

X/20 UN - SOVIETS LIKE THEIR ISLANDERS PRIMITIVE

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Free World Note

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The UN Trusteeship Council has been debating the future of the islanders of Nauru, who number about 2000 (or 4000 if you include immigrants from other islands plus Europeans and Chinese).

This island, vastly distant from the nearest land, lies almost on the equator east of New Guinea. It consists of a wide beach prickly with coral pinnacles, a fertile strip where the native settlements are situated, and a high interior plateau. It is all of twenty kilometers in circumference and represents one of the smallest dots on the Pacific map.

Discovered by Europeans in 1798, it was annexed by Germany in 1888, surrendered to Australian forces in 1918, and since 1947 has been a UN trust territory jointly administered by Britain, New Zealand and Australia - the last country having in practice provided the administrator.

But the most important date in Nauru's chronicles was around 1900, when it was discovered that practically the entire central plateau consisted of rich phosphate deposits. Ever since then the British Phosphate Commissioners have been exporting shiploads of it, mostly to Australia and New Zealand, to the benefit of those countries, of the foreign consumers of their food produce (phosphate being an important plant fertilizer) and of the Nauru islanders. For on every ton of phosphate shipped, a "royalty" is paid by the Commissioners, of which a fixed proportion is paid to the Nauruan landowners, another to the Administrator for the sole use of the native community, and another is invested for their future welfare.

The benefits reaped by the Nauruans are quite considerable. There is universal free education up to the age of 16 and many receive technical or administrative training thereafter. The snag is that the phosphate is only expected to last for another twenty years or so. The Nauruans are already asking questions about this, and have suggested that the Australians find them another island in good time, and meanwhile recognize them as a sovereign nation to be linked to Australia by a friendship treaty.

A UN mission which visited Nauru recently had a different idea, namely that the Australians, with plenty of room on their continent, should resettle them in Australia itself. The Soviet Trusteeship Council delegate Oberemko, who objects to this as creating a "non-white reservation", yesterday proposed a third solution: that the Nauruans should get their sovereignty but stay put on their island and run the phosphate industry themselves -- they would then last for "100 to 150 years".

A more likely estimate is that they would last for ever, unless the Nauruans continued to employ foreign services in extracting and marketing them. The idea of sovereignty for the Nauruans is not completely absurd, though the possibility of UN membership is somewhat hair-raising. (The smallest UN member in population terms is Iceland with 180,000. The 110,000 West Samoans, who acquired independence this year, decided not to ask for UN membership, being well aware of their dependence in world affairs on New Zealand. The Nauruans would probably appreciate their similar situation, just as the inhabitants of sovereign San Marino do.) But it is interesting to note that the Soviets favor a future for the Nauruans which would mean a loss of material prosperity. Certainly, their solution would mean that the phosphate would last longer, just as independence for Novaya Zembla would mean that the seals lasted longer. Perhaps the natives in both cases would be happier. But one imagined Oberemko had been brought up on Marx, not Bakunin.

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