

SATIRIZING CENSORSHIP IN EARLY SOVIET CULTURE:
“KROKODIL” AND LIMITS OF LAUGHTER

Ekaterina Tarasova

The leading satirical journal “Krokodil” (“Crocodile”), well known among generations of Soviet readers, originated in 1922 as an anonymous supplement to the newly founded newspaper “Rabochii” (“The Worker”). The illustrated supplement was launched three months after the newspaper’s founding, in an effort to expand its readership: beginning on June 4, it was mailed free of charge with the Sunday edition to all subscribers.¹ The first two issues focused on satirical coverage of the high-profile trial of the Socialist Revolutionaries;² the sixteen-page supplement included feuilletons, poems, and black-and-white political caricatures. In July, “Rabochii” was renamed “Rabočaia gazeta” (“Workers’ Gazette”), and by the end of the summer its supplement had been transformed into the weekly satirical journal “Krokodil.” Its emblem became a red crocodile wielding a pitchfork, symbolizing laughter as the satirist’s ruthless weapon. Within its first year, the journal’s circulation reached 150,000 copies, and by the end of the decade, it had grown to half a million. The 1920s were a period of rapid expansion for Soviet periodicals, yet by 1934 “Krokodil” remained the only satirical publication in the entire country.

With the establishment of the Bolshevik government, the entire system of print and periodical publishing was transformed. In 1918, the most prominent pre-revolutionary satirical journal “Novyi satirikon” (“New Satiricon”) was shut down because it openly mocked the Bolsheviks. After the October Revolution, Soviet authorities were supported and legitimized by new satirical journals. In Moscow, with the participation of Demian Bednyi and Vladimir

¹ S. Stykalin, I. Kremenskaia, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia pechat’. 1917-1963*, Moskva, Gospolitizdat, 1963, p. 177.

² In the summer of 1922, in Moscow, the Bolshevik government organized a show trial of members of the Socialist Revolutionary Party, who had been persecuted since the October Revolution. The Supreme Tribunal of the All-Russian Central Executive Committee charged the SRs with anti-Soviet activities. However, the proceedings attracted wide international attention, and the initial death sentences were later commuted.

Maiakovskii, the journal “Solovei” (“Nightingale”, 1917-1918) was released, but it only lasted for two issues. In Petrograd, “Gil’otina” (“Guillotine”, 1918), “Krasnaia kolokol’nia” (“Red Bell Tower”, 1918), and “Krasnyi d’iavol” (“Red Devil”, 1918-1919) were also published for a short time. In 1921, Maiakovskii and his fellow satirists from the ROSTA windows (Okna ROSTA) also attempted to publish the journal “BOV. Boevoi otriad vesel’chakov” (“Combat Detachment of Humorists”), but due to a paper shortage and the lack of stable funding, only a single issue was printed. A more sustained circulation of satirical journals only became possible after the end of the Civil War, when printing processes began to stabilize. “Krokodil” gave impetus to a new wave of satirical publishing in 1922, and the number of such periodicals grew rapidly. Most of them followed the trajectory of its development: first appearing as supplements to newspapers, they eventually became independent journals.³

Toward the end of the Civil War, within the consolidating Soviet press, “Krokodil” was the first satirical publication that quickly became a model for other periodicals. In the reference work *Soviet Satirical Press (Sovetskaia satiricheskaia pechat’*, 1963), Sergei Stykalin and Inna Kremenskaia emphasize that “Krokodil”’s talented collective of editors created a new type of mass periodical aimed primarily at a working-class readership. They identify “close connection with the people, a large influx of critical letters from the provinces, and the presence among its contributors of experienced satirists led by Demian Bednyi” as the key factors behind the journal’s success.⁴ Gleb Skorokhodov’s article in *Essays on the History of Russian Soviet Journalism (Ocherki istorii russkoi sovetskoi zhurnalistiki*, 1968) also notes that the journal’s rise was enhanced by the popularity of “Rabochaia gazeta,” with which it was originally affiliated.⁵ The influence of “Krokodil” within the Soviet press system is evid-

³ For example, in Petrograd, “Krasnaia gazeta” (“Red Gazette”) began publishing a supplement that was transformed into the satirical journal “Krasnyi Voron” (“Red Raven,” 1922-1924), followed by “Begemot” (“Hippopotamus,” 1924-1928), “Pushka” (“Cannon,” 1926-1929), and “Revizor” (“Inspector General,” 1929-1930). Similarly, newspapers launched supplements in Moscow, where “Rabochaia Moskva” (“Workers’ Moscow”) published “Krasnyi perets” (“Red Pepper,” 1923-1926) and “Zanoza” (“Splinter,” 1924); “Gudok” (“Whistle”) organized “Drezina” (“Handcar,” 1923-1924) and “Smekhach” (“Laughter,” 1924-1928); “Trud” (“Labor”) issued “Buzoter” (“Troublemaker,” 1924-1927) and “Bich” (“Scourge,” 1927-1928); and “Krest’ianskaia Gazeta” (“Peasant Gazette”) published “Lapot” (“Bast Shoe,” 1924-1933). For more, see S. Stykalin and I. Kremenskaia, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia pechat’*. 1917-1963.

⁴ S. Stykalin, I. Kremenskaia, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia pechat’*, p. 176.

⁵ G.A. Skorokhodov, *Satiricheskaia zhurnalistika (“Krokodil,” “Lapot,” “Smekhach,” “Chudak”)*, in: *Ocherki istorii russkoi sovetskoi zhurnalistiki*, ed. A. G. Dement’ev, Moskva, Nauka, 1968, pp. 444-472.

enced by the abundance of "Krokodil"-inspired periodicals that appeared across the Soviet Union on the wave of its wide circulation.⁶ According to Igor Nikulin's dissertation, these "Krokodil" spin-offs were either published by various Party organizations or as satirical supplements to newspapers, and after 1926, they ceased to emerge and gradually disappeared.⁷

The issue was that by the mid-1920s the process of centralization within the Soviet press intensified, and cultural authorities expressed concern that "this network of journals had emerged spontaneously, without any consideration of the tasks of serving different social groups."⁸ The Party leadership sought to concentrate satire in a limited number of periodicals in order to improve oversight and control. In 1927, the Central Committee's Press Department (Otdel pechati TsK) issued directives that assigned each leading satirical journal a clearly defined audience. "Krokodil" and "Begemot" were to serve as satirical organs for "the politically mature strata of the working class"; "Buzoter" was to address "broad layers of trade-union members and officials"; "Smekhach" was intended primarily for "broad ranges of clerical employees"; and "Lapot" was to orient itself toward "the advanced strata of the peasantry and the rural activist milieu."⁹ However, by the mid-1930s, "Krokodil" came to supply satire for all of these groups, emerging as a single all-Union publication.

In the 1960s, "Krokodil"'s early contributors began to publish their memoirs to mark the journal's fortieth anniversary, alongside the scholarly surveys of Soviet satire. Today, the journal remains an important source for studying Soviet humor, the functioning of periodicals of the time, editorial reshuffles under external pressure, and the representation of political and social phenom-

⁶ Apart from the "main" "Krokodil", Moscow saw the publication of "Krokodil konvoira" ("Convoy's Crocodile," 1923), "Bezbozhnyi krokodil" ("Godless Crocodile," 1924-1925), and "Voennyi krokodil" ("Military Crocodile," 1924-1926). Besides, "Komsomol'skii krokodil" ("KOK-Komsomol Crocodile," 1923) was issued in Baku; "Krokodil'chik" ("Little Crocodile," 1923) in Armavir; "Komsomol'skii krokodilenok" ("Komsomol Little Crocodile," 1923-1924) and "Krokodilenok" ("Little Crocodile," 1924) in Odessa; and "Bashkirskii krokodil" ("Bashkir Crocodile," 1925-1926) in Ufa. In addition, in 1923 a single issue of "Syn Krokodila" ("Son of Crocodile") was published without any indication of place of origin. For more, see S. Stykalin and I. Kremenskaia, *Sovetskaia satiricheskaia pechat'. 1917-1963*.

⁷ I. Nikulin, *Sovetskie satiricheskie periodicheskie izdaniia 1920-kh godov: sistemnye sviazi kontenta i tipologicheskikh kharakteristik*, diss. kand. filol. nauk, Krasnodar, 2013, p. 79.

⁸ One of the opening sentences of Sergei Ingulov's 1928 letter to the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), written in his capacity as Deputy Head of the Agitation, Propaganda, and Press Department. "Schast'e literatury." *Gosudarstvo i pisateli. 1925-1938 gg. Dokumenty*, sost. D.L. Babichenko, Moskva, Rossiiskaia politicheskaia entsiklopediia (ROSSPEN), 1997, p. 56.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 59.

ena on its pages.¹⁰ However, the question of how “Krokodil” interacted with mechanisms of cultural control – adapting to them, circumventing them, and developing editorial strategies for pushing sharp material into print – has not been explored. In *Gossmekh: stalinizm i komicheskoe* (State Laughter: *Stalinism and the Comic*, 2022), a major study of laughter as an instrument of power, Evgenii Dobrenko and Natalia Jonsson-Skradol note that “while in the 1920s the theme of the struggle against censorship occasionally broke through onto the pages of the press, by the early 1930s the very phrase ‘Soviet censorship’ had become taboo.”¹¹ In light of this observation, the present article turns to “Krokodil”’s formative years to trace how the journal resisted institutions of cultural control throughout the 1920s, and how this resistance was transformed by the 1930s.

In the Soviet cultural landscape, satirical journals faced an enduring challenge: how to perform critique without overstepping the shifting boundaries of what was permissible, so as not to be shut down? I argue that in the 1920s, “Krokodil” developed an effective strategy that allowed it to voice trenchant and often bold criticism of Soviet institutions: the journal mocked the contradictions and dysfunctions of postrevolutionary life through references to Party authority. “Krokodil” situated its satire within the framework of Bolshevik legitimacy and embedded its voice within the official discourse of Soviet criticism. Appealing to “Pravda” (“Truth”) and other authoritative sources, its satirical cartoons and exposés were carefully constructed as expressions of ideological loyalty. “Krokodil” presented itself as a mechanism for correction within the system of the young state, developing a form of “licensed satire” that contributed to its internal regulation.

This vision was explicitly articulated in early issues, where “Krokodil” presented its function as a satirical counterpart to the institutions of political surveillance and discipline. From the outset, the journal declared that every Soviet citizen could potentially be subject to its satirical scrutiny. In the piece *An Extraordinary Story (Diary of Incidents) – Neobyknovennaia istoriia (Dnev-*

¹⁰ In addition to the above-mentioned works of S. Stykalin and I. Kremenskaia, G.A. Skorokhodov, and I. Nikulin, see also: O.I. Kiiianskaia, D.M. Fel’dman, *Ocherki istorii russkoi sovetskoi literatury i zhurnalistiki 1920-kh-1930-kh godov. Portrety i skandaly*, Moskva, Forum, 2015; J. Etty, *Graphic Satire in the Soviet Union. Krokodil’s Political Cartoons*, Jackson, University Press of Mississippi, 2019; A. Iurganov, *V krivom zerkale satiry. Kul’t vozhdia partii bol’shevikov i ofitsial’naiia satira v seredine 20-kh – nachale 30-kh godov*, Sankt-Peterburg, Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2022.

¹¹ E. Dobrenko, N. Jonsson-Skradol’, *Gossmekh. Stalinizm i komicheskoe*, Moskva, Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2022, p. 315.

nik proisshestvii) –, Nikolai Ivanov-Gramen (1885-1961), one of the founders and active contributors of "Krokodil", described the journal as a creature that "lunges not only at random passers-by but also at citizens working in Soviet, cooperative, and private institutions and organizations."¹² Moreover, the text named the Politburo member Lev Kamenev as "a victim of its satire," indicating that the journal had already turned its critical attention to figures at the highest levels of Party leadership. Ivanov-Gramen heightened the journal's institutional pretensions by drawing a provocative analogy between "Krokodil" and the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission (Cheka), the Bolsheviks' primary organ of repression: "Instead of an All-Russian Extraordinary Commission, the Bolsheviks have created an All-Russian Extraordinary Crocodile (with the same initials VChK!), which seizes and swallows the finest Russian citizens without observing any legal formalities."¹³ This comparison underscored the journal's self-assigned role in the mechanisms of Party discipline, boldly claiming for satire a place within the logic of post-revolutionary culture.

In its formative years, "Krokodil" demonstrated boldness in satirizing the Soviet political elite. No figure was entirely beyond the journal's satirical reach: along with lower-level officials, Vladimir Lenin, Lev Trotskii, and Iosif Stalin appeared in its pages as targets of satirical cartoons. Even sacred figures of the Party canon, such as Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, were depicted with irony that indicates the extent to which humorous engagement with ideological discourse was still acceptable in the early Soviet period. The abundance of ironic representations of well-known political figures reflected a moment when satire was perceived as an integral component of the developing revolutionary culture, when the boundaries of acceptable imagery had not yet been fully codified.

Among all high-ranking officials, Anatolii Lunacharskii¹⁴ emerged as "Krokodil"'s most frequent and symbolically vulnerable subject. As Varlam Shalamov later observed, "Lunacharskii could intercede for artists, for cultural monuments, he could write plays and say 'my theater' [...] He could travel at the head of a diplomatic mission to international conferences, but he did not do politics and was neither a leader nor a major theorist."¹⁵ Unlike more doctrinaire

¹² N. Ivanov-Gramen, *Neobyknovennaia istoriia (Dnevnik proisshestvii)*, "Krokodil," 3 (1922), p. 4. Here and throughout the article, all translations from Russian into English are my own.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Anatolii Lunacharskii (1875-1933) was a revolutionary, one of the creators of socialist culture, writer, critic, art historian, and the first People's Commissar of Enlightenment (*narkom prosvescheniia*) from 1917 to 1929.

¹⁵ V.T. Shalamov, *Vospominaniia*, Moskva, Izdatel'stvo "Olimp", Izdatel'stvo "Astrel'", Izdatel'stvo "AST", 2001, pp. 29-30.

figures, Lunacharskii occupied a liminal space in the Soviet political sphere. His active engagement in debates about the future of revolutionary art – particularly his frequent polemics with Maiakovskii and the LEF group – presented him as an influential, but not unassailable, cultural figure. As People’s Commissar of Enlightenment, he supported the preservation of pre-revolutionary heritage, defended the position of the old intelligentsia within the new political and cultural regime, and advocated for the inclusion of “fellow travelers” (*poputchiki*) in Soviet literature. Lunacharskii himself was actively involved in literary work, writing plays, essays, and poems, which also increased the ambiguity of his position within the Party apparatus. As Shalamov recalled, “When the door to Lunacharskii’s office was closed, people at the Commissariat joked: ‘The Commissar is writing poems’”.¹⁶ These commitments made him susceptible to accusations of political softness or ideological inconsistency, which also rendered Lunacharskii a compelling satirical figure for “Krokodil”.

Throughout 1922 and 1923, “Krokodil” repeatedly criticized the general policies of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros) and the public figure of Lunacharskii. Although he was often described as personally tolerant of criticism, the journal’s persistent mockery eventually provoked a more serious response. According to the memoirs of his wife, Natal’ia Lunacharskaia-Rozenel’, “Anatolii Vasilievich treated all sorts of epigrams, caricatures, and similar things directed at him with a smile, with humor.”¹⁷ She further noted that although “people often said that Anatolii Vasilievich was frequently late – sometimes with annoyance – I must testify that if such instances did occur, they were solely the result of the inhuman workload he bore.”¹⁸ Despite his reputation as a tolerant public intellectual with liberal views, Lunacharskii did not always remain indifferent to all forms of satire. In response to “Krokodil”’s cartoon mocking his alleged tardiness at a lecture, he abandoned his usual restraint. Considering the material as both inaccurate and inappropriate, he submitted a formal complaint to Valerian Kuibyshev (1888–1935), head of the Central Control Commission (TsKK) – the Party’s highest disciplinary body – requesting a review of the journal’s conduct. The episode marked a significant escalation in the relationship between “Krokodil” and one of its most frequent subjects of criticism.

The episode that prompted Lunacharskii’s formal complaint concerned a caricature published in issue no. 40 of “Krokodil” in 1923. The unsigned draw-

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁷ N.A. Lunacharskaia-Rozenel’, *Pamiat’ serdtsa. Vospominaniia*, Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1977, p. 22.

¹⁸ Ibid.

ing, titled *The Curious One (Liubopytnyi)*, was accompanied by the epigraph: “The cell of the Time League at the Institute of Oriental Studies reports that due to Com. Lunacharskii’s delay to a lecture, between 2,500 and 3,000 hours were lost – that is, 300 to 375 eight-hour workdays.”¹⁹ The image itself depicted two male characters standing in front of a poster advertising Lunacharskii’s lecture and commenting on its consequences. The caption below was rendered in the form of a dialogue:

Rabfak student, a mathematician: “Because of Com. Lunacharskii’s delay, 2,000 working hours were lost.”

Worker: “And how many hours were lost during the lecture itself?”²⁰

The caricature mocked Lunacharskii for his lateness and also implicitly questioned the utility of his intellectual and pedagogical activities. Offended by what he perceived as a factual distortion and a public slight, Lunacharskii responded with an official letter. On November 9, 1923, the People’s Commissar wrote the following to Kuibyshev:

[...] It seems to me that if the editorial board of “Krokodil” intended to take a jab (*prodermut*) at a comrade appointed by the Party to a responsible position, then at the very least it should have verified whether the alleged event had actually taken place. In reality, my lecture *Materialism and Idealism* was not delivered in the large hall of the Conservatory, but at the Zimin Theater, where I arrived – something I can confirm with numerous witnesses – precisely at 9 o’clock. The organizers of the lecture asked me to wait, as the audience was still small, or rather, as it turned out, was queuing in a long line outside the theater. Due to the inefficiency of the ushers, people were entering the hall very slowly. But that is not all. Before the lecture began, I received several notes with ironic questions as to whether I was a member of the *Time League*, which compelled me, in the presence of the entire audience, to clarify that I had arrived on time and had spent about an hour waiting in the director’s office. Not content with discrediting me with a non-existent instance of tardiness – without even checking with my secretariat – “Krokodil” went on to continue its mockery with the worker’s punchline: “And how many hours were lost during the lecture itself?” This may, perhaps, be witty, but it is in any case unacceptable, for the simple reason that my lecture was met with great success by the audience, consisting entirely of students from universities and rabfaks, and it has since been republished by the “Path to Knowledge” (*Put’ k Znaniiam*) publishing house.

I respectfully ask the Central Control Commission to advise the Communists on the editorial board of “Krokodil” to cease this clearly unfounded campaign, which can bring pleasure only to our enemies. Are we truly so eager to maliciously spread the notion that responsible comrades make hundreds or even thousands of listeners wait for

¹⁹ *Liubopytnyi*, “Krokodil,” 40 (1923), p. 1134.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

hours, and that the lectures they eventually give are not even worth attending? Is this the kind of propaganda for which the Party created “Krokodil”?”²¹

Lunacharskii’s letter reveals his views on the acceptable limits of satire in Soviet political culture. In his response, he defends not only his personal conduct, but also his public image, grounded in the Party’s criteria of usefulness and productivity, measured by the audience’s enthusiasm and subsequent publication of the speech. By invoking the rhetoric of enemies of the Soviet state and appealing to the protective authority of the Central Control Commission, Lunacharskii presents satire as a potential threat to institutional legitimacy. Although “Krokodil” positioned itself as an internal mechanism of criticism, this episode demonstrates how easily satire can be interpreted as political disloyalty when it threatens the self-image of officials.

The response to Lunacharskii’s complaint was authored by Konstantin Eremeev (1874-1931), widely considered the founder and ideological architect of “Krokodil.” A veteran of the October Revolution and the Civil War, Eremeev had previously worked as an editor at the newspapers “Pravda” and “Zvezda” (“Star”), and was among the founding figures of Gosizdat (the State Publishing House) and served as the first editor of “Rabochaia Gazeta.” He assembled “Krokodil”’s first editorial team and secured for the journal an exceptional degree of autonomy in tone and content within the Soviet press of the early 1920s. “Krokodil”’s symbolic mascot – a red crocodile wielding a pitchfork – was even depicted smoking Eremeev’s trademark pipe, a visual nod to his foundational role in shaping the journal’s identity. In response to Lunacharskii’s complaint, Eremeev addressed a letter to Kuibyshev at the Central Control Commission, replying with pointed irony. In it, he defended “Krokodil”’s satirical treatment of Party officials and articulated a broader rationale for the journal’s mission and its autonomy in Soviet print culture:

Comrade Lunacharskii, while invoking high-minded Party motivations, is in fact simply upset by a rather sharp note. But “Krokodil” would much prefer to receive from him a more reasoned and literarily appropriate justification – an explanation, rather than a demand – as to why, before a Soviet minister (even of Enlightenment), we must respond only with: “Yes, sir. At your service. Bravo, your Commissariat!” (*Tak tochno. Rady starat’sia. Bravo, vashe Narkomstvo.*)

It is well known that not a few foolish things have been done by People’s Commissars – things publicly acknowledged at Party congresses. And yet “Krokodil” has remained silent about such foolishness, precisely for the same reasons that now unjustifiably lead A. V. Lunacharskii to demand a personal “taboo.”

²¹ A.V. Lunacharskii, K.S. Eremeev, *Pis'ma v TsKK o pomeschenii v zh. "Krokodil" zametki i karikatury na Lunacharskogo i reshenie TsKK RKP(b) po etomu voprosu*, RGALI, f. 600, op. 2, ed. khr. 216, l. 1.

True, “Krokodil” has repeatedly received private scoldings that “to touch those in power is counterrevolutionary.” But such reprimands have sounded more like timid whispers or hesitant sighs. Only now – for the first time in a year of “Krokodil”’s existence – do we hear from the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment and its certified man of letters a truly Shchedrinian: “I shall not tole-ra-te it!” (*Ne poter-r-pliu*). [...]

“Krokodil” naturally understands that Comrade Lunacharskii would much prefer to be portrayed as a sweetheart (*dushka*). Then all the ballerinas and young ladies in Rabispros (*sovbarysnyi Rabisprosa*) would say, while reading “Krokodil:” “How amusing Anatolii Vasilievich is! How charming!” But one would assume that his reputation is secure enough already. That he is a fine orator and agitator – everyone knows. But to claim that everything he has written, said, writes, or says is a divine revelation – that, “Krokodil” feels entitled to doubt. Though admittedly, that is a matter of taste. For some, perhaps, it is quite the opposite. “Can love really be forced?”

As for the unfortunate and “unverified” fact that gave rise to the caricature – this was reported in the central newspaper of our Party under the title *From the Practice of Time Cells (Iz praktiki iacheek L.Vr.)*, published in issue no. 221 (30 September 1923) by the Communists cell of the Institute of the Oriental Studies, therefore it was not subject to doubt.

Of course, “Krokodil” is flattered that Comrade Lunacharskii reads and takes interest in “Krokodil.” But we would not have been offended had the respected Anatolii Vasilievich read “Pravda” more attentively and publicly refuted the item on the very next day. In that case, there would have been no caricature.²²

Eremeev’s response to Lunacharskii’s complaint illustrates “Krokodil”’s satirical practice, which consisted of asserting its legitimacy by relying on the authority of the Party. By explicitly referring to official sources such as “Pravda” and simultaneously using rhetorical provocation, the journal’s first chief editor defuses accusations of political unreliability and also defends its right to autonomy, which is presented as necessary for the functioning of a vigilance mechanism over Soviet officials that supports the Party’s power. In addition to citing “Pravda,” Eremeev reinforces the journal’s legitimacy by appealing to a canonical literary authority – the figure of Mikhail Saltykov-Shchedrin – whose satirical legacy was officially recognized in the Soviet discourse. Moreover, Eremeev points out that “Krokodil” ignores many of the absurdities uttered by the People’s Commissars to avoid undermining their reputation. This statement reveals a tacit regime of self-censorship and strategic restraint, in which satire is aimed at strengthening rather than destabilizing the symbolic order of Soviet power. At the same time, Eremeev’s letter exposes the contradictions in Lunacharskii’s appeal to ideological authority, positioning his demand for immunity as a violation of the very principle of equality – including

²² Ibid., pp. 7-9.

the right to criticize anyone – that was proclaimed as one of the Revolution’s achievements. Through skillful rhetorical maneuvering, Eremeev suggests that it is not “Krokodil” but Lunacharskii himself who disrupts the proper functioning of Soviet authority by demanding exemption from the mechanisms of oversight essential to the Soviet state.

The Central Control Commission ultimately sided with “Krokodil.” After reviewing Lunacharskii’s complaint and Eremeev’s editorial response, the Presidium of the Commission concluded that “there are no grounds for the TsKK to intervene in this matter” and merely instructed Nikolai Ianson (1882-1938), the Commission’s secretary, to speak with Lunacharskii in private.²³ This decision validated “Krokodil”’s editorial stance and also affirmed the journal’s institutional status as an authorized instrument of satire in the Soviet media apparatus. A few months later, “Krokodil” published a cartoon by the caricaturist Konstantin Rotov (1902-1959) that likely referenced the incident. The image depicted Lunacharskii dancing was accompanied by the caption: “Comrade Lunacharskii performs the ‘halftime’ (in Komsomol slang-‘grab’) with his favorite partner. Who is grabbing whom – remains unclear” (“T. Lunacharskii so svoim liubimym partnerom ispolniaet “khavtaim” (po komsomolski – “khvatai”. Kto kogo khvataet – nevyiasneno”).²⁴ Ambiguous phrasing wittily alluded to the unresolved power dynamics behind the TsKK deliberations, suggesting that neither side had emerged unscathed.

Alongside its sustained critique of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment, “Krokodil” also directed its satire against Gosizdat, the State Publishing House under the jurisdiction of Narkompros, established on the initiative of Lunacharskii. In 1923, “Krokodil” released a series of caricatures and commentaries targeting Gosizdat’s perceived ideological inconsistencies and its patronage of Maiakovskii and the avant-garde journal “LEF”. Notably, the journal published a letter ostensibly written by a reader, Tamara Belskaia, asking: “By the way, why do you attack dear Maiakovskii (*napadaete na dushku – Maiakovskogo*) so much? He’s the most talented and most interesting of them all. Leave him alone.”²⁵ The ironic definition *dushka* (‘dear one’) later resurfaced in satirical references to Lunacharskii, suggesting a satirical trope

²³ Ibid., p. 13.

²⁴ *Chto bylo by, esli by...*, “Krokodil,” 26 (1924), p. 13. The joke hinges on a play on words between *halftime* and the Russian verb *khvatai* (“grab”). It likely references the salon dance “Khaftaim. Futbol” – a hybrid of mazurka and polka that gained popularity in the early twentieth century amid the growing enthusiasm for football (*Khavtaim Futbol: Novyi salonnyi tanets dlia f.-p.: S ob’iasneniem. Tanets i muzyka*, Moskva, A.A. Tsarman, 1916, 4 p.).

²⁵ Pis’ma v redaktsiiu, “Krokodil,” 23 (1923), p. 875.

in which culturally prominent men were discredited through exaggerated depictions of feminine admiration.

"Krokodil"'s criticism of Gosizdat and "LEF" was legitimized through its alignment with "Pravda", the Party's central newspaper. In the feuilleton *Left Art* (*Levoe iskusstvo*), published in 1923, Ivanov-Gramen mocked the group's obscure poetic style. The text opened with a reference to a recent article by Lev Sosnovskii²⁶ in "Pravda," titled *A Yellow Blouse Made of Soviet Calico* (*Zheltaia kofta iz sovetskogo sitsa*), which harshly criticized the first issue of "LEF." Sosnovskii accused the members of "LEF" of political unreliability, condemned their writings as poetic buffoonery (*stiikhotvornoe iurodstvo*), and reproached Gosizdat for publishing the journal.²⁷ The character in Gramen's satirical piece was a naive clerk who disagreed with Sosnovskii's criticism and ruined his life because of his passion for avant-garde poetry. Following Sosnovskii's lead, "Krokodil" suggested to its readers that "LEF" merely hid behind the label of "art" – poetic nonsense, above all, was a convenient way to earn money.²⁸

This line of critique was visually elaborated in a 1923 caricature by Dmitrii Mel'nikov titled with the biblical quotation *Blessed Are Those Who Pity the Beasts* (*Blazhen, izhe i skoty miluet*), which mocked the patron-client relationship between Maiakovskii and Nikolai Meshcheriakov.²⁹ The cartoon included a citation from a promotional text, *Best Recommendations* (*Luchshie sovety*), that Maiakovskii had written for Gosizdat to promote the journal: "Having ogled the shop window – buy "LEF"; come evening, read "LEF". It is a good book; otherwise, why would Gosizdat publish it?" (*"Vitrinu oglazev – poku-paite 'Lef'; vecherom sev, chitaite 'Lef'; khoroshaia kniga, a to s kakoi stati – stali b plokhuiu izdavai' v Gosizdate?"*).³⁰ Beneath the caricatured figures of Maiakovskii and Meshcheriakov appeared their dialogue, revealing the perceived misuse of state resources:

²⁶ Lev Sosnovskii (1886-1937) was a revolutionary, journalist, and publicist. From 1918 to 1924, he was the editor-in-chief of the newspaper "Bednota" ("The Poorfolk") and also contributed to "Pravda," "Izvestiia," "Raboचाia gazeta," etc.

²⁷ L. Sosnovskii, *Zheltaia kofta iz sovetskogo sitsa*, "Pravda," 113 (1923), p. 2.

²⁸ N. Ivanov-Gramen, *Levoe iskusstvo*, "Krokodil," 23 (1923), p. 866.

²⁹ Nikolai Meshcheriakov (1865-1942) was a Soviet press official, critic, and publicist. From 1918 to 1924, he was a member of the editorial board of "Pravda." Between 1920 and 1924 he worked at Gosizdat, first as a department head and later as head of the *politotdel* (the political department) responsible for the ideological control of print. He also was one of the initiators of the creation of Glavlit (the Main Administration for Literary and Publishing Affairs) and served as its first head in 1922.

³⁰ *Blazhen, izhe i skoty miluet*, "Krokodil," 19 (1923), p. 792.

Meshcheriakov: "I generally love puppies, especially such frisky ones as this! Happy to feed it at the state's expense." (*Ia, voobshche, liubliu sobachek, v osobennosti takikh rezykh, kak vot eta! Soglasen ee prikarmlivat' na Gosschet.*)

Maiakovskii: "This is LEF, not a dog! Just give us a ruble, and we'll feed ourselves." (*Se – LEF, a ne sobaka! Nam tol'ko rubl' dai, a prokormim sebia my sami.*)³¹

"Krokodil" portrayed Meshcheriakov as the unwavering advocate of "LEF." However, at the July debate "*LEF*" and *Marxism*, he criticized the literary group, claiming that their books were not selling well.³² Following a brief run – initially bimonthly, later irregular – the journal ceased publication in 1925 after its seventh issue, deemed unprofitable by Gosizdat.³³ "Krokodil," meanwhile, omitted these contextual details, instead continuing to present Meshcheriakov as an uncritical sponsor who wasted state funds on politically unreliable "LEF" allies.

"Krokodil" continued its satirical campaign later in 1923 with another caricature by Mel'nikov, *What a Pound! (Vot tak funt)*, which brought together Maiakovskii, Meshcheriakov, and Lev Trotskii. The cartoon contains multiple visual allusions to the poet's works – *A Cloud in Trousers (Oblako v shtanakh, 1915)*, *The Thrice-Ninth International (Trideviatyi Internatsional, 1922)*, two-volume edition *Thirteen Years of Work (Trinadtsat' let raboty, 1922)* – as well as biographical details, including his participation in *LEF* and the medal *For Zeal (Za zaslugi)* featuring the portrait of Nicholas II, which subtly hinted at his questionable political past.³⁴ Beneath the image appeared a quote from Trotskii's *Literature and Revolution (Literatura i revoliutsiia)*: "Maiakovskii performs linguistic feats in the arena of words, and sometimes achieves true marvels – but more often he heroically lifts obviously weightless burdens."³⁵ The cartoon offered a visual interpretation of this metaphor, portraying Maiakovskii as a circus strongman lifting a barbell that strategically foregrounded Trotskii's critique while omitting his acknowledgment of the poet's "enormous talent."³⁶ Further enriching the allegorical intensity, the drawing included a small figure of Meshcheriakov, taming a lion labeled "LEF" by holding a published volume over its nose – a visual metaphor for Gosizdat's effort to domesticate avant-garde literature through institutional sponsorship.

³¹ Ibid.

³² D. Bykov, *Maiakovskii. Tragediia-buff v shesti deistviakh*, Moskva, Molodaia gvardiia, 2014, p. 444.

³³ Ibid., p. 445.

³⁴ *Vot tak funt*, "Krokodil," 40 (1923), p. 1141.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ L.D. Trotskii, *Literatura i revoliutsiia*, Moskva, Gosudarstvennoe izdatel'stvo, 1924, p. 110.

A month later, "Krokodil" published another Mel'nikov's caricature *The Five-Percent Chapel of Gosizdat, or Hagiography of Gosizdat (Piatiprotsentnaia chasovnia Gosizdata, ili Sviatetsy-Gosizdattsy)*, turning attention to Gosizdat's decision to publish religious texts. In the drawing, Meshcheriakov is depicted at a grand piano, surrounded by singing angels and a lion labeled "LEF," dozing at his feet.³⁷ The cartoon linked two lines of critique: Gosizdat's tolerance of religious publishing and its continued literary sponsorship of the avant-garde. In the drawing, the number five was repeated many times, accompanied by a satirical utterance by Meshcheriakov: "And so, O Lord, 100 percent" (*I togo, o Gospodi, 100 %*), mocking Gosizdat's attempt to restrict religious material to a prescribed quota. The cartoon primarily alluded to a note from "Pravda" titled *The Prayerful Ecstasy of Gosizdat (Molitvennyi ekstaz Gosizdata)* and criticized the music division of the State Publishing House for issuing works with religious themes.³⁸ In response, Meshcheriakov as the chief editor of Gosizdat was compelled to clarify in "Pravda" that the publication of such works was permissible so long as they were by classical authors and did not exceed five to six percent of total print runs.³⁹ By visually exaggerating the effects of this quota, "Krokodil" called into question the cultural policy of the State Publishing Committee, portraying its leadership as ideologically inconsistent.

This satire was reinforced by the placement of Natal'ia Iur'eva's feuilleton *Artistries (Khudozhestva)*, published under the pseudonym Nikita Tverskoi) directly alongside the caricature *The Five-Percent Chapel of Gosizdat*. The feuilleton's epigraphs were quoted from Meshcheriakov's explanatory article about his editorial decisions in "Pravda." These included his remarks on the acceptability of publishing religious literature and his defense of Il'ia Ehrenburg's novel *Trust "D. E.": The Story of the Collapse of Europe (Trest "D. E." Istoriia gibeli Evropy)*, which he called "a useful book in the hands of a skilled propagandist" ("*Trest D. E. – kniga poleznaia v rukakh umelogo propagandista*").⁴⁰ Despite Meshcheriakov's clarification that the novel had been issued by the Ukrainian State Publishing House, which operated independently of Gosizdat, "Krokodil" ignored the distinction and used his endorsement as proof of the problematic ideological direction in Soviet book publishing. "Krokodil" discredited Gosizdat's cultural policy by highlighting the contra-

³⁷ *Piatiprotsentnaia chasovnia Gosizdata, ili Sviatetsy-Gosizdattsy*, "Krokodil," 44 (1923), p. 1200.

³⁸ *Molitvennyi ekstaz Gosizdata*, "Pravda," 237 (1923), p. 1.

³⁹ N. Meshcheriakov, *Vynuzhdennoe ob'iasnenie*, "Pravda," 243 (1923), p. 1.

⁴⁰ N. Tverskoi, *Khudozhestva*, "Krokodil," 44 (1923), p. 1200.

dictions of its leadership, which simultaneously authorized the publication of “fellow travelers” like Maiakovskii and Ehrenburg and permitted religious content under the guise of ideological flexibility.

In parallel with its critique of Gosizdat, “Krokodil” also directed its satire at Glavlit, the state censorship agency, which was also originally subordinate to Narkompros and had been shaped with Lunacharskii’s participation. Extending this line of attack, the journal satirized Vladimir Lebedev-Polianskii (1882-1948), head of Glavlit from 1922 to 1931, and thereby shifted its focus from those who produced controversial publications to those who legitimized them from above. Another cartoon by Dmitrii Mel’nikov published in 1923 as part of the series *Friendly Caricatures of “Krokodil”* (*Druzheskie sharzhi “Krokodila”*) portrayed him reviewing canonical verses by Apollon Maikov and Aleksandr Pushkin, annotating lines with religious connotations – such as *blagovest* (“peal of bells”) and *ptichka bozhii* (“God’s little bird”) – by adding censorial comments that questioned their admissibility in print.⁴¹ The drawing, titled *Censorship Dilemma: 5% of the Classics* (*Tsenzurnoe zatrudnenie 5-ti % klassiki*), transposed this controversy from music to literature, using Lebedev-Polianskii’s caricature to underscore the contradictions in the system of Soviet censorship. Referring to polemics in “Pravda,” “Krokodil” once again rooted its satire in officially sanctioned discourse, thereby defending itself against accusations of ideological subversion and retaining the ability to criticize high-ranking cultural figures while maintaining a rhetorical alignment with the Party’s priorities.

In another example of institutional critique, “Krokodil” targeted Glavlit, simultaneously implicating Lunacharskii as head of the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment. In 1923, the journal’s *Reader’s Page* (*Stranitsa chitatelia*) published a letter from A. Ivanov, an assistant editor at the newspaper “Pishchevik,” who mockingly demanded that Lunacharskii intervene to eliminate “illiteracy in Glavlit.”⁴² The letter sarcastically accused Glavlit staff of incompetence and bureaucratic sluggishness, claiming that publication of his paper had been repeatedly delayed by six days. Suggesting a mock solution, Ivanov wrote, “That is why I think the comrades working there are not particularly literate. I am sending along a primer so that Comrade Lunacharskii can begin the elimination of illiteracy (*likvidatsiia bezgramotnosti*) without delay.”⁴³ Presenting the reader’s complaint, “Krokodil” pointed out the failures of the censorship apparatus, hinting that responsibility for this lay with Lunacharskii as well. The critique was rendered institutionally safe by aligning the journal

⁴¹ *Vot tak funt*, “Krokodil,” 48 (1923), p. 1266.

⁴² *Stranitsa chitatelia*, “Krokodil,” 6 (1923), p. 589.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

with the interests of a sectoral newspaper “Pishchevik” – the organ of the People’s Commissariat of the Food Industry. Framing satire as a defense of productive Soviet institutions against bureaucratic inefficiency, “Krokodil” positioned itself as a loyal guardian of the Soviet press.

Nevertheless, the editorial independence that allowed “Krokodil” to freely criticize officials in its early years was closely tied to the personal authority of Konstantin Eremeev. Shortly after the conflict with Lunacharskii, Eremeev was reassigned to the Revolutionary Military Council of the Baltic Fleet (Revoensovet Baltflota) and was forced to leave the journal.⁴⁴ Two months after his departure, the “Krokodil” editorial board sent a letter to the Press Subdepartment of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) (Podotdel Pechati TsK RKP(b)), warning of the potential collapse of the journal’s operations. According to the editors’ letter, “Krokodil” lost Dmitrii Moor (1883-1946), a master of Soviet poster art described as “one of our most capable contributors,” and a similar mood prevailed “among other artists and writers” due to Eremeev’s departure.⁴⁵ “Krokodil” began appearing less frequently, and the average length of each issue was significantly reduced. Deprived of the leadership of the influential Bolshevik Eremeev, the journal was compelled to demonstrate heightened sensitivity to the Party line and political expectations.

Beginning in 1925, “Krokodil”’s editorial freedom became increasingly subject to formal Party oversight. In January, the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the RCP(b) issued a decree *On the Errors in “Krokodil”* (*Ob oshibkakh v zhurnale “Krokodil”*) marking the first significant intervention in the journal’s policy. The editorial board, then led by Nikolai Smirnov (1893-after February 1940), was instructed on the “inadmissibility” of certain cartoons about low-ranking Party members and ordered to “pay closer and more careful attention to the materials published in the journal”.⁴⁶ This directive demonstrates a shift in the boundaries of permissible satire: “Krokodil”’s humorous critique had to align with a vision of ideological unity that excluded even minor flaws in the image of the Soviet officials.

Paradoxically, despite the Party’s reprimand, “Krokodil” continued to publish critical materials targeting failures in Soviet cultural institutions. The journal no longer enjoyed the same freedom to mock high-ranking officials as

⁴⁴ *Postanovlenie kollektiva sotrudnikov “Krokodila”*, “Krokodil,” 47 (1923), p. 1242.

⁴⁵ *Chernovik pis'ma kollektiva “Krokodil” v TsK RKP(b) o razvale raboty redaktsii*, RGALI, f. 600, op. 2, ed. khr. 67, l. 2.

⁴⁶ *Vlast' i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia. Dokumenty TsK RKP(b) – VKP(b), VChK – OGPU – NKVD o kul'turnoi politike. 1917-1953*, pod red. A. N. Iakovleva; sost. A. Artizov, O. Naumov, Moskva, Mezhdunarodnyi fond “Demokratia”, 1999, p. 49.

it had in its earliest years, but it still attacked the mistakes and absurdities of some cultural administrators and censors. The authorities' loyalty to the publication of such materials may have been linked to "Krokodil"'s growing alignment with the Stalinist line in the press, particularly its active role in cultivating mass hostility toward any Party opposition. According to historian Andrei Iurganov, the journal was supposed to "convey to Soviet society" what "was happening in the Bolshevik Party in the mid-1920s," adapting Stalin's policies for a broad audience.⁴⁷ This alignment likely allowed the journal to retain a certain degree of satirical freedom in addressing issues that were peripheral to the inner-Party struggle, including the ability to critique cultural policy.

Within this space of permitted cultural critique, "Krokodil" directed sustained satirical attention toward the Main Repertory Committee (Glavrepertkom), an institution responsible for theatrical censorship and subordinate to People's Commissariat of Enlightenment. While satire was increasingly constrained, Glavrepertkom remained a viable target likely due to its associations with controversial theatrical figures such as Vsevolod Meierkhol'd who was actively criticized by the Soviet press. One 1925 feuilleton mocked the rhetoric of contemporary Soviet theater, which operated under grand slogans of artistic boldness: "Go forth and dare, you accursed ones! cried the most senior and most terrifying of the Glavrepertkom officials in a fit of ecstasy – dare, and go forth like Meierkhol'd in the desert..." ("Derzajte, okaiannye! – v isstuplenii vopil sami glavnyi i sami strashnyi iz glavrepertkomstvuiushchikh, – derzajte i griadite, aki Meierkhol'd v pustyne...").⁴⁸ This phrase likely alluded to Lunacharskii as the "chief Glavrepertkomitet" and echoed a line from his frequently staged play *The Royal Barber* (*Korolevskii bradobrei*, 1906), in which a character exhorts: "Dare, dare, great man!" ("Derzai, derzai, velikii chelovek!").⁴⁹ By placing this quotation in a grotesquely exaggerated context, the journal highlighted the theatricalization of the ideological fervor of Soviet cultural administration.

Ridiculing Glavrepertkom, "Krokodil" frequently grounded its satire in official Party discourse, particularly drawing on articles in "Pravda." A 1925 cartoon titled *At the Glavrepertkom* (*V Glavrepertkome*) referenced an article

⁴⁷ A. Iurganov, *V krivom zerkale satiry. Kul't vozhdia partii bol'shevikov i ofitsial'naiia satira v seredine 20-kh - nachale 30-kh godov*, Sankt-Peterburg, Tsentr gumanitarnykh initsiativ, 2022, p. 93.

⁴⁸ Pugachevshchina: *istoricheskii ocherk*, "Krokodil," 41 (1925), p. 11.

⁴⁹ A. Lunacharskii, *Korolevskii bradobrei*, in: A. Lunacharskii, *P'esy*, Sost. Aleksandr Deich, Moskva, Iskusstvo, 1963, p. 37.

by critic Iurii Larin in "Pravda,"⁵⁰ who denounced the committee's ban on a dramatization of Dostoevskii's *The Brothers Karamazov*. The cartoon shows the classical books by Pushkin, Schiller, Dostoevskii discarded in a trash bin, while a censor interrogates Dostoevskii himself: "What do you want, Comrade Dostoevskii? Again from Larin? Pushkin was here too – he has relatives named Larin in *Onegin*, so Larin is standing up for him. But why would he be favoring you?"⁵¹ The following year, "Krokodil" once again used a "Pravda" article by Larin as the source for a satirical epigraph and the basis for satirical attack: the cartoon *At the Zoo (V zooparke)* by Konstantin Rotov mocked Glavrepertkom's refusal to approve a play featuring "red-bottomed and blue-bottomed monkeys."⁵² The accompanying illustration exaggerates the absurdity of this decision, showing the monkeys being hastily repainted, with the caption: "Just in case the censor comes." Later that same year, "Krokodil" published another critique of Glavrepertkom, which, instead of referencing "Pravda", was framed as a response to a complaint from an anonymous citizen – thus emphasizing the mediated and indirect nature of the journal's satire. The note *Rejuvenated Farces (Omolozhennye farsy)* mocked the committee's practice of demanding that farces be renamed to sound more ideologically relevant, accusing Glavrepertkom of promoting shallow theatrical productions.⁵³ Through this critique, anchored in official Party discourse, "Krokodil" did not reject censorship, but rather discredited Glavrepertkom for its poor execution of ideological oversight.

In the mid-1920s, "Krokodil" was able to launch sharp satirical attacks without explicit references to the central Soviet press or other legitimizing frameworks only when targeting censorship at the local level. This period saw a series of publications ridiculing the absurdities of regional Glavlit offices and their overzealous officials. In 1925, the journal released a note *The Diligent Censor (Userdnyi Tsenzor)* describing a case in Saratov, where the local satirical magazine *Kleschi (Pliers)* planned to publish a cartoon criticizing the provincial communication department (*gubkommunotdel*) for its complete disregard for articles from the local press. The cartoon showed a protesting crowd shouting into the department's enormous ears, accompanied by the caption "The Great Deaf-Mute," which parodied the well-known epithet for early cin-

⁵⁰ Iurii Larin was the pseudonym of Mikhail Lur'e (1882-1932), a revolutionary, economist, and publicist.

⁵¹ *V Glavrepertkome*, "Krokodil," 45 (1925), p. 4.

⁵² *V zooparke*, "Krokodil," 28 (1926), p. 7.

⁵³ *Omolozhennye farsy*, "Krokodil," 42 (1926), p. 11.

ema “The Great Silent One” (*Velikii nemoi*).⁵⁴ However, the provincial censor, Dankov, took offense at the size of the ears and ordered that they be reduced to a “normal” size, marking the acceptable dimensions in red ink. “Krokodil” reported the incident, singling out Dankov by name and location and thereby drawing public attention to the absurdity of local censorship practices.

In 1926, “Krokodil” intensified its campaign by publishing a series of scathing pieces targeting specific figures within regional censorship offices, challenging the excesses and arbitrary decisions of local censors. The note *Gluplit* mocks the decision of the Voronezh censor B. Dimitriev to ban a rhyme-based promotional poster for agricultural books, interpreting its lines as veiled anti-Soviet messages. “Krokodil” quotes the verses and retells Dimitriev’s comments with increasing irony, culminating in the biting suggestion: “If you happen to come across silly little rhymes, don’t try to outdo them.” The feuilleton ends with an emphasized pun – “Let him keep foolitizing, let Glavlit take him” (“Puskai uzh gluplitsvuet, Glavlit s nim”) – transforming his institutional position into a linguistic joke that reflects the absurdity of his censorial power.⁵⁵ In *The Wall Newspaper Censors* (*Gubliteli stengazet*), the journal similarly attacks the Astrakhan’ censorship office for overregulating factory wall newspapers. The piece points out the absurdity of requiring prior approval, the payment of a publication fee, and the submission of a special questionnaire listing the names of worker-correspondents (*rabkory*). “Krokodil” sarcastically proposes that instead of collecting information about workers, it would be far more entertaining to publish the names and portraits of the censors themselves in order that readers might recognize those obstructing the free circulation of the Soviet press.

This editorial stance reveals the journal’s concern with protecting the channels through which it gathered material from across the Soviet Union. From its inception, “Krokodil” had relied on reader participation, launching a *Readers’ Mailbox* (*Pochtovyi iashchik*) column that responded to submitted texts and cartoons – a practice borrowed by Eremeev from pre-revolutionary journals “Strekoza” and “Satirikon.” In 1924, the journal formalized this network by establishing a corps of *krokory* (*krokodil’skie korrespondenty*), regional contributors who regularly provided the journal with firsthand regional content. Preserving this decentralized network required the editorial staff to defend them against the interventions of local bureaucracies. In 1923, the journal published a reader’s complaint: “The letters we send to the literary committee

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ *Gluplit*, “Krokodil,” 3 (1926), p. 9.

(*litkollegiia*) are so heavily edited that we no longer recognize them."⁵⁶ By legitimizing satire and criticism in local Soviet media, "Krokodil" positioned itself as an advocate for regional voices. The journal regularly documented cases of pressure and censorship against its authors in the form of public acts of condemnation.

"Krokodil" framed its critique of local censors and their attacks on the regional press and worker-correspondents as part of a struggle against the bureaucratic irrationality that threatened Soviet progress. The 1926 feuilleton *A Sacred Cause (Sviatoe delo)* by Vladimir Ivanov (1889-1942), published under the pseudonym Vl. Pavlov, presents the story of a rural wall-newspaper forced to comply with the censor's demand to submit three physical copies for pre-approval – even though the paper existed only as a mural painted on the side of a barn. The villagers dismantled the barn and transported the walls to the censor, who insisted that future issues be submitted in the same form. When the villagers protested, he exploded: "You want to sabotage a sacred cause and then blame me? I want that newspaper to come out once a week! Glavlit, provincial court, provincial prosecutor, provincial education board, and the provincial executive committee – all demand it!" ("Gublīt, govorit, gub-sud, gubprokuror, gubono i gubispolkom!").⁵⁷ "Krokodil" pushed the depiction of censorship to the point of grotesque absurdity, turning the figure of the provincial censor into a symbol of institutional irrationality. In 1926, the journal also published a provocative aphorism: "I suppose a wife can still love and respect her husband, even if he's a censor."⁵⁸ Such satire reinforced the image of the censor as a comically rigid and socially pathetic figure. A 1926 cartoon *Unbounded Zeal (Neogranichennoe userdie)* by the caricaturist Ivan Maliutin (1891-1932) depicts a censor who has crossed out large portions of a textbook solemnly declares, "In my opinion, a thread of narrow-mindedness runs through this entire article."⁵⁹ In a 1927 cartoon by Mikhail Khrapkovskii (1905-1959), *A Point of View (In the Provincial Glavlit Office) – Svoia tochka zreniia (V Gublite)* –, an official laments the decline of literary talent: "No more Gogols, no more Saltykovs... just petty scribblers. Nothing worth crossing out!"⁶⁰ In this period, "Krokodil" actively presented the provincial censor as a recurring comic type who embodied the blind zeal of Soviet cultural administration.

However, in 1927, Party leadership recognized that satire should be used

⁵⁶ *Nagliadnoe rukovodstvo dlia tsenzorov*, "Krokodil," 37 (1923), p. 1024.

⁵⁷ *Sviatoe delo*, "Krokodil," 22 (1926), p. 3.

⁵⁸ *V koren' i pod*, "Krokodil," 9 (1926), p. 5.

⁵⁹ *Neogranichennoe userdie*, "Krokodil," 16 (1926), p. 8.

⁶⁰ *Svoia tochka zreniia (V Gublite)*, "Krokodil," 22 (1927), p. 6.

more extensively by the state – “as a tool for the cultural education of broad layers of workers and peasants and as a weapon for criticizing and combating shortcomings”.⁶¹ In a resolution dated March 14, 1927, the Press Department of the Central Committee outlined the editorial objectives and defined the intended audience for “seven major satirical humorous journals.” As outlined earlier, Moscow’s “Krokodil,” alongside Leningrad’s “Begemot,” was expected by the Party to “become a satirical journal aimed at politically mature segments of the working class.”⁶² Following this directive, “Krokodil” underwent a period of rapid editorial turnover: the journal was headed in turn by Nikolai Smirnov (1924-1927, 1928), Konstantin Maltsev (1927-1928), Nikolai Ivanov-Gramen and Felix Kon (1928-1930), Leonid Mezhericher (1928-1929), and intermittently Vladimir Filov (1930).

Subsequently, prompted by the prominent Soviet press organizer Sergei Ingulov,⁶³ a Party review of the journals’ performance over the year found their “correction of errors” to be unsatisfactory. In a 1928 letter to the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the VKP(b), Ingulov criticized “Krokodil” for its excessive attacks on the Party apparatus, writing that “the journal unintentionally encourages the perception among readers that the bureaucrat, sycophant, embezzler, and bribe-taker are all synonymous with the Party member.”⁶⁴ He also accused the journal of disregarding the Party’s accomplishments: “‘Krokodil’ fosters the false impression that the darker sides of our everyday life are completely impossible to overcome, and that all the efforts of the working class and the Soviet state in this area are in vain”.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, Ingulov offered a generally favorable assessment of the journal, calling “Krokodil” the only publication that had “more or less come close to fulfilling the task assigned to it”.⁶⁶ The result of Ingulov’s letter was the resolution of the Secretariat of the Central Committee *On Satirical Journals (O satiricheskikh zhurnalakh)*, issued on August 3, 1928. This resolution served as the trigger for the systematic elimination of other satirical periodicals and the concentration of satire in “Krokodil,” thereby simplifying Party oversight. “Bich” and “Begemot” were the first to be shut down, while the surviving journals

⁶¹ “Schast’e literatury.” *Gosudarstvo i pisateli. 1925-1938 gg. Dokumenty*, p. 59.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ Sergei Ingulov (1893-1938) was a revolutionary and publicist, one of the leading figures of the Soviet press in the 1920s and later of the censorship institution. In 1928, he served as Deputy Head of the Department of Agitation, Propaganda, and Press of the Central Committee of the Communist Party.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 57.

were instructed to carry out a "radical purge of staff" and to undergo "systematic editorial instruction," which was to be overseen by Ingulov "no less than once every two months."⁶⁷

By the end of the 1920s, satirical attacks on censorship and cultural institutions had significantly declined in "Krokodil." The journal could still criticize bureaucratic inefficiency, but this critique increasingly depended on external legitimation. One such case emerged in 1928, when the question of children's literature became a subject of heightened ideological attention. In January of that year, the Scientific-Pedagogical Section of the State Academic Council (GUS) launched the journal "Kniga detiam" ("A Book for Children"), devoted to issues of children's reading and literature. The journal became a central forum for the debate over the use of anthropomorphism in children's books, later remembered as the "struggle for the fairy tale."⁶⁸ This controversy soon escalated into a Party discussion, culminating in the June resolution of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) titled *On Measures to Improve Youth and Children's Periodicals (O meropriiatiakh po uluchsheniuiu iunosheskoi i detskoi pečati)*, which identified children's print culture as plagued by "serious shortcomings" requiring corrective intervention.⁶⁹

"Krokodil" responded to this public discussion by criticizing the institutional mechanism that impeded book distribution in the two-page satire *The Tale of the Fairy Tale (Skazka o skazke)*, with verses by Vasilii Lebedev-Kumach (1898-1949) and illustrations by E. Samsonova.⁷⁰ This mock "tale" presents a manuscript's futile journey through a bureaucracy, targeting a broad bureaucratic apparatus – including the State Academic Council (GUS), the Main Political Enlightenment Directorate (Glavpolitprosvet), the Main Directorate of Social Upbringing (Glavsocvos), the school and preschool departments of Narkompros, the Institute for Children's Reading, the Central Library, and the Central Union of Consumer Cooperatives (Centrosoiuz). In the final episode, the manuscript is reviewed by Glavlit, depicted as a giant rubber stamp with the face of Lebedev-Polianskii, head of the censorship agency. Glavlit's final directive renders the tale almost entirely censored: "Remove half the fairy tale from the top and half from the bottom. In the third illustration – cover over the snail (a clear allusion to Glavlit's work), cross out the sparrow – he's only in the way. After these corrections – permission to print

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 59.

⁶⁸ A. Sen'kina, *Rospis' soderzhaniia zhurnala "Kniga detiam" (1928-1930), "Detskie chteniia,"* 1 (2012), pp. 151-152.

⁶⁹ *O kul'turnom stroitel'stve*, sost. I.F. Zakolodkin, V.V. Morozov, A.Ia. Podzemskii, Moskva, Rabotnik prosveshcheniia, 1930, p. 531.

⁷⁰ The biographical details of the illustrator E. Samsonova are unknown.

is granted” (“Ubrat’ pol-skazki sverkhu i pol-skazki snizu. V tret’em risunke – zamazat’ ulitu (iavnyi namek na rabotu Glavlita), Vorob’ia – zacherknut’, on tol’ko meshaietsia. Po ispravlenii – pechatat’ razreshaetsia”).⁷¹ This satire portrays the entire literary process as paralyzed by bureaucratic excess, revealing how institutions meant to regulate children’s books ended up mutilating their form and content.

At the turn of the 1930s, “Krokodil” continued to seek authoritative figures through whom it could legitimize satire targeting the censorship apparatus. One such figure was Maxim Gorkii, whose return visits to the USSR were met with enthusiasm in the journal. From 1928 until Gorkii’s full repatriation in 1933, “Krokodil” worked to bolster the writer’s popular image while also leveraging his growing cultural authority. In 1929, the journal published a note reproducing a copy of the letter from “Aleksii Maksimovich,” indicating the importance and reliability of the material. Gorkii highlighted a summary card prepared by Glavpolitprosvet for use in local libraries, describing the novel *The Rabbi and the Prostitute* (*Ravvin i prostitutka*, 1928) by Israel El’iasberg: “Dear Comrade Krokodil, please allow me to draw your attention to the attached card. In my view, it deserves commentary – of the kind that only you can deliver briefly and expressively.”⁷² Gorkii’s endorsement provided “Krokodil” with an opening to satirize Glavpolitprosvet and Glavlit, responsible for publishing the novel, while simultaneously emphasizing Gorkii’s own concern for literary quality. This strategy of authorized satire persisted into the early 1930s. “Krokodil” published the 1933 piece *A Serious Man* (*Ser’eznyi muzhchina*), ridiculing a censor from the Krasnodar office of Glavlit who had banned a poem by Vera Inber and criticized a local newspaper for reprinting an article from “Za rubezhom” (“Abroad”), a magazine edited in Moscow by Gorkii and Mikhail Kol’tsov.⁷³ The journal mocked the censor’s short-sightedness in failing to recognize that approval from such prominent cultural figures guaranteed ideological legitimacy.⁷⁴ By ridiculing overreaching provincial officials who defied the implicit authority of Gorkii and Kol’tsov, “Krokodil” continued to protect its satirical prerogative through association with officially sanctioned voices.

⁷¹ V. Lebedev-Kumach, E. Samsonova, *Skazka o skazke*, “Krokodil,” 45 (1928), p. 6.

⁷² *Opiat’-taki iz nashei perezpiski*, “Krokodil,” 2 (1929), p. 12.

⁷³ Mikhail Kol’tsov (1898-1940), was a revolutionary, writer and journalist. From 1922 he was a permanent contributor to “Pravda.” Until his arrest in 1938, he served as editor-in-chief of the journals “Ogonek” (from 1923), “Za rubezhom” (from 1930), and “Krokodil” (from 1934). He was also one of the founders of the satirical journal “Chudak” (1928-1930).

⁷⁴ *Ser’eznyi muzhchina*, “Krokodil,” 13 (1933), p. 6.

At the beginning of the 1930s, “Krokodil” became increasingly integrated into the Party apparatus – a shift that was most evident in its editorial policy. As scholars Oksana Kiianskaia and David Fel’dman note, in 1930, “thanks to the strong patronage” of prominent Party figure Dmitrii Manuilskii, his brother Mikhail Manuilskii was appointed chief editor of “Krokodil.”⁷⁵ Under his leadership, the journal expanded its presence in Soviet industrial life: it adopted patronage over major construction projects, produced localized satirical leaflets for factories, and organized theatrical brigades that performed for workers during lunch breaks. It firmly adhered to the course of alignment with the working masses set in the late 1920s and regularly reported on its contributions to public life in its regular column *Krokodil’s Diary* (*Dnevnik “Krokodila”*). According to Kiianskaia and Fel’dman, the new editor was “extremely cautious in his statements and judgments”⁷⁶ – a trait that becomes especially apparent in his correspondence with Mikhail Zoshchenko, one of the leading satirists of the time.

Zoshchenko’s letters to Manuilskii offer a rare window into the internal tensions between editorial caution and the author’s pursuit of a more complex and expressive form of satire. In January of 1933, Zoshchenko voiced his frustration with the heavy-handed editing of his texts:

“It is very upsetting that the stories went through with cuts. There is nothing in them that would warrant not publishing. [...] I’m a bit confused – I don’t understand why the stories need to be edited like this. Four stories I submitted to other journals went through without a single correction.”⁷⁷

At the time, Zoshchenko was working with “Krokodil” under a fixed-fee arrangement that obligated him to submit material regularly. However, the constant revisions imposed by the editorial board ultimately led to a rupture in his relationship with the journal. In a letter from December 20, 1933, Zoshchenko wrote to Manuilskii:

Dear Mikhail Zakharovich,

We have completely different views on satire. You believe that my story *The Sorrows of Werther* (*Stradaniia Vertera*) is incorrect and misguided. But I consider it one of my very best stories. It is a truly satirical piece. I could say the same about my most recent story.

⁷⁵ O.I. Kiianskaia, D.M. Fel’dman, *Ocherki istorii russkoi sovetskoi literatury i zhurnalistik...*, Moskva, Forum, 2015, p. 241.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 244.

⁷⁷ *Pis'ma Zoshchenko M. M. Manuil'skomu M. Z.*, RGALI, f. 600, op. 2, ed. khr. 214, l. 1.

I have a much firmer understanding of satire than you seem to think. And I do not need to be “re-educated” in this respect.

Another matter is whether this kind of work is suitable for “Krokodil.” Let’s suppose it isn’t.

You like my feuilletons like the one that was published in “Pravda” (By the way, that piece was taken from “Stalinets,” the political department’s newspaper of the October Railway). But feuilletons of that type – that’s trivial work. I could write six of those a day with my left hand. Literarily speaking, they’re insignificant. That’s a thing of the past for me. I can write them endlessly. But I get no literary satisfaction from that kind of work.

Now I understand what “Krokodil” wants from me. And now I understand all my “sorrows” in your journal.

In my 14 years of writing, “Krokodil” is the only journal that has ever returned my work.

That doesn’t offend me, but it doesn’t teach me anything either. I know quite well how I should write.

The kinds of feuilletons you like – I have written those constantly, both in factory newspapers and now for the political department. But I saw “Krokodil” as a literary journal where I could search for new directions.

If that’s not the case, then working with “Krokodil” does not interest me. And I’ve never been one to work purely for money...⁷⁸

While “Krokodil” made consistent efforts to retain the well-known Zoshchenko as its contributor, his commitment to satirical experimentation increasingly clashed with the journal’s cautious editorial policy. Under Manuilskii, who sought to shield “Krokodil” from mounting ideological pressure, the editorial board gravitated toward formulaic feuilletons modeled after “Pravda”’s style. This approach minimized risk but stifled authorial voice. Tellingly, in September 1931, Manuilskii delivered a special report entitled *The Paths of Contemporary Satire (Puti sovremennoi satiry)* before the Secretariat of RAPP (the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers), where he pointed to the absence of Party guidance in satire: “It can be said with confidence that Pushkin is now in charge of satire – there are no Party directives on the matter, no literature on Soviet satire, and criticism is almost absent.”⁷⁹ This attitude reflected Manuilskii’s editorial principle, which could be roughly summarized as “everything not explicitly permitted is forbidden,” and accordingly he avoided literary experimentation in favor of politically safe writing.

The literary climate at the turn of the 1930s was marked by growing instability. In 1929, a campaign was launched against Boris Pilniak and Evgenii

⁷⁸ Ibid., I. 10-11.

⁷⁹ E. Dobrenko, N. Jonsson-Skradol’, *Gossmekh. Stalinizm i komicheskoe*, pp. 371-372.

Zamiatin, who at the time served as heads of the Moscow and Leningrad branches of the All-Russian Union of Writers. Then, in 1932, the balance of power within the literary field shifted once again when the Politburo of the Central Committee of the VKP(b) issued the resolution *On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations (O perestroike literaturno-khudozhestvennykh organizatsii)*. This decree effectively dissolved RAPP, declaring that the existing proletarian literary and artistic organizations had become too narrow to allow serious creative development.⁸⁰ Zoshchenko – whose satire pushed literary boundaries – emerged as an uncomfortable figure: valued for his popularity, yet misaligned with a format shaped by the imperative to avoid ideological error.

The caution exercised by Manuilskii was not without cause. In 1932, the editorial team was preparing to celebrate “Krokodil”’s tenth anniversary. That same year, workers, metallurgists, and builders from the Magnitogorsk Metallurgical Combine – the journal’s main patronage project – sent repeated petitions to the Central Executive Committee of the USSR, requesting that the journal be awarded the Order of Lenin.⁸¹ However, the long-anticipated honor was never granted. On the contrary, by October 1933, the Central Committee’s Organizational Bureau began formally discussing the need to restructure “Krokodil.” The journal’s fate was ultimately sealed during meetings in March 1934: the editorial board’s work was deemed “extremely unsatisfactory,” ten staff members – including Manuilskii – were dismissed, Emmanuil German (pseudonym Emil’ Krotkii, 1892-1963) was sentenced to three years of exile, and Mikhail Volpin (1902-1988) received five years in a labor camp.⁸² According to Kianskaia and Fel’dman, this sudden escalation of Party scrutiny was driven by repeated denunciations of “anti-Soviet conversations,” “counterrevolutionary gossip,” and political jokes allegedly circulating within the editorial office.⁸³ In addition, despite regularly publishing reports on the achievements of the Five-Year Plan, the journal lost the Party’s trust due to its conspicuous silence on a signature Stalinist project: the construction of the White Sea-Baltic Canal.⁸⁴ The Organizational Bureau assigned oversight of “Krokodil” to “Pravda,” and the position of editor-in-chief was transferred to Kol’tsov, an experienced journalist with a carefully calibrated ideological trajec-

⁸⁰ *Vlast’ i khudozhestvennaia intelligentsiia*, p. 172.

⁸¹ O.I. Kianskaia, D.M. Fel’dman, *Ocherki istorii russkoi sovetskoi literatury i zhurnalistiki...*, pp. 263-264.

⁸² *Ibid.*, pp. 268-270.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 264.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 266.

tory. Kol'tsov, who proved adept at navigating Party directives, led the journal until his arrest in 1938, at the onset of a new wave of purges.

As Evgenii Dobrenko and Natalia Jonsson-Skradol have observed, “no other journal in the USSR attracted as much attention from the authorities as ‘Krokodil’.”⁸⁵ Its trajectory between 1922 and 1934 demonstrates how a satirical periodical could both test and reinforce the limits of permissible critique. In its formative years, the journal developed a mode of licensed satire: it criticized cultural overseers, embedding its attacks in Party-approved language and referring to the Bolshevik press organs and canonical literary authority. From its earliest issues, “Krokodil” assumed a supervisory role comparable to that of the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counter-Revolution and Sabotage (VChK), asserting the right to mock bureaucratic abuses, including high-ranking Party officials and censorship agencies. However, this radical potential was never entirely autonomous: even in the 1920s, “Krokodil” consistently sought alignment with Party-approved authorities – be it *Pravda*, Maxim Gorkii, or the broader ideological discourse – to legitimize its satirical interventions. Through this strategy, “Krokodil” assumed a dual position: it exposed and turned these supervisory institutions into objects of satire, as well as became their ally, functioning as another link in the system of cultural control.

Having passed through years of journal purges and tightening press control, “Krokodil” survived and learned to convert satire into an instrument of regulation. Its endurance was due not only to loyalty and to flexibility, but also to its privileged institutional niche as the central all-Union satirical organ, supported by its circulation, visibility, and the Party’s decision to concentrate satire in a single periodical. By the mid-1930s, satire had been institutionalized as a mechanism of oversight, and the journal, surviving censorship, emerged as one of its agents – an embodiment of the paradox of Soviet cultural politics, where laughter operated as a technology of state power. Having once positioned itself as a defender of the press against censorship, “Krokodil” was transformed into a tool of political stabilization as its humor was recast into ideologically sanctioned “state laughter.”

⁸⁵ E. Dobrenko, N. Jonsson-Skradol, *Gossmekh. Stalinizm i komicheskoe*, p. 19.

Abstract

Satirizing Censorship in Early Soviet Culture: “Krokodil” and Limits of Laughter

Founded in 1922 as a supplement to the newspaper “Rabochii”, “Krokodil” quickly became the leading satirical journal of the Soviet Union. Within its first year, the journal’s circulation reached 150,000 copies, and by the end of the decade, it had grown to half a million. The 1920s were a period of rapid expansion for Soviet periodicals, yet by 1934 “Krokodil” remained the only satirical publication in the entire country. The emergence of “Krokodil” reflects the complex tension between the Bolsheviks’ early promises of press freedom and their swift consolidation of media control. Although the Party came to power denouncing tsarist censorship, one of the first legislative acts of the new Soviet government was the 1917 *Decree on the Press*, which imposed an immediate ban on all opposition periodicals. In this landscape, satirical journals faced an enduring dilemma: how to deliver social critique without violating shifting ideological boundaries. This article argues that in its formative years, “Krokodil” developed an effective strategy for navigating these constraints. The journal often voiced sharp and bold criticism of Soviet institutions, while embedding its satire within the language of Party legitimacy. By referencing “Pravda,” the central newspaper, and other authoritative sources, “Krokodil” released its cartoons, feuilletons, and exposés as expressions of ideological loyalty rather than dissent. Drawing on a wide range of textual and visual materials published between 1922 and 1934, this study analyzes how “Krokodil” tested the limits of satire targeting institutions of cultural oversight, subordinate to the People’s Commissariat of Enlightenment (Narkompros). The journal framed these interventions as loyal contributions to the fight against bureaucratic inefficiency and ideological error. From early pieces reflecting the relatively bold tone of the dispute with Anatolii Lunacharskii to later materials in which the editorial caution becomes especially evident in the correspondence with Mikhail Zoshchenko, “Krokodil” reveals a dynamic but ultimately coherent logic: to criticize from within, always under the guise of constructive alignment with the Soviet project.

Keywords: Soviet satire, Censorship, Cultural institutions, Press control, Institutional oversight, Media and power, Legitimation strategies.

