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**The Visit of the Russian Sloop *Neva* to Sydney in 1807:
200 Years of Russian-Australian Contacts**

2007 marks the bicentenary of the first contact between Russia and Australia. The beginning of relations between the two countries can be dated to June 1807, when the Russian Navy sloop *Neva* put into Sydney harbour. The vessel was under charter to the Russian-American Company and was bound for the Russian possessions in Alaska with Company cargo. Russian colonization of North America had begun at the end of the eighteenth century and was to continue until the sale of Alaska to the United States in 1867. The territory was administered by the private Russian-American Company, whose affairs, however, were effectively under direct government control. The main obstacle to the colonization of Alaska was the problem of maintaining stable lines of supply and of protecting Russian interests in the New World. The overland route from European Russia across Siberia was at that time extremely unreliable, so that the sea lanes remained the only means of supplying Russian America and the provisioning and security of the territories were carried out by the Imperial Navy. For this reason, Russian naval vessels regularly made the voyage from European Russia to Novo-Arkhangelsk, the centre of the Russia's American possessions, throughout the first half of the nineteenth century. For much of that time, Sydney, and latterly Hobart, were among the few ports of call for Russian sailors as they followed their course from the Indian Ocean to the Pacific; here the crews could enjoy shore leave, repairs could be carried out, and fresh supplies of water and provisions taken on. Between 1807 and 1835, fifteen different Russian vessels put in at Australian ports on seventeen separate occasions. It is therefore hardly surprising that the first Russians Australians came into contact with were seafarers, or that visits by participants in successive Russian naval expeditions constitute an entire phase in the development of Russian-Australian relations.

The sloop *Neva*, the first of the Russian vessels to visit Sydney, had some time before taken part with the sloop *Nadezhda* in the first Russian circumnavigation of the globe conducted under the command of Kruzenshtern and Lisiansky in 1803-06. This expedition, generally successful in achieving its political, scientific and commercial aims, had not included any Australian

port of call. In 1806, the *Neva* was re-equipped and sent off on another long voyage, this time to deliver commercial cargo to Alaska. While it was charged with no special scientific mission, its crew, like the participants of all Russian naval voyages, were required to undertake oceanographic surveys, as well as to compile hydrographic reports and gather further information on the geographical coordinates of the harbours and bays to be visited during the voyage. The crew of the *Neva* was not a large one: five officers, a ship's surgeon, a commissioner of the Russian-American Company and thirty-six ratings. Among the officers were some who would make their name as distinguished naval commanders: M.B. Berkh, later admiral commanding the Black Sea Fleet, and Ye.A. Klochkov, the second navigator, who would go on to take part in two more round-the-world expeditions, on the *Kutuzov* in 1816-1819 and as commander of the Russian-American Company's vessel the *Riurik* in 1821-22. During the latter voyage Klochkov would visit Australia for the second time. The commander of the *Neva* was Lieutenant Leontii Andrianovich Gagemeister (in Russian transcription Gagemeister), a young (26-year-old) officer from the Baltic German nobility. Like all Russian naval officers he was an educated man, who had begun his naval training in Russia but completed it in England, where he was sent in 1802 to serve a cadetship in the Royal Navy. Here he distinguished himself, earning the praise of Admiral Nelson himself. Gagemeister had a thorough grounding in mathematics and astronomy and, apart from Russian and German, was fluent in English, French, Spanish and Portuguese. He would command another two circumnavigations after the voyage of the *Neva* – as master of the *Kutuzov* in 1816-1819 and of the troop-carrier *Krotkii* in 1828-1830, on which he visited Australia for the second time in 1829. He also had a distinguished civilian career as Chief Manager of Russia's American possessions in 1818 and as Director of the Academy of the Merchant Marine in St Petersburg in 1830-1833. Paying tribute to his intelligence and his talents, one of the directors of the Russian American Company, M.M. Buldakov, described Gagemeister as a man 'who liked to go beyond the surface and get to the bottom of things'.¹

¹ A.S. Berezhnoi, 'Krugosvetnyi moreplavatel' L.A. Gagemeister', *Izvestiia Akademii nauk Latviiiskoi SSR*, 1984, No 8, 53. On Gagemeister, see also R.A. Pierce, *Builders of Alaska: the Russian Governors, 1818-1867* (Kingston: Limestone Press, 1986).

The *Neva* left Kronshtadt on 1 November 1806 and arrived at Port Salvador in Brazil on 25 January 1807. After shore leave and repairs to the rigging, she set out on the next leg of her voyage on 10 March. Since it was now the start of autumn in the southern hemisphere and the route to the Pacific round Cape Horn or through the Straits of Magellan was likely to pose navigational problems, Gagemeister decided to set course for Alaska by way of the Indian Ocean, sailing round the south of Africa and Australia. After a difficult voyage lasting three months, the *Neva* entered Australian waters. On 7 June the sailors sighted the coast of Tasmania, and on 16 June the sloop dropped anchor in Neutral Bay in Port Jackson.

This first Russian visit to the young British colony took place at a difficult time in Australia's history. The economy of New South Wales was governed by the 'rum mafia', against which Governor Bligh was waging an unsuccessful campaign. It is difficult to say whether or not the Russian captain was aware of the complexities of political struggle going on in Sydney. The Canadian historian Glynn Barratt, who has touched on the question of the sojourn of the *Neva* in Sydney in his studies of Russian naval visits to Australia suggests that Gagemeister had little trouble in grasping the situation. However, he adduces no convincing evidence in support of such a view,² and the Russian sources provide no conclusive answer. It is clear, however, that in their relations with the officials of the colonial administration Gagemeister and his officers were at pains to treat everyone even-handedly and remain within the bounds of common courtesy.

Naturally enough, their Australian hosts were not about to advertise their disagreements in front of their guests from overseas and did their best to make them feel welcome. The Russians noted the warmth of their reception and the fact that in Sydney, as Gagemeister put it, 'we were shown every respect'. Such cordiality was attributable not only to the famous politeness of the British, but also to instructions the colonial administration had received from London. In fact, when preparations for the Kruzenshtern – Lisiansky expedition of 1803-1806 were under way, the Russian government had

² G.R.V. Barratt, *The Russian Navy and Australia: The Days before Suspicion* (Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1979), 10-11; *The Russians and Australia [Russia and the South Pacific, 1696-1840, Volume 1]* (Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 1988), 62.

appealed to the authorities in London for help in the event of any of the vessels putting in at ports in the British colonies. In 1803, the Secretary for the Colonies, Lord Hobart, had instructed the then Governor of New South Wales, Captain King, to render to the members of the Russian naval expedition 'every assistance' and 'to shew them every mark of Hospitality and Friendship'.³ Although this expedition did not in fact visit Australia, the local authorities fulfilled these instructions to the letter when the *Neva* arrived in Sydney in 1807. The Russians' arrival was marked by a ceremonial exchange of salutes between the vessel and the garrison of Port Jackson. In the absence of Governor Bligh, they were received by the Lieutenant Governor, Major Johnstone, who together with Robert Campbell, local merchant, collector of taxes and Naval Officer in the colonial administration, arranged for the sloop to receive all necessary supplies. Following Bligh's return to the town, Gagemeister paid an official call on him, and on 25 June the Governor of New South Wales was welcomed aboard the Russian vessel. In accordance with protocol, he was greeted by a salute from the ship's ordnance. The *Sydney Gazette* published a friendly report on the visit of the Russian sloop, going on to inform its readers of a dinner given in honour of the Russian visitors by the administration of New South Wales at Government House. The occasion concluded with a firework display.⁴ In a word, Governor Bligh could with every justification write in one of his reports to London following the Russians' departure that the *Neva* 'received every supply wished for, and every respect and attention was shewn to the Imperial flag'.⁵ Having completed its business, the sloop sailed out of Sydney on 1 July 1807, arriving safely in Novo-Arkhangelsk on 25 September.

Of the Russian sources concerning this first visit by Russian to Australia, only one document survives, albeit an interesting and fairly informative one. This is a letter written by Gagemeister about the visit of the vessel under his command to Sydney. It is clear from the text that the letter was written at more than one sitting, and was finished on 26 June 1807; its recipient was the Board

³ *Historical Records of Australia*. Series 1, Volume 4 (Sydney: Library Committee of the Australian Parliament, 1915), 159.

⁴ *Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 21/06/1807; 28/06/1807.

⁵ *Historical Records of Australia*. Series 1, Volume 6 (Sydney: Library Committee of the Australian Parliament, 1915), 159.

of the Russian-American Company. In essence it is a report which shows how conscious Gagemeister was of being the first Russian naval commander to visit the British colonies in Australia. For that reason he considered it necessary to write in as much detail as possible about the colony itself, the progress it had made, and the prospects for its further settlement.

In the first place, Gagemeister notes the extraordinarily rapid economic development of the colony: in just nineteen years of British settlement 'a surprising amount has been done'. In accounting for such growth he cites the fertility of the soil and the efforts of the administration in exploring and settling New South Wales. While the colony was 'still at the initial stage' – the reason for the high cost and occasional shortage of goods – 'the present governor through the sound measures he is taking might soon increase the value that the colony now has'. In the not too distant future 'we must conclude that this land will have an abundance of grain and of everything necessary for life'. Not forgetting that he is in the employ of the Russian-American Company, Gagemeister points to the possibility of establishing mutually beneficial trading relations between Australia and Russia, since 'all we produce commands high prices here'. In addition, the Company's ships might take part in transporting cargoes between Australia and Brazil, and Australia and England; and the prudent captain is careful to explain to the members of the Board the purely navigational advantages of the sea route from Russia to Russian America *via* Australia.

One further aspect of Australian life to which the commander draws attention is the exceptional mildness (by Russian standards) of the regime under which the convicts are kept. Only a part of them live under guard, while others have been released and are free to make their living 'by whatever trade they know', frequently even amassing large fortunes. Future Russian visitors to Australia would also write more than once of the two features that took them by surprise: the considered and purposeful nature of British colonial policy which underlay the rapid and successful development of New South Wales, and the remarkably humane (again, by Russian standards) treatment of the convict population.

The crew of the *Neva* were also the first Russians to encounter indigenous Australians. We cannot know how close the acquaintance was, but the documents show that the ship's company collected a number of artefacts of ethnographical significance, mostly aboriginal weapons. In the inventory of

items collected during the voyage of the Neva, compiled by Gagemeister himself, we find in the Australian section: ‘arrows for mock battles, simple, without serration, two; for fighting – four; for fishing – one. With them, a stick used to fire arrows, one. Staves for hand-to-hand combat, two straight and round, one flat and aslant. Shields, two’.⁶ The ‘arrows’ referred to are of course spears, since the aborigines had no knowledge of bows and arrows, and the ‘stick’ used to launch them is a spear-thrower or woomera; the ‘staves’ are apparently clubs or cudgels). Unfortunately this collection has not survived, or at any rate its whereabouts is unknown; although in a number of Russian museums there are ethnographic, botanical and zoological exhibits brought from Australia by participants of other naval expeditions whose vessels called in at Sydney or Hobart.⁷ In most cases they remain the basis of collections devoted to the flora, fauna and indigenous inhabitants of the Australian continent.

The account of the situation in New South Wales contained in Gagemeister’s letter was the first in a series of similar narratives compiled by Russian naval personnel visiting Australia. The published diaries, travel notes and memoirs of these seafarers were always a principal source of information on the different aspects of life in the colonies for the Russian reader. By our calculations, such editions constituted up to 20% of all publications in Russian relating to Australia, at least until the middle of the nineteenth century.

We publish below the text of Gagemeister’s letter to the Board of the Russian-American Company from Sydney on 26 June 1807. We have access to a nineteenth-century copy of the letter made by clerks of the Company now preserved in the District of Perm State Archive, among the papers of K.T. Khlebnikov,⁸ Assistant Director-in-Chief of the Company. Parts of it have already been published in Russian,⁹ and fragments are quoted by Glyn Barratt in his monograph *The Russians in Australia*. The full text is published here for the first time with an English translation. In preparing the text for publication

⁶ District of Perm State Archive (hereafter GAPO), f.445, op. 1, d. 58, l. 12.

⁷ A.Ia. Massov, ‘Izuchenie avstraliiskogo kontinenta russkimi moreplavateliami v pervoi treti XIX v’, *Izvestiia Vsesoiuznogo geograficheskogo obshchestva*, 1990, vol. 122, no. 5.

⁸ GAPO, f.445, op. 1, d. 58, l. 6 verso-8.

⁹ See *Russkie moriaki i puteshestvenniki v Avstralii* (Moscow: Nauka, 1993), 16-17.

we have revised the original dating and introduced paragraph and sentence divisions in accordance with modern Russian usage.

[Письмо в правление Российско-Американской компании о пребывании шлюпа «Нева» в Сиднее. Порт-Джексон, 26 июня 1807 г.]

26 увидели Вандименскую землю и прошли между южным мысом и островом [неразборчиво]. Ветр стал между О и NO и мы пришли июня 3-го в полдень на вид входа в губу Жаксон. Получив лоцмана, за противным ветром и наступающею ночью не прежде как 4-го в полдень дошли до губы Нютрал в расстоянии от входа в губу до 7, а от города Сидней до 1-й мили италианской. Пред положением якоря салютовали крепости из 11 пушек, на что отвечали нам равным числом. Губернатор здешний г-н Блей находится теперь для осмотра городов, внутри лежащих, командующий в его отсутствие майор Жокстон и начальник по морскому департаменту г-н Камбелл оказали нам всякую учтивость, и хотя команда, слава Богу, столь здорова, как они даже при отправлении из России не были. По приказанию губернатора, коему английским правлением «Надежде» и «Неве» при первом отправлении велено было оказать все пособие, привезли нам мясо и снабжают хлебом и зеленью. Правду сказать, мне не хотелось производить здесь [закупки] свежего мяса, как фунт обходится по 3 шиллинга, но мы чрез пять дней, я надеюсь, отправимся, и я намерен не принимать от них боле ничего.

В продолжение похода медь низко в воде претерпела много, и листы стали чрезвычайно тонки. Чтобы не потерять много времени, я должен отложить исправление до пришествия к нашим заселениям, ибо около 15-ти листов отстали и протерлись столь сильно в воде, что судно нужно бы кренговать, вынимая весь груз.

Как сие селение в начальном еще состоянии, хотя удивительно много сделано, то зависит дороговизна большей частию от привозу разных товаров из Англии. Все здесь чрезмерно дорого: бушель турецкого пшена по 6, а пшеницы по 30 шиллингов. Присланные для разных преступлений содержатся либо для работы в собственном доме под строгим присмотром на казенном содержании или, если поведение их заслуживает уважения, получают билеты и могут достать себе каким ни есть ремеслом пропитание. Работа так в высокой цене, что многие из ссылошных в продолжение 10 лет нажили себе большой капитал, наипаче

один, который имеет теперь более 30 000 фунтов стерлингов. Земля плодородна, но разными случаями часто случается крайний недостаток в провианте. Губернатор теперешний хорошими своими распоряжениями, может быть, возвысит еще скоро цену, которое поселение сие имеет. Главный вывоз состоит из воровани и тюленей, коих бьют великое множество в проливе Бассел.

Окромя Порт Жаксона селение близ моря в Новой Голландии при реке Гунтус, где достают каменный уголь. На Вандименской земле порт Далримпель в проливе Баса около мыса Пилар при реке Дервент. С острова Норфолк множество из вольных поселившихся, переехали сюда, и им отводится здесь земля, причиною тому, что около острова, который сам собою весьма плодороден, нет ни одной гавани или якорного места, и теперь остается там небольшой гарнизон для стражи над самыми худшими сылошными, которых находят за нужное отделить сколько можно от общества. Англичане не доходили далее 60 миль италианских от морского берега, имеют поселение городков Парамате в 16-и и Гокесбури в 50 милях отсель, и так внутренняя часть сего обширного острова, загражденная высочайшими горами, совсем неизвестна.

Цена привозимым товарам зависит единственно от случая, ибо теперь, например, можно бы продать бразильский табак, стоящий на месте около 13 коп., по 6 рублей фунт, а обыкновенно цена не превосходит 40 копеек. Со всех товаров привозимых, платят в казну по 5 процентов и несколько других податей, кои с горячих напитков однако же довольно высоки. Со временем, надобно думать, сия земля будет изобиловать хлебом и почти всем нужным для жизни, и по малому от Китая и Ост-Индии расстоянию, коль скоро потребности здешние умножатся и произведения будут известнее, откроется хорошая торговля.

При позднем отправлении из России путь около Новой Голландии, когда W ветры способствуют, весьма выгодна, ибо из Англии сюда доходят в 4 или 5 месяцев, и бывали примеры, что они совершали дорогу в 3 ½ месяца и, может быть, вы бы нашли пользу в оборотах со здешним краем света, как все продукты наши здесь в большой цене, а отсюда можно взять деревья, известные под именем She Oak, кои превосходнее красного дерева на мебель.

Англинские суда привозят сылошных и возвращаясь чрез кантон для получения груза для англинской Ост-индской компании, года с три тому

назад брали отсель кряжей и досок того дерева для укладки чая, и прибыв в Лондон, продают их с большею выгодною. Гавань здешняя известна довольно по разным описаниям, столь велика, что может поместить флоты всех держав, и, может быть, лучше ее нет в свете. Она закрыта от всех ветров, грунт ил при глубине от 9 до 6 саженой при расстоянии самом малом от берега, где пресная вода течет с горы, а лесу великое множество. При входе несколько подводных камней, но подальше в губу нет никаких опасных мест.

Губернатор Блей приехал и вчерашнего числа был у нас, и к вечеру мы были приглашены к нему на бал. Дождливая погода задержала нас несколько, но с божиею помощью вступим в поход. Препоруча себя на Ваше благорасположение, прошу Вас об оставлении вложенных писем, и буде мы останемся в американских селениях довольно времени, чтобы получить писем из России, надеюсь, что Вы одолжите меня пересылкою писем, если получите какое-нибудь на мое имя, и чувствительно обяжете.

Имеющий честь быть В. п. с.

Р.А.К. в Г.п.

[Letter to the Board of the Russian-American Company about the visit to Sydney of the sloop *Neva*. Port Jackson, 26 June 1807]¹⁰

On the 26th¹¹ we sighted Van Dieman's Land and sailed between the southern cape and the island of [illegible]. With an east to north-east wind we arrived at midday on 3rd June within sight of the entrance to Jackson Bay¹² Taking the pilot on board, because of nightfall and a head wind we came only at noon on the 4th¹³ to Neutral Bay, about 7 Italian miles¹⁴ from the entrance to [Jackson] Bay and about 1 Italian mile from the town of Sydney. Before dropping anchor we were saluted from the forts by 11 canons, to which we replied in like number. The local governor Mr Bligh was on a tour of

¹⁰ All proper names are given in their standard form, with no attempt to reproduce Gagemeister's transcriptions.

¹¹ 26 May 1807. Gagemeisters uses the 'Old Style', i.e. the Julian Calendar, which in the nineteenth century was 12 days behind the Gregorian Calendar (New Style, or N.S.).

¹² i.e., Port Jackson

¹³ 16 June N.S.

¹⁴ 1 Italian (nautical) mile = approximately 1.84 km.

inspection of inland towns, [but] Major Johnston commanding in his absence, and Mr Campbell, head of the naval department showed us every courtesy, although the crew, thank Heavens, is even healthier than they were when we left Russia. By command of the governor, who had been instructed by the British government to extend all possible assistance to the *Nadezhda* and the *Neva* during the earlier voyage, we were brought meat and provisioned with grain and greens. To speak truthfully, it was not my wish to carry out [the purchase of] fresh meat here, as one pound costs 3 shillings, but, I hope, we shall set sail in five days and I am resolved to take nothing more from them.

During the course of the voyage the copper lying low in the water has sustained much damage, and the plates have become extremely thin. In order not to lose much time, I am obliged to delay repairs until our arrival in our settlements, for almost 15 plates have become detached and have been so worn through in the water that the vessel will have to be careened and the entire cargo taken out.

Since the colony here is still at the initial stage, although a surprising amount has been done, the high prices mostly are the consequence of importing various good from England. Everything here is excessively dear: Turkish corn¹⁵ is 6 shillings a bushel, wheat 30 shillings. Convicts transported for various crimes are either kept as domestic servants under strict surveillance at government expense, or, if their conduct is worthy of respect are given their papers and can earn their own living by whatever trade they know. Labour is so well paid that many of the transportees have over ten years amassed large fortunes – one in particular now has more than thirty thousand pounds sterling. The land is fertile, but for different reasons there are often extreme shortages of foodstuffs. The present governor through the sound measures he is taking might soon increase the value that the colony now has. The principal export consists of blubber and seals, which are killed in great numbers in the Bass Strait.

Apart from Port Jackson there is a coastal settlement in New Holland at the Hunter river,¹⁶ where coal is mined. In Van Dieman's Land there is a port at Dalrymple in Bass Strait near Cape Pillar at the mouth of the river Derwent. Many free settlers from Norfolk Island have come here; they are allotted land

¹⁵ i.e., corn meal or maize flour.

¹⁶ i.e. Newcastle.

here, the reason being that the island, though in itself reasonably fertile, has no harbour or anchorage, and now there is only a small garrison to guard the worse convicts whom it is deemed necessary to keep as far from society as possible. The British have gone no further than 60 Italian miles from the coast and have settlements at Parramatta, 16 miles hence, and Hawkesbury,¹⁷ 50 miles; the whole interior of this vast island, surrounded by mountains of great height, being altogether unexplored. The price of imported goods depends only on chance, since at the present time, for example, one might sell Brazilian tobacco costing around 13 copecks per pound in that country for 6 roubles per pound, while the usual price does not exceed 40 copecks. On all imported goods 5% of their value is paid to the treasury, as well as several other duties, which in the case of liquor are quite high. With time, we must conclude that this land will have an abundance of grain and of everything necessary for life, and that because of the short distance from China and the East Indies, once local demand has increased and manufacture is better known prospects for trade will open up.

For vessels setting sail from Russia late in the year when westerly tail winds follow them the sea route by way of New Holland has great advantages, for ships sail from England to Australia in 4 or 5 months, and there have been cases where the voyage has been completed in 3½ months, and it may be you might find profit in commerce with this part of the world, since all we produce commands high prices here, and from here we could take the timber known as She Oak, which is superior to mahogany for making furniture.

British vessels bringing convicts here and returning by Canton to pick up cargo for the East India Company some three years ago took some of this wood in logs and planks for packing tea from here which on arrival in London they sold at great profit. The harbour here is sufficiently well known through various descriptions and is big enough to accommodate the fleets of all nations, and perhaps there is none better anywhere in the world. It is protected from all winds, and the sea-bed is silt to a depth of 9 to 6 Russian fathoms¹⁸ a short distance from the shore, fresh water flows from the hills and there is

¹⁷ Probably Windsor on the Hawkesbury River.

¹⁸ 1 Russian fathom (sazhen') = 1.83 metres

timber in great abundance. At the entrance to the harbour there are some submerged rocks, but further in towards the port there are no hazards.

Governor Bligh has arrived and yesterday called on us, and in the evening we were invited to a ball in his residence.¹⁹ The rainy weather has held us up somewhat, but with God's help we will be on our way. Relying on your favour, I ask you to keep the enclosed letters in your care, and should we spend sufficient time in the American settlements to receive mail from Russia, I trust you will be so good as to forward to me any letters you may receive addressed in my name. You will greatly oblige me.

I have the honour to be, Sir, your obedient servant

To the Board of the Russian-American Company.

Translated by John McNair

¹⁹ This permits us to date the document precisely. According to the *Sydney Gazette*, Governor Bligh visited the Russian vessel on Thursday 25 June; a ball was held at Government House that same evening (*Sydney Gazette* and *New South Wales Advertiser* 28/06/1827).