

Promoting Propaganda

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Пропаганда: propaganda

День Победы (Victory Day) used to be my favorite Russian holiday. I would always tear up when I saw the veterans, some still slender in their old uniforms, covered from neck to waist in medals and ribbons, marching proudly across Red Square. In the parks, I liked watching shy little kids get a last bit of parental advice before dashing to present a veteran with a handful of flowers.

And for a few years, when we were all friends, I liked watching the other Allied veterans march along with their former Soviet comrades-in-arms.

This year, with another war raging, the fighter jets buzzing my apartment house in rehearsals for the air show seem creepy, not cool. And the drumbeat of пропаганда (propaganda) is like nothing I have ever seen or heard before.

And so I find myself thinking constantly about a word I thought I could put on the dusty top shelf of my mind and forget. Пропаганда came to Russian from the Latin propaganda, defined as подлежащее распространению (that which is to be disseminated). The word appeared in the 17th-century Catholic Church, which founded a group to propagate the faith to the unenlightened and unfaithful.

And that is pretty much what пропаганда still does — only the faith changes over time and place.

Most of the time, the word has a negative connotation in Russian. In fact, in a dictionary of political terminology, the word is defined in part like this: "Пропагандой" назывались попытки тоталитарных режимов полностью подчинить науку и вообще всякое знание интересам государственной политики ("Propaganda" was the term used to describe attempts by totalitarian regimes to completely subordinate science and any other knowledge to the interests of state policy).

So you find usage like this: Благодаря топорной пропаганде люди точно знали, что правду они могут услышать только по "радио-голосам" (Thanks to the ham-fisted propaganda, people were certain that they could only get the truth from the "radio voices" [of America, etc.]).

But not all the ways and means of пропаганда and пропагандировать (to propagandize) are bad: Врач должен пропагандировать здоровый образ жизни, конечно, и на своём примере тоже. (A doctor should promote a healthy lifestyle, of course — and by example, too).

Пропаганда and пропагандировать can also be used for the promotion of commercial endeavors or products: Он делал всё, чтобы пропагандировать "Виртуозов Москвы" (He did everything he could to promote the Moscow Virtuosi).

Now this is usually промоушн (promotion), done by the noun промоутер (promoter) through the verb промоутировать (to promote).

Question: Как промоутировать умную книгу? (How do you promote an intellectual book?)
Answer: By using a native Russian verb like продвигать (to advance, promote).

Я предлагаю продвигать вашу книгу в соцсетях (I will promote your book in social media). This kind of продвижение (promotion) seems to be more covert than, say, рекламировать (to advertise) or проводить рекламную кампанию (carry out an ad campaign).

And all of it comes under the big umbrella of маркетинг (marketing), which can be коммерческий (commercial), социальный (social) or political: Политический маркетинг в России — это программирование поведения электората (Political marketing in Russia is programming the electorate's behavior).

And we know how you do that: пропаганда. Here we go again.

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