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Of Meat and Men

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Отбивать: to pound

Last week most of the journalists in Moscow spent much more time than they wanted looking up cuts of meat in dictionaries.

I refer, of course, to comments made by Viktor Zolotov, once in charge of security for President Putin and now the head of the Russian National Guard, to Alexei Navalny in a video.

I personally was most interested in finding out when and why making angry, threatening video addresses to enemies and sticking them on YouTube became a thing among the Russian elite, but everyone else was fretting over the perfect translation of сочная отбивная, the juicy meat dish that Zolotov promised to turn opposition politician Alexei Navalny into.

This was just one of many colorful insults Zolotov heaped on Navalny. In fact, his clip was a kind of dictionary of insults.

First Zolotov called him inhuman and — even worse! — Made in the U.S.A.: ...изделие из американской пробирки, вы все клоны. Естественно, конечно же, вы марионетки (...a product made in an American test-tube, all of you clones. Naturally, of course, you are puppets).

But even though Navalny wasn't a real person, he was rotten through and through: гнилые внутри, трухлявые (rotten inside, moldering). Not to mention lacking in principles: ни духовности, ни нравственности абсолютно (no piety, absolutely no morality). And at least one of the reasons for this is, apparently, that he hadn't been beaten the way he ought to have been. Zolotov told him: Вы, господин Навальный, никогда не получали ответку... Вам никто никогда не давал как следует по заднице. Да так, чтобы вы печенкой это прочувствовали (You, Mr. Navalny, have never gotten payback. No one has tanned your butt like you deserve — so hard that you feel it in your liver.)

Yikes.

But the killer line was this: "Я вызываю вас на поединок - на ринг, татами, куда угодно, где обещаю сделать из вас хорошую, сочную отбивную" which might be translated

literally as: I challenge you to a duel – in the ring, on a tatami, wherever you want, and I promise to turn you into a good, juicy piece of meat."

The piece of meat — отбивная —gave everyone a hard time. Was it mincemeat, a steak or a hamburger? Was Navalny going to be juicy or succulent or tenderized?

After a lot of consideration, I say: more or less "all of the above." It's all about the butcher shop.

Originally in Russian, котлета (from the French cotelette) was a sautéed piece of meat, usually on the bone. Отбивная is the adjective from the verb отбивать (to pound) and means a piece of meat (котлета) that has been pounded thin and, in this way, tenderized. In English culinary terms, which are basically borrowed and sometimes confused French culinary terms, this is a cutlet, scallop, escalope, or even paillard.

In case you were wondering — well, in case three of you were wondering — this is not quite a schnitzel. Or rather, it's not the breaded kind of schnitzel but much like the unbreaded kind of schnitzel.

I'm glad we got that settled.

Over time, котлета came to mean primarily a patty made of minced meat (fish, poultry, or vegetables). And so, mincemeat and steak, tenderized or not, are all more or less correct translations.

If you want to go with an equivalent American expression, you might translate Zolotov's threat as "make mincemeat out of you." If you wanted to go for a more vivid image, you might translate it as "pound you till you're flat." Or if you could just go for a verb: "I'll pummel, batter, pound, clobber, or hammer you."

After thinking about this too long — way too long — I think I might go with "I'll beat you to a pulp."

Now, if you just want to whack someone, there are easier ways to say it in Russian. Лупить is to flog, whack, or thrash, what is sometimes done to horses, animals, and in the Bad Old Days, miscreants large and small. Меня в детстве много лупили (I was beaten a lot when I was a kid.)

Колотить is to pound, hit, knock — what you can do to doors, keyboards, pianos and human faces. Он сел яростно колотить на компьютере гневное письмо председателю Гильдии российских адвокатов (He sat down and began to furiously pound out on his computer an angry letter to the chairman of the Guild of Russian Attorneys.) Днём он будет её колотить, а ночью спать с другими бабами (During the day he'll knock her around and at night he'll sleep with other women.)

Дубасить is another word like колотить — to pound on just about anything — although I think it is a notch up in smash-your-face-in scale. Сосед дубасил кулаками своего приятеля (My neighbor beat the crap out of his friend.)

Oh, hey, let's be traditional: nothing wrong with good old избивать (to beat up). Он избивал

жену, детей и даже собаку пока не попал за решётку. (He beat up his wife, his kids and even his dog before he ended up behind bars.)

Meanwhile, I'll stick to pounding on my computer. It never pounds back.

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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