

# How to Make the World a Tad Less Smelly

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*Портянка: foot wrap, wimp, diatribe*

With all the momentous events that have occurred over the past few weeks, it's possible you may have missed the most important news story of the millennium. After 300 years, the Russian army decided to get rid of *портянки* (foot wraps).

*Портянки* (*портянка* in singular) are large rectangles of cloth that are wrapped around the foot in an origami-like way and worn in lieu of socks. A kind of descendant, or second cousin, of *онуча* (foot cloth) and *обмотки* (windings) — pieces of cloth wrapped around the foot and leg and worn with traditional peasant *лапти* (bast shoes) — *портянки* have been worn in the Russian army since the reign of Peter the Great.

Learning how to properly wrap your *портянки* was something of a rite of passage in the country's military, and Russian soldiers have had a love-hate relationship with them. On the

one hand, портянки are one-size-fits-all, and properly wrapped портянки are warm and comfortable. On the other hand, properly wrapping them is an art not easily mastered, and poorly wrapped портянки give blisters like nothing else on Earth.

And they're вонючие (stinky). Although their purported advantage is the ease with which they're washed and dried, no one seems to be rolling up their sleeves over sudsy water. Except the women folk, that is: Жила с мужиком более тридцати лет, стирала его бельё и вонючие портянки (She lived with her man for over 30 years, washing his underwear and smelly foot wraps).

In prison camps, портянки were issued to convicts. Writer Alexander Solzhenitsyn has one of his characters say: "Кто же нынче стирает портянки? Их просто носят год, не стирая, а потом выбрасывают, от начальства новые получают." (Who washes foot wraps these days? You just wear them for a year without washing them, then toss them out and get new ones from the camp directors.)

There is something evocative for Russians about those stinky pieces of cloth, and the word портянка has a rich second life in the world of Russian slang.

Some of the slang has come and gone. A 15-year-old dictionary lists портянка as slang for a teabag and a wall newspaper, but I haven't found that usage today — at least among my set.

Other dictionaries cite портянка in professional argot. For example, among musicians playing wind instruments, портянка is a loud hoot or honk. In railway worker's slang, it's a long warning with many speed limitations. In the army, it's a blank sheet of paper issued for writing a letter home. Soldiers also use it as ироническое дружеское обращение (a deprecatory but friendly form of address). Эй, портянка! (Hey, butt-wipe!)

In more general slang, портянка is a spineless worm. Ты мне друг или портянка? Поможешь мне или нет? (Are you my friend or a wimp? Are you going to help me or not?)

Lately портянка has been used to describe a long, boring letter, blog post or comment, often a convoluted diatribe filled with dubious statistics and facts. Он написал целую портянку в ЖЖ (He posted this really long, boring story on LiveJournal.) Твой здоровенный пост-портянка к теме отношения не имеет (Your humungous diatribe post has nothing to do with the topic.)

Портянка can also refer to the poster of boring diatribes. Не обращайтесь внимания на портянок. Они сейчас начнут брызгать слюной. (Don't pay attention to the scribblers. They'll start foaming at the mouth.)

Instead, just tell them to stuff a sock in it.

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