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## Commentary on 'Language and Fear' (Caroline Humphrey)

The deadly power of words in Soviet Russia is aptly captured in Caroline Humphrey's anthropological exploration of taboo in Soviet culture. It is well known that Soviet culture, especially in the Stalin era, after the introduction of Socialist Realism, was 'literature-centric' and 'graphomaniac'. It lauded the word as the ultimate index of modernity, connoting advances in literacy as well as the establishment of the more orderly discursive (and therefore social) order of Soviet power. The counterpart to this positive identification of Soviet culture with 'cultured language' was, however, the extreme caution with which the 'wrong' words were separated from the 'correct' texts of Soviet modernity. Pre-emptive censorship and punitive judicial measures directed against anti-Soviet discourse as well as against uncultured, hooligan language (such as *mat*), represented powerful means of anathematising texts and speech acts which threatened to introduce a discordant note into the harmonious chorus of praise for Soviet power. These regulations excluded wrong words and their authors from the discursive community, often also displacing

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them from the social community, and — in the last resort — into the GULAG or physical extinction.

However, as Caroline Humphrey's article and many other recent studies of Soviet culture have argued, the operation of Soviet power should not be understood solely in terms of the vertical, top-down enforcement of rules and regulations; rather, as with other practices of everyday life, the use of language was defined and regulated not only by the Party, but also within Soviet society. Restrictions on what could be said and written were often both agreed upon, and also actively enforced by *both* the Soviet authorities *and* the Soviet people; self-regulation and self-censorship, albeit guided by quite different criteria and goals than the Soviet censorship, were important adjuncts to the coercive powers of the state in policing the borders of Soviet discourse.

The article locates this seemingly bizarre consensus within the *longue durée* of Russian culture. By emphasising the continuities between folk culture and the practices of Soviet modernity, Caroline Humphrey underscores the debt which Soviet linguistic censorship owed to older, occult notions of the power of the word, bridging the gulf which the Bolshevik revolutionaries sought to form between pre-revolutionary and post-revolutionary worlds. The article also suggests that even in the most oppressive and repressive circumstances, linguistic ingenuity supported a relatively autonomous sphere of popular culture in which Soviet citizens developed means of communicating unorthodox beliefs, whether through the spoken word, or through elaborate codes of silence. However, also implicit in the argument is the more controversial proposition that popular and official culture in many respects coincided in their shared beliefs about taboos. Thus, in addition to the role played by mechanisms of repression, tenacious popular beliefs about omens may also have abetted voluntary popular acceptance of state-imposed taboos, or at least an instinctive understanding of the ideas of verbal power implicit in Bolshevik linguistic policy. Accordingly, the fear of mentioning taboo subjects was twofold: a fear of violating Soviet regulations, yet also a deep-seated anxiety about breaking the rules of Russian folk culture. The latter fear may even, Caroline suggests, have been more pervasive than the former.

Yet, a more detailed study of the continuities between folkloric taboos and GLAVLIT would have to consider the intermediary role played by the Tsarist censorship, which surely bequeathed to the post-revolutionary authorities a workable model for the bureaucratic control of published texts. A comparison of the administrative and judicial mechanisms of late Tsarist and Soviet verbal censorship would also shed light on the concrete continuities in regulation of 'linguistic conduct' which ran alongside the more long-standing and

perhaps more diffuse beliefs to which Caroline alludes in outlining the forces for collective and individual 'self-censorship' within popular culture. The *longue durée* of popular beliefs, which cut across the putative divide of 1917, should not obscure the more mundane continuities of administration and social control which can be observed between Tsarist and Soviet orders.

However, Caroline's argument also leads us to some wider reflections on Soviet culture. It suggests a persistent ambivalence on the part of the Soviet authorities with regard to popular culture. Did Soviet culture seek to co-opt folk beliefs into a cynically syncretic discourse to which their (at least initially) peasant and illiterate audience would be receptive? Or was the apparent similarity between older linguistic prohibitions and the Soviet censorship an ironic coincidence, perhaps born of the subconscious beliefs of Soviet leaders themselves (as has been argued repeatedly of the seminary-trained Stalin)? This question may never receive a satisfactory answer. More worthy of serious consideration, however, is the question of the Soviet authorities' palpable unease with regard to popular culture, which complicated their efforts to police its often exuberant forms of expression.

The Soviet authorities' tortured relationship with folklore, and their evolving policies on religion, have both been well documented. However, Caroline's article also suggests a number of other ambiguities in official attitudes toward popular culture. First, as the example of the gloriously rude farm-worker at the conclusion demonstrates, 'taboo' language, especially in spoken form, could easily be confused with earthy working class honesty, the kind of proletarian popular culture which the Soviet authorities, at least in theory, ought to have been encouraging. One can imagine that this woman's behaviour represented the lesser of two evils; although she was coarse, she was at least not bourgeois (since a real *kulak* would never have spoken that way). In this instance, and at this historically specific juncture (collectivisation), relief at the absence of a class-based taboo diverted attention from the linguistic transgression. However, one could well imagine other party meetings, or public settings, where such chutzpah would evoke a much more punitive response. For, as Vera Dunham [Dunham 1976], and more recently David Hoffmann [Hoffmann 2003], have made clear, the equation of Sovietness with cultured and civilised behaviour was the Achilles heel of Soviet — especially Stalinist — ideology. The fear of uncivilised behaviour, of the persistence of forces of backwardness (*pe-rezhitiki proshlogo*), tended to blur the boundaries between intentionally anti-Soviet conduct and unwittingly uncultured actions, where the defiance of Soviet progress was more implicit, but no less frustrating to the party. In part, therefore, it would appear that the anxieties about taboos such as *mat* reflected the indeterminacy of the

boundary between 'uncivilised' and 'anti-Soviet' behaviour, a vagueness which was more broadly reflected in the notoriously elastic definition of 'hooliganism'. The charge of hooliganism from its earliest, pre-revolutionary incarnation, as described by Joan Neuberger [Neuberger 1993], and well into the post-Stalinist era, was ill-defined, and could cover everything from drunkenness and public disorder to scandalous speech, including *mat* and criticism of the Soviet system.

This capacious definition of taboo behaviour reflected the party's ineradicable suspicion of 'backward' behaviour' and permitted it to continue wavering between alternating perceptions of it: was it harmless ignorance, or a threat to the Soviet order? In the case of the speech acts with which we are concerned here, language's unique powers of transmission and contagion evoked particular anxiety, and, as the article indicates, intentionality was often disregarded in favour of emphasising language's independent capacity to do harm. The question of intentionality demonstrates how tightly the use of language and its regulation was bound up with the politics of identity. As Igal Halfin has argued, the party, especially in the Stalin period, found it impossible to resolve its doubts about the transparency (or obscurity) of language [Halfin 2002]. Was it enough simply to police language, and thereby to ensure Sovietness, or was language a means of dissimulation, a barrier to the authorities' attempts to look into the 'souls' of their citizens? The article's arguments about creative silence and other subaltern strategies of discursive play suggest that people may indeed have been '*speaking Bolshevik*' [Kotkin 1995] whilst all the time concealing a rich inner life out of the reach of the Soviet authorities. Humphrey provocatively suggests that it was the very strictness of Soviet taboos which gave rise to this rich diversity of '*silent*' activity, leading to a form of '*aphasia*' or barren silence, in the post-Soviet era, although a study by Nancy Ries suggest that this nonplussed reaction to the fall of Soviet power may have been shared only by certain social categories, whilst others (e.g. city dwellers, intellectuals) thrived in the absence of taboos [Ries 1997]. It should also be borne in mind that the *anekdot*, a means of playful inversion of official standards, persisted throughout the entire Soviet period and into the post-Soviet period as a popular and irreverent form of discourse, complicating the picture of popular culture presented here.

Given the uncertainty which plagued the authorities' policies on language, the linguistic '*fiats*' to which Humphrey alludes may capture the judicial force which the authorities brought to bear on the enforcement of linguistic order, but they simplify the complexity of the authorities' negotiations of the sayable. Like the shifting content of what *needed* to be said (the vague guidelines of Socialist Realism, as examined by Susan Reid and Régine Robin), the rules

of what could *not* be said were not set in stone, and were often destabilised by regime change, notably the transition between Stalinism and post-Stalinism and, as Humphrey briefly acknowledges, the end of the Soviet period [Reid 1997; Robin 1992]. At the same time, once a broken taboo had been categorised as one or other type of offence, taboos carried distinctly different consequences. The article tends to understate the differences between, for instance, Stalinist and the milder post-Stalinist regulations, or between the penalties for hooliganism and the more serious charges of slander [*kleveta*] or anti-Soviet speech. In addition, it is worth re-emphasising the critical role played by terror as a context for self-censorship, as many of the examples cited in this connection relate very specifically to the Stalin era, with many of the more irrational beliefs about words fading in the post-1953 period.

Likewise, there remain to be examined further distinctions which the authorities often, albeit inconsistently, made between different types and perpetrators of linguistic infractions. For instance, there is a possible distinction between oral and written texts. The 'oral' taboos and their negotiations receive more attention here, for example, than the equally important issue of breaking taboos in written form, such as the distribution of anonymous *listovki*,<sup>1</sup> or the more serious threat posed by *samizdat* as a relatively well institutionalised channel through which to transmit taboo-breaking reflections on Soviet power. Reflecting on the fate of those responsible for this type of linguistic transgression, who were inevitably punished as anti-Soviet elements, it is possible to argue that written texts generally evoked a more punitive response than the taboo-breaking oral utterances, including *mat* and sometimes even the 'forbidden words' which so terrified their speakers if they happened to slip out.

In other words, the case for the intentionality of language may have applied more consistently over time to the written word than to its oral counterpart. This 'preferential treatment' accorded to the written word is perhaps no surprise given the prestige which 'high', literary culture enjoyed relative to 'popular speech' [*prostorechie*] in official Soviet culture, but the consistently harsh treatment meted out to intellectuals and dissidents who broke taboos in unauthorised *texts* presents the mirror image of this hierarchy and offers fruitful grounds for further study of taboo. Humphrey herself suggests that dissidents may not have seen their task as the breaking of taboos; certainly, their squeamishness about uncivilised language (the GULAG *matershchina*) suggests that they may have agreed with the authorities' distinction between the violation of Soviet standards, and more universal norms of civilisation, and may have been more

<sup>1</sup> Leaflets or flyers. [Editor].

competent to maintain the conceptual division between the two. The distinction between 'backward' and 'anti-Soviet' that emerges even more strongly from dissident activity suggests that the question of taboo was heavily imbricated in questions of class and the divisions between high and popular culture. As such, it demands further case-by-case study to illuminate the different kinds of taboo language, and the different consequences that they provoked, in the many sub-communities making up Soviet society.

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