

Why Did We Shoot at One Another?

Heinrich Böll and Lev Kopelev

Lev Kopelev: The one-word answer is that I feel Russian. Today though, this is not enough. As Julian Tuwim, a Polish poet of Jewish stock, said: "I never spoke Jewish, I never worshipped the Jewish God, but I consider myself a Jew – not because of the blood flowing in my veins, but rather because of the blood that flowed into me from many veins..." Now, I think of myself as Russian. I've spoken Russian since childhood. I embrace Russian culture.

A talk hosted by Klaus Bednarz in 1979

Klaus Bednarz: Good evening gentlemen. Lev Kopelev and Heinrich Böll, you were both born at roughly the same time, with about five years' difference between you. Lev Kopelev, you were born into a Jewish family in the Ukraine in 1912. Do you think of yourself as – Ukrainian, Russian or Jewish?

Lev Kopelev: The one-word answer is that I feel Russian. Today though, this is not enough. As Julian Tuwim, a Polish poet of Jewish stock, said: "I never spoke Jewish, I never worshipped the Jewish God, but I consider myself a Jew – not because of the blood flowing in my veins, but rather because of the blood that flowed into me from many veins..." Now, I think of myself as Russian. I've spoken Russian since childhood. I embrace Russian culture. Russian history, too, is my own – its tragedies, the good and the bad, everything it stands for. I am a Russian of Jewish stock.

Bednarz: Heinrich Böll, you were born in Cologne, on the left bank of the Rhine, in 1917. People in your land often say they live in the West, the German West. What would you say about your roots?

Heinrich Böll: I can say without reservation that I think of myself as German. You say people in our country regard themselves as Westerners. Let me tell you one thing – Germany's West is German. It has never boasted about this, nor paraded its patriotism, but the fact that we are German – I mean we, the Left Siders – is so obvious there's no need for anyone to drum it in.

Bednarz: Heinrich Böll, and you, Lev Kopelev, we are here with you now, at your place in Moscow. I imagine that you, Mr. Kopelev, as a young child, had a good feeling about Germany, otherwise you wouldn't have started to learn German, meet Germans, or take an interest in German culture and "der Alte Fritz". Did your ideas about Germans change when the Nazis came to power in Germany?

Kopelev: In 1933, when Heinrich Böll was just sixteen, I was twenty-one and already married. I must emphasise that from 1933 right up to 1941, our propaganda was never intended to sound anti-German only anti-Fascist. We had a large German community here in Moscow and I had many German friends at the time,

like Erich Weinart and Willie Bredel, both writers living in exile. The question was never put that way, nor did it have anything to do with our attitudes to Germany. My generation was more inclined to play down the threat of Nazism, to think it wasn't as strong as it really was.

Böll: You mean people in the street...

Kopelev: Yes, it was, and still is, a problem with no easy solution.

Böll: Because their ideas were idealistic.

Kopelev: Yes, we really believed it was so. In all honesty, when, on 22 June [1941], early reports came in from the front, I was foolish enough to rejoice at what I thought was a holy war in the making, in which the German proletariat would join with us in overthrowing Hitler.

Bednarz: I don't understand. How could that be? Germany crossing your border...

Kopelev: For me at that time it wasn't Germany.

Bednarz: Ah, so it was the Nazis, then.

Kopelev: Of course, it wasn't Germany, but indeed the Nazis.

Bednarz: And you thought – now an uprising is about to break out.

Kopelev: Yes! That's it, exactly.

Bednarz: ... an uprising against that war and against Nazism. Is that right?

Kopelev: Absolutely so.

Böll: By the workers?

Kopelev: Exactly. As the war progressed, you know, I met some old friends who reminded me: "Do you remember how you went crazy on June 22? How you were rushing everywhere with wild excitement in your eyes. You said: Here it comes, a great holy war that will bring liberation, to Germany as well."

Böll: To both sides.

Kopelev: Yes, and to Europe too. I firmly believed that at the time. That went on for a few weeks. After a while, we saw proletarians from Berlin and the Ruhr. The ones we pictured for ourselves from anti-Fascist publications and from what our German friends in Moscow had told us.

Bednarz: How did you feel when you saw that no revolution was forthcoming in Germany, and that the proletariat on both sides were loath to fraternise, and instead were engaged in fierce opposition? What did that make you think?

Kopelev: I must admit I was deeply disappointed. It was also a revelation to me, as a Marxist, as I then thought of myself. I saw that the most rabid Nazis were among the young workers. And also that most of the anti-Fascist prisoners of war, the earliest I had to deal with, were intellectuals. That, too, was a bitter frustration to me. For a brief period during the war, I must admit, I was fired by the spirit of Russian nationalism. When we were retreating from Novgorod, a strange feeling came over me. This city which had never been occupied in its thousand-year history was now in enemy hands. At the time, few people thought about class struggle or world revolution – our nationalist feelings were too painfully hurt to think of anything else. But it never descended into Germanophobia with me – I had been inoculated against that from my early years and also by my humanistic and internationalist upbringing.

Bednarz: Heinrich Böll, was Russia, in principle, an attractive idea to you?

Böll: Yes, terribly attractive.

Bednarz: Terribly attractive? Even its Bolshevism?

Böll: Even Dostoyevsky.

Bednarz: Yes, you saw their terrible sides, but actually you didn't come to regard the Russians as our sworn enemies sent to us by God and Nature. What were your feelings when you had to march into Russia with Hitler's armies?

Böll: You may not believe it but I volunteered to fight in the war. There was no other way of looking at it as I told you already. Our schoolteachers were veterans of the First World War whose feelings were those of our fathers' generation. Up until 1941, I'd seen almost nothing of warfare. I came to France when the fighting was finished there – as a soldier in an army of occupation, and we just went on living there. Well, I was bored. I wanted to learn how it feels to be on the frontline – a foolish and irresponsible curiosity – that's what it was. Strangely, my conscience was clear. So that was the army I entered Russia with. I was a fellow traveller in the most direct sense of the word. Yes, that was exactly what we called it. Now, I say that word again. I finally came back with a very heavy conscience. You know, it's a problem, that whole myth of bravery and frontline experience. It always looked suspicious to me, even when I was a small boy at school, when we were told about it... "We rushed into the attack, and single-handedly took out all their artillery" and all that sort of nonsense. So I wanted to remove the mystique. I did it quite easily for myself as well. Do you know what I mean?

Bednarz: Yes, indeed. Tell us, Heinrich Böll, when you were on the frontline fighting against the Russians, did it affect your idea of Russia and its people? Did it change it? How did it feel when you found yourself in a trench facing the Russian trench, or engaged in close combat?

Böll: Yes, combat is something you can talk about for quite a while. Let's call it that. Here I was, sitting in my trench. And my sympathies, if that's the right word, were increasing rather than diminishing. Another strange thing – Lev spoke about the young workers who disappointed him. They were 20 to 22 at the time, with eight years of Nazi brainwashing behind them. For many of them, most of them in fact, all they knew of the Soviet Union was what they saw during the war, poor housing, bad roads, all immensely discouraging. You understand? They had to be aware of that as well as many other things. You also need to be aware of it to understand anti-Communism, which was very strong after the war. It wasn't simply Cold War propaganda. The impression that any soldier, Nazi or not, formed of the Soviet Union was not very favourable for Socialism or Communism. They weren't all stupid those German soldiers. They saw but they didn't really think much about it. Then came the Red Army's offensive, a turn of events that left them with no reason for hope – that so-called liberation or however else you describe it. The reason I'm telling you this is so that you can sympathise with my generation, and understand what anti-Communism was in the 1940s and 1950s. This devastating experience was a very significant factor. I don't think my personal image of Russia changed very much. As I said, it only added to my sympathy for it. Not just compassion but real fellow feeling, I feel that very strongly.

Bednarz: Let me suggest, for a moment, that war might have brought the two of you face to face, on opposite sides. You, Lev Kopelev, were a major with a frontline propaganda section, and you, Heinrich Böll, a corporal. Imagine that German Corporal Böll had fallen into the hands of Soviet Major Kopelev? What would have happened then? Can you think back to how it might've been?

Kopelev: Yes, it doesn't require a great deal of imagination. Things like that did happen quite often; and I have friends now, in both East and West Germany, who were taken prisoner in those days.

Bednarz: Lev Kopelev, as a propaganda officer, did you try to reform POWs who came your way? Did you try to remake them into anti-Fascists or Communists?

Kopelev: Anti-Fascists, above all. That was my personal conviction, and also the orders we were given. True, some of them would change their stripes right in front of your eyes, but those were the ones we trusted least of all. We laughed and marked them down as lily-white anti-Fascists and Nazis only too ready to change their tune for an extra ladle of porridge. What we knew for certain was that you can't turn a person into a Communist in days or even weeks. What we could do was tell them the truth about their Nazi Reich.

Bednarz: At the time, though, you had the power of life and death over your prisoners. You could send them on to POW camps. Depending on the kind of camp, you either gave them a chance of survival or took it away from them.

Kopelev: I think you overrate the position I had then. I was an officer, one of many, in the propaganda service. None of us had the power of life or death or any knowledge of the kind of POW camp the prisoners were being condemned to. That was for the NKVD to decide; we had hardly sent them behind the firing lines when they were taken over by...

Bednarz: The secret services?

Kopelev: The interior ministry, the NKVD. They were the ones who operated all POW camps. Once the POWs were dispatched behind the lines, we had no power over them. And our word meant nothing at all.

Bednarz: But you must have had some idea about the fate that awaited them?

Kopelev: Yes, we did, and we imagined it to be much better than it really was. We didn't learn the truth until 1943 when German soldiers were sent back by the National Free Germany Committee from POW camps deep in the Russian hinterland to fight on our side. That was the first time we heard their stories of constant hunger and the backbreaking work they were forced to do. We had no way of knowing, though, that things were going to be so bad, in many camps.

Bednarz: So you're saying that you as officers on the frontline knew nothing about what was going on in your own POW camps?

Kopelev: Yes, I really knew nothing about it until I found myself in a tight spot. That was when I was holding the megaphone calling on German soldiers to surrender and save their lives. I honestly expected them to surrender.

Böll: We also knew nothing about the goings-on in the POW camps. We didn't even suspect they existed.

Bednarz: You mean German camps?

Böll: Concentration camps. I'm sure I don't need to tell you how easy it is to run a campaign of disinformation both in your own country and abroad. I could tell you more about this later in our talk.

Bednarz: We can come back to that later. Let's keep with the subject in hand. Tell us, Heinrich Böll, if the situation had been reversed, can you imagine what would have happened to Soviet propaganda officer Lev Kopelev if he'd been unfortunate enough to be captured by German Corporal Böll?

Böll: I would just have let him go or waved him back across the lines, if I felt like it. I saw many Soviet prisoners of war being viciously mistreated. Indeed, no one can deny that they saw such things. They were slave labour in heavy industry, the prime target for bombing raids. When there were unexploded bombs buried

under the ruins, Soviet POWs were sent to defuse them. I witnessed this kind of brutality in 1941 to 1943, at home and in France. So I would've let him go.

Bednarz: So far, we've been speaking about a corporal by the name of Heinrich Böll. Now, let's drop the name, leaving only the rank, what could have happened then? In a scene like that: a Soviet propaganda officer is captured by the German army...

Böll: Heaven help him! He would most likely have been shot there and then. I saw POWs being killed as they surrendered. That would've been enough to make me set him free, if I'd had the chance. Well, even if they didn't kill him on the spot, he'd end up in a camp, to face a hideous fate. We all know now what they would have done to him, a German-speaking propaganda officer.

Bednarz: If anyone had seen Corporal Böll setting Soviet Major Kopelev free, what would have been the repercussions for Corporal Böll?

Kopelev: He would've been shot as well.

Bednarz: Did you consider that possibility at the time?

Böll: No, I wouldn't have been shot in any circumstances. The German army was not the same throughout. If my memory serves me right, something I've never thought about before, I wouldn't have been shot, given the sort of officers we had. At that time frontline troops were run by lieutenants. They weren't the sort to shoot me; they would probably have let me off with a reprimand: "lost his marbles letting the fellow go like that." Besides, you must sense which way the wind is blowing. At certain times, you can take greater risks than usual. That seems an important judgment we've made – at war and at peace. In peacetime too, you can be much more daring than many people think.

Bednarz: Heinrich Böll, you said your frontline experience helped boost your sympathies for the Russians. Unfortunately, unlike Lev Kopelev, you were not in East Prussia when the Red Army made their relentless march into the region, with the invading troops committing many outrages during their advance. We learned about this from Lev Kopelev's book *To Be Preserved Forever*. How, if at all, did your attitude toward Russia and Russians change after you heard about those atrocities?

Böll: I heard much, in great detail, but I didn't rush to judgment. I could understand how the Red Army must have felt at the time. These men had advanced westward over a ravaged landscape. They saw their country lying in ruins after years of a war that had caused the complete collapse of the Soviet economy, especially its agriculture, and now they entered enemy territory. I can recognise that all the Red Army troops must have shared these feelings, not just former criminals. If we want to discuss outrages, which certainly occurred, we have to look at it in the context of what had gone before. What really shocks me and, indeed, what was among the causes of anti-Communist propaganda was that it was an army calling itself Socialist that behaved in this way and carried out this 'liberation' in the way we now know.

Bednarz: Lev Kopelev, you were an eyewitness to this episode that made Germans shudder – the entry of the Red Army into East Prussia. Could you offer a justification, or at least an explanation, for what happened?

Kopelev: I can explain, but not justify. Yet, it's true what Heinrich Böll said. I, too, sympathised with soldiers whose families had been killed, who saw their homes razed and villages burned. I felt much the same way. And I saw outrages happen. Frankly, what I saw came as a complete surprise to me. I firmly believed

that we were a Socialist and Internationalist army. I have no statistics about thieves, marauders or rapists. And never had. Probably, a tiny minority, but they were the ones who were put in the spotlight. I saw many in the ranks and many senior officers were appalled at the outrages. I still remember the name of a colonel or major general in a cavalry division who had a lieutenant shot on the spot for his part in a gang rape. That was in Allenstein, East Prussia.

Bednarz: Many others looked the other way though. Do you believe Ehrenburg was capable of writing a letter that was turned into a frontline hate-Fritz leaflet – kill Germans, rape their wives, and more in the same vein?

Kopelev: No one said that outright. Nor was there any Ehrenburg leaflet though overall Ehrenburg set the tone. It was more widespread in support and supply than in the firing lines. It was mostly the support troops who engaged in looting and rape, not the frontline soldiers who had no time to spare for that.

Böll: Add to this the euphoria, if I may say so?

Kopelev: Yes, euphoria, too.

Böll: The euphoria of the conqueror. I remember the war in France, in which I did not fight, coming in as I did with the second or third wave. As you can imagine, we picked up whatever came our way – a nice shirt, a bicycle, a couple of spilt cigarettes, wine, at most.... But nothing on that scale. But then ...

Bednarz: Petty thievery and mass-scale killings and rape are ...

Kopelev: ... worlds apart.

Böll: Yes. And yet euphoria persists. Despite the warnings posted around French villages that looting was a capital offence. See what I mean?

Bednarz: Those were the orders...

Böll: They had official orders like that in the Red Army, too.

Kopelev: ... Like the one of January 29 [1945], which demanded that looters and rapists be shot on sight. It really worked. Trying to make it work was the reason I was carted off to camp.

Böll: I'd like to go back to the question of euphoria. It's real, and it's irrational, totally unrelated to politics, or friend versus foe attitudes. It's more to do with human physiology. After a spell of monstrous strain, and a 60-kilometre slog on foot, a man enters a village and can no longer keep control of himself. Things like that do happen.

Kopelev: Of course.

Böll: Wound up like that, a soldier can easily grab the first skirt that happens to cross his path.

Kopelev: This often happens with youthful soldiers, just out of their teens, with no experience of life, snatched out of school into an army that teaches them nothing but shooting and killing.

Böll: ... That kind of euphoria, it infects every army, French, American, whichever ...

Bednarz: Lev Kopelev, why did you write that book of yours, after so many years,? Writing up your East Prussia experiences, and much else. And yet, a key chapter of your book spotlights exactly that episode.

Kopelev: That experience lay heavily on my heart. I felt deeply disillusioned – with our army, with our ideology, if that means anything to you. That piece on East Prussia is one of 40 or so chapters in my book. In a sense, it was a fateful experience, one that has had a lasting impression on the rest of my life.

Bednarz: Lev Kopelev and Heinrich Böll, the centuries-long history of German–Russian relations has never been as dark since then. The Second World War was its darkest page. That war was the event of a lifetime, the centrepiece of your lives. After the war, you both dedicated yourselves to exploring it from every side. One of you wrote about East Prussia, and the other about the feelings of a German caught up in the middle of those events. You both gained a reputation as someone who desecrated national memories in his own country. Lev Kopelev has officially been portrayed as a near traitor, and Heinrich Böll has aroused the anger of sham patriots. Now that 40 years have gone by since the Second World War began, what account would you, Lev Kopelev, give of the Soviet people’s attitudes to Germans and Germany today?

Kopelev: You can’t really talk about it in such broad terms. In my opinion, we can assert, with a measure of certainty, that the moral scars inflicted by the war have healed and the hatreds it used to stir up have largely worn off. You can’t spot any of these among the younger generation. In the Eastern and Western parts of Germany. In spite of the propaganda that was rife in the ‘40s and ‘50s, when West Germany was branded as a seat of revanchism, when absurdity and exaggeration were much in vogue, we feel no hatred for Germans today. I am certain of that. Members of the older generation have relapses of it – against members of the government or the judiciary, who look like Nazis to them. Some sections of the Press are still haunted by the spectre of revanchism, which they are summoning up once again to frighten their readers. But, on the whole it is in the past. Heinrich Böll can claim much credit for providing an antidote to the bitter aftertaste of the war. Böll’s books, first translated into Russian in 1957, have been a deeply moving experience for initially hundreds of thousands, and at the latest count millions, of people.

Bednarz: Can you claim that psychological relations – not necessarily political, but more specifically psychological relations – between Germans and Russians have settled back into the rut of “normalcy”?

Kopelev: Yes, in a human sense... As I see it, you can’t overcome the mistrust and fear of revanchism, which until recently was still a fact of life for certain sections of the population. This is especially true of the country’s western areas that lived through occupation, or Leningrad, where there are still lingering memories of the long siege. I know people, Russians and others, Poles, for example, whom I’ve heard say, sometime in the ‘50s: Germany, no, I’ll never go there, I’ll never pick up a German book or make friends with a German. Now, after reading some of Böll’s books they think differently.

Bednarz: Heinrich Böll, your idea of Russians and the Soviet Union appears to be just as positive, am I right?

Böll: Hard to tell. Personally, I feel a similar attitude toward myself – well, as I pull in to fill up my car with petrol, or in stores where I shop, people know I’m just back from the Soviet Union. Generally, it all looks very much like one big mess, so people are forgetting cause and effect, what followed what, that the Red Army only came here because Hitler had started a war. If you attack a country, it will defend itself, and then its army has to go on the offensive to drive you out and forestall further attacks. It’s no surprise then that the enemy army ended up in Berlin. But people now defy this logic. They tend to focus on other things, like East Prussia, for example. No one seems to remember the obvious thing – the force that drew the Red Army into Germany, the undivided Germany that is. Looking at it from a psychological angle, I’ve never sensed a trace of hatred in people – either the man

in the street or intellectuals (a stupid name, I think, especially as I'm classed as one of them). To me, hatred is only to be seen in the press. In some parts of it, and in certain political quarters who overlook the fact that it was Germany that attacked the Soviet Union in breach of their Treaty and swear it was the other way round.

Bednarz: Lev Kopelev, don't you see a confusion of cause and effect in Soviet society, in the Soviet system? This year is the hundredth anniversary of the birth of Stalin. Has Stalin's legacy been discarded in the Soviet Union? What remains of Stalin in today's society?

Kopelev: To my regret, too much of it has survived. I must admit, though, that what people think of Stalin today, pales in comparison with what they did 20 or 25 years ago. People have different ideas about Stalin. Many young people know nothing about him at all. I, for one, hear 17 and 18 year-olds asking: "What did he do that was so bad?" Only saw off a few dozen of his enemies. My generation appears to be completely ignorant of the real Stalin whose betrayal of faith turned adoration into hatred, revulsion and disgust. At the other extreme, Stalin myths persist, many different kinds of them. Like the Communist 'myth' – he was, after all, a Marxist, committed mistakes, yes, but did some good, too. Well, much as you hear about Hitler building the autobahns in your country. Or a chauvinistic myth – didn't he build a Great Russian empire? Various myths are in circulation. How deep are their roots? You know the kind of society we live in – nothing is ever discussed in the open.

Bednarz: You hinted recently you are no longer a Communist. Why so?

Kopelev: Why? Because I see that Communism is a utopia. Everything I've gone through as a Communist under various guises – free man, soldier on the frontline, inmate of a labour camp, free man again, writer and teacher – was more than enough to convince me that Communism, as Marx or Lenin saw it, was a utopia unattainable in the economic, social or psychological sense. What we make ourselves believe in – a world of gardens in bloom – is little different from the paradise people used to put faith in, expecting to see a lion and lamb lying down together. And then, of the three ideals of the French Revolution in the late 18th century – Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity – the first two have been shamefully trampled. Real freedom does not exist anywhere, as far as I know. Freedom is curtailed everywhere either by totalitarian or police states, or by economic constraints.

Bednarz: What sort of state is the Soviet Union?

Kopelev: It used to be a totalitarian state but not any longer. It is ruled by state capitalism, and the state is part police, part market, and even anarchist. I don't think we are still the totalitarian state we were 25 years ago. Totalitarian ideology is no more. Neither is its bureaucracy as pervasive as it was in Stalin's time. Perhaps it could be characterised as a totalitarian state in decay. It may take quite a long time, though, for it to decay into non-existence.

Bednarz: Lev Kopelev, have you ever thought of leaving your country?

Kopelev: Leave it? Never. I want to travel. Travel is a vital need for me, but not leave for good.

Bednarz: Why not?

Kopelev: This is my country. Now we are going back to where we started – I'm Russian, Russia is my home country, Russian is my mother tongue, Russian history is in my blood, and Russia's tragedy is my tragedy. I can't be different. Being

stripped of my Russian citizenship would be the greatest misfortune that could befall me.

Bednarz: Heinrich Böll, you look braced for a fight at the slightest provocation, and your writings sound a note of disillusion, at times. Have you ever thought of going into exile?

Böll: The idea never crossed my mind. The very thought of it turns my stomach, and gives me pangs of nostalgia. West Germany is a land where I want to live forever. I write in German, I speak German, and I think in German, too, or so I believe. I never thought I'd be at home anywhere. At times, I used to get unnerved when polemics seemed a bit too much overdone, so I would pack up and go to work abroad. Sometimes I was away for as long as a year, but that wasn't anything like a self-imposed exile. Had my life been in danger, I would've considered this option, but now I see no threat coming over my horizon. Nor do I see any trends emerging in West Germany, no matter what the outcome of next elections might be.

Bednarz: No matter what?

Böll: Exactly, an outcome that could force me into exile. That would mean pain, exasperation, hostility. I can live with all that though. But I can't imagine any situation arising that could force me into exile, the way our compatriots were in 1933.

Bednarz: Lev Kopelev, your turn, please.

Kopelev: We have come to the subject with the hardest comparisons. I can only envy Heinrich Böll and his Western comrades their freedom to express their opinions so openly. It's an opportunity we lack here.

Böll: And travel...

Kopelev: And travel, too.

Böll: It's so important, indeed.

Kopelev: Too important, really... We've been robbed of the world, the whole wide world.

Böll: I'm afraid the Soviet government and the people with decision-making powers are making a big mistake. They have turned travel into a privilege for loyalists or bureaucrats who cannot bring anything back, not even fresh impressions. Had a writer, an intellectual or an author been able to mix freely in the Western world for just a few months, he would probably forget about emigrating.

Bednarz: I look forward to our next meeting, in Cologne, when I hope we will be able to pick up where we are leaving off now.

Kopelev: Fine, provided I have a return ticket.

Bednarz: Definitely.

Böll: Travelling is great. I would be glad to show him Western Europe, its delights and horrors, so he and then return to where he belongs, the Soviet Union.

Retranslated from Efim Etkind's Russian translation