

JOKES AS THE TRUTH ABOUT SOVIET SOCIALISM

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Abstract: The political jokes told in Estonia and other parts of the Soviet Empire were very important to those who told them. They were tiny areas of freedom, a brief escape from socialist hegemony. Those scholars such as Alexander Shtromas who took the jokes seriously were alone in predicting the rapid collapse and demise of the Soviet Union. Shtromas' thesis was rooted in a hard-headed analysis of power and politics but he knew that the jokes were a good indication of the failure of socialism and of the alienation from the entire system of both the broad masses and the intellectuals. Most Western 'Soviologists', some of them malign sympathisers with the socialist ethos, were foolish enough to think that the Soviet socialist order was a legitimate and enduring type of society. A knowledge of the jokes of socialism was a better guide to Soviet reality than the official Soviet versions and data or the theories of those Western scholars, particularly the revisionists, who tried to be 'fair' to the Soviet Union; fairness to evil is the father of lies. Jokes are not serious statements but when viewed within a comparative framework they can reveal a great deal about what a particular society is like. Jokes have no consequences whatsoever but they are a good indicator of where the tensions in a society lie. The political jokes of the Soviet Union and its empire revealed that social order to be riddled with contradictions and ripe for collapse as soon as those controlling the means of force began to falter. Force alone had kept the system in being.

Key words: Bulgaria, Estonia, hegemony, jokes, lies, Lithuania, Shtromas, socialism, Soviet Union

The political jokes from the time of Soviet tyranny, a tyranny that afflicted not only Estonia but her neighbours in Russia and Eastern Europe, are a vital and revealing form of folkloric (Banc & Dundes 1986, 1990) and indeed historical evidence (Adams 2005). They amply justify the effort and the scholarship devoted to them by Arvo Krikmann (2004, 2006) and those whom he trained, inspired and encouraged (Laineste 2008). Theirs is a major achievement, one to be appreciated not only by folklorists and by humour scholars in the

humanities and social sciences but by anyone who seeks fully to understand socialism, that truly dreadful period in European history, 1917–1991.

Why are these jokes so important? Why was and is it even more important to study the jokes about socialism than to study the jokes told in open, free, democratic societies such as Britain, the United States, Finland, Denmark, or indeed Estonia today. Jokes are always important as folklore, as entertainment and as one of the few ways in a mass-media dominated society in which ordinary people can display verbal creativity and the skills of the actor and the story-teller. But the jokes of tyranny are even more important, as the Estonian philologist Jüri Viikberg (2003: 3; see also Krikmann 2004: 38; Krikmann 2006: 1) recognised when he wrote down and saved 4,000 “bilious and offensive” Soviet jokes between 1960 and 1986, which were then secretly stored in the Estonian Folklore Archives, waiting for the rebirth of a free and independent Estonia.

The jokes’ importance lies not in their effects or long-term consequences, for jokes produce neither of these (Davies 2002, 2007). They are important, rather, because of the insights they give us into the particular society in which they are invented and circulated. Jokes are thermometers, not thermostats.

However, in Eastern Europe and in the former Soviet Union they were crucial for another reason, namely that they were important to those who told them. In liberal democratic capitalist countries joke telling was, and still is, a very important source of entertainment and of time off from the pressures of a serious world. However, for those living under socialist tyranny jokes were special. They were a means of communication, a way of expressing one’s alienation from and in some cases disgust with the entire political, economic and social order; they were a welcome reminder that socialism was a mere social construct and not the inevitable order of things. They were a way of testing and achieving interpersonal trust. Jokes were not tiny revolutions (Davies 2007) but they were tiny realms of freedom, the soul of soulless conditions. It may well be that young people who have grown up in the new free Estonia cannot feel and understand these now distant qualities of the old time joke-telling. Liisi Laineste (2009: 68) has commented in relation to contemporary Estonian Internet humour:

Unmodified old Soviet jokes are, however, also still being told (or rather sent to joke sites), even if the joke-tellers have little or no knowledge and experience of the circumstances that gave rise to those jokes. They are disappearing, but the old jokes still circulate as an important part of our social memory. Soviet political jokes that still circulate lack acute emotion – fear, anger, distress. In contemporary new jokes, the popular

themes come and go, arousing discussion in both serious and jocular conversation (themes like elections, incompetent decisions, corruption, etc.), but one single foolproof joke incentive like the one offered in Soviet times is missing. That is why the old Soviet political jokes can even acquire the status of “real” political humour for those who consider contemporary jokes to be too universal, shallow and lame.

During the socialist period this same failure to fully comprehend characterised those in democratic countries who read the many collections of socialist political jokes translated into other languages such as English, French or German (Beckmann 1969, 1980; Dolgopolova 1983; Draitser 1978; Drozdzyński 1977; Isnard 1977; Kolasky 1972; Meyer & Meyer 1979; Schiff 1972, 1975). Those in the free world laughed heartily, for they were very good jokes, but the jokes were not directly relevant to their own everyday lives. Likewise, for Westerners, there was no real sense of transgression or of breaking official rules when they told the jokes. It was not only that the rules being broken were those of another society but also that there was no parallel set of all-embracing rules in their own societies where it was possible to freely criticise politicians and the political/social system and the ideological beliefs that went with it. There are some very unpleasant islands of authoritarianism in democratic societies within which speech is not free and joking about the forbidden is penalised (Bernstein 2003) but these are mere islets of non-freedom in a political sea that is free.

In the Soviet Empire by contrast, jokes could carry a far heavier weight of meaning, as with the statement of an Uzbek, cited by Arvo Krikmann (2004: 241), who declared that an anecdote could express “the whole tragedy and drama of an event”. Likewise, those in the West interviewing refugees from the Soviet world noted that they would often make use of a humorous anecdote in general circulation to explain to the interviewer the nature and essence of the society they had left (Thurston 1991: 343). Jokes were communication. By the early 1980s, the time when it was fully recognised that the system had become entirely decadent, the time now known as late socialism, it was common for entire sizeable groups to spend hours in semi-public sessions of cynical joke-telling about the regime (Yurchak 1997: 179). In a politically free society when such sessions of joke-telling take place, they will include only a very few political jokes and these few have sometimes come from the mass media. By contrast there were places in Eastern Europe in the 1980s where individuals, when meeting, would immediately greet one another with the question “Have you heard the latest anecdote?”

In Soviet jokes told before the Second World War there are many references to famine, the Gulag and purges, events denied by many Western intel-

lectuals, such as the racist and homophobic Beatrice Webb and her tadpole-husband Sid (Conquest 2008: 126; McElroy 2000) or Walter Duranty (Taylor 1990). May they be forgotten but let the memory of those who died and suffered in that great criminal experiment be kept alive for ever.

Others such as Harold Laski claimed that the trials resulting in millions of deportations to the camps or execution were just and the accused were guilty; Laski even praised Vyshinsky (Conquest 2008: 125). Those who held such views were fools who should have studied the jokes rather than believing official data; many were liars and scoundrels who would have found these politically incorrect jokes highly offensive.

– Who built the White Sea-Baltic Canal?

– On the right bank those who told anecdotes. On the left bank those who listened.

[The canal was built in 1931–33 by 100,000 political prisoners working as slaves under appalling conditions with just pickaxes and wheelbarrows. Tens of thousands died yet it was too shallow to be of much use]

– What is the difference between India and Russia?

– In India one man starves for the people, and in Russia the people starve for one man.

[Gandhi went on a hunger strike in 1932 to promote Indian independence]

Two Russians discussed who was greater, was it Stalin or President Hoover.

“Hoover taught the Americans not to drink,” says one.

“Yes,” replies the other, “but Stalin taught the Russians not to eat.”

[Herbert Hoover, who had organised food aid to Russia during the Povolzhye famine of 1921–23 when five million died, upheld Prohibition (of alcohol) in America when President 1928–32. In Stalin’s famine of 1931–33 six to eight million people died]

The jokes of the Soviet time were a better guide to the essential nature and inevitable future of socialist society than the analyses of most Western scholars and specialists. When the entire Soviet edifice came crashing down in 1988–91, when that seemingly solid entity melted into air, most of the specialists were caught completely by surprise and made to look stupid. One of the few who foresaw that the Soviet Empire would collapse was the Lithuanian political scientist, Dr Alexander Shtromas (Burks, 1989; Gvosdev 2008: 6; Shtromas

1981) who had been Professor of Law at Moscow University before being forced to leave for England, where he became a lecturer in Peace Studies at a British university. He and I would often meet to exchange Soviet jokes and to discuss the future of the Soviet Union and its imperial satrapies and dependencies and he was able to convince me that the jokes were a harbinger of collapse. In his book *Political Change and Social Development, the Case of the Soviet Union* Shtromas (1981), who curiously enough had been a student contemporary of Gorbachev, not only predicted the collapse but even showed how the collapse would come about. He went on to plan a conference called “The Fall of the Soviet Empire” but before it was held in Geneva in 1985 he had to change the title because, though it proved to be deadily accurate, it was seen as too extreme by the sponsors of the conference and by many who would otherwise have liked to give papers. Even then many ‘Sovietologists’ boycotted his conference and went on absurdly proclaiming the legitimacy, stability and durability of the socialist order. Shtromas invited me to Geneva to give the paper “Humour for the Future and a Future for Humour” (Davies 1989 in Shtromas & Kaplan vol. 3, pp 299–319, see also Davies 1998) which turned out to be somewhat prescient. It was jokes like the following that helped to convince me that Shtromas was right:

A citizen of Moscow went into a restaurant and ordered: “Borsht, veal cutlets, rhubarb pie, a cup of coffee....oh and a copy of Pravda please.”

“Certainly,” said the waiter, “we have all that you have ordered except *Pravda*. That newspaper ceased publication when the old Communist regime collapsed.”

The waiter duly brought the borsht; the customer ate it with relish and said: “And now bring me the veal cutlets and don’t forget my rhubarb pie, coffee and my copy of Pravda.”

The waiter said patiently: “I’m sorry but I can’t bring you a copy of Pravda. It doesn’t exist anymore. It died with the Communists.”

The cutlets in turn were brought and eaten. “Now,” said the customer, “please bring me my rhubarb pie and then my coffee and the copy of Pravda.”

“The rhubarb pie is no problem,” said the waiter, “and there’s plenty of coffee but there is no longer any Pravda – like the old Communist government, it’s finished, done away with, no more.”

The customer consumed his pie and called the waiter over to his table. “That was excellent,” he said, “and now I’m ready for my coffee and the copy of Pravda.”

The waiter exploded: “How many times do I have to tell you, there is no Pravda. There is no Communist government. We’ve got rid of all that!”

“Yes, I know,” said the customer, “I just wanted to hear you say it again.” [Told by Alexander Shtromas in 1981, see Davies 1989, 1998]

Russian Social Survey question: “Where were you born?”

Soviet citizen: “St Petersburg.”

“Where did you go to school?”

Citizen: “Petrograd.”

“Where do you live?”

Citizen: “Leningrad.”

“Where would you like to live?”

Citizen: “St. Petersburg.”

[Told by Alexander Shtromas in 1981, see also Adams 2005: 30 joke 77]

Pravda is still with us, though now (at least in the English online version) full of stories about sexy women, UFOs and the relative market share of competing tobacco companies, including a cheap brand of cigarettes called CCCP (USSR). Whether the purpose of the brand name is to remind us that tobacco kills is not clear. The socialist system, though, is gone and so is Leningrad, whose citizens freely chose to expunge the name of the unspeakably evil Lenin from their city and to return to the old Tsarist title, St. Petersburg named for Tsar Peter the Great. Such a transformation was at least thinkable to the joke-tellers but it was utterly beyond the imagination of the so-called Sovietologists. I am not saying that the joke-tellers thought that such a change of name and regime was likely, merely that the jokes revealed a level of alienation in the population that few observers other than the insightful Alexander Shtromas believed was the case.

Let me add a joke told by an interpreter in Bratislava, Slovakia in 1985:

- What is the difference between Gorbachev and Dubček?
- There isn’t any, but Gorbachev doesn’t know it yet.

And a later joke from Poland incorporating a Western sex joke:

- What do a blonde and Gorbachev have in common?
- Both were fucked by ten men when on holiday.
- What is the difference between them?
- Gorbachev knows who the men were.

[E-mail to author from a linguistics scholar in Kraków, Poland 2008]

In the then Czechoslovakia they knew only too well the fate of would-be reformers. The joke-tellers were right to fear the aftermath of a coup against Gorbachev but by this time, as Shtromas (1981) had predicted, there was a division at the top in Russia, a second pivot, and the old guard had lost its nerve. A nineteen million member party imploded without a fight (Pipes 2008, Malia 2008: 124).

No-one is going to argue that jokes caused the collapse of the Soviet Union. Jokes are a very weak force in a world of much stronger forces. The collapse was caused by a combination of economic failure, the contradictions between a rigid antiquated system of government and the social and intellectual modernisation of society, pressure from outside by a new and more aggressive western leadership that was willing fully to compete with the Soviet Union militarily and to undermine the peripheral parts of the Soviet Empire in Africa and Asia and, of course the growth of local nationalisms that could no longer be suppressed. The main causes are listed in an excellent set of articles by many authors edited by Nikolas K. Gvosdev (2008). What the jokes had revealed to Shtromas and myself was that few people living within the system believed in its legitimacy. In his account of the social significance of the *anekdot*, Alexei Yurchak (1997) speaks of the cynical realism of the joke tellers of Brezhnev's time. They were not dissidents, for they felt that their rulers could deploy so much brute force that change was impossible, but they joked about it and sneered at the few 'aktivists' who believed in the ideology (Yurchak 1997: 171). A system based on force alone may be in equilibrium but it will be in unstable equilibrium. So long as it is not disturbed, such a system will remain where it is, as it did under Brezhnev but once disturbed it will rapidly collapse. Gorbachev provided just such a disturbance (Rush 2008: 28; Kontorovich 2008: 67), ironically enough because he believed in the system and wanted others to share his enthusiasm; he tried to reform the unreformable.

Perhaps the most revealing jokes of the Brezhnev era were those told about Lenin. Some were old jokes recycled and others were new ones, stimulated by the lavish, vulgar and futile jubilee celebrations of the centenary of Lenin's birth in 1970.

An old priest died and went to heaven. He was asked if he had one last wish before entering. He replied that he would like to have a conducted tour of hell. They began in one of the deepest pits reserved for those whose lives had been utterly evil. There he saw a lake of boiling shit in which stood Hitler and Stalin. Stalin was up to his waist in it and Hitler up to his nose.

“That’s outrageous,” said the priest. “Why should Hitler be punished more than Stalin? I suffered under both and Stalin was just as evil as Hitler.”

“You don’t understand,” said his guide, “Stalin is standing on Lenin’s shoulders.” [For variants see Krikmann 2004: 85]

Lenin’s widow, Krupskaya, visited a school to tell the children what a wonderful man Lenin had been and in particular how kind he had been to children.

“One day,” she said, “Lenin was standing outside his dacha, peeling an apple with his knife. A hungry little boy came and watched him and asked him what he was doing.”

“Can’t you see, little boy,” Lenin said, “I am peeling an apple.”

The children in the school were puzzled. “How does that show how kind Lenin was?” one of them asked.

“Don’t you see,” said Krupskaya in a fury, “Lenin could have cut the hungry little boy’s throat but he didn’t.” [Told by Shtromas in 1981. For a different version see Adams 2005: 127–8 joke 587 and also 586]

In the background to these jokes is the cult of Lenin which the Soviets had built into a secular religion, complete with myths, traditions, icons and pilgrimages to his ‘imperishable, un-decaying’ corpse, which became a kind of medieval relic (Tumarkin 1984). Some of the party faithful even claimed to have had mystical experiences in which the dead Lenin spoke to them. The cult had begun after Lenin’s death and great stress was placed on his love of children, even though he had been uncomfortable with them and greatly annoyed when one of them teased him about his baldness (Tumarkin 1984: 128–130, 227–229). In schools and Komsomol meetings it was this utterly fictitious aspect of Lenin’s character that was stressed and not surprisingly led to a great deal of mockery: ‘Gentle Lenin, meek and mild’. The joke also hints at the true but unmentionable fact that under Lenin many children had died of starvation as a result of his decrees and policies and many others had been murdered in those brutal times. The cult was given a new boost after Stalin’s death and an attempt was made under Khrushchev to create a distance between the image of the heroic founder of Soviet communism and Stalin who was now made to carry the entire blame for the murderous history of the Soviet Union. In 1961 Dora Lazarkina, acting as a kind of medium, told the delegates of the Twenty-Second Party Congress of the CPSU of her mystical encounter with the dead Lenin.

– Yesterday I took counsel with Ilich and he stood before me as though alive and said: “It is unpleasant for me to be beside Stalin who brought such misfortune to the party.” (Stormy prolonged applause.) (Tumarkin 1984: 259)

Stalin was now ousted from the Mausoleum he had shared with Lenin. For a joke to place Lenin under Stalin’s feet and completely submerged in shit was an appalling heresy and yet it may also be a play upon an earlier and curiously truthful slogan that had been used to elevate Stalin in the first place; Stalinism had after all flowed directly from Leninism, from Lenin’s ruthless example (Tolstoy 1981: 25, 60) and his authoritarian ideas of doctrine and discipline (Lane 1978: 76), embodied in the tyranny of the oddly named ‘democratic centralism’. To place both of them in the same moral category, and in the same lake as Hitler, was to invert a central Soviet myth, that of the antithesis of socialism and fascism and of the heroic struggle of the Soviet leadership against the Nazis. Estonians know better, which is why one of their first demands in the struggle to regain their independence was for the revealing and publication of the details of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, an alliance that had led to the subjugation of Estonia and the murder, torture and exile of so many Estonians (Laar 2005a, 2005b). The resources provided to Nazi Germany by the Soviet Union under that pact in 1939–40 were comparable to what Britain obtained from the United States under lend-lease at that time (Tolstoy 1981:108–110). As one whose parents were bombed in London in 1940 by Nazi aircraft fuelled by the Soviet petrol provided under the terms of the pact, I find the joke about Lenin, Stalin and Hitler sharing a lake in hell extremely compelling. The three murderous monsters deserve to share an eternity of excrement together. The joke is a profoundly moral tale. It gains even more force from the knowledge we now have of other Soviet-Nazi collaboration (McInnes 2008: 208):

Hitler asked Stalin to help him destroy London. Stalin offered him a thousand apartment managers. (Adams 2005: 44)

Even more to the point is that jokes like these about Lenin were so popular in Russia at the time of the pervasive celebrations of Lenin’s jubilee in 1970 (Tumarkin 1984: 263–4).

Equally common throughout the Soviet Empire were jokes about the poor standard of living and about the emptiness of the slogans concerning the quality of working and domestic life.

A Nigerian, a Frenchman and a Russian were arguing about whose wife had the best arse. The Nigerian proudly declared: “My wife has the biggest arse anyone has ever seen.”

“Size isn’t everything,” said the Frenchman, “my wife has the most shapely arse of any woman.”

“Listen,” said the Russian, “when I leave for work I give my wife’s arse a good slap and when I come home again it is still vibrating...but that is only because we have the shortest working day in the world.” [Told by a Russian Professor of Linguistics from Moscow in the United States in the 1980s, see also Adams 2005: 30 joke 77]

A Russian, a Frenchman and a Slovak discuss how they live.

Slovak: “I live 1 + 2.”

Frenchman: “What do you mean?”

Slovak: “1 kitchen + 2 rooms.”

Frenchman: “Then I live 1+ 5.”

Russian: “Ah, but I live 8 + 2.”

“What do you mean?” asked the others.

The Russian replied: “8 metres from the road and two metres into the ground.” [Told by the wife of a television producer who had just returned from Siberia; in Bratislava, Slovakia, 1985. The Slovak couple had been kept awake at night by Russians who wanted their clothes, pushing money under the door and making a racket]

The Soviet dictators Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev are travelling in a train. Suddenly, the train grinds to a halt.

Stalin decides to solve the problem. He orders that the engine driver be shot for sabotage and he sends the second driver to a camp in Siberia. The train doesn’t move.

Khrushchev is the next to try. He brings the co-driver back from the prison camp and tells him to drive the train. He cannot and the train still doesn’t move.

Finally, it is Brezhnev’s turn. He ordered that all the blinds be drawn across the windows and declares: “Now the train is moving.” [Told in Gabrovo, Bulgaria 1982]

This is a Brezhnev era joke but it has a sequel.

The train was still stationary. Finally Gorbachev suggested: “Why don’t we all get out and push.” (For other versions of the train jokes see Adams 2005: 144–145 joke 685; Krikmann 2004: 65–71)

- What is economic reform?
- An injection into an artificial limb.

These jokes show that the ordinary people had a good intuitive understanding of what was wrong. The Soviet economy had, as the inexorable laws of economics had predicted (Polanyi 1951: 126, 152–156), reached the final doomed stage in the evolution of a socialist society. The rate of return on investment was falling and of course a central characteristic of a socialist society is the fetish of investment, particularly in heavy industry, conspicuous investment in dubious giant projects just for show. To allow production for the market would have been to return to capitalism as had happened during the time of the NEP (*Novaya ekonomicheskaya politika*, New Economic Policy), whereas investing in heavy industry and armaments allowed the state to remain all-powerful, albeit hopelessly inefficient. The workers were bought off with higher money wages but there were no consumer goods on which to spend the money. Those with connections spent it on the black market or as bribes and the toilers spent it on vodka. By Brezhnev's time, the consumption of vodka was six times what it had been in 1926. The tax on it provided a large part of the state's income, though much *samogon* (rot-gut vodka) would have been produced in illicit stills using cheap Cuban sugar that been imported in exchange for Soviet armaments. Hence the jokes connecting the growing alcohol problem (see Zlobin 1996: 227) with the nature of the socialist system.

The intermediate stage between socialism and communism is alcoholism.

A drunk fell into a sewer and could not get out. He clutched the bars and tearfully cried out: "But for what, comrades, for what?"

- What is Russian business?
- Stealing a box of vodka and selling it so as to have money to buy a drink.

A new assistant was being taken on at a sobering up station in Russia.

"What do you do with the drunks," he asked?

"If they smell of vodka we send them back to their factory. If they smell of *samogon*, we send them back to their village."

"But what do I do if I get someone who smells of brandy?"

"In that case he's a senior party official, so you clean the vomit off his suit and send him home."

The masses told jokes about what they knew and could see before their eyes. The so-called experts in the West at that time refused to listen. They preferred to rely on official statistics and other government provided data and assumed or pretended to believe that these lies contained the truth (Conquest 2008: 130). Well into the 1980s many of the Western ‘experts’ were claiming that the system was stable and progressing and that there was no chance of it collapsing. The evidence from the jokes or from dissidents, defectors or émigrés (see Reddaway 2008: 80) was dismissed as ‘anecdotal’ (Conquest 2008: 130). Yet in the house of lies the underground anecdote is the corridor of truth. Humorous folklore revealed more than the official documents; that is why it is so important.

Why were the Western genuflectors to the Soviet Union so obtuse, so unwilling to see what was happening and in consequence, so utterly and shamefully discredited by the scale and rapidity of the collapse? Why could they not see that a system based on force without loyalty could not endure? Why could they not see that when the people ceased to be afraid, when they were willing to take to the streets to protest, when the army recruited from the people became reluctant to shoot, there was nothing left to prop up the entire rotten edifice?

They could not do so because they were a mixture of what Lenin is said to have called ‘useful idiots’, flinching cowards who could not face the cold war and sneering traitors who for ideological reasons wanted to praise the Soviet Union as a way of hating their own countries and denigrating the free world. Some were mere careerists who saw that deferring to the idiots and scoundrels who had gained an almost hegemonic control of the field would bring them jobs and promotions, particularly in the universities (Pipes 2008: 91), positions which they often did not deserve on the basis of ability (Pipes 2008: 93). Even those who were sceptical of the worth of Soviet power cautiously trimmed what they had to say and deleted any hint of serious criticism lest they not be granted further visas to visit the socialist countries they were studying (Reddaway 2008: 79). Hence they claimed quite absurdly that the Soviet Union was becoming a truly plural society (see Malia 2008:114, Odom 2008: 139–50) rather than a totalitarian one, and that the pressures of modernisation would automatically bring about a smooth automatic ‘convergence’ between socialist and capitalist societies, such that politics, political power and political decisions were unimportant. They saw not what was there but what they wanted to believe. ‘Revisionist’ historians re-wrote the history of the Soviet Union to make its birth a product of popular enthusiasm, rather than the sordid seizure of power by the Bolshevik faction that had really taken place (Pipes 2008: 91–104). The famines, including the genocidal *Holodomor* in the

Ukraine, and the deportation of the kulaks were either denied or downgraded or seen as an unfortunate necessity to bring about industrialisation. The purges and the trials of wreckers and saboteurs were seen as justifiable and some even believed that there had been a real plot by General Tukachevsky to bring down the regime (Conquest 2008:130). The purge of the army that was to lead to the disaster in the war against Finland and to the rout of the Soviet forces in 1941 was endorsed by the revisionists. Now that the Soviet archives have been opened (Andrew & Mitrokhin 2000 & 2005; Davies, S. 1997; Fitzpatrick 1999), we know that they were liars and fantasists, but even today they will not retract, much less apologise for the harm they did, not only to scholarship but to the oppressed peoples whose cause they had scorned. Their works were so popular with the Soviet leadership that it had them translated into Russian, published and distributed (Pipes 2008: 98). The Western 'revisionists' had become part of the very oppression that they were excusing.

However, let me speak not of villains but rather of one mere fool who enjoyed great, if undeserved, respect, indeed fame, in his own country, namely John Kenneth Galbraith, a slick journalist masquerading as an economist. Galbraith failed to see the short-comings of socialist planning and of state-run enterprises because he believed the market to be 'a snare and a delusion' and a place that could be manipulated indefinitely by giant private corporations (he did not live to see the collapse of General Motors, one of his favourite examples of an unsinkable Titanic). He thought that if a few small, local businesses were permitted in Poland all would be well with the Polish economy and that its state-run enterprises were doing just fine. Galbraith could not or chose not to understand the full importance of the price mechanism in running any kind of modern economy. He was so keen to deny the validity of the market-place that he became blind to the disasters facing a socialist economy. It is hardly surprising to learn that in 1984 he visited the Soviet Union and spoke of the great progress being made and of "how well off people look in the streets" (cited in Conquest 2008: 130). Galbraith ascribed this to the Soviet Union making "full use of its manpower"; this at a time when in the Soviet Union there was gross over-manning, no proper market for or even allocation of skilled labour and a collapse of labour discipline with high levels of absenteeism and alcoholic excess. He would have done better to listen to the jokes:

We pretend to work and they pretend to pay us.

"What is the difference between a zloty (Polish currency) in France and one in Poland?"

"There is none. In neither country will it buy anything." (See also Larsen 1980: 90)

Under capitalism you get rigid discipline in production and chaos in consumption. Under socialist economic planning you get rigid discipline in consumption and chaos in production (Benton & Loomes 1976: 98).

“Why are Polish meat shops four miles apart?”
“So the queues don’t get tangled up.”

There was a long queue outside a meat shop in Poland. After an hour the manager came out and said: “The delivery of meat will be less than we thought. The Jews should go home.”

An hour later he came out again: “There is even less meat than we expected. Those of you who are not party members will not get any.” Most people left.

After a third hour the manager addressed the party members: “I know you are all loyal party activists so I can tell you the truth. There isn’t any meat.”

As two of the activists trudged away, one said to the other: “Just as I thought another bloody Jewish conspiracy.” [Told by a Polish colleague in the 1980s]

A new food store has opened – everything is sparkling clean and there is an attractive shop assistant in a neat white coat.

A customer comes in and says: “Wrap me up half a kilo of meat please.”

The shop assistant takes out a sheet of paper and says: “Certainly, give me your meat.”

- What is seven kilometres long and eats potatoes?
- A Polish meat queue.

Jaruselski is being driven through Warsaw in a limousine, when he sees a long queue of people outside a food store.

He tells his chauffeur to stop and asks them how long they have been there.

“Six hours,” they reply.

“This is dreadful,” says Jaruselski. “I will have to do something.”

An hour later a huge lorry arrives outside the shop and delivers two hundred chairs.

And even more cynically from an earlier time:

“I hear that all the Germans in Nazi Germany are going to have a ‘people’s car’ each.”

“That’s nothing. We all have two vehicles, the NKVD car and the ambulance.” (See Davies, S. 1997: 97) [The Germans did not get their promised car, the Volkswagen, until after the fall of the Nazis]

Many Western delegates to such corruptly appeasing institutions as the World Council of Churches went out of their way to avoid criticising the excesses of the Soviet Union and others among them were enfeebled by their fear of appearing to take sides in the cold war. When Bukovsky presented a dossier on Soviet psychiatric abuses to the American Psychiatric Association they merely said that they were inclined to oppose the use of psychiatry for political purposes and the Soviet delegation at the World Psychiatric Association was able to blackmail that body into silence (Nekipelov1980: ix). There have been few more cowardly and mendacious betrayers of truth and decency than the Western peace-mongers of the Cold War. Given the choice between cold war and dishonour they chose the latter and did so at the expense of the enslaved peoples of Eastern Europe.

There is one further set of jokes that reveal the naivety and the bad faith of the Western Sovietologists and their failure to understand one of the key factors that led to the downfall of the Soviet Empire, namely persisting and indeed rising nationalism (Fukuyama 2008: 10; Reddaway 2008: 79; Rositzke 1982: 306–307); they believed the official lie that national sentiment had faded away with the creation of the ‘New Soviet Man’. The Sovietologists failed either to recognise or to sympathise with the yearning of the peoples of the downtrodden individual Soviet republics such as Estonia, Lithuania or the Soviet colonial protectorates such as Czechoslovakia, Poland or Hungary to be free, to be independent, to run their own affairs.

The jokes in which the empire talks back had three significant themes. One was the amount of paperwork that had to be sent to Moscow either to justify a decision or to get approval or simply as a pointless routine requirement. It was part of the frustration that attends all bureaucracies but under socialism there was even more of it and it was particularly galling to have to consult and inform a distant foreign department using an alien language. Another was the perception that national leaders were not standing up for their own people but preferred for reasons of fear, power or ideology to grovel to Moscow. The jokes express the sense that the Soviet Union was exploiting the resources of those at the periphery which are getting nothing in return. We might also add a fourth theme, for many Russian jokes mocked the official line about the benefits Soviet rule had conferred on subordinate and peripheral peoples; this is one aspect of the jokes about Chukchees.

Gierek went by train to visit Brezhnev. The journey took two days.

Brezhnev suggested to him: "Why don't you swim down the Friendship oil pipeline we built for you?" Gierek did not arrive back in Warsaw for an entire week; he was exhausted having to swim against the current.

One day, while visiting Ulbricht, a party member saw a strange telephone on his desk. "Comrade Ulbricht," he asked, "Why do you have such a strange-looking telephone? It has no mouthpiece but only the receiver. What do you use it for?"

"Well, since you ask," replied Ulbricht, "that is our direct line to Moscow."

On a bright sunny day Ulbricht walks out of his office with an open umbrella. "But you don't need an umbrella when the sun is shining," declares a comrade.

"I certainly do," replies Ulbricht, "it's raining in Moscow."

In Slovakia lavatory paper always comes in two layers. Why?

One copy has to go to Moscow. [Told in Bratislava, Slovakia in 1985]

Under the new Soviet-Hungarian treaty the Soviets have the right to navigate the Danube upstream and downstream and the Hungarians to navigate it crossways.

A meeting of Communist leaders in Moscow.

Walter Ulbricht takes the first chair. He notices a nail sticking up but he is a tough man and sits in it.

Next Poland's Gomulka takes a chair. He sees there also a nail on his chair but he is not going to be outdone by a German, so he sits on it.

Then Novotný pulls out his chair.

"Please, Comrade Khrushchev," he whines, "they forgot to give me a nail."

– How were the Chukchees before Soviet rule?

– Hungry and cold.

– How are the Chukchees under Soviet rule?

– Hungry and cold and with a feeling of deep gratitude.

The jokes indicated the strength of nationalist resentment and the wish to be free of Soviet control and indeed this is where and how the revolution began.

Once Gorbachev had, in 1985–1986 made it clear to the leaders of the East European governments that he was not prepared to use the Soviet army to keep them in power, they were doomed. Jaruselski dared not bring back martial law in 1989 so he permitted an election, a rigged one that he assumed he would win. He lost heavily to Solidarity and the collapse began. The Berlin Wall came down and within weeks every single communist government was gone. The puppet regimes had only ever been kept in power by the military power of the imperial master. The Soviet Empire fell as other empires have done, falling when those at the centre lost their nerve, when they decided that the rising cost of empire had become greater than the declining benefits. Within two years the Soviet Union itself had collapsed, and crucial to the collapse was the rise of a strongly nationalist opposition in the outlying republics and particularly in the Baltic republics Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania which had been brutally annexed in 1940 at the time of the Soviet-Nazi alliance and then reconquered in 1944. It was in these brave small states facing and resisting cultural and demographic extinction that the end of the Soviet Union began (Reddaway 2008: 85). The singing descendants of the Forest Brothers had not only freed their own country but the peoples of an entire empire. The jokes of nationalism had proved more accurate than the theories of the Sovietologists, who yet again had failed to see that the system was only held in place by fear. They had swallowed the lie that old ethnic and national identities and feelings had been destroyed by the ‘internationalist’ ideology of communism. Once again the western scholars had proved to be fools and dupes and in some cases scoundrels and liars.

There is one last group whose attitudes are of great interest; the Soviet and East European folklorists of the 1980s. We know that in Estonia and no doubt elsewhere they were secretly collecting and hiding political jokes for the day when they would be free to publish them. The folklorists were not like those deluded and mendacious Western scholars who abused freedom and in the process undermined it. The folklorists were people who knew the jokes, the significance of the jokes and the social and political realities of their own societies but were not free to say so. They could not say what they knew or what they believed in an open public forum nor could they publish it. What could they do? What did they do?

One stratagem, one which has also been ascribed to Mikhail Bakhtin, was to write about a distant, external topic such as medieval carnivals, while having in mind and perhaps being inspired by the popular humorous culture of the Soviet Union full of jokes that ridiculed the heroes and rituals of the system (Clark & Holquist 1984: 307–314; Vice 1997: 152–154). This was what the folklorists of Bulgaria did. Let me cite some extracts, (translated orally for me by

Margarita Vasileva as they were spoken), from papers given by folklorists at a conference at the House of Humour and Laughter in Gabrovo, Bulgaria in 1982 (Davies 1987).

(Bulgarian) Fascism was destructive. Spontaneous folklore was a struggle against the domination of cultural life.

Traditional Bulgarian jokes and songs show a strong wish for revenge against tyrants.

At various periods in our history it was forbidden to joke about certain topics....such as religious themes.

There were also comments from a German scholar from the DDR who was an expert on sixteenth century joking.

Comic situations involve a contradiction between two parties, one of which is superior to the other. The function of the jokes is to express that which cannot be expressed in other ways... [He added later in question time that it had been very dangerous to tell whispered jokes in Germany during World War II because they would be severely punished].

What is very striking about both the Bulgarian and the East German comments is how accurately they described the anti-communist and anti-Soviet jokes being told in both their countries at that time, for these were truly jokes that expressed a struggle against the domination of cultural life and spoke of revenge against tyrants. They were jokes about the forbidden, jokes about that which could not be expressed in other ways. They were *Flüsterwitze*, 'whispered joking' which carried the risks that term implies. The papers given in Bulgaria could not have been more apposite to the conditions of 1982. However, all discourse had to be kept within an absurd 'fascist bad, anti-fascist heroic' framework. In fact Bulgaria had never been a fascist country with a corporate state and a centrally organised ruling party. Bulgaria before World War II had been a mildly authoritarian and conservative country in which the largest single class consisted of peasants. The peasants were far better treated and far better off than they would have been in a socialist country such as the Soviet Union, where millions of peasants had been murdered, deported or deliberately starved to death. There was no reason at all for the Bulgarians to develop an 'anti-fascist folklore', until later pressed to provide an ersatz version of one for their new communist masters.

The Russian contributor to the conference spoke about Slavic folksongs in World War II and tacitly assumed that World War II did not begin until 1941. The British and the Estonians know better. The British know that in 1939–41

the Soviet Union was Hitler's most useful ally against the United Kingdom (Tolstoy 1981: 108–114). The Estonians know that Soviet brutality was similar to that of the Nazis (Tolstoy 1981: 192–195, 219). After the KGB archives were opened, it has become clear that there were Slavic folksongs and jokes circulating in 1939–41, during the early years of our World War II that did not in any way conform to the 'Great Patriotic War' myth and model. There were *chastushki* from the kolkhoz that inverted the official songs (Davies, S. 1997: 51–52, 174, 176–178) and there were even songs in favour of war because people hoped it would mean the end of the USSR and their liberation from the socialist regime (Davies, S. 1997: 94, see also 94–96, 109). The people knew about the unjust war with the Finns (Davies, S. 1997: 98, Fitzpatrick 1999: 100–101) which they did not support and about the pact with Hitler. They daubed swastikas on walls, not because they were pro-Hitler but because they knew it would enrage the authorities (Davies, S. 1997: 101). When the USSR annexed Eastern Poland, ordinary Russians felt sorry for the people there because they knew they would lose their land (Davies, S. 1997: 98). In the 1930s when the regime had sent assistance to the "anti-fascist" side in the Spanish Civil War it was resented by ordinary Russians because "we have no bread here". So much for Soviet lies about a 'spontaneous' anti-fascist folklore. The Spanish Civil War in which the Republicans who enjoyed Soviet support fought against the Nationalists, who included the Spanish Falangistas (fascists), coincided with the great purges of 1936–39 in the Soviet Union and led to jokes like the one remembered by Ilya Ehrenburg (Rubenstein 1996).

- They've taken Teruel.
- What? And his wife too?

There is another, slightly differing version.

- "Did you hear? They took Saragossa"
- "Her husband too?"
- "No, Saragossa is a city".
- "What, they're taking whole cities now?!" (Adams 2005: 39)

Both Teruel and Saragossa (Zaragoza) were towns that changed hands in the course of the Spanish Civil War, the war in which the Soviet Union ostensibly intervened in order to fight fascism but where it used the NKVD to eliminate rival Republican and leftist groups. But back in "anti-fascist" Moscow people were far more concerned that their friends, colleagues and neighbours were being arbitrarily arrested, imprisoned and murdered. Neither a fascist nor an anti-fascist be, for they are both much the same. To those who are murdered, tortured, jailed, exiled or starved by a futile and tyrannical regime it does not

matter what its ideology is. Likewise, cynical authoritarians merely change sides when fortune dictates.

- Why is a Nazi like a lightly done beefsteak?
- Brown on the outside, red on the inside.

After the Second World War a gypsy was put on trial before a committee and accused of having played the violin for the ‘Guardists’ (the Hlinka Guard, a Slovak nationalist, clerical, quasi-fascist movement, 1938–1944). He pleaded guilty.

“Why didn’t you deny doing so?” asked his wife afterwards.

“How could I?” replied the gypsy. “There were all the Guardists I had played for, sitting on the committee”. [Told in Slovakia in 1985. For a version with a different setting, where a violinist had played at the wedding of Symon Vasylyovych Petliura, the Ukrainian freedom fighter of the Civil War who was briefly head of an independent Ukrainian state, see Adams 2005: 11]

A Russian Jew was walking through the suburbs of Moscow when a car stopped suddenly, a man was thrown out at the side of the road and the other car sped off. He ran over and saw that it was his old friend Moishe who had been beaten almost to death by the KGB and was nearly unconscious, his eyes opening and closing.

“Moishe, Moishe,” he cried, “It’s me, Abram. Don’t you remember me? We were in Auschwitz together.”

“Ah,” said Moishe dreamily, “ah yes, Auschwitz.”

The Bulgarian folklorists of 1982 did try to analyse some (the very mildest ones) of the political jokes of their own time, claiming that they were a “harmless” feature of a verbal conflict between the generations, with young people taking the slogans with which they had been drilled and inverting and mocking them simply as a way of asserting their independence from and irritating their elders. The young people played with many trite slogans, exhortations and Marxist fragments:

Karl Marx’s “Material conditions determine Consciousness” became “Drinking determines consciousness”.

“A united group can rise up a mountain” became “A united group can steal a mountain”.

Labour is a song – but who wants to sing.

The folklorists dismissed these subversive utterances as merely one more way in which young people sought to speak “against the accepted thinking of society”, though it was admitted that their elders also repeated these witticisms. But such quips spoke of the nonsense of Marxist philosophy, of the drunkenness that was a visible social problem in Bulgaria, of the deterioration of labour discipline and also by implication, of the theft of a mountain of treasure by that venal embezzler Todor Zhivkov and his well-rewarded relatives and flatterers. The folklorists’ analysis was in earnest but they had to be content with uttering a half-truth, lighting up the just about permissible and leaving the more important aspects in darkness.

Today Estonians and others have two great advantages in analysing the political jokes told under socialism that were missing when the jokes were invented. First, there is no longer any reason for scholars to worry about the hostile reactions to their analyses of the tyrants, satraps and *chumchas* (literally ‘spoons’, officials who have become objects that can do only what the holder wants, *apparatchiks*) about whom the jokes were told. Those who supported the powerful ones of the Soviet era from within and those on the outside who from sympathy or stupidity or self-hatred chose to speak favourably of them have been utterly discredited.

Second, with the coming of freedom and the opening of so many formerly closed archives we have a far better understanding of the history and workings of Soviet society than before. We know more. It is not that we now have the whole truth for that is impossible but at least we have seen the old Soviet lies thoroughly discredited. The final test of the significance of the jokes lies outside them in the real world. We know that Shtromas’ hypothesis was correct because the system really did collapse as he had predicted. His detractors cannot evade this by mere playing with language. The collapse was a victory for those who persisted in inventing and telling the jokes in the harsh days of Soviet rule. These people’s jokes, a truly collective creation, express a double truth. They show that their tellers had a true insight into the essential evil of socialism and they demonstrate that it is not possible to crush a people’s spirit completely and indefinitely. The truth shall make you free.

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