

The Strange Case of a Russian Provocation

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

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"Who Framed Roger Rabbit" / Walt Disney Feature Animation

Провокация: frame-up

If you are casting around for an example of a Russian word or phrase that is a trial for translators, look no farther than the devilish trinity of провокация, провокатор, and провоцировать. You first think: easy peasy. It's just provocation, provocateur and to provoke. True, provocateur doesn't exactly trip off the tongue, but still, what's the problem?

The problem is that while the Russian and English are not false friends all the time, they aren't really equivalents either. And while the meanings of the Russian words haven't entirely changed, the subtext of usage has changed dramatically. I began tracking these words in 2012 and did a brief update in 2015. Now three years later, it seems like a good time to check in again.

Провокация and the rest of the P-gang came to Russian from Latin via French. The meaning of the original Latin words provocatio (challenge) and provocare (to challenge, elicit or rouse) were for a while, it appears, the only meanings in Russian and can still be found as the sole definitions in some dictionaries.

And this meaning hasn't gone away. On the everyday level, провоцировать does mean to elicit some kind of reaction. This can be translated as provoke: Мой брат проколол уши, хочет спровоцировать реакцию от родителей (My brother got his ears pierced — he's trying to provoke a reaction out of our parents.) But this is a bit formal in English. You might try something slangier: Не поддавайся на его провокацию! (Don't take the bait!)

With the noun провокатор (provocateur) translation gets trickier. Unless an English speaker can pull off a great French accent or is at a conference on 19th century Russian terrorist groups, he or she would never in a million years use the word provocateur. So here, except in specific historical contexts, провокатор and provocateur are false friends.

What do you say instead? Well, the annoying guy sitting next to you at a dinner party who keeps trying to get a reaction out of you — the evening's провокатор — might be a trouble-

maker, a mischief-maker, or an obnoxious tease. In English you'd be more likely to use a verbal phrase to describe him: he's trying to get your goat, get a rise out of you; he's baiting you, goading you, taunting you; he's trying to get you riled up, to pick a fight.

How about in the dog park? In Russian the little dog who yaps and yelps and lunges at the big dog — usually held firmly on a leash — is провокатор. Бобик — ужасный провокатор, Bobik's owner says, meaning that the little barking mutt is either trying to provoke a reaction or is just unintentionally causing one. But no English speaker would ever say: Fido is a terrible provocateur. If you wanted to make yourself clear in an American dog park, you'd probably say: Fido picks fights. Or if he is more yappy than nippy: Fido might set your dog off.

And finally we come to the political провокация. Here it helps to know a bit of history. From what I have read, the Russian special services under the tsar — Охранка (Okhranka, tsarist secret police) — were specialists in infiltration. Their agents provocateurs would get into an oppositional group, learn about their plans, and then disrupt them. They sometimes provoked the group into breaking the law, and of course made sure their colleagues were there to catch them. Or they committed a crime and made it look like the group was guilty.

Bingo. That last act has now become a definition of провокация, and it's not a provocation in English at all. It's a frame-up, a set-up, a false flag operation, a sting, something to make us (them, everyone) look bad/guilty/evil/nasty.

So when someone says: Отравление Скрипалей — чистая провокация! It doesn't mean: The Skripal poisoning is pure provocation. It means: The poisoning of the Skripals was a set up to make us look bad.

Or take another example: Малайзийский Boeing MH17 — три года тотальной лжи вместо расследования ... Провокация по-американски (Malaysian Boeing MH17 — three years of complete lies instead of an investigation... it's a frame-up by the Americans.)

Note that it's always clear the victim is Russia.

And note that the U.S. is always guilty.

The only good news here is that sometimes, in some situations, when the stars are in the right place, it's possible to avoid the whole провоцировать-provoke issue altogether.

Он тебя троллит. (He's trolling you.)

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