

## Russians

### **Mara Moustafine**

The earliest Russian visitors to Sydney were the officers and crew of a Russian Imperial fleet undertaking naval and scientific expeditions through the Indian and Pacific oceans in the early nineteenth century. Sydney became a transit point on their long-distance journeys. Apart from replenishing supplies and repairing their vessels, the crews were able to rest and interact with the settlers of the new colony of New South Wales. These ship visits played a key role in establishing early links between Russia and Australia.<sup>1</sup>

### **Nineteenth-century visitors**

The first Russian ship to visit Port Jackson was the sloop *Neva* in June 1807, under the command of Lieutenant Leonty Gagemeister, a Baltic German from Latvia.<sup>2</sup> Governor Bligh received the Russian naval officers with a banquet and fireworks. Seven years later, the second Russian ship, the *Suvorov*, arrived, bearing the long-awaited news of Napoleon's defeat. As Russia and Britain were by then allies, Sydney celebrated with great fanfare. Governor Macquarie himself hosted a lavish dinner for the officers, while Russian seamen were feted in Sydney's taverns.

Visits by Russian ships to Sydney became more frequent in the 1820s. Of note was the visit in 1820 of a squadron of four sloops which made Port Jackson their base during their research mission in the Pacific. While their ships were refitted and repaired, the Russian seamen became a familiar sight around Sydney. The Russians were given most-favoured-nation status and treated as brothers-in-arms. The spot on the northern shore of Port Jackson where they anchored came to be known as 'Russian Point', later renamed Kirribilli.

These sentiments changed dramatically as Russo-British relations deteriorated after Tsar Nicholas I brutally suppressed the Polish uprising in 1831, and the Crimean war of 1853–56 prompted widespread Russophobia. There were calls to strengthen Australia's defence capability, and the construction of Fort Denison in Sydney Harbour was resumed in 1855 as a defence against possible attack by the Russian Fleet. Although Russian ship visits became less frequent in the second half of the nineteenth century, the Sydney press continued to whip up Russophobia until Russia's defeat in the Russo-Japanese war of 1904–05. Despite this, there was a warm welcome for the Russian corvette *Rynda*, which arrived in January 1888, with a Grand Duke aboard, to participate in Sydney's centenary celebrations.

A Sydney businessman, Edmon Monson Paul, was appointed Honorary Consul of Russia in 1857 and served in the role until 1913. He looked after the interests of the growing number of Russian subjects in the colony, assisted with arrangements for ship visits and represented Russia in matters of state, including the inauguration ceremony for the Commonwealth of Australia held in Centennial Park in Sydney on 1 January 1901.<sup>3</sup>

An early Russian visitor to Sydney was scientist and Pacific ethnographer Nikolai Mikluho-Maclay.<sup>4</sup> He lived in Sydney at various times between 1878 and 1886, married the daughter of former New South Wales Premier John Robertson and was instrumental in the establishment of Australia's first biological marine station at Camp Cove in 1881. Though his plan for a 'free' Russian colony in the south Pacific did not eventuate, it stimulated public interest in Russia about migration to Australia.<sup>5</sup>

## Early Russian settlers in Sydney

Several men giving Russia as their birthplace were among the convicts who arrived in Sydney in the early 1800s. The earliest was Constantin Milcow, a horse-breaker born in Moscow who arrived on the *Atlas III*, to serve a seven-year sentence for stealing bacon. He was known to work around Sydney between 1816 and 1825. Russian seamen also jumped ship in Sydney in this early period.<sup>6</sup>

The 1881 census recorded 322 Russians in the colony of NSW. Their number grew to 1176 in 1891 and 1536 by 1911.<sup>7</sup> It should be noted that this early census data categorised as 'Russian' people of diverse ethnicity and nationality originating from the Tsarist Empire and their spouses. Initially, ethnic Russians and other Eastern Slavs (Byelorussians, Ukrainians) comprised a very small percentage of their number – most were Jews, followed by Finns, Poles and Balts.<sup>8</sup> The early migrants saw Australia as a land of opportunity where they could escape political, racial and religious discrimination. After the completion of the Chinese Eastern Railway in Manchuria in 1904, many of them travelled to Australia through China and across the Pacific.

Among the first wave of Russian migrants arriving before World War I, most of the long-term settlers were drawn from minority nationalities, while ethnic Russians, initially at least, saw their time in Australia as temporary.<sup>9</sup> Some were political exiles, evading the draft or awaiting the demise of the Tsarist regime; others wanted to make their fortunes and return home: these made little effort to establish social or cultural organisations. A benevolent society, aimed at uniting the Russian community and helping new arrivals, was formed in Sydney in 1909 and a branch of the Brisbane-based socialist Union of Russian Workers some years later. Russian settlers entered actively into the life of their adopted homeland and helped to build the nation. More servicemen enlisted in the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF) from Russia than from any other non-Anglo-Celtic nation, 373 of them from NSW.<sup>10</sup>

After the overthrow of the Tsar in February 1917, around 500 Russian political exiles from around Australia set sail from Sydney with the funds made available by the Provisional government in Petrograd. In 1918 the Bolshevik regime appointed Peter Simonov,<sup>11</sup> a Russian revolutionary activist in Australia, as Consul-General, though he was not recognised by the Australian government. In October 1920, Simonov launched the Australian Communist Party in his Sydney office before leaving for Russia the following year. Like many of the returnees, he is believed to have been shot in Stalin's purges.

## White Russians in Sydney

The second wave of Russian migrants who arrived in the 1920s were the so-called White Russians – loyalists of the Tsarist regime, who fled Russia in the wake of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and civil war. After the defeat of the White Armies in Siberia, most of them had crossed the border into Manchuria in northern China and later made their way to Australia via Japan. As Brisbane was the first port of call for the Japanese steamers in which they travelled, many of them settled in Queensland, though some ventured further south to Sydney.

Building a new life in Sydney in the difficult economic circumstances of the 1920s and 1930s was not easy for the Russians, especially those who had to learn a new language. Work was scarce and few were able to find employment in their previous professions. Some bought chicken farms on the outskirts of Sydney, others took on menial labour. The 1921 census recorded 1444 Russians in New South Wales. By 1933, their number had risen to 1624, an estimated three-quarters of them living in Sydney.<sup>12</sup>

In 1924 the small community of ethnic Russians in Sydney established a club, known as the Russian House, in a rented room in Pitt Street.<sup>13</sup> It served as a meeting place and venue for lectures, concerts, celebrations of traditional Russian festivals and the occasional church service. The club also helped new arrivals find work, accommodation and their way around in their new city. After relocating to larger premises, first at 700 George Street, then 800 George Street, the staunchly pro-monarchist Russian House became the heart of Russian social and cultural activities in Sydney. It had a large Russian language library, provided a meeting place for musical, drama, literary and chess groups, and a venue for theatrical performances, concerts and dinner dances. In June 1937, the Day of Russian Culture was launched there at a jubilee celebration of Russian poet Alexander Pushkin, which the community continues to celebrate annually.

The earliest Russian Orthodox church services in Sydney were conducted by Father Innokenti Seryshev at the Greek or Syrian churches in inner Sydney, while Easter Mass was celebrated at Christ Church St Laurence near Central Station. In 1933, the first Russian Orthodox parish was established under Father Methodius Shlemin, who then held monthly Sunday services at the Russian House in George Street. Many Russians in Sydney at that time lived around the eastern suburbs and the first Russian Orthodox Church, St Vladimir's, was opened in 1942 in a converted house at 31 Robertson Road, Centennial Park. It was the centre of Russian Orthodox life in Sydney until the early 1950s and still functions.<sup>14</sup>

Leading figures in the Sydney's fledgling Russian community in the 1930s were George Davidenkov, a former officer of the Russian Imperial Army, architect and musician, who arrived in Sydney from Estonia in 1928, and his wife, Irina Belinsky, the daughter of a former governor of Sakhalin. Their marriage in 1934 in the Greek Church was probably the first Russian Orthodox wedding in Sydney. Davidenkov served as President of the Russian House for many years, while Irina worked in its library and was the first teacher at its Russian school which opened in 1941.

The most prominent Russian in 1930s Sydney was Ivan Repin,<sup>15</sup> who had arrived from Russia via Shanghai in 1925. By the mid-1930s he had opened a string of Repin's coffee shops in the centre of Sydney. These quickly became meeting places for European migrants, businessmen and coffee-drinking intellectuals, and brought to the city a degree of European sophistication. Many newly arrived Russians found work in Repin's cafes, the last of which closed in the mid-1960s. Repin was also a generous benefactor of St Vladimir's church.

Several Russian language journals were published in Sydney by Father Sereshev, who established Sydney's first Russian printing house Oriento in 1937. These included *The Emigrant's Way* (1935–41) and other publications on religious and literary themes. Ivan Repin also funded the publication of *The Russian in Australia*, edited by Davidenkov, which appeared between 1937 and 1938, and was revived from 1950 to 1962.

Russian culture made its presence felt in Sydney in the late 1920s and 1930s through the visits of famous Russian émigré performing artists from Europe, including prima ballerina Anna Pavlova, opera singer Fyodor Shalyapin, the Ballet Russes de Monte Carlo and the Don Cossack Choir. As in other capitals, they played to full houses and their innovative style left a lasting legacy on Australian ballet and music. Some of the artists stayed on in Sydney and became part of the Australian arts scene.

Politically, the Sydney Russian community in the 1920s and 1930s was polarised over the fate of their homeland. Most were pro-monarchist and anti-communist, though they varied in the strength of their commitment to the cause. Activists founded organisations like the Military Union, the Russian Monarchist Group, and the National Alliance of Russian Solidarists (NTS), while others took a more passive approach, focusing on building their new lives in Australia.

At the other end of the spectrum, the pro-Soviet Russian Workers' Association raised funds to assist the Soviet Union. From 1930 to 1939 they operated from a rented room in Oxford Street. After hitting a low when Stalin signed a pact with Hitler in 1939, the group gained popularity in the wake of Germany's invasion of the USSR in 1941, which prompted Sydney Russians to close ranks and lend support to aid efforts for Russia. Sydney Russians were active in Jessie Street's 'Russian Medical Aid and Comforts Committee' and her 'Sheepskins for Russia' appeal<sup>16</sup>.

By 1943, the pro-Soviet group had moved to new premises which they registered as the Russian Social Club at 727 George Street, directly across the road from the rival pro-monarchist Russian House. Soviet films were screened there and dances and concerts held to raise funds for the USSR. At the height of sympathy for Soviet Russia, a benefit concert to celebrate the defeat of the Germans at Stalingrad drew a crowd of 500 people. Such support did not last long beyond the Allied victory. By the end of the 1940s, the Russian community again split along ideological lines.

## Russians in postwar Sydney (1949–52)

With the arrival of several thousand Russian refugees from war-torn Europe in the aftermath of World War II, Sydney displaced Brisbane as the main centre of ethnic Russian settlement in Australia. The 1954 census, which for the first time separated out the Ukraine and the USSR, recorded 5472 Russians living in New South Wales, 75 per cent in metropolitan Sydney. Most of the refugees had been taken to Germany as prisoners of war or forced labour, and ended up in the Displaced Persons (DP) camps. The remainder were White Russian émigrés who had been living in Europe after fleeing the Bolshevik revolution.

Arriving under the Commonwealth government's assisted passage scheme, many were initially sent to remote locations to work off two-year contracts. The majority then chose to settle in Sydney, where they were able to establish themselves successfully in a time of full employment. Eighty per cent of these Russians were less than 40 years of age and quickly embraced their identity as 'New Australians'. In fear of forced repatriation from the camps to Stalin's Russia, some had disguised their ethnic origins while still in the DP camps in Europe. In Australia, most kept a low profile and remained aloof from the Russian cultural community.

Among those who rose to prominence were Jennie George (born Eugenie Sinicky), the first female President of the ACTU and later a Labor member of the Federal Parliament; and Bill Jegorow, the foundation chair of the Federation of Ethnic Communities' Council (FECCA).

## Russians from China 1950s–1960s

The Chinese Communist Revolution in 1949 prompted thousands of ethnic Russians and Russian Jews, many of whose families had lived in China from the early 1900s, to seek refuge in Sydney. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, the majority came from the international settlements in Shanghai and Tientsin. Among them were refugees evacuated from Shanghai to the Philippine island of Tubabao shortly before the fall of the Kuomintang government in 1949. Like the DPs, this group initially had to work off two-year contracts. Most then settled in Sydney.

In the mid-1950s and early 1960s, Russians from Harbin and other parts of north China, which had once been home to a vibrant Russian émigré community, made their way to Australia.<sup>17</sup> With the assistance of the World Council of Churches, they were sponsored by friends and relatives already resident in Australia, and in turn sponsored others in a chain migration. In the mid-1960s, Russians from Xinjiang, often of mixed Russian-Chinese descent, managed to escape China ahead of the Cultural Revolution, which brought migration from China to a complete standstill until the 1980s, when the final groups arrived. Over half of the 14,000 people who arrived under the special humanitarian program for White Russians from China between 1947 and 1985 settled in Sydney.<sup>18</sup>

After living in multi-ethnic and cosmopolitan cities in China, the Russians from China adapted relatively easily to their new life in Australia. Most were well educated,

entrepreneurial and often multilingual. They succeeded in business and worked in technical professions. Graduates of the Harbin Polytechnical Institute found ready employment as engineers and draughtsmen in various departments of the New South Wales public service.<sup>19</sup> Having experienced life in vibrant Russian diaspora communities, these Russians also played a key role in developing Russian community institutions in Sydney, including Saturday language schools to ensure that their children retained Russian language and culture. Sydney's Russians from China were given unique visibility when the young Shanghai-born Sydney University student from Manly, Tania Verstak, became the first migrant to win the Miss Australia quest in 1961, and then went on to win Miss International in 1962.<sup>20</sup>

### Cold War Sydney

Sydney featured prominently in the unfolding of Australia's own Cold War drama, the Petrov Affair,<sup>21</sup> with the defection in April 1954 of Soviet diplomat and spy, Vladimir Petrov and his wife Evdokia. It was at the Russian Social Club in George Street that Petrov met Michael Bialoguski,<sup>22</sup> the Polish ASIO agent, who enticed him to defect with the unkept promise of a joint chicken farm in the Blue Mountains. It was on the tarmac at Sydney's Kingsford Smith Airport that a distraught Mrs Petrov, with one high-heeled shoe missing, was strong-armed onto a plane by Soviet agents. Sydney Russians were among the angry crowd of several thousand trying to prevent her departure. After their defection the Petrows initially stayed in a safe house at Palm Beach, before slipping quietly into suburban Melbourne under assumed names.

In the heightened Cold War climate following the Petrov affair, the Royal Commission into Espionage that followed it, and the revelations about Stalin's purges in 1956, most Sydney Russians further distanced themselves from all things Soviet. A visit to the Russian Social Club to watch a film or buy some imported Soviet vodka also ran the risk of being reported to ASIO. Exception was made for Russian cultural performances and many took their children to see Russian artists who visited Sydney in the 1960s, including the Stars of the Bolshoi Ballet, the Berioska Dance Company and the Great Moscow Circus.

### Building community

With the influx of Orthodox believers to postwar Sydney, the Russian Orthodox Church began to play a key role in Russian community affairs. In 1949, land was purchased in Vernon Street, Strathfield, and the Russian Orthodox Cathedral of St Peter and St Paul was consecrated in December 1953. Strathfield soon became the hub of Russian cultural life in Sydney.<sup>23</sup> A Russian Saturday school opened at the church in 1954 and other community organisations began to flourish, including the Russian Scouts and other youth and sports organisations, a literary society, choirs and folk dancing groups. Russian bakeries, delicatessens, and other businesses opened in Strathfield and neighbouring Burwood.

By 1956, the Russian Club – formerly the Russian House – had moved from the city to its own premises at 3 Albert Road, Strathfield. This became a permanent centre of Russian

cultural activities, hosting theatrical groups, musical, ballet and folk dance ensembles, as well as exhibitions of Australian Russian artists.

By this time, community organisations also shifted their attention from the needs of Russians abroad to local welfare needs. In 1957 the Committee to Aid Russians in Europe and Asia, established in 1945 to assist refugees, was transformed into the Russian Relief Association in Sydney with a focus on care for elderly Russians. They established the St Sergius Retirement Village in Cabramatta and later a nursing home and other facilities.<sup>24</sup> The first Russian Orthodox section at Rookwood cemetery was also acquired.

As the community grew, Russian Orthodox churches and Saturday schools were established in other areas where many Russians lived, including Fairfield, Cabramatta, Hurstville, Carlton, Blacktown and Croydon. During the 1960s, the schools held cultural performances at an annual celebration of the Day of the Russian Child. The language study undertaken at these schools equipped the students to sit exams in Russian at School and Higher School certificate levels. Tertiary courses in Russian were offered at the University of New South Wales and later at Macquarie University.<sup>25</sup>

In 1976 the pro-Soviet Russian Social Club also moved to the western suburbs, constructing a library and theatre in William Street, Lidcombe. The club hosted concerts and meetings with visiting Soviet artists in association with the Soviet Consulate in Sydney. In 2010, the club continued to celebrate events like Victory Day and is popular for its Russian restaurant.

Russian language media got a boost in the late 1970s with the launch of ethnic radio station 2EA and later SBS, which broadcast an hour-long Russian program five days a week. Since 1980, SBS television has screened a daily Russian news service. In 1977, the nationwide Russian language newspaper *Edinenie* (Unification), established in Melbourne in 1950, moved its operation to Sydney. Today it also publishes online.

### Russian-speaking migrants from the former Soviet Union

In the 1970s, following US President Nixon's visit to Moscow in 1972, Soviet Jews were permitted to leave the Soviet Union for Israel. Over a thousand arrived also in Sydney, mainly from Russia, the Ukraine and Kazakhstan, sponsored by the Jewish community. Many settled in the eastern suburbs, especially around Bondi, where Russian delicatessens, restaurants and video shops soon flourished.

A further wave of Russian-speakers arrived in Sydney in the wake of Gorbachev's liberalisation of travel and emigration in the late 1980s and the breakup of the former Soviet Union in 1991. These 'new Russians' included people of a variety of ethnicities, including Russians, Ukrainians, Jews and Georgians, who integrated well into a globalising Sydney.

Most were well-educated professionals and entrepreneurs with a good knowledge of English. Some, including academics, information technology specialists and musicians, brought with them highly marketable skills and talents. Others brought venture capital and trade

connections. Also among them were Russian women who arrived as wives or fiancées of Australian men, a theme captured in the 2001 Australian film, *Russian Doll*.

Among the new Russian language publications launched were the weekly newspaper *Gorizont (Horizon)* in 1993 and a journal, *Avstraliiskaya Mozaika (Australian Mosaic)* in 2001. The latter journal aims to introduce Russian migrants to Australia and its culture. Since the late 1990s, Russian schools have opened in the eastern suburbs of Maroubra and Bellevue Hill.

### **Historical legacy and broader engagement**

Since the 1990s various Russian language publications have emerged in Sydney with the aim of documenting the legacy of the Russian community in Australia. These include the quarterly journal, *Avstraliada*, as well as two volumes on the history of Russians in Australia, edited by Natalie Melnikov.<sup>26</sup> The Russian Historical Society, established in 1994, holds exhibitions and publishes monographs on Russian themes.

In 1994 the Russian Ethnic Community Council of NSW was inaugurated at the initiative of Bill Jegorow to serve as the umbrella for other community organisations.

The Russians of Sydney have also deepened their cultural engagement with the broader community. The Sydney Balalaika Orchestra, established in 1992, brings together musicians of different ethnic origins to perform Russian folk music both in Australia and abroad. More recently, the annual Russian Resurrection Film Festival, launched in Sydney in 2004 in collaboration with the government of the Russian Federation, has made Russian cinema part of Sydney's multicultural arts scene.

Since the demise of the Soviet Union, and with it the ideological differences that polarised Russians for so long, contacts between Russians in Sydney and their historic homeland have increased significantly. May 2007 saw the reunification of the Russian Orthodox Church, ending the 80-year schism between the Moscow Patriarchate and the Russian Orthodox Church Abroad. Travel and tourism have grown in both directions, as has contact through the internet and the World Wide Web, and many Sydney Russians watch Russian television directly via satellite.

In September 2007, 200 years after the visit of the first Russian ship to Sydney, a new highpoint in Russian-Australian relations was reached when President Vladimir Putin arrived in Sydney for the APEC meeting, the first Russian head of state to visit Australia.

Data from the 2006 census, released in 2008, provides an insight into the diversity of Sydney's Russians. While 5364 people listed the Russian Federation as their place of birth, 14,553 claimed Russian ancestry and 13,221 spoke Russian at home; 7912 espoused Russian Orthodoxy, while 2650 Jews claimed Russian ancestry; 1881 people born in China claimed Russian ancestry, while 443 who were born in China espoused Russian Orthodoxy and Chinese ancestry; 2510 Russian speakers were born in the Ukraine, 954 of them Jews. These

statistics are indicative of the many streams of the Russian diaspora who have come to Sydney and contributed to the richness of its multicultural society.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Elena Govor, 'Glimpses of Russian Australia', in Aleksander Massov, John McNair and Thomas Poole (eds) *Encounters under the Southern Cross: Two centuries of Russian-Australian relations 1807–2007*, Adelaide, 2007, pp 314

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