

How valid is the view  
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## **How valid is the view that “ the reign of achieved nothing of significance for Russia” Essay Sample**

Alexander II came to the throne in 1855, at a time when it was becoming painfully obvious that the Russian system as it was could not survive without change and reform. Alexander II became known as Tsar Liberator; undertaking 25 years of radical reform of many Russia institutions, Terence Emmons has regarded them as, Probably the greatest single piece of state directed engineering in the modern European history before the twentieth century. However a large amount of evidence suggests that these reforms were inadequate and often not followed through; due to Alexander autocratic beliefs.

The first, biggest and by far the most important reform was the emancipation of the serfs, which came in 1861. It was this reform, the greatest single liberating measure in modern history, (MS Anderson) which earned Alexander II his nickname of Tsar Liberator. However, the emancipation had many consequences as the act had not been fully thought out. The basic principle of the edict had been that the serf was to be given land when he was freed.

However, there was not enough land to allow every serf to support himself and the government imposed heavy taxes and debts on the serf; the idea being that the serf could pay for the land in instalments. This was impractical because many could not support themselves and their families on what they cultivated, let alone pay the government taxes. Ironically many were far worse off after emancipation than they had been before. Emancipation not

only failed the peasants, it angered the nobility as it took their power away, leading to bitter criticism of the Tsar concerning injustice in land allocation and compensation for land owners.

Further, it led to hostility towards the government on the part of intellectuals and philosophers. There were fundamental flaws with the other reforms as well. The system of the zemstva, or local government, was very limited by Alexander II autocratic beliefs. A scheme was created whereby there was a zemstvo (local council) for each rural district. Within each zemstvo three classes were represented, the landowners, townspeople and peasants, however in reality this system favoured the nobles. Each zemstvo was to have full responsibility for local roads, bridges, and poor relief and later on primary education and public health.

This measure of decentralization, removed some of the responsibility of the tsar, but further liberal hopes that this would lead to a national assembly were quickly declined by the tsar in a bid to keep Russia an autocracy which led to political agitation. Further limitations to the Zemstvo were that they had no power over the police and often limited funds for community projects. Yet despite these restrictions, some evidence suggests that important reforms in education and public health were made. The judicial measures were perhaps some of the most successful reforms.

The entire legal code was revised to create equality for all before the law, the right to a public trial and other basic ideas were recognized. In 1864 the introduction of the jury and hierarchy of courts created a much more effective legal system. Moreover a major contribution to this successful

reform was the factor that judges were paid, so therefore less likely to be bribed by the police as before. However, extrajudicial authority still existed and many 'undesirables' were arrested and frequently deported without trial. The military reforms were also largely successful.

Military service was in theory compulsory for all classes although in reality the nobility could buy or bribe their way out of it and it was mostly the peasants who served. This was no bad thing however, as the harsh discipline was revised and it was in the army that most peasants learnt to read and write and received the beginnings of an education. Service was reduced from 25 years to 6 years plus 9 years in the reserves and five in the militia. To the detriment of the government, however, it was mainly in the army that peasants were exposed to revolutionary ideas.

These Revolutionary ideas also developed through educational reforms, the number of educated citizens increased substantially, therefore potentially making more people critical of and dangerous to Tsarism. During the educational reforms: primary and secondary schools extended, class bias against poor students was reduced and the 1863 university statute gave autonomy to students and professors. However a conservative stream still remained, the government still had power to veto appointments; and student organisations were banned.

This was tightened in 1866 when the liberal education minister was replaced, which led to tighter government over schools and universities- with many students prosecuted and universities closed. Censorship was ambiguously liberalised, with it being first relaxed then re-imposed subject to the amount

of criticism. As Saunders says, what the government gave away with one hand, it took back with the other. This created much discontent among intellectuals, posing a threat to the government.

However the fact there was a vast increase in the number of publications and a beginning of Russian political journalism and educated public opinion should not be ignored. Industrial development was noticeable but slow under Alexander II and was not comparable to western standards. This was partly due to the lack of Russian entrepreneur spirit and limited domestic market. However the changes made began the industrial transformation: the Russian railway grew from 1, 200 to 14, 200 miles, the cotton and coal iron industries grew.

Nationalism throughout Europe posed a serious threat to the Tsar and his regime; therefore he was forced to take action, although still within Alexander II autocratic regime. For some national minorities came dissatisfaction with the limited reforms which resulted in riots. The initial relaxation in Poland in 1857 was later reversed after the 1863 revolt and Russification was imposed, 10, 000 polishes were exiled. There was also a liberalisation of control on Jews, however this liberal policy was also halted. One national minority that was successful in liberalisation to a certain extent under Alexander II were the Finnish.

Much evidence on the reforms suggests that Alexander II reforms did nothing of significance for Russia. Many historians believe this to be due to his indecisive attitude to the reforms in a bid to keep his autocracy; a prime example is his choice in advisors, " As his advisors he selected both true

reformers such as Dimitri Milyutin and extreme conservatives. "(Grenville). Mosse takes this point further, arguing his indecision meant he was not only a disappointing liberal but an inefficient autocrat; this attempt to combine both freedom and control resulted in insufficient reforms.

Another consisting viewpoint is that the reforms were unsuccessful due to their incomplete manner as Leroy-Beaulieu suggests," the task was to build a new Russia; the edifice was constructed upon the old foundations.

Buildings were carried out without a blue print without a general plan".

Another significant point is that the reforms were restricted by Alexander's autocratic beliefs and were only initiated in attempt to conserve autocratic society, although inevitably the reforms increased the numbers of educated which was potentially critical to the autocracy.

However Cranshaw emphasises that;" he did assert himself and fight hard to secure the emancipation of the serfs, the reform of the judiciary and the rival of the local government after centuries of neglect. " He goes further to suggest that these reforms were not sufficient as they lost their impetus, grinding to a halt in the 1860s suggesting that Alexander saw the reforms as limited measures only necessary to meet the needs facing the autocracy in 1855.

However Schlozer believed that the significance or insignificance of the reforms was beyond Alexander's control, " No depot can make a country happy which his predecessors have made unhappy. The traces left by centuries of oppression cannot be wiped out by imperial decree. " It seems overall therefore that Alexander II reforms were insignificant due the

unsuccessful attempt to combine authority and freedom. This resulted in many of the reforms being temperamental and restricted, with a lack of personal control.