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Political Humor under Stalin

An Anthology of Unofficial Jokes and Anecdotes

Edited and with an Introduction by

David Brandenberger

Bloomington, Indiana, 2009

Introduction

At first glance, the idea that political humor existed under Stalin seems rather unlikely. What could there have been to joke about? Who, aside from a handful of party card-carrying cartoonists at *Pravda* and *Krokodil*, would have risked telling jokes in such a repressive state? Was political joking even imaginable within a country where everyone was supposedly "speaking Bolshevik" by the mid-1930s?[1]

Apparently it was. Although émigrés have long debated whether or not the USSR's distinctive culture of political humor dates back to the Stalin period,[2] broader interest in the subject has recently been stimulated by the discovery of political jokes in the former Soviet archives. Treated in passing in a number of studies,[3] the political humor of the 1930s and '40s takes center stage in this volume through the reprinting and translation of a rare collection of jokes compiled during the last years of Stalin's reign. More than merely a joke book, however, *Political Humor Under Stalin* also examines both the

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[1] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilization* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), chap. 5; Jochen Hellbeck, "Fashioning the Stalinist Soul: The Diary of Stepan Podlubnyi (1931–1939)," *Jahrbücher für Geschichte Osteuropas* 44: 3 (1996): 371–72.

[2] Some testify to a vibrant culture of political joking, while others express skepticism—compare Dora Sturman, "Soviet Joking Matters: Six Leaders in Search of Character," *Survey* 28: 3 (1984): 204–08; and Zhanna Dolgopolova, "The Contrary World of the Anecdote," *Melbourne Slavonic Studies* 15 (1981): 1, 7.

[3] Early literature on the subject includes Eugene Lyons, "Red Laughter," in *Moscow Carousel* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1935), 321–40; W. H. Chamberlin, "The 'Anecdote': Unrationed Soviet Humor," *Russian Review* 16: 1 (1957): 27–34. More recently, see Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism—Ordinary Life in Extraodinary Times: The Soviet 1930s* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 3, 166, 183–85, 221; Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934–1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 28–29, 175–77, 185; James von Geldern and Richard Stites, eds., *Mass Culture in Soviet Russia: Tales, Poems, Songs, Movies, Plays and Folklore, 1917–1953* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995); Lesley Rimmel, "The Kirov Murder and Soviet Society: Propaganda and Public Opinion in Leningrad, 1934–1935" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pennsylvania, 1995); David Hoffmann, *Peasant Metropolis: Peasant Identities in Moscow, 1929–1941* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1994), 205; Robert Thurston, "Social Dimensions of Stalin's Rule: Humor and Terror in the USSR," *Journal of Social History* 24: 3 (1991): 541–62.

cultural context and the nature of the joking itself, providing a glimpse of everyday laughter and wit in one of the twentieth century's most authoritarian states. In some senses an archeology of Stalin-era popular culture, this study draws upon an array of diaries, memoirs, archival documents and interviews conducted with former Soviet citizens between 1950 and 1951 under the auspices of the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. It contends that humor in Stalinist society played an important role that has seldom been given the attention it deserves—as one Soviet diarist put it in 1933, "at some point in the future, when someone is given the difficult task of writing the history of our everyday life, it's difficult to imagine that he will be able to skirt the subject of political jokes." Continuing, this diarist explained the centrality of jokes and anecdotes to any understanding of the period:

> Within them, everything is captured in whimsical form: the ordinary citizen's hatred and protest against the cruelty and injustice of state policy; his hope and despair; his laughter and tears. Is there anything, anything at all, that hasn't made it into those jokes? They're openly swapped out-loud among drinking buddies while clinking glasses; they're whispered to one another while chuckling at intersections and tram stops; they're exchanged at work among colleagues while keeping a watchful eye out. Hope, despair, laughter and tears.... Sometimes these jokes are ribald or vulgar, but that only increases their appeal to the ordinary man, who's embittered enough to be driven to such things.[4]

Nearly twenty years later, one of this diarist's contemporaries echoed his sentiments, contending that "by studying the anecdotes, you can study the Soviet regime.... From a study of anecdotes, you can create the most correct picture of the Soviet Union."[5] Far from a laughing matter, then, political humor played a major role during the Stalin period that has too long remained at the margins of Soviet political, social, and cultural history.

Cultural Context

Most discussions of joke-telling under Stalin stress the degree to which the culture of political humor was governed by raw *chutzpah*. As is well known,

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[4] Diary entry from July 24, 1933, in A. G. Man'kov, "Iz dnevnika riadovogo cheloveka," *Zvezda*, no. 5 (1994): 151.

[5] Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (hereafter HPSSS), no. 149, schedule A, vol. 11, 42, 95 (idiosyncratic syntax is characteristic of this cycle of interviews; for other details concerning the HPSSS, see the Appendix). Emigrés still talked about the historical importance of Stalin-era jokes 35 years later—see Iulius Telesin, *101 izbrannyi sovetskii politicheskii anekdot* (Tenafly, NJ: Ermitazh, 1986), 8.

joke telling was considered "anti-Soviet agitation" by the secret police and prosecuted aggressively under Article 58/10 of the RSFSR Criminal Code.[6] Even so, political humor appears to have been quite widespread—some even claim that the majority of jokes told in the USSR during these years were of a political nature.[7] According to the memoirist Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov, "we knew there were NKVD informers among us, but we usually recognized and avoided them and they did not evoke much fear in us." He continues that although an unspoken taboo precluded joking around strangers, among "one's own," political humor served as a popular diversion:

> Scathing anti-Soviet jokes would spread through Moscow within a mere two to three days and be heard in the offices of Party executives and others, in homes, in shops and on the street. It seemed the all-powerful NKVD could not prevent this from happening. Never once did such an anecdote evoke indignation or revulsion in anyone. People merrily amused themselves at the expense of the authorities, ... [reveling] in a common sentiment.... The Soviet citizen lived as citizens have always and everywhere, quietly gloating, chuckling, or bristling with indignation, giving the authorities "the finger in the pocket."[8]

Of course, the fact that many ordinary workers, peasants, and even party executives told jokes does not explain how the practice persisted despite police persecution. Memoirists like Andreev-Khomiakov suggest, however, that it was cliques, networks, and other unofficial social institutions—whether

[6] According to émigrés, sentences varied according to the joke. Poking fun at the Soviet government could earn a person three years, whereas jokes about Stalin were punishable with five years or more. See HPSSS, no. 30, schedule A, vol. 4, 17; also no. 32, schedule A, vol. 4, 54; no. 385, schedule A, vol. 19, 256; no. 512, schedule A, vol. 26, 24; no. 1296, schedule A, vol. 33, 31; no. 1498, schedule A, vol. 35, 17; no. 1693, schedule A, vol. 36, 12, 16; no. 1497, schedule A, vol. 5, 30; no. 1498, schedule A, vol. 35, 17. On Article 58/10, see Sarah Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation' in the Soviet Union in the 1930s," *Cahier du monde russe* 39: 1–2 (1998): 149–68.

[7] Diary entry from July 24, 1933, in Man'kov, "Iz dnevnika riadovogo cheloveka," 151; Mikhail Boikov, *Liudi sovetskoi tiur'my*, vol. 1 (Buenos Aires: Seiatel', 1957), 359; HPSSS, no. 45, schedule A, vol. 4, 14; no. 79, schedule A, vol. 6, 8; no. 1582, schedule A, vol. 36, 10; no. 1693, schedule A, vol. 36, 62–63; no. 1705, schedule A, vol. 36, 45.

[8] Gennady Andreev-Khomiakov, *Bitter Waters: Life and Work in Stalin's Russia*, trans. Ann E. Healy (Boulder, CO: Westview, 1997), 131–32, originally published as *Gor'kie vody: Ocherki i rasskazy* (Frankfurt-am-Main: Posev, 1954). See also HPSSS, no. 127, schedule A, vol. 10, 36; no. 445, schedule A, vol. 22, 12; no. 1390, schedule A, vol. 33, 38.

FIGURE 1. Red Army soldiers

familial, professional, or patronage-based—that provided insiders with enough of a sense of security to make joking out-loud imaginable.[9] Perhaps the most common setting for this risky indulgence was at home among family members in an atmosphere that many appear to have believed was private and even privileged.[10] There, dissatisfaction with everyday life mounted into grumbling, sarcasm, and the exchange of caustic one-liners and wisecracks. Noting that "hard times and bad conditions forced families together," one former Soviet citizen explained to an interviewer in 1951 that the commonality of people's experience with "wants, needs, and sorrow" inclined them to try to make light of such drudgery. "We all had fun together, telling jokes and

[9] Theorists agree on the importance of the security afforded by such networks—see Mahadev Apte, *Humor and Laughter: An Anthropological Approach* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), 195. Some former Soviets confessed to having been afraid to take part in such conversations—see HPSSS, no. 1313, schedule A, vol. 33, 36, 64.

[10] Eugenia Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind* (London: Collins Harvill, 1989), 85; HPSSS, no. 445, schedule A, vol. 22, 12; no. 541, schedule A, vol. 28, 28.

FIGURE 2. Domestic scene

anecdotes against the regime," he claimed. "Joke telling got to be quite a pastime," functioning as a way of releasing pent-up tension and frustration.[11]

Although such dissembling seems to have been a feature of many ordinary households and family circles, it also found a place among the party elite. Indeed, one Soviet refugee claimed after the war that although all his brothers belonged to either the party or the Komsomol, "our parents cursed the regime freely in front of us." Apparently a common facet of everyday life, "anti-Soviet jokes were also told in the [extended] family. When a relative of mine who lived in Moscow came to visit us, he talked freely against the Soviet regime and brought us the latest anti-Soviet jokes."[12] A woman who grew up in relative privilege added that "from childhood on I was told never to tell outside home what mother and father said. And they always said things against the regime. When father came home from business trips, his friends

[11] HPSSS, no. 1240, schedule A, vol. 32, 44.

[12] HPSSS, no. 240, schedule A, vol. 14, 46.

FIGURE 3. Military academy cafeteria

always asked him: what goods did you bring back with you? For us he brought presents; for his friends, he brought jokes."[13]

This last comment suggests that while joking occurred at home, it took place in other contexts as well. Dozens of accounts speak of close friends and colleagues trading jokes back and forth on the street and in the workplace; some of the most daring even recorded examples of this political humor in diaries and notebooks.[14] Jokes circulated on the shop floor and in Red Army mess halls, in the corridors of public schools, academies and institutes, and even within the upper echelons of the party nomenklatura.[15] Of course, if joke telling was surprisingly widespread, it was also subject to a rigid set of social practices, as an interview transcript with a former jokester makes clear:

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[13] HPSSS, no. 501, schedule A, vol. 25, 9–10.

[14] For mention of jokebooks, see HPSSS, no. 110, schedule A, vol. 8, 68; no. 127, schedule A, vol. 10, 36; no. 1123, schedule A, vol. 32, 10. A. N. Afinogenov mentions the compilation of such a jokebook in a December 14, 1936 diary entry at Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv literatury i iskusstv (RGALI) f. 2172, op. 1, d. 119, l. 265.

[15] HPSSS, no. 25s, schedule A, vol. 3, 15; no. 175, schedule A, vol. 13, 13; Andreev-Khomiakov, *Bitter Waters*, 131.

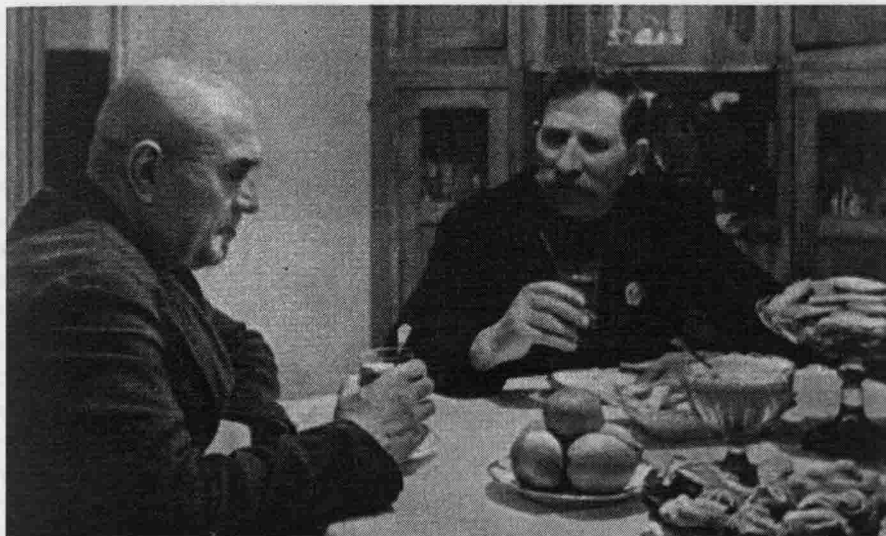

FIGURE 4. Industry executives after work

Question:	In general, did people tell political jokes?
Answer:	Yes, lots of them.
Question:	To whom?
Answer:	Oh, I could tell them to those I worked with. I knew them all. It was all a joke.
Question:	Were there some people to whom you would not have told them?
Answer:	Of course, to anybody whom I didn't know well… not under any circumstances.[16]

In other words, while political humor did play a role in Soviet society outside the home environment, this pastime was highly dependent on family-like bonds of trust and affinity.

Although joking on the domestic scene precipitated denunciations from time to time,[17] it was dissembling outside of the family circle that typically led to jokesters' downfall. Tens of thousands of Soviets were arrested every year during the 1930s for even the most innocent attempts at levity and humor. Scattered reports testify to occasional leniency on the part of the authorities—university students might only be expelled for a political joke instead of being formerly charged with anti-Soviet agitation, while Red Army soldiers might get away with an official reprimand or a dishonorable discharge.[18] Generally,

[16] HPSSS, no. 395, schedule A, vol. 20, 27.

[17] Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 85.

[18] HPSSS, no. 424, schedule B, vol. 21, 17; no. 517, schedule A, vol. 26, 24.

FIGURE 5. Celebration on a collective farm

however, party officials took a very dim view of the pastime. Widespread awareness of this punitive approach to political humor did not, however, discourage joke-telling so much as it encouraged jokesters to be selective about where and when they made their wisecracks.[19] Problems occurred when they failed to exercise sufficient caution, something that often came to pass in the context of social occasions where heavy drinking led to an unconscious lowering of inhibitions. Two former Soviet citizens interviewed in 1951 framed this peculiar sort of alcohol-induced candor by quoting the same proverb: "We Russians have a saying: 'Whatever a sober man has on his mind a drunk has on the tip of his tongue (*Chto u trezvogo na ume to u p'ianogo na iazyke*)."[20] Another supplied a story from personal experience that made the connection even more explicit:

> My uncle was arrested in 1931 for an anti-Soviet anecdote. He was an old man already, and he used to call on his friends [when he felt like a drink]. Once he narrated some anti-Communist anecdote. He did

[19] HPSSS, no. 1492, schedule A, vol. 34, 21; also no. 12, schedule A, vol. 2, 11; no. 25s, schedule A, vol. 3, 15; no. 395, schedule A, vol. 20, 27; no. 481, schedule A, vol. 24, 37–38.

[20] HPSSS, no. 483, schedule A, vol. 25, 18; no. 1664, schedule A, vol. 36, 13.

> not know that among his former friends there was already a [police] spy. On the next day all of them were arrested and sentenced to 5 years.[21]

As this and other examples indicate, one's mere presence at such a gathering could result in arrest if someone in the group later informed the authorities.[22] A variety of motives precipitated such denunciations. Some betrayed their neighbors and acquaintances out of sincere, patriotic convictions, accepting the regime's equation of joke-telling with anti-Soviet agitation. Others went to the authorities after hearing someone tell a joke out of fear that inaction would implicate them in the crime as well. Personal jealousy and rivalries sometimes also played a role, especially in overcrowded communal apartments. Careerism explains still other cases, as people attempted to curry favor with the authorities by appearing fanatically vigilant. Indeed, some of the most infamous denunciations were penned by "professional" NKVD informers among the intelligentsia and professional classes—the so-called *sekretnye sotrudniki* or *seksoty*.[23]

If the threat of denunciation failed to curtail the circulation of political humor in Stalinist society, it did force Soviet citizens to develop a set of social practices that governed the pastime. Among other things, these rules tended to reinforce the distinction drawn between close personal confidantes and more casual acquaintances. As one man confessed to an interviewer in 1951:

> It is painful to admit, but people behaved like beasts. They fought for their security even if it was at the expense of their neighbors' lives. [One could] not trust anybody, unless it was a person whom one knew well for many years.... I had three friends with whom I played bridge for 20 years, and still we did not say everything that we thought, although our conversation was rather frank....

According to this informant, such a tendency to be perpetually on guard was critical for survival. After all, it was common knowledge that an ill-timed joke could result in many years of hard labor.[24] A former Red Army officer confirmed that among casual acquaintances, people "lived a life of pretense." Although he reported that he had been lucky enough to have a confidante

[21] HPSSS, no. 1241, schedule A, vol. 32, 20; also no. 1124, schedule A, vol. 32, 39.

[22] For more examples, see HPSSS, no. 481, schedule A, vol. 24, 37–38; no. 1011, schedule A, vol. 31, 37.

[23] Among those Stalinist insiders traditionally viewed as responsible for high-level denunciations were the court litterateurs P. A. Pavlenko and V. P. Stavskii.

[24] HPSSS, no. 1091, schedule A, vol. 31, 15. For a similar set of observations relating to student life, see no. 424, schedule B, vol. 21, 17.

FIGURE 6. Red Army soldiers fraternizing with collective farmers

with whom he could swap the occasional joke, the bonds he shared with this colleague were rare—indeed, only after "psychologically feeling him out" for several years was the officer able to conclude that the two "thought alike and could speak with each other frankly."[25] What's more, even the closest of such relationships were delicate arrangements that depended upon a host of outside factors. As one former Soviet citizen recounted, "when my girlfriend entered the Party, I could no longer tell her all that I thought." Not only was she "no longer able to laugh at anti-Soviet jokes," but now she felt obligated to report anyone else indulging in the pastime to the NKVD.[26] Other changes in professional and personal life, from promotions and demotions to the appearance of new colleagues, acquaintances, and neighbors, also affected the ease with which trusted friends shared anecdotes with one another. It's almost cliché to say that the key to telling a good joke is knowing one's audience, but Soviet citizens under Stalin took this principle very seriously.

[25] HPSSS, no. 445, schedule A, vol. 22, 12.

[26] HPSSS, no. 14, schedule A, vol. 2, 35.

Subject, Genre and Performance

If the contents of this volume are any indication, Stalin-era jokes were almost as diverse as they were widespread. Wisecracks about official ideology and propaganda alternated with those concerning more mundane, everyday issues; sharp tongues assailed both specific leaders and the system in general. Neither women and children nor ethnic minorities escaped unscathed. As one former jokester put it, there were "anecdotes that were political, anecdotes about local affairs, which usually concerned Jews, and then we had jokes about Armenians."[27] Few subjects were taboo—fear of secret police persecution failed to prevent wisecracking, even on the most sensitive of topics. According to one woman, "anecdotes were very frequent, on all political events. Even though one could go to jail for five years for telling a joke, people still told them."[28] Another man added that once the joking began, almost nothing was sacred: "I remember there were lots of jokes about the private lives, especially about [the] sexual life [sic], of high officials, including Kalinin, Mikoyan, etc. I used to tell them to the [local] Party secretary and he used to enjoy them. Of course, all these rumors and jokes spread like wildfire." Apparently only Stalin escaped sexual ridicule.[29]

Aside from a great variety of subjects and themes, there were several distinct genres as well. The most common jokes were often little more than caustic wisecracks, to be muttered under one's breath. These one-liners gave voice to dissatisfaction or frustration through the use of sarcasm, vulgarity, cheap shots and other sorts of disrespectful behavior and represent the most straightforward type of political humor under Stalin. Short and sweet, such wisecracks allowed jokesters to challenge authority while enjoying a degree of plausible deniability that more direct forms of public protest did not afford ("No-no, I didn't mean *that*—you've just misunderstood me....").

Gallows humor, a second, more elaborate genre of joke-telling, generally revolved around the bitter realities of everyday life. Drawing upon Eastern European traditions favoring irony, double-entendres, and self-deprecation, this was another strategy that allowed ordinary people to express themselves while minimizing their accountability for potentially unfavorable commen-

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[27] HPSSS, no. 127, schedule A, vol. 10, 36.

[28] HPSSS, no. 1124, schedule A, vol. 32, 39. See also no. 446, schedule B, vol. 13, 72. Another informant noted that for most people, political humor consisted of exchanging "anecdotes in great number about the leaders; indeed it was a little dangerous to do this, because if we were discovered passing around these anecdotes ..., we might have been arrested." HPSSS, no. 373, schedule A, vol. 19, 49.

[29] HPSSS, no. 1390, schedule A, vol. 33, 38.

tary.[30] Alexei Yurchak notes that audiences responded to this sardonic, self-reflexive genre of humor for several reasons. Most obviously, it played off of a universal fascination that people have with each other's foibles, idiosyncrasies, and character flaws. Reveling in the exposure of hypocrisy, this genre frequently juxtaposed the fraudulent claims of official ideology against people's willingness to live according to such lies.[31] As one female refugee recalled after the war, "Students used to make fun of the slogans and make up different ones.... [W]e used to add words or change words in the slogans." Through such provocative acts, ordinary people could reveal to each other the degree to which they "understood and cursed the propaganda" that defined their lives.[32]

Political humor's allure in such contexts was compounded by the jokes' deliberate violation of social taboos. Much like contemporary humor revolving around sexism, ethnic stereotypes, and racy subject matter, the jokes of the 1930s and '40s resonated with their audiences because their burlesque and satire provided a striking alternative to the political orthodoxy that dominated mainstream Soviet culture.[33] The most outrageous of the era's jokes—those told at the expense of the party leadership and Stalin himself—represent an extreme form of this sort of joking. A combination of disrespectful irreverence and the flagrant transgression of social taboo, this genre of political humor and its dogged persistence is perhaps the single most remarkable aspect of joke-telling under Stalin.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the majority of the jokes told during the 1930s and '40s were bitter and dry rather than hilarious, jocular, or witty. For example, one classic joke begins: "For Marx, being (*bytie*) defines consciousness." It then immediately complements this ideological precept with the statement that "Soviet prisoners express this maxim differently, however: 'Beating (*bit'e*) defines consciousness.'" Ironic and self-reflexive, the humor here stems from the very structure of the joke. According to Yurchak, the first part of such jokes often focused on "a clichéd formula of official ideological

[30] Alan Dundes argues that such jokes serve as "socially sanctioned outlets for expressing taboo ideas and subjects." See his *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humor Cycles and Stereotypes* (Berkeley, CA: Ten Speed Press, 1987), vii.

[31] Alexei Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense and the *Anekdot*," *Public Culture* 9 (1997): 178–80.

[32] HPSSS, no. 455, schedule A, vol. 23, 78.

[33] Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism," 178–80. Yurchak bolsters his analysis with reference to C. Curco, "Some Observations on the Pragmatics of Humorous Interpretations: A Relevance Theoretic Approach," *Working Papers on Linguistics: Pragmatics* 7 (1995): 37, 47; and S. Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, vol. 8, *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. and ed. James Strachey (New York: W. W. Norton, 1960), 137. Arthur Koestler advances a similar argument in *The Act of Creation* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 91.

discourse, which was repeated with a straight face (as if taken for granted)." This was then immediately followed by another statement subverting it, the joke's formulaic structure allowing the jokester to deadpan it in such a way as to distance himself from the official claim that he was invoking and then indicting. The end result, according to Yurchak, "attracted listeners' attention to the discrepancy between their own understanding and their behavior," producing a sense of amusement that was subversive and introspective without losing its mass appeal.[34]

Of course, the wry nature of Stalin-era jokes also stems from the repressiveness of the state itself. Humor generally evolves in complexity and sophistication through repetition in front of a variety of audiences, where word choice is refined along with timing and delivery. Under Stalin, however, common sense cautioned against the performative aspect of this process, leaving Soviet jokesters with few opportunities to fine-tune their craft. This, as much as anything else, explains why modern readers may find the era's political humor somewhat stilted and perhaps overly dependent on irony and sarcasm.

Stalin-Era Humor in Historical Perspective

During the late 1930s, M. M. Bakhtin identified carnivalesque behavior—everything from satire and joke-telling to public displays of vulgarity—as a subversive bid to liberate society from the grip of ideological domination.[35] But while Bakhtin may have been right that some Stalin-era jokes hint at conscious oppositional activity, the vast majority should probably be viewed as resistance to authority on a more instinctive, emotional level instead. Humor during these years generally functioned as an escape valve of sorts that allowed people to vent their frustrations without committing themselves to anything more than a passing expression of dissatisfaction with the status

[34] Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism," 178–79.

[35] Although Bakhtin's work focused on Francois Rabelais' treatment of the tension between medieval society and the Catholic church, it is generally read as an allegorical critique of Soviet modernity as well. See M. M. Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1965); Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984), 295–320. Bakhtin's view was seconded during a postwar interview with a former Soviet citizen: HPSSS, no. 53, schedule B, vol. 1, 15. Many take an even more simplistic view of such jokes within oppressive political systems, seeing them as *a priori* evidence of articulate dissent—see Dundes, *Cracking Jokes*, vii, 159–68; Gregor Benton, "The Origin of the Political Joke," in *Humour in Society: Resistance and Control*, ed. Chris Powell and George E. C. Patton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988), 33–55, esp. 33–36; Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror: A Reassessment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 51; etc.

quo.[36] According to M. S. Petrovskii, such a sense of humor was highly personal and attempted to assuage "misfortune, humiliation and fright" rather than advance an explicit political agenda or undermine the established order.[37] Something akin to swearing and other types of disrespectful grumbling, joke-telling made a poor indicator of overall political loyalty—indeed, it was entirely possible during these years to make a wisecrack in private one moment and publicly swear allegiance to the USSR the next. Even when the jokes were daring enough to directly assail Stalin or other members of the party hierarchy, they probably had more in common with the limited, inarticulate resistance that the anthropologist James Scott describes in his book *Weapons of the Weak* (shirking, disobedience, verbal abuse, etc.) than they do with the mature and sophisticated political dissidence of the Brezhnev years.[38]

But if this joking was in many cases essentially devoid of lasting political and ideological meaning, memoirists like Andreev-Khomiakov certainly err in asserting that it never evoked popular indignation. As one former Soviet citizen recounted,

> I remember a banquet in honor of a movie director whom a cousin of mine had married. I was very gay, probably had too much to drink, and told two political jokes; the atmosphere became immediately strained and unpleasant. The whole party was spoiled.[39]

Choosing one's audience carefully was a serious matter—as the celebrated cases of O. E. Mandel'shtam and A. I. Solzhenitsyn make clear, even the naïve use of irony or sarcasm could be interpreted by party officials as an indication of disloyalty, if not outright anti-Soviet activity.[40]

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[36] For passing treatment of this interpretation, see Yekelchyk, "No Laughing Matter," 80–81, Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, 220; Davies, *Public Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, 177; Fitzpatrick, *Everyday Stalinism*, 186 n. 77; *Istoriia Sovetskoi Rossii (1917–1953) v anekdotakh*, ed. S. A. Shinkarchuk (St. Petersburg: Nestor, 2000), 5–8.

[37] M. S. Petrovskii, "Novyi anekdot znaesh'?" *Filosofskaia i sotsiologicheskaia mysl'*, no. 5 (1990): 49; more generally, Freud, *Jokes and their Relation to the Unconscious*, 102–15, 140–58, 233–35. For an extreme example of this phenomenon, see Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Uses of Humor during the Holocaust* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1991).

[38] James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985), 29.

[39] HPSSS, no. 31, schedule A, vol. 4, 11. Many explained their caution in public by averring that the secret police had an agent in every bar listening for inappropriate jokes. See no. 34, schedule A, vol. 4, 13; also no. 96, schedule A, vol. 7, 41; no. 523, schedule A, vol. 27, 14.

[40] O. E. Mandel'shtam was arrested in 1934 for reciting an anti-Stalin epigram at Boris Pasternak's apartment among friends; A. I. Solzhenitsyn was arrested in February

Part of the reason that people like Mandel'shtam committed such indiscretions in the first place stemmed from the fact that political humor in the USSR had not always been considered counterrevolutionary. Indeed, party leaders had encouraged anti-establishment joke-telling before 1917 and tolerated it in the years that followed.[41] Efforts to suppress political humor date only to the late 1920s, when officials were told to stop turning a blind eye toward the pastime after the outset of the Cultural Revolution. In 1929, a leading party critic and artistic censor even proposed to rein in the humor found in officially-sanctioned Soviet literature and theatrical productions. The critic, V. I. Blium, justified his position by warning in *Literaturnaia gazeta* that "the prerevolutionary tradition of satire (aimed against state and society) is turning into a direct attack against our own state and society." Inasmuch as satire threatened to undermine popular faith in the system as a whole, Blium called for the genre to be banned from the stage and belle lettres and restricted in the future to journalistic accounts of minor scandals.[42] A reflection of the Cultural Revolution's radicalism and intolerance, Blium's reservations regarding satire were seconded by other artistic authorities.[43] *Literaturnaia gazeta* proposed a compromise later that year whereby the formerly broad, wide-ranging Russian classical tradition of satire would henceforth be redirected against narrow social ills such as superstition, religion, and nationalism.[44] The paper's failure to include perennial Soviet concerns in this list such as political orthodoxy, class consciousness, labor discipline, and cultural literacy indicates that such issues were now to be discussed only with the appropriate modicum of sobriety and reserve.

Resistance to this hardline stance among members of the creative intelligentsia like Il'ia Il'f, Evgenii Petrov, and V. V. Maiakovskii led to the staging of a public debate in early 1930 to resolve the issue. There, Blium rebuked his opponents, declaring that satire served only to provide a forum for hidden class enemies to attack the USSR. "We don't need satire," he declared. "It's harmful to our worker-peasant state." Such hyperbole enraged Maiakovskii and quickly caused the debate to descend into little more than a shouting

1945 for caustic commentary about Stalin in personal correspondence with his childhood friend N. D. Vitkevich.

[41] Note the neutral tone of the official definition of "political joke" during the mid-1920s: "an idiosyncratic (*svoeobraznoe*) political tool" that "acquires major agitational significance in moments of social crisis"—"Anekdot," in *Bol'shaia Sovetskaia entsiklopediia*, 66 vols. (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1926), 2: 744.

[42] V. Blium, "Vozroditsia li satira?" *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 27 May 1929, p. 2. Blium's broadside was a response to A. Lezhnev's "Na puti k vozrozhdeniiu satiry," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 April 1929, p. 2.

[43] See, for instance, G. Iakubovskii, "O satire nashikh dnei," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 8 July 1929, p. 3; M. Rogi, "Puti Sovetskoi satiry," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 22 July 1929, p. 3.

[44] "O putiakh Sovetskoi satiry," *Literaturnaia gazeta*, 15 July 1929, p. 1.

match over the place of humor in Soviet mass culture. Although Blium was ultimately blamed for the fiasco, the satirists' victory was a pyrrhic one—indeed, even before the end of the debate, many of its participants had come to agree with Mikhail Kol'tsov that while Soviet satire had a right to exist, it also had a responsibility to uphold official state priorities.[45] This compromise, reaffirmed by Maksim Gor'kii in 1931 and again in 1934 by several speakers at the first conference of the Soviet Writers' Union,[46] effectively hobbled official Soviet satire at the same time that the secret police was attempting to curtail more run-of-the-mill joke-telling.[47] Fragmentary evidence suggests that this latter institution's campaign against political humor in society at large was aggressively enforced, leading to a massive increase in the number of ordinary people arrested on charges of "anti-Soviet agitation" between 1929 and 1931.[48]

Word traveled fast about the regime's determination to crack down on political humor—one diarist reported even before Blium's assault on satire that "the GPU has apparently been ordered to suppress jokes ridiculing Soviet power." Tellingly, however, the same diarist expressed doubts about the secret police's ability to stamp out the popular pastime, averring that "this folklore is not going to go quietly."[49] Evidence tends to confirm such suspicions, as the culture of political humor persisted despite its new-found notoriety. A good illustration is provided by events that unfolded in the wake

[45] Kol'tsov was the older brother of the famous *Izvestiia* cartoonist Boris Efimov. On the debate, see E. G. "Nuzhna li nam satira? Na dispute v Politekhnicheskom Muzee," *Literaturnaia gazeta,* 13 January 1930, p. 3; Efim Zozulia, "Fakticheskaia popravka," *Literaturnaia gazeta,* 13 January 1930, p. 3; Don Buzil'o [Il'f and Petrov], "Volshebnaia palka," *Chudak,* no. 2 (1930): 20; and archival materials published in E. Petrov, "Moi drug Il'f," *Voprosy literatury,* no. 1 (2001): 254–55. For A. M. Lunacharskii's 1931 attempt to revise views of the role of political humor under the old regime, see his "O smekhe," *Literaturnyi kritik,* no. 4 (1935): 3–9.

[46] M. Gor'kii, "Ob anekdotakh i—eshche koe o chem (okonchanie)," *Izvestiia,* 20 December 1931, p. 3; and speeches by M. Kol'tsov and N. Zarkhi at the first conference of the Soviet Writers' Union: *Pervyi vsesoiuznyi s"ezd sovetskikh pisatelei, 1934: Stenograficheskii otchet* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1934), 222–23, 465–66.

[47] For grumbling about Blium's chilling effect on Soviet satire, see Bulgakov's famous March 28, 1930 letter to Stalin and several pseudonymous articles by Il'f and Petrov: M. A. Bulgakov, *Dnevnik, Pis'ma, 1914–40* (Moscow: Sovremennyi pisatel', 1997), 226; Kholodnyi filosof, "Literaturnyi tramvai," *Literaturnaia gazeta,* 11 August 1932, p. 3; Kholodnyi filosof, "Listok iz al'boma," *Literaturnaia gazeta,* 23 March 1933, p. 2.

[48] Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation,'" 150–51. Davies attributes the policy shift to the growth of mass resistance against collectivization.

[49] Diary entry from May 13, 1929, in I. I. Shitts, *Dnevnik "Velikogo pereloma" (mart 1928–avgust 1931)* (Paris: YMCA-Press, 1991), 115. The timing of this change is obliquely confirmed in the postwar interview of a university student at the time—see HPSSS, no. 1158, schedule B, vol. 22, 5.

of the murder of S. M. Kirov in December 1934. Never satisfactorily explained, the killing of this Leningrad party boss touched off a firestorm of political hysteria within the upper ranks of the party, where even the most powerful seem to have feared that a plot was underway to undermine the Soviet political system.[50] As the secret police struggled to expose what was assumed to be a mass conspiracy, their union-wide investigation of political unreliability uncovered instead an entire subculture of joke-telling and dissembling, much of it at least temporarily revolving around Kirov's sudden demise.[51] Mean-spirited gossips referred to the fallen party boss as a lecherous Casanova done in by a jealous husband and chided that he "shouldn't have been chasing other men's wives" (*pust' ne taskaetsia za chuzhimi babami*).[52] Scores of Soviet citizens—including party members—were denounced for trafficking in such disrespectful talk.[53] Others got away with it, like the vandal in a Moscow suburb who scrawled "he got what he deserved" under a portrait of the party boss in early 1935.[54]

Cheap shots and snarky humor concerned police officials because of their potential to provoke more threatening commentary. For instance, a Moscow worker who accepted the official story that the party boss had been assassinated was reported to the NKVD for speculating aloud that "killing Kirov wasn't enough; for something to happen, you'd have to kill four more."[55] The sudden death of a second party boss, V. V. Kuibyshev, only months later added fuel to the fire. Sardonic rumors that he had "died from eating too

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[50] Leonid Nikolaev's motive for killing Kirov remains a mystery to the present day. His bitterness may have stemmed from his dismissal from a local institute; rumors of an affair between Kirov and Nikolaev's wife (who was the boss's personal secretary) have never been substantiated. See Alla Kirilina, *Rikoshet, ili skol'ko chelovek bylo ubito vystrelom v Smol'nom* (St. Petersburg: Znanie, 1993), 48–49, 104.

[51] See Tsentral'nyi gosudarstvennyi arkhiv istoriko-politicheskikh dokumentov g. Sankt-Peterburga (hereafter TsGAIPD SPb) f. 984, op. 5, d. 12, ll. 4, 16; f. 197, op. 1, d. 1008, ll. 11, 16; d. 873, l. 191, cited in Peter Konecny, *Builders and Deserters: Students, State and Community in Leningrad, 1917–1941* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1999), 131; HPSSS, no. 395, schedule A, vol. 20, 48.

[52] This quip, as well as those following it, are drawn from two files in the former Central Party Archive containing correspondence from transportation-sector party organizations to the Central Committee on local political dissidence in the wake of the Kirov assassination. All date to February and March 1935. See Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi arkhiv sotsial'no-politicheskoi istorii (hereafter RGASPI) f. 17, op. 120, dd. 174, 176, here d. 176, ll. 135; 20, 125. For more sarcastic comments about Kirov's private life, see Rimmel, "The Kirov Murder and Soviet Society," 58–63. For another example of high-ranking concern over political humor in Soviet society, see RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 70, l. 58, etc.

[53] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 174, l. 68.

[54] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 176, l. 47.

[55] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 176, ll. 26–27. Also note d. 174, ll. 68.

much flour" were traced to a religious sect in Krasnograd,[56] while a worker in Khar'kov was fired for his heretical jest to a friend that "a spot's freed up on the Politburo—maybe you'd like to fill in?"[57] Party officials found such sentiments to be harbingers of widespread social unrest.

Needless to say, it is impossible to determine whether these snide and obnoxious one-liners were a sign of self-conscious and articulate political dissent or whether they were merely expressions of contempt and disrespect. Indeed, the only thing that is clear is that such nuances mattered very little to the secret police charged with reining in the popular pastime. Swamped with reports from Moscow to Saratov describing a veritable epidemic of joke-telling, USSR State Procurator I. A. Akulov declared the situation in 1935 to pose a direct threat to state security:

> In relation to the death of Kirov, an increase in the activity of anti-Soviet elements has been noted in the form of counter-revolutionary agitation, approving not only of the terrorist act against Kirov, but also of the execution of such acts against other leaders of the Party and Soviet government. This has given the procuracy the task of rapidly and decisively intersecting other types of counter-revolutionary speeches.[58]

Lackadaisical political mobilization, both in schools and on the shop floor, was blamed for the proliferation of political jokes; the police and court system were also reproached for being too lenient in their enforcement of the criminal code. Arrests quickly followed. A second-year technical school student named Pyrkov, for instance, was turned over to the police in Balakovo for telling the "most outrageously counterrevolutionary jokes."[59] Far away in Tadzhikistan, a certain Trofimov's sardonic connection of Kirov's murder with the end of bread rationing—"Kirov was killed and bread became cheaper; if Stalin is killed, things will get even better"—earned him a ten-year prison sentence.[60] Ultimately, the NKVD arrested some 43,686 people on charges of anti-Soviet agitation during 1935 alone,[61] over half of whom were accused of swapping jokes and couplets (*chastushki*), vandalizing portraits of party leaders or speculating about the fates of Kirov, Kuibyshev and other

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[56] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 174, l. 112. For more examples of such audacious comments, see Rimmel, "The Kirov Murder and Soviet Society," 110–17.

[57] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 176, l. 158.

[58] Gosudarstvennyi arkhiv Rossiiskoi Federatsii (hereafter GARF) f. 8131, op. 28, d. 6, ll. 4–8, quoted in Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation,'" 152.

[59] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 174, l. 71.

[60] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 174, l. 48.

[61] GARF f. 9401, op. 1, d. 4157, ll. 201–03, 205, cited in Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation,'" 153.

Bolshevik bosses. Kulaks and other "usual suspects" were well-represented among such arrests, but so too were workers, peasants, and state employees.[62]

Perhaps unsurprisingly, this wave of arrests did not do much to discourage the circulation of political humor. In 1936, the Leningrad NKVD noted that problems were continuing: "at the Dentistry Institute, a student named Logicheva has been telling all sorts of anti-Soviet jokes. At the Zhdanov Factory, Fedorova, a former Komsomol member, is engaged in anti-Soviet propaganda. Not long ago, a notebook was confiscated from her that contained some 1500 jokes, a large portion of which were anti-Soviet."[63] Ultimately, about a quarter of all of those arrested by the NKVD for anti-Soviet agitation in 1936 were accused of joke-telling or making "terroristic" comments about the party leadership, while another twenty percent or so were charged with defacing portraits or making "counterrevolutionary" statements while drunk.[64] Reports from places like Khar'kov indicate that the trend did not diminish in the years that followed.[65] During 1937, some 234,301 people were arrested by the NKVD for anti-Soviet agitation, "a great army" of whom were apparently just "babblers," guilty only of telling political jokes out loud.[66] Despite this wave of repression, however, anecdotal accounts suggest that the culture of Soviet political humor survived the Great Terror intact; indeed, the USSR's signing of the ill-fated Molotov-Ribbentrop treaty with Nazi Germany in August 1939 quickly gave rise to an entirely new cycle of jokes.[67]

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[62] A review of 473 cases that came before the USSR Supreme Court in September 1935 indicated that two-thirds concerned dissembling in regard to the Soviet leadership (46.5%) or unpopular state policies (26.8%), as well as other sorts of jokes and couplets (7%). Another 4.6% of the cases involved the vandalizing of official portraits. Of those convicted in the third quarter of 1935, 25.4% were workers, 24.3% were state employees, 13.9% were collective farmers and 32.5% were kulaks or uncollectivized peasants. See GARF f. 8131, op. 27, d. 73, ll. 228–35, cited in Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation,'" 155–56.

[63] TsGAIPD SPb f. 598, op. 1, d. 5423, ll. 149, 185, cited in *Istoriia Sovetskoi Rossii (1917–1953) v anekdotakh*, 5. See also Rossiiskii gosudarstvennyi voennyi arkhiv f. 9, op. 29, d. 246, l. 1.

[64] Of the cases involving anti-Soviet agitation that went before the USSR Supreme Court in March 1936, 17% involved comments about the party leadership, 10% concerned joke-telling, 16% stemmed from drunken "counterrevolutionary" statements and 4% involved the defacing of portraits. See GARF f. 8131, op. 27, d. 73, ll. 228–35, cited in Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation,'" 156.

[65] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 237, ll. 129–32.

[66] GARF f. 8131, op. 28, d. 6, ll. 4–8, cited in Davies, "The Crime of 'Anti-Soviet Agitation,'" 160; Ginzburg, *Into the Whirlwind*, 85.

[67] HPSSS, no. 30, schedule A, vol. 4, 25; no. 91/1124, schedule A, vol. 32, 39. Such wisecracks persisted throughout the Stalin period and into the "Thaw," as evident in V. A. Kozlov and S. V. Mironenko, eds., *58/10: Nadzornye proizvodstva prokuratury SSSR po*

Of course, political joking was not only a source of concern for the police. High-ranking party members repeatedly attempted to discourage the practice as well. Even before Kirov's murder, M. F. Shkiriatov beseeched his colleagues at a Central Committee Plenum in January 1933 not to underestimate the threat that political humor posed to the party:

> I would like to speak of another antiparty method of operation, namely the so-called jokes. What are these jokes? Jokes against the party constitute agitation against the party. Who among us Bolsheviks does not know how we fought against tsarism in the old days, how we told jokes in order to undermine the authority of the existing system? We know that all factional groups always resorted to such a method of malicious, hostile agitation. This has also been employed as a keen weapon against the Central Committee of the party.[68]

The frequency with which such warnings were repeated during the 1930s suggests that political humor proved difficult to suppress even within party ranks. At a Moscow conference in 1934, for instance, an official named Kirillov implored his colleagues to stamp out political joke-telling, reiterating that this age-old social custom could no longer be tolerated. "We often do not attach political significance to jokes and rumors," contended Kirillov. "But this is one of our enemies' broadcast frequencies. Anyone making such jokes, especially jokes referring to our party and our leaders, must not only be exposed, but dragged off to where he deserves."[69] This menacing statement was echoed in an internal memo written by a party official in Leningrad at about the same time. Condemning even the most innocent sorts of political humor, this communiqué contended that "jokes about the party leaders may gradually blunt revolutionary vigilance if they are treated in a conciliatory manner. There may be a Menshevik, a Trotskiite, or a class enemy lurking behind that joke."[70]

Such candor ultimately testifies to more than just intolerance within the party hierarchy. Apparently, the party leadership was concerned about the

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delam ob antisovetskoi agitatsii i propaganda—annotirovannyi katalog, mart 1953–1991 (Moscow: "Demokratiia," 1999). A second volume in this series is expected to catalog anti-Soviet agitation cases between 1941 and 1953.

[68] RGASPI f. 17, op. 2, d. 511, l. 177, published in J. Arch Getty and Oleg V. Naumov, eds., *The Road to Terror: Stalin and the Self-Destruction of the Bolsheviks*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 89.

[69] RGASPI f. 17, op. 120, d. 174, l. 146. For a somewhat more oblique statement in a published source, see L. M. Perchik, *Agitatsiia* (Moscow: Partizdat, 1937), 39.

[70] TsGAIPD SPb f. 24, op.5, d. 2678, l. 10, quoted in Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, 152–53.

fragility of Soviet society's foundational myths—particularly Stalin's cult of personality. The Stalin cult performed an important political function in the USSR during these years by casting the general secretary as the charismatic embodiment of the Soviet "experiment." Such an inspirational symbol was desperately needed in this fractious, multiethnic society—scholars since Max Weber have noted that charismatic leadership has the ability to unite polities that are otherwise poorly integrated or lack regularized administrative institutions. According to this theory, loyalty to specific leaders is powerful enough to mobilize fragmented societies even when there is little other patriotic sense of community or rule of law.[71] The Stalin cult performed precisely this function in the USSR, harnessing the power of the general secretary's charisma to bind together an otherwise motley collection of peoples, cultures, and territories. Ultimately, the unifying role of the cult in Soviet society explains much of the party's hysteria regarding political humor and other sorts of "anti-Soviet agitation," inasmuch as popular joking about Stalin threatened to deface no less than the central icon of party ideology.

All in all, the historical record suggests that there was a widespread but heavily persecuted subculture of political joke-telling in the USSR during the Stalin years. Caustic, ironic humor expressed individuals' disrespect for authority and functioned as a safety valve for venting social tensions. Although much of this activity appears to have lacked broader political or ideological motives, it nevertheless provoked a fierce reaction from the party hierarchy and secret police. These punitive measures are probably best understood as having been motivated by the fear that lampooning the party leadership would ultimately undermine the legitimacy of the Soviet system itself.

The present volume reproduces a broad selection of political jokes drawn from a virtually-unknown anthology published in 1951 under the title *The Kremlin and the People.*[72] Little is known about its compiler, Evgenii Andreevich, its publisher (apparently the anti-Communist Munich weekly *Golos*

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[71] Max Weber, *Economy and Society: An Outline of Interpretive Sociology*, ed. Guenther Roth and Claus Wittich, vol. 3 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 1111–26; Immanuel Wallerstein, *Africa: The Politics of Independence—An Interpretation of Modern African History* (New York: Vintage Books, 1961), 99; Clifford Geertz, *Local Knowledge: Further Essays in Interpretive Anthropology* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 121–48. In the words of one commentator, the cult served as a unifying mechanism at a time when "most of the components of civil society or of the modern state were missing: a reliable bureaucracy, a unitary, consistent notion of citizenship or polity ... or even a sense of psychological inclusion." See J. Arch Getty, "The Politics of Stalinism," in *The Stalin Phenomenon*, ed. Alec Nove (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1991), 119.

[72] *Kreml' i narod: Politicheskie anekdoty*, ed. E. Andreevich (Munich: [Golos naroda,] 1951).

ing the end of the Stalin period.[81] Such jokes are better suited for characterizing how people under Khrushchev and Brezhnev remembered the Stalin years than they are for clarifying the nature of Stalin-era political humor itself.

These problems with archival and printed sources heighten the importance of Andreevich's collection, which was originally published during Stalin's lifetime on the basis of popular sources.[82] The present volume reproduces roughly two-thirds of the jokes contained in *The Kremlin and the People,*[83] organizing them into ten thematic chapters and laying them out in a split-face format alongside their translations. An arrangement usually reserved for scholarly editions of foreign-language poetry, this presentation preserves Andreevich's original Russian phraseology and lexicon while making the humor accessible to English-speaking audiences. This volume also cross-references Andreevich's jokes against variants found in other Stalin-era sources—particularly the 1950–51 Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System—inasmuch as this sort of triangulation can dispel even the most persistent doubts about the authenticity of the humor under discussion. Finally, this volume flanks Andreevich's jokes with nearly three dozen contemporary photographs and illustrations from long-forgotten Stalin-era publications in order to provide a glimpse of the propaganda that gave rise to such an extensive subculture.

As thorough as this volume's background research is, it is important to concede that further work on the subject still remains to be done. For instance, future investigations might continue to triangulate the contents of this volume against similar examples found in other sources. Connections might also be drawn both forward and backward in time—insofar as many recent Soviet

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[81] On the post-Stalin period, see Yurchak, "The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism"; Anatolii Dmitriev, *Sotsiologiia politicheskogo iumora* (Moscow: Rosspen, 1998); Seth B. Graham, "An Analysis of the Russo-Soviet *Anekdot*" (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 2003). Graham's bibliography contains a vast collection of anthologies and criticism dating from the Khrushchev period to the late 1990s.

[82] The relatively late publication of Andreevich's collection distinguishes it from NEP-era émigré publications such as *Sovetskie anekdoty* (Berlin: Chuzhbina, [1928?]). For a discussion of such sources, see Rashit Iangirov, "Anekdoty s borodoi: materialy k istorii nepodtsenzurnogo sovetskogo fol'klora," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 33: 3 (1998): 155–74.

[83] Virtually all of Andreevich's jokes relating to the interwar period have been incorporated into this collection with the exception of those containing untranslatable double-entendres or prohibitively obscure cultural references. Fewer jokes relating to the wartime and early postwar period have been included, however, as many appear to have originated among Soviet refugees in emigration rather than within Soviet society itself. Most former Soviet citizens like Andreevich ended up in the West as a result of their wartime internment as Nazi prisoners-of-war or *Ostarbeiter* laborers; as such, their first-hand knowledge of Soviet society did not extend past the first few years of the war. See the introduction to chapter 10 for more on this methodological concern.

and post-Soviet jokes harken back to examples found in this collection, it stands to reason that some of the jokes assembled here may, in turn, stem from earlier revolutionary-era or even pre-revolutionary traditions. Other patterns of influence might also be explored. For example, did Stalin-era jokesters borrow from (or influence) official Soviet satirists' irreverent depiction of foreign and domestic enemies, bureaucrats and petty officials? Did ordinary jokesters seek out official satire journals like *Krokodil* and the cartoons of Boris Efimov and the Kukryniksy, or did their sense of humor evolve independently of mainstream Soviet culture?

Other lines of inquiry await investigation as well. How much did the demographic profile of Andreevich's informants in postwar West Germany influence the content of his collection? Was this volume's repertoire shaped by the fact that Russians and Ukrainians from European regions of the USSR outnumbered non-Russian ethnic groups and Russians from other regions? Would Russian-speakers from Vladivostok or Tashkent have told different jokes? Would Georgians, Uzbeks, and other non-Russian ethnic groups have possessed their own homegrown traditions of political humor?

Equally important are a number of issues surrounding the role that the non-Russian peoples—be they Armenians, Jews, or others—play in some of the jokes contained in this volume. Additional research might allow scholars to determine precisely what place ethnic humor occupied in a society that was at least ostensibly organized along class lines. Was ethnic humor a legacy of the old regime, or was it stimulated by aspects of Soviet nationality policy?[84] Was it a more or less innocent form of joking, or did it reflect emotions associated with chauvinism, Orientalism, or nativism?[85] Such research might also explain why Jews are portrayed so inconsistently in this volume. Some jokes cast Jews as clever tricksters or sardonic critics. Others characterize them as foreign interlopers pursuing careerist ambitions within the Communist Party. Still others cast Jews as sly "bourgeois" nepmen.[86] Would such jokes circulate together within a single social circle, or separately, depending

[84] Joseph Boskin and Joseph Dorinson, "Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival," *American Quarterly* 37: 1 (1985): 81–97.

[85] Among the Harvard Project's interviewees, opinions differed about the implications of ethnic humor. Some denied that such jokes betrayed chauvinistic sentiments, pointing out that Jews did not take offense at such jokes and even told them themselves. Others disagreed, one commenting that at first glance, it seemed as if "there was no anti-Semitism. But in reality there was a very deep anti-Semitism. There was also discrimination against Caucasians. One could tell it in the jokes that went the rounds." Compare HPSSS, no. 9, schedule A, vol. 1, 115; no. 127, schedule A, vol. 10, 36 with no. 1109, schedule A, vol. 32, 36; see also the diary entry from June 12, 1929, in Shitts, *Dnevnik "Velikogo pereloma,"* 123–24.

[86] These three categories resemble those outlined in C. Davies, "Jewish Jokes, Anti-Semitic Jokes and Hebredonian Jokes," in *Jewish Humor*, 2nd ed., ed. Avner Ziv (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 1998), 75–98.

on the identity of the jokesters and their audiences? Should some be read as more or less anti-Semitic than others?

Questions also remain about the Stalin-era jokesters themselves. Further research might reveal more about who they were and how representative were they of *homo soveticus* as a whole. What made the jokesters more worrisome than other sorts of grumblers and complainers? What was it about the threat they posed that led them to be persecuted so much more ruthlessly in the USSR than in either Nazi Germany or Falangist Spain?[87] What were the precise rules that governed where and when they might safely indulge in a bit of wit, irony or sarcasm? Were these rules uniform and consistent, or did they vary according to circumstance and milieu? And what other reasons might explain the stubborn persistence of underground political humor during this period, aside from the need to vent frustrations or express dissent? Did joke-telling provide a forum for asserting personal autonomy in an otherwise oppressive society?[88] Did it supply a way of negotiating social boundaries with acquaintances and friends?[89] Or was political humor under Stalin simply too risky an endeavor to allow for the development of practices and traditions considered normative in other societies?

Two final caveats of a technical nature would seem to be in order before proceeding to the collection itself. At times, liberties have been taken with the translations that follow in order to convey the essence of the humor and double-entendres into colloquial English. Minor editorial changes have also been made to some of the materials from the Harvard Project, insofar as they are drawn from hastily-drafted interview transcripts that were never intended for publication. Of course, even if it were possible to flawlessly render these jokes into English, many would still strike the modern reader as dry and sarcastic rather than uproarously amusing. A historical artifact of sorts, this bitterness should be seen as an intrinsic aspect of the political humor of the Stalin era.

[87] Rudolph Herzog, *Heil Hitler, Das Schwein ist Tot! Lachen Unter Hitler—Komik und Humor im Dritten Reich* (Berlin: Eichborn, 2006); F. K. M. Hillenbrand, *Underground Humour in Nazi Germany, 1933–1945* (London and New York: Routledge, 1995); Kathleen Stokker, *Folklore Fights the Nazis: Humor in Occupied Norway, 1940–1945* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1995); Oriol Pi-Sunyer, "Political Humor in a Dictatorial State: The Case of Spain," *Ethnohistory* 24: 2 (1977): 179–90.

[88] Lawrence W. Levine, *Black Culture and Black Consciousness: Afro-American Folk Thought from Slavery to Freedom* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 298–366.

[89] Joan P. Emerson, "Negotiating the Serious Import of Humor," *Sociometry* 32: 2 (1969): 169–81.