You need to know a little about Alexander II, whose death in 1881 marks the start of the unit, and then more detail about his son, Alexander III.
Alexander II – the start of his reign

• Took power in 1856, just in time to surrender to Britain and France in the Crimean War.
• Realised that Russia needed reform to keep up with other countries so he:
  – Loosened censorship
  – Freed all peasants from “serfdom”
  – Improved law courts
  – Improved education
But his reforms weren’t very successful...

- Peasants wound up homeless
- Nobles went bankrupt
- Freedom of speech helped opposition groups and extremist parties to grow
- He refused to create a “parliament” type body
- Education and legal reforms did not change much in practice
From 1865, Alexander II became reactionary...

- His son died of TB
- He replaced his wife with a young Princess Catherine and ignored family members who had encouraged reform.
- He cancelled many of his reforms, though not all of them.
- Thousands of people were put on trial for criticising or opposing the tsar.

Catherine Dolgoruky
In 1880, Alexander II seemed to be returning to liberal ways, but in 1881, he was blown up by terrorists from the People’s Will movement.

Sketch by G. Broling, 1881
Alexander III

- Second son – never meant to be tsar but his older brother had died in 1865.
- He was not suited to be tsar - he had trained as a soldier, had no academic training and no interest in politics or economics.
Alexander III was incredibly conservative. He opposed his father’s reforms because:

- He blamed reforms and freedom of speech for his father’s death.
- His father’s reforms had reduced the army – Alexander III thought the army should be built up.
- He resented his father on personal grounds, as his mother had been abandoned for Princess Catherine.
- He disagreed on how to deal with nationalities – Al. II had wanted to reconcile with nationalities, Al. III thought they should be crushed into obedience.
- From age 20, when he became heir, he was tutored by Pobedonostsev, head of the church and extreme conservative.
- He didn’t want a parliament as it was not traditionally Russian. He believed he had a mystical link with the peasants through tradition.
Although most of Alexander III’s reforms were reactionary (counter-reforms), there were still some reforms that he passed.

For example...

• Land captains appointed. These gave some protection to peasants through more efficient local government.
• Peasants’ Land Bank allowed peasants to purchase more farm land.
• Nobles’ Land Bank helped prevent nobles going bankrupt and selling farm land to town-based middle classes. Indirectly this helped the people by keeping more stability around land ownership.