# *Chapter 1*

# THE TRICKSTER AND CYNICISM

## *Cynicism of Power*

As *The Big Soviet Encyclopedia* explains (an explanation that is copy-pasted without a qualm into many modern Russian-language dictionaries and lexicons, online and otherwise),

In social terms, the phenomena of C[ynicism] have a twofold source. First, there is the C[ynicism] of Power, characteristic of the dominant, exploiting groups, which exercise their power and selfish goals by openly immoral methods (fascism, the cult of violence, etc.). Second, cynicism can be found in the rebellious moods and actions (for instance, vandalism) of social strata, groups, and individuals who experience the oppression of injustice and disenfranchisement, the ideological and moral hypocrisy of the exploiting class but see no way out of their situation and are thus plunged into a state of spiritual desolation.

The entry goes on to add that “communist morality opposes C[ynicism] in all its manifestations” (“Tsinizm”). A similar notion on communist morality was expressed by Bertrand Russell in 1929 (and to some degree revived by modern researchers of Soviet subjectivity):

Young men in Russia are not cynical because they accept, on the whole, the Communist philosophy, and they have a great country full of natural resources, ready to be exploited by the help of intelligence. The young have therefore a career before them which they feel to be worth while. You do not have to consider the ends of life when in the course of creating Utopia you are laying a pipeline, building a railway, or teaching peasants to use Ford tractors simultaneously on a four-mile front. Consequently, the Russian youth are vigorous and filled with ardent beliefs. (Russel)

Meanwhile, cynics are actually among the central – certainly the most numerous – characters in Soviet society from the 1920s until its end in the early 1990s. It was them who were denounced as bourgeois, philistines, opportunists, embezzlers of socialist property, crooks, hucksters, and hustlers. Counterculture youth groups like *stilyagi* qualified as cynical, as did the *fartsovshchiki*, from whom *stilyagi* got their black-market Western or Western-style clothing. Loosely translatable as “some people know how to live the good life,” the expression *umeiut zhit’!* was a key phrase suggesting a cynical attitude. There were cynics among both conformists and secret rebels. (Anti-)Soviet cynicism produced the late-Soviet generation’s “living *vnye*” (seemingly outside of the system), to use a term coined by Alexei Yurchak – who, however, radically distinguishes between cynicism and “living *vnye*”. It also gave rise to late-Soviet corruption, and to Putin’s “power vertical.”

When speaking of cynicism, I am referring to Peter Sloterdijk’s interpretation of the concept in *The Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983) as a negative but wide-spread product of modernity, a special principle of subjectivation based on a perverse reaction to modernity and its demands on the subject. Drawing from Marx’s definition of ideology, Sloterdijk characterizes cynicism as an “*enlightened false consciousness.* It is that modernized, unhappy consciousness, on which enlightenment has labored both successfully and in vain” (1987: 5). Cynicism offers the modern subject a strategy of pseudo-socialization that reconciles self-interest with the demands of society or ideology. Sloterdijk’s cynic can be labeled as an ironic conformist – without ever really accepting social imperatives and values, s/he feigns enthusiasm for them, internally maintaining an ironic distance and never losing sight of his own interests. His crucial characteristics include (1) the splitting of the subject into a multitude of situational identities that are unrelated to each other, and hence the ability to radically change positions depending on the needs of the moment; (2) the latter constitutes the core of an “instrumental mind” (Horkheimer and Adorno), which excludes all moral constraints and uses other people as means to achieve one’s own or systemic goals. Modern cynics see this strategy as a predicate of power and the only realistic attitude to reality – “it can’t be helped,” “that’s life for you,” “this is how things are,” “only an idiot wouldn’t...,” etc.

Of course, the meaning of cynicism changes in different eras, and there is not much in common between Diogenes’s ancient followers, French libertines, international adventurers of the 18th century, and the cynics of the modern era.[[1]](#footnote-1) When speaking exclusively of the latter, Sloterdijk inextricably links cynicism to the delinquencies which Foucault places at the center of a disciplinary society. Foucault’s theory highlights delinquency as “a specific type of a politically or economically less dangerous – and, on occasion, usable – form of illegality […] apparently marginal, but in fact centrally supervised milieu” (Foucault 1995: 277). The disciplinary system not only punishes delinquency but also produces it, while simultaneously controlling, directing, categorizing, and defining punishments. At the same time, delinquency purposefully blurs the line between social norm and criminality, as Foucault emphasizes: “Delinquency, controlled illegality, is an agent for the illegality of the dominant groups... It is also an instrument for the illegality with which the very exercise of power surrounds itself” (1995: 279, 280). It is precisely this kind of delinquency – normalized and instrumentalized by the authorities, socially acceptable and shameless – that forms the modern *cynicism of power*. As a prime example, Foucault cites the famous detective Vidocq, who combined police service with criminal activity:

… the almost mythical importance that he assumed in the eyes of his contemporaries … was not even based on the fact that, for the first time in history, a former inmate of a convict-ship, redeemed or guilty simply bought, became a chief of police, but rather on the fact that, in him, delinquency visibly assumed its ambiguous status as an object and instrument for a police apparatus that worked both against it and with it. Vidocq marks the moment when delinquency, detached from other illegalities, was invested by power and turned inside out. It was then that the direct, institutional coupling of police and delinquency took place: the disturbing moment when criminality became one of the mechanisms of power. (1995: 283)

The applicability of this logic to Russia and Russian society is evidenced, for instance, by the popularity of a book by Matvey Komarov, “The Comprehensive and True Stories of Two Crooks, the First Being the Russian Glorious Thief, Robber, and Former Moscow Detective Vanka Kain, with All His Searches, Investigations, His Madcap Wedding, His Many Amusing Songs, and His Portrait, and the Second Being the French Swindler Cartouche and His Companions” (*Van’ka Kain*, 1779–1794). As the title comprehensively explains, the book, while inspired by the biography of the robber and trickster Cartouche (Louis Dominique Bourguignon, 1693–1721) and featuring some of his adventures, is mainly dedicated to Vanka Cain, a historical figure turned legend, who became even more successful in his robberies after joining the St.Petersburg police force. Like Vidocq’s career, this story also has an “almost mythical importance,” which can explain its enduring popularity for a whole century. Indeed, this was one of the first works of Russian mass literature (see Shklovskii 1929a).

When applied to Soviet culture, these circumstances have a twofold meaning, just as suggested by *The* *Big Soviet Encyclopedia* (though its authors probably had something else in mind). On the one hand, it is important to systematically consider the *cynicism of Soviet power.* As Sloterdijk has written, the Soviet experience involves combining extreme political cynicism with Marxist utopia. For the philosopher, it is the Grand Inquisitor[[2]](#footnote-2) who best embodies political cynicism: “He knows what he is doing and he knows it with a downright shocking clarity, regarding which the only remaining question is whether it should be called tragic or cynical … The concept of freedom, as the Grand Inquisitor knows, is the fulcrum in the system of oppression: The more repressive it is (Inquisition, etc.), the more violently must the rhetoric of freedom be hammered into people’s heads. Precisely this is the ideological stamp of all modern conservatisms in the East as well as in the West” (1987: 183, 185). According to Sloterdijk, Leninist and Stalinist power followed the logic of the Grand Inquisitor, merely modifying imperial power under the guise of its radical restructuring:

What was played out between 1917 and the 20th Party Congress must be understood as the cynical and ironical testament of czarism. Lenin became the testamentary executor of a despotism whose representatives had possibly been extinguished, but not its procedures and inner structures. Stalin raised the traditional despotism to the technological level of the twentieth century, in a way that would have made any Romanov blanch. If, under the czars, the Russian state was already a much too tightly fitting shirt for its society, under the Communist party it became a real straitjacket. If under czarism a tiny group of the privileged had held an enormous empire terroristically under control through their apparatus of power, after 1917, it was a tiny group of professional revolutionaries who, riding the wave of disgust with the war and the hatred the peasants and proletariat had for “those at the top,” overthrew Goliath. (1987: 244)

The very logic of the Stalinist system was internally contradictory, leading to a constant disconnect between political rhetoric and practice – which produced the effect of cynicism. Summarizing the work of historians of Stalinism, Nicolas Werth writes: “The 1930s, the stage of the formation of Stalinism as a political system, was a time of serious conflicts between two forms of organization and two logics of power. On the one hand, the logic of the ‘administrative-command system’, of the state apparatus ... On the other, [dominated by] the overtly despotic conception of the management of the affairs of the country shared by Stalin and his ‘inner circle’” (Vert 2010: 150). These contradictions are to some extent the root cause of the Great Terror, in which the cynicism of power culminates. In the 1930s, the category “enemy of the people” is deprived of any attachment to the “exploiting classes” and becomes arbitrary. As Fitzpatrick writes: “The Great Purges introduced a new definition of the target of terror: ‘enemies of the people’. In one sense, this was simply a code term indicating that in this terror, in contrast to previous ones, the hunt for enemies should focus on the Communist elite. But in another sense, it marked a destruction of the previous conceptual borders of terror. ‘Enemies’ no longer had any specific attributes like class; anyone could turn out to be an enemy, Soviet terror was random” (Fitzpatrick 1999: 92).

Slavoj Žižek, familiar with the experience of socialism from within, offers a more nuanced picture. In his view, the disconnect between the utopian program and reality along with a dysfunctional administrative system (or, rather, one that functioned only through violence) created a cynical contradiction between political declarations and practices from the *very beginning of Soviet history*. He argues that the treatment of ideological doctrine as a mask through which the cynic’s cunning eye peeks out is built into the very foundation of the Soviet system. For instance, in *The Plague of Fantasies* (1997), comparing Stalinism with Nazism, he wrote that “the paranoiac Nazis really believed in the Jewish conspiracy, while the perverted Stalinists actively organized/invented ‘counterrevolutionary conspiracies’ as pre-emptive strikes. The greatest surprise for the Stalinist investigator was to discover that the subject accused of being a German or American spy really was a spy: in Stalinism proper, confessions counted only as far as they were false and extorted …” (Žižek 1997: 58). According to this interpretation, the ambiguity and duality preprogrammed by power presuppose their own kind of joy – the *jouissance* of stealing a few forbidden fruits: thanks to the deliberately undefined boundary between law and crime, cheating only *seems* out of bounds, and the fruit is not quite as forbidden as one might think. As K. Hignett writes, analyzing the causes of socially normalized crime, or delinquency, in socialist societies: “in urban areas, many illegal transactions were motivated by ‘greed’ rather than ‘need’ and the desire to improve ones’ living standards and have a ‘nicer life’ within the constraints of the socialist system rather by survival at any basic level” (Hignett 2016: 207). Here, too, we see traces of Žižek-style jouissance – we deceive the state, which deceives us, and derive pleasure from our deception. According to Hignett, “the second economy seems to have represented a rather ambivalent form of opposition, functioning primarily as a solution to economic dissatisfaction rather than any concerted, political strategy of protest or resistance toward the regimes of power” (2016: 210).

This somewhat abstract reasoning is supported by contemporary sociological research and historical publications on the shadow economy, bribery, and corruption – elements as organically embedded into Stalin’s administrative system as into Brezhnev’s and Putin’s (see Druzhinin 2015; Khlevniuk 2023). Alyona Ledeneva, who has devoted a number of studies to these phenomena (see Ledeneva 1998, 2000, 2024), shows in detail that the networks of profitable connections known as *blat* and related forms of social networks do not emerge in the late Soviet period but run through the entire Soviet history. Moreover, as her analysis shows, the very existence of the Soviet socioeconomic system depended to a large extent on these extra-systemic (and even subversive) elements: only they enabled ordinary citizens to gain access to theoretically “guaranteed” but actually inaccessible goods and products, while also ensuring the functioning of the “planned” economy. The enterprises had their fixers (*tolkachi*), the large stores their “special services,” etc. By turning the system’s contradictions against it, using its loopholes and gaps, the Soviet cynic subverted it, arguably even rebelled against it – and, paradoxically, thus “*enabled* the Soviet system to function and made it tolerable” (Ledeneva 1998: 3). The *blat* system produced a whole cynical world, a shadow economy and shadow social networks existing under the cover (and with the tacit blessing) of the officialdom, which addressed passionate philippics against the *blatmeisters* but only rarely actually persecuted them.[[3]](#footnote-3)

As for late Soviet society (it’s worth recalling that Sloterdijk’s book was written before the collapse of the USSR), the authorities’ cynicism follows from the collapse of socialist ideology, which at the late stage served only as a cover for the interests of the ruling party *nomenklatura* and the conformist elite:

Everyone feels the gulf between the phraseology of the Leninist tradition and everyday experiences, particularly those who are forced to speak this phraseology because of their position. The world falls into two separate dimensions. One reckons everywhere with a split reality. Reality begins where the state and its terminology end. The conventional concept of “lie” does not adequately describe the situation in the East with its floating, schizoid diffusions of reality. (Sloterdijk 1987: 245)

Tatiana Goricheva, one of the intellectual leaders of the Leningrad underground and probably the first Russian philosopher to read Sloterdijk, further developed his thoughts by posing the question, “What is he like today, the Soviet cynic?” Her answer goes further than Sloterdijk’s:

The Soviet cynic in some respects resembles the Western one, namely in being doubly “enlightened.” He is enlightened in terms of negating the ruling ideology: nowhere in the world is contempt for Marxism probably greater than in the Soviet Union. “We are no fools, right?” Thus, the Soviet cynic is enlightened because he does not believe the official ideology. He easily jumped that moat long ago. But this isn’t all, his “enlightenment” is even more thorough: he does not believe the dissidents, either. After all, it is the dissidents who openly criticize Soviet and every other ideology. (Goricheva 1991: 40)

The late-Soviet cynic, Goricheva emphasizes, “managed to ‘rise’ above dissidents and considers them ‘Don Quixotes,’ attention seekers or even lunatics, much like Pyotr Verkhovensky in *Demons*” (1991: 41). Such cynicism makes conformism invincible: seeing itself as “above” both ideology and its criticism, it is super-pragmatic and super-flexible. These modifications of the *cynicism of power* and the corresponding ethical regime, which took place in late Soviet culture, in essence gave rise to the neoliberal subject that would come to the fore in the post-Soviet period (see Chapter 3).

***Success techniques***

The cynicism of power is mirrored in the culture of *“popular”* cheating and swindling, which flourishes in intertwined harmony with state institutions. The part of this culture that is closest to the world of tricksters – the phenomenon of the Soviet impostor – has long attracted scholarly attention. The American historian Golfo Alexopoulos was one the first to write about it, followed by Sheila Fitzpatrick’s *Tear Off the Masks: Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia*. In 2022, Oleg Khlevniuk published in Moscow-based NLO press a detailed monograph *The Corporation of Impostors* devoted to Nikolai Pavlenko, one of the chief imposters of the Stalinist period. The numerous Soviet impostors posing as “children of Lieutenant Schmidt,” “brothers of Lunacharsky” or simply “Red partisans” (and in the postwar years, “Heroes of the Soviet Union”),[[4]](#footnote-4) extensively used the system of social inequality and privilege that overlay the theoretical ideological egalitarianism in the USSR. As Fitzpatrick shows, just as much success was enjoyed by the roles of various “government inspectors,” especially party authorities, OGPU/NKVD officers, and valuable specialists (engineers). Such people had privileges, and so did the impostors who relied on the ambiguity of the Soviet system when posing as these social characters.

In the culture of modernity, the adventurer is transformed into a conman, keeping some of the adventurer’s traits but also incorporating those of the rogue and impostor. In her 1998 article “Portrait of a Con Artist as a Soviet Man,” Golfo Alexopoulos describes the fantastic fate of a certain Vladimir Gromov (Grinshpun). Successfully pretending to be a highly qualified engineer in various specialties (without even a minimal technical education) and a high-ranking NKVD officer, forging all kinds of documents and obtaining huge sums for his Khlestakovian projects, and even getting hold of a separate Moscow apartment (posing as a red partisan in addition to his engineer persona), Gromov is more than just an ordinary Soviet cynic. He radiates a certain excess, which brings him closer to the trickster. He is not merely cheating; he is *parodying the system.* Alexopoulos emphasizes that Gromov, whose activities fall within the first *pyatiletka* (five-year economic plan, 1928–34), mimics the methods of the Soviet authorities in the early 1930s, during the period when Stalin was rapidly consolidating his power: “This man did not act conservatively or discreetly when he appropriated the theatrical and hyperbolic style of Stalinist culture and constructed an identity that mir­ rored the grandeur of Stalin’s own. […] In the po­litical environment of the early Stalin years, which was characterized by theatricality, hyperbole, and reckless arrogance and lacked all caution and restraint, this daring con artist with the inflated identity was in the most fundamental sense a Soviet man” (Alexopoulos 1998: 776).

Gromov’s use of denunciations is particularly noteworthy – even before the peak of the Great Terror, he wrote heaps of them to all the authorities he could think of, using them to eliminate anyone who stood in the way of his scams. Accusing everyone around him of incompetence and sabotage, he presented himself as a victim of their intrigues. However, as Alexopoulos notes, at the end, this method was Gromov’s undoing: it had turned everyone against him, and he received a death sentence. In prison, he went on to write the novel *Is He Really an Enemy of the People?* and the play *Love and Homeland*, whereupon his death sentence was commuted to ten years in the camps. His trail was lost in the Gulag.

Like many other Soviet impostors, Gromov did not hide from the authorities; on the contrary, he *performed his imposture,* both as a free man and in prison. He was so immersed in his role, so carried away – as if he was following Stanislavsky’s system as described by O. Kharkhordin[[5]](#footnote-5) – that he ends up harming himself. Gromov’s final miscalculation illustrates this larger-than-life figure: having found himself in a high position at Glavryba, he did not abscond with the money after a few months (as he usually did) but began to defend his projects, trying to prove that he really was who he claimed to be. In doing so, Gromov *reproduced* the authorities’ “regime of truth” (as Foucault puts it), which, since 1928, gave rise to a great many show trials. As Alexopoulos notes: “The observer of the Stalinist show trial could listen to monstrous accusations and believe at one and the same time in their exaggerated nature and in their possible veracity, so perhaps So­viet officials responded similarly to the spectacle of Gromov. They could have been deeply suspicious of his inflated self-appellations, yet willing to accept them as well” (1999: 789).

In this context, phenomena such as “the real history of the so-called Military Construction Department (*Upravlenie voennogo stroitel'stva*), which operated in 1948–1952 on the territory of five Soviet republics,” described by Nikolai Mitrokhin, no longer seem exceptional:

It was engaged in capital construction (including railroads) under orders from various divisions of the Ministry of Defense and other government agencies. The UVS had a large staff, offices in the capitals of the republics guarded by its own armed units (armed with about 60 weapons, including machine guns), multimillion accounts in state banks (the total amount of contracts for work amounted to 38.7 million rubles), dozens of cars, excavators, and other equipment. And yet it was a completely private firm founded under false documents by “the son of a former kulak who had his own steam mill,” M.I. Pavlenko. (Mitrokhin 2006)

The history of this imposture has been the subject of much research by the well-known historian of Stalinism Oleg Khlevniuk. In his book *The Corporation of Impostors* (*Korporatsiia samozvantsev*, 2023), he shows that this fraudulent corporation could exist and prosper precisely because it made full use of the illegal (bribes, graft, misreporting) and semi-legal (acquaintances, connections, patron-client networks) mechanisms *underlying “official” Soviet society* and, in particular, planned economy. Khlevniuk observes: “Pavlenko’s organization fit quite organically into the real Soviet social and economic environment. The methods and techniques of the UVS were quite typical and widespread” (2023: 304). By exposing these mechanisms, the UVS blurred the boundaries between legal and illegal: “Yes, Pavlenko’s organization was fictitious, it was using false documents and had no legal status. But at the same time, in its main activities it adhered to Soviet laws: it concluded legal contracts with state institutions and enterprises, performed real work for them, and received payment in accordance with the amount of work performed, which was confirmed by legal inspection acts” (2023: 298). Moreover, Pavlenko’s enterprise clearly demonstrated that the difference between socialist planned economy and a capitalist business was quite arbitrary: “Overall, Pavlenko described his corporation as an ordinary capitalist enterprise mimicking a socialist one. ... Violating Soviet laws, Pavlenko’s shadow enterprise operated quite successfully and performed socially significant useful functions” (2023: 300–301). Thus, in this case, social mimicry – a crucial attribute of cynicism – characterizes not merely specific people or social roles but extends to whole systems, which, in turn metonymically correlated with the Soviet economy.

The combination of spectacularity with precise social mimicry is also characteristic of other major Soviet-era con artists, such as Valentin Purgin/Vladimir Golubenko, who claimed to be a Hero of the Soviet Union and worked as a journalist for *Komsomolskaya Pravda* (Iuferev 2020). There is a certain paradox in this: cynicism presupposes the coexistence of many mutually incompatible identities, but Gromov or Pavlenko actually fall in with the logic of the system, which itself is based on cynical deception and systematic cheating. This is why, instead of hiding, they demonstrate their proximity to power by openly reproducing its transgressions. In these and similar cases, social mimicry takes on a (self-)revealing character, in many ways anticipating the cultural function of the Soviet trickster.

***Survival techniques***

Cynical techniques of success constitute only one side of the popular responses to the cynicism of power. The need to adapt to power’s instable demands and norms, to its ever-changing “enemy image,” etc. gave rise to the cynicism of the masses as a “technique for survival” (Leibovich). Sheila Fitzpatrick’s *Tear Off the Masks* draws on numerous documents from the 1920s and 30s to demonstrate how the ever-changing logic of class discrimination forced the average Soviet citizen to manipulate their own identity in the fashion described by Sloterdijk, rewriting their autobiographies and searching for their places in both official and unofficial systems of social relations. The subject’s inclusion in *both* of these seemingly incompatible systems was the unspoken *norm o*f socialsurvival. Fitzpatrick suggests that it was the class-based approach to evaluating the individual and structuring society that *provoked* imposture and the tricksterish manipulation of one’s own identity. From this point of view, the numerous swindlers and impostors that proliferated in the 1920s and 1930s and were reflected in the literature of this era are not misfits but, on the contrary, virtuosos of the Soviet social order. As Fitzpatrick emphasizes, “...for many people in the revolutionary era, the world of Ostap Bender was not just a world apart, where tricksters hustled and the law did its best to catch and punish them, but the world in which they lived themselves—a world in which, to survive, everyone had to become a bit of an operator and impersonator” (2006: 271).

Class discrimination explains much about the tricksterism of the 1920s–1930s, but the heuristic potential of this theory clearly diminishes when applied to later periods of Soviet history, when class criteria no longer played such a significant role. What are the other social factors fueling the steadily growing popularity of Soviet tricksters?

Оleg Kharkhordin, in a book with a rather Foucauldian title and methodology, *Denunciation and Hypocrisy: A Genealogy of the Russian Personality* (*Oblichat' i litsemerit': Genealogiia rossiiskoi lichnosti*) shows that the Soviet regime’s systematic invasion of private life (what Foucault calls the pastoral function of power) shifted all things meant to remain personal into a sphere so isolated that it presupposed the formation of a persona – or even several personas – parallel to the “official” self. Thus, the Sloterdijk-style splitting of the individual into incompatible identites was stabilized independently of class discrimination. Moreover, this everyday dramatic identification(s), as convincingly described by Kharkhordin, were performed according to Stanislavsky’s system:

Actors in Stanislavsky’s theater were supposed to inhabit a different person, in the feat of total identification with an imaginary character. They effected the total merger by the introduction of an “as if” clause: the point was not to believe in the reality of an assigned role, but simply to act out all the consequences as if this role were their natural persona. (Kharkhordin 1999: 274).

This cynical bifurcation was not a deviation from but a condition of subjectivation – just as Sloterdijk suggested.

Did the post-Stalinist Thaw overcome this painful duality? Ilya Gerasimov writes about the Soviet culture of the 1960s: “When Stalin’s version of communism as a set of beliefs and disciplinary mechanisms that support these beliefs was compromised, it meant admitting the possibility of an error (albeit an allegedly overcome one), of development in the wrong direction, into the past, fraught with ‘throwbacks’ (to the cult of personality). It was not simply a question of one particular utopia’s collapse but of distrust in the very principle of a path toward grand historical progress that admits no alternatives” (2021: 25). Disillusion with historical progress as such was a crucial factor in the social cynicism that held sway from the late 1960s to the early 1980s. There were deeper reasons behind it than the failure of the Thaw and its reforms. As Gerasimov shows, at the heart of the matter was “a crisis of modern temporality itself as an orientation toward an ideal future” (2021: 37).

This crisis was mirrored and exacerbated by disillusion with scientific knowledge, which was being supplanted by all things occult and the New Age. In fact, the averagely educated person, be they Soviet or Western, could often hardly distinguish between science and pseudo-science. This is why in the second half of the 1960s the Strugatsky brothers, whose work Gerasimov analyzes, focused on “the fierce denunciation of clever and calculating cynics who differ from communist creative workaholics not in their lack of true knowledge but in their desire to build a personal rather than a universal bright future” (2021: 52). In this, Gerasimov sees a resemblance between the state of Soviet society and the pathos of Sloterdijk’s *Critique of Cynical Reason* (which he criticizes from a historical perspective): “If one recognizes that a better future is possible only personally and not collectively, then moral norms, democracy, and the very institution of the state turn out to be redundant” (2021: 56).

The logical continuation of both the subjectivation practices described by Kharkhordin and the crises described by Gerasimov is Yurchak’s “living *vnye*” the circle of similar-minded people. As this scholar shows in his book *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (2006), such circles constitute the second, crucial, and intellectually rich social world of the late Soviet era – as opposed to official society, controlled by the formalized and ritualized political discourse of power. With the category *vnye* (beyond, outside), Yurchak describes a very wide range of social and cultural phenomena – from the legendary cafe Saigon in Leningrad that has become the public sphere for the Leningrad underground to the rock music movement; from various hobby groups and creative studios to the community of theoretical physicists. The category also includes most of the artistic underground, be it the hippy-like Mitki, the necrorealists, or the Moscow Conceptualists. It is in these phenomena that Yurchak finds an explanation for the remarkable flexibility with which “the last Soviet generation” (those born in the first half of the 1960s) found its new place in post-Soviet capitalism, and with which the Komsomol functionaries turned into oligarchs. He argues that the collapse of the Soviet system, which had seemed unimaginable before 1991, did not actually surprise this generation (only producing nostalgia after the fact). In other words, he regards all these phenomena as what had undermined the Soviet system from within, preparing its seemingly sudden collapse. The last Soviet generation, Yurchak suggests, balanced between sincerity and cynicism, allowing its intelligentsia “to be neither completely ‘serious’ nor completely cynical and uninterested about the constitutive meaning of Komsomol work” (2006: 113) or any other subjects within the sphere of officialdom. Yurchak himself draws the following picture as a characteristic symbol of late Soviet culture: a high school or college student sitting at a Komsomol meeting, reading an illegal – i.e “tamizdat” copy of *The Gulag Archipelago* under his desk, while “performatively” voting in favor of the most loyalist proposals coming from the officialdom. It would be hard to find a more tangible embodiment of the cynical split personality combined with “instrumental reason”; the vote, after all, could concern not only abstract issues but also quite specific people.

Such a view considerably complicates the notion of the Soviet subject developed by Stephen Kotkin, Jochen Hellbeck, and Igal Halfin.[[6]](#footnote-6) Drawing on Stalin-era diaries, these researchers have shown how official Soviet rhetoric was internalized by ordinary Soviet people, leading to the formation of a new subjectivity: the “new Soviet person” was not merely an ideological phantom. As Hellbeck writes: “In this framework, the individual acts as a data center in which ideology is unpacked and personalized, resulting in the individual’s transformation into a subject with clear and meaningful biographical characteristics. It is in the process of activating the individual that ideology comes to life” (Hellbeck 2010).

However, this effect occurs if we pay attention *only* to the metamorphoses experienced by the languages of power and ideology. If we try to reconstruct the discursive map of a personality as a whole, the picture becomes much more complex. Thanks to Hellbeck’s and Natalia Kozlova’s research, Stepan Filippovich Podlubnyi’s multi-volume diary covering the period from 1930 to 1991 and kept in Russian People’s Archive (*Narodnyi Arkhiv*), has become one of the crucial sources for contemporary studies of Soviet subjectivity.[[7]](#footnote-7) The son of an exiled “kulak,” Poslubnyi managed to escape to Moscow. Successfully hiding his “social origins” he becomes first a student at a professional technical school and then at the Moscow Medical Institute. However, he was forced to drop out after being exposed as the son of a kulak after the arrest of his mother. Simultaneously, with all these events in his life, he provided services a secret agent of the OGPU/NKVD ... Despite all the efforts of scholars, Podlubnyi’s life cannot be contained within the framework of a single subjectivity, even one that evolves and rebuilds itself in accordance with Soviet notions of personality.

“The Soviet man” is only one of Podlubnyi’s identities. Parallel to it, almost as if never touching, there is the persona of the kulak in hiding – expelled from the institute, standing in prison queues with packages for his arrested mother. Moreover, there is also a third character developing in parallel with the first two: a secret agent and an informer for the OGPU/NKVD. As if this wasn’t enough, there is a fourth subjectivity plot to boot: Podlubnyi’s (frequently violent) relationships with women. He seems to be using gendered violence to make up for his social disadvantages. According to the historian Oleg Leibovich’s precise characterization, “Stepan Podlubnyi does not remake his identity; instead, he multiplies it for different needs. If he can be said to work on his self, it is only a matter of creating appropriate social masks: a progressive Komsomol member, a hard worker, a vigilant silent officer of the state organs” (2017: 120). The most striking feature of Podlubnyi’s diaries is the *artistic ease* with which this Soviet subject moves from one identity to another, seemingly completely forgetting about his other personae, while nonchalantly instrumentalizing other people (primarily women): a perfect illustration of what Sloterdijk calls a cynic.

Analyzing the diary of a different man – a Ural aristocrat turned worker (who, unlike Podlubnyi, believed himself to be invulnerable to repressions), Leibovich reveals a similar structure of the cynical personality: “While occasionally doubting the ideological dogmas, Dmitriev accepts Soviet language, but he does not engage in self-criticism and does not learn to live in the Bolshevik way. In all situations, he follows his own interests, sometimes without noticing the boundaries of what is allowed, approved, and accepted. In other words, what A. I. Dmitriev combines his everyday behavior with is not Bolshevik ideology but the culture of poverty, which permits and even approves of certain types of criminal behavior” (Leibovich 2017: 127).

However, cynical duplicity can well work without the extreme survival needs of poverty. Leibovich goes on to say about the same aristocratic worker: “Of course, he cheated. In his diaries, one can find many records of forged vouchers for enhanced meals, of how he tried and failed to get registered at a special canteen, of how he wooed female canteen workers and servers, bartered, stole, and was very offended when his acquaintance, a tractor driver, was slow to remove from the territory of the factory a stashed magneto, which Dmitriev had promised to a rural mechanic in exchange for bread” (2017: 120). It was not hunger that inspired Dmitriev to these deeds. It was, if you will, the logic of an active subject’s self-realization, which, in many cases, leads to cynical choices.

## *The creative potential of cynicism*

Discussing the memoirs of Mark Miller, a Kazan Jew born in the revolutionary period, a war veteran and worker who did everything to avoid affiliation with the state, Ilya Gerasimov describes a social type similar to Dmitriev, though seemingly quite different biographically: “Not fitting into the binary opposition ‘Soviet–anti-Soviet’ and not a helpless victim of external factors, Miller appears to be a self-conscious social actor. … It was safer to engage in shady labor and commercial schemes than to emulate the normative social role of a ‘true Soviet’” (Gerasimov 2017: 194). From the perspective of Soviet normativity, this social character could be described as an impostor (as Fitzpatrick would call it). However, Gerasimov argues that the case of Miller and similar social actors, reveals the possibility of an *autonomous position* that undermines the binary opposition between the Soviet majority and the anti-Soviet minority – a position distinguished by “a non-Bolshevik language of self-representation and rationalization of reality” (2017: 192):

His relatives, coworkers, business partners, employers, and friends were quite regular Soviets, only nonnormative. They did not “speak Bolshevik” to each other and avoided official institutional settings for their transactions, yet they managed to communicate meaningfully and navigate the Soviet society rationally. This means that they used some universally recognizable language even though it was not sustained by the official public sphere and through the medium of public discourse. (2017:192)

This universally recognized language is the language of cynicism, to a greater or lesser degree understood and practiced by all. While I would not describe Miller as a trickster (the comic element is missing), it is important to note that he uses cynicism not only as a means of survival but also as a means of self-realization – of a limited sort, to be sure, but nevertheless featuring many strategies and practices, including creative ones. He is not unique in this respect. For instance, Maria Litovskaia’s article “The Creative Possibilities of a Soviet Writer’s Demonstrative Conformism” considers the aesthetic and behavioral strategies of Valentin Kataev and Alexei Tolstoy, two writers known not only for their literary talents but also for their outspoken political cynicism. Having analyzed the paradoxes of their creative and political behavior, Litovskaia draws the following conclusion:

The analysis of Tolstoy’s and Kataev’s fiction and journalistic texts, which they created in parallel, suggests a clear distinction in the authors’ minds between these spheres of activity: art (an area of self-expression, where relative willfulness is possible, though the voice of power is still heard) and service (an area of obedience to the requirements of the state). Professional writers who valued the originality of their talent, Kataev and Tolstoy clearly distinguished between “private” and “commissioned” work without ever turning this mental operation into a subject of self-destructive reflection. (Litovskaia 2014).

Contrary to (idealistic?) expectations, this strategy, obviously resonaing with Sloterdijk’s characterization of cynicism, does not diminish the artistic significance of their work but contributes to the development and growth of their talents: “...writers of this type considered themselves obliged to serve their employer, that is, the Soviet state. Having understood and accepted the conditions of working with the pertinent Soviet subject matter, they use it to their advantage” (Litovskaia 2014). Illustrating this thesis, Litovskaia cites as an example Kataev’s novella *The Little Iron Door in the Wall* (*Malen’kaia zheleznaia dver’ v stene*, 1964), which is dedicated to Lenin and thus forms part of the official Soviet narrative (the so-called Leniniana). Thanks to this book, the writer was allowed to travel to France, Italy, and Switzerland (to “gather material”). However, the resulting novel was in fact Kataev’s first experiment in a radically modernist rather than socialist realist style (which he’d later come to call *mauvisme*). *The Little Iron Door* is, in Litovskaia’s words, “a text about the elements from which a writer puts together a historical narrative, a text on how history is written, which essentially exposes Soviet historical fiction” (Litovskaia 2014) – and, I would add, anticipates the genre of “historiographic metafiction” (Linda Hutcheon) that would take center stage in the global postmodernism of the 1980s and 1990s with Eco, Pynchon, Pavich, Doctorow, Sharov, etc. as its representatives

Far it be from me to claim that all Soviet people, much less all members of the Soviet intelligentsia, were cynics. Still, I would venture to suggest that cynicism is associated with a rather massive and, moreover, *viable* pattern of adaptation to the conditions of Soviet modernity, which in itself was dominated by cynicism. Using de Certeau’s terminology, the Soviet society was permeated both by cynicism as a strategy of power and cynicism as a practical tactic of “anti-subordination,” defined as “a calculated action determined by the absence of a proper locus” (Certeau, 1998: 35–36).

Both the power elites and their victims are united by a key feature of cynicism: distrust of social and political institutions and their formal discourses (Mazella 2007: 5); the elites use institutions as a means of personal enrichment, minimizing their other functions, while the population (quite sensibly) perceives them exclusively as mechanisms of economic, political, and cultural repression. As one might expect, this resonance of opposite cynicisms has a dangerous potential, as evidenced by the entire late Soviet experience. As Mazella reminds us, political cynicism is “an invaluable critical concept, largely because it complicates some of modernity’s most cherished self-images, its myths of rationality, dynamism, and progress. For this reason, cynicism, for all its affinities with conservative thought, has genuine critical potential” (Mazella 2007: 6).

## *A brief cultural history of Soviet cynicism*

The history of the cynic in Soviet literature has not yet been written, though there is enough material for a dozen dissertations. In the following, I will try to outline its crucial milestones. To begin with, countless negative characters in early Soviet and socialist realist literature bear the stamp of cynicism. Many of them are less clear-cut than one might think: often, it is these “hidden enemies” who are the mouthpiece of the author’s hidden thoughts. The work of Leonid Leonov, a leading “fellow traveler” and a classic of socialist realism, is particularly noteworthy in this regard: his negative characters, almost all of them hardened cynics, carry a much greater semantic load than the flat positive protagonists.

Following this principle, Evgeny Schwartz’s play *Dragon* (*Drakon*, completed in 1943) places cynics at the center of his subversive satire of totalitarianism. Shvarts typically situates his plays in imaginary yet emphatically Western locations – a chronotope reserved in Soviet literature for political or politicized discourses, with or without the veil of Aesopian language. Despite this disguise, there is a strong critical tradition of reading his plays as a reaction to the Great Terror and the Soviet experience in general. Iintellectual plot of *Dragon* is driven by the search for the source of social evil. Eventually, the play’s protagonists understand that it is not the title monster and even not its substitute, the Burgomaster, who generate the regime of terror, but the “folk”, ordinary city dwellers who rise as a collective cynic finding comfort and convenience in submitting to tyrannical violence. The people do not protest when, after the death of Dragon the dictator, the reins of power are taken by an ultra-cynic, the mayor. The third act of the play repeats the first one in detail: Elsa, who had narrowly escaped being devoured by the dragon, is again given away to the ruler of the city. Only now she knows who is to blame:

When a villain is holding his knife to your throat, you still can escape. Somebody could kill him, or you’d be able to break free… What if the villain’s knife suddenly lunges at you by itself? And his rope slithers towards you like a snake to tie you up? If even the drapes on his window, quiet little drapes jump at you as well, to muffle your screams? What would you say then? I thought you were only instruments to the dragon, like the knife is to the villain. But you, my friends, you turned out to be villains in your own right! I am not accusing you, you may not recognize it yourself, but I am begging you – come to your senses! Could it be that the dragon hasn’t died but turned into a human instead, as he often did? But this time he turned into many people at once, and now they are killing me. (Schwarz 2001)

There is a strange resonance between Ostap Bender’s self-description in *Golden Calf* (*Zolotoi telenok*) – “‘I am no surgeon,’ Ostap remarked. ‘I’m a neurologist. A psychiatrist. I study my patients’ souls. And for some reason the souls I come across are exceptionally stupid” (2009: 59) – and the Dragon’s famous monologue:

My dear man, I crippled them myself. Crippled them exactly as required. You see, the human soul is very resilient. Cut the body in half – and the man croaks. But tear the soul apart – and it only becomes more pliable, that’s all. No, really, you couldn’t pick a finer assortment of souls anywhere. Only in my town. Souls with no hands. Souls with no legs. Mute souls, deaf souls, chained souls, snitch souls, damned souls. Do you know why the burgomaster parades his supposed madness around? To conceal that he does not have any soul at all. Hollow souls, corrupt souls, worn out souls, dead souls. A pity they’re invisible, really. (Schwartz)

The Dragon also bears some features of the trickster as he consists of three personalities – a seemingly good-natured if churlish military man, a refined gentleman, and a “small, pale, elderly man.” By moving between these personalities, the Dragon performs different discourses of power: based upon brute force, historical “tradition,” and bureaucratic machinery respectively. Invariably, his rein requires cynics and tricksters to function, and they naturally inherit power after his death. Generally speaking, in Schwarts’ dramaturgy, cynicism and tricksterdom (an aestheticized version of cynicism) are both responsible for the formation and sustainment of the regime of terror.

The tendency to represent negative characters as cynics along with the understanding of cynicism as the normative Soviet feature, finds its most tangivle, if paradoxical manifestation in Mikhail Bulgakov’s *The Master and Margarita* (Master i Margarita). Having begun writing the novel in the late 1920s, Bulgakov continued working on it until the end of his life in 1940. However, his novel in no way reflects the breakdown in social and political culture, which, according to many historians, occurred between the late 1920s and the early 1930s, marking the beginning of Stalinism. For the author of *The Master and Margarita*, the 1920s and 1930s represent a homogeneous process precisely because the novel focuses on various forms of cynicism that are equally dominant in the culture of both decades. Having created a broad panorama of a society of cynics (to be discussed in the next chapter), Bulgakov traces the genealogy of cynicism back to Pontius Pilate. It is this historical character who forms the semantic center of the Biblical chapters, eclipsing with his complexity and genuine tragedy the somewhat flat image of Yeshua.

Who is Bulgakov’s Pilate? A classic cynic! Changing his masks, understanding everything, and doing nothing that could damage his career. He is a perfect fit for this description from Sloterdijk’s Critique of Cynical Reason: “By day, colonizer, at night, colonized; … officially a cynical functionary, privately a sensitive soul; … objectively a strategist of destruction, subjectively a pacifist; basically someone who triggers catastrophes, in one’s own view, innocence personified” (Sloterdijk 1987: 113). It is important to emphasize that Afranius – the head of Pontius Pilate’s secret police, in whom many scholars see Woland (for instance, Gasparov 1993: XXX) – is Pilate’s right-hand man, subordinate to him. (Is this perhaps why Woland cannot free Pilate himself, entrusting this duty to an idealist, the Master?)

Thus, Bulgakov’s novel both contrasts Soviet cynicism with the ethos embodied by the diabolical tricksters (we will discuss the meaning of this ethos in the next chapter) and creates an extremely likeable and profound image of the cynic. I would venture to say that it was this tricksterish ambiguous flirting with the cynical that led to the cult success of Bulgakov’s novel in the 1960s–1980s, when social cynicism took its most blatant forms.

The culture of the 1970s–1980s, both official and unofficial, not only saw cynicism as a key social evil but persistently revealed cynicism as the core of the official ideology and politics. For instance, Solzhenitsyn’s *The First Circle* (*V kruge pervom,* 1958—1964--1968) inverts the model of the Soviet industrial/spy novel to show how the Soviet system demands cynicism from the individual as a condition for survival and success, and how it destroys those who refuse to be cynical, like Solzhenitsyn’s protagonists Nerzhin (am autobiographical character) and especially Innokenty Volodin (a Soviet diplomat who voluntary leaks secret information to the Americans), Andrei Bitov’s *Pushkin House* (*Pushkinskii dom,* 1971, 1978) contrasts the imperfect, weak but sensitive and *intelligentnyi* Leva Odoevtsev with the super-cynic Mitishat’ev, who, having long before Baudrillard discovered the power of hyperreality and simulacra, effectively simulates affiliation with the intelligentsia, culture, and historical tradition. Yuri Trifonov explores the phenomenon of cynicism in almost every of his “urban narratives,” gradually deepening his analysis and discovering that the opposition between contemporary cynics and revolutionary idealists does not stand up to criticism: upon closer examination, old Bolsheviks, enshrouded in the halo of the 1920s, turn out to be just as cynical as their descendants in the 1960–70s, if not more so. His *The House on the Embankment* (*Dom na naberezhnoi,* 1976) presents cynicism as the one and only strategy enabling a nobody, Vadim Glebov, gifted with neither talent nor family status, to achieve social success and overcome the class barriers of Soviet society that separate proletarian Deryuginsky Lane from the party elite’s House on the Embankment. The price of this success orchestrated by a cynic’s instrumental reason are the ruined lives of those he betrayed in his struggle against cruel circumstances. In all of these and many other texts and films, the cynic is presented either negatively or ambivalently – certainly, invoking no desire for identification in the reader. Tacitly or openly, the narrative perspective favors idealism – be it associated with Soviet or anti-Soviet value systems.

However, the new attitude to cynicism emerges in Tatyana Lioznova’s twelve-part TV series *Seventeen Moments of Spring* (*Semnadtsat' mgnovenii vesny*: 1973), based on the eponymous novel by Yulian Semyonov and made under direct KGB orders.[[8]](#footnote-8) The series exceeded the expectations placed on it, becoming a widely quoted cult favorite and taking a major step toward the rehabilitation of cynicism. Apart from glorifying Soviet spies, the “fighters on the invisible front,” it also created a powerful archetype, whose magic seduced both the last Soviet generations and the first post-Soviet ones. According to numerous rumors, it was Stierlitz’s popularity that played no small part in Putin’s choice as Yeltsin’s “heir” and in the construction of his public image (see Nepomniashchy 2024, Fokin 2023).

Stierlitz does not take part in any shootouts, car chases or explosions, and yet he immediately had became a Soviet icon: it was during the broadcast of this series that people for the first time were so immersed into a fictional story that the streets grew empty. Photo postcards with the actor Vyacheslav Tikhonov in the uniform of the SS Standartenführer immediately became sought after by crush-prone girls and others, and a cycle of highly original *Stierlitz anekdoty* – a genre of its own, unlike any other jokes – confirmed the mythological effect of the KGB-ordered film.

It is not without reason that Stierlitz entered folklore and survived his era. This character formalized the paradoxical archetype of an *alien Soviet*. Stierlitz’s main attraction is the contradiction between what we know about him and how he behaves. As viewers, we know that he is a Soviet spy, working for “our side.” But everything about him – the immaculate fit of his civilian suit and his SS uniform, the dignity with which he talks to his superiors, the graceful elegance with which he walks and drives, drinks coffee and cognac, and smokes gracefully – suggests a Western man, or rather, a Western gentleman. Or, to be even more precise, a Western (gentle)man of the Soviet imaginary. As Stephen Lovell writes, “Stirlitz corresponds to Soviet stereotypes of Western behaviour: he can be regarded not only as the ideal intelligent but as the ideal Western gentleman. He enjoys all the autonomy and professional ease of a Frankfurt man about town. He is wonderfully mobile in his car: he can go where he wants when he wants. He can cross borders at will. This is a very far cry from Stalin-era culture, with its theme of borders ‘under lock and key’” (Lovell 2013: 314).

This whole set of external qualities, including a touch of aristocracy (he presents himself as *von* Stierlitz, after all) is motivated by his mission as a spy behind enemy lines. Thus, he must (and does) appear as a *Western* intellectual. The main paradox of the series was that this mask that became Stierlitz’s face, and it was precisely thanks to this mask that he became a *new kind of hero*: a spy of the intelligentsia, passing off his true self as an appropriated identity. The dilemma of the Soviet intellectual, who feels an alienation from the Soviet “systema” and moral/cultural gravitation toward “Western:, “bourgeois”, “alien elements,” becomes central to the portrayal of Stierlitz, who catches himself thinking of himself as German. Stierlitz’s accentuated non-Soviet identity is orchestrated by the undisguised admiration with which the camera lingers on the interiors of the bars and restaurants where he sits, the clean streets where he walks, and the house with a fireplace and garage where he lives. This longing gaze has such power that we almost forget that the story is taking place at the end of the war: even when bombs are falling, Europe appears beautiful.

The series’ extra-historical, or even counter-historical plot lays bare an archetype, using the model of the spy as a metaphor for the Soviet intelligentsia. Embodying artistic mediation between the Soviet and the capitalist, between war and peace, between service and everyday life, Stierlitz corresponded precisely to the cultural and social functions of the late Soviet intelligentsia, and most importantly, to its self-consciousness. *Seventeen Moments of Spring* utilized the heroic semantics of the main Soviet mythological system – that of the “Great Patriotic War” (the Soviet version of WWII) – transforming it into an extremely appealing myth about a member of the intelligentsia, who is at the same time an intellectually brilliant and aesthetically convincing cynic.

The series not only justifies but, indeed, heroizes Stierlitz’s internal non-belonging to the system into which history had placed him physically – not just the Nazi system but, and above all, the Soviet one. Stierlitz proves that it is possible to combine service to the homeland with a Western lifestyle; that it is possible to serve while keeping your distance: while formally he belongs to both the communists and the Nazis, he eludes the former by way of life and the latter by way of occupation. In short, Stierlitz makes cynicism not only morally justifiable and aesthetically attractive but also enshrined it with an aura of heroic service to the homeland.

But although Stierlitz, with all his cynicism, is portrayed in an undeniably positive way, he does not qualify as a trickster. He shares the trickster’s ambivalence, but he is not transgressive. From the viewer’s point of view, everything he does is reasonable and moral. He is not a liminal figure: as mentioned, the series presentshis (fictitious but very convincing) bourgeois façade as a reason for admiration. There is no hyperperformativity in him, either – even with his mustache glued on, he always remains himself. Most importantly, Stierlitz’s representation is completely devoid of laughter. Therefore, the semantics of freedom and chaos are also weakened – in fact, due to his restraint and rationalism, there is no chaos to speak of; all he has is the “secret freedom” of a systemic non-conformist. However, there is another Stierlitz who is indeed a trickster: the one from the countless *anekdoty* that appeared in urban folklore shortly after the series’ release. Here, we have laughter, transgressiveness, and chaos aplenty. As for hyperperformativity, the Stierlitz from *anekdoty* specializes in materializing verbal formulas as clownish gestures.

Stierlitz was not the last positively represented cynic of the Soviet era, but he was the most prominent. He was followed by a whole gallery of literary and cinematic characters based on the heroization of cynicism – characters who could not just survive but enjoy life under the given (usually extremely uncomfortable) circumstances. Though such protagonists were subject to condemnation, this condemnation became more and more proforma, while the admiration for heroic cynics became more and more sincere. For instance, Stanislav Govorukhin’s widely popular TV series *The Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed* (*Mesto vstrechi izmenit’ nel’zia*: 1979) centers, against the background of a detective story, on the conflict between the charismatic cynic Zheglov, played by the immensely popular actor/singer Vladimir Vysotsky, and the idealistic but unconvincing Sharapov (played by Vladimir Konkin, until then known mainly for his role as Pavel Korchagin in the film adaptation of Nikolai Ostrovsky’s novel *How the Steel Was Tempered*). Though the plot seems to demonstrate Zheglov’s moral defeat, it was he, not Sharapov, who became a cult character and the source of numerous memes and idioms. Gradually, the late-Soviet heroization of cynicism was transformed into the post-Soviet *normalization* of cynicism, culminating in the cult of Vladimir Putin, as will be discussed in more detail in the last chapter of this book. For now, what matters is how the trickster trope relates to this culture of cynicism.

## A Typology of the Soviet Trickster

The heroization of cynicism personified by Stierlitz is clearly a late-Soviet phenomenon. It is preceded by a general cultural legitimization of cynicism, which begins with the formation of legends around famous swindlers and criminals in the pre-revolutionary period, such as Nikolai Savin (Cornet Savin), Mishka Yaponchik (the prototype of Benya Krik), Sonya Golden Hand, and others (see Gerasimov 2018: 18–54). It is in the 1920s that this process acquires a mass character.

Surrounded by curiosity and fame, Soviet conmen become legendary characters and generate abundant folklore. As Fitzpatrick writes:

In the 1920s and ’30s, the con man seems to have engaged the Soviet imagination with unusual intensity. Not only was Ostap Bender the most popular of all Soviet fictional heroes with the public (though the significance of that should not be underestimated) but the stories of real-life con men attracted great attention, often mixed with a tinge of admiration, from journalists and even officials. The line that should have clearly separated con men from writers, journalists, and other presumably law-abiding Soviet citizens was oddly blurred. (Fitzpatrick 2006: 280)

This is strikingly similar to what Sloterdijk has to say about Weimar Germany:

Fraud and expectations of being defrauded became epidemic in it. In those years, it proved to be an omnipresent risk of existence that from behind all solid illusions, the untenable and chaotic emerged.

[...] In such an ‘insecure’ world, the impostor grew into a character type of the times par excellence. Cases of fraud, deception, misleading, breach of promise, charlatanism, and so forth multiplied not only in a numerical sense: The impostor also became an indispensable figure in the sense of collective self-reassurance, a model of the times and a mythical template. (Sloterdijk 1987: 483, 484)

Sloterdijk sees the cultural fixation on the impostor figure as a manifestation of moral panic in the face of the excessive complexity represented by modernity: “the impostor became the existentially most important and most understandable symbol for the chronic crisis of complexity of modern consciousness.” (1987: 484).

Soviet literary and cinematic trickster narratives arise in the 1920s and 30s from a cultural interest in con artists, but even if this interest borders on a panic, it goes on to transform itself into something culturally far more productive. As historians have noted, “in its attempts to control society, Stalin’s regime had to deal more often with various forms of social disobedience than with organized collective resistance” (Vert 2010: 346). The social mimicry discussed above gives rise to a cynicism of resistance – “a part of the country’s population was practiced at faking compliance with the demands of the state, while evading them whenever possible,” observes Oleg Khlevniuk (2023: 21). To specify which part of the population he has in mind, Khlevniuk quotes Mark Edele’s formulation from his book *Stalin's Defectors: How Red Army Soldiers Became Hitler's Collaborators, 1941–1945*: “the non-committal majority simply trying to survive in a world of armed ideological warriors” (2017: 174).

My central hypothesis is that it was trickster narratives that provided this non-committal majority with badly needed *models of subjectivation.* Not only the full-on oppressed but also the marginalized and socially stigmatized parts of Soviet society, who were either excluded from official channels of social mobility or consciously avoided them (out of caution), could fall back on the trickster narrative as a source of self-legitimization – cultural, socio-psychological, and even political.

By representing the cynic as the most vivid, most free, and most charming character (even if the plot contains his defeat), trickster narratives aesthetically legitimize cynicism. They deliberately or unwittingly turn idealistic discourses, be it Soviet or anti-Soviet, upside down and inside out – and, more importantly, they discursively formalize a “grey area” that undermines the binary opposition between loyalty and resistance, between the Soviet and the anti-Soviet, etc. This sphere is diverse, complex, and lacks detailed descriptions – still, it clearly isn’t merely the domain of a small minority. I argue that trickster narratives gain their immense popularity precisely because they articulate the languages of this sphere and thus legitimize it.

In the course of further discussing specific literary and cultural texts, I would like to emphasize (by way of hypothesis) the following functions of trickster narratives:

First, trickster narratives in literature and cinema transform the Soviet cynic from a slave of circumstances and an opportunist into an active and independent participant in the social drama – and more than that, into a lively and charming embodiment of autonomy and artistry. The function of the trickster narrative(s) is to assert *agency* outside hegemonic discourses and officially sanctioned channels. And this is the source of the trickster’s enduring popularity and positivity in Soviet culture.

Second, by vividly demonstrating how “the everyday ontological boundary between play and serious business” and how “the safe distance between fantasy and reality is eliminated” (Sloterdijk 1987: 488), Soviet tricksters present this condition as the main and crucial result of the revolution and subsequent transformations (be this connection colored positively or negatively) – and interpret it as a space of unprecedented opportunities for self-realization. It is in this capacity that Soviet tricksters of the early 1920s are involved in ideological polemics, in whose course they not only methodically deconstruct the emerging discourses of the Soviet culture but also put forward – metaphorically or performatively – *alternative models of modern subjectivity, and sometimes of modernity as a* *whole*. This is why trickster narratives remain relevant until the end of the Soviet era and do not disappear from the scene in the post-Soviet period, either.

It is not surprising that in Soviet culture, the trickster trope gave rise to several narratives, which tend to intersect and intertwine (with one dominating). These are hybrids of hybrids: the Soviet trickster had absorbed a variety of narratives that the modern era had distilled from ancient mythology. In what follows, I will rely on the following typology, albeit without discussing all possible types of trickster narratives in detail.

1. ***Fool/kynic/clown/holy fool***. This is arguably the most universal and timeless kind of trickster. All tricksters of this type are united by radical *selflessness.* Unlike rogues, they are closely embedded in traditional (ritual) contexts and therefore seek only symbolic profit. Soviet tricksters of this type usually perform such historical-cultural roles as the folklore fool (e.g. Ivan the Fool), the carnival clown, and even the holy fool. Broadly speaking, all of these cultural types can be considered through the prism of the Greek philosophy of kynicism. At the very least, they are all united by the aesthetics of the ugly (and more broadly: the imperfect, the foolish, the weak, and so on.), which is the basis of the kynic philosophy: “... it is *cynicism, the aesthetics of the ugly,* thepreaching of ugliness as a necessary element of beauty, for only the good can be beautiful, and only that which contributes to the freedom of the spirit can be good, and the freedom of the spirit requires independence from the arbitrariness of nature, from the caprice of the vital instincts; thus, nature and the vital instincts must be given complete, unbound, arbitrary freedom” (Losev 1969: XXX). Sloterdijk uses the category of kynicism, dating back to the school of Diogenes of Sinope, as a generalizing concept for the joyful and non-pragmatic aspect of cynicism that serves as the only antidote to its modern version: “Cynicism can only be stemmed by kynicism, not by morality. Only a joyful kynicism of ends is never tempted to forget that life has nothing to lose except itself” (1987: 194). While cynicism is always focused on the subject’s benefit and pragmatic goals, kynicism is selfless and wasteful. While the cynic is always conformist (which is ironic in itself), the kynic embodies nonconformism. And vice versa: in Soviet culture, virtually every nonconformist carries some kynic traits. A particularly vivid example among countless others is Venichka Erofeev, the protagonist and narrator of *Moscow-Petushki*.

2. ***The ironic messiah***. While fools and kynics perform philosophical *ostranenie* (defamiliarization) of social relations, a number of other Soviet tricksters, by their very way of thinking and acting, discredit the Soviet project of modernity – offering, not declaratively but performatively, criticism and sometimes alternatives. Ironic messiahs deconstruct and problematize Soviet (and other) notions of the sacred and the authoritative, opening them up to all kinds of trickster play. Involved in irreverent cultural circulation, undergoing parodic inversions and other transformations, the sacred is radically reinterpreted and renewed. In fact, these functions of the ironic messiah resonate deeply with fundamental aspects of the mythological trickster as a bricoleur of the sacred and the lewd: “The trickster manifests a distinctive transformative ability: he can find the lewd in the sacred and the sacred in the lewd, and new life from both” (Hynes 1993: 42).

In its genesis, this type of trickster directly descends from the rogue, adventurer, impostor, and con artist. In their acts of ironic sacralization they are especially close to the adventurer with his messianic ambitions. The trickster’s messianism is by definition ironic since his promise borders on deception. The alternative revolution and the post-revolutionary future they suggest are more often than not an inversion or shift of the current power ideology and rhetoric: the trickster messiah asserts his “kingdom of god” through profanation, and their “new heaven” is rather close to chaos (see more below on their “messianism without religion”).

3. ***The trickster in power / the hyperconformist***. Both kynic tricksters and ironic messiahs embody “the power of the powerless” (Vaclav Havel) – or at least an alternative countercultural perspective. In other words, they supply narratives for either non-Soviet or implicitly anti-Soviet subjectivities. However, Soviet literature and culture also feature a category of tricksters who either represent power or – more often – openly and theatrically demonstrate an exaggerated, grotesque conformism to it. Let us call this kind “the trickster in power” or a hyperconformist: such characters always latch onto power and often represent powerdiscourses and ideologies. This is the way Stalin appears in numerous *anekdoty* and, as will be discussed further on, in Fazil Iskander’s novel *Sandro from Chegem* (*Sandro iz Chegema,* 1966-1989). In the post-Soviet era, this type enters the political mainstream as evidenced not only by the “state pranksters” Vovan and Lexus (see Budnitsky 2024) but also by the late Yevgeny Prigozhin -- “Putin’s chef,” leader of the Wagner group, and subsequently rebel. To a certain extent, such characters re-actualize a key function of the mythological trickster: to serve as a mediator or imitator of the gods, as well as to embody the negative metamorphosis of supreme power. It is not without reason that the image of the trickster in or close to power is relatively frequent in folktales. By its genealogy, this type is closest to the court jester, who both broadcasts and subverts the voice of power.

In Soviet culture, this kind of trickster inevitably personifies cynicism as the dominant idea of the moral regime. However, paradoxically, he also represents a comic and performative alternative to the hegemony of cynicism. This is because the trickster is such a performative character that even when representing conformism, he does it so *excessively,* with such comedic theatricality that cynicism turns into a parody of itself. Thus, the comic excess of representation generates ambivalence and even criticism.

4. ***The feminine and the queer trickster*** are the most hybrid hybrids among the highly hybridized Soviet trickster types.Predominantly, Russo-Soviet tricksters are male. The virtual absence of female tricksters testifies to the profoundly patriarchal character of Soviet culture, even in its non-conformist aspects. The trickster is simultaneously transgressive and likeable – an impossible combination for a woman in a patriarchal society. While acceptable for (some) men, transgressions are incompatible with the image of the “proper” woman, thus excluding any possibility of empathy. However, there is a rich international tradition of female tricksters, ranging from folklore (be it Scheherazade or a vixen such as Kuma Lisa in Slavic fairy tales and Kitsune in Japanese legends) to literature (Defoe’s Moll Flanders, Chulkov’s “Pretty Cook,” Thackeray’s Becky Sharp). Marilyn Jurich coined the term *trickstar* – “a female trickster, undermining not only socio-political but first and foremost the gender regime of the society, challenging sexism and gender repression.” (1998: XX) Unsurprisingly, most trickstars in Soviet culture are “villainesses” – the Baba Yaga, followed by female thieves and profiteers, “philistine” women, and so on. A striking example of a Soviet trickstar transcending patriarchal normativity is the image and the legends accompanying Faina Ranevskaya, who played many a villainess – and who also retained her marginal status and reputation as a transgressor, despite being a star of Soviet cinema.

The trickstar is an independent cultural-historical type, which creates its own versions of other roles – the female rogue, joker, and adventurer are both similar and dissimilar to their male counterparts. The main difference is that the trickstar necessarily involves gender, gender repression, and gender performativity in all aspects of the trickster trope: ambivalence (the trickstar often has ambiguous gender aspects, ranging from crossdressing to queerness), transgressiveness, liminality, hyper-performativity, and narrative power. All these aspects are transformed by female/queer characters, while at the same time de-essentializing gender representations. Given the role of gender and the problematization of gender boundaries, it seems more accurate to speak not so much of the female as of the *female/queer* trickster – a category that includes trickstars, cross-dressers, and queer tricksters. This suggests that the straight cis-male is the norm, and only exceptions render gender salient – much as one might wish otherwise, this is indeed the usual perception in (post)Soviet culture, even in trickster narratives.

Maya Vinokour has shown that Ilf and Petrov process the traumas of the revolution, the civil war, collectivization, industrialization, purges, and other social upheavals of the 1920s and 1930s through laughter in their novels:

By evoking a traumatic moment in recent history and immediately prompting the reader to laugh at it, the authors maximally compress time spent in a sense of collective victimhood and facilitate the transition to a smiling contemplation of collective solidarity. Frequently, laughter follows so closely on the tail of a reference to trauma that it is almost simultaneous with it. (2015: 352)

Of course, trauma can provoke hysterical, nervous laughter, but this is not the way the Soviet trickster laughs. In mythology and folklore, the trickster loses neither power nor charm, even if suffering defeat after defeat. In Soviet culture, the trickster’s invulnerability becomes an inexhaustible source of *optimism* – their strategies of subjectivation turn defeats into victories, marginalization into a position of alternative power, and self-destruction into self-affirmation. Thus, the trickster represents a defense against historical traumas, trickster narratives giving people the strength to live and even to enjoy life despite all the falls and humiliations, rejecting both ascetic self-restraint and heroic self-sacrifice. The monuments to Ostap Bender in various cities of the former USSR, with which I began this book, are monuments not to the regime’s victims but to victors who survived not only the Soviet traumas but the Soviet Union itself, laughing all the while.

By creating so many vivid and much-admired tricksters, Soviet culture thus elevated its own cynicism to a trickster’s level – that is, to a level of artistic selflessness, agency, and messianism. Arguably, this elevation is the very source of the tricksters’ optimism. The ubiquity of trickster protagonists provided an alibi or even an *aesthetic* *justification* for cynical Soviet practices, while also representing the only *effective* *alternative* to cynicism: the trickster’s rebellion does not undermine the foundations of the world order but leaves enough space for personal freedom and self-expression. Strikingly, in most texts (including cultural ones), the trickster’s antagonist is neither an idealist nor a principled idiot, as one might expect, but, on the contrary, a hard-boiled conformist cynic. Some examples are the various ideologists and bosses in Ehrenburg’s novels, Koreiko in Ilf and Petrov’s *Little Golden Calf*, most of the characters in the “Moscow” chapters of *The Master and Margarita*, the angels and the murderous God in *Moscow-Petushki*, the viceroys of colonial power in Iskander’s novels – and the real judges and prosecutors in the Pussy Riot case.

Of course, trickster narratives and the trickster as a cultural figure are always transgressive and therefore resist any kind of normalization. However, as an “ideal script,” the trickster is normalized by a wide range of real cultural practices. In other words, though marginalized in official culture, tricksters still compete with the more normative and authoritarian models of Soviet subjectivity. As Sheila Fitzpatrick writes: “With the possible exception of Nikolai Ostrovskii’s inspirational Pavel Korchagin in his quasi-autobiographical novel, *How the Steel Was Tempered,* none of the ‘positive heroes’ of socialist realism in the 1930s achieved anything like Ostap Bender’s fame and popularity; certainly none was so often quoted or so quickly taken into popular speech” (2006: 268). And while it is hard to say for sure who had a greater influence on contemporaries and descendants – the smooth operator Ostap Bender or the communist martyr Pavel Korchagin – the later evolution of the Soviet system strongly suggests that the idealist fanatic lost, and the trickster won.

1. Besides Sloterdijk, see the following representative studies on the history of cynicism: Bewes 1997, Mazella 2007, Shea 2010, Foucault 2011, Stanley 2012, Small 2020. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. It is indicative that in Ilya Ehrenburg's novel *Julio Jurenito* (1921), which will be discussed below, the chapter in which the protagonist meets the head of the Soviet state, clearly recognizable as Lenin, is called “The Grand Inquisitor Beyond Legend.” [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. In addition to the already mentioned works on the shadow economy by Alena Ledeneva, see Grossman 1998; Los 1990; Klyamkin, Timofeev 2000; Mitrokhin 2022; Khlevniuk 2023. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See also: Ingerflom 2021. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. “Their double-faced life is not a painful split forced upon their heretofore unitary self; on the contrary, this split is normal for them because they originate as individuals by the means of split. … One of the steps in this long development was individual perfection of the mechanism for constant switching between the intimate and the official, a curious kind of unofficial self-training, a process that comes later that the initial stage of dissimilation conceived as ‘closing of’ (*pritvorstvo*) and one that we may more aptly call dissimilation as ‘changing faces’ (*litsemerie*).” (Kharkhordin 1999: 275, 278) [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. See, for instance: Kotkin 1995, Halfin 2003, Kozlova 2005, Hellbeck 2006. For a detailed discussion of this approach see the forum: “The Analysis of Subjectivization Practices in the Early Stalinist Society,” *Ab Imperio*. 2002, no. 3, pp. 209-417. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. On Podlubnyi’s diaries, see: Hellbeck 2006: 165-221; Kozlova 2005: 187-253. Fragments from Podlubnyi’s diaries are published in English in Garros et al 1995: 293--331. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. This background was described in detail by Leonid Parfenov in the documentary *Seventeen Moments of Spring: Twenty-Five Years Later* (NTV, 1998). The film’s consultant was Yuri Andropov’s deputy, KGB General Semyon Tsvigun (appearing in the credits as Colonel General S.K. Mishin), and he was indeed very active in his consultations. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)