
Reasons Of Emancipation Of The Serfs In Russian Empire

In 1861 in Russia, Tsar Alexander II decreed the emancipation edict for the serfs. In theory, this was to give perfect freedom to the millions of Serfs and State Peasants in Russia. The reasons as to why he did this can be seen in the years before he declared this emancipation.

Defeat in the Crimean War revealed weakness in the structure of the state that the men who ruled Russia had barely sensed or had not suspected at all, and that they feared would destroy the empire unless remedied immediately. The war cost Russia 600,000 lives. While St. Petersburg could boast that it commanded the largest army in Europe, poor roads, antiquated weapons, and low morale prohibited the effective use of that awesome potential power, but far more serious was a great wave of peasant unrest, which swept across much of the country. The defeat proved to the Tsarist autocracy in charge that Russia had fallen dangerously behind its Western neighbours, making it vulnerable to future attack and invasion.

Many liberal thinkers laboured long and hard over the reasons for Russia's great defeat. Looking to Western models and contrasting Russian society one element remained outstanding: the continued existence in Russia of serfdom.. Whether out of genuine progressive beliefs or merely a need for an effective conscript army when the next war developed, Alexander II initiated a period of reform in Russia with the February 19, 1861 Emancipation of the serfs

Alexander's second reason was that emancipation could subsequently be used as a way of progressing Russian reform policy. If the liberation of the serfs was to be executed in Russia, the nobility's manorial power would have to be diminished and civil rights granted to the peasantry. In this scenario further reform would have to be introduced to local administration and law courts to guard the peasants' rights since they were no longer under the sole jurisdiction of the landowner. Emancipation, in Alexander's opinion, would create an economic utopia and pave the way for reform in other sectors of Russian society.

The liberation of the serfs were very much the personal responsibility of the Tsar. Alexander's ideas on reform tended to be met with a general apathy throughout Russia by certain key sections of society; mainly the aristocracy and gentry from who control not only the peasants but also the economy, could benefit by being freed. It was this lack of concern, caused by the nobility which strengthened the resolve of the Tsar to liberate the serfs, if only in order to distance them from the uneconomically minded landowners since hired labour was more efficient and profitable for the agrarian economy than enforced labour. Alexander was not entirely without support, but after the nobility showed disinterest at the Tsar's request in March 1856 for ideas about emancipation, it was left to Alexander liberal intelligentsia in the press and

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universities to promote the policy. The Orthodox Church was too conservative to promote drastic change and the official classes too satisfied with their existing power and privileges; even the serfs themselves lacked the coherence to show any real enthusiasm for emancipation. Hence, it can be seen that the character of Alexander II and his frustration at the apathy of the landowners towards his proposals, strengthened his determination to apply some impetus and motivation to the reform process.

What is less clear is how much impact external Europe had upon the Tsar and his policy making decisions. Alexander's first public indication of his wishes with regard to the question of serfdom was the negotiations in Paris at the end of the Crimean War. Alexander may have seen emancipation as a way to restore Russia's influence amongst the other Great Powers in Europe in the wake of his military defeat. By informing the European states of his intention to emancipate Alexander may have hoped to receive recognition of his economic reforms and perhaps attract trade and investments from other countries. So another reason for emancipation may have been his general desire to see the Russian economy flourishing and competitive in the continent. With a 307 million rouble deficit in 1856 these concerns were paramount to his policy.

Considerable evidence of improvement can be noted in Russia's agricultural trade in the generation after the Emancipation. The average annual export of grain increased from 86 million between 1861-5 to 136 million, from 1866-70 and again to 286.5 million from 1876-80.

A common argument the Tsar used for the Emancipation of the serfs was that liberation was a way of containing peasant unrest. It is true that there had been two, recent revolts on the Black Sea and that the number of outbreaks had been increasing: - in 1826-34, there were 148 outbreaks. The nobility were the class within Russian society which Alexander had most fear of offending as they possessed the high administrative posts and had been previously responsible for the downfall of particular Tsars. Therefore, the policy of compensation to appease the landowners whose serfs would be liberated.

All the same, it was the individual landowners who were initially most at risk from any potential uprising, and Alexander, in as much as he wished to prevent unrest, used this motive to exploit the fears of the nobility. This served to plant the idea of a peasant uprising in the minds of the nobility so they would be more willing to see the emancipation of the serfs as a way of maintaining the peasants' dependant status to avoid the emergence of a peasant. It was more a ploy to make the nobility accept and not reject the reform policy than it was a genuine fear of revolution from the Tsar himself. Although he was no friend to civil unrest, the influence of this factor was less important than others.

In theory, the emancipation edict was to give freedom to the millions of Serfs and State

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Peasants, but on closer inspection, this was not true. The real terms of the emancipation edict gave peasants a limited amount of freedom in terms of rights, but in other ways they would see new restrictions imposed upon them.

They were now given the right to trade, act as they wished, and marry whom they liked. This in itself is an achievement, as other forms of slavery had been abolished around the rest of the world years before so Russia had finally caught up with the modernising world in that respect. The argument is even more compelling when we think of the freedom they gained from the brutal, oppressive landlords. The cases of landlords who brutally tortured their subjects, were bound to never happen again, as would the exiling of serfs to Siberia.

Beforehand the peasants had complete job security. They had all the access to common ground, to woods and to grazing land, and good fertile soil. The exploitation they suffered was only very little, and seldom. Only one hundred and seven peasants were sent to Siberia every year, out of a serf population of twenty million. Sexual exploitation was the exception, not the rule.

After emancipation, they lost many of their rights. Previously, they could farm as much land as they wished. However, after emancipation, the edict decreed that they were to be given one third of the land they had previously farmed. As this was to be chosen by the landlord, who did not have selfless motives behind him, the serf was given the most infertile land possible, and even this was limited in quantity, but this land was not free. The serf would have to pay over the odds for the land, and for the loss of his "industrial" production through Redemption Payments. These crippling costs meant that the situation they were in was virtually the same as before. They were tied to the land, and could not leave until they had paid off these excessive fines.

To compensate for this, one would expect that the freedom one would receive would be "beneficial" and worthwhile, when compared to how they previously lived, but often this was not the case. To explain this, we need to look at how the peasants lived at these times. The peasant population at this time was divided into two categories: the "Serfs" and the state peasants. In theory both groups were both tied to the lands, but again in practice this was not the case. Although they were not free to travel and although they had not owned their own lands until 1937, they had long since acted as though they did. They were able to exercise a sizeable degree of freedom within their own area, as long as they paid their taxes and stayed within the confines of the local Russian legal system, which in the form of the local government officers, were often partial to a bribe.

The situation for state peasants was vastly different. Under the strict confines of the Mir, the landlord and the noble, they were tied completely to the land. Their freedom was mitigated against mainly by the collective Mir, which made nearly all decisions in the Serf's life. All of

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these decisions were made by an elected "Elder" whose decision was final, and whose authority could not be questioned. A sizeable proportion of the peasants merely continued living in the same houses, worked the same fields, but gave their produce not to the Landlord but to the Mir's.

Of all the "Great Reforms" the results of the emancipation of the serfs was the first to be implemented in Russian society. Alexander's reasoning for this was twofold; firstly it was essential that in the strive for a greater, economically more advanced country, and agricultural practice would have to be made more profitable. Under serfdom the production of grain and development of agriculture had been retarded. For instance, from 1853-58 the Russian deficit had increased from 52 to 307 million silver roubles and by 1860 it was clear that the noble landowners were no longer receiving adequate incomes as 60% of all private serfs were mortgaged to the state. The dramatic increase in grain exports after the reform process in absolute and relative terms shows that to a certain extent the policy was a success. It also demonstrates clearly how much potential was being wasted prior to reform and why the Tsar was so keen to reverse the problem.

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