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“The Border”

by Kurt Tucholsky / Peter Panter

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Translated by Jon Cho-Polizzi

Translator’s Introduction

This translation came about as part of a collaborative project between Dr. Charlton Payne and myself in the context of Professor Deniz Göktürk’s graduate seminar ‘Framing Migration’ in Spring 2016.

The source text of the following translation was first published in the *Berliner Volkszeitung*—four days after the publication of Tucholsky’s “Der Ausweis”—on June 27, 1920. Like many of Tucholsky’s satires from this period, “Die Grenze” was also written under the pseudonym Peter Panter. The current source for this translation is published in the fourth band of *Die Gesamtausgabe der Texte und Briefe von Kurt Tucholsky*, first published in 1960 by the Rowohlt Verlag in Reinbeck bei Hamburg.

Translation

The landscape is open: mountains, valleys, lakes. The trees rustle, the fountains leap, and the grasses bow in the wind.

Barbed wire runs straight through a clearing, through the woods, over the country lane: the border. On either side stand men, but those on the far side wear blue uniforms with yellow buttons, and those on our side—red with black. They stand there with their weapons, some smoke, all glower with sternest mien.

This then is the border. Here, where empires collide—and each empire ensures that the inhabitants of the other do not cross this line between them. Here you may yet bend this blade of grass, spring over this creek, or cross this final path. But then—stop! No further. Here is the border. One step further—and you have reached another world. One step further—and you may be punished for something that you might do here unpunished. One step further—and you may insult the pope. One step further—and you’ll have made an outlaw of yourself—you will have become a “foreigner.”

Bah, foreigner! You are the most miserable being under the European sun. Foreigner—! The ancient Greeks called foreigners “barbarians”—yet treated them hospitably nonetheless. You, however, are hunted from place to place, you—foreigner of our time—you will receive no right of entry here, there no residency permit; you are forbidden to eat bacon in one place, nor may you bring it with you on your way from one spot to the next—foreigner!

And that thing that they call Europe is a rag of brightly colored scraps, and all are foreign who dare to stick their nose out from their villages. There are more foreigners than residents in this blessed corner of the Earth...

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After this war, after such displacements—compared to which the tiny day trips of the Great Migrations were naught but child’s play—after the bloody marches of peoples across half of Europe, the small disputes around the church steeples of every parish have attained hellish significance. Lineage more ancient than the Greiz-Schleiz-Reuss¹ and the People’s State of Bavaria and an autonomous Upper Silesia and France and Congress Poland—it’s always the same. Each man holds his own to be of the utmost importance and is of no mind to care a fig about that of his neighbor. At first we draw a demarcation line. We divide ourselves. We need a border. For we are something special, unique in ourselves.

But *one* Earth bulges beneath these foolish humans, *one* ground beneath them, and *one* heaven above. Borders crisscross Europe. Yet no one succeeds in dividing peoples forever—neither borders nor soldiers—if they don’t will it themselves.

How we would laugh today at someone who with quixotic pathos would seek to break down the borders between Berlin and Magdeburg! When the time comes, so will they, one day, laugh about an international pacifist in the year 1920. To facilitate this change is our common responsibility.

¹ A major hereditary split in the lineage of the Thuringian nobility.