

Assess the view that  
the tsars preferred  
repression to reform  
in the period 1855 ...

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Assess the view that the Tsars preferred repression to reform in the period 1855 to 1906 While the reforms between 1855 and 1906 strongly suggest the Tsars preferring a policy of reform rather than repression, the unexpected consequences of many if not all of the reforms lead to repressive policies.

Tsar Alexander II in particular, was very determined to modernize Russia but was not prepared for the liberal and democracy encouraging consequences and thus felt the need to counter reform. This was furthered by his far more reactionary son, Alexander III, who desperately tried to re-establish state control with very little success. Initially a significant departure from the previous system, Serf emancipation had the unexpected consequence of substituting the serf's personal relationship with the land owner with a more formal and commercial relationship with the state. Under the proposed emancipation, the Serfs would receive the land upon which they currently worked and the landowners would be compensated by the government. The newly liberated serfs, would in theory, be able to independently farm and manage their own land which they could use to generate profit. However in reality, the government was woefully short of money and instead of simply granting the new peasants their land, the peasants would now have to pay 49 years worth of redemption taxes as well as paying taxes which they had never had to pay previously.

Furthermore, the land owning nobility (who were tasked with formulating the emancipation) greatly overvalued the land and as a result many of the newly liberated peasants were working 20% land then they had previous to their emancipation. Indeed far from receiving more freedoms and liberties, <https://assignbuster.com/assess-the-view-that-the-tsars-preferred-repression-to-reform-in-the-period-1855-to-1906-essay/>

peasants were now legally forced to carry a passport, were unable to freely migrate and, crucially, were now liable for conscription. Yet, to 1881, the peasants were on the whole more autonomous, though in practicality they were limited by having to pay taxes and work less land. Following 1881, land captains were sent to peasant villages and would enforce taxes and laws which represented a return to the previous system, though under a different guise. By 1906, though a very small number of freed serfs had effectively worked their way up into the middle class, the majority were in a considerably worse situation than before emancipation as they no longer enjoyed the close relationship with the landowner. Similar to the agrarian reforms, the reform of administration of Russian provinces and the creation of the Zemstvos was born out of a desire to create a more efficient and effective state, yet ultimately was counter reformed to prevent a national congress of Zemstvos in 1904. The reforms were initially successful, and represented a significant shift in the administration of Russia. The Zemstvos represented a welcome change to the corrupt and ineffective bureaucracy, as they administered schools, hospitals and helped to establish much of the infrastructure that was needed to modernized Russia.

Surprisingly, and evidence of the initial liberal nature of the reform, the Zemstvos were able to raise taxes to sponsor the infrastructure and lead to a far more efficient system than had existed previously. However, in a trend evidenced through a number of the reforms, the creation of Zemstvos began to lead towards a more liberal society which would present a challenge to the regime. The creation of Zemstvos led to a new sub-class in society referred to as the *obshchestvennost* (conscientious public and social

workers), who were engaged and active within society and sought more power for the Zemstvos. The *obschestvennost* represented a threat to the regime and led to many of the counter reforms to limit the power of the Zemstvos. In 1886, spending of the Zemstvos was severely curbed to limit their ability to create liberal institutions such as schools. Even more crucially, in 1891 the franchise for Zemstvos was changed to limit their liberal tendencies and install a more conservative (and supportive of regime) membership. The Zemstvos under the new franchise were composed with roughly 40% nobles while peasants only attributed for 38% of the membership (and many were selected to support the nobles). Finally, the regime limited the number of times the Zemstvos were allowed to meet annually to roughly 3 or 4 times as well as preventing them from coordinating nationally (and thus preventing a congress of any sorts).

Thus what had initially begun as a positive reform to encourage modernization concluded with the Zemstvos being neutered to limit the threat they posed to the regime. Indeed one of the triggers for the 1905 revolution had been the Zemstvos collectively calling for greater power to be dissolved to them. Whereas Serf emancipation and reform of the countryside were counter reformed to limit the unexpected repercussions of the reforms, Legal reform proved to be the most significantly liberal and reformist policy and ultimately served to be largely irreversible. Following serf emancipation and the resulting dismissal of Manor courts, there was a need for a new establishment of justice in the countryside.

The immediate successor to the manor courts were the Volost courts which were overseen by the peasants. The Volost courts settled the majority of disputes and cases in the countryside under the guidance of two senior members of the village. However these Volost court ' judges; were not experts and simply used customary law and followed precedent which meant that law, and the interpretation of the law was different from village to village, in essence creating many different systems with different conventions. The various systems in the countryside also differed from the legal system within the towns and cities which followed imperial order rather than customary law.

The law reform statutes of 1864 were essentially a compromise between western judicial systems and the slavophile system. The statutes created justices of peace, who heard minor cases and were volunteer and unpaid local people, who received an element of training. This retained the slavophile system and led to the gradual progression towards a uniform legal system in the countryside. The other significant aspect of the statutes was the creation of judges who held mandates for life and therefore not susceptible to pressure from the government and other officials. Additionally, trials were to be held by jury and held in public which followed in the European style of legal systems. The reform of the legal system had the double effect of limiting the government's authority and power as well as presenting a channel for criticism of the regime. Two particular trials illustrate the impact of the new reform; the 1878 trial of Vera Zasulich and the 1909 trial of Mendel Beiliss. The case of Mendel Beiliss, a Jew who was accused of murdering Christian children and draining them of blood, in 1909

effectively illustrates the court's independence and the government's loss of authority.

Tsar Nicholas II and the government fully backed the prosecution of Beiliss, firmly believing the anti-Semitic claims that he was in fact responsible.

However despite the regime's pressure to convict him, Beiliss was acquitted because the presiding judge did not have conclusive evidence that Beiliss was guilty. Though not as significant as judicial review, the government's inability to influence the outcome of the trial marked a significant change from the traditionally autocratic and authoritarian Russia where the government controlled everything. The 1878 trial of Vera Zasulich, a populist who attempted to assassinate Trepov, the governor-general of St.

Petersburg, highlighted the political loophole which allowed lawyers to criticize the regime. In order to prove that Zasulich was justified in her attempted assassination, her lawyer accused Trepov (and the regime by association) with a multitude of crimes, corruption and other allegations. Not only was this case heard in public, but it was also reported in the newly liberalized press, thus spreading many of these criticisms.

Unsurprisingly, Lenin, Kerensky and many other key revolutionaries studied law as it presented the opportunity to criticize government and avoid censorship. In order to attempt to quell and shut these loopholes, Martial Law was imposed in 1881 which placed judicial power in military tribunals which did not rely on the establishments of the reformed system. However overall, legal reform proved to be resoundingly the most liberal and successful of all the reforms. The censorship of the press serves as a strong

example of the regime having to counter reform in order to prevent further liberalization and other unseen consequences of the reforms. Previous to the reform of 1865, Russia operated under a preventative system of censorship where prints were read and censored before being released and distributed. The censorship was very conservative, ensuring that words such as ' free' and ' revolution' were not printed. However, due to the dramatic increase in the number of newspapers printed (increasing from 6 in 1858 to 66 in 1864) it was no longer possible to censor the papers before they were printed as there were such a large quantity.

Following the 1865 reform, a policy of punitive censorship was adopted which involved challenging papers with litigation. Though it may seem more liberal, papers were rarely brought to court about censorship, instead their printing licenses were suspended by the administration and thus the papers were kept on a very short leash. Though the liberalization of press and the increased circulation of newspapers signified a progressive step for Russia society, the majority of the criticism of the regime was found in fiction. While the sudden increase in number of newspapers had been dramatic, it was easily dwarfed by the enormous increase in novels printed. In 1855, only 1, 020 books were published, but in 1864 this number increased to 1, 836 before reaching 10, 691 some thirty years later. It is interesting to note that the most serious discussions of the regime occurred in literary journals. Perhaps one of the most important novels (and therefore critiques) was ' What is to be done' by N.

Chernyshevsky in which he described a nation with many parallels to Russia. Ultimately the repression of the press seemed to be a near impossible task once and it is no surprise that historically, when a population under an autocrat reaches roughly 50% literacy, revolution generally occurs. Tsar Alexander II recognized that in order for Russia to effectively modernize, it needed a more literate population to sustain and perform the necessary reforms. This meant sponsoring and encouraging the increasing social class of the university educated, known as the 'intelligentsia'. Thus the 1863 reform was very liberal, comparative to the traditional Russian position. The reform created elective professorial chairs, a large number of grants for poor students and interestingly also allowed for women to attend courses. This was hoped to increase the size and influence of the 'intelligentsia' and encourage many of them to work for the state to bring reform to far reaches of the nation. In the same way that the legal reform had granted lawyers and judges autonomy, so too did the reform of university.

Universities, often hotbeds of radical and revolutionary thoughts, were to be overseen by university courts which employed western statutes and were tried by their peers. This helped to limit the quantity of violent riots and rebellions which were expected of such 'Islands of intellectual inquiry'. The reforms seemed successful as by the late 1860's, two thirds of all the students attending university were originally from peasant origin. These progressive and upwardly mobile people sought jobs working for the state, hoping to export their liberal views across the country. However there were not enough jobs in state employment which lead to unrest. While Alexander II sought to expand the influence of universities, his son Tsar Alexander III



sought to repeal the 1863 reforms and limit the role of universities.

Commonly perceived as a reaction to the assassination of his father, Alexander III's reforms only encouraged universities and their students to become more hostile to the regime.

Of the counter reform of 1884, perhaps the most important features was the replacement of the university courts by deans and rectors appointed specifically by the Tsar and the abolishment of student organizations. The autonomy of the universities and students were severely limited as the new courts were far harsher towards the student body and did not allow such liberal teachings. Additionally, preventative censorship was restored and urfews and uniforms were made mandatory. This led to a number of riots, most notably at Kazan where there were consecutive riots in 1899 and 1900.

Ultimately, Alexander III's counter reforms, rather than limiting the influence and liberal aspects of the universities, succeeded only in increasing the hostility of the institutions and festering radicalism, of which Lenin is an excellent example. Similar to the other crucial liberal reforms of the legal system and press, Universities proved irrepressible as they would often react violently to any attempt by the regime to restrict the universities. Political reform, in contrast to the other reforms, was not a regime initiated reform.

Instead the regime was forced to reform by outside pressures in particular the 1905 rebellion. This marked a crucial turning point for the regime as they were now forced to grant liberties rather than attempt to restrain them. Of the political reforms, perhaps the most significant were the October

Manifesto and the creation of the okhrana, each representing a the

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contrasting policies of reform and repression. The okhrana was created in 1884 in an effort to contain the growing political terrorism and left-wing revolutionary activity which had arisen as a result of the attempted repression of universities. Following serf emancipation and the reform of the countryside, there was a significant lack of official presence in the countryside until the creation of the land captains in 1881. Thus Alexander III, in an effort to re-establish the regime's presence in the countryside by creating the Okhrana. The Okhrana, who often employed torture, in combination with the Extraordinary Security Decree, which instituted martial law, symbolized the repressive nature of the Tsarist regime and thus it was no surprising that the 1905 Revolution was as violent as it became.

The October manifesto by contrast was, at least intended, to be quite liberal. Nicholas II was famously opposed to the manifesto, which conceded the principles of freedom of speech, conscience, and association, freedom from unwarranted arrest and accepted the creation of a national assembly (the Duma) but was persuaded to agree to it by his Prime Minister, Sergei Witte. The first Russian Constitution, known as the Fundamental laws, was enacted in 1906 and made legal many of the promises and principles of the October Manifesto. The constitution defined for example, the autocracy of Russia (Chapter 1) and the rights and obligations of the citizens of the Russian Empire (Chapter 2).

This change was extremely significant for Russia as it highlighted the weakness and indecisiveness of Nicholas II as well as suggesting hope for a further revolution. The October Manifesto and subsequent Fundamental Laws

crucially marked reform being forced upon the regime. While a number of crucial reforms such as that of universities and the legal system remained largely irreversible, the majority of the initially liberal and often pragmatic reforms were swiftly countered to limit the unexpected consequences which resulted in the 1905 revolution. The Tsars preferred reform over repression, initially because it was hoped to encourage modernization but quickly reverted to repression as they were not prepared to risk succeeding their autocracy.