

The Emancipation of the Serfs: Causes

Suggested Reading

Reforms of Tsar Alexander II	History Review	32
Alexander II	History Review	35
Alexander II	Modern History Review	Sep97

A. Introduction



- Tsar Alexander II's most controversial and far-reaching reform was the "Emancipation of the Serfs" in 1861.

- **Idealism** partly explains why Alexander reformed the serf system.

- a. His father, Tsar Nicholas I, had described serfdom as a "flagrant evil" and called for a "gradual transition to a different order".

- b. Landowners like Koshelyov argued that "the abolition of the right to dispose of people like objects or cattle is as much our liberation as theirs".

- c. Noblemen like Prince Kropotkin were inspired by the Liberal revolutions

which swept Europe in 1848 and were keen to improve the condition of the people.

- **Pragmatism**, however, was the most important motivation of the Tsar, as the following sources and tasks will demonstrate.

B. Task 1: Causes for the Emancipation of the Serfs

Source A: An English traveller, Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, writing in 1905

The very fact that few people had clear, precise ideas as to what was to be done ...tended to increase the reform enthusiasm ... The [Crimean] war had shown the War Minister, Milyutin, the disastrous consequences of having merely primitive means of communication; ... that a country which has not developed its natural resources very soon becomes exhausted if it has to make a great national effort; ... that a system of education which tends to make men mere apathetic automata [robots] cannot produce even a good army; ...that the best intentions of the Government [would be] frustrated if the majority of officials are dishonest or incapable.

There was so much to be done it was no easy matter to decide what should be done first. Administrative, judicial, social, economic, and political reforms seemed all equally pressing. Gradually, however, it became evident that precedence must be given to the question of serfage...So long as serfage existed it was a mere mockery to talk about reorganising Russia according to the latest results of political and social science. How could a system of even handed justice be introduced when millions of the peasantry were subject to the arbitrary will of the landed proprietors? How could agricultural and industrial progress be made without free labour?...All this was generally felt by the educated classes ... the Tsar's minister Kavelin argued that "in the economic sphere, serfdom brings the whole state into an abnormal situation"; the Head of the Third Section, Benckendorff, argued that that in a political sense "Serfdom is a powder keg under the state".

1. Complete this table using the extract and your background knowledge.

Problem facing Russia	Quote from the source	Evidence from background knowledge
Natural Resources:		
Military:		
Industry and Agriculture:		
Legal System:		
Politics:		
Communications:		

2. Outline why the Tsar came to think that reforming the serf system would solve each of these issues:

Problem facing Russia	How might the reform of the serf system help to solve this problem?
Natural Resources:	
Military:	
Industry and Agriculture:	
Legal System:	
Politics:	
Communications:	