

MIKLOUHO-MACLAY AND THE PERCEPTION OF THE  
PEOPLES OF NEW GUINEA IN RUSSIA

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It was only in the eighteenth century that Russia became aware of the peoples of the Pacific Islands. However, during the nineteenth century more than fifty Russian expeditions visited Oceania on their way around the world (Tumarkin 1983: 143-144). Many Russian navigators entertained warm feelings toward the South Seas Islanders and became convinced that all peoples, irrespective of race or skin color, were capable of developing their cultures and following the way of progress. In 1822, for example, V. M. Golovnin wrote about the islanders of Oceania: "All mortals are endowed with vast intellect and unusual gifts, no matter where they are born; if it were possible to bring together a few hundred children from all over the world and give them an education of our standard and norms, then, probably, more great people would emerge from among their numbers with curly hair and black faces than those born of European parents" (1822:337-338). However, the books and articles by those navigators were quite limited in their circulation and failed to affect the Russian public in any significant way. Furthermore, they dealt mostly with Polynesia and Micronesia, as the islands of Melanesia were seldom visited by Russian ships.

As for New Guinea, in the mid-nineteenth century the huge island remained terra incognita for Europeans, except for parts of its coast. According to some British and American anthropologists, who at best watched the indigenes of New Guinea from the decks of their ships, the

islanders belonged to the "lower human race" or were even an intermediate link between Europeans and their animal forebears (Tumarkin 1982:9-12; Tumarkin 1988:177). Fantastic and odd rumors about the Papuans--as all the indigenes of New Guinea were often called at the time--were current in Russia as in Western Europe. However, a radical change in the perception of the peoples of New Guinea in Russia occurred in connection with the activities of the outstanding Russian traveler and researcher Nikolai Miklouho-Maclay (1846-1888).

In 1871 Miklouho-Maclay landed on the northeast coast of New Guinea in the Astrolabe Bay area, where no European had set foot before him. He later visited the place twice more, spending nearly three years there altogether. Having made friends with the local people and learned to speak the language of the Bongu villagers and neighboring dialects, the researcher was able to collect unique scientific materials that have retained their importance to this day. In the 1870s and 1880s he also visited the southeast and southwest coasts of New Guinea, made a few voyages through Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia, and crossed the Malacca peninsula twice. These voyages too yielded a rich scientific harvest.

Miklouho-Maclay was not only a prominent researcher but also a progressive public figure. He was a fighter against colonialism and racism and for the rights of the Pacific Islands peoples. He vehemently protested against the brutal exploitation and plundering of the islanders, including their being made drunkards or kidnaped into slavery under the pretext of a "free labor trade." In his attempt to prevent the annexation of eastern New Guinea by colonial powers, he worked out a utopian project to create a Papuan Union as an independent state in the northeastern part of the island. Despite his efforts, Miklouho-Maclay failed to help his friends, for in 1884 eastern New Guinea was divided between Germany and Great Britain (Miklouho-Maclay 1975, 1982; Tumarkin 1977, 1982, 1988, 1990).

In the intervals between his expeditions to New Guinea and his voyages through Oceania, Miklouho-Maclay lived in the Netherlands Indies (now the Republic of Indonesia) and then in Australia, mostly in Sydney. The articles and travel accounts he sent to the Russian Geographical Society's journal *Izvestiya* had a limited readership, and his letters seldom appeared in Russian newspapers and had no significant public response. In 1879 the situation changed when the prominent Italian naturalist and traveler O. Beccari sent a letter to Russia about the poor health and the financial plight of Miklouho-Maclay, who had had to pawn his collections, manuscripts, drawings, and other materi-

als from his expeditions to survive. Beccari's letter found its way into newspapers and called forth anxious commentaries. There was a sharp increase in interest in the personality and work of Miklouho-Maclay and in the islands he studied, and a campaign was started to collect money to help out the fellow countryman. From that time on, Russian society came to see Miklouho-Maclay not merely as a daring traveler but also as a man fanatically devoted to science who had voluntarily surrendered himself to various hardships in mysterious far-away countries (Maynov 1880; Polevoy 1882; X. 1886).

Miklouho-Maclay's popularity among the Russian public reached its acme in 1882 and 1886, when he returned to his native country for a few months from Australia. The largest halls of Petersburg and Moscow, where his public lectures were held, were crammed with people; some stood in the aisles and on adjoining premises. Detailed accounts of each lecture, often in a stenographic form, were published by the metropolitan and provincial newspapers, and reviews appeared in various journals. Miklouho-Maclay evoked enormous interest among the most diverse layers of Russian society from the highest nobility to revolutionary-minded university students; meetings with him were sought after by many enlightened merchants patronizing the arts and literature, and some outstanding men of science and the arts (Anuchin 1882; 1898:228-229; Ekaterinoslavitsev 1882:504; Nosilov 1898; Press 1913:314-315, 333; Botkina 1960:237). What was it, then, that Miklouho-Maclay told his listeners, interlocutors, and readers?

In recounting his voyages, the scholar naturally paid most of his attention to New Guinea. He described the material culture, economy, and social organization of the local inhabitants, their beliefs, and their customs. In refuting the assertions of some contemporary anthropologists, Miklouho-Maclay emphasized that the indigenes of New Guinea were not significantly different from Europeans in either their physical or their psychological make-up. He paid much tribute to their industry, honesty, and brightness and to their ability to learn. As in his earlier articles and voyage accounts, the leitmotif of his lectures and conversations was that the Papuans as human beings were not different from the whites but stood at a lower stage in their historical development.

Miklouho-Maclay resolutely refuted any rumors concerning brutality, treachery, and "predatory instincts" on the part of the indigenes of New Guinea. One of his lectures puts it as follows:

When I came to know them closer and learned to understand their language--which seems to me indispensable to under-

stand the character of people--I was pleasantly stricken by the good gentlemanlike relations that exist between the natives and by their kind treatment of their wives and children. . . . I have not seen a single rough quarrel or a fight between the natives; I have never heard of a single theft or murder among the natives of one and the same village either. That community had no chiefs, no rich, and no poor; hence there was no envy, theft, or act of violence. Means of subsistence were easy to find and did not make them work too much, leaving thus no place for the expressions of spite, bitterness, or vexation there. . . . The various cases of cruelty such as burying people alive, the old and the sick being poorly looked after, and cannibalism--all of this does not, it seems to me, run counter to what I have said earlier and can be explained by certain ideas and beliefs." (Miklouho-Maclay 1886)

It was with indignation that Miklouho-Maclay told of the crimes perpetrated by European sailors and traders against the islanders of Oceania. One of the comments on his lectures read:

Our contemporary traveler in the person of Mr. Miklouho-Maclay still finds on the Pacific shores this shocking (*infâme*, as he puts it) treatment of the savage. To this day the unlucky children of nature are captured into slavery and transported to the plantations in Australia. The trade in slaves is practiced under various fictitious disguises. They are treated most awfully. The traveler says, "To kill a black is the same as to kill a dog," and he continues, "I held my pistol not against the blacks but against the whites insulting blacks." And to think that at the very time the blacks are being made to suffer on the plantations a scientific theory should develop to advocate the idea of the "dying out of the lower races." (Yadrintsev 1882)

As we can see from the press of the time and from the recollections of his contemporaries, Russian public opinion was stirred up and captivated by the ideas that guided Miklouho-Maclay and that he frankly expressed about the unity of humankind and the equality of its races, about the possibility of mutual understanding between people of different races and tribes or standing at different stages of social development, and about the struggle against the use of violence, oppression, the slave trade, and colonial forms of behavior (Yadrintsev 1886; Shvetsov 1888; Press 1913:335; Korotkova 1915:36).

These humane ideas were timely not only with reference to the peoples of faraway countries but also in the contemporary Russian context: the tsarist government was carrying out a policy of oppression and Russification toward the peoples of the outlying areas of the Russian Empire, and the chauvinism manifested at some levels of Russian society seemed to be sanctioned from above. The prominent traveler and public figure N. M. Yadrintsev, who suffered imprisonment and exile between 1865 and 1873 for his progressive views, despite censorship was able to demonstrate quite clearly the direct relationship of the moral preaching of Miklouho-Maclay to the realities of life in Russia.

In an article devoted to Miklouho-Maclay, Yadrintsev wrote:

The questions of lower races and aboriginals are of much importance to all mankind. A collision between races is usually marked by many a sad event and often results in the forced disappearance of whole tribes; that is why it seems to be a particularly urgent question of civilization. Although our academic traveler's observations concern the indigenes of New Guinea, the Malay Archipelago, and Australia, in the general context of the question of races, they can be of an instructive significance to us too.

Being important for all peoples in general, the question of aboriginals and races has a particular significance to us, the Russians, and the inhabitants of the outlying areas [of the Russian Empire]. Unlike [Western] Europe's isolation from the influence of its colonies' aboriginals, we are taking part in the historical process of developing ethnic contacts and merging with the aboriginals. The future will show what this rapprochement and merging have in store for us. Zealots of "civilization" and the inviolability of the Slavic race are warning us already of the danger of the race's decline and the loss of its best qualities and predict degeneration. It is easy to see that this conclusion derives from the same recognized theory that postulates the moral qualities of other races as lower. (Yadrintsev 1882)

A main purpose of Miklouho-Maclay's return to Russia in 1886 was to find some way to disrupt the actual implementation of the German annexation of northeast New Guinea. While having a poor knowledge of the diplomatic particulars and subtleties of international law, the scholar thought of setting up a free Russian settlement on one of the small islands in the vicinity of the modern town of Madang to provide a

barrier against German colonization. The vice-president of the Russian Geographical Society, P. P. Semyonov, who knew Miklouho-Maclay intimately, remembered later that the scholar meant "to establish relations between the Russian settlers and the indigenes that would combine the interests of the settlers with those of the indigenes and, instead of their egoistic exploitation, protect them against imminent extermination" (Semyonov 1896:939). To accomplish such a risky undertaking, to say the least, Miklouho-Maclay needed a few assistants. But the popularity and the charisma of the prominent scholar and traveler were so great that over two thousand people from all over Russia responded to his appeal carried in the newspapers. They made up their minds to try to improve their lot wherever Miklouho-Maclay asked them to go. In newspaper interviews he told about his plans and his guidelines for setting up the settlement (i.e., joint land cultivation, income distribution according to work, and democratic self-government) and described in detail the natural conditions and population of New Guinea. In December 1886 Miklouho-Maclay's project was rejected by the tsarist government. However, the episode served, no doubt, to facilitate the spreading of reliable information in Russia about New Guinea and its inhabitants (E. Ch. 1886; Val'skaya 1870; Tumarkin 1982:50-52).

Miklouho-Maclay's ideas about the equality of human races and the unity of humankind and his condemnation of the theory and practice of colonialism were not to the liking of everybody in Russia, especially among the metropolitan bureaucracy. Even during his first visit to Russia, he encountered not only general interest in his travels, sympathetic attention to his ideas, and a rapt appreciation of his personality, but also incomprehension and even hostility as reflected in various items of scandal and false, unfriendly rumors (Polevoy 1886). The ill will shown to Miklouho-Maclay in 1886 was even more evident when he put forward his project to set up a free Russian settlement near the coast of New Guinea. It was not without reason that some publicists saw in the project an echo of the ideas of the French utopian socialists (Modestov 1886). In summer 1886 some of the semiofficial and yellow press, led by the newspaper *Novoye vremya* (New Times) of Petersburg, developed a slanderous campaign against the scholar and accused him of scientific insolvency, undermining the state's "foundations," and a lack of patriotism. They mockingly called him "a Papuan tsar" and published jeering caricatures of him. But the liberal press repulsed the campaign and disgraced the abusers (Koropchevskiy 1886; Grum-Grzhimaylo 1939: 137-144).

The personality and work of Miklouho-Maclay were highly esteemed

by Leo Tolstoy, who was not only a great writer but the reputed collective conscience and indisputable moral authority of a considerable part of Russian society. In September 1886 he wrote to Miklouho-Maclay: "You were the first to demonstrate beyond question by your experience that man is man everywhere, i.e., a kind, sociable being with whom communication can and should be established through kindness and truth, not guns and hard liquor. You proved this, moreover, by a feat of true bravery" (Tolstoy 1888). The letter appeared in Russian newspapers immediately after the untimely death of Miklouho-Maclay in April 1888.

The tradition of goodwill toward the peoples of New Guinea and of interest in their life and culture that began with Miklouho-Maclay is distinct both in works on the South Pacific by Russian authors and in the biographies of the scholar published in Russia in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (see, for example, Koropchevskiy 1887, 1889; Gol'tseva 1910; Press 1913; Korotkova 1915). A typical opinion was expressed by the author of one such work: "If only all Europeans had followed the example of this Russian traveler, there would not have been so much innocent blood shed, and we would not have had so much false information on the character, morals, and manners of the 'savages' " (Polkova 1886: 115).

After the 1917 October Revolution, this tradition developed further in Russia largely owing to the study and popularization of the life and scientific heritage of Miklouho-Maclay. In 1923 the diaries of his major travels to New Guinea were published for the first time, one of the most outstanding works of their kind. Other publications followed. After extensive preparatory work, a five-volume collection of his works was published between 1950 and 1954 by the USSR Academy of Sciences. But this "comprehensive" publication was not complete either. Over the last three decades many more writings and drawings by Miklouho-Maclay have been located, both in the USSR and elsewhere. At present a new and more complete edition of his works is being published that will include these discoveries.

Apart from the academic publications, selected works of Miklouho-Maclay, mostly his New Guinea diaries, as well as his popular biographies, including those meant for children (the most recent example is Orlov 1990), were brought out many times in mass editions. In the 1940s a feature film was devoted to Miklouho-Maclay and in the 1980s, a TV series. Miklouho-Maclay has become a favorite hero among a few generations of school children.

The noble traditions of Miklouho-Maclay are being carefully pre-

served and developed by Russian ethnologists (social anthropologists). It is no coincidence that the Institute of Ethnology and Physical Anthropology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (until recently the Institute of Ethnography of the USSR Academy of Sciences), which studies the world's peoples, including Pacific Islanders, has borne the name of Miklouho-Maclay since 1947.

### NOTE

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