The Moscow Times
30 YEARS
INDEPENDENT NEWS FROM RUSSIA

Let It Be and Let It Go

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September 22, 2023



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Пусть: let, permit, request, threaten, concede

Among the many useful little words in Russian, there is one that tends to be overlooked: пусть. Пусть is a very handy word that can be used to express everything from an order to a wish to exasperated acceptance to a threat. Time to polish your пусть and be ready to pull it out of your linguistic pocket.

Пусть is related to the verb pair пускать/пустить, which has a number of meanings, including to let something or someone do something, to free something or someone, to let someone or something enter, or set something in motion. The underlying concept is allowing or starting to get something moving. Sometimes it's permission to enter: Директор магазина не хотел пускать его (The store director didn't want to let him in). Sometimes it's an action to turn on or start something: Когда лампа погаснет, можно пускать двигатель (When the light goes out you can start the engine).

Now then, пусть is the little word that gets action going. You have a wish you want to come true? Пусть to the rescue: Пусть всегда будет солнце! (May the sun always shine!) It's also good for adult wishes: Пусть Бог ниспошлет вам здоровья и удачи (May the Lord bless you with health and good fortune).

And пусть can be used to issue an order. Pay attention to this if you are working for a VIP; their пусть is an order — a rather polite order, but an order all the same. Пусть подаст машину через час (Have the car brought around in an hour). Пусть проверит, все ли на месте (Have him check to see if everyone is here). At a staff meeting, this is an order even if it doesn't quite sound like one: Пусть Иван скажет (Let's hear what Ivan has to say).

Do you want to threaten someone? Пусть does that, too. Если Иван не хочет потерять работу, пусть работает (If Ivan doesn't want to lose his job, he better get to work!) And if someone is going to try to take over your business, embarrass you in public, or steal your significant other, use this simple phrase: Пусть попробует! (Just let him try!)

But пусть can also be a polite, roundabout sort of way to request something, especially with бы. This is like a cross between a hope and an ask, which is the perfect mode for dealing with your family. Если бы мужа снять с работы, пусть бы домом занимался (If they fire my husband, then let him take care of the house). Напишите родителям, пусть бы помогли вам (Why don't you write your parents and see if they'll help?)

At the other end of the emotional scale, пусть can be used to indicate permission, agreement, concession or acceptance. Think Beatles: Let it be. Если нужно, пусть так и будет (If necessary, that's the way it will be). Пусть будет по-твоему (Okay, let's do it your way). Пусть так и думают (Let them think that, if they want).

If you have given up fighting or have finally just accepted a difficult situation, you need this phrase: Ну и пусть, which means: I give up, let her/her/them do what they want, I'm tired of fighting over this, what the hell. When the kids are running outside in the rain and stomping in the mud, you can look out the window, shrug and sigh: Пусть их (Oh, let them be.) Or if you are tired of arguing with someone, you can let them have the last word: Пусть так. (You might have a point). Or if you just tired of arguing, explaining, cleaning, fixing, or doing anything else, you can just stop and sigh: Пусть. (That's it for me).

Sometimes the acceptance is extreme and "let it be" tips over into "I give up." Ну и пусть умрём, зато останутся они после нас (So what if we die? At least they'll live on after us). –Так можно простудиться. –Ну и пусть ("You're going to catch a cold that way." "So what?") –Он же всё равно тебя бросит. –Ну и пусть! ("He'll dump you anyway." "Let him! I don't care!")

Want to get all theoretical? Пусть to the rescue. Пусть can form a conditional statement: Пусть он ошибся, ошибку можно исправить (Let's say he did make a mistake. It can be fixed!)

In other phrases пусть constructions might be translated as "even if" — for example, when you take a short vacation: Пусть их было не так много, но они были самыми тёплыми (Even if we didn't have that many days, they were the warmest).

And then there are the “let it be X because Y is even worse” phrases. Пусть и холодно, только бы не дождь (Better that it’s just cold; it could be raining). Пусть лучше бы мама меня ругала, чем так расстроилась и рыдала (It would have better if my mother yelled at me instead of getting so upset and crying).

And in the end, no matter how bad it seems, remember these famous last words: Ну, пусть — хуже не будет точно (What the hell. It sure can’t get any worse).

Remember not to say them. They are always wrong.

Original url: https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/09/22/let-it-be-and-let-it-go-a82540