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Why Police and Potatoes Wear Jackets

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Мундир: jacket (of sorts)

Confession: I know virtually nothing about any service or profession that requires uniforms and absolutely nothing about uniforms themselves.

On the street, I can't even tell a lowly участковый (beat cop) from a майор (major), and I can never remember if a капитан (captain) is higher or lower than a лейтенант (lieutenant). I can't help it. When I was growing up, Barbie had Beach Ken, Business Ken and Prom Ken, but no Marine or SWAT Ken. Only boys played with G.I. Joe.

Given my deprived and gender-stereotyped childhood, it's no wonder that Russian words for various uniforms and their parts give me a hard time. On the other hand, my Barbie was studying languages in her Dream House, so when uniforms intersect with figures of speech, I'm interested.

There's an interesting figure of speech connected with погоны (epaulettes). Человек в

погонах (literally "a man in epaulettes") is an example of metonymy — that is, a term for one thing used to describe something related. In this case, the epaulettes signal "an officer" or someone retired but still connected with a branch of service. The vividly expressive оборотень в погонах (literally "werewolf in epaulettes") is a metaphorical expression for a bent cop.

Another word rich in rhetorical devices is мундир (uniform, often full-dress or formal). Мундир is a fine example of synecdoche — that is, a figure of speech in which a part is used to mean the whole. So although мундир is the jacket of a uniform, it is often used to refer to the whole thing: Ветераны доставали из шкафов свои военные мундиры, надевали ордена, медали и шли на торжества (Veterans pulled their military uniforms out of the closet, put on their insignias and medals and attended the festivities).

In the Russia of old, мундир could also refer to civil dress uniforms, including придворный (court-dress) and студенческий мундир (school uniform).

And then мундир can also be a stand-in — synecdoche alert — for the profession or position that its wearer represents. Честь мундира (literally "the honor of the uniform") refers to the reputation or prestige of an organization. Sometimes the phrase is used seriously: Он опозорил честь мундира (He is a discredit to his position). In other cases, the phrase is used disdainfully to refer to saving face — or other parts of the anatomy — through cover-ups, lies or very creative crisis management. Компания обвинила прокуратуру в "топорной пропаганде", необходимой ей, чтобы спасти честь мундира (The company accused the prosecutor's office of issuing ham-fisted propaganda to save their own skin).

Мундир is also a metaphor used to describe potato skins. Картошка в мундире is a potato baked or boiled in its jacket, which is just like the English expression. In English, a jacket can refer to the outer cover of a number of things, like books, records or even bullets, although I don't know why potatoes have jackets while other vegetables and fruits have peels. But I can't find any evidence that Russian jacket potatoes came from their English counterparts. Some armchair etymologists theorize that hungry Russian soldiers roasted their potatoes over the fire without peeling them, and then joked that they were в мундире (in their jackets). I suppose that's possible, but I can't believe that hungry Russian peasants didn't do the same long before them, potato peelers not being a common kitchen utensil in 17th-century Russian villages.

Barbie's Dream House was very useful for language study.

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