

FOLK HUMOR OF POST-SOVIET RUSSIA: A SURVEY

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For most of Communist history, political jokes that Russians avidly exchanged with each other played an important part in Russian private life and became widely known outside of the country through Western press reports. They reflected the true nature of the Soviet system. Externally, they often served as a cold war weapon in public speeches of the American President Ronald Reagan.

A question most often raised today by students of things Russian (and by the Russians themselves) is why this ever-popular joke-telling has almost disappeared from everyday speech. I will attempt to answer this question by analyzing the nature of joke-telling as it was practiced in the former Soviet Union.

First of all, telling anti-Soviet jokes served more than the purpose of venting frustration over lack of freedom: after all, Russia had little of it under the tsars. As Sergey Averintsev, points out, Russian laughter has always possessed a peculiar quality: in order to function, it almost asks to be tabooed. In Averintsev's view, as he discusses the Russian notion that "it is funny, and yet it is sinful to laugh at [something] (*и смех и грех*), Russian laughter, unlike its Western variety, tends to take place not at the time when social or religious license permits it, but when it is inappropriate, not so much by external societal or religious prohibitions, but by the laughing individual's own sense of such inappropriateness. (In connection with this notion, a contemporary Russian proverb comes to mind: "if it's forbidden, but you want it badly-- then it's OK [to do it]" (*если нельзя, но очень хочется--то можно*). The Russians are aware of this trait of their national character and laugh at their "strange," from the Western point of view, inclination to act contrary to what is expected of them:

British sociologists are conducting an experiment: "What will it take to make an American, a Frenchman, and a Russian jump off the bridge into the Thames River?" They tell the American that the company he owns has gone bankrupt. Splash!

They tell the Frenchman that his lover was killed in an automobile accident. Splash!

Then, they approach the Russian, who has neither a business, nor a lover. They tell him: "Comradel It's illegal to jump off bridges in our country" "Oh, yeah? Well, here is what I think about your frigging laws!" Splash!

Thus, one of the factors that has contributed to the demise of joke-telling in Russia lies in the fact that, with the end of the state Communist ideology, the threat of repression for telling political jokes vanished. The forbidden fruit became permitted, thus losing its lure. The following item of the time of perestroika reflects the change in attitude toward political joke-telling:

A man walks up to a Russian militia man. "Like to hear a political joke?" he asks.

You must be out of your mind. Don't you realize I'm a militia man?"

"I know that. So I'm going to tell you the joke twice... and very slowly."

The demise of the genre of oral political humor in today's Russia can also be explained by the active participation of the practically uncensored Russian press in current political discourse, and its open criticism of those in power. Under these circumstances, as in other countries with active media (the US, for example), political humor has become much less common in the private life of Russians than it was in the former Soviet Union. Another important factor of the decline in Russian political joke-telling has to do with the condition of cohesiveness between a joke and its social references as a prerequisite of its perception, as the anthropologist Mary Douglas observed: "The joke works only when it mirrors social form; it exists by virtue of its congruence with social structure." In other words, for a joke to "fly" there should be a clear picture of "who is who" in the minds of both the teller and the hearer.

In Brezhnev's time, known as the period of stagnation, in addition to the total disillusionment with the system that the jokes implied, oral political folk humor flourished because all social stereotypes were easily and immediately recognizable. The demarcation line between the oppressed masses ('us') and a small, but privileged, Communist party elite ('them') was crystal clear in people's mind, thus making oral political satire right on target. With the collapse of the Soviet system and the ensuing political

power struggle at the top, the targets of folkloric satirical attacks became rather blurred. This fuzziness of the political picture, the lack of clarity about who is who in the country is a background against which in the following bit of Russian oral humor a fictitious situation is perceived by the listeners as at least marginally plausible. Under circumstances of total confusion and disorientation of the Russian population with its ever-changing political situation no development seems too bizarre and strange anymore:

Returning from one of his state visits, Yeltsin was hurrying to a cabinet session. In his opinion, the driver was going too slow. Yeltsin pushed him to the back seat and took his place behind the wheel. A few minutes later, a traffic cop stopped him for speeding. After a moment he reported over his radio phone:

"I can't give him a ticket. He's too big a big shot."

"Who is he?" asked police headquarters.

"I don't know, but Yeltsin works for him as a chauffeur."

After about a five year hiatus, when the Russian political situation became clearer, if not happier, new Russian humorous tales began to be spun. They portrayed the new, rather grim, reality. As would be expected, pessimistic and cynical jokes began to make the rounds among Russians. The following items refer to the harsh predicament of a large group of people, the Russian senior citizens, who have suffered the most during the on-going transition of the country to a market economy, resulting in quickly-rising prices for food and other necessities:

They asked a pensioner about his life.

"It's so-so. I don't eat breakfast. For dinner, I have a cup of tea with a piece of bread. And for supper I eat something lighter."

"Did you hear? They've introduced new benefits for retired people."

"You don't say! What?"

"Things like being able to stand under a crane, to lean on automatic elevator doors, to cross the street on red..."

This unhappiness on the part of a rather large portion of Russian population is mostly responsible for the introduction of the theme of nostalgia for Soviet times:

Lenin got resurrected. He looked about him, read the new newspapers press and new books and disappeared. They found him at a railroad station with a little suitcase. They asked him, "Where are you heading, Vladimir Il'ich?" "Into exile, my little father, into exile. Everything has to be done all over again..."

The following item refers to a set phrase of official announcements about lowering government prices for "items of first necessity," a measure undertaken by Communist propaganda during the late Stalin and early post-Stalin years. Meager in real worth for the population, these widely publicized discounts were designed to give some hope to the Soviet people whose standard of living, never very high, was totally devastated by World War II:

"Why has life become so much more expensive?"
"Because life stopped being an item of first necessity."

With the increased stabilization of the political picture in the post-Soviet period, Russian jokes about the country's leaders reappeared. Looking at several Yeltsin jokes, one can notice a rather drastic change from the all-out support of the first years of his ascendance to power to a rather denigrating attitude toward him in most recent times. For example, the following joke, collected in 1990, made the rounds under Gorbachev when Yeltsin stood out as the only man who cared about the well-being of the Russian people. One can feel on the part of the Russian folk an almost a loving attitude towards a man who seemed to almost single-handedly to be fighting for a better life for his people:

During one of the Supreme Soviet sessions, a group of soldiers with automatic rifles in hand, ready to dispose of enemies in the Soviet quasi-parliament, bursts into the hall: "Who is Yeltsin?"
Everyone pointed to him.
"Boris Nikolaevich, please get out of the way!"

Compare this with an item of more recent times, which reflects the people's disappointment with Yeltsin's government, which despite many failures (high inflation rate, the unpopular war with Chechnia, pauperization of the general population -- to name a few) refused to admit its own faults:

Three mothers chat while taking a stroll with their babies. "I'm sure my boy is going to be a doctor. Look how carefully he examines his pinkie!"

"And mine will be an engineer," says another woman.

"Look how swiftly he handles the shiny bar on his stroller."

"And mine is going to be this country's President. He's in shit all over, but still he carries his little head proudly."

To the same end, even folk humor with its flight of satirical fancy finds it hard to compete with the zany real life escapades of the notorious and scandalous member of the Russian parliament, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy. It is enough to recall his campaign's promise to give every Russian woman a husband and every Russian man a bottle of vodka, or his announcement about his readiness to father a child in each of the fifteen former Soviet republics. Some of his pronouncements sound like joke punch-lines. Attempting to hide his half-Jewish origin from inquisitive journalists, he answered their question about his nationality: "My mother is an ethnic Russian and my father is a lawyer." Very few jokes about Zhirinovskiy can rival his own antics as reported in the press. Here is one such joke that is hard to distinguish from his real-life escapades:

A BBC correspondent wants to ask Zhirinovskiy one question. His secretary replied that Vladimir Vol'fovich will answer for 3,000 dollars. The correspondent pays and asks: "The whole world is interested to know who finances your election campaign."

Zhirinovskiy: "They brought me money in a briefcase."

"Who did it?"

"That's already the second question."

In recent years, a gradual coagulation of new social types provided contemporary Russian joke-tellers new targets. Due to the appearance of these types, Russian folk humor slowly acquired a much more pronounced presence than it had in the preceding years of social destabilization. Perhaps the most biting satire of recent times is directed at the newly-born social type nicknamed "the New Russians." In contemporary jokes, they are stereotyped as spendthrifts, bragging about their wealth and buying power. Their thoroughly materialistic approach to life, their acquisitiveness and greed, their love for anything big,

expensive, or fashionable independent of aesthetic value, their smugness, and feeling of invincibility due to their material status are laughed at in the following samples:

Two Russian businessmen meet in Paris on the Champs Elysées and show off their newly bought clothes. "Look at my new tie!" says one. "I bought it at Pierre Cardin for \$500."

"Big deal, I bought one just like that for \$1,500 just around the corner."

A New Russian is standing on the beach. A golden fish swam up to him. And the new Russian says to it: "So, what's your wish?"

As with other envied groups in the past, such as the Communist party elite, the New Russians are portrayed as stupid, crude, and boorish, having low cultural awareness:

A New Russian comes to a museum and points to a Chagall miniature picture.

"I want to buy it," he says to the attendant.

"Are you crazy? It belongs to the museum!"

"How much?"

"It's not for sale."

"Is twenty thousand dollars enough?"

"How dare you!"

"Forty thousand. Call your director."

The attendant calls the director, then says: "He said, for sixty thousand dollars you can have it."

The New Russian pays and gets into his car. His wife calls him on cellular phone: "Where are you? We'll be late to the birthday party."

"It's OK, dear, don't worry. I'll buy a present on my way home. I just picked up a greeting card."

A New Russian walks with his son, passing a painter who is painting a street view. The father says to his son: "If you won't listen to me and become a person of means, you may wind up doing this instead of clicking a Polaroid."

They are also shown as morally corrupt and absolutely unscrupulous. The implication of such jokes is that the New

Russians do not deserve their wealth, that their success is a matter of either dumb luck or thuggery, but certainly not of competence and hard work: ,

One New Russian tells another: "I have a problem, what to do for my vacation."

"Fly around the world."

"I've done that twice. Boring."

"Why don't you go snorkeling?"

"I've done it. It's boring after a while."

"Why don't you do a safari?"

"What's that?"

"You sit in a four-wheel-drive car, go through a terrain and shoot whatever you feel like shooting."

"What's the thrill? Isn't that the same thing I do on the job?"

A New Russian gets an offer from the devil. "You want my soul? And in return I get \$1 million?" the business man says, dumbfounded. "What's the catch?"

A New Russian comes home in the morning and says to his wife: "I'm very sorry, dear, but you'll have to move to another man. I lost you to him in a card game."

"You lost me?! Oh God, how could you!!!"

"How, how! Very simple: I didn't notice his king of spades."

The social tension between the joke-tellers and the New Russians is often relieved by laughter targeted at the new class' pretension at refinement which does not exist in fact:

Two New Russians are riding in a taxi and talking. "Can you imagine, Vassily, yesterday I was at a party at the Ivanovs and they used the same spoon for salad and soup."

"That's nothing," says the other one. "Last week, I was a party at the Petrovs, and they offered the same little fork for lemon and for sardines."

The taxi driver chimes in: "I'm sorry, gentlemen, is it OK that I'm turning my back to you while I'm driving?"

As is known from news reports from Russia, organized crime occupies a considerable amount of public attention. Current Russian jokes reflect this:

A client approaches a co-operative of hit men. "How much would you pay for a hit?" they ask.

"Five thousand bucks."

"What's the address?"

"25 Tverskoi boulevard, apartment number..."

"That's enough! For that kind of money you don't need to tell us which apartment."

Another joke implies the Russians' lack of professionalism in the newly-acquired trade of contract killings:

It's 6 PM, and two hired killers are waiting for their victim at the entrance to a luxurious apartment building. Ten minutes pass, and the two are still waiting. One looks at his watch anxiously and says: "Something terrible must have happened. I'm really worried about him."

(This joke is an altered version of a Jewish joke of the Nazi period about an attempt on Hitler's life by two brave, but soft-hearted, Jews.)

Some current jokes reflect the growing popularity of bodybuilding among Russian youth and their tendency to show off their physical prowess. This type of youth is nicknamed "kachki" from the Russian verb "kachat" -- to pump [in this case, muscles]. Jokes about them imply that such preoccupation with the physical often is at the expense of intellectual development.

On a city bus, an old woman asks a bodybuilder in front of her:

"Are you getting out at the next stop?"

"Yes."

"What about these five people in front of you, are they also getting out?"

"They are. They just don't know it yet."

As the unclear political picture became a hindrance for satirizing in an upward direction, the new Russian folk humor began to shift its attention downward, to the lower social stratum. Many Russian jokes of the post-Soviet era show a tendency to resort to the ancient Aesopian type of tales in which

the downtrodden and utterly powerless behave as winners over the powerful in real life. These jokes are double-edged. On one hand, they satirize the pretense of the impotent to appear on equal terms with the mighty of the world. By pitting insects against huge mammals, they underscore the hopelessness of the underdog's position, its mission impossible. On the other hand, these tales demonstrate an undying will to preserve the dignity of the weak even under the most adverse situations.

Ants and elephants were playing soccer. The elephants trampled and crushed half of the ants. Those that survived the game were sitting in the locker room, wiping off their sweat and fanning themselves.

An elephant paid them a visit:

"Please guys, forgive us! We didn't want it to be that way."

"It's OK," the ants said. "We also played tough today."

Two fleas come out of a restaurant.

"So," one of them asks another, "should we walk or should we wait for a dog?"

A little worm is crying and asks his mother: "Mommy, Mommy, and where's my Daddy?"

"Be quiet! Your Daddy went fishing with some men."

As we can see, Russian folk humor is still alive and well. Its revival gives hope that common sense will eventually prevail and Russia will become a truly democratic country. We may then see those wonderful jokes disappear. But, then, this loss can be considered a small price to pay for a life of social peace and prosperity.

Emil A. Draitser is the author of Forbidden Laughter: Soviet Underground Jokes, Techniques of Satire: The Case of Saltykov-Schedrin, and the forthcoming Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia (Wayne State UP, July 1998). Currently, he is finishing a book-length manuscript on gender and sexuality in Russian humor.