

Humor as Political Protest

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Humor historically has been the most popular and widespread form of political protest in Russia and the former Soviet Union. Political humor usually has a very short lifespan, especially when compared to classic jokes about wives and lovers, mothers-in-law and enemies. Nevertheless, in Russia, these jokes stay as topical and valid today as they were under Mikhail Gorbachev or Leonid Brezhnev. Simply changing the name of the main character to present-day figures or occurrences convinces one that the situation that gave birth to these anecdotes continues to be Russian reality.

Once it appears, a joke will quickly spread across the country through any difficulty or distance. With unusual efficiency and speed, a joke becomes relevant to millions of people, yet no one, including the KGB, can ever trace it back to the author. The creator always remains a mystery, and thanks to that these authors remain free. “My mouth is my enemy” has been a general rule of survival that has come to life from the laws created by the communist regime. Regardless, these anecdotes are a means of social expression that no dictator could stop.

Political satire is a very social thing. To seem funny and pitiful in the eyes of most of the public is near death for a politician. Ridicule is absolutely deadly, politically speaking. The Soviet government feared jokes like the plague and constantly battled this “disease.” There was even a joke about the regime’s fear of jokes: The Soviets held a secret contest for the best joke. First prize was twenty-five years in jail, second was twenty years and third was fifteen. For jokes about Lenin, the grand prize was execution.

A short joke could obliterate the enormous propaganda efforts of the Marxist-Leninist ideologists in their attempt to create fearless, obedient Soviet citizens. In the days of Stalin, a joke teller could, under the infamous Article 58 of the criminal code (anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda), receive from ten years in a prison camp to *vishki*—death. Later, the regime lightened the punishment for those accused of the “deliberate spreading of untrue ideas contrary to the Soviet government and social structure” to a mere three years in prison.

None of this could stop the people from ridiculing the stupidity of those in authority, the idiocy of the regime, and the feebleness of the politicians. As people’s lives became more difficult and public opinion got angrier, political humor carried more weight and those in power feared it more.

So fearful were Kremlin leaders about jokes that even during *glasnost* they used the judicial system to prosecute those who would “offend the dignity” of President Gorbachev. President Boris Yeltsin signed a law in

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1992 making it a crime for a citizen to "offend the honor or dignity" of officers of the renamed KGB. Only last year, federal prosecutors filed criminal charges against producers of the television program *Kukly*, which satirized the current political scene using puppets as caricatures of President Yeltsin, Prime Minister Viktor Chernomyrdin, and some of the shadowy KGB generals in the president's inner circle.

Yet even the butts of the jokes, at the darkest of times, seemed to find them funny, at least in private. KGB officers, whose responsibility included battling politically incorrect humor, gladly told similar jokes in their own private circles. It has been said that even Stalin would occasionally ask someone from his staff to relate some current anecdotes. Sometimes, to the doubtless relief of his aides, he would even take on the role of storyteller himself. Brezhnev, too, loved jokes. It has been said that he had a collection of them big enough to fill three camps. In a recent interview, Gorbachev admitted that he likes to tell and listen to jokes, especially those about himself. He told the interviewer his favorite:

Two men are in line waiting to buy vodka. An hour goes by, then two, and the line barely moves. Everyone is in a terrible mood. Finally, one of the men can't take it any longer. "This is it! I'm sick of this kind of life. Everywhere there are lines, you cannot buy anything, and the store shelves are empty. All of this is because of Gorbachev and his stupid perestroika. I've had enough. I'm going to the Kremlin right now to assassinate him." The man returns after two hours, still angry, and says, "To hell with it! At the Kremlin the line to assassinate Gorbachev is longer than this one."

An effective way of measuring real political and social change in grass-roots Russia is to examine what new political jokes are being told or what old ones have been revived. This article offers a small selection.

It is the opening of the Twenty-Sixth Congress of the CPSU. A person walks up on the platform and announces: "Everybody stand up! Carry in the general secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Brezhnev."

Leonid Brezhnev is on television and says: "In Moscow there is someone spreading a terrible rumor that instead of me, a mannequin is riding around in the back seat of my car. This is completely untrue. The truth is that instead of a mannequin, they are driving me around."

A secretary of the CPSU Central Committee, Mikhail Suslov, calls the director of a *kolkhoz* outside Moscow and tells him that tomorrow an American journalist will be there and they urgently need to spruce up the farm by laying a road, bringing out electricity, installing lights in the buildings, washing the cows, and fixing the roof on the pigsty. The director says there is not nearly enough time to do all of this. "All right," concedes Suslov, "to hell with him, let him slander us."

A geography instructor at a military academy asks the best cadet, "With whom does the Soviet Union border?" The cadet responds, "With whomever it wants."

A teacher in a Soviet provincial day care center tells the children: "The Soviet Union is where the best hospitals are found, the best schools, trains, airplanes, the best factories, the best candy and toys . . ." Some of the children cry out, "We want to live in the Soviet Union!"

Brezhnev arrives in Central Asia. He is welcomed by a huge mob of people in the street. Everybody is chanting, "Salaam Alekham, Leonid Ilyich! Salaam Alekham!"

Brezhnev answers, as he was taught, "Alekham salaam! Alekham salaam!"

Suddenly a dissident jumps out and yells, "Archipelago Gulag!" Brezhnev answers automatically, "Gulag Archipelago!"

A Muscovite watches a communist demonstration next to a large statue of Lenin, upon which is inscribed, *YOU DIED, BUT YOUR WORK WILL LIVE LONG!* A passerby reads the inscription, sighs, and says, "It would have been better had you lived a long time and your work died."

A husband returns home and finds his wife in bed with her lover. "If I wasn't a communist," he exclaims, "I would kill both of you on the spot!"

"Thank God for the Communist Party! Thank God for the Communist Party!"

A Soviet and a Mongolian cosmonaut are giving a press conference after an emergency landing. "Why are your hands blue?" a reporter asks the Mongolian.

"My Soviet partner, throughout the voyage, kept hitting my hands and yelling *don't touch anything!*"

TASS issues a statement: "Yesterday in the Pacific Ocean, an American nuclear submarine sank after a collision with an iceberg. The Soviet government will award medals to the iceberg's crew."

A Soviet citizen throws himself at the car of an American ambassador and slashes a tire. Later, he explains to the police officer: "I wanted to breathe free air."

It is 1982. A Polish man goes to the government bank with 300 zlotys, but he cannot decide if he wants to deposit it. "Why are you so worried?" asks the teller.

"What if you go bankrupt?"

"Your deposit would be insured by the Polish government!"

"What if Poland goes bankrupt?" asks the man, still worried.

"We have the guarantee with the whole socialist bloc backed by the Soviet Union!"

"What if the Soviet Union goes bankrupt?"

"That wouldn't be worth 300 zlotys to you?"

In the fall of 1982, the CPSU Central Committee meets to choose a new general secretary. In walks a KGB officer, who announces, "The votes have been counted. Those of you who voted for Comrade Andropov may lower your hands and walk away from the wall."

What were Brezhnev's last words?

"Comrade Andropov! Don't touch my life support!"

An American tourist asks a Muscovite, "Why is it that no matter how sick he was, Brezhnev always visited other countries and Andropov, sick or not, never leaves the country?"

"That's very simple," answers the Muscovite. "Brezhnev operated off of batteries. Andropov plugs into the wall socket."

General Secretary Yuri Andropov is on the phone with President Reagan: "No," says Andropov, "No! No! No! No! No! No! No! No! Yes! No! No! No! No! Goodbye."

After the conversation one of Andropov's aides asks, "Yuri Vladimirovich, you were very firm with the American president, but you said yes to something."

"He asked me if I could hear him all right."

Andropov summons his KGB chairman, Chebrikov, into his office and asks, "How can we prove that we were not responsible for the assassination attempt against the Pope? Do you have any ideas?"

"Yes, Comrade General Secretary. We are putting together some proof that the Pope shot first."

On the day of the election of the Soviet parliament, a voter, instead of dropping his ballot immediately into the box, goes off to the side and begins to read it. An election official approaches him and demands, "What are you doing?"

"I wanted to find out who I was voting for."

"Don't you know that this is a secret ballot?"

From the records of the plenary session of the CPSU Central Committee: "The members of the CPSU Central Committee unanimously chose the new CPSU Central Committee General Secretary, Konstantin Ustenovich Chernenko. Before even regaining consciousness, K.U. Chernenko thanked the committee for its high trust in him, and began to go about his duties."

After Chernenko's funeral, the Kremlin gets a phone call. "Tell me, please," the caller asks, "do you need a General Secretary?"

"What are you, sick?"

"Yes, very sick. And I'm very old, too."

In the next world, Brezhnev asks, "Who is leading the USSR?" He is told that it is Gorbachev. Brezhnev then asks, "Does he have support?" "No, Leonid Ilyich. He can walk on his own."

Brezhnev and Khrushchev meet in the next world. One asks the other, "When you were head of the USSR, did you build anything?"

"No."

"Neither did I. So what is Gorbachev rebuilding?"

Mikhail Gorbachev visits a pig farm. Local newspaper editors were having a hard time coming up with what description to put under the picture. One journalist suggested, "Comrade Gorbachev amid pigs." Another suggested "Pigs with Comrade Gorbachev." Finally they decided to write: "Comrade Gorbachev—third from the right."

KGB Chairman Vladimir Kryuchkov calls Gorbachev and says, "Mikhail Sergeevich! I suggest that we strip the renegade KGB general, Oleg Kalugin, of his military title and all of his honors. He is a scoundrel, slanderer, and just plain stupid!"

"Do you have proof of these things?" asks the president.

"Of course! All his life he has served with us in the KGB under my shoddy direction."

At the beginning of his anti-alcohol campaign, Gorbachev receives a telegram from Siberia. The head of a regional party organization there

writes: "I beg you please to urgently send us three trainloads of vodka. The people have sobered up and are outside my office wanting to know what we did with the tsar."

During the anti-alcohol campaign, Gorbachev visits a large factory and asks to see their best worker. They take him to the worker, a man named Ivanov. Gorbachev watches him work and asks, "Could you work this well if you drank a shot of vodka?"

"Of course not," answers the worker, a little surprised.

"Could you work like this," continue Gorbachev, "if you were to drink two shots of vodka?"

"Of course not," answers the worker, more surprised.

"What about three shots?" continues Gorbachev.

"Now you're talking, that's what it takes!"

During the anti-alcohol campaign, a bunch of people are standing in a line that is several hours long. A car pulls up and the driver gets out and asks,

"Do you mind if I get ahead of the line? You see, I've got a car waiting."

"You must be crazy," someone answers. "Some of us have entire factories waiting."

As expected, during Gorbachev's fight against alcoholism, it became very difficult to get vodka. A city bus is going through Moscow. The bus stops and the driver announces the stop near the vodka store. "The next stop," he says, "will be the middle of the line for the vodka store."

Soviet Defense Minister Sokolov runs into Gorbachev's office and reports: "Mikhail Sergeivich! A minute ago, a German pilot of a small civilian plane landed in Red Square."

Gorbachev: "So, what do you want me to do? Go out and greet him?"

Gorbachev walks into a public bath. All the men cover themselves with towels. Surprised, Gorbachev asks, "What is wrong? We are all men here."

"Yes, we are, Mikhail Sergeevich, but isn't Raisa Maximovna with you?"

On the day after Gorbachev signs the order allowing citizens the right to leave the country, he is awakened by a phone call. He picks up the phone and hears Prime Minister Ryzhkov on the other end. "Do you see, Mikhail Sergeevich, what you have done with your *order*! Look out the window."

Gorbachev looks out the window and sees completely empty streets. "What has happened, Nikolai Ivanovich? Has absolutely everybody left? Is it only the two of us left?"

"What do you mean, two of us? I'm calling from Helsinki."

The minister of agriculture urgently approaches Gorbachev: "Mikhail Sergeevich, we have a big problem. All of our cows are dying. Almost a third of them have already died. We need to do something urgently. We are all counting on you."

"This is something we can fix," says Gorbachev. "I think we need to paint all the barns green."

After three days, the minister returns to Gorbachev. "It did not help. We've lost almost half of our cows."

"No big deal," says Gorbachev. "We urgently need to paint the insides of the barns yellow."

After a few days, the minister returns again and says that the barns are painted but the cows are continuing to die off. Gorbachev orders, "You immediately need to paint the roofs of the barns red."

A few days later, Gorbachev receives a phone call from the minister: "Nothing helped. All the cows have died."

"That's too bad," Gorbachev replies, "because I have so many more good ideas."

President Gorbachev calls President Reagan the day of the space shuttle disaster. "Please accept our deepest condolences for the explosion of the *Challenger*."

"What do you mean," asks Reagan, surprised. "The *Challenger* is in one piece and is due to blast off in four minutes."

"Oh," answers Gorbachev. "Once again my watch is five minutes fast. I'll call you back about this later."

Two dogs meet on the Russian-Chinese border. The Russian dog asks, "Why are you going to Russia?"

"It's gotten to where you can't even bark in a whisper," answers the Chinese dog. "In Russia, they say, you are free to bark as much as you like. Why are you going to China?"

"Well, you see," sighs the Russian dog, "I've barked enough to last a lifetime. Now I'd really like something to eat."

Raisa Gorbachev visits the United States. At her farewell dinner, President Reagan presents her with a brand-new Mercedes-Benz.

"No!" she exclaims. "I cannot accept this gift. Can you imagine what they will say about this in the Soviet Union?"

Uneasily, Reagan looks at her. Then his face brightens. "All right, then, I will sell it to you for the symbolic sum of one dollar."

Raisa pulls a five dollar bill from her purse. Reagan says, "I don't have any change. I'll ask somebody for some."

She stops him and says, "Don't bother looking for any change. Just give me four more cars."

During a session of the Soviet parliament, Mikhail Gorbachev becomes irritated with the constant debating about the future of the country. He interrupts, "Let's solve this right now. Whoever is for socialism go to the right side of the room and whoever is for capitalism go to the left." Eventually all of the deputies divided into two parts except for Boris Yeltsin, who kept going back and forth not able to decide. "Boris Nikolayevich," Gorbachev says, "what are you running around for? Decide!"

"You see Mikhail Sergeyeovich," Yeltsin answers, "on the one hand I am for socialism, but on the other, I want to be able to live like they do in capitalism."

"Well, Boris Nikolayevich," says Gorbachev, "you need to be here in the Presidium."

After the government frees prices, a senior citizen sits in his room with an empty bag, wondering, "Have I gone to the store yet, or did I already come back?"

In a press conference, Vladimir Zhirinovskiy is asked, "Is it true that the country is having a huge housing crisis?"

"That's ridiculous," he replies. "These are only rumors being spread by those with no place to live."

At a meeting of the State Duma, a deputy shows up wearing shorts and a tee shirt. "Who allowed you to show up at a parliamentary session looking like that?" demands Yeltsin.

"What do you mean, who?! The queen of England herself! Last month, when our delegation went to London, I showed up at their parliament dressed the same way. The queen said to me, 'You can go to your own Russian parliament looking like that, but...'"

A voice asks a lawmaker at a national parliamentary congress, "Excuse me, deputy, but would you please move. We cannot see the Presidium."

"If you cannot see it you should wear glasses!"

"What do we need glasses for when we have our sights!"

A meeting is taking place at a factory. Two items are on the agenda. First, to fix the factory's cafeteria, which has been closed for two years. Second is to switch over to democracy and free markets. The factory director takes the microphone: "We do not have the wood, bricks, cement, or workers necessary to fix the cafeteria. Which is the reason for the second topic of the day."

Boris Yeltsin is meeting with the communist faction of the parliament. Suddenly there is a bang. A squad of soldiers bursts into the room with machine guns. Everybody starts to panic. "Where is Yeltsin?" screams the leader of the soldiers. "Show us Yeltsin! Where is he?!"

The communists jump out their seats, point, and yell: "That's him! That's him! That's Yeltsin!"

"Boris Nikolayevich," says the squad leader, "duck down please." And the soldiers begin shooting.

A governor gets home from work and says to his wife, "That's it, I've lost my job!"

"Why? What happened?"

"You see, the local head of the KGB came into my office and saw portraits of Gorbachev and Yeltsin on the wall, and told me to take that idiot off of the wall. When he said that, I asked him which one he meant."

The KGB is having a meeting about the necessity of establishing democracy in its ranks. A young idealistic lieutenant stands up and says, "Comrades! I cannot be silent any longer. How much longer will the wife and mother-in-law of our general be allowed to use our official cars as if they were their own to go shopping and to the theater?!"

The next day the general summons the young lieutenant into his office: "I really liked what you said at the meeting yesterday. I see that you are brave and a man of principle. I think you deserve a promotion. We have decided to send you to Madagascar, where you will be our resident agent." The young lieutenant turns pale and stutters about his responsibilities here and his young wife and small child and how he does not know a single foreign language.

"As far as languages go," interrupts the general, "your cover will be that you are deaf and dumb, so we will cut off your tongue and ears before you leave."

In the parliamentary personnel office, a clerk asks a lawmaker, "How long were you at your last place of employment?"

"Eight years," answers the deputy.

"Why did you leave?"

"I got pardoned."

A Russian newspaper publishes a story that half of the members of parliament are swindlers. The parliament immediately demands a public apology. The next day the paper reads: "We offer our apology. Half of the members of the Russian parliament are not swindlers."

A CIA agent stationed in Moscow, after reading all of the newspapers and being filled with ideas of Russian democracy, decides to turn himself in. He goes to the KGB, finds the officer on duty, and tells him that he is a spy.

"From what country?" asks the KGB agent.

"From the USA."

"If you are from the USA you need to go to room 215."

The CIA agent goes to room 215 and says, "I am a spy from the USA." He is asked, "How long have you been working as a spy here?"

"Two years."

"Since you have been at it for less than five years, you need to come back on Monday and go to room 234."

The agent comes back on Monday and says, "I am an American spy working here less than five years. I would like to turn myself in."

This KGB agent asks him, "Did you enter the country legally or illegally?"

"Illegally."

"Then, please come back tomorrow and go to room 457."

The American comes back the next day, goes to room 457, and says, "I am a spy for the USA. I have been here less than five years and got into the country illegally."

The KGB officer asks him, "Have you completed your mission here?"

"No."

"So why are you wasting my time? Go complete your mission. When you have done that, come back and sign up to go through the whole system to turn yourself in like everybody else."

In Moscow, a man is walking down the street and a brick falls from a roof and kills him. A mob gathers and people remark that it's a shame that you cannot even walk down the street without a brick falling on you. Someone kneels down toward the victim and says, "I know him. He is from the apparat. He is an apparatchik."

The crowd yells, "So many apparatchiks, and so few bricks!"

A stern President Yeltsin asks Vice President Rutskoi to step outside with him. "Listen," says Yeltsin, "yesterday, you said to parliament that all politicians in this country are for sale. Does that mean that I am for sale, too?"

"Yes, Mr. President."

"I cannot calmly listen to this kind of slander!" Yeltsin bellows. "And if I am for sale, what, for example, is my price?"

"Half a million dollars."

"That little?!"

"You see, Boris Nikolayevich, you are already trying to negotiate your price."

A family is sitting at home, when gunshots are heard outside. "What happened?" asks the wife.

"President Yeltsin just entered our city," answers the husband.

They hear more gunfire. The wife asks, "What, did they miss the first time?"

Bill Clinton, Boris Yeltsin, and Helmut Kohl are meeting. Clinton moans, "I can't believe we didn't see it coming with China."

"Me neither," says Kohl.

Yeltsin exclaims, "I warned you it could all end this way." As he says this, a Chinese soldier strides over and barks, "You have had your time to talk. That's it. Everybody back to their cells."

A military parade marches through Red Square. First pass army troops, then the equipment: tanks, artillery, missiles. Then, at the end, with a confident stride march a group of people in business suits with briefcases. President Yeltsin asks his KGB chief, "Are they your people?"

"No."

He turns to the Minister of Defense: "Are they yours?"

"No."

Prime Minister Chernomyrdin leans toward the president and whispers, "Those people are my economists. They don't look like much. But they have horrifying powers of destruction. Within a couple of weeks they can destabilize any economy."

President Yeltsin meets with directors of sausage factories. "Let's hear," he says, "what the director of our top factory has to say. His sausage is said to be the best, and it sells faster than any other. Let's hear how he operates his factory."

"Well," starts the director, "I operate it just like anybody else. We make our sausage with bones, trash, sawdust, toilet paper, and then we add a little bit of meat—"

"What!" interrupts Yeltsin. "You even put meat in there."

Yeltsin is speaking to a meeting of factory workers. "Comrades! I know that life is difficult now, but we must persevere. We in the government have discussed it and are sure that our lives will improve in the next year."

A voice asks from the crowd, "What about us?"

The government holds a banquet in the Kremlin. "Friends," says the host, "the entire world is giving us humanitarian aid. In front of you is food from Holland, Finland, Switzerland, and Germany, and drink from Italy and France. I invite you to join us at the table."

Everybody sits down. A half hour passes. One of the guests whispers to the host, "Why aren't we eating yet?"

"If you could just wait a bit longer," he replies. "The plane with the silverware from Japan is running late."

From a twenty-first century encyclopedia: "Gorbachev, Mikhail Sergeyevich, and Yeltsin, Boris Nikolayevich: minor politicians in the epoch of Solzhenitsyn and Sakharov."