The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Stormy Weather, Russian Style

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July 07, 2017



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Природные катаклизмы: natural disasters

While it is absolutely true that Eskimos do not have 50 words for snow, in the past month I have learned at least 50 ways of saying "Can you believe this weather?" in Russian — from very polite to so obscene it would make a sailor blush. And with weather forecasters giving us the grim warning that "июль будет сложным" (July will be problematic), I expect to continue to expand my apocalyptic storm lexicon.

Because, you know, Идёт дождь (It's raining) just doesn't cut it when you look out the window at what even the Emergency Situations Ministry calls природный катаклизм (natural disaster).

Having already gone through several such natural disasters this summer, I can tell you that the only fun part is later, when you are safe and dry and can do a dramatic retelling. Start with a bit of suspense — how the day started off with no hint of what was to

come. The morning was merely пасмурно (overcast), or it was sunny until — dramatic pause — тучи сгущались (clouds gathered). At first: капает дождик (a light rain falls). And then: Разверзлись хляби небесные (the heavens opened) and hit us with проливной дождь (heavy rain). Not dramatic enough? Try обломный дождь (a real downpour). You can describe it metaphorically: Шёл дождь, и вода лилась на землю, как из ведра (It was coming down in buckets, literally "the rain came down to the earth like from a bucket"). This is also called ливень (a heavy downpour), which hurts if you are caught in it: Обрушился на нас ливень (We were battered by pounding rain.)

Of course, sometimes you get pounded by more than rain. Summer storms are famous for град (hail). When you tell this part of the story, exaggeration is acceptable: С неба на нас падал град величиной с дыню (Hailstones the size of melons pelted down on us.)

In our unhappy case, it's not just rain. Надвигалась гроза! (A thunderstorm was gathering.) Грянул гром (There was a crack of thunder) and: Сразу появились ослепительные зигзаги молний на грозовом небе (A blinding flash of lightning zigzagged across the stormy skies!) For more drama, ask a group of small children to provide sound effects.

Then comes ветер (wind) and the drama intensifies. It's not just сильный ветер (a strong wind), it's шквалистый ветер (gale force wind). Here you might pause to point out to your listeners that шквал is a borrowing of the English word "squall."

How fast was the wind blowing? Weather reports love to tell you: сильный дождь и ветер с порывами до 20 метров в секунду (heavy rain and wind with gusts of up to 20 meters a second). How bad is that? I have absolutely no idea, but whenever there are порывы (gusts) and the meteorologists talk about meters per second, I run out and move my car far away from anything that can fall.

You can call this буря (a gale or storm with strong winds). This usually occurs in the summer: Поднялась буря с дождём (We had a rain storm with strong winds.) But it can occur in the winter, too: Буря со снегом повалила деревья (A blizzard knocked down trees.) Вихрь is more or less the same thing, only the wind goes around in circles. If you want to be terrified, imagine the December version: снежный вихрь (a snow tornado).

This year's storms have been described as ураган, a borrowed word from the English "hurricane." In Russian ураган is a violent storm with really strong, gusty winds. This is also one meaning of hurricane, although in some parts of the English-speaking world it is more commonly used to describe a severe tropical cyclone with winds above a certain level. But you can translate "Ураган прошёл в Москве" as "A hurricane tore through Moscow." Just be prepared to be scolded by English language pedants.

Finally, there is смерч, a most satisfying word to pronounce — like death (смерть) with a sneer. And a nasty piece of business it is, too. Смерч is a tornado. A true tornado is rare in this part of the world, but there was a famous one in 1904: Смерч прошёл над восточными окраинами Москвы в сторону Ярославля, и более ста человека погибло (The tornado tore along the eastern outskirts of Moscow towards Yaroslavl, killing more than 100 people.)

So far this year we haven't had one of those, but I suppose the season is still young. In any case, don't get out those lightweight suits and summer frocks. Meteorologists have spoken, and it's grim: Лета в Центральной России уже не будет (There won't be summer in Central Russia.)

Maybe autumn will be warm?

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Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/07/07/stormy-weather-russian-style-a58316