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ANTI-STALINIST HUMOR OF THE 1930S: LIFE-DEATH JOKES

In the 1931 introduction to the novel, *The Golden Calf*, Il'f and Petrov described their conversation with a certain "severe citizen." Having heard that the authors had written a funny novel, he was terrified and responded: "It is a sin to laugh. … When I see our new life and our progress, I do not feel like laughing at all. I feel like praying." (8)

This citizen expressed the official attitude towards satire at the time. Indeed, by the beginning of the 1930s, literary satire started to disappear from Soviet literature. Satire, however, did not vanish from unofficial Russian culture. Moreover, at the beginning of the 1930s, political satirical jokes *(анекдоты)*, multiplied like mushrooms after rain. Many foreign journalists and writers reported with admiration that the exchange of new political jokes constituted a part of everyday life in Moscow and other big cities. One such journalist retold an anti-Stalinist joke for readers of *The Saturday Evening Post* in a 1931 issue of that publication and, subsequently, was expelled from the Soviet Union later that same year. (Grady, 14-15) Nadezhda Mandelstam noted that in the 1930s underground humor, *anekdoty* served as the only response to public life in the Soviet Union. (108)

While jokes and humor traditionally belong to popular culture, political jokes in Stalinist Russia belong to folklore insofar as joke telling and listening to jokes were both forbidden activities. As is almost universally the case with folklore, authorship of the jokes is impossible to attribute. In the big cities the intelligentsia cultivated an environment in which political humor flourished. Nevertheless, political jokes appeared in all levels of Soviet society. Consistent rumors circulated that even members of Stalin's inner circle, for example, Karl Radek, composed anti-Stalinist jokes. One of the jokes reflects these rumors:

> Once Stalin summoned Radek to his office.
>
> "Comrade Radek, people say that you tell jokes about me. Don't forget, I am the leader of the world revolution."
>
> "I am sorry," Radek says, "but the joke that you are the leader of the world revolution is not mine." (Andreevich, 67)[1]

[1] While many collections of Soviet jokes have been published in the last fifteen to twenty years and even more have appeared on the Internet recently, for this paper I rely on older and more authentic

Anti-Stalinist humor of the 1930s features jokes that employ the life-death opposition, which I call life-death jokes. While the theme of death is rather common for humor, it was applied to specific human experiences of the 1930s, namely famine during collectivization, and arrests and persecution of common people. Jokes about the food shortage in stores or the shortage of living space also sometimes included the theme of death. Death in these jokes added a philosophical dimension. There were also jokes about Stalin himself. Indeed, as true political satire, the jokes aim at a ruler and his rule.

How does this humor work? According to Arthur Koestler, humor in a joke depends on bisociation, i.e. on the combination of incompatible frameworks. It is important that these frameworks constitute binary oppositions. (36) The linguist Victor Raskin maintains that these binary oppositions (he calls them "scripts") include such categories as real/unreal, true/false, good/bad, death/life, etc. (100-101) The opposition and at the same time overlap of these contexts within these categories create humor.

The life-death opposition from Raskin's list could be applied to political humor of Stalin's time. Moreover, it constitutes a model for political jokes of Stalin's time. Here is an example:

> "How is your life?" one man asks the other.
> "Like Lenin's in the Mausoleum."
> "Why like Lenin's?"
> "They neither feed us nor bury us." (Muzychenko, 6; Antisovetskie, 9)

Life and death constitute a binary opposition, but the anonymous authors of this joke found common ground where Lenin's death and the life of the Soviet people unexpectedly become similar. In this joke both opposing contexts seem to be ambiguous. Indeed, Lenin's death is not a real death, because he is not buried properly. The life of a person is not real life, because people are not fed (reference here to the food shortage). Between life and death the unexpected coincidence of two realities takes place and humor emerges. Moreover, Lenin's death and his posthumous existence in the Moscow Mausoleum often served as the background to describe the life of a Soviet person in jokes. Whereas in this joke Lenin's existence in the Mausoleum mirrors the miserable life of the Soviet people, in the following joke about the shortage of the living space Lenin's 'life after death' is presented as enviable:

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sources. Some collections published abroad by representatives of the World War II 'displaced persons' proved to be the most reliable sources in terms of dates. Most of their jokes were circulated not later than 1940. (Muzychenko; Antisovetskie; Andreevich) It seems that Muzychenko and Antisovetskie collections were compiled by the same person. Published in the German camps in the 1944, Muzychenko's collection, however, contains a lot of anti-Semitic material. In addition to these collections I used published diaries, memoirs, and accounts by foreign correspondents. All translations from Russian and editing of the jokes are mine.

After visiting the new Lenin Mausoleum designed by architect Shusev one inhabitant of a cramped communal apartment exclaims, "Wow, what a life!" (Sokolova2, 369)

The anonymous authors of jokes often use the slogans and terms of Stalin's policies in an ambiguous way so that they may be perceived within a life-death opposition. Thus in one joke Stalin's concept of "tempo" of the industrialization reveals two opposing meanings. The authors of the joke use the positive official meaning of "tempo" in terms of technological progress and they also use it negatively as movement towards famine and death during collectivization.

A collective farmer comes to visit Kalinin in the Kremlin. He asks Kalinin what this tempo means, since it is written about it in all the newspapers.

"Well, you see," Kalinin looked out the window and pointed at the street, where a truck stands. "Tomorrow there will be a hundred trucks. In a year there will be many thousands of trucks. In one more year even a million of trucks. This is tempo, comrade."

The collective farmer returns to the village. At a meeting of collective farmers, his fellow peasants ask him to explain what tempo means.

"Well," — he looks out the window. "Do you see a grave and a cross at the cemetery? Tomorrow there will be a hundred graves. In a year there will be many thousands. In yet another year there will be a million graves. This is tempo, comrades." (Andreevich, 51)

In the next example, the creators of the joke translate the official notion of the Five-Year Plan into people's destruction and death caused by its policies:

Lenin got up in his Mausoleum and appears before Stalin as an apparition. Lenin asks Stalin about the five-year plan. "How is it going, Iosif?"

"Very well, indeed," Stalin says.

"What about the people?" Lenin asked.

"The people are with me." Stalin answers.

"What about your plans for the future, Iosif?" Lenin asks.

"We will force another five-year plan." Stalin says.

"What about the people?" Lenin asks again.

"They will be with me." Stalin says with confidence.

"No, this time they will be with me." Lenin answers. (Grady, 15-16)

In this joke Stalin's line, "The people will be with me" indicates mass support of Stalin. The same phrase reverts to a completely opposite meaning within life-death opposition when the anonymous authors switch the speaker of this phrase from Stalin to the apparition of a dead Lenin. In another grim joke arrest, interrogation, and execution belong to the same sequence of essential life events as birth and marriage. Thus, the events of persecution and even execution become parts of human life. The joke summarizes the life of a Soviet citizen through the enumeration of his/her daily activities over the course of a week:

On Monday he was born.
On Tuesday he got married.
On Wednesday he got arrested.
On Thursday he got interrogated.
On Friday he was sentenced.
On Saturday he was shot.
On Sunday he was buried. (Andreevich, 10; Muzychenko, 5)

Indeed, in the jokes of the 1930s, the "death" category most often manifests itself as persecution committed by the Soviet state. The jokes feature different stages of persecution, such as denunciation, arrest, interrogation, imprisonment, torture, execution or any sign recognizable by the audience of the joke as one of these stages. One of the recognizable signs, for example, became "a knock at the door at night," which automatically evokes the whole story of persecution and, ultimately, the death of the victim:

> It is late at night in 1937. Somebody knocks at the door. The husband says farewell to his family, takes his bag and walks to open his door. While already near the door he hears the voice on the other side of the door: "Don't worry. Everything is great. It is just that our whole house is on fire. Everything is great." (Shturman and Tiktin, 301)

The anonymous authors of this joke set a political arrest of the 1930s in the context of universal types of deadly events. The Soviet person's perception of discovering his house on fire is seen as something positive in comparison with arrest by the secret police. This paradox creates humor in the joke. This joke of approximately 1937 recycled an older joke, which appeared a decade earlier, at the NEP time in the 1920s:

> They knock at the Nepman's door. The Nepman, horrified, asks, "Who is that?"
> He hears the voice: "Don't worry. Everything is great. We are not from the GPU. We just came to rob you." (Karachevtsev, 97)

What is the difference between these two versions? Let us assume that both jokes have authors. Thus, in the 1937 version the implied author identifies himself with a common man, the victim of arrest. In the joke of the 1920s the victim is the Nepman, a representative of an often despised social group. Hence there is less sympathy towards the victim of arrest. Consequently, the projected arrest of the Nepman does not seem so terrifying for the author, joke teller or the audience as the arrest of a common person in the 1937 joke.

The jokes about arrests often employ an ambiguity of meaning inherent in Russian verbs. Such Russian verbs as «сидеть» — to sit, to be in prison, or «посадить» — to put somebody on his/her seat or to arrest, «взять» — to take, to arrest — all

double as puns. In Stalin's time, the metaphorical meanings of these verbs, indicating persecution, become dominant in people's perception:

> "How is life?"
> "Like in a tram. Some are sitting (in prison). The rest are shaking (from fear)." (Andreevich, 21)
> «Как жизнь?»
> «Как в трамвае. Одни сидят, другие трясутся».

The expression "like in a tram" in this joke defines simultaneously two opposing realities. One tells the audience of a joke about a tram ride and it belongs to everyday routine, which is the realm of life. The other conveys the atmosphere of fear and arrests. It obviously belongs to the realm of death. The double meaning of the verbs brings these two realities together.

This verb «*сидеть*», "to sit," lent itself most frequently to jokes. For example, here are three two liners:

> "Who sits and makes up all the jokes?"
> "First, one makes up the jokes, and then one sits (goes to prison)."
> «Кто сидит и сочиняет анекдоты?»
> «Сначала сочиняет анекдоты, а потом уже сидит». (Sokolova4, 357)

> "Rabinovich, do you stand for the Soviet power?"
> "Would you rather like me to sit (to be in prison) for it?" (Muzychenko, 11)
> «Рабинович, вы стоите за советскую власть?»
> «А вы хотите, чтоб я за неё сидел?»

> "The sun sat (was taken to prison)."
> "Really? Now, this is too much." (Shturman and Tiktin, 303)
> «Солнышко село».
> «Ну, да?! Это уже слишком».

There is a joke that uses different meanings of the verb «взять». Around 1938 during the Spanish Civil War Soviet newspapers announced that Spanish Republicans took the city, Saragossa:

> "Did you hear that they took Saragossa?"
> "With her husband?"
> "No, Saragossa is a town."
> "Do they take (arrest) whole towns now?" (Andreevich, 77)

So far we have looked at examples in which the anonymous authors of jokes played with the meanings of the verbs indicating persecution. But in addition to manipulating the meaning of verbs indicating persecution, these authors also

manipulated direct objects of these verbs, the victims of arrest. The jokes often created comic situations by extending the circle of victims into the sphere of the fantastic. For example, they set famous people from the historical and literary past in the context of the arrests of the 1930s. Pushkin often served as a victim of Stalin's regime. Indeed, the common reference to Pushkin's monument in everyday speech ("I will be near Pushkin," "I will go to Pushkin's") served to reinforce his role as a common target of the persecution in the 1930s. There is a joke about one of Pushkin's first encounters with Stalin's secret police:

> Pushkin's monument disappeared.
> "Where have you been, Alexander Sergeevich?"
> In the GPU. They wanted to know the whereabouts of the Covetous Knight. (Sokolova1, 368)

New wave of jokes featuring Pushkin appeared around 1937. Indeed, besides being the peak year of the Great Terror, 1937 marked the 100th anniversary of Pushkin's death:

> If Pushkin had lived in the twentieth century, he still would have been killed in '37. (Sokovova3, 364)

The joke that follows unfolds this witty remark into a more developed plot. In this joke Pushkin's death in a duel in 1837 is translated into the events of Stalin's time, specifically into Stalin's secret plot to kill Pushkin with the help of Pushkin's real killer, d'Anthes. This joke surfaced not in the 1930s, but around 1949, the year of the 150th Jubilee honoring Pushkin's birth. While I did not find a 1930s version of this joke, there are some indications that jokes involving a similar relationship between Stalin and Pushkin existed in the 1930s. Here is, however, the 1949 joke:

> Pushkin came to visit Stalin.
> "How can I help you?" Stalin asked.
> "Well, I do not have a place to live."
> Stalin dials the number of the Moscow Council.
> "Pushkin is here in my office. I want the best apartment for him."
> "What else, Comrade Pushkin?"
> "They don't publish me," says Pushkin.
> Stalin dials again. "Is this the Writers' Union? Pushkin is here in my office. I want you to publish his work in as many copies as possible."
> Pushkin thanks Stalin and leaves the office. Stalin again dials a number and says. "Comrade d'Anthes? Pushkin has just left my office." (Sturman and Tiktin, 219)

Clearly, this kind of culturally loaded joke worked especially well in literary and artistic circles. Moreover, some writers made up short poems, oral tales or just

uttered witty phrases, which functioned in Soviet society like the jokes. In 1933, playwrights Nikolai Erdman and Vladimir Mass were arrested for their satirical fables. Following their arrest their new fable featuring Aesop, though clearly reflective of their own fate, came into circulation:

> The GPU came to Aesop and grabbed the old man by the ass. The moral is obvious. No more fables! (Sokolova2, 373)

Mass' and Erdman's friends apparently reacted to their arrest with another poem/joke. This time the victim of arrest was a monument to Krylov in the Summer Garden in Leningrad:

> The GPU went to arrest a monument, but the bronze monument said: "No way, I am heavier than Mass and Erdman. You will not be able to lift me." (Sokolova2, 374)

We can find traces of these jokes in Mikhail Bulgakov's novel, *Master and Margarita*. Bulgakov posits arrests and interrogations involving famous people of the nineteenth century in the setting of the 1930s. Moreover, he sets these names in an ambiguous context so that they are governed by verbs indicating persecution. When, for instance, Bezdomnyi hears from Woland that the philosopher Kant proved God's existence, Bezdomnyi makes the following suggestions in the spirit of his time: "They ought to take this Kant and give him a three-year stretch in Solovki for such proofs." The same Bezdomnyi chases Woland, looking for him in the Griboedov House of Writers. He states, "I will search Griboedov." («Сейчас я обыщу Грибоедова»)

The circle of victims of arrests and persecution in the anti-Stalinist jokes includes not only human beings from the past, but even animals. Using animals, of course, serves as a common device for satirical representation. In these jokes, however, only the victims are presented as animals, while the executioners such as the GPU, Bolsheviks etc. are human beings. Persecution often is rendered by verbs indicating some physical or sexual abuse: castration, rape, beating, breaking of the spine, etc. These verbs also serve as metaphors for persecution in the jokes. Consider this joke, for instance.

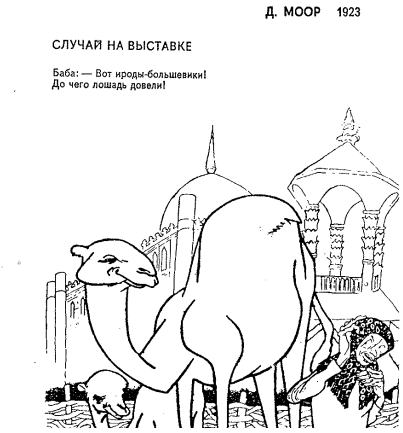
> Trying to leave the Soviet Union, a rabbit ran to the Soviet-Polish border. The rabbit was caught and asked about his motives.
>
> "You know, the GPU is going to arrest and castrate all of the camels," rabbit said.
>
> "But you are not a camel."
>
> "After they catch you and castrate you, try then to prove that you are not a camel."(Andreevich, 73)

Incidentally, the phrase, "prove that you are not a camel" came to mean in contemporary language "impossible to prove the obvious." Here is another camel

joke of the 1930s in which physical abuse of the animal serves as a metaphor of persecutions of Stalin's time.

> An old woman looking at a camel in the zoo says:
> "Look what these Bolsheviks did to a poor horse!" (Andreevich, 27; Antisovetskie, 23)

While this particular example constituted a forbidden joke of the early 1930s, the same joke was published in the Soviet satirical journal, *Krokodil*, in 1923. (Abramskii, 12) At that time, however, the target of the satire was an old woman ready to accuse the new regime of everything under the sun. In the early 1930s, however, the Bolshevik regime became the satirical target of the joke, while the camel served as the victim of the regime. In an even later version of the joke, around 1937, the old woman disappears entirely from the joke and the target of Stalin's regime became even more specific. ("What is a camel?" "A horse under interrogation.")



Now I will look at life-death jokes about Stalin. How was Stalin the man presented in anti-Stalinist jokes? In the 1930s the authors of forbidden jokes portrayed Stalin through the reality of death, in the same way they portrayed common people. The most daring jokes subject Stalin to arrest, persecution and death. In this case the notion of Stalin's death pops up unexpectedly. In jokes incorporating the subjunctive mood or ambiguous phrases or a slip of the tongue, Stalin's death manifests itself as wishful thinking. One can argue that killing off a dictator in jokes substitutes for active resistance to his regime.

Such jokes appeared immediately after Lenin's death. At that time they were not directed personally against Stalin, but against the entire Politburo. Here are

two jokes in which Jews, loyal to the regime, express desire for the death of the entire Politburo through ambiguous phrasing. In the first joke Lenin's death again serves as a necessary background:

> After Lenin's death there is a conversation between two party members:
> "Rabinovich, whom do you want to see in Lenin's place?"
> "In Lenin's place? I want to see the entire Politburo in Lenin's place." (Karachevtsev, 75)

> The Soviet commissar is dead. There are funeral processions. Impressed by the expense of the ritual, a Jew asks:
> "What is the cost of these arrangements?"
> "One hundred thousand rubles."
> "Give me ten thousand and I will bury the whole Politburo." (Andreevich 11)

By 1929, which marked the beginning of the cult of Stalin, these jokes usually had a more specific target, Stalin himself. The image of Stalin in these jokes had not yet acquired distinctive characteristics. Rather, Stalin was portrayed in abstract terms through the language, ideas, and imagery of Stalin's cult. This imagery of Stalin's cult creates a positive context which in turn bisociates with the imagery of his projected death and arrest. Figuratively speaking, the higher the cult elevated him, the lower the jokes buried him in his grave.

In 1929, on his fiftieth birthday, Stalin published a note in *Pravda*. It was a thank you note of sorts. Here Stalin expresses his gratitude to all of the organizations and comrades who sent him birthday greetings. He describes his own devotion to the Party by using popular imagery which at that time usually glorified the death of a hero during the Revolution and Civil War. Specifically, he vows to devote "all of his strength and all of his abilities, and, if need be, all of his blood, drop by drop, to the cause of the Communist Party." (Stalin, 140) This proclamation was quoted almost verbatim only to be transformed into this anti-Stalinist joke:

> At a Workers Meeting, Stalin announces that he is ready to give all of his blood, drop by drop, for the sake of the Communist Party. Then he receives a note:
> "Iosif Vissarionovich, why so slow, drop by drop? Give it all at once!" (Antisovetskie, 49)

Consider another joke in which the most common slogan of the Stalin's cult, *Slava Stalinu* (*Слава Сталину!*) (I translated it here as "Thank Stalin") leads to the expressed desire for his death:

> An old woman barely manages to get on board a bus.
> "Thank God," she says.

A young *Komsomol* member turns to her and says, "There is no God, *babushka*. You should say: Thank Stalin."

"You are right, my dear. I am old and not very educated. But tell me, son, God forbid, what if Stalin dies. Whom shall I thank then?"

"Then you can say: Thank God." (Antisovetskie, 53)

A similar sentiment was expressed by a young boy from an orphanage when some high authority visited:

"Tell us who your father is."
"Stalin," answers the boy.
"Who is your mother?"
"Our Soviet Motherland."
"Who do you want to be when you grow up?"
"I want to be an orphan." (Andreevich, 41)

In my last example the joke subjects Stalin to imprisonment.

A collective farmer visits Moscow. He points to the Kremlin walls and asks the passerby.
"What is it?"
"The Kremlin Wall," says the passerby proudly.
"What are these soldiers doing here?"
"They are guards."
"Who is inside these walls?"
"Stalin."
"Good. Now he, son of bitch, will never get out of there." (Andreevich, 52)

Here, the peasant perceives the institution of highest power, the Kremlin, as an institution of the highest oppression (prison during Stalin's time). Hence the dictator and the victim-prisoner reverse their roles, and the distinction and border between highest glorification on one side and imprisonment and destruction on the other vanishes. At least for this joke.

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Борис Брикер

ЮМОР СТАЛИНСКОГО ВРЕМЕНИ: АНЕКДОТЫ-ШУТКИ О ЖИЗНИ И СМЕРТИ

Резюме

В статье исследуются антисталинские политические анекдоты-шутки 30х годов прошлого столетия. Пользуясь теориями комического Кестлера и Раскина, мы выделяем одну группу таких анекдотов, анекдотов о жизни и смерти. По Кестлеру юмор строится по принципу биссоциации — особому взаимодействию в шутке двух контекстов. Эти контексты должны быть по смыслу прямо противоположными друг другу, но в шутке возникает частичное их тождество. Для политического юмора 30х годов такими противоположными контекстами являются категории жизни и смерти. При помощи антонимической пары жизнь-смерть в анекдотах описываются самые острые проблемы в жизни человека сталинскохо времени — преследования, аресты, голод в деревне, квартирный вопрос и дефицит еды и товаров в магазинах.

Boris Briker

HUMOR OKRESU STALINOWSKIEGO: ANEGDOTY O ŻYCIU I ŚMIERCI

Streszczenie

W artykule analizie zostały poddane antystalinowskie dowcipy polityczne lat 30. zeszłego stulecia. Wykorzystując teorie komizmu Kestlera i Ruskina, wyodrębniono jedną z grup dowcipów: o życiu i śmierci. Według Kestlera humor konstruowany jest na zasadzie biasocjacji — szczególnego wzajemnego oddziaływania dwóch kontekstów. Konteksty owe winny być wprost przeciwstawione sobie nawzajem, zaś w dowcipie powstaje częściowa ich tożsamość. Dla humoru politycznego lat 30. takimi przeciwstawnymi kontekstami są kategorie życia i śmierci. Za pomocą owej antynomicznej pary w dowcipach opisywane są najdrażliwsze problemy w życiu ludzi epoki stalinowskiej — prześladowania, areszty, głód na wsi, problem mieszkaniowy i brak żywności oraz towarów w sklepach.