The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Becoming Oblomov

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

May 07, 2019



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Лень: sloth, laziness, not feeling like doing something

Russians have several different ways of celebrating the May holidays. There's the Gagarin approach: Поехали! (Let's go!), when they are on a plane heading south before you've even left work on Friday. Or the local healthy approach: На дачу! (To the dacha!), when their car is packed so heavily with seedlings, cleaning supplies, food, and clean bedding that it almost scrapes the road as they head out of town at 4 a.m. to miss the traffic. Or the home-spa approach: Не звони! (Don't call me!), when your friend plans to do nothing but read murder mysteries, watch stupid TV shows, and sleep for the duration of the holiday.

And then there's my approach, which is totally bereft of both self-knowledge and common sense: Вот мой список дел! (Here's my to-do list!), when I think I'm really going to wash all my windows, switch all my summer and winter clothes, and catch up on about 12 days of admin.

My friends say: Щас (Like that's going to happen, from сейчас — literally "right now").

I say: Лень (sloth).

So instead of cleaning my windows, I felt guilty and lay on the couch like a modern-day, female Oblomov contemplating how interesting the noun лень and the verb лениться are.

In dictionaries they are defined as laziness and to be lazy, respectively, but they are, to my ear, a bit gentler than their English counterparts. Although лень can mean sloth or laziness in some contexts, in others it means not feeling like doing something, being tired or phlegmatic. Sometimes I think that English laziness is a sin, but Russian лень is a personality flaw — not good, of course, but, well, hey: it happens to the best of us.

But as usual, context is everything. For example, this is true laziness: Мы не ленимся, мы просто не можем это сделать (We aren't lazy. It's just impossible for us to do.) But this is probably someone too busy to get something done: Зубы он давно ленился лечить (He hadn't gotten around to fixing his teeth). And this is about someone who can't pull himself together: Это безумие ⊠ жить с мужчиной, который не уходит только потому, что ленится (This is nuts — living with a man who doesn't leave you only because he can't get it together to go.)

It's the same with лень. This is probably laziness lite: Мне было лень идти на стоянку и сметать снег с машины (I was too lazy to go to the parking lot and clean the snow off the car.) But this is more fatigue: Так жарко, что мне лень обижаться (It's so hot, I can't work up the energy to be offended.) And this is more like not minding pushing a button on the remote: Фильм смотрится очень легко, и в очередной раз не лень его посмотреть (The film is really fun to watch, and you won't mind taking the trouble to watch it a couple of times).

And then there is this brilliant description of the most beloved lazybones in Russian literature: Главных свойств Обломова ⊠ задумчивой лени и ленивого безделья ⊠ в Иване Александровиче не было и следа (Ivan Alexandrovich didn't have a bit of Oblomov's main qualities: pensive listlessness and listless indolence). You must agree that this is lazing about elevated to nearly a state of grace. Best of all, he doesn't feel guilty.

Beware, however, of this expression, кому не лень (literally "whoever isn't lazy"). This is the phrase you use when everyone is jumping on the bandwagon to do something. Все, кому не лень, правительство ругают (Everyone and his brother is criticizing the government.)

That's pretty much it for laziness in Russian. But there are a lot of ways to say you don't feel like doing something. And in a lot of cases, мне лень and ленюсь are synonyms for мне не хочется (I don't feel like it) or мне неохота (I don't want to). This might be an aversion: В доме ⊠ пусто. Заходить туда неохота (The house is empty. I don't want to go in). Or it might be not wanting the bother or being a bit lazy, like this person on a camping trip:

Палатку собирать неохота (I don't feel like putting up the tent).

If you don't want to do something and are feeling a bit slangy, you might use the phrase влом. This is for something you really don't feel like doing. Влом здесь оставаться, лучше домой поеду (I definitely don't feel like sticking around here — I might as well go home.) Муж пригласил соседей на обед, а мне влом готовить для всех (My husband invited the neighbors over for lunch, but the last thing I want to do is cook for them all).

Even slangier, and also cruder, is западло (sometimes в падлу), which entered mainstream Russian via criminal slang. But even tough guys sometimes talk back to their mothers: Мне западло мыть посуду! (I don't feel like washing the dishes). Or sometimes they just let the world know that they aren't feeling it, you know? Поехать просто так ему было западло в такую плохую погоду (He didn't feel like going there for the hell of it in bad weather).

So, what do you call these lazybones? Лентяй is the standard epithet, but you can also say ленивец or even лодырь. The last word has an unclear etymology. Some sources say it is based on the word loder or lodder (a slacker, a lazy person), from a "German dialect." Other sources say it is from the name of a Dr. Loder who in the early 19th century treated nervous and other disorders in Moscow with specially prepared mineral water and healthful strolls in a park. In this version, the purposeless strolling was perceived as goofing off, and the people doing nothing got the name of the doctor who made them do it. This seems a bit of a stretch to me — although it is a pretty story— but in any case, it's a good word for a lazy person: Муж оказался пьяницей и лодырем (Her husband turned out to be a drunk and a deadbeat).

Or you can just call someone — like yourself during the May holidays — ленивый (lazy), медлительный (slow-poke), сонливый (sleepy), неповоротливый (sluggish); вялый (torpid) бездельник (do-nothing).

Or, alternatively, you could just plan realistically and not have to call yourself лентяй at all.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2019/05/07/becoming-oblomov-a65508