



Dwarves Vs. Tanks

On 13 December 1981, the government in Communist Poland put tanks on the streets to suppress Solidarity, a movement with nine million members, whose very existence had for the previous sixteen months defied the one-party state. Thousands were beaten, teargassed and arrested.

It was unsurprising that Solidarity supporters daubed anti-government graffiti on walls across Poland during and after martial law. It was equally unsurprising that the Communist authorities kept whitewashing those graffiti away.

In 1987, a group called the Orange Alternative painted over the government's white splodges. But instead of yet more banned graffiti, they drew pictures of red-hatted dwarves, lookalikes of Snow White's Bashful, Dopey, Sneezy and friends. This put the government in a quandary. On the face of it, the gaily painted dwarves – krasnoludki or 'little red-hatted folk' – were not obviously subversive. They were, after all, just dwarves. And yet, the authorities could not help feeling that they were being mocked. They felt obliged to treat the orange and red figures as enemies of the state. The order went

out from on high: dwarves must be painted over wherever they appeared.

Despite and because of being painted over so often, the popularity of the dwarves continued to grow. The Orange Alternative, led by a self-styled 'major' called Waldemar Fydrych, organized dwarf rallies (bring your own red or orange hat), and public actions in defense of little guys. The banned slogan 'There is no freedom without Solidarity' was replaced by a more unusual chant: 'There is no freedom without dwarves.' The authorities were not sure how to cope.

As protests multiplied across Poland, the regime finally agreed to talk to the opposition. A year after the Dwarves' Revolution, partly free elections took place on 4 June, 1989 for the first time since the Second World War. Solidarity won 99 out of 100 of the freely elected seats. It was a political earthquake for all eastern Europe. Two months after the elections, on August 24, 1989 a non-Communist government was sworn in – right in the middle of the still-existing Soviet bloc. Three months after that, the Berlin Wall broke open.

“No one holds up a red card to an ocean.”
- Kurt Tucholsky



The Power of Applause

In authoritarian countries, leaders usually crave and even demand applause. In the former Soviet republic of Belarus, that principle was turned on its head. Protesters applauded the president – and the authorities locked them up for doing so.

The authorities' logic, it must be said, was compelling. After all, who would applaud Alexander Lukashenko, unloved president of Belarus for the past two decades, unless they were secretly mocking him? Lukashenko has been described as 'Europe's last dictator'. Ahead of elections in 2006, he said that anyone joining an opposition protest would be treated as a terrorist. He explained, 'we will wring their necks, as one might a duck.'

It might seem hopeless to attempt to confront Lukashenko's power. And yet, citizens of Belarus found ways to make the regime look angrily foolish. A weekly burst of public clapping began every Wednesday in

the Belarusian capital, Minsk, in May 2011. Lukashenko knew the applause for him and his government could not be serious. The authorities therefore forbade people to clap in public places at all.

During a speech given by Lukashenko a few months later, even presidential yes-men were obliged to sit silent, in case their applause for the president might be construed as illegal irony. Belarusians who ignored the ban and applauded the president were teargassed and arrested for 'petty hooliganism'. One of those arrested for allegedly applauding the president included a man who only had one arm.

The ban on applause was only the beginning. The authorities eventually came up with a blanket ban which prohibited all gatherings taking place 'for the purpose of a form of action or inaction.' For Lukashenko, those who choose to do something and those who choose to do nothing can both seem equally subversive.

“Irreverence is the champion of liberty, and its only sure defence.”
- Mark Twain



Putin's Guys and Siberian Dolls

Vladimir Putin worked for many years with the KGB, the Soviet secret police. In 1999, he became Russian prime minister. In 2000 and again in 2004, he became president for the maximum permitted two terms. In 2008 – unable to stand for the presidency – he went back to being prime minister again. Finally, in 2011, he suddenly announced he wanted to be president for an unprecedented third term, under an imaginative re-interpretation of the electoral rules.

For many Russians, this was the last straw, especially when there was documented evidence of vote-stuffing in the parliamentary elections that year. In Moscow, tens of thousands of protesters linked hands to encircle the city, wearing the white ribbons that became a national symbol of change. Many were arrested.

It turned out that the Russian authorities were not just afraid of people. Toys proved politically scary, too. An assortment of dolls – including teddy bears and *South Park* figurines – were planted in the snow in the Siberian city of Barnaul, as substitute protesters. The toys carried slogans like 'I'm for clean elections' and 'A thief should sit in jail, not in the Kremlin.'

On the face of it, the miniature dolls could hardly have been less threatening. But the authorities reckoned they represented an 'unsanctioned public event' – and also noted that the toys were 'not citizens of Russia' ('especially the imported toys') which meant

that the toys' protest was banned.

Police scrupulously recorded the dangerous slogans in their notebooks. The police action – ahead of presidential elections in 2012 – was duly uploaded to YouTube, where Russians could laugh at the official paranoia. In the words of protest organizer Lyudmila Alexandrova, 'We wanted to show the absurdity and farce of officials' struggle with their own people.'



“Freedom is always the freedom of those who think differently.”
- Rosa Luxemburg

