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Thugs, Rednecks, Nationalists: Understanding Russia's Gopnik Culture

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Гопник: intolerant, insular thug

Insulting slang words seem to go in and out of fashion — or maybe I go in and out of periods of noticing them. Lately it seems that the word гопник and its various derivatives are the new popular pejorative. I thought I knew what гопник meant but did some research to clarify, just in case. It turns out that the word is more interesting than I imagined, and I understood it less than I thought.

The first interesting bit is the word itself and its evocative variations. The singular form is гопник, гопа or гопарь. You can use the plural forms — гопники, гопы, гопари — or one of the collective nouns, which describe гопники as a kind of undifferentiated mass of redneck humanity: гопота, гопотень, гопьё, all of which have the stress on the last syllable.

The second interesting bit is the hypothesized origin of the word. One possible source is the onomatopoetic гоп (a jump, blow or leap). This led to the notion of гоп-стоп (a mugging, i.e., jumping someone), гопстопник (mugger) and even гопство (street crime or violent persecution of someone). In this origin story, гопник and his linguistic friends are thugs, petty criminals or crooks.

Another theory is that гопник came from the abbreviation ГОП, which before the 1917 Revolution stood for городское общество призора (municipal welfare society), a state organization that provided care and shelter to the homeless and poor. Later гоп was urban slang for a flophouse. This led to the notion of гопник as a bum, a homeless person or someone from the dregs of society.

And the third interesting bit is how these two streams of meaning came together and then poured into mainstream Russian in the late 1980s. Гопники became identified with badly educated, lower-class, bigoted thug-like guys who are at the edges of the criminal world. Think poor "Duck Dynasty" without the beards and religion.

And the last interesting bit is how гопники have become a thing. There are sites dedicated to гопота lore. Гопники hang out in courtyards. They like to squat (стоять на корточках), which they call на кортах or на карташах. They eat sunflower seeds. They smoke and practice the martial arts. They are nationalistic. They call progressives педики, пидоры and петухи (all highly insulting terms for homosexuals), not necessarily because they think they are gay, but because gay is bad. Critical thinking and impulse control are not their forte. In short — your basic nightmare.

Гопники tend to be found in urban settings: Прохожу вдоль вокзала, и тут же ко мне подкатывает какой-то поддатый гопник с недружелюбными намерениями (Here I am walking by the station, when a drunken bum with malicious intentions lurches toward me).

In the 21st century, гопота became ликующая (jubilant). First this meant the cheering pro-Kremlin Наши (Us) crowds. Then it began to be used to describe any mass of Western-hating, uneducated thugs. Зал — полон "ликующей гопотой," которая после каждого проклятия в адрес Украины и Грузии радостно свистит, хлопает, машет флагами РФ (The hall was filled with cheering cretins who greeted every curse of Ukraine and Georgia with exultant whistles, clapping, and waving of Russian flags). In Ukraine, гопота often refers to the pro-Russian crowd: Кто же развешивал в Луганске российские флаги? Русская гопота (Who put up the Russian flags in Lugansk? A Russian mob).

Гопота — a mob to be avoided.

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