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### Collective Coping: Humor as an Escape from Reality

Humor is known to be a universal language that spans time, culture, and location. When employed as a mechanism for enduring agonizing experiences, humor is equally unifying as it is universal. In instances of political turmoil, political jokes often prove to be a catalyst in uniting the oppressed in a common movement of opposition against the oppressor. At the minimum, humor provides the comforting knowledge that pain and suffering are mutual hardships. In the Soviet Union, the communal aspect of humor precipitated the realization that peoples' contempt for political leaders and decisions was not singular. The wielding of humor, particularly political jokes, in the Stalinist USSR allowed people to momentarily escape the harsh, oppressive reality of life by turning suffering into a shared experience to endure collectively. Ultimately, humor was a medium for healthily expressing fears and criticism and acted as a coping mechanism that united citizens.

In a regime in which terror was a political tool, Soviet citizens used humor as a way of therapeutically conveying their trepidation, such as arrests, executions, and war. In times of political infighting and extreme terror campaigns, citizens were left feeling castrated from having agency and separated from others. Humor became a predominant way to articulate personal emotions and receive support from friends since it was less easily regulated by government agents: "General wants, needs, and sorrow united us. We

all had fun together, telling jokes and anecdotes against the regime.”<sup>1</sup> While humor prompted personal vulnerability, political jokes explored overarching Soviet concerns.

Jokes were often the central way to communicate shared emotions and to create connections between people. In many anecdotes, underlying fear is present and hinted at through the details of the joke. For example, a common anecdote claimed that “when you have one Russian, you have a melancholic... and when you have three Russians, you have a revolution,”<sup>2</sup> discusses Soviet uneasiness and revolution and illuminates the insights found in jokes. The fact that a significant portion of anecdotes referenced war or revolution is a telling sign that citizens had concerns about future violence. Considering the Party’s regulation of any speech even remotely oppositional, jokes were a comparably safe way to divulge their authentic emotions towards Soviet life.

The indirectness of anecdotes protected people by assigning their opinion to a fictional voice. In a popular anecdote, a peasant unknowingly saves Stalin from drowning, but when Stalin identifies himself and asks the peasant to choose a reward for himself, the peasant replies, “Just please don’t tell anyone I saved you!”<sup>3</sup> If someone explicitly stated their hatred for Stalin, they would surely be imprisoned or executed; however, humor provided a thin layer of protection by letting people clearly express their opinions and feelings—anti-Stalinist included—using the ruse that they were merely recounting an anecdote that was not theirs.

Beyond being expressions of personal mindsets, humor could also be utilized to criticize political leaders. The expanding presence of political jokes during the Stalin era led

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<sup>1</sup> Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System. Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 433, pp. 44.

<sup>2</sup> HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 2, Case 14, pp. 52.

<sup>3</sup> HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, pp. 67.

people to view jokes as “a form of hidden opposition to the government.”<sup>4</sup> Although some forms relied on indirect messages, many were also overtly disapproving of political actions. For example, a war time joke alludes to foreign troops surrounding the home of Stalin’s mother: “[One] person thought that the troops were there in order to protect Stalin's mother from possible harm. However, another person answered - no. They're here to see that she doesn't give birth to another like him.”<sup>5</sup> Without the power to provide meaningful resistance to Stalin’s movement, citizens attempted to assign oppositional power to anecdotes. Soviets likely accepted that there was little room for them to take action against the overpowering regime without being severely punished; yet, feeling the obligation to engage in some form of public criticism and resistance, they wrote and spread anecdotes to publicly spread their message of disapproval of Stalin. When spoken jokes did not suffice, risky, rebellious acts were taken to draw the attention to those who did not choose to passively comply to orders: “Some boys in our village climbed up on a statue... and rubbed it with catnip, thus attracting all the cats in the place. Everyone thought this was a fairly funny joke. But doing anything to a statue of Lenin smelled of counter-revolutionary action.”<sup>6</sup> In an attempt to healthily endure the suffering caused by Stalinism, groups of people were banded together through humor and its value as a means of criticism.

More common and crucial than the use of humor as a form of expression against the regime, humor proved to be an indispensable coping mechanism. When it came to jokes, “A good anecdote was true and funny. It had to be understandable for every person.”<sup>7</sup> Due to

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<sup>4</sup> HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 1, Case 53, pp. 15.

<sup>5</sup> HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 2, Case 11, pp. 50-51.

<sup>6</sup> HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 642, pp. 5.

<sup>7</sup> HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 13, Case 446, pp. 71.

the unspoken guidelines for anecdotes, humor prioritized inclusivity. Everyone was able to engage in either the telling or listening to of jokes, and everyone's role was equally vital in cultivating a community that helped each other momentarily escape their realities.

Additionally, the humor that was employed was exclusively a Soviet experience:

"Americans cannot tell... Russian jokes; the jokes must be for the particular people who listen to them."<sup>8</sup> Both intentional and unintentional restrictions on who could share and relate to jokes furthered the notion that joke-telling produced an audience strictly of Soviet citizens who could genuinely empathize with the hardships of others. If a joke was being told to a group of friends, "The non-Party members would roar with laughter and really enjoy the joke, but the Party members would just smile a little to show that they are serious people."<sup>9</sup> Thus, humor became a strategy to distinguish the oppressed from the oppressors. Those who could relate to the message of the joke were welcomed into the coping group, while those who could not empathize were shunned for contributing to the terror and suffering. Furthermore, despite knowing the grave consequences for being caught telling an oppositional anecdote, many people chose to spread the message anyways: "People are suppressed for these anecdotes, but everyone tells them."<sup>10</sup> The sacrifice that Soviets were willing to make in order to momentarily escape the harsh reality of their lives is telling of the extent of the suffering that many Soviets were forced to bear.

"From a study of anecdotes, you can create the most correct picture of the Soviet Union."<sup>11</sup> Out of the existing sources regarding the Stalinist USSR, the accounts of humor,

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<sup>8</sup> HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 13, Case 446, pp. 72.

<sup>9</sup> HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 19, Case 385, pp. 81.

<sup>10</sup> HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 13, Case 446, pp. 70-71.

<sup>11</sup> HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 12, Case 149, pp. 95.

jokes, and anecdotes prove to be a crucial approach to analyzing the lives and attitudes of common Soviet citizens. The crafting and recounting of jokes enabled people to cope more effectively with the peril of their lives while expressing their criticism and fears regarding Stalin and other political leaders. Humor acted as a universal language to unify those who engaged in the sharing of jokes and provided the necessary resistance against the regime. Despite humor being a universal language, there still needs to be someone speaking the language for it to have an effect. The Soviets proved to be fluent in the language of humor.

## Bibliography

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Available online at <http://hcl.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/index.html>