

# MEMENTO

NEWS FROM THE NATIONAL ARCHIVES



AUTUMN -  
WINTER 2005

Seven Little Australians  
Russian Anzacs  
Chinese records  
Egon Erwin Kisch

# The untold story of Russian Anzacs

Dr Elena Govor is a Russian-born Australian writer and historian specialising in the history of Russian–Australian contact. She has been widely published in Russia and Australia. Her latest book, *Russian Anzacs in Australian History*, co-published by the National Archives and UNSW Press, uncovers a part of Australian cultural history that until now has been silent. It tells the story of the almost one thousand Russian soldiers who fought alongside other Australians in World War I as Anzacs.

COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA  
National Security (Aliens Control) Regulations

**Form of Application for Registration**  
(For Alien Resident in Commonwealth)

This form is to be filled up (except as to signature at triplicate, and the Alien is to attend in person, with the member of the Police Force in charge of the Police Station usual place of abode, and in his presence sign the application and allow an impression of his finger prints to be taken if required.)

Name (in full) Alexander Egoroff  
(Surname to be underlined)

Nationality Russian Sex male

Birthplace Roslagva Russia Date of Birth 23 November 1887

Place of abode Winkoo Road Phillipston

Place of business (if any) Winkoo Road Phillipston

Occupation Farmer  Married  Single (Write out the form that does not apply)

Date of entry into Commonwealth early March 1909

Name of Ship otto man

Port of Debarkation Sydney

**PERSONAL DESCRIPTION**

Height 5 ft. 8 in. Colour of eyes blue

Colour of Hair grey Build thick set

Notable marks left arm disabled

**REMARKS** EGOROFF.

Finger prints.—  
(Impressions to be made, if required, in presence of Alien Registrar (Alien).)

Date of application 13th September 1939.

Usual signature of alien Alex Egoroff  
(To be signed in presence of Inspector (Alien).)

(This space for office use only)

Certificate issued—No. 8755

Date 12.10.39

Remarks No evidence of nationality produced.

Const. I/c  
Specialist of Aliens Registration Office  
Blacktown  
Police Station

Distance Print, Sydney.

Alexander Egoroff's alien registration document. NAA. SP11/3, Egoroff A

Surprisingly, after those of Anglo or Celtic background, it was men born in the former Russian Empire that constituted the largest group in the First Australian Imperial Force (AIF). Uncovering these men's lives has been an act of monumental and painstaking research. Elena's book draws upon an extensive range of archival records, especially the World War I service records held by the National Archives. Elena managed to locate 969 men born in the Russian Empire who served in the Australian army, of whom 762 were on active service overseas. Of those, one in five (or 151 men) died while on duty. In many cases Elena found not just their names, but also enough facts to tell these men's life stories.

The stories that emerge in *Russian Anzacs* date from pre-revolutionary Russia, through the devastation of war and revolution to the cultural diversity of modern-day Australia. Unlike many accounts of war, *Russian Anzacs* does not end when the fighting finishes. Instead, it passionately rediscovers ties, formerly severed, between the children and the grandchildren of Russian Anzacs and their Russian past.

In the course of her research, Elena scoured phonebooks trying to make contact with descendants of the Russian Anzacs she had uncovered. Some people she traced were completely unaware of their Russian heritage whilst some knew only a little about their family background.

Others had actively tried to find their Russian ancestors with varying degrees of success. A profoundly touching aspect of Elena's research is just how many Russian families have reconnected because of her efforts. Her book is richer too, because it includes the personal narratives of some of the descendants of the Russian Anzacs. Alexander Egoroff's story is a good example – a man on paper brought more fully to life by the memories of his children and grandchildren who, despite their best efforts, had lost touch with their relatives in Russia until they came into contact with Elena. The following story, recounted in Elena's book, draws on a mixture of official records and personal interview.

### From Bestuzhevo to Blacktown: the Alexander Egoroff story

Alexander Egoroff was born in Bestuzhevo, Russia on 23 November 1880. Like many of his contemporaries, as a young man Alexander left the village where he grew up in search of a new life. He went first to Moscow where he trained as an agronomist, and later around 1905, he began to travel from one country to another before finally settling in Australia. He was not alone in his actions. In 1905, the renewed change in social and political conditions in the wake of the revolution, the end of the Russo-Japanese war and the completion of the trans-Siberian railway opened up the world for many Russians. The new railway made the trip to the East across Russia much easier. The new frontier attracted some families but it was mostly young men searching for adventure or different lives that took advantage of the new possibilities. Access to the eastern ports provided them with the opportunity to further roam the world and many did so, often ending up in Canada or Australia.

Alexander Egoroff arrived in Sydney, Australia in March 1909. Despite the many reports of favourable economic conditions in Australia at the time, life

was not easy for arriving Russians. Nearly all of them – educated intellectuals, professionals, peasants, labourers and seamen alike – had to engage in hard physical labour simply to survive. For some, enlistment in the army provided the only escape from unemployment and starvation. Alexander was better able to cope than many, being a thickset man used to working on the land. He worked as a gardener and in a sugar mill before joining the AIF on 7 July 1915.

Alexander's war experiences, like many Russian soldiers, differed little from the experiences of others in the AIF. In day-to-day trench life, Russianness, for the most part, was accepted as some sort of harmless peculiarity. In the face of death, Russians and other Australians were even mates – although sometimes it took time for this mateship to take root, and sometimes it only happened long afterwards. Alexander's granddaughter, Barbara Fox, recalls his memories of life in the trenches at the Somme in the winter of 1916–17 as told to her by Alexander's eldest daughter Lily:

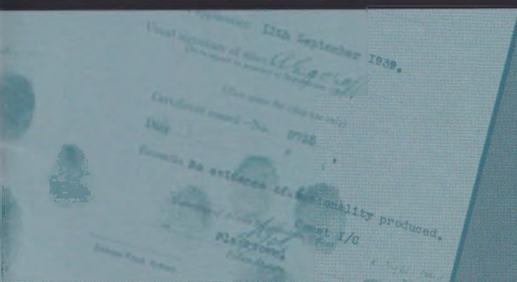
'He said he had to sleep outside the trench as the Australian soldiers told him there was not enough room for him in the trench. It was snowing and his hands were stiff when he woke up.'

Barbara adds circumspectly, 'It could have been because he was Russian, but we do not really know'.

What we do know is that Alexander Egoroff bore no grudges and after the war he always celebrated Anzac Day. Even in the 1930s when times were very tough for him and his growing family, he would put on his best suit and head into Sydney for the reunion of his 17th Battalion. The men that he as a stretcher-bearer had carried off the battlefields, recognised him and showed their appreciation, even if sometimes he himself could not remember their faces. Together, every year, they would seal their comradeship with a drink.

After Alexander returned from the war permanently disabled from a gunshot to his left arm he managed to find work as a gardener and lived in Paddington, Sydney. He married Lillian Hampson on 10 July 1918, and then worked as a gardener at Mittabah near Exeter, NSW. In 1920, using money he obtained through a war grant, Alexander bought 10 acres of land at a soldier's settlement in Plumpton (just outside of Blacktown, Sydney).

The young family maintained contact with only a few other Russians. It was not a good time in Australia's history to admit one's Russianness, which tended to be



Alexander Egoroff soon after his arrival in Australia.

Courtesy of Alexander Egoroff's family

Alexander and Lillian Egoroff's eight remaining children at the dedication of the 'Alexander Egoroff reserve', Blacktown, Sydney, 2004.

(back row left to right) Peter (b.1927), Alexandra (b.1927), Mary (b.1925), Jean (b.1931). (front row left to right) Shirley (b.1934), Alexander Robert (b.1919), Nancy (b.1921), David (b.1929). Courtesy of Alexander Egoroff's family

## Russian Anzacs

equated with radicalism. The process of applying for naturalisation, for example, was fraught. To be considered suitable, an applicant had to be recognised as Russian but had to also satisfy the police that they neither mixed with other Russians nor belonged to any Russian organisations. Many Russians, like Alexander, chose not to apply for naturalisation.

Alexander's wife, Lillian, suffered chronic illness requiring intermittent hospitalisation throughout their life together and in 1934, after the birth of their tenth child was again hospitalised. This time Lillian did not return home, remaining in care until her death in 1956.

For the rest of the 1930s, Alexander struggled to raise the children on his own while continuing to work their small farm. Because he had never been naturalised, when World War II broke out a few years later, he was required by law to register as an alien. His photograph was posted on the board at the local police station and he had to report there every week. When he became too ill to make the trip – he was dying of cancer and could not get out of bed – the police checked on him at home. Alexander died on 18 January 1940, still an alien.

At various times during the war years the younger Egoroff children were placed in

foster care. Three of the older children joined the army. The eldest son, Alexander Robert, was twenty years of age when his father died; and by the time the war ended he had two children of his own. Nonetheless, when he returned, he got all of his family back together, taking them out of welfare homes. His daughter Barbara remembers them all living together in their small house.

Alexander Egoroff's children all grew up Australians but they never forgot their Russian Anzac father. Unfortunately, however, they did lose contact with their relatives in Russia. After World War II, the family tried to find their Russian relatives in Bestuzhevo but had no luck. Meanwhile, Barbara, accompanied by her father, Alexander Robert, searched archives and recorded all the snippets of recollections and memories they could find about their family. When Elena tracked the Egoroff family down, she was so impressed with their thirst to rediscover the past that she suggested to Barbara that she compose a letter detailing all of the information they wanted to know. Elena then translated the letter and sent it directly to the village of Bestuzhevo. A few weeks later they received the following reply from Andrey Kovalenko, the grandson of Alexander's youngest brother:

'Perhaps I should again, as in my childhood, believe in Christmas miracles – on the 10/12/01 relatives from Bestuzhevo came to Moscow to our place with your letter. My grandfather Ivan Alexeevich Egoroff ... had searched for his brothers Alexander and Gavriil without success for a long time.'

In 2002 the Russian Egoroffs came to Sydney to meet their extended Australian family of more than 150 people. In the home of one of Alexander Egoroff's granddaughters, they had a family reunion which Elena attended as a friend and translator:

'While we watched [a] video about the old farmhouse in Bestuzhevo on a huge screen, I was translating the Russian comments to the family, and enjoying the faces of Alexander's children and grandchildren. They were discovering that mystical source of the Russian stream in their souls.'

*Russian Anzacs in Australian History* is published by UNSW Press in association with the National Archives of Australia. It retails for \$44.95 and can be purchased through our website at [www.naa.gov.au](http://www.naa.gov.au), by phoning (02) 6212 3609 or emailing [naasales@naa.gov.au](mailto:naasales@naa.gov.au).



Certificate issued—No. 2755

Date

Alexander and Lillian Egoroff's first-born Alexander Robert (b. 1919) and their fourth-born, Alexandra Egoroff (b. 1923) taken about 1942 in Sydney. Courtesy of Alexander Egoroff's family

Remarks No evidence of nationality produced

Const. I.C.  
Superintendent of Immigration Officer  
Police Station

Russian Anzacs