

Laughter and War: Humorous-Satirical Magazines in Britain, France, Germany and Russia 1914-1918

Review Number: 2123

Publish date: Thursday, 15 June, 2017

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ISBN: 9781443886864

Date of Publication: 2016

Price: £47.99

Pages: 292pp.

Publisher: Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Publisher url: <http://www.cambridgescholars.com/laughter-and-war>

Place of Publication: Cambridge

Reviewer: Pip Gregory

Lesley Milne's *Laughter and War: Humorous-Satirical Magazines in Britain, France, Germany and Russia 1914–1918*, offers a well written overview of the humour of four nations during the Great War, and in turn, four satirical magazines that provoked laughter in these combatant countries. She has approached these journals critically and comparatively within a thematic framework, which she uses to illustrate the styles of humour they each express. There was always going to be the risk of trying to cover too much material when looking at the satire of four diverse nations, particularly when those nations fell on opposing sides of a major conflict. However, this is something that Milne has succeeded in doing. In places, broader detail has been lost when looking at the wider 'multi-national' picture of the war, yet even so, there is a vast amount of detail provided for the specific topics addressed within the book. Thus, as a qualitative overview rather than a vast quantitative one that would have easily lost value overall, this book achieves its aims.

Laughter and War analyses the satire of four nations, although by covering four nations Milne has, by necessity, limited the volume of content that could be analysed from each nation individually. During the war, far more daily satire was available in each of the chosen countries and further afield. However, to reduce the potentially phenomenal scope of this study, Milne has focused on one specific satirical cartoon magazine from each of her chosen nations. The study looks at *Punch* for Britain, *Simplicissimus* for Germany, *Le Rire* in France and *Novy Satirikon* for Russia. These have been chosen as each was 'the leader in its field' (p. 1), for the countries being compared. The journals selected are argued to be 'repositories that save for posterity the jokes of the time', (p. 4). *Punch* is the classic 'go to' comic journal for Britain, offering easily recognised images and comic ideas for a British audience. *Simplicissimus* is a journal with an interesting history in its own right having adapted its politics significantly in light of the war. Whereas as a pre-war publication it was socialist, during the conflict it sought to inspire and unite the public towards national goals.⁽¹⁾ In France, *Le Rire* has a title specifically meaning 'laughter', and identified with a need for such mirth despite the situations of war. Finally, despite being predominantly unavailable in print in the UK, beyond a few select issues in the British Library, *Novy Satirikon* from Russia stands as a journal to parallel the others for its spread of satirical commentary and illustrations (p. 5).

The differing nationalistic standpoints portrayed in these journals could have created issues in the

comparison and analysis of the laughter they provoked, but Milne has balanced these well against one another, and openly highlights similarities and differences as appropriate. She makes it clear that although humour in these journals comes from different perspectives, each form is based in very nationalistic terms. Sexual or scatological formulations create much of the humour in French and Russian examples, while the British focus their humour far more within class definitions that use comparisons from table manners to sporting analogies (pp. 53–8). Milne similarly highlights the faults that occur when other nations take on opposing styles, when *Simplicissimus* attempts to use sporting analogy it misinterprets hockey for golf (p. 57). Such mistakes added to the level of humour in opposing nations as although the joke may still have worked for elements of the German audience ignorant of the mix-up, the contemporary British would identify irony in the confused situation and see that as confirming the enemy's weakness. A standard form of provoking laughter for all nations was to mock their enemies. Where Germany found fault in French sexuality, and made quips about adultery, the French celebrated this national feature, and rather than denying it, enhanced it as a statement of nationhood (p. 52). These are all national variations in the formation of laughter, but with an underlying similarity of national design.

The magazines chosen do match in social standing taking a reasonably central political position from which they were just as able to criticise their own governments' as their national enemies. *Punch* is a journal notably started by liberals that soon became almost a bastion of conservative 'upper-middle-class ideology'. *Simplicissimus*, as stated above, began as a socialist anticlerical, anti-feudal and thoroughly democratic satirical critic of society. However, it subtly altered its stance and provided text and visual media to suit the national politics of war, whilst maintaining its social middle-class status and avoiding some of its earlier socialist views.⁽²⁾ *Novy Satirikon* was a broadly read satirical journal in Russia that entertained across the 'spectrum of educated, politically aware society', matching the upper-middle-class readership of *Punch* and *Simplicissimus*, although perhaps with a better educated bias.⁽³⁾ Additionally, *Le Rire*, appealed to the upper-middle-class echelons of Paris in particular, and was critically able to tap into the anti-republican movements that appealed to that aspect of society.⁽⁴⁾ These journals do collectively serve as national representations for comic satire during the war in their own countries, each balanced against the others, but there remains room within the individual countries to have considered alternatives as well. For instance, in Britain, the *Herald* exhibited vast amounts of strongly socialist text and imaging as an alternative, and in France, the more liberal *Canard Enchaîné* would contrast with the mainstream *Le Rire*.

Laughter and War is a departure from Milne's usual focus on Russian literature, although within her previous works she has addressed humour expressed in authors' texts, as noted in her 2004 *Reflective Laughter*, and this strong critical analysis certainly comes to the fore again in *Laughter and War*.⁽⁵⁾ Milne's language skills are quite phenomenal looking at the text and images in French, German, Russian and her native English with equal aplomb. Furthermore, her comparative assessment of their individual approaches to humour during the wartime period is dominant throughout. In the book, she translates verse and renders it into English whilst maintaining the humour, which is simply a skill to be praised. Examples include an imagined conversation between Nelson and Kitchener from *Simplicissimus* (pp. 88–9), and commentary on the 'little war-time lady' in *Le Rire* that diffuses the worries of wives and *poilus* separated for more than a year by war (p. 122). In the *Le Rire* example, this also illustrates the French taking other nations' criticism of their sexuality and utilising it for their own benefit, as the 'war-time lady' is clearly not the *poilu's* wife.

Methodologically, the book looks to both cartoons and texts that illustrate particular chosen themes. There is a focus on adapting and adjusting to war (chapters two and 12), places of war (chapters seven, eight and 11), people in war (chapters five, six, nine and ten), and features of censorship and propaganda in the magazines themselves (chapters one, three, four and five again). For my part, I would have been tempted to group these individual aspects under the headings of perhaps war, people, places and comparisons of laughter in the media. In contrast, Milne has sub-divided these thematic groups and mixed the chapters up, each of which is detailed for the relevant theme, even if they do not quite seem to follow in a logical structure from the contents page. However, as one starts to read, the development of ideas and prevalent themes becomes much clearer. Milne has a way of writing, almost comparable to a detective novel in places where it can seem as though the final purposes for some bits of information are omitted along the way. This detective approach

can leave the reader searching for connections, but in each chapter, the seemingly disparate features inevitably come together to reach firm and logical conclusions.

One element appears to have been avoided in adequate depth within this monograph on wartime humour. A small section in the introduction talks about memory and the main focal point of recollection for each of the nations discussed in the book (p. 2). This section considers the loss of men for Britain, the Bolshevik Revolution in Russia, the discourse of memory surrounding a legacy leading to Nazism in Germany, and the 'triumph of national liberation' for France. This interesting little aside hints at a far wider reaching historiography, however it is grossly simplified and does not sufficiently engage with current broader ideas on wartime memory. Many early memory studies linked to the Great War focus on the concept of futility through authors including Eric Leed, Samuel Haynes and Paul Fussell.⁽⁶⁾ Then later following the work of Jay Winter and others, there began an enhanced focus on the cultural elements of memorial for remembrance of the war.⁽⁷⁾ Each of these considers different aspects of futility and memorial in different ways, and that solemnity can seem a poor fit when addressing memories of laughter. However, there is newly developing material relating wartime laughter to popular memories of the conflict, and this needed further acknowledgement.⁽⁸⁾

Overall, this book must be complimented for its vast array of commentary and analysis. Milne has undertaken a massive task in making a comparative analysis of the four nations by focusing on one of each of their important satirical comic journals. A great deal of material and themes are covered, and this perhaps explains the author's foreword that it was a book 'a long time in the making'. However, despite the areas and detail included there remains a sense that far more could have been added to support Milne's arguments. The wartime humour of each of the countries could have been analysed in their own volume to make a series, but this might have removed the comparative element, which works so well. Such a series might also have allowed for the inclusion of discussion of satirical commentary and laughter from other nations although this would have created an even more all-consuming undertaking. Equally, the specific topics covered under the overview of laughter; for instance, censorship and propaganda, images of identity, home and battlefield, soldiers and civilians, could have substantiated their own volumes, into which far more detail might have been added. Nonetheless, although the reader may in some ways feel that there are missing elements, the achievements of the volume in providing a detailed, interesting and clear comparison of humour across the combatant nations is clear and significant. Through this text, there is room for those seeking to take such analysis in different directions using varying methodological approaches to build upon what is offered. The volume as a whole will be of great help to those new to the study of humour, visual and textual satire, and equally serves as a reinforcement of these approaches for those already undertaking such academic study.

Notes

1. Hans Zimmerman, 'Magazine', <<http://www.simplicissimus.info/index.php?id=9> [2]> [accessed 16 January 2017].[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. See David Kunzle, 'The first Ally Sloper: the earliest popular cartoon character as a satire on the Victorian work ethic', *Oxford Art Journal*, 8, 1 (1985), 40; Hans Zimmerman, 'Magazine', <<http://www.simplicissimus.info/index.php?id=9> [2]> [accessed 16 January 2017].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. Lesley Milne, 'Novyi Satirikon, 1914-1918: the patriotic laughter of the Russian liberal intelligentsia during the First World War and the Revolution', *Slavonic and East European Review*, 84, 4 (2006), 639.[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Rogallery, 'Le Rire Magazine, France, (1894-1950s)' <http://rogallery.com/Le_Rire/le_rire-about.html [3]> [accessed 16 January 2017].[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. *Reflective Laughter: Aspects of Humour in Russian Culture*, ed. Lesley Milne (London, 2004).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (London and Oxford, 1975); Samuel Lynn Hynes, *A Soldier's Tale: Bearing Witness to Modern War* (London, 1998); Eric Leed, *No Man's Land: Combat Identity in World War I* (Cambridge, 1981).[Back to \(6\)](#)

7. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning: The Great War in European Cultural History* (Cambridge, 1998).[Back to \(7\)](#)
8. See for example, George Korankye, *Die Laughing: War Humour from WW1 to the Present Day* (Peterborough, 2008); Alan Weeks, *A Bloody Picnic: Tommy's Humour 1914-1918* (Stroud, 2010); Peter Doyle and Julian Walker, *Trench Talk: Words of the First World War* (Stroud, 2012); Martin Pegler, *Soldiers' Songs and Slang of the Great War* (Oxford, 2014); Max Arthur, *Forgotten Voices of The Great War: A History of World War I in the Words of the Men and Women Who Were There* (London, 2004).[Back to \(8\)](#)

The author is happy to accept this appreciative and insightful review.

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