

## The politics of naming warships

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The name of a merchant ship presumably represents a concept that the owner wants to publicize, while the name of a warship represents a concept that the state wants to publicize. This principle goes back as far as recorded history extends. The earliest name of a ship that has come down to us was one from the twenty-seventh century BC, in the reign of Pharaoh Sneferu. She was called *Praise of the Two Lands*, which refers to the union of Upper and Lower Egypt, so it is an example of the state praising its own achievements (Kennedy 1974, 14–18). A Greek inscription from the fourth century BC gives a list of 260 Athenian triremes, among which we find some mythological names (*Thetis* or *Danae*), some ships named for desirable qualities (*Courage* or *Victory*) and some named for swift or powerful animals (*Gazelle* or *She-wolf*). Several were named for the self-proclaimed virtues of the state: *Democracy*, *Freedom* or *Good Government* (Casson 1971, 350–54). All these could be paralleled in the modern period. But what happens when the state authorities disagree about what image they want to present, or when the principles of the state actually change?

The first example of this kind that I have traced occurs in the sixteenth century. The custom had already grown up in England that a major warship ought to be named after the currently reigning monarch: the first such vessel was Henry VIII's great ship *Henry Grace à Dieu* of 1514, which was renamed *Edward* under Edward VI (Colledge and Warlow 2006, 161). So during the short reign of Philip and Mary, a ship was indeed named the *Philip and Mary*. She kept her name until 1584, when Queen Elizabeth, being about to go to war with Spain, must have considered it unfitting to fight King Philip with a ship which shared his name, and so she was renamed the *Nonpareil* (Rodger 1997, 475–83).

But this was nothing compared to the upheavals that would afflict England, and its Navy, in the seventeenth century. Having abolished the monarchy in 1649, the Commonwealth, naturally enough, lost no time in renaming the *Charles* the *Liberty*, and the *Henrietta Maria* the *Paragon* (Capp 1989, 52–53). New ships also took a republican turn, with the *Speaker* and the *Fairfax*—the latter for Sir Thomas, Lord Fairfax, the leading Parliamentary general. After Cromwell’s military coup in 1653, nearly every major new warship was named after a Parliamentary victory in the Civil War, like those named after the battles of Dunbar (1650) and Naseby (1645). Later, when he had acquired virtually royal powers, he reverted to more conventional names, such as *London* or *Leopard* (Tanner 1903) but significantly named a ship *Richard* for his eldest son and heir, as if Richard had been a prince (Capp 1989, 5; Seymour 1990, 317–24).

In 1660, when Charles II was restored, the Parliamentary authorities sent over their most impressive warship to bring him back: it was the *Naseby*. Almost as soon as he got on board, the King renamed her *Royal Charles*, and nearly every other major vessel of the previous twelve years had to be given more traditional names also, such as the *Revenge* (previously the *Newbury*) or the *Dreadnought* (previously the *Torrington*). The *Fairfax* (the second one, by this time) was not renamed, for Sir Thomas had come over to the Royalist side (Tanner 1903, 265).

A participant at the SNSBI conference in Glasgow (April 2013) asked whether in 1707 the now British Royal Navy had renamed Scottish warships acquired at the Union. It did so, but the Scottish Navy was so tiny that this was not a controversial matter: there were only the frigates *Royal William*, *Royal Mary*, and *Dumbarton Castle*. The English Navy already possessed a *Royal William* and a *Mary*, so the first two were renamed *Edinburgh* and *Glasgow* respectively (Grant 1914, 303–07); the *Dumbarton Castle* retained her name, and all have been used again since that period.

It may also be of relevance in this context to mention that the first ship of the Royal Navy to be named *Britannia* had been ordered in 1677, a

few years after Charles II had placed the figure of Britannia on the copper coinage. She was a 100-gun ship, and the name was used for a series of first-rates thereafter (Winfield 2007, 1). However, it was not until 1790 that a first-rate named *Hibernia* was ordered, and that choice of name must surely have been a gesture to national feeling in Ireland, whose parliament had recently (though temporarily) regained its traditional powers. The first *Caledonia*, also a first-rate, followed in 1794; whereas there had been no corresponding nationalist movement in Scotland at the time, it may be significant that in that year the influential Scottish Vice-Admiral Sir Charles Middleton (who much later was honoured by the battleship *Barham*, named for his title as a peer) had been made a member of the Admiralty (Winfield 2005, 6–7).

An even greater upheaval came with the French Revolution. When the Republic was proclaimed in 1792, all names with any royal association had to be changed, so that for instance the *Royal Louis* became the *Republicain* and the *Dauphin Royal*, named for the heir to the throne, became the *Sans-culotte* ‘The man without breeches’, after those members of the radical left who wore trousers, which were considered more democratic. This kind of political name was also adopted for new ships, such as the *Droits de l’Homme* ‘The rights of man’. But in turn, after the end of the Reign of Terror in 1794, some of the ultra-republican names were themselves regarded as undesirable, so that the *Montagne* ‘The Mountain’, named for the elevated seats in the National Assembly where the extremists sat, had to be renamed the *Peuple* ‘People’. The *Sans-culotte* changed again to the *Orient*.<sup>1</sup> In 1804 Napoleon declared himself Emperor, and all overtly republican names had to be changed, so that the *Peuple* now became the *Majestueux* ‘Majestic’. Napoleon was

<sup>1</sup> On which, in the once famous poem by Felicia Dorothea Hemans, ‘The boy stood on the burning deck’ as she was blown up. The boy was the son of Captain Casabianca, who also died, and his name has been given to a succession of French warships.

fond of naming ships after French victories—for instance the *Austerlitz*, *Marengo*, and *Rivoli*—and this style of nomenclature proved acceptable even to the restored monarchy in 1814, so it did not require such wholesale renamings as there had been previously (Martinsen 1994, 17–21).

However, it did not always require a revolution to rename ships; it could happen even in a stable democracy. During the American Civil War, there had been an enormous expansion of the U.S. Navy. Lincoln's Secretary of the Navy, Gideon Welles, favoured Native American names for the most part, thus endowing the fleet with such names as *Ammonoosuc* and *Manayunk* (both river-names). However in 1869, he retired, and his successor decided to change most of these for more conventional ones: the large steam frigates got the names of states like the old ships of the line, so the *Ammonoosuc* became the more manageable *Iowa*, and the armoured monitors mostly got classical names, so the *Manayunk* became the *Ajax*. A couple of months later, yet another new Secretary of the Navy came into office, and changed nearly all the names back again! He need not have bothered, as most of them were scrapped before long (Gardiner 1979, 121–27).

It was about this time that France became a republic again; but for many years, the monarchists did not give up hope, and many held high positions in the armed forces. So, even in the 1890s, the names of French battleships and cruisers were dominated by those of historical figures, often reaching back to the days of the monarchy; the *Jeanne d'Arc*, *Charlemagne* and even the *Henri IV* (the ideal French King). But in 1899, the conflicts of the Dreyfus Case culminated in the revelation that the charges of espionage made against Captain Dreyfus by right-wing officers were unfounded. This brought a strongly republican and secular government to power (Johnson 1999, 134–35), and this was reflected in the names of new ships. The battleships began to take the names of republican virtues, like *Démocratie* and *Justice*, and later, several got the names of heroes of the Revolution like Danton and Mirabeau (though Robespierre was still beyond the pale). Meanwhile several cruisers were

named for more recent republicans like Victor Hugo or Léon Gambetta. However, this ultra-republican style did not persist after about 1910 or so (*Jane's Fighting Ships*, 1905–06, 90–126; Labayle Couhat 1974, 14–63).

Even Britain was not exempt from disputes about warship names. At the height of the naval race with Germany, Winston Churchill became First Lord of the Admiralty, and when proposing the names for the latest batch of battleships in 1911 he suggested *Oliver Cromwell* for one of them. When this was put to the King, he demurred at the choice of the name of England's greatest republican, and astutely suggested substituting the name *Marlborough* after Churchill's illustrious ancestor. A year later, Churchill suggested Cromwell's name again, this time linking it with a set of three famous monarchs, such as *Queen Elizabeth*: but again King George would not have it (Churchill 1967, 646–54). Thirty years later, however, Churchill finally got his way, but had to be content with naming a destroyer (Lenton and Colledge 1964, 120).

At the beginning of the First World War, the Admiralty decided to build a series of monitors for coastal bombardment, armed with whatever heavy guns could be procured. Because of their purpose, they were named for generals, *Sir John Moore* and so on. To honour Britain's French allies, Churchill had the largest pair named *Marshal Ney* and *Marshal Soult*. Having acquired a set of 14-inch guns from the United States to arm four more, he decided it would be appropriate to give them the names of American Civil War heroes, *Robert E. Lee* and the like (at this time it would have been unthinkable for the U.S. Navy itself to name a ship after a Confederate general). But on hearing of the proposal, the U.S. Government protested that it did not want attention drawn to the origin of the guns in neutral America; so the names were changed to those of British generals and the *Lee* became the *Raglan* after the Crimean War leader (Buxton 2008, 21–24).

The Russian Revolution of 1917 gave rise to the most comprehensive renaming of warships ever seen, for the Communists objected not only to names associated with the monarchy or the church, but to those from Russian history as well. Thus two of the surviving battleships which had

been named for Russian battles, *Gangut* (from the naval victory over the Swedes in 1714) and *Sevastopol* (the defence of which in the Crimean War, though ultimately unsuccessful, was considered a heroic action), became the *October Revolution* and the *Paris Commune*. Destroyers were named after revolutionary heroes dead or alive: *Lenin*, *Kalinin*, *Stalin*, *Karl Liebknecht*; but not Rosa Luxemburg, because she had disagreed with Lenin (Meister 1972, 24–25, 95–102). A similar policy was applied to new ships. Thus a class of submarines had the names of different groups of revolutionaries past and present; *Marxist*, *Garibaldist*, even *Chartist*. When these names ran out, the Red Navy resorted to the names of communist leaders in adjectival form, thus *Kirovets* ‘Follower of Kirov’. But they were not to know that some of the current leaders were shortly to be proclaimed traitors and shot: when it was proposed to name a submarine *Yezhovets* in honour of the head of the secret police, it could not have been predicted that before long, to declare yourself a ‘Follower of Yezhov’ would have signed your death warrant. So in the late thirties, submarines were hastily given numbers instead (Kalanov n.d.), and thereafter major warships predominantly received geographical names, such as the large destroyers *Leningrad*, *Moskva*, and *Kharkov* of the late 1930s, or those of Communist heroes who were safely dead, like the cruisers *Chapayev* and *Frunze* (both from Civil War heroes), laid down in 1939 (Meister 1972, 75, 84).

The dictatorships of the Right did not require so much change in warship names. The Fascists of course saw themselves as following in the traditions of Italian patriotism, which had already produced warships such as the battleship *Dante Alighieri* or a whole class of destroyers named for the leading followers of Garibaldi. So they continued in the same style, but occasionally slipping in a Fascist name as if it fitted into the pattern. Thus, in a class of destroyers named for types of soldiers, *Granatiere* ‘Grenadier’ and so on, they included the *Camicia Nera* or ‘Blackshirt’, and in a group of submarines named for patriots, the *Balilla* for the eighteenth-century boy hero after whom the Fascist Youth Movement had been named. Their most overtly political name was given

to the first of their great new battleships, which was called the *Littorio* meaning ‘person associated with a lictor’—the lictor having been a Roman official who carried the emblem of the Fasces before an important dignitary, so that the word was by extension used to mean ‘Fascist’ (Fraccaroli 1968, 19, 59, 107).

It might have been expected that the even more extreme Nazis would have gone farther in the direction of political names, but this was not so. The same principle of sticking to names of a generally patriotic character was usually followed. Thus, among the battleships, names like *Bismarck* and *Gneisenau* (from the Prussian statesman and field-marshal respectively) had been used several times before, and those of First World War heroes like Grand Admiral Tirpitz were a logical progression from these (Lenton 1966, 34, 43, 47). The most remarkable case among the large warships was that of the pocket battleship (as the British called her) *Deutschland*, which had been given that name under the Weimar Republic, quite fittingly, because she was Germany’s first capital ship since the War. But in 1939, Hitler had her renamed *Lützow*, after a nineteenth-century general, because he feared that invidious comparisons might be drawn if she was sunk (as in the end she was) (Von der Porten 1970, 44). To find overtly political names we have to look at the lesser-known auxiliary ships. For instance, the submarine depot ships got names associated with the former German colonies or their founders, like *Tsingtao* or *Carl Peters* (the founder of German East Africa) (Lenton 1966, 119).

In 1945 the fleet of the Third Reich disappeared, and its names with it. But the Soviet Union flourished as never before. During the War (‘The Great Patriotic War’ as it was called), Russian patriotism had been restored. So the old *Paris Commune* became the *Sevastopol* again; but the *October Revolution* obviously could not be changed (Meister 1972, 24–25). New ships could occasionally get the names of old Russian heroes, mixed with the Communist ones, so there were the cruisers *Aleksandr Nevski* and *Admiral Ushakov* alongside the *Sverdlov* and *Zhdanov* (Pavlov 1997, 101). This system meant that when the Soviet Union

eventually fell, it was only necessary to delete the most obviously communist names. The warships of the Russian Federation today thus represent, as arguably does the state, an uneasy combination of Russian patriotism with admiration for Soviet victories. Thus, the four big cruisers of the 1980s, named after Soviet heroes like those of the thirties, were renamed after three Tsarist Admirals, and, significantly, *Peter the Great* (formerly the *Yuri Andropov*). On the other hand, the aircraft carrier named *Baku*, from the capital of Azerbaijan, had to change her name when Azerbaijan seceded, and became the *Admiral Gorshkov* after the Soviet counterpart of the German Admiral Tirpitz (Pavlov 1997, 91, 95). Among the nuclear submarines, even saints' names are beginning to emerge again, *St Nicholas* and *St George the Victorious* just like the old ships of the line (*Jane's Fighting Ships*, 2012–13, 659–60).

It might be thought that the unrevolutionary United States would have no problems of this type, but it does. The problem lies in the fact that the U.S. Congress, unlike the British Parliament, has the power to alter the defence budget item by item. So if the Congress, as it sometimes does, passes a resolution urging the Secretary of the Navy to name a new warship after a particular person, he is wise to heed it. This influence may have odd results. Thus, in the midst of a series of 1970s nuclear submarines named after fish, as they traditionally had been, we find the U.S.S. *Glenard P. Lipscomb* named for a recently deceased Congressman (*Jane's Fighting Ships* 1975–76, 410). This was harmless, if bizarre, but more recently many commentators thought Congress overreached itself in naming a new amphibious assault ship *John P. Murtha*. This senior Congressman may have been a Marine veteran, but, as it turned out, had for years been using his position to divert defence contracts to firms in his constituency.<sup>2</sup> So far, the name has not been altered; but it shows that

<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, the outline at <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/john-p-murtha/gIQA8baN9O\\_topic.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/john-p-murtha/gIQA8baN9O_topic.html)>



as long as states have warships, there will continue to be disputes about what to call them.

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