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Moscow's Merchants, Malls, and Walls

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Sergei Kiselyov / Moskva News Agency

Кремль: Kremlin

Hey there, sports fans! As you celebrate victory — or mourn defeat, as the case may be — in the center of Moscow, you've probably been curious about some of the odd place names you see around you. No? Are you more curious about varieties of craft beer to try, or the telephone number of that very attractive person across the fan zone? Well, we can't help with that, but we can tell you that Moscow place names are a lot more interesting than you think.

I'll prove it to you. Let's start with something you think you know — the name of that vast square next to the Kremlin walls. Red Square, right? Named after all those Red Communists? No and no. In Russian красный (red) and красивый (beautiful) were once the same word. No one knows why. Perhaps a millennium or so ago red was such a rare color in nature and associated with such lovely, delicious things like berries and a lover's lips that anything red was perceived as beautiful. In any case, when people began to call this place Красная площадь, they were referring to the Beautiful Square next to the Kremlin walls.

And speaking of the Kremlin, by now you may have figured out that the name is simply the word for a fortress: кремль. You'll find kremlins in other Russian cities, too. The word, however, is of uncertain origins. Some scholars think it's from кремень (hard stone). Others think it's from кремь (an old word for a part of the forest that produces the strongest trees). Among another half-dozen theories is the assertion that the word comes from the Turkic words кырым (rampart) and эль (settlement). Supporters of that theory point out that in places like Novgorod that the invading Turkic-language armies from the East didn't reach, the fortress is called детинец — charmingly from the word дети (children): a heavily defended, walled-in area to house and protect children.

In any case, now the capital-letter Кремль and Kremlin mean: the seat of government in Russia.

The area on the other side of Red Square is called Китай-город, which sounds like Chinatown (Китай — China; город — town or city). But don't imagine Ivan the Terrible ordering Chinese take-out from the local noodle shop. Although, like all word histories, there are several versions, the most likely truth is that it's from the word кита, a wooden pole or stake.

The area was originally called Великий Посад (the Grand Settlement) – a посад was an unprotected settlement outside a walled-in fortress or monastery. In the 16th century a wall was built around it, first made of wooden logs and interlaced wooden poles called кита. With that, the area was no longer an unprotected посад, and Китай-город got its name.

These days the hot spot inside Китай-город is Никольская улица (Nikolskaya ulitsa). The name comes from Никольская башня (St. Nicholas Tower) on the corner of the Kremlin walls, which is where the street began. Now the street is home to revelers and the grand shopping arcade ГУМ (GUM, pronounced GOOM). Opened in 1893 as the Верхние Торговые Ряды (Upper Trading Rows) — followed by the Middle and Lower Trading Rows cascading down the side of the square to the river — it was first closed by Vladimir Lenin and then reopened by him in 1921 as Государственный Универсальный Магазин (State Universal Store). Now the abbreviation of this glass-covered emporium is usually deciphered as Главный Универсальный Магазин — the country's main department store.

Long before GUM was built merchants stayed in another place in Kitai-gorod: Гостиный двор (Gostiny Dvor). The name might remind you of where you're staying — in a гостиница (hotel), from the word гость (guest). But in times gone by, гость was a traveling merchant and двор (now a courtyard) was where goods were stored or sold.

This was a kind of medieval version of a mall and a hotel — you know, like where you're staying today.

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