

Alexander III, Tsar of Russia, 1881-1889

John Etty assesses the historical significance of one of the lesser known Tsars.

The reign of Alexander III will always be compared either with that of his 'liberating' father, Alexander II, or of his ill-fated son, Nicholas II. While it is easy to see Alexander III as the repressive antithesis of his father, or the strong autocrat his son wished he could be, it is important to assess Alexander III's significance in his own right.

Alexander and the Romanovs

Alexander III of Russia was born on 26th February 1845. Clumsy and gruff as a child, he grew up to be a man of great physical strength. Everything about him suggested imperial power. He was six feet four inches tall, broad and very strong. Stories circulated about Tsar Alexander bending (and restraightening) iron fire poker, crushing silver roubles in his fingers, and tearing packs of cards in half for the entertainment of his children, and about the occasion in 1888 when, after the imperial train was derailed by terrorists at Borki, he held up the wrecked carriage's roof on his shoulders while his family escaped. (It seems that Alexander's kidney disease dated back to this incident.) The first Tsar to wear a full beard since the time of Peter the Great, whos Europeanising reforms change fashions to such an extent that untrimmed facial hair had become a sign of lack of western sophistication. Alexander suited the imperil Russian stereotype. He could be rude and blunt in conversation, and was terrifying when angry. He used foul language when frustrated and senior officials were intimidated by him, though they felt secure when working for him, partly because they were confident of his personal support and partly because Alexander's physical and personal strength heightened the sense of autocratic might surrounding him.

Alexander was the second son of Tsar Alexander II, and as such was not provided with the education necessary for an emperor. His tutor, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, neglected Alexander in his early years because he considered him unintelligent. Even when Alexander's brother, the Crown Prince Nikolai, died, Pobedonostsev waited until he was sure that the twenty-year-old Alexander was not going to be passed over for the succession before beginning his imperial education. Unsurprisingly, he displayed signs of his limited education long after being crowned Tsar in 1881. Alexander's policies were suitably strong. He reacted angrily to the assassination of his father on 1st March 1881 by 'The People's Will', a terrorist group dismayed at slow reforming progress during Alexander II's reign (1855-1881). His father's assassination only reinforced the son's conservative instincts. He was also shocked at this most dramatic display of disloyalty from the tsar's subjects. Alexander III therefore blamed his father's own moderate aims, and soon halted all of the proposed reforms. Though this made him extremely unpopular with Russia's westernised educated population, it did allow a period of stability during which government control could be strengthened and Russian confidence and prestige restored.

Early Reforms

Alexander's new heads of both the Finance and Interior Ministries signalled the beginning of a more repressive phase, and it is these policies for which Alexander III's reign is most commonly remembered. The new Minister of Finance was Ivan Vyshnegradsky, a physics professor and corporate executive. He followed similar policies to his predecessor but ignored the social aspects of Bunge's reforms. Instead his basic emphasis was on achieving a balanced budget by increasing taxes and tariffs, and trying to reach a positive trade balance in order to attract vital foreign investment.

Russification

A natural conservative, Alexander had a strong sense of morality and duty. He was never close to his father, and came to disapprove of him. In particular, he had been angry when Alexander II kept his mistress and second family in a suite on the floor above his wife's in the Winter Palace. Alexander III was heavily influenced by Konstantin Pobedonostsev, adviser to Alexander II and Chief Procurator of the Holy Synod from 1880. He turned his back on his father and on the reforms which Russia had begun since 1861. Indeed, in the last few years of Alexander II's reign, the Crown Prince became the centre of a court movement towards conservatism. Alexander also

disapproved of Russia's foreign policy under his father, and demanded a more active policy in the Balkans. He criticised Miliutin's army reforms as a violation of Russian traditions, and even served in the Rushchuk Detachment during the 1877-8 Russo-Turkish War.

Unlike his father, Alexander III was very anti-German, especially after his marriage to Queen Dagmar. When Nikolai died in 1865, Alexander inherited both his brother's position as heir and his fiancée. Dagmar was from Schleswig-Holstein and her hatred of Germany was intensified by the 1861 war and the 1871 unification. Alexander was a frugal man who hated corruption and immorality. His one indulgence was vodka, which he refused to give up, even when ordered to do so by his wife after his kidney illness worsened. He carried out his duties conscientiously, but disliked large gatherings.

Alexander as Tsar

At first, with Alexander II's ministers still in office, the new tsar could not follow policies which contradicted those of his father. Besides, he was receiving numerous petitions requesting further reform. Yet his instincts were all opposed to such liberalism. He therefore took comfort from the articles of Mikhail Katkov that blamed liberals for Alexander II's death and from the denunciation by Pobedonostsev in March 1881 of Loris-Melikov (the Minister of Internal Affairs) and the reforms of 1860-70s as 'a deception based on a foreign model that is unsuitable for Russia'. Alexander then published Pobedonostsev's *Manifesto on Unshakable Autocracy* (29 April 1881), stating that Alexander would rule 'with faith in the strength and truth of the autocratic power that we have been called upon to affirm and safeguard for the popular good from any infringement'. Here was the ideal rationale for counter-reforms. So strong was this statement of intent that four ministers, including Loris-Melikov, resigned the following day, and a crackdown began immediately, with the execution of the five People's Will assassins, a nationwide police offensive and 10,000 arrests.

Despite Alexander II's reforms, Russia was still backward in 1881, administratively primitive and economically weak. The tsar held huge power but was unable to bring about change in some circumstances, and equally unable to halt change in others. Russia's rulers had to allow controlled modernisation of the economy while, at the same time, seeking to halt or even reverse social and political modernisation. Especially in his early years, therefore, Alexander III's ministers passed some relatively liberal measures designed to strengthen autocracy.

Alexander appointed Nikolai Bunge as Minister of Finance as Russia's industry and economy wobbled towards modernisation. Under Reutern the Russian economy had developed surer foundations, but major cities were expanding quickly (Kiev doubled in size, 1861-74) and at the same time the incidence of urban strikes doubled. Terrified by socialism, Bunge believed that Russia's workers might well become revolutionary as a result of the state's repressive intervention in the economy as well as from capitalist exploitation. He believed that a better way to defeat socialism was to protect workers from distress. Between 1882 and 1885 he introduced labour legislation to improve working conditions for women and children via a system of factory inspection. An 1886 law specified the procedures for hiring and firing workers and paying wages, and regulated factory owners' systems of workers' fines. These reforms were inadequate, however. That factory inspectors were mistrusted by both owners and workers alike was less problematic than the fact that there were just 267 of them in the whole of Russia by 1897.

Bunge's planned further reforms. There would be improved living conditions, legalised trades unions, industrial training for workers, accident insurance, the investigation of owner-worker disputes, and the construction of workers' houses, laundries, cafes and even reading rooms; and these might have significantly improved the lives of Russia's workers. Yet, unsurprisingly at a time when conservatives were so influential, his policies attracted criticism for raising expectations unrealistically high and encouraging further demands. Katkov said Bunge's ideas came out of 'German books' and drew up alternative proposals. Pressure from conservatives accusing him of incompetence and his inability to overcome the budget deficit led Bunge to resign on 1 January 1887.

The Ministry of the Interior saw a similar attempt to bolster the power of the tsarist regime through less repressive methods. Alexander replaced Loris-Melikov with Nikolai Ignatiev as Interior Minister. He attempted to strengthen the state and increase the base of social support for tsarism. The peasantry's loyalty could be increased, he argued, by granting certain limited improvements. Two pieces of legislation that aimed at reducing the burden on the peasantry were enacted before the end of 1881. In May a law made it easier for peasants to rent state land,

and by the end of December a law brought all of Russia's remaining serfs into the emancipation and redemptions process, whilst lowering payments for all. Ignatiev also planned an Assembly of the Land. Modelled on the assemblies seen in Russia before Peter the Great, this would be a consultative body of 3,000 representatives directly elected by the nobility, the merchant class, and the peasantry. It would, Ignatiev hoped, satisfy calls for parliamentary processes without limiting Alexander's authority. The scheme had many supporters, and Ivan Aksakov boasted the Assembly of the Land was capable of 'shaming all the constitutions in the world. It is broader and more liberal than they are, while at the same time it maintains Russia's historical, political and national foundations'. However, it all came to nought, as Alexander rejected the Assembly under pressure from Katkov and Pobedonostsev, and Ignatiev was sacked in May 1882.

Repression

Vyshnegradsky's policies had dramatic results. Tariffs on some foreign goods were as high as 33 per cent by 1891, and as a result government income rose by almost 50 per cent. Government revenue also benefited from 18 per cent increases in grain exports. The healthy growth in the Russian economy helped secure a series of French loans after 1888, and Russia's budget achieved a surplus for the first time in 1892.

Yet this success masked a serious weakness in the Russian economy. The peasantry, already encumbered with the brunt of taxation, had quietly suffered the burden of Vyshnegradsky's change of direction (under the pious slogan 'We must go hungry, but export'). Forced to pay back-dated taxes and redemption payments, they also had to sell grain to the state at the lowest possible prices in order to maximise export profits. Agriculture had always been precarious in Russia, but the coincidence of Vyshnegradsky's export drive with the worst harvests of the century in 1891-2 in the Volga region caused massive famine. Around 20 million people living in 900,000 square miles of Russia's most productive provinces were affected by food shortages which led to the illness and death of perhaps 1.5 to 2 million people. The famine attracted widespread liberal opposition within Russia and provoked horrified interest in many foreign countries. Yet, oblivious to the truth of the situation, government officials seized goods and animals when peasants could not pay their taxes. The famine cost Vyshnegradsky his job.

Repression under Alexander III continued through the Russian Orthodox Church. As lay head of the Church, Pobedonostsev believing that re-educating the people was the best way to stop a revolution. Under him, by 1894, the number of clergy had increased markedly (White clergy by 20 per cent, Black clergy by 64 per cent). The numbers of church schools increased sevenfold (to 31,835), and numbers of pupils attending these schools increased ninefold (to 981,076). The Church published spiritual literature and laid on more church festivals, while clergy were encouraged to give more sermons. Under Pobedonostsev, each year 250 new churches and 10 monasteries were built. Churches like the Kazan and St Isaac's Cathedrals in St Petersburg had been built, earlier in the century, in a much more European style than the traditional onion-dome churches. This new phase of church building, exemplified by the Cathedral of the Spilled Blood in St Petersburg (built as a memorial on the site of Alexander II's assassination), saw a return to the old Russian style. Yet the clergy, resentful of government control of the church, were generally unenthusiastic about these changes and the reforms had little impact. Pobedonostsev's religious policies were most clearly evident at the edges of the Russian empire, where the Orthodox Church expanded its influence in the 1880s-90s as part of the government's Russification policy.

The success of the policy was mixed. People had their names Russianised and were forced to learn to read, speak and write Russian. 500 Russian civil servants were sent to Berlin in the hope that their experience could be used to create a modern civil service which could further expand autocratic power. However, unrest and opposition increased. Poland saw some of the worst examples. There Russification, already established after the 1863 Polish rising, was extended in 1885 so that all teaching, except that of the Polish language and Catholic religion, had to be in Russian. A garrison of at least 100,000 Russian troops was permanently stationed in Poland, and protests were brutally suppressed. In addition, anti-Semitic persecution emerged. Over 600 social, political and economic restrictions culminated in a wave of pogroms, the worst of which (in Kishinev, Bessarabia, in 1903) left 47 dead, 400 wounded, and 700 houses and 600 shops destroyed.

Peasants and Nobility

After the failure of Russification, Pobedonostsev's personal influence declined. His ideas, however, remained extremely important as Alexander III's repressive counter-reforms gained momentum. The government adopted a

series of measures aimed at preserving traditional peasant life. Since the reforms of the 1860s had failed to increase the loyalty of the peasants by making them landowners, the government now assumed that the peasant commune, or *mir*, was the best way to maintain stability in the countryside. In March 1883 a law increased the power of the *bolshak* (commune leader) and made it harder for peasants to leave their *mir*. By 1893 peasants were banned from leaving.

Alexander also sought to regain control by passing reforms affecting the nobility. A Gentry Land Bank was set up in 1882 to give favourable loans to nobles buying land. Peasant self-government was also attacked by giving increased powers to the noble-dominated *zemstva*, and by the advent of the Land Captains. These delegates of the Governor-Generals did not replace Alexander II's local government reforms, but contradicted their powers and signified a clear return to more autocratic principles. Land Captains could overrule any decision made by a peasant court, remove peasant officials, fine or arrest peasants and use corporal punishment if necessary. They were so repressive that some believed that serfdom was being restored.

State Powers

Some of the plans for counter-reform were so radical that they even frightened many conservatives. Despite the implications of the changes to the legal system, widespread judicial counter-reform did not occur. Plans to end the autonomy of the *zemstva* were also dropped. Nevertheless, the independence of the *zemstva* was reduced in 1890, and at the same time the numbers of voters eligible to take part in elections was drastically lowered. By a similar reform of the *dumas* in 1892, only an estimated 0.7 per cent of the populations of Moscow and St Petersburg were actually eligible to vote.

The August 1881 Statute of State Security, passed after Alexander II's assassination, significantly strengthened and extended the powers of the state in pursuit of revolutionaries. The Ministry of Internal Affairs could declare any part of the country to be in a state of 'reinforced' or 'extraordinary' protection. There, the authorities had the right to prohibit all gatherings of more than 12 people, suspend periodicals, close schools and universities and dismiss local employees, as well as prosecute any individual for political crimes. Special government-controlled courts operated outside the legal system, and all judges, magistrates and officials sympathetic to the revolution were sacked. At first the regulation was for three years, but regular extensions meant that it became (according to Lenin) 'the real Russian constitution'.

The reach and powers of the tsarist secret political police, the *Okhrana*, were extended. Its offensive against revolutionaries after the assassination of Alexander II had been extremely effective. The major players in the revolutionary movements could not operate inside Russia. The *Okhrana* had agents in almost every building, and caretakers now became authorised government agents required to report suspected illegal activities. Even the fearsome *Okhrana*, however, did not provide a genuine permanent protection from the threat of revolutionaries, for it was riddled with incompetence, corruption and dishonesty. Ekaterinoslav Police Chief, Rittmeister Kremetskii, had a national reputation for efficiency, since each year he closed down three or four illegal printing presses, until it was discovered that he had the presses set up in order that he could 'discover' them. *Okhrana* factory informers were supposed to watch out for early signs of unrest by observing workers' conditions. In fact they spent most of their time looking for the instigators of strikes, but even this policy did not work. In 1886-94 there were an average of 33 strikes per year. By 1903 there were 550 strikes involving 138,877 workers. Especially in Alexander III's last four years, Russia seemed to be heading for more upheaval. In November 1890, four terrorists with links to Zurich bomb-makers were hanged. The 1891 famine increased revolutionary activity, and as a result the *Okhrana* found printing presses in seven towns and arrested 240 people. The trial and execution of Alexander Ulyanov and his accomplices attracted attention to the revolutionary cause. By the time Alexander III, aged 49, died of a kidney complaint on 1st November 1894, the pacifying effect of his policies seemed to be wearing off.

Conclusion

Alexander III's reforms of the 1880s-90s succeeded in enhancing the importance of traditional social estates, and satisfied conservatives by undermining the reforms of the 1860s. They enabled the government to exert a greater degree of control over society, which in turn allowed Alexander III to restore the pride and prestige of Russia after the turbulence of Alexander II's reign. His supporters cited the lack of major revolutionary disturbances as

evidence of his success and saw Alexander III as a peacemaker. However, peace was an illusion. Alexander's measures widened the gap between the regime and the people. They alienated almost every social, ethnic and economic group in the empire; they strengthened the mir – the institution which hindered economic modernisation; and by curtailing the rights of the zemstva, courts, universities and the press they disappointed the ambitions of those moderates who approved of the post-1861 reforms.

Arguably Alexander III's most significant legacy was the view of tsarism inherited by his son. Such was his idealised view, of tsarism and of his father, that Nicholas commissioned a huge bronze statue of Alexander III. The immense figure of Alexander riding a substantial horse created the impression of awesome autocratic power. Yet Nicholas and Alexander would have been disappointed with many people's reactions. The 'Hippopotamus', as it became known, was symbolic of the state's own colossal immovability, and, tellingly, was one of the first St Petersburg landmarks to be defaced when the revolution began in 1917.

Issues to debate

- How important a figure was Pobedonostsev?
- Why did the relatively liberal reforms undertaken in the reign of Alexander III fail?
- In what ways did Alexander III contribute to the downfall of the Romanovs?

Further Reading

- J. N. Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour* (Oxford, 1983)
- A. Polunov, *Russia in the Nineteenth Century* (M.E. Sharpe, 2005)
- R. Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (Penguin, 1977)
- H. Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution* (Longman, 1983)
- H. Whelan, *Alexander III and the State Council* (New Jersey, 1982)

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