

Recent Dissertations

CONCEPTS OF WAR IN L.N. TOLSTOY AND V.S. GROSSMAN

Frank Ellis, University of Bristol (UK)

Author's Note: In my doctoral thesis -- "Vasily Grossman: The Genesis and Evolution of Heresy" (Univ. of Bristol, UK) -- I demonstrate that the ideological, moral, and intellectual crisis which culminated in Life and Fate and Everything Flows began for Grossman in the thirties, and was intensified by his experiences at the front (1941-45) and by the public vilification he was subjected to in the post-war period. This excerpt on Grossman and Tolstoy is from the chapter "Concepts of War and Progress."***

Throughout the Great Patriotic War (1941-45) Grossman served as a correspondent for the Army newspaper Krasnaia zvezda (Red Star). His wartime sketches (ocherki) achieved great success, and at the height of the Stalingrad battle his frontline dispatches were avidly read by both soldiers and civilians. In addition, Grossman wrote a number of stories which continue to enjoy critical approval. To this period belong: "Narod bessmertn" (The People are Immortal, 1942), "Staryi uchitel'" (The Old Teacher, 1942), and "Zhizn'" (Life, 1943). In 1943 Grossman began work on Za pravoe delo (For a Just Cause, 1943-52), which together with his masterpiece, Zhizn' i sud'ba (Life and Fate, 1960), provides the most complete and powerful account of the Battle of Stalingrad available in Soviet war literature.

Circumstances surrounding Grossman's attempts to publish Life and Fate in the Soviet Union can only be described as bizarre. They have been well documented by Voinovich, so a brief account will be sufficient.¹ In October 1960, Grossman submitted a copy of the novel to the editorial board of Znamia, who in turn passed the manuscripts to the KGB; they responded by 'arresting' all remaining copies of the book and seizing rough drafts, typing equipment and carbon paper. Grossman was told that publication would be postponed for 250 years. While the author died in 1964, one copy escaped the attention of the KGB and was smuggled to the West, where extracts were serialised in Kontinent in the seventies.² In 1980 the full Russian version was published in Switzerland, and Soviet publication came eight years later.³

Since the end of World War Two, Soviet critics have actively sought a successor to Tolstoy in the field of war literature. I. Kuz'michev bemoaned the absence of any definitive chronicle of the nation's trauma:

***Editor's Note: This excerpt, edited for reasons of space, represents just one section of Frank Ellis' very interesting comparison of Tolstoy and Grossman. Readers who wish to see the complete chapter should contact the author directly.

We still do not have our War and Peace, that main book, which would tell us the whole truth about war.⁴

The demand among Soviet writers and critics for the 'main book' has not diminished with the passage of time. When writers were surveyed on the fortieth anniversary of the victory of Nazi Germany, large numbers still expressed the hope of seeing the new War and Peace.⁵ Grigory Baklanov, whose contribution to war literature is itself considerable, unreservedly affirms the significance of Tolstoy:

Anything of worth which has been created in Soviet war literature, be it on the First World War, the Civil War or the Great Patriotic War, is based on the Tolstoyan tradition.⁶

Tolstoy's writing (and it is worth emphasising that Baklanov does not confine himself to War and Peace) creates a set of criteria according to which all Soviet writers of war literature should be judged. Elements of this tradition are obvious in Grossman's prose. In both For a Just Cause and Life and Fate Grossman offers us a broad panorama of a nation at war and shows how Russian nationalism was as decisive in Hitler's demise as it was in the frustration of Napoleon's dreams. Grossman, although nominally a non-combatant, actively sought out and shared the dangers and privations of those about whom he wrote. This knowledge of war at the 'sharp end' is an essential feature of Grossman's realism. Grossman's highly successful Stalingrad sketches, of which there are thirteen altogether, have been compared to Tolstoy's Sevastopol Stories:

Both describe the heroic pages of the nation's life and both seek out those profound features of the national character which have shown themselves during these critical moments of history.⁷

Certain parallels do exist. Grossman's duties as a war correspondent at Stalingrad exposed him to the same dangers as the troops; Tolstoy, before being transferred to Sevastopol had attempted to produce a journal, a fact that is significant for the Sevastopol Stories:

The element of reportage, the eye-witness account, the diary, the notes of a war correspondent which we find in The Raid and The Wood-Felling, play an important role in the three Sevastopol Stories.⁸

There are also some major differences. Although the internal repercussions if the Crimean campaign were considerable, it cannot be said that Tsarist Russia was in any grave danger of being overrun by the British or French armies. In 1942, Russia was in a much worse situation. An entry in Grossman's notebook for 1942 reflects the sense of impending disaster: "We're done for. The thief has reached the heartland of our country."⁹

The Stalingrad sketches fall naturally into two parts. This is

consistent with the tenacious and bitterly contested defensive phase and the subsequent Soviet counter-attack launched on November 19, 1942. In this first phase, in keeping with its defensive character, Grossman seeks to demonstrate the commitment and resilience of the Russian soldier. Typical of this aim are the sketches: "Through Chekhov's Eyes", "Vlasov", "A Red Army Man's Soul", the various portraits in "The Stalingrad Battle" and "The Direction of the Main Blow". It is here that echoes of Tolstoy are most pronounced. Soldiers in Grossman's sketches emerge as archetypes, yet they are identifiable with living types and bear the stamp of 'veracity' (pravdivost').¹⁰

Concluding "Sevastopol in May", Tolstoy wrote that the hero of his tale was the truth.¹¹ The manner in which writers have dealt with the sordid and unglamorous aspects of war, not concentrating exclusively on acts of bravery, has become established as the most important criterion of the Tolstoyan tradition. Grossman's reportage does not entirely measure up to the severe standard set by Tolstoy; overt criticisms of the military leadership are absent. Nor do we find the grim detail of the casualty clearing-station. In addition, a recent study of war correspondents has been less than flattering about Grossman's journalism:

Grossman's literary style tended to be flowery and his dispatches of little use for the Western correspondents hungry for the facts.¹²

How strong then is the kinship between the Sevastopol Stories and the Stalingrad sketches? Like all war correspondents, Allied or Axis, Grossman's reports were subject to rigorous military censorship (Tolstoy had his problems with the censors as well).¹³ Also, it needs to be appreciated that Grossman covered the greater part of the battle. The majority of Western correspondents were not allowed anywhere near the frontline until after the German capitulation, and then only under strict escort. Grossman's diaries and essays comprise, therefore, a valuable, if somewhat incomplete historical source. As a literary source, they clearly mark the incunabula of characters, scenes and themes which are developed in greater detail in For a Just Cause and Life and Fate; themes first discussed in the Sevastopol Stories had undergone a similar evolution in the creation of War and Peace.

War reportage is more than just the presentation of factual evidence; it inevitably includes the reporter's impressions and represents a combination of fact, analysis and description. Some critics even see it as a distinct genre.¹⁴ Operating within the stringent parameters of military censorship, Grossman concentrates the thrust of his reporting on personalities, their hopes and fears, morale and the peculiarities of street fighting, what the contemporary journalist would refer to as 'colour pieces'.¹⁵ Grossman's main achievement in the Stalingrad cycle is the evocation of the defenders' spirit. He wholeheartedly vindicates Tolstoy's belief in the vital and decisive role of morale, what Tolstoy calls the 'latent heat' (skrytaia teplota) of the nation.¹⁶

The initial reception given For a Just Cause implied a comparison with War and Peace. Two reviews referred to the work as an 'epic' (epopeia).¹⁷ Grossman was praised for his comprehensive depiction of the war and the 'strength of great realistic art'.¹⁸ But positive comparisons with Tolstoy soon gave way to virulent, ideologically centered criticism. The infamous campaign against Jewish doctors was under way, and this, combined with Grossman's tendency to speculate in sensitive areas, provided the part-inspired hacks with plenty of ammunition. An article in Pravda by Mikhail Bubenov was especially venomous; he attacked anyone in the Union of Writers who regarded For a Just Cause as the 'Soviet War and Peace' or an 'encyclopedia of Soviet life'.¹⁹

Aspects of the Tolstoyan tradition can of course be found in the work of other Soviet writers. Mikhail Sholokhov, Bulat Okudzhava, Yurii Bondarev, Viktor Nekrasov, Grigorii Baklanov and Vasil' Bykov -- to name but a few -- were as much the heirs and exponents of the Tolstoyan legacy as Grossman. Sholokhov would seem to enjoy the strongest claim, and yet the philosophical speculation and the restless spirit of enquiry which inform War and Peace are absent.... Only in Grossman do we find a writer who combines the 'truth of the trenches' (okopnaia pravda)^{23*} with Tolstoy's unrelenting quest for meaning in the historical process. As Simeon Lipkin puts it:

Grossman unfolded a panorama of one of the greatest battles, and did it not only from above, as if from a helicopter, from where all the fronts, armies, corps and divisions are visible. He saw it from below, through the eyes of the soldier in the trench. Before him, only Tolstoy had seen war in such a two fold manner.²⁴

One facet of the critical response to the publication of Life and Fate in the Soviet Union suggests that the search for the 'main book' is over. Many critics have explicitly compared Grossman's achievement to that of Tolstoy in War and Peace. Anatolii Bocharov argued that Grossman's novel is 'closest to the Russian epic tradition which was established by L. Tolstoy in War and Peace'.²⁵ Others, like Lev Anninskii, recognised the parallels but sounded a note of caution and even scepticism.

They say there is much of Tolstoy here. But Grossman's similarity to Tolstoy is too obvious to be as simple as it seems. The key Tolstoyan move, 'at the time when', is absent from Grossman. Tolstoy interweaves and ties, Grossman places together and sets up collisions.²⁶

V. Kulish (an historian) and V. Oskotsky (a literary critic) provided the longest and most detailed Soviet analysis of Life and Fate. They dismiss the prize-winning novels of the seventies with pretensions to Tolstoyan grandeur and profundity, such as Ivan Stadniuk's War

* Editor's note: The original numbering of the footnotes has been preserved, even though sections have been omitted.

(Voina, 1974-80) and Aleksandr Chakovskii's Blockade (Blokada, 1968-75), arrogating that place to Life and Fate. But they, too, qualify this observation:

To correlate does not mean to identify or pair exactly, to make direct, literal analogies, seeking out among Vasilii Grossman's heroes an Andrei Bolkonskii or a Pierre Bezukhov...²⁸

Konstantin Simonov contends that demands to create the new War and Peace are impossible to implement because 'books like War and Peace are not created twice'.²⁹ Comparison with Tolstoy would have been impossible when these remarks were made in 1969, twenty years before the publication of Life and Fate, at a time when the novel was under the strictest ban. Personal rivalries and ideological considerations to one side, Simonov's remarks deserve attention. Naturally, the exact conditions which pertained to 1812, and to the inception of War and Peace itself, cannot be duplicated, but similarities certainly exist. Simonov himself lends support for this idea when he says that during the Russo-German war 'War and Peace lived as it were a second life in our consciousness'.³¹ That War and Peace should strike such a deep chord in the Russian psyche is not surprising. In the winter of 1941 with the Germans at the gates of Moscow, War and Peace seemed profoundly relevant, as Simonov confirms:

Reading War and Peace at such a time in our life was a deep shock, both in an aesthetic and in a moral sense, and one which remained forever in our memory.³²

Tolstoy was of immense importance for Grossman. In his wartime notebooks, extracts of which were published in 1966, Grossman recalls his visit to Yasnaya Polyana after the Germans had been evicted. Earlier visits had left him largely unmoved, but now in the midst of the war, Tolstoy, as for many others, acquires a deeper and more emotional appeal, and he felt "with striking force" that "everything was one; that which happened more than a hundred years ago, and that which is happening now."³³ Tolstoy's significance for Grossman does not recede after the war. In Life and Fate Tolstoy is never far away. Grossman's purpose is not difficult to discern. The references to the Sevastopol Stories, War and Peace, The Cossacks and Khadzhi Murat are one way of acknowledging not only the force of the Tolstoyan tradition, but also his personal and artistic debt to the great master.

Among contemporary Soviet Russian writers, Grossman provides the most complete analysis of war. While paying tribute to Tolstoy, he is no slavish imitator of the Tolstoyan epic tradition, but an independent, incisive and catholic mind of formidable proportions; this is one reason, among many, why the association with Tolstoy persists throughout a study of Grossman, especially in Life and Fate. Perhaps the most important reason resides in Grossman's devotion to the truth. In his portrayal of war in the twentieth century, with its indissoluble links to totalitarianism, Grossman has few equals.

NOTES

1. Vladimir Voinovich, Antisovetskii sovetskii soiuz, Ardis, 1985, pp. 201-04.
2. See: Kontinent, Nos. 4-5 (1975) and Nos. 6-7 (1976).
3. Vasilii Grossman, Zhizn' i sud'ba, Switzerland, L'Age d'homme, 1980. Soviet publication in Oktiabr', Nos. 1-4 (1988).
4. I. Kuz'michev, "Zametki o sovremennom voennom romane," in Oktiabr', no. 3 (1965): 186.
5. See: Voprosy literatury, no. 5 (1985).
6. Ibid., p. 30.
7. M. Kuznetsov, "Shkola muzhestva," in Literatura i iskusstvo, 14.08.1943, British Library Microfilm, London.
8. R.F. Christian, Tolstoy. A Critical Introduction, CUP, 1969, p. 58.
9. Literaturnoe nasledstvo. Sovetskie pisateli na frontakh Velikoi Otechestvennoi Voiny, tom 78, M., 1966, p. 168
10. Kuznetsov, op. cit.
11. L.N. Tolstoi, Sobranie sochinenii (v 20-i tom.), tom 2, M. 1960, p. 156.
12. P. Knightly, The First Casualty, N.Y. and London, 1975, p. 258.
13. Christian, p. 58.
14. See for example the introduction to The Faber Book of Reportage, ed. J. Carey, London, 1987.
15. D. Mercer, et al, The Fog of War, London, 1987, p. 109.
16. Tolstoi, Sob. soch., tom 4, p. 239.
17. B. Galanov, "Epopeia narodnoi bor'by," in Molodoi Kommunist, no. 1 (1953). See also: S. L'vov, "Rozhdenie epopeia," in Ogonek, no. 47 (1952).
18. S. L'vov, op. cit., p. 24.
19. Mikhail Bubennov, "O romane Vasiliia Grossmana "Za pravoe delo," in Pravda, 13.02.1953: 4. N. Anatol'eva provides a more detailed account of these early assessments which were not confined to Galanov and L'vov. See: "V neravnom boiu," Grani, no. 18 (1953): 112.

23.** A term used to describe the more pleasant, less jingoistic side of war. Writers who went too far in this direction were often accused of 'Remarquism'. For a discussion of 'Remarquism' see: F. Ellis, "The Problem of Remarquism in Soviet Russian War Prose," in Scottish Slavonic Review, no. 11 (1988).

24. Simeon Lipkin, Stalingrad Vasiliia Grossmana, Ardis, 1986, p. 50.

25. A. Bocharov, "Pravoe delo Vasiliia Grossmana, in Oktiabr', no. 1 (1988): 128. See also Voinovich.

26. L. Anninskii, "Mirozdan'e Vasiliia Grossmana," in Druzhba narodov, no. 10 (1988): 256.

28. V. Kulish and V. Oskotskii, "Epos voiny narodnoi," in Voprosy literatury, no. 10 (1988): 29.

29. Konstantin Simonov, "Chitaia Tolstogo," in Novyi mir, no. 12 (1969): 163.

31. Simonov, op. cit., p. 162.

32. Ibid., p. 163.

33. Literaturnoe nasledstvo, p. 162. In one of Grossman's war-time stories, "Aniuta," a Russian officer says of War and Peace: 'That's not a book, but a huge ocean'. Povesti i rasskazy, M., 1950, p. 463.

** See note in text.

Author's address: Frank Ellis
19 Grosvenor Place
Bobblesstock
Hereford HR4 9QB
United Kingdom

