More than Resistance: Political Humour Under Stalin in the 1930s[1]

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When used as a historical source, the political humour of populations living under repressive regimes is almost always interpreted as evidence of some kind of popular »resistance« to state power, restrictions, or norms. This tendency finds reflection throughout different areas of scholarship: whether for Hitler's Germany (cf. Hillenbrand 1995), Franco's Spain (cf. Pi-Sunyer 1977), the post-slavery United States (cf. Levine 1977), or, according to anthropologist James C. Scott, theoretically in any human society (cf. Scott 1990). In each case, the equation is the same: humour equals resistance. Despite this generalisation, these works are undeniably rich and illuminating; »resistance« has often been a productive approach to social history, but all studies which take this approach tend to become fixated by the issue of defining »resistance«. Indeed, the issue of whether telling or laughing at politically contentious jokes constitutes »resistance« to a given regime will surely remain a matter of interpretative preference – of various definitional boundaries – rather than of objective fact. Does the joke-teller need consciously to consider their witticism an act of resistance? Does the failure of a joke to effect any measurable damage to the status quo render it somehow unworthy of that label, even if the state reacted violently against it?

In fact, we do not have to get caught within these intractable issues, for exchanges of humour can reveal much more to us about the nature of society, sociability, and contemporaries' cognitive processes without the need to place these all within the problematic framework of »resistance«. In the space available here, I will attempt briefly to sketch some rather different and, I suggest, more analytically productive approaches to the study of humour under a repressive regime which has severely restricted the possibility

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of critical speech. In humour we can gain a sense of how citizens spoke to each other (rather than to Power) about their lived experiences, and how they thereby came to interpret and adapt to the circumstances in which they found themselves. Humour can both receive/accept and yet also criticise; it can belittle and hold at arm's length, yet stop short of outright rejection. It can therefore illuminate many dynamic and critical engagements with Soviet ideology and the lived realities of the 1930s and help us to understand some of the interpretive, coping and ultimately adaptive processes by which citizens who could effect little practical change in their lives, and did not take direct action against the state, were nevertheless constantly grappling with it.

The article is based on extensive archival research, utilising contemporary reports on »the mood of the people«, and on the criminal records of several hundred citizens arrested and sentenced for the crime of »antisoviet agitation« – here, this meant simply telling a joke which the regime found unacceptable. The significance of these sources is reinforced by published collections of *anekdoty* (jokes); while the archival sources allow us to learn with greater confidence where and when a particular joke was told, the voluminous anthologies demonstrate the longevity and wide dissemination of this humorous oral discourse. Two final points: the focus here is on what the content of popular humour can tell us; for this reason and due to space constrictions, I give little attention to the timing and location of these exchanges, nor to the people who told them (for more on these issues, cf. Waterlow 2012; 2013). Finally, although this article focuses on popular, political humour under pre-war Stalinism, it is hoped that these approaches might also aid the study of societies under other repressive regimes.

BATTLES OVER SIGNIFICATION

One of the most common elements of Soviet citizens' political humour was not simply to reject state propaganda or institutions, but to allow official discourse to highlight its own shortcomings. In a country awash with propaganda, citizens were very familiar with the regime's principal ideological slogans. Ubiquity led to mockery: a key genre of contemporary humour was the repetition of these official slogans in contexts which deflated and undermined their claims; given the disjuncture between optimistic slogans and the grim reality of 1930s life, the possibilities for doing this were abundant. For example, an *anekdot* which undercuts the standard refrain »Long live Soviet power!«:

»Radek [an old Bolshevik, later purged] had his monthly allowance reduced from 30 to 15 rubles [as a punishment]. He responded by telegram: ›Received 15 rubles – Long live Soviet power!‹« (GARF 8131/31/64008/26)

Similarly, endless official calls for »Vigilance« in propaganda were belittled by highlighting the irrelevance or mendacity of such calls given the abysmal material conditions and need for petty theft just to survive. Hence the boss of a Leningrad Metallurgical Plant responded to these demands by noting flippantly: »Yes, I've become more vigilant; I don't even sleep at night – I'm [busy] guarding my firewood!« (CGAIPD 25/5/48/48). Most common, it seems, was to repeat Stalin's famous 1935 declaration that »life has become better, comrades, life has become merrier«. Everyday experiences proved otherwise, and some people openly laughed when the slogan was repeated (GARF 8131/31/43804/13; 6264/7). Others recited it when faced with low quality produce: A.F. Firsikov noted witheringly that the tinned cod in his work canteen was so bad it had previously been used as pig food, adding later, »Cod again? Indeed it has got better, life has become merrier!« (GARF 8131/31/1247/10). Perhaps most common was the more circumspect sarcasm exemplified by a Leningrad factory worker: »Well, how merry« (CGAIPD 25/10/74/30).

Juxtaposition produced comedy, but to invoke these slogans was distinctly limited in its criticism. Official discourse was being made to mock itself, but, crucially, this was therefore criticism within regime ideology; not a criticism in relation to an alternative, external standard, but a demand that things should work as they were supposed to. Nevertheless, as contemporary theorist Mikhail Bachtin (who often critiqued the Stalinist regime between the lines of his work) argued of power in general, »the ruling class strives to impart a supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgments which occurs in it, to make the sign uniaccentual« (Bakhtin 1973: 23). Repeating slogans in these inappropriate contexts was a clear contestation of the officially-rendered meaning, breaking the semantic unity demanded by the Soviet state.

The countless official acronyms and contractions – signifiers for various government departments, shops, policies etc. – provided another rich source for contestation. For example, MTS (Machine-Tractor Station) was reinterpreted as »Mogila Tovarišča Stalina« (The Grave of Comrade Stalin), and the country's own initialisation, SSSR, was rendered »Smert' Stalina Spaset Rossiju« (Stalin's Death will Save Russia). So well-known did the latter

meaning become, that it was used by the Nazis in 1941 on leaflets inviting Red Army soldiers to defect, complete with a tear-off voucher guaranteeing them safe passage (cf. Archipova/Mel'ničenko 2010: 342).

This practice was not confined to the most prominent official signifiers, however: in a state where all of life was theoretically political, popular contestations of meaning were ubiquitous. Many everyday objects could be imbued with a critical subtext – even cigarettes:

»A customer enters a shop and asks the shopkeeper for some cigarettes with a revolutionary name – ›Something like, ‘What we fought for (Za chto borolis')'‹. The shopkeeper replies, ›We don't have ‘What we fought for', but we do have what we ended up with (Na chto naporolis')‹, and hands the customer the brand ‘Soviet'.« (GARF 8131/31/7038: 78)

Similarly, S.N. Aktimirov, an accountant, made a dark quip that the design of »White Sea Canal« cigarette packets, featuring a map with the waterway's course highlighted in red, represented the »blood shed by the builders of the canal« (GARF 8131/31/8782: 5). Thousands had died in its construction.

Given the widespread propensity to reclaim various kinds of signifiers or symbols, it is reasonable to assume that there were far more examples of Soviet citizens thus imbuing everyday items with a critical multivalency that often escaped detection by the authorities and hence remain invisible to us now. Bachtin proposed that every ideological sign »has two faces, like Janus«, with each »face« or signified contradicting the other; the »face« which one perceives depends upon one's ideological outlook (cf. Bakhtin 1973: 23). For 1930s Soviet citizens, there clearly existed a substantial collection of secondary, unofficial »faces« upon which they might focus. I do not mean to suggest that citizens were constantly contesting the »meaning« of every name, product or slogan, but, rather, that such a contestation was always possible.

M.A. Krongauz provides us with a useful model for this. He argued that, at least in the later period of »developed socialism«, there existed two »languages« in the USSR: the ritualistic »Soviet-Russian« and »Russian« itself. He described this as a »diglossia«: two languages which Soviet citizens could employ, with varying priority given to each one at any given moment (cf. Krongauz 1994: 236-237). Although Krongauz's use of »Russian« ignores the many other languages in the Soviet Union, his point is well made that an official, ritualistic language existed alongside an alternative, popular one, and that in practice the borders between those languages were porous.

Consequently, for Soviet citizens the world was not filtered through a monolithic, official discourse in which all words, concepts or even everyday objects were defined by the state alone. From the most grandiose slogans, via the omnipresent acronyms and contractions of newspeak, right down to the lowly pack of cigarettes, ordinary Soviet citizens took these signifiers and created and shared their own alternative interpretations of them in parallel to the official language. It is too much to name this a fully-fledged language, but this could at least be considered an alternative idiom. Citizens did not, therefore, only »speak Bolshevik« (Kotkin 1997), but could also speak a vernacular replete with additional signifieds for countless signifiers held in common between the two idioms.

It is too great a generalisation to suggest that all Soviet citizens were speaking one specific unofficial idiom in the 1930s, especially if we remember that in order to use such a vernacular safely, it would have to be spoken only in relatively small groups secured by bonds of trust and, therefore, could not be subject to any broad standardisation. (For more on »trust groups« cf. Waterlow 2013). Therefore, we must not reduce the range of possible meanings to just one official and one contradictory alternative: Soviet citizens' worldview was neither homogenised, nor positioned in direct, absolute contradiction of official ideology and culture. Instead, the examples examined here suggest a broad popular attempt to reconcile the incongruities between official signifiers and the realities which ordinary people encountered in life; this was an inherently critical act, at the heart of which lay not a simple rejection of ideological claims, but a strong desire that these should live up to their promise. Hence the people did fight for the promises of the Bolsheviks, but the current »Soviet« reality fails to deliver on those pledges; hence blame is limited to individuals, rather than focused on the system at large (Stalin's deathsaves Russia).

To adapt Bachtin's proposition, we might better say that it was ordinary Soviet citizens who were, or could be, Janus-faced: it was they who could look at the world around them from two different viewpoints, viewpoints which were, crucially, intimately connected. Furthermore, this proposition recognises individuals' subjectivity and agency in the process: the signifier did not turn a second face to the observer, but the observer had to look at it a different way.

THE »GREAT TERROR«

Humour could thus be used to engage with the regime's symbols and slogans, but how did it relate to a particularly disruptive, destructive event like the mass arrests of the so-called »Great Terror«, which swept across the country in 1937/38?

In response to the arbitrariness of arrest, a joke circulated in which a schoolteacher asks a pupil, »Who wrote [the famous Puškin poem] Evgenij Onegin?«, to which the instinctively cautious child replies, »Not me!«. Enraged at this foolishness, the teacher calls in the boy's parents, but they also stubbornly affirm that he did not write Evgenij Onegin. Confused and angry, the teacher runs into an acquaintance who works for the NKVD who agrees to investigate the family's obtuse behaviour. Sometime later, the NKVD agent proudly reports back that he's closed the case: »The bastards finally confessed that they'd all written Evgenij Onegin together!« (based on GARF, 8131/31/10568: 8; Brandenberger 2009: 116-118; HIP 64/A/6: 67-68).

A sardonic exchange between two workers in the Krasnaja znamja factory, Leningrad, played on the same theme: »Where's the map of the world?« one asked, searching for said item. His colleague replied, »The map's been arrested. The C[entral] C[committee] sent it to prison.« (CGAIPD 24/2v/2664/203). At this point, in 1937, when things or even people vanish, the assumption might as well be that they have been arrested. Similarly, one Govorov, a photographer, related the following joke to a friend in 1938: »Who makes up the USSR? – Many enemies and just one friend of the people.« (GARF 8131/31/19123/26). Clearly, Stalin is the only unequivocal »friend of the people«, while anyone else was in danger of being considered an enemy.

These jokes directly highlight the unpredictability but also the absurdity of the Terror's arbitrary mass arrests; as certainties were undermined and nothing could be relied upon to remain in place, for some people the only thing to do was to laugh about it. If people could not avoid these state actions practically, they could at least do so mentally; in humour they found one way by which to cope with, rather than attempting to deny the encroachments of the state on their everyday lives. Joking here operated as a kind of »gallows humour«; that is, a humour which laughs in the face of frightening yet intractable circumstances. Because in humour there is no expectation that things must make strict, logical sense, shifting frightening and uncontrollable events into this genre helps to defuse the fear or unease

they might cause – they do not come to make sense, but the pressure for them to do so is removed, or is at least ameliorated. This gallows humour dealt with the grim events not by explaining them, but by explaining them away; the incomprehensible was mocked precisely for its incomprehensibility. This did not change the circumstances in which citizens found themselves, of course, but it did, at least to some extent, change how they might feel about them – a theme developed in the following section.

A SENSE OF AGENCY

A sense of agency is certainly a constituent part of popular resistance, however broadly defined, but the former does not always imply the latter. The arrested joke-tellers in my sample do not seem to have been self-consciously or actively antisoviet: almost none had criminal records and any additional charges of conspiracy made against them were, given the absence of any evidence in their criminal records, clearly fictitious (cf. Waterlow 2012: ch. 1). And, insofar as we can access the motives of joke-tellers who were arrested in these years, they were, under questioning, often quite shocked that their jokes were considered »antisoviet agitation«. This seems plausible, because over a quarter of the cases examined involved arrests more than a year after a joke was told (what was safe at the time of telling was only retrospectively deemed unacceptable), and the incidence of arrest for joke-telling clearly fluctuated over the course of the decade, clustering around particular »flashpoints« when the state decided, arbitrarily, to crack down on critical speech.

There is not space here to go into detail, but the picture which emerges is that citizens who told jokes could not reasonably have expected that their witticisms would get them in nearly as much trouble as they often did (up to 25 years in the Gulag, although most often 10). Although political joke-telling was always a transgressive act, it is untenable to posit a broader scheme of self-conscious opposition (let alone a conspiracy) as underlying this practice.

If the agency felt by Soviet joke-tellers was not that of a staunch regime opponent demonstratively attacking the system, then what was their motivation, and what did they gain from telling these jokes? The gallows humour effect offers part, but not the whole answer. If the joke-tellers were not motivated solely by political opposition, then we may learn more from their jokes which were not straightforwardly or explicitly political in the sense of

criticising regime policies or figures. Indeed, much contemporary humour actually took the form of a brief, throwaway flippancy. For example, A.I. Šilo, an X-Ray technician at a hospital on the Turkestan-Siberian railway, was shopping with friends for placards and portraits to celebrate the new Stalin Constitution. When his friend asked the shopkeeper, »Do you have anything about the new Constitution?«, Šilo butted in with the crude rhyme, »Do you have anything about prostitution?« (GARF 8131/31/82045/9). In another shop, a doctor by the name of G.F. Narožnyj sarcastically enquired, »Are you going to get anything good in, or will it all be Soviet trash (*drjan'*)?« (GARF 8131/31/88415/13). And, in a dramatic final example, Nečaj, a shop head at a radio factory and award-winning shockworker (an especially productive labourer), entered a room in which a brigade meeting was in process and loudly quipped, echoing the language of propaganda: »I've come to drink the workers' blood!«. Although some tried to defend his outburst as a joke, all were later convinced to reinterpret his words as »the act of a class-alien person« (GARF 5451/42/262/63).

These very basic jokes broke for a moment the »fourth wall« of the Soviet drama scripted by the state; indulging in behaviour inappropriate to the »role« of Soviet citizen allowed the joke-teller (and potentially their audience) a momentary release from the constraints of »acceptable« behaviour – constraints they felt acutely, for citizens were expected to act as though they lived in a world enormously different to the one which they daily saw before them. These were simplistic, performative transgressions in public social contexts which lack any significant reflection or critical insight – they were naughty rather than knowing. As such, they can be directly related to children's enjoyment of writing rude words or drawing vulgar pictures, even when they do not necessarily know what they mean.

To take just one example, we can see this in the spread of a particularly forbidden symbol. During break-time, fourth-graders at a school in Solombal'skij rajon, Archangel'sk, drew swastikas in chalk on their hands and stamped them onto their classmates' backs (RGASPI M1/23/1265/50).[2] The same game was reported amongst older students at the Tomsk Transport Institute (RGASPI M1/23/1106/129). A rather enterprising student in Kyiv oblast', Liza Zabrodskaja, along with her friends, even carved a swastika into a potato and proceeded to stamp swastikas all over their school (HDA SBU 16/30/113/90). The thrill of drawing this particular contraband symbol

2 The report identifies one child and one instance in particular, but when questioned the schoolchildren claimed this was not a new game.

was not limited to children, either: accountant and former Red Army solider, P.N. Dyšlis, doodled two small swastikas on the front of a newspaper – on an article written by Stalin – while waiting for a haircut at the barber's. A fellow customer discovered these and reported him. Yet despite eventually admitting that he drew the swastikas, Dyšlis apparently could not explain to the NKVD why he had done so. In fact, it is quite possible that he did not have a particular aim in mind (HDA SBU 6/35430FP).

As with the children, a full or conscious understanding of the symbol and the act of drawing it was not really important: the very thrill of creating an illicit image – of having the power to create one – can be intensely attractive, giving a psychological high of some potency in an otherwise prescriptive life – be that the life of a child in general, or of an adult in the Soviet Union. Indeed, all acts of humorous transgression, whether ostentatiously or quietly performed, represented more than just the simple pleasure of breaking taboos. At the core of these jokes lay a search for a sense of personal agency within a state which had assumed the right to speak for every citizen.

This sense of agency was the mental gratification gained from using critical humour, yet that agency was rather ephemeral. As the gallows humour effect illustrates, to joke about immutable circumstances was not to change them, but only to change how one might feel about them. This was not resignation, then, but an active attempt to grapple with the difficulties of powerlessness; the transient feeling of agency could ease the pain of acquiescing to difficult realities. This was both a conscious and unconscious process of adjustment: Soviet citizens could consciously reassure themselves that they were not fools unable to see the deficiencies of life in the 1930s by making scathing and humorous comments about it, yet this humour was simultaneously, if unconsciously, reconciling them to those deficiencies. After the joke was over, the self-reassurance performed, one simply had to get back to work. This remained, nevertheless, a distinctly ambivalent acquiescence.

SAVOIR-FAIRE

Turning to some extent from the issue of why joke-tellers might risk sharing potentially dangerous humour, another productive way to analyse these contemporary jokes is to examine their didactic function. This was a decade in which all of life seemed to be in unpredictable flux, but humour continued to provide Soviet citizens with a method of communication through which to share insight and guidance, thereby helping one another (re)gain a sense of

how their world functioned. Indeed, jokes are rather like parables or proverbs, being concise and often ironic tales or apt phrases which serve to convey information about the world and how to live in it successfully. These fragments of »wisdom« worked as a »sense-making device«. This is a description which Andrea Mayr has applied to prison argot: an »insider« idiom which grows to enable the powerless to share their own, unofficial understandings of the world they cohabit alongside, yet apart from, official discourse (cf. Mayr 2004: 154 [quoting D. Wieder]).

Many of the previously cited jokes are good examples of the proverbial function of some jokes in action: a general »truth« about a given subject is summed up concisely, pointedly and memorably. These were officially contraband truisms which crystallised popular interpretations of the Soviet regime. There were, however, more complex variations within this proverb-like genre; these moved beyond mere statement of »fact«, and offered specific advice on how one should act to avoid trouble and to get ahead within the system. Once again, these were often formed by twisting or inverting memorable slogans so that they really did, ironically, convey a picture of life during the period.

The famous maxim, »He who does not work, shall not eat«, was altered to highlight the need for theft in order to survive in the 1930s: »He who does not steal, shall not eat« (RGASPI 671/1/257: 27). Another saying went, »The quieter you are, the further you go« (or, indeed, »the further you go, the quieter you are«) (GARF 8131/31/95714: 10; 3316/16a/446: 162; HIP 61/A /5: 13). Other jokes warned people not to trust particular Soviet leaders: one advised people to »read [Leningrad Party boss] Kirov's name backwards«, making the word »vorik«, or »little thief« (RGASPI M1/23/1102/168). Another leader's name – Vorošilov – was open to similar abuse, as demonstrated by a vandalised portrait discovered with all but the first three letters of his name (»vor«: thief) crossed out (CDAHOU 1/20/6642/27).

A further example cautioned against trusting the Soviet press, playing on the literal meanings of *Pravda* (truth) and *Izvestija* (news): »There is no truth in Pravda and no news in Izvestija«. This last example, and variations of it, most clearly straddled the boundary between something noted bitterly by contemporaries, and an amusing *anekdot*. Some citizens merely stated it as bald fact that there was often no »truth« in Pravda (RGASPI M1/23/1184: 98; NA 389/15: 79), while others recited it as a joke (HIP 5/A/1: 44; 95/A/7: 29; 451/A/22: 42) neatly illustrating how *anekdoty* could often shade into practical life advice.

In this way, official signifiers were being transformed from lies into genuine descriptors of the social realities facing the Soviet citizen of the 1930s; because they were »guides« to a building site, of course, there was an implicit anticipation within these popular hints and tips that they would at some point become redundant. For the time being, however, a significant body of life-lessons and satirical observations were in this way shared within trust groups; in their combination, this was creating a fugitive body of savoir-faire – a shared knowledge of not only fallacies within regime ideology, but also of strategies, tips or guides as to how one could still navigate and live through the difficulties of contemporary life. This savoir-faire represented a normalising purpose, of learning the »rules of the game« and thereby coming to accept those rules as simply how the world worked – hence the transmission of those »rules« in the didactic forms of proverb-style jokes (and, although I will not examine these here, Aesopian-style fables). To adopt Bourdieu's terminology, the exchange of humour was thus creating a »habitus«:

»The habitus is necessity internalized and converted into a disposition that generates meaningful practices and meaning-giving perceptions«. (Bourdieu 2010: 166)

Soviet citizens used humour to create this interpretive lens – this habitus – which was not only transforming inescapable, unwelcome realities into something which could be understood, but also something which progressively appeared to be »normal«. This does not mean that citizens felt satisfied or happy about these new »norms«, only that they were adapting to, rather than standing firmly against, them.

CROSSHATCHING

It would be impossible to argue that a stable habitus or sense of »normality« was established during this decade, and humour continued to bear witness to the population's struggles to address and adapt to the ever-changing present right up to the outbreak of war. Therefore, in conclusion, I offer not an attempt to crystallise a particular status quo or to discover when a particular popular »worldview« was achieved, but instead to propose a metaphor with which to better conceptualise the processes of understanding and adaptation which continued throughout the second decade of Soviet power.

As we have seen, the new Soviet ideology and its attendant policies were constantly confronted by alternative popular viewpoints, and the two often

seemed utterly incompatible. How was it possible for these two perspectives to co-exist? In fact, this was not a co-existence, nor even truly an opposition. This was not Orwell's infamous »doublethink«, in which two conflicting opinions are held hermetically sealed from each other in a single person's mind, thereby preserving two »realities« in a paradox of sorts. Nor did citizens choose from »a variety of idioms« (Davies 1997: 16) to suit particular situations without these also interacting with each other and being affected by official ideology. This study of humour demonstrates that no such quarantine-like isolation of official (state) and unofficial (personal) »reality« existed in the 1930s; citizens constantly engaged with and criticised the disparities, attempting to find some way to reconcile or at least to understand how the two could exist concurrently. Rather than speak of paradoxes and contradictions, therefore, we should attempt to understand the interconnectedness of these elements – of propaganda and lived everyday experience – for the Soviet citizen was, of course, constantly encountering both.

Soviet citizens perceived and understood the world of the 1930s and their lives within it in a complex and hybridised manner. I propose that we can best conceptualise this through the image of crosshatching.[3] Crosshatching is a drawing technique in which two sets of parallel lines intersect, thereby creating a grid of variable density. Although a simple technique, by varying the proximity, the angle of intersection, and thickness of each set of lines, a remarkable level of detail and texture can be achieved, adding depth, shading, and solidity to an image. If we take one set of those parallel lines to represent the various elements of official regime ideology, then the other set, intersecting the first at an angle, was made up of the numerous sources of critical popular opinion which we have been examining.

This model therefore incorporates numerous moments of intersection or engagement, allowing for significant variability in the particular elements of official and unofficial discourses and values which came into contact on any given occasion. It helps us to understand the interconnectedness of these »contradictions« and to appreciate the ways in which they were actively involved with each other, rather than assuming them to forever bypass or to cancel each other out. And while we cannot map out all or even most of these moments of engagement between official and popular discourses – not least because each person would have their own particular view of reality – we can yet describe the general nature of those engagements in order to

3 The idea for this conceptualisation was inspired by a novel which uses the metaphor rather differently (cf. Miéville 2009).

facilitate a more useful approach to the examination of particular instances. Soviet citizens did not meet Soviet power and its nebulous official ideology head-on; they instead approached many of its propositions, policies and personalities from oblique angles, neither denying nor accepting them in their totality, and instead blending them with their own perspectives and beliefs. That is to say, they attempted to blend their own, unofficial understandings and values with the regime's in such a way as to create meaningful patterns, both consciously and unconsciously. These were constantly occurring yet always fleeting relations; they were repeat encounters between official and unofficial discourses which together formed patterns in their crosshatching. In so doing, perspectives of significant nuance, density and depth could develop.

The Janus-faced Soviet citizen could thus see and identify the official discourse, but only truly »understood« it – its meaning in real life – when it was crosshatched with their own or a trust group's values and experiences. It was in this way that slogans and official tropes were made to mock themselves: by placing or articulating them in real-life scenarios, their gravitas was made to look absurd by the added context of, or image created by the intersection with, the second set of hatching. More broadly, official regime values were also used to throw older beliefs into a new light: some believers cited the Stalin Constitution to defend their right to worship, for example, thereby blending the regime's discourse with their own beliefs (cf. Davies 1997: 78). Similarly, others tried to argue that if all repossessed church buildings now belonged to »the people«, then »the people« could decide to reopen them if they so wished (cf. Husband 1998: 87-88). However, the opposite effect was also possible: citizens might accept particular Soviet policies by blending them with preexisting religious teachings – for example, by criticising or persecuting kulaks (allegedly rich peasants) because the gospels also proclaimed »Woe to you, the rich« (Davies 1997: 78). In a further, striking example, a Lutheran pastor attempted to crosshatch official and religious values in a 1936 sermon which he concluded with the words, »We must become Stachanovites of our belief and religion«! (Davies 1997: 78).

The most significant examples of crosshatching are the instances of savoir-faire examined above. Each embodies the »discovery« of patterns in the crosshatching, in which particular unofficial »rules of the game« were established and were then disseminated between citizens in a proverb-like format, in order to help them navigate through these unstable times. Initially created by citizens interweaving their own experiences with particular elements of

official ideology, certain patterns were thus fixed in »proverbs« and hence spread as increasingly de facto depictions of (popular) reality. The image of crosshatching reveals the way in which the »wishing it would work« factor and popular attempts to reconcile or path-find functioned in practice: this was a mixture of many different elements, official and unofficial, constantly interacting with each other and, in their sum, made by contemporaries to form patterns, motivated at root by the need and desire to make sense of the world in which they lived.

CONCLUSION

Studying political humour can reveal far more about a society living under a repressive regime – especially one undergoing intense change – than merely evidence of a will to »resist« the state and its various norms. Indeed, an examination of contemporaries' humour in the 1930s Soviet Union suggests that, while a subversive practice, joke-telling was in many ways concerned with the resolutely quotidian rather than the grand sweep of politics, and that it was shared by people who neither acted like nor appeared to consider themselves opponents of the system. This is not to say that they did not challenge the regime's power, but rather that they did so in specific, indirect ways: by reappropriating both official language and adding different significance to other elements of a life over which the state claimed interpretational hegemony, citizens could regain for themselves a potent sense of agency and thereby alleviate the fear and powerlessness which might otherwise overwhelm them. As the model of crosshatching helps to explain, however, these critical engagements should not be seen in terms of oppositions; the interactions between official and unofficial values and discourses were, in their complex confluence, for many citizens ultimately serving to normalise, and enabling adaptations to, immutable circumstances. This was, at most, an ambivalent acquiescence, but it was also an increasingly stable habitus.

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