

**A Mirror in the South Seas:  
Russian perspectives on New Caledonia during the nineteenth  
century**

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**Abstract**

The observations of nineteenth-century Russian visitors to New Caledonia have not previously been addressed. During the latter half of the century, a small but vocal number of Russians, including officers of the Imperial Navy and independent travellers, visited and documented their impressions of the new French colony. New Caledonia served as a mirror in the South Seas for a limited range of topics, each of which enjoyed contemporary currency in Russian domestic debates: colonial governance, penal colonisation, and the management of 'native affairs'. While the visits of these Russian observers were fleeting, their observations inevitably cursory, and their criticisms occasionally misdirected, their ability to identify issues of central concern both in New Caledonia and at home generated accounts that were vivid in their incidental detail and revealing both of themselves and their hosts.

While Glynn Barratt's work has made the Russian voyages in Oceania in the first decades of the nineteenth century accessible to an Anglophone readership, Russian activity in the region during the latter part of the century has received much less attention.<sup>2</sup> The depth of Russian interest in Oceania more broadly is evident in Elena Govor's unpublished 'Bibliography of Russian writings on Oceania', which lists some ten thousand Russian-language entries on the region, only a handful of which are known or have been seen outside Russia. This paper charts one aspect of the untapped riches of the history of Russian interest in Oceania: the perspectives of Russian writers of the period on the newly established settler colony of New Caledonia. In her study *Australia in the Russian Mirror*, Govor has made the case that Australia enabled Russian observers and writers to reflect in quite specific ways on the situation of their own homeland.<sup>3</sup> Unlike Russian writing on other Pacific islands, which was dominated by a focus on the 'exotic' rather than 'colonial' aspects of island life, early Russian observers of New Caledonia were largely preoccupied with its 'colonial' aspect. In this respect, New Caledonia served as a mirror for Russian reflection on a limited number of topics: colonial administration, penal colonisation, and relations with 'native' populations. This paper identifies these themes and addresses their treatment in the writings of nineteenth-century Russian visitors to New Caledonia – an important historical perspective not previously considered.

The first Russian voyage around the world, under Adam Krusenstern from 1803-1806,<sup>4</sup> heralded the entry of Russians into the South Pacific, where they remained active until the 1830s. During this period, more than twenty Russian expeditions visited the South Pacific, contributing to geographical discoveries and becoming entangled in local encounters. The primary grounds for Russian presence in the Pacific during this period were exploratory interests, as well as occasional revictualling visits by commercial vessels delivering supplies to the outposts of the Russian American colonies. The major Russian exploratory expedition (1819-1821), led by Taddeus Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev, expressed a plan to visit New

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<sup>2</sup> Barratt, Glynn, *Russia and the South Pacific, 1696-1840*, vols 1-4, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1988-1992.

<sup>3</sup> Govor, Elena, *Australia in the Russian Mirror: Changing perceptions, 1770-1919*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> The wealth of newly discovered archival material from this expedition is described in Elena Govor, *Twelve Days at Nuku Hiva: Russian encounters and mutiny in the South Pacific*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2010.

Caledonia 'if time permits'.<sup>5</sup> This plan had been instigated by Krusenstern, who was working by then on his major opus, *The Atlas of the South Seas*, which included a substantial chapter on the mapping of New Caledonia.<sup>6</sup> Other circumstances prevailed, however, and the Bellingshausen expedition never reached New Caledonia.

The decline of the Russian naval fleet from the 1830s, followed by the draining effects of the Crimean War of 1853-1855, had severely handicapped Russian presence in the South Pacific by the mid-1800s. After the Crimean War, Russia began to reassert its position in the Pacific; this was a period during which Russia was undergoing significant economic, political and social reforms. From this point, Russian voyages in the Pacific reflected a growing interest in the scope for settler colonies. The Russian advance into the Far East resulted in the establishment of a major Pacific port at Vladivostok in 1860, which became the base of the Russian Pacific Squadron.<sup>7</sup> Ships of the squadron visited Australia, the South Pacific and America in the course of their reconnaissance, training and research voyages. Vladivostok was the terminal point in a long history of expansion into and colonisation of Siberia and north-eastern Asia, a process which generated novel challenges for the Russian Imperial government, especially around the nature of colonial administration, the management of colonial subjects, and the increasing use of Siberia as a penal colony. Australia and New Caledonia, as examples of British and French penal colonies respectively, offered food for Russian thought.

Russian visits to New Caledonia took two forms: naval expeditions, which usually touched only at the port at Noumea, and were often tightly constrained by the diplomatic settings for formal encounters; and the less regulated travels of individual Russians, which tended to be characterised by a more broad-ranging acquaintance with New Caledonia and deeper insight. Both types of visit produced publications but the former were of a more official nature and had only a restricted circulation, while

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<sup>5</sup> Bellingshausen, F.F., *Dvukratnye izyskaniia v Iuzhnom ledovitom okeane i plavanie vokrug sveta v prodolzhenii 1819, 20 i 21 godov, sovershennoe na shliupakh 'Vostoke' i 'Mirnom'* [Repeated Explorations in the South Icy Ocean and Voyage around the World in 1819, 20 and 21 on the Sloops Vostok and Mirny], Pt 1, St Petersburg, Tip. I. Glazunova, 1831, p. 17.

<sup>6</sup> Krusenstern, A., *Recueil de Mémoires hydrographiques, pour servir d'analyse et d'explication à l'Atlas de l'Océan Pacifique*, Saint-Pétersbourg, de l'Imprimerie du Département de l'instruction publique, 1824-1827.

<sup>7</sup> Stephan, John, *The Far East: a history*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994.

the latter reached a much wider readership. Russians also found their way to New Caledonia either as crew on Russian or foreign trading vessels, though they seldom produced durable textual accounts of their visits, or – in small numbers – as settlers and convicts.

Between 1863 and 1903, six Russian naval ships visited the young French colony. The clipper *Abrek* (Brigand), under the command of Constantin Pilkin, was the first Russian ship to visit New Caledonia, when it anchored to cut firewood at Baie de Saint Vincent on 30 March 1863. The *Abrek* then proceeded to the recently established settlement of Port-de-France (later Noumea), where it met the Russian corvette *Bogatyr* (Hero), under Petr Chebyshev, in a planned rendezvous. The *Bogatyr* had arrived from Australia carrying Admiral Andrei Popov, the commander of the Pacific Squadron, who was leading his junior officers on a tour of the Pacific to acquaint them with Australia and other colonies of the region. Thereafter, Russian naval visits to New Caledonia occurred at roughly decadal intervals. The clipper *Izumrud* (Emerald), commanded by Mikhail Kumani, was the next to visit Noumea, on May 1872 en route from Australia to New Guinea. The fourth, in June 1886, was the *Vestnik* (Messenger), under Vladimir Lang, again travelling between Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea. From April to May 1894 New Caledonia was visited by the *Kreiser* (Cruiser), en route from Australia to Solomon Islands. The last Russian Imperial naval vessel to visit New Caledonia was the cruiser *Dzhigit* (Horseman), commanded by Alexander Nazarevsky, in May 1903. During this period, New Caledonia was also visited by Russian commercial ships and one such visit in June 1898 ended in tragedy when a boat with Russian sailors from the *Bay of Naples* capsized in Noumea harbour after striking a reef, with twelve sailors lost to sharks.

Following standard naval practice, reports containing hydrographical, geographical and socio-economic data were produced on each location visited, and were despatched to the Naval Ministry. The original reports are in the Russian State Naval Archives in St Petersburg. In many cases the commanders' accounts were also published in the leading Russian naval journal *Morskoi sbornik* (*Naval Collection*). Surgeons, who also played the role of naturalists aboard Russian naval vessels, produced their own reports discussing medical and ethno-historical issues in the

*Meditssinskie pribavleniia k Morskomu sborniku (Medical Supplements to Naval Collection).*

The first Russian individual traveller to write an account of his visit to New Caledonia was the naturalist and early anthropologist, Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay (1846-1888).<sup>8</sup> Educated in Germany, he had come to the Pacific to study the ‘Papuan race’. Miklouho-Maclay settled initially on the north-east coast of New Guinea in 1871, but when rumours of his death were received in Russia, the *Izumrud*, then returning from New Caledonia, was directed to sail to the secluded coast of New Guinea to determine what had become of him. There they found him safe, although very sick after a sojourn of fifteen months; quite possibly, the ship’s crew regaled him with tales and showed him artefacts collected during their visit to New Caledonia.<sup>9</sup> Thereafter, Miklouho-Maclay’s quest for the ‘Papuan race’ took him to the Malay Peninsula and Western Micronesia, and twice more to New Guinea. Recuperating in Sydney, he began to plan a new expedition to Island Melanesia, including New Caledonia, whose indigenous Kanak population he identified as an outpost of the ‘Papuan race’. As his financial resources were limited, he took the option of travelling on a commercial vessel, the *Sadie F. Caller*, which was engaged in harvesting bêche-de-mer. The first port of call, in April 1879, was Noumea, followed by Baie de Prony and Lifou, where local islanders were hired to work on the ship as it moved north to the New Hebrides. During the visit to New Caledonia Miklouho-Maclay kept a journal, made field sketches and recorded data in a separate notebook.<sup>10</sup>

Another independent Russian traveller, Edward Zimmerman (or Eduard Tsimmerman) followed Miklouho-Maclay to New Caledonia in January 1882. On the eve of his voyage he visited Miklouho-Maclay in Sydney, and we can assume that Zimmerman sought his advice about the trip. Unlike Miklouho-Maclay, Zimmerman,

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<sup>8</sup> In this paper we follow the preference of Miklouho-Maclay in spelling his name as he did when outside Russia; however, in references to his Russian works, we transliterate his name as Miklukho-Maklai, following Library of Congress rules. Other Russian names are similarly treated here.

<sup>9</sup> The New Caledonian artefacts collected by the *Izumrud* are now held in the Museum of Anthropology of the Moscow State University.

<sup>10</sup> Miklukho-Maklai, N.N., ‘Novaia Kaledonia i ostrov Lifu’ [New Caledonia and Lifou Island], in: *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh [Collected works in six volumes]*, vol. 2, Moscow, Nauka, 1993, p. 237-45. The unpublished English translation of the journal by Charles Sentinella was kindly provided by Mimi Sentinella. Miklouho-Maclay’s albums of sketches and field notebooks are held in the Russian Geographical Society Archives in St Petersburg (items 6-1-24, 6-1-70).

born in 1822 and educated at Moscow University, was travelling the world out of general interest and writing accounts for popular literary magazines in Russia, but his special field of interest and expertise lay in the emergence of new societies – in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and New Caledonia. He published two versions of his notes on New Caledonia, in the popular literary journal *Russkaia mysl* (*Russian Thought*) and in a book about his travels for young readers.<sup>11</sup>

Finally, Dimitri Dril (or Dmitry Dril), a scholar of criminal systems, came to New Caledonia in 1896 with the specific goal of studying the transportation system, in comparison with Russian and Australian experience. The results of his visit were published in the Russian *Journal of the Ministry of Justice*, and in a book-length comparative study of the Russian and New Caledonian transportation systems.<sup>12</sup>

Read together, the accounts of New Caledonia produced by the naval expeditions and the independent travellers reveal three broad and overlapping fields of interest – colonial administration, penal colonisation and the ‘native question’ – each of which we now address. Russian visits to New Caledonia often mirrored visits to Australia, and comparisons – voiced or assumed – between the two colonies constituted a central theme in approaching and writing about these visits. Unlike the Australian colonies, and particularly Victoria which had no convict past, New Caledonia did not inspire much approval in the Russian visitors. Karl Timrot, the surgeon of the *Bogatyr* in 1863, wrote that the population of Port-de-France consisted at the time of a few hundred European inhabitants and a battalion of soldiers, defending the settlement from the indigenous Kanaks: ‘A beautiful tropical land lies undeveloped because there are no colonists, while the soldiers build gun batteries and military roads to transport their artillery in the event of attack. Drums and bayonets everywhere, civil activity nowhere’, wrote Timrot critically, drawing explicit parallels with Russian

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<sup>11</sup> Tsimmerman, E.R., ‘Novaia Kaledonia’ [New Caledonia], *Russkaia mysl*, no.6, 1884, p. 255-83; Tsimmerman, E.R., *Puteshestvie vokrug sveta* [Voyage around the World], St Petersburg, tip. S. Dobrodeeva, 1886.

<sup>12</sup> Dril, D.A., ‘Frantsuzskaia ssylka v Novuiu Kaledoniu’ [French transportation to New Caledonia], *Zhurnal Ministerstva iustitsii*, no. 2, 1897, p. 1-42; Dril, D.A., *Ssylka vo Frantsii i Rossii (iz lichnykh nabludenii vo vremia poezdki v Novuiu Kaledoniu, na o. Sakhalin, v Priamurskii kraiu i Sibir* [Transportation in France and Russia (From Personal Observations on a Trip to New Caledonia, Sakhalin Island, Amur River Territory and Siberia)], St Petersburg, L.F. Panteleev, 1899.

colonisation in the Far East: ‘The French colonies of Tahiti, Saigon and Caledonia are no better organised than ours in the coastal Siberian regions.’<sup>13</sup>

Edward Zimmerman began his travel notes on New Caledonia with what he believed to be a commonly held assumption: ‘When it comes to colonisation, the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon over the Romantic [i.e. Mediterranean nations] is well known’. Following his visit to Australia, Zimmerman was keen to find out how the French settlements were faring in New Caledonia.<sup>14</sup> Pronouncing the choice of location for the capital, Noumea, ‘unfortunate’, he identified the primary failure in the ‘administration, which interferes in everything, yet does nothing thoroughly’ and in the contradictory obsession with bureaucratic regimentation seemingly shared by all freedom-loving Frenchmen as soon as they ‘enter some sort of official position’.<sup>15</sup>

Zimmerman’s critical attitude was confirmed by his confrontation with the Governor, Admiral Amédée Courbet. Visiting the Governor, Zimmerman mentioned that he wanted to see the demonstration government farm. The Governor refused, explaining that the farm was worked by convicts. Then, ‘desiring to uncover the true reason for his refusal,’ Zimmerman announced that he wished to see the Ducos Pensinsula, ‘where the Communards were imprisoned’. ““That is impossible!” exclaimed the Governor, again with horror on his face, “there are also criminals there now!”” The Admiral took pains to ensure that his refusal was enforced; a ‘printed circular’ was distributed, ‘which declared that a certain Zimmerman from Moscow had come to Noumea, followed by a detailed description of my person and costume, with identifying features, and concluding that the named individual must not under any circumstances be permitted into any administration office on the island.’ A local merchant, an acquaintance of Zimmerman, found the entire story humorous: ‘This is typical of our admiral! He is a stickler for the rules! Mind you, take no heed of it; don’t worry, we’ll show you anything you desire with or without his approval,’ and he did indeed take Zimmerman to the government farm. The British consul in Noumea, on hearing of the gubernatorial circular, ‘was not at all surprised,’ and

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<sup>13</sup> Timrot, K., ‘Meditinskii zhurnal za kampaniiu korveta «Bogatyř»’ [Medical journal of the voyage of the corvette ‘Bogatyř’], *Meditinskii pribavleniia k Morskomu sborniku*, no. 8, 1869, p. 179.

<sup>14</sup> Tzimmerman, ‘Novaia Kaledonia’, p. 255.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid*, p. 269, 267.



suggested that the admiral had taken Zimmerman ‘for a Russian nihilist.’<sup>16</sup> It seems that Zimmerman’s own prejudices were confronted here with French stereotypes about Russians travelling independently of naval or diplomatic missions. On the other hand, Zimmerman’s anti-French feelings did not extend beyond the administration. Visiting the ‘Cercle’, the famous *table d’hôte* and club for local society, he wrote that ‘not one of the globe’s nations is able to welcome a visiting foreigner so readily and humanely as the French’.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> *Ibid*, p. 264-7.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 261.