The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Russian Words of the Dreary Year

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

December 24, 2018

Martin Abegglen / Flickr (CC BY-SA 2.0)

“Новичок”: a type of nerve gas

At the end of every year, all over the world, in every nation, commentators and thinkers sit down and consider the events of the outgoing year in their area of their specialty and try to sum it all up. Was it a good year? A tough year? A year like others or a break-through year?

And so it is with language watchers. For over 20 years a group of specialists under linguist Mikhail Epstein have contemplated the words and expressions of the year gone by — and invented some to fill in any gaps — and then voted on the ones that most aptly and exactly captured the spirit and most important concepts and events of the year — the zeitgeist, if you will.

Back in 2018, the Russian zeitgeist was, well, let’s be blunt: not all sunshine and lollipops. After considering such words as Автокефалия (Autocephaly); лайфхак (lifehack); репост (repost); донос (denunciation); and блокировка (block, as in what governments do to websites), the distinguished panel decided that the word of the year was “Новичок,” spelled with a capital letter and in quotes to mean “a Russian nerve gas used to poison several people in the UK and kill one person.” Plain old lowercase новичок is a newbie, a rookie, someone new (from новый).

In second place was токсичный (toxic, see above), followed by the seemingly benign duo of пенсия (pension) and пенсионер (pensioner, retiree), this year deeply fraught with political and social drama when pension ages were raised.

In fourth place was ЧВК Вагнер (Частная военная компания — the Wagner private military company) a group that doesn’t officially exist, or does exist, sort of, but officially doesn’t do anything even though anyone who looks into what they aren’t doing ends up six feet under.

I would like to take this opportunity to make it clear that I know nothing about this group and am not the least bit interested in finding anything out.

Moving right along... to expressions of the year. Not cheerful, folks. The choices here continue the themes of the words of the year: Солсберецкий собор (Salisbury Cathedral), what the alleged "Новичок" poisoners allegedly traveled to Salisbury to see and then mispronounced – the standard translation is Солсберийский собор; пенсионная реформа (pension reform, which journalists were exhorted to refer to as изменения в пенсионном законодательстве — changes in pension legislation — to give a more positive spin to the working class having to work for another five to eight years); театральное дело (the theater affair, in which director Kirill Serebrennikov and his colleagues are being charged on an obviously trumped up case of embezzlement); «Новое величие» ("New Greatness," a fake group invented by a fake activist but real-life security officer that put a bunch of do-gooder teens in jail and on trial for wanting to make the world a better place); and my personal favorite: бомбить Воронеж (to bomb Voronezh) — what the Russian government is accused of doing when it responds to Western actions by counter-actions that hurt Russian citizens more than Western nations.

Dark, man; it was a dark year.

In the third category of антиязык (anti-language, or the language of enmity), the winning phrase was "Мы попадём в рай, а они просто сдохнут" ("We'll go to heaven and they'll just croak.") If you have forgotten, or perhaps blocked it out of your memory, this was said by President Vladimir Putin at his meeting with journalists in Valdai on Oct. 18. When asked about the Russian policy of nuclear weapon use, he responded that if attacked, Russia would respond in kind, except the Russian side would end up in heaven as жертвы агрессии и мученики (victims of aggression and martyrs) while the other side wouldn't go to heaven потому что они даже раскаяться не успеют (because they won't even have time to repent).

Against the backdrop of that dire image the second-place winner seems rather charming. But it really isn't: дожитие, which means the years left to live or survival. Most of the time you hear the word in phrases like вероятность дожития (survival probability), used by actuaries and doctors to describe the likelihood of being alive at a particular age. Now it's the time left to live out your days after your work life ends. So why is it "the language of enmity"? Because statistically Russian men die before even reaching the new pension age.

At the end of this grim but earnest review of the year's words and phrases, the linguists get to let their metaphorical hair down and invent their own words — words and phrases that don't exist in the Russian language but should. The wits came up with the winner Вохрократия, which I had to investigate since, as I have already pointed out and would like to reiterate, I know nothing about private military organizations or ВОХР (Военизированная охрана – paramilitary security service), and therefore can't even imagine what a branch of government based on them would look like. And I can't even imagine how to translate it, although perhaps something like Paramilocracy might work.

But don't quote me on that.

In second place was Пенсиянин ("Pensionian"), that is, a native of that distant land of post-reform pension recipients, celebrated in this little ditty: Когда я буду пенсиянин, сосед мой будет марсианин (I'll become a Pensionian when my neighbor is a Martian.)

Looking to the new year, I was taken by another commentator's choice for слово года (word

of the year), which might fit in 2019, too. Journalist Mikhail Fishman noted that the word most used by Vladimir Putin in his end-of-the-year press conference was прорыв (breakthrough) – what is needed in every aspect of Russian life, especially the economy. The problem is, Fishman writes, that first of all, every year Putin says we need a прорыв, and that second, it's defined by сочетания слов, которые при этом не несут в себе никакого смысла (a combination of words that have no meaning whatsoever)..

So fasten your seat belts, folks. Next year in Russia is going to be a bumpy ride, language-wise and otherwise, too.

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.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2018/12/24/russian-words-of-the-dreary-year-a63934