

Seventeen Moments, Seventeen Thousand Jokes

[Michele A. Berdy's The Word's Worth](#)

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"17 moments of Spring" / Youtube

Штирлиц: Stierlitz, iconic Soviet spy character

With a marathon screening of the iconic Soviet television series “Seventeen Moments of Spring” about to begin at the Pushkin House in London, newspapers writing about it, and everyone linking to it when Iosif Kobzon, the singer of the soundtrack, passed away recently, I realized — to my astonishment — that I’ve never done a column about it.

How could that be? It is such an important part of Soviet and post-Soviet culture and language.

For the uninitiated, "Семнадцать мгновений весны" ("Seventeen Moments of Spring") was a 12-part television series based on a novel of the same name by Yulian Semyonov and directed by Tatyana Lioznova. It tells the story of the German officer Max Otto von Stierlitz (Штирлиц), played by Vyacheslav Tikhonov, who is really a Soviet spy tasked by his handlers to thwart a separate peace deal between the Germans and Americans in the last days of WWII.

The series aired in 1973 to an audience that seemed to make up the entire Soviet Union. Since then, it is one of those television series that seems to always be on some channel somewhere at some time of day or night.

For anyone who watched television in the Soviet era, the name alone conjures up the image of a black and white television on spindly legs, geese flying homeward across the screen, endless rooms in the Gestapo Headquarters — tidy, silent, empty of all but the actors speaking — with Mikael Tariverdiev’s melancholy music playing in the background and the insistent ticking of a clock.

And it evokes quotes and jokes. It’s probably fair to say that no Soviet movie has produced more memorable quotes or more jokes. In fact, the jokes keep coming. It’s good to know a few of them, since otherwise you’ll find yourself trying to chuckle along with everyone when you have no idea what they are talking about.

You may have already heard some of the quotes. Say your Significant Other comes home from

the office looking like he got hit by a truck. After pouring himself a calming glass or two, he says: На работе было ужасно. Сажу на совещании. Все расходятся, а шеф мне говорит: Штирлиц, а Вас я попрошу остаться (It was awful at work. I'm in a meeting. Everyone gets up to go when the boss says to me: Stierlitz, please stay for a minute.)

“Oh,” you say, grabbing the bottle. “That’s bad.”

In the film, the line is a killer. Stierlitz’s fingerprints have been found on the suitcase of a Russian radio operator. As a meeting of S.S. officers is breaking up, S.S. Gruppenfuehrer Heinrich Mueller, who suspects Stierlitz of being a spy, says that line to him. All across 11 time zones, about 80 million TV viewers stopped breathing. But Stierlitz handles it and the danger passes. TV viewers resumed life functions.

Another Mueller line is Ясность — это одна из форм полного тумана (Clarity is one of the forms of total ambiguity), a statement that never fails to puzzle me. But I do get: Маленькая ложь рождает большое недоверие (A little lie breeds a great deal of mistrust). And I know people like this, even though they aren’t spies: Странное свойство моей физиономии: всем кажется, что меня только что где-то видели (My physiognomy has a strange quality: everyone thinks that they’ve just seen me somewhere.)

My personal favorite is a little dialog between Stierlitz and Frau Saurich at the beginning of the film. As they are walking in the woods she spots a medicinal plant. У вас болят почки? (Do you have kidney problems?), she asks him. He tells her that he doesn't. Undeterred, she replies: Жаль. Очень жаль. Потому что этот отвар очень помогает при больных почках (That’s too bad. That’s really too bad. Because a tincture of this really fixes up ailing kidneys.)

That’s my kind of logic.

But the series also produced what were then called анекдоты (jokes) and now would be called мемы (memes). Most of them are a play on the narration that accompanies Stierlitz throughout the series: deadpan comments on his thoughts and actions, along the lines of: Штирлиц приехал домой когда только-только начало темнеть. Штирлиц любил это время года. (Stierlitz came home just as it was beginning to get dark. Stierlitz loved this time of year.)

One joke goes like this: "Сколько будет дважды два?" - спросил Мюллер. Штирлиц задумался. Он, конечно, знал, сколько будет дважды два, ему об этом недавно сообщили из центра, но он не знал, знает ли это Мюллер. (“How much is two times two?” Mueller asked. Stierlitz thought for a moment. He, of course, knew how much two times two was since he’d just been told in a message from the Center, but he didn’t know if Mueller knew that.)

Then the jokes get grubbier: Штирлицу сообщили, что у него в России родился сын. Скупая мужская слеза выкатилась из его глаза. Штирлиц не был на Родине уже семь лет. (Stierlitz was told that in Russia he had a son. One single manly tear fell from his eyes. Stierlitz hadn’t been home in seven years.)

And the jokes keep coming. This week Russian commentators are having a grand time with два Штирлица (the two Stierlitzes) who went to Salisbury to see the cathedral but were put

off by the patches of snow and slush.

Of course, Russian jokers are coming up with Stierlitz and Novichok jokes, most too tasteless to retell. But here's a punning one playing on Stierlitz as the master of the obvious: Штирлиц зашёл в бар. За стойкой бармен в костюме химзащиты смешивал в пробирках ядохимикаты. "Новичок", подумал Штирлиц. (Stierlitz walked into a bar. Behind the bar the barmen, dressed in a hazmat suit, was mixing poisons in a test tube. "Novichok," Stierlitz thought.)

As far as spies and jokes go, Stierlitz is the gift that keeps giving.

Michele A. Berdy is a Moscow-based translator and interpreter, author of "The Russian Word's Worth," a collection of her columns. Follow her on Twitter @MicheleBerdy.

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