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A Prince By Any Other Name

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Сударь: My good sir

Foreign readers of Russian literature always have trouble with the names — last names that change depending on gender; first names and patronymics; pet names that depend on the speaker, the speaker's mood, and the age and behavior of the person being discussed. Particularly annoying are the nicknames that seem to have no connection with the full name, such as Шура for Александр. And then there are all those titles, which seem to change all the time and have a handful of translations.

Russian nobility is slightly confusing, but mostly because it changed over time. Here's a little primer for all you secret monarchists out there.

Once upon a time there was
князь, which is translated as prince but really meant king, as
you can tell by the linguistic similarity. The wife of the
князь or female leader was княгиня.
The daughter of the князь was княжна. Aren't you happy to finally know that?

A long,▣long time ago,
князь (prince) was the ruler of княжество (principality), but
starting▣in the 10th century the ruler of what we call a city state or principality▣became called Великий князь (great or grand prince). Moscow had▣one, as did Tver, Smolensk and other important places. But as you probably know▣from history books, the
московские
великие князи (Moscow grand princes) began▣fighting, defeating, and coopting the other grand princes. And then, in 1547 Великий князь Иван IV — aka Иван Грозный (Ivan the Terrible, Awesome, Majestic, Really▣Cool Although With Certain Mental Health Issues, depending on your point of▣view and preferred translation) — decided that since he was now the ruler of великие князи, he needed a title that put him above them. So he Russified Caesar into▣
царь (tsar), and▣crowned himself. The leader of
всея Руси (all▣the Russias, which
included all the principalities in what is now Russia,▣Ukraine — "Little Russia" —and Belarus — "White Russia") was the царь until 1721, when Peter the▣Great decided that Император▣(Emperor) was a more appropriate title and tacked that on,▣too.

The▣confusing bit with the
великие князи is this: after various tsars and▣emperors used
the term in various ways, in the late 19th century, Alexander III▣decided to call all the children and grandchildren (through the sons) of the царь/император either великий князь or великая княжна, which▣should be Grand Prince and Grand Princess but is generally translated as Grand▣Duke and Grand Duchess.
Because княжна is a daughter and
княгиня is a contemporary of the князь, the wife of a Grand Duke is великая княгиня.

Other than▣that, Russia had only two additional noble titles, both added under Peter the▣Great:
граф и графиня (Count and Countess) and барон и
баронесса (Baron▣and Baroness). All the other noble titles you come across in 19th century▣Russian literature are Russian translations of European titles, like
маркиз
(Marquis) and герцог (Duke).

Sometimes барин is used to mean "the boss▣man" as in
как барин хочет (whatever he
wants — he's the boss). And there is also a calque from English: oil barons are нефтяные бароны.

At the▣bottom of the nobility chart — or actually under it — are
сударь and сударыня: once
polite ways of addressing▣people in the upper classes, now pretentious ways of addressing diners in Ye▣Olde Russkie
Яestaurants.▣Very annoying after the fifth time, and always
difficult to translate. Ma'am▣and Sir are too modern and not quite sycophantic and Old Regime enough. I'd go▣with "my good sir" and "my dear lady."

But that’s if I ran Ye Olde Russkie
Яestaurant, made my wait staff wear silly fake pre-
revolutionary clothes, and pretended that the clientele talking on their cell phones were actually highborn ladies and gents. Which is to say:
когда рак на горе свистнет
(when pigs fly).

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