

Volume 21, Number 4, April 2019

Revision

Alexander II: the tsar-liberator

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Consider the following question on the topic of the Alexander II, then take a look at the sample student response and examiner's commentary (in red).

Question

How successful were the reforms of Alexander II?

Student answer with commentary

In order to assess the success of Alexander's numerous reforms it is important to consider his aims. His major concerns were to preserve autocracy, the support of the nobility, placate the peasantry, modernise the country and prevent revolution following a humiliating defeat in the Crimean War of 1855. It appears that Alexander's reforms were far-reaching with the most famous, the Emancipation Act of 1861, earning him the title 'tsar-liberator' and suggesting that he would at least have been popular and successful in dealing with the peasantry. Other areas, such as the army, education, the legal system and local government also saw significant change and would do much to secure the regime at least in the short term.

The opening paragraph outlines Alexander II's aims, providing a set of criteria against which his success can be judged. The response also outlines the debate, suggesting that the reforms, particularly the Emancipation Act are usually viewed as a success. It also offers the view that at least in the short term the reforms were a success as they secured the regime.

In the short term, Alexander's reforms appear to be a success as he was able to prevent revolution from below and lessen what was believed to be a considerable challenge to the autocratic system from the peasantry or 'dark masses.' His reforms led to a decline in peasant unrest that had been growing during the reign of his predecessors. Alexander was also successful in getting the nobility to accept change and by insisting that they drew up measures for emancipation ensured that they had to take responsibility for the outcome. He was also able to use the reforms to tighten control over the countryside, further securing the autocracy. Local government reform saw the establishment of land commandants and, along with the nobility maintaining control in the countryside, further achieving one of his major concerns of controlling the peasantry. However, although it would be unfair to argue that his reforms precipitated the downfall of autocracy in 1917 by dashing the expectations of many by not going far enough in terms of reform, it would be fair to argue that they failed to create the popular support which he might have expected. Despite the reforms there was unrest in Poland in 1863 and there were numerous attempts on the tsar's life, until he was finally assassinated in 1881. It could even be argued that the reforms failed to satisfy either the slavophiles or westerners within the country. The slavophiles thought that the abandonment of Russian values had gone too far, while the westerners thought that his reforms had not gone far enough to modernise the country. Alexander, at least in the short term, had preserved the autocracy, which was the major concern of all tsars. He had

tightened his control over the countryside, suggesting that the reforms were a success. He had also been able to win over the nobility, upon whose support he depended.

The response adopts a thematic approach and considers the success of the reforms for various groups within Russian society, starting with tsardom itself. The paragraph starts by arguing that the reforms can be viewed as a success for Alexander as he was able to stave off revolution while retaining the crucial support of the nobility. However, this view is balanced against his failure to win popular support, suggesting the reforms were less successful. The response then reaches a conclusion on the issue and reaches the judgement that the reforms were at least a short-term success for the tsar as they preserved autocracy.

The reforms were certainly successful in winning the support of the nobility. They gained considerable compensation from the Emancipation Act and were able to secure the better land. They were also able to preserve their local authority through the creation of the *zemstvas*, which they came to dominate. However, it might be suggested that Alexander's success in this area should be qualified. Many nobles were in so much debt before the Emancipation Act that they had to use the income to pay off debts and were therefore unable to invest in either agriculture or industry, and this limited the modernising of Russia. They also lost some of their privileges due to the army reforms, suggesting that reforms did little to enhance it.

The response then considers the success of the reforms in terms of the nobility. It suggests that although the tsar was able to placate them, providing them with apparent gains in terms of land and finance, the actual impact should be qualified as they were in debt and also lost privileges in the army. It concludes by arguing that the reforms were less successful in practice, even if the nobility continued to support the tsar.

The peasantry appeared to be beneficiaries of the reforms, particularly the Emancipation Act. However, this was not one of Alexander's aims and therefore it should not be surprising that on closer examination they did not gain. The Emancipation Act was not a success for them as the amount of good land available to them was limited and they were often forced into buying narrow strips which were difficult to maintain and produced low yields. Most were still tied to the land and simply replaced the jurisdiction of the local noble for the village *mir*, to which they became heavily indebted because of redemption payments for land which they believed was already theirs. Most saw the amount of land they farmed reduced, with on average a 4.1% decline, but this was even worse in the more fertile regions. However, for the tsar the measures were a success as peasant unrest declined and, over the next decades, there were rising yields. The peasants did benefit from some of the reforms as they were now able to marry, hold property and take action at law. The new legal system was fairer and less corrupt. Education opportunities were increased with the number of primary schools rising from 8,000 in 1856 to 23,000 by 1880 and there was a modernised curriculum. It would therefore appear that the reforms were a success for the tsar as unrest declined and productivity increased, while for the peasants the picture was more complex, with some benefits and some losses.

The response then considers the position of the peasants, for whom it argues the Emancipation Act was not a success, tying them to the village and burdening them with debts. However, this is balanced against the reduction in unrest — an aim of the tsar — and the benefits gained from the other reforms, such as the changes to the legal system and education. The paragraph concludes by arguing that the question of success in terms of the peasantry is more complex, with the tsar successful in controlling them, but with the peasants seeing some gains and some losses.

There has been much debate whether one of Alexander's aims was to modernise Russia, and if he did, whether he was successful. In terms of the economy it could be argued that the reforms failed as the movement of free labour, which was needed if the economy was to develop, was limited by the need for internal passports for any peasant wanting to move more than 20 miles. However, the fact some 2 to 3 million of these were issued to peasants who did not have land suggests there was a pool of labour available. Perhaps a bigger failure of the reforms were the redemption payments, which it can be argued meant peasants lacked an income with which to buy goods and thus stimulate the internal market. Similarly, the financial position saw little improvement as although there was financial reform much of the income that this generated was used to service debts rather than invest in economic development. There were however some successes in modernising Russia, most notably through the work of the *zemstvas* in education and in providing local services. The Crimean War had also shown that Russia needed to modernise, but victory, even if it was slow, in the Russo–Turkish War of 1877 suggested that progress had been made and Russia's attendance at the Congress of Berlin, even if it was a diplomatic failure, was still a sign that the nation was considered a major power. Despite these areas of success, Russia failed to modernise its economy because Alexander was more concerned with preserving the interests of the ruling social class, rather than promoting the ideas and views of the intelligentsia who were therefore alienated.

The response then considers the contentious issue of the modernisation of Russia. Historians have long debated whether the reforms were an attempt to modernise Russia after its defeat in the Crimean War. There is a balanced discussion of the impact and whether, if it was an aim, Russia was modernised. The response covers numerous issues, including economic development, finance and Russia's position as a major power in Europe. Despite success in some areas, the response concludes that modernisation was limited as the reforms did not go far enough because of Alexander's concern not to alienate the ruling social class.

The reforms did succeed in preserving the autocracy and unrest declined in the short term, but the emergence of groups such as the populists suggest that Alexander had not succeeded in stemming disquiet. However, when Alexander came to the throne in 1855 the country was in desperate need of reform. He was able to pass measures which were far reaching and more radical than anything that had gone before, but they did not go far enough to modernise the state. They alienated those who wanted greater progress and would ultimately have the opposite effect of that desired, seen in the emergence of the social revolutionaries, the descendants of the populists and the most popular insurgent group by the end of the century. The reforms propped up the regime and provided some short-term stability, but it did not last, suggesting the reforms had not succeeded. However, it was almost impossible to achieve the goals of social stability and modernisation and therefore success was almost unachievable.

The conclusion builds on the interim judgements made throughout the response and again provides a balanced discussion, concluding that they did bring some stability. However, the final sentence acknowledges that it was an almost impossible task to achieve the tsar's two main goals as they were incompatible, and success was therefore virtually unachievable.

The response is focused on the issue of success throughout and reaches a clear judgement on the issue, which would take it into the top levels of the mark scheme. The approach is interesting as it does not simply go through each reform and analyse them in terms of success, showing clearly that no set answer is required. It might be argued that more detail of some of the reforms is required, but sufficient knowledge is shown to give a clear indication that the student has a clear grasp of the

material and could provide further support if needed. It is a wide-ranging answer that adopts a different approach, and this should be rewarded.

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