

Russian Pandemonium Pop Quiz

Describing chaos, crowds and drunken revelry.

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

November 18, 2022



Sergei Kiselev / Moskva News Agency

Ералаш: mish-mash, chaos; Soviet-era children's television show

It's Friday in a rather gloomy November, which is the perfect time for a pop quiz. Clear your desk of all papers, switch off your cell phones, get out your pencils and start testing your knowledge of Russian.

Паноптикум is (pick two):

a) a special wide-angle lens used in photography; b) a spider found in the southern regions of Russia that has three sets of eyes providing 360-degree vision; c) the name of the movie-theater-in-the-round, a 360-degree cinema theater; d) the muddle in a person's head; e) a building or space that exhibits a collection of wax figures; f) any gathering of objects or people that are strange, weird and creepy.

If you answered e) and f) – Садись! Пятёрка! (Sit down – you get an A!) If you are British and you got it right, you get an A+, since it is easy to confuse this with panopticon, a prison design developed in the U.K. that let guards look inside any cell at any time. The idea was that since an inmate didn't know when he was being watched, he was always on good behavior.

Паноптикум is a tricky word, even for native Russian speakers. Some think it means a genius, as in this incorrect statement: Их сын - паноптикум, ему шесть лет и он уже говорит на пяти языках (Their son is a panopticon – he's only six years old and he already speaks five languages!) Or sometimes they think it means a muddle, a bit of insanity: Интернационализм ☒ это коммунистическая идея, толерантность ☒ либеральная, а совместить это в одной голове? Это полный паноптикум (Internationalism is a communist idea, tolerance is a liberal idea. How can they be combined in one head? Complete insanity.)

Proper usage is any place that displays wax figures or curiosities, especially the creepy kind. You can also use the word figuratively to describe a place that is an unsavory nuthouse: Хамовнический суд — это чистый паноптикум (The Khamovniki Court is a true house of horrors). Or it can even be a figurative place, like here in this harsh description: Список Forbes... паноптикум уродцев (The Forbes List is...a freak show).

The problem might be that Russian speakers confuse паноптикум with another Greek-sounding word: пандемониум (pandemonium). Note the descriptor — “Greek-sounding.” You might be surprised (as I was) to learn that the word was coined by John Milton in “Paradise Lost.” He combined the Greek prefix *pan-* (all) with the Latin *daemonium* (demon) to create a word that means a gathering of demonic spirits, the capital of Hell.

Today in both Russian and English it is more commonly a tumult, an uproar, chaos. Я пошёл полюбоваться на очередной парламентский пандемониум (I went to admire another session of parliamentary pandemonium). Дети устроили настоящий пандемониум в школе (The children created utter pandemonium at school).

And while we're in the Greek neighborhood, a slightly more upbeat and positive version of пандемониум is вакханалия (bacchanalia), a drunken revelry in honor of Bacchus, the god of the grape harvest, wine and general drunken merrymaking. Now in Russian it tends to be used figuratively to mean any kind of binge, from irresponsible spending of money to drunken revelry. Рыбаки крайне возмущены той вакханалией управленческих новаций, которые преподносит им правительство в течение последних лет (Fishermen are outraged by the bacchanalia of regulatory innovations that the government has presented to them in recent years). Or it could be a fiscal binge: Антикризисная финансовая вакханалия была импровизацией полуграмотных управленцев и экспертов (The anti-crisis financial bacchanalia was an improvisation by poorly educated managers and experts).

Next on the list of foreign words or almost-foreign words used to describe chaos is катавасия (katavasia or katabasia). This is a real Greek word that is a type of hymn chanted in the Orthodox Church. The word is derived from the verb that means to descend, because the monks or singers would all come down from their stalls and stand in the middle of the church to sing them.

I have not found a good explanation for why, when and how this word came to mean confusion, muddle, mayhem or chaos. Perhaps the monks gathered together and then went back to their usual places in a chaotic or unruly way? Or when they were gathered together, their chanting was muddled? I don't know, but any mess is good to avoid: Как началась вся эта катавасия, он редко показывался в библиотеке (As soon as the uproar began, he rarely showed up in the library). Вся катавасия с похоронами свалится на меня (The whole funeral mess is going to be on me).

Leaving the Greco-Roman world for the Turkic-language nations, we find another word for a mess or muddle: ералаш. You can find it in works by Nikolai Gogol: Он уже давно мне говорит: "Что это у тебя, братец, в голове всегда ералаш такой"? (For a long time he's been saying to me, "Why, my brother, is your head always in such a muddle?") And you can hear it today: Хаос царил во дворе ☒ весёлый ералаш (Chaos reigned in the courtyard — cheerful mayhem). This might remind you of another usage — it's the name of a very popular children's television show that began to air in the late Soviet era, which was just this kind of весёлый ералаш.

And here is an interesting word, Russian through and through but with origins in the Bible, and totally confusing to me for years: столпотворение. It means a loud, disordered, confusing mess of a huge crowd of people — a melee, crush, or free-for-all. В вестибюле театра было столпотворение (There was a crush of people in the theater vestibule).

I've always been confused by it because the two components of the word don't add up to a pushy crowd at all: столп (pillar or tower) and творение (creation). Tower-creation? How is that a mob?

But it's easier to understand if you know the entire phrase: вавилонское столпотворение (something like "putting up the Tower of Babel"). The image is of the masses of folks who built the tower but are now babbling incomprehensively in different tongues — which makes for an unruly, disorganized crush of humanity. На Пушкинской площади ☒ столпотворение (Pushkin Square was mobbed).

It's interesting, isn't it, that so many words for chaos and disorder are foreign in origin?

So let's end with a good old Russian word that is easily understood: свистопляска — any kind of wild, unbridled mayhem, uproar. It's easy to parse the word — свист (whistle) and пляска (dancing). This is bit like the English expression "song and dance," but that means a long and mostly untrue explanation for some deed. Свистопляска is more rowdy behavior, often политическая свистопляска (political havoc). Ключевое слово нынешнего царствования ☒ стабильность, и в год парламентских выборов глава Российского государства устраивать свистопляску с увольнением премьера не станет (The key word in today's rule is stability, so during a year of parliamentary elections the head of the Russian government is not about to create havoc by firing the prime minister).

Well. In any case, he'll give us a song and dance about whatever he does.