When It Blows Up

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Translated from the German by *Sinéad Crowe*

I've always scared easily. I've been scared of other people, loud trains, big cities, loneliness. And of the blank page. Maybe that's why translation assumed such an important role in my life when I discovered it many years ago: it opened the world of literature to me, yet it also created a sense of closeness and intimacy. At the age of 23, I thought I could hide behind the author, that I could find my literary voice without laying myself open to attack. Translation was a protective cloak that allowed me to make my way safely through the chaotic post-Soviet world. Beneath this cloak, though, I was pretty lonely. In a country with weak literature, unsophisticated criticism and a ruptured tradition of translation, it can feel as if you have no one to turn to, and self-doubt can fester.

Encountering a text: a colleague once compared it to stepping into a river in summer. At first, the water feels fresh, almost cold, and as wade in, you don't know how deep it's going to get. But after a few seconds, you get used to it and start to trust the current, even when you're not standing on solid ground. Feeling the water, you float. Lines blur, yet you are completely calm. The translation flows along with you, until tiredness overcomes you and you have to get out.

What effect does this encounter have on me? (I'm deliberately not asking how my translation affects the text; smart men dismissed me as a traitor long ago, said I was doomed to failure.) Yes, it can leave its mark, change me. It can hurt me. I can hardly bear texts about animals suffering, especially dogs, and especially when the suffering is described in a detached style. I try to avoid those kinds of projects.

Hate speech is even more difficult – when a novel's protagonist , a Nazi, talks about exterminating 'the gypsies', for example. I know the style, I know what the word is in Ukrainian, but in order to produce the translation, I also have to form a mental image of this man, to let his disgusting language pass through me. I feel fouled, but at the same time I want to shove this book, these words, into the faces of Ukrainian right-wing extremists. 'THIS IS YOU!' I want to shout. My rage helps a little, but it doesn't redeem me. I realise that I too am capable of hate speech – maybe a bit too capable.

In 2014, my translation of Martin Pollack's *Der Tote im Bunker* (*The Dead Man in the Bunker)*, a novel about the author's Nazi biological father, was launched at the Kyiv Book Fair. A man in the packed auditorium stood up and asked Pollack why he wasn't proud of his father, who had obviously been a very important man. This was the year in which Crimea was annexed and militant forms of patriotism were becoming socially acceptable. I was frightened by the perverse semantic changes that were going on: Russian propaganda attacked "the fascists in Kyiv;" Ukrainian propaganda invoked "the fascists in the Kremlin and Donetsk", and, by this logic, paramilitaries with Nazi *Wolfsangel* and *Reichsadler* tattoos were being restyled as leaders of the antifascist struggle. Was my translation playing into the hands of this ideological madness? In a politically polarised context, books can be seized and used counter to the intentions of their authors and translators.

During and after the Maidan protests of 2013–14, mainstream Ukrainian intellectuals – among them numerous translators – adopted the role of political brokers. They felt it was their mission to be activists and cultural translators, to answer questions such as 'What is Ukraine?' and 'What is the goal of the Maidan protests?' They explained why Russia Today cannot be trusted, why 'we' are the good guys and 'they' are the bad guys. Any attempts to take a more nuanced perspective, to stop being so black-and-white and to at least try to put oneself in the position of others (such as the people of Crimea or Donbas) were rigorously stamped out. Now's not the time for nuance, they said. If you're not with us, you're against us, and if you're against us, we'll bully and ostracise you.

The chorus of manipulative translators have sung along so harmoniously that they have created a new reality, one in which several wars are being waged at once: against the Russian language, which is equated with the Russian Federation; against the past, because the Bolsheviks and Stalinist terror are seen as responsible for the problems of what is today the poorest country in Europe; against the internal enemies who elected a clown as president instead of the national conservatives, with their faith in the army and religion. 'Lost in translation' means having a consulate in Hamburg that throws a party for right-wing extremists. It means an ambassador in Berlin who wants to limit the academic freedom of the German-Ukrainian Historians' Commission because it doesn't follow the Ukrainian state's historical and political narrative. And it means a major scandal erupting, with some even calling for the secret service to intervene, after a publisher sells the translation rights for Ukrainian writers to Russia.

Just recently, I asked a younger colleague whether there was any point in me pitching to Ukrainian publishers a German YA novel, given that the book is set in Marzahn (a district of Berlin home to a high proportion of Russia Germans) and its heroes are called Vladimir and Tatiana. When will we find our way out of such self-censorship? How many of us have fallen silent and crawled into our academic niches? 'WAR FIRST!' the chorus responds. When we get the Russians out of Donbas, our problems – corruption, poverty, censorship – will disappear. And until then, I find myself opting to translate children's books, works whose results aren't so easy to manipulate. I've long abandoned any romantic notions about literature and translation building bridges and promoting understanding. And yes, I sorely miss discussions about political correctness and cancel culture in literature. Here in Ukraine, only a few small activist groups promote sensitive language and linguistic differentiation, and their efforts have met with little interest. Meanwhile the mainstream opposes bilingualism and seeks to reconstruct 'inclusive nationalism'.

In the translation I'm currently working on, there are a few passages in which the author comes across as xenophobic. If you read the book quickly, you mightn't notice, but while translating (and what is translation if not very close reading?), I am unsettled by references to 'Arab men, listening to Arab radio and chatting in Arabic'. The publisher just shrugs; he can hide behind the author. And if it all blows up, he'll use me as his shield. After all, I am solely responsible for factchecking, style and accuracy. But it will probably only blow up within me.



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Nelia Vakhovska lives in Kyiv, where she works as a project manager and translator. She has translated works by authors such as Martin Pollack, Josef Winkler and Erwin Moser into Ukrainian.

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