While studying Alexander III for your exam, you must keep in mind the key areas of controversy that surround him. It is tempting to view him as the ‘bad one’, in contrast to the ‘Tsar Liberator’, but this is to only consider the two men from the shallowest of perspectives. As we have seen, Alexander II’s reputation as a great reformer is somewhat misplaced, and the same can be argued for his son’s reputation as a great reactionary.

By the end of you revision you should be able to address the following ‘big picture’ questions:

1. What motivated Alexander III?

2. How could you support the argument that he was a ‘reactionary’?

3. How could you argue that he was actually a reformer to a degree?

4. Was he successful? What citeria would you use?

5. What are the similarities and differences between him and Alexander II? Cut from the same cloth or a new kettle of fish?

Remember to use the TACKLED essay practice frames to develop understanding.

**What effect did the assassination of Alexander II have on Russia?**

The most obvious impact was that his son, **Alexander III**, came to power. Alexander III had watched his father’s attempts at reform actually lead to more opposition and, ultimately, his murder. The new Tsar was determined not to make the same mistake – he would work hard to roll back the reforms made by his father (as far as possible) and to strengthen the hold of the Romanov Tsars on Russia forever. Historians therefore describe him as a **reactionary. However, it is important to recognise that his guiding aim, that of preserving Tsardom, was actually in line with Alexander II – they therefore differed not in outlook but in strategy.**

Alexander III’s motto was “**Autocracy, orthodoxy and nationalism”.** By this he meant that he would do all he could to increase his own power, the influence of the church and the traditional structure of society, and to make all of the different peoples of the Russian Empire more ‘Russian’.

**What was the influence of Pobedonostev?**

**Pobedonostev** was an aristocrat who fully agreed with Alexander III’s reactionary goals for Russia. He was very intelligent and effective at getting things done. Alexander III made him head of the Orthodox Church and he became the Tsar’s right hand man. Together, they would introduce a series of reactionary measures that would go a long way to achieving the goals of “autocracy, orthodoxy and nationalism”.

**Evidence that Alexander III was a ‘reactionary’:**

1. Given his political convictions and his wish to send a clear message to opponents of Tsardom, Alexander III **started his reign with a strong statement of conservative reaction.**The terrorists responsible for his father's death were **executed**, and **10,000 suspected opponents across the country were arrested**.  Greater **censorship** was re-introduced and his father's plans for a written constitution and further reform were immediately scrapped.

2. The conservative nature of Alexander's rule shown in his early actions as Tsar was confirmed and given formal shape in his*"****Manifesto of Unshakeable Autocracy"***issued to the nation in April 1881.  This document clearly showed the influence of **Pobedonostsev** in its **rejection of democracy and further reform**, and the intent to have ***"full faith in the justice and strength of the autocracy"***that he believed God had bestowed upon him.  This manifesto (and possibly also the fact that he took his motto as that of Nicholas 1's: ***'Autocracy, Orthodoxy and Nationality'***) made Alexander III extremely unpopular with Russia's educated Westernized population, and liberal government ministers of his father's reign resigned in protest (including Loris-Melikov).

**Between 1881 and 1894 Alexander III and his government followed a series of policies that made conservative adjustments to his father's reforms in the 1860s:**

**1. LOCAL GOVERNMENT:**radical plans to destroy the *zemstva*completely were dropped, but the introduction of ***Land Captains*** and **changes in the voting system**served to **strengthen autocracy and the position of the nobility in the countryside**and **reduce peasant self-government.**The **Land Captains**were introduced in 1889, and as they were drawn solely from the **nobility, had total authority in local administration**and could thus **override the authority of the zemstva**they contradicted Alexander II's earlier local government reforms.  Similarly, given the conservative dislike of democracy and elected assemblies, new laws were introduced in 1890 and 1892 to alter the electorate and **reduce the popular vote in rural and urban elections**- for example, in St Petersburg the electorate was reduced by 2/3 from 21,000 to 7,000 following these reforms.

**2. PEASANTRY AND SOCIAL POLICY:** the peasants experienced the Land Captains and other aspects of Alexander's rule as so repressive that **some feared that he planned to re-instate the institution of serfdom.**A clear example of this repression, that shows Alexander's fear and attempt to control them, was his move in 1893 to **ban peasants from leaving the Mir**, placing a complete restriction on their freedom to move and **strengthening the control the Mir exerted over individual peasants.**

**3. POWERS OF THE STATE AND REPRESSION:**following the assassination the 1881 **Statute of State Security**gave the government more powers to pursue revolutionaries.  This gave the state the power to declare any part of the country under "extraordinary protection" and thereby **ban public gatherings, close schools and universities and charge and individual for political crimes.**The powers of the Secret Police were also extended to allow them to **imprison suspected opponents of the state without trial**, and**conditions in prisons were made more severe.**

**4. CENSORSHIP: was increased,**as the government attempted to limit the circulation of 'harmful' ideas in newspapers, books and libraries, and **education came under closer government control**in the attempt to further limit opposition and revolutionary ideas.  **Universities lost some of the independence** granted to them under Alexander II, while the **raising of school fees**was a deliberate ploy to keep lower-class children out of primary and secondary education.   Podenostsev believed firmly that education for peasant children was both a waste of time and resources, depriving their parents of help at home while failing to prepare them for their future lives in agriculture.

**5. RUSSIFICATION AND ANTI-SEMITISM:**under Podonostsev's influence and position as the Procurator of the Holy Synod (state head of Orthodox Church), a strict policy of *Russification*was followed towards the non-Russian groups of the empire.  This policy of suppressing local cultures and promoting Russian characteristics was not invented by Alexander III, but it was applied with new determination in his reign.  Worse affected by this cultural nationalism was the Jewish population, who faced **anti-semitic prejudice and oppression.**Anti-semitic legislation banned Jews from the civil service, limited their education opportunities and where they could live, while the government was happy to **encourage violence and pogroms against Jewish communities**as a means of diverting popular discontent.

**Counter – view: Evidence Alexander III was NOT just a reactionary**

Although there is clearly no shortage of evidence of Alexander III's conservatism, it would be **wrong** to dismiss him completely as a backward-looking reactionary.  He was well**aware of the need to modernize Russia's economy**, and in this sphere his reign saw some **impressive, and even progressive, change**.  Though he resisted social and political change wherever possible, he didn't reject reform completely, and some of his economic policies built on the work started by his father when he emancipated the serfs.

1. Alexander III's first Minister of Finance, **Nikolai Bunge,** was a reformer who introduced important changes between 1881 and 1887.  He created the **Peasants' Land Bank in 1882**to help peasants purchase their own farms, which was so successful that by 1904 peasants had bought 1/3 of the nobility's land.  He also **abolished the Poll Tax,**paid only by peasants, in 1886, which helped to reduce the financial burden the peasants faced.

2. Faced with the expansion of major cities and an increase in urban strikes, Bunge tried to reduce the appeal of socialism by offering **limited concessions to the workers**in the shape of laws to protect their rights at work.  Between 1883 and 1885 he introduced **laws to improve working conditions for women and children,**and in 1886 there was further **labour legislation concerning payment and dismissal**to protect the workers.  However, it should also be noted that there were only **300 inspectors for the whole of Russia**so there was little way of actually enforcing these laws, which were therefore largely ineffective.

3. Bunge's replacement as Finance Minister, [**Ivan Vyshnegradsky**](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ivan_Vyshnegradsky), was less interested in social reform and workers' rights and focused entirely on **industrializing Russia at whatever the cost.**He launched a huge export drive of grain and secured an important French loan to fund this industrialization drive, and by **1892 the Russian state had a *budget surplus*for the first time ever**- though this was achieved at massive social cost.  Between 1881 and 1894 **coal production**in Russia almost doubled, while the production of **pig-iron**was more than double - clear indications of a successful industrialization drive.

**How successful was Alexander III?**

When we judge how successful someone like Alexander III was, we have to think about what he set out to achieve. In an essay, you would have to establish a criteria that works for the question. Here are some broad consequences to get you started:

1. Supporters of Alexander III argued that his firm policies allowed a **period of stability** which allowed the Russian state to be strengthened and for Russian pride to be restored after the turbulence of the 1860s.  According to this view, the **lack of revolutionary disturbances** during Alexander's reign was seen as proof that his repression of opposition had been successful, and these supporters celebrated Alexander III as a great ***peacemaker.***

2. However, while an appearance of peace might be true in the short term, in the longer-term this was a fragile illusion - **repression would only encourage the growth of further and more extreme opposition to the Tsarist regime**.  The clearest example of this is the case of Lenin: the execution in 1887 of his elder brother, Alexander Ulyanov, for his role in a bomb plot to kill Alexander III, played an important role in driving the 17 year old Vladimir Ilyich Ulanov towards **political radicalism and revolutionary Marxism**, which would in due course have massive consequences for the future of Russia and the fate of the Romanov dynasty.

3. While successful economic policies led to improved government finances during Alexander's reign, this was achieved at **massive social cost.**In particular, Finance Minister Vyshnedgradsky's focus on exporting grain to fund industrialization - ***in his words, "we must go hungry, but export"***- contributed to the **severe famine of 1891-2 that cost the lives of between 1.5 and 2 million peasants**.  Politically, the **government's failure to respond effectively** to relieve the suffering caused by the famine **encouraged support for revolutionary opposition movements**, while the important role played by the zemstva in managing the relief effort demonstrated a new 'responsible' liberal strand of opposition to the Tsardom, which in turn led to pressure for greater democracy.

**INTERPRETATIONS: The Tsar Liberator v/s the Great Reactionary? Really?**

Should you be given the fairly typical exam question that asks you to compare and contrast the reigns of Alexander III and his father, rather than repeating the standard view that simply contrasts Alexander II the 'Tsar Liberator' with Alexander III the 'conservative reactionary' you might want to consider the following, slightly more interesting lines of argument to try and impress the examiner with.  Of course, in some ways Alexander III did indeed reverse his father's reforms, **BUT:**

* Though Alexander II might have liberated the serfs and made some 'liberal' reforms in the 1860s, in many ways **he was just as much of a reactionary as his son**.  (Think back to the limitations of Alexander II's reforms, his disillusions with the response to the reforms and his imprisoning of political opponents!)  With this in mind, it is difficult to maintain that Alexander II was actually much of a liberal at all, so that this part of the contrast with his son collapses.  Indeed, it can be argued that **both shared and pursued similar aims**: **strengthening the autocracy** and improving Russia's international standing.
* Though Alexander III did undermine the limited social and political reforms made by his father in the 1860s, his policies in the 1880s and 90s made important steps towards the **economic modernization of Russia,**particularly in relation to **industrialization.**In some respects, it might even be possible to argue that the traditional view can be turned on its head and that **Alexander III was a reformer** where **Alexander II was a reactionary** - though you must be careful not to take this too far, you need to preserve a **balanced view** and a **sense of perspective** in your answer.  Keep your argument closely pinned to the **evidence** you can support it with in your essays!