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LOOK

### 3.4.2 Russia: Modernisation under Alexander II

#### Modernisation under Alexander II, tsar and emperor of Russia from 1855 to 1881

Alexander Nikolaevich Romanov, also known as Alexander II, was the tsar and the Russian Emperor from 1855 to 1881. He is remembered for emancipating the serfs and being the only tsar who was assassinated.

#### Reforms by Alexander II

Born in Moscow, on 17<sup>th</sup> April, 1818, Alexander II was the eldest son of Nicholas I. Alexander II was brought up in a manner different from his father's upbringing. Nicholas I thought it was better to prepare young Alexander II, the future tsar for the challenges ahead. Therefore, as soon as baby Alexander was a few days old, he was made the head of a hussar regiment. His early training mainly consisted of military matters and he kept receiving promotions as he grew. As Alexander II turned six, Nicholas I put him under the training of Captain K K Merder, head of the Moscow Military School. Captain Merder's qualities such as love for the military and his kindness towards other people greatly influenced the future tsar. Alexander II also received literary training from the famous poet, Vasily Zhukovsky, who helped in enlightening his mind. The young tsar travelled through Russia and Europe. In 1837, he became the first Russian emperor to travel to Siberia. It was in Siberia that Alexander II called for a meeting with Decembrists and then asked his father to help them by improving their conditions.

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Alexander II was included in each and every aspect of governing by his father. Since, Nicholas I himself had been so unprepared for his role, he deemed it fit to prepare his son for every challenge as a tsar. Alexander II wholeheartedly participated in every aspect of his training. Alexander was made a member of the imperial council and also became the supervisor of the military schools. Further, when his father could not supervise the State Council meetings, he presided over them. In 1846, Alexander was made the chairman of the Secret Committee on Peasant Affairs, by his father Nicholas I. Alexander II stressed on the existing socio-political order. Since a young age he was trained to support the system where an autocratic leader was supposed to rule over the commoners, he, as yet, found no problem in this system. Nobody, however, would have thought that this young tsar would make significant changes in the existing system.

In 1855, Nicholas I passed away leaving Russia helpless in the middle of the ongoing Crimean War. Hence, Alexander II ascended to the throne as the new emperor. The defeat and his father's loss, compelled Alexander II to accept changes in the existing ideology. This led to fundamental changes in the entire Russian Political System.

Alexander II took over as the emperor on 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1855. However, his official coronation was on the 26<sup>th</sup> of August in 1856. During this time, the young tsar struggled with the Crimean War, which worsened with time. On 9<sup>th</sup> September, 1855, the Crimean city Sevastopol, surrendered. Alexander began the negotiations for peace and signed the Treaty of Paris on 30<sup>th</sup> March 1856. A large number of Russian soldiers were lost and the country also had to give-up its naval rights in the Black Sea. These events compelled Alexander to reform the existing system.

As soon as the war was over, in 1856, the Moscow nobles enquired the tsar about liberating the serfs, to which he answered 'I cannot tell you that I totally oppose this; we live in an era in which this must eventually happen. I believe that you are of the same opinion as I; therefore, it will be much better if this takes place from above than from below.' This quote by Alexander II became quite popular. This shows that the tsar knew the importance of this reform. However, Alexander thought it was reasonable to transform the autocracy from within. Thus, his decision to reform along with his pledge to autocracy became an important agenda.

Although, Alexander was firm on his decision to finish serfdom in Russia, yet he did not stop taking advice from his council of ministers. The liberation of serfs was a difficult process. Alexander II began the process of liberating the serfs in 1856. He formed a secret committee where he asked for suggestions regarding the emancipation. The emancipation degree was rolled out on 19<sup>th</sup> February. The emancipation of the serfs was not easy task for the tsar. He was opposed by many for taking such a drastic step. The emancipation order freed twenty million serfs and nearly thirty million state peasants, which is about 8 percent of the Russian

population. Since Alexander II worked for the liberation of the serfs, he was labelled the Tsar-Liberator.

Alexander II went on to support other changes after the process of emancipation had been completed. Historians, most often, refer to these changes as the 'Great Reforms'. Alexander did not take part in these changes himself, which took place after 1861, he merely selected those who were given the authority to draft the reforms. However, he was the one who approved these changes.

Alexander, between 1864 and 1874, announced several reforms, such as the creation of zemstvo, which was a new local government reform. He also brought out reforms in the censorship law, military law, education, and judiciary. In the process of reforming the system, Alexander trusted those bureaucrats, who were a part of the system since his father's time. Therefore, these reforms were linked with names such as Petr Valuev, Nicholas Milyutin and Dmitry Milyutin. However, these new reforms came with new set of challenges for the autocrat. During the reform process, he had to deal with many revolutionaries and rebels. All these responses were the result of the liberal reforms initiated by the tsar, some of which he had not anticipated. For example, in Poland, an uprising was brimming due to the reform initiatives undertaken by Alexander. Poland was a part of the Russian empire at that time. In 1863, the nationalists in Poland managed a Warsaw revolution, which asked for more liberation. Alexander became defensive as a result of this rebellion and tried to suppress the revolution, but he did not tighten his hold over the empire as his father would have. He permitted the Finnish Parliament to come together in 1863, because of their loyalty. In Russia, the reforms empowered the masses who wished to see more changes. In the 1850s and 1860s, those who were educated, discussed the pros and cons of the 'Great Reforms' openly and most of them suggested several changes. A large number of people were agitated and this resulted in a politically radical movement that wanted to finish off the autocracy.

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