of those who (with some exceptions) hated to see the disappearance of the old order and tried to save as much of it as circumstances would allow'. The response of the Russian intelligentsia was the Populist 'going to the people' in 1874. When this failed, propaganda gave way to terrorism, which culminated in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881. Although it did not achieve its objective of igniting a revolution in Russia, Populism was nevertheless significant. It made a start in developing the political consciousness of the people and its terrorist actions inspired later insurrectionists. The Social Revolutionaries, descendants of Populism, were the most important insurgent group at the turn of the century.

Conclusion

When Alexander II became Tsar in 1855, the Russian state was in desperate need of fundamental reform. The programme of reforms introduced by him was radical in comparison with previous Russian experience, but it did not go far enough. The government's commitment to modernise Russia through a process of westernisation was moderated by its concern to perpetuate the interests of its ruling social class. This approach alienated the Russian intelligentsia and, in so doing, undermined the stability of the regime, compelling it to rely on repression for its preservation. This strategy succeeded for some time, but in the long term it was likely to achieve precisely the opposite of its intended effect.

Further reading:

- M.T. Florinsky *Russia: A History and an Interpretation* (2 vols, 1953)
- M. McCauley and P. Waldron *The Emergence of the Modern Russian State 1855-1881* (1986)
- W.E. Mosse *Alexander II and the Modernisation of Russia* (1958)
- H. Seton-Wilson *The Russian Empire 1801-1917* (1967)

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