

NIKOLAI NIKOLAYEVICH MIKLOUHO- MACLAY AT THE SERVICE OF HIS MOTHERLAND

**(certain aspects of activities of a prominent Russian
scientist in Australia)**



[Nikolai Nikolayevich Miklukho-Maklay](#) occupies a particular niche in the history of Russian-Australian relations in the XIX century. He lived in Australia all up for more than five years (between 1878 and 1887), and his name had become a symbol of connections between two countries. A tremendous contribution of the Russian geographer, biologist, ethnographer and anthropologist to exploration of Oceania and Australia won him a broad recognition on the fifth continent, where, in his time, he had become more renowned than in his own country.

Till recently one more side of his activities during his second visit to Australia in 1885-86 had remained poorly known. That was his functioning as a political and military informer of the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) and Naval Ministry.

An idea to use the renowned scientist as a source of military-political information on situation in Australia and Oceania was born in the diplomatic and naval ministries of Russia in a course of discussion over N.N. Miklukho-Maklay's proposals to establish a Russian protectorate on the Maklay Coast and form of a Russian sphere of influence in the South Pacific. This idea had been actively promoted by N.N. Miklukho-Maklay since 1883.

In October 1883 in a letter from Sydney to N.V. Kopylov he noted the growth of expansionistic mood in Australia towards New Guinea and islands of Oceania and pointed at desirability of Russian territorial acquisitions in this part of the globe. In a letter from Sydney to Alexander III (8 December 1883) he developed an idea, that absence of a Russian sphere of influence in the South Pacific and English domination there will eventually become a constant threat to the Russian power in the North Pacific. The scientist also stated similar views in his letter to the almighty then K.P. Pobedonostsev, simultaneously expressing his readiness to provide all his personal assistance to the cause of protection of the Russian interests.

Nevertheless, the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs understood very well the ratio of powers in this region and evaluated the Russian chances to participate in a colonial division of Oceania with a lot of precaution. Recognising, that N.N. Miklukho-Maklay's proposals to establish a Russian protectorate over New Guinea had originated from a fair wish to protect them from destructive influence of the European culture, the Russian foreign minister N.K. Girs, however, thought that the proposal was unrealistic. By the end of 1884 the part of New Guinea, yet unoccupied by Holland, had been actually divided. The British Crown had declared its protectorate over the SE part of the island, Germany had annexed the NE part of New Guinea, and negotiations over the final demarcation of newly acquired territories were in progress. "Under such circumstances, -

Girs wrote, - the fate of the Papuans may be considered as decided and our interference in terms of their protection must not be recognised as useful and expedient".

Meanwhile, the Russian Foreign Minister did not exclude a possibility of the Russian interference in the colonial race in Oceania. In order to conduct such a policy the Russian Government needed expeditious and precise information, and Miklukho-Maklay might be very useful in it. In his report to the Tsar N.K. Girs suggested to maintain relations with him in a light of possible usefulness of his familiarity with the region, without giving him any information on the Government's intentions. The Naval Ministry occupied a similar position.

Already two days after sending the Tsar a note on the situation and Russian policy in the South Pacific N.K. Girs sent to the then based in Sydney Russian scientist a letter in which he adamantly asked for provision of necessary information. N.N. Miklukho-Maklay accepted the proposal with no hesitation and promised to try to inform about all major events taking place or being anticipated in this part of the world.

The traveller was very serious of his promise and already in June sent his first report to St-Petersburg. He also requested to specify what would be the most interesting subject for the Foreign Ministry. The Tsar was informed about this letter and after his order it was forwarded to the Naval Ministry. An Acting Minister at that time, Chief of the Naval Headquarters vice-admiral N.M. Chikhachev in his replying letter to N.K. Girs requested to ask N.N. Miklukho-Maklay to get familiarised closer, through straight contacts with Australian officials or out of media sources, with the overall plan of naval preparations in Australia for a case of war between Russia and England; find out how many naval ships were then at the disposal of colonial authorities; how many private steam ships were supposed to be armed and re-equipped for naval activities; which Australian ports and havens were planned to be mined or reinforced; in which places coal bunkers existed or were planned to be established.

Having received response from Russia in September 1885, N.N. Miklukho-Maklay undertook an attempt to answer the questions, the Naval Ministry was interested in, in a report sent to Russia on the 14 of April 1886. He also requested the Naval Ministry to keep the source of information confidential, but in May 1886 the script of his report was forwarded to the Naval Ministry with the name of the author of the document.

Why did the scientist agree to participate in informal activities on the territory of a foreign state? Apparently, this activity was a part of his struggle for establishment of a Russian protectorate over the Maklay Coast and for possible acquisition of other Pacific islands by Russia. He, actually, never tried to conceal that his reports would have to become an additional argument for more an active policy of the Russian Government in this region. For example, he wrote in his first report that if the Russian Government helped him to secure the Maklay Coast, Port-Alexey (an inlet on the northern coast of the island) might have become a convenient base to exert pressure on Australia!

Even before the instruction from the Russian Foreign Ministry to collect military-political intelligence N.N. Miklukho-Maklay had been trying to attract attention of the Russian officials to the military aspects of policy in this region. Thus, on the 26th of November 1884 he wrote to the Chief of Naval Headquarters N.M. Chikhachev a letter, in which he expressed his confidence that establishment of naval bases in the Pacific should be considered desirable and no time ought to be lost in doing it. Further on he tried to convince N.M. Chikhachev in military-strategic advantages of Port-Alexey as a potential base for the Russian Navy. Admiral, nevertheless, replied in rather a put off manner and did not advise his opinion on a possibility or desirability of establishment of a naval base in New Guinea.

In a course of collecting data for his report N.N. Miklukho-Maklay predominantly used Australian newspapers and, to a lesser extent, information given to him by political and public figures of England, Australia, Dutch East-India during private conversations.

The Russian scientist sent to Russia three reports in total. Information about growth of anti-Russian feelings and military build-up in Australia in the connection with a heat-up in Anglo-Russian relations was, no doubt, the most important for the MFA and Naval Ministry. Unusual growth of militaristic feelings amongst Australians was the first thing pointed out by the Russian scientist. This militarism became clearly noticeable from the moment of dispatch of an Australian military detachment to Sudan, and, after a heat-up of Anglo-Russian relations, erupted even more.

"Anticipation of a Russo-English war, - the scientist wrote, - made the colonial governments feverish!" N.N. Miklukho-Maklay informed about fears of a Russian landing in Australia in case of war and, shifting to analysis of military preparations, attempted to disclose the character of the main defensive undertakings. He wrote which steam ships had been re-equipped into naval ones and reported their battle characteristics. "The common opinion of competent people here is, - concludes the scientist, - that these vessels will be very serious opponents to naval ships of medium class and even for those ones, which were built specially for raids". He informed about proposals on reinforcement of defence of the Australian coast and establishment of new coal bunkers, about fortifying of the ports of Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide through construction of coastal batteries intended to paralyse activities of Russian cruisers, adduced data on numbers of the Australian and English naval units, which could be used in defence of the Australian shores and the numbers of the Australian army. He paid attention to the coastal sites, which had strategic importance and yet were insufficiently fortified. He attributed to this group the port of Albany - sizeable harbor and a very important coal bunker, Port-Darwin, Thursday Island in the Torres Strait and Newcastle - a source of coal supply for naval ships.

From a military point of view the Miklukho-Maklay's reports showed his dilettantism. Collection and systematisation of military information had been done by him negligently and unprofessionally. For example, having enlisted the re-equipped ships, he ended the list with the words "and others, names of which I don't remember" or "etc.". The same happened with the information about places where arrangement of coal mining was feasible. Sometimes the informer himself was not confident in trustworthiness of his data: "There are, seemingly, 3 small armoured ships in Melbourne, in Adelaide - 1 or 2". As to the really secret data, the Russian scientist didn't even try to retrieve it.

It is noteworthy, that some data or expressions of Miklukho-Maklay remained unclear to the officials of the Naval Ministry. For example, a hand of an official(s) of the Naval Ministry put question marks next to the information on setting up of 40-tonn guns in the Australian ports or next to the information on intentions of clearing of the oceans of Russian cruisers. Obviously, naval professionals could not understand what was meant under "40 tons" (clearly not the calibre) or what was meant under "clearing" - annihilation or pushing away.

Miklukho-Maklay's comments on strategic significance of some Australian ports often look rather naïve. For example, he affirmed, that capture of the Albany port by a hostile navy on the southern coast of Western Australia could easily interrupt navigation between Australia and Europe and significantly harm the Australian policy. He did not take into account considerable remoteness of Albany from bases of any potential aggressor and impossibility to hold it for any prolonged period of time. *(Nevertheless, let us not forget, that Albany had acquired a certain military-strategic significance at the beginning of WWI when it had become a base for forming of convoys for transportation of Australian and New Zealand troops to the Middle East and Europe over a way safer than around the northern end of Australia, which was under a threat of attack of German raiders. Powerful coastal batteries on the Albany coast were dismantled only after WWII - VK).*

The data, collected by the Russian scientist and related to the general issues of political situation in Australia and Oceania, was a lot more precise and full of information valuable for the Russian MFA. He, for example, correctly pointed out a clear tendency to federalisation of different colonies of the fifth continent into an integral state, which would try to obtain independence. Simultaneously, he justifiably paid attention to the fact that another direction of public opinion still held strong positions - a will to maintain the imperial unity. Information of the Russian scientist on colonial ambitions of different powers and political situation in Oceania was also very revealing.

The reaction on Miklukho-Maklay's report in the Russian corridors of power was very refraining. The MFA had considered the idea of Russian colonial acquisitions in Oceania as dubious from the very beginning. Already in March 1885 N.K. Girs was restricting possible actions of Russia in New Guinea only by protection of personal proprietary rights of N.N. Miklukho-Maklay, and after conclusion of Anglo-German agreement on demarcation of possessions of both countries in New Guinea, it had become clear that the colonial division of the island had been completed.

The Naval Ministry addressed to the N.N. Miklukho-Maklay's information with a similar refrain. To a large extent it was determined by the fact that the Naval Minister I.A. Shestakov disliked the scientist and did not share his ambition to protect the rights of the Papuans at the Russian expense and with a Russian military-political interference, connected with a high risk, into policy of a remote region. In particular, he found it possible to have characterised N.N. Miklukho-Maklay as not a fully sane man, having added, though, that even not very sane people had been useful for their Motherland by their insaneness itself. Finally, the naval minister objected establishment of a Russian naval base near the equator as in case of war it would have been impossible to hold it.

The contents of military notes of N.N. Miklukho-Maklay's reports were used only partially: only some information on fortification of Australian ports and re-equipment of merchant and passenger ships into men-of-war was copied. The Russian circles of power, realistically appraising the Russian opportunities, finally refused to support the traveler's proposals on establishment of a Russian sphere of influence in Oceania. In December 1886 N.K. Girs officially advised the scientist that his plans on establishment of a Russian colony in this region had been declined.

Can we today, more than 100 years after the described events, call the informal activities of N.N. Miklukho-Maklay the espionage and attribute him to the category of knights of cloak and dagger? Rather not. The information collected by him and forwarded to Russia was quite innocuous. This kind of work has always been done by diplomats and under circumstances of absence of a normal Russian embassy in Australia then, the Russian scientist only occupied a certain niche in the complicated system of relations between the Russian and British Empires. He was certainly driven by patriotic ambitions and a sincere will to contribute to the strengthening of the Russian position and her territorial acquisitions in the South Pacific. Moreover, the Russian scientist wanted his beloved native inhabitants of the northern coast of New Guinea to become the Russian subjects and be protected from European adventurers, including gold prospectors, who had often invaded new British colonies destructing the traditional way of life of native tribes. *(It is noteworthy that gold had been found in New Guinea by that time - VK)*. It is not excluded, that N.N. Miklukho-Maklay's participation in collecting of military-political information was partially driven by his will to be grateful to Alexander III for the subsidising of his scientific work and find a moral justification for a request for a new allowance.

Finally, for the history N.N. Miklukho-Maklay remained a renown scientist and traveler. Informal side of his work, of course, did not become a secret for the Australians, but did not impede their recognition of his scientific achievements and significant contribution the Russian-Australian relations.

(from A. Ya. Massov. Russia and Australia in the second half of the XIX century, 1998)