

INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE AGE OF ALEXANDER II

The Russian word “*istoriya*” can mean either history or story; *The Age of Alexander II* attempts to be both and is written for anyone who enjoys readable history. While emphasizing the “story” in history, I have taken no liberties with the facts, and even minor details such as descriptions of the weather on a particular day are based on solid historical sources. This book’s subject is the reign of Alexander II of Russia (1855–81) and some of the fascinating writers, thinkers and revolutionaries who made this the Golden Age of Russian literature and thought. It interweaves the personal and public lives of such individuals as Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Turgenev, but it also has a central thread woven throughout: Alexander II, his policies and the reactions they called forth from the book’s other central characters, most of whom could be considered intellectuals.

This drama occurs in a psychological atmosphere as real but elusive as a St Petersburg fog. It is one of raised but then dashed hopes, of confusion, conflict and alienation, but also one of yearning for love and a sense of community. It is one of a lonely Dostoevsky in Siberian exile discovering the necessity of becoming one with the common people; of the radical Sophia Perovskaya rejecting the world of her influential father and going among the workers and peasants to both teach and radicalize them; of a Leo Tolstoy so miserable that he contemplates suicide until he also discovers new hope among the peasants. It is one of the poet and philosopher Vladimir Soloviev seeking a vision of Sophia, the oneness of the universe, in an Egyptian desert. And finally, it is one in which even Tsar Alexander II seeks refuge from the complexities and conflicts of the time in the arms of a woman younger than his oldest children.

Although numerous books have been written on various aspects of this period, most are of a specialized nature. I know of no other historical work which incorporates the lives and ideas of the period’s great writers into the story of Alexander’s turbulent reign and at the same time offers some reflections on why its outcome was so tragic. Thus, it should be of interest to students and scholars of the period, as well as to more general readers.

The collective biographical approach used here, as opposed to an exclusive concentration on the politics or ideas of the era, not only provides history that is more readable, but more existential, more grounded in everyday reality, and, therefore, more understandable. As the German historian Wilhelm Dilthey wrote: "How can one deny that biography is of outstanding significance for the understanding of the great context of the historical world?"¹ This method also has something in common with the "polyphonic" method that the Russian critic M.M. Bakhtin attributed to Dostoevsky's novels. Such novels, Bakhtin thought, are marked by a "plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousness, a genuine polyphony of fully valid voices."²

This book strives for both objectivity and compassion in presenting the contrasting lives and ideas of many of the era's leading personalities. They found themselves in a difficult period of history with no easy answers available for solving their country's problems. If these individuals were sometimes foolish, dogmatic and impractical, at other times they were courageous and noble in their behavior. Although this work is mainly a narrative history, some analysis is interspersed throughout the chapters. Finally, the Epilogue summarizes what the preceding pages have revealed about Russia and its intellectuals under Alexander II and offers some thoughts about the relevance of these findings for post-Soviet Russia.

The first draft of this work was completed in 1987 and grew out of a course team-taught with Russ Larson on "Russia in the Age of Tolstoy and Dostoevsky." I wished to provide our students with a lively, readable but accurate portrait of the reign of Alexander II and the leading thinkers, writers and revolutionaries of that period. Many of the pictures that appear here were first taken by me in the 1980s and early 1990s as I visited Russian and Western European cities, estates and houses important in the lives of the manuscript's main characters and then later showed them as slides to our students. After beginning work on my two-volume *A History of Russia* (McGraw-Hill, 1997), I put the manuscript aside, except for course purposes, for about a decade. In 2000, I placed an updated version of the work on the Internet (<http://www.emich.edu/public/history/moss>) under the title *Alexander II and His Times: A Narrative History of Russia in the Age of Alexander II, Tolstoy and Dostoevsky* (with links to hundreds of images and other materials), where it can still be found. Soon after placing the work there, Kamaljit Sood of Anthem Press (Wimbledon Publishing Company) inquired about the possibility of printing a revised book version of this work, and it is this version that is now before the reader.

Two difficulties that face every Western historian dealing with Tsarist Russia are those of dates and spellings. Since the Russian calendar in the nineteenth century was twelve days behind the Western calendar, I have used the Russian dates for events occurring within Russia and the Western calendar for those

that occurred outside its borders. In regard to the transliteration of Russian spellings, I have slightly modified for use here the Library of Congress system. The most noteworthy modifications of it are the use of “yu” and “ya” instead of “iu” and “ia.” Thus Milyutin not Miliutin, and Perovskaya not Perovskaia. I have, however, maintained the more common English spellings of names such as Maria and Natalia rather than Marya or Natalya. Other minor variations will be noted by the specialist, but need not concern the general reader.

In the many years I have sporadically worked on this manuscript I have accumulated many debts of gratitude. At Eastern Michigan University (EMU), I have been indebted to Ira Wheatley, Russ Larson, James Waltz, Dick Goff, David Geherin, Margot Duley, Gersham Nelson and the now-deceased Bill Hauer, as well as to many helpful people at EMU’s library. I also wish to thank the libraries of Harvard University and the University of Michigan, especially the latter, which furnished most of the books I have consulted for this project. During and after putting my online version of this book on the Internet, I have received encouragement from Nathaniel Knight, Marshall Poe, John Randolph and Benjamin Sher, though none of them bear any responsibility for whatever failings this work may have. I am also very grateful to Kamaljit Sood at Anthem Press for his many efforts in encouraging and overseeing the publication of *The Age of Alexander II*. As always, my greatest debt is to my wife, Nancy.



WHO'S WHO?

PRINCIPAL FIGURES AND FAMILIES*

Alexander II (1818–81), Emperor and Tsar of Russia, 1855–81.

Empress Maria (1824–80), wife of Alexander II.

Alexander III (1845–94), son of Alexander II and Maria.

Maria (1853–1920), daughter of Alexander II and Maria, became Duchess of Edinburgh in 1874.

Catherine Dolgorukova (Katia) (1847–1922), longtime mistress and second wife of Alexander II.

Bakunin, Michael A. (1814–76), leading radical figure.

Antonia, his wife.

Antonia had a few children while married to Bakunin, but he was not their father.

Several of Bakunin's brothers were involved in liberal political activities in the Tver province.

Dostoevsky, Fedor M. (1821–81), writer.

Maria Isaeva (1826?–64), first wife of Dostoevsky.

Anna Snitkina (1846–1918), second wife of Dostoevsky, with whom he had four children, but two died as infants, Sonia in 1868 and Alyosha in 1878.

The Herzens:

Alexander (1812–70), radical journalist; editor of *The Bell*.

Natalia (1817–52), his wife.

Alexander (Sasha) (1839–1906), their son.

Natalia (Tata) (1844–1936), their daughter.

Olga (1850–1953), their second daughter.

In addition, the Herzens had two other sons, the first died when still a young boy in 1851, the second shortly after his birth in 1852.

The Ogarevs:

Nicholas P. (1813–77), poet, radical journalist, friend and co-editor with Herzen of *The Bell*.

* A note on Russian names: female last names often vary slightly from their male counterparts and most frequently end in "a"; thus Natalia Ogareva instead of Ogarev.

Maria (d. 1853), his first wife.

Natalia (1829–1923), second wife and Herzen's mistress from 1857.

Children of Alexander Herzen and Natalia Ogareva:

Liza (1858–75)

Elena (1861–4)

Alexei (1861–4)

The Muraviev clan:

Michael N. (1796–1866), Governor-general of Lithuania, 1863–65, the “hangman.”

Nicholas N. Muraviev-Amursky (1809–81), Governor-general of Eastern Siberia, 1847–61, a distant relative of Michael N.

Nicholas V. (1850–1908), nephew of Muraviev-Amursky, public prosecutor in St Petersburg at the time of Alexander II's death.

Bakunin's mother, several Decembrists, and many distinguished officials and high-ranking officers were also Muravievs.

Nekrasov, Nicholas A. (1821–1877), radical poet and editor of *The Contemporary*.

The Perovskys:

Lev N. (1816–90), civilian governor of St Petersburg province in the mid 1860s.

Barbara, wife of Lev.

Peter N. (1818–65), Russian negotiator in Peking, 1858–9, brother of Lev.

Sophia L. (1853–81), one of four children of Lev and Barbara, a leading member of People's Will.

The uncles of Lev and Peter, Vasily A. and Lev A., both held important government posts under Nicholas I. The mother of the poet Alexei Tolstoy was a sister of these uncles.

The Solovievs:

Sergei M. (1820–79), distinguished historian, professor, and administrator at Moscow University.

Poliksena Romanova, wife of Sergei and daughter of Vladimir Romanov (1796–1864), a naval hero at Sevastopol.

Vladimir S. (1853–1900), son of Sergei and Poliksena; philosopher, poet, mystic.

Of the other seven Soloviev children who lived to adulthood, several had distinguished careers; Vladimir's older brother, Vsevolod, was a popular historical novelist and his youngest sister, Poliksena, became a fine poet.

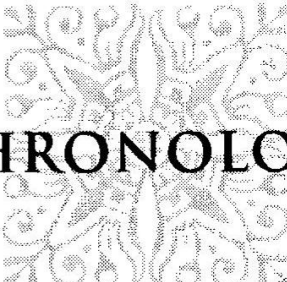
The Tolstoys:

Leo N. (1828–1910), writer.

Maria (1830–1912), sister of Leo, briefly infatuated with Turgenev.

Sonia Bers (1844–1919), Leo's wife.

Leo and Sonia had thirteen children, ten of them born during the reign of Alexander II. Of these ten, three died by the age of two. The Tolstoys were a distinguished family related to a number of other famous Russian families, including different branches of Tolstoys, and the Volkonskys, Trubetskoy, and Gorchakovs.



CHRONOLOGY

- 1855 Beginning of Alexander II's reign.
1856 Peace of Paris ends Crimean War.
Coronation of the Tsar.
1857 Bakunin released from prison and exiled to Siberia.
Tolstoy's first trip to Western Europe.
Herzen and Ogarev begin publishing *The Bell*.
1858 Russia and China sign treaties of Aigun and Tientsin.
Peter Perovsky arrives in Peking.
Chicherin visits Herzen in London.
1859 Katkov and Chernyshevsky visit Herzen.
Dostoevsky returns from Siberian exile.
1860 Treaty of Peking signed.
1861 Emancipation of the serfs.
Tolstoy and Bakunin visit Herzen.
Dmitry Milyutin becomes Minister of War.
Tolstoy and Turgenev break off relations.
1862 *Fathers and Sons* published.
Arrest of Chernyshevsky.
Turgenev and Dostoevsky visit Herzen.
1863–4 Polish rebellion.
1864 Zemstvo and legal reforms.
1865 Herzen moves to Geneva.
1866 Karakozov attempts to assassinate Alexander II.
Alexander begins affair with Catherine Dolgorukova.
Dostoevsky completes *The Gambler* and *Crime and Punishment*.
1867 Assassination attempt on Alexander II in Paris.
Dostoevsky and Turgenev meet in Baden-Baden.
1868 Dostoevsky's daughter, Sophia, dies in Geneva.
1869 Nechaev arrives in Geneva and meets Bakunin and Ogarev.
Tolstoy completes *War and Peace*.
1870 Death of Herzen.
1870–71 Franco-Prussian War.

- 1874 Alexander II visits London.
Thousands of young radicals "go to the people."
Dostoevsky's first stay at Bad Ems.
Sophia Perovskaya imprisoned for about five months.
- 1875 Vladimir Soloviev in Egypt.
- 1875-7 Tolstoy's *Anna Karenina* published.
- 1876 Death of Bakunin.
- 1877 Turgenev's *Virgin Soil* published.
Death of Nekrasov.
- 1877-8 Russo-Turkish War.
- 1878 Dostoevsky and Vladimir Soloviev visit Optina Monastery.
Tolstoy and Turgenev renew friendly relations.
- 1879 Death of Sergei Soloviev.
The People's Will formed.
- 1880 Loris-Melikov named head of Supreme Administrative Commission.
Death of Empress Maria and remarriage of Alexander II.
Dostoevsky and Turgenev give speeches at Pushkin festivities.
- 1881 Death of Dostoevsky.
Assassination of Alexander II.