CAPONEU - The Cartography of the Political Novel in Europe

Il'ia Il'f, Evgenii Petrov

The Twelve Chairs & The Golden Calf

Двенадцать стульев/ Dvenadtsat' stul'yev & Золотой телёнок/ Zolotoy telyonok

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In the fluid and often contradictory cultural climate of the post-revolutionary Soviet Union, a distinctive literary phenomenon emerged from the collaboration between Il'ia Il'f and Evgenii Petrov. Il'f (1897–1937) and Petrov (1903–1942) were Soviet writers best known for their joint satirical novels. Both began their careers as journalists within the vibrant literary scene of 1920s Moscow, where their shared sense of humour and sharp observational skills brought them together. Their partnership produced some of the most enduring works of Soviet satire, characterised by wit, irony, and a keen awareness of everyday absurdities. Il'f died of tuberculosis during a trip to the United States, while Petrov was killed in a plane crash during the Second World War, bringing their remarkably productive collaboration to an early end.

Their novel *The Twelve Chairs* (Двенадцать стульев / Dvenadtsat' stul'yev, 1928), later paired with its companion *The Golden Calf* (Золотой телёнок / Zolotoy telyonok, 1931), stands as one of the era's most inventive literary responses to a society in transition. Written amid the uneasy freedoms of the NEP and on the cusp of Stalin's drive for rapid industrialisation, the novels capture a revealing blend of hope, improvisation, and opportunism that characterised everyday life. In doing so, they helped shape a uniquely Soviet tradition of satirical fiction, whose humour remains firmly embedded in the cultural consciousness.

At the centre of this diptych are the exploits of the self-styled "smooth operator" (великий комбинатор / velikii kombinator) Ostap Bender. The plot of *The Twelve Chairs* is deceptively simple: on her deathbed, the mother-in-law of a former nobleman, Vorobyaninov, confesses that she hid her diamonds inside one of twelve family chairs later confiscated by the Soviet authorities. Vorobyaninov teams up with the young conman Bender to recover the treasure, though their search is complicated by a rival claimant, Father Vostrikov, a priest privy to the same secret. Their ensuing journey across Soviet Russia provides Il'f and Petrov with a panoramic canvas to satirise contemporary life, bringing their protagonists into contact with bureaucrats, journalists, remnants of the pre-revolutionary elite, small-town provincials, and worldly Muscovites.

In *The Golden Calf*, Bender discovers that Alexander Koreiko, a low-level Soviet official, is secretly a millionaire. Bender assembles a team of eccentric accomplices and travels across the Soviet Union to find Koreiko and blackmail him. Through his audacious attempts to accumulate wealth – while ostensibly maintaining a rhetorical allegiance to the Soviet penal code – the novel offers a sustained satirical critique of the contradictions within early Soviet ideology. Bender's schemes, though ingenious, consistently unravel in the face of the structural and ideological constraints of the emerging Stalinist order, exposing the limits of individual agency within an increasingly rigid socio-political system.

Given the novels' tendency to push the boundaries of what was permissible in Soviet culture, their warm critical reception within official literary discourse may at first seem paradoxical. Apart from two unfavourable notices – one in

Вечерняя Москва (*Evening Moscow)* and another in *Книга и Союзы рабочих* (*The Book and Workers' Unions*) in September 1928—and a dismissive remark in the 1929 year-end survey of *30 дней* (*30 Days*), the very magazine that had first serialised their fiction, Il′f and Petrov's novels initially drew little attention from the literary establishment. *The Golden Calf* was also serialised in *30 дней* (*30 Days*) in 1931, but concerns from the censors delayed its Russian book publication until 1933. In contrast, other satirists of the period experienced far harsher treatment. Mikhail Zoshchenko, for example, only came under sustained attack in 1946 after Andrei Zhdanov's denunciation, despite earlier praise from figures such as Maksim Gor′kii and his receipt of the Order of the Red Banner of Labour in 1939. Writers like Evgenii Zamiatin, Boris Pil′niak, and Mikhail Kol′tsov faced even more severe repression. Against this backdrop, the degree to which Il′f and Petrov managed to avoid official censure throughout their careers is particularly striking.

Many scholars describe the novels as employing a form of "subversive" humour that outwardly conforms to Soviet political and aesthetic norms while covertly undermining them at every illicitly satirical turn. Central to this interpretation is the concept of a satire-within-satire, in which seemingly conventional targets of ridicule simultaneously express deeper, potentially subversive critiques. The most notable transgressor of established norms is, of course, the "smooth operator" himself, Ostap Bender, whose resourcefulness and manipulative flair evoke both the Western European picaresque hero and the indigenous Russian figure of the impostor (самозванец / samozvanets).

Recent analyses of Soviet humour suggest an alternative perspective on the novels' canonical status. While their humour could have a liberating effect for some readers, *The Twelve Chairs* and *The Golden Calf* ultimately functioned in ways that aligned with the interests of the Soviet state. These studies show that Soviet humour often acknowledged collective trauma while discouraging prolonged engagement with it. By encouraging readers to laugh not through tears but instead of them, these novels helped cultivate a distinctly Soviet mode of laughter, in which trauma is repurposed as a mechanism of social discipline. In this sense, Soviet laughter served as a crucial tool for managing a uniquely Soviet collective trauma.

Adaptations:

1. The Twelve Chairs

Dvanáct křesel (1933): The first known film adaptation, a joint Polish-Czechoslovak production directed by Martin Frič and Michał Waszyński. This version significantly altered the plot, and several subsequent international adaptations were based on this film rather than the novel.

Keep Your Seats, Please (1936): A British musical comedy film directed by Monty Banks that loosely adapts the story, reducing the number of chairs to seven and setting the action in Britain.

It's in the Bag! (1945): Directed by Richard Wallace, this American film starring Fred Allen and Jack Benny is very loosely based on the novel, reducing the treasure hunt to five chairs.

Las Doce Sillas (1962): A Cuban film directed by Tomás Gutiérrez Alea, setting the story in a post-revolutionary tropical context, with a different political conclusion.

The Thirteen Chairs (1969): An Italian-French co-production starring Sharon Tate and Orson Welles, which strays significantly from the original novel.

The Twelve Chairs (1970): The best-known English-language version, directed by Mel Brooks and starring Frank Langella as Ostap Bender, Ron Moody as Vorobyaninov, and Dom DeLuise as Father Fyodor. Brooks's version follows the novel more closely than many others, with some added

slapstick humour.

The Twelve Chairs (1971): Leonid Gaidai's 1971 adaptation of *The Twelve Chairs* became a cultural phenomenon in the Soviet Union, attracting over 39 million viewers on its initial release and becoming one of the year's box-office leaders. Blending sharp satire with exuberant comedy, the film won audiences over so completely that many of its lines and character portrayals entered everyday Soviet humour. Its lasting appeal is reflected in modern ratings, with the film continuing to score above 8/10 on major review platforms, confirming its status as the most enduring and beloved screen version of Il'f and Petrov's classic.

The Twelve Chairs (1976): A four-episode musical television miniseries in the Soviet Union directed by Mark Zakharov.

Operettas and Stage Plays: Dmitri Shostakovich composed an unfinished operetta based on the novel in 1939. The novel has also been adapted numerous times for the stage.

2. The Golden Calf

The Golden Calf (1968): Soviet feature comedy film directed by Mikhail Shveitser; starring Sergei Yursky, Leonid Kuravlyov, Zinovy Gerdt, and Yevgeniy Yevstigneyev.

Zolotoy telyonok (2006 TV series): a multi-episode Russian adaptation of *The Golden Calf*, directed by Ulyana Shilkina and produced by Central Partnership and Park Cinema Production.

Zlatno tele (2010), adapted and directed by Goran Marković, Narodno pozorište u Beogradu (National Theatre in Belgrade).

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CENSORSHIP STATUS: