

The People Immortal: Soviet writer Vasily Grossman's first novel about World War II

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Vasily Grossman: *The People Immortal*, translated by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, New York Review Books Classics, 2022, 352 pages.

In September, the first of Soviet author Vasily Grossman's three great novels (along with *Stalingrad* and *Life and Fate*) about World War II—*The People Immortal*—was published in a new English translation by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler.

Like Robert Chandler's phenomenal new translation of *Stalingrad*, this translation also includes never before published passages from Grossman's manuscript. It therefore represents the most complete edition of this work published so far in any language, including Grossman's native Russian.

The edition also includes an appendix with additional essays by Grossman as well as an introduction and afterword, and notes explaining the history of this edition and the decision of the translators to include specific passages. The result is a work not only of considerable literary significance, but also an important historical document.

The People Immortal focuses on the first few months of the Nazi invasion of the Soviet Union, when the 10-million-strong German *Wehrmacht* and their local fascist allies overran sizable portions of what are today Ukraine and Belarus. The Red Army and Soviet people had been left completely unprepared for the Nazi invasion. Stalin had not only rejected dozens of warnings of the impending invasion but had also murdered the leadership of the Red Army and large portions of its ranks in the Great Terror of 1936-1938.

As a result, the Red Army of 1941 was poorly led militarily and politically, and vastly under-equipped to confront the highly sophisticated weaponry and mass assault of German imperialism. In the first months of the war, millions of Red Army soldiers were captured—about two million of them would be starved to death by spring 1942—and vast numbers more were killed and wounded on the battlefield.

Vasily Grossman began writing this novel only months after the events he describes had occurred, and completed it within just two months, in the spring of 1942. It was, in fact, the first Soviet novel about the war.

Since the outbreak of the conflict, Grossman had been working on the front as a correspondent for the Red Army newspaper *Red Star*, which also serialized the 18 chapters of the book. In that capacity, he had witnessed the devastation of Gomel, a major city in Belarus, by German aerial bombardment, which he depicts powerfully in the chapter titled, "Death of a City." He had met many commanders, soldiers and civilians, who would serve as the basis for the characters in this and his subsequent novels.

There are passages, especially in the book's first third, in which Grossman's apparent efforts to encourage the population and Red Army while toeing the official government line make for rather stiff descriptions and do not contribute to the narrative. But the more he unfolds the plot and, above all, develops his characters—who are perhaps the greatest strength of Grossman's writing—the more we see emerging the later

author of *Stalingrad* and *Life and Fate*, and we become engrossed in the novel.

At the center of the plot is a Red Army battalion that needs to retreat from the Germans in Belarus, goes into the forests and then develops one of the first counteroffensives of Soviet forces, three months into the war. The main protagonists are the battalion's political commissar, Bogariov; the commander Babadjanian; and the soldier Ignatiev. Bogariov is a former employee of the Marx-Engels Institute in Moscow, devoted to the legacy of Lenin and the early Russian socialists, who now takes to the art of war as much as he did to the writings of Marx and Engels.

Bogariov becomes the embodiment of what good political leadership means for Grossman. In what can only be read as a blatant rebuke of the Stalinist effort to dull the population and the soldiers into unconsciousness in the face of the immense dangers they were facing, and of the bureaucracy's constant lies during the war, Grossman writes, "In those difficult days, people wanted only the truth, however difficult and cheerless it might be. And Bogariov told them this truth."

Bogariov addresses the soldiers at times of peril with statements like this:

You are all adult sons of your people. You have been through the stern school of labour and this People's War. Our position is difficult, but we have no choice. We are a regular unit of the Red Army. In two or three days' time we shall engage with superior enemy forces. We will strike hard, break through their lines and rejoin our division. You must win, comrades, and you will win. Within you beats the heart of Lenin.

Not once is the name of Joseph Stalin mentioned.

There are also several other characters whose depiction, while only taking up a few pages, offers a broader portrait of wartime Soviet society, which Grossman will develop in his future novels.

These characters include an elderly peasant woman in a Ukrainian town. She is clearly modeled after Grossman's mother, who was murdered in an anti-Jewish massacre by the Nazis in his hometown of Berdichev. As he was writing this novel, Grossman did not yet know for certain the fate of his mother, but he suspected it. Her loss was devastating to him, and she would also become a recurring model for one of his key characters in *Stalingrad* and *Life and Fate*.

The reader also encounters the peasant Kotenko, from the same town, who, before the 1917 revolution and then afterward, had dreamed of becoming an "Estonian kulak," that is, a well-off peasant who could exploit the labor of his neighboring peasants. When the Germans come, he is overjoyed and offers them his services, believing that his lifelong dream will now finally be realized. Devastated when he realizes that they treat him with the same contempt that they have for everyone else, Kotenko

hangs himself.

While the novel was clearly meant to encourage the fighting Red Army soldiers—the war did not end until almost three years after its initial serialization—it still sought to depict truthfully their experiences and thoughts. This inevitably brought Grossman into conflict with the censors. Many of the most moving passages of the novel, which have now thankfully been restored, were not included in the previously published versions, having been cut either by the publishers or by Grossman himself, in an effort at self-censorship.

The reasons for this censorship were varied, but all were inevitably tied to the falsifications to which the Stalinist bureaucracy resorted in an effort to cover up its own responsibility, both for the victory of fascism in Germany and the outbreak of the war as well as for its criminal and stupid mistakes during the conflict. The notes provided by the translators on their work with the manuscript and the history of this edition will thus enable readers to get a deeper understanding, not only of the war, but also of the Stalinist falsifications of this history. The material also provides a sense of the extent to which the constant political and historical lies by the bureaucracy impacted the cultural and socio-political climate at the time.

Some of these cuts were seemingly minor—for example, a mention of the fact that Soviet soldiers, in the first months of the war, often did not even have arms to carry, and descriptions of physical violence that were considered too graphic. (As late as in the 1980s, the great Soviet anti-war movie *Come and See*, by Elem Klimov, was held back by censors who argued that its depiction of the Nazis' warfare against the Belarusian partisans was too explicit.)

Other cuts are more substantial and require a knowledge of Soviet history to understand the reasoning behind them and their implications. Robert Chandler and Julia Volohva correctly highlight the fact that the pre-war history of Bogariov, which was important to Grossman, was entirely omitted in the earlier published versions.

As they explain, this was directly bound up with the political and ideological crackdown by the Stalinist bureaucracy of the 1930s. The Marx-Engels Institute had been founded in 1919. Under its first director David Riazanov, it not only assembled the greatest Marxist library in the world, but also engaged in the pioneering work of publishing hitherto unknown works of Marx and Engels, including Marx's early economic manuscripts, Engels' *Dialectics of Nature*, and the Marx-Engels correspondence.

As the inner-party campaign by the Stalinist apparatus against the Left Opposition became ever more violent, Riazanov, who had dedicated over five decades of his life to the struggle for Marxism and socialist consciousness in the working class, turned his Institute into a haven for many persecuted revolutionaries. While Chandler and Volohva write that he employed both Left and Right Oppositionists, it was above all Left Oppositionists—far more numerous and better organized—who were connected to the Institute. Thus, former Left Oppositionists like Vagarshak Ter-Vaganian and Evsei Kaganovich were employed by the Institute as late as 1930.

Even more dangerously, Riazanov paid active Oppositionists, who had already been exiled, for translations, and sent them political and theoretical literature. In 1928 he even involved Leon Trotsky, who had already expelled from the party and exiled, in the translation of a text by Karl Marx, a move that required tremendous political courage. To the Soviet bureaucracy and the Stalinized Central Committee, his conduct became increasingly unacceptable. In 1930, the Central Committee, at the direct behest of Joseph Stalin, launched a campaign against him which culminated in his arrest in 1931, the purge of his Institute and his eventual execution in 1938.

As Chandler and Volohva note, Grossman most likely knew Riazanov personally, through a cousin who had also known Victor Serge, the latter in the early 1930s still an active member of the Left Opposition. Because

of this connection to Serge, Grossman's cousin, Nadya Almaz, who had a tremendous political influence on him, was arrested in 1933.

In the depiction of the pre-war work and views of Bogariov, combined with his role as the authoritative political figure in the novel, and his statements (many of which were cut, at least in part), Grossman clearly wanted not only to honor the memory of Riazanov and his Institute, but also everything that it stood for: the traditions of Marxism and revolutionary socialism that Grossman, like Bogariov, was still committed to and defended in the war against Nazism.

In one of the most moving passages of the book, Grossman depicts Bogariov contemplating what is at stake in the struggle against fascism and the defense of the Soviet Union,

Here, on the fringes of the forest, he clearly imagined the black force that had spread over the people's land. The people's land! Thomas More's dreams and Robert Owen's visions, the works of the brightest minds of the French Enlightenment, the writings of the Decembrists, the essays of Belinsky and Herzen, the correspondence between Zheliabov and Mikhailov, the words of Alexeyev the textile worker—all these were an expression of humanity's eternal longing for a land that does not know slavery, for a life built on the laws of reason and justice, for a land of equals, for a land where the inequality between workers and those who employ them has been eliminated. Thousands of Russian revolutionaries had died in this struggle. To Bogariov, these men were like elder brothers. He had read everything about them. He knew their last words and the letters they had written to their mothers and children. He knew their diaries and the secret conversations recorded by friends who had lived to see freedom. He knew the roads along which these men had taken to exile and forced labour in Siberia. He knew the post stations where they had spent the night and the jails where they had been shackled. He loved and honoured these men. They were his nearest and dearest. Many were workers from Kiev, printers from Minsk, tailors from Vilna, weavers from Bielostok—cities now held by the Nazis.

With every fibre of his being, Bogariov loved this land that had been won in the unprecedented struggles of the Civil War, amid the torments of hunger. It was still poor, it still lived a life of stern labour, according to stern laws—yet it was the motherland of the world's peoples, of all its peoples, the motherland of its best minds and best peoples. Bogariov was ready to die for it.

In the notes, Robert and Elizabeth Chandler write,

We have reinstated from the manuscripts the words 'for a land that does not know slavery, for a life built on the laws of reason and justice.' Grossman deleted from his manuscript the phrase beginning, 'yet it was the motherland.' The final sentence is present in his manuscript but was omitted from all the published versions. It seems from this and from the omission mentioned in the previous note that Grossman's editors were alarmed by the intensity of Bogariov's internationalism and love of freedom.

There is little to add to this. Like *Stalingrad*, this is a book every worker and young person should read. As a new world war is brewing in Ukraine, and the vilest nationalism, xenophobia and historical lies are being promoted by the ruling classes everywhere, works like this will help reconnect the generations that have to wage the revolutionary battles of

today with the socialist traditions of 1917, which, despite the immense crimes of Stalinism, still found a deeply progressive expression in the struggle of the Red Army against Nazism, and in the works of Vasily Grossman.



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