

Armed to the Teeth

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Травматика: traumatic or nonlethal weapon, slang

On their resumes, translators and interpreters list their education, experience and particular areas of expertise. I think it would also be useful to list areas of incompetence — subjects the translator knows nothing about, wouldn't know how to research and moreover, couldn't care less about. For me, that's weaponry.

Potential clients: If you have a text that involves any kind of weapon, do not hire me. Unless, of course, you want a Monty Python sketch.

But living in Moscow where half the news stories involve some kind of mayhem, usually with weapons, even I have to figure out a term or two.

Take the recent wedding party that drove down Tverskaya Ulitsa toward the Kremlin shooting guns into the air in a curious tradition of newlywed joie de vivre. One headline read: Какая свадьба без нагана! I get the first part: What's a wedding without ... but fall apart on the last

word. Наран, it turns out, is a handgun made by the Belgian company Nagant that was used in the pre-revolutionary Russian army.

Of course, the headline doesn't mean that the wedding party was shooting off antique guns. Like so many Russian headlines, this one is a punning allusion — in this case, to the title of a popular late Soviet-era song, *Какая песня без баяна* (What's a song without an accordion). This is supposed to be a rhetorical question, although my response would be: A song without an accordion is a really good song.

But I digress. Russian divides weapons into *огнестрельное оружие* (firearms) and *холодное оружие* (melee weapons — that is, weaponry that doesn't fire a projectile). English speakers and texts don't use the latter term much. They tend to be more specific, saying, for example, that the assailant was armed with a knife or blunt weapon.

Even for a dolt like me, Russian handguns are pretty easy to understand and translate, since most of the terms and guns are imports: *пистолет* (pistol), *револьвер* (revolver), *маузер* (Mauser), *кольт* (Colt). The slang term for all this is *пушка* (literally "canon"). Он открывает ящик своего стола и вынимает пушку крупного калибра (He opens his desk drawer and takes out a large caliber piece).

Long-barreled guns required some research and resulted in a revelation. *Ружьё* is a smoothbore shotgun. *Винтовка* is a rifle, so called because the barrel is rifled — cut with helical grooves to make the bullet spin and hit its target more accurately. *Винтовка* follows the same derivational pattern. *Винт* is a screw, and *винтовой* is helical. Cool, huh? Did everyone know this but me?

Today Russia is famous for its wide variety of *травматические оружия* (traumatic or nonlethal weapons), slangily called *травматика*. These are considered defensive weapons that harm but don't kill. However, I gather that if used at close range by an idiot who is drunk out of his mind, grievous bodily harm may occur. I also gather that they are a Russian thing because this newspaper always adds a descriptive translation: "a traumatic gun that shoots rubber bullets or gas-fired pellets." The classic *газовой пистолет* (gas pistol) just sprays gas.

In any case, my advice to the newly married: Consider the ridiculous American tradition of tying a bunch of empty tin cans to the car bumpers. It's totally senseless, makes a lot of noise, and, best of all, you won't spend your honeymoon in his and hers jail cells.

Michele A. Berdy, a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, is author of "The Russian Word's Worth" (Glas), a collection of her columns.

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