

Does alexander ii
deserve the title of
'tsar liberator'? essay
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Following the anticlimactic and repressive reign of his father Nicholas, Alexander II came to power as Tsar at what was notably a critical time for the Russian economy. In the years previous to Alexander coming to be head of the autocracy, an atmosphere for change had clearly begun to materialise, and it seemed indubitable that the declining economic and social state of affairs of the country was an issue which had been clearly neglected by Alexander's predecessors. As such, Alexander II clearly recognised that he could no longer continue to run the country with repressive policies and needed to make drastic reforms in light of a clear growth of discontent amongst his subjects. However, Alexander's motives for reform have been heavily critiqued by historians who have yet to agree whether the title of "Tsar Liberator" - awarded to Alexander after his death - is a fitting or accurate depiction of the Tsar and his twenty-six year reign, when taking in to consideration the consequences and effects of his policies and reforms on Russia and its people.

Many make the mistake of assuming that the initiative to reform was one born of Alexander II. In fact, the need for reform of the Russian economy and social configuration was an issue that had been partially raised with his father Nicholas, and it had become clear that there was a distinct feeling of volatility and agitation amongst the population. Indeed on his deathbed, Nicholas told Alexander, " I am not handing over the command in the good order I should have wished, and I am bequeathing you much worry and distress"[1]. This clearly supports the idea that Alexander II came to power as Tsar aware that he needed to take action to deal with a substandard autocracy and a diminishing economy in order to stabilise the country.

The ongoing war in the Crimea was a current and pressing reminder to the Tsar and the nobility that Russia was falling discernibly behind its European rivals in terms of military efficiency and technological development, and in some ways held a mirror up to show Russia the weaknesses and failures in its current state. Added to this the fact that Russia, since 1848, had been the only European country to still employ a social stratification based on the policy of serfdom, it was clear that any progress Russia needed to make to modernise its economy and military was being hampered by the social immobility caused by serfdom. In spite of the fact that Alexander's father had been aware of this issue, and been theoretically in favour of emancipation and reform of the Russian social system, he had clearly lacked the political conviction to do anything to tackle the issues. Hugh Seton-Watson explains that, " Alexander said the task of reform was his alone." [2] As such it is evident that on coming to power, Alexander had had placed upon him a colossal responsibility to undertake the task of reorganising improving Russia, both domestically and in reclaiming their position on the world stage, and he seemed to be sincere in his intentions to uphold that responsibility.

With regards to the socioeconomic context, the emancipation of the serfs - who totalled approximately 80% of the populace - seemed to be the most obvious chief concern and the area most observably in requirement of change. However, it can be suggested that Alexander's motives to emancipate the serfs are somewhat questionable. One of Alexander's more permissible motives was that the serfs were holding Russia back economically and the country was struggling financially and industrially.

Historian Victor Serge states that, " From 1840 onwards, the need for serious reform does begin to be apparent: agricultural production is poor, grain exports low, the growth of manufacturing industry slowed down through the shortage of labour; capitalist development is being impeded through aristocracy and serfdom." [3] In terms of assessing why Alexander was so keen to do what his father had not done, the very lucid problem of the economy is obviously a key motive and is one which would show Alexander in a good light and as taking steps towards emancipation for what could be deemed as the good of the state.

However, despite a clear need for emancipation, it is perhaps understandable that much of the nobility - who owned serfs- were resistant to this reason and were reluctant to support Alexander's first steps towards liberating the serfs. In Alexander's speech to the Moscow nobility, in March of 1856, Alexander proclaims, " It is better to abolish serfdom from above than to await the time when it will begin to abolish itself from below" [4]. This statement could be seen to be merely a persuasive technique employed by Alexander, and a way of getting the nobility to support him, perhaps a way of reminding them that it was better to free the serfs whilst the government had a firm grip on the emancipation process.

In contrast, a more critical interpretation of this famed quote would suggest that it revealed Alexander to have a more personal and political motive. This statement reveals that Alexander's other motive was to take steps towards emancipation because he feared that the suppressed peasants would eventually revolt, and in doing so, were a potentially large threat to his

position as Tsar. By saying that reform needed to come from the above
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rather than from below, Alexander advocates the idea that he is being forced to act to ensure that he and the government maintain control over the situation and to preserve the autocracy, and ultimately his position as Tsar, perhaps following his father's advice to, " hold on to everything". The fact that his motives are somewhat questionable - as to whether he pursued emancipation ultimately for the good of the state or for the safeguarding of government control, does conclusively have an effect on how Alexander is perceived.

Despite whatever motives Alexander had, it was incontrovertible that the emancipation of the serfs would not be a simple process. Serfdom was a cornerstone of Russian society, and reform in this area would lead to reform in other areas. Jonathan Bromley describes the situation of serfdom, " It was an organising principal of society. The serf-owner was his serf's policeman, judge and jury, as well as their recruiting officer".[5] It can be suggested that Alexander's decision to tackle emancipation, despite the reforms this would imply for wider society, was a valiant one and one which showed he truly believed in liberating the serfs, and had conviction in there being long-term positive effects for Russia and its people. Alexander II published the Emancipation Edict in March 1861, and it is at this point which many historians construct the view that he is deserving of the title ' Tsar Liberator'.

However, it would be unfair to ascribe this title to Alexander without analysis of the content of the Emancipation Edict and the overall effects this had on the actual liberation of the serfs. Despite from the surface this reform looking like one which had huge effect on Russian society and the lives of the serfs, in reality, it's effects have been overrated by many. The emancipation
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manifesto consists predominantly of a range of motives and ways of appealing to the nobility to support Alexander, and very little in the way of exactly how the process will be tackled and how the problems of military and industry will begin to be solved. Again, the manifesto incorporates a large section informing the nobility how order will be maintained, and the general legal justification of the emancipation, which further supports the argument that Alexander was more concerned with the preservation of their political control.

The Emancipation manifesto can clearly be interpreted as quite weak in terms of setting out clear, focused plans of how the situation was going to be dealt with in the short and long terms, and, like his father Nicholas had been, Alexander shows clear signs that he is focused more on maintaining support of the nobility than engaging in an emancipation that will have the greatest effect on the economy and the serfs themselves. Evidently it is difficult to assess whether Alexander deserves the title of ' Tsar Liberator' without analysis of the effects of emancipation and whether, in relation to his intentions and the need of the state, the reform was successful. It can be argued that the reform had many successes, and that it did liberate the serfs in many ways. Supporters of Alexander, such as historian M. S. Anderson, believes the emancipation decree to be, " the greatest single liberating measure in modern history"[6], an opinion which is perhaps deduced from a number of small successes of the reform.

The decline of the gentry continued and the Mir and its powers were strengthened, both of which were eminently popular and positive effects for the peasants, who had more independence on a local scale. However, the <https://assignbuster.com/does-alexander-ii-deserve-the-title-of-tsar-liberator-essay-sample/>

key effect, which some would label a success, of the emancipation of the serfs is that it led to more reforms, in military, the judiciary and in administration, where new local government structures were needed to replace the major roles played by the nobility. As such, the effects of the emancipation itself were not great, and in fact meant that many peasants were unhappy as they had been burdened with debt and were still not in possession of full citizens rights. As such, it can be argued that the title of Tsar Liberator would be unfairly given on the basis of the effects of emancipation as it itself did little. As would have been expected however, there were more lateral impacts of the emancipation reform which contributed to an eventual overhaul of Russian society.

Perhaps the most significant of the subsequent reforms was the Zemstva Reforms of 1864. Nobility had previously been in control of running the local communities but after emancipation, new agencies were needed to look after public services on a local scale. The first notable detail of the zemstvos is that they were selected local assemblies, and all classes could vote for zemstva members. This meant that more power was awarded to the Mir, and local problems were dealt with much more effectively. Despite the apparent evidence of successes, there were limitations to the zemstva reforms which detracted from their overall success. The zemstva were still answerable to the police and national government, and in reality had very limited powers. Due to the fact that the zemstva had become a meeting place, and the 'breeding ground' for intellectuals and revolutionaries, the government tried to limit the influence or growth of it by limiting their influence and ensuring they had insufficient finance.

Overall, despite the fact that the middle classes grew and that everyone could vote for the zemstva members, zemstvos' were heavily weighted towards the nobility and not given enough power to make radical changes. In spite of an outward appearance of being a drastic reform, deeper consideration of the successes and failures prove the zemstva reforms to merely be a way of the government cheaply maintaining some order in the Mir and in smaller, regional communities. As such, it is clear that the zemstva reforms were not introduced to further liberate the peasants, but were used to satisfy their hunger for a vote. Instead of empowering the newly liberated peasants, Alexander tried to retain as much control as possible for himself and the nobility and shaped these reforms in a way that it would prevent too much discontent but simultaneously make their vote count for practically nothing on a national or even regional scale.

As spectacular and as empowering as the zemstva reforms appeared to be on the surface, they lost their impetus. On the basis of this reform alone, it would be unfair to give Alexander the title of ' Tsar Liberator', as although it gave the peasants some feeling of control or power, it actually counted for nothing and the Tsar and gentry still maintained quite tight grip over the peasants. Not only did the zemstva reforms do little to help liberate the peasants and establish their citizenship rights, but it also had what is arguably an unintentional effect, in the beginning of a formation of the Intelligentsia, and the revolutionary and educated middle classes.

This is clearly an unintentional and remarkably ironic effect of the reforms imposed by Alexander, as supported by Kemp, who says, " The efforts of

Tsarism to survive, and reform in order to conserve, inevitably increased the
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numbers of the educated and potentially critical".[7] When one of Alexander's clear motives to emancipate the serfs was to do so in order to avoid revolution and maintain tight control, it is paradoxical that in the ensuing reforms, he managed them so poorly and showed a complete lack of control and knowledge about the situation that it led to heightened antagonism towards him, the government and the autocracy, which was the one thing he desperately wanted to avoid. It can be strongly argued that there was a clear neglected opportunity over the organization of some type of a nationwide representative parliament or assembly, and as such Alexander made a futile attempt at trying to establish a firm base for a modernised autocracy.

The unintentional effects of the zemstva reforms can be closely linked with the censorship reforms introduced by Alexander II at the same time. Moving distinctly away from his father's repressive policies, Alexander's censorship reforms were an initial relaxation of the harsh censorship regulations that had been imposed by Nicholas. Pre-publication codes were reduced and the media became allowed to discuss politics and government issues. This was a large step and meant that more people had potential access to information and a more educated public opinion. Again, this can clearly be argued to be a liberating reform and one which created a free press and a significantly less repressive society. However, once more Alexander is shown to have not thought through the reforms properly, as the increasingly free press and ability of them to criticise government naturally led to an increase in tsarist criticism.

This meant that the Tsar had to react, and rather than adapt his policies, imposed even tighter controls over the media. A vicious cycle ensued and certain publications were banned. Once more, this shows that the reforms seem to have been ill thought out as the effects of them seem to be the exact thing Alexander was intending to move away from or avoid. It could thus be suggested that Alexander was not establishing these reforms because he felt they would benefit the country long term and help it progress, but to instead pacify the discontent and agitation of the people and to ensure his power by evading a peasants revolt. Similarly to the inadvertent effects of the zemstva reforms, the relaxation of the censorship measures imposed by Nicholas increased radical ideologies and heralded an insurgence of Marxists and Populists who were opposed to the autocracy. The reforms were high risk, which although show an element of bravery in Alexander's character, also show a lack of intuition or forward thinking, as the spread of criticism of the government then lead to a reform of his reform, bringing the situation of censorship almost back to where he had tried to move Russia away from.

The next crucial reform of this period came with the legal and judicial reforms of 1864. It had been recognised, both by the government and people as well as internationally, that Russia was a notoriously corrupt country, with an indisputably sluggish and ineffective judicial system. Alexander accepted the fact that he needed to move Russia away from a totalitarian situation of the police and judiciary being controlled by the government, and as part of the liberation of the serfs, introduced a new judicial structure modelled on those extant in Western European countries at the time. Again, Alexander

cannot be criticised for not being brave in his decisions, as modelling a judicial structure on those established in the West incurred great condemnation and criticism from the Slavophil groups. On the surface, the legal reforms of 1864 looked to be the most liberating and, at least on paper, successful and effective of all.

The plans to modernise a large part of Russian society and to remove a lot of government and gentry power is arguably the most significant of any reform Alexander could have introduced. The reform also had a thoroughness which had lacked in other reforms, and had very little opposition in principal, as the judicial system would now theoretically be open to less political bias. This was the first of Alexander II's reform to benefit the country and the people primarily, and not to maintain government control. However, in accordance with being the most liberating and widely affecting of reforms, it simultaneously had the most limitations. Government officials could be offered a type of internal diplomatic immunity and the military courts remained unreformed.

Most crucially though, despite on paper the reforms looking most beneficial to Russia and to the liberation of the people, the new system did not apply to peasants and there were many legal loopholes. Alexander ensured the government were still very influential, by way of bribing judges and attorneys with promotions and so it was not as independent as Alexander had introduced it to be. Critically however, it is difficult to assess this reform as liberating, as the effects and successes were so very limited to a minute percentage of the population. The people that the reforming Tsar had originally set out to help, the peasants, were now being excluded from the <https://assignbuster.com/does-alexander-ii-deserve-the-title-of-tsar-liberator-essay-sample/>

reforms which would have had most impact on their lives and the social organisation of Russia.

The military reforms introduced by Alexander were marginally more successful, in terms of having fewer limitations, but did not have as broad an effect as the legal reforms would have, and again can be criticised as being for the benefit of the government and the army above all else. A smaller, better trained and more well educated army was the aim, and Alexander's Minister of War, Miliyutin, made the reform very popular with the peasants, through reducing compulsory conscription to just six years. The morale boost that the armed forces had needed for some years had finally come, and on a personal scale, meant vast improvements for the peasants who no longer had to serve what could be deemed as a life sentence with the army or navy. On the basis of this, it could be argued that these were the most successful of Alexander's reforms, but once more, the overall success was limited, as seen by a very narrow defeat of Turkey in 1877. One historian at the time quoted that Russia's victory over a weak Turkish army resembled, "the one-eyed beating the blind". It can be suggested that despite their introduction, emancipation and the subsequent reforms had come too little, too late.

Notwithstanding the seeming good intentions of the reforms, Alexander II can be criticised as not having enough forethought to predict that there may be outcomes which were not wanted, such as the insurgence of revolutionary groups. As such, the effects of what were fairly effective reforms were retroceded as he almost took a step back in becoming more repressive to deal with any unpopularity that surfaced. It is clear that Alexander had good intentions, and he evidently was willing to do more to reform Russia and <https://assignbuster.com/does-alexander-ii-deserve-the-title-of-tsar-liberator-essay-sample/>

bring it out of its economic crises, but prioritising his position as Tsar over the effects of his reforms, cost him a lot in terms of how successful he was as a reforming autocrat. He had not moved enough away from the precedent set by his ancestors and suffered from the same problem that had besieged them, in that he was unwilling to risk his own position and the control of the autocracy to reform for the good of the state.

Hugh Seton-Watson sums up this period of Alexander's reign well when he says, " The reign of Alexander II which began with bright promise, and changed to dreary stagnation, ended in tragedy. The ' Tsar-Liberator' was a victim of the unsolved conflict between social reform and the dogma of political autocracy".[8] This appears to be an accurate précis of Alexander's role as a reforming tsar, as it is clear that Alexander did feel it was his duty to emancipate the serfs and bring Russia forward with regards to its industry, military and social organisation. However, he also attacked the issue with a motive and intention to remain tightly in control of the autocracy and this impacted on the overall effects of his reforms. Alexander clearly had some desire for change, yet lacked the intellect to question what possible inadvertent effects there may be in retaliation to his reforms and in doing so, gave broader opportunity for revolutionaries and radicals to increase their influence. In dealing with this, clearly Alexander's main priority was to divert any threat to his position as Tsar and so was forced to revert back to repressive policies of control to ensure his own political stability.

It would be unfair to totally dismiss Alexander's role as a liberator. Many historians feel that the introduction of the reforms, irrespective of their long term successes, is reason enough to attribute Alexander with the title of '
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Tsar Liberator', especially when considering he was the only Tsar to have actively undertaken the task of reforming Russia and bringing it in to a new free and modern, industrialised economic position. Westwood argues, " no Russian ruler brought so much relief to so many of his people as did Alexander II"[9], which supports the argument that even though in hindsight the reforms had not achieved all they needed to, the fact that they were so drastic in comparison to anything seen before in Russia, Alexander can be justly represented as a liberator.

A further argument to this point is that following the reigns of Nicholas and Alexander I, even with the best most principled motives, Alexander II would have found it difficult during one reign to reorganise and un-repress an entire nation without there being some revolt. Schloezer, cited by Mosse, states, " No despot can make happy a country which his predecessors have made unhappy. The traces left by centuries of oppression cannot be wiped out by Imperial Decree. That is the tragedy of Alexander II"[10]. Supporters of Alexander would therefore argue that given the context at which Alexander II became tsar, he did his best to reform in a very difficult situation and that any successes he did manage to achieve deserve him the title of ' Tsar Liberator'.

In conclusion, it is most evident that Alexander did set out at the beginning of his reign to reform Russia and relieve some of the oppression imposed on his subjects by his ancestors. However, his true motives must be harshly questioned to assess whether he truly does deserve the title of a liberator.

The reforms Alexander did establish did not bring around complete liberation for the peasants and despite the perceptible need to bring Russia forward

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socially and economically, the reforms never truly tackled the issues in-depth. This can be attributed Alexander's other real motives, and the fact that although he appeared to be more reforming than his father, he still lacked the courage to risk political loss of support in order to press for further reforms for the good of the country. He appeared to reform for the benefit of the peasants, yet when the effects of these new policies are looked at carefully, it is clear that Alexander's main priority was to maintain the complete control that the autocracy had over the country and was unwilling to risk threat to his position as Tsar.

Some historians maintain that what Alexander gave with one hand, he took away with another, which is supported by the fact that by the end of his reign, Alexander had gone back to being repressive to combat the effects and unpopularity that Alexander had not anticipated. Leroy Beaulieu says, "The emancipation was followed by numerous reforms; administrative, judicial, military, even financial; yet all the reforms, prepared by different commissions subject to rival or hostile forces were undertaken in isolation, in an incomplete manner, without coherence and without a definite plan"[11]. Having explored the motives and the effects of Alexander's reforms, and in comparison to how his reign did not have significant or lasting reforms, it is clear that the common acceptance by many historians of Alexander being the 'tsar liberator' is somewhat misleading, and that although it is fair to say that Alexander made clear and distinguished attempts to liberate, the title 'tsar liberator' overrates his influences as it is clear that Russia's problems were not solved and the people were not in fact liberated to the fullest extent.

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