

Tsar Alexander II

In 1855 Alexander II became the Tsar of Russia. Unlike his father, Nicholas, Alexander had experience of running a government. He was more humanitarian but he remained a firm believer in the Divine Will of God. He came to the throne during the Crimean War and inherited a lot of problems from his father that had been highlighted by the war. Russia was defeated and had to suffer the neutralisation and loss of the Black Sea and loss of Romanian territory. The Tsar was both very embarrassed and angry but he held great hope for the people.

Many people hoped that Alexander II would be a great reformer. When he came to power he reduced censorship, released political prisoners, pardoned the Decembrist revolters and even gave some freedom to the Catholic Church. But his major contribution to reform was the freeing of the 40 million serfs in 1861. He passed the Ukase of Edict of Emancipation of the Serfs. This decree gave serfs their freedom over a period of 2 years. Household serfs received no land. Agricultural serfs were given land, which they then had to pay for through redemption dues over 49 years. Landowners received compensation in the form of government bonds. Their position of authority over the serfs was removed, but was replaced by the Mir.

Alexander wanted to strengthen the Tsar's authority and preserve his position. There were more and more peasant revolts and Alexander thought it better to abolish serfdom from above than see it abolished from below. The serf system was no longer able to feed the population, which was growing rapidly. The landowners' solution to this had been to drive the serfs harder, but the revolts proved that this was not working. The system was holding back industrialization and thus economic growth. The serf system had produced a weak and shambolic army in the Crimean War. Freeing the serfs was expedient to improving the quality of the military, which in turn would secure the Tsar's position. This Alexander could be seen as merely reacting to a crisis.

It took until 1881 to transfer all the land due to the serfs. Redemption payments were often set at too high a level by landowners for land that was poor quality. Serfs were economically worse off than before they were free. Serfs faced high taxation. Peasants resented having to pay for land that they felt was theirs anyway. They also resented the control of the Mir which restricted their freedom and controlled farming. The Mir's control of farming made it difficult for peasants to increase productivity and thus better their economic position. Freeing the serfs did not improve the economy. The serfs had so little to spend that they did not stimulate industry. Their holdings were so small that productivity did not increase dramatically. Peasant unrest continued. 70 were killed in the Kazan province in 1861.

Historians like Seton-Watson hail the emancipation of the serfs as a success. Others like Kochan say that the serfs were actually not freed. They simply replaced one type of bondage for another.