
Alexander II's and Alexander III's Different Approaches To Ruling The Russian Empire

Alexander II vs Alexander III

Despite being father and son, Alexander II's and Alexander III's approach to ruling the Russian Empire was vastly different, however both share the similarity of wanting what is best for their country. Alexander II was by nature a liberalist. His celebrated reforms and course of policies earned him the title 'The Tsar Liberator'. In contrast, Alexander III was a conservative, believing in the ideology of absolute autocracy, and leaving himself known as a 'peacemaker' for his non-involvement in wars or other foreign conflicts. The tsars' death situations underpin the differences in their reigns: Alexander II was shot in the 8th assassination attempt on him, meanwhile Alexander III passed away in his bed from a kidney disease at the age of 49. Despite having contrasting beliefs about the best way to approach power and control of the Russian Empire, both tsars helped it flourish economically, aiding its development, in order for Russia to be in the state it is in today.

Both tsars aided in the industrialization of the Russian Empire, shaping it into the form Russia is in today. Politically, Alexander II and Alexander III had different approach, however in the economic realm of policies, both modernized and expanded the economy of the Empire. Initially it became obvious that the Russian empire was in need of economic advancement after its defeat in the Crimean War. Serfdom was blamed for the backwardness of the economy, since it did not allow establishment of industries and obstructed the free flow of labor; even Nicholas I, the more conservative father of Alexander II, referred to serfdom as 'the flagrant evil'. The proposed solution to the issue, liberation of serfdom, directly correlated with Alexander II liberal viewpoint; thus the Emancipation Manifesto was implemented on March 3, 1861. However, the emancipation attempt had little to no effect on the economy, since the peasants were still tied to the communes, and the Mir, managing their financial affairs, and they grew in debt with the redemption payments which they were incapable of paying. The economy was still agrarian, however the peasants, who made up the work force, were only given the worse 1/3 of all soil, most of which was not suitable was growing crops. However, although slow, industrial development was present, the total workforce expanded from 860 thousands to 1.32 million by 1887. Under Alexander II's minister of finance Mikhail Ruetern (1862-1878), the building of the railways began. Railways would open up the vast lands of Russia, increasing exports of resources, allowing for the establishment of industries along the route, as well as the building itself would create many jobs.

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Under Alexander III industrial development sped up, with Russia becoming the 4th most powerful economy on the world by the end of his reign in 1894. Alexander III continued his father's reforms, similarly focusing on the railway construction. Under his first new minister of finance, Nikolai Bunge (1881-1886), the Peasants' Land Bank was established in 1883 in order to aid peasants in their affairs, allowing them to purchase land for farming at accessible prices, as well as eliminating the unpaid redemption payments. Under Alexander III's reign, with the building of railways the exports for minerals, oil, textiles, etc. greatly increased under minister of finance Ivan Vyshnegradkiy (1887-1892), who also encouraged foreign enterprises to subsidize the industrial growth of Russia. However, overall, Sergei Witte, who replaced Vyshnegradski as a minister of finance after his leave after famine of 1891-92, when 350 thousand people have died due to lack of crops, yet the country still continues exporting, had the greatest impact on Russia's economy. Count Witte saved the Russian ruble from inflation of 30% by establishing the new gold standard into which paper money was converted. He encouraged French investors to contribute to the growing industries, which later aided the building of the Trans-Siberian railway, which opened up the midst of Russia, and brought industrialization across all of the country. By 1900 Russia's economic growth rate was 8% a year. Hence both tsars believed in the importance of the establishment of a solid economy for its country in order for it to operate efficiently.

However, even though both tsars modernized the country economically by industrializing it, their political, social, education and foreign affairs and policies were polar opposites of each other. When Alexander II came to power in 1855, amid the Crimean War, despite his father's urges on his deathbed to 'hold on to everything strongly', the new tsar took the country upon a he liberal course of reforms, attempting to westernize it, as well as reestablish its prestige after the humiliation in the form of defeat in the war. According to Richard Pipes, "such package of reforms was not seen in Russia since the times of Peter the Great". Politically, Alexander II came close to converting the Russian absolute autocracy, into a constitutional monarchy, with the drafting of a constitution by the minister of Interior Loris-Melikov. Absolute power was also diminished with the creation of zemstvos, organs of rural government, in 1864, gradually giving the masses more power. Alexander II permitted freedom of press, became more acceptant of ethnic minorities, weakening the censorship and regulation imposed upon the Jews and the Poles, and granted universities autocracy. All of the following liberal reforms allowed enlightened ideas such as liberty, equality and enlightenment to flow into the society. People began to realize that there are different regimes and ideologies, apart from the ones practiced within their country, and were seeking changed. Hence, despite his liberal intentions, ironically Alexander II was assassinated by the radicals of Narodnaya Volya in 1881 and died with his family in the Winter Palace.

Having seen what his father's reforms resulted in, Alexander III stopped the liberal course of the country in its track, and implemented the principles of "orthodoxy, nationality, autocracy",

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with the guidance of the Procurator of the Holy Synod, governing body of the Russian Orthodox Church, his former tutor Konstantin Pobedonostsev. The tsar conducted the construction of the Church of Spilled Blood, upon the place of his father's murder; a truly 'Russian' building in the westernized capital, Saint Petersburg, in order to signify his intentions. He proposed the accession manifesto on April 29, 1881, proclaiming his belief in conservatism. Alexander counter reforms were backed up by the principle of Russification. He took away zemstvos' authority, and tightened the censorship upon the ethnic minorities. He forced the minister of Interior, Loris-Melikov to resign, due to Pobedonostsev referring to the constitution as the "greatest evil", meaning that the tsar wanted to ensure his absolute power. He also took away the universities' autonomy, and unlike his father, who permitted the Jews to leave the Pale of Settlement, Alexander III, conducted the establishment of May Law under the minister of Interior Ignatiev in 1892, which set thousands of regulation upon the Jewish community, setting quotas as to how many were allowed into cities, etc.

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