

The Revolutionary Power of Humour in the USSR

If somebody mentions the CIA to you, the last thing that you'll think of is their funny-bone. It may surprise you then to find that the Agency was highly preoccupied in the 1980s with writing down popular jokes doing the rounds in the then crumbling Soviet Union.

President Reagan himself was a fan of Soviet humour, allegedly sharing the following quip with then Premier Gorbachev:

'An American tells a Russian that the United States is so free that he can stand outside the White House and shout "To hell with Ronald Reagan!". The Russian replied: "That's nothing. I can stand in front of the Kremlin and shout "To hell with Ronald Reagan" too!'

By all accounts the CIA built up quite a collection, some of which have been declassified [here](#). Highlights include:

Shooting Gorbachev:

A worker standing in a liquor line says "I have had enough! Save my place, I am going to shoot Gorbachev."

Two hours later he returns to claim his place in line. His friends ask "Did you get him?"

"No, the line there was even longer than the line here!"

Shopping:

A man goes into a shop and asks "You don't have any meat?"

"No" replies the sales lady. "We don't have any fish. It's the store across the street that does not have any meat"

Drink Driving

A man is driving with his wife and small child. A militia man pulls them over and makes the man take a breathalyser test.

"See!" the militia man says, "You're drunk!"

The man protests that the breathalyser must be broken and invites the cop to test his wife. She also registers as drunk. Exasperated, the man invites the cop to test his child. When the child registers drunk as well, the cop shrugs, says

"Yes, well, perhaps it is broken," and sends them on their way.

Out of earshot the man tells his wife, "See, I told you it wouldn't hurt to give the kid 5 grams of vodka!"

The jokes all carry common themes- bureaucracy fatigue, a pessimism regarding the Soviet system, and a contempt for the overweening authoritarianism that formed the daily intrusion into citizen's lives. In the USSR, jokes weren't just jokes.

They represented a means of pushing back against the system- indeed, they were often the way that occupied countries and reluctant Soviets could subtly protect their older cultural identities and otherness from Moscow. In the middle of a great authoritarian madness, to be able to privately share a joke was vital in preserving one's mental well-being.

As the Reagan gag attests, there was a difference between telling a joke in the mostly free West and telling one behind the iron curtain. To tell a joke in the Soviet Union and its satellites could be in and of itself a revolutionary act. As Christie Davies wrote in her essay *Humour and Protest: Jokes under Communism*:

"The personal importance of the jokes can be inferred from the risks that so many individuals took in telling and circulating them when they knew that being reported to the authorities could result in possible imprisonment and deportation and even death... That people took such risks is both an indication of the importance the jokes had for them and of the strong and interlocking

networks of interpersonal trust and solidarity that they had created, which provided them with some degree of independence from an overwhelmingly powerful state."

The punishment to which Davies refers is the 1927 Article 58 of the RSFSR. By law, merely by repeating one of these jokes, a citizen could be found to be engaging in "anti-Soviet propaganda". By sharing a joke with a friend or colleague, a Soviet would have been risking everything, lending a fascinating and often extremely dry dynamic to eastern block humour.

Decades before meta-comedy became the norm in western television, Soviets at every level of society were engaging in it as a means of tipping their hat to the oppression under which they lived, whilst also recognising their need to engage with the system in order to maintain their social position and survive. As a popular soviet joke went:

"A judge walks out of his chambers laughing his head off. A colleague approaches him and asks why he is laughing.

'I just heard the funniest joke in the world!'

'Well, go ahead, tell me!' says the other judge.

'I can't - I just gave someone ten years for it!'"

Of course, the fear of arrest and the threat to livelihood had a cooling effect on the art scene in general. In 1934 the Central Committee of the Communist Party tightened its grip on artistic and comedic expression within the USSR by establishing the Union of Soviet Writers. If you wanted to be published, you had to be a member. To be a member you had to toe the line. If you were to mock the state, you better make sure it was with a pen so blunt as to be worthless-although Soviet satirisation of the West could of course be razor-sharp.

The ultimate effect of this, however, was to sharpen the pens and potency of those willing to take on the system either directly or through subterranean means.

Writers like Vladimir Voinovich, author of the masterpiece *The Life and Extraordinary Adventures of Private Ivan Chonkin*, referred to by western critics as the USSR's *Catch 22*, and *The Ivankiad*, a Homeric account of his quest through Soviet bureaucracy for a very slightly larger apartment, were frozen out of the writers' union, and thus-technically- should have been unpublishable.

When questioned as to his writing process and continued reputation during his initial cultural extradition (which preceded his being forced to leave the country entirely in 1980), Voinovich said:

"...I write a few pages and then I hide them... Then I write a few more and hide those, too. That is my general method"

This shutting down of any and all humour by which the state, politicians, or the Soviet way of life were mocked pushed the satirists and joke-writers underground. The result was the system of *Samizdat*, or "Self-publishing". This wasn't of the type we see now in the West, with Amazon's litany of straight-to-Kindle erotic fan-fiction or how-to hobby guides. Instead, this was sedition and revolutionary activity, with the joke as the bullet and the page as the gun.

As Vladimir Bukovsky described it in *To Build a Castle: My Life as a Dissenter*:

"Samizdat: I write it myself, edit it myself, censor it myself, publish it myself, distribute it myself, and spend jail time for it myself."

Writers such as Bukovsky, Bulgakov and Havel (later the first President of an independent Czech Republic) saw their works published via a network of carbon-copiers and typists, and those who risked arrest using state printing equipment. Although this limited the scale of publications, it ensured that they found their way among the intelligentsia and key influencers.

Inevitably, one of the largest sections of their readership were those seeking to cut down all such activities, as they sought to understand who was writing and distributing it, making the most loyal *Samizdat*-ists those that it satired. All part of the absurdist situation that increasingly defined late-Soviet life. An absurdity not lost on Soviet society's greatest wits and authors.

As Voinovich said in a [1987 interview with the Washington Post](#):

"Life made me a satirist. It was unavoidable. I wanted to be a realist, writing about what I saw. Almost like journalism. But when I published my work, which I thought was really true-to-life, they said, 'You're writing satire.' I wasn't, it was just life that was so absurd."

As the internal contradictions and politics of the Communist Party began to become more and more apparent, and the facade of omniscient control began to fade, the more ridiculous this crackdown on humour appeared. Brezhnev's tenure saw little by way of reform, meaning the state's failings gradually became more apparent- while commentary on these conditions remained dangerous.

Meanwhile, due to the nature of the party machine and the dangers present to political newcomers, those ascending the leadership had been getting older and older- to the point that the USSR had three leaders die of old age in post in 4 years. Jokes began to circulate, such as:

"Q: What is the main difference between succession under the tsarist regime and under socialism?"

"A: Under the tsarist regime, power was transferred from father to son, and under socialism - from grandfather to grandfather."

Eventually something had to give, and by the mid-1980s the Soviet Union began to oversee a thaw in control over humour and creative output. *Perestroika* and *Glasnost* saw an unprecedented loosening of state control over public expression. The idea was to save the USSR from internal collapse and to release much of the increasing tension as the system wobbled.

This increasing openness, allowing commentary on a system which had been looking increasingly preposterous, saw the rise of a new kind of Russian satire, sometimes called *Stiob*. *Stiob's* main technique was to take the normal language of Soviet government and society and applying it to the extreme to show the farce or contradictions in the system- a kind of Chris Morris meets Monty Python approach to satire.

The result of perestroika and glasnost, the increasing ridiculousness of the system being exposed by *Anekdoty* and *Stiob*, with people finally being free to expose it, led to the emergence of what [Commentary Magazine](#) in 1989 described as: *"Bitter disillusion, anger, radical nihilism, and dense fire aimed at the twin pillars of the ancien régime—Orthodoxy and absolutism"* A bonfire of all Soviet society, by humour and criticism. With it went faith in the system. As one quip from the time put it:

"There are two possible ways perestroika can succeed, one realistic and the other pure fantasy. The realistic possibility is that extraterrestrials will land in a spaceship and help us. The fantasy is that we'll help ourselves."

Initially a means of preserving a sense of self and cultural identity in the face of an all-powerful and all-seeing state, Soviet jokes and humour eventually became a much more devastating force against the Communist Party than Western propaganda. The evolution of Soviet jokes, from pokes against the regime to full-blown satire, charts the fracturing of the Soviet system as it became more and more contradictory.

Here are a few more of our favourites, including a Radio Yerevan joke (a popular call-and-response joke style in the USSR):

What's the definition of a Russian string quartet? A Soviet orchestra back from a US tour.

Radio Yerevan was asked: "When will life be better in the USSR?"

Radio Yerevan answered: "In the USSR, life already has been better."

Radio Yerevan was asked: "Is it good to sleep with an open window?"

Radio Yerevan answered: "Yes, but with a woman it is better."

What are your favourites?