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What Kind of Leader is Vladimir Putin?

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Vladimir Putin **Kremlin Press Serice**

Вождь: strong, charismatic leader

After Vladimir Putin won the presidential elections on Sunday, Margarita Simonyan, head of the RT — formerly Russia Today — television channel tweeted: Раньше он был просто наш президент и его можно было поменять. А теперь он наш вождь. И поменять его мы не дадим. (Before he was just our president and could be replaced. But now he is our leader. And we won't let him be replaced.)

If we just concentrate on language, what is this title of вождь? Is вождь some special kind of leader? How does a вождь differ from a президент? And once you've got a вождь, why don't you want to ever let him go?

So many questions about one short tweet.

But the word вождь is interesting, mostly for the connotations it acquired during the Soviet period that still affect who can and who cannot be considered a вождь.Вождь has three related but distinct meanings. First of all, вождь is the term you use to describe the chief of a tribe. In Russian children's books, written by authors captivated by the American "Wild West," there are a lot of "вожди краснокожих" (chiefs of the redskins). Вожди are also the chieftains of tribes or groups of people anywhere in the world.

The second meaning is a military leader, although this usage is now obsolete: Он был вождь русских полков (He was the leader of the Russian regiments.)

And the third meaning is the sense of Leader with a capital "L." This might be someone who is a charismatic and inspiring leader in a sphere of science and the arts. Помню одну популярную музыкальную группу, и у неё даже был духовный вождь (I remember a popular music group that even had its own spiritual leader.) Or you might use the word вождь to describe the leader of society: Для русской интеллигенции Степан Разин прежде всего ⊠ вождь восставшего крестьянства (For the Russian intelligentsia, Stepan Razin was above all the great leader of the peasant uprising.)

But most of the time it means someone who is an ideological and political leader. This isn't a statesman — a word that one struggles to convey in Russian — or just a popular leader. A group of subjects — i.e., Russian friends and acquaintances I tortured with questions — described a вождь as someone who is like the father of the nation, the source of inspiration, the one lighting the path into a bright future; strong, powerful, and rather autocratic.

This usage and meaning is tightly connected with the Soviet state and ideology. Ленин — вождь мирового пролетариата (Lenin is the leader of the world proletariat.) Сталин — великий вождь советского народа (Stalin is the great leader of the Soviet people.) Foreign leaders who were charismatic and inspiring — by Soviet socialist standards — like Fidel Castro and Mao — could be вожди, too. But when I asked my group of Russians if, say, John F. Kennedy — the only U.S. president I thought was genuinely popular and respected — could be called вождь, they all burst into laughter.

So вождь is a very idiosyncratic word. It is not a position or job, like президент (president), премьер министр (prime minister) or канцлер (chancellor). Now it seems to have lost its tinge of socialist ideology — Vladimir Putin does not espouse communist ideology — but it appears to have retained some autocratic connotations. It will be interesting to see how this word continues to develop. Check back in 50 years.

In the meantime, what does a вождь rule over? Not a country. He rules over вождество (chiefdom), defined as a primitive form of government that unites villages or communities under the вождь. The society in this вождество is not a meritocracy: статус индивидуума обусловлен тем, насколько близким родственником вождя он является (the status of the individual is determined by how closely he is related to the leader).

Вождество is called промежуточная форма политической структуры (intermediary form of political structure) without a профессиональной правящей элиты (professional ruling elite). Instead: есть централизованное управление и наследственная иерархия правителей и знати, существует социальное неравенство, но ещё нет формального и легализированного аппарата принуждения и насилия (there is centralized governance and an inherited hierarchy of rulers and nobility, there is social inequality, but there is not yet a formal and legalized government apparatus of coercion and violence).

No worries; nothing like Russia. So I guess Vladimir Putin is a вождь without a вождество.

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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