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Resistance Through Humor: Political Anecdotes and Soviet Propaganda in the Moldavian SSR

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Abstract
This article explores the role of political anecdotes as a form of resistance and dissent against the 20th-century communist regime, emphasizing how they served as subversive tools against oppressive propaganda. It highlights how Soviet propaganda sought to present an idealized image of communist society, while political anecdotes revealed the harsh realities and absurdities of life under the Soviet regime. Using examples drawn from two archival documents preserved in the Social-Political Archival Fund of the National Archives Agency in Chișinău, Moldova - drafted within the Propaganda and Agitation Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova (CC of the CPM) - as well as anecdotes from Russian literary works and data collected through a questionnaire addressed to Moldovan citizens, the article demonstrates how political humor illuminated the contradictions and absurdities of the totalitarian system. The author aims to show how political anecdotes functioned as subtle, clever forms of resistance against the oppressive Soviet regime, exposing hidden truths and criticizing propagandistic narratives

1. Introduction

This article aims to analyze the circulation of political anecdotes within the Moldavian SSR, in the context of an ideological and oppressive regime. This humorous phenomenon is examined not only from a historical perspective but also through literary and social psychological lenses, situating it within a historical framework that explains its emergence and development.

Through this approach, humor is understood as a form of resistance, with political anecdotes acting as a subversive tool against Soviet propaganda. These jokes reflect the impact of the regime on citizens and serve as a silent yet persistent form of opposition. As Professor Michael Shafir notes *"Communism can be condemned by resorting to collective memory or historiography"* (Shafir, 2006) - this statement gains an additional dimension when considering political humor as an alternative means of challenging totalitarian regimes, including the Soviet one.

To support this analysis, the article examines two archival documents that reflect Soviet propaganda, viewed through the lens of official discourse. These include a letter and an appeal issued by the Propaganda and Agitation Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova. In contrast, three anecdotes are presented: one from a published work, and two collected directly from field research via a questionnaire.

These anecdotes reveal the realities of the era and unveil a "hidden face" of public discourse -a living oral literature that subtly, yet effectively, opposed the messages promoted by communist ideology.

Studying political anecdotes as a form of silent resistance requires an interdisciplinary approach that extends beyond traditional history and incorporates social, psychological, literary, and folkloric perspectives, especially from urban folklore. This approach provides a nuanced understanding of how traumatic memories were processed, transmitted, and sublimated through humor, forming an eloquent alternative to the official discourse imposed by the regime.

2. Propaganda in the Moldavian SSR

To illustrate the functioning of Soviet propaganda in the Moldavian SSR, an archival document is presented - specifically, a letter addressed to the "Moldovan people" (ANA, p. 2) which offers imperial praise for the Red Army and the so-called saviors of the Bessarabian people.

Preserved in file 116 of the Propaganda and Agitation Section of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova (Rusnac, 2024), this document describes the *"heroism of the Soviet people"* in confronting the "fascist" enemy:

"For three years, the Soviet people have been heroically fighting the vile enemy of humanity the German fascists for the honor and independence of our homeland".

It also extols the Red Army and Stalin:

"The glorious Red Army, under the leadership of the Supreme Commander, Marshal of the Soviet Union Comrade STALIN, has achieved great historic victories. The enemy is being expelled from Soviet territory temporarily occupied".

This propagandistic language reflects the hyperbolic, idealized image of the Soviet state, reinforced through an omnipresent ideological apparatus. Within the Central Committee of the Communist Party of Moldova, the Propaganda and Agitation Section was tasked with promoting the image of an ideal society one free of failures, where the party and communist ideology were the pillars of progress (Rusnac, 2024).

The phrases used exemplify classic propaganda: they emphasize Soviet military triumph and heroism, employing adjectives like "glorious," "historic," and "great" to enhance the grandeur of the narrative. Stalin's name appears in capital letters, accentuating his mythic status in the collective consciousness (Rusnac, 2024).

At the end of the letter, a strategic address is made to an important social group: "Intellectuals of Moldova!" (ANA, p. 2). This invocation seeks to ideologically mobilize the intelligentsia, portraying them as devoted to a cultivated Moldova - modern, educated, and culturally progressive - and presenting the Soviet Union as a benefactor guiding the country back onto the path of progress:

"The Soviet Union will help the liberated people return to science".

This formulation serves a dual purpose: it legitimizes Soviet occupation through the rhetoric of liberation and reconstruction, and it seeks the support of the intellectual elites, seen as key agents of cultural influence. Promises of educational and cultural revival schools, colleges, theaters, libraries are expressed through expansive, optimistic language, constructing an idealized future in which Moldova's cultural and social institutions flourish under Soviet guidance.

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In this propaganda context, these statements are not mere promises but part of a broader strategy to legitimize Soviet domination by creating an illusion of inevitable progress achievable only under Moscow's leadership. Terms like "revival" and "powers" evoke a sense of hope and development, yet, in reality, cultural and educational spheres were tightly controlled to serve ideological purposes.

The document was signed in the immediate post-World War II period by the Chairman of the Presidium of the Supreme Soviet of the Moldavian SSR, F. Brovko; the Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, T. Konstantinov; and the Secretary of the Central Committee, N. Salagor (ANA, p. 2).

Another document from the same archive signed in 1945 contains common Soviet propagandistic expressions like *"let us fulfill our duty to the Motherland"* ("выполним свой долг перед Родиной") and "*Soviet country"* ("Советской страны") (ANA, p. 6). It is an appeal ("Призывы") addressed to kolkhoz workers, peasants, and agricultural laborers, written in Russian, and heavily marked by typical Soviet post-war language.

This document employs standardized formulas to mobilize the population and bolster loyalty to the regime. A prominent example is the call to patriotic duty: *"let us fulfill our duty to the Motherland",* linking individual labor to collective obligation. It emphasizes strengthening *"the Soviet country"* and supports the Red Army's final victory over the German invaders, shifting responsibility onto the working masses. It also demonizes internal and external enemies by calling for the *"exposure of enemy agents",* fostering suspicion and repression.

Finally, it invokes socialist competition, *"In the name of socialist competition",* reinforcing the regime's strategy to channel collective effort toward ideological goals under strict state control. These documents demonstrate how language was wielded as a tool of ideological domination - systematically shaping collective consciousness, legitimizing power, and suppressing dissent.

They reveal the systematic use of propaganda as a mechanism of social control, aimed at maintaining the regime's authority and elimina-

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3. Resistance through humor: political anecdotes in the MSSR

Amidst the official propagandistic discourse and the socio-political climate described, political anecdotes emerge as a subtle, clever form of resistance against the totalitarian regime. In an environment dominated by oppressive propaganda, these anecdotes served as covert tools to expose, through humor, the absurdities and contradictions of the system.

During the era of Socialist Realism - the official artistic doctrine promoting the glorification of workers, the party, and its leaders - art and literature largely became instruments of indoctrination.

However, only political anecdotes succeeded in subtly expressing, through humor, the true nature of a society captive to ideological illusions, allowing implicit critique of the regime.

Starting from a typewritten letter circa 1945, issued by the Propaganda and Agitation Section of the Central Committee, which references Stalin, the Red Army, and World War II, consider the following anecdote with a dark humor undertone:

"The first days of the war. Many generals are waiting in Stalin's anteroom. Passing by without looking at anyone, Stalin nods to one of the generals and says, 'Shoot him!' But the general is not immediately arrested; he goes home, says goodbye to his loved ones, and cries. Days and nights pass; no one comes for him. Eventually, the general suffers a heart attack. Months and years go by. The general has a second heart attack. Finally, the war ends. At a recep-

tion in the Kremlin honoring Victory, Stalin sees this general, approaches him, and says: 'You see, even in the hardest times for our Motherland, we never stopped joking!" (Раскин, 1997).

This anecdote illustrates a brutal reality of the Stalinist era: the pervasive atmosphere of fear, cultivated by the regime, proved to be a more effective weapon than executions themselves. The terror was often psychological, with the mere suggestion or glance from Stalin enough to condemn a person to a slow death of anxiety and uncertainty.

This story reflects the distorted perception of justice and the arbitrary power wielded by the regime. It underscores how fear was a primary instrument of control - more effective than physical violence - and how propaganda maintained an atmosphere of suspicion and paranoia.

Next, two political jokes collected through a survey are examined. These anecdotes, part of everyday life folklore, reveal popular responses to ideological constraints and reflect the social mentality of the era.

One such story features a young Bessarabian with ambitions to study at the university and become a Soviet official. His father's reply highlights the systemic discrimination faced by Bessarabians:

"During Khrushchev's rule, a high school graduate told his father he wanted to attend the university to become a Soviet leader. His father replied: "My son, unfortunately, you are Bessarabian, from beyond the Dniester; even if you were stupid, you couldn't be a minister"[1]

This anecdote, set during Khrushchev's era, reflects the marginalization of native Bessarabian Romanians - who faced political and social exclusion - and the policy of replacing local elites with those from other regions, often from Russia.

During the Soviet era, particularly under Khrushchev's rule, native Bessarabians from the Moldavian SSR were systematically discriminated against and excluded from high-ranking positions within their own republic. Despite their education or professional capabilities, they were often deemed politically unreliable due to their Romanian cultural identity and historical ties to Greater Romania.

In contrast, individuals from the Moldavian Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (MASSR), located on the left bank of the Dniester, were brought into Bessarabia and appointed to key administrative, political, and cultural posts. These newcomers were considered ideologically

[1] Anecdote collected through a questionnaire completed by Aurel Fondos in 2024. The anecdote was passed down by his father, Fondos Constantin Pantelimon, originally from central Moldova.

trustworthy because they had been raised and educated under stricter Soviet control. The ruling elite regarded local Bessarabians as potential threats to the Soviet narrative, and thus, their chances of ascending to influential roles were minimal or nonexistent (Carp & Carp, 2015).

A popular anecdote from the Khrushchev era captures the bitter reality of this marginalization: A young Bessarabian tells his father he dreams of studying at the State University and becoming a Soviet official. His father responds: *"My son, unfortunately, you are Bessarabian, from beyond the Dniester; even if you were stupid, you could have been a minister."* This sardonic comment underlines the fact that success in Soviet Moldova was less about merit and more about one's ideological background and geographic origin.

These exclusionary practices were institutionalized through mass deportations, restrictions on education and employment, and the replacement of local elites with Soviet -loyal cadres imported from the MASSR or other regions of the USSR, often Russian - speaking (Carp, 2015). Official justifications cited a lack of *"qualified"* local personnel, but in reality, it was a deliberate strategy to suppress Romanian identity and solidify Soviet control over the newly annexed territory. The consequences of this policy extended beyond the Soviet period, as many of those installed during that era - and their descendants - continued to dominate Moldova's post-independence political and bureaucratic structures. This historical legacy also fueled and legitimized the persistence of pro - Russian sentiment and separatism in regions like Transnistria.

Another anecdote, about Gorbachev, illustrates the disconnect between Soviet policies and social realities:

"Our peasant winemakers once brought some must[2] to Gorbachev
when the 'Dry Law' was introduced, and they said:
'Mikhail Sergeyevich, try this.'
He tastes.
The winemakers asks: 'Is it tasty?'
'Yes... it's must,' Gorbachev replies.
The winemakers: 'So what difference does it make whether we drink it
now or in half a year[3]?"[4]

This story satirizes Gorbachev's anti - alcohol campaign, which sought to curb drunkenness but ignored local traditions and the natural cycle of

[2] Fresh grape juice
[3] It means 'until the wine ferments
[4] Anecdote collected through a questionnaire completed by Olga Andranovici in 2024. The story was recounted by a painter from the Republic of Moldova, born and educated during the Soviet period (name not provided).

viticulture. The anecdote embodies popular resistance - humorously questioning the regime's policies and highlighting their disconnect from everyday life.

Throughout the history of the Soviet Union, campaigns against alcohol were launched repeatedly, but the most drastic and controversial effort came with the rise to power of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985. At that time, alcohol consumption had reached alarming levels exceeding 10 liters per person annually - and in reality, when including unofficial or homemade production, the figure was even higher. These concerning statistics prompted the launch of a campaign for "social purification," which became popularly known as the *"Dry Law"* (Sukhoi zakon in Russian) (Argint, 2023).

The new policy, initiated by the Politburo of the Central Committee of the CPSU and strongly supported by Mikhail Gorbachev, aimed to drastically reduce the production and distribution of alcoholic beverages. Within just a few weeks, a series of decrees and resolutions were adopted in Moscow and implemented across all Soviet republics. These measures limited alcohol sales, shut down retail outlets, and banned the traditional production of beverages such as țuica and basamac. In the Moldavian SSR, the campaign was officially launched at the end of May 1985, having a particularly profound impact on rural areas, especially on communities traditionally involved in winemaking (Argint, 2023).

The absurdity of these measures and the authorities' disconnect from the social realities of the population are vividly illustrated in an anecdote involving Gorbachev and Moldovan peasants. In the story, winemakers present a vessel of must to the Soviet leader and, with subtle irony, ask what difference it makes if they drink it now or after it ferments into wine. With a simple yet poignant question *"What difference does it make, now or in half a year?"*- they effectively expose the flawed logic of a policy that disregards local traditions and the cyclical rhythm of viticultural life.

This anecdote reflects the quiet, passive resistance of ordinary people to a regime intent on controlling not only the economy and public behavior but also deeply ingrained cultural practices. In this context, popular humor becomes a vehicle for critique, challenging the official Soviet propaganda that idealized the image of the *"new man"*- abstinent, disciplined, and detached from everyday concerns. In contrast, the Moldovan peasants, through their seemingly innocent gesture, lay bare the extent to which the regime's policies were divorced from reality.

Thus, Gorbachev's anti-alcohol campaign represents more than a misguided Soviet initiative; it stands as a symbol of cultural disconnect and popular defiance. Behind the joke about the *must* (fresh grape juice) lies a deeper truth: millennia - old traditions cannot be abolished by decree.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this article demonstrates that political anecdotes functioned as an effective form of silent, creative resistance against the official propaganda of the Soviet regime in the Moldavian SSR. By contrasting official documents characterized by triumphant, propagandistic language with popular humor, a dual reality emerges: one of state-promoted illusions and another of covert, ironic responses that subtly undermine authority.

Political anecdotes served as an active means of contestation, providing citizens with an anonymous yet eloquent voice. They became living documents of collective memory, conveying social tensions, ethnic discrimination, and the absurdity of political decisions with irony and wit. Unlike Socialist Realism, which idealized the regime, these anecdotes exposed harsh realities and internal contradictions, revealing the fractures within Soviet society.

Thus, humor and anecdotal storytelling became a vital form of cultural opposition and collective memory an oral archive of resistance that challenged the system's efforts to control both thought and life. Through their sharp, often bitter humor, political anecdotes embodied a subtle but powerful form of defiance against an authoritarian regime rooted in fear, repression, and propaganda.

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Opór poprzez humor: anegdoty polityczne i sowiecka propaganda w Mołdawskiej SRR

Słowa kluczowe

anegdoty polityczne, opór, sowiecka propaganda, Mołdawska SRR

Abstrakt

W artykule, zbadano rolę anegdot politycznych jako formy oporu i sprzeciwu wobec reżimu komunistycznego XX wieku, podkreślając, w jaki sposób służyły one jako narzędzia kontestacyjne przeciwko opresyjnej propagandzie. Podkreśla, w jaki sposób radziecka propaganda starała się przedstawić wyidealizowany obraz społeczeństwa komunistycznego, podczas gdy anegdoty polityczne ujawniały surowe realia i absurdy życia pod rządami radzieckimi. Na podstawie przykładów zaczerpniętych z dwóch dokumentów archiwalnych zachowanych w Funduszu Archiwalnym Społeczno-Politycznym Narodowej Agencji Archiwalnej w Kiszyniowie w Mołdawii - sporządzonych w Sekcji Propagandy i Agitacji Komitetu Centralnego Komunistycznej Partii Mołdawii (KK Komunistycznej Partii Mołdawii) - a także anegdot z rosyjskich dzieł literackich i danych zebranych za pomocą kwestionariusza skierowanego do obywateli Mołdawii, artykuł pokazuje, w jaki sposób humor polityczny uwydatniał sprzeczności i absurdy systemu totalitarnego. Autor stara się pokazać, w jaki sposób anegdoty polityczne funkcjonowały jako subtelne i sprytne formy oporu przeciwko opresyjnemu reżimowi sowieckiemu, ujawniając ukryte prawdy i krytykując propagandowe narracje.