

**ALEXANDER II**



# THE ASSASSINATION OF ALEXANDER II

In 1881 Tsar Alexander II was brutally assassinated by a terrorist group known as the “People’s Will”. Why on earth did they kill the reforming ruler known as the “Tsar Liberator”? Could this have been the moment that the Russian state started an **inexorable** march towards revolution?

# TASKS: READ THE SOURCES ON THE FOLLOWING 3 SLIDES & ANSWER THE QUESTIONS

**1. The final paragraph is the most interesting for historians.**

(a) What praise for Alexander is provided in the source?

(b) What criticisms of Alexander are made in the source?

**2. Historians must always be careful to question their witnesses.**

a. **Content:** Is the writer trying to inform (=objective) or persuade (=subjective)? Explain your answer by referring to the tone of the source.

b. **Provenance:** Find out a little about Peter Kropotkin. To what extent is he an unbiased witness?

# SOURCE A: BY PETER KROPOTKIN

“A bomb was thrown under the Tsar’s iron-clad carriage to stop it. Several of the escort were wounded. Rysakoff, who flung the bomb, was arrested on the spot. Then, although the coachman of the Tsar earnestly advised him not to get out, saying that he could drive him still in the slightly damaged carriage, he insisted upon alighting. He felt that his military dignity required him to see the wounded guards...He approached Rysakoff and asked him something; and as he passed close by another young man threw a bomb between himself and Alexander II, so that both of them should be killed. They both lived but a few hours. There Alexander II lay upon the snow, profusely bleeding, abandoned by every one of his followers. All had disappeared. It was cadets, returning from the parade, who lifted the suffering Tsar from the snow and put him in a sledge, covering his shivering body with a cadet mantle and his bare head with a cadet cap. And it was one of the terrorists, Emelianoff, with a bomb wrapped in a paper under his arm, who, at the risk of being arrested on the spot and hanged, rushed with the cadets to the help of the wounded man. Human nature is full of those contrasts”

# **SOURCE B: BY POLICE CHIEF DVORZHITSKY**

I was deafened by the new explosion, burned, wounded and thrown to the ground. Suddenly, amid the smoke and snowy fog, I heard His Majesty's weak voice cry, 'Help!' Gathering what strength I had, I jumped up and rushed to the tsar. His Majesty was half-lying, half-sitting, leaning on his right arm. Thinking he was merely wounded heavily, I tried to lift him but the tsar's legs were shattered, and the blood poured out of them. Twenty people, with wounds of varying degree, lay on the sidewalk and on the street. Some managed to stand, others to crawl, still others tried to get out from beneath bodies that had fallen on them. Through the snow, debris, and blood you could see fragments of clothing, epaulets, sabers, and bloody chunks of human flesh.

# SOURCE C: BY PETER KROPOTKIN

Thus ended the tragedy of Alexander II's life. People could not understand how it was possible that a Tsar who had done so much for Russia should have met his death at the hands of revolutionaries. To me, who had the chance of witnessing the first reactionary steps of Alexander II, and his gradual deterioration, who had caught a glimpse of his complex personality - that of a born autocrat whose violence was but partially mitigated by education, of a man possessed of military gallantry, but devoid of the courage of the statesman, of a man of strong passions and weak will - it seemed that the tragedy developed with the unavoidable fatality of one of Shakespeare's dramas I.

## WHAT HAPPENED TO THE CONSPIRATORS?

*Of the other conspirators, Nikolai Sablin committed suicide before he could be arrested and Gesia Gelfman died in prison. Sophia Perovskaya, Andrei Zhelyabov, Nikolai Kibalchich, Nikolai Rysakov and Timofei Mikhailov were hanged on 3rd April, 1881 (pictured).*



# SO WHY WAS THE REFORMING TSAR ASSASSINATED

- Alexander II inherited many problems when he came to the throne.
- Russia had suffered a humiliating defeat in the Crimean war to France, Britain and the Turkish Ottomans.
- This highlighted the backwardness of the army, industry and also that the social structure of Russia based on 'serfdom' was no longer working.
- Serfdom was the system whereby the majority of Russian peasants (serfs) were 'owned' by their landlords. They paid their feudal dues on the form of agricultural work and conscription to the army (15 years of service) they also needed permission to move from one area to another, and even permission to get married.
- This meant the Russian economy was still largely dominated by agriculture and morale and commitment in the army was low as conditions were so harsh and length of service so long (wives of serfs who were called up were officially declared widows as the chances of their husbands returning was very low.
- These factors had to be addressed by the new Tsar...




# ALEXANDER II TSAR - 1856-1881

## IN MARCH 1856 HE SAID TO THE NOBILITY..



My intention is to abolish serfdom...you yourself understand that the present order of owning souls (serfs) cannot remain unchanged. It is better to abolish serfdom from above, than to wait for that time when it starts to abolish itself from below. I ask you to think about the best way to carry this out.

What did he mean by this?



# **TASK: CREATE A PROFILE ON ALEXANDER II'S REFORMS AND THEIR SUCCESSES AND PROBLEMS**

**YOU CAN USE THE TEMPLATE WORKSHEET  
OR CREATE YOUR OWN**

**THERE IS SOME READING IN THE FOLDER,  
BUT IT MAY HELP YOU TO DO SOME OF YOUR  
OWN RESEARCH**

# CONCLUSIONS:

Think back to the sources on Alexander's assassination:

How did his reforms contribute to this despite aiming to improve the lives of the Russian people?

What do you think was his biggest mistake in his reforms?

**WHAT IF...  
WOULD THINGS HAVE BEEN  
DIFFERENT IF ALEX II HAD  
BEEN WILLING TO GIVE UP  
SOME OF HIS OWN POWER?**

**ALEXANDER WAS ASSASSINATED ON HIS WAY TO SIGN A DOCUMENT  
THAT WOULD HAVE BEGUN THE PROCESS OF AN ELECTED PARLIAMENT  
AND A CONSTITUTIONAL MONARCHY.**

**HIS SON AND HEIR SAW THIS AS DANGEROUS AND THE CAUSE OF HIS  
FATHERS MURDER AND THEREFORE VOWED NEVER TO RELINQUISH ANY  
OF HIS AUTOCRATIC POWERS!**