

Putting Money Where Your Russian Is

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Decades ago in a moment of insane hubris I told someone I might someday attempt to create a new translation of Leo Tolstoy's "War and Peace."

"Why would you need to translate again what's already been translated," he asked me in amazement. "Aren't all the words the same?"

I was speechless at the time, frankly. I wish I'd known then what I learned on the internet yesterday. It might have helped.

You see, I was doing a bit of translating of an Alexander Ostrovsky play and I ran across a word that — as often happens — I basically knew, but didn't know what to do with. The word was "grivna," which is stressed on the "i" and refers to a monetary unit that has long since disappeared in Russia.

I thought, okay, I'll just check this and get on with my work. "Just check this," right. That was until I ended up on an incredible site called Russika.ru. The page I wound up on was devoted

to a [description](#) of all things monetary in Russian history.

Holy Moses, as my father used to say! Little did I know!

A. G. Feoktistov's article entitled "A Historical Excursus About Money in Russia" is an exemplar of maximum information packed into a minimum of space. If this were a gold brick it would weigh two gold bricks. That may be impossible in the world of physics, but believe me, it is possible in the world of knowledge.

Let's take "grivna," for example, which I now temporarily know more about than I can ever possibly remember. It seems this denomination appeared in around the 10th century as a specific weight of silver, against which sundry commodities were weighed and, therefore, given value.

So far so good. But at various times in subsequent centuries it referred variously to various other denominations. For example, and I'm quoting Feoktistov here, "In the 10th century one grivna was equal to 25 kunas, 20 nogatas, 50 rezanas and 150 veverintsas, which corresponded to a half pound of silver. Converting to the 19th century (according to N.M. Karamzin) this corresponded to 10 19th-century Russian state silver rubles."

Curiously, Feoktistov does not provide a clear definition of the silver ruble, although he does state that at the end of the 14th century a pound of gold would bring you 55 silver rubles.

As for the 19th century, which concerned me yesterday because that's when the play I was translating was written, things are less clear. I did find in the description of the kuna (stress on the "a"), that a 19th-century silver ruble was roughly equal to a half pound of silver, which in turn — for the curious and the mad — was the equivalent of one kuna, or 1/25 of a grivna in the 10th century.

And then there was this: "In 19th-century terms one grivna of silver from the 13th century consisted of a half-pound of silver, whereas one pound of silver in the 19th century was the equivalent of 20 silver rubles."

Oh, yeah. We're getting somewhere now.

Actually, it's about at this point where I was ready to quit translating Ostrovsky and take up "War and Peace" for God's sake. Something short and easy!

Boy, did I love it when I ran across this phrase in Feoktistov's description of the ruble: After the 14th century "all the way to the 18th century, its standing is uncertain."

Oh, lovely! They lost track of the ruble for 400 years! Rather like the 1990s, I guess.

The ruble, by the way, took its name from the chips that were cut off of silver ingots, the noun "ruble" and the verb "rubit" sharing the linguistic root meaning to cut, chip or hack. I'm not going into where other denominations used during the centuries got their names. But they are incredibly juicy, chewy words and they deserve to have their moment in the English-language cyber sun: kuny mordki, veksha, pulo, polushka, denga, denezhka, zlatnik, grosh, grivennik, altyn, kopeika (kopeck), imperial, poluimperial, chervonets and the gold ruble, to name those I haven't mentioned yet.

Yes, and at least three foreign monetary denominations have had legitimate circulation in Russia — the nomism, the shlyaga and the ortug. Sure we know the dollar should be there too, but for linguistic purposes I'll take the shlyaga and the ortug any day.

I don't know how reliable everything is in Feoktistov's article. That's going to be a PhD dissertation for someone someday. But I will say he is a fascinating man. According to his [website](#), Alexander Grigoryevich Feoktistov is a professor of economics, the author of more than 100 scholarly publications, a novelist, a poet and an avid fisherman.

This poet and fisherman for knowledge in the sphere of legal tender helped me come to the rickety conclusion that I could get away with designating "six grivnas" in the late 1870s as sixty kopecks. Whether that's true or not, I still don't know. But at least it's something an English-language audience in a theater can relate to in some way.

And that allowed me to set aside visions of switching over to Tolstoy and get back to finishing Ostrovsky. I dodged that bullet again! Thank you, Alexander Grigoryevich!

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