

What does the view in Source A suggest about Alexander II's approach to reform in Russia?

Alexander II, 1818–81
How important were the experiences and personality of Alexander II in promoting reform?

Source A *Behind the Veil at the Russian Court* by Count Paul Vassili, (Cassell and Co. Ltd., 1913, p17)

[Alexander II] at heart was really more autocratic than his father, but having been brought up with immense care and by people imbued with Liberalism as it was understood at the time in Russia, he exhibited a curious mixture of despotic and revolutionary ideas.

Alexander assumed power in February 1855. He had been well prepared for his role as tsar in the years leading up to his accession. His father, Nicholas I, instilled in him the value of duty and obedience. As a young man he enjoyed military life and taking part in ceremonies. But he was also given a well-rounded education in history, sciences and languages. Among his tutors was the poet Zhukovsky who believed a sovereign must be raised as a 'human being' and win the love of his subjects. Despite this thorough preparation, Alexander told one of his tutors in 1829 that 'I wish I hadn't been born a grand Duke'. It seems he often felt inadequate and unable to live up to his father. David Saunders says that Alexander was not very bright, not a strong character and not very good at making decisions.

In 1837, with Zhukovsky, he went on a tour of 29 Russian provinces which took him to places no other members of the imperial family had visited, including Siberia where he encountered prisoner exiles. The tour, which was designed to build a bond between the future tsar and his people, was an enormous success. The tall handsome *tsarevich* (the tsar's heir) made a good impression. It also affected Alexander and he became the first tsar to consider that the people's approval was an important part of autocratic rule. In 1839 he embarked on a European tour during which he gained



► A painting of Alexander II by Yegor Boltman, 1875.

knowledge of Western ideas and traditions. He also met the German princess, Princess Marie of Hesse-Darmstadt, whom he married in 1841. She was of delicate health but their marriage produced eight children.

Nicholas believed that the tsar should take a personal hand in all aspects of government and passed this on to his son. He had placed Alexander on a number of committees (for example, peasant reform and the development of the railways) and councils including the Council of State, giving him knowledge of the workings of the state. He was also left in charge of routine state affairs when Nicholas was absent.

So Alexander seemed well-fitted for the role of tsar when his coronation took place in 1856. It ushered in a more optimistic period after the tight control of Nicholas I. Alexander had a humane perspective on the world and was more sensitive than his father. He wished to see himself in the ranks of the modern Western monarchs and he knew that Russia needed to become part of the modern world which meant changing some of its institutions. But he was no liberal. He was a firm believer in autocracy and Russia's special identity. He was a conservative who intended to preserve what was best of the old system. Nevertheless he drove the reform process forward and appointed more enlightened officials to carry out the reforms. In this he was supported by his liberal-minded brother, Grand Duke Constantine, who played an important role in assembling talented and able younger officials to work on the reforms. Also important was his aunt, the Grand Duchess Elena Pavlovna, who provided a forum for liberal thinkers who met at the salon in her palace.

The emancipation of the serfs, 1861

What were the causes and consequences of the emancipation of the serfs?

On 30 March 1856 Alexander II made a speech to the Marshalls of the Nobility in which he signalled the start of the process that led to the abolition of serfdom in 1861. As far as Alexander and his advisers were concerned modern statehood and serfdom were incompatible.

Source B *Alexander II's speech to the Marshalls of the Nobility, 30 March 1856.*

My intention is to abolish serfdom ... you yourself understand that the present order of owning souls (serfs) cannot remain unchanged. It is better to abolish serfdom from above, than to wait for that time when it starts to abolish itself from below. I ask you to think about the best way to carry this out.

Reasons for abolishing serfdom

A number of reasons have been put forward to explain why the Tsar decided to emancipate the serfs but historians differ as to which were the most important.

The moral case

Members of the royal family dating from Catherine the Great (1762–96) had considered that serfdom was morally and ethically wrong. Nicholas I himself had admitted that serfdom was an evil, palpable and obvious to all. Enlightened nobles and liberal state officials had come to accept the view that it was wrong to own someone like a possession or an object and that it demeaned the serf owner as well as the serf. They had been affected by writers such as Turgenev who had drawn attention to the plight of the serf and the need to improve the condition of peasants. A radical intelligentsia was growing who were opposed to serfdom.

NOTE-MAKING
Use a spider diagram to note down the reasons for emancipating the serfs.

What do you think Alexander meant by this [Source B] and why do you think he added the last sentence?

Nevertheless, the majority of nobles did not accept this position. They thought that the abolition of serfdom would be damaging to the Russian state as well as their own livelihoods.

Risk of revolt

Many historians have cited concern for social stability as one of the main reasons for the emancipation. There had been serious peasant revolts in the past and disturbances had been increasing since the 1840s. As we saw above, Alexander told the nobles that it was better to abolish serfdom from above than to wait for it to abolish itself from below and he had been unsettled by the 1848 revolutions in Europe. Particularly worrying was the fact that the army was made up mainly of peasants so it might be difficult for the government to contain a major peasant uprising. There was also a significant spike in disturbances between 1857 and 1859. The Tsar was worried enough to order weekly reports on the mood of the peasantry from December 1857.

However, other historians have maintained that the scale of peasant unrest had been exaggerated, especially as the main sources of data are unreliable tsarist police records. Also, some nobles feared that major reform might actually provoke serious revolt because the peasants would see it as sign of weakness or might be disappointed by the reform.

The Crimean War

The Crimean War had drawn attention to the state of the army which was mainly comprised of peasants, many of whom were serfs. They were compulsively enlisted for periods of up to 25 years (reduced to 15 years for those of 'good character') but at the end of that period, if they survived, were given their freedom. Military reformers (see page 22) thought that Russia needed a smaller, better trained army with a reserve like those in other European countries. This entailed conscripting peasants to serve a shorter period of time before going on to the reserve. This would mean that thousands of freed serfs with military training would be released back to their villages, a risky proposition. So officials became convinced that military reform could only be carried out if serfdom was abolished. There was also a question of loyalty: for how long would serfs remain loyal if nothing was done to improve their conditions and accommodate their aspirations?

Economic reasons

Many enlightened government officials and intellectuals in Russia at the time were convinced that it was necessary to abolish serfdom if the Russian economy was to advance. This was expressed clearly by Nicholas Millyutin, an official in the Ministry of Interior Affairs, in a memorandum he wrote in 1847:

Serfdom serves us the main – even the only – hindrance to the development in Russia at the present time ... Only with the emancipation of the serfs will the betterment of our rural economy become possible.

(Quoted in *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* by David Moon (Langman), 2001, p. 1)

Some of these officials and intellectuals accepted the arguments of economists like Adam Smith that free labour was more productive than forced labour; further that forced labour impoverished the population and stopped the growth of domestic demand which was essential for economic growth. They believed that you needed a free labour market where peasants could move around to where they could be most productive whether in agriculture or industry.

There is disagreement among historians about whether economic motives were a decisive factor in the decision to abolish serfdom. Some, like Olga Crisp, have argued that other factors such as the poor transport system were more significant in preventing economic development. Also, they point to the fact that immediately after emancipation there was a move on the part of the government to restrict the movement of peasants by introducing internal passports. This suggests that forcing labour to allow capitalist growth was not the government's priority.

Summing up

Historians give different weight to the various reasons put forward for the decision to emancipate the serfs. David Moon does not think that the economic argument – freeing up labour to promote economic growth – is convincing. Lindsey Hughes agrees that it was not the main aim, she says that Alexander and his contemporaries did not think in such terms. She maintains that it was done 'rather to improve the condition of the peasants and reduce the risk of rural revolts'. There seems little doubt that there was a strong moral imperative to end the evil of the ownership of other human beings. Moon, however, believes that it was the military factor that prompted Alexander to start the process. What we can say is that, although the need to reform the military was a powerful motive, humanitarian considerations, economic factors and concerns about social stability did influence intellectuals, nobles, state officials and the Tsar himself in reaching a decision about serfdom.

The process of emancipation

It took thousands of officials and numerous committees to draft plans for the abolition of serfdom. Provincial committees submitted plans for the emancipation in their areas. The main discussions revolved around:

- whether the serfs should be freed with or without land
- how much land should be given to each household
- how it would be paid for
- how much compensation would be given to landowners
- whether the nobility should retain judicial and economic control over the former serfs.

An Editing Commission was created in 1859 to turn their recommendations into legislation. This resulted in the Emancipation Statutes (22 of them) of 19 February 1861. Alexander declared in his proclamation that the basic aim of emancipation was to satisfy serfs and landowners alike. The main terms of the emancipation can be summed up as follows.

- Serfdom was abolished and serfs were now legally free. They could marry whom they liked, travel, vote in local elections and trade freely.
- Peasants would have land to go with their freedom. They would be allowed to keep their houses and the land immediately around it but would have to buy the other land (strips) they worked at the time of the emancipation.
- They would have to make annual payments for the land they were buying. The government purchased the land and the peasants had to make redemption payments over a period of 49 years.
- Peasants were still under the control of the Mir, whose power would be strengthened.
- The nobility would continue to play a role in politics.
- Landowners would be compensated for the loss of their land in government bonds but not for the loss of their rights over their serfs.

In 1860, state peasants were given the right to buy land in the same way as the former serfs or to remain tenants.