

(Not) Speaking Ill of the Dead in Russian

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

January 26, 2018



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Пасквиль: lampoon

Here in Moscow the story of the week on the arts scene has been the film “Death of Stalin” written and directed by Armando Iannucci and being shown, at least for now, in a couple of movie theaters while the Ministry of Culture figures out what to do about it.

One of the dozens of articles about the controversy quoted director Igor Ugolnikov, who called it “Пасквиль на историю нашей страны, злобная якобы 'комедия', очерняющая память о наших гражданах, победивших фашизм” (A lampoon of the history of our country; a mean, so-called “comedy” that blackens the memory of our citizens who defeated fascism.)

I was less interested in his opinion than the lovely word пасквиль.

The word comes from the Italian character Pasquino — or Pasquillus in Latin — one of Rome’s “talking statues.” Since the 16th century, people have posted anonymous letters and tracts on the statues, making them something like the first Facebook pages, only anonymous and meaner. In Russian, the word came to mean a lampoon, a send-up or, in legal terminology, libel.

Пасквиль is always a Very Bad Thing. Некоторые книги во времена “железного занавеса” изымали на советской таможне, а газеты в Москве называли их злобным пасквилом (During the period of the Iron Curtain, some books were confiscated by Soviet customs and called vicious libel by Moscow newspapers.)

But one man’s пасквиль is another man’s сатира (satire), which is defined as “проявление комического в искусстве, состоящее в уничтожающем осмеянии явлений, которые представляются автору порочными” (the use of the comic in art, which consists of destructive ridicule of phenomena that the author considers to be evil).

A different director thought “The Death of Stalin” was a satire, but she used yet another lovely old word to describe what the film wasn’t: поклёп (slander, calumny, defamation). She said, “Смерть Сталина” не поклёп на Россию, а сатира на тиранию, неважно, в России

или Америке ("The Death of Stalin" isn't slander against Russia. It's a satire about tyranny, regardless of whether it's in Russia or America.)

You could also just call this клевета (slander) — nasty lies meant to harm someone's reputation. This word has always been bandied about when criticism is voiced: С одной стороны, мы видели восхваление врага и вражеской литературы, с другой стороны ☒ клевету на советское партийное искусство (On the one hand we saw praise of the enemy and enemy literature, and on the other hand — slander of Soviet Party-approved art.)

Or you can call it злословие, a compound word consisting of зло (bad, evil) and слов(о) (word) that means speaking ill of someone — malicious gossip. In Russian it's famous as the translation of Sheridan's "School for Scandal" and the name of a snarky television talk show: Школа Злословия. But it's scandalous in the sense of causing a scandal with nasty gossip, which I guess can sometimes go too far: В своем злословии они порой доходили до полного абсурда (Their bad-mouthing sometimes got totally absurd.)

Another word is навет, also some kind of slander or mudslinging. It's been around for a long time: Вопреки наветам, Иван Грозный оставил своим наследникам мощное государство (Despite slander to the contrary, Ivan the Terrible left his heirs a powerful state.)

There is also "кровавый навет" — blood libel, what Jewish people call accusations of ritual murders of Christians.

If you don't like those native Russian words, you can try imports, like инсинуация (insinuation). You might wish to take the high road when accused: Мы не желаем даже комментировать подобные инсинуации (We don't even wish to comment on such innuendo.)

Of course, this is also what you say when the accusations are true. Or when you can't pronounce инсинуация.

Another imported word is диффамация (defamation), a word that is just different enough from the English to trip me up every time I try to spell it. Стихотворные надписи содержат прямую диффамацию русских (The poetic inscriptions contain clear defamation of Russians.)

As someone once asked: Диффамация, наветы, демагогия ☒ не наша ли эпоха? (Defamation, slander, demagoguery — isn't that our era?)

I'm beginning to think that it's everyone's era, everywhere and always.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/01/26/not-speaking-ill-of-the-dead-in-Russian-a60296>