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Finney, Patrick Benedict

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tel: +44 1970 62 2400
email: is@aber.ac.uk

Vasily Grossman and the myths of the Great Patriotic War

Patrick Finney

Aberystwyth University, UK

Corresponding Author

Dr Patrick Finney

Department of International Politics

Aberystwyth University

Aberystwyth

SY23 3FE

UK

pbf@aber.ac.uk

Abstract

This article locates Vasily Grossman's work in the context of the official collective remembrance of the 'Great Patriotic War' in the Soviet Union. It discusses the evolution of the official war myth and of Grossman's own thinking about the meaning and significance of the conflict. This provides the context for a close reading of *Life and Fate*, elucidating how it challenged the shibboleths of official war memory, which had already become the key legitimating foundation of the post-war Soviet system. This

brings into focus the key political issues at stake in the novel, yet it also reveals some ambivalences in Grossman's attitude, belying simple generalisations about his dissidence in the last years of his life.

Keywords

Vasily Grossman, Great Patriotic War, collective memory, ambivalence, *Life and Fate*, legitimisation

He was certain that he was not only fighting the Germans, but fighting for a free Russia: certain that a victory over Hitler would be a victory over the death camps where his father, his mother and his sisters had perished (Grossman, 2006: 300).

These are the thoughts of Major Yershov, a Red Army officer incarcerated in a German prisoner of war camp in Vasily Grossman's epic novel *Life and Fate*. Yershov was amply acquainted with Stalinist oppression. In 1930, his father had been denounced as a kulak and deported with his family to a prison camp in the Northern Urals (the twenty-year-old Yershov, on military service, alone was spared). Successive winters claimed the lives of Yershov's mother and two sisters, before his father too succumbed to the murderously primitive conditions. Despite the bitterness engendered by these losses, Yershov showed unrelenting vigour in prosecuting the war. Recalled to the colours in 1941, he distinguished himself as a battlefield leader, winning promotion and decorations; in captivity, he was organising an armed resistance movement. Yet while repudiating fascist tyranny, Yershov's purpose was not identical to that of the Soviet regime: for him the war was an internationalist fight for freedom which might also liberate his own nation from the cruel inhumanities of Stalinism.

Such sentiments were not uncommon amongst Soviet troops. In extremis after the German invasion in 1941, the Soviet regime conceded a certain amount of liberalisation, and propaganda began to stress nationalist and even religious themes as

much as communist ones (Markwick, 2012: 694-5). Many soldiers, invigorated by the solidarity of the trenches, dared to hope that their supreme efforts might ‘change Soviet society forever’: perhaps, once fascism was vanquished, collective farms, purges, show trials and the Gulag might all ‘be consigned to history’ (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2005: xv)? It was not to be, for after victory at Stalingrad in 1943 ‘Stalinism once more revived’ (Tumarkin, 1994: 65). The regime reasserted totalitarian control and the fundamentals of the Stalinist system; it also began to propagate a ‘template for official truth’ about the war (Merridale, 2005: 164). Stalin himself carefully managed the public remembrance of victory, presenting it as a vindication of the strength of the Soviet system and his own visionary leadership. Grossman dramatizes this foreclosing of a different future for Russia through Yershov’s fate. The official underground, operating under orders from Moscow, becomes alarmed at the growing popularity of his independent resistance movement; consequently, a communist trusty in the camp administration secures his despatch to Buchenwald.

Yershov is a minor character in *Life and Fate*, yet he embodies a theme of central importance. In reviving memories of these yearnings for an alternative future, Grossman was directly challenging official historical narratives insisting on an ineluctable entailment between the heroic war effort of the loyal Soviet people, the adamant purity of the communist party and the achievement of victory. Grossman’s work has been analysed from a wide range of perspectives. John and Carol Garrard

(2012) have produced a full-scale biography, while Frank Ellis (1994) has offered a critical overview of his oeuvre. Tzvetan Todorov (2003) has explored Grossman's significance as a defender of freedom against the oppressive political forces unleashed in the totalitarian century. The influence of Grossman's Jewish identity has been discussed (Markish, 1986), as has his relationship to other Soviet Jewish authors (Clark, 2009; Murav, 2008). *Life and Fate*, in particular, has also been read as an exemplar of Russian epic novels of the Soviet period (Clark, 2011), and compared to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (Hellbeck, 2007). Overall, Grossman's writing has provided fertile material both for Russianists and for a much wider interdisciplinary community of scholars (Maddalena and Tosco, 2007; Tosco, 2011). Yet it has not previously been analysed systematically from the perspective of collective memory.

This piece locates Grossman's work in the context of official collective remembrance of the war in the Soviet Union. It discusses the evolution of the official myth of the 'Great Patriotic War', from its origins in the war through into the Thaw inaugurated by Stalin's reform-minded successor Nikita Khrushchev in the later 1950s. It also outlines the evolution of Grossman's own thinking about the meaning and significance of the conflict. This provides the context for a close reading of *Life and Fate*, elucidating how it challenged the shibboleths of official war memory, which had already become the key legitimating foundation of the post-war Soviet system. This approach brings into focus the key political issues at stake in the novel, and enhances

our understanding of why the authorities forbade its publication and ‘arrested’ all copies of the manuscript in 1961. That said, it also reveals some ambivalences in Grossman’s attitude towards the war, belying simple generalisations about his dissidence in the last years of his life. Although Grossman did indeed indict the Soviet system – most notably in his last major work *Everything Flows* (Grossman, 2010a) – his lingering emotional attachment to the war as a time of heroic struggle and epic popular achievement ensured that his repudiation of the official myth was in fact less than total.

Through his wartime journalism, Grossman signally contributed to moulding the public meaning of the war. His frontline reporting lauded the achievements of the Red Army, striking patriotic notes perfectly in tune with the regime’s desire to mobilise troops and civilians. Grossman’s literary skill, empathy and eye for telling details elevated his journalism far above propaganda boilerplate and ensured him enormous popularity amongst his large readership. His wartime fiction worked similar heroic themes (for example, Grossman, 2010b: 81-8) and helped cement his reputation as one of the country’s leading literary figures. His 1942 novel *The People Immortal* was praised by critics, seriously considered for the Stalin Prize and conveyed ‘a belief in total victory’ (Ellis, 1994: 47).

This said, Grossman was somewhat sceptical about the regime’s massaging of truth. In early 1942 he voiced frustration about efforts to whitewash the war’s early disasters as part of a cunning stratagem: ‘the blood-soaked body of war is being dressed

in snow-white robes of ideological, strategic and artistic convention' (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2005: 96). By the same token, he was certainly no naïf about Stalinism, once telling his friend Semyon Lipkin that he hoped the war would prove cathartic and wipe away 'the Stalinist filth from the face of Russia. The holy blood of this war has cleansed us of the blood of those who were innocently dispossessed as kulaks, and the blood of 1937' (Ellis, 1994: 113). Grossman shared hopes that the war might usher in a more liberal regime, yet as the atmosphere changed after Stalingrad he grasped that these were unrealistic: by 1944 he was dismissive of 'fantastic talk about a complete reorganisation of Soviet government after the war' (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2005: 266).¹ His consistent rhetorical emphasis on the inordinate contribution of the Red Army was also increasingly in tension with official efforts to stress instead the sage leadership of Stalin and the party (Ellis, 1994: 68-70). Yet until the end of the war, he affirmed a broadly orthodox understanding of the virtue of the Soviet cause.

Stalin codified the official Soviet narrative in a speech in February 1946 on the lessons of victory. He argued that the war had proven the viability, popularity and superiority of the Soviet system and multi-national state ('our Soviet social system ... has proved its complete vitality' (Costigliola, 2000: 42)). Some credit was due to the armed forces, of course, but the material foundations for triumph had been laid by the pre-war programmes of collectivisation and industrialisation, and by the purges that had accompanied them. This speech had multiple aims: to justify the brutalities of the

1930s, to efface memories of the defeats and divisions of the war years and to justify future communist rule as the state geared up for reconstruction and the Cold War. It also reflected Stalin's personal determination to reassert fuller autocratic control, hence his stress on his own role and the wisdom of the party. While the regime thus prescribed the parameters of public memory, after an initial spasm of commemoration it subsequently also moved to discourage discussion of the war at all. The Victory Day state holiday was abandoned in 1947 and the publication of military memoirs and historical works was carefully controlled if not prohibited. This change of focus was enforced in a widespread political and cultural clampdown that scarred the last years of Stalin's rule (Markwick, 2012: 696-8).

Grossman was multiply embroiled in this late-Stalinist repression. Official anti-Semitism became rampant after the war, and a xenophobic 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign culminated with a furore over a supposed conspiracy by Jewish doctors to murder Soviet leaders which was only curtailed by Stalin's death in 1953. Grossman had been profoundly affected by the revelation of genocidal crimes against the Jews, not least because his own mother had been murdered by the Nazis in 1941. Accordingly, some of his most powerful journalism and fiction bore witness to the Holocaust, including landmark accounts of the killing grounds of the Ukraine and the extermination camp at Treblinka (Garrard and Garrard 2012: 167-228). In 1943 he had joined the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which was collating evidence of Jewish

persecution for a proposed documentary publication, *The Black Book*. Although this initially received some encouragement from the authorities, the Holocaust increasingly became taboo in Soviet collective memory (Gitelman, 1997). On the one hand, emphasising the specificity of the Jewish fate ran contrary to the assertion of universal suffering amongst all the peoples of the Soviet Union which was vital to the integrative ambitions of the war myth. On the other, detailed consideration of the Holocaust could not but open up the subject of collaboration by Soviet citizens in the Ukraine and elsewhere, which would be similarly inimical to post-war unity. Publication of *The Black Book* was forbidden; the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was dissolved and the majority of its members were arrested, tortured and in thirteen cases executed (Altman 2008). It is probable that only Stalin's death saved Grossman from a similar fate. Yet like many Soviet citizens he was also forced to manoeuvre and compromise: in 1952 he agreed to sign a letter calling for the execution of the accused Jewish doctors, a decision which troubled his conscience long after (Grossman, 2010b: 75-8).

Grossman's major work of this period was his first Stalingrad novel, *For a Just Cause* - in essence a prequel to *Life and Fate* - which experienced a tortuous path to publication. It was scrutinised by myriad editorial boards and censors and redrafted at least a dozen times. Some objections to the novel were undoubtedly anti-Semitic: Grossman refused to comply, for example, with a suggestion that he remove the central character, the Jewish nuclear physicist Viktor Shtrum. Others reflected the regime's

reluctance to countenance any remotely realistic engagement with the war at this time.

The novel was eventually published in instalments in the summer of 1952 and was initially well-received, even being nominated for a Stalin Prize. Yet soon it was subject to virulent attacks in the press that were only stilled several months after Stalin's death (Ellis, 1994: 6-10; Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 220-8; Grossman, 2010b: 72-8).

Opinions on *For a Just Cause* vary widely. Clearly, it was more orthodox than *Life and Fate* and some critics have damned it as ideologically conformist. Yet Frank Ellis has argued that it challenged the conventions of socialist realism and broached daring themes, including the causes of disaster in 1941 and even parallels between Stalin and Adolf Hitler, as indeed some contemporary Soviet critics alleged (Ellis, 1994: 23-5, 71-87, 171-5; Ellis, 2011: 159-70). Complicating judgement here is the fact that the text was revised for its first publication in book form in 1954 (and again for subsequent editions), as censorship was loosened. Changing political conditions of course also shaped how the text was read.²

Khrushchev aimed to modernise the Soviet system, stripping away its Stalinist excrescences and reinspiring the people with enthusiasm for Leninist ideals. In his 'secret speech' in February 1956, he denounced the 'cult of personality'; but he also argued that Stalin had only strayed off the true Leninist path from the mid-1930s (after collectivisation and industrialisation), thus blaming the state's woes on Stalin while exonerating the system itself. This move, it was hoped, would allow the party to

confront existing problems without undermining its own authority. The war was a central target of this revisionism. Khrushchev savagely criticised Stalin's tendency to hog the credit for victory while shirking blame for preceding setbacks, and enumerated a catalogue of crimes and errors. Stalin had failed to take the true measure of fascism; almost fatally weakened the military through the purges; made poor use of the breathing space purchased by the Nazi-Soviet pact; ignored warnings of the imminent German attack in 1941; delayed mobilisation at the cost of countless lives; and persistently either failed to make timely decisions or ineptly intervened in the conduct of military affairs. The victory, Khrushchev argued, was due not to Stalin but to the whole Soviet nation, guided by the party but with a prodigious contribution from the military (Rigby 1968).

In broad terms, the ideological reading earlier enshrined in public remembrance persisted: victory was still 'proof of the inevitable triumph of Soviet socialism over capitalism' (Markwick, 2012: 699). Yet Khrushchev's revisionism licensed changes in detail and emphasis, and also permitted a flood of new publications. A host of military memoirists, angry at their marginalisation under Stalin, reaffirmed the significance of commanders and soldiers in the war effort and rehabilitated comrades purged in the 1930s (Bialer, 1969). Historians produced important new studies, including documentary collections and a multi-volume official history which appeared between 1960 and 1965. They still celebrated the achievement of the Soviet party and state, but this was no longer a litany of unrelieved perfection; errors and setbacks could be

confronted, as long they were largely blamed on Stalin (Gallagher, 1963: 128-75). Ambitious plans for public memorialisation of the conflict were also set in train (Markwick, 2012: 700). Novelists produced scores of new works, hallmarked by ‘psychological complexity’ and ‘more sober, grimmer’ depictions of combat. ‘Themes such as cowardice, desertion, incompetence and even existential despair, hitherto ignored, now merited closer attention’ (Ellis, 1994: 36). This was an invigorating moment, but for all the probing of boundaries the authorities continued to police them, especially if criticism of Stalin threatened to shade into indictment of the system itself. This was essential now that ‘the historical representation of the war’ had become ‘central’ to educating the people towards communism (Markwick, 2012: 699).

During the Thaw Grossman worked on the two major projects – *Life and Fate* and *Everything Flows* – that are generally regarded as marking his move to outright dissidence. Tzvetan Todorov has argued that the controversy over *For a Just Cause* and the death of Stalin were decisive in triggering a ‘complete metamorphosis’ on Grossman’s part from orthodox servant of the regime to uncompromising speaker of truth (Todorov, 2003: 48). Yet Robert Chandler, Grossman’s English translator, counsels against this kind of conversion narrative, stressing instead the persistent ambivalence of an author who was simultaneously a product of the Soviet regime yet sceptical about it. Grossman’s writing in the 1930s was by no means entirely conformist and uncontroversial, just as his work in the 1940s was in some respects distanced from

official myths – for example, as regards the Holocaust – yet in others quite compatible with them. Of course, *Life and Fate* was more heretical than Grossman's previous writings, but the distinction was 'essentially one of degree'. His unwonted boldness was the product of both political context - the greater latitude granted to authors during the Thaw – and biographical contingency: at the height of his powers, 'he was simply tired of prevaricating, tired of trying to accommodate himself to the authorities' capricious demands' (Grossman, 2006: xvi; Grossman, 2010b: 9; cf. Bit-Yunan, 2011).

In any event, Grossman misunderstood the limits of what was acceptable under Khrushchev. He submitted his manuscript to a journal in October 1960, but the editors took fright and in February 1961 the secret police confiscated all known copies of the typescript. (Grossman, often accused of naïveté, had shrewdly secreted two further copies away with friends.) He campaigned on behalf of his novel, even personally petitioning Khrushchev in February 1962. However, the following July he was called for an interview with the chief party ideologue, Mikhail Suslov, who made clear that the novel was so politically harmful that it would not be published. This ruling cast Grossman into a depression, and his health was already failing owing to the onset of the cancer that would kill him in September 1964. That said, the last few years of his life were extremely productive, even if many of the stories he completed, and his final novel *Everything Flows*, went unpublished (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 257-99; Grossman, 2010b: 196-200). In late 1961 he travelled to Armenia on a commission to translate an

Armenian war novel, a trip which also saw him write a moving memoir that was posthumously published (albeit in bowdlerised form). There has been speculation that this commission was an official attempt ‘to buy Grossman off, to compensate him – at least in financial terms – for the non-publication of *Life and Fate*, and so lessen the danger of his contacting foreign journalists or sending manuscripts abroad’ (Grossman, 2013: ix). To the end, therefore, Grossman’s relationship with the regime was riddled with complexity.

Context partly determined official hostility to Grossman’s manuscript. The controversy caused by the regime’s bullying of Boris Pasternak after the award of the Nobel Prize for *Dr Zhivago* in 1958 was abating, but had seriously damaged Soviet prestige abroad. This shaped both the response to *Life and Fate* and the more subtle tactics employed to neutralise it (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 257-9). Wider international considerations – from the Berlin Wall crisis to the Sino-Soviet split to the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Israel – also induced caution about Grossman’s text (Ellis, 1994: 16). He was also perhaps unfortunate to be caught up in Khrushchev’s unpredictable tacking between reaction and reform (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 266).³ During their interview, Suslov touched on both the Pasternak precedent (‘your book is far more dangerous for us than *Dr Zhivago*’) and the current ‘great international tension’. It was perfectly permissible, he said, to explore ‘the dark pages of our life’, but only if it was done ‘from a Soviet viewpoint’ (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 357-9).

Grossman's response was that he had sought only to write the truth, and that his work was in line with Khrushchev's most recent pronouncements (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 356). This argument proved unavailing.

Official Soviet collective remembrance of the 'Great Patriotic War' crucially conditioned the novel's reception. Freedom is the central recurring theme in *Life and Fate*. Grossman repeatedly invokes how the war gave birth to an unwonted sense of emancipation which contributed materially to victory, only to be extirpated by the resurgent Stalinist regime. This is evident in the subversive conversation between Shtrum and his acquaintances in Kazan, especially the historian Madyarov. Madyarov laments the victims of the purges, hymns genuine freedom of the press and anatomises how the conditions of war have exposed the weakness and callousness of the Soviet system ('the needs of the State are one pole; people's needs are the other pole. These two poles are irreconcilable' (2006: 263)). Madyarov's views are challenged at the time, in particular by Sokolov, Shtrum's close colleague and Madyarov's brother-in-law. Later, after their return to Moscow, Sokolov reiterates the orthodox line in repenting of the Kazan conversations: 'we were so depressed that we tried to lay the blame for temporary military setbacks on entirely imaginary failings in the Soviet State itself. And what we thought of as failings have now shown themselves to be strengths' (2006: 454). Yet the very fact that this refutation occurs after the party has begun to retighten its grip underlines Grossman's seditious point. Having grasped that a new wave of political

arrests was afoot in Moscow, Shtrum laments: ‘how difficult it was to reconcile such things with the war for freedom ...! Yes, they had been fools to talk so much in Kazan’ (2006: 441). Moreover, Grossman has already more pointedly dramatised the virtues of free-thinking, since it was on his walk home from the conversation with Madyarov that Shtrum experienced the inspirational insight that transforms his work on atomic physics: ‘how strange’ that this idea should have come

when his mind was far away from anything to do with science, when the discussions that so excited him were those of free men, when his words and the words of his friends had been determined only by freedom, by bitter freedom (2006: 274.

This theme is extensively developed in relation to Stalingrad. Grossman’s representation of Stalingrad is suffused with the notion that the desperate struggle there induced not just new forms of comradeship and mutual respect but also a collective sense of liberation amongst the troops. This spirit was crucial to securing victory, but was also dangerous to the regime which subsequently sought to domesticate it. ‘The soul of wartime Stalingrad was freedom’ opines Grossman, and its passing engendered a curious sense of loss: ‘the old inhabitants of the city felt both happy and empty. ... This feeling was absurd. Why should a victorious end to the slaughter make one feel sad?’ (2006: 781-2). Repeatedly, Grossman as narrator makes emphatic pronouncements of this kind: ‘freedom engendered the Russian victory. Freedom was

the apparent aim of the war. But the sly fingers of History changed this: freedom became simply a way of waging the war, a means to an end' (2006: 472).

At the heart of this lies House 6/1, the Soviet enclave deep within German-held territory. Under the independent-minded Captain Grekov, an egalitarian atmosphere prevails amongst its intensely-bonded defenders. Grekov disdains ideological cant, formality and military regulations, encouraging his men to exchange views freely: accordingly attacks on those who perpetrated the purges and on collectivisation are commonplace; at one moment Grekov even criticises Lenin, for failing to realise that 'the purpose of a revolution is to free people' rather than simply to lead them more adroitly (2006: 244). House 6/1 offers us a microcosm of Stalingrad and of the whole 'Great Patriotic War', as individuals animated by soldierly comradeship, familial love and fierce patriotism fight in the name of, but not quite on behalf of, the Soviet state. It is 'suppressed Russia, caught between Hitler and Stalin, an outpost of freedom in no man's land' (Ellis, 1994: 89). The house lies in a crucial position on the frontline, and the spirit of independence that exists amongst the troops is vital to its successful defence against repeated German attacks. Yet this sentiment also represents a danger to Soviet power, and so the commissar Krymov is despatched to 'establish Bolshevik order' and eliminate 'unacceptable partisan attitudes' (2006: 403, 411).

A tense conversation ensues:

'Grekov, I want to talk to you seriously. What do you want?'

‘Freedom. That’s what I’m fighting for.’

‘We all want freedom.’

‘Tell us another! You just want to sort out the Germans.’

Krymov lambasts Grekov for allowing his men to voice ‘naïve and erroneous political judgements’ (such as calling for the abolition of collective farms after the war); Grekov ripostes that Krymov is seeking ‘to put everything back just as it was before. ...

Everything. The general coercion’. Krymov appeals to Grekov to help him ‘stamp out the evil anti-Soviet spirit that’s taken hold here’; further developments are curtailed when Krymov suffers a debilitating bullet wound – perhaps inflicted by Grekov himself – and is evacuated (2006: 411-12). Later, the defenders of House 6/1 are annihilated in a German attack, while Krymov is arrested, falling prey to the insatiable Soviet power that he had sought to defend. One *glasnost*-era Soviet critic described House 6/1 as ‘the centre of the novel ... in a conceptual sense. For here the dream of self-government and freedom of the individual man has been realised’ (Ellis, 1994: 96).

This is the core heresy of *Life and Fate*, because it challenges the invocation of the legacy of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ to vindicate the Soviet system. By insistently deploying the trope of the snuffing out of freedom and the denial of alternative futures, Grossman sets his face against official myth-making. (In various places within *Life and Fate*, moreover, characters bemoan the mnemonic engineering of the party (2006: 93-4, 258-9).) If victory was achieved almost in spite of the regime, and then misappropriated

by it, the war simply cannot serve as a valid basis for legitimation; yet by the early 1960s collective memory of the 'Great Patriotic War' was already eclipsing 1917 as the foundational moment of the modern Soviet Union. Grossman underlines this appropriation when he reflects on the beautiful quiet that fell over Stalingrad on the night of victory: 'this was the true expression of the people's victory. Not the ceremonial marches and orchestras, not the fireworks and artillery salutes, but this quietness ...' (2006: 645). Grossman is in essence arguing that the post-war Soviet state, even in the more honest times of Khrushchev, rests upon a lie.

Grossman's suggestions that there are significant affinities between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany – with both representing a particular type of 'totalitarian' regime – further challenge the war myth. The most dramatic instance of this comes during the interrogation of an 'old Bolshevik', Mostovskoy, by an SS officer, Liss. Liss torments Mostovskoy with the idea that fascism and communism are of a piece: 'when we look one another in the face, we're neither of us just looking at a face we hate – no, we're gazing into a mirror. That's the tragedy of our age' (2006: 379). Liss claims that the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany represent kindred forms of powerful nationalist one-party state headed by visionary revolutionary leaders; moreover, the violent atrocities of the one have repeatedly served as inspiration for the other. So, Hitler's liquidation of the Jews followed Stalin's destruction of the kulaks, just as Stalin modelled the Great Terror on Hitler's purges of his political opponents after 1933. This

fundamental similarity meant that victory in the war would almost represent a defeat for the Nazis: 'it's terrible – it's like committing suicide in one's sleep' (2006: 380).

Mostovskoy rejects Liss's arguments, yet the comparison has nonetheless been laid before the reader. Elsewhere, Grossman as narrator discusses the mechanics of totalitarian violence. The 'eternal, ceaseless violence, overt or covert' which 'is the basis of totalitarianism', he notes, has 'proved able to paralyse the human spirit throughout whole continents'. Yet man's indestructible and 'innate yearning for freedom' nonetheless persists, offering the basis for resistance (Grossman, 2006: 199-200). Although this passage is ostensibly about fascism, when Grossman provides hopeful instances of resistance his list mingles anti-fascist revolts (such as in Treblinka and Sobibor) with anti-communist ones (such as the 1956 Hungarian uprising).

The notion that fundamental similarities united the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany was not novel. The concept of 'totalitarianism' had a long history and was very prominent in western Cold War rhetoric. It yoked fascism and communism together in a manner that was extraordinarily useful for mobilisation and propaganda, and also justified containment. So with seeming perversity, memory of Nazi atrocities was mobilised against the Soviet regime which had played the pre-eminent role in extirpating them (Gleason, 1995). Yet at the time that Grossman was writing, the comparison was proscribed in the Soviet Union. The Soviet line, indeed, was the diametrically opposed one that it was the western democracies that had an affinity with

Nazism, since both were embodiments of capitalist imperialism; fascism and communism were utterly hostile and antagonistic systems. A corollary of this was that the lustre of the just war against fascism could be claimed by the Soviet Union alone, since it was the very superiority of communism over capitalism and fascism that had determined its outcome. This view was set down in a 1948 pamphlet, co-authored by Stalin, entitled *Falsifiers of History*, which became ‘the single most important source of Soviet historical writing on the war period and provided a definitive framework for the interpretation of the Western role in the war’ (Gallagher, 1963: 60). The notion of Nazi-Soviet affinities, in other words, was totally inimical both to the regime’s ideological self-understanding and to approved modes of remembering of the ‘Great Patriotic War’ as an anti-fascist liberation struggle.

Grossman also returned to the Holocaust in *Life and Fate*, which includes several story strands evoking Jewish suffering. One follows the journey of a Jewish army doctor, Sofya Levinton, from her capture through deportation in a cattle truck to her murder in an extermination camp gas chamber. Grossman follows her right to the moment of death, where she comforts David, a lone child she has befriended on the train. Another concerns Anna Shtrum, the mother of Grossman’s alter-ego Viktor, who sends her son a letter from the ghetto on the eve of her shooting, telling her story, reaffirming her love for him and urging that he ‘live, live, live for ever’ (2006: 77). Later we witness her death obliquely from the perspective of another victim. Placing the

so-called 'Holocaust by bullets' (Desbois, 2008) on an equal footing with killings by gas, Grossman presciently foreshadows one of the emphases of recent Holocaust historiography (Stone, 2010). This foresight is equally evident in his discussion of themes such as spoliation and collaboration (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2005: 251-9). Anna Shtrum's 'last letter' describes how some of her Ukrainian neighbours seize her property, just as Ukrainian policemen have an instrumental role in the massacre that takes her life. (It should be noted that she records some countervailing acts of kindness as well.) Grossman also insists on the centrality of the murder of the Jews to the war. At one point, a woman peers out of her window during the night and observes the arrival of the SS, police and military units that are to carry out a ghetto massacre. 'In those few minutes of moonlight', Grossman writes, 'she took the measure of the history of our age' (2006: 187). This emphasis on Jewish suffering further distanced Grossman from the tenets of authorised remembrance, for the Thaw had not altered the status of the Holocaust in Soviet collective memory: the multivolume Khrushchev-era official history contains no mention of 'Jews' (Gitelman, 1997: 21).

Grossman complements his treatment of the Holocaust with extensive discussion of Soviet anti-Semitism, thus further blurring the foundational distinction between Nazi evil and Soviet virtue on which the myth depended. At numerous points, diverse characters utter casual anti-Semitic slurs. Much more sinister, however, is the role of official anti-Semitism in the campaign of persecution which ensnares Shtrum in his

workplace. 'Your work stinks of Judaism' (2006: 555) is the unambiguous indictment from one of his colleagues as a purge, evidently modelled on the post-war 'anti-cosmopolitan' campaign, gathers momentum. Shtrum suffers the torments of denunciation, only to achieve an unprecedented state of moral and political clarity after he refuses to perform the self-abasing ritual of repentance demanded of him. Then, after the personal intervention of Stalin transforms his fortunes, he experiences the subtle corruption that comes from being once more embraced by the system (feeling 'a sense of regret for something sacred and cherished that seemed to be slipping away from him' (2006: 752)). Finally, he faces an existential moral trial when he is asked to sign a letter of denunciation in his turn, and yields. Grossman's depiction of the 'hypnotic power' and crushing 'invisible force' of Stalinist totalitarianism (2006: 656) is finely-wrought, and at its heart is Soviet anti-Semitism.

Elsewhere, Grossman explicitly invokes anti-Semitism as a point of comparison between the Soviet Union and Nazi Germany. During his interrogation of Mostovskoy, Liss remarks: 'today you're appalled by our hatred of the Jews. Tomorrow you may make use of our experience yourselves' (2006: 383). Grossman as narrator recurs to this in a digressive analysis of anti-Semitism, ostensibly referring to Nazism but in a way that strongly implies equal applicability to other 'totalitarian countries'. Anti-Semitism, he writes, 'is a mirror for the failings of individuals, social structures and State systems' which 'look to the imaginary intrigues of World Jewry for explanations of their own

failure'. The indictment is hammered home by repetition: 'historical epochs, unsuccessful and reactionary governments, and individuals hoping to better their lot all turn to anti-Semitism as a last resort, in an attempt to escape an inevitable doom'. The ultimate expression of this is state anti-Semitism, which 'is a sign that the State is looking for the support of fools, reactionaries and failures, that it is seeking to capitalize on the ignorance of the superstitious and the anger of the hungry'. The ultimate end-point, when 'anti-Semitism becomes an ideology of Party and State – as happened with Fascism', is 'wholesale destruction' (2006: 468-71).

Here, Grossman adumbrates the systemic critique that he would develop in *Everything Flows*. In a dramatic set-piece in a Gulag camp, two 'old Bolshevik' comrades, Magar and Abarchuk, are reunited as the former lies gravely ill. Although Abarchuk retains his faith in the regime, even after imprisonment, Magar has become disillusioned and urges him to recant as well ('I'm like an old prostitute weeping over her lost virtue'). The communist state, he laments, has betrayed the ideals it was supposed to embody as it lapses into despotism, oppressing the working class and likely soon to 'revive the Black Hundreds', a reactionary Tsarist-era anti-Semitic organisation. The whole revolutionary project was a terrible error: 'we made a mistake. And this is what our mistake has led to. ... No repentance can expiate what we've done. I have to say this. ... We didn't understand freedom. We crushed it' (2006: 177-8). Abarchuk rejects Magar's plea, but nonetheless the views canvassed here are clearly at odds with

the Leninist principles of the Thaw which Grossman, in his meeting with Suslov, claimed to be upholding.

This invocation of freedom returns us to Grossman's central concern within *Life and Fate*. In presenting the war as a space in which alternative possibilities for the Soviet Union emerged, only to disappear as the totalitarian state assumed credit for victory, Grossman undermined the essentials of the official Soviet war myth. Given the scope, scale and thematic complexity of the novel, readers unsurprisingly differed in their opinions as to what made it objectionable: so the writer and editor Alexander Tvardovsky regretted the excessive emphasis on anti-Semitism and the Holocaust (Zubok, 2009: 247) whereas Suslov prioritised the Nazi-Soviet comparisons (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 358). Yet the fundamental problem was that Grossman's reading precluded the war's instrumentalisation as the mnemonic and ideological foundation of the regime. Its official proscription should not, however, blind us to some significant elements of ambivalence in Grossman's vision. It is understandable that commentators should have focused on the taboo-breaching facets of *Life and Fate*, yet things said and unsaid within it point to a more complex and ambiguous reality.

Even as he inveighed against the way in which the Soviet state appropriated victory in the war, Grossman still regarded it as an immense accomplishment to be celebrated. He always remained convinced that 'those who died in the war died for a moral cause. They sacrificed themselves so that others could live: they died for the sake

of the Soviet people and a better world'. For him, the central truth of the war was always 'the heroic sacrifice of the Soviet people' (Hellbeck, 2007: 44-5). So he was deeply invested in an affirmative perspective on victory as a product of popular heroism, in a way that overlapped with official discourses. His daughter has testified to his habit of leading the family in lustily emotional renditions of songs from the war. Grossman, standing with 'his hands at his side as if he were on parade', his face 'solemn and stern' and his voice 'thundering', would sing the song he always considered 'a work of genius':

Arise, the huge country.

Arise for the mortal battle.

With the dark fascist horde,

with the accursed horde (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2005: 348).

The official mythology of the 'Great Patriotic War', for all its palpable falsehoods and omissions, nonetheless fulfilled basic emotional needs for Soviet veterans, endowing their suffering and sacrifice with patriotic meaning (Merridale, 2005: 321-35, 341-2). That Grossman too was, in this sense, partly encapsulated by the official reading is sometimes evident in *Life and Fate*. After the turning of the tide around Stalingrad, Grossman depicts a Red Army officer exulting in the new-found sense of Russian power. 'And the important thing is this', he says: 'under the leadership of the

Bolsheviks we Russians are the vanguard of humanity' (2006: 702). It does not appear that Grossman intends us to read this ironically.

This sense of partial incorporation is reinforced by other aspects of the novel. Grossman's abhorrence of fascism was absolute and enduring (in his Armenian memoir he includes 'hatred of fascism' in a short list of his defining personality traits (2013: 79), and his depiction of fascist evil is graphic. For all that he sometimes posits Nazi-Soviet affinities, there are other digressions in which Grossman assails fascism alone in impeccably orthodox fashion: 'if Fascism conquers, man will cease to exist and there will remain only man-like creatures that have undergone an internal transformation If Fascism should ever be fully assured of its final triumph, the world will choke in blood' (2006: 78-9, 179). Moreover, the most egregious crimes against humanity in the novel are committed by the Nazis, and these are not limited to the atrocities that comprise the Holocaust. Even the battle-hardened defenders of House 6/1 are sickened when they glimpse the Germans making preparations to burn a gypsy woman and her young son alive, drowning out their pitiable screams with a regimental band. The Soviet regime is not, of course, entirely benign: the interrogation of Krymov is physically and psychologically brutal and some characters starkly recall the horrors of the famine in the Ukraine in the early 1930s. Yet there is a marked imbalance, such that whatever the intellectual arguments presented for Nazi-Soviet equivalence, the most powerful emotional stimuli point towards repugnance for fascist inhumanity.

Grossman also presents a vision of the Soviet war which is partially sanitised, in accordance with the myth. Jochen Hellbeck argues that he glosses over ‘unheroic and degrading aspects of wartime experience’ and ‘the terror and carnage of modern combat’ in order to highlight more significant moral truths (2007: 45). His portrayal of the selfless heroism of the Red Army is certainly quite conventional, as when Vera Spiridinova imagines the

men marching through the darkness of the winter night, falling and standing up again, falling and never standing up again. It was for her and her son, for these women with chapped hands, for these old men, for these children wrapped in their mothers’ torn shawls, that the men were going to their death (Grossman, 2006: 594).

True, the novel is studded with instances of regrettable behaviour by soldiers, such as excessive drinking and inappropriate relations with female comrades. But the perpetrators of these offences are generally officers, or commissars (witness the drunken behaviour of the unnamed member of the Military Soviet in Stalingrad or the hypocrisy of the oily commissar Getmanov over the taking of ‘campaign wives’), which of course makes a narrower, and very particular, point. Overall, the conduct of Soviet troops is depicted in a quite idealistic fashion. Grossman knew that this was not the whole story. His notebooks contain graphic material detailing behaviour by Soviet troops in the later part of the war which clearly horrified him, especially looting and the rape of civilian

women, including even liberated Soviet citizens (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2005: 320-1, 326-8, 340-3). Yet he evidently managed to compartmentalise this knowledge so that it did not excessively disturb his pride in the courageous virtue of Soviet troops and his 'fierce joy' (Beevor and Vinogradova, 2005: 310) at their new-found supremacy. Similarly, when it came to writing *Life and Fate*, these abuses and crimes did not figure among the fundamental moral truths to which he felt compelled to bear witness.⁴

There is a further sense in which Grossman offers an airbrushed picture. Robert Chandler has observed that Grossman over-simplifies when he presents the defenders of Stalingrad as motivated simply by spontaneous patriotism and an exhilarating sense of freedom. 'An alternative view is that the city was defended by crazed men whose only choice was between being shot by the NKVD if they deserted and being shot by the Germans if they did not desert' (Grossman, 2006: xxvii). Frank Ellis has similarly argued that Grossman seriously downplays the coercive force employed by the Soviet state against its own troops at Stalingrad – through penal battalions, summary executions and NKVD 'blocking detachments', designed to catch deserters – even though his notebooks demonstrate that he was well aware of them (2011: 207-11). This omission certainly 'detracts from the novel's realism' (Ellis, 2011: 208) and might be thought strange, since including such material would have reinforced Grossman's accusations about the homicidal high-handedness of the Soviet state towards its own citizens. Yet it would also have detracted from Grossman's core purpose of challenging

the ‘Great Patriotic War’ myth by presenting the ordinary troops as fighting out of pure love of freedom. (Ellis speculates that Grossman would have found it ‘intolerable, maybe psychologically insuperable, to consider the possibility that Stalin’s harsh, even savage, disciplinary measures made any difference other than to weaken and destroy morale and to waste lives’ (2011: 209).) It is therefore an irony that choosing to challenge the myth in this fashion means endorsing it in another respect, since of course there was no place for this kind of violence in the official narrative. So Grossman’s romanticised view of the Red Army led him once more into partial complicity.

Clearly, *Life and Fate* transgressed against the official war myth sufficiently for its publication to be forbidden. Yet by the standards of contemporary historical scholarship – never mind cruder popular anathemas that depict the Soviets simply as pillaging rapists intent on subjugating half of Europe – it offers a somewhat rosy view of the Soviet war effort, overlapping not insignificantly with the then-prevalent official narrative. Chandler has argued that, but for ‘Grossman’s persistent moral questioning and his heretical equation’ of communism and fascism, ‘*Life and Fate* would have come oddly close to meeting the authorities’ repeated demand for a truly Soviet epic’ (Grossman, 2006: xv). Indeed, one post-Soviet Russian critic declared that ‘stylistically speaking, *Life and Fate* is a completely Soviet book’ (Garrard, 1994: 286), just as some Russian readers of 1970s samizdat versions apparently regarded Grossman as ‘too close to the system he was trying to debunk’ (Zinik, 2011).

Grossman's enduring incorporation into the myth of the 'Great Patriotic War' was manifest in his last ever short story (written in 1962-3). 'In Kislovodsk' tells of a Soviet doctor, accustomed to the finer things in life, who has long eschewed any active political commitment ('the country had lived out its fate but Nikolay Viktorovich's own fate had been free of storms, calamities, hard labour or war' (2010b: 273)). After the German occupation, he finds himself in charge of a sanatorium caring for wounded Soviet soldiers. He leads a quiet and comfortable life until a sinister Gestapo officer instructs him that the next day he must facilitate the killing of all the patients in his care. Aghast, he returns home and enjoys one last evening of luxurious food and wine, music and dancing with his wife before they both commit suicide rather than accede to the German order. This story seems almost completely in tune with the mythic view of the war. On the one hand, there is a stark invocation of fascist evil and of contempt for Nazism (the Gestapo officer 'looked as if he had been put together out of some kind of waste matter' (2010b: 280)). On the other, Grossman shows us how even Soviet citizens inured to compromise and softened by love of luxuries could find the courage to defy the inhuman evil of the invaders: suicide is an act of both resistance and redemption.

Consideration of Grossman's ambivalence is important for gauging the nature of his achievement. It should make us wary of construing him too simplistically as 'a stereotypically lonely victim of a brutal regime, a dissident author ruthlessly persecuted by the guardians of a totalitarian ideology' (Zinik, 2011). Recent work on dissidents in

the Khrushchev period has stressed how they ‘often displayed a growing sense of alienation from the Soviet system, even though many of them had at one time been proud communists and still shared many of the regime’s purported values’ (Hornsby, 2013: 18). This characterisation well fits Grossman, whose relationship to the Soviet state that nurtured him was never straightforward. Amir Weiner has portrayed him as ‘a Soviet man at his core’, unable fully to escape – or to think outside of – the habits of mind and reflex categorisations into which he had been enculturated: ‘the Soviet ethos overwhelmed even those who tried their best to reject it’ (Weiner, 2009: 394-5). Robert Chandler, similarly, has written of Grossman as someone who ‘retained at least some degree of revolutionary romanticism until his last days’ (Grossman, 2010b: 8). True, *Everything Flows* contained a bitter critique of the whole communist experiment, a critique that Grossman sharpened in later drafts written after the seizure of *Life and Fate* (Garrard, 1994). But in a slightly earlier piece, ‘Eternal Rest’, he offers an elegiac lament for the halcyon days of the early Soviet Union (roughly between 1917 and 1934) when the revolutionary intelligentsia flourished and the utopian ideals of humanity and freedom had not yet congealed. In a reverie in a graveyard, Grossman glimpses ‘the flame of young Bolshevism – of a Bolshevism not yet nationalized and taken over by the State: a Bolshevism still imbued with the lyrical passions of youth, with the spirit of the Internationale, with the sweet delirium of the Paris Commune, with the intoxicating

songs of the Revolution' (Grossman, 2010b: 316-17). The tone of mourning here points to something much more complex than simple rejection of Soviet totalitarianism.

Far from constituting a weakness or a flaw, ambivalence – the suspicion of glib certainty - lies at the heart of Grossman's artistic and moral vision. The diverse views expressed in different parts of Grossman's oeuvre find an echo in the polyphonic nature of *Life and Fate*. That novel is 'a conversation that Grossman conducts with himself, confessional in its character, an act of repentance, which he, in ventriloquist fashion, presents through a multitude of voices, embodied by his characters' (Zinik, 2011). It thus stages a sophisticated disquisition on profound philosophical and ethical questions, but it resists easy resolution of them. By the same token, Grossman abjures facile condemnation of those who have erred, as evidenced by his evocation of the agony of Viktor Shtrum after he signs the letter of denunciation:

Good men and bad men alike are capable of weakness. The difference is simply that a bad man will be proud all his life of one good deed – while an honest man is hardly aware of his good acts, but remembers a single sin for years on end (2006: 824).

In 1961, visiting a gargantuan statue of Stalin on a hill above Yerevan, Grossman was repelled by his Armenian companions' simplistic denunciations of the former dictator. Their 'total and unconditional rejection of him' was a mirror image of the 'hysterical worship' in which they had once indulged. For all his searing moral passion, Grossman

consistently lauded the value of complexity as a safeguard against the dictatorial certitude and closures of totalitarianism.

Their lack of objectivity was so glaring that I felt an involuntary urge to stand up for Stalin. ... No, no, it was impossible not to give this figure his due – this instigator of countless inhuman crimes was also the leader, the merciless builder of a great and terrible state (2013: 6-7).

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Notes

¹ Equally, we should note Amir Weiner's caution (2001) about exaggerating the radicalism of such sentiments. The frontline generation, Weiner notes, was 'mostly a Soviet product' (449); its capacity to question 'the high politics and philosophical dimensions of the polity' (452) into which its members were enculturated was thus somewhat circumscribed.

² In 1962 Mikhail Suslov, a hardline party ideologue, informed Grossman that in contrast to *Life and Fate* he had 'found nothing politically bad' in *For a Just Cause* (Garrard and Garrard, 2012: 359).

³ Frank Ellis reminds us that there was always some inconsistency to Soviet censorship: in both the later 1940s and the 1960s, some novels that seem clearly to deviate from the then prevailing orthodoxies were nonetheless allowed to appear (2011: 23-6).

⁴ Of course, the behaviour of Red Army troops dramatically deteriorated once they had moved onto foreign soil, which occurred outside the time frame of the novel; yet elsewhere Grossman was prepared to exercise dramatic licence – such as ante-dating the emergence of virulent official anti-Semitism – to convey a wider truth.

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