

TSAR ALEXANDER II ASSASSINATED

Czar Alexander II, the ruler of Russia since 1855, is killed in the streets of St. Petersburg by a bomb thrown by a member of the revolutionary "People's Will" group.

The People's Will, organized in 1879, employed terrorism and assassination in their attempt to overthrow Russia's czarist autocracy.

They murdered officials and made several attempts on the czar's life before finally assassinating him on March 13, 1881.

As czar, Alexander did much to liberalize and modernize Russia, including the abolishment of serfdom in 1861.

However, when his authority was challenged, he turned repressive, and he vehemently opposed movements for political reform.

Ironically, on the very day he was killed, he signed a proclamation—the so-called Loris-Melikov constitution—that would have created two legislative commissions made up of indirectly elected representatives.

He was succeeded by his 36-year-old son, Alexander III, who rejected the Loris-Melikov constitution. Alexander II's assassins were arrested and hanged, and the People's Will was thoroughly suppressed. The peasant revolution advocated by the People's Will was achieved by Vladimir Lenin's Bolshevik revolutionaries in 1917.

Roles of the Three Characters in the Assassination of Alexander II

Tsar Alexander II — the victim, the reformer

Role in the event:

He was the target of the assassination carried out by the revolutionary group People's Will.

On the morning of his death, he had approved a draft for limited constitutional reform (the Loris-Melikov plan).

He left the Winter Palace to review troops and was killed by the second bomb while stepping out of his damaged carriage.

His death ended Russia's reform movement.

Mikhail Loris-Melikov — the reform-minded minister

Role in the event:

He was the Interior Minister and chief author of the reform proposal meant to calm social tensions.

That same morning, he presented the reform draft to Alexander II and received tentative approval.

He was waiting for the Tsar to finalize the signature when the assassination occurred.

After the Tsar's death, his reform project was immediately rejected and abandoned.

Konstantin Pobedonostsev — the conservative ideological force

Role in the event:

He did not participate in the assassination, but his influence shaped what happened afterward.

As the Tsar's spiritual mentor and a hardened conservative, he opposed all reform, including Loris-Melikov's plan.

Following Alexander II's death, he became the dominant advisor to Alexander III, encouraging repression, censorship, and complete rejection of constitutional ideas.

In effect, he turned the assassination into an opportunity to reverse the reform era and strengthen autocracy.

Early life and rise

Konstantin Pobedonostsev

Born in 1827 to a scholarly Moscow family.

Educated in law; became a respected legal professor.

His sharp intellect and strict religious worldview brought him into the imperial court.

He became tutor to the future emperors Alexander III and Nicholas II.

Core beliefs

Pobedonostsev was one of the most influential conservatives in Russian history. His beliefs included:

Absolute autocracy — he believed the Tsar's power came from God and must never be limited.

Deep distrust of democracy and parliament — he called democracy “the great falsehood of our time.”

Orthodox Christianity as the foundation of national identity.

Suspicion of Western liberal ideas (freedom of the press, elections, public assemblies).

Political influence

After Alexander II's death:

Under Alexander III, Pobedonostsev became the Ober-Procurator of the Holy Synod — effectively the head of the Russian Orthodox Church administration.

He had enormous power over education, censorship, and religious policy.

He shaped policies that promoted Russification, restricted minority rights, and tightened autocratic control.

He strongly opposed Loris-Melikov's reform and ensured that no similar reform would ever be attempted again.

Historical reputation

Pobedonostsev is remembered as:

The architect of late imperial conservatism

The enemy of liberal reform

A figure whose rigid ideology contributed to the social tensions that later exploded in the 1905 and 1917 revolutions.

The Loris-Melikov Plan (1881) — Brief Introduction

The Loris-Melikov Plan was a proposed set of political reforms created by Mikhail Loris-Melikov, the Minister of the Interior under Tsar Alexander II. It was designed to reduce social unrest and respond to the growing revolutionary movements in Russia.

Main Goals

- To ease political tensions after a series of assassination attempts on Alexander II.
- To create a bridge between autocracy and public participation, without fully limiting the Tsar's authority.

Key Features

1. Creation of a national consultative council
 - Representatives from different social classes (nobles, townsmen, peasants) would be allowed to participate.
 - This council could discuss new laws but not write or pass them.
 - The Tsar would still have final authority.
2. Moderate, cautious reform
 - It was not a constitution or a parliament.
 - It was meant to be a safe, controlled step toward involving society in government decisions.
3. Strengthening administrative efficiency
 - Better tax systems, improved policing, and more responsiveness to public needs.

Historical Importance

- On the morning of his death (March 13, 1881), Alexander II approved the plan in principle.
- After his assassination, his successor Alexander III—guided by conservative adviser Pobedonostsev—immediately rejected it.
- As a result, the plan became a symbol of the last missed chance for peaceful reform in imperial Russia.

The Loris-Melikov Plan (1881) — Brief Introduction

Why does Loris-Melikov burn the reform document in the script if the Tsar had already agreed to it?

Historically, Alexander II did approve the Loris-Melikov reform plan on the morning of his assassination. He intended to sign it formally after returning to the palace. However, he was killed before the reform could take effect.

In the script, the moment where Loris-Melikov burns the document is not meant to be a literal historical action. Instead, it serves a symbolic and dramatic purpose.

1. It represents the death of reform

With the Tsar dead and the new emperor, Alexander III, guided by the conservative Pobedonostsev, the entire plan is doomed the moment Alexander II dies. Burning the document symbolizes that the political future it promised has vanished.

2. It expresses Loris-Melikov's despair

He spent years trying to move Russia toward moderation and reform. When the Tsar dies, he understands that any chance for progress has collapsed. Burning the paper shows his grief, frustration, and sense of helplessness.

3. It highlights the contrast with Pobedonostsev

Pobedonostsev represents strict autocracy and religious fatalism.

When he says "Ashes to ashes. The crown survives," he is essentially saying:

"Let the reform burn; all that matters is that autocracy stays alive."

This creates a powerful emotional and ideological contrast between the two men.

Why does Loris-Melikov burn the reform document in the script if the Tsar had already agreed to it?