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Newspeak in the New Russia

George Orwell must be spinning in his grave.

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Новояз: Newspeak

In 1949 George Orwell published his last novel, "1984," and it was translated into Russian and published in 1957 — but not in the Soviet Union. More than 30 years would pass before it was published officially in Moscow. Both the самиздат (self-published work) and bound book version were instant hits — after all, it was one of the first books to describe Soviet reality.

It was "1984" that gave the world Newspeak — in Russian called Новояз, a translation that captures the meaning and even has a whiff of the snappy abbreviations of the early Revolutionary period. A while back the linguist Maxim Krongauz wrote that новояз has developed three meanings in Russian: Orwell's fictional language, the language of totalitarian systems, and ненормативный язык (non-normative speech) — itself a lovely example of новояз since ненормативный язык can include what we call expletives in Oldspeak.

To that we can now add a fourth category: the language of 2022.

Let's start with самозащита России (Russia's self-defense), which actually means "attacking a sovereign neighbor that has not threatened Russia or any other state."

This was known in Oldspeak as война (war), but it is now a специальная военная операция (special military operation) or спецоперация (special op), which was meant to sound like — and meant to be — a quick in-and-out operation that would end with a new president and parades down main streets. This is also called операция по денацификации и демилитаризации Украины (an operation to deNazify and demilitarize Ukraine). Neither новояз version went well, the first because there is no new president or parades, the second because no one could find any Nazis.

But no matter. In новояз they say: всё идёт по плану (everything is going according to plan).

Another bit of новояз concerning the war is the phrase принуждение к миру (peace enforcement), which was patented, as it were, way back in 2008 when Russia invaded Georgia and annexed part of its territory. Президент Дмитрий Медведев убеждён, что проведённая Россией операция по принуждению Грузии к миру была верным решением (President Dmitry Medvedev is convinced that forcing Georgia to accept peace was the right decision).

In новояз the enemies in Ukraine are called неонацисты (neo-Nazis) and нацисты (Nazis) —even if no one has seen one, captured one, or shown one on television. The enemies of the special operation in Russia are called экстремисты (extremists), even though no one has ever figured out what they are extreme about.

In this language, you don't conquer territory, you liberate it, like an official said in July: Территорию ДНР полностью освободят от присутствия Вооружённых сил Украины до конца августа (The territory of the Donetsk People's Republic will be completely liberated from Ukrainian Armed Forces by the end of the August). This was said by deputy of what seems like another Orwellian term, министр информации (the minister of information). The minister should have double-checked that information.

When the territory that has been liberated gets liberated back to the original residents and authorities, the Russian armed forces' hasty retreat is called жест доброй воли (a gesture of good will). There are suddenly many good will gestures, starting with Snake Island. Представитель Министерства обороны РФ заявил, что "в качестве шага доброй воли" российский контингент покинул остров (A representative of the Russian Ministry of Defense announced that as a "gesture of good will" the Russian contingent left the island.)

Ликвидация (liquidation), the term usually used to describe, say, closing out a company, is used now to describe death and total destruction. Ликвидировано за сутки более двух десятков боевиков (More than 20 soldiers were liquidated in the past day). The word смерть (death) is not used. For the most part, Russian soldiers are not said to have been killed, not even with the euphemism of the Covid period — летальный исход (fatal outcome). Here's how it is usually described: Во время чрезвычайного происшествия, повлёкшего гибель танка, солдат был объявлен пропавший без вести " (During an emergency situation — that is, an attack — which resulted in the tank being ruined — that is, completely destroyed

— the soldier was listed as missing in action — that is, he was not MIA but KIA — killed in action).

During this non-war there might be an инцидент (incident), which really means some kind of major accident or natural disaster. It might be an explosion, now called хлопок (a pop) in новояз. This makes for strange official descriptions: Пострадавшие от хлопка газа жители вернутся в квартиры (The residents affected by the pop of gas — that is, gas explosion — will return to their apartments). Ночью были сильные хлопки в Белгородской области (Loud pops — that is, major explosions — could be heard at night in Belgorod oblast).

That инцидент can cause another инцидент — пожар (fire). But fire in новояз is either задымление (smoke, smokiness) or возгорание (flare up). Поступило сообщение о возгорании магазина, в результате чего повреждено потолочное перекрытие и продукция смешанных товаров на площади 72 кв м. (There was a report about a fire breaking out in a store, which resulted in damage to the ceiling and to 72 square meters of mixed merchandise).

Новояз is an important part of censorship, which is now called защита русскоговорящих и особенно русскоговорящих детей (the protection of Russian speakers and especially Russian-speaking children). People in Russia must be protected from many terrible things: провокация (provocative statements) — that is, criticism of the powers that be; фейки (fakes) — that is, any information that does not come from official Russian sources; and дискредитация российской армии (defamation of the Russian army) — that is, any criticism of the armed forces. And if the media fails to protect them properly, Роскомнадзор предупредит о мерах технологического воздействия (the Russian media watchdog organization will warn that they will take "measures of technical intervention.") That is, they'll block them.

And that's today's not-news from the not-war.

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