

Vasily Grossman's *Stalingrad*: A Soviet masterpiece about World War II appears in English for the first time

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Vasily Grossman, *Stalingrad*. Translated by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, New York Review of Books, 2019

In 2019, Vasily Grossman's novel, *Stalingrad* (in Russian: *Za pravoe delo* or *For a Just Cause*), appeared for the first time in a complete English translation, almost seven decades after its first publication in 1952. The work is the prequel to Grossman's well-known novel *Life and Fate* (1959). The author, in fact, conceived of the two as a unified whole. The publication of this masterpiece is a cultural event of considerable significance.

The novel begins with a meeting between fascist dictators Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini on April 29, 1942, in which they discuss the progress of the war. Less than a year earlier, on June 22, 1941, the Nazis had invaded the Soviet Union, launching the bloodiest conflict in the history of mankind. By the end of the war, in 1945, at least 27 million Soviet citizens, including 1.5 million Soviet Jews, would be dead. Despite the Stalinist degeneration of the Soviet Union and the Great Terror of 1936-38, the Soviet masses rose up to defend the conquests of the October Revolution against the fascist invaders.

In a partial but significant manner, the spirit that animated the Red Army during its early years, after it was created by Leon Trotsky and the Bolsheviks to defend the revolution, was revived. It is this same spirit that permeates Grossman's novel.

The plot of *Stalingrad* is too complex to be recounted in full. Many of the protagonists, especially the physicist Viktor Shtrum and the Shaposhnikov family, will be familiar to readers of *Life and Fate*. Grossman offers a panoramic view of Soviet society at war. He portrays sections of the technical intelligentsia; miners in Siberia working in war production; children orphaned by the war; historical figures such as Gen. Andrey Yeryomenko, but, above all, Soviet civilians and soldiers, drawn from the working class and peasantry in Stalingrad.

The last portion of the work is focused entirely on the Nazi attack on Stalingrad, a vital industrial and transportation center in southern Russia, and the Soviet defense of the city through the first two weeks of September 1942. It was the battle of Stalingrad (August 23, 1942 to February 2, 1943), on the western bank of the Volga in the "heart of Russia," that effectively helped decide the outcome of the war and sealed the fate of the Nazis' Third Reich. And everyone at the time, from Moscow to Berlin, London and Washington, understood this.

The Red Army had been taken by surprise by the Nazi invasion, largely due to the criminal Hitler-Stalin Pact of 1939 and the beheading of the army's leadership in Stalin's Great Terror. It had been forced to retreat deeply into Soviet Russia, at the cost of millions of lives, until the autumn of 1942. However, throughout that year, the Soviet Union was able to mobilize immense economic resources for the war effort, thanks in large part to the planning principles in place, however limited and distorted by

the bureaucracy, and the enormous sacrifices made by the Soviet population.

The Battle of Stalingrad

Though initially vastly outnumbered by the *Wehrmacht* (the German armed forces), the Red Army was able to defend Stalingrad and eventually go over to the offensive. By early February 1943, the entire 6th Army of General Friedrich Paulus had been destroyed, the first major military defeat suffered by the Nazis in the course of the war. As Leon Trotsky had predicted in 1934, "should the Russian Revolution ... be forced to direct its stream into the channel of war, it will unleash a terrific and overwhelming force."

The tide in the war had been turned. The morale of the population throughout the Soviet Union and in Nazi-occupied Europe was boosted dramatically. The battle also galvanized the anti-Nazi resistance in Germany, including the "White Rose" group of Sophie and Hans Scholl.

The sheer scale and brutality of the battle—the largest of the Second World War and, in fact, in all of human history—still almost defies comprehension. Well over one million men were involved in the battle on both sides, and the majority of them perished. On the Soviet side, conservative estimates put the number of military dead at 479,000, but it may be twice as high. The *Wehrmacht* lost an estimated 295,000 men.

Grossman's descriptions of the nightmarish bombardment of the city, which set the entire city ablaze, leave a profound impression. At least 40,000 people are believed to have died within just three days. He describes at length the desperate efforts by isolated Soviet troops from the 308th Rifle Division to hold fragments of the city, in the face of numbing and deafening shelling from the *Wehrmacht*, until reinforcement comes. In virtually every case, they do so at the cost of their own lives. For good reason these hellish experiences became deeply engrained in popular consciousness in the former Soviet Union.

Scenes of horrifying violence are followed by scenes that are humorous, poetic and tender. His depictions of the many who knowingly went to their deaths, defending the Soviet Union, are outstanding. Grossman has a keen sense for the complexity of human psychology in the face of these enormous historical convulsions and the accompanying mass destruction.

In one scene, Lena Gnatyuk, a young Red Army nurse, in some of the last moments of her life, is given an American aid package.

Lena removed the cord and began to unwrap the parcel. The

crinkly paper squeaked and rustled. There were many different items inside, some very small, and she squatted down to prevent anything falling out and getting lost. There was a beautiful woolen blouse, embroidered with a red, blue and green pattern; a fluffy bathrobe with a hood; two pairs of lacy trousers with matching shirts adorned with little ribbons; three pairs of silk stockings; some tiny lace-embroidered handkerchiefs; a white dress made from fine lawn, also trimmed with lace; a jar of some fragrant lotion; and a flask of perfume tied with a broad ribbon.

Lena looked at the two commanders. There was a moment of silence around the station, as if to prevent anything from disturbing the grace and delicacy of her expression. Her look said a great deal: not only that she knew she would never become a mother but also that she took a certain pride in her harsh fate. As she stood there in the pit, in her soldier's boots and badly fitting uniform, about to refuse these exquisite gifts, Lena Gnatyuk looked overwhelmingly feminine. "What use is all of this?" she said. "I don't want it." The two men felt troubled. They understood something of the young woman's feelings—her pride, her understanding that she was doomed and her mistaken belief that she looked awkward and ugly.

Within hours, all these people would be dead.

The scenes involving the German troops are also important. Grossman gives a sharp and damning portrait of a careerist *Wehrmacht* soldier, Stumpfe, from the German petty bourgeoisie, who dearly loves his own family but engages in violent assaults on and plunder of the Soviet population. He denounces fellow soldiers critical of Hitler to the unit's Gestapo representative and seeks to be "promoted" to work in one of the "death factories" for the Jews of occupied Poland, hoping this will give him more opportunity for self-enrichment.

Schmidt, by contrast, is a former trade unionist, who used to work with revolutionary socialist leader Karl Liebknecht. Indifferent to the ridicule and humiliation he is subjected to by Stumpfe and others, he is disgusted by the war and the Nazi regime but does not know how to connect with like-minded soldiers. Grossman clearly rejected the Stalinist lie that the entire German people had willingly followed Hitler (the theory of "collective guilt"), a lie propagated widely especially during the war in an effort to cover up for the Stalinists' own responsibility for the disaster of Hitler's coming to power in 1933.

Grossman's presentation of his characters is perceptive and, at times, scathing but never judgmental. Underlying all of it is a profound and deeply felt sympathy for their suffering and the enormous traumas that Soviet society had gone through—not simply in the bloody war but also in the Stalinist Great Terror of the 1930s. Moreover, the writer understood that in the midst all of this, people lived on, raised children, established, maintained and broke off relationships, acting at times in a petty and despicable or trivial, but often also in a noble, manner. He never isolates the individual from society and the historical process but rather shows the profound, but complex and not always direct, interconnection between the decisive social and political events of the time and the personal lives of individuals.

The characters of Krymov and Zhenya Shaposhnikova, his young and beautiful former wife, are perhaps among the most complex and important ones in this regard. Krymov is a convinced Stalinist but also dedicated to the revolution. A former official in the Communist International, he has lost many of his friends and comrades to the purges of 1936-38. Krymov himself only barely survives, yet his faith in Stalin remains unshaken. Zhenya leaves him during the terror, not out of concern for her own fate or disappointment with her husband's declining career, but because she simply fell out of love.

Stalingrad—and *Life and Fate*—Grossman no doubt wanted to produce a 20th century version of Lev Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. However, unlike Tolstoy, in his monumental account of the Napoleonic wars in the early 19th century, the Soviet author does not take the nobility, or their contemporary equivalents, or the generals as his protagonists. His primary concern is with the body of the people, in all its social, political and psychological contradictions, its different layers and countless shades of character and personality.

Grossman keenly understood that the masses of humanity made history and that, while national elements played a role, the ideals of the 1917 October Revolution above all—social equality and freedom from oppression of all kinds—motivated the heroic efforts of the Soviet masses in resisting the Nazis. He no doubt thought of his work as a tribute to their heroism and sacrifices. In the traditions of the Russian socialist intelligentsia, Grossman conceived of art as something relentlessly honest and a means of contributing to the people and the cause of social progress more broadly.

Grossman's battle with censorship

He began writing the novel in 1943, in the midst of the war, and completed it in 1949. His deep grasp of the war was rooted in his own experiences. As a journalist for the *Krasnaya Zvezda* (*Red Star*), an official military newspaper, he accompanied the Red Army during many of the conflict's most critical battles. He witnessed the battle of Stalingrad from September 1942 through January 1943 and the Soviet liberation of Ukraine, parts of Poland and Germany. For years, he spoke to soldiers in the trenches. He wrote about their lives and experiences and what he called "the ruthless truth of war" in articles that often only appeared after heavy censorship. His well-known courage at the front, his honesty and love of detail with which he conveyed the experience of the Soviet people during the war made him one of the most popular and respected figures in the USSR, especially within the Red Army.

Grossman also authored some of the first accounts of the Nazi genocide of European Jewry. He was born in 1905, the year of the first Russian revolution, in the small Ukrainian *shtetl* Berdychiv. His mother was murdered in a massacre by an SS Einsatzgruppe of the town's entire Jewish population of more than 30,000 in the first months of World War II. Grossman's essay on Treblinka, one of six death camps in Nazi-occupied Poland, later served as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials. Together with Ilya Ehrenburg, he compiled *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry* (1944), a comprehensive documentation of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union.

The Holocaust also features in *Stalingrad*, above all, through the character of Viktor Shtrum, whose mother, like Grossman's, is murdered in a massacre in Ukraine. In fact, the character of Shtrum was one of the points of contention with the censors. In 1949, as Grossman was finishing his novel, Stalin's anti-Semitic purges of sections of the intelligentsia and bureaucracy were underway. The Holocaust had become a taboo topic and would remain so for many years to come. Copies of Ehrenburg and Grossman's *Black Book* were pulped, and the censors tried unsuccessfully to convince the latter to remove Shtrum's character from *Stalingrad*.

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Other elements of the book also made it "dangerous," from the Stalinist point of view. The scene where a Red Army soldier on the front mockingly reminds Krymov that the latter had "proved" to him and others in 1932 "definitely" that the victory of fascism in Germany was absolutely impossible "with statistics of every kind" could not but have

infuriated the censors. The repeated references to the terror, too, placed the book at obvious risk of censorship. Stalin is invoked as an admirable figure only by convinced Stalinists and otherwise is hardly mentioned at all.

“Bureaucrat” is a recurring and disparaging term used by both civilians and soldiers in *Stalingrad*. In one scene during the bombardment of the city, the bureaucrat-officials running a hospital are said to refrain, not to anyone’s surprise, from saving the patients, while the entire staff risk their own lives and run into the bombed and burning building. The officials only return once the danger has passed, to continue commanding their subordinates. Grossman captures the anti-bureaucratic sentiments that were not only widespread, but also relatively open during the war. These sentiments, often expressed in the hope that after dealing with Hitler, the Soviet people might do away with Stalin, were one of the major reasons that the bureaucratic caste engaged in another round of purges after the war and murderously suppressed oppositional youth groups in the early 1950s.

Other, seemingly secondary, depictions of the realities of the war also touched on taboo subjects and themes: the depictions of the chaotic mass evacuations from burning Stalingrad, of massive defeats and retreats and of the handful of bitterly anticommunist peasants who eagerly await the Nazis’ occupation of their village. All this—the plight of the civilian population and the presentation of pro-Nazi sympathies and collaborators within the Soviet population—were erased from the history books by the Stalinists. The portrayal of army commanders in a less than heroic manner, which includes their petty jealousies and rivalries, likewise caused the ire of censors and sections of the military leadership that became involved in the discussions about the book. Other dictated changes and excised passages were the result of the narrow-minded, anti-Marxist conceptions of “socialist realism.”

This battle with government and military censors took several years. The novel was ultimately published in 1952 in the journal *Novy Mir*. However, this was not the version preferred by Grossman. In fact, there are no less than 11 variations of this work. Most publications have so far relied on the 1956 variant. This version, assembled by the principal translator Robert Chandler in collaboration with Yury Bit-Yunan on the basis of three editions and Grossman’s archives, is the most complete edition in any language. The editors and translators have explained their decisions in careful notes, which allow the reader to trace the history of the manuscripts. They are to be commended for their work.

Speaking in Copenhagen in 1932, Leon Trotsky noted, “The most profound meaning of the Revolution, but the hardest to submit to immediate measurement, consists in the fact that it forms and tempers the character of the people.” More than perhaps any other Soviet writer, Grossman sensed precisely that—the impact of the October Revolution on the thoughts, feelings and aspirations of the Soviet people—and he was able to capture it in his writing, both as a journalist and a novelist. While his *Life and Fate* indicates growing disillusionment and pessimism, he remained a committed socialist until the end of his life. In a moving Russian documentary, his son recalled how every year on Victory Day, May 9, Grossman would put on his Red Army uniform and sing war songs. He was proud to be considered a writer of the war and never wavered in his conviction that the Red Army’s struggle against fascism was a historic contribution to the progressive development of humanity.

For Grossman, who depended as an artist so strongly on the interaction with his audience, it was no doubt a great tragedy that he never saw either this work or *Life and Fate* appear in his lifetime in the versions that he wanted. (*Life and Fate* was not published at all until decades after his death.) In 1991, the Stalinist bureaucracy dissolved the Soviet Union and restored capitalism, carrying out what the Nazis had failed to accomplish in World War II.

Today, three decades later, the English translation of *Stalingrad* will not

only finally introduce a broad readership to a masterpiece of world literature. It will also help new generations, and especially young people, to understand the enormous impact of the October Revolution and to reconnect with this critical history.

Recommended further reading:

Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova (editors): *A Writer at War. Vasily Grossman with the Red Army, 1941-1945*, Pimlico 2006.

Jochen Hellbeck, *Stalingrad. The City that Defeated the Third Reich*, Public Affairs 2015.

David North, Introduction to Leon Trotsky’s *The Revolution Betrayed*
David North, *The Russian Revolution and the Unfinished Twentieth Century*, Mehring Books 2014.
<https://www.wsws.org/en/special/library/russian-revolution-unfinished-twentieth-century/00.html>

John G. Wright, *The Soviet Union at War* (1941).

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