



The Ancestral Searcher



Bachelor Days: Walter Wright and interior of beach house,
Airey's Inlet, Victoria 1880s

Photograph courtesy Niel Gunson

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And now . . . looking for Private Petroff

Dr Elena Govor*

Fifty years ago the Russian name Petrov was synonymous in Australia with impending danger – the ‘Petrov Affair’ is still regarded today as Australia’s greatest spy story. Surprisingly, Petrov – or Petroff – is one of the most common Russian names, and it appears three times on the Australian War Memorial’s WWI nominal roll. These Petroffs were among 1000 Russian men who served in the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Yes, there were Russian Anzacs in the AIF – and not just a few of them. One in every five Russian-born men resident in Australia between 1914 and 1918 enlisted to serve in WWI. After those of Anglo or Celtic background, it was men born in the former Russian Empire that constituted the largest group in the AIF. In the opening pages of his *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918* C E W Bean asserts of Australia in those years:

The percentage of Australians who came of any other stock (that is, other than English, Scottish, Irish, and Welsh) was negligible; the population of this vast unfilled land was as purely British as that of the two islands in the North Sea which had been the home of its fathers.

I believe the time has come to acknowledge these forgotten soldiers of non-British stock as an important cornerstone of our Australian nationhood.

The vast collection of the National Archives of Australia has been the most important source in my quest to discover the stories of these 1000 Russian Anzacs. The detailed records created by the Australian Government, and preserved in the Archives, have provided factual evidence about individual lives, stories that may otherwise perhaps have been lost. My book, *Russian Anzacs in Australian History* (UNSW Press and National Archives of Australia, 2005), traces the soldiers’ lives after the fighting was over and offers readers a fresh dimension to the Anzac legend – one that is firmly positioned in the context of a *multicultural* Australian social history.

The following brief histories of the three Petroffs were compiled using details taken from defence service records and immigration files. Service records contain basic physical descriptions – height, weight, complexion, and hair and eye colour. More importantly, they provide a window onto a serviceman’s career – including details of postings, promotions, illnesses and medical treatment. Sometimes these files also contain correspondence, poignant reminders of individual lives.

Other military records held by the Archives are army pay files, court martial records, and dossiers created by the Directorate of Military Intelligence and the Investigation Branch. The latter colourfully describe the personalities of servicemen who diverged from their official obligations. Department of Veterans’ Affairs case files allow us to trace a serviceman’s life after war service.

The lives of foreign-born servicemen – and especially Russians, who were often considered political suspects – are further richly documented in ‘alien registration’ forms, naturalisation

files and passenger lists, as well as immigration case files held by the Archives. Files – often containing photographs – of around a tenth of the surviving Russian Anzacs who enlisted in the AIF during WWII can also be found in the Archives.

Lance Corporal Jackow (Jacob) Petroff was born in 1887 in the village of Tokmak, near Bishkek, in Turkestan Province in Russian Central Asia (now Kyrgyzstan). His name, and the name of his father – Basil – suggests that his family belonged to the Russian church and that they were ethnically Russian. However, on his enlistment form Jacob Petroff indicated that he knew both the Russian and Turkish languages.

Before leaving his homeland, Petroff served for three and a half years in the Russian Cavalry as a Cossack. In 1912 he made passage to Australia on the *Itonus*, which brought him from India to Fremantle. Finding employment in the booming railway construction industry was not uncommon for new arrivals – Petroff worked as a sleeper cutter and sleeper hewer in Holyoake, Karridale and Collie, Western Australia.

When WWI broke out Jacob Petroff applied for naturalisation and, when naturalised as a British subject, enlisted in the First AIF in February 1915. Four months later, he was sent to Gallipoli as part of the 5th Reinforcements for the 11th Battalion, in which altogether around 30 Russians served during the war. After Gallipoli he was transferred to the 51st Battalion, another that comprised a score of Russians. Petroff was one of the lucky ones – he survived Gallipoli and the Western Front unscathed. In May 1918 he was appointed Lance Corporal. He returned to Australia and demobilised in May 1919, having spent nearly four years overseas.

Akim Petroff's military career was short. He was born in 1889 in the town of Novozybkov in Chernigov Province on the border of Russia and Ukraine. In 1912, leaving behind his wife and son, he joined a wave of migration from the Russian Far East to journey to Queensland with the aim of finding a 'working man's paradise'. His service record at the beginning of WWI reveals that he was employed as a miner at Mount Morgan, Queensland.

In August 1915 Petroff enlisted at Rockhampton with five other Russians, all of whom were allocated to the 6th Reinforcements for the 25th Battalion. Notably, around 25 Russian subjects, mainly ethnic Russians and Ukrainians, served in the 25th Battalion during the war. They reached Egypt too late to join the Gallipoli battle. Whilst in Egypt all six Russians were transferred to the 9th Battalion and were among the first units to be sent to the Western Front. On 20 April 1916, a few days after they arrived at the supposedly quiet Armentières sector, the farmhouse and outbuildings at Rouge de Bout, where 9th Battalion's C Company was billeted, received a direct hit under heavy shelling that killed and wounded many men, including several Russians.

Akim Petroff was severely wounded in the knee and hands and was evacuated to England, where his right leg was amputated. The six Rockhampton Russians with whom he enlisted and travelled overseas were all listed as casualties by the end of 1916. Now an invalid, Akim returned to Australia and became a boot maker. In 1923 he had the luck to win a

lottery prize of £875. In 1949, after his lonely death, his medals were returned to the Base Records Office (now Central Army Records Office) by a public curator.

Translation.

1 April 1916
Mount Morgan

Secretary
Russian Association

Dear Comrade Gray,

Mount Morgan Company is requesting Russians, who are working at the Mill & mines, to produce their passports.

A number of Russians, who could not produce passports, were discharged and told that they have to enlist. One of them went over to the military doctor, who found ~~to~~ him unfit for active service.

After this he was allowed to work again for Mount Morgan Company.

Our boss is distributing a letter with Russian Standard on. This letter is demanding us to enlist.

Let us kindly know how we have to act and fight against this kind of victimisation.

Fraternally Yours

A. Losgin.

1916 letter claiming that Russian employees of the Mt Morgan Gold Mining Company were coerced into enlisting for war service. Akim Petroff was working at the Mt Morgan mine at this time. NAA: A1 1915, 11795.

Alexander Petroff was a political refugee. Born in 1880 in St Petersburg, Petroff served in the Russian Red Cross at Port Arthur, China during the Russo-Japanese war. Petroff's subsequent involvement in the political struggle against czarism led him to flee Russia and travel, via Japan and Colombo, to Australia. He arrived in Fremantle in around 1908 on a German ship. As a timber worker Petroff travelled all over Western Australia – to Dowerin, Karridale, Collie, Korrelocking and Ballidu.

Alexander Petroff joined the First AIF in November 1915. He was allocated to reinforcements of the Mining Corps and served in the 3rd Tunnelling Company. Many Russians not fluent in English, like Petroff, ended up in advance parties of field engineers and tunnelers, or were stretcher-bearers. Alexander Petroff spent nearly a year and a half on the Western Front, suffering broken ribs, exhaustion, rheumatism, dilated heart and trench fever. At the end of 1917 he was evacuated to Australia and discharged as medically unfit. When he initially applied for naturalisation, in 1920, he was rejected. The evidence presented against him was a letter intercepted by a government censor that was said to reflect his internationalist pro-Bolshevik leanings.

Whilst the authorities deliberated on his application, Petroff established a farm in the remote area of Mullewa, Western Australia. A year later a local policeman came to the following conclusion.

I am of the opinion that if Alex Petroff had extreme views whilst working for wages, now that he is a land owner and an employer of labour his views have altered with his different standpoint.

Such 're-education', thanks to the benefits of the capitalist system, finally persuaded Major Jones, head of the Commonwealth Investigation Branch, to grant Petroff his naturalisation. Indeed, Alexander Petroff did not again present as a political suspect to Australian Government authorities.

Throughout WWI there was hardly an Australian unit without the presence of several Russian servicemen. These men served alongside their Australian mates from beginning to end: from Gallipoli – with more than 150 Russians involved – to post-war France – where several Russians were attached to the Australian Graves Registration Detachment. Their task was to remove bodies from isolated burial places to the larger war cemeteries. The names of more than 150 Russian Anzacs who did not return from the war are inscribed on the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial.

Archival records allow us to trace the lives of the Russian Anzacs after the war as well. Some of them settled on the land, often in soldier settlements, pioneering the Australian

The spelling of Russian names caused problems for Australian officials. In the attestation and nominal roll for Akim Petroff, his name is spelled as Pitroff and in the embarkation roll as Pehteroff. Only in naturalisation papers is it spelled correctly - Petroff. His first name had a lot of variations too – Akim, Akin, Akon and Akem. This is not surprising, as the only thing he could write in English was his name (even then mixing Russian and English letters).



IMPERIAL RUSSIAN
CONSULATE

in Adelaide South

9/22nd Dec. 1915

No 203.



Thumb Print



Dear Sir,-

The bearer, Effim Chernianin is a subject of the
IMPERIAL RUSSIAN GOVERNMENT, was born at Eniseisk, Siberia
on 20th January 1857. He has been resident in Port Pirie
for the past twelve ~~days~~ years, and is desirous of enlisting in
the Australian Expeditionary Forces.

I have no objection to his doing so provided he
is otherwise eligible. Attached hereto is the man's
photograph and thumbprint.

Yours faithfully,

[Signature]
IMPERIAL Russian Consul
at ADELAIDE.

The Enrolling Officer,
Australian Imperial Forces,
ADELAIDE.

During the war Russian men in Australia were pressured to enlist in the AIF by the Russian government via their consulates, which provided the men with letters to present at enlistment offices, like this one for Effim Chernianin. The addition of the photo and thumb print was a local initiative of the Adelaide consul. NAA: B2455. Chernianin, E.

outback from northern Queensland to the Tasmanian north-west; others worked as coal lumpers, wharfies and tram drivers in Australian cities; a few carried their swag until a lonely death somewhere in the bush. Many married British and Australian girls and raised Australian families.

In assimilating into Australian culture, the Russian Anzacs locked away their past Russian lives. However, I believe the time has now come for the children and grandchildren of the Russian Anzacs to rediscover this past through the invaluable records of the National Archives of Australia. Remarkably, these records preserve the collective past of all Australians, irrespective of racial, ethnic or national origins.

How to find records about a family member

Information about records can be found by searching the RecordSearch and PhotoSearch databases, both of which are available online at the National Archives website <www.naa.gov.au>.

Need help?

If you would like more help in locating records, contact the National Archives reference service at <ref@naa.gov.au>. You can also contact the Archives' reference service by telephone or fax on the following numbers: Telephone within Australia: 1300 886 881; Overseas: 61 2 6212 3900; Fax within Australia: 1300 886 882; Overseas: 61 2 6212 3999.

Detailed information about each Russian-born AIF serviceman, with direct links to archival files, can be found on my website <www.russiananzacs.narod.ru>.

*Dr Elena Govor is a Russian-born Australian writer and historian specialising in the history of Russian-Australian contact. In 1990 she came to Australia, the country of her childhood dreams, and now lives in Canberra, where she received her doctorate in history from the Australian National University in 1996. She has been widely published in Russia and Australia. Among her recent books are *Russian Sailors and Travellers in Australia* (Moscow, 1993), *Australia in the Russian Mirror: Changing Perceptions 1770–1919* (Melbourne University Press, 1997) and *My Dark Brother: the Story of the Illins, a Russian-Aboriginal Family* (UNSW Press, 2000). *Russian Anzacs in Australian History* is published by UNSW Press in association with the National Archives of Australia. It retails for \$44.95 and can be purchased through our website at <www.naa.gov.au>, by phoning (02) 6212 3609 or e-mail <naasales@naa.gov.au>.

War service records contain a wealth of data including place of birth, place of residence of the next of kin, age, occupation, previous military service, religious denomination, physical description and national and marital status. Records of the Russian Anzacs may also include further details, such as knowledge of languages or circumstances of their arrival to Australia, which were provided in Russian consular references.

To find records on a family member your first step would be to enter a surname as a keyword search in the RecordSearch search screen. Viewing the records is free, but charges apply for ordering copies. Information about people may be contained in service records, naturalisation records and registration forms. Online service record request forms are available at <<https://shop.naa.gov.au/servicerecord.php>>.