1982

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Recommended Citation

Broadwin, John A. (1982) "A Soviet Ship: What's Her Name?," *Naval War College Review*: Vol. 35 : No. 4 , Article 10.
Available at: https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/nwc-review/vol35/iss4/10

*Lo, I will bring a nation upon you from far, O
house of Israel, saith the Lord; it is a mighty
nation, it is an ancient nation, a nation whose
language thou knowest not, neither understandest
what they say.*

—Jeremiah 5:15

A Soviet Ship: What's Her Name?

by

John A. Broadwin

In 1979 American naval aviators sighted a new Soviet aircraft carrier whose bow reflected the Mediterranean sun with particular brightness. Flying lower they could make out five strange-looking golden letters welded to her hull—each over eight feet high.

Let's assume for a moment the aviators wanted to decipher these letters on the spot and report them to air control. Short of knowing Russian, the only way they could reasonably do so would be to use a table for converting the Russian characters into the letters of our alphabet.

But different conversion tables often represent Russian letters in different ways, so the aviators could easily produce a transliteration different from those produced by other divisions of the US Navy, by other Western navies or by rhe publishers of the common naval handbooks confusing effective communication.

Fortunately, the letters on the Soviet carrier, compared to other letters in the Russian alphabet, are relatively easy to convert: for each of the Russian characters there is a single English equivalent. Still, transliteration systems differ over the rendering of these letters. A recently proposed system, for example, would transliterate as *MNHCK* the name of the carrier that is known practically everywhere else as the *Minsk*.[1]

Naturally, the differences among the various systems for writing Russian names in the letters of our alphabet are magnified when they deal with Russian words that contain letters for which we have no one-letter equivalents. The Russian letters responsible for most of these differences—13 of the 33 in the modern Russian alphabet—are listed below in three groups; Roman equivalents follow in parentheses:

Consonants:	(ž,zh) X (h,kh)	(c,cz,ts,tz)	(č,ch)
	(š,sh) (šč,shch)		
Vowels:	(iu,ju,yu) (ia,ja,ya)	(y) E (e,ie,je,ye)	
	(e,ė,è,é) E (e,io,ye,yo)		
Semivowel:	(i,y)		

Table 1 shows how various systems for converting these letters have resulted in different spellings of the same Soviet naval or merchant ship name in several well-known naval handbooks and shipping registers:[2]

TABLE 1*

Breyer & Polmar	Combat Fleets	Jane's	Lloyd's	Soviet Register	US Navy	Weyer's
Alexandr Nevsky	Alexander Nevsky	Aleksandr Nevski	Aleksandr Nevskiy	Aleksandr Nevskiy	Aleksandr Nevskiy	Alexander Nevskij
Dostoyny	Dostoiny	Dostoyny	Dostoynyy	Dostoynyy	Dostoynyy	Dostoinyj
Elenya	Elnia	Elnya	Yelnya	Yelnya	---	Jelnja
Fedor Litke	Fedor Litke	Fyodor Litke	Fyodor Litke	Fyodor Litke	---	Fedor Litke
Sovetski Azerbaidzhan	Sovetsky Azerbaizhan	Sovietsky Azerbaidzhan	Sovietskiy Azerbaidzhan	Sovetskiy Azerbaydzhan	---	Sovjeckij Azerbeidžan
Ermak	---	Yermak	Yermak	Yermak	Yermak	Ermak
Jupiter	Yupitr	Yupiter	Yupiter	---	---	Jupiter

Historical Background

Before I discuss specific problems in converting Soviet ship names, I would like to touch briefly on writing systems in general and on the history of the Russian alphabet in particular. Readers will then better understand the culture that alphabet reflects and realize the importance of rendering Russian ship names consistently in a form easily read by people who do not know the language or script.

A nation's writing system offers interesting insights into its character. "[The scripts used by mankind]," writes Robert M. Hayes in his foreword to Hanan Wellisch's *Conversion of Scripts*, "embody a complex of cultural, economic, religious, and political issues far transcending their role as representations of recorded data . . . scripts may still be symbols, but not solely of recorded data. They are symbols of life, of conflict, of the history of civilization."[3]

The script currently used for Russian is called Cyrillic. It got that name, directly or indirectly, from a writing system invented in the ninth century by St. Cyril and St. Methodius, the two Greek brothers who christianized the Slavs. The Byzantine emperor Michael II commissioned Cyril to devise an alphabet so he could evangelize the inhabitants of Moravia in their own Slavic language. Cyril and Methodius based the new alphabet on the Greek script of their time, adding Hebrew letters and other signs to represent sounds not present in Greek.

From the vantage point of today it is ironic that the Cyrillic alphabet, which first brought the Christian gospels to the Russian people in the ninth century, is now identified with the missionary zeal of another great orthodoxy in the 20th century.[4]

The shape of the letters in the modern Russian alphabet derives from the so-called "civil script," a modified form of the old Cyrillic alphabet, that Peter the Great

*Dashes have been supplied when a name was not included in a register or handbook.

introduced in 1710. As part of his program to open Russia to the West and force modernization on the country, Peter tried to achieve greater conformity of appearance with Western typefaces. Over 200 years later, in 1918, the fledgling Soviet government decreed further reforms in the Russian alphabet. Today the descendants of these letters are emblazoned on the bows and across the sterns of most Soviet ships.

A part of the Russian national mentality, though, has always suspiciously rejected passive imitation and admiration of the West. Representatives of that mentality condemned the West as the source of evil while they glorified the Russian heritage. Their strategy was to take the best technology from the West without having to absorb the way of life that produced it.

So it is no accident that the large raised Cyrillic letters on carriers like the *Minsk* and the *Kiev*—highly sophisticated warships based on technology developed in the West—are modeled on the Slavic alphabet used before the beginning of the 18th century: they evoke nostalgia for a Russian past that stands apart from the West and proclaim pride in Mother Russia.

Present Situation

Before discussing the conversion of Russian Cyrillic into the English writing system, we must be clear about the meaning of a few terms: translation, transcription, Romanization, and transliteration.

Translation is a rendering from one language into another. *Equator* in *Jane's*, for example, is an English translation of the Russian *Ekvator*, the name of a Soviet training ship.

Transcription is conversion of oral or written language into a writing system that represents the sounds of the language. Using the letters "ye," for instance, to transcribe the name of the icebreaker *Yermak, Jane's* presumably intends to show that the initial "E" in the original Russian stands for a "ye" sound.

Romanization is conversion from one system of writing into another using the Roman alphabet—the same alphabet used to write English. Хрущев when Romanized becomes Khrushchev in English, Chruschtschow in German, Khrouchtchev in French, Chruszczow in Polish, and Hruscsov in Hungarian, and so on.

Transliteration is conversion from one alphabetic system letter for letter into another. *Ermak*, for instance, is a letter-for-letter representation of the Russian Ермак.

I have counted fifteen major systems currently in use in English-speaking countries to convert Cyrillic.[5] The most popular, in alphabetical order by originating institution, seem to be those developed by the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), the Board on Geographic Names (BGN), the British Standards Institution (BSI), the International Standards Organization (ISO), and the Library of Congress (LC).

The differences among the various schemes—even among those widely used in the same country—are considerable, which makes for great confusion and lack of compatibility. The USSR tried to set up compulsory standards for the Romanization of Cyrillic inside the Soviet Union. But even there "all manner of *ad hoc* transliterations and transcriptions of Russian names and words are used in foreign

language publications as well as in bilingual dictionaries and other reference works printed in the USSR."[6]

In my own reading I found as much confusion and inconsistency in the Romanization of Soviet ship names as in Cyrillic conversion generally. For example when I checked names from the sources in Table 1 against various Romanization schemes, I could not always be sure which system a particular handbook had used.

The latest editions available to me of *Jane's Fighting Ships, Lloyd's Register,* the Soviet *Register Book of Sea-Going Ships*, and the US Navy's *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments* appear to use the system of the Board on Geographic Names (which is identical to that of the British Permanent Committee on Geographic Names). The dual-language *Weyer's Warships of the World* seems to have adopted a modified version of the ISO system—at least for the names of individual ships; for classes of ships it uses another system, LC's perhaps. As for *Combat Fleets* and Breyer and Polmar's 1977 edition of *Guide to the Soviet Navy,* I was unable to definitely connect their Romanized ship names to any system I am familiar with.

During my research I came across only one naval handbook that specifically identified the system it had adopted for transliterating Russian names: the 1970 edition of *Guide to the Soviet Navy,* where the system used was LC's.[7]

No matter which system they used, most of the naval reference works I surveyed contained a great number of inconsistencies. Here are a few examples.

The 1976-77 edition of *Combat Fleets* rendered the name of one "Kara"-class cruiser three different ways: *Nicolayev, Nikolayev,* and *Nikolaiev*; the next edition transliterated it as *Nikolaev.* The 1978-79 edition transliterated the name of an "Alligator"-class tank landing ship as *Aleksandr Tortsev,* but then anglicized "Aleksandr" as "Alexander" in the name of the "Sverdlov"-class cruiser *Alexander Nevsky.*

Jane's 1981-82 edition at one point translated the name of the training ship *Ékvator* into English to read *Equator* while transliterating the names of two other similar training ships—likewise of non-Slavic origin—as *Gorizont* ("Horizon") and *Zenit* ("Zenith"). Similarly, to transliterate the Russian letter "X" the 1980-81 edition of *Jane's* used the letter combination "kh" (LC, BGN, BSI) for the name of the icebreaker *Khariton Laptev* and the single letter "h" (ISO) for that of the icebreaker *Kapitan Plahin.* It also changed Yuri, when used with the surname Gagarin, to Yury, when used with the surname Godin.

Besides the failure to adhere to one Romanization system, the sources in Table 1 contained many incorrect transliterations as well as misspellings and typographical errors. Here are some examples.

Understanding Soviet Naval Developments incorrectly cited the name of the merchant ship *Nadezhda Obukova* (the correct spelling of which is *Obukhova*) and of the escort ship *Gangulets* (which should read *Gangutets*).

The 1977 edition of *Guide to the Soviet Navy* listed a support tanker called the *Elenya,* the name of which has a second "e" where the original Russian has none (the name should be Romanized as *El'nya*). It also cited a class of river patrol boats called "Schmel" ("bumblebee") whose name should begin with the letter combination "sh," not "sch." "Sch" is a German letter combination foreign to the spelling rules of English on which the American edition of the 1977 *Guide* has supposedly based its Romanization system.

Finally, the 1979-80 edition of *Jane's* listed the same *Svedujschy* for a "Kotlin"-class destroyer, even though the original Russian did not contain a letter or sound calling for the insertion of a "j" in the Romanized name. It was also unclear from the transliterated form whether the "sch" was supposed to represent a Russian "sh" or "shch" (in fact, it was meant to stand for "shch"). Fortunately, the 1981-82 edition corrected the name to read *Svedushchy*.

Transcription versus Transliteration

All Romanization schemes for the Russian Cyrillic script face two basic problems. One is that the Russian script has more letters (33) than the English script (26), so certain Cyrillic letters have to be transliterated using either special marks or letter combinations (or both). The International Standards Organization's system transliterates the following Russian letters using a special sign: ž, č, š, šč. The system of the American National Standards Institute, on the other hand, transliterates the same letters using letter combinations: zh, ch, sh, shch.

The other basic problem is that Russian has certain sounds that can't be clearly transcribed by single Roman letters.

These characteristics of the Russian script and language are the main reasons for the development of so many differing Romanization schemes for the Russian Cyrillic script. And since most Romanization schemes try to do both transliteration and transcription at the same time—trying to account for the Russian letters as well as their pronunciation—they have set themselves a basically impossible task. In script conversion, as elsewhere, you cannot serve two masters.

For example, the place of stress—the prominence given a syllable through the use of accent—is crucial in Russian. As a result, the pronunciation of vowels is very different in stressed and unstressed syllables. No conversion scheme that sticks close to the Cyrillic letters will bring this out.

Adding to the problem, transcription calls for a good command of the Russian language. The Russian letter "e," for instance, can be transcribed as "ye" or "yo" depending on whether or not it is stressed. Sometimes a mark appears over the ë to indicate stress, but most Russian publications omit it. So the conscientious transcriber would have to consult a dictionary or a native speaker to determine where a word is accented.

Shchyogolev—the name of a cargo/training ship—is a transcription that appears in *Jane's*. "Yo" in the middle of a name is a concession to pronunciation (though surely not to pronounceability). *Shchegolev*, on the other hand, is a letter-for-letter transliteration that could have been produced by someone without any knowledge of Russian pronunciation.

Many languages using the Roman alphabet have different pronunciations for letters; but publications in those languages don't require phonetic transcription, despite the risk of mispronunciation. Few Americans, for example, would pronounce *all* the following "correctly": Brzezinski, Thames (in Connecticut), James Clerk Maxwell, La Jolla (in California), Pierre (in South Dakota) or Hamilton Jordan. So why should we strive to represent the sounds of Russian while sacrificing the simplicity of letter-for-letter conversion?

There is of course no foolproof system for conversion of Russian script; different systems will probably always coexist. But this should not discourage those who deal

with Soviet ship names from trying to find the scheme that best serves their needs; that is, a simple, efficient conversion system usable even by those untrained in Russian.

Optimally, such a system should:

1.   Adhere closely to the strict transliteration principle so as to provide a clear, one-to-one correlation with the original characters;

2.   Not require teaching the pronunciation of Russian; and

3.   Avoid as much as possible the use of special symbols.

If followed consistently and conscientiously, such a system should result in:

1.   Standard Romanized forms of Soviet ship names;

2.   Romanized forms easily reconvertible into Russian so as to allow an easy match with the actual Cyrllic name and make identification from the bridge easier;

3.   Predictability of a ship's name in an alphabetically arranged sequence, so readers would be less likely to miss a name when consulting an index or list; and

4.   Romanized forms that do not require symbols unavailable on commercially produced typefaces for printers or on typewriters.

Fortunately, a new system for the Romanization of the modern Russian alphabet doesn't have to be specially developed for the US Navy, since an existing system—approved in 1976 as an American standard—meets the conditions outlined above. That system is included in the *American National Standard System for the Romanization of Slavic Cyrillic Characters*, called the ANSI system for short.[8] It is presented below:

TABLE 2

Russian	Romanization	Russian	Romanization
A a	a		p
	b	P p	r
B	v	C c	s
	g	T	t
	d	y y	u
E e	e		f
E ë	ë*	X x	kh
	zh		ts**
	z		ch
	i		sh
	ĭ		shch
K	k		ˮ
	l		y
M	m		ʼ
H	n		ė
O	o		yu
			ya

According to the ANSI system the Soviet ship names in Table 1 would be transliterated as shown:

*Cyrillic e should not be Romanized as ë unless the mark appears in the original.

**When Russian T is followed by c, the conversion will read t's.

TABLE 3

Aleksandr Nevskiĭ	Fedor Litke
Dostoĭnyĭ	Sovetskiĭ Azerbaĭdzhan
El'nya	
Ermak	Yupiter

The ANSI system is simple, usable by those without a knowledge of Russian and capable of accurate reconversion. I am convinced it is better suited than other systems to the needs of the US Navy. Also, since it is a de facto endorsement of the British Standards Institution's system, which was published in 1958 and has gained wide acceptance in many parts of the English-speaking world, the ANSI standard has a greater chance of being accepted by other navies than does a purely American system like that of the Library of Congress.[9]

Unlike the International Standards Organization's system—which is based on the spelling rules of the Croatian language—ANSI does not make frequent use of special symbols foreign to the English writing system. Nor is it phonetic or ambiguous like the system of the Board on Geographic Names which, for example, uses the letter "y" (either alone or in combination) to represent *six* different Cyrillic characters.[10]

To minimize confusion and promote compatibility and consistency in the rendering of Soviet ship names, Western publishers of naval handbooks and the leaders of Nato's navies should strive to agree on a unified transliteration system. Then Western airmen, like those who observed the Soviet aircraft carrier in the Mediterranean, could transliterate Russian Cyrillic with the sure knowledge that any Allied sailor or airman would understand perfectly which ship they were referring to and could check it with ease in any handbook. By adopting the ANSI system the English-speaking naval community could set an example.

Words of Foreign Origin in Soviet Ship Names

A vexing problem that comes up in dealing with Soviet ship names, especially merchant ship names, is that of "retranscription." Bruno Bock, coauthor of *Soviet Bloc Merchant Ships*, says that "the most difficult thing was not the gathering of data [on these ships], but correctly transliterating the Cyrillic names into Roman letters."[11]

The Soviets have named a number of merchant ships, for example, in honor of non-Russians. Naturally, when they paint these names on their ships, they write them in Cyrillic characters. However since Russian can Cyrillize Roman names only by phonetic transcription, not transliteration, these names often look different from the original after they have been retranscribed into Roman letters.

Yulius Fuchik, a Seabee barge carrier named for a Czech poet and World War II underground leader, is a letter-for-letter transliteration of the transcribed Cyrillic name as it appears on the ship's side (it also happens to be the form of the name used by *Lloyd's* and *Jane's*). However, in the Roman letters of the Czech language this name is spelled Julius Fučík.

Just as it would be misleading to mechanically transliterate as "Ogaĭo" or "Natan Kheil" the American nuclear ballistic missile submarines *Ohio* and *Nathan Hale* when they are encountered in a Russian text, it would be wrong to let the retranscribed form "Yulius Fuchik" stand alone, without indicating the man's real name. Though cumbersome, the only method I can think of to do justice to the real name is to write it twice—the transliteration of the Cyrillic transcription and the name in the original language, with the two separated by a slant line: *Yulius Fuchik/Julius Fučík.*

Admittedly, recognizing and verifying foreign names in Russian is not always easy. But for the sake of accuracy I think it is worth trying to establish in the original language the correct form of non-Russian Soviet ship names.

Unfortunately for those who encounter these vessels at sea and try to determine on the spot the correct form of their non-Russian names, the task is sometimes complicated by the way in which the Russians themselves have painted these names in Roman letters on the ship's hull or bridgeboard. Bock notes that "the Soviet Shipping Register gives an official transliteration, but it does not always coincide with the way the names are written on the ship's sides."[12]

Probably by the time a directive has come down from some bureaucrat in Moscow ordering a merchant skipper to provide his ship with a Romanized form of its name, something has gotten lost in translation. That may help explain why "Henri" appears as "Anri" and "Ékvator" as "Ekwator" on ships bearing these names. A US Navy intelligence officer put the problem facing Soviet seamen in perspective by asking, "What kind of abortions do you think American seamen would come up with, if they were ordered to put the names of their ships into Cyrillic letters?"

The name "Północny (pronounced Pool-notes-nee) illustrates a slightly different problem. "Północny" is the Polish name of a Polish-built class of assault landing ships, renamed "Polnochnyĭ" (the cognate word in Russian) by the Soviet Navy. Most naval handbooks though—*Jane's* is an exception—have stuck to the Polish name when referring to these ships as part of the Soviet Navy; however I think we should use the Russian name for this or any other ship built outside the USSR but operated (and renamed) by the Soviets. No matter where a country's ships are built, we should adhere to the name assigned to them by the navy or merchant marine of the country that operates them.

Finally, when titles or ranks are included as part of a personal name, they should be transliterated, not translated or anglicized. Again, remember that transliteration does not call for a knowledge of Russian; it automatically makes for uniformity when a particular system is consistently adhered to and avoids problems in deciding on the "correct" translation.

The name of the Soviet Union's first satellite tracking ship, for example, should be written *Kosmonavt Yuriĭ Gagarin*, not *Astronaut Iurii Gagarin* (as in the 1970 edition of *Guide to the Soviet Navy*) or *Kosmonaut Yuri Gagarin* (as in the 1977 edition). "Kosmonaut" is neither a translation nor a transliteration; it is neither English nor Russian. The proper English translation is either "Cosmonaut" or "Astronaut"; and the correct transliteration of the Russian is "Kosmonavt" with a "v." Similarly, the name of the following "Kresta I"-class cruiser should be rendered as *Vitse-admiral Drozd*, not as *Vice Admiral Drozd.*

Conclusion

The United States' number one adversary at sea uses a script different from that of English. To make the names of the ships in that country's growing armada as intelligible and accessible as possible to those who wish to know about them, the US Navy and American naval publishers—as well as navies and naval publishers in other Western countries—should strive to use a single transliteration system. I have suggested one such system here. Using it, even the Western seaman without a knowledge of Russian could make sense of the mass of unfamiliar Cyrillic letters on his counterpart's ship.

Acknowledgements

NOTES

1. B. Lindström. "Transliteration between Latin and Cyrillic alphabets." *Tidskrift för Dokumentation* 32, no. 3, 1976, pp. 49-52.

2. Key to sources in Table 1:

Breyer & Polmar = Siegfried Breyer and Norman Polmar. *Guide to the Soviet Navy*. 2d ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1977).

Combat Fleets = *Combat Fleets of the World 1978/79: Their Ships, Aircraft, and Armament*, Jean Labayle Couhat, ed. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1978).

Jane's = *Jane's Fighting Ships 1981-82*. John Moore, ed. (London: Jane's 1981).

Lloyd's = *Lloyd's Register of Shipping 1980-81* (London, 1980). 3 vols.

Soviet Register = *Registrovaya kniga morskikh sudov SSSR 1978-1979* (Register Book of Sea-Going Ships of the USSR 1978-1979). (Leningrad: Izd-vo Transport, Leningradskoe otd-nie, 1978).

U.S. Navy = *Understanding Soviet Naval Developments*. 4th ed. (Washington: Office of the Chief of Naval Operations, Director of Naval Intelligence and Chief of Information, 1981).

Weyer's = *Weyer's Warships of the World 1979/81*. Compiled by Gerhard Albrecht. (Annapolis: Nautical & Aviation Pub. Co. of America, 1979).

3. Hanan Wellisch. *The Conversion of Scripts; Its Nature, History, and Utilization* (New York: Wiley, 1978), p. iv.

4. Donald Jackson. *The Story of Writing* (New York: Taplinger, 1981), p. 68.

5. G. Razran. "Transliteration of Russian," *Science*, 24 April 1959, pp. 1111-1113. For dozens of other Romanization systems for Cyrillic, see Hanan Wellisch's *Transcription and Transliteration: An Annotated Bibliography on Conversion of Scripts*. (Silver Spring, Md.: Institute of Modern Languages, 1975).

6. Wellisch, p. 263.

7. Breyer and Polmar, p. viii.

8. American National Standards Institute, *American National Standard System for the Romanization of Slavic Cyrillic Characters* (New York: 1976).

9. Wellisch, pp. 342-3, 349 discusses weaknesses of the LC system.

10. For a comparison of various major Romanization systems, see R. Neiswender, "Russian transliteration—sound and sense," *Special Libraries*, January 1962, pp. 37-41.

11. Bruno Bock and Klaus Bock, *Soviet Bloc Merchant Ships*. Translated by John A. Broadwin. (Annapolis: Naval Institute Press, 1981), p. 10.

12. *Ibid.*

Mr. Broadwin is a librarian and free-lance translator (German and Russian) with a special interest in naval affairs. He is the translator from German of the US Naval Institute's recent *Soviet Bloc Merchant Ships* by Bruno Bock and Klaus Bock.

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H H G G