SOCIAL DIMENSIONS OF STALINIST RULE: 
HUMOR AND TERROR IN THE USSR, 1935-1941

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The chief aim of this article is to improve our understanding of Soviet social cohesion and personal relations in the span of the “Great Terror,” usually considered the years 1935-1939. Most of the standard literature on the period makes broad but weakly supported assertions about the Terror’s impact on personal life. In a typical argument, the state strove for the “undercutting and eventual severance of all viable connecting tissues between the citizens” and succeeded so well that people could only relate “directly to the person of the dictator himself.” Other well-known authors echo this judgment: society was “broken” by 1939; it became a “scrap heap of humanity.”

These statements are reminiscent of discredited stereotypes about American blacks. Lawrence Levine found that

In this area [humor] as in so many others, black Americans have been treated as passive subjects reacting in an almost classic Pavlovian manner to external stimuli, rather than as people with a point of view and a cultural frame of reference who were able to respond with some degree of selectivity and intelligence to their environment.

Levine’s work on black folklore, especially his outstanding chapter on humor, was instrumental in laying this image to rest.

The evidence offered for similar assertions about Soviet society almost invariably consists of general opinions taken from selected survivors. For instance, historians often cite a line attributed to the writer Isaac Babel: “Today [the late thirties] a man only talks freely to his wife – at night, with the blankets pulled over his head.” Babel, in fact, was arrested and died in a camp in 1941. His opinion is obviously valid for his own case, but as a writer he was in an extremely high-risk category. Furthermore, the problem with this sort of testimony is that no person was in a position to judge the emotional life of the entire country, or even of a city block. It is therefore necessary to construct a picture of social cohesion under Stalin, in this case during the Great Terror, not on the basis of general assessments but through a careful sifting of eye-witness reports.

Humor is one of the useful materials in this construction; as Mahadev Apte has written, “Humor and joking exchanges need a familiar setting in which barriers to communication...are considerably reduced, if not totally removed, and togetherness is emphasized.” Since it was dangerous to tell certain kinds of funny stories, it is possible to discuss the levels and kinds of trust that operated in Soviet society by examining the incidence and nature of such jokes.

The first section of this article illustrates and analyzes several categories of Soviet anecdotes told in the late 1930s. Besides facilitating a discussion of social
relations, the jokes sometimes reveal much about popular views of the state and its policies. A second section then discusses the public context of private humor. Were there any points of contact and encouragement for private laughter in the humor officially permitted by the state, particularly in print and the cinema? Did popular political culture offer any such support? These questions relate to the issue of how alienated society was from the regime.

Terror, defined here simply as mass arrests of innocent people, and for the moment without reference to the state's motives, certainly existed in the Soviet Union from 1935 to 1939. It may be necessary to state at the outset that this article's view of the Terror is of a phenomenon truly awful in every aspect, but less pervasive and influential than some standard works on the subject argue. There has always been a range of opinion about the scope and impact of the arrests, however, so that one major task before us is to exploit more deeply the rich variety of sources on Soviet society. For the 1930s, this endeavor has begun in studies of workers, administration and the communist party on the local level, education, and response to arrest. The implicit or explicit conclusion in at least several of these works is that terror was not the central fact of Soviet existence; other trends were more important.

The present article does not attempt to explain why the "Great Terror" occurred, though some reflections on that point will be offered; rather, it focuses on the use of familiar sources and some new ones, together with a new methodology, to probe the social results of the arrests.

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The jokes present particular interpretive problems. Some of the stories come from memoirs, but most are taken from interviews in the Project on the Soviet Social System, conducted in 1950-1951 by faculty and graduate students from Harvard University. The project involved thousands of questionnaires and hundreds of interviews of ex-Soviet citizens, of whom all but a small number had left their country involuntarily during World War II.

This background creates a potential problem of bias in the evidence. It was psychologically important for emigres, especially those who had left the USSR with the Germans or had cooperated with them for any reason, to denigrate the life they had left behind. Moreover, the Harvard interviews took place at a time of sharp Cold War tensions. Many respondents, stranded in European displaced persons camps for years, hoped to immigrate to the United States, and they tried to make a good impression on their questioners in the belief that their answers might help their chances of admission. In the camps there were also a few emigres from the "first wave," those who left during the Russian Civil War. Such people were typically deeply anti-Soviet, and they had had decades abroad to harbor resentments and develop jokes about the USSR. These factors encouraged raconteurs to tell negative stories, so that probably not all the criticism expressed in the jokes related here had its roots solely in domestic events of the prewar decade.

Such problems are typical of oral literature in any setting. Nevertheless, since Harvard respondents were asked mainly about their experiences and attitudes during their last peacetime years in the USSR, the vast bulk of the material
gathering relates to the latter half of the 1930s. Those years were so dramatic, and
the war provided such a clear and sharp break in people's lives, that they very
likely remembered what they had done and heard before 1941 much better than
they would have in more peaceful circumstances. A number of memoirists and
Harvard respondents specifically indicated that they had heard the jokes they
recounted during the "Great Terror." Several anecdotes, particularly the ones
about the police and arrests, are strongly linked to that period. While some
interviewers asked subjects directly about jokes, others did not. Respondents
typically related funny stories in the course of the long, life interviews in order to
underscore a point they were making about Soviet existence, usually their lives
just before the war. Thus we may be reasonably sure that the jokes retold here are
at least indicative of the kinds which circulated during the terror. Neither the
Harvard Project nor the memoirs have been challenged in general as sources on
social life before the war; of course, they must always be used with considerable
caution.

In this case there is no more possibility of quantifying the incidence of
anecdotes or the backgrounds of their tellers than for any other culture. Nor do
there seem to be scientific criteria for what constitutes a "good" or "valid" joke
about social life and attitudes. I have selected stories on the basis that some appear
to reveal much more than others, especially when comparative evidence is
available. In the absence of any hard data on attitudes and social cohesion in the
1930s, an impressionistic treatment must suffice.

I have grouped the jokes into five categories: those about Stalin; those critical
of the regime or Soviet life in general; ones featuring the Narodnyi Komissariat
Vnutrennykh Del (NKVD), the People's Commissariat of Internal Affairs, which
comprised, among other agencies, the political police; anti-Semitic stories; and
dirty ones. The stories of the last two groups were infrequent and are not central
to the present discussion. In a word, the first three categories comprise what are
usually called political jokes.

Stalin appears to be unbalanced in an anecdote reportedly dating from 1937
or 1938. The Father of his People looks into the mirror one morning and says, "Just
wait, you ugly mug, I'll get to you, too." Here the general secretary's oft-men-
tioned determination to settle with his enemies is considered pathological; the
leader's sickness drives the nation's torment. Obviously, the joke suggests that
those who told it understood Stalin's role in perpetrating evil.

While this perception existed for some, other people held different images of
the country's most important figure. "Why did Lenin always wear shoes but Stalin
always wears boots?" one Russian asks another. "Because Lenin walked around
mud puddles and Stalin goes straight through them," comes the answer. The joke
may be interpreted in various ways. Stalin is cruder than Lenin, but, as with
Senator Joseph McCarthy, that may have been a popular trait. Stalin is not
reluctant to get dirty if that saves time. Perhaps the point is that Stalin often
splashed figurative mud on others. If so, one's interpretation depends on how
many were dirtied: a leader who is tough on his enemies may be admired if his
wrath is limited to a relatively narrow circle, especially one which is resented by
ordinary folk. This appears to be the case with popular perceptions of Ivan the
Terrible.
Another version of the story has Lenin wearing a clean shirt and tie while Stalin does not. This is because “Lenin knew the road he was travelling, but Stalin doesn’t.” While these lines may not exactly be hilarious, they depict only a leader without clear direction, not a sick one.

The man who told the joke in its boots variant added a different interpretation: “Stalin has always proceeded on a direct course.” Another respondent seconded this view by saying that, “People considered Lenin as flexible in politics, while Stalin barged ahead.” Whether one agrees with these remarks or not, the image of Stalin as strong and blunt remains. This probably accounts for some of his popularity; as the unofficial Soviet historian Roy Medvedev has written, “The longer he ruled, destroying people, the greater seems to have been the dedication to him, even the love, of the majority of people.” These feelings, which have lasted to the present in some strata, cannot be reconciled with the idea that people widely realized that they were ruled by a madman or with the theories of pervasive fear, unless we conclude that the Soviet citizenry was thoroughly masochistic.

In another story Stalin escapes personal judgment, but his rule fares badly. He goes to a factory incognito and speaks to a worker. “Who is your father?” he asks the man. “Stalin,” replies the worker. “Who is your mother?” is the next question. “The Soviet Union,” the man replies. “What would you like to be?” Stalin then asks. “An orphan,” the worker says. The joke purports to show the hatred of the workers for their situation and the state, so that the regime’s claim to legitimacy as the expression of the proletariat’s interests is ridiculed. But caveat lector: the anecdote was told by a man who was not a worker for any length of time. Instead, he served in the army and then the NKVD, which suggests that even this body shared society’s penchant for political humor. Nor did he have family connections to workers, as he came from a middle class background. The joke probably reveals more about this sector’s attitudes toward workers than anything else.

It was daring to tell any stories about Stalin in the late 1930s which fell short of glorifying him. In this period people were reportedly arrested for such acts as wrapping fish in newspapers bearing his portrait. Therefore the existence of Stalin jokes suggests several conclusions. First, a high level of trust between individuals had to exist before such anecdotes would be told. Second, at least some people formed their opinions of Stalin without complete reliance on the official view of him as God-like; these individuals retained some ability to think independently. Third, the negative stories in particular are examples of what Alan Dundes has called “socially sanctioned outlets for expressing taboo ideas and subjects.” People found their own ways and partners in dealing with forbidden topics, and they brought Stalin down to a human level, either positively or negatively.

An anecdote which illustrates the category critical of Soviet life in general concerns a factory director interviewing applicants for a position as an accountant. He asks all of them, “How much is two times two?” He keeps getting the answer, “Four,” whereupon he sends each person away. Finally one responds, “How much do you want?” and is immediately hired. The meaning of the story is that Soviet managers were forced by their system to break the laws and to doctor production figures in order to survive and please the higher-ups. So much pressure to fulfill the plan came from above, and it was so difficult to get raw materials, keep
qualified workers, and hold down spoiled output at the same time, that directors who wanted to succeed had to resort to subterfuges. Managers even had a saying for the situation: "It's necessary not to work well but to account well." Yet in order to do that, they had to have the cooperation of their bookkeepers and usually of the party and trade union chiefs in the plant, too. In short, a factory director could not function without a network of trusted associates. Such connections either survived the Terror or re-formed after arrests; there was no other way to operate.

Anthropologists like Dundes see jokes as a key part of folklore. In his view, a folk is "any group of people whatsoever who share at least one common factor...and have some traditions" which they call their own. By this definition, Soviet executives constituted a folk. In a discussion of humor, Gary Alan Fine has similarly maintained that every group possesses its own "idioculture" of knowledge, beliefs, and customs. This concept "suggests the means by which a group increases cohesion." Presumably, a truly terrorized folk would have difficulty generating new lore or "idioculture." Yet the opposite occurred in the case of Soviet managers. Despite the carnage among them produced by arrests, they functioned as interconnected and trusting people. Here too the psychological effect of the Terror has been exaggerated.

Several critical jokes were not fundamentally anti-regime but resounded more of everyday, albeit serious griping. Valentina Bogdan remembered that in Rostov during the year 1937, the worst for arrests, friends told her that only two kinds of sausage were available. The first was called "dog's delight," and the second, even worse, was named "Marusia poisoned herself." Consumers must not have been thrilled by the choice, but they could use humor as a valve to release their grievances and cope a little better with a dismal material situation - even though, it must be noted, Bogdan had a nice apartment and a domestic servant.

Another anecdote parodied the government's mania for handing out medals, ranks, and awards for any sort of achievement. Two friends who have not seen each other for many years speak on the telephone and agree to meet at a subway station. The first asks, "How will I recognize you?" The second replies, "I'll be wearing a gray hat and holding a book." First: "But that won't make you conspicuous enough." Second: "Yes, but I'll be the one without a medal." In the absence of sufficient material rewards, the government relied heavily for motivation on symbolic awards and titles. However, these in turn often became so widespread as to lose most significance. This is what happened to the Stakhanovite movement, the drive to develop exemplary workers and raise production norms that began in August 1935. In short order the movement became so diluted that a majority of workers in key industries were classified as Stakhanovites or the next category down, shock workers; by October 1939 a majority of all industrial workers were so classed. Most western accounts depict the Stakhanovite phenomenon as the creation of a labor "aristocracy." But, as the anecdote implies, that was not so.

Other jokes about daily life were much more negative and bitter. One Harvard respondent recounted the story of a Soviet family in which all members worked, but thanks to an unemployed relative in Western Europe, they were able to stay alive. A student quoted above remembered that for a few months in 1937
bananas were suddenly plentiful in the stores. A joke inevitably followed: a friend meets another friend, “How are things?” “As in Africa.” “What do you mean?” “Well, you go about naked and you eat bananas.”

Anecdotes of this type directly challenged the official view that Soviet life was greatly superior to western existence, so that relating them again involved an act of trust. But telling them did not necessarily signify a fundamentally anti-Soviet attitude; rather, the raconteurs may simply have enjoyed a humorous counter to propaganda. Perhaps above all they relished the “power of sudden illumination” that Arthur Koestler found in jokes from socialist countries; that is, people could share an understanding of the reality ignored in official parlance.

Nothing escaped the searchlight of popular humor, not even the arrests. Since important people were arrested, textbooks had to be purged as well, and in the late 1930s teachers had to tear out whole pages, paste in new portraits over old, cross out lines, and so forth, according to detailed instructions from the Commissariat of Education. A woman who taught in that period remembered that textbooks often lost one-half of their pages, and elementary readers shed up to two-thirds. “‘Now,’ people said jokingly, ‘we’ll be able to fulfill the [teaching] plans.”’ The folklore of Soviet teachers was alive and well, despite numerous arrests among them.

Certainly the repressions did inspire fear; the contention here is that that feeling was limited in scope and impact and that to a degree it was combatted by humor. Wolfgang Leonhard, whose German communist mother had brought him to the USSR in the early 1930s, was a committed Young Communist League member as a teenager toward the end of the decade. He noted that “there were actually jokes going around in this grim period.” The most popular was the “4 a.m. joke”:

At four o’clock in the morning there was a knock on the door of a Moscow house...Finally one of the tenants, Abram Abramovich, took his courage in both hands and opened the front door. He was heard whispering for a few moments with a man standing outside. Then he came back to his terrified fellow tenants with a bright smile on his face: “Nothing to worry about, comrades – the house is on fire, that’s all!”

The joke obviously reveals a deep fear of being arrested. But was that fear, as many accounts argue, due to a perception that the state was attempting to intimidate the entire population through a random system of terror? Leonhard’s comment on the anecdote would seem to support this contention: jokes were told “perhaps because everything seemed so inevitable anyway.” But his remark is contradicted on the same page by his own reaction and those of his friends. “Not one of the ten or so of us whose parents had been arrested allowed this cruel personal blow to lead us directly into opposition against the system.” These youngsters kept trying to convince themselves “that what was happening was no more than an exaggeration of measures which were in themselves both necessary and justified.” Thus this group, personally very close to victims, perceived the Terror as a limited and essentially correct policy, though mistakes had been made. Many Soviet citizens accepted the Terror this way, so that a sense of fear was often either absent, greatly submerged, or decreased by general confidence in the
regime. There were also numerous emigres who reported that no one they knew personally was arrested.

Fear of arrest often resulted from anxiety that one might be mistakenly identified as an enemy of the people. Memoirs and other accounts contain many reports of arrestees who, at the time of incarceration, believed that everyone else they encountered in jail was guilty, but that their own cases were mistakes. The experienced prisoners in R.V. Ivanov-Razumnik’s cell had heard this view so often by late 1938 that they joked about it: the newcomers were playing “records,” variations on a theme. One did not have to be afraid of the state per se to fear arrest, a keenly unpleasant event in any society.

Jokes were an important means of coping with the nexus of fear surrounding the possibility of detention. Lawrence Levine recorded a number of relevant black anecdotes which mocked lynching and other racial violence. Citing Freud, Levine argues that such jokes reduced a dangerous world to child’s play, to “pygmy proportions.” This allowed the “joke-tellers and their audiences...to set aside, or at least to minimize, the pain and defeat imposed upon them by the external world.”

There was probably another social function to anecdotes about arrest. A group of sociologists has speculated that during time of danger, such as occurs in warfare and concentration camps, the individual might want social comparison information about the extent of danger, the imminence of death, and the degree of fear experienced by others. Gallows humour may serve to manage the impression of courage in the presence of others and to elicit information regarding the situation and the feelings of others. In these circumstances failure by the target to laugh may serve to indicate that he or she is deeply afraid and may create more concern in the source. On the other hand, hearty laughter by others may serve to indicate less danger and fear, thereby increasing the resolve or morale of the relevant parties to the interaction.

In other words, telling jokes about the Terror was a way of testing the general level of apprehension among one’s acquaintances; if they laughed, the danger decreased in everyone’s eyes. In that case, social bonds were strengthened.

Diffusion of a feeling of dread was limited not only by these means but also by a perception that the arrests largely occurred among certain categories of citizens. People not in the wrong groups had little reason to fear arrest. This sense is illustrated in another joke from the same period, also set at 4 a.m., this time in Leningrad. There is the identical knock on the door, but in this case the terrified occupants choose to answer right away: “Who’s there?” “NKVD, open up!” is the reply. “No, no,” the residents respond, “You’ve got the wrong apartment, the communists live upstairs!” In this view, the non-communists, or all of the population of 170 million except the two to four million in the party during the late 1930s, were more or less spared. Other sources support the impression that party members and other highly placed people were indeed more likely to be arrested than those at lower levels.

A sense that some occupations were especially risky also appears in an anecdote about two old acquaintances who have not seen each other for years but meet on a Moscow street in 1937. One asks, “Well, how are things with you?” The
second answers, "Bad, my son has just been arrested." "Gosh," the first replies, "my son is an engineer, too." To cement the point, the teller added that, "The title of 'engineer,' especially in 1937 and 1938, was a synonym for 'candidate for concentration camp or execution.' And in fact accounts of arrests among engineers are legion. Many of them were young, as the anecdote suggests; this pattern calls into serious question the argument that Stalin wanted to replace those who came of age under the Old Regime or in Lenin’s time with creatures properly conditioned by his own rule.

Jokes also probed the actual work of the NKVD. During an oral examination, a professor asks a student who wrote Evgenii Onegin. The student thinks and then says, "I didn’t." The professor meets the director of the institute, shakes his head, and tells the story. "Do you think he did?" asks the director. After the professor leaves, the director calls a friend in the police and relates what happened. "Please help me find out," he asks. In a few days he gets a call back. "Don’t worry, everything is all right," says the policeman. "We had a talk with your student and he has confessed to writing Evgenii Onegin."

This story, told by a teacher, reveals some of the intelligentsia’s traditional disdain for the cultural level of the police, dating back at least to the early nineteenth century. That attitude is augmented in the anecdote by scorn for educational administrators, often appointed because of their party loyalty or service. Thus this joke also supports the contention that teachers maintained trusting relations and a folklore.

The story hinges on the use of torture. That it had been applied in 1937-1938 was no secret once Lavrenti Beria became head of the police in December of the latter year, though the scale of abuse was considerably underreported. Not only was a significant number of prisoners now released, but several public trials of NKVD men who had tortured victims during Nikolai Ezhov’s tenure, September 1936 to December 1938, were held around the country. Articles in local newspapers indicated that cases had been fabricated in 1937-1938, though without specifying how arrestees were made to confess. Thus knowledge or suspicion of torture could well have been widespread. It hardly seems likely that a regime dedicated to scaring its people would have let them know in this fashion that great injustice had occurred.

A final NKVD joke, which reportedly dates from 1940, shows a sense that police agents were everywhere. A man goes to the NKVD and asks to have an agent sent to his daughter’s wedding for security reasons. An officer refuses his request. Then the father pulls out a list of guests to show to the policeman and again asks that an agent be sent. The NKVDist replies, "With the exception of two, they are all our people."

While the joke obviously suggests that some citizens believed informers were omnipresent, other, more precise evidence suggests that in fact they were far from being so. A former colonel of the NKVD border troops maintained that the typical raion (roughly equivalent to a county) police organization had between six and fifteen “operational employees.” Another ex-policeman recalled that in the Murmansk area eight to ten such employees worked, while in the Far Eastern Krai (several oblasti, roughly provinces, administered together) up to fifteen were on the job per raion and in all of Leningrad there were no more than 30. A third ex-
NKVDist believed that in the city of Kuibyshev in 1938, when the population was over 400,000, the regular police (militia), part of the NKVD, had “about 1,000 informers at a minimum.” The statement suggests great uncertainty about the figures, but at face value it gives one informer per 400 inhabitants. Still another former policeman reported that fifty paid secret informers worked in Khark’kov in 1940 to monitor a population of 840,000, or one per 16,800 people. These numbers suggest that penetration of the population by the police was not nearly so effective as many western accounts have argued. Of course, other monitoring occurred, for example by party members and union officials, but such figures were readily identifiable and therefore avoidable. Indeed, Harvard project respondents often believed that secret informers posed no threat to them at all. The very fact that someone could tell a joke about police stooges indicates that they were not so omniscient and that people did not fear to have frank exchanges or even to mock the NKVD occasionally.

As a teacher and the daughter of a priest, the raconteur of the joke about agents at the wedding was a member of two social groups likely to be intensely aware of arrests in general and within their ranks in particular. To reiterate a point, it is a mistake to accept the views of a few as characteristic of all society, particularly when other evidence is available.

There is no question of the great power of the NKVD when it did intervene in people’s lives, however. One function of jokes about the political police was undoubtedly to use inversion or absurdity to mock them and gain a measure of psychic revenge and control over them. These were some of the techniques used in black American humor directed against whites. The anecdotes presented here had other social functions. Charles E. Schutz has argued about political humor in general that

with its comic permissiveness toward taboo violations, [it] can be resorted to as disguised aggression against moral and religious pretensions in politics. Moreover, comic blasphemy often makes the assumed moral superiority of some political pretender the target for ridicule. Thereby, impiety becomes allied with the leveling urge of the people and their repressed aggressions against all authority.

If he is right – and he offers material from ancient Greece to recent America to support his point – then the Soviet people in the late 1930s are characterized in regard to their humor by their similarity to other peoples. In this regard at least they were not reduced to some separate, lower category by their political system.

Soviet people engaged in telling jokes were not broken or atomized. Dmitrii Likhachev, a noted Soviet scholar himself imprisoned in the Gulag in the late 1920s, believes that “laughter removes psychological traumas...[and] reestablishes in its sphere contacts between people violated in another sphere.” Those who laugh are “plotters” in a sense, for they see and understand something that they did not before, or that others cannot see. One might quarrel with Likhachev only in that personal contacts may not have been violated, or at least broken, in the first place, so that laughter may serve to maintain human ties. In any event, the Soviet jokes could not have existed without close contacts between citizens.
How widespread were political jokes in the 1930s? Some material suggests that they circulated very broadly. One emigre claimed in his memoirs that, "In no [other] state of the world is there such a quantity of popular productions of humor and satire, directed against the government, as in the Soviet Union." Another survivor remembered that "anecdotes were...a colossal means of anti-Soviet propaganda." Things reached such a pass that people joked about their jokes. One interviewee and her friends used to refer to "Communications of O.B.S.," which stood for Odna Baba Skazala, meaning "one countrywoman said." This was a takeoff on the official "Communications of TASS," referring to the Telegraph Agency of the Soviet Union. The saying "there is no news in Pravda [which of course means truth] and no truth in Izvestiia [meaning news]" dates at least from the 1930s. Respondents in the Harvard survey often relied more on information from people they knew, indicating that some trust existed between individuals, than on official statements.

There were unwritten but widely understood rules about relating humor. "We tried not to tell anecdotes when meeting people we didn’t know," said one man. Of course, the implication is that he could trust people among his acquaintances. A woman recalled that, "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 jokes. She must report them immediately to the NKVD."

Standard western accounts argue that no one could rely on anyone else and that the Terror was entirely random, regardless of behavior. This view appears to be wrong. The anecdotes and remarks about them show that Soviet people knew, most of the time, whom they could trust and what they could say. Some people were arrested for telling stories, but this factor appears to have been very small among all arrests. A couple is riding in a street car in Khar'kov. The husband sighs, "Ah, ah." His wife reprimands him: "Don’t talk about politics." This is absurd, of course, but it indicates an understanding of what could be said in public. Private life, which could resist and temper the state’s influence, had different rules. Beyond the kinds of evidence presented here, the Harvard respondents offered many statements about high levels of solidarity, trust, and affection among family and friends.

What was the context for private, political humor? The purpose of this section is to sketch some of the ways in which officially permitted sources complemented private humor. To the extent that such matching existed, it would suggest that the regime tried not to break its people but to recognize their tastes and folk culture.

In the West, we are used to thinking of Soviet art of the 1930s as hopelessly dull and pedantic, the socialist realism of heroic production feats, zealous construction of the new epoch, and boy meets tractor. Yet other images of Soviet society existed, ones perhaps more meaningful to those who saw them. The satirical novels if Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov, the pseudonyms of Il’ia Fainzil’berg and Evgenii Kataev, who wrote each line together, were tremendously popular. Dvenadtsat’ stul’ev [The Twelve Chairs] (1928) was read and republished during the 1930s, and Zolotoi telenok [The Little Golden Calf] (1931), even more sharply satirical of officialdom and its goals, was almost as widely known.
The protagonist of the second novel, "the great schemer" Ostap Bender, goes through a series of adventures in his quest to get rich, hoodwinking scores of people on the way. He thinks and plots for himself, not for the collective good. Even though in the end he fails, Bender's mockery of petty bureaucrats is solidly approved in the book. Soviet critics reacted coldly to The Little Golden Calf, and yet it continued to circulate in the rest of the decade. By 1935 Il'f and Petrov were concentrating on writing for newspapers and journals, where their humorous and serious barbs at Soviet problems and bureaucrats reached an even wider audience. Their writing always encouraged readers to be critical of authoritarian behavior and other defects on the local level.

Another humorist active in the 1930s was Mikhail Zoshchenko, who had his troubles with the authorities but continued to publish sketches and satires through the years of the Terror. It was only the postwar government, in a very different atmosphere, which throttled him. Zoshchenko repeatedly challenged official pomposity in his work, for example in "the Pushkin Centennial" (1937). The tale mocks the official enthusiasm for the great national poet that filled the newspapers in that year, rivaling or displacing news of arrests. A local speaker rambles on about his ancestors and how they might have known Pushkin, except that they lived in different places. The end of the story reads, "Loud applause. Everyone rises and goes to the buffet."

Zoshchenko was able to jab at authority in other respects, including mass arrests. In "Big-City Lights" (1936) an old peasant arrives in Leningrad to visit his son. Everyone has a good time laughing at the father's hayseed ways. At one point the son tells him, "Don't go out on the street today, papa – today they're going to round up everybody with gray or red hair." Zoshchenko thus criticizes the penchant of officials for dealing with people not as individuals but as wholesale categories, just as various private jokes did. This criticism played an important role in contemporary political culture, as we shall see.

In 1937, the worst of all years. Zoshchenko wrote a film script which lampooned the cult of heroes, so widely developed for pilots, Stakhanovite workers, and many others. Though the film was never made, the script was published the next year. The story begins as a collective farm president addresses a meeting of the members. "And insofar as the slogan 'for abundance' is thrown about," he intones, "our collective farm 'Glorious Path' can, as it's said, fully answer in the same way...There they lie, the melons...[sic] But one of the melons we have surpasses all the melons as a hero-melon." Having ridiculed official gibberish on production achievements, much as the joke about medal-wearers did, Zoshchenko turns his attention to local leaders' habit of imposing their will on the rank and file. The president suggests taking the fruit to a regional agricultural exhibition. He continues: "(Quickly). Who is against? Abstaining? Adopted unanimously." In one short scene, the script touches a number of chords that must have been familiar to virtually all Soviet people, for the demands of production and leaders were ubiquitous. All this was not too dangerous to appear in an edition of 20,000 copies.

Soviet film of the period also went far in criticizing the bureaucracy. Movies had a vast audience; in 1940 alone viewers, who were not and could not be forced to go, purchased more than one billion tickets. The musical comedy Volga, Volga! (Grigori Alexandrov, 1938) a personal favorite of Stalin's, should serve by itself
to disturb our hoary notions of what the Soviet Union was like during the Terror. Why would a regime supposedly dedicated to scaring everyone permit a film that not only featured a great deal of comedy but also sharply satirized bureaucrats and even the act of political denunciation? The picture’s villain is the petty tyrant Byvalov, a name derived from *byvaet* (“it happens”). He serves as the callous director of a musical instrument factory. Disdaining all the low-ranking people around him, he announces that there cannot possibly be any talent in the small town where the plant is located. In response, the entire populace turns out to hound him with opera, a full orchestra, folk dances, and even a tune played on wine glasses.

Byvalov, who never puts down his briefcase for an instant, even when he must leap into the river, tells a crowd in Moscow that he knows a lot about music and is personally acquainted with Schubert. This is a slap at the pretensions of the “new class” of prosperous officials and managers and their efforts to take credit for all achievements; in fact, the ignorant executive has only hampered creativity.

The film’s most startling scenes mock political denunciations and fear of them. At one point Byvalov, inevitably, menaces a group of ordinary women and demands that they confess which one wrote a catchy new song; he fails to understand that the central authorities are looking for the author in order to congratulate her and award her a prize. Even the songwriter’s boyfriend, a nice but arrogant fellow, thinks that his beloved stole the tune and urges her not to draw attention to herself. But all’s well that ends well: Byvalov becomes an object not of fear but of laughter. His pomposity and authority are shattered, and no one can take him seriously again. As another song in the film says, “It’s possible to beat enemies with laughter, too.” Clearly, such petty monsters can be criticized and controlled from below, and nobody needs to be liquidated.

Of course, the target of all this is a local leader, so that the story fits the official tendency of the thirties to blame problems on anyone but Stalin. But, like private humor, that pattern constituted an important outlet for popular grievances. It also supported joke-making about day-to-day troubles.

How did official and unofficial humor of the late 1930s fit into the popular political context of the period? If any citizens could exercise their critical faculties on some level, was there any possibility of using their brains to participate meaningfully in public life? Did the central authorities encourage any critical thinking? If not, the official humor of the late thirties was the cruellest joke of all.

In fact, popular criticism and participation in decision-making, though limited in scope and subject matter, played important roles in Soviet life. On a daily basis they defused tensions, provided checks on the power of local officials, and gave some legitimacy to claims that the country was run as a people’s state. During the Terror the central leadership appealed to the masses against local bureaucracy. Over and over, Soviet cultural messages and public statements by top officials exhorted ordinary citizens to express their views, to complain, and to challenge the local authorities. Zoshchenko’s stories and *Volga, Volga!* among other works, anticipated a prominent role for ordinary people’s voices, while Stalin called for their input directly. In March 1937, as the Terror was building up, he stressed the importance of the party’s “ties to the masses.” To maintain them, it was necessary “to listen carefully to the voice of the masses, to the voice of rank
and file members of the party, to the voice of the so-called 'little people,' to the voice of ordinary folk [narod]. The party newspaper Pravda even identified lack of criticism with enemies of the people: "Only an enemy is interested in seeing that we, the Bolsheviks...do not notice actual reality...Only an enemy...strives to put the rose-colored glasses of self-satisfaction over the eyes of our people."

Of course, the central leadership and its policies remained sacrosanct; nonetheless, there were regular calls for ordinary citizens to criticize important features of their everyday existence, for instance working conditions, cultural opportunities, housing, and above all the bureaucracy. This pattern defies analyses of the Terror which argue that the regime intended to break the nation's spirit and dominate all aspects of life from above.

But were ordinary people actually permitted to criticize their superiors or conditions? Various kinds of evidence indicate that they were. A respondent in the Harvard project reported that when he worked for the newspaper Izvestiia in the mid-thirties, it received about 5,000 letters a day. In October of 1939 Pravda noted that the Commissariat of Education of the Russian Republic had received about 8,000 complaints and inquiries in the first seven months of the year, but that action on them had been very slow. In regard to only one oblast', the Commissariat of Justice of the Russian Republic recorded some 1,300 complaints in the period January 1-March 22, 1939.

An emigre recalled that his stepmother, a factory worker, "often scolded the boss" and also complained about living conditions. She was never arrested. The American worker John Scott, employed at an Urals metallurgical complex in the late 1930s, reported strong criticism of managers by workers in a Moscow factory meeting held in 1940. In Smolensk oblast during 1936 party officials were severely chastized, given reprimands, and even fired for suppressing criticism from below. Throughout 1937 party cells in Smolensk were generally characterized by heavy criticism of leaders up to the oblast' level, stimulated in part by editorials in Pravda. This was an atmosphere which promoted laughter about bad sausage and overbearing bosses, at the least.

Workers participated by the hundreds of thousands in special inspectorates, commissions, and brigades which checked the work of managers and institutions. These agencies sometimes proved effective. For instance, the former worker turned inspector V.R. Balkan, together with a union official, investigated an accident at his Moscow factory in 1937. Finding the cause in improper testing of materials, the two fined the head of the production shop 100 rubles and placed a reprimand in the foreman's record. Why shouldn't these men, and others who heard about the incident, have laughed at the boss?

The book which recounted Balkan's story was published as a guide to action for other union officials and inspectors. Far from ruling purely by the negative means of terror, the regime fostered a limited but positive political role for the populace. It would be useful to think of the Soviet system as authoritarian above, in the formation of broad policy guidelines, but participatory below, in day-to-day affairs and the implementation of policy. Complaints and suggestions constantly flowed upward. Humor helped by introducing glimpses of reality and lightening the problems of a tension-ridden society.
If the Terror ever crushed laughter, which is doubtful, the atmosphere improved drastically in 1938-1939. As early as January 1938 the party Central Committee announced that the “most evil traitor” was no longer the Trotskyite or the agent of a foreign power but the “masked enemy,” the “careerist-communist” who tried to advance or cover his/her own mistakes by denouncing others. Broad reinstatements of expelled party members began immediately, indicating that the purges (in Russian чистка, cleansing) did not always equal execution or dispatch to the Gulag. Appeals courts now began to overturn or reduce earlier sentences of sabotage or wrecking.

By the end of 1938, arrests declined precipitously, and, according to a number of accounts, torture all but ended. NKVD agents began to look for tangible evidence of guilt rather than to accept denunciations or the results of physical pressure as “proof.” The “Great Terror” was over. *Volga, Volga!* fits quite comfortably into this picture; the Byvalovs of the land could be handled other than by arrest, and people could laugh more easily. This does not mean that massive tragedy ceased, only that it began to decrease significantly. Even at its peak, it was far from dominating Soviet life entirely.

Soviet official humor of the 1930s shows that the state tried to cater to popular taste in humor, it relied on much more than pompous socialist realism in cultural policy, and it permitted satire of the bureaucracy and even of the Terror. Official humor touched people on a level they could understand and appreciate; it complemented and contributed to their private folklore.

The unofficial jokes illuminate a good deal about popular behavior, resentments, and levels of trust. It is important to note that the critical stories frequently concerned economic defects and not basic disaffection from the political system. On the whole, the anecdotes imply that it was more often low standards of living rather than the Terror or lack of most civil liberties which caused complaints. This contention is borne out by a number of memoirists’ comments. Economic problems per se are usually not enough to drive a people into massive opposition to its government, particularly when at least the perception exists that input and criticism from below are encouraged.

Perhaps the Incas or Aztecs after the Spanish conquest would qualify as truly shattered societies. In those cases the previous economy, social structure, political system, and religion collapsed simultaneously. In such a situation we might imagine mass psychosis and despair; it certainly seems that the Mexican Indians fell into drunkenness well beyond anything known in the USSR. Soviet society was not nearly so badly off, though of course the “Great Terror” and earlier events damaged the social relations of a significant portion of the population.

Nevertheless, on a broad scale Soviet people maintained the ability to laugh and to have close personal ties through the “Great Terror.” They laughed to make their fears manageable, to deflate the pomposity and excesses which so often marred their world, to test or celebrate their closeness, and to enjoy illuminating their problems. An examination of the social dimensions of both official and unofficial humor shows that Soviet citizens did not become a “scrap heap of
humanity” and further suggests that the state did not intend to make them so. The collective farmers who poked fun at political enthusiasts in 1936 by naming their prize bull “Aktivist,” along with the editors who published his picture in a party journal, would probably have laughed heartily at that notion.

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ENDNOTES

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6. I have challenged the use of such opinions in traditional interpretations of the impact of terror on Soviet society in my “Fear and Belief in the USSR’s ‘Great Terror:’ Response to Arrest, 1935-1941,” *Slavic Review* 45, no. 2 (1986).


other hand, in 1946 Frank Lorimer, a professional demographer, published The Population of the Soviet Union: History and Prospects (Geneva, 1946), which argued that excess deaths from all causes between 1926 and 1939 could have been no more than 5.5 million; pp. 133-140. This would imply in turn a lower arrest toll than the foregoing works do. George F. Kennan, Soviet Foreign Policy 1917-1941 (Princeton, 1960), p. 89, has written that "tens of thousands were killed," a figure that would suggest a much lower arrest total than Rosefielde et al. Kennan was a diplomat in Moscow at the time. S.G. Wheatcroft offers much lower estimates than Conquest or Rosefielde in his "On Assessing the Size of Forced Concentration Camp Labour in the Soviet Union, 1929-1956," Soviet Studies 33, no. 2 (1981): 265-95, and "Towards a Thorough Analysis of Soviet Forced Labour Statistics," Soviet Studies 35, no. 2 (1983): 223-237. The most extensive calculations of the inmate population, based on sentencing, labor force, unionization, and voting data, are in Ger P. van den Berg, "Quantitative Aspects of the Stalinist System of Justice and Terror in the Soviet Union," in J.M. Feldbrugge, ed., The Distinctiveness of Soviet Law (Dordrecht, 1987). On p. 139 van den Berg estimates that about 2.2 million people were in labor camps in 1940. The Soviet scholar V. Zemskov claims to have seen data from a "civil archive" showing 839,000 total prisoners in the prison and camp system in 1936 and 1,344,408 in 1940. Of these 12.6% in the first year and 33.1% in the second had been arrested for "counter-revolutionary crimes"; "Arkhipelag GULAG glazami pisatel'ia i statistika," Argumenty ifakty, no. 45, 1989, p. 5. At present this is as close as we have to official Soviet data on the numbers caught up in the Terror. Even from this brief discussion it should be evident that no one school of thought can claim that its estimates are "conservative" or the legitimate ones and that the debate on the numbers will not be resolved until the Soviet government releases reasonably complete data.


11. There were A schedule interviews, which were life stories, and B schedule interviews, which were sessions on specialized topics. Bound copies are available at Widener Library, Harvard University. This material will be cited here as HP, the number assigned to the interviewee, A or B, volume, and page numbers. When available, short biographical data from the prewar period will also be provided, using the designations given in the A series data. The interviews were translated into occasionally awkward English. Although a large number of books and articles have been based on this material, it has been neglected for some time and still represents, in any case, an extremely valuable resource.

12. See the discussion of possible bias in project responses in Raymond Bauer and Alex Inkeles, The Soviet Citizen: Daily Life in a Totalitarian Society (Cambridge, 1959) pp. 59-69; for an example of bias perceived by an interviewer see HP number 118, A, vol. 9, p. 49, a Ukrainian male born about 1910, a white-collar worker from a poor-average peasant family.

13. Apte, in Humor, p. 22, states that "humor has not been fully recorded, described, analyzed, and interpreted in even a single culture." On p. 25 he maintains that statistical analyses of humor are not possible.

14. HP number 91, A, vol. 7, p. 20, a Ukrainian female teacher born in 1895; her father was a priest.

15. HP number 61, A, vol. 5, p. 50, a Russian male school director born in 1910 to a family of poor-average peasants.


17. HP number 517, A, vol. 26, p. 24, a Russian male electrical engineer whose father was an elite worker; the respondent was born in 1913.
18. HP number 61, p. 50.

19. HP number 1693, a female physician from Belorussia, born about 1913, whose father was a nobleman and professor of mathematics; A, vol. 36, p. 49.


22. HP number 147, A, vol. 12, p. 31; a Russian male born about 1915.


24. HP number 26, B, vol. 3, p. 16, a Russian male chief engineer in a factory, born 1904 into a poor-average peasant family.

25. I.V. Paramonov, *Uchit'sia upravliat': mysli i opyt starogo khoziaistvennika*, izdanie 3-e (Moscow, 1977), p. 118. Paramonov was a manager in various branches of the coal, construction, and other industries in the 1930s and 1940s.


30. HP number 127, A, vol. 10, p. 16. A Russian male student born in 1924, whose father was an officer in one of the elite tsarist guards regiments.


32. HP number 59, A, vol. 5, p. 38, a Russian female chemist born in 1918 whose family was superior intellectual.


37. Many works have made this argument; see, for example, Friedrich and Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship*, especially p. 169; and Dallin and Breslauer, *Political Terror*, especially p. 5.
38. Leonhard, Child, pp. 50-51.

39. See my "Fear and Belief," especially 225-227. On lack of fear among respondents in the Harvard Project see, for example, HP number 421, A, vol. 21, pp. 19-20, a Russian female born about 1906, a timekeeper in a factory from a family that was middle-class before the Revolution; and HP number 6, A, vol. 1, p. 46, a Russian male medical student born after 1920 into a family of middle peasants.

40. Among those who reported no personal knowledge of terror were a Russian rank and file worker from a middle class family, born in 1926 or 1927, HP number 378, A, vol. 19, p. 24; a Russian male meteorologist born in 1907 whose father was a priest, HP number 12, A, vol. 2, p. 6. And see Viktor Nekrasov, Zapiski zevaki (Frankfurt, 1976), p. 37. Born into a financially comfortable family in 1911, Nekrasov worked as a journalist and in the theater before becoming a well-known writer.


42. Levine, Black Culture, p. 343.


44. Those respondents in the Harvard project with "administrative responsibility were twice as likely as their non-administrative peers to report having been personally arrested." Respondents believed that factory managers and engineers were particularly at risk while workers were generally much safer: Inkeles and Bauer, Soviet Citizen, pp. 48-49 and 108; and see my "Fear and Belief," especially 219-222.


46. See T.H. Rigby, Communist Party Membership in the U.S.S.R., 1917-1967 (Princeton, 1968), pp. 197-235, for a discussion of the numbers and composition of party members in this period. On page 212 Rigby concludes that a maximum of 180,000 could have been expelled from the party between November 1936 and March 1939, a figure lower than others have calculated, and one which reinforces lower estimates of arrest totals.

47. F. Beck and W. Godin, Russian Purge and the Extraction of Confession, trans. Eric Mosbacher and David Porter (London, 1951), p. 146, reported that during the Terror "people used to say, 'He's not a party member and he's not a Jew, so why has he been arrested?'" See also statements on the social composition of arrestees in G.A. Tokaev, Comrade X (London, 1956), p. 63, and "A. Dneprovets" [Aleksandr Vozniuk-Burmin], untitled manuscript in the Vozniuk-Burmin file, the Bakhmeteff Archive of Russian and East European History and Culture, Columbia University [hereafter BA], pp. 7 and 16. Many other examples could be given.

48. HP number 403, B, vol. 10, p. 18, no biographical data available.

49. Arrests of engineers are recounted, for example, by G. Andreev [Gennadii A. Khomianov], Trudnye dorogi; vosposminania (Munich, 1959), p. 19; and Fedor Ivanovich Gorb, "Chernyi uragan," memoir in his file in the BA, pp. 16 and 48.


51. HP number 64, A, vol. 6, pp. 67-8, a Russian male teacher born in 1910 whose family was middle class. And see a similar joke in HP number 610, B, vol. 10, p. 3, no biographical data available.

52. See Alexander Herzen, My Past and Thoughts (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 156-157 for a comment by
a nineteenth-century intellectual about the tsarist gendarmes' lack of education.


54. Fabrications of cases by police are reported in *Krasnoe Znamia* [Tomsk], 24 February 1939, p. 4; *Krasnaja Karelia* [Petrozavodsk], 9 February 1939, p. 4, a story repeated in *Sotsialisticheskaia Iakutzia* [Iakutsk], 12 February 1939, p. 4.


56. A. Repin, manuscripts, in his file in BA, p. 254.


60. For example, HP numbers 139, A, vol. 11, p. 9, a Russian female psychiatrist born 1886 into a middle class family; 353, B, vol. 11, p. 14, a medical student, no other biographical data available; 131, B, vol. 10, p. 38, a Russian male sports teacher and director born in 1911 whose family were poor-average peasants.


64. Mikhail Boikov, *Liudi sovetskoi tiurmy* (Buenos Aires, 1957), v. 1, p. 359. Boikov was a young journalist when he was arrested in 1937.

65. HP number 127, A, vol. 10, p. 36, a Russian male student, born about 1924 into the family of an elite worker.

66. HP number 14, A, vol. 2, pp. 66-7, a Russian female student born in 1919; her father was a professor and nobleman.

67. HP number 1313, A, vol. 33, p. 64, an Armenian female born about 1902, a bookkeeper whose wealthy family was in business before the revolution. And see HP number 95, A, vol. 7, p. 29, a Ukrainian female file clerk born about 1907; her father was a white collar worker and a nobleman.

68. Bauer and Inkeles, *Soviet Citizen*, p. 161, found that 50% of the Harvard project respondents said that word of mouth was an important source of information in the 1930s; 35% considered it most important.

69. HP number 12, A, vol. 2, p. 11, a Russian male meteorologist born in 1907 whose father was a priest.

70. HP number 14, A, vol. 2, p. 35.
For an example of someone arrested for telling a joke, see the story recounted by HP number 1296, A, vol. 33, p. 31, a Russian female born about 1912; a blueprint copyist and singer, her father was a colonel in the tsarist army. The judgment that arrests on this basis were rare is an impression based on my extensive files on arrests in this period.

HP number 1492, A, vol. 34, p. 21, a Ukrainian man born about 1906, a teacher whose family consisted of well-to-do peasants.

For example, HP number 51, A, vol. 5, p. 23, a Russian female bookkeeper born in 1920, whose father was a government employee; and number 125, A, vol. 10, p. 25, a Russian male who made his career in the army and whose father was a Cossack and tsarist army officer. As the discussion of jokes given here suggests, many respondents maintained strong friendships. For a more extensive treatment of policy and practice toward the Soviet family in this period, see my “The Soviet Family During the ’Great Terror,’ 1935-1941,” forthcoming in Soviet Studies.


See the discussion in Katerina Clark, The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual (Chicago, 1981) of how this and other Soviet works of literature tried to inculcate the idea that spontaneity was worthless or harmful without discipline imparted by the party.

A number of these sketches are contained in Il’ia Il’f and Evgenii Petrov, Sobranie sochinenii. Tom tretii. Rasskazy, fel’etony, stat’i, rechi, 1932-1937. Vodevili i kinostsenarii. (Moscow, 1961).

Mikhail Zoshchenko, Nervous People and Other Satires, edited, with an introduction by Hugh McLean; trans. Maria Gordon and Hugh McLean (Bloomington, IN, 1975), pp. 276, 278.

Ibid., p. 265.


Alliluyeva, Twenty Letters, p. 191.


Quoted in O.A. Ermanskii, Stakhanovskoe dvizhenie i stakhanovskie metody (Moscow, 1940), viii. No date was given for the Pravda statement, but the foreword to the book was written in December 1938.

HP number 359, B, vol. 4, p. 5, a Russian male newspaper writer and editor born in 1907 to a family of poor to average peasants.
86. Pravda, 3 October 1939, p. 2.

87. Sovetskaia iustitsiia [hereafter Slu], no. 10, May 1939, p. 45.

88. HP number 153, A, vol. 12, pp. 31-32, a Russian male airplane mechanic, born in 1927 into a worker's family.

89. John Scott, Behind the Urals: An American Worker in Russia's City of Steel (Bloomington, IN, 1973), p. 264. In Leningrad workers, engineers, and managers together discussed problems in their factories and exchanged views in a very lively way on many occasions. See, for example, Leningradskii Gosudarstvennyi Arkhiv Oktiabri'skoi Revoliutsii i Sotsialisticheskogo Stroitel'stva, fond [f.] 1633, opis' [o.] 15, delo [d.] 394, listi [l. or 11.] 37-49, a meeting at the Krasnyi Vyborzhets plant on 5 September 1937; f. 1253, o. 3, d. 81, l. 11. 50-51, a meeting at the Leningrad metal factory on 3 June 1938; and f. 1253, o. 3, d. 99, l. 11. 27-31, a meeting at the Leningrad mechanical factory on 6 May 1939, at which there was loud laughter about cursing on the job.

90. Vsesoiuznaia kommunisticheskaia partiia (bol'shevikov). Smolenskii oblastnoi komitet. The Smolensk Archives. This source will be cited here as SA with the archival series (T87 or T88), a box number, reel number if appropriate, WKP (file) number, and list. SA T88, box 4, reel 74, WKP 538, l. 179-80 (p. 2 of the document itself); and l. 1.168 (pp. 1-2).

91. SA T87, box 38, reel 37, WKP 322, l. 59 and 74; box 14, WKP 106, l. 1.60; and box 14, WKP 110, l. 1.185, for example.


93. Both Soviet and American intellectuals have told me this view is naive. But I have never heard this from anyone, American or Soviet, who has looked deeply into how ordinary Soviet citizens behaved in this period, as documented in sources such as SA, Soviet archives, local newspapers, and the many reports detailing activities of, at least, urban workers' commissions and inspectorates. John Scott, who worked and lived with Soviet workers for years, understood what they could and could not say; Scott, Behind the Urals, p. 264.

94. For a detailed discussion of how the general line on the Stakhanovite (model worker) movement was the subject of much maneuvering and interpretation on the factory floor, see Siegelbaum, Stakhanovism.

95. The Central Committee statement covered the top of the first page of Pravda, 19 January 1938. False denouncers were now arrested: see Slu no. 14, 20 July 1938, p. 16; Pravda, 5 July 1939, p. 6; and Pravda, 16 July 1939, p. 6. On reinstatements see, for example, Pravda, 2 January 1938, p. 2, the first of many calls to review applications for reentry to the party. The writer A.M. Afinogenov was reinstated in February 1938; see his Stat'i, dnevnik, pis'ma, vospominaniia, compiled and edited by A.O. Boguslavskii (Moscow, 1957), pp. 167-80. And see, among a flood of such examples for local reinstatements, Kommunist [Kuibyshev], no. 10, Mary 1938, and Slu no. 9, 5 May 1938, pp. 16-17, for party reinstatements; and Beck and Godin, Russian Purge, p. 200, for people released and restored to their jobs. We do not know how many were released; they represented, certainly, only a small portion of all who had been arrested. The point is that policy had now changed.

96. Slu, no. 18, 30 September 1938, p. 48, no. 11, June 1939, pp. 61-63, no. 2, January 1939, pp. 58-59, and no. 1, January 1940, p. 44.

97. Abdurakhman Avtorkhanov reported that beating ceased entirely in the prison where he was being held at this point. Memuary, p. 564; for similar observations see Nicholas Przychodko, One of the Fifteen Million (Boston, 1952) p. 92; Maria Ioffe, Odna noch': Povest' o pravde (New York, 1978), p. 127; Ivanov-Razumnik, Memoirs, p. 323; and Beck and Godin, Russian Purge, p. 48. Ioffe, a committed Trotskyite, was the wife of the prominent Bolshevik and Trotskyite A.A. Ioffe.
98. By 1939 NKVD investigators were "more competent," they were "concerned with technical and industrial sabotage" and often had the education to look carefully into charges, and they sometimes asked civilian engineers for their opinions on cases. See, respectively, HP number 70, B, vol. 2, p. 6, a Russian shop chief in textile mills, probably born in the 1890s; S. Swianiewicz, Forced Labour and Economic Development (London, 1965), p. 144; also Ashot M. Arzumanian, Tainabulata (Erevan, 1967), pp. 109-110; and Victor Kravchenko, I Chose Freedom: The Personal and Political Life of a Soviet Official (New York, 1946), pp. 289-291.

99. For example, Andrei Manchur, "Pochemu ia ne vozvrashchais' v SSSR," David Dalin file, BA, pp. 2-3; Lena Moroz, "The Road of the Young," David Dalin file, BA, p. 7; and G. Arkitin, "Politicheskie nastroeniiia naseleniiia g. Leningrada v leto 1941 g.," BA, pp. 4-7. And see HP number 394, A, vol. 20, p. 32, a female Ukrainian peasant born in 1913; also number 395, A, vol. 20, pp. 32-3, a Russian male who was a rank and file worker born into the same type of family in 1917.
