



Fate, Life, and Freedom in Vasily Grossman

A tribute to the great Russian author and his long- forgotten masterpiece *Life and Fate*

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Crossroads: Good evening, and welcome on behalf of Crossroads Cultural Center. We would like to thank our co-sponsors: the Columbia Catholic Ministry and the Center for the Study of Science and Religion at Columbia.

It is a great pleasure for us to host an event devoted to the life and work of Vasily Grossman. As the bloody history of the 20th century moves further and further away into the past, it is becoming easier for us to forget the scale of the drama which took place in Europe between 1914 and 1989, and to regard totalitarianism, both in its Nazi and Soviet incarnations, just as a failed and violent political system. The work of Vasily Grossman is probably the most vivid testimony we have that much more was at stake. What Nazism and Communism denied was the transcendent dignity of each individual human being, the fact that each person is an inexhaustible need for meaning and love. By contrast, Grossman's novels, and especially *Life and Fate*, are an epic tapestry of humanity on a quest for the Infinite, and thus free even in the face of demonic powers. The ultimate indestructibility of humanity and freedom marks the true defeat of totalitarian, atheistic ideology. Although Grossman was more a seeker than a believer, or perhaps precisely because of that, he was able to show that the desire for the Infinite cannot be eradicated from the human heart and remains the force that moves history forward towards its mysterious destiny.

We are very pleased to have here with us tonight an international panel: **John Garrard** learned Russian as a young officer-cadet in British Intelligence at Cambridge University, and it is his near-native facility with the language that has been the basis of his career. He is the author of 10 books, the last 4 of which are co-authored with his wife Carol. He has twice been a Senior Fellow at the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars in Washington, D.C., the last time 2004-05. That year led to the publication in 2008 of *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent: Faith & Power in the New Russia*. In 1996 they published *The Bones of Berdichev; The Life & Fate of Vasily Grossman*, the first biography in any language to make use of the formerly sealed Soviet archives in telling the story of Vasily Grossman (1905-1964), the Red Army's leading war correspondent during the titanic battles of the Eastern front.

Dr. Carol Garrard graduated from William & Mary in Williamsburg, (VA), and received her M.A. and Ph.D. from the University of Virginia in Charlottesville. After teaching for 10 years in the Virginia Community College system, she married John in 1979. Together they have co-authored 4 books, the last of which was *Russian Orthodoxy Resurgent: Faith & Power in the New Russia* and co-edited *World War II and the Soviet People*. Their biography of Vasily Grossman, *The Bones of Berdichev: The Life & Fate of Vasily Grossman* was translated into Italian and republished by Marietti 1820 in 2009 as *Le Ossa de Berdichev: La Vita e il Destino de Vasilij Grossman*. It won the 2009 Giovanni Comisso Prize for biography/history. In addition to writing, Dr. Garrard teaches for OASIS, a national organization for adult education.

Giovanni Maddalena (Ph.D. *Roma Tre*) is Associate Professor of Philosophy at the University of Molise, Italy. He specializes in American Philosophy, especially focusing on Charles S. Peirce and other classical pragmatists. He is the Executive Editor of *The European Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*, and is the author of several books and articles on Peirce's work. Since 2009 he has been an appointed member of the International Committee of the Charles S. Peirce Society. Dr. Maddalena is also the scientific director of the "Life and Fate Study Center" which organized conferences on Vasily Grossman's work (2006, 2009). He is the editor of the book *The Novel of Freedom: Vasily Grossman among the Classics of the 20th Century*. He is a Fulbright Research Scholar for the year 2009-10. And now Professor Garrard...

John Garrard: That war changes men is a truism acknowledged since the days of Thucydides. In Grossman's case, his service as a combat correspondent for the Soviet army's newspaper, *Red Star*, changed him for the rest of his life. He was born December 12, 1905 in Berdichev, a Ukrainian town home to a large Jewish population, but he considered himself a loyal Soviet citizen, and rejected a Jewish identity. After graduating from Moscow University as a chemical engineer, he began to publish both short stories and a novel, *Glyukauf*, about the Donbass miners, which won him admiration from the Soviet elite. He became a member of the privileged Union of Soviet Writers in 1937. He kept his head down during the Great Terror while his friends and relatives vanished. But Grossman the bystander disappeared when the Germans invaded the Soviet Union. The former chubby and sedentary writer re-emerged as fanatically courageous *frontovik*—a soldier who sought combat. Because he failed to evacuate his mother and his mentally challenged cousin from Berdichev to Moscow, they were trapped and murdered by the Nazis September 15-16, 1941. Grossman blamed himself thereafter.

He volunteered to serve in the Red Army as a private in the infantry, but they made him a war correspondent. He was present at all the important battles, from the defense of Moscow to the fall of Berlin. His account, "The Hell of Treblinka," was the first report ever published about a Nazi extermination camp. He was with the Red Army when it retook Berdichev, and thus saw the huge pits where his mother and cousin, along with 20,000 other Jews, were murdered.

Grossman finished the war as a decorated Lieutenant Colonel, his fame seemingly guaranteed for having been in the trenches at Stalingrad during the vicious street-fighting. But his determination to tell two stories—the specifically Jewish nature of the genocide against civilians in the occupied USSR, and the callous treatment given Red Army soldiers by their own command—put him on a collision course with the Communist Party. By the end of his life, Grossman had become a "non-person"; his books were swept from library shelves and pulped. The manuscript of *Life & Fate*, his novel about the Battle of Stalingrad, was "arrested" by the Party. The head of ideology told him that the manuscript was more dangerous to the Party than any of America's atomic bombs, and could not be published inside the Soviet Union for at least 200 years. He died in obscurity, from stomach cancer, September 14, 1964, the eve of the 23rd anniversary of the Berdichev massacre.

However, Vladimir Voinovich, a courageous émigré, secretly smuggled to the West a microfilm copy of *Life & Fate*. It has gradually gained recognition as a masterpiece. Thanks to Father Pier Frassati, a Center for the Study of Vasily Grossman & the Battle of Stalingrad opened at Turin, Italy in 2006. Adelphi is currently translating and publishing ALL of Grossman's works. When we first proposed our biography of Vasily Grossman to our editor, she replied, "A biography is either about a famous person, or written by a famous person. Grossman is not famous, and you are unknown academics." 20 years later, we are still unknown academics, but Grossman's fame is growing. This man, caught between the two fires of Communism and Fascism, witnessed firsthand their horrors, and emerged with his soul intact. His is the voice of the "wolfhound century," the twentieth century, which we should heed.

Carol Garrard: All nations look at war through the prism of their own experience. For Americans, “the war” means Pearl Harbor, the Ardennes, and D-Day. For the British, “the war” means Dunkirk, evacuations (I was evacuated from London myself), and V-1 and V-2 rockets. But what was “the war” for the Germans? For the German nation, “the war” meant the struggle on the Eastern front against the Soviet Red Army. The bombing, the U-boat campaign, the Afrika Korps—these were incidentals when compared with the 560 divisions of their soldiers deployed in the USSR.

For it was on the Eastern front that the Wehrmacht was battered to pieces, bled white in tremendous battles of annihilation that cost it, according to **Western** historians, between 80% and 85% of all German losses in both men and material. The United States and Britain’s “Second Front”—D-Day (June 6, 1944)—opened a full 11 months AFTER the Germans lost their last strategic offensive of the war: July 4-11, 1943, the enormous tank battle at Kursk. (The Wehrmacht’s offensive in the Ardennes was fought at the level of grand tactics.) The Red Army held the initiative from then until the final surrender in Berlin.

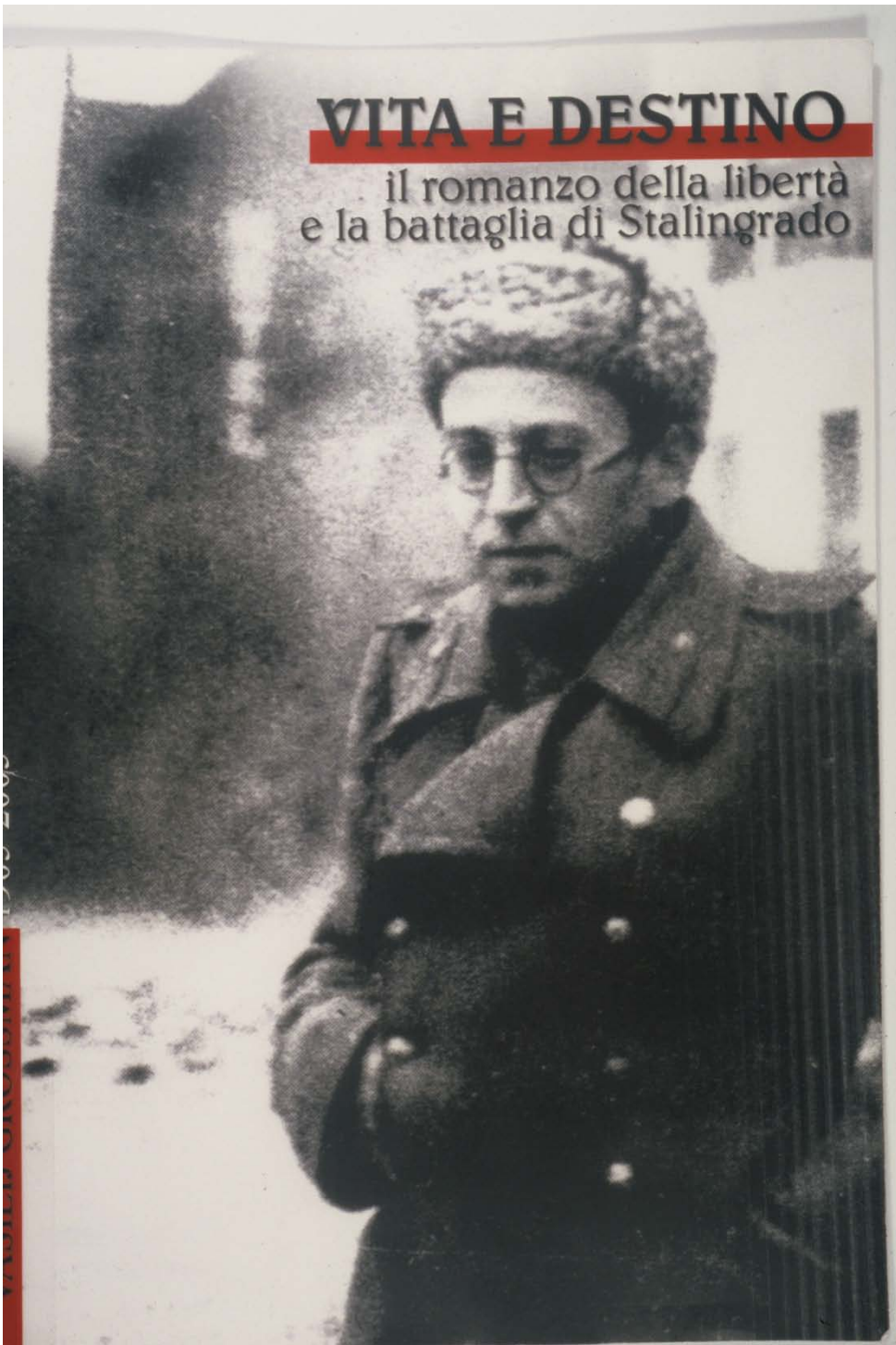
The turning point of the war was Stalingrad, September 10, 1942 to November 19th, 1942. It was here that for 100 days of street fighting, the Stalingrad garrison under General Vasily Chuikov held off the entire might of the German Sixth Army—13 infantry divisions, 3 Panzer divisions, 3 motorized divisions, 1 anti-aircraft division, and special engineer units, 10,000 German B-echelon troops, making of total of 230,000 Germans. The Germans also had 200,000 Rumanian troops and 200,000 Italian troops on their flanks, making a total of 630,000 men. To oppose them, Chuikov never had more than 45,000 soldiers at a time. The Russians were outnumbered 12 to 1.

During these 100 days, the Wehrmacht was superior to the Red Army in the 3 crucial qualities that had proven so successful since their invasion:

- Firepower. (6th Army had heavy tanks, flame-throwing tanks, Tigers, heavy artillery, and air superiority. Chuikov had machine guns, anti-tank guns, rifles, and the so-called “Molotov cocktails,” 40 tanks and a tank reserve of 19.)
- Training. (6th Army had superbly trained soldiers, and many highly skilled engineers. The Red Army sometimes threw in men who had been stuffed in a uniform for as little time as a month.)
- Technology. In addition to their excellent armor, the Germans had mobility with their motorcycles, and armored half-track personnel carriers. The Russians had excellent machine guns, superb snipers, the ubiquitous Molotov cocktail, spades, daggers. (The Molotov cocktail is a glass bottle filled with gasoline, and a flaming wick—a homemade grenade, or IED, “improvised explosive device” as they say now in Iraq and Afghanistan.)

So confident were the Germans of final victory that they struck a “Stalingrad medal” on October 10 to hand to the victorious 6th Army. But it was never handed out. So how is that, outnumbered 12 to 1 and vastly outgunned, the Red Army won the Battle of Stalingrad?

Let us here tonight take the perspective of the ordinary Red Army soldier, the “Ivan” so contemptuously termed subhuman, “**Untermensch.**” The best guide to the street-fighting during the critical days is Vasily Grossman, the hero of our book *The Bones of Berdichev: The Life & Fate of Vasily Grossman*. In both his wartime dispatches, and in his immense Stalingrad novel, *Life & Fate*, Grossman brings us as close as we are ever likely to get to “the truth of the trenches.”



Slide 1 of Grossman

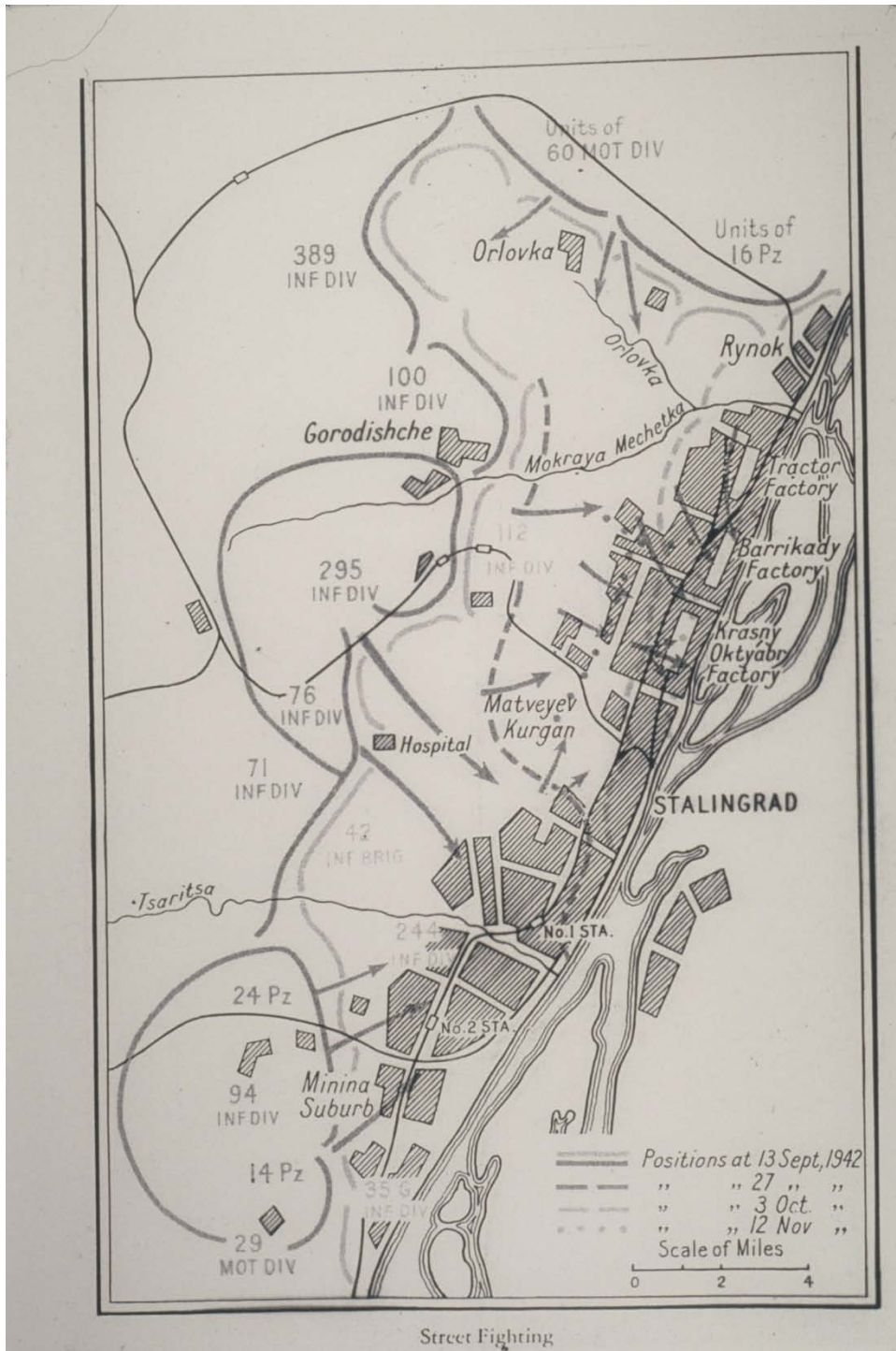
Grossman volunteered for frontline service immediately after the invasion. He spent over 1,000 days at the frontline. As special correspondent for *Red Star*, he accompanied the Red Army from July 1941—when it was in full strategic retreat—to the final surrender in Berlin, May 9th, 1945. He was present at all the big battles:

Slide 2 of Grossman & Ehrenburg at Kursk.



In 1990, in Moscow, we personally interviewed the wartime editor of *Red Star*, General David Ortenberg. He was then a man of 85, preparing to take his grandson ice fishing on the Moskva River! Ortenberg said that the 100 days of the streetfighting at Stalingrad was Grossman's "golden moment."

General Vasily Chuikov had assumed command of the Stalingrad garrison on September 10th. He called all his commanders together, some of whom had quietly moved their headquarters to the safety of the East bank of the Volga.



Slide 3 of map of city.

On pain of death, they were to return to the ruins of the city; he then ordered that they were to buy time for a counter-offensive, and he declared: **“Time is Blood.”** One week later, Grossman, who like all the other correspondents was physically located on the East bank, asked Ortenberg to be allowed to cross the Volga into

the city, where the fighting was taking place. Permission granted, he crossed into Stalingrad on September 19th. His boat was shelled and took casualties; the city itself was in flames.

Even before crossing the Volga, Grossman had sensed that the spirit of the city was unique. In a piece written for *Red Star* on September 5, 1942, he said, “Stalingrad lives and will continue to live. It is impossible to break the will of the people for freedom.” Here Grossman, who served in the trenches besides the men he interviewed, gives us a key fact about the eventual Soviet triumph. There was FREEDOM at Stalingrad—freedom **from** the NKVD and the Communist Party. Zhukov had ordered Chuikov to “Hold on” at all costs. Neither Stalin nor Zhukov cared at what price. Normally the Soviet rear was lined with NKVD and their minions waiting to shoot anyone who retreated. But there was no safe rear in Stalingrad. The NKVD and the Party *apparatchiks* decamped across the Volga to the safety of the East bank soon after the Germans entered the city limits.

The fact that the entire city was a “front” with no safe rear paradoxically played to the strengths of the Red Army soldier. Grossman mentions in his unpublished war diary, “*the Russian . . . may live a sinful life, but he dies like a saint. At the front many Russians have a purity of thought and soul, a kind of monk-like modesty.*” (BB, p. 148.) The Red Army termed the soldier who sought battle *frontovik*. Grossman was such a man. Willing or not, all soldiers of the Stalingrad garrison became *frontoviks*.

The “*sanctity of Russian death*” was how Grossman described the fighting. BUT the soldiers were free to conduct the street fighting as the battle situation required. Chuikov had a political commissar (Khrushchev was a commissar there), but no commissar dictated tactics. And Chuikov did not have to worry about Stalin’s two infamous orders—one condemning men who had been encircled and made prisoner as “traitors to the Motherland,” and the other, “not one step back” which forbade the Red Army to retreat. There was no retreat at the banks of the Volga.

Points to Slide 3: THIS LONG NARROW CITY BACKS ONTO THE VOLGA. Notice the landing stage: # 1.

The Germans eventually occupied 99% of Stalingrad; the crucial 1 % they did not take was composed of tiny groups of isolated and surrounded Red Army soldiers, usually 10-20 in number, and reachable only through the sewers. In addition, there was a miniscule continuous front on which the Volga ferries landed. The boats let off reinforcements, supplies, food, and ammunition, then took back the wounded to hospitals on the East bank. It was the ferries which were the Stalingrad garrison’s logistical supply line. Had they been cut, the Stalingrad garrison would have been itself totally surrounded, and eventually been forced to surrender. Sometimes this “front,” the landing strips for the ferries, abraded to less than 300 yards in depth. 900 feet was all that stood between the Germans & the Volga. But they could never take that last 900 feet.

One reason that tiny strip of 900 feet held was that the Germans made the fundamental mistake of being drawn into the only battleground—urban guerrilla warfare—where their superiority in training, in technology and firepower could be nullified. Take just the German superiority in the air. Once their own soldiers occupied and held 99% of Stalingrad, what use were their Junkers and Heinkels to the Germans? They would be bombing their own men.

So they tried tanks. But the city streets were ruined on the night of August 22-23 in a spectacular Luftwaffe terror raid which killed over 40,000 civilians (40,000 in London for the entire war!). This simultaneously transformed the city’s streets into alleys studded with chunks of concrete, and pock-marked by enormous craters. This meant they could not deploy their five tank corps effectively: massed machines and firepower.

No, thanks to the Luftwaffe's bombing the streets, the five tank corps of the Wehrmacht could only advance in small pack of 4-5 tanks at a time. The tank steel "fist" would meet one of the fortified houses occupied by the 10-20 men of the Red Army. Now they were supposed to kill all the Russians inside. The tanks' fire could gut the first two stories, but because the turret could not be elevated beyond a certain height, the 3rd, 4th, and 5th and 6th stories were untouched. The tank fist would pound at a 5 or 6 story building, and from the upper stories of their target, and other ruined buildings, the Russians would fire down on them. **See slide 4 of ruined concrete building—upper floors still intact!**



The flamethrowers could not squirt up to the 5-6th floor. (My father was trained as a flame thrower in the Pacific; elevation beyond a 45 degree angle was extremely dangerous to the flame thrower and his own unit.) So the tank fist would break up into individual tanks, which now became vulnerable to individual commandoes who would embark on suicidal—but frequently successful—attacks.

The Red Army had carefully sited these "houses." The 10-20 men inside were called a "storm group"; they were equipped with mixed arms, light and heavy machine guns, anti-tanks guns, grenades, and Molotov cocktails. The approaches to the house would be heavily mined. The Red Army knew the approach route. The German advance was carefully canalized into these routes, along which the Russians had pre-positioned snipers (many of whom were women) and soldiers armed with the Molotov cocktail and hopefully a few grenades. The Tiger tank was a marvel of engineering and good Krupp steel—it could withstand direct hits from heavy guns. But its rear deck was lightly armored. The rear deck could be penetrated by expert marksmen equipped with anti-tank guns.

The Russians had another deadly tactic—the slit trench. They would spade one of these narrow defiles during the night in the middle of the route, and stealthily crouch in it. When the tank rolled over their head, they would jump out, and board it on the move, sending the Molotov cocktail down the ventilator shaft. It was a suicide mission—but a single man could take out a tank with a primitive bomb—a glass bottle filled with petrol and a flaming wick. Thus a piece of killing machinery that was the pride of the great Krupp’s works, each costing thousands of Marks, could be defeated by what modern military parlance terms “asymmetric weaponry.”

Another reason the Russians held was that their commander, General Chuikov, showed enormous flexibility and imagination in evolving a fluid strategy as the 100 days dragged on. The battle for Stalingrad broke down into innumerable small engagements. Chuikov knew street fighting, and the Red Army were the Germans’ masters at it. His storm groups attacked at night, moving through the sewers, which fortunately, because of the deep cold, contained frozen human waste, though the heat of the guns sometimes melted the whole gruesome mess (cf. *Life and Fate*). The Germans controlled the air, but the Red Army was willing to fight in the sewers, to get close for the kill.

Meanwhile, Paulus stubbornly stuck to the same tactic: battering away with artillery at the city, block by block, creating more ruins. The more ruins, the more fragmented the battle. **Slide 5.**



The Russians would use the craters' rubble, moving on all fours through the sewers. They would take machine guns and 10-12 grenades or (Molotov cocktails) apiece. 80 days into the fighting, the diary of a Panzer officer tells what it was like:

My God, my God, why have you forsaken us? We have fought for 15 days for a single house . . . The front is a corridor between burnt-out rooms. There is a ceaseless struggle from noon to night. From story to story, faces black with sweat, we bombard each other with grenades in the middle of explosions, clouds of smoke, heaps of mortar, floods of blood, fragments of furniture mixed with fragments of human beings. Ask any soldier what half an hour of hand to hand struggle means in such a fight. And imagine Stalingrad; eighty days and eighty nights of hand to hand struggles. . . . Animals flee this hell; the hardest stones cannot bear it for long; only men endure.

The irony that this entry opens with a quote from the 118th Psalm—the same words uttered by Jesus from the cross—should not be lost on us. Militarily, the fact that this is a PANZER officer should tell you that the battle is going badly wrong for the Germans. He's supposed to be in his tank—he's mixed up in hand-to-hand fighting with the infantry. This is the hell Vasily Grossman sought. He himself crawled through the sewers many times to interview the Red Army soldiers in one of these concrete houses.

During the street fighting, Zhukov sent a bare minimum of infantry divisions across the Volga to Chuikov—barely enough to handle “wastage.” But while the Germans gradually fed all their reserves into the battle, becoming more and more worn out and spent, Zhukov built up his reserves, and readied his counter-attack from across the Volga.

In his notebooks Grossman made a comment which could not be published: “In the defense of Stalingrad, divisional commanders based their calculations on blood rather than on barbed wire.” Such fighting required fanaticism—and the Russians had plenty of that. In fact, Stalingrad proves a disquieting truth: the army who is superior in fanaticism—not discipline, but fanaticism—the willingness to die in order simply to kill the opponent—will prevail. As Grossman revealed in his war diaries—a great many of the men in the Stalingrad garrison had no hope of personal survival, for many of them were from the Red Army's own punishment battalions. The punishment battalions—the infamous *Shtrafbaty*—were used as human cannon fodder. These men were either taken from the Gulag and given the choice to fight for their country or rot in one of Stalin's prisons, or they could have started in the ordinary Red Army, and then been sent to a punishment battalion for some infraction.

Zhukov startled Eisenhower by saying that the Soviet tactic to clear a minefield was to march soldiers through it. He didn't mention, however, that it would be punishment battalions who would do the marching. Out of every given 100 men who were sent to the punishment battalions, fewer than 4 would survive the war. We interviewed one, a man who became a famous writer (Vladimir Karpov). He told us how your internal passport was taken away. If you distinguished yourself so much you were let out of the *Shtrafbaty*, to go into the regular Red Army—then your passport was handed back to you, stamped “redeemed in blood.” No one got out without having been wounded first.

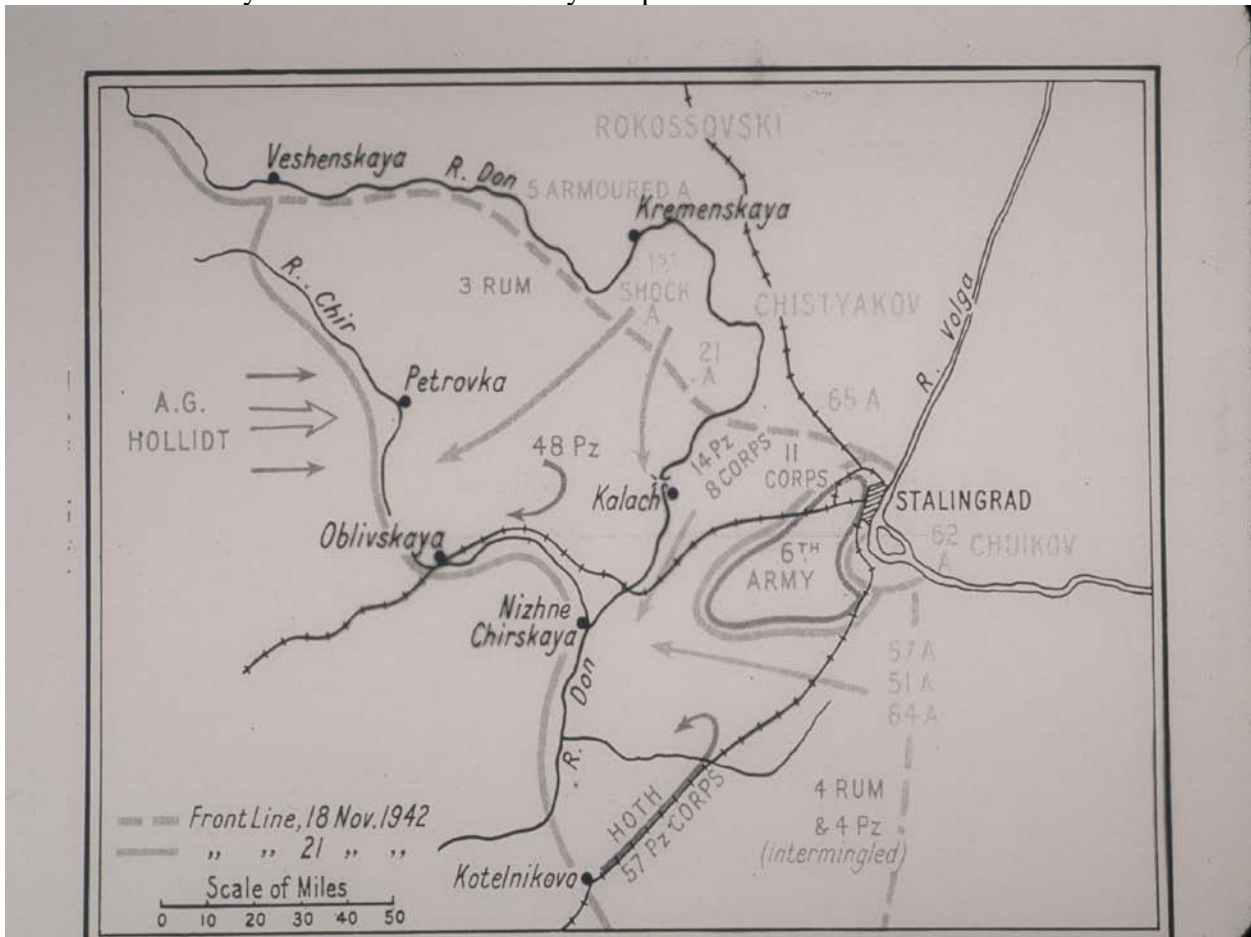
Grossman interviewed many men in punishment battalions. Indeed, one of his most celebrated pieces, “In the Line of the Main Drive,” is about the Siberian division commanded by Colonel Gurtiev. It was published first in *Red Star* and then republished in *Pravda*. Grossman stated that in this division, “heroism had become routine.” Yet Western historians have noted that the Siberian division was one of only two divisions fighting in Stalingrad after the middle of September that was neither promoted to Guards status, nor given a unit citation.

Almost certainly these men were from the punishment battalions, a fact Grossman could not mention, as Soviet censorship forbade it.

Grossman tried to slip the fact that many of the Stalingrad garrison were from punishment battalions into *Life & Fate*. He has Krymov, one of his alter egos, a commissar with his own rank, Lieutenant Colonel, get arrested, and sent back from Stalingrad to Moscow. As he is beaten by well-fed guards in the Lubyanka, he yells at them, “*You should be sent to a punishment battalion . . . you should be sent to face tanks with nothing but rifles!*” (p. 786) That was the truth of the trenches at Stalingrad.

The Germans’ last assault—the fifth in their attempt to take the ferries’ landing strips—started on 11th November. It soon degenerated into a series of violent personal subterranean battles without central direction. Now the Germans had nullified one of their last weapons—their flamethrowers (*flammenwerther*) and poison gas. They could no longer use either, as their own soldiers were forced into the sewers. For 4 more days desperate fighting continued between isolated packs of bearded and exhausted German and Russian soldiers. Prisoners were no longer taken. Fighting without sleep, the ultimate obsession of close combat—the desire to get at one another’s throats—blanketed the scorched and burning concrete ruins. On November 18th, Chuikov radioed Zhukov that in addition to being virtually out of medicine and rations, his garrison was now down to their last bullets, and their last artillery rounds. Zhukov radioed him back that help would soon be coming.

With Chuikov down to his last rounds, Zhukov ordered the counter-attack for the morning of November 19th. He attacked not in the center, but on the wings, where the Germans had denuded both the Italian 8th Army and the Rumanian army of their armor and heavy weapons. Zhukov rolled over them. **Slide 6.**



Over 900 tanks, and half a million men poured across the Volga. Zhukov had used the time bought so dearly with Russian blood to assemble more men and more firepower than the Red Army had ever been able to marshal.

96 hours later, 4 days—it was the Germans who were encircled. They now faced the logistical nightmare of being supplied by the air. Goering promised his Luftwaffe could do it. It couldn't.



Slide 7, German, the encircled German's inside a "cauldron" or "Kessel."

The Germans were defeated by their own arrogance. Drawn into a battlefield where their qualities of superiority in training, technology and firepower were nullified, facing a commander more flexible than their own, they never distributed their “Stalingrad medal” because here they met a soldier as brave, as cunning, and more willing to die than themselves, and they refused to acknowledge that this soldier, the “Ivan” they contemptuously dismissed as “subhuman,” the “*untermensch*” could be their superior, since they were the “*herrenvolk*”—the “Master Race.”

Grossman understood this profound military truth, and he stated it when he wrote *Life & Fate* in the 1950s. He posed the rhetorical question: How did Zhukov’s “vast build-up of forces in readiness for the [Soviet] offensive remain a secret?” (p. 488). He answered:

“Some of the Russian regiments now {that is, immediately before the counter-offensive of November 19th} only numbered a few dozen soldiers; it was these few men, bearing all the weight of the terrible fighting, who confused the calculations of the Germans. The Germans were simply unable to believe that all their attacks were being borne by a handful of men. They thought the Soviet reserves were being brought up in order to reinforce the defense. The true strategists of the Soviet offensive were the soldiers with their backs to the Volga who fought off Paulus’ divisions.”

Grossman stated this profound military truth in a manuscript which he never saw published; he would be dead when the most distinguished British historian of the Eastern front, Alan Clark, working from German sources, confirmed it in 1964 in *Barbarossa: The Russian German Conflict 1941-45*. Clarke was relying on German sources, and based on them, he stated that the Germans estimated “the Russian strength five or six times greater than the true figure.” (p. 240) He then details the disastrous consequences of this miscalculation:

“Besides inducing the Germans to believe that they were wearing down the Red Army at a faster rate than they themselves were suffering, this delusion also ruled out the possibility of a Russian counteroffensive for lack of reserves.” (240)

It was at Stalingrad that the myth of German invincibility was shattered.

Today, German historians are beginning to deal with some very ugly facts about the fighting on the Eastern front. They are admitting—sometimes to a very unwilling population—that ordinary German men in the Wehrmacht committed terrible crimes against civilians and POWs—not only Jews—on the Eastern front. German historians have admitted that fully 4 out of every 5 Red Army prisoners, and over 4 MILLION men were made prisoner, died in German captivity through German brutality.

It is today’s Russia—the former Soviet Union-- that still officially clings to its myths.

Nowhere is this more obvious than at the great monument to the Battle of Stalingrad, which sits atop the hill, Mamaev Kurgan, which changed hands countless times during the street fighting.

Slide 3. Points out Mamaev Kurgan.

And it is here, at this monument, that the visitor may see the final insult of the Soviet Union towards the soldiers of the Red Army who fought and won the battle of Stalingrad, and the final obliteration of any mention of Vasily Grossman, the *Red Star* war correspondent who described their courage.

Khrushchev renamed Stalingrad Volgograd, as part of his anti-Stalin campaign. In 1967, under Brezhnev, the Stalingrad memorial was opened—timed to coincide with the 50th anniversary of the 1917 Bolshevik revolution. It is 336 feet to the summit, and the traveler passes through 10 foot high sculptured tableaus recalling the Russian triumph. A quotation from Vasily Grossman’s famous piece, “In the Line of the Main Drive,” printed in *Red Star* in November of 1942, is engraved in letters twelve feet high. It is the question the German soldiers ask themselves:

They are attacking us again, can they be mortal?



Slide 8, of Grossman’s words in 12 foot high concrete.

But neither the source of these words nor their author is mentioned anywhere.

A huge 170 foot statue of “Mother Russia,” her cape flying back from her shoulders, and her right hand brandishing a sword crowns the hill, as she calls all her sons and daughters to battle. Inside the circular rotunda is a mass grave containing at least 10,000 bodies of Red Army servicemen. Their names are a fragment of the over one MILLION names inscribed on the rotunda walls. (The guides will tell you no one has ever counted them.) Funeral music sounds continuously. From the middle of a concrete slab covering the mass grave arises Mother Russia’s fist clenching a torch:



Slide 9 of Grossman’s words, inscribed INSIDE MAUSOLEUM.

Around the base of the giant dome, tooled in gold, is the answer the Red Army soldier gives to the Germans’ question, **“Can they be mortal?”**

“Yes, we were mortal indeed, and few of us survived, but we all carried out our patriotic duty before holy Mother Russia.”

Here is the classic Soviet war memorial—a masterpiece of disinformation captured in stone. Ostensibly the huge complex at Stalingrad honors the Red Army soldiers who won the battle and the war correspondent who penned this deathless tribute to their sacrifice. Yet the monument conceals the identity of both the soldiers and the writer. For we know from Grossman’s piece “In the Line of the Main Drive,” that these words are his tribute to the 308th Siberian Division, almost certainly a punishment battalion. Even today, none of the guides will say who **wrote** those lines that are engraved in concrete and tooled in gold, or **which division they commemorate.**

Grossman was ordered to leave Stalingrad on January 3rd 1943. The Party’s fair haired boy, Konstantin Simonov would be given the honor of reporting the surrender January 31st to February 2nd 1943. Grossman’s last Stalingrad piece in *Red Star* states that “faith in one another knit together the entire Stalingrad front from Commander-in-Chief to soldiers in the rank and file.” Out of this faith, he proclaimed, came a freedom that “engendered the victory.” Later, when he wrote about the Battle of Stalingrad for his novel, *Life & Fate*, he realized that the “freedom” from the Communist Party’s hand had been illusory at Stalingrad. It was granted by

the Party only for the 100 days of the street fighting. Once the Germans had been encircled—the ring closed November 22, 1942—the NKVD began trickling back into the city. Once again, they could find a safe rear. Now the city of Stalingrad became, as Grossman said in *Life & Fate*, “the icy ruins of what had once been a provincial industrial city and port.” (p. 798) But for 100 days, it had been he wrote, “a world capital,” whose “soul” was freedom.” (p. 798) Now you know why *Life & Fate* could not be published as long as the Communist Party ran the Soviet Union—its premise is that the soldiers of the Red Army were able to win at Stalingrad WITHOUT the Party at all.

As we gaze at the monument to the Battle of Stalingrad, we should remember that not only did an estimated 1,000,000 people die there, but so did Hitler’s dream of a “thousand-year Reich.” As we struggle to come to terms with the new Russia, which is neither World War II ally nor Cold War adversary, we should remember the soldiers of the Red Army, the “Ivans” so contemptuously underestimated by the Wehrmacht, and so callously treated by their own command. It was these soldiers whose courage and endurance at Stalingrad swung the “hinge of fate” (to quote Winston Churchill’s apt description) back on the Germans and changed the course of history. We will know these soldiers at their best if we read the works of Vasily Grossman.

Maddalena: Tonight, I will try to share with you my profound conviction about the fundamental importance of Grossman’s work for our epoch and our lives. I could synthetically say that Grossman is a classic of literature, showing that literature can be a profound philosophical and historical work, namely a work that helps us to understand ourselves. While philosophy was stuck in the awe of Marxism, and historians were holding a dialectic view of history, Grossman’s novel *Life and Fate* described the Soviet and Nazi system as a mirror of one another.

So the Nazi commander of the concentration camp says to Mostovskoj, the old revolutionary man, Lenin’s comrade: “When we look at one another in the face, neither of us is just looking at a face we hate: no, we’re gazing into a mirror. That’s the tragedy of our age. Do you really not recognize yourself in us - yourself and the strength of your will? You may think you hate us, but what you really hate is yourself – yourself in us. It’s terrible, isn’t it? Master! You will always teach us and you will always be our disciples. We will unite our thoughts.”

In the novel you will see the dramatic encounter of the two ideological systems during the battle of Stalingrad, perhaps the cruelest event of the entire Second World War. The pictures taken from the Moscow State Museum of Contemporary History and the material taken from the Memorial Foundation display the tragic truth of Grossman’s judgment.

But this is neither the apex nor the main point of Grossman’s view. Grossman is not only a good observer. Grossman points out an eternal law of history of which Nazis and Soviets are only a realization. Grossman says that ideology is the temptation of every single individual, not only of Nazis or Soviets. Anyone can be ideological in his or her life when he or she establishes a particular aspect of life as idol, and then makes up a theory according to the idol he or she has created. One can be ideological in one’s faith, in one’s family, in one’s citizenship, in one’s community, even with oneself. And intelligence is useless against ideology. The more you are intelligent, the more you risk being ideological. Ideology is a perennial temptation and freedom is the only antidote for Russians and Germans, and for any one of us.

But what is Freedom for Grossman? Freedom is this indomitable force with which each individual opposes power, be it that of the State or the like, or even of themselves. But how can one describe it? I will highlight its various degrees in Grossman’s work; these are not meant to be exhaustive but rather indicative of the diverse and progressive functions that Grossman ascribes to this ability to “be himself,” to preserve his own identity.

The first degree, elementary yet not to be taken for granted, is an appreciation of one's own 'human-ness' – that which is most truly human in a human being – which Grossman identifies as the fact of having the faculty of reason and ideals. If we wanted to, we could say that the most elementary level of freedom according to Grossman has an Illuminist tone, which we can find again in the preface to *The Black Book*.

The pure heart of the people was deeply shaken by seeing rivers of innocent blood spilled. [...] Through the dark clouds of racial madness, in the disgusting fog of hatred toward mankind, the eternal, inextinguishable stars of reason, good and humanitarianism continued to shine, announcing the imminent decline of the horrible empire of darkness and the approach of a new dawn. Though they sought to drown them in a sea of blood, the Fascists were unable to subdue the forces of good and of reason lying dormant in the soul of the people (LN: 19).

In the novel *Life and Fate*, both Germans and Soviets find freedom when they are losing the battle. During the German supremacy in Stalingrad, Soviet soldiers, abandoned by the officers of the party and by the KGB, discover the strength of their belonging to their country and the willingness to fight the Nazis out of ideals (maybe also out of the real desire for equality and justice that constitutes the only - unfortunately only theoretical – fascination of any communist ideal). When the situation changes and the Germans are losing, it is their turn to find their human face and their desires and ideals.

The second level – also not to be taken for granted – is freedom of expression. There are parts of *Life and Fate* that show the inherent necessity of the human being to communicate him or herself, an experience which is necessary in order to maintain one's own identity. Freedom does not exist without ties and the human being is therefore free – that is, him or herself – only when he or she can be in a relationship with others, as Grossman's hero of freedom – Darenskij – shows in his dialogue on Soviet politics with the unknown lieutenant Bova, lost in the night of the Kalmykian steppe. I'll quote only the end of that dialogue in order to point out the psychological echoes of this beginning of liberation.

Darensky felt that he still hadn't dug down to what really mattered, that he still hadn't been able to find the simple words that would cast a new, clear light on their lives. But he was happy to have thought and talked about what he had only very seldom thought or talked about. "Let me say one thing. I can tell you that, whatever happens, I shall never ever regret this conversation of ours." (Life & Fate, p. 391)

I hope that each one of us, at least once in our life, has felt the liberation connected to free speech. Free speech does not mean to say whatever you want, but what you really live, feel, and think. Human beings are relational beings, and without a real dialogue they cannot be themselves, they are only ideological machines. In the letter he wrote to Kruscev when the manuscript of the novel was taken he said: "*There are bitter and tragic pages in my book. Maybe reading them won't be easy. But believe me when I say that they weren't easy to write either. And anyway I simply had to.*"

Going more deeply, the third aspect of freedom is its connection with the truth, as we see in the stunned silence of the Soviet army after their victory, a silence in which everything becomes new, true and original again.

This silence then gave birth to many different sounds that seemed new and strange: the clink of a knife, the rustle of a page being turned in a book, the creak of a floorboard, the sound of bare feet, the scratching of a pen, the click of a safety-catch on a pistol. The ticking of the clock on the wall of the bunker. [...] These minutes of silence were the finest of their lives. During these minutes they felt only human feelings; none of them could understand afterwards why it was they had known such happiness and such sorrow, such love and such humility. [...] There is only one truth. There cannot be two truths. It's hard to live with no truth, with scraps of

truth, with a half-truth. A partial truth is no truth at all. Let us remember the good in these men; let us remember their great achievements. (Life & Fate, pp. 660-661)

At this third degree of freedom we find also those “almost incomprehensible, almost irrational” acts of goodness that from time to time appear in the book. It is another way to tell the truth. In the second section of the exhibit there are many stories about this goodwill, about this human face in apparently impossible circumstances. In a concentration camp, Ikonnikov, the fool of God, refuses to work for the construction of a gas chamber. His Communist cell mates are trying to convince him that there is nothing wrong in working when you are obliged to. At that moment the Italian priest, Guardi, comes and Ikonnikov, in the stiff language of the concentration camp, says: “Je dirai non, mio padre, je dirai non.” *“I will say no, father, I will say no.”* And while the old Communist prisoners are expecting the priest to preach humble obedience to the disobedient sheep, Father Guardi takes Ikonnikov’s hands and kisses them.

The human being’s bitter victory over his or her tragic fate is his or her ability to be moved by the truth of another being. It is a victory over the crude circumstances of history, but it is a sad one. This highest peak of humanity would be similar only to the ancient magnanimity if it were not the result of something more fundamental. Grossman is not able to explain it theoretically, but we see it throughout the whole book.

The fourth and last level could be defined as the moment in which the human being perceives, unconsciously, that he or she has questions and needs that exceed his or her own abilities and possibilities. The novel is full of these small yet great questions:

“Why should this simple tune played on a cheap fiddle seem to express the depths of the human soul more truly than Bach or Mozart?”;

“How can one combine an iron sternness with the tenderness, the love which knows neither laws nor party lines?”;

“How can one ever understand oneself? Why does the past make me so sad? Why do I feel so sorry for Krymov? Why can’t I stop thinking about him?”;

“There were people in whose presence Viktor found it hard to say even one word. There were people in whose presence even one sincere word sounded false. And there were old friends in whose presence he felt peculiarly alone. What was the reason for all this?”;

“What does a woman who has lost her children care about a philosopher’s definitions of good and evil? But what if life itself is evil?”;

“Why had she left him? Why had she caused him so much suffering? How could she?”;

“But is it possible to think so incessantly of someone you don’t love? And if she didn’t love him, how could she feel such distress over the tragedy that had overtaken him?”;

“Why had he written that letter? Why had he said those words? Why do people have memories? What had happened to him? Was it folly, chance? Or was it the deepest law of his soul?”

These open questions testify that we are in a deep relationship with every part of being and we are not the owners of this being; we do not even know how to answer these questions. For this reason Grossman describes

this fourth degree of freedom as the highest, and it pervades nearly every page of *Life and Fate*: freedom as awareness and friendship with the entire cosmos, which is a co-participant in every situation. There must be hundreds of passages that show this profound communion between man and nature and their participation in a common destiny. I will cite only one, one of those that we also put in the last section of the exhibit [In this steppe, Darenskij again encounters an old Cossacchian rider, and after they have talked a little with real piety, the rider gallops away]:

The Cossacchian steppe, infested with vipers, seems naked and melancholic when you see it for the first time, when in the car you are full of worries and concerns and your eyes follow distractedly the rise and fall of the low hills emerging little by little against the background of the horizon that slowly swallows them up... [...] On this steppe the earth and the sky have gazed upon each other for so long that they've begun to resemble each other, like a husband and wife who've spent a lifetime together start to look alike. What was the rider thinking of, the first time he crossed that steppe: his children, the fact that the father of the Russian colonel standing beside his dirty car lay dead? Darenskij followed the impetuous gallop of the old man and it was not blood that pulsed at his temples but a single word—freedom, freedom, freedom... (VD: 290).

Human freedom coincides here with the self-awareness of the cosmos: that's why the steppe is, for Darenskij, the memory of freedom. In this sympathetic view of the cosmos, of which those moments of goodwill are only a clue or a sign, lies the real possibility of human freedom: freedom is the link with everything that lives, it is life itself, and it is the joy of living.

Theoretically Grossman thinks that freedom ends when life ends, and those patches of goodness are the best that we have. But the novel is not desperate because Grossman is not that focused on this thought. He rather focuses on the description of the intrinsic value of freedom, understood as our positive acceptance of life, our somehow optimistic affection for life. This is the very "humanity of humanity," the secret of life and freedom, that which does not change in the eternal changes of the human being.

The characters of the novel are not stoic philosophers: they are unable to bear the weight of "moral obligations" (consider Strum, who, being a Jew, signs the hated petition against Jewish doctors, betraying his own convictions) but they don't want this to end their lives, they don't want to commit suicide, neither as a gesture of supreme duty, nor out of disappointment over their own inconsistencies. They remain attached to the life they are given. Before the attack, Novikov's soldiers feel this "will to live" as the only reason for the mixture of exaltation and fear that fills them. But there is one case in which this deep emotion, this unique vibration that occurs when facing what happens, is exceptional: when one discovers something absolutely new. In this case, as happens to Strum when he discovers a new law of physics, and the fundamental elements of the "feeling of life" are clarified.

'It's a strange feeling, you know. Whatever may happen to me now, I know deep down in my heart that I haven't lived in vain. Now, for the first time, I'm not afraid of dying. Now! Now that this exists!' He showed her a page covered in scrawls that was lying on his table. 'I'm not exaggerating. It's a new vision of the nature of the forces within the atom. A new principle. It will be the key to many doors that until now have been locked... And do you know, when I was little... No, it's as though a lily had suddenly blossomed out of still, dark waters... Oh my God....' (Life & Fate, p. 350)

In spite of everything that came before, the truth is a gift, an unexpected event, clear and bright and illuminating. In the face of a new discovery emerges the attitude one has when facing all of reality: the characters in *Life and Fate* accept reality because it is there, and living is always good, but it can be said that it is so because it is not something made by human beings – that is to say, it is a gift.

Here destiny is not the evil Fate of the totalitarian State; it is a Mystery, incomprehensible to human beings, but not foreign or hostile.