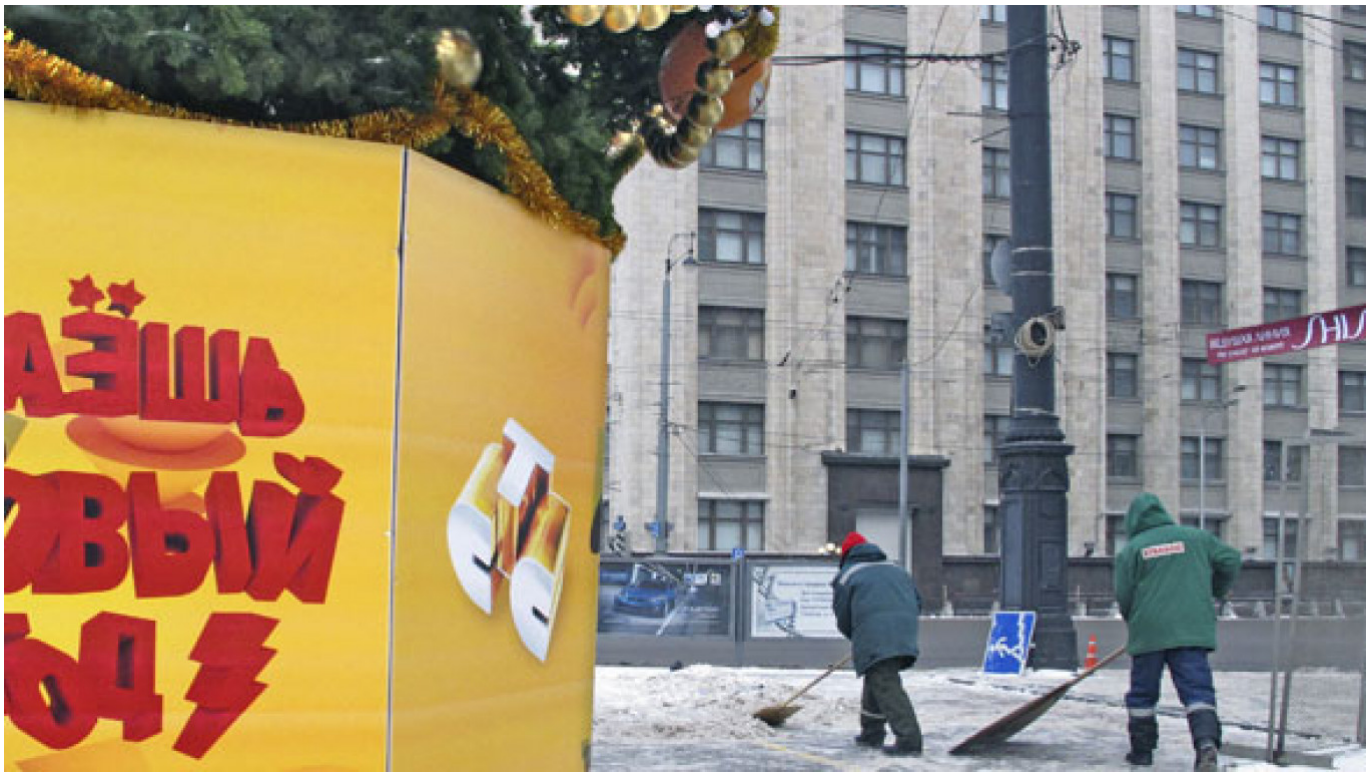
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# A Muzhik for All Seasons

By Michele A. Berdy

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Workmen clearing snow from Manezh Ploshchad. They may be muzhiki. **Vladimir Filonov**

*Мужик: peasant, husband, worker, rustic, man, guy*

Мужик is considered an almost untranslatable Russian word. In fact, in older translations of 19th-century literature, it's often transliterated as moujik or muzhik. Without a footnote, I wonder what 19th-century English-speaking readers made of it. Perhaps they were used to reading about fellah in Egypt and paesan in Italy, so for them the Russian muzhik was just another (objectified) crude peasant laborer.

When you render мужик into English, you lose some associations and "local color," but I don't think it's impossible to translate. At the same time, you do have to pay attention to context, time period, speaker and tone of voice.

If we go way back in time, мужик referred to an adult man who was a peasant or villager. Далеко впереди на телеге возвращается из Знаменского мужик (Far ahead a villager is returning from Znamenskoye on his cart). Кухонный (kitchen) or sometimes буфетный

(dining room) мужик referred to a male servant who did the dirty work in the kitchen.

Мужик could also be used affectionately by a woman to refer to her husband (муж): Ну, что, мужик, говорили на собрании? — спросила жена ("Well, old man, what did they say at the meeting?" his wife asked).

Later, presumably when urbanization was under way, мужик could refer to a worker or someone of the lower classes. Мужики убирали снег, следили за чистотой двора (Workmen shoveled the snow and made sure the courtyard was clean).

Then and now, мужик can be a familiar and somewhat jocular form of address for a man of one's own age or younger. For example, if you are the mother of a passel of boys, you can call out from the kitchen: Мужики! Помогите мне! (Hey, guys! Come give me a hand!)

Since мужик has always referred to someone from the lower classes, for some speakers it's a synonym for someone crude, dirty, uncultured and uneducated. Usually this is very clear from the context: Это — полусумасшедший бродяга, безобразный и грубый мужик (He was a half-crazed hobo, a filthy and crude rustic).

But for other speakers, мужик is the apotheosis of masculinity, strength, resourcefulness and ingenuity. In contrast to effete and useless upper-class twits, he's the salt of the Russian earth. Here, you can more or less convey the meaning, but you lose a bit of color: Алексей Косыгин, увидев Нижневартовск, город на месте непролазных топей, обронил вслух: "Такой город мог построить только русский мужик" (When Alexei Kosygin saw Nizhnevartovsk, a city built on impassable bogs, he remarked: "Only a true Russian man could have built this city").

Today, Russians understand and use the word мужик in a variety of ways. Some people say they don't see any difference between мужчина and мужик. Others see a big difference. One person says: Мужчина — благороден, умён. Мужик — это что-то замызганное, пахнущее. (A man is noble, smart. A muzhik is something filthy and smelly.) Others use мужик positively: Мужик ведёт себя по-мужски (A muzhik behaves like a man). Хороший мужик is what we might call a good guy. Настоящий мужик is what we call a real man — you know, the opposite of a metrosexual.

I think this is the meaning that Prime Minister Vladimir Putin had in mind when he called actor Leonardo DiCaprio настоящий мужик after DiCaprio's long and nerve-racking trip to Russia for the Tiger Forum. And it probably didn't hurt that DiCaprio turned out to be half-Russian.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, whose collection of columns, "The Russian Word's Worth," was published by Glas.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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