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Insurrection and Sedition in Russian Translation

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Valery Sharifulin / TASS

Штурм: storming

Things being what they are, it seems like a good time to review all the ways people, wherever and whenever they may live or lived, can revolt, rebel, mutiny, and rise up — often instigated, incited, or encouraged by other people. In other words, I'm very into sedition and insurrection these days.

Russian has four main words for insurrection, ranging from big and planned to spontaneous and/or violent. Восстание (insurrection) is literally a rising up, from the verb pair восставать/восстать. Восстание is generally large and organized. Незаурядная способность Степана Разина по-особому воздействовать на окружающих ◙ его

харизма ◙ была основой всех его удач, и ослабление оной могло привести к краху всего восстания. (Stepan Razin's extraordinary ability to influence those around him — his charisma — was at the heart of all his successes and, when it faded, it might have caused the entire uprising to fail.)

In Russian, people rise up a lot, for various reasons: Человек, восстающий против несправедливости, всегда был нашим героем (A person who stands up to injustice has always been our hero). When things rise up — восстать — from ashes, ruins, and so on, they are being reborn. Alas, bad things rise up, too: Труп расизма восстает из гроба истории (The corpse of racism has risen from the grave of history).

Мятеж can be anything from a local mutiny to a big revolt. Some dictionaries specify то же, что восстание, только стихийное (the same things as an insurrection, only spontaneous and disorganized), but after looking through pages of examples, it doesn't seem that all writers agree. You can find both Кронштадтское восстание (Krondshadt rebellion) and Кронштадтский мятеж (Kronshadt mutiny). Мятеж can be big, but it can also be somewhat limited in scope: Был подавлен мятеж военного флота (They navy mutiny was put down).

And then there's бунт (rebellion, revolt, uprising), which is often even less organized and even more riotous than восстание or мятеж. Бунт is scary. Pushkin told us so, and we believe him: Не приведи Бог видеть русский бунт — бессмысленный и беспощадный (God spare us from the sight of a Russian revolt — senseless and merciless). Russian history has experienced Пугачёвский бунт (the Pugachev Rebellion); кулацкий бунт (the kulak rebellion against collectivization); not to mention the assortment of бунт на корабле, бунт в войсках (rebellions on ships and among the troops) as well as голодный бунт (food riot, literally a hunger rebellion). Политика властей привела к бунту во многих регионах (The government's policy led to rebellions in many regions).

Curiously, despite its violent, tumultuous nature, бунт and the verb бунтовать are the words you use to jocularly describe a protest, of say, family members against spinach. Here is some prime adolescent outrage: Я не понимала ПОЧЕМУ нельзя носить серьги, каким образом серьги в моих ушах влияют на то, как я учусь, и я бунтовала (I didn't see WHY I couldn't wear earrings, how earrings in my ears affected the way I studied, and so I rebelled). Today the schoolyard, tomorrow the barricades!

Finally, there is государственный переворот (coup, putsch, regime change). This doesn't happen too often (in most countries and most eras), and it is usually well-organized, sometimes bloody. События августа 1991 года в Советском Союзе получили оценку со стороны официальных лиц и органов государственной власти в СССР как государственный переворот (The events of August 1991 in the Soviet Union were determined by Soviet officials and state organizations to be a coup).

In Russian, starting and stopping one of the above is linguistically neat and tidy: поднимать/поднять восстание (to rise up in rebellion, literally to "put up" a rebellion) and подавлять/подавить восстание (to put down a rebellion).

All of the above is what people do in protest against the powers that be; sedition is how they get there – through incitement of word or deed. There are lots of ways to describe this in Russian, but the legal phrase for it is подстрекательство (incitement, instigation) from the

verb pair подстрекать/подстрекнуть (to incite, instigate, foment).

It should be noted that incitement and rebellion are in the eyes of the people being rebelled against. So you might find yourself in a difficult situation, even when you are just trying to do your civic duty: На присяжных заседателей посыпались обвинения в подстрекательстве к бунту, сочувствии терроризму (The jury was accused of fomenting a rebellion and sympathizing with terrorism).

There is another useful word to know when reading all about this — зачинщик: the ringleader, instigator, or rabble-rouser. Телеведущий сообщал, что зачинщики митинга не задержаны, однако работа по их поиску ведётся (The newscaster announced that the organizers of the demonstration have not yet been detained, but a search for them is underway).

To describe what happened in Washington D.C. on Jan. 6, Russian newspapers and commentators used pretty much every word in the book — мятеж, бунт, восстание — subtleties of language be damned. It appears that the attack on the Capitol made the biggest impression: Захват Капитолия… разгром Капитолия станет водоразделом в истории США…штурм привёл к закрытию здания Капитолия… (The seizure of the Capitol… the rout of the Capitol will be a watershed moment in U.S. history… the storming of the Capitol led to the closing of the building).

They also used a variety of verbs to describe Trump's part, mostly, it seems by using English-language quotes that they translated. Демократы обвинили Трампа в подстрекательстве к мятежу (Democrats accused Trump of sedition). Конгресс США проголосовал за второй импичмент Трампа — за подстрекательство к нападению на Капитолий (The U.S. Congress voted to impeach Trump a second time, for inciting an attack on the Capitol). Байден обвинил Трампа в поощрении беспорядков (Biden accused Trump of encouraging a riot)… разжигании мятежа (fomenting an uprising)… Трамп — подстрекатель бунта (Trump is the ringleader of the rebellion).

Most of the journalists seemed horrified by what happened. But everyone once in a while you found a Trump sympathizer: Дональд Трамп призвал митингующих сохранять спокойствие, а вице-президент Майк Пенс пообещал, что все зачинщики бунта в Вашингтоне будут наказаны (Donald Trump called upon the demonstrators to remain calm, and Vice President Mike Pence promised that all the ringleaders of the uprising in Washington would be punished).

Ждём. (We're waiting).

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