Introduction

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The present volume is the continuation and supplementation of the anthology »History & Humour. British and American Perspectives«, which Barbara Korte and Doris Lechner published at transcript publishing house in 2013. Both volumes are the result of the work of the DFG research group »History in Popular Cultures of Knowledge«, which has, for the past several years, been meeting at the University of Freiburg to discuss the phenomenon of popularizing history and bringing it »up to date«.

At first glance the contributions here seem very heterogeneous. The settings range from the U.S. to Europe to Russia, covering a chronological period from 1800 to the present. However, on closer inspection, a surprising number of similarities become clear. If humour comes into play in dealing with history, it is almost always when coping with the most serious, even threatening situations: violence, terror, war, social, political and psychological tensions of all kinds appear to be the preferred subjects for humorous arrangement. Even if the scope of this anthology does not permit representative statements, it is remarkable that five of the six contributions discuss events that were in the present for the people concerned, i.e. humour is primarily activated in dealing with their own »story« and experiences of the world. Even in places where use is made of eras and traditions far in the distant past, it is always accompanied by a discourse about understanding one's own self. The popular-humorous approach to history may therefore be able to illustrate the profoundly constructivist or functionalist character of any interest in history: history is never researched just for its own sake; it is always additionally a means to deal with and interpret one's own present.

Another feature of the humorous turn to history, which is clearly expressed in this volume, is the preference for combining the verbal with the visual: images are often able to express humorous elements better and more concisely than words. On the other hand, the connections are usually too complex to manage without any verbal remarks at all.

Barbara Korte and Doris Lechner, of whose competent analysis of researching laughter and humour in different disciplines and at different times this anthology makes use, distinguish three basic functions of humour and laughter (cf. Korte/Lechner 2013: 11-13):

– The structural: humour serves to defuse »ridiculous« situations and incongruences caused by the divergence of event and expectation or by a clash of expectations;

– The psychological: humour is a means of reducing tension, insecurity, anxiety;

– The social: humour is an important part of social communication: one does not laugh alone. »Bergson was right when he wrote that the comic aspects of human life can hardly be experienced in isolation. Laughter requires an echo […]. Indeed, a passenger on a bus or sub-way, obviously travelling without a companion, does frighten us slightly if he or she suddenly bursts into laughter, or grins without interruption.« (Zijderveld 1983: 3).

It is understood – and is indeed also supported by the following contributions – that the three components mentioned above overlap frequently. Equally, when talking about laughter and humour, the anthropological and the historical component cannot be separated. The ability to laugh is undoubtedly an anthropological constant; however »das Lachen [verweist] nicht nur auf endogene seelische und geistige Zustände, sondern darüber hinaus auf die sie induzierenden extrasubjektiven Gegenstände, Situationen und Vorgänge« (Fietz 1996: 14) The specific form of the humorous thus always remains bound to particular historical conditions and constellations.

When invoking Mikhail Bachtin's thoughts on the carnivalesque (cf. Bakhtin 1968), it is often pointed out that the central feature of humour lies in its subversive function; that its use is favoured in questioning a prevailing system or even toppling it. In fact, humour is often based on a game with fixed, mechanized habits of speech, thought and life (cf. Zijderveld 1983: 10ff ., 17ff.), which it breaks open, raises awareness of and thereby potentially questions. Humour does have a playful, communicative nature but it is not per se a means of subversion, and also does not automatically imply a call for »thinking differently«, for more tolerance and understanding. Laughter and humour as character codes in the range of intersubjective communication cover »die gesamte Bandbreite von heiter-geselligen über kritische bis zu höhnisch-feindlichen Ausdrucksformeln« (Fietz 1996: 15), and they can consequently be used likewise to »zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen anzubahnen, auf Distanz zu halten oder gar auseinanderzubrechen zu lassen« (ibid.). The general constituent of humorous situations seems to be the need for some kind of »recognition« of the »strange« (cf. Scholz Williams 1996: 82): an »Other«, a counterpart – be it a situation, a person, a group, etc. – is constructed in such a way as to take away its horror and strangeness. This can take a symmetrical form: both sides find each other through common,

redemptive laughter; but it may just as well happen in an asymmetrical manner: the laughter becomes laughter *at* the other, with all the scorn, ridicule, devaluation and degradation this implies. This works better the more self-assured and superior the other previously appeared (key word: *schadenfreude*; cf. Zijderveld 1983: 39). Humour thus proves itself a tool that can be used in diametrically opposing ways: for the propagation of tolerance as well as intolerance, in the hands of rulers and of the oppressed, in stabilising as well as criticising the system. The strategies used in each case are of course quite different from each other. The contributions in this volume provide a good insight in-to the variety of such strategies.

In the area of social and historical macro-structures, laughter at another party seems to occur much more frequently than shared laughter. An even rarer occurrence on this level – Goethe's epigram »Wer sich nicht selbst zum besten haben kann, der ist gewiss nicht von den Besten« aside – is humour as a means of self-criticism and self-relativization. To be able to laugh in existentially relevant situations at oneself requires either a very stable identity or desperate self-abandonment (so-called gallows humour): the former is rare in history's biggest civilizations, and the latter, the state of anomie, is so dangerous for larger social groups that it is avoided wherever possible. In the field of history, humour usually thus expresses itself on the »middle« level, in laughter at another party, which is used as a foil in order to stabilize an own identity, but without completely dismantling the other. This is a balance of power which allows better control of the inevitable potential for conflict. However, the following contributions also show how precarious this balance is and how quickly the situation can escalate and flip into a literally »crushing« laughter.

ELISABETH CHEAURÉ's article deals with the role of humour in Russia's Patriotic War against Napoleon (1812). The confrontation with Napoleon has been crucial for the development of Russian national identity and its positioning relative to Western Europe. Although Napoleon remains a cult figure for some of the Russian intelligentsia, after 1812 the victory over him became the prototype of an ever-repeating pattern; a kind of stylized historical regularity: Russia is in its moral integrity always proven victorious over the aggressive and arrogant western invaders who wrongly consider themselves superior; Russia ultimately becomes the »saviour« of Europe – a narrative that is still effective today. In the 19th century, it became popularized in humour in the form of jokes and anecdotes, but especially – and not surprisingly given the widespread illiteracy – in visual media. So-called

lubki, simple lithographs, were distributed en masse. The *lubki*, which greatly contributed to the development of caricature in Russia and also for the first time contained representatives of the common people emerging as heroes, used characteristic strategies of devaluation and ridicule of the enemy. The superiority of the simple Russian people, collectively acting in solidarity against the selfish westerners in power, is demonstrated. The enemy is dehumanized (e.g. with animal metaphors) and subjected to degrading gender changes (feminization). The feeling of *schadenfreude* is used most effectively when exactly those defects of which »uncivilized« Russia is accused (indifference, sloppiness, etc.) are proven to be effective weapons in the fight against the civilized and seemingly vastly superior enemy, France – a country which provided the dominant culture for Russia in the 18th century.

AXEL HEIMSOTH uses examples of well-known German magazines of the 19th century to illustrate the changing public reputation of Alfred Krupp and his son Friedrich Alfred, as reflected – and indeed produced and established – in the popular genre of caricature. The man who, in the 1860s, was effusively celebrated in magazines such as *Kladderadatsch* and *Die Gartenlaube* as »King of the Guns«, able to protect and benefit his country better than the lawful kings, undergoes a significant image towards the end of the 19th century. In the context of increasing social tensions and the strengthening of the social democratic movement (*Ulk*, *Der wahre Jakob*) Friedrich Alfred Krupp tends to be portrayed as an unscrupulous capitalist, even a »demon«, who sells his arms to anyone who has the money – even to Germany's enemies. Caricature increasingly becomes a »weapon« wielded against the weapons manufacturers. Krupp flees from public hostility to his home on Capri. He dies in November 1902, after the *Vorwärts* published an article about his alleged homosexual relations with young men on Capri. There are rumours of a suicide. Even the demonstrative solidarity of William II with the Krupp family and company does not change anything. It is not until the First World War that the success of new Krupp weapons temporarily triggers another new mood; a kind of collective hysteria and enthusiasm; and the criticism, which becomes louder in the course of the war, never again returns to such extreme forms as in the case of Friedrich Alfred Krupp.

LESLEY MILNE turns to the genre of doggerel and comparatively investigates how it was applied in English, French and German satirical magazines (*Punch*, *Le Rire* and *Simplicissimus* respectively) during the First World War. In 1914 all three magazines are, regardless of their critical traditions,

supporters of the war and mouthpieces of public propaganda. At the same time, each legitimises its own country's involvement as »defensive«. Humour is used to represent the enemy as weak and ridiculous and thereby to demonstrate one's own superiority. The social function of collective patriotic mobilization clearly combines here with the psychological function of humour: the displacement of individual fears and insecurities. Each magazine develops its own form of »threats«. A popular old tradition, for example, was »flyting«, a boast-insult-contest in which one concedes the skills and achievements of one's opponent, yet at the same time appears completely unimpressed by them. Milne names Herodotus' story as a classic example: at the battle of Thermopylae a Spartan soldier laconically answers to the threat that the arrows of the Persian opponents would darken the sky, »Then we shall fight in the shade« (Sabrina Feickert also references this episode in her contribution). A similar effect is achieved, for example, when *Le Rire* reported that the Germans had indeed placed their flag on Antwerp Cathedral, but it would not stop the weather vane going about his business in the usual manner. Another possibility of such tactical understatement is realized by pretending to accept victories as well as defeats calmly and indifferently, in contrast to one's opponent. By referring to one's serene, dignified manner, defeats and setbacks can be reconstrued as »victories«. Milne concludes that the type of humour is less dependent on national peculiarities than on particular circumstances and constellations.

LOUISA REICHSTETTER comes next in the chronological order with a comparison of German, French and Spanish satirical journals in the period between the world wars. All magazines examined are attributable to the liberal and left wings. Their goal is primarily the defence and legitimization of the interwar republics, which were very weak in Germany and Spain. In connection with this, historical traditions and metaphors are often referred to, in both affirmative and negative ways. The French Revolution is a key historical image referenced not only in France; and the Phrygian cap of the Jacobins, for example, has a metaphorical function, where its physical state is used to simultaneously indicate the state of each existing Republic. Over time, the references to the French Revolution become more diverse and distinct; they shift from the visual to the verbal. The arrogance of the French Prime Minister Poincaré is commented on via the annotation »Les taxes c'est moi,« thereby connecting him with the Ancien Régime. Kurt Tucholsky mocks the lack of political action on the part of Germans, whose political will to change fails due to their love of order and deference to au-

thority, by allowing that a German revolution did take place – but by necessity »in music«. Negative historical references in Germany mainly use the Kaiserreich (Empire), whose legacy in Hindenburg's election to the presidency hangs like a millstone around the neck of the Weimar Republic. France's other cautionary example next to the Ancien Régime is, interestingly, Napoleon Bonaparte's unbridled thirst for power.

JONATHAN WATERLOW's contribution dives right into the middle of the world of subversive humour as described by Mikhail Bachtin. Based on extensive archival material, the author examines forms of political humour in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. Humour is used here as a highly elaborate weapon against the extreme fears, constraints and uncertainties with which the individual is faced in the Stalinist regime of terror. Whether humour can be described as a form of resistance remains open to question. As a rule, no independent oppositional political objectives are formulated via humour; rather, a subtle game is played with the political status quo, especially in regard to its linguistic expressions (propaganda, slogans, etc.). By simply transferring them to other, everyday contexts, their absurdity and distance from reality is demonstrated. Also popular is the reinterpretation of abbreviations, whose use in the Soviet Union took on inflated proportions; thus SSSR (Sojuz sovetskich socialističeskich respublik / Union of Soviet Socialist Republics) becomes »**S**mert' **S**talina **s**paset **R**ossiju« (Stalin's Death [Smert'] will Save Russia). The devastating, self-propelling effects of the regime of terror are apparent in a joke about a schoolboy who, responding to a teacher's question as to who had written *Evgenij Onegin* (one of the most famous 19th century Russian novels), answers in panic, »Not me«. His parents eagerly confirm to the appalled teacher that their son had not written the work; the NKVD interrogates the family and finally receives the answer that they had all written *Evgenij Onegin* together. According to Waterlow, there was a kind of diglossia of the Russian and the »Soviet« in the Soviet Union of the 1930s. In this way everyone lived in different worlds linguistically and with different masks that had to be combined in a more or less virtuoso manner. Interestingly, these worlds were not strictly separate, but, like crosshatching, often superimposed on and interacted with each other.

SABRINA FEICKERT shows how ancient historical events and myths are used in the present in order to categorize and cope with the terrifying Other. The clash of Spartans and Persians at Thermopylae in 480 BCE, described by Herodotus, has gained unexpected popularity through the Zack Snyder film

300 (USA, 2007). The film conducts an unrestrained aestheticization of violence, while skirting any discursive tendencies, let alone irony and humour – unlike, say, the films of Quentin Tarantino. Ironic sequences, for example, the famous laconic Spartan answer, »Then we will fight in the shade« to the threat of Persian arrows darkening the sky, serve to mock one's opponent, but not to question oneself. The film simplistically presents two irreconcilable, opposing worlds: the mercilessly rational, highly organized, strictly heterosexual order of Spartan society and their king Leonidas, against the immense tide of faceless, monstrous Persian combatants under Xerxes, whose dubiousness and inferiority is largely communicated by gender characteristics. The King of Persia is characterized as a sexually ambiguous being, a transvestite. *300* is clearly to be understood as a production (dressed up in ancient costume) about the current »clash of civilizations«; the supposed »threat« to Western civilization from archaic, vindictive, unpredictable cultures. Feickert refers inter alia to the obvious similarities between Leonidas' pronouncements and George Bush's »rhetoric of liberty«. Even more interesting than the film itself, and bringing humour into play, is the fact that *300* has given rise to a flood of parodies (two examples Feickert examines are Jason Friedberg's *Meet the Spartans* and the South Park episode »D-yikes«), which also prefer to work on the level of gender. By questioning and resolving the heterosexual norms of the Spartans, which seem so unassailable in the film, their entire behaviour is thrown into doubt. The inflationary use of slogans such as the famous »This is Sparta!« in every conceivable – appropriate and usually completely inappropriate – context leads once again to *300*'s message being not affirmed, but irredeemably pulled apart.

At this point we would like to express our gratitude to all the authors whose articles have contributed to readers discovering interesting news from the world of history, and especially in such a critical, instructive and entertaining way. A big thank you also goes to Kate Fletcher, who has carefully proofread all contributions written by non-native English speaking authors and has been an invaluable source of support to the editors (who are both professionals in Slavic Studies rather than English) in all questions of English wording. We would also like to articulate our affinity with our colleagues in the research group »Historische Lebenswelten« and express our thanks for three years of joint work on very different historical topics, something that has widened all of our horizons. Last but not least we would like

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