

Contexts: Church on Spilled Blood, St Petersburg

Xavier Edwards continues the series with the church monument to Tsar Alexander II



Tsar Alexander II

A RULER ASSASSINATED by a reformer at the time he has agreed to reform presents a particularly piquant picture. That was the fate of Tsar Alexander II. Such a bald statement, however, masks the full complexity of Alexander's reign and reforms.

Even before the age of the global economy, societies that had contact with each other, were disadvantaged by failure to change at a speed comparable to their neighbours. Tsar Peter the Great (1682-1725) had recognised this and introduced westernising reforms, one of which was the creation of a new capital, St Petersburg, on the Gulf of Finland from which future contact with the West could be fostered. The eighteenth-century European classical style of architecture is dominant in the centre of St Petersburg with one notable

exception, the Church on Spilled Blood.

A society that falls behind its neighbours usually fails to have the administrative and economic foundation for success on the battlefield. This was demonstrated by Russia's shortcomings during the Crimean War, 1854-6. Alexander II succeeded his father, Nicholas I, in 1855. In a decade, the 1860s, he introduced reforms to the army and navy, education, law, local government, finance and the economy and, in particular, he abolished serfdom (slavery) in 1861. He, also, relaxed censorship. These reforms are discussed fully by Dr David Moon in *new perspective*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (September 1995).

Reform while satisfying some can create unrest, not only among those with a vested interest in the former ways but among reformers themselves who, having gained some change, are encouraged to press for further reforms. Political activism increased during the 1860s and, by the 1870s, some political groups began to use terrorism. Alexander Soloviev, a doctor, shot at the Tsar from close range in 1879. He was caught and executed (see illustration, right, of Soloviev escorted to his execution). Later that year terrorists attempted to blow up the



imperial train. In 1880 the banquet hall of the Winter Palace was destroyed by a bomb. General Loris-Melikov was made responsible for suppressing the terrorists, in which he had some success, and it was he who pressed for an assembly, partly elected (on a very limited franchise),



which would be consulted over proposals for laws. Reformers would welcome this proposal. Alexander had already accepted the case for an assembly, although this was not publicly known, but on 1 March 1881 Nikolai Rysakov, a member of one of the terrorist groups, threw a bomb at Alexander's carriage. It did little damage, and despite his coachman's exhortations to move quickly onward, Alexander got out to help the wounded, who included the bomber. When, it is alleged, Alexander said to Rysakov 'I am safe, thank God', Rysakov replied, 'Do not thank God yet!' and within minutes another terrorist, Ignaty Grinevitsky, threw the bomb that blew off Alexander's legs. He died some hours later.

Shocked by the assassination of his father, Alexander III had the terrorist reformers hunted and political activism suppressed. One recent text comments, 'The last era of effective Romanov despotism had begun'. On the exact spot where his father was killed, by the Griboedov Canal, half a mile east of the Winter Palace, Alexander III ordered a memorial church to be built in the Russian Revival style, not dissimilar to St Basil's in Red Square, Moscow. Begun in 1883, it was completed over the next 25 years.

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