

Sourcework: The Reign of Alexander III

Source A: Letter from Count Leo Tolstoy (author and philosopher) to Alexander III after the assassination of Alexander II.

If you do not pardon, but execute the criminals, you will have uprooted three or four out of hundreds; but evil breeds evil, and in place of those three or four, thirty or forty will grow up, and you will have let slip for ever the moment which is worth a whole age - the moment when you might have fulfilled the will of God, but did not do so - and you will pass for ever from the parting of the ways where you could have chosen good instead of evil, and you will sink for ever into that service of evil, called the Interest of the State ... One word of forgiveness and Christian love, spoken and carried out from the height of the throne, and the path of Christian rule which is before you, waiting to be trod, can destroy the evil which is corroding Russia. As wax before the fire, all Revolutionary struggles will melt away before the Tsar who fulfils the laws of Christ.

Questions

1. How does Tolstoy argue that the assassins of Alexander II should be pardoned?
2. Do you agree that this would have been the best course of action?

Source B: Alexander III's "Manifesto of Unshakable Autocracy", April 1881

We proclaim this to all Our faithful subjects: God in His ineffable judgment has deemed it proper to culminate the glorious reign of Our beloved father with a martyr's death, and to lay the Holy duty of Autocratic Rule on us... It was not so much by stern orders as by goodness and kindness, which are also attributes of power, that [my father] carried out the greatest undertaking of His reign - the emancipation of the enserfed peasants. In this he was able to elicit the cooperation of the noble [serf-] holders themselves, who always quick to the summons of the good and honorable. He established Justice in the Realm and, having made his subjects without exception free for all time, He summoned them to take charge of local administration and public works. May His memory be blessed through the ages!

The base and wicked murder of a Russian Sovereign by unworthy monsters from the people, done in the very midst of that faithful people, who were ready to lay down their lives for Him - this is a terrible and shameful matter, unheard of in Russia, which has darkened Our entire land with grief and terror. But in the midst of Our great grief, the voice of God orders Us courageously to undertake, in deference to Divine intention, the task of ruling, with faith in the strength and rightness [istina] of autocratic power. We are summoned to reaffirm that Power and preserve it for the benefit of the people from any encroachment...

Questions

1. How does Alexander praise his father?
2. How does he nevertheless make it clear that he intends holding on to all his power?

Source C: Pobedonostsev's views on democracy (from his autobiography, *Reflections of a Russian Statesman*, 1898)



In a democracy, the real rulers are the dexterous manipulators of votes, with their placemen, the mechanics who so skillfully operate the hidden springs which move the puppets in the arena of democratic elections. Men of this kind are ever ready with loud speeches lauding equality; in reality, they rule the people as any despot or military dictator might rule it.

The extension of the right to participate in elections is regarded as progress and as the conquest of freedom by democratic theorists, who hold that the more numerous the participants in political rights, the greater is the probability that all will employ this right in the interests of the public welfare, and for the increase of the freedom of the people. Experience proves a very different thing. The history of mankind bears witness that the most necessary and fruitful reforms - the most durable measures - emanated from the supreme will of statesmen, or from a minority enlightened by lofty ideas and deep knowledge, and that, on the contrary, the extension of the representative principle is accompanied by an abasement of political ideas and the vulgarization of opinions in the mass of the electors. It shows also that this extension - in great States - was inspired by secret aims to the centralization of power, or led directly to dictatorship. In France, universal suffrage was suppressed with the end of the Terror, and was

re-established twice merely to affirm the autocracy of the two Napoleons. In Germany, the establishment of universal suffrage served merely to strengthen the high authority of a famous statesman [Bismarck] who had acquired popularity by the success of his policy. What its ultimate consequences will be, Heaven only knows!

Questions

1. Summarise Pobedonostsev's main arguments against democracy. Support each idea with a relevant quote.
(e.g. "Pobedonostsev thinks that democracy is used to trick the people into believing they have power – *'the real rulers...operate the hidden springs which move the puppets'*).
2. Does his argument improve your opinion of Alexander's reactionary policies? Explain your answer.

Source D: Pobedonostsev's views on education (from his autobiography, *Reflections of a Russian Statesman*, 1898)

The vast majority of children must learn to live by the work of their hands. For such work, physical training is needed from the earliest age. To close the door to such preparation, that time may be saved for the teaching of schools, is to place a burden upon the lives of the masses who have to struggle for their daily bread, and to shackle in the family the natural development of those economic forces which together constitute the capital of the commonwealth. The sailor qualifies for his calling by spending his boyhood on the sea; the miner prepares for his work by early years spent in the subterranean passages of mines. To the agriculturist it is even more essential that he shall become accustomed to his future work, that he may learn to love it in childhood, in the presence of nature, beside his herds and his plough, in the midst of his fields and his meadows.



Yet we waste our time discussing courses for elementary schools and obligatory programmes which are to be the bases of a finished education. One insists on the necessity for the agriculturist to know physics, chemistry, agricultural economy, and medicine; another demands a course of political economy and legal theory. But few reflect that by tearing the child from the domestic hearth for such a lofty destiny, they deprive his parent of a productive force which is essential to the maintenance of the home, while by raising before his eyes the mirage of illusory learning they corrupt his mind, and subject it to the temptations of vanity and conceit."

Questions

1. Summarise Pobedonostsev's main arguments against education. Support each idea with a relevant quote.
(e.g. "Pobedonostsev thinks education reduces the quality of life for families by reducing the size of the workforce – *'a burden upon...the masses who...struggle for their daily bread'*).
2. Does his argument improve your opinion of Alexander's reactionary policies? Explain your answer.

Source E: The Pogroms of 1881

The assassination of Alexander II prompted a large-scale wave of anti-Jewish riots, called pogroms, throughout 1881–1884. In the 1881 outbreak, pogroms were primarily limited to Russia, although in a riot in Warsaw twelve Jews were killed, many others were wounded, women were raped and over two million rubles worth of property was destroyed. The new Tsar, Alexander III, blamed the Jews for the riots and issued a series of harsh restrictions (the "May Laws" of 1882) which meant that Jews were disallowed from working in the civil service and were systematically expelled from towns and villages where they had lived for almost a century. Pobedonostsev hoped that "one-third of the Jews will convert, one-third will die, and one-third will flee the country". These laws proved a turning point in the history of the Jews in Poland and throughout the world. The pogroms prompted a great flood of Jewish immigration to the United States, with almost two million Jews emigrating to the USA; 200,000 emigrated to Great Britain; 100,000 went to Canada; 40,000 to South Africa; and 300,000 resettled in Europe. Thousands also left for Palestine.



Questions

1. What were the main aims and results of the "May Laws"?
2. Does this information change your opinion of Pobedonostsev? Explain your answer.

Source F: An account of the famine of 1891 from a modern school textbook.

The 1891 famine was caused partly by a very poor harvest and a rapid growth of the population, but the situation was transformed into a crisis by government insistence on raising revenue for industrialization through the export of grain ("We will go hungry, but we must export" – Vyshnygradsky). Despite the government banning the word 'famine', newspapers published reports of peasants eating "hunger bread" made of substitutes such as ground acorns. Ultimately up to two million people may have died.

There were several consequences. Politically it led to increased pressure for democracy. Alexander III tried to show the autocracy could handle the situation by announcing two state lotteries to help victims of the famine. However, it was the Zemstva (under the leadership of famous figures such as (Chekhov and Tolstoy) which were most effective in organizing local relief efforts.

In terms of industry, the new Minister of Finance – Sergei Witte – became convinced that the long-term benefits of industrialisation were preceded by short-term tension; so he aimed to leapfrog over this stage and "Save Russia by rapid and forceful industrialisation". He immediately arranged a loan from France rather than continue the export drive.

Finally, in terms of Agriculture, Durnovo, the new Minister of the Interior (1889-95) pulled in the opposite direction to Witte. The Government had initially responded well to the pressures on the land and to the agricultural depression by forming a Noble's Land Bank in 1882 and a Peasants' Land Bank in 1885. However, in 1893 the government – fearful of peasant uprisings - compelled peasants to pay their taxes through the Mir. This merely exacerbated the stagnation of agriculture.

Questions

1. Use the information in this source to develop your earlier notes.
2. Did the famine lead to more reaction, or to more reform?

Source G: Diary entry of Sofia Tolstoy, wife of Leo, from 1892. She and her husband were working with the Zemstva to alleviate the famine.

The hardest thing for us is having to decide which people are the neediest, who should go to the canteens, who should get the firewood and clothes that have been donated, and so on. When I made my list a few days ago there were 86 canteens. Now as many as a hundred have been opened. The other day Leo and I drove out to the neighbouring hamlets; it was perfect weather, bright and clear. First we visited the mill and enquired about the grinding; then we called in on another foodstore where we told them to release the millet (from Orlovka) and made general enquiries about distribution; and finally we opened a canteen in Kulikovka, where there had been a fire. We visited the village elder, asked him which families were the poorest, and told him to call the other elders and peasants to a council meeting. They came in and sat down on benches, and we began by asking them which families were worst off, then decided how many people per family were to be fed at the canteen. While I was taking down their names, Lyovochka told them to come on Tuesday to fetch their provisions....

Questions

1. Why was the Tsar embarrassed by the success of the Zemstva in dealing with the crisis?