Chartbook #21

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Reading Grossman's Stalingrad and Life and Fate

Adam Tooze

27 min ago 2

This newsletter is strong stuff, more *Wages of Destruction* than regular Chartbook fare. Some of the material is disturbing.

The battle of Stalingrad raged between 23 August 1942 and 2 February 1943 when the last of the German 6th Army surrendered. It cost the Red Army, the Wehrmacht and its allies, the Italian, Romanian and Hungarian forces, a combined total of c 2.5 million casualties, over 1 million of them KIA. It was the end of the last major German offensive on the Eastern Front, a turning point in the war and, thus, in world history.

In the last couple of months I've immersed myself in Vasily Grossman's two-volume epic about Stalingrad - *For a Just Cause* (1952) published in English in 2019 as *Stalingrad* and the sequel *Life and Fate* (1960), which has long been famous in the West as an account of the war that the Soviet censors tried to suppress. Reading the books back to back was engrossing. It became a habit. A daily need. These aren't books that it is easy to be "finished" with.

They are war novels. But they are much more than that. They portray a cross section of Soviet society. They offer a meditation on the revolution. They are also novels of ideas, spiked with passages of philosophical reflection and argument. They are made up of a massive collages of vignettes involving a hundred or so characters, stretching from the frontline, to family and work life in the rear areas, the ghettos behind the German lines, the deportation trucks, the gulag, concentration camps and gas chambers.

But it is not the subject matter as such that I want to address here, so much as Grossman's treatment of time and history at a moment of extreme crisis. I have never read a text that was more complex and fascinating in its rendering of historical actuality and change.

As Grossman remarks: "The outcome of this battle was to determine the map of the post-war world …. Stalingrad was to determine future social systems and philosophies of history." 860 (page references are to the NYRB Classics edition)

Grossman at Stalingrad, 1942.

Stalingrad was unique. But reading Grossman, I was continually imagining the way other great struggles, other great crises, other moments in history might appear if captured like this, if we were as attuned, as Grossman is, to the ways in which they shape our understanding of history.

The books are framed by the interval between the German assault on 22 June 1941 - Operation Barbarossa was the largest military operation in history - and the final surrender of the encircled German units in Stalingrad on 3 February 1943. As Frederick

Jameson remarks in a fascinating essay in New Left Review, if we ask “how a book like this could be written in the first place. … the answer is … of course: … the war; … only the content enables the possibility of form.”

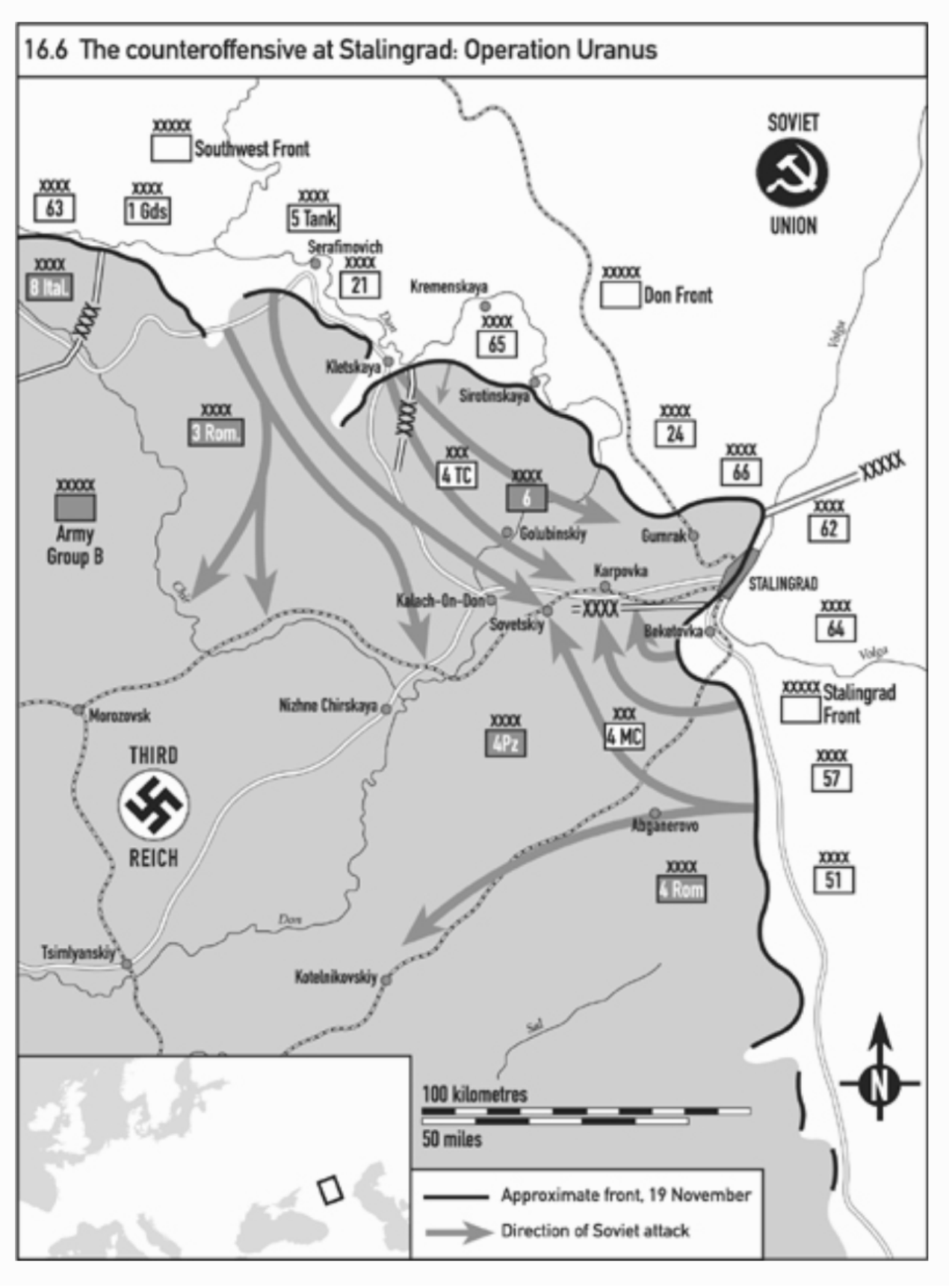
What Jameson does not remark upon is the extent to which Grossman himself reflects upon the multiple material and historical determinations of the literary artifact he is creating. What makes the books so compelling as historical analysis, is precisely that they do not merely presume their historical object - the concentration of the war and the fate of the world on a single city. They insistently ask, how this could be possible. How did this giant totality come to center on the streets and factories backing onto the Volga river? How can this be described? What does it mean?

The Eastern Front stretched, and continues to stretch, the human imagination. Grossman’s book is about that shocking novelty and how contemporaries struggled to come to terms with it. This has to be understood first at a military technical level: the logic of a new kind of war, the logic of mechanized encirclement.

Grossman wrote self-consciously in the shadow of Tolstoy, but he is also acutely aware of the real historical developments that separate them, the gulf that separated Stalingrad in 1942 from Moscow in 1812.

As Grossman remarks: “Tolstoy claimed that it was impossible fully to encircle an army. … Tolstoy’s claim was indisputably true for his time. But, like most of the thoughts of great men about war and politics, it was by no means an eternal truth…. The years 1941–1945 proved that it is indeed possible to encircle an entire army, to nail it to the ground, to fetter it in a hoop of iron. A large number of armies, Soviet and German alike, were encircled during these years. What made encirclements possible was the combination of the extraordinary mobility of shock troops and the vast, unwieldy rears on which they depended. ” 656

The entire first book, all 1000 pages of it, describes the process through which a city became a battlefield. *Life and Fate,* the sequel, describes the battle in the city itself and then how the Red Army gathered huge forces on its flanks and crashed through the Axis lines to encircles von Paulus and his men in the city they had invaded. Fittingly, the narrative tails off as the 6th army surrenders and the war rolls on.



Source: Bellamy, *Absolute War*

There would be other such moments in World War II - Bagration, Normandy, and the Battle for Berlin come to mind. But perhaps never again, indeed never again in history, would there be such a decisive and violent turning as at Stalingrad. What gave the German-Soviet war its uniqueness was not just its scale, the ideological stakes, or its

extreme violence, but this military dynamic: the encircler encircled. Punch and counterpunch. This was the heavyweight bout to end all heavyweight bouts. Round after round, from June 1941 all the way to May 1945.

The marvel of Grossman's text is that within this compact framing he overlays a dense mesh of reflections on temporality. Grossman reaches deep into natural history and the history of myth. 1812, as seen through Tolstoy's *War and Peace,* hangs over the text. Apparently, Grossman read nothing else during the war. But it is not just *War and Peace* that is at work here. There are recurring domestic scene reminiscent of Chekov in which the protagonists debate the history of Russian literature, from Tolstoy to Chekov, Dostoevsky and into the 20th century. In this respect as well, the book defines its own conditions of possibility.

Grossman was at Stalingrad, he was in Berlin in May 1945. The book draws on his frontline experience in the war. But it is also a book written after Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Next to war and literature, the next key theme is the history of modern physics, as personified by the book's anti-hero Viktor Shtrum. In Shtrum, Grossman delivers a painfully precise portrait of a narcissistic intellectual. Given the similarities in biography it is hard to avoid the conclusion that it is also Grossman's self-portrait. But Shtrum is also the bearer of a series of reflections on the trajectory of physics from classical 19th-century science, via relativity theory to nuclear fission in the late 1930s. For Grossman's central character there is a fateful alignment between modern physics and the state. Shtrum, we are lead to understand, is at the heart of the Soviet atomic research program. As Alexandra Popoff tells us, Grossman had since his childhood fantasized about releasing the power of the atom. His first career was as an industrial chemist. World War II, violent as it was, is thus overshadowed and framed by something even more terrible, the horizon of the atomic age.

And is the probabilistic logic of modern physics not a harbinger, Shtrum wonders, of the new age of totalitarian politics? It is unclear how seriously Grossman intends us to take that formal analogy. What is clear is his deep historical preoccupation with the transition from the orderliness of the 19th century to the extremity of the 20th. "The century of Einstein and Planck was also the century of Hitler", Shtrum muses "The Gestapo and the scientific renaissance were children of the same age. How humane the nineteenth century seemed, that century of naïve physics, when compared with the twentieth century, the century that had killed his mother. There is a terrible similarity between the principles of Fascism and those of contemporary physics." 94

Alongside the war, the histories of literature and physics, the fourth temporality that governs Grossman's vision is politics. More than a book about the war, this is book about Russia's revolution. The figure of Stalin hangs over the text as do the collectivization and famine, the transformation of Soviet society by industrialization and the purge of 1937. The protagonists of the book are survivors. They are haunted by relatives and friends who have disappeared. Starvation in 1942 reawakens memories of starvation in 1930. Again and again they ask themselves about their fate. They feel at times energized by, and at other time stranded in history. As John Garrard argues, for Grossman himself, the war *was* an opportunity to escape his memories and guilt over the years of the purges.

Whereas the first volume, *Stalingrad*, is relatively conformist, *Life and Fate* was horrifying to the censors, even after Stalin's demise. Reading the two books back to back we feel the narrator's voice evolving like that of one of Grossman's own characters.

Clearly, Grossman is struggling to elaborate a comprehensive analysis of totalitarianism. But Grossman's totalitarianism is not that of 1950s liberals in the West, nor is it that of Hannah Arendt. For Grossman, totalitarianism is, of course, characterized by coercion and the deprivation of freedom, but what he focuses on is the dynamic of power mobilization and production. Even in the regime of the camps, it is the (perverse) productivity that fascinates him. Though he uses the term totalitarianism mainly in connection with fascism, he is clearly haunted by the question of the parallels between Stalinism and Nazism. The idea is frankly expressed in the book. But by whom? The embarrassment for a liberal reading is that Grossman puts the argument in the mouth of a Nazi camp commandant vainly trying to coax a stalwart old Bolshevik into self-betrayal.

The meaning of a question depends on who puts it and with what intent. From the point of view of a facile liberalism, Stalingrad may simply be a clash of dictatorships. But that is not Grossman's view. Of course, there is coercion and brutality on the Red Army side, but the atrocities he recounts are committed by the Wehrmacht. Meanwhile, he shows no interest whatsoever in the Soviet Union's Western allies or their norms. The second front is a painful absence. Before the revolution, some of Grossman's characters spent time in exile in Paris or Switzerland, but none of them pine for the West. Grossman's identification with the Red Army was complete. Soviet victory was the premise of these books, the condition of their possibility in an existential sense.

Jameson puts it as follows: "as paradoxical as it may sound, what holds his novel together as a unified narrative is also what holds the Soviet Union together in this period, the unfreedom that allowed it, improbably, to defeat Hitler's Wehrmacht and win World War II." The only question is, why "improbably"? That casual suggestion of contingency is not innocent. It concedes far too much to Western condescension, to the British and American intelligence analysts who scoffed at Soviet production statistics, to the German generals who bemoaned the victories supposedly stolen from them by Hitler's meddling. It mistakes the essential point. What Stalingrad demonstrated was precisely that the unfreedom of the Soviet Union, as terrible as it was, was different from that of Nazi Germany or for that matter of the West precisely because it was more historically generative, more potent. It wrought a material, social and cultural transformation on such a vast scale that it overturned the presumptions of historical normality. It shifted the balance of probabilities. It made it probable, not improbable, that the Soviet Union would win World War II.

Table 3. *The mobilization of net national product for war: the U.S.A., U.K., U.S.S.R., and Germany, 1938-45 (per cent of national income)*

	U.S.A.[a]		UK[b]		U.S.S.R.[c]		Germany[d]	
	(I)	(II)	(I)	(II)	(I)	(II)	(I)	(II)
1938	—	—	7	2	—	—	17	18
1939	1	2	16	8	—	—	25	24
1940	1	3	48	31	20	20	44	36
1941	13	14	55	41	—	—	56	44
1942	36	40	54	43	75	66	69	52
1943	47	53	57	47	76	58	76	60
1944	47	54	56	47	69	52	—	—
1945	—	44	47	36	—	—	—	—

Key:
(I) National utilization of resources supplied to the war effort, regardless of origin: military spending (for the United States, *less* net exports) as share of national product.
(II) Domestic finance of resources supplied to the war effort, irrespective of utilization: military spending (for the U.K., U.S.S.R., and Germany, *less* net imports) as share of national product.

Source: Harrison, Mark. "Resource mobilization for World War II: the USA, UK, USSR, and Germany, 1938-1945." *Economic History Review* (1988): 171-192.

Certainly, that is the view of Grossman and his characters. And it was precisely that which made his books so unpalatable to Soviet censors after the war. Because there is a sting in the tail. What Grossman describes is a victory that was far harder than it should have been. What he indicts is a regime that was wasteful and destructive of its people, their extraordinary talents and commitment. The gulag was a crime, but June 22 1941 was, as Talleyrand might have quipped, something worse, it was a mistake. Comprehending that and so many other disasters early in the war, is the challenge that taxes characters like Commissar Krymov to the limit. This is the quiet dissidence of Grossman's first volume, the one that the censors let through. Grossman frankly faces the question of how it felt to be taken absolutely by surprise in June 1941, to face a historic disaster, to see the entire Soviet project thrown into question.

From 1941 to 1942 the Red Army was in retreat. Grossman has an extraordinary ability to render from the inside the formation and then dissolution and reformation of historical momentum. One is put very much in mind of Sartre. How do human groups form, coalesce and then lose their coherence? How does an army habituated to retreat, make a stand? How does it shift balance and go over to the offensive?

Grossman captures this dynamic at the level of Corps commanders and the individual soldier. The swirling intensity of combat at Stalingrad, which Grossman witnessed first hand alongside Rodimtsev's legendary 13th Guards division, is rendered in hallucinatory terms.

Source: https://warspot.net/312-unknown-stalingrad-pavlov-s-house-anatomy-of-a-legend

“One sense almost entirely lost during combat is that of time. … The distortion of the sense of time during combat is something still more complex. Here there is a distortion even in the individual, primary sensations. One second can stretch out for eternity, and long hours can crumple together. The sense of duration is linked to such fleeting events as the whistle of shells and bombs, the flashes of shots and explosions. The sense of quickness, on the other hand, is linked to protracted events: crossing a ploughed field under fire, crawling from one shelter to another. And as for hand-to-hand fighting – that takes place quite outside time.” 48-49

War heightens the kaleidoscope of temporality. That you might say is the premise of Grossman’s entire book. It is an effect of combat and of the proximity of death.

In the books, death sometimes comes fast. Sometimes it lingers. A character may simply disappear, fate unknown or make a defiant last stand. There is death in battle, as physical exhaustion and deprivation and there is death as murder, as execution. Grossman’s accounts are famous amongst other things because they integrate the fate of the Soviet Union’s Jewish population with that of the wider war. Grossman’s characters wake up to their jewish identity as a result of the lethal hostility they face. And this does not stop at the frontlines. The books were unpalatable to the Soviet censors in part because they were so unflinching in their rendition of Russian anti-semitism and Russian ethno-nationalism too. The Black Book that Grossman compiled with Ilya Ehrenburg on behalf of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee was pulped in the anti-semitic turn of late Stalinism. By 1960 Grossman was willing to face the fact that anti-semitism emerged out of victory itself.

The Holocaust passages in *Life and Fate* are of such unbearable intensity that they loom over the two books.

Grossman and his mother c. 1913.

Grossman was born in 1905 into a Jewish family in Berdychev in Ukraine. His mother was killed there by units attached to Einsatzgruppe C on 15 September 1941 along with thousands of other Jewish inhabitants of the city. The German Einsatzkommando recruited Ukrainian assistance to do the dirty work in liquidating the ghetto.

Rather than describing his mother's death directly, Grossman has Shtrum receive a parting letter from her, smuggled out of the ghetto hours before its liquidation. Through this device Grossman opens up a temporal effect of vertiginous horror. From beyond the grave, Shtrum's mother describes the dawning awareness of what lay ahead, the unfathomable horror of a mass execution, premeditated and inexorable. Even as she knows that the death pits are being dug for them, Anna Semyonovna watches a community continuing to live: "People carry on … as though their whole life lies ahead of

them. It's impossible to say whether that's wise or foolish – it's just the way people are. I do the same myself. … I'm taking care of one old man whose cataract it will be possible to remove in six months or a year. I give Yura French lessons and get quite upset at his bad pronunciation … I'm busy myself from morning till night. … I hear stories about the terrible punishments Jews have suffered … and then rumors, rumors, rumors … And we heard today, from a peasant we know who was driving past the ghetto fence, that the Jews who were sent to dig potatoes are digging deep ditches four versts from the town, near the airfield, on the road to Romanovka. Remember that name - that's where you'll find the mass grave where your mother is buried."

After his death, amongst Grossman's personal papers were found not a letter from his mother, but two letters he wrote to her on the anniversary of her death in 1950 and 1961.

Grossman was with the Red Army forces that first liberated the death camp of Treblinka. In *Life and Fate*, having stumbled into German hands, Sofya Levinton finds herself in a cattle truck, facing the uncertainty and torture of a seemingly endless journey. Arrived at what one must imagine as a blend of Treblinka and Auschwitz - a death camp with industrial facilities looming in the background - Grossman, this time, does not turn away. Unlike in Berdychev, in the death camp he grants us no mediation. We follow Sofya and her companions out of the cattle truck as they stumble dazed onto the railway siding, through the selection process, only dimly sensing what is at stake, as they march across the open ground, past the orchestra towards the low slung buildings, down into the changing room and from there into a concrete chamber with freshly washed floors. A little boy slides his hand along the shiny edge of the heavy metallic door, as children do. Then the door is closed and there is the terrifying claustrophobia and mounting panic.

It is as though Grossman is determined to pursue his social physics of human groups to its utter extreme. The sealed gas chamber is like a particle physics experiment. What happens to human interaction at the moment when a mass of people, stripped to their bare humanity, realize that they are at the end?

It is an obscene question. Ghoulish. Objectifying. The question should not exist. And yet it does and Grossman does not spare us from that either. There were people who knew the answer to that question. Men and women who learned to manage the transitions, to calm the masses of bewildered people, to prepare them, as if in a slaughter house, without revealing what was to come. There were men who shut the doors. Men who peered through armored glass into the chamber. Who were aroused by the writhing nudity of dying women.

Horrifyingly, it is precisely at this moment that Grossman reveals the logic of his title: life and fate. He does not do so indirectly by way of a character. At this point it is the narrator himself speaking, in the form of imaginary conversations between the camp commandant, the guards and an accuser: "What else could he have done in the face of such powerful forces – the war, fervent nationalism, the adamancy of the Party, the will of the State? How could he have swum against the current? He was a man like any other; all he had wanted was to live peacefully in his father's house. He hadn't walked – he had been pushed. Fate had led him by the hand" But, as Grossman goes on, "every step that a

man takes under the threat of poverty, hunger, labour camps and death is at the same time an expression of his own will. Every step Kaltluft had taken – from the village to the trenches, from being a man-in-the-street to being a member of the National Socialist Party – bore the imprint of his will. A man may be led by fate, but he can refuse to follow. He may be a mere tool in the hands of destructive powers, but he knows it is in his interest to assent to this. Fate and the individual may have different ends, but they share the same path." 537

As Grossman remarks about one of the Russian Hiwis who operated the gas chambers: "All he had asked for, all he had wanted, was life itself. He had fought off dozens of deaths – from cold, from hunger, from bloody flux . . . He wasn't a criminal – No one – had ever thought badly of him." But slowly what dawned on him was the utter obscenity of what he was doing and its corollary that sometimes, "if you wish to remain a human being under Fascism, there is an easier option than survival – death." 535

What lies inside the banality of evil is an attachment to life. At every level. On the part of the perpetrators but also their victims. Hope against hope is the problem. As Anna Semyonovna remarks from inside the ghetto: "I've realized now that hope almost never goes together with reason. It's something quite irrational and instinctive." 88 "It seems that nowhere is there so much hope as in the ghetto. The world is full of events and all these events have the same meaning and the same purpose – the salvation of the Jews. What a wealth of hope! And the source of all these hopes is one and the same – the life-instinct itself, blindly rebelling against the terrible fact that we must all perish without trace." 89

Freedom, clarity of mind, reason arise in *Life and Fate* precisely at moments of self-abandonment.

"The soil of hope – a hope that was senseless and sometimes dishonest and despicable – gave birth to a pathetic obedience that was often equally despicable. The Warsaw Rising, the uprisings at Treblinka and Sobibor, the various mutinies of brenners, were all born of hopelessness." 216

At the most forward position of the frontline, in Stalingrad, in House 6/1 Commissar Krymov is sent to investigate what one Communist indignantly described as "more like some kind of Paris Commune than a military unit." 241

Pavlov's House, Stalingrad 1943.

But, if the beleaguered fortress of House 6/1 becomes a place of free debate, and critical reflection about Stalinism, about collectivization and the terror, the condition of that freedom is precisely that the garrison know full well that there is virtually no chance of their surviving. Given this fact, the law has lost its grip.

With this grim logic in mind, we realize the significance of Grossman's title. If "life and fate" share the same path, so too, do "death and freedom".

One can agree with Jameson that the affirmative politics of *Life and Fate* is not liberalism or individualism so much as a kind of anarchism. But this is not a naive individualism. Grossman's insistence on the freedom impulse is always cross cut with an awareness of the power of the Soviet state and its historical project.

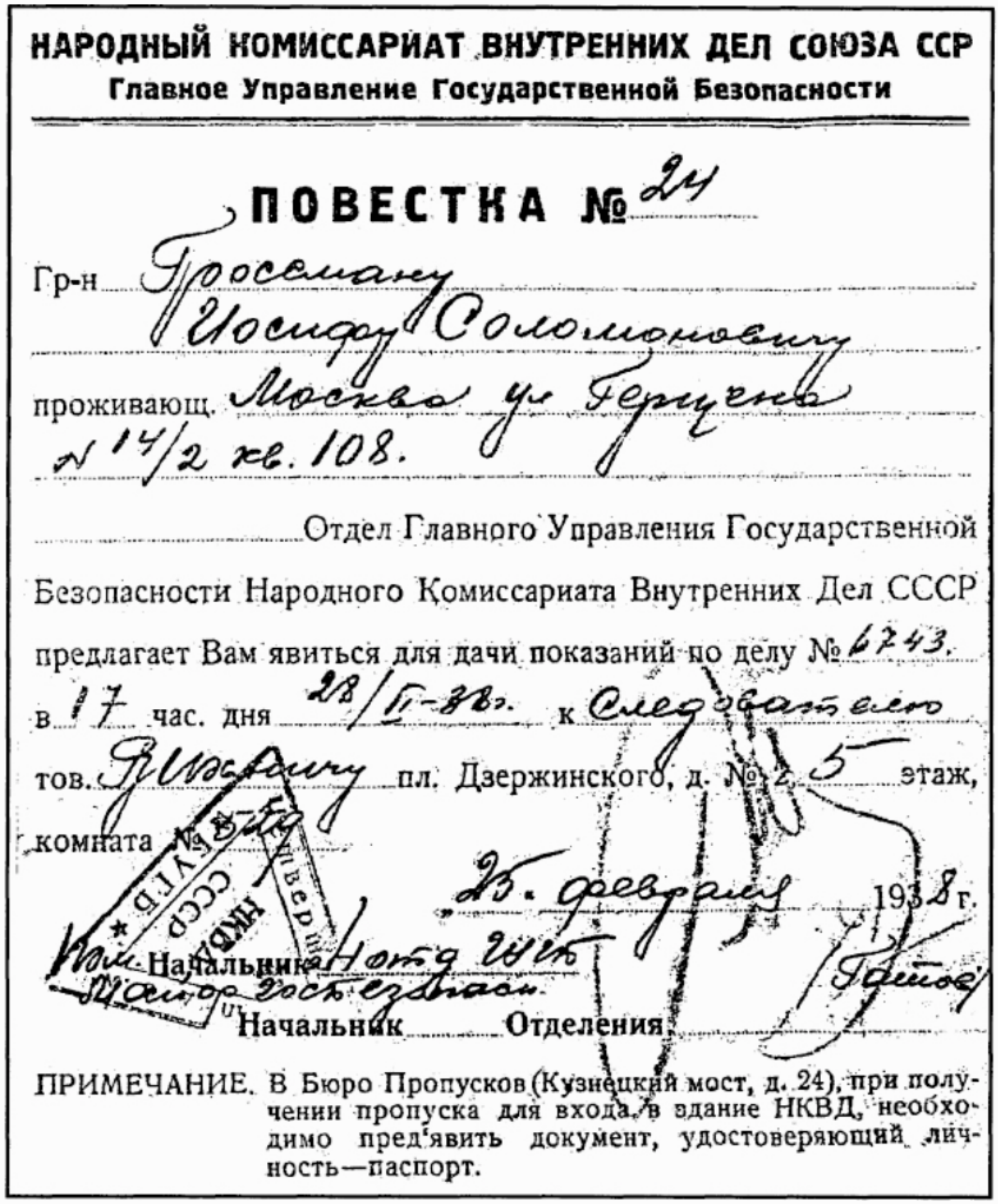
What the books unsparingly lay out is the working out of a brutal dialectic. The war could only be fought through freedom, through the willingness of millions of ordinary men and women to abandon life. Ordinary heroism drove the Red Army, as it drove the Wehrmacht. Power needs agency. What sustains an army's offensive is death-defying attack after attack. It was strong point after strong point resisting beyond the point of reason that held the line. At its limit this action defies all authority. What threat after all, can be made against someone already fated to die. The war was thus a gigantic assertion of freedom. That freedom could be expressed everywhere. Even in a camp. In the last steps towards the gas chamber. In the decision to lash out against a German guard, but also in the decision not to bid for life by volunteering to serve as a "dentist", but rather to stay with a child in need of comfort. One can imagine that a world governed by nothing but that logic would be radically different. But Grossman does not hold out utopia.

The triumph at Stalingrad was made by freedom in synthesis with power. The heroism of the Red Army soldiers and the relentless German offensives they fought off, had material conditions. Grossman's books are amongst other things a memorial to the material culture of Stalinism.

Even in his plea to Khrushchev on February 26, 1962 to permit *Life and Fate* to be published Grossman invoked precisely this connection: "The strength and courage of your speech give reasons to think that the norms of our democracy will grow just as production norms of steel, coal, and electricity grew after the days of economic collapse accompanying the Civil War. After all, the essence of a new society is even more [manifest] in the growth of democracy and freedom than in industrial development and economic consumption. I believe a new society is unthinkable without continuous growth of freedom and of democracy."

But Grossman was denied his wish. The regime that Grossman understood as having been carried to victory by freedom was determined to impose discipline at any cost. The Partisan spirit could not be tolerated behind one's own lines. And in that battle for control, death, ultimately, was the state's ally. If refusing to cling to life was the precondition of true freedom, death itself was freedom's ultimate negation. In death we become matter to be reworked. Literally or metaphorically.

At Stalingrad, the rebellious commune in House 6/1 was erased by a devastating German bombardment. That enables it to be subsumed into the official Soviet narrative as a heroic outpost. Perversely, Krymov, the Commissar who was sent to discipline the outpost is thrown onto the wrong side of power. He finds himself in the Lubyanka under interrogation.



НАРОДНЫЙ КОМИССАРИАТ ВНУТРЕННИХ ДЕЛ СОЮЗА ССР
Главное Управление Государственной Безопасности

ПОВЕСТКА № 24

Гр-н Гроссману Иосифу Соломоновичу

проживающ. Москва ул. Герцена № 14/2 кв. 108.

Отдел Главного Управления Государственной Безопасности Народного Комиссариата Внутренних Дел СССР предлагает Вам явиться для дачи показаний по делу № 6743.

в 17 час. дня 28/II-38 г. к Следователю

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комната № [illegible]

25. февраля 1938 г.

Начальник [illegible]

Начальник Отделения [illegible]

ПРИМЕЧАНИЕ. В Бюро Пропусков (Кузнецкий мост, д. 24), при получении пропуска для входа в здание НКВД, необходимо пред'явить документ, удостоверяющий личность—паспорт.

Grossman's summons to the Lubyanka (February 1938)

Source: NKVD-KGB Archives, Moscow

Source: Garrard and Garrard

It is there, through Krymov - sleep-deprived, drugged, semi-delirious and beaten to within an inch of his life - that Grossman delivers his verdict on the revolution and its legacy.

“The new age needed only the hide of the Revolution – and this was being flayed off people who were still alive. Those who then slipped into it spoke the language of the Revolution and mimicked its gestures, but their brains, lungs, livers and eyes were utterly different.” 841

His interrogator, Krymov muses, was a new type of Party official “those who had replaced the Old Bolsheviks liquidated or dismissed from their posts in 1937. They were people of a very different stamp. They read new books and they read them in a different way: they didn’t read them, they ‘mugged them up’. They loved and valued material comforts: revolutionary asceticism was alien to them, or, at the very least, not central to their character. They knew no foreign languages, were infatuated with their own Russian-ness – and spoke Russian ungrammatically. Some of them were by no means stupid, but their power seemed to lie not so much in their ideas or intelligence, as in their practical competence and the bourgeois sobriety of all their opinions”. 777

It was a necessary process. “Krymov could understand that both the new and the old cadres were bound together by a great common goal, that this gave rise to many similarities, and that it was unity that mattered, not differences.” 777

But what makes Grossman’s greatness is that he does not shrink from the violent implications of his metaphor: “The hide was being flayed off the still living body of the Revolution so that a new age could slip into it; as for the red, bloody meat, the steaming innards – they were being thrown onto the scrapheap.” 841

If this was a logic that passed over and through people and their bodies, its drivers were not reducible to single individuals either. “Stalin! The great Stalin! Perhaps this man with the iron will had less will than any of them”, Krymov muses. “He was a slave of his time and circumstances, a dutiful, submissive servant of the present day, flinging open the doors before the new age. Yes, yes, yes . . . And those who didn’t bow down before the new age were thrown on the scrapheap.” 842

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