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**Humor as a Mirror of Political Reality:
Anti-Communist humor in the Soviet
Union and Czechoslovakia in
comparative perspective**

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Abstract

Humor is an important part of our daily lives though sometimes it is overlooked by historians and those studying politics. This thesis explores anti-communist jokes in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in order to answer the question of whether or not humor is able to accurately mirror the political reality of a given country. After an extensive research, this thesis supports the argument that political humor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia provided an accurate description of the regime, meaning jokes were not only meant to humor the audience but they were also informative and touched upon questions such as foreign policies, domestic life, ethnic and religious issues, personality cults of their leaders, propaganda and censorship, and much more. But even though both countries had anti-communist jokes, some characteristics (e.g., context, form, length) varied. Furthermore, since jokes are time specific, the pattern of differentiation is also present chronologically.

Abstrakt

Humor is an important part of our daily lives though sometimes it is overlooked by historians and those studying politics. This thesis explores anti-communist humor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in order to answer the question of whether or not humor is able to accurately mirror the political reality of a given country. After an extensive research, this thesis supports the argument that political humor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia provided an accurate description of the regime, meaning jokes were not only meant to humor the audience but they were also informative and touched upon questions such as foreign policies, domestic life, ethnic and religious issues, personality cults of their leaders, propaganda and censorship, and much more.

But even though both countries had anti-communist jokes, some characteristics (e.g., context, form, length) varied. Furthermore, since jokes are time specific, the pattern of differentiation is also present chronologically.

Klíčová slova

Humor, komunismus, socialismus, Sovětský svaz, Československo, politika, vtipy

Keywords

Humor, Communism, Socialism, Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, politics, jokes

Range of thesis: 206,688 characters

Declaration of Authorship

1. The author hereby declares that he compiled this thesis independently, using only the listed resources and literature.
2. The author hereby declares that all the sources and literature used have been properly cited.
3. The author hereby declares that the thesis has not been used to obtain a different or the same degree.

Prague, 25 July 2020

Arevik Zadoyan



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Topic Characteristics:

My thesis will focus on anti-communist humor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia as a mirror of political reality. Political jokes are usually of great importance but their vitality was especially apparent during the Soviet era. It gave the public a sense of freedom and escape from the communist hegemony. Naturally, jokes – be it political or otherwise – as a form of minor arts cannot be considered serious statements. However, they can serve as tools for understanding what a given society is like. During the Cold War, the secret police of some of the East European countries would limit and control the output of jokes against the existing regimes which shows just how dangerous jokes can be for leaders – especially tyrants. Numerous scholars that adopted a serious approach to the anti-communist political humor were able to predict the rapid collapse of the regime. I will try to illustrate not only the importance of anti-communist political humor in the Cold War era but also show its variations based on the country of origin. By doing so, I will be able to provide a comparative outlook on the anti-communist humor in Czechoslovakia and the USSR. In order to provide an extensive analysis of the subject, I am going to use a variety of resources, from classified Central Intelligence Agency files and academic reports to numerous collections of political jokes and writings of political activists and leaders.

Hypotheses:

1. In the totalitarian political atmosphere that was omnipresent in the Soviet socialist republics, humor had become one of the most important means of political expression that allowed the public not only to show courage and express freedom with their jokes but also to mirror the political-economic reality of the time.
2. There were various patterns of differentiation based on the geographical setting (i.e., Eastern Europe compared to South Caucasus region) when it came to the substance of the jokes (e.g., focused on the economy rather than the politics or the social issues rather than material scarcity) even though several characteristics were repetitive.
3. The patterns of differentiation spread not only geographically but also chronologically because as communism in the Soviet Union and its sister states

evolved, the politics changed from Stalinist palace politics of collectivization to Khrushchev's reforms thus influencing and shaping the anti-communist humor of the time.

Methodology:

For the first part of the thesis that deals with the history and significance of political humor, I am going to employ a qualitative literature review methodology. This would help systematically research, gather, and analyze various primary and secondary sources. This method involves a primarily exploratory research and is usually used in order to gain insights into a given issue or to assist the development of ideas and hypotheses. For the second part of the thesis that deals with the political reality of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, a comparative method of analysis will be utilized. This will help establish common ground between the two as well as discover the aspects of the political jokes and the ways that they were spread that differ from one country to the other. Since the research is focused on the Cold War era, both internal and external issues are going to be taken under consideration and be analyzed in a comparative method.

Outline:

Introduction

- I. **Humor in the Soviet Union: *Preliminary Analysis***
- II. **Humor in Czechoslovakia: *Preliminary Analysis***
- III. **Pattern of Differentiation: *Czechoslovak versus Soviet Humor***
- IV. **The Evolution of Communism in the Guise of Humor: *from Stalinism to Perestroika***

Conclusion

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Introduction

Various scholars and social scientists have long tried to develop a “single theory of humor” that would largely explain its characteristics, yet most of the sociological studies have been focusing on humor’s “control and conflict functions”.¹ According to Richard Stephenson, the latter is “expressed largely by means of irony, satire, sarcasm, caricature, parody, burlesque, and the like”.² In this sense, humor is able to cloak hatred allowing the user to express disapproval and aggression without “the consequences of other overt behavior”.³ Conflict humor permits the expression of dissatisfactory feelings and allows the user to boost their morale while at the same time undermining the morale of those targeted by the humor.⁴ On the other hand, humor’s social control function can express “approval or disapproval of social form and action, express common group sentiments, develop and perpetuate stereotypes, relieve awkward or tense situations, and express collective, *sub rosa* approbation of action not explicitly approved”.⁵ This form of humor largely acts as a communication tool that passes the humor’s intent across the parties involved and as an interpersonal approach that communicates various sorts of feelings and attitudes.⁶ Humor’s conflict and control functions are even more apparent when it comes to political jokes and satire. Orion Pi-Sunyer argued that “the trading of jokes and stories with anti-regime content helps to mitigate anxiety and the sense of helplessness encountered in highly controlled political contexts”.⁷ Moreover, using humor as a means of nonviolent resistance hinders the interference from state authorities and governmental institutions.⁸ Orion Pi-Sunyer believed that “political humor is often a type of shorthand”.⁹ Political humor has the ability to compress the complexity of a given time or a situation into a simplified joke which communicates certain feelings and

¹ Stephenson, R. M., "Conflict and Control Functions of Humor". *American Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 56, No. 6, (May, 1951), p. 569

² *ibid.*

³ *ibid.*

⁴ *ibid.*

⁵ *ibid.* p. 570

⁶ *ibid.*

⁷ Pi-Sunyer, O., "Political Humor in a Dictatorial State: The Case of Spain". *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (Spring, 1977), p. 179

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *ibid.* p. 182

attitudes.¹⁰ Political humor, therefore, is time-specific and may lose its intensity “outside the confines of delimited time and situation”.¹¹

During the massive “ideological struggle” of the 20th century,¹² countless studies and books were published focusing on the ideals and sustainability of a utopian society that had emerged in Russia and spread across borders. However, they seemed to provide “little serious historical consideration” to communism’s most characteristic product: jokes.¹³ Perhaps the only political system to create a unique “brand of comedy” was communism whose anonymous creators steadily supplied “alluring new products and carefully constructed rebellious images”.¹⁴ Humor during communism played a vital role (especially since the lack of political freedom made humor the only platform to express the people’s real opinions) and some would go as far as to argue that it is possible to tell “the whole history of communism in jokes”.¹⁵ Political humor during communism is especially unique for the following three reasons: 1. Their particular homogeneity (i.e., “the monopoly of state power meant that any joke about any aspect of politics, the economy or media was a joke about Communism”) which was increased by the fact that the Soviets banned them all.¹⁶ The criminalization of all the jokes of a political nature led to the spread of “dull official humour which [the Soviets] disseminated in satirical magazines”.¹⁷ Nevertheless, these illegal jokes traveled across borders and demonstrated the connectedness of this culture.¹⁸ 2. Other notable characteristics of communist humor include “ubiquity, longevity and variety”.¹⁹ The content of communist jokes varied to include all aspects of day-to-day life, such as “the queues, the personality cults of the leaders, the propaganda of the media, the theories of Marx, ... the character of each Soviet leader, ... the Great Terror and Gulag, Sputnik, the invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the anniversaries of the Revolution and Lenin’s birth”.²⁰ 3. Even though new jokes kept emerging, some of the older jokes resurfaced and were repurposed and reapplied to situations that were decades apart thus showing

¹⁰ Pi-Sunyer, O., "Political Humor in a Dictatorial State: The Case of Spain". *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (Spring, 1977), p. 182

¹¹ *ibid.*

¹² Lewis, B., “Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes”. *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p. 10

¹³ *ibid.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.* p. 10-11

¹⁶ *ibid.* p. 11

¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid.* p. 12

²⁰ *ibid.*

the “continuity of the experience of communism”.²¹ Most importantly, the content of the jokes were modified according to the era of Soviet history.²² However, interestingly enough the overwhelming majority of communist jokes come from Russia and Eastern Europe.²³ While there are some jokes from Cuba and far less from China, they were not written by the people who were under the Communist regime and thus cannot be studied in the same light.²⁴

The aim of this thesis is to examine the conflict and control functions of political humor in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia in order to establish a connection between the telling of the jokes on a personal level and the gradual change and collapse of the authoritarian communist regime of the time (i.e., *does humor mirror the political reality of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia at a given time?*). For the first part of the thesis that deals with the history and significance of political humor, a qualitative literature review methodology will be utilized. This methodology is usually applied to research when it is dealing with the “social process or the reasons behind human behavior”.²⁵ In doing so, the socio-political situation of the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, respectively, will be analyzed in order to answer the *why* and *how* questions concerning the humor under the communist regime. For the second part of the thesis that deals with the political reality of Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union, a comparative method of analysis will be utilized in order to compare the focal points of each country’s jokes. In doing so, several jokes from the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia, respectively, will be analyzed in order to determine their reflectiveness of the political reality of the time. There are three initial hypothesis: 1. In the totalitarian political atmosphere that was omnipresent in the Soviet socialist republics, humor had become one of the most important means of political expression that allowed the public not only to show courage and express freedom with their jokes but also to mirror the political-economic reality of the time. 2. There were various patterns of differentiation based on the geographical setting (i.e., Eastern Europe compared to the South Caucasus region) when it came to the substance of the jokes (e.g., focused on the economy rather than the politics or the social issues rather than material scarcity) even though several

²¹ Lewis, B., “Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes”. *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p.12

²² *ibid.*

²³ *ibid.* p. 14

²⁴ *ibid.*

²⁵ Stenius, K., Mäkelä, K., Miovský, M., & Gabrhelík, R., "How to Write Publishable Qualitative Research." In *Publishing Addiction Science: A Guide for the Perplexed*, edited by Stenius Kerstin, et al, London: Ubiquity Press, (2017), p. 156

characteristics were repetitive. 3. The patterns of differentiation spread not only geographically but also chronologically because as communism in the Soviet Union and its sister states evolved, the politics changed from Stalinist palace politics of collectivization to Khrushchev's reforms thus influencing and shaping the anticommunist humor of the time.

1. Humor in the Soviet Union: Preliminary Analysis

*“Did you hear about the political system that was laughed out of existence?”*²⁶ While many regimes have had their share of political jokes, the ones circulating under the Soviet rule were perhaps the most potent. On the one hand, communist humor gave the people “a brief escape from socialist hegemony” and correctly signaled the coming collapse of the system based on the general dissatisfaction of the people – which was widely overlooked by Eastern scholars and “Western ‘Sovietologists’”.²⁷ On the other hand, while jokes are not regarded as serious accounts, they possess the ability to expose the reality of and identify the tense areas of a given society.²⁸ Moreover, according to Christie Davies, “the political jokes of the Soviet Union and its empire revealed that social order to be riddled with contradictions and ripe for collapse as soon as those controlling the means of force began to falter”.²⁹ Politics and humor are equally public in a sense that it can affect every other person.³⁰ Political jokes while loosely defined, usually involve three units: “the teller, the listener and the target” and they aim to “externalize anxieties about the public domain and the links between what C. Wright Mills called public issues and private troubles”.³¹ The telling of political jokes is considered a coping mechanism, a way to entertain hope and voice concerns.³² While George Orwell believed political jokes are “tiny revolutions”, others claimed that political jokes express passive concerns and are in no way a threat to the existing regime.³³ The latter claim supports the rumor that there used to be “a department of the KGB responsible for the production of anti-Soviet jokes” which was circulating in the

²⁶ Lewis, B., “Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes”. *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p. 1

²⁷ Davies, C., “Jokes As The Truth About Soviet Socialism”. *Folklore, Vol. 46*, (2010), p. 9

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. xi

³¹ *ibid.*

³² *ibid.*

³³ *ibid.* p. xii

Soviet Union.³⁴ The reason behind creating such a department would be to keep the people busy with a passive form of rebellion such as joke-telling instead of either creating real revolutions or giving up completely.³⁵

Humor's role in the Soviet Union was paramount and, as George Mikes wittingly wrote comparing jokes to salt, "you cannot eat salt but food – and life – without salt would be pretty unbearable".³⁶ Political humor in the Soviet Union tackled issues such as scarcity of produce, corruption, bureaucracy, religion, ideology, economics, mass media, power struggle, elections, national and ethnic differences and much more. Soviet Union can be considered the home of "the largest corpus of jokes ... ridiculing both rulers and a political system".³⁷ Soviet political humor is perhaps the "longest, largest and most widespread" protest against the regime.³⁸ These whispered jokes were also truly genuine since "they were totally excluded from the mass media".³⁹ According to Christie Davies, "They were the jokes of the powerless against the absolutely powerful. They were a collective product, for jokes have no authors and no discernible origin."⁴⁰

Soviet political jokes can be grouped into several central topics, one of which was the information gathering through civilian informers, trustees, and the active reserve of the KGB (also known as *chekism*). While most secret services – in democratic states as well as in autocracies – employ "formidable armies of informants to infiltrate and monitor their populations", the KGB was especially invasive and for some fatal as it "sought more than just passive conformity to the law".⁴¹ According to Stanford historian Amir Weiner, KGB agents not only wanted to acquire information about one's address, employment, pastime activities, or the people around them, but they also wanted to know and change the way people were thinking.⁴² Naturally, the people were bothered by these practices and lived in fear, although that didn't stop them from joking about the level of control.

³⁴ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. xii

³⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶ *ibid.* p. vii

³⁷ Davies, C., "Humour and Protest: Jokes under Communism". *International Review of Social History*, Vol. 52, SUPPLEMENT 15: *Humour and Social Protest*, (2007), p. 291

³⁸ *ibid.*

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹ Hein, B., "Getting to know you: Stanford scholar examines domestic surveillance in the USSR". *Stanford News, Stanford Report*, (October 2, 2012)

⁴² *ibid.*

A certain Moscow family, fond of telling jokes owned a parrot. One day it disappeared. They hunted high and low, but it was nowhere to be found. Without wasting any time the owner rushed to the KGB.

'Why come to us?' asked the official in plain clothes, 'We haven't got your parrot. No one's brought it here.'

*'Never mind, Comrade Commander, it's bound to be brought in sooner or later and I just want you to know I don't share its opinions.'*⁴³

Or

'What is your opinion of the recent Party resolution?'

'Same as yours.'

*'Then I arrest you in the name of the Secret Police.'*⁴⁴

Or

A Jew in Moscow was awakened in the middle of the night by a loud knock on the door.

'Who's there?' he called.

'The postman!' came the reply.

The man got out of bed and opened the door and found two KGB agents.

'Are you Goldstein?'

'Yes.'

'And did you make an application to go to Israel?'

'That's right.'

'Do you have enough food to eat here?'

'Yes, we do.'

'Don't your children get a good Communist education?'

'Certainly.'

'Then why do you want to leave Russia?'

*'Because,' replied Goldstein, 'I don't like the post being delivered at three in the morning.'*⁴⁵

Besides the KGB, the citizens of the Soviet Union also ridiculed their country's economic conditions. One of the reasons for it was the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). The end of the Second World War saw the emergence of a

⁴³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 5

⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 110

⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 122

number of international organizations that promoted economic cooperation.⁴⁶ Comecon was established in January 1949, peculiarly by “the mere publication of a notice to that effect in the 25 January issue of Pravda” without a mention of prior discussions.⁴⁷ The Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Romania, Poland, Bulgaria, Hungary, and later on Albania were the ones that established Comecon.⁴⁸ In the words of the organization’s Secretary-General, “The Comecon is an international organisation of socialistic states, which embodies a new type of economic relationship between the states based on the principle of proletarian internationalism”.⁴⁹ He further explained that Comecon possesses an exclusively socialistic ideology that includes factors such as “the essentially equal government bodies (the power remains in the hands of the people under the guidance of the working classes), the principle of economic equality (the state owns the methods of production), the uniform ideology (Marxism and Leninism) and the great communal aim (the strengthening and propagation of Communism)”.⁵⁰ Nevertheless, Comecon failed to improve the economic state of its member states as promised. Some saw the organization as a mere response to the creation of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Considering the power structure between the socialist states of the time, it was easy for the public to see how ridiculous and inoperative the Comecon economics really were.

COMECON economics:

‘What a beautiful dog! Is it for sale?’

‘Yes, for a million lei.’

‘A million lei! You’re crazy, you’ll never get it.’

A few days later.

‘Where’s the dog!’

‘I sold it for one million lei.’

‘Someone actually gave you a million lei for your dog?’

‘Not exactly. He gave me two cats, each worth 500,000 lei.’⁵¹

Or:

COMECON is based on seven fundamental principles:

⁴⁶ Thomas, C.J., "The Comecon: catalyst for economic cooperation in Eastern Europe". *The Comparative and International Law Journal of Southern Africa*, Vol. 9, No. 3, (November, 1976), p. 315

⁴⁷ *ibid.*

⁴⁸ *ibid.* p. 316

⁴⁹ *ibid.* p. 320

⁵⁰ *ibid.* pp. 320-321

⁵¹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 102

*the German sense of humor,
 Polish hard work,
 Russian good-neighbourliness,
 Czech courage,
 the widespread knowledge of the Hungarian language,
 Romanian socialist solidarity
 and Bulgarian intelligence.*⁵²

Or:

*A COMECON summit. The Russians place drawing pins on the chairs of the other delegations. The East Germans see the pins, sit on them and smile. The Hungarians quietly pocket theirs, sit down and howl as if in pain. The Rumanians pocket theirs, replace them with Rumanian-made pins, sit on them and smile.*⁵³

The poor management of the economy led to a number of issues. Lack of food and products, and the extensive queues people had to endure were part of the problem. As Andrei Shleifer and Robert Vishny described, “the single most pervasive phenomenon in socialist countries is shortage of ... consumer goods ranging from necessities, such as food, to luxuries, such as cars and gold, as well as many intermediate input”.⁵⁴ Products such as meat and butter could rarely be found in shops. Even if butter was back on sale, there was a 1.1 pound limit per customer.⁵⁵ But it was not just butter that was rationed; “de facto rationing, limits set by store managers on the quantities that shoppers can buy, or schedules regulating the hours when residents of particular housing developments can buy” was in place in Moscow.⁵⁶ Alternatively, a system of coupons was used outside the capital in order to ration products.⁵⁷ According to John Burns, “From the bombast of the Khrushchev era, when Soviet triumphs in agriculture and other areas were compared mockingly with the failures of the West, matters have reached the point where [during the 1982 meeting of the Communist Party's Central Committee] Leonid I. Brezhnev, the Soviet leader, has said that food is ‘economically and politically’ the central problem facing the country in the 1981-85

⁵² Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 44

⁵³ *ibid.* p. 52

⁵⁴ Shleifer, A., & Vishny, R., "Pervasive Shortages under Socialism". *The RAND Journal of Economics*, Vol. 23, No. 2, (1992), p. 237

⁵⁵ Burns, J., "Soviet Food Shortages: Grumbling and excuses". *The New York Times*, (Januray 15, 1982)

⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁷ *ibid.*

five-year plan.”⁵⁸ The political aspect can either be interpreted in terms of bureaucratic challenges that come with the implementation of new policies or it can be argued that the people queuing for food are gradually becoming unhappy with the Soviet system.⁵⁹ Although alarming, the latter option was more possible and it meant that fixing food shortages had to be the priority in order to avoid a situation like in Poland where discontent “gave birth to the Solidarity trade union”.⁶⁰

A customer comes into a large food store and asks at the counter, ‘Have you got any caviar?’

*‘Sorry,’ says the assistant, ‘we are the department where there is no meat. Over there is the department where they haven’t got any caviar.’*⁶¹

Or:

‘What will communism be like?’

‘Everyone will have what he needs.’

‘But what if there’s a shortage of meat?’

*‘Then there’ll be a sign in the butchers’ saying: ‘No meat needed today’.*⁶²

However, queuing had become a part of people’s lives and some were happy to devote their day waiting for products that “weren’t so desperately needed, like imported American jeans”.⁶³ Sometimes people were unaware what they were queuing for, it could be anything from “a Yugoslav coat with a special kind of lining” to “a chest of drawers with fake-bronze handles”.⁶⁴ Soviet queues were surprisingly organized and operated with a set of unwritten rules. One of the main principles was: “you join the line first and *then* ask what it’s for”.⁶⁵ The idea behind this thinking was that whatever the product may be, it ought to come in handy, and besides, one might not get a chance to buy it again anytime soon.⁶⁶

⁵⁸ Burns, J., "Soviet Food Shortages: Grumbling and excuses". *The New York Times*, (Januray 15, 1982)

⁵⁹ *ibid.*

⁶⁰ *ibid.*

⁶¹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 103

⁶² *ibid.* p. 154

⁶³ Andrews, D., “Why Does the Other Line Always Move Faster?: The Myths and Misery, Secrets and Psychology of Waiting in Line”. *Workman Publishing*, (2015), p. 153

⁶⁴ Sorokin, V., & Sorokin, V. V., "The Queue". *Readers International*, (1988), p. i

⁶⁵ *ibid.*

⁶⁶ *ibid.*

It's winter. A rumor goes around that there has been a meat delivery. A huge line forms outside the butcher's shop. After three hours have passed the shop door opens and the manager announces:

'Friends, we have meat but not enough for everyone; would the Jews please leave.'

The Jews leave; the line gets shorter.

Two hours later the door opens again:

'Comrades, we have meat but not enough for everyone. Would all those who didn't take part in the Great Patriotic War please leave.'

Three hours later the door opens again: 'Comrades, we have meat but not enough for everyone. Would all those who didn't take part in the overthrow of Tsarism please leave.'

There are now only three half frozen old men left. At eight o'clock the door opens once more: 'Comrades, there won't be any meat.'

The old men move off grumbling: 'The Jews always get the best of everything!'⁶⁷

Queuing in the Soviet Union took expertise, "the skilled queuer, to save time, will have a place in several at once, periodically renewing his or her claim to position by reference to those in front and behind (the man in the hat, the lady in blue)".⁶⁸ More sizable queues required a more formal approach; notably, queuers were assigned a number and had to respond to the roll call.⁶⁹ But this system too was subject to corruption.⁷⁰ For instance, "a place in the low numbers at the front can, if one chooses, be sold at a good price", alternatively, "someone's granny can be paid to keep your place, and with a little well-oiled cooperation from the police, the real pros (mostly Georgians, according to popular lore) may even get by without queuing up at all".⁷¹

'What's fifty meters long and eats potatoes?'

'A queue waiting to buy meat.'⁷²

The longest queues, however, were not in front of large food stores but in front of Lenin's tomb.⁷³ It had become a duty of the Soviet citizens to voluntarily visit the

⁶⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 28-29

⁶⁸ Sorokin, V., & Sorokin, V. V., "The Queue". *Readers International*, (1988), p. i

⁶⁹ *ibid.*

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ *ibid.* p. ii

⁷² Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 153

Mausoleum at least once in their life time and the “hours-long wait was as part of the sacramental ritual as seeing Lenin’s embalmed body”.⁷⁴ According to David Andrews, queuing possessed a sense of unity and a collective self-identity.⁷⁵ It had become a type of ritual, as Russian novelist Vladimir Sorokin said, “gray and boring, but inescapable, the line dissected the body into pieces, pacified and disciplined it, gave time to think about the advantages of socialism and about the class struggle; and in the end they were rewarded with food and goods”.⁷⁶ However, the reality was much less poetic. The uncertainty of how long one had to wait to get the product and in some cases *if* they would get it made the life of the Soviet people increasingly difficult. As Sorokin has pointed out, “the queue might be seen as a perfect symbol for life in a society governed ... by an ideology without a present tense; for a society-in-waiting, kept in permanent thrall to the future”.⁷⁷

A visitor comes to the door of a Russian home and asks to speak to the man of the house. A little girl answers the door and tells him that her father is not in. ‘But he’ll be back in eight hours, forty minutes and twenty-three seconds.’

‘Where is he?’ asks the visitor.

‘He’s orbiting the earth. He’s a cosmonaut,’ she tells him.

He then asks to speak to her mother. The girl explains that she is also out.

‘And when will she be back?’

‘Oh, I have no idea, she went to the market.’⁷⁸

The unfavorable economic conditions, constant shortages of food, heightened surveillance and what Churchill famously called the *iron curtain* made people question the ideology of the Soviet Union and draw parallels with the previous Tsarist regime. The similarities between Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union were overwhelming with both systems being highly centralized and inherently autocratic. Hence rose a question: was the Revolution and ultimately the change inevitable?

⁷³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 153

⁷⁴ Andrews, D., “Why Does the Other Line Always Move Faster?: The Myths and Misery, Secrets and Psychology of Waiting in Line”. *Workman Publishing*, (2015), p. 153

⁷⁵ *ibid.*

⁷⁶ *ibid.* pp. 152-153

⁷⁷ Sorokin, V., & Sorokin, V. V., "The Queue". *Readers International*, (1988), p. ii

⁷⁸ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 103

Stalin and Nicholas the Second meet in hell. The Tsar asks Stalin what changes were introduced after the revolution.

'Have you still got an army?'

'We've got a bigger and better army than ever before. We have six million men under arms.'

'And have you still got a secret police?'

'Of course. Our MVD would put your Ochrana to shame, I can assure you!'

'And do you still have enough Cossacks to maintain law and order?'

'Regiments of them!'

'What about vodka?'

'Gallons of the stuff!'

'Is it still 40 per cent proof?'

'It's 42 per cent now!'

*'And do you think the whole thing was worth it – just for that 2 per cent?'*⁷⁹

Questioning the inevitability of historical events is difficult, especially since grander events produce weightier consequences making them “appear part of the natural order of things that it is quixotic to question”.⁸⁰ For instance, Edmund Burke’s attempt to criticize the French Revolution earned him the title of a madman.⁸¹ According to Richard Pipes, “The events of 1917 demonstrated that for all its immense territory and claim to great power status, the Russian Empire was a fragile, artificial structure, held together not by organic bonds connecting rulers and ruled, but by mechanical links provided by the bureaucracy, police, and army.”⁸² The citizens of Imperial Russia were not connected by a sense of national identity or “strong economic interests” which was prevented though an autocracy ran mostly with natural economy.⁸³ As Richard Pipes cleverly articulated, “Imperial Russia was mostly warp with little woof”.⁸⁴ Though interestingly, the Russian Revolution was not, as Marxism claims, a product of “social discontent”, and while class struggle did exist – as it exists everywhere across time and

⁷⁹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 118

⁸⁰ Pipes, R. "Did the Russian Revolution Have to Happen?". *The American Scholar*, Vol. 63, No. 2, (1994), p. 217

⁸¹ *ibid.*, p. 216

⁸² *ibid.*

⁸³ *ibid.*

⁸⁴ *ibid.*

space – the “decisive and immediate factors making for the regime's fall and the resultant turmoil were overwhelmingly political”.⁸⁵

Nevertheless, the main concern of the people was the difference between the economic conditions under the Tsar and during socialism. According to Fred Carstensen and Gregory Guroff, “Every society must confront the problem of ordering the use of its human, natural, and technological resources to satisfy the material needs of its members”.⁸⁶ Even though scarcity of products was an issue since before the Revolution, many had fond memories of Imperial Russia's natural economy as opposed to the planned economy of the Soviet Union that resulted in numerous shortages.

An old woman asks her granddaughter: ‘ Granddaughter, please explain Communism to me. How will people live under it? They probably teach you about it in school.’

‘Of course they do, Grandma. When Communism comes, the shops will be full – there'll be butter, and meat and sausage ... you'll be able to go out and buy anything you want...’

‘Ah!’ exclaims the old woman jealously. ‘Just like under the Tsar!’⁸⁷

The Soviet Union brought not only economic change but also alterations in the religious life of the people. According to Freund, “At the root of the Soviet anti-religious offensive is the atheism of Soviet leaders which they partly imported from abroad in the form of Marxism, partly found at home in Russian revolutionary tradition”.⁸⁸ The anti-religious sentiments in Bolsheviks were largely due to Lenin's teachings.⁸⁹ He believed that religion is “the direct product of the class struggle which is being fought by the hostile camps of exploited classes and their exploiters in capitalist society”.⁹⁰ Lenin argued that when the exploited classes feel impotent, the need arises for “faith in a better life beyond the grave which will recompense them, if patiently

⁸⁵ Pipes, R. "Did the Russian Revolution Have to Happen?". *The American Scholar*, Vol. 63, No. 2, (1994), p. 216

⁸⁶ Fred Carstensen, F., & Guroff, G., "Chapter Title: Economic Innovation in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union: Observations". In *Entrepreneurship in Imperial Russia and the Soviet Union*. Princeton University Press, (1983), p. 347

⁸⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 116

⁸⁸ Freund, H. A., "Church and Religion in Soviet Russia". *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4, (1945), p. 17

⁸⁹ *ibid.*

⁹⁰ *ibid.*

submitting to the miseries of earthly life, by heavenly reward".⁹¹ And so the Soviet Union accepted the atheism of Marxist Leninism under the slogan "Religion is opium for the people".⁹² However, this did not stop the people from telling jokes with religious context or background.

A teacher was reading fairy stories to a class of children in post-revolutionary Russia. Without thinking he read:

'... and God gave the raven a piece of cheese.'

A small boy jumped to his feet and protested: 'There is no such thing as God!'

The teacher took fright, but quickly retrieved the situation.

*'And cheese?' he said, 'Is there such a thing as cheese? As you now see, both references were purely symbolic.'*⁹³

Despite the state efforts to eliminate religion, many found it rather amusing to mix the existing Marxist-Leninist ideology with Christianity. One of the reoccurring themes in Soviet political humor was the story of Adam and Eve. The ability to tackle important political, social and economic issues of USSR made these jokes not only funny for the audience of the time but also informative.

'Are there any historical precedents for the Soviet system of elections?'

'Yes, in the story of the Creation, God made Eve, put her in the Garden of Eden, and said to Adam: 'Now choose a woman''⁹⁴

Or

An Englishman, a Frenchman and a Russian were arguing about the nationality of Adam and

Eve.

'They must have been English,' declares the Englishman. 'Only a gentleman would share his last apple with a woman.'

'They were undoubtedly French,' says the Frenchman. 'Who else could seduce a woman so easily?'

⁹¹ Freund, H. A., "Church and Religion in Soviet Russia". *The Australian Quarterly*, Vol. 17, No. 4, (1945), p. 17

⁹² *ibid.* p. 18

⁹³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 20

⁹⁴ *ibid.* p. 125

*'I think they were Russian,' says the Russian. 'After all, who else could walk around stark naked, feed on one apple between the two of them and think they were in paradise?'*⁹⁵

Lastly, a common theme for Soviet political humor was the longing for the outside world. The expression *grass is always greener on the other side* was especially true for the people of the Soviet Union that lived in challenging conditions and had little possibility of leaving. Emigrating from the Soviet Union and even traveling abroad was almost impossible as one not only required a passport but also a government-issued permission. The Soviet Union had introduced a complicated internal passport system in order to provide “desirable population dispersion and ethnic concentration, labor and job allocation, housing allocation, and internal security”.⁹⁶ In order to understand this system two points must be taken into consideration. First, passports issued for internal use were mandatory for all Soviet citizens from the age of 16 and they had to be carried at all times in case an identification was requested.⁹⁷ Since other documents such as a driver’s license were insufficient forms of identification, if one failed to provide their passport as asked they could be fined.⁹⁸ Second, the content of the passport served as a summery of its holder as it included, inter alia “his name, place and date of birth, nationality (based upon the nationality of his parents), information concerning his marital status and the identity of his children, a record of his military service, his place of work, notations concerning his failure to make court-ordered alimony payments, if applicable, and, most importantly, a *propiska*”.⁹⁹ Even though it was only a stamp, the *propiska* was the pure embodiment of the lack of the freedom of movement in the Soviet Union. According to Pipko and Pucciarelli, “the *propiska* is a legal right to live in a particular administrative district, on a particular street, in a particular building and apartment, all as set forth in the passport under the *propiska* stamp”.¹⁰⁰ The restriction of movement was not just an internal issue, traveling abroad and especially to western countries was even harder.

Brezhnev wakes up in the morning, opens the window and looks at the sun above the wall of the Kremlin.

⁹⁵ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 108

⁹⁶ Pipko, S., & Pucciarelli, A., "The Soviet Internal Passport System". *The International Lawyer*, Summer 1985, Vol. 19, No. 3, (1985), p. 915

⁹⁷ *ibid.* p. 916

⁹⁸ *ibid.*

⁹⁹ *ibid.* pp. 916-917

¹⁰⁰ *ibid.* p. 917

*'Hello, Leonid Illyich! Good morning to our great leader,' says the sun.
At midday, Brezhnev walks out to the balcony and the sun greets him with
great affection.*

*'Good day to the hero of the Soviet Union, our beloved Secretary!'
In the evening, Brezhnev once more looks at the sun, but the sun is silent.
'Why don't you greet me now?' asks Brezhnev.
'You go to hell,' says the sun, 'I am in the West now.'*¹⁰¹

Or another version:

*Why does the sun have a smile on its face in the morning?
Because it knows it will be in the West in the evening.*¹⁰²

Looking into Soviet anecdotes allows us to not only see the socio-economic issues of the system but also to understand the feelings of the people that lived under it. According to Jonathan Waterlow, "Although we often look to history for 'lessons', we tend to place our focus exclusively on the politics and ideologies, rather than on the generic psychological and social mechanisms that people use to make sense of, and get by under, *any* conditions".¹⁰³

2. Humor in Czechoslovakia: Preliminary Analysis

Czechoslovakia has always possessed a type of dramatic literature that resonated with its people in terms of influence on the development of the Czechoslovak society as well as reflecting on its values and issues.¹⁰⁴ The case of Czechoslovak humor was no different. One of the most important elements in Czechs is their sense of humor. As Jan Werich, a witty Czech comic once said, "humor is not about laughing, but about knowing".¹⁰⁵ Political humor in Czechoslovakia was especially popular as the four-decades-long totalitarian rule was replete with dark and dismal days. In the beginning, the majority of intellectuals favored the ideals of socialism.¹⁰⁶ According to Jarka Burian, "disillusioned by the abandonment of their country by its western allies during

¹⁰¹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 38

¹⁰² *ibid.* p. 39

¹⁰³ Waterlow, J., "It's Only A Joke, Comrade!: Humour, Trust and Everyday Life under Stalin". *Oxford. Kindle Edition.* (2018), p. 10

¹⁰⁴ Burian, J., "Post-War Drama in Czechoslovakia". *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (October, 1973), p. 299

¹⁰⁵ Berka, P., et al., "Xenophobe's Guide to the Czechs". *Xenophobe's Guides*, (2013), p. 34

¹⁰⁶ Burian, J., "Post-War Drama in Czechoslovakia". *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (1973), p. 300

the Munich crises and impressed by the decisive efforts of the U.S.S.R. and Czechoslovakian Communists in liberating the country, they were sympathetic to the humanistic ideals expressed by the Communist Party”.¹⁰⁷ However, the creation of the Third Republic was an experiment that completely restructured “Czechoslovak politics, society, economics, and international relations”, rather than a case of interwar politics.¹⁰⁸ A shift also occurred in the relationship between the Czechs and the Slovaks as once again they found themselves under the same state.¹⁰⁹ As Carol Skalnik Leff explained, “in Czech-Slovak relations, old working alliances and antagonisms were reanimated, and the balance of organized party power in the National Assembly was strikingly close to what it had been before the war, insofar as the Czech lands were concerned”.¹¹⁰ From 1948, Czechoslovakia adapted a socialist blueprint “tailored to Soviet specifications” except for the fact that the existence of some satellite parties was allowed and “the provision of explicitly Slovak instruments for political and administrative action”.¹¹¹ The political structure in Czechoslovakia was asymmetric and the access to decision-making was not equal for Czechs and Slovaks.¹¹² Carol Skalnik Leff described the asymmetry as “a structural compromise between Slovak nationhood and Czechoslovak statehood” since it persisted until the federalization of January 1969.¹¹³

‘What is it about Socialism that the Slovaks like best?’

‘The fact that the Czechs have to live under it too.’¹¹⁴

After the Second World War, the Czechoslovak Communist Party (CCP) emerged as “the most popular political movement in a nation that was spared serious destruction of its relatively advanced pre-war industrial base”.¹¹⁵ The fact that CCP took a militant stand against the submission and escape of President Edward Benes helped

¹⁰⁷ Burian, J., "Post-War Drama in Czechoslovakia". *Educational Theatre Journal*, Vol. 25, No. 3, (1973), p. 300

¹⁰⁸ Leff, C., "Chapter Title: Political Structure and National Conflict: The Czechoslovak Socialist Republic, 1948–1968". In *National Conflict in Czechoslovakia: The Making and Remaking of a State, 1918-1987*, Princeton University Press, (1988), p. 86

¹⁰⁹ *ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *ibid.* pp. 86-87

¹¹¹ *ibid.* pp. 98-99

¹¹² *ibid.*

¹¹³ *ibid.* p. 99

¹¹⁴ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 150

¹¹⁵ Munk, M., "Socialism in Czechoslovakia: What Went Wrong?". *Science & Society*, Vol. 64, No. 2, (2000), p. 225

elevate the party's image in the public eye.¹¹⁶ Michael Munk pointed out that “unlike elsewhere in Eastern Europe, most Czechs and many Slovaks regarded the Soviet Union as a heroic liberator of fellow Slavs – especially because their liberators went home promptly”.¹¹⁷ Political power was handed to the CCP during the “Heroic February” of 1948 when, despite the capitalist opposition, the Communist Party “and its allies received the cabinet portfolios of their resigned opponents from Benes himself according to the bourgeois Constitution – without bloodshed and with the support of most of the working class”.¹¹⁸ The CCP was handed a unique opportunity to build socialism in a country with “a relatively advanced socioeconomic base” and strong support from the people.¹¹⁹ However, the socialist system that was so enthusiastically embraced in 1948 started to lose popularity within two decades and after twenty more years no one opposed the restoration of capitalism.¹²⁰

The Czech Party is conducting a recruitment drive.

A Party cadre is interviewing a peasant in a small country town in Moravia.

'Who were the two great founders of Scientific Socialism?'

'I don't know.'

'What do you know about Lenin?'

'Nothing, I'm afraid.'

'Who is the present leader of the great Soviet Union?'

'I haven't any idea.'

The questioning continues in similar vein. Finally the Party cadre, exasperated, asks: 'Where did you say you come from?'

'From that village over that distant hill.'

*'Ahhh!' sighs the Party cadre, 'It must be a beautiful place.'*¹²¹

There are numerous explanations as to what went wrong and changed the minds of the Czechoslovak people so drastically, some even going as far as to claim everything went

¹¹⁶ Munk, M., "Socialism in Czechoslovakia: What Went Wrong?". *Science & Society*, Vol. 64, No. 2, (2000), p. 225

¹¹⁷ *ibid.*

¹¹⁸ *ibid.* p. 226

¹¹⁹ *ibid.*

¹²⁰ *ibid.*

¹²¹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 111

sour.¹²² However, some explanations hold true. One of them is the argument presented by Jan Fontik, the CCP's former secretary for propaganda, culture, science and the media, who claimed that the declaration of Cold War by President Truman gave the Czechoslovak Communist Party “‘no choice’ but to submit to Soviet ‘hegemony’”.¹²³ Thus the CCP’s mistake was abandoning their “independent road in return for protection from ‘a counterweight to the USA,’” and their failure to grasp the fact that the Soviet Union’s interests did not necessarily align with that of Czechoslovakia.¹²⁴ Another argument suggests that the Soviet Union and its East European allies did not experience socialism and that “intra-party debate and ‘democratic’ control over economic planning and workplace decision making were the missing but essential ingredients for ‘genuine’ socialism”.¹²⁵ Lastly, although it is not quite accurate in the case of Czechoslovakia (“because the CSSR ... did not borrow heavily from the West to support export industries in the 1980s, it was not required to sacrifice living standards to service a bloated foreign and IMF debt.”) it is possible to argue that “socialism collapsed because its inflexible economies could not compete in the new ‘world economy’”.¹²⁶

A Czech housewife says: ‘Since we have a planned economy, whenever there’s a shortage of ham, there’s a shortage of eggs at the same time.’¹²⁷

Regardless of the reasons behind the loss of support for the communist ideology it is undeniable that people had lost the enthusiasm of 1948. The political climate of the time also influenced the topics of popular jokes. As Waterlow put it, “jokes are stories we tell ourselves about our experience of the world. They can capture, challenge, reimagine, and soothe that experience, holding tension and emotion in a provisional, playful state”.¹²⁸ Just as myths help people envision the world around us, humor is “challenging rather than dictating; questioning rather than answering; exploring rather than hiding beneath the covers of accepted wisdom”.¹²⁹

¹²² Munk, M., "Socialism in Czechoslovakia: What Went Wrong?". *Science & Society*, Vol. 64, No. 2, (2000), p. 226

¹²³ *ibid.*

¹²⁴ *ibid.*

¹²⁵ *ibid.*

¹²⁶ *ibid.* p. 227

¹²⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 103

¹²⁸ Waterlow, J., "It's Only A Joke, Comrade!: Humour, Trust and Everyday Life under Stalin". *Oxford. Kindle Edition.* (2018), pp. 2-3

¹²⁹ *ibid.*

3. Pattern of Differentiation: Czechoslovak versus Soviet Humor

When exploring the first stage of a Communist society, Karl Marx remarked that it is obliged to bear the “birthmarks of the old society from whose womb it sprung”, suggesting that revolutions are incapable of erasing all the elements of the previous society.¹³⁰ These *birthmarks* presented a unique issue in 1917 Russia where a dominant middle class and a Western *uomo singulare* had not been formed in the “primitive agrarian economy” pre-revolution.¹³¹ Moreover, the efforts of Peter the Great were in vain as Russia remained unbothered by the “Protestant Reformation and the European Renaissance”.¹³² Instead of celebrating heroes, Russian literature was replete by sagas and epics while its art was mainly represented by the ikon instead of portraits.¹³³ Similarly, Russian (and eventually Soviet) humor has its distinct patterns and characteristics. On the other hand, the communist takeover in Czechoslovakia was peaceful and smooth. The lack of a revolution in 1948 left a rather peculiar birthmark in Communist Czechoslovakia which in turn influenced the humor in the country. According to Ben Lewis, “the Czechs were known for their surrealist wit, the Romanians for their dry irony, eastern European Jews for their inventiveness and sardonicism, and Poles, apparently, for their Catholic analogues.”¹³⁴ In the Soviet Union, on the other hand, even though people “had not lost their prerevolutionary ability to reach a plurality of conclusions about their government or their own lives” they lacked the means to communicate their political views which made them “reroute critical discourse into other channels – and humour was one of the most important”.¹³⁵ One of the largest trends in anti-communist humor in the Soviet bloc was the Radio Yerevan jokes that were popularized in the mid-1900s. According to Ján Kalin, “The peculiarity of these jokes is that they are not of Armenian origin and that Armenians are quite angry with them. And yet, or perhaps because of that, they multiply with

¹³⁰ Slochower, H., "Fear, Tragedy and Humor in Soviet Literature". *Books Abroad*, Vol. 16, No. 3, (1942), p. 246

¹³¹ *ibid.*

¹³² *ibid.*

¹³³ *ibid.*

¹³⁴ Lewis, B., “Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes”. *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p. 113

¹³⁵ Waterlow, J., "It's Only A Joke, Comrade!: Humour, Trust and Everyday Life under Stalin". *Oxford Kindle Edition*. (2018), p. 4

undiminished intensity and spread further.”¹³⁶ These witty short jokes touched not only upon political issues but also joked about Soviet inventions, daily life, and even eroticism.¹³⁷

Question: Is it possible to buy an honest person?

*Answer: No, just sell.*¹³⁸

Or

Question: Can a Volga driver pick a sharp turn at a speed of 120 km/h?

*Answer: Yes, but only once.*¹³⁹

Or

Question: Every night I have dreams in foreign languages. What should I do?

*Answer: We recommend that you enjoy sleeping with a translator.*¹⁴⁰

Or

Question: Will there be money in communism?

*Answer: A dogmatist says no, a revisionist says yes. And we, the Marxist-Leninists say: some will have it, some won't.*¹⁴¹

Or

Question: Is it true that five hundred cars were handed out in Moscow's Red Square a month ago?

*Answer: It's true, but with minor changes. It wasn't a month ago, but a week ago, not in Moscow's Red Square, but in Leningrad on Nevsky Prospekt, it wasn't 500 cars, but 50 bicycles, and they didn't give them away, they stole them.*¹⁴²

Or

Question to Radio Erevan:

'Is there censorship of radio and the press in the Soviet Union?'

¹³⁶ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtíp: učebnica v tipológii a ž'artizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 116

¹³⁷ *ibid.*

¹³⁸ *ibid.*

¹³⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁴⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁴¹ *ibid.* p. 117

¹⁴² *ibid.*

*'In principle, no. But unfortunately it is not possible to go into this question in any detail at the present time.'*¹⁴³

Or:

Question to Radio Erevan:

'What would the Soviet Union do in a totally hopeless situation?'

*'We never give information over the radio about the problems of Soviet agriculture.'*¹⁴⁴

These and many such Radio Yerevan jokes were quite popular in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia. The difference between Soviet and Czechoslovak jokes is more often found in the context rather than the form. Some reoccurring themes in Czechoslovak humor include wishing for Soviet's retreat or for another power to defeat them as the efforts of 1968 left the people with no hope of reaching democracy on their own.

Czechoslovakia:

A man shouting in Prague: 'The Russians have landed on the moon!'

*Passerby: 'Really? All of them?'*¹⁴⁵

And:

Karel was walking through the woods near Prague when a good fairy appeared before him.

'Karel, I am your fairy godmother. I will grant you three wishes!'

'I wish that the Chinese Red Army would occupy Prague and then retreat.'

'And your second wish?'

'I wish that the Chinese Red Army would occupy Prague and then retreat.'

'And your third wish?'

'I wish that the Chinese Red Army would occupy Prague and then retreat.'

'Your wishes will be granted,' said the fairy. 'But tell me, why do you want the Chinese Red Army to occupy Prague three times and then retreat three times?'

¹⁴³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 91

¹⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 104

¹⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 139

*'Because they will have to fight their way six times across the Soviet Union.'*¹⁴⁶

Similarly, another common topic in Czechoslovak humor involves around the Kremlin's pressure on the country's politics, especially after the Soviet military invasion following the events of Prague Spring.

Zdeněk Nejedlý walks on the sunny Wenceslas Square with an open umbrella.

'Why do you have an umbrella open, Comrade Minister, don't you see that it's not raining?'

*'It's not raining here but in Moscow.'*¹⁴⁷

On the other hand, Soviet humor focused on its internal and foreign policies, the leaders, daily life in USSR and the issues of living under an autocratic regime. In the late 1950s, a decision was made to develop a "strong invention system" in the Soviet Union in order to make use of foreign technologies.¹⁴⁸ The Soviets have numerous argued that licensing foreign technologies was much better than developing their own or copying others as it allowed them to access the latest technological advancements without losing time and, thanks to various licensing arrangements, they were able to update the technologies created by other countries.¹⁴⁹ Thus on April 24, 1959, "the Soviets enacted the Statute of Inventions, Discoveries and Rationalization (or Innovation) Proposals".¹⁵⁰ Three years later, "articles 100-116 of the Principles of Civil Legislation of the USSR and the Union Republic" were passed, and, in 1965, "the Soviet Union ratified the International Convention for the Protection of Industrial Property (Paris Convention), a treaty involving most of the important industrial nations of the world, relating to industrial property rights, such as patents".¹⁵¹ The development of what many believe to have been the "strongest patent system in the world"¹⁵² led to numerous jokes on concealing the identities of original foreign inventors.

A Russian returns to his native town after a long absence. On his way through town he notices a large statue of Petrov who invented the telephone, the

¹⁴⁶ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 50

¹⁴⁷ ¹⁴⁷ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtíp: učebnica v tipológii a žartizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 246

¹⁴⁸ Blair, H., "Inventions in the Soviet Union". *The International Lawyer*, Vol. 7, No. 2, (1973), p. 485

¹⁴⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁵⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁵¹ *ibid.*

¹⁵² *ibid.*

electric light-bulb, the aeroplane [sic.], the cuckoo clock and many other important things. He continues walking and comes upon an even larger statue of Ivanov.

'Who's Ivanov?' he asks.

*'Ivanov,' he is told, 'Ivanov invented Petrov.'*¹⁵³

Similarly:

In the Moscow museum, a guide leads foreign tourists to the hall of inventors.

'On this wall you see images of three famous inventors,' he says, 'The one on the right is Telefonovich, who invented the telephone. The one on the left is Radion Radionovič, who invented the radio.'

'And who's in the middle?,' asks the tourist.

*'Ivan Ivanovich. He is the most important of them. He invented Telefonovich Telefon and Radion Radionovich.'*¹⁵⁴

Furthermore, Soviet humor more frequently dwelled on the importance of the communist ideology and the philosophy behind it. According to Oriol Pi-Sunyer, "A well-known example utilizes as its frame of reference the indoctrination of the young and the stress placed on ideologically correct answers".¹⁵⁵

Instructor: 'What is the chief characteristic of Capitalism?'

Youth: 'The exploitation of man by man.'

Instructor: 'Very good, and how does this differ from Communism?'

*Youth: 'Comrade, in Communism, the opposite holds true.'*¹⁵⁶

Similarly:

A guide explains to a party of tourists visiting the USSR that in the Soviet Union there are three kinds of love.

'First there is love between people of different sexes. This is very ordinary and commonplace and it is found almost everywhere in our country. Second, there is the love that takes place between people of the same sex. This is highly abnormal and disgusting and is virtually unknown in our country. And

¹⁵³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 21

¹⁵⁴ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtip: učebnica v tipológii a žartizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 245

¹⁵⁵ Pi-Sunyer, O., "Political Humor in a Dictatorial State: The Case of Spain". *Ethnohistory*, Vol. 24, No. 2, (Spring, 1977), p. 182

¹⁵⁶ *ibid.*

third there is the supreme form of love: that which unites the Soviet citizen to the Party, Vanguard of the Working class. Many aspire to this kind of love in our country, but very few attain it in its highest form.'

*A tourist, fascinated by this information, asks: 'I have one question. In the third kind of love, who screws whom?'*¹⁵⁷

The people's attitude towards the ideology of the Soviet Union was constantly changing and influencing the evolution of the society.¹⁵⁸ Ironically, Karl Marx saw ideology as "a form of false consciousness" that existed in order to "mask or 'rationalize' the unpleasant realities of a given socioeconomic system".¹⁵⁹ Lenin, on the other hand, massively stretched the meaning of the term making it equivalent to theory and knowledge.¹⁶⁰ According to George Kline, "all knowledge contains an ideological (hence partisan) element, and all forms of ideology with the exception of religion, contain a cognitive element. Pushed to its logical extreme, the Leninist reduction of theory to ideology would undercut any distinction between ideology and science, or between ideology and philosophy".¹⁶¹ The role of the Soviet ideology drastically changed after Stalin's death. During the early years of the Soviet Union, the people genuinely believed in the socialist ideology even through the Second World War and the terror of Stalin's reign. But as years went by and de-Stalinization progressed, people started questioning the communist ideology, and what better way to question it than by humoring the idea.

'What do Marxist philosophers think of these days?'

*'Whether or not there is life before death.'*¹⁶²

Or:

'What are the four stages of socialism?'

*'Utopian, Scientific, Real and Curfew.'*¹⁶³

Or:

'What is socialism?'

¹⁵⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 108

¹⁵⁸ Shlapentokh, V., "Social Values in the Soviet Union: Major Trends in the Post-Stalin Period", *Michigan State University*, 626-13, (August 30, 1984), p. i

¹⁵⁹ Kline, G., "Philosophy, Ideology, and Policy in the Soviet Union", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (1964), p. 174

¹⁶⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁶¹ *ibid.*

¹⁶² Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 152

¹⁶³ *ibid.* p. 95

*'Socialism is the dialectical synthesis of the various stages in the historical development of mankind. From pre-history it takes [sic.] the method. From antiquity, slavery. From Feudalism, serfdom. From capitalism, exploitation. And from socialism, the name.'*¹⁶⁴

The promises of a better future, of a utopian state started to lose its effect on the public. Many started questioning the philosophy behind the regime as well as its application in the Soviet Union.

Two Jews met in Moscow in the 1930s.

*'Well, Cohen,' said one of them grimly, 'do you think we've already reached 100 per cent Communism, or will it get worse?'*¹⁶⁵

Or:

'What is the difference between Communism and Capitalism?'

*'In Capitalism man exploits man. In Communism it's vice versa.'*¹⁶⁶

Polish Professor Bochenski identified three Marxist-Leninist components: "the 'basic dogmas,' the 'systematic superstructure,' and the 'declassified doctrines'".¹⁶⁷ The content of these dogmas and, to some extent, the Marxist-Leninist "systematic superstructure" remained unchanged for an extended period of time while the "style and rhetoric of Marxist-Leninist utterance" remained close to the Stalinist norm.¹⁶⁸ Bochenski argued that while there is change in authorities, the "appeal to doctrinal authority, except in the 'declassified' disciplines, remains methodologically constant".¹⁶⁹ At the same time, the "tone of Soviet ideological and philosophical pronouncements" was still arrogant and dogmatic, and while the basics remained unchanged, a couple of rather modest "post-Stalin amendments to the 'systematic superstructure' of Soviet philosophy" had occurred.¹⁷⁰

While the questioning of the communist ideology and the people's future under the regime began in the Soviet Union, it swiftly spread across the Eastern bloc. According to George Kline, "Since 1956, when a new wave of Marxist revisionism, both philosophical and political, broke over Eastern Europe, Soviet Marxist-Leninists

¹⁶⁴ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 95

¹⁶⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁶ *ibid.*

¹⁶⁷ Kline, G., "Philosophy, Ideology, and Policy in the Soviet Union", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (1964), p. 176

¹⁶⁸ *ibid.* p. 177

¹⁶⁹ *ibid.*

¹⁷⁰ *ibid.* pp. 179-180

have devoted most of their professional energy to its ‘refutation’¹⁷¹. These revisionists were outspokenly anti-Stalinist.¹⁷² Nevertheless, Czechoslovaks did not include the issue of ideology in their jokes as much as the citizens of the Soviet Union. The fact that state propaganda and the reality of the country’s state did not coincide led to many jokes.

A distinguished Soviet aesthetician was answering questions on the theory of art.

‘What is expressionism?’ one questioner asked.

‘Expressionism is painting what you feel.’

‘What is impressionism?’

‘Impressionism is painting what you see.’

‘And what is socialist realism?’

‘Socialist realism is painting what you hear.’¹⁷³

Besides the contextual difference in Czechoslovak and Soviet humor, there is also the difference in the joke’s length. According to Kalin, “The Russian joke is concise, a bit harsh and engaged. Already the spirit of the XX Congress has partially released the valves of a critical joke, which notes the ailments in the moral, social and political spheres.”¹⁷⁴ However, some Russian jokes like to build a narrative before reaching the punch line. Meanwhile, Czech jokes tend to be precise and to the point. Naturally, this is not obsolete and there are of course longer Czech jokes.

‘What is the difference between the Prague Uprising and the film of the Prague Uprising?’

‘The film was five minutes shorter.’¹⁷⁵

And:

A sociologist is doing an experiment on the behavior of different national groups. He puts three groups, of French, English and Russians on three deserted islands to see what will happen. Each group contains two men and one woman. After six months, the sociologist goes around to see how things are turning out.

¹⁷¹ Kline, G., "Philosophy, Ideology, and Policy in the Soviet Union", *The Review of Politics*, Vol. 26, No. 2, (1964), p. 175

¹⁷² *ibid.*

¹⁷³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 25

¹⁷⁴ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtip: učebnica v tipológii a žartizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 113

¹⁷⁵ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 136

When he arrives on the island with the three English people he realizes that nothing has changed, and the three people are in fact sitting in the same place that they had been left in six months ago.

'What's the matter, why haven't you done anything?' asks the sociologist.

'Oh,' replies one of the Englishmen, 'we've been waiting for somebody to introduce us.'

The sociologist arrives on the island with the French group and finds one man working in the fields. 'Where are the others?' asks the sociologist.

'They are off making love. We split the year so each man spends six months with the woman while the other works; it's his turn now.'

When he arrives on the Russian island he finds the two men sitting drinking tea in a well-kept garden.

'Where's the woman?' asks the sociologist.

*'Oh,' replies one of the Russians, 'The masses are toiling in the fields.'*¹⁷⁶

The people of Czechoslovakia as well as the Soviets seemed to have a few favorite jokes that kept reappearing throughout the years. These jokes are usually general (i.e., instead of focusing on a specific policy, meeting or an event they address a problem that has been present for years if not decades). In the Soviet Union, such topics include: 1) the presence of arbitrary power and mass arrests, 2) the omnipresent censorship and lack of freedoms, 3) ethnic differences (especially towards the Jews), and 4) religion.

1)

Three Soviet labor camp inmates sit chatting.

'What are you in for?' asks the first.

'Me? I spoke badly of Comrade Popov in 1939.'

'And you?'

'I spoke well of Comrade Popov in 1940.'

'And what about you?,' they asked turning to the third.

*'I am Comrade Popov.'*¹⁷⁷

Or:

A Russian meets an old friend on a Moscow Street after many years.

¹⁷⁶ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 43

¹⁷⁷ *ibid.* p. 121

'But where have you been?' he asks.

'In prison,' the other replies.

'How terrible! For how long?'

'Ten years.'

'But what for?'

'Nothing, of course,' his friend replies.

*'No,' he says, 'that is impossible. You only get five years for nothing.'*¹⁷⁸

Or

'Have you heard the news? Pravda is going to hold a competition for the best political joke.'

'What's the first prize?'

*'Twenty years.'*¹⁷⁹

2)

A foreign journalist was interviewing a worker in Gdansk.

'Do you find your job rewarding?'

'In every respect.'

'And what's your apartment like?'

'Modern, spacious and cheap.'

'How do you spend your leisure?'

'I go to the opera and the theatre. I attend evening classes to broaden my education. I play football at weekends.'

'Do you possess a radio?'

*'Of course I do. How else would I know how to answer your stupid questions?'*¹⁸⁰

3)

A streetcar in Moscow after the Revolution.

'Lenin Square,' announces the conductor.

'Formerly Nicholas Square,' mutters a Jewish passenger.

The conductor gives him a warning look and announces, 'Street of the October Revolution.'

'Formerly Street of Peter the Great,' says the Jew.

¹⁷⁸ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 121-122

¹⁷⁹ *ibid.* p. 10

¹⁸⁰ *ibid.* p. 92

Now the conductor gets very annoyed and shouts 'Watch your tongue, Comrade Israelite.'

'Formerly dirty Jew,' comments the passenger.¹⁸¹

4)

Kennedy comes to God and says:

'Tell me, God, how many years before my people will be happy?'

'Fifty years,' God replies.

Kennedy weeps and leaves.

De Gaulle comes to God and asks:

'Tell me, God, how many years before my people are happy?'

'A hundred years,' replies God.

De Gaulle weeps and leaves.

Khrushchev comes to God and says:

'Tell me, God, how many years before my people will be happy?'

God weeps and leaves.¹⁸²

At the same time, the jokes that remained in circulation in Czechoslovakia concerned topics such as 1) the different living conditions of the countries in Eastern Europe and 2) dissatisfaction towards the oppressive state.

1)

A lonely spot on the Czech-Polish border.

Suddenly a Polish dog comes running to the border; at the same time a Czech dog comes running towards the Polish dog. Heads down they approach each other and collide with a crash.

After a few dazed moments the Czech dog shakes his head and asks 'What's the big hurry to get to Czechoslovakia?'

'I'm hungry,' says the Polish dog. 'I want something to eat. And why are you rushing to Poland?'

'I want to bark.'¹⁸³

2)

A man is vomiting in Prague's Wenceslas Square. Another man comes up to him and says:

¹⁸¹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 117

¹⁸² *ibid.* p. 165

¹⁸³ *ibid.* p. 39

*'Let me tell you, comrade, I am of the same opinion!'*¹⁸⁴

Or:

*The five rules of socialism: (1) Don't think. (2) If you do think, don't speak. (3) If you think and speak, don't write. (4) If you think, speak and write, don't sign. (5) And if you think, speak, write and sign, don't be surprised.*¹⁸⁵

As the preceding findings and examples indicate, while there are some patterns of differentiation between Soviet and Czechoslovak jokes (e.g., the style, the context, the length), anti-communist humor in Eastern Europe shares special characteristics that cannot be found in other Socialist or Communist states (e.g., Cuba, China, Vietnam).

4. The Evolution of Communism in the Guise of Humor: from Stalinism to Perestroika

4.1. *The Soviet Union*

Understanding how humor evolved throughout history requires a closer look at the political figures that have inspired those jokes. The most powerful figures of Soviet history are its leaders, each with a unique personality and set of policies that has been immortalized in Soviet political humor. The following chapter explores the humor aimed at the leaders of the Soviet Union from Joseph Stalin to Mikhail Gorbachev, and their policies.

The common associations with the word Stalinism usually include “repression, dictatorship, famine, Gulag and terror”.¹⁸⁶ Between 1928 and 1941, as Jonathan Waterlow described, “the Soviet Union became a colossal pressure-cooker in which a self-declared ‘backward’ country of illiterate peasants was forced through massive programmes of frantic industrialization, the bloody collectivization of agriculture, and heady yet ruthless attempts to create a New Soviet Person who would embody Communist values in word, deed and identity”.¹⁸⁷ Starvation, death, and paranoia surrounded this new era of transformation and seemingly left no place for humor.¹⁸⁸ Yet people were laughing, some joking about the socio-economic and political situation,

¹⁸⁴ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 2

¹⁸⁵ *ibid.* p. 114

¹⁸⁶ Waterlow, J., “It's Only A Joke, Comrade!: Humour, Trust, and Everyday Life under Stalin (1928-1941)”. *Oxford, Kindle Edition*, (August 12, 2018), p. 1

¹⁸⁷ *ibid.* pp. 1-2

¹⁸⁸ *ibid.* p. 2

while others were composing anecdotes on the authoritative figures.¹⁸⁹ Jonathan Waterlow contended, that “funny” and “serious” sometimes collide allowing some serious matters to be joked about and some jokes to be taken seriously.¹⁹⁰ All in all, jokes possess a certain rhetoric and sharpness that reflect on the reality with remarkable insight and precision.¹⁹¹ It is commonly believed that a good joke requires no further explanation; therefore, the following pages provide a context rather than an explanation for the jokes and anecdotes included.

The creation of a *New Soviet Person* was not the only task the Soviets were facing. Constructing an image of Lenin and Stalin as the masterminds behind the regime was part of the process. Hence Stalin’s cult of personality emerged, drawing from a long-standing tradition of uniting the people under a collective entity and strengthening the legitimacy of those in power.¹⁹² In order to spread a consistently effective Bolshevik propaganda that would advocate the socialist and communist regime, state took control over art and other forms of cultural production.¹⁹³ In case of Stalin, the state went so far as to develop “a formulaic Stalin biography that was to be used to educate the ‘simple people’, and demonized ‘the enemy’ as a backdrop against which Stalin could appear as a wise man and savior”.¹⁹⁴ But despite the centralization of art under VseKoKhudozhnik (i.e., “the central state commissioning agency”) and cultural take-over by Stalin (i.e., from 1934 to 1938 Stalin took over the position of a “commissar of cultural enlightenment” in order to secure control over the cultural production), his opposition was growing and his image continuously being ridiculed.¹⁹⁵ In Lev Trotskii’s words: ‘Stalin ... is the outstanding mediocrity in the party.’¹⁹⁶ In 1934, the image of Stalin was almost constantly present in media and propaganda, turning the Soviet cultural production into what Malte Rolf referred to as “hall of mirrors”.¹⁹⁷ Eventually, Stalin’s omnipresent image became canonized in media and propaganda which resulted in the unexpected: ridicule.

¹⁸⁹ Waterlow, J., “It’s Only A Joke, Comrade!: Humour, Trust and Everyday Life under Stalin (1928-1941)”. *Oxford, Kindle Edition*, (August 12, 2018), p. 2

¹⁹⁰ *ibid.*

¹⁹¹ *ibid.* p. 4

¹⁹² Pisch, A., “‘The rise of the Stalin personality cult’ in The personality cult of Stalin in Soviet posters, 1929–1953: Archetypes, inventions and fabrications”. *ANU Press*, (2016), p. 87

¹⁹³ *ibid.* p. 88

¹⁹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁹⁵ *ibid.* pp. 88-91

¹⁹⁶ *ibid.* p. 87

¹⁹⁷ *ibid.* p. 92

Two skeletons meet on the streets of Kiev. 'Hey,' says one. 'When did you die?'

'In 1932, in the Great Famine,' the other replies. 'How about you?'

'Oh I'm still alive, thank God.'

'Shhhh! Don't you know that nowadays you can't thank God, you must thank Stalin.'

'And what should I do when he dies?'

*'Then you can thank God.'*¹⁹⁸

Naturally, the people were afraid to openly joke about Stalin or even discuss their feelings about him. The possibility of kulak deportations to the North or forced labor in the Urals under gulag kept everyone alert and cautious.

Two friends are walking down the street. 'What do you think of Stalin?' the first asks the second.

'I can't tell you here. We have to go somewhere private.' He leads his friend into a side street.

'Now, you can tell me here,' says the first.

'No. it's not safe. Follow me.' They turn into a yard of an apartment block.

'Okay. Here then.'

'No. It's too public. Follow me.' The two friends head down some stairs into the dark basement of the block.

'No one will be able to hear us here. Now here you really can tell me what you think of Stalin.'

*'Okay. I quite like him actually.'*¹⁹⁹

Political propaganda under Stalin was indeed exceptional. Stalin's reign was a time of "terror, mass executions, brutal collectivization, and the most horrific war the world has ever seen".²⁰⁰ But all this was disguised in official propaganda which portrayed Stalin's Soviet Union as "a land of peace, progress, harmony, and – most of all – unending love for and devotion to Stalin himself".²⁰¹ The absurdity of the contrast between the reality and what was being propagated officially was not only to encourage

¹⁹⁸ Lewis, B., "Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes". Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd., (2009), p. 57

¹⁹⁹ *ibid.* pp. 68-69

²⁰⁰ *RadioFreeEurope/Radioliberty*, "Stalin: Propaganda and Reality". Accessed March 15, 2020 (n.d.)

²⁰¹ *ibid.*

the people and inject patriotic sentiments but also to paint a certain picture to the outside world that was constantly on the watch.

Stalin dies and he's not certain whether he wants to go to Heaven or to Hell. He asks for a tour of each. In Heaven, he sees people engaged in quiet prayers and meditation; in Hell people are eating, drinking, dancing and generally having a good time. Stalin opts for hell. He is led through a series of labyrinths into an area with boiling cauldrons. Several devils grab him. Stalin begins to protest and points out that on his tour he was shown people enjoying themselves.

*'That,' replies the devil, 'was just propaganda.'*²⁰²

Nevertheless, Stalin's legacy is especially notable in relation to terror and ideology. Due to the secrecy of Stalin's regime, most historical findings of the time were based on guesswork and outside observations which gave birth to the discipline of Kremlinology.²⁰³ Prominent author Robert Conquest noted that rumors were one of the best accessible sources for studying Stalin and his reign.²⁰⁴ It wasn't till the era of *glasnost* and *perestroika* that several documents were declassified and made available for research.²⁰⁵ More was made public after the collapse of the Soviet Union while other documents were reclassified.²⁰⁶ Additionally, Stalin's "personal library and archives [including his orders in 1937 that allowed the use of torture against those believed to be the 'enemies of the people'] are also missing, either stolen or destroyed after his death in 1953".²⁰⁷ Nevertheless, some of the data collected by the OGPU and later by the NKVD on the prosecution of the presumed enemies of state survived.²⁰⁸ Just in 1937, 800,000 people were prosecuted by the NKVD mostly for "petty jealousies, bitter rivalries, or outright hatred among neighbors, factory workers, or office staff" which was disguised under political reasons.²⁰⁹ According to David King, "these mass arrests and killings followed Stalin and Molotov's 'Campaign of Vigilance' which, in the

²⁰² Lewis, B., "Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes". *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p. 64

²⁰³ Kuromiya, H., "Stalin and His Era". *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3, (September, 2007), p. 711

²⁰⁴ *ibid.*

²⁰⁵ *ibid.*

²⁰⁶ *ibid.* pp. 711-712

²⁰⁷ Kuromiya, H., "Stalin and His Era". *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3, (September, 2007), p. 712

²⁰⁸ King, D., "Enemies of the People". *Grand Street*, No. 67, *Fire*, (1999), p. 210

²⁰⁹ *ibid.*

prevailing culture of distrust, compelled the Soviet people to expose their fellow citizens as spies, wreckers, or terrorists”.²¹⁰

An Englishman, a German and a Russian were arguing together over which of their three nations was the bravest.

‘We’re the bravest,’ insisted the Englishman, ‘because one in every ten of us is drowned at sea.’

‘Nonsense,’ protested the German. ‘We are the bravest, because one in every six of us dies on the battlefield.’

‘You are both wrong,’ said the Russian. ‘We are the bravest, because although every second one of us is an informer, we still tell political jokes.’²¹¹

In the beginning most of the gulag prisoners were common criminals and “prosperous peasants” who publicly went against collectivization.²¹² But soon the list of political prisoners expanded to include regular citizens such as “doctors, writers, intellectuals, students, artists and scientists”.²¹³ Without any warning, some of the victims were “randomly picked up by Stalin’s NKVD security police and hauled to the prisons with no trial or rights to an attorney”.²¹⁴

‘What are you in for?’ one prisoner asks Another.

‘I was lazy.’

‘Do you mean you engaged in sabotage?’

‘No, I was having a chat with a friend of mine about the political situation. I thought I could wait until morning before denouncing him. He managed to get to the Security Police the same night.’²¹⁵

Just in Moscow during the 1930s over 30,000 individuals were killed by the NKVD from which only about 6,000 files are available to this day.²¹⁶ According to David King, the mug shots and “their accompanying documentation – bundles of false confessions to crimes that the accused could not possibly have committed – have been hidden for decades in the central archives of the KGB”.²¹⁷ Most of these prisoners that

²¹⁰ King, D., "Enemies of the People". *Grand Street, No. 67, Fire*, (1999), p. 210

²¹¹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 10

²¹² "Gulag". *History.com*, (March 23, 2018), Accessed March 16, 2020

²¹³ *ibid.*

²¹⁴ *ibid.*

²¹⁵ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 16

²¹⁶ King, D., "Enemies of the People". *Grand Street, No. 67, Fire*, (1999), p. 210

²¹⁷ *ibid.*

were “incarcerated in the depths of Lubyanka” were “teachers, engineers, housewives, or ordinary workers and peasants, trapped in Stalin's machine of death”.²¹⁸

A Georgian delegation has come to visit Stalin. They come, they talk with him in his study and they leave.

No sooner have they disappeared down the corridor than Stalin starts looking for his pipe. He opens drawers, moves papers, but he can't find it anywhere. He shouts down the corridor for the head of his political police, Lavrenti Beria. 'Beria,' he says, 'I've lost my pipe. Go after the Georgian delegation and see if you can find if one of them took it.'

Beria bustles off down the corridor. Stalin carries on looking for his pipe. After five minutes he looks under his desk and finds it on the floor. He recalls Beria. 'It's okay,' he says, 'I found my pipe. You can let the Georgians go.'

*'It's a little too late for that,' Beria replies. 'Half of the delegation admitted they took your pipe and the other half died during questioning.'*²¹⁹

Stalin himself liked to joke about his Terror, where a tenth of the Soviet population (i.e., over twenty-four million people) was either “exiled, imprisoned, sentenced to forced labor or killed”.²²⁰ According to Ben Lewis, “Stalin liked to make jokes about his power, and his kindness. There's a similar binary structure to them all, in which he ironically admits the violence of his rule but then supplies a punch line suggesting his magnanimity ... or vice versa”.²²¹ Hence came the chicken or egg causality dilemma: did Stalin's cruelty inspire the jokes or did his cruel jokes lead to his regime.²²² Either option presents a separate implication. On the one hand, Stalin's repartee may not only have inspired the jokes targeting him but it also meant that “Stalin was opposed to, or – to use the language of Marxism – alienated from his own sense of humor” since the joke-tellers were being persecuted.²²³ On the other hand, if the jokes were created by the people and added to Stalin's own conversations later on, it can be labeled as “an appropriation or ‘co-opting’ of the joke”.²²⁴

²¹⁸ King, D., "Enemies of the People". *Grand Street, No. 67, Fire*, (1999), p. 210

²¹⁹ Lewis, B., “Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes”.

Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd., (2009), p. 53

²²⁰ *ibid.* p. 51

²²¹ *ibid.* p. 52

²²² *ibid.* p. 54

²²³ *ibid.*

²²⁴ *ibid.*

Stalin is giving a speech to an assembly of workers in a big factory. 'The thing we hold most precious in the Soviet union is a human life,' he says.

Suddenly someone in the audience has a fit of coughing.

'Who is coughing?' bellows Stalin.

Silence.

'Okay, call in the NKVD,' says the dictator.

Stalin's political police, the NKVD, rush in with semi-automatic weapons blazing. Soon only seven men are left standing.

Stalin asks again: 'Who coughed?'

One man raises his hand.

*'That's a terrible cold you've got,' says Stalin. 'Take my car and go to hospital.'*²²⁵

Or another version:

An honorary military unit is standing in the Red Square, during the tour of which a soldier sneezes.

'Who sneezed?' asked Stalin.

No one answers.

Ratatata! Machine guns fire at the first row of soldiers.

'Who sneezed?' Stalin asked the second time.

Still no answer.

Ratatata! Machine guns fire at the second row of soldiers, too.

'Who sneezed?' Stalin asked the third time.

A shallow voice was heard from the third row:

'Me...'

*'Bless you!' Stalin exclaimed cheerfully.*²²⁶

The retelling of jokes gave Stalin "a layer of cynicism to the brutality of his regime, which only joking could provide".²²⁷ Furthermore, Stalin's intentions were not to find a "moral justification for his actions" but rather to celebrate its arbitrariness.²²⁸ Stalin's wit implied that the "flaw of the Communist joke ... was that it was a weapon

²²⁵ Lewis, B., "Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes". *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p. 53

²²⁶ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtip: učebnica v tipológii a žartizmu". *Archa SK, trans. Arevik Zadoyan*, (1969, 1990), p. 244

²²⁷ Lewis, B., "Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes". *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p. 54

²²⁸ *ibid.*

that could be turned against the person who wielded it”.²²⁹ Within a decade of being in power, Stalin managed not only to monopolize the politics, the economy, the violence and the cultural production but also humor.²³⁰ The popularized *Communist jokes of Stalinism* soon homogenized the array of political jokes.²³¹ Despite all the stories, rumors and documents from Stalin’s era that survived, he has and will always be an “enigma”.²³²

The Soviet Union entered its next stage when Nikita Khrushchev ascended to power in 1953. While Stalin’s image was carefully fabricated throughout time, Khrushchev “attained a lofty eminence at a much later age and could not have expected to occupy the top post for a period comparable to Stalin”.²³³ Another difference between their legacies is due to the fact that Stalin died in “honor” and only gradually started losing his “good standing”, whereas Khrushchev was “removed from office in silent disgrace as he was consigned to virtual oblivion”.²³⁴

Khrushchev is ninety years old. He lives in a dacha near Moscow but is not permitted to leave it. Meanwhile, Russia has undergone profound changes. In the Kremlin, there lives once more the Tsar of all the Russias. But Khrushchev feels death approaching. He wants to see his capital one last time. So he telephones the Tsar

‘It’s Nikita here,’ he says. ‘I’m old. Grant me permission to come to Moscow. I wish to see our beautiful capital before I die. I promise to behave and speak to no one.’

*The Tsar turns and asks: ‘Well, what do you think, Gromyko?’*²³⁵

Despite the exposure of his regime, Stalin was still occasionally credited for his “virtues and good deeds”.²³⁶ On the contrary, from October 1964 an “abrupt and complete halt” occurred to the acknowledgement of Khrushchev’s “virtues and an almost complete ban on mention of his name, whether in a negative or positive

²²⁹ Lewis, B., “Hammer and Tickle: A History of Communism Told Through Communist Jokes”. *Phoenix, Orion Books Ltd.*, (2009), p. 54

²³⁰ *ibid.* p. 55

²³¹ *ibid.*

²³² Kuromiya, H., "Stalin and His Era". *The Historical Journal*, Vol. 50, No. 3, (September, 2007), p. 712

²³³ Larson, T., "Dismantling the Cults of Stalin and Khrushchev". *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (September, 1968), p. 383

²³⁴ *ibid.*

²³⁵ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 118-119

²³⁶ Larson, T., "Dismantling the Cults of Stalin and Khrushchev". *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (September, 1968), p. 383

context”.²³⁷ Perhaps one of the reasons for that was the difference between their personality cults.²³⁸ While Stalin was regarded as one of the founding fathers of communism and was associated with the Soviet Union’s fundamental institutions, Khrushchev was associated with the policies of the Soviet Union during his time in the office.²³⁹ According to Thomas Larson, “The latter-day Stalin image was that of a remote and somewhat mystical being, present everywhere as an immanent but ordinarily invisible force. Khrushchev's image was that of an active, earthly human leader who traveled widely inside the country and to other countries, who voiced ideas and policies on a wide range of questions, who served as the spokesman of the regime”.²⁴⁰ Khrushchev’s era began with the delivery of his secret speech during the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.²⁴¹ In his speech, Khrushchev not only denounced his predecessor Stalin’s personality cult but also exposed his despotism and the cruel ways he treated his opposition.²⁴² Khrushchev noted that instead of “persuasion, explanation, and patient cooperation with people” Stalin chose to impose his ideas and demand “absolute submission to his opinion”.²⁴³ Moreover, those showing opposition to Stalin or expressing a viewpoint that slightly contradicted his own was “doomed to be removed from the leading collective and subsequent moral and physical annihilation”.²⁴⁴ According to John Rettie, “some were so convulsed as they listened that they suffered heart attacks; others committed suicide afterwards”.²⁴⁵ This speech was regarded as an act of bravery and morality in the West.²⁴⁶

At the 20th Party Congress as Khrushchev recounted the evils perpetrated by Stalin, a voice called from the hall:

‘And where were you then?’

‘Would the man who asked that question please stand up,’ said Khrushchev.

²³⁷ Larson, T., "Dismantling the Cults of Stalin and Khrushchev". *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 21, No. 3, (September, 1968), p. 383

²³⁸ *ibid.* p. 384

²³⁹ *ibid.*

²⁴⁰ *ibid.*

²⁴¹ “Khrushchev's Secret Speech, 'On the Cult of Personality and Its Consequences,' Delivered at the Twentieth Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union,” (February 25, 1956), *History and Public Policy Program Digital Archive, From the Congressional Record: Proceedings and Debates of the 84th Congress, 2nd Session (May 22, 1956-June 11, 1956)*, C11, Part 7 (June 4, 1956)

²⁴² *ibid.*

²⁴³ *ibid.*

²⁴⁴ *ibid.*

²⁴⁵ Rettie, J., "The secret speech that changed world history". *The Guardian*. (February 26, 2006)

²⁴⁶ Parfitt, T., "The real secret of Khrushchev's speech". *The Guardian in Moscow*. (February 24, 2006)

Silence. Nobody stands up.

*'That's where we were too!' replied Khrushchev.*²⁴⁷

However, some were suspicious as to why Khrushchev decided to denounce his predecessor just three years after his death.²⁴⁸ It has been said that “Khrushchev's speech was a cynical ploy to save his skin and that of his party cronies”.²⁴⁹ According to Russian historian Yuri Zhukov, “Khrushchev was trying to dump all the blame on Stalin when his own hands were drenched in blood”.²⁵⁰ In any case, Khrushchev’s speech came as a shock and had an enormous effect on the events that soon unfolded.

Khrushchev was aware of the economic crisis in the Soviet Union and so along with his political aspirations he had also set a goal to fix the economy through various economic policies. He was first introduced to the agricultural issues of USSR during his years as the head of the Communist Party of Ukraine (1938-1949).²⁵¹ This period coincided with the famine of the Soviet Union which was especially disastrous in Ukrainian SSR where millions of people perished.²⁵² The famine was not only due to the “foreign and domestic policies of the Soviet Union” but it was also influenced by the international and European events.²⁵³ One of the main issues from the Soviet Union’s domestic policies was connected to agricultural policies. Several Soviet leaders including Joseph Stalin, Viacheslav Molotov, and Lazar Kaganovich abused their power to further repressions as to advance the Soviet “military-industrial complex” and ensure the backing of the “newly established regimes of the ‘socialist camp,’ as future allies in the next world war, for which the Soviet Union was preparing”.²⁵⁴ According to Veselova et al, “to this end they militarized the Soviet economy and increased the strategic grain reserves by extracting grain and other agricultural products from the countryside.”²⁵⁵ So as Nikita Khrushchev became the First Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union he decided to implement agricultural changes, most notably the so-called *Virgin Lands* policy which promoted the usage of previously uncultivated

²⁴⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 127

²⁴⁸ Parfitt, T., "The real secret of Khrushchev's speech". *The Guardian in Moscow*. (February 24, 2006)

²⁴⁹ *ibid.*

²⁵⁰ *ibid.*

²⁵¹ Taubman, W., “Khrushchev: The Man and His Era”. *W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.*, (2003)

²⁵² Veselova, O., Olynyk, M., & Wynnyckyj, A., "Famine in Ukraine after the Second World War".

Harvard Ukrainian Studies, Vol. 30, No. 1/4, AFTER THE HOLODOMOR: THE ENDURING IMPACT OF THE GREAT FAMINE ON UKRAINE, (2008), p. 183

²⁵³ *ibid.*

²⁵⁴ *ibid.* p. 185

²⁵⁵ *ibid.*

lands in order to increase yield. According to this policy proposal, “virgin and fallow land[s] in Kazakhstan, Siberia, the Urals and the north Caucasus” were to be ploughed up.²⁵⁶ According to Frank Durgin Jr., “during this period the sown area of the USSR has increased by *46 million hectares* [italics added]”.²⁵⁷ Khrushchev also implemented policies that would facilitate the increase in grain production by combining collective farms under direct control, whereby he managed to increase “grain production ... by about 50%, output of livestock products by about 60% and overall agricultural output by about 50%”.²⁵⁸ But despite the initial success, both policies failed to improve the economic conditions of the Soviet Union. At the same time, Khrushchev “spearheaded a vigorous attack on the housing problem” and initiated “wage and pension reforms”.²⁵⁹ Khrushchev knew how bad the economic situation was in the Soviet Union and was keen to implement both political and economic reforms.

Nikita and Nina Khrushchev were on their way back to Moscow by train after a state visit to the GDR. After an hour or so of travelling, Nina asked her husband if they were back in Russia yet. Nikita stuck his hand out of the window as the train pulled into a station and said:

‘No, we’re not back yet.’

After several more hours Nina repeated her question. Nikita once more stuck his hand out of the window and again told her that they were not yet back in Russia.

Some time later Nina asked him a third time. He stuck his hand out of the window and said:

‘Yes, now we’re home.’

‘But how could you tell where we were just by sticking your hand out of the window?’

‘Simple. The first time I stuck my hand out someone kissed it, so I knew we were still in the GDR. The second time I stuck my hand out someone spat on

²⁵⁶ Durgin, F., Jr., "The Virgin Lands Programme 1954-1960". *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 3, (January, 1962), p. 255

²⁵⁷ *ibid.*

²⁵⁸ *ibid.*

²⁵⁹ Hoeffding, O., "Substance and Shadow in the Soviet Seven Year Plan". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (1959), p. 394

*it, so I knew we were in Poland. The third time someone stole my wristwatch – then I knew we were back in Russia.*²⁶⁰

In 1958, Khrushchev introduced his economic plan for the years 1959 to 1965, the so-called *Seven Year Plan*.²⁶¹ According to Oleg Hoefding, “If Khrushchev's past economic record could well have spoken for itself, his preview of further advances to be made by 1965, and beyond, traced out a program also impressive enough, on its own merits, to cheer his followers and to force the West to take thoughtful notice of the dimensions which the Soviet economic challenge is likely to assume within the coming decade”.²⁶² However, instead of letting the data speak for itself, Khrushchev decided to turn the economic report into a “political manifesto, and garnished it with propagandist embellishment unusually heavy even for Soviet documents of this kind”.²⁶³ He presented his plan as one of the milestones in the Soviet Union that was going to move them closer to a true communist state.²⁶⁴ Yet he carefully left out the specifics on when exactly “the Soviet Union might enter this promised land of superabundance and social harmony, but he tried to build up the impression that two or three seven-year strides would take it there”.²⁶⁵ Khrushchev further promised that his economic plan would boost the Soviet production to a point where the production curve would cross streams with that of the United States.²⁶⁶

Khrushchev was furious with the joke tellers:

‘It’s a disgrace! Jokes and then more jokes! Who makes them up? Bring me just one joke writer!’

They bring a joke writer to him. The joke writer pauses in the doorway of Khrushchev’s home and looks around, with great admiration.

‘What are you looking for?’ Khrushchev asks him.

‘I’m just looking. I see that you don’t live too badly.’

‘Well what of it? In twenty years we’ll have Communism and everybody will live like this!’ says Khrushchev.

²⁶⁰ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 51

²⁶¹ Hoefding, O., "Substance and Shadow in the Soviet Seven Year Plan". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (1959), p. 394

²⁶² *ibid.*

²⁶³ *ibid.*

²⁶⁴ *ibid.* pp. 394-395

²⁶⁵ *ibid.* p. 395

²⁶⁶ *ibid.*

*'Aha!' says the joke writer. 'A new joke!'*²⁶⁷

Despite the praise the *Seven Year Plan* received in the Soviet media and the more modest approval of the country's economists, Khrushchev's lengthy report "is but a glossy publicity release abstracted from what must be many volumes of sober and technical calculations compiled over 15 months by Gosplan and the 30 special committees that worked in detail on every aspect of the Plan".²⁶⁸

In the words of Nikita Khrushchev's granddaughter Nina Khrushcheva, the former's "legacy was [always] a mixed matter, not a straightforward story of democratic good overcoming totalitarian evil".²⁶⁹ While some considered Khrushchev a reformer after his secret speech, others saw him as a despot since he served over two decades as "Stalin's loyal lieutenant".²⁷⁰ Khrushchev was able to relax the censors put in place during Stalin's reign (e.g., he "ordered the closing of the gulag, the agency that ran the Kremlin's prison system, although some individual camps continued to function").²⁷¹ This era of socio-political and artistic freedoms came to be known as *the Thaw*.²⁷² A writer from the Thaw generation described Khrushchev as the "only guarantee against the possible restoration of the Stalin order".²⁷³ According to Nina Khrushcheva, "By 1961, the process [of loosening the censorships] seemed almost irreversible, so much so that eight years after Stalin's death, his body was taken out of Vladimir Lenin's tomb in Moscow's Red Square and reburied a few yards away next to the Kremlin wall, where it remains to this day."²⁷⁴ However, Khrushchev's image overseas was completely different.²⁷⁵ With the story of Khrushchev banging "his shoe on the desk at the United Nations" in 1960, the arms race between the Soviet Union and the United States, and more specifically the Cuban missile crisis in 1962, "American schoolchildren ducked and covered under their desks in case the menacing Khrushchev, or Hurricane Nikita as he was called, carried out a nuclear missile attack".²⁷⁶ These events even sparked the imagination of several Hollywood film directors, more notably Don Siegel ("Invasion of

²⁶⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 9

²⁶⁸ Hoeffding, O., "Substance and Shadow in the Soviet Seven Year Plan". *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 37, No. 3, (1959), p. 399

²⁶⁹ Khrushchev, N., "Khrushchev: Hero or Villain?". *Newsweek*, (5/12/2014)

²⁷⁰ *ibid.*

²⁷¹ *ibid.*

²⁷² *ibid.*

²⁷³ *ibid.*

²⁷⁴ *ibid.*

²⁷⁵ *ibid.*

²⁷⁶ *ibid.*

the *Body Snatchers*”, 1956) and Stanley Kubrick (“*Dr. Strangelove*”, 1964).²⁷⁷ Soon Nikita Khrushchev’s bad reputation and menacing image reached the Soviet Union.²⁷⁸

One afternoon, Khrushchev disguised his appearance and went to see a film in a Moscow suburban cinema. After the feature film there was a short newsreel. A picture of Khrushchev appeared on the screen. Everyone stood up, except for Khrushchev himself. He sat there with tears in his eyes, deeply moved by this spontaneous show of popular affection.

A man tapped him on the shoulder and whispered:

‘Get up, you fool! We all think the way you do, but what’s the point of sticking your neck out?’²⁷⁹

Khrushchev’s appearance and rather poor physical state did not work in his favor. Even from the very beginning “standing just 5 feet 3 inches tall, [Nikita Khrushchev] was the one member of the politburo who did not tower over the man he would replace, the 5-foot-6 Stalin”.²⁸⁰ Stalin himself found Khrushchev’s lacking athleticism highly amusing as, on one occasion, he forced “his protégé to dance a *gopak*—the famous squatting, spinning, kicking Cossack dance” which requires a level of agility that Khrushchev did not have.²⁸¹ Khrushchev’s image worsened after the 1962 incident at the Central Exhibition Hall in Moscow, known as the *Manège Affair*.²⁸² Khrushchev’s attempt to assume the role of an art critic that speaks on behalf of his people failed miserably and the tragicomic episode portrayed him as the short-tempered leader he was believed to be.²⁸³ As the host of the exhibition and an artist Ely Bielutin recalled, “Khrushchev ran around a rather large hall three times. ... From the outside, it looked like in a comedy film from the time of Chaplin and Harold Lloyd”.²⁸⁴ Khrushchev would utter profanity at the pictures and referring to Gribkov’s artwork entitled 1917 he claimed that his grandson would have drawn better.²⁸⁵ Eventually Khrushchev was heard shouting “Forbid! Forbid everything! Stop this mess! It’s an

²⁷⁷ Khrushchev, N., “Khrushchev: Hero or Villain?”. *Newsweek*, (5/12/2014)

²⁷⁸ *ibid.*

²⁷⁹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 64-65

²⁸⁰ Dash, M., “Khrushchev in Water Wings: On Mao, Humiliation and the Sino-Soviet Split”. *Smithsonian Magazine*, (May 4, 2012)

²⁸¹ *ibid.*

²⁸² Reid, S., “In the Name of the People: The Manège Affair Revisited”. *Kritika: Explorations in Russian and Eurasian History, Slavica Publishers, Vol. 6, No. 4*, (Fall 2005), p. 673

²⁸³ *ibid.*

²⁸⁴ Porkhaev, S., “Manege scandal: Khrushchev”. *CHRONOGRAPH: unknown pages of history, XIX-XX century, Vol. 6*, (n/d)

²⁸⁵ *ibid.*

order! I tell you! And keep an eye on everyone! Uproot the fans from the radio, and from television, and in print!”²⁸⁶ Khrushchev’s shortcomings as the leader of the Soviet Union and, to some extent, as a person led to anecdotal comparisons.

A man ran through the streets of Moscow shouting: ‘Khrushchev is a swine!’

*He was seized and given twenty-one years: one year for defamation and 20 years for leaking state secrets.*²⁸⁷

Or another version:

Khrushchev visited a pig farm and was photographed there. In a newspaper's office, a discussion is under way what should be the caption under the picture.

*“Comrade Khrushchev among pigs,” “Comrade Khrushchev and pigs,” “Pigs around comrade Khrushchev,” – all is rejected. Finally the editor makes the decision. The caption is “The third from left - comrade Khrushchev.”*²⁸⁸

In the words of Nina Khrushchova, “As quickly as he had denounced Stalin, acolytes of the fallen Communist God denounced my grandfather in turn, voting him out of office.”²⁸⁹ And so in October, 1964, Leonid Brezhnev became the leader of the Soviet Union.²⁹⁰

Brezhnev’s succession to “candidate member of the Politburo early in 1956” was largely due to his progress in “implementing the virgin lands policy” as the First Secretary in Kazakhstan.²⁹¹ This eventually resulted in him becoming “a member at the top level of the Moscow ‘*nomenklatura*’, and this in turn provides a key to understanding the Soviet power system”.²⁹² According to Thomas Crump, “the *nomenklatura* was a distinctive new class characteristic of society in the Soviet Union”, which included those with “special privileges and economic preference” due to their administrative monopoly.²⁹³ It began with Stalin’s idea to materially interest the newly forming class in order to support his industrialization initiative.²⁹⁴ As Thomas Crump

²⁸⁶ Porkhaev, S., “Manege scandal: Khrushchev”. *CHRONOGRAPH: unknown pages of history, XIX-XX century, Vol. 6*, (n/d)

²⁸⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 64

²⁸⁸ Clare, J., “One Hundred Russian Jokes”. *Johndclare.net* (n/d)

²⁸⁹ Khrushchev, N., “Khrushchev: Hero or Villain?”. *Newsweek*, (5/12/2014)

²⁹⁰ *ibid.*

²⁹¹ Crump, T., “Brezhnev and the Decline of the Soviet Union”. *Routledge*, (2013), p. 81

²⁹² *ibid.*

²⁹³ *ibid.* pp. 81-82

²⁹⁴ *ibid.* p. 82

states, this act was merely a “statement of policy, which was carried out in parallel to the implementation of the first Five-Year Plan (1929-1934)”.²⁹⁵ The number of the Party members kept expanding thus forming a new class that enjoyed the rapidly growing privileges.²⁹⁶ Just like other governmental organs, the *nomenklatura* too had a hierarchical structure where each enjoyed their own set of privileges and even the lowest ranking members were better off than the non-members.²⁹⁷ According to Brezhnev’s niece Lyubov Brezhneva, *nomenklatura* refers to “a list of those key positions in every sphere of Soviet life from economics to culture, that were deemed so important that aspirants could be appointed to them only with special party approval”.²⁹⁸ Brezhneva claims that the top *nomenklatura* members enjoyed a lifestyle that included “a spacious apartment, a private car and chauffeur, special aircraft for long distance travel, a well-appointed dacha, special schools for children, shops with high quality goods, privileged access to higher education, high-grade medical care, sanatoria in prime holiday locations, even reserved cemeteries”.²⁹⁹ Thomas Crump suggests that the way to succeed in the hierarchical Soviet system was to “build up a supporters’ club by securing as many senior posts, honors and decorations for subordinates from every stage in one’s career; no-one did this more successfully than Brezhnev, who was also quite unashamed about the scandalous jet-set lifestyle”.³⁰⁰

Brezhnev’s mother came to visit her son.

‘This is my house,’ said Brezhnev, showing her around. ‘And this is my car. And that’s my swimming pool. And this’ – he shows her some photographs – ‘is my second house. And this is my aeroplane. And this is my villa on the Black Sea. And this is my yacht.’

His mother gasps in wonder.

‘You do well, son,’ she says. ‘But I’m worried for you. What if the Bolsheviks come back?’³⁰¹

Soon after Khrushchev’s dismissal, Brezhnev and his associates started a campaign of “*de-Khrushchevisation*”.³⁰² The Soviet Union’s internal and foreign

²⁹⁵ Crump, T., "Brezhnev and the Decline of the Soviet Union". *Routledge*, (2013), p. 82

²⁹⁶ *ibid.*

²⁹⁷ *ibid.*

²⁹⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰⁰ *ibid.*

³⁰¹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 118

policies from Nikita Khrushchev's era were mostly modified and reversed.³⁰³ In 1966, through the Report on 23rd Party Congress, Brezhnev claimed that a number of his predecessor's "plan-targets" were left unfulfilled and blamed Khrushchev for "miscalculations and ambitious targets".³⁰⁴ Soon Brezhnev and Kosygin abandoned "the Utopian goals and populist campaigns" of Khrushchev.³⁰⁵ Furthermore, they believed the "suspension of severest punishments, elimination of the use of terror and repealing of draconian labour laws caused the erosion of discipline in later years".³⁰⁶ However, interestingly enough, unlike other Soviet and Russian leaders whose popularity is constantly changing, Brezhnev's popularity in polls consistently portrayed him as the most favorable leader of the century.³⁰⁷ According to Peter Rutland and Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, "The Brezhnev period is depicted as a time when citizens could lead a secure and predictable life, where living standards were rising every year, and where their children could receive a good education and expect stable careers".³⁰⁸ Though these certainly were not the only memories from this time period and the real picture is much more elaborate.³⁰⁹ Per usual, there were food shortages and lack of numerous other consumer goods.³¹⁰ Additionally, the communist ideology was a "deadening presence - but it was alleviated through cynicism and humor".³¹¹ The period of Brezhnev's leadership is remembered as the "golden age of Soviet political humor".³¹² The tone of the jokes reflected the "time of kissing politicians, absurd vanity and old men in the Politburo".³¹³ As mentioned before, Brezhnev was in favor of keeping a tight grip, appearing omnipresent and intolerant towards political jokes. This itself, however, created more jokes such as the following:

A man turns on the TV. On the first channel, dear Leonid Ilyich is delivering a speech. The man switches to the second channel: Brezhnev again. Channel three: still Brezhnev. He turns to the fourth channel, and it's showing a

³⁰² Modak, A., "'DEKHRUSHCHEVISATION' ACCOMPLISHED". *India Quarterly*, Vol. 42, No. 4, (1986), p. 405

³⁰³ *ibid.* p. 406

³⁰⁴ *ibid.* p. 408

³⁰⁵ *ibid.* p. 409

³⁰⁶ *ibid.*

³⁰⁷ Rutland, P., & Smolkin-Rothrock, V., "Introduction: Looking Back at Brezhnev". *Russian History*, Vol. 41, No. 3, (2014), p. 300

³⁰⁸ *ibid.*

³⁰⁹ *ibid.*

³¹⁰ *ibid.*

³¹¹ *ibid.*

³¹² Yegorov, O., "'Dear Leonid Ilyich': jokes about Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev". *RBTH: Lifestyle*, (December 19, 2016)

³¹³ *ibid.*

*KGB colonel who shakes his fist and warns: 'You'd better stop changing channels...'*³¹⁴

And in the same light:

During a break in the summit meeting in Helsinki, President Carter asked Brezhnev whether he collected stories against himself.

'I certainly do,' replied Brezhnev.

'Do you have many?' asked Carter.

*'Two camps full,' said Brezhnev.*³¹⁵

The mood of the time was also expressed by some reoccurring jokes that drew comparisons between the Soviet leaders.

With Lenin, it was like being in a tunnel: You're surrounded by darkness, but there's light ahead.

With Stalin, it was like being on a bus: One person is driving, half the people on the bus are sitting³¹⁶ and the other half are quaking with fear.

With Khrushchev, it was like at a circus: One person is talking, and everyone else is laughing.

*With Brezhnev, it was like at the movies: Everyone's just waiting for the film to end.*³¹⁷

Or another version:

Lenin proved that even female cooks could manage a country.

Stalin proved that just one person could manage a country.

Khrushchev proved that a fool could manage a country.

*Brezhnev proved that a country doesn't need to be managed at all.*³¹⁸

One of the most memorable traits of Brezhnev undoubtedly is his tendency to kiss foreign officials and leaders.³¹⁹ Known as the *socialist fraternal kiss* (which was viewed as an "expression of equality" unlike the Tsarist custom of kissing a noble's hand³²⁰), this practice existed even during Stalin's reign but it wasn't until Brezhnev

³¹⁴ Yegorov, O., "Dear Leonid Ilyich': jokes about Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev". *RBTH: Lifestyle*, (December 19, 2016)

³¹⁵ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 10

³¹⁶ *Note: In Russian, sitting also means serving time in prison.*

³¹⁷ Yegorov, O., "Dear Leonid Ilyich': jokes about Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev". *RBTH: Lifestyle*, (December 19, 2016)

³¹⁸ *ibid.*

³¹⁹ *ibid.*

³²⁰ Chapple, A., "The Soviet Kiss, Gone But (Mostly) Not Missed". *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, (April 12, 2018)

that the peck-on-the-cheek-turned-a-kiss received much attention.³²¹ Leonid Brezhnev and Erich Honecker's kiss is perhaps the most notorious example which Dmitri Vruble immortalized on the Berlin Wall.³²² But the East German leader was not alone, Brezhnev had managed to kiss "former United States President Jimmy Carter, Palestine Liberation Organization leader Yasser Arafat, Yugoslav leader Josip Broz Tito and India's then prime minister Indira Gandhi" and Romanian leader Nicolae Ceaușescu who later admitted his discomfort and his fear of exchanging bacteria.³²³

*Brezhnev did not like Romanian leader Ceaușescu. 'He's a grown man,' thought Leonid Ilyich, 'and yet he still hasn't learned how to kiss.'*³²⁴

Nevertheless, some managed to avoid the displeasure of kissing Brezhnev, such as the former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and "Cuban revolutionary Fidel Castro" who took a creative approach and put a lit cigar in his mouth.³²⁵

The humor in Brezhnev's Soviet Union was replete with jokes about his foreign relations. His strict approach towards Soviet Union's sister states was expressed during his 1968 speech at the Fifth Congress of the Polish United Workers' Party, commonly referred to as the Brezhnev doctrine.³²⁶ During his speech, Brezhnev stated that they respect the sovereignty of all countries, however, when foreign or internal "forces hostile to socialism seek to halt the development of any socialist country and restore the capitalist order, when a threat to the cause of socialism in that country, or a threat to the security of the socialist community as a whole emerges, this is no longer only a problem of the people of that country but also a common problem, concern for all socialist countries".³²⁷ The Brezhnev doctrine served as an excuse to justify the invasions (e.g., the 1956 Hungarian Revolution) and interventions (e.g., the 1968 Prague Spring). It has been argued that the main purpose of the doctrine was to excuse the Soviet intervention in Czechoslovakia, though the Brezhnev Doctrine managed to spread fear far and wide.³²⁸

Castro visits Moscow and is taken on a tour by Brezhnev. First, they go for a drink and Castro praises the beer.

³²¹ Yegorov, O., "Dear Leonid Ilyich': jokes about Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev". *RBTH: Lifestyle*, (December 19, 2016)

³²² *ibid.*

³²³ *ibid.*

³²⁴ *ibid.*

³²⁵ *ibid.*

³²⁶ Glazer, S., "The Brezhnev Doctrine". *The International Lawyer*, Vol. 5, No. 1, (January, 1971), p. 169

³²⁷ *ibid.* p. 170

³²⁸ *ibid.* p. 171

'Yes, it was provided by our good friends from Czechoslovakia.'

Next, they go for a ride in a car and Castro admires the car.

'Yes, these cars are provided by our good friends from Czechoslovakia.'

They drive to an exhibition of beautiful cut glass, which Castro greatly admires. 'Yes, this glass comes from our good friends in Czechoslovakia.'

'They must be very good friends,' says Castro.

'Yes, they must,' says Brezhnev.³²⁹

While the Khrushchev's reign was instable and experimental, the Brezhnev era was "characterized by aversion to experimentation – exemplified by the decision to invade Czechoslovakia in 1968 to crush the 'Prague Spring'".³³⁰ According to Peter Rutland and Victoria Smolkin-Rothrock, Brezhnev disapproved "economic reform proposals" and the "conventional wisdom is that it was increased revenue from oil and gas exports after the rise in world oil prices in the 1970s that bought the Brezhnev model another decade or two of operation".³³¹ Brezhnev's foreign policy approaches also reflected this approach. He was able to carelessly deplete – or attempted to deplete – other states' resources for his own gains.

The Soviet Union and China finally reach an agreement to reconcile their differences. But China first makes three demands.

'We need one hundred million tons of coal,' Chinese Leader Deng Xiaoping orders.

'Done,' Brezhnev replies.

'We must have twenty new cargo ships,' the Chinese leader declares.

'Agreed,' snaps Brezhnev.

'And we need a million bicycles,' the Chinese chief adds.

'Impossible,' answers Brezhnev.

The baffled Deng asks why, if Russia can provide the costly coal and ships, it can't come up with a few bikes. Brezhnev replies:

'The Poles don't make bicycles.'³³²

Similarly:

³²⁹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 52-53

³³⁰ Rutland, P., & Smolkin-Rothrock, V., "Introduction: Looking Back at Brezhnev". *Russian History*, Vol. 41, No. 3, (2014), p. 304

³³¹ *ibid.*

³³² Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 47

Meat is supplied jointly to the Poles by the Russians and the Czechs.

The Czechs supply the meat.

*The Russians supply the coupons.*³³³

Since Brezhnev came to power in 1968, at least “four sets of considerations” molded the foreign policy of the Soviet Union.³³⁴ According to R. P. Barston, these considerations were the following: 1. “an acceptance of the need to stabilize the arms race without undermining those areas in which the Soviet Union had an advantage in strategic delivery systems by extending arms control beyond the early forms of agreements of the 1960s – the Partial Test Ban Treaty (1963), Non-Proliferation Treaty (1968) and Outer Space Treaty (1969) – to central strategic systems and anti-ballistic missile (ABM) systems”; 2. “resolving the German problem and other related European questions, on terms which would formalize the status of East Germany (GDR) and the frontiers of central Europe”; 3. “the requirement of continuing the political and ideological struggle in areas of opportunity outside Europe”; 4. “Soviet diplomacy has operated on the basis of the continued hostility of the People's Republic of China, for which the triangular relationship with Washington, Tokyo and the PRC has been of central importance , as well as the need to establish a diplomatic and military cordon sanitaire around the PRC”.³³⁵ However, no foreign policy of the Cold War era would be complete without the mention of the rivalry between the United States and the Soviet Union. From late 1960s the Cold War entered a new phase of détente. Richard Nixon came into the office with a determination to negotiate with China and the Soviet Union. During his 1969 inaugural speech, US president Richard Nixon proclaimed: “Let us take as our goal: where peace is unknown, make it welcome; where peace is fragile, make it strong; where peace is temporary, make it permanent. After a period of confrontation, we are entering an era of negotiation. Let all nations know that during this administration our lines of communication will be open.”³³⁶ This new era was marked by Strategic Arms Limitation Talks (SALT I) in 1972 whereby the Soviet Union and the United States agreed to limit the production of nuclear weapons,

³³³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 51

³³⁴ Barston, R., "Soviet Foreign Policy in the Brezhnev Years". *The World Today*, Vol. 39, No. 3, (Mar., 1983), p. 81

³³⁵ *ibid.*

³³⁶ "First Inaugural Address of Richard Milhous Nixon". *Yale Law School Lillian Goldman Law Library, The Avalon Project: Documents in Law, History and Diplomacy*, (January 20, 1969)

intercontinental ballistic missiles (IBMs) and anti-ballistic missiles (ABMs).³³⁷ But despite all the efforts of President Nixon and the Kremlin Leader Brezhnev, the arms race continued. Technological achievement no matter how significant became important.

Nixon and Brezhnev argue about the superiority of their countries' technology.

Nixon: 'We have a computer that can tell you what will happen in the year 1990.'

He pushes a button, and the printout says: 'Fidel Castro, President of the USA, goes to visit the Cuban territories,'

Brezhnev: 'That's nothing. Our computers can tell what is happening in the year 2000.'

He pushes a button and the printout reads: 'All quiet on the Chinese-Finnish border.'³³⁸

As Soviet and US leaders indirectly fought for decades for the title of the best economic and political system, the people began to realize just how far they were willing to go and how much they were willing to sacrifice on the way.

Ford was visiting Brezhnev in the Kremlin. Brezhnev was delighted to see that his guests were surprised at the opulence around them, and he couldn't resist trying to impress them still further.

He invited them into his private office. There on his desk was a golden telephone.

'Is that the hot line to Washington?' Ford asked.

'No, my friend,' replied Brezhnev. 'As a matter of fact it's my personal line to Satan.'

So saying, he picked up the phone, and within seconds he was asking the Devil to have a few words with his guests. Satan agreed, and on Ford's behalf Kissinger negotiated a similar line for the White House.

Just after they had hung up, the phone rang and Brezhnev answered it.

'Satan?' enquired Ford.

³³⁷ Smart, I., "The Strategic Arms Limitation Talks". *The World Today*, Vol. 26, No. 7, (1970), pp. 296-305

³³⁸ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 53-54

'No,' said Brezhnev, 'just the operator telling me how much the call cost.'

'And how much was it?'

'Two roubles,' Brezhnev replied.

Back in Washington, Ford could hardly wait to make a call to his new connection. In front of his Cabinet he spoke to the Devil, then put the phone down, saying the operator would soon ring back with the cost of the call. The phone rang and the operator said:

'200 dollars.'

'200 dollars?' But it cost Brezhnev two doubles!'

*'Maybe,' said the operator, but that was a local call.'*³³⁹

Another issue that was raised by the jokers of the Brezhnev era was the seniority of the Politburo (i.e., the main policymaking committee in the Soviet Union) and Brezhnev himself. During the later years of the Brezhnev era “the majority of high-level government officials were, to put it mildly, extremely experienced”.³⁴⁰ According to Rein Taagepera and Robert Dale Chapman, while the early Politburo’s members were under 40 years old with the exception of the 47-years-old Lenin, by 1974 “the average age of Politburo members reached 65 – the mandatory retirement age in many occupations”.³⁴¹ The ever increasing age of the Politburo between 1951 and 1971 can be viewed as gerontocracy.³⁴² Rein Taagepera and Robert Dale Chapman pointed out that if “a group had zero mortality and no recruitment”, its age would annually increase by one, and the same applies if the group “co-opted new members at their own current age” – which was the case of Brezhnev’s Politburo.³⁴³ According to Taagepera and Chapman, “At the level of top decision-making, higher ages have often been accepted, but this may be due largely to past accumulation of prestige and political acumen, rather than continuing top-level performance”.³⁴⁴ Regardless of the circumstances, age has a

³³⁹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 107-108

³⁴⁰ Yegorov, O., “‘Dear Leonid Ilyich’: jokes about Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev”. *RBTH: Lifestyle*, (December 19, 2016)

³⁴¹ Taagepera, R., & Chapman, R., “A Note on the Ageing of the Politburo”. *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Apr., 1977), p. 296

³⁴² *ibid.*

³⁴³ *ibid.* p. 299

³⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 296

peculiar effect on people's mind, and even though the effects vary from person to person, it is able to decrease "creativity, inventiveness, and speed of reaction".³⁴⁵

What has four legs and forty teeth?

An alligator.

And forty legs and four teeth?

*Brezhnev's Politburo.*³⁴⁶

Or

Brezhnev delivers a speech at the opening ceremony of the Olympic games. Keeping before his eyes the text prepared for him by his aides, and typed on an official stationery, Brezhnev says, 'O...O... O... O...'

*The aide whispers to Brezhnev's ear: 'Leonid Ilyich, this is not O, these are Olympic rings.'*³⁴⁷

Or

An aide says to Brezhnev, 'Comrade General Secretary, you wear today one shoe black and the other brown.'

'Yes,' Brezhnev answers, 'I've noticed it myself.'

'Why didn't you change?'

*'See, I went to change, but when I looked in the closet, there was also one shoe brown and the other black.'*³⁴⁸

Or

*At a Politburo meeting, Brezhnev says, 'Comrades, it's intolerable. Some of the Politburo members have practically become senile, play children games, jump on wooden horses. And look, comrade Gromyko has taken away my tin soldiers and (Brezhnev weeps) wouldn't give them back....'*³⁴⁹

Or

Brezhnev is dining in a restaurant. The waiter brings the first course.

'Haven't I seen you somewhere before?'

'No.'

'Wasn't it in Odessa in 1938?'

³⁴⁵ Taagepera, R., & Chapman, R., "A Note on the Ageing of the Politburo". *Soviet Studies*, Vol. 29, No. 2, (Apr., 1977), p. 296

³⁴⁶ Yegorov, O., "'Dear Leonid Ilyich': jokes about Soviet leader Leonid Brezhnev". *RBTH: Lifestyle*, (December 19, 2016)

³⁴⁷ "Our Great Leaders and Teachers: Jokes about Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev". *Talk Reason*, (n.d.)

³⁴⁸ *ibid.*

³⁴⁹ *ibid.*

'No.'

The waiter brings the second course.

'Are you sure I haven't seen you before? Was it perhaps in the Ukraine in 1952?'

'No.'

The waiter brings the last course.

'I'm sure I have seen you before,' Brezhnev insists. 'Didn't you bring me the first course?'³⁵⁰

In January, 1976, Leonid Brezhnev suffered "clinical death" but was miraculously saved and went on to rule over the Soviet Union "in a virtual daze for six more years".³⁵¹

Brezhnev's daily schedule:

9 am: reanimation

10 am: breakfast

11 am: delivering medals

12 noon: recharging the batteries

2 pm: dinner

4 pm: receiving medals

6 pm: signing important documents.

8 pm - clinical death

*9 am- reanimation...*³⁵²

After the stroke, Brezhnev's health was noticeably declining to a point where he was unable to "carry out the most simple protocol functions and could no longer understand what was going on around him".³⁵³ Roy Medvedev, historian and a former Party member, noted that "many people in [Brezhnev's] entourage who were influential but totally wallowing in corruption needed Brezhnev to appear from time to time in public as at least a formal head of state. They literally led him around by the hand".³⁵⁴

³⁵⁰ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 128

³⁵¹ "Brezhnev 'Died' in '76 Stroke, Ruled Six Years in Daze, Historian Says". *Los Angeles Times*, *Reuters*, (September 7, 1988)

³⁵² "Our Great Leaders and Teachers: Jokes about Lenin, Stalin, Khrushchev, Brezhnev, and Gorbachev". *Talk Reason*, (n.d.)

³⁵³ "Brezhnev 'Died' in '76 Stroke, Ruled Six Years in Daze, Historian Says". *Los Angeles Times*, *Reuters*, (September 7, 1988)

³⁵⁴ "ibid.

Brezhnev's serious condition was apparent not only to his associates and fellow Party members but also to the public.

Two men were talking together over a drink:

'Have you heard the rumour that Brezhnev is ill?'

'No.'

*'Nor have I. But if we could start it going....'*³⁵⁵

Or another version:

'Have you heard the story about Brezhnev's death?'

'No, how does it go?'

*'I don't know the details, but it seems to start beautifully...'*³⁵⁶

Just like since the mid-1970s Brezhnev had been addicted to drugs, the *nomenklatura* "became addicted to the good life".³⁵⁷ The corruption that initially facilitated the development of the economy was now hindering the progress.³⁵⁸ *Nomenklatura* became a role model for the workers, and "lazy bosses meant lazy workers".³⁵⁹ According to Martin Mccauley, "boozing became a national disease (except in the Muslim republics)".³⁶⁰ The Soviet economy was in need of a boost and the previous method of dedicating more resources was no longer possible since these resources were becoming increasingly scarce.³⁶¹ During these rather challenging times, as Martin Mccauley noted, "Brezhnev gave way to [former head of the KGB Yuri] Andropov who was dying when he took over, an apt metaphor for the Soviet Union".³⁶²

Andropov is sitting at Brezhnev's bedside just as the dying leader is about to breathe his last breath. But Brezhnev opens his eyes and says:

'I must warn you Yuri, it won't be easy to get the Soviet people to follow you once I am gone.'

*Andropov smiles and says: 'Don't worry Leonid. Those who don't follow me will follow you.'*³⁶³

³⁵⁵ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 10

³⁵⁶ *ibid.* p. 63

³⁵⁷ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge.* (2014)

³⁵⁸ *ibid.*

³⁵⁹ *ibid.*

³⁶⁰ *ibid.*

³⁶¹ *ibid.*

³⁶² *ibid.*

³⁶³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 133

Unfortunately, Andropov's health was already poor and his condition required him to be on a dialysis machine.³⁶⁴ This inspired a number of jokes such as:

*'Comrade Andropov is the most [turned-on] man in Moscow!'*³⁶⁵

Or

*Why did Brezhnev go abroad, while Andropov did not? Because Brezhnev ran on batteries, but Andropov needed an outlet.*³⁶⁶

Andropov's approach to foreign policy was also unlike his predecessor.³⁶⁷ In 1983, Andropov not only accepted and answered questions sent to him by an American journalist but also took the opportunity to extend wishes to American families for the upcoming year.³⁶⁸ More substantially, Andropov suggested a meeting with the US president Ronald Reagan in order to discuss his updated disarmament proposals which included an offer to "cut the number of Soviet medium-range missiles in Europe to the combined total deployed by Britain and France".³⁶⁹ These proposals, according to John Burns, aimed at "blocking NATO's plans for deploying enough American medium-range missiles in Western Europe to match Moscow's strength in that category".³⁷⁰ But even though there was a "new sense of movement" some still questioned Andropov's ability to "do more than tinker with an entrenched bureaucratic system that mates a political dictatorship to a rigid state economy".³⁷¹ According to John Burns, Andropov "has said little to indicate any inclination to challenge the power of the centralized bureaucracy with fundamental economic reforms; and without that, any change for the better in everyday circumstances of Soviet life could prove elusive".³⁷²

Nevertheless, Andropov was aware of the issue that was causing the decline of the Soviet economy: "people were not working and when they were not working they were drinking".³⁷³ He imagined getting them back to work would not only improve outputs but also solve the issue of alcoholism.³⁷⁴ Andropov's initiative seemed to have

³⁶⁴ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". Routledge. (2014)

³⁶⁵ *ibid.*

³⁶⁶ Barry, M., "Communist Jokes". *Nation States*, (2015)

³⁶⁷ Burns, J., "The Emergence of Andropov". *The New York Times Magazine*, (February 27, 1983)

³⁶⁸ *ibid.*

³⁶⁹ *ibid.*

³⁷⁰ *ibid.*

³⁷¹ *ibid.*

³⁷² *ibid.*

³⁷³ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". Routledge. (2014)

³⁷⁴ *ibid.*

worked as the “streets of central Moscow ... become quieter during working hours”.³⁷⁵ Moreover, as John Burns noted, “labor productivity in January rose 5.5 percent, an abrupt advance over recent years and a measure of the impact the new leader has made with a nationwide police crackdown on absentees and idlers”.³⁷⁶ During the first weeks of his leadership, the clothing and food stores had ample products on the shelves even though meat, fruits and vegetables were still scarce.³⁷⁷ According to John Burns, “the popular explanation for the improvement is that the new party leader's intensified drive against corruption has persuaded store managers and clerks to release supplies from beneath counters and out of storage rooms, where they were previously held back for customers who insured their priority with payoffs and other favors”.³⁷⁸ Andropov's leadership and its early results gave the people a sense of hope that their government is ready to face the issues of the state.³⁷⁹ In a number of newspapers Andropov “told the machine tool workers that the economy was weighed down by the waste of resources and manpower, by wage increases that outstrip productivity, and by a national indulgence in smoking breaks, absenteeism and slipshod work”.³⁸⁰ He clarified that if the workers were to continue their antics, the shelves in stores would remain empty.³⁸¹ However, Andropov soon realized that separating a Russian from their drink is almost impossible and as vodka started disappearing “*samogon* [(italics added)] (hooch), toothpaste, shoe polish, and other illicit beverages” served as replacements.³⁸²

‘What is alcoholism?’

*‘Alcoholism is a transitional stage between capitalism and communism.’*³⁸³

Because the communist state was unable to protect private property, the “new entrepreneurs had to turn to the criminals for protection”.³⁸⁴ As Martin Mccauley put it,

³⁷⁵ Burns, J., "The Emergence of Andropov". *The New York Times Magazine*, (February 27, 1983)

³⁷⁶ *ibid.*

³⁷⁷ *ibid.*

³⁷⁸ *ibid.*

³⁷⁹ *ibid.*

³⁸⁰ *ibid.*

³⁸¹ *ibid.*

³⁸² Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

³⁸³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 151

³⁸⁴ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

“the road to hell is paved with the best intentions”.³⁸⁵ Andropov’s health and age were not working to his favor. At the time of his appointment to lead the Soviet Union, Andropov was eleven years older than when his predecessor accepted the position.³⁸⁶ Andropov was believed to have suffered “at least one heart attack; the pallor of his complexion and a slight hesitancy in his gait suggest that he is hardly robust”.³⁸⁷ Soon enough Andropov passed away and was followed by “the dying Chernenko whose emphysema was so bad that he could not speak coherently most of the time”.³⁸⁸ Politburo’s decision to appoint Konstantin Chernenko, the septuagenarian apparatchik and the “doyen of the Brezhnev loyalists in the Politburo”³⁸⁹ as the General Secretary was strange but for some predictable.³⁹⁰ As Archie Brown put it, “to succeed a man who had tried to breathe new life into the Soviet system but whose own health had taken a fateful (and ultimately fatal) downward turn within months of his coming to the General Secretaryship, they selected an even older man who has within the past year or so been less robustly healthy than he appeared to be in the 1970s”.³⁹¹ Brown further points out the pattern of succession in the Soviet Union whereby each new candidate challenges the previous leader and implements drastically different policies; this pattern can be found from Nikita Khrushchev’s reign to that of Yuri Andropov.³⁹² So in a sense, the choice of Chernenko as the General Secretary “can be seen as a yearning for the *status quo ante* and a reaction to the more abrasive approach of Andropov and the insecurity of tenure which the brisk start he made to his General Secretaryship seemed to betoken”³⁹³ Chernenko’s success, however, was short lived as he too soon died.³⁹⁴ The brief leaderships of Andropov and Chernenko produced several jokes such as the following.

Do you attend many funerals in Moscow?

Yes, I have a season ticket.

³⁸⁵ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". Routledge. (2014)

³⁸⁶ Burns, J., "The Emergence of Andropov". *The New York Times Magazine*, (February 27, 1983)

³⁸⁷ *ibid.*

³⁸⁸ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". Routledge. (2014)

³⁸⁹ Burns, J., "The Emergence of Andropov". *The New York Times Magazine*, (February 27, 1983)

³⁹⁰ Brown, A., "The Soviet Succession: From Andropov to Chernenko". *The World Today*, Vol. 40, No. 4, (1984), p. 134

³⁹¹ *ibid.*

³⁹² *ibid.* pp. 134-136

³⁹³ *ibid.* p. 136

³⁹⁴ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". Routledge. (2014)

Or

Brezhnev meets Andropov in the afterlife:

– *Shall we drink?*

– *Better wait for the third...*³⁹⁵

The Soviet Union entered its next and final stage when Gorbachev became the General Secretary of Soviet Communist state in 1985.³⁹⁶ Gorbachev was thought to be a “committed ‘Soviet patriot’” who believed the Bolshevik revolution had transformed the “semifeudal Russian Empire” into a progressive state just within several decades even though some “Western sovietologists” argued that Khrushchev was the last true Marxist-Leninist.³⁹⁷ In 1989, Yurii Afanas’ev and Nikolai Shmelev noted that deep down Gorbachev was still a devoted communist who was trying to create and impose an ideal society.³⁹⁸ Thus a question arose: “[how] did such a fervently committed Marxist-Leninist and staunch ‘Soviet patriot’ end up burying the legitimizing ideology of the USSR, destroying the Communist party which had ruled the country for seventy years, and fatally weakening the unity of the Soviet state?”³⁹⁹

The geriatric Politburo of the time thought of Gorbachev as a younger version of themselves, a “breath of fresh air in the Kremlin”.⁴⁰⁰ Moreover, his rather unremarkable background prior to becoming the leader of the Soviet Union worked in his favor.⁴⁰¹ Gorbachev came from a small village in North Caucasus and had “missed some schooling during the German occupation of his village”.⁴⁰² This resulted in serious gaps in his knowledge of Russian which became evident as he constantly utilized “wrong endings and stresses” and was unable to overcome “his habit of not completing some sentences”.⁴⁰³ Nevertheless, somehow Gorbachev was able to attend the “prestigious Moscow University” studying law, a “subject which was not taken very seriously in the Soviet Union”.⁴⁰⁴ It was in the Moscow University that he met his wife Raisa

³⁹⁵ "Anecdotes about Andropov." *Time USSR, trans. Arevik Zadoyan* (2002)

³⁹⁶ Dunlop, J., "Gorbachev and Russia." In *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire, Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press*, (1993), p. 3

³⁹⁷ *ibid.*

³⁹⁸ *ibid.* p. 4

³⁹⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁰ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴⁰¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰² *ibid.*

⁴⁰³ *ibid.*

⁴⁰⁴ *ibid.*

Maksimovna Titorenko⁴⁰⁵ who was later criticized for excessively interfering with politics and “making too many foreign appearances with and without her husband”.⁴⁰⁶

Gorbachev enters the banya. All the people that were washing themselves stepped aside and covered themselves with buckets.

‘Come on, comrades! It’s just me, Mikhail Sergeyevich, a man just like you!’

‘How, but isn’t Raisa Maksimovna with you?’⁴⁰⁷

After graduating he returned to Stavropol krai and eventually joined Komsomol (i.e., the All-Union Leninist Young Communist League).⁴⁰⁸ Soon Gorbachev was appointed the head of the communist party in his hometown though he knew he was destined for more.⁴⁰⁹ According to Mccauley, Gorbachev’s success started in 1978 when “he was appointed (in Politburo speak, elected) secretary for agriculture” which put him above the minister as the party’s “top man for the rural sector”.⁴¹⁰ With Andropov’s efforts to promote Gorbachev’s career and despite Chernenko’s attempts to sabotage the chances of Gorbachev succeeding him, Gorbachev became the new leader of the Soviet Union.⁴¹¹

The five years of Gorbachev’s leadership were sufficient to turn the Soviet Union on its head and completely transform eastern Europe. Each new leader of the USSR had the opportunity to appoint his own team though unlike the “freedom of action of a US president or a British prime minister”, this usually happened gradually and over time.⁴¹² And so Mikhail Sergeyevich was tasked to create a dynamic team that would free his reign from the “deadwood of the Brezhnev era”.⁴¹³ According to Mccauley, “he made Nikolai Ryzhkov, an industrialist from the Urals, his Prime Minister and Eduard Shevardnadze, first party secretary in Georgia, his foreign

⁴⁰⁵ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴⁰⁶ Coalson, R., "Gorbachev: 'Alone With Myself'". *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, (September 24, 2009)

⁴⁰⁷ “Anecdotes about Gorbachev: Collection of the funniest jokes about Gorbachev”. *Anecdote Street, trans. Arevik Zadoyan*, (2015)

⁴⁰⁸ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴⁰⁹ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁰ *ibid.*

⁴¹¹ *ibid.*

⁴¹² *ibid.*

⁴¹³ *ibid.*

minister".⁴¹⁴ Thus Gorbachev and his team embarked on a mission to make the Soviet Union economically and militarily competitive.⁴¹⁵ He was aware of the fact that the "increasing defense burden was breaking the back of the Soviet Union and that his economic reforms would fail unless defense spending could be contained".⁴¹⁶ During the first year of his administration, Gorbachev implemented what historian Geoffrey Hosking called the "*Perestroika Mark One*".⁴¹⁷ In this stage, Gorbachev "revived Yuri Andropov's program of tightening up labor discipline; stepping up the dismissal and criminal investigation of corrupt officials; emphasizing economic 'acceleration' over deep-seated restructuring; and restricting the sale of vodka".⁴¹⁸ Gorbachev's decision to continue Andropov's fight with alcohol earned him the nickname "the mineral water general secretary".⁴¹⁹ His determination to stunt viticulture brought a massive blow to the already fragile Soviet economy as the revenue in 1987 dropped from about \$2 billion to \$1.2 billion.⁴²⁰ According to Martin Mccauley, "about 200,000 ha of vines were uprooted, particularly in Armenia".⁴²¹ The decrease in wine production led to another \$1.1 billion loss.⁴²²

There was this long line for vodka, and one poor guy couldn't stand it any longer:

'I'm going to the Kremlin, to kill Gorbachev,' he said.

An hour later, he came back. The line was still there, and everyone asked him, 'Did you kill him?'

*'Kill him?!' he responded. 'The line for that's even longer than this one!'*⁴²³

Some viewed Gorbachev's plan as highly affective stating that it helped increase birth rates and life expectancy, "wives started seeing their husbands more, and work

⁴¹⁴ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴¹⁵ Dunlop, J., "Gorbachev and Russia". In *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*, *Princeton University Press*, (1993), pp. 4-5

⁴¹⁶ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴¹⁷ Dunlop, J., "Gorbachev and Russia". In *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*, *Princeton University Press*, (1993), p. 5

⁴¹⁸ *ibid.*

⁴¹⁹ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴²⁰ *ibid.*

⁴²¹ *ibid.*

⁴²² *ibid.*

⁴²³ Fedun, S., "How Alcohol Conquered Russia: A history of the country's struggle with alcoholism, and why the government has done so little about it". *The Atlantic, Global*, (September 25, 2013)

productivity improved”.⁴²⁴ Nevertheless, while the legal production of alcohol decreased by fifty percent and over half a million individuals were arrested for bootlegging, the production of *samogon* skyrocketed.⁴²⁵ Additionally, Erofeyev pointed out that “some started hoarding sugar to make moonshine, and others poisoned themselves with substances such as antifreeze”.⁴²⁶ In 1987, as Mccauley stated, “about 180 million deciliters of hooch were produced, which works out at about six liters per man, woman and child in the Soviet Union”.⁴²⁷ During the second half of 1986, Gorbachev took Perestroika a step further initiating the Mark Two which is believed to be one of the reasons that led the country to its collapse.⁴²⁸ Perestroika Mark Two included “the holding of competitive elections and encouraging both the emergence of informal organizations and of ‘popular fronts in support of perestroika’”.⁴²⁹ In addition to Perestroika, Gorbachev also implemented the policies of *Uskoreniye* (i.e., acceleration), *Gospriyomka* (i.e., state approval), and *Glasnost* (i.e., openness).

In a restaurant:

- *Why are the meatballs cube-shaped?*
- *Perestroika!*
- *Why are they undercooked?*
- *Uskoreniye!*
- *Why have they got a bite out of them?*
- *Gospriyomka!*
- *Why are you telling me all this so brazenly?*
- *Glasnost!*

4.2. *Czechoslovakia*

The final years of Nazi rule in Europe were quite tragic for the Czechs of “the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia, a Nazi rump state carved from the remains of

⁴²⁴ Fedun, S., "How Alcohol Conquered Russia: A history of the country's struggle with alcoholism, and why the government has done so little about it". *The Atlantic, Global*, (September 25, 2013)

⁴²⁵ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴²⁶ Fedun, S., "How Alcohol Conquered Russia: A history of the country's struggle with alcoholism, and why the government has done so little about it". *The Atlantic, Global*, (September 25, 2013)

⁴²⁷ Mccauley, M., "Bandits, Gangsters and the Mafia: Russia, the Baltic States and the CIS since 1991". *Routledge*. (2014)

⁴²⁸ Dunlop, J., "Gorbachev and Russia". In *The Rise of Russia and the Fall of the Soviet Empire*, *Princeton University Press*, (1993), p. 5

⁴²⁹ *ibid.*

Czechoslovakia six months after the 1938 Munich agreement".⁴³⁰ The Germans had managed to eliminate organized resistance groups in the country, especially after the slaughter of Lidice following Reinhard Heydrich's assassination in 1942.⁴³¹ Chad Bryant pointed out that "even as Soviet troops began to organize domestic resistance groups and sweep across Moravia and Bohemia, there were only about 30 partisan groups in the Protectorate".⁴³² These resistance groups were fairly small with most of them consisting of fifteen to twenty people even though Czechs outnumbered the Germans thirty to one.⁴³³ According to Bryant, "most Czechs seemed cowed, obedient, and, in some ways, barely distinguishable from their German oppressors".⁴³⁴ The living conditions of the Czechs were far from enviable as foodstuffs were increasingly scarcer.

Two Praguers met during the Protectorate, when there was a great need for food and other raw production materials.

– *What are you doing?*

– *Shit.*

– *And where do you get the material for that?*⁴³⁵

Meanwhile factories "manned by Czech workers receiving hefty salaries" were producing around ten percent of the industrial output in the Third Reich.⁴³⁶ At the end of 1942 some described the Protectorate as the only peaceful place in the middle of World War two, claiming that travelling to Prague felt like a "trip to tranquility".⁴³⁷ Nevertheless, resistance groups still existed and such patriots gave hope to the people not to despair.⁴³⁸ Czechs smiled and told each other jokes and anecdotes as a way to express their grievances towards the oppressors and voice the political attitudes of the people, which along with other reports "penned for President Edvard Benes and other Czechoslovak officials in London".⁴³⁹ As one Czech engineer explained, while a minority went with the flow due to personal or financial issues and an even smaller number of Czechs were traitors, the core population was unhappy with the situation and

⁴³⁰ Bryant, C., "The Language of Resistance? Czech Jokes and Joke-Telling under Nazi Occupation, 1943-45". *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 41, No. 1, (2006), p. 133

⁴³¹ *ibid.*

⁴³² *ibid.*

⁴³³ *ibid.*

⁴³⁴ *ibid.*

⁴³⁵ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtíp: učebnica v tipológii a ž'artizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 21

⁴³⁶ Bryant, C., "The Language of Resistance? Czech Jokes and Joke-Telling under Nazi Occupation, 1943-45". *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 41, No. 1, (2006), p. 133

⁴³⁷ *ibid.* p. 134

⁴³⁸ *ibid.*

⁴³⁹ *ibid.*

“could be ‘instantly identified, thanks to their smiling faces’” when a political joke was told.⁴⁴⁰ Jokes were spreading and they were spreading fast. What had fueled Czechs since the Nazi occupation were the “jokes and innumerable anecdotes that travel[led] like an avalanche from Prague to the countryside”.⁴⁴¹ Some would even risk their lives collecting political jokes. A good example is the case of Oskar Krejci who was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944.⁴⁴² According to Chad Bryant, “[Oskar Krejci] saw jokes as both proof of opposition to the regime and a particularly intriguing form of Czech culture”.⁴⁴³ Some argued that humor worked as a weapon against the regime and just as a beetle it “gnawed away at the feeble foundations of that monstrous colossus”.⁴⁴⁴ On the other hand, Edvard Benes – the Czechoslovak president in exile, desperately needed some proof of resistance as “British and later Soviet Allies demanded evidence that Czechs were contributing to the war effort”.⁴⁴⁵ The patriots argued jokes served as *odboj* (i.e., a special kind of resistance) against the oppressive regime.⁴⁴⁶ According to Bryant, “patriots also saw in jokes proof that the Czech nation still existed and that people were still acting ‘Czech’, despite Nazi attempts to ‘Germanize’ the Protectorate's economy, political structures, ... and population”.⁴⁴⁷

After the Czechoslovak coup d'état in February 1948, some of the Nazi-era-joke forms of the Protectorate smoothly transitioned into the communist Czechoslovakia. As Klement Gottwald assumed the position of the General Secretary of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in February, the country entered a new phase. Klement Gottwald, leader of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, had argued that Czechoslovakia portrayed the theories of classic Marxists who claimed “there exists another path to socialism than by way of a dictatorship of the proletariat and the soviet state system”.⁴⁴⁸ But shortly after the establishment of communism, the dictatorship of

⁴⁴⁰ Bryant, C., "The Language of Resistance? Czech Jokes and Joke-Telling under Nazi Occupation, 1943-45". *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 41, No. 1, (2006), p. 134

⁴⁴¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁴² *ibid.*

⁴⁴³ *ibid.*

⁴⁴⁴ *ibid.* p. 135

⁴⁴⁵ *ibid.* p. 137

⁴⁴⁶ Bryant, C., "The Language of Resistance? Czech Jokes and Joke-Telling under Nazi Occupation, 1943-45". *Journal of Contemporary History*, Vol. 41, No. 1, (2006), p. 136

⁴⁴⁷ *ibid.* p. 136

⁴⁴⁸ Skilling, G., "People's Democracy, the Proletarian Dictatorship and the Czechoslovak Path to Socialism". *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, (1951). p. 100

the proletariat – “called by Stalin ‘the fundamental thing in Leninism’ and by Lenin ‘the very essence of Marx’s teaching’” – emerged in Czechoslovakia.⁴⁴⁹

In the busy days of February 1948, two Prague factory owners who fled urgently after the liberation met in London. One of them was in a hurry.

– Where are you headed in such a hurry, mister?

– I'm packing, sir. I'm going back to Prague.

– You're crazy. Now to Prague? After all, there is a class struggle!

– So? I'll wait three days.⁴⁵⁰

The Stalinist era (1948-1960) in Czechoslovakia was characterized by severe repression and “witchhunts [*sic.*] for suspected enemies of socialism”.⁴⁵¹ The society was quickly mobilized in order to implement Soviet political and economic practices.⁴⁵² Furthermore, to accelerate the construction of socialism, Czechoslovak communists reorganized the industry “according to the Soviet model”, abolished the workers’ rights and private enterprise, and, despite the prevailing opposition of the peasantry, collectivized the agriculture.⁴⁵³ During the early years, no one felt safe since the “regime arrested and incarcerated people almost at random”.⁴⁵⁴ After Stalin’s death in 1953, Czechoslovakia experienced some respite since “politically-inspired executions were halted, arrests became more selective, and the pace of forced mass mobilization greatly decreased”.⁴⁵⁵ Nevertheless, following the Hungarian revolution in 1956, the communists of Czechoslovakia initiated a “new phase of rapid socialist construction” by increasing the level of repression.⁴⁵⁶ According to Evanson, “arbitrary arrests of persons on the basis of their social and political profiles persisted into the next decade”.⁴⁵⁷

Two Czechs stand in a street, admiring a brand new Cadillac parked outside an hotel in Prague.

‘What a fantastic achievement of Soviet technology!’ says the first.

⁴⁴⁹ Skilling, G., "People's Democracy, the Proletarian Dictatorship and the Czechoslovak Path to Socialism". *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 10, No. 2, (1951). p. 100

⁴⁵⁰ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtip: učebnica v tipológii a ž'artizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 68

⁴⁵¹ Evanson, R., "Political Repression in Czechoslovakia, 1948-1984". *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 28, No. 1, (March 1986), p. 1

⁴⁵² *ibid.*

⁴⁵³ *ibid.*

⁴⁵⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁴⁵⁶ *ibid.*

⁴⁵⁷ *ibid.*

'Soviet technology?' says the other, 'Don't you know that this is an American car?'

*'Yes of course I do,' says the first, 'but I don't know you.'*⁴⁵⁸

One of the most important events in the 1950s was the Geneva Big Four Conference, which was enthusiastically welcomed by the Czechoslovak communists.⁴⁵⁹ That was because since the February revolution “the Communist leaders have been trying hard to persuade the Czechoslovak people, predominantly anti-Communist, that they are within the Soviet orbit to stay and that the West cannot and will not do anything about it”.⁴⁶⁰ According to Edward Taborsky, “the ‘Geneva spirit,’ subtly adapted to their needs, fitted admirably into this Communist strategy of showing the subjugated majority the hopelessness of their situation”.⁴⁶¹ However, as the wishful thinking began to fade, disillusionment came over the communists in Czechoslovakia as the results of the conference uncovered certain “by-products”.⁴⁶²

During this period and well into the 1960s, the most important figure in communist Czechoslovakia was one of the last true Stalinists Antonín Novotný who actively and successfully resisted de-Stalinization even in the 1960s.⁴⁶³ Due to this fact, Novotný was “increasingly presented [in Czechoslovakia as well as in the West] not just as a Stalinist but as a second Stalin, all-powerful and exclusively responsible for all the flaws and injustices of pre-1968 Czechoslovakia”.⁴⁶⁴ Coming from a working class, Novotný made his career in the communist party “almost exclusively in the Prague regional Party organizations, including the position of leading secretary of the Prague-region Party organization – a position sometimes considered to be the highest prize attainable by regional Party officials short of (and usually prior to) full membership in the highest echelon of the Party, the Presidium”.⁴⁶⁵ During this period, Novotný enthusiastically cooperated with security organs and so-called Russian advisors in order to compile a case against Rudolf Slánský which increased the tensions between

⁴⁵⁸ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 13

⁴⁵⁹ Taborsky, E., "Czechoslovakia in the Khrushchev - Bulganin Era". *The American Slavic and East European Review*, Vol. 16, No. 1, (1957), p. 50

⁴⁶⁰ *ibid.* p. 51

⁴⁶¹ *ibid.*

⁴⁶² *ibid.*

⁴⁶³ Golan, G., "Antonin Novotny: The Sources and Nature of His Power". *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (1972), p. 421

⁴⁶⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁵ *ibid.* p. 422

Gottwald and Novotný.⁴⁶⁶ Once in power, Novotný continued the purges prepared by the security organs.⁴⁶⁷ After the deaths of Stalin and Gottwald, seven major trials took place “one of the most important being the 1954 trial of the Slovak Party leaders, another one leading to still one more execution”.⁴⁶⁸ According to Golan, “Novotny used these trials to consolidate his position by maintaining the atmosphere of terror and demonstrating his intention to rule in what had now become the customary Stalinist manner”.⁴⁶⁹ Nevertheless, the trend of de-Stalinization and the pressure from Moscow as well as the internal insistence led Novotný to permit “an investigation, albeit tightly controlled and of only a limited number of trials”.⁴⁷⁰ As new demands of de-Stalinization came through in 1963, Novotný started to lose power and control on the Party *apparatus*.⁴⁷¹ The people of Czechoslovakia were aware of Novotný’s reign of terror and injustice, and most of them raised their concerns through humor. Never have so many jokes been created on any other statesman as their last Stalinist Novotný.⁴⁷²

*A large empty Tatra 603 came to Prague Castle and Antonín Novotný stepped out.*⁴⁷³

Or

*Novotný is writing his political speech. He sits a secretary in front of his office to make sure no one will disturb him. Suddenly, the secretary sees something scary rolling down the hall - a shapeless, misty ghost. Frightened, she hides behind a closet and the ghost slips through a keyhole into Novotný's office. When the secretary finally realizes what had happened she runs to the president but sees Novotný writing a speech and a spirit nowhere to be found.*⁴⁷⁴

Or

There was a reception at Prague Castle in honor of the Indian delegation. Mrs. Novotná comes to her husband.

– *You have to put a gem on your forehead!*

– *Why? – Novotný asks.*

⁴⁶⁶ Golan, G., "Antonin Novotny: The Sources and Nature of His Power". *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (1972), p. 422

⁴⁶⁷ *ibid.* p. 423

⁴⁶⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁶⁹ *ibid.* pp. 423-424

⁴⁷⁰ *ibid.* p. 427

⁴⁷¹ *ibid.* p. 429

⁴⁷² Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtip: učebnica v tipológii a žartizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 259

⁴⁷³ *ibid.*

⁴⁷⁴ *ibid.*

– I heard with my own ears how the Indian ladies said: That Novotný is quite a nice man, just that he is missing something here, – she points to her forehead.⁴⁷⁵

Or

Dubcek's predecessor, Antonin Novotny, was one day called to the telephone. It was Brezhnev, phoning from Moscow.

'Yes, Comrade,' said Novotny respectfully, 'Yes, Comrade ... yes, of course, Comrade ... yes, yes ... no Comrade ... goodbye Comrade.'

Having overheard his side of the conversation, a horrified Vasil Bilak comes up to him and asks:

'Tonda, you actually said 'No' to him. What did he want?'

*'Nothing,' replies Novotny. 'He just asked me if I wasn't ashamed of saying 'yes' all the time.'*⁴⁷⁶

Since Novotný's loss of control over the Party apparatus, the number of grievances and demands kept rising, to a point where "cultural union journals such as *Kulturny zivot* and *Literarni novitny*, the then state-sponsored *Kulturni tvorba*, and even such "official" dailies as *Prace* and the Slovak Party daily itself, *Bratislava Pravda*, published any number of bold criticisms, demands, and proposals".⁴⁷⁷ According to Golan, "Regional and local officials were known to ignore notifying or on occasion even obeying central organs in Prague with regard to cultural exhibitions, theatre performances, local television and radio emissions", as was the case of "Bratislava television's failure to broadcast all of Novotný's June speech in Kosice as planned".⁴⁷⁸ By the late 1960, it became apparent that reform was inevitable. On the one hand, there were some people that were labeled as the progressives thanks to their call for reform for mere pragmatic reasons.⁴⁷⁹ Then there were the idealists that "saw a great gap between Czechoslovak society of the 1960's and the image of the socialism they had sought to build".⁴⁸⁰ On the other hand, some – including young members of the Communist Party – believed that "Czechoslovak society had simply reached a stage of socialism unattained elsewhere

⁴⁷⁵ Kalin, J., "Tisíc a jeden vtíp: učebnica v tipológii a ž'artizmu". *Archa SK*, trans. Arevik Zadoyan, (1969, 1990), p. 260

⁴⁷⁶ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 50

⁴⁷⁷ Golan, G., "Antonin Novotny: The Sources and Nature of His Power". *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (1972), p. 429

⁴⁷⁸ *ibid.* pp. 429-430

⁴⁷⁹ *ibid.* p. 433

⁴⁸⁰ *ibid.* pp. 433-434

and for which no ready solutions or blueprint existed”.⁴⁸¹ From the public discontent and declining party support, Ota Šik – a key economist and politician of the time, criticized “the entire party system as it had operated, including the suppression of criticism and the ‘immense cumulation of power in the hands of some comrades, especially comrade Novotný’”.⁴⁸² Among other proposals, Šik suggested Novotný’s resignation as First Secretary after which a secret vote of the plenum would decide upon his successor.⁴⁸³ Thereafter, two candidates would be nominated “together with several new presidium members, by a special commission, which would not include any members of the Presidium”.⁴⁸⁴ Additionally, the issue of Czech and Slovak separation and lack of political balance was raised.⁴⁸⁵ According to Skilling, “The dramatic statement touched off three days of sharp debate which were followed, after a Christmas break, by three more days of discussion, beginning on 3 January”.⁴⁸⁶ Eventually, Novotný was left with no other option than resorting to “a new defensive manoeuvre [*sic.*], informing the Presidium, and later the plenum, that he was ‘placing the function of first secretary at the disposal of the plenary session of the Central Committee,’ and pledging that he would abide by any decision that was made”.⁴⁸⁷ This was perceived as an incomplete resignation, a “shrewd move” that did not touch upon the issue of separation.⁴⁸⁸ So Alexander Dubček – a politician that played a major role during the Prague Spring – came forward with the proposal to defer the final decision until January 3rd “when the plenum would resume its deliberations”.⁴⁸⁹ Finally, after the Central Committee’s “three stormy meetings” Antonín Novotný was “relieved of the post of First Secretary ... and was replaced by Alexander Dubček”.⁴⁹⁰

With the implementation of the revolutionary Action Program meant to liberalize the Czechoslovak people, Alexander Dubček introduced *socialism with a*

⁴⁸¹ Golan, G., "Antonin Novotny: The Sources and Nature of His Power". *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 14, No. 3, (1972), p. 434

⁴⁸² Skilling, G., "The Fall of Novotný in Czechoslovakia". *Canadian Slavonic Papers / Revue Canadienne des Slavistes*, Vol. 12, No. 3, (1970), p. 233

⁴⁸³ *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁵ *ibid.* pp. 233-234

⁴⁸⁶ *ibid.* p. 233

⁴⁸⁷ *ibid.* p. 234

⁴⁸⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁸⁹ *ibid.* pp. 234-235

⁴⁹⁰ Economic and Political Weekly, "Peaceful Revolution in Czechoslovakia". *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 3, No. 17, (April 27, 1968), p. 671

human face in the country.⁴⁹¹ Internally, Dubček's reforms intended to "build an advanced socialist society on sound economic foundations ... that corresponds to the historical democratic traditions of Czechoslovakia", whereas externally he advocated the establishment of relations with the West as well as the nations of the Soviet bloc, the opening of trade routes, permission of private enterprises, and "a ten-year transition to democratized socialism that would allow multiparty elections"⁴⁹² However, the most important change introduced through the Action Program was "the reestablishment of personal liberties to the people of Czechoslovakia".⁴⁹³ According to Anna Stoneman, "Dubček uprooted the totalitarian principles of the KSČ by granting greater freedoms of press, travel, and assembly, and greatly limiting the power of the secret police".⁴⁹⁴ Dubček's reforms (especially the fact that he was able to eliminate the KSČ's most oppressive measures) sparked a lot of criticism and hesitation among other Soviet bloc leaders.⁴⁹⁵ Politics in Czechoslovakia had become so transparent that "televisions began regularly broadcasting news programming and impromptu political meetings that 'wound late into the night, and were watched excitedly by viewers'"⁴⁹⁶

Mao, Brezhnev and Dubcek on an international flight. A stewardess prepares to make an announcement:

'Ladies and gentlemen, we are extremely fortunate. We have Jesus Christ on board. He is about to come into the cabin and grant each passenger one wish.'

Christ enters the cabin and walks up to Mao.

'What's your wish?' Christ asks him.

'I wish that all the Soviet Revisionists would disappear from the face of the earth,' says Mao.

'Very well,' says Christ and proceeds to Brezhnev.

'What is your wish?' Jesus asks him.

'I wish that all these Chinese Deviationists would disappear,' says Brezhnev.

'Very well,' says Jesus, and moves on to Dubcek.

⁴⁹¹ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher*, Vol. 49, No. 1, (2015), p. 104

⁴⁹² *ibid.*

⁴⁹³ *ibid.*

⁴⁹⁴ *ibid.*

⁴⁹⁵ *ibid.* p. 105

⁴⁹⁶ *ibid.*

'And what is your wish?' asks Jesus.

'Comrade Jesus,' says Dubcek, 'are your [sic] really going to do everything these two asked you?'

'Of course,' replies Jesus, 'I'm God.'

*'Mm ...' says Dubcek, 'in that case, I'll settle for a cup of coffee.'*⁴⁹⁷

However, Dubček occupied the position of the First Secretary of the Presidium of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia for a rather short period of time. Dubček thought the Soviet Union did not oppose his reforms since “the lack of direct Soviet involvement with internal affairs produced an illusion of sovereignty, heightened by Brezhnev's stated refusal to intervene when previously summoned to Prague”.⁴⁹⁸ This however was not the case as Czechoslovak liberalization imposed a threat on the unity of the Soviet bloc.⁴⁹⁹ The Kremlin's response to Prague Spring came in three stages.⁵⁰⁰ Initially, within a period of three months Czechoslovakia and its new leader were surveilled and reconnoitered “which culminated in the summoning of Dubcek to an official meeting in Dresden, Germany, on March 23, 1968, during which Dubcek refused Soviet demands to repeal his Action Program”.⁵⁰¹ Then as the growing political pressure on Dubček proved fruitless, the leaders of the Soviet bloc met in Warsaw on July 14, 1968 in order to authorize the “last resort” intervention tactic.⁵⁰² The final stage of the Kremlin's response was when the Soviets called Dubček to a meeting in Bratislava on the 3rd of August.⁵⁰³ During this meeting the “Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia, Poland, East Germany, and Hungary negotiated and ratified the Bratislava Declaration, which stated that the Soviet Union would intervene if a bourgeois system were established with multiple parties challenging the KSČ, but stressed that socialist Czechoslovakia could continue ‘on the basis of the principles of equality, respect for sovereignty, and national independence’”.⁵⁰⁴ Dubček returned to Prague confident that autonomy had been achieved for Czechoslovakia while Western media claimed that the Bratislava meeting was a “Soviet retreat and a Czechoslovak

⁴⁹⁷ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), pp. 60-61

⁴⁹⁸ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher, Vol. 49, No. 1*, (2015), p. 106

⁴⁹⁹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁰ *ibid.*

⁵⁰¹ *ibid.*

⁵⁰² *ibid.*

⁵⁰³ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁴ *ibid.*

achievement".⁵⁰⁵ However in reality, the Soviets managed to buy some time and distract the Czechoslovak people from what was actually coming.⁵⁰⁶ Not even two weeks after the meeting in Bratislava, "during the night of August 20, 1968 ... 200,000 Soviet and Warsaw Pact troops and 2,000 tanks were sent into Czechoslovakia to occupy the territory and brutally and efficiently suppress the Prague Spring movement".⁵⁰⁷ This invasion took everyone by surprise. Dubček went on the radio to urge people "to keep the peace and not resist the advancing armies" as it was too late to defend the Czechoslovak borders.⁵⁰⁸

Soviet troops had seized the whole of Czechoslovakia and were busy arresting supporters of the overthrown regime. In desperation Dubcek consulted a Jewish soothsayer to ask his advice on what to do.

'There are two possibilities,' said the soothsayer. 'A natural one and a supernatural one.'

'What is the natural one?' asked Dubcek.

'That the archangel Gabriel will chase out the Russians with a dirty sword.'

'And the supernatural one?'

'That the Russians will decide to leave of their own accord.'⁵⁰⁹

There were 186 casualties and 362 seriously injured just within a week of the invasion.⁵¹⁰ Soon Dubček and along with four other KSČ members were arrested and sent to Moscow "where they were forced to approve the 'temporary' military occupation and restoration of complete censorship".⁵¹¹ According to Anna Stoneman, "Although Communist rule continued in Czechoslovakia after the invasion, the people now considered themselves independent from and opposed to the ruling government. The idea that Communism could be reformed was crushed under the tanks on August

⁵⁰⁵ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher, Vol. 49, No. 1*, (2015), p. 106

⁵⁰⁶ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁷ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁰⁹ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., "No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes". *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 49

⁵¹⁰ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher, Vol. 49, No. 1*, (2015), p. 107

⁵¹¹ *ibid.*

21, 1968 and never recovered, as it became widely apparent that the actions of the current leadership were not for the good of the people, but that of the ruling party.”⁵¹²

One Czech to Another in Prague after the 1968 invasion.

‘Czechoslovakia is the most neutral state in the world.’

‘Why?’

‘It doesn’t even interfere in its own affairs.’⁵¹³

Alternatively:

A Czech goes to a palm reader:

The palmist: ‘I see in your hand that now...’

The Czech: ‘Please, skip the present.’⁵¹⁴

The Soviet invasion marked the beginning of the so-called normalization era when all the reforms of the Prague Spring were repealed and Gustáv Husák – a Slovak communist politician – succeeded Dubček.⁵¹⁵ In 1971, during the 14th Party Congress Husák claimed that “the process of normalization and consolidation had been successfully completed, and that, having eradicated all traces of the ‘crisis period’, the Party would proceed to build up a new and prosperous Czechoslovakia”.⁵¹⁶ Though even five years later it seemed that the events of 1968 still haunted Husák’s administration which hindered the country’s progression according to Moscow’s plan.⁵¹⁷

Czechoslovakia.

Mr. Strougal and Mr. Husak see a large queue for meat. ‘We haven’t got enough meat,’ says Strougal.

‘We have. They don’t,’ says Husak.⁵¹⁸

The 1970s in Czechoslovakia were troubling times. During this time a number of Czech and Slovak artists along with anyone who dared speak against the regime were

⁵¹² Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher*, Vol. 49, No. 1, (2015), p. 108

⁵¹³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 50

⁵¹⁴ *ibid.* p. 164

⁵¹⁵ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher*, Vol. 49, No. 1, (2015), p. 107

⁵¹⁶ Pravda, A., "Czechoslovakia: The Legacy of 1968". *The World Today*, Vol. 32, No. 8, (1976), p. 282

⁵¹⁷ *ibid.*

⁵¹⁸ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 153

arrested or forced to leave the country.⁵¹⁹ On January 6, 1977, Charter 77 (*Charta 77*) declaration was signed by over two hundred people “calling on Czechoslovakia’s Communist rulers to honour their commitment to human rights under the 1975 Helsinki Accords”.⁵²⁰ This too led to a number of arrests, interrogations and loss of employment.⁵²¹ Nevertheless, the people of Czechoslovakia “were able to adapt to the deplorable conditions”, spending their weekends telling jokes in cottages.⁵²²

Czechoslovakia 1970:

‘What is black and knocking at the door?’

*‘The Future.’*⁵²³

According to Stoneman, “The ultimate legacy of the Prague Spring came in 1989, when its other primary legacies - dissidence and disillusionment - came together in the Velvet Revolution, which finally eliminated Communism from the nation”.⁵²⁴ The erosion of the Soviet Union during the late 1980s led to many of its sister states to demand freedom. Just eight days after the fall of the Berlin wall, “student protesters filled the streets of Prague” fueled with “the same tide of freedom” as in Berlin.⁵²⁵ Naturally, the leaders of the protests, including Vaclav Havel, were arrested which then led to more protests that “went well beyond the circle of established dissidents to draw in a much larger group ... who had not previously taken public action”.⁵²⁶ These events inspired Dubček to return from exile in order to lead the Slovakian group Public Against Violence that together with Vaclav Havel’s Czech Civic Forum created a united front in their demands to have “those members of the Presidium of the [KSČ] who are directly connected with the [invasion] in the year 1968” step down.⁵²⁷ It was the efforts of the Prague Spring that provided “the disillusionment with the distorted ideals of Socialism that set into motion the movement toward democracy”. Largely due to the efforts of

⁵¹⁹ Burns, T., "Life during the Communist era in Czechoslovakia". Private Prague Guide: Custom Travel Services, (n.d.)

⁵²⁰ Willoughby, I., "Charter 77: An original signatory on Communist Czechoslovakia’s most important protest movement." *Radio Prague International*, (01/06/2017)

⁵²¹ Burns, T., "Life during the Communist era in Czechoslovakia". Private Prague Guide: Custom Travel Services, (n.d.)

⁵²² *ibid.*

⁵²³ Lukes, S. & Galnoor, I., “No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes”. *Penguin Books Ltd.*, (1987), p. 166

⁵²⁴ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher*, Vol. 49, No. 1, (2015), p. 108

⁵²⁵ Kopsa, A., "Czechoslovakia’s Velvet Revolution Started 30 Years Ago—But It Was Decades in the Making". *Time, History: Revolution*, (November 16, 2019)

⁵²⁶ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher*, Vol. 49, No. 1, (2015), pp. 108-109

⁵²⁷ *ibid.*

Dubček to introduce reforms in Czechoslovakia, the Velvet Revolution of 1989 proved to be successful.⁵²⁸ As Dubček beautifully put it, “They may crush the flowers, but they cannot stop the Spring”.⁵²⁹

Conclusion

The decades of socialist rule in Russia and Eastern Europe were the time of joking dangerously. But the draconian punishments did not keep the public from making jokes. Instead, they found creative ways of expressing their disapproval and by doing so boosted the collective morale of those who hopelessly believed in their powerlessness. Not only did anti-communist humor emotionally and psychologically motivate its tellers but they also provided an accurate depiction of the regime. Political humor both in the Soviet Union and Czechoslovakia was able to portray the reality of the time and depict not only the large-scale problems but also minor ones that concerned the daily lives of the people. In the quest to answer whether anti-communist humor indeed reflected the life at the time and whether or not there are differences in the pattern of the Soviet and Czechoslovak jokes, I was able to prove that the three initial hypotheses were accurate. In order to do so a qualitative literature review methodology and a comparative method of analysis were employed. Firstly, in the totalitarian political atmosphere that was omnipresent in the Soviet socialist republics, humor had become one of the most important means of political expression that allowed the public not only to show courage and express freedom with their jokes but also to mirror the political-economic reality of the time. Secondly, there were various patterns of differentiation based on the geographical setting - specifically between Czechoslovakia and the Soviet Union - when it came to the substance of the jokes even though several characteristics were repetitive. While the Czechoslovak jokes were famous for their surrealist wit and usually explored topics such as the different living conditions of the countries in Eastern Europe and the people’s dissatisfaction towards the oppressive state, Soviet humor was lengthier and touched upon various topics such as religion, ethnicity, ideology, the existence of arbitrary power, and foreign affairs. Lastly, the patterns of differentiation spread not only geographically but also chronologically because as communism in the Soviet Union and its sister states evolved, the politics

⁵²⁸ Stoneman, A., "Socialism With a Human Face: The Leadership and Legacy of the Prague Spring". *The History Teacher*, Vol. 49, No. 1, (2015), pp. 108-109

⁵²⁹ *ibid.* p. 103

changed from Stalinist palace politics of collectivization to Khrushchev's reforms thus influencing and shaping the anticommunist humor of the time.

This research supports the argument that humor is one of the best and commonly used weapons against a government as it is able to showcase the lives of people as it was. Political humor is especially important in oppressive states where joking may lead to imprisonment or even death (as was the case in the Soviet Union). This research allows us to look at the history through the eyes of those who lived through it and helps us understand the political climate through minor arts such as jokes and anecdotes. This principle not only applies to Socialist states of the 20th century but it can also be used in current politics, scilicet one can evaluate the level of satisfaction and trust toward the government by looking at the pattern of jokes.

Anti-communist humor has its own branch in the Soviet Union and the Eastern bloc which is why I have chosen to compare Czechoslovak and Soviet anti-communist humor. Due to the limited scope of this research some aspects of Czechoslovak and Soviet political humor have not been addressed. Therefore, one of the possible extensions to this work can be focusing on specific aspects of Soviet and Czechoslovak anti-communist jokes (e.g., migration policies, ethnic issues especially after the creation of the state of Israel, economic shortcomings in areas other than the agriculture). Alternatively, one may also compare the joke patterns and trends in Soviet Union with socialist countries beyond Eastern Europe (e.g., Armenia, Azerbaijan, Georgia).

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List of appendices

1: A note on names and translations

2: the Socialist fraternal kiss

Appendices

1: A note on names and translations

Jokes, especially the ones involving wordplay, are the most challenging for translators, and since this thesis concerns non-English speaking countries, such jokes were unavoidable. I have done my best to translate them as close to the original as possible in order to preserve its effect. Furthermore, I have tried to stay consistent when it comes to transliterating names (for example using “Khrushchev” instead of “Khruschev”) and tried to avoid unnecessary transliterations into the Latin alphabet. At the same time, since part of the thesis concerns Czechoslovakia, where publications were in Czech as well as Slovak, the names have been kept in the original form of the author (for example “Ján” instead of “Jan”).

2: Socialist fraternal kiss:

Joseph Stalin and Valery Chkalov, 1936



Source: Chapple, A., "The Soviet Kiss, Gone But (Mostly) Not Missed". *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, (April 12, 2018)

Joseph Stalin and Vasily Molokov, 1937



Source: Chapple, A., "The Soviet Kiss, Gone But (Mostly) Not Missed". *Radio Free Europe, Radio Liberty*, (April 12, 2018)

Nikita Khrushchev and the returned cosmonauts, 1962



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