

What's Big, Bad and Scary in Russian - But Made of Straw?

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Жупел: bugbear

We all know Russian words that end in –изация, and we love them because most of them have English equivalents ending in –ization, like модернизация (modernization) and легализация (legalization). Knowing the pattern, it's easy to figure out десталинизация (deStalinization) or ФСБ-изация (FSB-ization), or the much lamented фейсбукизация (Facebookization).

But that didn't help me with a word I found recently: жупелизация.

To solve the mystery, first we have to find out what жупел is. The odd answer is that жупел is both brimstone and a bogeyman — which seem like very different things to me. It turns out that the first meaning was sulfur or brimstone, that smelly stuff in the place you don't want to spend eternity. And then a good joke in a play by Alexander Ostrovsky called “Hard Days” changed the meaning. In the play, a silly woman gets frightened by a conversation and says: Как услышу я слово “жупел”, так руки-ноги и затрясутся (as soon as I hear the word “brimstone” (жупел), my arms and legs start shaking). From that moment on, жупел came to mean something terrible: Это был какой-то жупел для Мандельштама, воплощение всего пошлого и безвкусного и в литературе, и в искусстве, и в быту (That was the bane of Mandelshtam's existence, the embodiment of everything cheap and tasteless in literature, art, and daily life.)

But more often жупел is a fake threat: Интернет стал всеобщим жупелом (Internet has become the all-purpose bogeyman.) As someone writes: Пропаганда гомосексуализма — жупел, придуманный для тёмных людей (Propaganda of homosexuality is a bogeyman dreamed up for dim-witted people.)

Today жупелизация — the process of turning something or someone into a bogeyman — is a niche word and concept, found on websites that identify and debunk propaganda campaigns which specialize in жупелизация. But the word occasionally finds its way into general discourse, like this comment from seven years ago: Жупелизация ислама — процесс опасный для России (Making Islam into the bogeyman is dangerous for Russia.)

If you don't like the word жупел, Russian has other words for that big, bag scary thing in the corner, or the national debt, or free and fair elections — you know, whatever scares the shirt off you. But interestingly they almost all have the sense of being a manufactured rather than a real threat. Take пугало (scarecrow, bogeyman), from the word пугать (to scare): Национализм это только пугало (Nationalism is just a strawman.) Or пугалище (stress on first syllable), an old-fashioned word for scarecrow, only bigger and uglier and scarier: Бессонница его мучила; ему всё чудились какие-то отвратительные пугалища (He suffered from insomnia; he kept thinking he saw some kind of horrible hobgoblins.)

The verb страшить (to terrify) has given Russian the word страшила, which is something awful, particularly in physical appearance. Today literature, TV and movies have inured us to the scary-looking guy. Страшила is the fellow we know as Scarecrow in the Wizard of Oz, who was so benign-looking that the crows sat on him. Or he's a guy dressed up for

Halloween: Жёлтые зубы ☒ неременный атрибут любого☒уважающего себя
страшили (Yellow teeth are a required attribute of any☒self-respecting monster.) There is
also страшилка, but the letter к makes it a horror story, not☒a horror show:

Я не верю

никаким страшилкам про мировую ядерную войну (I don't believe any☒horror stories
about worldwide nuclear war.)

Ain't scared of no threats.☒Bogeymanization doesn't work on me.

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