Causes Of Change In The Russian System Of Government 1800-1917 Essay, Research Paper

“Nothing short of war could have any impact of the Russian system of government.” How accurate is this of the Tsarist system of government from 1800-1917. The Russian Tsarist system under the Romanovs was extremely resistant to change in all forms. Reforms were brought in only to preserve and little improvement resulted from these reforms. In this essay I will attempt to examine whether or not war had any impact upon the Tsarist system of government, and whether or not war brought about any changes to the system. First, the war with Napoleon that ended in 1815 with the Vienna settlement. Tsar Alexander I, Tsar at this time, had a genuine wish to reform, but because of the desire for order instilled in him by his Father Tsar Paul, his good intentions came to nothing. His military victories against Napoleon played a vital role in the eventual defeat of Napoleon’s forces. Consequently, these victories brought power and prestige to Russia and increased her standing as a great power. La Harpe, a French liberal, had tutored Alexander and this had resulted in him having some very liberal ideas. However, despite his positive attitude towards reform in other European countries, its implementation of these reforming tendencies in Russia was limited. This was due to his desire for order. Alexander was petrified of losing control and consequently, when reform and improvement was presented to him, he often turned his back on it, because of the chaos he feared might accompany it. In a sense the victory against Napoleon was probably not particularly beneficial for Russia. Even at this stage, Russia was behind other European powers in its industrial and economic development, and unlike Prussia, and even to some extent Austria-Hungary, Russia learnt no lessons from the war, and consequently implemented no reforms. Perhaps, had the war been lost, Alexander may have realised the need for change, and perhaps some governmental reform may have resulted from this, due to public pressure. However, it is clear that in this case victory in war had no effect upon the Russian system of government. Second, I would like to examine the Crimean war. This war was clearly the war that can be most associated with reform and change. It came during the reign of Alexander II who was clearly the most forward-looking Tsar between 1800 and 1917. However, it must also be remembered that when compared to previous Tsars, indeed, Alexander II accomplished much in the way of reform. On the other hand, when one compares Alexander II to the rest of Europe, the reforms he introduced were extremely limited in scope and vision and certainly did not remove Russia’s backward nature. The key realisation of Alexander II was that Russia was in fact a backward power that needed to be brought up to date. This fact was illustrated for him by the war in Crimea. Russia was defeated by powers fighting thousands of miles from home, and this illustrated the ineffectiveness and the incompetence of the Russian army, and transport system as a whole. Alexander realised that part of the reason for Russia’s backward nature was the serf system. The peasants in Russia were still the property of their landowner, this lead to the emancipation of the serfs. However, Alexander’s insight ended here. Like other Tsars before him, he believed strongly in the principles of conservatism and autocracy, he would not let the conservative landowners loose out in the emancipation edict. The result was disastrous, the serfs who were freed were disappointed and enraged as they had to pay compensation to the landowners for 49 years, whilst loosing on average around half of the land farmed by their families for centuries, as well as loosing traditional privileges such as grazing rights on the land of their landowner. Consequently, most serfs did extremely badly out of the edict. Instead of freeing the serfs unconditionally from slavery and allowing economic growth to take place, Alexander tied the slaves to their land by introducing the redemption payments, and making the peasants answerable to the Mirs, a body who organised strip farming, an antiquated system and told the peasants what crops to plant and when. In actual fact, the emancipation achieved little in the short term, and certainly did not spark an industrial revolution as such, although it did bring about some sort of movement towards the rapidly industrialising towns, and it certainly didn’t spark economic growth on the scale that perhaps it could and should have done. Although this reform, sparked by the Crimean war was far reaching, I would argue that it didn’t reach far enough. However, not only were the serfs disappointed with the reforms, the reforms also disappointed many of the landowning class. At this time up to 60% of the serfs were mortgaged, so many of the redemption payments went towards repaying these debts, consequently, many of the landowners did not do very well out of these lavish repayments. Also, the bonds issued by the government devalued and therefore, the landowners lost more money. This led to Alexander, not only becoming unpopular with the peasants, and achieving few of the aims he set out to achieve, but also isolating his traditional conservative support. However, the emancipation of the serfs did bring about a form of local government in the introduction of the zemstvas and the dumas, these to bodies were responsible to a certain extent for local government. These bodies did have some power locally such as supervising prisons and hospitals and arranging military conscription, in this way the Russian system of government was improved by the emancipation of the serfs, and many people benefited from this reform. It also involved thousands of ordinary Russian civilians in the running of their country on a local level, and many more in the election of this body. However, despite improving the system of local government as a whole, I would argue that in actual fact this reform had little impact on the overall picture. The Tsar, whilst delegating power that was insignificant, maintained absolute power over the entire country. Therefore, very little had changed in the Russian system of government. It can therefore be concluded that the war in the Crimea had very little impact upon the Russian system of government, as the reforms introduced by Alexander II had an effect that was twofold, firstly, it showed that the Tsars were not willing to reform the Tsarist system of government in any way to compromise the supreme power of the Tsar, even if improvement could be made, and secondly, it showed other Tsars that reform brings dissatisfaction among the people, loss of support among the conservative upper class and the autocracy and that liberalising ideas bring about assassination attempts, shown by Alexander II’s death at the hands of the People’s Will. This discouraged other Tsars from liberalising and bringing in reforms. This was shown in the brutal repression introduced by Alexander III upon his accession to the throne. In this case, therefore, war did have an impact upon the Russian system of government, as it encouraged the Tsars to turn from reform to repression, and therefore reduced future alterations to the Russian system of government. The Third war was that with Japan in 1904. This war ensued in the midst of a bad time for Russia. The economic growth, encouraged under Sergei Witte, experienced a down turn in the depression of 1899-1903. This caused unemployment, which led to discontentment among the working classes and this led to strikes. The war with Japan was yet another unmitigated disaster for Russia, and yet another illustration of the extreme backward nature of Russia. By this stage, although estimations are difficult, Russia was probably anything up to 50 years behind the rest of Europe in economic terms. This lack of development was crucial in the defeat in the Japanese war. The loss of Port Arthur was a trigger factor in the growing unrest within Russia. This unrest was eventually to lead to the overthrow of the Tsarist regime. However, it was not the defeat alone that led to the forced abdication of Nicholas II, in fact comparatively speaking the Japanese war played a relatively minor role in this eventual outcome. On the other hand, it did decrease moral and faith in the system of government within Russia. Perhaps, had the Tsar been forward looking and progressive with keen insight and new ideas, the defeat would have led him to implement a series of far reaching reforms that would have averted the revolution of 1917. However, this was not to be the case, and yet even when Nicholas II is forced to come up with a constitutional monarchy that he eventually offers in the October manifesto. It is clear that his objective is to appease and not to reform. Even the state Duma which is implemented, and could perhaps have been a real step towards change and improvement in the Russian system of government, was limited in power, could be ignored by the Tsar and dissolved after 2 months. The Tsar could also change the electoral law in order to obtain the Duma that he wanted. These conditions effectively meant that there was no change to the Tsar’s absolute autocratic power, and no improvements to the Russian system were made. Indeed, even in the Fundamental law of April 1906, it was clearly stated that: “Supreme autocratic power belongs to the emperor of all Russia”. Again this is another example of war having no effect upon the Russian system of government Even the First World War could not alter the Tsar’s autocratic, non-reforming ideas. Although it was clear through Germany’s thrashing of Russia, Russia still required much reform and improvement, although, by this stage, the majority of the Russian people had lost all confidence in the Tsar, and in reality reform at this stage may have made little difference to the eventual outcome. However, from statements made by the Duma and by the request of the generals to the Tsar’s brother, it was not the Tsarist system they wished to overthrow, their objective was simply to remove Nicholas II from power. Perhaps, had the Tsar realised that the Russian system of government was in desperate need for reform in order to make Russia a Great Power once more, then the Tsarist system may, even at this stage, have been saved. However, again we see a prime example of the autocratic Tsarist system resisting change in any shape or form. It is clear that the First World War, as other wars had done, had no effect on the Russian system of government. It is clear in my mind, after my examination of the four wars between 1800 and 1917 that not even war could have any impact upon the essentials of the Russia system of government i.e. the supreme autocratic power of the Tsar. Pressure from the middle classes, minor revolutions, changes of Tsar and many other factors as well as war all failed in their objective to achieve a better system of government for Russia. War showed time and again throughout the 19th century that Russia was well behind the times in both military and economic terms. However, this had little effect on the Tsars who seems absolutely set upon maintaining absolute autocratic power. Perhaps had the Tsar been willing to make real concessions, the Russian system of government would not have been subjected to such dramatic change. In the eventual outcome, the Tsarist system of government was overthrown by negligence and assumptions in that after Nicholas II’s abdication, and his brother’s refusal to become Tsar and given Alexi’s unsuitability, Russia was left without a Tsar. This situation could and should have been averted had the Tsar been will to give up part of his absolute autocratic power for a more reasonable, rational and diverse system of government. In my opinion, it was necessary for the Tsar to give some form of constitutional Monarchy, and consequently increase reform within Russia to improve the country in economic and military terms so that it was up to date with the rest of Europe. However, whilst the Tsar maintained absolute power improvement was near impossible. Even war had no impact on the Tsars intent to preserve the Tsarist system and, ultimately it was Russia and the Russian people who suffered. .