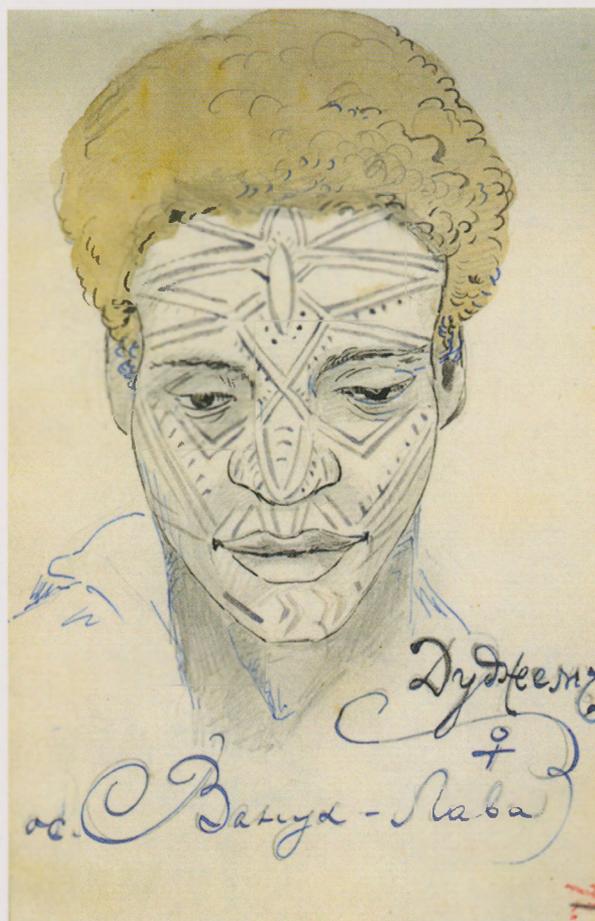


Sous la direction de Frédéric Angleviel

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L'Harmattan

A Mirror in the South Seas: Russian perspectives on New Caledonia during the nineteenth century

Elena GOVOR and Chris BALLARD¹

Elena Govor, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.

Chris Ballard, School of Culture, History and Language, College of Asia and the Pacific, The Australian National University, Canberra, ACT 0200, Australia.

Summary

The observations of nineteenth-century Russian visitors to New Caledonia have not previously been addressed. During the latter half of the century, a small but vocal number of Russians, including officers of the Imperial Navy and independent travellers, visited and documented their impressions of the new French colony. New Caledonia served as a mirror in the South Seas for a limited range of topics, each of which enjoyed contemporary currency in Russian domestic debates: colonial governance, penal colonisation, and the management of 'native affairs'. While the visits of these Russian observers were fleeting, their observations inevitably cursory, and their criticisms occasionally misdirected, their ability to identify issues of central concern both in New Caledonia and at home generated accounts that were vivid in their incidental detail and revealing both of themselves and their hosts.

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Résumé

Les témoignages des visiteurs russes en Nouvelle-Calédonie au dix-neuvième siècle n'ont pas été étudiés jusqu'à ce jour. Durant la seconde moitié du dix-neuvième, un petit nombre d'observateurs russes, y compris des officiers de la marine impériale et des voyageurs attentifs, ont visité et laissé par écrit leurs impressions sur cette nouvelle colonie française. La Nouvelle-Calédonie servit alors de miroir des mers du Sud pour une gamme particulière de thématiques qui participaient aux débats nationaux russes : la gouvernance coloniale, la colonisation pénale et la gestion des « affaires indigènes ». Bien que les visites de ces observateurs russes soient éphémères, que leurs observations se révèlent inévitablement superficielles, et que leurs critiques soient souvent faciles, leur capacité à identifier des questions d'intérêt central à la fois pour la Nouvelle-Calédonie et l'empire russe permet de mettre en exergue des détails pertinents à la fois d'eux-mêmes et de leurs hôtes.

While Glynn Barratt's work has made the Russian voyages in Oceania in the first decades of the nineteenth century accessible to an Anglophone readership, Russian activity in the region during the latter part of the century has received much less attention.² The depth of Russian interest in Oceania more broadly is evident in Elena Govor's unpublished 'Bibliography of Russian writings on Oceania', which lists some ten thousand Russian-language entries on the region, only a handful of which are known or have been seen outside Russia. This paper charts one aspect of the untapped riches of the history of Russian interest in Oceania: the perspectives of Russian writers of the period on the newly established settler colony of New Caledonia. In her study *Australia in the Russian Mirror*, Govor has made the case that Australia enabled Russian observers and writers to reflect in quite specific ways on the situation of their own homeland.³ Unlike Russian writing on other Pacific islands, which was dominated by a focus on the 'exotic' rather than 'colonial' aspects of island life, early Russian observers of New Caledonia were largely preoccupied with its 'colonial' aspect. In this respect, New Caledonia served as a mirror for Russian reflection on a limited number of topics: colonial administration, penal colonisation, and relations with 'native' populations. This paper identifies these themes and addresses their treatment in the writings of nineteenth-century Russian visitors to New Caledonia – an important historical perspective not previously considered.

The first Russian voyage around the world, under Adam Krusenstern from 1803-1806,⁴ heralded the entry of Russians into the South Pacific, where they remained active until the 1830s. During this period, more than twenty Russian expeditions visited the South Pacific, contributing to geographical discoveries and becoming entangled in local encounters. The primary grounds for Russian presence in the Pacific during this period were exploratory interests, as well as occasional revictualling visits by commercial vessels delivering supplies to the outposts of the Russian American colonies. The major Russian exploratory expedition (1819-1821), led by Taddeus Bellingshausen and Mikhail Lazarev, expressed a plan to visit New Caledonia 'if time permits'.⁵ This plan had been instigated by

² Barratt, Glynn. *Russia and the South Pacific, 1696-1840*, vols 1-4, Vancouver, University of British Columbia Press, 1988-1992.

³ Govor, Elena. *Australia in the Russian Mirror: Changing perceptions, 1770-1919*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 1997.

⁴ The wealth of newly discovered archival material from this expedition is described in Elena Govor, *Twelve Days at Nuku Hiva: Russian encounters and mutiny in the South Pacific*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 2010.

⁵ Bellingshausen, F.F., *Dvukratnye izyskaniia v luzhnom ledovitom okeane i plavanie vokrug sveta v prodolzhenii 1819, 20 i 21 godov, sovershennoe na shliupakh 'Vostoke' i 'Mirnom'*

Krusenstern, who was working by then on his major opus, *The Atlas of the South Seas*, which included a substantial chapter on the mapping of New Caledonia.⁶ Other circumstances prevailed, however, and the Bellingshausen expedition never reached New Caledonia.

The decline of the Russian naval fleet from the 1830s, followed by the draining effects of the Crimean War of 1853-1855, had severely handicapped Russian presence in the South Pacific by the mid-1800s. After the Crimean War, Russia began to reassert its position in the Pacific; this was a period during which Russia was undergoing significant economic, political and social reforms. From this point, Russian voyages in the Pacific reflected a growing interest in the scope for settler colonies. The Russian advance into the Far East resulted in the establishment of a major Pacific port at Vladivostok in 1860, which became the base of the Russian Pacific Squadron.⁷ Ships of the squadron visited Australia, the South Pacific and America in the course of their reconnaissance, training and research voyages. Vladivostok was the terminal point in a long history of expansion into and colonisation of Siberia and north-eastern Asia, a process which generated novel challenges for the Russian Imperial government, especially around the nature of colonial administration, the management of colonial subjects, and the increasing use of Siberia as a penal colony. Australia and New Caledonia, as examples of British and French penal colonies respectively, offered food for Russian thought.

Russian visits to New Caledonia took two forms: naval expeditions, which usually touched only at the port at Noumea, and were often tightly constrained by the diplomatic settings for formal encounters; and the less regulated travels of individual Russians, which tended to be characterised by a more broad-ranging acquaintance with New Caledonia and deeper insight. Both types of visit produced publications but the former were of a more official nature and had only a restricted circulation, while the latter reached a much wider readership. Russians also found their way to New Caledonia either as crew on Russian or foreign trading vessels, though they seldom produced durable textual accounts of their visits, or – in small numbers – as settlers and convicts.

[*Repeated Explorations in the South Icy Ocean and Voyage around the World in 1819, 20 and 21 on the Sloops Vostok and Mirny*], Pt 1, St Petersburg, Tip. I. Glazunova, 1831, p. 17.

⁶ Krusenstern, A., *Recueil de Mémoires hydrographiques, pour servir d'analyse et d'explication à l'Atlas de l'Océan Pacifique*, Saint-Petersbourg, Imprimerie du Département de l'instruction publique, 1824-1827.

⁷ Stephan. John, *The Far East: a history*, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1994.

Between 1863 and 1903, six Russian naval ships visited the young French colony. The clipper *Abrek* (Brigand), under the command of Constantin Pilkin, was the first Russian ship to visit New Caledonia, when it anchored to cut firewood at Baie de Saint Vincent on 30 March 1863. The *Abrek* then proceeded to the recently established settlement of Port-de-France (later Noumea), where it met the Russian corvette *Bogatyr* (Hero), under Petr Chebyshev, in a planned rendezvous. The *Bogatyr* had arrived from Australia carrying Admiral Andrei Popov, the commander of the Pacific Squadron, who was leading his junior officers on a tour of the Pacific to acquaint them with Australia and other colonies of the region. Thereafter, Russian naval visits to New Caledonia occurred at roughly decadal intervals. The clipper *Izumrud* (Emerald), commanded by Mikhail Kumani, was the next to visit Noumea, on May 1872 en route from Australia to New Guinea. The fourth, in June 1886, was the *Vestnik* (Messenger), under Vladimir Lang, again travelling between Australia, New Zealand and New Guinea. From April to May 1894 New Caledonia was visited by the *Kreiser* (Cruiser), en route from Australia to Solomon Islands. The last Russian Imperial naval vessel to visit New Caledonia was the cruiser *Dzhigit* (Horseman), commanded by Alexander Nazarevsky, in May 1903. During this period, New Caledonia was also visited by Russian commercial ships and one such visit in June 1898 ended in tragedy when a boat with Russian sailors from the *Bay of Naples* capsized in Noumea harbour after striking a reef, with twelve sailors lost to sharks.

Following standard naval practice, reports containing hydrographical, geographical and socio-economic data were produced on each location visited, and were despatched to the Naval Ministry. The original reports are in the Russian State Naval Archives in St Petersburg. In many cases the commanders' accounts were also published in the leading Russian naval journal *Morskoi sbornik* (*Naval Collection*). Surgeons, who also played the role of naturalists aboard Russian naval vessels, produced their own reports discussing medical and ethno-historical issues in the *Meditsinskie pribavleniia k Morskomu sborniku* (*Medical Supplements to Naval Collection*).

The first Russian individual traveller to write an account of his visit to New Caledonia was the naturalist and early anthropologist, Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay (1846-1888).⁸ Educated in Germany, he had come to the

⁸ In this paper we follow the preference of Miklouho-Maclay in spelling his name as he did when outside Russia; however, in references to his Russian works, we transliterate his name as Miklukho-Maklai, following Library of Congress rules. Other Russian names are similarly treated here.

Pacific to study the 'Papuan race'. Miklouho-Maclay settled initially on the north-east coast of New Guinea in 1871, but when rumours of his death were received in Russia, the *Izumrud*, then returning from New Caledonia, was directed to sail to the secluded coast of New Guinea to determine what had become of him. There they found him safe, although very sick after a sojourn of fifteen months; quite possibly, the ship's crew regaled him with tales and showed him artefacts collected during their visit to New Caledonia.⁹ Thereafter, Miklouho-Maclay's quest for the 'Papuan race' took him to the Malay Peninsula and Western Micronesia, and twice more to New Guinea. Recuperating in Sydney, he began to plan a new expedition to Island Melanesia, including New Caledonia, whose indigenous Kanak population he identified as an outpost of the 'Papuan race'. As his financial resources were limited, he took the option of travelling on a commercial vessel, the *Sadie F. Caller*, which was engaged in harvesting bêche-de-mer. The first port of call, in April 1879, was Noumea, followed by Baie de Prony and Lifou, where local islanders were hired to work on the ship as it moved north to the New Hebrides. During the visit to New Caledonia Miklouho-Maclay kept a journal, made field sketches and recorded data in a separate notebook.¹⁰

Another independent Russian traveller, Edward Zimmerman (or Eduard Tsimmerman) followed Miklouho-Maclay to New Caledonia in January 1882. On the eve of his voyage he visited Miklouho-Maclay in Sydney, and we can assume that Zimmerman sought his advice about the trip. Unlike Miklouho-Maclay, Zimmerman, born in 1822 and educated at Moscow University, was travelling the world out of general interest and writing accounts for popular literary magazines in Russia, but his special field of interest and expertise lay in the emergence of new societies – in the United States, Australia, New Zealand and New Caledonia. He published two versions of his notes on New Caledonia, in the popular literary journal *Russkaia mysl* (*Russian Thought*) and in a book about his travels for young readers.¹¹

⁹ The New Caledonian artefacts collected by the *Izumrud* are now held in the Museum of Anthropology of the Moscow State University.

¹⁰ Miklukho-Maklai, N.N., 'Novaia Kaledonia i ostrov Lifu' [New Caledonia and Lifou Island], in: *Sobranie sochinenii v shesti tomakh* [Collected works in six volumes], vol. 2, Moscow, Nauka, 1993, p. 237-45. The unpublished English translation of the journal by Charles Sentinella was kindly provided by Mimi Sentinella. Miklouho-Maclay's albums of sketches and field notebooks are held in the Russian Geographical Society Archives in St Petersburg (items 6-1-24, 6-1-70).

¹¹ Tsimmerman, E.R., 'Novaia Kaledonia' [New Caledonia], *Russkaia mysl*, no.6, 1884, p. 255-83; Tsimmerman, E.R., *Puteshestvie vokrug sveta* [Voyage around the World], St Petersburg, tip. S. Dobrodeeva, 1886.

Finally, Dimitri Drill (or Dmitry Dril), a scholar of criminal systems, came to New Caledonia in 1896 with the specific goal of studying the transportation system, in comparison with Russian and Australian experience. The results of his visit were published in the Russian *Journal of the Ministry of Justice*, and in a book-length comparative study of the Russian and New Caledonian transportation systems.¹²

Read together, the accounts of New Caledonia produced by the naval expeditions and the independent travellers reveal three broad and overlapping fields of interest – colonial administration, penal colonisation and the ‘native question’ – each of which we now address. Russian visits to New Caledonia often mirrored visits to Australia, and comparisons – voiced or assumed – between the two colonies constituted a central theme in approaching and writing about these visits. Unlike the Australian colonies, and particularly Victoria which had no convict past, New Caledonia did not inspire much approval in the Russian visitors. Karl Timrot, the surgeon of the *Bogatyr* in 1863, wrote that the population of Port-de-France consisted at the time of a few hundred European inhabitants and a battalion of soldiers, defending the settlement from the indigenous Kanaks: ‘A beautiful tropical land lies undeveloped because there are no colonists, while the soldiers build gun batteries and military roads to transport their artillery in the event of attack. Drums and bayonets everywhere, civil activity nowhere’, wrote Timrot critically, drawing explicit parallels with Russian colonisation in the Far East: ‘The French colonies of Tahiti, Saigon and Caledonia are no better organised than ours in the coastal Siberian regions.’¹³

Edward Zimmerman began his travel notes on New Caledonia with what he believed to be a commonly held assumption: ‘When it comes to colonisation, the superiority of the Anglo-Saxon over the Romantic [i.e. Mediterranean nations] is well known’. Following his visit to Australia, Zimmerman was keen to find out how the French settlements were faring in New Caledonia.¹⁴ Pronouncing the choice of location for the capital,

¹² Dril, D.A., ‘Frantsuzskaia ssylka v Novuiu Kaledoniuu’ [French transportation to New Caledonia], *Zhurnal Ministerstva iustitsii*, no. 2, 1897, p. 1-42; Dril, D.A., *Ssylka vo Frantsii i Rossii (iz lichnykh nabliudenii vo vremia poezdki v Novuiu Kaledoniu, na o. Sakhalin, v Priamurskii kraiu i Sibir* [Transportation in France and Russia (From Personal Observations on a Trip to New Caledonia, Sakhalin Island, Amur River Territory and Siberia)], St Petersburg, L.F. Panteleev, 1899.

¹³ Timrot, K., ‘Meditinskii zhurnal za kampaniiu korveta «Bogatyr»’ [Medical journal of the voyage of the corvette ‘Bogatyr’], *Meditinskii pribavleniia k Morskomu sborniku*, no. 8, 1869, p. 179.

¹⁴ Tsimmerman, ‘Novaia Kaledonia’, p. 255.

Noumea, 'unfortunate', he identified the primary failure in the 'administration, which interferes in everything, yet does nothing thoroughly' and in the contradictory obsession with bureaucratic regimentation seemingly shared by all freedom-loving Frenchmen as soon as they 'enter some sort of official position'.¹⁵

Zimmerman's critical attitude was confirmed by his confrontation with the Governor, Admiral Amédée Courbet. Visiting the Governor, Zimmerman mentioned that he wanted to see the demonstration government farm. The Governor refused, explaining that the farm was worked by convicts. Then, 'desiring to uncover the true reason for his refusal,' Zimmerman announced that he wished to see the Ducos Peninsula, 'where the Communards were imprisoned'. "That is impossible!" exclaimed the Governor, again with horror on his face, "there are also criminals there now!" The Admiral took pains to ensure that his refusal was enforced; a 'printed circular' was distributed, 'which declared that a certain Zimmerman from Moscow had come to Noumea, followed by a detailed description of my person and costume, with identifying features, and concluding that the named individual must not under any circumstances be permitted into any administration office on the island.' A local merchant, an acquaintance of Zimmerman, found the entire story humorous: 'This is typical of our admiral! He is a stickler for the rules! Mind you, take no heed of it; don't worry, we'll show you anything you desire with or without his approval,' and he did indeed take Zimmerman to the government farm. The British consul in Noumea, on hearing of the gubernatorial circular, 'was not at all surprised,' and suggested that the admiral had taken Zimmerman 'for a Russian nihilist'.¹⁶ It seems that Zimmerman's own prejudices were confronted here with French stereotypes about Russians travelling independently of naval or diplomatic missions. On the other hand, Zimmerman's anti-French feelings did not extend beyond the administration. Visiting the 'Cercle', the famous *table d'hôte* and club for local society, he wrote that 'not one of the globe's nations is able to welcome a visiting foreigner so readily and humanely as the French'.¹⁷

The Russians aboard the clipper *Vestnik*, which visited Noumea in 1886, voiced similar criticisms: 'In mercantile and industrial respects, New

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 269, 267.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 264-7.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 261.

Caledonia does not yet warrant any attention,' wrote Lang.¹⁸ 'Trade and industry are in a slump, at least for the present period', seconded surgeon Ivan Lisovsky, concluding sadly: 'New Caledonia, in terms of its climate, the wealth hidden in its mountains, its beautiful tropical flora, and complete absence of malaria ... presents an opportunity for a far better colonisation than that presently in place.'¹⁹

On the other hand, Russians enjoyed their status in New Caledonian society as emissaries of a powerful political ally of France. The *Vestnik* happened to arrive at Noumea soon after the return of the French naval transport vessel *Dives* from the New Hebrides, where it had unloaded troops and raised the French flag. Two other vessels in the harbour were British – the *Raven* and *Undine* – also newly arrived from the New Hebrides 'to protest against the French occupation of those islands.' The arrival of the Russian ship 'was considered no simple coincidence' reported Captain Lang, but asserted that 'the clipper had come deliberately in support of French claims to the occupation of the New Hebrides Islands.'²⁰

In spite of a history of Franco-Russian hostility during the Napoleonic and Crimean wars, Russians continued to regard France as the cultural centre of Europe, and French was the language of culture in Russian noble and educated circles. This enduring relationship resulted in the signing of the Alliance of 1893, a significant state treaty between the two countries, and the *Kreiser*, visiting Noumea soon afterwards, enjoyed an exceptionally warm welcome from the local authorities and population. 'On entering the harbour, the cruiser was met with steamboats and dinghies, decorated with flags and filled with people who were enthusiastically shouting "Vive le Czar!", "Vive la Russie!"' A few hours later the official ceremonies started. On 'disembarking from the launch onto the town quay, covered in greenery and Russian flags,' the sailors heard the Russian national anthem, and to their great surprise found that it was being performed by a Kanak choir, 'with their national weapons and decorations.' Moreover, Commander Nebogatov

¹⁸ Lang, V. I., 'Kliper «Vestnik». Vypiska iz opisaniia portov Avstralii. Tasmanii. Novoi Zelandii. Novoi Kaledonii i Novoi Gvinei, sostavlenno go vo vremja plavaniia klipera «Vestnik» v 1886 godu...' [Clipper *Vestnik*. Extract from description of the ports of Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, New Caledonia and New Guinea compiled during the voyage of the clipper *Vestnik* in 1886], *Morskoj sbornik*, no.1, 1887, p. 14.

¹⁹ Lisovskii, I.A., 'Materialy k opisaniiu Novoi Kaledonii' [Materials for a description of New Caledonia], *Meditsinskie pribavlenija k Morskomu sborniku*, no. 6, 1887, p. 426, 431.

²⁰ Lang, V.I., 'Kliper «Vestnik». Izvlechenie iz raporta komandira ... 30 maia 1886 g.' [Clipper *Vestnik*. Extract from the Commander's report ... 30 May 1886], *Morskoj sbornik*, no.10, 1886, p. 6-7; Lang, 'Kliper «Vestnik»', 1887, p. 13-14.

wrote, the Russian words 'were pronounced most accurately by the Kanaks'. The Commander was then presented with bread and salt by the Mayor of Noumea, and the delegation proceeded to the house of the Governor. 'The streets along which we processed were richly decorated with flags and plants;' noted Nebogatov, 'a triumphal arc had been erected, and the population of the whole town of Noumea welcomed us with enthusiastic cries.' After a ceremonial reception for the Russian seamen at his house, the Governor went on board the *Kreiser*. On the same day, Nebogatov received 'welcoming telegrams from all of the corners of New Caledonia connected with the telegraph in Noumea.'

The colonisation of New Caledonia by means of deportation was another issue of particular interest for the Russians, and especially so following the deportation to New Caledonia of political convicts, the Communards, in 1872-1874. Russia, which already had one of the largest convict populations in Europe and had embarked on a program of convict colonisation of the endless expanses of the north, Siberia and the Far East, kept a close watch on the development of similar state programs of exile and deportation. Descriptions of the 'horrors' of convict colonisation in New Caledonia began to appear in the pages of Russian literary and political journals and newspapers. For instance, *Souvenirs d'un déporté*, by the exiled Communard Charles Simon Mayer, was simultaneously published in three major Russian journals.²¹ These were translations of French and British publications, often with the addition of cutting critical commentary by Russian polemicists. Public opinion in Russia would have tended towards sympathy for French political prisoners exiled to a distant Pacific island. Almost certainly, the Russian imperial administration permitted the publication of such material with the aim of distracting Russian readers from the faults and horrors of their own convict system. Characteristically, the harsh criticism of New Caledonian deportation voiced in the liberal-democratic press was not repeated in official Russian judicial publications.²²

²¹ *Otechestvennye zapiski*, nos 5-8, 1880; *Russkoe bogatstvo*, nos 6-9, 1880; *Delo*, nos 5, 7, 1880.

²² 'Ocherki frantsuzskoi katorgi' [Essays on French penal servitude], *Tiuremnyi vestnik*, no. 8, 1893, p. 309-17, no. 9, p. 339-42; Malinin, F.N., 'Katorga vo Frantsii' [Penal servitude in France], *Tiuremnyi vestnik*, no. 1, 1904, p. 70-82. A substantial analysis of New Caledonian deportation in a global comparative context can be found in the works of Russian criminal historians: Foinitskii, I.Ia., *Ssylka na Zapade v ee istoricheskom razvitii i sovremennom sostoianii* [Deportation on the West in its Historical Development and Current Status], St Petersburg, Tip. M.M. Stasiulevicha, 1881, p. 210-69 and Feldshtein, G.S., *Ssylka: ocherkiee genezisa, znacheniia, istorii i sovremennogo sostoianiia* [Deportation: Essays on its Origins, Role, History and Current Status], Moscow, Skoropech. A.A. Levenson, 1893, p. 109-24.

Thus in 1880, *Delo*, one of the more progressive and influential Russian publications of the time, reproduced and reworked extracts from the memoirs of Simon Mayer and Henri Rivière, both recently published in Paris.²³ The Russian author of this report, 'V. T.' (presumably the notable Russian journalist Vasily Arkadievich Timiriachev), opened with a review of the appearance in France of a wave of publications by the so-called 'amnestied Communards' – former political exiles who had played an important role in the 'peaceful agitation' against deportation, amongst whom Mayer figured prominently.²⁴ Timiriachev then contrasted the perspective of Mayer with that of Rivière, a novelist and former commander of the naval vessel *Vire* during the suppression of the Kanak uprising in 1878.

Rivière, predictably, had nothing but praise for the 'stern, but humane discipline' of the French officials: 'the iron hand of the penitentiary administration could more fairly be called the hand of strength and fairness'. Governor Léopold Pritzbuër was portrayed by Rivière as a 'worthy admiral, very pleasant and obliging', and the sponsor of daily balls in Noumea, his eyes 'shining with kindness'.²⁵ With unmasked sarcasm, Timiriachev's commentary made clear where his sympathies lay: 'Thus, all was good, pleasant and perfect in this picturesque neck of the woods, which had the fortune to be under the "parental guidance" of a worthy and kind-hearted admiral. However, unfortunately, the reader is already aware of the dark and shameful tragedies that were being played out on the island at the same time as this naïve naval officer danced the evenings away at the Governor's ball, and took delight in the beauties in their Parisian finery. The cries of the unfortunate victims of the cat o' nine tails and inquisitorial torture, the dull moans of those dying on the guillotine did not disturb the Governor's merriment.'²⁶ Had there been freedom of press in Russia at the time, Timiriachev and other Russian progressives would presumably have been writing in the same bitter vein of their own country.

Miklouho-Maclay was the first Russian writer to directly observe the nature of penal transportation in New Caledonia. The day after his arrival in Noumea he visited the Governor, Jean Olry, who provided him with an opportunity 'to see all the sights of Noumea as a penal settlement'.²⁷ On the

²³ V.T., 'Zhizn v Novoi Kaledonii' [Life in New Caledonia], *Delo*, no. 5, 7, 1880.

²⁴ Masanov, I.F., *Slovar psevdonomov* [Dictionary of Pseudonyms], vol. 1, Moscow, 1956, p. 205.

²⁵ V.T., *Op. cit.*, no. 7, p. 246.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Miklukho-Maklai, 'Novaia Kaledonia', p. 238.

orders of the Governor, he was also provided with a small steamboat to visit the island of Nou and the Ducos Peninsula. It is not easy to account for the help offered in this case by the colonial authorities – respect for Miklouho-Maclay or the personal attitude of the Governor, perhaps; but when, just a few years later, Eduard Zimmerman approached Governor Courbet with a similar request, he received the categorical refusal mentioned above.

Miklouho-Maclay spent a single day – 15 April 1879 – inspecting the penal settlements. Given his progressive political stance, one would expect to find a forthright articulation of his attitudes towards French political exile in his diary. We find instead a prosaic description of what he saw that day: the jail, the workshops, the hospitals on the island of Nou and in the valleys of the Ducos Peninsula, where the exiled Communards lived. The tone of his account is dry and reserved. Miklouho-Maclay does not say a word about the hard penal labour, innumerable punishments, abuse, bad food and so on – facts which by that time had already become known to the press. It seems that the explanation is not merely that he visited New Caledonia on the eve of the amnesty of the Communards, when their situation had somewhat improved. Almost certainly, he could not afford to be entirely frank in his diary, as he could not guarantee that it would remain unread. There is just a hint, in a single line of his diary, of Miklouho-Maclay's real attitude to what he had seen, and his deep compassion for the Communards: 'I was glad when I had finished inspecting these institutions for exiles'.²⁸ Miklouho-Maclay's particular interest in the state of the French Communards is repeated in a letter sent to the Russian writer Ivan Turgenev, shortly before their meeting in Paris in 1882, in which he asks Turgenev to acquire booklets 'written by Communards formerly deported to New Caledonia, about their lives there and the sufferings they had endured'.²⁹

Zimmerman, in spite of the Governor's prohibition on visiting the government's demonstration farm, made his way there with the assistance of his acquaintance from Noumea and was duly shocked at the sight of a line of fifty convicts, walking back and forth along a field of sugarcane, driving away locusts which immediately settled down again behind them. 'Such work, under the burning sun, and especially given its fruitless nature, seemed to us truly convict labour,' wrote Zimmerman. He was quick to spot convicts in the streets of Noumea, identifiable not only by their clothes but also by the fact that 'their beards and moustaches were clean-shaven, so their faces were

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 245. This line was crossed out in his journal prepared for publication.

²⁹ Turgenev, I.S., *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii i pisem v 28 tomakh* [Complete Collection of Works and Letters in 28 vols], vol. 12, book 2, Moscow, Nauka, 1968, p. 132.

markedly different from the rest of the bearded inhabitants.³⁰ He recognised Kabyles, deported from Algeria, by their 'coffee-coloured skin'; 'in long white robes with hoods on their heads'³¹, they appeared to spend much of their time in coffee houses.

The visitors aboard the *Vestnik* in 1886 had no problems in visiting the penitential settlements. The Governor permitted them to visit a convict prison on the Ile de Nou and to converse with the convicts, and their impressions of this visit are detailed in Lisovsky's materials. In general, Lisovsky formed a favourable opinion of the living conditions of the convicts, though the brevity of his visit could hardly have served as the basis for a comprehensive understanding of the organisation of the penal and convict system. The workshops on Ile de Nou served, in his opinion, 'only as a way to entertain the convicts' rather than producing truly useful work, such as repairing ships. 'Oversight of the criminals is surprising in its simplicity; there is no sign of an armed guard [and] outside the city it is not uncommon to meet a group of convicts, as many as a hundred in number, going to work under the watch of a single gendarme.' Having described the barracks, diet, and clothing of the prisoners (apparently quite reasonable by comparison with the conditions in Russian convict labour settlements), Lisovsky was unable to explain why, 'in spite of the good conditions and humane treatment, the morale of the prisoners is not particularly high. There are often disturbances, killings and other crimes of that ilk.' Apart from that, he was strongly affected by the suffocating, dark cells of the barracks for the prisoners condemned to death, where they were chained to the walls.³² While the Russian ship was in harbour, two men were guillotined. Nevertheless, the Commander of the *Vestnik*, Lang, noting that the death penalty was a rare occurrence in New Caledonia, wrote that: 'complaints are often heard regarding such leniency in the treatment of the prisoners, as most of the murders are performed by criminals who are already condemned for life.'³³

As a doctor, Lisovsky was also interested in the medical services available to the convicts, and offered a detailed description of the hospital on the island of Nou. But if the hospital made a 'favourable impression' on him, he could not bear the convicts' psychiatric ward, and he gave a damning and probably accurate description of the attitudes that reigned there. All of the patients, with the exception of the most violent, were housed in the barracks

³⁰ Tsimmerman, 'Novaia Kaledonia', p. 266, 265.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 272.

³² Lisovskii, *Op. cit.*, p. 428.

³³ Lang, 'Kliiper «Vestnik»', 1887, p. 14.

in just one room.³⁴ ‘The conditions ... are highly unsavoury, and remind one of the conditions in disciplinary cells; instead of beds there are only wooden benches with some small bundle at the head, in all likelihood meant to be the bedding. The floor is brick. In one corner, where a squalid, demented patient was seated, the floor was soaked in excrement, the air was muggy, and there was little light – the few windows were cut high into the walls and covered in thick iron bars ... there is no question of any work that might keep the calmer patients occupied; all were doomed to sit in their shed under lock and key surrounded by perpetual noise, shouting, laughter, gibbering and so on; fights between these unfortunates are frequent.’ In the solitary cells the violent patients ‘wallow on the floor on rough mattresses.’ The doctor accompanying Lisovsky, when asked ‘why these unfortunates are kept in such wretched conditions ... shrugged and muttered “because they are, after all, convicts and are physically healthy”.’³⁵

Lang also reported on a phenomenon that would have appeared exceptional for a Russian readership of the time: the release in January 1886 by the President of the French Republic, Jules Grévy, of ‘all political prisoners’ deported to New Caledonia, ‘with the exception of deported Arabs and the notorious Berezovsky.’³⁶ A Russian subject, Anton Iosifovich Berezovsky (1847-1916) had taken part in the Polish uprising of 1863, and fled the country after it was crushed. On 6 June 1867 he made an unsuccessful attempt in Paris to assassinate the Russian Emperor, Alexander II. At his trial, Berezovsky alleged that this attempt had been planned by him in revenge for the oppression of Poland and the cruel repression of the 1863 uprising. The French jury, finding mitigating circumstances, sentenced Berezovsky to life imprisonment in New Caledonia. He was amnestied only in 1906 by the government of Georges Clemenceau and chose to remain in New Caledonia as a free settler.³⁷

The visit of the Russian criminologist Dimitry Drill in 1896 to study the results of New Caledonian deportation was particularly significant. Making much of overseas comparisons, Drill was the first to attempt to direct domestic public attention to deportation within Russia. Following his visits

³⁴ For details of this single-roomed construction, see M.C. Pétron, *Nouvelle Calédonie. L’île Nou*. Nouméa, 1987, p. 104-8.

³⁵ Lisovskii, *Op. cit.*, p. 429.

³⁶ Lang, ‘Kliper «Vestnik»’, 1887, p. 14.

³⁷ *Bolshaia sovetskaia entsiklopedia* [*Great Soviet Encyclopaedia*], 1st ed., vol. 5, Moscow: Sov. entsiklopedia, 1927, p. 606. Bazilevskii, B., *Gosudarstvennyye prestupleniia v Rossii v XIX v.* [*State Crimes in Russia in the XIX Century*], St Petersburg, Russkaia skoropechatnia, 1906, p. 153-9.

to Australia and New Caledonia, he travelled to the penal settlements of the Russian Far East, Sakhalin, and Siberia. He considered New Caledonian deportation to be an important source of comparison, as the most ardent advocates of deportation at that point were the French. His book, published in 1899, was the result of a thorough investigation, based not only on official sources but also on materials that he collected through interviews with New Caledonian residents, from the Governor of the colony, Paul Feillet, to long-term settlers. He visited a wide range of penitentiary establishments and, armed with a large quantity of factual and statistical material, demonstrated the untenability of deportation and convict labour even in their routine forms, setting aside the glaring incidents of excessive abuse. In describing the convict labour system, with its division into disciplinary classes, Drill noted its greatest flaw: that it was created to 'break in' the convict rather than reform him.

In an account of the conditions of the recidivists 'relegated' to penal colonies under the law of 1885, Drill extended his critique to a society which, through neglect, produced these marginalised, petty criminal strata, and then disposed of them for the term of their natural lives in New Caledonia. He was especially interested in those people whom the French government hoped to recruit for the colonisation of New Caledonia – the freed convicts who had completed their terms, and the 'concessionaries' who received land. Drill's conclusion was unambiguous: 'Deportation has not succeeded... and has not provided the results anticipated at its establishment... Of course, from the outside, deportation to New Caledonia appears relatively orderly... but this order is achieved almost exclusively through extremely harsh means of punishment and constraint, rather than the reform of deportees planned for at the inception of deportation, which is necessary for any sort of right and stable colonisation.'³⁸ Following his visit to New Caledonia, Drill continued his survey of the organisation of deportation on Sakhalin, in the Far East and in Siberia, all of which provided him with an opportunity to draw some instructive comparisons: 'The country, nationality, level of culture, ways and customs... were all seemingly different. Yet, in its principal features, the deportation system of one country appeared as a copy of the deportation system of another'.³⁹ His comparisons showed that the shortcomings of Russian deportation could not be explained purely in terms of the deficiencies of its organisation, systemic abuses, and so on; for in New Caledonia, despite a system apparently better than that in Russia, the central

³⁸ Drill, *Ssylka*, p. 58-60.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 61.

goal of 'the reform and moral rebirth of deportees in a new environment and under new working conditions' had proven equally unattainable.⁴⁰

On his return to Russia, Drill presented an 'enormous, factually replete report to the Minister of Justice, Murav'ev', as a result of which several reforms were made in Russia.⁴¹ Drill's criticisms did not go un-noticed in France, as the bulk of his report was published in the French journal *Revue pénitentiaire*.⁴² Supporters of French deportation, who had not themselves visited New Caledonia, sought to discredit his conclusions but, during a discussion of his report at the French Penitentiary Society on 17 March 1897, Governor Feillet rose to Drill's support, confirming the fairness of his observations.⁴³ Before Drill's book had even been published in Russia, deportation to New Caledonia had been brought to an end.

The Kanaks of New Caledonia provided a third topic of special interest for Russian observers. Along with an anthropological interest in the Indigenous population and its traditional cultures, the visitors were interested in their relationships with French settlers. The 'native question' was a burning issue in Russia itself, which for centuries had used a variety of methods to subjugate Indigenous populations on the margins of its territory, from the Caucasus to the Far East, and to incorporate them within the country for the benefit of the state.⁴⁴

Anthropological studies were the primary reason for Miklouho-Maclay's visit, and in order to see Kanaks in their natural surroundings he visited the Tamoa plantation of Eduard Schiele, scion of a family of liberated Russo-German intelligentsia.⁴⁵ Accompanied by a former convict, Miklouho-Maclay visited a Kanak settlement near Schiele's plantation: 'We were met by a few inhabitants of both sexes who scarcely differed in type from the Papuans of New Guinea. Some decoration, the tattooing of the women made them appear somewhat different, but the general type was identical'.⁴⁶ He made five sketches of the women's "tattoos" (possibly semi-permanent skin

⁴⁰ As argued by a reviewer of Drill's book in *Zhurnal Ministerstva iustitsii*, no.5, 1899, p. 338.

⁴¹ Kovalevskii M.M. a.o., *Dmitrii Andreevich Dril kak uchenyi i obshchestvennyi deiatel* [*Dmitry Andreevich Dril as a Scholar and Public Figure*], St Petersburg, Tip. Soikina, 1911, p. 22.

⁴² T. 21, 1897, p. 658-61, 942-7, 1435-8.

⁴³ *Revue pénitentiaire*, t. 21, 1897, p. 657, 666-7; Dril, *Ssylka*, p. 59.

⁴⁴ See, for instance, James Forsyth, *A History of the Peoples of Siberia: Russia's North Asian Colony, 1581-1990*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1992.

⁴⁵ Miklukho-Maklai, 'Novaia Kaledonia', p. 237.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 238.

dyes), which do not appear to have been described or published elsewhere and are an important contribution to the history of Kanak culture. He also visited and sketched an abandoned settlement and cemetery, from which he stole a number of skulls, suggesting that a general sympathy and respect for Indigenous peoples did not extend to their remains – an attitude prevalent amongst his scientific contemporaries.⁴⁷

Russian visitors were interested in different aspects of Kanak interaction with Europeans, whether missionaries, settlers or administration officials. Miklouho-Maclay was quick to remark on the negative consequences of European invasion: at Tamoia, the Kanak community had been displaced and forced to abandon their traditional territories. The ‘native dance’ which Schiele organised to entertain Miklouho-Maclay, ‘turned out, of course, to be a caricature of the real one; the native drums had been replaced with kerosene tins, the pleasure and excitement of the usual native dance was exchanged for a semi-drunken affair as a result of the drinking of European spirits (rum and gin)’.⁴⁸

Miklouho-Maclay held an ambivalent attitude towards missionaries. He valued their knowledge of the traditional life of the islanders, but he also suspected that their interventions contributed to the destruction of the traditional culture, which he observed in the Kanak settlement at the Catholic centre of La Conception. He was especially critical of the disrespect shown by missionaries towards traditional culture: visiting Father Fabre in the village of Eacho on Lifou Island, he recorded with disappointment that ‘I learnt practically nothing from the missionary himself about the habits and customs of the natives although he had been living here for several years. He answered all my questions with an obvious ignorance and he was surprised that I should ever have become so interested in such questions’.⁴⁹

Zimmerman also visited Kanak villages: one near Païta, which retained a traditional way of life, and a second at the missionary station of Saint Louis. Learning about the lives of the Kanaks in Païta, Zimmerman became interested in their system of landholding, offering this brief account: ‘The land closest to the village is almost all occupied,’ he noted, ‘and each man owns his plot as a private owner. The uncultivated land further off is under common ownership. Any of the owners living in the village is free to choose a parcel of land in these commons and work it. Such a worked parcel is

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 238-40.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 240.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 241, 243.

thereafter considered his inalienable property and is even inherited by his children.⁵⁰ Prior to his visit, while still in Sydney, he had learnt details of communal land systems in New Guinea from Miklouho-Maclay.⁵¹ This interest in the forms of land ownership, and especially communal land ownership, was not a chance one for Zimmerman. Such questions were very much in the spotlight in Russian discourse on rural life, where traditional communal peasant landholding stood starkly in contrast with the emergence of capital-intensive approaches to agriculture.

At Saint Louis, the pride of the Catholic mission to New Caledonia, Zimmerman visited the wood mill and sugar factory, where converted Kanaks toiled 'for reduced wages', as well as the school, which was kept 'in exemplary order', and where young Kanaks studied the history and geography of France in French.⁵² A visit to the settlement at the mission made a most favourable impression on Zimmerman: 'there before me was a delightful idyll! The location of the native settlement was traversed by a number of straight paths covered in red sand. On either side stood huts whose exteriors recalled to me the mud huts of Malorussia [the Ukraine]: they are almost the same in size and similarly whitewashed, though they are roofed not in reeds but in palm leaves. Each hut is surrounded by a garden patch with bananas and coconut palms, shading the cosy dwellings with their feathery leaves. The natives sitting on the lawns before them, smiling brightly, answered my greetings.'⁵³ The clothing and the implements in the Saint Louis houses were all of European manufacture.

Zimmerman was not entirely deceived by this outward appearance of order and contentment, however, as he was continually troubled by questions: 'why, given these appealing conditions, are their children dying out?... Why does a sort of bleak expression break through their friendly smiles?' Zimmerman's explanation was that the Kanaks, despite all the benefits of civilisation, felt themselves captive and he sought to demonstrate the socio-economic and psychological reasons for this. Although the settlement was not fenced in, the Kanaks could not leave it, as they had nowhere else to go; their traditional lands had been taken, and the newly established and hostile tribes would not accept them back. The missionaries, expertly trapping the Kanaks in the nets of civilisation, 'conclusively deny them the possibility of

⁵⁰ Tsimmerman, 'Novaia Kaledonia', p. 276.

⁵¹ Tsimmerman, E., 'Puteshestvie po Avstralii i Okeanii' [Travels in Australia and Oceania], *Otechstvennye zapiski*, no. 9, 1883, p. 223.

⁵² Tsimmerman, 'Novaia Kaledonia', p. 280.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 281.

returning to their old free lives.' Zimmerman concluded: 'The missionaries... want to make them happy according to their own notions... losing sight of [the fact] that like any individual, the tribe, at a certain age, apprehends happiness in its own way, according to the level of its development. Having been denied the means of satisfying its own natural desires, the tribe, like the individual, dies out slowly.'⁵⁴

Miklouho-Maclay visited New Caledonia in the immediate aftermath of the Kanak uprising of 1878-79. Schiele, his host, had played a part in rescuing Europeans during the uprising and no doubt related his experiences to his guest, but the atrocities committed against Kanak communities made a greater impression on Miklouho-Maclay. In January 1879, just before his journey to New Caledonia, he had written bitterly to Sir Arthur Gordon, British High Commissioner for the Western Pacific, referring to the recent tragic events in New Caledonia: '*L'histoire du contact de la race blanche avec les peuples de l'Océanie nous montre le résultat funeste de l'introduction des alcools par les blancs, dont les tristes suites rivalisent avec les effets des maladies introduites et la poudre (dernièrement la dynamite en Nouv.-Calédonie) pour exterminer les races non blanches.*'⁵⁵ Zimmerman also identified land seizures, often enforced through violence or the threat of violence, as the underlying cause of the struggle of Kanaks against the Europeans.⁵⁶ Retaining control of their traditional lands enabled many Kanaks to choose not to seek employment under Europeans, Zimmerman reflected, though this in turn led to the transportation of Islander labour from the neighbouring New Hebrides, a form of slave trade in his eyes.

One of Miklouho-Maclay's aims on his voyage around the Melanesian islands in 1879-1880 was to observe the workings of this 'slave trade'. On the eve of the voyage, he wrote to Rudolf Virchow: 'The abominations performed by whites in New Caledonia forced me to write an open letter to Sir Arthur Gordon. ... It is doubtful that it will have any effect, as my minimal requests are too fair! I did this as I cannot remain a passive observer of these dishonest affairs'.⁵⁷ The French historian Gabriel Monod, a close acquaintance of Miklouho-Maclay, wrote soon after this voyage: '*A Nouméa, M. de Maclay assista à des scènes scandaleuses, à de véritables ventes de nègres aux enchères... Un colon qui veut une belle négresse pour son*

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 282-3.

⁵⁵ Thomassen, E.S., *A Biographical Sketch of Nicholas de Miklouho Maclay, the Explorer*. Brisbane: [s.n.], 1882. appendix, p. III.

⁵⁶ Tsimmerman, 'Novaia Kaledonia', p. 269.

⁵⁷ Miklukho-Maklai, N.N., *Sobranie sochinenii...*, vol. 5. Moscow, Nauka, 1996, p. 214.

service personnel n'a qu'à s'adresser au capitaine d'un des schooners qui font la traite, et on la lui livre ponctuellement. Un jour M. de Maclay, visitant un de ces schooners en rade de Nouméa, y vit un groupe de jeunes nègres de dix à quinze ans. Il demanda successivement au capitaine et au commissaire d'État comment il se faisait que l'on embauchât des garçons trop jeunes encore pour travailler utilement. Ils répondirent tous deux : « Vous savez, les goûts varient. »⁵⁸

Miklouho-Maclay's views on the labour trade were then outlined in his 'Notes in re Kidnapping and Slavery in the Western Pacific', sent in 1882 to J. C. Wilson, Commodore of the Royal Navy's Australia Station. In relation to New Caledonia he wrote: 'I find in a letter addressed (by Mr. C. Koff) to the editor of the Noumea gazette *La Nouvelle Calédonie*, of the 9th April, 1879, where, *inter alia*, the writer recommends to the Government the importation of two or three thousand white women, the following passages:—"Elles [the white women] remplaceront dans les ménages de Nouméa et dans les fermes de l'intérieur, les Néo-Hébridais... Il se commettait peut-être moins d'abominations dans les villes de la Mer Morte, détruites par le feu du ciel, qu'il ne s'en commet presque en plein jour, impunément, dans notre malheureuse colonie. Ah! si l'on faisait une étude des maladies dont meurent les Néo-Hébridais !" I am sorry to say that facts confirm this statement.'⁵⁹

Miklouho-Maclay also gathered materials testifying that the condition of Islanders brought to work in New Caledonia was even worse than on the Queensland plantations, for a number of reasons: 10-12 hour working days for which the pay was 2½ pence per day; a lack of inspectors; and excessive profit enjoyed by the shipping firms, which bought labourers wholesale and sold them retail.⁶⁰ He suggested a series of immediate, concrete solutions which might partially ease the condition of the Islanders.⁶¹ Monod mentioned that, after Miklouho-Maclay's representations, '*Le gouvernement français s'en est ému et a interdit le commerce de nègres qu'on faisait entre les Nouvelles-Hébrides et la Nouvelle-Calédonie.*'⁶² This almost certainly

⁵⁸ Monod, G., 'La Nouvelle-Guinée. Les voyages de M. de Mikluho-Maclay', *La Nouvelle Revue*, t. 19, no. 2, 1882, p. 242-3.

⁵⁹ Miklouho-Maclay, N., 'Notes in re Kidnapping and Slavery in the Western Pacific. N. de Miklouho-Maclay to Commodore Wilson', in: *Correspondence Respecting the Natives of the Western Pacific and the Labour Traffic*, London 1883, p. 83.

⁶⁰ Cf. Shineberg, Dorothy, *The People Trade. Pacific Island labourers and New Caledonia, 1865-1930*, Honolulu, University of Hawai'i Press, 1999, p. 147-8.

⁶¹ Miklouho-Maclay, 'Notes in re Kidnapping', p. 82-85.

⁶² Monod, *Op. cit.*, p. 242

exaggerated Miklouho-Maclay's influence, but his contribution to the debate has been acknowledged by the leading modern scholar of the labour trade in New Caledonia, Dorothy Shineberg.⁶³

New Caledonian Kanaks provided a point of interest for the Russian naval visitors as well. Lisovsky, the surgeon of the *Vestnik*, and other fellow officers undertook a trip to the interior of the island, visiting a number of Kanak villages. They likely visited the Saint Louis mission, as Lisovsky, referring to schools for Kanaks, makes the comment that 'civilisation does not take hold easily. The natives are considered Catholic only de jure, de facto they are in the main still pagan.' He also noticed that the Marist church enjoyed little support from either the government or the local population. The naval visitors had at least one friendly encounter with a Kanak family: 'Entering one hut, I found the whole family at supper,' wrote Lisovsky, 'an elderly Kanak, with a kind-hearted smile, invited me to try their fare: baked manioc, yam and fish wrapped in leaves and baked on coals, without any salt – that was the entirety of their simple menu, with sugarcane and fruits constituting a sort of dessert.' They were interested to see in the Kanak huts such signs of 'civilisation' as European beds and trunks, yet noticed a number of traditional artefacts still in use such as a '*bec d'oiseau*' club, shell money, gourd water containers and barkcloth. Unlike the more radical Miklouho-Maclay and Zimmerman, Lisovsky failed either to see or to comment on the negative effects of European invasion on Kanak life, repeating the time-worn colonial grudge that the Kanaks 'are very lazy and don't practice agriculture, other than small manioc plantations.' Only the capture and transportation of Islanders from the New Hebrides to work in New Caledonia provoked in Lisovsky the mild criticism that it 'slightly resembles slavery.'⁶⁴

Conclusion

For the nineteenth-century Russian observers discussed here, whether they were officers of the Imperial Navy or independent travellers with more progressive views, New Caledonia served as a mirror in the South Seas for a surprisingly limited range of topics, each of which enjoyed contemporary currency in Russian domestic debates: colonial governance, penal colonisation, and the management of 'native affairs'. Comparisons between New Caledonia and Australia, that other Russian mirror in the Pacific, were

⁶³ Shineberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 7, 119, 202n85, 237.

⁶⁴ Lisovskii, *Op. cit.*, p. 430-1.

inevitable, and rarely to the advantage of the former colony. But the primary pole of comparison, whether explicit or not, was usually Russia itself, and Russian accounts of life in New Caledonia played to a variety of domestic readerships, whether as thinly disguised social critique (Miklouho-Maclay and Zimmerman), or as a point of contrast in advocating domestic reforms (Drill), or in mildly self-congratulatory comparison with Russian achievements in the Far East (Lisovsky and Timrot).

For each of these Russian visitors to New Caledonia, conventional understandings of the Pacific as exotic and a long-standing reverence for French culture were quickly cast in the shadow by issues that spoke more immediately to corresponding problems in contemporary Russian society and its growing empire. While their visits were fleeting, their observations inevitably cursory, and their criticisms occasionally misdirected, their ability to identify issues of central concern both in New Caledonia and at home generated accounts that were vivid in their incidental detail and revealing both of themselves and their hosts.