

NEVA — THE FIRST RUSSIAN WARSHIP IN AUSTRALIA

At dawn on 16 June 1807 the Aborigines of the Cammeraygal tribe, whose camp was spread along the northern shore of Port Jackson, saw a small three-masted ship stubbornly making its way, tacking and battling the wind, towards the settlement of the English. Above the stern of the sailing ship flew a white flag with a blue cross. At last the ship anchored in Neutral Bay, where foreign ships usually stopped. Some time later the Aborigines heard cannon shots of salute: the strangers were greeting the masters of the colony.

Thus began the first visit in history of a Russian warship to Australia. It was the sloop *Neva*, of 370 tonnes displacement, built in the London shipyards and formerly bearing the name *Thames*. In 1803–1806 the sloop had made a round-the-world expedition together with the *Nadezhda* under the command of Yu. F. Lisiansky and I. F. Kruzenshtern. This time the purpose of the *Neva*'s voyage was quite prosaic — the sloop was to deliver to Russian America the cargoes of the Russian-American Company (RAC). Commercial interests led to the crew being reduced to a minimum; unlike its brilliant predecessor, it included no naturalists, nor, apparently, were there among the participants of the voyage any persons inclined to describe their travels.

The sloop's crew was small — 5 officers, a surgeon, an RAC commissioner and 36 lower ranks. The commander of the *Neva* was Lieutenant Leonty Andrianovich Hagemeister. His ancestors lived in the Baltic provinces; he himself, having completed the Naval Cadet Corps in St Petersburg, devoted himself from his youth to service in the Russian fleet. Before Hagemeister took the ship out into the expanses of the Pacific, he had served in the Baltic Fleet and had been in the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean. While serving as a volunteer in the English fleet the young Russian officer was noticed and earned the praise of Admiral Nelson himself. The twenty-seven-year-old captain was a well-educated man, possessed deep knowledge of mathematics and astronomy, and wrote and spoke fluently in Russian, German, English, French, Spanish and Portuguese.



The sloop Neva off Kodiak Island in 1805 (from a sketch by Yu.F. Lisiansky)

Among the other participants of the voyage two more, like Hagemeister, were descendants of Baltic Germans — the surgeon Karl Mordhorst and Lieutenant Moritz Berkh, the future historian and admiral, commander of the Black Sea Fleet. The young assistant navigator of the *Neva*, Yefim Klochkov, was to make two more round-the-world expeditions — as navigator on the ship *Kutuzov* in 1816–1819 and as commander of the RAC ship *Rurik*, on which in 1822 he visited Australia once more. The *Neva*'s second lieutenant, Alexander Kozlianinov, also continued to serve in the fleet, as, probably, did the navigator Ivan Vasilyev. The RAC cargoes

were accompanied by the commissioner Rodion Zakharov, whose tasks included gathering information on the possibilities of Russian trade with the colonies visited.

The *Neva* set out from Kronstadt on 20 October 1806; delays en route meant that after calling at Brazil, in February 1807, it became clear to Hagemeister that to go to Russian America by the traditional route round Cape Horn in that autumnal stormy season was too risky, and he chose a new route — across the Atlantic and Indian oceans, in the “roaring forties”. For more than three months the courageous mariners saw no land, and only on 26 May did the shores of Van Diemen’s Land appear in the distance (as Tasmania was then called), and by 15 June the *Neva* was at the entrance to Port Jackson.

The Russian sailors appeared here at a difficult period for the young colony. An inefficient economy based on the forced labour of convicts, a small number of free settlers, and dependence on supplies of food from England had led to actual power falling into the hands of the “rum mafia” — the officers of the New South Wales Corps, who were supposed to guard the colony, and several large landowners. Pooling their resources, they bought up the goods and spirits brought here and then resold them to convicts and free settlers at fabulous prices, making enormous profits. Rum, of which they were the absolute masters, became the only hard currency.

Attempting to restore order in the colony, the English authorities in 1805 appointed to the post of Governor William Bligh, a courageous and resolute naval officer. This was the very Captain Bligh whose ship *Bounty* had been seized near Tahiti in 1789 by its mutinous crew. The mutineers settled on the uninhabited islet of Pitcairn, while Bligh, with a group of officers loyal to him, suffering great privations, crossed the Pacific in a boat and reached the island of Timor. Arriving in Sydney in August 1806, Bligh attempted to break the power of the local mafia. The confrontation lasted almost a year and a half. Seven months after the *Neva*’s call at Port Jackson, Bligh was to suffer a new fiasco — the officers, headed by Major G. Johnston, raised the “Rum Rebellion”, overthrew Bligh and completely seized power in the colony.

The Russian sailors had the opportunity to become acquainted with the main protagonists of the approaching drama. Hagemeister wrote in a dispatch to the RAC on 24 (12) June 1807: “The governor here, Mr Bligh, is at present away inspecting the towns lying inland; the commander in his absence, Major Johnston, and the head of the naval department, Mr Campbell, have shown us every civility.” (Campbell is Robert Campbell, another of the heroes of early Sydney, who combined in his person the functions of a customs official and of a merchant delivering rum to the colony in defiance of all prohibitions.) “Governor Bligh has arrived and yesterday visited us, and towards evening we were invited to a ball at his residence.” We do not have sufficient data to judge how deeply the Russians managed to understand the conflict within the colonial administration, but there is no doubt that Hagemeister approved of Bligh’s line: “The present governor, by his good arrangements, may perhaps soon raise still further the value which this settlement possesses.”

Bligh’s “arrangements” consisted precisely of attempts to break the trading monopoly of the officers and rich landowners, to normalise the monetary system, and to limit the uncontrolled use of convict labour by well-to-do colonists in their personal interests.

Of course, the economy of the colony interested the Russians much more than the struggle for power within it. Some of the economic problems the Russians felt for themselves. “By order of the governor meat has been brought to us, and we are supplied with bread and greens,” wrote Hagemeister. “To tell the truth, I did not wish [to buy] fresh meat here, as a pound costs 2

shillings, but ... in five days I hope to depart, and I intend to take nothing more from them.... Everything here is excessively dear.”

At the same time Hagemeister appreciated the energetic activity of the English in developing the colony: “This settlement is still in its initial state, though astonishingly much has been done”; besides Sydney the towns of Parramatta and “Hawkesbury” had already been founded, and “near the sea ... on the river Hunter ... they extract coal”. (The reference is undoubtedly to Newcastle, situated on the Hunter River.) “The interior part of this vast island, barred by the highest mountains, is completely unknown.” (It is interesting that the Blue Mountains, rarely rising above the 2,000 m mark, were perceived by the Russian traveller at the beginning of the last century as “the highest”.)

The Russians were also interested in the position of the convicts, and especially in their successful return to normal life: the convicts either are “under strict supervision at government maintenance or, if their conduct deserves respect, receive tickets and can earn their living by some trade or other. Labour is at such a high price that many of the convicts in the course of 10 years have made themselves a large capital, above all one who now has more than 30,000 pounds sterling.” Telling of the development of Van Diemen’s Land, begun in 1803, Hagemeister emphasises that the convicts there receive allotments of land. This interest in the favourable conditions in which convicts found themselves in Australia would be shown by Russian sailors during subsequent visits as well.

Despite the economic and administrative difficulties experienced by the young colony, on the whole the impression the Russians formed of its future was an optimistic one. “The land is fertile... In time, one must think,” Hagemeister remarked with foresight, “this land will abound in grain and almost everything needful for life, and owing to the small distance from China and the East Indies, as soon as the needs here multiply and the products become better known, a good trade will open up.” Thus already at the beginning of the last century Hagemeister foresaw that ties with China and South-East Asia would play an important role in the economic prosperity of Australia — precisely what is happening in our own time.

Hagemeister’s primacy is indisputable in yet another field. In his letter to the RAC he emphasises that Russia could find “benefit in dealings with this part of the world, [since] all our products are at a high price here, and from here one may take the trees known by the name of she-oak, which are superior to mahogany for furniture.” (She-oak was a name widespread at that time for certain species of casuarina.) Hagemeister also reported on the possibility of RAC ships taking part in intermediary trade between Australia and England, and between Australia and Brazil. Russian sailors would write more than once of the prospects of Russian-Australian trade, though in the nineteenth century it never developed. Hagemeister also noted the navigational advantages of the route from European Russia to Russian America with a call at New Holland, and emphasised the convenience of the Sydney harbour as an anchorage on long ocean passages.

The Russian sailors were interested in the life of the Aborigines as well, as witnessed by the ethnographic collection they assembled, which Hagemeister describes thus: “Arrows for military games, plain, without barbs — two; fighting arrows — four; for catching fish — one. Staves for close combat, straight and round — two; slanting and flat — one. Shields — two.” (The arrows mentioned here are spears and fish-spears — the Aborigines knew neither bow nor arrow; the collection also included “a board with which they throw arrows” — a spear-thrower. The straight round staves are evidently clubs, and the slanting flat ones boomerangs.)

The collection was sent to St Petersburg and would now be of great ethnographic interest, but unfortunately its further fate is unknown.

Warm relations developed between Governor Bligh and Hagemeister. Russia and England at that time were allies (a little more than a month remained before the Peace of Tilsit and the temporary worsening of Russo-English relations). Bligh had met Russians before, in particular on the island of Unalaska, which he visited in 1778 on the ship *Resolution* during James Cook's third expedition, and later, in the 1790s, when Russian sailors helped England during her wars with continental Europe. There is no doubt that now the strangers from distant Russia, headed by a brilliantly educated captain, aroused interest in Sydney society. Hagemeister paid Bligh an official visit, and on the morning of 23 (11) June received him on board his ship. The Russians met the distinguished guest according to all the rules of naval etiquette and fired an artillery salute. In the evening of the same day the captain and officers were invited to supper and a ball at the governor's residence, the so-called Government House. It was then situated on Bridge Street; in the following years Russian sailors would visit it more than once. The ball was attended by the flower of local society, "gentlemen and their ladies", as the *Sydney Gazette* wrote. At 11 o'clock in the evening the night sky was lit up by colourful fireworks, at midnight supper began, and then the dancing continued until morning itself. The evening was a resounding success, and, who knows, perhaps it was one of the last carefree evenings that fell to Bligh's lot in Sydney... In any case he could write with full justification in his report to London: "The Russian sloop ... received all those supplies which she desired, and every possible attention and respect was shown to the [Russian] Imperial flag." On 1 July (19 June) 1807 the *Neva* left the hospitable shores of Port Jackson and in September arrived safely at the centre of Russian America — Novoarkhangelsk.

Hagemeister was twice more — on the *Suvorov* in 1816–1819 and on the *Krotky* in 1828–1830 — to circumnavigate the globe. Later he was governor of the Russian-American Company and director of a school of merchant navigation.



In 1957 the Australian branch of the Society of Lovers of Russian Military History created a jubilee medal in honour of the 150th anniversary of the visit of the *Neva*. Thus the Russians who had settled in Australia immortalised the name of the first Russian warship to come to the shores of the fifth continent.

L.A. Hagemeister. Letter to the board of the Russian-American Company on the voyage of the ship "Neva", from Port Jackson, 12 June 1807. — In: Russian Seamen and Travellers in Australia, compiled by E.V. Govor and A.Ya. Massov, Moscow, Nauka, 1993, pp. 16–18.

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