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How to Fail Spectacularly in Russian

The Word's Worth

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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A still from "The Man who Killed Don Quixote"

Накрыться медным тазом: to fail, flop, end, close

The other day a friend was talking about a project that had gone belly up. But in Russian, belly up is — pardon the bad joke — another kettle of fish. Instead of the image of a dead fish in the water, it's the image of something covered with a copper pot: Работал там переводчиком, пока контора не накрылась медным тазом (I worked there as a translator until the agency went belly up).

Of course, I wanted to find out where the expression came from, but no amount of searching provided an answer.

There are, naturally, versions. The most obvious one is the image of Miquel de Cervantes' Don Quixote, who wore a copper pot on his head. The first problem with this derivation is that it is

a bit of a stretch from that image to the notion of a failed endeavor, although I suppose you could say that Don Quixote was a walking failure of sorts. The second problem is that the book was translated into Russian in the late 18th century and the expression seems to have appeared — or at least be used in conversational speech — in the late 20th century. What took everyone so long?

Another version cites Kornei Chukovsky's children's tale Мойдодыр ("scrub them to bits" — literally scrub them so hard you make holes) a magical washstand that takes on a dirty little boy who wants to stay that way. The angry washstand beats on its copper sink to get the magic going. The problem with this version is how magical flying sponges and soap suds became an image of failure.

The third version is that in the days before refrigeration, people would put meat and other perishables under the copper pot used to make jam. Supposedly the copper preserved them, but it wasn't effective. The advantage of this version is that at least it is the exact image of covering something with a copper pot. But the problem is that if the process was a failure and meat always spoiled anyway, why on earth would people continue to do it for centuries?

But wherever it came from, it is a very colorful and satisfying expression. You can use it when something doesn't happen or fails: Мечта о блестящем телесюжете накрылась медным тазом (His dream of a brilliant tv news segment went down the tubes.) Or when something is a public flop, like a movie or book: Спектакль накрылся медным тазом! (The show was a complete flop!)

You should be careful not to confuse медные тазы with медные трубы (copper trumpets). These are the kind of trumpets royal pages play to announce the appearance of the great ruler. Now they are colorful shorthand for heaping praise on someone. You often hear it in the expression Прошёл огонь, воду и медные трубы (He went through fire, water and fame), an astute observation that fame is as hard to handle as fire and water.

But if you'd like to show off, you might try to construct a sentence like this: Читатели восторженно трубили в медные трубы, критики спешили прихлопнуть его медным тазом (Readers ecstatically blew trumpets in praise, while critics were ready to use the pages to blow their noses, literally "blew copper trumpets and shut the book with a copper bowl).

But back to failures. They are not all alike. Sometimes a project doesn't get beyond the concept phase. For that kind of disaster, you can use the verb реализоваться (to be implemented, to come to fruition) in the negative. Очень жаль, что этот музыкальный проект не реализовался (It's really a shame that this music project never got off the ground). У нас беда с национальной политикой ⊠ декларативна, существует лишь на бумаге, на практике не реализуется совсем (In our country it's a shame that our nationalities policy is purely declarative and exists only on paper, but it's not carried out in practice at all).

Another neutral verb for describing a dud project is состояться (to take place), again used in the negative. Sometimes this just means that something didn't happen: В самый последний момент заболела. Поездка не состоялась (At the very last moment I got sick. So I didn't make the trip.) But it can also mean that something didn't come off: Реальный социализм не состоялся, хотя отдельные элементы модели проявили себя (Real socialism never came off, although isolated elements of the model could be found). It can also be used when

someone or something doesn't achieve what was expected of them: Ещё не состоялся ни один артист в нашем театре (Not a single actor has reached his promise in our theater).

For something that happened but was a real failure, use провалиться (to fail, to fall through something), which is something of an all-purpose verb for the failure-prone. It can be used just to describe a physical accident: Боялась, что собака выбежит на лёд и провалится (I was afraid the dog would run onto the ice and fall through). And then it can be used to describe a failure itself: "Хованщина" ставилась в "Ла Скала" в 1950 году, но тогда она провалилась: опера шла на русском, которого в зале никто не знал (Khovanshchina was performed at La Scala in 1950, but it was a flop at the time — the opera was in Russian, which no one in the hall understood).

When you really flop, you do it с треском (with a bang): Оксфорд из Омска не получился. Проект с треском провалился. Англичане уехали (They couldn't turn Omsk into Oxford. The project was a resounding failure. The British went home.)

And then, when you have failed spectacularly, you can use the verb again: Готов был сквозь землю провалиться (I wished the earth would swallow me up).

Finally, there is the phrase потерпеть крах, which is literally "to suffer destruction." This can be histgorically massive: Мы знаем, что советский эксперимент потерпел крах (We know that the Soviet experiment was an abject failure). Or it can be personally massive: Я потерпела крах своих первых любовных отношений (All of my first relationships were complete disasters).

I've also seen it used to translate the English expression too-big-to-fail: слишком большие, чтобы им можно было позволить потерпеть крах. This is expressive but much wordier than the common translation слишком большой, чтобы обанкротиться).

But unfortunately, as we see, no one and nothing is truly too big to fail.

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