

Just Your Average Ivan Six Pack

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July 14, 2011

The  Moscow Times

Обыватель: average person, pleb

☒ When I told a friend what I was going to write about this week, he complained: У тебя сплошной негатив! Что с тобой? (Everything you write is so negative! What's up with you?)

What's up with me? Well, Awful August has arrived early this year. I can't watch Russian news without three handkerchiefs. I can't watch Western news without throwing something at the television. Где тут позитив? (Where's the bright side?)

So in this gloomy frame of mind, I've been investigating Russian words for average folks and wondering why so many of them are so frankly disdainful.

Take обыватель. In the old days it simply meant a resident, as in городской (urban) or сельский (rural) обыватель (dweller).

In the pre- and post-revolutionary period of Russian history, обыватель became associated

with the merchant class and a lack of proper revolutionary zeal. One dictionary still defines обыватель as: человек, лишённый общественного кругозора, с косными, мещанскими взглядами; человек, уклонившийся от классовых позиций пролетариата (a person without broad social vision, with retrograde bourgeois views; a person who has rejected the class positions of the proletariat).

Today обыватель can be a neutral term meaning average Ivan — the man or woman on the street. For example, someone asked at a news conference: Не могли бы Вы на простом примере, понятном обывателю, объяснить, как было достигнуто это чудо? (Could you give a simple example understandable to the average person to explain how this miracle was achieved?)

In other cases, the word is used to draw a distinction between a specialist and a non-specialist. Статья была рассчитана на обывателя, и профессионалам антитеррора мало что давала (The article was written for a popular audience and had little to offer to anti-terrorism specialists). And in certain contexts, обывательский язык can refer to everyday or popular language.

But people who might describe themselves as обыватель in a particular field would not like to be called обыватель in general. Marxist notions of class may be passe, but обыватель is still perceived to have a low- to middlebrow mentality. This is hard to translate, since in American English the common man and Main Street are still celebrated as the bedrock of common sense, hard work and independent thought. Joe Six Pack might share with the обыватель a certain lack of sophistication in his sartorial and alcoholic tastes as well as a definite ignorance of high culture, politics and the workings of high finance — but for all that, he's a noble fellow.

Whatever обыватель is, he's not noble. Reams of unflattering description have been written about this Russian Everyman. He doesn't think about anything but himself: Деятельность обывателя ограничена собственными интересами (The average man is only concerned with his own interests). He lives a gray, ordinary, routine life: Я обыватель, а следовательно, моё существование подчинено ритуалам (I'm a pleb and consequently my existence is subordinated to rituals). He's subservient to power: Это молодой скучный обыватель, надежда и опора режима (He's a young, boring pleb — the hope and pillar of the regime). And he is easily manipulated: Легко обмануть доверчивых обывателей, которым “лень вникать” (It's easy to deceive the trusting hoi polloi who are too lazy to study a subject in depth).

You know, the popular images of Average Ivan and Joe Six Pack have more in common than I thought. Обыватели мира, соединяйтесь! (Everymen of the world, unite!) ... and hire a good PR agency.

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Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/07/14/just-your-average-ivan-six-pack-a8275>