

Zyuganov Is Lower Than Low

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Последняя собака: lowest of the low

In the heat and confusion of events, a politician sends a sharply worded tweet. Public outrage ensues. His aides clarify, only making things worse. The politician says he didn't mean what critics say he meant, and then says he didn't write the tweet at all.

This would hardly catch my eye — it happens every day in the United States — but this particular Twitter incident occurred in Russia, and the tweet concerned an American. One of the politician's colleagues said, "Мы считаем, что это произошло из-за плохого знания американцами всех нюансов русского языка" (We believe this happened because the Americans had a bad understanding of all the nuances of the Russian language). I'm always interested in nuances Americans don't understand.

The purported author was Communist Party leader Gennady Zyuganov, and the alleged tweet was this: Американского посла в Ливии расстреляли как последнюю собаку. Это был главный специалист по ливийской «революции». Он получил то, что посеял. (The U.S.

ambassador to Libya was shot like the lowest dog. He was the main specialist on the Libyan "revolution." He reaped what he sowed.)

Zyuganov and his aides insisted the phrase расстрелять как собаку (to shoot like a dog) means без сожаления расстреляли, беспардонно расстреляли (to shoot someone without mercy, to shoot someone brazenly). This phrase, they said, condemns the executioners, not the executed.

This is the nuance Americans supposedly didn't get. But English has the exact same expression — to shoot someone like a dog — which, exactly like the Russian, is a comment on the way someone was treated. ☒

So what's the problem? Well, at least part of the problem is the word последний (last), a word left out of all the convoluted and contradictory explanations.

Последний generally isn't a problematic word. It means the last something, like последний день месяца (last day of the month), or я живу на последнем этаже (I live on the last floor). Like in English, it can refer to an action done just before death, like последний вздох умирающего (a dying person's last breath). Sometimes it can mean the very newest of the new, like последняя новость (latest news) or последняя мода (the latest style).

And then it can be an intensifier that means the worst in a bad series, like последний дурак (the stupidest idiot), or последний негодяй (the worst scumbag) — or последняя собака (a lowly dog, the lowest of the low).

Calling someone последняя собака is a strong insult. Это самая что ни на есть анафема: ты хуже последней собаки (That is the worst kind of anathema: You're worse than the lowest dog). Лучше быть последней собакой дома, чем в вашей Америке (It's better to be the lowest of the low at home than to live in your America.)

On the other hand, in examples where someone was treated like последняя собака, the phrase clearly condemns the treatment. Бросили нас в аэропорту как последних собак (We were dumped at the airport as if we were a pack of ☒ street dogs). На допросах били как последних собак (At interrogations they beat us like dogs.)

But if there is any ambiguity about the first sentence, the tweet resolves it with the last sentence: получил то, что посеял (usually что посеял, то и пожнёшь — as ye sow, so shall ye reap). He got what he deserved.

It's no wonder there was such a scramble to explain, clarify, translate and blame. Outrageous.

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