Comparative Study of the 100 Most Frequent Russian, French, German and British Surnames

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Abstract

This paper presents a contrastive study of the 100 most frequent Russian, French German and British surnames. The aim of the study is to elaborate and evaluate name-based materials for four countries in the form of statistical data, then to analyse and confront surname percentages in order to determine their naming patterns and name giving properties.

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Introduction

Through a variety of means names express the identity of a society (Shokhenmayer 2009: 83). Not only from a historical perspective, but also from a statistical point of view, they give evidence of valuable non-linguistic information on cultural, social, economic and other levels. So-called *surnames* or *family names* represent a particularly interesting group of names which are to be found throughout Europe. From the number and the dwelling place of people bearing definite surnames we can speculate over the diffusion of certain traditions, crafts, activities, interests, and thus in some degree recreate the structure of medieval societies. A lot of names, regions, occupations and local crafts fell into oblivion, but the information on their former value is well encoded in onomastic evidence, mostly in surnames, as well as in their statistics.

In regard to surnames studies, the situation is more than just confusing. Although European onomasticons are ones of the most complex, numerous and varied in the entire world, they have received much less attention in the context of frequency analysis. There had been a lot of investigations on the origin of names in a concrete area or town, but all of them have been done from the historical perspective (Nölle-Hornkamp 1992, McClure 2010).

On the basis of the 20 most frequent surnames in various European countries, Brozović Rončević (2004: 168-169) clearly shows different traditions in naming patterns: for example, in Hungary 8 surnames derive from professions, in England – 5, in France – 2, in Italy – 1, in Sweden, Norway and Denmark – 0 and in Germany – 17.

Of course, we must admit that an analysis of the most frequent surnames may be likened to the observation of the 'tip of the iceberg', but, however, they may be illustrative and shed light on some specific details. It is a well-known fact that the most frequent surnames are of polyphyletic origins. The typical polyphyletic surnames, alternatively to the monophyletic ones, have dozens or hundreds of genetic sources of the surname where

hundreds or thousands unrelated men used a surname based on common trades, occupations, activities, clans or topographic terms. In this regard, Manni points out that it can be easily shown that the etymologies of the first 100 most frequent surnames are 'very similar' in European countries: 'this datum reflects the similar natural and social environment of Europe, and implies the polyphyletic origins of corresponding patronymic markers' (2005: 223). For our part, we set as a goal to clarify to what extent the meanings, or so to say name-driven motives, are to be similar in European countries.

Therefore, the establishment of a contrastive study of the 100 most frequent Russian, French German and British surnames is reasoned by the singular situation of their onomasticons: for although they have much in common with the rest of neighbouring communities in the essential linguistic system due to their genetic relationship and cultural affinity, their surnames subsist in and have originated within very different historical and social circumstances. The intention here is, first, to compare percentages of motivation surname groups from each country, second, to note similarities and differences between them and, third, to discuss results.

German Surnames

In 2002, Lüderitz (cited in Marynisson and Nübling 2010: 314) has demonstrated by comparing the 100 most frequent German and Danish family names that surnames share of two Germanic-speaking countries differ considerably:

	Denmark			Germany		
Motive	Rank	Surnames %	Bearers %	Rank	Surnames %	Bearers %
Patronymic	**1**	**65**	**92**	**3**	**22**	**14**
Topographic	**2**	**25**	**5.3**	**4**	**10**	**5**
Nicknames	**3**	**6**	**1**	**2**	**24**	**20**
Occupational	**4**	**4**	**2**	**1**	**44**	**61**

Table 1. Percentage of motivation name types for the 100 most frequent German and Danish surnames

We may conclude that, for instance, German occupational surnames within the national onomasticon represent one of the richest and highest Europe-wide percentage. Let us represent German data in the form of a diagram:

Fig. 1. Motive-related percentage of German surnames

Percentage Variability Depending on Surnames' Quantity

In order to relativize these data, we shall plot a percentage 'curve' of above-mentioned groups by points according to various numbers of surnames.

In 2007, Farø and Kürschner (cited in Marynisson and Nübling 2010: 315), having criticized the latter research for the unrepresentative method of sampling, examined 1,000 surnames in Germany and Denmark respectively. But, to ensure the homogeneous geographical spread, all transparent surnames (those of foreign origin and obscure etymology have been filtered out) assigned to typical street names throughout the countries – *Lindenstraße 30* and *Kirkevej 5* – have been selected from the phone directories. The results differ from the 100 most frequent surnames considerably: this time occupational names (*Berufsnamen*) in Germany amounted to 25% instead of 44%, patronymic names (*Rufnamen*) to 33% instead of 22%, nicknames (*Übernamen*) to 18% instead of 24% and topographic names (*Herkunftsnamen + Wohnstättennamen*) to 29% instead of 10%.

Marynisson and Nübling (2010) compared the 200 most frequent surnames in Germany, the Netherlands and Flanders and revealed their naming motives as follows:

Rank	Flanders		The Netherlands		Germany	
1	Patronymic	40.0%	Topographic	41.7%	Occupational	34.16%
2	Topographic	32.4 %	Occupational	25.9%	Patronymic	32.33%
3	Occupational	18.1%	Patronymic	22.5%	Nicknames	22.25%
4	Nicknames	9.5%	Nicknames	9.92%	Topographic	11.25%

Table 2. Percentage of motivation name types for the 200 most frequent German, Dutch and Flemish surnames

Rosa and Volker Kohlheim (2001), after having analysed the 1,000 most frequent German surnames according to the phone register of 1996, found out that, besides 15% of ambiguous and 1% of foreign names, occupational surnames constitute about 20% of the most frequent family names in contrast to 35% for patronymics, nicknames – 18% and topographic surnames – 11%.

As we may conclude, these discrepancies confirm the very fact that methodologies of analysis and quantities of surnames do play a significant role for name-landscapes. The percentage of surnames can be summarized in the form of a diagram which reflects the share of surnames from top 10 (added by us) and top 20 (Brozović Rončević 2004) through top 100 (Lüderitz 2002) and top 200 (Marynisson and Nübling 2010) to top 1000a (Farø and Kürschner 2007) and top 1000b (Kohlheim and Kohlheim 2001):
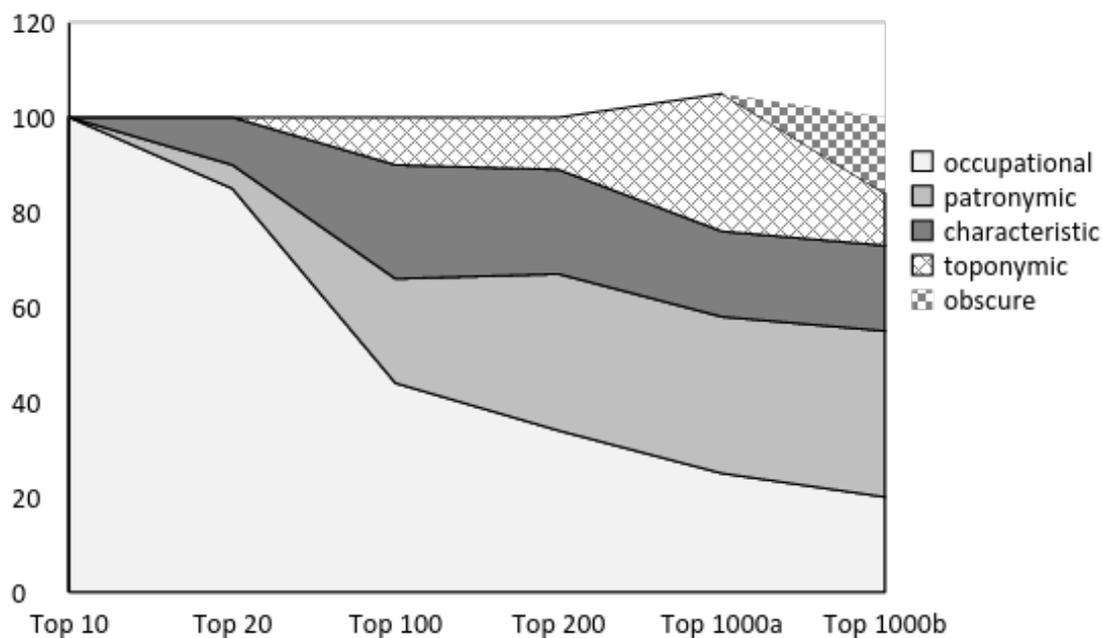

Fig.2. Percentage of motivation name types for German surnames from top 10 to top 1000

French Surnames

French surnames were first used in the 11th century to distinguish people who had the same given name, but surnames for all did not become common until centuries later. French surnames developed from four major sources: patronymic, occupational, characteristic and geographic surnames. A patronymic surname is the most common category of French last names.

Marie-Odile Mergnac numbers (2000: 68) 46% of patronyms (*noms de baptême*), 20% of occupational surnames (*noms de métier*), 18% of nicknames (*noms de caractéristiques physiques ou morales*) and 11% of topographic surnames (*noms de lieux*). Let's recheck these amounts. The onomastic data of births between 1891 and 1990 from the French National Institute for Statistics and Economic Studies are available on the websites Geopatronyme (n.d.) and Genealogie (n.d.), and others. In order to be objective, we shall categorize one surname of various origins into the relevant graphs. In so doing, we have classified 105 proprial lemmas of 100 surnames (see Table 3).

Meanings of patronymic surnames can be described in terms of origin and history of French culture: 20 surnames are of Germanic origin (*Bernard*), which reflects the Frankish background of early *Francia*; 10 Latin names are reminders of the parental relationship of French and Latin languages (*Laurent*); 8 surnames of Hebrew origin refer to ecclesiastic name giving traditions in the Middle Ages (*Thomas*); 5 Greek names tell us about the general Hellenistic influence (*Nicolas*); 5 surnames of Spanish origin are surely related to the common border between Spain and France and to the Provencal South (*Martinez*); one Basque name (*Garcia*) in the top 100 is to be explained by the French Basque Country with 262,000 inhabitants (1999 census).

Among 22 occupational surnames, five denote forging (*Lefe(b)vre, Faure, Schmitt, Fabre*), three – clerical activities (*Leclerc(q), Lemaire*), two – bakery (*Fournier*), milling (*Meunier*), trading (*Mercier*), status estate (*Chevalier*), military (*Lacroix*), and one – farming (*Meyer*), shepherding (*Boyer*), wagon-making (*Caron*), hairdressing (*Barbier*) and religious occupation (*Lemoine*).

As for toponymic surnames, seven refer to natural landscape (*Dubois*), four – to artefacts (*Dumas*) and only one – to a regional toponym (*Picard*).

In respect to nicknames, eleven surnames characterize a set of colours (*Rousseau*) and qualitative attributes (*Bonnet*) respectively, and two describe the size of a person (*Legrand*).

Name Groups	Patronyms	Occupational surnames	Toponyms	Nicknames
Surnames	Martin1, Bernard2, Thomas4, Robert5, Richard6, Simon11, Laurent12, Michel14, Garcia15, David16, Betrand17, Vincent19, Girard22, André23, Lambert27, François29, Martinez30, Garnier32, Guérin36, Henry38, Nicolas40, Perrin41, Mathieu43, Clement44, Gauthier45, Lopez47, Robin50, Masson51, Sanchez52, Gérard53, Denis56, Gautier60, Roger61, Noel64, Lucas66, Jean68, Perez69, Marie73, Colin80, Fernandez8, Pierre82, Renard83, Arnaud84, Rolland85, Aubert87, Giraud88, Vidal90, Renaud92, Philippe96	Lefebvre13, Fournier20, Lefevre24, Mercier25, Faure33, Müller37, Chevalier49, Boyer55, Lemaire57, Meyer65, Meunier67, Marchand70, Dufour71, Barbier74, Schmitt78, Caron86, Leclerc89, Bourgeois91, Lemoine93, Leclercq97, Lacroix98, Fabre99	Dubois3, Dupont26, Dumont46 , Fontaine48, Duval58, Roche62, Dumas76, Pierre82, Picard94, Lacroix98, Dupuis100	Petit7, Durand8, Leroy9, Moreau10, Roux18, Morel21, Bonnet28, Legrand31, Rousseau34, Blanc35, Roussel39, Morin42, Lopez47, Nguyen54, Joly59, Roy63, Blanchard72, Brun75, Brunet77, Leroux79, Renard83, Lemoine93, Gaillard95

Table 3. Categorization of the 100 most frequent French surnames with corresponding ranks

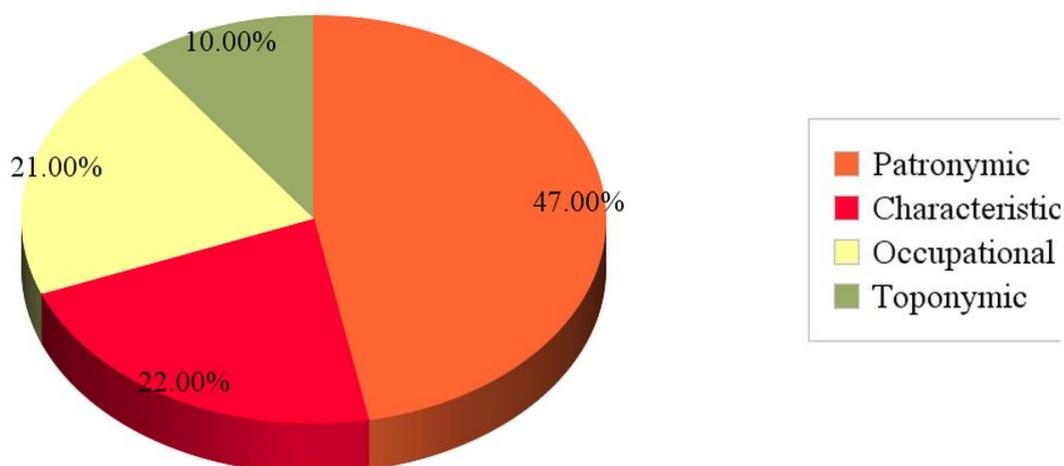The chart of these results may be presented in the form of a diagram as follows:

Fig. 3. Motive-related percentage of French surnames

Russian Surnames

Zhuravlev from the V.V. Vinogradov Russian Language Institute of the Russian Academy of Sciences collected top 500 of the most frequent Russian surnames (Журавлев 2005). The classification of the first hundred is presented below (see Table 4).

As we may conclude, the majority of Russian surnames (60%) are formed from personal names (*Sergeyev* – Sergey's son, *Vasilyev* – Vasiliy's son, etc.). Among 33 nicknames, 19 originate from names of animals, birds, insects and plants (*Lebedev* – the possessive adjective from *лебедь*, 'swan'; *Korovin* – the possessive adjective from *корова*, 'cow'; etc.), which have long ago been used as additional personal names; ten reflect appearances or inherent properties and four denote colours. Eight surnames have their origin in people's professions and crafts (*Kuznetsov* – Smith's son). And only the surname *Polyakov* refers to a toponym (*Pole, from Poland*).

Name Groups	Patronyms	Occupational surnames	Toponyms	Nicknames
Surnames	Иванов1, Васильев5, Петров6, Михайлов8, Фёдоров10, Морозов11, Алексеев13, Семенов15, Егоров16, Павлов17, Степанов19, Николаев20, Андреев22, Макаров23, Никитин24, Захаров25, Борисов28, Яковлев29, Григорьев30, Романов31, Сергеев33, Кузьмин34, Фролов35, Александров36, Дмитриев37, Ильин41, Максимов42, Антонов49, Тарасов50, Филиппов53, Давыдов55,	Кузнецов3, Попов4, Новиков9, Ковалев46, Мельников69, Казаков73, Коновалов92, Пономарев97	Поляков43	Смирнов2, Соколов7, Новиков9, Морозов11, Волков12, Лебедев14, Козлов18, Орлов21, Зайцев26, Соловьев27, Воробьев32, Королев38, Гусев39, Киселев40, Сорокин44, Виноградов45, Белов47, Медведев48, Жуков5, Баранов52, Комаров54, Беляев56, Крылов65, Куликов66, Чернов79, Щербаков84, Калинин86, Чернышев88, Быков89, Маслов90,

	Герасимов57, Богданов58, Осипов59, Сидоров60, Матвеев61, Титов62, Марков63, Миронов64, Карпов67, Власов68, Денисов70, Гаврилов71, Тихонов72, Афанасьев74, Данилов75, Савельев76, Тимофеев77, Фомин78, Абрамов80, Мартынов81, Ефимов82, Федотов83, Назаров85, Исаев 87, Родионов91, Лазарев93, Климов95, Филатов96, Прохоров100			Воронин94, Голубев98, Кудрявцев99

Table 4. Categorization of the 100 most frequent Russian surnames with corresponding ranks
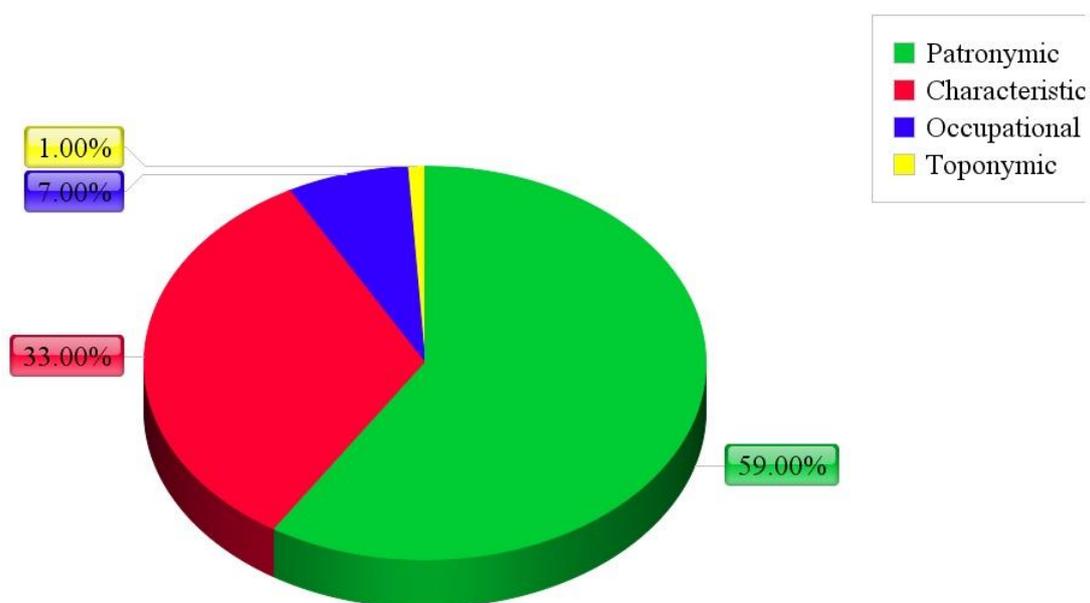The chart of these results may be visualized in the form of a diagram as follows:

Fig. 4. Motive-related percentage of Russian surnames

British surnames

The onomastic data of UK are available on such websites as So Feminine (n.d.), British Surnames (n.d.), and others. Because of different theories of the origins of these surnames, we have classified 123 proprial lemmas for 100 surnames:

Name Groups	Patronyms	Occupational surnames	Toponyms	Nicknames
Surnames	Jones2, Williams4, Davies6, Evans7, Wilson8, Thomas9, Roberts10, Johnson11, Lewis12, Robinson14, Thompson16, Watson18, Jackson19, Harris22, Martin26, James2, Edwards31, Harrison35, Morris38, Ward40, Phillips43, Mitchell44, Adams46, Anderson48, Davis54, Price56, Griffiths59, Kelly60, Simpson61, Collins63, Richardson66, Robertson72, Reynolds74, Ellis76, Richards77, Wilkinson79, Murray84, Powell85, Rogers88, Stevens89, Thomson92, Matthews93, Saunders100	Smith1, Taylor3, Walker13, Wright20, Cooper23, Clarke27, Moore33, Clark34, Hall39, Ward40, Turner41, Carter42, Patel45, Cook50, Bailey51, Parker52, Miller53, Murphy55, Bell57, Baker58, Marshall62, Chapman70, Hunt71, Stewart82, Palmer86 Hunter91, Mason96, Knight97, Butler99	Wood15, Thompson1, Green21, Lee25, Hill32, Moore33, Scott36, Hall39, Ward40, Bell57, Kelly60, Cox65, Gray68, Shaw73, Graham81, Murray84, Holmes87, Ross94	Brown5, White17, Green21, King24, Morgan29, Hughes30, Moore33 Young37, Morris38, Hall39, Turner41, Mitchell44, Campbell47, Allen49, Bell57, Collins63, Bennett64, Cox65, Fox67, Gray68 Rose69, Shaw73, Lloyd75, Ellis76, Russell78, Khan80, Reid83, Walsh90, Ross94, Owen95, Kennedy98

Table 5. Categorization of the 100 most frequent British surnames with corresponding ranks

Meanings of patronymic surnames can be described in terms of origin and history of Great Britain as well: 18 surnames are of Germanic origin which reflects its Anglo-Saxon background (*Wilson*); 15 Celtic names of Scottish, Welsh, Irish and Gaelic diaspora are a reminder of the persistence of regional naming patterns (*Evans*); 9 surnames of Hebrew origin refer to ecclesiastic name giving traditions in the Middle Ages (*Jones*); 3 Greek names tell us about the general Hellenistic influence of Renaissance period (*Phillips*); 4 surnames of Latin/French/Norman origin are surely related to the Norman Conquest (*Martin*). After it, 'the Old English naming system gradually dissolved. Old English names became less common and were replaced by popular continental European names. The earliest surnames in England were found shortly after the Norman Conquest in 1066' (Davies 2012: 43).

British occupational surnames reveal the picture of medieval society: forging (*Smith*), clothing (*Taylor*), white-collars (*Clark(e)*), woodwork (*Wright*), watercrafts (*Moore*), servant activities (*Bailey*), military (*Ward*), milling (*Miller*), bakery (*Baker*), trading (*Chapman*), hunting (*Hunter*), etc.

Among 18 topographic surnames, nine refer to natural landscape (*Wood*), two – to artefacts (*Bell*), four indicate some concrete settlements (*Graham, Kelly*), and two mean an area (*Scott, Murray*).

As far as nicknames are concerned, 12 of them denote a set of colours (*Brown, White, Russell*) and 20 describe some peculiar features (*Morgan, Allen, Shaw, Kennedy*).

The percentage diagram of these results looks like follows:
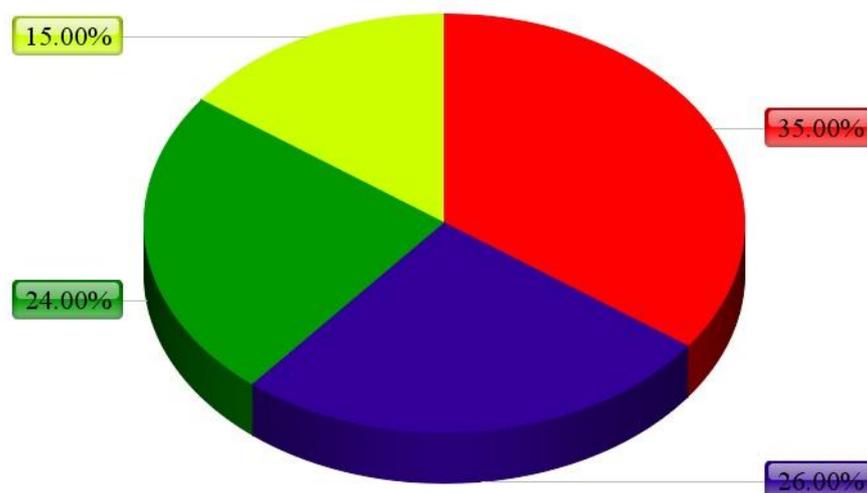

Fig. 5. Motive-related percentage of British surnames

Conclusion

Percentile proportions vary from one country to another. They depend on local history, culture and name giving traditions. The summarizing table is presented below in Table 6:

Surnames →	Russian		German		French		British	
Name type ↓	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%	Rank	%
Patronymic	1	59	3	22	1	46	1	35
Nicknames	2	33	2	24	3	18	2	26
Occupational	3	7	1	44	2	20	3	24
Toponymic	4	1	4	10	4	11	4	15

Table 6. Percentage table of Russian, German, French and British surnames

As we can observe, topographic surnames always 'finish in the cellar'. For the latter, aside from Russian names, any natural landscape is of greater importance. Surnames based on given names, on the contrary, rank as number one for each country except for Germany where occupational surnames prevail considerably. We suggest that such an interesting detail should be explained by the impact of the Hanseatic League created in Germany of the 12th century as 'a commercial and defensive confederation of merchant guilds and their market towns that dominated trade along the coast of Northern Europe. The Hanseatic cities had their own legal system and furnished their own armies for mutual protection and aid' (Dollinger 1999: 15).

German occupational surnames surpass corresponding amounts in the UK or France twice, and they are six times more common than in Russia. However, several unvaried elements are to be found in all of them: family names mostly denote the metalworking (*Кузнецов*, *Ковалёв*, *Lefèvre*, *Schmied*, *Smith*) bread making (*Мельников*, *Baker*, *Fournier*, *Bäcker*), horse serving (*Коновалов*, *Chevalier*, *Marshall*, *Roßmann*) and religion (*Попов*, *Пономарёв*, *Lemoine*, *Bell*, *Palmer*, *Kirchner*) as pillars of the medieval society.

Almost everywhere nicknames reflect external characteristics (colour, height) and inner properties (character, livelihoods).

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