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Russian as She Is Taught

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Вопросы и ответы: questions and answers

Over 100 years ago, Mark Twain wrote a very funny piece called "English As She is Taught," which chronicles American schoolchildren's hilarious misapprehensions about the world, science and literature.

Some of them are clever in a wrong sort of way: capillary is defined as "a little caterpillar" and mendacious is "what can be mended." Some are very confused: "The two most famous volcanoes of Europe are Sodom and Gomorrah." And one or two are so wrong they're almost right: "The United States is quite a small country compared with some other countrys but is about as industrious."

Since then, it seems like trumpeting American ignorance has become something of a national tradition, like the annual poll that shows about one-third of the population has no idea who the vice president is.

My Russian friends have always been a bit smug about this — and rightfully so. The Soviet school system had many drawbacks, but it was pretty good at getting basic facts into kids' heads.

But times change. A compilation of answers on a recent Единый государственный экзамен (nationwide college-entrance exam) that has been making the rounds on the Internet indicates that some Russian kids may be doing texting during class instead of paying attention to history lessons. But their creativity — linguistic and interpretative — would make Twain proud.

For example, one kid writes, При Иване Грозном происходило искоренение инакомыслия путем коррупции (Under Ivan the Terrible, opposing views were put down through the use of corruption). Another clearly sees the present in the past: Иван Грозный убил многих влиятельных бизнесменов, мешавших ему управлять государством (Ivan the Terrible killed a lot of influential businessmen who were preventing him from governing the state).

Some showed great use of figurative language: При Екатерине II страна покрылась университетами (Under Catherine the Great, the country became covered with universities). Она меняла фаворитов как колготки (She changed her favorites like pantyhose).

Others had some issues with word choice, something I sympathize with: В советских школах дети были как инкубаторы — у них всё было одинаковое (In Soviet schools, children were like incubators, they all had the same things). Врагов советской власти называли дивидентами. Дивидентское движение росло и ширилось (Enemies of Soviet power were called dividents. The divident movement grew and spread.) Ельцин осуществлял политику шаговой терапии (Yeltsin carried out a policy of step-by-step therapy).

But you have to applaud some of their logic: Большевики ликвидировали неграмотность для облегчения цензуры. Ведь как можно цензурировать неграмотность? Никак. (The Bolsheviks liquidated illiteracy to make censorship easier. Because how can you censor illiteracy? You can't.)

Kids knew that Yeltsin was important, but they were a bit shaky on why: Ельцин был первым президентом СССР (Yeltsin was the first president of the U.S.S.R.). Ельцин — первый президент СНГ (Yeltsin was the first president of the CIS). Ельцин создал партию Единая Россия (Boris Yeltsin founded the United Russia party).

And then one kid was philosophical beyond his years: Закончилось всё, как обычно в России: беззакониями власти и недостатком продовольствия (It all ended like it always does in Russia: with the lawlessness of the authorities and food deficits).

I hope that kid passed with flying colors.

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