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The Bear Russian Truth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Медвежья услуга: disservice

Some Russians —mostly the ones who host television talk shows — like to chide foreigners for their myth that bears walk down the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities. The problem with this myth is that in all my years of talking about Russia to foreigners, I have never actually met anyone who thinks this. This is a Russian myth about a foreign myth, which is that kind of post-modernist hell that gives me an instant headache.

But that's not to say there aren't myths about bears. There are — lots of them. But they have been developed by Russians themselves, who actually know a thing or two about bears.

In the Russian metaphorical and mythical universe, the bear is a contradictory creature. He is greedy, yet lazy; strong, yet clumsy; cunning, yet stupid. People are often compared to bears, usually for being big and clumsy: Что-то в нём медвежье: тяжёл, полноват, в массивных очках, с каким-то слоёным лицом ◙ при разговоре оно колыхалось (There was something bear-like about him: he was heavy, rather stout, wearing huge glasses and had a kind of puffy face that wobbled when he talked.)

Some contemporaries though Lev Tolstoy had ursine qualities: Другой, менее высокопарный наблюдатель называет толстовские глаза просто ◙ "медвежьими" (Another less pompous observer said that Tolstoy had eyes like a bear.)

Everyone agrees that bears like to get friendly: Шурик радостно воскликнул и заключил Вадика в медвежьи объятия (Shurik shouted with delight and wrapped Vadik in a bear hug.)

They might also step on you if you are napping in a field or forest. Or at least that's the image behind the expression медведь ему на ухо наступил (literally "a bear stepped on his ear"), which actually means: the person has no musical talent: Поэту Блоку, как выяснилось, медведь с детства на ухо наступил (It turned out that the poet Blok had a tin ear from childhood.)

Медвежий угол (literally, "a bear's corner") is a place far away from civilization — but not,

apparently, hidden from the enemies' eyes: Со времен холодной войны мы привыкли говорить о том, что спутники-шпионы могут вести наблюдения за любым медвежьим углом на территории противника (Since the Cold War we have been accustomed to saying that spy satellites can observe any godforsaken spot on their opponent's territory.) Bears go off to their медвежий угол to sleep away winter in their dens, called берлога. Unless you want to know what it means for a 300-lb. hungry bear to get up on the wrong side of the bed, try not to stumble upon one.

In fact, even other bears stay away from their neighbors' dens, since два медведя в одной берлоге не уживутся (literally, "two bears can't live in one den"). Россия и Польша барахтались на Восточной равнине, как два медведя в одной берлоге, царапаясь, но чувствуя, что они одной породы (Russia and Poland flailed about the East European plain like two bears in one den, scratching each other but sensing that they were the same breed.) On the United States plain, in the Wild West, this was expressed differently: This town ain't big enough for the two of them.

Another ursine expression captures the human tendency to count their chickens before they're hatched, which in Russian is делить шкуру неубитого медведя (literally "to divide up the pelt of a bear before he's dead"). Пока весь шум вокруг ядерных отходов напоминает стычку вокруг шкуры неубитого медведя (For now the whole discussion about nuclear waste reminds me of a fight over the pelt of bear who isn't even dead yet.)

And then there is my favorite bearish expression: медвежья услуга (literally "a bear's favor.") It comes from a fable by Ivan Krylov called Пустынник и Медведь (The Hermit and the Bear) in which a bear wants to be nice to his friend, the Hermit, who can't fall asleep because a fly keeps buzzing around his face. The kindly bear takes a log and whacks the fly... and kills his friend in the process. This "bear's favor" means a well-intentioned act that turns out to be a terrible disservice. Родители оказали ребенку медвежью услугу: укрепили в нем чувство страха перед публичными выступлениями (The parents didn't do their child any favor: instead of helping him, they reinforced his fear of public speaking.)

This can lead to one more bear-related expression: медвежья болезнь (literally "a bear's illness" — a fear-induced case of the runs.)

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