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CHAPTER EIGHT

The Politics of Emancipation

THE ACCESSION OF ALEXANDER II AND THE END OF HOSTILITIES

Making decisions was not one of the new tsar's greatest gifts. Indeed, an upbringing which gave Alexander II many qualifications for the tasks which confronted him failed to conceal the fact that he was not very gifted at all. Born in 1818, he had been educated under the supervision of the liberally inclined Romantic poet Vasilii Zhukovskii. Between 1835 and 1837 he heard lectures on Russian law from the reforming bureaucrat Mikhail Speranskii. After travelling extensively at home (and becoming the first Romanov to see Siberia), in 1838 and 1839 he toured Europe. Having married a princess of Hesse-Darmstadt in 1841 (by whom he rapidly had six children), he was gradually introduced to his future duties. Nicholas appointed him to the State Council and the Committee of Ministers and then made him chairman, in 1842, of the committee which supervised the construction of the railway between St Petersburg and Moscow. In 1846 he sat on one of the tsar's many secret committees on peasant affairs, in 1848 he chaired another, and in 1849 he succeeded his uncle, the Grand Duke Mikhail, as head of the empire's military schools. By 1855, as we have seen, he was sufficiently trusted to dismiss the Crimean commander on his father's behalf.

The historian and jurist Boris Chicherin, who was predisposed to like him, believed that Alexander had been denied 'an upbringing capable of providing him with guidelines in the precarious circumstances in which he found himself'.[1] Another contemporary, Sergei Solov'ev, made the same point more acerbically when he said that 'In the Roman Empire emperors ascended the throne from various callings', whereas 'in the Russian Empire Alexander II ascended the throne from the ranks of the heads of military-educational institutions'.[2] In some ways, however, Alexander was better prepared for the throne than either of his immediate predecessors. His educational opportunities had been considerable and he had seen a good

deal of Russian government from the inside. His difficulties did not derive from the way he was reared. Nor, apparently, did they spring from his disposition, for his outlook was less severe than that of his father and he was quite devoid of that propensity for abstraction which had impaired the prospects of Alexander I. Although he liked parades and reviews, his inclinations were not really militaristic. The Marquis de Custine, who observed him at Ems in 1839, thought that he would 'command obedience by the inherent appeal of charm, rather than by fear'.[3] The British traveller and journalist, Sir Donald Mackenzie Wallace, believed Alexander 'had inherited from his father a strong dislike to sentimentalism and rhetoric of all kinds' and that 'This dislike, joined to a goodly portion of sober common-sense, a limited confidence in his own judgment, and a consciousness of enormous responsibility, prevented him from being carried away by the prevailing excitement' with which his reign began.[4] His background, therefore, and some aspects of his personality, seemed to fit him for government.

The tsar could be cold, however – 'he trusted neither himself nor others, and therefore lacked the ability to attach anyone to himself'[5] – and unsympathetic observers were less sure of his temperament than the indulgent Mackenzie Wallace. The 'anarchist Prince', Petr Kropotkin, who was a boy in the Corps des Pages in the late 1850s and a revolutionary in exile by the time the reign ended, thought Alexander suffered from a split personality: 'two different men lived in him, both strongly developed, struggling with each other. ... He could be charming in his behaviour, and the next moment display sheer brutality. He was possessed of a calm, reasoned courage in the face of a real danger, but he lived in constant fear of dangers which existed in his brain only'.[6] He was not very bright. Even a courtier admitted that although he was tactful and judicious he possessed less character, less resolution and less intelligence than his father.[7] 'When the emperor talks to an intellectual,' said the poet Fedor Tiutchev, 'he has the appearance of someone with rheumatism who is standing in a draught'.[8] He let Turgenev know that he had enjoyed his *Sportsman's Sketches*, but his interest in them probably derived from his love of hunting rather than from the fact that the stories cast aspersions on serfdom. If Alexander II had died before ascending the throne, it is hard to believe that some Russian Fortinbras would have said he was 'likely, had he been put on, to have proved most royal'.

It was to be many months before the new tsar accepted defeat in the Crimean War. At the end of 1854 Britain and France had received the promise of military assistance from the north Italian Kingdom of Piedmont, but on 29 January / 10 February 1855, less than three weeks before his death, Nicholas had provided for a much greater increase in the size of the Russian armed forces by ordering the creation of a pan-imperial militia. On 23 February / 7 March, five days after his accession, Alexander told the ambassadors of Austria and Prussia that in foreign affairs he would adhere to the late tsar's principles. 'These principles', he said, 'are those of the Holy Alliance. If this alliance no longer exists, it is certainly not the fault of my

father'.[9] The talks which Nicholas had made possible by accepting the Four Points as a basis for negotiation opened in Vienna three weeks later. Even the relatively uncontroversial Points One and Two (the Danubian Principalities and control of the mouth of the Danube) occupied the negotiators' attention for some weeks. Point Three, revision of the Straits Convention, proved intractable. On 17/29 April 1855 Aleksandr Gorchakov, the Russian plenipotentiary, declared that St Petersburg was happy with the Straits Convention as it stood. He wanted to make concessions, but his masters at home were intransigent. The Russian government would accept no reduction in the size of the empire's Black Sea fleet. Austria tried to mediate between the belligerents, but her efforts came to nothing. When the Vienna conference ended on 4/16 June, Point Four (the Christian inhabitants of the Ottoman Empire) had not even been aired. The siege of Sevastopol' continued. The young soldier Lev Tolstoy made his literary debut by publishing the first of three *Sevastopol' Stories* in *The Contemporary* in June. After conveying much of the horror of the siege, Tolstoy concluded optimistically. 'The one central, reassuring conviction you have come away with', he wrote, 'is that it is quite impossible for Sevastopol' ever to be taken by the enemy'.[10] On 27 August / 8 September, Sevastopol' fell. The third of Tolstoy's *Sevastopol' Stories*, which appeared early in 1856, described the 'remorse, shame and violent hatred' with which the Russians evacuated the city.[11]

The tsar remained hopeful. He urged his new Crimean commander (another Gorchakov and a relative of the Russian negotiator in Vienna) to 'think of the year 1812 and trust in God. Sevastopol' is not Moscow, and the Crimea is not Russia. Two years after Moscow burned, our victorious army entered Paris. We are still the same Russians and God is with us'.[12] In a way Alexander was right to persist. Even at Sevastopol' the fighting continued. The Russians had withdrawn from the southern to the northern side of the harbour, but survived there until the end of the war. One scholar points out that, in a sense, the siege of the city lasted not 349 days but 533.[13] Although Britain and France had captured the main part of Sevastopol', their military prospects were unattractive. Britain had 50,000 troops and 10,000 horses in the Crimea, France 200,000 and 34,000, but penetrating the interior of the Russian Empire would prove much more difficult than winning victories in the Crimean peninsula. Even if the Russians could be dislodged from the north side of Sevastopol', the allies would soon reach the point where their ships were unable to help them. They would also have to undertake exceptional recruitment measures at home. The assistance which they continued to seek from Austria might not tip the scales in their favour. Indeed, Austrian entry into the war might provoke a crisis in the Habsburg Empire greater than that of 1848–9 and throw the whole of central Europe into the melting-pot. In the Caucasus, meanwhile, Russia was performing more successfully than in the Crimea. N. N. Murav'ev, Vorontsov's successor as Caucasian Viceroy, took Kars in eastern Anatolia on 14/26 November 1855 and looked able to threaten Constantinople. The

Russians now held more enemy territory than their opponents and could contemplate taking the war into a fourth year.

But Russia also suffered from severe disadvantages. Her Black Sea fleet had by this time been destroyed, the allies had landed not only in the Crimea but also at Nikolaev to the west and Novorossiisk to the east, and the Turks retained a position at Sukhumi which gave them the chance of counter-attacking in the direction of Tiflis. Away from the principal theatre of the war, the Russian Baltic fleet was blockaded at Sveaborg and Kronstadt, St Petersburg was under threat of attack, and the empire could do little to protect its Arctic and Pacific coastlines. At the beginning of the war Russia had felt able to commit no more than a quarter of her field army to the southern part of the empire, as she needed the other three-quarters on her western frontier to defuse possible threats from Austria, Prussia and Sweden. Troops had been withdrawn from the west, but not because the likelihood of attack in that quarter had diminished. When Austria finally despatched an ultimatum to St Petersburg on 16/28 December 1855, the need to make peace looked overwhelming.

On 3/15 January 1856 the tsar chaired a meeting at which various dignitaries argued that Russia would eventually lose the war anyway, that she was financially exhausted, and that the loyalty of the empire's national minorities could not be guaranteed. The Minister of War probably had the most influential voice, for one of his officials, Dmitrii Miliutin – older brother of Nikolai, the 'enlightened bureaucrat' who had redesigned St Petersburg's municipal administration in 1846 – had armed him with a wide-ranging and incisive brief entitled 'On the danger of continuing military action in 1856'. Numerically, Miliutin wrote, Russia's forces looked strong, but it was doubtful whether they could withstand the fresh and well-organized armies which the enemy would be putting into the field against them. Losses in the three campaigns which had already taken place meant that most of Russia's rank-and-file soldiers had been recruited recently and that there were not enough officers to train them. Even if the troops currently under arms could be knocked into shape, finding yet more reserves of manpower was going to be difficult. In theory 25 million men were subject to the draft, but 12 million were exempt on health grounds, 5 million for various technical reasons, and something over 6 million for the simple reason that the economy required their labour. By Miliutin's reckoning, no more than 1.8 million men could actually be enlisted, and 800,000 of these had been called to the colours already. When shortages of equipment, powder, bombs and food were set alongside the shortage of men, the prospect of eventual victory receded still further. Even if resources had been plentiful, Russia lacked the roads and railways she needed to get them to the front. In 1854–5 the state had spent the equivalent of three years' income on the war and had accelerated inflation by covering the deficit with paper money. Miliutin pointed out that, if the war ended badly, all Russia's sacrifices would represent no more than 'the futile exhaustion of [her] last resources'.[14]

CHAPTER NINE

In the Wake of Emancipation

RESPONSES TO THE LEGISLATION OF 1861

Immediate reactions to the emancipation were hostile. 'On reading the [General] Statute,' wrote Herzen's collaborator Nikolai Ogarev, 'the first question you involuntarily ask yourself is: for whom is it written?' 'Least of all', he believed, 'for the peasants'. The length and complexity of the document were such that 'not a single literate peasant will master it and not a single illiterate peasant will listen to it. A statute for peasants has to be written on a single sheet of paper'.[1] The one thing the serfs did understand was that they were not yet free. Because their relations with the landlords were to remain unaltered for at least two years (while charters were drawn up describing the obligations they were supposed to redeem), they believed that the government had cheated them. Disturbances occurred in forty-two of the forty-three provinces to which the legislation applied. According to the Ministry of Internal Affairs (which admitted that its statistics were highly approximate), 647 incidents took place between April and July 1861. The sharpest clash occurred in the village of Bezdna in the eastern province of Kazan', where a certain Anton Petrov began claiming that the statutes really did grant wholesale freedom. Thousands flocked to him, soldiers fired on the crowd, dozens died, and Petrov was executed.

The gentry were almost as dissatisfied as the peasantry. On the right of the spectrum, nobles in the province of Tula lamented the effect of emancipation on their economic interests and sought a way of preventing the central administration from overriding their interests in the future. To this end they proposed that gentry representatives be summoned from all parts of the empire to a national commission which 'should have the right to present its drafts of proposed laws directly for consideration' by the tsar. The equally conservative nobles of Smolensk echoed Tula's belief in the need for joint discussions with 'representatives from other provinces', while the nobles of Tver', one of the few gentry groups to espouse the cause of immediate emancipation rather than the conversion of serfs into temporarily obligated peasants, argued that the new laws had been botched, that 'the

reforms so urgently required cannot be achieved by a bureaucratic order', and that the 'convocation of elected representatives from all the Russian land represents the only means for a satisfactory solution'.[2]

Radical intellectuals were the most disenchanted of all. The Bezdna affair evoked an indignant response from Afanasii Shchapov, a graduate of Kazan' Ecclesiastical Academy who began teaching Russian history at Kazan' University in November 1860. 'I enter the university department of history,' Shchapov declared in his inaugural lecture, 'not with the thought of statehood, not with the idea of centralization, but with the idea of nationality (*narodnost'*) and of regionality'.[3] Five days later he illustrated his radicalism by lecturing sympathetically on the Decembrists. At the Kazan' requiem for the victims of Bezdna (which took place in the emotionally charged atmosphere of Palm Sunday) he stepped forward at the end of the service with a commemorative address in which he referred to the dead peasants as 'friends, killed for the people'.[4] 'The history of the Russian people', wrote Shchapov from prison a month later, 'fills our heart with the belief and the hope that sooner or later a time must come for the Russian people when it acquires political self-consciousness and, as a result, political self-government'.[5]

If opinions like those of Shchapov could emerge in remote Kazan' – they were partly generated, it seems, by members of the local ecclesiastical hierarchy[6] – it was hardly surprising that the more sophisticated radicals to be found in other places expressed even greater disillusionment with the government's performance. In London Herzen pointed out that not even the eighteenth-century rebel Emel'ian Pugachev had been shot 'on the sly' like Petrov.[7] All but one of the five parts of Ogarev's provocatively entitled 'Analysis of the New Serfdom' concluded with the ringing declaration that 'The people have been deceived by the tsar'.[8] Anonymous writers began calling for action. 'A Great Russian' put out a flysheet in St Petersburg in July 1861 which argued that 'The educated classes must take the conduct of affairs out of the hands of the incapable government and into their own'; otherwise, 'patriots will be compelled to call upon the people to do what the educated classes refuse to do'.[9] A long letter to *The Bell* argued that expecting Russia's 'educated classes' to solve the country's problems was futile. What Russia needed was revolutionary cells with roots among the people and contempt for abstract theory.[10]

The so-called 'Great Russian' – by this time a committee – put out two more pamphlets in September 1861, only to be upstaged by the simultaneous appearance of a much more forthright proclamation. *To the Young Generation* averred that 'We do not need a tsar, or an emperor, or the Lord's anointed, or a robe of ermine covering up hereditary incompetence'. The authors wanted an 'elective and limited' executive, the abolition of censorship, 'the development of the principle of self-government', equal rights, and the collective ownership of the land. If necessary, they were prepared to 'call for a revolution to help the people'.[11] *The Bell* had asked in July, 'What do the people need?', and had answered its own question by

saying 'It is very simple, the people need land and liberty'.[12] 'Land and Liberty' became the name of an amorphous political movement which operated in various parts of the Russian Empire between 1861 and 1863 and strove to convert the radicalism engendered by the emancipation into action. In March 1862 the novelist Ivan Turgenev satirized Russia's revolutionary youth in *Fathers and Sons*, but the fires that devastated St Petersburg two months later led many to suppose that radicals were tough enough to engage in arson. At the moment the fires began, Petr Zaichnevskii, a twenty-year-old Moscow University student who had been in prison since the previous year, managed to publish *Young Russia*, 'the most bloodcurdling and extreme' of all the calls to action which circulated in the wake of the emancipation.[13] Unlike the 'Great Russian' and the authors of *To the Young Generation*, Zaichnevskii made no bones whatever about using violence. Rather, he looked forward to the day when those who sympathized with him would 'kill the men of the imperial party without pity'.[14] As the summer of 1862 began, the regime seemed to be under serious threat.

The authorities had compounded their unpopularity among radicals by appearing to draw back from reform after publishing the emancipation statutes. Without conceding that the gentry of Tula, Smolensk, and elsewhere were justified in calling for an assembly which would give them a chance to vent their spleen, Alexander II seemed to be no less frightened than they by the enormity of the changes he had sanctioned. At the end of April 1861 he dismissed two of his brightest stars – Sergei Lanskoi and Nikolai Miliutin, the Minister and Acting Deputy Minister of Internal Affairs. In June he replaced an enlightened Minister of Education with an admiral who had conducted the Russian mission to Japan during the Crimean War and was identified in the public mind with oriental despotism. The incoming Minister of Internal Affairs, Petr Valuev, had been accounted a liberal when he criticized the state of the empire at the time of the Crimean War, but had apparently become less enthusiastic about change with the passage of time. In 1858 he had moved from the Governorship of Kurland to a position in the Ministry of State Properties, an institution which had forsaken the sympathy for reform which it had displayed under Kiselev. By 1861 observers considered Valuev to be the creature of M. N. Murav'ev, his benighted Minister, and of Viktor Panin, Rostovtsev's conservative successor as chairman of the Editing Commission. When Valuev became Minister of Internal Affairs Dmitrii Miliutin wrote that 'The landowning party had every justification for counting on [him] for the realization of their views'.[15] At the end of June 1862, not long after *Young Russia* and the fires in St Petersburg – and immediately after an attempt on the life of the Grand Duke Konstantin Nikolaevich – Valuev produced a paper on the internal condition of the empire in which he admitted the many difficulties under which the government was labouring but proposed no more than converting the State Council into a somewhat more representative body and bypassing the judicial system to deal with radicals more speedily.[16] The

government's main concern now seemed to be stifling dissent before it became intractable. Enacting further reform was apparently far from its thoughts. A historically inclined contemporary might have been tempted to compare Alexander II's outlook in mid-1862 with that of Alexander I in 1805 or Nicholas I at the end of 1830. In different degrees, both the earlier tsars had devoted their first years on the throne to improving the condition of the empire, but one of them had been distracted by Napoleon and the other by foreign war and a rebellion in Poland. Neither had succeeded, to any great extent, in returning to the path of reform. By legislating for the emancipation of the serfs Alexander II had achieved more than either of his immediate forebears, but he had also upset peasants, nobles and intellectuals. He had revealed a capacity for giving with one hand and taking away with the other. Many indicators suggested that reform was too dangerous to be allowed to continue and that the tsar's capacity for embracing change had been exhausted.

The regime recovered, however, from the immediate aftermath of the emancipation, and continued to work on modernizing the empire's institutional and social structure. It is doubtful, indeed, whether the difficulties it faced in 1861 and 1862 were as great as they look, and it is highly unlikely that the tsar decided in 1861 to substitute conservatives for reformers at the heart of the imperial administration.

Peasant disturbances were numerous in the spring and early summer of 1861, but declined sharply thereafter. P. A. Zaionchkovskii calculated for the period June 1861 to December 1863 that even if the number of incidents in which troops were used against peasants is doubled or tripled (which may be a legitimate procedure in view of the possibility of underreporting), no more than 4 per cent of the places where peasants lived were affected.[17] It is sometimes thought paradoxical that, when part of the rationale for emancipating the serfs was the elimination of disorder in the countryside, the legislation of 1861 increased it.[18] In fact, violence soon diminished. Once serfs began paying redemption dues they discovered that their new taskmaster, the state, was less efficient and less demanding than the gentry. Even if the authorities had wanted to rule the countryside with a rod of iron they were in no position to do so. The regime did not employ the equivalent of the landlords' bailiffs. As the peasants put it, 'God is high and the tsar is far away'. More to the point, the pre-emancipation budgets of the gentry were less well able to sustain a deficit than the post-emancipation budget of the regime. Both were unbalanced, but the former reached breaking point sooner than the latter. Peasants under serfdom tended to be forced to fulfil their obligations. When pressed too hard, they rioted. After 1861 (or rather, after they started making redemption payments), 'Peasants could and did accumulate huge arrears without any definitive confrontation with the authorities'.[19] Alexander II was well advised, at the point of emancipation, to plan an elaborate security operation, but he did not have to maintain it indefinitely.

Nor did he have to worry for long about hostility on the part of the