



LIFE AND FATE
VASILY GROSSMAN

TRANSLATED AND
WITH AN INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERT CHANDLER

LIFE AND FATE

VASILY GROSSMAN (1905–1964) was born in Berdichev in present-day Ukraine, the home of one of the largest Jewish communities in Eastern Europe. After studying chemistry and working as a mining engineer, he was discovered by Maksim Gorky, whose support enabled him to begin publishing his writing. Grossman was a combat correspondent during World War II, covering the defense of Stalingrad, the fall of Berlin, and writing the first account in any language of a German death camp. Although the manuscript for *Life and Fate* was initially seized and suppressed by the KGB in 1960, and Grossman did not live to see it published, it was smuggled out of the USSR a decade later with the help of Andrei Sakharov and Vladimir Voinovich. The novel was eventually published throughout Europe and North America in the early 1980s; it appeared in Russia in 1988. *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941–1945*, a collection of Grossman's journalistic writings and notebook entries, was published in 2006.

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INTRODUCTION

“Speaking for Those Who Lie in the Earth” The Life and Work of Vasily Grossman

Vasily Semyonovich Grossman was born on December 12, 1905, in Berdichev, a Ukrainian town that was home to one of Europe’s largest Jewish communities. His parents were Jews and they originally named their son Iosif, but this obviously Jewish name was Russified to Vasily; the family was well off and assimilated. At some point in his early childhood his parents appear to have separated. Vasily was brought up by his mother; a wealthy uncle helped financially. From 1910 to 1912 Vasily and his mother lived in Switzerland, probably in Geneva. His mother, Yekaterina Savelievna, was later to work as a French teacher, and Vasily would retain a good knowledge of French throughout his life. From 1914 to 1919 he attended secondary school in Kiev, and from 1924 to 1929 he studied chemistry at Moscow State University.¹ There he soon realized that his true vocation was literature. He never, however, lost interest in science; it is not for nothing that Viktor Shtrum, the central figure of *Life and Fate* and in many respects a self-portrait, is a nuclear physicist.

After graduating, Grossman moved to the industrial region known as the Donbass, working as a safety inspector in a mine and as a chemistry teacher in a medical institute. In 1932 he was able to return to Moscow, and in 1934 he published both “In the Town of Berdichev”—a short story that won the admiration of such different writers as Maksim Gorky, Mikhail Bulgakov, and

1. Primo Levi, perhaps the greatest Western witness to the Shoah, worked throughout his life as an industrial chemist. Like Grossman, he is a master of precise description and analysis.

Isaac Babel²—and a novel, *Glyukauf*,³ about the life of the Donbass miners. In 1937 Grossman was admitted to the prestigious Union of Soviet Writers. His novel *Stepan Kol'chugin* (published 1937–40) was nominated for a Stalin Prize.

Critics have often divided Grossman's life into two parts. Tzvetan Todorov, for example, claims that "Grossman is the only example, or at least the most significant, of an established and leading Soviet writer changing his spots completely. The slave in him died, and a free man arose."⁴ This sounds impressive, but it is wrong to draw so absolute a distinction between the "conformist" writer of the 1930s and 1940s and the "dissident" who wrote *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows* in the 1950s. *Glyukauf* may seem dull today, but it must once have had some power to shock; in 1932 Gorky criticized a draft for "naturalism"—a Soviet code word for presenting too much unpalatable reality. At the end of his report Gorky suggested that the author should ask himself: "Why am I writing? Which truth am I confirming? Which truth do I wish to triumph?"⁵ Even then such a cynical attitude to truth would almost certainly have been anathema to Grossman. It is hard, however, not to be impressed by Gorky's intuition; it is as if he sensed where Grossman's love of truth might lead him. In "Four Days," a story written a few years later, Grossman quoted the maxim "Absolute truth is the most beautiful thing of all"; and in 1961, after the manuscripts of *Life and Fate* had been confiscated, Grossman would write to Khrushchev, "I have written in my book what I believed, and continue to believe, to be the truth. I have written only what I have thought through, felt through and suffered through."⁶

Something about Grossman—his love of truth, or perhaps his

2. See Semyon Lipkin, *Stalingrad Vasiliya Grossmana* (Ardis, 1986), p. 10. Babel: "Our Yid capital has been seen through new eyes." Bulgakov: "Don't say it's really been possible to publish something worthwhile!"

3. The title is derived from the German *Glück auf*. This phrase, literally "Luck up!," was used to greet a miner when he was brought up to the surface. It is used more generally to mean "Good luck."

4. Tzvetan Todorov, *Hope and Memory* (London: Atlantic, 2005), p. 50.

5. Lipkin, *Stalingrad*, p. 10.

6. Lipkin, *Stalingrad*, p. 81.

critical intelligence—seems to have alarmed not only Gorky, but also Stalin. Like *Glyukauf*, *Stepan Kol'chugin* may seem orthodox enough today, but Stalin deleted it from the list of Stalin Prize nominees, declaring that this novel about a young revolutionary was “Menshevik in sympathy.”⁷ Grossman was, in reality, neither a Menshevik nor a martyr; nevertheless, he showed considerable courage during the years of the Great Terror. In 1938, when his second wife, Olga Mikhailovna, was arrested, Grossman adopted her two sons by her previous husband, Boris Guber, who had himself been arrested the previous year; but for Grossman’s prompt action, the boys might have been sent to one of the camps for children of “enemies of the people.” Grossman then wrote to Yezhov, the head of the NKVD,⁸ pointing out that Olga Mikhailovna was now *his* wife, not Guber’s, and that she should not be held responsible for her former husband, with whom she had broken completely; later that year Olga Mikhailovna was released.⁹ Grossman’s friend Semyon Lipkin commented, “All this may seem normal enough, but . . . only a very brave man would have dared to write a letter like this to the State’s chief executioner.”¹⁰ It was around this time that Grossman began work on several stories about arrests and denunciations; these were first published only in the 1960s.

Grossman’s move towards dissidence was a gradual one; no single event should be seen as uniquely important. Like most people, he acted inconsistently. Throughout the war years he appeared to feel no fear of either the Germans or the NKVD; in 1952, however, as Stalin’s anti-Jewish campaign gathered momentum, Grossman

7. During its second congress in 1903, the Russian Social Democratic Party split into two factions, which became known as Bolsheviks and Mensheviks. After the Bolshevik coup d’état in 1917, most Mensheviks were either arrested or exiled.

8. The Soviet security service was renamed many times; the most important of its names and acronyms, in chronological order, are the Cheka, the OGPU, the NKVD, and the KGB.

9. For a fuller account of this story, including Grossman’s astutely phrased letter to Yezhov, see John Garrard and Carol Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev: The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman* (Free Press, 1996), pp. 122–125 and 347–348.

10. Lipkin, *Stalingrad*, p. 13. Todorov is wrong to reproach Grossman, if only implicitly (*Todorov, Hope and Memory*, p. 50), for not trying to defend Boris Guber as well; any such attempt would have led not only to Grossman himself being arrested but also to Olga Mikhailovna staying in prison.

agreed to sign an official letter calling for the harshest punishment of the Jewish doctors allegedly involved in a plot against Stalin's life.¹¹

Grossman's weakness at this moment may seem surprising. It is possible that it was a momentary aberration; just before being asked to sign, Grossman had quarreled with the poet and editor Aleksandr Tvardovsky and he was, no doubt, feeling confused.¹² *Life and Fate*, however, is almost an encyclopedia of the complexities of life under totalitarianism, and no one has articulated better than Grossman how hard it is for an individual to withstand its pressures:

But an invisible force was crushing him. He could feel its weight, its hypnotic power; it was forcing him to think as it wanted, to write as it dictated. This force was inside him; it could dissolve his will and cause his heart to stop beating . . . Only people who have never felt such a force themselves can be surprised that others submit to it. Those who have felt it, on the other hand, feel astonished that a man can rebel against it even for a moment—with one sudden word of anger, one timid gesture of protest (p. 672).

Grossman did not try to hide from his own faults. He condemned himself, above all, for his failure to get his mother evacuated from Berdichev after the German invasion in 1941. He also, however, blamed his wife, who did not get on with his mother; shortly before the war, Grossman had suggested they invite his mother to live with them in their Moscow flat and Olga Mikhailovna had said that there was not enough room.¹³ In September 1941, Yekaterina Savelievna was killed by the Germans, along with

11. Ilya Ehrenburg, Grossman's fellow—and rival—war correspondent, has often been seen as unprincipled. Ehrenburg, however, not only refused to sign this letter but even wrote to Stalin explaining his refusal. Shtrum's ambivalent feelings towards Sokolov in *Life and Fate* are Grossman's ambivalent feelings towards Ehrenburg (Jonathan Brent and Vladimir P. Naumov, *Stalin's Last Crime: The Plot Against the Jewish Doctors, 1948–1953*, pp. 300–306). My thanks to Alice Nakhimovsky for pointing this out to me (personal correspondence).

12. Lipkin, *Stalingrad*, pp. 42–43.

13. Lipkin, *Stalingrad*, p. 75.

most of the other 30,000 Jews who lived in Berdichev. After Grossman's death, an envelope was found among his papers; in it were two letters he had written to his dead mother in 1950 and 1961, on the ninth and twentieth anniversaries of her death, along with two photographs. In the first letter Grossman writes, "I have tried dozens, or maybe hundreds of times, to imagine how you died, how you walked to meet your death. I tried to imagine the person who killed you. He was the last person to see you. I know you were thinking about me . . . during all that time."¹⁴ One photograph shows his mother with Vasily when he was still a child; the other, taken by Grossman from a dead SS officer, shows hundreds of naked dead women and girls in a large pit. His mother's death, Grossman's guilt, and the ensuing recriminations between Grossman and his wife are all reflected in *Life and Fate*. I know no more powerful lament for East European Jewry than the letter that Anna Semyonovna, a fictional portrait of Grossman's mother, writes to her son and manages to have smuggled out of the Jewish ghetto.¹⁵

Grossman may have looked on the war as a chance to redeem himself. He volunteered as an ordinary soldier, despite his bad eyesight and poor health. Assigned instead to *Red Star* (*Krasnaya Zvezda*), the Red Army newspaper, he quickly won acclaim as a war correspondent, impressing almost everyone with his tenacity and courage. He covered all the main battles, from the defense of Moscow to the fall of Berlin, and his articles were valued by soldiers and generals alike; no other journalist wrote with the same regard for what Grossman called the "ruthless truth of war." Many passages from his notebooks, had they been seen by the NKVD, could have cost Grossman his life; some reflect badly on important commanders, others deal with such taboo matters as desertion and collaboration with the Germans.

14. Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, p. 352.

15. *La Dernière Lettre*, a one-woman play based on this letter, was staged in Paris by Frederick Wiseman in 2000; Wiseman went on to make a film based on this production. He then staged *The Last Letter* in New York in December 2003. A Russian version was staged in Moscow in December 2005, on the centenary of Grossman's birth.

The notebooks are full of unexpected detail, much of which reappears in *Life and Fate*. In an early note he refers to “the usual smell of the front line—a cross between that of a morgue and that of a blacksmith.” Soon after arriving in Stalingrad Grossman writes, “Sunset over a square. A terrifying and strange beauty: the light pink sky is looking through thousands and thousands of empty windows and roofs. A huge poster painted in vulgar colors: ‘The radiant way.’”¹⁶

Grossman never took notes during interviews, perhaps afraid of intimidating people and so preferring to rely on his remarkable memory. He had the ability to win the trust of men and women from all walks of life: snipers, generals, fighter pilots, soldiers in a Soviet penal battalion, peasants, German prisoners, or schoolteachers who had guiltily carried on working in German-occupied territory. Ortenberg, the chief editor of *Red Star*, wrote, “All the correspondents attached to the Stalingrad Front were amazed how Grossman had made the divisional commander . . . , a silent and reserved Siberian, talk to him for six hours . . . telling him all that he wanted to know, at one of the hardest moments.”¹⁷ Elsewhere Ortenberg wrote, “We didn’t ask him to hurry up. We knew how he worked. Although he had taught himself to write in any conditions, however bad, in a bunker by a wicker lamp, in a field, lying in bed or in an *izba* (peasant hut) stuffed with people, he always wrote slowly, persistently giving all of his strength to this process.”¹⁸

In 1943, after the German surrender at Stalingrad, Grossman was with the first Red Army units to liberate the Ukraine. He learned about Babi Yar, where 100,000 people, most of them Jews, were massacred. Soon afterwards, in Berdichev, he learned the details of his mother’s death. “The Old Teacher,” a fictional account of events leading up to the massacre of several hundred Jews in an

16. Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941–1945*, edited and translated by Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (Pantheon, 2006), p. 126. *The Radiant Way* is the title of a film directed by Aleksandrov (1940).

17. Grossman, *A Writer at War*, p. xiv.

18. Grossman, *A Writer at War*, p. 62.

unnamed town resembling Berdichev, was published in the journal *Znamya*; the article “Ukraine without Jews,” a litany for the dead, was turned down by *Red Star* but published in Yiddish translation in the journal of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee; these two pieces are among the first accounts of the Shoah in any language.¹⁹ And Grossman’s vivid yet sober “The Hell of Treblinka” (late 1944), the first article in any language about a Nazi death camp, was republished and used as testimony in the Nuremberg trials.

Even today—after so many accounts have been published—it is hard to grasp the magnitude of the Shoah. In being the first to research both the massacres in the Ukraine that marked its beginning and the death camps of Poland that were its culmination, Grossman showed a degree of moral and imaginative courage that is almost beyond comprehension. The SS had tried to destroy all trace of Treblinka’s existence, but Grossman interviewed local peasants and the forty survivors and managed to reconstruct the physical and psychological mechanisms according to which the camp functioned. He writes perceptively about the role played by deceit, about how the “SS psychiatrists of death” managed “to confuse people’s minds once more, to sprinkle them with hope . . . The same voice trumpets word after word: ‘Women and children must take their shoes off . . . Stockings must be put into shoes . . . Be tidy . . . Going to the bathhouse, you must have your documents, money, a towel and soap. I repeat . . .’”²⁰ Coleridge once defined Imagination as “the power to disimprison the soul of fact”; Grossman was evidently endowed with this power to the highest degree.

The official Soviet line, however, was that all nationalities had suffered equally under Hitler; the standard retort to those who emphasized the suffering of Jews was “Do not divide the dead!”

19. “The Old Teacher,” *Znamya*, nos. 7 and 8 (1943); “Ukraine without Jews,” *Eynikayt*, November 25 and December 2, 1943.

20. Grossman, *A Writer at War*, p. 291.

Admitting that Jews constituted the overwhelming majority of the dead would have entailed admitting that other Soviet nationalities—and especially Ukrainians—had been accomplices in the genocide; in any case, Stalin was anti-Semitic. From 1943 to 1946, along with Ilya Ehrenburg, Grossman worked for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee on *The Black Book*, a documentary account of the massacres of Jews on Soviet and Polish soil. *The Black Book*, however, was never published²¹; no amount of compromises could make such material acceptable.

The novel *The People Immortal* (1943), like *Stepan Kol'chugin*, was nominated for a Stalin prize but vetoed by Stalin—although the committee had voted for it unanimously. Grossman's next novel, *For a Just Cause* (1952), received enthusiastic initial reviews but was then denounced; this was probably both because Grossman was a Jew and because, at that time of high Stalinism, it had become unacceptable to write of the war—and especially of its disastrous first year—with even a modicum of realism. Other leading members of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee had already been arrested or murdered and a new wave of purges was about to begin; but for Stalin's death, in March 1953, Grossman would almost certainly have been arrested himself.

During the next few years Grossman enjoyed public success. He was awarded a prestigious decoration, the Red Banner of Labor, and *For a Just Cause* was republished. Meanwhile he was writing his two masterpieces, neither of which was to be published in Russia until the late 1980s: *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows*.²² Intended as a sequel to the politically less heretical *For a Just Cause*, *Life and Fate* is better seen as a separate novel that includes many of the same characters. It is important not only as literature but

21. The plates for the Soviet edition were destroyed in 1948. The complete Russian text (to this day unpublished in Russia) was first published in Israel in 1980 and in Lithuania in 1993. See Simon Markish, "A Russian Writer's Jewish Fate," *Commentary* (April 1986), p. 42.

22. An early and incomplete version of the latter, poorly translated by Thomas Whitney, has been published under the title *Forever Flowing*. Grossman entrusted his final version, a typescript with handwritten insertions, to Yekaterina Zabolotskaya. She donated it to John and Carol Garrard, who in turn donated it to the Sakharov archive of Harvard University; it is freely accessible to researchers.

also as history; we have no more complete picture of Stalinist Russia. The power of other dissident writers—Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, Nadezhda Mandelstam—derives from their position as outsiders; Grossman's power derives at least in part from his intimate knowledge of every level of Soviet society. In *Life and Fate*, Grossman achieves what many other Soviet writers struggled but failed to achieve: a portrait of an entire age. Every character, however vividly realized, represents a particular group or class and endures a fate which exemplifies the fate of that class: Shtrum, the Jewish intellectual; Getmanov, the cynical Stalinist functionary; Abarchuk and Krymov, two of the thousands of Old Bolsheviks arrested in the 1930s; Novikov, the honorable officer whose ability was recognized only when the disasters of 1941 compelled the authorities, at least for a few years, to value military competence more highly than possession of the correct party credentials. There is nothing eccentric about the novel, either stylistically or structurally. But for Grossman's persistent moral questioning and his heretical equation of Communism with Nazism, *Life and Fate* would have come oddly close to meeting the authorities' repeated demand for a truly Soviet epic. Even in the West, however, few people at this time understood that Communism and National Socialism were mirror images of each other; to a regime that prided itself above all on its defeat of the Nazis, no heresy could have been more shocking.

In October 1960, against the advice of his two closest friends and confidants, Semyon Lipkin and Yekaterina Zabolotskaya, Grossman delivered the manuscript to the editors of *Znamya*. It was the height of Khrushchev's "Thaw" and Grossman clearly believed that the novel could be published. In February 1961, three KGB officers came to the flat to confiscate the manuscript and any other related material, even carbon paper and typing ribbons. This is one of only two occasions when the Soviet authorities "arrested" a book rather than a person²³; no other book, apart from *The Gulag*

23. The OGPU confiscated two copies of the manuscript of *A Dog's Heart* during a search of Bulgakov's flat in May 1926; two years later, however, they were returned. Grossman himself always

Archipelago, was ever considered so dangerous.²⁴ Grossman refused to sign an undertaking not to speak of this visit, but in other respects he appeared to cooperate, taking the KGB officers to his cousin and his two typists so they could confiscate remaining copies of the manuscript. What the KGB, somewhat surprisingly, failed to discover is that Grossman had made two other copies; he had left one with Semyon Lipkin and the other with Lyolya Dominikina, a friend from student days who had no connection with the literary world.

Many people think that Grossman was crazily naive to imagine that *Life and Fate* could be published in the Soviet Union; this is the view put forward by Lipkin and Zabolotskaya, who make out that it was only under pressure from them that he even agreed to make an extra copy of the novel.²⁵ The poet Kornei Chukovsky, however, wrote in a diary entry for December 27, 1960, “Kazakevich had a call from Khrushchev’s secretary saying the novel was magnificent, just what was needed now, and he would let Khrushchev know how he felt.” Even if this was mere rumor, the fact that Chukovsky took it seriously is significant.²⁶

I cannot myself see Grossman as naive; he clearly had a deep knowledge both of human psychology and of the inner workings of the Soviet regime. And it is all too easy to make retrospective judgments about a political situation that had been changing rapidly ever since Khrushchev’s denunciation of Stalin in 1956. The art critic Igor Golomstock has spoken to me about the high hopes entertained at this time by many intelligent people who were deeply critical of the Soviet regime but who—like Grossman—had lived their whole lives within it. Lipkin makes it clear that

spoke of *Life and Fate* being “arrested”; other Russians discussing the incident tend to use the same word.

24. Pasternak, in contrast, showed copies of *Doctor Zhivago* to friends and editors and even trusted the manuscript to the Soviet postal service; his offense lay not in writing the novel but in publishing it abroad.

25. Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, pp. 263–265.

26. Kornei Chukovsky, *Diary 1901–1969* (Yale University Press, 2005), p. 451.

Grossman knew he might be arrested; my own view is that he was simply tired of prevaricating, tired of trying to accommodate himself to the authorities' capricious demands. He did not foresee that the authorities might take the unusual step of arresting not him but his novel. Nevertheless, he took the precaution of not even telling Lipkin about the copy he had left with Lyolya Dominikina.²⁷

Grossman continued to demand that his novel be published. In time he was summoned by Suslov, the chief ideologue of the Khrushchev and Brezhnev years. Suslov repeated what Grossman had already been told, that the novel could not be published for another two or three hundred years. Still more striking than Suslov's presumption—as the satirist Vladimir Voinovich once pointed out—is his apparently unquestioning recognition of the novel's lasting importance.²⁸

Afraid that the novel might be lost forever, Grossman fell into depression. In the words of Semyon Lipkin: "Grossman aged before our eyes. His curly hair turned greyer and a bald patch appeared. His asthma . . . returned. His walk became a shuffle."²⁹ In Grossman's own words: "They strangled me in a dark corner."³⁰ Nevertheless, Grossman did not stop working. As well as writing *Peace Be with You*, a lively account of a journey to Armenia, he completed *Everything Flows*, a work still more critical of Soviet society than *Life and Fate*. Part novel, part meditation, it includes a brief study of the camps, eloquent pages on the terror-famine of the early 1930s, an impassioned attack on Lenin, and reflections on Russia's "slave soul" that still infuriate Russian nationalists. Grossman, however, was suffering from stomach cancer; late on

27. It is unclear whether he made this copy before or after the warnings from Lipkin and Zabolotskaya.

28. *Index on Censorship* (London), Vol. 5, (1985), pp. 9–10. This article is an edited translation of the speech at the 1984 Frankfurt Book Fair during which Voinovich said that it was he who, in 1970, smuggled *Life and Fate* to the West. The two microfilms, it emerged later, were made with the help of Andrey Sakharov and Yelena Bonner.

29. Lipkin, *Stalingrad*, p. 87.

30. Lipkin, *Stalingrad*, p. 78.

September 14, 1964, on the eve of the twenty-third anniversary of the massacre of the Jews of Berdichev, he died.³¹

The structure of *Life and Fate* is similar to that of *War and Peace*: the life of an entire country is evoked through a number of subplots involving members of a single family. Aleksandra Vladimirovna Shaposhnikova is an old woman whose spiritual roots are in the populist traditions of the pre-revolutionary intelligentsia; her children, and their families, are the novel's central figures. Two subplots, set in a Russian labor camp and a physics institute, revolve around the former and present husbands of Lyudmila, Aleksandra Vladimirovna's elder daughter. Two more subplots trace the careers of Krymov and Novikov, the ex-husband and the present fiancé of Yevgenia, Aleksandra Vladimirovna's younger daughter. Krymov is arrested and sent to the Lubyanka; Novikov, after commanding a tank corps that plays a decisive role at Stalingrad, also falls foul of the authorities. Other subplots involve still more friends and relatives of the Shaposhnikov family: one works at the Stalingrad power station, another is serving at the front, another tries to organize an uprising in a German concentration camp, another is transported by cattle-truck to the gas chambers.

Grossman once wrote that the only book he could read during the street fighting in Stalingrad was *War and Peace*³²; his choice of a similar-sounding title almost challenges the reader to compare the two novels. *Life and Fate* stands up to this comparison. Grossman's evocation of Stalingrad is at least as vivid as Tolstoy's evocation of Austerlitz. Grossman is equally convincing whether he is writing about how it feels to be subjected to a long bombardment or about the "domestic" detail of war, e.g. the importance of having

31. September 14 was also Grossman's and Olga Mikhailovna's wedding anniversary, a fact that must, for Grossman, have been a painful reminder of his wife's antipathy towards his mother and its tragic consequences.

32. Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, p. 239.

a good bunker. The account of how the destruction of General Chuykov's bunker leads to one officer after another each evicting his immediate subordinate from a bunker is only one of many passages that are also surprisingly funny.

Grossman describes the development of a spirit of camaraderie and egalitarianism among the defenders of Stalingrad; he then shows this spirit being stamped out by Party functionaries who see it as more dangerous even than the Germans. He writes equally movingly about the general sadness in Stalingrad after the Russian victory, when the ruined city has ceased to be the focus of the world's attention, a "world capital" whose "soul . . . was freedom," and has been reduced to being merely a ruined city like any other ruined city (pp. 796–798).

Like Tolstoy, Grossman adopts many viewpoints: from the immediate perceptions of an ordinary soldier to the loftier perspective of a historian or philosopher. Grossman's general reflections are more interesting and more varied than Tolstoy's; some are memorably succinct. On the eve of his arrest Krymov realizes that it was not only fear that led him to hold his tongue when innocent comrades were arrested: it was "the revolutionary cause itself that freed people from morality in the name of morality" (p. 528). After his arrest, Krymov's thoughts take on the power of poetry:

The hide was being flayed off the still living body of the Revolution so that a new age could slip into it; as for the red, bloody meat, the steaming innards—they were being thrown onto the scrapheap. The new age needed only the hide of the Revolution—and this was being flayed off people who were still alive. Those who then slipped into it spoke the language of the Revolution and mimicked its gestures, but their brains, lungs, livers and eyes were utterly different. (p. 841)

Sometimes, Grossman's reflections derive their power not from imagery but from slow, deliberate logic; the unusual idea that

totalitarian states operate on the same principles as modern physics, both concerned more with probabilities than with cause and effect, more with vast aggregates than with individual people or particles, threads its way through the whole length of the novel. Sometimes logic and poetry combine; the image of Stalin snatching the sword of anti-Semitism from Hitler's hands at Stalingrad provides a powerful coda to the argument that Nazism and Stalinism are essentially the same phenomenon.

Grossman expresses his beliefs most directly in a thesis about "senseless kindness" supposedly written by Ikonnikov, a former Tolstoyan who has recently witnessed the massacre of 20,000 Jews.³³ This thesis includes thoughts we would do well to remember every time we hear promises of a new world order:

whenever we see the dawn of an eternal good . . . whenever we see this dawn, the blood of old people and children is always shed. . . . Human history is not the battle of good struggling to overcome evil. It is a battle fought by a great evil struggling to crush a small kernel of human kindness (pp. 406, 410).

Only individuals, it seems, can keep this kernel alive, and it can be spoken of only in a language that has not been appropriated by state ideologies. Before effectively condemning himself to death by refusing to work on the construction of a gas chamber, Ikonnikov turns to an Italian priest and asks a profound question in a haunting jumble of Italian, French and German: "*Que dois-je faire, mio padre, nous travaillons dans una Vernichtungslager.*" Grossman's style has sometimes been called ponderous, typically Soviet; it would be truer to say that Grossman is capable of many kinds of poetry, from the fumbling, broken language of Ikonnikov to the self-denunciatory eloquence of Krymov, but that, being suspicious of poetry for its own sake, he gives himself up to it only when more ordinary language ceases to be adequate.

33. The number of Jews initially thought to have died at Berdichev.

Only in one respect, perhaps, is Grossman overshadowed by Tolstoy: he lacks Tolstoy's ability to evoke the richness, the fullness of life. There is nothing in *Life and Fate* that matches Tolstoy's portrayal of the young Natasha Rostova. Grossman, however, is writing about one of the darkest periods of European history, and the overall tone of his novel—despite the hymn in the last chapter to spring sunlight shining so intensely, on snow and ice, that Byerokhin and his wife “seemed almost to have to force their way through it”—is correspondingly somber; most of the subplots end with the death of at least one of their main characters.³⁴ Nevertheless, Grossman is not without love, faith, and hope; there is even a powerful, tempered optimism in his belief that it is never impossible for us to act morally and humanely, even in a Soviet or Nazi labor camp. And his subtle understanding of guilt, uncertainty, and duplicity, of the pain and complexity of moral choice, gives his work extraordinary value.

This subtlety of moral understanding is one of many qualities that link Grossman to a writer who worked on a very different scale: Anton Chekhov. Many individual chapters in *Life and Fate* are surprisingly like Chekhov short stories. Abarchuk courts death by telling the labor-camp authorities the name of the criminal who has murdered a friend with whom he himself had been arguing only hours before; having regained the sense of his own rectitude that is so desperately important to him, Abarchuk feels furious with his dead friend and wants to give him a piece of his mind. The reader is torn between admiration of Abarchuk's courage and revulsion at his self-righteousness.

There is a similarly Chekhovian irony in the chapter about Klimov, a young soldier at Stalingrad who is forced by a German bombardment to hide in a crater for several hours. Thinking he is lying next to a Russian comrade and feeling an uncharacteristic need for human warmth, this gifted killer holds the hand of a

34. I am grateful to Daniel Rancour-Laferrere for bringing my attention to this (Teaching Notes for a Seminar on Current Russian Prose, Rus. 224, University of California, Davis, 1987).

German soldier who happens to have taken refuge in the same crater. Only when the bombardment lifts do the soldiers realize their shared mistake; they clamber out in silence, each afraid of being seen by a superior and accused of collaboration with the enemy. . . . Grossman poses similar but subtler questions in the chapter about Semyonov, a Red Army driver who has been taken prisoner by the Germans. The Germans release Semyonov when he seems about to die, and Khristya Chunyak, an old Ukrainian peasant woman, takes him into her hut, feeds him, and cares for him.³⁵ A month or so later, after Semyonov has recovered his strength, a neighbor calls and the conversation turns to collectivization. Semyonov finds it hard to believe that his savior, the woman he thinks of as “the mistress of the good hut,”³⁶ could once have been as close to death from starvation as he has just been himself. Khristya, for her part, feels the need to cross herself before going to bed that night; she might—we think—not have saved Semyonov’s life had she known that he approved of collectivization and that he was from Moscow—like the Communists and Komsomol members responsible for killing her entire family only twelve years before. Her capacity for kindness seems to be independent of understanding; it may even depend on a lack of understanding.

Just as much of *Life and Fate* can be read as a series of miniatures, so Chekhov’s stories—in Grossman’s view—can be read as a single epic. And the tribute one of Grossman’s characters pays to Chekhov is a statement of Grossman’s own hopes and beliefs:

Chekhov brought Russia into our consciousness in all its vastness—with people of every estate, every class, every age. More than that! It was as a democrat that he presented all these people—as a Russian democrat. . . . Chekhov said, let’s put God—and all these grand progressive ideas—to one side.

35. For Grossman’s conversation with a nonfictional Khristya Chunyak, see Grossman, *A Writer at War*, p. 253. As he often does, Grossman is commemorating a real person who has impressed him.

36. In Russian, *khoyzaika dobroy khaty*: another of Grossman’s fragments of poetry.

Let's begin with man; let's be kind and attentive to the individual man—whether he's a bishop, a peasant, an industrial magnate, a convict in the Sakhalin Islands or a waiter in a restaurant. Let's begin with respect, compassion and love for the individual—or we'll never get anywhere." (p. 283)

Life and Fate could perhaps be called a Chekhovian epic about human nature; like any great epic, it occasionally shatters its own frame. On the train to the death camp, Sofya Osipovna Levinton, a middle-aged, childless doctor, "adopts" David, a small boy to whom Grossman has given many of his childhood memories as well as his own birthday, December 12. Refusing to abandon either David or the Jewish people with whom she is identifying for the first time, Sofya sacrifices her life by not responding when a German officer orders any doctors and surgeons to come forward. Sofya and David are among the crowd propelled into the gas chambers. David dies first and Sofya feels his body subside in her arms. The chapter ends:

This boy, with his slight, bird-like body, had left before her.

"I've become a mother," she thought.

That was her last thought.

Her heart, however, still had life in it: it contracted, ached and felt pity for all of you, both living and dead; Sofya Osipovna felt a wave of nausea. She pressed David, now a doll, to herself; she became dead, a doll."³⁷ (p. 554)

As she dies, Sofya Osipovna feels the power of maternal feelings

37. I have revised my translation of the paragraph beginning, "Her heart . . ." I am grateful to Harriet Murav for gently pointing out the inadequacy of my original translation of this paragraph in her article "Responding to the Holocaust: Bergelson, Grossman, and der Nister." A Russian version of her article will appear in *Istoriia i kul'tura vossiiskogo i vostochnoevreiskogo evreistva: Nove istochniki, nove podkbody*, edited by O. V. Budnitsky (Moscow: Dom evreiskoi knigi, 2006). For this new edition of *Life and Fate* I have also corrected about a dozen minor errors and reinstated several phrases of Yiddish which I had unthinkingly translated into English. Grossman's occasional uses of Yiddish are, of course, significant.

for the first time. She has become a mother—but has she borne her child into life or into death? We cannot say: David is dead, but David/Vasily is still alive—and Sofya herself must also, in some sense, be alive because her heart feels pity not only for the dead and the dying, not only for her contemporaries, but for “all of you,” that is, for us readers. She has, perhaps, borne Vasily Grossman—and perhaps some of his readers—into a life that will be fuller and deeper, if no less painful.

As he said in a letter to Ehrenburg about the *Black Book*, Grossman felt it his moral duty to speak on behalf of the dead, “on behalf of those who lie in the earth.”³⁸ What is no less important, however, is that he felt sustained by the dead; he believed that their strength could help him to fulfill his duty towards the living. This is clear from the guardedly optimistic conclusion to the story of Viktor Shtrum. After uncharacteristically betraying men he knows to be innocent, after agreeing to sign a slanderous official letter merely because he can’t bear the thought of losing a few new privileges, Shtrum expresses the hope that his dead mother will help him to act better another time; his last words in the novel are “Well then, we’ll see . . . Maybe I do have enough strength. Your strength, Mother . . .” (p. 841)

Grossman’s feelings are revealed still more clearly in the letter he wrote to his mother on the twentieth anniversary of her death: “I am you, dear Mama, and as long as I live, then you are alive also. When I die you will continue to live in this book, which I have dedicated to you and whose fate is closely tied to your fate.”³⁹ His sense of his mother’s continued life in the book seems to have made him feel that *Life and Fate* was itself a living being.⁴⁰ His letter to Khrushchev ends with a challenge: “There is no sense or

38. Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, p. 206.

39. Translated by John Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, p. 353.

40. Cf. Alice Nakhimovsky: “frequent references to the book as a kind of living being recur in Grossman’s own writing and in everything written about him in Russian.” (*Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity*, Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992, p. 115).

truth in my present position, in my physical freedom while the book to which I dedicated my life is in prison. For I wrote it, and I have not repudiated it and am not repudiating it. . . . I ask for freedom for my book.”⁴¹

John Garrard, coauthor with his wife Carol of a fine biography of Grossman, *The Bones of Berdichev*, has written to me about what he calls “two open wounds” relating to Grossman:

The first is the culture of silence that exists to this day in former Soviet territory about the collaboration among some of the local population in the deaths of Soviet Jews. Last month I heard from an American Peace Corps volunteer assigned to Berdichev. She was trying to locate the massacre sites. When she asked her Ukrainian friends (and she speaks Ukrainian) for help, they looked at her blankly and denied the existence of any such massacres, and any such pits. The second relates to the Battle of Stalingrad. In huge granite letters on the wall leading to the famous Stalingrad mausoleum a German soldier asks, “They are attacking us again; can they be mortal?” Inside the mausoleum the words of a Red Army soldier’s reply are tooled in gold: “Yes, we were mortal indeed, and few of us survived, but we all carried out our patriotic duty before holy Mother Russia.” Although these words are taken from “In the Line of the Main Drive,” an article first published by Grossman in *Red Star* and reprinted in *Pravda*, the designers of the memorial did not acknowledge Grossman as their author. Guides at the memorial still claim that they do not know who wrote those words.⁴²

41. Nakhimovsky, *Literature and Identity*, p. 115.

42. See John Garrard’s article about Grossman in *Encyclopedia of Europe 1914–2004* (Scribner, 2006).

During the war, Grossman's articles were of great importance to the Soviet people. At the front, groups of soldiers would gather round while one of them read aloud from a single copy of *Red Star*. In the words of John and Carol Garrard, "there really is no journalistic parallel in the West to *Red Star's* role on the Eastern Front."⁴³ And the writer Viktor Nekrasov, who fought at Stalingrad, remembers how "the papers with (Grossman's) and Ehrenburg's articles were read and reread by us until they were in tatters."⁴⁴ It is, of course, shameful that Grossman's words should still remain unacknowledged. Grossman himself, however, would probably just shrug; what would upset him more is people's reluctance to take in what he has said "on behalf of those who lie in the earth."

—ROBERT CHANDLER
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43. Garrard and Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*, p. 140.

44. Frank Ellis, *Vasily Grossman: The Genesis and Evolution of a Russian Heretic* (Berg, 1994), p. 48.