

Soviet Russian Given Names

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RUSSIAN ONOMASTICS is a field in which there is much opportunity for scholarly research. Given names, in particular, still need much investigation. Only about a dozen scholars in Russia and the Soviet Union have concerned themselves with the problem of personal names, and even less research has been done abroad. In recent years, some research has been done in the Soviet Union mainly on what the Soviet researchers call "new names." This term is generally meant to include those names which became popular in Russia only after the Revolution of 1917 and which are not found in the Russian Orthodox Church Calendar of Saints.

Only one book has been written entirely on the subject of Soviet names. This one, *Novye imena*¹ ("New Names"), by D. Delert, published in Rostov in 1924, is out of print today and not available even in Moscow's Lenin Library. Among the other Soviet scholars who have dealt with the problem of names, A. V. Superanskaja and L. V. Uspenskij are the best known. Both have written articles and books on various aspects of Russian onomastics, and each has at least one chapter concerned with Soviet names.

One other Soviet work contains a chapter on the "new names." This is *Russkie imena* ("Russian Names") by A. A. Ugrjumov, published in Vologda in 1962. This book, however, was written on a popular rather than a scholarly level, and it contains errors resulting from the strong influence of Soviet attitudes upon the author. In addition, some Soviet names appear in various dictionaries, including the Russian-Ukrainian dictionary of names published by S. F. Levčenko in 1961, and the Russian-White Russian dictionary of names published by M. R. Sudnik in 1965.

¹ Transliteration of Russian words and names will conform to the system used in the *Slavic and East European Journal*.

In 1964, the University of Pennsylvania Press published a *Dictionary of Russian Personal Names* which, although concerned mainly with surnames, contains a list of given names, including some "new names." This work, compiled by Morton Benson, is the only American dictionary of Russian names.

The only one of these works that included statistics was the book by Delert. His statistics were designed to prove that workers and peasants were progressively rejecting calendar names in favor of the new Soviet names. He claimed that in 1920, 25.5 per cent of the children born in the Don region received non-calendar names, and in 1923, 49.8 per cent received non-calendar names.² His figures seem extremely high and are, in all likelihood, not correct.

The statistics in this paper are based on a study of the names of about 11,000 Russians living in the Soviet Union. These names were found in the divorce notices listed in *Večernjaja Moskva*. This is a Moscow evening newspaper, published every day but Sunday. At present, divorce notices are not listed. Previously they appeared five times a week with approximately 25 notices each time. For the present study, the year 1964 was used. About 11,000 of the persons listed bore Russian (not foreign) patronymics and surnames; these were included in this study. The source itself, however, contains a basic weakness in that the ages of those seeking divorces are not given. It was assumed that an overwhelming majority of persons seeking divorces in Moscow in 1964 were born between 1918 and 1940.

The statistics obtained in this study show a far smaller use of "new names" than those of Delert. Briefly, the numbers are as follows: Of the 5,500 men listed in the divorce notices, 5,356 or 97.4 per cent had traditional Russian Church names. Of the 5,500 women, 5,200 or 94.6 per cent had calendar names. This shows little change from pre-revolutionary practice. Statistics obtained in the same study indicate that 99.3 per cent of men and 97.7 per cent of women born in Russia between 1700 and 1917 bore calendar names. Pre-revolutionary statistics were based mainly on the names of persons found in encyclopedias and biographical dictionaries.

Thus, of the 11,000 Soviet Russian citizens listed in the divorce notices only 4 per cent had non-calendar names. These names may be discussed under two headings – borrowed names and invented names.

² *Pravda*, review of *Novye imena* by D. Delert, June 12, 1924.

Three fourths of the non-calendar names are borrowed names. These are mainly Russian adaptations of names used in western countries. Some of these became relatively popular in Russia, particularly those that had some political significance. The given names of widely known revolutionary figures, such as Inessa Armand, Clara Zetkin, Rosa Luxemburg, Robert Eiche, and Felix Dzerzhinsky, appeared several times. A number of other non-calendar names of western origin also appeared more than once. These were *Al'bert*, *Alina*, *Alisa*, *Dina*, *Èduard*, *Èrnest*, *Èmma*, *Genriks*, *Nelli*, and *Žanna*.

Besides these fairly popular western borrowings, another 34 western names – some of them Russianized – occurred once each in the 11,000 names considered. They originated in various languages. Sometimes the direct source-language cannot be definitely ascertained, because the name has been Russianized or because it exists in the same form in several western languages. Following are the western names which were recorded and the languages from which they probably came into use in Russia.

- 1) From French: *Al'bertina*, *Amelija*, *Artur*, *Diana*, *Èmil*, *Èmilija*, *Izabella*, *Lilija*, *Luiza*, *Violetta*, *Žannetta*, *Žozefina*.
- 2) From English: *Džoja*, *Èdgar*, *Èlla*, *Èrik*, *Frank*, *Garri*, *Meri*, *Tomas*, *Vil'jam*.
- 3) From German: *Dora*, *Èl'za*, *Gertruda*, *Irma*, *Iza*, *Izol'da*, *Lora*.
- 4) From Italian: *Džemma*, *Floria*, *Paola*, *Stella*.
- 5) From Spanish: *Èl'mira*, *Konsuèla*.

It can easily be seen that some of these names could have come into Russian from a language other than the one with which they are identified here. For example, *Tomas* might have come from French, German, or even Spanish, rather than from English. Some of these names were known in Russia long before the Revolution of 1917. Foreign names had always been fashionable among the Russian nobility. In the early nineteenth century, names such as *Al'bert*, *Leonard*, *Robert*, *Èduard*, *Adolf*, *Karl*, and *Ludwig* were relatively popular. With the Revolution, however, came one very noticeable change. German names, such as those mentioned above, disappeared almost entirely, and names of English origin, previously extremely rare, began to be recorded more frequently.

The increase in foreign names following the Revolution may be attributed in part to the enforced separation of church and state, and in part to increased literacy. A number of the borrowed names recorded only after the Revolution were introduced into Russia through literature. The Italian name, *Gemma*, appeared in Russian as *Džemma* following the translation of Estelle Voynich's novel, *The Gadfly*.³ *Ėdgar* may have been introduced through a translation of *King Lear*. *Ėl'za* and *Isol'da* were heroines of Wagnerian operas. *Meri* was used by the Russian author Mixail Lermontov in his novel, *A Hero of Our Time* (1839).

The increase of literacy among Russians is reflected also by the fact that some children received names used only in literature. Oscar Wilde's *The Picture of Dorian Gray* produced the forms *Dorian*, *Dor*, and *Graj*, all found in the 1964 divorce notices. Some Russian children were named for Shakespearian heroines. The name *Ofilija* was found in this research, and Superanskaja noted also *Dezdemona* and *Džul'etta*.⁴

Russian children were named for some of Puškin's heroes. The story has been told that the father of Russian cosmonaut German Titov (born 1935) was a great admirer of Puškin, and, therefore, named his son *German* for the hero of *The Queen of Spades* and his daughter *Zemfira* for the heroine of *The Gypsies*.⁵ This story may or may not be true. The hero of *The Queen of Spades* is named *Germann* and not *German* – etymologically a different name. Puškin chose the name carefully to indicate that his hero was of German background. But *Zemfira* is undoubtedly taken from Puškin.

The most popular non-calendar name found in this research is *Svetlana*. This is also a literary name. Its origin is obscure. Soviet scholars consider it a pre-Christian Slavic name, but it is not found in Old Church Slavic or Old Russian sources. It was used by the Russian poet Žukovskij and may have been his creation. It was not recorded before the Revolution, but appeared in twenty-fourth place among names found in the divorce notices. Its popularity continued to increase, and, since the Second World War, it has been one of the most popular names in the Soviet Union. The fact that

³ A. V. Superanskaja, *Kak vas zovut? Gde vy živate?* (Moscow, 1964), p. 25.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ This story is told by Superanskaja (p. 24) and others. It came originally from *Pravda* (August 7, 1961).

Stalin's daughter was named *Svetlana* undoubtedly helped to increase the popularity of this name.

The other type of "new name" is the invented name. This is the more interesting type and also the rarer. Only one per cent of the 11,000 Soviet Russians considered here bore invented names. These names were created to honor the Revolution or some revolutionary figure. They were most common in the early days of Soviet power when enthusiasm for the cause was at its height. In general, these Soviet neologisms are of several types. Here, they will be considered in the following groups: 1) Names taken from the name of Lenin; 2) Names taken from the names of other well-known revolutionary figures; 3) Scientific terms used as names; 4) Revolutionary terms used as names; 5) Acronyms; 6) Names of unknown origin.

The most common type of Soviet neologism is that formed from some part of Lenin's name. Many persons in the Soviet Union wanted to name a child for Lenin. The majority of them simply used his given name, *Vladimir*, which, consequently, became the most popular name in the country. Almost ten per cent of the men listed in the 1964 divorce notices were named *Vladimir*. Other parents made up their own forms as tributes. Among persons considered here, the following were recorded: *Lenian*, *Leniana*, *Vilen*, *Vladilen*, *Vladilena*, *Vladlen*, and *Ninel'*. The last is *Lenin* spelled backwards. It is a feminine name and the most popular of Soviet neologisms. Soviet citizens are generally familiar with it. It seems to have reached its peak of popularity in the thirties, and to be declining at present. Superanskaja recorded the following additional forms, composed from parts of Lenin's name: *Vilena*, *Vilenina*, *Vilora* (from *V. I. Lenin*, *organizator revoljucii* "organizer of the Revolution"), and *Lenina*.⁶

Other revolutionaries were also honored with namesakes. It has already been shown that the given names of various revolutionary figures became popular in Russia. In addition, various forms of surnames were used as given names. Those recorded here were *Ėngel'sina*, *Ėngelina*, *Marks*, and *Marat*. The last was previously one of the most popular Soviet names. Other interesting names of this type were noted by Delert. Some of these are *Dzerž* (from *Dzerzhinsky*), *Ledav* (from *Lev Davydovič Trotskij*), *Lunačara*

⁶ Superanskaja, p. 85.

(from Lunačarskij), *Marksina*, and *Ėngfrid* (a reverse acronym from *Friedrich Engels*).⁷

At this time, many common nouns were given to children as names. Most of these nouns were either scientific terms or words expressing something important to the Revolution. The following scientific terms were recorded here: *Gelij* "helium," *Granit* "granite," *Stal'* "steel" (Also recorded was *Stalij* with the suffix used in the names of chemical elements. It is possible that this name was given in honor of Stalin.) Superanskaja mentioned a few similar ones, such as *Radij* "radium," *Torij* "thorium" (an element used in making atomic weapons), and *Nikel'* "nickel" (probably a feminine name). She also noted other scientific terms which were apparently used as names. Some of these are *Traktor* "tractor," *Ėlektrostancija* "electric power station," and *Ėlektrofikacija* "electrification."⁸ Ugrjumov supplied *Ėlektron* "electron," *Raketa* "rocket," and *Diferencial* "differential."⁹

In addition to those who used scientific terms as names, there were also parents who used words intended to glorify the Revolution or some aspect of it. Some examples of this type of name found in the divorce notices are *Ėra* "era," *Genij* "genius," *Ideja* "idea," *Iskra* "spark" (from the name of a revolutionary newspaper of which Lenin was an editor), *Oktjabr'* "October" (the month of the Revolution), *Oktjabrina* (feminine name from *Oktjabr'*), *Pioner* "pioneer" (also the name of a Soviet youth organization), and *Simvolika* "symbolics." Other names of this type (not recorded in the divorce notices) include *Fevralina* (given in honor of the February Revolution), *Maj* "May" (a masculine name given in honor of the First of May), *Nojabrina* (from *nojabr'* "November," the actual month of the October Revolution), *Volja* "will," *Svoboda* "freedom," *Smena* (a word whose primary meaning is a change of workers in a factory and then, by analogy, the younger generation as replacement for the old), *Dekreta* "decree," *Barrikada* "barriade," and finally *Revoljucija* "Revolution."¹⁰

It has already been shown that many of the Soviet neologisms were acronyms formed from parts of the names of revolutionary

⁷ *Pravda*, June 12, 1924.

⁸ Superanskaja, pp. 22–23.

⁹ A. A. Ugrjumov, *Russkie imena* (Vologda, 1962), p. 36.

¹⁰ Superanskaja, pp. 21–22.

leaders. Word-acronyms were also formed. The following were found in this study: *Kim* (a masculine name known to most Soviets and considered to be formed from the initial letters of *Kommunističeskij Internacional Molodeži* "Communist Youth International," 1919–1943), *Novomir* (probably from *novyj mir* "new world," constructed to appear as a pre-Christian Slavic name), and *Rëm* (from the initial letters of the Russian words for revolution, electrification, and mechanization). Other acronyms noted by Superanskaja include *Revmira* (*revoljucija mira* "world revolution"), *Junarma* (*junaja armija* "army of youth"), *Revdit* (*revoljucionnoe ditja* "child of the Revolution"), *Mjuda* (*Meždunarodnyj junošeskij den'* "International Youth Day" 1915–1945), *Nëra* (*novaja ëra* "new era"), *Lenëra* (*Leninskaja ëra* "era of Lenin").¹¹

There have been other similar acronyms composed by parents for their children. One of the strangest and possibly the most complicated ever recorded was *Lorikërik* composed of the initial letters of the Russian words for the following: Lenin, October Revolution, industrialization, collectivization, electrification, radio installation, and Communism.¹²

Several of the non-calendar names which appeared in the divorce notices may be considered either western borrowings or invented names. They are basically Western European names which could be given a Soviet political reinterpretation. Among these is the very popular name *Majja*, a pre-Christian name appearing as *Maia* or *Maja* in various European languages. In the Soviet Union it is probably given in honor of the First of May.¹³

Two other names, listed here as western borrowings, have possible political connotations. They are *Gertruda* (reinterpreted by some as an acronym from *geroinja truda* "heroine of labor"), and *Izol'da* (sometimes given in the arctic parts of Russia by parents who mistakenly interpreted it as *izo l'da* "out of ice").¹⁴ There is also one name which is sometimes reinterpreted in the opposite direction. It has been suggested that the popular Soviet neologism *Rëm* is not a Soviet acronym but a Russianized form of the Latin name *Remus*.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 21, 23.

¹² L. V. Uspenskij, "Zovut zovutkoj," *Literaturnaja Gazeta*, November 14, 1959.

¹³ Superanskaja, p. 88. See also: Vera Inber, "Maja," *Short Stories by Soviet Writers*, p. 21.

¹⁴ Superanskaja, p. 23.

This is unlikely because the vowel used in constructing *Rèm* is almost always the same vowel as the initial letter of the Russian word for electrification rather than that of the first syllable of *Remus*. However, the form *Rem* has also been recorded.¹⁵

It must also be noted that there appeared among the names listed in the divorce notices a significant number of names of unknown origin. They may possibly have been created by an imaginative parent. Those found here are listed below, usually with some suggestion as to their origin.

Alij: possibly a Russian transliteration of the Arabian name *Ali*, the son-in-law of Mohammed.

Damir: possibly an acronym composed of *mir* "world" or "peace" and some other element – perhaps *daj* "Give!"

Everest: probably from Mt. Everest.

Galija: an alternation of *Galja*, hypocoristic form of *Galina*, or possibly a feminine name derived from gallium, the name of a metallic element.

Geliona: possibly a misspelling of the calendar name *Geliana* or a form derived from *gelij* "helium."

Gema: probably an alternation of the Italian *Gemma*.

Genofeja: phonetic alternation of German *Genoveva* or a misspelling of the calendar name *Genovefa*.

Junna: possibly an alternation of English *June*.

Lenarij: possibly formed from Lenin. It contains a common suffix for masculine names, seen in *Valerij*, *Jurij*, and others.

Ljusja: hypocoristic form from *Ljubov'*, *Ljudmila*, or *Ol'ga*, used as a given name.

Min'ko: possibly a Ukrainian surname used by a parent as a given name.

Neriga: possibly a phonetic alternation of the modern Lithuanian feminine name *Neringa* from *neringa* "isthmus."

Reva: possibly from *revoljucija* "revolution."

Rida: This form is known to Superanskaja, who feels that it was used by someone accidentally because it sounded like a foreign name. It may be a misspelling of *Rita*, diminutive of *Margarita*.¹⁶

Romèna: probably a feminine name formed from the given name of French author Romain Rolland.

¹⁵ Inber, *Short Stories by Soviet Writers*, pp. 20–22.

¹⁶ Superanskaja, p. 26.

Rudi: a feminine name, possibly a Russian transliteration of English *Rudy* – mistakenly thought to be feminine because of the ending.

Sim: possibly a Russian transliteration of English *Sim*, hypocoristic form of *Simon*, or an acronym formed from the initial letters of *Socialističeskij internacional molodeži* “Socialist Youth International” 1907–1914.

Stenmar: unknown – possibly an acronym.

Suslanna: possibly a misspelling of *Susanna*, perhaps from association with *Svetlana*.

Taja: possibly a hypocoristic form from *Tat’jana* or *Taisija*.

Tanina: possibly derived from *Tanja*, hypocoristic form from *Tat’jana*.

Zira: unknown.

Granik: possibly an alternation of *Granit* “granite,” a known Soviet neologism.

Ilijana: possibly a misspelling of the calendar name *Julijana* or a feminine name formed from *Il’ič*, Lenin’s patronymic, with the suffix *-jana*, which is found in many feminine names.

One cannot conclude a paper on Soviet names without mentioning some of the most unusual ones. Uspenskij, writing in *Literaturnaja Gazeta* (November 14, 1959), gives three such examples. He tells of a boy incongruously named *Milèdi* (milady), and of a person whose passport bore, as a given name, the words *Cvet višnevoغو dereva v mae* “The color of the cherry tree in May.” He writes of an incident in which a girl asked the principal of her school if he intended to read the full names of students at the graduation exercises. When he answered affirmatively, the girl burst into tears and ran from the room. Puzzled, the principal checked the file of this student whom he knew as *Velira*, and found that her official given name was *Velikij Rabočij* “Great Workman.”

Use of such Soviet neologisms was at a peak in the twenties and thirties when the Soviet Union was new and many of its young people were filled with over-zealous patriotism. Twenty years later, the children who had been the innocent victims of this zeal had grown up and become parents themselves. Apparently remembering the difficulties they or their friends had encountered in childhood because of their unusual names, they did not wish to subject their own children to similar embarrassment. Many masculine bearers of

Soviet invented names, when they reached adulthood, changed their names so that their children would have proper patronymics.

This study included, as a supplement, lists of 400 boys and 350 girls born in the Soviet Union between 1947 and 1956 and presently living either in Moscow or in Kislovodsk, a town in the Caucasus. It also included a list of 19 boys and 22 girls born in Kislovodsk in 1964. The only Soviet invented name to appear among these children was *Oktjabrina* which occurred once on the list of school children in Kislovodsk. The only borrowed names to appear among the names of school children were *Artur*, *Éduard*, *Éleonora*, *Émma*, *Nelli*, and *Žanna*, which occurred once each. In addition, the names *Majja* and *Žanna* each appeared once in the list of infant girls.

Although these samples are too small to indicate any definite conclusions about the fate of Soviet neologisms after 1940, it is probably accurate to assume that, while they have not yet completely disappeared, they are definitely disappearing. Probably before many more years have passed, they will have disappeared from use completely and be remembered only as a feature of Russian history.

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