

Assess the relative importance of the factors which persuaded the tsar to liberat...



Alexander II was crowned Tsar of Russia in 1855, towards the end of the Crimean war. At the subsequent settlement known as the "Peace of Paris", Alexander, after less than a year as Tsar, first declared his ideas of reform for Russia and his resolve to tackle the question of serfdom. The Crimean War seemed to have acted as a catalyst in increasing Alexander's resolve to deal with the problems facing the country he had inherited, which had fallen behind much of Europe in its development. Whilst the threat of "revolution from below", external development in Eastern Europe and a general apathy from his own subjects also contributed to his policy of reform, it was the Crimean conflict which highlighted Russia's fundamental need for change; a change that it could be argued was long overdue. It was during the Russian Revolution that Trotsky pronounced "War is the locomotive of history", the credence of which is evident in earlier Russian history. Both Peter the Great and Catherine were pressured to reform by military events, and Alexander also, after a humiliating campaign in the Crimea was attempting to force changes. The failure of Russia in the campaign exposed three areas of deficiency in Russia which became the greatest causes of Alexander's concern: military, economic and agrarian. For a country to have international standing and power, it needed a strong military with the latest weaponry, supplies and communication routes. Part of achieving this was through dramatic economic and agricultural reform. The emancipation of the serfs would not only help make agriculture more efficient but would also increase the pace of urbanisation, which would help the industrial growth necessary for military and economic improvement. In this way, significant military defeat in the Crimea contributed heavily in Alexander's decision to liberate the Serfs. Of all the "Great Reforms" the emancipation ukase, published on <https://assignbuster.com/assess-the-relative-importance-of-the-factors-which-persuaded-the-tsar-to-liberate-the-serfs-in-1861/>

***** 1861 was the first to be implemented in Russian society.

Alexander's reasoning for this was twofold; firstly it was essential that in the strive for a greater, economically more advanced country, agricultural practice would have to be made more profitable. Under serfdom the production of grain and development of agriculture had been retarded. For instance, from 1853-58 the Russian deficit had increased from 52 to 307 million silver roubles and by 1860 it was clear that the noble landowners were no longer receiving adequate incomes as 60% of all private serfs were mortgaged to the state. The dramatic increase in grain exports after the reform process in absolute and relative terms (detailed later) shows that to a certain extent the policy was a success. It also demonstrates clearly how much potential was being wasted prior to reform and why the Tsar was so keen to reverse the problem. Alexander's second reason was that emancipation could subsequently be used as a way of progressing Russian reform policy. If the liberation of the serfs was to be implemented in Russia the nobility's manorial power would have to be diminished and civil rights granted to the peasantry. In this scenario further reform would have to be introduced to local administration and law courts to guard the peasants' rights since they were no longer under the sole jurisdiction of the landowner. Emancipation, in Alexander's opinion, would create an economic utopia and pave the way for reform in other sectors of Russian society. The liberation of the serfs and other related reforms were very much the personal responsibility of the Tsar. Alexander's ideas on reform tended to be met with a general apathy throughout Russia by certain key sections of society; chiefly the aristocracy and gentry from whose control not only the peasants but also the economy, could benefit by being freed. It was this apathy, <https://assignbuster.com/assess-the-relative-importance-of-the-factors-which-persuaded-the-tsar-to-liberate-the-serfs-in-1861/>

caused by the nobility which strengthened the resolve of the Tsar to liberate the serfs, if only in order to distance them from the uneconomically minded landowners since hired labour was more efficient and profitable for the agrarian economy than enforced labour.

Alexander was not entirely without support, but after the nobility showed disinterest at the Tsar's request in March 1856 for ideas about emancipation, it was left to Alexander liberal intelligentsia in the press and universities to promote the policy; the Orthodox Church was too conservative to promote drastic change and the official classes too satisfied with their existing power and privileges; even the serfs themselves lacked the coherence and galvanisation to show any real fervour for emancipation. Hence it can be seen that the character of Alexander II and his frustration at the apathy of the landowners towards his proposals, strengthened his determination to apply some impetus and motivation to the reform process. What is less clear is how much impact external Europe had upon the Tsar and his policy making decisions. It is, however, interesting to note that when, in December 1857, the government decided to accept Nazimov's rescript for the abolition of serfdom, this was first published in the French newspaper "Le Nord" and only subsequently in Russia. Furthermore, Alexander's first public indication of his wishes with regard to the question of serfdom was the negotiations in Paris at the end of the Crimean War. Alexander may have seen emancipation as a way to restore Russia's influence amongst the other Great Powers in Europe in the wake of his military defeat. By informing the European states of his intention to emancipate Alexander hoped to receive recognition of his economic reforms and perhaps attract trade and investments from other

countries; it should be noted therefore that this aim was all part of his general desire to see the Russian economy flourishing and competitive in the continent. With a 307 million rouble deficit in 1856 these concerns were paramount to his policy. Considerable evidence of improvement can be noted in Russia's agricultural trade in the generation after the Emancipation. The average annual export of grain increased from 86 million poods between 1861-5 to 136 million from 1866-70 and again to 286.5 million from 1876-80. This represents an absolute as well as relative increase in agrarian export trade. How much of this was directly related to the Emancipation or to Alexander's attempts to improve relations with other powers is not quantifiable; but without doubt, within the Tsar's overall determination to improve the Russian economy was the aim to increase Russia's international standing in Europe's great power system; both of which contributed to his decision to emancipate the serfs and institute other reforms. A common argument the Tsar used for the Emancipation of the serfs was that liberation was a way of containing peasant unrest. It is true that there had been two, recent revolts on the Black Sea and that the number of outbreaks had been increasing :- in 1826-34 there were 148 outbreaks compared with 348 between 1845 and 1854, although these were isolated incidents mainly induced by the hardship associated with the war. The fact that Nicholas I's chief of Gendarmes talked of serfdom as the " powder keg" under the government is slightly misleading. The nobility were the class within Russian society which Alexander had most fear of offending; they possessed the high administrative posts and had been previously responsible for the downfall of particular Tsars. Hence the policy of compensation to appease the landowners whose serfs would be liberated. All the same, it was the

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individual landowners who were initially most at risk from any potential uprising, and Alexander, in as much as he wished to prevent unrest, used this motive to exploit the fears of the nobility. In Alexander's speech to the marshals of the nobility of Moscow he argued about peasant liberty in that it was " better that this comes from above than from below." This served to plant the idea of a peasant uprising in the minds of the nobility so they would be more willing to see the emancipation of the serfs as a way of maintaining the peasants' dependant status so as to avoid the emergence of a proletariat. It was more a ploy to make the nobility accept and not reject the reform policy than it was a genuine fear of revolution from the Tsar himself. Although he was no friend to civil unrest, the influence of this factor was less important than others.