

Tiny Revolutions in Russia

Twentieth-century Soviet and
Russian history in anecdotes

Bruce Adams



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Tiny Revolutions in Russia

This book presents a large collection of anecdotes and jokes from different periods of the twentieth century to provide an unusual perspective on Soviet and Russian history. Anecdotes and jokes were a hidden form of discursive communication in the Soviet era, lampooning official practices and acting as a confidential form of self-affirmation. Although the anecdotes were anti-Soviet, by their very nature they both criticized existing reality and acted as a form of acquiescence. Above all they provide invaluable insights into everyday life and the attitudes and concerns of ordinary people. The book also includes anecdotes and jokes from the post-Soviet period, when ordinary people in Russia continued to have to cope with rather grim reality. The compiler provides extensive introductory and explanatory matter to set the anecdotes and jokes in context.

Bruce Adams is Professor of Russian history at the University of Louisville. His previous book was *The Politics of Punishment: Prison Reform in Russia, 1863–1917*, which was not as funny as *Tiny Revolutions in Russia*. His current research concerns the re-emigration of Russian and Soviet citizens from China to the Soviet Union between the 1920s and the 1960s.

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“The secret source of humor itself is not joy but sorrow. There is no humor in heaven.”

Mark Twain

“By making our enemy small, inferior, despicable or comic, we achieve in a roundabout way the enjoyment of overcoming him—to which the third person, who has made no efforts, bears witness by his laughter.”

Sigmund Freud

“Every joke is a tiny revolution.”

George Orwell

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1

Introduction

They say that if you have to explain a joke, it isn't funny. But what if the joke does the explaining? What if jokes in all their intricacies contain valuable information and nuances about the culture that spawned them? Then they might be worth telling for what they can teach us. If we're lucky, clichés notwithstanding, laughter can follow understanding. As a teacher of Russian history and culture, I have been telling Soviet anecdotes to my students for many years in the hope that they would not only leaven a grim history with humor but also teach some of that history.

These attempts have met with mixed success. Not long ago I taught a course in Russian and Soviet Culture. The semester before I had taught my standard survey of Modern Russian History. Whenever I told an anecdote in the culture class by way of illustrating some point or other, the reaction was the same. The one Russian *émigré* laughed immediately, enjoying the joke itself and, often, the familiarity of a story heard before. A beat or two after him, the several students who had attended the previous semester's course caught on and joined in. The rest of the class just sat there. (If they'd done their assigned readings, their reaction might have been different!) Finally I would explain the joke and they would get it, but by then it was usually too late for laughter. I asked them late in the semester if they had gotten anything out of the anecdotes. Unanimously they agreed they had, and, finally understanding the context, they were ready to laugh at some retellings.

In my classes I learned that anecdotes were most successful if I told them after we had discussed or I had explained the current topic, be it the Lenin cult, propaganda, de-Stalinization, or anti-Semitism. That is the approach I will follow in this book. This is not meant to be a comprehensive history of the Soviet Union. I hope to explain just enough of the history of a period or of a particular topic to make the jokes comprehensible and then let them speak for themselves. Nor is this a balanced account of the events it describes. The nature of anecdotes determines that this will be an unbalanced, negative account of Soviet history; the anecdotes satirize, parody, and otherwise savage the individuals and topics they address.

As far as I know there is no other such book available in either English or Russian. There are many collections of Soviet anecdotes. Naturally, most are in Russian. The earliest good collection I have found is Evgenii Andreevich's *Kreml'i Narod* (*The Kremlin and the People*) (Munich: Golos Naroda, 1951). It is fairly small and covers only the first thirty years or so of Soviet history, but its chronological organization lets the

reader know when the jokes originated. The most useful of the anecdote collections for my purposes was Dora Shturman and Sergei Tiktin's *Sovetskii Soiuz v zerkale politicheskogo anekdota* (*The Soviet Union in the Mirror of the Political Anecdote*) (Jerusalem: Express, 1987). Its large collection of jokes, also organized chronologically with many individual anecdotes dated by the authors, runs up to the Gorbachev years. The funniest, most clever presentation of a large number of these that I have seen is Iulius Telesin's *1001 Izbrannyi Sovetskii Politicheskii Anekdot* (*1001 Selected Soviet Political Anecdotes*) (Tenafly, NJ: Hermitage, 1986). Telesin arranged 1001 well-chosen anecdotes topically and added humorous rhyming quatrains called *chastushki* (the Russian equivalent of limericks), excerpts from Soviet dissident publications such as the *Khronika tekushchikh sobytii* (*Chronicle of Current Events*) and other snippets to make a very entertaining book. Another large, well-organized collection of jokes from which I drew some items is Iosif Raskin's *Entsiklopediia Khuliganstvuiushchego Ortodoksa* (*Encyclopedia of Perverted Orthodoxy*) (Moscow: Zvonitsa-MG, 1996). This alphabetized collection includes jokes, *chastushki*, and witticisms on a wide variety of topics, political, sexual, scatological and more. Iurii Borev's *Istoriia gosudarstva sovetskogo v predaniiakh i anekdotakh* (*The History of the Soviet Government in Legends and Anecdotes*) (Moscow: PIPOL, 1995) and his *Kratkii kurs istorii xx veka v anekdotakh, chastushkakh, baikakh, memuarakh po chuzhim vospominaniiam, legendakh, predaniiakh, i.t.d.* (*Short Course of the History of Twentieth Century in Anecdotes, Chastushkas, Fables, Memoirs of Others' Memories, Legends, etc.*) (Moscow: Zvonitsa-MG, 1995) contain more "legends" (apocryphal stories) about real people than anecdotes. These are interesting and some are amusing, but they did not enjoy the same wide circulation and become part of "folklore" in the same way that anecdotes did. Other recent publications, such as I.I. Shitts' *Dnevnik "Velikogo Pereloma"* (*Diary of the Great Upheaval*) (March 1928–August 1931) (Paris: YMCA Press, 1991), contain a few anecdotes not recorded in the collections.

In recent years a large number of extremely cheap books of jokes have been churned out in Russia. Some are topical (e.g. medical jokes, Brezhnev jokes), others are more comprehensive. *Anekdoty i chastushki* (*Anecdotes and Chastushkas*) (Voronezh: Chernozem'e, 1997), for example, is the third volume of a huge collection, and runs to 574 pages. Many of these editions have clearly copied from one another. One small and undistinguished collection by Mark Dubovskii even calls itself *Istoriia SSSR v anekdotakh, 1917–1992* (*A History of the Soviet Union in Anecdotes, 1917–1992*) (Smolensk: Smiodyn, 1992), but it has no historical or chronological organization for its rather random selection of anecdotes. None of these is as comprehensive or as clever as the Tiktin, Telesin, Raskin, or Borev books, and none supplies the sort of explanation an English-language reader might need. Computers have also increased the rate at which Soviet anecdotes have been shared. There are now and have been for a while a number of good websites with and about Soviet and Russian anecdotes. The largest and best in my opinion is Dima Verner's "Anekdoty iz Rossii" (*Anecdotes from Russia*) at .

There are a few English-language collections also. Some of these, such as *Russia Dies Laughing: Jokes from the Soviet Union*, edited by Z.Dolgoplova (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982), and Algis Ruksenas, *Is That You Laughing, Comrade?: The World's Best Russian (Underground) Jokes* (Secaucus: Citadel Press, 1986) are slim and unorganized. Others are larger but topically limited, such as *The Jokes of Oppression: The Humor of*

Soviet Jews by David A. Harris and Izrail Rabinovich (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1988), *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia* by Emil A. Draitser (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), and *Making War Not Love*, also by Draitser (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999). For language students one bilingual collection, edited by Emil Draitser, *Forbidden Laughter/Nedozvolennyi Smekh: Soviet Underground Jokes* (Los Angeles, CA: Almanac Press, 1978), is available, but the collection is small and none of the anecdotes is explained.

Up until now there has been no comprehensive collection of Soviet anecdotes for English-language readers. Anyone who knows Russian well would prefer to hear or read Soviet anecdotes in Russian. Translations cannot capture all the shades of meaning in some of the jokes, and there are absolutely wonderful but untranslatable puns and other plays on words in many others. On the other hand many readers who don't know Russian may also have limited knowledge of Soviet history and culture and need help understanding some of the anecdotes. It is for that readership that I have written *Tiny Revolutions*.

What may you expect to find in this book? You probably wouldn't pick it up if you knew absolutely nothing about Soviet history, but if you know even a little, you might be wondering what there is to laugh about. Few countries have had such a sad and violent history. None has experienced death by war, starvation, torture, and execution on the scale of the Soviet Union. What then did they laugh at and why did they laugh? It is not my purpose in this introduction to write either a psychological or literary explanation of why this humor works. I have found few things that kill humor more quickly. A young American scholar has recently completed a comprehensive rhetorical analysis of Soviet anecdotes in his doctoral dissertation. See Seth Benedict Graham, "A Cultural Analysis of the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot*" (PhD dissertation, University of Pittsburgh, 2003). There you can learn, for example, that:

At its peak, the *anekdot* enjoyed the status of a carnivalesque genre laureate in the organic hierarchy of popular discursive forms that had developed concomitantly with the state-prescribed *Ars poetica*.... An important reason for the genre's preeminence was its capacity to outflank, mimic, debunk, deconstruct, and otherwise critically engage with other genres and texts of all stripes and at all presumed points on the spectrum from resistance to complicity (or from unofficial to official). The *anekdot* was able to so function in large part because of the number and variety of contact points between its distinctive generic features and the constituent "epochal features" that defined the cultural moment and informed textual production therein.

(p. 104)

Graham's dissertation is a very useful explanation of the genre. I have used several of the points he makes in what follows, but the level of explanation I will provide is a good deal simpler and is generally understood by anyone who reads widely or has lived past age 30. If you have read the *Diary of Anne Frank*, novels about London during the Blitz, Oliver Sachs' tales about people with Alzheimer's, or stories about people facing their own death or loved ones', or if you have lived through any of the experiences they describe,

you know that people laugh at the—apparently—oddest times and most incongruous things. Experience and science teach us that people need to laugh at those times and at these things. Laughter is indeed good medicine, a purgative and a restorative. And if anyone knows about purges and restorations, it's the Soviet people. That's a joke. If it's not clear now, it will be before you're done.

Steve Lipman's book, *Laughter in Hell: The Use of Humor during the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1993) makes this point better than any other book I have seen. A few other good books that readers might want to look at that make these points in a variety of ways are George Mikes, *Humor in Memoriam* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1970); Itzhak Galnoor and Steven Lukes, *No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985); Ron Jenkins, *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy* (New York: The Free Press, 1994); Christie Davies, *Ethnic Humor around the World: A Comparative Analysis* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); Rabbi Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Humor: What the Best Jewish Jokes Say about the Jews* (New York: William Morrow, 1992); and Charles E. Schutz, *Political Humor: From Aristophanes to Sam Ervin* (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1977).

Much of the humor spawned by horrible experiences is necessarily tasteless, some of it what we and the Russians call black humor. There will be a lot of that in this book. If you are easily offended, this book is probably not for you. I read on a bathroom wall very shortly after the Challenger space shuttle disaster that NASA stood for "Need Another Seven Astronauts." I find that clever enough, but I still don't think it's funny. What after all did Christy McAuliffe ever do to me? The characters and situations lampooned in Soviet anecdotes on the other hand are seen to have done immense harm to the tellers and hearers of these jokes, and to countless innocent others, indeed to the whole nation. They deserve what they get. In spades! When Arnold Schwarzenegger married Marie Shriver, we learned it was an effort to breed a bullet-proof Kennedy. Funnier, right? Not because we have come to approve of John's or Bobby Kennedy's assassination, but because at the time the whole Kennedy mystique needed a little deflating, and John's affairs and Ted's shenanigans (were the events at Chappaquiddick a shenanigan?) made them vulnerable. Moreover the Kennedys are rich, and as Mark Twain taught us, the money of the rich is twice tainted: 'tain't yours, 'tain't mine.

Compared to the Kennedys, Soviet heroes were huge and hugely blameworthy. The bigger they were, the harder they had to fall. Lenin, for example, was not only the progenitor of the whole Soviet experience, but he became the object of a cult that made him the Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Jesus Christ of the Russian Revolution as well as its George Washington. He had to be dragged through the mud repeatedly and hacked at in a hundred jokes to chop him down to more nearly life-size. Stalin and the Stalin cult were many times worse. One might think that the things Stalin did were too horrible to joke about, and it was, of course, dangerous to joke about him while he was alive. Alexander Solzhenitsyn, for a famous example, spent eight years in labor camps in large part because of derogatory remarks he made about the Great Leader in letters from the front during World War II. The anecdotes were necessarily underground humor shared only with close friends. (The word *anecdote*, by the way, in the direct translation of its Greek roots, means simply "unpublished item." I will often refer to them below as jokes, but that is only because I got tired of calling them anecdotes. In Nazi Germany,

where jokes about the Nazis were similarly dangerous, they were called *Flüsterwitze*—whispered jokes. It is important to remember their *sub rosa* origins.) Nonetheless there are wonderful jokes about Stalin, his government, the camps, and the new culture created by the social revolution of Stalin's era. Many of the jokes about Lenin and Stalin were made up after their deaths, but a surprising number were coined—and told—in their times. I am sure that many jokes made up in Lenin's time and some from Stalin's time have been forgotten and lost, even good ones. No longer topical or relevant, they dropped out of circulation and were forgotten before they were collected. More than enough remain.

The richest periods for inventing Soviet anecdotes were the Stalin and Khrushchev years. These were the most experimental and eventful years of Soviet history. I suspect that more jokes were told by more people in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, however, than while Stalin was still alive. Certainly by that time they were told more openly. Compared to Stalin, the pudgy, folksy Khrushchev and the eventually doltish Brezhnev aroused little fear. And by their time most of the revolutionary enthusiasm, which had been real enough in Lenin and Stalin's time, had died. True cynicism set in. In those years jokes about the earlier heroes were coined and circulated as well as plentiful jabs at contemporary people and situations. Nothing was sacred any longer. If there are fewer jokes about Brezhnev, it is in part, I think, because so little of great significance changed or was even attempted in those eighteen years. Some of the old jokes recirculated with the names changed.

The Andropov and Chernenko years were mercifully short, but they also left a little spoor on the trail. More recent years produced only a few good jokes, however. Some of these follow the long Soviet tradition of lampooning government ineptitude, but more are aimed at "new Russians," the semicriminal, tasteless *nouveau riche* of the 1990s. For one thing life became too hard and too uncertain for the inventors of the anecdotes to find it amusing. We need to remember who made up Soviet jokes, who told them, and why.

Practically all jokes are anonymous, of course, but it is safe to assume that most are the product of the urban intelligentsia. For most of Soviet history, but perhaps especially in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years, this was a group who felt alienated from, yet at the same time smugly superior to, the government and society. They were comfortably employed and had leisure time in which to amuse themselves; more hard work wouldn't earn them appreciably more money or greater comforts. In a free society many of these people would have belonged to civic and political organizations and worked to improve their societies. They would have spoken out about injustices and problems they experienced and saw. In the USSR they could do none of those things. Feeling helpless about their inability to affect their world and eventually pretty hopeless that anything in it would change much for the better, they sighed, sat back, and found what pleasure they could in making fun of it. In the 1990s, however, this group found it just as difficult to live as everyone else. Those who didn't take advantage of the opportunity to emigrate found very little funny in unemployment, inflation, increasing crime, and a very unaccustomed political instability. And others were now beating them to the punch line with public criticism and humor. In post-Gorbachev Russia newspapers, journals, and TV shows have been able to openly criticize and lampoon the usual targets of anecdotes. The traditional Soviet intelligentsia and the anecdote died.

But if people aren't telling many new jokes, this is a good time for remembering old ones. You will find that I have arranged the anecdotes first chronologically and, within the chronological divisions, topically. This causes some apparent repetition. You will read jokes about Lenin in at least three places, for example, but they are three different sets of jokes. If I had put them all together, they would have told you nothing about the times that produced them. Likewise jokes about shortages, bureaucrats, Jews, and many other topics recur throughout. These are problems that never went away. I have provided some internal guides and an index so you can find favorite categories.

You will also find that I have numbered the jokes. This will make any joke easy to find again for classroom use, retelling, whatever. And once you and your friends have read the book a sufficient number of times, you can employ the convenient shorthand of referring to the joke by number only. You do know the story about the old card-playing buddies (or long-time cell mates) who knew each other's jokes so well they had numbered them and "told" them by saying only their numbers? Well, they did. Then a newcomer joined the group. He was mystified that everyone would laugh when someone called out 12, or 22, or 34, until he had it explained to him. Then he gave it a try. "22," he said, but nobody laughed. Later he tried 17, but again no one laughed. When he asked how come, someone told him, "Some people know how to tell a joke, others just don't." In another version, when the newcomer tries, only one listener laughs, but he just can't stop laughing. He finally explains that he had never heard that one before. In yet another version, which I heard in the Soviet Union where there was a great deal more sexism and gender separation than here, no one laughs and someone reprimands the newcomer, "We don't tell that one with ladies present." You will find yet one more version in the collection. See #156.

They do say if you have to explain a joke, it isn't funny. But if you can get through this book and haven't had many a good laugh, I expect it's your fault. So lighten up, loosen up, and don't be afraid to learn a little history along the way.

2

Lenin

The first thing we might notice about Soviet anecdotes is that there are none about the October Revolution or about the Civil War that soon followed. Much later, jokes would poke fun at the way official history had come to glorify and otherwise distort the events of these years. But either the jokes of this period have been forgotten and lost, or at the time no one found much that was amusing about the Bolsheviks, their seizure of power, and the long, bloody struggle they eventually won to stay in power. It shouldn't surprise us if the latter were true. Conditions in Russia from 1917 to 1921 were about as horrible as life can be. The revolutions of 1917 came near the end of Russia's involvement in the World War I. By the time Russia withdrew, she had lost over three million citizens, more than all the other combatant nations combined. Trying to fight a "total" war had severely damaged the Russian economy. Modern war usually produces full employment, with soldiers in the army and an augmented factory force producing war *materiel*, but unemployment was higher in Russia in 1917 than in America during the Great Depression. Inflation had severely eroded the value of money. There were such great shortages of fuel and food that factories could not operate and people went hungry. They fled the cities to find refuge and something to eat in the villages.

Things got a great deal worse after 1917. The Bolsheviks who seized power in October 1917 were themselves a singularly humorless lot. What is most important to understand about them is that they were true believers, that is, fanatics. They were Marxist revolutionaries who had spent their adult lives—in Lenin's case, for example, over twenty-five years—preparing to make revolution for the purpose of establishing a socialist state. Most had spent years in tsarist prisons and in exile, both in Siberia and in self-imposed foreign exile. Some, like Lenin, came from middle- and upper-class families and knew the deprivation of the proletariat only intellectually or at second hand, but others, like Stalin, came from extreme poverty, and all of them hated the tsarist and capitalist order on which they blamed Russia's and the world's ills.

When the Bolsheviks were able to seize power in October 1917 because of the chaos and disillusionment caused by the war, they were not confident that they could stay in power, but they were determined and willing to use all means to do so. This included the application of summary justice by revolutionary tribunals and a political police organization called the Cheka (very short for Extraordinary commission for combating counter-revolution, speculation and sabotage). Headed by Feliks Dzerzhinsky, who was nicknamed Iron Feliks for his fierce dedication to the Revolution, the Cheka rounded up,

imprisoned, and sent off to the first Soviet labor camps huge numbers of suspects. The Cheka executed more people in 1918 than the tsarist government had in the previous 300 years. They did again in 1919.

By that time Civil War had broken out. The Bolsheviks were a minority party—they had won 24 percent of the votes for a Constituent Assembly in November 1917 in what turned out to be the last free election until the Gorbachev era—and they had aroused suspicion, then hostility and opposition by their authoritarian behavior after coming to power. The many groups who struggled against the Bolsheviks could never find a popular countervailing ideology, however, never coordinated their efforts well or for long, and were defeated by 1920 to 1921. Another five million Russians died in the Civil War, and the economy was further torn apart and worn down. Paper money became essentially worthless. In 1921, the first year of peace since 1914, Russian industry produced less than a quarter as much as it had in 1913. One-third of the urban population had died or abandoned the cities. For most of the last three decades before World War I, Russia had been the world's largest food exporter, but in 1921 Russian agriculture turned out about half as much grain and other foodstuffs as in 1913. Draft, meat, and dairy animals were down by at least 50 percent as well. In 1921 three to four million more Russians died of starvation. Millions more emigrated in the Civil War and immediate post-war years before the government closed the borders tightly.

To survive in these years and to administer the country the Bolsheviks had to appoint untrained and inexperienced followers to every sort of position and entrust them with largely unchecked powers. Indeed, for many years, having a proletarian, that is, poor and uneducated, background was an advantage in getting work, preferment, and advancement under the Bolsheviks. These people defended the Revolution, whose ideals appealed to many in theory, with such viciousness that the ideals seemed to have been lost almost from the beginning. To the observer the pure-at-heart seemed to have been quickly displaced by bandits and fools. The oldest extant Soviet jokes pertain to the brutality and stupidity of the people who served the Party, in its leadership and in its ranks, during these years.

1. What does RSFSR stand for? [This is actually the Russian Soviet Federated Socialist Republic.]

Rejected Soldiers from the Front, Selected Robbers

2. Two policemen stop a passerby and demand his papers. The passerby can find only the report of his urine analysis.

The first policeman reads aloud: "Analysis: albumen, negative; sugar, negative."

Second policeman: "No sugar. Means he's not a speculator. Proceed, citizen."

Had the policemen decided the citizen was a speculator, he was likely to have been shot. People's lives now depended on civil servants of spectacularly low quality. As the Civil War wound down and it became clear the Reds would win, careerists and opportunists of all stripes flooded into the Party, and the problem became worse. Not everyone was equally impressed by Party membership.

3. A man arrives home and excitedly informs his wife, "Guess what, I got into the Party!"

"You're always getting into something. Did you get it on your shoes?"

One of the most famous figures in Soviet anecdotes, Rabinovich, makes his first appearance in one of these stories from the early 1920s. Rabinovich is, of course, Jewish.

An oppressed minority in tsarist Russia with a higher than average level of education and culture, many Jews had become revolutionaries. While a majority of Jewish revolutionaries were not Bolsheviks, many of the Bolsheviks, including some of the leadership, were Jews. Leon Trotsky, for example, had been born Bronshtein; Iakov Sverdlov's real family name was probably Solomonov. Anti-Semitism was supposed to disappear along with every other injustice in the brave, new, socialist world. It didn't, of course, and the majority of the Russian population looked upon these Jews—even though as Bolsheviks they were atheists—with suspicion and resentment. The same would be true of their descendants.

A large percentage of Soviet anecdotes are actually Jewish jokes, invented by the Jewish, urban intelligentsia, who strike back in one of the few ways they can at anti-Semitism and the many forms of discrimination it takes. Most Rabinovich and other anecdotes about Jews were coined, told, and retold by Jews. In much the same tradition that produced vaudeville in the United States, they poked fun at themselves while they skewered other aspects of Soviet life. Rabinovich will appear again and again, sometimes to personify the supposedly superior intelligence, education, and cunning of the Jews, sometimes their outsider status in anti-Semitic Russia.

4. After the October Revolution God sent three observers to Russia: St. Luke, St. George, and Moses. The three send Him telegrams.

"I've fallen into the hands of the Cheka. St. Luke."

"I've fallen into the hands of the Cheka. St. George."

"All's well. Doing fine. People's Commissar Petrov."

5. Rabinovich's application to the Party was rejected. Someone had reported that he had played his violin at Petliura's wedding. [Petliura was a famous figure in the Civil War, a Ukrainian nationalist who fought against the Bolsheviks.]

His friends advised him to deny the report.

"I can't," he explained. "All the Party committee members were guests at the wedding."

The Bolshevik leadership improvised madly through these first years. No one had ever "built" socialism before, and everything was horribly complicated by the moribund economy and the deadly Civil War. For example, on the first night of the Revolution Lenin had decreed that all the land belonged to the peasants and the factories to the workers, but within months the Bolsheviks learned that voluntarism and a free market would not supply them with what they needed to stay in power and win the war. So they devised an emergency policy they called War Communism. Among other things this justified the expropriation of grain from the peasants and the dragooning and militarization of labor in the cities. Not surprisingly, this aroused a great deal of hostility. After the Bolsheviks changed the name of their party during the Civil War to the Russian Communist Party (of Bolsheviks), peasants were heard to say that they were for the Bolsheviks who gave them the land but against the Communists who took their grain.

6. A new lodger moves into his room. The walls are bare except for one nail. There is no furniture, but there are the ubiquitous framed pictures of Lenin and Trotsky. "I don't know," he grumbles, "which of them to hang and which to put against the wall."

7. Lenin is working late at night. Around 3 a.m. he decides to take a nap and tells the young Red Army guard outside his door to wake him at 7 a.m. The soldier is proud to have the responsibility, but as the time draws near he begins to think, how will he wake

the great man? Should he say, "It's time to get up, Mr. Lenin?" No, too formal. How about Comrade Lenin? Too familiar? He thinks through all the alternatives, none of which seems appropriate. As 7 approaches, he grows increasingly apprehensive. Finally he looks at his watch; it is 7. He walks into the room, still can't think of what to say, and begins to sing the Internationale.

The famous hymn of the French Revolution, the Internationale, was adopted by Russian and other revolutionaries around the world as a universal marching song of revolution. As you may recall, it begins, "Arise, ye wretched of the Earth."

8. A shopper asks a store clerk if she has pictures of the Politburo members. "Of course," she says and shows him one.

"Not that kind."

She shows him another and then another, but each time it's not what he has in mind. Finally she offers him a picture of Lenin in his tomb.

"Yes, that's it. Do you have one with the whole Politburo?"

After the Civil War the Bolshevik leadership engaged in another fierce debate about the direction of the Revolution, particularly as it related to the devastated economy. On the one hand the Revolution had been carried out in the name of the workers and peasants. On the other, not enough of them wanted to work for love or to sell grain at the absurdly low price the Soviet government offered. Could they revive the economy while they built socialism? Trotsky and others thought they could steam ahead with the authoritarian policies of War Communism. Lenin prevailed with his call for a temporary retreat into limited capitalism, and the New Economic Policy (NEP) was established. Still checks remained in place. For while private enterprise was permitted to operate in all but the largest businesses, trade unions and a Soviet bureaucracy called the Workers' and Peasants' Inspectorate (Rabkrin) watched to make sure the capitalists didn't exploit the workers. The trade unions had certain traditions developed in their independent existence before the Revolution and inherited from the trade union movement in Europe, but the new proletarian bureaucrats of Rabkrin quickly gained a reputation for incompetence. Both contributed to the problems of featherbedding and bureaucratization that would grow much worse in later years.

9. The Rabkrin inspector asks a factory worker, "What do you do here?"

"Nothing."

"And what do you do here?" he asks another.

"Nothing."

The inspector writes in his report: "The second worker may be released for unnecessary duplication."

10. After a Rabkrin inspection, one worker who had consistently come late to work was fired for carelessness. Another who had come consistently early was fired for sycophancy. A third who always arrived on time was fired for his bureaucratic approach to work.

A later version of this joke will reflect the fear and xenophobia of the Stalin years. See #88

11. A Jew explains to an acquaintance, "My son Moisei and I have set ourselves up pretty well. I've got a job in the Ivan the Great bell tower in the Kremlin, where I watch for the dawn of world revolution. Moisei's working as a Negro in the Comintern."

“That must be pretty boring work watching and waiting for the dawn of world revolution.”

“Yes, but it’s steady work and it could last forever.”

On the Comintern, see below, following #19.

Some other uneducated, uncultured proles wound up in positions of authority even less suitable than Rabkrin. They were made fun of in anecdotes like this:

12. The orchestra director, newly appointed due to his proletarian origins, addresses the drummer: “You’re getting a full day’s pay, but you’re not doing much. I want to hear you hit those drums more!”

13. The wives of Soviet officials are boasting about their husbands.

“Mine is assister to the main director over the deputies.”

“And mine goes to the abroad every year. He works as a Chinaman in the Comintern.”

These wives have descendants in the generals’ wives of the post-World War II period. See #126–#130.

Despite its contradictions and absurdities, NEP worked; that is to say, capitalism worked. The 1913 levels of agricultural and industrial output were reached again by 1926. During the shortages of the earlier 1920s the following story circulated.

14. A Party worker is trying to explain to an old woman what communism will be like. “There will be plenty of everything,” he said, “food, clothing, all kinds of merchandise. You could travel abroad.”

“Oh,” she said, “like under the tsar!”

During NEP, when more goods were available again, the first Soviet vodka was produced, popularly called *rykovka* after Aleksei Rykov, the Chairman of the Supreme Economic Council. Tsarist vodka had been 80 proof (40 percent alcohol); *rykovka* was 84 proof. The wags quipped:

15. “Did we really need a revolution just for two percent?”

Although the Bolsheviks could not agree on either what it was they hoped to accomplish or how they might accomplish it, one thing they did agree upon from the beginning was that communism could not be built without modern industrial power. In some ways they had a great deal in common with Teddy Roosevelt and Herbert Hoover. One of their favorite watchwords was “progressive,” and one of the most important projects of the NEP years was their effort to provide electrical power to the whole country. This was summed up in the slogan “Communism=Soviet power+electrification,” which until recently could still be seen in steel and neon lettering on electrical generating plants. Wags who knew a little algebra quickly made fun of the absurdity of this formula with:

16. Soviet power=communism–electrification, or

Electrification=communism–Soviet power.

Even though life was getting better and the Utopia of communism was promised in the not too distant future, some people did not cooperate. They had to be dealt with. As noted above, a variety of harsh measures was available. The following story circulated in the 1920s about a convict sent to hard labor in exile at the Solovki Islands in the White Sea.

17. “You are sentenced to ten years on the Solovki Islands.”

“Where are these islands?”

“In the far north.”

“Who’s in charge up there?”

“The Soviets!”

“Couldn’t you send me somewhere a little further away?”

One of the groups that suffered particular persecution was the Russian Orthodox Church to which almost all ethnic Russians among other subjects belonged before the Revolution. Thousands of priests were killed or sent to labor camps and projects. Churches were closed. Some were razed, others were turned into warehouses, still others into museums of atheism, which were part of a concerted effort to turn citizens away from religion altogether. The enormous wealth of the Church, much of it in gold plate and the gold and silver frames of icons, was confiscated for use by the new state. Gold and silver was taken from the “bourgeoisie” as well.

18. When peasants first saw the new silver coins with which the government started to pay for agricultural produce in 1922, they crossed themselves.

“Why are you crossing yourselves?” asked the village priest. “The money is Soviet.”

“Yes, father, but the silver is the Church’s.”

19. Two Jews looking over Lenin’s mausoleum read the plaque on the wall: “Lenin freed us from the chains of capitalism.” One of them pats his belly and says to the other, “That’s the truth, Moisei. You remember the big, gold chain I used to have?”

As the only would-be socialist nation on Earth, the Soviet Union became a pariah nation. Not only did it repudiate all of the debts incurred by the tsarist government, but it proclaimed its chief international mission to be the spread of communist revolution. To that end Moscow established the Third Communist International, known as the Comintern. International trade plummeted. International relations were few. The United States, for example, did not recognize the Soviet government until 1933. Isolation harmed efforts at economic recovery, but the Bolsheviks put the best face on it by emphasizing ideological purity. Apparently they didn’t persuade everybody.

20. “Which is the purest nation on Earth?”

“The Soviet Union. It doesn’t have relations with anybody.”

Policy and the existence of the Comintern notwithstanding, it was pretty clear to everyone by the mid-1920s that the workers of the world were not about to unite. The European and American parties that accepted Moscow’s leadership in the Comintern had very little influence in their own countries. Still, appearances had to be kept up.

21. When no African delegates showed up at a Comintern Congress, Moscow wired Odessa [a very cosmopolitan port city with a large Jewish population]: “Send us a Negro immediately.”

Odessa wired right back: “Rabinovich has been dyed. He’s drying.”

An era came to an end when Lenin died in 1924. Soon Stalin would emerge from the struggle for power, a few years later NEP would be ended, and a more dictatorial, bloody regime would take its place. But Lenin did not disappear. Someone, possibly Stalin who had had a seminary education, decided he should be embalmed and kept on display in a mausoleum, the physical reminder of a cult to be created around him. A few more jokes about Lenin appeared at this point, usually in response to official pronouncements and slogans about him. Some made fun of a speech impediment Lenin had. Others held Lenin up as a lost ideal, even as they made fun of him, to contrast the current mess to his imagined Revolution. New jokes continued to be invented as his cult waxed and waned, reaching their apogee during the jubilee celebration of his birth in 1970.

22. After Lenin's embalming the doctor emerges from the mausoleum: "He will live forever!"

23. Rabinovich reads a poster: "LENIN DIED, BUT HIS CAUSE LIVES FOREVER!"

"Better he had lived and his cause had died!"

24. Rabinovich bears a striking resemblance to Lenin. He is summoned to the GPU [Main Political Administration, the successor to the Cheka], where they offer to change his appearance for him, or who knows what might happen....

"Nu, let's say I shave off my beagd," responds Rabinovich, "but what do you pgopose we do about my little ideas?"

3

Stalin

Between 1924 and 1928 a fierce struggle took place to determine who would lead the Party and set its policies. As alliances among the contenders shifted, so too did official policies. The Party continued to maintain a facade of unity, but its “general line,” as official policy came to be called, in fact zigged and zagged. What private entrepreneurs could and couldn’t do under NEP, how they were taxed, how peasants could own or hold land and deal on the market and how they were taxed, how ideologists viewed the failure of international revolution, all changed in only a few years. And then in 1928 to 1929 when Iosif Vissarionovich Stalin (born Dzhugashvili) seized power, he changed much of it again. This did not escape the attention of contemporaries.

25. “Can a snake break its own spine?”

“It would if it tried to crawl along the general line of the Party.”

During these years the Party carried out a purge of its membership. This was not the sort of purge Stalin would later carry out in which individuals were executed or sent to the camps but an attempt to purify the Party by expelling Vanya-come-latelies, hangers-on, and opportunists; that is, people who threw in their lot with the communists after the Revolution and Civil War, not because they believed in their goals, but because the communists had won. The best defenses against being purged were proof of membership before October 1917 and/or a proletarian pedigree. Evidence of ideological purity was also demanded. At a time when official ideology itself fluctuated widely this essentially meant blind obedience.

26. “Did you waver in carrying out the general line of the Party?” asked an official during the purge.

“I wavered along with the line.”

After Stalin took command there would no longer be any doubt about what the general line was. Although it might continue to change, it was whatever Stalin wanted it to be. And blind obedience was increasingly rigorously demanded.

Stalin is a giant figure in Soviet history. He was in complete control of the country for twenty-five years. During that quarter century he caused what historians now call the Stalin Revolution to be carried out. The major features of the Stalin Revolution were the rapid, or “crash,” industrialization of the country, the collectivization of agriculture, and the central planning of the entire economy. Important secondary effects included very rapid urbanization and the cancerous growth of the political police which carried out purges of millions of citizens from industry, the Party, the government, the military, the

arts, and many other walks of life. Some see this as an organic stage of the Revolution, the logical next step in the attempt to build socialism after the temporary retreat of the NEP. Others see it as a betrayal of the Revolution and a ravaging of the country by typically Russian means *à la* Ivan the Terrible or Peter the Great. Was Stalin the outgrowth of Lenin's revolution or an aberration in it? Was the difference between them one of substance or only of degree? In the following anecdote Lenin with his customary speech characteristic converses with Stalin.

27. "Iosif Vissagionovich, fog the cause of the gevolution would you shoot ten people?"

"Most certainly, Vladimir Ilich!"

"Then tell me, old friend, would you shoot ten thousand?"

"Of course, Vladimir Ilich!"

"Well, well, old pal, and if fog the cause of the gevolution it was necessagy to shoot ten million people, would you do that?" Lenin squinted craftily at Iosif Vissarionovich.

"Of course, Vladimir Ilich!"

"No, no, old pal, there we will have to set you straight."

28. In the other world, not far from the pearly gates, the Devil came across a very gloomy Stalin.

"Why so sad, friend?"

"They let Marx into Heaven; they let Lenin in; but they won't let me in. Help me, brother."

"OK, climb into this sack."

Stalin climbed in. The Devil slung the sack over his shoulder and hauled it to the gates of Heaven. "Is Lenin here?" he asked.

"He's here," replied St. Peter.

"Here, take his trash," said the Devil as he slid the bag through the gates.

29. When Stalin arrived in Hell, the Devil threw him at the feet of Karl Marx: "Here, collect the dividend on your *Capital*."

In ideological struggles before 1928 Stalin had remained rather quietly in the background. But once he had eliminated his major rivals for power, he adopted the view already held by a faction of the Party which believed that the USSR could not long survive unless it quickly became industrially and militarily powerful. Fearing the hostility of neighbors who held their country in "capitalist encirclement," they were determined to overcome the traditional backwardness of Russia by controlling and directing all the resources available to the country. To finance the grand industrialization projects called for in the First Five-Year Plan and to feed the army of laborers needed to carry them out, Stalin ordered the forced collectivization of the peasantry. Some three-quarters of the population, essentially all the country's peasants, were forced to give up their private property, including land and draft animals, and to turn these, and themselves, over to the management of collective and state farms.

The cost was enormous. Not only do the most recent economic histories of the period show that crash industrialization was hugely wasteful in economic terms—that is, that the Soviet Union could have reached a higher level of economic development at less cost by continuing the policies of the last tsars or of NEP—but it was terribly costly in human terms. Millions of peasants died during forced collectivization and the famine that ensued. The number of citizens who disappeared into the archipelago of labor camps is

still a subject of fervent debate. They undoubtedly numbered many millions more, several million of whom were worked and starved to death. Enormous additional losses in World War II can also be blamed on Stalin's acts. He is remembered as one of the great monsters of the twentieth century.

In the debates about how to finance industrialization, which led up to collectivization, one faction in the Party, the rightists, advocated continuing and possibly even expanding NEP policies toward the peasants. They believed a freer market in grain would provide incentive for the peasants to produce surpluses, as they had in the last decades before the Revolution. That would, of course, at least temporarily raise grain prices in the cities. Their leftist opponents advocated raising the price of industrial goods and squeezing the peasantry with higher taxes, principally taxes in kind which were enforced by seizing grain. The "general line" steered a middle course until Stalin imposed collectivization.

30. A thought expressed in words is called a deviation. There is a left deviation and a right deviation. When the left deviation is in effect there is bread in the city but no bread in the village. During the right deviation there is bread in the village but not in the city. When the general line is strictly adhered to there is no bread in either the city or the village. Under decaying capitalism there is bread in the city and the village.

You may not even recognize this as a joke at first. It does not take the form of a standard joke, either question-answer or set-up-punch line. But it was amusing in 1929 because of the way it poked fun at the didacticism and speciousness of the official language with which the Soviet people were continually bombarded in newspapers and agitational speeches. If you can picture it delivered as a speech by a pompous party man to long-suffering citizens, it will fit into the scenes-we'd-like-to-see genre.

Collectivization proceeded in three waves between late 1928 and 1932. At each step peasants resisted so strenuously that Stalin halted several times and even permitted partial retreat before pressing on again. When he relaxed the pressure momentarily in 1930, over half the people who had joined collective farms (*kolkhoz* singular, *kolkhozi* plural) left them. In many cases rather than give up their surplus and seed grain or their animals, peasants destroyed them. Soviet officials and the urban zealots and thugs they recruited to carry out collectivization saw this as class warfare waged by the richer peasants, the kulaks, whom they expected to be hostile to progress and socialism in any case. So they destroyed them. Several hundred thousand were shot on the spot. Millions more were loaded on to open freight and cattle cars and shipped off, usually in midwinter, dying along the way and in the wilderness of the Urals and Siberia where they were dumped. *Pravda* and *Izvestiia* reported that the collective farmers (*kolkhoznik*, *kolkhozniki*) embraced their new life enthusiastically.

31. A Western journalist asks a Soviet diplomat, "Is it true that the peasants are joining *kolkhozi* voluntarily?"

"Yes, of course, only voluntarily. There is a special order to that effect."

"But in reality?"

"Really, voluntarily. It all depends on one's approach to the matter.

A dog will voluntarily lap up mustard if you take the right approach."

"That can't be."

"Just watch." The diplomat seizes his dog and smears mustard under his tail. The dog writhes and howls and licks the mustard off. "See, he likes it so much he sings."

The new farms were neither popular nor successful. Many of the best farmers had been killed or deported, and grain and seed stocks had been severely depleted by expropriation and destruction. Much less land could be planted in 1931 and 1932. Animal stocks, restored only recently to 1913 levels after the losses in World War I and the Civil War, were halved again. There was widespread starvation in 1932 to 1933 and rationing for several years thereafter. Official media nonetheless continued to trumpet Soviet achievements.

32. The deceased Lenin appeared in a dream to Stalin and asked, "How are things?"

"All right, things are difficult, but the people follow me."

"You'd better give them a little more bread or they'll all wind up following me."

33. Ingredients of our bread: 20 percent flour, 80 percent Soviet achievements.

34. An American and a Russian were arguing who was the greater leader, Hoover or Stalin.

"Hoover is greater," said the American. "He has taught Americans not to drink."

"Stalin has taught Russians not to eat."

Herbert Hoover, by the way, was gratefully remembered in that period for having led the American Relief Administration's efforts to feed starving Russians during the 1921 famine. The ARA probably saved a million lives. No relief efforts, especially foreign relief efforts, were permitted during the 1932 to 1933 famine.

35. The teacher is reading her students a poem by Ivan Krylov: "...and God sent the crow a bit of cheese."

One student asks, "Is there really a God?"

Another asks, "Is there really cheese?"

36. There is so much more food in the papers than in the stores, institutions of higher education are considering introducing "correspondence dining" for their students.

37. Peasants went to see Kalinin [Mikhail, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet in the 1930s and early 1940s] to complain that nothing was available in the stores.

"They say you can buy everything abroad," said one of them.

"Oh, that's the old story: everything's better where we aren't."

"That's the way we think about it too, Mikhail Ivanovich. Everything is better where you aren't."

38. During another visit of peasant petitioners the *kolkhozniki* complain, "Comrade Kalinin, it's impossible to live. We're walking around in tatters, barefoot."

Kalinin tries to calm them: "Be patient, comrades, it's not so bad. There are countries where people go about completely naked."

"I guess, Mikhail Ivanovich, that Soviet power is considerably older there?"

39. Prisoners are exchanging stories about what they are in for.

"What did they arrest you for?"

"Masturbation."

"I didn't know that was a crime."

"It is now. They said I was wasting the seed supply."

40. A *kolkhoznik* asks a guard at the Kremlin Wall, "Tell me, young fella, how come they've got such a tall wall?"

"So the bandits can't get over it."

"From in there to out here or from out here into there?"

41. An Armenian riddle: "What nationality were Adam and Eve?"

“Soviet, of course. Who else would walk around barefoot and naked, have one apple to share between them, and think they were in Paradise?”

Armenian riddles go back at least to 1930. One commentator thinks they may pre-date the 1917 revolutions, but I have never seen any in pre-1930 sources. The questions are sometimes quite straight, sometimes provocative, but the responses are always at least equivocal. Most are politically quite incorrect. I have never heard a definitive explanation of why such riddles—and the more famous Armenian Radio jokes they evolved into by the 1950s—are attributed to Armenians, but there are good explanations. One traces the origin back to an alleged but undocumented slip of the tongue by a broadcaster on the real Armenian Radio. He was supposed to have said:

42. “Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man. Socialism is just the opposite.”

But that is almost certainly an apocryphal and anachronistic invention. Another says it is because Armenians have always had an especially creative relationship with the bosses in Moscow and the demands of the planned economy. Behind the unavoidable façade of obedience they maintained older traditions of commerce, an unusual degree of autonomy, and extraordinary prosperity in their homeland. From there, using a wit for which they are also famous, they thumbed their noses at the fools who followed the rules. This is certainly true, and the jokes do honor to their craft. In this collection Armenian riddles will be marked with the abbreviation AR. When they become Armenian Radio jokes in the late 1950s—I have not been able to date the transition more precisely—the form remains the same except that the questions can be directed at Erevan from anywhere. I will then mark the responses with AR. Georgians, who also prospered while flaunting Soviet laws, did so in very different ways. On Georgian stereotypes in anecdotes, see #212–#224 and #332.

Even after the resistance and retribution involved in collectivization had ended, most collective farms functioned badly. Not only were the peasants reluctant participants, but the managers were for the most part inept. They were usually chosen for their political reliability rather than for their agricultural knowledge or experience. Revolutionary enthusiasm, if it had ever been present, usually soon faded. Peasants learned to avoid unrewarded work. Some buttered their bread with sycophancy. Managers, left with largely unchecked powers, engaged in theft and fraud.

43. At a meeting of the *kolkhoz* the Chairman speaks: “The members of the *kolkhoz* management and I will receive 250 days of overtime pay. Objections? Anyone against Soviet power, raise your hands.”

Every *kolkhoz*, like every factory and military unit, soon had a political officer whose job it was to indoctrinate the peasants; that is, to explain Marxism-Leninism and the Revolution and to put the proper spin on current events. Peasants didn’t like these meetings any better than workers or soldiers did. Having less education than the city folks, they may have gotten less out of them. On the other hand, they possessed a strong store of common sense and may have been hard to fool about some things.

44. The *kolkhozniki* were herded to a lecture. One managed to hide and later asked a friend what it had been about.

“About two Jews, Hegel and Feuerbach.”

“Yeah, and...?”

“Well, they found seed on one and material on the other. I think they might try them.”

What you know that those peasants didn't know is that Georg Hegel and Ludwig Feuerbach were German philosophers of the early and mid-nineteenth centuries, whose writings strongly influenced Karl Marx. Hegel's idea of a dialectical change planted the seeds for further speculation about the forces of change in history. Feuerbach rejected Hegel's idealism and sought the explanation for change in material causes.

45. At a *kolkhoz* meeting to mark the anniversary of the October Revolution prizes are being distributed to outstanding peasant workers.

"For excellent work in the fields Comrade Ivanova is awarded a sack of grain."
[Applause.]

"For excellent work on the farm Comrade Petrova is awarded a sack of potatoes."
[Applause.]

"For excellent political work Comrade Sidorova is awarded *The Collected Works of Lenin!*" [Laughter, applause, shouts: "Serves you right, bitch."]

46. The chairman of the *kolkhoz* is speaking at a meeting about how much Soviet power has given to simple people: "Look at Marya Petrovna. She was a simple peasant. Now she runs the village club. Look at Pelageia Fedorovna. She was a simple peasant too, and now she is in charge of the library. Look at Stepan Mitrofanich. He was the biggest of fools, and now he is secretary of the Party organization."

47. The *kolkhoz* Chairman addresses another meeting: "We have had a great piece of luck. The regional bosses have sent us some plywood. What shall we do with it, repair the holes in the pigsty or patch the roof of the cowbarn?"

No one says anything for a long while, then an old man stands up: "Let's build an airplane outa that there plywood and fly the fuck outa this here *kolkhoz*."

Shortages, particularly of foodstuffs, continued for most of the 1930s. Rationing had barely ended in the late 1930s before World War II began, creating new shortages and necessitating rationing again. Except for the late 1950s and some of the 1960s, a time of relative plenty, lines and shortages became a normal part of Soviet life. Not that anyone liked it.

48. AR: "What is a line?"

"A line is the communist approach to sales."

49. A suggestion was made at the People's Commissariat of Domestic Trade to increase the efficiency of food stores. Instead of having saleswomen standing idly behind every counter of the empty stores, a single woman could be posted at the front door to say to each customer, "We've nothing to sell. We've nothing to sell."

People remembered, of course, not long before when things were much better, under the tsars or during NEP.

50. AR: "What came before, the chicken or the egg?"

"Before you could get chickens and eggs?"

Part of the reason why stores were empty was that managers and salespeople quickly learned that some people would pay much more for goods in short supply than the artificially low, state-subsidized prices charged in their stores. So they started selling out of the back door. If they were going to be able to afford to pay back-door prices for goods at other stores, they almost had to supplement their meager salaries in that way. It was the new ruling classes, party leaders especially, who had the money and connections to take greatest advantage of this new informal system. Eventually "special" stores, closed to *hoi polloi*, would be stocked for the elites, but the practice of selling off the truck, under the

table, and out of the back door became common and remained normal until free markets were permitted again in the 1990s.

51. AR: "What did the October Revolution do for the masses?"

"Before the Revolution the ruling classes used the front door of stores. The people came in through the back. Now the people use the front door and the bosses use the back."

Food was not the only deficit item. As the Five-Year Plans invested almost exclusively in heavy industry, many consumer goods were in short supply.

52. A worker woke up so late he didn't even have time to put on his pants. He ran off to work in his undershorts, holding his pants in his hands. But still he was late. People kept stopping him to ask where he'd bought the pants.

53. A man is walking along the road wearing only one boot.

"Did you lose a boot?" a passerby asks sympathetically.

"No, I found one," the man answers happily.

In a famous speech in 1935, Stalin declared, "Life has gotten better, comrades. Life has become more joyful." Not everyone was persuaded.

54. "Did you hear, yesterday Stalin said, 'Life has gotten better. Life has become more joyful'?"

"Yeah, I heard. He didn't say for whom."

55. High Party officials from the center [Moscow] were inspecting a psychiatric hospital somewhere in the provinces. As they walked into a ward, all the patients rose and chanted: "Life has gotten better. Life has become more joyful."

The officials were pleased that the slogan had reached so far but noticed that one little fellow standing in a corner hadn't joined in. "Why," they asked him, "didn't you say 'Life has gotten better'?"

"Excuse me, I'm not crazy, I just work here."

In 1936, when Stalin declared that the country had completed the building of socialism and was embarking on the next stage, namely the construction of communism, people asked one another:

56. "Have we already reached socialism, or will things get even worse?"

57. "It will get worse!" says the pessimist.

"It can't get worse than this," says the optimist.

Not everyone was in a position to play in the gray market. People who had nothing to sell often had a difficult time making ends meet.

58. "A healthy man like you begging! For shame, get a job!"

"This is what I do after work."

Meanwhile the Five-Year Plans were transforming Soviet industry. To say that the successes of the plans were bought at unnecessarily high cost or that more could have been accomplished by other means is not to say that there were no successes. The tightly centralized police state could ignore the "demand" for consumer goods and direct all available resources—natural, financial and human—to the development of heavy and military industries. Huge hydroelectric dams went up, the world's largest at the time. Whole new cities were built around gigantic projects, such as Magnitogorsk [Magnetic Mountain City], the Steel City of the Urals. Enormous truck and tractor plants went on line. Throughout the 1930s, Soviet newspapers, newsreels, radios, and classrooms were

filled with stories of the latest triumphs. But not all the stories were true, and the stories that were true didn't tell the whole truth.

The First Five-Year Plan began with unrealistically high goals. Before a year was out the goals were raised. Then they were raised again. The government called this picking up the pace, more literally "speeding tempo." Workers were exhorted, driven by piecework wages, encouraged to challenge one another in "socialist" competitions, rewarded with increasingly unequal pay, and finally terrorized to meet their quotas. Managers were subject to similar pressures and learned to lie about what their workers had accomplished. On paper at least, the goals were almost always met. The bureaucracy created to manage the plans grew at least as rapidly as industrial output. Managers and bureaucrats learned quickly how to turn the system to their advantage. As usual the people knew more than they were being told. They lived in substandard housing and experienced rationing. They worked in the dirty and dangerous conditions demanded by the timetables. From their perspective it was easy to see that haste made waste and that the Plan created its own difficulties. Even children could tell that what they heard and what they saw weren't the same.

59. AR: "Is it true that before the creation of the world there was chaos?"

"No, as we have seen during the creation of our own world, the world of socialism, first there was the plan and then came chaos."

60. "Why can't the communists accept the Bible?"

"According to the Bible, in the beginning was chaos, and then by God's plan order was established. The experience of communism teaches that first there came the plan, and then came chaos."

61. AR: "How is the Soviet system better than all others?"

"It is constantly able to overcome difficulties which do not even exist in other systems."

Or the variant response: "There are no difficulties which the communists cannot create for themselves."

62. "Vanya, hey Vanya, what's a counter-plan?"

"Counter-plan? Hm, how can I explain that to you, Masha? Well, let's say, you say to me, 'Let's make love twice tonight!' Then I say to you, 'No, Masha, let's make it three!' That's the counter-plan, even though we both know that as tired as we are we won't even get started once."

63. Kalinin receives a delegation of *kolkhozniki* and gives them the usual pep talk. When he is done, one of them says, "I understood everything you said, except I still don't understand this word 'tempo.'"

Kalinin takes him over to the window and points out a passing trolleybus. "You see that trolleybus going by? In a quarter of an hour another one will go by. Under communism there will be one trolleybus right after another. That's what tempo's all about."

The *kolkhoznik* returns to the *kolkhoz* and is relating the story of his visit when he comes to the concept of tempo. At that moment a funeral procession passes by. "You see," he says, "they're carrying a dead man to the cemetery. A month from now, a year from now maybe, who knows, they'll carry another. But under communism they'll be carrying one after another. That's tempo!"

64. Somewhere in the provinces the plan called for a bridge to be built over a stream. But as all bridges with any strategic importance were supposed to be guarded, the local officials assigned a guard to it. To pay him they assigned a cashier to the project. To make sure the cashier did his work properly they assigned a bookkeeper. With such a big staff they needed to assign a general manager. When orders came to cut back on staff, they let the guard go.

This anecdote reminds me of the wonderful story, "How Robinson was created," which Ilf and Petrov wrote in 1932. In the story a children's magazine editor, who wants a good adventure tale for his young readers, keeps picking at the story of a shipwrecked Soviet sailor to make it politically correct. By the time he is done, three party members, a committee chairman, a meeting table, and a fireproof safe have all been washed ashore.

65. It was decided to open a public house in Odessa for foreign sailors. Auntie Pesia, a well-known madam from pre-revolutionary days, was invited to City Hall and asked to run it. She was tempted by various emoluments.

"No. I know how you do things. Ten beds for the City Committee, twenty for the District Committee, the GPU whenever they feel like it. In spring you'll take my girls out to dig at the kolkhoz, and in the fall again for the harvest. And old Auntie Pesia has to get on her back and fulfill the plan by herself?!"

66. A delegation of Soviet workers visits a large automobile plant in the USA.

"Who does the factory belong to?" the workers ask.

"Ford," their guide explains.

"And whose automobiles are these in the parking lot?"

"The workers'," says the guide.

American workers make a return visit to a large Soviet plant.

"Who does this factory belong to?" they ask.

"The workers," the guide from the Party committee tells them.

"And whose car is this in the parking lot?"

"The manager's."

67. A first grade teacher tells her children: "In the Soviet Union everyone eats well and dresses well. In the Soviet Union everyone has a beautiful apartment. All the children in the Soviet Union have pretty toys..."

One little boy breaks into tears. "I want... I want... I want to go to the Soviet Union."

Because of the haste and because the plan measured output only by numbers of products or their weight, the quality of goods was often low.

68. AR: "What is it that doesn't knock, growl or scratch the floor?"

"A machine made in the USSR for knocking, growling, and scratching the floor."

69. "Did you hear, the manager of our match factory was given a medal?"

"How come?"

"Saboteurs tried to blow up the gas tanks at the airport using our matches...."

70. A foreigner is given the grand tour of a Soviet factory. He learns that the factory administration is wise and progressive, that the factory works around the clock in three shifts, that socialist competition and shock work brigades yield high productivity, and so forth and so forth.

The foreigner asks, "What does the factory produce?"

"Stamped metal signs," he is told. And, indeed, on the production line he sees a mountain of signs. They all say: "Elevator out of order."

71. An Odessa resident dies. He is given a choice: capitalist Hell or socialist Hell. He chooses socialist. The demons are impressed by his patriotism until he explains: "Under capitalism work goes on without interruption. But in socialist Hell they'll be out of matches or run short of firewood, or the furnaces will be down for repair, the demons will have party meetings...."

Remember the cosmopolitan, often Jewish heritage of Odessites. They are frequently associated with sin and crime—most whorehouse jokes take place in Odessa—but they adopt a more detached, intellectual view of things.

Peasants left the countryside in huge numbers in the 1930s. Some fled the horrors of collectivization, others the monotony of village life. Many were attracted to the opportunities for adventure and higher pay at construction projects and in the cities. The cities were not prepared to respond to this influx, however. There was no private construction market to build houses and apartments, and the planners had little money to divert into housing. Older apartments were divided and subdivided. Most of the new dwellings that did go up were hastily and shoddily built communal apartments, which suited the frugality of the Plans and the ideology of collectivism. Families each had one small all-purpose room to themselves in a *kommunalka* but shared a bathroom and kitchen with several other families. Like a lot of other Soviet experiments, the *kommunalki* worked much better in theory than in practice. Individuals found little privacy, a lot of noise and a great deal of filth left by their least civilized, least considerate neighbors. Ill feelings and feuds sometimes simmered for decades.

72. In a communal apartment. A husband returns home. His wife gives him a bowl of soup.

"This soup tastes like kerosene."

"Yeah, I think Manka splashed some kerosene in it."

"So put the rest of this soup in her kerosene."

73. Someone had smeared excrement on the bathroom wall of the communal apartment. The residents agreed it must be the old professor. He always washed his hands after going to the bathroom.

Older city residents, the former upper classes, and members of the intelligentsia (a word English gets from Russian, by the way), were horrified by the low cultural level of their new neighbors. Russian *intelligenty* not only had higher education, but most importantly they had culture. No longer privileged, but still certain of their superiority, they felt sorely out of place in the USSR. This may have been especially true in St. Petersburg. Once called the Venice of the North, Piter was a beautiful old European city and Russia's former capital. Sophisticated St. Petersburgers had long looked down on the rest of Russia and hadn't stopped in 1914 when the tsar renamed their city Petrograd (St. Petersburg was too Germanic for nationalistic taste during World War I), in 1918 when the Bolsheviks moved the capital back to Moscow, or in 1924 when they renamed the city Leningrad. This feeling never went away. The original name of St. Petersburg was restored in 1991.

74. An intellectual conversation:

"Wadda you think, is there life on Marx?"

"That's just a scientific hypotenuse."

"However, gastronomy has shown..."

"I'm not contingent with all those theories."

75. An elderly woman climbed onto an overcrowded Leningrad bus. No one offered her a seat.

“Are there really no *intelligenty* left in St. Petersburg?” she asked sadly.

An army major answers her from his seat: “We got intellegials comin’ out the ass, lady, just not so many buses.”

76. An intellectual fell under a steamroller. The driver scraped up the flattened intellectual, rolled him up and took him home to his wife, who used him as a mat at the front door. Everyone wiped their feet on him, and soon he got dirty. She washed him and hung him out to dry. But he caught a cold and died.

77. A sociological survey:

“Where were you born?”

“St. Petersburg.”

“Where did you go to school?”

“Petrograd.”

“Where do you live now?”

“Leningrad.”

“Where would you like to live?”

“St. Petersburg.”

The consummate anti-intellectual was Stalin. Although his biographers agree that Stalin was not a deep thinker, increasingly after 1928 a cult developed around his person that made him out to be the greatest genius of all time. The cult was a justification of the Party’s complete control of the nation’s fate and of Stalin’s control over the Party. Stalin now wrote books on Marxist-Leninist theory and made pronouncements which determined how economics, law, genetics, agronomy, military science, linguistics, and many other fields could be studied and practiced. History was rewritten to make him a great leader of the Revolution and the Civil War. All the accomplishments of the plans were attributed personally to Comrade Stalin. When World War II swept across Russia, he appointed himself Generalissimo, and once the German retreat seemed irreversible, he took credit for his generals’ victories. Whatever the topic, whatever the occasion, in those years speakers and writers began and ended all their discussions with references to Comrade Stalin. At public occasions every reference brought on applause, which was always described in the meeting protocols as “spontaneous,” “stormy,” and/or “prolonged.”

78. AR: “Who is the most important person in the Kremlin whose name begins with E?”

“Enukidze?”

“No.”

“Ezhov?”

“No.”

“Emilian laroslavsky?”

“No.”

“I give up. Who?”

“E... Stalin.”

79. “What did they talk about most of all at Pushkin’s centenary celebration?”
[Alexander Pushkin, Russia’s most beloved poet, died in 1837.]

“Stalin.”

80. Stalin is judging entries in a contest for a memorial to Pushkin. In the first model Pushkin is reading Byron.

"This is true historically, but it is false politically. Where is the general line?" [Stalin, recall, was born Dzhugashvili, a Georgian. He never spoke Russian with a Moscow accent.]

The second model has Pushkin reading Stalin.

"This is true politically but false historically. In Pushkin's time Comrade Stalin had not yet written books."

The third project turned out to be correct historically and politically. It had Stalin reading Pushkin.

When they unveiled the statue, it was Stalin reading Stalin.

81. Rabinovich appeared at an October demonstration with a sign: "Thank you Comrade Stalin for my happy childhood."

The party organizer runs up to him. "What are you trying to do? You're an old man! When you were a child, Stalin wasn't even born yet!"

"Yes, and for that I thank him."

By themselves the pervasive propaganda and the overblown cult would have been only laughable. But the "dictatorship of the proletariat" was propped up not only by the bureaucracy but also by the police. The Cheka had been reorganized in 1922 as the Main Political Administration, the GPU. It hadn't a great deal to do in the NEP years: wipe out a few pre-revolutionary opposition parties, persecute the Church, check up on hoarders and speculators. In 1934 it was made a self-standing commissariat, the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs (NKVD). Through all the name changes the agents continued to be called *chekisty*. Their headquarters in the old Lubianka prison in Moscow became a feared symbol of police violence.

The NKVD was a fearsome watchdog of Stalinist policies. In the late 1920s and early 1930s its vigilance was directed against saboteurs and "wreckers," that is, the real and imagined foes of crash industrialization. In the mid-1930s it began a thorough purge of the Party, including the most famous Old Bolsheviks. Historians believe this was Stalin's way of ridding himself of everyone who knew him when he was a good deal less important, intelligent, influential, and so on, than the cult made him out to have been. Stalin's most serious rival for power in the mid- to late 1920s, Leon Trotsky, was only exiled and then deported (until he was murdered in Mexico in 1940, almost certainly on Stalin's orders), but he was especially reviled during the Party purge, most of whose victims were identified as Trotskyites. Stalin now surrounded himself with inferior intellects, toadies, and sycophants. As the threat of war with Germany grew in the late 1930s, the NKVD killed and imprisoned half the officer corps of the Red Army. No one felt safe during the Great Terror. A knock on the door in the middle of the night could mean imprisonment, years in the camps, and death. Many people kept a suitcase of necessities packed against that eventuality. Who wouldn't have stood and applauded? Even stormily?

82. Menzhinsky [Viacheslav R., the head of the GPU] upbraids Kuibyshev [Valerian, Chairman of the Supreme Council of National Economy, a primary organizer of the first Five-Year Plan] for the poor results of the first years of the First Five-Year Plan.

Kuibyshev retorts: "If I had as many engineers as you do, we'd be doing alright."

83. During Stalin's speech at the XVIII Party Congress someone sneezed.

“Who sneezed?” he demanded. Silence.

“Take out every tenth person. Ten years in the camps.” He waits while they are taken out.

“Who sneezed?” Silence.

“Every tenth person. Shoot them.”

“Who sneezed?”

One brave and frightened soul stands up to confess.

“Bless you.”

84. Stalin’s pipe goes missing. Beria begins an investigation. [Lavrenty Beria was head of the NKVD from 1938 to 1953.] By the end of the day he has arrested a hundred people. The next morning the cleaning lady finds the pipe under Stalin’s couch.

Stalin telephones Beria: “Don’t work so hard, Lavrenty. The pipe turned up.”

Beria replies: “OK, but what should I do with the prisoners? Ninety-nine already confessed.”

“One didn’t confess?! Better continue the investigation.”

85. The NKVD ordered that in honor of Maksim Gorky capital punishment be renamed Maksimum.

When Gorky died in 1936, rumors immediately began to spread that the NKVD had murdered him to silence a past and potential critic of Stalinism. Another nice quip about Gorky from this time depends on a pun on his name. Maksim Gorky is actually a pseudonym for Aleksei Maksimovich Peshkov, and Gorky means “bitter” in all its associations. After his death an official announcement proclaimed that “Maksim Gorky had founded an epoch in Soviet literature.” Someone suggested that this epoch be called the “maximally bitter.”

86. Pressured by the “apparatus,” Trotsky was offered a chance to publicly proclaim: “Stalin, the great leader of the world revolution,” and to beg the Party’s forgiveness. Trotsky capitulated and at the next party congress intoned: “Stalin, the great leader of the world revolution? Excuuuse me!”

87. It is the middle of the night. There is a knock at the door. Everyone leaps out of bed. Papa goes shakily to the door.

“It’s all right,” he says, coming back. “The building’s on fire.”

88. A worker came to work five minutes early. He was arrested for espionage. Another arrived five minutes late. He was arrested for sabotage. A third came exactly on time. He was arrested for anti-Soviet agitation. He had a Swiss watch.

89. A new question appeared on personnel forms: “Have you been arrested? If not, why?”

90. A German goes home. His wife has his dinner and beer ready. He eats, goes to bed with his wife, and is happy.

An Englishman goes home. His wife gives him dinner. Then he takes a walk with his dog. He returns, goes to bed with his wife, and is happy.

A Frenchman goes home, but his wife is out. He grabs a bottle of champagne, goes out to see his lover, and is happy.

A Russian and his wife return home from work. It is already late. They were delayed by yet another meeting where they had to damn the latest “enemies of the people” and demand unanimously that they be shot. They have enough energy to swear at one another and crawl into bed where they lie back to back.

In the middle of the night there is a knock at the door.

“Who’s there?”

“It’s the NKVD. Open up!”

They come in. “Petrov? You are under arrest. Here are the orders for your arrest and the search of your apartment.

“But I... I... I’m Ivanov! The Petrovs live above us, next floor up.”

“You got it wrong again, you stupid drunk,” says the agent to the janitor as he leaves.

And despite the noise from upstairs the Ivanovs return to their bed, and they are happy.

91. Two Jews are walking past the Lubianka. One says to the other, “Khaim, did you ever notice, all their doors say ‘Entrance.’ I don’t see an exit anywhere.”

92. Two Jews are walking past the Lubianka. One says to the other, “Khaim, did you ever notice, all their doors say ‘Do not enter?’ As if, if they all said ‘Welcome,’ I’d be likely to go in?”

93. Two Jews are walking past the Lubianka. One sighs heavily.

“Ha,” says the other, “he’s telling me!”

94. Rabinovich and his wife are going home on the trolleybus. He sighs deeply.

“How many times have I asked you,” his wife reproaches him, “not to talk about politics in public?!”

95. AR: “What has down and feathers above and terror below?”

“A sparrow on the roof of the Lubianka.”

“What has terror above and down and feathers below?”

“Beria on a feather bed.”

96. One *chekist* points out a citizen to another *chekist*: “I’d like to know what he’s not talking about today.”

With millions of people, including especially the high ranking, disappearing in only a few years, careers were made and unmade with unprecedented rapidity. Many people won promotion when their bosses were taken, sometimes because they had denounced their bosses. They in turn were put in higher but more precarious positions.

97. The scene is an international magicians’ competition. Out comes a Hindu. He shows his empty hand. “Nothing in my hand. Phoo! (He blows on his palm.) An egg. Phoo! A chicken. Phoo! Nothing there.”

An American performs. “Nothing in my hand. Phoo! An iron ingot. Phoo! A wheel. Phoo! An automobile. Phoo! Nothing there.”

The Soviet magician enters. “Nothing in my hand. Phoo! A city committee secretary. Phoo! A regional committee secretary. Phoo! A Central Committee secretary. Phoo! Nothing there.”

The NKVD became so powerful, its agents feared no one else—except Stalin and their own superiors.

98. “What is the tallest building in Moscow?”

“The NKVD headquarters at Lubianka. From there you can see the Solovki Islands, the White Sea Canal, the Kolyma....”

These are extremely distant places of exile and labor camps.

99. A marshal [the highest rank in the Soviet army] is inspecting troops on the parade ground.

“Greetings, comrade infantrymen!”

“We wish you health, comrade marshal!”

“Greetings, comrade tankers!”

“We wish you health, comrade marshal!”

And so on through the artillerymen, pilots, etc.

“Greetings, comrade *chekisty*!”

“Yeah, hi yourself!” [Said in a threatening tone.]

One of the horrifying aspects of the Great Terror was the complicity of tens of thousands of police and *chekists* and the fearful silence of the rest of the population. The police were relatively well paid for their dirty work, but they lived surrounded by the same conditions as everyone else. The *chekists* extracted confessions through sleep deprivation and beatings from people they knew were innocent of the charges against them. Everyone knew they were engaged in a hellish charade, but no one could do anything to stop it.

100. Two friends are walking the winter streets of Moscow. It is 20° below zero. One says, “It’s unbearable.”

A plainclothesman immediately apprehends him. “You are under arrest.”

“What for?”

“You just announced that the regime is unbearable.”

“I said that the cold is unbearable.”

“You lie. The cold is bearable. If anything’s unbearable, it’s the regime.”

In another variant:

101. “What a miserable life!” says Rabinovich.

“Come with me,” orders the plainclothesman.

“I was just saying, what a miserable life they have in the capitalist West,” explains Rabinovich.

“Sure you were! We know where life is miserable....”

102. “How do you catch a lion?”

“Catch a cat and beat him until he confesses he is a lion,” says the *chekist*.

103. In Egypt explorers discovered the mummy of an unknown pharaoh. Specialists from England and Germany tried to identify him but failed. Specialists from the USSR were called in. They entered the tomb and a short while later emerged to announce: “It’s Ramses XVIII.”

“How could you tell?”

“Son of a bitch confessed.”

The only big-name Bolshevik with a reputation as a jokester was Karl Radek. Until the Party purges began in the mid-1930s, Radek was even said to make jokes about Stalin. He was sentenced to ten years’ imprisonment in the 1937 show trial and shot a few years later. Here’s one witticism attributed to him and two more about him. The first one is much cleverer in Russian, in which the word *sylka* means both citation and exile.

104. “It is very difficult to argue with Stalin. You give him a reference, he gives you five years.”

105. Stalin summons Radek and asks him, “What do you think you’re doing, making up all these jokes about me? I am the great leader of the world proletariat.”

“Even I don’t tell jokes like that!”

A variation on this theme will be told in the Khrushchev years. See #441.

106. Three prisoners meet in a concentration camp and introduce themselves.

"I've been here since 1929 for saying that Karl Radek was a counter-revolutionary."

"I got sent here in 1937 for saying Karl Radek wasn't a counter-revolutionary."

"And I, excuse me, I am Karl Radek."

Along with millions of others, many of the joke tellers wound up in the camps, but very few jokes came out of the camps or were told about them in the 1930s. That may be because the experience was so utterly terrifying or because so few of the people interned survived and returned to society until the 1950s. When the rate of arrests declined in the 1940s, more jokes about the camps appeared as did many more about the political police. The oldest of these anecdotes concerns the construction of the White Sea—Baltic Canal. Stalin began work on this grandiose project late in 1931. In the next year and a half 280,000 prisoners dug 227 kilometers of canal from the White Sea to Lake Ladoga with primitive tools in horrible conditions. About 100,000 of them died. The canal turned out to be too small for seagoing vessels and was never much used. Nonetheless, the government proclaimed the construction and the effort at human rehabilitation a great success.

107. "Is it true that conditions in the corrective labor camps are excellent?"

"One of my friends doubted it. He was given an opportunity to check them out himself and liked it so much he still hasn't come back."

108. "How long is the work day in the corrective labor camps?"

"Seven hours: from seven in the morning to seven at night."

109. "Who built the White Sea-Baltic Canal?"

"On the right bank—those who told anecdotes, on the left bank—those who heard them."

In the 1950s an analogous joke would ask about the construction of the Bratsk High Dam in Siberia.

Through all these horrors the government used pervasive propaganda to persuade citizens that life in the Soviet Union was continually improving. Not only were the daily press and radio closely controlled, but so were all the arts. After 1934 if writers didn't belong to the new Union of Soviet Writers, they couldn't be published. Stalin demanded that writers become "engineers of the human soul" and participate in building socialism by helping to create the "new Soviet person." In the militant language characteristic of the time, they were commanded to be riflemen on the literature front. The only acceptable style, improving on reality to describe the triumphant new projects, came to be called "socialist realism." One of the early examples of it was a thick anthology of stories and essays, edited by Maksim Gorky and contributed to by many well-known writers, praising the genius of the White Sea-Baltic Canal, which many of them had helped to dig as slave laborers. Despite their best efforts, many writers ran afoul of officialdom, usually when the Party line had changed, making an earlier published work currently unacceptable. The usual practice was to apologize quickly for deeply lamented errors.

110. AR: "Why was socialist realism invented?"

"So no one would think to depict socialism realistically."

111. AR: "What is socialist realism?"

"It is glorification of Soviet leaders in language they can understand."

112. AR: "What is a telegraph pole?"

"A well-edited pine tree."

113. AR: "What is the difference between realists, surrealists and socialist realists?"

“A realist writes about what he sees, a surrealist about what he feels, and a socialist realist about what he hears.”

114. Two writers walking along Gorky Street [in Moscow] pass a statue of Pushkin. One says to the other: “How unfair it is. Dantes won the duel, but they erect a statue to Pushkin.”

Alexander Pushkin (1799–1837), Russia’s most beloved poet, fell into disfavor for liberal tendencies and critical witticisms in his writings during the reign of Tsar Nicholas I, who had him exiled for a time and watched by his police. He was killed by Baron George D’Anthès (Dantes in Russian) in a duel with pistols in 1837.

115. The Union of Russian Writers has included a new clause in its general contract for authors: “The author beforehand admits all his errors in the forthcoming publication, renounces them, and most sincerely begs forgiveness for writing such disgusting trash, distorting Soviet reality, and playing into the hands of the warmongers.”

116. Six commandments were proposed for all Soviet citizens:

- (1) Don’t think.
- (2) If you think, don’t speak.
- (3) If you speak, don’t write.
- (4) If you write, don’t publish.
- (5) If you publish, don’t sign.
- (6) If you sign, renounce.

The media also made a great effort to persuade citizens that everyone arrested in the purges were “enemies of the people.” We know from memoirs of the time, which were published much later, that the Party faithful had to persuade themselves that something was fishy about those who were arrested or in other cases that mistakes were being made. What they couldn’t face up to was that the terror was as senseless and intentional as it actually was. Most people weren’t Party faithful, however, and understood more clearly the source of the terror. They couldn’t speak their wish out loud, but many hoped and prayed for the dictator’s death.

117. Every morning Rabinovich picks up a copy of *Pravda* at the newspaper kiosk, looks at the front page, and returns the paper. After several days the vendor asks him what he is looking for.

“An obituary.”

“The obituaries are always on the last page.”

“The one I’m waiting for will be on the front.”

118. An old woman barely manages to squeeze on to an overcrowded trolleybus.

“Well, thank God.”

A citizen standing beside her pipes up: “You have misspoken, dearie. There is no god. You must say, ‘Thank Stalin.’”

“You’re right, citizen, excuse me. I should not say ‘Thank God,’ of course, but whom shall I thank when Stalin dies?”

“Then you may say ‘Thank God,’” said the citizen as he jumped from the trolleybus.

119. Stalin is making a speech to some workers: “For the cause of the working class I am prepared to give all my blood, drop by drop.”

A note was passed forward through the crowd: “Dear Iosif Vissarionovich, Why drag it out? Give it all at once.”

120. The dream of many Soviet citizens: to see Beria's widow at Stalin's funeral.

This dream almost came true when Beria was executed only a few months after Stalin's death in 1953. On Beria, see below following #184.

In the midst of the purges and the Great Terror the USSR became involved in the Spanish Civil War. War had broken out in Spain in 1936 when a socialist coalition government had been elected and conservatives in the Spanish army, led by Francisco Franco, rebelled against the republic. The war quickly became a practice run for World War II. Franco styled himself a fascist and accepted military assistance from Hitler and Mussolini. Should the fascists win, France would find herself essentially surrounded by fascist nations. The republican forces appealed for outside intervention, but the European democracies were determined to avoid a larger war by appeasing Hitler, and the political mood in the United States was firmly isolationist. The Soviet Union alone sent troops to help the republicans stand up to Franco and Hitler, and most of these were NKVD troops who spent their time combating other leftists among the republicans. They didn't enjoy many successes, and even when they did, other things were on people's minds back home.

121. "Did you hear? They took Saragossa."

"Her husband too?"

"No, Saragossa is a city..."

"What, they're taking whole cities now?!"

In some ways the 1940s and early 1950s were easier on the Soviet people. Ten years after collectivization the collective farms had settled into a rather dreary routine. The terror and famine of the early 1930s had passed for them. Life in the cities improved in some ways as well. The tempo of the

Third and Fourth Five-Year Plans was not as hectic as the First and Second had been. There was less pressure to complete huge projects ahead of schedule or to overfulfill planned goals, and few feared death or the camps for failure to meet those goals. The Great Terror with its show trials and purges eased off after the military purges. The camps of the Gulag filled up again after World War II with POWs and domestic victims. Food rationing and other shortages, and hints of new purges to come kept life uncertain and hard, but for much of the time between the end of World War II and Stalin's death (1945–1953), a sense of accomplishment and an absence of largescale terror contributed to a feeling that things had gotten better and might continue to do so.

On the other hand, between 1941 and 1945 the Soviet Union suffered terribly in World War II. The fascist victory in the Spanish Civil War in 1939 led directly to the World War. When that war ended and the Western democracies had still not raised a hand to deter Hitler, Stalin decided to protect the USSR by entering into a mutual non-aggression pact with Nazi Germany. This guarantee that he could fight a one-front war was what Hitler was waiting for. One week later the Nazis invaded Poland, and the war had begun. Stalin had not avoided war with Germany, it turned out, but he had bought almost two years in which the Soviet Union might have prepared for the onslaught that was to come. That he personally prevented better defense preparation and undid much that had been accomplished by the officers he purged in 1938 to 1939 must stand as one of the blackest marks against Stalin as a leader. As many as twenty-nine million Soviet citizens were killed in the war, more than in all the other combatant nations combined, and almost a quarter of the nation's industrial plant and housing units were destroyed as well. The pain

and shortages would be felt for decades. Not surprisingly, the war generated very few jokes.

Among the thousands of jokes I have read for inclusion in this collection I have found only one about the conduct of the war itself. It comments on the danger of allowing the workers and peasants of the Red Army loose on “liberated” Europe. Not only did they behave atrociously, but they saw at first hand that much that propaganda had taught them about Europe was false. Millions of Red Army soldiers would live the rest of their lives under a cloud because they had been “abroad.” Almost all the Soviet soldiers who had been captured and interned by the Germans were “repatriated” after the war, and many were taken directly to Soviet concentration camps as traitors.

122. AR: “Is there a dark side to the victory over Germany?”

“There are two. First, the Red Army saw Europe. Second, Europe saw the Red Army.”

Another anecdote comes out of the brief occupation of Lithuania (along with Latvia, Estonia, Moldavia, and large parts of Finland) by the Soviet Union between the signing of the Soviet-Nazi pact and the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union. Anyone who was politically aware in the late 1980s will hear relevant history in this one.

123. When the Soviet army occupied Lithuania in 1940, a few Lithuanians shot at departing Germans. When the German army occupied Lithuania in 1941, a few Lithuanians didn’t shoot at the retreating Soviets.

Another speaks to the advantages of being a Party member and the disadvantages of being Jewish:

124. Before the attack Rabinovich writes a last wish: “If I die, consider me a communist. If I don’t, then never mind.”

This one is mainly about the advantages of a larger pension and benefits for Rabinovich’s survivors, but it also carries a little of the sense of another anecdote in which an old anti-Semite asks to convert to Judaism just before he dies—so there will be one less Jew in the world when he dies.

The only other memorable anecdote from World War II is the only one that challenges the cult of the war; that is, the enormous propaganda campaign of vilification of the enemy and glorification of the heroic, selfless Russian people. One of the greatest individual heroes of the cult was 18-year-old Alexander Matrosov, who threw himself over the embrasure of a German pillbox in order to save his buddies. In the anecdote he is conflated with 14-year-old Pavlik Morozov, who turned his father in as a *kulak* during the collectivization campaign of 1932 and was soon thereafter murdered by his neighbors.

125. In recent years Soviet scientists have developed a new type of hero: Pavlik Matrosov, who threw the body of his father over the embrasure of an enemy pillbox.

There are a few more anecdotes from the period that use characters from the war era—Hitler, Roosevelt, Churchill—but they are not really about the war. Some of these appear below in various categories.

One category of jokes that appeared immediately after the war concerned generals’ wives (singular *generalsha*, plural *generalshi*). Because of the carnage, many young men from the provinces had been quickly promoted through the officer ranks, a significant number ending the war as generals. After the war they enjoyed relatively high salaries, good benefits, and postings to Moscow with their families. When they attempted to participate in “cultured” society, however, the more cultured residents of the capital—including obviously some who told jokes—were not impressed by their behavior, their

language, or their dress, in short their level of culture. A lot of *generalsha* jokes depend on malapropisms and other mangling of proper Russian which do not translate. Here are a few that do.

126. Two *generalshi* are sitting in the tsarist family's old box at the Bolshoi Theater, talking loudly. The lights dim, the director appears, and the orchestra strikes up the first notes, but still they chatter on.

Someone behind them whispers to them, "Quiet up front, overture."

One of the *generalshi* turns around: "Look who's calling who an overture."

127. A general and his wife are sitting in a *loge* at the Bolshoi, watching *Swan Lake*. The general is very moved by the music, the ballerinas, and maybe by the shot of vodka he had during the intermission. "Manka, what beautiful music that Rimsky-Korsakovsky wrote. And how they dance. Look how the swans rise from the swamp. Manka, wouldn't you like to be a swan?"

"Just what I need. Walk around with a wet butt all day!?"

128. A young *generalsha* has made the rounds of all the shoe stores in Moscow, rejecting all the shoes she has been shown. Finally she tries an antique store.

"Show me some completely unique shoes, shoes that nobody else will have."

"That's not an easy task. Let me see, I do have one pair." He brings them out. "Here they are, some Louis XVI's."

The *generalsha* tries them on. "I like them, but they're a little tight. Have you got any Louis eighteens?"

129. Workers struggle to carry a grand piano into the *generalsha's* new apartment, a trophy sent by her husband from the West.

"Where should we put the piano?"

The *generalsha* looks the rooms over and indicates the smallest of them. "Put it here."

One of the workers shakes his head, "Excuse me, comrade *generalsha*, but there won't be any resonance."

"What!?! My husband's a major-general. If he bought me a piano, I expect he'll buy a resonance too."

130. In the summer of 1946 Muscovites were startled to see a huge crowd of Jews in Red Square, men and women, young and old, Muscovites and provincials, even rabbis and some antediluvian types in earlocks.

"What are you all doing here?" asked the startled Muscovites.

"We're Jews...from anecdotes."

"We don't understand. What do you mean, from anecdotes?"

"The *generalshi* pushed us out."

The war wrought enormous changes in Europe and the Soviet Union. The lives that had been lost and the property that had been destroyed could only be slowly replaced. Meanwhile people in all of the belligerent nations lived with rationing and shortages. The relaxation that many Soviet citizens had anticipated as a reward for their suffering in the war did not occur. Stalin insisted on keeping belts tightened while heavy industry was restored and expanded. *Gosplan*, the State Planning Commission, continued to believe in the efficiency of enormous projects. Not only did it plan huge industrial and power projects, but in the immediate post-war years it carried out the amalgamation of the already large collective farms. Everything got bigger, including the government. Nothing became more efficient.

131. Applicants to the Party are being asked who their parents were and what they were doing in 1917:

“My parents had an estate. Not as big as the state farms are now, just a family farm.”

“My father had a factory. Not as big as the state factories are now, just a family business.”

“My mother ran a bordello. Not as big as the government is now, just a family business.”

This is even funnier in Russian where *bardak* (bordello, whorehouse, disorderly house) is a synonym for disorder. One of my favorite Russian words is *bardachok*, a diminutive *bardak*, which means a car’s glove compartment. For reasons worth pondering there aren’t any jokes about women’s handbags.

132. Roosevelt, Churchill, and Stalin are driving in the Crimea. A bull in the road brings them to a sudden stop. Roosevelt gets out and tries to talk the bull off the road. The bull pays him no attention. Churchill tries, with the same result. Stalin then gets out and whispers in the bull’s ear, and immediately the bull leaps from the road and gallops across a field. Roosevelt asks Stalin what he had whispered.

“Nothing special,” says Stalin, “I just told him, if he didn’t move, I would send him to a *kolkhoz*.”

133. During the first amalgamation of collective and state farms the Big [*Bolshoi*], Little [*Malyi*, which can also mean “not very”], and Artistic Theaters decided to join together into a single Big Not Very Artistic Theater.

Another of the ways the Soviet Union tried to replace their own losses was to expropriate industrial plants and other valuables from occupied territory and haul them home. They kept German POWs in labor camps, working essentially as slave labor, until 1953. Without the scientific and industrial expertise of the Germans, however, not everything they stole could be used effectively.

134. A machine for turning shit into butter was liberated from occupied Germany and sent to a Scientific Research Institute. Two years later the SRI sent a report to the ministry: “The butter spreads well, but it hasn’t yet lost its original taste, color or smell.”

Along with armies, factories, railroads, and other military targets the war also destroyed a huge number of dwellings in Soviet cities. The housing shortage, already severe before the war, became worse. Soviet attempts to manage the housing problem were already recognized to be incompetent.

135. A contest was held for furniture suitable for small apartments. The winner was a chamber pot with the handle on the inside.

136. Hitler asked Stalin to help him destroy London. Stalin offered him a thousand Soviet apartment managers.

One of the major post-war changes was the Soviet occupation of the central European nations on its Western border. In all these countries, with the exception of Austria where the Allies shared the occupation, opposition parties and politicians were harassed or killed, elections were rigged, and communist regimes were put into power. These became the so-called satellites of the Soviet Union and members of the Warsaw Pact when it was organized in 1949. Among these nations Yugoslavia, which already had a strong indigenous communist movement, soon gained a reputation for independence. Bulgaria earned a well-deserved reputation for following the Soviet line most slavishly.

137. An international contest was held to produce the best book about elephants. Entries came in from:

Germany: *A Brief Introduction to the Natural History of Elephants*, in four volumes.

England: *The Elephant and the Empire*.

The USA: *Elephants and Money*.

France: *Elephants and Love*.

The USSR: *Russia, Homeland of the Elephants*.

Bulgaria: *The Bulgarian Elephant, Best friend of the Soviet Elephant*.

Soviet stereotypes about nations and peoples are simple and consistent. Many of them may be seen in this anecdote. Germany stands for science, advanced technology, and discipline. England for colonialism, propriety, and standoffishness. The USA for money and swaggering independence. France, what else, for sex and moral laxity. It is a rare Soviet joke about Africa that doesn't involve cannibalism, but they come later. Here's another from the same period.

138. In Germany, if it's forbidden, you may not. In England, if it's not forbidden, you may. In France, even if it is forbidden, you may. In the USSR, even those things that are permitted are forbidden.

During the 1930s, Soviet propaganda deflected citizens' attention from the Terror in part by trumpeting achievements of the time: record harvests on the farms, production in the mines and factories; altitude, speed, and endurance records in aviation, and so on. At the same time they began to put forth claims of primacy, usually bogus, for many inventions. When this continued in the 1940s, the jokesters began to make fun of it.

139. AR: "Who invented X-rays?"

"They were invented in the sixteenth century by the Russian clerk Ivan Pupkov. According to the chronicles, he said to his wife Marfa, 'I can see right through you, bitch.'"

140. AR: "Who discovered the electric razor?"

"It was discovered by Ivan Petrovich Sidorov in the trash behind the American Embassy."

141. "We found a wire in an eighteenth-century archeological dig that suggests the existence of the telegraph in England back then," brags an Englishman.

"We found nothing is ours," counters the Russian, "clear evidence of the invention of the wireless telegraph in Russia."

142. In the foreign press you might run across the claim that the law of universal gravity was discovered by the Englishman Newton," intoned the lecturer. "However, long before Newton that law was in effect here in Russia."

143. There were two portraits on the museum wall, one of Academic Ivanov who invented the locomotive, the steamship, and the airplane, and the other of Academic Petrov, who invented Academic Ivanov.

The following joke refers to the very real Timofei Lysenko, a charlatan biologist, who won Stalin's protection and patronage by promising easy, though unworkable, solutions to Soviet agricultural problems. Lysenko began the infamous part of his career, during which he destroyed the careers of many honest scientists, with a speech in 1935 in which he denounced the "*kulaks* of science" who were "wrecking" Soviet agriculture. He did considerable damage to Soviet biological science, such as genetics, in the 1930s, and again after World War II.

144. "Who invented barbed wire?"

"Lysenko, who crossed a grass snake with a hedgehog."

145. Academic Lysenko demonstrated the results of his work through the hearing of fleas. He placed a flea in his right hand and commanded, "Jump to my left hand." The flea jumped to his left hand. He commanded, "Jump to my right hand," and once again the flea obediently jumped.

Then the scientist carefully removed the flea's hind legs and commanded, "Jump to my left hand," but the flea didn't move. He put the flea in his left hand and commanded, "Jump to my right hand," but once again the flea stayed put.

"We can now consider it dialectically scientifically proven," said the great scientist, "that along with its legs a flea loses its hearing."

By far the largest category of new political anecdotes of the 1940s concerns the NKVD, prisons, and camps. Not only are there more of them than in the 1930s, when the *chekists* were more active, but their nature has changed. Stalin's viciousness and the utter corruption of the Party are now more openly acknowledged. Citizens taunt and talk back to the police, if only in their anecdotes. In most anecdotes in which he appears Stalin speaks correctly. In some others his heavy Georgian accent and imperfect Russian add to the humor and to the joke tellers' sense of superiority.

146. Beria informs Stalin that the security organs have arrested a man who looks exactly like Stalin and asks what they should do with him.

"Shoot him!"

"Maybe we could shave off his mustache?"

"That too."

147. Pushkin seeks an audience with Stalin. [This, you already know, is historically incorrect.]

"Whad's your problem, Comrade Pushkin?"

"I have nowhere to live, Comrade Stalin."

Stalin picks up the phone. "Moscow Saviet? Comrade Pushkin's here with me. See that he has a first-rate apartment by tomorrow!"

"Whadelse, Comrade Pushkin?"

"They won't publish my books, Comrade Stalin."

Again Stalin picks up the phone. "Writers' Union? Comrade Pushkin's here with me. See that a big printing of his book comes out tomorrow!"

Pushkin thanks him and leaves.

Stalin again picks up the phone. "Comrade Dantes? Pushkin just left!"

148. Stalin asks Roosevelt during the war, "Why have you stopped the Lend Lease deliveries?"

Roosevelt: "The dockers are striking for higher pay."

Stalin: "Don't you have any police?"

This brings to mind one of my favorite political cartoons which must have appeared in 1981 when General Jaruzelski came to power in Poland. It shows Jaruzelski on a ladder, leaning against a larger-than-life statue of Marx. Below the engraved words "Workers of the world unite" he is painting "Void where prohibited by law."

149. At a party meeting the Chairman ends his talk and invites questions. No one does so for a long time. Finally Shapiro raises his hand: "I have three questions. First, where

have all our cattle gone? Second, where did all the meat from those cattle disappear to? And third, where is all the timber in our forests going to?"

"I have written your questions down and will answer them at the next meeting," says the chairman.

At the next meeting the Chairman gets around to inviting questions again. Finkelshtein asks shyly, "I have only one question. Where did Comrade Shapiro disappear to?"

150. An applicant to the Party is asked: "Who is your mother?"

"Our Soviet Motherland."

"Who is your father?"

"Our great leader, Comrade Stalin."

"And what is it you hope to become?"

"An orphan!"

151. A Jew walks along the ravaged streets of a recently liberated city. Stopping in front of a ruin he shakes his head and says, "Aye, yai, yai. And all of this because of one man."

He is immediately detained and dragged off to the local NKVD.

"What 'one man' were you talking about?"

"Hitler, of course."

"All right, you may go."

"And who did you have in mind?"

152. A blind American millionaire wrote his nephew in the USSR, asking him to come help him with his affairs. The "organs" called the nephew in for a chat.

"Why don't you write your uncle, tell him to sell his business and come over here with his money. We can take care of him here."

"You must have misunderstood his letter. He's only lost his sight, not his mind."

153. Rabinovich had stopped writing to his relatives abroad a long time ago when he was summoned to the NKVD and told to write a cheerful letter.

"Dear Family," wrote Rabinovich, "come home. We are building communism. If you come, you will soon see grandad Baruch, grandma Leia, and great-grandma Sarah. It is like Heaven!"

154. A conversation in the camps:

"How many years did they give you?"

"Twenty years. How about you?"

"Also twenty."

"What are you in for?"

"Nothing."

"Liar! For nothing they give ten."

In longer variations of this joke it is a newcomer to the barracks who says he got twenty years for doing nothing. He is then shunned as an outsider, probably a stool pigeon, who doesn't know what's what.

More jokes about anecdotes appeared in the 1940s when one could still be arrested for the "anti-Soviet activity" of telling them. Most joke swapping was confined to close friends. It was risky to tell them to strangers. And a lot of what people didn't want the NKVD to hear they told out of doors. More than the walls had ears in some apartments.

155. An American, a Frenchman, and a Russian are bragging about the bravery of their people.

“One out of every five of us will wind up in an automobile accident,” says the American, “but we aren’t afraid to drive.”

“One out of every four French prostitutes has a venereal disease,” says the Frenchman, “but we aren’t afraid to go to brothels.”

“One out of every three of us is an informer,” says the Russian, “and despite that we aren’t afraid to tell political anecdotes.”

156. A group of old friends gather. They all know each other’s jokes so well, they have numbered them.

“#41!” Laughter.

“#19!” Laughter.

An uninitiated newcomer joins the evening. He doesn’t want to feel left out so he tries, “#35!”

Everyone practically jumps out of their chairs. One points to the wall, another to the ceiling, a third to the telephone.

Remember the two American versions of this chestnut from the introduction? They both translate fine into Russian culture. After all, they’re just silly. You have to understand the fear that the “organs” are listening and what you are saying is dangerous to make this one work.

157. AR: “Why do Soviet laryngologists learn to perform tonsillectomies through the asshole?”

“Because no one dares open his mouth.”

But not everyone was cautious and many were caught.

158. The judge comes out of his chambers doubled over with laughter. “What’s so funny?” a colleague asks him.

“What a joke, what a great joke,” says the judge through his laughter.

“Tell me,” says his colleague.

“Are you kidding?! I just gave ten years for it!”

159. In a prison cell. “What are you in for?”

“I told an anecdote. And you?”

“I listened to an anecdote. What about you?” he asks a third prisoner.

“I’m in for laziness. I was at a party, and someone told a political anecdote. I went home and tried to decide, should I inform on him now or in the morning. All right, I figured, the morning’s soon enough. They came for me that night.”

Some of the jokes about jokes depend on a pun in Russian on the verb “to sit,” which can mean just to sit, but it also means to do time, to sit in prison, or in the camps.

160. “Who sits and thinks these things up?”

“Whoever thinks them up, for sure they sit.”

161. AR: “How are jokes created? Does someone just sit and make them up?”

“No, first they make them, then they sit.”

Another significant category of anecdotes from the 1940s and early 1950s is Jewish jokes. Some historians see in the purges of the 1930s particularly harsh treatment of non-Russian nationalities in general and of Jews in particular. Soviet Jews who escaped the Nazi occupation and genocide had enjoyed the general relaxation of internal tension and repression during World War II, but after the war they experienced the crackdown on all independent expression of religion and nationalism. Jewish papers and theaters were closed. Although Jews had enjoyed success as academics far out of proportion with their

numbers in the population, especially in math and physics, quotas were established to limit their access to the universities. Stalin had established a new Jewish "homeland" in distant Siberia in 1934, called Birobidzhan, to which Jews were again encouraged to move. Near the end of his life Stalin allowed a particularly insidious new purge of Jewish intellectuals to begin. He died before one notorious part of it, the so-called "doctors' plot," could do much damage.

This first anecdote may be from the 1920s or early 1930s. Like the Jews, it just didn't fit in well earlier, so we'll let it lead off here.

162. The trolley is making its way across Leningrad. The conductor is announcing the stops. "Uritsky Square."

"Former Palace Square," comments an old Jew.

"Gogol Street."

"Former Little Sea Street."

"October 25 Prospect."

"Former Nevsky Prospect."

"Shut up, Comrade Jew, former Jew face."

163. A Jew is trying hard to get the attention of the salesman in a Moscow grocery, who is very busy...talking with a colleague about soccer. Finally the salesman turns around: "Well, what do you want?"

"Do you have any caviar?"

"No." And turns back to his friend.

The Jew finally gets his attention again, but the salesman is losing his patience. "What do you want from me?"

"Tell me, do you have any salmon?"

The salesman snaps at him, "No. Now get out of here, Jew face."

"Look at this," the Jew says sadly, "It's just like under Tsar Nicholas... except that then they had caviar and salmon."

164. A Jew is filling out yet another official form.

"Did you serve in the tsarist army?" "No."

"Did you serve in the White army?" "No."

"Were you ever in German-occupied territory?" "No."

"Have you ever been arrested or tried?" "No."

"Have any relatives ever been arrested?" "No."

"Nationality?" "Yes."

165. New rules for auto licensing: if you get stopped once for an infraction, a hole is punched in your internal passport; if you get stopped twice, another hole; if you get stopped a third time, the nationality on your passport is changed to "Jew."

166. An advertisement: "Will exchange one nationality for two convictions. Will consider long sentences."

167. A caller knocks at the door and calls out, "Does Rabinovich live here?" When no one answers, he knocks and calls out again. And again.

Finally Rabinovich answers, "You call this living?!"

In a variant the NKVD breaks down the door and asks Rabinovich why he didn't answer. "You call this living?" moans Rabinovich. You can say that again.

168. "Do you remember Rabinovich who used to live across from the jail?"

"What about him?"

“Well, now he lives across from his old house.”

169. The phone rings.

“May I speak with Abramovich?”

“He’s not here.”

“Is he at work?”

“No.”

“Is he away on business?”

“No.”

“Is he on vacation?”

“No.”

“Have I understood you correctly?”

“Yes.”

170. Rabinovich dies and winds up in Hell.

“After a life like mine haven’t I earned Heaven?”

“After a life like yours this will seem like Heaven.”

171. AR: “Who are the physicists and mathematicians in the anti-world?”

“Anti-Semites.”

If you don’t get this one, it isn’t matter. The Jews were wily though. Some took advantage of arrest to plan for the future. Others took measures to avoid arrest.

172. “What is Rabinovich doing in exile?”

“Scientific work. He married a Chukcha and is breeding frost-resistant Jews.”

Why did Arnold marry Maria anyway? The Chukchi are an indigenous people who inhabit the Chukotka Peninsula in the far northeast, just across the Bering Strait from Alaska. They became common figures of anecdotes as symbols of extreme remoteness and isolation, extreme ignorance of modern life, and on occasion of the wiliness of those still close to nature. See #503, #508, and #605–#614 for more Chukchi jokes and further explanation.

173. A comment overheard in a public bath: “Rurik Solomonovich, one or the other: take off your cross or put on your pants.”

This is one of my favorites. When you understand all its subtleties, you are ready for the advanced course in Soviet culture. Think about it again before you read these few hints. Rurik was the legendary founder of the Russian state. Although Rurik was a Viking, his name became as pure a Russian name as can be imagined. Solomonovich means son of Solomon, and we all know who Solomon was. Igor Abramovich would work just as well. Real Soviets didn’t wear crosses; they were atheists. But no Jews would while lots of Russians did, as did Armenian and Georgian Christians who might look more like Jews. A cross was good camouflage. But then there is that little problem of circumcision. If you got that one, the next one is easy.

174. The principal comes into class and announces: “Fainshtein, Buberman, and Ivanov on your mother’s side, don’t come to class tomorrow. An Arab delegation will be here.”

Not surprisingly, Jews did not feel at home in the USSR.

175. “Do you have relatives abroad, Rabinovich?”

“No.”

“Don’t lie to us. We know you have an uncle in Israel.”

“It is not he who is abroad, but I.”

The lot of Soviet women after World War II was also particularly hard. The great majority of the millions who died in the war were men. Millions of women, a whole generation of women, therefore lived after the war without husbands. Russian society, and Soviet society as its historical successor, was already more patriarchal than European and American societies. The losses of the war intensified this trait. Men were spoiled, and women bore the multiple burdens of jobs, domestic work, and coddling their men if they could find one. Practically all women were in this position until the late 1960s, and gender relations have changed but slowly since then.

176. An ordinary Soviet woman is asked how she feels.

"I don't know. I get up in the morning with the roosters and run around in the kitchen like a squirrel on a wheel. I run out of the house like a deer, latch on to the trolley like an ape, and ride to work like a sardine in a can. At the office I'm harnessed to my work like a horse, I growl like a tiger, meow like a cat, and bark like a dog. After work I crawl into the lines like a snail, stretch to the shelves like a giraffe, grab whatever's there like a shark, and scurry home like an ant. At home I still have to work like an ox, and fall into bed exhausted. And my husband says, "Move over, cow!"

By the end of Stalin's regime cynicism about the Party was deep and widening. Many people continued to deceive themselves past 1953 about the Party, the NKVD, the plans, or Stalin himself, but others were less completely gulled. As we will see, in Khrushchev's time, especially after his famous speech at the end of the XX Party Congress, citizens would express their disgust, anger, and sense of betrayal more openly. But already in the 1940s many saw things pretty clearly.

177. AR: "What is philosophy?"

"It is like trying to catch a black cat in a dark room. Marxist philosophy is distinguished by the fact that there is no cat in the room. In Marxist-Leninist philosophy not only is there no cat, but someone keeps claiming to have caught it."

178. A mute walks into an office and loudly babbles something incomprehensible, repeating over and over the same meaningless combination of sounds. The secretary tells him, "The Party organizer is not here."

The mute collapses into a chair, twiddles his thumbs, and stares at the ceiling. The secretary adds, "The chairman of the union is out also."

179. A grave-digger goes home and gives his wife three times as much money as usual.

"A lot of bodies today?" she asks.

"No," he replies, "just one. Court workers were burying a judge. They had me dig him up three times for encores."

In the early 1950s the Soviet Union became involved in the Korean War. Their participation was minor and surreptitious. At the time they did not want a direct confrontation with the United States and denied that they were aiding the North Koreans. Documents released from Soviet archives as part of Boris Yeltsin's continuation of Mikhail Gorbachev's "openness" suggest, however, that Stalin ordered North Korea's attack on South Korea. And during the fighting American troops saw unmistakable signs of Soviet participation.

180. Several Korean flyers distinguished themselves in the air over Pyongyang. Among them were Si Ni Tsyn, Li Si Tsyn, Ku Ri Tsyn, and Tu Pi Tsyn.

Pronounced out loud or written without the spaces and extra capital letters, these are clearly Russian names and funny ones at that.

181. Soviet fighter pilot Tu Pi Tsyn returns from Korea. He reports: “It wasn’t easy trying to fight the Americans. Flying the plane and firing the guns were hard enough, but squinting all the time and using one hand to stretch my eyebrows back toward my temples....”

The Korean War was just part of the ongoing Cold War. Before Stalin’s death in 1953 NATO confronted a powerful Soviet state. The Americans had fission bombs by the end of World War II and developed fusion bombs in 1949. The Soviets were only a few years behind. The Chinese communists won their revolution in 1949, adding the world’s most populous nation to the world’s largest to the communist camp. Both aided the North Koreans during the war. Soviet propaganda assailed the warmongers of the West and proclaimed their camp the champions of peace, but it didn’t always look that way, even from inside the country.

182. AR: “Will there be a Third World War?”

“No, but there will be such a struggle for peace that nothing will be left standing.”

4

Khrushchev

On March 5, 1953 Joseph Stalin finally died. One might think that the general reaction would have been one of relief and even jubilation, and surely there was much of both. But the most apparent and public reaction was of grief and confusion. Huge crowds thronged Red Square, and an endless line of mourners streamed past the generalissimo as he lay in state. This was partly staged for show, of course. The honor guard, the crepe, the music, and the flowers didn't appear spontaneously. But much of the grief and confusion was real. Stalin had led the country for twenty-five years through some of its most momentous changes and events, and the years of the cult of personality and its pervasive propaganda had their effect. Many people could hardly imagine the future of the Soviet Union without Stalin's firm hand. On the other hand, others could, including the jokesters. They celebrated the monster's death with glee and wished for more.

183. An old Jew asks an official how much Stalin's funeral cost. When the official names an enormous sum, he gasps and says, "For that kind of money I could have buried the whole Politburo."

184. Hitler stands in Hell with boiling tar bubbling up around his throat. Beria stands next to him. The tar comes up only to his waist.

"How did you get off so easy?" asks Hitler.

"I'm standing on Stalin's shoulders."

Lavrenty Beria, Stalin's next-to-last Minister of State Security (the NKVD had been renamed the MVD, Ministry of State Security, in 1946) and executor of many of the purges, was one of the ruling triumvirate that briefly succeeded Stalin, but he was arrested and executed four months after Stalin's death by his colleagues, who feared his power. Shortly thereafter the MVD was downgraded to a Committee of State Security, the KGB.

185. The day after Stalin died, devils start knocking at the Pearly Gates.

"Where do you think you're going?" St. Peter challenges them.

"Stalin arrived yesterday. We're the first refugees."

186. Stalin solicits recommendations for Heaven from his predecessors.

"I won't recommend you," says Ivan the Terrible. "I always killed my enemies quickly, but you tortured them for years."

"I won't recommend you," says Peter the Great. "I opened the window to Europe, and you closed it."

“I won’t either,” says Alexander II. “I freed the peasants, and you enserfed them again.”

Catherine the Great obliged him, but she rarely refused a man.

Other anecdotes about Stalin and his rule appeared after his death, perhaps because people felt a little safer telling them.

187. AR: “How come Lenin wore shoes, but Stalin wore boots?”

“Because in Lenin’s time the shit only came up to our ankles.”

There was no clear successor to Stalin. For a couple of years the Party and country were run by a “collective leadership,” at first comprised of Lavrenty Beria, Georgy Malenkov, and Viacheslav Molotov. Neither the structure of the Party nor the traditions of the country lent themselves to this form of rule, however, and the tensions soon showed. Malenkov seemed the most likely successor to Stalin, but Beria had the powerful Ministry of Internal Affairs behind him—until his sudden demise. No one seems to have considered Nikita Khrushchev a serious contender for power, but Khrushchev was able to use the patronage powers he had as Secretary of the Party’s Central Committee to appoint numerous supporters. He was soon able to push Molotov aside, and in 1955 to ease Malenkov out of his primary post as premier. Nikita Bulganin, who helped Khrushchev displace Malenkov, replaced him as Premier but suffered a similar fate only a year later. He should have seen it coming.

188. AR: “What is the very shortest telegram?”

“The one Malenkov sent Bulganin: ‘Aha!’”

One of the greatest sources of tension in these early post-Stalin years was the situation in the labor camps. Shortly after news of Stalin’s death reached the camps, inmates in a few of them began to rebel. Some merely refused to work, others disarmed their guards and took over the camps. Political prisoners demanded that their cases be re-examined and that they be legally released. Although the Party bosses had already begun to relax the grip of the terror and the regime of the camps, neither they nor the camp administrators wanted to undergo the financial loss or the chaos such uprisings might lead to. They crushed the rebellions, in places with planes and tanks.

The leaders in Moscow found themselves in a serious dilemma. On the one hand they did not want to continue the exceedingly harsh policies of the Stalin years. On the other they had all held powerful positions in those years and were implicated in the repressions. Despite his own considerable guilt, Khrushchev helped promote his own popularity and career by forcefully promoting de-Stalinization. Judicial re-examinations were permitted to proceed and hundreds of thousands of prisoners were soon released.

189. A young man was sent to the camps before the war. Twenty years later his mother received a telegram from him and met him at the railroad station. As soon as he stepped from the overcrowded train, she rushed into his arms.

“How did you recognize me after all this time, mama?”

“By your coat, darling.”

Khrushchev further separated himself from his political rivals by escalating the de-Stalinization campaign in 1956. At a closed session at the end of the XX Party Congress he delivered his later famous “secret” speech in which he revealed and denounced some of what he called Stalin’s “excesses.”

190. Immediately before his denunciation of Stalin's excesses at the XX Party Congress Khrushchev left the stage for a few minutes. Someone asked him after the speech where he had been.

"I stopped in at the mausoleum for a minute to take Stalin's pulse... just in case."

191. After Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's excesses at the XX Party Congress, someone called out from the hall: "And where were you when all this was happening?"

Khrushchev shouted, "Who said that?" No one answered. He asked again, but no one answered. "That is where I was," he explained.

I sometimes use that one in class to illustrate collective guilt and collective fear, and to help explain the very possibility of the Terror. If it didn't hit you hard at first read, give it another try.

192. Khrushchev returned from a visit to the USA in a very bad mood. He explained to Mikoian: "Kennedy told me they have invented a machine that can bring a man back from the dead. I didn't want to admit how backward we are, so I told him we had invented a compound that could make a man run faster than a car."

"No problem," said Mikoian. "If they bring Stalin back from the dead, you'll run faster than any car."

Anastas Mikoian was one the great survivors among the communist leaders. He was one of the few Old Bolsheviks who held important posts in the 1930s to survive Stalin's purges. He continued to hold important Party posts under Khrushchev and Brezhnev almost until his death in 1978. Here is an anecdote about him that comes from the Brezhnev years.

193. Mikoian is writing his memoirs. The working title is *From Ilich to Ilich Without Seizure or Paralysis: Fifty Years on the Lookout*.

194. AR: "Who is braver, Hitler or Khrushchev?"

"Hitler. He fought Stalin while he was alive. Khrushchev took him on when he was dead, and he didn't win either."

That one was obviously dreamt up a few years later, probably after Khrushchev's ouster in 1964.

After lying in state, Stalin's mummy was placed in the mausoleum in Red Square beside that of Lenin. The following anecdote did not appear, however, until after Khrushchev's revelations.

195. The following ad appeared in 1956: "Will exchange one room in the center of Moscow for two in different regions. Lenin."

Divorcing couples often placed similar ads. Remember as you read it the problem of housing shortage and the desirability of residing in downtown Moscow.

Six years after his secret speech Khrushchev carried de-Stalinization still further. At the XXII Party Congress in 1962 he called for Stalin's body to be removed from the mausoleum and reburied beside the Kremlin wall. At the same time the south Volga city that had been Tsaritsyn, then Volgograd, then Stalingrad, was made Volgograd once again. There never was a cult of Khrushchev as there had been cults of Lenin and Stalin and would be of Brezhnev, but there was no doubt who was in control of the Party and the country by 1962, and some obviously thought that Khrushchev might develop pretensions.

196. "What new highest measure of party punishment was introduced at the XXII Party Congress?"

“Exhumation.”

197. When Stalin’s body was reburied at the Kremlin wall, a wreath was placed on his grave inscribed: “To the posthumously repressed from the posthumously rehabilitated.”

198. AR: “What did the XXII Party Congress do for Lenin?”

“It removed a bad neighbor and increased his living space.”

199. A telegram arrives from the other world: “To the Central Committee, the Kremlin, Moscow: I approve the decisions of the XXII Congress, Iosif Volgogradsky.”

Stalin was of course the pseudonym of Iosif Dzhugashvili, who preferred to call himself “Steel.”

By 1957 most of the camps’ prisoners had been released, but it was too late for millions who had died in them. In some instances relatives pursued and won their loved ones’ legal exoneration. This came to be called posthumous rehabilitation.

200. A new article has been added to the Constitution: “Every Soviet citizen has the right to posthumous rehabilitation.”

201. AR: “What is the difference between a Christian and a communist?”

“A Christian hopes for paradise after death, a communist for posthumous rehabilitation.”

Khrushchev’s 1956 speech ushered in an era of relative openness—not quite the *glasnost* of the later Gorbachev years, but a significant relaxing of censorship and an easing of international tensions that came to be known as the Thaw. In the following years Khrushchev permitted stories and books to be published which added to his revelations and criticism of the Stalin years. Alexander Solzhenitsyn’s *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich*, Ilia Ehrenburg’s *The Thaw*, and Alexander Dudintsev’s *Not By Bread Alone* are but a few of the more famous of them. In the country that had helped pioneer non-representational art early in the century, Khrushchev also permitted a few “daring” displays of modern art. The bounds of permissible satire of contemporary life were also widened. For the first time since the 1920s, humorists, such as Arkady Raikin, became celebrities. Freedom of speech was far from complete, however. Every publication, every exhibition had to be officially approved. Punishment for having gone too far was still a real possibility. It should not surprise us that the jokesters were cynical about the new freedoms.

You will notice that this chapter is the largest in the book. Comparing the ten years that Khrushchev was in power to the twenty-five years that Stalin ruled or the eighteen years that Brezhnev presided over with the relative thickness of the chapters organized around them, we might conclude that this was the golden age of the anecdote. As the fear of the Stalin era gave way to a more relaxed atmosphere under Khrushchev and as the revelations of the Thaws corroded what remained of true belief and revolutionary enthusiasm, cynicism grew. More people became more willing to laugh at more aspects of the Soviet state, whose past and present problems were increasingly apparent. In addition, Khrushchev was much more active than Brezhnev, reforming and tinkering with the socialist system more, providing more topics for the anecdotes. It was in Brezhnev’s time that the practice of sitting around a kitchen table and “reeling out” (*travit*) anecdotes by the hour became common, but Khrushchev’s era produced more of them.

202. “We are free,” says the American. “I can walk right up to the White House and yell, Down with Eisenhower.”

"Big deal," retorts the Russian. "I too can walk out on Red Square and yell, Down with Eisenhower."

203. "Our Constitution guarantees freedom of speech," intones the lecturer.

"How about freedom after the speech?" asks a listener.

204. "What do freedom of speech and oral sex have in common?"

"One slip of the tongue and you get it in the ass."

205. On election day a voter is given a ballot, but instead of simply walking across the room and dropping it in the ballot-box, as is usual and expected, he begins to read it.

"What are you doing?" an observer in plain clothes asks him threateningly.

"I want to see whom I'm voting for."

"Don't you know we have a secret ballot?"

206. "When did the first Soviet election take place?"

"When God stood Eve before Adam and said, 'Choose your wife.'"

207. An abstract artist is walking down the street. Behind him walk two plain-clothes art critics.

208. "What movements have dominated Soviet art in recent years?"

AR: "Late rehabilitance, sur-sur-realism, and neo-repressionism."

I mentioned in the introduction that some jokes don't translate at all and others not so well. This is one of the latter. All three nouns in the punch line are plays on words. Two come through pretty clearly. To appreciate the third you have to know that the sur-sur sound is how one soothes a baby in Russian. Note the shift of AR in this anecdote from the question to the response. I have not been able to date the shift from Armenian riddles to Armenian Radio precisely, but the evidence I have suggests it was during Khrushchev's Thaw. At that time, friends tell me, the real Armenian Radio had some clever announcers who allowed themselves to use increasingly daring plays on words on the air.

There were problems with the Thaw, however. One was a conservative backlash. Khrushchev had to contend with rival party leaders who interpreted his policies as weakness and feared the repercussions that appearing to be weak might have, both at home and abroad. Therefore, the Thaw developed in fits and starts, proceeding when it served Khrushchev's interests, stopping when it was imprudent to proceed. The greater problem was that the conservatives were right. Liberals at home and citizens of Soviet satellite nations did see the Thaw as an opportunity to push for further freedoms. The East Germans rebelled in 1953, almost before Stalin's corpse was cold. That was before the Thaw, of course, and the rebellion had been quickly crushed by the Red Army. One might think that that lesson would have lasted more than a few years, but in 1956, arguably as a consequence of the first Thaw, another, more serious rebellion against communist hard-liners—and by extension against Soviet authority—broke out in Hungary. Soviet troops crushed this rebellion too, but it raised Cold War tensions to a dangerous pitch and cost a great deal of international goodwill. Many Hungarians hoped that the Western powers might intervene to help them, but no one did. Hungarian observers, by the way, noted that Hungarian anecdotes dried up in 1956 until they returned to mock the "friendly" Soviet invasion.

209. "Why do the Hungarians hate the Americans more than they do the Soviets?"

"Because the Soviets liberated them from one hated regime, but the Americans didn't liberate them from the other."

210. "What did the Hungarians get out of the 1956 uprising?"

"Hungary became the most comfortable barracks in the whole socialist camp."

It was hard for a "liberal" to know what to do when things were getting better, but such large and basic problems remained.

211. "Two times two is six," announces the speaker at the meeting, and his words are drowned out by applause.

"False, two times two is four," shouts a lover of truth, who immediately disappears for twenty years.

Having returned from distant places, he once again finds himself at a meeting, where the speaker announces to loud applause, "Two times two is five."

"False, two time two is four," shouts the lover of truth, whom life has taught nothing.

After the meeting the speaker comes over to him, embraces him, and whispers, "Surely you don't want two times two to be six again?"

Other problems, such as nationality tensions within the Soviet Union, which had been repressed by Stalin's firm hand, rumbled to the surface during the Thaws. Russia (and then the Soviet Union) was a multi-national empire. The many peoples who lived in it had through war, conquest and migration intermingled and assimilated somewhat over the previous many centuries, but Russia had never become a "melting-pot" to the extent that the USA has. The majority population of peripheral areas and of many pockets within Russia were non-Russian people still living in their homelands which had been conquered at one time or another by the Russians. Their varying shades of skin color, facial features, languages—over one hundred languages were spoken there—and cultures set them apart from the Russians and from one another. Here are a few anecdotes which illustrate the Russian stereotype of Georgian men and culture, and tension between the Georgians and some of their neighbors. Among other things they should help explain why Armenian Radio was used for jokes rather than, say, Georgian Radio.

212. A young woman asks the zookeeper, "Excuse me, please, can you tell me, is that monkey a man or a woman?"

A Georgian standing nearby speaks up, "The monkey is a male. A man is someone who has money."

213. A Georgian walks over to a table in a restaurant where another Georgian sits with a young woman. "My good fellow, permit me to ask your queen to dance."

"Certainly."

A short while later: "My prince, permit me to ask your princess to dance."

"Certainly."

And again a little later: "Brother, permit me to ask your duchess to dance."

Here the young woman interrupts, "Why don't you ask me? Maybe I don't want to dance with you."

"Shut up, whore, while gentlemen are talking."

214. A Georgian is driving along in an old Moskvich [a small, cheap, Russian car] when a new Volga [a larger, more expensive, Russian car] speeds past and screeches to a stop, blocking the road ahead of him. Out steps a fashionably dressed Georgian, who says, "How dare you shame the nation like this. I've only been out of jail for a year and already I drive a Volga." He gets back into his Volga, slams the door, and speeds off.

The first Georgian grits his teeth and continues on his way. A little while later a beautiful Mercedes cuts him off the same way, and a more expensively dressed Georgian

steps out. "You should be ashamed! You bring shame upon our people. I've only been out of jail half a year and drive a Mercedes." He slams his door and speeds off.

The first Georgian grinds his teeth and grumbles to himself, "A year out of jail, a half year out of jail. Just let me get all the way home from jail."

215. A Georgian implores a friend, "My good man, buy this factory from me, it's a good factory. Listen, you should buy this factory. It always overfills the plan; it has three Hero of Socialist Labor awards."

"If it's such a good factory, why are you selling it?"

"I can tell you, as a friend. I want to buy the regional Party committee."

216. In first grade in a Tbilisi school the teacher is asking students what their fathers do.

"My father is a storekeeper," answers one.

"My father runs a warehouse," says another.

"My father is a store manager," says a third.

"My father is an engineer," says a fourth, and all the students erupt in laughter.

"Children," says the teacher, "it's not nice to laugh at others' misfortune."

217. A Georgian is accepted into the Party and is told that he must now set an example; he must give up drinking and chasing women. He agrees. Then he is asked if he is ready to give his life for the Party. "Of course," he quickly replies. "What do I need a life like that for?"

218. A Georgian youth writes home from Moscow, "Dear Papa and Mama, I got settled into my apartment all right. My studies are going well. The only thing I don't like is that I drive to the institute in my car while all the other fellows go by trolley."

His father answers, "Dear Son, we are glad that everything is going so well. Don't get too upset about the car. We'll send you some money, and you can buy a trolley and go to school like everyone else."

219. A Georgian and an Armenian leave a restaurant together. When they claim their coats at the coat check, the Armenian drops a fifty-ruble bill: "Keep the change."

The Georgian leaves a hundred: "Keep the coat."

220. Georgian Radio is asked: "What does the friendship of peoples mean?"

"The friendship of peoples is when all nations—the Georgians, the Azeri, the Abkhaz, even the Russians—unite for a common purpose, like, say, killing Armenians."

Two Armenian retorts:

221. "Is it possible to deport all the idlers from Erevan?"

AR: "Yes, but wouldn't it be better to start with Tbilisi?"

222. "What is the most beautiful city?"

AR: "Erevan."

"How many atomic bombs would be needed to destroy the most beautiful city?"

[Pause]

AR: "Excuse us, we were mistaken. The most beautiful city is Tbilisi."

223. Two men, a foreigner and a Georgian, walk into the mausoleum. The foreigner points at Stalin and asks, "Who's that one with the mustache?"

"That is our great teacher, the genius of all times and people, Comrade Stalin," explains the Georgian.

"And who's this little one next to him?"

"That's his Order of Lenin."

224. An old Jew says during the intermission at a concert given by Emil Gilels [a famous pianist]: "How beautifully that son of the Jewish people plays. The entire audience was in tears."

A Georgian retorts: "When the son of the Georgian people was playing, the whole nation wept."

Soviet Jews, like most of the Soviet people, found their condition considerably improved under Khrushchev, compared to Stalin's time, but they continued to suffer various forms of official and unofficial discrimination. Jews who had not repudiated or did not conceal the fact of their Jewishness had "Jew" stamped in the nationality blank (item #5) on their internal passports. They found it harder to get hired or to enter institutions of higher education. They suffered slights from officials and individuals in a generally anti-Semitic population. After telling enough jokes about their plight, however, some realized that they might sometimes be seeing anti-Semitism where it wasn't. One way or another many continued to do quite well.

225. Khrushchev ordered that a synagogue be allowed to open. Sometime later he checked to see if this had been done, but it hadn't. They couldn't find a rabbi. Only Jews had applied, and there was a standing order not to hire Jews.

226. The head of personnel looks thoughtfully at a Jew: "You don't fit our profile."

227. "Hello, my name is Rabinovich. Do you need such specialists?"

228. "We would take you on, but we need someone who knows higher mathematics."

"Math was my major."

"Very good, but we also need a specialty in nuclear physics."

"I completed a physics degree too."

"Excellent. But the fact of the matter is that this job will be at our Ashkhabad branch, and you would need to know Turkmen."

"I speak Turkmen."

"How long do you plan to keep sitting there, trying to make a fool of me, Jew face?"

229. They're cutting back at work and want to get rid of Rabinovich. But how can they? He's a Party member, has a degree in their specialty and, according to his passport, he's Russian. Finally they decided to let go twenty Jews and Rabinovich. That way there could be no talk about anti-Semitism.

230. A Jew applies for graduate study in the Department of History. He answers all the questions in the entrance exam correctly, but they keep demanding more names and dates.

"A historian must have an extraordinarily good memory," they tell him.

"Oh, I've got an excellent memory. I remember when I was just eight days old and a gray-bearded Jew bent over me and cut off my path to graduate study in history."

231. The telephone rings in a communal apartment.

"May I speak to Moishe, please?"

"No one here by that name!" says the neighbor and hangs up.

The phone rings again.

"May I speak with Misha, please?"

"Moishe, telephone for you!"

232. A foreigner in Red Square asks Rabinovich what the big line in front of GUM is for. Rabinovich says it is citizens waiting to buy government bonds.

Molotov summons Rabinovich. "Comrade Rabinovich, I thank you in the name of the Central Committee and all the Soviet people. However did you think of such a clever reply?"

"I am a patriot."

"I would like to reward you for that. Tell me, what would you like?"

"Give me a visa for America!"

233. "Will the fifth point remain in the passport under communism?"

"No, but there will be a new sixth point: 'Were you Jewish under socialism?'"

234. One friend tells another, "Th-th-th-they d-d-didn't hire m-m-m-me as an announcer at th-th-th-the r-r-r-radio station."

"How come?"

"B-b-b-because I'm a J-j-j-jew."

235. A Jewish mother comes home unexpectedly early and finds her son screwing the housemaid, standing up in the hallway. Her mother's instincts make her say, "You miserable anti-Semite, how can you torture a poor, Jewish boy like that?! Is it so hard to lie down?!"

236. Two beggars are sitting side by side. One of them holds a sign reading: "Help an invalid of the Great Fatherland War." The other's sign reads: "Help a poor Jew." Everyone tosses coins into the veteran's hat, no one gives anything to the Jew. Finally a kindly soul passing by offers advice to the old Jew: "If you change your sign, you might do better."

"The Jew turns to the veteran: "You hear that, Chaim, he's telling us how to beg."

Through the turmoil of the Khrushchev years—the Brezhnev years too for that matter—the most reliable Soviet ally among its Eastern European satellites was Bulgaria. The Bulgarians had had good relations with the Russians before the 1917 Revolution, and remained especially close and obedient after the "liberation" of Eastern Europe at the end of World War I.

237. Groups of two men and one woman of different nationalities were marooned on uninhabited islands.

The two Englishmen fought a duel over the woman.

The two Americans got into a fist fight.

The French lived in a peaceful *ménage à trois*.

The Russians organized a *kolkhoz*. One man became the Chairman, the other the Party Secretary. Together they drove the "people" into the field.

The Jews soon became four. They got another woman from somewhere.

The Bulgarians telegraphed Moscow for instructions.

238. There is only one chair in the room and it has a nail in its seat, point up.

An Englishman walks in and sits on it. He immediately stands up, looks at the nail, harrumphs, and walks out.

A Frenchman walks in, sits, jumps up, kicks the chair over, and runs out.

A Russian walks in, sits, grimaces, but continues to sit. A Bulgarian walks in, fetches another chair, drives a nail into it and sits down next to him.

One area where Khrushchev at least temporarily enjoyed some success was in foreign policy outside Eastern Europe. Stalin had allowed relations with Communist China to sour and had never managed to develop close relations in the Third World. Khrushchev immediately improved relations with Mao Zedong's China and worked to improve

relations in the Middle East, with newly independent African nations, and in other poor, post-colonial nations. These efforts were hampered by the poverty of the Soviet Union, which had little to offer most of these new friends, and by the tactlessness and racism of the Soviet leaders and people. By 1960 relations with China had seriously deteriorated again. To most Americans it might seem strange, but many Russians thought, and continue to think, of the Chinese as a people who hold life cheap, and, because there are so many of them, feared them. Most Soviet jokes about China reveal both fear and racism.

239. Mao Zedong sends Khrushchev a telegram: "China starving period send food,"

Khrushchev replies: "Short supplies here period cannot send period tighten belts."

Mao wires back: "Send belts immediately."

240. At the monthly factory meeting the Chinese revisionists are reviled and abused. One worker takes it all to heart. On the way home he sees a Chinaman. He strides over to him, grabs him by the shirt front and shouts in his face, "You...dirty Jew!"

241. "What is the most recent scientific proof that the Earth is round?"

AR: "All the shit we pour on the West flows back on us from the East."

242. "What will they call the coming war between China and the USSR?"

AR: "The First Socialist."

243. "How will the war between China and the USSR end?"

AR: "With the unconditional surrender of the USSR after they take 400 million Chinese prisoner."

For more in the same vein from the Brezhnev period, see #669-#674.

244. "How do African leaders choose universities for their children?"

AR: "If the leader wants his son to become a communist, he sends him to the West. If he wants him to become an anti-communist, he sends him here."

One of the hallmarks of Stalin's regime had been the industrialization drive of the Five-Year Plans. Historians will long debate the merit of these efforts—recent scholarship claims that the Soviet economy would have developed more rapidly in all areas had it continued tsarist policies rather than enacting collectivization and the Five-Year Plans—but none denies one conclusion that Khrushchev and the Soviet people had drawn by 1953. The Five-Year Plans had emphasized heavy industry to the detriment of light, consumer industry. There was considerable pent-up demand in the Soviet Union for refrigerators, washing machines, automobiles, and other items of domestic economy that had become common in the capitalist West. Khrushchev promised to produce more things that the people wanted and needed. He also recognized that some of the country's economic problems stemmed from overcentralization and managed to decentralize control of parts of the economy, but this was the beginning of the computer age which aroused fresh hopes that the bottlenecks and failures of the State Planning Commission (Gosplan) could be overcome by the power of computers. So at the same time, somewhat contradictorily, he encouraged the computerization of planning. The percentage of families that possessed various domestic appliances increased rapidly in Khrushchev's years, but the cynics still found much to poke fun at.

245. "What is the difference between a miniskirt and ASUP?" [ASUP was the newly introduced "automated product administration system."]

"A miniskirt provides maximum information with minimum waste."

246. "Is state planning of the population possible?"

AR: "Not as long as the means of production remain in private hands."

Part of the reason why the anecdotes multiplied was that, as much as the people would have liked to have seen him succeed, much else that Khrushchev tried to do failed. One of his more spectacular programs, which at least in 1963 seemed to be a failure, came in the area of agriculture. Khrushchev, who had been involved with agricultural policy as Party First Secretary for Ukraine and then in the Politburo under Stalin, fancied himself an expert in the area. One of the features of dictatorships, of course, is that the dictators wind up surrounded by sycophants and come to believe themselves experts in many fields. In any case, in 1954 Khrushchev inaugurated a project, called the Virgin Lands, to plant huge, previously unplowed areas of Siberia and Kazakhstan. The following year he began to insist that corn could solve all food supply problems in the USSR. Following his lead, the agricultural bureaucracy required that plowing be conducted even where it would lead to severe erosion and that corn be planted even where the soil and climate were unsuitable. The first few years of increased harvests encouraged Khrushchev to declare in 1957 that the USSR would catch up with the USA in the production of meat, butter, and milk in three to five years. In 1961, despite a leveling out of grain production, Khrushchev announced that there would soon be an "abundance" of better, cheaper food. Shortages nonetheless continued. As a matter of fact, after a particularly bad harvest in 1963, rationing had to be reintroduced. And the country's problems were not confined to agriculture. The centrally planned industrial economy, perhaps in part because it now operated without the level of fear that Stalin had inspired, turned out shoddy goods. For the last thirty years of the Soviet Union, shortages and shoddy workmanship were continuing sources of frustration—and humor.

247. A *kolkhoznik* sat with a writer on a train. When he learned what the man did, he told him, "You're lucky. Nikita Sergeevich understands literature...."

248. The son of the Chairman of a Murmansk area *kolkhoz* asks his father, "What is corn, papa? It's all you talk about these days."

"Corn is a fearsome thing, my son. If you don't plant it, they plant you. If you don't harvest it, they harvest you."

Take a look at a map. Would you want to try to grow corn at Murmansk?

249. "What is communism?"

AR: "It is Soviet power plus the cornification of the whole country."

Compare this with #16, on electrification. See also #615.

250. Khrushchev decided to test the nutritional value of corn on a Russian, a Ukrainian, and a Jew. For several months they were given only corn to eat. At the end of the experiment the Jew looked much healthier than the other two. No one could figure out why. Finally Khrushchev called on Rabinovich himself to explain it.

"It's very simple," explained Rabinovich. "I ran the corn through chickens first."

251. At a ceremonial reception for Khrushchev a Jew demonstratively sucked on a corn cob.

Khrushchev: "What are you doing eating the winter feed? This time of year you should be eating grass!"

252. "What food is national in form and socialist in content?"

AR: "Matzo made of corn meal."

The humor in this one depends on understanding the Soviet Union's hypocritical policy toward its national minorities. Many minority groups took advantage of the

chaotic Civil War years to make themselves independent of the former Russian empire. Early Soviet leaders and constitutions declared their right to national self-determination. In fact, nationalists and national elites were soon suppressed and the border “republics” were bound increasingly tightly to the highly centralized, Russian-dominated USSR. At the Xth Party Congress in 1921 official policy was expressed in the formula “national in form, socialist in content.” This was meant at the time to express a concession to non-Russian minorities, allowing some forms of indigenous culture (school instruction in the local language, for example) but claiming for the Communist Party the right to control just about everything else (what was taught in the schools, for example). Matzo is easily identified with a particular nationality—as nationality was defined in the USSR—and corn, which has nothing to do with socialism in fact, had everything to do with (failed, stupid) Soviet policy and authority.

253. “What is Khrushchev’s hair-style called?”

AR: “The harvest of 1963.”

Picture him bald!

254. “Does Khrushchev believe in God?”

AR: “So it would seem. He reintroduced the Lenten fast.”

255. “Does the Russian language need the letter M?”

AR: “No. There’s no meat, milk or margarine. Malenkov is gone, Molotov too. Only Mikoian is left, and he’s not Russian.”

You can tell by Mikoian’s surname that he is Armenian.

256. “Give me a kilogram of meat, please.”

“No meat.”

“But the sign on the store says ‘meat.’”

“A lot that means. On my shed it says ‘cock,’ but all I’ve got in it is firewood.”

257. A shopper asks a food store clerk, “Are you all out of meat again?”

“No, they’re out of meat in the store across the way. Here we’re out of fish.”

258. The store is unusually clean, even pretty. A customer says, “Wrap me up a kilo of meat, please.”

The saleswoman in a sparkling white apron pulls out spotless white paper. “Give me your meat.”

259. “What signs will there be in the stores in communism when they are out of things like butter?”

AR: “Today there is no demand for butter.”

260. “Why don’t you have any black caviar for sale?” asked the foreigner.

“There’s no demand for it.”

The foreigner didn’t believe this and hung around the counter all day. Sure enough, no one asked for caviar.

261. They opened a new “Eros” grocery store—with naked shelves.

262. “Will Penza be named a hero city?”

AR: “Yes, it has lived blockaded for years: no meat, no butter, and still it hasn’t surrendered.”

Because of the heroic resistance they offered and the extraordinary suffering they endured during The Great Fatherland War, four Soviet cities were named Hero Cities in 1945. Another of the original four was Leningrad, where approximately two million

people died during 900 days of German blockade. Eight other cities were subsequently designated.

263. Two Leningraders were talking. "The lecturer said that we will soon have abundance."

"Don't worry about it. We survived the blockade. With God's help we'll survive abundance."

264. Khrushchev visits a *kolkhoz* and speaks in a kindly way to the *kolkhozniki*. "Well, how are you getting along?" jokes Nikita Sergeevich.

"We're getting along just fine!" the *kolkhozniki* joke back.

265. "By the end of the Five-Year Plan we will have ten kilograms of meat per person..." the lecturer is saying when Rabinovich interrupts from the back row: "Excuse me, it's hard to hear back here. Is that for each person or on each person?"

266. "Whose skeleton is this?" the med professor asks an anatomy student.

"A *kolkhoznik*!" the student confidently replies.

"What makes you think that?"

"Well, who else could it be?! They took his meat, his eggs [balls], his hair and hide. All that's left is his bones."

In time of famine peasants bulk out their flour with less nutritious additives, for example, grasses or bark. The Soviet state, supplier of just about everything since the end of NEP, continued the tradition, producing unappetizing new breads in 1964. Unlike 1932 when Stalin simply allowed millions to starve, Khrushchev also began the long practice of importing grain to supplement inadequate Soviet harvests. Soviet breads, like cheeses there and elsewhere, were often named for cities or regions. One of the ironies of subsidized food prices in the Soviet Union was that, even when it was in short supply, bread was often cheaper than grain. For many decades farmers fed some of their animals at least in part with bread.

267. "What do they add to Zabaikalsky bread?"

AR: "Flour, I suppose."

268. "Why isn't there any flour for sale?"

AR: "Because they started adding it to bread."

269. "How do they make Zabaikalsky bread?"

AR: "So that you can't feed it to cattle."

The people were pretty sure they understood why things had gotten so bad. They were not at all confident that conditions would improve.

270. "Why has food disappeared from the stores?"

AR: "We are in such a hurry to get to communism, there's no time to eat."

271. "Why have there been shortages of meat?"

AR: "We are going toward communism so fast, the cattle can't keep up."

272. A Nenets [Eskimo] from the Far North explains at a conference for agricultural workers how they plant potatoes in the tundra: "One brigade goes out ahead and plants them, another comes right behind them and digs them up."

"Why do you dig them up immediately?" asks the Chairman.

"We're hungry."

273. An old man who had been shouting against the authorities on the street was dragged into the KGB. "What authorities are you talking about?"

"The tsars."

“Why are you doing that now, forty-six years after the October Revolution?”

“Because in the 300 years they ran this country they couldn’t put up food reserves for a measly forty-six.”

274. “What are the main obstacles in the way of Soviet agriculture?”

AR: “There are four: spring, summer, autumn, and winter.”

275. “What will the harvest of 1964 be like?”

AR: “Average: worse than 1963 but better than 1965.”

276. “What will happen when Khrushchev dies?”

AR: “Abundance will come to an end, and normal life will begin.”

277. “Who is the most resourceful magician in the world?”

AR: “Khrushchev. He planted in Kazakhstan and harvested in Canada.”

278. At the border of Iowa the Chamber of Commerce has erected a large sign in Russian: “Welcome to Iowa—the breadbasket of the Soviet Union.”

Let’s let Armenian Radio have the last word on this particular topic.

279. “How can you find your way out of a hopeless situation?”

AR: “We do not consult on problems of agriculture.”

There were many places, like Penza, where meat was unavailable in the stores for years at a time. If it was available at all, it was available in the capital. Moscow was the center of everything. Americans aren’t used to the idea of a nation comprising a capital and the provinces, but many European countries have been like that in the past and some still are to a certain extent. Russia and the Soviet Union were like that for centuries. Moscow was home to the country’s leaders, a showplace for foreign visitors whose movements were carefully controlled, and was by far the best provisioned city in the country. Because transportation costs were also subsidized and much lower than their real market value, people streamed into Moscow even from hundreds of miles away to shop for food and other items that were unavailable at home. In general the best of whatever was available could be found in Moscow, and Muscovites became quite snobbish about the provinces.

280. About a neighbor, getting ready to leave for Israel: “Just imagine! She’s going all that way, and already fifty kilometers from Moscow there’s nothing to eat.”

281. “What is long and green and smells of sausage?”

AR: “The train from Moscow to Kaluga.”

282. “What do they call the Ail-Union Congress of *Kolkhozniki* in Moscow?”

AR: “Ten Days that Shook Children’s World.”

John Reed’s famous book about the October 1917 Revolution was titled *Ten Days that Shook the World*. You remember John Reed, the American journalist and communist who was the main character in the Warren Beatty film *Reds*. Children’s World was a huge store in central Moscow that sold toys, games, school uniforms and supplies, and many other items that were in short supply elsewhere.

283. “Comrades,” said the woman in the ticket booth, “the show is sold out.”

The man’s wife shyly touches his arm. “Come on, Vasia, let’s go, you can see....”

“She can go fuck herself!” Turning to the ticket seller: “Now, comrade administrator, surely you can find just two little tickets for the Cheliabinsk intelligentsia.”

284. “Attention, this is Riazan Radio. We are beginning our program for Octobrists. Riazan time is 3:05...shit...fuck it all...is 5:03.”

Soviet first graders were ceremoniously made Octobrists during their first weeks at school. They were given red scarves and a pin with a child's face, who was Lenin of course, to wear with their school uniforms. They remained Octobrists for three years when almost all of them moved on into the Pioneers. Both of these school-based organizations provided indoctrination for young children. At age 14 many of them would join the *komsomol*, or communist youth organization.

285. "This is Riazan Radio, answering questions from workers. Comrade Ivanov wants to know, what is solfeggio? We reply, people here have nothing to eat. Quit screwing around, Ivanov!"

Of course, it wasn't only food that was in short supply or poorly made. Khrushchev actually diverted more of the state's resources to consumer goods than Stalin had and improved the lot of common people in that regard. The numbers of families with refrigerators, telephones, washing machines, and other modern conveniences increased considerably. He also invested heavily in housing and is remembered especially for five-storey walkups without elevators which became known as *khrushcheby* (combining Khrushchev and *trushcheby* which means slums). By Western standards all of these things were substandard, however, and supply never caught up with demand. Spare parts and repair services were very hard to come by, and small items such as toothpaste, toothbrushes, and toilet paper remained in short supply.

286. "There are two items on the agenda for the *kolkhoz* meeting," said the Chairman, "the building of a new barn and the building of communism. In the absence of boards we will proceed immediately to the second matter."

287. Besides the usual small "Khrushslum" tenements, Khrushchev had plans to build 4S apartments: with room to "sit, stand, sleep, and shit."

I've also encountered this one with the punch line "with room to sleep sitting and shit standing."

288. The inspection committee is checking out a newly finished apartment building. To test the sound-proofing one walks into the next apartment and yells to his partner, "Kolia, can you hear me?"

"You fool, I can see you."

289. A woman was taking a bath in a communal apartment when she spotted a neighbor looking in at her through the transom.

"What do you think you're doing? Never seen a naked woman?"

"Like I really need to see you. I want to see whose soap you're using."

290. "Can a regular Soviet person get an automobile?"

For two days there is no answer.

"Why don't you answer?"

AR: "Sorry, we've been laughing too hard."

291. At a political meeting workers are let in on one of the country's war plans. "In that case our people would carry atom bombs into the enemy's cities in suitcases and then they would..."

A worker interrupts: "I know you have more than enough bombs, but where do you find the suitcases?"

292. Before his repatriation an Armenian arranges with his brother that if everything is all right in the USSR, he will write him a letter in regular black ink, but that if things are bad, he will write in green ink. Pretty soon a letter arrives, written in black ink:

“Everything is great. I got an apartment and found work. Food is abundant and cheap. If there are some shortages, they are minor. For example, it is hard to find green ink.”

293. “What will happen is they build socialism in the Sahara?”

AR: “For the first fifty years, nothing. There will just be plans. Then the sand shortages will begin.”

294. “Will they still have *avoskas* in communism?” [*avoskas* are net bags, mockingly known by the word *avos*, which means “just in case.” People carried them everywhere just in case they happened upon something worth buying.]

“Yes, but then they’ll call them *nikheraskas*” [not-a-fucking-things].

295. A worker comes home and finds his wife in bed with her lover. “Here you are fooling around,” he screams, “and across the street oranges are for sale.”

One of the consequences of shortages was lines. Ubiquitous lines. Soviet citizens got used to waiting for just about everything.

296. There is a big line at the store. They say a truckload of black caviar is coming. After a while, the manager comes out and announces: “There won’t be enough caviar for the Jews.” The Jews leave. Two hours later he emerges again to say: “There will only be enough caviar for Party members.” The non-members leave. Another two hours pass before he comes out again: “There’s only enough caviar for Party members with at least twenty years’ seniority.” Now only the old Party members are left in line. As dark falls the manager comes out again: “Comrades, only to you, the most conscious workers, can I tell the whole truth. There won’t be any caviar.” The line drifts away, grumbling, “Those damn kikes have been warm at home for hours.”

297. “Will there be lines in communism?”

AR: “There won’t be lines because there won’t be anything to stand in line for.”

298. “How will people live in communism?”

“Everyone will have their own apartments, cars and even airplanes.”

“Why will everyone have an airplane?”

“What if suddenly they ‘give’ sausage somewhere? Without an airplane how could you get in line on time?”

All of this deprivation will have its effect on people, of course.

299. “What will people look like in communism?”

AR: “They will have small, weak arms as they won’t have to do anything. Machines will do it for them. They will have small, weak legs as they will ride everywhere they go. They will have tiny stomachs since all they will eat will be high-calorie pills. And they will have enormous heads as they will be thinking all the time about how they can get their hands on some of those pills.”

300. “How does a lizard differ from a crocodile?”

AR: “Basically they’re the same. A lizard is a crocodile who has passed through socialism to communism.”

301. “What is a herring?”

AR: “It is a whale that survived into communism.”

The problems with consumer goods extended past shortages and the endless lines to the quality of the goods and services one could get. Many—it would be more honest to say most—were of low quality. The systems of production and sale produced precious few incentives for people to work hard. Everybody was part of a state monopoly of production or service, and almost no one—managers, workers, salespeople, waiters—

cared if people ever bought their product or used their services. Hotel and restaurant workers, for example, came to prefer that people stayed away. Their coming didn't produce substantial additional income, but it did mean more work. "No vacancy," "closed for repairs," and "restaurant full" signs became common. The death of the work ethic extended famously to so-called Scientific Research Centers where highly educated specialists did as little as possible, and to the state and collective farms where non-agricultural workers, including highly educated specialists, were sent every fall to help with the harvest. Probably the best known line in this genre is "They pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work." This either originated in or developed into this Armenian Radio gag.

302. A question comes from abroad for Armenian Radio: "Is it true that pay doesn't correspond to work in the USSR?"

AR: "Not true, there is an exact correspondence: they pretend to pay us, and we pretend to work."

303. "What should I do if I feel like working?"

AR: "Lie down. It will pass."

304. Two friends who haven't seen each other in a while meet.

"Chaim, where are you working these days?"

"At the blast furnace."

"Smelting?"

"No, we make dominoes."

"Why aren't you at work?"

"Well actually, my job is to cut out the holes."

"Then why aren't you there cutting them out instead of wandering around the city?"

"I got myself in the section where we do the double zeros."

305. An Englishman, a Frenchman, and a Russian are bragging about their wives.

"When my wife rides a horse," says the Englishman, "her feet touch the ground, not because the horse is so small, but because she has such long legs."

"I can span my wife's waist with just my two hands," said the Frenchman, "not because my hands are so large, but because her waist is so small."

"When I leave for work," said the Russian, "I slap my wife on the ass. When I come home from work, it's still jiggling, not because my wife's ass is so flabby, but because in the USSR we have the shortest workday in the world."

306. An American labor union official visited a Scientific Research Institute. He found practically no one at their desks. Employees stood about in the hallways in groups, smoking and telling jokes. Two others sat in a window-sill, playing chess. One woman was showing another her new jacket. As he left, the official wished them well with their strike.

307. They opened a whorehouse in Odessa for foreign sailors. To maintain an air of decency, however, they called it SRISR, the Scientific Research Institute for Sexual Relations. It worked very well. A journalist asked the director for the secret of his success.

"It's the only SRI where people don't spend their time beating off."

308. "What complex problem is the following group of specialists put together to solve: a mathematician, physicist, biologist, engineer, doctor, architect, economist, lawyer, and philosopher?"

“The potato harvest on the kolkhoz.”

309. A poster at the kolkhoz: “Kolkhozniki! Let’s help the students fill the granaries of the motherland!”

310. They built a new hotel, but the inspectors wouldn’t accept it. The builders had forgotten the “No vacancy” sign.

311. A diner in a restaurant finds a screw in a roll and angrily calls the head waiter over.

“What is this?”

“It’s an iron screw,” the head waiter replies calmly.

“Well, why is there a screw in my roll?”

“You didn’t think for 20 kopeks you’d get a whole car, did you?”

312. A Yugoslav in Moscow asks, “What is that line for?”

“They’re giving out butter.”

“Wow, so far they only sell it at home. What’s all the noise over there?”

“They’re throwing out shoes.”

“Yeah, they’d throw those away at home too.”

The Russian language is endlessly flexible and the Soviet people were generously sarcastic. Because of the conditions in which items were sold, that is, because of how the people perceived their relationship to those who decided what would be sold to whom, they made “to give” and “to throw out” synonyms for “to sell.” They didn’t forget the words’ primary meanings of course.

313. “What would be left of Leningrad after a major earthquake?”

AR: “Saint Petersburg.”

314. Khrushchev was proud of a new sausage that had just been developed, so he sent a sample to the Germans. He soon got a response: “Mr. Khrushchev, no worms were found in your stool.”

One of the casualties of the very artificial system of wage and price controls maintained by Soviet economic planners was the ruble. The Soviet government liked to say that there was no inflation in the USSR, but there was, of course. It was sometimes expressed in price increases; less frequently currency devaluations were declared. One such devaluation occurred early in Khrushchev’s tenure, when everyone had to exchange their old currency for new bills of considerably less value.

315. “What is small and green and crinkles but isn’t money?”

AR: “A new three-ruble bill.”

316. An old Jew comes to the rabbi and asks, “Rebbe, I heard there might be a currency reform soon. Advise me, what should I do with my money: put it in the bank or take it all out?”

Just then a young woman runs in, looking happy and excited. “Rebbe, advise me, tonight is my wedding night. Should I go to bed in my nightgown or just go to bed naked?”

“Sarah, my daughter, it doesn’t matter how you go to bed. One way or another, you’re going to be fucked. Same goes for you, Rabinovich.”

Khrushchev liked center stage. One of the venues he liked to perform at was a Western-style press conference for foreign correspondents.

317. Khrushchev announced he would hold a press conference. Journalists attended from all over the world.

The correspondent from *Figaro* asked, "Mr. First Secretary, is it true that you have recently raised the price of gold?"

"Yes, that is true. We want the price of Soviet gold to approach the world price. This has had no effect on the well-being of the workers."

The correspondent from the *Evening Post*: "Mr. First Secretary, is it true that you have raised the price of wine and liquor?"

"Yes, but we have done that as part of our struggle with alcoholism and it has had no ill effects on the well-being of the workers at all."

The correspondent from the *Associated Press*: "Mr. First Secretary, have you recently increased the price of furniture?"

"True, but we have raised the price only on imported furniture. Domestic furniture is of very high quality. This has had no effect on the well-being of the workers."

One correspondent had been drifting off. Suddenly he opens his eyes and sleepily asks, "Have you tried pesticides on them?"

318. A Soviet diplomat takes a girl to her room in a whorehouse. Soon a frantic scream resounds: "No, no, anything but that."

The madam hurries to the room to hush the girl and remind her that the client's wishes are law.

"I know, but he wants to pay me in rubles."

And I'd heard that that is one business where the customer always comes first.

Low wages, controlled inflation and devaluation were not the only way to squeeze value out of the workers. From time to time the government ran lotteries and issued bonds which many workers were made to feel considerable pressure to purchase.

319. Khrushchev and Bulganin are trying to think up a name for a new state "loan" [bond]. They reject "reconstruction" and "development." They've already been used, and they want something new. They decide to consult an old, wise Jew and offer him 10,000 rubles to come up with a good name.

"Yes, this is an important matter. You'd better offer me more," says the old Jew.

Khrushchev adds 5,000 rubles.

"Yes, this is a very important matter, a very serious matter indeed! Throw in another 5,000."

Khrushchev reluctantly agrees.

"Yes, a very, very serious matter of utmost importance. It's probably worth another 10,000 rubles."

Bulganin explodes, "This is extortion."

"That's it. That's what you should call your new loan."

320. A boy wanders through a graveyard, rapping on the gravestones. "You are rehabilitated. You are rehabilitated. You are rehabilitated...."

Forty years later an old man walks through the same graveyard, rapping on the headstones. "Your bonds have matured. Your bonds have matured. Your bonds have matured...."

321. From a police report: "The corpse of an unidentified male was discovered on the station platform. There were no signs of violence on the body except for a receipt for a year's subscription to *Pravda* and five lottery tickets."

Another consequence of shortages was the continuous existence of a black market in which deficit goods could be acquired either at higher prices or in exchange for other

deficit goods or services. If one had the right connections and the wherewithal, one could get practically anything. The relatively cosmopolitan port city of Odessa, which was heavily Jewish, was notorious as a source for many black market items.

322. "Are there really atom bombs in the USSR?"

AR: "No. If they existed, they'd be for sale at the Odessa market."

323. The most terrible curse in Odessa: "May you live all your life on your salary alone!"

324. "Rabinovich, you have a dacha."

"Is that so bad?"

"And you have a car."

"Is that so bad?"

"Your wife has a mink coat."

"Is that so bad?"

"Yes, but your salary is only 120 rubles."

"Is that so good?"

Other ways to acquire goods in the land of shortages were through theft or bribery. To possess anything worth being bribed for meant, of course, being in an official position of some consequence. But salaries were generally low, temptation was high, disincentives to corruption diminished in the Khrushchev era, and corruption flourished. As to theft, once again being in a powerful position put things worth stealing within one's reach, but almost everyone worked somewhere producing, transporting, storing, or selling something of value. And, of course, everyone worked for the state. As respect for the ideals that the state ostensibly stood for waned, the willingness to steal waxed. (Roth had nothing to do with this.) Theft became endemic.

325. A worker is asked how the pay is at the factory. "Not bad, but the take home is better."

326. "Are there thieves in the Soviet Union?"

AR: "No, the Soviet people steal from themselves."

327. "What is the richest country in the world?"

"The USSR. Forty years they've been stealing from it and still haven't taken it all."

328. "Will there be theft under communism?"

AR: "No, everything will have been stolen under socialism."

329. A Romanian bureaucrat, playing host to his Soviet counterpart, shows off his one-storey villa and his car.

"How did you manage it?"

"We built a bridge here." He points it out. "I took it all out of that."

Years later the Soviet bureaucrat plays host to his Romanian friend and takes him out to his two-storey dacha where he has two cars parked.

"How did you manage it?"

"We built a bridge too." He points to the river. "I took it all out of that."

"But where's the bridge?"

"Right here," he says, pointing at the dacha.

330. A wealthy Odessite asks the director of a fur store for a mink coat for his wife. The director says there are no mink coats.

"I mean to buy two, of course, one for myself and another for you."

That solves the problem immediately. He goes next to the ticket office of the Bolshoi Theater and asks for a ticket to that night's performance. He is told they are sold out.

"I would like to buy ten tickets, one for me and nine for you."

He enjoys the show. The next day he goes to the mausoleum, but it turns out to be closed that day. He shows the guard the contents of his briefcase: five bottles of vodka and red caviar.

"Will you go inside, sir, or shall I bring him out?"

331. "Where do you hope to go to school?"

"The medical institute."

"You'll never get in. All the places are sold already."

332. In a Georgian court the judge addresses the accused: "Do you have any last words?"

"Fifteen thousand. Not a kopek more."

333. "Can you live on your salary alone?"

AR: "Don't know, I've never tried."

Some people just couldn't be bought, however. What could you do with people like that?

334. "Can you buy an honest and upright person?"

AR: "You can't buy one, but you can sell one."

While you read this last, little section of jokes about criminal acts, did it strike you that jokes about the NKVD-KGB and the camps were more numerous and considerably grimmer in the Stalin era? Justice remained capricious in Khrushchev's time, but it must have been such a relief compared to the Stalin years that what official injustice remained inspired fewer jokes of a very different nature. People now laughed at crimes against the state. To my ear these jokes express more admiration for those who bribed and stole than indignation at their illegal acts. The few jokes about the KGB and police that I could find from the later Khrushchev years express precious little fear or respect.

335. "Will the KGB and the police still exist in communism?"

AR: "No, by that time citizens will be able to arrest themselves."

336. "Why do police always travel in threes?"

AR: "One can read but doesn't know how to write. Another can write but doesn't know how to read. The third, who doesn't know how to read or write, has to keep an eye on those intellectuals."

Another object of ridicule in the Khrushchev era was the continuing flow of transparently false propaganda. The stores might be empty, but the newspapers, radios and, increasingly, the televisions were full of outrageous claims of prosperity and plenty. All domestic news was good news, all forecasts were optimistic. According to the media, things were good and constantly getting better. Except of course outside the Soviet Union where there was a clear tendency to disorder and decay.

337. Alexander the Great, Caesar, and Napoleon are guests of honor watching Soviet troops parade on Red Square.

"If I had had Soviet tanks," says Alexander, "I would have conquered the whole world."

"If I had had Soviet planes," says Caesar, "I would have conquered the whole world."

"If I had had *Pravda*," says Napoleon, "the world would still not have heard about Waterloo."

338. Eisenhower and Khrushchev have a foot race. The following day the Soviet newspapers report that Khrushchev came in second and Eisenhower came in next to last.

339. "How do we learn about world news?"

"From the denials of TASS."

TASS, which stands for Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union, was the official Soviet news agency.

340. A sociological questionnaire asked workers about their reading habits and the quality of their lives.

One replied, "I read the papers and journals. How else would I know that I am living well?"

341. "Which is more useful, the newspaper or the radio?"

"The newspaper, of course. You can wrap fish in it."

342. "How can you fill a refrigerator with deficit goods?"

AR: "Plug it into the radio."

343. "Is it true that in communism we'll be able to order groceries by phone?"

"Yes, but they'll distribute them only by television."

344. Communism has arrived. "Hello, Manka, turn on your television. They're showing red caviar."

345. "Why are the new televisions equipped with windshield wipers?"

"To wipe the spit off."

346. "What's the difference between TV and a chamber pot?"

AR: "They're both full of shit, but it's easier to see in the chamber pot."

347. "How will Soviet people learn that communism has arrived?"

"There will be announcements in the papers and on the radio. If people still have televisions, they'll announce it there too."

348. "What is the difference between a pessimist and an optimist?"

AR: "A pessimist is a well-informed optimist. An optimist is a well-instructed pessimist."

349. A citizen asks at the polyclinic to see the ear and eye doctor.

"What's the problem? Do your ears and eyes hurt?"

"No, but I can't see the things I hear about, and I don't hear about the things I see."

In a variation the patient complains that he keeps seeing one thing and hearing another.

350. Fidel Castro was given a warm reception in Moscow. Alone finally with Khrushchev, he takes off his wig, peels off his beard, and collapses into a chair. "I can't go on...."

"We have to, Fedia, we have to."

Some jokes turned the very language of propaganda against itself. One of the most widely told jokes punned on the names of the official newspapers of the Party and the government. Others made fun of the slogans and jargon of propaganda.

351. "What is the difference between *Pravda* [Truth] and *Izvestiia* [The News]?"

"There is no truth in *The News*, and no news in the *Truth*."

A slightly longer variation of that one:

352. The newspaper vendor shouts: "There's no more *Truth*! *Soviet Russia* has been sold out! All we've got left is *Labor* for three kopeks."

353. In the shop there is an enormous overhead crane on rails. For years and years it goes back and forth with a big banner on its side: "Forward to Communism."

354. A huge new banner is unfurled for May Day: "Long live the Soviet people—the eternal builders of communism."

355. Archeologists excavated a cave occupied during the Stone Age and found scratched over its entrance: "Long live the slave-owning era, the glorious future of all mankind."

356. "What is most constant in the USSR?"

AR: "Temporary difficulties."

357. Khrushchev died and soon appeared at Other World Administration.

"Where would you like to go, Heaven or Hell?"

"Show me how people spend their time in Heaven and Hell."

He was allowed to look through two small windows. In Heaven righteous men sat at desks while angels read to them from *Pravda*. In Hell it was women, vodka, snacks, cards....

"Send me to Hell," said Khrushchev. He immediately found himself in a kettle of boiling tar.

"Wait, wait," he screamed. "This isn't what you showed me at all."

"Fool," taunted the devil, "that was our *agitpunkt* [propaganda station]. We learned a thing or two from you."

As in Stalin's time, the people were coerced into agreeing publicly that all was well. Speakers at factory and *kolkhoz* meetings continued to present the official point of view on issues. Ambitious brown nosers rose to support their views. Everyone else was expected at least to applaud.

358. A lecture was announced at the club: "The People and the Party are One." No one came. A week later a lecture called "Three Forms of Love" was announced. A large crowd showed up.

"There are three forms of love," the lecturer began. "The first is pathological love. It is so bad it is not worth talking about. The second is normal love. We are all familiar with that and don't need to speak of it either. There remains the third, the highest form of love, the love of the people for the Party. Of that I will speak at length."

359. A man fell asleep on a bus. When someone stepped on his foot, he woke with a start and applauded.

"What are you doing, citizen?"

"I was dreaming I was at a meeting."

360. "Comrade Rabinovich," asks the Party Secretary at a meeting, "do you have an opinion on that?"

"I do, but I don't agree with it."

361. "Can you sit bare-assed on a hedgehog?"

AR: "You can in the following circumstances: if the ass isn't yours, if the hedgehog has been plucked, or if the Party orders you to."

362. "How is it easiest of all to explain what communism is?"

AR: "With your fist."

Remembering the secondary meaning of fist (*kulak*), the wealthy peasants who were destroyed during collectivization, will add another layer of meaning to this one.

One major area of propaganda concerned the glorious future. Whatever the propagandists might claim about the present, it had the disadvantage of being visible. The future, however, might possibly hold great changes. Perhaps the Soviet system had advantages that would allow it to catch up with and surpass the decaying West after all. Presumably it took longer for cynicism about such claims about the future to catch up with their unlikelihood. But not much longer. The greatest extended jokes about the glorious future are books by Alexander Zinoviev, *The Radiant Future* (1978) and *The Yawning Heights* (1976), the title of which is itself a pun on two overused propaganda phrases that might translate as “the shining heights” and “the yawning abyss.” Anecdotes on the theme were common in Khrushchev’s time.

363. “They say that communism is just over the horizon. What’s a horizon?”

AR: “A horizon is an imaginary line which continues to recede as you approach it.”

364. The shortest joke of all: communism.

The longest joke of all: the program for building communism, adopted at the XXII Party Congress.

365. “Did you hear? In just twenty years we’ll be living in communism.”

“That’s all right for us old people, but what will become of the children?”

366. An American millionaire bought up everything in GUM [the State Universal Store, a large emporium across Red Square from the Kremlin] and announced that he was giving it all away for free. There was a riot with many killed or injured.

They asked him why he did it. “I wanted to see communism with my own eyes: I gave it away to each according to their needs.”

367. It is a hundred years later. Communism was reached a long time ago. A young boy asks his grandmother what a “line” is.

“They used to have lines in socialism. People would stand in a row one after another, and they gave them butter or sausage.”

“What are butter and sausage?”

Then there was the effort to export revolution, including the prediction that the superior communist system would establish itself in all the countries of the world sometime in the future.

368. “Could communism be built in Denmark?”

AR: “Maybe, but what did they ever do to us?”

369. “Could communism be built in Monaco [or Israel, or other small countries in other variations]?”

AR: “Yes, but why give so much happiness to such a small country.”

370. “Could communism be built in Armenia?”

AR: “It could, but it would be better to build it in Georgia.”

371. “Could communism be built in the USA?”

AR: “Maybe, but who would want to?”

372. A national competition was held to find the best epigraph for a three-volume edition of *The Resolutions of the CPSU*. First prize was awarded to: “The road to Hell is paved with good intentions.”

The CPSU is the Communist Party of the Soviet Union.

373. During Stalin’s time our economy stood at the precipice of disaster. Since then we have made great strides forward.

374. “Were Marx, Engels, and Lenin, the founders of scientific communism, genuine scientists?”

AR: “Are you kidding?! Real scientists would have tested it out on rabbits first.”

375. “What is the difference between mathematics and scientific communism?”

AR: “In mathematics you have a ‘given’ and a ‘to be proven.’ In scientific Marxism it’s all been proven, but nothing is given.”

376. Khrushchev is speaking to the *kolkhozniki*: “We stand with one leg planted firmly in socialism and with the other stride toward communism...”

“Will we have to stand in this awkward position for very long?”

377. A friend once asked Khrushchev why he had included the impossible promise of completing the task of building communism within twenty years in the Party’s official program.

In reply, Khrushchev told his friend the story of Khodzha Nasreddin. The Emir threatened to cut off his head if he failed, but Khodzha Nasreddin nonetheless undertook the task of teaching the Emir’s donkey to read in twenty years. A friend tried to dissuade him, telling him he could never teach a donkey to read, but Khodzha was not concerned: “Think of it this way,” he explained, “In twenty years one of us will be dead, either I or the donkey or the Emir.”

Even as living standards rose, the jokes complained that life was terrible and bound to get worse.

378. “How’s life?”

“Like on a boat: the horizon is wide, but you can’t go anywhere; it makes you sick, but it just keeps going.”

“Like Lenin: they don’t feed you, but they don’t bury you.

“Like a truffle: there are oaks [fools] all around, and every pig tries to eat you.”

“Like a potato: if they don’t eat you in the winter, they plant [imprison] you in the spring.”

“Like in a fairy-tale: the further you go, the more frightening it gets.”

379. Khrushchev asked Kennedy how he could always be so well informed about political matters. Kennedy explained that he often telephoned Hell and spoke with the Devil. He gave Khrushchev the number but warned that calls were expensive, more than \$100 a minute. Khrushchev made his first call. The bill was for five kopeks. When he asked the operator why his bill was so small compared to Kennedy’s, he learned that Kennedy had to call long distance.

380. A repatriated Armenian fell through a manhole into an open sewer. He climbed out complaining: “In Europe they put red warning flags next to open manholes.”

“And when you got on the Soviet ship to come home, didn’t you notice the big, red flag?!”

A corollary of propaganda was secrecy. Great, unnecessary, and therefore wasted effort was made to keep secret things that were well known. The effort was meant primarily to keep foreigners ignorant of the strengths and weaknesses of the Soviet nation, but they were also directed at the Soviet population and included matters that had no strategic value. Here’s a story that includes the themes of employee theft and secrecy gone awry.

381. A worker at a baby carriage factory complains: “Every day I take home another part. But whenever I try to put a baby carriage together, it always comes out as a machine-gun.”

The propaganda effort also had considerable fall-out in the area of education. Students were required to spend a great amount of time studying the classics of Marxism-Leninism, the history of the CPSU, and other such topics which were a poor substitute for what they might more profitably have been studying. They resented the wasted time and learned to especially dislike those topics.

382. “Who should be considered a communist?”

AR: “He who reads the classics of Marxism-Leninism.”

“And who should be considered an anti-communist?”

AR: “He who understands the classics of Marxism-Leninism.”

383. At the final exam at the medical institute two skeletons lie on the examining table. The chairman asks a would-be graduate, “What can you say about these skeletons?”

The student says nothing.

“Well, what have we taught you all these six years?”

“Is it really they, Marx and Lenin?”

The Soviet regime was xenophobic. Not only was it concerned about the military might of the United States and NATO; it was aware of the falsity of its propaganda about foreign nations and careful to minimize any positive information that its citizens might get about them. The propaganda couldn’t possibly have the desired effect if the masses knew what the Western nations really looked like. Foreign travel was therefore severely restricted, emigration made almost impossible. Likewise the movement of foreigners inside the Soviet Union was curtailed and often watched. Foreign radio broadcasts were jammed. In Stalin’s time a foreign assignment held the danger of making the diplomat, bureaucrat, or security serviceman a suspect of espionage for a foreign power. Many who had served abroad disappeared into the maw of the purges. In Khrushchev’s time, however, foreign service or touring became a plum, a chance to see exotic, forbidden lands, to live in greater comfort, to earn foreign currency, and to purchase high-quality goods to bring home. Besides embassy employees, almost the only people who traveled abroad outside the “fraternal” nations of Eastern Europe were those who could earn foreign currency for the state or display the superior accomplishments of the Soviet system—musicians, dancers, and athletes. Security men were always assigned to travel with the performers, but they couldn’t watch all of them all of the time. Families were generally not permitted to accompany those traveling abroad. They were kept at home essentially as hostages. Nonetheless increasingly it became a problem—and a joke—that some of them did not return.

384. Before the victory of communism the fundamental question was “Who whom?” Since the victory it has become “Who where?”

The question “Who whom?” was posed during the 1905 Revolution when it was uncertain whether the tsarist government could withstand the revolutionary effort to overthrow it. It was shorthand for “Who would do whom in?” The phrase remained in circulation and memory beyond the Bolshevik victory in the Civil War.

385. “Wouldn’t it be better if we sent all the idlers and freeloaders abroad instead of to the camps?”

AR: "It wouldn't work. All of a sudden there'd be so many more freeloaders."

386. The government wants to send an expert abroad on a special project, but there is a problem: he's a bachelor.

"You're going to have to get a wife and kids as quickly as possible. What do you need?"

"I guess a woman and at least nine months."

"We've got a deadline. We'll give you nine women and one month."

387. Two Soviet violinists return from an international contest abroad. One took second place, the other came in last. He tries to console the fellow who came in second: "Second place is a fine achievement."

"If I had come in first, I would have won a Stradivarius!"

"But you already have a fine violin."

"Do you understand what a Stradivarius is? How can I explain it to you? A Stradivarius for me would be like your getting Comrade Dzerzhinsky's own Mauser!"

388. They sent Comrade Ivanov abroad on a special project. He couldn't handle it. They then sent Comrade Petrov. Same result. It was necessary to send Rabinovich. Soon they received a telegram: "My task complete. I hurry to the free world."

This caused near panic in the office. They were meeting to condemn and expel him when in walked Rabinovich.

"I was interested to see how you would take my telegram."

When foreigners came to the Soviet Union, their movement and activities were severely restricted. The diplomatic community was required to live together in foreign compounds. Foreign correspondents and the few businessmen who had anything to do in the USSR were likewise constrained. The regime set the KGB to eavesdropping on and following many of them. In these Cold War years the fictional KGB Major Pronin enjoyed the sort of popularity in the USSR that James Bond did in the West. He employed little of the violence and high-tech gadgetry which was so popular in Western spy fiction, but he was mighty smart, doggedly persistent...and so earnest as to seem dull to the jokesters. The Pronin stories were written by Lev Shapovalov, using the pen name Ovalov. The first of these appeared in 1957. For other Pronin anecdotes see #527 and #747.

389. James Bond makes sure no one is following him and slips into the train station toilet. He takes a small note from his pocket, reads and memorizes his assignment. Then he tears it into small pieces, throws it into the toilet and flushes...but recoils in horror: there looking up at him with his intelligent, piercing, but somewhat weary eyes is Major Pronin.

390. Khrushchev is at a banquet in India. A beautiful, scantily dressed Indian dancer is sitting next to him. Under the table Khrushchev strokes her knee, and the dancer leans closer and whispers, "Comrade Khrushchev, would you stroke my thigh—don't change your expression—Major Pronin of State Security is making his speech."

The regime also engaged in the old Russian practice of *pokazukha*, that is, putting on a show. Correspondents were shown only model farms and farmers, model factories and well-prepared "workers," the best of whatever they were permitted to see. "The best" was usually in or near Moscow. Soviets traveling abroad were aware they were watched and trained not to respond to the "provocation" of their hosts.

391. A foreign correspondent is interviewing a worker at the factory. A man from “the organs” is looking on.

“How much do you earn?”

“Ninety rubles...” The *gebist* [from KGB as *chekist* had come from *Cheka*] gives him a wink. “...a week,” he finishes.

“How are your living quarters?”

“We have a room...” He sees the next wink and finishes with “for each family member.”

“And what is your private life like?”

“It’s a good six inches...” The *gebist* is winking furiously. “...in diameter.”

392. A foreign delegation is visiting the *kolkhoz* market. They see a farmer selling a cow and ask the price. The Regional Committee Secretary, who is accompanying them, signals the farmer from behind the foreigners: “Lower, lower.”

“Three rubles,” says the farmer.

The foreigners are impressed. Another passing farmer overhears and says, “Three rubles. I’ll take it.”

The Secretary shakes his fist and makes a horrible face at the buyer, who immediately understands: “On second thoughts, maybe I’ll put in another ruble and buy a chick.”

393. Soviet tourists, after looking over a worker’s home in a Western European country: “Bedroom, dining room, children’s room, living room, kitchen. We have all those too only without all these walls in between.”

394. A conversation in a store:

“Do you have any butter?”

“No butter.”

“Do you have any milk?”

“No milk.”

“Grrrrrrr!”

“What are you doing?!”

“I’m jamming the Voice of America.”

Despite the jamming of foreign radio broadcasting, which is possible only in a small range from the jamming equipment, a lot of programming got through. Millions of Soviet citizens could pick up the powerful stations on their short-wave radios and chose to do so on a regular basis. They knew it was illegal and joked about the silliness of the prohibition and their own daring. In conversation “Did you listen to the enemy?” meant “Did you hear the news?” “The enemy says” meant “I heard on the radio.” BBC became especially well respected for the unbiased reporting of international news, including news about the Soviet Union. Soviet citizens were impressed by how much the BBC seemed to know about Soviet affairs. VOA was known for more slanted news coverage with much negative commentary about Soviet affairs. Willis Conover’s jazz program on VOA became the most widely listened-to radio show in the world. Armenian Radio jokes may have become as popular as they did in this period in part due to radio’s association with subversive information.

395. A policeman calms a lost child: “Don’t cry. We’ll put an announcement on the radio about you, and your mama and papa will come and take you home.”

“OK. But you better put it on the BBC. It’s the only station mommy and daddy listen to.”

396. “What sorts of questions do children most embarrass their parents with?”

AR: “It used to be ‘Where do babies come from?’ Now it’s ‘What’s the BBC?’—that other strange pleasure parents indulge in at bedtime.”

397. Because the BBC always seemed to know Soviet secrets so quickly, it was decided to hold the next meeting of the Politburo behind closed doors. No one was permitted in or out. Suddenly Kosygin grasped his belly and asked permission to leave. Permission was denied. A few minutes later there was a knock at the door. A janitress stood there with a pail: “The BBC just reported that Aleksei Nikolayevich shit himself.”

Aleksei Kosygin became first Deputy Chairman of the Council of Ministers in 1960. In 1964, when Khrushchev would be displaced by a coup headed by Leonid Brezhnev, Kosygin would for a time share power with him as Premier.

398. The VOA asks Soviet Radio, “Is it true that your stores are empty?”

Three days later Soviet Radio replies, “And you lynch Negroes!”

399. “Who are the primary ideological foes of the CPSU?”

AR: “The Voice of America and Armenian Radio.”

400. “Why is your signal so weak?”

AR: “We used to broadcast from Erevan. Now we’re in Magadan.”

401. “Is it true that the manager of Armenian Radio sits in Erevan?”

AR: “It’s true that he sits, but he’s already in Magadan.”

Magadan was the administrative center for the Gulag’s camps on the far northeastern Kolyma Peninsula.

Despite efforts to control information Soviet citizens learned a great deal about Western society. They possessed a lot of misinformation, usually some exaggerated notion that had a modicum of truth to it, but they learned to separate the truth from the propaganda to a surprising degree. I was frequently impressed by the depth and accuracy of my Soviet acquaintances’ knowledge about the United States. Contrarily, I was often underwhelmed by Americans’ knowledge of the Soviet Union when I was asked to speak with church and civic groups at home in the 1980s. Just as they had with domestic propaganda, the jokesters turned propaganda about the West and its cant phrases into anecdotes.

402. “How is the USSR able to buy so much grain abroad?”

AR: “One of the biggest problems of the capitalist system is the chronic overproduction of consumer goods.”

403. “If communism is triumphant throughout the whole world, where will we buy grain?”

404. Two signs seen on the highway:

“Catch and surpass the USA.”

“If you aren’t sure, don’t pass!”

405. “Will we catch and surpass the USA?”

AR: “We might catch up, but how can we run ahead of them with our asses bare like this?”

406. At political training: “The USA is sliding down a fast, slippery slope above the abyss. The USSR is moving rapidly ahead and will soon pass the USA!”

407. At political training: “Monopolies, exploitation, unemployment, and crime reign in the USA. Our task is to catch and surpass the USA!”

408. “What does it mean that capitalism is at the edge of the abyss?”

AR: “It means that they are watching from there how we are thrashing around on the bottom.”

409. A Soviet citizen returning from abroad reports that capitalism is indeed decaying, but reports with a sigh, “But oh, the smell.”

410. “Who are most of the Western communists?”

AR: “Those who have lost hope of becoming capitalists.”

One of the very serious problems that the Soviet government continually, but unsuccessfully, wrestled with in the effort to make its people better workers and better people was the heavy drinking that is a deeply rooted part of Russian and Soviet culture. It is interesting to note that so few jokes about alcoholism have survived from earlier Soviet years. There are none in the previous chapters. Was vodka such an understandable retreat from earlier reality that no humor was found in it? Is this another example of less serious problems being subjected to satire because other much more serious worries were left behind? The appearance of these jokes in the 1950s cannot be explained solely by Khrushchev’s launching an anti-alcoholism campaign at that time, for the Soviet government had attempted such drives before. Note that some of the jokes are directed at the drinkers while others skewer the government’s failure to make much headway against the problem.

411. According to the perfected theory of historical materialism, it is necessary to pass through an intermediary stage between socialism and communism—alcoholism.

412. Three postulates about vodka:

One: There is no such thing as bad vodka, only good or very good.

Two: There is no such thing as too much vodka, but there can be too few snacks.

Three: There is no such thing as an ugly woman, just too little vodka.

413. “How is the struggle with drunkenness going?”

AR: “The first stage is complete: snacks have been eradicated.”

414. In just half an hour it will be a new year. A couple is hurrying home through the mostly empty streets with full bags when they come across a man, falling down drunk, puking on the sidewalk.

“It’s always the same with you,” the husband reproaches his wife. “You always wait until the last minute while other people are already having a good time.”

415. A policeman is bawling out a citizen he caught urinating against a wall. “You should be ashamed! Look over there, two steps away from you there’s a public toilet.”

“How can I pee in there where people are eating and drinking.”

The campaign against alcoholism managed for a time to drive the alcoholics out of public sight—into the underground toilets.

416. A policeman finds a moonshiner and is about to seize his still. The moonshiner stops him with: “Hands off Cuba!”

How do you make moonshine? Where did the sugar come from? When Gorbachev tried to reduce drunkenness in his first years in office by raising prices and shortening liquor store hours, the primary result was a sugar shortage. See #731–#736.

417. Russian business style: steal a case of vodka, sell it at half price, and go drinking with the money.

For New Russian business style, see #762.

418. Eisenhower remarked to Khrushchev that he was amazed by the number of drunks he saw in the streets of Moscow. Khrushchev retorted defensively, "As if you don't have any in Washington."

"If you ever see any falling-down drunks in Washington, you can shoot them," said the President.

After Khrushchev's return visit the *Washington Post* reported that an unknown, bald, chubby gangster had shot down three Soviet diplomats.

Another problem facing the government was the very low level of education and culture of much of the population. When the tsarist government fell in 1917, 90 percent of the population was still rural and a great majority were illiterate or barely literate. The Soviet government made great strides with a concerted effort to teach its people to read, but progressed much more slowly against old habits of hygiene, gender relations, filthy language, and other aspects of culture. We saw some extreme examples of this in the previous chapter (see #72–#76). Note my comment there about the nature of the joke tellers. The tenor of these jokes suggests that the problem was less severe by the 1950s.

419. "What is the difference between *mat* [vulgar swearing with mother words] and *diamat* [dialectical materialism]?"

AR: "Everyone knows *mat* but pretends they don't. No one understands *diamat*, but everyone pretends they do. But they are both powerful weapons in the hands of the working class."

420. A policeman takes a young couple back to the station. He reports to his lieutenant: "I was walking through the park and I see these two fucking behind a bush."

"Not fucking, Prokhorov, having intercourse."

"That's what I thought, lieutenant. From a distance it looked like they were having intercourse, but I got closer and sure enough they were fucking."

421. Vovochka is explaining to his very angry father why he got a D in arithmetic: "The teacher asked how much was two times three, and I said, six. Then he asked how much was three times two."

"It's the same fucking thing."

"That's what I said."

422. "How do you build a fence?"

AR: "First write the word 'cock' and then attach boards to it."

423. When the children at a daycare center began to swear like troopers, the administrator went to the local military unit to complain. Two soldiers had recently repaired the school's wiring. The lieutenant called the soldiers in.

"No way, lieutenant, we didn't say nothing like that. Private Sidorov was soldering some wires, and I was holding the ladder for him. Then he splashed some solder on my head."

"Yes?"

"Well, I says to him, 'Private Sidorov, can't you see you are dropping molten solder on my head?'"

424. "Which of Lenin's theses does Furtseva prove?"

AR: "Lenin said, 'We will teach every cook to run the government.'"

Ekaterina Furtseva, often called Madame Furtseva, was the highest ranking woman in the Communist Party for much of the 1950s and early 1960s. She became Khrushchev's

Minister of Culture in 1960. Furtseva was not, in the opinion of either the old or the new intelligentsias, a highly cultured woman. One witticism about her in the early 1960s said:

425. "I don't fear the Minister of Culture, I fear the culture of the minister."

426. At the Revolution Day parade in Tbilisi the man carrying a portrait of Furtseva had his foot stepped on.

"I'm carrying this beautiful woman, and you step on my foot?!"

The same person steps on his foot again.

"You do that once more, and I'll hit you up side the head with this bitch!"

427. The launching of a dog into space proved that any bitch could rise to unreachable heights.

428. Picasso forgot his invitation to an art exhibition in Paris. The doorkeeper wouldn't let him in unless he could prove he was Picasso. With a single flourish of a pencil Picasso drew a dove of peace and was admitted. Furtseva also forgot her ticket and was refused admission.

"But I am the Minister of Culture of the USSR."

"You will have to prove it. We wouldn't let Picasso in until he proved who he was by reproducing one of his drawings."

"Picasso? Who's Picasso?"

"Everything is in order, Madame Minister, please go right on in."

Chastushki, a sort of Russian limerick, are usually untranslatable. I have tried to translate quite a few and can usually retain the rhyme scheme, the rhythm, or the humor, but rarely all three. Here's one about Madame Furtseva that almost survives the transition.

429. Farewell boredom, so long blues,

I'm going to marry Furtseva.

Now I'll fondle Marxist tits.

Why, there must be quartseva.

430. The telephone rings and is picked up. "Hello, is this the laundry?"

"This is no fucking laundry. This is the Ministry of Culture."

431. The Czechs decided to establish a Naval Ministry. A Soviet adviser asked, "Why do you want to do that? You don't have any seashore."

"But you have a Ministry of Culture!"

In another version to make another point the punch line is "But you have a Ministry of Justice."

The Party itself came in for some pretty hard knocks in the jokes of the 1950s. It had had a generation by that time to build socialism, and most honest people would have said it had failed. The Party had led the people into and through the horrors of Stalin's time. If things were getting materially better under Khrushchev, educated people were aware that the West had left them far behind in that regard, even war-ravaged, divided Germany. Most of the ideals of the early post-revolutionary years had been shattered by these events and the slow erosion of corruption.

432. In the beginning it was decreed that every Party member be intelligent, honest and, of course, loyal to the Party. But it turned out that intelligence and Party loyalty were not consistent with honor, nor intelligence and honor with Party loyalty, nor honor and Party loyalty with intelligence.

433. "Can one be a morally honorable communist and take bribes?"

AR: "Yes, if he pays his dues regularly from them."

434. A *kolkhoznik*, arguing with his wife, threatens to join the Party. "You bitch, I will cause you such shame."

435. Khrushchev was invited to the opening of a whorehouse. He cut the ribbon and joked with the girls. He pinched the youngest one on the cheek and said, "You're so cute! I'll give you a recommendation for the Party."

"Oh no, Nikita Sergeevich, I had enough trouble persuading mama to let me come here."

436. A judge, a surgeon, a builder, and a Party worker argued about whose profession was the oldest.

"When God sentenced Adam and Eve to eviction from Paradise, that was a judicial act," said the judge.

"When God created Eve from Adam's rib, that was surgical intervention," the surgeon topped him.

"But before that God built the world," said the builder, "before that there was just chaos."

"And who do you think made the chaos?" challenged the Party worker.

437. A candidate for the Party is being interviewed.

"If you had two houses, would you give one to the state?"

"Of course I would."

"And if you had two cars, would you give one to the state?"

"It goes without saying."

"And if you had two shirts...?"

"No. I already have two shirts."

438. They're electing a new Party Secretary in Hell. One long-haired, bearded fellow is nominated because he seems to have the theory down pretty good. But he excuses himself: "I am not right for the times. I lived practically all my life abroad, my wife comes from the gentry, and I'm a Jew." So they didn't elect Karl Marx.

One of the primary complaints about the Party was that it had become a new elite class. Amidst shortages it claimed for its approximately 10 percent of the population the best of what was available: apartments, cars, jobs, promotions, residence in Moscow, foreign travel, and more. These Party members were bitterly resented.

439. "Are all Soviet people equal?"

AR: "Some are more equal than others."

That famous line had, of course, already appeared in George Orwell's *Animal Farm* in 1945.

440. The schoolchildren are telling one another about their plans for the upcoming holidays.

"My papa works at the Regional Party Headquarters. They gave him a pass for a free trip to the Caucasus for the whole family."

"My mama works at the City Party Headquarters. They gave her a pass for a trip to the Caucasus too, and I can go with her."

"My father works at the factory. He went and asked about a pass, and they told him he could go fuck himself, but they didn't say if he could take the family along."

441. The organs caught a joke teller and reported to Khrushchev, who ordered that the man be brought to him so he could hear the anecdote.

The jokester is brought in. “What beautiful furniture,” he exclaims. “What gorgeous carpets!”

“Soon everyone in the country will have things like this,” responds Nikita Sergeevich.

“Well, what’ll it be? Are you going to tell the jokes, or am I?”

442. “Will there be money in communism?”

AR: “Yugoslavian revisionists say there will be. Chinese dogmatists say no. We approach that question dialectically. Some will have it, some won’t.”

443. They built a high-rise apartment but forgot to put in any bathrooms. On the first floor they installed pensioners: they take everything out for analysis anyway. On the second floor they settled students: with nothing to eat they couldn’t cause problems. KGB administrators moved in on the top floor: they’re used to shitting on everyone else. And under them they moved in intellectual workers: they were used to it!

444. “What do Soviet society and a chicken coop have in common?”

AR: “Everyone tries to eat higher up, peck his neighbors, and shit on those below them.”

445. “What is an honorable man?”

AR: “A man who doesn’t fuck others over unless he needs to.”

446. After Khrushchev’s ouster, Nina Petrovna Khrushcheva went shopping at a regular store with ten rubles.

“Give me a half kilo of red caviar.”

“No red caviar.”

“Then give me black.”

“We don’t have any.”

Back home she told her husband, “Since they removed you, things have disappeared from the stores. You can’t buy anything for ten rubles and the people are starving.”

This anecdote was obviously created after Khrushchev’s dismissal, but so soon after that we’ll let it sneak in here.

Khrushchev did enjoy some notable successes during his time in office. The Soviet Union frightened the Western world in 1957 by launching the Earth’s first artificial satellite, Sputnik. The missile gap, a heating up of the arms race, the American high school advance placement program in the sciences, and eventually the race to the Moon all grew out of that signal event. Yet even in this arena, in which most Soviet citizens took great pride and satisfaction, the jokesters found room for darts.

447. The Moon asked Sputnik, “How is it they let you leave the Soviet Union alone?”

“They sent another one after me, a big one with a dog.”

The second Sputnik had aboard a dog named Laika. Laika died long before the satellite fell out of orbit in 1958. A later Sputnik carried two other dogs into orbit.

448. “What is the difference between the Earth and the second Sputnik?”

AR: “The dog’s life has already ended on Sputnik.”

449. Shortly after a Sputnik launch with the dogs Mushka and Pchelka aboard, ground command received a message from them: “We’ll die first, but we’re not coming back.”

450. After a lecture on “When will we be able to spend our holidays on the Moon?” the lecturer was asked: “When will we be able to spend our holidays in Switzerland?”

451. When a Soviet satellite met an American satellite, they quickly found a common language—German.

“‘Und I’m learning Chinese,’ says Werner von Braun.” After you’ve read Tom Wolfe’s *The Right Stuff*, you can find that reference in your Tom Lehrer songbook.

452. “What did Khrushchev have in common with Voskhod 2?”

“They were fired almost simultaneously.”

Voskhod 2 carried two cosmonauts into orbit shortly before Khrushchev’s ouster.

There were plenty of jokes aimed directly at Khrushchev rather than at the failure of any one specific program. To the joke tellers he was crude, longwinded, self-important, and once some of his louder failures had occurred, incompetent and even stupid. Like most of us, however, and perhaps especially like people used to power, Khrushchev did not take kindly to these forms of satire and fun.

453. One time Khrushchev decided to write his own speech. He gave it to Suslov, Ilichev, and Adzhubei to look over.

Suslov: “It is ideologically sound.”

Ilichev: “Everything is correct politically.”

Adzhubei: “It looks all right to me, Nikita Sergeevich, only ‘chickenshit’ is written as one word and ‘up yours’ is two.”

Mikhail Suslov and Leonid Ilichev were leading ideological and political advisers in the Politburo. Aleksei Adzhubei, after marrying Khrushchev’s daughter Rada, became editor-in-chief of *Izvestiia*, a member of the Party Central Committee, and an influential inside adviser to Khrushchev. Suslov, a wily old insider, helped engineer Khrushchev’s ouster and Brezhnev’s ascendancy. Adzhubei lasted only as long as Khrushchev. See #478.

454. “Can you wrap an elephant up in a newspaper?”

AR: “You can if the paper has run one of Khrushchev’s speeches.”

455. In the other world Khrushchev met Marx, Engels, Lenin, and Stalin. They all had the letter “T” printed on their shirts. Pretty soon the devil came along and put a “T” on him too.

“What does this stand for?” asked Khrushchev.

“Marx the Theoretician, Engels the Titan, Lenin the Tribune, Stalin the Tyrant.”

“And me?”

“You’re a Twaddler.”

456. Khrushchev made one of his many well-publicized visits to a *kolkhoz*. The newspaper article about this particular visit was accompanied by a photo of Nikita Sergeevich with the model farm’s very healthy pigs. The editors had trouble with the caption. After rejecting “Khrushchev among pigs” and “Swine with Khrushchev,” they went with “Third from left, Khrushchev.”

457. Khrushchev is touring the famous exhibit of abstract art at the Manege.

“What is this stupid square surrounded by red dots supposed to be?”

“That is a Soviet factory and workers hurrying to work.”

“What’s this burlap all smeared with green and yellow?”

“That’s a *kolkhoz* and ripening corn.”

“Remove it immediately! And what is this, an asshole with ears?”

“That...that’s a mirror, Nikita Sergeevich.”

The Manege, located just outside the Kremlin walls, was a riding academy in the tsarist era. It became an exhibition hall in Soviet times. It has now been razed to the ground, and an expansive shopping mall occupies the space.

458. “What did Khrushchev accomplish and fail to accomplish?”

AR: “He managed to put the bathroom and the water closet together but not the floor and the ceiling.

He managed to split regional party administrations into industrial and agricultural units, but he didn’t split the Ministry of Transportation into ‘there’ and ‘back.’

He managed to issue new paper currency ten times more expensive than the old money, but he didn’t issue silver coins with his bust surrounded by a wreath of corn.

He managed to sow corn in Kazakhstan and harvest it in America, but he did not teach people to write as he spoke.

He managed to award Nasser an Order of Lenin and the gold star Hero of the Soviet Union for destroying the Egyptian Communist Party, but he did not give an Order of Victory for the defeat in the Six-Days War.

He managed to invite the monarchist Vasily Shulgin to the XXIIth Party Congress, but he did not posthumously decorate Nicholas II, Rasputin, or Prince Yusupov for creating a revolutionary situation in Russia in 1917.

He managed to remove Stalin from the mausoleum, but he did not secure a place for himself.

He managed to destroy the anti-party group of Molotov, Malenkov, Kaganovich, Bulganin and, affiliated with them, Shepilov, but he did not destroy the Party group of Brezhnev, Kosygin, Podgorny, Suslov and, affiliated with them, Shelepin.

459. “Have you stocked up on soap and detergent yet?”

“No, should I?”

“Khrushchev just took control of the chemistry industries.”

460. After his ouster Khrushchev was asked to head a cancer research center.

“But I don’t know anything about that.”

“You took charge of agriculture and pretty soon there was no bread. Maybe you could have the same results with cancer.”

461. How times have changed in just one Five-Year Plan. In 1952 someone said Stalin was a fool. They shot him that very day. Just the other day someone else said Khrushchev was a fool. They gave him eight years for revealing a state secret.

462. “Is it better to be stupid or bald?”

AR: “Stupid. It’s not so noticeable.”

463. “What can you do about baldness?”

AR: “We don’t respond to political questions.”

464. “What is the difference between Khrushchev and Arkady Raikin?”

AR: “Raikin is smart but pretends to be a fool. Khrushchev tries to seem smart.”

465. An entry on “Khrushchev” in a twenty-first-century encyclopedia: “A minor political figure of the Arkady Raikin era.”

Arkady Raikin was a well-known humorist who was most famous for pushing the limits of acceptable public humor.

466. Khrushchev decided to establish three prizes in his own name for jokes about himself: ten years, five years, and two motivational prizes of one year each.

After Khrushchev’s ouster it didn’t take long for the people to learn to miss him. Compared to Brezhnev and all he stood for, Khrushchev looked pretty good. After his death in 1971 people took to laying flowers on his tomb in Moscow’s Novodevichy Cemetery as a way of thumbing their nose at the Brezhnev regime. Brezhnev soon closed

the cemetery to all but relatives of those buried there. It is thus somewhat surprising to hear the apparent venom of some of the anecdotes directed at an unpopular Khrushchev.

467. While he was visiting a *kolkhoz*, Khrushchev fell into a storage pit. A *kolkhoznik* pulled him out.

“Thank you, comrade, but don’t you tell anyone I fell in.”

“As long as you don’t tell anyone I pulled you out.”

468. Khrushchev ordered that a postage stamp bearing his portrait be issued. A few weeks later he asked the Minister of Communications if people were using it.

“No one is any more.”

“Why not?”

“They say it won’t stick to the envelope.”

“How could that be?”

“It seems they’re spitting on the wrong side.”

469. Khrushchev and Bulganin are flying across Russia. Bulganin says, “I’m going to throw a hundred-ruble bill out the window. Someone will be plenty glad to find it.”

Khrushchev counters, “I’ll throw a thousand rubles’ worth of ten-ruble bills out. Many people will be glad to find them.”

The pilot speaks up, “If I were to throw the two of you out, the whole world would be glad.”

470. A Muscovite was standing in yet another line for food. He asked the man standing behind him, “Who do you think is to blame for all this mess?”

“Khrushchev of course.”

“Hold my place. I’m going to go punch him in the face.”

When he returned, his acquaintance asked, “Well, did you get him good?”

“Nah, the line over there was even longer.”

The following joke was recycled to feature Brezhnev and then Gorbachev. I repeat it below only slightly changed in the Gorbachev era. See #732.

471. “Did you hear the news? They killed the President in America.”

“Damn! They’re ahead of us at that too?”

472. “What do you wish for the new year?” [1964]

AR: “That Khrushchev could meet with Kennedy again at a higher level.”

But before he died, before anyone could assassinate him, Khrushchev was ousted in a bloodless coup in October 1964. He was vacationing at the Black Sea at the time. It was officially announced that he had retired voluntarily because of ill health, but everyone knew that to be untrue.

473. “Is it true that Comrade Khrushchev’s health has worsened recently?”

“Yes. He got an ulcer from corn, shortness of breath from trying to catch America, herpes from the Virgin Lands, and diarrhea of the mouth from who knows where.”

474. “Is it true that it is dangerous to dive into the Black Sea?”

“Yes. You can dive in a premier and come up a pensioner.”

475. “What happened, Mama? Is our Nikita Sergeevich no longer

Khrushchev?”

476. A granny talks with her grandson.

“Was Lenin a good man?” he asks.

“Yes, he was,” she answers.

“And Stalin was bad?”

“Very bad.”

“What about Khrushchev?”

“I don’t know. Let him die first, then we’ll find out.”

477. “Why did they double the guard at the mausoleum?”

AR: “Khrushchev was spotted hanging around with a cot.”

478. “What did Adzhubei understand after Khrushchev’s ouster?”

AR: “He understood that he had married Rada Khrushcheva only for love.”

Adzhubei was identified at #453.

479. In 1965 residents of Odessa sent a request to the Central Committee to restore Khrushchev: “Better ten years without bread than a year without anecdotes.”

5

Brezhnev

It was not until many years later, long after Khrushchev's ouster, that the Soviet Union fell apart, but it might fairly be said that the Soviet experiment ended with him. For the next twenty years the Party and country would be led by men who apparently no longer believed in the goals or values of the 1917 Revolution. As we have seen in the preceding chapters, the Party had long ago become home to opportunists and careerists. By now they were well entrenched and, with Brezhnev's ascendancy, in charge. The country was run by a self-selected, largely self-perpetuating elite through a system of patronage and nepotism.

480. An old general is walking with his grandson.

"Grandad, will I be a general when I grow up?"

"Of course you will, grandson."

"Will I be a marshal?"

"No, the marshals have their own grandsons."

481. "Why can't you buy muskrat hats any more?"

"Because muskrats only reproduce arithmetically, while the *nomenklatura* has grown geometrically. No one's been shooting them for a long time."

Muskrat hats were popular headgear for the *nomenklatura*, the Party and bureaucratic elite.

482. Sign on the Regional Party Committee building: "He who doesn't work here doesn't eat."

The phrase "He who doesn't work doesn't eat" comes from Lenin's 1918 speech "On hunger" and became a widely used slogan in the 1920s. While the we're-all-in-this-together sense of the Revolution lived, Lenin's version prevailed. This anecdote reflects much more accurately the Brezhnev era. I wonder if Lenin knew how closely he was echoing St. Paul: "If any one will not work, let him not eat" (2 Thessalonians 3:10).

483. "Under communism we will have plenty of everything," says the Party lecturer.

"How about us?" asks a voice in the hall.

Well content and self-satisfied at the top of this heap, they saw no reason to undo the muddle their predecessors had created. Nor did they possess the sorts of vision that Lenin, Stalin, and even Khrushchev had, which had driven these leaders to launch huge projects and daring social experiments. And so they did little.

Leonid Ilich Brezhnev was no fool, at least not at first. He knew well what the Party had become and how it worked, well enough to remain at its helm for eighteen years, far

into his dotage. But he was a very gray bureaucrat who could not stir himself to more than tinker with the system even when it became clear that it was deteriorating. Except in military might, where the Soviet Union remained a fearsome superpower, and in a few other, mainly military related, scientific areas, the Soviet economy was still Third World. A wag of these years would describe it as “Upper Volta with missiles.” In some areas, we would later learn, it was moving backwards. Gorbachev was not mistaken when he branded the Brezhnev years the “era of stagnation.”

But coming to power as he did, Brezhnev had to put on a little show of strength at least at first. He didn’t want a repeat of the East German and Hungarian uprisings that had followed Stalin’s death and Khrushchev’s first Thaw—though in just a few years he would have to deal with Czechoslovakia. For the first year or so he made tough speeches about Soviet power and had a few more dissidents arrested than usual. Readers over the age of 50 may remember the trials of Andrei Siniavsky and Yuli Daniel in 1966. Some of the earliest Brezhnev anecdotes were about this toughness which the jokesters found difficult to take seriously. To understand the following two anecdotes you need to recall the pictures of Brezhnev with his thick, black eyebrows meeting above the bridge of his nose.

484. “We’ve fooled around long enough!” said Brezhnev, regluing his eyebrows beneath his nose.

485. “What do Brezhnev’s eyebrows represent?”

AR: “Stalin’s mustache at a higher level.”

In these early years Brezhnev was irreverently called the “two-browed (*dvubravyi*) eagle,” a pun on a symbol of tsarist power, the two-headed (*dvuglavyi*) eagle, and the “eyebrow bearer in the dark” (*brovonosets v potemkakh*), an even better pun on the Battleship Potemkin (*bronenosets Potemkin*), a naval vessel famous in Soviet history books and Sergei Eisenstein’s classic film for the mutiny that occurred on it in 1905. Everything in the Soviet Union was done at a “higher level,” meaning in a superior, more progressive way than it was in capitalist countries. By the same sort of self-declared definition, everything in the Soviet Union was also more “progressive” than in the West. A quip of the time claimed:

486. Soviet paralysis is the most progressive in the world.

Another theme, which appeared early and continued to inspire jokes until his death, was Brezhnev’s highly inflated sense of self-importance. To be fair to Brezhnev, this characteristic was not due entirely to his personality but was thrust upon him by the system. The coterie who surrounded him and depended upon him could not rely on Brezhnev’s brilliance or his vision or his viciousness, none of which he possessed, to keep him and them in power. Therefore they mounted a massive propaganda effort to make him appear to be what he was not. They rewrote parts of his younger biography (and with it minor parts of Soviet history), they showered him with medals, and gave him high-sounding titles, none of which helped very much. There was an emperor’s-new-clothes transparency to everything that was done to wrap him in a cult of personality. Many people still accept Lenin as a genius of sorts. No one doubts that Stalin was a fearsome tyrant. But it was impossible to take Brezhnev seriously as either. The following are some of the earlier anecdotes of this genre.

487. After Brezhnev came to power, members of the Party press asked him what he would like to be called: Great Leader, Genius of All Times and Peoples, or Father of the People?

“Call me simply Ilich.”

Stalin had been called all of the former, of course. Leonid Ilich shared his patronymic with Vladimir Ilich Lenin, who had been endearingly or intimately referred to as Ilich.

488. “What is the difference between God and Brezhnev?”

AR: “God is limitlessly merciful. Brezhnev is mercilessly limited.”

489. “Do we have a cult of personality now?”

AR: “We have a cult...but no personality.”

Perhaps because it was so difficult to establish the Brezhnev cult, the effort was stepped up in the 1970s. Three memoirs were ghost-written for Brezhnev—*Little Land*, *Rebirth*, and *The Virgin Lands*—telling of the leader’s exploits as a younger man in World War II, in industry, and in agriculture. Needless to say, all three memoirs greatly inflated his achievements. Adding insult to injury, in 1979 Brezhnev was awarded the Lenin Prize for Literature. In history, as it was rewritten for him, Stalin had been a hero of the Revolution, the Civil War, and then the generalissimo of the Great Fatherland War. It was necessary that Leonid Ilich measure up.

490. Did you hear that Leonid Brezhnev’s new book, *Rebirth*, has been translated into Italian? It was published as Leonardo, *Renaissance*.

491. A new memoir of an old Bolshevik appears in 1970: “I remember one day in October 1917. Lenin and his comrades were walking down a Petrograd street, discussing when they should lead the Revolution against the Provisional Government. Suddenly a youngster with heavy eyebrows appeared before them and said, The 25th, uncle, only the 25th.”

‘Hey there, young fellow,’ said Lenin, ‘what’s your name.’

‘Lenka.’”

Lenka is a childish nickname for Leonid. Brezhnev would have been 11 years old in 1917.

492. The last days of April 1945. General Zhukov telephones Stalin to inform him that the troops of the 1st Belorussian Front and the 1st Ukrainian Front can take Berlin within the next four days. He briefs Stalin on the plan of attack.

Stalin replies, “I like your plans, Comrade Zhukov, but give me fifteen minutes to ask Colonel Brezhnev’s advice.”

On every conceivable occasion for barely conceivable reasons Brezhnev was showered with decorations and medals. He eventually wore over sixty medals on his military uniform. Marshal Zhukov, a real hero of the war and postwar military leader, wore forty-six medals. Before he collapsed under their weight Brezhnev had been awarded 260 medals of various sorts, including five Hero of the Soviet Union and Hero of Socialist Labor gold stars.

493. Did you hear that Brezhnev is going to have surgery? He’s having his chest widened to make room for more medals.

The medals were not enough to demonstrate Brezhnev’s military leadership, however, so in 1976 he was promoted to marshal of the Soviet Union. Brezhnev, who had long been a major-general in the political commissariat of the Soviet Army, was promoted only a few days after Defense Minister Marshal Grechko died.

494. Brezhnev: "I should be made a marshal."

Grechko: "Over my dead body."

It was at this time that the wags inverted the inscription on the tomb of the unknown soldier for Brezhnev's glory:

495. "Your deeds are unknown, your name will live forever."

496. "What was Brezhnev awarded the rank of marshal for?"

AR: "Capturing the Kremlin."

497. "What will the new Five-Year Plan be called?"

AR: "The Marshal Plan."

Although the Marshall Plan didn't affect the USSR directly, educated Russians knew what it was.

498. "Will Brezhnev be given the rank of generalissimo?"

AR: "Yes, he will. And if he can correctly pronounce generalissimo, they're going to make him a people's artist as well."

Calling a duck a swan doesn't make it a swan, however.

499. "What's this new cake called Brezhnev like?"

AR: "It's the same thing as a napoleon, except without eggs."

Remember eggs? See #266.

As we have seen in earlier decades, it didn't matter how transparent or phoney the claims were. In public, officials and the people alike were expected to praise the leader and applaud when others did. Brezhnev insisted on the same sort of adulation and participation. One of the odder forms of adulation was the epithet "dear" which came to be attached to his name in the media. Another cant phrase from the period was "deep gratitude," which the people were said to experience continuously. The public, who read much of the official adulation in the papers and saw more on TV, found it all a bit too much.

500. The first day they introduced a fourth television channel a citizen tuned into the first channel and saw Brezhnev delivering a speech. He turned to the second channel, and there was Brezhnev. On the third, still Brezhnev. He turned to the fourth channel, and there sat a KGB colonel, shaking his finger and threatening, "Stop changing channels."

501. The telephone rings. Brezhnev picks up: "Dear Leonid Ilich speaking."

502. "What sixth sense have the Soviet people developed?"

"A sense of deep gratitude to the Party."

503. Before the Revolution the Chukchi had only two feelings, cold and hunger. Now they feel cold, hunger, and a sense of deep gratitude to the Party.

504. Brezhnev is lying on a beach, his face covered with a Panama hat. A dog pads over to him and starts to lick his private parts. Without looking up he says, "Now come on, comrades, this is going a bit too far."

505. When he was received by the Queen, the Soviet ambassador to Great Britain wanted to demonstrate his gallantry. But when he bowed to kiss her hand, the Queen withdrew it, explaining, "I have eczema."

"That's all right, your majesty, Brezhnev has hemorrhoids."

506. A high Soviet delegation is flying home from abroad. All of a sudden the bottom falls out of the airplane. The officials hang on for dear life, grabbing whatever they can. The plane plummets.

Brezhnev shouts, "Long live the USSR!"

Stormy, but very brief applause follows. The plane rights itself and flies on to Moscow.

And, of course, Brezhnev was concerned about how he would be remembered by posterity. Before you read the following anecdote, you may want to refresh your memory about earlier mausoleum jokes. See #22, #195–#198, and #477.

507. Brezhnev visits Lenin's mausoleum with his grandson, who asks him, "Grandad, is this where you will be after you die?"

"Of course. Right here."

At which Lenin sits up and says, "What is this, a fucking dormitory?"

Another of Brezhnev's unattractive traits, which had showed itself even before he became First Secretary, was his acquisitive nature. He liked nice things: silver, china, carpets, hunting weapons, snazzy automobiles, and more. Such items were, of course, generally inaccessible. Most were no longer made in the Soviet Union. No one could afford to purchase such goods with their legitimate salaries, not even the "servants of the people." In Brezhnev's case they came on "loan" from the nation's museums, as gifts from foreign leaders, and in who knows what other ways. People who found Brezhnev's covetousness disgusting were able to turn one of the popular contemporary propaganda slogans back on him. The slogan proclaimed: "All in the name of man. All for the good of man." This became:

508. A Chukcha returns home after his first visit to Moscow. He explains to his family what the Revolution is all about—"All in the name of man. All for the good of man"—and demonstrates his deep understanding of contemporary life: "And I even know who that man is."

509. The leaders take a short break at their summit meeting. De Gaulle produces a silver cigarette case. It is engraved "To General de Gaulle from a grateful France."

President Johnson pulls out his gold cigarette case, engraved "To Lyndon from his loving wife."

Brezhnev removes his, a beautiful platinum case encrusted with diamonds and engraved "To His Imperial Majesty Alexander II from the Russian Nobility."

510. After the Czech leaders were permitted to leave Moscow in August 1968, Brezhnev said to Kosygin, "What a classy watch Dubcek had!"

"Let me see," said Kosygin.

Alexander Dubcek was the young, reformist First Secretary of the Czechoslovak Party during the Prague Spring and the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968. For more on the Soviet invasion see #615–#621.

511. Brezhnev was driven to the countryside in one of his limousines to pick up his elderly mother and bring her back to Moscow. She is awed by the car and by the strains of Tchaikovsky playing on its stereo. In the Kremlin he shows off his spacious apartment with all its beautiful furniture, carpets, paintings, china, silver, and crystal, much of it taken from the tsars' collections. She is overwhelmed and responds quietly and fearfully when he asks how she likes it all. After about the tenth prompting she breaks into tears: "Oh, Lenechka, what will happen to you if the communists come back?"

The communists, of course, never would come back, not in the sense it is meant here, but at least one citizen, Second Lieutenant V.Ilin, so despised dear Leonid Ilich that in January 1969 he tried to shoot him. He missed. Rumors about the event spread quickly, but no official news was released for several days.

512. “Why hasn’t there been anything in the press about the fate of Ilin?”

“They’re looking for his younger brother, who said, ‘We will follow another path.’”

Lenin is supposed to have said this when he learned of his older brother’s execution for attempting to assassinate Tsar Alexander III in 1887. Forty years after the fact Lenin’s younger sister put these words in Vladimir Ilich’s mouth in her memoir. Lenin is supposed to have meant that he would not be a populist revolutionary like brother Alexander, but a Marxist.

513. Everyone is criticizing Ilin for having missed at such close range.

“You’ve got to understand, everyone was grabbing at my arm and saying, ‘Let me shoot, let me shoot.’”

514. They told Budenny what had happened.

“Well, did he get him?”

“No, Semyon Mikhailovich.”

“I’ve always said, sabers are better.”

Budenny was a famed cavalry commander of the Civil War. He was a notorious example of a general who remained in command for far too long, advocating the weapons and tactics used in the last war. He was removed from command very early on in World War II but not before his incompetence had caused many Soviet casualties.

One of Brezhnev’s problems was that he was neither well educated nor, apparently, very bright. That he had risen to the top of the Party said a lot about how the Party had changed since its revolutionary beginnings. Brezhnev wouldn’t have lasted a day among the brains and wits who made up the Central Committee before the Stalin-era purges. He was obviously street smart, at least until senility set in, but he was not school smart and he had little culture—which was important to the jokester *intelligenty*, who could be very snobbish.

515. The phone rings in Brezhnev’s apartment. Victoria Petrovna, Leonid Ilich’s wife, picks it up and hears a woman ask, “May I speak with Leonid Ilich, please?”

“Who is this?”

“I’m an old schoolmate.”

“You’re a whore is what you are. Lenny never went to school.”

516. Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya visits Brezhnev at his office. She is shown in and introduced, but she realizes he doesn’t know who she is.

“Hello, Leonid Ilich. I’m Krupskaya. You must know who I am, and you know my husband. You often quote from his works.”

“Welcome, Nadezhda Konstantinovna. Of course I know who you are. And your husband. How is Comrade Krupsky?”

Krupsky and Krupskaya are the masculine and feminine forms of the same last name. As you know, however, Krupskaya’s husband was named Lenin.

517. Brezhnev visits the Tretyakov Gallery.

“This is a Savrasov,” says the guide.

“S-s-savrasov.”

“‘The Rooks Have Returned.’ A beautiful painting.”

“B-b-beautiful.”

“And this one is called ‘Demon.’”

“D-d-demon.”

“A magnificent painting. A Vrubel.”

“M-m-magnificent. And so cheap!”

The Tretyakov Gallery is Moscow’s largest fine arts museum. The heart of the museum is a private collection which had been given to the city in 1892. Aleksei Savrasov was a realist painter of the late nineteenth century. Mikhail Vrubel completed his most famous canvases near the turn of the century.

518. Brezhnev travels to Central Asia. He is greeted by local party officials: “Salaam Aleikum!”

“Aleikum Salaam!” he responds properly, remembering what he was told to say.

“Salaam Aleikum!” they repeat.

“Aleikum Salaam!” repeats Leonid Ilich.

Suddenly and unexpectedly a dissident appears in the crowd and shouts: “Gulag Archipelago!”

“Archipelago Gulag!” responds a happy Brezhnev.

If the wags are to be believed, it may be that Brezhnev undertook so few new programs, not because he had so few ideas, but because they were so harebrained.

519. Brezhnev telephones Kosygin at midnight: “Tell me, Aleksei, who was that one-eyed, English admiral who defeated Napoleon’s navy? It’s six letters in my crossword.”

“Nelson.”

In the wee hours Brezhnev calls back: “Aleksei, what’s seven letters for our one-eyed field marshal, the one who beat Napoleon?”

“Kutuzov. Now can I get some sleep?”

At dawn Brezhnev calls Kosygin: “Aleksei, that one-eyed, Israeli general, what’s his name?”

“Dayan. Now will you stop waking me up?”

“Listen, Aleksei, I’ve got an idea. Why don’t we have one of Grechko’s eyes put out?”

520. After the American astronauts landed on the Moon, Brezhnev summoned the leaders of the Soviet space program. “The party and government instruct you as soon as possible to land our cosmonauts on the Sun.”

“But,” they object, “the temperature of the Sun is so high, we will not be able even to fly near it.”

“Do you take me for a fool?! We’ll send them in at night.”

Even hosting the Olympics in 1980 backfired. Moscow was renovated and spruced up at great cost. It was meant to be a showcase for the world of the achievements of the Soviet Union not only in sports but, it was hoped, would lead to a bonanza of tourism. Instead, Jimmy Carter decided that the Americans would boycott the Olympics in protest against the invasion of Afghanistan, and other countries followed his lead.

521. “Is it true, like they promised, that by 1980 we will have built communism?”

“No, they decided to host the Olympic Games instead.”

Late in his life the state of Brezhnev’s physical and mental health became a painfully obvious problem. By the late 1970s he looked bloated, pale, and unsteady, his voice slurred, and his memory failed him—all on occasion in public. His speeches, which had never been riveting, became even duller. The “gerontocracy” that the Politburo had become had no one to put in his place who wasn’t a threat to some of them, and so they propped Brezhnev up, sometimes literally, until he died in November 1982.

522. “What is the most fashionable old-folks’ home in the world?”

“The Kremlin.”

523. “What has forty teeth and four feet?”

“A crocodile.”

“What has four teeth and forty feet?”

“The Politburo.”

524. Brezhnev begins his official speech opening the 1980 Olympics: “O! O! O!”

His aide interrupts him with a whisper: “The speech starts below, Leonid Ilich. That is the Olympic symbol.”

525. Brezhnev officially welcomes Margaret Thatcher to the USSR. He reads: “Dear, much respected Indira Gandhi....”

An aide urgently whispers, “Leonid Ilich, this is Margaret Thatcher.”

“Dear, much respected Indira Gandhi....” he begins again. The aide interrupts him again. “I can see she is Margaret Thatcher, but what do you see written here?” snaps an angry Brezhnev, and again begins to read: “Dear, much respected Indira Gandhi....”

526. Brezhnev begins to read a speech: “Comrade Zionists!” As the audience gasps, Brezhnev looks at the text more closely and starts again: “Comrades! The Zionists are preparing....”

527. During Brezhnev’s speech a man in the audience is arrested. He turns out to be a spy.

“How did you recognize the enemy?” Brezhnev asks Major Pronin.

“I was guided by the wise words of your speech—‘the enemy never sleeps.’”

528. There is a knock at Brezhnev’s door. He grabs a slip of paper, finds the passage he needs, walks to the door, and reads: “Who’s there?”

Brezhnev was not the only character to wear the dunce’s cap in these years. Another favorite butt of jokes was Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev. Chapaev had been a real person, a minor hero in the Civil War. He had been made into a much larger hero by Dmitry Furmanov, who wrote his best-selling novel *Chapaev* in 1923, and by one of the first Soviet “talkies,” filmed in 1934. This movie was restored and rereleased on its thirtieth anniversary in 1964. An excellent indication of how much people’s attitudes had changed in thirty years are the anecdotes that follow, many of which echo in warped ways scenes from the movie. In 1934 people saw *Chapaev* many times and knew large parts of the dialogue by heart. Adults admired the hero, and cried when he drowned trying to swim the Ural River to escape the murderous Whites. Children played Chapaev in their war games. There are no Chapaev jokes from the 1920s or 1930s, when Vasily Ivanovich was apparently accepted as brave, intelligent, resourceful, and pure of heart. In the avalanche of jokes from the 1960s and 1970s he is a heavy-drinking, uncultured boob with a foul mouth, a larcenous heart, and uncertain loyalties. The myth of the Civil War was not completely undone by this time. In most Russians’ viscera, if not their minds, the Reds were still the good guys and the Whites the villains. This may still be true; a 1999 survey revealed that Chapaev jokes continue to be among Russians’ favorites. We should understand these anecdotes to be directed more against the excesses of Brezhnevite propaganda than against Chapaev and other heroes and victims of the Civil War. Chapai, as he was sometimes fondly called, has two sidekicks, invented for the movie and much present in the jokes: Petka, his faithful aide, and Anya, a beautiful, fiery machine-gunner. Here are a few of them.

529. “What dirty feet you have, Vasily Ivanovich, even dirtier than mine.”

“I’m older than you are, Petka.”

530. Furmanov asks, "Vasily Ivanovich, won't you change your socks?"

"Only for sugar."

531. Petka and Vasily Ivanovich are washing in the sauna. Petka is washing Chapai's back with a loofa. "Hey, Vasily Ivanovich, here's that T-shirt you said was stolen a few weeks ago."

532. Petka sees Chapaev digging an enormous hole.

"Vasily Ivanovich, what are you digging such a deep hole for?"

"Furmanov offered to recommend me for the Party. I have to take a picture of me, just a head shot."

"A head shot? Then why are you digging the hole so deep?"

"I want to take it sitting on my horse."

533. Anka gets a new apartment and invites Chapaev and Petka to a housewarming party. "Take the 93 bus," she tells Chapai.

Vasily Ivanovich never showed up. The next morning Petka, the hair of the dog that bit him already aboard, takes the bus home and runs into Vasily Ivanovich at his stop.

Chapaev exclaims, "Good thing you got here. That was 92 just leaving. Next one we take to Anka's."

In real life and in Furmanov's novel Chapaev went to the Military Academy to learn more of his craft and to advance his career. In the anecdotes he never quite could get accepted though he tried repeatedly. Inspired by his boss, Petka tried too.

534. Chapaev tried once more to get into the Military Academy.

"How'd it go, Vasily Ivanovich? Pass everything?"

"Not everything, Petka. I passed urine and stools but not the math."

535. Petka failed his entry exams to the Military Academy.

"What happened, Petka, didja mess up the math?"

"You know, they asked me who Newton was, and I told them he was a stallion in the third squadron."

"Well, they were right to fail you. I transferred Newton to the second squadron back in the summer."

536. Petka tried yet again to get into the Military Academy, but once again he failed. The problem this time was *diamat*. [Dialectical materialism= Marxist philosophy; see #419.]

"What happened, Petka, didn't you pass *mat*?" [The roughest sort of swearing using mother words.]

"Not *mat*, *diamat*."

"What's that, some special kind of *mat*?"

"Yeah, I guess."

"Well, I can't help you there. Better ask Furmanov."

If math and *diamat* were problems for our heroes now and then, *mat* never was and vodka was continuously.

537. "Fuck your mother!" said Vasily Ivanovich. Then he began to really swear.

538. "Vasily Ivanovich, how much is five-tenths plus one-half?"

"I feel sure it's a liter, but I couldn't prove it."

539. "Vasily Ivanovich, orders from HQ to shut down the apparatus."

"OK, Petka, turn it off, but be careful with the coil."

540. Chapaev asks Petka, "Did you finish questioning the White officer?"

“No, he still won’t say a thing.”

“Did you give him a good beating?”

“Practically killed him. Nothing.”

“Put needles under his nails?”

“Repeatedly. Still nothing.”

“Hmm...have you tried getting him good and drunk and then withholding the hair of the dog next morning?”

“What are you saying, Vasily Ivanovich? We are not beasts.”

But there were greater heroes than Chapaev, and he knew it.

541. “Vasily Ivanovich, can you drink a liter?”

“I can.”

“Two?”

“I can.”

“A whole bucket.”

“No, Petka. Only Ilich could do that.”

As the memory of Chapaev was crudely satirized, so too was it used to satirize the way in which heroes in general were memorialized in the USSR—in school books, classroom visits by Civil War veterans, and museums of the Revolution.

542. The regional *komsomol* [Communist Youth League] organized a visit for local schoolchildren to meet veterans of the Civil War. They introduced an old man who was the last to see Chapaev alive. The organizer asks the old man to tell the Pioneers of his meeting with Chapaev.

The old man tells his story. “I crawled up on a ridge above the river with my machine-gun, a Maxim. I see Chapaev, he’s swimming across the river. I fire a burst at him, but he dives. I see him surface and fire another burst. And that, children, was the last I saw of Chapai.”

On the Pioneers and *komsomol*, see #284.

543. In the Museum of the Revolution a guide points out the skeleton of Vasily Ivanovich Chapaev.

“And whose is the little skeleton next to him?” asks a viewer.

“That’s Chapaev as a child.”

In fiction Chapaev didn’t get to travel except with his unit in the war. In the jokes he became a man of the world, so to speak.

544. Chapaev returned from Paris. “Petka, I was on the Eiffel Tower. Out to the right of me...holy shit! I look out to the left...holy shit!”

“What a memory you have, Vasily Ivanovich.”

545. Chapaev returned from Italy.

“Say something in Italian,” asks Petka.

“Go fuck yourself, Petruccio.”

546. “Vasily Ivanovich, they say you applied for an exit visa to Israel.”

“Shh, Petka, red af idish.” [Yiddish for “speak Yiddish”]

547. Chapaev is sent abroad for two months with the unit’s funds to make necessary purchases. Six months later he returns.

“What took you so long? Where have you been?”

“England, France, a bunch of other places.”

“And did you go to Israel?”

“Of course not.”

“Really...? Tell me the truth, Vasily Ivanovich. Did you go to Israel?”

“Ma pitom?” [Modern Hebrew for, literally, “Why suddenly” or figuratively “Why are you asking me this?”] The Hebrew phrase is a direct translation of and probably comes from the Russian idiom *chego vdrug* through the very heavy Russian Jewish settlement of Israel.]

Israel and Jewish emigration were obviously not issues of the 1920s when the real Chapaev strode the Earth; neither was black power protest in the USA. But in the 1960s, when these jokes appeared, both were. When American “dissidents” visited the USSR, they could wind up in Chapaev jokes.

548. When Angela Davis came to the USSR, she saw the film *Chapaev* repeatedly. She especially liked the part where they say, “We’ll kill all the Whites, and then life will be good.”

There was no denying that Vasily Ivanovich was resourceful. But this didn’t mean the wags couldn’t make fun of that too.

549. The Reds and Whites are dug in. Across the White position comes a peasant cart with a woman in it. The Whites stop her. She asks to be permitted to go on to the next village toward the Red position. They let her go. The cart comes into the Red emplacement and goes directly to HQ. Furmanov meets the cart. The woman removes her braids.

“Petka!” exclaims Furmanov. “What a great disguise.”

“This was nothing,” Petka says modestly. “Unhitch Vasily Ivanovich.”

For all their bravery and resourcefulness heroes must meet their death, heroically if possible, of course, but inevitably. Vasily Ivanovich died well the first few times, but by the 1960s he couldn’t get even that right.

550. Chapaev is swimming across the Ural River but he’s using only one arm. Petka swims up beside him: “Drop the suitcase, Vasily Ivanovich.”

That’s the whole joke in its original form. Chapaev had in fact been shot in one arm and drowned trying to swim the cold and turbulent river. The suitcase added cupidity and stupidity. Later another line was added.

551. Chapaev is swimming across the Ural River but he’s using only one arm. Petka swims up beside him: “Drop the suitcase, Vasily Ivanovich.”

“I can’t, Petka. All the General Staff cards are in it. Two decks.”

This is a great deal funnier in Russian, in which *karty* means both cards and maps.

552. Petka is swimming across the Ural River with a looted contrabass.

“Where’s Chapaev?” Furmanov greets him at the far bank.

“Vasily Ivanovich got a grand piano. He’s coming across the bottom.”

One purely fictional character played a similar role in popular culture during these years. Eight years after “Chapaev” was rereleased, the first of a series of hugely popular films about SS Standartenführer Max Otto von Shtirlits, a Soviet undercover agent in Nazi Germany, was screened. There was nothing *Le Carré* about Colonel Isaev, alias Shtirlits. He was boundlessly loyal and brave. Working shoulder to shoulder with hated Nazis and far from those he loved, he never doubted his purpose or let his guard drop. He found himself in plenty of tight places, but he always got the better of his German counterpart, Heinrich Müller, who sometimes suspected him, and various Gestapo agents set on his trail. Shtirlits movies must have been for 1970s Soviet audiences like James Bond or

Indiana Jones movies were for us in some ways. They were exciting and they were fun, but when they were over you could laugh at the ridiculously close escapes and the almost supernatural powers of observation, insight, and agility possessed by the hero. How stupid could the bad guys be anyway? Add in the Soviet case that you could also feel used—once again—by the propaganda machine. Not surprisingly, Shtirlits caught a lot of flak.

553. On Monday they put Shtirlits before the firing squad. Yes, it looked like it was going to be a rough week.

554. The Gestapo closed off all the exits...but Shtirlits escaped through the entrance.

555. Shtirlits walked to the window and blew his nose in the curtain. Just for a moment he wanted to be Colonel Isaev again.

556. Shtirlits received a coded telegram: "Your wife has had a son." A single tear slid down the agent's cheek. It had been twenty years since he had been home.

557. The Gestapo informed Shtirlits that if he didn't pay his electricity bill, they would turn off his radio transmitter.

558. Coming to in his office, Müller saw Shtirlits lurking suspiciously by his safe.

"What are you doing here, Shtirlits?" he demanded sternly.

"I'm waiting for a trolley," answered Shtirlits.

Müller walked out of his office and down the hall. Suddenly he thought, "How could there be a trolley in my office?" He ran back to the office. Shtirlits had gone. "I guess it left already," thought Müller.

559. Shtirlits ran down the hallway. Müller stuck out a leg and tripped him up.

"Fuck your mother," thought Shtirlits.

"How dare you speak familiarly to me," thought Müller.

560. The general staff officers are in a meeting. A messenger comes in: "Sirs, on Thursday everyone must report for vegetable harvesting."

Shtirlits slaps himself just above the knee: "Fuck your mother, it's just like at home...."

Müller: "A wily one you are Shtirlits, pretending to be a Russian agent just to get out of harvesting vegetables."

561. Shtirlits noticed his contact right away. She was in a red swimsuit with a bright star on her breasts. She held a copy of *Pravda*. He approached her unnoticed.

"What time have you got?" he asked playfully.

"I forgot my watch at the Lubianka," smiled the girl. That was the password.

Viacheslav Tikhonov was the very popular actor who played Shtirlits.

562. Pitsunda [a Black Sea resort in Georgia]. Peoples' Artist of the USSR Tikhonov is walking on the beach. Young women are stretched out, sunning themselves.

"Whores," thinks Tikhonov.

"Shtirlits," think the whores.

Shtirlits and Chapaev were not the only heroes to come in for a lambasting in these years. Lenin himself became a target in 1970, when the propaganda machine launched an enormous campaign to mark the centenary of his birth. The jubilee organizers built museums, gave prizes for songs, poems, and statues glorifying the immortal leader, churned out books, posters, pamphlets by the millions, and broadcast innumerable programs. They dusted off all the old slogans and devised a few new ones. Products, factories, farms, and towns were renamed in his honor. It was too much—much too

much—and people got tired of it; even while admiration for Lenin's intelligence and accomplishments lingered, they retaliated with anecdotes making fun of it all. Notice the difference between these jokes and those told about Lenin in the 1920s and 1930s.

One of the famous phrases that had already met a riposte a few years earlier was a line from a poem by Maiakovsky which pointed out the fundamental importance of Lenin and Leninism in the early party: "We say 'Lenin' and mean the Party. We say 'the Party' and mean Lenin." This now became:

563. "We say 'Lenin' and mean the Party. We say 'the Party' and mean Lenin." For fifty years we've been saying one thing when we mean another.

"Lenin died, but his cause lives on" became:

564. "Lenin died, but his body lives on."

Compare with #23 and #688.

This was not much of a stretch, considering not only his constant presence in the mausoleum, but also the use of such slogans as "Lenin is more alive than the living" (also Maiakovsky), "Lenin is eternally alive," and "Lenin is always with us."

565. A worker walks out of the mausoleum deeply moved: "The motherfucker looks like he's alive."

"Where do you think you are?" a policeman reprimands him.

"Say what? I was just saying, our dear Ilich, I can't fucking believe it, he looks completely alive."

"Where do you think you are?" a policeman barks again.

"What did I do? I was just saying, Lenin...."

"Fuck Lenin. I'm asking you, where do you think you are?!"

566. It is the year 2000. The loudspeaker in the subway car squawks: "Lenin Station with connections here for the Lenin Line and the Lenin Line. Next stop: Lenin Station."

567. A telegram is sent to the mausoleum: "Arise, ye wretched of the Earth."

Signed: "Prisoners of starvation."

The two lines in quotes are the full first line and part of the second line of the Internationale (on which see #7). Addressed to Lenin and separated as they are, the lines take on a very different meaning.

568. An old Jew travels to Moscow to see Lenin. He goes straight to the mausoleum, but the guards won't let him in.

"I'm here to see Lenin."

"He died years ago, grandad."

"But for you he's eternally alive, for an old Jew he's dead!"

569. A pair of newlyweds go to a furniture store to buy a bed and come home with a new three-person bed. Because Lenin is always with us.

The campaign was pervasive. It was plastered on public walls, it was in the schools, it filled radio and TV. A new commemorative one-ruble coin, stamped with Lenin's profile, was minted. It was almost inescapable. Only the true rube or the thoroughly ignorant prole might not know what was going on. One didn't have to be very bright for the basic fact to sink in.

570. A student comes to exams dishevelled and unshaven. The professor asks, "Why do you look like this?"

"I'm afraid. I turn on the radio, and all I hear is 'Lenin lives.' I turn on the TV, and all I hear is 'Lenin lives.' I'm afraid to turn on my razor."

571. Two theater buffs meet. One greets the other: "I just saw *The Living Corpse* for the umpteenth time."

"How could you? I'm just sick of it all. Everything about Lenin!"

The Living Corpse is a play by Leo Tolstoy which pre-dates Lenin's fame and has nothing to do with him.

572. A counselor in a Pioneer camp asks the children a riddle: "Children, guess who this is. He's gray, he has big ears, and he jumps all around the field."

The children look blank.

"Well, come on. Who do we sing all those songs about?"

The children respond together, "I know. I know. It's Uncle Lenin!"

573. A school lesson:

"Children, who knows what century this is?"

Utter silence.

"What year is it?"

"Jubilee."

574. The doctors are interviewing a patient in the mental hospital: "What is your name?"

"Ehhhh...."

"Where are you from?"

"Behhhh...."

"What seems to be your problem?"

"Mehhhh...."

"Do you know what year this is?"

"Jubilee."

575. It's 1970. Entrance exams are underway at the university. A teacher tries to draw out a weak student by speaking of the most obvious of current events: "Whose jubilee are we celebrating this year?"

"I don't know. That's not in the textbook."

"So, don't you read newspapers or magazines? Don't you listen to the radio or watch TV?"

"We don't have any of those things in our town."

"And what town are you from?"

"From Flyshitston."

The professor says to his assistant, "You think we could get away there, maybe just for the summer?"

576. At rush hour the resurrected Lenin boards a tram. "Comgade, don't push," he says to the worker standing beside him.

The worker stares at him in amazement and finally says, "Mr. Ruble is alive."

Lenin's speech impediment had been used in some earlier anecdotes but became common in jubilee jokes.

Tours of "Lenin places" were promoted. Everywhere Lenin had lived (within the Soviet Union), everywhere he had made a speech, held a meeting, or hidden out was marked with a commemorative plaque and put on a tour. Ten new Lenin museums, mostly at "Lenin places," were erected in 1970 alone.

577. Two students decided to take a tour of “Lenin places”—to see Geneva, London, Brussels, and Paris, places where Lenin had lived in emigration. They asked for a recommendation [in order to procure a visa] from their institute’s party committee.

They were told: “We understand your desire completely but recommend for the time being that you visit Ulianovsk [Lenin’s birthplace on the Volga River], Shushenskoe [Lenin’s Siberian exile], and Lenin Hills [Moscow River embankment behind the University of Moscow].”

578. What new prizes will be established in connection with the jubilee?

AR: For a critical reading of Lenin’s works: a trip to the Lenin places.

Read Shushenskoe!

579. The KGB announced a competition for the best anecdote about the jubilee:

First prize: a meeting with Lenin.

Second prize: seven years of housing at government expense.

Third prize: five years in the Lenin places.

580. Did you hear that there’s a new jubilee soap? It’s called “Through the Lenin places.”

While factories and farms and some of their products were being renamed to honor the birthday boy, the people as usual ran ahead of the propagandists. They invented products, for instance, the three-person bed and the soap, that they’d like to see. These anecdotes were told in many forms: Did you hear...; What is the name of...; Armenian Radio is asked...; and so on. Here are some of the longed-for products and their names:

581. A new memorial fountain: Lenin’s stream

Perfume: the smell of Ilich

Powder: Lenin’s cremains

Bra: Lenin’s hills

Eggs: Lenin’s balls

Child’s toy: a mausoleum with a button. Push it and Stalin’s coffin flies out.

A shooting gallery in the park: Fanny Kaplan [who shot Lenin in 1919].

A locomotive clock: on the hour Lenin pops up, stretches out his arms and intones, “Comrades, the proletarian revolution, of which the Bolsheviks dreamed, cuckoo.”

Back in the 1920s dozens of memoirs had been written by old Bolsheviks and others who had come into contact with Lenin in one context or another. These were trotted out again, and new memoirs, often only vignettes, were written by people who had some fleeting contact with the great man. Schoolchildren and workers were treated to talks by people who had met him.

582. Humankind is divided into two categories: those who saw Lenin alive, and those who saw him in the mausoleum.

583. An old Bolshevik is sharing his memory of Lenin: “It was at the II Party Congress. I go in, excuse me, to the toilet, and there stands our great leader modestly taking care of business. And his eyes were so kind, so kind! That’s the way I remember him.”

584. It’s 1917. Lenin goes to the baths. There are no tubs free, but not far from him he sees a worker, washing in one tub and soaking his feet in another.

“Comrade, let me have one of those tubs.”

“Go fuck yourself.”

Lenin walks around the bath but doesn't find any free tubs. He returns and addresses the worker: "Comgade, that's uncommunistic. You have two tubs and I don't have any."

"Fuck off or I'll hit you upside your bald head with the fucking tub."

Fifty years later the Chairman of the Party meeting introduces a speaker: "And now to share his memories with us, here is an old fellow worker who twice conversed with Lenin."

585. At a Pioneer meeting a participant of the very first Lenin *subbotnik* [Saturday of "voluntary" labor] is telling the children of his experience: "They took me and Fedia out of the shop to the *subbotnik*. A little guy with a cap and a beard comes up to me and says, 'Pick up the logs, comgades, don't just stand around.' So we told him where to go. That's the last I ever saw of Fedia. I just got out a month ago myself."

The most famous image from this first *subbotnik* on May Day, 1919 is of Lenin carrying a heavy log. In later jokes this became an inflatable rubber log which would be lost or stolen, setting Dzerzhinsky into action to find it.

Nadezhda Krupskaya, who died in 1939, was also resurrected for the anecdotes. She had played an ambivalent role in establishing the original Lenin cult, insisting that the modest and selfless Lenin wouldn't have wanted it, that an ideology of collectivism should eschew it, but at the same time writing essays for children and adults about Lenin's fine qualities. Her essays for children emphasized Lenin's love of children—she and Vladimir Ilich never had any—and his extraordinary kindness. Officially Nadezhda Konstantinovna was remembered as plain, selfless in the service of her great spouse, and morally pure. The jokesters inverted and perverted these characteristics to get at Krupskaya and Lenin.

586. Schoolchildren come to visit Krupskaya. "Granny Nadia, tell us a story about Lenin."

"You know, children, about Lenin's great kindness. I remember once when a group of children came to visit Vladimir Ilich when he was shaving. 'Play with us, grandad Lenin,' they said. 'Fuck off, you little bastards,' he told them. His eyes were so kind."

587. Krupskaya was speaking to a group of schoolchildren: "Everyone knows about Lenin's great kindness. I'll tell you a story. Once Vladimir Ilich was shaving and a young boy was standing next to him. Lenin sharpened his blade and fondled the little boy. He shaved himself, rinsed out his shaving brush, sharpened his razor, and fondled the little boy. Then he dried his razor and put it in its case. And he never slashed the little boy!"

588. Dzerzhinsky visits Krupskaya. "Nadenka, permit me to embrace you—for fifty rubles."

She thinks, "I could buy Volodia a new cap," and allows him to embrace her.

"Nadenka, permit me to kiss you for a hundred rubles."

She thinks, "I could buy Volodia a new suit," and gives her permission.

"Nadenka, permit me to fuck you for two hundred rubles." She agrees to this too. Half an hour after Dzerzhinsky leaves, Lenin comes home.

"Nadiushka, has Feliks Edmundovich come by? Did he give you my salary?"

589. A Lenin art exhibition opened in the Manege [tsarist riding academy outside the Kremlin]. Visitors are standing in front of a canvas entitled *Lenin in Poland*. It shows a cot with two pairs of legs sticking out of the cot, one toes up, the other toes down.

"Isn't that Lenin's cot in Razliv?" [Lenin's place of refuge from the Petrograd police between July and October 1917]

“Exactly right.”

“But whose legs are they?”

“Feliks Edmundovich’s and Nadezhda Konstantinovna’s.”

“But where’s Lenin?”

“Lenin’s in Poland.”

590. Two girl-friends are talking. “Come on, buck up, this is nothing to cry about. Beauty’s not the most important thing. Look at Nadezhda Konstantinovna Krupskaya. She was as ugly as they come, and look at the guy she landed.”

Lenin too was officially remembered as austere and almost asexual. In fact he was pretty abstemious, denying himself most of the pleasures of normal human diversions: music, theater, friendships, love, jokes. He was not known for public displays of affection and heartily disapproved of the radical sexual philosophy of Bolsheviks such as Aleksandra Kollontai. He kept his mind on business. Lenin probably had one affair in his short life, with a pretty married disciple named Inessa Armand, but in the jokes he shows an inordinate interest in masturbation, Nadezhda’s faithlessness, what other people might be doing, and little boys.

591. A memorial plaque: “In this building in 1910 V.I. Lenin hid with I.F. Armand from N.K. Krupskaya.”

592. “Tell me, Iakov Mikhailovich [Sverdlov], is it true what they say, that Feliks Edmundovich spent a lot of time in exile beating off?”

“What are you saying, Vladimir Ilich? He was always studying *Kapital*.”

“A waste of time, my friend, a waste of time! Masturbation is a most diverting pastime, I can tell you. And as you can see, it in no way detracts from revolutionary work! Only don’t tell Nadezhda Konstantinovna, she is such a crystalline soul.”

Iakov Sverdlov was a loyal follower of Lenin. He played a major role in organizing the October Revolution, and from 1917 until his death in 1919, was Chairman of the Soviet Central Executive Committee, that is, titular head of the young Soviet state. He may be best remembered today for having given the order in 1919 that led to the execution of the tsarist family in Ekaterinburg, later renamed Sverdlovsk.

593. Lenin asks Dzerzhinsky, “Have you ever masturbated, Feliks Edmundovich?”

“No, I never tried.”

“Not in prison, not in exile? How could that be, my friend? It’s a most pleasant thing. You really must try it. I’m sure you could do it.”

594. “Nadia, open up, please. Nadia, it is I, Volodia, why won’t you open up? Nadiushka, it’s Vovka-mogkovka [an infantile Brucie-Woosie variation on Vladimir that comes out Vovka-carrot, characteristically mispronounced]!... Feliks Edmundovich, she’s in there with Tgotsky, break it down.”

595. Dzerzhinsky, exhausted after another sleepless night at the Central Committee, nods off in a chair. Lenin sneaks up behind him and whacks him on the back of the head. Dzerzhinsky comes to and looks around. “Gotcha, just checking your revolutionary vigilance.”

Lenin’s kindness, so often referred to in official stories, especially Krupskaya’s, also becomes more than slightly warped in the anecdotes.

596. Lenin’s secretary announces, “The Red Cross has sent you a package.”

“The children, give it to the children.”

“It’s prophylactics.”

“Save twenty for Dzerzhinsky, puncture the rest and give them to the Mensheviks.”
597. A peasant supplicant comes to Lenin.

“Welcome, comrade supplicant, sit down! You ag, of cougse, a poog peasant?”

“Not exactly, Vladimir Ilich, maybe not. I have a horse, you see.”

“Aha, then you are a middling peasant?”

“So to speak, Vladimir Ilich. We don’t go hungry, the children have shoes. I have two horses in fact.”

“Ahhh, you tugn out to be a *kulak*.”

“I suppose, Vladimir Ilich. We have cabbage soup every day, the children have clothes, so the neighbors they sometimes say to me, they say, ‘You, Afanasy, are a *kulak*.’”

“Aha. A *kulak*. Hm, hm, hm. Feliks Edmundovich, shoot this comrade, please.”

“Vladimir Ilich, it’s already dinner time. We’ll shoot him after dinner.”

“No, gight now. Befoge dinneg without fail. And give his dinneg to the stagving childgen.”

598. Peasant supplicants come to Lenin. “Vladimir Ilich, what shall we do? We have nothing to eat. Only straw is left.”

“Then you must eat straw.”

“We have been. We’re starting to moo.”

“What’s the problem? I have lime honey almost every morning and you don’t hear me buzz.”

599. “Vladimir Ilich, the participants in the civil disturbance have been arrested. What shall we do with them?”

“Shoot them! But first give them tea. And make sure it is hot.”

Children had long been urged to grow up like uncle or grandad Lenin, and parents to raise their children after that model. Is it surprising that all these stories might damage that image?

600. Two mothers are talking about their children.

“Ivan has become just like Pushkin, always writing, writing....”

“And Fedia is just like Lenin, always in jail or exile.”

Lenin’s image survived the jubilee, bloodied and maybe bowed, but still hero to millions. In various de-Stalinization campaigns it had been and remained common to praise Lenin as the progenitor of a great movement that had been temporarily perverted by the evil Stalin. Gorbachev would say such things in his 1987 book, *Perestroika*. Dissident, but communist, historians such as Roy Medvedev did also. It is not surprising then to find Lenin in this role in a few jubilee anecdotes.

601. At one end of a huge square in Kharkov stands the building of the regional committee of the Communist Party, at the other end the university and a number of other institutes. In the middle of the square a new statue of Lenin was erected, facing the regional committee building. The sculptor was asked why Lenin stood with his back to the workers.

“Such bandits are in the building across the way, he was afraid to take his eyes off them.”

602. Lenin came to life, looked about him, read the papers and the new books, and disappeared. He was found at the train station with a suitcase.

“Where are you going, Vladimir Ilich?”

“Into emigration, into emigration. We’ll have to start over from the beginning.”

A more common conclusion for the jokesters seemed to be:

603. “Let’s have a drink, Vladimir Ilich.”

“No, my friend, I don’t drink anymore. The last time I got soused, back in April, I got up on a train in Finland Station and said such crap that I don’t think we’ll ever get it stigmatized out.”

On the whole people seemed to care more about the jokes than about Lenin, whatever conclusion one might come to about him.

604. All through the jubilee year jokes were fed into a computer which was programmed to write the “average” joke. The result: Lenin meets Chapaev in Prague and asks him, “Khaim, did you submit your emigration documents yet?”

One series of largely apolitical jokes that circulated in these years concerned the Chukchi, an indigenous people to the northeastern peninsula of the Russian Far North. Chukchi jokes are sometimes like American redneck and Polish jokes, featuring the stupidity of the protagonists. More often the Chukchi stand as symbols of extreme remoteness and isolation, understandable ignorance of modern life, and on rare occasion of the wiliness of those still close to nature. On balance the Chukchi wind up seeming more naive and likeable than foolish. A strange linguistic characteristic of Chukchi jokes is the use of “however” (*odnako*) to introduce many phrases, which might be best translated as “How about that?” in this context. Chukchi jokes were often told with a characteristic accent that does not translate. Nor unfortunately do some clever puns that are made possible by the accent. Apparently the anecdotes were inspired in large part by a 1966 film about a young revolutionary who represented Soviet power in Chukotka in the 1920s (*Chief of Chukotka*, “Nachal’nik chukhotki”) and by a popular song from 1972. Chukcha is singular, Chukchi plural.

605. Two Chukchi sit on the ice at the edge of the Arctic Ocean, fishing. The fish aren’t biting.

“Let’s tell anecdotes.”

“What kind?”

“Political.”

“You crazy? They hear, they’ll exile us.”

606. A Chukcha sits in a tree and saws at the branch on which he is sitting. A hunter passes by and warns him, “Careful there, you’ll fall.”

The Chukcha continues sawing. The branch falls and the Chukcha with it. He picks himself up, looks admiringly after the hunter, and says, “How about that, a shaman.”

607. Two Chukchi come to Moscow. They board a trolley.

“Can I go to GUM [Moscow’s largest department store] on this trolley?” asks one.

“No, it doesn’t go that far.”

The second Chukcha: “Can I?”

608. A Chukcha comes to Moscow. He takes a taxi. The taxi goes careening through heavy traffic, swerving repeatedly to miss pedestrians. The taxi bears down on an old woman trudging across the street with heavy bags. At the last instant the driver swerves left. The Chukcha opens his door. Thunk.

“How about that, Chukcha great hunter.”

609. A Chukcha applies to the Literary Institute.

“What books have you been reading recently?”

“Chukcha not reader. Chukcha writer.”

610. A Chukcha applies for a job. He signs the application with three crosses.

“What’s this, surname, first name, and patronymic?”

“No. That surname, first name, and academic degree.”

611. A Chukcha stands guard at an army post. Someone approaches.

Chukcha: “Halt. Give password.”

“Go suck my cock.”

“Strange. Two years I stand guard and still the same password.”

612. A Chukcha stands guard.

“Halt. I will shoot.”

“I have halted.”

“I am shooting.”

613. A Chukcha calls the information number for Aeroflot. “Tell, please, how long flight from Moscow to Yakutsk?”

“Just a minute, please.”

“Thank you.”

614. A geologist on an expedition to Chukotka gets lost in the tundra. He has abandoned all hope of rescue when suddenly he sees a Chukcha approaching on skis. With his last strength he yells, “Over here, comrade.”

The Chukcha glides over and says reproachfully, “So in Moscow is ‘Chukcha,’ but here is ‘comrade.’”

One of the most momentous events of Brezhnev’s eighteen years occurred in 1968 when Soviet troops invaded Czechoslovakia. A political crisis in Czechoslovakia in January had led to the dismissal of the old hard-line Party leadership and their replacement by younger reformers. Led by Alexander Dubček, they permitted increasing criticism of the regime and freer discussion of the country’s problems. Soviet and other Warsaw Pact leaders watched the so-called Prague Spring nervously until July when the Czechoslovak Party abolished censorship. This they interpreted to be abandonment of socialist leadership, and in August, Warsaw Pact troops, led by Soviet troops, invaded and crushed the “rebellion.” They announced that they had been invited by the Czechoslovak people to defend socialism.

The invasion was a watershed of sorts for the Soviet Union. Dissidents who found Brezhnev’s rule repugnant but harmless until then were driven into deeper opposition. A few dared to demonstrate on Red Square and were promptly arrested and imprisoned. Many of the secondary leaders of the Gorbachev and Yeltsin years would later say that as young people they were deeply affected by the brutality and cynicism of the invasion and had prepared since then for the opportunity to reform or rebel. Others expressed their disgust in the form that had long been available to them—the anecdote.

615. “Is it true that the invasion of Soviet troops produced communism in Czechoslovakia?”

“It must have. The electrification of Czechoslovakia was accomplished a long time ago.”

616. “Why did our troops cross the Czech border?”

“Because the friendship between socialist countries knows no bounds.”

617. “Who are the Russians to the Czechs—friends or brothers?”

“Brothers, of course. One gets to choose one’s friends.”

618. “What varieties of perverted love are there?”

“Armenian, French, and Soviet-Czechoslovakian.”

619. “Why have the Soviet troops remained in Czechoslovakia so long?”

“They are still looking for whoever it was who called for their help.”

620. A TASS announcement: “For the Soviet Union the agreement about normalization of relations with Czechoslovakia was signed by T. [tovarishch =comrade] Brezhnev, T.Grechko [Minister of War], and T-64.”

The T-64 was the latest model Soviet battle tank.

621. When the “fraternal assistance” ended, a sign appeared on the exterior wall of the Prague Museum, which was heavily pitted by bullets: “An exhibition of EI-Grechko.”

Because there were no terrible wars or grand programs (such as collectivization or crash industrialization) in Brezhnev’s time, the dominant visible mood of the country in these years was complacent and placid. This is not to say that Brezhnev and the government didn’t have their worries or that the people were content. Resigned might be a better word than complacent. The only large project, which the regime tried to elevate to grand status with a great deal of hype, was the construction of BAM, the Baikal-Amur Mainline Railroad. This hugely wasteful project pushed through taiga, swamps, and permafrost. Built largely with convict labor and Komsomol recruits, BAM was meant to open up the more northerly parts of Siberia through which it ran, as the Trans-Siberian Railroad had done for southern Siberia and parts of Central Asia in late tsarist times. As you will see, the only two BAM anecdotes included here reflect on BAM and the conditions in which it was built, but are just as much about Brezhnev’s ignorance and the continuing effort to put the best foot forward in the presence of foreigners, which we saw more of in the previous chapter.

622. Brezhnev visits a BAM construction site and sees hundreds of convict laborers in distinctive striped clothing.

“Hello, comrade sailors,” he greets them.

623. A call comes from the Central Committee to BAM administration: an American journalist will be visiting and they must make sure that everywhere he goes the workers’ accommodations look pretty good. BAM replies that this would be impossible.

The leadership capitulates: “Well, the hell with him then, let him slander us.”

Smaller, niggling problems continued to gnaw at the population. One continuing problem was that consumer goods and services remained shoddy and in short supply. Notice how many fewer anecdotes there are here than in the previous chapter on the Khrushchev years. The lines weren’t any shorter in Brezhnev’s time, nor were meat or toothpaste any more readily available. But the jokes had all been told ten and twenty years before. The jokes were old—only a few new ones appeared—and the situation wasn’t funny any more. One commodity that tourists were always reminded to bring with them was toilet paper.

624. “Excuse me, where did you get that toilet paper?”

“I’m bringing it back from the dry cleaners.”

625. An eager young journalist working for *Pravda* is sent on a tour of villages. His job is to present the Party line on international events to villagers in informative talks. After one evening’s talk he invites questions as usual. As usual there are none. He concludes, “We at *Pravda* are there to serve the people. What else can we do to make the paper more useful to you?” A voice from the back of the hall calls out, “Use less ink.”

626. After years of waiting a man saves enough rubles to buy an automobile. He orders one at the store.

"I can let you have one exactly ten years from today."

"In the morning or afternoon?"

"What difference could that make? I said, ten years from now."

"Yes, but the plumber is coming in the morning."

At home, the dissident movement, which dominated American news stories about the USSR through the 1970s, making household names out of Solzhenitsyn, Sharansky, Bukovsky, Sakharov, and others, rose and fell as Brezhnev vacillated between toleration and sterner oppression.

627. "Leonid Ilich, do you have a hobby?"

"Yes, I collect anecdotes about myself."

"And have you managed to collect many?"

"Two and a half camps full."

628. A dissident stands in the square, handing out leaflets. People take them, walk away and discover that nothing is written on them. One walks back to him: "Hey, these don't say anything."

"What's to say? Everyone knows."

On the fringes of the dissident movement among what we might call passive, rather than active, dissidents, the practice of *samizdat*, literally self-publishing, grew. The price of borrowing a copy of forbidden poems, stories, or books was sometimes the requirement to retype it so as to share it with trusted friends and friends of friends. As they did with other forbidden activities and commodities, people referred to typescripts with euphemisms.

629. A woman brings a copy of *War and Peace* to a typist to copy.

"What for?" she asks. "You can buy this in the bookstore."

"I know, but I want my children to read it."

630. A Moscow telephone conversation:

"Did you finish the pie?"

"We'll finish it up tonight."

"When you're done, pass it on to Volodia."

Many of the dissidents were Jewish—as many of the early Bolsheviks had been and for the same reasons. When the opportunity arose, many of them and tens of thousands more who had kept silent chose to emigrate. For complex reasons, including American trade and human rights policy, this opportunity became greater in the Brezhnev years. The regime vacillated in its policy toward would-be *émigrés*, as it did in many other areas, usually delaying or at first refusing their exit visa applications. Many refuseniks, as they were called in the Western press, were punished for asking for permission to emigrate by being fired from their jobs and, for the minority who were party members, by expulsion from the Party. Those who were permitted to leave were charged fees for the free services they had received in the USSR, particularly for their higher education. This created a pool of unhappy refuseniks at home, more resentment against the Jews in an already anti-Semitic population—that they wanted to leave our beloved Russia, but "we" had to stay in this accursed Soviet Union—and more negative publicity abroad. Between 1971 and 1981 over a quarter of a million Jews left the Soviet Union.

First, another of those few *chastushki* that actually translate:

631. It's at the Visa Office
you learn to love your native land
from the friendly comrade
with your visas in his hand.

632. A Jew submits his papers for an exit visa. He is asked why he wants to leave.

"I have two reasons. My neighbor in our communal apartment keeps telling me that as soon as Soviet power collapses he's going to kill me and my family."

"But you know very well that Soviet power will never collapse."

"That's my other reason."

633. "Rabinovich, why do you want to go to Israel? Don't you get paid enough?"

"No, I'm well paid."

"Don't you like your work?"

"I like it fine."

"You got problems with your apartment?"

"No, that's fine too."

"Well, what else do you want, Jew face?"

634. "Rabinovich, why do you want to go to Israel?"

"I'm tired of all the holidays."

"What holidays?"

"You buy some sausage, it's a holiday. You find some toilet paper, it's a holiday...."

635. A new Russian restaurant has been opened in Tel Aviv, called "Nostalgia." If you can get in, the food is bad, the service is worse, and they overcharge. The waiters scream at diners as they leave, "If you don't like it here, why don't you go to Israel, Jew face."

636. A Jew applies for a job.

"What's your name?"

"Rabinovich."

"Why should we hire you? You're just going to emigrate."

"I have no thoughts of emigrating."

"So much the worse. We don't need any fools."

637. Rabinovich is expelled from the Party for three outrageous acts:

(1) When the Secretary of the Party bureau came into his office and saw portraits of Khrushchev and Brezhnev, he asked, "Why haven't you taken down that idiot's picture?" And Rabinovich asked, "Which one?"

(2) Watching the sumptuous funeral of a Politburo member, Rabinovich said, "What a waste of money! For that money I could bury the whole Central Committee."

(3) The Secretary asked Rabinovich why he wasn't at the last party meeting and Rabinovich replied, "If only I'd known it was the last one."

638. Rabinovich is expelled from the Party. That night he dreams: Israel declares war on the USSR and wins. Moshe Dayan stands atop Lenin's mausoleum, reviewing a parade of Russian Jews, who are all chanting, "Reinstate Rabinovich! Reinstate Rabinovich!"

639. "Why are those refusesniks always making application to emigrate?"

"So they can make up slanderous stories about how we won't let them go."

640. Two Jews board a trolley at opposite ends. One calls out to the other, "Khaim, did you get a ticket?"

"No. I'm still filling out my visa forms."

641. "Guys, we've talked enough about emigration. Let's talk about women."

"All right. Has Rachel left yet?"

642. These days the Jews are divided into those who are leaving, those who want to leave, and those who think they won't want to leave.

643. "How should a smart Jew speak to a stupid Jew?"

"Condescendingly, by telephone, from New York."

644. "What did Brezhnev get his last medal for?"

"Liberating Odessa from the Jews."

645. Odessa, 1990. A conversation in line.

"Take a look at that citizen. I think he's a Jew."

"Can't be. All the Jews left long ago."

"He looks it to me. Let's ask him."

"Comrade, excuse me, you wouldn't happen to be a Jew?"

"I, a Jew? A putz is what I am, not a Jew."

646. Two Jews are sitting on their suitcases in Sheremetevo Airport [in Moscow]. The PA announces: "Because of the departure of a Soviet government delegation the flight to Vienna has been postponed for an hour and a half." [Almost all *émigrés* flew to Vienna on their way to Tel Aviv or New York.]

An hour and a half later the PA crackles to life once more: "Because of the departure of a Soviet government delegation the flight to Vienna has been postponed for an hour and a half."

Another hour and a half passes, and the PA makes the same announcement again. And so on. Finally one of the Jews turns to the other: "You know, Khaim, if they're all going to leave, maybe we should think about staying."

647. The regional agricultural instructor is speaking at a *kolkhoz* meeting about the usefulness of raising chickens. From each chicken so many rubles annual income can be made, and so forth.

A peasant interrupts: "And how much do the Jews pay, if they leave, for their education?"

"Four thousand rubles, but let's not get distracted, comrades." He goes on to talk about the profitability of raising sheep but is interrupted again.

"And how much does a Jewish engineer pay if he leaves?"

"Eight thousand, but let me continue comrades." And he goes on to talk about cattle until he is interrupted yet again.

"What if the Jew completed the university?"

"Twelve thousand, but...."

"Maybe we could do better raising Jews."

648. There is a row at the birthing clinic. The doctors and nurses are clearly treating a Jewish mother-to-be much better than everyone else. The head doctor speaks to the other women: "Comrade mothers, we must ask for your understanding, as conscious workers. She is after all producing for export."

649. A Jew is clearing customs on his way out of the USSR. He's carrying a large portrait of Lenin in a big gold frame. The customs officer challenges him: "What's that you've got?"

"That's not a WHAT. That's a WHO, not a WHAT."

He arrives in Israel where the customs officer is startled: "Who's that you've got?"

“That’s no WHO. That’s a WHAT.”

650. “Beat the Jews and the bicyclists!”

“Why the bicyclists?”

651. “I’m going to beat some Yids.”

“What if they beat us?”

“Why would anybody want to beat us?”

When they got to Israel, life was not easy for most Russian *émigrés*. Housing was in short supply there too, jobs were scarce, and prices high. They were newcomers and still somehow foreigners, no longer Jews in Russia but Russians in Israel.

652. After a few years in Israel, some Russian Jews placed an ad in a Moscow newspaper: “Soviet Jews, come to Israel! Only here will your longcherished dream of becoming Russians be realized.”

Other Russians who were sent abroad in these years for the glory and the foreign currency their performances would garner—athletes, dancers, circus performers, musicians—embarrassed the country by defecting with some regularity. It was widely assumed that if the borders were opened, millions of ordinary citizens would leave.

653. Two sparrows meet at the Soviet border, one flying in, the other flying out.

“Where are you coming from, brother?”

“From over there, the West.”

“How is it over there?”

“Bad, brother. There’s nothing to eat. They clean the fields out to the last grain. How’s it with you?”

“There’s as much as you can eat and more. They leave half the harvest in the fields.”

“Then why are you leaving?”

“I want to chirp a little.”

654. “What is a Soviet string trio?”

“A quartet returning from a foreign tour.”

655. “What is the Little Theater?”

“It’s the Big Theater after a foreign tour.”

The *Malyi* (little) and *Bolshoi* (big) were two of the best theaters in the country. See #133. Of course, not everyone in theater, ballet, or orchestra could find a job abroad.

656. “What is the difference between the soloists of the Bolshoi Theater and its directors?”

“The directors come and go while the soloists remain.”

657. “Why doesn’t the Soviet Union send people to the Moon?”

“They are afraid they won’t come back.”

658. “How many Jews do we have altogether?” Brezhnev asks Kosygin.

“Three or four million.”

“And if we let them all leave, how many would want to?”

“Ten to fifteen million.”

659. A foreign delegation came to tour an institute that had long ago gotten rid of all of its Jews. Fearing unfriendly questions about anti-Semitism, the director appointed Ivanov Rabinovich for a day. The delegation arrived and immediately someone asked if any Jews worked at the institute. The director pushed a button on his intercom: “Send in Comrade Rabinovich.... What do you mean, he left?”

660. “What would you do if all of a sudden they opened the borders?”

“Climb a tree.”

“How come?”

“So as not to be trampled.”

661. Brezhnev receives Sophia Loren in the Kremlin. “I am prepared to fulfill any request,” he tells her.

“Allow anyone who wishes to do so to leave your country.”

“Sophia, is it true then that you wish to be alone with me, entirely alone?”

Foreign relations also created headaches from time to time, especially when erstwhile or supposed allies proved to be hostile or great, big Israel beat up its hapless, Soviet-allied neighbors. Egypt, for example, was clobbered for a second time in a decade in 1967, and in 1972, after many years as a Soviet client, Anwar Sadat expelled Soviet advisers and technicians from Egypt.

662. It is 5 June 1967. The Six-Day War has just begun. Nasser telegraphs

Brezhnev: “Moscow. Kremlin. Jews beat. Save, Russia.”

The battle cry of pogromists had long been “Beat the Jews. Save Russia.” In Russian, which is a highly inflected language, the word order and word roots of these two phrases are identical, only the endings are different.

663. The Russian influence in Egypt was strong during the Arab-Israeli War. Nasser employed Kutuzov’s strategy against Napoleon. He lured the enemy deep into Egypt, and now he’s waiting for the winter freeze.

664. Two Jews meet in Moscow during the Six-Day War: “I heard on our station that our guys shot down two of our airplanes yesterday.”

Picture a Russian-Jewish *émigré* broadcaster on Voice of America speaking about Israeli forces shooting down Russian jets flown by Egyptians.

665. “What’s Golda Meir to Lenin, his widow or his sister?”

“Where’d you get that idea?”

“Half the day on the radio they talk about him, the other half about her.”

666. Two Russians are in court on charges of beating two Jews.

“Your honor, we drank half a liter and turned on the radio, and there they were in Gaza. We had another half liter, and they were already at the Suez Canal. We went into the store, got another liter and drank it on the spot. Then we look around, and they’re already here, standing by the subway. So then, well, we beat ‘em.”

667. An hour before Anwar Sadat was assassinated Brezhnev summoned the Politburo. “Which of you can tell me exactly what the time difference is between Moscow and Cairo? I just called Jihan Sadat to express my condolences, and she told me everything was fine. Anwar was watching a parade.”

President of Egypt Anwar Sadat was assassinated by Muslim extremists in 1981. Although he had been a thorn in the side of the Soviet leadership for many years, there is no reason to think they were implicated in his death. Jihan was his wife.

668. In the course of giving him a haircut Brezhnev’s barber asked him several questions about Poland. Finally an agitated Brezhnev stopped him: “Why do you keep asking me questions about Poland?”

“It helps me work. Every time I do, your hair stands on end.”

The suspicion and fear of the Chinese, which we saw in Khrushchev’s time, had not gone away.

669. Soviet ambassador to China, Tolstikov, arrives in Peking. He greets the Chinese officials who meet his plane: "What are you dirty Jews squinting at?"

Vasily Tolstikov, well known for his anti-Semitism while he was leader of the Leningrad Party Committee, was ambassador to China from 1970 to 1978.

670. Brezhnev has a nightmare: Czechs and Slovaks on Red Square are eating matzo with chopsticks. The Chinese have learned to fight like the Israelis, who are multiplying like the Chinese.

671. Brezhnev rings Nixon up on the hot line to tell him his dream: over the White House a red flag is waving.

The next day Nixon calls Brezhnev to tell him his dream: over the Kremlin a red flag is waving.

"But that's how it really is," says Brezhnev. There is a red flag waving over the Kremlin."

"And there was some writing on it," says Nixon.

"What did it say?"

"I don't know. I can't read Chinese."

672. Carter and Gromyko come out of facing rooms and walk into one another.

"At last we have completely disarmed!" says Carter.

"Yes, we can finally trust one another completely!" Gromyko responds.

"Enough talk, back in your cells!" says their Chinese guard.

673. "What will a bottle of vodka cost in 2000?"

"Five yuans."

674. Two foreign languages are studied in Soviet schools now, Yiddish for those who are leaving and Chinese for those who are staying.

For one more about the Chinese "threat," see #749.

In his last year Brezhnev announced a new program, the "Food Supply Program" which, like Khrushchev's "Abundance" program, was supposed to end food shortages. It was about as successful.

675. Two skeletons meet in a cemetery.

"Did you die during the Food Supply Program or after it?"

"I'm still alive."

676. "What happens after the Food Supply Program?"

"A census of the surviving population."

To my mind the following anecdotes summarize the mood of most people through most of the Brezhnev years, at least of the educated population who could understand what they were living through. Their country was not progressing economically or socially, and there was no reason to hope that it might.

677. "How do you feel about Soviet power?"

"The way I do about my wife: I love her a little, I fear her a little, I cheat on her a little, I screw her a little, sometimes I wish I had another one, but mostly I'm used to her."

678. The Seven Wonders of Soviet power:

- (1) There is no unemployment, but no one works.
- (2) No one works, but the plan is fulfilled.
- (3) The plan is fulfilled, but there is nothing in the stores.
- (4) There's nothing to buy, but there are lines everywhere.

- (5) There are lines everywhere, but we are on the threshold of plenty.
- (6) We are on the threshold of plenty, but everyone is dissatisfied.
- (7) Everyone is dissatisfied, but everyone votes yes.

679. Two worms emerge into the light.

"Mama, what is that so big and bright?"

"That is the sun, my child."

"And what is that, rolling and sparkling?"

"That is the sea."

"And what is that, so green and fragrant?"

"The forest."

"Then how come, mama, we live in a cow pie?"

"Because this is our motherland."

680. Nixon asked God when the American people would be happy. God replied, "Not before thirty years have passed."

"Too bad," grumped Nixon, "I won't live to see it."

Pompidou asked God when the French would be happy. "Not before fifty years have passed," He said.

"Too bad," said Pompidou, "I won't live to see it."

Brezhnev asked God when the Soviet people would be happy. God replied, "I won't live to see it."

681. Khaimovich approaches Rabinovich, who is reading a paper with a broad black border. "Who died, who?" asks Khaimovich with hope and excitement.

"It's just Pompidou," Rabinovich replies with disappointment.

Georges Pompidou, the French Premier, died in 1974.

682. "Why was Podgorny dismissed?"

"For complimenting Brezhnev on his birthday: 'Leonid Ilich, you look better at 70 than Soviet power does at 60'."

Nikolai Podgorny was Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet from 1965 to 1977 and a prominent member of the Politburo—many people thought he was Brezhnev's likely successor—until his dismissal in 1977. By 1977 Brezhnev looked none too good. Podgorny was four years older than Brezhnev.

683. "What hopes do we have for 1982?"

"Soviet power turns 65.

Maybe it will retire."

684. In Lenin's time it was like being in a tunnel: it was dark all around, but there was light ahead. In Stalin's time it was like being on a bus: one person was driving, half were sitting [in prison], and the rest were standing but shaking. In Khrushchev's time it was like being at the circus: one person talked and everyone else laughed. In Brezhnev's time it is like being at a bad movie: everyone is just waiting for the show to end.

685. Lenin, Stalin, and Brezhnev were riding in a crowded train when in the middle of nowhere the train wheezed yet again and scraped to a stop. They sat for only a short while before Lenin arose, rallied all the passengers out of the cars and exhorted them to help him move the train. "All together now, we can do this. Shoulders to the train and one, two, three, push."

Mightily they strained. And again. And yet again. But the train did not move. It was, after all, a train.

Stalin then demanded a turn. He walked to the front of the train and shot the engineer. It didn't help, so he shot the fireman. Then the conductors. The train still didn't move, so he started in on the passengers. Nothing helped.

Finally Brezhnev asked to try. He herded the survivors back on to the train, ordered them to sit and to pull down their window shades. "Now, everyone, rock back and forth like this. There, doesn't it feel like we're getting somewhere?"

This is a favorite and long-lived anecdote. It was actually told first in Khrushchev's time in a different version in which the tracks were the problem, not the locomotive. Subsequent leaders were added to versions of it. Gorbachev, for example, made all the passengers join him in shouting "We have no rails. We have no cross-ties either. The train's headed over a cliff."

The last few years of Brezhnev's life were difficult, sad or laughable depending on your point of view. He experienced a rapid debilitation of physical and mental health. A death watch began. But to some it seemed his death might never come.

686. "What does Brezhnev's schedule look like these days?"

AR: "9 a.m.: reanimation. 10: intravenous breakfast. 11: makeup for an official lunch. 12: official lunch. 1: medals are removed. 2: new medals are bestowed. 3-5: batteries are recharged. 6: makeup for official dinner. 7: official dinner. 8: clinical death. Next day at 9 a.m.: reanimation...."

687. "Listen to this good joke. The cleaning woman walks into Brezhnev's bedroom and finds him dead...."

"Yes, and then?"

"I don't remember the rest, but how's that for a beginning?"

688. Brezhnev died, but his body lives on.

Sounds familiar? See #23 and #564. Making fun of the ubiquitous slogan, "Lenin died, but his cause lives on," which in a 1970 anecdote had become "Lenin died, but his body lives on," the jokesters now said the same about Brezhnev. Since he was still alive, more or less, the twist kept the joke fresh.

689. Brezhnev is walking with his grandson.

"Grandad, when I grow up, will I be general secretary?"

"What are you saying, boy, how could there be two general secretaries?"

Compare this to #480.

Finally, it was over. Brezhnev died. Even then he was not immune from sharp tongues. This time they made fun of the language of the late cult which, when it ascribed something to the leader, often added the adverb "personally": Comrade Brezhnev personally said, personally did, and so on.

690. "Did you hear? Brezhnev died."

"Really? Personally?"

6

Andropov and Chernenko

The transition of power after Brezhnev's death was quick and smooth. There had been, after all, a lot of time to prepare for it. Whatever behind-the-scenes struggle may have taken place, it was over by the time Brezhnev died. The very next day Yuri V. Andropov was named General Secretary of the Party, nominated by his only serious rival for the position, Brezhnev's most devoted protégé, Konstantin Chernenko. It is hard to say why Andropov succeeded rather than, say, Chernenko. It may be that he was a little younger, only 68, and more vigorous. It surely had much to do with the fact that he had been head of the KGB for the previous fifteen years. As head of state security he had gained a reputation for strict discipline, hard work (an unusual quality in the 1980s), and incorruptibility (which was downright rare). He was at least partly responsible for the fact that the country, though slipping economically, was not experiencing significant internal turmoil. The dissident movement was negligible; the borders were secure. And it may be that, like the much feared J. Edgar Hoover, Andropov's extensive files on others' misbehavior had given him additional leverage.

Andropov's appointment received an odd, ambivalent reception. At home, opinion seemed to be divided between those who expected him to clean up official corruption and introduce ambitious new economic programs and those dreading a return to police-state severity. Abroad, rather strangely, the media speculated on just how "liberal" the new *gensek* might be. He dressed better, spoke in a more sophisticated and diplomatic fashion, and carried himself in a more Westernized way than did most of his Politburo colleagues; he was said to be smart, well educated, and fond of American jazz. Not all of these things turned out to be true.

His fifteen months in office would be remembered primarily for three things: his attempt to resuscitate the economy by enforcing discipline among workers (punishing them for tardiness and other unauthorized absences), the firing of hundreds of party and government officials accused of various forms of corruption, and his rapid decline into ill health and death so soon after Brezhnev's demise. I find it surprising that the joke makers didn't find much humor in the come-uppance of the dismissed officials. Remember the joke about Adzhubei after Khrushchev's dismissal? (See #478.) Even Brezhnev's daughter was implicated in a scandal involving the theft of state diamonds, and her husband was fired from his lucrative position. But I have found no such jokes. Almost all the jokes involving Andropov concern either his policeman's demeanor and behavior, his earlier work as KGB director, or his later ill health.

The earliest jokes concerned how Andropov came to succeed Brezhnev. I don't believe anyone seriously thought Brezhnev had been done in, but it must have been fun to imagine the KGB director planning his rise to the top while dispatching his predecessor. Then there was the matter of Chernenko and other rivals in the Politburo. How had they been persuaded to elect Yuri Vladimirovich?

691. Brezhnev is reading yet another speech: "Today we bid farewell to General Secretary of the Central Committee of the CPSU, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR, Marshal of the Soviet Union Leonid [pause] Ilich [pause] Brezhnev!"

He looks the paper over, up and down, turns it over, then looks at his clothes. "Excuse me, comrades, it seems I have put Comrade Andropov's jacket on again."

692. "What was the last medicine Brezhnev took?"

AR: "Andropin."

693. "What were Brezhnev's last words?"

AR: "Leave the plug alone, Yuri."

694. At the meeting of the plenum of the Central Committee after the unanimous vote by which he was elected General Secretary, Andropov announced, "Voters, lower your hands and move away from the wall."

It was nervous laughter. People weren't at all sure there wouldn't be a return to Stalinist tactics, that discipline wouldn't escalate into terror.

695. As 1982 drew to a close people wished one another "Happy New 1937."

696. Socialism equals Soviet power plus the electrification of all barbed wire.

697. "What is the General Secretary's favorite kind of music?"

AR: "Chamber."

698. "Did you hear? Andropov broke an arm."

"Whose?"

699. Andropov was nominated for a Nobel prize in physics for proving that denunciation [*stuk*] travels faster than the speed of sound [*zvuk*].

700. A new unit of time was introduced in 1983: one androp equals seven years.

701. An American correspondent asks Andropov, "Will the Soviet people follow you?"

"They will. Those who don't follow me will follow Brezhnev."

Do you recall that almost the same joke was told about Stalin and Lenin in 1924? See #32.

The sycophants who ran the propaganda machine began to shape a new cult, and the personality they described was a stern disciplinarian.

702. "What will they study in schools now instead of the works of Brezhnev?"

AR: "Comrade Andropov's memoirs, *My Meetings with Dissidents*."

One of Andropov's supposedly superior qualities was his diplomacy. The optimists hoped that his sophisticated demeanor might bode well for an improvement in Soviet international relations. It may be that, given more time, Andropov would have scored some successes in this area, but his time ran out before these were achieved. In dealing with the "fraternal" socialist nations of Eastern Europe, Andropov demonstrated the same firm hand with which he ruled at home. The most obvious case in point and the only one that was memorialized in anecdotes was relations with Poland. Soviet troops had been poised on the Polish border in 1981 until General Jaruzelski had come to power,

introduced martial law, and tamed the “Solidarity” movement. Although Jaruzelski was thought of as a stern disciplinarian in the Andropov mold, relations between Big Brother USSR and fraternal Poland remained strained.

703. Two new dances have become popular in the USSR and Poland, the Andropolka and the Jaruzelka. Their study will be made mandatory in all the schools. The Andropolka is danced with the dancers’ hands behind their backs. For the Jaruzelka the hands are held stiffly at one’s side.

704. “Comrade Andropov, the Polish ambassador is here to see you.”

“Drag him in.”

And if that was the way to deal with the satellites, why not the whole world?

705. Andropov in a speech before the Plenum of the Central Committee: “As before we will struggle for the establishment of peace and state security throughout the world.”

Andropov’s campaign of work discipline succeeded momentarily in raising economic production, but only slightly and not for long. The economy remained in the doldrums. Consumers’ desires were not being met.

706. Andropov wanted to see how simple Soviet people live. He put on old clothes, went to the outskirts of the city and saw an old woman digging up potatoes in her garden.

“Greetings, mother. How’s life? Do you have a television?”

“Of course I have, and not just one but two, a black and white and a color one.”

“Do you have a car?”

“Of course I have, and not just one but two. Now get out of here, you dirty spy.”

“I’m no spy, little mother. I am Comrade Andropov, General Secretary of the Communist Party.”

“I can see right through that lie. Comrade Andropov knows very well that we have nothing.”

Nonetheless, half a year after he came to power Andropov declared that on its way to communism the USSR had reached the stage called “developed socialism.”

707. On June 14, 1983 the General Secretary announced, “Soviet society has entered into that prolonged historical period known as developed socialism.”

“Just what is developed socialism?”

“That’s when you don’t get anything for free yet, but there’s nothing to buy with your money.”

708. “What is developed socialism?”

“It means that the problems of growth have been replaced by the growth of problems.”

709. “Where is the boundary between developed socialism and communism?”

“Along the Kremlin wall.”

In the end neither the hopes nor the fears aroused by Andropov’s election were realized. In less than a year he was incapacitated by kidney disease, spending increasing amounts of time hooked up to dialysis machines, and in fifteen months he was dead.

710. “What was good about Andropov’s term in office?”

AR: “Its brevity.”

711. “What was the greatest failure of Soviet science in 1983 to 1984?”

AR: “They couldn’t transplant an artificial kidney into an artificial intellect.”

712. Many people wondered why Andropov didn’t travel abroad the way Brezhnev did in his time. It turned out that it was because Brezhnev ran on batteries while Andropov needed to be plugged in.

713. "Is there a cult of Andropov's personality?"

AR: "There's a cult, but no Andropov."

Compare this with #489.

Andropov was the fourth of the aging Politburo leaders to die in a brief two-year period. Dmitry Ustinov, Brezhnev, and Arvid Pelshe had popped off in rapid succession before him. Each had, of course, been accorded a lying in and a solemn state funeral.

714. Two party *apparatchiks* met at Andropov's funeral.

"How did you get in?"

"I got a ticket. How about you?"

"I've got a subscription for the whole series."

When Andropov died in February 1984, Kremlin watchers in the USSR and abroad waited for three nervous days to learn whom the Politburo would choose to replace him. This time there seemed to be a choice between yet another representative of the older guard or one of a younger generation. Along with Konstantin Chernenko (73), Georgy Romanov (61) and Mikhail Gorbachev (53) were apparently being considered. The old guard was not yet ready to hand over the keys to the kingdom, however, and the waiting was soon over. Konstantin Chernenko, a Brezhnev crony whom many had expected to succeed him fifteen months before, emerged as the next General Secretary. Already in very poor health, Chernenko would last for less than thirteen months. In the year left to him Chernenko proposed some large programs in education and agriculture, but he did not have the time to implement them. As far as the jokesters were concerned, Chernenko's term of office was nothing more than a death watch.

715. "Why were Andropov and Chernenko elected unanimously by the Politburo?"

"Because Andropov had the worst kidney analysis and Chernenko had the worst cardiogram."

716. At a special plenum of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union two resolutions were adopted: (1) to elect Comrade Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko General Secretary, and (2) to bury him on Red Square.

717. "What was Andropov's funeral?"

AR: "A dress rehearsal for Chernenko's."

718. "How does Chernenko differ from Andropov?"

AR: "Body temperature."

719. Brezhnev meets Andropov in the nether world. "Well, what say we get a bottle."

"Hang on, let's wait for a third."

The larger projects, probably because they did not get off the ground, were not memorialized in anecdotes. A few smaller events, the Chernenko style, and the feeble attempt to glorify the new General Secretary were all noted in passing.

720. A TASS announcement: Today at 9 a.m. after a prolonged and serious illness the General Secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the USSR Konstantin Ustinovich Chernenko, without regaining consciousness, set about fulfilling his obligations.

721. "Why does Chernenko always appear before several microphones?"

AR: "He holds himself up on one of them, receives oxygen from another, and through a third he is prompted what to say."

722. Chernenko, breathing heavily, reads a report. After the meeting he berates his aide, "I told you to prepare a twenty-minute report, and you hand me this thing that goes on for an hour."

"You weren't supposed to read all three copies."

723. After yet another rambling speech to the Politburo by Chernenko his colleagues tell him, "Comrade General Secretary, your doctors fear you are suffering from memory lapses."

"What do you mean, memory lapses?! It's Andropov who can't remember anything. How many Politburo meetings has he missed now anyway?"

724. "How many people now rule the Soviet Union?"

AR: "One and a half. Lenin, who lives forever, and the half-alive Chernenko."

725. "Why did the 72-year-old Chernenko restore the 94-year-old Molotov to party membership?"

AR: "To prepare his successor."

726. After Chernenko's selection the Kremlin was renamed: from Andropole to Konstantinople.

Even as the inevitable approached, it seems not to have come quickly enough for some. At the risk of reading too much into an anecdote, it would also seem that some people expected Chernenko's death to usher in a larger change than just another general secretary.

727. Just before the May Day holidays Abramovich is summoned to the factory's party office and told: "As the oldest member of our work collective, you will be given the honor of carrying Comrade Chernenko's portrait in the parade."

"Don't ask me to do that. I carried Lenin's portrait and he died. I carried Stalin's portraits and he died. I carried Khrushchev's portraits and he disappeared. I carried Brezhnev's portraits and he died. Not long ago I carried Andropov's portrait and he died too."

"You have golden hands! You must carry Comrade Chernenko's portrait."

One of the workers yells out, "Let him carry the red flag" [the banner of communism].

7

Gorbachev, Yeltsin, and Putin

Chernenko was the last of the powerful old-timers. At his death the baton finally passed to a younger generation. The new *gensek*, Mikhail Sergeevich Gorbachev, almost immediately began to talk about the need for substantive reforms and soon began to carry some of them out. In just a few years they had unleashed enormous pent-up forces, which he and his supporters had seriously underestimated, that in an astonishing few years led to the end of the monopoly on power of the Communist Party and not long thereafter to the breakup of the Soviet Union. History will show that he had no idea where his efforts would lead. He certainly did not intend to destroy either communism or the Soviet Union. In any case Gorbachev's six years in power have been so recent and the consequences of his efforts so readily apparent that readers probably do not need a refresher course in the Gorbachev era.

What you will notice in this book is that Gorbachev inspired very few jokes. I think the reasons are obvious. First, there wasn't much funny about Gorbachev personally: he wasn't folksy, doltish, thuggish, senile, or dying.

728. "Who supports Gorbachev in the Politburo?"

AR: "No one. He can walk by himself."

More importantly, while Gorbachev committed huge blunders, the *intelligenty* who make jokes—if they had not already emigrated—approved of what he was trying to do with his campaigns of *glasnost* (openness) and *perestroika* (reconstruction). Neither their successes nor their failures seemed funny to supporters of reform. In addition, once the reforms took hold, the economy went into a tailspin and the *intelligenty* found themselves in the unaccustomed and uncomfortable position of having to scramble and scratch around for a living like practically everybody else. As conditions became progressively worse—and they did—there was less and less to laugh at.

729. "What can you buy with an old ruble?"

"Nothing."

"What can you buy with a new ruble?"

"Ten times as much."

For the most part they liked Gorbachev's wife too. Raisa Gorbacheva was every bit as unusual and admirable as her husband. He was relatively young, relatively liberal, and politically daring. She was slim, stylish, well educated and smart, and very visible; everywhere Mikhail went Raisa was sure to go. The old guard and the old-fashioned, men who traditionally kept their women in a much less visible and much more subordinate

position, heartily resented Raisa. Even the intelligentsia, not to mention Nancy Reagan, found a touch of arrogance in her.

730. Raisa Maksimovna asks her husband, "Misha, did you ever think that one day you'd screw the wife of the General Secretary?"

Did you hear the one about Bill and Hillary returning to Little Rock after a few months in the White House? Hillary points out a gas station attendant she had almost married. "Aren't you glad you married me instead," asked Bill, "now that I'm president?" "If I'd married him," she said with a smile, "he'd be president now."

The following jokes come from Gorbachev's first two years in office. A protégé of Andropov, Gorbachev tried initially to stimulate the economy by a campaign of discipline. His added measure was an anti-alcohol campaign meant to produce sobriety and increased productivity. He tripled the price of vodka and shortened the hours of operation of liquor stores. The only obvious results were a rapid increase in moonshine distilling, a consequent shortage of sugar in the state stores, longer lines at the liquor stores, a couple of nicknames for Gorbachev (Lemonade Joe, and *gensok*—*sok* means juice in Russian), and a trickle of jokes.

731. A bus driver announces: "This stop: liquor store. Next stop: end of the line."

732. There is a long line at the liquor store. One man grumbles and grumbles and finally says, "I'm going over to the Central Committee and punch that Gorbachev right in the face."

He leaves. A while later he returns. Everyone gathers round him and asks him, did he punch Gorbachev? "Nah, the line there was even longer."

733. Gorbachev is visiting a factory. He collars the first worker to walk by and asks him, "Have you worked here long, comrade?"

"A little more than three years."

"And how has it been?"

"I do all right. My name is on the honor roll."

"Do you think you could do your job after a glass of vodka?"

"I think I could."

"After two?"

"I'm pretty sure."

"How about after three?"

"I'm here, aren't I?"

734. A new slogan appeared during the anti-alcohol campaign: "From the alcohol-free wedding to the immaculate conception."

735. The boss is screwing his secretary in his office: "Don't close the door. They might think we're in here drinking."

Why don't Baptists screw standing up? Someone might think they're dancing.

736. In Geneva a local correspondent asks Gorbachev in German, "What will your next book be called?"

Mein Kampf [My Struggle], responds Gorbachev.

An aide quickly whispers something to him.

Gorbachev elaborates, "Against Alcoholism."

When he began to talk about *perestroika*, the "restructuring" of the national economy, his efforts were at first more exhortative than substantive; that is, he allowed private enterprise to operate only on a very small scale and provided little investment and few

incentives to state enterprises. Without much to back it up, not many citizens were impressed by his call for a program of “rapid development.” Gorbachev never did get over his squeamishness about private property. During his last couple of years in power, Gorbachev began to permit joint ventures with foreign firms and privatization on a slightly larger scale. Neither was very successful. Unbusinesslike business laws and prohibitive taxes inhibited the formation of joint ventures, and privatization presented problems that have yet to be overcome.

737. The American magazine *Playboy* and the Soviet journal *Communist* have formed a joint venture to publish *Party Member*.

738. A journalist asks a *kolkhoznik* how *perestroika* was proceeding on the *kolkhoz*. “The chairman reconstructed, and the party organizer reconstructed, but there weren’t enough shingles for me.”

739. Gorbachev is speaking to a gathering of activists: “We must move from stagnation to rapid development.”

A voice from the hall: “We will work double shifts.”

“We must carry out a comprehensive reconstruction,” continues Gorbachev.

The same voice: “We will work three shifts.”

“The imperialists threaten us with ‘Star Wars,’ but we will fulfill our international obligations.”

“We will work all day and all night!”

When the meeting is over, Gorbachev orders that the outspoken activist be found, and asks him, “Where do you work, comrade?”

“I am head of a team of grave-diggers.”

Compare this with the “tempo” joke from Stalin’s time. See #63.

740. Armenian Radio asks Gorbachev, “Mikhail Sergeevich, have you found guidance for your program of rapid development in the writings of Lenin?”

“Yes, I have,” responds Gorbachev. “One step forward, two steps back.”

Note the inversion of format. AR asks the question and MSG replies. His answer, by the way, is the title of a 1904 pamphlet by Lenin, which was familiar to anyone educated in Soviet schools. The joke is still on Gorbachev, however.

Before Gorbachev barely got started on his campaign of *glasnost*, the USSR suffered a catastrophe which became at the same time a considerable embarrassment: the explosion of the atomic energy plant at Chernobyl. The world’s largest nuclear accident to date, Chernobyl killed hundreds of people and irradiated hundreds of square miles of fertile agricultural land and tens of thousands of people in the path of its fall-out. Gorbachev’s lamentable instinct was to hush it up. News leaked out much more slowly than the radiation had and minimized the tragedy when it did. Had the winds not carried fall-out westward across Poland to Sweden, the scope of the disaster might have been concealed much longer. To give Gorbachev credit, when pushed to it, he did allow the story to be covered much more honestly than it would have been in earlier times. This didn’t spare him from the joke makers, however.

741. “Why didn’t they announce the Chernobyl catastrophe more quickly?”

“They didn’t know which way the wind was blowing.”

742. Kurchatov’s dream has been realized: the power of the peaceful atom in every home.

Igor Kurchatov was one of the fathers of the Soviet nuclear bomb and a longtime advocate of peaceful uses of atomic power.

A couple of old slogans mutated in honor of the event. On the model of "Soviet paralysis is the most progressive in the world" we now got:

743. Soviet radiation is the most penetrating in the world.

The venerable slogan about electrification became:

744. Communism equals Soviet power plus the radiation of the whole country.

There were a lot of "Day of" holidays in the Soviet Union: Day of Victory, Day of the Army, Day of Aviation, and so on. Now there would be another.

745. 26 April—Day of Soviet Radiation.

746. A child asked his grandfather, "Grandad, was it frightening at Chernobyl?"

"No, it wasn't frightening at all," said grandad as he patted his six-fingered hand on his grandson's left head.

747. Major Pronin asked James Bond, "Tell me, James, Chernobyl, was that your work?"

"Of course not."

"Please, James, tell me the truth."

"No, not Chernobyl. Soviet agriculture, that's mine."

Glasnost had the very positive effect of creating ever increasing openness in the media. Before events had driven Gorbachev from office, crusading journalists of an almost free press could finally make themselves felt in the political arena. Scandals revealed in the newspapers brought down more than one minister. It had the very negative effect (depending upon one's point of view), however, of diminishing respect for Soviet authorities and contributed substantially to the downfall of Eastern European communist regimes in 1989, the reunification of East and West Germany in 1990, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. While the West applauded, Gorbachev's popularity at home plummeted. Even citizens who had hated the Soviet regime found the rapid collapse of power frightening.

748. "What do a minister and a fly have in common?"

"You can crush one as easily as the other with a newspaper."

749. "Monsieur Gorbachev, I told you a long time ago that you overestimated the danger of German revanchism and underestimated the Chinese danger," Mitterrand told his partner as they pushed their wheelbarrows.

When Hungary had flirted with liberalization in 1956, Khrushchev had sent troops to crush the incipient dangers. Seeing that Khrushchev's domestic Thaws were leading in the same dangerous direction, conservatives in the Politburo forced Khrushchev to pull back and crack down on dissidence at home. Brezhnev had crushed Czechoslovakia's Prague Spring in 1968 with tanks and, when Poland threatened to drift out of the socialist camp in 1981, put troops on their border until Jaruzelski restored order. In August 1991 conservative forces rallied briefly to try to save the Soviet Union from Gorbachev. They took Gorbachev hostage, declared themselves a Committee of the Emergency, and tried to take over. Loyal troops, legions of brave citizens, and Boris Yeltsin stood up for the "legitimate" government, however, and the coup failed. This was nonetheless the beginning of the end for Gorbachev. Too liberal for the conservatives, not liberal enough for supporters of market reforms, humiliated by recent events, and outmaneuvered by Boris Yeltsin, he would soon resign.

Effective at midnight on Christmas Day 1991 the Soviet Union officially ceased to exist. Mikhail Gorbachev resigned, the Soviet flag slid down the Kremlin flagpoles, and Russia's pre-1917 tricolor was run up. Gorbachev's erstwhile rival and critic, Boris Yeltsin, had already been elected President of the Russian Republic earlier that year. He now moved into Gorbachev's offices and administered the three-quarters of the former Soviet Union which was Russia without the larger structure of the Soviet Union above him.

Not long after the USSR had fallen apart some wag asked:

750. "What was the most devastating artillery shot in all history?"

"The Aurora fired a single blank in 1917 and caused seventy-six years of destruction."

The cruiser *Aurora* contributed to the siege and surrender of the Winter Palace to the Bolsheviks when revolutionary soldiers sailed it up the Neva on 25 October 1917. They fired a warning blank and a little while later a couple of ineffective rounds at the palace, whose noise helped weaken the resolve of the Provisional Government's ministers and soldiers huddling inside.

At the end of our book we face an irony. In Gorbachev's last years and throughout Yeltsin's there was finally freedom of speech and publication in Russia. One really could go into Red Square and denounce the president—Yeltsin, that is, not just Eisenhower. Or, as some did, one could collect all the jokes one could find and publish them. Newspapers and magazines proliferated, filled with real news, scandal, calumny, and pornography. On the other hand few fresh jokes were circulating.

Why? Surely not because things were going well or the leaders' qualities were so admirable. If Brezhnev's senility had been funny, why wasn't Yeltsin's alcoholism? Khrushchev's inflated claims of plentitude had inspired hoots; where were the catcalls when the shelves became bare under Gorbachev? Surely Gennady Ziuganov was as easy to lampoon as Brezhnev. Part of the answer is that humor had been displaced by a free and serious discussion of problems. Critical articles and editorials appeared daily in the more serious newspapers; sober discussions filled TV news and news magazine programs. Another part of the answer is that there was new humor, but it no longer took the secretive form of anecdotes. It too came out of the closet. Humorists on TV variety shows and new satirical shows now said openly what the people had for years said only secretly. The *raison d'être* for *anekdoty*, that is, unpublished items, disappeared as the open media replaced the underground mill. Judging from the published collections, if people told jokes now, they preferred the absurdities of sex to the conundrums of economics and politics.

Yeltsin almost immediately expanded the market reforms begun by Gorbachev. One of the enormous problems he faced from the outset was the near impossibility of privatizing gigantic factory complexes fairly. Who would own them: all of the people, some of the people, which people? An attempt was made to share the national wealth by issuing "vouchers" to the whole population. These resembled shares of stock in multiple privatized enterprises. The project was badly done, however, and the vouchers, which were traded freely, were soon essentially worthless, literally not worth much more than the paper they were printed on. A huge part of newly privatized property wound up in the hands of those who managed it at the time of privatization and who now stole it fair and square. Vladimir Putin still struggles with the mistakes of privatization and the wealthy, powerful "oligarchs" the process created. The single joke about vouchers depends on a

pun in Russian which does not translate perfectly. In Russian the verbs “to invest” and “to insert” are identical.

751. A young woman goes to her gynecologist. “Doctor, can you give me an examination?”

“What seems to be the problem?”

“Could you look please, have I properly invested my voucher?”

Most of the new jokes from post-Soviet Russia concerned so-called New Russians. These are people who grew quickly and often fabulously rich in the changed conditions of market Russia. Most of the largest, new fortunes are derived from the extractive industries (oil and gas principally) which were privatized into a few well-placed hands, large sums often changing hands in the process. Other fortunes were made in banking and a few factory industries as they were privatized. Most of these New Russians—Yeltsin’s Prime Minister Victor Chernomyrdin is a good example—had already been near the top of the Soviet power structure. The jokes for the most part are not about them.

Many smaller fortunes were made by wheeling and dealing in all sorts of commodities. Rackets, protection networks, and other clearly criminal activities that prey upon the not entirely clean, but legal, activities have made others wealthy. Almost all new wealth is necessarily “protected” by criminal activity. As a consequence most New Russians are “mobbed up”; many, probably most, are literally filthy rich. The jokes are about smaller fry—the businessmen, the racketeers, their “soldiers,” and their girlfriends.

Such wealth hadn’t been seen in Russia for eighty years, so all New Russians, but especially the smaller fry, are necessarily *nouveau riche*. Like the *generalshi* of the post-World War II period, they tended to be loud and crude; they reveled in their wealth and wore it tastelessly. There are many jokes, which I don’t include here, about loud, expensive clothes and powerful, expensive, foreign cars. In the jokes we can sense the bitterness of sour grapes, which we might expect—the joke tellers are so much better educated and oh-so-much more highly cultured than the New Russians but have so much less to show for it—but there are other reactions as well, specific to Russian conditions of the 1990s.

The most basic characteristic of the New Russian in jokes is his exaggerated and crude maleness. A very few women struck it rich, but they do not make it into the jokes. In jokes the New Russians have girl-friends and wives, in that order of importance. They are inarguably and horribly male, drinking too much, driving too fast, and keeping trophy women. It’s hard to tell if this arouses more disgust or envy in the joke tellers.

752. A son asks his rich father, “Pop, what’s money?”

“Money, my boy, is everything. Money means cognac, cars, girls”

“What if you didn’t have money?”

“Then it would be Pepsi, the subway, and your mama.”

A second basic characteristic of the New Russian is that he is poorly educated and probably stupid.

753. One New Russian brags to another, “I must be some kind of genius.”

“What makes you say that?”

“I bought my boy this Lego set and put the whole thing together in just three days.”

“So?”

“Well, it says right here on the box: ‘From 3 to 5 years.’”

754. "You don't have a single mistake in your homework," the teacher tells the son of a New Russian. "Tell me the truth. Did someone help your father do it for you?"

Despite this he has an affinity for money. Because he is so dumb, he often doesn't understand how he has managed to acquire so much money and he handles it badly, but he has so much it really doesn't matter. Awed by the sums involved, the joke tellers can't seem to decide if this reveals unawareness, indifference, or insouciance.

755. Two old school chums meet. One is a poor professor, the other a wealthy New Russian. The professor asks how that could be. He had been the best student in the class, earned advanced degrees, and worked hard at the institute. The other was a terrible student.

The New Russian replies that he doesn't understand it either. He just buys goods abroad for \$1 each, brings them back to Russia and sells them for \$3, and somehow manages to live well on that 2 percent.

756. A New Russian is checking his books. He asks his secretary with how many zeros a million is written.

"Six."

"And half a million?"

"Three."

757. A New Russian comes home very pleased with himself after a long night playing cards. "You won't believe how lucky I was last night. You know that new suit I bought for \$200? I lost it for \$600."

758. A New Russian caught a golden fish, regarded it with boredom, and asked, "Well, what can I do for you, little fish?"

Although there are none in this collection, there is a long Russian tradition of golden-fish jokes. Taking off on folktales in which golden fish grant three wishes in exchange for their release, the anecdotes usually involve shortsighted men wishing for rivers of vodka. In a few the fish wind up eaten as snacks. But what could such a little fish give a New Russian that he didn't already have?

One important use of New Russians' money is the conspicuous consumption of expensive commodities. Their cars and clothes are badges of their station. Like Georgians (see above), they will spend even beyond their impressive means to impress their acquaintances. Wheeling their big deals, some New Russians have made and lost several small fortunes already. Borrowing beyond their means to fund the next big deal is also characteristic.

759. A New Russian is in a horrible car wreck. He comes to on the pavement, surveys the wreck, and moans, "Oh, my Mercedes, oh, my poor Mercedes."

A passerby, trying to give him first aid, points out that his arm has been torn off. The New Russian stares down where his arm used to be and wails, "Ohhh, my Rolex!"

760. Two new Russians meet on a Paris street. "Look at this," brags the first, "I just bought this Pierre Cardin tie for \$300."

"Big deal," retorts the other, "I got the same tie yesterday for \$500."

761. A New Russian orders two new Mercedes, one for himself and one for his friend. The friend protests, "Really, you shouldn't."

"Why not, didn't you buy me a cup of coffee yesterday?"

762. Business New Russian-style:

One New Russian meets another and says, "I've got a boxcar of Snickers I need to move. You want 'em?"

"Sure, no problem. I can handle that kind of money."

And they go their separate ways, the first to find a boxcar of Snickers, the other to find the money.

For business old Russian-style, see #417.

763. Two New Russians meet.

"What are you working at these days?"

"I'm a street salesman."

"Aren't you a sharp one! How much does a street go for these days?"

764. "Listen, if you had a million bucks, what would you do with it?"

"I'd pay off debts."

"And the rest?"

"The rest would have to wait."

A consequence of their ignorance and their preoccupation with money is that New Russians remained uncultured. They seemed more likely to buy the Bolshoi Theater than to enjoy the opera. This really sticks in the joke tellers' craw. In the Soviet Union education and culture had stood for something. Higher education was a primary path to advancement to positions of relative comfort and prestige, and with a higher education had come a certain level of culture. Temporarily at least this is not the case; many young people are choosing not to go to college or on to graduate school, preferring to go straight into business. Beyond that, the free market has filled stores and kiosks with trashy novels, and movie theaters with lurid imports, satisfying tastes Soviet cultural bosses always previously ignored. To intellectuals who had lived rather poorly but who kept alive the flame of higher culture, the primacy of money over culture is sin. From their perspective the soulless New Russians are to blame for the general decay of taste, ethics, and culture they see all around them.

765. A literature teacher asks the son of a New Russian, "Who wrote *Evgeny Onegin*?" [a famous poetic drama by Alexander Pushkin]

"I don't know."

"I want to talk to your father about this tomorrow."

The student goes home and explains everything to his father, a New Russian with criminal connections. The next day a "soldier" from the father's organization shows up at school. "We got to the bottom of it. It was him all right, but he won't do it again."

766. A New Russian is strolling through the Hermitage [art museum in St. Petersburg]. When his cellular phone rings, he flops down in the nearest chair and begins a long conversation.

A very distressed guard rushes over to him: "How dare you! This chair belonged to Empress Catherine."

"Don't worry, granny. When she shows up, I'll let her have it."

767. A New Russian is considering buying an English estate. The steward is showing him around: "This, sir, is the servants' quarters. These are the horse barns and just beyond is the polo field. The park is laid out in traditional English style. At the end of this alley is the manor house, first half of the eighteenth century."

"All right," says the New Russian, "I'll take it. There are three million bucks in this suitcase. Just make sure that by next week you have the second half here too."

768. A New Russian is asked to write something in the guest book of the large, foreign factory he is touring.

“What shall I write?” he whispers to his assistant.

“Whatever you usually write, I guess.”

He wrote, “Sasha was here.”

769. A New Russian returns from his first trip to America.

“What surprised you most of all about America?” another New Russian asks him.

“You won’t believe it, brother. It turns out their dollars are the same as our bucks!”

Thieves everywhere have their jargon words. Many in New Russia are English. Along with a variety of English words from business, finance, and computing, which have recently entered everyday Russian, words such as *killer*, *gangster*, *bandit*, and *bucks* have also been adopted.

770. A very young New Russian walks up to a bank teller: “Listen, bitch, I wanna open a new account.”

“How dare you!” says the startled teller.

“What’s your problem, bitch? I wanna open an account.”

The young woman jumps out of her chair and soon returns with the manager of the bank. “What seems to be the problem?” asks the manager.

“There’s no problem. I want to deposit \$500,000, but this bitch....”

“I understand,” interrupts the manager and turns to the teller: “Do what this gentleman wants, bitch, and do it quick.”

771. A New Russian returns from Paris. His wife wants to know: “Well, how was it in Paris, Vasya?”

“Great, fucking beautiful. That Fifel Tower, holy shit, that was something. The whole fucking place was goddam gorgeous. Now, what are you crying about, Manya?”

“Such beauty.”

772. The Devil appears to a New Russian and tempts him with an offer of anything he wants. “I want a duty-free import license, I want oilfields, I want tax breaks,” responds the New Russian. “What do I have to give you?”

“Your soul,” grins the Devil.

The New Russian scratches his head and thinks hard: “Uh, OK. What’s the catch?”

Most of the preceding jokes could be told about New Russians who had made their money more or less legally. Others pertain only to those involved in criminal activity. Soviet society enjoyed a relatively low level of serious crime and violence, which grew enormously and quickly after the collapse of the Soviet Union. A lot of that can justifiably be blamed on organized crime which produced its share of New Russians. Such organizations have rapidly appeared, and often noisily collapsed in inter- and intra-gang squabbles. There doesn’t seem to be a great deal of honor among the new thieves, but there are many thieves among the new rich.

773. Two New Russians have a business meeting.

“You want to borrow \$100,000 from me. What guarantee do I have that you will return it in a month?”

“I give you the word of an honest man.”

“Fine. I’ll meet you here tonight. Bring that man with you.”

774. A check arrived at the tax inspection office with a note: "Yesterday I paid my taxes, but I did not reveal my entire income. Last night my conscience would not let me sleep, so I am sending you this additional check.

P.S. If I can't sleep again tonight, I'll send you some more tomorrow."

775. A New Russian urgently needs a new bookkeeper.

"I've got an excellent candidate in mind," says his manager, "but he's still got half a year to serve."

776. A man approaches a New Russian to ask for a job: "I hear you are looking for a new bookkeeper."

"Yes, and for my old one too."

777. Three New Russians meet at a restaurant to celebrate the merger of their businesses. Suddenly one of them realizes he has forgotten to lock the safe at the office.

"What's the problem?" another calms him, "We're all here, aren't we?"

778. Two former companions meet at Ivanov's bank. "Allow me to introduce you," says Ivanov. "This is Petrov," he says to Sidorov.

"You son of a bitch."

"And this is Sidorov," he says to Petrov.

"You bastard."

"Ah, you already know one another."

779. "My dog bit a creditor today," said the New Russian. "I took him to the vet."

"Did you have him put down?"

"No, I had his teeth sharpened."

780. Two killers wait to ambush and kill a prominent banker. They wait an hour, then another. Their concern grows. When three hours have gone by, one says to the other, "I hope nothing bad happened to our banker."

781. The leader of a band of robbers sends a telegram to his connection in Chechnya: "Send 2 AK-47s, 10 grenades, 20 pistols, 2000 rounds. Planning bank robbery."

The connection writes back: "Transport problems. Sending \$50,000. Get weapons at nearest garrison."

Chechens, along with Georgians, figure prominently in Russian organized crime. Soldiers do not, but enormous problems of pay, discipline, and morale have led soldiers, officers, and anyone else who could get their hands on it to sell large quantities of Soviet military hardware in the past ten years or so. The war in Chechnya brought these problems together in a particularly dangerous way. Russian officials and the Russian press have acknowledged this in an interesting new euphemism. Just as some Americans have trouble saying "Jew," substituting circumlocutions such as "a Jewish person" or "of the Jewish persuasion," Russian officialdom had long referred to Jews as "people of Jewish nationality." Now they are simply Jews, but Chechens or Georgians have recently become "people of Caucasian nationality." I'd bet that Rabinovich, may he rest in peace, loves it.

782. "Have you got a book on how to get rich?" a customer asks the sales clerk.

"Yes, it's called *The Criminal Code*."

783. "Do you know why New Russians always live in such luxury?"

"Insufficient evidence."

How did the little people who scraped by with honest earnings feel about all this? It left some of them wondering if the Soviet Union hadn't been so bad after all.

784. The tax inspector is going over a New Russian's books. "Now tell me, are you sure that your villa, your apartments, and cars were all purchased with honestly earned money?"

"With what else could I have bought them?"

"It seems to me, they were bought with the people's money."

"Where would the people get that sort of money!?"

785. "Ladies and gentlemen, please pay your fares," says the trolley conductor.

"All the ladies and gentlemen ride in Mercedes," replies an old woman.

"And who are you?" asks the conductor.

"We are comrades," the passengers reply together.

Not many new Jewish jokes have appeared in Russia. Unlike the putz from Odessa (#645), huge numbers of Jews have emigrated. Those who remain apparently don't find much to laugh about in their current condition in new Russia. Almost all the new stories have to do with New Russianism.

786. Two factory managers meet.

"Do you hire Jews now?"

"Of course."

"Where do you find them?"

This one isn't very funny, at least on the surface, but in Russian it is at least clever, as the verbs *to get* and *to take*, or *to hire* and *to find*, are the same word. I include it to make the point that business managers now want to hire anyone with good training and work habits. Jews, who had long experienced discrimination in hiring, are now prized employees, but with so many in emigration they are harder to find.

787. A wealthy old Jew submits a formal request to the government that he should henceforth be considered a New Russian.

788. A New Russian says to an old Jew, "Give me some money, dad."

789. An old Jew arrives in Tel Aviv. Passport control asks him what he did in Russia. "I was a New Russian," he tells them proudly.

Although market reforms may eventually create greater, more widely shared prosperity in Russia, as of 2004 a significant proportion of the population is worse off than they were under communism. In 2001 official statistics put the gross domestic product at 43 percent of what it had been in 1989. Despite the fact that Russians were working harder than before, if they could find work, they lived in greater economic instability and worried a great deal more about their financial security. New private banks, large and small, went belly up, taking people's savings with them. Most new businesses failed.

790. A woman walks up to a teller at a bank. "Whom do I see about opening a bank account?"

"A psychiatrist."

791. One businessman calls another and asks how he's doing.

"Great!" comes the answer.

"Sorry, wrong number," says the caller and hangs up.

It is not surprising that many people resented the enormous inequities visible in New Russianism. All this of course gave a black eye to the regime and its leaders who backed the market reforms, which to many people seem to be the cause of New Russianism with all its attendant problems.

792. Yeltsin addresses the newly elected Duma: "Fellow citizens, six years of mistakes by my predecessor had brought Russia to the brink of a terrible abyss." He pauses for dramatic effect. "But now in just two years under my leadership we have taken a great stride forward."

793. "What has Yeltsin done in three years that the communists couldn't do in seventy years?"

"Make communism look good."

794. Is there hope for the future? An optimist and pessimist discuss the possibilities. The optimist hopes that aliens will arrive from another planet to sort out the crisis. The pessimist worries that the Russians may have to solve their own problems.

The hope for the future as this book goes to press lies with the government of Vladimir Putin. Boris Yeltsin appointed Putin Prime Minister and anointed him as his successor in August 1999. On New Year's Eve 1999 Yeltsin resigned, leaving Putin as acting President. He was elected in his own right in March 2000 and re-elected in 2004. From a Western perspective and apparently from the perspective of an increasing proportion of his countrymen, more than 70 percent of whom approve of the job he is doing, he is succeeding. There are still enormous problems of poverty, criminality and terrorism, nationality conflicts, and more. On the other hand there have been considerable improvements. Employment is increasing. The stock market has risen rapidly for the past three years. The official rate of poverty is declining. Some serious reforms have been undertaken; more are in the pipeline.

Consequently, there are precious few jokes that fit the templates of earlier anecdotes. Small joke cycles sprang up around the sinking of the Kursk submarine in 2000 and the seizure of a Moscow theater by terrorists in 2002, few of them very funny, all of them short-lived. A few clever jokes poke fun at Putin's strait-laced image. These sometimes call him Vovochka, a nickname for Vladimir and the protagonist of an old series of jokes about a foul-mouthed schoolboy. Others laugh at his bluntness, which is so uncharacteristic of political figures. When asked by a Western correspondent at a press conference, "What happened to the Kursk submarine?", he replied, "It sank." In one joke he climbs into bed with his wife and says, as he has done on many official occasions, "I'll make this brief."

And so we come to an end. Where Russia will go from here is uncertain. I'm hoping the Russians will continue to laugh at jokes and give the anecdotes a well-deserved rest.

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