

ON THE PHENOMENOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY OF POLITICAL HUMOR IN EASTERN EUROPE

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Over the last twenty years some 2500 underground political jokes from the USSR and the East European people's democracies, dealing critically with questions of Communist ideology and the socialist social order, were collected. The evaluation of this collection has revealed that 32 % contained sharp, even bitter attacks on the Communist regime. The great majority, almost 64 %, were characterized not so much by an aggressive stance toward Communism as by detached, matter-of-fact criticism of the topics of the day. Jokes aimed at popularizing or making more attractive the objects dealt with account for 4 % of the collection.

About 40 % of the jokes surveyed are probably of Jewish origin, but many (c. 25—30 %) — including some of the most brilliant — were simply „inspir-

ed“ by a concrete matter, without any discernible model. Tsarist Russia had already furnished an ideal soil for politically-colored humor. While the Soviet leadership during the 1920's appreciated the role of political humor as a safety valve, Stalin put an abrupt end to it after 1930. Only during the post-1956 „thaw“ were a few eminently political jokes put into circulation which uncompromisingly attacked the „violation of socialist legality“.

In the other states of East-Central Europe, on the other hand, it was the loss of ideals and the sudden depreciation of the national idea that promoted the development of political humor. The latent opinions that may surface in the form of underground political humor afford an unexpected insight into the deeper context and motivation of events.