

## BOLSHEVIST "HUMOR"

By KLAUS MEHNERT

*It is a commonplace that humor differs in different countries, as anyone who has ever turned over the pages of humorous magazines of various nations, a "New Yorker," a "Punch," or a "Simplizissimus," will agree. But it is equally true that the humor of one nation differs at different times. The humor of a nation indicates to some extent its psychological condition at any given period of its history.*

*In the following pages we present a comparison of Bolshevik humor today with that of ten years ago.*

**T**HE very word "humor" sounds pleasant and refreshing. When I began my study of Soviet humor, I looked forward to a few hours of relaxation; for there is a type of humor which is so irresistible that one is forced to laugh even when it comes from one's enemies. Good humorous magazines seem funny to us even in the dentist's waiting-room.

But I was bitterly disappointed. I have seldom read anything that was so far removed from humor as the last eight numbers of the biggest Soviet humorous periodical *Crocodile* and the booklet of jokes entitled *Metkim Udarom* (Well-aimed Hits). I worked my way through 244 items—jokes, caricatures, verses, etc.

### "JOKES" ABOUT FRITZ

It is hardly surprising that all items refer to the war. But what is surprising is that only very few of the items deal with events on the Soviet side, to be exact, 65 out of the 244, while all others deal with the enemy—the Germans, Finns, Rumanians, etc. Incidentally, not a single joke has as its subject the allies of the Soviet Union—evidently there is nothing to laugh about there. The great majority of jokes about the enemy are aimed at the Germans, who are always called "Fritz." Here are a few examples:

*First Fritz:* What bad luck! I've dropped the whole load of my plane on the Russians!

*Second Fritz:* Why bad luck?

*First Fritz:* Because my load consisted

of food supplies for our troops. (*Metkim Udarom*, page 27.)

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Or the "joke" about fourteen German soldiers who, while digging a dugout, are buried under an exploding Soviet mine; or the one about the German couple in Königsberg who are invited for tea at friends and find upon their arrival that their friends' house has been destroyed by a Soviet bomb (both from *Crocodile*, No. 33, September 1942).

This cannot be called humor. It is mean and stupid. It is everything but funny.

### JOKES ABOUT THEMSELVES

Jokes dealing with the Soviet side can be divided into two groups. The first and by far the larger serves to praise their own efficiency, at the front as well as at home. They are primitive and brutal. The Red soldiers are, of course, always shining heroes, while abuse and filth are heaped upon the enemies.

As for the small percentage of jokes following the tradition of Russian wit, which expressed itself in self-criticism, they are the only ones which may be called humorous. Since they throw light on events within the Soviet Union, we have reproduced some of the caricatures and have replaced their Russian texts with English translations. Three of them emphasize the necessity of saving electricity, fuel, and gasoline; the fourth deals with

insufficient compliance with the order to be polite to all comrades in view of the distress in which the Soviet Union finds itself at present.

#### HOW TO KEEP A SECRET

Below we give two more examples of this self-criticism. The first of these shows the fear of spies and deals with the constantly emphasized necessity for secrecy. It is a letter addressed by a man to his wife:

"Dear wife, how often have I told you that babbling in war time helps the enemy. You must understand that I am not entitled to tell you details of my life at present because we are at war and must maintain secrecy.

As I wrote you before, I am working as the deputy chief of stores in the local food supply organization. There are piles of work to be done. At present the harvest is in full swing, and as a result we are receiving p-toes, c-bage, and other v-tables day and night. I have hardly any free time at all. The day before yesterday I saw a famous movie of the civil war period; of course I cannot tell you the title, since we are at war. But



"In September I shall burn 50 per cent less wood than in August."

"How will you manage that?"

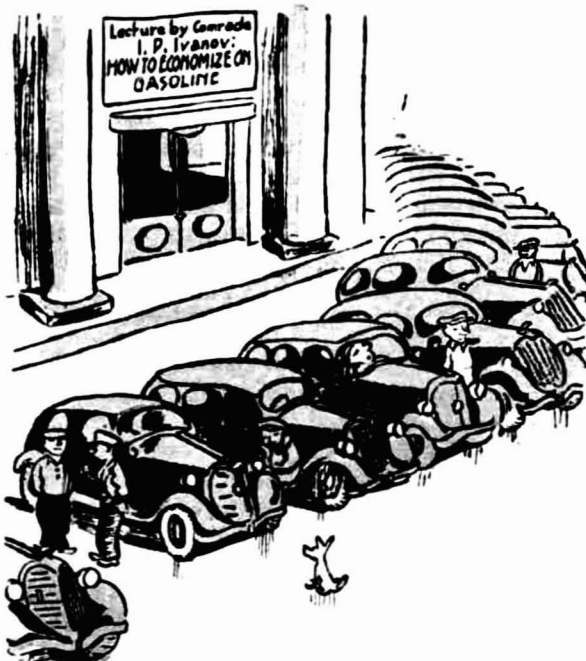
"Very simple. Half my wood was stolen."

I can tell you that this movie was made by the brothers Vassiliev, the same who made the movie 'Ch-.' There is no other news. The motor factory which is in T street next to the club is building a new department. In our town a tank division is being trained. At the military airfield they are looking for a charwoman. I should like to recommend you, if you feel like coming here. I cannot let you know my private address because we are at war. Write to me c/o the vegetable storehouse of the food supply organization. Please give my regards to Aunt X (Comrade Tchutchkin's wife). Your loving husband." (*Crocodile*, No. 33, September 1942.)

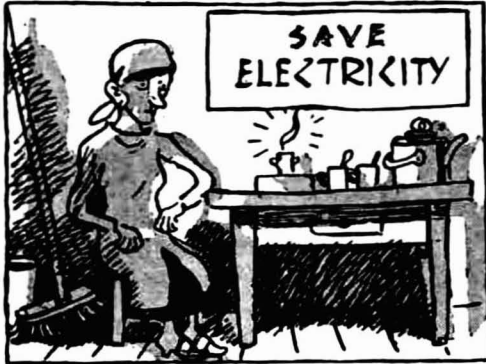
#### HYGIENE AND WAR

The next is also a letter, supposedly written to the editor of a newspaper by the manager of a public eating place who has been discharged. He complains about his dismissal and defends himself against the reproach that he has neglected his duties. He continues:

"I do not wish to deny that during the last few months my eating place was less hygienic than before. But I cannot bother much about hygiene. During war time there are more important things to



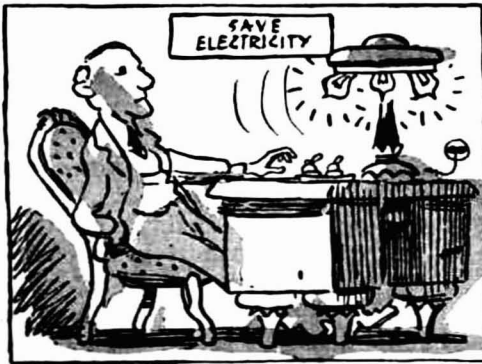
## HOW THEY SAVE ELECTRICITY



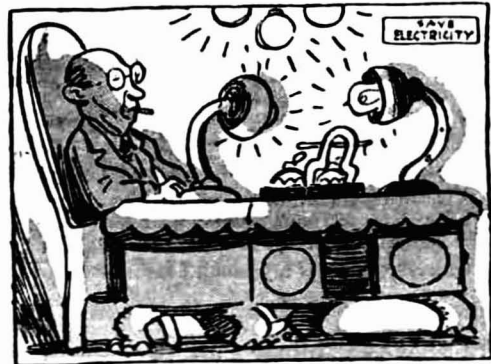
Charwoman Shura  
(0.00 Kilowatts)



Bookkeeper Luzikov  
(15 Kilowatts)



Manager Tchijikov  
(100 Kilowatts)



The Boss Himself  
(300 Kilowatts)

be done, and if in these times there are people who accuse me because of food being served on dirty plates, I must protest most vehemently. I am a man of culture myself, yet you will find at my home dishes that have not been washed for two months. Are these the times to bother with such trifles?! The author of a letter to the editor complains that at the eating house the garbage has not been removed for weeks. This assertion is unfounded. All in all, it is only for 27 days that the garbage has not been removed, that is, since the middle of August, when I had to dismiss the charwoman in order to replace her by a man who could reply to the complaints entered by the guests of the eating place into our complaint book. The complaints about the unhygienic condition of the eating place had become so numerous that I was faced by the choice

either of answering them myself (in which case I would have had no more time left to manage the eating place) or of engaging a man who could devote all his efforts and talent to the complaint book. I decided to do the latter, and I believe that I have done the right thing." (*Crocodile*, No. 38, October 1942.)

## BOLSHEVISM AND HUMOR

Our readers will agree with us: if these are the funniest jokes to be found nowadays in Soviet publications, they are not exactly that which one would expect from a comic paper. It might be said that it is entirely false to assume that Bolshevik publications contain humor. To some extent, this objection is correct. Bolshevik periodicals are indeed not allowed to print jokes against Bolshevism. But humor as such is not forbidden. Yet what a difference between Soviet



Visitor to Government office: They say that you should be polite to your fellow citizens, and you are getting tough with me.

Official: This is my lunch hour and I can do as I please.

humor today and, say, a decade ago.

Bolshevist humor up to the outbreak of the present war had essentially followed the traditional Russian humor, about which we spoke in connection with the translation of Zostchenko's stories in our issue of October 1942. Those who have read the excellent works of the great Russian humorists such as Gogol or Tchekhov know that these men were not concerned in their humorous or satirical plays, fairy tales, short stories, and novels with evoking roars of laughter from their readers. Their aim was to achieve definite social effects by the comical exposure of bad conditions. Their humor always criticized society.

This characteristic of Russian humor became even more apparent after the Revolution. Humor was supposed to fulfill a social function in political and economic life. At the same time, Bolshevism had limited humor to very narrow fields: it was never allowed to attack the system itself or its principles,

only the abuse of it. Within these limits there was an extensive literature of books, magazines, and humorous stories in newspapers. One could meet people who had become rich as the authors of this type of literature, as, for instance, the "Tur Brothers," one of whose stories, written in the middle thirties, runs as follows.

#### THE ADVENTURES OF COMRADE POROSHKOV

Comrade Poroshkov had not been feeling well for some time. He went to see a doctor, who diagnosed a gastric complaint and urgently advised him to go to a sanatorium for gastric diseases. Since Poroshkov was an excellent worker, he succeeded in getting his name onto the list of persons who were to be given

a place in a sanatorium in the summer. Imagine his dismay when, a week before his leave was to start, he received an assignment—a "little paper," as they say in Russia—not for a sanatorium for gastric but for a sanatorium for nervous diseases near Leningrad. His complaints met only with indignation: "What a choosy fellow! There's nothing available for stomach, take nerves. Or, if you don't like it, we'll give it to Comrade Oblatkin, he's had his eye on it for a long time. In any case, you can still go to Vetoshny Street."

So Poroshkov took the little paper, and that same afternoon he strolled down Vetoshny Street. At first he thought he had gone crazy.

"Have you got a heart?" With these words a man came dashing at him.

"Yes," replied Poroshkov.

"That's great!" yelled the other. "Give me your heart, I'll give you my tuberculosis."

"Don't listen to him," another man interrupted, "for heart I'll give you gout and a hundred rubles."

Poroshkov was surrounded by a yelling mob. "Who has a good lumbago? I offer a coupon for an overcoat or liver, first class."—"Who wants mountain air?"—"I have mineral baths!"

It was a regular market. Three days later Poroshkov felt already entirely at home in Vetoshny Street and knew all the quotations. He knew that heart was quoted highest of all, that a little paper for Sochi on the Black Sea was quoted at six to eight hundred rubles, and that tuberculosis was worth as much as lumbago plus a hundred and fifty rubles. On the fifth day he succeeded in making the necessary exchange, and he went off happily to his stomach sanatorium.

Incidentally, he could have saved himself all the trouble. After a thorough examination at the sanatorium, the doctor said: "I don't know what you are doing in a sanatorium for gastric diseases, Comrade, you have a stomach like a horse. But your nerves are in bad shape, your nerves! You'd better clear out and see that you get into a nerve sanatorium."

The story of Comrade Poroshkov is typical of this kind of critical humor. Although it is quite funny, it was written not so much in order to give the reader a good laugh as to criticize the chaos to which the overorganization of life, coupled with inefficiency, had led in the Soviet Union.

#### EVERYBODY'S ENEMY—BUREAUCRACY

I cannot recall ever having come across a "joke for the joke's sake" in Russia. The basis is always a certain evil. Many jokes are directed at one of the worst evils—bureaucracy, which leads an existence divorced from reality and gravely endangering the life of the country. In a 1934 number of the *Crocodile*, for instance, this bureaucracy was flayed by the following caricatures:

In the first drawing there was a three-storey house, in the lowest floor of which

the house committee was sitting in order to decide on the repairs needed for the building. In the second drawing—in the meantime winter had come—serious cracks were already to be seen in the house while the house committee was still sitting in earnest discussion. The only change there was that another man happened to be speaking. The third drawing showed the moment at which the two upper floors collapsed, which, however, did not interfere in the least with the session of the house committee. In the fourth drawing, trees had already grown out of the ruins in whose shade a family had comfortably established itself—while the house committee continued to sit indefatigably.

#### PLANNING LIFE AND DEATH

Even the "planning" craze was not spared ridicule. The paper of the Soviet Youth Organization, the *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, published the following satire, also in 1934:

At the end of November, the Artists' Union sent out a questionnaire to the Moscow theaters concerning the percentage of sicknesses among persons carrying health insurance and to what extent the plan was being carried out. The author describes the conversation between the theater manager and his secretary while filling out the questionnaire.

*Secretary:* Let's write that the plan provides for ten sick persons a month and that through united efforts we hope successfully to carry out the illness plan for 1934, and that we even hope perhaps to surpass it.

*Manager:* And suppose we don't carry it out? Then we'll both get hauled over the coals.

*Secretary:* We'll easily fill the quota, Comrade Manager. These last few weeks before New Year are the worst time for influenza. Just now at the rehearsal everybody was coughing.

*Manager (heaves a sigh of relief and enters the figure. Then he reads out the next question):* Which sicknesses and how many cases are planned for 1935?



*Secretary:* We could write that gripe is planned.

*Manager:* But they want to have exact data.

*The point is passed over for the time being. The next question is: How many pregnancies and births are planned for 1935?*

*Secretary:* That's easy, I'll ask around among the actors and find out what's planned in that respect.

*Manager (reads next question):* How many deaths are provided for in the plan for 1935?

*Secretary:* Hm, that Petrovna woman seems to have very bad lungs.

*Manager:* Not so bad at all. I saw her only yesterday.

*Secretary:* Well, of course we can't count on her for carrying out this year's plan, but we can include her in next year's . . . . Hm, who else is there? How about Uralov? He's been on the stage fifty years; we could include him with a clear conscience.

And so on and so on . . . .

#### THE BLACK MARKET

Besides these so to speak officially quoted and admitted jokes, there are, of course, also innumerable jokes which are only whispered from mouth to mouth, a sort of black market. Here is an example:

In an isolated hamlet the peasants are discussing the meaning of a term they have heard so often "Bolshevist tempo." As they cannot discover the meaning, they decide to send a representative to Moscow to see Stalin.

"Little Father Stalin," asks the peasant, "what is the meaning of 'Bolshevist tempo'?"

And Stalin takes him to the window and says: "Do you see the tramway over there? Just now, eleven trams pass here every hour; in three years there will be a hundred and eleven. You see, that is Bolshevist tempo. Or that airplane over there. Now four planes a day fly

past here; in three years there will be forty."

The peasant goes back home, and a meeting is called.

"Little Father Stalin," he says, "has explained it all to me. Here in our village eleven cows died this year; in three years, a hundred and eleven will die. That is Bolshevist tempo. This year, four of our peasants died; in three years, forty will die. That's Bolshevist tempo, too."

Or another example, which is directed at Stalin's boundless dictatorial arbitrariness:

During the thirties, when Stalin had already suppressed all opposition against him within the Bolshevist Party by bloody terror, the only person who still dared now and again to speak her mind to him was Lenin's widow. Supported by the prestige of being the widow of the almost deified first Bolshevist leader, she could afford to take more risks than anyone else. But one day Stalin lost his patience and roared at her:

"You old witch, if you don't shut up I shall appoint someone else to be Lenin's widow!"

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We cannot compare the black-market jokes of the thirties with those of today, since we do not know the latter. But if we contrast the officially permitted jokes of the period before the German-Soviet war with those of the last few months as printed in the latest Soviet publications, we arrive at the following conclusion:

War is a desperately serious affair, but even in war there are funny situations and even soldiers facing death every day like to laugh. If the leading Soviet humorous periodical in its last eight numbers, which flooded the Soviet Union and the front with 1.6 million copies, does not once raise a hearty laugh—or any laugh at all—from its readers, the mood within the Soviet Union must be gloomy indeed.