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Time of Troubles

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Попасть в цейтнот: to run out of time

There is a lovely concept in linguistics called the Frequency Illusion, which I personally experience very frequently. In nonspecialist language, it means that once you've noticed a phenomenon, it seems to happen a lot. In my case, once I identified the chess metaphor in рокировка (castling), now all I see are chess allusions.

To catch all these allusions in Russian, first you need to know the basics. Шахматы (chess) is played on a доска (board) with фигуры (chess pieces). The names of the pieces vary from language to language. In Russian, the pieces are король (king), ферзь (queen; literally "vizier"), ладья (rook; literally "boat"), слон (bishop; literally "elephant"), конь (knight; literally "steed") and пешка (pawn). Конь and слон are called лёгкие фигуры (minor pieces), and ладья and ферзь are тяжёлые (heavy or major pieces).

Since фигура is also a figure (person), you can see the fun you can have with puns. A political figure might be a lightweight (лёгкая фигура) or a heavyweight (тяжёлая фигура).

Бизнесмены — это пешки, а депутаты и чиновники — это фигуры более тяжёлые (Business leaders are pawns, while deputies and bureaucrats are the heavyweights).

Most of the time, the lot of pawns is pretty terrible. Someone wrote dramatically: Глупые, жадные дурочки, они погибли пешками в чужой игре (Stupid, greedy little fools, they died as pawns in someone else's game).

But as someone pointed out: Пешки назад не ходят, они превращаются в фигуры (pawns can't go backwards, and they can turn into major figures). That is, a pawn can inch its way to the other side of the board and become promoted — usually to a queen. In Russian, this is выйти в ферзи and is used whenever a figure of ostensibly little importance rises up to the top. For example, an analyst studying Middle Eastern politics wrote: Турция — пешка, которая способна выйти в ферзи (Turkey is a pawn that could very well be promoted to queen).

Выйти в ферзи is sometimes confused with a similar expression, пройти в дамки (to be crowned), which comes from checkers (шашки). Here, the notion is not so much coming into power but rather achieving success and wealth: Не всякому удаётся, но всякому желается попасть в дамки (Not everyone can do it, but everyone wants to go from rags to riches).

Even though the knight (конь) is a lightweight, its L-shaped, jumping move suggests strength and daring. This ход конём (knight's move) is used figuratively to describe any clever and unexpected move. Sometimes the move is crafty: Валентина Матвиенко сделала ход конём. На муниципальных выборах она не будет состязаться с оппозиционерами (Valentina Matvienko made a clever move — she won't be going up against opposition politicians in the city elections). Now it also seems to refer to any bold and perhaps unexpected act: Он сделал ход конём и купил дом (He took the leap and bought a house).

But not only chess pieces are used figuratively. Попасть в цейтнот is chess-speak for being in a time crunch — zeitnot is German for "time trouble." A managerial consultant advises: Если Вы не хотите попасть в цейтнот, то стоит завести органайзер (If you don't want to find yourself pressured for time, you should get a personal organizer).

To which I would add: You might also consider hiring a pawn who is about to be promoted to queen.

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