THE INDEPENDENT, 10 March 2001

Laugh ... I nearly died; Heard the one about the Communist, the Nazi and the Jew? Throughout the bleakest historical moments of the last century, says Adam LeBor, political jokes flourished. But what will we find to laugh about in the stable, integrated Europe of the 21st century?

A German joke, they say, is no laughing matter. Which, just in case you were wondering, is in itself a joke. Admittedly, it may not reduce you to hysterical giggling, but doubtless down Munich way it has them slapping their lederhosen with delight. And certainly to anyone familiar with German earnestness, it is funny. It's curious that it is the German language that has brought us the term schadenfreude, which translates as joy in others' suffering, but as a country the Germans take a definite masochistic delight in others' mockery of them as stolid and dull. Consider this humorous question posed by one German to another:

"You know what they say about crime in Germany?"
"No, what do they say?"
"It's illegal."

Well, quite. Jokes and humour, like food, are a barometer of a nation's character. Even if founded in national cliche there is usually some truth in the stereotype, otherwise it would not exist - which is why German jokes tend to plod along. Perhaps national humour is related to cuisine. Germans drink plenty of beer and pile up the sausage and sauerkraut (remember ex-Chancellor Kohl's favourite dish is a stuffed pig stomach) - all solid fare to dull the sensibilities. That also presumably explains why farting jokes are always popular. Either way, such a diet is unlikely to inspire a new generation of Teutonic Oscar Wildes. In fact even the opening epigram was coined not by a German, but by Mark Twain.

So then, what about a contemporary German joke? Try this: It is Christmas and someone rings at the gate of a house in the country. A woman opens the door and sees a man is outside, looking cold and hungry. He asks: "Would you take in an asylum-seeker at Christmas?" The woman replies: "Hold on, I must ask my husband." She goes into the living room and asks: "Dear Hans, there is someone outside asking if we would take an asylum seeker in for Christmas." Hans puts his newspaper down and considers this for a moment: "Well, it's all right on my account, but I would rather it was a goose!" The Teutonic concern for the practicalities of life and organisation is also implicit in this joke: Kunibert reads out to his wife from the newspaper: "Electricity is getting more and more expensive." She replies: "Well then, be glad you are not a large light bulb!"

Jokes are also a means of self-definition. Every nation mocks one or another neighbour for supposedly being dull or stupid, and those mocked in turn mock others. Humour exhibits little solidarity: the Irish immigrants in the United States laughed at for their Celtic provincialism were soon telling jokes about later arrivals from Poland, to show their stronger roots in American society. Within countries themselves, people from different regions are laughed at by their compatriots. British people tell jokes about the Irish, Irish people tell jokes about residents of

County Cork. Germans themselves, especially the chic metropolitan elites of cities such as Berlin and Frankfurt, like to poke fun at Saxons. Residents of Saxony, site of Dresden in the former East Germany, are cruelly lampooned for speaking a supposedly incomprehensible dialect, being rural bumpkins and suffering high unemployment. For example: What is the difference between a Turk and a Saxon? A Turk can speak German and has a job.

Even the Scandinavians, whose home is a byword for tolerance, moderation and successful social democracy, laugh at each other's national characteristics. Finns tell jokes about Swedes, Swedes tell jokes about Danes. Danes in turn laugh at Finns, considered dourest of the lot.

Q: How can you tell an extrovert Finn?
A: He looks at your feet instead of his own while he is talking to you.
As for the poor Danes, can they really be this unloved:
Q: Why do Danish people never play hide and seek?
A: Nobody wants to look for them.

Let him who is without stereotypical national characteristics cast the first punchline, as Jesus might have said. The great man has inspired quite a few witticisms himself: witness Liberal Democrat leader Charles Kennedy recently proclaiming that, had Jack Straw encountered the Three Kings on their way to the crib, he would have had them arrested for carrying suspicious substances. I prefer the one that asks, How do we know that Jesus was Jewish? Because he lived at home until he was 30, he went into his father's business, he thought his mother was a virgin and she thought he was God. Perhaps not surprisingly, some of the best Jesus jokes are Jewish jokes:
Mr Goldber's son wants to convert to Catholicism, so he goes to the rabbi for advice. The rabbi himself is in despair, because his son wants to become a Catholic priest. So they decide to pray to God for help and guidance on how to bring back their sons to Judaism, when suddenly a voice booms through the sky: "You think you've got problems!"

Now, as the prospect of a united Europe grows ever more likely, the number of pan-European jokes, taking a swing at several nationalities in one go, flourishes. Such jokes are usually set on a desert island, that perfect Shangri-La - at least for humorists - where every nationality perpetually, and conveniently, conforms to its stereotype. The Euro-joke, as it may be dubbed, is easily convertible as a common currency of humour, and can be translated into every European language as there is something to laugh at about everyone ... A ship carrying passengers from all over Europe sinks and the survivors manage to make their way to a desert island. They are: two Italian men and one woman; two Greek men and one woman; two French men and one woman; two German men and one woman; two Englishmen and one woman.

A month later they are rescued by a passing cruise liner. The captain steps ashore, and he finds: one Italian man has killed the other in a duel over the Italian woman; the two Greek men are sleeping together while the Greek woman does the cooking and cleaning; the two French men and the woman are living together in a blissful menage a trois; the German woman has set up a strictly timetabled rota, dividing her favours between the two German men; the Englishmen and the woman have not spoken a word to each other as nobody introduced them.

As the European Union prepares to expand eastwards, the jokes are packing up and preparing to start travelling as well. The joke told by Austrians about Hungarians - How do you make a Hungarian omelette? First, steal six eggs - is now told by Hungarians about Romanians.

Under certain regimes through history jokes could be dangerous, as well as amusing, because of their latent power. Milan Kundera's book The Joke opens with the story of Ludvik, a cynical student living in Stalinist Czechoslovakia, who sends his puritanical girlfriend a postcard praising Trotsky. Poor Ludvik was then sent to an army penal battalion. Which is not very funny, but somehow the sentence, out of all proportion to the crime, starkly illustrates the subversive power of a joke.

When a society is purportedly based on an idea - whether Marxist-Leninism or a fundamentalist religion - that claims to embody eternal truths, the penalty for mentioning the names of other prophets, and other alternatives, must be severe, or the whole rickety construction will start to wobble, and then collapse. To mention Trotsky, even in jest, was to suggest that there was an alternative path. Under Communism there were none. Which is why George Orwell called political jokes "tiny revolutions".

In their wonderful book No Laughing Matter: A Collection of Political Jokes, authors Steven Lukes and Itzhak Galnoor note that political jokes under tyranny are a form of coping, that even if the situation deteriorates drastically, "they still represent a collective intimacy, a sign that people belong, that they care, and consequently that they entertain hope". The Hungarian humorist George Mikes, who called jokes the "folksongs of an urban population" even claimed that in some Eastern European countries the secret police actually invented and spread, censored and licensed anti-regime jokes, on the principle that if you can't beat them, join them. Perhaps they invented this one: Why do secret policemen go around in threes? One to read, one to write, and one to keep an eye on the two dangerous intellectuals.

During the Sixties, noted Mikes, some Polish and Hungarian Communist leaders were keen on collecting jokes told against themselves; the hardline East German leader Walter Ulbricht was keen on collecting the people who told them. But even the subtlest satirist was hard-pressed to compete with the reality of life under the Communist regimes. We now know that Ulbricht, and the fellow leaders of the former East Germany, collected not just people who told anti-regime jokes, but their smells. Agents of the secret police would enter the flats of those considered a threat and bottle their smell, before training sniffer dogs to detect it. In Hungary every typewriter in the country was licensed, numbered and a sample of its print taken. When dissidents produced samizdat (underground) literature a special department would compare the typewritten documents with the samples until the offending machine was tracked down. No wonder the Soviet bloc nations were known as "Absurdistan".

Telling anti-regime jokes in the Third Reich was far more perilous. The scathing Weimar-era cabarets, immortalised in the film Cabaret, that had reduced Hitler and his henchmen to objects of mockery were closed down once the Nazis took power. Perhaps it was a perverse recognition of the power of humour under totalitarianism that the penalty for telling a joke about the Nazi leadership was death, and a mere denunciation was often sufficient evidence. On 28 July 1944 the People's Court sentenced Father Josef Muller to be hanged for telling the following joke: On his death bed a wounded soldier asked to see for one last time the people for whom he had laid down his life. The nurses brought a picture of the Fuhrer and laid it on his right side. Then they brought a portrait of Reichsmarschall Goering and laid it on his left. He said: "Now I can die like Jesus Christ, between two criminals."

Still there were those who took the risk and kept humour alive. The tradition of cynical wit lived on, especially in Berlin, which was never the most enthusiastic of Nazi cities. In the early

stages of the war, jokes were aimed mainly at the vanity and the unsavoury lifestyle of the Nazi chieftains. The racial ideology was mocked. The perfect German? Blond as Hitler, slim as Goering, tall as Goebbels. There was some cynical prescience in the jokes circulating in 1940. Two friends are talking. "When the war is over," says one, "I plan to make a bicycle tour around Germany." The friend replies: "Fine, what will you do after lunch?"

In war, as in peace, jokes evolved in line with changing circumstances. As the Wehrmacht's victories halted under the onslaught of the Red Army, and the death notices mounted in the newspapers back home, jokes began to circulate about the army's military performance. As a mock communique about the battle of Stalingrad said: "Valiant German soldiers captured a two-room flat with its own kitchen, toilet and bathroom, and despite fierce counter-attacks by Soviet bandits, managed to retain two-thirds of it."

The foibles of Nazi leaders provided rich material for humorists. Ernst Rohm, leader of the SA Brownshirts, executed in the 1934 Night of the Long Knives, was a violent and predatory homosexual. After his death one joke proclaimed that: Now we can understand his recent address to young people, that "Out of every Hitler Youth a Storm Trooper will emerge."

Even mordant Jewish humour found a new outlet in the madness of Hitler's rule ... An SS man says to a Jew in a concentration camp:

"You will die today but I will give you one last chance. I have a glass eye. If you can tell which one I will spare you."
The Jew looks at the SS man and says: "It is the left one."
"How did you guess?"
The Jew replies: "It looked more human."

Nowadays, thankfully, Jewish jokes are less morbid. Yiddish jokes - wry, self-deprecating, tinged with sorrow - permeate much of Western humour, reflecting the contribution of Jews to the entertainment industry. The archetypal overbearing Jewish mother has moved away from specifically Jewish humour into the mainstream, thanks in part to comedians such as Woody Allen. The rapid-fire cynical wit of comedians like Lenny Bruce and Ben Elton draws heavily on this cultural tradition. Jewish jokes have evolved from making cracks about survival under oppressive regimes, to the difficulties of ensuring a comfortable bourgeois family life, and worrying over children's professional careers. A pre-war Jewish joke has two men sitting on a park bench in Warsaw: the first one continually sighs, and holds his head in his hands. This goes on for some time, until the second man becomes increasingly exasperated, turns to him and says: "If you keep talking politics, I'm leaving." The same joke is now told about two dowager ladies playing cards on Miami Beach, except the punchline goes: "If you keep talking about the children, I'm leaving."

Joke anthologies of political jokes and Jewish jokes often feature the same anecdotes. Acerbic Yiddish humour flourished under Communism. It is perhaps a bit far-fetched to say that such political jokes ultimately helped bring about the downfall of the Soviet bloc, but they certainly encapsulated the grim realities and staggering hypocrisies of daily life. Cataclysmic events such as the 1956 Soviet invasion of Hungary immediately spawned their own gloomy cracks:

Istvan goes to the Budapest police headquarters in 1956, shortly after the Soviet invasion. "I want to file a crime report," he tells the officer at the reception.

"What happened?"
"A Swiss soldier stole my Russian watch."
"Pardon?"
"A Swiss soldier stole my Russian watch."
"Don't you mean a Russian soldier stole your Swiss watch?"
"I didn't say that, you did."

The Alice-in-Wonderland claims of the Communist regime that things were progressing ever onwards and upwards, when in reality they were going backwards, are more subtly mocked in this riddle: What is the difference between an optimist, a pessimist and a Marxist-Leninist? An optimist is searching for a non-existent black cat in a dark cellar, and he hopes he will find it. A pessimist is searching for a non-existent black cat in a dark cellar, and he doesn't think he will find it. A Marxist-Leninist is searching for a non-existent black cat in a dark cellar and he finds it.
Nowadays, Russian quips about five-year plans and shortages have been replaced by humour that pokes fun at an often out-of-control capitalism, ostentatious mafiosi and an economic meltdown with all its attendant social chaos. Capitalism may have replaced Communism, but jokes still act as a safety valve for those struggling with the new system.

"Humour is very important. It is a means for people to hit back at authority, especially when they feel that they are powerless with regard to all the momentous changes in society that they see around them," says Budapest- based psychologist Dr Laszlo Petrovics-Ofner. "Telling jokes is still a defence mechanism. Rather than blow up a government building, they tell a joke to try and assuage their powerlessness. These new jokes show political humour evolves in different circumstances. Now the jokes are about social issues."

Such as: What's the difference between a Russian optimist, pessimist and realist? The optimist is learning German, the pessimist is learning Chinese and the realist is learning how to shoot a Kalashnikov.

Communist puritanism has been replaced by lavish ostentation, as this joke from Moscow shows: Two Russian mafiosi are sitting in a bar, showing off their new clothes.

"How much did you pay for that tie?" asks the first.
"This tie is pure Italian silk. It cost $300," says the second proudly.
"Three hundred dollars! Is that all? You were ripped off my friend. This tie cost me $800!"

Paradoxically, while many jokes are based on mocking the "other", humour can also be a great unifier. Every country has its joke about the little man putting one over on the authorities. This Vietnamese joke is easily transportable and has been told all over the world: Tuan cycles up to the Chinese border, with two large bags on his shoulders. The Chinese border guard stops him and asks what is in the bag. "Rice," says Tuan. The guard opens the bags, empties them out, sends the rice to be analysed, and holds Tuan overnight. The results come back: pure rice, and nothing else. Tuan is released and cycles off into China. A week later, Tuan is back and the guard goes through the same procedure. A week after that Tuan returns again, the guard again checks the