

THE VISIT OF THE RUSSIAN NAVAL SQUADRON OF ADMIRAL ASLANBEGOV TO AUSTRALIA IN 1881-1882

The naval visit of the squadron of rear admiral A.B. Aslanbegov to Australia in 1881-1882 was the most prominent in the XIX century in terms of the number of ships, duration and political resonance. It is also remembered due to some statements issued in certain circles in regard to its assumed espionage character. Unfortunately, echoes of these suspicions have survived till now. Was it a visit of good will or, actually, a confidential mission?

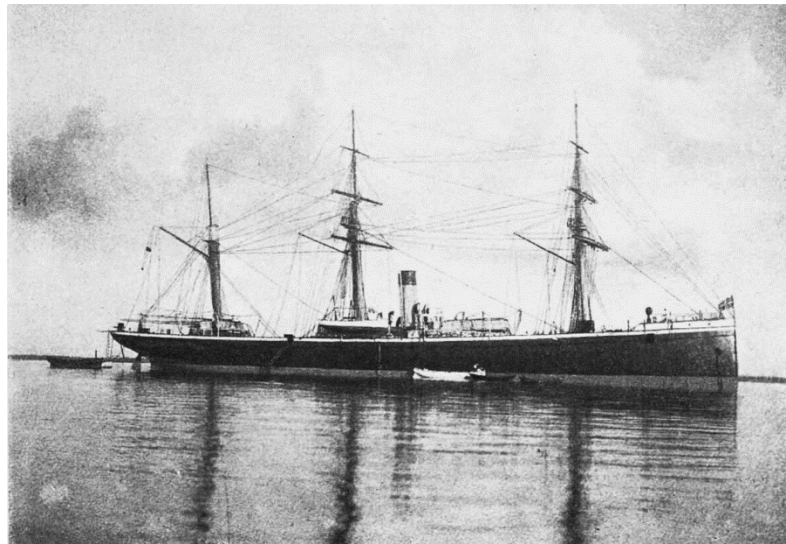


Clipper Vestnik



Visits of the Russian navy ships to the Australian ports which took place, as a rule, during the transfer of the ships from Kronshtadt to the Far East for reinforcement of the Pacific navy detachment or during training navigations, were an essential factor in the development of the Russian-Australian relations in the second half of the XIX century. The Russian government aspired to use the visits to Australia for the demonstration of the friendly feelings of Russia to the people of this country, remembering, at the same time, that visits to the fifth continent would enable to show the St Andrew flag (flag of the Russian Navy) in the Southern Pacific. Before the arrival in Australia the Aslanbegov's squadron had visited the Pacific coast of Canada and USA, Hawaiian and Marquesas Islands, Tahiti and New Zealand. The program of stay on the fifth continent was rather extensive. Three Russian ships - cruiser *Africa* (in which rear admiral [Aslanbegov](#) (on the photo to the left) held his flag), clippers *Plastun* and *Vestnik* stayed in Australia for more than

two months, having visited Sydney, where they stayed till the 14th of January, 1882, then from the 17th to the 26th of January, Hobart (Tasmania), then the group proceeded to Melbourne where it stayed till the 24th of February, and, at last, between the 26th of February - 3rd of March they visited Glenelg (near Adelaide). Besides, *Africa* called at Albany (Western Australia) and finally left the Australian coast on the 10th of March, 1883.



Cruiser Africa

The Russians were heartily welcomed everywhere, and sometimes all that went far beyond the expected official framework. However, it is necessary to recognize, that observance of all formalities was carefully watched by Aslanbegov, especially when the due respect to the Russian flag was on the agenda. Everywhere in Australia Aslanbegov demanded a precise observance of all formalities of the report from local authorities. Herewith is a story about the arrival of the Russian ships in Sydney told by [V.F. Rudnev](#) (in 1881-82 a warrant officer in *Africa*, subsequently - rear admiral, a hero of the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-1905):

Upon the arrival of the cruiser an aide-de-camp of the General-Governor came down and passed a message, that the General-Governor would expect admiral next day at one o'clock. In this occasion there was a following conversation:

Admiral asks Aide-de-camp: "And who will meet me?" Aide-de-camp was hushed up and said: "It seems to me, somebody, your excellence". - "Well, pass to your General-Governor, that I shall not go". The confused aide-de-camp has left. Having come back after a while, aide-de-camp reported to the admiral: "The carriage of the General-Governor will be sent to the quay for your excellence, aide-de-camps will accompany astride, a guard company of honor with brass and banner has been sent to the quay for reception, and at the moment of presentation the coast fortress will make an established salute with the rise of the Russian flag". - "Now I shall go", - the admiral said and, being satisfied, went down to his cubicle.

At the numerous official receptions there were, as a rule, high rank officials of local administration. During these receptions Aslanbegov excelled with his magnificent eloquence, and the officers of the Russian ships willingly showed a secular luster and gallantry. Banquets in honour of the Russian seamen were also arranged by numerous public organizations and clubs. The Russian visitors were issued with free-of-charge railway tickets for familiarization inland trips. In Albany even such an exotic entertainment as a kangaroo hunting was organized for the officers of "Africa". "As to the officers, - the doctor of "Plastun" M.V.Smirnov wrote about his stay in Australia, - they were positively spun in a whirlwind of picnics and balls..., everybody in the city tried to render courtesy to the Russian crew and to surpass each other in... hospitality". Reciprocating to the friendly attitude of the Australians, the Russians organized a number of receptions on the flagship of the squadron - the "Africa" cruiser and receptions were held with a purely Russian sweep. Thus, for example, on the 24th of January, 1882, about 300 persons were invited to a ball which was organized onboard of "Africa" in Hobart. The residents of the Australian cities were allowed to visit the Russian ships, and there were days when their number reached two thousand. "The cultural program" was also actively carried out in original way: the brass of *Africa* performed

in city parks. Rowing regattas were organized in Sydney and Melbourne, in which, alongside with the Russians, seamen of the British ships based in Australia took part.

However, the days of stay of the Russian squadron on the fifth continent were filled not only with entertainment. The officers got acquainted with the life of the country with great interest, learned particularities of its political structure and public development, collected statistical data about the economic and demographic situation in Australia. This data was systematized in the Aslanbegov's official report on the navigation. The admiral described in detail the impressions of the Australian cities, told about contacts with the Australian political figures. Among them there were such outstanding Australian politicians of that time as the Governor of New South Wales, the former ambassador of Great Britain in St. Petersburg [Lord Loftus](#), the Governor of Tasmania, in the past - the personal secretary of the English Prime Minister [W. Gladstone](#) G. C. Strachan, the Governors marquis Normanby (of Victoria) and W.F.Jervois (of South Australia, not only an appreciable figure on the political sky of Australia, but also a prominent military engineer). Aslanbegov included extensive information on the dynamics of prices in Australia, the foreign trade turnover of the Australian colonies, data on the development of gold mining and other industries down to winemaking, in his official report. Also the condition of the Australian shipbuilding and ship repair, certainly, was exposed to the analysis. With this purpose the inquisitive Russian admiral together with the Major of the city and a group of local engineers examined a number of ship-repair enterprises in Sydney.

The Aslanbegov's detailed official report about the stay of his squadron in Australia was supplemented with even more colourful stories about this visit in memoirs of other participants of the navigation. Among them the memoirs of V.F. Rudnev, a warrant officer of *Africa* and notes of the younger navigator of the same cruiser, an ensign F.A. Timofeevsky are the most interesting. The scenes of the everyday life of Australians, which struck the Russians with its extraordinary democratic character, were of the greatest interest to them. Thus, for example, Rudnev and his comrades were literally shocked, when it had been found out, that one of the ministers of the government of South Australia was a butcher and ran a meat shop!

The visit of the Aslanbegov's squadron turned out to be very suitable for the well-known Russian explorer [N.N. Mikluho-Maklay](#) who resided then in Australia. The scientist had been looking for a chance to return to Russia, and managed to make arrangements to become a passenger on *Vestnik*.

The visit of the squadron was widely covered both in the local and in the Russian press. In Australia the information about the visitors from Russia had, as a rule, a benevolent character, and not only the battle qualities of Russian ships, but also the matters which are referred to as the "Russian exotic", were discussed. For example, a detailed report on a church service on one of the ships appeared in newspapers, and the Australians were surprised by the abundance of icons in cubicles. The Russian sailors were recognized as skilful seamen, however, their main weakness - an excessive predilection to alcohol was pointed out. The Russian press, in turn, emphasized the geniality of the reception rendered to the seamen and, not without a patriotic pride, informed about the victories of the Russian rowers during a regatta in Sydney. It was enthusiastically marked in newspapers, that the Russians appeared to have been the first who had demonstrated the advantages of electric illumination to the Australians. "During a reception onboard of *Africa* in Tasmania the cruiser was filled with the light of the "Yablochkov's bulbs" The residents of Hobart had not seen such illumination yet and were amazed by its effect", - *Kronshtadt Bulletin* wrote about this event.

In a word, the visit of the Russian ships to Australia went most advantageously and fully corresponded to the perception of a "visit of good will". It seemed, nothing could mar the arisen atmosphere of mutual goodwill. However during the stay of the Aslanbegov's squadron in Melbourne on the 15th and 16th of February, 1882, the *Age* newspaper published two pieces. In one of them it affirmed, that the purpose of navigation of the Aslanbegov's squadron in the Pacific was to hunt down the English cargo ships. In another - that at the discretion of the newspaper, ostensibly, there was a copy of an "intercepted" report of the Russian admiral to St. Petersburg

where the weakness of fortifications of Melbourne and other Australian cities had been noted. However, nobody in Australia took these articles in "Age" seriously. Their general bearing coincided with the arguments this newspaper had adduced long before the arrival of the Russian squadron, demanding a strengthening of the defense capability of Melbourne. This circumstance was noticed by some Australian newspapers, and the "Age" forgeries were unanimously assessed as ineptly fabricated and offensive for the Russians. Admiral Aslanbegov got furious. He immediately visited the Prime Minister of Victoria O'Loughlen and demanded explanations, and on the 19th of February sent an extremely emotional full of indignation letter to governor Victoria marquis Normanby. In the message (the admiral himself translated it into English) Aslanbegov resolutely rejected all accusations of the press and demanded to sue the authors of the articles in "Age" in court. Simultaneously he explained, that the message to St. Petersburg sent by him on the 31st of January from a Melbourne post office had included the report on the navigation of his squadron from San Francisco to Australia and had not contained "a single word about the ports of Australia and Tasmania". It is necessary to tell, that the admiral did not sin against the truth at all. Really, in the published condensed version of this report and in its complete text kept in archive, nothing is written about the defensive capability of Australia. The Governor of Victoria in the reciprocal telegram hurried to express a deep regret concerning the ill-starred publications and asked Aslanbegov not to pay any attention to them. Normanby explained publication of these articles by the internal political reasons: the aspiration to push Victorian government to a more active construction of coastal fortifications. As to the legal persecution of the authors of the publications, he did not exclude it, but wrote that for this purpose the admiral would have to stay in Melbourne. Aslanbegov, certainly, did not begin a legal process, accepted Normanby's explanations and found the incident depleted.

Unfortunately, the anti-Russian publications in *Age* from the 15th and 16th of February were not the last. In two weeks after the departure of the squadron the newspaper published another article, which launched a new round of the anti-Russian campaign. On the 23rd of March it issued information obtained from a certain "secret Russian agent" Henry Bryant (Henry De Beaumont). He asserted that during the visit of the Russian squadron Aslanbegov was investigating the fortification of the main Australian ports and their defending capacity. In the near future, the "agent assured", according to the instruction ostensibly received from the Russian Naval ministry, the admiral would assume command over a group of 17 cruisers. These forces would carry out an attack on the main Australian ports. The article included an impressive size of a contribution, which the devious Russian admiral would collect from Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide. The *Age* also published a draft copy of one more message handed to the paper editors by Bryant - an "Aslanbegov's telegraphic dispatch in cipher" to St. Petersburg, written in French and containing the data on the weak points of the Australian coastal fortifications, which "confirmed" an opportunity of an unpunished capture of the fifth continent. It also could be concluded from the message, that before Bryant the duties of the Russian agent in Australia had been carried out by N. N. Miklukho-Maklay. Bryant declared, that he had helped Aslanbegov to write the text of the message to St. Petersburg, but, having not got along with the admiral and having terminated all connections with the Russians, decided to make the data known to the public. This article in "Age" caused responses in the Australian newspapers, stirred up the public and even induced the Prime Minister of Victoria O'Loughlen to address to London for appropriate explanations. However, during the investigation conducted by reporters of the Australian newspapers, some obvious absurdities came to light. It was difficult to assume, that the Russians had sent a whole naval squadron for spying, and that admiral Aslanbegov had written a confidential report at the presence of an ordinary agent. The analysis of the text of the message revealed a number of long absurdities. Some expressions could not have been used in a Russian official document any way, even being written in French: for example, the Tsar was called in the text as "His Majesty our Father" ("...par sa Majeste notre Pere"). The version about participation of Miklukho-Maklay in "subversive activities" also collapsed. His friend and biographer professor E.S. Thomassen raised his voice to protect the Russian scientist. An answer with an actual renunciation of the reliability of Bryant's information also came from London from the Minister of Colonies of Great Britain [Lord Kimberley](#).

The Australian journalists addressed for explanations to the Russian consul in Melbourne J. Damyon and to the Aslanbegov's flag-officer lieutenant V.N. Fridriks who was compelled to linger

over in Melbourne because of illness and was on treatment in a hospital. Both confirmed, that Bryant visited admiral Aslanbegov, but specified, that he, in their opinion, was one of many adventurers who crowded Russian military ships in every foreign port, offering commanders every possible services and doubtful inventions. According to the words of Damyon and Fridriks, Bryant tried to sell Aslanbegov drawings of an underwater mine for 5 thousand roubles. The admiral turned the bargain down, and the angry "inventor" decided to avenge it. The impartial reference about Bryant given by the Russians was proved to be true by new information about him. It was found out, that he was an impostor well known to the Melbourne police, which pretended to be a French noble Henry De Beaumont. After a series of attempts to purchase jewelry for forged checks in Melbourne shops he was arrested and sent to the Pentridge prison, which he had been released from shortly before the arrival of the Russian squadron. In prison Bryant repeatedly asserted, that he had invented an underwater mine, capable to make a revolution in naval warfare. After all these exposures the Australians calmed down and the anti-Russian campaign in press also stopped. The sensation inflated by "Age", came to Russia in May, 1882. This story was treated here with undisguised irony. Articles with appropriate headings were published in the *Novoye Vremia* and *Kronshtadt Bulletin* newspapers. The author of the publication in "Kronstadt Bulletin", the editor-in-chief of the newspaper N.A. Rykachev labeled the Bryants messages "a ridiculous and silly fairy tale" and expressed satisfaction, that it "was quite exposed".

At the same time until recently at the discretion of historians there have been no documents which would throw a light on the real character of contacts between Aslanbegov and Bryant-Beaumont. The report of the squadron commander to St. Petersburg with his own assessment of the anti-Russian publications in "Age" has never been published either. All this caused certain doubts concerning the true intentions of the Russian admiral and his connections with the Australian rascal. An archival research has disseminated these suspicions. First of all, in the file "About navigation of the group of ships in the Pacific ocean under command... of Aslanbegov" there are no documents, which would testify to presence of any hostile intentions of Russia in relation to Australia or plans of confrontation with England with the use of the Russian Navy against her colonies on the fifth continent. In Aslanbegov's report from the 11th of June (old style) 1882 from Yokohama about the stay of his squadron in Australia, in other documents there is no slightest hint on existence or attempt of organization of a net of Russian agents in Australia.

As to the contacts of the admiral with Bryant-Beaumont it is possible to refer to the materials of correspondence between the Russian Navy Ministry and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in the first half of 1882. As it could be found out from it, during the stay of the Russian squadron in Melbourne Bryant approached Aslanbegov "with an offer of services in detection of nihilistic plans" and even expressed his readiness to go to St. Petersburg for that. Taking into account, that this attempt to join the secret political police service was undertaken soon after the assassination of the Tsar Alexander II, it has to be recognized, that Bryant-Beaumont knew the political situation in the Russian empire well.

Aslanbegov immediately telegraphed to the Naval Ministry about the proposal received by him and sent a letter to St. Petersburg which contained information he had obtained from Bryant-Beaumont. We can read in the diary of the Chief of the Naval Ministry I.A. Shestakov (note of the 24th of March (old style) 1882) the following: "In the morning I received a letter from Aslanbegov with documents from Mr. Beaumont who claims some serious revelations about nihilists. He is a scoundrel, but reports the number of converted into nihilism and the names of the leaders".

Having received the telegraph message from Aslanbegov the naval Ministry advised of the proposal made to the admiral to the Ministry of Internal Affairs. The senior officers of the secret police took, however, an evasive position in relation to such a delicate matter. On the 14th of February (old style) the Ministry of Internal Affairs sent a letter to the vice-admiral I.A. Shestakov - head of the Navy Ministry with a request to order Aslanbegov to reject the Bryant-Beaumont's offer on his trip to St. Petersburg, but "to refer to our consul in Melbourne so that the latter take the trouble to ask Beaumont on character and the contents of those statements he wishes to make to the Russian Government". A cable with the appropriate contents was immediately sent to Aslanbegov who was then in Adelaide, and on the 28th of February, 1882 he cabled to the

Russian consul in Melbourne: "The offer is not accepted, notify Mr. Bryant". Soon after that the slanderous Bryant's statements appeared on the pages of *Age*. Probably, having learned about them, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs had decided to reject any contacts with the fraud. In the letter from the 27th of April (old style), 1882, signed by Shestakov, it was requested "to inform rear admiral Aslanbegov that the offer of services in detection of nihilistic plans, made to the Russian Government through his mediation by the known to him count Beaumont, may not be accepted and due to it any further contacts with him represent no need". Admiral received this information already in Nagasaki where the Russian squadron then stayed. That was the hidden reason for contacts between the Russian seamen and Bryan-Beaumont in Australia. It is believed, that the reference to archival documents finally allows to deny suspicions about possible espionage activity of the Russian seamen on the fifth continent.

The visit of the Russian naval squadron to Australia in 1881-1882 was not a confidential mission. It was a visit of good will. The sensation inflated around the Aslanbegov's squadron on the fifth continent had no considerable consequences for the relations between Australia and Russia. Despite the attempts to distort the intentions of the Russian seamen, this visit remains one of the brightest pages in the uneasy and, as we have seen, not always smooth history of development of the Russian-Australian relations.