

Good Day, Comrade Shtrum

John Lanchester

In this review article, the distinguished contributor to the London Review of Books, John Lanchester, considers Vasily Grossman's Life and Fate, as translated by Robert Chandler, and now issued in paperback (Vintage, £9.99).

In *Postmodernism or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* – a difficult book, but, it seems increasingly clear, the most important critical work of the last twenty years – Fredric Jameson observes that ‘the disappearance of the individual subject, along with its formal consequence, the increasing unavailability of the personal style, engender the well-nigh universal practice today of what may be called pastiche’. This thought-provoking assertion captures a truth about the shift from the modern to the postmodern: there is something pastiche-like about a great many contemporary writers, not least those who write in a personal voice which is in itself a variety of pastiche. Vasily Grossman’s masterpiece *Life and Fate* is fascinating for many reasons, and one of them is the way in that it is both a pastiche and a personal statement; a conscious, cold-blooded attempt to sum up everything Grossman knew about the Great Patriotic War, and at the same time to rewrite *War and Peace*. Tolstoy’s novel was the only book Grossman read during the war, and he read it twice; *War and Peace* hangs over Grossman’s book as a template and a lodestar, and the measure of Grossman’s achievement is that a comparison between the two books is not grotesque.

Part of what Tolstoy’s example did for Grossman was to give him a place on which to stand, a vantage point. We can see this by considering what some English-language writers did with the war. The two British novelists who went off to the war in mid-career in their mid-thirties, Evelyn Waugh and Anthony Powell, both wrote books about what they had seen at first hand, Waugh’s war being more overtly interesting (the Commandos, Crete, parachute training, Yugoslavia) but Powell’s more typical (garrison duties, staff work, office politics). In America, the writers who went off to war were younger, apprentice meteors. Gore Vidal wrote a small, cool, personal book in *Williwaw*; Norman Mailer

attempted in *The Naked and the Dead* to write the Big Novel about the war and ended up writing a kind of pastiche, a strange hybrid of modernist ambition and postmodernist decentredness – a fake, perhaps, but an interesting one.

As Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova's superb book *A Writer at War* makes clear, Grossman saw more of the war than any of them; more than any other writer. He volunteered to fight but, tubby and shortsighted and unathletic as he was, was sent instead to cover the war for *Krasnaya Zvezda*, the army newspaper. In that capacity he was present at the initial collapse of the Russian army in response to Operation Barbarossa, and the rapidity of the German advance very nearly led on more than one occasion to his capture. He covered the counter-attacks of early 1942 and then went south later that year, providentially, so that he was ideally placed to cover the battle of Stalingrad. He repeatedly crossed the Volga to the west bank, home of the 'Stalingrad Academy of Street Fighting', and interviewed everyone from the famous sniper Chekhov to the commander Chuikov. His reports were vivid but also had a flintiness and a realism about death – much more so than in equivalent Anglo-American war writing – and were very popular with the troops. He was in Stalingrad for five months.

As the Russian army advanced westward Grossman travelled with them. He was present at Kursk, the greatest tank battle in history, and when he came to his birthplace of Berdichev in the Ukraine began to understand the full extent of what the Nazis had done. His writing about the Holocaust has a rare freshness, because he was writing at the same moment he was finding out what had happened. It is as if Grossman, an assimilated Jew, became more conscious of his own ethnicity through confronting evidence of the Holocaust.

'There are no Jews in the Ukraine. Nowhere – Poltava, Kharkov, Kremenchug, Borispol, Yagotin – in none of the cities, hundreds of towns, or thousands of villages will you see the black, tear-filled eyes of little girls; you will not hear the pained voice of an old woman; you will not see the dark face of a hungry baby. All is silence. Everything is still. A whole people has been brutally murdered.'

Krasnaya Zvezda would not publish that piece – a glimpse of trouble to come. Grossman began to assemble material for what would be the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee's *Black Book*, detailing Nazi atrocities*. He arrived at Treblinka, and although the death camp had been demolished by the Nazis on Himmler's direct order, he interviewed witnesses and survivors and published the first account of the camps in any language. His article was a remarkable piece of journalistic assiduity, and was of sufficient weight as a piece of evidence to be quoted at the Nuremberg trials. He travelled through Warsaw and Lodz and followed the final assault on Berlin; he was in the city on the day of its capitulation, and on that very day, wandering around the Reichschancellery, went into Hitler's office and took out a selection of his desk stamps – 'The Führer has confirmed', 'The Führer has agreed' and so on. It's difficult to imagine a more definitive closeness to the action

* According to Robert Chandler, the *Black Book* has still not been published in Russia.

than that. Quite a few writers covered the war as journalists and covered it well – Liebling, Malaparte, Gellhorn – but no one got anywhere near Grossman for the amount of time he spent at the front and the historic centrality of the actions he witnessed. I'm not sure there has been a parallel in the writing on any other war.

To say that Grossman had a lot of material to work with, when he sat down to write his war novel, would be to understate. So much material; and so many different perspectives; and so many stories to bring to life. Grossman had already written several novels. It would be interesting to know if he considered adopting a fragmentary, impressionistic method for his war book; some of the journalism has a choppy, imagistic technique which is in some respects more modern in feeling than the novel he came to write. But in the event it was Tolstoy he turned to as a model, as much for the sense of a stable moral perspective as for the fictional techniques: an omniscient third-person observer, a panoramic breadth of focus, a plot which uses a central family group as a way of organising a huge cast of characters. Faced with the greatest horrors of the 20th century, Grossman took up a position in the 19th century as a vantage point.

He did not get it right first time. His first big novel about the war, *For a Just Cause*, is regarded by those who have read it as a Socialist Realist dog, in which the characters, no more than 'names with problems', wander round spouting Stalinist clichés. I can't comment directly because it hasn't been translated, but there is something intriguing in the fact that *Life and Fate* is the sequel to this dud; as if cardboard characters – indeed, the same characters – were suddenly and magically to come to life. Grossman had had more time to digest his experiences, and his gradual disillusionment with the Soviet system led him to see the events of the war, and therefore the people who had taken part in it, more clearly.

When *For a Just Cause* came out it was first praised and then, apparently as part of the anti-semitic turn of the times, denounced. Beevor and Vinogradova make the point that Stalin's anti-semitism was less a matter of racist ideology and more a kind of xenophobia. In any case, it bore down heavily on Grossman. Strangely, it might have been this anti-semitism that made his artistic instincts come to life, and therefore made *Life and Fate* into the book it is. Grossman was never a Party member and several people close to him had spent time in prison for political offences – his cousin, his second wife – but he, to use the language of a different set of circumstances, made the choice to 'work within the system'. He did not, however, manage to delude himself in the way that his friend Ilya Ehrenburg did, and became increasingly disillusioned with the Soviet system. The growing anti-semitism of Stalin's later years was a big part of this. In 1952, Grossman was forced to sign a petition condemning the Jewish doctors involved in the notorious non-existent plot; in the novel he assigns a similar humiliation to the scientist and alter ego Viktor Shtrum. In doing so he antedated the anti-semitic campaigns of Stalin's last years and brought them forward into the period of the war. This transposition hints that it may have been his encounters with anti-semitism that galvanised Grossman into seeing through the pieties of *For a Just Cause*, and turned *Life and Fate* into a great novel.

That greatness is to do with scale. This is one of the hardest qualities to demonstrate, and it is made harder by the unpyrotechnic flatness of Grossman's writing; although it has its virtuosities and set pieces, these are at the level of the character sketch rather than the brilliant sentence or flashy paragraph. Once you get used to this, it comes to seem a virtue; there's no writerly showing-off. What there is is an immense depth of feeling and experience.

In addition to his wartime adventures, Grossman knew the Ukraine; the world of factories, where he had worked; the world of science, from his training as a chemist; the world of the Party ideologues, and the world of those they cajoled, arrested and interrogated. He knew prisoners, snipers, starving old ladies, Slavophile bigots, commissars, collaborators, every flavour of ordinary soldier, tankman, fighter pilot, nurse, power-station worker, Tolstoyan, drunk, and cross teenage daughter. His experiences of Soviet society had an immense range, and he tried to get all of it into *Life and Fate*. The novel gives an extraordinary sense of intimacy with an entire culture.

One test of greatness in fiction is unflinchingness, and *Life and Fate* is utterly unflinching, taking the reader both into the prison camps of the Soviet state and the death camps of the Nazis: the latter journey, accompanying a young boy, David, and the woman who looks after him on the journey, Sofya Levinton, I found that I could not reread. The horror is all the more real because we have actually witnessed the gas chambers being built, and an inspection visit by Eichmann.

'A small surprise had been laid on for Eichmann and Liss during their tour of inspection. In the middle of the gas chamber, the engineers had laid a small table with hors d'oeuvres and wine. Reineke invited Eichmann and Liss to sit down.

Eichmann laughed at this charming idea and said: "With the greatest of pleasure."

He gave his cap to his bodyguard and sat down. His large face suddenly took on a look of kindly concentration, the same look that appears on the faces of millions of men as they sit down to a good meal.

Reineke poured out the wine and they all reached for their glasses, waiting for Eichmann to propose a toast.

The tension in this concrete silence, in these full glasses, was so extreme that Liss felt his heart was about to burst. What he wanted was some ringing toast to clear the atmosphere, a toast to the glory of the German ideal. Instead, the tension grew stronger – Eichmann was chewing a sandwich.

"Well, gentlemen?" said Eichmann. "I call that excellent ham!"

"We're waiting for the master of ceremonies to propose a toast," said Liss.

Eichmann raised his glass.

"To the continued success of our work! Yes, that certainly deserves a toast!"

Eichmann was the only man to eat well and drink very little.'

I remember its being said, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, that a novel should be written about the true believers, about the perspective on events of the people who were, and who remained, completely committed to Communism. *Life and Fate* is, among other things, that novel. One of its central characters is a commissar called Krymov. He is a Party enforcer by trade but also a brave, likeable, fundamentally

decent man, still in love with his first wife, Zhenya, a member of the Shaposhnikov family, the clan at the heart of *Life and Fate*. Krymov has had experience of the less rational aspects of the Stalinist state; after being encircled by the Germans in the catastrophic early stages of the war, and fighting his way out, he was subject to interrogation by the NKVD – a consequence of Stalin's clinically paranoid reaction to anyone who had been cut off behind German lines. Krymov's faith in the Party was not shaken. As he spends more and more time in Stalingrad, however, he starts to feel the kind of freedom Grossman himself experienced: 'he no longer felt he was a stepson of the age'. But then Krymov is sent to House 6/1, a bombed-out outpost in which Grekov, the crazily courageous, charismatic 'house manager', and his men are holding off the Germans in intense daily and nightly street-fighting. Grekov is manifestly unimpressed by Krymov's mission – to restore Party discipline and correct attitudes – and Krymov, who finds the atmosphere in the house very disturbing, concludes that he has to remove the house manager from his command. During Krymov's first night in the house, however, Grekov shoots him, not fatally, but so that he has to be withdrawn from the front. While convalescing, Krymov does what he feels has to be his duty, and writes a report on his experiences, including a denunciation of Grekov. But what Krymov doesn't know is that while he was in hospital, the Germans launched a massive assault through a tractor factory, and in the course of it House 6/1 was shelled flat and overrun – so that Grekov and his comrades are now, officially, heroes. Krymov's denunciation could not be more badly timed. He is called to a meeting at the underground command post of the 64th Army.

'A staff officer with a captain's green stripes on his greatcoat called out his name. He had followed him from the command post.

Krymov gave him a puzzled look.

"This way please," the captain said quietly, pointing towards the door of a hut.

Krymov walked past the sentry and through the doorway. They entered a room with a large desk and a portrait of Stalin on the plank wall.

Krymov expected the captain to say something like this: "Excuse me, comrade Battalion Commissar, but would you mind taking this report to comrade Toshcheev on the left bank?" Instead, he said:

"Hand over your weapon and your personal documents."

Krymov's reply was confused and meaningless. "But what right ...? Show me your own documents first ...!"

There could be no doubt about what had happened – absurd and senseless though it might be. Krymov came out with the words that had been muttered before by many thousands of people in similar circumstances:

"It's crazy. I don't understand. It must be a misunderstanding."

These words were no longer those of a free man.'

Krymov, the heartbroken commissar, begins his journey through the penal system of the Soviet state. As he falls, he drags down his ex-wife's current lover, a tank commander called Novikov. The filaments of state surveillance and terror reach everywhere, even in the darkest days of the fight against the Nazis.

Life and Fate does not have a central protagonist, but the character closest to the author's heart is perhaps Viktor Shtrum, a physicist whose working life is evoked so convincingly that it is something of an indictment of other writers who use scientists in their fiction. Shtrum is a theoretical physicist, married to Lyudmila Shaposhnikova; in the course of the novel his mother is murdered by the Nazis, and Lyudmila's son by a previous marriage dies in the battle of Stalingrad. Shtrum has a close circle of scientist friends, with whom he has slightly too frank conversations which he later regrets, and there is a question about whether some of his circle are provocateurs or informers; but when he does get into trouble it is because the state is beginning its turn to anti-semitism. Shtrum has made a theoretical breakthrough, connected with his research into the atom, but he begins to find his work denounced as anti-materialistic and un-Russian. Jewish colleagues lose their jobs. His peers are avoiding him, he is clearly not in favour at his laboratory. Shtrum starts to experience the strange freedom of the outsider, the fact that, once disgraced, he no longer has to be so careful about what he says and does – and then the telephone rings. 'Its ringing now made Viktor as anxious as if it were the middle of the night and a telegram had arrived with news of some tragedy.' He takes the receiver:

'Now it was Lyudmila's turn to look questioningly at him. He groped on the table for a pencil and scrawled a few letters on a scrap of paper. Very slowly, not knowing what she was doing, Lyudmila made the sign of the cross first over herself and then over Viktor. Neither of them said a word.

"This is a bulletin from all the radio services of the Soviet Union."

A voice unbelievably similar to the voice that had addressed the nation, the army, the entire world on July 1941, now addressed a solitary individual holding a telephone receiver.

"Good day, comrade Shtrum."

At that moment everything came together in a jumble of half-formed thoughts and feelings – triumph, a sense of weakness, fear that all this might just be some maniac playing a trick on him, pages of closely written manuscript, that endless questionnaire, the Lubyanka ...

Viktor knew that his fate was now being settled. He also had a vague sense of loss, as though he had lost something peculiarly dear to him, something good and touching.

"Good day, Iosif Vissarionovich," he said, astonished to hear himself pronouncing such unimaginable words on the telephone.'

Stalin expresses good wishes for Shtrum's work – and in that moment Shtrum's life is transformed. That one call is all it takes. Stalin, the *deus ex machina*, really does have the powers of a god. It is one of the most extraordinary, electric moments in 20th-century literature, far transcending Tolstoy's use of Napoleon in *War and Peace*, but the moral of the incident is yet to come. As soon as Shtrum gains something, he immediately has more to lose, and his corruption is simply effected. With his new status, he is easily inveigled by his boss at the laboratory to sign an anti-semitic petition. Grossman, who signed a similar petition himself, makes it all too easy to empathise with Shtrum's weakness. It is a devastating

depiction of the final trick played by a totalitarian state: to destroy people's sense of themselves by giving them a sniff of success and inclusion.

Fate was kinder to Viktor Shtrum than to his creator. Shtrum at least experienced the acclaim to go with his inner sense of betrayal and shame; from the 1952 publication of *For a Just Cause* onwards, Grossman increasingly felt himself a failure and an outcast. The death of Stalin did not herald a golden age of liberty. Grossman put his sense of disillusionment into *Life and Fate*, and it is part of what makes it a great book. He does not propose a one-for-one moral equivalence between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia – he was too intelligent to do that – but he has no compunction about pointing out similarities when he sees them. The sense that he had nothing much left to lose energised his writing, and when he submitted the work to *Znamya* in 1960 he was braced for trouble. He did not, however, expect it in the form it took: the KGB arrested not the author, but his book. They confiscated every known copy of the manuscript, as well as the drafts, the out-takes, and the typewriter ribbons with which it had been written. Suslov, the Party ideologue, told Grossman that the book would not be published for two hundred years. 'Why should we add your book to the atomic bombs that our enemies are preparing to launch against us?' Quite a compliment, his certainty that the novel would last that long.

Grossman, warned by his friend Semyon Lipkin, had taken precautions. He gave a copy of the manuscript to Lipkin and another to a friend from his student years. Some time later, a microfilm copy of the manuscript was made by Andrei Sakharov and Yelena Bonner, and the microfilm was smuggled to the West in 1970 by Vladimir Voinovich. (It must have been a bit like Celebrity Dissident Pass-the-Parcel.) In 1980 the book was published for the first time; in 1985, Robert Chandler's fine English translation came out, and in 1988 *Zhizn i Sudba* was published in Russia. Its author did not live to see any of this. After the arrest of his book, Grossman wrote the superb novel *Vsë Techët*, available in English as *Forever Flowing*, though Chandler thinks that translation a mistake: he calls the book *Everything Flows* and says that 'this translation should not have been republished. Firstly, it is both clumsy and full of errors. Secondly, it is based on an incomplete manuscript. Grossman's final, considerably expanded text was published in the Soviet Union in the late 1980s. A translation of that text is long overdue!' Nonetheless, the novel has a real freshness and power: it tells the story of Ivan Grigoryevich, who returns to civilian life in the Soviet Union after thirty years in the gulag. The vision of mid-1950s Russia, seen through his eyes, as a luxurious materialistic paradise, a world of 'parquet floors, glass-enclosed bookcases, paintings and chandeliers', is startling – you can't help but wonder what Ivan Grigoryevich would make of Moscow today. The book is as comprehensive an indictment of the gulags as Solzhenitsyn's work was to be, except more economical, brisker:

'Soviet prisoners ... were nonetheless fascinated by people who had been imprisoned for actual due cause.

In a hard-labour camp for political prisoners, Ivan Grigoryevich had met an adolescent student named Borya Romashkin, who had been sentenced to ten years in prison because he had actually written leaflets accusing the state of persecuting innocent people, and he had really typed them out on a typewriter, and he himself had actually posted them at night on the walls of apartment buildings in Moscow. Borya had told Ivan Grigoryevich that during the course of his interrogation dozens of officials of the Ministry of State Security, among them several generals, had come to take a look at him. All were interested in this boy who had been arrested for due cause. In the camps Borya was even famous.'

Grossman died in 1964, with his last two books, as far as he knew, not just unpublished but unpublishable. The posthumous publication of *Life and Fate* is implicitly taken as his vindication, his triumph over the Soviet state, similar to the triumphs of other writers whose work has found its real readership after the author's death – Melville and *Moby-Dick*, say. It is tempting to claim that, on the basis that the novel eventually found readers, there has been an element of redemption for Grossman and his work. That is what one wishes for Grossman. I wonder, though. *Life and Fate* still seems to me to be a grossly under-read book. Its first edition had a reception that may have been muted by the criticisms of the book in its own introduction. (Chandler's first go at introducing *Life and Fate* to the world pointed out Grossman's occasional ponderousness, and the unfinished nature of the book. But then translators sometimes have a too close view of their author's flaws – David Magarshack's *The Devils* comes to mind.) The bad news about Stalin seemed to have come in already; the novel's news didn't seem to be new. In Russia, too, I get the sense that Grossman is revered but not read as much as he might be. There, the nature of the accommodations he made with the regime put some readers off, and his criticisms of Stalin's Russia in its moment of triumph are not totally welcome. The upshot is that *Life and Fate* has never quite had the global readership it deserves. Now, when people are so keen to read about the Second World War – on the basis, I suspect, that it was the last time we in the West felt comprehensively and unequivocally in the right – would be a good moment for that to change.

With grateful acknowledgements to the London Review of Books (www.lrb.co.uk).