



Chervontsi or roubles – does it matter?

Jan Vanhellemont

In *The Master and Margarita*, Mikhail Bulgakov used several times the word "chervonets". According to Jan Vanhellemont, the webmaster of the Master & Margarita website, it's a pity that the English, French and Dutch translators of Bulgakov's masterpiece translated this word as "ten-rouble bill". He argues that, by doing so, they missed a part of Bulgakov's satire on the subject of money in the Soviet Union era.

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The Master and Margarita

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Translating Bulgakov's satire

It must be a real slog for any translator to grasp entirely Mikhail Bulgakov's satire in *The Master and Margarita*. Bulgakov's major talent was in his capability to transform his impressions and deceptions into satire. He worked secretly on *The Master and Margarita* during the ongoing repression in the Soviet Union in the thirties. It turned into a glorification of freedom and a gorgeous love story, but also into a book by which he took revenge on the soviet literators for thwarting him, and on the soviet authorities – often Stalin himself – for making megalomaniac decisions which were, according to the supporting propaganda, intended to create the socialist utopia, but in reality disturbing people's life – and often even ending it abruptly. No wonder that many characters, locations, houses and situations are fictitious only on the face of things. Sometimes it's dead easy to find out to whom or to what Bulgakov is referring, but sometimes it needs more insight.

Most translators have tried to respect Bulgakov's style and to make his satire clear for non-Russians as well. Which must have been rather difficult because there was no definitive authorial text, and the first translators, like Michael Glenny, had to work with a heavily mutilated source text. Yet it is a shame that some obvious satire elements which were clearly present in all versions of Bulgakov's source texts, were not discerned by any of the translators.

An example of an obvious satire element is the subject of money. Money plays an important role in *The Master and Margarita*. There is, of course, the issue of the forbidden foreign currency and the perverse existence of the foreign currency stores. But there is more, because strange things happen with bank notes in Moscow after Woland's black magic show in the Variety Theatre. Bank notes all of the sudden change into labels of bottles of Narzan mineral water or Abrau-Durso wine, they turn into cut-off paper or even into foreign currency. Not always though – sometimes money appears to be a very normal and reliable tender in the novel.

As a reader of an English, French or Dutch translation, you may wonder why these strange things sometimes happen to the bank notes, because the translators, in their wordings, made no difference between bewitched money and normal, solid bank notes. Both are called roubles. But the Russian reader knows better: in the original text Bulgakov, in general, refers to money as to roubles as well, but he consistently uses specific other words - червонец (chervonets) or червонцы (chervontsi) - to denote a specific kind of bank note: the chervonets – by most translators called a ten-rouble bill.

Monetary issues in the Soviet Union

Many people think that the rouble was the currency in the Soviet Union. And so it was, though only partly.

The Soviet Union did not have a stable currency at the end of the civil war, and the government realized that it could not achieve its ambitious economic development plans of the New Economic Policy (NEP) without first solving this pressing monetary problem. There was an urgent need to restrain chaos in the money standard and to stop the hyperinflation. In Bulgakov's diary we can read that, on April 18th, 1922, the rent of his apartment in Bolshaya Sadovaya ulitsa – the haunted flat in the novel – was increased to one and a half million roubles. And it was for "a room which is worth nothing, and the neighbours either". A pound of flour was 18 million roubles, a white bread 375 thousand per pound, and butter was 1 million 200 thousand per pound. One year later, on July 11, 1923, the white bread reached 14 million per pound. Three months later, on October 18, 1923, it was at 65 million.

In order to stop this hyper-inflation, a decree of October 11, 1922, issued by the sovnrakom, the administrative branch of the Soviet government, authorized the Soviet state bank to issue a new currency: the chervonets bank note. It was issued as the equivalent of the pre-revolutionary ten roubles gold coin (7.74232 grams of pure gold). The legislation required at least 25 percent of the chervontsi (plural for chervonets) to be backed by precious metals and hard currency.

The first step, the issuing of chervontsi, began at the end of November 1922. Chervontsi were bank notes, sometimes referred to as sovznaki. The ratio of the chervontsi to the old roubles, also referred to as kaznaki and not really backed by gold at all, was to be two to one. No exchange rate was established between the two currencies, so the gold-backed currency would eventually prevail.

And the chervontsi did drive the old paper money away. Whereas at the beginning of 1923 the chervontsi represented only 3 per cent of all money in circulation, the percentage increased to 83.6 per cent in February 1924, on the eve of the final act of currency reform.

Through the 1920's, the chervonets was officially quoted on foreign exchanges. However, this attempt to maintain a "hard" Soviet currency was controversial almost from its inception and quickly ended along with the NEP itself. On June 9, 1926, the government passed a resolution forbidding the export of Soviet currency abroad, and in February 1930 all transactions to sell gold and foreign currency to private individuals for chervontsi at a fixed rate were banned, the Soviet currency was withdrawn from foreign exchanges and a quoting commission was set up under the State Bank's Board to set the exchange rates of foreign currencies.

In 1937 Lenin's portrait appeared on the chervonets bank notes. But the life of chervonets was not long. The rouble became the main currency unit again. The word chervonets existed though until 1947. To normalise money circulation a confiscatory monetary reform was then conducted, during which old money was exchanged for new roubles at the rate of 10 to 1.

Bulgakov's satire

In *The Master and Margarita* Bulgakov criticizes the existence of the chervonets more than once, but it seems that not any of the English, French or Dutch translators caught his satire and consequently missed the opportunity to show some typical aspects of the attitude developed by the Russian people towards the glorious and often pompous projects of the Soviet authorities... An attitude, characterized by mixed feelings and a dual behaviour: most Russians showed an outward appearance of acceptance and even approval of the political system on one hand, but on the other hand they demonstrated an unrivaled mastery in scrubbing round the official politics and expressing their criticisms on it by the use of humour. In their hearts many Russians did not like the decisions of the Soviet authorities to replace pre-revolutionary values by new norms and standards which often were at odds with the people's feelings. But they could not easily criticize it openly. The denial of the reality which was created by the authorities could be considered as subversive – exile to labour camps or even execution could be the result of it. But yet disaffection needed to be expressed. Which often happened through clandestine behaviour or humorous speech in veiled terms. Many Russians, for instance, openly paid lip service to the official atheism, but had their children secretly christened in the banned orthodox church. And the very same behaviour was shown towards the chervonets. They sure used it to pay their bills, but they didn't stop loving the rouble, which in their hearts remained the one and only real Russian tender

Bulgakov starts criticizing the chervonets with some lenient irony in the scene at the Variety Theatre. A "bewildered citizen" in the gallery thought he would find a deck of cards in his pocket, but it appeared to be a bank-wrapped packet with 'One thousand roubles' written on it. In his original text, Bulgakov described that, when this citizen picked at the wrapper with his fingernail, he was trying to find out if the bills were червонцы (chervontsi) or какие-нибудь волшебные (any magic ones).

*Соседи навалились на него, а он в изумлении ковырял ногтем обложку, стараясь дознаться, настоящие ли это **червонцы** или какие-нибудь волшебные.*

*- Ей богу, настоящие! **Червонцы!** - кричали с галерки радостно.*

*His neighbours hovered over him, and he, in amazement, picked at the wrapper with his fingernail, trying to find out if the bills were **chervontsi** or some sort of magic ones.*

*- By God, they're real! **Chervontsi!**' - joyful cries came from the gallery.*

Not one of the translators, however, used the word *chervontsi*, they all translated it by *ten-rouble bills*, *real money* or just *money* and they continued doing so throughout the novel, as if there was no difference between the chervonets and the rouble.

The conclusion of the public at the Theatre, however, was very clear: "Ей богу, настоящие! Червонцы!" or, in English: "By God, they're real! Chervontsi!". In this simple and short sentence is hidden a fully fledged satire on the monetary politics of the Soviet authorities. In some well-chosen words, Bulgakov uses skilfully and plentifully the masking, the constant interchanging of illusion and reality, and the naming or concealing of concepts as instruments to create fantastic and grotesque effects. Chervontsi are called "real money", as opposed to "any magic ones" – which only can be roubles, of course. But in the next chapters we will see that the supernatural things only happen to chervontsi, never to roubles.

When the financial manager of the Variety Theatre, Grigory Rimsky, stared "with inflamed eyes" at the banknotes in his office, Bulgakov described the chervontsi as *магические* (magic), and when Rimsky put them in his briefcase a little later, they are described as *гипнотизерские* (hypnotic). Hypnotic – as if Bulgakov wanted to say that chervontsi can never be real money, but an illusion created by a higher authority or, by extension, dust in the eyes. A little further in the novel we will understand why... because strange things happen to the chervontsi – things which never or seldom happen to the solid and reliable roubles.

The first strange thing happened to Vassily Stepanovich Lastochkin, the bookkeeper of the Variety Theatre. Vassily Stepanovich wanted to go to the Finspectacle sector so as to turn over the receipts of Woland's show in the Theatre, he saw an empty cab driving up, and he also noticed, with a cough of surprise, how the driver's face twisted the moment he saw the passenger. 'Show your money,' the driver said angrily. He wanted to make sure that Vassily Stepanovich would not be paying with chervontsi, but with the more reliable Трешки (three-rouble bills).

*- Деньги покажите, - со злобой ответил шофер, не глядя на пассажира. Все более поражаясь, бухгалтер, зажав драгоценный портфель под мышкой, вытащил из бумажника **червонец** и показал его шоферу.*

- Не поеду! - кратко сказал тот.

- Я извиняюсь... - начал было бухгалтер, но шофер его перебил:

*- **Трешки** есть?*

Совершенно сбитый с толку бухгалтер вынул из бумажника две трешки и показал шоферу.

- Садитесь

*- Show your money, - the driver replied angrily, without looking at the passenger. With increasing amazement, the bookkeeper, pressing the precious briefcase under his arm, pulled a **chervonets** from his wallet and showed it to the driver.*

- I won't go! - the man said curtly.

- I beg your pardon... - the bookkeeper tried to begin, but the driver interrupted him.

*- Got any **threes**?*

The completely bewildered bookkeeper took two three-rouble bills from his wallet and showed them to the driver.

- Get in

The driver felt very suspicious of the chervonets bill, because earlier that day, he had received chervontsi, and they had changed in labels of Narzan (*) mineral water bottles.

- Дает какой-то сукин сын **червонец**, я ему сдачи -- четыре пятьдесят... Вылез, сволочь! Минут через пять смотрю: вместо **червонца** бумажка с нарзанной бутылки!
- Some son of a bitch gives me a **chervonets**, I give him change - four-fifty. He gets out, the scum! About five minutes later, I look: instead of a **chervonets**, it's a label from a bottle of Narzan!

A little later, when Vassily Stepanovich was at the cash desk of the Finspectacle sector, everything swam before his eyes when no chervontsi, but foreign money flitted before his eyes: there were stacks of Canadian dollars, British pounds, Dutch guildens, Latvian lats, Estonian kroons... And straight away he was arrested, of course.

The next victim of the magic chervontsi was Andrei Fokich Sokov, the bartender of the Variety Theatre. He made a complaint to Woland about the chervontsi he had been paid with the night of Woland's black magic show. The chervontsi had changed into cut-up paper. The bar was a hundred and nine roubles short.

- И вот заходит ко мне в буфет молодой человек, дает **червонец**, я сдачи ему восемь с полтиной... Потом другой.
- Тоже молодой человек?
- Нет, пожилой. Третий, четвертый. Я все даю сдачи. А сегодня стал проверять кассу, глядь, а вместо денег - резаная бумага. На сто девять рублей наказали буфет.
- And then a young man comes to my bar and gives me a **chervonets**, I give him eight-fifty in change... Then another one ...'
- Also a young man?'
- No, an older one. Then a third, and a fourth ... I keep giving them change. And today I went to check the cash box, and there, instead of money - cut-up paper. They hit the buffet for a hundred and nine roubles.

Sokov for his part had paid professor Kuzmin with three chervontsi. The professor did not have many patients that evening and as twilight began to set in, the last one was gone. Taking off his white overall, the professor glanced at the place on the desk where Andrei Fokich had left the three chervontsi and saw that there were no longer any chervontsi there, but three labels from bottles of Abrau-Durso (*) wine.

*Больных в тот вечер у профессора было немного, и с приближением сумерек ушел последний. Снимая халат, профессор глянул на то место, где буфетчик оставил **червонцы**, и увидел, что никаких **червонцев** там нет, а лежат три этикетки с бутылок "Абрау-Дюрсо".*

*That evening the professor had few patients, and as twilight approached the last one left. Taking off his white coat, the professor glanced at the spot where the barman had left his **chervontsi** and saw no **chervontsi** there but only three labels from bottles of Abrau-Durso wine.*

There are many more examples in *The Master and Margarita*, but it should be clear now to the reader that, throughout the novel, it becomes apparent that, in Bulgakov's opinion, there was a huge difference between the newly introduced chervontsi and the good old rouble bills in the Soviet Union. In the novel, chervontsi mean trouble, roubles don't. Russian readers find an obvious satire in what happened to the chervontsi, but English, French and Dutch readers don't. In real life, chervontsi were issued by a new regime which had, in a brutal way, no respect for the traditions of the Russian soul, society, religion or culture and, by doing so, thrown their lives upside down. In the novel, chervontsi were introduced by the devil who would, also in a brutal way, upturn the life of the Muscovites totally.

In the real life of his time and place, Mikhail Bulgakov used linguistic instruments to denounce the ridiculous character of the official discourse by generating a hierarchical shift between language and reality, which was, in fact, what the authorities did themselves constantly. What was true or false in the language of the Soviet authorities ruled over what was true or false in reality. So Bulgakov did fight the enemy with his own weapons. Yet with more linguistic feeling, more sense of perspective, more sense of beauty, less arbitrariness and more respect for the reader or the listener. It's a pity that the translators did not catch it all...

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(*) *Other missed opportunities to twig the Russian soul by many translators are in the typical eponyms used by Bulgakov and the Russians in general – and for which often very uninventive descriptions are used by the translators. The Narzan mineral water is translated as "seltzer" or "soda-water", and the Abrau-Durso champagne is presented by most translators as just "champagne" or "old champagne".*