**Why did Alexander II introduce reforms to Russia?**

* The shock of defeat in the Crimean War raised questions regarding the efficiency of the Russian army. It had lost its superiority over the French and English armies.
* The landowner, A.I. Koshelyov wrote a memorandum to the tsar in 1858 in which he presented an argument that it was wrong for a landowner to own other human/ beings like possessions and such ownership demoralized the landowner.
* The number of peasant disturbances increased from the 1840s leading to a fear that there would be a peasant war, which was particularly worrying for rural nobles living on remote country estates.
* Serfdom was blamed for the rising debt contracted by nobles to finance their extravagant western lifestyles. By 1859 landlords had mortgaged 66% of their serfs as security for loans from the State Loan Bank.
* The war revealed the inadequacy of Russia’s communications. It was recognized that railways were crucial for a speedy deployment of troops as well as for dispersal of goods.
* Early nineteenth century educated Russians argued that free wage labour was more productive than forced labour because workers would lack the motivating influence of wages being determined by market forces.
* In the 1840s, Benckendorff, Head of the secret Police, warned Nicholas I that, ‘the whole mood of the people, is concerned with one aim – emancipation…Serfdom is a powder keg under the state, and is the more dangerous because of the fact that the army itself consists of peasants.’
* The Crimean War had shown the weakness, and corruption, of leadership of the army. The latter depended on the loyalty of serfs who had been compulsorily enlisted but the hardship experienced by so many encouraged a more critical attitude.
* Various groups had expressed concern about the welfare of peasants under serfdom. In 1842 Nicholas I had declared to the Council of state, ‘there can be no doubt that serfdom in its present situation in our country is an evil It cannot last forever…The only answer is thus to prepare the way for a gradual transition to a different order.’
* The benefits of free peasant labour had been demonstrated in Siberia, where there was growing prosperity.
* Military advisers, such as Milyutin, warned that reform of the army was impossible while serfdom survived. He warned the tsar in 1867, ‘thanks to the army, Russia became a first class European power and only by maintaining the army can Russia uphold the position it has acquired.’

**Serfdom – the issue!**

1858 – population 74 million of whom 85% worked on the land.

22.5 million were serfs (personal property of the landowner)

19 million were ‘state peasants’ tied to land owned by the crown.

The authority laid in the hands of the mir (peasant commune) which prevailed over allocation of land, labour dues, taxes, corporal punishment and the sale of serfs to a new master.

Serdom was a difficult domestic problem in Russia for more than half a century. Moral objections to the system had been recognized but swept under the carpet.

‘There is no doubt that serfdom in its present situation in our country is an evil, palpitable and obvious to all, but to attack it now would be something still more harmful’. Nicholas I (1842).

Nicholas did away with some of the more inhuman aspects;

* Forbidding the splitting up of families (1833)
* Banning auctioning of serfs (1841)

Peasant discontent was a constant feature of Russian politics. There were 712 outbreaks of revolt between 1826 and 1854. Half of them between 1844 and 1854.

There were economic arguments to the abolition of serfdom. It made less and less economic sense. It was increasingly difficult to produce enough grain to feed the local population as well as to produce a surplus.

Landowners found their debt mounting. By 1860 60% of private serfs had been mortgaged to the state.

It was viewed as a brake on Russian economic development. As an essentially rural institution it prevented the rise of an urban middle class and of an urban workforce. In 1833 the total urban population was 2 million. Most towns were market and administrative rather than industrial. Russia lacked the basis for any serious industrial development. Soviet Historian P.A. Khromov estimated that only 67,000 people were employed in textile manufacture in 1830 and only 20,000 in iron and steel production. Russia’s cotton industry in 1843 had only 350,000 mechanized spindles compared to 3.5 million in France and 11 million in Britain.

Percentage of Iron production fell from 12% to 4% in 1859 and the network of railways was under developed. The first train did not run from Moscow to St. Petersburg until 1851.

However the monarchy did not dare challenge the vast vested interest of the nobility and landowners whose financial and social status depended on how many ‘souls’ they owned.

The monarchy derived great benefit from ‘state peasants’ as well as the role played by landowners in the maintenance of local order and stability.

**How successful was the emancipation of the Serfs?**

Measuring success

1. Aims v Outcomes
2. Complexities facing the ruler
3. Choice v options
4. Long-lasting v short term

**Aims**

Alexander's general programme of reforms can be understood in relation to his desire to **strengthen and consolidate the tsarist autocracy.** It should not be forgotten that Alexander's childhood readings in history had **firmly embedded his belief in his own autocratic powers as tsar.** In support of this view there is Alexander's comment to the nobles in 1856 that it "*is better to* ***abolish serfdom from above*** *than to wait for the time when it will begin to* ***abolish itself from below****."* Rather than any liberal desire to emancipate the serfs, this suggests a **pragmatic concern with maintaining the powers of the tsarist state** in a time of complex challenges.

In carrying out his reforms, Alexander hoped to **secure Russia's position as a great power** following the humiliation in the Crimea**,** through improving the position of the Russian state both internally and externally. He hoped for a **peace and stability in the countryside,** with a **prosperous and contented peasantry**, and for a degree of **industrial growth that would strengthen and modernize the army and the economy.**

**The Issue - Land!**

Alexander II became responsible for the introduction of the most spectacular social reform of the 19th century. Citing defeat in the Crimean and increased peasant disturbances he told the nobility of Moscow in April 1856 that reform was necessary. ‘Under these pressures, Alexander may appear less as a far-sighted reformer than as a dutiful ruler forced to confront challenges of great complexity’. Morris and Murphey *Europe 1870 - 1918*

There was 5 years between his Moscow speech and the edict of emancipation in February 1861. This reflected the difficulty of the task.

‘none of the enlightened bureaucrats of the reign of Alexander II was a social revolutionary, all of them sought greater social fluidity. Like the Tsar, they were determined to maintain order, but they were also anxious to discover new sources of energy.’ David Saunders 1992

Few landowners were sufficiently scared to co-operate unreservedly with the Tsar. The greatest problem was land!

Land could only be granted at the expense of landowners and would come dangerously close to accepting the radical doctrine that land truly belonged to those who worked it. To liberate the serfs without land would serve to create a vast and dangerous mass of destitute third class citizens. This was difficult for landowners to understand.

**How**

**Emancipation Edict (February, 1861):**

* Serfs granted **personal freedom within 2 years,** allowing them to own land, marry without interference, use law courts and set up their own businesses.
* Freed peasants were granted **ownership of their houses and the plot of land** they had worked on.
* Each serf was guaranteed a minimum size of allotment, but 75% of serfs received allotments 20% smaller than the land they worked before and 80% of the size considered necessary to feed a peasant family.
* The government then **compensated landlords** for land lost to peasants, on a very high valuation of the land. Freed serfs were to repay the state this in the shape of **‘redemption dues’ over 49 years at 6% interest**.
* The local ***mir*** was made responsible for collecting and paying the redemption taxes, and thus exercised **considerable control over each peasant.**
* State serfs were granted the same terms, but the transition period was **5 years** not 2 and they generally received larger plots of lands. **Household serfs** came out worst of all: they received **no land**, just their freedom.

**Evaluating successes and failures of emancipation:**

· Viewing the emancipation as a 'success' or a 'failure' depends very much on what **criteria** it is judged against.

* **+** Viewed in **legal terms of rights and liberties**, the emancipation was a **monumental success: 40 million Russians were liberated overnight**, and Russia made a dramatic break with its social and economic past to an extent unparalleled in nineteenth-century Europe.
* **-** Yet the political system that initiated these reforms, in order to strengthen their own position had collapsed within 60 years.
* **Historian Hugh Seton-**Watson compared Russian emancipation to that of the emancipation of African Americans in the USA in 1865. He argues that the US reform was carried out less peacefully and was far less successful in guaranteeing the personal freedom of those it liberated. This is supported by David Moon who argues that the guarantee of land was a major benefit that was not shared by the American slaves.
* **-** Immediate impact of the emancipation was lessened by **practical problems of implementing the reform at local level**. As the process was dependent upon the support of the nobility, it was often slow and carried out in a way that favoured the interests of landowners at the expense of the peasants.
* **-** Land settlements were thus **unfavourable to the peasants:** areas granted to the peasants were too small, and **landlords charged inflated prices**. This left peasants with **less land (4 hectares)** than before, **paying redemption taxes beyond the productive value of the land** for **land they thought was theirs by right**. Moon estimates that peasants were overcharged by 20% in more profitable areas and as much as 90% in less productive regions. In many cases the peasants were convinced that the land was really theirs in the first place and thus greatly resented the redemption payments. Furthermore, former domestic serfs who hadn’t previously worked the land didn’t receive any land at all under the terms of the Edict. In the short to medium-term, then, the emancipation probably (and ironically) actually **worsened the wealth and living standards of former serfs** in many cases.
* **-** Though freed from the landlord, **peasants were still under control of the *mir*** (peasant commune), which could restrict travel and freedom of enterprise in the village. The *mir* tended to be **backwards looking** in terms of perpetuating traditional farming techniques: by sharing land inefficiently in narrow strips, it helped to **prevent the transformation of former serfs into individual peasant land owners**.
* - Emancipation therefore **failed to solve industrial backwardness**: lacking land, facing economic difficulties and often prevented by the *mir* from being able to leave the village for towns, the peasants were **not transformed into a new class of prosperous consumers**. As late as 1878 it was estimated that only 50% of the peasantry farmed allotments large enough for production of a surplus. Nor did the reform succeed in creating a landowning class with funds for substantial agricultural or industrial investment. The majority of landowners before emancipation were so deeply in debt that it has been estimated that 248 million of the 543 million roubles paid to them by the government by 1871 was used to pay off existing debts.
* Many landowners struggled to adapt more than the peasants. Many simply abandoned their land-holdings. Thus whereas in 1862 the nobility owned 94.8 million hectares of land – their property in 1911 amounted to only 46.9 million hectares.
* It could be argued that by undermining the role of the nobility in local government, the emancipation struck a serious blow at the effectiveness of Tsarist government.
* + On balance, even if emancipation did not improve peasants' living standards in the short term it did lead to over 85 % of former serfs becoming landowners in some shape or form within 20 years of the reform. Furthermore, historian **David Christian** argues that **emancipation was a success in achieving its immediate objectives**: peasant disturbances were reduced for the next 40 years, and serfdom was abolished without provoking an immediate major rebellion.

**Alexander II's further reforms**

* As serfdom had been central to the functioning of the Russian state before 1861 (in terms of the military, political, administrative and social structure of the country), its repeal demanded a further series of reforms to enable to tsarist system of government to operate effectively.

**Legal Reforms**

* Previously local legal issues had been handled by the landlord in his position of owner of the serfs. With no lawyers or juries in courts, and presumed guilty until proven innocent, the poor had little chance of securing justice.
* In **1864 Alexander introduced a modern Western-style system** that aimed to be an independent judiciary that was "***equal for all our subjects"***. This included the **introduction of juries, judges to be well-paid to avoid bribery** and **courts open to the public.**
* **+** Possibly the most **liberal and progressive of Alexander's reforms,** this new system offered Russians the chance of a **fair trial** for the first time. The court-rooms offered many from the rising intelligentsia a new and exciting career option, and the court-rooms enjoyed **considerable freedom of expression**. As Hugh Seton-Watson argues, "***the court-room was the one place in Russia where real freedom of speech prevailed"***
* ***-*** However, it should also be noted that political cases were removed from these courts and the Secret Police could still arrest people at will. On balance, though, these were remarkable reforms.

**Local Government Reforms**

* With the abolition of serfdom removing the legal basis of gentry’s control of the peasantry, Alexander saw the need for changes in the governmental system. In 1864 local government assemblies called[*zemstva*](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FZemstvo&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFrqEze-jaCV0652nw3ldJRrBU_g2ds3Cw)were set up, followed by urban assemblies called[*dumas*](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FDuma%23Municipal_dumas&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFrqEze3nb249CaHM81PJhGlDWnhNDe5XA)in 1870.
* These *zemstva* were potentially a radical liberal measure towards a system with a degree of local self-government - a radical measure in a centralist autocracy. However, Alexander intended them to **support the traditional system of government** rather than to move away from this. In effect, Alexander was **appeasing local nobility** by giving them some **local political power** in response to their perceived loss of status with the serfs' emancipation.
* **+** The *zemstvas* and *dumas* had local power over **public health, prisons, roads, agriculture, and education**, which provided **new opportunities for local political participation** in ways they had not previously been possible. These local officials therefore had the chance to **engage in Russia's real social problems.**
* - On the other hand, and revealing the clear limitations of this new form of 'local power', the **police remained under central control**, the **provisional governor could overrule all *zemstva* decisions**, the *zemstva* were **permanently short of money,** which limited their practical options, and the **voting system was heavily weighted towards local landowners** (they were far from democratic institutions!), which made it easy for the **conservative nobility to and their interests to dominate assemblies.**

**Army Reforms**

* Given that the military humiliation in the Crimean was effectively the catalyst to Alexander's reforms, modernizing Russia's army was seen as crucial.
* Carried out by the liberal Minister of War,[Dmitri Milyutin](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FDmitry_Milyutin&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFrqEzcguzozFfcU9u4uu7PUl-xtNLTdag), these military reforms included **reducing the length of service for conscripts from 25 years to 6 years in service** (and 9 years in reserve) and **introducing universal military service for all males over 20** (no longer allowing the wealthy to escape this).
* **+** Milyutin's reforms made the army more **civilized and efficient** - training and discipline no longer included brutal punishments, and shorter services meant that the army was no longer a 'life sentence'.

**Education Reforms**

* **New atmosphere of toleration and reform**, as seen with relaxation of press censorship, was also notable with **more liberal education policies**.
* Important university reform meant that **universities were given much greater autonomy in their affairs (1863)**: **lectures on European law and philosophy** were allowed, scholars were allowed abroad to study and a new breed of **liberal professors** replaced many of the conservatives in place in Nicholas I’s reign. Furthermore, **poor students did not have to pay fees**, and by 1859 2/3 of students at Moscow university were exempt from fees.
* **+** The number of children **attending primary school increased considerably** as the *zemstva* played a key role in increasing the number of elementary schools. Between 1856 and 1878, the number of children in primary school more than doubled from 450,000 to over 1 million.
* **-** The government's liberal policies made universities into a "***powder keg****" -* student radicalism grew and teaching lectures "*appeared to be serving not only academic and economic purposes but also the promotion of* ***political instability***" (**David Saunders**).

**Economic Reforms**

* Crimean defeat demonstrated that economic modernization was an urgent priority - military failure and inefficiency clearly had its roots in the **backwardness of the Russian economy** in relation to those of the European Great Powers. In particular, the government focused on trying to **develop railways** and **increasing coal and iron production** and pursued a more vigorous policy of industrialization than Nicholas I did.
* **+** The Russian railway system developed from 1,600 km in 1861 to **over 22,000 in 1878** (though this was still small compared internationally and given Russia's immense size). This growth in railways helped to provide the empire with **greater internal coherence** (through improved communications) and to **stimulate internal trade** ( chiefly though reducing the price of grain in the key cities of the north, which in turn encouraged urbanization and further industrialization).
* **+** There were **considerable increases in oil and coal production** and **new industrial areas were emerging,** though much of these were dependent upon foreign investment (such as the Nobel brothers).
* **+** Steady population growth led to a **growing market in the countryside for manufactured goods -** however, this 'peasant market' was extremely fragile as it was dependent on a good harvest, and transport difficulties still hindered further market development.
* **-** One area that saw little reform was the **government's taxation policies -** the peasants were still forced to bear the heavy burden of the **poll tax,** which the gentry were exempt from and which **rose by 80% over Alexander's reign.**

**Successes (from whose perspective?) Failures (from whose perspective?)**

To be able to evaluate the successes and failures of Alexander II's reforms, we have to view them from someone's perspective. I will view the successes and failures from firstly Alexander's perspective and then later from the "people's" perspective (the people, which the reforms had effects on).

Alexander II:

His main aims were to 1) hold on to/strengthen autocracy by liberal reforms and 2) make Russia a great power.

His first aim was clearly not achieved by his liberal policies and the emancipation of the serfs, as in the end, Alexander was assassinated by political radicals who wanted to overthrow Tsardom. Half-hearted reforms (legal + local government) upset the liberals (who wanted more freedom) and the conservatives (who resented loss of power). Educational reform + relaxation of the press etc. backfired and generated opposition to the Tsar instead of support. The liberation of the serfs had serious flaws and did not improve the situation of the serfs in Russia. In short, Alexander II's reforms did not achieve their intentions of stablizing Russian politics and did ultimately lead to Alexander's death.

However, his second aim of making Russia a great power was partly achieved through economic reforms, as every great power is in need of an industrial economy. During Alexander's reign Industry developed + railways system developed intensely. The overall industrial output of the country rose significantly. However, the progress was uneven, and in 1881, Russia was still an agricultural economy. The Tsarist taxation system had not either changed and prevented Russia's economy from expanding.

"People's" perspective:

In many ways the reforms of Alexander II were great successes for the Russian people. Even though they were limited and were intended to strengthen autocracy, they still opened up Russia's political and social climate. For example, liberation of serfs, the establishment of Dumas and Zemstvo and introduction of a western educational system all marked a significant step away from the traditional Russian authoritarian rule and paved way for a more modern and democratic Russia.

**Overall assessment of Alexander II and historiography**

**Responses to Alexander II's reforms and the**[\*\*growth of opposition\*\*](https://sites.google.com/site/ibhistoryrussia/syllabus-overview---imperial-russia/opposition-1)

Instead of strengthening and stabilizing the regime, **Alexander’s reforms led to greater political opposition**: trying to choose a delicate middle path Alexander upset both conservatives (resenting loss of influence) and liberals (wanted reform to go further). On the one hand, the reforms led to a ‘crisis of rising expectations’: Alexander's reforms had raised hopes which **he could not fulfill without undermining the autocracy**, in particular calls for **a national assembly** (parliament) and **a written constitution defining and limiting the Tsar’s powers**. On the other hand, his later reactionary impulses that attempted to reduce and damper these expectations only angered reformers further and **encouraged the growth of radical extremism against the state**.

Furthermore, the freer and more open political atmosphere of the reforms, and the toleration of Western liberal ideas in the university lecture-rooms, led to the **growth of a more radical opposition** who demanded fundamental changes to Russian autocracy and society**,** particularly among students influenced by the growing flood of radical ideas in this period.

Having made key reforms in the 1860’s Alexander effectively stood at the crossroads between autocracy and liberal reform, but he opted against further reform and remained firmly committed to autocracy in the later stage of his reign.

Indeed, following the growth of opposition to his regime (including terrorism and assassination attempts of Alexander himself) and with the more radical political climate of the 1870's, Alexander **enacted a series of more conservative measures** that some historians have described as a reactionary "swing to the right" in contrast to his earlier "liberal" reforms.

Key examples of Alexander's **repressive policies between 1866 and 1881** are: liberal reforming ministers in his government were **replaced with conservative ministers who opposed further reform.** There was also **less freedom of the press** and **greater censorship.** Also, following the first assassination attempt in 1866, the Secret Police ("[Third Section](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FThird_Section_of_His_Imperial_Majesty%2527s_Own_Chancellery&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFrqEzdhjm6C8X5PfJE0Nh9iKNRJra1Dlg)") were given greater powers to **arrest and clamp down on radicals.**

Some historians have argued that Alexander's **'conservative shift'** and his ending of reforms can be related directly to the first assassination attempt on the tsar's life made in 1866 by[Dmitri Karakozov](http://www.google.com/url?q=http%3A%2F%2Fen.wikipedia.org%2Fwiki%2FDmitry_Karakozov&sa=D&sntz=1&usg=AFrqEzeEhWXYgTrh6ecZQfaJKK6yj16L4A), a disillusioned student radical. According to this argument, this radical act shocked Alexander II into taking more repressive action against opposition, and he spent the rest of his reign **increasingly disillusioned with reform and conservative in outlook**. So in this interpretation, Alexander's reign can effectively be split into two distinct phases: **(i) an early liberal phase committed to reform** (c. 1855 - 1866), and **(ii)** **a later conservative phase** (c. 1866 - 1881), in which he turned against his earlier reformism.

However, as **Jonathan Bromley** points out, this 'early liberal/late conservative' argument, switching with the first assassination attempt in 1866, **is too simplistic,** as it ignores the fact that the later part of Alexander's reign also included **various liberal measures.** For instance, in response to revolutionary political violence of the late 1870's Alexander responded both conservatively, with execution of radicals. Indeed, far from Alexander being a bitter conservative in 1881, just before his assassination he had agreed in principle to one of the reformers and radicals' key demands: **a national assembly (parliament).** Ironically then, Alexander II was assassinated by radicals just as he had conceded further, and potentially far-reaching, liberal reform for Russia.

***Historiography*: how far does Alexander II deserve the title of ‘Tsar liberator’?**

Stephen J Lee argues that reform had two meanings;

1. understood as action against the whole system of autocracy and a modification of the basis of Russia’s political institutions. This was the hope of liberal reformers
2. autocracy could not be undermined but it could be made to work more efficiently by modernizing and rationalizing the range of social and administrative institutions over which it presided. It was obvious that, by 1855, Russia was in desperate need of overhaul.

· The key historiographical debate concerning Alexander is how far he deserves the title he received of being the 'Tsar Liberator'. The central issue that historians have disagreed upon is **what Alexander's *motives* were in carrying out his reforms?** Does it make sense to refer to Alexander II as a 'liberator'?

Some historian have **denied Alexander’s role as a great reformer and liberal**.

· What **evidence** do they support their argument with? They point out that Alexander was motivated by a desire to ***strengthen autocracy*** not replace it. As **W. Bruce Lincoln** claims**,** “***the concept of the state embodied in the person of the autocracy was in no way altered***”.

‘The Tsar-Liberator presided over an ‘era of great reforms’ which finally dragged Russia into the nineteenth century and provided the background to further changes under Nicholas II.’ – Stephen J Lee *Aspects of European history 1789-1980.*

Other historians have stressed the **military benefits of reform**, also beneficial to the ruling class, in explaining the motivation for reform. **A.J. Rieber** goes as far as stating that the emancipation and reform process was **motivated solely by military considerations** and the desire to strengthen and protect the state through a strong, modernised army.

**Most historians** now agree that Alexander was **not cynically exploiting reform for political advantage**, and instead argue that the ***inconsistent nature*** of his reforms can be related to the specific **strengths and weaknesses of Alexander’s character:** sometimes brave, sometimes confused and not especially intelligent: “*the laws which freed the serfs emerged from a process that the Tsar barely understood and over which he had only partial control* ” (David Saunders).

· As an autocrat he recognized his duty to try and fix a system that had clearly failed Russia in the Crimea, yet he was not sure as to the best way to do this, and he became scared whenever he saw potentially radical consequences to his reforms. Thus **Hugh Seton-Watson** saw Alexander at the crossroads between autocracy and modern liberal constitutional development, and judged him a **failure** for seeking an **unrealistic compromise between the two** and refusing to abandon autocracy.

‘Alexander was called upon to execute one of the hardest tasks that can confront an autocratic ruler: to completely remodel the enormous state which had been entrusted to his care, to abolish an age-old order founded on slavery, to replace it with civil decency and freedom, to put a repressed and humiliated society on its feet and to give it the chance to flex its muscles.’ Russian Liberal B. N. Chicherin

‘This kind of political and social liberation that emerged from all this may not have been the kind that either Alexander or Chicherin envisaged, but it was liberation nonetheless.’ Morris and Murphy.

‘It is hard to find in Alexander the reformer’s breadth of vision and harder still to find the strength of will… his autocratic will did not manifest itself in bold strokes but in passive tenacity.’ D Field.