

All the World in One Russian Word

The Word's Worth

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

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Лихач: reckless person; skilled person

Friday pop quiz: Name a Russian word that is a noun, an adverb and a short-form adjective all in one and means evil, clever, wicked, smart, rakish, daring, reckless, cool, or wild. I think it could even mean swashbuckling, if anyone is buckling their swashes these days.

Any guesses?

Лихо.

It exists in various forms in all the Slavic languages, generally in the negative sense (bad, evil, bare, poor, alone), although the etymologist Fasmer believes it came from ancient Greek and had the sense of being a remnant, and it was related to a word for hair loss. Nothing in its

origins foretold the word's schizophrenic metamorphosis.

You are most likely to come across лихо and its various derivations in the sense of something bad or evil in several common expressions. One is used quite a lot: лиха беда — начало. Here it's a short form adjective, and the phrase literally means "a start is a wicked misfortune." The sense is that starting is hard, but then it will get easier. In English we might say that "the first step is always the hardest" or "a good start is half the battle."

Or you might hear: она узнала почём фунт лиха (she fell on hard times, literally "she found out the price of a pound of sorrow"). Or one of my favorite expressions: не буди лихо, пока оно тихо (let sleeping dogs lie, literally "don't wake evil while it is quiet"). Or the evergreen truth: не делай людям добра, не увидишь от них лиха (no good deed goes unpunished, literally "if you aren't kind to people, you won't see wickedness from them"). Or the exhortation we should all follow: не поминайте их лихом (don't speak ill of them, literally "don't mention them with evil").

The "evil" лихо does not appear to be used a lot in conversational speech. It is sometimes used as an adverb that translates as hard or difficult. Лихо пришлось ему в чужой стране (He had a tough time abroad). Here it is from Alexander Solzhenitsyn's "One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich" as a noun: Ну, а не будет ☒ мне лихо какое? (Well, if I don't get it, what harm would there be?). You might come across the adjectival form in phrases like лихой поступок (a wicked act, bad behavior) or лихое слово (a bad word).

But then лихо takes a weird turn. Tough, rough, evil, hard turns into fast: лихая езда (fast ride), the famous лихая тройка (swift troika) or people who go fast, like лихие мотоциклисты (fast motorcyclists). And then it adds on the meanings of brave, daring, provocative, lively, or feisty. This might be young folks full of energy — and full of themselves — like these visiting students: Мы были все вместе, лихо и весело, москвичи и ребята с эстонской киностудии (We were all together, feisty and funny, Muscovites and guys from the Estonian film studio). Or it might be a daring — if not to say reckless — idea: Тут пришла вдруг ему в голову лихая мысль (Just then a wild idea popped into his head).

The fast-reckless-daring meaning is also found in the derivative noun лихач. In my experience, it can be a positive, admiring word when used to describe a driver who just pulled off a magnificent stunt — like not hitting a car that runs a red light. Вот это лихач! Вот как надо уметь (Now that's what I call a real driver! That's what I'm talking about!) The same notion is conveyed by the adverb: Водитель лихо вёл наш автобус по дороге, петляющей между холмами (The driver skillfully drove the bus along the road that wound through the hills).

But it has a negative meaning when used to describe a driver who passed you on a blind curve and nearly got the drivers and passengers in three cars smashed to smithereens. Or not "nearly": Лихач погиб на месте аварии (The reckless driver died at the crash site).

And then the word mutates once more. Fast, reckless, feisty becomes skillful, artistic, jaunty, or rakish. Sometimes you hear the adverb лихо used this way on its own as a reaction when someone does something really clever and amazing. — Он не только успел сдать все экзамены за три дня, он получил одни пятёрки. — Лихо! ("Not only did he manage to take all his exams in three days, he got straight A's!" "Nice one!")

You might say this when someone pulls off a tricky move: Он лихо вынес из своих тайников драгоценности (He pulled off getting the jewels out of their hiding places). Or in reference to complicated plots in movies: Сюжет действительно оказался лихо закручен (There were really a lot of plot twists).

And then you use it for doing something jauntily or rakishly. I don't think I have a rakish or jaunty bone in my body, but some folks are good at it. Он лихо закручивал чёрный ус (He rakishly twirled his black moustache). Дверца черного «Форда» захлопнулась, и профессор лихо махнул шоферу ладонью: поехали! (The door of the black Ford slammed shut and the professor gave a jaunty wave to the driver: Let's go!)

Finally, we come to the most problematic of the fast-clever-daring-evil combinations. The adjectival form *лихой* is often used to describe a time period that is difficult, dramatic, or full of problems — *лихая пора* (hard times), *лихой год* (a rough year). And it is now the standard adjective to describe the 1990s in Russia. Some people — like the Russian president — use the term *лихие девяностые* to mean “the evil 1990s” when everything went the wrong direction. Наступил тот период, который сейчас вспоминают как *лихие девяностые*. If this were a quote from Putin, I'd probably translate it as: That was the start of a period we now call the vile 90s.

But there is an overlay, it seems to me, of the other meanings of *лихой* — wild, crazy, tumultuous, jaunty, irresponsible — on top of the sense of tough or rough times. Моя молодость пришлась на *лихие девяностые* (My youth was during the wild and crazy 90s). Пережив вместе со всей страной *лихие* годы начала рыночных преобразований, в так называемые нулевые Дальний Восток начал восстанавливаться (After suffering through the rough and tumble years at the start of the market transformation with the rest of the country, the Far East began to rebuild in the first years of the new century).

Ни ГУЛАГ, ни войны, ни застой, ни перестройка, ни «*лихие 90-е*», ни «потребительское общество» ☒ ничто не изменило нас коренным, бесповоротным образом (Nothing — not the GULAG, not the wars, not the period of stagnation, not perestroika, not the freewheeling 90s, not life in a consumer society — nothing changed us fundamentally, once and for all.)

Лихо сказано.

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