**You must be able to address the following ‘big picture’ questions by the end of your revision:**

1. What were Alexander II’s motives for reforming? In what ways and for what reasons do historians disagree about this?

2. How successful was the emancipation of the serfs? What criteria should we use to judge a question like this?

3. Were Alexander II’s other reforms more or less significant? Does he deserve the title the ‘Tsar Liberator’?

4. What was the impact of Alexander II’s later reactionary policies and why did he implement them? What does this tell us about his motives for reform in the first place and how we judge their success?

**You must be confident in the following knowledge areas:**

1. Evaluate his emancipation of the serfs: motives, process and impact

2. Evaluate his reforms: military, legal, educational, local government, economic: motives, process and impact

**It is important that you can confidently use Russian terminology in your essays. Below is a glossary of key terms that relate to this section:**

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**Once you have revised the content for this section (not forgetting to use your class notes etc. too) use the TACKLED essay planning sheets on Wisdom for some active revision – remember, knowledge is useless without application.**

**1. Interpretations: Why did Alexander II decide to reform Russia?**

While students find it tempting to view Alexander II as ‘the nice one’, this would be a gross oversimplification of both his motives and the actual results of his policies. It is clear that Alexander II’s **overriding goal in introducing reform was to strengthen Russia and, in doing so, strengthen Tsardom** – he was certainly not democratically minded. Historians do, however, disagree about his specific thinking and tend to stress one or more of the following motives as being the most significant:

**a) Military reasons**: The timing of the reforms, beginning with the Edict of Emancipation, followed the Russian defeat in the Crimean War (by Great Britain and France), suggest that military considerations were at least involved. In order to strengthen the army, comprehensive social reforms had to be made to allow for the changes in recruitment and length of service that would be necessary to improve the morale and efficiency of the military. In addition, it was obvious that the impact of a backwards education system and consequent lack of technical expertise in Russia had been a particularly significant factor in Russia’s defeat.

**b) The ‘Zeitgeist’:** Meaning the changing atmosphere of ideas and values in which we all live. By the mid-nineteenth century, the concept of serfdom (in particular) was beginning to be seen as not only backward but also morally wrong. There had been liberal revolts and revolutions across Europe in 1848, which even inspired some of the powerful Russian aristocrats (such as Prince Kropotkin) to demand greater freedom for the ordinary people in Russia. Alexander II’s father, Nicholas I, had also come round to this view, describing the keeping of serfs as a “flagrant evil” at the end of his reign.

**c) To prevent revolution:** In 1856, Alexander II famously warned his aristocrats that if they did not reform from above, they would be abolished from below. While some historians argue that he was simply using fear to convince them to give up some of their land and power, historical research has since shown that the number of serf uprisings and revolts were indeed steadily increasing in the mid-nineteenth century. It is therefore likely that this consideration played a genuine role in his decision, especially in light of the revolutions that had occurred elsewhere in Europe in 1848. The other reforms that Alexander II introduced to local government also support this view as they show a desire to give a larger proportion of society a stake in the Tsarist system.

**d) To allow economic modernisation:** Some historians stress that reform was necessary to industrialise Russia and hence increase her power. This would make sense as the only way of getting workers for new factories would be to free the serfs (otherwise, they would remain trapped on the land by their ‘owners’). Later reforms that Alexander II would make in education and law support this view as they encouraged the entrepreneurship and professional training necessary to support a modern economy. However, it has been noted that Alexander II did not systematically try to industrialise Russia on a large scale, being primarily interested in only building railways and the production of military items.

**e) The collapse of the feudal system:** Marxist historians argue that the feudal system in Russia was at the point of collapse (pointing as evidence to the frequent revolts and the difficulties faced by many aristocrats in sustaining their lifestyle by the 1850s, as well as the loss of the Crimean War). They argue that the reforms of Alexander II were really simply an attempt to change the economic focus of Russia to allow new forms of revenue to be created for landowners. While there may be some truth to this interpretation, it is important to remember that Marxist historians have a world view that seeks to explain all significant historical changes as the result of a continuous struggle between social classes.

**2. The Emancipation of the Serfs (1861)**

**A2 comes to power – relaxes censorship** immediately, encourages debate about reform and emancipation

Second report recommending **emancipation with land. A 2 supports**. Rostostev given job of drafting final policy – he plans for a huge and fast transfer of land to the peasants.

A2 makes his famous speech: **“It is better to abolish serfdom from above…”** to the aristocracy

**Edict of Emancipation** is announced. “Serfdom…abolished forever”

**1859**

**1858**

**1857**

**1856**

**1860**

**1861**

**1855**

First report on emancipation recommends **freedom without land** – **rejected by A2** due to fears it would cause massive unrest.

Rostostev dies. Panin, his successor, **dilutes proposals** and makes the emancipation slower and more expensive for peasants. **A2 does not intervene.**

**Defeat in the Crimean War**

**a) Why was emancipation supported by Alexander II?**

As outlined in part 1, there were many persuasive arguments in favour of reforming Russia. **Alexander II identified the abolition of serfdom as being the fundamental first step that would be necessary to begin the process**. The following table summarises the key problems that faced Russia (which had been brought to the fore by the defeat in Crimea) and how the emancipation of the serfs (in particular) would help to ameliorate them:

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| --- | --- |
| **Problem** | **How abolishing serfdom would help** |
| **Natural Resources, Industry & Communications:** While Russia had natural resources in abundance; they were not efficiently exploited (see background notes). Industry was very limited in Russia as there was little technical expertise, free labour or entrepreneurship. The Crimean war had highlighted the problems of moving resources and men efficiently across Russia due to the poor state of roads and lack of railways. | It would create a more **free labour market** that would make it much easier for mines, factories etc. to hire workers. Building railways would also be much easier for the same reason. In the longer term, freeing the serfs would also enable the **development of a modern capitalist economy** that would reward entrepreneurship and high productivity. |
| **Military:** While large in size, the military suffered from extremely low morale and lacked the technical expertise and creative thinking necessary to win modern wars. | Freeing the serfs would mean that soldiers would not have to serve such long periods as they would not need to be bought by the state. This would **increase morale**. Educational improvements, which would require serfs to be free to attend schools, may lead to **greater military efficiency.** |
| **Agriculture:** The serfs had no incentive to work harder than they absolutely had to. Nor could they afford (or even know about) modern machinery or fertilisers. Productivity was low and the people unhappy. | By freeing the serfs, assuming they were given their own land to work, the people would be much **more productive** as they would get the benefit derived from working hard (rather than their landlords). The new peasants would also be **grateful to the Tsar** if this was done fairly, increasing support for him and preventing revolts. |
| **Legal System:** The legal system was extremely corrupt, slow moving and unjust. This was a deep source of discontent among the people and it hampered the efficient running of the government and economy. | It would not be possible to introduce widespread and meaningful legal reform while the majority of the population were clearly trapped in an unjust system and had few rights to get justice against their superiors. |
| **Politics:** There was little ‘politics’ as such in Russia, with the government largely in the hands of the tiny aristocracy under the Tsar. Therefore, government officials were not held to account for their actions, leading to an **inefficient and corrupt administration** that was widely despised by the ordinary people who had no stake in it. | While Alexander II was firmly in favour of autocracy, he probably recognised the need to bring **more groups into politics at the local level**, so that they would have an incentive to support his government. This would likely lead to better government in the localities too. However, until the majority of the serfs were emancipated, there was very little prospect of groups outside the aristocracy being able to get involved. |

**b) Why did the emancipation proposals end up being diluted in favour of the aristocracy?**

As we have seen, there were many persuasive arguments for emancipating the serfs. However, in reality these ideas were actually only championed by a relatively small section of the aristocratic elite (generally those who had been educated abroad) known as the **‘westernisers’**. As a consequence of Alexander’s interest and support, they were nevertheless able to attain considerable influence over policy decisions.

In opposition to these modernisers, there was also a significant group of aristocrats and officials who resented the influence of foreign ideas in Russia and were fearful of the outcome of any reforms on their privileged position. This group has become known as the **‘slavophiles’**. As their power and wealth relied on land (and hence serf ownership) they were especially motivated to ensure that they would be sufficiently compensated for losing land in the emancipation.

We can see the influence of ‘**slavophile’** ideas during the emancipation process (see timeline above) when, in 1859, Panin was able to increase the cost of emancipation to the serfs. It is also perhaps evident in the fact that Alexander II was unable (or perhaps unwilling) to intervene to prevent this change - despite his prior approval of the much more generous terms proposed by the westerniser, Rostostev.

**c) What** **was the impact of the emancipation?**

* Serfs granted **personal freedom within 2 years,** allowing them to own land, marry without interference, use law courts and set up their own businesses.
* Freed peasants were granted **ownership of their houses and the plot of land**they had worked on.
* Each serf was guaranteed a minimum size of allotment, but 75% of serfs received allotments 20% smaller than the land they worked before and 80% of the size considered necessary to feed a peasant family.
* The government then **compensated landlords** for land lost to peasants, on a very high valuation of the land.  Freed serfs were to repay the state this in the shape of**‘redemption dues’ over 49 years at 6% interest**.
* The local ***mir***was made responsible for collecting and paying the redemption taxes, and thus exercised **considerable control over each peasant.**
* State serfs were granted the same terms, but the transition period was **5 years**not 2 and they generally received larger plots of lands.  **Household serfs**came out worst of all: they received **no land**, just their freedom.

**d) Interpretations of the Emancipation of the Serfs:**

At the time:

* Emancipation was **both criticized and praised** at the same time.  Prince Kropotkin, a serf-owner and anarchist, said that peasants met the reforms with 'enthusiasm' and celebrated their liberation.  However, other westernisers hoping for greater change argued that the reforms pleased no-one.
* **Peasants** tended to be dissatisfied with what they saw as the **shortcomings** of the deal - i.e. they thought the land they worked was theirs by right and did not see that they should have to pay landlords for it.  There were in total **647 incidents of peasants rioting** following the Edict, with a notable example in **Bezdna** (where a peasant urged his fellow serfs to seize land for themselves, and was then arrested and executed for his part in the disturbances that followed).
* **Nobility**resented their **loss of social importance**and felt betrayed that Alexander II had not fully consulted them in the process of drawing up his final draft.
* Effectively, then, the **nobility were angered by what they saw as a radical document** while the **peasants were disappointed by what they say as a moderate document.**

Historians:

Historians tend to view the emancipation as a 'success' or a 'failure' depends very much on what **criteria** they are interested in judging it against (TOK moment!)

* Viewed in**legal terms of rights and liberties**, the emancipation was a **monumental success: 40 million Russians were liberated overnight**, and Russia made a dramatic break with its social and economic past to an extent unparalleled in nineteenth-century Europe.
* Some historians (e.g. **Hugh Seton-Watson**) have compared emancipation favourably with USA’s abolition of black slavery in 1865 as it **guaranteed land**to the former serfs and did more to guarantee the personal freedom of those liberated than occurred in the States.

BUT…

* Immediate impact of the emancipation was lessened by **practical problems of implementing the reform at local level**.  As the process was dependent upon the support of the nobility, it was often slow and carried out in a way that favoured the interests of landowners at the expense of the peasants.
* Land settlements were thus **unfavourable to the peasants:** areas granted to the peasants were too small, and **landlords charged inflated prices**.  This left peasants with **less land**than before,**paying redemption taxes beyond the productive value of the land** for **land they thought was theirs by right**. In the short to medium-term, then, the emancipation probably (and ironically) actually **worsened the wealth and living standards of former serfs**in many cases.
* Though freed from the landlord, **peasants were still under control of the *mir***which could restrict travel and freedom of enterprise in the village.  The *mir* tended to be **backwards looking** in terms of perpetuating traditional farming techniques: by sharing land inefficiently in narrow strips, it helped to **prevent the transformation of former serfs into individual peasant land owners**.
* Emancipation therefore **failed to solve industrial backwardness**: lacking land, facing economic difficulties and often prevented by the *mir*from being able to leave the village for towns, the peasants were **not transformed into a new class of prosperous consumers**.

On balance, even if emancipation did not improve peasants' living standards in the short term, it did lead to over 85 % of former serfs becoming landowners in some shape or form within 20 years of the reform.  Furthermore, **David Christian** argues that emancipation was a success in achieving its immediate objectives: peasant disturbances were reduced for the next 40 years, and serfdom was abolished without provoking an immediate major rebellion.

**3. The ‘Other’ Reforms**

It is important to remember that the emancipation of the serfs was only the first of many reforms that Alexander II undertook. Below is a summary of his other key measures, along with some evaluation. Make an overall judgement under each table that will help you to develop an analysis in an essay – see the example below.

**Educational & Censorship Reforms**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue/Problem** | **Detail of Reform** | **Impact / Evlauation** |
| Education strictly limited to the upper classes only. Censorship was strict throughout the country – both at universities and in print. This meant Russia could not benefit from the spread of new ideas and expertise, particularly harming the development of a modern economy/military as well as preventing individuals from bettering their lot. Liberal westernisers found this especially depressing. | **Zemstvos** given responsibility for providing secondary and primary education – felt they would be more interested in seeing quality education in their locality. This was proved correct.  **Censorship laws relaxed** by Alexander II in 1865.  **Westerniser Golvonin** put in charge of education. | **Positives:**  **Schools:**  - Between 1861-81 historians estimate the number of schools increased by four times.  - Some students from poor/peasant backgrounds were able to attend schools for the first time.  **Universities:**  - Libraries exempted from censorship laws – quality and range of courses increased.  - 2,000 women in university (from almost 0) by 1881.  - Scholarships set up allowing top students from poor backgrounds to attend for the first time.  **Negatives:**  1866 assassination attempt led to a reaction from Alexander II:  - **Tolstoy** put in charge of secondary schools and he limited freedom in the curriculum away from liberal ideas.  - Censorship less strict, but not gone. **Editors could be prosecuted for attacking the government** – often without being allowed to defend themselves. The political journal, *The Contemporary,* was banned in 1866.  - Alexander II allowed ultra-slavophile (but respected Orthodox Church academic), **Pobedonostev**, to have full responsibility for his son’s education. |

**Analysis:** *Alexander’s selection of a westerniser to introduce reforms indicates his initial genuine intention to pursue liberal reform. However, his subsequent appointment of the more conservative Tolstoy shows that he was very uncomfortable with even these limited freedoms once they were reality. Perhaps he realised that censorship and educational control were essential to maintaining an autocracy. However, even taking into account his back sliding, the system he created (while still restrictive by western standards) was much more progressive than anything that had gone before.*

**Legal Reforms**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue/Problem** | **Detail of Reform** | **Impact / Evaluation** |
| Legal system was very corrupt – bribery common: **“No grease, no motion”**  Judges often very poorly trained –selected for their loyalty to a powerful aristocrat rather than ability. In some instances, they were illiterate! This meant the people had little confidence in the justice system, leading to much bitterness especially among the lower classes. Westernisers felt no modernisation could happen without the legal system working properly (as they would enforce any changes). | Western systems were researched and a Russian version introduced in 1864:  **Procedures**:  - Everyone had **equal rights in law** – no special status for aristocrats, Church etc  - **Trial by jury** for first time (lessen impact of a bad judge)  - **Appeal courts** set up – meant ‘bad judgements’ could be changed.  **Personnel:**  - **Training** introduced for judges. Given permanent jobs, making them independent of government (no longer afraid of being fired for annoying officials/aristocrats!)  - Lawyers trained by an **independent bar** (university) – led to development of an independent educated elite, who were generally westernisers and liberals. | **Positives:**  Confidence in the legal system increased, seen to be more independent and somewhat more liberal in its outlook (supporting rights of poor etc in some cases). Evidence of this new independence seen in 1878 Zasulich case in which a violent revolutionary was acquitted against the wishes of the government.  Historian Seton-Watson: “The court room was the one place in Russia where freedom of speech prevailed”  **Negatives:**  Alexander II went back on some reforms after the 1878 case:  - Government minsters could not be put on trial without his permission  - Police remained outside the law – especially the Third Section (secret police)  - Revolutionaries and radicals no longer allowed jury trials and could be arrested without evidence.  - Peasants put on trial outside the new system and therefore a large proportion of the population did not benefit.  - There were never sufficient numbers of properly trained lawyers to make the system work all the time, everywhere.  - The idea of independent judges was logically incompatible with autocracy and was never fully achieved as a result. |

Analysis:

**Military Reforms**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue/Problem** | **Detail of Reform** | **Impact / Evlauation** |
| **Defeat in the Crimean War** showed real weakness. **Morale was very low** – conscription lasted 25 years, wives of soldiers could automatically declare themselves widows! **Poorly organised, lacking practical and technical expertise.** | **Milyutin** led reforms, highlighting the Prussian army as a model of what could be achieved.  **Conscription:** Opened to all classes, reduced to 15 years.  **Training:** Promotion based on merit rather than aristocratic birth introduced.  **Administration:** Reorganised army into 10 regions to allow for better local organisation. | **Positives:**  Army won the 1878 Russo-Turkish war. While a good thing, the Turkish army was very backwards at that time*…”a war between the one-eyed and the blind”*  **Negatives:**  1904-5 Russo-Japanese War actually showed a widening gap between the Russian army and a modern force like Japan – indicating reforms had not been embedded effectively, especially due to ‘red tape’. |

Analysis:

**Local Government Reforms**

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| **Issue/Problem** | **Detail of Reforms** | **Impact / Evaluation** |
| The Emancipation **ended the feudal system** which had been the basis for local government in Russia (the provision of roads, law and order, markets, hospitals etc in an area) – therefore a new system was needed. The **increasing number of rebellions** in the localities (prior to the emancipation) also indicated that the people wanted more say and influence. | **1864: Zemstvos created in the villages** – elected councils that took on the responsibility for local government.  **1870: Dumas created in urban areas** – same model as the zemstvos (do not confuse these with ‘the’ Duma that would come later after 1905…) | - **The professional classes** (doctors, lawyers, teachers etc) were often elected and **became engaged** in the process.  - The Zemstvos in particular became **powerful voices for public opinion** and were respected. Historians argue they allowed criticism to be aired and did reduce tension as a result.  - Evidence provided **more effective government** in some areas – this was, embarrassingly for Alexander III, particularly evident during the famine relief programmes set up by the zemstvos in 1891.  **BUT…**  - Zemstvos still dominated by aristocracy (75% of membership)  - Introduced very slowly – only half of the regions covered by them as late as 1914.  - While technically had lots of local power, they had to rely on Tsarist officials to implement their measures. Their measures could therefore be prevented by inaction. |

Analysis:

**Economic Reforms**

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| --- | --- | --- |
| **Issue/Problem** | **Detail of Reforms** | **Impact / Evaluation** |
| Crimean defeat demonstrated that economic modernisation was an urgent priority - In particular, the government focused on trying to **develop railways** and **increasing coal and iron production** and pursued a more vigorous policy of industrialization than previously. **Tax system unfair** – the aristocracy was exempt and so the burden fell on the poorest. **Trade within Russia was expensive and difficult** due to a poor transport network. | The Russian railway system was developed from 1,600 km in 1861 to **over 22,000 in 1878.**    Government encouraged foreign investment in developing heavy industry. | **Positives:**  Railways helped to provide the empire with **greater internal coherence**and to **stimulate internal trade**(lowered cost of grain in cities, allowing for the expansion of their population needed to build factories etc)  There were **considerable increases in oil and coal production**and **new industrial areas were emerging.**  **Negatives:**  Industrial development largely created by **foreign investment** and focused on heavy goods that did not improve quality of life. **Workers exploited**, sewing the seeds of later problems.  While a steady population growth led to a **growing market in the countryside for manufactured goods -**however, this 'peasant market' was extremely fragile as it was dependent on a good harvest and still hampered by poor transport.  **Government's taxation policies -**the peasants were still forced to bear the heavy burden of the **poll tax,**which actually rose by 80% to pay for his other measures.  Despite improvements, **rail network still comparatively small** given size of Russia (GB still had one third more by 1880, despite being many, many times smaller) |

Analysis: *On balance, though Russia made important steps towards industrialization and economic modernization during Alexander II's reign, the rate of development was still slow, uneven and not handled in a way that would increase the standard of living for the majority.*

**4. The Growth of Opposition & Reaction**

*“The most dangerous moment for a bad government is when it begins to reform”* – Alexis de Tocqueville

In addition to the impact of the reforms above, one (possibly counter-intuitive) outcome of Alexander II’s actions was actually the growth of organised opposition groups (as opposed to the usual riots and rebellions that had been a regular feature of Russian history) throughout his reign. By now, you should have plenty of examples of why this came about – broadly speaking expectations had been raised among the poorer classes / radical activists and then far from fully met. On the other end of the scale, the Tsar’s traditional power base had been unnerved by the fact that there had been any change at all. (*See the later section on ‘Growth of Opposition Under Alexander II and Alexander III’ for detail on this).*

**It is, however, significant in explaining what is known as Alexander’s ‘reaction period’, which followed his initial reforms**. This can be seen in the backtracking he made in some areas of his reforms identified already in this section (education, law, censorship and to some extent in the dilution of the original emancipation proposals) – make sure you have identified these as part of your revision.

**5. Conclusion: Interpretations of Alexander II’s Reign**

There is no agreement among historians about Alexander II – the major debate is around the success of the emancipation (already covered). Here are two additional conclusions from historians attempting making overall judgments about Alexander II:

**1. Westwood:** “..no Russian ruler brought so much relief to so many… as did Alexander II”

**2. Seton-Watson:** Argued that Alexander II tried to have the best of both worlds – i.e. successful, liberal reform and autocracy. This goal would be impossible to achieve, as the two are mutually exclusive. His failure to establish the long term stability in Russia that was necessary to preserve Tsardom was therefore inevitable given this ambition.

The fact that historians are so divided show that the opportunity for debate (and therefore exam questions!) is abundant in this topic. You must make your own evaluation based on the evidence from all the areas in this chapter – this will very much depend on the criteria of success that you identify as being the most important.

**A cautionary note:** Be careful when using historiography in your essay. A carefully placed reference to a specific historian and use of an interpretation to construct your essay argument will certainly impress an examiner. However, simply regurgitating rote learned lists of quotations and interpretations will score **very badly** – use your awareness of the interpretations to help create **your** argument (and evidence to support it) which must **tightly focus on the specific question set**. Remember, these historians were not answering the same exam question you are, but some of their work may, or may not, help you to do so!

**NOW USE THIS GUIDE TO HELP YOU COMPLETE THE ‘TACKLED’ ESSAY PLANNING FRAMES ON WISDOM.**