

# Struck by a Bolt of Thunder

By [Michele A. Berdy](#)

August 26, 2010

**The**  **Moscow Times**

*Молния: a lightning bolt, a news flash, a zipper*

Everyone knows that during a thunderstorm, you wait for a bolt of lightning (молния) and then count the seconds until you hear the clap of thunder (гром). If you're in Russia and there are five seconds between light and sound, the storm is five kilometers away. If you're in the United States, the storm is five miles away (about eight kilometers). This shows how much our two great nations have in common. It also shows that our folk storm-tracking systems are pretty lousy.

Long ago in Russia, folks seem to have been a bit confused about thunder and lightning. In some expressions гром means молния. For example: Однажды в сильную грозу убило громом несколько человек. (Once during a heavy storm several people were killed by lightning.) Or: Я остановился, как громом поражённый. (I stopped as if I'd been struck by lightning.) When you want to swear to the truth of your words, you can say: Разрази меня гром, если буду не прав. (May lightning strike me if I'm wrong.) And finally, there is the expression как гром среди ясного неба (like a bolt from the blue). Apparently all of our

ancient ancestors believed that lightning only strikes during a storm, and so a bolt of lightning in a blue sky described something utterly unexpected. For example: Телефонный звонок раздался, как гром среди ясного неба. (The telephone call came out of the blue.)

But sometimes thunder is just thunder, as in the common expression пока гром не грянет, мужик не перекрестится (literally, “until there is a clap of thunder, a man doesn’t make the sign of the cross”). Many commentators insist this is the essence of Russian mentality: В России эта истина подходит практически к любым ситуациям. (In Russian this truth can be applied to almost any situation.) But others assert that this is just part of human nature. I vote for the latter assertion. In English we express this with a horse, a lock and a barn door, but it’s the same idea: Human beings don’t take action until there is an emergency.

The adjective громкий means loud or noisy, but громкое имя (literally “a loud name”) is a famous person. Среди членов оргкомитета не оказалось громких имён. (There weren’t any celebrities on the organizational committee.) When the adverb громко (loudly) is combined with the verb звучать (to sound), the result is not so much an increase in decibels as an increase in significance. Доктор наук — за рубежом это звучит громко. (Outside Russia the title Doctor of Science sounds really important.) Звучит громко can also be used to good effect when you want to wax poetic or sentimental: Я хочу служить своему городу, как ни громко это звучит. (I know it sounds corny, but I want to serve my city.)

Молния also undergoes some metaphorical transformations. It can be the sharp glint of anger in someone’s eye: В его глазах сверкнула молния. (His eyes flashed with anger.) Or it can indicate some urgent information, like телеграмма-молния (top-priority telegram) or сообщение с отметкой молнии (news flash, breaking news). Застёжка-молния, or simply молния, is a zipper.

If you are furious, you can throw around bolts of lightning and thunder clouds. Правительство мечет громы и молнии, а цены растут. (The government rants and raves, but prices are rising all the same.)

Where’s Zeus when you need him?

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator. A collection of her columns, “The Russian Word’s Worth,” will be released by Glas in October.

*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

Original url: <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2010/08/26/struck-by-a-bolt-of-thunder-a942>