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Did you hear the one about Stalin's mother and the N.K.V.D.? Jokes, Popular Opinion, and Personal Relationships in the U.S.S.R. (1924-1953)

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Did you hear the one about Stalin's mother and the N.K.V.D.? **Jokes, Popular Opinion, and Personal Relationships in the U.S.S.R. (1924-1953)**

Contents

Glossary

Aktivisty – 'Activists', people with pro-Soviet views.
Anekdoty – Jokes, specifically political jokes.
A.S.S.R – Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic.
Collectivisation – The replacement of individual peasant farms with *kolkhozy*.
Dekulakisation – The liquidation of the *kulaks*.
Dissidenty – 'Dissidents', people with anti-Soviet views.
Gulag – Forced labour camp.
Gorsovyet - City Council.
Kolkhoz/Kolkhoznik – Collective farm/ Collective farm worker.
Kulak – Wealthier peasant.
Mashinno-traktornaya stantsiya – Machine-Tractor Station.
N.K.V.D. – The Secret Police.
Pioneer – Member of the Soviet Youth Organisation.
Politruk – Political Officer.
Stakhanovite – A title given as a reward for beating 5-Year-Plan production targets.
S.S.R – Soviet Socialist Republic.
Svoi – 'Ordinary people', neither activists or dissidents.
Tovarisch – Comrade.
Vydvizhentsy – 'Promoted Person', an upwardly mobile demographic of people under Stalin.
Vyssheie Sovietskoie Narodnoie Khoziaistvo - The Supreme Soviet of the National Economy.
Raicom – District Party Committee.
Zek – Gulag Inmate.

Places

Odessa – a city in southern Ukraine.
Lviv Oblast – a region of Ukraine in the far west of the U.S.S.R.
Primorskaya Oblast - a region of Russia in the far east of the U.S.S.R.
The Caucasus – a region in the south of the U.S.S.R comprising Georgia S.S.R., Armenia S.S.R., Azerbaijan S.S.R., and several A.S.S.R.

Introduction

"a group of government officials was paying a visit to an insane asylum, to see how the inmates lived, whether they ate well, etc. When they came into one room, they saw five or six insane persons there. All of them cried: "Hello, Comrade Stalin!" But one stood and didn't say this. Members of the government group said to him: "Why didn't you cry this too?" He replied: "I am not crazy – I am just working here"".[1]

Anekdoty ('jokes') such as this one present a multitude of problems to the historian of Stalinism. While it is not possible to trace the origins of this joke, the mere fact that it was told casts doubt on multiple orthodoxies that pervade social histories of the U.S.S.R. In this dissertation, I will use *anekdoty* as a lens to argue firstly that distrust pervaded Stalin's Soviet Union - people distrusted the authorities, strangers, colleagues, friends, and even their family members. Subsequently, many came to fear joke-makers as dangerous individuals who risked their comrades' fates in the *gulag*. Secondly, and seemingly paradoxically, the Stalinist authorities unintentionally created material and psychological conditions conducive to the making and sharing of *anekdoty*, even though such acts were explicitly outlawed.[2] Jonathan Waterlow touched on the notion that Soviet 'uniformity in politics, culture and society' created 'an abundance of shared reference points' for *anekdoty*.[3] I will elaborate on this idea – arguing specifically that governmental acronyms, Stalin's cult of personality, policies, and political events were drawn on as these 'shared reference points'. In this section of the dissertation I will also draw a distinction between *anti-Soviet* and *anti-Stalinist* jokes in order to more accurately gauge citizens' attitudes towards Stalinism *and* towards the Soviet project as a whole. I argue that Stalinism was widely criticised and that the experience of Stalinism led many to oppose the Soviet project they had once supported. Moreover, the bleak and often tragic subject matter of many *anekdoty* reveals the psychological need to tell jokes in times of hardship, an interpretation that is supported by Alexander Solzhenitsyn's writings on jokes in the *gulag*. Lastly, I will argue that Soviet citizens used jokes to establish who was *svoi* – locating a precursor to Alexei Yurchak's concept of 'ordinary people' in the late Soviet Era, in the culture of *anekdoty* under Stalin.[4] In making these arguments, I raise questions about several trends in the historiography of this field: the notion that Stalinism created an 'atomised'

[1] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 13, Case 446, p71.
[2] Jonathan Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke Comrade!* (Oxford: Jonathan Waterlow, 2018), p148.
[3] Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke Comrade!*, p231.
[4] Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), p103.

populace, the notion of a total 'People v. The State' binary, and the notion of Stalinism's popularity among upwardly mobile young people. While officially this was a society whose only jokes were the 'approved' ones in State publications like *Krokodil*, this dissertation will demonstrate that jokes were omnipresent in Stalin's empire.[5]

Historiography – Popular Opinion

In writing this dissertation I aim to contribute to the body of historiography on popular opinion in the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. Traditionally, the field is divided into two schools. The 'totalitarian school', primarily associated with Robert Conquest, holds that Stalinist society 'atomised' individuals, rendering the very formation of 'popular opinion' impossible.[6] In the 1970s, social historians began to challenge this view, labelling it a product of the Cold War.[7] These 'revisionists' argued that popular opinion in the U.S.S.R. did exist, and could be gleamed from the few Soviet documents available at the time – primarily in the *Smolensk* archive captured by the Germans in WW2.[8] They were not united, however, in what they thought this 'popular opinion' *was*. Some, such as Moshe Lewin and Sheila Fitzpatrick, argued for the existence of Stalinism's 'support from below', particularly among a group of upwardly mobile people known as *vydvizhentsy*.[9] Others, like Donald Filtzer, argued for the existence of 'popular resistance'.[10] More recent works have been categorised as 'post-revisionist', most notably Stephen Kotkin's 1995 *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation*, in which he argued that popular opinion was a 'unitary thing', determinable from public discourse, not subject to class or national divisions.[11] Kotkin's thesis was that many Soviet citizens learned to 'speak Bolshevik', and socially identify with the Revolution and the 'Soviet project' (here, not described as a 'Regime').[12] The other seminal 'post-revisionist' work is Sarah Davies' 1997 *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941*, in which

[5] Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke Comrade!*, p14.
[6] Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p5.
[7] Jan Plamper, 'Beyond Binaries: Popular Opinion in Stalinism', p65. in Paul Corner (ed.), *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes: Fascism, Nazism, Communism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).
[8] Plamper, 'Beyond Binaries', p65.
[9] Plamper, 'Beyond Binaries', p76; Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Education and social mobility in the Soviet Union 1921-1934* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), pp251-252.
[10] Plamper, 'Beyond Binaries', p76.
[11] Sheila Fitzpatrick, 'Popular Opinion in Russia Under Pre-war Stalinism', p21 in Paul Corner (ed.), *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes.*
[12] Stephen Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain: Stalinism as a Civilisation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), p207.

she made a new case for the Soviet Union as 'a nation of resisters'.[13] There are then, three prevailing opinions on this matter: (I) That there was no popular opinion under Stalin, (II) that Stalinism enjoyed a level of support, and (III) that Stalinism faced popular opposition. All three theses have persisted, even though the opening of the Soviet archives in 1991 revealed a wealth of new sources. In this essay, I will draw on recent work by Jonathan Waterlow, Jan Plamper, and Alexei Yurchak in an attempt to move past these arguments.

The evidence I present in this dissertation challenges several claims that pervade the historiography of this field: (I) The notion of an 'atomised' populace, (II) the notion of Stalinism's popularity amongst *vydvizhentsy*, (III), and the notion of a total 'People vs. the State' binary. This dissertation heeds the call made by Sheila Fitzpatrick and Jan Plamper to move beyond reductionist binaries of ''resistance' vs. accommodation', 'people' vs. state', and 'positive' vs. 'negative' opinion'.[14] The lens of *anekdoty* reveals a more complex picture of popular opinion.

What is striking about the historiography is that before the very existence of this field of study (in the West) there was primary source material contradicting many of the arguments that would come to define the area. Mikhail Bakhtin wrote *Rabelais and his World* in 1940, which used the pretence of a study of medieval French society to present a veiled critique of Stalinism.[15] More notably, he detailed how in medieval France, as in Stalin's Russia, the official culture was widely distrusted and ridiculed through humour.[16] The very existence of the book challenges the 'atomisation' thesis. Similarly, Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago* was released in 1973, which could be said to challenge 'revisionist' notions of Stalinism's popularity.[17] Chapter 19, entitled 'Zeks as a Nation' deals with the subject of jokes in the *gulag*, which I will return to later.

[13] Fitzpatrick, 'Popular Opinion in Russia Under Pre-war Stalinism', pp18-21; Plamper, 'Beyond Binaries', p67.
[14] Plamper, 'Beyond Binaries', p67.
[15] Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and his world* trans Hélène Iswolsky (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1984); Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's* Russia, pp7-8.
[16] Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia*, pp7-8.
[17] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: an experiment in literary investigation*, Vol. 1, (London: Harvill Press, 1975).

Historiography – *Svoi*

In Chapter 3 I will argue that the culture of *anekdoty* that emerged under Stalin can be viewed as a precursor to Alexei Yurchak's description of *svoi*, or 'ordinary people' in the Brezhnev era. *Svoi* were 'normal' people who co-operated with each other to negotiate a safe life in the Soviet system.[18] They were defined primarily by their status as neither *aktivisty* or *dissidenty*.[19] However, it seems reasonable to suggest that, under Stalin, the categories of *svoi* and *dissidenty* could, and did, overlap, as the potential for individuals to co-operate socially without breaching any laws was almost zero. In a literal sense, jokers were *dissidenty* because sharing *anekdoty* was prohibited under Article 58-10 of the Criminal Code – 'Anti-Soviet Agitation'.[20] However, as I will demonstrate in Chapter 3, joke-tellers tended to consider themselves 'ordinary people'.

Like in the Brezhnev era, the Stalin era *svoi* negotiated their way through life by accepting and appropriating elements of the regime.[21] As I will discuss in Chapter 2-I, anti-Soviet *anekdoty* commonly appropriated official Soviet acronyms and policies, transforming them into joke-matter. Additionally, Catherine Wanner described *svoi* as denoting a 'shared experience with an oppressive state apparatus'.[22] As I will demonstrate in Chapter 2-II, jokers revelled in their mutual oppression by the state.

Naturally however, there are some differences between the two eras of *svoi*. Not only were the Brezhnev-era *svoi* explicitly not *dissidenty*, but Yurchak highlighted that belonging to the Brezhnev-era *svoi* was partially defined by an 'ethic of responsibility to others'.[23] This marks a stark contrast with the Stalin-era *svoi*, who I define largely by their proclivity to share *anekdoty*, as the sharing of jokes was dangerous, and risked a 10 year prison sentence for both joke-teller and audience. However, as I will detail throughout this dissertation, this fact did not deter everyone.

[18] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p103.
[19] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p103.
[20] Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke Comrade!*, p148; It should be noted that Article 58 was part of the Russian SFSR Penal Code. The Ukrainian Penal Code had its Article 54, and the Belarussian Penal Code had its Article 63, which performed the same functions.
[21] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p103.
[22] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p103.
[23] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p109.

Methodology

This dissertation will utilise the Harvard Project on the Soviet Social System (H.P.S.S.S.), a database of interviews with Soviet refugees in the United States and West Germany, conducted by sociologist Alex Inkeles and psychologist Raymond Bauer between 1950 and 1953.[24] Despite its age, it remains the most comprehensive and conclusive collection of oral histories of Stalinism. Furthermore, it can be used to illuminate several flaws in the existing historiography – showing that evidence existed in the 1950s that contradicts claims made by academics throughout the late-twentieth century. It is also necessary to return to the H.P.S.S.S. now as it was criticised at the time as American propaganda, and subsequently dismissed by many social historians.[25] Of course, the validity of the interviews has been overwhelmingly confirmed by the passage of time.

The reoccurring problem one encounters when engaging with the H.P.S.S.S. is that of contradictions. For example, one Russian interviewee was adamant that no one ever told jokes about Stalin, while another happily volunteered several.[26] While this may initially seem like an issue, a fuller examination of the interviews often reveals explanations for these discrepancies. In this case, the man who was adamant that there were no jokes about Stalin seems to have been a particularly paranoid individual – he refused to leave his address in the response ad for the interview.[27] Moreover, he had lived in Moscow where it was significantly more dangerous to tell jokes.[28] As a 'fairly well educated and intelligent person', it is also possible he knew that jokes about Stalin carried a higher sentence than jokes about other politicians.[29] Conversely, the man who volunteered to tell jokes about Stalin was less educated, from a small town, and spoke 'freely' and 'naturally', according to his interviewer.[30] Subsequently, discrepancies and contradictions in the interviews are revealing in themselves, as they allow us to examine the factors that shaped individuals' differing perceptions of Soviet life. From the above example we can see how education, location, and personality shaped two different perceptions of life under Stalin.

[24] https://library.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/about.html#about [accessed 2nd December 2019].
[25] Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke Comrade!*, p20.
[26] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p38; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p67-68.
[27] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p1.
[28] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p4.
[29] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p2; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p17.
[30] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p1; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p2.

The other issue with the H.P.S.S.S. is that its subjects were Soviet *refugees*, not Soviet *citizens.* These were predominantly people who had fled or been exiled from the U.S.S.R., and subsequently pro-Soviet views were naturally under-represented. Additionally, the interviewees were *reflecting* on their experience under Stalin, not reporting it *as it happened*. I propose two reasons why these facts do not impact the validity of the interviews as sources: (I) The interviews overwhelmingly agree on the key aspects of Soviet life, and (II) there is no distinct difference in views between interviewees who fled the U.S.S.R., and interviewees who were misplaced. Lastly, it should be noted that the H.P.S.S.S. subjects were predominantly from Russia, the Baltic, Belarus, Ukraine, and the Caucuses. Subsequently, like many histories of the 'Soviet Union', this dissertation will focus on these areas, rather than Soviet Central Asia.

In order to provide additional strength to my argument I will cross-reference numerous interviewees from different national, occupational, and class backgrounds where possible. I will occasionally refer to other primary sources to support claims made by the interviewees.

Chapter 1 – "Friendship was very dangerous".[31]

Geoffrey Hosking described the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin as the 'Land of Maximum Distrust'.[32] Distrust emanating from the internal politics of the Communist Party in the aftermath of the Civil War permeated through 'the whole structure of society'.[33] In the 1930s this was compounded by collectivisation and dekulakisation which led to widespread chaos that was officially explained by sabotage from internal enemies.[34] Simultaneously, the rise of imperialism in Germany and Japan left the Soviet Union encircled on the world stage, further radicalising the populace.[35] Trust became absent from Soviet life.

The H.P.S.S.S. interviews reveal distrust between students, colleagues, soldiers, strangers, friends, and even family members. One Polish-Russian woman remarked that 'fifteen students were expelled [from her university] for saying political jokes or anecdotes, and friendship was very dangerous'.[36] She befriended a Jewish girl on her course but stated that 'only after four years could we feel that we trusted each other'.[37] A Russian engineer had the same experience at his academy, noting that 'in our class there was not such a close relationship between the students'.[38] His interviewer asked him whether anyone at the academy spread anti-Soviet jokes and his response was 'it was impossible…. Surely everybody had known many jokes, but nobody spoke them'.[39]

An identical picture emerges from interviews with older émigrés with experience in Soviet workplaces. A Russian economic planner explained that the N.K.V.D. infiltrated offices and subsequently 'it was dangerous to tell jokes'.[40] He knew of a case 'when a man was sentenced to 10 years' after his co-worker asked him if he had heard any news from the front during the Second World War and he ironically replied 'Nothing in particular. We gave up three cities'.[41] A Ukrainian teacher told his interviewer of his 'very incompetent female supervisor by the

[31] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 21, Case 424, p14.
[32] Geoffrey Hosking, *Trust: A History* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), p9.
[33] Hosking, *Trust* p13.
[34] Hosking, *Trust*, p14.
[35] Hosking, *Trust*, p14.
[36] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 21, Case 424, p14.
[37] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 21, Case 424, p14.
[38] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol 13, Case 25, p15.
[39] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol 13, Case 25, p15.
[40] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol 7, Case 96, p14.
[41] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol 7, Case 96, p14.

name of Mariula who was a Party candidate and reported all the other teachers to the N.K.V.D.'.[42] Similar events occurred in the Red Army. A Russian officer was asked if he ever heard anti-Soviet jokes. He replied 'Yes. They were spoken quickly, then there was a laugh, and we all turned in fear to see if the political representative was present'.[43] Another soldier reported that his sergeant was 'severely reprimanded' merely because a few of them had gathered for a smoke – their officer had assumed that they were sharing anti-Soviet *anekdoty*.[44]

Among strangers, the same level of distrust existed. A Ukrainian engineer remarked that 'If one heard political jokes from people who are not well known to him, he must express dissatisfaction with them. In no case must he laugh'.[45] A Russian soldier stated that 'with strangers you had to watch out – their anti-government talk could always be a provocation'.[46] This notion of a joke as a 'provocation' was repeated by the aforementioned Ukrainian teacher. When asked if a child would be arrested for a practical joke, he responded 'a militiaman would have to arrest the boy, even if he was aware that this was a joke and not a crime, for it might have been a provocation'.[47] Interviewees commonly assumed that joke-tellers, even children, were undercover informants attempting to trick them into revealing their hidden dissident views.

Some interviewees highlighted a particular distrust of Party members. A Russian journalist remarked that Party committee workers 'were feared… you had to be careful of them'.[48] A school-director told his interviewer 'I always thought it is better to have non-Party people as my friends. I was less afraid of them and I could talk with them more freely and even tell jokes which were not favourable to the Soviet power'.[49] This sentiment was echoed by a Ukrainian-Russian woman who said 'many people felt that anyone becoming a Party member was lost to them as a friend. To a member of the Party you can't say all that you think. You must be careful with him every minute'.[50] More poignantly, she remarked 'When my girlfriend entered the Party I could no longer tell her all that I thought. She was no longer able to laugh at anti-Soviet

[42] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 104, p6.
[43] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 22, Case 445, p13.
[44] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 14, Case 2, p7.
[45] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 526, p15.
[46] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 2, pp11-12.
[47] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 104, p8.
[48] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 31, p11.
[49] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 19, Case 45, p25.
[50] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 2, Case 14, p34.

jokes'.[51] In this instance, the relationship between individuals and the Party was more powerful than friendship. According to a Russian radio technician, the Party/non-Party divide superseded even the historical national divides between the constituent states of the U.S.S.R. When asked if there was 'any evidence of national friction', he replied 'None. Especially under the Soviets - it has entirely evaporated. Everybody is equally scared'.[52] When asked again, he replied 'Party membership is the decisive thing'.[53]

Despite this, I would argue against Sarah Davies' claim that Soviet citizens framed the relationship between 'people' and 'power-holders' as a simple 'Us/them (*nizy/verkhi*)'.[54] Certainly, as the above examples reveal, this was *often* true, but its totality has been overstated.[55] Several interviews reveal the existence of personal relationships that comfortably transcended one member holding a government position or belonging to the Party. For example, a Russian engineer told a story about his Ukrainian friend who was caught telling a joke but 'managed to stay out of jail because the *politruk* was on good terms with him'. [56] In this instance, a strong relationship between two people outweighed the fact that one of the individuals was part of the State apparatus. The *politruk* shirked his duty to the state for the sake of a personal relationship. Similarly, a Russian man told his interviewer how his friendships with 'some important Communists' allowed him to abandon his dangerous job as a plant engineer in 1933 and gain employment in Moscow as a 'chief of supplies' for a sugar factory with high pay and travel expenses.[57] He believed that friendships were the key to surviving Stalinism.[58] More significantly still, a Russian sailor told his interviewer that his friend was married to their local *gorsovyet* chairman.[59] He 'used to crack jokes about this funny situation, such as "I sleep with the Soviet Government"'.[60] Not only did his wife's position in the Party not pose a problem to their relationship, but he felt comfortable enough about the situation to openly joke about it. In these three cases, personal relationships superseded Party membership in importance, demonstrating that some relationships were strong enough to

[51] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 2, Case 14, P34.
[52] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 522, p33.
[53] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 522, p33.
[54] Sarah Davies, '"Us against Them": Social Identity in Soviet Russia, 1934-41', pp70-71, *The Russian Review*, Vol. 56. No. 1. (1997).
[55] S. Davies, '"Us against Them": Social Identity in Soviet Russia, 1934-41'.
[56] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 26, Case 517, p24.
[57] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, pp3-4.
[58] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p4.
[59] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 1, Case 105, p34.
[60] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 1, Case 105, p34.

withstand the Party/non-Party divide, and that conflict between state and non-state actors was not guaranteed.

Additionally, non-state actors distrusted and competed with each other – even family members. A middle-aged Russian writer, when told a story by his interviewer about a young man being arrested for telling a joke, mused 'I would say that the youngster could certainly be punished severely, unless his father was a high party official, but even then [the] father might try to enhance his personal prestige by letting his son take full punishment'.[61] In this instance, ascribing the blame for the severing of the family connection to the father's membership of the Party obscures his own agency – he would *choose* to let his son be punished to further *himself*. Here, the definitive factor would not have been his membership in the Party per se, but rather his desire for career progression. When explaining that a child would have been arrested for a practical joke, the aforementioned Ukrainian teacher remarked that in the 1920s the boy's father could have intervened, but 'not in the thirties and afterwards when the fathers were afraid of losing their jobs just as much as their sons'.[62] Here we can see then how the culture of distrust, exacerbated by economic crisis, even separated families. More extreme still is the story of Pavel Morozov, who reported his own father as a *kulak*.[63] He defended his actions in court by telling the judge 'I no longer consider him my father… I am not acting as a son, but as a Pioneer'.[64] His father was shot in a labour camp, and his relatives killed Pavel in retribution.[65] One Ukrainian Harvard interviewee was fired from several jobs because of his 'class origin' as the son of a *kulak* and was forced to change his name and cut off all ties with his family in order to remain employed.[66] He managed to survive through a combination of luck and charisma.[67] While some families continued to tell jokes regardless, the above examples reveal that no social unit was impervious to the culture of distrust.[68] This fact also challenges the totality of an 'us/them' understanding of the person/state relationship. In all three of these instances, non-state actors distrusted and competed with each other for survival under Stalin. Intra-familial bonds were severed not by the state but by individuals themselves.

[61] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 308, p10.
[62] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 104, p8.
[63] Orlando Figes, *The Whisperers: Private Life in Stalin's Russia*, (London: Allen Lane, 2007), p122.
[64] Figes, *The Whisperers*, p123.
[65] Figes, *The Whisperers*, pp122-123.
[66] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 104, p3.
[67] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 104, p3.
[68] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p79; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 24, Case 481, pp37-38; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 526, p15.

The culture of distrust was summarised by a middle-aged Russian agent of purveyance. He gave his interviewer some advice on how one could stay safe in the Soviet Union:

> "I should advise anyone to do one thing: never explain one thought to another person. If something is not liked, never speak about it; there are spies everywhere. I remember once how someone had told an anti-Soviet anecdote [joke] among a group of friends; later he was taken, despite the fact that the anecdote had been spoken among friends; who of his friends was an informer? One can never say".[69]

Distrust seeped into every possible relationship. The possibility that your interlocutor was an N.K.V.D. informant was simply too high to justify trusting them. The secret police permeated through society to the extent that joke-tellers were commonly assumed to be undercover-agents sniffing out the subversives who would dare laugh at an anti-Soviet joke. More devastatingly, ordinary citizens – even friends and family – were likely to testify against each other to protect themselves, such was the scale of Stalinist paranoia. Naturally, Party members were rarely trusted, but the Party/non-Party divide was not total. Some personal relationships had the strength to withstand the division, while non-state actors reported each other on an hourly basis.

[69] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 24, Case 481, pp37-38.

Chapter 2 – Conditions for Comedy

Seemingly paradoxically, the Harvard interviews reveal that the conditions of Stalinism were conducive to the making and sharing of *anekdoty*. Joking was extremely dangerous, but the omnipresent nature of the Soviet regime created a 'uniformity in politics, culture and society', and subsequently 'an abundance of shared reference points' for jokes, as Jonathan Waterlow noted.[70] I will use the Harvard Project interviews to elaborate upon this idea, arguing specifically that Stalin's cult of personality, Soviet state acronyms, political policies, and political events were drawn on as these 'shared reference points'. This will allow me simultaneously to challenge the 'totalitarian school' notion of an 'atomised' society, as well as 'revisionist' notions about the popularity of Soviet ideology and policy. Moreover, the interviews, in conjunction with Solzhenitsyn's writings, reveal the psychological need to tell jokes as a response to the conditions imposed on the Soviet citizenry. In this sense, the Soviet authorities' approach to *anekdoty* was counterintuitive. Out of their obsession to destroy arose the possibility and need to create.

Chapter 2 – I: The Material Conditions

Firstly, I will deal with these 'shared reference points'. A middle-aged Russian bookkeeper remarked that 'the people of the Soviet Union are famous for appropriate interpretations of the numerous Soviet abbreviations [acronyms]'.[71] She gave the following three examples about the acronym V.S.N.K.H. – *Vyssheie Sovietskoie Narodnoie Khoziaistvo*.

> "This is read by the Soviets: "*Vam skvierno, nam khorosho*." "(It's bad for you, it's good for us)"
>
> The peasant reads it: "*Vorui smelo, net khoziaina*." ("Steal freely, there is no master")
>
> A Jew reads it backwards: "*Kholera na Sovietskuiu Vlast*" ("The cholera plague, the Soviet government!" – Cholera being a common curse word).[72]

The fact that this joke was told, and the content of the joke itself challenge notions of an atomised, and a Stalinist populace. A distinction is clearly drawn between 'the Soviets' and

[70] Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke, Comrade!*, p231.
[71] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 35, Case 355, p17.
[72] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 35, Case 355, p17.

'the peasant' - a negation of the state ideology which held that the two groups were one and the same. Moreover, the peasant's interpretation of the acronym - "steal freely, there is no master" - is a clear indictment of the logic of collectivisation. Jews are also highlighted as opposing the Soviet system, a theme I will return to in Chapter 3.

An older Russian man told a similar joke in which M.T.S. - *mashinno-traktornaya stantsiya* - is said to stand for *mogile tovarisch Stalin* ('tomb of comrade Stalin').[73] Here again, collectivisation – a universal rural Soviet experience – was the subject of the joke, machine-tractor stations being central to the process.[74] The acronym-jokes seem to have been so pervasive that one Russian man remarked, 'you may notice that "Tovarisch" Stalin is always written out in full. They are afraid that if they simply wrote "T" Stalin, people might start making jokes about "Tyrant" Stalin'.[75] While this anecdote can't be confirmed, it shows an impressive level of creativity - this man pre-emptively created a joke for a Soviet abbreviation that did not yet exist, perhaps even indicating a saturation of *anekdoty* targeting existing acronyms.

Both these jokes were also clearly anti-Stalin. The omnipresent cult of personality surrounding the General Secretary was a common source of mockery. Many anti-Stalin jokes took the form of simple one-liners, such as 'Stalin can make dogs eat mustard', and 'Stalin can turn a people's commissar into dirt and dirt into a people's commissar'.[76] Others were more explicit. For example, the middle-aged Russian bookkeeper I referenced in the 'methodology' section told his interviewer the following jokes:

> "[a] fisherman rescued Stalin from drowning, and…was asked by Stalin what he desired as a price for rescuing him." He replied "Stalin, please do not give me anything, just don't tell anyone I saved you".[77]

And

[73] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 24, Case 481, pp37-38.
[74] https://www.britannica.com/topic/machine-tractor-station [accessed 19 March 2020].
[75] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 31, Case 445, p84.
[76] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 30, p17; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 522, p33.
[77] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p67-68.

"Once three peasants were walking in the Caucasus. Suddenly they saw a procession of people, guarded very closely by N.K.V.D. men. One of the peasants said: "What is this?" and he was answered: "This is the home of Stalin's mother". Then the peasant asked: "But why should these people be guarded so closely?" The first peasant responded: "So that Stalin's mother should not give birth to another devil like Stalin".[78]

These jokes do not necessarily challenge Fitzpatrick's notion that Stalinism was popular amongst *vydvizhentsy*, as the man who told them was uneducated and not upwardly socially mobile.[79] However, they are revealing in other ways. The fisherman joke hints at Stalin's widespread unpopularity, as the implication is that the fisherman would be killed by his fellow citizens if they found out that he had saved Stalin's life. The joke about Stalin's mother is even more revealing. The description of the Premier as a 'devil' both highlights the peasants' opposition to him and contravenes the 'Atheist Five Year Plan' of 1932, which proclaimed that religious language would be eradicated from the Soviet Union.[80]

It is here that the distinction should be drawn between *anti-Stalin* and *anti-Soviet* jokes. Jokes about Stalin didn't necessarily indicate opposition to the Soviet project as a whole, in fact, some were pro-Soviet. For example, one middle-aged Russian intellectual told the following joke:

"Voroshilov was said to have criticized Radek at the time of the Stalin-Trotsky fight. Voroshilov was said to have told Radek that he was like a tail, always following Trotsky. Radek answered… 'Better to be Trotsky's tail than Stalin's ass".[81]

The man who told this joke was a self-described 'political prisoner' in exile or in various *gulags* from 1934 to 1941.[82] He also detailed that he had been supportive of the Soviet project until '1927 or 1928'.[83] Subsequently, it is reasonable to assume that he was anti-Stalin, rather than anti-Soviet. A similar joke concluded 'Lenin knew the road he was travelling, whereas Stalin doesn't', unfavourably comparing the latter leader to the former.[84] These *anekdoty* could be said to support Kotkin's claim that Soviet citizens identified with the eternal cause of the Revolution, as in criticising Stalin, they affirmed their commitment to the Soviet project as they understood it.[85]

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[78] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p67-68.
[79] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p1
[80] http://www.marxist.com/religion-soviet-union170406.htm [accessed 18 March 2020].
[81] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 32, p55.
[82] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 32, p1; p3.
[83] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 32, p18.
[84] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 26, Case 517, p24.
[85] Kotkin, *Magnetic Mountain*, p207.

However, the experience of Stalin's reign led some to oppose the Soviet project as a whole. Under Stalin, many jokes were told about Lenin. For example, one interviewee told an anecdote in which a young *stakhanovite* woman was rewarded for her hard work with the 'selected works of Lenin', and her fellow worker remarked, 'That is what she deserved'.[86] When this comment was made 'there was a general laughter' among the workers.[87] The joke here also comes at the expense of the *stakhanovite*, simultaneously criticising and drawing a link between Lenin, and Stalinism. Another interviewee told the story of a *stakhanovite* who visited Lenin's Mausoleum and read the sign, 'Lenin has died but his work lives on', 'the *stakhanovite* read the sign and considered it for a while. Then he said, "It would have been better if his work had died and Lenin had lived on".[88]

Similarly, a Belarussian woman told her interviewer that some students had once thrown a message in a bottle at a statue of Marx that had replaced a historic monument in their town square. The message read "When you get out of here, we hope your predecessor will return. This is not your place'.[89] The attitude towards Lenin, and indeed Marx, at any given time was indicative of the attitude towards the Marxist-Leninist Soviet project as a whole. For example, in the comparably liberal Brezhnev period, jokes about Lenin were widely considered distasteful.[90] The presence of anti-Lenin jokes under Stalin is telling then, because it reveals that opposition to Stalin led to opposition to the Soviet project as a whole.

Other jokes targeted Soviet ideology. For example – 'the complete society without private property, so that several people would own one blanket!'[91] The young man who told this joke was a *vydvizhentsy* who became a doctor under Stalin.[92] This fact undermines Fitzpatrick's notion of Stalinism's support among this demographic.

Another joke simply targeted Soviet propaganda:

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[86] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 3, Case 65, p28.
[87] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 3, Case 65, p28.
[88] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol 5, Case 48, pp63-64; The presence of *stakhanovites* as re-occurring characters in *anekdoty* can be attributed to the fact that the official term was reappropriated as an insult. See Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke, Comrade!*, p251.
[89] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 36, Case 487, p12.
[90] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, pp97-98.
[91] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 6, p36.
[92] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 6, p3; Fitzpatrick, 'Popular Opinion in Russia Under Pre-war Stalinism', pp18-19 in Paul Corner (ed.) *Popular Opinion in Totalitarian Regimes*.

"The Odessa Raicom Party Secretary was saying that the regime was doing great things. The secretary said that the regime had erected a dock in the harbour. Another fellow, a critic, said that he was down to the harbour and that he had not seen this new dock. The secretary responded "Comrade, you don't read the newspapers"'.[93]

Tracing the origins or dissemination of these jokes is not possible. However, it is clear that their subject matter was non-specific. Every rural citizen of the Soviet Union experienced collectivisation – they all would have seen a machine-tractor station. Every citizen was exposed to enough propaganda to know at least the basic Soviet acronyms and policies. Moreover, the fact that several jokes were repeated by numerous Harvard interviewees is indicative of their pervasiveness. For example, three respondents, a 26 year old Russian student, a 50 year old Russian-Azeri, and a 42 year old Russian bookkeeper, all told the following joke:

"Kalinin went to the assembly of *kolkhozniks* and heard one complain that his clothes were very bad. Kalinin answered that in Africa they did not have any clothes. Another peasant said: "Maybe they have had Soviet power longer than we have".[94]

It should be noted that all three told the joke slightly differently. One told a variant in which a surplus of bananas in a local shop led to the punchline: 'you go about naked and eat bananas' in both the U.S.S.R. and Africa.[95] The other substituted Kalinin for 'a Party man'.[96] The sentiment in each joke however, was the same: all three drew on the experience of not being able to afford clothing as a source of humour. Moreover, in the two jokes featuring a character representing the Soviet system, the punchlines were directed against them, demonstrating opposition.

Through these examples, we can see how the omnipresent nature of Soviet society created jokes which spread quickly due to their universal appeal. *Kolkhozniks* from *Lviv Oblast* to *Primorskaya Oblast* would have related to the above joke. Between the state acronyms, Stalin's cult of personality, policies – particularly collectivisation – and ideology, there was no shortage of universal, and mockable, cultural reference points to create relatable and spreadable jokes out of. The universality of Soviet society ensured that anti-Soviet *anekdoty* would have widespread appeal.

[93] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 32, p55.
[94] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, pp67-68.
[95] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 10, Case 127, pp36-37.
[96] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 31, Case 433, p43.

Chapter 2 – II: The Psychological Conditions

While the material conditions of the Soviet Union under Stalin created the *possibility* to share *anekdoty*, the cruelty and inhospitality of Soviet life created a psychological *need* to share them. As Jonathan Waterlow summarised, 'humour performed in a social, shared context creates a sense of camaraderie, mutual suffering, or endurance which establishes a bond… it's the social glue of everyone being 'in the same boat''.[97] Or, as psychologist Alexander Bain put more simply 'laughter is a relief from restraint'.[98] Here, the subject matter of many anti-Soviet *anekdoty* confirms Waterlow and Bain's interpretations.

We have already come across the joke in which a man was asked how the war was going and was met with 'Nothing in particular. We gave up three cities'. Not only was this joke a clear indictment of the Soviet war effort, but the punchline comes at the expense of hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of people who were condemned to Nazi occupation. Similarly, a Russian soldier told the following joke: 'When I saw how well the German soldiers are living – then I understood. Russia is liberating them, but from what? From bread and bacon!'.[99] A young Russian woman told a similar joke which held that the Soviet Union invaded Poland in order to 'help them live *worse*'.[100] The subject matter of the war, naturally, was very dark.

The aforementioned *anekdoty* about not owning clothes drew on the appalling conditions of Soviet peasant life as a source of humour. Similarly, a Ukrainian *kolkhoznik* told the following joke:

> "A *kolkhoznik* was sent to Moscow to take a course in which the 5-year plan would be explained to him… But the *kolkhoznik* could not understand. The teacher said to him: "I see that it is difficult to explain something to you, so I will give you a concrete example. Suppose you went out on the street and you saw a car go by… In the first 5-year plan you would see one car. But in the 2nd 5 Year plan there would be two of them". So, the peasant went back to the *kolkhoz*, having finished the course. When he got back the other *kolkhozniks* asked him what the 5-year plan was about. He told them: "I will give you an example. Suppose you go out in the fields and you see the body of a dead cow. In the first 5-year plan there would only be one dead cow, but in the second there would be two".[101]

[97] Waterlow, *It's Only A Joke, Comrade!*, p231.
[98] Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the* Unconscious (London: Penguin, 2002), pp143-144.
[99] HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol. 15, Case 133, p26.
[100] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 30, Case 642, p58.
[101] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol 5, Case 48, pp63-64.

The 5-year plans of course, were a disaster for millions of rural Soviet citizens.[102] Moreover, for the average *kolkhoznik*, the death of a single cow would have been a tragedy.

This gallows humour phenomenon can also be found in the nineteenth chapter of *The Gulag Archipelago*. While the *gulag* was certainly one of the most extreme aspects of Stalinism, it was not wholly removed from the lives of ordinary people. The *gulag* population was approximately 8 million in 1939, and the network of labour camps was an integral part of the Stalinist system.[103] Consequently, any history of jokes under Stalin would be incomplete without its mention. Solzhenitsyn explained that 'Humour is their [the *zeks*'] constant ally, without which, very likely, life in the Archipelago would be totally impossible'.[104] The *zeks*' 'every reply to a question, their every judgement about their surroundings, is spiced with at least a mite of humour.'[105] Making light of their dire situation kept them sane, as Solzhenitsyn explained, 'the *Zeks* value and love *humour* – and this is best evidence of all of the healthy psychological state of those… who manage not to die during their first year'.[106]

The jokes told in the *gulag* differed from those told in the rest of society. Naturally, the lambasting of Soviet culture that characterised non-*gulag anekdoty* relied on cultural reference points and political developments unknown to the *zeks*. The *anekdoty* Solzhenitsyn recorded ironically described life in the *gulag* – 'If you don't drink your water, where will you get your strength?', and 'He sleeps and sleeps, but has no time for rest', for example.[107] Solzhenitsyn ascribed the simplicity of the jokes to the fact that 'the *Zek*'s thought process [was] below the average level common to all mankind', after being worn down through forced labour.[108]

Both in and out of the *gulag*, the motivation to create and share *anekdoty* was the same. It was a psychological need. In the more extreme case of the *zeks*, 'all that remain[ed] noticeable to them [was] the funny side of events'.[109] Regular citizens shared this need, as evidenced by the

[102] Sheila Fitzpatrick, *Stalin's Peasants: Resistance and Survival in the Russian Village after Collectivisation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), p69.
[103] Stephen G. Wheatcroft, 'Victims of Stalinism and the Soviet Secret Police: The Comparability and Reliability of the Archival Data – Not the Last Word', p318, *Europe-Asia Studies*, 51 (1999).
[104] Alexander Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago, 1918-1956: an experiment in literary investigation*, Vol. 2, (London: Harvill Press, 1975), p527.
[105] Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, P527.
[106] Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, p527.
[107] Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, p528.
[108] Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, p528.
[109] Solzhenitsyn, *The Gulag Archipelago*, p522.

subject matter of many *anekdoty* – poverty, famine, and war. A Russian bookkeeper explained to his Harvard interviewer that 'if these means of expression and release [jokes] did not exist in the family it would be very hard indeed for the population'.[110] From Chapter 1, we know that not every Soviet citizen could trust their family, and so they were forced to take the risk, and share jokes amongst friends, colleagues, or even strangers.

[110] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p79.

Chapter 3 – "Without friends you cannot do a thing".[111]

At this point, a few of the questions at hand have been answered. *Anekdoty* reveal opposition to Stalinism and the Soviet project across society. Men and women, old and young, Russian, Belarusian, and Ukrainian all shared anti-Soviet *anekdoty*. *Anekdoty* could also be pro-Soviet, but anti-Stalin, as in the jokes unfavourably comparing Stalin to Trotsky and Lenin. We have also partially answered the question of *why* Soviet citizens spread *anekdoty* when the risk was so high – jokes making light of Stalinism, poverty, famine, war, and the *gulag*, were psychological coping mechanisms in unprecedentedly difficult times. In this chapter, I will build on Jonathan Waterlow's argument that jokes were used to 'intimate trust', locating a precursor to Alexei Yurchak's description of the late-Soviet *svoi*, or 'ordinary people', in the culture of *anekdoty* under Stalin.[112]

Almost all the Harvard interviewees were acutely aware of the potential repercussions of sharing *anekdoty*. Many knew the maximum sentence of 10 years in a jail or *gulag*.[113] So why do it? The answer was well articulated by a middle-aged Russian bookkeeper – 'The tongue gets unloosened when they are strongly convinced that their words will not go any further.'[114] In other words, when someone can be trusted once, they can be trusted again. An older Red Army officer explained, 'The only people I ever told things to were those whose views I was sure of… the only way you could notice that was through anecdotes and through jokes of a similar nature.'[115] While the risk of a 'provocation' always loomed, jokes could be used to establish trust between individuals, forming what Waterlow calls 'Trust groups'.[116] An example of such a group can be found in the Harvard interview of a young Ukrainian teacher. The woman in question was once a fully committed Communist.[117] As her interviewer noted 'She was willing to go to any sacrifices in order to build a happy socialist state which was surrounded by the "menacing and greedy capitalists"'.[118] For most of her life, she lived in 'serene ideological bliss'.[119] However, after her father's arrest she became disillusioned, and

[111] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p4.
[112] Waterlow, *It's Only A Joke, Comrade!*, p227.
[113] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 32, p55; HPSSS. Schedule B, Vol 21, Case 64, p30; HPSSS Schedule A, Vol. 7, Case 96, pp13-14.
[114] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 6, Case 66, p79.
[115] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 1, p53.
[116] Waterlow, *It's Only A Joke, Comrade!*, p227.
[117] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 644, p81.
[118] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 644, p81.
[119] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 644, p81.

'little jokes, little bits of gossip, and half expressed thoughts among students made her realise that many of her comrades were not idealists either.'[120] Jokes played a significant role in her deradicalisation and she became fundamentally anti-Soviet, embraced her Ukrainian roots, and became a nationalist.[121] When the Germans invaded her village during Operation Barbarossa, she didn't resist, explaining 'I knew by then what the Germans were like… Nevertheless, I preferred to let myself be deported away from my homeland, because there was not place in it for me anymore'.[122] She eventually made her way to New York and found work at the Voice of America.[123]

These testimonies support Dale Pesmen's interpretation of *svoi*. He noted that the term implied that 'one could speak openly without fearing that what one said would be used against one'.[124] As the above testimonies reveal, the sharing of *anekdoty* was used to establish this relationship. It was a way to determine who could be trusted. It was certainly risky, but as discussed in Chapter 2-II, there was a psychological need to share *anekdoty*, and not everyone had the (relatively) safe outlet of their family for this purpose. As Yurchak explained of the late Soviet period, 'Whether a person would end up being *svoi* or not, in a concrete context, was often unclear in advance, and would emerge only in the course of interaction'.[125] In the case of the Ukrainian teacher, as in countless others under Stalin, this interaction was the sharing of *anekdoty*. As the Russian chief of supplies in Chapter 1 explained, 'without friends you cannot do a thing'.[126] Human beings are dependent on friendships, and friendships are dependent on trust. Where Stalin destroyed trust, *anekdoty* re-established it.

As I alluded to in Chapter 2-I, while anti-Soviet jokes often came at the expense of ethnic minorities – particularly Jews and Armenians – several respondents were eager to explain that such jokes were rarely told with malicious intent and were intended to be complimentary.[127] Undeniably, there will have been an element of the interviewees white-washing their anti-Semitism to their American handlers, particularly as the interviews were conducted in the wake

[120] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 644, p81.
[121] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 644, p82.
[122] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 644, p82.
[123] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 644, p80; Examples of these types of stories commonly reoccur throughout the Harvard Project interviews.
[124] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p110.
[125] Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More*, p112; This concept bares resemblance to Waterlow's notion of 'Trust Groups', see *It's Only a Joke Comrade*, p227.
[126] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 33, Case 338, p4.
[127] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 522, p32; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 9. pp119-120.

of the Holocaust.[128] However, this notion reoccurs frequently in the Harvard interviews, and at least reveals what the joke-tellers themselves interpreted as the social function of *anekdoty*, even if the vast majority of Jews and Armenians did in-fact find them offensive. For example, a Belarussian woman told her interviewer some anti-Soviet *anekdoty* in which the characters were Jews, but 'was quite eager to explain that she did not mean it to be offensive in any way'.[129] She was asked why the joke involved Jews, given that their ethnicity bore no relevance to the joke, and replied that 'it was most often Jews who made up the jokes, since they were keen witted'.[130] One Russian man stated that 'of course the Armenians or the Jews are the butts of some jokes, but this was never considered a national insult'.[131]

Another Russian gave his view that while 'the anecdotes about the Jews didn't convey anti-Semitism, in the Soviet Union the Armenians, as far as humour goes, were looked at in the same light as the Irish in England'.[132] He elaborated, 'The Armenians are considered a very sly, smooth people'.[133] Anti-Armenian attitudes seem to have been particularly common, with other interviewees describing them as 'hot headed' and 'temperamental', while another proclaimed 'the Armenians are considered homosexuals'.[134] One young Russian man was adamant that Polish-Ukrainians 'do not understand jokes: they never laugh at them'.[135] Another held the same belief of Caucasians, stating 'The Ukrainians or the Belarussians are easier to joke with'.[136] A soldier recalled that jokes about 'Asiatics', such as Tartars and Uzbeks were common in the army, and were not taken seriously by officers.[137] Nevertheless, the insistence that offence was rarely intended as a consequence of *anekdoty* reveals their social function – to breed the unity of *svoi*, not division.

Lastly, it should be noted that not all Soviet citizens successfully used *anekdoty* to safely establish who was *svoi* and who was not. For some, the experience of Stalinism left them unable to trust anyone. A Ukrainian man summarised his view on life under Stalin for his interviewer: 'fear is the governing factor in the lives of Soviet people. Hence, nobody is really friendly with

[128] https://library.harvard.edu/collections/hpsss/about.html#about [accessed 2nd December 2019].
[129] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 9. pp119-120.
[130] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 1, Case 9. pp119-120.
[131] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol 27, Case 522, p32.
[132] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 10, Case 127, pp36-37.
[133] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 10, Case 127, pp36-37.
[134] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 27, Case 522, p32; HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 13, Case 166, p67.
[135] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 21, Case 419, p33.
[136] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 13, Case 166, p67.
[137] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 26, Case 514, p47.

you. Everybody can turn on you and denounce you'.[138] This interviewee was so jaded that he reached the conclusion that friendship did not exist. Similarly, the Russian intellectual we met in Chapter 2-I stated that after 1928, when the first 5-year-plan began, 'there could be no friendship'.[139] Others reached this conclusion the hard way. A young Russian journalist recounted that he once went to a social gathering and 'had too much to drink and told two political jokes; the atmosphere became immediately very strained and unpleasant. The whole party was spoiled'.[140] He got off lightly. An older Russian woman 'knew a man who told a joke when he was drunk and careless about the company in which he told it'.[141] He was never heard of again.[142]

[138] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 34, Case 104, p7.
[139] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 32, p18.
[140] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 4, Case 31, p11.
[141] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 91, p39.
[142] HPSSS. Schedule A, Vol. 32, Case 91, p39.

Conclusion

Any overarching theory of attitudes to Stalinism will obscure the complex reality. However, it should be noted that while the Harvard interviews contain anti-Soviet and pro-Soviet jokes, they do not contain a single joke that could be unequivocally described as pro-Stalin. Additionally, the small handful of pro-Soviet *anekdoty* pale in comparison to the wealth of anti-Soviet ones. The lens of jokes then, raises questions about popular opinion under Stalin: If Stalinism enjoyed a degree of popularity, where are the Stalinist jokes? Conversely, can any political system survive without a degree of popularity? Given that Stalin is a popular figure in the former U.S.S.R today, when did this popularity emerge if not under his rule?[143] Future historians in this field ought to consider such questions in order to further our understanding of popular opinion in the Soviet Union.

With regard to personal relationships, some people became so cynical through their experience of Stalinism that they ceased to believe in the concepts of friendship or family. In other cases, however, humanity prevailed. The psychological need to tell jokes and to establish relationships overrode the material risks. Certainly, this was not an 'atomised' populace, but one who skilfully and bravely adapted to extraordinary circumstances. Soviet citizens prevailed to share *anekdoty* amongst their families and to establish trust with strangers, knowing that they could be imprisoned for 10 years as a result.

I hope to have demonstrated several things in this dissertation. Firstly, that distrust pervaded the Soviet Union under Joseph Stalin. Secondly, jokes reveal popular opposition to Stalinism, and a degree of opposition to the Soviet project as whole – not only were jokes told despite being illegal, but the content of many jokes was explicitly anti-Stalinist, if not anti-Soviet. Thirdly, Stalinism created conditions that allowed a culture of *anekdoty* to flourish. These were an omnipresent political system that created 'an abundance of shared reference points', and humanitarian conditions that created a psychological need for humour.[144] The combination of widespread distrust, universally shared cultural reference points, and a psychological need to share *anekdoty* resulted in jokes gaining a new social function. They were used to establish who was *svoi* – who was an 'ordinary', 'non-Soviet' person who could be trusted. In this sense,

[143] 'Stalin's Approval Rating Among Russians Hits Record High – Poll', *The Moscow Times*, 16 April. 2019; 'Poll Finds Stalin's Popularity High', *The Moscow Times*, 2 March. 2013.
[144] Waterlow, *It's Only a Joke Comrade!*, p227.

I hope to have located a precursor to the late-Soviet *svoi* described by Alexei Yurchak in his *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More* in the culture of *anekdoty* under Stalin. Finally, I hope to have demonstrated that *anekdoty* were omnipresent in Stalin's empire.

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