**Alexander III of Russia**

**The calm and stability of the Tsar in 1881 meant no new dawn for Russia, but an era of Counter-Reform, writes W. Bruce Lincoln.**

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**Tsar Alexander III of Russia. Photograph by Sergey Levitsky**

*‘The nightmare that weighed over Russia for so many years had at last been lifted....  
An overwhelming weight had fallen from our shoulders. Reaction was at an end. The dawn of the New Russia was at hand.’*

These were the words with which Vera Figner, one of the young terrorists who assassinated the Emperor Alexander II on March 1st, 1881, described her reaction to his death. Yet, Vera Figner’s ecstatic optimism could not have been farther off the mark; the assassinated Emperor was succeeded by his son, Alexander III, and with him came the last great surge of social and political reaction that Russia was to know during the Imperial period of her history.

Russia embarked upon what is often regarded as the ‘Era of Counter-Reforms’ in which the Great Reforms, that had heralded her efforts at social and political reconstruction in the decade after the Crimean War, were in varying degrees eroded. Censorship became more rigid, driving numbers of progressive and moderate journals and periodicals out of existence, while access to education for Russia’s lower classes was sharply curtailed on the grounds that Russians should be educated in accordance with their social station.

As Alexander III’s Minister of Public Instruction, I. D. Delianov, wrote a few years later, all but the most rudimentary education was dangerous for children of lower class origin because it bred in them ‘contempt for parents, dissatisfaction with their own station, and bitterness toward the... inevitable inequality in the financial position of various social groups’.

Yet the reign of Alexander III also saw considerable progress, though not of the sort that Russia’s revolutionaries had envisaged. Alexander III and his advisers achieved much economic progress, and it was during his reign that Russia’s first great industrial boom began. Russia’s rail network, which her Emperor and his planners had first begun to develop in earnest in the 1870s, was greatly expanded during Alexander III’s reign.

The Empire’s heavy industry grew rapidly during these years as well and, by the time of Alexander’s death in 1894, Russia had fully entered the age of the Industrial Revolution. Alexander III’s reign thus was marked by reaction, designed to crush the social and political turmoil which Russia had known in the 1870s, while, at the same time, industry flourished and was fostered by all branches of the government, especially the ministries of Finance and Interior.

Alexander III had not been born to rule Russia, however. Born on February 26th, 1845, he was the second son of Alexander II and his Empress Mariia Aleksandrovna. He therefore received the traditional education of a Russian Grand Duke; he was not at first trained in the science of statecraft, but in the art of military command. His early education thus subjected Alexander to all the rigid influences that were so much a part of the Russian military establishment, for the unyielding militarism, so pervasive in the lives of young Russian Grand Dukes ever since the accession of Paul I in the late eighteenth century, was still very much in evidence at the Russian Court during his childhood years.

Alexander III’s childhood spanned the last decade of the Nicholas system in Russia. It saw the repression that set in as a reaction to the revolutions of 1848 in western Europe, and the great mobilization of Russia’s cumbersome military forces to meet the western Allies’ challenge in the Crimean War. These events would leave a lasting mark upon his character. More than any Russian monarch since Nicholas I, Alexander believed in the precepts of‘Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality’, laid down by Nicholas’s Minister of Public Instruction, S. S. Uvarov, as the model to which Russian life should conform. And, like Nicholas I, Alexander stressed autocracy as the most important element in Uvarov’s trilogy.

It was not until he had passed his twentieth birthday, in 1865, that Alexander ceased being simply another Grand Duke and became Heir Apparent. In that year, his elder brother, Grand Duke Nikolai Aleksandrovich, died of consumption, and Alexander, who at best regarded himself as simply a ‘conscientious regimental commander’, replaced him as heir to the Russian throne. He was awkward, unimaginative, and, as time would prove, a mediocre army commander.

One contemporary, the British correspondent Dillon, described him as being ‘built like a butcher, powerful and extremely muscular. In his youth, he could straighten horseshoes with his bare hands and smash in doors with his shoulders. His body was huge and unwieldy, and his movements clumsy, partly the result of his almost morbid shyness.’

But like his grandfather Nicholas I, Alexander was consumed by a sense of duty and a conviction that fate or, in his view, the hand of God, had singled him out to rule Russia. The following year, this sense of duty led him to marry his brother’s fiancee, the Princess Dag-mar of Denmark, because state policy required it, though the marriage proved a happy one and his wife, who assumed the Russian name of Mariia Fedorovna, a woman to whom he was devotedly faithful throughout his life.

Beginning in 1865, Alexander began to study Russia’s past so as to prepare himself to better direct her future. In this effort, his studies during the winter of 1865-1866 with the great Russian historian S. M. Solovev were particularly significant. Although by that time Solovev had rejected his earlier leanings toward Slavophilism (he later characterised the Slavophiles’ idealisation of Russia’s past as ‘Buddhism in the science of history’), he still retained, as Professor Mazour has pointed out, ‘his faith in religious and political messianism of Russia’.

To Solovev, Russia’s history represented a vast and intricate tapestry which he sought to portray in his life’s work, a twenty-nine volume history of his homeland. Heavily influenced by Hegel and the historian, von Ranke, he saw the state and nation as being inseparably linked and, to an important extent, viewed Russia’s history as being the history of her government.

For a man of Alexander’s straightforward and uncomplex views, who was generally incapable of abstract thought, it was but a small step from Solovev’s more sophisticated theories of Russia’s national development to the simplistic conclusion that autocracy had played the major role in Russia’s past, that the autocrat personified Russia, and that he must play the central part in her present and future. Alexander soon came to see what he regarded as the weakening of autocracy, brought on by the Great Reforms of the 1860s, as a central ingredient in Russia’s social and political turmoil of the 1870s.

He therefore developed what the historian Florinsky once characterised as ‘an instinctive elemental attachment to the idea of the unfettered supremacy of the crown, interpreted as the mainstay of the Empire and the very essence of Russia’s historical tradition’. It would be the Russian Emperor and, by extension, his chosen advisers, who would direct Russia to new heights of greatness, and it would be the Emperor, through his paternal understanding of Russia’s masses, who would guide their lives in their own best interests which he, rather than they, was best able to identify. As Constantine Pobedonostsev, the man who became Alexander III’s closest adviser, argued, his Emperor was a true Russian who knew his people and their needs.

If Solovev had taught Alexander about Russia’s past, others were to fill his mind with a vision of Russia’s future at which the historian’s belief in Russia’s political and religious mes-sianism had hinted. By the 1870s, he had already fallen somewhat under the spell of pan-slav ideas, especially those espoused by the Slavophile Ivan Aksakov. But, again, he took from Aksakov’s doctrines only a crudely formulated Russian chauvinism; for he had little sympathy with the nationalistic strivings of other Slavic peoples.

As he noted in 1881 on a memorandum from his Ambassador to Berlin, P. A. Saburov, ‘We can have no policy except one that is purely Russian and national’. For Alexander, panslavism would never be more than a means for furthering Russian nationalistic aims, and he sought to use the demands of other Slavic peoples for independence from the Ottoman or Habsburg Empires to foster Russian goals in the Balkans and Central Europe.

If Alexander had little sympathy for the pan-slav doctrines that fostered the aspirations of other Slavs for independence, he had even less use for the romantic Slavophile dream of reviving the old Russian institution of the *zemskii* *sobor* (assembly of the land), which Muscovite Tsars had summoned from time to time for advice and consultation. Slavophiles, among them Ivan Aksakov, saw the *zemskii* *sobor* as an embodiment of the union between autocrat and people; to Alexander it smacked of constitutionalism or, at the very least, a dangerous erosion of the autocrat’s undivided power to rule Russia.

As his closest adviser and mentor, Constantine Pobedonostsev wrote to him as early as 1876, ‘this [i.e. a constitution] is a lie, and God forbid that a true Russian shall see the day when this lie will become an accomplished fact’. Pobedonostsev’s was a view that Alexander fervently shared.

Pobedonostsev most clearly articulated the principles upon which Alexander based his government’s policies. Whatever the romantic and idealistic young terrorists who had assassinated his father might have expected, their dreams were rudely dashed almost immediately. In a manifesto drafted by Pobedonostsev, Alexander declared in late April, 1881, that he was convinced he had been ‘called upon to maintain and defend, for the good of the people’, the power of autocracy and that, as Emperor, he had ‘complete faith in the strength and truth of absolute power’.

Thus, during the thirteen years in which he ruled Russia, Alexander jealously defended the autocrat’s absolute power; he gave no ear to any call for popular participation, no matter how limited, in state affairs; and he sought to strengthen and extend Great Russian culture throughout his Empire. As a result, national minority groups throughout his domains were subjected to a firm and pervasive policy of Russification designed to erase or, at the very least, erode, their ethnic and cultural identities. In Alexander’s view, all subjects of the Russian Emperor should be Russian in terms of language, culture, and outlook.

Alexander III thus came to the throne on March 1st, 1881, with his political views firmly established. The decade of social and political upheaval through which Russia had just passed and, more immediately, the assassination of his father on the very day he had signed a new programme of reforms proposed by his chief minister Count M. T. Loris-Melikov, convinced him of the absolute need to be firm and unyielding on all social and political issues. Two major problems confronted him on the day of his accession: the terrorists had to be dealt with and, perhaps even more important in the long term, he must decide the fate of Count Loris-Melikov’s reform proposals.

Alexander dealt with both matters resolutely. Terrorist conspirators were quickly arrested during the first days of his reign; five were executed, and a number of others condemned to long terms of exile or imprisonment. So thorough were the arrests made by the Emperor’s agents that, with the exception of one very feeble attempt upon his life (for which Lenin’s elder brother Alexander was executed), there were no revolutionary stirrings in Russia for a decade. The revolutionary groups that remained in Russia were destroyed; those that had gone abroad were forced to remain in exile throughout most of his reign.

For Russia’s radical intelligentsia, an era of ‘small deeds’, focused mainly upon such prosaic and unheroic undertakings as educating the peasant masses in district schoolhouses, had begun. What Nicholas II would later characterize as their ‘senseless dreams of the participation of... representatives in the affairs of central administration’ would not again find sympathy in any notable stratum of Russian society before the early twentieth century.

Not only his ruthless suppression of all revolutionary groups, but also the manner in which Alexander dealt with Loris-Melikov’s reform proposals was significant in relegating the ‘senseless dreams’ of Russia’s revolutionary and liberal elements to the innermost recesses of their hearts.

On March 8th, just a week after his accession, Russia’s new Emperor summoned his father’s closest counsellors to discuss Count Loris-Melikov’s plans. The result was a foregone conclusion. Alexander rejected Loris-Melikov’s modest proposal for consultations by the central government with elected representatives of Russian society. Pobedonostsev had argued that the adoption of the proposal would have meant *Finis Russiae*; and Alexander agreed.

Alexander’s rejection of Count Loris-Melikov’s reform plans also brought a significant shift in the composition of the Imperial cabinet. Loris-Melikov and Minister of Finance A. A. Abaza resigned the moment that Alexander made clear his intention to ‘defend, for the good of the people, against all assaults’ the full power of autocracy. Soon afterwards, Russia’s progressive and very able Minister of War, General Count Dmitrii Miliutin, and Alexander’s uncle, the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich, went into retirement; all were replaced by men chosen by Pobedonostsev.

Within a few months after Alexander’s accession, it was clear that the ‘Era of Counter-Reforms’ had begun. By early 1882, the Ministry of Interior was headed by the reactionary Count Dmitrii Tolstoi; the Ministry of Public Instruction by I. D. Delianov, a close friend of Tolstoi and Pobedonostsev; and the Ministry of War by the reactionary General P. S. Vannov-skii. And, over them all, firm in his position as Alexander III’s closest confidant, hovered the ever-present figure of Pobedonostsev, Supreme Procurator of the Holy Synod.

Once Count Loris-Melikov’s reform proposals had been rejected, Alexander and his new ministers set about the task of restoring the full power of autocracy by imposing restrictions upon the reforms promulgated during the 1860s. Alexander and Pobedonostsev believed that these so-called Great Reforms were the chief cause of the social and political upheavals that Russia had since suffered.

First, they turned to the matter of press censorship, an area of state policy in which Alexander II had generally been quite lenient. As early as October, 1880, Pobedonostsev had warned Alexander that ‘the government should not allow control of the press to slip from its hands.

...To entrust it [i.e. censorship] to the courts [as Count Loris-Melikov proposes] would give the press unbridled license.’ In order to ensure full control of the press by state authorities, Alexander had Minister of Interior Count Tolstoi draft a series of ‘provisional’ rules in August, 1882, which remained in effect until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Most important, newspapers and journals were subjected to preliminary censorship under conditions that most periodicals found almost impossible to meet; and a committee headed by Pobedonostsev himself was granted the arbitrary power to suspend the publication of any periodical and prevent its publishers and editors from future publishing ventures.

Pobedonostsev’s protege, Mikhail Katkov, extolled these measures as creating a virtually free press in Russia because ‘what is not contrary to the law and institutions of the country, what does not offend public morality, and what is not deceit and incitement to violence, can be, and is, expressed in the press with complete independence’. In effect, however, only those periodicals that reflected the views of Alexander and his advisers were regarded as fully meeting those conditions.

Aside from restricting the press and limiting access to higher education to all but the upper classes, three particularly important decrees comprised the core of the counter-reforms that Alexander and his ministers imposed upon Russia, although they came only towards the end of his first decade on the throne. First came the Statute on Land Captains of 1889, followed by the *Zemstvo* Act of 1890, and the Municipal Government Act of 1892.

The first of these decrees imposed much more stringent state controls upon the institutions of peasant local self-government introduced by the Great Reforms by bringing a new type of official- the Land Captain - into the countryside. Land Captains were to be appointed by the Minister of Interior from lists of candidates chosen by the provincial nobility and approved by the provincial governor; and these men usually were selected from the conservative hereditary aristocracy.

As the historian Florinsky observed, the result of this new decree was that ‘a sham of self-government [in the peasant villages] was preserved, yet peasant Russia was actually ruled by petty officials drawn from the midst of the landed nobility and controlled by the Minister of the Interior’.

Intensified bureaucratic control and administrative centralization were the means by which Alexander and his advisers sought to restore to the autocracy some of its arbitrary power eroded by the Great Reforms. This process was carried further with the *Zemstvo* Act of 1890 by which the Russian government sought to bring under the direct control of the central bureaucracy the elective district and provincial organizations (*zemstva*) created in 1864.

Both appointed and elective *zemstvo* officials now had to be confirmed by provincial governors, and the Minister of Interior was given the power to review all *zemstvo* decisions and remove from office any *zemstvo* official whose decisions displeased the central government. The same principles were applied to elective municipal officials by the Municipal Government Act of 1892. In both cases, the electorate was significantly reduced from what it had been during the 1870s and, at the insistence of Pobedonostsev, Jews were completely disenfranchised.

Indeed, Russia’s Jews occupied a prominent place in Alexander’s thoughts throughout his reign. Given his fervent nationalism and rigid orthodoxy, it could hardly have been otherwise. ‘We must not forget’, he once wrote, ‘that it was the Jews who crucified Our Lord and spilled His precious blood.’ Like their master, a number of Imperial ministers, especially Count Dmitrii Tolstoi and Pobedonostsev, were violent anti-semites, as was much of public opinion in Russia.

During the 1880s and early 1890s, Alexander and Pobedonostsev utilized these sentiments to launch a vicious campaign against Russia’s Jews. The new reign opened with a wave of pogroms against Jews in southern Russia as the authorities stirred anti-semitic passions among Russians by publicizing the fact that a young Jewish woman, Gesia Helfmann, had been among the terrorists who had plotted the assassination of Alexander II.

During the spring and summer of 1891, Russia witnessed more than one hundred such anti-Jewish riots in which the authorities generally took no action to defend Jews against attack. Alexander’s only response to these vicious persecutions was to impose more restrictions upon the Empire’s Jewry despite the fact that *The Complete Collection of the Laws of the Russian Empire* already contained well over six hundred anti-Jewish decrees.

Largely at the urging of Pobedonostsev, Alexander and his ministers proceeded to limit further Jews’ access to education, narrowed the area of the Empire in which they were allowed to reside (in Moscow alone some 20,000 Jewish artisans and tradesmen were forced to leave the city), and excluded them from all participation in local governmental affairs.

Finally, in 1893, Alexander decreed that it was a criminal offence for Jews to bear Christian names. Such persecutions at the hands of the Emperor and his advisers caused a mass exodus of Jews from Russia, and also drove numbers of others into the resurgent revolutionary movement in the 1890s.

If the virulent anti-semitism of Alexander and his advisers drove thousands of Jews from Russia, their extreme chauvinism had the somewhat similar effect of further alienating national minorities in the Empire from their Russian rulers. Throughout the nineteenth century, a number of nationalist movements had been growing within the Russian Empire, although, with the exception of Russian Poland, these movements had at first been largely cultural in emphasis. Alexander’s policies toward these groups turned them toward a more violent course, and also spurred some of them to demand political independence rather than cultural autonomy.

Because he believed that all subjects of the Russian Emperor should be Russian in language, culture, and outlook, Alexander launched an aggressive campaign against all national minority groups in the Russian Empire. A programme of Russification already had been undertaken in Poland under Alexander II; his son intensified it, and applied its precepts not only to the Poles but to their fellow Slavs, the Ukrainians. Russia’s Baltic Provinces - present-day Lithuania, Estonia, and Latvia - were also subjected to a firm policy of Russification, as were the populations of Armenia and Georgia.

In all cases, Russian was made the language of local administration as well as the language of instruction in the local schools; and the authorities undertook concentrated campaigns to convert native populaces to Orthodoxy, while persecuting non-Orthodox religions. Certainly tolerance of national minorities had never been a state policy in Russia; but the chauvinism and prejudice of Alexander and his ministers even by Russian standards was extreme.

Yet, although Alexander III’s reign was a time of oppression and reaction in social and political matters, it saw notable progress in the Empire’s national economy, especially in the industrial sector. Most of this development was confined to heavy industry (the only exception being the textile industry), because the Empire’s peasants were still quite self-sufficient, and there was little in the way of a mass market for consumer goods.

In the heavy industrial sector, railroad construction boomed and, in turn, stimulated the production of coal, iron, and steel, as the political tranquillity of Alexander’s Russia attracted large quantities of foreign capital and a considerable number of technicians. Mainly due to the efforts of John Hughes, an Englishman, the vast coal deposits of the Donets Basin were opened at this time, as well as the iron ore resources of Krivoi Rog. As a result, Russian coal production rose from 3,610,000 tons in 1880 to some 17,959,750 tons by 1900. The growth figures for iron, oil, and steel during the same period were similarly impressive.

If Alexander’s domestic programme was designed to impose a regime of political order and social stability upon Russia, his foreign policy sought to achieve much the same end. With the exception of limited military campaigns in Central Asia, Alexander’s reign was a time of peace for Russia, for neither he, nor his cautious and reserved Foreign Minister, N. K. Giers, sought to achieve grand designs abroad.

Russia required peace as she embarked upon an ambitious programme of industrial development; a stable, harmonious atmosphere was an essential requirement for attracting the vast sums of foreign investment that Russian industry required. Alexander and Giers provided just such an environment in which Russian industry could flourish by following a cautious and reserved policy abroad.

Alexander’s reign brought important changes in Russia’s international policies nonetheless. Although the *Dreikaiserbund*, the alliance between Russia, Germany, and Austria, was renewed during the first months of his reign, Alexander and his Foreign Minister soon turned Russian policy toward another course as the latter years of the 1880s brought a deterioration in the relations between Russia and Germany.

Conflicts over Germany’s increased tariff on Russian grain imports were one important reason for the growing rift between the two powers. Germany’s renewal of the Triple Alliance with Austria and Italy, and her refusal to renew the so-called ‘reinsurance treaty’ of 1887 with Russia, were others. Alexander and Giers sought new allies and, despite the Emperor’s apprehensions about France as a hotbed of revolution, Russia ultimately settled upon an alliance with France, in August, 1892, to offset the growing influence of Germany in Central European affairs.

When he entered into an alliance with France in the summer of 1892, Alexander had been on Russia’s throne for more than a decade, and during that time Russia had known no foreign wars. At home, as we have seen, the Empire’s industry showed dramatic development, and the social tensions and political turmoil that had characterized the 1860s and 1870s seemed to have disappeared.

The revolutionary forces in Russia were in total disarray; their organizations had been destroyed, their leaders imprisoned, exiled to Siberia, or forced to live abroad; and order reigned supreme in Russia. To be sure, the situation was far from ideal. Factory workers suffered all of the social trauma and economic difficulties usually associated with the first stages of the Industrial Revolution in any country.

And the Russian peasants, their meagre resources stretched to the breaking point by the economic policies of Alexander and his ministers, died by the tens of thousands in the great famine of 1891. But even these catastrophes had not disturbed the tranquillity of Alexander’s Russia.

This pleasing picture of calm and stability was due, in large measure, to Alexander’s policies and personality. Everything about him suggested strength. He was not plagued by self-doubt, and never questioned that his major purpose was other than to maintain the full strength of autocracy. To his mind, Russia required a firm hand to guide her along the only proper path of development - that dictated by Orthodoxy, Autocracy, and Nationality - which he and his mentor Pobedonostsev had chosen; indeed, for him there could have been no other.

But once his hand slipped from Russia’s helm, it rapidly became clear how very illusory the calm of Alexander’s Russia had been. On October 20th, 1894, Alexander III died of nephritis, and with him ended the last period of stability that Imperial Russia would ever know. Alexander’s son, Nicholas II, was far less assertive than his father, nor did he possess his father’s singleness of purpose.

Soon, Russia was torn by war in the Far East, revolution, war in Europe, and, again, revolution as all those cataclysmic upheavals, which Alexander had managed to avoid, fell upon her in the course of a few years. Just more than two decades after Alexander’s death, Tsarist Russia would be no more; and the Romanovs were driven from the Russian throne. A new regime, dedicated to different ideals, but sharing Alexander’s sense of purpose, began the task of instituting a new order in Russia.