

Political Humor Under Stalin: An Anthology of Unofficial Jokes and Anecdotes,

Edited by David Brandenberger

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Political Humor under Stalin is an anthology of jokes, wisecracks and satire from the Soviet 1930s and '40s that provides a glimpse of everyday dissembling and dissent in one of the modern world's most repressive societies. More than merely a joke book, *Political Humor under Stalin* offers no less than a folkloric counter-narrative to the "official" history of the USSR, spread across ten thematic chapters that have been fully annotated for maximum accessibility. *Political Humor under Stalin* also features a ground-breaking introductory discussion of the culture of joke-telling under Stalin, analyzing the

nature of the era's political humor and the context within which jokes were (and were not) told. As such, *Political Humor under Stalin* addresses a long-neglected subject in Soviet socio-cultural history that promises to attract considerable attention within the interdisciplinary field of Russian studies.

Political Humor under Stalin begins with a sweeping investigation of joke-telling during the darkest years of the Russian twentieth century. Taking advantage of an array of little-known sources (archival documents, diaries, memoirs and refugee interviews), the volume's introduction examines Stalin-era humor as a practice, detailing the context in which political joking took place and determining what led Soviet citizens to indulge in such a risky pastime. The introduction also outlines the party's campaign to suppress political humor—both its condemnation of joke-telling and its persecution of the jokesters themselves—in order to explain why the Soviet leadership reacted so hysterically to even the most innocent of wisecracks.

The core of this study consists of some 350 Stalin-era jokes, arranged into chapters and laid out in split-face format in Russian and English. Based on a little-known collection

published in Munich in 1951,¹ *Political Humor under Stalin* presents the material in English translation along with explanatory notes and extensive cross-referencing against other Stalin-era sources. This cross-referencing not only confirms the authenticity of the volume's contents, but also hints at the pervasiveness of political humor in the society as a whole. Ultimately, *Political Humor under Stalin* challenges popular assumptions about the 1930s and '40s by demonstrating the existence of an underground culture of joke-telling in a society long thought to have been thoroughly cowed by the secret police. Indeed, this volume reveals that despite the enforcement of legal statutes punishing jokesters for "anti-Soviet agitation" (the Soviet criminal code's notorious Article 58/10), political humor played a vital role in everyday life during the Stalin era.

Humor itself is a serious subject of inquiry in cultural studies and similar books have been published in the past ten years on the culture of political humor in Nazi Germany, Communist Romania, ancient Rome and other equally unlikely places. One study has even looked at the grim history of Jewish humor during the Holocaust.² *Political Humor under Stalin* extends this analysis of popular resistance and dissembling to Stalinist society, filling an important niche in the developing literature. Until now, collections of Soviet humor have almost always relied on jokes that circulated after the Khrushchev "Thaw."³ *Political Humor under Stalin* is the first full-scale investigation of joke-telling to seriously address the preceding period, drawing attention to a little-understood subculture of Stalinism that few have ever suspected even existed.

Long overlooked by scholars, the political humor of the Stalin era has direct bearing on ongoing debates over the nature of conformity, indoctrination, dissent and resistance in the USSR during the 1930s and '40s. It also has a role to play in the larger field of Russian social and cultural history, as well as cultural studies. A neglected topic with enormous potential, Soviet joke-telling provides a glimpse of Stalinist society that few have ever imagined.

[2009]

¹ *Kreml' i narod*, ed. E. Andreevich (Munich: [Golos naroda,] 1951).

² *Underground Humor in Nazi Germany, 1933-1945*, ed. F. K. L. Hillenbrand (New York: Routledge, 1995); Anthony Corbeill, *Controlling Laughter: Political Humor in the Late Roman Republic* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1996); Steve Lipman, *Laughter in Hell: The Uses of Humor during the Holocaust* (Northvale: Jason Aronson, 1991).

³ Bruce Adams, *Tiny Revolutions in Russia: Twentieth-Century Soviet and Russian History in Anecdotes* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005); Emil A. Draitser, *Making War, not Love: Gender and Sexuality in Russian Humor* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999); idem, *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1998); Zhdanna Dolgoplova, *Russia Dies Laughing: Jokes from Soviet Russia* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1982); P. Beckmann, *Hammer and Tickle: Clandestine Laughter in the Soviet Empire* (Boulder: Golem, 1980); etc.