

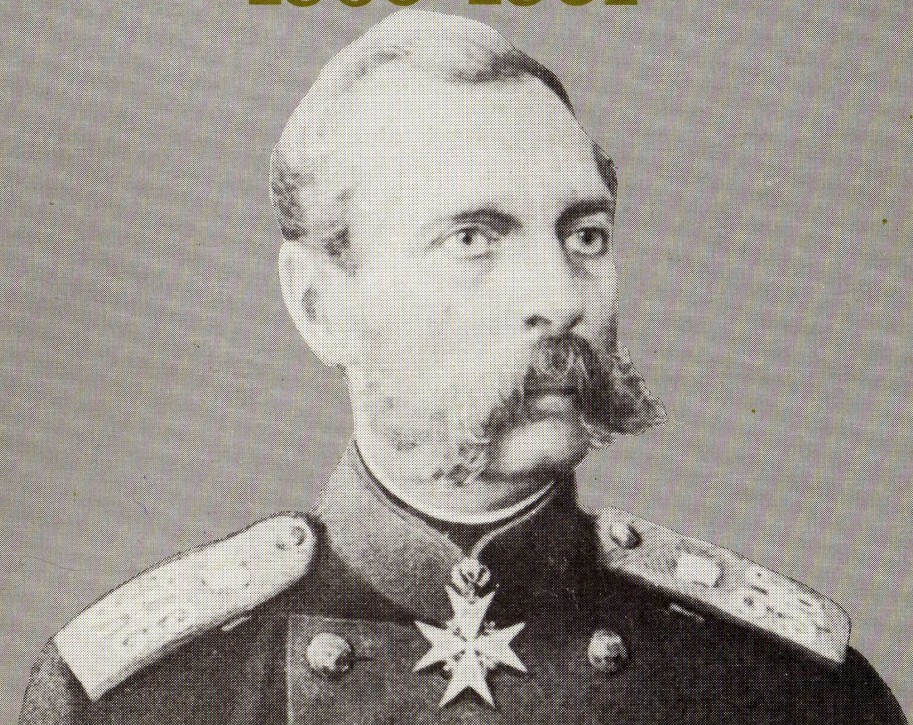
NEW APPRECIATIONS IN
HISTORY 17

Published by
The Historical Association

Alexander II

Emancipation & Reform in Russia

1855~1881



by Maureen Perrie

N. J. Jones

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The Historical Association
59a Kennington Park Road, London SE11 4JH

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This pamphlet has been edited by J.M. Bourne

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1. A 'nobleman's nest': the manor-house at Marfino, in Moscow province, on the estate of Countess Panina

Alexander II

Emancipation & Reform in Russia

1855~1881

The 'great reforms' of Tsar Alexander II (1855-81) are generally recognised as the most significant events in modern Russian history between the reign of Peter the Great and the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. The most important of Alexander's reforms, the emancipation of the serfs in 1861, has been described as 'probably the greatest single piece of state-directed social engineering in modern European history prior to the twentieth century'.¹

In spite of their importance, however, the 'great reforms' have not attracted much attention from historians as an object of research. This is particularly true in Britain, where the only two books on the topic published in a thirty-year period have been of a fairly general survey character.² Even in the Soviet Union, the reforms have been relatively neglected.³ The main body of

literature which will be reviewed in this essay has been produced by American historians. It may be instructive to ask why American scholars should have shown more interest in the topic than their British counterparts. In Britain the concept of 'serfdom' tends to suggest a medieval institution whose persistence in Russia until the second half of the nineteenth

century may be regarded as an indicator of chronic backwardness, and whose eventual abolition is not therefore particularly surprising or interesting. For Americans, however, the obvious parallel is the system of black slavery in the southern states, which lasted even longer than Russian serfdom. And whereas the abolition of slavery in the United States took place as the result of a bitter and bloody civil war, the Russian emancipation took place comparatively peacefully.⁴

The historian Daniel Field has suggested reasons why his American colleagues have been so interested in the 'great reforms' of Alexander's reign. 'As citizens of a lawyer-ridden nation,' he wrote,

we attach great importance to legal norms, and therefore see in the reforms of the 1860s principles analogous to the milestones of progress in our own past. Among them are the substitution of civil freedom for bondage, trial by jury, elective local government, and equal liability to military service.

And he added that Soviet historians might be less interested in the reforms because 'advances and reversals in Soviet life are not considered dependent upon enacted constitutional principles'.⁵

Field's last point may have been a valid one until comparatively recently, but there are now signs that Soviet writers are taking a greater interest in the reign of Alexander II precisely because the era of *glasnost* under Mr Gorbachev, since 1985, has raised for the first time in the USSR similar issues to those which Russia faced in the reform epoch. Certainly the parallels are striking, and are recognised as such by perceptive members of the contemporary Soviet intelligentsia. The term '*glasnost*' itself, for example, was also used in the reform era of the

nineteenth century, to indicate the controlled relaxation of censorship in order to permit the expression of public opinion on the issues of the day. And one daring Soviet historian has recently suggested that the problems faced by Gorbachev and by Alexander II were similar: the need for reconstruction (*perestroika*) of the economy by replacing arbitrary methods of compulsion with market relationships; and the democratisation of an autocratic, bureaucratic political system.⁶ So far, this new Soviet interest in the 'great reforms' has expressed itself only in popular journals,⁷ but if *glasnost* continues we may hope for more serious scholarly studies in the next few years.

I. THE DECISION TO EMANCIPATE: BACKGROUND AND MOTIVES

Unfree labour in mid-nineteenth century Russia

In spite of its superficial similarities to the medieval serfdom of Western Europe and the slavery of the nineteenth-century United States, the Russian system of serfdom was different in character from both. The serfs of private landowners comprised 22.8 million persons in 1858. The landowners' serfs were the personal property of their masters or mistresses, and could be bought and sold, with or without land. Serfowners had almost complete power over the lives of their peasants: they could impose severe punishments upon them; and serfs required their master's permission to

marry and to acquire property. The right to own serfs was the exclusive privilege of landowners belonging to the hereditary nobility, whose numbers have been estimated at rather more than 100,000 families in 1858. About one-fifth of nobles' estates had over 100 'revision souls' (male serfs): more than four-fifths of all serfs belonged to these wealthier nobles.

The great majority of landowners' serfs were peasants who had to work on the land of their master's estate. These labour services, known in Russian as *barshchina*, usually occupied three or four days a week. About a quarter of all serfs paid money dues (*obrok*) instead of or in addition to *barshchina*. *Barshchina* was most common in the agricultural provinces of the black-soil belt south of Moscow; *obrok* predominated in the industrial provinces to the north. *Obrok* serfs enjoyed greater freedom than *barshchina* peasants: they could earn money from agriculture, crafts and trades or industrial wage-labour in order to pay their dues to their landlords.

In return for their *barshchina* or *obrok* the masters provided the serfs with land to till for themselves. This peasant land was administered by the village commune or *obshchina*. The arable land of the commune was held in an open-field system with a traditional rotation of winter-sown crops, spring-sown crops and fallow. In the ethnically Russian provinces, the communes periodically redistributed this land among the peasants, according to the size of their families. Each household received its land allotment (*nadel*) in the form of a number of strips scattered over the three open fields. In addition, each household had a small piece of land behind the cottage, in the form of a garden plot (*usad'ba*), which was not subject to redistribution. Not all serfs held land, however. The household

serfs, who performed domestic labour in their masters' homes, were landless and totally dependent on their owners. This category comprised about 1.5 million persons on the eve of Emancipation.

Landowners' serfs were not the only 'unfree' labourers in Russia. They were outnumbered by 1858 by the 27.4 million 'state peasants', who lived on land belonging to the state. Most of these paid *obrok* to the state, although they were also liable to certain labour obligations. In general the state peasants enjoyed greater freedom than the private serfs, and were better provided with land. A smaller category of 800,000 'appanage peasants' lived on land belonging to the imperial family. They were similar to state peasants in that they paid mainly *obrok*, but their land allotments were generally smaller than those of the state peasants, and there were more restrictions on their legal freedom.

It is important to note that unfree labour in Russia was not an exclusively rural and agricultural institution. Domestic serfs worked in their owners' town houses as well as on their country manors. Many state peasants and landowners' serfs on *obrok* were in practice virtually full-time urban industrial workers. And even *barshchina* did not always take the form of agricultural labour, as serfs were sometimes required to work in factories owned by their lords. Often these industrial serfs were landless, but where the enterprise was sited on the master's estate they could combine factory labour with farming on their own allotments. A further category of unfree labour was the 'possessional peasantry', former state peasants and private serfs who were assigned by the state to work in certain industrial enterprises. Such workers usually also had land allotments. By the middle of the nineteenth century this type of labour persisted mainly in the ironworking industry of the Urals.

Autocracy, nobility and serfdom

Serfdom had been legally established in Russia by the law-code of 1649 as a means of attaching the peasants to the land of the nobility. The nobleman who was guaranteed control over the labour force on his estate was thereby better equipped to serve the state as an army officer or civil servant: and this connection between the enserfment of the peasant on the noble's estate and the obligation of the nobleman to serve the state was reinforced in the reign of Peter the Great (1682-1725), when government service was made compulsory for the nobility. The requirement of obligatory state service for the nobles was abolished by Peter III in 1762; and their freedom was confirmed by Catherine the Great in her Charter to the Nobility of 1785. But almost a century was to elapse before the serfs obtained their emancipation.

Until the early nineteenth century, at least, serfdom was in the interests not only of the nobles, but also of the autocratic state.⁸ The institution of serfdom helped to regulate the relationship between the nobles and the monarchy. The crown delegated to the nobility the task of administering, policing and controlling virtually half of the population of the Empire; in return, the nobles refrained from demanding an institutionalised role in central government. Autocracy and serfdom were therefore closely linked; any attempt to reform the latter might threaten the stability of the former. Alexander II's immediate predecessors were understandably reluctant to tamper with serfdom, fearing a backlash from the nobility which might destroy their autocratic power. Even after the emancipation of the nobility from state service, most of the leading positions in the bureaucracy and armed forces continued to be filled by

noble landowners, and the autocracy was acutely aware of its dependence on this class. But the landowners also needed the autocracy, to provide the forces of coercion on which their powers over their serfs ultimately depended. The interests of crown and nobility, then, were finely balanced, and in the first half of the nineteenth century neither side seemed willing to risk a confrontation. The only major challenge to the autocracy was the abortive Decembrist revolt of 1825, led by a small group of Guards officers of aristocratic background, who were influenced by the radical and constitutional ideas of the French revolution. Badly organised and lacking popular support, the Decembrists were also untypical of the nobility as a whole, by virtue of their opposition not only to the autocracy but also to serfdom.

Catherine the Great seems to have hoped that the nobility, once emancipated from compulsory state service, would play an active part in the new institutions of local government which had been established in 1775, and that they might institute progressive reforms on their estates. These hopes proved to be unrealistic. Most nobles neglected the elective offices of provincial administration; and only a minority administered their serfs on the basis of benevolent paternalism. From the beginning of the nineteenth century, the state began tentatively to intervene in peasant affairs, in an attempt to improve the condition of the serfs and to regulate and control the worst abuses of the system of serfdom. Alexander I (1801-25) forbade the placing of newspaper advertisements for the sale of peasants without land, and issued a decree in 1803 permitting serfs to buy their freedom and land from their masters on a voluntary basis. In the reign of Nicholas I (1825-55) a series of secret committees examined the question of serfdom, but only a few



2. Serfs often had to provide goods and services for their owners. Here peasants from Prince A.P. Kropotkin's country estate bring provisions for the winter to his town house in Moscow

relatively minor improvements in the condition of the serfs were introduced. The decree of 1842 on 'obligated peasants' offered another version of voluntary emancipation. More significant changes were enacted for the state and appanage peasants. The tsar and his ministers may have hoped that these reforms would serve as a model for private serfowners and might even persuade them to free their peasants on a voluntary basis, but few nobles took advantage of the legislation which enabled them to do this. By the end of Nicholas's reign things seem to have reached an impasse: the nobles were reluctant to free their serfs

voluntarily, and the tsar was unwilling to force them to emancipate their peasants.

The reasons for emancipation

In March 1855 Alexander II succeeded his father, Nicholas I, who died during the Crimean War. Within a year of the new tsar's accession, the war had been brought to an end, and Alexander had publicly stated that the liberation of the serfs was inevitable. In the course of 1857, the political initiatives were taken which led to the Emancipation Act of 19 February 1861.

Various explanations have been put forward for Alexander's momentous decision to free the peasants. Some historians stress economic

considerations; others emphasise the government's fear of peasant unrest, the role of liberal and humanitarian ideas, or military and fiscal motives. Let us review these in turn.

Economic arguments

For many historians, it has seemed that economic concerns played a major part in the decision to emancipate the serfs. Soviet historians, who have to work within a conceptual framework dominated by the economic determinism of Marxism, have naturally placed much emphasis on economic reasons for emancipation. Western historians, on the whole, have been less impressed by the economic case.⁹

Some economic historians, both Marxist and non-Marxist, have argued that emancipation was a necessary precondition for industrialisation. Russia needed a free labour force before her industrial growth could really 'take off', and only a peasant population free from landlord exploitation could constitute a prosperous internal market for manufactured products. There are problems with these assumptions, however. In the first place, there is little evidence that serfdom had in practice constituted an insuperable obstacle to the development of factory industry in Russia in the first half of the nineteenth century. The cotton industry had made considerable progress from the 1830s, mainly utilising the labour of state peasants and private serfs on *obrok*. In the Ukraine, from the 1840s, the refining of sugar beet developed on noble estates, in factories which employed mostly *barshchina* labour. The success of this industry, as Olga Crisp has suggested, 'shows that the historians must look more critically at the so-called rigidities arising from serfdom and the gentry labour monopoly'.¹⁰ Nor did the the existence of serfdom prevent the creation of a growing

domestic demand for the products of these essentially consumer industries.

Of course, in the absence of serfdom industrial growth might have been much greater and much faster. Undoubtedly, Russian industry lagged far behind that of Western countries in the first half of the nineteenth century, but it can be argued that serfdom was not the only or even the main barrier to Russia's industrial development. The Empire's unfavourable climate; the uneven distribution of its natural resources; the inadequate development of a network of transport and communications: all of these factors — rather than the institution of serfdom — have been seen as the major obstacles to the growth of Russian industry.¹¹

These points would be less relevant if it could be shown that nevertheless the tsar's advisers believed that industrialisation was necessary and that the emancipation of the serfs was the best way to promote it. But in fact, there is little evidence that the Russian government in the mid-nineteenth century had any strong desire to encourage industrialisation. From the

1830s, indeed, the government of Nicholas I had displayed certain reservations about the possible undesirable social and political consequences of rapid urban industrial growth, which had contributed to revolutionary unrest in the West. In the reign of Alexander II, as we shall see, economic policies of financial reform and the promotion of railway-building were motivated more by fiscal and military-strategic considerations than by an urge to encourage the expansion of industry. Indeed, it was not until the middle of the 1880s that the Ministry of Finance adopted a clear

programme for promoting industrial development. Nor can the emancipation be explained in terms of pressure on the government by industrialists and entrepreneurs: this group was too small and too politically immature to have any significant influence on policy-making at any time in the nineteenth century.¹²

A second variant of the 'economic' explanation for emancipation stresses not so much the potential contribution of the agricultural to the industrial sector of the economy, as the internal economics of the system of serfdom itself. The liberal critique of serfdom as economically inefficient had been familiar in Russia since the late eighteenth century: indeed, the winner of an essay competition organised by the Imperial Free Economic Society in

3. 'Wooden Russia': a typical village near Moscow, with peasant cottages and church built of logs.



1766, with the blessing of Catherine the Great, had stressed the greater productivity of a free peasantry. The advantages of freely hired labour over bondage were however recognised only in fairly abstract terms, by academic economists and Westernised intellectuals who had studied the fashionable ideas of Adam Smith and his disciples, and it is not clear how far they influenced the tsar himself and his advisers, other than in the most vague and general way.

Soviet historians write about a 'crisis of the servile economy' in mid-nineteenth-century Russia. In their analyses they stress not only the symptoms of economic decline on serf estates, but also the development of capitalist forms within the economy of serfdom. A major problem with any attempt to analyse serfdom as an economic system, however, lies in the scanty and unreliable nature of the statistical data concerning the workings of the manorial economy in the last decades before emancipation, on which the Soviet interpretations are based.

Certainly Russian agriculture was in process of transition in this period from a natural to a more commercialised economy, as grain production for the market, domestic or foreign, came to predominate over production for consumption on the estate itself. But this transition did not necessarily involve a crisis of the servile system, since serfdom in other parts of Eastern and Central Europe had been demonstrably compatible with production for the market. A high proportion of nobles' estates were heavily mortgaged by mid-century, and many nobles seem to have responded to economic pressures by increasing the exploitation of their peasants by various means. As long as such possibilities of readjustment or adaptation existed, the nobility as a whole remained content with the

system of serfdom.¹³ The evidence that serfowners themselves in their overwhelming majority were opposed to the abolition of serfdom is regarded by most Western historians as a strong argument against the Soviet explanation in terms of a 'crisis of the servile economy'. And at least one Western historian has argued that the serfowners may well have been correct in their perception of their economic interest. Alfred Skerpan supports the views of the pre-revolutionary economist Peter Struve that compulsory agricultural labour was still productive and even profitable on most estates in the mid-nineteenth century.¹⁴ And a recent study of a serf estate in the nineteenth century argues not only that it was profitable for its owner, but also that the peasants themselves were relatively prosperous.¹⁵

Peasant unrest

In his famous speech of 30 March 1856, Alexander II told the marshals of the nobility of Moscow province that it was better that the emancipation of the peasants should come 'from above' than 'from below'. In these words, the tsar appeared to indicate clearly that the government's main motive in considering emancipation was its concern with peasant unrest directed against serfowners. Many historians believe that fear of agrarian disturbances was a major reason for the reform policy.¹⁶ Soviet historians place this motive in the context of the 'crisis of the servile economy', and explain the growth of peasant unrest in the last decades of serfdom as the bondsmen's response to their increased exploitation by the landowners. More generally, Soviet historians see peasant unrest as one symptom of a broader 'revolutionary situation' in mid-nineteenth-century Russia, the other manifestations of which included the activities of a group of radical intellectuals — the 'revolutionary

democrats' — and the emergence of a 'crisis of the elites', or divisions within the government and ruling classes.¹⁷

Certainly, statistics seem to show that peasant disturbances were becoming more numerous in the years immediately preceding emancipation, and especially during the Crimean War. These statistics must be treated with caution, however, since inconsistent criteria were used to define and record incidents of rural unrest. Even if one accepts that there was an increase in peasant disturbances, this may well reflect not so much intensified economic exploitation, but rather heightened expectations of reform. The latter seems to be the case during the Crimean War, when rumours spread in the countryside that emancipation would be the reward for victory, and also in the years 1857-61, when the statistics (artificially inflated by official nervousness) indicate a particularly high incidence of unrest, *after* the government had announced its intention to emancipate.¹⁸ In previous reigns, ironically, the prospect of peasant unrest unleashed by expectation of reform had been adduced as a major argument *against* emancipation: this was the 'law and order' justification for preserving the status quo.¹⁹

Had the government, then, decided by 1856 that the balance had tipped, and that the risks to public order of retaining serfdom were greater than those of abolishing it? Undoubtedly, ministers were concerned about serf unrest, especially when it had threatened to disrupt the war effort in 1855. But Alexander may simply have tailored his argument to suit his audience, conjuring up the spectre of Pugachev's revolt of 1773-5, in order to persuade the nobility to agree to reform. This is the argument of the American historian Alfred Rieber, who asserts that the tsar himself was not afraid of peasant unrest, nor was it in

his character to respond to a threat of upheaval with concession rather than repression.²⁰ Ironically, the tsar's 'veiled form of blackmail'²¹ towards the nobility appears to have carried little weight with them. The great majority continued to oppose emancipation, and it seems that there was no widespread fear, in the 'noblemen's nests' of mid-nineteenth-century Russia, that the proprietors ran a real risk of being murdered in their beds by their rampaging serfs. In Daniel Field's words, the nobles were 'willing to take their chances' with peasant unrest.²²

The power of ideas

Moral arguments against serfdom were often cited in 1856-7 as the major motive for the reform,²³ and some Western historians accept that this was indeed a major consideration.²⁴ Soviet historians, too, allow for the influence of ideas, but see them as an expression of class interests, with the revolutionary democrats among the intelligentsia acting as spokesmen for the peasants, and the liberals for the 'bourgeoisie' or capitalist elements among the nobility. As Gary Hamburg has pointed out, however, Academician Nechkina and her followers have seriously exaggerated the influence of figures such as Herzen, and have failed to prove that they had a significant impact on the drafters of the reform legislation.²⁵

Like the liberal economic critique of serfdom, moral and humanitarian arguments against bondage date back to the eighteenth-century enlightenment. From the time of Radishchev, exiled by Catherine the Great in 1790 for his outspoken criticism of serfdom, most leading intellectual figures in Russia had spoken out — often at considerable risk to their own freedom, if not to their lives — against the moral evils of a form of bondage which was little better than chattel slavery. The

Decembrists of 1825; Alexander Herzen, the 'first Russian socialist'; and creative writers such as Pushkin and Turgenev, all denounced serfdom — although many critics of the institution continued to enjoy its advantages, not only in the form of revenues from serf estates, but often also in fringe benefits such as serf mistresses. The moral arguments against serfdom had been accepted for almost a century, not only by oppositional intellectuals, but also by many serfowners and officials: the autocrats themselves, from Catherine to Nicholas I, paid at least lip-service to them.²⁶ Because it was not new, Daniel Field argues, it is therefore difficult to attach much significance to the moral critique of serfdom as a crucial factor in the tsar's decision to emancipate.²⁷ The moral case was conceded: the obstacles to emancipation were seen as purely practical ones. 'Serfdom,' Nicholas I had said in 1842, 'is an evil, palpable and obvious to all, but to touch it now would be even more disastrous.'

Few influential figures could be found in the first half of the nineteenth century to provide a principled defence of the institution of serfdom. (Daniel Field even argues that the absence of an ideological defence of serfdom was the major reason why the bureaucracy failed to oppose its abolition in 1857.)²⁸ Such justifications as were put forward were in terms of the virtues of a hierarchical, patriarchal society, and the merits of the conservative precept of 'let well alone'. In the reign of Nicholas I, the Slavophiles and the ideologists of 'official nationalism' produced more sophisticated views of the unique virtues of the Russian political and social order.²⁹ Russia was believed to possess qualities of order and stability which were demonstrably lacking in the countries of Western Europe which had been racked by revolutionary unrest since the late eighteenth century. But most leading Slavophiles

favoured emancipation, and even the official nationalists did not include serfdom in their 'trinity' of traditional values, comprising Orthodoxy, Autocracy and Nationality. This conservative complacency, which did to some extent provide an ideological underpinning for serfdom, was however to be shattered by the Crimean War.

Military arguments

Whatever their views about longer-term factors, most commentators, both Soviet and non-Soviet, agree that the timing of the emancipation, at least, must be explained in terms of the Crimean defeat. The internal crisis resulting from the war, so this argument goes, brought to a head within the government all the pre-existing pressures for reform, while also undermining the justification for delay.³⁰ Alfred J. Rieber, however, has argued that the Crimean War led to emancipation in a more specific way. In March 1856 one of the tsar's advisers sent him a memorandum pointing out that the main problem of the Russian army was the absence of a trained reserve, which meant that the state had to bear the considerable financial burden of maintaining a huge peace-time army. The reason for this situation, which had contributed to the Crimean defeat, was the system of serfdom. Serf recruits had to serve twenty-five years in the army, after which they became free men. If the period of service were reduced, a higher number of freed ex-soldiers would annually be returned to society, constituting in the government's eyes a potential source of social and political instability. It followed that a thoroughgoing reform of the army, including the system of recruitment, could only be carried out as a consequence of the abolition of serfdom. Rieber has to admit that there is no conclusive proof that Alexander was influenced by this line of



4. Serfs for sale at the annual fair at Nizhnii Novgorod, on the River Volga. Note the leg-irons on the male peasant in the centre of the picture

argument, but he believes that there is considerable indirect evidence that motives of military efficiency played the major part in the tsar's decision to emancipate the serfs. Russia's status as a Great Power in the first half of the nineteenth century rested entirely on the reputation of her army; Alexander's upbringing, and his father's influence in particular, had instilled in him a concern for military values; and throughout his reign he took a great personal interest in the reorganisation of the army.³¹

Daniel Field has expressed scepticism about Rieber's military explanation of the emancipation, and

more generally has questioned the received wisdom about the importance of the Crimean War. Field argues that the aftermath of military defeat, with its concomitant financial crisis, was not the most auspicious time for the tsarist government to introduce a reform which threatened a confrontation with the nobility.³² But the system which was discredited by the Crimean defeat, as Rieber recognises, was that of Nicholas I.³³ As far as its effect on the timing of the reform is concerned, the significance of the war lies not only in the defeat itself, but also in the fact that it coincided with the death of the old ruler and the accession of a new young tsar. The Soviet historian Natan Eidel'man has recently commented that

it is a most revealing fact for our understanding of the entire Russian system, for our understanding of the enormous role of the supreme

power and the supreme ruler, that 'the ice broke' only after the change of monarch.³⁴

The blame for the military fiasco could be buried with the father: the possibilities it created for new political initiatives were to be exploited by the son.

The tsar and his advisers

This brings us finally to the question of the role of the tsar himself. According to Jerome Blum, Alexander played a decisive part in the decision to emancipate:

Alexander, convinced by the defeat in the Crimea that his state teetered on the edge of political collapse, had the will to introduce reforms and the determination to carry them out.³⁵

Field is more sceptical, and points to the 'continuity of values and methods' between the reigns of Nicholas and Alexander.³⁶ Alexander's biographers generally agree that the 'tsar-liberator' was not a liberal by conviction nor a reformer by temperament.³⁷ But he did have certain personal qualities which enabled him to play a decisive role in the emancipation process. Although naturally irresolute, Alfred Rieber argues, Alexander had been imbued by his father with a strong sense of duty which he identified with the welfare of the autocratic system.³⁸ And once he had decided that the survival of the autocracy depended on the enactment of reform, Alexander doggedly pressed on with his policies. Even Daniel Field acknowledges the part played by Alexander's 'passive tenacity' and the importance of his personal intervention at key moments of the legislation process.³⁹ And most historians agree that the institutional role of the tsar, and the authority of his office, were of paramount importance in enabling him to overcome the inertia of the bureaucracy and the opposition of the nobility.

The tsar, of course, could not emancipate the peasants single-handedly. And as his predecessors had discovered, it was hard to find civil servants devoted to the abolitionist cause while the tsar's top bureaucrats and officials were recruited primarily from the nobility and represented its interests. But by the middle of the nineteenth century a new group of 'enlightened bureaucrats' had been created whose primary loyalty was to the state rather than to the noble class. Men of this kind, such as Nicholas Milyutin, were to play an important part in the framing of the emancipation legislation.⁴⁰ But it was not only the enlightened officials who aided and supported the tsar. Alexander's younger brother, Grand Duke Constantine, was an influential advocate of reform, as was his aunt, the Grand Duchess Helena. And General Jacob Rostovtsev, who as chairman of the Editing Commission in 1859 probably did more than anyone else to determine the character of the Emancipation Act, was a career soldier who enjoyed the tsar's confidence precisely because his reputation was not that of a liberal but of a loyal servant of the autocracy.

II THE ABOLITION OF SERFDOM

The politics of reform

Debates on the reasons for the emancipation of the serfs have, as we have seen, been largely inconclusive. In the absence of agreement on any single broad factor which contributed to the reform, some historians have suggested that a combination of factors was responsible.⁴¹ Yet this approach has been criticised for avoiding the issue. Daniel Field, arguing that 'the causes of an act of legislation are the motives of the men who undertake it', has suggested that a detailed study of

the legislative history of the reform might cast light on its immediate causes.⁴² The most recent work on the emancipation, including Field's own book, has adopted this narrower perspective. As a result, much more is now clear about the process of reform and the interaction and interrelationships of the autocracy, the bureaucracy and the nobility.⁴³ (It is less certain, however, whether this new information does in fact cast much light on the broader issues concerning the reasons for reform: Field's book, indeed, presents a picture of the regime virtually drifting accidentally into emancipation, with the tsar having little understanding of the significance or implications of his actions.)

The process of emancipation was initiated by Alexander II's speech to the nobility of Moscow province on 30 March 1856. At this stage the tsar apparently hoped to be able to encourage the nobles to prepare their own proposals for reform, and this aim was pursued further by Assistant Minister of Internal Affairs A.I. Levshin, who sounded out the provincial marshals of the nobility when they assembled in Moscow for the coronation in August 1856. There was no response from the gentry, however: they clearly had no intention of 'voluntarily' petitioning the tsar to liberate their serfs.

Faced with the inactivity of the provincial nobility, the tsar on 3 January 1857 established a Secret Committee, under his own chairmanship, to discuss proposals for reform of the condition of the serfs. The formation of this committee was firmly in the tradition of the series of Secret Committees presided over by Nicholas I; and the first product of its deliberations was also in the tradition of these earlier committees, which had been notorious for their procrastination and delaying tactics. In

its report of 18 August 1857, the Secret Committee proposed only some very gradual measures in the direction of emancipation.

By the autumn of 1857, then, little progress had been made towards reform. At the end of October, however, V.I. Nazimov, the governor-general of the north-western (Lithuanian) provinces of Grodno, Kovno and Vilna, came to St Petersburg with proposals from the nobility of these provinces for a landless emancipation, modelled on the emancipations of the peasants of the Baltic provinces of the Empire in the reign of Alexander I. The proposals of the Lithuanian nobles had been elicited in response to the government initiative of 1856, but belatedly and under pressure. The government was threatening to impose throughout the western provinces 'inventories' regulating peasant dues and obligations similar to those which had been introduced in the Right-Bank Ukraine from 1846, and the Lithuanian nobility felt that a landless emancipation was preferable even to so modest a reform as the introduction of a more closely regulated form of serfdom. By these means, the appearance of a noble initiative in the emancipation process was therefore obtained.

In response to the petition from the North-West, Alexander issued his famous Rescript, or instruction, to Nazimov of 20 November 1857. This laid down guidelines for emancipation in the Lithuanian provinces: the peasants were to retain only their cottages and garden plots, which they would acquire as their private property by means of payments over a number of years; in addition, they would have the right to use a certain amount of arable land. This farmland would continue to be the property of the gentry, and the peasants would pay them dues in money or kind for its use. These proposals were less

favourable to the landowners than the 'Baltic-style' emancipations requested by the Lithuanian nobility: under the pretext of responding to a 'voluntary' request for emancipation from the provincial nobility, the government was able to publish a programme for reform which had been drafted in the Ministry of Internal Affairs, and grudgingly approved by the Secret Committee. On 24 November, the Rescript to Nazimov was circulated to other provincial governors and marshals of the nobility, and from December 1857 the government solicited requests from the nobility of other provinces for their own rescripts permitting them to elect committees to prepare plans for reform, on the model of the Lithuanian committees established in the Nazimov Rescript.

Provincial reaction to the rescript was generally hostile, but the nobility grasped the opportunity to elect their committees, in the hope of thereby influencing the emancipation in a direction more favourable to their own interests. Discussion of the reform now became public, and the Secret Committee — renamed the Main Committee from January 1858 — was the focus of active lobbying by both the opponents and the advocates of reform. For a time, it seemed that the more obstructionist elements among the provincial gentry had won a victory, when on 21 April 1858 the Main Committee approved new directives for the provincial committees. This 'April Programme' allowed the nobles' committees greater latitude in discussing the reform than had been envisaged by S.S. Lanskoï, the Minister of Internal Affairs.⁴⁴

By the end of the year, however, a more radical policy, formulated by General Rostovtsev, and based on proposals drafted by Nicholas Milyutin, had gained the tsar's approval. This programme, which was accepted by the Main Committee on 4 December

1858, gave the peasants the opportunity to purchase or 'redeem' from the landowners not only their garden plots, but also their much larger allotments of farm land, as their personal property. This was a significant change in the government's programme, the reasons for which have not been entirely clear to historians. Soviet historians have asserted that pressure was put on the government by the 'revolutionary situation' — the writings of the radical intelligentsia and the mounting peasant unrest; others stress pressure from the liberal minority of the nobility, especially the noble committee of Tver' province. Western historians have been sceptical about Soviet arguments concerning the impact of peasant unrest:⁴⁵ the recent work of Zakharova, however, has documented the influence of peasant unrest in Estonia in the summer of 1858, which made officials unhappy about the



prospect of social instability resulting from emancipation without land.⁴⁶

In March 1859 the preparation of the reform was delegated to an Editing Commission, chaired by Rostovtsev, and dominated by high officials sympathetic to his ideas. The task of the Editing Commission, which also included some 'expert' members — landowners and academics from outside the bureaucracy — was to review the reform proposals of the various provincial committees, and to draft the general legislation. Its draft statutes, however, were closer to Rostovtsev's 'December programme' than to the proposals of the gentry committees, and the principle of consultation with the nobility was

5. Peasant domestic handicrafts: in addition to agriculture, activities such as spinning, weaving and carpentry were conducted in the villages



preserved only in the modified form of inviting to St Petersburg representatives of the provincial committees to discuss the draft reform. Two convocations of deputies came to the capital: the first in August 1859, and the second in February 1860. Neither group of deputies was happy about the reform proposals, but few modifications were introduced in the light of their criticisms.

On 10 October 1860 the reform agreed by the Editing Commission was sent to the Main Committee for discussion, and in January 1861 it was approved, with only minor amendments. The final hurdle was the State Council. Here the majority opposed the reform, but they were overruled by the tsar. The only modification agreed at this stage was a provision enabling a peasant to receive without payment, by mutual agreement with his landlord, a land allotment of

one quarter of the maximum size of plot for that region (the so-called 'beggar's allotment'). Finally, on 19 February 1861, the sixth anniversary of his accession to the throne, Alexander III signed the Act of Emancipation.

The terms of the emancipation

The Emancipation Act of 1861 was not one, but a series of complex statutes laying down the provisions of the reform. The most important of these, the 'General Statute on Emancipated Peasants', set out the main principles of the liberation. The peasants acquired immediately their personal freedom, and the right to dispose of their movable property. The situation with regard to immovable property — land and buildings — was much more complex. The landowners retained property rights over their estates, but they were obliged to grant their peasants perpetual use not only of their cottages and garden plots, but also of a certain amount of farmland. In return for their rights to use these resources, the peasants had to perform obligations to the landowners.⁴⁷

The land reform was to be carried out in stages, over a period of years. For the first two years, the peasants would continue to perform the same obligations to their lords as they had under serfdom. In this period, charters were to be drawn up, specifying the amount of land the peasants would receive, and the obligations which would be required for its use. After these two years, the former serfs would acquire the status of 'temporarily obligated' peasants. All peasants had to transfer to this status within nine years of the Act: they had no right to refuse a land allotment if the landowner offered it within that period (that is, they were obliged to remain on the land). At any time, temporarily obligated peasants could

start to redeem their lands. The cottage and garden plot could be redeemed whenever the peasant himself wished it: the farmland, however, could be redeemed only with the landowner's consent. The government was willing to assist in the redemption of landholdings, by advancing most of the price to the estate owner, and collecting the repayments from the peasantry, with interest, over a period of 49 years. In spite of the demands of some of the gentry on the provincial committees that redemption should be made obligatory for the peasants, the government had refused to agree to this, on the grounds that it would be too expensive for the state. Many peasants therefore faced the prospect of an indefinite period of 'temporarily obligated' status. The fact, however, that the peasants were guaranteed permanent rights to use the land made redemption attractive for the landowners,⁴⁸ and 85% of all former serfs had transferred to redemption status by 1880. Redemption was made compulsory for the remaining peasants in 1881, after the death of Alexander II.

The provisions for the amount of land to be used by the temporarily obligated peasants, and the dues to be rendered for its use, were laid down in four 'local statutes' covering different parts of the Empire. Within the area covered by the Great Russian Statute, upper and lower limits were set for the size of holding, based on zones and localities determined by the quality of land in each region. In return for their land, the peasants were to pay a money rent or perform labour services corresponding to the form of obligations they had rendered as serfs.

Throughout the territory covered by this statute, the repartitional commune predominated. This system was to be preserved after emancipation, and because the land was subject to

redistribution the members were to be jointly responsible for performing obligations and for paying redemption dues. In the areas covered by the other three local statutes (roughly speaking, the territory of the present-day Ukraine and Lithuania) the practice of repartition did not exist, and here the land was allocated to individual households on a hereditary basis.

A separate Statute dealt with household serfs, who were liberated without land after the two-year transitional period. Other provisions covered the various categories of serfs employed in factories or mines. Where they had used arable land or held a cottage and garden plot they could acquire these on terms similar to those which applied to agricultural serfs; those who did not have even a cottage were treated like household serfs.

For the sake of completeness, we should also note that further legislation in the 1860s brought other categories of peasants in the Russian Empire more or less into line with the position of the landowners' serfs who had been emancipated in 1861. The serfs in the Caucasus and Transcaucasia, for example, were emancipated between 1864 and 1871. In Russia proper, the appanage peasants were given the opportunity to redeem their land in 1863. And the state peasants received rights of use of their land in 1866, and transferred to compulsory redemption in 1886.

The Emancipation Act of 1861 also dealt with the administrative structure of the post-emancipation countryside. At the lowest level was the village administration, the assembly of heads of households of the commune with their elected elder (*starosta*) and other officers. Next came the rural district (*volost'*) administration: an assembly consisting of elected representatives from each village; the elected elder (*starshina*) and other

officers of the rural district and village administration; and the *volost'* court with its elected peasant judges.

Above these institutions of what was at least nominally 'peasant self-government', the emancipators created a three-tier hierarchy of bureaucratic supervision of rural life. The 'Statute on Provincial and District Institutions for Peasant Affairs' established a system comprising 'peace mediators'; district mediation congresses; and provincial offices for peasant affairs. Peace mediators were recruited from the landed nobility. In addition to their primary functions of advising on the compilation of land charters, and acting as arbitrators in any disputes arising between landowners and peasants in the enactment of the emancipation statutes, they had broad powers of supervision over the peasant institutions in their area of jurisdiction. The district mediation congress was the first court of appeal against the peace mediators' decisions: it comprised all the peace mediators of the district, together with the district marshal of the nobility and an official representing the central government. The higher court was the provincial office for peasant affairs, which included representatives of the local landowners as well as provincial officials.

Reactions and assessments

The immediate peasant response to the publication of the Act of 1861 was one of confusion and disappointment, aggravated by the complexity of the reform legislation and the incomprehensibility of much of the language in which it was written. Many peasants believed that 'true freedom' would give them all the land. They refused to believe that the tsar, whom they regarded as their benefactor, would have voluntarily signed such a

fraudulent decree, and they blamed its terms on the pernicious influence of the nobles and officials. Protests were widespread in 1861-3, the best-known case occurring in the village of Bezdna, in Kazan' province, in April 1861, when a peasant named Anton Petrov began to interpret the statutes as granting the peasants 'true freedom'. Troops were brought in, and about 100 peasants were killed, and several hundred more wounded. Once initial misconceptions had been dispelled, however, and the peace mediators had begun work on drawing up the land charters, the level of peasant unrest abated, and the countryside remained largely peaceful for the next forty years. The peasants' grievances over the land settlement never entirely disappeared, however, and their aspirations for a 'black repartition', or redistribution of the land of the large estates, were to resurface again in the revolutions of 1905 and 1917. After the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-8, rumours spread that a new land allotment would be granted as a token of the tsar's gratitude for the victory, and fears of a new wave of rural discontent contributed to the pressures on the government at that period for further reform.⁴⁹

The radical opponents of tsarism also reacted with hostility to the reform. Chernyshevsky denounced the emancipation as a deception of the peasants, and sought to counter their faith in the tsar by depicting the Emperor as a landlord himself who shared the interests of the nobility. Herzen at first welcomed the emancipation, but his attitude changed when he had studied its terms in more detail, and especially after the shootings of the peasants at Bezdna. The formation of the revolutionary organisation 'Land and Freedom' at the end of 1861 marked the beginning of a revolutionary campaign against the government spearheaded by members of the intelligentsia who felt that

Alexander's 'reforms from above' were inadequate. The main revolutionary challenge, however, was to develop in the 1870s, and to culminate in the assassination of the 'tsar-liberator' by a terrorist bomb on 1 March 1881.

How valid were the radical intelligentsia's condemnations of the Act of 1861?

The emancipation reform has often been criticised, by Western as well as Soviet historians, for favouring the gentry at the expense of the peasantry. It is alleged that the emancipation settlement deprived the peasants of a significant proportion of the land which they had cultivated for their own use as serfs, thereby laying the basis for the rural 'land-hunger' of the turn of the century. Also, the price the peasants had to pay for their land was set too high: redemption payments were based on the quitrents paid under serfdom and proved higher than the market value of the land warranted. The peasants paid more for the first *desyatina* (2.7 acres) of land than for subsequent amounts, and this suggested to the former serfs that, contrary to the claims of the emancipators, they were paying their lords not only for the land, but also for their personal freedom. The 'binding' of the peasants to the commune, through the system of joint responsibility for taxes and redemption payments, guaranteed the landowner a cheap and plentiful supply of labour for his estate in the post-reform period; and the system of administrative supervision of peasant institutions, and of the implementation of the reform, preserved many features of the old practice of tutelage by the nobility over peasant affairs.

There is much validity in these criticisms of the reform, although it has been pointed out that the peasants paid no more, and sometimes paid less, to redeem their land than the quitrents they had paid as serfs.⁵⁰ Nevertheless,



6. The Tsar-Liberator

7. Alexander reads out the Emancipation Manifesto in St. Petersburg



it was often the case that, as a result of the reform, the peasants were redeeming holdings which were below subsistence level, for more than the market price current at the time when the redemption agreement was concluded. In addition, it is indisputable that the repartitional commune, with its periodic redistribution of narrow strips of land in an open-field system with a traditional crop rotation, served as an obstacle to the increased productivity of peasant agriculture.

In these respects, the Act can certainly be criticised for failing to promote a healthy peasant sector in Russian agriculture in the second half of the nineteenth century. If, however, the emancipators sought to favour gentry farming at the expense of that of the peasantry, such a policy might have been justified in the interests of the economy as a whole, since it was the gentry demesne land, rather than

the peasant plots, which produced primarily for the market. Redemption payments guaranteed the gentry a continuing income, and communal joint responsibility assured them of a convenient labour force, in the post-reform transition period. Yet the gentry, too, felt aggrieved by the economic consequences of the emancipation. In practice, the bonds which they received from the state as redemption payments often went to pay off their pre-existing debts, and could not in any case be converted into cash to provide capital for the transformation of their estates into commercial farming enterprises. This served as a disincentive to the gentry from making significant improvements in their agricultural productivity in the post-emancipation decades. The sale of land by nobles is generally regarded as an indicator of their economic decline or 'crisis': by 1882 noble landholdings were just over 80% of their 1862 level.⁵¹ Seymour Becker has argued, however, that the sale of noble land was not always enforced by debt, and that in many cases the nobles were choosing to diversify by investing in commerce or industry. The decline in the acreage of noble landownership, therefore, did not necessarily betoken the economic decline of the nobility as such.⁵²

Where Soviet historians generally stress the bias of the Emancipation Act towards the gentry, some Western scholars see it rather as a compromise between the interests of the landowners and those of the peasantry, with the government acting as an honest broker between the two.⁵³ Certainly the tsar himself in the period 1858-61 had consistently defended peasant interests to the extent of insisting on a landed emancipation, while a number of concessions had to be made to the nobility to ensure their consent to this. Zakharova's work has shown more clearly than that of her predecessors that the basic idea which

underlay the reformers' programme was that of creating in parallel two separate types of farming in Russia: the large manorial economy and small peasant landownership. This was the programme of the 'enlightened bureaucrats' such as Milyutin, and was governed by their concept of state interests: not just the desire to prevent peasant unrest, but also to stimulate the economy in general by promoting peasant prosperity. Even the preservation of the peasant commune Zakharova regards as evidence of the concern of the reformers for the encouragement of small peasant farming: the retention of the commune was intended as a temporary measure to protect the peasants against their former masters.⁵⁴

Alfred Rieber has argued that the state's interest in the reform made its role more than that of a neutral arbitrator between the two main rural classes. The state's concern was not only to ensure political and social stability in the countryside — although this was undoubtedly important — but also to guarantee its own financial interests. The peasant commune, in Rieber's view, was preserved largely for reasons of administrative and fiscal convenience. The commune tied the peasant to the land and to the landowner; it also saved the state the expense of gathering its taxes itself through its own paid officials; and joint responsibility for taxes made their collection more assured. The nobles, too, were deprived of cash payments in compensation for the loss of their serfs and land, basically because the government could not afford to pay them other than in the form of interest-bearing bonds. In Rieber's words:

Defenders of the nobility and the peasantry lamented the fate of both, and not without good reason. Their interests and the interests of Russian capitalism were sacrificed to the

fiscal stability of the state.⁵⁵

More generally, the retention of the commune has been criticised for restricting the impact of the emancipation on Russia's industrial development in the latter part of the nineteenth century. Both Alfred Skerpan and Alexander Gerschenkron have noted that certain features of the emancipation limited its effect on economic growth.⁵⁶ Olga Crisp, however, questions Gerschenkron's assertions that the redemption payments restricted the peasants' purchasing power, and that the retention of the commune constrained their mobility and hence the formation of an industrial labour force. Crisp contends that peasant consumption standards did not decline, and that there was no shortage of labour supply for industry. In Crisp's view, the relatively slow growth of industry in the first quarter-century after Emancipation stemmed from the general backwardness of the Russian economy rather than from any specific deficiencies of the emancipation settlement.⁵⁷ Emancipation did stimulate economic growth, but other government policies of the reform era, such as the budgetary and financial reforms, and the state's promotion of railway building, probably did more than the abolition of serfdom to promote industrial development.⁵⁸

III THE 'GREAT REFORMS' AFTER 1861

Gentry constitutionalism and the reform of local government

Recent Western and Soviet work on the emancipation has shown that the reform was put through against the wishes of the majority of self-owning nobles. The 'enlightened bureaucrats'

who framed the reforms succeeded in securing for themselves and their supporters dominance in the Ministry of Internal Affairs and in the Editing Commission. They were able to take advantage of their positions of influence in central government to outmanoeuvre their noble opponents both in the provincial committees and in the two convocations of deputies.⁵⁹

The inability of the nobles to prevent a reform which they opposed has been the subject of some discussion in the historical literature. Field stresses the divisions within the nobility. Russian landowners ranged from the masters of vast estates and thousands of peasants to those with a few acres and a handful of household serfs; from the descendants of the princely families of medieval Russia to men recently ennobled as a result of promotion in the civil service. There were also geographical and regional differences, for example between the landowners of the Black Earth belt in the south, where *barshchina* predominated; and those in the north, where the land was less fertile and where the main income of the nobles came from the *obrok* payments of their serfs. The pre-revolutionary historian A.A. Kornilov argued that this was the main basis for divisions among the nobility over the terms of emancipation: the southern landowners wanted to keep as much land as possible for large-scale farming on their own estates, while those in the north were willing to give the peasants large allotments in return for high redemption payments which would compensate them for the loss of *obrok*. Recent Western studies, however, suggest that Kornilov's generalisation is an oversimplification, and that other factors, such as the political attitudes of individuals, modified the impact of geographical and economic divisions.⁶⁰ Not only did the nobles have little in common, but they also lacked an effective corporate organisation to

advocate their interests with the government. Such an organisation had seemed unnecessary, as the nobles assumed that the state acted in their interests. Thus when the government decided after 1856 to act against serfdom, the provincial nobility had no tradition or experience of political mobilisation to which it could resort in order to defend what it regarded as its interests.⁶¹

Where Daniel Field stresses the compliance of the nobility in the face of the government's reform initiative, and their willingness to relinquish their legal rights over their peasants in return for the perpetuation of many of the economic advantages of serfdom, Terence Emmons has emphasised noble opposition to the reform. This assumed two forms: an aristocratic and a liberal response to bureaucratic domination of the emancipation process and the threat of bureaucratic control of local government after emancipation. The 'aristocrats' wanted the nobility to monopolise new elective institutions of local self-government, and also demanded a national assembly which would represent noble interests in central government. The 'gentry liberals', on the other hand, such as those of Tver' province, wanted a reform of local government on the basis of representation of all classes, and the convening of a national assembly of elected representatives on the same basis. A property franchise, however, would guarantee noble dominance both in local government and in a national assembly, so the liberal demands were not in fact too far apart from those of the aristocratic 'oligarchs', and the two factions were able to make common cause against the government in 1861-2.⁶²

The 'constitutionalist' demands of the nobility in the early 1860s may thus be regarded both as an expression of gentry discontent with the

emancipation and with the manner of its introduction, and also as a bid for political power. The tsar rejected calls for a national representative assembly, but the local government reform of 1864 went some way towards meeting the demands of the liberal gentry, by creating *zemstvos*, representative assemblies at district and provincial level which were elected on the basis of a property qualification, and which had broad powers and responsibilities in the field of local government.⁶³

The electoral system for the *zemstvos* involved three curiae or colleges of voters: individual landowners in rural districts; urban property owners; and the communal peasantry. The system operated in such a way that the nobles predominated in most district (*uezd*) assemblies and their executive boards. Noble representation in the provincial (*guberniya*) assemblies, which were elected by the district *zemstvos*, was even greater. By 1875, *zemstvos* had been established in 34 provinces of the Empire, all in the heartland of European Russia. The ethnically Russian nobility were thus the main beneficiaries of the reform, but in the *zemstvo* provinces all groups of society, including the peasantry, acquired rights of political representation for the first time, and benefited from the new services which the *zemstvos* provided. The jurisdiction of the *zemstvos* was defined as the management of 'local economic welfare and needs': in practice this included the administration of charities, food supply and property insurance, and a role in the provision of public education, public health and prisons. The *zemstvos* were permitted to finance their activities by the imposition of a property tax. In some areas such as education the powers of the *zemstvos* overlapped with those of central government, thus creating sources of friction. Further grounds for conflict

The framers of the Emancipation Act



8. Nicholas Milyutin, a leading figure among the 'enlightened bureaucrats'. Assistant Minister of Internal Affairs, 1859-61



9. General Jacob Rostovtsev, chairman of the Editing Commission from its formation in March 1859 until his death in February 1860

were provided by the ever-increasing powers of administrative control which were exerted by central over local government.

Emmons sees the creation of the *zemstvos* as a significant concession to gentry constitutionalism on the part of the government,⁶⁴ and this view is generally shared by most Western historians. Alfred Rieber, on the other hand, denies that the local government reform was designed to serve the cause of liberalism: it was simply a 'compromise between political centralization and socio-economic decentralization', with 'the traditional forms of local government dressed up in a new guise'. The tsar himself, according to Rieber, 'never doubted throughout his long reign that representative bodies should function

exclusively as administrative arms of the center'.⁶⁵ In his detailed study of the preparation and enactment of the *zemstvo* reform, however, S. Frederick Starr makes a useful distinction between decentralisation and self-government. He sees the *zemstvo* reform not just as a measure for the decentralisation of administration, but as a genuine attempt to introduce local participation in self-government through elected representatives.⁶⁶

The 'enlightened bureaucrats' had opposed the claims of the nobility for participation in central government, but they were prepared to advocate a form of local government which would involve a degree of genuine public participation as well as administrative decentralisation. Some of Alexander's closest advisers went even further than

this, in suggesting that elected representatives of the *zemstvos* be invited to participate in legislation in an advisory capacity. Schemes proposed by P.A. Valuev, the Minister of the Interior, in 1863, and by D.A. Milyutin in 1879, were rejected by the tsar, since they would have meant the creation of a permanent national representative body, albeit with only consultative powers. Alexander was more sympathetic to proposals made by his brother Grand Duke Constantine in 1866, and by Count Loris-Melikov in 1881, in which the advisory bodies would have had only ad hoc status, thereby preserving the autocratic prerogatives intact. Loris-Melikov's proposal, indeed, was accepted by the tsar on the very day of his assassination. More generally, Alexander resisted any attempts by the enlightened bureaucrats to introduce a more rationalised system of government. He feared that while in theory such reforms would not weaken his autocratic power, they would in practice reduce it by institutionalising governmental procedures and thereby curtailing the personal and arbitrary nature of his rule.⁶⁷

In spite of Alexander's opposition to the introduction of any type of constitutionalism in Russia proper, there was one part of the Empire where he was willing to act as a constitutional monarch. The Finnish diet, or representative assembly, was allowed to meet in 1863, for the first time since 1809, and Finland continued to enjoy a considerable degree of autonomy until the late nineteenth century. The loyalty and moderation of the Finns, apparently, earned them in Alexander's eyes the privilege of national self-government which was denied to other parts of the Empire. In Poland, by contrast, the expectations of reform which were raised in the early years of Alexander's reign led to the nationalist uprising of 1863, which was suppressed by

military force. Separate Polish institutions were abolished, and a policy of ruthless Russification was introduced.

The consistency of the reform programme

None of the other 'great reforms' of Alexander's reign has been subject to the same degree of discussion as the emancipation and the introduction of the *zemstvo*, although individual reforms have been the subject of useful and valuable studies. A general issue of debate, however, is the degree to which the reforms comprised a coherent programme governed by consistent objectives.

In line with his view that military and fiscal considerations were paramount not only for the emancipation but for the reform activity of Alexander II more generally, Alfred Rieber attaches considerable significance to the military and financial reforms which followed the emancipation.⁶⁸ In 1861 Dmitry Milyutin (the brother of Nicholas) was appointed Minister of War and began to implement a programme of reforms in the armed forces. Most forms of corporal punishment were abolished in 1863, and the administration of the army was improved.⁶⁹ A single State Bank was created in 1860 in response to the economic crisis resulting from the Crimean War. Financial reforms continued with the creation of a unified treasury in 1862 and the publication of the state budget. In 1863 the method of obtaining revenue from the sale of alcohol was reformed when an excise duty replaced the former system of 'farming out' the tax on spirits. Economic policy was generally 'laissez-faire', but the government encouraged railway-building, as the Crimean War had revealed the weaknesses of Russia's system of communications.⁷⁰ The main



10. Elections to the *zemstvo*: note the somewhat bewildered peasants at the right-hand side of the picture

railway lines which were built in Alexander's reign either served military-strategic purposes, or helped to promote grain exports to Western Europe. The main aims of these measures, which were by and large achieved by the 1880s, were to improve the efficiency of the army and to restore the finances of the state. But they also had a longer-term importance for economic development more generally, by helping to lay the basis for the industrial growth of the 1890s.

In areas more remote from 'the central concerns of fiscal and military security', Rieber concedes, the tsar's advisers were allowed greater latitude in their reforming activities.⁷¹ These areas were the judiciary, the press, and the universities. Like the *zemstvo* reform, the judicial reform of 1864 was in part a necessary consequence of

emancipation, which removed the judicial as well as the administrative powers of the serfowners over their peasants. But it went much further than the minimum required to adjust to the changed legal status of the peasants. The judiciary was separated from the executive branch of government, all citizens were declared equal before the law, judges' independence was guaranteed by their appointment for life, and trials were open to the public, with a jury system based on Western models. Most commentators agree that the judicial reforms were the most successful and effective of all of Alexander's Great Reforms, replacing the notoriously corrupt old courts with a modern and efficient system of justice.⁷² The peasants, however, still remained in many ways second-class citizens, with their own system of rural courts based on traditional customary law. The reform of the censorship in 1865 created new opportunities for the freedom of the press. Preliminary

censorship was virtually abolished, and attempts to impose post-publication changes had to be brought before the courts.⁷³ The educational reforms introduced by the Minister of Education Golovnin (1861-6) expanded primary education in the countryside, opened opportunities for secondary education to sectors of society who had previously been virtually excluded by the nobles' near-monopoly of the schools, and broadened the syllabus. The independence of the universities was established in 1863, and a programme for the expansion of higher education was initiated.⁷⁴

On 4 April 1866 an attempt was made on Alexander's life by a young revolutionary named Dimitry Karakozov. Karakozov's act was viewed by conservatives as a symptom of the corruption of youth by the reformed educational system and by radical ideas. Security was tightened, two radical journals were closed down, and Golovnin was replaced as Minister of Education by the reactionary D.A. Tolstoy.

Karakozov's attempt on the tsar's life has been seen by some historians as a crucial turning-point.⁷⁵ Before 1866, it has been argued, the most significant of the 'great reforms' were enacted; thereafter there was a turn to reaction, with liberal ministers losing their posts and conservatives gaining ground. This division of Alexander's reign into two distinct periods is however clearly an oversimplification. Before 1866 the tsar had not been afraid to resort to repression where it seemed necessary. The peasant protests of 1861-3 against the terms of the emancipation had been brutally suppressed, as had the nationalist uprising in Poland in 1863. On the other hand, enlightened reform continued in some areas after 1866, alongside 'counter-reforms' in other spheres. Reforms of the Orthodox Church were launched in the late

1860s.⁷⁶ The local government reforms introduced in the provinces were extended to the towns and cities with the municipal reform of 1870. And the military reforms continued, culminating in the introduction of universal conscription in 1874.

Stressing the 'basic continuity' of Alexander's policies, Alfred Rieber has drawn attention to the careers of M.Kh. Reutern and D.A. Milyutin, whose tenures of the Ministries of Finance (1862-78) and War (1861-81) respectively covered the greater part of the tsar's reign.⁷⁷ Significantly, in Rieber's eyes, these two ministers were responsible for the areas which he regards as central to Alexander's policies. As we have seen, Rieber believes that the concerns of fiscal and military security, together with the preservation and strengthening of the autocracy, were consistent priorities throughout the reform era, and that Alexander permitted greater freedom in society only in so far as he saw it as compatible with these aims.

For other historians, however, the old charges against Alexander still hold good: of vacillation, contradiction, incoherence and inconsistency in his policies.⁷⁸ The disagreements relate both to the aims which historians attribute to the reforms and to the criteria which they use to evaluate them. Rieber insists that we should not judge Alexander's motives and goals by 'artificial criteria lifted from the experience of western Europe'. Alexander's economic policies, Rieber argues, were not intended to introduce capitalism, his administrative and legal reforms were not inspired by liberalism, and his policy towards the nationalities was not governed by the concept of granting rights of self-determination to peoples sharing a common language and culture.⁷⁹

In general, of course, it is a valid point that historians should not use

inappropriate or anachronistic criteria in forming their assessments. And it is certainly important to try to establish the aims and outlook of the historical figures we study. Rieber makes a convincing case that Alexander's own motives were not those of a Westernising and modernising liberal, and that there is little point, therefore, in criticising him for his failure to introduce policies based on liberalism, capitalism and nationalism, which might in any case have proved counter-productive in Russian conditions.⁸⁰ Criticisms of the reforms by contemporaries, and the accusations by subsequent historians of inconsistency and contradiction, may well have been based upon a misunderstanding of Alexander's motives. But it is surely legitimate to enquire whether Alexander's aim of 'utilizing Western techniques in order to bolster ... the Russian autocracy'⁸¹ was a realisable one. Because the reforms introduced into Russian life institutions and values borrowed from the West, they raised expectations on

the part of some — and fears on the part of others — that this process might continue and develop further. The reforms thus provoked a range of conflicting responses in Russian educated opinion, which led in turn to political instability. The liberals favoured democratisation and the rule of law, while in the eyes of conservatives the reforms had already gone too far in introducing alien Western values into Russian society. The revolutionary populists' reaction was perhaps the most contradictory of all: influenced by Western Marxist thought, they opposed the development of capitalism, but called for a uniquely Russian variant of socialism based on the peasant commune, which they idealised in a manner similar to that of the Slavophiles. At the end of his life, faced with a mounting domestic crisis in the

11. A *zemstvo* assembly: the peasant deputies are seated on a bench against the wall on the left-hand side of the picture



aftermath of the Russo-Turkish War, Alexander made concessions to the liberals with the appointment of Count Loris-Melikov as his Minister of the Interior.⁸² On the very day on which he agreed to Loris-Melikov's modest scheme for involving *zemstvo* representatives in the preliminary discussion of legislation, however, the Tsar-Liberator was assassinated by revolutionary terrorists, and in the ensuing reign of his son, Alexander III, the conservatives quickly gained the upper hand.

CONCLUSION

The power of the autocratic state, of course, survived for less than a quarter of a century after Alexander's death, until the revolution of 1905. Much of the criticism of the 'great reforms' has been coloured by hindsight: we know that Alexander's 'reform from above' did not, in the long term, avert revolution from below — although it may well have postponed it for half a century. It is an axiom of Soviet historiography, based on Lenin's comment that '1861 gave birth to 1905', that the inadequacies of the 'great reforms' contributed to the outbreak of revolution in the early twentieth century. Western historians are less convinced by this determinism, noting that there were many opportunities in the period 1881-1904 for further reforms to have been introduced which might have forestalled revolution. Much blame for the crisis of the turn of the century can be laid at the feet of Alexander III and his counter-reforms, which modified the impact of his father's policies.⁸³ In defence of Alexander II, it can be pointed out that his reforms not only marked a significant amelioration of the system of Nicholas I, but also that their fundamental character was not altered or reversed by the counter-reforms of his successor. Administrative controls were

intensified over the peasants, but serfdom was not restored; the electoral system for the *zemstvos* was restricted, but the elective principle in local government was retained.

Although Russian society and many of its institutions were reformed, however, the autocracy itself remained much as it had been under Nicholas I, based on the tsar's personal rule. Not only did Alexander not permit a constitutional monarchy, but he also resisted the introduction of a rationalised bureaucratic system of government. The tsar was able to play off the bureaucrats against the nobility, and vice versa, and thereby to preserve and even augment his own power.⁸⁴ Thus the autocracy triumphed over the nobility, without allowing the bureaucracy to establish itself as the new 'ruling class'. Enlightened officials such as Nicholas Milyutin and Lanskoi were dismissed as soon as they had served their purpose of putting through the emancipation. They failed in their aim of establishing an institutionalised and systematised autocracy, just as the liberal nobles failed to establish constitutionalism.

Alexander has been criticised for his failure to adopt either of these two models for reform of the autocracy. Yet it may be questioned whether a modified and limited monarchy of any kind could have enacted such a far-reaching programme of reforms as Alexander was able to achieve by his apparently erratic methods of personal rule. A national representative assembly elected on the basis of a property franchise would have been dominated by the nobility, whose obstructionist attitudes to reform had been only too apparent in 1856-61. And a bureaucracy governed by law might have lacked that freedom and flexibility of action which had proved so valuable for Alexander's reform initiatives in the first decade of his reign.⁸⁵ The 'Great Reforms' must be

ranked among the most successful achievements of the traditional autocratic system in Russia. But they were to prove to be its last creative act. In the aftermath of the terrorist bomb of 1 March 1881, Alexander's successors employed their arbitrary

powers in the interests of repression and reaction rather than reform and progress. The next wave of reforms in Russia, after 1905, came not as a voluntary initiative 'from above', but as a series of forced and grudging concessions to revolution 'from below'.

NOTES

- ¹ T. Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry and the Peasant Emancipation of 1861* (Cambridge, 1968), p.414
- ² W.E. Mosse, *Alexander II and the Modernization of Russia* (London, 1958); M. McCauley and P. Waldron, eds., *The Emergence of the Modern Russian State, 1855-81* (London, 1988)
- ³ D. Field, 'The Reforms of the 1860s', in S.H. Baron and N.W. Heer, eds., *Windows on the Russian Past* (Columbus, Ohio, 1977), pp.89-104
- ⁴ Many American studies of serfdom make passing comparisons with slavery. A recent fully comparative work is P. Kolchin, *Unfree Labor* (Cambridge, Mass., 1987)
- ⁵ Field, 'The Reforms of the 1860s', p.95
- ⁶ N. Eidel'man, 'Revolutsiya sverkh' v Rossii', *Nauka i zhizn'*, 1988, no.10, p.98
- ⁷ In addition to Eidel'man's work see also G. Popov, 'Fasad i kukhnya 'velikoi' reformy', *Eko*, 1987, no.1, pp.144-75; G. Popov, 'Kak na Rusi otmenyali krepостное право', *Znanie — sila*, 1987, no.3, pp.65-71; no.4, pp.82-6
- ⁸ For the argument that the state 'needed' serfdom in the early nineteenth century see G. Yaney, *The Systematization of Russian Government* (Urbana, 1973), pp.143-50
- ⁹ For examples of representative Soviet views in English translation, see T. Emmons, ed., *The Emancipation of the Russian Serfs* (New York, 1970), pp.42-56; and P.A. Zaionchkovsky, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* (Gulf Breeze, Florida, 1978), ch.1. For cogent criticisms of the economic arguments

- for emancipation, see A. Gerschenkron, 'Agrarian Policies and Industrialization: Russia 1861-1917', in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. VI, part II (Cambridge, 1965), pp.706-12; and J. Blum, *Lord and Peasant in Russia* (New York, 1968), pp. 612-6
- ¹⁰ O. Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy before 1914* (London, 1976), p.16
- ¹¹ A. Baykov, 'The Economic Development of Russia', *Economic History Review*, 2nd series, vol. VII (1954), pp.137-49
- ¹² Gerschenkron, 'Agrarian Policies and Industrialization', pp.707-11
- ¹³ Blum, *Lord and Peasant*, pp.613-5; Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*, pp.19-26
- ¹⁴ A. Skerpan, 'The Russian National Economy and Emancipation', in A. Ferguson and A. Levin, eds., *Essays in Russian History* (Hamden, Conn., 1964), pp.196-211
- ¹⁵ S.L. Hoch, *Serfdom and Social Control in Russia* (Chicago, 1986), pp.11-14
- ¹⁶ E.g. Gerschenkron, 'Agrarian Policies and Industrialization', pp.709-10; Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*, pp.49-50
- ¹⁷ This interpretation has been developed most fully in the works of Academician Nechkina and her collaborators. See M.V. Nechkina, ed., *Revolutsionnaya situatsiya v Rossii v 1859-1861 gg.* 7 vols. (Moscow, 1960-78)
- ¹⁸ Statistics and other materials relating to peasant unrest in the period 1826-69

- can be found in the four Soviet volumes listed in the bibliography under the title *Krest'yanskoe dvizhenie v Rossii v ... gg.* (Moscow, 1961-4)
- ¹⁹ D. Field, *The End of Serfdom* (Cambridge, Mass., 1976), pp.51-3
- ²⁰ A.J. Rieber, ed., *The Politics of Autocracy* (Paris, 1966), p.33
- ²¹ *ibid.*, p.34
- ²² Field, *The End of Serfdom*, p.52
- ²³ *ibid.*, p.96
- ²⁴ For example, Blum, *Lord and Peasant*, pp.616-7
- ²⁵ G.M. Hamburg, 'The Russian State and the Peasant Emancipation of 1861', editor's introduction to L.G. Zakharova, *Autocracy and the Abolition of Serfdom in Russia*, Soviet Studies in History, vol. 26, no.2 (1987), p.5
- ²⁶ Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*, pp.34-5
- ²⁷ Field, *The End of Serfdom*, p.97
- ²⁸ *ibid.*, pp.97-101
- ²⁹ On these ideas, see N.V. Riasanovsky, *Nicholas I and Official Nationality in Russia, 1825-55* (Berkeley, 1959)
- ³⁰ Blum, *Lord and Peasant*, p.617; Emmons, *The End of Serfdom*, p.48
- ³¹ Rieber, *The Politics of Autocracy*, pp.17-29
- ³² Field, *The End of Serfdom*, pp.54-5
- ³³ A.J. Rieber, 'Alexander II: a Revisionist View', *Journal of Modern History*, vol.43 (1971), pp.44-5
- ³⁴ Eidel'man, 'Revolutsiya sverkh' v Rossii', *Nauka i zhizn'*, 1988, no.10, p.98. Eidel'man compares the significance of the death of Nicholas I in 1855 with that of Stalin in 1953.
- ³⁵ Blum, *Lord and Peasant*, p.618

- ³⁶ Field, *The End of Serfdom*, p.56
- ³⁷ Mosse, *Alexander II*, ch.2; N.G.O. Pereira, *Tsar-Liberator: Alexander II of Russia, 1818-1881* (Newtonville, Mass., 1983), ch.1
- ³⁸ Rieber, *The Politics of Autocracy*, pp.20-21
- ³⁹ Field, *The End of Serfdom*, p.95
- ⁴⁰ W.B. Lincoln, *In the Vanguard of Reform* (DeKalb, Ill., 1982); W.B. Lincoln, *Nikolai Milutin: an Enlightened Russian Bureaucrat* (Newtonville, Mass., 1977); D. Orlovsky, *The Limits of Reform* (Cambridge, Mass., 1981)
- ⁴¹ E.g. Zaionchkovsky, *The Abolition of Serfdom*, ch.1
- ⁴² Field, *The End of Serfdom*, p.56
- ⁴³ The following discussion is largely based on Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*; Field, *The End of Serfdom*; and L.G. Zakharova, *Samoderzhavie i otmena krepостного prava v Rossii, 1856-1861* (Moscow, 1984). Zakharova, *Autocracy and the Abolition of Serfdom* is an abridged version of this book in English. Emmons, Field and Zakharova all acknowledge their debt to the veteran Soviet historian P.A. Zaionchkovsky, whose on views on the 'politics of emancipation' can be found in ch.2 of his *The Abolition of Serfdom*.
- ⁴⁴ Field, *The End of Serfdom*, pp.143-8; Zakharova, *Samoderzhavie i otmena krepостного prava*, pp.92-103
- ⁴⁵ E.g. Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*, pp.222-3
- ⁴⁶ Zakharova, *Samoderzhavie i otmena krepостного prava*, pp.105-7, 120-1.

Zakharova's presentation of this evidence has convinced at least one former sceptic: [D. Field,] 'From the Editor: the Way It's Supposed to Be', *Russian Review*, vol.44, no.3 (1985), pp.v-viii

⁴⁷ There are useful accounts of the emancipation settlement in G.T. Robinson, *Rural Russia under the Old Regime* (Berkeley, 1972) and Zaionchkovsky, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia*.

⁴⁸ Zakharova, *Samoderzhavie i otmena krepostnogo prava*, pp.174-5, 232

⁴⁹ For discussion of peasant protest against emancipation, and the 'myth of the tsar' which inspired it, see T. Emmons, 'The Peasant and the Emancipation', in W.S. Vucinich, ed., *The Peasant in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Stanford, 1968), pp.41-71; and D. Field, *Rebels in the Name of the Tsar* (Boston, 1976).

⁵⁰ Gerschenkron, 'Agrarian Policies and Industrialization', p.741; Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy*, p.17

⁵¹ S. Becker, *Nobility and Privilege in Late Imperial Russia* (DeKalb, Illinois, 1985), p.46

⁵² *ibid.*, chs. 1-2

⁵³ E.g. Gerschenkron, 'Agrarian Policies and Industrialization', p.724

⁵⁴ Zakharova, *Samoderzhavie i otmena krepostnogo prava*, pp.156-62, 234

⁵⁵ Rieber, 'Alexander II', p.51

⁵⁶ Skerpan, 'The Russian National Economy and Emancipation', pp.186-93; Gerschenkron, 'Agrarian Policies and Industrialization', pp.745-56

⁵⁷ Crisp, *Studies in the Russian Economy*, pp.17-22. See also her 'Labour and Industrialisation in Russia', in *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol. VII, part 2 (Cambridge, 1978), pp.323-9.

⁵⁸ Skerpan, 'The Russian National Economy and Emancipation', pp.211-12

⁵⁹ Field, *The End of Serfdom*

⁶⁰ Blum, *Lord and Peasant*, p.583; Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*, pp. 198-205; Field, *The End of Serfdom*, pp. 220-32

⁶¹ Field, *The End of Serfdom*, pp.8-21

⁶² Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*, Parts III and IV

⁶³ A useful collection of essays on the zemstvo is T. Emmons and W.S. Vucinich, eds., *The Zemstvo in Russia; an Experiment in Local Self-Government* (Cambridge, 1982)

⁶⁴ Emmons, *The Russian Landed Gentry*, pp.394-402

⁶⁵ Rieber, 'Alexander II', p.52

⁶⁶ S.F. Starr, *Decentralization and Self-Government in Russia, 1830-1870* (Princeton, N.J., 1972)

⁶⁷ For a perceptive discussion of these issues, see L. Schapiro, *Rationalism and Nationalism in Russian Nineteenth-Century Political Thought* (New Haven, 1967), pp.114-28.

⁶⁸ Rieber, 'Alexander II', pp.47-8

⁶⁹ On Milyutin's reforms see F.A. Miller, *Dmitrii Miliutin and the Reform Era in Russia* (Vanderbilt University Press, 1968)

⁷⁰ On industrial development in this period, see R. Portal, 'The

Industrialization of Russia', *Cambridge Economic History of Europe*, vol.6, part 2 (Cambridge, 1965), pp.810-23

⁷¹ Rieber, 'Alexander II', p.54

⁷² On the background to the judicial reform, see R.S. Wortman, *The Development of a Russian Legal Consciousness* (Chicago, 1976)

⁷³ On the censorship reforms see D. Balmuth, *Censorship in Russia, 1865-1905* (Washington, D.C., 1979); and C.A. Ruud, *Fighting Words* (Toronto, 1982)

⁷⁴ On the education reforms see A. Sinel, *The Classroom and the Chancellery* (Cambridge, Mass., 1973)

⁷⁵ E.g. M.T. Florinsky, *Russia* (New York, 1953), vol. II, pp.1033, 1065-6

⁷⁶ G.L. Freeze, *The Parish Clergy in Nineteenth-Century Russia* (Princeton, N.J., 1983)

⁷⁷ Rieber, 'Alexander II', pp.42, 47-8

⁷⁸ Pereira, *Alexander II*, p.160 and McCauley and Waldron, *The Emergence of the Modern Russian State*, pp.3-5, 16-17, 56-8

⁷⁹ Rieber, 'Alexander II', pp.4, 57

⁸⁰ *ibid.*, p.57

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p.48

⁸² On this period, see P.A.

Zaionchkovsky, *The Russian Autocracy in Crisis, 1878-1882* (Gulf Breeze, Florida, 1979)

⁸³ See for example, H. Rogger, *Russia in the Age of Modernisation and Revolution, 1881-1917* (London, 1983)

⁸⁴ Rieber, *The Politics of Autocracy*, pp.54-5

⁸⁵ For a quirky defence of the necessity of arbitrariness in Russian government in this period, see Yancy, *The Systematization of Russian Government*, pp.228-9

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