

How appropriate is
the description of
alexander ii as the
'tsar liberator' essay



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“ With the possible exception of Nikita Khrushchev, no Russian ruler brought so much relief to so many people as did Alexander II, autocratic and conservative though he was. ” This quote from the historian Westwood shows the opinion he holds that Alex II was a ‘ Tsar liberator’. This essay will examine Russia under Alexander’s rule and decide how appropriate a description ‘ Tsar liberator’ is for him. Alexander II was arguably the best prepared for leadership of all the Tsars. His father had given him a liberal education and he had worked in several posts in the government before he came to power, this gave him a good understanding of Russia’s problems, and of the need for reform.

Despite this preparation for leadership Alexander was not a strong leader; he was indecisive, inconsistent, and easily swayed by the views and opinions of others. He was less militaristic and more sensitive than his father and his rule began more promisingly than his father’s ended. Despite this Alexander was a firm believer in autocracy, and felt that this was the way forward for Russia. Alexander came to the throne when Russia was in the middle of the Crimean war, he did not want to start his reign by surrendering, and so he dragged out the war for as long as possible, and only surrendered when Austrian involvement was threatened. The defeat in Crimea was a terrible one for Russia, they were shown up as un-industrialised, backward, and the fact that serfdom was still in place was seen as barbaric by western states. Alexander’s top priority after the war was to emancipate the serfs.

Serfdom was failing Russia in several ways; it was failing the serfs themselves because it did not give them any chance to improve their standard of living, it was failing the nobility because they were not making

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enough money and were falling deeper and deeper into debt, and it was failing the state because with serfdom in place Russia could not industrialise. The serf population was already huge, and was growing faster than Russia could cope, many serfs were hungry, and as a result they were unhappy. Peasant unrest was rising, between 1833 and 1844 there were 216 outbreaks of peasant disobedience, and between 1845 and 1854 there were 348 outbreaks. However, these figures may not be representative of the truth as anything from insubordination to a full-scale riot counted as one outbreak, but the threat of revolt was always there. Alexander used the defeat in Crimea to underline the need for emancipation.

In 1857 a plan was proposed to the different provinces in Russia, 19 provinces approved the plan, but the other 31 felt it was too liberal. The minister in charge of emancipation, Rostovstev, was replaced by Panin, who was much more conservative. Alexander put pressure on Panin to get the act approved. Alexander announced the plan to the public, and this forced the other provinces to approve the plan to avoid revolt in their province.

Finally, in 1861, the decree was passed. The decree itself was very complex, it had seventeen articles, and each article had over 100 sections. It abolished forever the 'Right of bondage', which meant that serfs would receive land equal to the amount that they had cultivated, and the serfs were free to move around, marry, and trade as they pleased. To appease the nobility the government awarded them compensation. Serfs had to pay for the land they were given, they had to pay twenty per-cent of the lands value up front, and then 49 annual redemption payments.

There were also reforms to the Mir, it was now officially recognised as being responsible for directly governing the peasants. Peasants had to ask the permission of the Mir to leave or to marry, and the Mir was also in charge of administering justice. However, despite this reform the serfs were still not equal, there were many limitations to the decree, and the serfs were still not happy after the decree had been passed. In the four months after the decree was passed there were 647 serious incidents of rioting. The problem was that the serfs could not understand why they had to pay for land that their families had farmed for generations.

Also many thought that the redemption payments had not been on the decree and had been invented by the nobility as an attempt to get money out of the peasants. Emancipation of the serfs was not the only reform under Alexander II, he reformed local government, the legal system, the education system, the economy, the military, and there were reforms for national minorities. Zemstvas were a form of local councils at district and provincial level. 40% of the members were elected by the peasants, which gave them a greater say in the way the country was run.

The zemstva had the power to levy taxes, to appoint officials, and to improve the local government. However there were several limitations to the power of the zemstvas; they were slowly introduced, by 1914 only 43 out of 70 provinces had zemstvas. The voting system was created to favour the nobility, and so they still had a large say in local affairs. Provincial governors had the power to reverse any decision made by the zemstva; the zemstvas also had no control over the police. However, there were many positive effects of the creation of zemstvas; members often came into conflict with <https://assignbuster.com/how-appropriate-is-the-description-of-alexander-ii-as-the-tsar-liberator-essay/>

central government, which led to increased criticism of the autocratic regime, local organisations could respond better to the needs of the community than central government could, the zemstvas did important things for education and public services, especially from the 1890's onwards. The zemstvas appointed many liberal officials, and became known as 'seedbeds of liberalism, they also created a larger desire to have a national parliament.

Legal reforms under Alexander II were arguably the most effective of all of his reforms. The old, inefficient system was replaced by a new, fairer system. There was a clear hierarchy to the system of courts, and Judges were paid better salaries, were trained and the government was not able to remove them from their posts. But again there were limitations.

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But again there were limitations; there were government guidelines, which the universities had to adhere to, and student organisations were banned. In 1866 the liberal education minister, Golvonning was replaced by the reactionary Count Tolstoy. Count Tolstoy put more stress on traditional subjects and controlled universities more tightly. The initial expectations of the reforms were not achieved, and student criticism grew, which led to greater restrictions, and therefore even more criticism. Student numbers grew from 3, 600 to 10, 000 under Alex II. There was also a large increase in the number of educated people, and so, therefore an increased amount of people critical of the tsarist regime.

Before Alex II's rule Russia's economy was very backward, and Alex identified the need to industrialise. In 1870 Alex and Reutern, the finance minister, created a single state bank, government spending was made more open so that people knew where the money they paid in taxes were going. There were new duties on several products, increasing government income, a lot of investment was placed in Russia's rail network, which stimulated other industries into growth, and by the 1890's Russia's economy was developing rapidly. However, There was a lack of total reform, and interaction between firms and institutions was very complex, and the intelligentsia criticised Alex for this. There was also a lack of entrepreneurs in Russia, and this limited economic growth also. In 1861 Alexander appointed Miliutin as the war minister.

Miliutin identified several key problems in Russia's army. The command was inflexible and highly inefficient; punishment was severe and barbaric; and conscripts were in the army, or on stand-by, for 25 years, which was

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effectively a life-sentence. Miliutin addressed all of these problems in a series of reforms, greatly influenced by the style of the successful Prussian army. These reforms antagonised traditionalists and the nobility, as conscription was extended to all classes. However, there were limitations. Although conscription was reduced to 15 years, it still favoured the nobility as educated people could have this reduced even further.

There were also large amounts of corruption and dishonesty within the army, and leadership was still lacking. There were also reforms to benefit ethnic minorities in Russia, such as Poles, Finns and Jews. The diet of these races was accepted, as was their language. But again there were limitations, after the 1863 revolt by Poles the policy of russification was introduced to them, and the name Poland was changed to ' Vistula Province". The liberal policies towards Jews were also halted. Censorship were continually relaxed and then tightened by Alex II, and went on and on in a chain.

Alex II would relax censorship laws, and so criticism of the Tsarist regime increased, this caused Alex to tighten the laws until the criticism died down, and then Alex would relax the laws and criticism would start up again, and so it went, over and over. In 1881 the Loris-Melikov proposal was put to alex, it contained ideas to reform the political system and make it more democratic. However, on his way to sign the proposal Alex was assassinated, and so did not get to bring about the greatest of all his reforms. On the whole Alex did do a lot for his people, but did not go as far as was possible. This reluctance to reform totally angered many people, especially the intelligentsia into starting opposition groups, such as the people's will.

The description of Alexander II as ' Tsar liberator' is a fair one, but should be used with caution.