

INTRODUCTION

A man is distributing leaflets at Red Square. He is stopped by a policeman who confiscates them, only to discover they are blank. “What are you spreading? Nothing is written!” the surprised guardian of order exclaims. “Why write?” is the answer. “Everybody knows...” (Przeworski 21)

This joke from the late Soviet period is having an ironic comeback. As the Russian war against Ukraine rages and Ukrainian citizens fight or flee for their lives, Russian citizens are not only barred from publicly protesting against the war but also against using the word “war” to describe the Russian invasion. To express their dissatisfaction, some Russian citizens have decided to protest holding up blank sheets of paper – and they are nonetheless arrested, prompting social media users to pull from their shelves dusty books of Soviet *anekdoty* and spread jokes like this one. When devising this special issue on the topic “From Perestroika to Putin and the Pandemic: Russian humour since the mid-1980s to the present”, we could not have foreseen the portentous turns that world events would take. Since November 2020, when the editors of the special issue of “*Studia Rossica Posnaniensia*” met for the first time, the name Putin has acquired much more sinister connotations. For most of the world, the corona virus pandemic, which created a surge in gallows humour, initially appeared to be a passing nightmare that was nearing its end... Alas, the corona virus is still around us, but millions of people have lost their lives to it. However, two years ago, none of us could have foreseen that life and death would intervene in our lives in a completely world-changing way. To some readers, it may seem surprising or even inappropriate to see humour, Putin, and the coronavirus in one phrase together. But our aim was not to take the topics of pandemics, authoritarian politics, and state crimes lightly – our aim was and is to offer a platform to discuss the multifarious ways that people in Russia engage with all aspects of life including the torments of the world we live in. Thus, when we looked through the proposals made by the authors involved in this special issue and noticed essays dealing with the annexation of Crimea and with a state-commissioned assassination, the “Salisbury-Case”, it was clear to us how important it is to underline the seriousness of humour and satire. With the knowledge of the events that changed the world after 24th of February 2022,

however, we can only emphasise that the editors of this volume would have never imagined that this issue would be prepared under the circumstances of a war between Russia and Ukraine.

This tragedy obviously has an enormous impact on the perception of the journal's contents, making it both particularly up-to-date and intellectually challenging. At the same time, the dynamically changing situation reminds us that humour and satire have always been and remain enormously significant expressions of reflections on the most essential questions concerning human existence. Consequently, it becomes even clearer that terms like humour and satire are always closely tied to the time in which they are used – when paradigms and certainties dissolve, they continue to evolve. We must not forget that humour and satire have multiple functions in human communication and exist even in the most difficult circumstances. We, as outsiders, may not be able to laugh at some jokes or satires written by those suffering under authoritarian rule as a means to express opposition and to cope, but as scholars we can analyse and contextualise them. Thus, if the present special issue continues an on-going discussion of the complexity of the topic in many variations, shows multiple perspectives in its study – including new comparative and interdisciplinary approaches – and offers a new understanding of the past and the present, we know that since the beginning of the war, a, let us say, light-hearted reading of the contributions of this issue no longer seems possible. But the contributions are united by a central theme, namely the inherent complexity of life as it is mirrored in a wide variety of genres and forms of humour and satire.

Humour and satire do not have the same relevance at all times and in all societies, their solvent nature is one of the archetypal self-protective measures of the individual against the challenges of history and the present. But humour itself is so malleable that jokes, for instance, can offer an ironic means to confront political hypocrisy, but they can also create spaces where cynicism and even prejudice can thrive. In the 19th century, Alexander Herzen made the rather grandiloquent claim that “laughter is the most powerful weapon of destruction. It causes idols and crowns to topple” (Henry XIV). To be sure, humour and satire can give those who partake in them a fleeting sense of empowerment, yet it also underlines their powerlessness. Contradiction is inherent to humour and satire.

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Humour's manifold forms are linked with the comic, although many forms of humour are easily associated with seriousness, melancholy, or even sadness. Representations of this phenomenon are known from the works of Nikolai Gogol, Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin, Anton Chekhov, Mikhail Zoshchenko, Abram Terts,

Grigori Gorin, or Fazil Iskander. Humour can also be found in many forms of cultural expression, such as in satire, in film comedies, in *anekdoty*, and, at present, in internet memes. In the Russian context, humour often brings to mind well-grounded theoretical approaches, e. g. by Mikhail Bakhtin or Vladimir Propp, popular authors like Igor Guberman or Mikhail Zhvanetsky, certain themes, especially politics, human vices, stereotypes, and, last but not least, genres or stylistic devices like *estradnyj humor*, *evreyskiy humor*, menippea, sarcasm, cynicism, obscenity, or hyperbole.

The articles in this special issue represent this broad spectrum; they come from literary studies as well as linguistics and use the whole range of methods from cultural studies to approach their subjects. Notwithstanding the relevance that humour, but also satire, have in times like these, some of the authors and works studied in this issue occupy outsider positions or they are transformed into outsiders, as the smear campaigns against Viktor Shenderovich and his subsequent expatriation illustrate, or, for instance, Ievgeniia Voloshchuk's contribution on the work of Oleg Yuryev.

As usual, the current issue begins with literary studies. The opening text of Nicolas Dreyer analyses Vladimir Tuchkov's short story collection *And he earned many dollars...: New Russian fairy-tales* and elucidates the inter-textual complexity of these satirical texts that include allusions to fairy-tales, and to Soviet and post-Soviet culture. Agnieszka Juchniewicz discusses Oleg Bogayev's comedy works *Maria's field* and *Notes of a prosecutor in love*. She recognises modes of expression that can be described as good-natured and comical, directed at human existence and social problems as well as satirical humour, destabilizing the image of the presented world, shattering stereotypes and lurking the tragedy and absurdity of human experience. Natalia Maliutina's article analyses the use of humour in Nadezhda Ptushkina's plays and presents insights into an author who is often overlooked due to her work's perception as low brow. Mirosława Michalska-Suchanek works on a completely different topic insofar as she turns to the prose of the Russian-Jewish author Anna Fein. In it, Michalska-Suchanek identifies a very specific, traditional Jewish humour that blends with both Israeli and Russian one. The result is a mixture that not only encloses auto-ironic comments on Israeli reality and one's own Russian-Soviet past, but also focuses on identity as an exile. In contrast, Sergey Troitskiy looks at different models of humorous communication to address the controversial question of 'Russian' humour as a form of collective expression. Ievgeniia Voloshchuk's text deals with the specifics of outsiders' laughter in the book *Unknown letters* by the Russian-German writer Oleg Yuryev. It offers insight into how Russian cultural and historical traumas of the 20th century were reinterpreted in the book from the perspective of an ironical outsider, addressing, at the same time, the inter- and transcultural aspect of outsiders' laugh-

ter. The topicality of satire is made clear in Kristina Vorontsova's contribution to the volume, as she deals with a contemporary play by the Russian satirist Viktor Shenderovich. In *To see Salisbury* (2019), Shenderovich, well-known author for the then extremely popular TV series *Puppets* (*Kukly*), now living in exile, addresses the unsuccessful assassination attempt on Sergey and Yulia Skripal', using actual statements from the two hitmen. In doing so, he makes clear the direct connection between satire and contemporary history.

In more language-oriented contributions to the volume, Daria Khrushcheva deals with the Russian political caricature used for propaganda purposes in relation to the Ukraine crisis that began in 2014. Above all, it is about the way in which images of a supposed enemy are designed, which are then disseminated by mass media, in order not only to flank political action, but, at the same time, also to justify it. Khrushcheva's contribution, therefore, is of highest relevance. In turn, Jana Kitzlerová tackles a complex subject within contemporary satire, dealing with translations of Vsevolod Nekrasov's poetry into Czech. In this context, she not only points out the difficulties that generally arise from the translation of poetry into a target language, but she is also concerned with the question of the effect of a source text and the possibility of its preservation in the target language, especially if the source text contains word play that eludes translation. Maria Mocarz-Kleindienst's article on the intersemiotic transposition of comical devices in audio description (AD) in Soviet film comedies is based on movie classics from the Soviet Age, such as *We are from jazz*, *Autumn marathon* and *The twelve chairs*. It proves that the verbal track of the AD reflects the most important peripeteia of the characters, and together with them the features of the characters (appearance, character traits) as well as details of their behaviour. The article by Žanna Śladkiewicz focuses on a contemporary subject by offering an analysis of a series of internet memes criticizing the lavish Black Sea manor known as Putin's Palace. Marcin Trendowicz characterises Russian-language Internet memes that allude to the character of Stierlitz, the legendary intelligence agent created by the writer Yulian Semyonov and adapted for the screen in the Soviet TV series *Seventeen moments of spring*. The author touches upon memes directly referring to the series, jokes about Stierlitz and the examples using associations related to the character and the film (in the textual and/or iconic layer) to humorously illustrate phenomena occurring in contemporary Russia. Anna Weigl compares phrases attributed to politician Viktor Chernomyrdin with satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko's heroes and finds overlap in their use of comic techniques. Like Khrushcheva's contribution, Gabriela Wilk's article focuses on a current topic that literally concerned or concerns everyone, the Covid-19 pandemic. Wilk studies the 'second life' of Soviet comedies in this context, as they appear to be particularly suitable as background for

satirical debate because familiarity with them can still be assumed in large parts of the Russian-speaking world. This explains the widespread proliferation of memes, in which new dialogues are ascribed to characters from Soviet comedies or into which consumer goods are copied in for comical effects.

This special issue demonstrates how Russian – and often also Soviet – history serves as a foil to engage with contemporary issues in their full complexity. Given current developments involving a growing number of state (and war) crimes and increasing censorship, let us keep in mind the important role that dissident Soviet satirists played not only in history, but also in confronting Russia's violent history. In 1966, satirist writers Andrey Sinyavsky and Yuli Daniel were brought to court for allegedly producing anti-Soviet propaganda. Their work dealt with persecution campaigns including the mass repressions under Stalin. Exasperated that the court circumvented any discussion of history and the truthfulness of these horrors, the satirist Yuli Daniel bravely confronted the judge asking: "Well, what is the truth of the matter – did we kill or didn't we? Did all this happen or didn't it? To pretend that it didn't happen, that we didn't kill these people, is an insult. It is – forgive me for putting it so bluntly – like spitting at the memory of those who perished" (Hayward 186). No amount of prison time could erase his words and what they say about the importance of dissident satire in authoritarian states.

We hope that the broad range of topics touched upon in this special issue will prove intellectually stimulating and that it will offer inspiring approaches to future studies on Russian humour and satire.

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Bamberg–Kiel–Poznań, Spring 2022

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