

10 'Subversive' Jokes to Land You in an East German Prison

Making fun of politicians is an American tradition. Some jokes cross lines of good taste; some are unfair or unfunny. Good taste and humor aside, Americans take it for granted that we can poke fun at politicians and our leaders.

What's the difference between Obama and God? God doesn't think he is Obama.

What does the Trump administration use instead of emails? Alternative fax.

Mocking political leaders seems to be a bipartisan pastime, accepted by the right and [the left](#). And for good reason. A good joke has psychological, social, and spiritual benefits, [research](#) shows. Humans use jokes to lift the spirits of others, reduce stress, and to mock absurdity and dogmas.

Because of their potency, historically many have seen such jokes as less than funny. As we near the 30-year anniversary of [the fall of the Berlin Wall](#), it's worth noting that East Germans faced the threat of prison for mocking the state.

Bodo Müller, [an author of East German jokes](#), says the Stasi (official name *Ministerium für Staatsicherheit*, or Ministry for State Security) viewed jokes as subversive propaganda. [The Lives of Others](#), perhaps the best film of the 21st century (one guy's opinion), revealed the terror an ill-timed joke could trigger.

Telling these jokes invited investigation by the Stasi, Müller [says](#). They'd show up at a joker's home and interrogate friends and neighbors. Of the 100 people identified in Müller's research, 64 were convicted. Convicted joke-tellers served

between one and three years. At least one man served four (he must have told a real knee-slapper, like the one about *General Secretary Honecker kissing Brezhnev). The accused were of course never convicted of telling jokes. Rather, they were found guilty of “state-endangering propaganda and hate speech”; the jokes themselves were never read publicly.

This joke about two East German communist leaders, Wilhelm Reinhold Pieck and Otto Grotewohl, for example, [landed](#) a man before a judge in 1956.

Pieck and Grotewohl are visiting Stalin in Moscow.

Stalin gives them a car. But when they want to leave, they realize the car doesn't have a motor.

Stalin says: “You don't need a motor if you're already going downhill.”

Here are 10 more jokes that were popular in East Germany, but were almost certainly too hot (or just too honest) for the Stasi, including several about the Trabant, the [worst car in history](#).

1. Why do Stasi officers make such good taxi drivers? – You get in the car and they already know your name and where you live.
2. What's the best feature of a Trabant? – There's a heater at the back to keep your hands warm when you're pushing it.
3. Capitalism is the exploitation of man by man. Under socialism, it is exactly the other way around.
4. What would happen if the desert became a socialist country? – Nothing for a while... then the sand becomes scarce.
5. Why do the Stasi work together in groups of three? – You need one who can read, one who can write, and a third to keep an eye on the two intellectuals.

6. The Stasi held a competition for the best political joke. First prize? Fifteen to twenty years.
7. How can you use a banana as a compass? – Place a banana on the Berlin Wall. The bitten end would point east. (Bananas were scarce and deeply desired in East Germany, in contrast to West Germany, where they were ubiquitous.)
8. A man-on-the-street poll was taken in three countries: “What is your opinion of the recently announced shortage of meat?” In the U.S., they asked, “What shortage?” In Poland, they asked, “What is meat?” and in East Germany, they asked, “What is an opinion?”
9. How do you catch a Trabi? – Just stick chewing gum on the highway. (An allusion to the Trabant’s weak motor.)
10. Why did Erich Honecker get a divorce? – Because Brezhnev kisses better than his wife.*

*This joke is a reference to [the socialist fraternal kiss](#), also known as the Triple Brezhnev; see below.

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