

Book review

Milne, Lesley (2016). *Laughter and War. Humorous-Satirical Magazines in Britain, France, Germany and Russia 1914-1918*. Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Despite the stark contrast between laughter and war, it is not hard to understand why the two go together so well. Not only does humour form an ideal weapon to attack the enemy without running the immediate risk of losing lives, but it can also function as a coping mechanism, a way to come to terms with the inevitable atrocities unfolding in times of military conflict, either through cold cynicism or through mild jokes that offer comic relief. Humour can bring consolation and distraction when everything around looks sinister and all hope for salvation seems vain. As such, it can also boost morale. Knowing this, it does not come as a surprise that the First World War (1914-1918), arguably one of the grimmest episodes of the twentieth century, gave rise to a rich collection of jokes. A significant number of them are discussed in Lesley Milne's study *Laughter and War. Humorous-Satirical Magazines in Britain, France, Germany and Russia 1914-1918*.

Milne, Professor Emerita in Russian literature at the University of Nottingham (United Kingdom), centres her study around four humorous-satirical magazines, stemming from four different countries all heavily involved in the First World War: the British journal *Punch*, the French magazine *Le rire*, the German journal *Simplicissimus* and the Russian magazine *Novy Satirikon*. All four had an evident comical intent, although the types of humour they deployed could vary. They were all published throughout the war, except for *Novy Satirikon*, which was forbidden by the new Bolshevik authorities in August 1918, just a few months before the war ended with the armistice of 11 November 1918. Furthermore, they were all written for an educated middle-class audience. This makes the four magazines perfectly fit for a comparative analysis aimed at mapping the use of humour by the various combatant nations during this international conflict.

In the short introduction that opens her monograph, Milne states that the approach that she has chosen for her research "is contextual and empirical rather than theoretical" (p. 5). The overall structure of the book follows from this choice. The twelve chapters, excluding introduction and conclusion, that make up this study are not so much trying to make a sweeping argument as they are listing various topics that regularly occurred in the four magazines and that represent key elements of the wartime experience as they saw it.

Chapter 1 introduces the magazines themselves, thereby paying attention to their main characteristics, their respective histories and what happened to them after the war. Chapter 2 discusses how the magazines responded to the sudden outbreak of war in the summer of 1914. Together with the last chapter, which discusses the final stages of the war, this is the only chapter that follows a more or less chronological order. All other chapters freely jump back and forth in time, but this only adds to their readability. Each of the chapters 3 to 11 can be said to offer a "snapshot" of the war – a favourite metaphor of Milne – from a specific angle.

Chapter 6, for example, discusses the issue of Self and Other: how did the magazines represent their own nation and how did they represent their enemies? It turns out that each nation had its favourite self-image. The British cherished their levity, whereas the French emphasised their gaiety. The Germans were represented by their enemies as a frightful nation, a bunch of monsters that knew no mercy. They themselves mainly identified with the idea of

encirclement: how they were attacked from all sides, thus being the victims of the other nations, who denied them their rightful place under the sun.

Chapter 10 is devoted to the topic of women, and discusses both the share of female contributions to the magazines, which was moderate but undeniable, and the overall representation of women in the magazines. Because the majority of the male population was at the front during these years, many jobs that used to be practiced solely by men were now taken over by women, for example, the job of waiter and that of tram conductor. This situation led to many predictable jokes on role reversal in the magazines, stories and cartoons in which the woman had become the one who wore the pants at home, also sometimes literally. Underlying these jokes is an anxiety for the enlarged possibilities for social agency offered to women due to the war circumstances.

Other topics discussed in *Laughter and War* include the responses to the various types of warfare taking place at sea, in the air and on land (Chapter 7), the ways both home front and war front dealt with the tremendous amount of casualties suffered during this conflict (Chapter 8) and the discourse surrounding love and sexuality as it functioned in these years (Chapter 9).

The four magazines are shown to have much in common, but also to differ in some respects. The British *Punch*, for example, was very careful to avoid bawdy references, whereas the French *Le rire* did not hesitate to make sexual or scatological jokes, or to discuss a topic like adultery. Here the stereotype of the prudish Brits versus the libertine French seems to be corroborated. The German *Simplicissimus* was the only magazine to offer ample room for non-comical content, which can be explained by its origin as a literary magazine. The Russian *Novy Satirikon* differed from the other three in that it had no contributors who actually served at the front, and was generally much more distant from the battlefield, both physically and mentally, than the others.

The comparative analysis that grounds this study is definitely one of its strong points. By choosing four comical sources from four nations that all played a significant part in the First World War, Milne is able to deliver a truly transnational account of the practice of humour in these years of turbulence and despair. She is thereby greatly helped by her expertise in twentieth-century Russian literature, which enables her to broaden her scope both geographically and linguistically, and not confine herself to a purely “Western” perspective. What this comparative analysis shows is that even in this age of extreme nationalism, humour had a rather cosmopolitan outlook. Surely, there are differences in context and comical tradition that make humour function differently in the various countries (cf. the prudish Brits versus the libertine French mentioned above). On the other hand, however, there are many striking similarities in the motifs and images used in the four magazines, as well as in the humour techniques they deploy. These similarities prove the universality of comedy as a mode and counter the common view of national humour styles that can be directly related to certain national characteristics.

Another strong point of *Laughter and War* is its treatment of humour as an object of study. Without explicitly referring to the field of humour studies, the author inscribes herself in it through the concepts she uses. Terms like irony, parody, wit and incongruity are regularly mentioned when discussing the content of the four magazines. Milne thereby does not limit herself to the visual genre of cartoon that so often forms the sole focus when political humour is included in historical research. On the contrary, she deliberately chooses to concentrate on verbal humour: “the telling line of verse, the exemplary story, the well-crafted caption, the joke that sums up absurdity, desperation or relief” (pp. 4-5). This gives her study an important surplus value for the field of humour studies, strengthening its historical outreach that has thus far been quite meagre.

Milne also manages to season her argument with compelling examples. In Chapter 3 (*Adjusting to the War*), she discusses three cartoons from three different magazines, all depicting a beach scene and making innocent fun of the 1914 summer holiday season. Together, they form a striking proof of the suddenness with which the war entered the public mind in August 1914. Of all verbal examples that are not originally in English, she offers lively translations. When these examples concern rhyming verses, the translation is in rhyme as well. As a result, you get a good idea of how the verse must have sounded for a reader at the time, and most of the time you understand why he or she might have found it laughable.

In her conclusion, Milne mentions several functions that humour fulfilled during the First World War. “Laughter was a means of organising defiance”, she states (p. 215). And: “At other times, laughter provided consolations and distractions, temporary relief from stress” (p. 216). But these particular functions are not systematically analysed in the study itself, which is more an overview of the wartime experience as it was expressed through comedy than it is a detailed survey of the social and political functions of humour at the time. Hence, the mentioning of these functions at the end of the book feels a bit gratuitous. Humour no doubt offered consolation, distraction and relief to a society in distress, but these are all truisms, to which no deeper layer of analysis is offered by this study.

The claim that humour was “organising defiance” is even more problematic. The word *defiance* is brought up several times by Milne to describe the role the four magazines played during the war, most significantly in Chapter 1 (p. 8). By calling them defiant, she pictures the magazines as rebels and places them in an anti-establishment position. Humour is commonly framed in this way, especially when its topic is political. We tend to see political comedy as critical towards the government and the national status quo *per se*, even though there are many examples of political humour supporting and enforcing the ruling authorities and dominant groups in society, rather than contesting them (cf. Kuipers 2011, Nieuwenhuis 2017). The magazines that Milne discusses all seem to belong to the latter category. They were all in favour of the war. They supported the temporary suspension of internal political debate –what was called the *Burgfrieden* in Germany and the *Union sacrée* in France– and even pictured the still existing debate in parliament as a threat to the national war effort (cf. Chapter 3). They were also defending the use of censorship. By the end of the war, *Punch* praised the famous Defence of the Realm Act (DORA), which promoted (self-)censorship among journalists with the following lines: “This be the praise no caviller can rob, / ‘*She wore no chevrons but she did her job*’” (p. 32). All in all, then, it is hard to understand on what grounds one could call these magazines defiant. That word seems simply misplaced.

Despite these critical remarks, my overall evaluation of this book is positive. It offers a lively picture of how Great Britain, France, Germany and Russia experienced the First World War, or at least how their educated middle-classes did. As such, *Laughter and War* proves how valuable comical sources can be for getting a hold on these experiences. Jokes often play with people’s expectations. They show what scares them and what angers them. Hence, they reveal a lot about both individual and group mentalities of both past and present societies. The book also shows itself to be the work of an eminent scholar, who knows her topic very well and is capable of delivering a sharp and comprehensible account of it.

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References

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