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25 Russian Words For 25 Years: Part One

By Michele A. Berdy

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Nashe Kino Studio

You'll have to forgive us for being a nostalgic mood these days. The Moscow Times is celebrating its 25th anniversary, and we've been walking down memory lane. In my case, I've been walking down Linguistic Lane, pulling up words that are emblematic of various years. Here are the first 13 years of Russian words for your first blast from the past.

1992 Хозрасчёт: for-profit — the totally revolutionary concept of making a profit from a company's business activities, introduced in the late Soviet period in either special divisions of large, otherwise loss-making companies or in independent businesses; in most cases, these profit-making entities were used as cash cows for the "red directors" at the top, starting a great new tradition of outrageous wealth disparity

Embed:

1993 Подворовывать: to steal a little on the side, especially from your employer; may range

from tucking a half-used roll of toilet paper into your briefcase to working with the bookkeepers to skim profits; considered fair play at the bottom when asset-stripping at the top was rampant (see 1992: хозрасчёт)

1994 Пирамида: a financial scheme in which people invest money at extremely high returns — returns that are funded solely by new investments — until the entire pyramid collapses; one of the favorite ways to bilk citizens in the 1990s; the most famous pyramid scheme, МММ, crashed in August 1994, contributing to the population's growing skepticism of capitalism

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1995 Наличка: cash, something the legislation did not permit companies to have much of; most of the 1990s were spent employing 10 bookkeepers whose entire job was to make up fake receipts so cash could be withdrawn from company bank accounts

1996 Пальцевать: show off, play the big shot; from палец (finger) and the gesture of extending index finger and little finger as a sign of being a tough guy in the criminal world

1997 Тусовка: crowd, party, bash, get-together — both a group of friends and any kind of get-together; also тусоваться: what you do at a party, mingle, hang out, be seen; also тусовщик: someone who does the rounds of parties, a generally derogatory term for a party animal, socialite, a hanger-on; all of this was the new incarnation of the post-Soviet social scene, where money and flash counted more than party membership

1998 Кинуть: slang word used by Deputy Prime Minister Anatoly Chubais to describe what Russia did to the IMF when the country defaulted on its debt; the word, which meant an intentional scam in criminal slang, had come to mean unintentional failure to do something among the general population; unfortunately, the change in meaning hadn't reached all the translators, and the U.S. Congress held hearings on why Russia "conned the IMF" out of several billion dollars

1999 Бардак: total mess, a brothel; how бардак began as a house of ill repute and came to mean a mess has been lost in the mists of time, but it is the ubiquitous description of anything disordered, from a bedroom and an analytical report up to a political leader's thinking processes

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2000 Замочить в сортире: to wipe 'em out in the outhouse, what President Putin said should be done to Chechen bandits; uttered at a press conference, this was the first of Mr. Putin's Russian Lessons, a series of helpful language learning classes he held during the first years in office

2001 Вообще, pronounced ваааааще: yowza, wow, golly gosh darn, i.e., any exclamatory phrase that expresses astonishment, either good or bad; of unclear provenance — how a word that means "in general" came to mean "can you believe it?" is at present unexplained;

conveniently used in the phrase “ну ты вообще,” which means either “you are great” or “you are horrible” and is therefore applicable to anything your spouse ever says or does

2002 Как бы: kinda, a parasitic phrase that for several years was uttered constantly by everyone in every situation in Moscow, then St. Petersburg and for all we know — eventually every nook and cranny of this great, vast land; for several years when it was at its peak use, it seemed that people did not do things, they kinda did things; they kinda read books, they kinda felt well, they kinda went to work — as if they lived in a virtual reality; in retrospect, they kinda did

2003 Пофигист: someone who doesn’t care about anything, especially elections but also politics, economic indicators, climate change, clothing styles, or cleaning up the kitchen and changing the sheets; from the expression мне по фигу (I don’t give a hoot); the typical пофигист has good and bad qualities: he is hard to live with but very easy to rule

2004 Экзит-пол: exit poll, what was used in earlier elections to determine the outcome of the elections after people voted — I know, right? what a concept!; annoying term for Russian-speaking people in Russia who did not spend their youth working the primaries on the Jersey shore; not used in over a decade because: Why?

25 Russian Words for 25 Year continues here.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of “The Russian Word’s Worth,” a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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