

Soviet Humor--Laughter through Tears

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It has been said that there were only three sources of uncensored information and thought in the Soviet Union. One was broadcasts aimed at the USSR by the U.S. government's Radio Liberty, a Russian-language service which operated from 1949 until the early-'90s. Another was surreptitiously circulated literature, known as *samizdat* (self-published). These typescripts, passed from reader to reader and frequently retyped in order to put more copies into circulation, included such renowned but un-publishable works as Boris Pasternak's 'Dr. Zhivago' and Alexander Solzhenitsyn's 'Gulag Archipelago'.

The third source of uncensored information consisted of numerous whispered jokes, or anecdotes (анекдоты), that circulated broadly and, like *samizdat* manuscripts, often made their way to the West. On the whole, these anecdotes could be categorized as "laughter through tears", a phrase variously attributed to Pushkin or Gogol.

Like many students of Russian history and culture, I collected anecdotes. Usually these were scribbled down and later typed onto note cards, now quite yellowed, which I still keep, held together by a nearly rotten rubber band. I would love to relate here how I came by each of the twelve favorites below, but in the interest of not keeping you from them any longer, will spare you the details of their provenance which mean much to me but would doubtless bore the reader.

The dozen anecdotes are arranged in roughly chronological order, starting with two from the 1930s when both collectivization of agriculture (subject of the first) and the rapid industrialization of the five-year plans (subject of the second) were newly implemented policies. Next comes one that imagines Khrushchev during the reading of his landmark 1956 'secret speech', followed by one that satirizes the lengths to which Lenin worship could reach. Then we come to certain activities of the street police and KGB, and some wry commentary on the nature of socialism and communism and the dispiritingly long wait for consumer goods or services. The 'Soviet string trio' joke may call to mind the subject matter of the well-known film 'Moscow on the Hudson'. Finally are two jokes about Leonid Brezhnev, communist party head from 1964 until his death in 1982, who presided over a long era of stagnation and disillusionment. Here we go, then...

In 1933, an epidemic of body lice strikes the entire membership of the Soviet politburo. Doctors try numerous remedies, but none work. Scientists, when consulted, also can offer no cure. Finally, someone suggests: collectivize the lice; half will die, the other half will run away!

At the end of the second Five-Year Plan, when few industrial firms had managed to exceed their projected total production, Gosplan statisticians discover one factory that had over-fulfilled its goals by 900%. Upon investigation, it is discovered to be the facility where "Out of Order" signs are made.

As he is reading his lengthy "Secret Speech" on the crimes of Stalin to the 20th Congress of the Soviet Communist Party in 1956, Nikita Khrushchev is given a note which was passed to the front of the audience. He pauses, opens the note, and reads it to himself: "Dear Nikita Sergeevich, While all of this was going on, where were you?" Looking up at his audience, Khrushchev says "I have just been give note. Will writer of note please stand." Nothing happens, so he repeats, "Will writer of note please stand." Again, nothing. Khrushchev then continues... "To writer of note let me say: where you are now, I was then."

To celebrate the 400th anniversary of Shakespeare's birth (1616), the Soviet ministry of culture commissions a contest for best portrayal of Shakespeare in sculpture. After judging entries, it is announced that third place winner is a statue of Lenin reading Shakespeare. second place is awarded to a statue of Shakespeare reading Lenin, and first place goes to a statue of Lenin.

Soviet *druzhiny* (militia or street police) always travel in threes: one can read, one can write, and the third is along to keep an eye on two dangerous intellectuals.

During the years of close connections between Nasser's Egypt and the Soviet Union, a royal tomb containing a mummy is discovered. Egyptologists cannot decide which pharaoh was buried in the tomb. The KGB station chief in Cairo is brought into the case. Two days later, the mummy confesses to be Rameses VI.

The difference between capitalism and socialism: under capitalism one finds the exploitation of man by his fellow men, while under socialism it is the other way around.

Burning question: What is the transitional stage between socialism and communism?
Answer: Alcoholism.

Boris, after long being on a waiting list to purchase a new Soviet-made Lada auto, is told he can pick up his car ten years later to the day. "That's great," he answers and, checking a small pocket diary asks "should I come in the morning or afternoon?" "Why does this matter?" he is asked. "Well, I have a plumber coming that morning."

What is a Soviet string trio? A quartet that has just returned from a trip abroad.

Brezhnev, newly arrived in Hell, is being given a personal tour of alternative punishments by the devil. He is shown, for instance, a room in which Lenin is being ripped apart by the tsar's wolfhounds. Down the hallway in another room Stalin is being flogged by two very large Ukrainians, while in an adjoining room Khrushchev is being slowly roasted on a spit turned by smiling Hungarians.

As he and the devil walk further, Brezhnev glances into a room where he sees a couple joined in embrace. Looking closer, he sees that it is Marilyn Monroe, being clumsily but very enthusiastically screwed by Walter Ulbricht, late leader of East Germany.

Catching up with the devil, Brezhnev says, "Devil, all this is very interesting, but just back a little way I noticed accommodations that might be to my liking. For instance, there was Comrade Ulbricht's room... "

"You don't understand," interrupts the devil, "that's not Hell for Ulbricht, that's Hell for Marilyn Monroe."

A new stamp with image of Leonid Brezhnev was issued, but soon there were numerous complaints that it would not stick to envelopes. An investigation followed, revealing that people were spitting on the wrong side of the stamp.

Once Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* (openness, гласность) was implemented in the late 1980s, the jamming of Radio Liberty ceased, works of literature were published with little or no censorship, and the need for jokes critical of the Soviet order to remain underground ceased. I have no anecdotes about Gorbachev, but do offer a tangible example of "laughter through tears" from the early 1990s, after the Soviet Union had collapsed.

I purchased this button bearing the phrase "everything will be okay" at a Sunday flea market near Moscow's Luzhniki Stadium in February 1992. The ruble was in free fall, on its way to more than 5000 to 1 versus the U.S. dollar, unemployment was rampant, stores were empty. The future of the nation seemed dismal, and hardly headed toward 'okay'.



Which brings us to Mr. Putin. I have nothing about him. Plenty of one-liners from American late-night TV, but no real, Russian-origin anecdotes. Censorship is back, so whispered underground humor should again be popping up like mushrooms in the forests around Moscow. If you can offer us a Putin joke of Russian origin, Dr. Evans and I will gladly place it here and post extra credit points for you in the grade book.