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# **RUSSIA AND SOUTH AFRICA BEFORE THE SOVIET ERA**

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## **RUSSIA AND SOUTH AFRICA BEFORE THE SOVIET ERA<sup>2</sup>**

This article is devoted to relations between Russia and South Africa from the mid-17<sup>th</sup> to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. It covers first attempts at sending Russian expeditions around the Cape of Good Hope by Peter the Great and Catherine II and describes how the first Russians reached the Cape from the other end, from Kamchatka. It goes on to describe the trips to the Cape by Russian naval officers and other Russians, some of whom spent a long time in South Africa and left interesting descriptions of the Cape. A unique testimony to the fact that black South Africans knew about Russia is presented in the letter of a Pondo chief to the Russian tsar. The most significant part of Russia's relations with South Africa was its preoccupation with South African affairs during the Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1900, when Russian volunteers went to fight for the Boers and two medical detachments were sent to treat their wounded. At that time Russia even established diplomatic relations with Transvaal. Mutual interest in the mining sphere is also analysed, and relations between some Russian and South African intellectuals are mentioned. Immigration of Russian Jews to South Africa is also described.

Key words: South Africa, Transvaal, Anglo–Boer War, Peter the Great, Witsen, Cathrine the Great, Beniovsky, Golovnin, Goncharov, van Riebeeck, Nicholas II, Grand Duke Alexei, Pondo, Olive Schreiner, Leipoldt, Maximov, Russian Jews.

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The history of relations – or attempted relations – between South Africa and Russia began much earlier than one might think, with the establishment of the Cape Colony. There were unlikely connections, little-known plans and incredible voyages long before mutual visits between the two countries became commonplace.

### **From Jan van Riebeeck to Peter the Great**

It was not really a surprise for us to discover how much the first Dutch administrators of the Cape Colony knew about Russia: seventeenth-century Holland had close trade and other relations with its neighbours. Muscovy was one of them.

Jan van Riebeeck, the founder and first commander of the European settlement at the Cape of Good Hope, mentions ‘Moscovy’ in his diary as early as September 1652, soon after his arrival at the Cape. Van Riebeeck thought of using seals’ fat for food, ‘considering how much train oil is annually extracted from seals in Moscovy’.<sup>3</sup>

Among the early Cape settlers there was at least one émigré from Moscow, Johannes Swellengrebel (Schwellengrebel), father of the first Cape Town-born governor of the Cape Colony, Hendrik Swellengrebel. Johannes was born in Moscow in 1671 and died in Cape Town in 1744. His father, Heinrich Schwellengrebel, was born into an Amsterdam worker’s family and in 1643 became a trader in Moscow, where he lived until his death in 1699. Johannes spent most of his life in Russia before becoming an official of the Dutch East India Company in the Cape. This ‘Russian from Moscow’, as the *South African Dictionary of National Biography* called him, could have told a lot about Russia – and not only to his son, the governor.<sup>4</sup>

There were, of course, no South Africans in Russia in those days. What little knowledge the Russians had about South Africa came from books – and this luxury was available only to the chosen few. Until the end of the seventeenth century only theological books were printed in Moscow. Secular books were written and copied by hand and were, of course, very expensive and rare. However, those who had access to them could find all sorts of interesting information about distant lands, some real, some invented. The best sources of such information were the so-called cosmographies, hand-written geographies of the time. The most famous surviving cosmography dates back to 1670. Based on the work of a Flemish

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<sup>3</sup> *Journals of Jan van Riebeeck*, vol 1, 1651–1655. Cape Town: AA Balkema, 1952, p 58. ‘Train’ here is a horse-drawn sledge used in Russia in winter.

<sup>4</sup> *Dictionary of South African Biography*, vol 2. Cape Town: Tafelberg, 1972, p 726; E Rosenthal (ed), *South African Dictionary of National Biography*. London: F Warne, 1966, p 369.

author, Gerard Mercator (1512–1594), the expanded Russian edition contained references to Africa and Madagascar.

South Africa was clearly depicted on maps brought to Russia from abroad. A Dutch mission presented Tsar Aleksei Mikhailovich (who ruled from 1645 to 1676) with a huge seven-foot copper globe made by pupils of the famous Dutch geographer and cartographer Willem Janszoon Blaeu. The globe still exists and is housed in a museum in the Red Square at the very centre of Moscow. One can still discern the words *Caput de Bonae Speranca* at the southern tip of the African continent. It was, perhaps, this globe that struck the imagination of Aleksei Mikhailovich's son, Peter the Great, arousing his passion for travel.

Peter was 25 when, in 1697, he spent more than four months in Holland as Peter Mikhailov, learning every possible naval skill from carpentry to mathematics and navigation. Every day he and his companions worked and dressed as common workers, sail makers, mast builders, or seamen. Peter's dream was to build his own fleet and open the southern seas for Russia, which was not a naval power at that time.

Among Peter's friends in Holland was Nicolaas Witsen, burgomaster of Amsterdam and one of the directors of the Dutch East India Company. It was he who gave Peter and his companions permission to work at the Company's docks. Witsen accompanied Peter to his meetings with many important people, first of all with the Prince of Orange, William III, who simultaneously held the titles of Stadholder of Holland and King of England.<sup>5</sup> The culmination of the friendship was the gift that Witsen gave Peter in the name of the citizens of Amsterdam when the Tsar's visit was finally over. It was one of the ships that was built during Peter's stay. One of Peter's biographers wrote: 'Peter was so delighted that he threw himself on Witsen's neck. He accepted the present with gratitude and gave the vessel the name *Amsterdam*.'<sup>6</sup>

Witsen was a well-educated and well-travelled man who visited many European countries and studied astronomy, mathematics and classics at the University of Leiden.<sup>7</sup> His interest in Peter – at that time an uncouth youth – was scholarly too. In 1664 he spent about a year in Russia and subsequently published three volumes of his impressions and notes about this trip. These volumes were thought sufficiently interesting to be published again three

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<sup>5</sup> V Kliuchevski, *Kurs russkoi istorii (The Course of Russian History)*, part IV. Petrograd, 1918, pp 29–30.

<sup>6</sup> O Browning, *Peter the Great*. London: Hutchinson, 1898, p 102.

<sup>7</sup> JFL De Balbian Verster, *Burgomeesters van Amsterdam in de 17e en 18e eeuw*. Zutphen: WJ Thieme en Cie, 1932, pp 99–105; A Boeseken and M Cairns, *The Secluded Valley. Tulbagh: 't Land van Waveren 1700–1804*. Cape Town and Johannesburg: Perskor, 1989, p 20.

centuries later.<sup>8</sup> During Peter's stay in Amsterdam Witsen was working on another book which was to provide detailed descriptions of several countries and regions of the world, including Central Asia, Northern Persia, the Caucasus, the Crimea, China and Japan. Russia, with its eastern regions, was to occupy the central place in this publication. To have the Russian tsar as a consultant on his own country was a real stroke of luck for the author.

Two large volumes of this book were published in 1705. They were beautifully illustrated, supplied with maps and detailed descriptions of many Russian cities and towns, geographic features, traditions and habits. As a source for his information Witsen often gave 'the Russian court'. This clearly meant Peter. Naturally, he dedicated his book 'To Tsar and Great Prince Piotr Alekseevich'.<sup>9</sup>

This friendship is important for us here, as, without a doubt, Witsen was the person who got Peter interested in Southern Africa. Witsen had already been a director of the Dutch East India Company for four years by the time Peter appeared in Amsterdam, and the Cape Colony was constantly on his mind. His signature appears on many Company letters addressed to the governor of the Cape. Moreover, this governor, Simon van der Stel, was Witsen's personal friend, who even named a mountain range in the Tulbagh area after him. Later this range, Witsenberg, gave Witsen's name to one of South Africa's famous wines.<sup>10</sup>

During Peter's reign Russian knowledge of Africa accumulated exponentially. In 1713 the first map of Africa, based on a map by a famous Dutch cartographer, Frederick de Witt Senior (1616–1689), was published in Moscow. In 1719 the first Russian book containing a detailed description of Africa was published. It was a translation of a book by the German geographer, Johann Hübner.<sup>11</sup> Hübner's *Geography* was translated into all the major European languages and in Germany 36 editions of the book were published during the

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<sup>8</sup> N Witsen, *Moscovische reyse, 1664–1665: Journaal en aantekeningen*, 3 vols. Leiden: Martinus Nijhoff, 1966–1968.

<sup>9</sup> [N Witsen], *Noord en Oost Tartarye, ofte Bondih Ontwerp Van eenige dier Landen en Volken, Welke voormaels bekend zijn geweest. Beneffens verscheide tot noch toe onbekende, en meest hooft voorheen beschreve Tartersche en Nabuurige Gewesten, Landstreeken, Steden, Rivieren, en Plaetzen, in die Noorder en Oosterlykste Gedeelten van Asia en Europa, Zoo buiten en binnen de Rivieren Tanais en Oby, als omtrent de Kaspische, Indische-Ooster, en Zwarte Zee gelegen; gelijk de Landschappen Ninche, Dauria, Yesso, Moegalia, Kalmakia, Tanght, Usbek, en Noorder Persie, Turkestan, Georgia, Mengrelia, Cirkassia, Crim, Astakkia, Altin, Tingoesia, Siberia, Samojedia, en andere aen hunne Tzaersche Majesteiten koon gehoorende Heerschappyyen: Verdeeld in twee stukken, Met der zelve Land-Kaarten: mitsgarders, onderscheidene Afbeeldingen van Steden. Drochten, enz. Zederet naeuwkenrig onderzoek van veels Jahren, en eigen ondervindinge ontworpen beschreven, deteekent, en in 't licht gegeven, door Nicolaes Witsen, t'Amsterdam, by Francois Halma, Boekverkooper of de Nieuwen-dyk. 1705.*

<sup>10</sup> *Standard Encyclopaedia of Southern Africa*, vol. 12. Cape Town: Nasou, 1976, p 471.

<sup>11</sup> *Zemnovodnogo kruga kratkoie opisanie iz staryia i novyia geografii po voprosam i otvetam, chrez Iagana Gibniera sobranioe i na nemetskom dialekte v Leiptsige napechatano. A nyne poveleniem Velikogo Gosudaria Tsaria Velikogo kniazia Petra Pervogo Vserossiiskogo Imperatora pri nasledstvennom blagorodneishem Gosudare Tsareviche Petre Petrovihe na rossiiskom napechetano v Moskve (A Short Description of the Land and Seas Globe and a New Geography Arranged by Questions and Answers by Iagan Gibner, collected and published in Leipzig in the German Dialect. And Now by Order of His Great Majesty Tsarevitch Piotr Petrovich Printed in Moscow in Russian). Leta Gospodnia 1719, v aprele mesiatse (1719, April). The German original: J Hubner, *Kubrze Fragen aus der Alten und Neuen Geographie*. Leipzig, 1693.*

author's lifetime and more later. Hübner called the southern part of the African continent 'Cafferia' and wrote that it was situated 'on both sides of the Cape of Good Hope'. He also described the important Dutch fortress at the Cape as 'the door to East India'. The book was translated and published on Peter's order.

In 1723 Peter decided to send an expedition of two ships around the southern tip of Africa to Madagascar and, if and when this had been achieved, even further, to India. The details of the expedition were top secret. Few people, even among those involved, knew the whole plan. It was forbidden to discuss anything connected with it before the expedition started – and the more so after it failed. Some of these secrets, however, left traces in the archives. For this important mission Peter chose two frigates, the *Amsterdam-Gallei* and *De Kroon de Liefde*, bought in Holland. There were several Dutchmen among the officers, and Admiral JV Hooft, another Dutchman and the commanding ensign in Revel (now Tallinn, the capital of Estonia), oversaw the preparations.<sup>12</sup>

The ships left the port of Rogervick (close to Revel) on 21 December 1723, carrying Peter's letter 'To the Highly Revered King and Sovereign of the Glorious Island of Madagascar'.<sup>13</sup> The king of Madagascar did not exist. The letter was in fact addressed to the leader of the pirate community which at that time made Madagascar their base. A few years earlier the pirates had sought protection in several European countries, and Peter, having found out about this, decided to invite them, as experienced seamen, to Russia. As far as India was concerned, the instruction to the expedition's commander was to persuade 'the all-powerful Mogol' to trade with Russia.

None of these ambitious plans materialised. Almost immediately the ships were caught in a storm. The flagship, *Amsterdam-Gallei*, started leaking so badly that the expedition had to be halted. It was not just bad luck: the expedition was prepared in haste and thus badly.

### **The Tsarina's Expedition and that of the Run-away Criminals**

Catherine the Great, who reigned from 1762 to 1796, considered herself the successor to Peter's ideas and deeds. In some ways she was. She cared no less than Peter about the territorial expansion of Russia and about keeping an eye on its acquisitions. One of her initiatives was to send an expedition to Kamchatka – not to implement Peter's unfulfilled plan, but with a much more pragmatic purpose. She wanted to affirm Russia's sovereignty

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<sup>12</sup> Davidson and Makrushin, *Zov dalnikh morei*, pp 11–142; *Obshchii morskoi spisok* (The General Navy List), vol I, St Petersburg, 1885, pp 35, 388–389.

<sup>13</sup> AVPRI. File Snosheniia Rossii s Madagaskarom (Russia's Relations with Madagascar), 1723.

over Kamchatka in order to prevent British traders, who often sailed there, from buying furs, an important Russian export item, directly from the locals.

By this time Russia was already a naval power. From the beginning of her reign Catherine had sent Russian naval officers to serve in the British navy in order to perfect their skills. In 1763 six such officers had sailed to India on British ships. All stopped at the Cape, but none left any memoirs or notes. Two, Timofei Kozlianinov, later a vice-admiral, and Nikifor Poluboiarinov, later a captain of the first rank, joined the crew of the British East India Company's the *Speaker*. The *British King*, also the Company's ship, had Prokhor Alisov and Ivan Salmanov on board, while Fedor Dubasov and Nikolai Tulubiev visited India with the British navy.<sup>14</sup> However, none of the Russian ships sailed beyond Gibraltar.

On 22 December 1786 Catherine gave secret orders to the Russian Admiralty to send warships, with heavy cannons and other arms, to Kamchatka around the Cape of Good Hope. This was the only sea route from one end of the Russian Empire to the other in the days before the Suez Canal. The Admiralty decided to send two large vessels of the same type as Captain Cook's ships, the *Solovki* and the *Kholmogory*; two smaller ships, the *Sokol* and the *Turukhan*, and a cargo ship, the *Smelyi*. The young captain, Grigorii Mulovski, who had distinguished himself in the war against the Ottoman Porte, was appointed head of the expedition.

Despite Catherine's strategic considerations and the participation of warships, the expedition was not military. Catherine sent along scholars to make observations and to do research and artists to draw sketches. Among them were the German professor George Forster, and the astronomer Francis Baily who sailed with Captain Cook. 'Scholarly instructions' to the crew were given by a famous naturalist, linguist and traveller, Peter Pallas.

The Cape of Good Hope occupied an important place in the planning of the expedition. The crew was going to rest and get provisions there. It was instructed 'to take several pairs of young cattle, capable of breeding, various seeds, such as corn, hemp, flax, various trees and vegetables, especially potatoes, for growing in the Kuril Islands and other places designated for settlement'.<sup>15</sup> The expedition was planned to the smallest detail. Even the decorations

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<sup>14</sup> *Materialy dlia istorii russkogo flota (Materials for the History of the Russian Navy)*, part XI. St Petersburg, pp 8, 12, 49, 54-55; *Obshchii morskoi spisok (General Navy List)*, vol II, pp 184-186, 333, 363-364, 439-440; VV Pertsmaher, 'Russkii moriaki v Indii v 60-x godax XVIII v' ('Russian Sailors in India in the 1760s'), *Strany i Narody Vostoka*, no 5, Moscow, 1975, pp 225-226.

<sup>15</sup> 'Prigotovlenie krugosvetnoi ekspeditsii 1787 goda' ('Preparations for the Round-the-World Expedition of 1787'), in *Zapiski Gidrograficheskogo departamenta Morskogo ministerstva*, part VI. St Petersburg, 1848, pp 168-169.



Mulovski was to be awarded were prepared. On reaching the Cape he was to be awarded the Order of St Vladimir, 3rd class, and on reaching Japan, promoted to the rank of major-general. The ships were to leave late in 1787. But wars, first with Turkey and then with Sweden, led to the cancellation of the expedition. The ships had to take part in action, and Mulovski was killed by the Swedes.

Thus Catherine's plans were dashed, just as those of Peter the Great had been. But where two emperors failed, a bunch of run-away criminals without any preparations or special training succeeded. The Russians' first successful expedition around Africa was undertaken by the inmates of Kamchatka's Bolsheretsk prison.<sup>16</sup> One April night in 1771, having killed the prison commandant, they broke out, captured the ship *St Peter*, which was moored in the harbour, and set off on a long and dangerous voyage. The 70 escapees were people of different professions, occupations, social positions, and nationalities: soldiers, sailors, Cossacks, traders, middle-class citizens, and several noblemen; Kamchadals, Aleuts, Koriaks, and Russians. Seven of them were women, wives of the exiles. Three were navigation students, and it was they who steered the ship.

As one might have guessed of any event at that time, more is known about those among the rebels who belonged to the gentry. These were Piotr Khruschev, lieutenant of the Imperial Household Troops, Vasilii Panov, a Guards lieutenant, Ippolit Stepanov, a retired cavalry captain and landowner from Moscow, Iosafat Baturin, an army officer, and Aleksander Turchaninov, a chamber footman of the late Empress Elizabeth. All were charged with the same crime, conspiracy against the government.

One of the instigators of the escape was Maurice (Mauritius) Augustus Benyowski. He was born in a Slovak region which at that time was part of Hungary. He signed himself as 'Baron' Benyowski, while in his memoirs published after his death he called himself 'Count'. Benyowski had fought against the Russians in Poland and been taken prisoner, but released on condition that he would no longer take part in military action. He broke this promise and was again taken prisoner. This time he was sent to the provincial city of Kazan. He managed to escape from there, was captured yet again, and exiled to Kamchatka.

There are few first-hand accounts of the dramatic escape from Kamchatka. Benyowski was the only one who wrote detailed memoirs. He described how the rebels decided to reach Europe by sea, and how, having landed in Macau, they had to sell their ship and then proceeded to board two smaller French vessels, *Le Dauphin* and *Le Laverdi*, and also how

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<sup>16</sup> For a detailed account of this story, see Davidson and Makrushin, *Zov dalnikh morei*, pp 143–206.



many of the fugitives died on the way, unable to endure the hardships of the voyage. In March 1772 they reached Mauritius and spent eight days there. Later they stayed several days at Port Dauphin in Madagascar. By April they had reached the Cape. Benyowski did not give any details of their stay in South Africa, only mentioning that on 27 April 1772 they ‘doubled the Cape of Good Hope’.<sup>17</sup> A clerk named Ivan Riumin, one of those few who made notes during the voyage, made no mention of the Cape whatsoever.<sup>18</sup> However, the fact of the Russians’ stay is confirmed by the notes by a French officer, Claude Hugau, who wrote that he learnt about their arrival at False Bay on 15 April.<sup>19</sup>

Benyowski’s memoirs leave the impression that the travellers were not particularly interested in these (or any other) new lands. With few exceptions they were not natural adventurers and the trip was taking a hard toll on them. By the end the majority had only one dream: to get home as soon as possible, and at any cost. Having finally reached Paris, many wrote to Catherine asking for permission to return and blaming Benyowski for their misbehaviour.

The Empress was magnanimous, as in this case magnanimity was the only way to avoid bad publicity. Were the fugitives to stay abroad, their stories could have damaged Catherine’s image as an ‘enlightened ruler’ which she assiduously cultivated in Europe. They were pardoned, but once they reached Russia, they were sent straight back to Siberia and Kamchatka without the right of return to the European part of the country. They were also forbidden to speak about their adventures so as not to tempt anyone to follow their example.

Benyowski, of course, did not return. He stayed in France and joined the French army, thus becoming a threat in Catherine’s eyes – and yet another reason why her thoughts turned to an expedition to Kamchatka. But instead of leading the French to Kamchatka he was sent to Madagascar at the head of a group of volunteers, which included eleven or twelve from his previous voyage. These were Ivan Uftiuzhaninov, a priest’s son, two sailors, Potolov and Andreianov, Andreianov’s wife, six workers, and a former shop assistant from Kamchatka.<sup>20</sup> All these Russians were to see the Cape again, some more than once.

The volunteers left France in late 1773, called in at the Cape, then spent some time in Mauritius. They finally arrived at Antongil Bay on the north-eastern coast of Madagascar and

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<sup>17</sup> *Memoirs and Travels of Mauritius Augustus Count de Benyowski*. London: Kegan, Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co, 1904, p 454.

<sup>18</sup> [I Riumin] Zapiski kantseliarista Riumina o iego priklucheniiakh s Beniovskim (Notes by Clerk Riumin about his Adventures with Benyowsky), in *Severnyi Arkhiv*, nos 5–7, 1822.

<sup>19</sup> Hugau’s handwritten notes are housed in the Evreux Archive in France.

<sup>20</sup> Zapiska o bunte, proizvedionnom Beniovskim v Bolsheretskom ostroge i o posledstviakh onogo (Memo on the Revolt Caused by Benyovskii in the Bolsheretsk Gaol and on its Repercussions), in *Russkii Arkhiv*, Moscow, 1865, nos 1–2, p 433.

built a village and a fort at the mouth of the Antanambalana River near the present city of Maroantsetra. Louisburg, as the fort was named, became one of the trading ports of Madagascar. Benyowski maintained ties with the Cape, receiving wine, flour, rusks, pickles, and other provisions from there, and sent letters to the representative of the French king. We came across two of these letters written in 1774.<sup>21</sup> Later Benyowski quarrelled with the French and sought the support of the local inhabitants against them. In his memoirs he wrote that on 10 October 1776, the ‘tribes’ around Louisburg had declared him their ‘king’.<sup>22</sup> He returned to Europe and spent time in Poland, Britain and France, and then left for North America to support its struggle for independence. On both continents he met and got to know many outstanding people of his time, including Benjamin Franklin.

But Benyowski ended his days in Madagascar. He returned there in June 1785 and started to create the basis for his own state, building a fortified village above the sea near Angontsy and the Antongil Bay. From there he sent an official letter notifying the French government of his arrival and assuring it of his readiness to cooperate with the French colony on the island. The French sent a regiment to settle the matter.<sup>23</sup> In the ensuing clash Benyowski was killed.

The question of what happened to the other rebels from Kamchatka who came to Madagascar with Benyowski has excited the curiosity of many Russian historians. The only fact to emerge from their researches was that the youngest of Benyowski’s volunteers, Ivan Ustiuzhanin, travelled with him and stayed with him until his death. In 1789 he returned to Siberia and joined the Russian civil service.<sup>24</sup> But Catherine’s censorship worked all too well: he never spoke of his adventures and left no memoirs.

### **No Meeting of Souls at the Cape**

The first book about South Africa in Russian was published in 1793. It was a translation of the work by the famous French traveller François Le Vaillant.<sup>25</sup> But by the end of the eighteenth century many Russians, including naval officers and an occasional civilian, had visited the Cape Colony. Some wrote notes or memoirs.

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<sup>21</sup> [Bérubé-Dudemème]. Journal de Bérubé-Dudemème, capitaine du Bougainville, a Madagaskar en 1774, *Bulletin de l'Académie Malgache*, nouvelle série, tome fasc. Tananarive, 1972, pp 89–111.

<sup>22</sup> [MA Benyowsky] *Voyages et mémoires de Maurice-August comte de Benyowsky, Magnat des Royaumes d'Hongrie et de Pologne, etc, etc*, vols 1–2. Paris, 1791.

<sup>23</sup> A Fidler, *Goriacheie seleniie Ambinanitielo (The Hot Settlement of Ambinanitielo)*. Moscow, 1959, p 40.

<sup>24</sup> AS Sgibnev, ‘Bunt Beniowskogo v Kamchatke v 1771 g’ (‘Beniowski’s Mutiny in Kamchatka in 1771’), in *Russkaia Starina*, January 1876, p 762.

<sup>25</sup> *Voyage de M Le Vaillant dans l'Interieur de l'Afrique, par le cap de Bonne-Espérance, dans les Années 1780, 81, 82, 83, 84 et 85*. Paris, 1790. The Russian translation: *Puteshestviie g. Valiana vo vnutrennost Afriki, chrez mys Dobroi Nadezhdy v 1780, 1781, 1782, 1783, 1784 i 1785 godakh*, vols 1–2. Moscow: Zelennikov, 1793.

Gerasim Lebedev was a musician who played the cello and travelled widely with concerts throughout Europe. In 1785 he left London for India and spent many years there, mostly in Calcutta and Madras. His concerts earned him more than £1000 a year, a great deal of money at that time. In 1797 Lebedev headed home on board the British East India Company ship, the *Lord Terlow*. He quarrelled with the purser and the captain, was beaten and had to escape from the ship at the first opportunity, which came in Cape Town. But he had to leave his luggage on board, and it was his attempts to get it back that kept Lebedev in Cape Town from February until early November 1798. He kept a diary which was discovered in 1959 at the Institute of Russian Literature of the Soviet Academy of Sciences.<sup>26</sup>

Lebedev complained about his loss to Lord Macartney, governor of the Cape, and sued the ship's crew. He won the case, and his luggage, containing his notes about the Bengali and Hindi languages, and expensive Indian silks which he had taken to show in Russia as trade samples, was returned.

Meanwhile he continued to perform, attracting enough people to give five 'subscription' concerts, each with an audience of 200 or more, with the price of a ticket going up from 12 to 20 shillings. Tickets for such concerts had to be bought at least two days before the performance. All Cape Town's elite and some passengers of the passing ships must have attended, some more than once. The governor was in attendance at several performances. This is testimony not only to Lebedev's talent but also to the life and tastes of Cape Town society.

Lebedev became so interested in the Cape that in one of his letters he wrote: 'In order to see different places in Africa I would like to stay here for some time.' He did. In March Lebedev described the Cape Malay festival, and in April visited the Constantia farm. Lebedev's relations with the Dutch were very friendly, but he was appalled by their attitude to their labourers, which he described as 'intolerable barbarity'. He wrote indignantly about a house owner, Wildt, in Siki Street, who behaved like a 'stupid tyrant' towards his servants. Lebedev was also distressed about two Mozambican servants who were hanged for killing their master. He had known the master and described him as 'malicious'. Lebedev had either forgotten the casual cruelty of his own compatriots towards their serfs after many years abroad, or, on the contrary, this was the reason that made him particularly sensitive to such

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<sup>26</sup> Afrikanskiie dnevniki, zapiski i pisma iz Afriki Gerasima Stepanovicha Lebedeva (African Diaries, Notes, and Letters from Africa by Gerasim Stepanovich Lebedev). Cape Town, London, 12 February 1789–14 February 1800. Institute of Russian Literature (Pushkin House), St. Petersburg. Lebedev usually transcribed English and Dutch terms and names into Russian. We quote them in back translation from Russian here.

cruelty in other societies. But he certainly felt deep sympathy for the underdog in Cape Town, never, though, making a comparison with his own country.

Lebedev was not the only Russian to notice the cruelty of South African colonists towards their slaves and servants. While in Cape Town he met Lieutenant Yurii Lisianski, a volunteer in the British navy. Lisianski spent several months in South Africa on his way from Europe to India. He saw not only Cape Town and Simons Town, but the surrounding areas as well, spending a lot of time on the nearby farms. He was even more outspoken than Lebedev about the Dutch colonists' cruelty. 'In the middle of our conversation,' wrote Lisianski, 'one showed his wounded arm to me. In his own words, the wound was inflicted while he was shooting Bushmen or savage Hottentots. He continued his horrid story without a shade of shame, adding that local inhabitants often get together, and having found a dwelling of poor savages, surround it at night. When the unfortunates leave their huts, terrified by gun shooting, they kill the older ones, and capture the youngsters, who remain their slaves for good.'

Even irrespective of such brutalities, Lisianski did not think highly of Cape colonists. 'Having spent more than half a year here,' he wrote, 'I met no Cape resident who could be called an intellectual... It is true that if they are not making money they must be asleep. Mr Vaillant was not far from the truth when he wrote in his *Travels* that he "never met so many fools inhabiting one place, and such a good place at that, as the Cape of Good Hope".'<sup>27</sup>

Lisianski was no doubt arrogant – a quality common in young men at the early stages of their career. Having met Lebedev soon after the musician's arrival in Cape Town, Lisianski wrote about him arrogantly too: 'It was not difficult for me to understand in just a few hours' conversation that he was one of those characters who could not live in their motherland because of their dissipation and who roamed around without bringing any glory to their motherland...'<sup>28</sup> This was grossly unfair, as Lebedev did indeed make his motherland proud both by his success in his profession and by his study of Indian languages and customs.

Lebedev left the Cape on 2 November 1798. He was past 50 by the time he got to St Petersburg and made no further trip anywhere. Both Lisianski and another Russian navy officer whom Lebedev met during his wanderings, Ivan Kruzenshtern, became famous. Every

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<sup>27</sup> Zhurnal leitenanta Yuriiia Fiodorovicha Lisianskogo, vedennyi im vo vremia sluzhby iego volonterom na sudakh angliiskogo flota s 1798 po 1800 god (Journal by Lieutenant Yurii Fiodorovich Lisianskii, Written by him during his Service as a Volunteer on the Ships of the English Navy). TsGALI, 1337/1/135.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid*, 1337/1/135/124.

Russian schoolchild knows their names, for they were the captains of the *Neva* and the *Nadezhda*, the first Russian ships to sail beyond the Gibraltar and to complete the first Russian trips around the world (1803–1806).

### **The Sloop *Diana* and the Frigate *Pallada***

The beginning of the nineteenth century saw a change in Russia's attitude to long-distance sea travel. The main reason for this was the foundation, in the last year of the eighteenth century, of the Russian-American Company as a result of the merger of several Russian industrial and trade companies active in and around Russian Alaska. The Company was granted a hunting, mining and trading monopoly, as well as the right to have its own armed forces and fortresses and to occupy new lands. Naturally, it needed to maintain its ties with St Petersburg, but it also had to deliver heavy cargo which could not be done by land. However, when Ivan Kruzenshtern submitted his first project of the round-the-world trip to Tsar Paul I, the reply was: 'What nonsense!' The Tsar had every reason for scepticism: by the time of his short reign at the turn of the nineteenth century the Russian fleet was in a deplorable state.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, however, the Russians sailed around the world 36 times. Most of these expeditions stopped at the Cape for some time, and some members of their crews left interesting descriptions of this far-off land. One of the most notable was left by Vasilii Golovnin, who ended his life as an admiral, a high-ranking official at the Marine Ministry and a corresponding member of the Russian Academy of Sciences, whose name became part of the geography of the Kuril Islands, the islands of Novaia Zemlya and the Yamal Peninsula. But when in 1808–1809 his ship, the sloop *Diana*, spent 13 months at the Cape, he was just a young captain. Anchoring in Simons Town, Golovnin, who had been at sea for ten months, did not know that since his departure from Kronstadt Russia had joined France in its war against the British. The *Diana* was immediately detained by the British.

The Cape's British authorities treated Golovnin and his crew well, perhaps because only two years earlier Golovnin had ended his training service in the British navy with good recommendations from admirals William Cornwallis, Horatio Nelson and Cuthbert Collingwood. In theory the Russians were free, although Golovnin had to sign an obligation to stay at the Cape until his request to proceed was considered in London. A year passed, and there was no reply from London. Golovnin's funds were coming to an end. The British did not feel obliged to feed his men, as they were not prisoners. Golovnin decided to escape. He

chose a stormy and misty night, the crew cut the anchors, and the *Diana* set off. The sloop was slow and it took three and a half hours to sail out of Table Bay, but the escape was so audacious that the crews of the British ships right in front of which the *Diana* sailed initially did not pursue it. Either they did not understand what was going on or thought that the *Diana* would not sail far on such a night. But the sloop reached Kamchatka without further complications.

Golovnin was a remarkable observer and a good writer with several books to his credit, published in Russian and translated into foreign languages in his lifetime. But his memoirs about the *Diana*'s voyage and notes about Cape Town and Simons Town remain his best known book, perhaps because of his dramatic escape from the Cape, the news of which resonated throughout the world. It was even published in South Africa in 1964, 150 years after its first Russian edition. It was important not only because it was the first detailed Russian account of the economy, geography, population and society of the Cape, but because Golovnin based his text entirely on his own observations and findings. It became a valuable source for historians – a fact fully recognised by the author of the preface to the Cape Town edition.<sup>29</sup>

Golovnin's notes were not those of a tourist, but of a seaman. He described the goods that seamen could get in the colony, the tricks that traders used when they supplied ships, ways to find everything necessary cheaply without agents, food prices and the cost of other useful items. But, of course, he provided general information about the Cape as well: about its territory, military and civil authorities, foreign and home trade, population, its 'virtues, vices, occupations, disposition to foreigners, etc'. Among the vices of the local Dutch Golovnin noted their cruelty towards their slaves. He wrote of his hosts more cautiously than Lisianski, but he too noted that 'the local Dutch, who from early youth are engaged only in trade and in looking for ways to get rich, do not go far in their education, and that is why their conversations are usually boring and not engaging. The weather, local news, trade, the arrival of convoys and some political changes that pertain directly to them are their only topics...'

This was hardly a compliment, but the South Africans had little reason to feel offended: Golovnin saved his most scathing criticism for his own compatriots. Having arrived at Kamchatka he wrote of their greed and unscrupulousness, and of their oppression of the local population. And of the Siberian officials he wrote: 'There were some administrators there, whom honour sent to serve at this end of the world, but they were very rare. And all such

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<sup>29</sup> VM Golovnin, *Detained in Simon's Bay. The Story of the Detention of the Imperial Russian sloop Diana. April 1808–May 1809*. Cape Town: Friends of the South African Library, 1964.



were oppressed from above because they did not have anything to share,<sup>30</sup> and slandered and denounced from below because they did not allow thieves and robbers to have a free hand.<sup>31</sup>

During the nineteenth century Russian ships became a familiar sight in Cape ports. At least 17 Russian ships sailed around the Cape in the period 1814–1829, some more than once. For various reasons some of them spent months in the Cape's ports and docks, and more Russian descriptions of the colony appeared. Coming from a country which, like South Africa, still had serfdom – practically slavery – in the nineteenth century, all Russian observers without exception noted the cruelty of oppression in South Africa. The further into the nineteenth century, the more strongly expressed this attitude became.

But only one nineteenth-century Russian account of the Cape after that of Golovnin stands out. In March–April of 1853 the frigate *Pallada* was undergoing repairs in Simons Town. Among its passengers was the novelist Ivan Alexandrovich Goncharov, who later became famous for his novel *Oblomov*. Goncharov's 156-page book *At the Cape of Good Hope* became the standard text which formed the Russian reader's view of pre-industrial South Africa not only in the nineteenth but even in the twentieth century. And his novel, *The Frigate Pallada*, which had a slightly shorter chapter about the Cape, was translated into many languages. A century after the book appeared this chapter was published in Cape Town.<sup>32</sup>

Goncharov was the first Russian to travel deeper into the colony – or, at least, to describe such a trip. Having visited Stellenbosch, Paarl and Wellington, his expedition turned east and reached Worcester. He was also the first Russian to speak to Africans from outside the colony – a Xhosa chief and his wife who had just been taken prisoner by the British. He wrote warmly about this meeting.

Some contemporaries reproached Goncharov for not studying the existing literature about the places he intended to visit beforehand and then giving a more informed picture. The lasting success of Goncharov's book proved the critics wrong. Readers did not want academic studies, but rather a story of exciting adventure and about the life and ways of real people in an exotic land. This is what Goncharov provided.

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<sup>30</sup> One of the Russian colloquial expressions for bribes.

<sup>31</sup> [VM Golovnin] *Puteshstviie na shliupe 'Diana' is Kronshtadta v Kamchatku, sovershennoe pod nachalom flota leitenanta Golovnina v 1807-1811 godakh* (*Voyage from Kronstadt to Kamchatka by the Sloop Diana under the Command of Navy Lieutenant Golovnin in 1807–1811*). Moscow: Geographizdat, 1961. All quotations are from this edition.

<sup>32</sup> 'A Russian View of the Cape in 1853. Translated by NW Wilson from IA Goncharov's *Fregat Pallada* with Additional Notes by DH Varley', *Quarterly Bulletin of the South African Library*. Cape Town, vol 15, nos 2–4; vol 16, no 1 (December 1960–September 1961).



To imagine how these people looked was a different matter. Alexei Vladimirovich Vysheslavtsov, a Russian artist, stayed in South Africa from mid-March to mid-June 1858. Upon his return he published a book with his own sketches of South African scenes and ‘types’ – a fisherman, a sailor, a fishmonger, Cape Malays, a Khoi woman with a child on her back. Vysheslavtsov did not depict any whites. They were obviously the same as everywhere else and therefore of no interest to him. In his book he described South Africa not as an outpost of white civilisation on the tip of the African continent, but as a Babylonian mixture of peoples:

It seems as if all the nations of the world have sent a sample of their nationality to Cape Town. There is an amazing diversity of colours in the streets; here – red Malay turbans, there crowds of Kaffirs, strong people with dark copper faces, a Mozambican, a *pur-sang* Negro, a Hindu in his picturesque white coat, draped easily and gracefully. In addition, there are the British in all sorts of hats, some in grey felt helmets with something like a fan... Amidst Kaffirs, Negroes, British and Malays there are, occasionally, skippers and captains from merchant ships, soldiers in red uniform, and, finally, us, the inhabitants of Orel, Tambov, Tver...<sup>33</sup>

After the opening of the Suez Canal the majority of Russian ships chose the shorter route from one end of the Russian Empire to the other, which meant that fewer Russian ships visited the Cape. But one visit, that of the son of the Russian Tsar, the 22-year-old Grand Duke Alexei Alexandrovich, attracted a lot of attention both in Russia and in the Cape.

### **Russian Grand Duke in Cape Town**

The reason was not so much Alexei’s title as a romantic story that followed him. It was said that the Grand Duke had either married, or was about to marry a girl who was just a maid of honour of his mother, the Empress Maria Nikolaievna. The girl’s name was Sasha Zhukovskaya and she was a daughter of Vasili Zhukovsky, who occupied a high position in the Russian court as the former tutor of Alexei’s father, Tsar Alexander II. Zhukovsky was a famous poet and was credited not only with introducing Romanticism to Russian literature, but also with instilling liberal values into the head of his student, which purportedly led to the reforms which Alexander initiated in the 1860s. But, however famous, Zhukovsky was just a poet and on top of that, the illegitimate son of an ordinary landowner. Poor Sasha was definitely not a match for a prince, even if only the fourth in line to the throne.

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<sup>33</sup> AB Vysheslavtsov, *Ocherki perom i karndashom iz krugosvetnogo plavaniia v 1857, v 1858, v 1859 i v 1860 godakh* (*Sketches by Pen and Pencil during the Voyage Round the World in 1857, in 1858, in 1859 and in 1860*). St Petersburg, 1862, pp 71–72.

It was said that Alexander II sent his son on a voyage around the world for two or three years to let him think the matter over. Of course, Alexei was followed by gossip everywhere he went. In the Cape the gossip was fuelled by rumours that a mysterious Russian princess, rich but long out of favour, arrived at the Cape shortly before the royal visit and even went to see the diamond mines.<sup>34</sup>

Alexei arrived in Cape Town on 3 June 1872.<sup>35</sup> His squadron was led by Admiral Posiet, who had visited the Cape two decades earlier together with Goncharov on board the *Pallada* and whom Goncharov had described in his book.

The Grand Duke was met with great pomp: the Cape parliament allocated funds for his reception and adopted a welcoming resolution.<sup>36</sup> He stayed in the colony for three weeks, and the Cape newspapers were full of reports about the way he passed his time: a formal reception at the Government House, the success of a ball in his honour, his trips around the colony, a banquet on board the frigate *Svetlana*, his purchase of the best ostrich feathers, a ‘magnificent gift’ from the Russian Tsarina that he gave to Lady Berkeley, wife of the Cape governor-general, and another gift, a malachite necklace, to an eminent Cape Town lady, this time from himself.<sup>37</sup> The same excitement met Alexei in Cape Town two years later when he visited it on his way back, this time as commander of the *Svetlana*.<sup>38</sup>

But what about his love affair? After Alexei’s death General Alexander Mosolov, chief of staff of the Ministry of the Imperial Court, wrote in his memoirs: ‘Alexei Alexandrovich as a very young man was infatuated with the maid of honour Zhukovskaya, and, according to some rumours, married her secretly and had a son with her, who received the title Count Belevsky. However, according to the more recent opinions of members of the imperial family, these rumours ... were false.’ According to other sources, Zhukovskaya died in 1893, and was at that time married to somebody else.<sup>39</sup>

The Grand Duke was not out of favour for long. In July 1881, after his brother, Alexander, became the Tsar, Alexei was appointed head of the navy and of the Naval Ministry. He held this position during the reign of his brother, Alexander III, and his nephew, Nicholas II. The Duke, however, showed no talent in naval affairs. During the Anglo-Boer War the owner and editor of the best informed Russian newspaper, the *Novoie Vremia*, wrote:

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<sup>34</sup> *Standard and Mail*, 28 March 1872.

<sup>35</sup> *Cape Argus*, 4 July 1872.

<sup>36</sup> *Cape Argus*, 6 July 1872.

<sup>37</sup> *Cape Argus*, 6, 9, 11, 13, 16, 18, 20, 23, 25 July 1872; *Standard and Mail*, 4, 6, 9, 11, 18, 20, 13, 26 July 1872; NASA. KAB. GH, vol 1/348, ref 77, part 1.

<sup>38</sup> *Cape Argus*, 22 January 1874; 21, 25 April 1874; 18 July 1874.

<sup>39</sup> AA Mosolov, *At the Court of the Last Russian Emperor*. Moscow: Ankor, 1993, pp 72–73, 260.

‘The Naval Minister lives in Petergof <sup>40</sup> with his mistress, doing nothing. As long as the Grand Duke is General Admiral, we won’t have any Navy. Grand Dukes do nothing, while ministers do everything “not to disturb Grand Dukes”. Theft is colossal.’ The editor could not publish such sentiments even in his paper, so they remained just an entry in his diary. He predicted the defeat of the Russian Navy in the Russo-Japanese War – which, indeed, occurred a few years later.<sup>41</sup>

In 1904, the great Russian armada sailed past the coast of South Africa to the Far East to fight the Japanese – culminating in the disastrous defeat at Tsushima in 1905. After the defeat Alexei Alexandrovich resigned and, like many Russian aristocrats, left his luxurious palace in gloomy St Petersburg and went to live out his days in the more cheerful milieu of Paris. He died soon afterwards, keeping his rank of admiral of the Russian navy till the end.

### **A Pondo Chief Seeks the Protection of the Russian Tsar**

By the late nineteenth century Russians were a common sight at the Cape. But had anybody heard of them further inland? Were they known at all to the African population? It appears that both questions may be answered in the affirmative.

We found the following letter in a Moscow archive.<sup>42</sup> It was handwritten, and both its handwriting and grammar were so difficult that we had to seek help in deciphering it.<sup>43</sup> It was addressed to ‘the Czar’ (Alexander III at the time) and posted to St Petersburg from Esihlonyane in Pondoland on 10 November 1886. It was undoubtedly one of the most unusual documents in the history of Russia’s international relations. We cite it in full, retaining the grammar and spelling of the original.

To the Czar	Esihlonyane
St Petersburg	Pondoland
Russia	10 Nov. 1886

Sir

I again write, to you, I wish to explain our present position As a Nation. We are independent Nation subject to no other power up to the present Self Independent.

The Pondo Nation now ask to be protected by you. The English Government wants

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<sup>40</sup> Petergof – a small town in the suburbs of St Petersburg with a summer palace belonging to the royal family.

<sup>41</sup> [AS Suvorin] *Dnevnik AS Suvorina (Diary by AS Suvorin)*. Moscow–Petrograd: LD Frenkel Publishers, 1923, p 244.

<sup>42</sup> GARF. 677/1/475/1-2.

<sup>43</sup> We are grateful to Professor Christopher Saunders of the University of Cape Town for this assistance.

to take Away our Country. They have recently taken forcibly a portion of our country occupied by the AmaXebisis<sup>44</sup> and have Annexed it since we wrote to you on the 25th.<sup>45</sup> Our Country is taken away from us without any just Cause. And we have not fought with the Colonial Govt. We are quite unaware of our Crime to the English Govt. Things which have been forcibly taken from us are 1<sup>st</sup> the Country occupied by the Xebisis.

2nd Port St. Jones River Mouth they have taken it, saying they will purchase it with Money. So said they. They made an offer to buy the country occupied by the Xebisis from us for Cash. As I said have made an offer for the two ports they have taken these two ports and still make an offer to buy them for Cash.<sup>46</sup> We refuse to accept their offer. After the letter we sent to you the Country occupied by the *AmaXebisi* is, we hear, Annexed on the 25th Oct last they have taken our ground without our being fighting with them and without any just reason The only thing is their imposition on us. As we are not strong. As them, the Pondos Are not Armed As the Colonial Govt Subjects. The extent of our Country is about 300 miles breadth and 380 miles long. Trusting you will give this letter your Serious Consideration.

I have the honor to be

Sir

Your Most Obedient Servant

Umhlangaso JS Faku<sup>47</sup>

For Paramount Chief Umquikela<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> AmaXebisi – a Xhosa-speaking group, closely related to the Pondo. They inhabit a small territory between the Mtamvuna and Mzimvubu rivers to the north of the Pondo. Their northern border is the modern town of Kokstad. The Pondo believed that according to their 1844 treaty with the British this territory was under their sovereignty. It was occupied by the British in 1886.

<sup>45</sup> We have found no trace of this first letter in the archives.

<sup>46</sup> Port St Johns – a harbour at the river mouth of the Mzimvubu River. British ships had been calling at this port since the mid-nineteenth century. In 1878, the governor of the Cape Colony, Sir Henry Frere, declared Mgikela deposed and ‘bought’ Port St Johns from Ndamase’s son. In response Mgikela levied tribute on transit through his territory and with the assistance of local white merchants built a new harbour, Port Grosvenor, to create competition for Port St Johns. In 1885 Frere declared the entire coast of Pondoland a British protectorate. (Davenport, *South Africa*, pp 126–128).

<sup>47</sup> Mhlangaso (Umhlangaso) JS Faku was Mgikela’s secretary and main adviser, as well as Prime Minister of Pondoland, obviously a very well-educated and far-sighted politician. The idea of levying tribute on transit caravans from the Cape Colony and of building Port Grosvenor was his (Davenport, *South Africa*, pp 126–128). So, apparently, was the initiative to send letters to the Russian Tsar.

<sup>48</sup> Mgikela (1867–1888).

P.S. do not listen the English Govt what might they say. They might say perhaps the Pondo Country belongs to them. They might say this to delude you as you are no aware of the facts, that it is false. The boundary of the Pondo Country Commences from Umtata river Mouth and up along the Umtata river and through Gungululu to Shawbury Mission Station, and go down to Ngxaroli and through Ishungwana and to the Umzimvubu River and Run along the Stream to the junction of the Imvenyane stream and along the Intsuzwa Mountain and to Celintcungu<sup>50</sup> Mountains to Nolangeni Mountains through Engele Mountains. Another thing they have armed their subjects to come and fight us. As we have no friend to assist us we don't want to be under the protection of the English Govt. We shall await your valuable assistance. The English Govt is treating us most shamefully. The population of the Pondo Nation is about 200 000. Our country is very rich in Copper, Gold, Coal, etc. and all kinds of Menirals<sup>51</sup> It is for this reason they want to take away our Country forcibly against our Consent. Should you kindly agree to protect us. We would Allow you to Open all Mines in the Country.

I have the honor to be

Sir

Your most obedient Servant

Umhlangaso JS Faku

for Paramount Chief Umqikela

Chief Councillor and Prime Minister

How did Faku get the idea of sending a letter to the Russian Tsar? What did he know about Russia? Obviously not much – not even the Tsar's name. And yet he asked him for help.

Most likely, the main origin of this letter was a rumour about the Russians that spread among the Xhosa in the wake of the Crimean War. In 1857 the Xhosa heard that somewhere in the north some 'Russians' were fighting against the British and that they were willing to come to the Xhosas' aid. These rumours were sparked by the news that

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<sup>49</sup> The meaning of letter 'W' in the text is not clear.

<sup>50</sup> The name is not clear.

<sup>51</sup> Both the size of the Pondo population and the mineral wealth of their country were greatly exaggerated.

General George Cathcart was killed in one of the battles with the Russians. In 1852–1853 Cathcart had been Governor of the Cape and one of the figures most hated by the Xhosa.

The renowned South African writer Zakes Mda wrote in his novel *The Heart of Redness*: ‘We all remember how the news of the death of Cathcart spread like wildfire, with universal jubilation and impromptu celebrations. People for the first time heard about the Russians. And while the British insisted that the Russians are as white as themselves, the AmaXhosa knew that it was a lie. The Russians were black. They were the spirits of the AmaXhosa soldiers who had died in various wars against the British colonisers...’<sup>52</sup>

But Faku wrote his letter three decades later, in 1886. By then he could have gleaned information about Russia from many other sources. There were already a number of graduates of missionary schools among the Xhosa – those who read missionary magazines and wrote articles for them. Faku himself was a correspondent of *Imvo Zabantsundu*, the first Xhosa newspaper.<sup>53</sup> A well-educated person like Faku would doubtless have visited Cape Town and may even have met a visiting Russian. He could even have been to the Museum of Curiosities and Natural History, which exhibited Russian arms and uniforms, coins and even cast-iron oven shutters.<sup>54</sup> Faku could also have received information about Russia from European traders living in Pondoland.

Whatever the sources of his information, it could only confirm and reinforce the impression of the 30-year-old rumour: the Russians were enemies of the British, they were fighting against them, and sometimes won. Hence, it was to them that he turned for help.

### **Russian Immigration to South Africa**

The late nineteenth century saw the arrival of the first substantial wave of immigration to South Africa from Russia.

The first project to bring a significant group of immigrants from Russia appeared in 1882, when Adalbert Bukowski, Count of Leliva, sent a letter to the commissioner of Crown Lands and Public Works in Cape Town. He requested ‘to bring over eight thousand souls to these shores, who are all German agriculturists, living at present on the Volga river, in Russia’. Bukowski explained that these Germans had been invited to Russia in the eighteenth century by Catherine II and now wanted to leave. He recommended them to the South African authorities. ‘I may add,’ he wrote, ‘that these people ... are not destitute of means.

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<sup>52</sup> Z Mda, *The Heart of Redness*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 2000, p 70.

<sup>53</sup> A Odendaal, ‘African Political Mobilisation in the Eastern Cape’, PhD thesis, Cambridge University, 1983.

<sup>54</sup> AV Wrangel, ‘From the Cape of Good Hope’, *Nautical Collection*, no 1, 1859.

Being a very industrious class, a great number of them are in good circumstances. They would, therefore, be no burden to the Government, but on the contrary could be of great service to the Colony in regard to military operations in time of war.’<sup>55</sup>

This project never materialised, but in fact mass emigration from Russia to South Africa was beginning to happen at just the time that Bukowski wrote. This was Jewish immigration from western parts of the Russian Empire. In 1875 there were only 82 Russian émigrés in the Cape Colony<sup>56</sup> But by 1891 they numbered 1 092,<sup>57</sup> and by 1904, 12 137.<sup>58</sup> By the same year, 9 000 Russian émigrés were already resident in the Transvaal.<sup>59</sup> According to the 1911 census there were 24 839 Russian-born residents in the Union of South Africa, of whom more than half resided in the Transvaal.<sup>60</sup>

South Africa’s Jewish population numbered about 4 000 in the 1880s, 38 101 in 1904, and 49 926 by 1911. This was 3.7 per cent of all the whites.<sup>61</sup> This means that more than half of South African Jews came from the Russian Empire, mainly from Lithuania, Poland and the western territories of White Russia. Cities of Kovno (Kaunas), Vilna (Vilnius), Grodno, Vitebsk, Minsk and Mogilev and the surrounding areas gave the majority of émigrés, outnumbering the rest by far. They were called Litvaks, and South African Jewry generally was sometimes referred to as ‘a colony of Lithuania’.<sup>62</sup>

The immediate reason for Jewish emigration in the late nineteenth century was the policy of Alexander III. Instigated and organised from the top, the upsurge of anti-Semitism and anti-Jewish pogroms resulted in a mass outflow of Jews from Russia. From the early 1880s until the outbreak of the First World War three million Jews left the country. The majority went to North America, about 40 000 to South Africa.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> NASA. KAB. AMPT PUBS, vol CCP 1/2/1/51, ref A 56.

<sup>56</sup> *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope, taken on the night of Sunday, the 7th March, 1875.* Cape Town, 1877, p 157.

<sup>57</sup> *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape Good Hope as on the night of Sunday, the 5th April 1891,* Cape Town, 1892, p 78.

<sup>58</sup> *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope as on the night of Sunday, the 17th April 1904,* Cape Town, 1905, p 100.

<sup>59</sup> *Result of a census of the Transvaal Colony and Swaziland, taken on the night of Sunday, the 17th April 1904,* London, 1906, p 142.

<sup>60</sup> *Results of a Census of the Colony of the Cape of Good Hope as on the night of Sunday, the 17th April 1904, part V, Birthplace (Europeans),* Pretoria, 1923, p 4.

<sup>61</sup> G Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism: The South African Experience (1910–1967).* Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1980, p 5.

<sup>62</sup> L Feldberg (ed), *South African Jewry, 1965.* Johannesburg: Fieldhill, 1965, p 25.

<sup>63</sup> L Feldberg (ed), *South African Jewry, 1976–1977.* Johannesburg: Fieldhill, 1977.



Even before the pogroms Russian Jews were deprived of many civil rights. They were not allowed to own land or to reside in the central and eastern areas of the country (an exception was made only for some professionals, such as doctors). They could reside only in Russia's western territories, behind the so-called 'pale of settlement'. It was extremely difficult for Russian Jews to get admitted to universities, because even in the pale of settlement their proportion among university students was not allowed to exceed 2 or 3 per cent. In other words, Russian Jews had to encounter apartheid long before the word itself was invented. The pogroms made their situation untenable.

The majority of Russian Jews who came to South Africa were poor pedlars or artisans, many in poor health. The voyage itself was very hard, and they could not afford decent conditions. The South African archives house many descriptions and pictures of these émigrés. They look exhausted and shabby, their luggage virtually nil. Thirty-year-old men often appear to be in a state of complete ruin. The physique of one tailor, a certain Berman, who arrived in September 1911, was quite typical. At the age of 38 he was 5 feet tall, weighed 105 lbs, was bald and anaemic, and missing 12 teeth.<sup>64</sup> The majority were not well educated and did not speak English.

There were exceptions: several doctors who had qualified in Russia were on the Cape Medical Registers by 1880-1910. They practised in the Transvaal, Paarl, Oudshoorn, Ladysmith and Cape Town itself. Even these people had problems. The long correspondence between Russian and South African authorities about the qualifications of one Dr Alexander Krakowsky, for example, involved even Russia's foreign minister, Count Lamsdorf.<sup>65</sup> One other notable exception was Captain Aaron Friedman. In Cape Town he was known as Old Mariner. Born in Latvia in 1872, he had served in the Russian Navy, but then settled in South Africa and helped his large family – seven brothers – to move there. He was even elected mayor of Carolina, a small Transvaal town. He died in Cape Town in 1964.

But these were exceptions. The absolute majority of the first generation of Russian Jews in South Africa roamed the streets of Johannesburg in search of jobs. Many moved to the Transvaal as there were more jobs there. One of the privileged positions was that of a 'kaferitnik' – helping in the so-called 'kaffir canteens' on the mines. Work was very hard and the hours long, but this job provided a bed and food.<sup>66</sup> More often Russian Jews became

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<sup>64</sup> E Bradlow, 'Immigration into the Union, 1910–1948. Policies and Attitudes. Thesis', University of Cape Town, 1978, vol I, p 187.

<sup>65</sup> NASA. KAB. GH, no 1/485, ref 26, 35; no 23/84, ref 15.

<sup>66</sup> N Berger, *Chapters from South African History, Jewish and General*. Johannesburg: Kayor Publishers, 1982, p 69.

pedlars, who walked from farm to farm for weeks, offering farmers their goods, gossip and news. Their baskets were heavy and there was no protection from sun or rain, but in the process they learnt a bit of Dutch and a lot about the tastes and ways of the Boers.<sup>67</sup>

Despite the hardships, Russian Jews could immediately see the advantage of moving to South Africa. The first synagogue in Johannesburg was opened in 1892 by Transvaal's President Paul Kruger.<sup>68</sup> The main speaker at the official opening of the Jewish Board of Deputies in 1903 was the Cape governor, Lord Milner.<sup>69</sup> Any participation by such high-ranking officials in similar Jewish ceremonies in Russia was unthinkable. Of course, these were just words, but Jews certainly felt more welcome in South Africa than in Russia.

In 1905–1906, during a new upsurge of pogroms in Russia, South African Jews organised a series of meetings expressing indignation at the outrages upon Jews in their former motherland. These meetings took place not only in big cities, but also in small towns all over the country, and were attended by South Africans of all religious confessions and of different political views.<sup>70</sup> The next wave of such meetings started in 1913 in connection with the 'Beilis Case', when Russian Jews were accused of killing Russian children in their rituals. The meeting in Johannesburg was chaired by the city mayor, and the text of one of the resolutions was prepared by Patrick Duncan, the future governor-general of the Union of South Africa. The meeting appealed to Louis Botha to exert pressure on the Russian government in order to prevent new pogroms.<sup>71</sup>

### **The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War**

Compared to everything that happened in relations between Russia and South Africa in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Russia's preoccupation with the Anglo-Boer War was so enormous that it merited a study of its own. In fact, two were published in South Africa. One, in 1981, by Elisabeth Kandyba-Foxcroft, at that time head of the Russian Department at the University of South Africa,<sup>72</sup> the other, in 1998, by us.<sup>73</sup> So here we shall only mention a few facts.

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<sup>67</sup> Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, p 11.

<sup>68</sup> *Johannesburg, One Hundred Years*. Johannesburg: Chris van Rensburg Publications, 1986, pp 80–81.

<sup>69</sup> Shimoni, *Jews and Zionism*, p 15.

<sup>70</sup> See, for example, NASA. KAB. GH, vol 1/487, ref 124, 139; 141; KAB. GH, vol 1/488, ref 3; KAB. GH, vol 23/90, ref 334, 338, 354; KAB. GH, vol 23/94, ref 196; KAB. PMO, vol 212, ref 1838/05.

<sup>71</sup> NASA. SAB. PM, vol 1/1/290, ref 354; KAB.GG, vol 129, ref 3/1479.

<sup>72</sup> E Kandyba-Foxcroft, *Russia and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902*. Roodepoort: CUM Books, 1981.

<sup>73</sup> A Davidson and I Filatova, *The Russians and the Anglo-Boer War, 1899–1902*. Cape Town, Pretoria, Johannesburg: Human & Rousseau, 1998.

‘Church services are held for President Kruger's health. Orchestras in public places are asked to play “the Boer anthem” and when they do they have to repeat it indefinitely,’ reported a St Petersburg magazine at the beginning of 1900.’<sup>74</sup>

‘The Boers and everything that is in any way connected with them now attract the interest of all sections of the public. In a beau monde sitting room, at newspaper publishers, and in a cabmen's inn you hear one and the same conversation, about the Boers and the Boer War,’ wrote an anonymous author, calling himself ‘Boerophile’, in a pamphlet ‘In relief to the Boers!’ published in St Petersburg in 1900.<sup>75</sup>

Things reached such a pitch of Boer-mania that another author sounded an almost plaintive note: ‘Wherever you go these days, you hear the same story – the Boers, the Boers, and only the Boers.’<sup>76</sup>

These observations were not an exaggeration. Thousands of articles and hundreds of books and pamphlets about the war and about the Boers were published in Russia in the first years of the twentieth century. A collection of most important of the Russian documents and contemporary publications on the war, published in 2012, consists of 13 volumes, about 400 pages each.<sup>77</sup> Books by Boer politicians were translated into Russian. A folk song, ‘Transvaal, Transvaal, My Country’, was sung everywhere. It became the most popular Russian song and the only folk song ever about a foreign country. Theatres showing plays about the war were full to the brim. Even the Moscow City Circus called its programme ‘At the heights of the Dragon Mountains, or the War between the British and the Boers’. Russian villages, streets, restaurants and pubs were named after Boer heroes or places in South Africa.

After news of Piet Cronje’s imprisonment reached Russia a mass campaign was organised to collect donations for a gift for him. The gift, a huge two-metre-high silver and porphyry cup of traditional Russian design decorated with enamel, emeralds and rubies and placed on a massive pedestal of carved wood, represented scenes from South African life. After many adventures it finally arrived in the Transvaal in 1921 together with huge lists containing 70 000 signatures of Russian well-wishers, many of whom had without a doubt perished in the Russian revolution and civil war by then.

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<sup>74</sup> *Zhurnal dlia vsekh*, 1900, no 1.

<sup>75</sup> ‘*Burofil. V pomoshch buram! Prichiny voiny i yeio techeniie. Vozmozhnyie posledstviia anglo-burskogo stolknoveniia*’, *St Peterburg* (‘*Boerophile. In relief of the Boers! The Reasons for and Events of the War. The Possible Results of the Anglo-Boer Collision*’). St Petersburg, 1900, p 25.

<sup>76</sup> *Bury i anglichane (The Boers and the British)*. St Petersburg, 1900, p 3.

<sup>77</sup> GV Shubin and VN Pankratov (eds), *Anglo-burskaia voina 1899–1902 godov glazami rossiiskikh poddannyykh (The Anglo-Boer War of 1899–1902 as Seen by Russian Subjects)*, 13 vols. Moscow: IB Bely Publishers, 2012.

Leading St Petersburg artists, actors, musicians, composers, writers and other public figures donated their portraits, pictures, autographs, paintings and drawings for the cause. This was how one of the best known gifts to the Boers, the album *St Petersburg – the Transvaal*, came into existence. The album was luxuriously published and contained reproductions of paintings by Repin, Rerikh, Makovsky and other world-famous Russian artists, as well as signed portraits and photographs of ballet dancers, opera singers and actors, many of these celebrities supplementing their gifts with warm wishes of success to the Boers.<sup>78</sup>

Tsar Nicholas II constantly mentioned the war in his letters and diaries. ‘Like you and Sandro,’<sup>79</sup> he wrote to his beloved sister Xenia, ‘I am wholly preoccupied with the war between England and the Transvaal; every day I read the news in the English newspapers from the first to the last line, and then share my impressions with the others at the table... I can not conceal my joy at the confirmation of yesterday’s news that during General White’s sally two full English battalions and a mountain battery have been captured by the Boers!...’ Nicholas then added what he called his dearest dream: ‘You know, my dear, that I am not arrogant, but *it is pleasant for me to know* that I, and *only*<sup>80</sup> I possess the ultimate means of deciding the course of the war in South Africa. It is very simple – just a telegraphic order to all the troops in Turkestan to mobilise and advance towards the frontier [of India]. Not even the strongest fleet in the world can keep us from striking England in this her most vulnerable point.’<sup>81</sup>

Even Leo Tolstoy, despite his pacifist convictions, experienced similar emotions. Tolstoy followed events in South Africa closely and made copious notes about them which he then published under the title *About the Transvaal War*. A reporter from a St Petersburg newspaper who visited Tolstoy at the beginning of 1900 wrote: ‘...The Count was not willing to discuss his works, but as soon as the Transvaal and the Anglo-Transvaal war were mentioned, the great old man became animated, his eyes glittered. “You know what point I’ve reached?” – he said. “Opening a paper every morning I passionately wish to read that the Boers have beaten the British.”’<sup>82</sup> Another interlocutor related a similar conversation with

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<sup>78</sup> *Sankt Peterburg – Transvaal. Izdaniie Gollandskogo komiteta dlia okazaniia pomoshchi ranenym buram (St Petersburg - Transvaal. Published by the Dutch Committee for the Relief of the Wounded Boers)*. St Petersburg, 1900.

<sup>79</sup> Xenia’s husband, Grand Duke Alexander Mikhailovich.

<sup>80</sup> Underlined in the original.

<sup>81</sup> ‘Nikolai Romanov ob anglo-burskoi voine’ (‘Nicholas Romanov on the Anglo-Boer War’), *Krasny arkhiv. Istorichesky zhurnal*, no 63, 1934, pp 125–126.

<sup>82</sup> *Novoie vremia*, 10 January 1900.

Tolstoy: “I know,” he said, as if apologising for breaking his moral religious principles, “that I should not rejoice at the victories of the Boers or grieve about their defeats; after all they kill the English soldiers too. But I cannot help it: I am glad when I read about the defeats of the British, it cheers my soul.”<sup>83</sup>

Central to pro-Boer activities in Russia was the Dutch Committee for the Relief of the Wounded Boers, formed in the first days of the war. The Committee issued regular information bulletins and addressed repeated appeals to the Russian people, starting in October 1899 with an appeal for donations for the Boer wounded. By December the donations exceeded 100 000 roubles. A Moscow newspaper, *Moskovskiiie vedomosti*, estimated that in all the Committee had collected 165 547 roubles during the war, an enormous sum for the time; 117 300 roubles were spent on the Russo-Dutch Ambulance sent to South Africa and on allowances for South African widows and orphans. A further 48 245 roubles were handed in to the Russian Credit Bank which had opened its own Russian-Boer Fund for the restoration of ruined Boer households.<sup>84</sup>

The generous donations of the Russian public made the Russo-Dutch Ambulance better equipped than any other medical detachment to arrive in the Transvaal. It had seven doctors, four Russian and three Dutch, and nine nurses. The Ambulance reached Pretoria in February 1900 and began to operate in the Orange Free State near the Modder River. With the retreat of the Boers it moved to Kroonstad and set up a hospital there with 106 beds. One doctor and his staff worked at Fourteen Streams. The further advance of the British troops made the work of the Russo-Dutch Ambulance very difficult and at the end of May it left South Africa. Dr Kukharenski, head of the Ambulance, was not with his staff: he and his group were taken prisoner by the British, and for three weeks treated British wounded and sick. Another doctor of the detachment, Dr Rennenkampf, stayed with the Boers until the end of the war, sharing the fate of De La Rey’s commando.

The Ambulance was not the only Russian medical detachment in South Africa. The Russian Red Cross sent its own hospital to treat the Boers. Volunteers to it applied by the hundred, but the Red Cross selected only the most experienced doctors. Dr Kuskov, appointed head of the hospital, with 25 years’ experience, was the main physician of the St Petersburg Mariinskaia Hospital and associate professor at the Military Medical Academy.

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<sup>83</sup> VA Posse, ‘LN Tolstoy kak chelovek. Iz vospominany’ (‘LN Tolstoy as a Person. From the Memoirs’), *Gorkovskaia kommuna*, 17 November 1940.

<sup>84</sup> *Moskovskiiie vedomosti*, no 4, 15 March 1904.

There were five other doctors, four medical assistants, nine nurses and 20 hospital attendants at the detachment.

The detachment reached Pretoria in January 1900. From February till May the Red Cross Hospital worked in Natal, operating three hospitals in Newcastle, Volksrust and Glencoe. In May the main hospital was moved to Pretoria. The Volksrust group reached Waterval-Boven by Boer wagons. The Glencoe group left under British artillery fire. It moved with the Boer rearguard and reopened its hospital in Charlestown. All three groups were finally reunited in Machadodorp. There the Russian doctors and nurses worked on a hospital train and organised expeditions to the battlefields to assist the wounded. In August the detachment left, having treated 1 090 sick and wounded in its hospitals and 5 716 outpatients.<sup>85</sup>

According to authoritative foreign sources (no Russian statistics exist), 225 Russian volunteers – both army officers and civilians – came to South Africa to fight for the Boers.<sup>86</sup> If this figure is correct, the Russians constituted approximately one tenth of the 2 500 foreign volunteers in South Africa and were the fifth biggest contingent after the Dutch, Germans, French and Americans.<sup>87</sup> Some fought with the Boer commandos, some in the European Legion under a French colonel, De Villebois Mareuil. Lieutenant-Colonel Yevgeny Yakovlevitch Maximov was deputy commander of the Legion. There was a separate Russian detachment under the command of Second Lieutenant Alexei Ganetsky. Some Russian Jews (whom both other foreigners and the South Africans called ‘Russians’) who had emigrated to South Africa a few years earlier, also fought for the Boers. At least three Russians were killed in battle, many wounded, and several taken prisoner by the British. On top of all that the Russian general staff sent its military agents (official observers) to both the Boer and British sides. They wrote regular reports, sending them back to St Petersburg.

The dreams of the Russian Tsar of changing the course of the war remained just that – dreams. In reality neither he nor the Russian government did anything for the Boers. When, in August 1900, a delegation of three Boer ministers<sup>88</sup> arrived in St Petersburg to seek assistance, not only Nicholas, but even his foreign minister, Count Lamsdorf, refused to

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<sup>85</sup> *Vestnik Rossiiskogo Obshchestva Krasnogo Kresta*, no 19, p 227, 1900; no 52, p 449.

<sup>86</sup> HC Hillegas, *With the Boer Forces*. London: Methuen, 1900, p 257; LS Amery (ed), *The Times History of the War in South Africa*, vol 7. London, 1907, p 89; *Voina anglichan s burami. Redaktirovano 2-m biuro frantsuzskogo generalnogo shtaba (The War between the British and the Boers. Edited by the 2nd Bureau of the French General Staff)*. Translation from French. St Petersburg, nd [1905], p 65.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, p 257.

<sup>88</sup> They were Abraham Fischer, CH Wessels and Andries Daniel Wynand Wolmarans. The ministers were accompanied by Dr Willem Leyds, Transvaal’s representative in Europe.



receive them, treating the visit as unofficial. Only Dr Willem Leyds, Transvaal's representative in Europe, who accompanied the ministers, was accorded such an honour.

Another Boer group arrived in St Petersburg half a year after the ministers' visit, in February 1901, and received a hero's welcome. These were the Boer fighters Willie Steyn, Piet Botha, Louw and George Steytler and Ernst Hausner, who had been taken prisoner by the British and escaped from the British ship taking them to a prisoner-of-war camp in Ceylon. They were picked up by a Russian ship, the *Kherson*, and brought all the way to Russia. They stayed only five days, hurrying back to South Africa to take part in further guerrilla actions.

There were many reasons why the Russians were so fascinated by the Anglo-Boer War and so preoccupied with the Boer cause. The most important of these was the general dislike of Britain as the embodiment of capitalist and liberal values – something that was equally unacceptable to Russian conservatives and socialists. Britain's part in the Crimean War of 1853–1856 played a role too, as did the rivalry between the two countries in the scramble for Asian territories. Many of the officers who went to South Africa as volunteers wanted to gain experience in fighting against Britain to be better prepared for the future war with this historic enemy, which many thought was imminent. Russian conservatives were attracted by the perceived patriarchal nature of the Boers, socialists, by their republicanism and the perceived democratic organisation of their society. All felt deep sympathy for the small freedom-loving nation fighting against the mightiest empire on earth.

Russia's love affair with the Boers was not forgotten. Many famous Russian writers and poets, such as Anna Akhmatova, Marina Tsvetaeva, Konstantin Paustovskii and Ilya Ehrenburg, wrote about it even decades later. The song 'Transvaal' was still alive during the Second World War. The Boers remembered the Russian assistance too. During the Russo-Japanese War many wrote letters to Russia expressing their sympathy and offering all kinds of schemes and plans which, in their view, could assist the Russians. Some, like President Kruger, sent donations. Some went to Russia to fight the Japanese.<sup>89</sup> But gradually domestic problems, wars, revolutions and the passage of time moved the memory of the Boers far away from the centre stage in Russia.

### **Cape Town Watches the Tragedy of the Russian Armada**

The biggest fleet ever to visit African shores was the huge Russian armada – the Baltic fleet of the Russian Empire – heading for the Far East to fight the Japanese at the height of

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<sup>89</sup> See, for example, *Niva*, no 28, 1904, p 559.



the Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905: 40 ships with 12 000 sailors. The Russians sailed in two squadrons: the larger one moved around Africa, the smaller one through the Suez Canal. They rejoined near Madagascar, and from there sailed on together.

On 19 December 1904 the larger squadron sailed past the Cape. One of the ships was the *Aurora*, which 13 years later gave the signal for the beginning of the Bolshevik revolution in St Petersburg. The British government, which openly sided with Japan, prohibited the Russian ships from entering any British ports anywhere in the world.<sup>90</sup> This was a heavy blow: the furnaces of the Russian ships devoured 10 000 tons of coal a day, so the ships had to carry huge supplies of fuel. Coal was stored everywhere, even in the cabins. Despite the ban, the military authorities of Cape Town and Simons Town were worried.

‘Should the Russian ships put into Simons Bay I shall send a force of at least 150 police, officers and men, to Simons Town to assist the local detachment to maintain order in case the Russian crews have “liberty”,’ wrote the acting commissioner of the Cape Town police on 9 December 1904.<sup>91</sup> The problem existed, however, only in the horror-stricken imagination of Cape officials. Indeed, the idea of thousands of Russian marines descending on Cape Town under the cover of the guns of dozens of their huge armoured ships was terrifying to say the least. But the Russians could not afford to give Britain an excuse for further hostile action.

The squadron sailed on into a terrible storm which lasted several days, while the ships were skirting the Cape. Vice-Admiral Rozhdestvensky, the squadron’s commander, reported to St Petersburg: ‘The column of five armoured battleships presented a rare sight. Colossuses, a million pood<sup>92</sup> each, went up 40 feet six times a minute... All five battleships created the impression of a mad dance.’<sup>93</sup> Some ships were damaged but the squadron did not change its course. Only the hospital ship *Orel* ventured into the port of Cape Town.

Laurence Green quoted the reaction of the *Cape Times* to the passage of the Russian armada. ‘It is certain,’ the paper reported, ‘that at least some of the proud ships which are now passing along our coasts will never return.’<sup>94</sup> Soon after the Russian ships were gone a bottle containing a message from an unknown Russian sailor was found ashore: ‘Oh,

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<sup>90</sup> NASA. KAB, Source T type Leer, vol 904, ref 902.

<sup>91</sup> NASA. KAB. AG, vol 1547, ref 15291, part 1.

<sup>92</sup> Pood – old Russian measure of weight, equivalent to 16.38 tons.

<sup>93</sup> *Russko-iaponskaia voina 1904–1905 gg. Kniga shestaia. Pokhod 2-i Tikhookeanskoi eskadry na Dalnii Vostok. (Russo-Japanese War of 1904–1905. Volume six. The Cruise of the 2nd Pacific Ocean Squadron to the Far East)*. Petrograd, 1917, p 70.

<sup>94</sup> LG Green, *Eight Bells of Salamander*. Cape Town: Timmins Publishers, 1984, p 108.

fisherman who may chance to find and read this letter, pray for those who are being sent to their death and pray that this terrible war may soon be brought to an end.’ The message was published in the *Cape Argus* with a note of sympathy to the Russian sailors: ‘We hope the fleet will be recalled before it is too late... The whole world may well hope, for the sake of humanity, that this mournful armada may yet turn back before it be too late.’<sup>95</sup> But the ships sailed on.

For more than two months, from late December 1904 till early March 1905, the Russian fleet was at anchor at Madagascar. The Russians received their first news from home via Cape Town, when the hospital ship *Orel* rejoined the squadron. Most shocking was the news of the destruction of the Russian squadron in Port-Arthur – the squadron which the Baltic fleet had been sent to assist.

The news from St Petersburg was equally devastating: Russia had plunged into the revolution. But there was still no order to turn back. On 27 May 1905 the Russian fleet suffered a devastating defeat in the Japanese Sea, losing 30 of its ships. The majority of those who sailed past the Cape met their death in this battle.

### **Leo Tolstoy and Mohandas Gandhi**

When Mohandas Gandhi asked Tolstoy to support his cause, he wrote to the Russian writer: ‘You command, possibly, the widest public today.’<sup>96</sup> It was probably true. Thousands of people from all over the world wrote to Tolstoy, seeking his advice, and Tolstoy communes sprang up in many countries.

In 1904 a settlement based on ideas that were very close to Tolstoy’s was founded at Phoenix, near Durban.<sup>97</sup> In 1910 it was followed by the Tolstoy Farm in the Transvaal founded by Hermann Kallenbach, a German architect and an ardent supporter of Gandhi.<sup>98</sup>

Gandhi had become acquainted with Tolstoy’s ideas soon after his arrival in Durban, when he read Tolstoy’s pamphlet, ‘The Kingdom of God is Within You’. Later he re-read it in prison, and upon being set free, gave it to his warder.<sup>99</sup>

In 1908 Tolstoy turned 80. Among many other messages he received congratulations from Gandhi.

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<sup>95</sup> *Ibid*, pp 109-110.

<sup>96</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol 9. Ahmedabad, p 529.

<sup>97</sup> Now one of Durban’s suburbs.

<sup>98</sup> S Bhana, ‘The Tolstoy Farm: Gandhi’s experiment in “Co-operative Commonwealth”’, *South African Historical Journal*, November 1975, no 7.

<sup>99</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol 8, p 115.

The same year the editor of a Canadian journal, the *Free Hindustan*, wrote to Tolstoy asking him to contribute an article. Tolstoy was interested in Hinduism and started writing his answer the same day. However, he sent it off only six months later: he took this work so seriously that he discarded 28 tentative versions covering 413 pages.<sup>100</sup> The essay was never published, but it became very popular among the Indian intelligentsia. It was copied by hand, read and studied. Tolstoy wrote that England would not be able to enslave 200 million people if they did not accept its values and that the Indians should resist Britain non-violently.

On 1 October 1909 Gandhi wrote his first letter to Tolstoy. He described the position of Indians in South Africa and said that, despite the adversities they faced, he and some of his friends ‘were and still are firm believers in the doctrine of non-resistance to evil’.<sup>101</sup> Of course, by ‘non-resistance’ he meant non-violence. Of importance to Tolstoy, no doubt, was Gandhi’s request to allow him to translate Tolstoy’s article for the *Free Hindustan* into Gujarati and to publish it as a pamphlet with a print run of 20 000 copies.

On 10 November 1909 Gandhi wrote a second letter to Tolstoy, requesting that he use his influence to popularise the Indian movement in the Transvaal.<sup>102</sup> Enclosed with the letter was a book by JJ Doke, *MK Gandhi: An Indian Patriot in South Africa*.

In the last year of his life, in 1910, Tolstoy wrote two letters to Gandhi. He praised Doke’s book and Gandhi’s own book, *Indian Home Rule*, and wrote, ‘the question you treat in it – the passive resistance – is a question of the greatest importance not only for India, but for whole humanity’.<sup>103</sup>

### **A South African Poet’s Glimpses into Russia**

In the middle of 1908 a South African poet and writer, Christian Leipoldt, visited Moscow. Leipoldt was not yet famous: his first book was to be published a year later. He was a physician who had moved to Europe and America to perfect his medical education. Russia caught his attention because in Berlin he heard a lot about its achievements in the medical field. He found that this information was correct.

‘My Russian journey,’ he wrote, ‘has been profitable in so far that it has given me an opportunity of seeing Russian methods in medicine. These are certainly very good and in many ways much ahead of ours in England... Even the small towns have their cottage

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<sup>100</sup> M Green, *Tolstoy and Gandhi. A Biography*. New York: Basic Books, 1983, p 91.

<sup>101</sup> *The Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol 9, pp 444–446.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid*, p 529.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid*, vol 10, p 505.

hospitals, and although I expected a very unhygienic country, I found little to complain of as to the sanitary arrangements – these are everywhere much better than in Austria or Italy.’

Leipoldt was impressed not only by Russia’s medical service but by the country in general. ‘The visit has entirely changed the views I held about Russia,’ he wrote:

The country is rich, well cultivated, and so far as a stranger can see, well ruled. What was best there was the city itself. [Moscow] is magnificent, with a hillocky environment which makes the houses irregular and breaks the monotony of the straight lines which one sees at Warsaw and Berlin, and with the most charming turns and windings, minaretted churches in the Greek style towering high over the houses, and a congeries of wide broad paved streets. Over all towers the citadel, the Kreml[in], with its thirty chapels and nearly a hundred spires, gilt domes and broad roofs, green grey with verdigris. The public buildings are very fine – especially the university, the royal library, the numismatic museum and the post office.

Leipoldt also liked the colourful crowds in Moscow streets:

I have never yet seen so many varieties of our race jostling one another as in the Moscow streets. You can imagine the picturesqueness of it all with dandy-like Frenchmen, bluff Germans, haggard Finns, fanatically looking Armenians, gaudy Croats, Tartars, and Herzegovinians, broad-rim-hatted Thibetians, long-tailed Chinese, Japanese with their noses ‘tip-tilted like the petal of a flower’ in supreme satisfaction with their diminutive selves, white-robed Parsees from Baku, tall Cossacks from the Vistula and still more giant-like Kurds, crimson-shawled Persians, Mongolians with jingling bells, and amidst all constantly, like a stream of yellow water flowing into the sea or a vein of mica shimmering in a stratum of variegated conglomerate, comes a line of military gold, green and silver uniforms, clanking spurs and clattering sabres.

Even the Russian bureaucracy that appalled so many other visitors proved acceptable to Leipoldt. ‘With the authorities I did not have the least trouble,’ he wrote. His only complaint was Moscow’s exorbitant prices.<sup>104</sup>

This was the best report by a visitor that Russia could hope to get in the tense years of political repression and violence that followed the first Russian revolution. Leipoldt did not notice any of this other side of Russian life.

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<sup>104</sup> CL Leipoldt, *Dear Dr Bolus. Letters from Clanwilliam, London, New York and Europe Written Mainly During his Medical Education by C Louis Leipoldt to Harry Bolus in Cape Town from 1897 to 1911*. Cape Town: AA Balkema, 1979, pp 120–125.

## South African Mining and Russia

The first office of a South African mining company, De Beers, was opened in Russia on 8 September 1992. But mutual interest between the two countries in one another's mining was already more than a century old.

In 1890 the mining engineer Kitaev, director of the Ural Mining School, was sent to the Transvaal for eight months 'to study mechanic and chemical methods of mining gold deposits and to collect information about laws, rules and instructions pertaining to mining in the South African Republic'.<sup>105</sup> This trip, as well as other trips by Russian mining engineers to South Africa in the late nineteenth century, was connected with the development of mining in Siberia and the Ural mountains.

On 30 September 1897 a mining engineer from Siberia, VS Reutovsky, sent a memorandum to the Mining Department of the Ministry of Agriculture and State Property of the Russian Empire: 'Until now the purpose of trips of Russian engineers to Africa and Australia has been the acquaintance with the technology of these gold mining countries.... Not much attention has been paid to the interests of practical geology... The geological structure of the Kelbess system of Tomsk mining region resembles that of the Transvaal and it may have the same conglomerates, for the test in the Tomsk gold-melting laboratory showed the gold content in them.'<sup>106</sup> Reutovsky was sent to South Africa and Australia for eight months too. The 'highest consent' to Reutovsky's mission was received less than a month after his own memorandum was sent.

Already on 29 January (10 February) 1898<sup>107</sup> Reutovsky sent a report from Cape Town, containing his observations about the Witwatersrand and Kimberley:

What I have seen in the Transvaal is interesting not only in itself, but also because we can apply it with great benefit. The process of treating gold ore with the cyanide calcium as it is used in South Africa is one of the novelties. In combination with the process used by 'Siemens and Halske' it constitutes a method which can be easily used to treat dumps which now form mountains at our gold mines, let alone the fact that these methods make the use of expensive chlorination treatment almost unnecessary.<sup>108</sup>

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<sup>105</sup> TsGIA. 37B/44/841/10.

<sup>106</sup> TsGIA. 37/57/956/7-8.

<sup>107</sup> Russia still used the Julian calendar, which was 13 days behind the calendar used by European countries.

<sup>108</sup> TsGIA. 37/57/956/39-41.

Reutovsky was interested in diamond mining too and wrote a lot about the Kimberley diamond mines. Labour relations in the mining industry also attracted his attention, and he commented on the bad treatment of black workers.

Reutovsky's detailed report about his trip written on his return to Russia was published in several issues of *Vestnik zolotopromyshlennosti (Gold Miner's Herald)*, and later, as a pamphlet. And Reutovsky was appointed manager of Tomsk gold melting laboratory.<sup>109</sup>

The Russian government attempted to use South Africa's mining experience in many different ways. Thus it invited the American mining engineer, John Hays Hammond, to visit Russia. For many years Hammond had lived and worked in South Africa. He was South Africa's main expert in gold prospecting and in the evaluation of its gold reserves and worked for several gold mining companies. Hammond was also close to Cecil Rhodes and was known as one of the leaders of Rhodes' conspiracy against the Transvaal in 1895 – 'the Revolt of the Uitlanders', as it was called. He was condemned to death, but let off, as were other conspirators.

In 1898 Hammond spent several months in Russia at the invitation of Sergei Witte, the finance minister and later chairman of the Council of Ministers, who wanted Hammond's view on Russia's mining reserves in the Urals and Siberia and on the prospects of British investment in mining in these areas. Hammond examined several deposits in both regions and found that Russia's platinum deposits were more attractive for investment than its gold deposits (at that time Russia produced 90 per cent of the world's platinum).

In the course of his research, Hammond travelled in Siberia, the Altai Mountains and along the Yenissei River. He returned in 1910, this time to assess the prospects of developing Russian industries with the assistance of American and British capital. He met Russia's leading reformer, Piotr Stolypin, and was even received by the Tsar. He came back again in 1912. Later he devoted many pages of his autobiography to these trips. His main conclusion, which he did not conceal from Witte, was that although Russia's mineral resources were 'amazingly attractive', Russian legislation was not conducive to investment and the heavy hand of the 'Russian bureaucracy controlled all dimensions of Russia's economic life'.<sup>110</sup>

### **Diplomatic Relations and New Opportunities – a Short-lived Hope**

When the threat of British aggression against the Boer republics became obvious, the government of the Transvaal decided to strengthen its ties with other European countries,

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<sup>109</sup> TsGIA. 37/57/956/35–36.

<sup>110</sup> JH Hammond, *The Autobiography*, vol II. New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1935, pp 461, 465.

including Russia. In April 1897 the Transvaal contacted the French Foreign Ministry to request its assistance in establishing official relations with Russia.<sup>111</sup> Russia's foreign minister, Mikhail Muraviov, responded immediately. His letter, stating that the Tsar had given him orders to start preparations for opening Russia's diplomatic mission in the South African Republic, was signed on 28 March (10 April).<sup>112</sup> The letter was addressed to the finance minister, Sergei Witte.

Witte's reply, sent only on 29 April (11 May), was very cautious. He pointed to the fact that Russia had no trade with the South African Republic and suggested that the project be reviewed and the expenses cut.<sup>113</sup> Muraviov agreed, but sent a request to Russia's ambassador in London to find out about the legal possibility of establishing such relations.<sup>114</sup> The problem was that under the 1884 London Convention, signed after the first Anglo-Boer War (1880–1881), the Transvaal could establish diplomatic relations with other countries only with Britain's consent.<sup>115</sup> But the ambassador replied that this did not concern consular relations and that France and Germany had already established such relations with the Transvaal.<sup>116</sup>

In August 1898 Russian representatives discussed the matter directly with representatives of the Transvaal in Europe. The negotiations took place in France. On 28 September Russia's deputy foreign minister, Vladimir Lamsdorf, informed the state secretary of the Transvaal, Francis William Reitz, that Nicholas II had accepted Dr Willem Johannes Leyds as minister plenipotentiary of the South African Republic in St Petersburg. This became the official date of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Russia and the Transvaal. By then Leyds had already been appointed as Transvaal's representative in France, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium and Portugal.

Leyds did not manage to come to Russia before 1900, when he accompanied the delegation of Transvaal ministers, mentioned earlier. He had to send his credentials by diplomatic mail. Russia, too, did not have time to establish its diplomatic mission in the Transvaal because of the Anglo-Boer War, and the end of the war soon put an end to the diplomatic relations between the Transvaal and Russia.

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<sup>111</sup> AVPRI. II department/929/2(1895)/32.

<sup>112</sup> TsGIA.565/8(1987)/29362/1, 3–6, 9.

<sup>113</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>114</sup> TsGIA.565/8(187)/29362/26.

<sup>115</sup> Britain did not even recognise the right of the Transvaal to use its official name, the South African Republic.

<sup>116</sup> TsGIA.565/8(187)/29362/26.



In July 1902 Lamsdorf, by then foreign minister, sent a request to the Russian ambassadors in Germany, France and Belgium to find out about the official standing of Leyds's mission there – that is, whether they considered the mission finished.<sup>117</sup> All confirmed that 'their' countries no longer had official relations with the Transvaal and that Leyds's name had been dropped from their lists of diplomatic corps. The Russian Foreign Ministry did the same on 30 July (12 August) 1902.

However, from 1907, with the advent of the Anglo-Russian Entente, the question of a Russian consulate in the Transvaal was raised again. The Russian Foreign Ministry argued that 'Johannesburg, the place of the biggest concentration of Russian subjects, has to be the venue of the proposed Russian permanent consul, while honorary Russian consular representatives would be appropriate in Cape Town and Lourenço Marques'. 'The latter,' it stated, 'has been in existence in Cape Town for a long time.'<sup>118</sup> The 'concentration of Russian subjects' was, of course a reference to the Russian Jews.

In reality the reason for this new initiative had nothing to do with Russian subjects, and everything to do with Russia's economic interests. Mining was, of course, at the heart of it, but there were other spheres as well, first of all trade. Already during the Anglo-Boer War Russia had supplied South Africa with butter, but this was done through England, not directly.<sup>119</sup> In 1907 an attempt was made to export Russian paraffin to South Africa.<sup>120</sup> In 1909 the Transvaal was buying Russian timber, textiles, and railway rails. Russian rails were cheaper,<sup>121</sup> and, despite the protests of British industrialists, the Cape Colony ordered 36 thousand tons of rails from Russia.<sup>122</sup> In 1909 trade relations between Russia and South Africa were discussed by the Russo-British Trade Chamber. Russia offered to supply South Africa with more timber, sugar, paraffin, technical oil, tobacco and cotton textiles.

Academic ties were developing too. There was, for example, an extensive correspondence between the South African Secretary for Agriculture and the Bureau of Entomology of the city of Stavropol in south Russia on the problem of locusts. It began in 1913 and lasted several years.<sup>123</sup> In 1916 a deputy chief engineer of Russia's Ministry of

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<sup>117</sup> AVPRI. II Department 1–5/ 929 (1898)/3/18.

<sup>118</sup> AVPRI. II Department 1–5/929/34/1–2, 2 reverse.

<sup>119</sup> *Torgovo-promyshlennaia gazeta*, no 62, 1902.

<sup>120</sup> *Torgovo-promyshlennaia gazeta*, no 218, 1908; no 212, 1909; *Torgovyi mir*, no 6, 1909.

<sup>121</sup> *Novoie vremia*, 2 January 1910.

<sup>122</sup> *Torgovo-promyshlennaia gazeta*, no 272, 1909.

<sup>123</sup> NASA. SAB. CEN, vol 610, ref E2510.

Agriculture in Tashkent attempted to establish ties with the corresponding institutions in British dominions in order to exchange experience in the sphere of irrigation.<sup>124</sup>

There was also a nascent cultural connection. The South African writer, Olive Schreiner, was very popular in Russia. The first translation of her novel, *The Story of an African Farm*, appeared in Russia in 1893.<sup>125</sup> In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century her stories and novels appeared in virtually all Russian literary journals and popular magazines – and there were more than a dozen national ones alone. Provincial publications followed suit. Maxim Gorky published her stories and wrote about her in a magazine in Nizhnii Novgorod.<sup>126</sup> Her socialist views, her affirmation of women's rights, her attitude to sex and race and her deep sympathy for the downtrodden made a great impact on the Russian reading public.

Olive Schreiner's books were still published in Russia in the early 1920s, but all economic ties were brought to an abrupt end by the revolution and the civil war in Russia and by the collapse of the Russian economy.

During the last years of the tsarist regime there were four Russian honorary consuls in South Africa. John Sacks in Pretoria, V van der Byl in Cape Town, F Moor in Johannesburg, and EM Searle in Port Elizabeth. After the end of the Russian civil war, in January 1922, all 'non-Bolshevik Russian consular representatives' were ordered to cease their activities on the territory of the British Empire, including South Africa.<sup>127</sup> By then it was clear that Bolshevik power was there to stay.

In 1924 South Africa, as part of the British Empire, dropped the word 'Russia' from official communication with the Soviet government.<sup>128</sup> Henceforth Soviet reality – reviled by Britain and all its dominions – was what counted. All contact between South Africa and Russia was supposed to cease, but, as we shall see, it never really did.

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<sup>124</sup> NASA. SAB. GG, vol 983, ref 35/13, part 1.

<sup>125</sup> *Vestnik inostrannoi literatury*, September–December, 1893.

<sup>126</sup> There was such wealth of these publications that we were surprised to find that the most detailed list of translations of Olive Schreiner's works, which mentioned even translations into Esperanto (R First and A Scott, *Olive Schreiner*. London, 1980, pp 370–376), did not give a single translation into Russian.

<sup>127</sup> NASA. SAB. GG, vol 1033, ref 20/1178, 1188, 1192; SAB. GG, vol 1032, ref 20/1171; SAB. GG, vol 1031, ref 20/1125; SAB. GG, vol 776, ref 20/1137; SAB. GG, vol 777, ref 20/1188.

<sup>128</sup> NASA. SAB. GG, vol. 1324, Ref. 37/262

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