

Russia: Emancipation & Revolutionary Stirrings

During the last half of the nineteenth century, Russia changed dramatically. The death of Tsar Alexander I after the Crimean War made reform necessary. Tsar Alexander II, the son of Alexander I, recognized this problem and made a series of reforms for what he thought would be for the betterment of Russia.

The long-standing problem of serfdom was finally addressed. In March 1856, at the conclusion of the Crimean War, Alexander II abolished it, announcing that it was necessary if Russia was to remain a great power. Serfdom was economically inefficient. Forced labor resulted in a constant threat of revolt by the serfs. In addition, nineteenth century moral opinion condemned serfdom. For five years, the Russian government was stuck in the logistics of how to implement the tsar's desire. In 1861, despite opposition from the nobility and the landlords,



Alexander II ended serfdom. However, the actual emancipation law gave serfs little freedom from the nobility. While they had the rights to marry without their landlord's permission and buy and sell property, they did not receive free title to their land. Over the course of forty-nine years *plus* interest, serfs had to pay their landlords and the government. Most could not afford these payments and fell increasingly behind in their debt.

The emancipation of the serfs required local government and judicial reform. Flagrant inequities and abuses within each of these systems could not continue. In 1864, Alexander II issued a new statute that introduced Western European legal principles.

These included equality before law, impartial hearings, uniform procedures, judicial independence, and trial by jury. The new systems were more efficient and less corrupt than before.

The army was also reformed. Russia had the largest army on the Continent but floundered in the Crimean War. In the 1860s, the harsh, brutal standards were toned down. Service was now fifteen years from the previous twenty-five. In 1874, the enlistment period was lowered to six years of active duty and nine in reserves. All males were subject to military service at the age of twenty.

In 1830, Polish nationalists attempted to overthrow Russian dominance. In response, Alexander II emancipated the Polish serfs to punish the Polish nobility. Poland was treated as merely another Russian province. The Polish suppression demonstrated that Alexander II was only a reformer within the limits of his own autocracy.



The reign of the tsar in Russia had long been criticized by many citizens, current and former, of Russia. Alexander Herzen was a Russian writer and thinker known as the "father of Russian socialism" and one of the main fathers of agrarian populism. He was exiled to England in 1850 and gladly accepted it due to his disillusion with the revolutions of 1848. During his time in London, he began publishing a newspaper called *The Bell*, where he was able to share his reformist ideals. This newspaper gave rise to many revolutionary groups, made up of mostly students, in Russia that all formed under the banner of *populism*.



Around 1870, the aforementioned revolutionary groups began to mobilize. Their idea was to move into the countryside of Russia and live with the peasants. They wanted to gain the trust of the peasants and make sure they knew what they would become in the coming revolutions. However the majorities of the peasants were untrustworthy and turned the students into the police. Despite the tsars wishes of extremely heavy penalties, the courts handed out light sentences or acquittals to most all of the students, who had been imprisoned for quite some time.

It was after this that the revolutionaries began to adopt a policy of terrorism. In January of 1878, Vera Zasulich attempted to assassinate the military governor of St. Petersburg, however we were later acquitted. A few years in 1881, a group known as *The Peoples Will*, who dedicated themselves to overthrowing the aristocracy of Russia, assassinated Tsar Alexander II. All for assassins, who were willing to give up their lives for the cause, were executed for treason.



The reign of Alexander III was a reign of oppression and a roll-back in political policies back to Nicolas I. Alexander III was an extremely oppressive leader who preferred a centralized government. He inadvertently gave revolutionaries a model of exactly what they thought to be wrong with an autocratic government.