



Melissa Caldwell. *Dacha Idylls: Living Organically in Russia's Countryside.* Berkeley CA: University of California Press, 2011. 200 pp.

Melissa Caldwell's *Dacha Idyll*

This new book by the US anthropologist Melissa Caldwell adds to a series of studies that she has published about how people in post-Soviet Russia have adapted to the new realities of everyday life [Caldwell 2002; Caldwell 2004]. From the problems of social provision, the alterations in the food culture, and the topic of historical memory, Caldwell has now moved on to attitudes towards nature and to natural ('organic') life, and the ways in which these are expressed in discourses on the dacha and the practices related to it.

Until relatively recently, the only context in which dachas tended to be mentioned in the historiography was when famous historical figures had happened to live in them, or in specialist studies by local historians. Non-elite dachas concerned only those working on the informal economy and exclusively from the point of view of land use [Seeth et al. 1998]. However, at the start of the 2000s, there was a sudden burst of interest across the social sciences, both among Russians and among foreign scholars: while study of the economic role of dacha plots continued, there were also two important studies of the social history of the dacha [Lovell 2003; Malinova 2006], and of the sociological and anthropological aspects of modern dacha life [Galtz 2000; Humphrey 2002]. My own work is part of this general drift. When I began working on my dissertation (which deals with the garden settlements of

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Leningrad province), I suddenly realised why study of the subject is so rare in Russia itself. The dacha is so completely routinised, so deeply ingrained in our everyday life, that even close colleagues have sometimes reacted to my topic by saying, 'What on earth do you find to write about? Isn't it obvious in any case?' This gives a particularly important function to the studies of 'outsider' anthropologists, who can help us to recognise that not everything is so obvious after all, to direct an oblique gaze on ourselves, and to approach a new understanding of our own culture and everyday life.

Melissa Caldwell's study is based on an impressively large corpus of fieldwork data, mainly drawn from participant observation and interviewing, which she collected over the course of a decade (from 1995 to 2005) while she was working on a variety of different projects in Russia, including a stint of fieldwork in Tver province in the summer of 2005 devoted specifically to the dacha. The material that she has gathered is particularly valuable, since it provides the basis for a grasp of the often significant changes that have taken place within the discourses and practices relating to the dacha over ten years of economic and social transition. At the same time, it should be said that the discussion of these changes could in fact be considerably fuller and more informative than it is. The book's strength is, rather, its saturation with ethnographic detail. Each chapter begins with an episode from the author's fieldwork as a way of facilitating effective cultural immersion, an important consideration given that the book's core readership is one for whom dacha life is something exotic. Caldwell leads her readers on a process of discovery, describing dacha life as a type of bodily experience that is constructed by various types of physical activity and sensation, an insight that one assumes is based on her own experiences, since her study of dachas began accidentally, when some of her informants happened to ask her along for a visit. This strategy has important advantages, since it allows Caldwell's readers to apply their own schemes of analysis to the material that she supplies, and to criticise the conclusions that she herself comes to where this seems to be appropriate.

In the first chapter, which has the lyrical title 'Dacha Enchantments', Caldwell sets out her main purpose in writing the book: to construct a detailed ethnography of dacha life (p. 4), and to illustrate that this cultural site can be seen as central to modern Russian social existence. The second aim strikes me as more controversial than the first (for reasons that I will return to later in my discussion), but the first has been successfully realised: the seven themes that Caldwell addresses really are ones that Russians would associate with dacha life above all. They include the enjoyment of leisure and the 'natural' life, physically exhausting work, growing 'your own' fruit and vegetables, warm and informal social contact, the difficulty of getting anything done in an organisational sense, and friction with your neighbours.

Caldwell also analyses the understanding of the 'real dacha'. The combination of these themes is paradoxical: the dacha is both a thoroughly idealised commonplace of the Russian imaginary and an inalienable and often annoying manifestation of the mundane. The attention to this hiatus between representation and reality is central for Caldwell's methodology — hence, no doubt, the title of the book, *Dacha Idylls*.

In dacha life, the romanticised enjoyment of nature is combined with the need to endure significant discomfort from the physical point of view. The physically exhausting work in the vegetable garden is understood as unavoidable, but also as healthy and satisfactory in a spiritual as well as a bodily sense. In her effort to explain the paradoxes of dacha life, Cornwell chooses an approach that is, to my way of thinking, very productive: she treats the dacha not as a space in a physical sense, but as an assemblage of different types of emotional and corporeal experience and of different kinds of activity. The work of digging the garden plot emerges as an important method of undergoing an induction in the specific types of corporeal experience that are associated with the dacha, and this combination of pleasure and discomfort acts as a shaping force, its contradictory nature resolved by the high social value that is assigned to suffering in Russian culture generally (p. 52). I myself would argue that the specific 'joy of suffering' that goes with time spent at the dacha is also coloured by the heritage of Soviet rhetoric, which dwelled on the civilising force of 'active leisure' and surrounded physical labour of all kinds, and exposure to the untempered forces of nature, with a particular heroic aura. One has only to think of the way in which the images of polar explorers, geologists, and the builders of the Baikal-Amur Railway were romanticised to have an appropriate context for understanding. Among the older generation who received their entire socialisation in the Soviet period, a characteristic lexicon is in use that cements this connection: 'a feat of labour' [*trudovoi podvig*], 'a mighty labourer' [*truzhenik velikii*].

Another important point that Caldwell notes is the importance of time relations in dacha life. The dacha is perceived as a place where time, indeed life in general, is perceived differently from the ways in which it is perceived in the city. This is another area where apparent paradoxicality undergoes resolution, since the usual binary oppositions lose their force. Because the rigid timetables to be found in urban life melt away, it is possible for physical work to be interpreted as 'leisure'; indeed, the entire opposition between 'labour' and 'leisure' ceases to be meaningful (pp. 62–3, p. 69).

The dacha inhabits a timeless realm of a quite literal kind: people pay less attention to watches and clocks than in the city. They may even hide them away. Caldwell extrapolates from this to what she sees as

a characteristic relation with historical time: she observes that modern dacha-dwellers are still deeply attached to the image of the pre-revolutionary dacha, such as may be found in Chekhov and Gorky's writings, so that the dacha becomes a link between epochs that are often seen as hopelessly divided by the chasm of revolution. I have to say that her informants seem to have been influenced by the sense that they were talking to a foreigner into over-emphasising the importance of the 'classic' dacha image to the present-day situation. But fair enough, the landscapes of dacha life may indeed be perceived as forming a common background for modern and literary experience and may create the impression that time has stood still.

Thanks to this particular sense of time, the dacha is, in Caldwell's view, perceived as a key locus for experience of the authentic past and of authentic 'Russianness' (to this I would add: and 'Sovietness' too). It is a nostalgia object, and in this sense characteristic for a culture that is undergoing upheaval (pp. 115–6). At the dacha, the characteristic Russian nationalist conviction of the ties between 'the People' and the natural world is actualised. The openness of this location (sometimes in the most literal sense, since, in the Soviet period, there were often no fences), the readiness to offer mutual aid, the close and relaxed modes of contact that are characteristic for the dacha in its idealised form, (eternally?) receding into the past, are often held, as Caldwell argues, to stand for 'the Russian mentality' in general (p. 126). It is also possible to explain dacha-dwellers' love for working on their garden plots by their roots in the village, which has given them a 'yen for the soil'. In turn, the temporal and historical specificity of the dacha, as identified by Caldwell, give her the foundations for a critique of the widespread application of a 'transitional' paradigm to post-socialist countries, and more broadly, of the emphasis that she identifies in Western academic tradition on concrete moments of transformation and the existence of a sharp division between the historic, Soviet past and the post-Soviet present. Society cannot exist long-term in conditions of all-out transition, and the millions of Russians who seek shelter from the rapidly changing urban world express a clear understanding of this.

At the dacha, people can exercise control not only how they spend their time, but also what they eat. 'When I'm here, at least I know what chemical substances I put in, and which I don't' — that's the standard explanation for why food you grow on your plot is better than what you can buy at a market or in a shop. The desire to exercise control and to acquire a measure of autonomy from large systems such as the state or manufacturing industries or the market in the area of diet is something, Caldwell contends, that Russian dacha-dwellers share with 'back to the land' movements elsewhere in Europe and in America. In turn, this opens up fruitful possibilities of comparison (p. 170). Further, the key themes around which dacha

life is organised — the emergence of different types of intimacy and of ways of life perceived as natural — point to the connection between dacha life in Russia and the global striving to escape the alienated social relations of the big city.

At the dacha, people feel more in charge of their own lives, mainly because they are far away from state control (this is a notable feature of villages and exurban areas in Russia). As Caldwell contends, this may be expected to stimulate critical judgements and expressions of independent social organisation, possibly of a kind that are not strictly legal: after all, the organs of state are far away, back there in the city. This leads Caldwell to argue that the dacha (or other such space in the 'natural' world) is a likely crucible for the move to grassroots democracy and civil society, which 'naturally' emerge within the mode of life that people live out in such places. Here Caldwell's ameliorative view seems to me misplaced. It is certainly true that the regulations imposed by the state are often interpreted wilfully, if not ignored completely, in dacha communities, where people are often motivated by their own perception of how to behave, which throws up all kinds of conflicts. The situation is well captured by something I recently heard someone say at the AGM of a garden cooperative. When someone mentioned the existence of a certain law, the middle-aged man sitting next to him said, 'The General Meeting decides what goes on here, and not some mythical law'.¹ In this particular case, though, the General Meeting never actually got to a decision on the points raised by the agenda and was concluded with no progress having been made at all. As for the informal contact that one finds in dacha communities, I have rarely seen it go beyond chat about gardening, the weather, and what's on TV.

Fair enough, what Caldwell observed when she was working in Tver province does give some cause for optimism, but I would be inclined to see this as a fortunate exception from the general rule, given that she identifies as key local features a strong sense of social solidarity in the dacha cooperative community itself and the presence of a chairman who was capable of offering decisive leadership. It is much commoner for dacha and garden settlement administrations to be completely helpless in terms of the formal regulation of business, ineffectively operating mechanisms inherited from the Soviet period. The explanation for this may lie in those very features that Caldwell herself sees as giving grounds for optimism. For instance, it is reasonable to speculate that living in a 'natural' location may make people socially passive as well as fostering initiative, and that they would then be extremely reluctant to bother with social problems and administrative duties. The images of dacha life that Caldwell cites in

¹ See Alexandra Kasatkina's article in this volume for a further discussion of the context and meaning of this statement [Eds.].

order to advance the case for 'initiative' can be interpreted in exactly the opposite way from the one that she has chosen to espouse: for instance, the heaps of litter and the frequent brush fires in woods and fields around dacha cooperatives could be taken as a clear sign that the common good is of little concern to most.

The subject of conflicts between dacha-dwellers, one that any researcher on social relations is likely to find a rewarding one, is treated by Caldwell only in passing, with a focus on the social changes that have come about in recent Russian life. She observes that in the mid-2000s, there was a sharp rise in conflicts between neighbours in a dacha community that she had hitherto visited for some years. These stemmed from the appearance of solid plank fencing that acted as an impenetrable barrier between different plots (pp. 164–5). The view of the fence as a particularly blatant way of withholding information from others acts as an important indication of the way that legitimate expressions of privacy are understood in this society. The shift that is noted here shows how the reordering of the boundaries between public and private, and the re-evaluation of the concepts of public and private themselves, have recently come to characterise non-elite dacha settlements, which, because of the peculiarities of the time regime that Caldwell points to, had formerly retained a more or less 'Soviet-style' attitude to the construction of privacy.

These conflicts, along with the problems of self-organisation in dacha associations, are presented by Caldwell as part of the process by which people assimilate the new values of the capitalist society, including security as well as privacy and the practices of civil society. Dacha communities, in which people live far away from state control and are left dependent on their own resources to face organisational problems and the risks of living out in the sticks, can act as a unique kind of educative sphere, Caldwell argues. Here, once again, one may wish to express some doubts: for instance, the world 'educative' is rather misleading, with its assumption that there are some benchmark values of capitalism that Russian citizens can be expected to absorb, and its begging of the question of who the 'teachers' may be, and how it will be possible to determine whether the 'lessons' have been absorbed as they 'should be'. It seems in fact more likely that the situation will work the other way round, and that, as Nancy Ries has argued [Ries 2002: 310], Western researchers who are studying post-socialist societies may have the opportunity to rethink the significance and usefulness of concepts that they have hitherto confidently applied. As a possible alternative to 'the civil society' that Caldwell criticises and other like concepts, I would suggest that we might think in terms of processes of absorption and adaptation along the lines of Michel de Certeau's concept of 'bricolage' [1984], where elements are selected according to how well they suit a given moment

and the bricoleur's notions of what happens to be required. This type of approach seems to me more productive in that we can then address underlying desires, needs, and concepts, and not leap to schematic conclusions about the cultural processes that may be in train.

Having drawn the threads of her argument together, Caldwell moves on to critique such fundamental binary oppositions in the social sciences as rural / urban, modern / traditional, and centre / periphery. If people perceive the dacha as a kind of 'safe space', where activities are somehow more meaningful than in the city with its constant fuss, perhaps it is the dacha, and not the city, that should be seen as central to the understanding of Russian life? Caldwell argues that those who search for a civil society in modern Russia are ignoring important features of the culture, because they are fixated on urban life, and do not pay attention to the fact that civil initiatives can take different forms depending on local conditions. In the circumstances, does it not make sense to see dachas and villages as the real centres of Russian culture and politics, while cities and the Kremlin are the periphery (p. 174)? Calls to place axiomatic academic perceptions of the past under critical review (in line with the so-called 'democratisation' of the social sciences) have become familiar in the recent past. But Caldwell's special contribution is that she roots her critical comments in an empirical study of post-Soviet material. Her ambition is, evidently, to break a perceived deadlock in the anthropology of post-socialism, which, it is often argued, has still not managed to put forward new ground-breaking theoretical positions that might have an impact on the field of anthropology as a whole [Thelen 2011]. Yet, while underlining the desirability of a re-conceptualisation of the field of 'post-post-socialist' ethnography, Caldwell, regrettably, gives no firm sense of what direction she thinks this should take.

It is perhaps the chief weakness of Caldwell's study that she sometimes allows herself very broad conclusions on the basis of such specific material. I have already cited the case of local democracy. But the fact is that her ruminations on the perception of the natural world in Russian culture and nation-building also extrapolate huge generalities from the specific instance of the dacha. Other cases from which conclusions might be drawn, such as parks, are mentioned only in passing. And one may also speculate that people who live permanently in the countryside (the inhabitants of villages) and are fully-paid-up inhabitants of the natural world are likely to understand that world very differently. What is more, if (as Caldwell contends) we should understand the natural world primarily from the position of dacha-dwellers, then how does that square with her insistence that we should avoid taking the city (where most of the dacha-dwellers live outside the summer season) as the centre of Russian life? But leave

such questions dangling as it may, this lively and well-researched study of the Russian dacha does make a significant contribution to the study of former socialist societies. With luck, it may stimulate new work on the dacha not only from Western academics, but from Russian ones too.

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Alexandra Arkhipova, Mikhail Melnichenko. *Anekdoty o Staline. Teksty, kommentarii, issledovaniya* [Jokes about Stalin: Texts, Commentaries, Studies]. M.: OGI / RGGU, 2010. 399 pp.

No Laughing Matter

When first coming across the title of this book, one immediately wonders about the fundamental point of the entire initiative. The topic of political jokes has recently become so popular that one can now count many dozens of collections of source materials, including ones about Stalin (e.g. [Borev 1990]). But Alexandra Arkhipova and Mikhail Melnichenko's book is a far more serious undertaking than most others, distinguished by its meticulous treatment of its source material and by its interdisciplinary approach, drawing both on folklore and on straight history. The book is both intellectually stimulating and a pleasure to read, not just because one is able to meet up with old favourites and encounter new ones,¹ but because of the commentaries and analysis offered by the editors themselves.

The fundamental source for the collection, as Arkhipova and Melnichenko note, is 'print publications and archival documents' (p. 95). The editors have not made any attempt to collect oral sources. The range within the categories selected is, however, very wide: it includes diaries and memoirs, émigré newspapers, academic articles, police reports (OGPU *svodki* on 'the moods of the Soviet public'), denunciations, archives of materials relating to

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¹ What price, for instance, the witticism: 'The current high fashion dance in the USSR is — the stalin-ton, but in Europe it is the foxtrot-sky' (II-5), or, 'From Trotsky's will: "I request that after my death my brain should be preserved in spirit and sent to Moscow; I bequeath the spirit to Rykov, and the brain to Stalin' (II-8).

the political repressions of the Stalin and post-Stalin years and to the rehabilitations associated with them, and, in some cases, belles-lettres. None of these sources were originally aimed primarily at the recording of anecdotes (which were merely noted down to provide evidence of some kind, whether for an accusation or for a characterisation of the times), and they usually provide a clear date when a given joke was circulating. A much more tricky operation was work with the various collections of jokes that are already in existence. As Arkhipova and Melnichenko put it, ‘the dates here at best speculative (assuming that the jokes were indeed noted down, rather than made up by the compiler to begin with...!) In addition, it is obviously impossible to establish what sources the compilers themselves used (written, oral?) to put the material together, let alone what social sphere the material circulated in’ (p. 96).

Arkhipova and Melnichenko do their best to get round these difficulties by cutting the use of joke collections to a minimum and by frequent reference to Arvo Krikmann’s study, *Internet-anekdoty o Staline* [Stalin Jokes on the Internet], which was published in 2004 in Tartu. As they say, ‘we at first assumed that our study would mainly act as a supplement to Krikmann’s work’ (p. 29). Since Krikmann concentrated on jokes that were doing the rounds in the 1960s, Arkhipova and Melnichenko themselves have focused on the earlier period (beginning in the 1920s), and have used different sources from those cited by Krikmann. This is entirely reasonable, given that Krikmann’s work is easily accessible (in three languages, Estonian, Russian, and English) on the Internet,¹ and that the collections of jokes genuinely are a very poor source: ‘often the compilers simply cut-and-paste the jokes from previous compilations, sometimes making a few alterations to some, but not all of them’, and in any case, ‘the “handlists” that result have got little to do with folk tradition, which continues to live a life of its own’ (p. 35).

The most substantial part of the book (Section A) is comprised by a classification of the jokes on historical and thematic lines: the chronological denominations are the various phases of the Stalin era, from the emergence of the leader to his death, including the struggle with the opposition, collectivisation, the Great Terror, the War and its aftermath, and also the campaign against the ‘cult of personality’ and the afterlife of Stalin in the Khrushchev and Brezhnev eras. Within each discrete section, the jokes are arranged by subject-matter, with variants on one subject grouped together, and the annotations link the materials to similar themes elsewhere in the collection and in Krikmann’s collection. The second part of the book includes jokes arranged according to structural features: renaming, decoding, and comparison of political leaders with their era.

¹ See <http://www.folklore.ee/~kriku/HUUMOR/STALIN_FIN.pdf> (last accessed 29 September 2013).

Some of the contentions put forward by Arkhipova and Melnichenko strike me as rather controversial — for instance, when jokes composed along identical lines are listed as independent in terms of subject matter.¹ Sometimes the reasons why a joke has been assigned to one category and not another are unclear.² But argument about this kind of decision is potentially endless — and, in the end, pointless as well, because a good many of the jokes are multi-faceted, and the classifications themselves are necessarily contingent. The far more significant point is that the editors have evolved a system that is easy to use and allows material to be unearthed quickly (there is also a detailed index of topics at the end of the book that allows rapid retrieval of specific materials).

All in all, this is a unique collection of jokes that can be used by future researchers to chase up one or another aspect of the jokes themselves, or the culture that spawned them. Arkhipova and Melnichenko themselves offer such an analysis in the opening frame of the book, in essays devoted to the emergence and evolution of the (anti-)Soviet folklore of the 1920s and 1930s and its differences from the joke culture of later generations. To be sure, there is the slight sense that the first section (under the title, ‘Put v anekdot’ [The Road to the Anecdote]) does not track all the analytical paths that it might. It would be interesting to know more about the contention raised by Arkhipova and Melnichenko that ‘the positive connotations of Stalin’s personality — the wise, modest, just, though severe ruler — emerge only towards the end of Khrushchev’s leadership’ (p. 48), and particularly, about the effects of and reasons behind this phenomenon. An overview of Stalin’s image in the different socialist countries and how this changed at different periods before and after his death would also have been welcome.

Alongside this, one might regret the fact that the jokes cited are torn from their immediate sociological context and that there is no effort to reconstruct, for instance, what it meant to tell a joke about Stalin before he died or after, although the records of the state procuracy and other legal institutions and the accounts in memoirs (as mined by Arkhipova and Melnichenko for their source materials) do provide evidence that would facilitate such a reconstruction. There is a distinct shortage of analysis also relating to the political repressions enacted against the ‘narrators of anti-soviet jokes’, although

¹ For example, V-11 is assigned to the topic, ‘where is there more democracy, in the USSR or the USA?’, while V-12 includes the joke, ‘I’m completely free to say to Stalin that Truman’s an idiot too’: that is, both types of joke express a single underlying idea: that Soviet citizens are entirely free to make political criticisms — provided the target of their criticisms is America.

² For instance, IV-9 (‘The construction of a non-existent power-station’) is, for reasons best known to Arkhipova and Melnichenko, assigned to the theme ‘Collectivisation and Famine’, and not ‘socialist construction’, and the latter includes jokes about collectivisation (VII-5, ‘Stalin asks the peasants for a loan’).

Alexandra Arkhipova herself has a number of publications on this subject already.¹ In this connection, it is also unfortunate that no information is given about Arkhipova and Melnichenko themselves (records of their academic biographies and publications, for instance).

But these small criticisms are not meant to cast a shadow on the considerable achievements represented by the publication of the collection. The first of these relates to the discussion of narrative jokes in an interdisciplinary perspective, using a methodology drawn from both folklore and history. Another important point is the use of dated sources (police reports, etc.) that allows a sense of chronology to be established, and the development of the genre to be addressed.

Indeed, perhaps the most interesting points in the discussion relate precisely to this process. Occasionally, the motivation for a joke turns out to have been straightforward — a reaction to a poster, a slogan, or a published speech.² But in other cases, Arkhipova and Melnichenko have needed to carry out a formidable amount of detective work, making use both of archival materials and of the expertise from the Russian Folklore Fund in order to show how ‘jokes might crystallise out of printed memoirs and oral traditions’ (p. 64).³

Added to this, the authors do all they can to retrieve the meaning of the words used as it was at the time when the joke was originally told. For instance, they put forward a hypothesis that the earliest versions of the joke running, ‘Write “collective farm” on your forehead, and the lice will run for it,’ used the words ‘wreckers’ or ‘parasites’ instead of ‘lice’, these being terms of abuse regularly employed to stigmatise the political opposition. And in the famous riddle, ‘Why does Lenin always wear shoes, and Stalin boots? Because Lenin did his best to skirt round the bog, and Stalin just walks right into it’ (I-3), the word ‘bog’, according to Arkhipova and Melnichenko, was also regularly used about the political opposition; the punchline (‘because under Lenin they’d not managed to muck up the country more than ankle-deep’) was a later adaptation. This particular example (pp. 74–84)

¹ See, for instance, the Radio Svoboda [Radio Liberty] broadcast of 16 November 2003, ‘Sovetskii anekdot, zhivoi geroicheskii epos russkoi istorii (svodka prigovorov za anekdoty po Tatarstanu)’ [The Soviet Anecdote: a Living Epic of Russian History (Record of Sentences Passed across Tatarstan for Telling Anecdotes)].

² Thus, for instance, the commonplace in Stalin-era rhetoric referring to the Constitution of 1936 as a sun warming the earth produced the following riddle: ‘Why is there no butter in the shops? Because it’s all melted in the heat from the Stalin Constitution’. And after *Pravda* published a quotation from one of Stalin’s speeches, ‘I am ready to give all of my blood for the cause of the working classes, drop by drop’, a joke appeared that added to this stirring quotation an invented voice from the audience: ‘Why is it flowing so slowly?’

³ For instance, a joke where Stalin hints that a leading official’s dacha is unduly luxurious and would make a good kindergarten goes back to anecdotes about Peter the Great, but one can also find a trace from the real-life historical context, since Politburo minutes of the time recorded efforts to control the building of such dachas (pp. 36–49).

is also interesting because it draws attention to the simultaneous existence of a whole range of political cultures — what Arkhipova and Melnichenko term the ‘two folklore’ phenomenon.

Indeed, ‘the joke topics recorded in sources such as diaries, denunciations, and NKVD police reports [...] are not at all the same as the ones that ended up in émigré publications and later in Western collections of jokes’ (p. 27). The former topics relate to peasant and worker circles and the materials from this type of source indicate how this traditional milieu ‘worked through’ the flood of political material and evolved its responses to the Party leadership. Characteristic of this level of joke-telling is the pervasiveness of traditional motifs from folk-tale, ‘which could be found in the international index of folklore motifs’ (p. 28). This folklore is quite different from urban political folklore of the kind published in émigré journals and which then formed the basis of published joke collections.¹ ‘And at the moment it is exactly collections such as this that are mainly used to study the folklore of this period, without any attention being given to the fact that there is no such thing as a homogeneous, unified national folklore, and that this “folklore” circulated among just one, fairly restricted, group of individuals in the Soviet Union’ (p. 27). The publication of this book will certainly help to fight that misperception.

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¹ Crucial here was the intelligentsia culture of the early twentieth century and the emigration: anyone who does not know French would find it difficult to understand a joke about how to deal with Soviet diplomats defecting that ran: ‘Stalin has ordered that there should be only one attaché and that the word should apply in its literal sense’ (VII-10) (the joke rests on a literalisation of the French attaché, meaning ‘attached’ as well as the title of an official diplomatic position).