Risky Business

*Political Jokes under Repressive Regimes*

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Although oftentimes sources of amusement and delight, jokes and witticisms can exact severe penalties. Sometimes these are merely the social censures that result from joking about a sensitive topic in an uncongenial environment to an unreceptive audience—telling “sex jokes” at a National Organization of Women’s convention, for example, or appearing in blackface and telling race jokes at a public banquet.¹ Other times, however, the costs of joking are more pointed, painful, and permanent. When Theocritus of Chios was told that he would be pardoned by King Antigonus I (382–301 BCE) if only he would “stand before the eyes of the king,” Theocritus, knowing the king had only one eye, responded, “Well, then, reprieve is impossible.” Theocritus was executed for this remark (Clement and Hoffleit 1969:131). Sotades of Maroneia told King Ptolemy II Philadelphus (308–246 BCE) that by marrying his sister Arsinoë he had thrust “his prick into a hole unholy.” The king had his general seal Sotades in a leaden jar and drop him in the sea (Athenaeus 1959:345). The humorous invectives of Marcus Tullius Cicero against Marcus Antonius resulted in the nailing of the orator’s head and hands to the speaker’s rostrum in the Roman forum (Corbeill 1996:216). After the Sung emperor Xingzong was defeated in battle by Li Yüanhao in 1044 A.D., the emperor fled and barely escaped capture. Li Yüanhao cut off the noses of several of the emperor’s men whom he captured. Later the emperor’s jester remarked to the emperor, “Let’s see whether your nose is there or not,” alluding to the emperor’s pusillanimous flight. The emperor became so enraged that he had the jester strangled behind a tent (Otto 2001:143). Rulers have been just as unreceptive to jokes in modern times. A Nazi court condemned Josef Müller, a Catholic priest, to death for telling a joke about a dying German soldier requesting that a portrait of Hitler and Goering be placed on either side of him so that he could “die like Jesus between two thieves” (Lipman 1991:34).² In 1984, Omar al–Hazza, a top Iraqi officer, made a joke about the identity

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of Saddam Hussein's mother. (Saddam Hussein and his four brothers each had different mothers.) Al-Hazza's tongue and the tongues of his sons were cut out as their wives looked on. Then, al-Hazza's male family members were killed before his eyes and his daughters turned out of their homes. Finally al-Hazza himself was executed (Periscope 2003:10). Over the centuries, other wiseacres have lost lives and limbs, or if they were lucky, only liberty and livelihoods for their joking remarks (Otto 2001:139–142).³

Joking is a risky business. Not merely socially hazardous but physically dangerous. It is the making of jokes under such risky conditions that I am interested in exploring—that is, under conditions in which jokers and their audiences recognize the perilous circumstances of their humorous collaborations. Such joking is most predictably risky under totalitarian regimes—regimes with authoritarian rulers, press censorship, secret police, informers, and summary or extra-judicial trials—as found in Nazi Germany; the former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and their socialist "allies"; Franco's Spain; Ba'athist Iraq; and I would expect in Communist China, North Korea, Cuba, and Albania, and, perhaps, on occasion, in Iran—imperial and Islamic. In these countries, there was not merely an effort to control what was printed in the press or broadcast through the electronic media,⁴ but an attempt to control what was orally communicated by individuals face-to-face. In other words, there was an effort to suppress folk humor—the humor of everyday conversation and everyday life.

The kinds of jokes I speak of are well known. They might be directed against particular individuals or economic or political conditions. Two examples:

Lenin's widow, Krupskaya, was telling a class of Soviet school children what a kind man Lenin had been.

"One day," she said, "he was standing outside his dacha shaving himself with a bowl of water and an open razor. A little boy came to watch him and asked him what he was doing. "I'm shaving, little boy," Lenin said.

"Why did that make Lenin a kind man?" asked one of the class. "Don't you see?" said Krupskaya. "He could have cut the little boy's throat, but he didn't." (Davies 2004:11)

A visitor comes to the door of a Russian home and asks to speak to the man of the house. A little girl answers the door and tells him that her father is not in. "But he'll be back in eight hours, forty minutes, and twenty-three seconds."
“Where is he?” asked the visitor.
“He’s orbiting the earth. He’s a cosmonaut,” she tells him.
He then asks to speak to her mother. The girl explains that she is also out.
“And when will she be back?”
“Oh, I have no idea. She went to the market.” (Lukes and Galnoor 1985:103)

Indeed versions of such suppressed jokes have been reported from various times and places and vary only in superficial details.

A man is running in panic down a Bucharest street. A friend stops him.
“Why are you running like this?”
“Didn’t you hear? They have decided to shoot all the camels.”
“But for heaven’s sake, you’re not a camel.”
“Yes, but these people shoot first, and then they realize you’re not a camel.” (Banc and Dundes 1989:33)

This joke was often told with an animal protagonist, and instead of camels, the target animals might be dogs, cats, rabbits, bears, giraffes, buffaloes, or donkeys. In some versions, the person fleeing has heard they are castrating anyone with more than two testicles. When the friend protests that he has only two testicles, the man replies, “But these people cut them off first, and then they count them.” The joke has been reported from Nazi Germany, Russia (Soviet and Tsarist), Romania, and the Middle East (Ibid: 33–34; Kishtainy 1985:174). It has been traced as far back as the 12th century in the works of the Persian poet Anvarî (Omidsalar 1987:121–124).

In another joke, two Nazis meet in Berlin:

“How are things with you?” asks one.
“Very well thank you. I have a fine job,” says the other.
“What sort of job?”
“I sit on top of a steeple all day and watch so I can report to the Führer when Germany has conquered the world.”
“What is your salary?”
“Twenty marks a week.”
“Well, that isn’t much.”
“That’s true . . . but it’s a lifetime job.” (Lipman 1991:94)

This joke was also told in the Soviet Union about the realization of world revolution (Larsen 1980:1), by Tunisians about the coming of Arab unity (Kishtainy 1985:133), and by Jews about the coming of the Messiah (Telushkin 1992:147). This joke, however, could easily be adapted to any
kind of political regime as it merely depends on an opposition between the ideal and real. It could even be used to register the illusory nature of our own civic ideology of “one nation, under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.”

What characterizes joking in repressive regimes is less the nature of the joke texts than the circumstances of their telling. In Franco’s Spain and the Shah’s Iran, a joke about the head of state could be considered a les majesté that could be formally prosecuted (Pi-Sunyer 1977:183) or less formally avenged by a group of policeman at a local station house. During Stalin’s regime, a carelessly told “anecdota” could earn years of hard labor. Leon (pseudonym) spoke of a friend who was invited to a cafe near Moscow State University where he was a student and encouraged to tell jokes. His host, however, worked for the KGB and this eighteen year-old student was arrested and didn’t return for six or seven years. A refugee in the United States after World War II told of an acquaintance sentenced to three years for jostling a Party worker and saying, “I have no time because I have to fulfill the 5 year plan” (Fitzpatrick 1999:186). Even after Stalin, such jokes could be considered “anti-Soviet conversation” (ibid.:3) and tellers or listeners could wind up in a correctional labor facility (Draitser 1979:5), lose their jobs, or be denied promotions.

Consequently, anti-regime humor was always told with the greatest circumspection—“with a keen eye as to who is within listening distance” (Brandes 1977:334–335). “People were reluctant to tell jokes to strangers. Informants usually spoke in low tones after glancing around to see if there was anyone else listening” (Dundes 1971:51). Consequently, such jokes have come to be labeled “underground humor,” “whispered anecdotes” or “Flüsterwitze” (Draitser 1979; Lipman 1991:18).

The situation of telling such jokes is perhaps epitomized by the account of Klava, a Jewish woman from Odessa. Klava was born in 1948. She remembered growing up with political jokes. “It was a national past time.” Odessans prided themselves on their jokes and on being good jokers, and this reputation was recognized by people from others parts of the country as well (Harris and Rabinovich 1995:x). But Klava was always aware that jokes and other kinds of discussions could not be freely shared. “It was a given . . . . You are not to repeat . . . . Only to your family members and your friends.” Because there were very strict—though unofficial—quotas for Jews at the university, Klava, like many Jews seeking education and advancement, obtained her degree in engineering. She was employed at a large firm, but she eventually quit her job, and became a manicurist.
She planned to apply for permission to emigrate, and she knew that once she applied, she would lose her engineering job. By obtaining a job as a manicurist before submitting her application, she could assure herself a source of income while awaiting permission. Nevertheless, she did not immediately apply as her family did not want her to leave.

In 1974, she was working in the shop and she had several clients who were waiting to have their nails done. One of her customers came in without an appointment. She needed to have her nails done because she was going on vacation. She had been Klava's customer for several years. Klava told her that she would do her nails if she would wait until she had finished with her scheduled customers. So while she worked on the other customers, the woman waited in the shop. 1974 was a celebratory year in the communist calendar—a Lenin anniversary—and Klava and her customers exchanged jokes and witticisms—many about Lenin. Several that she remembered were:

When we say Lenin, we mean Party. When we say Party, we mean Lenin. And this is how we deal with everything. We say one thing, we mean something else.

And then they came out with a bed that sleeps three—Lenin is always with us.

Party slogans were a popular target of joking even in Stalin's time (Fitzpatrick 1999:184). Here, familiar communist slogans are turned into jokes about the inability to say anything honestly and straightforwardly, or to be rid of the presence of Lenin and the society he orchestrated.

She remembered relating another joke about Lenin's anniversary:

A young engineer working in a big industrial plant. And he was a very exemplary man. He was coming to work very neatly dressed—always. And one day, all of a sudden, he shows up and he's all disheveled. His clothes are wrinkled. His tie is wrinkled. And the boss calls him in and says, "What happened? You always set an example. All of a sudden you come . . . look at yourself. Look how you look. What happened?"

"You know, I got up in the morning. I turned on the TV set. And there they go. Celebrating Lenin's hundredth birthday. 10 'We promise . . . . ' I turned it off. I turn on the radio, and there they go again celebrating Lenin's hundredth birthday. 'We promise, we promise . . . . ' I turned it off again. I was afraid to turn on the iron."

These were the kinds of jokes that Klava remembered sharing with her scheduled customers on that occasion. Her unscheduled customer
sat there the whole time that the jokes were being told. The rest is in Klava’s words:

After the two girls left and she was in the chair. And as I was working on her, she told me, “Klava, do you know who I am?” I said, “Of course, your name is Ludmilla Ivanovna.” And she said, “Do you know where I work?” “Of course, it’s in the municipal hall.” She said, “Do you know what department I work in?” “I have no idea.” “It’s department number one,” which was KGB. And the joke was said, it was Lenin’s hundredth birthday, and so all the jokes were about it. [The customer then told the following joke.] “There was a competition for the best joke about Lenin. And the first prize is ten years to where Lenin used to go”—jail, exile. And she looked at me and the smile disappeared from her face, and she told me, “If I did not value you as my manicurist, I would send you for ten years to where Lenin used to go.” And that was a decisive moment, because I wanted to go [emigrate] like three years ago, and my family did not want me [to]. I was scared. I was very scared, more than in my whole life, before that or after that.11

That night Klava called her family together and told them what had happened and that she was going to submit her application to emigrate. It only took her three months to get the permission, and then she had thirty days to leave the country. Her parents also applied to leave but they were refused, and she had to leave without them.

This account gives some sense of the danger that was understood to accompany the telling of jokes under a totalitarian regime. One could never be absolutely certain about the person one told jokes to, and if one heard a joke, unless it was from a family member or a close friend, one could never be sure whether one should report the occurrence. What is particularly interesting about Klava’s experience, is that the woman from the KGB threatens her with a joke; a joke which picks up on the topic of Lenin that had characterized the previous joking, and that was a joke about joking—that is to say, a metajoke.12 The KGB officer asserts her power by means of the very same kind of expression that she is condemning. There is no system of rules that applies to all. Privileged persons may ignore the rules.13 In fact, the KGB officer doubly ignores the rules: first she threatens Klava by means of a proscribed form of expression, and then she lets Klava off for personal reasons; because she is a good manicurist. The message is clear: The exercise of state power is arbitrary, unpredictable, and consequently, the more terrifying.14

It is worth noting that sometimes jokes served to communicate the exact opposite message. In the first months of Robert Cochran’s
Fulbright scholarship in Romania in 1985, he was watching television in a friend’s Bucharest apartment. As the familiar scene of Nicolae Ceaușescu appeared on the screen waving his hand back and forth from the elbow to his admiring and applauding audience, the friend remarked, “It’s the only way he serves us; almost every night he cleans the television” (Cochran 1989:259). This friend turned out to be an “assigned friend” whose job it was to report on the conversations and interactions of foreigners—as probably all friends and acquaintances of Westerners did during the Ceaușescu era. But in some way, the telling of this joke was an indication that there was a real friendship developing between them even though it was this friend’s job to report the American’s conversations and contacts to the authorities. He became Cochran’s friend despite the fact that he was an informer, and Cochran heard several good jokes from him during the period of his stay in Bucharest. In this case, it is the one who is reporting to the secret police who reaches out to establish a connection by means of a joke.15

Given the conditions under which jokes were told in the former Soviet Union and in other communist countries, it seems worthwhile to revisit some of the hypotheses about political jokes that have appeared in the literature over the years to see how well they account for the kinds of jokes that have been described. There are six hypotheses to be considered. A few are frequently conflated in the writing of scholars and journalists, but it will prove important to distinguish between them.

The first hypothesis that needs to be considered has not, to my knowledge, ever been discussed. It might be called the null hypothesis of whispered political joking. It is that whispered jokes about authoritarian or totalitarian regimes are in no wise different from any other kinds of jokes that are told about any aspect of life. They are not distinctive kinds of jokes but only one type in a series of types, and they are governed by the same motives; the same joke-making impulses that create sexual jokes, ethnic jokes, marriage jokes, mother-in-law jokes, absent-minded professor jokes, religious jokes, and so on. This hypothesis should not be summarily dismissed. There is something to the notion that jokes are aestheticizations of ideas and experience—an artistic manipulation of the content of everyday life. Jokes and other forms of humor are simply the most popular forms for such aesthetic expression in modern society. In another time, in another place, it might have been achieved in a dance, a song, or some graphic artistic expression.

In any event, there are some facts that speak against such a hypothesis. In the first place, informants spontaneously expressed the distinctiveness
of these jokes. "We lived by political jokes," one informant said.16 "That's what we survived on," said another.17 In other words, informants felt that these jokes were special and not to be lumped with other kinds of jokes they might tell. Some Norwegians kept and preserved joke diaries during the Nazi occupation between 1940 and 1945 (Stokker 1995:9–10,13–15). Of course this sense that political jokes were special may simply have resulted from the danger that attended their telling. Things that are forbidden and dangerous are often more exciting and stand out against the backdrop of ordinary life.

Yet, if political jokes were of a piece with the rest of joking, one wonders why people would have risked telling them. After all, one could satisfy the aesthetic impulse by telling jokes about relatively safe topics: mothers-in-law, cramped apartments, the weather, alcoholism, or Western society and culture. Under communist rule, humor, at least certain kinds of humor, was allowed—even encouraged. There were the numerous satirical magazines: the Czech Dikobraz [porcupine], the Slovak Rohac [stag beetle], Poland's Szpilki [needles], Bulgaria's Sturshev [hornet], Romania's Urzica [nettle], Hungary's Ludas Matyi [named after a peasant boy who outwits his landlord], East Germany's Eulenspiegel, and Russia's Krokozil [crocodile] (Rose 2001–2002:66–67; Sanders 1962a:26). All of these magazines were approved organs and had very substantial numbers of subscribers. They contained a good deal of non-political humor, but they also contained cartoons directed at the West and satire directed at low and middle-level government functionaries and the operations of various institutions. Thus, humor concerning the ineptness of bureaucrats, the shirking of laborers, the stupidity of newspaper editors and administrators, and the inefficiencies and shoddiness of agricultural and industrial production appeared in their pages. Of course the boundaries between humor that was acceptable and unacceptable were fine ones, and editorial staffs of these journals were sacked when they overstepped those boundaries (Sanders 1962b; Rose 2001–2002:66). Again, if whispered political humor was just one strain in the arts of everyday life, there was no compelling reason to hazard liberty or livelihood in purveying it. There were plenty of opportunities to create and appreciate humor that did not entail the risks that whispered anecdotes did. Yet, the topics of jokes—even during the Stalin era—seem largely to lie in the forbidden political arena (Fitzpatrick 1999:3).

A second hypothesis to be considered is that jokes and other forms of humor are vehicles for speaking about what would otherwise be
unspeakable. This somewhat oxymoronic perspective suggests that jokes convey messages that would be difficult or impossible to express directly. In discussing Romanian political jokes, Alan Dundes has written, “In political jokes in Iron Curtain countries, one frequently finds said what many individuals feel but dare not utter” (1971:51). Dundes and his collaborator C. Banc continue, “Criticisms can be uttered only sotto voce and that is why political jokes play so important a role in Eastern Europe . . . . One can speak in jokes when one cannot speak otherwise . . . . In Eastern Europe, what one cannot talk about are the inadequacies of the government. Hence there are far more political jokes in Eastern Europe than in the United States” (Banc and Dundes 1989:10). Charles E. Schutz agrees, “Humor is the first and most natural form of secret speaking and writing . . . . The comical form conceals messages that we could speak or write more directly or forthrightly . . . . The greater the potential for conflict, the greater the comic veil . . . . The indirectness or disguises of humor may be due to fear, propriety, perversity, or entertainment” (Schutz 1995:52–54,62), and undoubtedly it would be fear that Schutz would see as a motivating factor in shaping the political joke under totalitarian regimes.18 Anthropologist Don Handelman—which speaking of joking, rather than jokes per se, saw it as permitting the expression of “discrepant messages that . . . do not overly disrupt official reality” and which can therefore be successfully communicated even though they may contain criticisms of serious issues in the real world (1974:67).

This view of the disguise of joking was formulated by Sigmund Freud, albeit in reference to the sexual and not the political. Wrote Freud, “Only when we rise to a society of a more refined education do the formal conditions for jokes play a part. The smut becomes a joke and is only tolerated when it has the character of a joke. The technical method which it usually employs is the allusion—that is, the replacement by something small, something remotely connected, which the hearer reconstructs in his imagination into a complete and straightforward obscenity. The greater the discrepancy between what is given directly in the form of smut and what it necessarily calls up in the hearer, the more refined the joke becomes and the higher, too, it may venture to climb in good society” (Freud 1960:100). In other words, something that could not be expressed directly in society could be expressed using the allusive techniques of the joke.

How well does this conjecture account for political jokes? In fact, it does not seem to explain political jokes very well—particularly the
whispered anecdotes from behind the Iron Curtain. For the jokes themselves were dangerous communications. The indirection or allusion in jokes offered little or no protection. Under Stalin, telling political jokes could initiate a process that might well end in the gulag.\textsuperscript{19} Even after Stalin, jail or a destroyed career could result. When I asked an émigré from the USSR whether she knew of people who got in trouble for telling jokes, she said, "We knew it left and right. People were telling on each other . . . . That was the beauty of it [the system]." People did not tell jokes to just anyone. They only told them to close family or friends whose trustworthiness had been established over the course of a lifetime.\textsuperscript{20}

Nor would they listen to jokes from just anyone. Again, Klava:

If someone would tell jokes, and you didn't report, someone might report you that you were not one who reported . . . .\textsuperscript{21} [When I heard a joke from someone I didn't know] I would refrain from reacting at all. I just played the role of an idiot. I didn't get it. And it was a signal to them. Take it anyway you want, and try and repeat it and expose yourself more without knowing why I didn't react. Or just get that I don't want to hear it."\textsuperscript{22}

But jokes were not the only way that people communicated. People also complained to one another and criticized conditions. They discussed the incompetence of leaders, shortages, and the injustices and failures of the system. And to whom did they complain and with whom did they share their social and political views? The very same people to whom they told their political jokes.

In other words, people could and did speak rather directly about the very situations that were addressed in the jokes. There is no indication that jokes served as any kind of encrypted channel of communication that insulated the tellers and hearers from reprisals by the authorities. Both serious and humorous discourse were dangerous. Both required extreme caution. One could not serve as a surrogate for the other.

Closely allied with the hypothesis of political jokes serving as a means of indirect and thus sanctioned expression, is the hypothesis that political jokes give vent to frustrations with and aggressive feelings toward the political regime. This connection is natural. Because the jokes are seen as providing a sanctioned frame for the communication of otherwise dangerous ideas, they naturally come to be seen as the major or only outlet for the expression of such ideas and their associated emotions. Alan Dundes accepts without question that Romanian jokes "provide a much needed vent for emotion," and that they succeed in doing so because
they “provide a socially sanctioned frame which normally absolves individuals from any guilt which might otherwise result from conversational . . . articulations of the same content” (1971:51). Stanley Brandes, commenting on political jokes in Franco’s Spain, also sees them as “a safety valve for anti-regime sentiment” (1977:345). Writes Brandes,

The mixture of rage and fear, hostility and self-defense, which is important in all humor, is nowhere more apparent than in the field of politics. . . . When people live under politically repressive circumstances, they are likely to vent their anger and frustration through . . . jokes . . . or related genres, and thereby create for themselves a temporary escape from omnipresent and severe restrictions on freedom of expression (ibid. 331).

Oriol Pi-Sunyer, also writing about the same tradition of Spanish jokes, agrees: “Humor in such circumstances . . . helps to alleviate anxiety, and there were periods during the long Franco rule when levels of anxiety were very high” (Pi-Sunyer 1977:185). George Mikes sees laughter as “the only weapon the oppressed can use against the oppressor. It is an aggressive weapon and a safety-valve at the same time” (1971:109). Mary Lee Townsend viewed the jokes and caricatures published in nineteenth-century Berlin as expressions that permitted Berliners to “vent their spleen about life and love’s everyday irritations” (1992:196). Alleen and Don Nilsen concur, “Antiauthority humor illustrates the theory that people use humor to relieve stress by making fun of situations where they feel put upon” (2000:36). Charles E. Schutz, although less focused on whispered anecdotes, sees political humor of all sorts as sublimating aggression. The creator of political and social satire, according to Schutz, is the “aggressor against a political personage or social institution. By his comic genius he has translated his anger or resentment into a satirical attack in which his target is made the butt of humor for an audience. The target becomes a victim and the aggressor’s anger is expended peacefully” (Schutz 1977:77). Christine Pelzer White saw the peasant plays that mocked the dominant classes as a safety valve (1985:54), and James C. Scott felt that all hidden expressions of resistance were symbolic expressions of suppressed anger in the face of domination, although he was skeptical that anger was actually relieved through such expressions (Scott 1990:186–187).

Again, all these views are interpolations of Freud’s view of tendentious jokes: “Jokes . . . make possible the satisfaction of an instinct (whether lustful or hostile) in the face of an obstacle that stands in its way. They circumvent the obstacle and in that way draw pleasure from
a source which the obstacle had made inaccessible . . . . The pleasure in the case of a tendentious joke arises from a purpose being satisfied whose satisfaction would otherwise not have taken place" (1960:101, 117). Although Freud was particularly concerned with the internal repression of sexual instincts, he was quite aware that jokes could be employed when the constraint was external and the situation straightforwardly political.23 Building on Herbert Spencer’s notions of laughter (1860:395), Freud saw laughter at such jokes as a discharge of excess energy. A joke, in Freud’s view, circumvents an inhibition and makes the energy employed in maintaining that inhibition superfluous. That energy is then discharged in laughter (1960:146–149). Ultimately, the whole view of the expressive and discharge function of jokes goes back to Aristotle’s intimation that tragedy provides an outlet for the emotions (Aristotle 1970:25).

Cathartic, discharge, or safety-valve theories of joking are as problematic as they are pervasive. The problem is that while it is easy to recognize the performance of a joke, it is far more difficult to register the catharsis or venting that is claimed to result. Too often, the jokes themselves become the indices of the anxieties, frustrations, or emotions discharged. To take an extreme example, one scholar concluded that people were coping with “fear of space travel” and “of the unknown” because he was able to collect large numbers of jokes involving Martians, moon men, and space explorers (Winick 1961:48–49). Unfortunately, the only indicator of these fears and anxieties were the jokes themselves. There was only one variable, not two. In far too many cases, the mere existence of jokes about a particular topic is accepted as a demonstration that (1) fears and anxieties exist with reference to that topic; and (2) that those anxieties are discharged or relieved in the act of telling and responding. While I am more comfortable accepting the idea that many Soviet citizens were disgusted with political and economic conditions under communist rule, were critical of the party and its leaders, and truly feared the political regime, the cathartic explanation, nevertheless, leaves much to be desired. We are faced with the fact that such anxieties and frustrations were often expressed directly.24

In the Soviet Union in the 1930s, people wrote anonymous letters to the authorities expressing anger and heaping abuse on the regime. Leaders were sometime threatened. Some authors of these letters even dared the police to try to identify them (Fitzpatrick 1999:186). In other instances a more dangerous ploy was used. An anonymous note was passed up to the speaker at a party meeting and the speaker might as a
matter of course read it out loud. At a party meeting in Moscow in 1929, Vyacheslav Molotov read out the following note that had been passed to him:

Comrade Molotov! You shout about self-criticism, but . . . if someone would criticize the dictatorship of Stalin and his group, then tomorrow he will fly . . . to the devil, to prison, and further . . . . Many are against you, but are afraid to lose a crust of bread and their privileges. Believe me, all the peasantry is against you. Long live Leninism! Down with the Stalinist dictatorship. (Fitzpatrick 1999:1187)

For those who were not so brave as to defy the authorities directly, other modes of expression were available. People engaged in “kitchen conversations” (besedi na kukhnye);25 that is, candid conversations with close relatives and friends often lasting late into the night. What was discussed during these conversations was, as one informant put it, “everything that it was risky to say.” People complained, people criticized, people expressed themselves without inhibition.26 They also discussed forbidden broadcasts on Voice of America and the BBC that they regularly listened to, and the underground samizdat27 literature that they read.

If the hypothesis that the circumvention of an inhibition in a joke results in a discharge of energy that produces a cathartic effect is accepted, it must be recognized that such inhibitions were regularly circumvented. What was it that the jokes accomplished that was not accomplished by these other means? What, exactly, did these jokes do?

A fourth hypothesis about whispered political jokes is that they are, in actuality, revolutionary acts. Most frequently cited is George Orwell’s comment that “every joke is a tiny revolution” (Orwell and Angus 1969:184). Others have elaborated upon the theme. George Mikes: “Every joke whispered against a regime, every laughter at the expense of the Hitlers and the Stalins of this world is a nail in their coffin” (1985: vii). Oriol Pi-Sunyer regarded political jokes told in Spain as “the oral equivalent of guerilla warfare” (1977:187). Egon Larsen (1980) entitled his history of the political joke: Wit as a Weapon. Hans Speier also stated that “ridicule is . . . a weapon. Tyrants who do not permit jokes to be aimed at themselves use it against their enemies” (1969:182).

It is comics, writers, and journalists that have been perhaps the greatest purveyors of these views. Mel Brooks stated that “if you ridicule [dictators], bring them down with laughter—they can’t win. You show how crazy they are” (quoted in Rose 2001–2002:68). Milan Kundera in his
novel *The Joke* has one of his characters opine that “No great movement designed to change the world can bear to be laughed at or belittled, because laughter is a rust that corrodes everything” (1969:226). Andrew Stuttaford characterized Osama bin Laden as “someone to jeer and scoff at, a clown in a cave to be mocked, parodied, derided, lampooned, taunted, and ridiculed . . . . A loser” (quoted in Rose 2001–2002:68), as if the threat that bin Laden and his organization posed were somehow diminished through ridicule.

The term “revolution” denotes a drastic change in social and political conditions. The idea of a joke as a political “weapon” suggests that it inflicts damage on a regime. Yet jokes, to my knowledge, have never been implicated in revolutionary change. Orwell’s term was perhaps unfortunate, because he did not mean to suggest that social changes were initiated or accomplished by joking. He believed that the joke “upsets the established order” (Orwell and Angus 1969:284), but not necessarily the order of the real world. The joke aims to destroy dignity, but whether that regime loses its sense of dignity or whether any change comes about even if it does, is quite another matter.28 Stanley Brandes did not see any positive effect of Spanish jokes on political life in Franco’s Spain (1977:345). Hans Speier recognized ridicule to be a weapon, but more in the hands of the strong than the weak. For the weak, jokes served only to “help the victims of repression and persecution bear their suffering” (1969:182).29 Other scholars have also opposed the view of the real-world efficacy of political joking. Khalid Kishtainy, writing of Arab political humor, felt that “people joke about their oppressors, not to overthrow them but to endure them.” People who have guns, have no need of jokes (1985:7,179). Alexander Rose saw Russian political jokes as essays in endurance: “temporary pain relievers serving as a substitute for being allowed to participate in real politics” (Rose 2001–2002:68). Political jokes, according to Robert Cochran, are “at once an assertion of defiance and admission of defeat . . . . No public change is effected” (1989:272). Indeed, Hans Speier actually considered political jokes to be accommodations with repression. The telling of such jokes assuaged guilt over the failure to act politically (Speier 1998:1395–1396).30 Thus the jokes are not an instrument of political revolution but an index of political resignation.

And resignation was endemic. In the face of Soviet power, the people were mostly “fatalistic and passive” (Fitzpatrick 1999:234). Linda Mizejewski, another Fulbright lecturer in Romania in the mid-1980s, was dismayed and then angered by the utter resignation of the Romanian
people. "We were not prepared for the silent shrug, the lack of anger, the hopeless shaking of the head in the face of each absurd new shortage . . . . How can they take it, how can they put up with it?" (1987:62). But as the essays and books amply demonstrate, if the Romanians were passive and compliant, they had innumerable jokes.

Anthropologist Mary Douglas characterized the joke as an "anti-rite" (1968:369). She regarded it as "anti" because the joke destroys harmony and overturns established order. She regarded it as a "rite" because it is an expressive, symbolic formation devoid of impact on real world affairs. It is not a technology. It does not do anything. It is merely an exercise in cognition.31

There is one place in the scholarly literature where it has been argued that whispered jokes might have had some positive political effect. Kathleen Stokker surveyed the humor in Norway during the Nazi occupation. She pointed out that resistance to the Nazis in the early years was sporadic and came largely from individuals. There was no organized opposition. The circulation of anti-Nazi humor, she argued, may have helped to educate, allay fear, reduce the sense of individual isolation, boost morale, and engender a sense of solidarity conducive to a more organized resistance. At the very least, the jokes may have provided the Norwegians after the war with a sense—most probably a false sense, she adds—that they had resisted as a nation and that they could return as one whole to the reestablishment of the state and the values that they had previously shared (Stokker 1995:206–214).

But the humor that Stokker documented in her work was not merely whispered anecdotes that were recorded and hidden away in personal diaries or published in collections after the war. Much anti-Nazi humor was published in underground newspapers, printed on publicly posted placards, rendered in graffiti, or circulated on postcards and even mock postage stamps. In other words, Norwegian humor was not all of the interpersonal variety. A good deal of the humor registered defiance in public and produced spectators who might be moved to action as they recognized the existence of an organized and active opposition.32 Whispered anecdotes were not publicly defiant. Although they involved confidants, they created no spectatorship. Of course, whispered anecdotes proved important to individual Norwegians during the occupation, but that they were responsible for a change in political conditions either during the occupation or after remains to be demonstrated.33

A fifth, and the most recently proposed, hypothesis of political joking shifts the discussion from the relations of citizens to state power to their
relationship to the symbols of that power. Alexei Yurchak (1997) argues that since the 1970s, the majority of Soviet citizens regarded the pervasiveness of official ideology as a given that was discounted in everyday consciousness. Life went on, not by repudiating, validating, or even ridiculing the "hegemony of Soviet representations" but by ignoring them. The citizenry—both leaders and ordinary citizens—simply conducted their lives in parallel, shaping their everyday behaviors in and around these representations as one might for the weather. Soviet ideology was regarded as false but it was not contested because no other public representations of reality were possible—even for those in power. For example, people participated in parades on May Day because they were inevitable. Participation did not evidence support for socialist definitions of reality, and various forms of carnivalesque behaviors engaged in during parades did not reflect either opposition or ridicule. Parades were simply a part of life, and people enjoyed themselves because crowds and parades were opportunities for enjoyment. They could carry signs without even knowing what was written on them. Official holidays, speeches, party meetings and other occasions were simply scenes set for them and from which they sought to extract the maximum amount of personal satisfaction. Most leaders also acted as if the ideology were not recognized for what it was. They acknowledged the salutes of the people as they paraded past the reviewing stands, and secretaries at Komsomol meetings recorded the unanimous votes of the members even though they were aware that the attendees had been sleeping, reading, or playing cards throughout and could not have known what motion they were in fact approving.

A deeply cynical perspective was necessary to live in these circumstances. It required what Yurchak calls pretense misrecognition. People recognized the falsity of the official ideology but had to pretend that they did not. Political humor, Yurchak argued, proceeded from this cognitive dissonance.\footnote{\textsuperscript{34}} It served to expose both the lie and the pretense that it was not a lie. In this context, political anecdotes were not signs of resistance against official ideology, nor were they ways of speaking surreptitiously, or efforts to recover a measure of self-respect in an oppressive environment (the next hypothesis to be considered). In essence, the humor was self-mocking, as it exposed the tellers' own contradictory and self-duplicious behavior. The jokes "exposed the coexistence of two incongruous spheres, official and parallel, and the subject's simultaneous participation in both" (Yurchak 1997:180).

To illustrate his point, Yurchak cites anecdotes that explicitly employ clichéd expressions (italicized below) or that dealt with activities defined
in terms of official claims: “What is the most constant element of the Soviet system?—Temporary problems.” “In what aspect is socialism better than other systems?—In that it successfully overcomes difficulties which do not exist in other systems.” “How will the problem of lines in shops be solved in communism? There will be nothing left to line up for.” In each case the lie of the system is revealed in the punchline and breaks through the suppression of that lie. The jokes highlight the discrepancy between the people’s sense of the falsity of the system and their pretended blindness to it.

The pleasure that the audience received from such jokes—beyond what they might receive from any joke—was the lifting of a repression, the repression of one’s own pretense that no discrepancy existed between official and parallel practices. The jokes allowed people to articulate their predicament without having to analyze it. That is, the jokes did not lead to reflection about the official lies or the pretense that the lies did not exist. The jokes served not to ridicule the official reality but to adapt the normal Soviet citizen to living with it (ibid.:182).

Yurchak’s thesis is ingenious, but like all hypotheses, it raises questions. First, it depends upon a double division of the data. Soviet anecdotes are explicitly separated from political humor in other times and places. They cannot be conflated with political jokes in Nazi Germany or Fascist Spain, let alone with anti-regime humor in postcolonial Togo (1997:162–163). Furthermore, late Soviet joking is split from earlier joking, and the description and theory apply only to the generation of late socialism—people born between 1955 and 1970 (ibid.: 166). While such divisions may be justified, they do not contribute to theoretical economy.

Yurchak suggests that there was a change in the jokes between earlier and later periods and an increase in the number of anecdotes in the Brezhnev period. Certainly the jokes that centered on party slogans, which he highlights, were popular under Stalin. Also, it is almost impossible—in the absence of systematic collecting and archival storage—to ascertain the quantity of oral jokes in any particular period. There is no compelling reason to think that many of the jokes from earlier periods did not persist and remain popular later on.

Also, the hypothesis only works if there was an absence of serious commentary about the Soviet system. Yurchak admits that if ironic and critical commentary—such as is displayed in a letter he reproduces (1997:181–182)—was common in late socialism, it might undermine his argument, for it would belie the repression of the recognition of
official lies. But were such commentaries rare? My own informants indicated that they were frequent. One would also need to assess the place of samizdat, tamizdat (foreign publication), and magnitizdat (home recorded media), the BBC, and Voice of America in this later period. If adaptation to the hegemony of representations depended on pretense misrecognition, could people reading or listening to such productions have escaped an honest confrontation with their own pretenses?

Finally, Yurchak ignores or plays down the element of risk in joke telling. Klava, whom I quoted earlier in this paper about her 1974 encounter with the KGB official, was born in 1948. She misses by seven years the window for the late-socialist generation. But if what is called late socialism is in fact characterized by dramatic reductions in joke-telling risk, then this factor alone could alter the circumstances and significance of joke telling. There may have been no substantive difference between earlier and later periods with regard to pretense misrecognition, or this pretense may in itself have been a pretense. If jokes were no longer a truly risky business in late socialism then their significance would necessarily change. (Consequently, the failure of the Soviet regime would be less a function of the disintegration of the "spiritual substance" of the community, as Yurchak suggests (188), than the breakdown of the panoptic and disciplinary technologies of the state. Or, as one of my informants put it, "The writing was on the wall. We just didn’t see it. The executioners were tired. You can’t run a terrorist regime when you’re fat and lazy.")

The last hypothesis of political joking is the one that Yurchak’s own thesis was meant to challenge. It concerns identity and the maintenance of self. Political jokes, it is argued, offer their tellers and listeners a brief respite from the realities of everyday life, a moment when they feel that they—rather than the authorities—are in control. To complain about or criticize a political system is to take that system at face value. It is an admission that the system defines and regulates life. Perhaps one may vent anger and aggression through such complaint and criticism, but ultimately the terms of the encounter are established by a set of objective conditions—that is, the regime. To read samizdat or to listen to illegal radio broadcasts are likewise engagements with objective political conditions in their own sphere and on their own terms. The jokes, however, are different.

Recall the joke about the “Bed that sleeps three—‘Lenin is always with us.’” The party’s intrusion into personal life is carried to an absurd conclusion—the development of a piece of furniture designed to
accommodate both Lenin and the conjugal couple. The joke about the disheveled man who was afraid to turn on his iron for fear that he would only be exposed to further propaganda, again extends regime practice to an absurd conclusion. Soviet radio and television propaganda are so relentless and pervasive that all electronic appliances are suspect as channels for its dissemination. In the joke “When we say Lenin, we mean Party; when we say Party we mean Lenin,” the proclamation of ideological unity becomes irrefutable evidence that the Party either cannot say what it means, or more insidiously, does not mean what it says.39

The political joke, with its incongruities and its mechanisms for making those incongruities appropriate (Oring 2003:13–26), allows for a momentary revision of reality. The joke is a reductio ad absurdum by means of which the regime, the leaders, the incompetence, the hardships, the duplicity, the surveillance, and even the terror are domesticated and discounted. In each of these jokes, a space is created—however small—that the Party cannot penetrate. The joke rejects conventional logic and with its own counter-logics affirms the independence and integrity of tellers and hearers.

These jokes do not merely express opinion. They objectify that opinion and crystallize it in aesthetic forms. And while no genuine public is created for this opinion, in some sense, the jokes stand as the oral artifacts of an “alternate moral universe” (Scott 1976:240)—monuments of a buried civilization. Of course, any victories that emerge from such an enterprise are fleeting and purely psychological. Rather, the jokes are modes of “consolation,” manifestations of “spirit” (Cochran 1991:16,20), and exercises in the maintenance of “self-esteem” (Mikes 1971:109), which serve to maintain “good morale” (Obrdlik 1942:712), and serve as sources of “liberation” (Limon 1997:74). Perhaps Freud said it best: Humor allows an “exaltation of the ego” and reflects “man’s tenacious hold on his customary self and his disregard of what might overthrow that self and drive it to despair” (Freud 1960:229, 234).40

And there were those who “despaired.” At least, there were those who simply subordinated themselves to the system without any visible signs of disturbance. Boris’s father was arrested and accused of sabotage in the last year of World War II because he had refused to approve an airplane for flight that he felt was unsafe. Because of a curious set of circumstances, Boris’s father was not shot. He managed to get released and returned to work. But he had been so “scared by his experience that he couldn’t even afford to say something like that [jokes] at home. He
would read the paper and he would say ‘It’s written in the paper, therefore it’s true. The matter is closed.’”

None of my joke-telling informants entertained hopes that the Soviet regime would end or be substantially ameliorated in their lifetimes. None of them were actively trying to change conditions or the regime. “Most people would say,” said Boris, “this is not my business. Leave me out of it. Let me live my life, do my menial little job, come home, drink a glass of vodka, and forget about the whole thing.” One might argue that they had also despaired. But that despair was political only. Boris, and many others like him, did tell jokes. Boris did not learn them from his father at home. He learned them in school and on the job. Through such jokes, Boris could deny consequence to the regime that defined his life and with which, in some way, he was forced—like every other Soviet citizen—to collaborate each and every day. The jokes created a private world impervious to economic conditions, governmental demands, and ideological doctrines.

There is some evidence to support this hypothesis. There is experimental data that suggests humor and comedy engender hope (Vilaythong et al. 2003), although one need wonder what exactly in the Soviet Union there was to hope for. Also Antonin Obrdlik (1942:712) observed that jokes told about the regime in Czechoslovakia after the Nazi takeover had the effect of immediately lifting the mood of their listeners. Two of my informants who made plans to leave the USSR in the 1970s reported that once they began the process of applying to leave, their joke telling stopped. At least in their cases, programs of action may have made jokes superfluous. Therefore, it must be acknowledged that any enhancement of mood, any exaltation-of-self afforded by the jokes, may have been bought at the expense of real action. Perhaps no serious political action was possible. But if the jokes were a substitute for action, political joking might be characterized as more a technology of domination than resistance.

Some sense of the self-defeating aspect of political humor is undoubtedly the reason that several of my informants suggested that the KGB actually created, or at least purveyed, political jokes. The jokes were circulated from time to time, they said, in order to relieve stress and defuse tense political or economic situations. This view has also been promoted in the scholarly literature although no evidence has been presented to support it. Certainly the members of the KGB knew and told political jokes. There is no indication, however, that they were responsible for either their creation or dissemination.
A problem remains. If the jokes were merely symbolic and joke telling did not have any real-world consequences, what, ultimately, distinguished Boris from his father? Both worked, both endured, both survived. How did Boris and his father differ except that Boris told jokes? But jokes are the phenomena that we are attempting to understand and explain; they cannot be invoked to explain themselves. We are left with the real possibility that political joke telling contributes nothing at all to survival, adaptation, endurance, or even equanimity in a repressive society. Political joking, in other words, may have no discernible functions at all.

So why tell political jokes under repressive regimes? Why engage in such risky business for something that is of so little consequence in the real world? The answer, I think, is not to be found in a theory but in an old joke:

A man complains to a friend that his home life has become unbearable. His brother-in-law has moved into his house and thinks he’s a chicken. From morning till night the brother-in-law goes about scratching, pecking, and clucking. It is driving him and his wife to distraction.

“Why don’t you have your brother-in-law committed?” asks the friend.

“We would,” he replies, “but to tell you the truth, we need the eggs.”

NOTES
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1. As actor Ted Danson did at a Friar’s Club banquet in 1993.
2. Sigmund Freud also cites a version of this joke (Freud 1960:74).
3. Not that long ago, two U.S. Secretaries of Agriculture lost jobs and ended their political careers because of their joking remarks. Earl L. Butz resigned his position in 1976 after the press reported a racial joke he told in private conversation. When asked why the Republican party was not able to attract more blacks, he said, “The only thing coloreds are looking for are tight pussy, loose shoes, and a warm place to shit.” James Watt resigned in 1983 after he jokingly referred to the diversity of his coal-leasing review commission as consisting of “a black, two Jews, a woman, and a cripple” (Nation 1976:23; Essay 1983:100).
4. Control of humor in the press was a big concern of the Prussian government in the nineteenth century, but it does not seem that they were equally concerned with control of humor in everyday life (Townsend 1992).

5. "Anekdot" (pl. "anekdoty") is the Russian word for a story about an actual personal experience. It became the designation of a folkloric genre that we would most likely call a joke (Draitser 1982:233).

6. Leon, interview, 30 April 2003. For some examples of the lengths to which the KGB would go to trap people see Deriaben and Gibney (1959:300–306).

7. To grasp the role that such jokes could play in a State Security investigation, see the sample report in Deriabin and Gibney (1956:296–297).

8. Such surreptitious communication was regarded by James C. Scott as part of the "hidden transcript" in systems of domination (1990:37).

9. Since the 1800s, Odessa has had a significant Jewish population. By 1900, Jews comprised more than thirty-five percent of the city's population and gave a distinctive character to the culture of the city. In 1941, the city was occupied by German and Rumanian armies and thousands of Jews fled. Thousands of others were massacred or transported making the city *Judenrein*. But after the war, Jews returned making it one of the Jewish centers in the Soviet Union, although the were no public expressions of Jewish communal or cultural life. By 1959, Jews comprised some sixteen percent of the population (Dinur 1972:1319–1328). There is even a joke about the Jewish character of Odessa:

   Question: How many people live in Odessa?
   Answer: One and a half million.

   Question: And how many Jews?
   Answer: What are you, deaf?

10. In fact, the hundredth anniversary of Lenin's birth would have been 1970. The fiftieth anniversary of his death would have been 1974. Klava was sure that the year was 1974 in which the incident took place, and when questioned, admitted that the occasion could have been the anniversary of his death. In any event, there were many jokes going around about Lenin at that time.


12. This joke is well known and versions have been printed in a number of collections. For example, Lipman, 1991:35,49; Banc and Dundes 1989:9; Lukes and Galnoor, 1985:10.

13. This is not entirely true. KGB officer Peter Deriabin almost got in serious trouble for telling a joke about Stalin's son (Deriabin and Gibney, 1959:173).

14. Two informants also communicated to me that when they applied to leave the Soviet Union, they had no way of determining who would be allowed to leave. Permissions were granted in a seemingly random manner. People with security clearances might be allowed to leave while ordinary people of
no particular value to the state might be denied. Leon actually expressed
the belief that arbitrariness was deliberate and designed to intimidate
(Leon, interview, 18 June 2003).
15. Saul Bellow’s novel, *The Dean’s December* captures something of the anom-
aly of this situation in the character of Ioanna, the building concierge
(1982:72,212–13).
19. As did Leonid Z., who in 1936 began to be investigated because of an anec-
dote he told at a drunken party (Solzhenitsyn, 1973:200).
20. KGB officer Peter Deriaben estimated that 80% of the Soviet population
acted at one time or another as agent or informer (Deriaben and Gibney
1959:75).
21. Unsurprisingly, there is a joke about this: “What are you in for? ’For
being talkative: I told some jokes. And you?’ ’For laziness. I heard a joke
and thought: I’ll tell them tomorrow, but a comrade didn’t waste time’”
(Fitzpatrick 1999:185).
22. Interview, 20 April 2003.
23. See, for example, his discussion of Serenissimus in which he recognizes
the obstacle to expression as an external political constraint rather than an
internal psychological one (Freud 1960:68–69,104).
25. The association of such conversations with the kitchen probably dates the
expression to the period in which people had individual apartments with
private kitchens. They could not have taken place in the period when kitch-
en were communally shared. Fitzpatrick refers to this type of speech as
“kitchen table” (1999:166).
26. Leon, interview, 18 June 2003; Vladimir, interview communication, 23 April
2003.
27. Literally, “self-publishing house,” it referred to those works that circulated
from person to person in typescript. For information on the circula-
tion of Aleksandr Solzhenitsn’s works in *samizdat*, see Michael Schammel
28. Witness the tenacity of President Bill Clinton in the face of the torrent of
jokes about his affair with Monica Lewinsky, and his misrepresentations
under oath during his deposition in the sexual harassment suit of Paula
29. Speier thought that this forbearance came largely through their venting of
their aggression. This hypothesis was examined above.
30. There are interesting dialogues in Gerald Seymour’s novel *Archangel* con-
cerning the merits of real resistance versus humor and other forms of sym-
32. Such expressions would have been part of what Scott has called the “public transcript” and would have constituted powerful acts of political resistance (Scott 1990:45–69, 202–227).

33. Curiously, a joke that Stokker cites as reflecting a high degree of anti-Nazi sentiment in Norway (1995:132) is also cited by Egon Larsen in describing the early years of Nazi rule in Germany. Larsen claimed, however, that jokes of this type gave people an undeserved feeling of confidence that Hitler’s regime could not be very long as there were so many anti-fascists in governmental and administrative institutions. In other words, it communicated that active resistance was not really necessary at all (1980:44–45).

34. A term Yurchak does not use.

35. “Repression” seems too strong a term. “Suppression” would be a more accurate term from the Freudian lexicon as it suggests a conscious rather than unconscious process.

36. Admittedly, theoretical economy has not been much valued in the last several decades.

37. Indeed, Leszek Kolakowski characterized the split between the spheres of Soviet life and the misrecognition as characteristic of the Stalin era:

> Half-starved people, lacking the bare necessities of life, attended meetings at which they repeated the government’s lies about how well off they were, and in a bizarre way they half-believed what they were saying . . . . Truth, they knew, was a Party matter, and therefore lies became true even if they contradicted the plain facts of experience. The condition of their living in two separate worlds at once was the remarkable achievement of the Soviet system.” (quoted in Amis 2002:152–153)

38. Leon, interview, 30 April 2003. Martin Amis would seem to agree:

> Glasnost, which was a euphemism for not lying, laughed the Bolsheviks off the stage. The poets had talked about the inhuman power of the lie—but there is an antithesis to that: the human power of truth. Lying could no longer be enforced, and the regime fell. And the leaders had become too evolved, and were incapable of the necessary cruelty—the cruelty of Lenin and Stalin. (2002:48)

39. The jokes were also about the way Lenin anniversaries were packaged and presented by the state. See Graham (2003:44).

40. It is odd, no doubt, that buried within Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious is a rationale for humorous expression that rests upon a notion of self. Freud, however, paid little attention to the concept of self in his work (Jackson 1984:108–110).


42. Obrdlik was not merely equating the lifting of mood with the laughter that normally follows a joke. He reported a general increase in good spirits.

43. Contrary to Scott (1990:19). The domination was not so complete, however, as to keep such jokes from being generated in the first place.
44. For example, see Wertheim 1965:31; Speier 1969:180; Lukes and Galnoor 1985:xii. When there have been specific references to support the allegation, they usually concern the use of official humor magazines or the establishment of cabarets to damp down dissent (Rose, 2001–2002:67). Fitzpatrick (1999:183) also notes that under Stalin some people believed that the NKVD started rumors because “people liked to hear them.” Also see Deriabin and Gibney 1959:61, 74, 80, 141, 142, 173, 175, 227–28. It is interesting that the “World Upside Down” graphic prints that began to be circulated in the 16th century were also regarded as a conspiracy of the dominant class (Scott 1990:167–68).

45. It would require some independent protocol to assess that those who told jokes were psychologically, and perhaps also socially, different from those who did not.

46. All of the explanations of underground political jokes that have been offered by scholars are formulated as functional explanations. Functions are the effects of social behaviors, and while functions are real and important, their use as explanations is problematic. (See Jarvie 1965:18–34; Cancian 1968:29–43; Oring 1976:67–80.) However, as these explanations of political jokes have been framed as individual psychological functions, they can escape the charges of illegitimate teleology or tautology (Turner and Maryanski 1979:118–126). The tellers of the jokes, consciously or unconsciously, mean to speak surreptitiously, or discharge aggressive energies, or destabilize the regime from below, or elevate their spirits. They are first and foremost intentions, and they are functions only to the extent that these intentions are realized.

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