

Tsar Alexander III: A Reassessment?

PART 1: The Reaction

1. Background – the Introduction of Emergency Rule

On the very day of his assassination, 1 March 1881, Alexander II had been planning to sign new laws that were intended both to further suppress insurgency to, but also to try to involve more Russians directly in the governance of the kingdom. This dual strategy had been developed with the guidance of General Loris-Melikov, and it reflected both the challenge of countering socialist revolutionary terrorism, but also the continuing desire to modernise the ruling system. In spite of modernising reforms to education, the law and the armed forces, the 1870s had been a highly destabilising and nervous decade. Repeated attempts had been made against the Tsar's life by the *Narodna Volya*, while the 1878 Congress of Berlin was seen as a humiliation of Russia's interests by the other European powers, who were anxious to prevent the collapse her enemy, Turkey. By this time, many of the other European powers feared Russian ambitions in the Black Sea and the Adriatic, and preferred to prop up the ailing Turkish empire against it.

From the moment of Alexander III's succession on the death of his father, the trend towards greater participation in government was abandoned, while the security measures were renewed with even greater severity. The sudden death of Alexander II renewed rivalries between the assassinated Tsar's ministers. Both the **Westernisers** and the **Slavophiles** wanted to continue reforms; the former looked to European models of political participation, while the latter sought remedies in the revival of historic Russian institutions. A third important force within Russian government circles was that of the Church. The government minister responsible for the church (known as the Procurator of the Holy Synod), **Pobedonostsev**, opposed any form of progress or modernisation, whether it was inspired by Westernising or Slavic ideas.

Under pressure from Pobedonostsev, Loris-Melikov was forced to resign, and was replaced as interior minister by the Slavophile Ignatiev. However, Ignatiev's proposals also failed to secure the support of the Tsar, and **Emergency Rule** was introduced. **Dimitri Tolstoy** became Interior Minister, and he set himself the task of further limiting the effects of the modernising laws of the previous reign. The **Department of the Police** and the **Corps of Gendarmes** were established in order to enforce the new reactionary policies. **Serge Zubatov** became one of the most important secret policemen of the Tsarist State. He introduced modern police practices such as **photographing suspects** and **finger-printing**. (He was so dedicated to serving the Tsarist state that, on hearing of the news Nicholas II's abdication in February 1917, he shot himself.)

2. The forms of Emergency Rule

- **14 August 1881:** Alexander III signed a royal decree introducing **Emergency Rule**.

Laws were enacted to enable the government to implement two forms of States of Emergency:

- **'Reinforced Safeguard'** – The Minister of Interior had the power to declare this. It conferred significant powers on state governors:
 - to imprison anyone up to 3 months and impose a fine of 400 roubles
 - to forbid all forms of political, cultural or social gatherings
 - to close down all businesses for as long as the state of Reinforced Safeguard lasted
 - to deny individuals the right to live in a particular area
 - to handover any suspected troublemakers to military justice (i.e. to be shot)
 - to order the dismissal of any paid employee of the zemstva, city governments or courts

- **'Emergency Safeguard'** – This gave the Minister for the Interior even more significant powers, in addition to **all of the above**:
 - to dismiss any elected officials of the zemstvo
 - to dismiss all but the most senior civil servants
 - to appoint a Commander in Chief with special powers
 - to impose fines of up to 3,000 roubles

Ten Russian provinces were put immediately under the State of Reinforced Safeguard. Although the laws that enabled both forms of emergency were supposed to be temporary, they were renewed every year and remained in force until the fall of the Tsar in February 1917.

- **12 March 1882**: The right of government surveillance over all individuals was introduced. This gave the police the power to control all aspects of the daily life of those under surveillance, including whether they should receive mail.

Effectively Russia had become a Police State. Punishments for any criticism of the Tsar, or any conspiracy against the Tsarist system, became more important than those for any other offences, including those of murder, mutilation and rape.

George Kennan, [an American diplomat and great-uncle to the same George Kennan who later wrote the famous telegram of 1946] wrote in 1889:

'If you are a Russian, and wish to establish a newspaper, you must ask the permission of the Minister of the Interior. If you wish to open a Sunday-school, or any other sort of school, whether in a neglected slum of St Petersburg or in a native village in Kamchatka, you must ask the permission of the Minister of Public Instruction.

... The police, with the Minister of the Interior at their head, control, by means of passports, the movements of all the inhabitants of the Empire; they keep thousands of suspects constantly under surveillance; they ascertain and certify to the courts the liabilities of bankrupts; they conduct pawnbrokers' sales of unredeemed pledges; they give certificates of identity to pensioners and all other persons who need them; they superintend repairs of roads and bridges; they exercise supervision over all theatrical performances, concerts ... theatre programmes, posters and street advertisements; they collect statistics, enforce sanitary regulations, make searches and seizures in private houses, read the correspondence of suspects, take charge of the bodies of persons found dead, admonish members who neglect too long to partake of the Holy Communion, and enforce obedience to thousands of multifarious orders and regulations intended to promote the welfare of the people or to insure the safety of the state. The legislation relating to the police fills more than five thousand sections of the collection of Russian laws, and it is hardly an exaggeration to say that in the peasant villages, away from centres of education and enlightenment, the police are the omnipresent and omnipotent regulators of all human conduct – a sort of incompetent bureaucratic substitute for divine providence.'

3. The use of exile as a form of punishment

The Russian government had a range of penalties and punishments at its disposal for the policing and punishment of opposition. The penalty of **internal exile** would become one of the most significant to be used by the Tsarist system.

- First level exile: enforced life in the countryside, under police surveillance
- Second level exile: Enforced settlement in Siberia, but with the freedom to farm and earn a living

- Third level exile: Hard labour in Siberia

All forms of exile became increasingly important, both as a form of punishment and as a profitable source of labour for the Tsarist State.

- By 1887 the Ministry of the Interior made a profit of 166,000 roubles from the proceeds of business carried out by forced labourers.
- By 1898 there were 300,000 exiles of all types, and 10,688 serving hard labour sentences.

4. How far did the repressive policies of Alexander III increase the stability of the tsarist autocracy?

Following the introduction of Emergency Rule, there was a wave of arrests across the Russian Empire. By 1883 the *Narodnya Volya* had been broken up and most of its leaders had been imprisoned or exiled.

In 1887 conspirators made a failed attempt against the life of Alexander III. One of the executed conspirators was Alexander Ulyanov, the brother of the future Bolshevik leader and revolutionary leader, Vladimir Ulyanov (Lenin).

Historian Anatole Mazour argues: 'By the end of the reign of Alexander III the underground movement and terrorist activities subsided to a point that did not imperil the regime.'

However, not all historians have agreed on the degree and effectiveness of repression during Alexander III's reign.

R. Pipes, *Russia under the Old Regime*, p. 313.

'Yet, when all is said and done, it would be difficult to maintain that imperial Russia was a full-blown police state; it was rather a forerunner, a rough prototype of such a regime, which fell short of its full potential. The system had too many loopholes. Most of these resulted from the assimilation by the Russian ruling elite of western institutions and western values, which though incompatible with the patrimonial spirit, they were unwilling to give up. Such loopholes quickly vitiated the elaborate set of repressive measures, introduced in the 1870s and 1880s.

Of these counterforces perhaps the most important was private property. The institution came late to Russia, but once introduced it soon made itself thoroughly at home. While harassing its subjects for the slightest political offences, the imperial regime was very careful not to violate their property rights.

... Another loophole was foreign travel... Russians travelled frequently in Western Europe and stayed there for long periods of time; in 1900 for instance, 200,000 Russian citizens spent abroad an average of 80 days. In Wilhelmian Germany, they constituted the largest contingent of foreign students. To obtain a passport valid for travel abroad one merely had to send an application with a small fee to the local governor. Passports were readily granted even to individuals with known subversive records, evidently on the assumption that they would cause less trouble abroad than at home...

.....Thirdly, there were powerful factors of a cultural nature inhibiting the full use of repression. The elite ruling imperial Russia was brought up in the western spirit, and it dreaded disgrace. It hesitated to act too harshly for fear of being ridiculed by the civilised world. It was embarrassed to appear even in its own eyes as behaving in an 'Asiatic' manner.

Q. How far does the evidence support the conventional model of Alexander III's Russia as a repressive and regressive state?

PART II: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS DURING THE REIGN OF ALEXANDER III

1. Background – economic growth since the mid-century

From the reign of Nicholas I, the governments of Russia had identified economic development as a crucial priority. Regardless of whether they were politically conservative or modernising, slavophile or westernising, the servants of the Tsarist state recognised the need for economic development.

Although starting from a low base compared to Britain and the USA, Russia achieved rapid rates of growth in the second half of the 19th century. Alexander II's Finance Minister, **Reutern**, had pursued a threefold strategy: (i) railway construction; (ii) attracting foreign industrialists to invest in Russia; (iii) attracting foreign investment in Russia.

- Between 1861-1885 Russia achieved an annual growth rate of industrial output of 6%.
- Between 1866-1879 the number of Russians employed working in mechanical cotton factories rose from 95,000 to 163,000.
- Between 1862-1878 open track railway lines increased from 3,500 to 22,500 km.

2. The Economic Policies of Bunge (1882-1886), Vyshnegradsky (1887-1892) and Witte (1893-1903)

(i) Bunge

The new finance minister, Bunge, believed that too much power had been put into the hands of private business during the years of his predecessor, Reutern. Private railway companies were driven out, and the growing railway network was placed under state control.

In spite of the generally conservative and repressive tone of Alexander III's rule, this was a period of economic modernisation. Regressive forms of taxation (those taxes that penalised the poor most harshly), were abolished.

- **1881:** Salt Tax was abolished
- **1886:** The Poll Tax was abolished
- By 1886 direct taxes had been reduced to 1/3 of the level of 1862.
- The burden of redemption debt was cut by 6%.

(ii) The consequences of Bunge's policies

Although Bunge's policies were notably liberal, they were not always beneficial to the economy. The government's spending priorities were slanted too far to favouring the army (30% of the national budget), and not enough was invested in the railways (10% of the national budget). This growth in army expenditure reflected Russia's increasing concern over the military modernisation of its neighbours, and the increasing hostility of many Western powers including Britain.

Another consequence of Bunge's policies was **deflation**, a decline in prices and a reduction in the amount of money flowing around the Russian economy. However, this did starve Russian industry at a time when it needed considerable investment to maintain its growth.

(iii) Vyshnegradsky

During the 1890s Vyshnegradsky, the successor to Bunge, pursued a policy of building up Russia's gold reserves. In the 1890s the French and German banks speculated against the value of the rouble, and Vyshnegradsky was concerned to preserve its value. These purchases of gold helped the Russian government to balance its budget, and by the 1890s the government was running a current accounts surplus.

(iv) Witte

By the time that Witte came into power as finance minister, the state sector in Russia had grown enormously, and was greater even than that in Prussia. Witte wanted to re-balance the Russian economy, and achieve more of a spread between private enterprise and the state sector.

Witte's main priorities were:

- Massive increase in the growth of railways
- State encouragement for the development of heavy industry, especially steel production
- To increase foreign private investment in Russia
- To encourage the development of a managerial elite capable of effectively controlling the new economy.

Witte's policies did enjoy considerable success, and supported the development of the economy more effectively than those of Vyshnegradsky, who had been obsessed with building gold reserves at the expense of liquidity in the economy.

C. Trebilcock, *The Industrialisation of the Continental Powers, 1780-1914* (1980), p. 233.

In aggregate, it is clear that the Russian economy, and particularly its heavy industries, responded positively to these measures: during the Witte era, coal production doubled, while that of iron ore and steel increased by about fourfold; by 1900 Russia had ousted France from the fourth rank in world iron production and had taken the fifth rank in steel manufacture. The supporting railway provision expanded by 87 per cent between 1892 and 1903, and some advanced technologies crystallized rapidly around the core of the capital goods sector: oil extraction raised its outflow by better than threefold and chemicals by nearly threefold between 1887 and 1898. Foreign capital, the lifeblood of this development, pumped in at the phenomenal average annual rate increase of 120 per cent between 1893 and 1898, and the yearly allocation of funds to new enterprise expanded by sevenfold through the 1890s. The total yield, in terms of income derived from industrial activity, quadrupled between 1888/1893 and 1893/1897 (from 42 m. roubles to 161 m. roubles) and, in terms of average annual growth of industrial production, composed a rate of 7.5 per cent, far exceeding Russian achievement for any comparable period before 1914 and establishing one of the most impressive performances in late nineteenth century Europe.

Q. What evidence is there to support the view that the Russian economy under Alexander III experienced "one of the most impressive performances in late nineteenth century Europe?"

3. The railway expansion

By 1892 the main economic hubs of western Russia had been linked by a railway network. Although the most famous line was the Trans-Siberian, by far the most important were those that linked the economically productive areas with ports and cities. For example, the coal producing areas of Donets were now linked to the factories of the Ukraine. In Western Russia, where Witte had concentrated his expenditure, the sudden growth in Russian railways was the most significant of the later 19th century.

As well as enabling cotton producers from Tashkent to ship their harvest to Russia's ports, the railways also enabled the growth of the internal economy. The wheat producing areas of the North Caucasus and Lower Volga were now linked to consumers in the large urban areas.

- By 1892 The total extent of the network had reached 52,000 kilometres.

Russian railways: construction of track, running total in km.

1886	25, 282
1891	28,809
1896	37, 179
1901	51, 937
1906	58, 285
1911	61, 684

While the growth of the railways under Alexander III and Nicholas II seems impressive, economic advantage was not the sole motivation. Railways were becoming increasingly integral to military planning, and the wars of German Unification against Austria and France had shown that rapid mobilisation of the army was essential to modern warfare. Of course, the railways could also be used to move troops inside Russia for the policing of internal discontent.

The 1880s and 1890s were a period of transformation for the economy, but there were also a significant social impact. Big businesses sucked large numbers of people into manufacturing areas, driving up wage costs and causing shortages of skilled labour in other areas of the economy

4. The rouble, the gold standard and state finance

Whereas Bunge had deliberately lowered taxes, Witte followed Vyshnegradsky and raised tax revenues in order to fund investment and also to purchase gold reserves.

In January 1897 the rouble was formally pegged to the value of gold, known as the Gold Standard. Witte hoped that this would encourage foreign investors to gain confidence in the rouble and invest in Russia, but the results were not impressive.

Moreover, some economic historians have recently criticised the Witte administration for being costly and inefficient. Administrative costs alone consumed 19% of the state budget in 1894, capital which could have been used to fund further modernisation.

5. Agriculture

While industry saw considerable innovation and investment during the reign of Alexander III, there was more of a mixed picture in agriculture. Due to the security issues surrounding Emancipation and the perceived threat of unrest and revolution from the countryside, agriculture came under the control of the **Interior Ministry**.

Its main interests were securing taxes from the peasants and ensuring that they remained politically quiescent. However, these policies were disastrous in their effects.

1889: Land Commandants were appointed, with the power to overrule the local decisions taken by the Mir and the Zemstvo. These **Land Commandants** were often members of the local nobility, and so this represented a partial recovery of the authority that they had lost with Emancipation in 1861.

- Rural taxes went up
- Debt and redemption payments continued to cripple the peasants
- **State procurement also grew: the forced purchase of what for export was 25% of the total crop by the end of Alexander III's reign.**

State procurements of wheat and grain drove up prices for peasant consumers, who were already suffering under high taxes and debt.

Trebilcock: *'For agriculture the Witte system was a disaster ... The actual tasks assigned to agriculture were the traditional ones: to stagnate, to remain subservient, to render tribute.'*

Two views on the economic policies of Sergei Witte

Strengths	Limitations
A bold moderniser who invested heavily in railways	Witte's obsession with building gold reserves relied on punitively high taxes
Understood the need to attract foreign capital into Russia	Agriculture was ignored and peasants were left to stagnate
His policies helped to develop Russia's internal and external markets	The costs of government grew and became increasingly inefficient

Trebilcock: *'Generally, Witte's system travelled far and fast but not sufficiently deeply into Russian economy and society. Partly the values of the regime prevented it from doing so ... As Prince Mencherskii acutely saw, "Witte was an insufficiently contemporary minister of finance, and too much of a future one." In this interpretation, close to Von Laue's vision of Witte as "a precursor to Stalin", the developmental tsar was precocious in the scope of his economic vision, but equipped with the all too frail economic instruments of his day.'*

Q. How far does the evidence for economic performance challenge the conventional view the reign of Alexander III as a regressive phase in Russian History?