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# Europe's Displacements: Kurt Tucholsky's Satirical Essays "Identification" and "The Border"

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Europe (including Germany), Tucholsky's short satirical pieces remind us, was undergoing momentous changes as a result of the efforts to secure and administer its national borders during and in the immediate aftermath of the First World War. The modern nation-state had been developing techniques for drawing borders, identifying citizens and aliens, and controlling the movement of persons and goods across borders since at least the eighteenth century. But the outbreak of war in 1914 ignited a vehement, renewed effort by European nations and empires to secure their respective borders. Nation-states combined the various technologies of identification and record-keeping with the state's authority to impose comprehensive wartime measures with the aim of regulating the movements of persons throughout the striated spaces of nation and empire. One consequential way to do so was through the administration of identification documents. A passport had to include a personal description, photograph, and the signature of its bearer along with official certification that the bearer was in fact the person in the photograph. On 31 July, 1914, Germany implemented such passport restrictions on anyone entering the Empire from abroad. Additionally, foreign passports for entry into the German Empire required a visa from German diplomatic or consular authorities. Of course, the nation-state is interested not only in keeping out unwanted persons, but also mobilizing its human resources in the event of war. This meant, as Tucholsky describes in "Identification," that German military personnel could only obtain passports enabling them to exit Germany with the approval of commanding officers. By 1916, however, everyone wishing to enter and leave the territory of the German Empire had to procure a visa from German consular authorities. In June of 1919, new regulations required not only any traveler entering or leaving but also all foreigners within German territory to carry a passport. What had been introduced as emergency measures to protect national borders during the war had become permanent law.

Nearly all the nations and empires of Europe implemented similar laws and policies during this period. Significant repercussions of this regime of border control and identification would soon come to the fore in the wake of the collapse of the major European empires—Ottoman, Hapsburg, German, Russian—and the subsequent redrawing and establishing of new nation-states as a result of the War. Not only had war displaced previous European borders and regimes, but Europe was now populated by an unprecedented number of newly displaced persons.

One of the earliest literary responses to these changes to the political landscape of Europe was provided to us by the writer Kurt Tucholsky (1890-1935), best known for his

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work as a journalist and satirist penning biting political and social commentary during the Weimar Republic. Born in Berlin, Tucholsky also lived for long periods of time in Paris, and he moved to Sweden in 1930. Having been conscripted to fight as a soldier for Germany in WWI, he became an outspoken pacifist and left-leaning social democrat after the War. For this, the Nazis honored him by burning his publications.

The two short satirical pieces below are taken from the *Berliner Volkszeitung*, which like *Die Weltbühne*, was a left-liberal daily affiliated with the Nobel-Prize-winning journalist Carl von Ossietzky. Tucholsky published both pieces at the end of June 1920 under the pseudonym Peter Panter. The first piece is simply titled “Identification” (*Der Ausweis*), a term referring to the many identity documents for which a person now had to apply. In this piece, Tucholsky draws out the ties between the military regulations he had recently experienced as a soldier and the humiliations and absurdities of the bureaucratic apparatus introduced to manage the issuance of identity documents to civilians. The granting of access and alienation effects illustrated within the text are enacted at the outset by way of a curious epigraph: “‘Die Losung, Bursche!’ / ‘Hie gut Brandenburg allewege!’ / ‘Passiert!’” The word *Losung* denotes a password that is uttered, in military contexts, to pass by a sentry. On the one hand, the password is agreed upon to secure insider access, to determine whether someone properly belongs to the group. That this password takes the form of dialect, on the other hand, introduces a further distinction between those capable of knowing and speaking (or understanding) the password in the sense of a shibboleth. Already from the outset, then, Tucholsky’s piece places its reader in an uncertain position—will we be privy to what follows? Will the German (reader) wishing to travel know the locally-distinct words that grant access to...a territory, an office, an identity document, the Promised Land? What follows is a grotesque encounter with bureaucratic disinterest fleshed out later in the many literary depictions of persons seeking identity documents or visas at police departments and consuls across Europe who we encounter in the novels of B. Traven, Remarque, Seghers, and more. Tucholsky traces this identification apparatus back to the War, wryly observing that a soldier required identification to do just about anything except die: Soldiers were always granted access to the battlefield. Ultimately, a recursive logic of self-maintenance appears as the ultimate purpose of this inflated bureaucracy of documentation and regulation which assumes a life of its own—perpetuating itself through social acquiescence and blind Prussian obedience.

“The Border” (*Die Grenze*), published only a few days later, opens with an idyllic landscape that is then cut through by a barbed-wire fence. As with all borders, this line of demarcation introduces a typology which at once unites and divides people and places. Empires may collide at the border, but nowadays the lines of demarcation have become even stronger. Whereas, in ancient times, the foreigner was labeled a barbarian, he or she was nevertheless treated with hospitality. Today’s displaced persons, on the contrary, are persecuted without recourse to law or basic human rights—“miserable,” Tucholsky writes—regardless of where they go. A preoccupation with the importance of one’s own identity overshadows any tincture of neighborliness. The desire to demarcate has led to war, decimated Europe, and created millions of displaced individuals. But as in the previous piece on identification papers, here, too, Tucholsky calls upon his readers to resist these changes: to change the current border regime by rejecting the very mindset which underlies it. Tucholsky explicitly links his satires to a call to action. He hopes that

his readers will see the absurdity of borders and identification requirements, reject their fundamental logics, and assume responsibility for changing them.

*TRANSIT* is pleased to provide these essays in new English translation, identifying historical precedence for issues which remain so pertinent in our own globalized, yet increasingly fractionalized times. We are reminded here less of the inevitability of these regulatory measures, but more of the fallacy of their implementation: their capacity to divide across faux ideological lines. As Tucholsky's contemporary, Stefan Zweig, states in his own autobiographical reflections on the 1920s:

Before 1914 the earth had belonged to all. People went where they wished and stayed as long as they pleased. There were no permits, no visas, and it always gives me pleasure to astonish the young by telling them that before 1914 I traveled from Europe to India and to America without passport and without ever having seen one. One embarked and alighted without questioning or being questioned, one did not have to fill out a single one of the many papers which are required today. The frontiers which, with their customs officers, police and militia, have become wire barriers thanks to the pathological suspicion of everybody against everybody else, were nothing but symbolic lines [...]<sup>1</sup>

Our glance back upon the development of the modern regulatory state provides us with the context to reexamine our own dependency on its traditions, reminding us that even the most fundamental elements of the modern nation-state are relatively new additions to the project of political progress, subject to changing interpretations, appropriations, or rejection.

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<sup>1</sup> Zweig, Stefan. *The World of Yesterday: An Autobiography*. Trans. Benjamin W. Huebsch and Helmut Ripperger. New York: Viking Press, 1943.