

Striking Gold

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

September 23, 2010

The  **Moscow Times**

Золотой: made of gold, golden, wonderful, talented, rich

Here in Moscow we went from summer's smoky inferno to fall's dreary rain with barely time to switch the fan for the heater. Sodden and chilled, I'm still hoping for золотая осень (golden autumn) when the trees turn a brilliant yellow against a vibrant blue sky. In the meantime, I've been thinking about the words золото (gold) and золотой (golden), and enjoying the fact that for once, Russian and English seem to be largely on the same page.

In Russian, as in English, золото refers to gold metal, a gold coin or sports medal, riches or anything of great value. Наш новый сотрудник — золото (Our new employee is pure gold). You can also say: Такие менеджеры у нас на вес золота (Our managers are worth their weight in gold).

English and Russian share a number of gold and golden expressions, like не всё то золото, что блестит (all that glitters is not gold), золотой мальчик (golden boy), золотая середина (golden mean) and золотой век (golden age). Both English and Russian seem to

have picked up the expression *молчание — золото* (silence is golden) from German. English generally leaves out the first half of the expression, which Russian still sometimes maintains: *слово — серебро* (speech is silver).

We also share a belief in golden eggs, although we disagree on what is laying them. In Russian you say *убить курицу, несущую золотые яйца* (to kill the chicken that lays golden eggs). This expression is used when someone eliminates a source of income, spelled out nicely in this example: *Зачем убивать курицу (то есть, хозяина), несущую золотые яйца (то есть, обеспечивающую кров и питание)?* (Why would someone kill the chicken — that is, his boss — who lays golden eggs — that is, who provides food and shelter?)

In Russian *золотая жила* (a vein of gold) or *золотое дно* (literally, “gold bottom”) are what we call in English a gold mine or a mother lode. *Туризм — это настоящее золотое дно для области* (Tourism is a real gold mine for the region). Wealth might come more suddenly in *золотой дождь* (literally, “golden rain”). *На ведомство упал золотой дождь — и бюджетные деньги, и деньги международных займов, и федеральные программы* (Money rained down on the agency — from the budget, international loans and federal programs).

If someone is very rich, you can call him *золотой мешок* (a sack of gold). This is now a bit old-fashioned. Today you’d be more likely to call a rich person *олигарх* (oligarch), *чиновник* (bureaucrat) or *жена мэра* (mayor’s wife).

Gold can refer to a skill, regardless of the income produced. *У неё были золотые руки — она отлично шила* (She was a dab hand at sewing; literally, “She had golden hands”). In some cases, you can also add on the second half of the expression: *У него золотые руки, да рыло поганое* (literally, “He has clever hands, but his face is a wreck”). That is, he’s a skillful worker, but a drunk.

Gold can also mean exemplary personal qualities. *Золотой мой* (literally, “my golden one”) is an exclamation of praise and love. Or you can call someone *золотой человек* (kind-hearted) or talk about someone’s *золотое сердце* (heart of gold).

And then there’s *золотая молодежь* (literally, “golden youth”), a calque from the French *jeunesse doree*. In the Soviet period and now, it’s used to describe rich kids from privileged families. You know — *дети чиновников* (bureaucrats’ kids).

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter. Her collection of columns, *The Russian Word’s Worth*, will be released by Glas in September 2010.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/09/23/striking-gold-a1691>