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**THE BLOCKBUSTER MINISERIES ON SOVIET TV:
ISAEV-SHTIRLITS, THE AMBIGUOUS HERO OF *SEVENTEEN
MOMENTS IN SPRING***

Ещё одна причина, по которой Путин - наш президент.

В его личности соединились два любимых персонажа анекдотов - Штирлиц и Вовочка.

In the past decade, as a result of increased access to the Russian audience in the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union and as a result of more general scholarly trends, Western Slavists have become increasingly interested in manifestations of popular culture during the Soviet period. The relative independence of the Soviet cultural economy from market considerations makes it difficult, if not impossible, to draw a strict line of demarcation between officially generated mass cultural phenomena and genuinely popular entertainment. Nonetheless there is ample evidence that Soviet readers and television viewers, film goers and music lovers sought within the censored culture itself and, at least in the post-Stalin period, successfully found, if in insufficient quantities, cultural products that answered a genuine desire for entertainment and therefore enjoyed indisputable popularity among the Soviet audience. In this context, I will focus this article on what was arguably one of the most important “low” culture events of the Brezhnev period: the airing in 1973 of the twelve-part miniseries (some 14 hours of TV viewing long), *Seventeen Moments in Spring* (Semnadsat' mgnovenii vesny), which chronicles the adventures of the fictional Soviet double agent Maksim Maksimovich Isaev, working under cover as SS officer Max Otto von Shtirlits, in the upper echelons of the Nazi high command during the last months of World War II. As a testimony to the enduring appeal of the film, the June 15, 1998 issue of *Ogonek* carried the following brief news note under the heading “Shtirlits Came Back” (Shtirlits vernulsia) about a guest appearance at a film festival in Sochi by the actor Viacheslav Tikhonov, who played Shtirlits in the series:

“Shtirlits has arrived!” rejoiced the children and citizens who were meeting the great ones of the world at the “Kinotaur” festival. Shtirlits decorously made his rounds of the crowd, shaking hands. There were so many people who wanted to squeeze the palm of the real live Shtirlits that an incredible crush formed, in which a pickpocket touring in the south had his hand pulled out of joint. The victim was taken to the hospital. A prison one.¹

In the same vein, a post-Soviet commentator remarked, apparently only partly tongue in cheek: “after a showing of the film in 1995 on Russian Central Television it was noted that,

¹ Aleksei Torgashev, Aleksandr Nikonov, Sergei Solovkin, Viktor Kliukin, “Shtirlits vernulsia,” *Ogonek*, no. 24 (15 June 1998) (<http://www.gornet.ru/ogonyok/win/199824/24-06-10.html>).

just like 20 years before, city streets were empty during the showing of *Moments* on TV, a drop in the crime level almost to zero was noted in cities, which testifies to the popularity of the film not only among the people, but also in the criminal milieu (what, aren't they people too?).”²

This commentary, by virtue of having been posted on the internet, also belongs among what is perhaps the most compelling *post factum* evidence of the original and continuing appeal of this made-for-TV movie, and especially of its central character Shtirlits - that is, its indisputably popular aftermath in the Soviet and post-Soviet periods, culminating in a rather striking presence on the internet. A 2002 article charting popularity on the Russian internet (Runet) by the number of mentions of a given figure on websites, observed that “[Alla] Pugacheva’s popularity was comparable to that of Shtirlits,” commenting:

But on the whole much more interesting is the presence in the list not of politicians, but of mythical and semi-mythical popular [narodnykh] personages like Shtirlits, who are the heroes of numerous jokes. Precisely they - Vovochka, Chapaev, Lieutenant Rzhevsky and Rabinovich - possess the most constant popularity: independent of the political structure and trends in fashion and culture anecdotes from internet-folklore about Vovochka and other signal figures of the Russian mentality don’t go away. The number of entertainment sites like Anekdot.ru or fomenko.ru can only grow, including various sites devoted to each personage separately. For example, it is best to start your acquaintance with the first personage - Shtirlits - with the site in his name (www.geocities.com/stirlits2001ru), where one can become acquainted with the real biography of KGB Colonel Isaev, and then, feeling oneself the spy himself with the aid of a special program (designed to decipher electronic letters written in the Russian language and received in “unreadable” form and also for the decoding and recoding of text files) at the sites Shtirlits.ru (www.shtirlitz.ru), it is possible to go to the many anecdotal stories of the adventures of the famous spy at the site “Shtirlitsiada” (ww.webideas.com/shtirlits).³

Shtirlits jokes apparently appeared shortly after the original airing of the miniseries and continued to proliferate in the late glasnost period when anthologies of jokes began to be published in the Soviet Union.⁴ The analogy with that other popular hero of film Chapaev is exposed on occasion in the jokes themselves, as in the following example:

- А вас, Штирлиц, я попрошу остаться!
- Минут 10 Мюллер пристально всматривался в лицо Штирлица.
- Где же я мог видеть раньше? - спросил он Штирлица
- Может быть в Китае? - неуверенно попытался подсказать Штирлиц

² [Posted on the Kontora brat’ev Divanovyh website], “К истории вопроса о Shtirlitse” (<http://webideas.com/shtirlits/history.htm>).

³ Iurii Rosich, “Samyi glavnyi geroi Runeta” (<http://rocich.ru/articles/article.php?sid=251>). Another commentator observed that Shtirlits was “the most popular hero of the Soviet people, leaving Chapaev and [Ostap] Bender far behind.” Dvitrii Bykov, Vladimir Voronov, Irina Luk’ianova, “Shtirlits i seichas zhivee vsekh zhivykh,” *Sobesednik* (<http://www.sobesednik.ru/weekly/23/investigation/288.phtml>).

⁴ See A.V. Voznesenkii, “O sovremennom anekdotopечатanii,” *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie*, no. 22 (1996): pp. 393-399.

- Это какой год то? Нет, еще раньше? А, в России!
- Постой, постой ... Петька?
- Василий Иванович?

Moreover, in the late 1980s parodic sequels, brief prose works styling themselves “novels” and featuring Shtirlits and the other characters from the series in irreverent and absurd episodic adventures, began to appear in computer samizdat, then in multiple, often pirated book editions, and have now made their way onto the internet as well. While these “low” culture spin-offs of the “classic” original (to paraphrase the indignant discourse of some Russian commentators) in part are merely expressions of post-Soviet nostalgia and in part merely poke fun at the credulity-stretching ideological purity of Shtirlits and the hackneyed conventions of the series’ structure, I will argue here that the popularity of Shtirlits jokes and parodies are in some sense a function of the popularity of the original series itself, exposing it, and its “positive hero,” as an inherently ambiguous text through which we can read the deeply rooted, unvoiced, and perhaps unacknowledged cultural allegiances and anxieties of its audience.

The character of Isaev-Shtirlits was created by Iulian Semenov, himself perhaps the most successful Soviet writer of popular fiction of the post-Stalin period.⁵ Semenov, who was born in 1931 and died in 1993, began publishing in 1958, but it was after the 1963 publication of his crime novel, *Petrovka, 38* (which took as its title the address of the main police headquarters in Moscow), that Semenov achieved real fame as a popular author. In the wake of the success of *Petrovka, 38*, Semenov began publishing the series of what Soviet critics termed “political chronicles” featuring Shtirlits-Isaev and including the novel *Seventeen Moments in Spring*, which was first published in 1969. Soviet critics coined the term “political chronicles” for Semenov’s novels as a generic catchall for their mixture of fact, in the form of real historical events and documents, and fiction.

The figure of Isaev-Shtirlits himself partakes of this same mixture. According to his fictional biography as it unfolds in Semenov’s novels, not in the film, he was born in 1898 in Switzerland, the son of a Moscow law professor and Bolshevik sympathizer forced into emigration. Isaev as a youth came to know the leading Russian émigré revolutionaries, returned to Russia right after Lenin, and joined the Cheka at the request of Dzhzhzhinsky himself. The civil war finds him in the Far East, in the 1920s he takes on the identity of Shtirlits to penetrate the Nazi movement in Shanghai, he is in Yugoslavia in 1941 on the eve of the German invasion, and in Cracow in 1944, and, in *Seventeen Moments in Spring*, he is entangled in the intrigues of the Nazi elite in Berlin in February and March of 1945. The following books chronicle the end of the Third Reich and find Shtirlits in cold war Europe. Semenov, who openly acknowledged his KGB connections, was apparently given access to secret archives and based his “hero,” however loosely, on the real life Soviet spy code named “Braitenbruch,” code number A/201. Thus, a recent issue of *Argumenty i fakty* claimed:

⁵ Richard Stites, *Russian Popular Culture: Entertainment and Society Since 1990* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1992): p. 152. On Semenov, see also: Walter Laqueur, “Julian Semyonov and the Soviet Political Novel,” *Society*, Vol. 23, no. 5 (July/August 1986), pp. 72-80; A. Vulis, *V mire prikliuchenii: Poetika zhanra* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel’, 1986), pp. 354-363; V. Kardin, “Sekret uspekha,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 4 (1986), pp. 102-150.

Indeed, the Central Committee of the CPSU advised the writer to transform the German Willy Leman into the Russian Maksim Isaev.

Like Shtirlits from the book Willy Leman was indeed the right hand of Valter Shellenberg, head of the German spy service. He engaged in counterespionage protection of the Reich military industry. Most important was Leman's information on the development of a fundamentally new weapon - "fau"-missiles - headed by Verner von Braun in Germany. Shtirlits-Leman was held in high esteem both in Moscow and Berlin.⁶

Unlike Shtirlits, however, Leman was arrested by the Gestapo in December 1942 and did not survive the war.⁷ In this, as in other things, Semenov had no qualms about "improving" on reality. More to the point, the documentary traces in *Seventeen Moments in Spring* serve to heighten the complex interplay between the reality the series purports to depict and the reality it evokes in the viewer as I hope further discussion will demonstrate.

Semenov himself wrote the screenplay for the television serial of *Seventeen Moments in Spring*, and the miniseries was directed by Tatiana Lioznova. The cast was impressive. As noted above, Isaev-Shtirlits was played by Viacheslav Tikhonov, whose film career now spans half a century and includes such roles as Prince Andrei Bolkonsky in *War and Peace* and, more recently, Vsevolod in *Burnt by the Sun*. The rest of the distinguished cast included Leonid Bronevoi as Gestapo chief Henrich Mueller, Evgenii Evstigneev as Professor Pleishner, Oleg Tabakov as Shellenberg, Rostislav Platt as Pastor Schlagg, Yuri Vizbor as Borman, Leonid Kuravlyov as Eismann, Ekaterina Gradova in the film's only major female role as Katia Kozlova (alias Kathe Kien or "radistka Ket"), and Efim Kopelian as the voice of Semenov's omniscient third-person narrator. In this context, we should note that Shtirlits jokes frequently and significantly play on a blurring of boundaries between, actor and role, art and life, often demanding a comprehensive knowledge of the cast, as in the following examples:

Штирлиц просыпается утром, связанный по рукам и ногам, и начинает лихорадочно вспоминать, что с ним случилось. После долгих раздумий он решает: "Если войдут люди в черном - значит гестапо и я Штирлиц. Если войдут люди в зеленом - значит, нахожусь в НКВД и я Исаев."

Входят двое в сером, поднимают и тащат его по коридорам. Связанный брыкается и кричит:

- За что?

- Вы вчера на приеме нажрались как свинья и учинили погром. А еще Народный артист, гражданин Тихонов!

Штирлиц выстрелил Мюллеру в голову. Пуля срикошетила и ударила в стену. "Броневой!", - подумал Штирлиц.

⁶ [Anon.], "A Visit to 'Shtirlits'," *Argumenty i fakty Internet* (http://www.aif.ru/koi/900/shtirlits_e.htm).

⁷ In the same vein, the obituary of a former intelligence agent recently maintained that she had been the real life prototype for "Radistka Ket": "V Moskve skonchalas' 'radistka Ket,'" *Novoe russkoe slovo* (25 June, 1998): 4. Moreover, a March 1998 article maintained that the Gestapo chief Mueller was in fact the prototype for Shtirlits: Igor' Tufel'd, "My gorvorim--Shtirlits, podrazumevaem...Miuller?" *Ogonek*, no. 11 (16 March 1998) (<http://www.gornet.ru/ogonyok/win/199811/11-12-16.html>). The issue also contains an interview with Leonid Bronevoi, the actor who played Mueller, on the same subject.

The permeability of the boundary between the roles and the actors who play them speaks to the extent to which the miniseries may be seen as exposing itself as artifice and thereby subverting its own “ideological purity,” a point to which I will return below.

Needless to say, given that I am talking about a film of epic length devoted to intrigue and espionage, the intrigue chronicled in *Seventeen Moments in Spring* is complex. As the title suggests, the plot is structured around seventeen “moments” or temporally bounded episodes, generally each concentrated on a particular day, beginning with February 2, 1945 and ending with March 24, 1945. These “moments” are unified into a more or less coherent plot by the assignment Shtirlits (code named “Iustas” in radio transmissions from Moscow) receives from his control back home (code named Aleks) to check if rumors that someone in the Nazi leadership is trying to negotiate a separate peace with the Western allies are true and, if so, on whose initiative. During the course of the miniseries, Shtirlits indeed discovers that Allen Dulles is negotiating in Berne with General Wolf, who is working on behalf of Himmler. To accomplish his mission, Shtirlits exploits the mutual distrust and atmosphere of general demoralization regnant among the German leadership with the collapse of the Third Reich imminent, throwing in his lot with Borman to trap Himmler. Shtirlits’s task is complicated by the fact that from the beginning of the series we learn that vague suspicions have arisen around his activities, and he is being investigated by Mueller, who is portrayed more as an honest, old-time cop than a vicious Nazi, and who plays a game of cat-and-mouse with Shtirlits throughout. While Mueller is depicted as Shtirlits’s worthy intellectual opponent, the double agent repeatedly and ultimately outwits him, concocting stories and employing strategies that are implausible, to say the least. Jokes frequently poke fun at Mueller’s incredible credulity and Shtirlitz’s consequent invulnerability. Again the examples below “lay bare the device” of the transparency of the conventions on which the series rests:

Мюллер шел по рейхсканцелярии и увидел Штирлица, стоящего перед дверью Гиммлера.

- Штирлиц, что вы здесь делаете?
- Трамвая жду.

Пройдя еще немного, Мюллер обернулся. Штирлица не было.
“Видимо дождался”, - подумал Мюллер.

Идет заседание в ставке Гитлера. Вдруг в кабинет входит Штирлиц с подносом апельсинов, ставит поднос на стол, подбирает комбинацию к сейфу, читает и фотографирует все документы, кладет их обратно, закрывает сейф и спокойно уходит. После минуты оцепенения Гитлер приходит в себя и кричит

- Кто это такой?!
- Да это русский шпион Исаев - отвечает Мюллер
- Почему вы его не арестовали и не расстреляли?!!!
- Мы уж пытались, все равно отвяжется, скажет что апельсины приносил.

Shtirlits also makes use of several helpers, who generally cause him more trouble than they are worth. His professional contacts are his radio operator (alias Erwin Kien) and his wife “Ket,” Russians also living in Germany under assumed names. When their apartment is

bombed at a crucial moment in the film, the husband is killed, Ket lands in the hospital, and Shtirlits is left without any means of communicating with Moscow. For lack of a better alternative, he recruits Professor Pleishner, a singularly inept agent, who seems to have little other purpose in the plot than to go to Berne and place the Russian code at risk. Then there is Pastor Schlagg, whom Shtirlits has released from prison in return for a vague promise of cooperation, with whom he has lengthy philosophical discussions, and whom he later obscurely sends to Berne to use his pacifist connections to discredit the peace negotiations. Episodes involving these helpers figure among the most memorable moments in the miniseries (as evidenced by the frequency with which they serve as the butt of Shtirlits jokes). Two of the more notable scenes in which they appear deserve mention here. Professor Pleishner, realizing too late that he has missed the danger signal Shtirlits warned him of two flower pots in the window of the “safe house” in Berne, finds himself trapped by Nazi agents and, swallowing the cyanide capsule with which Shtirlits has foresightedly supplied him, crashes through the stairway landing window into the street below. Numerous jokes poke fun at the melodramatic prolongation of the scene aggravated by Pleishner’s singular dimwittedness as an agent:

Плейшнер доедал десятую пачку “Беломора”, а ампула с ядом все никак не попадалась.

“Успеть бы”, - думал Плейшнер, поглядывая на оторопевших гестаповцев.

Плейшнер выбрасывался из окна пятый раз. Яд не действовал.

Ket is pregnant, and Shtirlits asks her to return to Russia to give birth since a woman in childbirth can never hide her nationality, because she will scream out in her native language while in labor. Ket refuses to go home, maintaining valiantly that she will just have to learn to scream in German. The bombing of their building, in which her husband is killed, intercedes, however, and when the injured Ket gives birth in a hospital she does indeed scream out in Russian (suggesting that nationality is a biological birthright of sorts and will out), and a nurse reports her to the Gestapo.

- А не могли бы вы родить? - спрашивает Мюллер у Штирлица.
- Что именно? - интересуется Штирлиц.
- Это не важно. Я просто хочу узнать, на каком языке вы будете кричать?

(Shtirlits, by the way, is forced into some of his most “creative” fib weaving by this eventuality when he has to come up with a whopper to explain why his fingerprints are on the Russian radio operator’s suitcase.) Unquestionably the most absurd scene in the series: when Rolf, interrogating Ket, threatens her baby by holding open the door to the wintry weather outside. Russian audiences apparently did not find ludicrous the assertion that a child bared before an open door would die of exposure in two or three minutes. It would seem, however, as the repeated references in jokes to these and like scenes from *Seventeen Moments in Spring* make clear, that the trope of hyperbolic exaggeration on which these scenes are constructed renders them effective, apparently because they simultaneously acknowledge and lampoon deep rooted cultural stereotypes. In other words, precisely because it follows its own presumptions to the point of overstatement, the series undercuts

its own apparently transparent monology and topples into the very ambiguity on which jokes feed.

Aside from the more preposterous elements of the plot, the narrative structure of the film exhibits certain peculiarities that have also inspired comic rejoinder. As already noted, the title of the miniseries itself foregrounds the passage of time in the film. Apparently to enhance the documentary “feel” of the movie, scenes are flagged with headings giving the precise date and time. This insistence on chronological precision, which might be construed as a device to build suspense, in fact, given the excruciatingly slow pace of *Seventeen Moments in Spring* - and apparently not only to those of us used to the high-paced action of Hollywood-made spy thrillers - borders on the ludicrous. Jokes like the following example lay bare the combination of the excruciating pace of the film and its continual invocation of time:

Штирлиц ехал по автобану Берлин-Мюнхен. Дорога была прямой, как стрела. Руки разведчика крепко сжимали руль, глаза смотрели вперед, лицо не выражало ни единой эмоции. Штирлиц спал, спал с открытыми глазами - эту привычку он выработал за долгие годы работы в разведке. Он спал, но он знал, что ровно через три часа двенадцать минут и тридцать восемь секунд он проснется, чтобы притормозить у первой автозаправочной станции.

Other pseudo-documentary techniques serve, on the other hand, to break up the linear chronology of the film. Every time a new historical character makes his first appearance, it is preceded by a short documentary biography. In the case of the highest-ranking figures - Goering, Goebbels, Himmler, and Borman - these biographies follow a relatively set pattern including ideologically damning quotes from the historical figures themselves and newsreel clips and are titled “Informatsiia dlya razmyshleniia,” a phrase apparently of Semenov’s own concoction. The entrances of characters such as Mueller, Eismann, Shellenberg, etc. are preceded by the narrator reading from the character’s personal dossier (*lichnoe delo*). These dossiers are so repetitive as to make one suspect parody. Even more suspicious is the fact that in bureaucratic form these “personal dossiers” are virtually identical to Soviet Communist Party dossiers.

Continuing with the film’s nonlinear narrative, we note that Russia and the Soviet Union - terms I believe it is particularly important to distinguish here - are relegated to the margins in the film. While this is perhaps inevitable in a film in which the bulk of the action takes place in Berlin and Berne, with only a few shots of actors playing Shtirlits’s superiors - including Stalin - back in Moscow, it has the effect, intended or not, of endowing the distant homeland with the status of myth. On the one hand, then, the fictional plot is interspersed with newsreel clips of the Red Army’s inexorable progress toward Berlin, threatened by the Allies’ impending perfidy, which Shtirlits is striving to sabotage. On the other hand, Russia becomes the stuff of nostalgia, relegated to flashbacks, merging with Shtirlits’s personal life, with his beloved wife back home and his solitary celebrations in the privacy of his Berlin house, behind carefully lowered air raid shades, of the Soviet holidays, Red Army day and International Women’s Day. Russia is thus associated with what is most near and dear, with private life and family, that which is either inaccessible or savored only behind closed doors and reduced from geographical reality to emotionally-charged symbol, a saccharine sentimentality many Shtirlits jokes exploit.

Обычно, 23 февраля, Штирлиц одевал косоворотку и выпив бутылку водки садился играть на гармошке. Однако на этот раз он отправился в один из берлинских пивняков и, построив находившихся там гестаповцев, заставил их маршировать, распевая революционные песни. Лишь придя домой, он понял как был близок к провалу в этот день.

In one sense at least *Seventeen Moments in Spring* is very much about the time in which it was made rather than about the historical period in which it is set. While we learn in a flashback that, earlier in the war, Shtirlits single-handedly and presciently stopped Germany from developing the atom bomb first, thereby implicitly preventing a Nazi victory, we are informed in no uncertain terms virtually from the beginning of the series that for all intents and purposes the war is over, that the defeat of Germany is inevitable whether Shtirlits's current mission succeeds or fails. What is at issue, then, is not World War II, but the alignment of powers during the Cold War, and the noncoincidence of the Iron Current with the borders of Germany blurs the lines between enemies and allies in the film, as evidenced by jokes like the following:

Штирлиц никогда не испытывал ностальгии по Родине. Он привык к Германии, полюбил баварское пиво, ездил на «Мерседесе», разговаривал и даже думал по-немецки. Но вокруг было так много советских шпионов, и Штирлицу по неволе приходилось притворяться, что он с удовольствием пьет «Столичную», курит «Беломор», жрет тушенку и тоскует по русским безрезкам...

Мюллер получил донос на Штирлица. В нем говорилось:

“В ночь на первое Мая Штирлиц выехал из Берлина за город. Там в лесу, на глухой поляне он выпил бутылку водки. Развел костер и достал балалайку. Потом стал, играя на балалайке, плясать вприсядку и петь частушки. После полуночи он вернулся к себе на квартиру, запер бутылку и балалайку в сейф и лег спать”.

На следующий день Штирлиц открывает сейф - а там вместо балалайки и бутылки лежит записка: *“Штирлиц, имейте совесть - не один вы страдаете ностальгией”.*

Штирлиц зашел в кабинет и увидел Мюллера в буденовке, сидящего на столе и играющего на балалайке. “Да, Штирлиц, - меланхолично произнес Мюллер, - не один Вы тоскуете по Родине”.

All of this serves to remind us that, by the time *Seventeen Moments in Spring* was written and then transformed into a TV serial, the allies had become adversaries, and Germans had been parsed ideologically into good ones and bad ones. Hence not only the number of “good” Germans in the film, who come across much better than the Americans do, but the

relatively positive portrayals even of such historical personages and ideological adversaries as Mueller.⁸

Quite apart from the Cold War realignment of powers, however, disturbing ambiguities in the representation of identity and national and ideological allegiance are inherent in the very conception of *Seventeen Moments in Spring*, ambiguities that seem to have found resonance, not necessarily on a conscious level, in its original audience. The popular culture responses, as I hope some of the jokes I have already read have suggested, play on these ambiguities and thereby reveal - and draw their humor from - the subversiveness inherent in the original film. (Again, I am not taking a stand here on whether the film was intentionally or unintentionally subversive. In this context, however, I would point out that the only character who actually spouts anything remotely resembling communist ideological rhetoric in the series is also the only character Shtirlits shoots in cold blood: his paid German informant who happily betrays people who help him.)

To clarify the point I am trying to make here, let me point out the obvious: everyone in the film speaks Russian. While this was certainly the only practical way of making the film, it has a disconcerting tendency to render the national boundaries between adversaries invisible and therefore implicitly and potentially permeable, as evidenced by the series of Shtirlits jokes concerned with language and nationality.

Из всех машин Штирлиц предпочитал «Мерседесы», проявляя тем самым истинно немецкий патриотизм, столь полезный для конспирации. При этом русский разведчик очень радовался, что он - не немецкий шпион в России. А то пришлось бы ездить на «Запорожце»...

Мюллер вызывает Штирлица и говорить

- Завтра коммунистический субботник, явка обязательна.

Штирлиц отвечает:

- Есть! - И, поняв, что провалился, садится за стол и, не замечая удивленного взгляда Мюллера, пишет:

“Я, штандартенфюрер фон Штирлиц, на самом деле являюсь советским разведчиком”.

Мюллер, прочитав этот рапорт, звонит Шелленбергу и говорит.

- Вальтер, зайдите, посмотрите, что ваши люди придумывают, чтобы на субботник не ходить.

Звонок Гитлера Сталину:

- Сталин, ваши люди не брали у меня из сейфа секретные документы?

- Виясню.

Звонок Сталина Штирлицу:

- Штирлиц, вы брали у Гитлера из сейфа сэкрэтные дакументи?

- Так точно, товарищ Сталин.

- Так палажите на мэсто, люди валнуются.

Мюллер составлял как-то раз список приглашенных на новогодний банкет:

⁸ Which a recent commentator claims was because Mueller himself had actually been a Soviet agent, see Tufel'd, “My govorim--Shtirlits...”

- Штирлиц, дружище, скажи мне, ради бога, как правильно пишут твою фамилию - через “Sht”, “Sch” или “St”?
- Через “Ш”, - уверенно ответил советский разведчик.

Штирлиц шел по улицам Берлина и вдруг услышал за спиной русскую речь. “Олим хадашим” - подумал Штирлиц. (“Новые репатрианты”)

The latter joke in particular, with its anachronistic invocation of Jewish emigration from the Soviet Union in the 1970s and 1980s, throws into relief Shtirlits’s peculiar status as himself as émigré of sorts.

Arguably it is the pointedly heroic figure of Isaev-Shtirlits himself that is unquestionably the nexus of the cipher of identity in *Seventeen Moments in Spring*. As the following joke suggests, while Shtirlits’s status as a positive hero is indisputable, it is nonetheless problematic:

- Штирлиц - спросил как-то Мюллер. - Вы хотели бы сниматься в кино?
- Ясное дело! - кивнул Штирлиц.
- А почему?
- Ну как же? В кино всегда положительный герой убивает всех негодяев, и ему в награду достается благодарность правительства и любовь длинноногой блондинки с пышными формами!
- Позвольте Штирлиц! С какой стати вы решили, что вы - положительный герой?
- Да потому, что мне на все положить! - радостно заявил Штирлиц.

Let me remind you here of what Andrei Sinyavsky has to say about the socialist realist positive hero in his essay *What is Socialist Realism*, using an episode from Leonid Leonov’s novel *The Russian Forest* as an example:

The courageous girl Polya is making her way to the front on a dangerous assignment - it takes place during the Fatherland war. For purposes of disguise she is ordered to pretend to be a German sympathizer. In conversation with a Hitlerite officer, Polya for awhile plays this role, but with great difficulty: it is morally difficult for her to speak like the enemy and not like a Soviet [*govorit’ po-vrazheski, a ne po-sovetski*]. Finally, she can no longer hold out and exposes her true face, her superiority over the German officer: “I am a girl of my epoch...perhaps the most ordinary of them, but I am the world’s tomorrow...and you would stand up, stand up when you talk to me, if you had the least bit of self-respect! But you sit in front of me, because you’re nobody, just a performing horse under the main executioner...Well, there’s no reason to sit now, go to work...take me, show me, where do you shoot Soviet girls here?”⁹

“It is impossible,” Sinyavsky concludes, “to hide [the positive hero’s positive qualities], to mask them; they are written on his brow and sound in his every word.”¹⁰

⁹ Abram Terts, “Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realism,” in his *Fantasticheskii mir Abrama Tertsy* (New York: Inter-language Literary Associates, 1967): pp. 421-422.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 422.

Clearly, compared with the exemplary - and foolhardy - Polya, Shtirlits presents us with problems. On the one hand, it is true that Shtirlits is so noble that it is virtually written on his brow, and Russians and Germans vie in the film in insisting that “Shtirlits is *dobryi*. “Shtirlits’s “goodness,” however, is of the universal human kind. (Thus, what gives him grist for the story that gets him off the hook when his fingerprints are found on the suitcase with the radio in it is that he has paused in his spying to help a woman with a baby carriage cross the street.) Where ideology is concerned, however, Shtirlits and Polya are poles apart as culture heroes, a gap, I would suggest even wider than just that between the window dressing of the late Stalin period and that of the mid-Brezhnev years. Thus, one V. Kardin, writing in *Voprosy literatury* in 1986, relates an anecdote that throws into relief all of the insidious duplicity inherent in the figure of Shtirlits:

...I remind you of the portraits of Shtirlits one came across a few years ago in women’s dormitories. My frontline comrade, invited to a meeting with young people, froze when he caught sight of a photograph of a fascist officer on the wall. I calmed him down, telling him of snapshots of Captain Kloss - the hero of a serial about a Polish agent. Photographs of the fearless captain in the very same greatcoat stand out vividly in a student dormitory in Warsaw...¹¹

Kardin adduces this incident to argue that in detective novels ideology gets pushed into the background by the absorbing plot and rendered neutral and therefore harmless, so that one roots for one side or another just as one would at a soccer match. I would suggest that there is more to it than that.

I would argue that the equivocal episode cited above means something much closer to what the horrified frontline veteran saw in it than our commentator will allow, that it does suggest an analogy between Hitler’s Germany and the Soviet Union. Let me further advance the proposition that, at least implicitly, in *Seventeen Moments in Spring* the split between Isaev and Shtirlits in some sense invokes a split between Russian and Soviet, that Semenov’s super spy represents a paradigm for the survival of the “honest” intellectual in a totalitarian state, striving for professional excellence and basic human decency while hiding his true face from the inhuman state bureaucracy, trusting no one, surrounded by intrigues and enemies, able to be himself only in the solitary confines of his home. Thus, it is hardly surprising that Shtirlits’s main opponent, Mueller, under his Gestapo exterior just a gritty professional cop with no use for ideology, seems so sympathetic, such a “brother” to his sworn ideological adversary.

Writing recently on that new Russian superhero, Viktor Dotsenko’s Savely Govorkov, the “furious” (*Beshenyi*), one critic ventured the hypothesis that this Russian “Rambo” incarnated contemporary myths just as Shtirlits had in his time, inferring that

Earlier, at a time when we had seen our fill of the “feat of the espionage agent,” [...], only one superman - Shtirlits - commanded the reader’s (or viewer’s) attention. Shtirlits played the piano, in his time studied in the math-physics department, knew

¹¹ V. Kardin, “Sekret uspekha,” *Voprosy literatury*, no. 4 (1986): p. 119.

heaps of languages, and in general knew everything. Shtirlits was a sign of the decline of empire.¹²

The reference to Superman - and the even more persistent analogy drawn between Shtirlits and James Bond - have repercussions far beyond the intellectually trivial affirmation that both sides in the Cold War had their own culturally specific hero figures. Thus, Umberto Eco in his article, "The Myth of Superman," posits what happens to a mythic hero "fallen" into the time of popular narrative. Eco argues that the episodic, iterative portrayal of Superman in cartoons resolves the narrative paradox of the timeless mythic hero - who "embodies a law, or a universal demand, and therefore must be in part *predictable* and hold no surprises for us"¹³ - who is subjected to the temporal mode of popular narrative. I would suggest that the laborious and belabored cinematic conventions on which the portrayal of Shtirlits in *Seventeen Moments in Spring* rests perform the same function: it is Shtirlits's very predictability carried to an absurd degree that allows him to find a cozy home in the popular imagination. Like Superman and James Bond, Shtirlits transcends his time and becomes a cultural paradigm for his society's fears, desires, and anxieties. And, as my final examples should make clear, it is a paradigm that retains a powerful hold over the post-Soviet Russian imagination.

The fourth and most recent of the Shtirlits novels written by two computer programmers, Pavel Ass and Nestor Begemotov, the authors of the first of the genre, *How Hedgehogs Multiply* (*Kak razmnozhaiutsia ezhiki*) (written in 1986) in fact rests on the tension between time and timelessness adumbrated by Eco. While despite its widespread, virtually cult popularity, Ass and Begemotov's first effort is a rather sophomoric romp of Shtirlits and his German buddies reputedly set at the same time as the original film, the more recent work, *Shtirlits, or Second Youth* (*Shtirlits, ili vtoraiia molodost'*), finds Shtirlits back in Moscow, old and on pension, in the present day. Through a convoluted series of events, Shtirlits is rejuvenated by a capsule developed for Brezhnev, but too late for the Gensek to take advantage of it. Borman is already in Moscow, working not for the KGB, but for the GKChB, an even more elite, apparently Russian secret service, and Pastor Schlagg finds himself happily taking care of a beloved hippopotamus as director of the Moscow zoo. Shtirlits summons Pleishner - not the one who fell out of the window, but his twin brother - to come to Moscow bringing a part of the missing party gold he has stashed in a Swiss bank for Shtirlits. Eismann comes, in full SS uniform, at Shtirlits's request as well, and Mueller, the eternal bureaucrat, shows up on his own. They pool money and talents to create a commercial spy agency, called the ShRU (by analogy with the TsRU/CIA), and - to make a very, long and convoluted story short, Shtirlits ends up foiling a plot on the part of Arab terrorists to steal Lenin's corpse from the mausoleum. This clever spoof demonstrates the vitality of the Shtirlits figure, which, tellingly, outlives the other embalmed bodies and outmoded leader cults in the tale, fed by a nostalgia that blurs the lines between SS and KGB, throwing them all together as "old friends from the front." There is a certain charm about Shtirlits, even gone commercial, that is lacking in the creations of Dotsenko and his ilk. Perhaps it is because these new adventures of Shtirlits hark back to the popular

¹² Vladimir Berezin, "Mifologicheskaia eponieia: Beshenyi, Savelii. Professii--supermen" *Literaturnaia gazeta* (11 June 1997) (<http://www.relis.ru/MEDIA...g/texts/0097/23/1101.html>).

¹³ Umberto Eco, "The Myth of Superman," *The Critical Tradition*, p. 931.

entertainment of childhood and therefore, in Pastor Schlagg's zoo, merge with Doktor Aibolit and other figures of the lost, rosy childhood of totalitarianism.

More to the point, however, as Ass and Begemotov's tale confirms, the figure of Shtirlits has lost none of its mythogenic power. And so we find that the most recent manifestation of the ongoing appeal of Shtirlits in Post-Soviet Russia seems to pack considerable political energy. I have in mind here the continual analogies drawn by commentators between Shtirlits and President Vladimir Putin since the latter's election to the Russian presidency in 2000.¹⁴ Commentators have, for instance, invoked the "Shtirlits phenomenon" to explain Putin's sudden rise to power, pointing especially to the Putin's stint as a Soviet intelligence agent in East Germany:

It would seem unnecessary to have to demonstrate that Putin is Shtirlits; it's enough to recall the "German" - in all respects - biography of our Prince: beginning with the fact that every true Petersburger is perceived in Russia as "a bit of a German," and ending with the most natural work with the most natural Germans in the professional line (intelligence, of course, as is appropriate for Shtirlits). For all that inside he is "ours," more precisely "for our side," as he brilliantly demonstrated in Chechnya.¹⁵

Putin himself, moreover, has seemed to encourage such comparisons by claiming that he "decided on a career in the KGB because he was so enamored with the heroic deeds of Soviet detectives and intelligence officers."¹⁶ While the analogy is as often as not invoked merely to dismiss it - "Putin Isn't Your Shtirlits"¹⁷ - the need to deny it continually speaks almost as eloquently as the TV spoofs and even nationalist anti-Putin rants linking Shtirlits and Putin - or even the joke used as the epigraph to this article.¹⁸ Most evident in these analogies is an element of wishful thinking - perhaps most indicative of the original function of Shtirlits himself - the hope that Putin will prove to be the same sort of decent chap as Shtirlits behind the enigmatic, intimidating, and seemingly alien façade. After all, as one proposal - perhaps only partly in joke - has it, rather than putting back up the monument to Felix Derzhinsky, taken down in the aftermath of the 1991 failed coup attempt from Lubyanka Square in Moscow, a monument should be erected to Shtirlits, "the sole and inimitable Russian national hero":

We suggest several variants of the monument: Shtirlits in a forest of birch trees. Shtirlits relates to Vasily Ivanovich [Chapaev] a joke about a Chukchi. Shtirlits carried the suitcase of a Russian woman pianist. Shtirlits hits a probable antagonist over the head with a bottle of cognac. Shtirlits sits on the spring earth and pets it with his hands. And what figures could be fit on the pedestal! Pastor Shlag on skis.

¹⁴ Interestingly enough in a survey taken before the 2000 election, in answer to the question, "For what hero of film would you vote in the presidential election?" Shtirlits was one the more frequent responses. (See <http://vladimir-putin.ru/d7/frames33.htm>)

¹⁵ Sergei Zhekov, "Putin i Rossiia" (<http://panorama.ru/works/putin/rossia00.html>).

¹⁶ Nina L. Khrushcheva, "Homo Sovieticus" [review of *First Person: Conversations with Vladimir Putin*], *Los Angeles Times* (September 24, 2000) (<http://www.cdi/russia/johnson/4535.html>).

¹⁷ For example in the article of the same name: Sergei Mironov, "Putin - eto vam ne Shtirlits" (http://www.komok.ru/article.cfm?c=3&_id=2932).

¹⁸ In this context we should note that the Vovochka of jokes evoked and continues to evoke Vladimir Putin even before Vladimir Putin.

Ket gives birth and cries out “Mama!” Professor Pleishner jumps from the fifth floor, but the poison still doesn’t work.¹⁹

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¹⁹ “Shtirlits zhivee vsek zhivykh.”