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Shopping Is Like Getting Hit Upside the Head

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Отоварить: to buy or sell something with a chit or coupon, to hit someone (slang)

A vacation is a wonderful thing, especially if you are in a cozy cabin on a clear, clean lake surrounded by mountains, with perfect weather, plenty of kayaking, swimming, white-water rafting, serious eating and drinking — and no radio or television. When you come back to civilization, you find that the world hasn't changed much in your absence and ignorance.

On the other hand, you discover that you've missed one of Mr. Putin's language lessons. This lesson was about the verb отоварить, which is derived from the noun товар (merchandise, commodity). Etymologists think that товар came from the Turkic languages and originally meant commodity, property or livestock. This gave us the word товарищ (comrade), which probably had the original meaning of someone with whom one shared property, and товарищество (an association, fellowship) — a group of people united by common commercial, warm personal or other ties.

As far as I can tell, the verb отоварить appeared during the Soviet period. It meant either selling or buying food and other goods for ration cards or certificates. You can find dozens of examples of this usage in literature and newspaper articles. The word can be difficult to translate, since we express the concept a bit differently in English. Хлеб выдавали по карточкам, которые не всегда можно было отоварить (Bread was distributed by ration cards, but you couldn't always find it; literally, "[the cards] couldn't always be traded"). Today, you find отоварить used to describe chits for free medicine: Льготники месяцами пытаются отоварить выписанные рецепты (People with vouchers spend months trying to get their prescriptions filled).

Отоварить produced another verb, отовариться, which today has two meanings. One is to successfully use some kind of voucher to buy something. По этим картам можно отовариться в продуктовых магазинах (You can use the vouchers to buy what you need in grocery stores). The second meaning is to go on a shopping spree. Еду в Таиланд отовариваться (I'm taking a shopping trip to Thailand).

Somewhere along the line, отоварить became camp slang for beating someone up, similar to the English expression "giving it to someone." And then this meaning drifted into mainstream Russian, although it still seems to be a slangy term. Putin used it in this sense when talking about how protesters who didn't receive a sanction for their demonstrations should be treated. As is his want, he cited the alleged way that protesters in London are treated by the cops when they demonstrate in a place that's off-limits. "Где нельзя, бьют дубиной по башке. Нельзя? Пришёл? Получи, тебя отоварили." (Where they can't [demonstrate], they're hit over the head with a billy club. Is it a forbidden place? Did you come anyway? Take it — you're going to get smacked.)

Mr. Putin thoughtfully provided some contemporary synonyms of отоварить for us foreigners, all involving дубина, which I like to translate as "billy club." For example, he said: "Вышли, не имея права, получите по башке дубиной" (If you come out and don't have permission, you're going to get hit upside the head with a billy club). And here's another example, in his version of the protesters' intentions: "... мы вас будем провоцировать на то, чтобы вы нам дали дубиной по башке" (... we're going to provoke you to whack us upside the head with a billy club). Lots of verbs — only the billy club stays the same.

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