

Beware the Pointy Things in Moscow

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Прикол: post, point, gag

It's time for another language pop quiz: What do ships, badges and jokes have in common? Any takers? No? Is everyone on vacation?

For those of you with your nose to the Russian language grindstone regardless of the season, the answer is the Russian word *прикол* and the derivative verb pair *прикалывать/приколоть*.

The story of these wide-ranging definitions seems to start with the verb *колоть*, which means to stab, chop or prick. That gave us the word *кол* — a stake or picket, i.e., something that might stab someone. In fact, should you have need to know this — *Боже упаси!* (God forbid) — *посадить на кол* is to impale someone.

Then came the word *прикол*, which is a special kind of stake — a post sunk deep into the

ground that you tie a boat or animal to. Мы привязали на прикол лошадь и пошли обсуждать дела (We tied up the horse to the post and went off to discuss business).

If you were in the shipping business — the kind of business that conveys shipping containers full of, say, Parmesan cheese from South America to a Russian port — you would not want to hear the phrase стоять на приколе (literally to stand at the post) in reference to any of your fleet.

This means the ship is in dry dock. As a Soviet-era dictionary points out with propagandistic glee: Массовая постанoвка торговых судов на прикол характерна для капиталистических стран, особенно в периоды депрессии и экономических кризисов (Putting merchant ships in dry dock on a mass scale is characteristic of capitalist countries, especially during periods of depression and economic crises).

Now you might think that прикалывать/приколoть would be the act of putting a ship in dry dock or tying a horse to a post. No such luck. This verb pair goes back to the chopping-stabbing-pricking root verb and means to fasten by means of a pin: Я приколола брошь к платью (I pinned the brooch onto my dress). And, should you ever need to know this, it also means to kill someone by stabbing them: Я видел, как прикалывают человека штыком (I saw someone run through with a bayonet).

And then somehow we jump from posts and pinning to making a point and poking fun. In today's Russian slang, прикол can sometimes be the point of something. В этом-то и прикол! (That's the whole point!) But most of the time прикол is a gag, a put-on, a spoof or a joke.

Most of these gags lose something in translation. Всякие бывают приколы — например, раздеться догола и пойти в гости (There are all kinds of gags, like stripping naked and going to visit someone). Мы оделись как мушкетёры чисто по приколу (We dressed up like Musketeers just for the fun of it). Хочешь ради прикола встретить рассвет? (Want to stay up until dawn just for the heck of it?)

Прикалывать in slang is to make sport of someone, like the guy who used a windfall to buy the worst Soviet car: Разбогател как-то мужик, купил Запорожец. А друзья его прикалывают: Молодец! (A guy got rich somehow and bought himself a Zaporozhets car. His friends poked fun at him: Good going!) Or it can mean to kill, figuratively and usually with laughter: Меня прикалывают дамы, рожающие дома в ванну (It just kills me when ladies give birth at home in the bathtub).

Прикольно! (What a kick!)

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