

Alexander ii domestic policies



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

Alexander II of Russia was in many ways one of the most important tsars in the history of the Russian Empire. He took over the throne from his father, Nicholas I, in 1855. When he first came into power his first task was to end the Crimean war in which his father had been involved. After the Crimean war, many other countries saw Russia as weak. The army was outdated and despite its magnitude, not strong enough. People also saw Russia as underdeveloped and behind because of the weakness of its industry.

Alexander wanted to change this. He not only wanted to show the rest of the world what Russia could achieve, but he also wanted to show Russia what it could achieve. Encouraged by public opinion he began a period of radical reforms, including trying to make Russia less dependant on a landed aristocracy controlling the poor. He also wanted to develop the natural resources of Russia reform the government to make it less like an autocracy. Until his assassination in 1881, how far did Alexander II succeed in changing his domestic policy?

Alexander initiated substantial reforms in the government, the judiciary and the military. But before he started these reforms, his first radical act was in 1861 when he proclaimed the emancipation of around 20 million privately held serfs. Serfdom was how the upper classes and the nobles controlled the peasants and the lower classes. In 1859, there were 23 million serfs in Russia. And the total population of Russia was 67.1 million. The serfs lived under harsh conditions that were often worse than the conditions peasants lived in during the Middle Ages. Alexander decided to abolish serfdom from above rather than wait for it to be abolished from below by revolution. The emancipation was effected by local commissions, which were dominated by

landlords, who gave land and limited freedom to serfs. The former serfs remained stayed in the village commune, but they were required to make redemption payments to the government over a period of almost 50 years. The government compensated former owners of serfs by issuing them bonds.

The regime had envisioned that the 50, 000 landlords who possessed estates of more than 110 hectares would thrive without serfs and would continue to provide loyal political and administrative leadership in the countryside. The government also had expected that peasants would produce sufficient crops for their own consumption and for export sales, thereby helping to finance most of the government's expenses, imports, and foreign debt. However, Both of these assumptions were unrealistic. Emancipation left both former serf and their former owners unsatisfied. The new peasants soon fell behind in their payments to the government because the land they had received was poor and because Russian agricultural methods were inadequate. The former owners often had to sell their lands to remain solvent because most of them could neither farm nor manage estates without their former serfs. In addition, the value of their government bonds fell as the peasants failed to make their redemption payments.

Reforms of local government closely followed emancipation. In 1864 most local governments in the European part of Russia were organized into provincial and district 'zemstva' which were made up of representatives of all classes and were responsible for local schools, public health, roads, prisons, food supply, and other concerns. In 1870 elected city councils were formed. Dominated by property owners and constrained by provincial

governors and the police, the 'zemstva' and the city councils raised taxes to support their activities.

In 1864 the regime implemented judicial reforms. In major towns, Western-style courts with juries were established. In general, the judicial system functioned effectively, but the government lacked the finances and cultural influence to extend the court system to the villages, where traditional peasant justice continued to operate with minimal interference from provincial officials. In addition, the regime instructed judges to decide each case on its merits and not to use precedents, which would have enabled them to construct a body of law independent of state authority.

The regime also proposed to reform the military. One of the main reasons for the emancipation of the serfs was to facilitate the transition from a large standing army to a reserve army by instituting territorial levies and mobilization in times of need. Before emancipation, serfs could not receive military training and then return to their owners. However, there was no military reform until the Franco-Prussian War (1870-71) demonstrated the necessity of building a modern army. The levy system introduced in 1874 gave the army a role in teaching many peasants to read and in pioneering medical education for women. But the army remained backward despite these military reforms. Officers often preferred bayonets to bullets, expressing worry that long-range sights on rifles would induce cowardice. In spite of some notable achievements, Russia did not keep pace with Western technological developments in the construction of rifles, machine guns, artillery, ships, and naval ordnance. Russia also failed to use naval modernisation as a means of developing its industrial base in the 1860s.

Although Alexander II was in many ways the first tsar to attempt change the Russian political and social system and modernise it, he did not succeed as well as he set out to. His main focus of his reforms was the emancipation of the slaves. However, in many ways this did not succeed as well as his other reforms. Alexander wanted to improve living conditions for the serfs and at the same time keep the landlords happy. However, he did neither of these things well. His reforms were also not supported by a lot of people. And especially the Nobles believed that the new laws were ruining the country. Despite Alexander trying to revolutionise the Autocratic system, a radical revolutionary group assassinated him in March 1881. Although Alexander II set out with high goals, which he in some ways fulfilled, in the end he failed.