

Book review

Jonathan Waterlow (2018). *It's Only a Joke, Comrade! Humour, Trust and Everyday Life Under Stalin (1928-1941)*. Oxford: CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

It's Only a Joke, Comrade! Humour, Trust and Everyday Life Under Stalin (1928-1941) by Jonathan Waterlow presents a historiographic study of popular humour, which emerged and was circulated in the Soviet society in the 1930s. The writer aims at showing how the official propaganda of the Stalin regime and its interpretation by ordinary people created “a complex interweaving of the official and unofficial which did not result in a undifferentiated sludge, but in a complex and often vibrant living culture” (p. 5). Jokes about Stalin have been analysed and classified before (see Arkhipova & Mel'nichenko 2010). However, the scope of Waterlow's monograph is wider: the book includes analyses of various humorous genres reflecting multiple aspects of life under Stalin's oppressive regime.

Traditionally, the Stalin epoch is described as a dark period when jokes about authorities were considered a crime that could easily lead you to GULAG, i.e., to any of the countless concentration labour camps. However, Waterlow's study proves that even in the darkest times, people created and used humour in their everyday life. The data demonstrate how Soviet citizens responded to the regime and coped with the fears and hardships of living in terror. With a full understanding of the consequences of telling jokes about the authorities in public, people still expressed their discontent with the economic situation and their disagreement with the authorities and their reforms of the state.

The writer uses data from various sources: personal diaries of Soviet citizens, accounts of foreign visitors to 1930s Soviet Union, archive documents including criminal files of those convicted for the so-called anti-Soviet agitation, and the database of the Harvard Interview Project on the Soviet Social System, which consists of 764 interviews with Soviet refugees conducted in 1950-1951.

When describing the pre-war Stalin epoch, scholars tend to focus predominantly on the lives and deeds of political elites. However, the study of everyday humour requires attention to everyday life of ordinary people, and this attention makes Waterlow's research different.

Six chapters of the book lead the readers through the dark pre-war period of Soviet history, giving a detailed account of the features of the Stalin era. The chapters are organised in three parts which address various aspects of humour in the Soviet society of the 1930s.

The book opens with a detailed Introduction in which the author explains the main idea of the book, that is, to show that jokes under oppression had a variety of functions: not only did they oppose official ideology, they also functioned as the way to adapt to new reality and to survive in harsh economic conditions. The author presents his view on the essence of humour and outlines the thematic focus of each chapter.

Chapters 1, 2 and 3, united as **Part 1: Taking Liberties**, present the analysis of jokes about political leaders of the Soviet Union, certain political events and economic practices of the 1930s. In this part, Waterlow demonstrates the variety of political humour that existed in

the Soviet Union at that time: apart from *anekdots* (canned jokes), there existed *chastushki* (short satirical folk songs), witticisms and various forms of non-verbal subversive humour silently aimed at Soviet political leaders.

Chapter 1, “Kirov’s carnival, Stalin’s cult” addresses the circulation of jokes about the political elite of the Soviet Union. Many of these jokes possessed a common feature: through their carnivalesque absurdity and violence, they brought Soviet political leaders down to reality. To explain the popularity of jokes and witticisms dethroning Soviet political leaders, Waterlow uses the notion of *carnival* introduced by Bakhtin (1981). This notion explains why rather violent jokes about Sergey Kirov’s assassination were so popular.

Chapter 2, “Plans and punchlines: ‘The *anekdoty* always saved us’”, analyses jokes about political and economic changes in the lives of ordinary Soviet citizens. Events like forced collectivisation, five-year plans of economic growth (the so-called *piatiletkas*), state loan subscriptions, the Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact signed in 1939, or industrial modernisation became targets of sarcastic comments and bitter irony. Waterlow demonstrates that for most people, everyday life here and now was more important than “the bright future”. Consequently, the poor state of the Soviet economy became the butt of multiple jokes. Morbid humour functioned as people’s collective response in their dialogue with authorities.

Chapter 3, “Speaking more than Bolshevik: Crosshatching and codebreaking,” discusses jokes devoted to social values (e.g. religious beliefs or gender issues), which also were subject to drastic changes under the Stalin regime. Waterlow claims that these jokes reflected a real evaluation of the newly established relationships between people in the new Soviet society, and this evaluation in many ways contradicted the official values introduced by the Soviet propaganda. For instance, jokes about women still portrayed them as voiceless sexual objects, while the state officials were talking about a New Soviet Woman, a concept that, in fact, was just another ideological promise of the regime. In the same vein, while the official propaganda promoted atheism and tried to substitute religion with the Communist ideology, jokes about God interacting with the Soviet political leaders reflected ordinary people’s understanding of the world from the religious perspective. Unlike the official Soviet ideology, this perspective allowed people to fulfil their emotional needs. As a result, the attempt to instil new beliefs led to the mixing of values, and, as the archive data demonstrate, this blend is reflected not only in jokes, but also in the real-life activities of people.

This chapter also looks at jokes that were the signs of the historical awareness of ordinary people. As Waterlow demonstrates, by comparing the old and the new political regimes, these jokes questioned the new order of things, criticised the authorities for their desire to standardise and control people’s lives, and explicitly showed flaws of the Soviet regime and the failure of Bolsheviks to fulfil their promises.

Part 2: “Joking Dangerously” includes Chapter 4, “Who’s laughing now? Persecution and prosecution”, the main theme of which is the price many people paid for joking in public. It also discusses the use of humour and satire by the Soviet authorities. The chapter focuses on how the authorities tried to control the use of unofficial humour, and on the twist that led to the use of humour as part of Soviet propaganda.

Waterlow cites secret communiqués and criminal case files which confirm the official treatment of joke telling as a counter-revolutionary act. The chapter demonstrates that the official ideology of humour in the mid-1930s could be summed up as follows: humour should be used as a weapon against ideological enemies and as a didactic tool to correct the behaviour of those loyal to the Soviet authorities. In accordance with this logic, enemies were also likely to use humour against the regime. Consequently, on the one hand, published satire marked

shifts in the official policy, and, on the other hand, the telling of political jokes by ordinary people was treated as an ideologically hostile act and was punished as such.

In this chapter, Waterlow also focuses on the social characteristics of joke-tellers and on the contexts in which the act of telling a political joke led to arrest. While the main aim of the state was to stop the spreading of critical humour, the data also demonstrate a lot of inconsistencies in the state's treatment of public joke telling as well as the desire of local authorities to present some acts of joking in public as a conspiracy against the Soviet regime.

Part 3: Alone Together comprises Chapters 5 and 6. Its oxymoron-like title suggests that the 1930s Soviet society was an example of contradicting social practices.

Chapter 5, "Beyond resistance: The psychology of joke-telling", focuses on joke telling as the way of understanding the fast-changing world. Humour satisfied one of the fundamental psychological needs – the need to adapt to the new circumstances and the new social values. As the archive data demonstrate, for many Soviet people, even the blackest humour could relieve frustration or emotional tension and get them to grips with the inescapable. As Waterlow puts it, the jokes turned the frightening course of events into a mock-victory over the official ideology. At the same time, the analysis of jokes allows the author to conclude that it was not the malfunctioning political system that was the target of many jokes. Rather, it was mostly political leaders who could not make this system function properly.

However, while providing psychological comfort, jokes also enshrined the sense of powerlessness. Unlike many other authors, Waterlow suggests that jokes were a mechanism of adaptation to the system, not a way of opposing or fighting it.

Chapter 6, "In on the joke: Humour, trust and sociability," discusses joke telling as a social act of trust. The evidence presented in the chapter supports the claim that political humour not only helped ordinary people to adjust to new circumstances, but also enabled them to create reliable social bonds, which were especially important in a total atmosphere of distrust and mutual suspicion. Waterlow introduces the concept of *trust groups*, i.e. the groups of either tight-knit friends or family members. These trust groups were small communities in which, by telling political jokes, people could openly express their criticism of the regime. Respondents of the Harvard Project cited in the chapter shared the opinion that telling political jokes within such groups without fear of being reported to the NKVD was a clear sign of trust bonds in the Soviet society in the 1930s. Despite the fact that telling jokes could potentially lead to denouncing, sharing them was a way to demonstrate one's social identity and establish social bonds with the like-minded. The jokes included in Chapter 6 mostly reveal the discrepancy between the real social inequality and the officially proclaimed principles of egalitarian society.

The Conclusion reiterates the main ideas of the book: the multifunctionality of humour under the oppressive regime, the role of humour in crosshatching the ruthless reality with official ideology and adjusting to the new order, and the impossibility of understanding life of Soviet society in the 1930s without looking into the life of ordinary people who had to make sense of new values and rules of life.

Summary

Waterlow's book offers a detailed perspective on everyday humour in a particular epoch. Importantly, the author refers to a range of historical facts and events of Soviet history, which gives a detailed account of the context in which this humour emerged. In this sense, it is undoubtedly useful for anyone interested in the pre-war period of the Soviet history. As one would expect in a historiographic study such as this, each chapter is followed by a list of sources which includes references to criminal cases and other archive documents used for the

research. All these details make it easier for the readers to understand the bitter humour of the jokes and folk songs.

Not only the historical facts but also their interpretation is interesting. The idea of using humour as a tool of adjustment permeates the book. Waterlow consistently shows that the jokes were told not to overthrow the regime, but rather to help people adapt to the new circumstances.

So, can such a historiographic study of Soviet humour be useful for humour scholars? My answer is – yes, since a detailed historic analysis of facts and events which brought to life spontaneous witticisms and jokes places the readers in the context of people’s daily encounters with the regime and allows for evaluating the humour which circulated almost a century ago in a country that does not exist anymore.

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