

REVISING THE HISTORY OF *NITCHEVO* WITH TEXT ARCHIVESMIROŚLAWA PODHAJECKA<sup>1</sup>

## ABSTRACT

This article focuses on the way *nitchevo*, a nineteenth-century Russian borrowing, was adopted into the English language. In order to investigate the history of the word, six digital text archives were considered. The results of the research are promising: not only do they allow one to trace antedatings for both senses, which updates the treatment of *nitchevo* in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED), but they also shed light on its semantic development, spelling variation, and route of transmission. Tellingly, albeit unsurprisingly, the evidence suggests that the press is responsible for boosting the recognition of the word on both sides of the Atlantic. All this indicates that the potential of modern research tools, including British and American newspaper archives, remains to be fully explored.

Keywords: Text archives; *nitchevo*; history; borrowing; loanword; citation; OED.

## 1. Introduction

Being manifestations of language contact, borrowings in the history of English have attracted a good deal of scholarly attention.<sup>2</sup> Suffice it to say that they came to be discussed in individual studies (e.g., Ackerman 1958; Benson 1962; Cannon 1988, 1998; Algeo 1996; Wade 1997; Durkin 2020); monographs (e.g., Serjeantson 1935; Chan & Kwok 1985; Hughes 2000; Pinnavaia 2001; Bator 2010; Schultz 2013, 2016, 2018; Durkin 2014); edited volumes

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1 Institute of Linguistics, University of Opole; Pl. Kopernika 11, 45–040 Opole. [mpodhajecka@uni.opole.pl](mailto:mpodhajecka@uni.opole.pl)

2 A brief description of lexical borrowing, including the typology of borrowings, can be found in Podhajecka (2021: 123–124). It should be noted that differentiating between borrowing and other language contact phenomena, particularly code-switching, is fraught with difficulty. It has been discussed by, among others, Haspelmath (2009: 40–41), Durkin (2009: 173–177, 2014: 8–11), and Poplack (2018: 141–157).

(e.g., Rodríguez Gonzáles 1996; Schreier & Hundt 2013; Wright 2020); and etymological and historical dictionaries, of which the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth, the OED) deserves pride of place. Apart from etymologizing, which consists in tracing borrowings to etyma in the donor languages, lexicographers and researchers alike go to great lengths to collect textual attestations. Documenting the contexts in which the words have been used serves far better than illustrating the sense development, of which stylistic functions are but one feature worthy of mention at this juncture. This paper suggests that a range of digital resources, including British and American newspaper archives, may provide more nuanced qualitative and quantitative information updating the current state of knowledge.

English as a contact language may be investigated from various perspectives, but the fact remains that a sizeable proportion of English vocabulary comes from a handful of languages. The impact of Latin, Greek, and Scandinavian languages on Old English has been well acknowledged (e.g., Bator 2010; Miller 2012; Durkin 2014); Latin and French on Middle English (e.g., Miller 2012; Durkin 2014; Sylvester, Tiddeman & Ingham 2020); and Latin, Greek, French, German, Italian, and Spanish on Modern English (e.g., Algeo 1996; Cannon 1998; Pinnavaia 2001; von Schneidemesser 2002; Schultz 2013, 2016, 2018; Durkin 2014). More recently, these tongues have influenced world Englishes to different degrees (e.g., Bieswanger 2004), affecting not only the lexicon, but also syntax, morphology, and phonology (e.g., Purnell, Salmons & Tepeli 2005).<sup>3</sup>

Other languages have received less attention. Russian, classified as the fourteenth most prolific donor language in the history of English (Durkin 2014: 26), is one of them.<sup>4</sup> This apparent paradox requires an explanation. Of a large pool of Russian words attested in English writings since the mid-sixteenth century, when the British first came into contact with Russians (Eddy & Proshina 2016: 9–10), approximately 500 came to be recorded in British and American dictionaries (Podhajecka 2018: 134). The problem is that they remain unfamiliar to a wide cross-section of English speakers. Although the notion of familiarity may arouse some controversy, most Russian loans refer to native concepts, including those for culture and society (e.g., *tsar*, *muzhik*, and *kulak*), products of the natural world (e.g., *beluga*, *osetr*, and *sevruga*), and politics (e.g., *Bolshevik*, *Soviet*, and *Politburo*). The number of words which have lost their Russian flavour (e.g., *mammoth* and *steppe*) is relatively small (Durkin 2014: 378–379).

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<sup>3</sup> The status of particular words may require an in-depth analysis, as Meier (2000) discovered in relation to German borrowings in AmE.

<sup>4</sup> Durkin's estimate concerns the alphabetical ranges M–R and A–ALZ, i.e., the fully revised portions of OED3.

The third edition of the OED (henceforth, OED3) includes forty newcomers of Russian origin. The majority are items overlooked in the compilation of the first and second editions (Podhajecka 2018: 154), *kompromat* (1990) and *novichok* (1992) being the latest additions. Among the words, we can also encounter *nitchevo*, which had previously found its way (as *nichevo*) solely into the American unabridged dictionary known as *Webster's Second* (1934).<sup>5</sup> After a period of what might be termed lexicographical neglect, *nitchevo* was admitted into OED3 in December 2003. The most recently verified version of the entry was published in March 2022.

According to OED3, *nitchevo* functions as an interjection and a noun. It appeared in English in the second half of the nineteenth century in five spelling variants: *nitchevo*, *nitschewo*, *nichevo*, *netchevo*, and *nitzchevo*, of which the last two are labeled as rare. The interjection is defined as ‘in representations or imitation of Russian speech: ‘it is nothing’, ‘never mind’, ‘no matter’, with the first citation dated to the *Times* of December 19, 1877:

- (1) “No being with only one neck to break would ever have committed one-half of the follies and blunders that we [Russians] have been guilty of. But *nitchevo!*.. ‘It is no matter’..”

The definition of the nominal sense is as follows: ‘the attitude of resignation or fatalism conveyed by (habitual) use of the word ‘nitchevo’; the tendency to accept defeat or to do nothing. Also: nothing, a trifle’. The first recorded instance comes from the *Times* of August 25, 1905:

- (2) “The *Temps* warns Russia against allowing the fatal ‘nitchevo’ to invade the sphere of diplomacy.”

In the light of the above, the British newspaper may be claimed to have played an essential role in the transmission of both senses of the loanword.

It is worth adding that, in the twentieth century, *nichevo* entered the public sphere both in and outside the anglophone world. Among other things, it was the title of a 1926 French drama directed by Jacques de Baroncelli (1881–1951); the *nom de plume* adopted by the editor of *The Irish Times* Robert M. Smyllie (1894–1954); a painting by the Danish artist Asger Jorn (1914–1973); the title of a song in the 1963 Broadway play *Tovarich*, which ran for a total of 264 performances; a cat’s name in *The Malediction*, a story by the American writer Tennessee Williams (1911–1983); a quality perfume for women produced by the Swiss company Juvena and launched in 1973; and the name of the yacht

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<sup>5</sup> The loanword was left out in the revision for *Webster's Third* (1961).

(*My Nitchevo*) owned by Sir Peter Ustinov (1921–2004). Johann Strauss' piece of music arranged by Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975) under the name of the polka “Nichevo” may have been noticed by classical music connoisseurs. These facts have clearly had an impact on the prominence of the word.

## 2. Tracing *nitchevo* to its sources

### 2.1 The OED

The first edition of the *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth, [OED1](#)), compiled by James A. H. Murray and his team of subeditors, was published between 1884 and 1928. A one-volume Supplement appeared in 1933 and was followed by a four-volume Supplement (1972–1986) edited by Robert Burchfield. The second edition (henceforth, [OED2](#)), published in 1989, integrated the first edition, the Supplements, and additional entries in a single alphabetical sequence under the editorship of John Simpson and Edmund Weiner (Durkin 2016: 163). In 1994, the subsequent CD-ROM version of OED2 was launched onto the market. A few years later, it was decided that OED2 would be revised in its entirety (e.g., Simpson 2004; Gilliver 2005; Durkin 2016). The main reason, as Brewer (2022: 379) explains, was “pulling the still largely Victorian and Edwardian second edition into the twenty-first century”.<sup>6</sup> The revision, a truly gigantic enterprise, was supervised by John Simpson. Since 2013, Michael Proffitt has acted as Editor-in-Chief.

In the preface to OED3,<sup>7</sup> which is only available online, we read:

The overall effect of incorporating information on word-forms and meanings from donor languages, together with dates of attestation in those languages wherever possible, is to give a much fuller picture of the process of transmission of individual words into English. These sources also allow the editorial staff to plot contemporaneous borrowings into other languages in Europe and elsewhere, showing that English is part of a network of languages which share in the process of borrowing and semantic development, and that the process of borrowing itself has often been far more complex in particular cases than the *Oxford English Dictionary* has previously been able to demonstrate.

This remark alludes to efforts undertaken by lexicographers to make the dictionary a more exhaustive and reliable resource than it used to be,

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<sup>6</sup> The shift from a print to a digital resource has been described engagingly by Simpson (2014).

<sup>7</sup> <https://public.oed.com/history/oed-editions/preface-to-the-third-edition/>.

or “the definitive record of the English language” it aspires to become.<sup>8</sup> Indeed, those of the entries which have been revised include corrected etymologies, improved definitions, and consistently labelled sources of citations. The dating of the citations has also attracted attention,<sup>9</sup> so the earliest occurrences of headwords or senses are more properly located in time: many have been pushed back by dozens, and some even by hundreds, of years. Since, moreover, the textual record of OED3 is much broader than the corpus of quotations created for the compilation of OED1 (Gilliver 2016: 91), the dictionary wordlist has also grown substantially. Regrettably, the revision turned out to be more demanding in terms of time and money than had originally been anticipated (Gilliver 2016: 561), which is why the pace of work has been slow. The editors, acutely aware of the complexities of “the process of overhauling, re-researching and rewriting each and every component of each and every entry” (Brewer 2022: 379), sensibly provide no finishing date.<sup>10</sup> Ogilvie (2013: 12) suggests that “somewhere in the vicinity of twenty years from now seems accurate”, but even this cautious prediction sounds a little optimistic. To date, more than “forty percent of the dictionary has been revised, with new and revised words from across the alphabet appearing each quarter”,<sup>11</sup> which means that the project is now nearly halfway through.

## 2.2. Research materials and results

As mentioned above, the revision has resulted in crucial changes to both the dictionary’s macrostructure and microstructure. One specific area of interest is antedatings, i.e., citations predating those currently in the dictionary. The goal of OED3, just like any other dictionary based on historical principles, is to illustrate the way words and meanings have evolved. The quotation paragraphs following the definitions unfold into chronological narrative accounts of each headword’s history,<sup>12</sup> so when a word or sense was first attested – or born, to put it in organic terms – is an essential starting point in that history. Over the last two decades, thousands of words and senses have been successfully

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<sup>8</sup> <https://languages.oup.com/research/oxford-english-dictionary/>.

<sup>9</sup> Inconsistencies in the dating of OED1’s (and, hence, OED2’s) first quotations have been set forth before (e.g., McConchie 1997: 154–181).

<sup>10</sup> One might wonder if any finishing line is feasible at all, since “for lexicographers there is never a last word in a good dictionary because, once you finish, you always start again” (Ogilvie 2013: 11).

<sup>11</sup> <https://public.oed.com/history/dictionary-milestones/>.

<sup>12</sup> Murray and other nineteenth-century scholars, such as Max Müller or Herbert Coleridge, used to refer to the histories of words as “biographies” (see, e.g., Muggleston 2012: 85; Ogilvie 2013: 29; Brewer 2020: 36).

antedated, but, as my research reveals, there remains room for further improvement (see, e.g., Podhajecka 2015: 190).

This paper is based on the premise that enormous collections of text: Google Books (GB),<sup>13</sup> HathiTrust (HT),<sup>14</sup> and Internet Archive (IA),<sup>15</sup> along with newspaper archives: the British Newspaper Archive (BNA),<sup>16</sup> (American) Historical Newspapers (HN),<sup>17</sup> and Chronicling America (CA),<sup>18</sup> provide us with opportunities to verify and update lexicographical data. In this case, they suggest that the history of *nichevo* should be sketched somewhat differently. Newspaper archives, in particular, were chosen deliberately because of the great many borrowings that have been carried into English through the language of the press (e.g., Schultz 2013: 47). The fact that the earliest citations for both senses of the loanword in OED3 come from the *Times* seems to corroborate this claim.

In what follows, chronologically arranged citations are given for *nitchevo* as an interjection (sense 1) and *nitchevo* as a noun (sense 2). While the former help to antedate the first recorded occurrence of the word by 45 years, the latter do so by as many as 63 years. The background materials for the antedatings come from various text archives.

Sense 1: 1877 > 1832

(3) London

“In vain Rubini pointed out the possibility of their being freed, and becoming singing and music masters themselves in their turns; to all his observations they replied, with stoical apathy, “*Nietchevo*,” “It is of no consequence” (Charles C. Frankland, *Narrative of a visit to the courts of Russia and Sweden, in the years 1830 and 1831*, vol. 2, 1832: 427).

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<sup>13</sup> The official webpage (<https://www.google.com/intl/en/googlebooks/about/index.html>) tells us that Google Books has helped to make more than 40 million books discoverable, in more than 400 languages (cf. Michel et al. 2011: 176).

<sup>14</sup> HathiTrust preserves and provides lawful access to more than 17 million digitized items. <https://www.hathitrust.org/about>.

<sup>15</sup> This is a digital library, which allows access to 38 million books and texts, and 625 billion web pages, among other things. <https://archive.org/about/>.

<sup>16</sup> This archive contains circa 49 million pages dating from 1700s. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/>.

<sup>17</sup> This newspaper collection covers more than 737 million newspaper pages to explore. <https://www.newspapers.com/>.

<sup>18</sup> The website Chronicling America provides access to selected digitized newspaper pages from 1777 to 1963, but no information on the number of titles or pages is given. <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/about/>.

- (4) London  
 “Meanwhile the object of your choice laughs in his beard, and grumbles out “*Nitchevoss*—Nothing at all, *Sudar*; we shall get on well enough” (“Jesse—Kohl—and Sterling on Russia”, *The Quarterly Review*, vol. 69, 1841–1842: 415).
- (5) London  
 “But there is one mischievous word,” said he, “which will for ever hinder them from reaching perfection in any thing, and that is “*nitshevo*” (it is no matter), the use of which no Russian can be persuaded to leave off” (Johann Georg Kohl, *Russia: St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkoff, Riga, Odessa, and the German provinces on the Baltic, the steppes, the Crimea, and the interior of the empire*, 1842: 148).
- (6) London  
 “If you find fault with him for some oversight or mistake, he immediately replies, “*Nitschewo*—it is nothing—a mere trifle—let me alone!” (Johann Georg Kohl, *Russia and the Russians, in 1842*, 1842: 91).
- (7) New York  
 “Gourieff questioned the driver, to know why he was taking us through such by-roads and, apparently, in such a roundabout direction, but he answered constantly, “*nechevo nechevo, sechass sechass, bolshey dorogah*—never mind, never mind, have no fear, we shall have the great road directly,” and, cracking his whip, sent his horses off at a gallop” (Perry McDonough Collins, *A voyage down the Amoor: With a land journey through Siberia, and incidental notices of Manchooria, Kamschatka, and Japan*, 1860: 123).
- (8) London  
 “Nadine smiled, and the little creature pressed nearer to her. Nadine broke off a piece, and gave it to the little girl, who took it eagerly and then drew back. Then she came near again, and, by several little manœuvres, made her brother lift her up to kiss Nadine and examine her bonds. She tried with her tiny fingers to undo them. “*Ne nichevo ne norjna*. You can’t—you can’t, *duchinka, darling*,” replied Nadine” (Lady Charlotte Pepys, *Domestic sketches in Russia*, vol. 1, 1861: 103).
- (9) London  
 “Joining hands, they seized their glasses, and with a desperate resolve emptied them; when they stared at each other in astonishment, exclaiming,

Nechevo! (it is nothing)—it is exactly like water; and concluded that their masters were great simpletons for drinking such rubbish, and paying so much money for it, when they could have a whole bottle of vodky for forty kopecks” (Mrs. [Lucy] Atkinson, *Recollections of Tartar steppes and their inhabitants*, 1863: 332).

- (10) Boston  
 “Nitshevo” (“It’s no matter”), he said graciously, thinking the Russian word would perhaps be more agreeable to her; but it was of no use” (Sarah West Lander, *Spectacles for young eyes: Moscow*, 1866: 17).
- (11) London  
 “If a Russian was to have “nitchevo” painted on the panels of his carriage he would probably be arrested as a member of the mysterious sect of “Nihilists,” who are now occupying so much attention” (“Occasional notes”, *Pall Mall Gazette* of July 24, 1866).
- (12) London  
 “Nichivo” is the song they sing wherever despatch of business is demanded, and “nichivo” is feebly translated by the synonym of Mr. Toots, “it’s of no consequence” (“Art. VIII: Russia”, *The Westminster Review (New Series)*, vol. 32, 1867: 520).
- (13) New York  
 “Indeed, there is little malice in the Russian nature. He is always ready to pardon and forgive, no matter how deeply he may have been injured. Patience is one of his greatest characteristics. He can endure ill-usage, ill-fortune, and hunger with a sort of religious stoicism, always expressing his trust in God, and saying of every accident, “Nitchevo, that is nothing” (“The Russian peasant”, *Hours at Home: A Popular Monthly of Instruction and Recreation*, vol. 9, 1869: 18).
- (14) Hartford, CT  
 “I brought from New York a heavy overcoat that braved the storms of Broadway the winter before my departure. My Russian friend pronounced it *nechevo* (nothing,) and advised me to procure a ‘*shooba*’ or cloak lined with fur. The shooba reaches nearly to one’s feet. And is better adapted to riding than walking” (Thomas Wallace Knox, *Overland through Asia. Pictures of Siberian, Chinese, and Tartar life...*, 1870: 388).



- (15) New York  
 “What did you say, my child?” “Nichévo” (nothing), she answered, and, hiding her face now in the pillows, she wept on” ([Charlotte Louisa Hawkins Dempster], *Véra; or, the Russian princess and the English earl*, 1871: 82).
- (16) London  
 “Officers talk much, and protest that such things ought not to be. But “*Nishevo!*”—it is nobody’s business, and they good-naturedly give the man a cheque, and direct the envelope for him” (Frederick Boyle, *The narrative of an expelled correspondent*, 1877: 393).
- (17) London  
 “The first word of Russian learnt by a foreigner, and the last that rings in his ears, is Nischevo. In the hospitals it is heard as frequently as anywhere, and all the system is infected with it” (“The Russian breakdown”, *London Evening Standard* of September 26, 1877).
- Sense 2: 1905 > 1842
- (18) London  
 “If a problem is to be solved, the Russian is always ready with his “Nitshevo,” which acts as a constant impediment to any progress of a solid and enduring kind, which demands time and labour. On the other hand, it must be confessed, the Russian’s “nitshevo” helps him through a thousand difficulties” (Johann Georg Kohl, *Russia: St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkoff, Riga, Odessa, and the German provinces on the Baltic, the steppes, the Crimea, and the interior of the empire*, 1842: 148).
- (19) London  
 “No one enjoys all this abuse, meanwhile, more than the object of it, who laughs in his sleeve, and grumbles out his “*Nitshevoss!* never fear, sir; we shall get on well enough” (Johann Georg Kohl, *Russia: St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkoff, Riga, Odessa, and the German provinces on the Baltic, the steppes, the Crimea, and the interior of the empire*, 1842: 37).
- (20) London  
 “I don’t know what Alexis answers to this harangue, but I hasten to assure the Starosta with much gesticulation, and many harostros and nitchevos (all right and never mind), that I have not the slightest objection to the drunken man in the bed, and, as he is quite dumb,

that I rather liked his revolving lighthouse appearance than otherwise” (“A journey due north. A country house”, *Household Words. A Weekly Journal*, vol. 14, 1856: 518).<sup>19</sup>

(21) Philadelphia

“If you told them these lights were dangerous, their answer would be the characteristic “Nitshevo,” “that which is to happen, will happen” (Prof. Charles Rudy (Paris, France), “Despotic Russia”, *The Reformed Quarterly Review*, vol. 26 (April), 1879: 181).

(22) Mansfield, LA

“The correspondent adds that his union with the Princess Dolgorouka explains this calmness—not coldness or indifference, or, to use a Russian expression, the “nitchevo”—with which the great mass of the people received the intelligence of the Czar’s death” (“Princess Dolgorouka”, *Mansfield Reporter* of March 25, 1881).

(23) London

“Tell him if he chooses to behave in this way he has not two minutes to live.” “Nitshevo,” was the only reply. This went on for some minutes, every inquiry being met by a dogged silence, every threat by “Nitshevo.” At last Seppel lost patience, and told Feron to fire upon the prisoner” (Deborah Alcock, *The Czar. The tale of the time of the first Napoleon*, 1882: 126).

(24) London

“To the suggestion of the Prussian Minister, who could only speak his own language, that the animals in front were only rats, the driver returned a curt “Nitschewo” (“The story of Prince Bismarck’s iron ring”, *Pall Mall Gazette* of November 2, 1885).

(25) Boston

“There is a word in the Russian language used quite frequently. It is *Nitschewo*: Never mind, Don’t care! You can hear it in all classes of society, and at every occasion. Every thing the Russian thinks, feels, and does seems saturated with this *Nitschewo*. A criminal carelessness pervades every thing in Russia” (Louis Richard Klemm, *Chips from a teacher’s workshop*, 1888: 403).

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<sup>19</sup> This extract comes from George A. Sala’s *A journey due north; being notes of a residence in Russia* (1858: 242).

- (26) New York  
“Thus he played with Social Democracy and the Liberals as trump-cards in his battle royal with the Catholic clergy and the Anti-Semitic party. He did this openly, frankly, with the spirit of absolute “Wurschtigkeit” which the Russian expresses in his “Nitchewo!” (Don’t care)” (K. Ellar, “Bismarck as an educator”, *The Teacher (New Series)*, vol. 1, 1891: 13).
- (27) New York  
“Meanwhile General Melikoff was making preparations for his great attack on Kars, and at last the long expected assault was delivered, and the Russians with their strange, untranslatable cry of “Nichivo,” which is the ultimate expression of a reckless bravery that refuses to count any cost, swept in upon the Turkish batteries, and took the town” (Charles Snodgrass Ryan, *Under the red crescent: Adventures of an English surgeon with the Turkish army at Plevna and Erzeroum, 1877–1878*, 1897: 332).
- (28) Boston  
“For *Nichevó* is the Russian fatalist formula; it escapes from the lips of the peasant in every variety of intonation, flippant or feeling, reassuring or resignatory, filled full with contempt or dyed deep with melancholy; it is the characteristic note of his acquiescent temperament; it means “I submit, I am helpless, I cannot resist it, thus it is the same to me whatever happens, i.e., it is nothing at all—*Nichevó*” (E. Hughes, “Rusticating in Russia”, *The Living Age*, vol. 216, 1898: 186).
- (29) London  
“The spirit of “Nichevo” may irritate the Westerner, but it permits an army to rise victorious above reverse, it is a breakwater against the utmost efforts of a numerically inferior force” (Douglas Story, *The campaign with Kuropatkin*, 1904: 89).
- (30) Manchester (England)  
“Just as the strenuous “Banzai!” has come to express to us the Japanese nature, so the fatalistic “Nichevo” may be said to epitomize the Russian” (“Nichevo”, *Manchester Courier and Lancashire General Advertiser* of June 1905, 24).

### 3. Discussion

Firstly, there is every indication that the loanword was introduced into English by Charles C. Frankland, a naval officer who visited Russia in the years 1830–1831, and who had his impressions published soon thereafter. Nonetheless, the significance of the word, in both of its senses, should be attributed to three influential travelogs written in German by Johann G. Kohl, a German travel writer, historian, and geographer.<sup>20</sup> Unlike the originals comprising eight volumes, the English translations appeared in two condensed versions titled *Russia: St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kharkoff, Riga, Odessa, and the German provinces on the Baltic, the steppes, the Crimea, and the interior of the empire* (1842a) and *Russia and the Russians, in 1842* (1842b),<sup>21</sup> excerpts of which were printed in literary magazines prior to the publication of the books (see (4)). It needs to be emphasized that *Russia and the Russians, in 1842* brought into English the typically German spelling *nitschewo* (see (6)).<sup>22</sup> No wonder translators of other German works (e.g., Bauer’s *Memoirs of Karoline Bauer, 1885*) also favoured it.

Secondly, despite the neatly classified antedatings, methodological problems come to light. On the one hand, it is sometimes hard to determine unambiguously what part of speech the borrowing represents, since it is by no means applied in self-explanatory contexts. *Nitchevo* is treated as a noun when it occurs in standard nominal phrases (e.g., (20), (22), (24), (27)), but does this entail usage in inverted commas or double quotation marks? The following passage may serve as a good example:

- (31) “Nathan and his friend had come into a nation of them, the land of Whiskers, Vodka and “Neechivo!” which translated into plain United States means “I should worry!” (William D. Pelley, *The fog*, 1921: 400).

To complicate things a little further, is it sufficient for *nitchevo* as a noun simply to be preceded by a possessive adjective? The use of “his” accounts for a tiny but potentially significant difference in meaning between (4) and (19), remaining open to interpretation.

<sup>20</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann\\_Georg\\_Kohl](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Johann_Georg_Kohl).

<sup>21</sup> Both translations were later republished. *Russia and the Russians, in 1842* (1842) is the source of OED3’s first English attestations for *blini*, *nagaika*, and *troika*. A handful of other Russianisms found in the narrative (e.g., *chinovnik* ‘civil servant’, *dacha* ‘country house’, *paskha* ‘rich Easter cheesecake’, and *tchin* ‘rank’) also deserve attention.

<sup>22</sup> In German, *nitschewo* appeared 80 years earlier in Johann G. Gmelin’s *Reise durch Sibirien von dem Jahr 1733. bis 1743...* (1752).

On the other hand, it is unclear which occurrences should be distinguished as loanwords proper and which, by contrast, as their lexical antecedents, i.e., words fitfully making their way into English, but still considered foreign. Simpson, Weiner & Durkin (2004: 341) point out that the earliest uses are valuable for the documentation of the history of English words and may be a starting point for investigating their etymologies, but what goes into the dictionary must be established loanwords rather than foreignisms.<sup>23</sup> The latter are sometimes admitted, but only in so-called square-bracketed citations (see, e.g., the entry for *nyet*), which predate legitimate attestations.<sup>24</sup>

The difficulty in evaluating the above quotations stems from the fact that the meaning of *nitchevo* is explained by means of a range of English equivalents in practically every case. This could signify a clear identification of its foreign origin, possibly, albeit not necessarily, in a mixed English-Russian context (cf. Durkin 2009: 174). OED3's prerequisite is that loanwords included in the dictionary be illustrated as English words in an English context, a principle adopted already by James Murray (qtd. in Ogilvie 2013: 55).<sup>25</sup> This notwithstanding, one may find a classic example to the contrary in the entry for *nitchevo* (see (32b)), whilst the explanatory technique is applied both here and elsewhere (see (33b)). Some of these cases are discerned at first sight, but for others a retrieval of the relevant passages is a necessity, as what is of interest to us is hidden behind the ellipsis. The citations in OED3 (a) and their full versions (b) are exhibited below:<sup>26</sup>

(32a) “No being with only one neck to break would ever have committed one-half of the follies and blunders that we [Russians] have been guilty of. But *nitchevo!*.. ‘It is no matter” (OED3, sense 1, 1877).

(32b) “No being with only one neck to break would ever have committed one-half of the follies and blunders that we [Russians] have been guilty of. But *nitchevo! Russki Bog velik!*”—i.e. “It is no matter; great is the Russian God” (OED3, sense 1, 1877).

<sup>23</sup> Haspelmath (2009: 42–43) provides a thorough discussion of the “complex matter” of loanword integration, which includes drawing the line between foreignisms and loanwords.

<sup>24</sup> The 1983 quotation for *kompromat* in OED3, illustrating, we are told, an early use of the Russian word in an English context, is an exception, as it is given in the etymology section, not a quotation paragraph.

<sup>25</sup> Simpson clarifies this by saying that words used in an English context are relevant examples “as long as they are not put into the mouths of non-English speakers” (p.c., May 2010).

<sup>26</sup> Example (32a) provides the same quotation as (1).

- (33a) “She smiled broadly and said, ‘Nitchevo’... ‘Nitchevo,’ she repeated several times and added, ‘You can pay me later when you get some money’ (OED3, sense 1, 1987).
- (33b) “She smiled broadly and said, “Nitchevo” (an extremely common Russian colloquial expression with a variety of meanings, including okay, all is fine, hardly worth mentioning, don’t worry yourself). “Nitchevo,” she repeated several times and added, “You can pay me later when you get some money” (OED3, sense 1, 1987).
- (34a) “The Russian mind..samovar, troykas, gipsy songs, and endless discussions about stars and the final destiny of man... Also the eternal maddening ‘nitchevo,’ ‘nitchevo’ yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow” (OED3, sense 2, 1943).
- (34b) “The Russian mind,’ smiled Zolperich. ‘Die Russische Seele... Yes, samovar, troykas, gipsy songs, and endless discussions about stars and the final destiny of man... Also the eternal maddening “nitchevo,” “nitchevo” yesterday, to-day, and to-morrow... *Nitchevo*—nothing matters—” (OED3, sense 2, 1943).

This raises questions regarding the reasons the lexicographical principles have been treated less rigorously here than in other cases. Of course, real language usage often fails to conform to strictly defined rules, but one might hypothesize that it is the complexity of the “virtually untranslatable” concept (Kutzinski 2012: 47) that should be partly to blame. All in all, since attestations (3)–(30) do not diverge markedly from those in the entry for *nitchevo*, perhaps with the exceptions of (7) and (8) with longer stretches of Russian text, they are expected to meet OED3’s formal criteria.

Thirdly, the borrowing brought into English a new means of expression to epitomize the so-called Russian spirit, which gave rise to an eagerly applied stereotype. In the nominal sense, *nitchevo* has thus been depicted as “a criminal carelessness” that pervades every sphere of life in Russia (Klemm 1888: 403); a characteristic note of “acquiescent temperament” (Hughes 1898: 186); “a general expression of indifference or resignation to the inevitable” (Dorr 1917: 178); and “Russia’s motto of “don’t care” (Fraser 1918: 89). The same approach is found in more modern sources referring to “the passive acceptance and resignation” (Slochower 1970: 249); “the stoical apathy” comparable to Spanish *mañana* (Stites 1989: 163) or Japanese *shikata ga nai* (Steinman 2013: 54); and “fatalism typical of the Slavs”, particularly the Russian peasant (De Seife 1994: 11).

Some authors go as far as to compare the national characteristics of Russians on the one hand with those of the British or Americans on the other. Holmes (1901: 63–65), for example, juxtaposes the allegedly inherent Russian incapacity to handle problems (assessed negatively) with American efficiency and pragmatism (assessed positively):

- (35) “The word means literally “nothing,” and yet it means everything. It sounds the keynote of the Russian character—“nitchevo.” There’s nothing to be done. Nothing was wrong. Nobody is to blame. What’s the use of bothering? It will be all the same in a thousand years. “Nitchevo.” Our captain moors his tow-boat and barge alongside and calmly proceeds to drink tea, and murmurs “nitchevo” with the other captain. After waiting thirty-six hours longer for telegraphic instructions from one of the officials not more than a hundred miles away, the captains finally decide to do the very thing that the all-wise Americans had been advising from the very first.”

Another author who contrasted the AmE expression “So what?” with Russian “*nitchevo*” arrives at the conclusion that the former should be perceived as a “stimulant”, while the latter as a “depressant” (Walton 1941: 26–27). According to Miller (1973: 64), “the greatest of Russian vices—the slackness, idleness, lack of initiative, hopelessness, and all that is included under the name of *accidie*—all that, foreigners have come to condemn in the Russian character under the catchword *nitchevo*”.

Borrowings evoke either positive or negative connotations not only in terms of the concepts they denote (Koteyko 2014: 38), but also the cultures they represent (Podhajecka 2009: 105–106). With the baggage of pejorative associations situated on a cline between mild (indifference, resignation, apathy, fatalism) and strong (idleness, a criminal carelessness), *nitchevo* has inevitably come to stigmatize the Russian culture.

More sympathetic interpretations of the word’s meaning, perceived as Russians’ “quiet heroism in the face of adversity” (Patenaude 2002: 551), are harder to find (see (29)). Baring (1911: 40, 42) asserts, for instance, that “Combined with this spirit, which in Russia goes by the name of *Nitchevo*, we find instances of fierce energy and relentless persistence in the face of obstacles”. What is particularly worth quoting here is his observations on the constraints of the popular belief: “popular books on Russia have suffered from the fault of being written either by people who were ignorant of the subject, or, still worse, by writers with a strong political or racial bias; or again, simply by sensation-mongers, to whom Russia, a large, far-off, and comparatively unknown country, has proved a rich field for exploitation” (Baring 1911: x).

All this should sensitize us to the fact that stereotypical thinking distorts reality, so national, cultural, racial, and other types of stereotypes should be approached with caution, advice that also holds in the realm of historical lexicography. Lexicographers working on OED1 relied on diachronic quotations not only as documentation (“the raw material”), but also as direct sources for drafting the definitions (Brewer 2007: 127). Upon closer scrutiny, we notice that the definitions of the two senses of *nitchevo* in OED3 have likewise been written on the basis of the illustrative material, some of which is stereotypical in nature.

Further, the range of graphic variants is much wider than acknowledged by OED3. Guided by my intuition, I identified as many as 25 forms: *nitchevo*, *nichevo*, *nitschewo*, *nichivo*, *nitschevo*, *netchevo*, *nitshevo*, *nitcheva*, *nitchivo*, *nechevo*, *nitchevo*, *neechevo*, *nitschewo*, *nietchevo*, *nischevo*, *neechivo*, *nitchewo*, *neetchevo*, *nitchevoss*, *nitzchevo*, *nychevo*, *nytshevo*, *neitchevo*, *nyitchevo*, and *nytchevo*. They are spelled with lower- or upper-case, with or without diacritics, in inverted commas or double quotation marks, in italics or left unmarked.<sup>27</sup> The form *nitchevos(s)* is a peculiar example. It usually signifies a noun in the plural (see (20)), but the final *-s* may also be a contraction of Russian honorifics *sudar'* (Sir) or *sudarynja* (Madam), used as a sign of respect. *Nitchevos* should thus be rendered as ‘nitchevo, Sir’/‘nitchevo, Madam’ (cf. Mladenova 2004: 66). The only instance of the latter, however, is *nitchevoss* (see (4) and (19)), a faithful replica of the German model.<sup>28</sup>

The spelling variants and their frequencies culled from the six text archives are exhibited below (DOA: March 14, 2022). The data were obtained from searches for which no filter (e.g., language, country, region, or timeframe) was selected. They have been arranged by the second column.

Table 1. Frequencies of spelling variants of *nitchevo* across text archives.<sup>29</sup>

No.	Variant spelling	GB	HT	IA	BNA	HN	CA
1	<i>nitchevo</i>	13,200	923	2,049	642	1,701	138
2	<i>nichevo</i>	7,740	690	2,127	229	1,834	2,661
3	<i>nitschewo</i>	7,290	312	725	71	129	72
4	<i>nichivo</i>	659	56	136	729	17	2,592
5	<i>nitschevo</i>	346	63	64	6	21	6
6	<i>netchevo</i>	353	5	22	1	11	11

<sup>27</sup> A few other wordforms, such as *nishchego* and *nishchevo*, have been used mainly for transcribing Russian.

<sup>28</sup> In the German original, the word was spelled as *Nitschewo fs* (sic; Kohl 1839: 120) and *Nitschewoss* (Kohl’s *Petersburg in Bildern und Skizzen*, vol. 1, 1841: 84).

<sup>29</sup> The abbreviations of the archives are introduced in Section 2.2.



7	<i>nitshevo</i>	333	65	57	12	12	0
8	<i>nitcheva</i>	262	16	39	3	20	37
9	<i>nitchivo</i>	249	12	40	11	50	31
10	<i>nechevo</i>	225	32	131	7	28	60
11	<i>nitchevo</i>	207	34	24	26	65	16
12	<i>neechevo</i>	173	51	84	11	103	13
13	<i>nitshewo</i>	134	19	29	0	1	1
14	<i>nietchevo</i>	121	32	32	2	112	5
15	<i>nischevo</i>	83	5	15	10	2	633
16	<i>neechivo</i>	54	4	8	0	2	10
17	<i>nitchevo</i>	10	31	1	2	0	4
18	<i>neetchevo</i>	9	17	17	1	13	0
19	<i>nitchevoss</i>	9	12	3	0	0	0
20	<i>nitzchevo</i>	9	14	16	0	4	1
21	<i>nychevo</i>	4	0	0	0	9	0
22	<i>nytshevo</i>	3	10	10	0	0	0
23	<i>neitchevo</i>	2	2	2	0	0	0
24	<i>nyitchevo</i>	1	0	2	0	1	0
25	<i>nytchevo</i>	1	0	1	0	1	0

The attention is initially drawn by the significant disproportions between the frequencies of particular spellings. If we used a Likert scale, the first three would be regarded as fairly frequent, the next few as frequent, those in the middle range as occasional, and those in the last rank as rare. These disproportions result from differences in the size of the archives,<sup>30</sup> the time periods covered, the quality of optical character recognition (e.g., *-nisco* treated as *nischevo*), BrE/AmE spelling preferences, homographic forms (e.g., *Nitcheva* as a surname), and foreign-language texts (e.g., *nitschewo*, *nitshewo*, and *nitschevo* in German, *nichivo* in Italian, and *nitcheva* in French).<sup>31</sup> A few cases (e.g., 103 hits for *neechevo* in HN vs. one in GB) prove that some variants had better coverage in newspapers than in books and magazines, which might imply specific text-type preferences.

What may be inferred from this is that the archives are not directly comparable with one another, but the data are still useful for a general overview.

<sup>30</sup> As has been shown in footnotes 13–18, the approximate numbers of books and webpages provided by each archive do not translate easily, or at all, into the numbers of words (or running words in the terminology of corpus linguistics).

<sup>31</sup> For example, none of the 633 occurrences of *nischevo*, 37 of *nitcheva*, and eleven of *netchevo* in CA comes from an English-language newspaper.

More accurate results will require manual analysis.<sup>32</sup> If one looks at the manually verified list of spellings through the prism of usage, one is bound to admit that *nitzchevo* and *netchevo* (labeled as rare in OED3) lag behind more frequent variants, such as *nichivo*, *nitschevo*, *nitshevo*, and *nitchivo*, which appear far better candidates for inclusion.

Lastly, my research suggests that this Russianism became widespread via books, many of them travelogs, published primarily in London and New York/Boston.<sup>33</sup> They formed two main transmission routes characteristic of BrE and AmE respectively. Still, as might be expected, books were not the exclusive source. Some texts featuring *nitchevo* came to be widely republished in the British and the American press, which made for better visibility of the word. Two antedatings in my collection come from newspapers printed in Mansfield (1881), in the United States, and Manchester (1905), in Britain, the only places to diverge from the established route of transmission.

#### 4. Diachronic analysis of variant spellings

Of the spelling variants identified in the archives, two prevail: *nitchevo* and *nitchevo*. Google Books Ngram Viewer, an online search engine, makes it possible to compare them diachronically. It should be explained that, in computational linguistics, n-gram is a contiguous sequence of words in a sample of text, i.e., 1-gram sequence covers one word, 2-gram sequence covers two words, etc.<sup>34</sup> Google Books Ngram Viewer retrieves sequences with the maximum of five words (5-grams). The search engine is based on eight million English books, i.e., approximately 20% of the entire Google Books collection, which comprises 40 million scanned books calculated at more than two and a half trillion words.<sup>35</sup> Five million of those books allowed the American linguist Mark Davies to create a user interface to Google Books covering two corpora: Google Books American Corpus (155 billion words) and Google Books British Corpus (34 billion words) (see, e.g., Davies & Chapman 2016). The data provided below are derived from

<sup>32</sup> This is impossible in the case of Google Books, which provides access to a restricted number of websites.

<sup>33</sup> Andrews (qtd. in Dubinina & Polinsky 2013: 3) points out that Russian-speaking immigrants “settled most densely in America’s major metropolitan areas, such as New York, Philadelphia, Boston, Chicago, Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Houston”. Unsurprisingly, New York became a port of entry for many loanwords (Mencken 1921: 202) and, as my research indicates, held a central position in the publication network.

<sup>34</sup> <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/N-gram>.

<sup>35</sup> According to statistical counts, the median length for all books is about 64,000 words (Habash 2012).

Google Books Ngram Viewer and both corpora. The graphs are shown separately for BrE (Fig. 1) and AmE (Fig. 2).

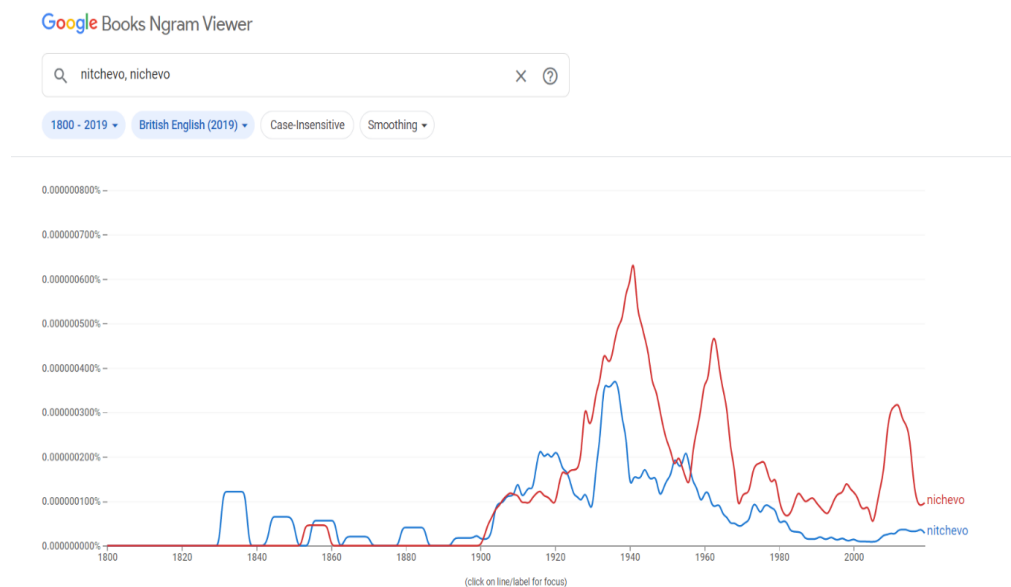


Fig. 1. Google Books Ngram Viewer: BrE

Table 2. The frequency chart of Google Books British Corpus (1880s–2000s).

Spelling	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970	1980	1990	2000
<i>nitchevo</i>	2	–	2	8	<b>11</b>	7	6	4	9	7	2	–	–
<i>nichevo</i>	–	–	3	4	6	<b>22</b>	7	9	9	6	3	2	4

The frequency chart of Google Books British Corpus (Table 2) exhibits 58 occurrences of *nitchevo* versus 75 instances of the rival spelling *nichevo*. According to Ngram Viewer, the former appeared in the 1830s, which is in line with the results of my research, and was most visible in the 1930s, but since then its eminence has waned almost entirely. The latter was used most frequently in the 1940s, but, despite fluctuations in its usage over the decades, a few attestations are found even in the 2000s. These trends are visible in Fig. 1, albeit with a discrepancy between the facts and figures provided by the corpus and Ngram Viewer. According to the former, the largest number of occurrences of *nitchevo* was noted in the 1920s (11), not the 1930s (7). Similarly, *nichevo* came to be attested most frequently during the 1930s (22), not the 1940s (7).

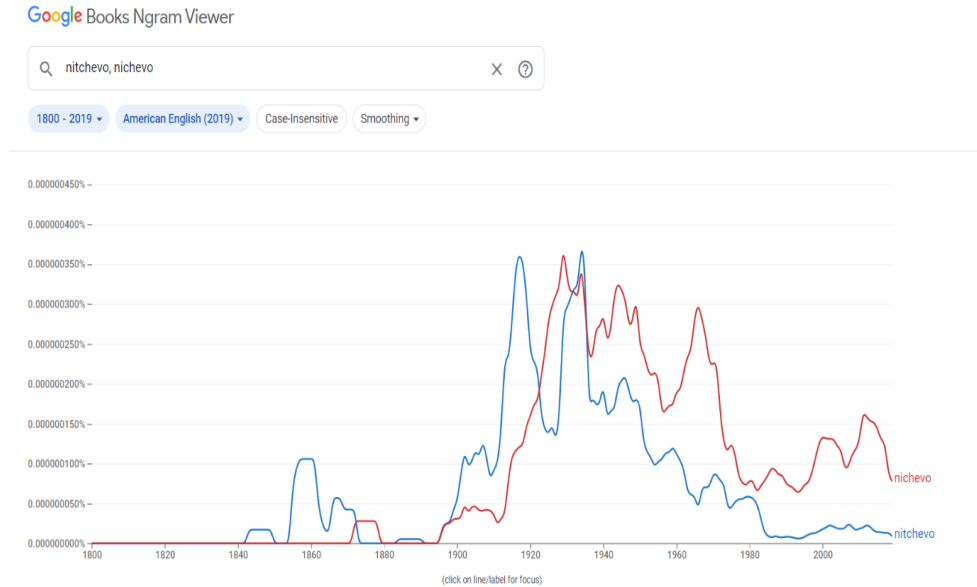


Fig. 2. Google Books Ngram Viewer: AmE

Table 3. The frequency chart of Google Books American Corpus (1850s–2000s).

Spelling	1850	1860	1870	1880	1890	1900	1910	1920	1930	1940	1950	1960	1970
<i>nitchevo</i>	5	2	–	–	3	8	<b>87</b>	26	59	49	29	26	36
<i>nichevo</i>	–	–	–	–	4	8	8	27	43	66	<b>73</b>	71	33
Spelling	1980	1990	2000										
<i>nitchevo</i>	8	10	5										
<i>nichevo</i>	33	36	50										

Figure 2 indicates that, over the last 160 years, the two variants have been struggling for primacy. The frequency chart of Google Books American Corpus (Table 3) provides 353 occurrences of *nitchevo* versus 452 instances of *nichevo*. According to the graph, the loanword came into use in the 1840s. There were two almost identical peaks for *nitchevo*: during the 1910s and the 1930s, and one peak for *nichevo* around 1930. Again, the graph and corpus data do not overlap.<sup>36</sup> The frequency chart shows that most occurrences of *nitchevo* were recorded in

<sup>36</sup> One possible explanation is that Ngram Viewer originally relied on five million books shared with the corpora, but its newer version called Ngram Viewer 2.0 indexes eight million books (cf. Rosenberg 2017: 291). Michel et al. (2011: 176) claim that Ngram Viewer can help visualize “linguistic and cultural phenomena that were reflected in the English language between 1800 and 2000”, but such cases as these call into question the reliability of the results (see also Tyrkkö 2020: 176–177).

the 1910s (87) and the 1930s (59), falling steadily to the first decade of the 2000s (5). The highest frequency of *nitchevo* was noted during the 1950s (73), with the 1930s coming second (59). This form remains in common use today, since 50 hits are dated to the first decade of the 2000s.

Apart from shedding light on the historical development of the two spellings, this comparative analysis serves one more purpose. Durkin (2016: 163) writes that the headword forms in OED3 are “typically contemporary English words”, so *nitchevo* ought to be replaced by *nitchevo*, which enjoys greater recognition among speakers of world Englishes today.<sup>37</sup>

### 5. *Nitchevo* in newspaper archives

Let us now look specifically at newspapers as sources of diachronic data. The numbers of hits obtained from the British Newspaper Archives, the (American) Historical Newspapers, and Chronicling America are less impressive than in the case of other text archives, but they should not go unnoticed.

Searching for different spelling variants of *nitchevo*, I came across the story of Bismarck’s ring (see (24)). Prince Otto von Bismarck (1815–1898), the German diplomat and statesman, was one of the most prominent figures of nineteenth-century European politics.<sup>38</sup> In 1858, he was appointed Prussia’s ambassador to the Russian Empire and, consequently, spent four years in St. Petersburg. The story of the ring set in Russia was first published on October 30, 1885 in London’s *Hendon & Finchley Times*, having been reproduced from an (unidentified) edition of *Life*:

- (36) “One of the peculiarities of Prince Bismarck is his wearing a conspicuous iron ring, bearing the inscription of “Nitschewo,” on one of his fingers. This is a memento of an accident the “Man of Blood and Iron” once met with in Russia.”<sup>39</sup>

<sup>37</sup> So far, spelling changes have affected *agitprop* (OED2 *agit-prop*), *burka* (OED2 *burqa*), *Kyrgyz* (OED2 *Kirghiz*), *muzhik* (OED2 *moujik*), *nyet* (OED2 *niet*), *osetr* (OED2 *osseter*), *pech* (OED2 *peach*), *pelmeni* (OED2 *pelmeny*), *pirozhok* (OED2 *piroshki*), *Politburo* (OED2 *Polibureau*), *pristav* (OED2 *pristaf*), *proletkult* (OED2 *prolet-cult*), and *Raskol* (OED2 *raskol*).

<sup>38</sup> Bismarck masterminded the unification of Germany in 1871 and served as its first Chancellor until 1890, in which capacity he dominated European affairs for two decades. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto\\_von\\_Bismarck](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Otto_von_Bismarck).

<sup>39</sup> The Corpus of Historical American English (COHA) has only one attestation of this kind for *nitschewo*, derived from the 1898 issue of the magazine *Century* (October 1898).

Searches for Boolean expressions in the three newspaper archives show that the story appeared, sometimes in vastly altered versions, in at least 49 newspapers in Britain (see Appendix 1) and at least 48 in the United States (see Appendix 2). The reprints continued in the British press until 1898, but in the American press until 1918. The rate of success, however, depends on serendipity. In other words, one needs to come up with the right lexical items for Boolean expressions to find the story in the newspaper archives. Apart from such combinations as “Nitschewo” “iron ring”, it is advisable to use some without the keyword (e.g., “Bismarck” “Russia”), because the spelling of the Russianism may be subject to change. Indeed, while British editors usually applied the German-derived *nitschewo*, the Americans opted for Anglicized variants such as *nitchevo* or *nitchevo*. Since the quality of optical character recognition is somewhat below par, we may safely assume that even more newspapers carried this story. Samples of two accounts are given below:

- (37) “There is quite a little romance associated with the large iron ring worn by Prince Bismarck. The ring has the Russian inscription of “Nitschewo,” a word much used by the Russians, and expressing much the same meaning as our “No matter.” This is the story of the ring: When Bismarck was Minister at St. Petersburg in 1862 he received in the winter an invitation to an Imperial hunt, which was to take place at a very considerable distance from the capital. He turned up at what he supposed to be the rendezvous with plenty of time to spare, but unfortunately it turned out that he was still a matter of sixteen miles away. A peasant undertook to bring him to the spot in time, and forthwith Bismarck and his guide set off in a sleigh with two diminutive horses. To the suggestion of the Prussian Minister, who could only speak his own language, that the animals in front were only rats, the driver returned a curt “Nitschewo.” “You’ll be sure to be in time?” again ventured Bismarck after a while, and the answer was another “Nitschewo.” The impatient huntsman complained that the pace was not swift enough, and the peasant, with “Nitschewo,” lashed his horses into such a speed that Bismarck began to upbraid him. The answer was still the same. A short time afterwards both occupants of the sleigh were thrown out, yet all the satisfaction Bismarck could get from his driver was “Nitschewo.” Picking up a piece of iron which had been broken from the sleigh, the Prussian Minister carried it back to St. Petersburg and had a ring made as a memento of an adventure which might have had a more serious end” (*Pall Mall Gazette* of November 2, 1885).

- (38) “Prince Bismarck wears a large iron ring, inscribed with the Russian word “Nitschewo,” which signifies “It is nothing,” or “It does not matter.” The Berlin correspondent of the St. Petersburg *Vedomosti* has heard from the Chancellor’s own lips the history of the ring. In the winter of 1862, when Prince Bismarck was Minister at St. Petersburg, he was invited to a Royal hunt at about one hundred versts from that city. The Prince, who was a passionate sportsman, set off for the rendezvous in good time, but missed his road, and found himself at the appointed time in a little village entirely unknown to him. He knew enough Russian to make himself understood, and asked a peasant boy how far he was from the rendezvous. “Twenty versts,” replied the countryman. “Will you lead me there?” “Willingly, sir.” A few moments after, the Prussian Minister was sitting in a little sledge, harnessed to two miserable horses. “Take care that I arrive in time,” said Bismarck. “I am in a great hurry.” “Nitschewo!” replied the peasant. A short time passed, and then Bismarck impatiently exclaimed, “You have harnessed two rats to your sledge, and not horses.” “Nitschewo!” replied the peasant, shrugging his shoulders, but at the same time he whipped up his horses and set them off at a gallop. “Oh, oh!” cried Bismarck, “Now you run like a madman!” The answer was still “Nitschewo.” “You will upset us.” “Nitschewo.” And this reply was repeated at every question or observation of the Minister, until at length the sledge really upset, and Bismarck rolled in the snow. Then, also, the comforting word “Nitschewo” was again pronounced by the peasant. The Prince taking up an iron bar which had become detached from the sledge, was on the point of giving the driver a good drubbing, when he thought better of it, and, keeping the bar in memory of the incident, afterwards had a ring made out of it, with the inscription it still bears” (*Tavistock Gazette* of November 20, 1885).

While the story was occasionally embellished, as in Wolf von Schierbrandt’s article “The Russians’ ‘Nitchevo’” printed in the *Sunday Magazine of The New York Daily Tribune* of July 9, 1905, it also appeared in significantly abridged versions, not infrequently confined to a single sentence. This may be illustrated by the telegraph-style information “Prince Bismarck wears an iron ring with the motto, “Never mind,” in Russian”, which appeared in *The Republican Journal* (Belfast, ME) of December 31, 1885.

The accounts were also modified stylistically, so the peasant – or the *moujik*, to use another Russian borrowing – was called a “driver”, a “coachman”, or an “*ivostchik*”.<sup>40</sup> Taking into account the derivative nature of such press narratives,

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<sup>40</sup> *Ivostchik* (Russ. *извозчик*) first appeared in Mrs. Guthrie’s *Through Russia: From*

which may be regarded as a chain of “Chinese whispers” or “Russian scandal”,<sup>41</sup> it comes as no surprise that the spelling sometimes became distorted. *Mitschowo*, recorded in the *Manitowoc Pilot* of November 19, 1885, and *Nitschowo*, encountered in *The Argus* of April 6, 1886, are fitting examples. The *Victorian Review* of May 1, 1880, published in Melbourne, had it in another erroneous form *Neet chevo*.

The same or roughly comparable newspaper articles dedicated to Bismarck’s ring came to be reprinted throughout Britain and the United States. In this way, readers had a chance to familiarize themselves not only with the story, but also with the Russian loan. One cannot exclude that the story was a metaphorical threshold to the anglophone world, especially America, where it persisted for 33 years. Newspapers, the oldest of the mass media, played a special role in the representation of social reality if only for the sheer quantity of information they disseminated, even though its accuracy could not always be guaranteed.

## 6. Word-formation productivity

It is believed that the productivity of loanwords correlates with “a career of their own” in the borrowing language (Yaguello 1998: 135). The entry for *nitchevo* in OED3 mentions no derivatives, but research shows that three nouns – in different spellings – came into being: *nichivoeing* (1892),<sup>42</sup> *nichevoism* (1907), and *nitchevist* (1921), the last two of which were supposedly modelled on *nihilism* and *nihilist* respectively. To use a circular definition, the first may be defined as ‘repeating nichevo’, the second as ‘the nichevo attitude’, and the third as ‘someone with the nichevo attitude’. Only the second derivative has achieved any visibility in English. Of the attestations given below, (39)–(40) illustrate *nichevoing*, (41)–(44) *nichevoism*, and (45)–(46) *nichivist*.

- (39) The driver called, “Nichivo” (It is nothing). But no amount of “nichivoeing” prevented my feeling uneasy (Kate Marsden, *On sledge and horseback to the outcast Siberian lepers*, 1892: 39).

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*St. Petersburg to Astrakhan and the Crimea* (1874). The spellings *izvoschik* or *isvoschik* would have been more accurate (cf. *yesvosgick* in Pellew Smith 1859: 317).

<sup>41</sup> *Russian scandal* is defined in OED3 as ‘a game in which a whispered message, after being passed from player to player, is contrasted in its original and final versions’.

<sup>42</sup> *Nichevoing* is interesting, in that it looks like a deverbal noun, but *nichevo* has never functioned as a verb.



- (40) “Griffin is having his jolts setting up his kino workshop running into *seichassing* (*seichass* is the Russian word meaning “immediately” according to the dictionary, but “any old time” actually), and *nichevoing* (the Russian word that is equivalent to a shrug of the shoulders, signifying “I should worry” or “Ishkabibble”), but he is working hard and has a group of carpenters and workers with him who don’t *seichass* and *nichevo*” (Edward Thornton Heald and James B. Gidney, *Witness to revolution: Letters from Russia, 1916–1919*, 1972: 212).
- (41) But it is difficult to ascertain whether Japan, in spite of her expansive power and her extraordinary social drill, would have been able to do what Russia accomplished within five years, owing much less to her military power than to the nichevoism of her officials (*The Eclectic Magazine of Foreign Literature, Science, and Art*, vol. 148, January–June, 1907: 333).
- (42) “With him everything is *netchevo*, and this quality of *netchevoism*—if I may so term it—is too often seen in his work. *Netchevo* is a favourite Russian expression, and means “nothing,” “never,” “all the same,” “good, bad, wretched,” according to the stress and intonation one puts on the word” (William Steveni, *Things seen in Russia*, 1913: 195).
- (43) “One must make bold to translate into the vernacular this mysterious *nitchevo* of the steppes... In our own slang the nearest equivalent, I suppose, would be don’t-care-a-damnateness, but that indicates a more aggressive, heavier attitude, something quite without “grace,” Slav or other Nitchevism proper, I take it, though a weakness, a form of self-indulgence, may yet have amiability and charm” (*The New York Times* of August 21, 1921: 26).
- (44) “Lateness, the tortoiselike torpor of waiters, *seichasism*, and *nichevoism* (the Russian equivalent of *mañana*, “it doesn’t matter,” “it can wait”), irregularity, asymmetry, inefficiency, and unnecessary queues—which to this day resemble blobs, not lines—were all the result, not only of socialism, but of the sudden and massive juxtaposition of two cultural frames—the village and the city” (Richard Stites, *Revolutionary dreams: Utopian vision and experimental life in the Russian Revolution*, 1989: 163).
- (45) “The word is M. Paul Bourget’s. He explains the character of Jules de Maligny, the hero or rather the protagonist of his new novel “L’Écuyère,” by saying that he is a nitchevist” (*The New York Times* of August 21, 1921: 26).

- (46) I think it will show that we Nichivist Anarchists are interested in the future if I show up with a pregnant woman (*The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction*, vol. 25, 1963: 37).

The three derivatives, no doubt introduced by users with at least a working knowledge of Russian, are relatively rare. Since most occurrences in the second half of the twentieth century come from specialized discourse (e.g., Slochower 1970: 249; Maynard 1979: 517; Stites 1989: 163), they are rather unlikely to gain currency in modern English.

## 7. Conclusions

This article provides evidence indicating that the history of *nitchevo* in English covers a longer period of time than has hitherto been assumed. While OED3 dates the first sense to 1877, the earliest recorded attestation of *nitchevo* as an interjection comes from 1832. English translations of Kohl's German book, which appeared ten years later, introduced a nominal sense that helped to keep the loanword in the public eye. A spate of British and American travelogs published in the following years granted it further recognition, stereotypical as it was, as did newspaper articles commenting on Russia and things Russian. Both senses may now be antedated in line with the dictionary's historical principles, contributing to a more consistent "biography" of the headword.

As demonstrated in Section 3, throughout its nearly 200 years in English, *nitchevo* has been recorded in more spelling variants than shown in OED3, some of them frequent and some not. Even though the raw frequencies presented in Table 1 cannot be considered fully credible, they point to the significance of selected forms. This part of the research was complemented by Google Books Ngram Viewer and Google Books British and American Corpora, which displayed diachronic trends in the use of *nitchevo* and *nichevo*. Despite some inconsistency between Google Books datasets, the former predominated in the past and the latter is its modern counterpart.

*Nitchevo* showed limited word-formation productivity. Among other things, attempts were made to characterize Russians by means of their *nichevoism*. However, this coinage has never caught on, perhaps because of its inherent ambiguity – the "don't-care-a-damnateness" offered as its English equivalent in (43) can hardly be considered a universally comprehensible word. The concept may be expressed more conveniently with such phrases as "the nitchevo attitude" or "the nitchevo mentality", which is probably why the derivative was less robust than it might have been. The other items, *nichevoing* and *nichevist*, were ephemeral.

The potential antedatings cited in Section 2.2 show that travelogs published in London (for BrE) and New York/Boston (for AmE) were the earliest sources of the loanword. At the same time, the flourishing of the newspaper market ensured a steady flow of information to anglophone readers. Since the foreign and the exotic was always received with great interest, it comes as no surprise that narratives of various aspects of Russian culture, sometimes far from comprehensive or detached, filled newspaper pages. The story of Bismarck's ring that was reprinted extensively, it is argued, made the loanword more recognizable on both sides of the Atlantic. After all, while travelogs are aimed at specialist target users, newspapers cater to readers with both sophisticated and unsophisticated tastes.

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## Appendix 1

A chronological list of British newspapers featuring the story of Bismarck's iron ring.

Oct 30, 1885	<i>Hendon &amp; Finchley Times</i> (reproduced from <i>Life</i> )
Oct 30, 1885	<i>Leominster News and North West Herefordshire &amp; Radnorshire Advertiser</i> (reproduced from <i>Life</i> )
Oct 30, 1885	<i>Sevenoaks Chronicle and Kentish Advertiser</i> (reproduced from <i>Life</i> )
Oct 31, 1885	<i>Canterbury Journal, Kentish Times and Farmers' Gazette</i> (reproduced from <i>Life</i> )
Oct 31, 1885	<i>Warminster &amp; Westbury Journal, and Wilts County Advertiser</i> (reproduced from <i>Life</i> )
Oct 31, 1885	<i>Whitstable Times and Herne Bay Herald</i> (reproduced from <i>Life</i> )
Oct 31, 1885	<i>Witney Gazette and West Oxfordshire Advertiser</i> (reproduced from <i>Life</i> )
Oct 31, 1885	<i>London Mid Surrey Times</i>
Nov 2, 1885	<i>Pall Mall Gazette</i>
Nov 3, 1885	<i>Edinburgh Evening News</i>
Nov 3, 1885	<i>Western Daily Press</i>
Nov 3, 1885	<i>Liverpool Mercury</i>
Nov 4, 1885	<i>Daily Gazette for Middlesbrough</i>
Nov 4, 1885	<i>Yorkshire Post and Leeds Intelligencer</i>
Nov 4, 1885	<i>Belfast News-Letter</i>
Nov 9, 1885	<i>Dundee Evening Telegraph</i>
Nov 12, 1885	<i>Shields Daily Gazette</i>
Nov 13, 1885	<i>London Daily News</i>
Nov 14, 1885	<i>Lancaster Gazette</i>
Nov 16, 1885	<i>Western Morning News</i>
Nov 18, 1885	<i>Exeter Flying Post</i>
Nov 20, 1885	<i>Tavistock Gazette</i>
Nov 20, 1885	<i>Herts &amp; Cambs Reporter &amp; Royston Crow</i>
Nov 21, 1885	<i>Kentish Independent</i>
Nov 21, 1885	<i>Cork Constitution</i>
Nov 21, 1885	<i>Wigton Advertiser</i>
Nov 23, 1885	<i>London Magnet</i>
Nov 27, 1885	<i>Hull Daily Mail</i>
Nov 27, 1885	<i>Durham County Advertiser</i>
Feb 26, 1886	<i>Jarrow Express</i>
May 14, 1886	<i>Pall Mall Gazette</i>
May 22, 1886	<i>The Graphic</i>



Nov 12, 1887	<i>Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser</i>
Nov 19, 1887	<i>Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser</i>
July 21, 1891	<i>Mid Sussex Times</i>
July 24, 1891	<i>Cornubian and Redruth Times</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Framlingham Weekly News</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>West Sussex County Times</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Beverley and East Riding Recorder</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Maryport Advertiser</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Exmouth Journal</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Dorking and Leatherhead Advertiser</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Shipley Times and Express</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Beverley and East Riding Recorder</i>
July 25, 1891	<i>Framlingham Weekly News</i>
July 28, 1891	<i>North Devon Gazette</i>
July 12, 1894	<i>Wood County Reporter</i>
July 12, 1894	<i>Mineral Point Tribune</i>
April, 23 1898	<i>Newcastle Courant</i>

## Appendix 2

A chronological list of American newspapers which republished the story of Bismarck's iron ring.

Nov 12, 1885	<i>The Wheeling Daily Intelligencer</i>
Nov 13, 1885	<i>New Castle Courier</i>
Nov 14, 1885	<i>Sandusky Daily Register</i>
Nov 19, 1885	<i>Monmouth Evening Gazette</i>
Nov 19, 1885	<i>The Manitowoc Pilot</i>
Nov 20, 1885	<i>Essex County Herald</i>
Nov 22, 1885	<i>New York World</i>
Nov 26, 1885	<i>Westville Indicator</i>
Nov 27, 1885	<i>Monmouth Atlas</i>
Nov 29, 1885	<i>Critic</i>
Dec 2, 1885	<i>Middletown Daily Argus</i>
Dec 5, 1885	<i>Pueblo Colorado Daily Chieftain</i>
Dec 6, 1885	<i>Daily Times</i>
Dec 9, 1885	<i>New Albany Public Press</i>
Dec 17, 1885	<i>Kingston Daily Gleaner</i>
Dec 18, 1885	<i>Marshfield Times</i>
Dec 19, 1885	<i>Superior Times</i>
Dec 23, 1885	<i>Cedar Rapids Evening Gazette</i>
Dec 24, 1885	<i>Napier Daily Telegraph</i>
Dec 25, 1885	<i>Abilene Taylor County News</i>
Dec 28, 1885	<i>Brisbane Telegraph</i>
Dec 30, 1885	<i>Evening Capital</i>
Jan 6, 1886	<i>Connersville Times</i>
Jan 20, 1886	<i>The Somerset Herald</i>
Feb 5, 1886	<i>The Mitchell Capital</i>
April 6, 1886	<i>The Argus</i>
April 13, 1886	<i>The Hawaiian Gazette</i>
April 27, 1886	<i>Oxford Democrat</i>
May 26, 1888	<i>The Sun</i>
May 2, 1890	<i>Logansport Reporter</i>
May 4, 1890	<i>Dubuque Sunday Herald</i>
May 20, 1890	<i>Salem Daily News</i>
Nov 16, 1890	<i>Pittsburgh Dispatch</i>
Dec 21, 1890	<i>The Morning Call</i>
Jan 3, 1891	<i>Weimar Mercury</i>
Aug 7, 1898	<i>Omaha Daily Bee</i>

May 1, 1905	<i>Abilene Daily Reporter</i>
July 9, 1905	<i>Evening Star</i>
July 9, 1905	<i>Sunday Magazine of The New York Daily Tribune</i>
July 9, 1905	<i>The St. Louis Republic</i>
July 16, 1905	<i>Daily Arkansas Gazette</i>
Aug 23, 1905	<i>Defiance Express</i>
Jul 30, 1908	<i>Syracuse Post Standard</i>
Nov 5, 1909	<i>Leadville Herald Democrat</i>
Nov 13, 1914	<i>Fort Wayne Sentinel</i>
March 17, 1918	<i>New York Times</i>
May 25, 1918	<i>Norwich Bulletin</i>
Aug 29, 1918	<i>New York Times</i>