William Tyler | Alexander II The Czar Liberator, 1856–1881

– Thank you Wendy, and welcome to everybody of course, and as I've been doing in the last few weeks, I'm going to read the blog that I put on my blog, but I believe that Lockdown are putting on their website as well, and this talk is simply called Alexander II: The Czar Liberator, known to many Russians as the last great czar, that the final judgement on Alexander II must be that, although some reform was achieved during his reign, it wasn't of such a nature that it would save the Romanovs and czarism when the revolution finally came in 1917. Yes, he liberated the serfs finally in 1861, but towards the end of his life, he became rather paranoid and more conservative in his views as various factions in Russian society threatened revolution and assassination. At the end of the 19th century, not just in Russia, but across Europe and America too. assassination was being used as a political weapon, and for all the czar's caution, he was himself indeed assassinated in 1881, and that paved the way for repression under his son, Alexander III and his grandson Nicholas II, the last czar, right up until the time of 1917 revolution, and irony of ironies, the assassination occurred in 1881 of Alexander II on the very day that he was seeking to make constitutional changes that had been desperately needed by Russia for decades, constitutional changes which would have given some sort of advisory parliament to Russia, but you can forget that, because the assassination made his son, Alexander III, turn to repression, the answer of all the Romanovs to threats of revolution, threats of violence, repression. It is true that Alexander II's reign saw relations with Britain improve. Indeed his daughter married a son of Queen Victoria, and he himself visited the Queen in England twice, once when he was a czarewich, and once when he was the czar, despite the background of The Crimean War, but he never seemed to learn the lessons of constitutional monarchy that were evident to him on his visits to Britain, and I have written, so it's not particularly clever, but I have written this. "In the final analysis, the question which hangs in the air is one of what might have been, what might have been rather than what was." So you're left with a sense of sadness, or at least I am, when I tell the story of Alexander II. He could have saved Russia, and I mean by that 20th and 21st century Russia, had he democratised czarism, and there were plenty of models to do that, but the most obvious model was the British model, had he established parliament, and given power to Prime Ministers, and et cetera, et cetera, but then Russia might have avoided the revolution, and the story of Russia, indeed the story of Europe and the world might well have been different, but that's a what if, so let's look at the reality. Now the one gift that historians have is hindsight, and as the American history professor, Joseph Marsh, once said, "Hindsight is a tricky business because it means, by definition, the historian always knows more than the men and women he is studying." If only I could have advised Alexander II, I could have averted the Russian Revolution, but it doesn't work like that. History

simply doesn't work like that. I can think that, and I can say that, and I can justify saying that this was the last chance for Russia, but Alexander II couldn't say that. Alexander II has no idea what is to lie ahead in the 20th and 21st centuries for Russia. He can only do what he sees as the right thing during his lifetime. One of the interesting facts about Alexander II is that his father, Nicholas I, whom you recall died during the course of The Crimean War, came to believe that change in Russia was inevitable, even perhaps desirable, and he is on record as saying that he wanted to liberate the slaves, sorry, the serfs, that he wanted to emancipate serfs, but felt that he couldn't do so. You remember from my last talk, because if he had done so, he thought that he would've pulled the brick from the dam and the whole thing would've come down, but because he believed that change was inevitable, maybe desirable, he ensured that his son Alexander was ready to take on the challenge when he became czar. And in the magazine we'd been using on the Romanovs, I can read this little piece. "From his birth in 1818, Alexander had been raised to be a liberal and progressive ruler. In this Nicholas I, his father, apparently recognised that change was inevitable. Nicholas himself was unable to implement serious reforms, but everyone expected that Alexander would be a different sort of ruler."

Now that's quite an impressive thing that Nicholas did, if you think about it, to educate Alexander to be a liberal, and as part of that education, he visited Britain. As part of his education, he did a tour of Russia. No other czarewich had ever done anything like that. So Nicholas prepared him for the throne, and prepared him in such a way that the reforms that Nicholas felt unable to carry out could be carried out by Alexander. Now, as we noted last time, Alexander came to the throne in a difficult time in the midst of The Crimean War, which Russia had, by then, virtually lost. In his book "The Romanovs" Simon Sebag Montefiore writes this. It is a massive book, but it is a fantastic one. "The world has come tumbling down" and Montefiore is quoting Anna Tyutcheva who was a courtier in Alexander the II's court, and before that, in Nicholas I. "The world has come damning down." And that was when Nicholas died and Alexander became czar. Sebag Montefiore goes on to say, "Her father was no less stricken." He said, "It is as if a God had died. No Romanov, since the first, Michael, had inherited such desperate straits as Alexander II." Because of The Crimean War, Russia was in a mess, "but no autocrat was better prepared." Exactly what I just said. Nicholas had prepared his son to deal with crisis, and in particular to be liberal and reformist. "The day after his father died, Alexander praised 'his unforgettable parent', and went before the State Council. When he saw the diplomats, Alexander declared, 'I want peace,' but added, 'I'll fight on and perish rather than cede.'" But of course, the war did come to an end, and peace was restored. Two weeks after his father's funeral, he called a family council of himself, his younger brother, and his own wife to discuss what needed to be done. Remember, he's been brought up as a reformer and Simon Sebag Montefiore says, "Both the brothers

understood that the Crimean debacle proved that serfdom be reformed because the peasant dominated army of Russia could never compete with the armies of the industrialised west, but only his younger brother demanded immediate reform. Alexander, backed by his wife, proposed 'quiet for now, nothing too quick.'" In fact, it took a further six years, 1861, before implementation of the policy proposed by his younger brother was implemented, the abolition of serfdom. So interesting that the abolition of serfdom came about, not on moral grounds, but on the grounds that a serf peasant army was far less effective than the free armies of, shall we say, Germany, in particular, or any a western European country. In hindsight, there we go again, in hindsight, The Crimean War was arguably one of the most senseless of wars, and that's how we see it in Britain, the charge of the light brigade, and all of that nonsense, but it did have a wider impact. It rearranged the balance of power in Europe, and in doing so, kept Europe at peace until war broke out in 1914. That period from 1856 to 1914 was to see the rise of Germany, and was to see Europe take on a division between the great powers. Britain and France and Russia eventually, in the early years of the 20th century on one side, Germany, Austria, on the other side, and indeed at the very last moment, Germany, Austria, and the Ottoman Empire, and that sort of rejigging of the map of Europe, political diplomatic map of Europe was a consequence of The Crimean War, but it had another consequence which was unpredictable. And that was, as Simon Jenkins says, in his "Short History of Europe", "a period of Russian creativity." We have concentrated on the political side of Russian history, and the social side, and as indeed we should, but as with China today, and indeed as with Russia today, we think the cultural side. Well, we don't think of the cultural side, but you have to think of the culture side. For example, Tolstoy was a soldier in The Crimean War, and in his writings, particularly that about The Napoleonic War, he gave the West a new picture of Russia and Russians. Dostoevsky investigated moral complexities, and both these writers are of international, of course, I don't even need to say that, of international standard, and in music, Russia hit the high notes, Tchaikovsky, Mussorgsky, Borodin, and on the stage, Chekhov, whose plays we still see acted out today. I always have to pull myself up in a Chekhov play to realise that he's writing about imperial Russia. He's not writing about Germany or England, he's writing about Russia, and yet his plays seem awfully reminiscent of 19th and early 20th century Britain, and Germany, and France, but it's Russia, and that of course emphasises another point, that there is a growing middle class emerging in Russia, after all Chekhov's plays need a middle class audience to succeed, and even the music of Tchaikovsky, and Mussorgsky, so on need a middle class audience at concerts, and there is a growing middle class in Russia. Jenkins summarises what he calls Russian creativity in this period in this way. "Alexander II's Moscow did not become a second Rome, but St. Petersburg, the capitol, became a second Paris." So not just Vienna, to visit, before the first World War, for culture or Paris, but you could also visit St. Petersburg, but certainly not London. No, you

needed St. Petersburg, Vienna, or Paris, and to speak of Russia as an equal says something very important about the society that Russia was developing into at the turn of the 19 and 20th century. So even more depressing is the fact that it was stagnant on the political constitutional side. It had cultural developments, it had social developments with the creation of a middle class, and it had more than that. It had, in economic terms, it began to industrialise. It has an industrialization, particularly in the big cities like Moscow and St. Petersburg, and of course Warsaw, which was a Russian city, the third in size after Moscow and St. Petersburg.

So the opportunity for constitutional reform was there for Alexander to seize. If he had managed to politicise the middle classes towards constitutional democracy, then he might have won. The problem for him was that industrialization, created as it had done in England a long time before, created a new urban proletariat, and that urban proletariat became unionised, and the urban proletariat becomes the foot soldiers, if you like, of the middle class intellectuals who were buying in, not just to democracy, but to the far left political views really of Marx. So he had failed to capture the hearts and minds of the middle classes, by and large, and there was an urban proletariat, which was ready for exploitation by people like Lenin and Trotsky, and after all, Alexander II is still czar in 1881, and the revolution is only 38 years away. So the revolution has its roots here in Alexander's reign, and it has it here in terms of the social changes, some of which, well, largely the social changes are created by economic changes. Russia was catching up with the world and firms like my family's firm, producing railway locomotives, little railway locomotives had a market in Russia, and so did many other British firms. French firms had even more links to Russia. Russia was becoming industrialised. Russia was becoming more middle class, but it didn't become more democratic, and the failure to do that, let me emphasise the point again, meant that there was sufficient politicisation of the middle classes. Many of them, of course, Jews remember Trotsky, for example, who were left wing in their policies, and they had an urban proletariat that could be put onto the streets. You can't put a rural proletariat onto the streets, and a rural proletariat tends to be conservative, small c, in British terms, be conservative, more dominated by religion, whereas the urban proletariat is becoming literate, and is reading, not the Bible, is reading political tracts, and I find all of that absolutely fascinating, because it means that Alexander could and could have done, and his failure to do anything really about the constitution is what damns his reign, and damns Russia. This is a book that I've not put it on my list, I might put it on, called "Isle and Empires". It's really a very strange local history in Britain, a very good book, but written by a retired school master. It's about the Isle of Wight, which the Russian aristocracy, and the Russian exiled Marxists visited and stayed at. And in one chapter he writes this, "Newly liberated serfs will become a powerful factor in the economic transformation of Russia, as well as the rise

of a new middle class. At the same time, Russia was industrialising and a new urban proletariat was emerging. All this was to have a major impact on the future of Russia in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Political and social forces were being unleashed, which it will be increasingly difficult for the traditional czarist power to control." Just to prove that I don't make this history up as I go along, that's what I've been trying to say. It's not true that Alexander didn't make any reforms. He did, for example, he introduced new forms of self-government at district and provincial level. There had been that before. He's building on that, but that wasn't what was required. What was required was at national level, and they did not do that. He also introduced trial by jury and open courts, open courts in the sense that the public could attend them, all of which was absolutely positive. All of these things are positive, so if you were landing up things, landing things up on a scale, the good things and the bad things, on the good side, it goes up and up and up, and on the bad side, there's only no constitutional reform. But all of this side is as though it was paper and feathers, and on this side, the one issue of constitutional reform is so heavy that the scales come down on that side rather than all the reforms, and that's why in my opinion, Alexander II, in the last analysis, failed, failed not only himself, but failed his father who had educated him to make all of these changes. It's interesting to note two people who made comments, which I'm going to share with you.

The first is a German writer who was in fact the first woman to be nominated for the Nobel Prize in literature. And her name was Malwida von Meysenbug. Now she circulated amongst group of German, Hungarian and Russian intellectuals and writers, and the great Russian intellectual, Alexander Herzen, employed her as a housekeeper. I'm not sure that's the right word, but it's usually the word used to describe her, to look after him and his children, his wife having recently died, and they were in England, and Herzen went to the Isle of Wight to the town of Ventnor on the Isle of Wight which basically hasn't changed since the 19th century. Go and see it. You can see where they stayed, and they were on holiday there. They were attracted to the Isle of Wight. Well, it's in a nice place, but there they were anyhow, and during The Crimean War, they're there. And this lady, Malwida von Meysenbug, wrote this while she was in the Isle of Wight in England, housekeeper to the great Alexander Herzen. She writes, "News reached us in the Isle of Wight about the taking of Malakoff. This meant that Sevastopol, in the Crimea, would probably fall, and the war would be over. We rejoiced at the news not only out of consideration for human life, but especially for Russia since it could be assumed that the new emperor." This is on the turn, 1855, when Nicholas I dies, Alexander II replaces him. "Since it could be assumed that the new emperor would attempt domestic reforms after the close of this war, which he had inherited." So there was hope at the time, not just in hindsight, of what Alexander might do, and the author of this book, "Isle and Empires", Stephan Roman, writes about Herzen. Herzen is left wing,

intellectual. He's known as a father of Russian socialism, and this is how the author of this book, Roman writes, "Initially Herzen hoped that The Crimean War would lead to the fall of the Romanovs, and he was convinced that it would expose the rotten and corrupt nature of Russian autocracy. In short, revolution would come as a result of being defeated. His political attacks on the czar and his government now reached new levels. In June, 1853, soon after his arrival in London, Herzen had launched the paper "Free Russian Press". He said it would become the uncensored voice of a liberated Russia." Well, we don't see it have gone far from 1853 to 2022 when people like Herzen today, his equivalent, are also banned in Russia. Herzen himself had gone into voluntary exile in the early 1840s. "So he launched his paper, the "Free Russian Press". Its leading publication was also an openly revolutionary periodical beside the press called "The Polar Star". This was followed by a series of deliberately inflammatory brochures and pamphlets, calling for the liberation of the Russian peasantry and for Poles and Russians," Remember Poland is part of Russia. "For Poles and Russians to work together in launching a common revolutionary front against a czarist regime." Remember just now I said, you've got an urban proletariat that's literate and is reading. It's reading things like Herzen is printing. They're circulating in Russia. There is a growing sense, a growing sense that czarism is coming to an end, that revolution is in the air, and that was 1853, so that's what I can't do the math quickly, 70 years, am I right? Yes, 70 years, nearly 70 years before the first World War and revolution does come. It must be strange to live in a country where you feel that revolution around the corner, and that is certainly what many in Russia thought. Of course, many, the majority didn't think about that at all. The liberated serfs in the countryside would've had no idea about this. Out in the extremities of Russia, like Siberia, no one would've had an idea, but in the middle class drawing rooms of Moscow and Warsaw, and St. Petersburg, they would know. The aristocracy, some of whom were favourable to change, and even those who were not favourable to change, nevertheless knew and so did the czar, so did the czar. Russia for all the reforms remained an autocracy. It remained an autocracy, emancipation of the serfs, yes, but not remember on moral grounds, but on purely practical military grounds. In Jeffrey Hoskin's book, "Russian History: A Very Short Introduction", Hoskin writes this, "It is remarkable that such a far-reaching measure as the emancipation of serfs could be carried out at all in opposition to the interest of the ruling class. It was of vindication of the power, the much criticised autocratic state, which alone could rise above the interest of all social classes." True, but Alexander II needed to use that power to introduce democracy. He'd used it to get rid of serfdom, fantastic, but that is a featherweight against this great weight of no constitutional reform. Emancipation of serfs would not alone be enough to save Russia from revolution, to save czarism, and to save the Romanovs, but what about the army reforms that were introduced, which is why the serfs were emancipated in the first place? What about them, because they were carried out,

and this is the story of Russia then, before, and after. "One of the main reasons." says Hoskins, "for abolishing serfdom was to create a non serf army in which all adult males would have the duty to serve, and in which a reserve could be built up without endangering rural security. The War Minister, Dmitry Milyutin, pushed through that reform in the Military Conscription Act of 1874." That's a very similar date to the army reforms incidentally in Britain, the Cardwell Reforms, "and insisted that all new recruits should take literacy classes. He also stipulated that officers should be professionally trained." Literacy classes for all, and officers no longer drawn simply from the aristocracy, but from the middle class, should be trained. This is very much on a model with what was happening in Britain, except we never bothered about literacy. One of the things that push adult education as a movement in Britain came in 1919, because they had discovered during the war that the large numbers of the troops in the trenches were illiterate, and so there were real moves after the war to make more people literate, but Russia was doing this in 1874. So why did the Russian army perform so badly in 1914 against the Germans? Well, "After Milyutin left his post, literacy training was dropped. The training of officers was dropped. The Chancellor reforged the army as a school of nationhood, which is what Milyutin intended, was lost. Only during the first World War was that aim suddenly revived, but far too late to affect the necessary changes of mentality and organisation." And the first revolution in 1917 occurs because Nicholas II and his government had lost total control of the war and of the home front, which we will come to. So Alexander II's reforms of the army drove into the sand, and the one reform, the reform of the Constitution, never came about, and so far the story has really been the story from 1855, when he came to the throne, into the early 1860s, and sometimes one event can change the course of a government or of a nation. In this case, one event changed the attitude of the czar. In 1866, a man called Dmitry Karakozov made an attempt to assassinate the Czar, Alexander II. He was not assassinated, but he was very, very severely shot, and his reaction, he slid back to the traditional Romanovs position of conservatism and repression. I've written here two steps forward, three steps backwards. In our Romanov magazine, we read the following, "Alexander was confounded. He had made repeated concessions and yet found himself hated and derided as a tyrant. Conservatives remained disgruntled while liberals pushed for self-governance and a more open society. Terrorism drove Alexander towards reaction. He turned his back on his previous liberal agenda. The secret police began a clampdown on universities and newspapers. Newspapers faced heavy censorship laws. Liberal advisors and ministers found themselves turned out of office, replaced with reactionary officials and new military tribunals began prosecuting suspected dissidents." And they reintroduce torture and they shot them. It's too close to Putin, isn't it? And this is 1866. Russia was moving, if very slowly accepted along a path that would make it European, along a path that would give it constitutional monarchy, probably a democracy with a parliament. It was moving along

a path with greater industrialization, with more workers working in factories, and along a path with a growing middle class, which is really deeply important in a democracy. That's another story, but take my word for it. Middle classes are important. Cromwell in England rose because of a middle class. The American Revolution was a middle class revolution. The middle classes are vital, and he goes backwards into conservatism.

Now we know with politicians, let alone with czars, that when they're first elected or they first come to a throne, everyone thinks it's going to be a wonderful new opportunity. Every prime minister, every president on coming to par makes a speech in which, if you are young and naive, you believe everything they say, and it's all going to be different, because they promised it will, and it will never be like the past, except the older we get, we remember previous prime ministers and previous presidents making much the same sort of speech, and where did it get us? Seldom did it move us. Sometimes, but seldom did it move us forward. And then later on people begin to be critical. The people who were in opposition, but kept their mouth shut now come out of hiding, and they, "I never liked him anyway, and I never trusted him anyway." And unfortunately for Alexander, he became more conservative. Well, that's wonderful, more reactionary. That was more difficult, but he also had a dodgy private life. And it's said, "Well, what does that matter?" It mattered in the late 19th century because people can read it in a newspaper or in a pamphlet, and he'd had various mistresses. He didn't get on well with his wife, but at the age of 48, he took up with a 17-year-old girl, and that was a scandal. He had children by her, four children by her. His wife died in 1880. He'd already put his mistress into a room or rooms above those of his wife in the palace at St. Petersburg. Two weeks after his wife had died of TB, he secretly married this girl, now a young woman, and was going to make her, so the family feared, crowned as czarina. His own son, later Czar Alexander III, threatened to leave with all his family, renounces his place in the succession to the Russian throne, and departs to Paris. Those of you listening from Britain, we're only too well aware of this sort of problem in Britain, and this was a problem in Russia, and it was a problem because, okay, there is no internet, there's no radio and television, but there is increasingly newspapers and pamphlets. And there is true small, but an increasing number of literate Russians, and more importantly, they're situated in those major cities. Revolution is not going to break out in some tiny village in Siberia. If revolution is to break out, it will break out in Warsaw, which it attempted to do during Alexander's reign when it was repressed, because that was a Polish thing. It's going to break out as indeed it did in 1917 in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Eight years after that assassination attempt of 1866, there's a mass movement as described by Roman, which I'm going to read to you. This is really rather important. And he writes this, "There was a mass movement from 1874 onwards of intellectuals, students," always students, "socialists, and revolutionary ideologies through working and living

with the peasantry in the countryside. At its peak, perhaps as many as 2000 people were involved in this movement, which was given the name of going to the people. 1,600 of its members were soon arrested, and the movement collapsed," but it was there. "This failure," says Roman, "radicalised the political opposition to czarism and laid the foundation for the revolutionary terrorism that was to become a hallmark of the last Romanov rule in Russia. In 1876, a new secret revolutionary organisation appeared. This was founded in St. Petersburg and was called Land and Liberty. Its avowed aim was violent revolution, and its programme argued for direct action against a czarist regime, including assassination. The days of dialogue, I read, and talk, appeared to be over. In 1879, this movement split. The members who argued for a peaceful approach to revolution set up a new organisation called Black Repartition. Those committed to terrorism as the only means of achieving their aims created what was to become the most feared terrorist organisation operating inside Imperial Russia. This was known as the People's Will. One of its first formal acts was to sentence Czar Alexander II to death in August, 1879." The government was well aware of these terrorist organisations, but from what I've just read, you can see that this is now becoming a serious threat, and Russia is still 100% autocratic. In 1866, after the first assassination attempt on Alexander's life, they established the Department on Protecting the Order and Public Peace, but it only had 12 investigators. And then in 1880, knowing about People's Will, they established the Department of State Police under the Ministry of the Interior. That was the lead to the Okhrana, to the KGB, and arms to Putin, Secret Police today. Any society with a secret police is a worrying development of autocracy, just think of Nazi Germany. This is really a turning point, and Alexander could have done something about it, but he didn't. He is firmly set on the path. He's firmly set on the path of repression, and with hindsight, going back to my original theme tonight on with hindsight, we would advise him, don't do that. Don't do that. He attempted, well, what would you do, faced with internal difficulties, you create an external threat, and he did. It was a disaster. "Russia's biggest foreign policy blunder was a brief war against the Ottoman Empire. In 1876, Ottoman controlled Bulgaria rose up against the Turks, the Ottomans. The revolt was crushed, but Russian public opinion was outraged." Why? Because the Bulgarian are Orthodox Christians. "But Russian public opinion was outraged. This religious appeal about orthodoxy finally convinced Alexander to act. Thus in April, 1877, he declared war on the Ottoman Empire. Russia won, but lost over 200,000 soldiers." Think Putin and Ukraine. "But this triumph evaporated over the ensuing peace talks." He had made peace, and then the rest of Europe said, "Hang on, hang on. We're not having this. We need another peace conference, and we shall tell this Russian czar what he has to do." "Afraid that Russia would use the victory to gain a foothold in the Balkans, the European powers united and forced Alexander II to accept terms agreed upon Congress of Berlin meant to prevent the czarist empire from expanding a sphere of influence." And who did that? Otto von Bismarck. Otto von Bismarck. So

we've come from 1855 to 1880. We've come from a relatively young, liberal czar in which many people have put their hopes. We've seen the emancipation of serfs, but we've come into the end to a czar that's fearful of personal death through assassination, but perhaps more fearful of revolution in Russia, who has turned his back on liberalism, and embraced conservatism and reactionary attitudes, but as all the czars from Peter the Great to Putin have done, have sought to expand Russian territory and influence, in his case in Bulgaria, von Bismarck was right, he was looking and eyeing up the Balkans as well, and that's a story that we will pick up in future talks.

In 1881, the beginning of 1881, he must have thought, "This isn't working." And to his credit, he decided to do the one thing that he should always have done, and that was to introduce reform at national level, to put in place a consultative council, and that would've been a step towards a genuine western European style path. He recognised that, and on the 1st of March, 1881, it's already there for him to sign, but before he could sign it, death awaits. On that March day so long ago, Robert Massie, in what I consider one of the greatest books to read about the end of Russia, "Nicholas and Alexandra", Robert Massie, takes up the story from the point of view of the last czar, Nicholas II. "The Russia described to the young Nicholas as a child had nothing to do with the restless, giant stirring outside the palace windows. Instead, it was an ancient, stagnant, coercive land made up of the classical triumvirate of czar, church, and people. It was God, his tutor explained, who had chosen him one day to be czar. There was no place in God's design for representatives of the people to share in ruling the nation." How far back had they gone from Nicholas I, who ensured that his son, Alexander II, was brought up to believe in reform, to be brought up as a liberal. Alexander's own son, later Alexander III, brings up his son, Nicholas, in his own authoritarian, autocratic views. If you like, give the people an inch and their take a mile. Massie goes on to say, "For Nicholas, later Nicholas II, grandson of Alexander II, the most dramatic proof", of giving people an inch and they take a mile, "the most dramatic proof of this teaching against the dangers of liberalism was the brutal assassination of his own grandfather, Alexander II, the most liberal of Russia's 19th century czars," the Czar liberator. The date was the 1st of March, the year 1881, the place, a street in St. Petersburg, and the irony, as I've said before, and will repeat now. The irony was as Massie writes, "Ironically, the assassination occurred only a few hours before the czar had approved the establishment of a national representative body to advise on legislation, an embryonic parliament." And what happened? "As Alexander's carriage rolled through the streets of St. Petersburg, a bomb thrown from the sidewalk sailed under the carriage. The explosion shattered the carriage, wounded the horses, his equerries, and one of his Cossack escorts, the Czar himself was unhurt. Stepping from the splintered carriage, Alexander the Czar spoke to the wounded men, and even asked gently about the bomb thrower, who had been arrested. Just then a second

assassin ran up shouting, 'It's too early to thank God,' and threw a second bomb, and that bomb fell between the feet of the Czar and exploded." Between his feet, and exploded. "Alexander's legs were torn away. His stomach ripped open, his face mutilated, but still alive and conscious, he whispered, 'To the palace, to die there.' What remained of him was picked up." What a terrible phrase that is. "What remained of him was picked up and carried into the Winter Palace, leaving a trail of thick drops of black blood on the marble steps. Unconscious, he was laid on a couch. His right leg torn off, his left leg shattered. One eye closed, the other opened, but vacant. One after another, the horrified members of the Imperial family crowded into the room. Nicholas, age 13, wearing a blue sailor suit, came in deathly pale, and watched from the end of the bed. His mother, who had been ice skating, arrived still clutching her skates. At the window, looking out, stood his father, the Heir Apparent, Alexander III, his broad shoulders hunched and shaking, his fist clenching and unclenching. The surgeon announced, 'The Emperor is dead.' The news Czar, Alexander III, nodded grimly a motioned to his wife. Together they walked out of the palace, now surrounded by guardsmen with bayonets fixed. He stood for a moment saluting, then jumped into his carriage and drove away, accompanied by a whole regiment of Cossacks in attack formation. In his accession manifesto, Alexander III proclaimed that he would rule, 'with faith in the power and right of autocracy.'" And the clock has turned firmly back. Alexander III is no liberator. Alexander III is a deep dyed in the wool reactionary. He was a big man in every sense of the word, and we'll talk about him next time, but suffice it to say that his personality was such that he could enforce repression. But when his son, Nicholas II succeeded, way before he thought he was going to, Alexander III died before anyone thought he was going to die. When Nicholas ascended the throne, he and his wife Alexandra proved, and there's nothing worse than an autocracy facing revolution with a weak person at their head. Think Charles I in the English Revolution, weak and vacillating was Nicholas, weak and vacillating was Charles I as revolution gradually took over in Russia, as it did in England, and the end result for both King and Czar was death at the hands of their own people. I want to finish by reading one piece from Stephan Roman's book, and it goes like this. "The Memorial Church was built in St. Petersburg on the site of Alexander II's assassination. It was called the Church of the Saviour of the Spilt Blood, and it became a chilling reminder of the violence that had now reached into the very heart of Imperial Russia. The new Czar, Alexander III and his son, Grand Duke Nicholas, were both scarred by the events they'd witnessed on that bloody March day in 1881. From then on, they would both mistrust any move towards greater democratisation of Russian government and society. The actions of the People's Will ensure that Alexander II's planned reforms did not proceed in any form. They also laid the foundations for the revolution that was to come a generation after Alexander II's death." The last chance salute, with hindsight, had died with the murder of Alexander II, and the policies of Alexander III and Nicholas II cannot cope with

the rising tide of opposition and the first revolution of 1917, which established a democratic Russia was too late, because it in its turn could not survive the pressure of Marxist Leninism that arose in the October revolution in 1917. The results of which we live with today with ex KGB Chief, or annexed KGB Chief, in terms of Putin. The past and the present are always linked, and the present and the future are always linked, but can Russia now break the tragic pattern of the past, that when reform has come, it's been succeeded by repression, reform under Gorbachov and Yeltsin, replaced by the repression of Putin, the hope of the Kerensky regime in the middle of 1917, squashed by Lenin, and subsequently by the horror of Stalin. Can Russia one day break free finally from autocracy in it's many forms, from secret police, and from repression? I can't answer that question. All we can do is hope and pray that one day it will. Let me finish there. I think it's exactly half past, well, it's half past by that clock. One minute past by my watch, so we'll call it half past, and I'll see if I've got any questions.

Q & A and Comments

– And Angela has written, absolutely right, culture, of course, the wonderful Russian ballet, absolutely right.

– Nicholas II has an affair with a ballerina. That's another story to come.

Q: Now who assassinated the Czar?

A: It was people, it was left wing propaganda. It's students, it's the left wing intellectuals, not the nobility. The nobility remain opposed largely to change. It's the organisation called the People's Will.

Q: When was serfdom abolished in Russia?

A: Years before. It had disappeared in England by the end of the Middle Ages, and really very much across Europe, it had died out long, long before.

Q: Please speak about the Russian Canton system. Was it used to force recruit other than Jews?

A: Yes, it was, But I'll talk about that next time if that's a question you'd like answered.

– Oh, the first allier to Palestine is 1861, why things were improving in Russia? And somebody's answered that for me. Thank you. It was 1880 after the pogroms in the south of Ukraine. We'd come to the pogroms. I won't say too much because Trudy is speaking about it, but I can speak about Alexander II, of course, without a reference to it, so I will do

that.

Q: Why did England and France enter The Crimean War?

A: To prop up The Ottoman Empire for the very fear that Russia, as they did under Alexander II try a muscle in on that empire, and we all know the disaster when the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the end of the first World War in the Middle East, and indeed in eastern Europe, we're still living with both those problems in the 21st century. No corporal punishment was there in the Army.

– No, the serfs didn't receive any support money.

Q: Did their situation really improve?

A: Basically, it didn't improve. The interesting question is, did it improve under communism? Well, probably not either.

– No, sorry, Myrna, it's Herzen, H-E-R-Z-E-N.

Q: Weren't Lenin and Trotsky a very small minority even among the socialists? What about the rural based social revolutionaries?

A: I will come to all of that. Yeah, I will come to that. There is a sense in which they are a small minority, Lenin and Trotsky, but in another sense not. I will explain that, but I come and deal with the Russian Revolution.

Q: Did any organisation, the church or state aid serfs?

A: No, they didn't aid the serfs. If you had a master, a landowner who was modern and liberal, you were very, very lucky.

– The Orthodox church does not engage in social work. The constitutional reform, yeah, constitutional reform simply meant that there would be a representative council, parliament, Duma, whatever word you like, and that would've developed into a full grown constitutional parliament, so it would probably have meant, in European terms, a written constitution in which the rights of the czar, and the rights of the Duma, scope parliament, would've been laid out. That's what we mean by constitutional reform.

– Yeah, people are talking about Mechavich, 1921. I will go on to that. I promise when I get there.

– Peter suggests the "House on the Dvina" by Eugenie Fraser is a really good book to read. It is. I'd second that.

Q: How would you compare the assassination Kennedy, King, and the student revolutionary movement amidst the Vietnam War with the

assassination in Russia?

A: Ooh, I don't think you can compare. No, I don't think, no, I don't think you, I was not thinking in American terms of Kennedy and King. I was thinking in 19th century, early 20th century terms in American politics, not in late 20th century.

– No, secret police were not invented by the Russians. Sandy, "So what about Walsingham?" Yes, yes, and other people, yes, yes, yes. But what the Russian secret police is really rather like the Nazis. This is a nasty organisation. Walsingham was not really like that.

– Estelle says, "I'm feeling that revolutions coming to the USA." Let's hope not.

– "During the Second World War," says Jonathan, "Stalin framed it as the great patriotic war, opening up the church and appeals to country and nationalism rather than political system." Yes, he did. Remember that what Dr. Johnson said about patriotism. "Patriotism," said, Dr. Johnson, "is the last refuge of the scandal." And that is exactly what Stalin was doing at that time.

– No, I have not read, is it, I'm not sure, which is it Jillian? No, Jillian, I've not read Tom Stoppard's "The Coast of Utopia" about Alexander Herzen. Thank you. It's on my list now, on my ever-growing list of embarrassments, of books I have not read.

– Yes, no, no, it was the People's Will who claimed responsibility for the assassination.

Q: Who were The People's Will, and what were their aims?

A: To get rid of czarism by killing the head of it, and establishing a, we can use the word, I think, socialist state. No, it wasn't to stop the Constitution. They didn't know about it. No one knew what he was about to sign. It was to get rid of the czar and czarism.

– Yes, there was a blood disorder in the Imperial family that led to the problem with Nicholas and Alexandra's son, and I promise I will come to that. It's haemophilia. I will come to that.

– Yes, Stephen, you are right.

Q: Was the assassination attempt 1868 influenced or inspired by the assassination of Lincoln?

A: No, it wasn't directly, but Lincoln's assassination is part of a rash of assassinations across America and across Europe in the late 19th, early 20th century. It's, I was going to say, it's a deeper question to answer, but basically they saw assassination as direct

political action. I suppose the equivalent today are Trump supporters in the Capitol building, but not assassination. We tend, assassinations are something, for goodness sake, let's hope they remain in the past.

Q: Do I think the Russia's in terminal decline?

A: No, I don't know that it is. That will be a very dangerous thing, Clive, to say that Russia's in terminal decline. It is a powerful nuclear country with an unbalanced leader.

- I think that probably brings me to an end because you've got another talk coming with Lord Young very shortly, and I was asked not to go too long winded tonight, which I usually am.

- [Judi] Well, we love it, William.

- But I better stop.

- [Judi] Thank you so much, and thank you to everybody who joined us, and we'll see everybody in about 45 minutes for Lord Young. Thank you so much, see you next week, William.

- See you, bye-bye.

- [Judi] Take care, bye-bye.

- Bye-Bye, everyone.