

Section A

Read the two passages and then answer Question 1.

- 1 Evaluate the interpretations in both of the two passages and explain which you think is more convincing about the impact of the domestic policies of Alexander II.

[30]

Passage A

The 'Tsar Liberator' presided over an 'era of great reforms' which finally dragged Russia into the nineteenth century. Indeed, the scope of Alexander II's achievement has been compared by some historians with that of Peter the Great or Lenin. Autocracy would not be undermined, but it would be made to work more efficiently by modernising and rationalising the range of social and administrative institutions over which it presided. It was obvious that, by 1855, Russia was in desperate need of overhaul. Alexander had come to the throne at a time when Russia was in grave internal disarray; Nicholas I had admitted that 'I am handing you command of the country in a very poor state.' Defeat in the Crimean War showed the structural weakness of the army, the inefficiency of the financial administration and, above all, the dangerously archaic features of serfdom. Alexander was therefore impelled to take action, although what he had in mind was not a break with the past but controlled surgery to save the whole hierarchical body. The first and most important measure was the one which earned him the title 'Tsar Liberator', was the Emancipation of the Serfs, carried against a protesting nobility by the 1861 Edict. This can be seen as a monumental achievement. The grant of individual freedom and a minimum of civil rights to twenty million people previously in legal bondage was the greatest single liberating measure in the whole modern history of Europe. The 1861 Edict accomplished for Russia what had been done in France in 1789, in Prussia in 1807 and Austria in the 1780s. Its lateral impact was also considerable, for the end of seigneurial jurisdiction necessitated reforms in the entire system of justice, local government and military service. The emancipation of the serfs was therefore the force behind a series of reforms which followed between 1864 and 1881.

Adapted from: S. Lee, *Aspects of European History: 1789–1980*, published in 1982

Passage B

When Alexander II became Tsar in 1855, the Russian state was in desperate need of fundamental reform. The programme of reforms introduced by him was radical in comparison with previous Russian experience, but it did not go far enough. The government's commitment to modernise Russia through a process of westernisation was moderated by its concern to perpetuate the interests of its ruling social class. This approach alienated the intelligentsia and, in doing so, undermined the stability of the regime, compelling it to rely on repression for its preservation. Significant though the reforms were, they failed to create popular support for the Tsarist regime.

The Edict of Emancipation freed serfs from their feudal obligations and allotted land for their needs. Landlords received compensation from the state in the form of Treasury bonds. The peasants were then indebted to the state and obliged to make redemption payments to the village mir. Peasants were incredulous that they had to pay for the land which they thought belonged to them because they had always worked it. Many, believing that the real terms of the Emancipation had been concealed by their landlords, rioted in protest. The Emancipation was certainly onerous. The peasants lost on average 4.1% of their pre-1861 agricultural holdings. In the more fertile regions the situation was far worse. There was little investment in industry and agriculture following Emancipation, and the persistence of obsolete agricultural techniques made the central problem of low yields even worse. Serfdom was a medieval method of social control upon which the autocracy and nobility had become reliant. The government sought to perpetuate a similar level of control after 1861. The terms dictated that the village mir controlled the movement of the peasants. It is clear that the abolition of serfdom did not facilitate the optimum conditions for Russia's economic advancement.

Adapted from: C.P. Watts, *History Review*, published in 1998