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Take Your Pick: Mutiny, Coup, Uprising or Nothing

Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth

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A member of Wagner group stands guard outside the headquarters of the Russian Southern Military District in the city of Rostov-on-Don. **AFP**

Поход: hike, walk, march

Like just about everyone else reading this, I watched Russia very closely for about 30 hours over the weekend, and despite all that and a lifetime of experience with the place, I have no idea what happened. What was it? Mutiny? Rebellion? Attempted coup?

As I look back, it seems that what it was depended on the day and speaker.

When Vladimir Putin first spoke to the nation on Saturday, he called what was happening a мятеж, which is a kind of mutiny, insurrection or uprising. In fact, he spoke directly to the мятежники (insurrectionists, mutineers): Обращаюсь и к тем, кого обманом или угрозами втянули в преступную авантюру, толкнули на путь тяжкого преступления – вооружённого мятежа (I am speaking to those who have been drawn into this criminal undertaking by deception or threat, who have been pushed onto the path of committing a serious crime — an armed uprising).

Putin portrayed what was happening as a major threat, one that would do no less than determine the future of Russia: Эта битва, когда решается судьба нашего народа, требует единения всех сил, единства, консолидации и ответственности (This is a battle when the fate of our people is in the balance, demanding the solidarity of all forces, unity, consolidation and responsibility).

It's really bad: Это удар в спину нашей стране и нашему народу (This is a stab in the back of our country and people) and это именно предательство (this is nothing less than treason). Putin uses various words for treason, blackmail and mutiny nearly a dozen times. He even compares it to the uprising of 1917 and the civil war it eventually led to. He calls it смута, a rich word that is redolent of the dark days of the distant past. Смутное Время (translated as the Time of Troubles) was the period between dynasties, a time of anarchy, wars, usurpers of the throne, and invading armies. Смута can mean civil unrest and disruptions of public order, chaos, and turmoil.

On Day Two Putin was presumably too busy to speak to the public. On Day Three when it was over, he still painted a dark picture of what had happened, saying that организаторы мятежа, предав свою страну, свой народ, предали и тех, кого втянули в преступление (the organizers of the uprising betrayed their country and their people and then betrayed the people they roped in to committing this crime).

He called it мятеж three times in as many sentences, but — drumroll — he also introduced new villains. It will not surprise you that this is the demon West: Именно такого исхода – братоубийства – хотели враги России: и неонацисты в Киеве, и их западные покровители, и разного рода национал-предатели (It was exactly this result — fratricide — that Russia's enemies wanted: the neo-Nazis in Kyiv and their Western patrons, and all kinds of national traitors).

It all ended happily because the people were in solidarity, although he didn't cite any examples and apparently ignored the groups of mostly young men cheering on the insurrectionists. But, all the same, Putin said: гражданская солидарность показала, что любой шантаж, попытки устроить внутреннюю смуту обречены на провал (the unity of the citizens showed that any blackmail, any attempts to foment internal turmoil are doomed to failure).

In layman's language: they dodged the bullet.

But by June 27, the emphasis began to change slightly. In his first address in the Kremlin before members of the armed forces, мятеж was getting a bit less emphasis and the excellent work of the armed forces was getting more play. They had been working in the vague but dire-sounding в трудный для страны час (in the country's dark hour)…в непростой ситуации (in the complicated situation).

Of course, this makes sense. He was speaking to the armed forces and the trick to making a convincing speech is to tell people they are what you want them to be. And so: вы действовали чётко, слаженно… (You acted with precision and in harmony). Ваша решимость и мужество, так же как и консолидация всего российского общества, сыграли огромную, определяющую роль в стабилизации обстановки (Your commitment and courage as well as the consolidation of the entire Russian nation, played an enormous and indeed the determining role in stabilizing the situation).

Again, he is not too clear on what situation had to be stabilized, but all the same: Вы защитили конституционный строй, жизнь, безопасность и свободу наших граждан, уберегли нашу Родину от потрясений, фактически остановили гражданскую войну (You defended the constitutional order, the life, safety and freedom of our citizens, you protected our Homeland from turmoil, and in fact stopped a civil war).

But a few minutes later inside the Kremlin, everything gets wishy washy. Suddenly there is a lot of use of the subjunctive about what might have happened, including this mouthful of бы: Я хочу, чтобы мы все поняли, что происходило и что бы было, если бы вы не сделали то, что вы сделали, и не исполнили бы своего воинского долга и не проявили бы верности присяге (I want us all to understand what would have happened if you hadn't done what you did and hadn't carried out your military duties and hadn't been true to the oath you took).

What would have happened? …хаос в стране был бы неизбежен, и противник, конечно, этим бы воспользовался (chaos in the country would have been unavoidable, and of course the enemy would have taken advantage of that). Very bad, what would have happened, whatever it might have been: Неизвестно, что бы стало со страной в конечном итоге (It's not clear what would have happened to the country in the end).

But in the vague в таких случаях (in these cases) and в очень сложных условиях (in very tough conditions), somehow it all worked out. In fact, except for, well whatever happened and whoever did it, the Wagner guys are okay: те, кто служил и работал в этой компании – «Вагнер», пользовался уважением в стране (the men who served and worked in that company, Wagner, were well respected in the country).

At this point, I completely lost the plot.

So let's hear what the traditionally unnamed виновник (guilty party) has to say. After all, he did it, whatever "it" was, so he should know what he did, right?

Yevgeny Prigozhin didn't call it мятеж, смута, бунт, восстание or путч (uprising, riots, rebellion, insurrection or coup). In fact, he denied that it was anything of the sort. He called it поход (hike) or марш справедливости (march for justice) — you know, as one does with 25,000 armed men heading toward the country's capital. He said he just wanted to be treated right and for people to pay attention to all the mistakes being made in battle in Ukraine. Мы шли для демонстрации своего протеста, а не для свержения власти в стране (We marched to demonstrate our protest, not to overthrow the authorities in the country.)

He couldn't help but brag a bit about how well they'd done, taking total control of Rostov, winning the support of the people, getting to within 200 kilometers of Moscow, covering over 780 kilometers on foot there and back to Rostov. So what was it? Actually, Prigozhin said, Мы показали мастер-класс, каким образом должно было выглядеть 24 февраля 2022 года (We gave a master class in how it should have looked on Feb. 24, 2022).

So that's what it was. A master class.

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