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Popular Humour in Stalin's 1930s. A Study of Popular Opinion and Adaptation. PhD Project*

Understanding everyday life – 'history' as experienced by the majority – during Stalin's 1930s remains problematic. The historiography of the Stalin period has shifted ever more towards social analyses, away from totalitarianism-based explanations of the regime as based upon either total state coercion or total state conversion, with the focus coming to rest upon the space between those poles. Exactly what that space was, its nature and operation, its blurring of boundaries between affirmation and dissent, has yet to be clearly defined. The outlines of the everyday realities for the majority of Soviet citizens have been sketched, but have yet to be coloured in. My research proposes that studying the humour of the population can offer us a keyhole onto the period, providing a wealth of new detail to this still underdeveloped picture of popular perceptions, understandings of and reactions to the upheavals of the 1930s. Policies, speeches, leading figures and the daily grind of life in the Soviet Union were all subjected to constant mockery by the Soviet population. This was evident in *anekdoty* (jokes or humorous tales), sarcastic remarks and observations shared at work, and in the widespread practice of 'decoding' the ubiquitous acronyms of the Soviet authorities in mocking and sometimes filthy ways. But in the end, nothing approaching a dangerous 'opposition' emerged from this plethora of humorous subversion. How, then, did the relationship between official ideology and popular responses to it actually function?

I propose an intricate blend of acceptance and criticism or, rather, of acceptance *through* the process of criticism. By criticising that which could not be changed, 'ordinary' Soviet citizens could retain some agency of their own and shared these interpretive acts widely with those whom they trusted. These processes created a pathway to adaptation without becoming simply crushed or brainwashed by ideology, and simultaneously shaped a very complex interaction between the population and official ideology. They picked and chose only certain pieces which they held to be true, but did not simply discard the most patently false or unwanted. Instead, my research reveals not outright rejection, but strong desires that the system should live up to its claims, combined with a subtle, popular reclamation of official 'signs' (e.g. the acronyms mentioned above), which were given new, clandestine meanings that reflected the majority's view of world around them.

In a broader sense, the aim of my research is to develop scholarly understanding of how populations engage with and adapt to dominating, 'totalitarian' regimes. I propose humour as a key indicator of the path many citizens may take between those poles. That is not only to say that people are selective, but to identify the operational islands of the everyday which they constructed and to examine them in their own right. Humour is especially suited to this goal because it both receives/accepts a regime's ideology, but continues to allow for personal agency to colour that reception. My analysis therefore directly engages with the continuing debates surrounding the category of 'resistance', but not upon the subjective and

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value-laden question of 'why' people endured the difficulties of the Stalinist regime. Instead, my research is more empirical in its focus, noting first that because people *did* endure it, our focus should be upon the vital question of *how* they did so.

The focus upon humour adds an important element of social psychology to my research which may be more widely applicable to studies of contemporary societies' social bonds and interactions. Humour plays an important role in the forging, shaping and endurance of social bonds, and I examine the different kinds of jokes or comments that citizens would risk in different social settings. It is possible in this way to identify different 'trust-groups', the contours of which I propose to be more useful interpretational categories than the problematic labels of 'public' and 'private' – a binary division that simply does not work for Stalinist Russia nor, I argue, in many other societies, perhaps including our own.

The principal source bases of this project are reports on the 'mood' of the population, combined with the criminal casefiles of individuals who were arrested and imprisoned for crimes of humour committed during the 1930s. The sample materials are drawn from archives in Moscow, St Petersburg and Kyiv.

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