

## The need for change

'I am handing you command of the country in a very poor state.' This simple admission of the ageing Tsar Nicholas I to his son and heir, Alexander, speaks volumes about the decades of neglect the autocratic system had shamelessly presided over in the first half of the Nineteenth Century. In 1855, when Alexander II took possession of his ramshackle inheritance, the last traces of national pride were being snuffed out by British, French and Turkish troops on the Crimean peninsula. Defeat in this war revealed fundamental deficiencies in the Russian system. The national debt was high and rising steadily, the army was inefficient in both its structure and operations, central administration was inept and the countryside was seething with 50 million disaffected peasants grimly mourning the loss of 600,000 fellow Russians. In the villages, popular disturbances multiplied, sending shock waves reverberating around Russia to the gates of the Winter Palace itself.

Alexander II assumed responsibility for an empire whose political and social systems were not just 'in a very poor state' but in fact, as history would reveal, in a terminal condition. Alexander, of course, did not have this knowledge but he understood fully that the State was seriously diseased and that remedial treatment was urgently needed to restore the patient. The new Tsar acted instinctively to save the autocratic system to which he was bound by honour and tradition. While representing a major progressive phase in nineteenth-century history, his reforming efforts were designed to modernize the autocracy and to ensure its preservation, rather than to create an alternative system. As a result his reforms, though ambitious in appearance and scope, were often limited in practice. His reluctance to go beyond a basic rescue mission produced resentment and encouraged political opposition. Eventually Alexander fell victim to forces which he had unwittingly released and was unable to restrain. The most significant of Alexander's projects, and the one which earned him the unofficial title 'Tsar Liberator', was the abolition of serfdom in 1861. The nature of Russian serfdom and the principal factors involved in its demise are explored in the following section.

## EXAMINING THE EVIDENCE

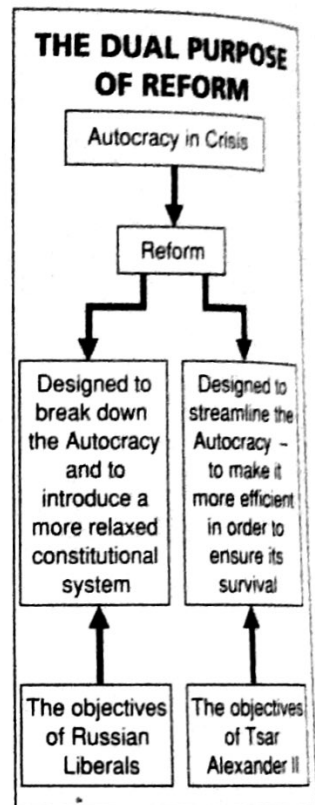
### Section 1: the material condition of the Russian serf

#### Source A

Serfs cultivated the land allotted to them, and in recompense for the use of this land they were required to work also on the land reserved for the use of the landowner. Three days a week was probably the average requirement but in the worst cases, and in busy weeks, this might be doubled (which meant that the serf could not properly look after his own land). There were no fixed rights or obligations for the peasantry. A landowner could increase his serfs' dues and duties, he could seize their property, he could forbid their buying from, selling to, or working with persons outside the estate, he could make them into domestic servants, sell them either separately or with their families, force them to marry so as to breed more serfs, or forbid them to marry disapproved partners.



TSAR ALEXANDER II



Except in cases of murder or banditry, the landowner administered rural justice and could send troublesome serfs to Siberia or into the army. Whipping was commonplace. Although there were many landowners who were kindly, educating and sometimes liberating favoured serfs, there were others who were brutal; social isolation and almost absolute power led some landowners to excesses which in other circumstances they would have found revolting. Probably the worst off peasants were those with an absentee landlord. Some nobles had never even seen their estates, and many more visited them only rarely. Such estates were entrusted to bailiffs who all too often were dishonest and tyrannical.

JN Westwood, *Endurance and Endeavour: Russian History 1812-1971* (1973)

### Source B



RUSSIAN SERFS

### Source C

...If, however, I were to relate what I heard of in those years [during his childhood] it would be a much more gruesome narrative: stories of men and women torn from their families and their villages and sold, or lost in gambling, or exchanged for a couple of hunting dogs, and then transported to some remote part of Russia for the sake of creating a new estate; of children taken from their parents and sold to cruel or dissolute masters; of flogging 'in the stables', which occurred every day with unheard of cruelty; of a girl who found her only salvation in drowning herself; of an old man who had grown grey haired in his master's service and at last hanged himself under his master's window; and of revolts of serfs, which were suppressed by Nicholas I's generals by flogging to death each tenth or fifth man taken out of the ranks, and by laying waste the village, whose inhabitants, after military execution, went begging for bread in the neighbouring provinces, as if they had been the victims of a conflagration. As to the poverty which I saw during our journeys in certain villages, especially in those which belonged to the imperial family, no words would be adequate to describe the misery to readers who have not seen it.

Peter Kropotkin, a Russian nobleman, quoted in WE Mosse, *Alexander II and the Modernization of Russia* (1958)

### Source D

Serfdom was an economic institution not a closed world created for the gratification of sexual appetites. Isolated instances of cruelty are no evidence to the contrary. It is simply not good enough to cite the notorious case of one Saltykova, a sadistic landlady immortalized by historians, who whiled away her idle hours by torturing to death dozens of her domestic servants. She tells us about as much about imperial Russia as does Jack the Ripper about Victorian London. Where statistics happen to be available they indicate moderation in the use of disciplinary prerogatives. Every landlord, for example, had the power to turn unruly peasants over to the authorities for exile to Siberia. Between 1822 and 1833, 1283 serfs were punished in this fashion; an annual average of 107 out of over twenty million proprietary serfs is hardly a staggering figure.

Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (1974)

### Source E

Read the complaints of the English factory workers; your hair will stand on end. How much repulsive oppression, incomprehensible sufferings! What cold barbarism on the one hand, and what appalling poverty on the other. You will think we are speaking of the construction of the Egyptian pyramids, of Jews working under Egyptian lashes. Not at all: we are talking about the textiles of Mr Smith or the needles of Mr Jackson. And note that all these are not abuses, not crimes, but occurrences which take place within the strict limits of legality. It seems there is no creature in the world more unfortunate than the English worker...

In Russia there is nothing like it. Obligations are altogether not very onerous. The soul tax is paid by the *mir*; the *corvee* is set by the law; the *obrok* is not ruinous (except in the neighbourhood of Moscow and St Petersburg, where the diversity of industry intensifies and stimulates the greed of owners). The landlord, having set the *obrok*, leaves it up to the peasant to get it whenever and by whatever enterprises he can think of and sometimes travels two thousand kilometres to earn money... Take a look at the Russian peasant: is there a trace of slavish degradation in his behaviour or speech? Nothing need be said of his boldness and cleverness. His entrepreneurship is well known. His agility and dexterity are amazing. A traveller journeys from one end of Russia to the other, ignorant of a single word of Russian, and he is everywhere understood, everyone fulfils his requests and enters into agreements with him. You will never find among the Russian people that which the French call *un badaut* [an idler or loafer]: you will never see a Russian peasant show either crude amazement or ignorant contempt for what is foreign. In Russia there is not one man who does not have his own living quarters. A poor man who goes into the world leaves his *izba* [peasant hut]. This does not exist in other countries. Everywhere in Europe to own a cow is a sign of luxury; in Russia not to have one is a sign of dreadful poverty.

Alexander Pushkin, extract from *Journey from Moscow to St Petersburg*  
quoted in Richard Pipes, *Russia Under the Old Regime* (1974)

### Source F

On the whole...so far at least as mere food and lodgings are concerned, the Russian peasant is not so badly off as the poor man amongst

ourselves [in Britain]. He may be rude and uneducated – liable to be ill-treated by his superiors – intemperate in his habits, and filthy in his person; but he never knows the misery to which the Irish peasant is exposed. His food may be coarse; but he has abundance of it. His hut may be homely; but it is dry and warm. We are apt to fancy that if our peasantry be badly off, we can at least flatter ourselves with the assurance that they are much more comfortable than those of foreign countries. But this is a gross delusion. Not in Ireland only, but in parts of Great Britain usually considered to be exempt from the miseries of Ireland, we have witnessed wretchedness compared with which the conditions of the Russian boor is luxury, whether he live amid the crowded population of large towns, or in the meanest hamlets of the interior. There are parts of Scotland, for instance, where the people are lodged in houses which the Russian peasant would not think fit for his cattle.

Robert Bremner, extract from *Excursions in the Interior of Russia* (1839) quoted in Richard Pipes, as above

## Section 2: the pressure for emancipation

### Source G

This measure [proposal for emancipation] is more necessary for the welfare of our class itself [landowning nobility] even than for the serfs. The abolition of the right to dispose of people like objects or like cattle is as much our liberation as theirs: for at present we are under the yoke of a law that destroys still more in us than in the serfs any human quality.

Al Koshelyov (Russian landowner) quoted in Hugh Seton-Watson, *The Russian Empire 1801–1917* (1967)

### Source H

Just as in Western Europe before enclosures, the land was divided into strips allocated amongst the peasant families. There were commons and pastures or meadowland whose use was regulated by the community [the *mir*]. All this was the antithesis of the agrarian individualism which was to make possible great increases in production and productivity in the West...From an economic point of view the agrarian system was wasteful and unproductive, giving little scope for improvement and providing the peasant mass with little above the barest minimum necessary for existence. The surplus extracted from the peasantry went to support a nobility not interested in improving the productivity of the land and essentially a parasitic consuming class. The state likewise, though needing to promote some forms of industry for its own purposes, was not concerned to carry out any policy which would disturb the social