

FRIEDRICH VON GENTZ—A PATRON OF TRANSLATORS?

Conference translators have not yet, as far as I know, laid much stress on their kinship with *Friedrich von Gentz*, who at the peak of his power combined the offices of second-in-command to Metternich, Secretary-General of the Vienna Congress, agent of a number of foreign powers and—very much sought-after translator of diplomatic documents.

Chronologically, his services to the British Government of a less clearly specified nature preceded his employment by Lord Castlereagh as chief translator to the British delegation at the Vienna Congress. Ever since June 1800 irregular but considerable payments had been made to him (up to [^]1000 by Lord Grenville and others) as a propagandist and agent for the British view on international issues.

In 1813, Sir George Jackson commented on him to an emissary of H. M. Government: “If any circumstances should bring you within reach of Gentz, you should actively keep up communication with him, though with more caution even than formerly. Because in addition to his vanity—which might have led him to disclose your secrets, if entrusted with them, to other persons—there is now the circumstance of his connection with Metternich, whose agent he is supposed to be, and with the French Government, who, most likely on their own terms, have forborne to persecute him. Nevertheless, I cannot help thinking that Gentz is good at bottom, and that he would rather serve our cause than that of the French; in which case he is by far the ablest man I ever met with in Germany...”

The identification of “good at bottom” with sympathy for the British cause is probably no less typical than the insouciance with respect to linguistic services. This generally current view of Gentz’ discretion and disinterestedness, which would hardly make him acceptable by the professional standards of interpreters’ unions, did not prevent Lord Castlereagh from making the fullest use of Gentz in his linguistic (and other) capacities. Lord Castlereagh arrived for the Vienna Congress a “staff of mainly young men, some of them regular members of the Foreign Office, others relatives of Lord Castlereagh and his friends. Their

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command of French appears to have been limited, since Gentz had frequently to be employed by Castlereagh to translate his notes and memoranda” (Sweet, p. 331). The use of French at the Conference was not “limited” but exclusive, and Gentz’ employment is amply documented by his own diary notes. (These were kept sometimes in French, sometimes in German, over periods of years; his was a special kind of bilingualism, as French was for him more the language of a convention than of a country.) To quote some:

(Oct. 13) «travaillé à la préface d’un écrit sur le commerce des nègres pour Lord Castlereagh;»

«travaillé jusqu’à 2 heures et demie du matin à la traduction de la lettre écrite par Lord Castlereagh à l’empereur Alexandre», on which Sweet comments (p. 148-149): ... “the whole question was so delicate that Castlereagh was anxious to invent a form of words as soon as possible, lest others should take the initiative, and bring undesirable ideas and expressions. *Accordingly*, he got Gentz to translate the British suggestions into his best French and sent the result to Alexander...”

Many interpreter-especially with fulsome experience of international conferences—may deem himself able to put a delegate’s point of view better than he did himself—but how many are allowed to nowadays?

Another letter shows what a personality of Gentz’ rank (who would not [Sept. 24th, 1815]: «travaillé à une déclaration qui doit faire l’ouverture du Congrès») could make of the opportunities that came his way owing to his linguistic usefulness.

Oct. 12th: «en traduisant la lettre de Lord Castlereagh (sur l’affaire de la Saxe) j’ai senti mes idées s’éclaircir et se fortifier. Après dîner, ... j’engage sur la lettre de Castlereagh la discussion la plus importante et je tiens à Metternich... le langage le plus énergique qu’il ait jamais entendu de moi. Ce jour est un des plus beaux de ma vie...»

In how far the translator of the letter was authorized by its writer to discuss it with Metternich, is a detail not discussed.

There are other instances when his position of interpreter had led to situations which he describes as “rather remarkable”, as when in February 1801 he had noted that: “Lord Carysfoot entrusted me with the translation into French of the publication of the English note

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against Prussia on the one hand, and shortly afterwards Graf Haugwitz with that into German of the Prussian note against England.” An even neater illustration of the position of the translator-intermediary at that time is provided by an incident referred to on September 20th 1814, (Sweet, p. 316):

«J’avais été prié de rédiger le discours que le comte Herberstein doit adresser demain au comte Stadion en l’introduisant à la chambre. J’y ai travaillé dans la matinée. Le comte Stadion l’ayant appris, m’a écrit un joli billet; j’ai été chez lui à une heure et demie et je lui ai communiqué le discours. Il m’a prié alors de lui composer aussi le sien.» What difficulties and misunderstandings might not be avoided and how much time saved by leaving matters so trustfully in the interpreter’s hands!

His command of the language was not the least important factor that helped Gentz to hold the treads of diplomatic developments so firmly in his hands with respect to more important issues as well. The documents show us of course mainly Gentz’ activity as translator; as the Congress never really met, this was more important than interpreting work at non-existent sessions and in committees; it is generally agreed that the decisive achievement is to get your version into the final documents.

We will let Gentz have the final word with his perhaps not untypical view of the main actors on the political scene as seen by the expert ‘Handlanger’, in the proud consciousness that he is more completely «à même» of his work than they are of theirs:

«L’aspect des affaires publiques est lugubre, mais il ne l’est pas, comme autrefois, par le poids imposant et écrasant suspendu sur nos têtes, mais par la médiocrité et l’ineptie de presque tous les acteurs; or, comme je n’ai rien à me reprocher, la connaissance intime de cette impitoyable marche et de tous ces êtres mesquins qui gouvernent le monde, loin de m’affliger me sert d’amusement, et je jouis de ce spectacle comme si on le donnait exprès pour mes menus plaisirs.»

Source : *Babel*, vol. 3, n° 2, 1957, p. 87-88.