

# Alexander II

## The tsar-liberator

Shane O'Rourke

Alexander II is often seen as a weak figure. This article re-examines his time in power



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### Exam links

**AQA 1H** Tsarist and communist Russia, 1855–1964

**Edexcel paper 3, option 38.1** The making of modern Russia, 1855–1991

**OCR Y318** Russia and its rulers 1855–1964

**A**lexander II (1855–81) was the most enigmatic of tsars. He liberated 43 million people from a form of slavery, established the basis of modern, law-based society for the first and only time in Russian history, restored Russia's prestige as a great power after the calamitous **Crimean War** and died a martyr's death at the hands of terrorists in 1881. Any one of these should have been enough to secure his posthumous reputation as one of the greatest rulers in Russian history.

Instead, Alexander is seen as an ineffectual figure, lacking the essential qualities of ruthlessness and toughness that his father Nicholas I (1825–55) and his son Alexander III (1881–94) possessed in spades. Despite the fact that the former led the Russian empire into catastrophe and the latter set the empire on the path to an even greater catastrophe, both enjoy significantly higher reputations. In this article, I want to offer a different interpretation of Alexander and his reign that places him as the centre of all the great transformations that took place during it.

### Russia before Alexander II

The Russian empire under Nicholas I was a highly despotic, repressive regime in which any criticism of the regime, however mild, was seen as seditious and ferociously punished. The secret police, known as the

Third Section, had informers everywhere, making any discussion of contemporary issues difficult and dangerous.

These issues were of little concern to the majority of the population, who were serfs, belonging either to nobles or the state. Most serfs were peasants, eking out a precarious existence from the soil, trying to satisfy the voracious demands of their noble masters and the state.

The political, social and economic system fitted together very neatly and had served Russia well in the eighteenth century, enabling the empire to play a major role in defeating Napoleon. Russian power after the Napoleonic wars was feared throughout Europe and Nicholas used that power to suppress threats to the status quo in Europe. This was apparent, most spectacularly, in Poland in 1831 and in Hungary in 1849 when Russian armies brutally crushed revolutionary movements.

### The Crimean War (1853–56)

By the end of the 1840s, Alexander was fully prepared for his future role. His political outlook, like his father's, was basically very conservative and not at all liberal. He was as committed to autocratic rule as his father. However, Alexander possessed a certain flexibility and humaneness, allowing him to respond to problems in a much more creative way.

Alexander's ascension to the throne came much earlier and in more difficult circumstances than anyone could have imagined. The Crimean War, blundered into on all sides, was catastrophic for the Russian empire. The bankruptcy of the repressive system created by Nicholas was displayed in the starkest manner and the series of military disasters hastened Nicholas' early death in 1855.

**Crimean War (1853–6)** Conflict between Russia and the Ottoman empire, Britain and France. Russia failed to increase its influence in the Balkans and was forced to accept a humiliating peace treaty.

**serfdom** A form of chattel slavery which tied the serf to a plot of land. The serf owner and family exercised extensive power over the serfs on his estate or in his household.

The Crimean War had been catastrophic for the Russian empire, but Alexander II wanted to keep fighting







Alexander II liberated 43 million people from a form of slavery

**Treaty of Paris**  
Concluded the Crimean War, restoring Russian and Ottoman territories to their pre-war boundaries and establishing the Black Sea as a neutral area for international trade.

Alexander, like virtually the entire elite, believed that the empire had right on its side and wanted to continue the war. His advisors, however, made clear that was impossible. The state was bankrupt, serf unrest was growing and continuation of the war threatened the existence of the empire itself. Alexander agreed to seek peace terms which resulted in the profoundly humiliating **Treaty of Paris** in 1856. Alexander took this humiliation to heart, recognising radical change was necessary if the empire was to survive as a great power.

### Emancipation of the serfs

Defeat in war and the death of Nicholas unleashed the pent-up demand for change in Russian society. Alexander, to his credit, recognised this by his relaxation of censorship, the release of political prisoners and most spectacularly and unexpectedly opening up the question of emancipation of the serfs.

### The cause of Russia's ills

Russian society was united in seeing serfdom as the cause of Russia's ills and abolition as the first indispensable step to rectifying them. In 1856 Alexander told a meeting of the Moscow nobility that it was better to emancipate the serfs from above rather than wait till they began to emancipate themselves from below.

From the time of Catherine the Great (1763–96), every tsar had recognised that serfdom needed to be abolished, but none had the political will to bring it

about. Alexander set the process in motion with his speech in 1856 and over the next 5 years intervened at critical moments to ensure it remained on track until it was finally delivered in 1861. Alexander's strategic interventions were vital to the success of the emancipation.

### Minimal disorder

The Emancipation Act of 1861 was a stupendous achievement. It freed 21 million serfs belonging to nobles. Two years later, 22 million state serfs were freed. Forty-three million people were liberated from a form of a servitude with only minimal disorder. In the USA, in contrast, civil war and 700,000 deaths were necessary to free 4 million slaves.

### Residual problems

Of course, neither peasants nor nobles received all that they wanted and were deeply unhappy with the Act: the peasants because they received only part of the land they had formally used and because they had to pay for this land; the nobles because they lost their power over the peasants and a part of their land. This stored up problems for the future, but should not, however, diminish the scale of Alexander's achievement.

### The Great Reforms

Alexander was astute enough to appreciate that emancipation on its own was insufficient to overcome the legacy of backwardness. Alexander recognised it

was necessary to seek the cooperation of society in the regeneration of the empire. A series of reforms followed which, within the space of 10 years, dismantled the system created by Nicholas and provided the basis for a very different type of system. These reforms, along with the Emancipation, are rightly known as the Great Reforms:

- In 1864 an independent judiciary was created for the first time, a profound break with the Russian tradition.
- In the same year, local councils were introduced into rural areas with the zemstvo (council) reform, followed in urban areas in 1870.
- In 1874 a universal system of military service was introduced.

Collectively these reforms ended the despotic regime of Alexander's father and indeed his ancestors, and in its place was a more open and law-based society, even though it was still conservative and authoritarian. These changes fitted Alexander's pragmatic cast of mind and the values of enlightened rule that his tutors had instilled in him. They created the possibility of the empire developing into a modern European state.

### Foreign policy

The Crimean War had destroyed Russian prestige in Europe and threatened its status as a great power. Alexander was determined to restore Russia's standing, keenly feeling its humiliation after the Crimean War. Alexander reorientated Russian foreign policy, announcing that Russia repudiated its role as the 'gendarme of Europe'. Instead Russia would pursue its own interests.

To carry out reform, Alexander needed to be free of any European wars at least until the empire's power was somewhat restored. However, Alexander was able to pursue a successful policy of active expansion into

central Asia, although it deepened British suspicions of Russia. The Polish Rebellion of 1863 almost led to a new European war, but skilful diplomacy prevented a new anti-Russian coalition forming. Alexander showed himself a true son of his father in the brutal suppression of that revolt. The wars of Italian and German Unification provided Alexander with opportunities to escape the most humiliating clauses of the Treaty of Paris, those that prevented Russia from fortifying the Black Sea shoreline. Alexander promised Russian neutrality to Prussia in return for support in the repudiation of those clauses.

The war of 1877 against the Ottoman empire marked the return of Russia to great power status. Alexander spent several months at the front during the war, which ended successfully for Russia. The Congress of Berlin in 1878, consisting of all the European powers, forced Russia to give up many, but not all, of its gains. Alexander had successfully demonstrated that the Russian empire was now again a force to be reckoned with in European great power politics. Again, this was a remarkable achievement given the desperate situation Alexander had inherited in 1855.

### Terrorist threat

Alexander's enthusiasm for reform began to diminish from the mid-1860s. Partly, this was a natural occurrence after 10 years of ceaseless change. In addition, two specific incidents darkened Alexander's mood and whole political outlook. In 1865 Alexander's beloved eldest son Nicholas, only 21, died after complications from a riding accident. A year later the first of many assassination attempts against Alexander took place when a student, Dmitrii Karakazov, fired several shots at him. A renewal of repression followed, with censorship tightened, police powers increased and special courts established to deal with political crimes.



Dmitrii Karakazov was unsuccessful in his attempt to assassinate Alexander in 1866



In the late 1870s a tiny minority sought to destroy the autocracy by assassinating the tsar. These terrorists, known as the People's Will, pursued Alexander relentlessly, coming close on several occasions to killing him. Alexander responded with more repression which only seemed to make matters worse.

The cycle of terrorism and repression continued to intensify until finally Alexander's political pragmatism once again asserted itself. Rather than continuing with a failed policy, Alexander sought a different approach. He appointed a new chief minister, Prince Loris-Melikov, with dictatorial powers to deal with the terrorist threat in 1880. The new minister persuaded Alexander that repression was not enough. Political concessions were needed. In 1881 Alexander agreed to establish a commission to look at ways of creating an assembly of delegates from the rural and urban zemstvo which would have a role in the legislative process. Alexander signed the order for the commission on 1 March 1881. Tragically, a few hours later he was dead, murdered by the terrorists of the People's Will.

### Questions

- 1 To what extent was Alexander a 'great' tsar?
- 2 How would you characterise Alexander's political beliefs?
- 3 Was the Crimean War the reason for the emancipation of the serfs?
- 4 Can Alexander claim credit for the emancipation?
- 5 How successful was Alexander's foreign policy?

### References

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- Radzinsky, E. (2005) *Alexander II: The Last Great Tsar*, Free Press.
- Swezey, M. and Symington, J. W. (2009) *The Tsar and the President: Alexander II and Abraham Lincoln, Liberator and Emancipator*, University of Wisconsin Press.

### Conclusion

The murder of Alexander brought to an end one of the most productive and impressive reigns in Russian history. Alexander inherited an empire mired in a form of servitude, defeated in war and lagging far behind the developed nations of Europe. He abolished serfdom, restored Russia's great power status and laid the basis for a modern state. Many problems remained: above all how to modify autocratic power to make it more appropriate to a modern society. These, however, were problems for his son and grandson to deal with. That they failed dismally in this task does not diminish Alexander's achievements. Alexander was the central figure in the great transformation of Russia and fully deserves the title of 'tsar-liberator'.

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## Using this article in your exam

How could this article be useful in your exam?

Shane O'Rourke's article highlights the controversy that still surrounds the rule of Alexander II. He focuses on the concept of 'liberator' (which begs the question as to what constitutes a 'liberator') and ends up providing a balanced analysis of the Alexander's achievements.

A notable feature of the article is the comparative technique used — the author compares the situation before and after Alexander II's reign by referencing the work carried out by his father, Nicholas I, and his son, Alexander III. This enables a judgement based on relative importance to be made. Also, the context in which Alexander II was operating is outlined, which creates a greater understanding of why the tsar carried out his reform programme.

O'Rourke believes Alexander II was a pragmatist. Having read the article how far do you agree with this view? An exam-type question on this topic might be worded as follows: 'Assess the view that Alexander II carried out reforms due to the consequences of the Crimean War.'

# Winston Churchill and votes for women

David Thackeray

What can Churchill's changing viewpoints tell us about politicians' responses to the women's suffrage movement in Britain between 1900 and 1918?

While Winston Churchill has received more attention than any other figure in modern British political history, his responses to the women's suffrage movement have had relatively little attention from historians. This may be because he appeared to lack a settled viewpoint on the question of whether the vote should be granted to women.

### Exam links

- AQA 1G** Challenge and transformation: Britain, c.1851–1964
- AQA 2M** Wars and welfare: Britain in transition, 1906–1957
- Edexcel paper 1, option 1H** Britain transformed, 1918–97
- Edexcel paper 1, option 34.1** Industrialisation and social change in Britain, 1759–1928: forging a new society
- Edexcel paper 3, option 36.1** Protest, agitation and parliamentary reform in Britain, c.1780–1928
- OCR Y141/Y111** Liberals, Conservatives and the rise of Labour 1846–1918
- OCR Y142/Y112** Britain 1900–1951

Suffragettes gather outside the Houses of Parliament in 1910

