

# How well did tsarist governments cope with the pressures

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The emancipation, in its final reform, was both progressive and retrogressive. In other words, it looked simultaneously to the future and to the past. It is undeniable that, for all its faults, emancipation opened the door to the modernisation of Russia, the first stage that followed in Alexander II's subsequent reforms of the 1860's. The post emancipation reforms of Alexander II did not simply fill the gaps left in the administrative and social structure of the country by the abolition of serfdom.

Several went further than that and were based on the conviction of the ministerial reformers such as the Miliutins that Russia needed a more flexible social structure, and that western freedoms were essential to Russia's future progress. Initial reformers did not look promising. Disappointed with the limitations of the emancipation statutes and the earlier suppression of the Bezdna peasants gave rise to intense frustration among radical students and university teachers. However the behaviour of the government was not as crude as it may first appear, by the end of 1862 Alexander gave his stamp of approval to his more liberal ministers.

The reforms which followed came into effect in 1864, they were (in order of importance); the Judiciary, local government, the army, education and the church. The reform of the Judiciary could be seen as the most forward-looking of all Alexander II's reforms. Although it suffered some restrictions later in his reign, as political trials tested the mettle of Alexander's reformism and these restrictions increased under Alexander III, the system remained essentially intact until the Bolsheviks buried it in November 1917.

For the first time Russians had the possibility of a fair trial, and this marked a crucial step in the evolution of a civil society. Local government reform was also a major innovation for tsarist Russia. The options to the tsar were; an extension of tsarist power, an extension of ministerial power, or to give power to the localities themselves through elected assemblies. The third option was adopted, and this implied that Russia could have a representative political system, spelling the end of autocracy.

The zemstva (local assembly created in 1864), and dumy (urban equivalent of zemstva, created in 1870) were introduced for practical reasons. These also gave Russia the proper basis of local government for the first time. However the zemstva and dumy have been criticised for their inadequacies when measured against contemporary western administrative systems. It is obvious that from the tsarist state's obsession with a strong foreign policy, and therefore its need for a strong army, that modernising Russia's army was seen as crucial. Three areas had to be tackled recruitment, organisation and education.

During the period 1862 to 1874 Dimitri Miliutin introduced a string of military reforms, including reducing military service and reorganising the regional structure of the army. Miliutins reforms had a significant impact on Russian society as a whole, making the army more civilised. Where recruitment to the army before the reforms could be seen as a life sentence to penal servitude, a new recruit could now expect to return to his town or village, and would probably be better equipped to run his daily life and contribute to his community. Russia also wanted to improve its educational provisions.

The new minister, Alexander Golovinin began to free the universities, as well as producing two Education Statutes in 1864. Golovinin stated that in all secondary schools children of all estates are to be taught without distinction of profession or religious belief. The reforms illustrate the problem Russia had, and in order for its society to modernise it had to be educated and prosper in an increasingly competitive European environment. Yet the upper sections of Russia's educational establishment were vulnerable to seductive, subversive western ideas. It is not surprising therefore that Russian educational reform followed an erratic path.

Another major institution to be scrutinised and re-evaluated during the reform period was the church. In the climate of uncertainty following emancipation, an overhaul of the church so that it could fulfil its traditional role of instilling loyalty through Orthodoxy was a high priority. The reforms created in 1867-9 provided greater opportunities for promotion for energetic, talented priests. However, they did little to improve the life of the lower clergy or the general material condition of the Church. Alexander II also had economic and nationality policies during this period.

The backwardness of Russia's economy was the root cause of its defeat in the Crimean War and this indicated that economic modernisation was an urgent priority. The railways were a high importance for Alexander II. A rail system gave the disparate empire greater coherence and immediately stimulated internal trade, this effect in turn stimulated urbanisation and further industrialisation. This also helped to stabilise Russia's finances. Overall Alexander coped with modernisation well. The emancipation of the

serfs was a huge undertaking, fraught with danger. In practice Russia managed to free 40 million serfs with minimal disruption.

Emancipation of the serfs was the key to all future economic modernisation. The other Great Reforms, especially those made to the legal system and local government laid the basis for a future 'civil society' in Russia. Alexander II's government made the first serious attempt to modernise the Russian economy, notably by stabilising Russia's finances and embarking on the first Russian railway - building boom. There were some failures however. Alexander's government veered between liberalism and repression, first encouraging criticism of many aspects of his regime, then turning on the critics.

This in turn had the effect of pushing opposition to extremes and, ultimately, terrorism. The Russian monarchy veered to the right after the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, and in the personal politics of the last two tsars, Alexander III and Nicholas II, that is where it stayed until 1917. After 1881 there was a discernible change of mood and ideology. Pobedonostsev was a fierce and perceptive critic of the West and its liberal ways, and he sought to create a workable, popular, conservative ideology of his own. Pobedonostsev put a lot of emphasis on 'Nationality' and a notion known as russification.

This attempted to create a single 'Russian' nationality out of the multi-national Russian Empire (only 44% Great Russian in 1900). This was also the key policy of the tsarist government after 1881. It aimed to give the empire greater strength and coherence. However the overall impact of russification was mainly negative. In the Baltic Provinces for example clumsy applications

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of russification such as imposing the Russian language on the largely German University of Dorpat, only helped to increase tension. Although Alexander II had made some progress in modernising Russia's economy, Britain and Germany were now forging ahead even more quickly.

Russia was a difficult country to industrialise, due mainly to its size and the problem it had with serfdom. It is not surprising therefore that Russia did not launch a full-scale drive to industrialise until the 1890's. Ivan Vyshnegradsky attempted to drive Russia forward by increasing its exports and imports. This initially had the desired effect however it put a lot of pressure on the peasantry and in 1891-2 Russia suffered its worst famine of the nineteenth century, costing 1.5 - 2 million lives as well as brutally exposing the shortcomings of government policy.

The catastrophe of the famine cost Vyshnegradsky his job and he was replaced by Sergei Witte in 1892. Witte was one of the few Russian ministers to appreciate the sheer magnitude of Russia's problems as it tried to modernise. Hence he entitled his most important policy statement: 'Save Russia by rapid and forceful industrialisation'. The tsar had no choice but to accept his plans and Witte began ruthlessly by collecting as much capital as he can. He then began building an efficient railway system that was essential if Russia wanted to increase its extraction of resources.

A good railway system also offered significant military and security advantages. This all paid off as extraction of resources tripled during the ten years that Witte was Minister of Finance. This was a substantial achievement but it doesn't mean that Russia had an industrialised economy by 1900.

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Witte's policies then began an irreversible process in that his approach was successfully continued by the tsarist regime. Witte's progressive policies contrasted sharply with the conservatism of the Ministry of Interior, which was responsible for policy regarding the peasantry and therefore agriculture.

This meant that the Russian economy was being pulled in two directions at once in the 1880s and 1890s. The problems with agriculture were that there were inadequate land provisions for the peasants and the terms on which peasants might acquire further land were poor. Russia's rural population also doubled in the period 1861-1913 (74 million to 164 million), which further increased the problems. The government looked to solve the problems with the economy by providing credit to keep the system afloat. They founded a Nobles' Land Bank in 1882 and a peasants' Land Bank in 1885, however these did little to alleviate the pressure.

Agricultural problems were also made worse by a famine in 1891-2, and reforms were not brought in until 1902. The period 1881 to 1905 saw the revolution of serf emancipation begin to pay off in terms of economic and social modernisation. By 1904 Russia was still well behind the western European powers in economic and social modernisation but Witte's reforms had shown the capacity for startling change. However Russia's progress was unbalanced. Agriculture was lagging behind industry and clearly needed further reform under the pressure of a rural explosion.