

Research Note

Cite this article: Bulkeley R (2019). Billingshausen of the Antarctic? *Polar Record* **55**: 117–120. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S003224741900041X>

Received: 12 April 2019
Revised: 3 June 2019
Accepted: 21 July 2019
First published online: 20 September 2019

Keywords:

Bellingshausen; Russification; Genealogy; Estonia

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Abstract

The Russian naval officer Faddej Faddeevich Bellingshausen began life with a slightly different surname, in his case ‘Billingshausen’. It is possible to work out roughly when the Russian surname ‘Bellingshausen’ was chosen. Considerations prompting the selection of that particular Russian version can also be suggested.

Bellingshausen

The Imperial Russian Navy’s Antarctic expedition of 1819–1821 was originally conceived towards the end of 1818 as a single expedition for both Arctic and Antarctic exploration (Belov & Kuznetsova, 1974). After gaining the enthusiastic support of Emperor Alexander I, it was enlarged into a ‘double polar venture’ (Barratt, 1988, p. 235) for two separate squadrons, each comprising two sloops-of-war. Whereas previous Russian expeditions had been confined to the Arctic and sub-Arctic or to the increasingly well-known waters of the central Pacific, the tasks assigned to the Antarctic squadron in 1819 represented an ambitious extension of Russian aspirations. The main aim was to surpass the achievements of the only previous Antarctic expedition mounted by any nation, James Cook’s second circumnavigation of 1772–1775. For although Cook had found what he considered to be reliable *evidence* for Antarctic land (Cook, 1777, 2, pp. 239–243), he had not actually sighted any land below the Antarctic Circle. That prize was secured in January 1821 by the second commander to circumnavigate the Antarctic Ocean, Junior Captain Faddej Faddeevich Bellingshausen, known outside Russia by a German version of his surname, Bellingshausen. Not one of those names, however, occurs in the record of his baptism (Fig. 1). For the somewhat similar case of James Weddell, see (Verlinden 2008).

An old family name

Over the centuries, while members of the family migrated from their ancestral village near Würzburg to Lübeck, and then in the 16th century first to the island of Ösel in Livland (modern Saaremaa in Estonia) and then also to Reval (Tallinn), their name took many forms. Gradually, ‘Billingshausen’ was preferred to others (Russwurm, 1870, pp. 5–9). Under that or very similar names, their leading men in Ösel held the estates of Hoheneichen (Pilguse) and Lahhentagge (Lahetagus) (Hagemester, 1851), were recorded in the registers of their Lutheran parish church of St Michael at nearby Kielkond (Kihelkonna) (Fig. 2) and served their overlords, the Swedish monarchs of the houses of Vasa and Wittelsbach, as military officers and local magistrates (Fig. 3).

Livland passed from the Swedish to the Russian crown under the Treaty of Nystad in 1721, so that the explorer’s father Fabian Ernst von Billingshausen served in the Russian rather than the Swedish army in the Seven Years War of 1756–1763. His third son Fabian Gottlieb Benjamin Billingshausen was born at Lahhentagge on 20 September 1778 and baptized like his ancestors on 26 September 1778 in St Michael’s (Fig. 1). (Perhaps because the family had lost the last of its estates before he entered the navy, Billingshausen rarely if ever used the ‘von’ badge of gentility.) The baptism could have been, but was not, the end of the matter of his names.

When the Russian version was adopted

Veselago’s history of the Naval Cadet Corps shows us that Bellingshausen retained his Lutheran forenames Fabian Gottlieb until 1797, but is not reliable evidence for the surname because the explorer had adopted and publicized the ‘Bellingshausen’ (Беллингсаузенъ) spelling long before that book was written (Veselago, 1852, p. 46). He probably acquired the Russian forenames Faddej Faddeevich when he passed out of the Corps in 1797 and entered service as a midshipman, a commissioned rank in the Imperial Navy. In the narrative of the first Russian circumnavigation of 1803–1806, during which Midshipman Bellingshausen was promoted lieutenant, Captain Adam Krusenstern called him ‘Baron Beelleengsauzen’ (Биллингсаузенъ) (Kruzenshtern, [I. F.], 1809, p. 19). So perhaps Bellingshausen used that form himself until he was about 30. Krusenstern went on calling him Billingshausen in German letters for some

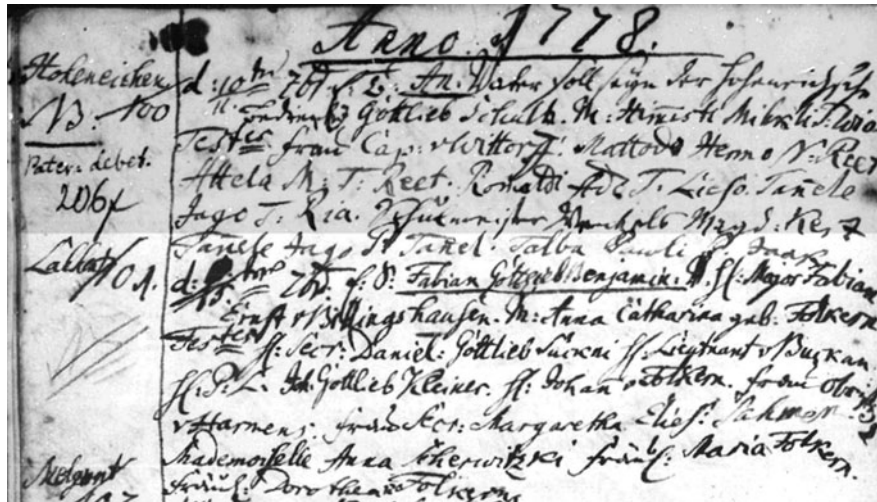


Fig. 1. Entry for Bellingshausen's baptism in the register of St Michael's Church, Kielkond (Kihelkonna). The date numbers for birth and baptism are taken to be a blotched 9 over 15 (O.S.), or 20 and 26 September 1778 of the Common Era. Source: Estonian National Archives, Piece EAA.3134.1.2.



Fig. 2. St Michael's Church, Kihelkonna, Saaremaa. Image created by Vaido Olsar in 2015, and published on the Wikipedia website with the Creative Commons license CC BY-SA 4.0.

years, but in a Russian memoir about the possible goals of an Antarctic expedition and how it would need to be organized, which he submitted in March 1819, the name of his nominee for command looks more like 'Bellingsgauzen', the final Russian form (Kruzenshtern, I. F., 1819, folio 21). (Naturally, Krusenstern went on referring to Cape Bellingsgauzen on Sakhalin with the name he gave it originally.)

Just to confuse the issue, one set of orders cut for the Antarctic expedition was addressed to 'Captain Ballingsgauzen'. But that individual settled matters, more or less, by signing the reports he sent back to the Minister of Marine, Admiral the Marquis de Traversay, as 'Bellingsgauzen'. Not that everything went smoothly, the clerk entrusted with adding an ornate title to the navigational chart of the voyage, possibly after it was shown to the Emperor when he visited the ships on 15 August 1821, metathesized the vowels into 'Beellensgauzen' (Bellingsgauzen, 1963, Sheet 2), and a news report describing the visit did the same (Anon., 1821). But

a year later the expedition's astronomer, Ivan Mikhajlovich Simonov, gave it as 'Belinsgauzen' in a published lecture (1822, p. 6), although that deteriorated to 'Belinghausen' in German translation (Simonow, 1824, p. 3). During the 19th century, the name was still sometimes given as 'Billingshausen' in English, French or German.

In 1847, towards the end of his life, the Admiral signed a German letter to Alexander von Meyerndorff as 'Bellingshausen', the name by which he came to be known outside Russia.

Why that Russian version?

As we have seen, although the Ösel family were Billingshausens by the 18th century their ancestors had spelled the name in various ways, such as Billingshusen, Billenhusen, Bellinghusen, Bellinkhausen etc. (Russwurm, 1870, p. 5). In searchable printed texts after 1500, the name is rare, but 'Bel' varieties are almost



Fig. 3. Coat of arms and signature of Major-General Johann Eberhardh von Billingshusen (1604–1651) of Reval (Tallinn). Sources: Russwurm (1870) and <http://www.30jaehrigerkrieg.de/>.

as common as ‘Bil’. Before 1778 ‘Billingshausen’ scores 7 but ‘Bellingshausen’ 4 (Anon, 1692, p. 392). When some group of Billingshausens (or Bellingshausen alone) decided to establish a Russian version of their name, given that Russia was where they and their descendants would be pursuing their careers for the foreseeable future, they would have been faced with certain considerations. Ideally, the first, stressed vowel needed to be short, so that Krusenstern’s ‘Beelleensgauzen’ may not have appealed. True, the Arctic explorer Friedrich Benjamin Lütke settled for ‘Leetke’ (Лутке), but the ‘ü’ in his name was longer than the two ‘i’s in Billingshausen. Next, although the Russian alphabet included the roman letter ‘i’ back then, it was a subordinate vowel, only used with another vowel and never by itself between consonants. With Billingsgauzen (Биллинггаузен) unavailable, Belleensgauzen, close to historical precedents, would have been an attractive option, the more so because the second syllable, being unstressed, sounds more or less like ‘in’, and is usually so transliterated. As for the ‘g’, that was the usual transliteration for ‘h’, which Russian does not have. Educated people, aware that this was a German name, may have pronounced that Russian ‘g’ as ‘h’. By chance however, anyone using the spelling pronunciation, as Russians generally do today, comes close to early variants like ‘Bellinkhausen’. (There is no native ‘ng’ sound, but some foreign words containing it, such as ‘gangrene’ and ‘penguin’, have been imported.)

And there this trivial matter might be left, not before time, but for a telling counter-example. The English mariner Joseph Billings (1758–1806) served in Cook’s third expedition to the Pacific and then joined the Russian Navy, where he specialized in exploration and survey and rose to the rank of commodore (captain-commander). His name was given in Russian as Beelleens (Биллингс), with two longish i’s and the foreign ‘ng’, e.g. by his deputy (and successor in command) during an extended Arctic expedition, Gavriil Andreevich Sarychev (1763–1831) (Sarychev, 1802, title). Perhaps Billings had chosen that spelling before he knew much Russian, but no wonder Krusenstern opted for ‘Beelleensgauzen’ in 1809.

Acknowledgments. The author would like to thank Dr Bernd Warlich, who opens the contents of his website on the Thirty Years War (<http://www.30jaehrigerkrieg.de/>) for public use, including the page on Major-General Billingshusen, and once again Dr Erki Tammiksaar, of the Centre for Science Studies in Tartu, for his guidance on matters archival and Estonian.

Financial support. None.

Conflict of interest. None.

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