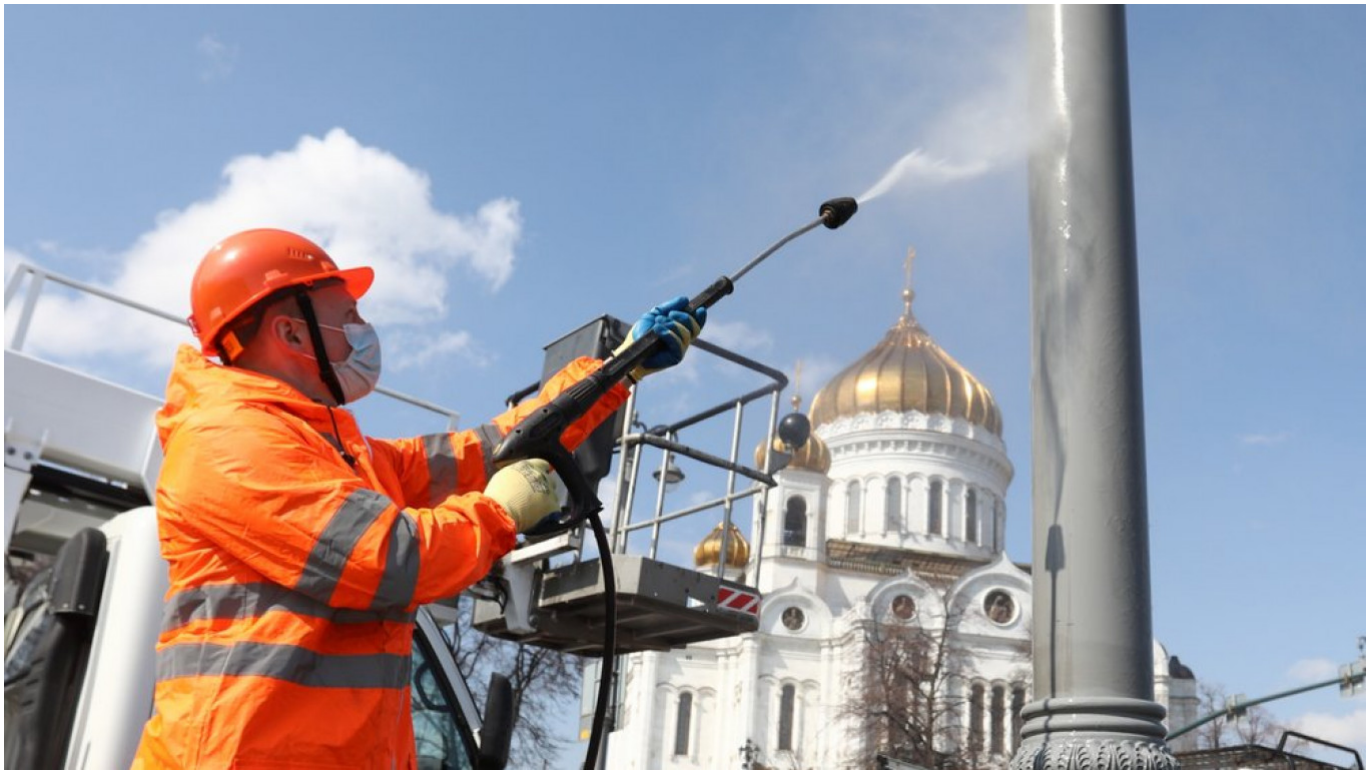
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Cleaning House the Russian Way

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Kiril Zykov / Moskva News Agency

Рука руку моет: one hand washes the other

As the days grow longer and spring is almost in the air —when there isn't snow pelting down, that is — a young man or woman's heart turns to... spring cleaning. They don't actually call it that in Russian. They call it генеральная уборка (a thorough cleaning), often done on Чистый Четверг (Maundy Thursday) of Holy Week to welcome the celebration of Easter in a clean and tidy home.

Генеральная уборка is also done when one's parents are about to visit, when that slovenly roommate finally leaves, and, of course, when you have a major deadline approaching. Nothing like a good deadline to make you want to finally clean out the basement.

There are four basic ways to clean in Russian: мыть (wash), стирать (launder), убрать (put

away) and чистить (clean, polish). If you think about it, that pretty much covers every action you'd need to take to make yourself, your clothing, your abode, and your possessions clean, tidy, and in their place. All you might need to do is add a prefix or two to cover all contingencies.

Мыть is the word to use when you wash your body, hair or an object with soap and water. Note #1: In Russian you don't wash your hair, you wash you head: мыть голову. Other things you can wash with soap and water: уши (ears); фрукты (fruits); пол (the floor); окна (windows). Note #2: Посуда is a collective noun, like china, so when you wash the dishes in Russian, you use the singular form: мыть посуду.

When one hand washes the other — рука руку моет — it means that your friend will help you in return for you helping him. The only thing is: your name is probably Bugsy and his is Rocko.

When you wash something through and through, you add the prefix вы- to get вымыть. This is used a lot in cooking instructions: Картофель как следует вымыть под горячей проточной водой (Give the potatoes a good scrub until they're clean under hot running water). Note #3: The phrase как следует, which means "in the right way," or "properly," is an essential expression for anyone commanding a clean-up operation. Practice a rat-a-tat delivery; growl optional: Вымой пол на кухне как следует! (Wash the kitchen floor down good!)

Another very useful prefix is с — смыть means to rinse or wash something out. This might be a sad thing: Во время половодья тополь смыло в реку (When the high water hit, the poplar was swept into the river). Or it might be a good thing: Дождь пошёл вовремя, смыл грязь (The rain came in time and washed away the dirt).

Note #4: Do not confuse смыть with смыться. The former is a way of 'washing that man right out of your hair,' as they used to sing. The latter is when that man does a vanishing act — он смылся (he took off). The former is gratifying; the latter is deeply annoying or great news, depending on the man.

Next up in our clean-up is стирать (to launder). A lot of English speakers stumble with this verb since in English you can wash the dishes, then wash your clothes before washing your hands. My fix? Think of стирать as to launder and стирка as the laundry. Где моя белая рубашка? (Where is my white shirt?) your Significant Other might ask. Наверное, она в стирке (It's probably in the laundry), you say.

Note #5: No, your Significant Other will never hear "она в стирке" as a hint to do the laundry. Move on.

Убрать (imperfective убирать) is a marvelously productive verb that is also delightfully easy to decipher: брать = take + prefix у = away, that is, to take away, put away, tidy up. For example, you can take in the harvest (take it away from the fields): Через три недели я буду убирать урожай (In three weeks I'll be harvesting the crops). You can take something down: Губернатор поручил убрать безобразные вывески с улиц (The governor ordered ugly street signs taken down). Or you can take away the official ordering things taken down: Убрали губернатора (The governor was removed from office.) Or you can take someone out, that is, make them go away forever: Нужно убрать его до того, как нас заметят

охранником (We need to take him out before the guard see us.) And then you put away the instrument of putting him away: Он убрал пистолет в карман (He put the pistol in his pocket).

In our clean-up marathon, убрать is tidying up, putting things away, or clearing things, like the dinner table: Я выключила плиту и сказала: "Давай-ка, убирай всё со стола" (I turned off the stove and said, "Come on, clear the table.")

Убрать can mean a combination of tidying and cleaning: Накануне приезда подруги Катя допоздна убирала квартиру (The night before her friend was to arrive, Katya cleaned the apartment until late).

Note #6: This is an excellent verb for discussions of hair styles with your children: Убери волосы с лица (Get the hair off your face). Убери волосы в хвост (Pull your hair back into a pony tail).

And finally there is чистить, which is almost a universal cleaner verb. You can use it to describe cleaning something of dirt, grime, patina, tarnish, stains or old paint. It can be a bit vague. If you want someone to grab the mop, say мыть пол (wash the floor). But you could say чистить пол, too, although chances are you'd add some information: чистить пол щеткой или новым средством (clean the floor with a scrub brush or new detergent).

But чистить is the verb you use for cleaning without washing with soap: polishing зубы (teeth); серебро (silver); and ботинки (boots).

When you use чистить with food, it means removing the non-edible or yucky parts from it. Sometimes this is fun: Он умел чистить яблоки цельной кожурой (He could peel an apple in one piece). Sometimes it is not: Я собрала целую корзину грибов — кто поможет мне их чистить? (I picked a whole basket of mushrooms — who's going to help me clean them?)

Note #7: The answer to this question is always silence. Дети смылись (The kids disappeared).

You can also clean streets, premises and organizations of anything undesirable: Снегоуборочные машины отправили чистить дороги (Snowplows were sent to clean the streets).

Sometimes the undesirables are human: Надо чистить партию от элементов, позорящих партию в глазах массы (We have to purge the party of elements that disgrace the party in the eyes of the masses). In 1921 Vladimir Lenin organized what was called генеральная чистка партии (a thorough purge of the party).

Note #8: Когда чистят партию, убирают людей (When they clean a party, they take out people). You get my meaning?

Well, now. Somehow we went from making everything spick and span for the holidays to being removed from office or killed.

Note #9: Пора очистить мозг от дурных мыслей (It's time to clean my brain of nasty thoughts).

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