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## The Soviet Version of Heinrich Böll's *Gruppenbild mit Dame*: The Translator as Censor

Henry Glade and Konstantin Bogatyrev

All of Heinrich Böll's major fictional works have been translated into Russian, and have appeared in book form, except for "Irisches Tagebuch" (*Novij mir*) and "Ende einer Dienstfahrt" (*Inostrannaja literatura*). In accordance with the special rules and quirks of the Soviet publishing system, issuance of his major works has not proceeded in chronological order: from *Und sagte kein einziges Wort* in 1957 to the volume comprising *Der Zug war pünktlich; Im Tal der donnernden Hufe; Entfernung von der Truppe* in 1971. Publication of any foreign book in the Soviet Union is never a routine matter, and some of Böll's works almost did not survive the elaborate sifting process of the Soviet publishing machinery. In particular, this was the case with *Ansichten eines Clowns* whose lack of *Perspektivbewusstsein* caused considerable consternation among establishment critics.<sup>1</sup>

Nothing, however, can match the Byzantine tussle with *Gruppenbild mit Dame*. D. Melnikov, a high-ranking authority on German affairs, floated a trial balloon in the weekly *Literaturnaja gazeta* (10 November 1971) with a full-page excerpt from *Gruppenbild* (dealing with Leni's brother and with her lover Erhart), translated by his wife, Ludmilla Chernaja. In his brief comments Melnikov expressed his admiration for the novel but cautioned that "some pages are controversial and some others completely unacceptable to the Soviet reader." Such a statement seemed to preclude an early publication of *Gruppenbild* in the Soviet Union, but through a series of deft maneuvers Melnikov/Chernaja succeeded in placing the novel in the prestigious monthly *Novij mir* (circulation 175,000), where it appeared in serialized form in No's 2-6, 1973<sup>2</sup>. This was not the first Soviet translation, however, for the remarkably lively Ukrainian journal *Vsesvit* had published the novel in No's 5, 6, and 7, 1972. The translation into Ukrainian by Evgen Popovich is a good one; the translator competently handles difficult passages in which this novel abounds. Moreover, the expurgations are held to the absolute minimum for conformance with Soviet publishing policy.

None of these qualities, however, distinguishes the work of the Russian translator, L. Chernaja. To be sure, she is an old hand at translating Böll (*Das Brot*, *Billard*, *Clown*, among others), and her past performance had generally conformed to the high standards for which Russian translators are justly famous. If Chernaja's prior Böll translations could be faulted, it was only because of her continuing attempts to "uncomplicate" the text. Put differently, she was often insensitive to "Böll's syntax which is

stylistically colored.”<sup>3</sup> Perhaps this is a forgivable sin, inasmuch as the desire to “normalize” is a common failing of translators, according to Jiří Levý.<sup>4</sup>

In Chernaja’s work on the *Gruppenbild*, however, something entirely different from mere “normalizing” is at issue. For here she has not produced a translation, but a Soviet adaptation—a bowdlerization of the worst sort. There is a laughable footnote on the first page of her *Gruppenbild* to the effect that the Russian translation has been slightly abridged. 150 deletions—the equivalent of about 500 lines—cannot be considered a slight abridgment. What is slight are the instances where the translator bothered to acknowledge cuts through ellipses. Admittedly, *Gruppenbild* would never have been published in Russian if it had not been for Chernaja’s re-creation of the novel in strict adherence to the Soviet index. Therefore, our documentation of the omissions and changes in her text should offer valuable insights into those topics which must be handled with care within the Soviet Union.

Obviously it will not be possible to cite the whole catalogue of Chernaja’s sins of omission and commission within the confines of this paper. A listing of the most extensive deviations from the original, as well as of representative examples will suffice for our purposes.

As is generally known, the highest puritanical standards are vigilantly maintained in the Soviet publishing field. Thus, the translator and/or editor (rarely the censor) can be counted on to red-pencil any and all naturalistic details, including sex, even in its most innocuous form. In the past these considerations have rarely affected Russian translations of Böll’s works, in contrast to, say, Grass’ *Katz und Maus*, where almost the entire third chapter was omitted.

*Gruppenbild* of course contains much more explicit and implicit sex than Böll’s preceding works. As a consequence, the deletions in this category are quite extensive. First, the most radical surgery was performed on the episode of Boris’ foreskin; there are some minor cuts of 2/3 lines up to “. . . keine Ahnung hatte er”<sup>5</sup> after which the whole section—75 lines—is excised without any ellipses.<sup>6</sup> The second major cut in this category removes the entire last section of Chapter 8 (308-312), the summary of Leni’s direct quotes. A high percentage of them are scatological, and the remainder of the quotes has been mangled so badly by Chernaja that there was no point in offering even a truncated version of this part.

Less extensive cuts are interspersed through Chernaja’s adaptation. For example, they remove explicit reference to the male sex organ, as “. . . das Instrumentarium männlicher Geschlechtlichkeit, dessen Erregung und Erregbarkeit mit sämtlichen Folgen, Freuden . . .”(52). Also red-pencilled are the descriptions of Leni’s “sinnliche Erfüllung” (190 and IV, 145) as well as that “es Boris nach Art des Mannes [erging]” (191 and IV, 145).

Another tactic of the translator is to render offensive descriptions in an ambiguous manner. Here are three examples from page 49: “. . . ‘wenn die Jungen ‘es allein machten’ ” becomes “for them to do those nasty things” (II, III); “. . . was die Jungen



alles mit ihr anstellten" becomes "how the boys even wanted Margret" (111) and " 'Auf einmal immer nur mit einem' " becomes "Never more than one on any given evening" (112). At other times the changes are rather bizarre, as from ". . . wir krochen eben einfach zusammen" (261) to "we were brought together by grief" (V, 202) and a few lines later from "mein Gott, da sind wir eben ein paarmal zusammengekrochen" (262) to "Oh God, were were simply drawn together on a few occasions" (202).

Mild expressions, at least by our standards, are also altered: ". . . erotische, bzw. sexuelle Erregung" (28) to "erotic and other sensual emotions" (II, 99) and "Fanden schoi Anfang 44, als Pelzer schon Blut schwitzte, 'Ringkämpfe' zwischen Boris und Leni statt?" (214) to "At the beginning of 1944, when Pelzer began to 'cough up blood' (sic!), had Boris and Leni already established a liaison" (IV, 159)? Unbelievably, even "auch biologisch ungeduldig" (89 and III, 138) is deleted.

Finally, in accordance with standard Soviet practice, all vulgarisms are either excised ("beschissen," 202 and IV, 151), or changed ("diese Scheisse," 306, to "this science," V, 226), or modified ("süsslicher Scheisskaiser," 202, to "stinking little Kaiser," V, 151). And of course, Rahel's special talents had to be suppressed, as for example: "Rahel scheute sich nicht einmal, auf Formen des Stuhlgangs bezogen, den Begriff 'klassische Architektur' anzuwenden (B.H.T.)" (48 and II, 111).

More than Böll's previous works of fiction, his *Gruppenbild* was predestined to ruffle Soviet political feathers. Thus, political and historical matters are the main targets for extensive revision. There are more than 200 instances of omissions or changes in this category.

To start with, references or allusions to the stark totalitarian quality of life in the Soviet Union touch a sensitive spot. To preclude any possible temptation on the part of the Soviet reader to compare political systems, qualifiers are inserted at strategic spots: ". . . und nur, wer je in ähnlicher Lage war, kann ermessen, wieviel ein paar Augen, in die man tief und frei hineinblicken darf, bedeuten können" (221). This sentence reads in Russian: "Only a person who has experienced fascism can comprehend what it meant to meet a comrade whom one can look into the eye" (IV, 163). Another example of this approach: ". . . es gibt nämlich eine sehr einfache Methode, Menschen loszuwerden . . . man erschießt sie . . ." (288). In the Russian text the verb (es gibt) is changed to the past tense and is prefaced by "In Germany" (V, 217).

Such unhappy events of the past as Kirov's murder (284), "' . . . der heimwehkranke Kerl mit der GPU-Visage' " (168), and Bogakov's apprehension about the fate of his son in the Soviet Union (first 8 lines on 283) are excised.

Predictably, a great number of passages relating to the Soviet POW's are deleted, especially those dealing with their unwillingness to return to their homeland. Because of the heavy cutting in this area, two Soviet POW's, Belenko and Kitkin, never even surface in the Russian text, for after "Sein Zimmer in einem Heim mit kirchlich

karitativem Hintergrund teilt er mit" (167), the Russian version has "two neighbors" and the next 23 lines are cut (IV, 133). Relatively minor cuts of 3/4 lines eliminate uncomradely remarks like "... aber die meisten wurden ja ... zu Väterchen Stalin heimgeschickt" (257 and V, 199); "... wenn er [Boris] schon nicht in die Sowjetunion wollte" (258 and V, 200); and "... soll er [Bogakov] nun zu Mütterchen Russland heimkehren oder nicht ..." (262 and V, 202).

As for German POW's, one gathers that Soviet political realities of 1973 demand some adjustments: "... ja, elf Jahre lang war ich weg, Gefangenschaft—bei den Russen ..." (105); in the Russian text (III, 147) the narrator's imprisonment is reduced to 8 years. An even better adjustment is made at another spot through an insertion of 2 words: "... die hypothetische sowjetische Gefangenschaft ersparen wir ihm ..." becomes "we'll spare him the hypothetical Soviet imprisonment until 1945" (126 and III, 160).

A very sensitive area of course is the occupation of East Prussia by the Red Army. The Soviet adaptation leaves out: "... und das machte sich gut auf unseren kümmerlichen Veranstaltungen, wo wir doch gegen den Wahnsinn anzukämpfen hatten, der in Ostpreussen und so angerichtet worden war, durch eine angeblich sozialistische Armee" (315 and VI, 156), and in the following sentence "... wo Nonnen beerdigt wurden, die, wie man uns vorzumachen versucht, seinerzeit bei der Besetzung Ostpreussens vergewaltigt worden sein sollen" (332), "during the time of the battle in East Prussia" (VI, 166) is substituted for "bei der Besetzung Ostpreussens."

Everything remotely connected with "68" and "68ers," Böll's shorthand for the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, is cut, amounting to 35 lines (313-318). In the single instance where the major part of the sentence is retained, there is a reformulation from "Auf diese Weise wurde der Verf. Mitwisser der höchst eigenwilligen Vertriebspolitik des '68ers'" (313) to "Thanks to this the author became an accidental witness to a highly unique trade policy pursued by a former activist" (VI, 155).

And finally there are deletions throughout the text whenever references to communism are less than flattering, such as in the passage: "... Dem Kommunismus die Ehre, ihm sei in Zukunft die Macht'-nur hat man uns natürlich nicht beigebracht, dass der Kommunismus von 1897 ein anderer war als der von 27/28-," (82 and III, 133) and three passages on pp. 314-316 which the reader can easily spot himself. For the sake of preserving the purity of the Communist Party, the Soviet reader is not made privy to Pelzer's past membership in it "... dann wurde er tatsächlich Kommunist, richtig Mitglied, aber auch nicht lange ..." (203) reads in Russian: "... it is true that he flirted with the Communists" (IV, 157).

The additional 100 instances of major deviations from the original fit into a different category. They are not directly related to considerations of censorship, but they are related to these considerations. It seems that after her scissors job on the political aspects of the novel, Chernaja must have decided to be equally high-handed in her treatment of the less sensitive areas of the novel.



In some instances, she exhibits an appalling degree of parochialism. Some examples: she turns Bologna into Boulogne (223 and IV, 164); the title of Pushkin's famous short story *The Station Master* (in German *Der Postmeister* 219) is translated as *Počta* (*The Post-Office*); she does not seem to be familiar with Walter Benjamin whose name she writes as Benzhamin instead of *Benyamin* (158 and III, 178), and "Persilschein" (267) meaning character-reference, becomes "health-certificate" (V, 205). Another blind spot is her unfamiliarity with Yeats: "... zuviel chymische Rose in der Mutter . . . (78) is rendered by her as "a hothouse rose raised on chyme" (III, 131) and then footnoted as "Chyme—semifluid mass of partly digested food expelled by the stomach into the duodenum."

The major cut in this category stretches from pages 293-296: these pages, admittedly, are among the most difficult ones for a translator and Chernaja apparently decided to take the easy way out.

The whole text is shot through with quixotic translations such as the few random samples given here:

"Ausgesprochene Existenzgrübeleien" (63): "quite-down-to-earth" (III, 122).

"... da kann man nachträglich noch graue Haare kriegen." (223): "it is enough to give you a heart attack even today" (IV, 164).

"... das wären arme Säue, und er liesse auch bei denen manchmal ein paar Aktive springen, und seine Kippen bekämen die sowieso," (224): "But he was quite willing to squeeze a few marks out of these poor people; he gave them smokes . . ." (IV, 165).

"... Bei den sowjetischen Kriegsgefangenen ist es schon aus disziplinären Gründen nötig, den Waffengebrauch sehr scharf zu handhaben." (293): "In guarding Soviet prisoners of war, one should have a total mastery of one's weapon; this is essential to maintain discipline" (V, 220).

[About Trakl] "Dichter, deutsch, Österreich, tot." (218): "Poet, German, Austria, red" (IV, 162).

We have saved for the last what may well be the most revealing example of Soviet apprehensions. Purging the novel of all religious aspects is really tampering with its most fundamental ideas since the religious theme, in our opinion, is Böll's major concern in *Gruppenbild*. His belief in *Erneuerung*, in a broad sense, emanating from the Soviet Union is more explicitly stated in a most noteworthy interview which appeared in the *Frankfurter Rundschau* (23 November 1974). Needless to say, such beliefs are not welcomed by Soviet officialdom, but, interestingly, the loudest reaction to Böll's depiction of *homo sovieticus* as a spiritual being have come from German communist circles, specifically from F. Hitzer.<sup>7</sup>

The purging of religion from the Russian text was accomplished in a number of ways. "Sowjetmenschen" throughout the text is changed to "Russians"; whenever possible, Boris and Leni are downgraded. Most crucial, however, is the omission of this passage: "Von wegen Sowjetparadies! Wissen Sie, wer der einzige war, der uns

das Beten wieder gelehrt hat: dieser Sowjetmensch! Ja. Beten hat er uns gelehrt" (274 and V, 209). Related to this is the deletion of the book's dedication: "For Leni, Lev, and Boris." These people are real-life Moscow intellectuals whose life style and ethos are similar to those of their fictional namesakes. Therefore it is understandable that any reference to them would be unacceptable to Soviet authorities.

In conclusion, it is worth noting that some establishment scholar-critics in Moscow think that a bowdlerized version of *Gruppenbild* is better than none at all. Whether or not one agrees with this, there can be no doubt that if it had not been for Melnikov's and Chernaja's special interest in a Russian publication of the novel, it would have never come out in Moscow. It is equally clear, however, that never again will they or anybody else be able to put out such a wantonly mutilated translation of Böll's works. For the stipulations of the Universal Copyright Convention (which the Soviet Union has joined since the Russian publication of *Gruppenbild*) enable Western publishers now to demand in a written contract a faithful translation of their authors' work.

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### NOTES

1. For a full account of Heinrich Böll's critical reception in the Soviet Union from 1956 to 1971 see Henry Glade, "Soviet Views of Heinrich Böll," *Arcadia*, 7 (1972), no. 1, 65-72.
2. It seems highly unlikely that *Gruppenbild* will ever be published in book form in the Soviet Union. Both the publishing houses 'Progress' and 'Molodaja Gvardija' evinced a keen interest in publishing *Gruppenbild* under their imprint, only to be rebuffed by higher authorities.
3. T. A. Ostudina, "Princip povtora u Genrixa Bellja i perevod," in: *Voprosy filologii metodiki prepodavaniya inostrannyx jazykov*. Omsk, 1972, p. 32.
4. "... a translator tends to explain the logical relations between ideas even where they are not expressed in the original text, to explain away any breaks in thought or changes in perspective, to "normalize" the expression." *Übersetzen*. Vorträge und Beiträge vom Internationalen Kongress literarischer Übersetzer in Hamburg, 1965, ed. Rolf Italiaander (Frankfurt: Athenäum, 1965), p. 79.
5. Heinrich Böll, *Gruppenbild mit Dame* (Köln: Kiepenheuer & Witsch, 1971), p. 178. Further references are by page number in parenthesis.
6. *Novij mir*, No. 4, 1973, p. 139. In future references to the *Novij mir* text, the issue will be identified by a Roman numeral with Arabic page number.
7. "... Wenn wir erfahren, dass für Lenis Bildung Rahel und Boris entscheidend geworden sind, korrespondieren auch die Kräfte, die diese beiden Menschen befähigt haben, sich zu erkennen. Weiterhin wird dargelegt, dass die Grösse der Sowjetunion darin bestehe, einen Boris hervorgebracht zu haben. Die grösste Bewährungsprobe hat Boris in der Stunde, als fast alle Deutschen schlottern, nur noch eines kennen: Tod oder Leben. In diesem Augenblick lehrt Boris die Deutschen das Beten—im "Sowjetparadies". Mit anderen Worten: das Wesen der Oktoberrevolution ist mystischer Natur, ist Alexander Bloks Christus, der den "Zwölf" visionär voranschwebt—den zwölf Bolschewiki in den Strassen Petrograds im Oktober 1917. Allerdings beherbergt Bölls Allegorie mehr Solschenizyn als Blok, mehr Berdjaew als Jessenin..." Friedrich Hitzer, "Verweigerter Grösse oder grosse Verweigerung?" *Kürbiskern*, No. 4, 1973, p. 777.