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Russian Curse Words Have Lost Their Power

By Victor Erofeyev

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Russian invective is reborn! If Russian curse words were a person with arms and legs, he would be dancing for joy right now. The art of swearing has won a peculiar victory: The State Duma has officially recognized it as a threat, a foe of Russian civilization and a cancerous tumor in the healthy body of Russian culture.

The authorities have bestowed a high honor on the four most graphic of all Slavic expletives by banning them from use in works of art. This is tantamount to officials admitting that the offensive words are stronger than they are and that the expletives carry an energy transcending their own will.

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But who is it exactly that fears language? Pagans consumed by the dark magic of the words, Russian Orthodox opponents of nontraditional sexual orientations and those who glorify authoritarianism while they quietly become totalitarian leaders — only they are capable of waging this ridiculous battle for absolute control of the language.

It so obviously stupid to ban offensive words. Swear words ceased being meaningful in France once they were freely incorporated into French literature in the 18th century. Now the people of France are truly at a loss to find French equivalents for Russian expletives. Invective lasted longer in the German and English languages, but indifferent attitudes toward cursing robbed it of its force in the last third of the 20th century. That indifference has been the ultimate undoing of foul language.

Cursing has also been on the decline in the Russian language too. It has become increasingly rare to hear foul language on the streets of Moscow and other Russian cities. The words have lost their sharp, provocative appeal and lately only appear as individual expletives scrawled on the walls and fences of provincial towns.

We already witnessed the final convulsions of cursing when it emerged from the dark and forbidding forest into the light of day to become nothing more than a casual expression of displeasure or frustration. The innocuous "damn," which my atheist grandmother was ironically afraid to utter, disappeared in the 1960s but reappeared in the mid-1990s, when beautiful Muscovite ladies took it up as a fashionable way to complain about a flat tire or a broken eyeliner pencil.

Cursing has transformed from a language expressing hatred to a kinder and gentler collection of interjections and rhetorical demands. It has lost its original function, reverting into

simple vulgarisms.

But what is swearing? Is it a word or an action, a mere combination of sounds or a vehement curse?

If using expletives in their original meaning, the language of hatred can become the language of love. With rare exceptions, Russian obscenities never refer to fecal matter — unlike the swear words of most European languages.

Russian expletives can be purely erotic, and the most progressive of today's youth are very adept at this application of the medium. The authorities would have a tough time banning that form of cursing. In fact, over time, the meaning of swear words has taken on a purely "localized" character.

The truly abusive form of invective is mainly used in prisons, dysfunctional families and by those classes of society that once staged the October Revolution. In fact, those three classes often intersect. When a child grows up in a dysfunctional family in which a drunken father curses wildly while he beats his wife and causes the baby to cry in terror, swearing becomes anathema by association. If such a child goes on to become a teacher, doctor, athlete or public official, he will fiercely hate foul language because of the ugliness of his childhood.

Generally, the first generation of people to rise above their low beginnings — the bourgeois,

in the old and positive sense of the word — despises its roots and tries in every way possible to distinguish itself from the masses. The State Duma, largely consisting of such respected personages, has expressed this inherent aspiration by condemning the use of obscenities.

Russia's aristocrats, merchants and accomplished people generally hold a completely different attitude toward swearing.

Filmmaker Nikita Mikhalkov, with whom I am rarely in agreement, correctly defended the right to use obscenities. The occasional expletive clearly did not play a harmful role in his upbringing.

To the contrary, in Russian aristocratic culture from Ivan Barkov to the Silver Age, obscenities were used as a diversion and a plaything. Western as well as more "nativist" Russian writers valued the natural strength and expressiveness of Russian expletives. Russian obscenities allow for the multiplication of contradictory meanings and reveal the mobility and morphological flexibility of the Russian language. Its expletives are concise and yet expansive, concrete and also very abstract.

Fyodor Dostoevsky wrote eloquently of Russian curse words in his "Diary of a Writer," Alexander Pushkin used them in his humorous verse and they were no strangers to the poetry, prose and letters of Ivan Turgenev, Anton Chekhov, Vasily Rozanov, Vladimir Mayakovsky and Sergei Yesenin — in short, all who knew the power of the Russian language.

The ban on cursing only reinforces its use as an expression of anger and hatred, though. And in our day, when the echoes of war are no longer empty metaphors but full of terrible meaning, the aggressive language of swearing becomes the domain not of the "unwashed masses" but of commanders and even state leaders bent on conquest.

Victor Erofeyev is a Russian writer whose autobiographical novel "Good Stalin" was recently published in English. This comment originally appeared in Snob.

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