

What Did Trump Call Them? What's the Russian for That?

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Дыра: a hole; a place in the middle of nowhere; a lousy, dirty place

I wish President Trump would time his outrageous statements to better fit my publishing schedule. It would be most convenient for me if he'd shock the world with his potty mouth on a Wednesday so I could do my research in a leisurely fashion on Thursday and post on Friday.

But no! He has to go and shoot off his mouth on Thursday in Washington — Eastern Standard Time — so I only found out about it on Friday, too early for Russian commentary and too late for my weekly column. And now I'm late to the party.

But, lucky for me, the party seems to be still going strong.

It all began with a meeting with lawmakers about emigration. In a discussion about emigrants from Haiti, El Salvador and African countries, he was reported to have asked, "Why are we having all these people from sh-thole countries come here?"

The sh-thole comment caused lots of problems for the press. In the English-speaking world, the issue was whether or not to print the obscenity. Some television and radio newscasters and reporters called it "the s-word" and a few print publications used asterisks or wrote rather blandly that the president had used "a vulgar term." We favor a hyphen.

Outside the English-speaking world, the issue was how to understand "sh-thole," how to translate it, and whether or not to print the vulgar translation or tidy it up a bit.

In Russia, like elsewhere, they began with establishing a definition. What is a sh-thole?

It seems to have several meanings, most commonly "an extremely dirty and unpleasant place," but also a dysfunctional organization; a hole that a person defecates into; and the hole that a person defecates out of, i.e., the anus.

In Russian, translators and journalists had three main vectors of translation. The first involved the word дыра, a hole (including in the human body), but also any lousy, dirty, terrible place or any a hole in the wall — a place in the middle of nowhere. For example, someone wrote about a movie with a hero from a small, pokey town: Фильм о человеческих мечтах и о том, что даже в такой дыре они все равно сбываются (It's a film about human dreams and how they can even come true in a jerkwater town.) In another case, someone was horrified by his friend's living conditions: Я понимала, что такой музыкант, как он, не может жить в этой дыре (I realized that a musician like that couldn't live in a dump like this.)

In a few Russian publications, дыра was enough: Трамп якобы заявил, что не понимает, почему в США должны принимать мигрантов из Гаити и Африки, назвав их “дырами” (Trump allegedly said that he didn't get why the U.S. should accept migrants from Haiti and Africa, calling them “dumps,” literally “holes.”)

But other publications apparently thought that дыра didn't quite convey the sense or vulgarity. So they added adjectives for greater accuracy and, one must think, пикантность (piquancy, something to spice it up), which varied from mild to pungent: грязные дыры (dirty holes); вонючие дыры (stinking holes); говённые дыры (shitty holes); and сраные дыры (shit holes) — the last being perhaps a bit stronger than the English.

The second vector was помойка (dump), which is a bit less vulgar but conveys the sense of a dirty, nasty place. In Russian помойка is a landfill, the garbage pail under your sink, a messy or filthy place, or a place that is a wreck. Эта гостиница ужасная помойка! Нельзя там жить! (That hotel is a filthy wreck — you can't stay there!)

This wasn't a bad choice, although a tad decorous: Выходцы из Африки, а также Гаити и Сальвадора являются жителями "стран-помоек". Об этом заявил президент США Дональд Трамп (Migrants from Africa as well as Haiti and El Salvador are from “dump-countries.” So said U.S. president Donald Trump.)

One publication combined the first two, translating “sh-thole countries” as “помоечные дыры” (dump holes), which conveys the insult if not the bad language.

The third vector had to do with the part of the anatomy that produces sh-t. One publication translated the sh-thole countries as “задница мира” (literally “the world's bottom”), which emphasizes the nowhere-ville aspect of Trump's insult but with only a subtle hint of vulgarity.

Another paper just called them жопы (asses), which is actually pretty close to the original. In Russian slang, жопа is a person's bottom, a fool, a real mess, or a horrible and filthy place. The word puts a bit more emphasis on the countries' being in bad shape — like in a jam — but then I'm overthinking this all beyond all belief. If you were just reading the paper, страна-жопа (an ass-country) would tell you what you need to know about Trump and his view of parts of the world.

Finally there was an outlier — гадюшник, literally a nest of vipers or snake pit, but more figuratively a hornet's nest (a place where there is a lot of back-stabbing, to confuse metaphors), a pit, a pigsty, a hellhole, or a dive. I like this a lot. Гадюшник is a terrible, filthy,

messed-up place. It would be a perfect translation if it were just a bit more vulgar and a tad more obscene.

So what's the moral of this translation story? If you want to talk about sh-tholes, come to Russia! Великий могучий (the great and powerful) will not let you down.

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