

VOSTOK AND MIRNY IN AUSTRALIA

Vostok and *Mirny* put to sea from Kronstadt on 17 July 1819 together with their twin ships *Otkrytie* and *Blagonamerenny*. Before them lay a voyage to the southern waters of the Pacific Ocean.

The sloop *Vostok*, under the command of Captain-Lieutenant Faddey Faddeyevich Bellingshausen, had been launched in 1818 at the Okhta shipyard. She had a displacement of 900 tonnes; the ship's length and beam were 39.5 m and 10 m respectively, and she carried 28 guns. The transport *Mirny*, under the command of Mikhail Petrovich Lazarev, was of smaller size (530 tonnes, 36.5 m x 9 m, 20 guns).

The crews of the ships consisted of experienced officers and seamen (189 men in all), most of whom had previously taken part in long voyages in the waters of the Pacific. Among the officers of the *Vostok* were Captain-Lieutenant (later Admiral) Ivan Zavadovsky, the future Decembrist Konstantin Torson, the Kazan astronomer Ivan Mikhailovich Simonov, and the artist Pavel Nikolayevich Mikhailov. The crew of the *Mirny* included Midshipman Pavel Mikhailovich Novosilsky and the surgeon Nikolai Galkin, who left interesting accounts of this voyage.

After a short stay in Rio de Janeiro (13–14 November 1819) the ships parted: *Otkrytie* and *Blagonamerenny* made for the shores of Australia around the southern tip of Africa, while F.F. Bellingshausen and M.P. Lazarev led their ships south and, finally, on 18 February 1820 reached the shores of Antarctica, leaving a most brilliant mark on the list of great geographical discoveries made by Russian explorers. When the stores of provisions and fuel on both ships were running out (the question was even considered of using empty barrels as fuel), the ships turned north in the direction of Australia. The *Vostok* dropped anchor in the port of Sydney on 11 April 1820 (a mere two weeks after the departure of the *Otkrytie* and *Blagonamerenny*). The *Mirny* arrived 4 days later. The joy of the Russian naval visitors, exhausted by the long and dangerous voyage among the ice in the conditions of the polar night, knew no bounds.

The first priority of the Russian visitors was the restoration of their strength and health, for among the crew there were men who had fallen ill with scurvy. The officers and sick sailors settled in tents on shore, ate fruit in abundance and drank lemon juice. In one of the tents a bathhouse was set up — the first steam bath in the history of Australia. Sheep and pigs were also brought ashore, and given the opportunity to feed on succulent Australian grass.



The ships, battered by the Antarctic voyage, required substantial repairs. In workshops set up on shore, repairs were made to the ships' hulls, the rigging, the sails, and the copper sheeting of the sides mangled by the ice. At the same time provisions and fresh water were being brought aboard and timber procured. It is noteworthy that by the time of the Russian sailors' visit, several decades of felling of building timber on the coast had completely exhausted the stocks of trees suitable for ship repairs. Cedars suitable for making straight and strong beams were found almost within the city limits of Sydney, near the site of the present-day famous Sydney bridge.

Nor did the Russian sailors forget the scientific character of their expedition, for in those years military power and the natural sciences were intertwined in the closest possible way. They engaged in "natural history" and carried out astronomical and geodesic measurements in a field observatory. This research was directed by the expedition's astronomer I.M. Simonov and the *Vostok's* lieutenant K.P. Torson. I.M. Simonov, who turned only 26 in 1820, was the sole professional scientist on the Bellingshausen–Lazarev expedition. The astronomical observations that he carried out throughout the entire circumnavigation acquired particular significance in Port Jackson: in 1820 there was still no complete certainty about a sufficiently accurate determination of the coordinates of Sydney. I.M. Simonov made calculations daily, performing during his stay in Australia 200 observations for the determination of latitude and 504 for the determination of longitude. K.P. Torson in the same period made 390 measurements for the determination of longitude. The data obtained in the course of these repeated calculations could no longer leave room for doubt. The importance of these measurements was later noted by European scientists.



Among the natural-science investigations of I.M. Simonov (in the portrait above) in Australia, mention should also be made of his work in geology and his description of Australian flora and fauna. His, too, were the mathematical calculations of the height of the Blue Mountains, based on the barometric measurements of the British engineer Hawkley. The height he determined (1,234 m) was, by the standards of the early nineteenth century, calculated fairly accurately and proved not so far from the figure known today (1,360 m). In the environs of Sydney the Russian scientist carried out studies of soils and minerals. On the basis of his observations, I.M. Simonov, like Fyodor Stein, came to the conclusion that the Australian continent was geologically homogeneous with the other continents of the Earth. "One may conclude," he wrote, "that only organic nature depends on the geographical position of places in relation to the equator and the ecliptic of the Earth; stones and metals are found equally in all countries of

the globe, only in greater or lesser quantity in relation to the various rocks, and this quantity depends on the proximity of some chain of mountains.”

Substantial attention was devoted by I.M. Simonov to the study of the flora and fauna of Australia. This part of the research was reflected in the drawings of the expedition’s artist P.N. Mikhailov. His works have survived to our day and are at present kept in the Russian State Museum in St Petersburg and in the Historical Museum in Moscow. P.N. Mikhailov’s artistic legacy is well known on the fifth continent as well, and the sketches he made in Sydney have been reproduced more than once in Australian publications.

I.M. Simonov also carried out ethnographic research, collecting objects of the material culture of the Aborigines, and his collections are kept to this day in Russian museums. He met with the Aborigines and, according to his memoirs, “came unarmed to their gatherings” in order to observe the behaviour of the “natural inhabitants”. It is noteworthy that on the basis of his observations I.M. Simonov was one of the first in world science to raise the question of the origin of the Australian Aborigines, and suggested their kinship with the autochthonous population of the Indian subcontinent. Modern anthropological research has confirmed the kinship of the racial type of the indigenous inhabitants of Australia and a number of tribes of India and South-East Asia. He left interesting remarks on the social organisation of Aboriginal society and on the religious beliefs of the Aborigines.

Despite I.M. Simonov’s benevolent attitude towards the Aborigines, in his works he sometimes described them as “hideous savages”, “black half-demons” and even as beings having “a certain resemblance to orang-utans”. I.M. Simonov clearly exaggerated the prevalence of cannibalism among the indigenous Australians. Like some other young Russian naval visitors who came to Australia (A.I. Lazarev, N.D. Shishmarev), he did not succeed in fully overcoming the racist prejudices characteristic of Europeans. On the whole, however, the Russian sailors behaved irreproachably towards the Aborigines, and, in the assessment of the Australian historian V. Fitzhardinge, “only the Russians kept their reputation with regard to the Aborigines unblemished”.

The stay in Australia left the warmest memories among the Russian sailors. “Not without regret did we leave this beautiful port. A place where, one may say, we were received as sincere friends or relatives,” wrote the commander of the *Mirny*, M.P. Lazarev. Still more emotionally, in his characteristic manner, I.M. Simonov wrote of it: “Our stay in this curious country remained for us the finest memory of a whole lifetime.” In the memory of the Australians themselves, the arrival of the Russian ships in Sydney in 1820, and in particular the visit to Australia of F.F. Bellingshausen, remained as the visit to their country of the most outstanding navigator since the days of James Cook.

Vostok and *Mirny* left Port Jackson on 20 (8) May 1820. After voyages in Oceania, where they discovered a number of unknown islands, they returned once more to Sydney in the same year for rest before a new expedition to the Antarctic, remaining here from 21 (9) September to 12 November (31 October).

A.Ya. Massov. *Andreevskiy Flag Pod Yuzhnym Krestom*. St Petersburg, 1995

E. Govor. Na Mysu Russkikh. - *Avstraliada*, 5, 1995

G. Barratt. *The Russians and Australia*. Vancouver, 1988