

On Wars, Ducks, Fakes and Anniversaries

The Word's Worth

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Специальная военная операция: special military operation

This should be a happy moment for me, The Moscow Times, and the Word's Worth. May 2022 marks my 20th anniversary writing the column. If at any time in those past 20 years you told me that I'd meet this date in a rental apartment in a country I'd never been to before, with none of my books and few possessions, unsure when or even if I'll ever return to the country I called home for so many years, I would have thought you mad.

Everything has changed in the last three months, and it has been hard to know how to begin again.

It's not just the absence of my wall of reference books, or living in a smaller — and slightly different — Russian-speaking environment. I've also thought a lot about the millions of people who hate the very sound of Russian now, who associate the language with death and the destruction of their homeland even if they once associated it with neighbors, or friends, or beloved members of their family.

I would feel the same way. This column is not for them.

So for a while I didn't know if I should continue. But for 20 years my job has been to explore the Russian language, so in the end I decided to keep at it.

It does seem fitting — for me anyway — that I left Russia largely because the Russian government outlawed certain words, or rather outlawed their use in certain combinations and contexts.

You can't write about words when some of them are forbidden.

And now that I am in a place that doesn't outlaw words, I thought I'd catch up with a short glossary of the new Russian-language reality: words forbidden, words explained, and words remembered — sadly — once again.

Let's begin with the difference between специальная военная операция (special military operation), the approved description of what Russia is doing in Ukraine, and война (war) the Word That Must Not Be Used.

Although специальная операция is defined in many different ways, all the definitions have one thing in common: a special operation is always limited in scope. It is: форма ведения военных действий... которые проводятся в соответствии с единым замыслом и планом на театре войны в установленный период времени (a form of warfare... that is carried out based on a one concept and plan in the theater of war in a fixed period of time). It is limited пространственным размахом, продолжительностью (in scale and duration).

When abbreviated to спецоперация it sounds like a quick task of “get in, get out,” but as far as I can tell, even the slangy спецоперация can be much bigger than what in U.S. English and practice are called special ops.

Still, специальные операции are only part of a larger military effort (i.e. war), even if they are very big themselves. For example, one of the biggest ones in modern history was Операция Багратион — стратегическая наступательная операция Великой Отечественной войны, проводившаяся 23 июня — 29 августа 1944 года (Operation Bagration — a strategic offensive operation of the Great Patriotic War carried out from June 23 to Aug. 29, 1944).

And there was also Операция Барбароса (Operation Barbarosa), the German invasion of the U.S.S.R. It's considered an “operation” because it was just part of the war the German army was waging.

Война (war) is a different matter — and it's also defined with greater variety. Объявление войны — юридическая, дипломатическая процедура в международном праве (A declaration of war is a legal and diplomatic procedure in international law). The procedure is

предупреждение одним государством другого о прекращении между ними мира и переходе в состояние войны (one government warns another that peace between them has ceased and they are entering into a state of war).

But that's just one definition. Военные авторы обычно определяют войну как вооружённый конфликт, в котором соперничающие группы обладают достаточно равными силами, чтобы сделать исход сражения неопределённым. (Military writers usually define war as an armed conflict in which the two warring sides are almost evenly matched, which makes the outcome of the warfare uncertain).

Or there's this definition: Война – это вооружённая борьба между государствами. Цель войны – навязать противнику свою волю: заставить изменить поведение, отдать часть территории, отказаться от идеологии и другие. (War is an armed conflict between states. The goal of war is to force the will of one state on its opponent, make it change its behavior, hand over part of its territory, give up its ideology, etc.)

So is it a special military operation or a war? Here's what I think: If it looks like a duck, walks like a duck and quacks like a duck — it's a duck.

Another issue is the goal of the Russian military efforts in Ukraine. Объявляя о вторжении России в Украину, президент РФ Владимир Путин заявил, что одной из целей военной агрессии является "денацификация" Украины (When he announced Russia's invasion into Ukraine, Russian president Vladimir Putin said that one of the goals of the military aggression was the "denazification" of Ukraine).

Russian political figures and the state media use three names to describe the Ukrainian leaders and, in some cases, all or most Ukrainians. All three words have primary meanings that don't really apply now. For example, they are called нацисты (Nazis), defined as сторонники нацизма: члены нацистской партии (supporters of Nazism; members of the Nazi Party). Or they are called неонацисты (neoNazis), defined as сторонники нацизма, видоизменивший в соответствии с современными условиями (Nazism, modified in accordance with contemporary conditions). Or they are called фашисты (fascists), supporters of фашизм — крайне правые националистические идеология и движение с тоталитарной структурой, диаметрально противоположные демократии и либерализму (fascism, an ultra-right-wing nationalistic ideology and movement with a totalitarian structure that is diametrically opposed to democracy and liberalism).

These three names are used pretty much interchangeably. One day the president of Ukraine is called нацист, and the next day the same Russian politician calls him неонацист. And, probably most importantly, all three harken back to the German Nazi Party and what Russian historians and political figures call the Great Patriotic War (the part of WWII after the German invasion of the Soviet Union). The words push the buttons of a historical memory that has been constantly cultivated. They might as well be called мерзавцы (bastards) or злодеи (evil-doers).

In English, we often use lower case nazi with an identifier as an insulting way to describe an unbending and narrowminded person who wants to control an activity or practice — like a fitness nazi or a food nazi. In Russian they don't use нацист this way, but they often use фашист as an insulting word that means крайне злобный, агрессивный человек (an

extremely ill-tempered, aggressive person).

Now with all this name-calling and official list of prescribed usage, people might slip up unintentionally or intentionally. In those cases, some Russians are reviving an old tradition that was almost lost: донос (informing on someone). The person who delivers the information is доносчик (informer) and the process is доносить (to denounce, to inform on): Среди вас не может быть доносчиков, нельзя же доносить на самого себя (None of you can be informers because you can't inform on yourself).

In slang the verb pair used is стучать/настучать (literally to knock) and the informer is стукач.

Как недавно выяснилось, он был стукачом. Доносил на своих знакомых (It recently came to light that he was an informer. He informed on his acquaintances).

Like so much Russian slang, стучать seems to have been coined in prison. Prisoners knock on the cell doors so that the guard will take them to the officers in charge. And no one goes to the prison officers to chat about the weather. In any case, the image is very convenient. You don't actually have to say the words, you can just knock on the table and everyone knows what you mean.

On the other hand, sometimes it needs to be spelled out: Ты давай сворачивай эту враждебную пропаганду, а то я на тебя в органы настучу (You better stop with the enemy propaganda or I'll have to inform on you to the security guys.)

If someone says that to you, consider another old tradition: voluntary exile.

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