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Brighter Thinking

Tsarist and Communist Russia, 1855–1964

A/AS Level History for AQA Student Book

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Series Editors: Michael Fordham and David Smith

PART 1: AUTOCRACY, REFORM AND REVOLUTION: RUSSIA, 1855–1917

1 Trying to preserve autocracy, 1855–1894

In this section, we will examine the nature of political authority in Russia from 1855 to 1894 and consider some of the changes that were taking place and how these changes began to affect the relationship between the people and their Tsar. We will look into:

- the nature of autocracy in Russia, including social divisions and the cultural influences of the Church
- the impact of the Crimean War on Russia
- attempts to reform Russia
- the governance of Russia under Alexander II and Alexander III
- the Tsars' treatment of ethnic minorities
- the growth of opposition
- the economy

Introduction to Tsarist Russia

Russian political life was overwhelmingly the preserve of social elites in the 19th century under the Romanov dynasty. Ordinary people played almost no role in the institutions that governed Russia and this was to remain the case until 1917 when Tsardom fell. The imposition of autocracy on Russia changed little under

Alexander II (the sixteenth Romanov Emperor), who ruled 1855–1881, although he oversaw the most dramatic domestic reform witnessed in Russia in two hundred years, for example, he stripped Russia of serfdom, introduced trial by jury and relaxed censorship. A radical group who were dissatisfied that his reforms were too conservative assassinated him in 1881, but autocracy survived as the throne was successfully passed to his son, Alexander III. Alexander III did not want to suffer the same fate as his father, and autocracy was imposed more ruthlessly as police powers were extended and Russia's conservative traditions were once again re-enforced. After the first assassination attempt in 1866, the ethnic minorities and, in particular, the Jewish community, bore the brunt of the imperial government's attempts to affirm 'Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationality'. These minorities were targeted for discrimination under a policy that became known as 'Russification'.

On his deathbed in 1855, Tsar Nicholas I said to his son and heir: 'I am passing command to you that is not in desirable order. I am leaving you many disappointments and cares. Hold it like that!' (cited in Radzinsky, 2006, page 97). At 37 years old, Alexander II was to inherit the largest power in the world but with it, the largest problems. Russia was on the brink of defeat against Britain and France in the Crimean War and couldn't even afford to repay the national debt. The regime was facing increasingly frequent riots by peasants in rural areas and the emergent middle classes were becoming more critical of Russia's evident political and economic 'backwardness'. The 1.5 million subjugated minorities on the fringes of the empire were beginning to call for self-determination and there was genuine fear that the 50 million peasants living in rural Russia were a real threat to the Tsar's authority. It was left to Alexander II to maintain a difficult balancing act: modernise Russia whilst retaining autocratic power.

Political authority and the state of Russia: autocracy

Autocratic rule was not unique to Russia. This system of government, in which solely the sovereign exercises supreme power had existed in France and Britain too, although by 1855 Russia was the last autocratic state in Europe. Tsarist imperial government had been developed under Peter the Great (1689–1725), when there was little alternative to a centralised authority. Russia was a vast country, even during this period. Poor roads, no railways and an unfavourable climate meant that mid-17th-century travellers could expect to travel approximately just 50 miles in 24 hours by horse-drawn carriage. Even unrivalled territorial expansion during the 19th century did not alter Russian autocracy; in fact, it only heightened the need for highly centralised authority. In 1900, Italy and France spent more than twice as much per capita as Russia on policing the empire, and Russia, whose population was spread thinly over vast areas, possessed only four state officials for every 1000 inhabitants. Lacking a network of state control, the government became reliant upon the infrastructure of the Orthodox Church to enforce their authority. Tsars did not want to see their power curtailed and they were supported by officials whose careers and authority depended on the maintenance of the status quo. This provided a powerful motivation against change taking place – resulting in systemic inertia.

Therefore, by 1855 little had changed; Alexander II's political authority was virtually unchecked as the Tsars of Russia had established a form of autocracy

Speak like a historian: Alexander Gerschenkron

Explanation of Russian 'backwardness'

Historians often use the word 'backwardness' to describe 'the Russia' in the 19th century. The word was first used by an economic theorist called Alexander Gerschenkron, who suggested Russia was backwards economically because there was a reliance on agriculture as the main source of income that banks (not private investors) were relied upon to invest in enterprise and new technologies were limited in use.

unrivalled in the rest of Europe. The Tsar stood at the head of the Russian state, ordained to his position by God, with unrestricted power. These men were similar in their allegiance to the ideological doctrine laid out in 1833 by Nicholas I – 'Official Nationality' was based on autocracy in government, orthodoxy in religion and Russian nationalism. The historian, Richard Pipes, suggests that the final three Tsars also seemed to lack any method for resolving political crisis other than repression.[1] Thus, the final three Tsars – Alexander II, Alexander III and Nicholas II – could implement dramatic shifts in policy without popular consent. Furthermore, the styles of government that they imposed reflected the character of the men themselves.

The concept of autocracy had important implications for the Russian people. For example, the nature of law in Tsarist Russia was very different from its status in Europe. In the West it became accepted that the monarch was subject to the same laws that governed the behaviour of the population. The 'Rule of Law' was never accepted in Russia, where the law was something imposed on the population by the state – embodied by the sovereign. In this way, the Russian Tsars were above the law and this had important ramifications for the ordinary Russians who were subject to it. The Tsars' representatives were able to act with impunity in passing judgment on any particular issue, or punishments that they meted out. The historian Peter Waldron (1997) suggests that, as a result of this implantation of the law, the level of corruption was widespread. This autocratic system stretched through Russian society from the Tsar himself to the lowly rural tax collector. It meant that each government official (at whatever level) was imbued with the idea that they could act without risk of consequence in their dealings as agents of the state. For Alexander II, this could mean surrendering a war without taking advice; for a rural bureaucrat, it could mean confining a peasant to prison without evidence.

Orthodoxy and the role of the Church

Autocracy and the preservation of Tsarist authority were at the heart of the Romanov monarchs. However, no regime could rest on politics alone: they needed to win the hearts of their people. Religion played the crucial role here. The Russian Orthodox Church had been established in the 15th century when it had split from the eastern Byzantine Church. The Russian Church reflected the principles of the state, that Russia possessed a particular spiritual role in the Christian world. The Church was governed by the Holy Synod, chaired by a government minister,

Figure 1.1: Alexander II c.1860

and the Tsar's family had to be members by law. The Tsar had absolute power over Church finance and appointments. The Orthodox Church made spirited efforts to convert people to Orthodoxy from other religions, motivated by the need to integrate new populations into the empire and therefore serve both the interests of the Church and state. Orthodoxy also played a significant role in legitimising the imperial regime. Nicholas I had overseen widespread construction of Orthodox Churches across the empire, and an extension of the religious rituals in government, to cement the link between Church and state. Golden domes and minarets still dominate the skyline of many Russian towns.

Nationalism

On 26th December 1825, a group of aristocrats, lead by Russian army officers, along with about 3000 soldiers, staged a protest against Nicholas I's assumption of the throne after his elder brother, Constantine, removed himself from the line of succession on the same day in Senate Square, St Petersburg. The protest was brutally suppressed by Nicholas I and the five ringleaders of 'The Decembrists' (as they came to be called) were hanged. It showed the Tsarist regime that it was not just the peasants they had to fear but also their closest allies. The Romanov tradition was to paint any threat to the regime as 'un-Russian'. The most potent means of bringing people together under the authority of the Tsar was to become known as 'Official Nationality'. This policy represented the application

Figure 1.2: The family tree above shows the House of Romanov from Nicholas I to the last Tsar, Nicholas II. The Romanovs had ruled Russia for almost 250 years by the time Alexander II came to the throne.

of Orthodoxy and Autocracy and identified Russia as having an historic destiny to direct the development of its subjects. Linked to this was the belief that Russia and her people were distinctly different to Europeans.

The map below shows the expanse of the Russian Empire and where some of the different nationalities lived. The historian Dominic Lieven; 1999 p.212, has suggested that, of all the borderlands, Ukraine and Belorussia were most crucial to the empire. They lay across the main invasion routes from the West, where Imperial Russia's most powerful and dangerous enemies lurked. They shielded the empire's capitals and its political and economic heartland.

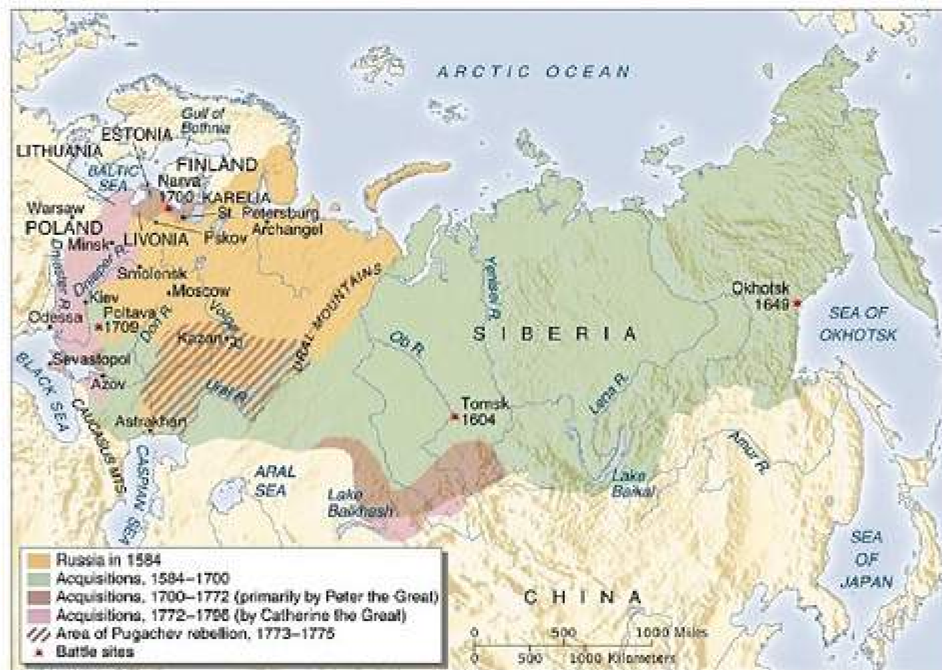

Figure 1.3: The Russian Empire c.1850, showing all territories that were part of the empire

Russia was a state dominated by the rural world and this was fundamental to her identity. 'Slavophiles' embodied this belief, emphasising Russian uniqueness and rejecting Western socio-economic development. This view dominated intellectual thought until the 19th century when a new ideology started to infiltrate Russia from the West. The Russian empire had expanded so much by the 1850s that people in the western states now lived 4500 miles away from those living on the empire's (Pacific) coastline. Ultimately, Russia could not remain immune from the wider processes of industrialisation that had been sweeping through Europe since the 1750s. 'Westernisers' (or *progressives* to use common parlance) started to argue that Russia needed to imitate Europe and industrialise, encouraging peasants to move to the cities. They argued that Russia was lagging behind due to 'Slavophile' (reactionary) beliefs. To what extent Russia should engage with European ideas was a dilemma Alexander II could not ignore when he took the throne in 1855.

When studying Russia during this period, it is important to note the European context. European states such as Britain, Germany and France had begun industrialisation to varying degrees during the 18th century, but all three had made extraordinary shifts in the preceding 50 years. Russia could not maintain her status as a major power without industrialising. To an extent, this plagues all of the leaders until the end of this study in 1964.

The political, social and economic condition of Russia in 1855

When Alexander II succeeded to the throne he used the nobility almost exclusively to administrate the governance of Russia. The Tsarist government was made up of an Imperial State Council and 13 ministries which oversaw areas such as education, internal affairs, the military and the economy. The State Council was no more than an advisory body in reality and often referred to as a comfortable place for civil servants to retire to. The 13 ministries were often in competition with each other and relied upon the autocratic Tsar to authorise policies, as they reported directly to him. This meant the efficiency of government depended largely on how committed the Tsar was to governing. With no representative body, popular participation in politics was non-existent and there was no single institution to co-ordinate the work of government, making governing complex and tiresome for Tsars. In efforts to control his administration, Nicholas I had asked for reports from the ministries every year. In 1849, it was recorded that the Ministry of the Interior alone produced 31 122 211 official papers, 165 000 of them 'urgent'. This cumbersome, bureaucratic machine meant that progress was at best slow and at worst, non-existent. Alexander II had worked on the Imperial State Council for ten years prior to him becoming Tsar. He was acutely aware of the deficiencies of the government, as well as the calls for more representative government from 'Westernisers' who saw 'enlightened' Europeans participating in politics and increasingly demanded change.

This pattern was mirrored in local government too, where institutions were largely disconnected and inefficient. Local government existed on three levels: province, district and rural district. Russia was divided into 50 provinces and each province divided into 20 districts. Each province had a governor who was also the head of one of the ministries, and therefore directly responsible to the Tsar. He could deal with up to 100 000 documents a year if he completed his work diligently. Unsurprisingly, the quality and amount of work produced by governors varied greatly. No such chain of command existed in the districts, which were led by a 'marshal of the nobility' who oversaw approximately 200 000 people and was elected by fellow nobles. Although the system of government was incredibly inefficient, it did ensure that the nobility were loyal to the regime and exercised control in the provinces on behalf of the Tsar.

The Third Section

The third element of Russian government was aptly named 'The Third Section' and was responsible for political security. It conducted surveillance and gathered information on political dissidents, religious schismatics (objectors) and foreigners. It had the power to banish suspected political criminals to remote regions and operate prisons for 'state criminals'. It was also responsible for prosecuting counterfeiters of money and official documents, and for conducting

censorship. The Third Section functioned in conjunction with the Corps of Gendarmes (formed in 1836), a well-organised military force that operated throughout the empire and with a network of anonymous spies and informers. It became a particularly repressive institution under Nicholas I and was feared throughout Russia by the educated elite, who wanted to be able to discuss ideas without state retribution.

ACTIVITY 1.1

Part of becoming a historian is being able to use historically-specific terms with accuracy. To understand the context in which Alexander II was ruling, you need to be able to discuss Russian society, which was distinctive from the rest of Europe. Some words you will have come across before, but their meaning is distinctive when referring to Russia in the 19th century. Some key words are: **serf**, **nobility**, **elite**, **intelligentsia**, **and peasant**. Draw a diagram to see if you can show how each of these groups of people relate to each other.

Peasants and serfs

Figure 1.4: A group of serfs at a rare social event, St Petersburg, Russia, 1890s. One man plays the flute in the background while two younger serfs dance.

European Russia's population stood at about 65 million in 1855 and, of these, around 59 million were peasants or serfs. Peasants and serfs had various obligations as a consequence of subordination to different kinds of landlords, which makes it difficult to generalise about their conditions. At risk of oversimplification, peasants – owned by the state – were deprived of the right to own private property, although they were allowed to move to find jobs. They were

also deprived of any individual legal rights. There were 30 million people classified as 'state peasants' by 1850. Conversely, serfs – numbering 21 million or so – were privately owned by nobles and prohibited from leaving their landowners' estates, and therefore bonded to the land they worked on. They had to provide their lords with labour services (*barschina*) or cash payments or kind (*obrok*), and sometimes both. (A payment in kind in this case would have been a share of the crops grown.) The dominance of *obrok or barschina* varied by region. For example, in Ukraine, 98% of serf obligations were met by *barschina*. The level of payment that landowners expected increased throughout the 19th century and by 1855 it is estimated they were taking over one third of peasant/serf incomes and production. Lastly, there were household or 'personal' serfs who were subject to the whims of their owners; they had no allotment of land, no way of supporting themselves, and numbered approximately 8 million. All peasants and serfs had to pay taxes and provide for themselves and their families. The limit of their world was the boundary of their village. They were largely uneducated and illiterate and knew little of politics. Life expectancy was only about 35 years by the 1850s and many found their only solace in the church and, more often, vodka.

Little had changed in rural areas for hundreds of years, as the motivation for modernisation had been nullified by the practice of serfdom. Landlords had free labour and serfs had nobody to whom they could sell excess goods. The system of serfdom was intended to give the landowning elites a large income by enabling them to exploit the peasantry, but it also provided a useful way of deterring uprisings in the countryside as punishments could be very severe indeed. Although landlords were not allowed to kill or maim the serfs, corporal punishment, such as whipping, was commonplace. It is important to note that uprisings did occur and even the iron-fisted Nicholas I experienced over 1400 different uprisings in the first half of the 19th century. The 'masses', as they were referred to, were genuinely feared as a primary source of revolution when Alexander II assumed the throne in 1855.

The nobility

The Russian nobility also had burdens placed on them because of the 'Table of Ranks' imposed by Peter the Great in 1722. This made state service compulsory for every noble male aged 15, unless overcome by disability or death. State service mostly meant becoming an officer in the military, although, for the luckier ones, a position in the state bureaucracy was available. (This obligation to serve ended in 1762, but the privilege of property ownership remained.) Military service was universally unpopular amongst many noble families as it took them away from running their estates. However, becoming a civil servant was a far more attractive proposition to many with the state providing a regular salary and schools to educate nobles for a life in this service. It is important to note that the Russian nobility, although comparably far more privileged than the rest of society, were neither universally wealthy nor educated, particularly in rural areas. In 1858, 40% of all landowners owned fewer than 20 serfs and scraped a meagre living from the land. It was these nobles who stayed on in active service.

Only a very small number of landowners owned vast estates, such as Count D.N. Sheremetev who had 300 000 serfs on his land when Alexander II took the throne. Many of the wealthy nobles took on cultural pursuits: the creators of the 'Golden

Age' of Russian literary works and art were almost exclusively drawn from the noble elite, for example Pushkin, Gogol, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky. The intellectual nobility was often progressive and pushed for reforms on behalf of the peasantry. To a large extent, however, the nobility had been utilised by the Romanovs to run Russia for them in a mutually beneficial agreement and were therefore loyal to the regime. Power still lay with the regime, for they could deal with any nobles who were seen to be neglecting their duties or who were less than supportive. Calls for an end to Russia's system of serfdom had been heard since Nicholas I but this would threaten the very structure of society upon which the regime was based and jeopardise the authority the Tsars had over their people. Therefore, calling an end to serfdom would have serious consequences for any Tsar who undertook to do so.

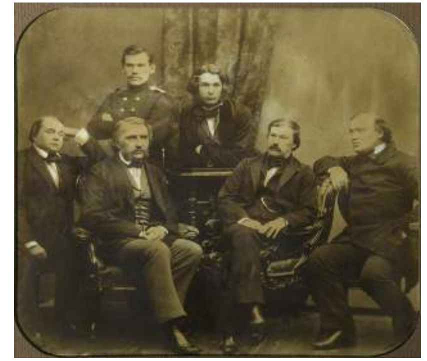

Figure 1.5: A group of nobles in 1849, several of whom became world-renowned writers. From left to right: (top) Leo Tolstoy, Dimitri Grigorovich; (bottom) Ivan Goncharov, Ivan Turgenev, Alexander Druzhinin and Alexander Ostrovsky

The intelligentsia

Historians tend to refer to 'the intelligentsia' (educated elite) as a group distinct from the nobility or peasants. Many students of Russian history make the mistake of assuming that these are the 'middle classes'. In fact, Russia had only a small, yet growing, 'middle class' of professionals in the mid-19th century. They were an emergent economic force who could be found pursuing cultural, educational and legal professions. The intelligentsia was socially diverse, although in numerical terms its ranks swelled with nobles. Those not part of the nobility have been referred to as the *raznochintsy* – or men of mixed ranks – and were often sons of townsfolk, clergy and merchants. What was distinct about members of the intelligentsia was not necessarily the level of education they had, but, as Richard Pipes ; 1995p. 253 puts it, 'is someone not wholly preoccupied with his personal well-being but at least as much and preferably much more concerned with that of society at large, and willing, to the best of his ability, to work on society's behalf').

Saunders (1992) suggests that the educated elite came to dominate the intelligentsia because they were being 'marginalised' as early as the 1780s, as there were not enough important or prestigious jobs to employ the growing number of educated men. Alexander Pushkin – perhaps Russia's greatest poet – wrote *Eugene Onegin* (his now classic novel in verse) in 1887 about this very group. Onegin, Pushkin's fictional protagonist, was a talented and highly educated aristocrat who did not feel at home in the society to which he belonged. Many noble and 'middle class' families allowed their children to complete their university studies abroad in Germany or Britain, while others travelled from Russia after their studies to experience 'new Western ideas'. Men you will come across later, such as Bakunin, Herzen, Turgenev and even Lenin, were examples of an educated elite who absorbed ideas from abroad. Their travels 'cut them off' from their Russian traditions and left them contemplating the future of their nation. The improvements in Russia's education system meant that by the 1840s there were approximately 20 000 non-nobles (predominantly from the middle classes but some extraordinary peasants too) who had been educated to university level. This, in turn, meant that a new generation thirsty for change and a 'market for ideas' was growing.

Economic conditions: agriculture

Russia was undoubtedly the most economically backward of the great European powers in 1855 and this deficiency was most pronounced in the countryside.

Tsarist Russia was an agricultural economy where 90% of the 65 million strong population lived in rural areas and the majority of these were peasant serfs. Farming in Russia was based on communal structures. The peasant commune (*mir*) was the body that was responsible for ensuring the peasants fulfilled their obligations. The commune could redistribute land after deaths in the village and ensured fairness in the quality of distribution. This system caused huge inefficiencies; the *mir* operated a system of strip farming and crop rotation, and redistribution prevented any investment from the peasants, for example peasants often refused to manure the land the year before repartition because they would have to surrender their land. These policies discouraged new agricultural techniques and contributed to the underdeveloped nature of the agrarian sector. Serfdom was not merely a symptom of Russian backwardness but one of its major causes. Low yields were a persistent problem and Russia compared very poorly with other European powers. By the 1850s, Russian grain production per hectare was less than half that of British, Prussian or French farms. As the population was growing at an alarming rate throughout the 19th century, almost doubling towards the latter half, and grain still accounted for 40% of total Russian exports (at a time when the price of grain was decreasing), it became clear Russia needed to reform her economy. Russia had not yet industrialised because the pool of labour needed to work in the new industries was tied to the land as serfs. Coupled with this problem was the fact that Russia's underdeveloped banking system made it difficult for foreigners to invest.

The costs of war

Russia's finances were frequently put under significant stress due to war and the continual expansion of the empire. This was particularly true of the 1800s as warfare became technologically demanding, thus requiring ever greater resources and draining the coffers. The Russian state had been drawing new lands into its domains in a virtually continuous process for almost 150 years from 1700 to 1850. The Romanovs had so successfully acquired lands that the various peoples now incorporated into the Russian empire together accounted for the greatest variety of languages and religions of any state on earth. Yet war put great strain on the state as it required massive amounts of money and men.

In 1855 Russia was at war with Britain and France in the Crimea. It was a ruinously expensive war, taking up to 45% of government expenditure in 1854 and requiring the levying of local taxes in the south to provide fuel, candles and straw for the army. The first reaction to the conflict had been to print more money to cover the state's expenditure, doubling the amount of money in circulation by 1855. However, the state's accustomed methods of dealing with deficits were stretched to the limit. Its debts to the banks had grown from 166 million rubles in 1845 to 441 million just 15 years later, and Russian foreign debts reached 360 million rubles. Even landlords were mortgaged beyond their means to pay for lifestyles to which they felt entitled. According to the historian Orlando Figes;1997, one third of the land and two thirds of the peasants were mortgaged to the State Bank or other noble banks by 1859. Many managers and bailiffs were running the estates rather than the noble families themselves. It was clear to Alexander II that Russia was in a financial crisis and the question of abolishing serfdom, this time, had to be answered.

The impact of the Crimean War (1853–56)

Nicholas I died after contracting pneumonia whilst inspecting his troops on the front line on 2nd March 1855. His death came just after Russia's loss of Sevastopol, her most precious fortified base – thought to be invincible – on her own soil against an alliance of Britain, France and Turkey. Over 25 million men were subject to military service but Russia's standing army was only 1.4 million. Most of even this number was exempted due to poor health. Russia could not field anywhere near even 1.4 million to the Crimea due to troops being stationed elsewhere to maintain peace across the empire, and poor infrastructure meant they simply couldn't transport the soldiers safely. It was not just a lack of railways and roads that hampered the Russian army, they were also fighting the industrialised armies of Britain and France who had steamships and rifled muskets. Russia was still using the same weaponry that had been used in the Napoleonic wars 40 years earlier.

It is estimated that about 800,000 men (2% of the European-Russian population) went to the Crimea to serve and casualties were very high. About 500,000 men were killed, not by fighting but by disease and illness. In 1854–55 Russia had spent the equivalent of three years' income on war and had accelerated inflation by covering the deficit with printing more money. The war itself might not have been so devastating had it not been for the significant pressures already facing the regime; in this way, the war exacerbated problems that already existed. As Miliutin (Alexander's Minister for War) pointed out: if the war ended badly, all Russia's sacrifices would represent no more than 'the futile exhaustion of her last resources' (cited in Saunders;1992. p. 207).

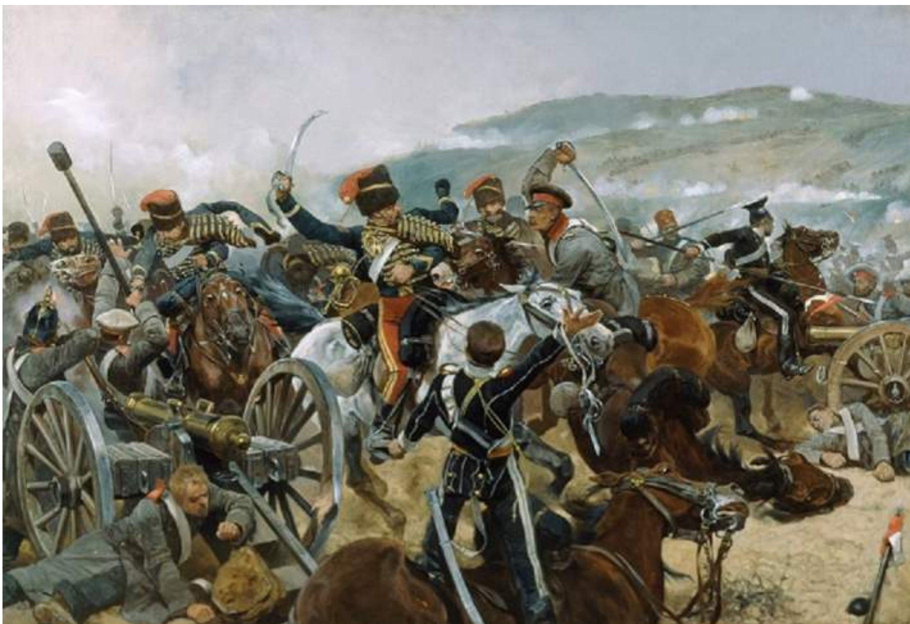

Figure 1.6: 'The Relief of the Light Brigade' by Richard Caton Woodville;1897. The painting shows the Battle at Balaclava, which was part of the British and French attempt to take the port of Sevastopol. This was one of the few battles the Russians won due to tactical errors on the part of the British Generals.

Nicholas' death may have prolonged Russia's involvement in the war, as Alexander II did not want to be seen to be capitulating too easily. However, by January 1856 he had no choice but to surrender to Britain and France and sign the humiliating Treaty of Paris, in which Russia was forced to remove themselves from the Danubian provinces, completely restoring power back to the Turks. Russian battleships were banned from sailing the Black Sea, which drastically decreased their influence over their only access to a warm water port. Another loss the Russians needed to contend with after the Treaty of Paris was the stretched economy, and a restless people unhappy with the way in which the war was executed. Alexander II's hand was forced. Even those conservative intellectuals who had advocated 'official nationality' were calling for change. Alexander II was being asked to restructure Russia's army, taxation and her economy and, more importantly, he had to abolish serfdom.

Political authority and attempts at reform

Alexander II

Alexander II had had a fairly liberal education for an heir to the Russian throne and was relatively well prepared for the role when it came in 1855. As a teenager, Alexander was taken on a six-month tour of Russia, visiting 20 provinces in the country. He also visited many prominent Western European countries. As Tsarevich, Alexander became the first Romanov heir to visit Siberia. When he was 24 he sat on the State Council, Committee of Ministers and oversaw the construction of the railways between Moscow and St Petersburg. Yet Alexander II was neither bright nor well-liked, and seemed to all around him that he was not the strong-willed man his father had been. In fact, many around described him as wholly irresolute (lacking in conviction). Alexander was a cautious man, and although the abolition of serfdom had occurred only six years after his succession to the throne, in reality it could have been realised more quickly had the Tsar committed himself to it.

Emancipation of the serfs – a liberation?

Emancipation had been discussed as early as Catherine the Great in the 1760s; Catherine had said serfdom was 'moral and unjust' yet during her reign it spread further and deeper into Russia. Nicholas I had experimented with reform in Ukrainian Russia, but it caused some 300 peasant disturbances in the countryside and was widely considered a failure. He also changed the status of some state peasants (mainly in Siberia and the north-east) to 'free agriculturalists' but in reality they just paid tax on land instead of their property and were given no greater rights. The nobility also resented this measure as they were forced to relinquish their rights to free labour without any additional incentives. If the two great monarchs that preceded Alexander had failed to emancipate the serfs, how would this indecisive man with an average mind manage it?

Hidden voices: Edward Acton

Edward Acton is a renowned historian and has challenged many ideas about the nature of the Russian revolution. This extract is from Acton's book, *Russia: The Tsarist and Soviet Legacy 1995* p. 68–69:

The Tsar's support for emancipation must be understood within the broader context of the state's role in a serf-based society. That role involved two primary and overriding responsibilities: to guarantee domestic and foreign security. The head of the Third Section had explicitly warned Nicholas that friction between serf and master constituted a time-bomb which threatened the whole empire. Peasant disturbances grew ominously in number and intensity as each decade passed, and outbreaks were overwhelmingly concentrated on private estates. Confronted by noble resistance and alarmed by foreign upheaval, Nicholas had shelved the issue and committed himself to upholding the status quo at home and abroad. It was the catastrophe of the Crimean War which rendered this commitment untenable. Humiliated on her own doorstep, Russia's ability to influence Western affairs was sharply curtailed. The whole framework within which Nicholas had viewed the options before him broke down. Moreover, the war rudely brought home the military cost of social and economic backwardness. The Treasury had run up a huge deficit. Russian forces had been incomparably less well armed than those of Britain and France. Supply problems during the war made it seem madness to postpone further the steps necessary to improve communications and construct strategic railways. The correlation between serfdom and economic backwardness was now conventional wisdom, vague though the economic analysis on which it was based might be. The case for following the Western example of reducing the costly standing army by building a reserve of trained men became incontrovertible. Yet as long as serfdom remained, so did the objection that it was not safe to return hundreds of thousands of trained men into the countryside. Serfdom was becoming a dire threat to both domestic and foreign security.

It is this conjuncture which explains why a state rooted in the social and economic dominance of the serf-owning nobility should have undertaken Emancipation. It also explains why the Tsar was able to secure the acquiescence of the nobility. The sense of urgency over the issue took time to spread. It was not at first shared by most serf-owners in the provinces, or indeed by most of the great landowners among senior officials. Individual noblemen had of course learned to their cost of both peasant fury and Russia's military decline. A minority, responding to a combination of moral conviction, economic incentive, frustration at the cost and difficulty with overcoming the inefficiency and petty subordination of serf labour, and fear, might favour some sort of Emancipation. But the majority preferred to live with the moral problem and forgo the reputed advantages of freely hired labour rather than contemplate the abolition of their traditional rights over their peasants. Yet should their own government, run by fellow noblemen and dedicated to their security, conclude that serfdom was too dangerous to perpetuate, they would bow to the inevitable. And it was this message which, haltingly, the Tsar and some of his ministers began to communicate.

Discussion points

1. What is Acton's argument here? Why was abolition of serfdom favourable?
2. How, in Acton's interpretation, did the Tsar manage to persuade the nobility to lose their free labour?
3. Acton suggests that the Crimean War was a turning point for the question of emancipation. He states: *'The whole framework within which Nicholas had viewed the options before him broke down.'* What does he mean by this?
4. How convincing is his argument? Can you find evidence from your own notes that supports or refutes his view?

As early as 1856, Alexander had said to his ministers:

> *(…) rumours have spread among you of my intention to abolish serfdom. To refute any groundless gossip on so important a subject I consider it necessary to inform you that I have no intention of doing so immediately. But, of course, and you yourselves realise it, the existing system of serf owning cannot remain unchanged. It is better to begin abolishing serfdom from above than to wait for it to begin to abolish itself from below. I ask you, gentlemen, to think of ways of doing this. Pass on my words to the nobles for consideration. (Cited in Saunders; 1992. p. 217.)*

Yet he only tentatively started secret discussions in a committee on emancipation in 1857. In reality, this was an act of necessity because of the level of domestic disquiet, both in the countryside (there were 250 disturbances recorded that year) and in university towns such as Moscow, where 'Slavophiles' and 'Westernisers' were orchestrating the circulation of handwritten memoranda on the question of emancipation. The European-wide banking crisis in 1857 caused by high inflation (and a fragile economy) forced Alexander to announce his decision to emancipate the serfs publicly, so as to maintain public order. There was now a fiscal (financial) urgency as the state banks could not function without stability in the banking system. The government needed new ways to raise revenue through direct taxation because they could not rely on borrowing any longer – it was just too risky.

The Emancipation *Ukase* (statutes) were finally issued on 19th February 1861 and fell a long way short of almost everyone's hopes. It had taken more than 409 meetings of the Emancipation Commission over 18 months to complete the complex work of transforming Russian society. Even Alexander himself was well aware of the shortcomings of the laws and delayed the bill to the 5th March 1861 for publication, fearing peasant unrest. There were 19 acts in total, which divided Russia into regions, then sub-regions, and so this was extremely complex legislation. However, the main principles were:

- Serfs were free to marry whomsoever they wished, own property and set up their own businesses.
- All serfs were to become 'obligated peasants' for two years whilst charters were drawn up to decide the portions of arable land to be given to them. While the charters were being drawn up, existing relations between serfs and nobles were to remain in place.
- After two years, 'obligated peasants' could buy their homes and land if the owner wanted to sell it. Nobles were largely accommodating and, by 1881, 85% of former serfs had become owners of their allotments.
- Peasants were restricted by a maximum allowance of land they could buy. This allowed landowners to trim their holdings so 75% of allotments bought were less than 4 *dessyatinas* (about 11 acres). The minimum land required to feed a peasant family was 5 *dessyatinas*, so peasants were farming about 20% less land than before, on average.
- Peasants had to pay 'redemption dues' annually for 49 years at 6% interest. These were effectively mortgages on their land and calculated not on the size of their land, but on the obligations they had paid to nobles before 1861. These had never been recorded before and so many nobles managed to inflate the obligations

owed to them. Redemption dues were a way for the Tsarist regime to reimburse nobles for the loss of free labour.
- The village commune (*mir*) was made responsible for collecting redemption dues and peasants were only released from the commune (*mir*) when redemptions were fully paid, which would take 49 years.
- State peasants received slightly better treatment as they were given plots of land twice the size of privately-owned serfs, although they had to wait until 1866 for their freedom.
- Household or 'personal' serfs were the most poorly treated. They received no land, just their freedom from domestic servitude.

Alexander II has been referred to as 'the Tsar Liberator' by some historians in the past and many have suggested that the *ukase* of 1861 was an epochal event. However, the immediate aftermath suggests quite the contrary. Michael Lynch (2013)[2] explains that peasants, or 'dark masses' according to some at court, were soon a threat throughout Alexander II's reign: 'Beneath the generous words in which emancipation had been couched was a belief that the common people of Russia, unless controlled and directed, were a very real threat to the existing order of things. Whatever emancipation may have offered to the peasants, it was not genuine liberty.'

The so called 'Emancipation' settlement had reduced the land available to the peasants and therefore perpetuated their dependence upon the nobles; it compelled them to work for the nobility in conditions which had much in common with those of serfdom, because they needed to use the nobles' land to earn enough money to make a living. The redemption payments, along with the historic payments peasants had to make to nobles to access their land, put an enormous strain on the rural economy. Peasants who had been freed were now economically enslaved in many cases. This was not 'emancipation', even though serfdom had definitely been abolished; now, instead of paying the landlord, peasants were paying the state. State peasants had profited slightly more under the *ukase* and many became *kulaks* – that is, a wealthier group of peasants who were able to hire labourers to work on their land and therefore sell their goods for profit. This caused deep resentment between peasants, ex-state serfs and ex-household serfs in the countryside, as the abolition statutes had not freed everyone equally. There were 647 peasant disturbances in 1861 and the army had to be mobilised to restore order in 449 of them. In Bezdna, peasants had tried to seize freedom for themselves from their landlords and over 70 were killed when soldiers were ordered to fire into the crowds. Many radical critics, who had argued that the peasants should have been given the land they worked on for free, were proven right not only on moral grounds, but on practical ones. The abolition statutes had completely ignored the peasant beliefs that the land belonged to those that worked on it. The newly 'freed' peasants couldn't afford the fiscal demands now placed on them and consequently many fell into arrears.

The abolition of serfdom was deeply disturbing too for the landed nobility. Compensation granted to them via redemption payments was not sufficient to prevent a steady decline in noble landownership following 1861. Historians such as Acton (1995) and Smith (2012) agree that a growing proportion of the nobility lost their land altogether. Smith; 2012. p. 26) suggests that between 1861

and 1905 the rural nobility lost up to 1% of its land per year and this caused the spread of disillusionment with the Tsarist regime. They were also increasingly threatened by a growing professionalism in the army and civil service. Even the nobles who maintained their land resented the government for the ways in which heavy industry was receiving greater investment following 1861, and they felt they were left to deal with mounting peasant disturbances alone. Many in the province of Tula called for greater involvement in local government, partly to shore up the influence of their class and partly to express their frustration with the inadequacies of provincial administration. The nobles of Tver went further and suggested that the new laws were slipshod and the only way to remedy this was to create an assembly of elected representatives to set about solving the problems emancipation had created.

Attempts at domestic and military reform

Changes to the military

Alexander II's attitude was clearly different to that of his father's, who believed in preserving Russian traditions at all costs. Nowhere was this more apparent than in the military reforms he passed almost immediately after the Treaty of Paris was signed in 1856. Many soldiers were demobilised (taken out of active service) as Alexander realised that Russia needed more men in reserves in case of war, rather than an extensive standing army. By 1858, all military colonies had been dissolved and in 1859 he reduced military service from 25 years to 15 (with nine of those years spent in the reserves).

Alexander then appointed Dmitrii Miliutin as Minister for War in 1862, and the changes introduced by Miliutin proved to be the most far-reaching army reforms ever accomplished. Firstly, Miliutin made every male Russian liable to military service (an inevitable consequence of the emancipation of the serfs). Miliutin, a liberal bureaucrat, also changed the amount of time the educated had to spend in the army by reducing it to six months' active service and 14½ years in the reserves; this meant the nobility could avoid being conscripted like peasants and retain their status. The size of the army actually increased in this way as fewer men tried to opt out and, by 1876, the Russians were able to call up more than 750 000 reserve troops to fight in a war that broke out with Turkey. Miliutin also established *gymnasia* (schools that focused on academic learning) for aspiring officers and military personnel, where the curriculum was similar to that of contemporary secondary schools in an effort to produce more well-rounded officers.

Financial reform

The Minister of Finance, Mikhail von Reutern, took his lead from Miliutin and accelerated the introduction of changes at the Ministry of Finances. He suggested that all ministries set budgets a year in advance and auditors could then compare the past budgets with the projections. This reflective system would allow the regime to borrow money from abroad (as other European countries did), as the state had established accounting procedures. Large loans were made available to industrialists and, as a result, railway building expanded twenty-fold. Reutern also presided over the abolition of tax-farming – a system where the state transferred the right of collection to private individuals called tax farmers in exchange for a certain fee. Under this system, the tax farmers became very rich and only about a

third of the revenue collected made it into the Treasury coffers. A particular area of success was in vodka, where the excise tax that replaced the old farming method actually made the liquor cheaper and allowed retail merchants to invest in railways, banks and mines. It was also a victory for the average peasant, who could now regularly afford this small luxury.

Voices from the past: Anna Karenina

Anna Karenina by Leo Tolstoy is a classic novel written just after the Emancipation Statute of 1861. Tolstoy wrote this love story against a backdrop of sweeping changes taking place throughout Russia. A key theme in the novel is old patriarchal values sustaining the landowning aristocracy and the new, liberal values of the Westernisers.

. . . The speaker was a country gentleman with gray whiskers, wearing the regimental uniform of an old general staff-officer. It was the very landowner Levin had met at Sviazhsky's. He knew him at once. The landowner too stared at Levin, and they exchanged greetings.

'Very glad to see you! To be sure! I remember you very well. Last year at our district marshal, Nikolay Ivanovitch's.'

'Well, and how is your land doing?' asked Levin.

'Oh, still just the same, always at a loss,' the landowner answered with a resigned smile, but with an expression of serenity and conviction that so it must be. 'And how do you come to be in our province?' he asked. 'Come to take part in our coup d'état?' he said, confidently pronouncing the French words with a bad accent. 'All Russia's here—gentlemen of the bedchamber, and everything short of the ministry.' He pointed to the imposing figure of Stepan Arkadyevitch in white trousers and his court uniform, walking by with a general.

'I ought to own that I don't very well understand the drift of the provincial elections,' said Levin.

The landowner looked at him.

'Why, what is there to understand? There's no meaning in it at all. It's a decaying institution that goes on running only by the force of inertia. Just look, the very uniforms tell you that it's an assembly of justices of the peace, permanent members of the court, and so on, but not of noblemen.' 'Then why do you come?' asked Levin.

'From habit, nothing else. Then, too, one must keep up connections. It's a moral obligation of a sort. And then, to tell the truth, there's one's own interests. My son-in-law wants to stand as a permanent member; they're not rich people, and he must be brought forward. These gentlemen, now, what do they come for?' he said, pointing to the malignant gentleman, who was talking at the high table.

'That's the new generation of nobility.'

'New it may be, but nobility it isn't. They're proprietors of a sort, but we're the landowners. As noblemen, they're cutting their own throats.'

'But you say it's an institution that's served its time.'

'That it may be, but still it ought to be treated a little more respectfully. Snetkov, now ... We may be of use, or we may not, but we're the growth of a thousand years. If we're laying out a garden, planning one before the house, you know, and there you've a tree that's stood for centuries in the very spot ... Old and gnarled it may be, and yet you don't cut down the old fellow to make room for the flowerbeds, but lay out your beds so as to take advantage of the tree. You won't grow him again in a year,' he said cautiously, and he immediately changed the conversation. 'Well, and how is your land doing?'

'Oh, not very well. I make five per cent.'

Anna Karenina – **OXFORD WORLD CLASSICS, WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY MALCOLM BRADBURY (1999), PART 6: CHAPTER 29, PP.802.**

DISCUSSION POINTS:

1. What are the key problems facing the landowning classes according to Levin?
2. Levin and the other landowner seem to be lamenting the rise of the new nobility? Why is this?
3. Some have suggested Tolstoy is making a political point in this section about working for the public good being an avoidance of seeking personal fulfilment first. Can you provide evidence from the text to support this view?

Educational reform – universities

Soon after ascending the throne, Alexander had relaxed constraints on universities placed on them by his father Nicholas I. The Ministry of Education started to allow women to attend lectures, stopped monitoring students' behaviour off-campus, introduced contentious subjects which involved students questioning ideas, such as the history of philosophy and law, abolished entry quotas and abolished fees for the less well off. Significantly, the Ministry allowed forward-looking professors to teach in Russia's universities; one example was Konstantin Kavelin, who was employed at St Petersburg in 1861 and was a prime advocate of conferring land as well as liberty on the peasants. Although the student body remained small (it was just under 5000 by 1860) the removal of entry quotas meant young people who had been denied access to university under Nicholas I could now attend. The effect of this was that many students were older (now referred to as 'mature students') and more politically engaged than previous students. The government's 'liberal' approach had turned universities into a powder-keg. Staff spoke out and students became organised, serving to increase political instability.

Local government

After the *ukase* of emancipation, the second most important changes made to Russia were almost certainly those to local government in 1863. Severing the link between the nobility and peasants left an administrative vacuum in the countryside. The first solution proposed was to put military commanders in control of the provinces and appoint 'district captains' to enact their decrees. Nikolai Miliutin and large numbers of the rural nobility were appalled and made their voices heard through newspaper columns. Miliutin was put in charge of local government reform, but spent most of his time worrying about how the countryside would be policed. As such, a new level of local administration was added to that which already existed. *Volosti* were introduced in 1861 as bodies which grouped together *mirs* (peasant communes) to provide administrative and judicial units. The executive board was elected by the peasantry, whom they served, but the *volosti* were really just a new source of authority in the countryside. They served to widen the gap between peasants and the privileged, particularly because they were peasant-only institutions. Therefore, new assemblies had to be created to reward the nobility for liberating serfs and to ensure the new social orders interacted with each other. The new local assemblies – *zemstva*, as they came to be known – were implemented in 1864 and seemed not only to represent provincial society but possess considerable authority. The men who joined the *zemstva* were primarily from the professional classes and the nobility and, by 1900, there were about 70 000 doctors, lawyers, teachers and agronomists who joined their ranks. It could be argued that too much significance has been placed on the formation of local government institutions as only 43 out of 70 provinces had *zemstva* assemblies by 1900. However, *zemstva* could raise taxes and had the right to oversee local education, medical care, prisons and road maintenance. Although they did not have the power to enforce their decisions, nor did they have jurisdiction over the *volosti*, and were watched closely by the central administration, these were steps towards representative government as delegates were elected by all members of the district for three years from landowners and *volosti* delegates.

Educational reform –schools

The *zemstva* made an immediate difference to primary education as individual members started Sunday Schools to educate the illiterate peasantry. Over 500 had sprung up by 1862, with lessons in History, French, German and basic reading. The Third Section (the secret police force used by the Tsarist regime) believed them to be hotbeds of sedition and by June 1862 they were closed. In 1863, Primary Education statutes were passed but with severe weaknesses. Attendance was voluntary, had to be paid for and curricula had to be centrally managed by the state. Primary education was to cover reading, writing (in Russian only), religion and arithmetic and so demonstrated a lack of willingness on behalf of the government to promote education amongst the peasantry. Despite this, over 1 000 000 children attended primary school by 1878 (up from 450 000 in 1856). *Gymnasia* (the name of the institutions) were introduced at secondary level and were very academic; it was from these schools you could enter university if the final exams were passed. Traditional curricula were maintained here too, where Greek and Latin were stressed over the sciences.

Judicial reforms

The statutes that brought emancipation to an end in 1861 also stimulated the introduction of *volost* courts, which dealt exclusively with the peasantry. In this respect, peasants did not achieve legal parity with the rest of society and so were not truly 'liberated'. The nobility would have to wait until 1864 to benefit from legal reform.

The old legal system was at best slow and at worst corrupt: in criminal cases the defendant was guilty until proven innocent and there were no juries or lawyers. Judges sat behind closed doors relying only upon police evidence and court cases were not open to the public. To combat corruption and deliver a more efficient judicial system, five tiers of courts were created in 1864, modelled on Western European legal systems. The *zemstva* were to elect Justices of the Peace (JPs) to deal with minor offences and joint JP sessions constituted the second tier. Judges were appointed at the remaining levels, which were: circuit courts – including magistrates and district courts, which generally heard criminal cases; judicial tribunals – modelled on the French system; and the Senate – the highest of all courts which acted as a court of appeal. Judges were paid more highly, so were less likely to take bribes, and a profession of barristers was introduced so trials became much more like British trials. Juries were also introduced so that trials were open and more fairly practised at all levels.

These legal reforms caused the regime a great deal of trouble, however. The most famous case is that of Vera Zasulich, daughter of a Captain, who shot Fyodor Trepov (Governor of the City of St Petersburg) in 1878, allegedly because he had given an order to flog a political prisoner for rude behaviour. Zasulich was indicted with attempted murder and put before a jury in St Petersburg. At her widely publicised trial the sympathetic jury found Zasulich not guilty, demonstrating the courts' ability to stand up to the authorities. This outcome was influenced by Zasulich's very good lawyer who turned the case on its head so that, as Ulam (1977) notes, it 'very soon became obvious that it was Colonel Trepov rather than his would-be assassin who was really being tried' (page 294).

Censorship

In 1855, Tsar Alexander II abolished the censorship committee, demonstrating his willingness to allow a certain amount of freedom of the press. He never considered abolishing censorship altogether and no one really expected him to. Both the Minister for Education and the Minister for Internal Affairs ran censorship until 1863 when Internal Affairs took over. In 1865, Alexander issued the 'Temporary Rules' for the press (which remained in place until 1905) and allowed periodicals to print materials without gaining approval prior to print. However, editors were now made personally responsible for any printed materials and could be punished either by court trial or directly by the Minister for Internal Affairs. By 1865, a flurry of texts and journals had already been published under the 'spirit of reform' that seemed to be sweeping through Russia, and once texts had been circulated they were much harder to control.

The censorship reforms of 1865 had gone as far as Alexander II wanted to go. He had exhausted his drive for reform and the last 16 years of his reign were absent of innovation. The death of Alexander's eldest son in 1865 and the first assassination attempt on his life in 1866 had a significant impact on the Tsar. He replaced the reform-minded ministers with old conservatives, most notably in Education (Tolstoy replaced Golovnin), Internal Affairs (Timashev replaced Valuev) and the Third Section (Shuvalov replaced Dolgorukov). That Alexander felt he had done enough by 1865 supports the assertion that his reputation as 'Tsar Liberator' (as he became known by the people of Russia) is ill deserved: he was not resolutely keen on reform in the first place but was pressured by the effects of the Crimean War and the reform-minded ministers around him.

ACTIVITY 1.2

Use your notes to complete a table like the one below on the reforms during the reign of Alexander II.

	Improvements	**Weaknesses**
Education – universities		
Financial reforms		
Local government		
Education – schools		
Judicial reforms		
Censorship		

Government and Tsars

Alexander II and Alexander III as rulers; attitudes to and imposition of autocracy; key developments

Reforms under Alexander II: assessment

The new era of conservatism only highlighted the weaknesses of some of the reforms made in the first ten years of Alexander II's reign. It took the regime ten years to force the nobility into military service. It took Reutern six years to reorganise the state's collection of revenue and he failed to extend the new auditing system to cover the state's investment of railways. The new ministers only exacerbated inherent weaknesses. Tolstoy did create teacher training colleges but state expenditure on education was limited to 6% (compare this with 40% expenditure on the military). Tolstoy was also the Procurator of the Holy Synod and so reasserted the influence the Church had over education. He made it impossible for students to attend university unless they had studied a certain amount of Latin and Greek, and reduced the time allowed for all other subjects. Although universities were educating 60% more students in 1880 than they had been in 1859, the population had grown just as fast, which illustrates the conservative progress made.

The major drawback of Alexander II's reforms was his outright refusal to allow a representative national assembly. Even his brother, Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaievich, returned to the subject constantly. Alexander, on this issue, was resolute; he wanted to maintain autocracy and so he had to remain the central authority in Russia. As Hugh Seton Watson (1967) argues, this was perhaps his biggest failing, as the *zemstva* had given the nobility a taste of participation in politics and they wanted more. Whether Alexander II would have gone further in reforming Russia is much debated among historians. The Tsar was threatened by a violent Polish uprising in 1863 and endured seven attempts on his life from 1866 onwards; he was eventually assassinated in 1881 by a group of radicals called the People's Will. Alexander was forced to concede after 1866 that he had to introduce a new political institution, which might satisfy both the liberal nobles on the *zemstva* and the radicals who tried to take his life. Count M.T. Loris-Melikov was to undertake this enormous task of creating a new cabinet-like group that would act as an advisory body to the Tsar whilst seeming to be a new constitution to the critics. The Tsar agreed to meet with his ministers on 4th March 1881 to discuss how it might be implemented. The proposals were nothing like the national assembly that the *zemstvo* or the radicals wanted but it might have opened the way for more concessions later if they had ever been approved. Loris-Melikov was successful in eradicating the hated Third Section. It is perhaps ironic therefore that Alexander II was assassinated on 1st March, just after the police concerned with state security had been abolished.

It could be argued that the nobility were the biggest losers after emancipation, despite gaining the greatest share of the best land, receiving compensation for lost land and having new assemblies they could dominate (the *zemstva*). By 1905 they owned 40% less land than they had in 1861, mostly because they could no longer run their estates profitably through having to pay for labour. Even the expanding civil service was no longer reserved just for the nobility as more

educated 'middle class' men graduated from university. The growing numbers of organised opposition parties that flourished under Alexander II would be drawn from the nobility and educated elite, who were disillusioned with emancipation and the impact of the reforms. Alexander II ultimately failed to convince the radical intelligentsia that pressure and assassination attempts would not persuade him to concede his authority. The peasants, whatever they had suffered due to economic burdens following emancipation, now had access to education and legal rights and so did have improved prospects under Alexander II. As Saunders (1992) suggests, 'there can be little doubt that they [the reforms] marked a radical break with the past' (page 272).

Alexander III – unshakeable autocracy?

On 1st March 1881 Tsar Alexander II was assassinated in broad daylight on his way to the Winter Palace. His son had no intention of befalling the same fate and wanted to demonstrate to Russia that he was decisive and strong- willed, unlike his father. At first, with Alexander II's ministers still in office, the new Tsar could not follow policies which contradicted those of his father. Yet his instincts were in opposition to his father's 'liberalism'. He surrounded himself by conservatives such as Mikhail Katkov, who blamed liberals for Alexander II's death. Pobedonostsev, who had been Alexander III's tutor and was to become Minister for Internal affairs, said the Loris-Melikov proposals had been 'a deception based on a foreign model that is unsuitable for Russia' (cited in Polunuv, 2005, page 174). Pobedonostsev published a *Manifesto on Unshakable Autocracy* (29 April 1881), in which he suggested that Russian monarchs should rule 'with faith in the strength and truth of the autocratic power that we have been called upon to affirm and safeguard for the popular good from any infringement'. Alexander III took this literally and set about implementing counter-reforms, setting the tone for his reign. Four ministers who had served Alexander II, including Loris-Melikov, resigned the following day. A crackdown on dissidents began immediately, with the execution of the five People's Will assassins (see the section 'Radicals'), a nationwide police offensive and 10 000 arrests.

Re-establishing control

Yet for all of Alexander III's reactionary policies aimed at preventing opposition, the Tsar was of the opinion that Russia needed to industrialise rapidly (see Section 'Economic and social developments: industrial developments and the land issue; social divisions; nobles, landowners and the position of the peasantry'); he needed peace to allow it to happen and this was his justification for keeping Russia under such oppressive control. Therefore, the first decade of his reign was aimed at curbing the forces of sedition by augmenting the power of the autocratic state.

The *Okhrana*

Alexander III introduced a new instrument of control and repression, which came to be known as the *Okhrana*. They were at first fairly few in numbers and took over many of the duties that had been undertaken by the Third Section, being used primarily as secret police. Their main target was the educated: newspaper editors, teachers, university professors and students. However, whole towns or even provinces could be designated 'areas of subversion' in a supposed 'temporary law' and provincial governors were given extraordinary powers to search, fine, arrest

or deport individuals within the area, without evidence. Between 1881 and 1894 the ministry for Internal Affairs approved 5000 'dissidents' to be exiled, mostly to Siberia. In 1882 another 'temporary law' tightened censorship, making it difficult to distribute or sell publications that were seen to be critical of the government in any way, and editors were threatened with life bans if found guilty of publishing 'harmful' works. In 1884 a new statute was passed against universities which completely destroyed any autonomy enjoyed by professors in terms of what was taught and who was teaching. By 1887, the Church had begun to take back full control over primary education and significant financial barriers had been put in place to deter young peasants from entering education.

Local government

In 1889, Alexander III wanted to reward the nobles who had remained loyal to the regime and to reinforce traditional social structures in Russia once more. He introduced 'Land Captains' who could exercise substantial administrative (especially tax collection), judicial and police authority over peasants in the district. It was an unprecedented assertion of Tsarist authority in the countryside and effectively replaced the elected JPs established in 1864.

In 1890 the *zemstvo* too were reordered, giving the peasantry less voting rights to elect members, allowing noble dominance. As well as new voting procedures, every elected member had to be approved by the Minister of the Interior. Some of these measures must be seen as Alexander III attempting to get a grip on tax collection and absenteeism from assembly meetings, which his father had never managed. However, the newly-established special 'closed' courts and more severe conditions in prison demonstrate the regime's determination to control dissent at all levels of society. Under these circumstances it seems right that historian Chubarov (1999) has described Alexander III's reign as one of 'continuous reaction … political stagnation with growing aggressiveness' (page 109) towards any attempt to undermine the autocratic power of the monarch. If Alexander III had really wanted to modernise Russia through industrialisation, he would have had to modify its institutions. He was unwilling or unable to do so and therefore failed to stamp out opposition as he had wished.

Political authority in action

There was an extensive gulf between the mythology of autocracy where the Tsar wielded unrestricted power as head of state and the complexities of dealing with such a vast empire on a daily basis. This was none more evident than in the Tsar's approach to ethnic minorities. Nationalism was a potent idea sweeping throughout Europe in the 19th century. Alexander III combined these European ideas with the old 'Official Nationality' of his grandfather to drive Russia towards seeing its national characteristics and identity as superior to those of its subjects and European neighbours. Nationality became an increasingly divisive force across the empire and would weaken the Russian state by antagonising non-Russians and engendering hatred for the Tsarist regime.

Speak like a historian: Pan-Slavism

Nationalism was a potent force in this period. France and Great Britain's strong nation-states had inspired jealousy throughout the rest of Europe. This prompted other groups, such as German intellectuals, to argue there was some kind of national spirit that unified them as a people. Within the century, almost every European language group argued that they should have their own nation. In Eastern Europe, the Poles wanted their own state (prompting the Polish Revolt of 1863), and in Austria, the Magyars wanted their own kingdom of Hungary, prompting the 1848 revolution. A particularly compelling nationalist force known as Pan-Slavism began to circulate among various Slavs in Russia, Poland and Austria. Tsar Alexander III was particularly taken with the idea as it fitted with his own beliefs about the supremacy of Russian culture over any other.

Russification

Based on the idea that all things Russian were superior, the official doctrine was translated in a particularly pernicious policy under Alexander III called 'Russification'. It was not so much intended to cement the empire together but rather to bring the 'dangerous' elements on the fringes of the empire under state control. A whole battery of discriminatory legislation was devised under 'Russification' which aimed to suppress manifestations of 'non-Russian' identity as well as crush any un-Orthodox religious practices.

This approach was in direct contrast to that of Alexander II, who had taken a slightly more liberal approach to the ethnic minorities and nationalities during his reign. Alexander II had allowed the first journal in the Ukrainian language to be published and the setting up of societies called *bromady* to celebrate Ukrainian culture. Alexander II also allowed Jews – historically the most harshly treated of all the minorities – into universities and the government service. Some Jews were allowed to settle outside the 'Pale of Settlement', where they had been forced to live for centuries (an area which today covers central Poland and the Ukraine). The Finns were given their own parliament (*Diet*) and could use their own currency by the 1860s, and even Poland was allowed its own Archbishop. In 1857, Poland was also granted the establishment of the 'Agricultural Society' which became a debating chamber for political ideas. This was somewhat retracted after the uprising of 200 000 Poles who demanded self-determination in 1863. Not surprisingly, Alexander II acted decisively in putting down the rebellion and limited any further freedoms for minorities. By 1876, schools could no longer teach children in Ukrainian or as the edict insultingly referred to it: 'Little Russian'.

Treatment of ethnic minorities and Jews

Alexander III sought to use religion as a way of homogenising the empire. In the Baltic regions, land was given to the landless if they became Orthodox and financial support was made available to schools who agreed to come under the Orthodox Church's control. It is estimated that 37 000 Lutherans underwent conversion to Orthodoxy by 1894 (although many returned to Lutheranism after

laws were relaxed in 1905). Catholic monasteries were closed down in Poland and an 'All-Russian Orthodox Missionary Society' was established. By 1894 the society claimed that 60 000 heathens and Muslims had become Orthodox as a result of its work.

The Jewish population suffered the most direct discrimination as a result of their religion. Alexander III was openly anti-Semitic at court and under his rule special legislation was passed to restrict the rights of Jewish people. Their choice of employment was severely limited and they were no longer allowed to enter government service. Jewish access to education was limited by quotas: in the Pale of Settlement, only 10% of schoolchildren could come from Jewish families and this was reduced to 5% across the rest of the empire. There were also increased 'pogroms' on Jewish communities, which were violent attacks on property, synagogues and people. Tsarist authorities always turned a blind eye to these attacks. It is perhaps unsurprising that many radical revolutionary groups found it easy to recruit young Jewish men to their ranks after the 1870s.

Summary of key events

- Alexander II had instigated limited reforms in 1861, but they were too limited in scope to satisfy radicals, who assassinated him in 1881.
- Alexander III was a reactionary Tsar who feared being assassinated as his father had been, therefore he ensured as little reform as possible occurred and instigated widespread repression.
- Alexander III implemented a ruthless policy of Russification to encourage unity within the empire amongst the different nationalities and ethnicities. His policies prefaced Russianness over any other culture.

Opposition

Both Alexander II and Alexander III faced opposition during their reigns. What was striking about the hostility that developed from 1855 onwards was that it came from circles that had mostly been loyal to the Tsars of Russia. Apart from the Decembrists, who had attempted a *coup d'état* against Nicholas I in St Petersburg in 1825, the gentry had been relied upon to act as agents for the Tsar across his kingdom. Nicholas I had hanged the ring leaders of the Decembrist uprising and exiled their associates, but the ideas they expounded – that Russia needed to change – were not lost amongst the younger generation, who saw these men as heroes. It would be the next generation of gentry who would prove fatal to Alexander II and be a thorn in the side for Alexander III.

Liberal and radical groups

Liberals

The *zemstvo* were 'all-class' institutions; although dominated by fairly conservative nobility and professionals, they were not the tireless champions of the peoples' rights as some have claimed. They began to emerge in the 18s

as centres of opposition to the bureaucracy and, eventually, autocracy as well. They began to resist Alexander III's encroachments of their activities and funds. In 1890, Tolstoi, the new Minister for the Interior, limited the power of the *zemstvo* by making appointments the responsibility of the governor and giving him the power of veto over their decisions. Despite these restrictions, the *zemstva* increased their work in health, education, welfare and agriculture from 1890 onwards as expenditure doubled. Alexander's interference benefited neither the state nor the *zemstvo*, provoking only new tensions.

Radicals

The intelligentsia can be characterised according to Chubarov (1999) by having a strong social consciousness, an 'anti-bourgeois' mentality and being alienated from the state. The two most influential men of the intelligentsia in the 1860s were Alexander Herzen and Nicholas Chernychevsky. They believed that the village commune (*mir*) could become the best form for the realisation of the collectivist instincts of the individual. Herzen was particularly fervent in his insistence that Russians must find a solution within her peasant institutions. In 1863, Chernychevsky wrote *What is to be done?* It was a fictional novel and so slipped past the censors, but it gave some stirring descriptions of co-operative workers' associations of the future. It caused a sensation amongst university students, and heroes of the novel such as Rakhmentov – who slept on wooden planks studded with nails to steel himself for the revolution – became prototypes upon whom generations of radicals consciously modelled themselves. In later years, a schoolboy from Simbirsk, Vladimir Ulianov, better known as Lenin, would read the novel. Years later, in 1902, Lenin would lay down his own ideas about revolution and title his own book *What is to be done?*

The ideas of Herzen and Chernychevsky had laid the foundations for the movement characterised by Mikhail Bakunin (1814–76) and the Narodniks (*narod* in Russian means 'the people' so Narodniks can be translated as 'populists'). The populists believed Russia would inevitably reach socialism (a society of equals) because of the survival of the *mir*. This is because the commune, or *mir*, was founded on egalitarian principles, thus ensuring a basic equality of wealth and smooth transition into a new social order. They proposed the transition would occur by transferring all land to the peasants, lifting the burdens of taxation and removing administrative and police controls. Bakunin hoped this would be achieved by spontaneous peasant uprising, helped along by small groups reigniting the communes by making villagers believe in the need to unite in the struggle for their liberation. Sergei Nachaev developed the 'conspiratorial trend' that enveloped the intelligentsia during the 1860s. He wrote *Catechism of a Revolutionary* (1869), in which he explained the code of rules by which the revolutionaries should be guided. He said revolutionaries should sever all ties with society, give up their interests and feelings thereby devoting themselves to a single thought – the revolution. His extreme amoralism led him to murder one of his circle after a disagreement; he died in prison for his crime.

By the 1870s, a number of groups under the ideological influence of Bakunin, Nachaev and others initiated a 'going to the people' movement whereby hundreds of students adorned peasant clothing and went to the countryside in order to educate the peasantry about their plight, with hopes of sparking a revolution.

Speak like a historian: Bourgeois

Marxists often use the term 'bourgeois' or 'bourgeois mentality' – which usually refers to someone's materialism. That is, the excessive desire to acquire and/or consume material goods. Bourgeois types are often associated with a value system which regards social status as being determined by the affluence of a person.

They found the people wholly unreceptive, loyal to their Tsar and to God; they were suspicious of these outsiders who had tried to mimic their accents. One such populist, Mikhail Romas, sailed 30 miles down the Volga River to a small village to set up a co-operative store. He hoped to rescue the peasants from merchants by selling them cheap manufactured goods. The peasants could not understand why his prices were so cheap and they refused to buy from him, ultimately murdering one of his assistants and bombing the store. Romas's enemies then blamed him for the fire and so forced Romas to flee for his life.

The 'to the people' movement had failed miserably and split the revolutionaries between those who wanted to continue with propaganda and agitation, working with the peasants (this group became 'The Black Partition'), and those who wanted to use terrorism to stage a political coup. The latter became known as 'The People's Will' and consisted of about 30 intellectuals who sought to bring down the oppressive regime by assassinating the key political leaders, including Tsar Alexander II. Even though others had tried to assassinate the Tsar, those attempts were in response to particular events. For example, Dmitrii Karakosov, who carried out the first assassination attempt in 1866, shot at the Tsar out of revenge for the deception of the peasants after Emancipation. The People's Will attempted assassination as a method to achieving social transformation and, after a number of attempts, Ignacy Hryniewiecki from the group was successful in finally killing the Tsar. The popular response to the assassination included anti-Semitic pogroms in the Ukraine, as Jews were often scapegoats for dreadful events. Alexander III sentenced his father's assassins to death by public hanging; the effect of the assassination had not been to destroy autocracy but to frighten it into more repressive policies.

Opposition: ideas and ideologies – Marxism, individuals and radical groups

The Communist Manifesto

Born on 5th May 1818 in Germany to a middle-class Jewish family, Karl Heinrich Marx was probably the most influential political philosopher of the 19th and 20th centuries. His message is most clearly set out in the pamphlet he was to write in 1848 with Frederick Engels: '*The Communist Manifesto*'. He was the first to set out the far-reaching powers of modern industry and chart the astounding transformation of society under the emergence of global capitalism. He was the first to recognise the inherent tendency within capitalism to invent new needs and the means to satisfy them; not only subverting but obliterating cultural practices and hierarchies, and its turning of everything into an object for sale. Steadman

Jones (1967 page 6) argues that what was unique about Marx's *Manifesto* was: 'its unflinchingly modernist vision, in which the capitalist world market was not simply identified with destabilisation and exploitation but also with a liberating power, the power to release people from backwardness and tradition-bound experience'.

It was perhaps this unique vision that attracted so many thousands of young people from all over the world. The *Manifesto* announces Marx's beliefs as a set of predictions, not principles, and in this way convinced his followers that revolution was inevitable. He introduced his theory of socialism as a scientific discovery through his materialist conception of history. Historical materialism looks for the causes of developments and changes in human society in the means by which humans collectively produce the necessities of life. Contemporary economic activity therefore creates social classes and the relationship between them, along with the political structures and ways of thinking in society. The key to this pattern of history was the control of the means of production by a particular social class, who could then use this to exploit the labour of the rest. As one class became dominant, it would establish its own political, religious and cultural institutions reflecting its own self-interest. The supremacy of this class, however, could never be permanent due to the growth of other factors, leading to the emergence of a new class, which would eventually overthrow the previous one. Therefore, history had thus far proceeded as a continuing struggle between classes. By using this approach, Marx singled out five socio-economic formations: primitive society; slavery; feudalism; capitalism and communism. The central idea in Marx's analysis of capitalism was a remarkable 'acceleration' that this phase of history, dominated by the bourgeoisie, had brought to global development.

The starting point of *The Communist Manifesto* is an evaluation of the declared antagonist, the bourgeoisie (those who own most of society's worth and means of production). Unexpectedly, Marx discusses their triumphs as being greater than building the Egyptian pyramids in creating 'productive forces'. Yet Marx suggested in 1848 that the end is nigh for this triumphant class. The 'proletariat' – the modern working class – had been created by the bourgeoisie:

> 'The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself. But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons — the modern working class — the proletarians.' (page 226)

The sequence of events seemed inexorable; the bourgeoisie would antagonise the proletariat by driving it to utter destitution and poverty, and would therefore provoke an uprising which would destroy capitalism altogether, leading to an egalitarian society of the workers. Russia hadn't been affected by industrialisation until the 1880s and so the earlier radical groups, such as the populists and university students, had largely ignored Marx's determinist principles as a theory for Europeans, not Russians. They accepted his criticisms of capitalism and the bourgeoisie, but rejected his doctrine that Russia would follow a capitalist path where peasants would become factory hands or proletarians (workers). It was the famine of 1891–93 that would change this, illustrating as it did to many that the peasantry as a class was literally 'dying out'. This, coupled with the great strides

being made in industrialisation under Witte and the growth of towns that were associated with it, signalled to some that capitalism was coming to Russia.

The emergence of Russian Marxism

It was in the wake of the populist disasters that Marxists emerged as a distinct group of the intelligentsia. It is no coincidence that the resurgence of radicalism in Russia coincided with the great famine that began in 1891 (see the section 'Economic and social developments: industrial developments and the land issue; social divisions; nobles, landowners and the position of the peasantry') and was compounded a year later by epidemics of cholera and typhus. The disaster was a reminder to almost all educated Russians that the country was economically backwards and that industrial-scale change was necessary. Confronted by a regime that included staunch 'anti-modernists' such as Pobedonostsev (see the section 'Alexander III – unshakeable autocracy?'), who was determined to maintain

Hidden voices

This is an extract from *The Communist Manifesto*, page 226

Modern bourgeois society, with its relations of production, of exchange and of property, a society that has conjured up such gigantic means of production and of exchange, is like the sorcerer who is no longer able to control the powers of the nether world whom he has called up by his spells. For many a decade past, the history of industry and commerce is but the history of the revolt of modern productive forces against modern conditions of production, against the property relations that are the conditions for the existence of the bourgeois and of its rule. It is enough to mention the commercial crises that by their periodical return put the existence of the entire bourgeois society on its trial, each time more threateningly. In these crises, a great part not only of the existing products, but also of the previously created productive forces, are periodically destroyed. In these crises, there breaks out an epidemic that, in all earlier epochs, would have seemed an absurdity – the epidemic of over-production. Society suddenly finds itself put back into a state of momentary barbarism; it appears as if a famine, a universal war of devastation, had cut off the supply of every means of subsistence; industry and commerce seem to be destroyed; and why? Because there is too much civilisation, too much means of subsistence, too much industry, too much commerce. The productive forces at the disposal of society no longer tend to further the development of the conditions of bourgeois property; on the contrary, they have become too powerful for these conditions, by which they are fettered, and so soon as they overcome these fetters, they bring disorder into the whole of bourgeois society, endanger the existence of bourgeois property. The conditions of bourgeois society are too narrow to comprise the wealth created by them. And how does the bourgeoisie get over these crises? On the one hand, by enforced destruction of a mass of productive forces; on the other, by the conquest of new markets, and by the more thorough exploitation of the old ones. That is to say, by paving the way for more extensive and more destructive crises, and by diminishing the means whereby crises are prevented.

The weapons with which the bourgeoisie felled feudalism to the ground are now turned against the bourgeoisie itself.

But not only has the bourgeoisie forged the weapons that bring death to itself; it has also called into existence the men who are to wield those weapons – the modern working class – the proletarians.

Discussion points

1. 'What the bourgeoisie, therefore, produces, above all, is its own gravediggers.' Using the extract and your own knowledge, explain this quote from Marx.
2. Why (according to Marx) isn't it possible to eliminate class antagonisms through political reforms that improve the workers' quality of life?
3. What is Marx's theory of history?

the social order through brutal repression whilst facing the emergence of an industrialised proletariat, it is perhaps not surprising that many of the more radical members of the intelligentsia found Marx's political philosophy so appealing.

The first Russian Marxist group had been set up in Switzerland in 1883 by Georgi Plekhanov. His small organisation, 'Emancipation of Labour', had been active *Narodniks* (see the section 'Radicals') in the past but the failures of the 1870s had led them to re-evaluate their ideology. They now chose the urban working class as their base of support and Russia's main potential force for revolution. (This was set against their former populist ideology, which had chosen Russia's rural peasantry.) Plekhanov analysed the situation in Russia from Marxist positions and wrote *Socialism and Political Struggle* (1883) to attract the intelligentsia to the revolutionary cause. He mapped out the two-stage revolutionary strategy; Russia was at the start of the capitalist stage and a democratic movement by the workers in alliance with the bourgeoisie was needed before the socialist stage of revolution could commence. For decades, revolutionaries had rejected capitalism, but Marx's views explained by Plekhanov began to gain ground with young radicals, as it seemed to prove in a scientific way that socialism was inevitable: history was on the side of the proletariat.

The Tsarist reaction to radicalism

On the face of it, Alexander II's regime had overestimated the security threats it faced in the earlier stages of his reign, as peasant disturbances had all but fallen away by 1863. This was perhaps because peasants found it easier to avoid paying taxes to the state than a landlord, or because emancipation had removed day-to-day friction between landlords and serfs. There had been a rash of illegally-printed revolutionary pamphlets produced in 1862 and several fires had broken out across several cities, including the capital, believed to have been started by a group of university students calling themselves 'Young Russia'. Yet those journalists believed responsible were arrested swiftly and pressure from the nobility calling for a constitution sharply abated. The turning point had to be 1863 when the Polish revolted against imperial rule and then the attempt on the Tsar's life in April 1866 by an emotionally unstable radical student named Dmitrii Karakosov. These events played into the hands of conservative advisers whose confidence in 'liberal' reforms was severely shaken. The assassination attempt seemed to represent a rapid broadening of the ranks of educated public opinion outside officialdom. The attempt had followed the populists' 'mad summer' of 'going to the people' (see the section 'Radicals') and it was felt that some political change should be made before mass propaganda could be circulated amongst the peasantry. The Vera Zasulich acquittal in 1878 (see the section 'Judicial reforms') had undermined the regime, but it was the humiliating Treaty of Berlin, signed to end the Russo–Turkish war in 1878, which dealt a severe blow to Alexander II. The war had been fought against the Ottoman Empire to try and recoup territory and pride lost in the Crimean War. Russia had won the war but Britain and France had made her accept revised peace terms. This was quickly followed by the creation of 'The People's Will' in 1879 (see the section 'Radicals'), which pronounced a death sentence on the Tsar himself, inducing near panic at government level.

There was no clear strategy about how to deal with the complex series of pressures facing the government, but Alexander was swayed in the end by his even more complex private life. He had been retreating further into privacy with his mistress Catherine Dolgorukaya since his wife's illness. This had caused a division not only in the royal family but in high society too, between those who supported the Tsar and those who sided with his dying wife. The traditional conservatives had sided with his wife, which left Alexander with progressive-minded ministers such as General M.T. Loris-Melikov. It was Melikov's idea to broaden the base of support for the government by proposing that some representatives from outside government could sit on the State Council as advisers. It was not a constitution, but signalled that autocracy was unsustainable and would inexorably lead to some form of constitutional monarchy. The Tsar hesitated as usual at first, but did eventually accept consultative commissions on the issue, the same day he was assassinated.

Alexander III's reaction to hostility can be characterised as intense. He needed to 'pacify' the growing number of radicals seeking to undermine the Tsarist regime and so reinstated the secret police, this time with extended powers. The major players in the revolutionary movements could no longer operate inside Russia because the *Okhrana* had agents in almost every building, and caretakers now became authorised government agents, required to report suspected illegal activities. Even this fearsome organisation, however, could not provide genuine permanent protection from the threat of revolutionaries, for (as with many Russian institutions) it was riddled with incompetence, corruption and dishonesty. Police Chief Rittmeister Krementskii had a national reputation for efficiency, since each year he closed down three or four illegal printing presses, until it was discovered that he had had the presses set up in order that he could 'discover' them. The *Okhrana* used factory 'informers' to watch out for early signs of unrest by observing workers' conditions. However, they spent most of their time looking for the instigators of strikes. This was clearly ineffective given that during 1886–94 there were an average of 33 strikes per year. By 1903, this had increased to 550 strikes involving 138 877 workers.

In Alexander III's last four years, Russia seemed to be heading for more turmoil. In November 1890, four terrorists with links to Swiss bomb-makers were hanged. The 1891 famine increased revolutionary activity as the peasants started to respond to their calls for land redistribution. The trial and execution of Lenin's brother, Alexander Ulyanov, and his accomplices attracted attention to the revolutionary cause. By the time Alexander III, aged 49, died of a kidney complaint on 1st November 1894, the pacifying effect of his policies seemed to have proven ineffectual at dampening hostility towards the regime from radical circles.

Economic and social developments

Industrial developments and the land issue

The defeat in the Crimean War had driven home the problem of Russia's economic backwardness. In 1860, she was the least economically developed country of the European powers, with only about 860 000 of her 74 million inhabitants employed in industry and a heavy reliance on the agricultural sector for national income. The 'great' reforms begun in 1861 were necessary if industrialisation were to take place

as they made mobilisation of money and men much easier and established a legal framework designed to secure property rights. Nonetheless, industrial growth remained slow for the following 25 years due to the regime's failure to lay down a clear economic policy.

Reutern's influence

Mikhail von Reutern, Finance Minister under Alexander II (1862–78) encompassed a transition between the agriculturalist economy Russia had developed and the industrialist economy that Sergei Witte (Minister of Finance under Nicholas II) would embrace in 1892. Reutern had been extremely impressed by his visit to America and lamented the lack of enterprise in Russia that had evidently swept through Britain and America in the 19th century. He wanted to secure the conditions to encourage private initiative (which had not been widespread in Russia) and planned to implement fiscal (economic) reform so that Russia would once again have a balanced budget with a new taxation system and stable currency. He had a huge task ahead of him as state debt had reached 566 million rubles by 1857 and a deficit of 64 million rubles as the Crimean War had strained the banking system beyond endurance.

Reutern published a list of revenues and expenses in 1862 and introduced a government-wide system of accounting and book-keeping in the hope that this 'openness' would encourage trust from foreign investors. Reutern was also successful in introducing the State Bank in 1860 (which became the hub of private commercial banking) and abolishing tax farming of vodka in 1863, which gave the state more control of vodka revenues. This in turn helped peasants to access cheaper alcohol. Reutern managed to bring state spending under control, particularly in military affairs. He only allowed major state investment in railways (by guaranteeing the annual dividends to foreign investors whether or not lines were profitable). By 1883, common-carrier railways ran 14 700 miles, increased from 3000 in 1866. Industry underwent notable expansion, even with Reutern's cautious approach, particularly in textiles and metallurgy (due to British investment), as areas such as the Donets Basin were developed in the 1860s as a centre for iron and steel production. The Nobel brothers invested money in Baku in 1873 to found oil refineries, eventually establishing technical chemical research centres to complement their work there.

Even though private investment increased and the development of railways tied Russian agriculture to the international grain market, very little was done in the agricultural sector and this accounted for Reutern's overall failure to stabilise the ruble (Russia's currency).

Reforms under Bunge

Nikolai Bunge, Finance Minister under Alexander III (1881–87) undertook a number of reforms with the aim of modernising the Russian economy. He believed the country would be best served by making the peasants better producers of crops and wealth, as well as consumers who would spend more. For these reasons, he consolidated the banking system of the empire and founded the Peasants' Land Bank in 1883, which helped peasants to purchase land, although it should be noted that the bank only helped in 20% of most peasant land purchases. He also introduced important changes to tax law because he wanted to shift dependence

away from direct taxation and enhance the importance of indirect levies. The government had been slow to reform taxation during the 1860s–70s because they were wary of the upheaval caused by emancipation, therefore it was only during the 1880s that they felt confident enough to make major financial reforms. To achieve this, Bunge reduced the poll tax which had been established under Peter the Great as a tax on households, eventually abolishing it altogether by 1886, despite the fact it had brought in 60 million rubles annually during the 1870s. Abolishing the poll tax reduced the tax burden on the peasantry, although at the same time, Bunge reformed the system of cash payments due from former state peasants, converting them to full redemption payments in 1886 (20 years after emancipation) which increased state income from this source by 30% to 43 million rubles annually by 1890.

Bunge's policies towards the Russian industries were extremely protectionist and he introduced tariffs on imported goods in 1878, which increased until 1891 when duties reached 30% of the value of raw materials. This supported the iron industry in southern Russia particularly. Bunge also promoted the construction of railways (by 1885, there were 17 000 miles of track) and spearheaded the first Russian labour laws, some of them aimed at reducing child labour. He managed to resist colleagues in the War, Navy and Transport ministries who requested substantial sums of money to maintain the empire among the great powers, however, he was still unable to avoid government borrowing. In 1887, under pressure from conservative deputies who were accusing him of incompetence and incapability to overcome the budgeted deficit due to continued problems of state capital, Bunge resigned.

Economic reform under Vyshnegradsky

Bunge's successor, Ivan Vyshnegradsky (1887–92) took a different view to Bunge. Vyshnegradsky's policy can be summed up by the quote, 'We shall ourselves not eat, but we shall export' (cited in Mosse, 1996). He thought that by curbing consumption, imports and state expenditure he could boost gold reserves, create a surplus and encourage investment in Russian industry. He increased indirect taxes on consumer goods, raised tariffs (taxes) on imports even more than Bunge had and pressed the collection of redemption payments, all of which increased the financial burden on the peasantry. He was able to negotiate French loans and Russia's gold reserves almost doubled, enabling him to claim success for his first five years in office, even though he trimmed expenditure further, including curtailing railway construction. A bad harvest in 1891 demonstrated the risk of these policies: many peasants had been left with insufficient grain to survive a crop failure because they had sold increasing amounts of grain off to be able to afford everyday goods. The famine that ensued hit 17 of Russia's 39 provinces. The heir to the throne, the future Nicholas II, was appointed as chair of Famine Relief and sought to coordinate charitable efforts to help those suffering. The government had done a reasonable job in limiting what could have been a complete disaster. Imposing Land Captains on rural areas and restricting the powers of the *zemstvo* (under the 1890 statute) had made co-operation almost impossible, but this national danger did bring officials together. Despite their efforts and those of individuals such as the writer, Leo Tolstoy, who opened a soup kitchen, 350 000 peasants died. Although Vyshnegradsky's exporting policies

cost Russia dearly, grain production continued to expand by 2.1% annually between 1883 and 1914, despite these two disastrous years. The famine was too widespread, however, and Vyshnegradsky had to go; he retired in disgrace in the summer of 1892. His policies had only served to politicise Russia and resurgence in opposition to the government was now inevitable.

Alexander III had placed a stronger emphasis on industrial growth than his father, preferring to maintain the status quo in the rural areas where he saw law and order as a primary concern. However, as both Tsars neglected the burdens of redemption payments and inertia, caused by repartition exercised by the *mir*, grain productivity only grew at a slow but steady rate. This marks a huge contrast with the rate of population growth and the energy that was diverted towards industrialisation, although even this did not really develop until the 1890s.

Social divisions

There were two disparate attitudes held within the educated class that came to be known as the 'intelligentsia'. One group was to reconcile themselves with the Tsarist regime as 'new nobility' that made up the increasing numbers of bureaucrats in the civil service, which ballooned as a result of the reforms. The alternative was highly critical of the regime and had been influenced by European ideas of the Enlightenment. Increasingly radical, it was this group of intelligentsia who saw the advances of Western industrialisation and thought that Russia's system of serfdom was nothing less than a moral scandal. These radicals sought a change in the power structure of Russia through constitutional development, as they had no vested interests in the current system but everything to gain in a more accessible one. It was to be this group who proved so dangerous to the Tsarist regime.

Nobles, landowners and the position of the peasantry

Autocratic power was founded on the total control of every aspect of Russian state and society. But the *Ukase* Acts of 1861 dismantled one of the crucial elements of autocracy as they severed the central link between the regime and the nobility, ultimately undermining control of the rural population. Between 1877 and 1905, the amount of land owned by peasants grew from 6 million to 21.6 million hectares and noble landholdings fell by half. The nobility needed a new role in society, which might have been achieved if Alexander II's reforms had continued apace as they had begun. However, conservative reaction and further tightening of control under Alexander III meant that many younger members of this class never found a reason to be loyal to the autocratic regime. The regime itself was helping to plant the seeds of its own downfall.

The abolition decrees of 1861 had stopped short of really freeing the peasants in order to maintain stability across the empire. The Tsar and his ministers were fearful of a mass influx of peasants to the cities, creating a landless 'proletariat', (landless workers who can only sell their ability to work) which would be dangerous for law and order. Consequently, reinforcing old ties to the *mir* were necessary, although this time through redemption payments rather than through serfdom. Whilst leaving villages permanently was impossible, many peasants did start to travel to towns and cities for temporary work, to keep up with redemption

demands. Seasonal labourers, such as those who moved from the central rural villages to the Donbass mines, could be away for months at a time, only returning for harvest. By 1900, almost 8.5 million peasants took out passports for seasonal work in St Petersburg and the central industrial regions. As Fitzpatrick (2008 page 18) explains, 'Many peasants were in fact living with one foot in the traditional village world and the other quite different world of the modern industrial town'.

The Orthodox Church became responsible for elementary education in the 1860s due to fears that radical intellectuals would influence the masses, now that they were emancipated. However, Dmitri Tolstoy (as Procurator of the Holy Synod in 1865–80 and Minister of Education) showed little interest in educating the masses in religious instruction, spending only 6% of the Education budget on schools themselves. Despite this, primary education expanded rapidly, as did peasants' appetite for reading fiction, and book production went up 400% between 1855 and 1881. This perhaps signals that, despite the deprivation suffered in the post-emancipation period, peasants were aspirational in a way they hadn't been before. It should be noted that, in 1897, literacy was still only at 21% according to the national census, perhaps because by 1895 government spending on primary schooling was only 2 million rubles, but literacy was growing particularly amongst the younger generation in both rural and urban areas. The education of the masses could have been a positive development for Russia, however in the long term it was to stir up more discontent and make it easier for radicals to spread new ideas about how Russia should be governed.

By the 1890s, both the nobility and the peasantry found themselves in a never-ending maze of debts and arrears due to relative land shortage (because of a growing population) and low productivity. Both Tsar Alexander II and Alexander III had failed to offer remedies to the problem of land ownership and productivity because it would have diverted resources away from industrial development and security needs. Whereas between 1871–90 relief (for food or shelter) expenditure had been 12 million rubles, in 1891 the exchequer handed out 144 million, with another 95 million rubles spent in the following decade (1893–1902) on relief alone.

The cultural influence of the Church

The Russian Orthodox Church was not, according to the historian Richard Pipes (1974), a popular institution even by Catherine the Great's reign (1762–96). He writes 'what popularity it had it steadily lost' (page 243), most probably because of its extremely conservative outlook which seemed to many who belonged to the educated class to be 'anti-intellectual'. To add to this, the Procurators of the Holy Synod had stood quiet in the debates over the abolition of serfdom, appearing to show indifference to this social injustice. Many of the intelligentsia felt that the actions of the Church showed a lack of Christian ethics and the 1860s saw a real chasm grow between the younger nobility and the Orthodox Church. It is perhaps no wonder that the intelligentsia filled the spiritual vacuum created by the policies of the Church with secular ideologies which sought to realise social and political justice.

Developing concepts

The following concepts have been very important in this section. For each one, write a definition of the concept and give an example of what it means in the context of Russian Society 1855–94.

- Autocracy
- Nobility
- Intelligentsia
- Serfs
- Peasants
- Russification
- Orthodoxy
- Official Nationality

However, it would be absurd to suggest that Orthodoxy and custom didn't permeate deep in the Russian countryside. It is said that every Russian peasant home had a 'red corner' where religious icons were kept, brought out for births, marriages and deaths, and the beginning of war. Religious events also determined the nation's holidays, of which there were up to 90 annually. For many Russians there was a strong element of mysticism in their religious beliefs. Many fasted regularly and consulted 'holy men' for advice about solving all manner of problems. Some 'holy men' wandered around Russia like beggars, relying on the charity of believers to support them. Some claimed they had healing powers. Some engaged in debauchery, teaching that only after great sin could you truly repent to God.

Recent scholarship by Simon Dixon (1999) suggests that the Orthodox Church was torn for much of the 19th century between assimilating its rivals' techniques from across the multinational empire whilst seeking to differentiate its own doctrinal identity. In practice, this meant making sure the churches were warm in the winter and redecorating them periodically. Archbishops insisted liturgy (services) remained ritualistic to preserve the element of mystery, for orthodoxy relied heavily on aesthetics to attract worshippers. This became increasingly important as a philosophy in the 19th century when Russia had extended her borders so that Finns, Ukrainians, Poles, Germans, Lithuanians and Latvians were all now under the empire.

Conclusion

It is tempting to assume, as many historians such as Richard Pipes (1995) have, that 'the trappings of imperial omnipotence (after 1762) served merely to conceal the monarchy's desperate weakness' (page 138). This view focuses on the weaknesses of autocracy, however the previous three Tsars' successions to the throne were smooth and all enjoyed colossal public outpourings of joy and celebration at their coronations. Of course, there were underlying weaknesses: Russia's rulers had to allow controlled modernisation of the economy while, at the same time, seeking to halt or even reverse social and political modernisation – an impossible task. Opposition was growing and Russia needed a strong Tsar to hold back the tide; instead, what they got was Nicholas II.

Timeline

Year	Events
1855	Crimean War ends with Russia's defeat
1861	Emancipation Act is announced
1862	Mikhail von Reutern becomes Finance Minister Dmitrii Miliutin becomes Defence Minister and begins military reforms
1863	Censorship laws relaxed Polish revolt
1864	*Zemstvo* created – legal reforms implemented

Year	Events
1866	State peasants free First assassination attempt – by Dmitrii Karakosov
1869	*Catechism of a Revolutionary* is released
1876	Russification – Ukrainian schools could not teach in native language
1877	Russo–Turkish War
1878	Russo–Turkish War ends Versa Zasulich case
1879	The People's Will is formed
1881	Assassination of Alexander II – People's Will executed Alexander III becomes Tsar *Unshakable Autocracy* is released by Pobedonostsev Bunge becomes Finance Minister
1882	Censorship laws
1883	Peasant Land Bank established Georgi Plekhanov creates *Emancipation of Labour*
1884	Law against university autonomy
1887	Bunge resigns – Vyshnegradsky becomes Finance Minister Church regains control of Primary Education Lenin's brother is hanged for revolutionary activity
1889	Land Captains are introduced
1890	Four terrorists hanged for plot against the Tsar Act passed limiting power of the *zemstvo*, peasant voting rights restricted in *zemstvo* elections
1891–1893	Famine
1894	Tsar Alexander III dies of kidney disease Nicholas Romanov becomes Tsar Nicholas II of Russia

Chapter summary

After studying this period, you should be able to:

- describe political, economic and social conditions in Russia in 1855
- evaluate Alexander II's domestic and military reforms
- compare how Russian autocracy was imposed differently under the two Tsars
- explain the increasing discrimination against ethnic minorities and Jews.

Practice essay questions

1. Alexander II was more successful than Alexander III in coping with the economic problems he inherited. Assess the validity of this view
2. 'The most repressive of their policies.' To what extent do you agree with this assessment of the treatment of the nationalities by Alexander III?
3. To what extent had Tsarist autocracy been weakened by 1894?

Stretch activity

Daniel Saunders ends his book *Russia in the Age of Reaction and Reform 1801–1881* with this statement: 'Terrorism made compromise impossible.' How far do you agree with this statement?

Further reading

David Saunders provides a thoroughly researched overview of the reforms undertaken by Alexander II and the impact of them in *Russia in the age of reaction and reform 1801–81* ;1992. This is a very good place to start if you would like to know more about the reasons why Alexander II reformed and why there were so many compromises made.

The author of *Alexander II: The Last Tsar*: 2006 – Edvard Radzinsky – was a playwright as well as a historian, and it shows in this engaging book about Alexander II. Full of interesting stories about his childhood and life at court, this is an illuminating and enjoyable read.

The most comprehensive study of Russia in the 19th century that I've come across is probably *Russia under the Old Regime; Pipes;* 1995 – it is quite a challenging read in places, but extremely detailed.

End notes

[1] Pipes R. *A Concise History of the Russian Revolution 1995*: New York: Vintage Books: 1995

[2] (http://www.historytoday.com/michael-lynch/emancipation-russian-serfs-1861-charter-freedom-or-act-betrayal)