

## Laughter in the Dark: Humour under Stalin

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There was a seasoned vaudeville comedian who took to the stage of a Berlin cabaret one night in 1933. He raised his hand in a Nazi salute. But instead of saying ‘Heil Hitler!’ he asked ‘Heil? What was his name again?’ and began to tell a joke mocking the National Socialist Party. Within seconds Gestapo officers rushed the stage and whisked him away in a black Maria. By some miracle he survived the next twelve years in the camps and when released the first thing he did was return to the old cabaret club. He mounted the stage again and raised his hand in a fascist salute, the de-Nazified crowd gasped, but then he broke the tension and quipped, ‘Anyway, as I was saying before I was so rudely interrupted...’<sup>1</sup>

This joke cum urban myth emerged from the ashes of Third Reich. It sums up a commonly accepted image of modern dictatorships: as rude interruptions in the history of comedy.<sup>2</sup> The story does have a genuine historical parallel in Soviet Russia. A pair of clowns, Bim and Bom, were amongst the earliest victims of Lenin’s secret police. In spring 1918 during one their performances the famous circus double act began satirising the Bolsheviks. Some angry Cheka officers in the audience decided to put a stop to this: they interrupted the show, chased after the clowns– opening fire as they did so (much to the amusement of the crowd who thought it was part of the act)– and arrested them.<sup>3</sup> Comedy, it appears, was the first casualty of class war.

Is it possible for dictatorships to suppress laughter? They certainly don’t seem to encourage it. The world’s first joke book – *Philogelos* (‘Laughter Lover’) – was after all the product of democratic Athens, not the ancient dictatorships of Persia and Egypt. Yet laughter, Aristotle thought, is the very thing which separates us from the animals, it defines us as human. Surely, therefore, a general repression of humour – a feat of mass dehumanisation – is impossible. George Orwell disagreed. Observing the zenith of ‘totalitarianism’ in 1939, he argued, ‘we cannot at all be certain that “human nature” is constant, mass-suggestion is a science of the last

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Rosen, ‘Laughter Close to Tears’, BBC Radio 4, 26 Jan. 2008.

<sup>2</sup> Numerous television and radio documentaries have examined the phenomenon of humour under dictatorships. See for example, Ben Lewis, ‘Hammer and Tickle: the Communist joke book’, BBC4 *Storyville*, May 2006 & in *Prospect Magazine*, Sept. 2006.

<sup>3</sup> Iu. A. Dmitriev, *Sovetskii tsirk* (Moscow, 1963), p.29.

twenty years, and we do not yet know how successful it will be.’<sup>4</sup> Stalin’s Russia was the principal inspiration for Orwell’s novel *1984*. It would be a humourless place, he predicted, where ‘there will be no laughter, except the laugh of triumph over a defeated enemy.’<sup>5</sup>

The Orwellian nightmare juxtaposes two contradictory types of laughter as it depicts kindness crushed by cruelty.<sup>6</sup> This idea has a long pedigree: one of the earliest laughter theorists, Enlightenment essayist James Beattie, similarly highlighted two distinct types of laughter: ‘pure laughter’ – the product of humour – and ‘unnatural laughter’ – ‘a mixture of hypocrisy, malice, and cruel joy.’<sup>7</sup> Orwell’s terrifying dictatorship clearly aimed to suppress pure laughter and to promote the unnatural ‘laugh of triumph.’

Was Stalin’s Russia anything like *1984*? The book was heavily based on an early critique of the Bolshevik utopian project, Evgenii Zamiatin’s 1920 science fiction novel *We*. In *We* laughter rings out on almost every page. Nevertheless, the joviality of the law-abiding citizens of Zamiatin’s imaginary future utopian dictatorship, OneState, fits Beattie’s definition of unnatural laughter. It is the forced product of the ‘compulsory organisation of human happiness.’<sup>8</sup> Zamiatin’s fiction is an uncanny anticipation of Stalinism. In 1935 Stalin’s infamous claim that ‘life has become better, life has become more joyful’, was more an order than a statement of fact. This jollity was a state of submissive gratitude, expressed in the motto foisted on every Soviet schoolroom: ‘Thank you dear Stalin for our happy childhood.’ Stalinist laughter was the product of enforced happiness. It was formal, conformist, respectful, and, thus, the anti-thesis of humour.

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<sup>4</sup> *New English Weekly*, 12 Jan. 1939. George Orwell, *Essays* (Everyman, London, 2002), p.111.

<sup>5</sup> George Orwell, *1984* (Everyman Edition, London, 1994), p.280.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* Laughter is mentioned on only six occasions in the entire book. Genuine laughter belongs entirely to the pre-dystopian world and non-conformity: The first ‘little laugh’ heard is from an apparent ‘prole’, untouched by the dictatorship, Mr Charrington (p.158). The rebel Julia finds it difficult ‘to avoid bursting out laughing’ (p.160) during the Two Minutes Hate. Winston recalls a last happy memory of his childhood: laughing with his mother (p.308). Winston laughs insanely as he is led away by ‘the men in white coats’ to his interrogation and the final loss of his humanity (p.255). (This may have been linked to journalists’ observations that the physical wreck Rykov giggled inanely through the ‘great’ show trial of 1938.) The endpoint of Smith’s interrogation is that ‘never again will you be capable of love, or friendship, or joy of living, or laughter’ (p.269).

<sup>7</sup> Beattie’s *Essay on Laughter, and Ludicrous Composition* (1768) was used for *Encyclopaedia Britannica* entries on ‘Laughter’ up to 1842. Laughter typology since has tended to orbit three theories of laughter: ‘superiority’, ‘relief’ and ‘incongruity.’

<sup>8</sup> The citizens of the utopian OneState are described as people with ‘faces undimmed by anything so crazy as thought. Rays, you see. Everything made out of some kind of uniform, radiant, smiling matter.’ E. Zamiatin, *We* (E.P.Dutton, 1924/Clarence Brown, 1993), p.7. For all their technological sophistication they are inhuman beings who believe that ‘cruelty is the highest, the most difficult kind of love...’ (p.118) and find humanity (‘the ancients’) hilarious: “Innumerate pity is a thing known only to the ancients; to us

It was expressed in Grigory Aleksandrov's politically correct cinematic comedies such as the 1934 *Veselye rebiata* (literally 'Jolly Fellows', but released in the US as 'Moscow Laughs') and, Stalin's favourite, the 1936 film *Tsirk* ('The Circus'). Under these conditions happiness and humour were diametrically opposed. State-approved merriment was an act of complicity with the Soviet tyranny because it signified a belief in the beautiful lie, a state of blissful ignorance. Meanwhile genuine comedy was repressed because it was a malcontent's expression of the ugly truth.<sup>9</sup>

The dreary propaganda of the Stalin era seems to strengthen this impression of humourlessness: endless industrial statistics and personality cults which celebrated grim-visaged bureaucrats. The ideal Bolshevik, after Lenin and the boss himself, was 'Iron Felix' Dzerzhinsky (1877-1926), the founder of the KGB. Dzerzhinsky personified the deadly serious side of the revolution. He was self-sacrificing, disciplined, austere, inflexible, and obsessed with the pursuit of happiness.<sup>10</sup> Dzerzhinsky was a lapsed Catholic who abandoned youthful ambitions to be a priest when he joined the political underground. He seems to have inherited his sobriety from religion (there is after all only one joke in the New Testament, and none at all in the Old). The founder of the Polish nation state, Józef Pilsudski, went to the same school as Dzerzhinsky and remembered him as a pious pupil, 'an ascetic with the face of an icon... Tormented or not, this is an issue history will clarify, in any case, this was a person who did not know how to lie.'<sup>11</sup> A British spy who met Dzerzhinsky noted that he was 'without a ray of humour in his character.'<sup>12</sup> Zamiatin picked up on this with his depiction of the perfect citizen of utopia in *We* who admits 'I simply can't make jokes – because the default value of every joke is a lie.'<sup>13</sup> Dzerzhinsky moulded the Inquisitorial Cheka as if it were a modern day order of warrior monks, and his fundamentalist fanaticism was rather like Umberto Eco's laughter-hating monk, blind Jorge, possessed by: 'arrogance of the spirit, faith without a smile, truth that is never seized by doubt.'<sup>14</sup> To Dzerzhinsky and many more like him the revolution was a sacred mission. To mock it was profane.

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it's funny" (p.104). Ancient democracy also provokes mirth: "it's hard to say this with a straight face—they couldn't even tell before the election how it would come out" (p.132).

<sup>9</sup> Aristotle was the first to suggest in his *Poetics* that laughter was a vehicle for truth.

<sup>10</sup> See his 'Pages from a Prison Diary, 1908-09' published in Felix Dzerzhinsky, *Prison Diary and Letters* (Honolulu, Hawaii, 2002), pp.19-128.

<sup>11</sup> Qutd. in R. Blobaum, *Feliks Dzierżyński* (Columbia UP, 1985), p.30.

<sup>12</sup> R. H. Bruce Lockhart, *Memoirs of a British Agent* (London, 1932), p.257.

<sup>13</sup> Zamiatin, *We*, p.14.

The repression of comedy in the Soviet Union became a deliberate policy in the wake of Stalin's disastrous Collectivization campaign of 1929–32: when the last bastion of independent society was crushed, famine roamed the countryside, former top-rank Party members were alienated, malcontents inside the government began to fulminate against the boss and an embittered peasantry rose up against the new Stalinist missionaries. To defend his position Stalin ordered that all potential threats be treated with the utmost severity, including joke-tellers. 'Satirical jokes about the Party leaders may gradually blunt revolutionary vigilance if they are treated in a conciliatory manner. Behind an anecdote there may lurk a Menshevik, Trotskyist, class enemy.'<sup>15</sup> Jokers could be arrested under the infamous article 58 of the Stalinist criminal code for involvement in 'anti-Soviet conversations'. Roy Medvedev estimated that 200,000 people were imprisoned in the 1930s for telling 'subversive' jokes.<sup>16</sup> Cultural historian James Billington has argued that genuine comedy 'all but vanished from the Russian scene in the Stalin era'.<sup>17</sup>

The ersatz comedy of cruelty and hatred, on the other hand, was always encouraged by the Bolsheviks. During the Civil War the Party nationalised the circus and co-opted its own 'Red clowns' such as Vitaly Lazarenko, who performed a series of anti-White skits written by the Futurist poet Mayakovskiy.<sup>18</sup> The aim was to subordinate laughter to their revolutionary mission. The People's Commissar for Enlightenment, Anatol Lunacharsky, had even planned to write a book on jokes as the ultimate expression of proletarian culture.<sup>19</sup> Ridicule identified the difference between 'us' and 'them', it thus became a tool for control and a powerful weapon of state propaganda.<sup>20</sup> The best examples can be found in the first cartoons of Boris Efimov in the

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<sup>14</sup> Umberto Eco, *Il nome della rosa* (1980)/*The Name of the Rose* (Minerva edition, 1996), p.477. For William of Baskerville's debates with Jorge on laughter and religion see pp. 79-83, 95-6, 111, 130-34.

<sup>15</sup> Qutd. in Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia* (Cambridge UP, 1997), p.153 (& p.97 on how jokes were repeated to police in arrest reports).

<sup>16</sup> Ibid. Medvedev also claimed that the joke-tellers were the first to be freed from the Gulag after the death of Stalin.

<sup>17</sup> James H. Billington, *The Icon and the Axe* (New York, 1970), p.565.

<sup>18</sup> The dreadful idea of Bolshevik comedy is brilliantly depicted in *The Simpsons* when Krusty the Clown airs the Eastern Bloc version of *Itchy and Scratchy* called *Worker and Parasite*. All Krusty can say afterwards is: 'What the hell was that?' See: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-nviaWnxwo&NR=1>

<sup>19</sup> A.V. Lunacharsky, 'O smekhe', *Literaturnyi kritik*, 4 (1935), pp.3-9. The revolutionist and novelist who inspired Lenin, Nikolai Chernyshevskii, wrote an article on humour while in prison in 1863: 'Vozvyshennoe i komicheskoe', in *Izbrannye filosofskie sochineniia*, vol. 1. (Leningrad, 1950), pp.252-99.

<sup>20</sup> This was nothing new. On the ancient use of ridicule for political repression, see Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton UP, 1996). Religion was a

‘satirical’ journal *Krokodil*, which rather humourlessly picked on easy targets in the early Stalin era – mostly drunks, low level bureaucrats and foreigners.

Another keen cartoonist, the ‘rightist’ Bolshevik Nikolai Bukharin,<sup>21</sup> owed much of his popularity in the Party to his ready wit. When he was forced to publicly recant his opposition to Stalin at a crowded Party Central Committee meeting in December 1930, Bukharin survived the ordeal by mocking his former supporters amongst the ‘right deviation’. Reading the transcripts with hindsight, the levity of the meeting has an ominous air: Bukharin – doomed to be executed eight years later in spite of this shriving – wisecracks in order to win his way back into favour, he jokes about the mass-murder of ‘rich’ peasants (the so-called *kulaks*) and shooting Party oppositionists.<sup>22</sup> The transcripts record laughter erupting throughout the hall on half a dozen occasions in response to Bukharin’s brief confession; it seems now to be the hollow, nervous laughter of the living dead: the majority of those present would be executed before the end of the decade. The cruelty of Stalinist laughter escalated in tandem with the brutality of the purges. Bukharin was no longer cracking jokes when he mounted his last defence against accusations of treachery at the Central Committee plenum of February 1937. Nevertheless, the audience of accusers– hysterical, terrified and vicious– found his wheedling attempts to escape death hilarious. ‘Why are you laughing?’ Bukharin whined. ‘There is absolutely nothing funny about any of this.’<sup>23</sup> But they were no longer laughing *with* him, they were laughing *at* him. This nightmarish, bedlamite laughter served as a vital release of tension for the survivors to preserve their own sanity, display unity and prove their loyalty to the boss.

Joseph Stalin loved to joke, as George Bernard Shaw observed: ‘he is a man with a keen sense of comedy, and a very ready and genial laugh.’<sup>24</sup> Stalin’s sense of humour was undoubtedly very sharp indeed, but few would call it genial. The General Secretary’s bodyguard, part-time executioner, former make-up artist and hairdresser, Karl Pauker, was able to reduce Stalin to tears of laughter with his impressions of Grigory Zinoviev begging for his life in front of the firing

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particular target of Bolshevik mockery, eg, see N.P.Andreev, ‘Fol’klor i antireligioznaia rabota’, *Voinstvuiushchii ateizm*, no.12 (Dec. 1931), p.3.

<sup>21</sup> For Bukharin’s recently discovered caricatures of Party leaders, see A. Vatlin, *Piggy Foxy and the Sword of Revolution: Bolshevik Self-Portraits* (Yale UP, 2006).

<sup>22</sup> For a translation of the stenographic records, see J. Arch Getty & O. V. Naumov, *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks, 1932-1939* (Yale UP, 1999), pp.45-50. Karl Radek was to do the same at the great show trial of 1937, joking his way through cross-questioning to escape the death penalty.

<sup>23</sup> For the original transcripts, see *Voprosy istorii*, nos.4-5 (1992), pp.24, 32-34.

squad. (The boss particularly enjoyed the Jewish lilt Pauker gave to the accent of his former rival.)<sup>25</sup> Stalin had a cynical, dry and sarcastic sense of humour. He frequently scribbled ‘Ha! Ha!’ in red crayon in the margins of books and official documents whenever he read something that struck him as particularly stupid, naïve or pious.<sup>26</sup> He had a good memory and some talent as mimic: attributes of a raconteur, but also those of a bully who used laughter to intimidate his retinue; indeed Stalin’s bruising humour played a part in the suicide of both his wife, Nadya, and his oldest friend, Sergo Orjonikidze.<sup>27</sup> Like Peter the Great, Stalin loved the comedy of drunkenness and the humiliation it inflicts. He regularly forced all around him into liver-pounding drinking sessions and endless toasts. He would occasionally throw food at guests or leave tomatoes on the chairs of self-important Party bigwigs. He often forced close colleagues to dance for his amusement. His pet ‘Ukrainian bear’ Khrushchev (assigned the role of ‘jester’ – *skomorokh*) had to dance on the table, and the corpulent Malenkov (re-christened *Malania* – ‘Melanie’ – owing to the fact that the fatter he got the more looked like a woman) had to dance with men.<sup>28</sup>

With a chief like Stalin it is not surprising to find that state-sponsored Soviet comedy – tame, fawning, loyal as a lapdog – was never very funny. The comedy highlight for Russians in the 1930s was a visitor from abroad, Harpo, the silent Marx Brother, who came as a goodwill ambassador from the United States (and part-time spy for the FBI). Harpo’s wordless performances were a runaway success on the Moscow stage. Good comedy in the public sphere during the Stalin era was, quite literally, mute.<sup>29</sup> Even Stalin later admitted in a speech to the Soviet Writers’ Congress in 1952 that his reign had produced no great humorists.

### **Pure laughter or the laughter of defeat**

Nevertheless, unlike Orwell’s *1984*, even Stalin could not banish ‘pure laughter’. Quite the opposite: Soviet humour inevitably erupted *as a reaction to* Stalinism. This development was

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<sup>24</sup> Shaw commenting on the meeting between Joseph Stalin and H. G. Wells in 1934: ‘The Stalin-Wells Talk’, *The New Statesman*, 27 Oct. 1934.

<sup>25</sup> Donald Rayfield, *Stalin and His Hangmen* (London, 2004), pp. 198-99.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, pp.19-20. Rayfield notes how Stalin found Leo Tolstoy’s piety particularly amusing.

<sup>27</sup> Simon Sebag-Montefiore, *Stalin: Court of the Red Tsar* (London, 2003), p.216.

<sup>28</sup> See, *inter alia*, *ibid.*, pp.49-51, 58-9, 529-44; Milovan Djilas, *Conversations with Stalin* (London, 1963), pp.62-4, 75-6, 108-9, 148-61; Robert Service, *Stalin: A Biography* (London, 2004), pp.115, 291-92, & 437-38; D. Tutaev (trans. & ed.), *The Alliluyev Memoirs* (London, 1968), p.138.

also predicted by Zamiatin. The pursuit of universal happiness is so strait-laced it invites ridicule. In *We* natural laughter bursts to the surface at key moments when the protagonists begin to rebel against the system.<sup>30</sup> This seems to be a precursor to Orwell's idea that in a dictatorship 'every joke is a tiny revolution'.<sup>31</sup> After the death of Stalin, when small acts of rebellion seemed safe once more, a vibrant and distinctive Soviet joke-telling culture gained global notoriety: the political joke or *anekdot* (plural *anekdoty*). This brand of humour is most commonly associated with the later days of Khrushchev and Brezhnev.<sup>32</sup> But all of its essential components were crafted in the dark cellars of the Stalin era.<sup>33</sup> It was an absurdist, deadpan, bittersweet brand of humour: the laughter of defeat. Rather than suppressing this comic vein Stalin unwittingly created the perfect conditions for it to evolve. Four distinct elements of the Stalin revolution, when mixed together, activated the alchemy of Soviet comedy: cultural revolution, novelty, the peculiar nature of the Stalinist tyranny and the everyday evidence of the failure of the great utopian experiment.<sup>34</sup>

### Cultural revolution

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<sup>29</sup> Harpo Marx, *Harpo Speaks!* (with Rowland Barber; London, 1961), pp.299-337. See: John Harlow, 'Harpo Marx smuggled Stalin's secrets in his socks', *The Sunday Times* (UK), 22 Dec. 2001.

<sup>30</sup> The protagonist D-503 first attracts the attention of the rebel I-330 when he bursts out laughing while thinking about the pre-dystopian times: Zamiatin, *We*, p.7. D finds I's rebellious laughter profoundly disturbing: 'her tone was impudent, so full of mockery' (p.55).

<sup>31</sup> 'Funny, But not Vulgar', *Leader Magazine*, 28 July 1945 in Orwell, *Essays*, p.783.

<sup>32</sup> The earliest significant compilation of the *anekdoty* was published in 1951: E. Andrevich *Kreml' i narod* (Munich, Golos Naroda). The most in-depth and complex analysis of *anekdoty* with a comprehensive bibliography on the subject is by Seth Benedict Graham: 'A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot*' (PhD diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2003). It is also available online. On p.3 he refers to the 'Stagnation era', 1961-86, as 'the apogee of the *anekdot*'s popularity'. Bruce Adams has arranged a wide selection of anecdotes in chronological order as source material for a very entertaining history of twentieth century Russia: B. Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia* (New York, 2005).

<sup>33</sup> On the prevalence of underground humour in the 1930s see Mikhail Boikov, *Liudi sovetskoi tiur'my* (Buenos Aires, 1957), vol. 1, p.359.

<sup>34</sup> Most of the *anekdoty* which follow are jokes which have been told to me over the years by former residents of Soviet states. A wide collection is available in Russian online, particularly Dima Verner's site [www.anekdot.ru](http://www.anekdot.ru). A vast number of compilations of Soviet *anekdoty* have been published in English over the past few decades. A few examples include (in no particular order) Petr Beckmann, *Hammer and Tickle* (Boulder, CO, 1980). Zhanna Dolgoplova, *Russia Dies Laughing: Jokes from Soviet Russia* (London, 1982). Emil Draitser (ed. and comp.), *Forbidden Laughter (Soviet Underground Jokes)*, trans. Jon Pariser (Los Angeles, 1978). John Kolasky, comp. *Laughter Through Tears: Underground Wit, Humor and Satire in the Soviet Russian Empire* (Australia, 1985). Algis Ruksenas, *Is That You Laughing, Comrade? The World's Best Russian (Underground) Jokes* (Secaucus, NJ, 1986). James von Geldern & Richard Stites (eds.), *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays, and Folklore, 1917-1953* (Indiana UP, 1995). For sources in the Russian, see Tat'iana Gennad'evna Nichiporovich's compilation of over thirty volumes of *anekdoty* published by Literatura in Minsk 1997-98.

First and foremost, Soviet jokes were the creation of the victims of Stalinism, those excluded from the inner circles of power. They treasured humour because this was the one institution which the disenfranchised could call their own, a party to which the Party was not invited. Joke-telling was a mass phenomenon, but one that spread in private. It was a virulent super-bug passed from person to person in queues, in bars, at work, in cafés, at home and wherever a whispered conversation was possible.<sup>35</sup> It thrived because genuine *popular* culture was robbed of other creative outlets such as theatre, cinema, music, and literature, which were all centrally controlled by the state. Consequently, popular creative energies flowed towards humour. In the absence of civil society, laughter more than ever served the Bergsonian function as a social cohesive.<sup>36</sup> Soviet *anekdoty* caught fire on the dying embers all of that was good about 1917: contempt for authority, spontaneous creativity, humane common sense, popular unity and a joyful camaraderie. Revolution and carnivalesque humour naturally go hand in hand because both aim to turn the whole world upside down. Joke-telling is the last refuge of popular rebellion because it is impervious to police measures: no-one ever really writes a joke (though everyone *re-writes* them), so you can't arrest the author, you can't raid a house and seize a joke, you can't put it in prison or shoot it, it is compact (jokes can be stored in abundance in one's head) and easily dispersed (the KGB supposedly experimented and found that it took only half a dozen hours for a joke to travel from one end of Moscow to the other by word of mouth alone).

The humour that proved most contagious in the USSR was part of the timeless comedy of the wily slave compelled to serve the foolish master: a comic vein that runs throughout literary history in the works of, amongst others, Aristophanes, Beaumarchais and Wodehouse. This kind of humour was born out of the irony of unfair defeat, Greece eclipsed by Rome. Stalinism reactivated this on a grand scale because it was under Stalin that the Party extended the rule of a crude culture (Bolshevism and bureaucracy) over a spectacular array of groups who considered themselves superior.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>35</sup> The underground nature of the anecdote is evident in the word's etymology: *anekdot* is derived from the Greek root meaning 'unpublished item'. The German equivalent under the Third Reich was known as the *Flüsterwitz* ('whispered joke'): Adams, *op.cit.*, p.5.

<sup>36</sup> Henri Bergson, *Le Rire: essai sur la signification du comique* (1899); in English: *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*. Trans. C. Brereton and F. Rothwell (London, 1911/1935).

<sup>37</sup> In one of the earliest attempts to dissect humour, the political philosopher Thomas Hobbes in *Leviathan* (1651) defined laughter as a 'sudden glory arising from some sudden conception of some eminency in ourselves.'



Jews, freed after the revolution from internal exile in the Pale of Settlement, migrated east to the heartlands of the Soviet empire. They brought with them a brand of humour based on what they saw as the irony of God's chosen people suffering centuries of repression. This caught on amongst the Russian masses because under Stalin the lot of the ordinary Soviet citizen grew to resemble that of the pre-revolutionary Jew.<sup>38</sup> The 'chosen people' (now the 'proletariat') were excluded from power, told where and how to live, spied on and bullied by dim-witted officialdom.<sup>39</sup> The process expanded when Stalin launched Collectivization, when juvenile city-folk came to the countryside to teach the ancient serfs of mother Russia how to farm.<sup>40</sup> The situation can be summed up in a brief gag: A member of the *Komsomol* (Communist Youth) watches an aged peasant working with his old horse and plough tilling the field. 'I can see it works in practice,' he says, 'but does it work in theory?'

The richest source of this humour was the intelligentsia. They turned to joke-telling after Stalin subordinated Russian writers (reduced to 'engineers of human souls') to the crude priorities of industrial planning. The *intelligenty* had only two options: they could either sell their souls and devote themselves to the celebration of Soviet power in public or they could sit on the sidelines and make fun of the whole charade in private. Those with integrity chose the latter path of glorious defeat. The topsy-turvy irony of the high brought low drew on the literary traditions of Gogol's 'bitter laugh'<sup>41</sup> and Chekhov's amusing tales of disaster, their 'laughter through tears'. It is no accident that two of the greatest works of literature of the pre-war Stalin era – Zamiatin's *We* and Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margarita* – were light-hearted, carnivalesque and condemned to obscurity; wholly unlike the later more sombre works which were better known in

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<sup>38</sup> Nazi-hunter Simon Wiesenthal, published a compilation of Soviet *anekdoty* under the pseudonym Mischka Kukin: *Humour Behind the Iron Curtain* (1962).

<sup>39</sup> For example, the following joke was adapted from an old Jewish joke about waiting for the Messiah. A rich American businessman visiting Moscow asks a sentry-man what he is doing on the walls of the Kremlin. 'I have very keen eyesight,' he says, 'I'm paid to keep an eye out on the horizon for the dawning of the Communist utopia.' 'Impressive,' replies the American, 'I'll quadruple your pay if you come work for me at the top of the Empire State building and keep watch for the next financial collapse.' 'No thanks,' says the simple Russian 'why give up a permanent job for a temporary one.'

<sup>40</sup> Terence Wade, 'Russian Folklore and Soviet Humor', *Journal of Russian Studies*, 54 (1988), pp.3-20. Peasants adapted old *chastushki* (traditional four-line doggerel poems usually set to music) in satirical ditties about their new overlords, see F. M. Selivanova (comp.), *Chastushki* (Moscow, 1991), p.153.

<sup>41</sup> Gogol's last words were inscribed on his grave: 'And I shall laugh with a bitter laugh.' Their topsy-turvy humour at its most basic can be seen in the famous jokes of Yakov Smirnoff in 1970s & 1980s, the simple but effective 'Russian Reversal' gags (a sort of middle-brow Oscar Wilde meets Franz Kafka sense of comedy); eg, 'In USA you watch TV, in Soviet Union TV watches you.'

the West: the post-war grim epics by celebrated Soviet dissidents such as Pasternak, Grossman and Solzhenitsyn.

Culturally, the Soviet *anekdot* was a cosmopolitan brand of humour which grew as a result of the expansion of Stalin's empire. It drew on national cultures (such as Armenian,<sup>42</sup> Polish<sup>43</sup> and Czech<sup>44</sup>) with long experience of subjugation to inferior imperial overlords. Chauvinistic national stereotypes and less humorous xenophobia inevitably crept into these *anekdoty*. Nevertheless, their jokes are mostly characterised by a wry and self-deprecating acceptance of defeat. This tradition was lubricated by one other aspect of Russian culture: the love of drinking. An old Russian proverb affirmed that a group of three (*troika*) was the divine number both for a drinking session and for joke-telling. Stalin tried and failed to repress both.<sup>45</sup> Drinking and joking go arm in arm: the more the *troika* drank the more they laughed. The word comedy, after all, derives from *komoedia* – the drunken song sung by Dionysian revellers.

### Novelty

One of Edward de Bono's more sensible ideas is that laughter is a synaptic response to novelty. The brain, he argues, is a pattern-making machine.<sup>46</sup> A joke is something which carves a surprising new neural pathway in the brain. This explains why a joke we've heard before is not likely to make us laugh. It also explains why a joke needs to follow certain familiar patterns, to lull us into a false sense of security, before the surprise punch line. The Stalin era was, thus, fertile soil for comedy because everything was made uniform and familiar (language, shops, schools, towns, clothes etc.) and almost everything was new (leaders, institutions, habitation, ways of working, language etc.). Comedy thrived in this environment. The new slogans of Stalinism were easily subverted for comic effect. For example, an *anekdot* could be expressed in the sober style of a *Pravda* news item,

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<sup>42</sup> An Armenian émigré is thinking of returning home and so writes from Paris to his brother in Erevan. 'Tell me what it's like in the new socialist utopia. To get round the censor, if what you tell me is true, write in black ink. If false, write in green ink.' His brother dutifully writes back in black ink: 'This is paradise on earth. Here we have everything we need – beautiful houses, motor-cars, wonderful jobs for all, delicious food aplenty, fine wines, every luxury you could want... The only thing we don't have here is green ink.'

<sup>43</sup> For example, see Anna Wierzbicka, 'Anti-totalitarian Language in Poland: Some Mechanisms of Linguistic Self-defense', *Language in Society* 19/1 (March 1990), pp. 1-59.

<sup>44</sup> Czech jokes drew on gags dating back to their subjugation under German/Habsburg rule. And the literature of Kafka was tailor-made for satirising Stalinism.

<sup>45</sup> On Bolshevism's failed attempts to wean Russians off the booze see, I.R.Takala, *Veselye Rusi: Istoriia alkogol'noi problemy v Rossii* (St Petersburg, 2002), pp.186-216.

<sup>46</sup> Edward de Bono, *The Mechanism of the Mind* (1969).

A delegation of octogenarians visited the great architect of universal happiness in the Kremlin this morning. They paid tribute to Lenin's heir: 'Thank you comrade Stalin for our happy childhood.' 'What are you talking about?' our glorious leader asked, 'you were children long before the Revolution.' 'Exactly,' they replied.

Jokes, according to de Bono, function in this way as an aid to understanding. A laugh is the endorphin rush which follows a joke, a sort of chemical treat, an evolutionary mechanism for encouraging neophilia. Consequently, humour assists intellectual development. Jokes are compact, efficient and accessible explanations of the world we live in: they make sense (and nonsense) of novelty. This was particularly important behind the Iron Curtain because the version of the news reported by the state propaganda machine could not be trusted, so jokes worked as an alternative news service.<sup>47</sup> Even Soviet leaders and foreign observers looked to Soviet jokes for a true picture of what was going on inside the USSR. Ronald Reagan supposedly had compilations of Russian *anekdoty* included in his weekly intelligence briefings.<sup>48</sup> To see the cognitive value of these jokes take this example, which manages to describe the entire history of the Soviet experiment in less than three hundred words:

Stalin, Khrushchev and Brezhnev are travelling along at high speed in the great locomotive of socialism, built by the dear departed engineer of human happiness, Lenin. Suddenly the train grinds to a halt. Stalin is the boss, so he decides to go investigate the cause of the delay. He enters the driver's cabin and sees the driver working on the engine. 'Aha,' Stalin thinks, 'he's a wrecker.' So the boss pulls out his revolver and shoots the driver in the back of the head. Stalin returns to the cabin and reassures his comrades that he has solved the problem and the train will be moving again soon. They wait a few minutes. The train does not move. Khrushchev decides to take the initiative. He too goes to the front of the train and there he finds that the driver, his tools scattered around him, has been shot dead whilst trying to fix the engine. Khrushchev returns to the cabin and points an accusing finger at Stalin: 'It's his fault. The train stopped because he shot the driver. If we all ignore Stalin the train will start moving again.' They sit in awkward silence for a while, but still the train refuses to budge. Brezhnev doesn't like to see everyone fall out like this, so he volunteers to take the helm. He goes to the driver's cabin and sees that Khrushchev was right: Stalin's revolver lies on the floor, still smoking next to the dead engineer. He then has a look at the machinery, but quickly realises he hasn't a clue how to fix it. So he returns to his fellow travellers, lowers the blinds, pulls out a bottle of vodka, pours everyone a drink, and says: 'Let's just pretend we're moving shall we.'<sup>49</sup>

### **The peculiar nature of the Stalinist tyranny**

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<sup>47</sup> For example, see Viktor Mikhailovich Khrul', *Anekdot kak forma massovoi kommunikatsii*. (Diss. Moscow State University, 1993).

<sup>48</sup> On the Kremlin also listening to the jokes, one joke put it: President Carter asks Brezhnev if it is true that he collected political jokes. The Soviet leader says yes, it is true. 'How many do you have?' asks Carter. 'Two camps full' says Brezhnev.

<sup>49</sup> The only part of the history missing is where Gorbachev enters the carriage, confiscates the bottle of vodka and raises the blinds. For the use of Soviet jokes as historical evidence, see Sergei Alekseevich

All tyrannies invite ridicule. Yet the Soviet regime is arguably unique in the way humour reached into every last nook and cranny of the system. No subject was too dark for Soviet humour. Two peculiar features of the Stalinist tyranny can help explain this.

First, it employed random acts of terror. To secure compliance from the general public, even loyal citizens were arrested on the pretext that foreign invasion was imminent. Apparently nobody was wholly safe, everybody a potential victim. This might not sound funny, but tension is the lifeblood of comedy. Immanuel Kant asserted that, 'laughter is an affect that arises if a tense expectation is transformed into nothing.' If fear is all pervading, then jokes have a universal currency. Only the fearless are immune to the virus of comedy. It is likely that the majority of the Russian population lived in a state of tense expectation in the 1930s (whether it be fear of Nazi invasion or the arrival of the NKVD). Jokes were told in all corners of society to break the tension and glory in the fact that their worst fears had not yet come to pass.<sup>50</sup> If their worst fears had come to pass they wouldn't be alive to enjoy the jokes. In a state of terror, jokes are told as a survival mechanism: because *anekdoty* can transform what people fear most into something absurd;<sup>51</sup> and because humour can be used to gently reform the system: As Lord Shaftsbury put it, humour enables us to 'polish one another and rub off our corners and rough sides by a sort of amiable collision.'<sup>52</sup> The joke below seemed to perform these functions:

A Russian rabbit flees to Poland and meets a Polish hare. 'Why are you running?' asks the hare. 'Stalin has just ordered the arrest of all elephants.' 'But you are not an elephant,' the Pole points out, 'you're a rabbit.' 'I know,' the rabbit replies, 'but I can't prove it!'

Jokes like this were based on the hope that if everyone, Stalin included, recognised to some degree the absurdity of the purges then some moderation would surely take place. The following joke was heard and repeated by Stalin; it is difficult to see how he could appreciate it and not realise the absurdity of his own actions (though knowing that he enjoyed the joke does kill the humour):

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Shinkarchuk (comp.), *Istoriia Sovetskoi Rossii (1917-1953) v anekdotakh* (St. Petersburg, 2000); D. Shturman & S. Tikhtin (comp.), *Sovetskii soiuz v zerkale politicheskogo anekdota* (London, 1985).

<sup>50</sup> R. W. Thurston, 'Social Dimensions of Stalinist Rule: Humor and Terror in the USSR, 1935-1941.' *Journal of Social History*, vol.24, no.3 (Spring 1991), pp. 541-62.

<sup>51</sup> Perhaps the most famous recent example of the power of comedy to defeat terror is in J. K. Rowling, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* where the *riddikulus* spell is used to defeat a *boggart* (a metamorph which assumes the shape of a person's worst fear).

<sup>52</sup> Lord Shaftsbury, *Characteristics of Men, Manners, Opinions, Times* (1711) quoted in Vic Gatrell, *City of Laughter: Sex and satire in eighteenth century* (London, 2006), p.169. See also Avner Ziv, 'Humor as a Social Corrective' in L. Behrens and L. J. Rosen (eds.), *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum*, (Glenview, IL, 1988), p.357.

After receiving a delegation from the provinces Stalin loses his pipe. He orders the chief of his secret police, Beria, to conduct an investigation. Half an hour later the boss phones Beria to inform him that he has found his pipe down the back of the sofa and so he can call off the search. 'But I have already arrested ten culprits,' replies Beria. 'Well release them then,' says Stalin. 'We can't,' says Beria. 'Five of them died during interrogation and the other five confessed, so we shot them.'

The second uniquely comic facet of Stalinism was the propaganda it purveyed. The regime claimed to have transformed society at every level. Consequently, every aspect of daily life played a role in the image of the world painted by propaganda: efficient factories, bountiful shops, well-fed children, cultured youth pursuing elevated hobbies in their ample leisure time, etc.<sup>53</sup> Yet the happy world depicted in the media was entirely divorced from reality. This created a psychological challenge for the law-abiding Soviet citizen. Sigmund Freud proposed that mental problems are caused by a gulf between the ego and the id, the conscious and the unconscious mind. Stalinism exacerbated this dichotomy because in order to survive all citizens had to internalise a split identity, what Orwell described as *doublethink*, separating their public and their private personas. Laughter, Freud suggested, provides relief because it is caused by the unconscious breaking through the self-censorship of the conscious mind.<sup>54</sup> Jokes thus bridge the gap between the ego and the id. The encounters of everyday existence in Stalin's Russia were inherently comic because they constantly exposed the gulf between unconscious truth and the conscious delusions in which all apparent 'believers' were complicit. Thus daily life in the USSR was a feast for Freudian laughter. And because everything was political, all humour was political also: 'the jokes that Soviet citizens liked to tell, despite the dangers of being caught in 'anti-Soviet conversations' were typically not about sex or mothers-in-law or even ethnicity, but about bureaucrats, the Communist Party, and the secret police.'<sup>55</sup>

The centrepiece of Stalinist propaganda was the cult of personality. This was inherently amusing because it made a patently absurd proposition: that the flesh and blood human beings who ruled the Party, a gang of fat infantile middle-aged mediocrities, were gods on earth.<sup>56</sup> Mocking this whilst feigning obedience was child's play. Stalin's portrait would be hung up in the toilet. The smelliest farmyard animals would be named after Party bigwigs. And the leader

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<sup>53</sup> On this subject see J. Brooks, *Thank You, Comrade Stalin! Soviet Public Culture from Revolution to Cold War* (Princeton UP, 1999), passim.

<sup>54</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*. Trans. James Strachey (New York, 1960).

<sup>55</sup> S. Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism* (Oxford UP, 1999), p.3.

<sup>56</sup> For a contemporary example see Parker and Stone's sublime depiction of Korean dictator Kim Jong Il in the film *Team America: World Police* (2004).

cults provided ideal stock characters for jokes (Stalin the psychopath, Leonid Brezhnev the lazy bureaucrat, Khrushchev the clown, Iron Felix the ignorant fanatic and so forth). They were perfect shorthand for satirising not just the political system but also the human condition.<sup>57</sup> The revival of the cult of personality in recent years has triggered a renaissance in old style *anekdoty* in Russia, as this joke accompanying an article on Putin as *Time* magazine's 'Man of the Year 2007' shows:

Stalin's ghost appears to Putin in a dream, and Putin asks for his help running the country. Stalin says, 'Round up and shoot all the democrats, and then paint the inside of the Kremlin blue.' 'Why blue?' Putin asks. 'Ha!' says Stalin, 'I knew you wouldn't ask me about the first part.'<sup>58</sup>

### **The failure of the Soviet experiment**

Martin Amis, in his rather unorthodox biography of Stalin, observed that laughter is the crucial difference between Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union:

it has always been possible to joke about the Soviet Union, just as it has never been possible to joke about Nazi Germany. This is not merely a question of decorum. In the German case, laughter automatically absents itself. *Pace* Adorno, it was not poetry that became impossible after Auschwitz. What became impossible was laughter. In the Soviet case on the other hand, laughter intransigently refuses to absent itself. Immersion in the facts of the Bolshevik catastrophe may make this increasingly hard to accept, but such an immersion will never cleanse the catastrophe of laughter.<sup>59</sup>

Most of the ingredients of Soviet comedy described above could be applied to the Nazis: an inferior culture vanquishing their betters, a new order, widespread terror and absurd personality cults. So why are jokes about the Nazis far more limited in their scope?<sup>60</sup> Amis seems to find this difference inexplicable. Yet there is an obvious reason why laughter refuses to absent itself in the Soviet case: in contrast to the Nazis, Communism's failure was total, it collapsed from within. Fascism needed intervention from without to fall. This joke can illustrate the point:

A doctor, a civil engineer and a Communist Party official are sitting in a pub arguing about whose job is the most important. The doctor says 'It is we physicians who came first in the

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<sup>57</sup> Eg, see D. Sturman, "Soviet Joking Matters: Six Leaders in Search of Character." *Survey*, vol. 28, no. 3 (Autumn 1984), pp.205-20.

<sup>58</sup> 'Adi Ignatius, 'A Tsar Is Born.' *Time*, 31 Dec. 2007, p.42. Putin is described in the interview as 'sardonic but humourless'.

<sup>59</sup> Martin Amis, *Koba the Dread: Laughter and the Twenty Million* (New York, 2002), p.12.

<sup>60</sup> Yes we have learned to laugh at the Nazis, but only at *aspects* of the Third Reich, and it took more than twenty years after the war as the threat of fascist revival receded for this to happen. Mel Brooks' 1968 film *The Producers* opened a comic vein last seen in Charlie Chaplin's *The Great Dictator* (1940). Hitler has become a stock character of British comedy since Monty Python's 'Mr Hilter' [sic] and his attempt to win the North Minehead bi-election. Hitler was clearly the basis of other British television characters such as Basil Fawlty, Mr Mackay in *Porridge* and Blakey in *On the Buses*.

world. Look at the Bible: Who do you think created Eve from Adam's rib?' 'Nonsense,' says the engineer. 'We technicians came first. Who do you think created order out of chaos?' 'You are both wrong,' says the Communist. 'Who do you think created chaos in the first place?'

If we were to substitute 'Communist' with the word 'Fascist' it would no longer be funny. The ruthless efficiency of Nazi brutality negates laughter. Stalin's purges were just as brutal, yet so inept that historians still can't agree on why they took place. Skodas, Ladas and Trabants are funny, Panzer tanks are not. Another Russian surreal classic sums up the tragic incompetence of Stalinism:

The head of the secret police, Ezhov visits the noted genetic scientist Lysenko. The scientist explains that they are having problems with the latest impossible task set by Stalin: to mutate the genes of a rabbit and turn it into an elephant. Ezhov boasts that the NKVD has the best scientists in the world. 'Give me the rabbit' he says, 'and our scientists will solve the problem.'

A month later Lysenko goes to see Ezhov in the Lubianka. 'How is it going?' he asks. 'The job is done,' crows Ezhov, '100% success. We have turned the rabbit into an elephant.' 'This I have to see,' says Lysenko. And so Ezhov leads him to a vast cavernous dungeon, large enough to hold a whole herd of elephants. In the gloom some distance away Lysenko can just about make out a tiny white creature. It is the same rabbit holding his head and screaming, 'I'm an elephant! I'm an elephant!'

The Bolsheviks claimed that their revolution was the greatest endeavour in human history: the Promethean appliance of science in pursuit of earthly paradise. And yet it failed in the most spectacular fashion possible, instead of Utopia they got the Gulag, Biblical famine and Borat.<sup>61</sup> 'If you had to define humour in a single phrase,' Orwell wrote, 'you might define it as dignity sitting on a tinctack. Whatever destroys dignity, and brings down the mighty from their seats, preferably with a bump, is funny. And the bigger the fall, the bigger the joke. It would be better fun to throw a custard pie at a bishop than a curate.'<sup>62</sup>

### **What are we laughing at?**

When we laugh at the custard-caked bishop what exactly are we laughing at? Jewish victims of the Holocaust did in fact develop humour similar to Soviet *anekdoty* in response to the Nazi tyranny.<sup>63</sup> Yet Holocaust humour never gained the same kind of global currency. Why not? Probably because anti-Nazi jokes are about the 'other': victims in the camps are poking fun at a regime that they were never a part of and never could be. This is a deeply exclusive kind of

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<sup>61</sup> For a Canadian take on this watch SCTV's 3CP1 on YouTube from 1981-2. It is a precursor of the humour of Borat.

<sup>62</sup> 'Funny, But not Vulgar', *Leader Magazine*, 28 July 1945, in George Orwell, *Essays*, p. 781

humour. Consequently, those who were not victims of the Holocaust don't always feel entitled to laugh along with the victims' jokes. The same logic can be applied to the polar opposite of Jewish Holocaust humour: the bullying gags of the Stalin regime. They also fail to provoke laughter because it is the aggressive comedy of 'us versus them': the Stalinists laughed, but their victims, like Bukharin, did not; and we outsiders are also not amused.

Underground Soviet *anekdoty* on the other hand were told by law-abiding citizens, participants of the Stalin revolution (even Stalin, as noted, found these jokes amusing). They were poking fun at *their own* revolution.<sup>64</sup> This explains their broad appeal in Soviet society. But why, long after the death of Stalin, do Soviet *anekdoty* still amuse us? The answer again is linked to the perspective of 'us' and 'them'. Communism, like Western liberalism, was a child of the Enlightenment; fascism on the other hand was a deliberate rejection of Reason. Soviet jokes are still topical and still make us laugh because they satirize ideals we share with the Soviets (at least in their abstract forms), such as materialism, rationalism, technology, and above all else 'progress'. A hateful person slipping on a banana skin provokes the unnatural laughter of triumph. When someone with whom we empathize slips it provokes the natural laughter of defeat. Twenty-first century office drones can replace 'Communist' with the name of their boss and most *anekdoty* still work. Soviet jokes still have the power to make us laugh because they are descriptions of humanity's struggle to come to terms with modernity and the limits of human endeavour. They follow Henri Bergson's definition of humour as man versus machine. 'What are you laughing at?' The Governor in the final scene of Gogol's *Inspector General* asks and answers the question: 'you are laughing at yourselves.'<sup>65</sup>

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<sup>63</sup> Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ, 1993).

<sup>64</sup> Jokes in this sense were more reformist than revolutionary and need not be taken as showing irreconcilable hostility to the regime. For example, a US project of interviews with former Soviet citizens just after the Second World War found a 'general congruence between popular values and the goals the system purports to pursue.' Quoted in S. Davies, *op. cit.*, p.185, from R. Bauer, A. Inkeles & C. Kluckhohn, *How the Soviet System Works* (Harvard UP, 1956).

<sup>65</sup> This article was completed thanks to funding from the Carnegie Trust for the Universities of Scotland.