**Key dates and events:**  
  
**1857 -** Alexander Herzen, *The Bell,* critical of Western developments and industrial capitalism.

**1863 -** Nikolai Chernyshevsky, *What is to be done? -* socialist pamphlet with guidelines on revolutionary activism.  
Polish Revolt.

**April 1866 -** First attempt on the Tsar Alexander II's life - Dmitri Karakozov, a disgruntled noble student.

**1873 - 74** - Narodniks and populism: 'going to the people'

**1876 -** More radical 'Land and Liberty' formed, under leadership of George Plekhanov.

**1879 -** Still more extreme 'The People's Will' set up (*narodnaya volya)* as 'land and liberty' splits into peaceful and violent factions over question of whether terror should be used in pursuit of their aims.

**1 March 1881 -** Assassination of Alexander II at the hands of 'The People's Will' led by Mikhailov.

**1886 -** Execution of Alexander Ulyanov, a student part of a group aiming to kill Alexander III. This was Lenin's older brother.

**Why did opposition grow? What did they oppose?**

* **Nationalities**: Polish revolt, 1863. Polish desire for land reform, and re-establishing Polish nationhood, led to unrest and demonstrations killing 200. Planned conscription of Poles into the Russian army led to armed rebellion in February 1863, which lasted a year across the countryside before it was put down by granting land reform. This showed that non-Russian nationalist aspirations within the Russian Empire were not possible, and contributed to the adoption of Russification policies in the future.
* **Ideological rejection of the regime:** nihilists who argued for a total rejection of existing institutions and moral values, in favour of unrestricted individual freedom. Turgenev's novel: "*A nihilist is a man who does not bow before any authorities, who does not accept a single principle on trust".* (1862) Mikhail Bakunin's anarchist political philosophy preached overthrowing the regime by violence, and replacing it with the self-governing form of the peasant commune.
* **Slavophile argument against Western capitalism:** linked to the above, an ideological rejection of development towards greater industrial development along Western lines and greater centralised state power. Instead, preserving the specifically Russian institution of the *mir* (peasant commune) was put forward as a goal for the future - see 'Populists' below.
* **Political opposition:** radical demands for a written constitution and a national parliament, to limit the autocracy and allow the people a greater political role.
* **Emancipation of the serfs:** nobility resented the loss of a third of their land (though they were compensated for this, much of this went to pay off existing debts) and a loss of their social influence and prestige; peasants resented that they had less land than before, but now had to pay redemption taxes for this! 647 incidents of peasant uprisings after the edict was issued - i.e. Bezdna. To the intelligenstia, the limited nature of the reform showed that Alexander II was incapable of meeting the needs of ordinary Russians, and it therefore caused more revolutionary activity against the state.

**What was the nature of this opposition?**

* intellectual, exclusive and secretive - educated and middle classes, not peasants or workers.
* universities - students! Idealistic youth - gentry and middle class- of the *narodniks* in the 1870s.
* unorganised, sporadic local uprisings of the peasantry - i.e. 647 incidents of rioting in four months after the emancipation edict in 1861.

**Aims and actions of key opposition groups:**

* **Populism -** leaders drawn from the middle and upper classes, developed as an ideology out of slavophile thinking of the 1860s, such as Alexander Herzen. These populists disliked Tsarist autocracy and wished to replace it with local government based on the *mir,* the village commune - a very Russian form of local democracy. For the populists - the *narodniks* - were agrarian socialists who idealised Russia's agricultural past, and rejected capitalism and industrialism as destroyers of peasant communities. In populist thought, the *mir* was to be the democratic model around which Russia's socialist future could be built.
* **Populist disagreement about how revolution should be achieved:** Peter Lavrov and moderates who argued for gradual change via educating the peasants which would evolve towards the withering away of the state vs more extremists, such as Chernyshevsky, who wanted more direct action to be taken now to seize revolution (mirroring later debates between Bolsheviks and other socialists about the timing of the revolution).
* **'Going to the people', 1873 - 74 -** the populist campaign, following Herzen's ideas, that saw thousands of intellectuals and students going out into the countryside to spread the idea of a socialist revolution to the peasants. However, very little was achieved to this end. The movement lacked clear central organisation, and campaigners had diverse aims: some wished to spread revolutionary propaganda, but some wished to spend time with the peasants to learn their ways. The peasants did not receive the positives favourably, and many called the police - leading to hundreds of the *narodniki* to be arrested. Clearly, as Marx had argued and as Lenin would later be aware, the peasants did not at this point possess sufficient 'revolutionary consciousness' to consider revolution a viable option!
* **'Land and liberty', 1876 -** failure of the 'going to the people' led to disappointment and the discrediting of the moderate populists, which then drove the movement towards terrorism and political violence as 'land and liberty' was formed. Vera Zasulich shot and wounded the governor of St Petersburg, and then managed to be found 'not guilty' in her trial, which shocked AII and drove him to hold such political cases behind closed doors.
* **'The People's Will' (*narodna volya*), 1879 -** still more extreme organisation developed after 'land and liberty' broke up. 'People's will' argued that social revolution would not be possible without first achieving a political revolution. Its programme aimed to rescue Russia from the autocracy and demanded key democratic reforms: national constitution, universal suffrage, freedom of speech and press, local self-government and national self-determination. Their use of political terror culminated in the assassination of Alexander II in 1881, but ironically this allowed Alexander III to crack down on opposition movements and many leading figures of the People's Will were imprisoned. So their violent opposition to autocracy succeeded in increasing tsarist oppression and persecution of anyone who dared to oppose the autocracy!

**How extensive and effective was this opposition?**

* Given the need for such opposition to remain secretive and underground in order to survive, it is difficult to accurately assess the extent of it. However, for most of the above movements the number of members and supporters ranged from a couple of hundred to a few thousand.
* Judged against the aims they hoped to achieve, the opposition movements during the reign of Alexander must be seen as largely ineffective. Even though they succeeded in killing the Tsar, little was achieved in terms of reducing the power of the autocracy or gaining the support of the peasantry for a revolutionary uprising against the state.
* These opposition groups were significant, however, insofar as they 'laid the groundwork' for later revolutionaries and raised central issues that had had to be addressed - such as were the peasants ready for a revolution? Should political violence be used against the state? Who should lead the revolution? What role should the small group of dedicated revolutionaries, as put forward by Chernyshevsky, play in all this? Clearly, such considerations had an impact on Lenin and the Bolsheviks.

**Why did it not achieve greater success?**

* its nature (secretive) meant that revolutionary opposition could not mobilise peasant discontent, the greatest threat to stability.
* no practical alternative to existing regime offered - lack of political tradition in Russia, meant that opposition thinking tended to be utopian in character, rather than rooted in realities of governing a state.
* no clear united front of opposition - but various different, often conflicting, strands of thought about 'what is to be done'!
* conservative interests too strong - even if nobility might have been cross with Alexander after the emancipation, they were still not going to support revolutionary opposition against him!
* The People's Will might have succeeded in killing AII in 1881, but this did not lead to greater reform or revolution - instead it strengthened the resolve of the establishment to clamp down on opposition, as seen with the harsh treatment of revolutionaries during Alexander III's reign.