



Individual Advanced Research Opportunities Program

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Armenia and Russia

In Principle, Yes... Radio Yerevan: The Collective Dissident!

Topic of research

The secret source of Humor itself is not joy but sorrow.
Mark Twain

The focus of my research is underground oral political humor in the former USSR, with particular attention focused on the highly popular Radio Yerevan (aka Armenian Radio, Radio Erevan)—the name credited with producing satire predominantly composed of unselfconscious, witty, and critical reflection on the grim realities of life behind the Iron Curtain. Specifically, Radio Yerevan was a body of jokes and anecdotes using wit to achieve comic and humorous interpretations of Soviet/socialist reality. As such, it was circulating in the former Soviet Union and the entire Socialist bloc satirizing everything! That is, everything from Communist Party leaders' lavishly outrageous whims to the countrywide toilet paper deficit, and from basic human rights abuses to the treatment of entire ethnic-religious groups. The conversational, debate-like form of these jokes is very telling as it incorporates many elements of traditional Armenian, Jewish, and

Russian discourse of the Soviet times (albeit, under the circumstances of being born under the state-imposed silence, a lot of it comes to life as a subtext between the lines). As an example, a question for Radio Yerevan:

--*Why does Radio Yerevan often answer questions with another question?*
--*Why not?*

It is clear that Radio Yerevan is not shy to expose its “in-your-face” attitude, yet it is intelligent enough to make the “listeners” search for multiple levels of meanings and send them looking for the real significance of the response between the lines. Additionally, the utilized question and answer format specifically with what only pretended to be a real radio station, heightens the dramatic effect of the joke and, at the same time, pokes fun at the impossibility of any clear-headed listener directing such questions to any official media outlet in the Soviet Union.

My research objective was to study the origins and role of Radio Yerevan as an expression of eccentric self-reflexivity born out of the Soviet system of state-imposed silence. I looked at Radio Yerevan as a tool for disseminating information that otherwise would not have been available for mass consumption, since the oral, word-of-mouth “channel” of an imaginary radio program “broadcasting” humorous material in the former Socialist bloc was perhaps the only way to escape Soviet media censorship and scrutiny from Communist party officials. Furthermore, it is my intention to evaluate the role Radio Yerevan has indirectly played as a part of the overall Western anti-Communist and anti-Socialist rhetoric during the Cold War.

Relevance and contribution to field

Unfortunately, no comprehensive study exists that explores the origins, history, role, and effects of Radio Yerevan in the former Soviet Union. As it became evident from numerous conversations with American academics and from reviewing the available literature in the US, many former communist bloc specialists have fragmented knowledge of Radio Yerevan. Regrettably, there are no specialists on the subject and only a tiny amount is known of what can be researched and discovered. During my research, I was able to find only a handful of scholarly articles written on the history and role of Radio Yerevan, and most of these articles are available only in Russian and are not readily accessible to an English-speaking researcher. Furthermore, there seems to be only a small number of similar materials in English. It is my hope that this research will contribute a modest share to the existing body of knowledge, expand it, and generate more interest for further inquiry.

While freedom of speech and of other forms of expression are among the most fundamental human rights, it can often be difficult to find individuals, especially in totalitarian countries, willing to openly speak about issues and, if needed, express opposition. Under such circumstances, where human beings are either forced to be silent or opt for passivity, we find that dissent, although mainly reduced to whispers, is often expressed through humor. Humor, in this way, takes a function of a window that provides a unique and invaluable insight into a cultural system. One needs to look no further than “Seinfeld”, “The Simpsons”, or “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart” to find a distinct experience that dissects American culture and politics and provides a mode of

embracing the American culture in a very personal and unique way. Radio Yerevan, I would argue, was the Soviet counterpart to these American TV shows, where anything and everything was up for a discussion.

Even though jokes and anecdotes are little stories told here and there by certain individuals who are fond of the genre, they can often yield longer lasting impressions and become more vivid reflections of certain societies and regimes compared to that of standard research data. Humor can also be an important vehicle for breaking the ice on the road to cultural understanding between groups and serve as a fertile ground for educational, cultural, and scientific exchange. Ultimately, it can lead to laughing *with*, and not *at* the “other”, possibly bringing political entities closer together.

I plan to use the data gathered through my research for a scholarly article and a documentary film about Radio Yerevan, thereby doubling the reach and availability of my findings for readers and viewers. These materials will be constructive tools in developing lessons on totalitarian censorship and alternative “media” outlets that developed as a result of such restrictions. Since the true nature of the human reaction to an authoritarian socio-political system can hardly be found in dry facts and statistics, folkloric expressions such as political humor, being the free and unselfconscious outbursts of culture and society, are able to portray a more intimate and telling picture of life in a totalitarian regime. As there is currently a scarcity of sources for those wishing to learn about Radio Yerevan and its impact on the culture within the socialist bloc, this research will present a unique yet multidimensional work on this subject.

A concise summary of your approach and research methodology including a list of research sites

During the research phase of the project I collected empirical data through interviews with ex-Soviet Armenian, Jewish, and Russian political analysts, former political officials, political humorists, TV and radio commentators, satirists, and university professors in order to gain insight into the origins, formation, role, and influences of Radio Yerevan in the Communist bloc on the following levels: The genesis of the imaginary and ubiquitous Radio Yerevan as originating in the context of a mono-ethnic culture and serving the purpose of pointing out the contradictions found in the multiethnic and heterogeneous Soviet/socialist system; the success of Radio Yerevan as a result of being shaped and sustained in a large degree by Russian, Armenian, and Jewish producers of humor; and the role Radio Yerevan has played in uniquely describing and commenting on the dominant living conditions in the USSR without being trapped in the confines of political correctness, censorship, and by fearlessly using stereotypes for the purpose of engaging, informing, reflecting, and amusing.

Ethnographic field research in Armenia and Russia contributed immensely to the process of gaining insight into the origins, role, popularity, and influences of Radio Yerevan. Combined with an in-country literature review, I organized semi-structured videotaped interviews with former and current political officials, political satirists, TV and radio commentators, artists, university professors, and members of the general public. I videotaped my interview-based research for documentary purposes and to preserve the metacommunicative elements and non-verbal contextualization signals in communication as they related to Radio Yerevan. The following questions were used as

starting points in my research: What was the mission of the phenomenon called “Radio Yerevan jokes”? Who were the producers of content? Why was Radio Yerevan anonymous and ubiquitous? Was Radio Yerevan successful in its mission? If yes, who needed it the most, the East or the West? Was Radio Yerevan a certain type of a counterpart to Voice of America? How did Radio Yerevan dissect stereotypes and bring attention to issues? Does Radio Yerevan still exist and, if yes, what is its current role? Is the current role any different from its past role? Why was specifically Radio Yerevan credited with authorship and not another “radio” or “voice”?

In Armenia, interviews were conducted with:

- Dr. Aharon Adibekian, Director of “Sociometr”, an independent sociological center in Yerevan
- Mr. Armen Amirian, Executive Director of Public Radio of Armenia
- Mr. Paruyr Hayrikyan, Member of the Parliament, Republic of Armenia
- Professor Hrachya Ashughyan, Radio and TV director
- Mr. Ruben Jaghinyan, SHARM (entertainment company) chairman
- Ms. Hranush Kharatyan, Head of the Department of Ethnic Minorities and Religious Affairs, Government of Armenia
- Mr. Koryun Khumaryan, Director of Radio Impulse-Mayak and a former employee of the state radio of Soviet Armenia
- Mr. Karen Kocharyan, Newscaster
- Dr. Armen Petrosian, National Academy of Sciences of Armenia
- Dr. Hrachya Tatevian, Psychologist, Yerevan State Linguistic University
- Mr. Martin Vartazaryan, Composer
- Mr. Willy Weiner, Composer
- Mr. Yervand Yerznkyan, Conductor

In Russia, the following interviews were conducted:

- Mr. Semyon Altov, Writer, satirist
- Mr. Arkadi Arkanov, Writer, satirist, playwright
- Mr. Karen Avanesyan, Actor, comedian
- Dr. Alexandr Belousov, Professor, Saint Petersburg State University
- Mr. Armen Djigarkhanyan, Actor
- Mr. Nikolai Fomenko, Actor, musician
- Mr. Yuri Galtsev, Actor
- Mr. Yuli Gusman, Actor, director, former member of the Russian Parliament
- Mr. Dmitri Kharatyan, Actor
- Mr. Genadi Khazanov, Actor, comedian, satirist
- Mr. Garik Martirosyan, Actor, comedian
- Mr. Konstantin Melikhan, Writer, comedian
- Mr. Ilya Oleinikov, Actor
- Ms. Svetlana Samodelova, Journalist
- Dr. Elena Shmeleva, Russian Academy of Sciences
- Dr. Alexey Shmelev, Russian Academy of Sciences
- Mr. Yuri Stoyanov, Actor, comedian

- A summary of your research findings and preliminary conclusions addressing the questions and issues raised in your research proposal.

Whether born inside the studios of the state-controlled Armenian Radio or inside a dissident's mind in the camps of Siberia, at the height of its popularity Radio Yerevan was an imaginary radio program with imaginary listeners, and the jokes about Radio Yerevan were told as if they were answers to the listeners' questions.

The phenomenon of Radio Yerevan became widespread in the USSR and Eastern Europe in the 1950s, shortly after the invention of popular radio. Partly, this phenomenon was a parody of the pre-screened and pre-approved loyal questions that Soviet radio listeners would ask through their letters (and later, through phone calls) to those in charge of programming the Communist propaganda on the radio waves. Some sources suggest that the phenomenon of Radio Yerevan was popular also because "the real Radio Yerevan had some clever announcers who allowed themselves to use increasingly daring plays on words on the air", such as the following example of an alleged slip of the tongue by a real broadcaster illustrates: "Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man. Socialism is just the opposite"¹ (where the former was a slogan often used by the Soviets to describe the West).

Whether the questions to Radio Yerevan were "straightforward or provocative, its responses were always and certainly equivocal"² and would start with the words "In principle yes..." and continue to provide an answer blending subtexts and multiple meanings with a witty touch of criticism aimed at a particular aspect of Soviet life. While Radio Yerevan looks Armenian judging by its name, it echoed many socialist societies and ethnic groups found on the Eastern side of the Iron Curtain. Russians, Armenians, Jews, Georgians, Romanians, East Germans, among many other peoples, found Radio Yerevan to be a part of their everyday cultural life and an appropriate channel for voicing opposition.

It was always understood that the humor of Radio Yerevan is not only a commentary on the Armenian reality, but on the Soviet and socialist reality as a whole. In Kolasky's opinion, through humor "The people subjected their oppressors to withering ridicule, scorn, and satire. These anecdotes reflected vividly Soviet reality and the popular opposition to it."³ Under these circumstances, the need to break the silence and speak out could not have been more evident. As an example, a typical question for Radio Yerevan:

--Is it true that communism appears now clearly at the horizon?

--In principle, yes. According to definition, the horizon is an imaginary line which recedes in the distance as we try to approach it⁴.

¹ Bruce Adams, Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-century Soviet and Russian history in anecdotes (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005) 60.

² Bruce Adams, Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-century Soviet and Russian history in anecdotes (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005) 22.

³ John Kolasky, Look Comrade, The People Are Laughing (Toronto: Peter Martin Associates Limited), vi.

⁴ C. Banc and A. Dundes, First Prize: Fifteen Years! (Rutherford: Associated University Presses, 1986)

What were the reasons that had driven to select Radio Yerevan to be the alleged producer of this well-regarded body of humor? Similar to the other republics of the USSR, the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic had a state-controlled radio operation located in the capital city of Yerevan which announced as “Khosum e Yerevane” (a literal translation is “Yerevan is speaking”; a semantic-cultural equivalent in American English would be “This is the Voice of Yerevan”). This may explain why this body of humor was known in the USSR as Armenian Radio and in Eastern Europe as Radio Yerevan. Essentially, Radio Yerevan, with its synonymous Armenian Radio and Radio Erevan designations, was an imaginary radio program that had shared the same name with the official country radio station of former Soviet Armenia and had become a “character” or a “hero” of popular jokes and anecdotes from Vladivostok to Bucharest.

The origins of Radio Yerevan are based on a model of Armenian riddles, which utilize the question-and-answer format borrowed from the Bible. Taking into account the vast expanse of the former Soviet Union, we can attempt to explain the chosen name for the Radio Yerevan phenomenon through the popularity of the radio medium itself. At the time (in the 1950s), it was perhaps the most familiar interactive media channel connecting masses from one end of the Soviet empire to the other.

The presence of the anti-Soviet and anti-Communist body of humor expressed through Radio Yerevan was proof that the Soviet people were dissatisfied with the regime. Such presence also informed the anti-Soviet political activists within the USSR during the 1970s and in the coming decades that they did not need to profess anti-Soviet ideology to the people simply because such ideology was absolutely widespread already. Humor gave a feel of what the general sentiment was. Additionally, it allowed to see the saddest things with a smile and filled the authoritarian political landscape with some laughter and warmth, thus playing a role in both national and international politics (Since humor is one of the forms that can be used to express criticism against authorities in domestic politics, by extension, it can be a general tool for information gathering used in international relations as well. For example, it can be a tool for gauging general attitudes and sentiments in conjunction with popularity and unpopularity polls).

Radio Yerevan was a form of political folklore specific to the 20th century and, as a part of the general folk tradition of the Soviet Union, it was collective and without a single author. It enjoyed a large consumption rate (was extremely popular not only in the USSR, but also in Eastern Europe), had various channels of dissemination (word of mouth, underground publications) and, in general, was a tool to ease social pressures. It was an important characteristic of the Soviet civilization and an expression of ethnic-national mentality and culture. To a degree, Radio Yerevan became a form of a calling card for Armenians in the Soviet Union. Just like a Western is an American genre, Neorealism is an Italian creation, Radio Yerevan is a genre that has been borrowed by many ethnic groups in Eurasia and used as a form for expressing their own ethnic-cultural humor and history by adding to it their own elements and substance.

Interestingly, the body of Radio Yerevan humor includes a large anti-Soviet element and a large anti-Russian element (not in ethnic, but in the political sense of the word). Why was this genre so popular and liked by the people? Perhaps because dissidents saw anti-Soviet elements and the party members saw elements of anti-dissidence. Everyone was able to see and find what they wanted to see and what they thought would make

their lives more livable. The genre was very collective and every social group could express itself in it and find expressions about itself--both positive and negative. The positive made them feel better about themselves, and the negative made them think a little more critically about themselves and laugh their shortcomings away. This was the unique characteristic of Radio Yerevan. Unfortunately, what it offered was, to a degree, a "soft" characteristic, since laughter and humor often help in tolerating, but not necessarily in organizing and struggling against something.

Radio Yerevan was not necessarily of Soviet Armenia. The name Radio Yerevan was more of a concept characterizing an Armenian environment (or any Armenian environment in Eurasia). Armenians lived everywhere in the territory of the USSR and the words Armenian and Armenia were very familiar to all and it was an easy choice to assign authorship of such political satire to Armenians. Those who told the jokes probably did not always think about the name of the phenomenon referring to the Armenian ethnic group. Even though it was labeled as Radio Yerevan, it had soon become an independent phenomenon.

Suggestions for future research

There are various localities that can be focused on in addition to the countries that I was able to cover in my research. Since Radio Yerevan was popular not only in the former Soviet republics but in former socialist countries of Eastern Europe as well, country-specific research will shed light on the role this phenomenon has played in each country independently. Additionally, such data will make it possible to do a comparative analysis of several countries spanning from Asia (e.g. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, etc) to Europe (Romania, Germany, Slovak Republic, etc).

Most importantly, however, further research is necessary into the transition from Armenian riddles to Armenian Radio. The former, being the foundation of the latter, is still a largely unexplored area and may explain the popularity and ubiquity that Radio Yerevan enjoyed. Suffice it to mention that Armenian riddles are such to which one cannot find a rational answer (e.g. "What is it that hangs in the kitchen and is green?" *It's fish.* "But why is it green?" *Since it is my fish, I can color it any way I want!*)

Recommendations for the US policy community.

The US effort to reach out to Armenia and Russia requires sensitivity to the local cultures, including their humor. As Adams argues, "Jokes in all their intricacies contain valuable information and nuances about the culture that spawned them."⁵ As a part of our policy toward Armenia and Russia we need to have an intricate understanding of all aspects of the local cultures, where the study of humor and satire are seen as a significant contributor to the multidimensional understanding of these cultures, peoples, and political systems.

⁵ Bruce Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-century Soviet and Russian history in anecdotes* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005) 1.

Since the fall of the USSR, mutual views between Russia and the United States have not been consistently positive. One of the most important issues that can be addressed is that of the negative image of the other that plagues each country's political discourse. One way to dissolve the stereotypes and prejudice between the two countries would be to clearly delineate through the American media channels that the US does not see Russia as a criminal leftover of the USSR and a safe haven for corrupt elements, but as a new, developing country that is moving toward a progressive democratic society.

Another fruitful method of improving relations in the international arena would be to increase the much necessary support for exchange programs in secondary and higher education that promote the sharing of knowledge, experience, and ideas between the ordinary citizens of Armenia/Russia and the US. A modern, cost-effective way to achieve this is through the use of new technologies that allow video- and audio-conferencing over IP between individuals and groups. By increasing the frequency of organized contact and the duration of exposure to each other, enough familiarity can be built to be more willing to work together.