



Rushcliffe School

Everyone at Rushcliffe School will be given the chance to shine brightly

Alexander I is the most underrated tsar. He was a massive figure of great effectiveness, but because Napoleon described him as a feckless weakling, everyone else followed that line. He was slightly unbalanced and given to crazy ideas, and of course he was involved in the killing of his father – which is always a problem with anybody – but actually, once he learned how to rule, he was very effective.

The key thing was not to over-interfere in military matters, because he wasn't a great commander – but then very few of the Romanovs were very good generals, despite the fact that they all wanted to be. Only Peter the Great properly understood military matters, but he was brilliant in every way. Alexander I turned out to be a great diplomat, and put together the coalition that destroyed Napoleon. He led an army from Moscow to Paris, which is incredible.

Because they had absolute power, tsars had to manage a huge number of things at once. How did they do that?

The problem was that, to be tsar, you had to be a generalissimo, a pope and a politician. Nobody could do it – with the exception of Peter the Great, but he had his own problems: he was a demented sadist as well. You just couldn't do everything.

That was a huge flaw in the whole regime: you couldn't really have a brilliant first minister. You couldn't have a Disraeli or a Bismarck, because that would undermine the autocracy – and yet nobody was capable of doing it themselves.

So you had to be tough to flourish in this position – almost brutal.

Yes, you did. You were expected to be severe, but you had to be consistent. You couldn't just turn on people: Paul I (1754-1801), for instance, would be kind to someone one day and cruel the next. He sacked some people three or four times only for them to be promoted higher each time they came back, and in the end they decided that he had to be killed. His murder was a classic in how not to handle the court.

What characteristics did you need to get ahead at the Romanov court?

Incredible duplicity and an ability to conspire were essential. Ultimately, you had to attract the tsar, and one way of doing that was by delivering a victory – but that made you a threat to the tsar, too.

A better way, the old-fashioned way, was to have the tsar fall in love with you.

But that didn't necessarily give you any power at all, depending on the tsar. The conventional argument is that this system risked promoting idiots, but two of the greatest ministers of the Romanov dynasty – Ivan Shuvalov, favourite of the 18th-century empress Elizaveta, and Grigoy Potemkin, favourite of Catherine the Great – started out as lovers of tsarinas, so that wasn't necessarily the case.

How early in Peter the Great's life can we tell that he was going to be extraordinary?
