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WORKING SESSION 1

The Rise and the Fall of Oceania Studies in Russia

This paper is nothing more than a narrative history of Oceania studies in Russia which seem to have begun in 1802 when the first Russian circumnavigation took place under the direction of Ivan Krusenstern. He drew up the maps of Oceania which were issued in Russia only in 1823. Then, in 1886, a spirited Russian adventurer Micklouho-Maclay organised the first exhibition on Oceania in St. Petersburg (the capital of Russia by that time), which unexpectedly became an incredible success. In the 19th century the Russian Government had chances to purchase Suvoroff Islands (situated 500 miles west from Samoa) and then Fiji. In both cases the suggestions were rejected because of lack of finances to maintain the colonies if set on the islands. There were also a few volunteers in Russia in the middle of the 19th century who collected either money or companions for the purpose of building up a colony of people of equal rights in the South Pacific (as further as possible from the depressing Russian reality). But as the Pacific Islands were finally determined under their metropolises, such ideas faded away.

In spite of the inspiring development of Asian studies in the Soviet Union since 1930, the first department for the South Pacific Studies was established in 1969 within the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Science, aiming to fill up the gap in regional studies which became quite popular in the Soviet Union. In 1980s the Department of the South Pacific Studies was at peak of its activity. But soon after the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the break of the bipolar system, the contacts and exchange with the leading Australian and American centres for the South Pacific studies had slowed down. At present about a dozen devoted people or those interested in Oceania are keeping on studying the South Pacific region.

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