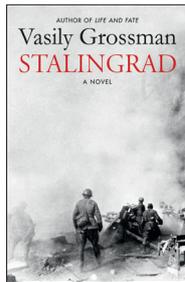


Life & Times Books

Stalingrad Vasily Grossman

Harvill Secker, 2019, HB, 992pp, £10.99,
978-1846555794



HUMANITY IN EXTREMIS

Vasily Grossman belatedly earned his reputation in the West as one of the great novelists of the twentieth century with the first English publication in 2011 of *Life and Fate*; it was always intended as the second instalment of his magnum opus dealing with the events leading up to and following the Battle of Stalingrad. That this 'prequel' is only now being published in English is the result of the ideological currents that swirled around its gestation in the repressive Soviet regime of the 1950s, examined in fascinating detail in the introduction to this volume.

As a Jew, Grossman could very easily have fallen victim to one of Stalin's last purges, in which case we might never have

had the inestimable privilege of reading this magnificent story.

Grossman was a war correspondent who spent much of his time on the front line; he had also been a student of physics and was familiar with the working lives of his countrymen on the land and in industry, as well as being steeped in the Russian literary tradition. His only reading during the war, he claimed, was a battered copy of *War and Peace* that he carried everywhere. It is hardly surprising then that echoes of Tolstoy are inescapable. Like Tolstoy, Grossman's field of vision ranges from magisterial reflections on the great forces of history, to detailed descriptions of domestic scenes and the horrors of the battlefield. He is as ready to offer imagined (and convincing) meetings between Hitler and his senior commanders as to voice the thoughts of a peasant conscript in the last moments of life.

The Battle of Stalingrad has been described as one of the most important battles in history, and it is generally regarded as being a major turning point in the course of the Second World War. For the Russians of course it has even greater significance, and this is powerfully conveyed in Grossman's account. In September 1942, when the Russian army had been driven back to the Volga and was clinging on, at huge cost, to fragments of the city on the west bank, Stalin gave the order that further retreat was forbidden.

Historians have debated the justification for this ruthless command, but in Grossman's telling it comes across as being in accord with the intense patriotism of the citizenry and the soldiers holding their positions. Of course he was writing under the stern eyes of political commissars and censors, but the sense of belief in the rightness of the Russian cause and in its eventual victory is powerfully evoked.

To read *Stalingrad* is to be immersed in a world where everything is in flux, where the fight for daily survival is as tough for civilians as it is for fighters, where terror, fear, and hardship go hand in hand with extraordinary courage, sacrifice, and endurance, and where the universal ties of human relationships and their related emotions continue to be manifest. Grossman engages with all this and more.

The reader emerges from his pages exhausted and chastened, but hugely enriched. It is a long book, but the translators have done a superb job. If you haven't read *Life and Fate*, it would pay to read *Stalingrad* first and prepare for the marathon of both volumes; if you have, *Stalingrad* is an essential companion.

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3399/bjgp20X709157>

