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***NO LAUGHING MATTER: STATE  
REGIMENTATION OF UKRAINIAN HUMOR AND  
SATIRE UNDER HIGH STALINISM (1943-1953)***

The postwar ideological campaign for Soviet values in culture, which became known as the *Zhdanovshchina* after the name of its leading ideologue Andrei Zhdanov, was a complex phenomenon. Although the origins of this ideological counter-attack may be traced back to the last years of the war, with the first salvos being fired in Ukraine during the conference on propaganda in June 1946, the authorities launched the *Zhdanovshchina* as a countrywide campaign in mid-August of the same year. On August 21, *Pravda* published the Central Committee's decree "Regarding the Journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*," which was dated August 14 and accompanied by the text of Zhdanov's long speech on the same subject.<sup>2</sup> Even though these two documents condemned specific mistakes of two literary journals and in particular the errors of some writers who were published in these journals, they signaled the beginning of an ideological freeze. Starting with a denunciation of "ideologically harmful" and "apolitical" works of two prominent Leningrad writers, the satirist Mikhail Zoshchenko and the lyrical poet Anna Akhmatova, the *Zhdanovshchina* soon developed into a general re-assertion of ideological control. From the very beginning, the campaign against apoliticism included the struggle against "kowtowing to Western culture." This component eventually grew into a condemnation of both excessive complexity in culture – e.g., abstractionism in the arts, atonalism in music, psychologism in literature – and undue frivolity, as in jazz and other lighthearted entertainment. But the struggle against Western influences also fueled more sinister aspects of Stalinist culture, such as Russian chauvinism. Having run its course in culture, the Zhdanovite crusade triggered belated ideological purges in fields as removed from literature as biology and economics. After 1949, as a last echo of the *Zhdanovshchina*, for the first time in Soviet history, official pronounce-

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1. I would like to thank the journal's two anonymous readers—the first for his/her enthusiastic endorsement and the second for a longer review with helpful suggestions for improvements. Marta D. Olynyk kindly helped with the stylistic editing of my article.

2. *Pravda*, Aug. 21, 1946, pp. 1-3.

ments against “rootless cosmopolitans” allowed for public manifestations of anti-Semitism.<sup>3</sup>

Given the wide range of cultural processes involved in the *Zhdanovshchina*, one might think that its inauguration in August 1946 with an attack on a satirist and a lyrical poet was incidental. Thus, Evgeny Dobrenko suggests that charges against Akhmatova and Zoshchenko were “completely random”; Stalinist ideologues simply needed negative examples to start their campaign. Dobrenko further argues that Zoshchenko had long abandoned social critique in favor of harmless didactic satire. The unexpected publication of his work for children, “A Story of a Monkey” may have been a provocation providing Zhdanov with an example of anti-Soviet attitudes in literature.<sup>4</sup>

The present article, however, adopts as its starting point the proposal that the *Zhdanovshchina*'s most spectacular denunciations were not incidental. It argues that a look at contemporary attacks on satirists in Ukraine places the critique of Zoshchenko in its proper context – that of the discreet suppression of satire during Stalin's last decade. While Stalinist functionaries sought to hold back all satirical representations of the Soviet system, they were particularly wary of a dangerous connection between literary humor and street folklore. In the end, however, separating “negative” satire from “positive” humor proved difficult. Furthermore, some satirists seem to have been protected by their fame, which in turn depended on their relationship to popular humor.

In examining the role of laughter and joking in Stalinist culture, scholars may be tempted to interpret them after Mikhail Bakhtin, who saw the carnival as undermining the official culture's monopoly in the medieval world. For Bakhtin, who was writing his book on Rabelais during the Stalinist period and possibly intended it in part as a commentary on his own time, laughter is subversive: jokes and songs desacralize official symbols and break the taboos. Such an interpretation of laughter as resistance seems imminently applicable to unofficial folklore in the Stalinist USSR.<sup>5</sup> Yet, following Freud,

3. On the *Zhdanovshchina*, see Werner G. Hahn, *Postwar Soviet Politics: The Fall of Zhdanov and the Defeat of Moderation, 1946-53* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell Univ. Press, 1982); Iu. S. Aksenenko, “Poslevoennyi stalinizm: udar po intelligentsii,” *Kentavr*, no. 1 (1991): 80-89; Serhy Yekelchyk, “Celebrating the Soviet Present: The *Zhdanovshchina* Campaign in Ukrainian Literature and the Arts,” in Donald J. Raleigh, ed., *Provincial Landscapes: Local Dimensions of Soviet Power, 1917-1953* (Pittsburgh: Univ. of Pittsburgh Press, 2001), pp. 255-75.

4. Evgeny Dobrenko, “The Literature of the Zhdanov Era: Mentality, Mythology, Lexicon,” in Thomas Lahusen, ed., with Gene Kuperman, *Late Soviet Culture: From Perestroika to Novostroika* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1993), p. 116.

5. The Bakhtinian vision of subversive laughter is developed in M. M. Bakhtin, *Tvorchestvo Fransua Rable i narodnaia kultura spednevekovia i Renessansa* (Moscow: Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1965). On its applicability to unofficial culture under Stalin, see Sarah Davies, *Popular Opinion in Stalin's Russia: Terror, Propaganda and Dissent, 1934-1941* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1997), pp. 7-8. On Bakhtin's work as his implicit critique of Stalinism, see

other students of laughter understand joking as a social safety valve, a temporary escape into the realm of nonsense that eases the pressures of modern socialization. In this interpretation, laughter does not seek to overturn social order, but can actually reinforce it.<sup>6</sup> Anna Krylova's excellent article on Soviet and post-Soviet anecdote – the only attempt to apply this theory to Soviet underground folklore – concludes that the subversive function was predominant: although jokes were entertainers and social valves, they were first of all “a particular form of social resistance to the tendency of modern society to reduce subjects to passive receptacles of authoritative discourses” and “an attempt to break out of the official interpretive framework by creating a counter framework.”<sup>7</sup>

Unlike recent studies of unofficial humor during the Soviet Union's last decades, this article looks at the place of laughter in official culture of Stalin's time, albeit with an eye to its connection to popular joking. This article posits an ambiguous role for laughter in Stalinist culture that could function both as social safety valve and subverter of social order. Moreover, it suggests that Stalinist bureaucrats and satirists were aware of the dual nature of jokes, even if they did not use Bakhtinian and Freudian terms. For writers, working in the comic genre meant performing a delicate balancing act between these two functions of laughter, while the authorities constantly sought to move the genre in the direction of sanitized, safety-valve humor. Finally, the popularity of anecdotes and feuilletons apparently depended on their connection to folk humor – a connection jeopardizing the official sanitizing efforts and sometimes leading to accusations of nationalism against popular humorists.

### The unbearable lightness of satire

The end of the war put Soviet satirists in a difficult situation. For several years they had thrived on lampooning the Nazis, and a return to domestic topics was the last thing they wanted. The official satire of the 1930s had targeted foreign enemies, such as the Poles, the Japanese, and (until August 1939) the Germans, but it could also take aim at a clearly identifiable internal

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Katerina Clark and Michael Holquist, *Mikhail Bakhtin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard Univ. Press, 1984), p. 305.

6. See Sigmund Freud, *Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious*, trans. James Strachey (New York: Penguin, 1976); Mary Douglas, “Jokes,” in her *Implicit Meanings* (New York: Routledge, 1979), pp. 49-59.

7. Anna Krylova, “Saying ‘Lenin’ and Meaning ‘Party’: Subversion and Laughter in Soviet and Post-Soviet Society,” in Adele Marie Barker, ed., *Consuming Russia: Popular Culture, Sex, and Society since Gorbachev* (Durham, NC: Duke Univ. Press, 1999), p. 250. Also see Alexei Yurchak, “The Cynical Reason of Late Socialism: Power, Pretense, and the Anekdot,” *Public Culture*, 9, no. 2 (1997): 161-88.

foe, the “enemies of the people.” Arrogant bureaucrats, irresponsible collective farm managers, drunk drivers, coquettish women, and wayward husbands had been present in Stalinist satire, but they remained page-fillers rather than topics of the day. It is no wonder that satirists preferred an obvious external enemy to a painful search for serious internal subjects for their cartoons and feuilletons.

The Ukrainian republic’s “magazine of satire and humor,” *Perets* (The Pepper), fully reflected the difficult reorientation of postwar satire. During the war, the magazine targeted the Nazis and their alleged collaborators, the Ukrainian nationalists. In 1942, when all of Ukraine was under German occupation, special issues of *Perets* were smuggled there in the form of one-page leaflets.<sup>8</sup> With the liberation of the republic’s territory by the late fall of 1944, however, the transition to domestic subjects was seemingly inevitable. In fact, it did not happen until the fall of 1945, for journalists were clearly reluctant to abandon the ideological safety of war topics. The overwhelming majority of materials in the double issue, no. 5/6 for 1945, which was scheduled for March release but probably did not appear until May, is still devoted to ridiculing Hitler and the German army. But together with the next installment of Serhii Voskreksenko’s trademark humorous poems about Sergeant Ivan Rakhuba, the nebulous Ukrainian wisecracker commenting on the Germans’ last-ditch efforts, page four of this issue features Ievhen Krotevych’s feuilleton “Nightmares.” In the form of the narrator’s bad dream this bold short story attacked such recognizable realities of everyday life as bread salespersons shortchanging their customers, long lines to buy railway tickets, and building managers neglecting heating.<sup>9</sup> More innocent is Ostap Vyshnia’s feuilleton “How to Cook and Eat a Wild Duck Soup” written in the tradition of a classic situation comedy dealing with the subject of hunters who drink.<sup>10</sup> The last two pages feature condensed letters to the editor reporting on minor cases of mismanagement and bottlenecks – the restoration of a column that had existed before the war.

The search for safe subjects continued in nos. 7 and 9 for 1945 with Iukhym Martych’s situation-comedy humoresque “12 to 0” about a soccer game, and his feuilleton “Evening on the Water” about people skipping work to sunbathe on the Dnieper beach.<sup>11</sup> But no. 9 also included O. Koziurenko’s more audacious cartoon entitled “Difficult Task,” which portrays two concerned officials, one of whom says: “Before, we were not fulfilling the plan

8. *Perets*, no. 1 (1942).

9. Ievhen Krotevych, “Koshmary,” *ibid.*, no. 5-6 (1945): 4.

10. O. Vyshnia, “Iak varyty i isty sup iz dykoi kachky,” *ibid.*, p. 12.

11. Iukhym Martych, “12-0,” *ibid.*, no. 7 (1945): 3; idem, “Vechir na reidi,” *ibid.*, no. 9 (1945): 1.

and explaining this with the war. What will we refer to now?" Even more startling was a feuilleton by Ievhen Krych in no. 11/12, which pictured Kiev public markets as dangerous places dominated by speculators, thieves, drunks, fortune-tellers, and hooligans.<sup>12</sup> Yet the satirical repertoire was not entirely limited to a combination of serious social satire and harmless situation comedy. Issue no. 8 for 1945, which brought the news of the Victory in Europe, also indicated an external target specific to the republic, the émigré Ukrainian nationalists. One of the fake "legal notices" on p. 4 announced that Stepan Bandera was calling on Heinrich Himmler in the matter of a divorce hearing. Barely noticeable during the first postwar year, this topic would gain prominence once the Cold War heated up.

By mid-1946 *Perets* seems to have found its niche in Stalinist public discourse, which at the time stressed *bezkonfliktnost'*, or absence of major conflicts within the USSR. The magazine satirized minor shortcomings in economy and society, while allowing a certain dose of pure entertainment and situation comedy. Thus, cartoons in nos. 1-2, 3, and 4 for 1946 address the following subjects: drunk driving, salespeople wetting sugar to increase its weight, a secretary guarding her boss from visitors, dirty dishes in restaurants, and construction workers failing to fulfill their work norms. The cover of no. 12 is a good illustration of the scale of such satire. It shows a doctor recommending a course of mud bathing in a sanatorium to an apartment building manager. The manager answers, "But why? I can undergo this course without any travel, in the mud in our building's courtyard." Since such "social satire" was usually feeble, the magazine had to intersperse it with banal, if effective, anecdotes about conflicts between neighbors, the lack of acceptable bridegrooms, and a husband catching his wife with a lover, who turns out to be the husband's new boss.<sup>13</sup>

Political commentary was all but absent in *Perets* in the first year after the war. Soviet political life could not be satirized, nor did it lend itself easily to humorous endorsement. The magazine's cartoonists made two lame attempts to mark the national elections of February 1946, the first major political event in the postwar Soviet Union. The cover of no. 1/2 for 1946 featured a group of voters looking at a stand hung with the portraits of some candidates: soldiers, scholars, and female Stakhanovites. An explanatory line plays on the multiple meanings of the Ukrainian word *velykyi* and reads, "A great people have a wide choice (*U velykoho naroda velykyi vybir*)."<sup>14</sup> This cartoon would seem to be a success, if it were not for the obvious fact that Soviet

12. O. Koziurenko, "Vazhke zavdannia," *ibid.*, no. 9 (1945): 1; Ievhen Krych, "U Kyievi na rynochku," *ibid.*, no. 11-12 (1945): 5.

13. Ihor Muratov, "Perevelysia zhenykh," *Perets*, no. 3 (1946): 3; Petro Lubensky, "Strashna pomsta," *ibid.*, no. 4 (1946): 2; idem, "Vidstale pochutnia," *ibid.*, no. 11 (1946): 5.

Ukrainian voters did not have any choice at all: the candidates were not competing against each other, as all of them had been pre-approved by the party bureaucracy and were running in single-candidate election campaigns. K. Ahnit's cartoon in the same issue tries to make the reader smile about the highly regimented procedure of checking the voters' lists before the elections. It portrays a boy saying to his father before the last elections in 1937: "Look, Dad, you're on the list!" and, eight years later, an aged father saying to his son, a decorated war veteran, "Look, son, you're on the list!"<sup>14</sup> The nature of Stalinist elections left the cartoonist precious little room for a smile – he did not dare show the process of voting – but even this cartoon in a satirical journal remains an isolated attempt at political commentary.

The first of the two May issues for 1946 shows just how nostalgic satirists were for the war period, when they could safely mock an external foe. To mark the first anniversary of Victory Day, the editors filled the entire magazine with feuilletons and cartoons ridiculing the failed Nazi crusade against the Soviet Union. The cover was the only signal that this issue appeared in 1946. In one of the first reflections of the Cold War in Soviet satire, the cover illustration entitled "The Thunder of Victory" pictured two fat "capitalists" being startled by a fountain of fiery sparks from a restored Soviet steel mill. "A salute again?" asks one of them incredulously.

If M. Dolenko's dull story about defective alarm clocks in no. 7 for 1946 exemplifies the prevalent variety of safe satire, then the cover of no. 11, an example of genuinely funny social commentary, is a rare break-through. The large cartoon shows a traveling lecturer named Zapozchenko (literally, Borrow-man) in shock, as a railway-station thief runs away with his suitcase full of quotations. The poster on the wall advertises Zapozchenko's lecture on fly breeding. In addition to noting the postwar epidemic of theft, this picture ridicules the excesses of the political-education system, which forced the citizenry to listen to thousands of lectures about politics, economy, and the natural sciences. Lecturers frequently fashioned their texts almost entirely out of quotations from ideological authorities. A critique of dogmatism and obscure topics was quite in line with the party's stated intent to make public lectures more relevant to their listeners, but where did one draw the line between ridiculing the deficiencies of the public lecture system and mocking the unpopular system itself?

Archival documents from early 1946 nevertheless show that Ukraine's ideologues were not particularly concerned with the direction of the magazine's satire. Rather, the apparatus of the CP(b)U<sup>15</sup> Central Committee worried about printing problems. Due to insufficient and outdated printing

14. K. Ahnit, "After 8 Years," *ibid.*, no. 1-2 (1946): 2.

15. CP(b)U is an acronym for the Communist Party (Bolshevik) of Ukraine.

equipment, throughout 1946 *Perets* was typically four to five months behind schedule, an enormous delay for a biweekly magazine. In addition, a special report forwarded to Central Committee secretary Demian Korotchenko stressed that regular newsprint was unacceptable for a color magazine with numerous illustrations.<sup>16</sup> *Perets* was in fact printed in black-and-white, with one or two other colors occasionally added. When the editor could secure better-quality paper and inks, the magazine changed its appearance completely, if only temporarily. Thus, during 1945 and the first six months of 1946, just two issues used multiple colors: no. 13 for 1945 and no. 12 for 1946. In the latter case, a report to Korotchenko may have been helpful in securing the supplies.

The attack on *Perets* started unexpectedly. As the Soviet reading public was digesting the first official announcements of the *Zhdanovshchina*, which had appeared in *Pravda* on August 21, 1946, on August 24 the authoritative newspaper struck again with a short, unsigned review entitled "About One Magazine's Tasteless Writings." Like many other Stalinist ideological pronouncements, this editorial could be read on many levels. On the surface its author condemned the lack of contemporary, socially significant subjects in *Perets*, accusing the magazine of "banality and scoffing": "It is as if the authors of *Perets* had agreed not to react to the important events in their republic's life; instead, they despondently and monotonously rumble about silver-fox fur coats, old husbands, and incidents at a dacha, portraying Soviet people as stupid and malicious philistines."<sup>17</sup> If, however, one looks at *Pravda*'s examples, the editorial's message emerges in a different light. The party paper claimed that publications in *Perets* were apolitical and displayed "no connection whatsoever to the present and the topics of the day." But among its many examples only two support the charge of detachment from reality. Petro Lubensky's story about a husband catching his wife with a lover is mentioned as a kind of anecdote one would find in nineteenth-century provincial journals, while the caricature of a building manager who does not have to travel in order to take a mud-bathing course is labeled as "trite." Comic situations presented in both of these humoresques are universal, although the contemporary reader no doubt perceived them as portrayals of a Soviet apartment manager and a Stalinist bureaucrat discovering that the lover he has caught is in fact his new supervisor.

Other examples were even less straightforward. *Pravda* saw as banal the following short anecdote: "Semen Netulydohubysalo [literally, 'do not touch the lard to your lips.' – S.Y.] was expelled from the collective farm because

16. Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv hromadskykh obiednan Ukraine (TsDAHO), fond 1, op. 23, sprava 2795, arkushii 1-3, 22.

17. *Pravda*, Aug. 24, 1946, p. 3.

he was sneezing while a representative from the district center was giving a speech.” Yet this sentence is rich in allusions to the nebulous accusations that flourished during the Terror, Soviet bureaucrats’ speech mania, and the post-war campaign to expel so-called unproductive elements from collective farms. One could even read in the character’s family name a muted reference to the famine of 1946. In similar vein, *Pravda* attacked M. Kutsenko’s satirical poem “An Accountant’s Death-Bed Letter.” One of only a handful of genuinely funny poetic works that appeared in the magazine, this short poem imitates Taras Shevchenko’s famous “Testament” (1845), the work that most literate Ukrainians knew by heart. Far from being too general and trite, Kutsenko lampoons the excessive paperwork created by Soviet bureaucrats. His character, an accountant, asks: “When I bite the dust, bury / Me among the books / And cover my grave / With all the papers.” The poem ends with a request that the annual report be used in lieu of a tombstone.<sup>18</sup> Accusations of banality and apoliticism being inapplicable here, *Pravda* denounced the poem as “a blasphemy, a desecration of the Ukrainian people’s sacrosanct text.”

The critique of a cartoon that had appeared on the cover of no. 7 for 1945 carried home the party’s ideological message. O. Koziurenko’s caricature depicted a close-up of an unshaved tractor driver asleep at work. Flies sit on his face, which does not show a trace of intelligence, while a harrow sits abandoned in a field. *Pravda* called this sketch “an aberrant lampoon of the Soviet people.” In other words, what specifically upset the Stalinist ideologues was the satire directed against their system and society, rather than trite plots and the lack of contemporary topics. Subsequent developments in Ukrainian satire would confirm that contemporaries read the Kremlin’s pronouncements this way and took the hint.

The immediate reaction in Ukraine, meanwhile, included a writers’ conference on August 27 and 28 to discuss *Pravda*’s recent ideological articles. The conference’s resolution instantly transformed Moscow’s charges of banality into something more sinister: “Having forgotten the honorable tasks of Soviet satire, the editors of the magazine *Perets* converted their periodical into an arena for irresponsible and harmful ripostes by some ‘humorists’ who are guided by tastelessness, apoliticism, and philistinism.”<sup>19</sup> There followed a decree of the CP(b)U Central Committee about *Perets* (September 1946) that once again condemned what was now seen as “ideologically-harmful writings and tasteless exercises by humorists with low standards.” In line with *Pravda*’s original critique but not with the campaign’s general spirit, Ukrainian party functionaries declared the need for “sharp satire” that would “casti-

18. M. Kutsenko, “Peredsmertnyi lyst bukhaltera,” *Perets*, no. 11 (1946): 3.

19. Tsentralnyi derzhavnyi arkhiv-muzei literatury i mystetstva Ukrayiny (TsDAMLM), f. 590, op. 1, spr. 36, ark. 8.

gate the deficiencies impeding the fulfillment of the Five-Year Plan." In a more constructive vein, the decree suggested "better coverage of the work and everyday life of the working class, collective farmers, and Soviet intelligentsia."<sup>20</sup>

To ensure the radical change in the magazine's direction, the authorities replaced its editor-in-chief M. Karpov with a young journalist named Fedir Makivchuk. As Makivchuk recalled decades later, he was slightly apprehensive about his new appointment because he had never worked in the genre of satire, having been the editor of the republican *Komsomol* paper, *Molod Ukrayny*. The young editor quailed before such celebrated, if politically unreliable, satirists as Ostap Vyshnia.<sup>21</sup> Makivchuk's transfer also meant the end of his promising career in party journalism. Makivchuk managed to adapt, eventually becoming a leading satirist himself, but his role during the late 1940s was primarily that of a political editor. Immediately after his appointment, Makivchuk began implementing his vision of what under High Stalinism constituted acceptable laughter.

At a conference at the CP(b)U Central Committee in October 1948, he thus summarized his main accomplishment during his two years as editor: "We began restructuring the magazine *Perets* by turning the edge of satire and humor against the warmongers and the so-called bourgeois 'culture' of Western Europe. During the last two years, no less than 60 percent of the magazine's space was devoted to these topics."<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the emergence of the Cold War as a major subject in the Soviet press was a welcome change for Makivchuk and the magazine's authors, who could again concentrate on ridiculing the external enemy, although this topic never became quite as dominant as the lampooning of the Nazis. No. 14 for 1946, the first issue that Makivchuk signed as the new editor-in-chief, featured a cartoon portraying Greek democracy as a woman in the clutches of the British lion, as well as short satirical sketches about Churchill; the head of the Polish Peasant Party, Stanisław Mikołajczik; and the Greek king. The back cover pictured evil-looking "capitalists" suddenly spotting a noose above the table on which they have spread their war maps. The cover of no. 17/18 was even more straightforward with its depiction of the turning globe throwing off kings and capitalists, together with swastikas and the Ukrainian nationalists' tridents. In addition to cartoons on rising unemployment in the USA and the Western deliver-

20. *Radianska Ukraina*, Sept. 27, 1946, p. 1 and Iu. Iu. Kondufor, ed., *Kulturne budivnytstvo v Ukrainskii RSR: cherven 1941-1950: zbirnyk dokumentiv i materialiv* (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1989), pp. 263-65.

21. Fedir Makivchuk, "Velykyi humorist moimy ochyma i moim sertsem," in V. O. Hubenko-Masluchenko and A. F. Zhuravsky, eds., *Pro Ostapa Vyshniu: Spohady* (Kiev: Radianskyi pysmennyk, 1989), p. 38.

22. TsDAHOU, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 1311, ark. 20.

ies of tanks to the Kuomintang, this issue included a humorless editorial survey of the international situation and the first installment of the poet Andrii Malyshko's series of reports about his trip to the USA. In this and subsequent articles, Malyshko concentrated on denunciations of American mass culture.<sup>23</sup> The magazine's critique of the West reached its high point with a poster-size cartoon on pages 3 and 4 of no. 23/24 (1946), which attempted to include every social ill and militaristic sin of capitalism.

The reformed *Perets* also stressed its active political position by attacking the Ukrainian nationalists, both the émigrés and their alleged sympathizers in Ukraine. Significantly, after the war's end, the very real nationalist underground in Western Ukraine was no longer considered an acceptable subject for satire. In 1945 Ostap Vyshnia could lampoon the nationalist insurgents in his much-lauded collection *An Independent Hole*,<sup>24</sup> but by 1946 the state discouraged any discussion of this problem in the press. The republic's satirists, however, were expected to condemn Ukrainian nationalism in general and its émigré exponents in particular. In addition, during the *Zhdanovshchina* the authorities also uncovered "nationalist deviations" in contemporary Ukrainian scholarship and culture. Makivchuk's *Perets* joined the anti-nationalist crusade by publishing in its first issue a feuilleton by Ostap Vyshnia, "An Insane Concept," which satirized the views of Mykhailo Hrushevsky, the greatest nationalist historian of Ukraine, who died in 1934.<sup>25</sup> The next issue contained a cartoon by K. Ahnit of a Ukrainian artist named Khoma Netudyhliad (literally, "Looking the wrong way"), who is painting antique pottery and a Cossack moustache, with his back turned to new Soviet factories. A cartoon by K. Zaruba presented two onlookers surprised to see a young Ukrainian historian with a long, gray beard. One of them explains that the beard is Hrushevsky's.<sup>26</sup> As for Ukrainian émigrés, they are lampooned in a caricature published on the back cover of no. 21/22, depicting DP camps in Western Europe as foul anti-Soviet places, where war criminals and venal journalists offered their services to foreign intelligence services.

*Perets* did not completely eliminate its satire on inefficient bureaucrats, but it became rare, and negative characters were usually opposed, even in a cartoon, by positive ones. For instance, a caricature on p. 2 of no. 15/16 pictures a factory director in conversation with the righteous-looking head of the party committee, who presumably went public with his criticism of the man-

23. "Shcho my maiemo na sohodnishnii den," *Perets*, no. 17-18 (1946): 1; Andrii Malyshko, "Ol-rait!" *ibid.*: 2; idem, "Prohresyvne kabare," *ibid.*, no. 21-22 (1946): 2.

24. See Ostap Vyshnia, *Samostiina dyrka* (Kiev: Radianska Ukraina, 1945). The lead feuilleton of the collection, "The Ukrainian-German Nationalist Independent Hole," was building on the press report about one nationalist hideout having been camouflaged as a toilet.

25. Ostap Vyshnia, "Kontseptsia nesopovna rozumu," *Perets*, no. 14 (1946): 3.

26. *Ibid.*, no. 15-16 (1946): 3-4.

agement. The director says, "Why wash our dirty linen in public?" and the party organizer replies, "So that our linen will become clean, comrade director." Similarly, in O. Koziurenko's cartoon on p. 1 of no. 21/22, a manager is giving a speech about "obstacles beyond his control," which prevented his organization from fulfilling the annual plan, but one worker tells another that the manager himself is the main "obstacle."

In following the party directive, the new *Perets* also made a point of stepping up the positive coverage of events in Ukraine. Under the caption "Those Who Are Demobilized are Now Mobilized [for Labor]," the cover of no. 14 shows soldiers returning home and taking up jobs in industry. Equally humorless is the cover of no. 15/16, featuring two almost identical pictures: a train delivering tanks and decorated with the slogan "To Soviet Ukraine from the Russian People" and, after the war, a train under the same slogan bringing in tractors. In the same spirit of straightforward political propaganda with no trace of humor, the cover of no. 21/22 pictures a smiling skier with a small placard on his sweater reading "Everyone to the voting stations!" The cover of no. 23/24 was simply a political poster typical of the reconstruction period – a worker turning a knife-switch, with the massive dam of the Dnieper hydroelectric station in the background. The only attempt to elicit a smile while talking about the Soviet achievements is found in no. 17/18, which published a collection of friendly jests glorifying famous Ukrainian Stakhanovites.<sup>27</sup> The magazine's obvious difficulty in celebrating Soviet life is worth noting, but we should now return to the final component of Makivchuk's renewal plan.

Although the issues for 1946 do not fully reflect this last ingredient of the new editor's recipe for political reliability, *Perets* moved energetically to increase the number of readers' letters. This could be achieved by printing – after careful investigation – more letters to the editor and by forcing the local authorities to take action on others. Both tasks required an increased staff and extensive correspondence with various administrative bodies, but Makivchuk obviously thought that the political benefits far outweighed the costs. The number of letters quickly skyrocketed from 1,200 in 1946 to 6,500 in 1947 to 17,350 in 1949.<sup>28</sup> After some literary editing, *Perets* published only a dozen letters or fewer in each issue. But in most cases the magazine requested official replies from the local authorities, which made the public-at-large see the satirical magazine as an official institution accepting petitions. Most letters dealt with minor cases of everyday bottlenecks and small injustices, and were thus politically "safe." At the same time, processing letters allowed *Perets* both to claim an active role in socialist construction and to increase its popu-

27. *Ibid.*, no. 17-18 (1946): 3-4.

28. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 1311, ark. 21; TsDAMLM, f. 668, op. 1, spr. 232, ark. 1.

larity with readers. In late 1948 Makivchuk could boast that the print run of 120,000 was being sold out instantly.<sup>29</sup> All in all, the reforms of 1946 worked – despite the fact that the new *Perets* laughed primarily at foreign enemies, had trouble smiling at Soviet successes, and was increasingly turning into a bureaucratic letter-processing machine.

### **Ukrainian laughter, Soviet-style**

If the critique of *Perets* was indicative of the new official attitude to satire in general, other aspects of the *Zhdanovshchina* in the Ukrainian republic brought to the foreground the issue of language and tropes in Soviet satire, as well as the possible connection between official and unofficial humor.

At the time, Ostap Vyshnia (1889-1956) was the recognized dean of Ukrainian satirists. Born Pavlo Hubenko, Vyshnia had less than a spotless biography. He began publishing during the revolution in anti-Bolshevik Ukrainian newspapers; his popularity peaked during the Ukrainization campaign of the 1920s, but by the early 1930s official critics were denouncing him as a “kulak writer.” His trademark lower-class narrator, who – like most peasants in Eastern Ukraine – spoke ungrammatical Ukrainian peppered with Russian words, was seen as “backward-looking” and reactionary. Given Vyshnia’s frequent reliance on folk humor and situation comedy, critics bemoaned his fame as an indication of the masses’ undeveloped literary taste.<sup>30</sup> During the 1933 purge of the Ukrainian intelligentsia, Vyshnia was arrested and sentenced to ten years’ hard labor for his alleged participation in a conspiracy to assassinate Pavel Postyshev, the second secretary of the CP(b)U.<sup>31</sup> Thanks to his pre-revolutionary training as a medical assistant and his writing talents, Vyshnia managed to survive in the GULag. In October 1943, when the Red Army was preparing to capture Kiev, the Ukrainian party leader Nikita Khrushchev ordered a list to be prepared of imprisoned intellectuals who might be useful during the reconstruction. Only a few actually returned from their exile settlements; Vyshnia, who was nearing the end of his term, was apparently the only person released from the GULag.<sup>32</sup> (During the war, the authorities handed down new, arbitrary sentences to most political prisoners who had completed their initial terms.)

29. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 1311, ark. 23.

30. Fedir Makivchuk, “Ostap Vyshnia,” in Ostap Vyshnia, *Tvory v semy tomakh* (Kiev: Derzhlitydav Ukrayny, 1963), 1: 10.

31. I. V. Zub, *Ostap Vyshnia: rysy tvorchoi individualnosti* (Kiev: Naukova dumka, 1991), p. 25.

32. See TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 23, spr. 699, ark. 1-15; Ju. Aksiutin and D. Tabachnyk, “Ukrainskyi synodik Khushchova,” in O. I. Sydorenko and D. V. Tabachnyk, eds., *Represovane “vidrodzhennia”* (Kiev: Ukraina, 1993), pp. 28-52.

Vyshnia marked his return to literary work with a feuilleton entitled “Antiaircraft Gun,” which was published in February 1944 in the Ukrainian republic’s main newspaper, *Radianska Ukraina*. Building on the huge success of this story, he quickly produced dozens of other sketches ridiculing the Germans and the Ukrainian nationalists. By the war’s end, Vyshnia had fully re-established himself as the republic’s leading satirical writer, but his language and tropes had not changed significantly. Even the intensely political “Antiaircraft Gun” probably owed much of its success to the return of Vyshnia’s familiar peasant narrator and the use of slapstick comedy. In fact, the last part of the story describes in great detail Grandpa Svyryd’s past “battles” with his late wife, which had prepared him for killing German soldiers.<sup>33</sup>

An obvious reliance on Ukrainian folk humor defined Vyshnia’s style no less than his narrator’s lower-class dialect and tongue-in-cheek persona. “Vyshnia is not an Englishman or Frenchman, nor is he Russian or Belarusian. Vyshnia is Ukrainian,” wrote approvingly the writer Iurii Smolych in *Radianska Ukraina* in April 1945.<sup>34</sup> The satirist’s clear identification with the national tradition guaranteed his unparalleled popularity among the masses, but it also spelled trouble in the period when the authorities sought to promote internationalism over the national form. As an official writer living under Stalinist rule, Vyshnia may have been a bit too close to the sometimes unruly urban and rural folklore. Later scholars would argue that Vyshnia worked hard to imitate popular speech.<sup>35</sup> Contemporaries left many descriptions of his creative method. The secret of Vyshnia’s popularity, wrote Petro Panch, “was very simple – it consisted of [his] unity with the people.” Makivchuk recalled that Vyshnia had a “fantastic ear for language, a rare sensitivity for words.” Iurii Burliai describes how Vyshnia “tested” new sentences by reading them aloud. If a word did not sound as though it belonged to popular speech, he would immediately replace it.<sup>36</sup> All in all, Vyshnia intensely studied and replicated the dialect of lower-class Ukrainians, or more precisely what Roland Barthes would call a *sociolect* within a national language. But by immersing himself in the lower-class sociolect, Vyshnia must have found it increasingly difficult to censor it consciously and maintain cultural distance from it. Also, unlike most writers of Stalin’s time, Vyshnia’s financial wellbeing depended primarily on the success of his public readings

33. Ostap Vyshnia, “Zenitka,” in his *Tvory v semy tomakh*, 5: 7-10.

34. *Radianska Ukraina*, April 11, 1945, p. 3.

35. Zub, *Ostap Vyshnia*, pp. 32-33; V. M. Rusanivsky, *Istoriia ukrainskoi literaturnoi movy*, 2nd ed. (Kiev: ArtEk, 2002), pp. 340-41.

36. Petro Panch, “Slozy na ochakh humorysta,” in I. M. Duz, ed., *Zhyyyi Ostap Vyshnia: Zbirnyk spohadiv pro pysmennyyka* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1966), p. 88; Fedir Makivchuk, “Velykyi humorist,” p. 38; Iuri Burliai, “Svyyi holub ukrainskoho humoru,” in Hubenko-Masliuchenko and Zhuravsky, *Pro Osiapa Vyshniu*, p. 201.

rather than on state awards or the print run of his books. His sketches were thus connected to folk humor in a circular way – they borrowed the language and tropes from modern folklore, and their success relied on the joke's resonance with the popular humor of the time. In such a circular interaction with his audiences Vyshnia could not help but violate the rules of official literary discourse on a frequent basis. A persistent and crude gender stereotyping is only one example, if not the most obvious one, of popular prejudices creeping into the satirist's work. Another transgression landed Vyshnia in hot water during the *Zhdanovshchina*.

Stalinist functionaries in Ukraine hardly needed Vyshnia to stumble in order to begin their witch-hunt. As demonstrated earlier, satire had been an early victim of the Zhdanovite campaign that led to the re-definition of the genre's rules of engagement. Like Zoshchenko in Leningrad, Vyshnia, the pre-eminent Ukrainian satirist with a compromising biography, was a natural choice for denunciation. The ideologues simply needed a pretext for their attack, and they found one on the very day that the founding documents of the *Zhdanovshchina* appeared in *Pravda*.

By mid-1946, in addition to his many public readings and publications elsewhere, Vyshnia had a regular column in *Radianska Ukraina*. His feuilletons usually, but not always, built on the reader's letters about various problems of everyday life, sometimes touching upon larger social issues. For instance, in April 1946, in a single column Vyshnia ridiculed office clerks' widespread failure to greet visitors and the stampede during the boarding of (rare) streetcars.<sup>37</sup> In June he twice addressed the abuses in assigning rooms and apartments to citizens. In July the satirist criticized collective farms for delays in distributing bread rations to their members, and lambasted Kievan cinemas for shadowy deals in distributing tickets.<sup>38</sup> During August, the month when Zhdanov inaugurated the campaign for ideological purity, Vyshnia published three feuilletons in *Radianska Ukraina*. The first, on August 9, was a harmless piece ridiculing the lack of politeness and ceremony during marriage registration. It was the third story that immediately created a stir.

On August 21, 1946, the same day that *Pravda* published Zhdanov's speech about the journals *Zvezda* and *Leningrad*, *Radianska Ukraina* carried Vyshnia's feuilleton "Allow Me to Err." Written with the best political intentions in mind, this piece was conceived as a reaction to a recent incident at the republican Writers' Union, when the writers Iakiv Horodsky and Petro Panch requested that ideological controls be somewhat loosened. Horodsky had reportedly blustered that "Pushkin did not submit his works for anyone's approval," while Panch suggested, "Give us the right to err, and our works

37. *Radianska Ukraina*, April 14, 1946, p. 3.

38. *Ibid.*, June 16, 1946, p. 4; June 30, 1946, p. 3; July 21, 1946, p. 4.

will not be as boring as they often are.”<sup>39</sup> Intended to lampoon these two courageous writers, Vyshnia’s sketch did not turn out to be his finest work. It depicted a writer having difficulty in coming up with a subject for his next novel and asking “one knowledgeable comrade” for permission to err. Not having received a clear rebuttal, the writer heads home and creates an absurd novel about a male contemporary who gets pregnant.<sup>40</sup>

What offended some readers, however, was one sentence describing the nebulous novel’s predictability after the first chapter: “To some degree it was already clear who had spent the war at the front and who in Ferghana or Tashkent, who will return to rebuild and reconstruct and who to sell beer or soda on tap and fight for apartments.” This example clearly demonstrates the intimate connection between Vyshnia’s satire and unofficial folk culture, for its offence was obvious only to those familiar with contemporary street humor with its cynicism and prejudices. Neither Stalinist newspapers nor the official literature offered any explanation as to who those people were allegedly returning to Ukraine from Soviet Asia to sell beer or soda and to demand the return of their apartments. Unofficial folklore did. Within days *Pravda* started receiving letters protesting Vyshnia’s anti-Semitism. According to the war veteran M. B. Vashits, the feuilleton reflected the views of Kievan hooligans who teased the returning Jews as “Tashkentians” and asked decorated Jewish veterans whether they had bought their medals in Tashkent, and invalids whether they had lost their limbs by falling under a streetcar in Tashkent. Vyshnia’s text also echoed the popular belief that there were “no Jews at the factories,” since most of them were speculators selling drinks on tap. In addition, Vyshnia’s statement resonated with those unhappy Kievans who had usurped vacant apartments during the war and were now displeased to see their lawful (and often Jewish) tenants returning from Soviet Asia to claim their living space.<sup>41</sup> In addition to several more letters from the readers who were ethnic Jews, *Pravda* received similar protests from people with Slavic surnames and one petition signed by five Kievans of Jewish, Ukrainian, and Russian nationalities: Abramovich, Popryshchenko, Pryiemsky, Avvakumov, and Livshits.<sup>42</sup>

Although their works hardly reflected familiarity with street folklore, members of the Writers’ Union also did not miss the allusion in Vyshnia’s story, all the more so since in the wake of Zhdanov’s attack on Zoshchenko they needed a similar sin-offering in Ukraine. During a writers’ party meeting on August 26, Iakiv Horodsky was allowed to expiate his earlier transgres-

39. As quoted by D. Moroz, *ibid.*, Aug. 18, 1946, p. 3.

40. *Radianska Ukraina*, Aug. 21, 1946, p. 3.

41. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 23, spr. 2812, ark. 2-5 overleaf.

42. *Ibid.*, ark. 1-17. The letter of five is on ark. 17.

sion by attacking Vyshnia: "This is how they say it at a bazaar, 'See! They arrived from Tashkent.' This is said of a certain nationality, and I do not believe that Vyshnia wanted all Jews to have stayed [in Kiev] and all of them to have perished in Babi Yar."<sup>43</sup> The attack on the satirist continued during the ideological conference of all Kievan writers on August 27-28, which featured a major speech by the secretary for ideology of the CP(b)U Central Committee, Kost Lytvyn. This time it was the poet Leonid Pervomaisky who attacked Vyshnia: "Exactly what did Vyshnia mean? Did he not realize that he became the mouthpiece of those very recognizable Kievan speculators who were brought up in the atmosphere of free trade during the German occupation – those Ukrainian obscurantists (*okhotnoriaadtsy*) who are hostile to the people saved by the Red Army from Babi Yar."<sup>44</sup>

The real roots of popular anti-Semitism under Stalin were, of course, much more complex. This phenomenon had deep historical and cultural foundations, but it was also fueled by misguided protests against the political and social system allegedly privileging the Jews. In addition, anti-Semitic remarks were perhaps the only form of (perverted) social criticism that the Stalinist regime tolerated to some degree – and, beginning in the late 1940s, even encouraged. Luckily for Vyshnia, anti-Semitism was thus a minor sin compared to kowtowing to the West or apoliticism.

Pervomaisky did discover another political error in Vyshnia's previous feuilleton in *Radianska Ukraina* in which the narrator gets smacked with a sun umbrella on a Kievan beach, and one rib gets stuck in his trunks. The offender then demands the rib back, yelling, "This is a Japanese umbrella! What did I spill my blood for?"<sup>45</sup> Pervomaisky tried to present this passage, no doubt also borrowed from city folklore, as ridiculing veterans of the war against Japan.<sup>46</sup> But this offence was apparently too insignificant to merit a new round of criticism.

In the end, Vyshnia suffered harsh criticism at several meetings and underwent an unpleasant interview at the Ukrainian Central Committee,<sup>47</sup> but was allowed to continue publishing. Moreover, he remained on the editorial board of *Perets*. On August 29 *Pravda* carried a short editorial note entitled "A Mistaken Publication in *Radianska Ukraina*." Calling Vyshnia's feuilleton "Allow Me to Err" confusing, the author of the note declares that the Ukrainian satirists had not suitably condemned those writers who had spoken out in favor of ideological laxity. As an aside, the editor also notes, "The au-

43. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 513, ark. 75.

44. *Ibid.*, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 515, ark. 8-9; TsDAMLM, f. 590, op. 1, spr. 36, ark. 62-3.

45. *Radianska Ukraina*, 14 August 1946, p. 3.

46. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 515, ark. 9.

47. *Ibid.*, op. 23, spr. 2812, ark. 13.

thor writes mockingly about those Soviet people who in 1941, under the threat of German occupation, had been evacuated to the eastern regions of the Soviet Union. Why, on what grounds did the author choose these people as the target for his senseless jokes?"<sup>48</sup> For those with inside knowledge of the controversy, it was a subtle signal that anti-Semitic overtones in unofficial folklore were not (at least, not yet) allowed in the official press.

While Vyshnia escaped unscathed, party functionaries used the occasion to spell out their general message to the satirists. The resolution of the Kievan writers' meeting accused Vyshnia of "apoliticism and the harmful distortion of Soviet life."<sup>49</sup> But the resolution found these same mistakes in *Perets* in general. The meeting's participants criticized other Ukrainian satirists, in particular Iurii Mokriiev, who in his short story "A Salute of Laughter" purportedly portrayed all Red Army soldiers as drunks and idiots, and in "Fifochka from Lubny" blackened Soviet women by depicting a gold-digger accepting valuable gifts from as many returning veteran "fiancés" as possible.<sup>50</sup> In addition to a more specific message sent by the Vyshnia incident – namely, maintaining distance from unofficial folklore – there was a more general signal. Quite in line with the essence of their simultaneous attack on *Perets*, Stalinist ideologues were warning satirists to cut down on social critique, which could be perceived as an intentional distortion of Soviet realities.

In the Ukrainian and Russian cultures, there is a clear distinction between the notion of unfriendly, confrontational "satire" and harmless, friendly "humor." *Perets*, for instance, was supposed to combine both elements, having been designated as the "magazine of satire and humor." After 1946, however, the authorities indicated their preference for humor in portrayals of Soviet life. Satire was not banned or limited to foreign topics, but its share in the official laughter culture was to decline. In his presidential address to the Second Congress of the Union of Soviet Ukrainian Writers in December 1948, Oleksandr Korniichuk emphasized the welcome change in Ukrainian satire. He said,

At last, comrades, young forces enter the humor genre. Our respected and distinguished humorist Ostap Vyshnia today has highly talented colleagues in the person of Dmytro Bilous and, especially, Stepan Oliinyk – this very gifted young humorist, who can so skillfully combine murderous satire, which he uses in writing about negative phenomena, with warm and lyrical humor, which he uses when describing our Soviet people. Under Stepan Oliinyk's pen the genre of humor acquires new di-

48. *Pravda*, Aug. 29, 1946, p. 3.

49. TsDAMLM, f. 590, op. 1, spr. 36, ark. 3; *Radianska Ukraina*, Sept. 5, 1946, p. 3.

50. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 515, ark. 49-51, 99.

mensions. Most of his works are emotional narratives about the deeds of today that have a warm humoristic coloring.<sup>51</sup>

The promotion of “positive,” openly didactic humor paralleled other contemporary processes in Stalinist literature, most notably the forced optimism of the postwar decade, when so-called *lakirovka* or “glossing-over” became the litterateurs’ primary method of depicting their society. But perhaps Korniichuk was likewise engaged in a *lakirovka* of his own, glossing over the difficulties in redefining Ukrainian laughter?

### Who had the last laugh

One problem with giving important ideological lessons in the republics was the need to recap them at an all-Union level. In the wake of Zoshchenko’s affair, *Pravda*’s short editorial about *Perets* signaled the Stalinist authorities’ new take on laughter, but serious administrative measures were instituted only in Ukraine. Another lesson, this time in Moscow, followed in 1948, which confirmed the direction of ideological evolution. In September 1948 the Soviet party leadership adopted a resolution chastising *Krokodil*, the central “journal of satire and humor,” for exactly the same sins that had been found in the Ukrainian *Perets* two years earlier. The magazine’s editorial board had allegedly “isolated itself from reality” and had “not been sufficiently demanding regarding the artistic level of feuilletons, stories, verses, and cartoons.”<sup>52</sup>

While the Kremlin apparently wanted to reiterate its earlier message about the new role of satire and humor in a Stalinist society, the critique of *Krokodil* automatically led to the investigation of similar magazines in the republics, including the unfortunate *Perets*. During this audit it became abundantly clear that Korniichuk’s rosy picture of Ukrainian humor was incomplete, to put it mildly. At a special conference at the CP(b)U Central Committee on October 28, 1948, party ideologues and censors aired their persistent frustration with *Perets*. Their complaints provided an excellent commentary on the relevant party decrees, which were couched in a more obscure ideological language. I. Kyforenko began by claiming that the magazine’s legitimate attacks on red tape, pilfering, and the lack of culture “are lost among the mass of petty, atypical, and vulgar representations of our present.” His subsequent remarks reveal that the functionary was concerned in particular with the images of Stalinist bureaucracy. Kyforenko felt that, in *Perets*, “management and office workers in general are presented as callous bureaucrats, who scoff

51. *Ibid.*, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 1534, ark. 11.

52. *Kultura i zhizn*, Sept. 11, 1948, p. 1.

at Soviet people, and as idlers, spongers, toadies, and grabbers.”<sup>53</sup> The party official must have realized that such satires resonated well with the mass of readership, hence his longing for a positive approach: “Most materials deal with negative topics. This is a significant shortcoming of the magazine. Why should they not publish feuilletons and essays on positive subjects that would be filled with warm, heartfelt humor?”<sup>54</sup>

The head censor of periodicals, Comrade Minchin, Ph.D., treated the conference participants to a scholarly lecture about positive humor. He agitated for a “new type of a feuilleton, where instead of sarcasm, anger or irony, a joyous, life-asserting feeling prevails.”<sup>55</sup> Sadly, Minchin did not see in Ukrainian literature many examples of this. The young Stepan Oliynyk demonstrated clear promise, whereas Vyshnia and other established humorists relied on traditional folkloric tropes. The censor warned, however, that such common subjects as a hated mother-in-law or arguments between spouses could now be seen as a “distorted portrayal of Soviet family relations.”<sup>56</sup>

A high official of the Central Committee’s propaganda department, V. Ruban, added a couple of complaints of his own. He disclosed that even the new editorial board under the reliable Makivchuk were standing up against overzealous censors and party ideologues: “Unfortunately, the editorial board of *Perets* does not show the desire to listen and take advice. We are having fierce arguments about every issue.” At least once during 1948 censors had to halt the printing of four or five various issues. In addition, all materials touching on foreign topics had to receive the approval of the republic’s Foreign Ministry, leading to further delays. The printing of no. 20 (1948) was stopped no fewer than six times, and many other issues, especially those satirizing pilfering, were not sent to foreign subscribers.<sup>57</sup> Aside from these administrative concerns, Ruban also had a problem with the magazine’s “deliberately ethnographic approach,” that is, with its strong connection to traditional Ukrainian folklore.<sup>58</sup>

But most insightful was his minor comment that the orientation toward readers’ letters in fact diluted the special function of *Perets* as a satirical journal. Other participants of the 1948 conference lauded this innovation, and Makivchuk must have seen the letters as a safe substitution for satire. In 1950 the magazine would receive 25,232 letters, of which only 491 could be published, but 971 would result in an administrative punishment for the guilty.<sup>59</sup>

53. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 1311, ark. 5 and 7.

54. *Ibid.*, ark. 14.

55. *Ibid.*, ark. 66.

56. *Ibid.*, ark. 61-63, 66.

57. *Ibid.*, ark. 93-94.

58. *Ibid.*, ark. 86-87.

59. TsDAMLM, f. 668, op. 1, spr. 232, ark. 1.

By 1953 the volume of readers' letters would increase so much that *Perets* would be submitting to the Central Committee ten-day reports on the number and main themes of the letters. During the first ten days of February 1953, the magazine received 687 letters, most of which the editors dismissively described as "private complaints," while the two biggest groups of letters deemed important dealt with lack of attention to village clubs (63) and abuse of power by local authorities (22).<sup>60</sup> But *Perets* was increasingly trading its function as a magazine of literary satire and humor for that of a complaint-processing institution.

Success remained equally elusive with regard to other aspects of late Stalinist "laughter reform." The Soviet authorities had indicated their preference for humor over satire as far as Soviet society was concerned, and they marked official humor's connection to folk laughter as highly suspect. Yet not even Stalinist ideologues could completely separate satire from friendly humor or fully eliminate folkloric tropes. Nor could they openly ban satire that was directed at bureaucrats, since official party documents continued to condemn red tape and cronyism. Although greatly diminished in scope, satire was never dismissed as a genre, and criticisms of satirists were limited to accusations of alleged distortions of the Soviet present and bad taste.

Just as a quick review of *Perets* for the years 1948-53 indicates that it was far from being a sanitized magazine filled with "positive humor," so a look at Vyshnia's post-1946 work reveals an ever-bold satirist and troublemaker. During the 1948 conference, the party functionary Sosnovsky remarked that one could feel in Vyshnia's stories a "certain bitterness toward our Soviet reality."<sup>61</sup> Makivchuk, however, had prudently preempted any possible attacks on Vyshnia by stating in his report that the veteran humorist recently gave three sold-out readings: for the Kievan intelligentsia, factory workers, and the students of the Higher Party School.<sup>62</sup> An ability to engage such diverse audiences was so rare among official writers that it seems to have served as an absolution of sorts.

Vyshnia weathered many other storms, such as an incident in April 1950 when, during a trip to Western Ukraine, he told a group of fellow writers about his sense of guilt as a person who eats and dresses well, while the local peasants are being herded into collective farms. His remark was reported to the Central Committee.<sup>63</sup> In April 1952 Vyshnia sent a daring telegram to congratulate the newspaper *Literaturna hazeta* on its 25th anniversary. The satirist greeted those comrades who had *not* served as editors during the past

60. TsDAHO, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 2219, ark. 2-3.

61. *Ibid.*, f. 1, op. 70, spr. 1311, ark. 104.

62. *Ibid.*, ark. 24.

63. *Ibid.*, op. 24, spr. 15, ark. 7.

25 years, while vaguely warning those who had that “history may repeat itself.” This transparent reference to the many purges of a literary newspaper resulted in a reprimand issued to Vyshnia at a meeting of the Writers’ Union executive.<sup>64</sup> Vyshnia’s fragmentary diaries, published in the late 1980s, portray him as somewhat of an oppositionist who, for instance, sympathized with another Ukrainian victim of the *Zhdanovshchina*, Iurii Ianovsky.<sup>65</sup>

Nevertheless, the authorities tolerated Vyshnia’s digressions. In late 1950 he was even nominated for the Stalin Prize in literature, although the Moscow selection committee did not shortlist him. The nomination letter from the Ukrainian Writers’ Union offers some clues to his unique position. In it, Vyshnia is called “a most popular writer” whose sketches “are performed by many thousands of amateur theater groups; they are read at folk festivals, at factories, and at brigade meetings on collective farms.”<sup>66</sup> In 1951 Vyshnia was included in a delegation of Ukrainian writers traveling to a prestigious showcase event, the week of Ukrainian culture in Moscow.<sup>67</sup> By the end of his life Vyshnia was so popular that, as a contemporary intelligentsia joke went, ordinary people knew three famous Ukrainians: Bohdan Khmelnytsky (the founder of the Cossack state), Taras Shevchenko (the father of modern Ukrainian literature), and Vyshnia.<sup>68</sup>

Vyshnia’s funeral in 1956 was the first spontaneous mass procession in Kiev in years, if not decades. With the signs of de-Stalinization in the air, tens of thousands (one contemporary even speaks of hundreds of thousands) of mourners stopped traffic on the city’s central avenues. Perhaps in affirmation of Vyshnia’s adherence to the national folkloric tradition and in defiance of the authorities, the grieving public sang the old Cossack funeral song, “They Carry a Cossack and Walk His Horse.”<sup>69</sup> Vyshnia’s lifelong renown best illustrated the authorities’ failure to purge folkloric tropes and social satire from the official laughter culture. His name became a symbol of Ukrainian folk humor, connected as it was with national identity. In death, Vyshnia once again triumphed over Stalinist “positive humor.” A survivor of the Stalinist camps, and the king of Ukrainian humorists, a writer whom Stalinist ideologues always wanted but never quite managed to bring into line, Vyshnia no doubt had the last laugh.

#### *University of Victoria*

64. TsDÁHO, f. 1, op. 30, spr. 1934, ark. 1.

65. Ostap Vyshnia, “Dumy moi, dumy moi,” in his *Tvory v chotyrokh tomakh* (Kiev: Dnipro, 1989), 4: 446 and 449.

66. TsDAMLM, f. 590, op. 1, spr. 117, ark. 121

67. Zub, *Ostap Vyshnia*, p. 27.

68. Burliai, “Svyyi holub,” P. 201; Panch, “Slozy na ochakh,” p. 88.

69. Makivchuk, “Velykyi humorist,” p. 39; Leonid Lench, “Chotyry zustrichi,” in Hubenko-Masilichenko and Zhuravsky, *Pro Ostapa Vyshniu*, p. 213; Mykola Upenyk, “Kozaka nesut i konia vedut,” *ibid.*, pp. 315-17.