

What's In a (Dog's) Name?

The fascinating world of Russian canine names, old and new.

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

September 02, 2022



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Тузик: Ace (classic dog name)

When I moved to Riga, the first morning I was woken up by the unmistakable pitter patter of little dog paws in the apartment above me. Later that day when I was walking my dog, we met the pitter-patterer: a very friendly, sweet-natured dog of mixed, rather confused origins – short legs, sturdy body, delicate face – with the charming name of Фантик.

Фантик is a candy wrapper. In the Soviet period candy wrappers were some of the few brightly colored and cheery objects you could find, so delightful that little kids saved and traded them. Фантик can be something cute, or a little thingamajig. And it's a good name for the cheery little dog who immediately became my dog's BFF (best friend forever).

Dog names are a Thing. I think every nation/language/country has their own set of unspoken

— or spoken — rules about the right sort of names for dogs, be they mutts or pedigreed pooches who get long, aristocratic names that must begin with a certain letter of the alphabet.

In the old days Russian dogs were usually given names that described their coloring or characters. So at manor houses and on farms you might have found Умник (Smarty); Молчан (Silent); or Буран (Snowy — буран is a blinding snowstorm). Жучка or Жук is the name for a black dog (жук — beetle — is black). He might pal around with Белка (Whitey); Снежок (Snowy) and Каштанка (Chestnut, for brown dogs).

One source writes that some common Russian dog names are derived from foreign words. For example, Трезор is from the French trésor (Treasure); Бобби is recognizably Bobby; and even that seeming absolutely Russian Шарик is actually from the Polish word szary that means gray. I'm not sure about that last one. Today it's often given to round little fluffy pups — шар is a globe or ball.

Today vets and canine experts suggest that dog owners continue this tradition and pick a name that fits their dog — that is, don't call your mini-poodle Вулкан (Volcano). This is good advice, but in my previous dog park there was a pug (мопс) named Шрек (Shrek) that seemed to be appropriate. Big dog energy in a small, panting package.

They also advise a name that is short and doesn't sound like a command. You shouldn't name your dog Фуфу and then shout Фу! (Bad!) every time she does something wrong. It's also good to give your dog a relatively original name. Otherwise, if you call out Тузик! (Ace!) Шарик! (Fluffy!) seven dogs might come running. For almost the same reason they advise against giving dogs people names so that small children don't dash through the park toward you when you are calling Соня (Sonya) and Дима (Dima). Awkward. Parents are definitely not amused.

If you have a best friend sort of dog, you might call him Друг or the diminutive Дружок (Friend); Тим or Тимка (Timmy); or Бим, the Russian equivalent of Fido. Fido (faithful in Latin) was a dog in Italy who would meet his master at the bus stop after work every day. During WWII, his master was killed in a bombing raid and never came home. But Fido continued to wait at the bus stop for another 14 years until his death.

Бим is best known from the story Белый Бим Чёрное Ухо (White Beem Black Ear) by Gavrill Troyepolsky that was written in 1971 and made into a film in 1977. It's a seven-handkerchief story of a dog who waits for his master to come home from the hospital but tragically dies before his owner is released and finds him. I'd cry all the time if I had a dog named Бим, but I guess Бим is everyone's model of a great, faithful, loving dog.

Guard dogs get scary names — Клык (Fang); Гроза (Storm); Гром (Thunder) or names of planets and leaders: Марс (Mars); Зенит (Zenith) and Цезарь (Caesar). Guard dogs also get names that seem Orientalist to me: Казбек (Kazbek, a mountain on the Russian-Georgian border); Султан (Sultan); and Мухтар (Mukhtar, a common name in Central Asia and the Caucasus, and the name of a heroic dog in a television series — think "Lassie" only a German shepherd rather than a collie).

Hunting dogs have the most interesting names. In the old days their names were commands: Догоняй (Catch!); Сокрушай (Crush!); Хватай (Grab!) and Замечай (Find!). Today the

names are more likely to be about speed: Пуля (Bullet); Стрела (Arrow); Выстрел (Shot); Ветер (Wind); and Сокол (Hawk).

Huskies and other northern dogs might be Арктика (Arctic); Зима (Winter); Буря (Tempest) or Тайга (Taiga).

And cute little fluffy or scruffy dogs are Бублик (Ringtail); Буся or Бусинка (from the word for bead); Пончик (Roly-Poly or Donut); Пушок (Fluffy); or any number of sweet-sounding little puffs of sound: Мушка, Боня, Кузя.

In my book, the best dog names were given by Anton Chekhov. He had two mutts named Тузик and Каштанка, and later was given two dachshund puppies from one of the first breeders of dachshunds in Russia. Chekhov, who was a doctor as well as a writer, called them Бром (Bromine) and Хина (Quinine). He wrote that Brom was ловок и гибок (clever and agile) while Khina was неуклюжа, толста, ленива и лукава (clumsy, fat, lazy and sneaky).

I suspect he loved Khina most of all.

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2022/09/02/whats-in-a-dogs-name-a78708>