**Perspectives on Emancipation**

'Emancipation was intended to give Russia economic and social stability and thus prepare the way for its industrial and commercial growth. But it ended in failure. It both frightened the privileged classes and disappointed the progressives. It went too far for those slavophiles in the court who wanted Russia to cling to its old ways and avoid the corruption that came with western modernity. It did not go far enough for those progressives who believed that a major social transformation was needed in Russia.

There is a larger historical perspective. It is suggested by many historians that, for at least a century before its collapse in the Revolution of 1917, imperial Russia had been in institutional crisis; the tsarist system had been unable to find workable solutions to the problems that faced it. If it was to modernise itself, that is to say if it was to develop its agriculture and industry to the point where it could sustain its growing population and compete on equal terms with its European and Asian neighbours and international competitors, it would need to modify its existing institutions. This it proved unable or unwilling to do.

Therein lies the tragedy of Emancipation. It is an outstanding example of tsarist ineptitude. Its introduction held out the possibility that Russia could build on this fundamentally progressive measure and modify its agricultural economy in such a manner as to cater for its vast population, which doubled to 125 million during the second half of the 19th century. But the chance was lost. So reduced was the peasant as an agricultural worker by 1900 that only half of his meagre income came from farming. He had to sustain himself by labouring. So much for Alexander II’s claim that he viewed the task of improving the condition of the peasants as ‘a sacred inheritance’ to which he was honour bound.'

- Michael Lynch, *The Emancipation of the Russian serfs* (2003)

'The Emancipation Act has been subjected to withering criticism over the decades. Its failure to satisfy either the nobility or the peasantry was obvious from the start. It has been blamed for many of the subsequent disasters in Russian history. Yet, the criticism seems unfair to say the least. The achievements of the emancipation were staggering. Twenty-two million people were emancipated, virtually without violence, from a form of slavery. A similar Act two years later freed another 23 million people. The contrast with the United States undergoing its own traumatic emancipation process at the same time is striking. The Emancipation Act was the foundation stone of a modern state, giving the empire the possibility of developing into a state based on law and citizens rather than despotism and bondsmen.'

- Shane O'Rourke, *Emancipation in Russia* (2006)

- What are the similarities and differences in these perspectives on Emancipation?

- Research task - Who are these historians? Can you uncover why they disagree?