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Serving and Not Serving in the Military

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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Уклонист: draft dodger

When it comes to anything military, I am an absolute профан — an imbecile, an ignoramus, a dunderhead, a know-nothing (and not, as English speakers might think, a person who uses profanities — though, let's be honest, I do that, too).

What I mean to say is that I know very little about how any military works and even less about how the Russian military works. But the new way of calling up people to active duty — more on that in a minute — made me realize that I don't really understand the differences between a призывник and a срочник or a запасник and a резервист — especially because the first two are both translated as recruit and the second two are both translated as reservist. And then these words are doubly difficult because they sound like this: the first is a guy who summons you (призывник призывает); the second is a guy who does things quickly (срочник срочно); the third is not a person but a storehouse (запасник); and the fourth is someone who puts something aside (резервист резервирует). And that just can't be right.

So I have put myself through a mini crash-course in joining the army and avoiding the army, which might be useful to my fellow профаны.

It all begins with воинская обязанность (повинность), which is obligatory military service — обязанность is more modern and has the sense of a requirement, while повинность is an older term that has the sense of servitude. Lots of countries have it, and some have reinstated it: На фоне российской агрессии в Украине Латвия снова вводит всеобщую воинскую обязанность (Considering the Russian aggression in Ukraine, Latvia is reinstating obligatory military service).

Who gets called up? Военнообязанные (people who are eligible for military service, who can be conscripted). In Russia this is pretty much every man from age 18 to 65 — to be more exact, it's men from 18 to 26 who have not yet served, men up to the age of 65 who have served and are now in the reserves, and women until age 45 who served and are in the reserves.

Then there are two call-ups: весеный и осеный призыв (spring and fall call-up). Men who are eligible get повестка (draft notice). It used to appear in their mailbox, but the Russian military decided to go digital: Повестка будет считаться полученной после её размещения в личном кабинете на Госуслугах (The call-up notice will be considered received once it is placed in the person's personal account on the State Services website) — so it is considered received whether the person sees it or not. Much discontent in the population. Clarification quickly followed: it would be mailed, too.

The guy who gets the повестка is призывник (draftee). If he doesn't want to serve, he can leave town, region or country so as not to get it or pretend he never saw it or see it and try to disappear. All of this avoidance is what English speakers (Americans mostly) call draft dodging. In Russian there are two verbs, one standard and the other very slangy: уклоняться (to avoid/dodge, standard) and косить от армии (to dodge, very slangy). Draft dodgers are chased down: Задача комиссаров — ловить «косящих» от армии призывников (The job of the commissars is to catch draft dodgers).

A common word for the guy on the run is уклонист. Attitudes toward draft dodgers seem confused: Отдавать своих детей в армию россияне не спешат, однако 66% уверены, что уклонист не может быть патриотом (Russians are in no hurry to hand their sons over to the army, but 66% are convinced that a draft dodger is not and cannot be a patriot).

If the young man does not try to escape military service, призывник должен появиться в военкомат (военный комиссариат) (the draftee must appear at the induction center).

After much questioning of people who have gone through this, I have learned that призывник is a призывник from the moment of eligibility until the moment he is in the training camp and takes the oath. After that he becomes срочник (conscript) aka новобранец (recruit, conscript). В Российской армии срочниками называют военнослужащих, которые проходят воинскую службу по призыву (In the Russian army servicemen who have been drafted are called recruits/conscripts).

The other kind of serviceman or servicewoman is контрактник (contract or professional soldier).

I was also very puzzled by the difference between запас and резерв since they both mean reserves. If I've got this right: after a срочник serves his term (one year) he is в запасе (in the general pool of people who can be called into duty). Actually, the list of people called запасники (reservists of the general sort) is long and includes завершившие обучение на военных кафедрах (people who graduated from military departments); освобожденные от призыва или получившие отсрочку до 27 лет (people who were exempt from call-up or who had a deferment until the age of 27); женщины, имеющие военную специальность (women who have a military profession). So basically, these are veterans or people eligible for service who can all be called up back into service.

But резервы and резервисты are something else. Резервисты — это люди, пребывающие в запасе и заключившие контракт с Министерством обороны (Reservists are people who have been in the general pool and signed a contract with the Ministry of Defense.) Они могут работать на любой работе, регулярно проходят военные сборы и получают ежемесячные выплаты (They can work anywhere, but regularly undergo reservist training and receive monthly salaries).

And that's what I've been able to figure out so I can read news that I wish I never had to read.

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