

Going Crazy Over Russia

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Дурка: loony bin (slang)

The other day, a Russian friend and I got into a lively discussion about the latest law passed in the State Duma. I think it was the one prohibiting "politically provocative" white trim on clothing. Or no, it was the one that outlawed sighing in a public place as a form of unsanctioned individual protest. Or maybe it was the one banning adoptions to any country that has an "A" in its name.

OK, I made all that up. But in any case, we were talking about recent legislation and legislators when my friend said, "Ну и дурка." Because I mentally live in the more congenial 19th century, I understood that as "What a fool." But because I physically live in the 21st century, I was wrong again.

Дурка is slang for дурдом (madhouse).

There are, of course, neutral terms to describe an institution for people with mental health problems. When the first hospitals were built in the 18th century, they were called долгауз, which is a corruption of the German tollhaus, apparently a term for a psychiatric hospital. In those genteel but scientifically less sophisticated old days, it was also called дом для душевнобольных (a home for the mentally ill; literally "people with ailing souls"). Or дом для умалишённых (a home for lunatics; literally "people deprived of reason," ума лишённые).

Today it is called психиатрическая больница (psychiatric hospital), although this term is commonly reduced to психбольница or the even slangier психушка.

Several other slang words for psychiatric hospitals required a bit more research to decipher since they were derived from specific facilities. For example, жёлтый дом (literally "yellow house") once meant the Obukhovskaya Hospital in St. Petersburg, built as the first public hospital in the city in 1799, which had a ward for mentally ill patients and happened to be painted yellow. Отправлять в жёлтый дом (to send someone to the yellow house) came to mean "to have someone committed." Неужели можно просто вот так взять и отправить неугодного тебе человека в жёлтый дом? (Can they really just take someone they don't like and stick him in a psych ward?)

Not to be outdone by its northern rival, Moscow also contributed to psychiatric slang. Until 1994, Psychiatric Hospital No. 1 was called the Московская психиатрическая клиническая больница № 1 имени Кащенко (Kashchenko Moscow Psychiatric Clinical Hospital No. 1), aka Кащенко. It was also called Канатчикова дача (Kanatchikov's dacha) because it was originally built on land belonging to the merchant Kanatchikov.

Another facility outside Moscow in the town of Белые Столбы (literally "White Pillars") gave its name to the slang cause. Now the lower-case кашченко, канатчикова дача and белые столбы are irreverent synonyms for insane asylums.

Дурка, дурдом, сумасшедший дом (nut house) and sometimes кашченко, канатчикова дача, белые столбы, and жёлтый дом are all slang for the facility itself or any place that is chaotic, crazy or noisy. They can also refer to any disorganized, insane activity. Всё было оцеплено полицией, армейские части были в полной боевой готовности — полный дурдом (Everything was cordoned off by the police; the army units were in full combat readiness. It was a madhouse).

Or you could call it bedlam, a word that comes from the name of the first English hospital for the mentally ill, called at various times St. Mary Bethlehem, Bethlem Hospital, Bethlehem Hospital and Bedlam.

Or you just call it all completely wacko.

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