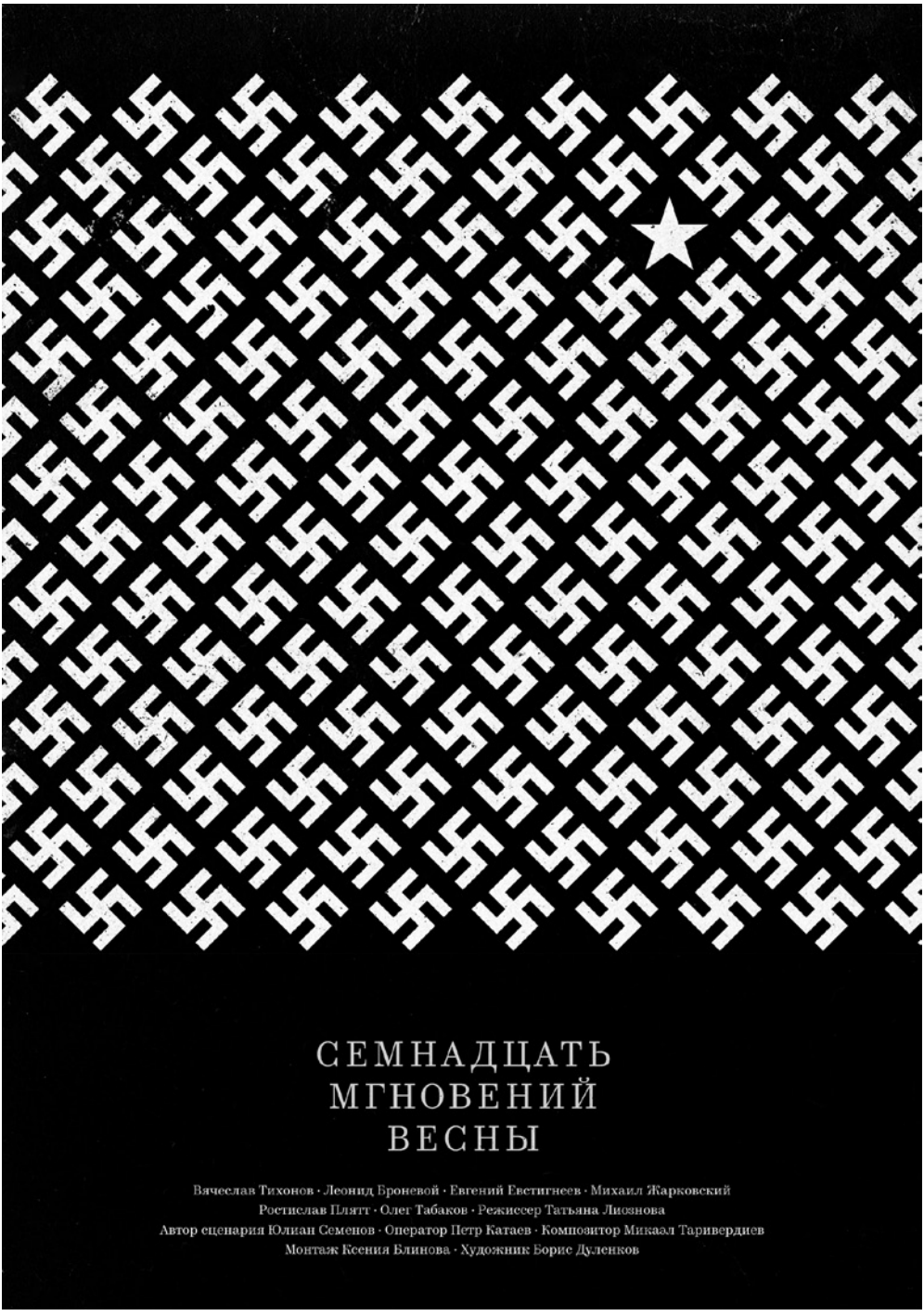

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This bulletin would like to grow up to be a *New Yorker* article.
It was researched in complete ignorance of the Russian
language, and relied on the generosity of a number of people
including Sergei Kostin, Alexander Ostrogorsky, Olga Semyonova,
Sergei Stafeev, and, in particular, Sophio Medoidze.

All photographs of Julian Semyonov are courtesy of his daughter,
Olga Semyonova.

With apologies to William Empson

Cover image: poster design for *Seventeen Moments of Spring*
by Alexander Zhuravskiy. Reproduced with kind permission

The Gestapo intercepted an encrypted message which read: "Justas, you asshole. Alex." Only Stirlitz could figure out that he had been conferred the rank of the Hero of the Soviet Union.

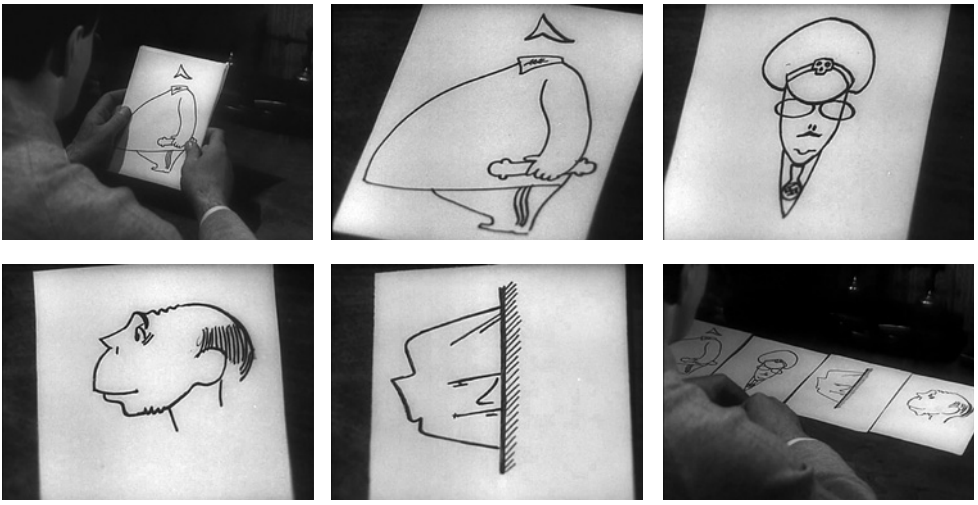
On February 8, 2003, Vladimir Putin awarded the Order for Merit to the Fatherland, Class III, to the actor Vyacheslav Tikhonov. It was Tikhonov's 75th birthday. Tikhonov had enjoyed a long career on stage and in film, but no one was under any illusions for what role he was receiving this honor—the same one, in fact, for which he had received a medal as a Hero of Socialist Labor from the Soviet premier Leonid Brezhnev in 1982, which was already nine years after the fact. Tikhonov was synonymous with the role of Max Otto von Stirlitz—a.k.a. "Justas," a.k.a. Maxim Maximovich Isaev, secret agent of Moscow Center—in the television series *Seventeen Moments of Spring*. Putin, a former KGB officer in East Germany, was honoring an actor most famous for playing a Soviet spy operating in deep cover in Nazi Germany.

The 12 black-and-white episodes of *Seventeen Moments of Spring* have been running almost constantly on Russian television since they were first broadcast in August 1973, particularly around the May 9 "Victory Day" commemoration of the capitulation of Nazi Germany when they are sometimes screened back-to-back. (A new "colorized" and abridged version of the series was aired in 2009, to general disgust.) The "seventeen moments" in question occur between February 12 and March 18, 1945, in the final days of World War II—or the "Great Patriotic War,"

as the Russians call it — as Stirlitz endeavors to use his position as a high-ranking SS officer to uncover and disrupt the attempts of various Nazi leaders to broker a separate peace treaty with the Americans, potentially forming a new bloc against the Soviet Union.

Stirlitz is often referred to as the "Russian James Bond," but the comparison only holds as far as the two characters' saturation of the popular consciousness. *Seventeen Moments*, in content and style, is much closer on the spectrum of spy fiction to the work of John le Carré: slow, labyrinthine, paranoid, and calibrated to the micro-tensions of bureaucratic intrigue. Across its 14 hours, the action, such as it is, is more or less limited to two discharges of pistols and one somewhat staid car chase through Berlin. Most of the drama is played out instead as a series of duels in the form of dialogue, in which pairs of characters try to outmaneuver one another on the slippery slope which leads, as both they and we are fully aware, to the Third Reich's total collapse.

Almost every leading character in *Seventeen Moments* is a Nazi. Many are drawn from the historical record: Heinrich Himmler, Reichsführer of the SS; Walter Schellenberg, head of foreign intelligence; Ernst Kaltenbrunner, Chief of the Reich Main Security Office (RHSA); Martin Bormann, Chancellor of the Nazi Party; Hermann Göring, commander-in-chief of the Luftwaffe; and in particular Heinrich Müller, head of the Gestapo. (Goebbels features only in documentary footage; Hitler, like Stalin, has a walk-on part, but is largely a figure invoked by others.) Familiarity with the leading Nazis is not assumed — and in fact, the series has a pedagogical streak, in which each of these characters is introduced to us as they first appear by the series' intrusive voice-over, which reads the rote summary assessments from the Gestapo's own dossiers, or offers us "information to be considered." Stirlitz himself, while contemplating which of the Nazi leaders might be attempting to contact the Americans, draws caricatures of them — a device which doubles as a doodling form of meditation for Stirlitz and a mnemonic primer for a younger Soviet audience. Although the pains taken to inform and instruct the audience add to the series' ponderousness, especially in the early episodes, one of *Seventeen Moments*' strengths is the vividness with which it evokes a Third Reich which is not a monolithic and orderly pyramid of authority, but instead a Venn diagram of overlapping bureaucracies (the SS, the RHSA,



Stirlitz's sketches of Göring, Himmler, Goebbels, and Bormann

the Gestapo, the party, military intelligence, the police, the army, and so on) enmeshed in viperous internecine rivalry.

Mutual surveillance is the great constant in *Seventeen Moments*: everyone is constantly being recorded, or in fear of it. When Himmler, in an early scene, approaches Göring to suggest that the latter replace Hitler in order to avert disaster, Göring wants to go along with the plan, but is too frightened that the black folder Himmler is holding contains a secret microphone and that this proposal is just an elaborate trap. (We never learn the truth.) Offices, cells, homes, bars, cars, telephone lines—all are potentially bugged. In fact, we often learn of conversations between the characters after the fact from recordings or transcripts. The entire visual grammar of the series, meanwhile, is forensic: fingerprints, photographs, dossiers, reel-to-reel recorders.

Every conversation in *Seventeen Moments* is coded, and every proposal has to be parsed, like Göring parses Himmler's, as the bait of a provocateur. As Gestapo chief Müller puts it: "Clarity is one of the forms of complete fog." In the same way, the most valuable commodity in the series is the alibi: the cover story which will keep you from the Gestapo's interrogation cells, or a euphemistic death by "car accident." When Himmler gives Schellenberg responsibility for devising a way of making overtures to the Americans, Schellenberg's plan to provide them with a

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tripartite alibi has something of Freud's self-contradictory "kettle logic," a triple hedge of mutually incompatible lies. Importantly, however, none of the leading Nazis' machinations seem to be born of ideology; there is very little ranting about race, the *Führer*, or *Lebensraum*. This is a game of pure self-interest, played out against a backdrop of blackest paranoia.

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Some secret documents were missing from Hitler's safe. Five days passed, but they were not found. Finally Hitler sent a wire to Stalin: "Did your men take my dox?" On the same day Stirlitz got an encrypted message from the Center: "Justas, if you took documents from Comrade Hitler's safe, please put them back, people worry."

Stirlitz, as played by Tikhonov, is a peculiar protagonist, even if we disregard the fact that he spends much of the series in full SS regalia. (Let us not linger among the pedants who have pointed out that his uniform should, by 1945, have been grey rather than black.) The Russian film critic Viktor Demin characterized him acutely: "Up to a certain moment the hero remains a mysterious 'black box' out of which there is simply no response to the signals of the world. He is a sort of superdense star, whose gravity only attracts light waves but itself does not emit any." Stirlitz is precisely a black hole, whose enigmatic passivity warps reality around him. He is played by the luminously beautiful Tikhonov as a kind of inverted Buster Keaton: his face is an impassive mask most of the time, but rather than resembling that of a child too ingenuous even to clown, like Keaton's, it becomes the poker face of someone playing for his life, that we scrutinize for every tell or tic. The omniscient voice-over provides the cues, with its insistent interior monologues—"Stirlitz thought…"—while Tikhonov essays every variety of pensiveness in close-up (his actorly method, apparently, being to rehearse times tables in his head).

Stirlitz's great antagonist is the Gestapo chief, Müller. The latter part of the series unfolds as a cat-and-mouse game between them—a battle of wits staged by two arch sophists, in which Stirlitz's identity as the Soviet "resident" inches ever-closer to incontrovertible revelation. There is a kind of limbo-dance logic to the way Stirlitz must squeeze himself into a decreasing margin of plausibility as he explains, for example, why his

Leonid Bronevoy as Heinrich Müller, head of the Gestapo, and Vyacheslav Tikhonov as Max Otto von Stirlitz, a.k.a. "Justas," a.k.a. Maxim Maximovich Isaev

fingerprints were found on a Russian radio transmitter. Strangely, however, Müller grows more sympathetic over the course of this duel. And in the realm of Russian fandom, his character is almost as iconic as Stirlitz's. Unlike Stirlitz's immediate superior, the urbane Schellenberg, Müller is a figure of peasant cunning — "I still don't know," he remarks sarcastically to Stirlitz, "whether one should cut up an apple, or eat it whole as they do at my home, together with the seeds" — and resolutely cynical in the face of all ideologies.

The theater actor Leonid Bronevoy plays Müller as the genially menacing uncle; his trademark laugh is a leering bark, summoned mechanically and mirthlessly to signal a checkmate. Tikhonov's Stirlitz, by contrast, is debonair, ironic rather than jocular, and strangely chaste; his supernatural calm does not take the form of Bond-like bravado, but rather the resolve to stay in character at all costs. He only comes under suspicion in the first place because Kaltenbrunner, Müller's boss, decides he seems TOO loyal, never complaining about "our tragic situation, the stupidity of our military, the cretinism of Ribbentrop, about that idiot Göring, about the nightmare that awaits every one of us if the Russians break into Berlin . . . ." A signature Stirlitz misdirection-under-fire would be his having the presence of mind, while being interrogated by Müller in a subterranean cell and on the brink of being uncovered, to demonstrate a yoga breathing exercise for the Gestapo chief's headache. In such moments, Stirlitz is in many ways an anti-Bond. Bond, after all, is always *utterly himself*—even if he bothers with a cover story, it is the purest fig leaf. Stirlitz represents the stoical opposite, a spy who sacrifices his whole identity, consumed by his cover story — as if Bond had spent most of his time as one of Dr. No's senior henchmen.

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Stirlitz wakes up to find that he has been imprisoned. "Who got me? Which identity should I use?," he wonders. "Let's see. If they wear black uniforms, I'll say I'm Standartenführer Stirlitz. If they wear green uniforms, I'm Colonel Isaev." The door opens and a policeman in a blue uniform comes in saying, "You really should ease up on the vodka, Comrade Tikhonov!"

During the production of *Seventeen Moments*, the KGB were always close at hand. Their main liaison with the crew was a Georgian agent called Georgi Pipia. One day the director of the series, Tatyana Lioznova phoned Pipia to ask him to come to the set to advise on an interrogation scene, but Pipia was not available. He suggested instead she simply ask her producer, Zenovi Genzor, to offer his own expertise — Genzor, Pipia knew, had been arrested and spent two years in jail in the late 1940s for telling a politically incorrect *anekdot*.

The term "anekdot" is normally translated as "joke," but, as Seth Graham puts it in his study of Russo-Soviet *anekdoty*, "the dissimilarity of their respective cultural environments makes the terms less synonymous than one might expect, even in the post-Soviet era." An *anekdot*, in the Soviet context, was a joke under pressure, a joke in an environment where humor was a hair's breadth from subversion — in a sense, every true *anekdot* in Soviet Russia was politically incorrect, a kind of oral *samizdat*. As Genzor had discovered, the Soviet state was a stony-faced audience for *anekdoty* — he was one of an estimated 200,000 people sent to the gulag for *anekdot*-telling during the Stalin period. The system's paranoia was inflationary. Article 58, the catch-all statute of the penal code against "anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda" under which *anekdoty* were punishable by up to ten years in prison, applied even to *bytovye anekdoty*, everyday and apparently apolitical shaggy dog stories that would shade into what we might call anecdotes. This, as Graham notes, meant that the penal code itself took on a weirdly anecdotal logic: today you tell a dirty joke, tomorrow you will make one at expense of the state. But the *anekdoty* responded to the expansiveness of the taboo with their own forms of self-reflexivity, jokes about joke-making, for example: "The state announces a contest for the best political joke. First prize: 15 years."

Part of *Seventeen Moments*' afterlife in Russian culture has been the proliferation of Stirlitz *anekdoty*. Stirlitz is, in fact, one of the most popular figures of the *anekdot* form, along with Chapaev (a Red Army hero of the Civil War and subject of a hugely popular 1934 film), Sherlock Holmes (subject of a series of early 1980s Soviet television films), and Vinni-Pukh (the Russian cartoon version of Winnie the Pooh). There is an enormous cycle of Stirlitz *anekdoty*, which tend to fall into a number of overlapping categories: jokes about the failure of Müller and company to recognize

Stirlitz as a spy in the face of all the evidence, jokes about Stirlitz's own pensiveness, jokes travestying Yefim Kopelyan's deadpan voiceover, and jokes based on puns and wordplay. It's possible to find some of these jokes in English, though that large proportion which fall into the last category, of course, defy translation. For example: «Штирлиц погладил кошку, кошка сдохла. «Странно»—подумал Штирлиц, поплевав на утюг» ("Stirlitz stroked a cat, the cat died. 'How strange,' Stirlitz thought, while spitting on a hot iron"—the pun being on the verb погладил, which means both "to stroke" and "to iron.")

Seventeen Moments is also the subject of endless parody in other films and television series. In particular, one famous scene recurs: a flashback to Stirlitz's Russian wife being brought into the Blue Elephant bar in Berlin by a Soviet handler, for a "meeting" in which, for six wordless minutes, they will do nothing but exchange surreptitious glances across the room, in increasingly charged close-ups and to the strains of Mikael Tariverdiyev's melancholic theme. The original scene embodies many of *Seventeen Moments*' most distinctive traits and concerns: clandestinity, nostalgia, fidelity, chasteness, self-mastery. The wildly different valences of *Seventeen Moments* in contemporary Russian culture can partly be gauged by this scene's afterlife in send-ups. The queer performance artist and mimic Vladislav Mamyshev, who died mysteriously in early 2013, had a famous sketch in which he played both parts and pantomimed Tikhonov's strained taciturnity; by contrast, when the






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unmasked-Russian-sleeper-agent-turned-celebrity Anna Chapman played the part of Stirlitz's wife in a US-baiting sketch for a Russian state television channel's New Year's gala in 2010, the effect was brazenly nationalistic.

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Driving on a highway, Stirlitz saw Müller, who was trying to get a lift. Stirlitz nearly stopped, but he thought: "I cannot give a lift to the Nazi hangman who killed hundreds of Soviet people, can I?" After a while he saw him again: "I don't have to let this dirty double-dealing swine into my car, do I?" Stirlitz twisted his mouth and went on. Seeing Müller for the third time, he just thought: "Ring road."

In spring 1973, a few months before the series was first broadcast, a select group of KGB officials watched all 12 episodes of *Seventeen Moments of Spring* on the third floor of their headquarters in Moscow's Lubyanka Street. Since the head of the KGB, Yuri Andropov, struggled to find time in his schedule (he had only recently been promoted to full voting status in the Politburo, its first KGB member for two decades), the screenings normally comprised four-episode blocks, omnibus style, which would start around 1 a.m. and run through until early morning.

Andropov — the notorious "Butcher of Budapest," a deceptively grey apparatchik who was behind many of the most repressive policies against the "dissidents," and who would briefly be Soviet premier before his death in the early 1980s — had a personal stake in *Seventeen Moments*. He was deeply concerned to improve the image of the KGB and the Soviet leadership in general, and in 1967, early in his tenure as head of the of the KGB, he seems to have effectively commissioned *Seventeen Moments of Spring* from the author Julian Semyonov. For Andropov, Stirlitz was an ideal vehicle to preemptively stir patriotic memories of the war, in advance of the 30th anniversary of victory, while at the same time insinuating a more heroic archetype for the hated agents of state security.

Semyonov, an established novelist, had already written a book, *No Password Required*, featuring Isaev as a Cheka agent in the post-revolutionary period, but the idea of transposing him to the Great Patriotic War as

"Stirlitz" appears to have emerged from his conversations with Andropov. Andropov turned Semyonov loose on the KGB's archives, where he could read about Soviet agents in Nazi-occupied Europe like Leopold Trepper and Sándor Radó (both rewarded for their services with spells in Lubyanka prison), or Willi Lehmann, a German-born SS Hauptsturmführer who had fed information to the Soviets and whose warning about an imminent Nazi attack the Soviet authorities had catastrophically disregarded. Stirlitz was thus born as a kind of composite figure with a patina of authenticity, but a distinctly more harmonious relationship with his Moscow Center employers than any of his real-life counterparts.

Seventeen Moments of Spring first appeared in serialized novel form in 1969, while the screenplay for the television series was still being written, and received mixed notices. Some reviewers objected that the Nazis were portrayed with too much intelligence and charm, in stark contrast with the goose-stepping automata Soviet audiences were familiar with. But Vsevolod Yezhov, a consultant on "historical issues" to the all-powerful Central Committee of the Communist Party, wrote a positive review in the weekly *Literaturnaya Gazeta*, in which he defended the book on precisely that basis: setting up the Nazis as worthy opponents only added to the glory of the final Soviet victory, he argued. With the joint lobbying power of the KGB and Yezhov (who would later receive an on-screen credit), the television adaptation was commissioned with a substantial budget — which it required in order, for example, for the production of more than 200 individually-tailored Nazi uniforms, as well as location shooting.

When it was finally broadcast in August 1973, after a three-year production, *Seventeen Moments of Spring* was a phenomenon. Viewing figures were reported between 50 and 80 million, a record for the period. The lead actors were immediately besieged: Leonid Bronevoy, who played Müller, had to barricade himself into his apartment on at least one occasion; Ekaterina Gradova, who played Kathe, Stirlitz's loyal "pianist" (secret radio operator) and subject of the series' most melodramatic moments, was trapped for two hours in a supermarket by a crowd of excited fans. Eventually the police had to be called. After it was shown in the GDR, the actor who had played Schellenberg, Oleg Tabakov, received a postcard from Schellenberg's niece thanking him for his portrayal which was "just as kind as uncle Walther."

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Leonid Brezhnev, the Soviet premier and iconic figure of this "stagnation" era in Soviet life, supposedly watched the series over 20 times and would reschedule Central Committee meetings that clashed with it. (He later had Tikhonov read his memoirs for television.) Even the foreign press, not much given to covering Soviet popular culture, registered its success. A much-cited report in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* claimed that when Stirlitz was in the streets of Berlin the streets of Moscow were empty, adding that the crime rates plummeted and electricity consumption spiked.

Seventeen Moments has reached such a level of iconicity in Russia that even its own popularity is part of the myth. What is striking is how much the series, and the myth, have survived the collapse of the USSR, with their touchstone status in Russian culture seemingly unharmed. Putin — who gave an award to the director Lioznova, as well as to Tikhonov — is an avowed fan of Stirlitz, quoted as saying, "What amazed me most of all was how one man's effort could achieve what whole armies could not." At the same time, Putin was also, from his earliest days in power, concerned to rehabilitate Andropov. In 1999, for example, he presided over the reinstatement of a memorial plaque for his predecessor outside the FSB (formerly KGB) offices on Lubyanka Street, which had been removed in 1991. This, as journalist Irina Borogan puts it, was an act of pure self-interest: "The myth of Andropov as a liberal is one that was dug out of dusty Soviet store-rooms at the turn of the millennium, when Putin felt the need to explain to society why the secret services were beginning to play an increasingly important role in society and why KGB alumni were being installed in top positions in government and business."

Stirlitz, who was from the outset the magic mirror wish-image of the secret state, and whose myth had never gathered much dust, thus became the archetype for an unspoken continuity. From the start, Stirlitz was a heroic-nostalgic symbol of high Stalinism, minted in a later Soviet milieu. Now he become the jack-booted patron saint for a revisionist version of the Soviet era *tout court*, comfortably compatible with a contemporary Russian politics whose ideology is too hollowed out to even convincingly be called Putinism.

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"Congratulations upon your son's birth," a message from the Center read. Stirlitz even cried for joy: the brave spy had not been at home for twenty years.

The novel *Seventeen Moments of Spring* was dedicated by Julian Semyonov to "my father." "Semyonov" was, in fact, his pen name —his real name was Julian Semyonovich Lyandres. His father, Semyon Alexandrovich Lyandres, had been an editor at the newspaper *Istvestiya* and personal secretary to Nikolai Ivanovich Bukharin, the last and most emblematic of the old Bolsheviks to be "purged" in Stalin's show trials of the 1930s.

Semyon Lyandres, a Belarussian Jew, was a committed Bolshevik. Lyandres was close to the centers of power—the infant Julian was once dandled on Stalin's knee after his father had been called to Stalin's dacha with some papers—but also fatally close to Bukharin, and was unable to escape the association, even though he narrowly avoided arrest during the period of the purges. In 1952, 15 years after Bukharin had been sent to Lubyanka, he was arrested under Article 58, specifically charged as "an accomplice of the Bukharin counterrevolutionary conspiracy." He was brutally beaten during the interrogation and rendered partly paralyzed. He remained in jail until 1954.

Julian was born in 1931. According to family legend, Julian's maternal grandmother had him secretly christened and chose the name Stepan; his parents, both firmly irreligious, responded by having him registered under the name Julian, after the Roman emperor who had renounced Christianity. Julian retained "Stepanov" as a kind of alter ego, and one of the protagonists of his later novels goes by the same name. In 1941, aged ten, he tried to run away to join the Soviet soldiers fighting the Nazis at the front, and again the next year; finally, in May 1945, a family photograph shows him standing, aged 14, in front of the ruins of the Reichstag in Berlin—his father had taken him on a posting there to report the end of the war.

The jailing of his father affected Julian badly. He was 20 at the time, and was summarily expelled from his course at the Moscow Institute of Oriental Studies. He wrote letters pleading for his father's release to

Stalin, his deputy Beria, the ministry of defense, and anyone else he could think of, but always received the same rote response. Whether his lobbying had any effect, or whether the key was Stalin's death in 1953, Semyon's release does seem to have removed the stigma. Julian was able to resume his studies. He wrote his thesis at the Institute on feudal border rights in Afghanistan and traveled to Kabul in 1955, the beginning of a lifetime of foreign travel, which seems scarcely credible in that period of travel controls and rationed exit visas. He moved away from academia and became a journalist, often a foreign correspondent, specializing in exotic and dangerous locations—tiger hunting in the Taiga forests, visiting polar stations, following Viet Cong fighters on combat missions. He self-consciously modeled himself on Hemingway, whom he discovered at 19 and identified with as an adventurer and passionate anti-fascist. He was in contact with the widow, Mary Hemingway, and took her duck hunting on the Volga when she visited Russia.

By most accounts, Julian Semyonov was a Hemingway-like character —or perhaps more like a character from Hemingway: imposing, restless, reckless, relentlessly gregarious, prolific, a carouser and womanizer. His friend Lev Durov, an actor who played the *agent provocateur* Klaus in *Seventeen Moments*, compared him to Falstaff and called him a "perpetual motion machine;" John Calder, who published the English translation

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of *Seventeen Moments*, recorded in his memoirs fond, booze-soaked occasions with Semyonov on a promotional tour in Britain and the United States in 1988. An *LA Times* profile by Jack Miles from that trip accorded Semyonov grudging respect, but identified a streak of self-promotion: "Hustle is not a word that we associate with the word spy. Hustle is indeed a word that I might associate with the name Semyonov." Miles also probed the unusual license with which Semyonov, as a Soviet writer, seemed to operate: "We may trace a plot within the plot of his rise to fame. The outer plot is his journey from the margin to his present position as consummate Soviet literary insider. The inner plot is his way of bringing a little of the margin along with him."

What Semyonov was not, on anybody's account, was a dissident. For Western audiences of the period, worthwhile Soviet literature could be summed up in one word: Solzhenitsyn. Apart from his books themselves, and in particular *The Gulag Archipelago*, Solzhenitsyn's status in the West was confirmed by his being sent into exile in 1974. Preceding that had been a long campaign waged against Solzhenitsyn and other dissident writers by Andropov and the KGB, including their forced incarceration in mental hospitals. Semyonov was different; he felt that it was unfair to expect the victims of Stalin's persecution like his father to "go into the political wilderness" a second time by voicing their anger. He remained close to Andropov and, according to his daughter Olga, mourned him as a friend rather than merely a patron when he died; he was later good friends with Mikhail and Raisa Gorbachev. Semyonov was a political animal, certainly a less convinced Communist than his father — if a Communist at all — but also clearly informed by his father's experience and careful to cultivate connections.

What is mysterious about Semyonov is that he was not simply a court flatterer — as Miles put it, he was trying to retain a little of the margins. He seems to have achieved this by a kind of tacking back and forth across the border of what was permissable. The American historian Walter Lacqueur, in a 1986 article called "Julian Semyonov and the Soviet Political Novel," wrote: "Semyonov cannot rehabilitate Trotsky or even Bukharin in his novels, but he can drop broad hints indicating in which direction the wind is blowing; and he can go, on occasion, a little bit further than the official line." After inventorying some factual failings and seeming

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Julian Semyonov

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political pandering in Semyonov's fiction, Lacqueur is careful not to moralize, but acknowledges that it is impossible to gauge how necessary Semyonov's compromises had actually been: "Who can blame Semyonov if he chose concessions (and immense popularity) rather than the obscurity of *Samizdat*? Whether he would have been shot in the cellars of the Lubyanka had he refrained from bringing in Stalin and Vyshinski [to the Stirlitz novels] is another question."

Semyonov, like Tikhonov, had become identified with Stirlitz; his status as a Soviet insider was based partly on the success of *Seventeen Moments*. He went on to write a cycle of another dozen novels featuring the spy, ranging across the 20th century. His daughter relates that he wore a silver bracelet for much of his later life, with his own name on one side and on the reverse, "Maxim Stirlitz." If it indicated that Stirlitz was a kind of alter ego for Semyonov, it is significant that it was the spy's cover identity he chose; and his "own" name was, after all, a pen name; two sides of a nonexistent coin.

Shortly after the fall of the Berlin Wall, Semyonov had a stroke, which severely debilitated him. He died in 1993. He had become somewhat more outspoken in the latter days of Glasnost, and Olga believes he may have been poisoned on account of some of his journalism, perhaps related to the journal *Top Secret*, which he started in 1989.

At the beginning of his career, Semyonov had apparently been torn between writing and acting. In 1972, for reasons which are not clear but may well reflect his power to pull strings, he was cast in Andrei Tarkovsky's science-fiction film *Solaris* as the Chairman of the Investigation Commission, his only major role. He appears in an early scene, conducting a cross-examination of an astronaut who has reported visions while serving on a space station orbiting the ocean planet Solaris. Semyonov, as the Chairman, concludes: "Everything we know about Solaris is negative, and has come to resemble a mountain of disjointed, incoherent facts that strain credulity."

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Müller was walking through the forest when he saw two eyes staring at him in the darkness. "An owl," thought Müller. "Who's an owl? You're an owl yourself!" thought Stirlitz.

An early dialog in *Seventeen Moments* between Himmler and Schellenberg takes place in a private screening room, much like the one in which Andropov and his colleagues would have first watched the series in their offices in Lubyanka. Ten minutes into the very first episode of the series, the two of them watch propaganda reels, one after another: an American reel, a German reel, and a Russian reel — we, the audience, watching with them — the image cutting between the newsreels and the reactions of the two Nazi functionaries. To begin with, Schellenberg translates the English newsreel for Himmler — translates, that is, into Russian, which is nonetheless of course understood by the audience to be German, in diegetic terms. After a while, Himmler tells him to stop — "Propaganda hype. You don't need to translate." — and they, and we, watch the rest of the American reel and the whole of the German reel without translation. When it comes to the Russian reel, about the Yalta conference, Himmler snidely observes that Stalin is looking old, but Schellenberg demurs: we seem, for a moment, to be in an alternate universe version of *Mystery Science Theater 3000*, in which notorious Nazis provide running commentary.

Ostensibly, the scene lays out a dynamic in which Schellenberg encourages his boss to make peace overtures; but the longeurs of the newsreel, so early in this "thriller" series, seem too conspicuous, particularly since they don't even do any heavy-lifting in terms of providing exposition about the backdrop of the war in early 1945. Towards the end of the first episode, however, the newsreel returns — but this time in the form of documentary footage used purely illustratively, while the omniscient narrator tells us about the triumphant advance of the Soviet armies through Hungary. Something peculiar has happened: we have become the direct consumers of newsreel propaganda, but only after we have already been provided with an example of skeptical spectatorship in the model of leading Nazis. In effect, the series has given us its own alibi — it offers us the official story of the Great Patriotic War, which it continues to recite periodically by way of stock footage, while simultaneously suggesting this official story is mere "propaganda hype" we can safely ignore.

A crack seems to open up in *Seventeen Moments*, a gap between its function as a product of official Soviet culture and some other allegorical logic. There is a long tradition in Russian culture of what Lenin referred to as "that accursed Aesopian language," the indirect language of political fable and allegory by which the censors (Tsarist or Communist) could be avoided — a way of embedding private messages in public speech. Lenin himself, for example, had used "Japan" as a proxy for "Russia" in his 1917 text "Imperialism, the Highest Form of Capitalism," so that an apparent critique of Japanese imperialism was intelligible to "interested" readers as a target closer to home. Bukharin, 20 years later, published several articles in *Istvestiya* which signaled the anti-Stalinist analogies of his anti-Nazi polemics by, for example, quoting Machiavelli, the anointed father of political double-speak — in his last published article, written shortly before he was tried and executed, he was almost explicit: "An intricate network of decorative deceit (in words and deeds) is an extremely essential characteristic of fascist regimes of all kinds and complexions."

In *Seventeen Moments*, the murmur of such Aesopian allegory is almost audible. Is it not strange, for example, that Stirlitz is fretting about the Nazis making overtures to "the West," as if Germany were somewhere further to the East? Mark Lipovetsky, in the most suggestive (English-language) reading of *Seventeen Moments*, observes how, "the general discourse of the film, which was peppered with such expressions as 'he was remolded,' 'party apparatus,' 'dissident,' 'listened to western radio too much,' 'this is not a telephone conversation,' and 'his grandma is a Jewess' also inevitably triggered Soviet rather than Nazi associations." Andropov's KGB does not escape this metaphorical contagion: as Schellenberg remarks at one point, "Müller is immortal — as immortal as the sleuth profession." Even the otherwise incidental fact that the actors are speaking Russian, which we are nonetheless expected to treat as if it were German most of the time, takes on an unexpected charge — a kind of emperor's new clothes effect. Schellenberg and Himmler's exchange about the newsreel would thus be a signal moment: instead of tame propaganda, the series seems to promise a self-portrait of the Soviet subject, living out a schizophrenic existence in the springtime of the post-Stalinist "thaw."

The perils of conformity, the importance of alibi, and the attempt to maintain a discreet inner distance from the ideology to which you have to pay

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lip service: these were everyday experiences for many Soviet citizens of the 1970s. Lipovetsky goes further, sketching a more specific double-coding of the series for at least some of its Soviet audience: "The whole system of characters unfolds here as the conflict between dissenting (Soviet) intellectuals and those intellectuals who have chosen to play by the system's brutal rules for the sake of self-realization." Stirlitz, in this version, becomes as much the dream self-image of the Soviet intelligentsia, as he is that of Andropov's secret state: a piano- and chess-playing sophisticate, living in relative comfort, who dazzles his party employers while remaining privately critical of them. The surface aspects of Stirlitz's cover story, his bourgeois (western) sophistication, would therefore be the clue to his real identity. His secret is that he has no secret: "He is actually," suggests Lipovetsky, "a spy FROM THE INTELLIGENTSIA who tries to present his true self as his adopted identity."

To be truly Aesopian, however, we would have to be able to ascribe an intention to these readings. Was any of this subtext, for example, really present for the director Lioznova, a Soviet patriot who apparently wept over Stalin's speeches? Or for Semyonov, who would in this case be as daring as Stirlitz, plotting his satire from Andropov's office? Perhaps we now begin to understand why Lenin called this language accursed. Fables are not like one of Stirlitz's ciphers, a completely private code that is perfectly intelligible to whomever holds the key; they are instead a form of public encryption which attempts to rely on a set of shared values and associations, common enough to remain unspoken. A fable is an anecdote sharpened to the point of allegory, a story that is at least halfway autonomous from its teller. Inherent, irreducible ambiguity marks both the political fable's stratagem and its limits. Moreover, the kinds of shared contexts on which it subsists have a half-life: they invariably decay, in such a way that the moral of the fable, its political payload, is also indexed to history.

We can disregard this question of intention, if we like, or simply take pleasure, like Susan Sontag's followers of camp, in discovering perhaps unintended meanings. A certain lack of apparent intention may even produce a more powerful allegorical effect: Theodor W. Adorno, for example, prized the unintentional (and anachronistic) resemblance between Charlie Chaplin's Tramp and Hitler over the explicit parody of

The Great Dictator. But if we are actually interested in the mechanism of this double-agency by which — as a product of intentions, or in spite of them — a drama about deception can deceive us, or itself, we will have to reckon with a powerful irony, whose meaning cannot be vouchsafed. Or, as Graham writes of the *anekdoty*: "The trajectories of satirical vectors are often tricky to establish . . . ."

. . .

Stirlitz thought. He liked it, and he thought again.

Olga Semenyova tells an anecdote about an incident towards the end of her father's life. There was a writers' conference in Prague in 1989, but Václav Havel, the dissident writer and future Czech president, was still in jail as a political prisoner, and many of the participants in the conference wished to pass a resolution of protest. The French contingent wished to protest in strident terms, but others, in particular a Cuban writer and the Soviet representatives, including Julian Semyonov, wanted to temper the language, for fear of the consequences — not only for themselves, but for Czech comrades. Semyonov and his bloc were ostracized.

Havel was a poet, playwright, and essayist who had taken the other fork in the road when faced with the question of conformity. Confronting

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the often brutal Czechoslovakian regime, Havel was not interested in chameleon writerly strategies of the kind that might allow him to smuggle in second-order meanings for a select audience, or in paying the kind of lip service which might grant him the license, like Semyonov, to go "a little bit further than the official line." His approach was, instead, one of blazing intransigence and uncompromising honesty, at whatever personal cost. Slavoj Žižek, writing recently on Havel's 1978 book about life under Communism, *The Power of the Powerless*, is clear about the features and prospects of this more puritan path: "With the terrorism that characterizes every authentic ethical stance, Havel mercilessly cuts off and denounces all false exits, all false modes of distance towards the ruling ideology, including cynicism and seeking refuge in the apolitical niche of the 'small pleasures of everyday life'—such acts of indifference, of making fun of official rituals in private circles, are the very mode of reproduction of the official ideology."

The "terrorism" of uncompromising dissidence confronts, then, not blind obedience or fanatical belief, but accommodating cynicism, that compliant form of getting-along that privatizes its discontent. This mode of indifference and introspection, the feeling of seeing through the ideology but having, to some degree at least, to play along in public, was, according to Žižek, the very essence of late Soviet conformity: "Every party functionary, right up to Stalin himself, was in a way a 'closet dissident,' talking privately about themes prohibited in public." Havel, then, was an exemplary out-of-the-closet dissident in abolishing the difference between private and public expression—excluding, absolutely, the possibility of taking up the role of a spy in one's own culture, the compromise of double-agency.

In *Seventeen Moments*, the idea of breaking cover or taking a position openly is mocked, or as one fork-tongued character puts it: "Openness is the ultimate, intelligent, purposeful substance of cynicism." There are no Havel-like puritan figures; the few German characters who are idealistic anti-Nazis are naive, or ineffectual—Stirlitz has to manipulate them skillfully before they can serve a purpose. There are, however, writers. Klaus, the *agent provocateur*, is in many ways the most diabolical character, more repellent than the card-carrying Nazis he serves because he is so craven—"You can't be free among the slaves. So wouldn't it be better to be the freest among the slaves?"—but he is also, as he

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conspicuously confesses, a failed writer. Stirlitz, on the other hand, responds to a toying accusation from Schellenberg that he is a poet by saying, "I swear I wrote everything except verses." Hiding in plain sight.

Bertolt Brecht, another writer in constant negotiation with Communist authority, argued in his essay "Writing the Truth: Five Difficulties" that one of the essential strategies for a writer was the ability to disguise meanings, in order to disseminate one's words without reprisal: "Cunning is necessary to spread the truth." He even cites, as an example, Lenin and his juggling of "Japan" and "Russia." But what use, ultimately, are fables? When we use one thing to speak of another, what kind of equivalence does that actually suggest? The apparent resemblances between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, for example, which have often been noted and which feed the rubric of "totalitarianism," may conceal as much as they reveal. It is not even clear under what conditions the secret meaning of a fable becomes self-evident in the first place; Brecht does not linger over the codes of literacy by which readers become initiates, and perhaps with good reason. *Seventeen Moments* appears to offer a fable about fables, a drama about double-speak, in which writerly cunning is the highest virtue —but writers can never entirely wish away the possibility they will be taken at their word.

There are accounts, from 1970s Moscow, of gangs of neo-Nazi youths who modeled themselves on *Seventeen Moments*. Who is to say that they were bad readers for their insistence on its stubbornly literal surfaces? Those of us who enjoy the "small pleasures" of fable, real or imagined, the refined and cynical pleasures of irony? Perhaps every consumer of culture wishes, at some moment, to feel like a spy, understanding more than is said, knowing more than they say. Lest we forget, however: Aesop himself was a slave.

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