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Political Humor under Stalin

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The Great Terror

Between 1936 and 1938, rumors of conspiracies fomented by German, Polish, and Japanese secret agents or renegades like Trotskii triggered an explosion of popular fear and xenophobia in Soviet society. The show-trial confessions of Old Bolsheviks supposedly involved in these conspiracies fed the flames, as did reports of treachery throughout the Red Army high command. A fire-storm of denunciation and arrest quickly spread to the mass level of society, terrorizing rank-and-file party members as well as teachers, engineers, and members of the Soviet elite.

Long a source of confusion, Stalin's purges appear to have been a pre-emptive strike against purported fifth columns and "unreliable elements" within the party and state bureaucracy, the armed forces and society as a whole. Such an explanation accounts not only for the arrest of many of Stalin's perceived rivals within the party ranks, but for the wholesale purge of certain ethnic minorities as well as social marginals, non-conformists, and recidivists.¹ This latter "prophylactic" round-up of former *kulaks*, black marketers, prostitutes, and other "usual suspects" targeted "anti-social" groups perceived to be holdovers from the capitalist economy. In all, some 680,000 "enemies of the people" were executed between 1936 and 1938, while another three million were sent to GULag prison camps or exiled to the barren wastes of Siberia and the far north.²

Ordinary Soviets struggled in vain to make sense of the purges. Many seem to have accepted official accounts of treason in high places. Others believed that the purge was chiefly aimed at communists and Jews.³ Still others expressed discomfort with such logical explanations, attributing the frenzy of bloodletting to Stalin's paranoiac insecurity or the murderous psychopathol-

¹ Ethnic minorities living in Soviet border regions—people of Korean, Finnish, Polish, and Bulgarian ancestry, for instance—were perceived to have divided loyalties and became some of the terror's least known victims.

² J. Arch Getty, Gabor T. Rittersporn, and V. N. Zemskov, "Victims of the Soviet Penal System in the Pre-War Years: A First Approach on the Basis of Archival Evidence," *American Historical Review* 98: 4 (1993): 1017–49.

³ F. Beck and W. Godin, *Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession*, trans. Eric Mosbacher and David Porter (New York: Viking Press, 1951), 146.

ogy of the NKVD and its leader, N. I. Ezhov.⁴ Political jokes in circulation at the time depicted the waves of arrests as simultaneously systematic and random. Persecution was inevitable and resistance futile. Such naïve, hysterical, and internally inconsistent explanations at the grass roots level testify to ordinary Soviets' widespread confusion and their panicky search for a way to make sense of the Great Terror.

На партсъезде Сталин закончил свою речь словами:

—Итак, товарищи, выполним завет великого Ленина!

В этот момент Сталина вызвали к телефону:

—Сталин слушает.

—Говорит Ленин....

—Откуда Вы, Ильич, дорогой?..

—Об этом после, а пока скажи-ка, что это ты там за свинство без меня устроил?

Сталин бросил трубку и подозвал охрану:

—Найти и убрать этого врага народа.

At a party conference, Stalin concluded his speech with the words:

—And so, comrades, let us fulfill Lenin's testament.

Suddenly, the phone rings and Stalin is handed the receiver.

—This is Stalin.

—Stalin, this is Lenin....

—Where are you calling from, dear Il'ich?

—That can wait—first, tell me what all this swinishness is about that you've gone and done without me?

Stalin slams down the phone and calls to his guard:

—Find that enemy of the people and arrest him.



Разгневанный Сталин вызвал к себе Радека:

—Ты что это на меня анекдоты сочиняешь?! Даже осмеливаешься про то, что я—вождь мировой революции!

Радек:

—Товарищ Сталин, помилуй, ведь анекдота, что ты—вождь мировой революции, право же, никто не сочинял....

Furious, Stalin summons Radek to his office.

—What are you telling jokes about me for? You even dare to joke about me as the leader of the world revolution!

Radek replies:

—Comrade Stalin, forgive me, but no one's ever joked about you being leader of the world revolution.⁵

⁴The 1936–38 time period is referred to in Russian as the *ezhovshchina* (lit.: “the pernicious times of Ezhov”).

⁵One former Soviet citizen went so far as to declare in 1951 that “Radek is the author of almost all the counter-revolutionary anecdotes which are told in the Soviet Union”; another claimed that he had been purged on account of his jokes about Stalin. Lyons recalls having heard the first of these rumors, although he treats it with much more



Трое заключённых встречаются в пересыльном лагере.

Первый:

— Сижу я с 1929 года за то, что назвал Карла Радека контрреволюционером.

Второй:

— А я сижу с 1937 года за то, что сказал, что Карл Радек—не контрреволюционер.

Третий:

— А я, извините, сам Карл Радек....

Three prisoners meet at a transit camp.

The first says:

— I've been in prison since 1929 for calling Karl Radek a counterrevolutionary.

The second replies:

— I've been here since 1938 for saying that Radek wasn't a counterrevolutionary.

The third interjects:

— And I'm sorry to say that I *am* Karl Radek.



Рыков от природы был заика. Во время его травли, организованной Сталиным, партийцы говорили:

— Рыков заикаться перестал.

— Вылечился?

— Какое! Ему и заикнуться не дают.

Rykov stuttered all his life. But during the show trial that Stalin organized in order to persecute him, party members observed to one-another:

— Rykov has stopped stuttering.

— Has he been cured?

— No. He's been forbidden to utter even a stutter.



Как только Сталин ликвидировал «оппозиции» и начал выдвигать на важные посты кавказских людей, все чистильщики сапог в Москве (айсоры) отказались чистить и сидели сложа руки.

Их спросили:

— Почему?

Они ответили:

— А жидаем балших назначений.

After Stalin finished eliminating the "opposition" and began to move cadres from the Caucasus into major party posts, Moscow's bootblacks (the *Aisors*) all refused to do their work and just sat around with their legs crossed.

When people asked them what was going on, they answered (in heavily accented Russian):

— We're expecting major promotions.⁶



skepticism. See HPSSS, no. 149, schedule A, vol. 11, 41; no. 446, schedule B, vol. 13, 73; Lyons, *Moscow Carousel*, 322.

⁶ Stalin's supposed promotion of Caucasians into the central party apparatus apparently referred to the advancement of G. K. Ordzhonikidze, Mikoian, A. S. Enukidze, and Kirov into high posts, misdated to the second half of the 1930s. According to popular wisdom, the *Aisors*, an ethnic group from the Caucasus, dominated the shoeshine trade in Moscow.



FIGURE 28. Workers chatting as they clean a piece of equipment

—Что слышно в Политбюро?

—Как всегда ничего, только запах изменился.

—Как так?

—Раньше пахло чесноком, а теперь шашлыком.

—What have you heard about the Politburo?

—Nothing much, as always, except that the smell has changed.

—What do you mean?

—Before, it smelled of garlic and now it's shishkebab.⁷

★ ★ ★

Все ночи напролёт работнички НКВД «трудились», арестовывая, пытая и убивая людей. Между собой стали «шутить».

—Что такое НКВД?

—Неизвестно Когда Вернёшься Домой.

NKVD agents spent every night hard at “work,” arresting, torturing, and killing people. They sometimes “joked” among themselves:

—What does NKVD stand for?

—“Nobody Knew this Vocation was so Demanding.”

★ ★ ★

Следователи советской тайной полиции, хорошо знающие их собственные методы, говорят так: «Был

Soviet secret police investigators who know their trade well say: “Get your man first and work out the charges later.”

⁷ This reference to cuisine refers to rumors that Stalin had replaced Jewish Politburo members with appointees from the Caucasus. A related joke: “Why is Stalin like Moses? Because Moses rid Egypt of the Jews and Stalin rid the Politburo of the Jews.” HPSSS, no. 307, schedule A, vol. 16, 29; also *Sovetskie anekdoty*, 12.

бы человек, а статья найдётся». Иллюстрация: педерасты осуждались по ст. 58.10 «Агитация и пропаганда».

Homosexuals, for instance, could be charged under Article 58/10, "Agitation and Propaganda."



«Вход воспрещается» — такая надпись висит на здании НКВД. Прохожий еврей:

— Если бы они здесь повесили «Добро пожаловать», я бы и тогда не пошёл.

A sign saying "Entrance Forbidden" hung outside NKVD headquarters. A Jew passing by scoffs:

— I wouldn't go in there even if they hung something up saying "Welcome! Make yourself at home!"⁸



Два еврея проходят по Лубянке (площадь, где находится НКВД в Москве):

— Лёва, ты знаешь, какая разница между Сталиным и ослом?

В этот момент из дверей НКВД высовывается «чин» и подзывает пальцем евреев к себе:

— А ну, подойди сюда, сказать тебе, какая разница?

— Я, я ничего не сказал, нет, нет никакой разницы....

Two Jews are walking on Lubyanka Square near the Moscow NKVD headquarters.

— Lev, what's the difference between Stalin and a donkey?

Suddenly, a policeman sticks his head out of the building and points a finger at the two Jews.

— Hey, you, come over here. Maybe you'd like me to tell you the difference?

— Who, me? What difference? Did I say there was a difference?



Самая длинная улица в мире — это Литейный проспект в Ленинграде. Он ведёт до самых Соловков и раньше, чем через 3 года с него не возвращаются.

The longest street in the world is Leningrad's Liteinyi Prospect. It leads straight north to the Solovetskii islands and if you go there, it'll take you at least three years to return.⁹



Встречаются два зайца в поле:

— Отчего ты так бежишь, запыхался даже?

— А ты разве не слышал, объявили, что всех верблюдов будут кастрировать?

Two rabbits meet in a field.

— You're out of breath — what are you running from?

— Haven't you heard? They've announced that they're going to start

⁸ For a variant, see Lyons, *Moscow Carousel*, 338.

⁹ The Leningrad headquarters of the NKVD were located on Liteinyi Prospect and the Solovetskii islands were the site of a major Gulag camp. Variant: "What is the highest building in Moscow? It is the building of the NKVD because from it you can see all of Siberia." HPSSS, no. 128, schedule A, vol. 10, 30.

—Так ты же не верблюду?
 —Ну да.... Поймают—кастрируют, а
 потом доказывай, что ты—не верблюду.

castrating camels.
 —So what? You're not a camel.
 —Yeah, but they'll catch you, castrate
 you, and then go ahead and prove all
 you want that you're not a camel.¹⁰



Один мелкий служащий ошибся
 этажем и пришёл на работу не в своё
 учреждение. Сел за стол и стал
 перебирать бумаги. Так он приходил
 три дня, пока начальник случайно не
 вскрыл «чужака». Допрос:

—Разве Вы на заметили, что
 работали не в своём учреждении?
 —Замечал, что вроде как незнакомые
 лица кругом.
 —А почему Вы не спросили?
 —Побоялся....

A minor bureaucrat mixed up the
 floors in his building and went to the
 wrong office one morning. He sat down
 and got to work. He did this for three
 days until a supervisor accidentally
 discovered the "stranger." They asked
 him:

—Didn't you notice that you were
 working in the wrong institution?
 —Well, it did seem to me that I was
 surrounded by unfamiliar faces.
 —Why didn't you ask someone what
 was going on?
 —I... was afraid to.



По требованию Всесоюзного
 Общества Советских Писателей в
 типовой авторский договор Госиздата
 был включён следующий пункт:

«Автор заранее признаёт ошибки в
 своём будущем произведении,
 отрекается от него и чистосердечно
 раскаивается в том, что написал эту
 возмутительную халтуру, искажающую
 советскую действительность и
 играющую на руку поджигателям
 войны».

At the request of the All-Union Society
 of Soviet Writers [sic, Soviet Writers'
 Union], the following line was added to
 the State Publishing House's standard
 book contract:

"The author admits in advance to the
 mistakes in his forthcoming work,
 denounces it, and sincerely regrets that
 he ever wrote such an appalling travesty
 that perverts Soviet reality and plays into
 the hands of warmongers."



Один НКВДист заметил, что какой-то
 человек, встречая его каждое утро на
 улице, снимает шапку и говорит:

An NKVD agent noticed that every
 morning, as he passed a particular fellow
 on the street, the guy would take off his

¹⁰ For a variant, see Louis Fischer, ed., *Thirteen Who Fled* (New York: Harper, 1949), 190; Talmadge, "The Enjoyment of Laughter in Russia," 49–50; oblique reference to this joke is made in HPSSS, no. 387, schedule A, vol. 20, 41; no. 1664, schedule A, vol. 36, 15.

—Добрый вечер!
 Однажды НКВДист остановил его:
 —Кто Вы такой, и почему Вы
 говорите «добрый вечер», когда теперь
 утро?
 —Я гражданин... я видите... как
 только встречаю Вас, так у меня в глазах
 темнеет....

hat and say "Good evening!" to him.
 Finally, the NKVD agent stopped him.
 —Who are you and why are you
 saying "good evening" to me when it is
 actually morning?
 —Uh, I'm nobody, really.... It's just
 that whenever I run into you, everything
 grows dark....¹¹



У Сталина пропала трубка. Он
 позвонил в НКВД и приказал
 разыскать её. Через два часа сам нашёл
 её в своём собственном сапоге. Звонит
 опять в НКВД:
 —Нэ надо, нашлась.
 —Помилуйте, тов. Сталин, мы уже
 десять человек арестовали за Вашу
 трубку.
 —Выпустить.
 —Никак не возможно, все десять
 сознались.

Stalin's pipe went missing. He calls the
 NKVD and orders them to find it. Two
 hours later, he finds it himself in his own
 boot. He calls the NKVD again and says
 (in heavily accented Russian):
 —Don't worry about it. I've found it.
 —I'm sorry, Comrade Stalin, but we've
 already arrested ten people on account of
 your pipe!
 —Let them go.
 —But that's impossible sir. All ten have
 confessed.¹²



Раньше все ходили под богом, а
 теперь — под НКВД.

Before, everyone lived by the grace of
 God. Now, they live by the grace of the
 NKVD.¹³



В трамвае сидит какой-то гражданин
 с женой. Незнакомец, сидящий
 напротив, вздыхает:
 —Ох, хо, хо, хо, хо!
 Гражданин тихо, про себя:
 —Эх, хе, хе, хе, хе!
 Жена сердито:

A man and his wife are sitting in a
 trolley. A stranger sitting across from
 them sighs loudly:
 —Ooooh!
 The man also sighs quietly to himself:
 —Ehhhhh!
 His wife angrily cuts him off:

¹¹ For a variant, see HPSSS, no. 147, schedule B, vol. 19, 30–31.

¹² For a variant, see HPSSS, no. 610, schedule B, vol. 20, 3. According to one Georgian party veteran, Stalin himself told a variant of this joke. See Akakii Mgeladze, *Stalin: Kakim ia ego znal—stranitsy nedavnego proshlogo* (Tbilisi: n.p., 2001), 168.

¹³ For variants, see the entry from December 19, 1937 in "Diary of Stepan Filippovich Podlubny," in Veronique Garros, Natalia Korenevskaya, and Thomas Lahusen, eds., *Intimacy and Terror* (New York: New Press, 1995), 307; HPSSS, no. 1035, schedule A, vol. 31, 40.

—И сколько раз я тебе говорила: не разговаривай с незнакомыми про политику.

—How many times do I have to tell you not to talk about politics with strangers?¹⁴

★ ★ ★

Один сталинский полицейский другому, указывая на одного гражданина:

Pointing at a man on the street, one Stalinist policeman says to another:

—Интересно, о чём он сегодня молчит?

—What do you s'pose that one's keeping quiet about today?

★ ★ ★

Два гражданина потихоньку говорят про политику. Один «критикнул» власть, а другой испуганно:

Two men are quietly talking to one-another about politics. One says something critical about the state and the other reacts in horror:

—Ой, не говори такого.

—Почему?

—Oh, don't say that!

—А может... кто-либо из нас двоих... сексот.

—Why?

—One of us might be a... secret police agent!

★ ★ ★

В СССР если встречаются двое, по крайней мере, один из них—сексот.

In the USSR, whenever two people get together, at least one of them is a secret police agent.¹⁵

★ ★ ★

¹⁴ Variant: "An elderly man, distressed with Soviet conditions, utters the mournful sigh 'oi!' on a tramcar. His wife hushes him and says, 'Fool, don't talk counter-revolution in public!' Lyons, *Moscow Carousel*, 323; also 339; HPSSS, no. 1492, schedule A, vol. 34, 21.

¹⁵ Variant: "There is an anecdote that circulated in the Soviet Union in 1940 about the use of agents by the NKVD. A man wanted to put on a wedding for a daughter of his, but he was afraid that if he invited 20 or so people, they would be drinking and someone might say something, which would get everybody else in trouble and have the whole wedding branded as a counter-revolutionary meeting. So, the man [...] went to the NKVD and invited [them] to send someone to attend the wedding for security reason[s]. This request was refused. So, then he pulled from his pocket a list of the guests and he asked the NKVD to look over the list and to o.k. the people. [...]the NKVD man looks at the list and says 'With the exception of one or two, they are all our people.'" HPSSS, no. 91, schedule A, vol. 7, 20; also no. 403, schedule B, vol. 20, 36; Lyons, *Moscow Carousel*, 338. This joke is narrated as an actual occurrence in HPSSS, no. 1091, schedule A, vol. 31, 15.

В Советском Союзе каждый гражданин имеет два автомобиля: скорой помощи и «черный ворон».

In the USSR, every citizen has access to two cars: an ambulance and a “Black Raven.”¹⁶

★ ★ ★

—Почему в этом году в СССР не было наводнений?

—Why was it so quiet in the USSR this year?

—Потому, что 180 миллионов советских граждан воды в рот набрали.

—Because 180 million Soviet citizens’ lips were sealed.¹⁷

★ ★ ★

Население Советского Союза делится на три категории: на сидевших, сидящих и ожидающих сидеть.

The population of the Soviet Union can be divided into three categories: those who’ve done time, those who are doing time and those who expect to do time.

★ ★ ★

У каждого советского человека есть две тени: одна собственная, другая — НКВД.

Every Soviet citizen has two shadows: his own and the NKVD’s.

★ ★ ★

Дальше едешь — тише будешь.

The further you go, the quieter you get.¹⁸

★ ★ ★

¹⁶ NKVD vans used to transport suspects were called “Black Ravens” and “Black Marias.” Variants include: “What do you mean, in the United States everybody has a car? In Soviet Russia everybody has two cars—the Black Maria and the ambulance.” HPSSS, no. 30, schedule A, vol. 4, 35; also the diary entry from July 18, 1931, in Shitts, *Dnevnik “Velikogo pereloma,”* 316; TsGAI PD SPb f. 24, op. 2v, d. 1833, l. 34, cited in Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin’s Russia*, 97.

¹⁷ It is impossible to translate this joke literally—note the variant: “All the ice has thawed on the rivers and lakes and oceans so that there should be a lot of water, but there is not a drop of water. What happened to it? The answer is 170 millions of people took water into their mouth and keep quiet.” HPSSS, no. 34, schedule A, vol. 4, 23.

¹⁸ Mention of this joke in reference to Trotskii appears in a diary entry from January 5, 1925, in Bulgakov, *Dnevnik, Pis’ma, 1914–1940*, 87. Variants also include “The quieter you are, the further you’ll go” (*Tishe edesh’, dal’she budesh’*) in HPSSS, no. 61, schedule A, vol. 5, 13.