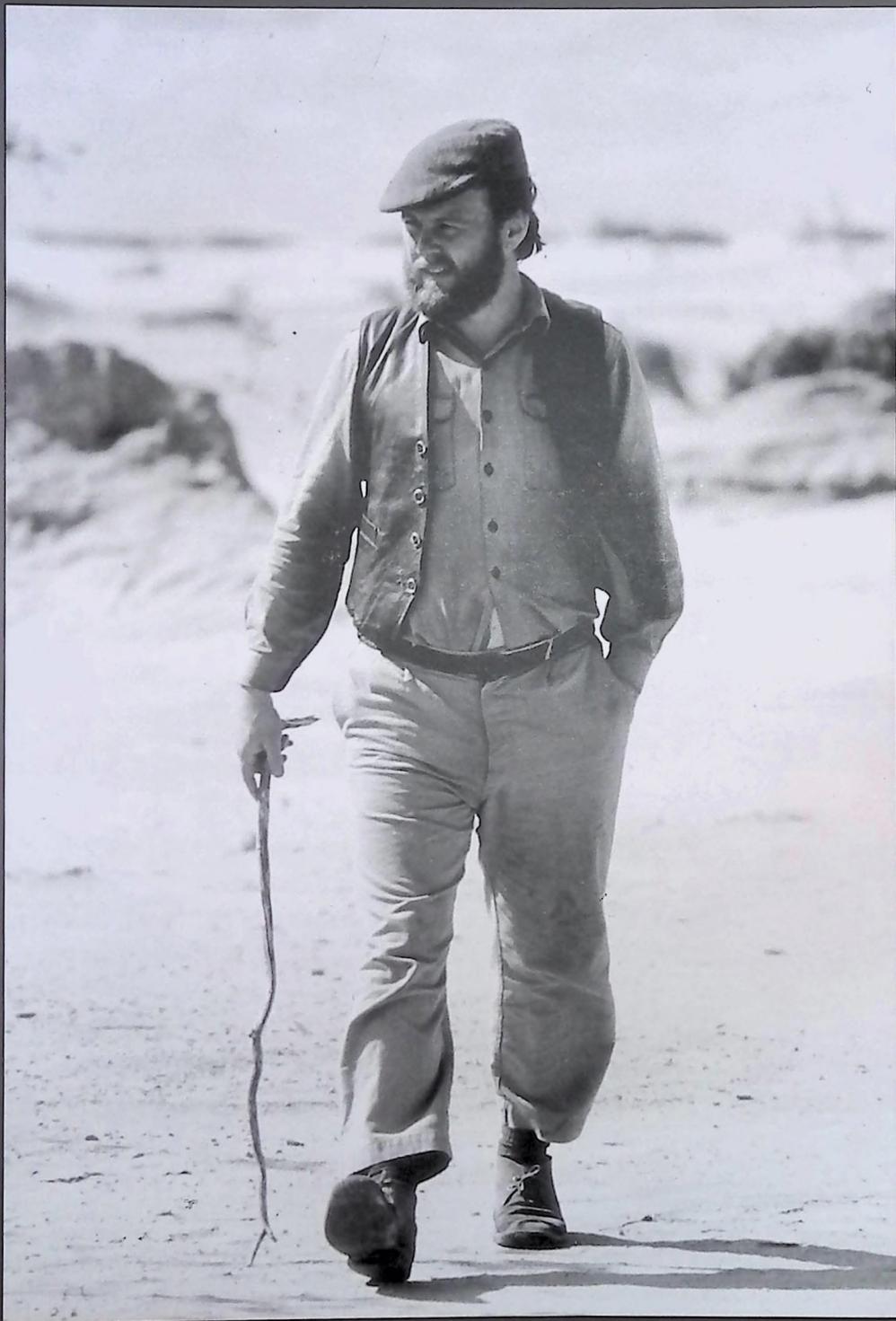


# HISTORIES OF OLD AGES

Essays in honour of Rhys Jones



Edited by Atholl Anderson, Ian Lilley & Sue O'Connor

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# Russians and the Australian Aborigines (200 Years of Observation, Research and Speculation)

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RUSSIAN STUDIES and perceptions of the Australian Aborigines remain hardly accessible to Western scholars because of the language barrier. Still, for the Russian mind it has always been an important field to which Russians contributed their original views and attitudes.

In spite of distance Russians were the third nation after the English and the French to make a significant contribution to the studies of the Australian indigenous population in the early post-contact period. Russians were prompt to translate for wide readership diverse early accounts describing Aborigines, such as those of Joseph Banks (translated in 1772), James Cook (1786, 1796, 1805), Watkin Tench (1790), John Hunter (1793), Arthur Phillip (1793), George Barrington (1803), and François Péron (1809–1810). In the next decades they were followed by the travels of Jacques Arago (1823), Jules Dumont d'Urville (1837), George Grey (1838, 1842), Thomas Mitchell (1839), Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet (1834) (for details, see Govor 1985:65–70). Fifteen Russian expeditions visited Australia between 1807 and 1835. Russian direct contacts with the Aborigines started in 1807 when the *Neva* visited Sydney on the way to the Russian colony in North America. In Sydney the visitors acquired a collection of Aboriginal weaponry. The records of their encounter with the Aborigines did not survive, but the following expedition on the *Suvorov* (1814) and especially on the *Otkrytie*, *Blagonamerennyi*, *Vostok*, and *Mirnyi* (1820) resulted in an extensive original material — travel journals, articles, books, drawings, collections. That is not surprising as studying the indigenous population was a part of the task set to these expeditions by the Naval Ministry. Observant officers and experienced naturalists, professional artists and just curious onlookers, they had many personal contacts with the Aborigines of Port Jackson area and became the last European team to provide a portrait of this community before its disintegration under the influence of colonisation. The factual results of these early expeditions have been described by Barratt (1981) and I just provide a specifically 'Russian' aspect to their contribution.

At this early stage Russian perceptions of Aboriginal society as a whole were determined by the belief common among Europeans that these natives belonged to the lowest stage of human culture. Due to Eurocentrism the Russian visitors invariably focussed their attention on the issues that in their view seemed to be the dominating features of human society. The set of Russians' expectations was blunt: clothing, dwellings, 'kings', and hard toil for subsistence. The Aborigines did not fit into this model. For Russians it was the first encounter with such a human society - the traditional societies which inhabited the territory of the Russian Empire, be it the peoples of the Caucasus, Siberia or Far East, could boast all these attributes. Encountering the Aborigines the Russians obviously experienced an initial shock — half-naked natives living on fish and mussels, sleeping by a fire under the open sky, dancing corroborees and enjoying life were obviously a society in its own right. And Russians did their best to reconcile their model with the reality.

Many of them persistently repeated that they had heard that the Aborigines constructed bark huts, and expressed regret that they themselves managed to see only windbreak brushwood fences around fires. The idea that the dwelling was an integral part of human settlement reached its apotheosis in Pavel Mikhailov's drawing 'Natives of New Holland'. Depicting Bungaree's group, in whose camp on the Kirribilli Point at Port Jackson the Russians had seen nothing but windbreak fences, Mikhailov nevertheless chose as the dominant element of the picture the stick-and-grass hut. It is obvious that he used not his personal observations but someone's description or drawing, as the hut is disproportionately large in comparison with the human figures near it (Barratt 1981:76).

Similarly they paid an exceptional tribute to 'King Boongaree'. While the colonists, although awarding him a brass chest plate, would perceive him with a degree of humour — on the portraits of the local artists he would appear with a grim and cunning mien dressed in ridiculous European cast-off clothes, — the Russians seem to treat him with genuine sympathy. Mikhailov's paintings of Bungaree and his wife are even distinguished by a romantic-heroic idealisation of their appearance. Moreover, the Russians were apt to treat Bungaree as a personification of their image of a 'noble savage'.

Symptomatically, as the Russians' contacts with the Aborigines developed, — and many of them had opportunities for this, living in a tent camp on Kirribilli Point close to Aborigines or going there for excursions — their initial perception of the Aborigines as 'repulsive' 'half-demons' gave way to the image of a kind and friendly community. Russians, probably more easily than other Europeans, inclined to enrich the image of a 'primitive native' with a specific Russian emphasis on a compassionate attitude towards the 'younger brother'. The Naval Ministry's instruction to Bellingshausen advised: 'When you are in foreign countries or amongst natives, deal kindly with all and observe every courtesy and politeness, instilling the same into the minds of your subordinates' (Bellingshausen 1945:21). Russians indeed had a good reputation in the Pacific as their contacts with natives, as distinct from many Europeans and Americans, have never been violent.

Although finding nothing attractive in the traditional way of life of the Aborigines, the Russians did not doubt their capacity to reach higher standards of culture through education. Novosil'skii (1853:67) wrote: 'New Holland natives are considered through their ignorance below all other peoples of the world, yet their children made progress in schools equally with Europeans', while Bellingshausen (1945:338) noted that 'the results have proved that the natives of New Holland are capable of being educated, notwithstanding the fact that many European armchair professors declared them to be utterly devoid of intelligence'. With such a belief it was not surprising for Russians discussing Aboriginal — settler confrontations to take side of the former. Actually colonists' atrocities towards Aborigines were the only point of criticism of the Russian visitors when writing about Australian life. Although Eurocentric in the notions of land ownership Russians were aware that 'The natives remember very well their former independence. Some expressed their claims to certain places, asserting that they belonged to their ancestors. It is easy to understand that they are not indifferent to having been expelled from their own favourite localities. Despite all the compensation offered to them, a spark of vengeance still smoulders in their hearts'. Noting that the Aboriginal 'dislike of the English has almost entirely vanished', Bellingshausen emphasised that 'the Europeans themselves often [have been] the cause of quarrels' (Bellingshausen 1945:331, 337). The Russian visitors, when telling about the tragic resistance of Tasmanian Aborigines to the European invasion, blamed the latter, observing that the English started the perpetual hostilities when the first settlers fired grapeshot at a friendly group of Tasmanians (Lazarev 1993:79). The most tragic picture was given by Berens, who wrote after a visit to Australia in 1829: 'I was told by one of the officers, who served in Van Diemen's Land in a detachment, about the means they use to move the native inhabitants off the colony. Usually such a detachment sets out for the bush, as if to hunt game; on seeing the natives, they surround them and kill without any regret' (Berens 1903:55-6). And finally the last expedition of this period brought grim news to Russia: 'Native New Hollanders, it seems, disappeared completely. Since the settlement began, they gradually died out of the misuse of alcohol' (Zavoiko 1840:60).

Atrocities towards the Aborigines were a constant theme on the pages of Russian periodicals of the time. *Northern Bee* in 1829 published the account by Henry Widowson, an agricultural agent in Van Diemen's Land, who said that the colonists there deliberately provoked the natives' aggression and sometimes shot at them just to satisfy their inclinations to brutality. *Muscovite* in 1843 wrote that settlers corrupted Aborigines, treated them as brutes, addicted them to alcohol, deprived them of their last means of existence and, finally, exterminated them. But the Aborigines, argued *Muscovite*, 'possess worthy qualities that are not always inherent in those who enslaved them: they love their mothers, children and freedom!' *Son of the Fatherland* wrote in 1847: 'Since the conquering of Mexico and Peru there has been no event more monstrous than the extermination of the natives of Van Diemen's Land. In order to excuse themselves from any pangs of conscience, English colonists [then] began to preach that the savages were not people and that one could treat them as brutes' (Widowson 1829; Anon 1843:554; Anon 1847:49). Although experiencing similar collisions while colonising the newly gained frontier regions of the Russian Empire such as Siberia, Russians believed that they had grounds to criticise the English as in general their own colonisations tended to be more tolerant and place greater stress on assimilation than in Australia.

Being keen observers, early Russian visitors left accurate descriptions of their contacts with the Aborigines. Their evidence now is a valuable source for social-economic reconstruction of Aboriginal society. For instance in 1814 they witnessed an important social event in the life of the Aborigines on the south shore of Port Jackson - a crowded pre-planned gathering for the ritualised settlement of a conflict, which ended in a bloody fight. There are two independent descriptions of this battle by the *Severov's* crew members, Aleksei Rossiiskii and Semen Unkovskii. Unkovskii gave the exact place where it was held: 'behind the new hospitals in the place known as Hyde Park'. The Russians' descriptions provide evidence that this was a traditional territory for gatherings and rituals, including, as in this case, rites to settle inter-group conflicts. If my supposition is correct, it reveals the importance of this part of Sydney's territory in the social life of the Aborigines of the southern shore. Rossiiskii gave the number of participants in the fight: initially 50 and later on ca. 100. Unkovskii noted that the two parties of fighters formed a circle of one *verst* [1 km] in circumference. Though there were many white onlookers, the large number of Aboriginal participants and the bloody ferocity of the fight (emphasised by both Russians) shows that the gathering was not provoked by the whites but had a traditional cause. The following remark of Unkovskii also confirms that in 1814 such fights were still common. He wrote that the Aborigines in Englishmen's service 'have to be present at fights of their fellows and precisely fulfil every native practice; the master of such a servant never prevents him from going to a slaughter' (Rossiiskii 1993:24-5; Unkovskii 1944:100). Supposing that only male warriors took part in the fight (approximately 50 on each side according to Russians), we can estimate that their groups (probably bands, or even remnants of tribes) were several times larger in number - ca. 150-200 people each.

Ivan Simonov, who lived in a tent on Kirribilli Point in 1820, described two groups of Aborigines using the same part of the northern shore in the area of Kirribilli. A member of one group, a man called Burra Burra, was very friendly towards the Russians and even invited them to put their tent near his own camp. His group, which joined him at the seashore, consisted of 'a great number of natives, men and women; the women went off to fish, but the men remained with us, they fashioned various fishing implements with small iron axes, and smoothed them down with glass'. ... 'Shortly after this crowd, one more family of natives came up', Simonov tells, led by the 55-year-old Bungaree. Later on he, 'accompanied only by his family, continued to wander in our vicinity; all the rest [i.e. Burra Burra's group] soon ... moved away into the wood. However they appeared near us from time to time' (Simonov 1829:48-52, 1993:48-50). It is possible to make the following reconstruction on the basis of these data. The 'great number of natives', who joined Burra Burra on the seashore, could be a core of the community (local group) who owned the northern shore of Port Jackson. Bungaree's family was probably an extended family, perhaps a foraging group, that was wandering at the time separately from the community's core. Bellingshausen mentioned that, during Bungaree's first visit to

the *Vostok*, he had been accompanied by his wife Matora, daughter and son. Bungaree, pointing to his companions, said: 'These are my people'. Then, pointing to the whole north shore: 'This is my land' (Bellingshausen 1945:163).

Bellingshausen collected further evidence on the social organisation of the Aborigines: 'All live in communities of 25, 50, 60 or even more, each with its own name. In one, called Burra Burra, there were last year [i.e. 1819] reckoned to be as many as 120 people' (Bellingshausen 1945:330). Novosil'skii (1853:69) and Simonov (1993:61) provide similar data. The Russians' evidence of the numerical composition of the bands is very interesting. Although by the time of their visits in 1814 and 1820 the numbers of Aborigines of the Port Jackson area had dramatically reduced, and the initial bands ceased to exist, the Russians describe what can be considered as bands with numbers close to those in traditional society. The only explanation is that the remnants of the initial bands regrouped and formed new bands close in numbers and lifestyle to the pre-contact bands. That was the Russians' remarkable discovery of the amazing ability of the Aborigines to restore their traditional social structure even in the most hostile environment and adapt to changing conditions.

As the nineteenth century progressed the first Russian original anthropological studies of the Aborigines appeared. While most of the Russian anthropologists wrote in the tradition of evolutionism, N. I. Ziber, a Russian Marxist, in his work *Essays on the Primitive Economic Culture* (1883) creatively used the materials of Australian anthropology to show the role of the economy and socio-economic relations in the life of primitive society. He was a pioneer in anthropology, revealing the importance of the main socio-economic unit of traditional society - the community - at a time when Western anthropologists, following the tradition set by Morgan and the English anthropological school, devoted their attention mainly to kinship relations.

Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay pioneered the field of Russian anthropological studies in Australia, mainly in physical anthropology. Visiting Mabiak Island in Torres Strait in 1880 he recorded the custom of skull deformation of newborn children by their mothers. While in Queensland he got interested in a group of 'hairless' Aborigines and travelled as far as Gulnarber Station on the Balonne River in Southern Queensland to describe them. He also conducted a number of anatomical studies of the brains of Aborigines. He had constant interest in the field of sexual customs of the Aborigines, in particular he wrote several articles about 'operation mika' (sub-incision) in central and northern Australia, gathering evidence from reliable locals. But his greatest contribution to Aboriginal issues were his passionate appeals to the officials against extermination of the Aborigines of Australia and Oceania. Colonists of northern Australia, he wrote with indignation, as punishment for a stolen horse, 'killed as many blacks as they could manage'. In spite of his popularity at the time in Australia he realised that his exhortations to spare natives 'for the sake of justice and philanthropy' looked like 'an appeal to sharks not to be so voracious!' (Miklouho-Maclay 1990-96 vol.3:187-8, vol.4:50-77, vol. 5:222-3).

In Russian popular literature the tendency to compassion took the upper hand. For instance Cherniaeva's *Tales of Australia and Australians*, whose publisher shared Leo Tolstoy's spiritual ideas and addressed a working-class audience, depicted Aborigines with considerable sympathy, as pitiful but happy in their own way. Cherniaeva did not spare 'the English' for whom 'it was not enough to exterminate or drive away the black native; it seems that they want to change the Australian land itself into England'. She, like other Russian critics, said nothing about the situation of the natives of the Russian Empire. But, significantly, a reviewer in the influential journal of opinion *Russian Thought* criticised Cherniaeva because 'the comparison of the Russian colonisers with the English suggests itself' (Cherniaeva 1896; Anon 1897:32).

Atrocities against the Aborigines and their 'extermination' (as Russians put it) by colonists became, in the second half of the nineteenth century, the focal point of writings by both visitors and armchair travellers. S. V. Eshevskii (1862:549), a liberal historian, argued that the cause of the extinction of the Tasmanian Aborigines was the whites' atrocities, 'rather than the natural inability of these natives to adopt Christian-

European civilisation'. V. Linden, a naval visitor to Tasmania in 1870, criticised Robinson's relocation of the remaining Tasmanians to Flinders Island: 'Robinson, in describing his exploits, claims that he used only his powers of persuasion on the natives. It was hardly so. It was not persuasion that made the indigenous Tasmanians leave their native forests - it was their hopeless situation. If they had known what awaited them, they would doubtless have chosen to die of hunger like hunted beasts in their dens, rather than yield to Robinson's persuasions. Their life on Flinders Island was no better than imprisonment' (Linden 1871:134-6). Ten years later E. Tsimmerman, an observant Russian traveller, would write prophetically: 'One is in doubt as to who were the barbarians - the English administration with its free settlers and convicts or the uncivilised black indigenous peoples. Before the court of history, the latter will certainly be acquitted ... because their actions were in self-defence, protecting themselves and their families and the land they had peacefully occupied for many centuries before the uninvited civilised invaders'. Yarning with drovers around a campfire near Morgan, Victoria, he discovered that the atrocities were still going on. Telling of drovers' boasting how they had got rid of importunate natives using poisoned flour Tsimmerman remarked with indignation: 'All this was told with extreme cynicism, as if it were a matter of poisoning gluttonous rats' (1882, 12:461-2, 467-9, 1883, 8:351-4).

Vsevolod Rudnev, another naval visitor, in 1882 collected chilling evidence in Albany in Western Australia: 'We were told that the civilised conquerors of Australia, if they need to enlarge their properties, proceed in parties ... to the nearest [native] villages to clear the land in accordance with established custom, which consists in the following: members of the expedition descend on the villages, burn them, and without exception shoot the inhabitants, young and old alike. The combination of the agreeable with the useful — a picnic and land clearance' (Rudnev 1909:118). It is likely that such impressions disseminated in Russia by these naval visitors echoed in one of the first Russian short stories about an Australian kangaroo hunt (Al. L-va 1901) published in one of the most popular magazines. The anonymous author, although aware that Russian natives 'have far from a sweet life' indignantly concluded: 'But still in [Russia] even in the most extreme times no one stooped to "hunt for two-legged game", as the English say when they talk about chasing the poor savages'. Criticism of the English who, Russians believed, considered Aborigines 'even lower than animals' (Vitkovskaia 1915:281) was due to a specific ideology of Russian intelligentsia with its compassion to the 'younger brother', to the underprivileged.

The early 20th century brought the diversity of Russian approach to the field of Aboriginal studies. Some Russian anthropologists continued to treat Australian Aborigines as a perfect example of the initial stage of human evolution. For instance K. M. Takhtarev chose Australian Aborigines as a basis for the analysis of early forms of primitive social organisation and culture; his book *Essays on the History of Primitive Culture* (Takhtarev 1907) targeting the educated reader, ran to four editions between 1907 and 1924. The Russian Prince Petr Kropotkin, a scholar of broad-ranging interests and a famous theorist of anarchism, was especially interested in the development of ethics and related issues. As a political emigre in England he wrote *Mutual Aid among Animals and People*, which ran to at least three editions in Russia at the beginning of the century (1904, reprinted with slight title variations in 1919 and 1922). Australian Aboriginal materials available to him confirmed his theory that mutual aid had been the cornerstone of ethics, justice and harmony in human society since the early stages of mankind. The Russian sociologist and anthropologist Maksim Kovalevskii, in his book *Clan Life* (1905, reprinted in 1911), used Australian materials for a creative development of Marxist ideas, combining them with an evolutionist approach. Aleksandr Maksimov was one of the first to depart from evolutionism and Marxism. He argued that each people had its unique way of development and that the social organisation of Australian Aborigines did not confirm the evolutionists' ideas (Maksimov 1997). A new development was the interest of Russian educated readers in Aboriginal folklore. Poet Valerii Briusov wrote two poems imitating Australian Aboriginal songs. The folklorist P. N. Sakulin in his book *Primitive Poetry* (1905) made extensive use of Australian materials. Also such important Western works as Andrew Lang's *Mythology* and K. Langlo-Parker's *The Australian Legends* were translated into

Russian. All these publications, particularly *The Australian Legends* which was directed at juvenile and general readers, contributed to the more enlightened perception of the Aborigines as a people with an ancient, elaborate culture, as opposed to the idea of 'pitiful natives' which dominated in the previous century (see bibliographical details in Govor 1985:88, 98-9, 107-8).

The Russian naturalist Aleksandr Iashchenko came to Australia in 1903 as an envoy of these enlightened views. Unlike many of his contemporaries he never perceived Aborigines as a 'pitiful' race destined to die out in the face of European civilisation. He would describe the Aborigines whom he met as 'good-natured', 'good-humoured', 'cordial', 'with handsome and intelligent face' (1959:67, 99, 167, 169). Going with Dieri to the bush in Killalpaninna (or Bethesda, southeast of Lake Eyre) Iashchenko was amazed to discover how well their society was adjusted to life in the harsh semi-desert conditions. Although they were already significantly influenced by European culture, he managed to see and describe many features of their traditional lifestyle. Killalpaninna mission station, where Iashchenko incidentally met the famous pastor and anthropologist Carl Strehlow, was headed by Pastor Johann Reuther who for years gathered materials about local Aborigines. Iashchenko was the first scholar to whom Reuther showed his materials; understanding their outstanding scientific value, Iashchenko tried to persuade Reuther to publish them (1959:94-110). With sorrow Iashchenko (1959:129-31, 160-68) observed the consequences of European destruction of the traditional Aboriginal society in Victoria and northern Queensland where he visited the Yarrabah mission near Cairns.

The poet Konstantin Balmont who visited Australia in 1912 elevated the interest in traditional culture to a symbolic level; for him Australian natives and nature *a priori* symbolised harmony, while the whites were agents of slavery and destruction:

Rails cut into the waves of yellow hills,  
All calculated space is fettered and coupled.  
Where the blacks had composed harmonious dances, -  
There is a lonely white-faced shepherd.

In his public lectures read in Russia he strongly condemned the English who 'exterminated the beautiful dark-complexioned Tasmanian tribes... The savagery of the English exceeded even that of the Spaniards in their subjugation of the last Mexicans. The creators of political freedom were unable to comprehend simple human freedom' (Balmont 1993:289, 1913:717). But Russians could adopt a quite different approach: agriculturalist Nikolai Kruikov, visiting Australia in 1903, depicted Aborigines as 'ferocious cannibals' ... 'unable to adapt to any elements of culture' (Kruikov 1906:35, 80-84). Such views could have been formed under the influence of his contacts with Australian farmers.

The Russian pre-revolutionary tradition of equality of races and compassion towards any downtrodden people, whatever their nationality, culminated in the case of the Russian émigré family of the Illins who came to Australia in 1910. The father, Nicholas Illin, an intellectual and eternal rebel who failed in the practical application of his ideas, did succeed in raising his son Leandro in accordance with his democratic beliefs. In 1912, exploring the suitability of the Northern Territory for a Russian colony, Leandro Illin made perceptive remarks about the Aborigines, in particular about the social and numerical composition of Aboriginal 'camps', their traditional diet, and the role of hunting and gathering of wild rice. But the main issue of interest was a shocking picture of European exploitation and cruelty in relation to the Aborigines recorded by Illin in his journal, particularly by Thomas and Roberts, the owners of Glenavon plantation near Daly River. When Illin wanted to pay the Aboriginal guides, who had brought him to the plantation, with some provisions, he was reproached by the hosts for 'spoiling the blacks for them. "They would not get as much from us for a year's service", said Mr Thomas. When I wanted to give them tea he became really angry and said "There is plenty of water, don't you spoil my blacks!" ' Illin constantly heard from the locals that they could use natives' labour for nothing, witnessed chained, imprisoned Aborigines and watched how they

were tried without understanding the nature of their trial. He sympathised with several farmers who treated Aborigines more kindly (Illin 1912:14, 21, 34, 68, 73, 77–8; Govor 1997:210–12).

Continuing the traditions of the Russian intelligentsia, Leandro Illin himself passed the test in practice a few years later when he, after a long battle with officials, married an Aboriginal woman in 1915, raised the Aboriginal family of six after his wife's tragic death and became a champion of the equal treatment of Aborigines. 'I fought for every black that I seen wronged', Leandro wrote, reflecting on his life. One of his first public appeals in defence of equal treatment for Aborigines was as early as 1925 when in the *North Queensland Register* he declared his principles and attitudes to his 'dark brother' to be ones based on equality rather than corrupted paternalism. He never stopped demanding a similar stance from official Australia until his death in 1946 (Govor 2000).

Russian post-revolutionary studies of, and attitudes towards the Australian Aborigines might provide enough material for a special article. Here I outline only the main tendencies of this period.

After the revolution of 1917 formal defence of racial equality became the state policy in the Soviet Union as if continuing the pre-revolutionary democratic traditions. On the part of official Russia, which at that time brutally exiled whole nations (like Chechens or Crimean Tartars) and gradually replaced national cultures by uniform socialist 'culture' among its national minorities, it was predominantly hypocrisy. It reached its apotheosis in Vyshinsky's defence of the Australian Aborigines at the United Nations Assembly at the time of Cold War. Russians themselves considered Vyshinsky, the main prosecutor at Stalin's show trials of the 1930s, a personification of hypocritical brutality. Still, propaganda of racial equality had its positive effect on the Russian population at large. Russians, although possessing some prejudices towards their neighbours — Jews or 'blacks' from Central Asia and the Caucasus, did sincerely sympathise with the indigenous peoples abroad. Australian Aborigines were least known and thus most attractive. The tradition was set in 1928 when the Russian writer N. Moguchii wrote a novel about heroic resistance of the Aborigines to the white invasion. In the following decades Soviet journalists, writers and visitors to Australia produced over a hundred books and articles in which condemnation of the 'Australian colonisers' treatment of the Aborigines became a common theme (Govor 1985:113–7, 1989:31–3). Although for some of them it was propaganda, many writers took it to heart. I, for instance, as a teenager was deeply touched by an unpublished poetry cycle by Galina Usova 'The Perished Tribes'. My chance acquaintance Alla, an anthropology student brought up in an orphanage, told me how in the 1980s she literally wept with joy sitting over an article in the library when she suddenly 'discovered' that Aborigines had not 'died out' but were reviving. The Aboriginal problem also became an excuse for vast translations into Russian of Australian fiction dealing with Aborigines (Govor 1985:254–314). As for the Aboriginal 'revival' and the positive role of the Australian government, it was held suppressed as long as possible. Anthropologist Vladimir Kabo, while visiting Fred Rose in Berlin in 1985, received from him Australian newspaper cuttings concerning land claim developments in connection with official recognition of Aboriginal spiritual ties with their land and told about it to a surprised audience at the conference on Australia and Oceania in Moscow in 1986 (Kabo 1986).

By that time 'perestroika' and freedom of speech were gaining pace. The State did not insist on compulsory propaganda of racial equality any longer. Journalists were not obliged to follow the old traditions. And they did not. Two of them, visiting Central Australia in 1994, created a telling example of ignorance and prejudice in their depiction of encounter with the Aborigines 'as they are' which was eagerly published by a popular Russian newspaper (Kucher and Berestov 1994). V. Kabo and O. Artemova's protest to the editor fell on deaf ears. Indeed it was freedom of speech! Years of propaganda, it seemed, had no lasting effect on public mentality. Nearly half of Russian Internet sites with the words 'Australian Aborigines' are dirty jokes about them. On the other hand Aborigines begin to attract attention of the Russian parascientists, for instance as inheritors of a mysterious lost civilisation.

Soviet anthropologists writing about Aborigines for years had no chance to conduct field work in Australia and based their research on Western sources. Aborigines attracted them as a perfect example of a primitive

human society, as a field for theoretical speculations. As such Aboriginal studies experienced the pressure of Marxist-Leninist dogmatism in the most ridiculous ways. Up to the early 1930s there still was some diversity of opinions, for instance Maksimov, who never accepted either evolutionism or Marxism, continued his original studies till 1930. A number of talented scholars — S.A. Tokarev, P.F. Preobrazhenskii (repressed), A.M. Zolotarev (repressed), M.O. Kosven, A.B. Piotrovskii — wrote fruitfully in that period. By the 1930s, as Stalinism progressed, Marx's and Engels' remarks on the Aborigines — which they drew mainly from L. Morgan's works of the 1870s (see Spriggs 1997) — were elevated to Holy Script. A new group of militant 'proper' Marxist anthropologists unleashed a struggle for the purity of Marxism in Aboriginal studies (E.Iu. Krichevsky, VI. Ravdonikas, I.N. Vinnikov) (Govor 1985:11, and section on 'Ethnography'); some of them were repressed later too.

In spite of the spirit of Marxism itself which considers that the basis (economic relations) determines the superstructure (all other relations) in the case of Aboriginal studies their clan and kinship relations were placed over their basic socio-economic unit (band or local group). It happened because Engels believed clan and kinship relations to be the main institutions of primitive society (local groups had not been studied at that time). After World War II, when facts about the role of the local group in Aboriginal society had reached Soviet scholars, Sergey Tolstov, the head of the Institute of Ethnography, declared that the local group emerged only under the influence of colonisers and labelled it as 'the cancerous cell on the body of the primitive society'. Moreover, it was considered axiomatic that in prehistory matriarchy preceded patriarchy. This idea derived from Engels and was later consolidated with the authority of Stalin, who happened to refer to it in one of his articles and thus it became a Holy Script of Soviet prehistory, including Aboriginal studies (see interesting discussion of it by Rhys Jones in the section 'State dogma and Joseph Stalin' in afterword to Kabo 1998:296-7; Kabo 1990).

Up until the 1980s Soviet anthropologists belonging to the anthropological establishment were under the spell of these postulates. The younger generation of the 'rebels', whose 'crime' was just to return to the idea of Marxism versus Soviet style dogma in the field of Aboriginal studies, were handicapped in their research and careers. By the late 1980s the old guard had lost its battle, but by that time Soviet anthropology as a whole discovered itself at the edge of the mainstream of Western anthropological studies. Still the efforts of Soviet scholars aiming to convey the truth even under the totalitarian regime was not in vain; in their own way they contributed to the final collapse of Soviet ideological dogmatism. Vladimir Kabo produced a profound and complex study of the origin of Aborigines; later he published his comparative book *Primitive Pre-agricultural Community* — the result of his long battle with dogmatism in social issues, and for years he was writing 'in desk' about Aboriginal religion as well (Kabo 1998). Olga Artemova, drawing mainly on Aboriginal society, revised a widespread concept of egalitarianism in primitive society arguing that in reality an individual are of utmost importance in that society. Later she became the first historian of Russian Aboriginal studies (Artemova 1987, 1991). Levon Abrahamian from Armenia, a 'clandestine' follower and Aboriginal spiritual culture in obscure collections (Abrahamian 1983). Hopefully Russian anthropologists of the new millennium will draw from the aspirations, mistakes and tragedy of their less fortunate predecessors.

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