

Гойда! They Shouted. Say What?

What were they shouting on Red Square and should we worry?

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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Гойда: let's go (maim and kill)

Last Friday there was a big event on Red Square in Moscow to celebrate (sic) the new Russian regions (sic), i.e., Ukrainian land annexed (on paper) by Russia. One of the headliners was Ivan Okhlobystin, an actor-cum-Orthodox-priest-cum-political-rabblouser, who got the crowd worked up shouting what he described as старорусское междометие (an old Russian exclamation): Гойда!

Spewing spittle and hoarse with passion, he screamed: Гойда, братья и сёстры, гойда! Бойся, старый мир, лишённый истинной красоты, истинной веры, истинной мудрости, управляемый безумцами, извращенцами, сатанистами. Бойся, мы идём! Гойда! Гойда! (Goida, brothers and sisters, goida! Be afraid, Old World, devoid of true beauty, true faith, true wisdom, ruled by maniacs, perverts, Satanists. Be afraid, we are coming!

Goida! Goida!)

In reply the audience screamed Гойда! Гойда!

Okhlobystin's speech may not have sent men and women to their local military recruitment center, but it did launch a thousand memes that had everyone from Hitler to Jack Nicholson in "The Shining" screaming "Гойда! Гойда!" in Okhlobystin's voice.

But what does the word mean, and where does it come from?

As usual, these are not questions easily answered.

Most etymological and historical Russian dictionaries don't include гойда, but they put айда and гайда together. Айда, they say, is from Siberia and Eastern Russians lands; гайда is from Ukrainian lands. Both came from Tatar language(s) and were words to urge on or drive animals — the steppe version of "come on, little doggies." It means, they suggest: иди, идём, пошёл, погоняй, ступай, живей, скорей (go, let's go, get going, hurry up, shake a leg, get a move on, faster).

Okhlobystin said from the stage that гойда was just a variant of айда, призыв к немедленному действию (a call to immediate action). But is that right?

I remembered гойда vaguely from Vladimir Sorokin's "Day of the Oprichnik," which is a novel about Ivan the Terrible's reign of terror in the upcoming year of 2028 — giving us something to look forward to. I also remembered that Okhlobystin played the role of the court jester in Pavel Longin's film about Ivan the Terrible, "Tsar." So maybe Okhlobystin learned the word гойда on the set and kept it in his linguistic pocket, waiting for just the right moment to use it? I don't know.

But the thing is, гойда is not a benign little word. I didn't have any medieval Russian texts on hand — and probably could not read them if I did — but I did find works by several authors, starting with Nikolai Karamzin writing in the early 1800s and ending with Alexei Tolstoy writing in the 1940s. The action in most of them takes place during the time of Ivan the Terrible, and all have crowds shouting Гойда! Гойда! But they are clearly not calling to march "Onward!" or "Forward!" They're calling for blood.

Karamzin wrote in his "History of the Russian State": Умертвив более ста человек, тиран при обыкновенных восклицаниях дружины: гойда! гойда! с торжеством возвратился в свои палаты и снова сел за трапезу (After killing more than 100 men, the tyrant triumphantly returned to his quarters and sat back down at the table to the usual shouts of his retinue "Blood! Blood!")

In the later 1800s Alexei Tolstoy wrote in "The Silver Prince": Опричники... начали громогласно взывать: ✘ Гойда! Гойда! Да погибнут враги государевы! (The oprichniks began to loudly appeal [to the crowd]: "Kill! Kill! The sovereign's enemies must die!) Mikhail Bulgakov used the word in his 1935 play that would become the film "Ivan Vasilievich Changes Professions": [В палату врывается Опричник.] Где демоны? Гойда! Бей их! ([An oprichnik bursts into the room and says: "Where are those demons! I want their blood! Strike them down!")

And the other Alexei Tolstoy wrote in his 1940s trilogy “The Road to Calvary”: Колеса загрохотали по булыжнику около станции. Раздались крики: «Гойда, гойда!» Звон стёкол, выстрел, короткий вопль, удары по железу (The wheels rattled along the cobblestones by the station. Shouts could be heard: “Attack! Attack!” The sound of breaking glass, a shot, a short wail, metal against metal).

As you can see, in all the texts I found, “Гойда!” was not a quaint ye olde russky way of getting the crowd warmed up to go forward to victory. It was a way of getting their blood racing to go maim and kill. Okhlobystin’s Бойся, мы идём! Гойда! Гойда!” is more like “Be afraid! We are coming! Kill! Kill!”

There are, however, quaint ye olde russky expressions that are a call for action. They are not war cries. Айда means “let’s go”; “get going”; “come along.” It is used for all kinds of non-bloodthirsty activities. Ну, ребята, айда за грибами! (Come on, guys, let’s go mushroom hunting!) Айда купаться! (Let’s go swimming!) Айда к нам ☒ чайку попьём (Come to our place and we’ll have some tea). Айда по домам (Let’s all go home). Я шагаю быстро — кто хочет, айда со мной (I walk quickly, but anyone who wants can come along with me.)

Гайда seems to be more old-fashioned and less used in Russian. In most of the examples I found it is used to urge along animals, like in a famous song by Mikhail Shteinberg with the chorus: Гайда, тройка! Снег пушистый (Onward, troika! The snow is like down!).

And finally, just to complete our list of Russian Words That Are Easy to Confuse, there is the two-word ай да. Ай да is used with a noun to express admiration of someone – yourself, the person you’re speaking to, or a third person. Ай да молодец! (Well done, you!) Ай да умница! (What a brilliant kid!)

You probably know this from Alexander Pushkin’s often-quoted letter to a friend after he finished writing his tragedy “Boris Godunov.” He wrote that he read it aloud to himself and shouted, “ай да Пушкин, ай да сукин сын” (‘Brilliant, Pushkin, what a brilliant son of bitch you are.’)

The takeaways from this column are two-fold. 1) In Russian every letter and space counts. 2) Never scream “Гойда!” unless you want to start a war.

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