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If You Can't Beat 'Em, Join 'Em

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Братство: brotherhood, fraternity

Scrolling through my local cinema listings, I caught sight of the new film by Pavel Lungin called Братство. The title literally means "brotherhood," although the English version is called "Leaving Afghanistan," presumably for movie-going clarity. But братство is a good word to convey the notion of a group of men who share a sense of commitment to each other and to a cause.

Just like, I thought, women have the word sisterhood, which in Russian is... hmm... it's... well, let me think about it... well... it's... not used much.

There is the word сестринство (literally sisterhood), but it was almost never used, even in literary Russian, until it was remembered by Russian-speaking feminists who were reading a

lot of Western literature about the Movement. So now you can find websites like this: Сестринство – это компания обычных женщин, которые хотят изменить что-то в своём мире (Sisterhood is a group of ordinary women, who want to change something in their world).

Although there is no problem translating words for formal, organized groups like организация (organization) or объединение (association), the subject of informal or loose groups of people is a minefield for Russian-English translators. Here I think the English to Russian folks have the short end of the stick — or rather the sharp and heavy end of the stick that they want to use to bash everyone over the head who talks about "communities."

But for now, let's just look at the options Russian gives us.

If you are talking about religious orders, it's possible to use the terms братство for a group of men and сестричество for a group of women, but this is quite specific usage that can be a bit confusing. When used to describe a religious order in the West, it usually means a monastery or group of monks: Пиво называется La Trappe в честь французской деревни, в которой в 1098 году и зародИлось Бенедиктинское братство (The beer is called La Trappe in honor of the French village where in 1098 the Benedictine Brothers were founded). When used to describe a religious group in Orthodox Christianity, it is a lay group: Сестричества, как правило, занимаются социальной работой при медицинских учреждениях, их члены называются сёстрами милосердия (Women's orders, as a rule, carry out social work in medical facilities and their members are called sisters of charity).

In non-religious contexts, братство, however, can be applied to any group of people united by some kind of shared value. It's the word you use when quoting the French revolutionaries: свобода, равенство и братство (liberté, égalité, fraternité, that is, liberty, equality, fraternity). In other contexts, you might choose different words in English: Он испытал чувство братства ко всему слабому и бедному, живущему в мире (He felt a sense of kinship with every weak and poor person living in this world). Социализм выражает мысль о братстве народов и братстве людей (Socialism expresses the notion of unity of nations and people).

When you are talking about groups of people united by nationality or place of origin, you might use the word община or землячество, the first being a more universal term for a variety of communities or communes, the latter being a group of people from a particular place (from the word земля — land). Русскоязычные общины Латвии и Эстонии имеют возможность отстаивать свои интересы в институтах ЕС (Russian-speaking communities in Latvia and Estonia have the right to defend their interests in European Union institutions). Община can also be a religious community, like православная община (an Orthodox community or congregation), or any loose organization of people, like соседская община (neighborhood group) or simply местная община (local community). In most cases people united in землячество are people of the same nationality, but not always: Он выступал с докладом на обеде в узком кругу сибирского землячества Москвы (He gave a talk at a luncheon for a small group of Siberians in Moscow).

Another word for a group of people is сообщество, a compound word that seems like a bit of overkill: со- (with) and -общество (society). But it refers to something bigger than

общество or община. Сообщество can be large or small, united by anything or nothing much, that is, either organized or totally unorganized.

In other words, it's a great word to have in your linguistic pocket to pull out whenever you can't think of a better and more exact word. So, you can talk about бизнес-сообщество (business community); интернет-сообщество (online community); научное сообщество (academia); or сообщество наций (family of nations). You can use it when you don't really need to use it: Мировое сообщество не должно ослаблять внимание к проблемам Африки (The world community — commonly called "the world" — must not waver in their attention to African problems.) Or when you really do need to use it: В наше время, различные национальные сообщества и страны прикладывают множество усилий, чтобы сохранить своё национальное своеобразие (Today many different ethnic groups and countries are making great efforts to preserve their national identities).

It is also used in a lot of names of organizations, like Сообщество латиноамериканских и карибских государств (Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, or CELAC).

And then there is the lovely содружество, another compound word of со- (with) and -дружество (archaic word for friendship). This can be any group of people united by friendship and mutual commitment, like боевое содружество (comrades-in-arms). In geopolitical terms, it's the word for what English speakers call a commonwealth, as in Содружество независимых государств (Commonwealth of Independent States), aka СНГ (CIS), aka where many of us are living.

Finally, in our list of slightly mushy words for a mass of united people, there is лагерь (camp). This can, of course, refer to any physical camp, like детский лагерь (children's camp) or the opposite kind of camp: Главное управление лагерей и мест заключения (ГУЛаг) (Main Directorate of Camps and Places of Incarceration [GULag]). But there are virtual camps, too: Образовалось два лагеря: один за старые учебники, другой против (Two camps were formed – one for the old textbooks, the other against them).

If you don't know how to describe the group you are part of, don't worry. You can always say: Я с ними! (I'm with them!)

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