

The New Russians' Jokelore: Genesis and Sociological Interpretations

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In his perceptive study of Soviet society, A. Akhiezer treats the widespread proliferation of political jokes, gossip, and rumors, which he nicknames “whisper,” as a phenomenon worthy of sociological attention.¹ He rightly points out that these forms of social interaction not only serve as popular entertainment but also represent a noteworthy sociopolitical phenomenon that he terms popular “discomfort” with the existing system.

Whisper may take place in times of total suppression of free expression in a stable social system, or it could begin spreading at a period of popular maladjustment to dramatic social changes. From this vantage point, it is interesting to look at the phenomenon of current Russian “jokelore.”

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union, the most conspicuous and popular kinds of jokes circulating in Russia have been jokes that about the New Russians.² The adjective “new” aims to differentiate them from the “old” Russians, as history witnessed them: Despite dramatic political and social change, the “Old Russians” sustained perception of themselves as a group—as a nonmaterialistic people, much more concerned with cultural and spiritual values than with profitmaking. The Soviet system of national wealth distribution, in which the vast majority of people were equally poor, fit with this self-image. The following joke from the post-Soviet period can be viewed as both self-deprecatory, from the point of view of the materialistic West, and self-congratulatory, from the Old Russians' vantage point, in that it shows their refusal to bend their beliefs and habits in the face of sweeping political and social changes:

What's business Russian style?

To steal a case of vodka, sell it off cheap on the streets, and drink up the money.

The New Russians are depicted as bulky men who look like weight lifters or wrestlers. In this respect current Russian humor continues the folkloric tradi-

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tion of treating corpulence as a signifier of wealth. In many jokes, the New Russian is characterized as a "burly lad with a bull's neck" (*detina s bych'ei sheei*).

A young lady says to a New Russian, "You know, I've seen you before somewhere. . . I've got it: on a can of Spam."³

Although real "New Russians" tend to surround themselves with long-legged slim, attractive females, in jokelore the wives of these *nuouveaux riches* are also portrayed as heavy.

A grossly fat wife of a New Russian asks a furniture salesman:

"Are you sure that beds made by this company are truly reliable?"

"Oh yes, lady, this is a very solid firm. They test every new model of their beds by borrowing a hippo from a zoo. However, in your case, I'd recommend proceeding with care."⁴

In jokelore, the New Russians are uniformly dressed in crimson jackets (sometimes they are called *krasnopidzhachniki*); they sport mirror sunglasses and heavy golden chains around their necks and carry cellular phones wherever they go, even, as one item has it, while scuba diving.⁵ They have a peculiar way of keeping their fingers spread out like a fan (*veerom*).⁶ With their limited and primitive vocabulary and the predictability of their reactions, they are presented as mechanical dolls filled with modern technology.

Three New Russians get together. Suddenly something begins squeaking in one of the men's hands. He brings his pinkie to his eyes and studies it.

"What's that?"

"I have a micropager sewn in my finger."

At this moment, something buzzes in the other's ear.

"What's with you, brother?"

"It's my internal radiotelephone turning itself on."

After a short while, something begins rumbling in the third one's stomach.

"What's with you?"

The third one grabs his stomach: "Oh, my God, a fax is coming."⁷

The social origin of this type of satire is not quite clear. The New Russian is thought of as coming from the provinces (in one item, he's visiting his grandmother in a village),⁸ but he himself is not aware of the simple facts of rural life:

A New Russian visits a village for the first time in his life. Upon returning, he tells his wife: "I saw a man who made a horse with his own hands."

"Don't pull my leg."

"I swear! When I approached him, he was finishing hammering down its feet."⁹

The New Russians' are depicted as lumpens who have left the countryside and never fully adjusted to city life. Most jokes about the New Russians are slightly revised versions of Russian ethnic jokes of the last few decades. Many are modernized versions of jokes told since the late 1950s about the Georgians. Others are similar to jokes told in the past about Jews. Some items are borrowed from the jokelore about Ukrainians and Chukchis, and some are recycled prerevolutionary Russian jokes about ignorant, uncultured, and boastful merchants. The more recent precursors of some jokes targeted the Communist elite of the Soviet period.

Even though many real-life New Russians are among the most educated members of the population—engineers, teachers, and scientists,¹⁰ as well as doctors and lawyers¹¹— they are portrayed as provincials and country hicks, just as, traditionally, the Georgians, Ukrainians, and Chukchis have been:

One New Russian says to another, “You know, it turns out that I’m a smart cookie, after all.”

“How do you know that?”

“Well, I bought a Lego construction set for my little son, and I put it together in a mere three days.”

“So what?”

“It’s written on the box, ‘Three to five years.’”¹²

In jokes, the New Russians are portrayed as cheap,¹³ greedy, and stingy,¹⁴ as in many old jokes that targeted traditional Russian satirical folklore, greed is gluttony.¹⁵ In the following item, to be human for the New Russian means to consume as much food as possible, especially if it is free:

At a party celebrating the opening of a new bank in Moscow, English partners present were astonished to see that many of the attendees drank champagne by the bottle and ate herring for snacks, followed by cognac and whiskey, vodka and beer. Some were already stinking drunk. Some began “squat dancing.” Some took refuge with girls behind closed doors. A New Russian came up to an Englishman who was observing the whole scene with horror: “And why aren’t you eating anything, sir?”

“I don’t want to.”

“Listen, it’s a freebie (*khalyava*). Free of charge. Eat!”

“I eat only when I’m hungry.”

“My, my! You’re just like an animal.”¹⁶

Unlike the jokes aimed at the Georgians, Jews, and other superachievers of the Soviet period, in which the targets of the jokes were shown as needing to conceal their income, the New Russians are ridiculed for doing the opposite; they are treated as spendthrifts who flaunt their wealth.¹⁷ In one joke, a New Russian beats both a Texas oil king and an Arab sheik in his ability to throw money to the wind:¹⁸

A New Russian arrives at an expensive hotel in the Canary Islands accompanied by his servant, who is carrying his skis.

"But, Sir," a porter says. "I think you're somewhat mistaken. We never have snow and . . ."

"I know," the New Russian interrupts him, "It's coming right after me on my cargo plane."¹⁹

They often compete with each other in showing off their wealth:²⁰

Two New Russians meet. One says to the other, "I heard you bought a crocodile."

"Well, it was a while ago. I recently put gold bridges and crowns on its teeth. Now I have my hands full with the problem of feeding it!"

"You don't say! And why do you have a problem feeding it? Give it black caviar if it has difficulty chewing."

"Well, while they were fixing its teeth, the poor thing got used to eating dentists."²¹

In another item, a New Russian buys a new Mercedes just because the ashtray of the one he drives is full.²² The New Russian is depicted as so wealthy and powerful that a reversed scenario of folkloric wish fulfillment is played out in many jokes. It is not a gold fish and Santa Claus (*Ded Moroz*) but the New Russian and his son who are capable of performing miracles.²³

The New Russian is portrayed as self-satisfied and smug. He is sure that this historical period is his for keeps. In the following item, he is the conqueror of the Old Russian's sexual territory, which, without a trace of discomfort, he claims as his own:

A husband returning from a business trip sees a Mercedes 600 parked in his driveway. Inside, he sees a crimson jacket on a hanger, a cellular phone on the table, and his wife in bed with a man. The husband pushes the man:

"Hey, what are you doing here?"

"What do you mean? Don't you see? We're making New Russians."²⁴

In their characterization of the New Russians as unstoppable womanizers, many jokes about them are nothing but slightly altered versions of jokes about the Georgians.

A New Russian phones his friend: "The circus has come to town. They show such unbelievable things there! Just imagine, a stark naked broad on top of an elephant!"

"Perhaps it's worth the trip," his friend says. "I haven't seen an elephant in ten years."²⁵

As in jokes about the ruling class of the Soviet state and party elite, the New

Russian treats his secretary not as a clerical assistant but as a sex object first and foremost.

A New Russian is asked, "What's the difference between a good female secretary and a very good one?"

"It's very simple," he says. "A good secretary every morning says 'Good morning, boss!'"

And a very good one tenderly whispers in your ear, "'It's already morning, boss.'"²⁶

As in jokes about the Georgians, the New Russians are mercilessly ridiculed as lacking culture, a failure that from the joke teller's point of view, sets them light years apart from the Old Russians:

The wife of a New Russian sees an ad on the street and says to her husband, "Let's go to this Mozart concert."

"What for? What's with you? Can't you read? Mozart made it clear that this concert is not for us. It's for a flute and orchestra."²⁷

A New Russian is urinating in a driveway. An intellectual in a pince-nez and a fedora comes up to him: "Excuse me, where do I find Symphony Hall?"

"Hey, why bother? Go ahead, piss right here!"²⁸

The New Russian is usually depicted as a family man but not a virtuous one. His is only a semblance of a family, and he is always nepotistic.²⁹ He hates his wife and cheats on her at every opportunity. A great deal of traditional Russian misogyny is directed at the wives of the New Russians. They are portrayed as the spitting image of their husbands: avaricious and spoiled. In one item, a New Russian's wife purchases a Mercedes just because, upon stopping at an automobile dealership to make a phone call, she feels uncomfortable leaving without buying something.³⁰ She reciprocates her husband's philandering with equal obliviousness to spousal vows and fidelity; she does not mind her husband's transgressions as long as she can profit by them.

"You know," says one New Russian to another, "I've recently been betting with my wife and winning. The bet is that if I don't come home in the evening at the time I promised, I owe her a grand (*shuka baksov*)."

"And if you come very late? Or the next morning? Then what, a terrible scandal?"

"That's the beauty of it! If that happens, she jumps on the bed and shouts. 'You've lost, you've lost!'"³¹

The children of the New Russians are invariably portrayed as mercenary and rude.³² They are spoiled brats, full of contempt for their less fortunate peers. As in many jokes about Georgians, a child of a New Russian is depicted as an exag-

generated copy of the parent; his image is the realization of a Russian proverb: "An apple falls near the apple tree."

A teacher has his pupils write an essay called "If I Were Chairman of a Corporation."

The pupils are all writing diligently; only the son of a New Russian is gazing out the window.

"And why aren't you writing?" the teacher asks.

"I'm waiting for my secretary."³³

A New Russian is checking his son's homework:

"How much is two times two?"

"Seven."

"It's not seven. It's four."

"I know that. But I feel like bargaining."³⁴

In the following joke, the satirical device of children exposing parents' vices is used:

A New Russian is sending his son to England for study at Eton.

"My boy, when you grow up, I want you to become a gentleman."

"I don't want to be a gentleman, Daddy! I want to be like you!"³⁵

What truly distinguishes jokes about New Russians from numerous ethnic jokes is that they introduce a new subject matter—their attitude toward work and their business ethics. The New Russians' business skills are portrayed as next to nothing. They are depicted as *luftmenchen* who produce nothing and have nothing to sell but their souls.

One New Russian says to another:

"I've found a shipment of sneakers in my warehouse. Interested?"

"Yes. That's a trifling sum."

And they part: one looking for sneakers, the other for the money.³⁶

When they should be working, the New Russians are engaged in partying or endless orgies.³⁷

Russians have been conditioned to perceive poverty as a virtue and being poor as a sign of the purity of one's soul (as a Russian proverb goes, "Poverty is not a sin"; "*Bednost'*—*ne porok'*"), so in jokes the obscenely rich New Russian is invariably portrayed as having no sense of honor or conscience.³⁸ In one item, he does not bother to stop a blind man from stepping onto a bridge under repair.³⁹ Although observers of the contemporary scene disagree about the extent of their philanthropic activities,⁴⁰ in jokes, the New Russians invariably show no compassion for others, not even the less fortunate:

A New Russian's wife asks her husband, "They came to ask for donations for a high school swimming pool. How much should I give them?"
 "Give them two . . . no, three buckets of water."⁴¹

A homeless man standing at the door of a luxurious villa in Barvikha (an expensive Moscow suburb) asks the mistress of the house, "Dear lady, help me! I haven't seen meat for two weeks!"
 "What an unfortunate man!" says the mistress and shouts to her maid, "Nyura, bring over a meat rissole. Show it to him."⁴²

All human feelings are foreign to the thick-skinned New Russian.

A New Russian is having a high time in Florida. He calls his buddies in Yaroslavl.
 "How are things going for you?" they ask.
 "Just fine! No problem! I have everything my heart desires. Sunny beaches, beautiful girls, the best food and drink money can buy. And there's no work, just play."
 "Aren't you homesick, Vanya? Don't you feel nostalgic from time to time?"
 "Me? Homesick? Are you kidding? What am I, a Jew?"

The New Russian constantly changes apartments, wives, banks, lovers.⁴³ A compulsive gambler, he squanders his money in casinos.⁴⁴ He mocks those moral values that the Russians hold especially dear, cheats on his friends, and, in general has no sense of friendship or solidarity.⁴⁵ He does not understand what the soul is all about.⁴⁶ In one item, a remake of a Jewish joke, he buys a diamond-studded cross for himself and asks the jeweler to remove Christ from it, saying that he is not interested in "that gymnast."⁴⁷ If he turns to God, he does so only to ask him to multiply his wealth.⁴⁸ He may jump on the bandwagon of religion just because it's a new Russian fad. The results are disastrous:

A New Russian gives a church big money in exchange for a chance to deliver a sermon. Afterwards, he asks the minister how it had gone.
 "In principle, it was okay, my son. But there's no point in putting a crimson jacket over a cassock. And when you cross yourself, you should keep fingers together, not spread them so they're a fan. And you should bless the parishioners with a cross, not with your cellular phone."⁴⁹

Although only a small fraction of the New Russians have a criminal record, jokes about them often place them with criminal activities.⁵⁰ Their money lets them spit on the law and literally buy their way everywhere.⁵¹ They corrupt the whole system of justice, as seen in the following remake of a joke about the Georgians:

A judge tells the New Russian defendant, "You may say your last word to the court."

"One million—and not a cent more."⁵²

A striking feature of these jokes is their treatment of the sharp class stratification in post-Soviet society.

A New Russian meets a well-known actor at a reception.

"Are you an actor? I'm a banker. I'm ashamed to admit it, but I haven't visited a theater in ten years."

"Don't be ashamed," the actor says. "I've never been in a bank."⁵³

As in jokes about the Georgians, what constitutes a dream for the Old Russians is a trifle for the new.⁵⁴ Class disparity is symbolized by the two signifiers of social standing: the quality of the food and the brand of car.

During a reception, two Russians introduce themselves.

"Sergey Novikov, importer. Swiss bananas and TV sets from New Zealand."

"Nikolai Shevchenko, tax collector. Rye bread and tap water."⁵⁵

A New Russian complains to his doctor that his stomach doesn't digest food properly.

"I eat caviar, and I crap caviar. I eat sturgeons, and I crap sturgeons. I eat those damn lobsters, and I crap lobsters. I drink a martini, and what comes out is a martini. What should I do?"

"Why don't you try eating what simple people eat."⁵⁶ (Of course, "crap" is implied here.)

A bus conductor announces: "Gentlemen (*gospoda*), please get your tickets."

The passengers are silent.

"I repeat again, gentlemen, please pay for your ride."

Again silence.

"Gentlemen, how many times do I . . ."

A voice from the crowd says, "There are no gentlemen here. Gentlemen ride in Mercedes."

"And who are you then?"

"We are comrades."

As cars symbolize social disparity and class division, in current jokelore the newly rich Russian drives a Mercedes (or sometimes a BMW or a Jeep Cherokee). His less fortunate compatriot drives a tiny subcompact Zaporozhets; one joke has it that its would-be owner died of hunger trying to save money for it. In one item, a New Russian also buys this car, but only to have something in which to move around his vast apartment.⁵⁷

In a number of jokes, the class clash is metaphorically rendered as a car col-

lision. The outcome is often predictably bad for the smaller car, but in some items, in the tradition of Russian folk satire, the socially disadvantaged Zaporozhets driver outwits the rich and powerful Mercedes owner.⁵⁸

These car jokes show that in the tellers' imagination, it is the working class that has the ability to confront the newly rich. In the tradition of Communist propaganda, which rendered the proletariat as omnipotent, the power of the working class is symbolized by a huge truck from the Kama Automotive Plant, a Kamaz. A Superman of sorts, the driver of a Kamaz restores social justice by turning a shiny and sleek Mercedes into a pile of junk:

At an intersection, a Kamaz and a Mercedes collide.

A traffic cop asks the Mercedes driver, "What were you thinking when you drove through the yellow light?"

"I thought I would make it."

"And I thought," says the Kamaz driver, "I'll be damned if I'll let you make it."⁵⁹

Like ethnic targets in the 1980s, the New Russian is subjected to "bad wish" jokes.⁶⁰ Disasters of all kind befall him—from major material losses (e.g., "A New Russian's villa burned down. Besides his insurance company, who cares! But it's such a pleasure to hear about it.")⁶¹ to such devastating blows to the folk male ego as his wife's infidelity or his own impotence.⁶² Traditionally, in folk satire, the potency of the poor is contrasted with the impotence of the rich, as exemplified by a proverb collected by Dahl: "Bogatyi tuzhit, chto khui ne sluzhit, a bednyi plachet, chto khui ne spriachet."⁶³

A newlywed New Russian goes to a doctor.

"Doctor, help me! I can't consummate my marriage."

The doctor examines him and says: "Alas, nothing can help you anymore."

"And what about the remedy called 'bee's milk' (*pchelinoe molochko*)?"

"Mister, I can prescribe 'bee's milk' for you. I can even make you begin to buzz. But to sting—never!"⁶⁴

In other "bad wish" jokes, the New Russian is exposed to dreadful visits by tax collectors and racketeers.⁶⁵ In one, he is hunted like a wild animal.⁶⁶ In this, and in a number of other jokes, he is subjected to violent death.⁶⁷ In the following item, it seems that the teller fantasizes that the only choice a New Russian should have in his life is the kind of coffin he should buy for himself:

In a funeral parlor, a New Russian is looking over coffins. He asks a salesman, "What do you think, which of these coffins is a better buy?"

"It's hard to say. The zinc ones last longer, of course. But wooden ones would be better for your health."⁶⁸

The following item reveals that the bad wish is nothing but an expression of social envy:

A blue-collar worker (*rabotyaga*) goes to Paradise. He sees a slogan on an archway: "Wish Fulfillment for Half of Russia's Working Class." He enters. They dress him in a crimson jacket, hang gold chains on his neck, give him a wad of money, and let him into the Garden. He just manages to have a drink and a snack, to play in the casino, to feel up some girls, when a mob of workers attacks him and beats him up mercilessly. He crawls with great difficulty to the exit and asks, "What was that?" "That way we fulfill the wishes of the other half of Russia's Working Class."⁶⁹

Conclusion

The cultural clash between the nouveaux riches and the old elite has been a part of many societies throughout history and is reflected in world literature. Moliere's *Bourgeois Gentilhomme* is a celebrated example of a satire directed at social upstarts. In nineteenth century Russia, Saltykov-Shchedrin relentlessly ridiculed members of the new entrepreneurial class, calling them the "new predators" and the "dirty ones" (*chumazye*), in such works as *The Sanctuary of Monrepos*, *The Contemporary Idyll*, and *Loyal Speeches*.⁷⁰

Oral culture also usually follows the trend. Jokes about ignorant parvenus represent a reaction of the old elite to those who threaten their position.⁷¹ While the struggle for resources continues in private, the old elite attempts to represent "the newcomers . . . as violators of the . . . norm."⁷² In the post-Soviet period, the question is not so much Who wields the power? as What is the nature of the power? It basically belongs to the same people: a hierarchy built on ideological principles has been replaced with the one built on money. Thus the New Russians do not quite fit the traditional image of the newly rich. Current jokelore does not provide an accurate view of the heterogeneous new entrepreneurial class. Its satirical stereotype is based on the lowest denominator of the group's characteristics. And the jokes come not from the members of the old elite (who, in large part, actually *are* the New Russians) but from those who for one reason or another cannot join the money mongers—that is, from blue collar workers, rank-and-file white collar workers, and the intelligentsia. The "view of the cultured but poor on the rich but uncultured" expressed in these jokes corresponds to reality only to a degree.⁷³ Many of the truly rich are well-educated former members of the old nomenklatura and professionals with considerable management experience.⁷⁴ The jokes' play with the idea of ignorance and low culture is especially preposterous. The richest businessmen are better educated than other segments of society, except the intelligentsia itself.⁷⁵ The New Russians continue the cultural heritage of prerevolutionary merchants, such as Morozov, Mamontov, and Ryabushinsky, by carrying out patronage of the arts. Levinson reports that some of the newly rich make money for the sole purpose of supporting actors' studios, including providing scholarships for disadvantaged students.⁷⁶

Hence the New Russians of the jokelore are really constructs of the popular *wish* that all of them were undeservedly wealthy—in folkloric terms: stupid, ignorant, greedy, and immoral. These jokes give voice to popular resentment of the

new economic realities of post-Soviet Russia. In them, the whole enterprise system is portrayed as criminal, exploitative, and humiliating for workers.⁷⁷ In their gibes at the New Russians' morality the tellers reassure themselves that there is no such a thing as a legitimate business, that no man of honor would get himself involved in such an activity, that only unscrupulous, thoroughly immoral people are qualified for the enterprise.

They asked a New Russian what made him wealthy.

"In order to make money, a person should be a bastard for ten years."

"And then?"

"And then he has to stay that way."⁷⁸

This new folklore is the best illustration of Christopher Wilson's observation that by their very nature, jokes are an expression of the conservative spirit.⁷⁹ Jokes about the New Russians are told presumably by those who differ from them, that is, by Old Russians. They believe that the free enterprise taking root on Russian soil is morally corrupt. Although reflecting a great deal of justifiable disappointment in the practices of entrepreneurs, including violations of employment rules and tax evasion, these jokes are also indicative of the general anxiety about the new economic reality—an anxiety combined with no small dose of envy. Many Russians, because of age or lack of entrepreneurial capabilities, long for the old Soviet days, which provided a minimal existence: equal poverty for all, except a small fraction of the population made up of the party and state elite.

Although many jokes about the New Russians are borrowed from the vast repertory of ethnic jokes, the big and significant distinction is that the objects of popular resentment are not outsiders but the tellers' own kin. In a way, this is a positive development. From the late 1950s through the 1980s, one could find plenty of jokes about wealthy Georgians, Armenians, and Jews but hardly any directed at the Russian profiteers in the "shadow" economy and the underground millionaires who flourished in the post-Stalin period. Although class distinction in the Brezhnev period was rather pronounced, group antagonisms, as expressed in ethnic jokes, followed the current urban American pattern, which runs "not along economic or social lines, but along racial and cultural ones."⁸⁰

Thus most jokes about the New Russians are old ethnic jokes turned inward: they ridicule the stupidity, low culture, criminality, and extravagance of a subset of their own group. Only a few jokes give way to traditional Russian anti-Semitism and make a futile attempt to cast the New Russian as a Jew (e.g., "A New Russian comes to an Old Jew and says: "Daddy, give me money."). The Russians' tendency to attribute to "outsiders" the negative traits they do not want to recognize among their own members is a well-known phenomenon in folk humor around the world.⁸¹ As is the case with New Zealanders' jokes about the Maori, or Germans' jokes about Swabians, Russians' jokes about Jews project "traits that they wish to remain on the moral periphery of their culture onto [those] who inhabit the social or geographical periphery of their society."⁸² With the advent of Russian capitalism in the second half of the nineteenth century, although the

nouveaux riches were mostly Russians, jokelore cast them as Jews.⁸³ This was repeated with the New Economic Policy (NEP) in the 1920s; jokelore of the period often made a “nepman” Jewish.

It's Christmas time and a nepman's family is at dinner. They hear church bells ringing all over Moscow.

“What's that, Daddy?” the nepman's little son asks.

“Pay no attention, sonny,” the nepman says (with a Jewish accent). “It's nothing. It's the local population celebrating some kind of holiday of theirs.”

The New Russian of current jokelore is undeniably a Russian type: from his attendance at Orthodox church services, to his physical appearance, his excessive drinking, his violence and raw power, and his language (a mixture of peasant talk, slang, and thief's argot). Moreover, the wealthy of all other ethnic groups are now coined in this image:

A Georgian boy asks his father: “Daddy, what nationality am I?”

“You're a Georgian.”

“And you?”

“I'm also a Georgian.”

“And Mom?”

“She's a Georgian as well.”

“So, Uncle Otar's also a Georgian?”

“No. He's a New Russian.”⁸⁴

The following joke, which used to imply that a Georgian or a Jew could buy out all of Mother Russia, has recently switched the culprit to a New Russian. This current remake of the old joke, which hinges on two meanings of the word “Volga” (the name of a Russian car and the Russian river, the symbol of Russia itself), expresses the popular resentment at privatization and sees it as an attempt to desecrate the Russian soul.

They asked the New Russian: “Is it true that with your income you can afford to buy a ‘Volga’ every week?”

“It's true. But I don't need that much water or that many steamships.”

Thus the current jokelore about the New Russians can be considered a sign of a healthy tendency—to strengthen the sense of identity for Russians who have begun to look for culprits within, not outside, their own group. Today it is no longer only “the other” who is at fault for the vast majority's substandard level of living, but Russians themselves.

It is noteworthy that, in general, jokelore about the New Russians is on the wane. As the very term “New Russian” has begun to be used less and less in a strictly pejorative sense and more to signify “businesspeople,” the jokes like those

mentioned in this study began trickling down the social ladder. Today, they can be heard on the lower social stratum, among Russians who have realized that they can never catch up with the times.

NOTES

1. A. Akhiezer, *Rossia: kritika sotsiologicheskogo opyta* (sostiukul'turnyi slovar') (Moscow, 1991), 273.

2. For a short survey of post-Soviet Russian folk humor, see Emil Draitser, "Folk Humor of Post-Soviet Russia: A Survey," *Slavic and East European Folklore Association Journal* 3, no. 1 (Spring 1998): 51–3. The term "New Russian" in reference to the advancing entrepreneurial class was first used by Hedrick Smith, in part, perhaps, for its resemblance to the French term nouveaux riches. Cited in Daniil Dondurei, "Novye russkie idut," *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1995): 1.

3. S. Erokaev, ed., *Zhizn' udalas': Anekdoty o novykh russkikh* (St. Petersburg, 1997), 90.

4. *Ibid.*, 86.

5. Victor Kulikov, *Anekdoty pro novykh russkikh i drugikh zhitelei zemli* (St. Petersburg, 1997), 152. Hereinafter jokes from this comprehensive collection of items about the New Russians will be abbreviated as "K," followed by an item number from the collection. A few unidentified joke samples come from the author's personal collection.

6. K 9.

7. K 47 and 8.

8. K 118.

9. K 29.

10. Aleksei Levinson, "Novye russkie i ikh sosedi po anekdoticheskim kontekstam," *Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie* 22 (1996): 385.

11. Herstin Holm, "Novye russkie: kak oni zhivut, chto oni lyubiat," *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1995): 108.

12. K 45.

13. K 170.

14. In K 15, he is cheap even at the expense of his own wife.

15. For a discussion of the cultural roots of such folkloric perception, see Emil Draitser, *Making War, Not Love: Gender and Sexuality in Russian Humor* (New York: Palgrave, 1999), 20–25.

16. K 41.

17. K 229.

18. K 35.

19. S. Eroshkin et al., eds., *Malinovyie parusa: Anekdoty pro novykh russkikh* (St. Petersburg, 1997), 45.

20. K 28 and 116.

21. K 71.

22. K 137.

23. K 658.

24. K 179.

25. Eroshkin et al., *Malinovyie parusa*, 32.

26. Erokaev, *Zhizn' udalas'*, 85.

27. K 174.

28. K 380.

29. K 460; S. Eroshkin et al., eds., *Malinovyie parusa*, 61.

30. K 191.

31. K 195.

32. K 20.

33. K 344.
34. K 326.
35. K 227.
36. K 246.
37. K 18 and 142; S. Eroshkin et al., eds., *Malinovye parusa*, 56.
38. K 78. Writing about everyday talk of the perestroika period, Nancy Ries notes: "Abundant were both long stories and quick philosophical remarks affirming the conviction that while people are poor, they are generous, but as soon as they move up the economic ladder and gain materially, they lose spirituality. Speaking about provincial people, a common remark was that, 'They are poorer out there, but they are kinder.'" Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997), 131. In Rolan Bykov's film, *Scarecrow*, a youngster comments: "The poor ones are the kind ones. I read about it in a book."
39. K 10.
40. Although Semyon Faibesovich sees the New Russians as world leaders when it comes to charity, Vadim Tsarev thinks that their donations are not especially generous or altruistic. Semyon Faibesovich, "Novye russkie—snaruzhi i vnutri," *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1995): 35; Tsarev, Vadim, "Novye uzkie," *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1995): 39.
41. S. Eroshkin et al., eds., *Malinovye parusa*, 37.
42. Erokaev, *Zhizn' udalas'*, 92. See also K 96.
43. K 36.
44. K 485.
45. K 56, 112, 208, 213, and 538.
46. K 46.
47. K 39.
48. S. Eroshkin et al., eds., *Malinovye parusa*, 31.
49. K 330.
50. K 26, 95, 429, 509, and 564.
51. K 87 and 105.
52. S. Eroshkin et al., eds., *Malinovye parusa*, 32.
53. *Ibid.*, 53.
54. K 209.
55. K 559.
56. K 232.
57. K 133.
58. K 132.
59. K 225. A variant of this joke involves, instead of a Kamaz truck, a locomotive (K 304).
60. See Emil Draitser, *Taking Penguins to the Movies: Ethnic Humor in Russia* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1998), 29–31.
61. K 287. See also K 163, 193, and 198. On the theme of social envy and bad wish in Russian everyday talk, see Ries, *Russian Talk*, 64.
62. K 649 and 652.
63. Claude Carey, *Les proverbes erotiques russes* (The Hague, 1972), 44.
64. K 646.
65. K 61, 200, and 334.
66. K 189.
67. K 103, 306, and 567; S. Eroshkin et al., eds., *Malinovye parusa*, 55.
68. K 294.
69. K 147.
70. For a survey of Saltykov's work, see Emil Draitser, *Techniques of Satire: The Case of Saltykov-Shchedrin* (Berlin: Walter De Gruyter, 1994), chap. 1.
71. Levinson, "Novye russkie i ikh sosedi po anekdoticheskim kontekstam," 383.
72. *Ibid.*

73. Ibid., 385.
74. Holm, "Novye russkie: kak oni zhivut, chto oni lyubyat," 108.
75. Levinson, "Novye russkie i ikh sosedi po anekdoticheskim kontekstam," 385. Elsewhere Levinson observes that the very rich and totally illiterate could be met in the far provinces or among hard-core criminal elements only. Aleksei Levinson, "Chego starye intelligenty ne dali novym russkim," *Iskusstvo kino* 1 (1995): 29.
76. Ibid., 30.
77. K 355.
78. K 210.
79. Christopher P. Wilson, *Jokes: Form, Content, Use and Function* (London: Academic Press, 1979), 228.
80. Vamik D Volkan, *The Need to Have Enemies and Allies: From Clinical Practice to International Relationship* (Northvale, NJ: Aronson, 1994), 88.
81. See Christie Davies, "Ethnic jokes, moral values and social boundaries," *British Journal of Sociology* 33, no. 3 (September 1982): 383–403.
82. Ibid., 386.
83. Levinson, "Novye russkie i ikh sosedi po anekdoticheskim kontekstam," 383.
84. Draitsler, *Taking Penguins to the Movies*, 159. There are also jokes that pattern other ethnicities along the same line of the social type—about the New Ukrainians and New Chukchis, who drive not a Mercedes 600, but 600 deer.