Painting by Mihály Zichy of the coronation of Tsar Alexander II and the Empress Maria Alexandrovna, which took place on 26 August/7 September 1856 at the Dormition Cathedral of the Moscow Kremlin. The painting depicts the moment of the coronation in which the Tsar crowns his Empress

Emancipation of the serfs

Main article: Emancipation reform of 1861

In spite of his obstinacy in playing the Russian autocrat, Alexander II acted willfully for several years, somewhat like a constitutional sovereign of the continental type. Soon after the conclusion of peace, important changes were made in legislation concerning industry and commerce, and the new freedom thus afforded produced a large number of limited liability companies. Plans were formed for building a great network of railways—partly for the purpose of developing the natural resources of the country, and partly for the purpose of increasing its power for defence and attack.

The existence of serfdom was tackled boldly, taking advantage of a petition presented by the Polish landed proprietors of the Lithuanian provinces and, hoping that their relations with the serfs might be regulated in a more satisfactory way (meaning in a way more satisfactory for the proprietors), he authorised the formation of committees "for ameliorating the condition of the peasants", and laid down the principles on which the amelioration was to be effected.

This step was followed by one still more significant.[*citation needed*] Without consulting his ordinary advisers, Alexander ordered the Minister of the Interior to send a circular to the provincial governors of European Russia, containing a copy of the instructions forwarded to the governor-general of Lithuania, praising the supposed generous, patriotic intentions of the Lithuanian landed proprietors, and suggesting that perhaps the landed proprietors of other provinces might express a similar desire. The hint was taken: in all provinces where serfdom existed, emancipation committees were formed.

But the emancipation was not merely a humanitarian question capable of being solved instantaneously by imperial *ukase*. It contained very complicated problems, deeply affecting the economic, social and political future of the nation.

Alexander had to choose between the different measures recommended to him. Should the serfs become agricultural labourers dependent economically and administratively on the landlords, or should they be transformed into a class of independent communal proprietors?

The emperor gave his support to the latter project, and the Russian peasantry became one of the last groups of peasants in Europe to shake off serfdom.

The architects of the emancipation manifesto were Alexander's brother Konstantin, Yakov Rostovtsev, and Nikolay Milyutin.

On 3 March 1861, 6 years after his accession, the emancipation law was signed and published.

Other reforms

In response to the overwhelming defeat (1856) suffered by Russia in the Crimean War, and to an awareness of military advances implemented in other European countries, the Russian government re-organised the army and navy and re-armed them . The changes included universal military conscription, introduced on 1 January 1874.[9] Now sons of all the "estates" - rich and poor - had to serve in the military.[10] Other military reforms involved setting up an army reserve and the military district system (still in use a century later), the building of strategic railways, and an emphasis on the military education of the officer corps. Corporal punishment in the military and branding of the soldiers as a punishment was banned.[11]

A new judicial administration (1864) - based on the French model - introduced security of tenure.[12] A new penal code and a greatly simplified system of civil and criminal procedure also came into operation. Reorganisation of Judiciary, to include trial in open court, with judges appointed for life, a jury system and the creation of justices of the peace to deal with minor offences at local level.

Alexander's bureaucracy instituted an elaborate scheme of local self-government (Zemstvo) for the rural districts (1864) and the large towns (1870), with elective assemblies possessing a restricted right of taxation, and a new rural and municipal police under the direction of the Minister of the Interior.

Marriages and children

During his bachelor days, Alexander made a state visit to England in 1838. Just a year older than the young Queen Victoria, Alexander's approaches to her were indeed short-lived. Victoria married her German cousin, Albert of Saxe-Coburg in February 1840. On 16 April 1841, aged 23, Tsarevitch Alexander married Princess Marie of Hesse in St Petersburg, thereafter known in Russia as Maria Alexandrovna.

(Marie was the legal daughter of Ludwig II, Grand Duke of Hesse and by Rhine and Princess Wilhelmina of Baden, although some gossiping questioned whether the Grand Duke Ludwig or Wilhelmina's lover, Baron August von Senarclens de Grancy, was her biological father. Alexander was aware of the question of her paternity).

The marriage produced six sons and two daughters:

- Grand Duchess Alexandra Alexandrovna (30 August 1842 – 10 July 1849), nicknamed Lina, died of infant meningitis in St. Petersburg at the age of six
- Tsarevich Nicholas Alexandrovich (20 September 1843 – 24 April 1865), engaged to Dagmar of Denmark (Maria Feodorovna)
- Emperor Alexander III (10 March 1845 – 1 November 1894), married 1866, Dagmar of Denmark (Maria Feodorovna), had issue
- Grand Duke Vladimir Alexandrovich (22 April 1847 – 17 February 1909), married 1874, Marie of Mecklenburg-Schwerin (Maria Pavlovna), had issue
- Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich (14 January 1850 – 14 November 1908), had (presumably illegitimate) issue