“Grossman wanted the truth”: An interview with Robert Chandler, translator of Soviet novelist Vasily Grossman

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Soviet writer Vasily Grossman (*Stalingrad*, *Life and Fate*, *The People Immortal*) was born in 1905, the year of the first Russian Revolution, in Berdichev, a town in what is now Ukraine, which then formed part of the Russian Empire. After the 1917 October Revolution and the civil war, Grossman moved to Moscow in 1923 where he studied to become an engineer.

Though never a party member, he witnessed first hand the major political and literary debates and struggles of the 1920s, in which Leon Trotsky’s Left Opposition opposed the nationalist betrayal of the October Revolution by the Soviet bureaucracy. In the late 1920s and early 1930s, Grossman met Left Oppositionists, including the Trotskyist literary critic Alexander Voronsky, and many figures from the Communist International (Comintern).

Although many of his friends and colleagues were arrested and executed, Grossman survived the Great Terror of 1937-1938. During World War II, he became one of the most popular war correspondents with the Red Army. Grossman was the first journalist to cover the Nazi genocide of Eastern European Jewry.

However, as part of the growing promotion of anti-Semitism by the Stalinist bureaucracy, *The Black Book* documenting the Holocaust that he and fellow writer Ilya Ehrenburg co-authored was pulped in 1947. All of Grossman’s writings during and after the war were subject to significant censorship, including during Nikita Khrushchev’s Thaw (mid-1950s to mid-1960s), which the bureaucracy initiated amidst an immense crisis in 1956, allowing for broader political and cultural discussions. Grossman completed the second volume of his opus magnum on World War II, *Life and Fate*, in 1959, but the work was banned and only published in 1980, 16 years after his death.

British poet and translator Robert Chandler and his wife, Elizabeth Chandler, have spent decades translating many of Grossman’s works into English, most recently *Stalingrad* (the prequel to *Life and Fate*), *The People Immortal* and *The Road*.

The following is an interview with Robert Chandler about Grossman, his views of literature and Soviet society, and his reception in the West. A follow-up interview with the Russian scholar Julia Volohova on Grossman’s relationship to Alexander Voronsky and the literary debates of the 1920s will be published in the coming days.

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You have spent many years translating Vasily Grossman. What attracted you to the writings of Grossman, and why and when did you become convinced that works like *Stalingrad* and *The People Immortal* should be translated?

It’s been over 40 years since I first was introduced to Grossman. It is curious that really at every step of the road I have been a little reluctant and then ended up realizing that I had hugely underestimated Grossman. The first step was when the late art historian and friend Igor Golomstock pushed this enormous novel at me [*Life and Fate*] and said I should translate it if I wanted to become established as a translator. He thought it was a great novel. I just laughed at him and said, “I don’t read books as long as that in Russian, let alone translate them.”

At the time I was much more interested in poetry, especially modernist poetry, as well as magical realism. Grossman’s *Life and Fate* seemed a bit old-fashioned. But Igor was an admirably obstinate man. He did programs on the novel for the BBC Russian service and sent me transcripts of his programs. I realized that this novel was remarkable. I published an article about it in *Index on Censorship* and that led to the book being published.

But at the time I sort of absorbed what was an absolutely widespread view: that Grossman had been a rather dull, if better than average, Soviet novelist, who had undergone some kind of transformation during his last years and written this one truthful work. Wanting to bring the worldwide’s attention to Grossman, well-meaning admirers chose to exaggerate the difference between Grossman’s earlier and later work.

It was a historian, Jochen Hellbeck, who told me, emphatically, what a great novel *Stalingrad* was. He was also very insistent that I should look at manuscripts and typescripts. That seemed a non-starter because from what I had read, there were 12 complete versions of the novel. Fortunately, an Italian scholar, Pietro Tosco, who was working in Moscow, was able to send me a complete scan of one of the first typescripts.

I was also very grateful to Yuri Bit-Yunan, a Grossman scholar working in Moscow. He gave me a very clear explanation of what these supposedly 12 different versions were. A lot of them were not complete versions at all; they were just extra chapters added late in the day. It was quite clear that there was one version that was probably the earliest complete typescript and that everything after that was part of a process of compromise in which Grossman was dealing with the editors, trying to come up with something that everybody would find acceptable.

Once I had discovered that one truly important typescript, everything became a lot easier. The other thing that made things easier was that there were three different lifetime publications. There was a 1952 journal publication. That was while Stalin was still alive and it was the most heavily censored. Then there was one in 1954, after Stalin’s death [in March 1953], which is a bit less censored, and then there was one in 1956 when Nikita Khrushchev had started the Thaw. It was entirely clear, looking at those three different versions, what kind of things Grossman was eager to reintroduce into the novel when given the opportunity.

Working on *Stalingrad* was an education in the nature of Soviet censorship. Some of the cuts were the kind of things I was expecting—mentions of collectivization, the Gulag and so on—but a great many of them weren’t. A great many of the things that Grossman was

eager to introduce were more a matter of tone: bits of humor, an important general making some sort of silly, frivolous or selfish little remark or joke before an important battle. Generals weren't supposed to do that. All mentions of insects—all the fleas, the lice—got ruthlessly edited out of the versions published in 1952 and 1954.

[Soviet writer and dissident] Andrei Sinyavsky [1925-1997] once defined Socialist Realism as a kind of neo-classicism: everything's got to be solid, and everything has got to be dignified, everything has got to be in the same tone—serious—especially when dealing with something really important like the battle of Stalingrad which was foundational for the justification of the post-war Soviet Union.

Once it was clear to me how Grossman wanted to move, it gave me confidence in dealing with the typescripts. I would say that in probably 95 percent of the instances where I introduced passages from the typescript other people in my position would have done the same. And the version we published certainly works; I have been overjoyed by the way that this version has been picked up in at least another dozen countries.

The new edition of *Stalingrad* does not seem to have been published in Russia, however, is that correct?

No, it hasn't been. It's the one country where, while there is not an absolute ban on Grossman, he is not widely read. He is much more widely read in most other European countries and in some non-European countries. Certainly *Life and Fate* is still published in Russia, but Grossman would be liable to be in prison for things he wrote in it. Drawing a direct parallel between Nazi and Stalinist policies is a criminal offense today.

I had a very clear, bittersweet moment when I realized why Grossman isn't widely read in Russia today. About nine to ten years ago I met Arseny Roginsky, one of the founding members of [the human rights organization and research institute] Memorial. He was speaking at a conference in Cambridge. I introduced myself as the translator of Grossman. He smiled very, very warmly at me and said, "Ah, *our* writer". But Memorial by that time was a very marginalized organization on its way to being suppressed, unlike when it first started in the late 1980s, early 1990s, when it was a huge organization. The destruction of Memorial is a great sadness. But I'm sure a complete version of *Stalingrad* will be published one day. Russians usually do get around to publishing good writers in the end, even if it sometimes takes a very long time.

There has been a massive promotion of neo-Stalinism in Russia under Putin, and Grossman's works clearly go against that. Grossman was one of the most important war journalists of the 20th century and was proud to call himself a writer of the war. Can you speak more about his experiences during the war and how they shaped his writings?

His 1930s work is uneven. Sometimes a great, original writer suddenly appears and then there are duller passages. His reporting during the war was hugely important both to him and to his readers.

Red Star was a remarkable journal. It was the official army newspaper, there is no equivalent to it in any other country. Along with *Pravda* and *Izvestiia,* it was one of the most widely read newspapers of the time, read by both civilians and in the army. David Ortenberg, the editor for the first years of the war, was a gifted and brave editor. He took on [Soviet writer] Andrei Platonov [1899-1951] as a war correspondent on Grossman's recommendation, even though Ortenberg knew perfectly well that Platonov had incurred Stalin's rage ten years before that. Most of the great Soviet writers did some writing for *Red Star*.

Grossman was a very courageous man indeed. And he had an extraordinary gift for getting people to talk to him—all kinds of people: Senior generals who had a reputation for being taciturn, just ordinary soldiers. His daughter once told me how she and her schoolfriends had been amused, perhaps a bit puzzled, at seeing Grossman on a bench on the street talking to people they themselves would have looked down on, almost down-and-outs. He probably gave people a sense that he wasn't judging them, and this freed them up. Other correspondents were amazed, they would try to get an interview with some important officer and totally fail—and then Grossman would chat to the man for hours on end. No less importantly, he was able to remember these long conversations in detail. He didn't take notes, and that's part of what made people feel at ease with him and ready to trust him.

We need to remind ourselves that the Soviet Union was in many ways a hierarchical and snobbish society, certainly by the late 1930s. Grossman's account of the terror-famine in Ukraine is derived largely from what he was told by the domestic worker employed by the Zabolotskys. He was very close to the poet Nikolai Zabolotsky (1903-1958) and spent a lot of time in that household. Their cleaner had lived in the Ukrainian countryside and had actually been an activist, taking part in the collectivization and the grain confiscations during the terror-famine. Grossman was ready to listen to a cleaner, which a lot of Soviet writers at that time and a lot of important Soviet figures at the time would not have wanted to. They would have seen cleaners as beneath them. But he was not like that, he would listen to anyone.

His curiosity for other people and his ability to listen to them seems to be related to his conception of realism. How would you describe his understanding of realism?

Grossman is a rare example of a writer who wrote better and better throughout his life. His last stories are getting very close to poetry. Grossman does not go out of his way to use language in an extraordinary way. He will always use the most ordinary and plainest language that is adequate, but if ordinary, plain language isn't adequate, he does come up with very extraordinary phrases.

As for his realism: his tastes were fairly old- fashioned. He did not have much time for modernist poetry. He could recognize that Osip Mandelshtam [1891-1938] was a great poet. Nevertheless, Grossman wrote a rather moving formulation that a lot of modernist poetry was like the work of jewelers, whereas what he wanted to do is to write works that would be people's daily bread.

Grossman has sometimes been criticized for being *merely* realistic. One reviewer of the first publication o*f Life and Fate* wrote that Grossman had no real imagination, that he was a mere reporter, telling us what he or someone else witnessed. That's totally, totally wrong-headed.

Grossman wanted the truth. When a source of truth was available to him, when there were people he could speak to or things he could read, he would use them. But if there were not, then he would draw on his imagination.

One of the two or three most memorable passages of Grossman is the scene in the gas chambers in *Life and Fate*. Sofia Osipovna's last thoughts as she "adopts" little David are that she has, at last, become a mother. Grossman clearly had nothing but his own imagination to draw on for this scene and it's absolutely convincing. The scene doesn't seem in any way different from Grossman's writing when he was relying on his or other peoples' memories. Few writers, in fact, have been able to imagine more convincingly what most people would consider unimaginable.

Grossman has often been described as a "dissident writer." Historically, this is not quite accurate, however, and your publications of *Stalingrad* and *The People Immortal*, in fact, make that clear. Grossman was not part of the dissident movement (and he died before it really took off) and for a certain period of time, he was both popular and well-established. Moreover, until the end of his life, despite his severe criticisms of Stalinism and the Soviet government, he did retain a commitment to socialism and the October revolution, unlike many dissidents who turned away from socialism, especially after the crushing of the Prague Spring in 1968. How did Grossman, in your assessment, view the revolution and Soviet society, and how

did this view evolve over the decades?

It is very difficult with writers like Andrei Platonov and Grossman to know what they were truly thinking in the 1930s. I sometimes think it's easier to be certain of what, say, Dante, believed 700 years ago than of Platonov's or Grossman's beliefs.

We can say one thing for sure: Grossman was very close to his cousin Nadia Almaz who was deeply involved with the internationalists and the Comintern circle, people like Victor Serge [then a member of the Left Opposition]. Nadia Almaz was a kind of mentor to Grossman. She helped him to get published for the first time in Moscow. A lot of the more attractive figures in his writing are Comintern people. Krymov in *Stalingrad* and *Life and Fate* is not a self-portrait, but Grossman gives a lot of his own experiences to Krymov. Grossman's notebook account of his journey to Yasnaya Polyana, Leo Tolstoy's estate, is practically identical to Krymov's journey there in *Stalingrad*. Grossman would not have given his own experiences to someone alien to him.

Throughout his work, including the very last short stories, there's a great deal of sympathy on Grossman's part for the early *People's Will* activists, the early revolutionaries. That's the thing I'm most confident about. I would even say that he romanticizes them. [*Narodnaya Volya* or "*The People's Will*", was a revolutionary organization in the 1880s, which included figures like Andrei Zhelyabov and Vera Figner. It was part of the populist (or Narodnik) movement out of which Georgi Plekhanov, the "father of Russian Marxism," emerged as well.]

Grossman's relation to the dissident movement and the revolution is a complex question. It's true that there wasn't really a dissident movement when Grossman was still alive. He kept pretty much out of public life during his last years. He was seeing a lot of people who were coming back from the Gulag and was collecting accounts of that. So, on the one hand, he was not a part of anything we could call a dissident movement; on the other hand, his passages on Russian history in *Everything Flows* are the sharpest and most damning accounts of what went wrong in Russia over the centuries that I've read. They are among the finest passages of his writing. So he was unflinching in that respect. But like Andrei Platonov or Varlam Shalamov [1907-1982], he was writing from inside Soviet society, whereas a writer like Mikhail Bulgakov [1881-1940], who was probably always hostile to the revolution, was almost writing from outside or even from above.

I disagree with you, however, about one point. It is true that Grossman remained sympathetic, till the end of his life, to the 19th-century Populists and the early revolutionaries. And it may be true that he remained committed to the October Revolution throughout the 1920s and 1930s, perhaps even later. In his late masterpiece *Everything Flows* [1964], however, he is devastatingly critical of Lenin and the October Revolution. In Grossman's understanding, the 1917 February Revolution offered Russians a chance of freedom that they, tragically, failed to grasp.

What is striking about Grossman's writings is how sharply he perceived the contradictions of Soviet society. His depiction of Soviet society during the war in *Stalingrad* has an almost panoramic character. Someone writing "from the outside" would have hardly been able to do that.

I like the word panoramic. There's a huge variety to his work. However important his criticisms, it would be a great loss if he were simply to be pigeon-holed as a critic of the Soviet Union.

Let me say a word about his short stories, since they are another indication of his paradoxical standing. I did not read his last short stories until the early 2000s. No one ever mentioned them to me so I assumed they weren't important. Several of them, however, are masterpieces.

Most of them were published in the early 1960s, but only in Soviet journals. They didn't have the glamour of the *samizdat* [non-official, self-published works, distributed in the West and among the dissidents in the Soviet Union] so they didn't circulate among the dissidents. Nor were they published in big official editions, so they did not really get noticed.

"Mama" is an account of the household of Nikolai Yezhov (1895-1940), the head of the Soviet secret police, his family and his world seen through the eyes of his little five-to-six-year-old adopted daughter. All the most prominent Soviet politicians of the time, including Stalin himself, used to visit the Yezhov household, as did many important artists, musicians, film-makers and writers, including the writer Isaak Babel.

We see these figures, however, only through the eyes of little Nadya or of her good-natured but politically ignorant peasant nanny. Grossman leads us into the darkest of worlds, but with compassion and from a perspective of peculiar innocence. The nanny is described as the only person in the apartment "with calm eyes." It's an extraordinary story, but it's very little known. It's in the collection titled *The Road*, which includes several of his stories.

It is astonishing how many works we are still discovering today even by a relatively well-known figure such as Grossman. A complete edition of *Stalingrad,* in my view a real masterpiece of 20th century literature, came out only some 70 years after it was written. It gives a sense of how much more there is yet to be discovered about Soviet literature.

We're hugely, hugely ignorant of Soviet culture generally. I think one of the greatest artists of the 20th century, not just in Russia but internationally, was Pavel Filonov [1883-1941]. He was an absolutely passionate socialist. He didn't want to sell his paintings, so they all ended up in the Russian Museum, in what was then Leningrad [today St. Petersburg]. Of course, they were completely at odds with the style of Socialist Realism, and so the Soviet authorities hid them away until the late 1980s. And Western art historians haven't been bothered to make the journey to Petersburg and take in these paintings.

It's pretty simple: by and and large, we only know the writers and artists who have been the subject of some huge international scandal. We know about *Doctor Zhivago* by Boris Pasternak [1890-1960] because the Soviet authorities forced him to refuse the Nobel prize. It was much the same with [the dissident writer] Alexander Solzhenitsyn [1918-2008] and the poet Joseph Brodsky [1940-1996]. Because they were exiled, they got huge attention. Grossman's case is a little different. We ignored him for many years, but then we learned the dramatic story of the "arrest of his manuscript." This, long after his death, won him some international attention, even if only for his last works.

That seems to be changing, however. There are many new translations of important Soviet writers like Grossman, but also Shalamov, a supporter of the Left Opposition in the late 1920s, and Mikhail Zoshchenko [1894-1958]. And it is striking how positive the reception of your latest translations of Grossman has been. Why do you think his works speak so directly to readers today, including young generations who have gone through experiences that are seemingly entirely different from those of Grossman?

It took quite a long time for Grossman to really become popular. In the United States, *Life and Fate* was published in the mid-1980s, but then fell out of print. Here in the UK, it remained in print, but was only selling about five hundred copies a year. It was not until the early 2000s that people rediscovered Grossman. That was partly the doing of historians like Antony Beevor, who was constantly going out of his way to draw attention to him. And it was partly because of the republication of *Life and Fate* in an excellent edition with the New York Review of Books Classics.

It's also partly due to the world becoming a more difficult place in the past 20 years. I know a couple of war correspondents who are at present in Ukraine. They've been rereading Grossman with passionate enthusiasm and they feel like it really relates to what they're seeing now. The magical realism that was popular when I was first translating Grossman has perhaps begun to seem a bit facile in today's world, with its multitude of

huge, intractable real problems.

One thing that continues to take me aback is how often people I don't know write to me out of the blue and say almost in identical words, "Reading *Life and Fate* changed my life." I suspect that part of the reason for this is Grossman's emphasis on moral choice. There are a lot of moments in his work when people are faced with moral choices of life-and-death importance. Take the burning hospital scene in *Stalingrad*, for instance: a very junior, seemingly rather silly young nurse, is running away from the hospital because her first reaction is fear, fear that her face might be scarred. She runs some distance from the hospital, then suddenly comes to a stop, runs back to the hospital and from that moment behaves with unfailing heroism, climbing the burning staircase several times and helping to drag people to safety. There are many similar moments in Grossman's work. He gives his characters a chance of redemption, and they seize it.

A Russian friend living in the US told me that when she lived in Russia she was faced with important moral choices every day, whereas living in America she would often go for months on end without having to make any real choices at all. But that's changing, people are conscious that they have to make more and more moral choices, with climate change and all our other intractable problems. I think Grossman's difficult realism speaks to that.

There are also other aspects of Grossman's work that are becoming important today. During the last 20 years, the Anglophone world has gradually been coming to recognize that the second world war was basically fought between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany, and that the Western allies playing a very secondary role in it. There are many, many reasons why Grossman seems more relevant today than when I was first translating him over 40 years ago.