

A Mix of U.S. Rednecks and Russian Rabble

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

July 28, 2011

The  Moscow Times

Быдло: sheep, lemmings, cretins, rabble

☒ I have a tattered and dog-eared mental manila folder called “Intriguing and Possibly Highly Indicative Fun Facts about Russian and English” where I put grammatical, syntactical and lexical differences between the two languages that reveal fundamental differences in worldview. I keep pulling it out to scribble something and then shoving it back in exasperation because there are too many exceptions and too little evidence.

But I can’t help hauling it out to ponder because the differences reflected in language usually cause havoc for the translator. Take the личность-народ distinction in Russian. The collective noun народ (people, nation) describes a kind of undifferentiated mass of humanity. In contrast, личность (vibrant personality, striking individual) is a person of heightened energy, intelligence and individuality who stands out against the background of the народ.

You can say this in English — with a few added qualifiers — but this distinction is not natural to the language. This is particularly true of American English, where the national myths stress the diversity and individuality of the citizens. Americans tend to say “the people are” rather than “the people is.”

There is another collective noun in Russian that describes a subset of народ: быдло. Derived from the same western Slavic root that gave us бытие (existence, reality), in Polish the word evolved to mean house, then property and then livestock. At that point, быдло arrived in Russia. In the 19th century, быдло was a highly unflattering term used by land- and serf-owners to describe peasants as sheep-like, devoid of personal initiative and content to be told what to do.

Today быдло has retained the notion of sheep-like docility, but it has been expanded considerably. In fact, defining and describing быдло seems to be something of a Russian national pastime.

Most of the быдло-describers — who are, incidentally, быдло-loathers — begin something like this: Быдло является оппозицией к личности (The rabble stands in opposition to individuality). They go on to assert that these folks have no personal taste: Для быдла характерно отсутствие собственного мнения, художественного и музыкального вкуса и даже вкуса к еде.❑ Чувства стиля тоже нет. (The rabble has no personal opinion, no taste in art, music or even food. They also have no individual sense of style.)❑

Descriptions of their favorite entertainment make them sound like what Americans call “trailer trash”: После работы быдло идёт за пивом и включает футбол, хотя сначала может посмотреть вечерние новости и пробурчать что-то вроде “вот козлы чё делают” (After work these cretins go for a beer and turn on the television to watch football, although first they might watch the evening news and mutter something like, “What are those jerks up to now?”)

But unlike U.S. rednecks or trailer trash, in Russia, социальный статус быдла, его воспитание, образование, уровень доходов значения не имеют (a cretin’s social status, upbringing, education and salary make no difference).❑ Even a highly placed official can be быдло.

Curiously, other nationalities in Russia might be тупые (stupid) or наглые (obnoxious), but only Russians can be быдло. This gives Russian nationalists a hard time. They, in turn, give online dictionaries a hard time, which is why a lot of them are closed for comments on this word.❑

Oh — there’s one other thing: У быдла есть особенность — оно❑ всегда не ты (The rabble has one distinguishing feature — it’s never you).

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of “The Russian Word’s Worth” (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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

Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2011/07/28/a-mix-of-us-rednecks-and-russian-rabble-a8572>