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A Proposal for Transliterating Russian И and й

In scholarly publications we transliterate Russian names with consistency: linguists use the "international system" (with *j*, *š*, etc.), social scientists the "modified Library of Congress system."¹ But whenever any of us needs to communicate with a broad public of nonspecialists, such as the readers of a weekly news magazine or those who consult our own college catalogues, he finds himself on the horns of an old dilemma. This is the traditional English oversimplification of names ending in -И or -й, which is strikingly and needlessly inconsistent, giving rise to confusion equally among native speakers and émigrés.

This oversimplification is spelled out in the British System of Cyrillic Transliteration, which uses "-y to express -й, -ий, -ий, and -ий at the end of proper names, e.g., Sergey, Dostoevsky, Bely, Grozny."² Note also J. T. Shaw's comment that, for -ий, -y is "preferred, instead of -i, for both prenames and surnames (e.g., Dmitry, *not* Dmitri; Dostoevsky, *not* Dostoevski)."³ Confusion resulting from such inconsistency produces impossible spellings like *vedo-mosty* and *profily*, which plague scholars when they write for a nonspecialized audience.⁴

But to overcome this problem when we wish to communicate with the large public and therefore use a "popular" transliteration system, we need to make just two simplifications of the Library of Congress system: (1) omit diacritics (as is already done in Shaw's system II); (2) shorten -й- and -yi-, wherever they would appear, to -i- and -y-, respectively. The resulting "popular" orthography will be consistent, using -ski for all -ский names, and displaying such spellings as Gai, Sergei, Tolstoi, Kuibyshev; Bely, Skoptsy; Dmitri, Dolgoruki, Dostoevski, Georgi, Pirosmanshili; *istoria*, *print*; and so forth.

To an objection, recently raised on rather subjective grounds, that my proposed -ski is nothing but a Polish version of this Russian ending, I replied

1. See J. Thomas Shaw, *Transliteration of Modern Russian for English Publications* (Madison, 1967), systems III and II; and, similarly, the *Slavonic and East European Review's* pamphlet, *Guide to Style and Presentation of MSS* (c. 1966), p. 6.

2. *Oxford Slavonic Papers*, n.s., 4 (1971): iii.

3. Shaw, *Transliteration*, note 15.

4. Two examples among many are Edward Braun, *Meyerhold on Theatre* (London, 1970), and Jay Leyda, *Kino: A History of the Russian and Soviet Film* (New York, 1960).

that by the same token *-sky* is nothing but a Czech version! Why not, in fact, transliterate the Russian version itself, directly and consistently? And my proposal can do just that, with two distinct advantages: (1) Consistency in letters: *i* is rigorously used to transliterate *и* everywhere else; there is no need (other than tradition) to make one exception here, which only creates confusion between *i* and *y*. (2) Consistency in sounds: *ski* as an English noun is, by happy coincidence, pronounced /skiy/; but *sky* as an English noun is pronounced /skay/! Thus the transliteration *-ski* is also more accurate phonetically for the nonspecialized English reader, a fact of which we should not fail to take advantage.