Wolfgang Ahrens

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0002-8649-1482

⌂ York University

🌐 Toronto, Canada

Sheila Embleton

✉ embleton@yorku.ca

ⓘ https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7245-1845

⌂ York University

🌐 Toronto, Canada

Baltic Germans in the Russian Imperial Navy: Navigators, Explorers, and Contributors to Place Naming

Abstract

From the 13th century onwards, Germans spread northeastwards along the Baltic coast, the area now occupied by Lithuania, Latvia, Estonia, the St. Petersburg region of Russia, and Finland. Most of these Germans were active as merchants. While for most of this period Lithuania had Poland as an overlord and Finland had Sweden, in Estonia, Livonia, and Courland (now Estonia and Latvia) the Germans soon formed the ruling class. Not only were they merchants, landowners and military leaders, but they also basically formed the government of these regions. In 1710, Russia became the new overlord of these regions. As a result, the Germans in this area were obliged to serve in the Russian Imperial forces. The Germans rapidly gained leading positions in these forces. In the Russian Imperial Navy, Baltic German captains sailed in the North Pacific area, particularly along the coasts of Siberia and Alaska. We will look at some of these captains and their role in naming places they visited and having places named after them. Among the most prominent are Adam Johann von Krusenstern, Ferdinand von Wrangel, Fabian von Bellingshausen and Otto von Kotzebue.

1. Brief historical overview of the Baltic Germans

From the thirteenth century onwards, Germans spread along the eastern coast of the Baltic Sea. While they were never more than 10% of the population in any of the regions, they were very prominent as merchants, teachers, doctors, architects, clergymen and administrators. In addition, in many areas they owned large estates together with their main manors. Most of these Germans were of an educated class and many of them belonged to the lower nobility (indicated by a *von* in their names). German became the language of many official documents in these areas. These areas comprised Finland, Estonia, Lithuania, Courland and Livonia (the latter two for the most part form today's Latvia). Over the centuries, these countries had one of Poland, Sweden or Russia as an overlord country. Courland for a while during the 17th and 18th centuries enjoyed a form of independence. The country's rulers were German, for instance the Kettler and Biron families who supplied respectively seven and three of the Courland dukes.

What happened to this German-speaking population, known as the Baltic Germans? After the First World War, Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania became independent. A wave of nationalism swept the new states and the large estates of the Germans were expropriated. As a consequence a large number of the Germans left for Germany. In 1939, Germany signed a non-aggression treaty with Russia, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact. This resulted in fear that Russia would invade Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania. Germany created a policy of "Heim ins Reich" (loosely translatable as "Return to the Homeland, the German Reich") and in December 1939 and early 1940 large numbers of Baltic Germans left for Germany; there were large transports of Baltic Germans by ship. After the Second World War, the Russians expelled most of the Germans that were still left in the Baltic countries. If we take Estonia as an example, we can follow the effects of these historical events in the number of ethnic Germans according to the Estonian census (Statistics Estonia, n.d.; "Demographics of Estonia", 2021); especially in later years, 'ethnic Germans' as a census category will contain many who are not historically or culturally 'Baltic Germans'. In 1897, there were 33,362 ethnic Germans (3.5% of the population); in 1922, 18,319 (1.7%); in 1934, 16,346 (1.5%); in 1959, only 670 (0.1%); in 1970, 7,850 (0.6%); in 1989, 3,466 (0.2%); in 2000, 1,870 (0.1%); in 2011, 1,544 (0.1%); and in 2021, 2,570 (0.2%).

There has been a slight increase in the number of ethnic Germans in recent years, but their number is a tiny fraction of the total population.

We will now return to the historical period relevant to our topic.

2. Baltic Germans in the Russian Imperial Navy

In the early 18th century, Russia became overlord of Estonia, Courland and Livonia. Many German-speaking families sent their sons to Russian military academies, with the result that these German speakers rose to senior positions in the various Russian forces. In the army, we have such generals as Alexander Wilhelm Andreas Freiherr [Baron] von Kaulbars (1844–1925) who was a general of the Russian Cavalry, but who also was one of the originators of the Russian air force during the First World War; and Paul von Rennenkampf (1854–1918), a general in the Russian Army during the First World War, commanded the Russian First Army during the battle at Tannenberg in East Prussia (Rennenkampf was executed by the Bolsheviks in 1918). The Russians lost this battle; the German army was commanded by Paul von Hindenburg (not a Baltic German), who later became president of Germany. In the Russian Imperial Navy in the nineteenth century, there were Baltic German captains who, as explorers and sailors across all of the world oceans, acted as representatives of Russia. They were particularly important in maintaining the Russian presence in eastern Siberia and Alaska.

2.1. Von Krusenstern

One of the most prominent Baltic German captains was Adam Johann von Krusenstern (1770–1846; Ivan Fyodorovich Kruzenshtern in Russian). He is known for being the first to captain a Russian ship in a circumnavigation of the globe (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911b). He set out in 1803 and returned to St. Petersburg in 1806. He had sailed around Cape Horn to the northern Pacific, Japan and Eastern Siberia. After this, he returned via the Cape of Good Hope. He wrote a book reporting on his trip: "Reise um die Welt in den Jahren 1803,

1804, 1805 und 1806 auf Befehl seiner Kaiserlichen Majestaet Alexander des Ersten auf den Schiffen Nadeshda und Newa unter dem Kommando des Capitaens von der Kaiserl. Marine A. J. von Krusenstern". It was published in 1811 and soon translations appeared in English, French, Dutch, Danish, Swedish and Italian (but not in Russian).

Several locations were named in his honour. There is a *Cape Krusenstern* in Northwest Alaska and a group of small uninhabited islands (*Krusenstern Islands*) in the Kara Sea, north of Siberia, south of Novaya Zemlya. For a time also Little Diomede Island in the Bering Sea and the Ailuk Atoll in the Marshall Islands carried the name of *Krusenstern Island*. There is even a crater on the Moon bearing the *Krusenstern* name.

There are also two ships named in his honour: the Russian ice-breaker *Ivan Kruzenshtern* and the Russian training tall ship *Kruzenshtern*. For the 200th anniversary of Krusenstern's circumnavigation, the tall ship retraced his route in 2005–2006.

Von Krusenstern published an atlas, "Atlas de L'Océan Pacifique", in 1824 and a second edition later in 1835. In it, he decided to change the name of the Hervey Islands (named by Captain James Cook in honour of Augustus John Hervey, 3rd Earl Bristol, who was Lord of the Admiralty in 1775; actually Cook named only one uninhabited island, Manuae, but the name was given later to all 15 islands in the group). Von Krusenstern gave the southern Hervey islands the name Cook Islands, in honour of Captain Cook. The whole of the island group was given the name of Cook Islands in 1901 by New Zealand. Now there is a discussion in the islands as to whether to rename them in order to remove a vestige of the colonization by Great Britain.

Another Baltic German, Otto von Kotzebue (more on him below), later discovered the Tikehau atoll, in the Tuamoto Archipelago, 12 kilometres west of Rangiroa, 340 kilometres northeast of Tahiti, and named the atoll after *von Krusenstern*. It lost this name when the French took over these islands and gave it its new native name, Tikehau.

On the von Krusenstern voyage, there were other Baltic Germans. Noteworthy were a young officer Fabian Gottlieb Thaddeus von Bellingshausen (1778–1852; Faddej Faddeevich Bellinsgauzen in Russian), and a sixteen-year-old Otto von Kotzebue (1787–1846). Both von Bellingshausen and von Kotzebue would later make a name for themselves with their own voyages of exploration and world circumnavigation. All of them also made significant contributions to naming.

2.2. Von Bellingshausen

Von Bellingshausen was appointed to command a Russian circumnavigation of the globe in 1819–1821 (Armstrong, 1971; Tammiksaar, 2016). Rather than heading for Alaska and the Northern Pacific, he headed for the Southern Pacific and the Antarctic area. He was the first explorer to see land in the Antarctic on January 27, 1820 and he was the first explorer to discover the continent itself and sail completely around it, circumnavigating it twice. Several locations have been named in his honour: *Bellingshausen Island*, part of the South Sandwich Islands, *Bellingshausen Sea* in the Southern Ocean and *Bellingshausen Station*, the Russian Base in the Antarctic. The airstrip on this Russian base also serves other nearby bases, including an American base. Touristic tours by air from Punta Arenas in Chile and Ushuaia in Argentina to the Antarctic land on the *Bellingshausen airstrip.* Unusually, his first name was given to the uninhabited *Faddey islands*[1] in the Laptev Sea north of Siberia. Other than with saints and royalty it is extremely unusual to use a man's first name for a place name; sometimes the full name occurs, but just a first name is unusual (Embleton, 1983).

Not only do we see his name in the Antarctic. In the Pacific, the Motu One atoll (Motu One = Sandy Land) in the Society Islands (14 islands, including Tahiti, Bora Bora and Moorea) was earlier also known as *Bellingshausen atoll*. His name even appears beyond Earth. *Bellinsauzen*[2] is a crater on the far side of the moon and *3659 Bellingshausen* is a minor planet outside our solar system, discovered by a Russian astronomer in 1969.

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[1] *Faddey* is the Russian version of Thaddeus, von Bellingshausen's first name. There may be another possible explanation. One of the anonymous reviewers of this paper remarks that Russian Wikipedia says that these islands were named after saint Faddey in 1739, not after Bellingshausen's first name, and ascribes the naming to Khariton Laptev ("Ostrova Faddeya", 2023). Detailed archival research, impossible for us to carry out, might resolve the difference. Toponymy in North America and the Caribbean has many examples where a place is named after a saint, but that is also the first name of the founder/discoverer.

[2] *Bellinsauzen* is the Russian version of *Bellingshausen*, once the Cyrillic script has been transliterated into Roman letters.

2.3. Von Kotzebue

The second young Baltic German sailor who accompanied von Krusenstern on his voyage was Otto von Kotzebue[3] (Encyclopaedia Britannica, 1911a; "Otto von Kotzebue", 2018; Kau Manor, n.d.). Otto von Kotzebue later commanded his own two voyages into the Pacific, his first in 1815–1818 and his second in 1823–1826. Von Kotzebue discovered and named the Romanzov Islands.[4] As well, he named the Rurik Islands, after his ship, the brig *Rurik*. Von Kotzebue continued his travels along the Alaskan coast and discovered and named *Kotzebue Sound*. Now there is a town located on this sound which was named *Kotzebue* in his honour in 1861. Kotzebue has about 3,200 inhabitants and is a major centre in Alaska, located about 33 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

The purpose of von Kotzebue's second voyage (1823–1826) was to bring military reinforcements to Kamchatka on the Eastern Russian Asian Coast. However, the voyage also contributed to correcting existing charts and collecting new botanical and zoological specimens. A species of butterfly in the Philippines (*Pachliopta kotzebuea*) and the North American flower, *Kotzebue's grass of Parnassus* (*Parnassia kotzebuei*), were named after him (Kau Manor, n.d.). His family's coat of arms features the California poppy (*Eschscholzia californica*, see below).

2.4. Von Eschscholtz

Another Baltic German, Johann Friedrich Gustav von Eschscholtz (1793–1830), signed on for both of Kotzebue's voyages. He acted as the medical officer, having obtained his medical degree from the University at Dorpat just before the first voyage.[5] He also was very interested in flora, insects and butterflies in destinations such as California and Hawaii (McKelvey, 1998), and his botanical and insect collections were deposited at the natural museums of the universities in Dorpat (Tartu) and Moscow.

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[3] Otto von Kotzebue's father, August von Kotzebue, was a prominent German playwright of conservative leanings, assassinated in 1819 by a militant member of the Burschenschaften (student associations with liberal ideas, founded in the 19th century in Germany).

[4] Romanzov is derived from Nikolay Rumyantsev, the Chancellor of the Russian Empire, who financed the Kotzbue expedition.

[5] Dorpat, in Estonia, is now Tartu.

Von Kotzebue named an atoll in the Marshall Islands in Eschscholtz's honour, as well as a small bay east of Kotzebue Sound in Alaska. Adalbert von Chamisso (not a Baltic German), the botanist on the first von Kotzebue voyage named the California poppy in von Eschscholtz's honour, *Eschschol-zia californica*. Von Chamisso, born in France, is better known as a poet and short story writer of the German Romantic period; he was also the director of the Berlin Botanical Gardens.

The *Eschscholtz Atoll* was also named the Bikini Atoll during the German colonial period of the Marshall Islands (1899–1914). When it became a Japanese territory during and after the First World War both names seem to have been used. After the Second World War, the Marshall Islands became a territory of the US and the atoll from 1946 onwards was exclusively named Bikini Atoll. Bikini is derived from the Marshallese word *Pikinni* (*pik* means 'place or land' and *ni* is 'coconut'). Shortly after the US exploded their first two atomic bombs on the island, a French fashion designer, Louis Réand, introduced a two-piece bathing suit he considered like an atomic explosion in the fashion world. Perhaps also there was a faulty assumption that *bi* meant 'two' and *ini* made it sound little. Later, this faulty assumption led to an actual reanalysis of the word with *bi* meaning "two", leading to the creation of *monokini* (bottom half of a bikini only) and in 2020 *trikini* (a bikini with matching face mask).

2.5. Von Wrangel

Of the Baltic German sailors and explorers not associated with the von Krusenstern expeditions, perhaps Ferdinand Friedrich Georg Ludwig Freiherr [Baron] von Wrangel (1797–1870) is the most noteworthy. He rose to the rank of Admiral and was Minister of the Navy. He also was founder of the Russian Geographic Society. He made several journeys to Alaska and the Russian settlements in California. He made a journey there overland through Siberia (O'Grady, 2001) and two journeys by sea (1817–1819 and 1825–1827), which ended up as circumnavigations of the earth. He acted as resident Chief Manager of the Russian-American Company in Novo-Arkhangelsk/New Archangel, the capital of Russian America from 1808 to 1867, when Russia sold Alaska to the US (Pierce, 1990, p. 547). Novo-Arkhangelsk/New Archangel is now Sitka, population about 8,900. Von Wrangel was honoured by various place names in Alaska: *Wrangell Island*, *Cape Wrangell*, *Wrangell-Saint Elias National Park*,

Wrangell Mountains, and a large volcano, *Mount Wrangell*. There is also a small town named *Wrangell* with a population of about 2,300. A Russian island in the Chukchi Sea, part of the Arctic Ocean, is named *Wrangel Island* (north of the most eastern part of Siberia). Also, a deeper part of the Arctic Ocean north of Siberia is called the *Wrangel Plain*. It should be noted that in Alaska, *Wrangel* is spelled with two *L*'s and in Russia with one. However, it is the same person honoured in both locations with place and sea names.

There are three other Baltic German individuals who can be especially mentioned as leaving an imprint on place names: von Hagemeister, von Lütke and von Middendorff.

2.6. Von Hagemeister

Ludwig Karl August von Hagemeister (1780–1833; also known in Russian as Leonty Andrianovich Gagemeyster), after serving as a volunteer midshipman in the Russian Imperial Navy from 1795, joined the British Royal Navy in 1802. In 1806, he left the British Navy when he was appointed captain of the Russian ship *Newa* (one of Krusenstern's ships – see the title of Krusenstern's publication above). He travelled to Eastern Siberia and Alaska (Pierce, 1990, pp. 185–187). On his voyage to New Archangel (now Sitka) he stopped in Australia – the first Russian ship to do so. He also stopped in Hawaii to pick up a load of salt, a necessary preservative in those days. In 1810, he departed for his journey back to St. Petersburg. He did this by travelling overland through Siberia. Von Hagemeister started his second trip to New Archangel in 1816. The purpose of this trip was to investigate the Russian administration in Alaska, as some problems with the administration's finances had been reported. While in New Archangel, von Hagemeister dismissed the manager of the Russian-American Company and assumed the post for part of the year 1818. He returned to Russia in October 1818. In 1828–1829, von Hagemeister made his third circumnavigation of the world. On his way back to New Archangel, von Hagemeister spent some time in the area of the Marshall Islands, plotting their exact location and, in particular, he surveyed the Menshikov Atoll (now Kwajalein, one of the world's largest coral atolls). In Alaska, *Hagemeister Island* and next to it, the *Hagemeister Strait*, were named after him.

2.7. Von Lütke

Friedrich Benjamin Graf [Count/Earl] von Lütke (1797–1882) was an Arctic explorer, geographer and mariner, rising to the rank of Admiral in 1855 (Alekseev, 1996). From 1817 to 1819, he was on a world voyage on the ship *Kamchatka*, captained by Vasily Golovin. One of his crewmates was Ferdinand von Wrangel. A group of islands in Franz Josef Land, and another in the Nordenskiöld Archipelago, as well as a strait between Kamchatka and Karaginsky Island were named after von Lütke. His main contribution was in 1827, with his surveys of the Pribilof and Commander Islands and the Siberian coast. He also named some geographic features of the Alaska coast, such as the Walrus, Kritskoi and Kudobin islands. Named after him in Alaska was *Cape Lütke* and in the Arctic Ocean 350 kilometres north of Svalbard/Spitsbergen, we have the *Lütke/Litke Deep*,[6] 5,400 meters/17,881 feet below sea level.

2.8. Von Middendorff

Alexander Theodor von Middendorff (1815–1894) was not connected to the navy. He was a scientist with multiple interests (Tammiksaar & Stone, 2007). He studied medicine at Dorpat (Tartu) University and graduated in 1837 with a thesis written in Latin. Then he studied for two years at four different German universities. In 1839, he became an Assistant Professor of Zoology at Kiev University. In 1840, he travelled through Russian and Norwegian Lapland and crossed the Kola Peninsula on foot. While there, he collected zoological and botanical specimens. Later, in 1843–1845, he travelled to the Taymyr Peninsula and the Northern and Eastern regions of Siberia. He charted this entire area and again collected zoological and botanical specimens. He published a description of this trip in German ("Reise in den äußersten Norden und Osten Sibiriens"). The Latin name for the Kodiak bear recalls Middendorff: *Ursus arctos middendorffi*. There are place names in northern Siberia with his name: *Middendorff Bay* on the Taymyr Peninsula and *Cape Middendorff* on Novaya Zemlya.

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[6] Lütke is Litke in Russian.

3. Conclusions

The Baltic German navigators and explorers we have mentioned all made their journeys in the first half of the nineteenth century, a time when there were still areas of the world not known to Europeans. In particular, there were still islands in the Pacific Ocean, uncharted parts of the north-west coast of North America, the north coast of Siberia and the islands lying off its coast, as well as all of the Antarctic, whose interior of course also had yet to be charted.

It was common not only to have sailors on board, but also zoologists, botanists, and ornithologists, as well as painters and sketch artists to capture new geographical features and also inhabitants that looked very different from Europeans. This was common on the ships from all nations, not only the German-Russian ones. Another feature was that captains, as well as some other members of the crew, kept careful notes of their voyage. These notes were often published and reports of this kind often ran to three or four volumes. While the officers on ships captained by Baltic Germans were German-speaking, for the most part, the ordinary sailors were Russian-speaking. So the officers were usually bilingual (German and Russian). Ships arriving back in Europe often carried extensive collections of mounted beetles, butterflies and insects, and many examples of different plants and fruits. Of course, these newly discovered plants and insects were mostly given new names, often referring to sponsors of expeditions or to senior members of the crew. That topic will have to wait for future onomastic research.

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