

## Alexander III: An introduction

### Alexander the man



- Alexander III was the epitome of what a Russian Tsar was supposed to be: forceful, formidable, fiercely patriotic. At 6' 4" he towered over his fellow countrymen and could bend iron bars with his bare hands. He was suspicious of anything Western and grew a thick beard when he became Tsar in a conscious rejection of European fashions (Tsar Peter the Great had banned facial hair as part of his "Westernising" drive).

- Alexander III was not born heir to the Russian throne. His older brother, Nicholas, died in 1865. Alexander was therefore not educated or prepared in his youth to be Emperor. He was greatly influenced by his reactionary tutor **Pobedonostsev** who believed that all opposition to the government be ruthlessly crushed and viewed liberal ideas as constitutions and free press as a threat to the state. It was also Pobedonostsev that taught Alexander III to be anti-Semitic and view the Jewish community of the Empire as "Christ Killers".

- To many westerners he appeared crude and unintelligent. Queen Victoria thought of him as "a sovereign whom she does not look upon as a gentleman". He had an awful temper and would bully his ministers with obscene language when they disappointed him.

### The start of the reign

- The reign of Alexander III began in tragedy. One can only imagine the rage he felt as they watched the Tsar bleed and die in a St Petersburg palace. This event would solidify the reactionary tone of his 13-year reign.
- He immediately cancelled his father's planned constitution. The police rounded up those involved in the assassination of Alexander II and five were hanged. Censorship became more repressive. In his Accession Manifesto, he declared his intention to have "full faith in the justice and strength of the autocracy" that he had been entrusted with. His motto was the half-forgotten motto of the reign of Nicholas I, "autocracy, orthodoxy and nationality".
- However, although he was determined to strengthen autocracy, it would be wrong to dismiss Alexander as a backward-looking reactionary. In economic terms, he was well aware of the need to modernise Russia and his reign saw some great strides forwards. Unfortunately, he was unequal to the task of modernising Russia socially and politically and this created terrible tensions that pushed the country towards crisis.

### Questions

1. "In terms of both personality and policies, Alexander III did not possess the qualities necessary for a successful ruler of late 19<sup>th</sup>-century Russia" – to what extent do you agree with this judgement? Complete this table then discuss any differences of opinion as a class.

	Good points	Bad points
<b>Personality</b>		
<b>Policies</b>		