



End of a Mission

Heinrich Böll , Leila Vennewitz (Translation)

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End of a Mission, written in 1968, finds Heinrich Boll trying to come to terms with his country's monstrous past in an investigation of an inexplicable crime and an even more absurd trial. Told to rack up mileage on a jeep to prepare it for inspection, a soldier drives it home--and burns it in the company of his complaisant father. Boll's account of the testimony and background of the witnesses, and their nonplussed response to the composure and satisfaction of the accused, illuminates the life of an insignificant town caught up in sudden, unreasonable importance.

End of a Mission Details

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From Reader Review End of a Mission for online ebook

Maureen says

OK, I get that it's a satire. The whole narrative concerns the trial of a father and son for setting fire to an army jeep as an artistic 'happening' or perhaps it is an anti-government protest. Some laughs to be had around the crazy bureaucracy of driving army vehicles aimlessly for thousands of miles just to get the speedo up to the next service, I can see it happening. The farcical evidence raises smiles too. It certainly provokes some wry smiles with its tableau of small town German characters, but somehow it wasn't worth the effort for me. Perhaps you need to be German.

Elham Zakeri says

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Sara says

Bureaucracy, broadly-speaking, has become associated with illogically rigid adherence to procedure (a.k.a. red tape) and for jealously guarding purview over the tasks it exists to perform, even at the expense of performing those tasks well. Among bureaucracies, few are more famous (and alternately infamous) than those at work in the German state. Germany and its institutions have long had a reputation for order and efficiency. Yet there emerge dark and ridiculous ramifications from too literally and too closely following the rules that lead to orderliness. When following rules gets elevated from a method to a goal, order and efficiency disappear. English-language readers may immediately think of Joseph Heller's *Catch-22* as an exploration of this bureaucratic dark side. Among German authors, with many examples to choose from, few so successfully and repeatedly satirized bureaucratic behavior as did Heinrich Böll.

Böll is usually considered part of Germany's post-war literature (Nachkriegsliteratur); a literary movement that sought to reclaim and rebuild German literary language in the wake of its co-option as a vehicle for ideology by the National Socialists (Nazis). Germany's post-war authors examined, among other themes, how average German citizens did or did not come to terms with their nation's recent past and their own roles during the war, how they dealt with their loss of "home" occasioned by the vast destruction of so many German cities, and with their increasing isolation as individuals. Böll also dealt with these topics in his wry and understated way, lending humor to seemingly humorless situations while displaying an acute sense of the absurd. In his work he often ridiculed bureaucracy and its representatives, whether in the church, government, justice system, industry or, as with Heller, the military. Böll specifically derided self-important bureaucrats and the way they represented recent transformations in post-war German society, such as the Economic Miracle (Wirtschaftswunder) of the 1950s, a boom period for that nation's economy in which many Germans optimistically immersed themselves, albeit understandably, to avoid grappling with the pain of their recent past not to mention their active or passive roles in the Nazi regime.

Böll's novel, *Ende einer Dienstfahrt* (End of a Mission)*, appeared in 1966 and so falls toward the tail end of Nachkriegsliteratur. Nevertheless, it handles many similar themes, especially the satirization of bureaucracy-run-rampant. In this case, the bureaucracy of the military receives particular attention, although government at all levels and the justice system also figure in the story.

The plot turns upon a single act of destruction by a father and son, respectively Johann and Georg Gruhl. On a rural road outside of the small town, Birglar, the Gruhls set fire to a military vehicle under charge to Georg and joyfully watched it burn, singing, smoking their pipes and knocking them together to the rhythm of *Ora pro nobis*, the image of triumph and satisfaction in a job well done. In addition to destruction of army property, the Gruhls' fire caused a traffic jam of some 65 vehicles or about 100 people as estimated by one witness, Heuser, himself a self-important bureaucrat with the unlikely title Regional Traffic Agent ("Kreisverkehrsbevollmächtigte"). The traffic jam, Heuser tells the court in useless detail, caused several accidents: one, between an Opel and a rig hauling pipe in which several pipes smashed the smaller vehicle; a second, between a bicycle and a new Citroën left the new car badly scratched; yet another, between a small car ("Kleinwagen") and a Mercedes 300 SL resulted in a fist fight. The drivers of a beer truck and a cement truck, waiting for the road to clear, became fast friends and engaged in some mutually beneficial bit of business. Unprepared to testify precisely what trade the men transacted, Heuser ventures to note the beer truck driver had a newly laid cement driveway two days later.

In short, the fire caused a great commotion in Birglar, occasioned no little property damage, direct or indirect, and generally impressed the citizens of that small town (at least the ones stuck on the road) as an important and exceptional event. Moreover, based on witness testimony and the Gruhls' own admission, they set the fire purposefully and thoroughly enjoyed watching their handiwork.

The meat of the novel details the single day of court proceedings against the Gruhls in Birglar's tiny courthouse. From the outset, we understand that one of the tacit forces influencing the proceedings is "die nahe gelegene Großstadt," Birglar's neighboring Big City, which remains unnamed and in which a sensational murder case is also scheduled to begin. The amorphously-referred-to "Staatsmacht" (state power) has determined that the Gruhls' trial will be held in Birglar rather than in the Big City and that the Gruhls will receive the lesser charge of malicious damage and gross mischief ("Sachbeschädigung und groben Unfug") rather than arson ("Brandstiftung").

The bureaucratic powers-that-be, from political party representatives and newspaper editors to district judges and military officers, seem bent on downplaying the importance or political and social relevance of the Gruhls' act: the army declines to prosecute and leaves the process in state hands; the venue is smalltown Birglar instead of the Big City and scheduled to coincide with the aforementioned murder trial, sure to eclipse it in public interest; the presiding judge is set to retire upon passing sentence in the Gruhls' case which presumably encourages him to usher the trial along with due haste; the only reporter in Birglar planning to cover the case is reassigned at the last moment and sent to the Big City along with all the other media. In short, every care is taken by interested bureaucratic authorities that the Gruhls' trial proceed rapidly, quietly and uneventfully to minimize possible embarrassment to anyone of consequence, namely themselves and other bureaucratic authorities.

But of what embarrassment are these authorities frightened? Why go to so much trouble to keep the trial under wraps? The answer has everything to do with the Gruhls' motive in burning the jeep, a motive the court approaches quizzically as though it were quite opaque. And yet the Gruhls' motive is evident to the reader and to Birglar's citizens. As a carpenter and fine craftsman, accustomed to business in another era, Johann's trade suffered during the industrialization of the Wirtschaftswunder. He finds himself in further financial straights when the army calls up Georg, his partner in trade, for compulsory service. Then Georg

receives his titular "mission": to drive a military jeep. And that is it. To drive...no place in particular. The army has ordered Georg to drive the vehicle aimlessly so that it meets the requirements of an arbitrary bureaucratic protocol: he must raise the vehicle's odometer to a mileage in correspondence with its next scheduled inspection. The profound inanity of these orders requires no elucidation. Moreover, as Georg testifies, he has performed this duty many times before and witnessed the waste of his time, the government's money and natural resources (gas and oil) occasioned by such a ludicrous task. The idiocy of Georg's orders further disgusts him as his service renders him incapable of helping his father. Refusing to complete this "mission" and setting fire to the jeep, with Johann readily assisting, is clearly an act of disdain for the army's nonsensical orders and rejection of its over-literal bureaucratic authority.

The military wants to keep the incident quiet presumably so its wastefulness receives no attention and so it does not earn a negative public image for tearing family life asunder. Other authorities possess their own competing, but equally self-serving, reasons. For example, the local delegate from a liberal political party harkens back to a previous trial in which his party, along with the local media outlet nestled squarely in its pocket, attempted to create a martyr for freedom ("einen Märtyrer der Freiheit") out of a defendant who proved himself merely a braggart and an imposter. The reader never learns this would-be martyr's alleged crime, but we do discover the lengths the party and the newspaper went to in order to vaunt the man and publicize his trial, create a hero of him, and how proportionally mortifying they found it when he turned out a fraud. In short, justice and due process fall absolutely secondary to the official interests of bureaucracy and authority.

Because the Gruhls admit their guilt, their trial concerns justification, motive and appropriate punishment more than guilt or innocence. It experiences a number of delays primarily owing to preoccupation with various forms of bureaucratic minutiae: the court officials become concerned with how to spell certain words for the record, how to translate colloquialisms used by various witnesses, how to characterize the crime and the demeanor of the accused; semantic issues all that have no real bearing on the outcome of the trial. Various witnesses seem more fascinated by the intricacies of their own bureaucratic situations than interested in answering counsels' questions, taking the court on detours through the ins-and-outs of their own jobs, the hoops through which they must jump, or make others jump on a daily basis.

As the trial proceeds, the march of witnesses and their testimony also demonstrate the intertwined relationships of all of Birglar's citizens. Nearly everyone called to testify, whether they saw the event or not, knows the accused and has an opinion about their crime and state of mind. Most find the Gruhls sympathetic and justified. Johann and Georg appear well-liked and their act of "malicious damage" viewed with some comprehension and indulgence. Witnesses called include military officers and enlisted men, Birglar's police chief, former patrons of the Gruhls' carpentry, local business owners, a priest and an economic theorist. Old enmities and affinities among the citizenry, differences in religious or political affiliation, emerge. All of these individuals share the commonality that, in their varied ways, they represent relationships to the authorities running their city and its bureaucracies which they all either work in, cater to, merely suffer or, like the Gruhls' actively defy.

The denouement of the trial begins when one Professor Büren is called to testify. The professor asserts that the Gruhls' act of burning the jeep constitutes an artwork, a "Happening" (but spelled with an 'ä' or merely an 'a' wonder the court officials?), by which he means a piece of performance art. According to Büren, the Gruhls' destruction of the jeep...

...was even an extraordinary act that demonstrated five dimensions: the dimension of architecture, of sculpture, of literature, of music - for it had distinct concerto-like moments - and finally dance-like elements, as he [Büren] considered, which found expression in the way they knocked their pipes together.

"...sei sogar eine außerordentliche Tat, da es fünf Dimensionen aufweise: die Dimension der Architektur, der Plastik, der Literatur, der Musik - denn es habe ausgesprochen konzertante Momente gehabt - und schließlich tänzerische Elemente, wie sie seiner Erachtens im Gegeneinanderschlagen der Tabakpfeifen zum Ausdruck gekommen seien." (131)

An uproarious scene follows Büren's profoundly silly, if sincere testimony. The prosecuting State's attorney Kugl-Egger receives the professor's revelation by declaring that the powers-that-be elsewhere ("andernorts" which we understand euphemistically as the Big City) have fooled him, have forced him into a position of irresponsibility and that he must abdicate his office. He realizes, so belatedly it is comic, that he was not meant to prevail against the Gruhls and this was not meant to be a serious trial. The tumult increases as Kugl-Egger suffers a near heart attack and must be temporarily removed from the court.

We all realize that this political theater, orchestrated by the authorities in "andernorts" and so faithfully executed - whether they knew it or not - by the petty bureaucrats in Birglar, has been successful as Judge Stollfuss sentences the Gruhls only to time served and declares their act, indeed, to have been a work of art. He contentedly lays aside his gavel for the last time and everyone seems to have won (with the exception, I suppose, of poor Kugl-Egger and the army who is down one unrecompensed jeep).

This reader was pleased that the Gruhls got off easy but recognizes the victory, as I think Böll intends, as a fleeting and accidental one, lasting only until they have another inevitable run-in with nonsensical, indomitable, eternal red tape.

*All German quotations are from Heinrich Böll, *Ende einer Dienstreise* (Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag GmbH & Co. KG: München) 1973. All English translations are my own.

Weaverannie says

Het duurde vrij lang voor ik in het verhaal kwam: het aantal namen was heel groot en de personages moeilijk uit elkaar te houden.

In een gehucht op het Duitse platteland is een rechter bezig met zijn laatste proces. Hij gaat met pensioen. Verdachten zijn een vader en zoon, die een auto in brand hebben gestoken, en vrolijk zaten te kijken hoe die uitbrandde. Ze zongen daarbij een stichtelijk lied en stootten de koppen van de pijp die ze rookten tegen elkaar. De auto was eigendom van het leger. De zoon moest daar een dienstreis mee maken, als afsluiting van zijn dienstitijd. Wat die dienstreis inhield blijft lang onvermeld. Dat de reis eindigde met de brand is duidelijk.

Een hele stoet getuigen is opgeroepen en nauwkeurig wordt alle haarkloverij opgeschreven. Ook ieder personage wordt uitgebreid beschreven, evenals zijn persoonlijke omstandigheden als woonplaats, relatie, uiterlijk, smaak.

Eigenlijk gaat het verhaal nergens over. Het duurt alleen erg lang om te lezen. Daarmee komt het overeen met het beschreven proces: het gaat echt helemaal nergens over. Dingen worden belangrijk gemaakt, die het niet zijn. Mensen doen geheimzinnig over zaken, die dat niet verdienen.

De beschrijving van de bekrompen, roddelende samenleving in een plaatsje als Birglar, van economische en belastingtechnische zaken, maar vooral van de (on)zin van de Bundeswehr zal niet iedereen in Duitsland gewaardeerd hebben. Satire op zijn best.

Sawsan says

[illegible]

Hubert says

A most fascinating indictment of the German legal system post-WW II. Touches upon small-town life, local and national politics, religion, and even art. Cleverly designed through the lens of a small-town trial of a father and son who purposefully set a military jeep on fire. Böll's language sometimes meanders on in sub-clauses and asides; one paragraph lasted for 8 pages. Readers do need to pay attention lest they miss some important detail that might be easy to gloss over.

A worthy text! My second Böll novel - not as famous as some others but still good, artful craft.

Ramintz says

[illegible]

Krisz says

So absurd, yet so real, that it is hurtingly funny.

I couldn't find out how it would end, couldn't believe it would end with a closure, and therefore the book surprised me!

I loved the little details, for example when the witnesses in the small room debate little things like smoking or that the restaurant usually serves great food but not today because the lady of the house is stressed as their daughter is pregnant etc. Böll creates a full world with these interesting details and I loved it.

A book to keep!

Karlo Mikhail says

This past week I was reading two short novels, one by Benoît Duteurtre and the other by Heinrich Boll. While both are satires, it is interesting to note how much the horizons of the peoples living in Europe has changed over the years.

Duteurtre's Customer Service, published in 2008, problematizes the relationship between the individual consumer and the globalized capitalist economy. Boll's *The End of a Mission*, published in 1968, tackles the relationship between the individual citizen and the modern state.

In Boll's 1970s West Germany, the overwhelming concern of the intellectual class was the struggle against so-called "totalitarianism." In this story about the trial of a man in military service and his father who burned an army jeep, we get hints of the prevailing discourse at the time of writing against the domination of the state as represented by the Nazi heritage and the threat of the eastern Soviet bloc.

Consider the following dialogue: "'The Minister of Defence has no authority over my private parts,' but the lieutenant disputed this, saying that the Bundeswehr needed the whole man..."

In another instance, the district attorney howled in protest when one of the witnesses praised the elder suspect's profession as a carpenter by "pointing out that in the course of the last forty-five years of German history several carpenters had risen to the highest positions in the land, one even becoming head of state" – the witness, of course, wrongly alluding to Hitler who was in fact a painter.

The same attorney also vehemently objected to the same witness' description of the accused as being "in a natural state of self-defence" against the state because this sounds "particularly subversive" in the sense that "no citizen, if he obeyed the law, could ever find himself in a condition of self-defense against the state."

Meanwhile, another witness describes the younger of the accused as having "suffered from this 'quaternity of the absurd' – pointlessness, unproductiveness, boredom, laziness – while he, Kuttke, actually considered these to be the sole aim and object of any army."

Strangely enough, unlike the dystopic aura of novels dealing with the same topic such as Orwell's 1984, what we have in Boll is a very light, even comic treatment. This is no "Stalinist" show-trial as it is kept very low-profile nor is there the shadowy Abu Ghraib-type of brutality that the United States government tried to hide from public view. The prospective punishment is light (six weeks detention) and the two accused are not even concerned with the charges at all.

Fast forward four decades into Duteurtre's 21st Century France and the focus of ire shifts from the state to the omnipresent and seemingly faceless global capitalism. This can be explained by the advent of neoliberal doctrine which reduced the function of the state from providing social welfare and regulating the economy to simply ensuring the smooth functioning of the global market.

Industries are deregulated while public services are sold by private companies as expensive commodities. The advent of new technologies accelerate the pace in which business and pretty much everything else is done while intensifying the alienation of individuals from each other and from the products of their labor. This is the world described by Duteurtre's Customer Service.

It begins with our middle-aged narrator losing a "smartphone" given by his parents in a taxi. Things quickly turn awry as he seeks redress through the agency of the consumer service. He goes through several pre-recorded messages on the phone that is paid by the second before being told by a human operator that he must continue to pay for the lost phone's subscription even if he gets a new phone.

Duteurtre wittily interjects: "This was the kind of highway robbery that the press, when writing about the economy, suavely refers to as a growth in the telecommunications sector." And indeed, he eventually gets difficulties using his bank card, changing his flight, logging into the internet, entering his home, and getting

access to a bunch of other basic needs. Things seem simpler without all the technological hassle of passwords and pin codes.

But instead of proposing the common Luddite solution to this problem, Duteurtre's short novel understands that there is a deeper explanation for his frustrations: the monopoly capitalist drive for profit.

"On the one hand, these companies lure the public with cut-rate prices, enticing offers, publicity brochures, rock-bottom fees, and months of free service... On the other hand, once the consumer signs up, he must obey the draconian rules and pay penalties if he commits the slightest infraction... For the most minor complaint, the wait time is infinite and the billing for that wait period itself contributes to increased profit."

Here's Duteurtre explaining our usual problems at the airport:

"All the planes were cancelled one after another for technical reasons... Actually, these planes were almost empty, which allowed the companies to fill to bursting a single plane, at the end of the afternoon. Of course, when he's making reservations, the consumer has a choice... But once the tickets have been paid for, a hidden distribution operation seems to make sure of maximum occupancy."

He notes the irony of the myth of capitalist efficiency as opposed to socialist bureaucratic claptrap. The logic of the market is supposed to eliminate long waiting lines. But it would seem the opposite is the case:

"Since the widespread victory of capitalism – focused only on relentless competition, the continual growth of profit, a nonstop reduction of costs and personnel, a fanaticism for mergers – the consumer was becoming obligated... unless you belong to a well-to-do nomenklatura who could pay through the roof, delegate the tiresome steps, buy business class or get their complaints to the top of the pyramid."

This realization is capped by the revelation of the ideal of our monopoly capitalists: "to eliminate personnel totally and to perfect a system in which the customers did everything themselves from a computer terminal." Indeed, the drive to maximize profit lends to the most absurd propositions. Yet, this is how today's high-tech world of flexible labor, contractualization, and globalized production works to the detriment of the majority.

The only problem with Customer Service is its nostalgia for the bygone days of the social welfare state that supposedly balanced the interests of big business and the needs of the people. But as Boll already recognized in *The End of a Mission*: "Those ridiculous Social Democrats, those hypocritical crooks, they're more capitalist now than the capitalist!"

<http://karlomongaya.wordpress.com/201...>

Amy says

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Pooya says

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Hromčenie pred zadnými vrátkami. V prvom rade určite treba vyzdvihnúť prácu prekladateľa, ktorý sa nestratil vo syntakticky vetvených, niekedy koúrovňových súvetiach, a zrušne pretlmočil aj právnický oficiálnu rétoriku súdneho konania na malom meste. O zvládnutej interpunkčnej explózii ani nehovoriac, myslím, že som nečítal knihu, kde by bolo na strane viac znamienok. Samotná novela až taká zaujímavá nie je, v zásade ponúka zábavu vo forme kritickej veselohry, ktorá má v pôvodnej slovenskej literatúre bohatú históriu (Denokrati a im podobní), a vari aj to bolo motiváciou vydať ju ako akýsi aktualizovaný a inozemský náhľad na neduhy malomeštiactva. Sú všade rovnaké. A to je práve kameň úrazu. Satira, ako ju poznáme z našej tvorby, totiž ťažšie než neúprosnú kritiku či klinický detail akcentuje skôr láskavú didaktickosť, moralisticky zdvihnutý prst, ktorý hneď vzápätí pohladí, lebo si je sám dobre vedomý vlastnej nedokonalosti. A výsledkom je sprisahanie priemerných.

[illegible]

The author is clearly a monstrous intellect, and pure distilled intelligence drips from every line. But I think I picked the wrong one to start with. (Actually I read 'The Bread of Those Early Years' a long time ago, but can't remember anything about it and was no doubt too young - if this one is anything to go by...) An interesting premise, quirky and interesting characters, but I found myself asking So What? over and over.

Some German geysers burn a jeep as a demonstration of their discontent with er, the army? society in general? I'm not sure. I got 50 pages in and rapidly tired of the endless detailing of the lives and motives of a long list of characters. There's a dramatis personae list at the beginning of this book - which seemed a little foreboding, considering the book (my version at any rate) is only 170 pages long; and yet I continued to encounter more and more characters that weren't even mentioned in that list! I just didn't see the point. A realisation that the author is terrifically clever isn't enough to sustain interest in such a dry academic exercise. I'm not giving Boll up - oh no - but this isn't one of his best (I hope!)
