

THE RUSSIAN CORVETTE *BOGATYR* IN MELBOURNE AND SYDNEY IN 1863

The Russo-English relations remained quite tense during the second half of the XIX century. The rivalry between the two great powers found a specific reflection in the Australian colonies. The white inhabitants of Down Under considered Russia not just as the main foe of the British Empire but as a direct and real threat to the security of the fifth continent. The political and military elite as well as a significant part of the colonial population were convinced that should there is a war between England and Russia the Russian navy will strike upon the Australian cities and land troops on the coast. Each new exacerbation of Russo-English relations awoke military alarms in Australia and visits of the ships of the Russian Pacific Squadron were often considered as espionage missions aimed at collection of intelligence necessary for preparations of future military operations.



Bogatyr off San-Francisco

One of the visits, which awoke an anti-Russian campaign in the Australian media, which involved accusations of the Russian seamen in espionage and other indecent intentions, occurred in 1863 when the corvette "Bogatyr" came to Australia. Till now the accusations preferred towards the seamen of the corvette remain one of the main arguments confirming presence of the "Russian threat" to Australia in the past for some researchers... How did the visit of *Bogatyr* go along, what kind of accusations were produced against the Russians and how did they match the reality?



The corvette *Bogatyr* called in Melbourne (2-15 of March) and Sydney (19-27 March) during a drill navigation under the flag of the Commander of the Russian Pacific Squadron Rear Admiral A.A. Popov. The friendly character of the visit was not doubtful and henceforth the crew of *Bogatyr* was received in Australia with warmth and exceptional politeness. Rear Admiral Popov (*on the photo to the left*) and his officers paid the Governors of Victoria [H. Barkley](#) and New South Wales J. Young protocol visits and they in turn visited the Russian ship. The guests from Russia took part in an official reception at the spouse's of the Governor of New South Wales, they were given a chance to see the gold mines of Ballarat and get acquainted with the everyday life of the gold miners. Special performances were given in theatres to honor the Russian seamen.

The crew of corvette got familiarized with the life of a poorly known to them country with a lot of interest. The stories about the unusually fast and successful development of the colonies after the discovery of alluvial gold and commencement of the "gold rush" were well known in Russia. The seamen took a chance to see the "Australian miracle" by their own eyes. They attended museums and botanic gardens, visited the Sydney Mint and the Pentridge Gaol in Melbourne, had an excursion to the Victorian Parliament and the industrial works and docks of Sydney. The Russians were overwhelmed by the beautiful Melbourne, elegant noisy crowds on its long straight streets, windows of its rich shops, "beauty of its women and luxury they are dressed with".

The Russian seamen gave an account of their Australian impressions in a series of articles out of which some were published in 1860-ties. Rear Admiral Popov could not desist of admiration of the energy, enterprising and diligence of Australians even in his official reports on the course of navigation - the documents which were meant to be dry and boring.



The Russian seamen opened their ship for public visits in Melbourne. Over several days more than 8000 Australians came on board of *Bogatyr* "inspecting" the ship day and night. "Our artillery, carbines, galley and engine, - midshipman P.S. Mukhanov (*on the photo to the left*) remembered, - were most strictly and critically scrutinized... Even shrouds and topcastles were mobbed by the curious people... The public, apparently, stayed glad with our reception as well as we were happy with them". The Australian press referred quite amicably about the design and condition of the corvette itself, noted the "athletic appearance" of the Russian sailors what made them different from the punier English sailors from the reporters' point of view.

In a word, the visit was going along more than successfully. The set up atmosphere of mutual benevolence and a good impression of the visit of *Bogatyr* could not be marred by those few publications in newspapers, which expressed alarm over the Russian visit. Thus, the *Argus* from Melbourne and the *Star* from Ballarat pointed out that *Bogatyr* had managed to approach Melbourne unnoticed and noted the lack of sufficient naval forces in the Bay of Port-Phillip. Shortly after the departure of the corvette on the 7th April 1863 *Sydney Morning Herald* published an article with an assertion that the crew of *Bogatyr* had been doing topography survey of the Port-Jackson and Botany Bay area and investigating the presence of coastal fortification over there. This information, however, did not raise much response in Australia.

A powerful anti-Russian campaign in the Australian media commenced much later - in November 1864, more than in a year after the departure of the Russian corvette. It was caused by a publication in the London *Times* issued on the 17th of September 1864. It was asserted in an article "The Perils of Australia" that just recently, in 1863 the fifth continent was on the brink of a Russian invasion. The threat had been created by the Russian Pacific Squadron. Its commander Rear Admiral A.A. Popov which had visited Australia in *Bogatyr* had received instructions from the Russian Naval Minister to raid Melbourne in case of a Russo-English war. "Times", however, expressed doubts in the reality of such a plan as it considered the forces of the Russian squadron insufficient for an attack.

The Australian press regarded the information in *Times* more than seriously. The papers from Melbourne "Age" and "Argus" as well as other ones published a whole series of pieces in which the plans of the Russian invasion and the danger hung over Australia were being commented. "Our fate it seems, - *Argus* wrote in November 1864, - has hung by a thread any time during the last eight or nine months". From the point of view of the media, the threat of the Russian invasion had to activate the efforts of the colonies in strengthening of their defence capability.

Later on, already in 1880-ties the hidden motive of this much-talked-of piece in *Times* was revealed. In 1882 *Age* became an initiator of a scheduled anti-Russian campaign (this time in connection with the visit of the Rear Admiral's [A.B. Aslanbegov's](#) squadron to Australia) and returned to the vents of 1863-64 in some of its publications. On the 30th of March 1882 *Age* published interview with G. Verdon who occupied position of the Treasurer of Victoria in 1860-ties. The ex-Treasurer advised that a year after the visit of *Bogatyr* around June 1864 he received quite important and interesting information from a Polish-born citizen of Melbourne certain S. Rakowsky. Rakowsky declared that he had a copy of a plan of attack of the Russian Navy on the British naval ships positioned near the Australian shore. The plan also included shelling and destruction of the Melbourne, Sydney and Hobart coastal batteries. This document had been allegedly worked out still in the first half of the year 1863 and designated for Rear Admiral A.A. Popov. Rakowsky had received its copy in May 1864 from the lieutenant of *Bogatyr* V. Zlyshuvsky, also a Pole, which had deserted from service soon after the visit of his ship to Australia. The worried Treasurer handed this information to the Governor of Victoria C. Darling. The Governor as well as many politicians of the colonies considered the military action of Russia against Australia as quite possible. "It was impossible to disregard his information, - C. Darling wrote referring to the Rakowsky statements,- as the projects attributed to Russia appeared to be both probable and feasible". C. Darling immediately reported of the hostile intentions of the Tsar's Empire to the other Governors of the colonies and also sent the obtained information to London. From there the assertions about a Russian secret plan travelled to the pages of *Times*. Rakowsky himself who still lived in Melbourne in 1882, confirmed the Verdon's story.

Rakowsky was a well-known personality in the capital of Victoria. In 1863 he presided over the Polish-Australian committee of solidarity with the Polish rebellion (1863) against the Tsar's oppression, participated in organization of meetings and collection of means for the rebels. He had been familiar with the lieutenant from *Bogatyr* Zbyszewski (not Zlyshuvsky) whom he called his nephew and had met during the stay of the Russian corvette in Melbourne. In July 1863 Zbyszewsky really deserted from the Russian service and after long adventures found himself in Paris where he deployed activity in creation of the Polish Revolutionary Navy under the aegis of the Provisional National Government formed by the Polish rebels.

It has to be emphasized that the authenticity of the Rakowsky's information on the Russian secret plans provided by Zbyszewsky does not sustain any critics. First of all, it is unclear why did the lieutenant from *Bogatyr* advised these plans to his Australian vis-a-vis only in 1864 when the Polish rebellion had already been defeated. Such information, had it arrived in Australia in 1863 during a hot stand-off between England and Russia over the Polish question would have benefited the Australian Poles a lot more in regard to the collection of means as well as political and moral support. It seems to be strange that Zbyszewsky wrote not a single word in his reminiscences about Rakowsky, his links with Australia or the secret Russian plan of attack on the fifth continent. We can judge the contents of the Zbyszewsky's letter to Rakowsky about the instruction given to A.A. Popov, as well as existence of the letter itself only based on the words of Rakowsky himself. One cannot get rid of an impression that Rakowsky just made up the Russian plans in Australia, and he simply needed this impulse to activate the efforts of the Polish-Australian Committee and preserve his popularity.

The conviction of the unreliability of the Rakowsky's information has become better grounded after familiarization with the Russian archive documents. Among the instructions of the Russian Naval Minister N.K. Krabbe to A.A. Popov related to the activities of the Russian Squadron in the Pacific and the anticipated was against England and France there is no directions on actions against Australia. Moreover, it is clear from the letter from N.K. Krabbe to A.A. Popov (14.10.1863)

that the Russian Minister considered the navigation of *Bogatyr* to Australia and Oceania only as "geographical" which could be useful for the "education of our sailors".

In the archive correspondence related to the Zbyshevsky's desertion there is no evidence of stealing of secret documents by him either. And all this happened under the circumstances of the first case of desertion of a Russian Naval Officer which was studied very thoroughly by the Government officialdom. Tsar Alexander II wrote his own resolution on the report about the Zbyshevsky's desertion: "Very sad". Such a melancholic reaction would not have taken place had the deserter stolen any secret documents as well.

Assertions of the espionage character of the visit of *Bogatyr* to Australia and presence of a secret plan of attack on the fifth continent in A.A. Popov's possession were certainly a fabrication. The visit of *Bogatyr* was a one of "good will" and bore no threat to the security of the colonies.

Russkie moriaki i puteshestvenniki v Avstralii. Compiled by E.V. Govor and A.Ya. Massov. 1993.

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