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Subverting Socialist Realism: Vasily Grossman's Marginal Heroes

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Subverting Socialist Realism

Vasily Grossman's Marginal Heroes

by

Maria Karen Whittle

A thesis submitted to the
faculty of Pomona College
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
Degree of Bachelor of Arts
in
Russian

Advised by:
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A Note on Transliteration

For all of the Russian passages and most of the Russian names and places referred to in this thesis, I utilize the simplified Library of Congress transliteration system. For the names of famous writers, places, and historical figures, I use the common English spelling of the name, for example Tolstoy instead of Tolstoi, or Vasily Grossman instead of Vasiliï. Proper names from Grossman's fiction use the spellings from the English translations I consulted—the James Escomb translation for "In the Town of Berdichev" and the Robert Chandler translation for *Life and Fate*.

Introduction

On February 14, 1961 the KGB raided the apartment of state writer Vasily Grossman to confiscate all manuscripts of *Life and Fate*, a novel Grossman had submitted to the editors of the Soviet journal *Znamya* four months earlier (Garrard 258-261). The chief of the Cultural Section of the Central Committee announced that the book could certainly not be published for over two hundred years (Beevor 350). This moment would mark Grossman's initiation into cultural memory as a dissident, elevating him, at least in certain Western media sources, to the ranks of anti-Soviet literary greats such as Solzhenitsyn and Pasternak. However, even after this point, Grossman still saw himself as writing and publishing for the Soviet public, demanding even after the raid that *Life and Fate* be published (Chandler xvii). Yet even before turning to *Life and Fate*, Grossman had had a prolific—and at times tumultuous—career. Between 1929 and February 14, 1961 Grossman had three novels nominated for Stalin Prizes; published one of the very first outside accounts of the atrocities of the Holocaust, which was later used as testimony at the Nuremburg trials; was a journalist on the front lines of the Battle of Stalingrad, and received praise from the likes of Mikhail Bulgakov and Maksim Gorky for his early short story *In the Town of Berdichev*. Grossman's literary roots were humble. He started dabbling in literature as a young Communist student. Characteristically, he began flirting with Jewish themes even in his very first publication, an essay about his hometown Berdichev, which was considered to be an informal Jewish capital of the Soviet Union (Garrard 87-8). However, despite his position as a

dissident author writing on Jewish topics, there is very little Western scholarship on Grossman. In Russian, there is almost none.¹

What is it about Grossman's work that makes it so enthralling for Western media and so forgotten in Russia? In order to understand the literary world in which Grossman was writing, it

¹ The two books written on Grossman, both of which are fairly straightforward biographical accounts, are John Garrard & Carol Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev*; Frank Ellis, *Vasilii Grossman*. Since these accounts were among the earliest scholarly works published on Grossman, both provide a rather superficial glance on his actual work and neither yet engages with direct criticism of Grossman's literature. The main analysis of *Life and Fate* as variations on Socialist Realist texts is Katerina Clark, "Russian Epic Novels of the Soviet Period" in *The Cambridge Companion to Twentieth Century Literature*, ed. Evgeny Dobrenko & Marina Balina. For an analysis of *Life and Fate* as a cosmopolitan socialist text see Katerina Clark, "Ehrenburg and Grossman: Two Cosmopolitan Jewish Writers Reflect on Nazi Germany at War". For an account of Grossman's humanism (expressed through Chekhov) as a foil to Russian chauvinist policies of the late Stalin era, see John Garrard's essay, "A Conflict of Visions: Vasilii Grossman and the Russian Idea" in *The Search for Self-Definition in Russian Literature*, ed. Ewa M. Thompson. For an interesting analysis of familial structures as metaphor for state attitudes towards members of the Soviet Family and mother-love as an anecdote to totalitarianism in *Life and Fate* see John Garrard's "Stepsons in the Motherland: The Archetectonics of Vasilii Grossman's *Zhizn' i sud'ba*". The best scholarship I have found for tackling the Jewish question in Grossman's work is Harriet Murav, who examinations Grossman's manipulation of silence and narrative space to offer a place for Jewish mourning in both of his war novels: see chapter 4 of *Music From a Speeding Train: Jewish Literature in Post-Revolution Russia*, "In Mourning : Responding to the Destruction of the Jews". Murav also puts Grossman's war novels in dialogue with Der Nister, a more traditionally Jewish writer (who writes in Yiddish) in order to reaffirm Grossman's status as a Jewish writer and, again unpack his use of absence as a coping mechanism for mourning of the Holocaust: "Violating the Canon: Reading Der Nister with Vasilii Grossman". The other primary English-language analysis of Jewish identity in Grossman's text is by Alice Stone Nakhimovsky, who takes the opposite approach of Murav maps Grossman's literary career and argues that only after the war and the death of Stalin (in the manuscript of *Life and Fate* does Shtrum embrace his Jewish identity and reject the Marxist ideologies in his earlier works: ch. 4 and 5 of *Russian-Jewish Literature and Identity: Jablonitsky, Bable, Grossman, Galich, Roziner, Markish*. Efraim Sicher uses *Life and Fate* as a conclusion to an analysis of literature by Soviet Jews writing in Russian, showing how Grossman's work, as a product of the Holocaust generation, deals with traditional dilemmas of identity that assimilated Soviet Jews face in a new way: "Epilogue: Hope Betrayed", *Jews in Russian Literature after the October Revolution*. Shimon Markish, who publishes in Israel is the only scholar I was able to find who writes about Grossman in the Russian language. Markish's analyses of Grossman tend to ask the question: of whether Vasily Grossman was a "Jewish" writer and if his literature belongs in a Jewish canon: "Tragediia ili triumf Vasiliia Grossmana", "Vasilii Grossman—Evreiskii pisatel'?", *Primer Vasiliia Grossmana*.

is crucial to understand the basic structures and ideologies of Socialist Realism, the system in which Grossman was born and raised as a writer in the early thirties.² From the official standpoint, Socialist Realism was intended to combine "the most matter-of-fact everyday reality with the most heroic prospects" and create a vision of the ultimate socialist ideal as it should be (Zhdanov qtd. in Clark, *Soviet Novel* 34). In *The Soviet Novel*, Katerina Clark argues that the defining feature that makes a Soviet novel a Socialist Realist novel is its set formulaic structure, the so-called "master plot." The finalized version of the master plot consists of a system of signs that take on specific meanings within the text. These signs were embodied in epithets, stock images and character types, structure of events, and so on. Ultimately, the use of these ritual images affirmed loyalty to the state, but once utilized, could be arranged and expressed in different ways to inform a large variety of concepts and experiences (6-13).

The master plot centers on a positive hero, a "defining feature of Soviet Socialist Realism" and "an emblem of Bolshevik virtue" that the reader "might be inspired to emulate." The positive hero must be both a "typical" person and at the same time adopt a path that will "show the way forward" to an ideal socialist future. The specific types and forms of positive heroes shift at different points in Soviet History, but the basic structure of the hero's journey remains the same (Clark, *Soviet Novel* 46). The most standard form of the master plot is the "Production Novel", though other patterns, such as the "novel of war or revolution," are common and share many of the production novel's tropes and structures. The hero typically arrives in the

² Grossman was raised in a liberal family of assimilated Jews, and his parents had ties to radical socialist groups, such as the Bund and the Mensheviks (Garrard 40). Grossman began studies in 1923 at the prestigious Moscow State University, at the time a stronghold of new Communist ideas. There, Grossman found Bolshevism and later changed his specialty from chemistry to writing in order to spread his newfound Bolshevik idealism to other people. Like many students his age, Grossman was interested in the progress embodied by the revolutionary atmosphere of the post-Civil War years (Garrard 70-81). His background and ideology match that of many of the idealistic and self-selected writers of the early Soviet era (Dobrenko, *State Writer*).

small, closed world of a "microcosm," where he is given a public task to complete that would make right some sort of wrong. The hero develops a plan to fix the problem, but soon encounters obstacles, such as obstinate bureaucrats, but when he garners support from other workers, he can begin working towards completing the task. Next comes a period of transition or trials, in which the hero encounters various problems, either natural or man-made. The action culminates in a "climax," where the task seems impossible to fulfill: the hero faces death, harm, and/or has a moment of self-doubt. Only when the hero talks to a mentor figure and the mentor figure passes down a "baton" of wisdom is the hero able to undergo an initiation process and fulfill the task. (We will see several conventional and unconventional versions of this "baton" in *Life and Fate*.)

The end of the Socialist Realist novel is more complex, but includes the completion of the task, a celebration of its completion, the resolution of love or some other emotional aspect of the plot, and the hero's acquisition of an extrapersonal identity (Clark, *Soviet Novel*, app. 1). The hero's secondary task is thus to acquire this identity by moving from a state of impulsive and emotional spontaneity (*stikhiinost'*) to consciousness (*soznatel'nost'*) (Clark, *Soviet Novel* 225). Both the public task and the private acquisition of a conscious identity through the public task compose what Clark calls the "dual goal" of the positive hero, the details of which I will discuss later in relation to two of Grossman's texts (*Soviet Novel* 162). The specifics of the master plot change over the years, as Soviet ideologies changed. For example, the post-war years saw an emphasis on culture and replaced the epic young heroes whose task was to build with older heroes and tasks involving intellectual feats (Clark, *Soviet Novel* ch. 9). The fifties saw a return to thirties-era tropes, but with mutations in the usual patterns as writers struggled with how to fit

new anti-Stalinist politics with familiar structures (*Soviet Novel* ch. 10). We will see the influence of some of these changes in Grossman's later work.

If the official doctrine dictated that Socialist Realism portray the ultimate socialist ideal, there still begs a question of how that ideal was viewed and defined. Within the Soviet Union, there were fundamental differences in the promotion of socialist ideals depending on the group of people being addressed. National policy was an extremely important and ever-changing entity of Soviet politics. The cultivation of national culture, language, and education was originally intended as a way to encourage the spread of socialism to the ethnically non-Russian territories that made up much of the Russian Empire. According to Marxist and Leninist thought, these lands had the status of colonies that had been oppressed by ethnic Russians, who forced Russification onto resentful indigenous cultures. To further economic, social, and ideological progress, socialists should encourage these formerly oppressed nations to develop their own autonomous languages and cultures. By fostering the growth of individual cultural practices, minority nations would advance their own understanding of socialism, thus progressing towards the ideal of an international Commune (Slezkine, "Communal Apartment" 315-16).

By the thirties, a common metaphor on Soviet national policies had emerged. The USSR was seen as a communal apartment, inhabited by a diverse group of nation families. As in a communal apartment, each national family was entitled to a room of its own—that is a physical territory distinct from that of its neighbors. Ethnic Russians, as former imperial oppressors, were not entitled to their own room, as overemphasis on Russian culture might promote a backwards step to imperial chauvinism (Slezkine, "Communal Apartment" 314-25). Instead, ethnic Russians inhabited the central, communal parts of the apartment. Like the concept of the USSR itself, Russia, with its ideal lack of national identity, was supposed to represent "pure 'socialist

content' completely devoid of 'national form' (Slezkine 326). Therefore, Russians were default examples of socialists. Minority nations, on the other hand, practiced their own forms of socialism that were informed by officially determined national cultural practices.

This metaphor becomes complicated for traditionally landless ethnicities, such as the Jews, within the Soviet Union.³ Many traditionally nomadic ethnicities, and especially the Jews, engaged in broker or mediator roles, acting as neutral parties who could negotiate between divided groups such as the countryside and towns of the Russian empire (Slezkine, *Jewish Century* 111). The dissolution of serfdom drastically changed Russian social structure and cosmopolitan developments rendered traditional Jewish roles, such as money lending and peddling obsolete. This forced many Russian Jews to migrate to cities, such as Berdichev, and engage in artisanal work in small craft shops or factories (again, a theme that comes up in Grossman's early treatment of Berdichev).⁴ The landless state that the Jews embodied (in many ways by choice influenced by faith) dramatically complicated their status within the communal apartment structure. How could an ethnicity have the status of a nationality to train into communism without the basic possession of a national territory?⁵ The Jews were even more

³ Yuri Slezkine describes the Jews along with the gypsies and Germans as the nomadic "mercurian" groups in the Russian empire, whose nomadic way of life and eternal otherness becomes a principal defining factor of their status within the empire. The "mercurian" way of life Slezkine describes has been a crucial part of Jewish identity since ancient times (*Jewish Century 111*). There is even a Hebrew term, *galut*, for the feeling of upheaval and exile that being in Diaspora from Israel (and thus having no homeland) gives them (Ben-Sasson 352).

⁴ The increase of Jewish populations to cities increased anti-Semitism and rising nationalist sentiments made Jewishness even more problematic (Slezkine, *Jewish Century* 114-6).

⁵ In his article on the national question in 1913, Stalin would not describe the Jews as a nation within the Russian empire due to their lack of an historic territory and only in 1934, when he was solidifying national policy did he establish the "Jewish Autonomous Region" with the Capital Birobidzhan in eastern Siberia. The Crimea had also been offered as a potential Jewish national territory. However, a general resistance to settling in these regions (which, given the very nature of *galut* could never be a replacement for the homeland of Israel) left the Jews with the

minor than national minorities; they were nationless and thus could not be categorized comfortably within the communal apartment model.

If Russians were considered representative of true socialist identity, how would a Socialist Realist from a minority nationality, whose worldviews were not quite pure forms of Socialism, depict the ideal state of socialist reality? This is a paradox that Grossman faces as a Jewish Socialist writer. We have every reason to believe that the young Grossman (a Jewish-Soviet author writing in Russian) was a strident believer in pure, trans-national socialism.⁶ Yet he also wrote about Jews. According to the logic of the Soviet communal apartment, was his version of socialism not inherently diluted due to his choice of topic and status as a national minority? How/ was he supposed to write his way out of this dilemma and depict his own socialist reality?

Grossman seems to portray these tensions and attempt to answer these questions through characters that I call "marginal heroes". Marginal heroes are members of groups whose bodies, nationalities, or other signifying traits keep them from fitting the mainstream definition of a good and pure socialist (and thus Soviet) citizen. A word on the divergent Russian and English uses of the Greek term *geroi*/hero is in order here. English definitions of "hero" remain heavily influenced by classical Greek notion of an epic hero, and all four historic definitions of the word maintain that the English-language hero has "valorous" or "courageous" characteristics ("hero,

reputation of being cosmopolitan, or internationalist Communists and thus, in the nationalist Stalinist government, an ideological problem (Service 317).

⁶ Grossman, like his protagonist Viktor Shtrum in *Life and Fate* was also very assimilated into Russian culture, having grown up in an upper-class and foreign educated Jewish family (Garrard 37-40). Grossman did not know Yiddish, and he had changed his patronymic from Solomonovich to Semyonovich to better integrate into society as Russian (Garrard 53). As upper-class and cosmopolitan-oriented Jews, Grossman's family was decidedly alienated from many of the lower-class *masterskaia* Jews such as the ones depicted in his early works about Berdichev. This alienation will reappear in Grossman's earlier work about Jewishness.

n.").⁷ The Russian *geroi* is broader in meaning, referring both to those who have accomplished heroic feats (*podvigi*), but also potentially to any character in any literary text.⁸ The more "heroic" meaning, however, comes first in Russian dictionaries; moreover, Socialist Realism itself is steeped in heroics in a classical Greek sense. Not only does the positive hero complete exceptional deeds in the tradition of the ancient epic, but Zhdanov even expressed the romantic notion that the writer should "heroize" reality. My "marginal heroes" thus combine both senses of the Russian *geroi*: while they are often minor characters, they tend to be hardworking and idealistic members of society who strive to embody the heroic aspect of being a character in Socialist literature.

In this thesis, I will examine Grossman's treatment of marginal heroes and how he uses them to manipulate, subvert, and possibly break free of Socialist Realist conventions. The first chapter will analyze the narrative arc of one of Grossman's earliest pieces of fiction, "In the Town of Berdichev". The remaining chapters will engage with various heroes and subplots of *Life and Fate* to determine how Grossman's marginal heroes operate in their most developed and refined form.

⁷ For more detailed definitions, consult the Oxford English Dictionary for full historic background. The only usages of hero in the literary sense relate directly back to the epic genre: "1. *Hist.* A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; at a later time regarded as intermediate between gods and men, and immortal," and "4. The man who forms the subject of an epic; the chief male personage in a poem, play, or story; he in whom the interest of the story or plot is centred."

⁸ In the Efremov dictionary, the literary term is the third main entry after: 1. "One who has accomplished an heroic feat [*podvig*], showing personal courage, resilience, and preparedness for self-sacrifice. . . ," and 2. "One who embodies the typical characteristic qualities of an era."

Chapter I

"In the Town of Berdichev": Treatment of Marginal Heroes in Vasily

Grossman's Early Fiction

How to approach a short story about the Civil War that was written and published in 1934 by an official Soviet author when the Brezhnev-era film adaptation of the story (1968), similar in form and plot was banned “due to ‘political errors’” and its director forbidden from making films until 1988 (Perova 221)? This complication adds an extra challenge for a reader trying to place one of Vasily Grossman’s earliest published short stories, “In the Town of Berdichev” (*V gorode Berdicheve*), into cultural context. “Berdichev” was published in 1934, the year when the standards for Socialist Realist literature were being finalized; Grossman published the story just as when he was beginning to be initiated into the Soviet literary circle under Stalinist dictates (Beevor ix). The story brought Grossman statewide attention as a promising young Communist writer and received praise from writers as diverse as Babel, Gorky, and Bulgakov (Garrard 113-6). Yet the short story itself has elements that are far from standard in Socialist Realist texts. The main focus of the text is not on the male Soviet worker or even the collective, but instead on Klavdia Vavilova, a female officer (*kommissar*) in the Red Army, and on the Magaziniks, a Jewish family living in the Ukrainain *shtetl* Berdichev, who are ordered to take her in. This line-up of characters, who are all in some way marginal, and their interactions with each other subvert the master plot of Socialist Realism by exploring the tensions between public and private spheres in Soviet life by exposing ideological contradictions in the figure of the New Soviet Woman.

Maternity as a Master Plot in “In the Town of Berdichev”

"In the Town of Berdichev is a story that follows a Socialist Realist master plot, but the Party that the positive hero, Klavdia Vavilova joins at the culmination is not the Communist party, but the party of motherhood. This proves a complication for the story's socio-cultural context, and is a problem I will revisit at the end of the chapter. "In the Town of Berdichev" fits nicely into a variation on the Socialist Realist master plot that Katerina Clark calls the “war and revolution” genre. The setting of "Berdichev" is actually fairly typical; Grossman utilizes not only the Civil War, which is common in Socialist Realist literature as a “Great Time,”⁹¹⁰ The plot of this particular story of war and revolution does not take place on a battlefield, but within the confines of the town and within the walls of the “small house” (*domik*) in which Vavilova is confined for her pregnancy ("Berdichev" 7). This *domik* setting is a domestic version of the “microcosm” to which the typical positive “hero arrives” in the prologue of Socialist Realist novels (Clark, *Socialist Realist Novel*, 256).

The story fits all of the major features that Clark lays out in her schema of the master plot. The “hero” (in this case Klavdia Vavilova, the female Commissar in the Red Army) must accomplish some sort of task, which in this story is giving birth. Vavilova encounters obstacles that work against completion of the task as she must fight against her conditioning as a masculinized female Commissar and embrace her feminine body and role as a mother (Grossman, "Berdichev" 6, 8). Vavilova also has the typical "mentor" or "elder" figure in the Jewish mother Beyla Magazinnik, who aids her in the process of becoming a mother. At the

⁹ Clark defines this as “a time when life would be qualitatively different from present-day reality” (40). This sort of setting is generally used to create a sort of folklore or mythical quality. As a result, the “epic past” was disconnected from the present in a way that would bring ideals to the forefront.

climax of the master plot Vavilova must struggle to give birth and has a near-death experience. Vavilova's physical condition changes drastically, her face turning so pale that even her "tan lay on it as if she were dead."¹¹ Vavilova's hearty physical condition (reflected by the tan skin) is weakened by the drastic toll that the birth process takes on the body. The task is completed after the baby is born and Vavilova becomes the perfect mother, scolding her fellow soldiers for making noise and constantly checking if her child is cold. The birthing scene serves as the archetypal ceremony to mark Vavilova's induction into motherhood: the entire Magazinik family "gathered at the door" to see the new child ("Berdichev" 14). Vavilova finally "transcends [her] selfish impulses and acquires an extrapersonal identity" as she leaves behind her soldier habits and her public life to attend solely to her new child in the private family realm (Clark, *Soviet Novel* 259). Vavilova has thus been initiated into a cult of motherhood in a Jewish family, a strange departure from the publically heroic tasks of most thirties master plots.

However, the master plot does not end with an archetypal finale. While Vavilova seems briefly to live happily as a mother, the plot and her social role shift again as Polish troops begin to invade Berdichev. Bombardment becomes the climax of the story in the traditional sense, as it marks the high point in tension for the entire plot. As Vavilova hears the Red Army soldiers singing about "the Red Flag embody[ing] the hopes of the workers" as descend into the city to defend it, her persona suddenly shifts again ("Berdichev" 19). Instead of seeing herself as a helpless "peasant woman with a baby at her breast" (17), Vavilova relives memories of a demonstration with the workers on Red Square, where she listened to a "bald man gesticulating with his cap" (presumably/transparently Lenin). At that moment she feels or experiences again (*ispytala*) what she had lived through two years before (20). The arrival of the troops thus marks

¹¹ My translation. The Russian appears as: *zagar na nem lezhal kak-to osobenno mertvo.*

a point of emotional transition for Vavilova and she leaves, in the story's actual finale, without her child, dressed again in the Red Army uniform. The Magaziniks are left to care for her baby Alyosha as Vavilova joins the Red troops to fight the Poles.

Vavilova's transition back into the public realm of Red Army soldiers and her complete abandonment of her child and the maternal identity she had assumed through the master plot throws a troublesome wrench into maternity as Socialist Realist plot. If the final event of the story is Vavilova's casting off the new maternal identity she assumed through the master plot, then what sort of moral is being presented? What is the ideology the reader is supposed to believe? Does Vavilova belong in the private (*lichnyi*) realm of motherhood toward which the plot of the entire story drives her, or does she belong in the public (*publichnyi*) realm of the Red Army, fighting for communism? Can Soviet mothers ever truly be both mothers and positive heroes? Or does the mother, like the nationalities I discuss in the introduction, become more of a marginal figure? In the next sections, I intend to answer the question: Vavilova a positive hero, or a marginal one?

Vavilova and the New Soviet Woman

In "In the Town of Berdichev," Grossman places his positive hero(ine) in the tumultuous Civil War years. While the Civil War years are an important archetypal setting for Socialist Realism and perfect for framing stories as epic or mythical, the chaos of that setting time also reflects the chaotic ideology of the years in which Grossman wrote the story. In 1934, when the story was written, rapid changes were occurring in the Soviet economic, cultural, and social spheres. Gender roles, and especially the role of women had been in constant flux since the Revolution. At the same time, 1934 is often cited as the year that put an end to the multiplicity

of ideological positions. For the literary world, this idea is embodied in the First Congress of Soviet Writers, which sought to set unified standards for writing official literature after a decade that had been wrought with fragmentation and disagreement of what a State writer's function should be (Dobrenko, *State Writer* 357).

Lynne Attwood argues that the main tension in developing an image of the “new Soviet woman” in the 20s and 30s was primarily a tension in the public sphere. The industrial era led to a new way of life in which work and domestic tasks were physically distanced from each other. Whereas in the pre-industrial era, domestic (or private-sphere) tasks would be performed in close proximity to agricultural labor (labor, or work being traditionally classified as public-sphere), with industrialization came a distancing between private and public lives (158). Early proponents of Marxism, such as the Bolsheviks, promoted what Attwood dubs a “rationalist” approach to female labor.

Rationalism was a key proponent of the early feminist movements in Russia and the West and thus societies that were pushing for equality and egalitarianism sought out its assimilationist approach to work (159). Rationalists were proponents of the “New Woman” in the Russian labor force. The New Woman was to be the “rational superintendent of the new ‘civilized’ Russia”, who in the tradition of the enlightenment women of the 18th century, was responsible for the country’s moral education. She was to be “the symbol of the triumph over Nature” and was to “transgress the negative irrationality of her old femininity” (Rosenholm 76). The emancipated New Woman should strive to assimilate to traditionally male tasks, and in doing so, suppress her physical female characteristics. Since pregnancy was a symbol of irrational and animal instincts (passion or *strast*’), the New Woman should suppress this by becoming more or less asexual. Procreation would be controlled strictly (Rosenholm 82-3). This was a point in time when more

androgynous representations of women were becoming common in the middle-class work force (Rosenholm 83). Ultimately, the rational woman's aim was to obtain equality in the workforce and society by striving to perform male tasks and act as male as possible. This, Rosenholm argues, left women with a paradoxical duality. They essentially obtained male minds with a female body, whose "irrational" nature automatically undermines the maleness of the assimilated New Woman (86).

In the early years of the Soviet Union, this "rationalist" approach to portrayals of the Soviet woman was most common. Domestic, or private realm functions were to be primarily taken over by the state in day cares or cafeterias (Attwood 159) while female laborers contributed to the collective work force. Yet as Stalin took power in the late 20s, "romantic" views of womanhood, which held that women's responsibility lay primarily in the private or domestic realm, began to take hold as the Party became more concerned about birthrates and strong families to turn around the unstable economic circumstances of the country (Attwood 159). During the "Great Retreat", the romantic woman gained quite a bit of visibility over the rational woman. The proper "new Soviet woman" was supposed to be both a fantastic mother, who reared multiple children, and a *stakhanovka*, or ideal worker. A woman's labor was not for the same purpose as a man's; rather her labor was to serve as a role model for her children or to help her husband meet his quotas (Attwood 163-4). Thus the new Soviet woman became domesticized into the private realm under High Stalinism and State social and cultural policies encouraged worship of the cult of motherhood and emphasized, rather than deemphasized, the male-female binary (162).

If anything, Vavilova's uncomfortable straddling of Red Army life and motherhood is representative of the tension between the rationalist and romantic depictions of women during

High Stalinism. As a female commissar in the Red Army, Vavilova makes for a perfect rational woman or *stakhanovka*¹². By placing a female in charge of male troops, Grossman makes her stand out as an ideally assimilated rational woman. Nearly everything about Vavilova screams “man”: she speaks in a man’s “deep voice” (*basom*) and is “scarcely a woman at all” (*vrode i ne baba*), wearing masculine clothing (Grossman, "Berdichev" 8). The text constantly emphasizes such traits in Vavilova. Furthermore, her initial discomfort with everything in the Magazinik’s home, the family’s snores, the “stuffiness”, and the “all-pervading smells [of]...paraffin, garlic, sweat, goose-fat, dirty underwear,” symbols of the private realm, place her distinctly in the public realm of soldier (8). As a commissar in the Civil War, Vavilova would naturally be stridently against these domestic symbols of *staryi byt* and trying to spread a new order of *novyi byt*, rooted in a shift to more communal, collective ways of being. For the Bolsheviks, the materiality of the domestic sphere represented deeply conservative values and embodied "meaningless ritual" that would distract from the enlightened consciousness that the party was trying to promote (Kiaer & Naiman, "Introduction"; Trotsky 109).

Yet nothing else about Vavilova’s task in the master plot is at all male or rational. Vavilova’s task is to give birth, to become a mother—the very definition of the Stalinist romantic vision of womanhood. Vavilova transforms into this very image, moving from a coarse, cursing, and deep voiced commissar, so assimilated that she is practically a man, to a picture perfect mother. Vavilova adopts each of the traits that her “elder” Beyla teaches her. She learns

¹² The *stakhanovka* was an ideal New Woman and a champion of labor. While Vavilova does not fit into the role of a worker, her role as soldier indicates that she fights for the labor/collective ideology that Soviet propaganda championed. The female soldier had a prevalent cultural role in the era of the civil war and as Laurie Stoff notes were symbols that women could “actively and successfully participate in the public sphere” (204). Thus, even though Vavilova is not a pure *stakhanovka*, her role as soldier provides an effective and ideological substitute.

to wear a dress and scarf, she sings and frets over her child, and even her “deep” (*bas*) voice turns into a “peasant-woman’s” scream (*po-bab’i*) as she becomes a mother, or “romantic” woman (11).

***Stikhiinost’* and *Soznatel’nost’*: A Female Inversion of the Master Plot?**

A key theme that repeats itself in theories of progress from the second half of the 19th century to the Soviet period is this binary of nature versus order, romanticism versus rationality. This was a constant conflict for the rational “New Woman”, who, in order to assimilate, must suppress her female “nature” and become a rational woman with a male mind. In Russian Marxist literature, this translates to the two concepts of *stikhiinost’* (spontaneity) and *soznatel’nost’*, or consciousness. *Stikhiinost’* represents the “antirational, spontaneous, instinctive” aspects of life and can also refer to natural forces, both good and bad. *Soznatel’nost’*, on the other hand, is order, rationality, and technology (22-3). As I have discussed in the introduction, the movement from *stikhiinost’* to *soznatel’nost’* is one of the main ideas that shapes the master plot. Thus it is crucial to pay attention to its patterns within the master plot of “In the Town of Berdichev” (23).

This archetypal progression is *not* true for Vavilova as a positive hero. Vavilova starts her role in the novel as a rational, or “assimilated” Soviet woman, possessing masculine traits and suppressing all signs of womanhood. Yet gradually, Vavilova's female body strips her of this rational identity, this *soznatel’nost’* that fighting for the party would entail for a Soviet citizen. Despite her “assimilated” male traits, Vavilova can’t escape nature. Kozyrev, a fellow officer of Vavilova’s battalion notes:

She's scarcely a woman at all, goes around with a pistol, wears leather pants. How many times has she led the battalion into attack? Even her voice isn't a woman's, but there Nature has the last word [*priroda svoe beret*]. (Grossman, "Berdichev" 6)

Vavilova herself is disturbed at her body's ability to disrupt her work within the public realm: "She had fought it, fairly and stubbornly, for many months...But the child had stubbornly gone on growing, hampering her movements, making it hard to ride on horseback" (Grossman, "Berdichev" 8). The fact that her pregnancy, and thus her female body, prevents Vavilova from riding horseback is significant in the framework of the Soviet novel. Horses are symbols of bogatyr in Russian folklore, and Civil War heroes in Socialist Realism, and signify "surging initiative" that will lead the rider to help society "leap forward" (Clark 141). Therefore, Vavilova's body keeps her from reaching a higher state of *soznatel'nost'* and becoming the quintessential Soviet hero.

In fact, as her pregnancy progresses, it seems that Vavilova moves farther and farther away from *soznatel'nost'* and towards a state of *stikhiinost'*, in which the irrational, or nature, takes control of her. Vavilova's most concentrated form of *stikhiinost'* appears in the climax of the master plot when she gives birth. She has the desire to "howl with a wild wolf voice and bite the pillow" (Grossman, "Berdichev" 12), adopting the very "wild, uncontrollable 'forces' (such as storms in nature and human rage)" that are characteristic of *stikhiinost'* (Clark 21). It appears that Vavilova, in her transformation from a rational Bolshevik woman to the romanticized maternal Stalinist woman, takes the reverse path of a typical (read: male) positive hero; rather than passing from *stikhiinost'* to *soznatel'nost'*, she moves from a state of *soznatel'nost'* to pure *stikhiinost'*. The Stalinist maternal woman moves backwards, then, from progress to chaos.

Polish troops bombard Berdichev, Vavilova waits in fear with the Magaziniks. As Vavilova sees a column of Red Army soldiers marching to fight the Poles and singing about the Red Flag, her memories of her time as a “rational”/Bolshevik woman come flooding back. Just by hearing this song and feeling the ideology of the Bolsheviks, Vavilova is ready to leave her child who she had just crooned over minutes before (Grossman, "Berdichev" 19). In order to regain her *soznatel'nost'* and experience Bolshevik ideology, Vavilova must give up her son, the symbol of her natural womanhood/motherhood and the trait that all along separated her from the men. She does this, leaving her son with the Magaziniks, and rejoins the front, dressed androgynously yet again.

Vavilova's strange progression from *soznatel'nost'* to *stikhiinost'* and back to *soznatel'nost'* is striking amidst other portrayals of women in Socialist Realist literature. Thea Margaret Durfee notes that female heroes in Socialist Realism are often reflections of official Soviet views on women. Durfee examines two stories, *Cement* (1925) and *How the Steel was Tempered* (1934), works crucial to the formation of the Socialist Realist canon. *Cement*, Durfee argues, is indicative of the New Soviet Woman ideology of the 20s. The heroine of the story, Dasha is the ideal *stakhanovka* from the outset of the story, serving as a mentor figure in the socio-economic realm for her husband (92). Like Commissar Vavilova, Dasha has a strong and masculinized physique and a stern character that is required for the rational woman¹³ Like Vavilova, Dasha must give up her child, Nurka, who eventually dies, to a state-run childcare facility so she may participate in the public realm fully (93-4). In *How the Steel Was Tempered*, however, the ideologies surrounding women change completely. The main female character in

¹³ The features that Durfee points out with regards to this are strikingly similar to Vavilova in language as well as physical form. Dasha is described as “strange, not womanly” and wears “bobbed hair” and “men’s clothes” (93).

this work, Taia, possesses sharply feminine characteristics.¹⁴ Durfee argues that *Steel* reflects “the resurgence of traditional values regarding women’s roles in the family and responsibilities to the state” (100) as much as *Cement* reflects the idealized *stakhanovka* of the 20s.

Vavilova mirrors neither Dasha’s completely public sphere woman of the 20s, nor Taia’s domesticized Stalinist woman of 1934. Instead, her dual master plots reflect the “hybrid” nature of the new Soviet woman and the “uneasy resolution of conflicting qualities” that the other two stories can only hint at (Durfee 101). Vavilova’s plot progression is so hard to resolve precisely because the personage of the Soviet woman is so hard to define. Thus, Vavilova is reflective not of one time’s ideology, but of the tension in transition between two conflicting ideologies.

The New Soviet Woman as a Marginal Figure

As we have seen, “In the Town of Berdichev” takes the traditional master plot, in which the positive hero moves from a state of *stikhiinost’* to a state of *soznatel’nost’*, or greater consciousness or knowledge of the Soviet ideal, and subverts it. Vavilova, a strong character reminiscent of Gladkov’s Dasha, loses control of her rational position to the nature that is her body and the result of female sexuality. Yet after taking this reverse path, the events of the Polish invasion and seeing the Red Army move her through a rapid final “master plot” in which she transforms from the maternal role back to a Red Army officer, thus returning back from *stikhiinost’* to *soznatel’nost’* and taking back the traditional structure of the master plot. This accumulates in the climactic sacrifice/abandonment of Vavilova’s son to the Magazhniks similar

¹⁴ Again, these are strikingly similar to those characteristics Vavilova possesses as a mother: Taia has a “quiet voice” and a submissive demure, as well as highlighted feminine characteristics (98).

to the “symbolic death” that Clark mentions in her outline of the climax (258).¹⁵, But why this double master-plot? Why does the majority of the archetypal action occur in the first transformation, of Vavilova from the rational woman, in a powerful position in the public sphere, to her as a “romanticized” mother figure, whose realm is the private sphere?

As I have stated, the role of the New Soviet Woman contained a significant tension between the public sphere and the private sphere and the idealized woman under Stalinism was expected to be a master of both realms. Vavilova straddles these spheres to illustrate this tension. Yet Grossman’s map of this tension does not show a woman who falls into normalcy under this ideal picture of a Soviet woman. Instead, Vavilova is a marginal figure in both spheres.

As a Red Army soldier within the public realm, Vavilova’s female characteristics are pathologized. Vavilova attempts to get an abortion to overcome the female body that would prevent her from fulfilling her duties as a rational Soviet citizen. However, her dedication to her work/labor actually prevents her from doing this: “I let things drag on,” she says to her commander. “You know I was hardly out of the saddle for three months down by Grubeshov. By the time I got to the hospital, the doctor wouldn’t do it” (Grossman, “Berdichev” 6). Paradoxically, her dedication to rational life allows nature, or perhaps the natural *stikhiinost’* in her female body to catch up to her and sabotage this rational life. *Stikhiinost’* is inescapable in a female body precisely because of the nature to bear children. Yet when the army releases Vavilova on leave, her comrade is stumped about how to word the release. He writes that she be released on the ““grounds of sickness [*po bolezni*],” then inserted the word ‘female’ [*po*

¹⁵ This sacrifice exactly mirrors Dasha’s sacrifice of her own child to join the workforce (Durfee 93).

zhenskoi], cursed himself, and crossed it out” (Grossman, "Berdichev" 6).¹⁶ Thus, pregnancy is not only seen as a sickness, something to be treated or fixed, but the mere feminine nature of it makes it unspeakable for a man dealing in the public realm. It is shameful for womanhood to appear in the masculine realm of the army. Like the feminist New Woman in the emancipated workforce, a rational woman must undermine her naturally feminine characteristics, just as she must undermine the conventions of everyday life as conservative *staryi byt* and become asexual. “The body, especially the female, the procreative body . . . is too unpredictable and incalculable for the new order. Procreative power is under no one’s control” (Rosenholm 81).

Yet Vavilova’s loyalty to the rational/public realm, or her Soviet ideology as a Red Army officer also marginalizes her. Vavilova’s attitude towards maternity, as an “absurd and embarrassing accident [*tiazhelei sluchainoi nepriiatnosti*]” is far from healthy in the context of Stalinist ideology of the time. Women in the 30s who did not wish to have children were often demonized or pathologized. Women who sought abortions were “aberrant creatures who defied female nature...the lack of desire to give birth to a child [was] something abnormal in a healthy woman” (Attwood 163).

Emerging Tensions for the Marginal Hero

Thus, Soviet women have a place in neither sphere. Women who choose childbirth and domesticity are “sick” or taboo in the rational public sphere, but women who refuse to have children are “abnormal” and unhealthy because they defy female nature. Women are torn between their *stikhiinost’* in their childbearing responsibility, and the urge to assimilate into the public sphere by hiding their female difference.

¹⁶ In the Russian text, “and crossed it out” is written as “*i ‘po zhenskoi’ zacherknu!*” (2), the repetition of “*po zhenskoi*” emphasizing the taboo nature of Vavilova’s womanhood.

By the end of Grossman's text, however, it is clear by Vavilova's choice which way is the more officially acceptable way to live. Throughout "Berdichev," the text equates the sphere of domesticity with the Magaziniks and their Jewishness. Everything surrounding the Magaziniks, including their name, is domestic: even the husband Chaim has a very nurturing and nostalgic attitude surrounding his home and family.¹⁷ For him, the scents that are so stifling and unusual to Vavilova are wonderful. He "bathed in the dusty pillars of sunshine" and "the cries of children, the miaowing of the cat and the cooing of the samovar" (8). Chaim doesn't care for going to his work at the workshop (*masterskaia*, which indicates that Magazinik is part of the Jewish merchant bourgeoisie class).¹⁸ He would rather remain at home in the private sphere and his love for the family is mentioned numerous times. The Magaziniks are examples of an ideal family in the early 30s, when families were encouraged to have multiple children. The Magaziniks have seven children, well above the average for a Soviet family and under Stalin's promotion of family in the 30s, this number would have earned Beyla Magazinik an award as a heroic mother. Beyla is certainly an ideal mother; as the "elder" figure in the master plot, she gives Vavilova advice about all aspects of child-rearing. Magazinik is also the only one who recognizes that Vavilova cannot be separated from her natural *stikhiinost'* of womanhood. As Beyla expresses her surprise and pride that Vavilova has become such a worried and attentive mother, Magazinik responds "You think if a woman wears leather pants she turns into a man?" (10). No matter how much a woman tries to assimilate into the "rational" and public sphere that

¹⁷ The name Magazinik is, of course, derived from the Russian word for shop, *magazin* and would have originally been given to the owner of a small shop. This notion is in itself anti-Soviet and much like Magazinik's *masterskaia* and the *staryi byt* of the sights and smells of his home, places him in the realm as a non-Soviet other and a stereotypical Jew.

¹⁸ Grossman's first published essay was about Berdichev, published in 1929. In the article, Grossman notes that for anti-Semites, "Berdichev is a synonym for the merchant bourgeoisie, a nest of speculators. . . ." (qtd. in Garrard 88).

is occupied by men, her female nature still labels her as different. Magazinik, who can relate to Vavilova through their mutual alienation from the mainstream Soviet citizen, is the only male figure in the story that realizes this. None of Vavilova's male comrades in the army believe it when they see her acting like a woman.

Yet the Magaziniks are *not* the ideal domestic/private realm family in the way that *Steel's* Taia is. The Magaziniks, as ethnic minorities, are *not* the Great Russian majority, nor are they even an appropriate minority nationality. Nor can the Magaziniks even be considered truly "socialist" in ideology. Chaim Magazinik consciously separates himself from the Socialist Jews of the Bund and, while he is a worker, he still prefers to return home to his wife and children in the *shetl*. The Magaziniks embrace none of the institutions of socialism and are thus minorities that do not belong in the Soviet Union.

The striking thing about Vavilova's domestic transformation is that she integrates into a family that at first seems to be the Stalinist ideal of the Socialist private realm, yet they are *not* Socialists, not even Russian peasants, but Others. Furthermore, Vavilova's domestic identity reflects the mannerisms of *shetl* Jews and not socialist Jews of the Bund or similar politically conscious movements. Vavilova becomes not a *Soviet* woman, but a Jewish one. Showing pride for her pupil, Beyla calls Vavilova a "good Jewish mother [*kak horoshaia evreiskaia mat', odnim slovom*]" (Grossman 15). That Vavilova assumes not only a maternal identity, but also a Jewish one is significant in both sealing her association with the Magaziniks and with establishing her as a marginal "Other" figure.

Thus, in "Berdichev", the Stalinist woman and private realm is inherently *not* Soviet. As Vavilova transforms into the ideal of the Stalinist mother, she loses all about her that is socialist. As long as Soviet women possess the ability to give birth, they possess this same *stikhiinost'* that

the Magaziniks and (non-socialist) Jews in the story possess and thus can never fully integrate into the Leninist/Marxist ideal of *soznatel'nost'*, or rationality in society. The domestic woman of the private realm can never be a true socialist. As she hears the Red Army pass, Vavilova realizes her inability to fit into the public role as a Bolshevik idealist while she is still a mother. She leaves her child and female clothes for her Mauser and sheepskin hat, to join the Red Flag and the singing cadets (Grossman 20).

Grossman closes the story with a shocking exchange as the Magaziniks watch the Red Army and Vavilova disappear into the distance:

Magazinik, looking after [Vavilova] said: "These were the people who were in the Bund¹⁹ sometime long ago. These are real people, Beyla. Are we really people? We are manure [*navoz*]."²⁰

Non-socialists can never in fact be the "real people" that Vavilova and the socialist Bund members embody in the Red Army. Instead, those left to care for children and households in the private sphere are left behind as manure, something offensive and useless to society at large. The harsh language that Grossman evokes, and which was omitted, perhaps as an act of censorship, from the English translation of the text, shows the almost violent manner of marginality that non-Russian non-socialists represent in the text.

Even in "In the Town of Berdichev," one of Grossman's earliest pieces of fiction, Grossman examines the uncomfortable role marginality can play. Though Vavilova moves

¹⁹ A Jewish labor union that was active from the 1890s to the 1920s. They sought to unite Jewish workers under socialism and tended to side with the Mensheviks. They were especially active in western regions of the Russian empire (Poland, Ukraine, the Baltics). ("Bund")

²⁰ Translation mine, from the Russian version of Grossman's text (Biblioteka Maksim Moshkova). These lines do not appear in the Escomb translation, though it does appear in the more recent Robert Chandler translation (*The Road*). This indicates that at one point this passage was probably censored. The Russian text is: "Vot takie liudi byli kogda-to v Bunde. Eto nastoiashchie liudi, Beyla. A my razve liudi? My navoz."

along the natural arc of a master plot, the inversion of *stikhiinost'* and *soznatel'nost'* that a female positive hero invokes seems to cause unbearable conflict for Grossman. The master plot cannot resolve in the spontaneous state that Vavilova and uninitiated Jews live in. Instead, Grossman must revert back to the ordained arc where the proper Soviet hero moves from spontaneity to rationality. As a result, the ending seems forced and patched over with proper "socialist" imagery, such as Lenin, banners, singing, and the Bund. It is unclear whether this abrupt change at the end of the story is the result of editorial pressures or Grossman's own ideological discomfort, as a cosmopolitan socialist, with the story's plot as it had unfolded. However, it is clear that, even from his earliest years as a writer, Grossman struggled with the problem of representing marginal heroes in Socialist prose and that their fates in his prose take unusual structural and narrative forms.

Chapter II

Writing Realisms: Literary Discussions in Life and Fate

Vasily Grossman turned in the manuscript for his epic novel, *Life and Fate* (*Zhizn' i sud'ba*) in 1960 as a follow-up to his 1952 Stalingrad epic *For a Just Cause* (*Za pravoe delo*). A product of the liberal atmosphere of Khrushchev-era artistic reforms, Grossman's epic novel revisits themes of his earlier work. Grossman writes explicitly about the Jewish experience by making his hero Viktor Shtrum, a Jewish scientist modeled in many ways on Grossman himself (Chandler, "Introduction" vii). Grossman even revisits his hometown Berdichev through an epistolary correspondence between Shtrum and his mother, who is—like Grossman's own mother—confined to a ghetto in the city and then shot by the Nazis.²¹ The character of Shtrum is, in fact, a carry-over from *For a Just Cause*. Unlike *For a Just Cause* or other earlier works, however, *Life and Fate* takes a new position in the Soviet literary conversation. While *For a Just Cause* was received solidly in the Stalinist Soviet Union as exemplary literature,²² *Life and Fate* not only explicitly criticizes Stalin's regime itself, but also tries to overcome the generic restrictions and limitations imposed by Socialist Realism on literature.

Grossman did not see himself as a dissident writer when he tried to publish the *Life and Fate* through the state military literary journal *Znamya*. Despite hesitations from friends and

²¹ Grossman even comes back to his hometown in his article "On the Murder of Jews in Berdichev", which he prepared for *Black Book*, a systematic documentation of the Holocaust on Soviet soil. The collection was edited with fellow Soviet Jewish journalist Ilia Ehrenburg and represents yet another attempt by Grossman to represent Jews as a group (rather than merely as Soviet citizens) that was victimized under fascism.

²² Grossman's novels *The People Immortal*, *Stepan Kol'chugin*, and *For a Just Cause* were nominated for Stalin Prizes in literature (Chandler xiv).

family members, Grossman seemed to think, however naive this may seem to a present-day literary audience, that de-Stalinization in the Khrushchev-era's cultural policies would allow his scathingly critical work to pass censors (Chandler xiv). It was only in 1961 when KGB agents confiscated copies of the manuscript that the novel was sealed into historic memory as dissident. Since *Life and Fate's* release in English in 1985, the perestroika- and post-Soviet-era western media has seized on this story in order to market the book as a dissident classic. The book's similarity in structure and scope to *War and Peace* has earned it the similarly epic classification as the "greatest Russian novel of the 20th century" (Klinkenborg). Finally, *Life and Fate's* Jewish themes and strongly anti-Fascist messages have drawn attention to Grossman's status as a Jewish writer and *Life and Fate* has been coined a by some as a Holocaust novel.²³ The Western popular media continue to praise the novel and it was even adapted to an eight-hour radio play by the BBC in fall of 2011, yet, as I mentioned in my introduction, scholarship in English and Russian remains meager (*The Economist*, "Life and Fate").

In a 1996 review of John and Carol Garrards' biography on Grossman, Slavist David Bethea takes note of this state of affairs: Grossman is a talented writer, but *Life and Fate* falters where the classics it is compared to do not. Bethea wonders if excessive praise of Grossman as a dissident writer in the Western media has informed the book's status as "classic" rather than any inherent literary qualities. Rather than elevating Grossman to a status of greatness where perhaps he does not fit and did not see himself, Bethea proposes a different challenge for scholars:

There is . . . a story that [the Garrards] do not tell, and one that would have been fascinating to explore. It is the extent to which the very forms of the Socialist

²³ For more on this debate, see Murav, Markish, and Nakhimovsky.

Realist world view, including its thirst for epic sagas and master plots of redemption, may have undermined Grossman's talent and made it impossible for him to write in a way that was not itself a kind of photographic negative of what he was trying to expose as false.

I accept Bethea's challenge. In the next two chapters, I will try to determine how Grossman's approaches to realism via a Socialist Realist lens have hindered his ability to transcend the Socialist and Stalinist literary frameworks that he criticizes. In various literary discussions conducted by characters in *Life and Fate*, Grossman denounces Stalinist literature as decadent and iconoclastic and instead turns to nineteenth-century Russian realists as models of how to best depict the human experience. Ironically, the models Grossman chooses, namely the epic sweep and moralism of Tolstoy and the humanist democracy of Chekhov, reveal the limits of Grossman's artistic and ideological vision and show him to be an author steeped in a Soviet understanding of classic Russian literature. In this chapter, I examine how Grossman's readings of the classics inform his own idea of how to write a realist text and best represent the human experience in *Life and Fate*.

Rejecting Socialist Realist Literary Form

In two surprising and distinct instances in *Life and Fate*, Grossman writes scathing critiques of the Soviet literary canon. One of Grossman's literary tools introducing his personal philosophies in *Life and Fate* is through Shtrum's social circle, which meets every evening to talk about politics, culture, and other serious issues. Such meetings take place in a small room in a communal apartment with "people who would never have met in Moscow": Madyarov, an historian, Sokolov, a mathematician in Shtrum's lab, Karimov, a Tatar translator, and Artelev, an

engineer (Grossman 273). In one key scene, the group discusses literature, presumably setting up Grossman's own thoughts about literature in the Soviet Union. The main proponent of Grossman's philosophy is Madyarov, who sweeps briefly through the nineteenth Russian literary tradition with criticisms and praises.²⁴ Madyarov compares Socialist Realism to the poets of the Russian Silver Age.

I am certain that there is no divide between Socialist Realism and the decadent movement. People have argued over the definition of Socialist Realism. . . . Socialist Realism is the affirmation of the uniqueness and superiority of the state; the decadent movement is the affirmation of the uniqueness and superiority of the individual. The form may be different, but the essence is one and the same—ecstatic wonder at one's own superiority. . . The decadents are indifferent to man—and so is the state. (282)

In another scene, Lyudmila's brother-in-law Krymov discusses literature with fellow prisoners—Dreling, a Menshevik, and Bogoleev, an art historian—in a cell in Lubyanka. Dreling compares Gorky's *Mother* to a religious icon, stating that "you only need ikons if you wish to enslave the working class. In your Communist ikon-case you have ikons of Lenin and ikons of the revered Stalin." Bogoleev, extends this critique, saying that Marxists in general are "deaf to poetry" (Grossman 632-3). True literary works should not be objects of worship—and those that are toe the line of propaganda—but something that moves the individual reader. It is clear that with *Life and Fate*, with its emphasis on the themes of humanity and kindness and its heavy reliance on intertextual references to both Western and Russian literature, Grossman tries to distance his

²⁴ Grossman explicitly introduces Madyarov as a philosophical voice in the book, as Shtrum notes that "listening to Madyarov...it seemed clear that all this [state rhetoric about history] would give way to a more powerful logic—the logic of truth" (277).

work as much as possible from Socialist Realist literary conventions. Instead, he turns to forms of nineteenth-century realism as reference points for describing everyday reality.

Cultural Myth and Soviet Readings of the Classics

The importance of Grossman's analyses of authors in the literary discussion depend not on the authors' actual text, but on what they would signify to Grossman as a Soviet intellectual. To some extent the notions of literature Grossman engages in this discussion are directly linked to Russian literary heritage as a cultural myth. According to Lyudmila Parts, cultural myth is a "construct employed by every culture to transform the past into a mode of explanation for the present...what matters in myth is not the reality of truth of events, but how they correspond to a collective's self-perception today" (4). Russian culture places a particularly heavy emphasis on literary heritage as a source of national pride and identity, which has created a mythical aura around national literature itself.

In the Russian literary myth, proper names of individual writers stand in for a set of ideas, philosophies, and personalities in Russian literature and culture at a given time. Pushkin, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Tolstoy, and Chekhov no longer represent the writers themselves, nor their actual works, but serve as signifiers for the concepts that culture has assigned to them. If Pushkin represents "national greatness and artistic perfection and freedom," for example, then Dostoevsky "is summoned when there is a need to set the stage for a philosophical discussion of Good and Evil. and other "eternal" questions" (Parts 9). But what do Grossman's favorites, Tolstoy and Chekhov stand for? Tolstoy's "function in the myth of Great Russian Literature is that of the great moralizer" or a "sage who holds all the answers", which, while appealing for the absolute moralism of official cultural doctrine during the Stalin years, became more problematic

once the authors of the Khrushchev-era began searching for ways to engage in more dialogue about the ideological path of their country. Chekhov's role "is most complex" due to the fact that Chekhov as a literary figure was still being canonized as a model for Soviet literature was being solidified (Parts 9). I will discuss the implications for varied readings of Chekhov later on.

Russian authors commonly utilize intertextual interactions with past works in the canon as a way to differentiate themselves within the existing dialogue of Russian literature. By utilizing these recognizable symbols, authors can engage with and modify cultural histories of these ideas (Parts 15).

Since cultural myths inform national and personal identities, it is unsurprising that the Soviet regime would utilize the cultural significance of the Russian literary myth in order to promote new identities for a new order. At around the same time that Bolshevik writers and officials were struggling to define literary conventions for state-published writing, they were also faced with the task of aligning these myths with proper Soviet ideology. Such ideologies were utilized in educational anthologies for both children and adult readers (educated, for example in a higher-level technical school) of the new regime. By teaching one set of anthologies of classics and a correct form of interpreting them, the State could not only formulate new ways of interpreting history (through myth), but also teach the reader a way of reading texts (Dobrenko, *State Reader* ch. 4).

By learning a correct way to read the classics in school, Soviet students of any age would learn a way to approach and interpret a literary text, starting with "'the author's' . . . basic idea,' 'the content of ideas,' and 'the ideological intention' " (Dobrenko, *State Reader* 162). This Soviet way of approaching reading in turn influences formations of a Soviet version of the literary myth. By the 1940s, for example, a distinctly Soviet reading of Chekhov, whose categorization

as a classic had been contested in Russian and Soviet literary circles since the symbolist era, had emerged into the critical canon (Parts ch. 3). While Tolstoy, as we have seen, remained a great moralizer so fitting of Stalinist-era epics, Chekhov, due to his notoriously apolitical stance, was promoted as an unconscious revolutionary: though he was a "Russian liberal", the state can forgive Chekhov because of his "patriotism, his interest in the lives of simple people, and the democratic nature of his works" (Parts 67, 75).

Finally, a special sort of literary myth-formation took place while training the new generation of Soviet writers. Since its formalization, official State writers have been informed about how to construct a text through special, standardized literature that would include special exemplars of literary material. These exemplars were deemed "model" literature and would influence the formation of Soviet literary aesthetics (Clark, *The Soviet Novel* 37). Such exemplars included classics of the Russian literary canon. As early as 1929, both Chekhov and Tolstoy were held up in tandem as examples for new Soviet prose writers, with Gorky encouraging them to "read Chekhov, read Tolstoy" to develop their aesthetics. Chekhov was used, for example, as the "master of the short story" (Parts 68).

Despite his active resistance to Socialist Realist aesthetics, Grossman's own reading of the 19th-century realists is heavily influenced by the myths of the Russian literary canon. Grossman would have been exposed to readings of Tolstoy as a great moral sage and Chekhov as a democrat, humanist, and master of the short story since the start of his literary career as a student at Moscow State University in 1929. In the coming sections I will look more closely at Grossman's treatment of Tolstoy and Chekhov and examine how these literary myths inform his readings of the classics and influence generic tensions in the book in general.

War and Peace, Realism, and Morality

For a Just Cause and even *Life and Fate* noticeably utilize both Tolstoyan war and epic tropes and aspects of the traditional Socialist Realist epic. Both novels function at first glance as clear rewrites of *War and Peace*; Grossman himself brought *War and Peace* to the Stalingrad front and read it several times during the war (Chandler xviii). In their literary conventions, the books bear a far greater resemblance to Tolstoyan realism than to Socialist Realism: *For a Just Cause* was recognized in the Soviet press for its adherence to the Tolstoyan "epic sweep" (*epichnost'*) and its focus on Stalingrad as a patriotic symbol of the Soviet empire (Clark, "Epic Novels" 144). Like other World War II epics, it uses *War and Peace's* device of framing large spans of history through the experiences of one family and its connections (Clark, "Epic Novels"). *Life and Fate* pushes the similarities to *War and Peace* even further: not only does the novel focus on the Shaposhnikov family's saga during, before, and after the War (expanding *For a Just Cause's* scope to go years beyond the war in both directions), but it often segues into long philosophical statements about science and rationalism (which replace Tolstoy's philosophy of history), war, and the human experience. Narrative devices of the book also borrow significantly from *War and Peace*. Points of view shift rapidly and various episodes take place on the front and the home front. The book also includes extended Tolstoyan metaphors, perspectives panning in and out from a grand to individual scope, and entire chapters from the points of view of enemy soldiers and officers. One passage even evokes Napoleon looking over Borodino as it describes the war from Hitler's point of view.²⁵

²⁵ An example of Grossman's usage of Tolstoyan extended metaphor compares Nazi propaganda encouraging slaughter of Jews by local governments to a cattle-slaughtering procedure (213). To see an example of the "panning" technique see Part 2, Chapter 1 which describes a tank corps on its way to the Stalingrad front. The chapter written from Hitler's point of view is Part 3, Chapter 16.

Yet Grossman was hardly the only Soviet writer to model his war fiction on Tolstoy. Stalin himself began promoting *War and Peace* as an official model for patriotic literature as early as 1938 and Stalin saw in himself a Kutuzov protecting Moscow from invasion, with Hitler as a Napoleon figure (Clark, "Russian Epic Novels" 135). The patriotic name for the eastern front of the war, the Great Fatherland War (*Velikaia otechestvennaia voina*) was borrowed from the Napoleonic invasion of Russian soil. Even in an unofficial context, Soviet people looked to *War and Peace* to make sense of their reactions to everyday life during a "people's war" (Ginzburg 34). In this vein, *For a Just Cause* makes recurring comparisons with its characters' wartime hardships to the wartime experiences in *War and Peace*. In one passage Krymov, a Red Army officer and the husband of Viktor Shtrum's sister-in-law stops at Yasnaiia Poliana to visit Tolstoy's estate. In a reference to the book's realism, Krymov wonders to himself how "everything merged together, that which was happening now and that, which Tolstoy wrote in his book with such strength and such truth that the war that happened 100 years before had become a higher reality" (Grossman, *Za pravoe delo* bk.1: chap. 46).²⁶ He wonders if Tolstoy cried or suffered when writing scenes of the battle at Borodino. Krymov's reading of Tolstoy reflects Lidia Ginzburg's statement that Soviet people would use *War and Peace* to help them process their own emotions and experiences of a war on their home soil. Krymov's statement that the war of Tolstoy's epic had become elevated to a higher reality reflects the immortality that *War and Peace's* status had reached as a classic. Krymov's statement idealizes Tolstoy as the great writer-philosopher whose ideas, though a century old, inform the experiences of all

²⁶This example and its translation are my own: ". . . i vse kak by silos', to, chto proiskhodit seichas, segodnia, i to, chto opisano Tolstym v knige s takoi siloi i pravdoi, chto stalo vysshei real'nost'iu proshedshei sto let nazad voiny."

humanity. This in and of itself is an extension of the mythical status that *War and Peace* had gained as an epic.

Life and Fate is, like *For a Just Cause*, similar in form and style to *War and Peace*, but Grossman complicates the book's reading of Tolstoy, by making his characters aware of the role *War and Peace* plays with regards to propaganda and patriotic literature. Tolstoy, according to Madyarov:

made poetry out of the idea of a people's war. And the State has just proclaimed a people's war. Tolstoy's idea coincides with the interest of the state. And so—as Karimov would say — the magic carpet is whisked in. Now we have Tolstoy on the radio, we have literary evenings devoted to Tolstoy, his works are constantly being reprinted; he even gets quoted by our leaders. (Grossman 281)

The paradox of this statement is striking. Madyarov's critique of the usage of Tolstoy in state literature and propaganda appears in a novel that owes its structure and many of its devices to *War and Peace*, in a novel written for intended state publication. This passage thus calls into question the novel's very status as a *War and Peace*-type epic, as it calls into question the motives and aesthetics of its status as a socialist piece of fiction.

In fact, upon closer examination, some of the explicit *War and Peace* moments in the text operate in more complicated ways than they appear initially. Lyudmila's nephew Seryezha, for example, seems a descendant of Tolstoy's Nikolai Rostov—maturing from an innocent and patriotic boy to a man integrated into a battalion and familiar with the less glamorous side of war. But one of his encounters develops into a critique of the famous encounter between Pierre Bezukhov and the peasant Platon Karataev.

Part of Seryozha's initiation as a soldier is his adjustment to life at house 6/1, his living quarters in Stalingrad. For several pages, Seryozha reminisces about the skills and attributes of the members of his battalion, going through their positive characteristics and their professions (workers, scientists, teachers, musicians). The soldier who makes the greatest impression on Seryozha is Grekov, the captain and "house-manager", an erstwhile miner and construction foreman. Seryozha reflects on what he has learned from Grekov and the others. Seryozha

had been brought up among intellectuals; he could now see the truth of the faith his grandmother had repeatedly affirmed in simple working people. He was also able to see where his grandmother had gone wrong: in spite of everything, she had thought of the workers as simple (*ona vse zhe schitala prostykh liudei prostymi*).

²⁷ (Grossman 260)

Seryozha's thoughts about the simple people seem a jab at Pierre's relationship with Platon in *War and Peace*; while Pierre loves the simplicity of the peasant lifestyle and learns from it, he errs in the same way as Seryozha's grandmother; he sees the peasants as simple peasants first and foremost.²⁸ He learns from them not as fellow humans, but as the simpler class. Seryozha's thoughts have transcended this to a more egalitarian form of learning.

Indeed, despite the nobility of Tolstoy's moral system and the admirable realism of his prose, many of Grossman's characters in *Life and Fate* take issue with Tolstoy's philosophical system. The holy fool Ikonnikov-Morzh, a prisoner in a Nazi concentration camp, is one of the

²⁷ The repetition of the word *prostye* in the Russian text drives this categorization home, though oddly it also points to Seryozha's own categorization of the workers as simple. This sentence shows the paradox of a democracy; even with an egalitarian ideology, it is still nearly impossible to transcend signifying typologies such as class (simplicity) or ethnicity. We will see more instances of this in later analyses of Grossman's marginal heroes.

²⁸ Even the name *Grekov* bears parallels to the scene in *War and Peace*. *Grekov* refers to a person's Greek origins, whereas *Platon* is the Russian transliteration of Plato, the quintessential Greek philosopher.

novel's most morally upright characters; Nazi guards torture him at an interrogation, but Ikonnikov, as he is familiarly called, refuses to denounce his fellow inmates— and as a result he is executed.²⁹ In one of the earliest chapters of the novel, Ikonnikov explains that he believes in a moral system that "transcended class." Despite the impulse to have a moral system with defined notions of "Good" and "Evil", Ikonnikov points out that many terrible and inhumane acts have been carried out in the name of Good. "I do not believe in your 'Good'. I believe in human kindness" (Grossman 28). Ikonnikov's moral background is complex; he grew up in a family of Orthodox priests, pursued an education as a scientist instead, read Tolstoy's teachings, and eventually ended up in a peasant commune that practiced Tolstoyan teachings until he was sent to prison in early Stalinist years. However, when his fellow inmates compare his tone to a priest's or a Tolstoyan's, he confirms this by saying that he "used to be a Tolstoyan (*ved' ia byl tolstovtsem*)" (Grossman 27). Since Tolstoyans defined themselves by the moral code and spiritual way of life they possessed, Ikonnikov's reference to this faith in the past tense suggests that he no longer identifies himself with it ("Leo Tolstoy"). His code of kindness rather than set notions of "good" suggest that he has transcended or moved beyond his Tolstoyan beliefs, marking Tolstoy yet again as a good stepping stone for a quest for morality, but not the final stopping point.

Ikonnikov's problems with creating set definitions for "good" actions have a direct link to a later analysis of Tolstoy among Shtrum's circle. Madyarov claims that this is the problem with Tolstoy. While Tolstoy's admirable representations of national minorities in *Hadji Murat* and *The Cossacks* elevate him above the anti-Semitic Russian realist Dostoevsky, his portrayals

²⁹ Aside from this fact, Ikonnikov was imprisoned for helping Jews in his town and preaching against the Nazis, which presents us with a beacon of hope for moral citizens at times of war, even before we hear of the Nazi atrocities in later sections of the book.

aren't perfect. The even greater problem, Madyarov argues, is that his "doctrine of non-resistance to Evil is intolerant—and his point of departure is not man but God. He always wants the idea of goodness to triumph. True believers always want to bring God to Man by force; and in Russia they stop at nothing—even murder—to achieve this" (Grossman 283). According to Grossman's characters, Tolstoy fails to transcend artificial notions of right and wrong, self vs. other and while his design for an ethical world is inclusive of minority groups, it still labels them as inherently different. For Grossman's philosophy, while Tolstoy's morals are on the right track, they cannot be fully ideal because they still divide good people from bad. Such divisions have deadly potential, especially in the hands of totalitarian governments such as those of Stalin or Hitler.

This rejection of Tolstoy as a moralist again reflects an attachment to the Soviet Tolstoy myth. Soviet readers were taught to think of Tolstoy as a great moralist and sage and the preacher of absolute truths. For authors of the Khrushchev-era thaws, absolute truths were reminiscent of Stalinist repression and were no longer appealing. As a result, literary themes shifted from the idealism of "epic wholeness" that we see in Krymov's idealization of *War and Peace* in *For a Just Cause* to a recognition that "truth is complex", a poetics "not of wholeness and harmony, but of alienation, disintegration and confusion" (Clark, *The Soviet Novel* 231-2). As an attempt to move away from the parallels between the Tolstoy myth and Stalinist absolutism, Grossman perhaps over-generalizes in his criticisms of Tolstoyan truth, forgetting, for example, aesthetic devices such as omniscient narrative that give put even peasant Platon Karataev in dialogue with Pierre. But in the Soviet mind frame, even well into the eighties, as Parts points out, the Tolstoy myth is incompatible with moral uncertainty. Instead, Grossman

turns to Chekhov as a literary model of depicting humanist democracy and a lack of absolute truths.

The Chekhovian Moral Democracy

Grossman's characters look to Chekhov both for literary inspiration and a personal moral system. In more than one instance, characters will make value judgments about other characters based on whether or not they have read and/or appreciate Chekhov. Both Viktor Shtrum and Yevgenia Shaposhnikova make value judgments about spouses and lovers based on their love of Chekhov. Shtrum expresses anger that his wife Lyudmila feels indifferently towards Chekhov and hasn't read many of his stories, whereas the woman he loves, Masha Sokolova says one evening that Chekhov is her favorite writer (Grossman 281, 761).³⁰ Yevgenia recalls her former lover, Novikov, a tank corps commander, and the alienation she had felt to his very essence. As with Lyudmila, Novikov also has expressed "indifference" (*ravnodushie* again) towards Chekhov while preferring more morally and politically-oriented novelists Dreiser and Feuchtwanger (Grossman 761). Finally, Shtrum's mother, one of the most important moral voices of the book (as I will discuss in Chapter III) includes a volume of Chekhov stories with the few possessions she brings to the ghetto with her.

Madyarov, offers Chekhovian realism as a suitable moral and democratic alternative to Tolstoyan realism in the literary discussion. He argues that the Soviet authorities accept Chekhov into official canon because they do not understand him and that the elegance of his moral system is his devotion to portraying humans of all backgrounds and types as humans first

³⁰ While in the Chandler translation, it says that Grossman "resents" this behavior, the Russian "...on serdilsia na Liudmilu za ravnodushie," indicates that Viktor's feelings towards this indifference are much more hostile.

and foremost. "...let's put God and – all these grand progressive ideas – to one side....Let's begin with respect and love for the individual, or we'll never get anywhere. That's democracy, the still unrealized democracy of the Russian people" Chekhov is key for his subtlety and for his embracing of kindness and love for people as humans (Grossman 283). This appears to be Grossman's own moral code, as it is revisited throughout the book, in Ikonnikov's preachings on human kindness, on a passage on human kindness being one trait that defines us, and on multiple episodes of good deeds done by one "human" (the word *chelovek* is repeated over and over again for emphasis) who decide lives and fates of people.³¹ The words "humanity", "human being", and "kindness" are repeated so often that they almost become a mantra for the book. War and totalitarianism and strict moral codes can try to kill this aspect in people, but ultimately humans decide each others' fates. Grossman writes an epic of what he sees as a Chekhovian moral system, in which kindness, acceptance, and acknowledgement of many sorts of human experiences, including those of evil dictators like Hitler, are given a voice.

Officially, Madyarov's reading is, in spite of itself, in line with the Soviet reading of Chekhov as a humanist democrat, despite the fact that individual notions of democracy might vary. However, there is a second part to the Chekhov myth that complicates the official version. The intelligentsia class has traditionally identified with pieces of Chekhov's biographical personality: Chekhov as a certain type of imperfect, struggling, middle-class intellectual. The intelligentsia saw Chekhov as a human ideal, rather than as a divine genius, as some writers are portrayed. This, combined with his official aura as a "master" of a certain aesthetics, led to a certain striving amongst writers to emulate his philosophy. Vladimir Nabokov observes that,

³¹ The passage on human kindness can be found in Part 2, chapter 15. In one particular episode in which an old peasant woman who has lived through the famines rescues a runaway prisoner from starvation, Grossman writes "That day [Semyonov's] life and fate were decided not by the merciless forces of warring States. but by a human being" (557).

"[it] was quite a game among Russians to divide their acquaintances into those who liked Chekhov and those who did not. Those who did not were not the right sort" (qtd. in Parts 70). This exact discussion of Chekhov occurs in the minds of Yevgenia Shaposhnikova and Viktor Shtrum, indicating that they, and likely Grossman himself, are among the intellectuals who have been struck by this particular form of the Chekhov myth.

Grossman, though he rejects Soviet official truths and dislikes the restrictions that both Tolstoyan and Socialist Realist epic literary forms place on him, still conforms to a Soviet-informed mythical concept of Chekhov. Grossman both promotes Chekhovian prose and democracy in the philosophical discussions of *Life and Fate* and tries to emulate Chekhov's democratic style himself in the episodic nature of his writing.³² Unlike other writers of the sixties who were hesitant of absolute truths, Grossman still engages with classic modes of Soviet epic-novel-writing. Though he dismisses Tolstoy as coming short of a democratic moral ideal, his novels still depend heavily on the *War and Peace* epic framework. While Chekhov's form of democracy consists of detailed accounts of different kinds of people from all over the empire, the "democracy" in this form isn't embodied in an individual work, but in Chekhov's collection of short stories as a whole. Moreover, according to Clark, the sixties fiction that attempts to distance itself from concrete truths is often short in form.³³ And, while Grossman desperately tries to distance himself from Socialist Realism as a literary genre at many points in his novel, *Life and Fate*, though not subject to as many rules and codes as its predecessor, still consciously or unconsciously implements some of the most tried and true tropes of the Socialist literary culture. The very structure and authorial definition of *Life and Fate* pose a fundamental

³² Incidentally, Clark describes sixties-era Soviet novels short in nature and with "stream-of-consciousness narration or a series of disconnected fragments" including some novels "made up entirely of seemingly disconnected short pieces" (233).

³³ Clark, *The Soviet Novel* 233

problem: Grossman tries to take the short-story writer Chekhov as his moral model for writing an expansive Tolstoyan war epic, which, moreover, is supposed to conform to official literary conventions and pass censorship. That is a tall generic task. Where the novel succeeds and where it fails will be the subject of the next chapter, which returns to the question of the marginal hero: how is Grossman to fit *all* of the new Soviet Chekhovian heroes into a single novel?

Chapter III

Chekhovian Democracy in a Tolstoyan Epic: Clash of the Marginal

Heroes

Grossman's choice to present the Chekhovian democracy in an epic war novel leads to its own set of problems. Namely, the epic requires a single hero, whereas democracy inherently calls for equal attention to all participants. In other words, we might say that Grossman's novel suffers acutely from an imbalance between the "One" and the "Many," a tension that is in fact typical of the nineteenth-century realist novel (Woloch). After a brief introduction to Woloch's theorization of the relationship between major and minor characters in the novel, I turn first to the "Many" of *Life and Fate*, that is, to the dozens of minor, and often marginal, characters that embody Grossman's vision of a democratic Russia, and who all strive to be "heroes" in their own right. . In the second section of the chapter, I will examine the "One" of *Life and Fate*, namely the functional protagonist Viktor Shtrum. I propose that by looking at Grossman's writing through Woloch's Bakhtinian lens, I can show not only how Grossman's project of Chekhovian democracy ultimately fails, but also how Grossman successfully utilizes the Socialist Realist literary trope of the positive hero in order to bend and subvert the Socialist Realist novel in order to give a proper voice to marginal populations in the Soviet Union.

In his analysis of minor characters in the 19th-century novel, Alex Woloch discusses character development in terms of character-spaces, or the "particular and charged encounter between an individual human personality and a determined space and position within the narrative as a whole" and the character system, or "the arrangement of multiple and differentiated character-spaces—differentiated configurations and manipulations of the human figure—into a

unified narrative structure" (14). Character development gets torn between a character's role as a referent for the human experience, and between his role holding together the structure of the novel, based on interactions with other characters, setting, and other narrative structure. This problem becomes magnified with the introduction of the realist novel in the nineteenth-century, where "the tension between the one [hero] and the many becomes particularly pressing." In the realist novel, the author must communicate both the reality of the personal human experience in the psyche of a character, while at the same time being socially expansive and "casting a wide narrative gaze over a complex social universe" (Woloch 17-19).

However, in the novel, minor characters still function within a system. In order to hold a plot together, subordinate characters help define the hero's experience their actions and interactions with him. Subordinate characters are allegorical references by which the reader can compare and understand the hero's experience (Woloch 18). A successful realist novel transcends earlier narrative forms such as the epic or the romantic novel by acknowledging this relationship that minor characters have with narrative structure and questioning or drawing attention to its tensions:

The realist novel is infused with the sense that any character is a potential hero, but simultaneously enchanted with the freestanding individual, defined through his or her interior consciousness. In the paradigmatic character-structure of the realist novel, any character *can* be a protagonist, but only one character is.

(Woloch 31)

As a result, the author must choose which characters to prioritize. Minor characters can either fade into the background as "flat character[s]", in which "the character is smoothly absorbed as a gear within the narrative machine, at the cost of his or her own free interiority" or an explosive

character, who "grates against his or her position" as minor character and "is usually, as a consequence" of this narrative tension "wounded, exiled, expelled, ejected, imprisoned, or killed" (Woloch 25).

The emphasis on minor characters as individuals becomes more defined with the development of socially conscious realism in the nineteenth-century. The tension between the "One" protagonist in the novel and the "Many" minor characters becomes stronger as the author struggles to increase the scope of human experience while still maintaining the realism of the human psyche (Woloch 19). Grossman's prose resembles such socially conscious novels, a fact that is unsurprising, since so much of *Life and Fate* sees itself as based on social democracy and on nineteenth-century Russian realism. Grossman's attachment to democracy and realistic portrayals of all of his marginal heroes will ultimately impact his success at balancing the minor character's two functions.

"Probuite, okhvatite vsekh geroev!"

During his speech promoting Chekhovian democracy, Madyarov challenges his companions to "just try and remember all Chekhov's different heroes [*probuite, okhvatite vsekh ego geroev*]! Probably only Balzac has ever brought such a mass of different people into the consciousness of society [*obshchestvennoe soznanie*]" (Grossman 282). Madyarov sees Chekhov's work as a collection of heroes, one so vast that it is hard to wrap one's mind around it.³⁴ To illustrate his point, Madyarov repeatedly launches into endless lists of Chekhovian "heroes," emphasizing their diversity, before being interrupted.

³⁴ Thus Madyarov's usage of the word *okhvatite*, which encourages his conversational companions to not only remember, but try to wrap their minds around the concept of such a sheer volume of heroes.

Just think! Doctors, engineers, lawyers, teachers, lecturers, landlords, shopkeepers, industrialists, nannies, lackeys, students, civil servants of every rank, cattle-dealers, tram-conductors, marriage-brokers, sextons, bishops, peasants, workers, cobblers, artists' models, horticulturalists, zoologists innkeepers, gamekeepers, prostitutes, fishermen, lieutenants, corporals, artists, cooks, writers, janitors, nuns, soldiers, midwives, prisoners on the Sakhalin Islands. . . (Grossman 282).

Madyarov's list of heroes from individual Chekhov works is replicated in the plot of *Life and Fate* itself. Grossman similarly tries to envelop (*okhvatit'*) a whole host of characters, including pilots, doctors, civil servants of every rank, engineers, scholars, children, old Bolsheviks, prisoners of war, political prisoners, army officers and privates of every rank on both the German and Soviet sides, German nannies, pilots, mystics, Tatars, Kalmyks, Ukrainians, and Jews. The list goes on, as the appendix to the English publication of *Life and Fate* neatly indicates. Many of these "heroes" get their own small subplots in the war epic, to such an extent that Tolstoy's sprawling *War and Peace* seems like a model of tight narrative structure. Though both books use a family tree as the binding entity for various lines of subplot, it is easy in *Life and Fate* to lose sight of familial connections; in other words, Grossman's prose often leaves the reader wondering how a particular subplot about a particular pilot or Soviet official ties back to the Shtrum and Shaposhnikov families, or even their social circle. Perhaps this is due to the difficulty of integrating a full scope of democratic and ethnically diverse heroes into one contained familial structure. Grossman attempts to create a Chekhovian world in an epic novel form, trying, like Madyarov's Chekhov, to cover, or *okhvatit'* all types of heroes in one epically Soviet space.

Further, even though Grossman's analysis of Chekhov's work departs from the official Soviet depiction of Chekhov as an "unconscious revolutionary," his reading of humanism itself (and Chekhov as a humanist) takes on a Soviet bent.³⁵ Moreover, just as he accepts and reinterprets the official Soviet literature of Chekhov as a humanist, Grossman portrays Chekhov with revolutionary language, though he envisions a different type of revolution than the sort depicted in the Stalinist canon about Chekhov. According to Madyarov, Chekhov "brought such a mass of people into the consciousness of society" (Grossman 282). As I have discussed in Chapter I, bringing consciousness (*soznatel'nost'*) to the masses is a crucial component of Leninist thought and one of the foundational threads of Soviet literary narrative structure. Grossman argues that Chekhov makes the masses conscious of the many sorts of people who live in the world and of their inherent equality as human beings. This sort of revolution of bringing humanity into consciousness does not directly correlate to intellectuals teaching the masses to become politically conscious people. However, according to Grossman's characters Chekhov revolutionizes humanism and democracy by bringing such a diverse cast of sympathetic characters into mass consciousness (Grossman 282).

Clark argues that Grossman's war fiction differentiates itself from other Soviet war fiction due to its emphasis on international socialism, or cosmopolitanism (Clark, "Ehrenburg and Grossman" 607-8). Clark suggests that Grossman's international and leftist background (his family's origins in the Bund, his education in Switzerland, his coming of age in the more cosmopolitan 20s), and the abundance of references to the Bund, Mensheviks and Socialist

³⁵ As Parts notes, the Chekhov stories that made it into the official Soviet were generally only "those that presented 'a sad picture of Russia . . . —a picture of ignorance, poverty, prejudice and suspicion'" (64). Grossman, on the other hand focuses on all variations of Chekhov's characters. Grossman again distances his reading from the Soviet reading of Chekhov through Madyarov, saying that the Soviet state "simply doesn't understand Chekhov—that's why it tolerates him. There's still no place in our house for democracy—for a true humane democracy"(284).

Revolutionaries, even in his earliest works, indicate his commitment to a more cosmopolitan/international form of Communism (Clark, "Ehrenburg and Grossman" 616).³⁶

In *Life and Fate*, the pseudo-Chekhovian model of an all-inclusive humanism provides the ideal organ in which Grossman can create an internationalist socialist representation of the Soviet Union. Rather than focusing on the metaphoric communal apartment of patriotic nationalities, Grossman, through a Chekhovian democracy, attempts to represent people first and foremost as Soviet citizens. Only after this does he seek to address the identities shaped by their careers, ethnicities, and other "typologies" that are used to label and separate people.³⁷

Grossman produces this in a war epic in which a reader can find all types of Soviet citizens and can take pride in the diversity of these Communists who fought for their country.

In the next pages, I will use several of Grossman's minor, marginal characters as case studies to examine Grossman's usage of the Chekhovian character model. Each of the three characters I have selected represents a different function that *Life and Fate's* minor characters can possess. The first marginal character, Katya Vengrova, is an example of how Grossman creates a miniature Socialist Realist plot for everyone and how her experience as a female soldier complicates the traditional narrative arc of a war hero. The second character, a Jewish Pilot named Korol is an example of a marginal hero that is added to fulfill quotas on nationality even in the most minor episodes. The third character, a Tatar academic named Akhmet Karimov,

³⁶ Clark mentions that some of these groups are presented as mentor-figures in Grossman's earlier, more Socialist Realism-oriented prose, indicating that representations of diverse communist groups is important to Grossman.

³⁷A discussion of Stalin-era national policy also takes place in the literary circle, when Karimov, the Tatar points out that despite supposed state and cultural autonomy, national minority republics are still in debt: ". . . it's Moscow that collects our harvest and Moscow that sends us to prison." (Grossman 285)

illuminates how even the most structurally successful minor characters are sometimes undermined by the author's need to make them significant.

Katya Vengrova ("The Girl Soldier")

Katya Vengrova is a young Moscow woman who has enlisted in the Red Army and is stationed in House 6/1 in Stalingrad. Since the novel switches focus from character to character, often within pages of each other, the Grossman presents the reader with two highly distinct images of Katya in rapid succession: her notion of herself and how her fellow soldiers see her.

For a minor character, Grossman provides Katya with an extremely detailed background. Soon after being introduced to the front in House 6/1, the reader learns that Katya had a fairly typical Soviet childhood, raised by a single mother in a communal apartment, envying the bourgeois class, and coming to consciousness via war.³⁸ While Katya's actual motivation for enlisting in the Red Army is never fleshed out, Grossman presents the event as a turning point, that not only changes others' attitudes towards her, but also her attitude towards life itself. Katya's choice to embark into the public sphere and serve her country changes the course of her life. The night before she leaves, "everything had been reversed", as Katya's mother suddenly confides in her as an adult and Katya learns that "the world of the human soul suddenly seemed so vast as to make even the raging war seem insignificant" (Grossman 245). Katya's initiation as a hero, who leaves "like millions of others, both young and old" in order to serve for some greater cause, also gives her life purpose, thus enriching her understanding of humanity. Katya, with her Soviet upbringing embarks on the dual journey of the positive hero described by Clark

³⁸ Katya's upbringing in a single mother family is a familiar trope in Socialist Realism, with the father figure usually being replaced by Stalin, or in later texts, by an Old Bolshevik, or similar ideological mentor (Clark *The Soviet Novel* 114, 226). Grossman includes his own criticism of this model by revealing that Katya's father, after leaving her mother to raise her, was sent to a camp during the purges and disappeared. Thus, the father Stalin imposes fatherlessness in Katya's private life.

in her own miniature version of the master plot. Katya must fulfill the public task of serving in the Red Army as a young Soviet citizen and at the same time must resolve the tensions from her childhood unhappiness to gain insights about life and humanity, her private task of gaining *consciousness* (Clark, *The Soviet Novel* 162).

Katya's own impressions of the war are not particularly gendered, but rather give the impression that she could be any young soldier, male or female. Her experience in the army is reminiscent of that of the male soldier in, for example, *War and Peace*:

All this no longer surprised her. She knew that the machine guns in the wall were Degterevs; that the captured Walther took eight bullets, that it was powerful but difficult to aim; that the greatcoats in the corner belonged to soldiers who had been killed and that the corpses hadn't been buried very deep—the general smell of burning blended with another smell that had already become all too familiar. . . (Grossman 242)

Yet Katya's commanders immediately distinguish her as an outsider when she arrives: "They brought with them (*dostaval*) several boxes of ammunition, hand-grenades, a radio set and a very young operator, a girl (*devushku-radistku*)" (Grossman 240). In this passage, Katya is placed in the house as a functional member of the war effort. She arrives with ammunition and a translator; the Russian word *dostaval* indicates that Katya, like the ammunition, is something that was obtained by the battalion. Therefore, even before she is even given a voice (in the passage cited above), the soldiers of the all-male battalion mark Katya as different from themselves. Katya is immediately coded as a sex object and becomes the object of scrutiny amongst most of the men in the unit. Her battalion mates approach her using flattery and yet also undermine her function in the public sphere through qualifying statements: "You may be a girl," says one soldier, "but at least you can understand: that's a reconnaissance plane flying over the

Volga...But the poor stupid hare can't make out anything at all" (Grossman 249). Katya's gender marks her as alien to the war and undermines any skill set she may possess. Women cannot possibly understand war as men do, and thus Katya is not considered to be a real member of the battalion. Instead, Katya becomes an object possessed *by* the battalion. The male soldiers seem to think that, like the ammunition, Katya was supplied to the battalion for their use. Grossman emphasizes that, "during the few quiet moments, the men engaged in a long and detailed discussion of Katya's physical appearance" including her "tits" (*biust, sisiataiia*) "legs like a stork, no arse worth speaking of, and great cow-like eyes" (Grossman 251). Most notable is the comparison of Katya's features to animals. This indicates that Katya, as the lone woman on the battalion, is not quite human in the eyes of the male soldiers.

In fact, the objectification of Katya's otherness in the private sphere of soldier life (i.e. free time) leads to both a disruption of her public task as a radio transmitter and to a violation of her own personal rights. Later in the same chapter, Grekov, the house manager who is fixated on Katya purposefully ignores orders from Headquarters, "knock[s] Katya's hand off the switch" in order to disconnect her from headquarters, and rapes her.³⁹ Katya, who sees herself as a Soviet citizen fighting for her country, cannot fulfill her job of serving the Red Army due to perceptions by Russian men of her Otherness. In the case of Battalion 6/1, Katya's marginalization occurs primarily during the Soldiers' downtime, during everyday life, or *byt*, the private sphere and not the public sphere, where Katya is integrated as a full member of the Red Army.

The rest of Katya's plot fades into a love story with Seryozha Shaposhikov. Grossman constantly reminds the reader of the pair's presence on the front, with bombs going off in the

³⁹ This is not stated, but heavily implied, due to Grekov's focus on Katya's body, his fantasies about her, and the final line in which Katya cries and Grekov says "I'm sorry Katyusha" and "took her by the hand" (252-3).

background as they discuss love or embrace. At the climactic moment for Katya and Seryozha, the two consummate their relationship in the dark of a battlefield. The setting of the act, combined with the innocence of the relationship (Katya is the first girl whose hand Seryozha has held) define the function of the relationship for the book's philosophical message. Love, in its innocence, can exist anywhere, even on the battlefield. Soon after this, however, the plot shifts back to other characters and by the third part of the novel, the Katya and Seryozha are not mentioned again, leaving Katya's struggle as a female soldier and her private fate unresolved.

Katya is the least minor of the minor characters I address, but her plotline is typical of many of Grossman's more fleshed out minor characters. While her backstory is very detailed and her life develops into a sort of miniature master plot, it fades in and out of action and ultimately disappears in a dissatisfying way. This leaves the reader confused about a character's ultimate fate, and its links to the main plot.

Viktorov and Korol ("The Pilots")

Most of *Life and Fate's* episodic subplots connect back to the Shaposhnikov family. However, many of these familial connections become increasingly vague, as Grossman introduces love interests, friends, or colleagues for his characters, whose lives become fodder for more analysis. One example of such a subplot is the fate of Lieutenant Viktorov, a member of a fighter squadron and the lover of Alexandra Shaposhnikova's granddaughter Vera (Lyudmila's niece). Viktorov mainly appears in Vera's imagination, giving the reader the psychological experience of waiting for a loved one on the front. Grossman introduces Viktorov and his flight squadron before mentioning his relationship with Vera. While the character quickly becomes a private shadow, or memory for Vera, his squadron's status as heroes must be glorified first. As

with Katya, the text immediately introduces the squadron with typical characteristics of the positive hero.

Since the early thirties, pilots were promoted in Soviet literature as "aviation heroes", who started with positive aspects of spontaneity, such as "high spirits, reckless daring, and indefatigability." Through journeys of flight, their personalities would be tempered, as they learned discipline while setting records or achieving some unprecedented feat with the help of a mentor figure (Clark, *Soviet Novel* 125-6). In addition, the aviator's ability to conquer spaces, to leap into the sky, they became "symbolic heroes" who literally leap "off the mundane ground of the feasible" to "attain such fantastic heights of production" and progress (137). These heroes were conflated with the traditional Slavic fairy tale trope of the *bogatyr*, a mythical warrior who could perform "amazing feats" and possessed a high-spirited daring (138).

Interestingly, Grossman's aviators confirm their status as initiated aviation heroes through similar tropes. Viktorov finds a sublime state of both wonder and discomfort when he finds himself in the woods outside his squadrons' quarters. Though he finds sensory input such as "the rustling of the trees" as "somehow disturbing" or even alarming (in the Russian text, they *trevozhili ego*), he also finds a naïveté in the setting's ancient past. He is reminded how "the Grey Wolf had run through these forests" and "Alyonushka had stood and wept on the very bank along which Viktorov was now walking" (Grossman 159).⁴⁰ Viktorov first thinks about the primeval qualities of the woods and compares them with modern life when he is in flight above the landscape. Learning to know the world from above has given Viktorov and other pilots new perspective on the difficulties of conquering nature, and in doing so, it has allowed Viktorov to

⁴⁰ The Grey Wolf is a reference to the wolf that the fairy tale hero Tsarevich Ivan rode on his own journey.

compare himself with fairytale heroes (like the Bogatyr) and relate to the ambivalent feelings that the wild spontaneity can cause.⁴¹

Grossman's aviators have already achieved many of their public goals in the air. Right before departing for the front, they feel at home only in this sublime nature, as they recount the battles that initiated them as heroes who have rescued friends from burning fuselage and shot down enemy planes. The war has tempered their emotions, but they still live in the air. As the pilots are sent out to their final task, air battle at the Stalingrad front, Viktorov says his greetings and farewells from the sky. With a cheerful "they were off" (or "let's go", based on the Russian *poshli*), Viktorov bids farewell to the woods from the air as he heads into battle ready to face his fate (Grossman 174). It follows that just as Viktorov is an initiated hero, so are his squadron-mates, who have seen the same deaths and battled with the same courage. There is a broad complication, however, to the four brief chapters dedicated to Viktorov's squadron. While three of the chapters focus on the psychological experiences of the pilots and on their heroism at war, the remaining chapter segues off into a discussion of nationality and prejudice.

Unlike many of Grossman's marginal characters, Junior Lieutenant Korol has little back-story other than being labeled as the youngest pilot of the squadron and than his general categorization as a pilot-hero. During an anti-Semitic exchange about the squadron's Commissar, Berman, several pilots attempt to defend their Jewish friends, stating that "every nation had its villains" and that Korol, a Jew, is a "splendid person to have as a mate. It's good to

⁴¹ Clark notes the ambivalence with which nature is portrayed in Socialist Realism. On the one hand, a hero's "closeness to nature seems to be a major criterion for establishing that a protagonist's spontaneity is positive", whereas on the other hand it can prove a major obstacle for achieving the hero's dual goals (*Soviet Novel* 164-5).

know there's someone you can rely on at your tail" (165).⁴² To this, one pilot protests that Korol can't possibly be a Jew, due to his heroism and trustworthiness in the air. "He's one of us. In the air I trust him more than I trust himself" (165). It is impossible for this pilot to imagine that Korol is simultaneously a Soviet hero and a national minority (specifically a Jew). Korol seems to be conscious of this fact; when interrogated by his fellow squadron members about his nationality, he expresses some embarrassment (*smutitsia*) before confirming his Jewishness.. Even verbal confirmation is not enough, however. Rather than accepting this difference and moving on, the other pilots now look for physical differences to distance Korol from themselves and place him into the category of "other." In two separate instances, these attempts incite a violent response from Korol. When asked if he is circumcised, he tells the pilots to go to hell. When one pilot asks " I suppose you want to be off to Berdichev, your very own Jewish capital (*svoiu evreiskuiu stolitsu*), Korol reacts with violence, his "dark eyes" turning "black with rage" (Grossman 167). Korol's demeanor changes from that of a "spoiled . . . little child" (*izbalovannyi mal'chik*) who is the subject of affectionate teasing to a this mad ("*beshenno*") state, the result of having been demoted by his friends from heroic pilot and comrade to an outsider with his own people and mock-capital (Grossman 163, 167). Korol's struggle to assimilate and to accomplish his task of becoming an enlightened military pilot has been diminished the second his marginal identity is revealed. Now that his Jewishness is out in the open, he must do more than fulfill his duties as an enlightened pilot defending the motherland; he must also prove himself as an equal to his comrades.

After the pilots depart for the front lines of Stalingrad, nothing else is said from their point of view. Only over 400 pages later does the reader learn that Lieutenant Korol "was shot

⁴² The word used in this passage is *evrei*, meaning most of the squadron is trying to avoid the blatant anti-Semitism of the word *zhid*.

down" and Viktorov's plane set on fire. Their plots are thus resolved with heroic deaths, reaffirming Korol's hero status (Grossman 611). Like so many other minor characters in the novel, Viktorov and Korol vanish suddenly and inexplicably from the plot. While Korol's struggle with his Jewishness is a striking anecdote within the story, the actual episode seems superfluous and repetitive. Though Korol's shame at his Jewishness and the speech Commissar Berman gives about national pride and friendship of the peoples are apt commentaries on anti-Semitism, this issue has already been addressed multiple times through plot developments with Shtrum, and other various Jewish characters who are killed in the Holocaust. Korol's presence in the squadron, struggle with a Jewish identity, and tragic death all read like an awkward attempt by Grossman to fulfill some sort of national quota in even the most trivial of war anecdotes. Even Viktorov himself seems a side thought, merely the personification of the father of Vera Spiridinova's child. The passage therefore becomes forgettable and distracting in a sea of plots and heroes.

Karimov ("The Tatar Intellectual")

The relationship between Viktor Shtrum (Jewish, but who before the war never thought about his nationality as anything particularly significant) and his friend Karimov, a Tatar academic famous for translating western classics into his native Tatar, is striking in its tensions. Many of the descriptions of Karimov are filtered through Viktor's thoughts and impressions. Viktor himself marks his friend as "other" in the description of him. Karimov is an "ugly man with a pock-marked face. His swarthy [*smuglyi*] skin made his hair look still greyer, while his grey hair made his skin look still swarthier. [*ot sediny smuglost' kazalas' gushshe*]" (Grossman 272). Karimov is not only set apart in his homeliness, but his skin-tone itself is described as a substance. His gray hair thickens the swarthiness of his complexion, as if his Tatar skin was

poured onto him. Likewise, Karimov's intelligence and knowledge of Russian culture is treated as a surprise: "He spoke Russian very correctly, and only the most attentive listener could detect his slight oddities of pronunciation and syntax" (272).

Only in the next paragraph does the reader learn that Karimov has prestige: a dacha in the Crimea, French education, and fame in the academic community. This same paragraph clarifies the effect of the Great Patriotic War on Karimov; he has lost a wife and daughter. Karimov's integration as a Tatar into Soviet society is underemphasized. Instead the narrator notes that if a Russian-speaker was attentive *enough*, he could see the non-Russianness of Karimov's speech. Karimov, despite his knowledge of Russian and assimilation into elite Soviet culture lacks something, even in the eyes of his friend and fellow minority Shtrum. Karimov is not developed enough to reveal his private goals, but publically he is already established as a successful Soviet citizen.⁴³ Despite the accomplishment of this public goal, even before his introduction into *Life and Fate's* plot, Karimov's Tatariness alienates him from interlocutors.

Interestingly, though Shtrum sees Karimov as different from himself, Russians around them often conflate their experiences as intellectuals and national minorities. A librarian at the institute introduces Shtrum and Karimov to each other before they even meet. Later, Karimov indicates that he has even been questioned about tiny details of Shtrum's life. When he asks why Shtrum would tell him such things, the officers merely respond "You understand. You're a Tatar, he's a Jew" (Grossman 728).

Shtrum and Karimov's friendship also takes a strange and somewhat underdeveloped form. While Shtrum can supposedly "talk to [Karimov] about what he couldn't even talk about

⁴³ By the post-war era, positive heroes were already being portrayed as middle-aged academics and intellectuals and knowledge of culture was crucial to a hero's Soviet consciousness (Clark, *The Soviet Novel* 196-7)

with his wife or his daughter" and feels that in Karimov's presence, his "inner world suddenly ceases to be mute and isolated", Karimov plays an extremely minor role in Shtrum's own plotline and in the novel as a whole (Grossman 273). In fact, the only times Karimov appears apart from this initial introduction are times in which Shtrum's circle discuss problems of national minorities, or in which Shtrum faces his own Jewish identity. In one scene, Karimov visits Shtrum at home to discuss news from a Tatar friend who had returned from the front. Almost immediately, the conversation becomes clouded by Shtrum's internal comparison of Karimov's Tatariness with his own Jewishness. Shtrum notices the ways both Karimov's face and Jewish faces have subtly noticeable physical features that reveal their minority status, "at odd moments" changing their faces from "the usual Slavonic mould" into either "that of a Mongol" or "Jewish origins" (Grossman 360-1). Shtrum compares Karimov's mastery of the Tatar language and his ability to communicate with fellow Tatars with his own incomprehension of Yiddish and his reliance on Russian to talk with other Jews. When Karimov expresses the possibility of his wife and daughter's liberation and return to Kazan, Grossman is reminded of the impossibility of his mother's return from her death by the Nazis and by the fact that the Jews bear a different status to the Germans than the Tatars.

During the literary discussion, while Karimov discusses the fate of Tatars and Jews in literature as a shared struggle for national minorities, the dialogue that follows emphasizes the unique status of the ethnic republic: " '...You've got your own State now... You've got your own Institutes, your own schools, your own operas, your own books. You've got newspapers in Tartar. . .'"(Grossman 285). While these markers of Soviet national politics do not equal national autonomy, as Karimov points out, they themselves are a reminder of Shtrum's unequal situation as a Jew. While the Tatars and other national minorities have official cultural artifacts and

territories, Shtrum as a Jew lacks these concrete signifiers of national identity. As Jew, Russians label him as Other and group him with Karimov and other national minorities, but as an assimilated Soviet Jew, he lacks the unity of a community that national minorities with their own territories are provided.

Karimov, of the characters I have discussed, perhaps best fulfills his structural role as a minor character in Woloch's sense, as he brings out and defines the struggles of the protagonist. However, Karimov's status falters when Grossman exaggerates the role he plays in Shtrum's life. Karimov is not, as Grossman's text asserts, a major player in Shtrum's own hero journey, and the fact that Grossman defines him as such makes his lack of development almost distracting to his purpose. Rather than focusing on Shtrum's development, the reader is left to wonder where Shtrum's good friend has disappeared to and hears fragments of Karimov's life experience that often seem irrelevant. By trying to appear democratic and elevating Karimov's status past the one it actually plays in the text, Grossman undermines Karimov's very real textual function.

Hero Tasks and Identity Negotiation

The marginal heroes in *Life and Fate* face a two-fold problem. In an attempt to create a Chekhovian democracy, Grossman seeks to elaborate the stories of each character as much as possible, to separate himself from a Socialist Realist tradition which affirms the greatness of the Soviet state, and instead emphasize the humanity of each person in his literary world. The choice to present a democratic depiction of the Soviet Union in a Soviet war epic, however, requires an emphasis on a holistic depiction of Soviet war experiences. Having served at the front as a Red Army journalist, Grossman was already well versed in how to officially depict experiences of the war by the people and perhaps, as an official reporter who had been subject to

the requirements of war censors, perhaps Grossman's literary vocabulary already associated official war literature with an overarching emphasis on heroism.⁴⁴ So on the one hand, Grossman attempts to present each Soviet citizen as having heroically endured the war or some other external struggle. In this sense, he tends to revert to Socialist realist tropes for heroes, in their occupations (Korol as a pilot, a typical Stalinist representation of the new and pragmatic Soviet man), and their actions (fighting in the Battle of Stalingrad, translating iconic cultural texts for the people) (Clark 125, 199).⁴⁵

On the other hand, an overemphasis on representing each ethnicity in the Soviet Union leads to complications in the plots of these heroes. For Grossman, it is essential that in a democratic text, his heroes represent the full ethnic scope of Soviet citizens, especially as the war was focused so specifically on *Russian* patriotism (Service 290). Yet this sort of approach tends to lead Grossman to fall back on a sort of awkward quota system that is typical of the discourse of multinational Socialist Realism, peppering certain subplots with a Jew, others with an Uzbek, others with a German, amidst a sea of ethnic Russians (Slezkine). Grossman's Soviet Union inadvertently begins to resemble the communal-apartment approach to nationalism that his characters so dislike. As I have shown, this approach works elegantly as a way to question the way that ethnic labels separate and alienate people, preventing them from completing the archetypal heroic tasks that male Russian heroes do without question. Yet the ethnic bent for

⁴⁴ The Soviets actually utilized heroism as a political method to garner support from the people. For example, Amir Weiner writes of the Soviet attempt to "reconstruct the pantheon of heroes" to gain back support from the peasant populations during the war. A former enemy of the state could be restored as a good Soviet citizen by fighting at the front. (62-70, 365). Grossman's portrayal, then, of Soviet participants in the war as heroic is uniform with the myth-formation of the war years.

⁴⁵ The Battle of Stalingrad was one of the most common tropes of World War II heroism, whereas culture and intellectualism became a popular trope of the rise of culture in 1950s Soviet literature (Clark 201-2)

the minor characters decidedly complicates the small plots that Grossman gives his marginal heroes. The marginal hero must not only complete what Clark calls the typical "dual goals" of both completing a public task (fighting a war, translating a text) and a personal journey from spontaneity to consciousness as a Soviet citizen, but she must also prove herself to her Russian counterparts as a true Soviet hero in spite of her marginal status (Clark 162). Therefore, the marginal hero must negotiate her marginal identity in addition to completing her other duties in the master plot.

This fact alone need not pose a narrative problem; in fact, this additional goal of identity negotiation could be seen as an intriguing way to complicate the typical positive hero's journey. However, in *Life and Fate* the reader rarely gets the opportunity to see the goals of the novel's various heroes met, nor are any of the case study characters fully integrated into the plot framework. The lives and fates of Katya, Korol, and Karimov disappear into the large volume of text and wide array of characters and settings.

Grossman's marginal heroes take on the function of Woloch's explosive minority character, who grates against her position in the narrative structure and as a consequence must be expelled from it. His emphasis on representing each type of Soviet citizen as a hero, of representing a long list of types as equally human, results in a narrative conflict. Instead of creating one central protagonist, Grossman attempts to give textual character space to dozens of them, developing detailed personalities, goals, dreams, and background stories for each of them. Yet the realist novel generically requires an emphasis on only a small number of protagonists in order to maintain a narrative's structural integrity. Grossman's marginal characters, unable to sustain their position as equal heroes in an epic (and simultaneously realist) war novel, disappear into the volume of the book, only occasionally and randomly reappearing to prove their existence

in the Soviet empire once again. While individual characters and their struggles are memorable, for the most part, the sheer number of heroes fighting for narrative space makes the novel's structure fall short, and, as Bethea writes, "something is lost" to the overall message of Grossman's novel.⁴⁶

Generic Setbacks: Limitations of a Socialist Realist Worldview

Grossman's inability to successfully flatten his minor characters and integrate them into one cohesive narrative structure indicates the generic limitations of his worldview. Bakhtin defines genre as a way of visualizing reality, or how humans place language with abstract mental conceptions. A person's way of verbalizing perception is based on his ideological environment, or how he has learned to conceptualize the world. Genre and perception have a symbiotic relationship. While one's perception of the world can change to form new genres (as the epic transformed into the novel), learning new genres can also expand one's worldview and teach one to see the world in a new way. Genres are "combinations of specific blindneses and insights" (Morson & Emerson, 275-6). A person or society's ability to negotiate the world via certain methods depends on that person's or society's understanding of the world, as influenced by culture: "the varieties of the dramatic, lyrical, and epic genres are determined by [the] direct orientation of the word as fact, or, more precisely, by the word as a historic achievement in its surrounding environment" (Bakhtin & Medvedev 131).

Grossman was raised on a Socialist Realist ideology. He became a writer as part of his internationalist Communist beliefs in the first wave of writers trained in the Socialist Realist

⁴⁶ Woloch describes this phenomenon, when a minor character does not get flattened or drowned out of a narrative as a situation when "the minor character emerges only out of the *wreck* of the text as a whole" (38)

tradition (Garrard 101). By 1928, Grossman was already publishing articles in *Pravda* and traveling on youth trips to the peripheries of the empire, such as Uzbekistan to teach himself about the new communist ideology (Garrard 81). This was typical for young writers of the 20s, who were "infected with the passion of [the] 'mad-chase'" of the revolution and bent on the momentum of forward motion towards a new era, rather than reflecting on the past (Dobrenko, *State Writer* 116).⁴⁷ Grossman was initiated into the Socialist Realist literary worldview just its conventions were being defined; his worldview was shaped as he learned to write. Thus, though he strives for *Life and Fate* to transcend Socialist Realism in its content and structure, Grossman is still ingrained in a Socialist Realist generic reality.

Though Grossman has lofty goals for *Life and Fate*, his generic worldview limits him from realizing them. The literary discussion at the Sokolov's apartment introduces two main literary problems for the novel. Grossman, through Madyarov, scorns Socialist Realist content as self-indulgent in favor of the party, yet he still places himself in charge of the task of writing a *War and Peace* structured epic realist novel for a World War II Soviet empire. As a *podtsenzurnyi* writer of the 60s, he reaches into the past outside of Socialist Realism and looks to 19th century realist forms in Tolstoy and Chekhov as models for his literature.⁴⁸ In many ways this fails because both of Grossman's chosen genres of Tolstoyan novel and Chekhovian democratic anecdotes clash with one another and cannot peacefully coexist. Further, Grossman's own Soviet way of looking at the world, his so-called Socialist Realist genre, affects his reading

⁴⁷ Grossman's choice to become a writer in order to make the country a better place was thus very common for young intellectuals and his formative years as a writer were spent developing specifically as an ideological writer rather than a technical one. In fact, for 20s Komsomol writers, Dobrenko notes that it "was enough to see a 'potential' *writer*" in a young person's work, i.e. ideology with a creative bent, that could later develop technically (173).

⁴⁸ Parts mentions sixties "young prose" as another movement that references the nineteenth-century Russian realist tradition. (74)

of what these 19th century genres should be. Grossman, even as an internationalist, who believed in adapting communist teachings for different sorts of communities, shows an uncomfortable attachment to national labels.

This Soviet tendency to distinguish between national and professional "types" leads to a tense sort of pressure in Grossman's prose. If Grossman wants to represent the sort of "unrealized Russian democracy" that his characters see in Chekhov, he is obligated to truly capture and represent all of the different types of people in the Soviet Union. Rather than writing each of his heroes as he reads Chekhov's heroes ("first and foremost we are all of us human beings") Grossman is still attached to the secondary labels for his characters, leading in an overwhelming flux of types in his text. In addition, Grossman, having grown up as a Bolshevik idealist as his writing was formed, is solidly attached to having positive heroes of some form in his texts.⁴⁹ While definitions of heroism for *Life and Fate* are far more subtle than in Grossman's earlier work, or than many standard Soviet texts of the time, Grossman still presents his characters as heroes possessing worth and individual goals and struggles. Having so many heroes and subplots to *Life and Fate* causes the structure to falter, undermining the book's ability to truly succeed as a 19th century realist novel. Grossman refuses to make minor characters truly minor, and the very minorness of minor characters has been a defining characteristic of 19th century socially conscious realist novels (Woloch 19).

Similarly, because Grossman chooses the typical *War and Peace* epic structure for *Life and Fate*, he falls short of portraying a Chekhovian democracy. Chekhov gained his status as a

⁴⁹ Clark emphasizes that positive heroes are a "defining feature of Soviet Socialist Realism" because of their allegorical representation of Bolshevik virtue. This is a development from earlier positive hero figures in pre-Revolutionary literature. For both the Bolsheviks and the realist writers who developed the trope, the hero is affirmative of prescribed moral values. (*The Soviet Novel* 46; Mathewson 3)

classic not as a novelist, but as a master of the short story and a playwright. Soviet writers were encouraged to study Chekhov as "an example for every prose writer" for his mastery of *short stories* and even Grossman's references to Chekhov's so-called democracy emphasize Chekhov's works as a whole, rather than at an individual level (Parts 69). Most of the works based strongly in Chekhovian intertext are short in length. Most importantly, Chekhov famously struggled with writing longer works and could not write a novel, despite a wish to do so. It follows, then, that perhaps Chekhov's way of seeing humans, of telling stories and bringing life to the many characters on Madyarov's list, is in its essence incompatible with the novel form. One cannot tell the stories of each character in a novel equally; the plot structure would falter and read like a collection of short stories, or, in the case of *Life and Fate*, characters whose stories exceed their function in the novel must be explicated from it in order to hold basic plot structures together.

Finally, while Grossman obviously reveres Chekhov's moral system for being "kind and attentive to the individual man", for seeing various sides to people, and for offering insight into the human condition instead of prescribing a set code of what is good and what is evil, his own reading of Chekhov still relies on his Soviet need to see heroes in every text and heroism in every *geroi*, just as Madyarov challenges his friends to "try and remember all of Chekhov's heroes" (Grossman 282).⁵⁰ In fact, the ambiguity of Chekhov's characters, and the lack of grandeur to their missions (focusing on their internal journey of being human, rather than any grand external goals) made his work problematic for early Soviet literary critics.⁵¹ The Soviet emphasis on Chekhov's loving representations of oppressed people reemphasizes types and

⁵⁰ The emphasis on this word is more powerful in the English translation than in the Russian, whose word *geroi* could translate to mean any literary figure, but the courageous connotation still come first in dictionary definitions of *geroi* (*Bol'shoi Tolkovyi Slovar'*). See my discussion in the introduction for a more in-depth analysis of the meaning of *geroi* for a Soviet writer.

⁵¹ Parts refers to incidents in the 20s when theaters deemed Chekhov's plays as "unsuitable to the heroic epoch" that the cultural revolution was trying to convey to the masses. (61)

heroes, rather than the moral ambiguity of Chekhov's characters themselves. As a result, Grossman struggles with his own characters. While Grossman portrays the struggles of Katya, Karimov, or countless other characters with a loving hand and very sharp insight, they still must prove themselves as worthy, positive heroes in order to be accepted as full citizens of a Soviet "democracy".⁵² Without meaning to, Grossman has inserted a moral credo into his democracy, undermining the uncertainties to the Chekhovian humanism he tries to emulate.

Ultimately, though Grossman doesn't manage to break completely away from the Socialist Realist forms that he criticizes, this does not mean that Grossman lacks talent or insight into Soviet life during Stalinism and the war. The success of *Life and Fate* in a post-Soviet era is indication enough that the book does not fail as a whole. Instead, Grossman's shortcomings are similar to a failure by Gogol that Bakhtin cites, of

taking a genre where it could not go... 'to a very real extent the tragedy of a genre....Gogol lost Russia, that is, he lost his blueprint for representing her; he got muddled somewhere between [epic] memory and [novelistic] familiar contact—to put it bluntly, he could not find the proper focus on his binoculars ' (Morson & Emerson 276; Bakhtin "Epic and Novel" 28)

Grossman has merely taken up a task that, given his own generic limitations, he cannot complete. He cannot focus his binoculars on Chekhovian democracy and nineteenth-century realist style because his own worldview distracts from that. As a result, he remains uncomfortably within the Soviet Novel structure.

⁵² At an individual level, critics enjoy these insights. Bethea writes of Babel-like insights that Grossman has about moments of the war and their powerful realism.

Viktor Shtrum: Implications of a Jewish Positive Hero

While certain genres can never overlap, this does not mean that new insights and subversions cannot be created within an existing genre. Bakhtin emphasizes the importance of artistic conflict within a single genre. Authors who write in a given genre "sometimes hold views at odds with the genre's form-shaping ideology," which creates conflict in the process of verbalizing perception to fit a genre. When this happens, "the author must adapt one [form or ideology] to the other or the work will fail." This results in innovation within a genre as the artist learns to use familiar forms in new ways to express his own personal ideology, ultimately leading to subtle shifts in an author's perception of the world within the genre. After exposure to this new sort of task, the reader's perception of the world in turn can start to shift. This is how new genres eventually adapt (Morson & Emerson 283)⁵³

Grossman explicitly states his personal conflict with the Socialist Realist novel, but his work shows clear evidence that he is unable to break free from its conventions. Instead, in the form of his marginal heroes, Grossman shows his own internal dialogue with the positive hero, as he must adapt it to fit a democratic model of Sovietness. We have already seen with the character of Katya Vengrova how Grossman adapts traditional forms of the hero's "dual goals" to fit a marginal character's goal to be recognized within society as a conscious Soviet citizen. Yet due to their conflicted function within the war-epic form, these marginal heroes are not given a

⁵³ This is part of Morson & Emerson's analysis of dialogic truth in Bakhtin's essay "Toward a Reworking of the Dostoevsky Book". Bakhtin argues that Dostoevsky is an innovator by reworking our understanding of traditional forms by forcing the reader to have a dialogue with them: "The author is profoundly active, but his activity is of a special dialogic sort. It is one thing to be active in relation to a dead thing, to voiceless material that can be molded and formed as one wishes, and another thing to be active in relation to someone else's living, autonomous consciousness. This is a questioning, provoking, answering, agreeing, objecting activity; that is, it is dialogic activity no less active than the activity that finalizes, materializes, explains, and kills causally, that drowns out the other's voice with nonsemantic arguments" (285).

chance to fully fulfill their tasks and their forms are never fully fleshed out enough to illustrate the subversions to the genre that Grossman has set up. As in all, a main protagonist eventually emerges. Viktor Shtrum will become the figure closest resembling a positive hero in the novel. Yet Viktor, like so many of Grossman's minor characters, is not ethnically Russian and must grapple with this fact throughout a war that is focused on Russian nationalism and patriotism. Viktor, the Jewish positive hero, is the ultimate instrument which Grossman uses to bend the genre as he uses Socialist Realist forms to question the status of minorities within the Soviet Union.

Shtrum's Master Plot

Shtrum's plot trajectory in *Life and Fate* possesses many qualities of the typical positive hero of the 1930s and 40s. His particular microcosm is contained in a laboratory that has been evacuated to Kazan', a typical provincial setting for the launching of a Socialist Realist master plot.⁵⁴ Shtrum's first introduction is as a slightly quirky intellectual who obsessively "thought about his work." He is also a "democrat" (Grossman 70-1).⁵⁵ Shtrum's public task has already been assigned; like many heroes from Socialist Realist novels of the 1940s he has already arrived at some degree of "consciousness" in his scientific job. His task will be to "'storm the doors of temple science' in the name of 'a new science'" (Clark, *Soviet Novel*, 195-6, 200).

⁵⁴ Clark *The Soviet Novel*, 257. The novel makes a clever commentary about Kazan', seen by Viktor, Lyudmila, and Nadya as poor and oppressive compared to their Moscow lives (Grossman 75). Viktor even expresses surprise that this was the city of his big discovery: "How could he have ever guessed that he would do (*emu udalos' sdelat'*) his most important work in Kazan' (*v kazanskoi evakuatsii*), . . . , with all the suffering and homelessness that entailed?" (442). There is a slight jab to the marginal or provincial status the Muscovites assign Kazan'; Alexandra Shaposhnikova points out its very central role to Russian literature, that "Aksakov, Tolstoy, Lenin, Zinin, and Lobachevsky had all lived here, that Maxim Gorky had once worked in a Kazan' baker's" (68). Even a capital city with huge significance to a Russian cultural history is marginalized and provincial due to its status as a city in a marginal republic.

⁵⁵ "*Dumal o svoei rabote*" becomes an epithet of sorts, as it repeats often throughout the early chapters.

Science becomes a sort of ideology for progress that he believes in. Shtrum's archetypal problem is fixing a scientific theory that his experimental results challenge and restoring harmony to the "chaos of the data" (Grossman 267). Like most positive heroes, Shtrum faces initial obstacles in the completion of his public task: failed experiments, delay of equipment for a new apparatus, and bureaucratic indifference. Shtrum consciously strives to become a hero who can think "about the link between science and people's lives . . . Only a master, a conqueror, can think about such questions—and he was just a bungling apprentice" (Grossman 270).

The transition point in Shtrum's master plot actually occurs when he discovers a groundbreaking theory, after which case his real work in the lab begins. At this point, Shtrum sees himself as a "conquering hero" (*pobeditel'*), a phrase he repeats three times, and works towards recognition so that his work may progress (Grossman 444). Among the challenges that face Shtrum are bureaucratic problems obtaining personnel and equipment, problems tempering his strong emotions towards injustice or unpopular political decisions, and ultimately bureaucratic prejudice spurned by Shtrum's suddenly ubiquitous Jewishness.⁵⁶

The climax of Shtrum's master plot occurs when he stands up to the bureaucratic villain Shishakov, who has refused to hire the most talented laboratory workers due to their Jewish names, and fires a longstanding Russian lab assistant Anna Loshakova, who has courageously stayed in Moscow to look after the lab during the war. In retribution, Shishakov and other high-up bureaucrats publish an article on the wall-newspaper decrying scientists who "became mouthpieces for alien, anti-Soviet views and attitudes" that was "obviously about Viktor" and the

⁵⁶ These obstacles correspond quite neatly with the transitional plot phases in the framework for the master plot that Clark lays out. Heroes often experience "problems with supplies, manpower, or equipment" and "bureaucratic corruption or slackness", a "struggle with an antagonistic bureaucrat" (in Shtrum's case, Shishakov, the antisemitic director of the academy), and "a problem . . . controlling his emotions" (258).

cosmopolitan interests in physicists such as Planck and Einstein that he had expressed (Grossman 666-7). Despite this threat to his career, instead of going to read it he chooses to stay behind and finish installing an apparatus for his work. However, when he is called to apologize before a meeting of the Scientific Council, Shtrum stands his ground and is forced to remain at home to await a possible arrest. These events seem to correspond with the "dramatic obstacle" to the public task's completion, and the threat of arrest could even be compared to a near death for Shtrum, both key to Clark's version of the master plot (*The Soviet Novel* 258). And like the positive heroes of high Stalinist works, Shtrum has a "grave moment of self-doubt" in which he drafts a letter of apology (which he never sends), and is reaffirmed in his decision by a visit to his mentor Chepyzhin (*The Soviet Novel* 258-9).⁵⁷ Chepyzhin seems to represent an advocate of pure and human science, having resigned after refusing to take on new projects.⁵⁸

At this point, Shtrum's master plot seems to be revealed as an anti-master plot of sorts, as a plot in direct opposition of Stalinism. For inspite of his positive energy towards his work, Shtrum expresses anti-Stalinist sentiments throughout the text. However, this assumption is complicated when, in the most classical Socialist Realist style, Stalin himself calls Shtrum on the phone to "wish [Shtrum] success in [his] work" and to make sure he has enough foreign research materials, thus confirming Shtrum's belief in international scientific sources and falsifying the claims of Shtrum's enemies that his science was anti-Soviet (Grossman 763). For Clark, the Socialist Realist novel's "meeting with Stalin is the ultimate stage in . . . the mentor-disciple exchange" and Stalin enlightens his chosen disciples not "merely . . . due to circumstances" but

⁵⁷ Chepyzhin is the former director of the institute who, in *For a Just Cause* served as a mentor figure for Shtrum (Nakhimovsky). Though he is barely mentioned until the final part of *Life and Fate*, Chepyzhin continues to serve as an "old friend and teacher" (*stariy drug i uchitel'*) (Grossman 451).

⁵⁸ Grossman later discusses Chepyzhin's choice not to work in the field, which clarifies his refusal "to undertake any new projects".

because he has "privileged access to the mysteries and will impart them only to the chosen and worthy" (144). By receiving the privileged phone-call from Stalin, Shtrum has become a "chosen one", as he acknowledges: 'If Stalin gave a man a quick smile, his life would be transformed overnight; he would suddenly rise up out of the outer darkness to be greeted with power, fame, and showers of honours" (Grossman 764-5).⁵⁹ After this moment of initiation, Shtrum's master plot carries on with the typical material results of the Finale. He receives all of the help and the chosen assistants he needs to complete his research, receives a car and other special privileges in honor of his work. By all intents and purposes, Shtrum has achieved "perfect freedom" in his work and "rejoice[s]" in his "triumph" (. . . *on radovalsia. On pobedil!*) (Grossman 821). Viktor has cast off the doubts of his earlier life and embraced the "rule" (*pravilo*) that his new life has become, ready to reject former criticisms of the regime as falsities (Grossman 820).

However, once Shtrum reaches the finale stage of his version of the master plot, his "triumph" is not as purely positive as he tries to believe it is. Almost immediately, Shtrum rejects moments of his past that would be considered dissident. For example, he dismisses his conversations with his circle in Kazan' and his choice of Chepyzhin as his mentor and suddenly (and seemingly blindly) accepts Stalin as a great leader. This sets up an uneasy tension with Shtrum's previous personality; despite his hard work and path along the trajectory of the master plot, until this point Shtrum had been staunchly anti-Stalinist. Occasionally even Shtrum recognizes the strange tensions that his triumph and initiation as a positive hero have brought him. During and immediately after the phone conversation, he senses a sort of loss (*poterie*) that

⁵⁹ Grossman illustrates the mythic and mystical power of Stalin for several pages, relating to anecdotes about the outcomes of people's encounters of Stalin. For examples of this conversation, see pages 764-9.

seems "to well up from somewhere deep underground, a sense of regret for something sacred and cherished that seemed to be slipping away from him (*ukhodilo ot nego v eti chasy*)" (Grossman 768). At other moments in the laboratory, Shtrum feels the sense that he is an impostor, that his sudden success isn't "absolute victory" (*vyschuiu pobedu*) and that his talent isn't the only reason that Stalin phoned him, but rather his usefulness to a State agenda of some sort (Grossman 821).

Even Shtrum's phone conversation with Stalin himself is devoid of the grandeur that is typical of the archetypal meeting with Stalin, in which the hero enters "the Great Hall of the Kremlin" and is "dazzled at first by a 'blinding' light" before he finds the courage to speak and are able to see the world in a new and clearer way (Clark, *Soviet Novel* 143). While Shtrum's conversation mimics the archetypal moments before the meeting, the conversation with Stalin is almost shockingly normal, so normal that Shtrum thinks at first that it is a "hoax"

(*mistifikatsiia*):⁶⁰

[Stalin's] voice was slow and guttural and he placed a particularly heavy stress on certain syllables; it was so similar to the voice Viktor had heard on the radio that it sounded almost like an impersonation. It was like Viktor's imitation (*podrazhal etomu golosu*) of Stalin when he was playing the fool at home. It was just as everyone who had ever heard Stalin speak—at a conference or during a private interview—had always described it. (763)

The whole conversation has an element of the absurd to it, from the parodic focus on Stalin's Georgian accent, the triviality of the verbal exchange, and the absence of mysticism. Even

⁶⁰ The traditional meeting with Stalin typically fills the hero with "trepidation and nervous confusion; they feel all churned up and unable to express themselves" (Clark, *The Soviet Novel*, 143). Viktor mirrors this behavior before he even knows who is calling. The telephone ring makes him "as anxious as if it were the middle of the night and a telegram had arrived with news of some tragedy" (Grossman 762).

Shtrum is shocked by the normalcy of the situation. Unlike the usual positive hero, whose entire worldview changes and clarifies after his meeting with Stalin, Shtrum is shocked by the unchanged atmosphere ("*neizmennost'*") of his room: "The sideboard, the piano, the chairs, the two unwashed plates on the table, were exactly the same [as before]. It was enough to drive one insane. Hadn't their whole lives been turned upside down?" (763).

Shtrum's discomfort with his success comes to its culmination when he is asked to sign a letter affirming the guilt of Doctors Levin and Pletnyov in the murder of Maksim Gorky and, due to "an agonizing sense of his own passivity" he agrees (Grossman 835).⁶¹ Shtrum is wracked with guilt and unable to forgive himself until he strives to "lift up his head, to remain his mother's son" and live each day of his life struggling to do good, struggling "to be a man" (a better translation would be "human", as Grossman uses the word *chelovek*) (Grossman 841). The Russian text emphasizes this task as a "battle" (*bor'ba*) for his "right" (*pravo*) to be human rather than merely a struggle to stay a human.⁶² Only when Shtrum embarks on this new journey, driven and inspired by a heritage as his mother's son, is there evidence that he has sought repentance and peace.

Shtrum's mother plays a valuable role throughout his plot. When Shtrum is first introduced we learn that she has been killed by the Nazis, a fate identical to that of Grossman's

⁶¹ Two of the defendants in the famous show trial, Trial of Twenty-One in the 30s. This case was used during the Doctor's Plot in the early fifties as evidence that well-known, Jewish doctors (in the case of Levin) had plotted against the government in the past and were capable of doing so again (Brent & Naumov 4, 138-9). Grossman's usage of the case appears somewhat anachronistic, since Shtrum signs the letter while the war is still on, whereas the actual anti-Semitic anticommunist campaign that spurred the Doctor's plot didn't begin until 1947. It appears the presence of these doctors in *Life and Fate* is an attempt by Grossman to emphasize escalating anti-Semitism in state institutions.

⁶² The exact translation of this moment is "*nuzhno vesti bor'bu za svoe pravo byt' chelovekom*" (Grossman, *Zhizn' i sud'ba* 847).

own mother.⁶³ It is the fate of Shtrum's mother at the hands of Fascists that forces him to consider "the fact that he and his mother were Jews" (Grossman 72). This fate is clarified in a letter from Shtrum's mother, in which she herself admits having forgotten her Jewish nationality during the "years of the Soviet regime" living as an assimilated Jew.⁶⁴ Only when the Jews are gathered together to share one fate does her "heart . . . become filled with a maternal tenderness [*materiinskaia nezhnost'*] for the Jewish people [*narod*]" which reminds her of her love for Viktor (Grossman 87). This line infuses Viktor's relationship with his mother with Jewishness. At the end of the letter, Shtrum's mother beseeches him to "remember that your mother's love is always with you, in grief and in happiness, no one has the strength to destroy it" (Grossman 93). Grossman's mother's love for him, as for the newly found love for the Jewish people, will permanently remain attached to Viktor for the remainder of the novel, a reminder of his Jewishness and his humanity.

Curiously this trope ebbs and flows with the status of Shtrum's public task. There is no further mention of Shtrum's mother or his Jewishness as he focuses on his work, and strives to be a "master" scientist. Only after the literary conversation among his circle of friends, where they have "talked like human beings [*po-liudski*] for once in "bitter freedom" does he make his scientific discovery (Grossman 290). The discovery itself appears in a very spontaneous manner, seeming to "have given birth to itself" out of "chaos [that] had refused to yield to their demands!" (Grossman 290, 349). Shtrum equates this type of spontaneous theoretical science with his

⁶³ Grossman's mother was shot in Berdichev by the Nazis, an event which prompted Grossman to write an essay about the massacres for the Black Book of Soviet Jewry (Chandler x-xi; Beevor 259).

⁶⁴ She writes "I never used to feel I was a Jew: as a child my circle of friends were all Russian; my favorite poets were Pushkin and Nekrasov; . . . and Once, Vityenka, when I was fourteen, our family was about to emigrate . . . and I said to my father 'I'll never leave Russia—I'd rather drown myself" (Grossman 86).

Jewish faith, referring to this practice many times as "Talmudist" (Grossman 358, for example).⁶⁵ Also key is the development of the theory at home in the private space, which, like the initial idea, is "quite detached from the world of experience" and so far from the ideal of a public task done in the public sphere (Grossman 348). Only when Shtrum begins to receive recognition for his idea among scientists in the public sphere does he begin to dissociate once again from his Jewishness, accusing his colleague of having a "shtetl mentality" for worrying about anti-Semitism and unable to accept the thought of such a thing in a Soviet public space (Grossman 360).

However, as Shtrum himself begins to become the target of workplace anti-Semitism, reminders of his mother and images of his Jewishness begin to regularly recur; as he becomes demoted to being a Jew in the eyes of his bosses, he becomes a stereotypical version of a Jew to himself. He is "no longer a professor, a doctor of science, a famous scientist who had made a remarkable discovery", his image of a Soviet hero, but "just a man with curly hair and a hooked nose, with a stooped back and narrow shoulders . . ." (Grossman 575). To Shtrum, this image of hero cannot coexist with the image of "Jew". Only when Shtrum realizes the role his mother has played in his ability to stand up to his co-workers, even as it demotes his status, does this Jewish image begin to take a positive form.⁶⁶ When he talks to Chepyzhin about physics and makes the choice to remain at home rather than compromising his values and apologizing, he begins "speaking very quickly and with a strong Jewish accent" (Grossman 693). As soon as Shtrum rejects the need for public fame and holds strong to his values, he is able to embrace his Jewish

⁶⁵In the Russian text, Shtrum also refers to himself as a Chaldean, (*khaldei*), a Semitic tribe mentioned in the bible and associated with Babylonia, further emphasizing the link between his work and Judaism (Rainey 561-2).

⁶⁶Shtrum does this by standing up for his humanity and the humanity of his co-workers whose jobs are being threatened. "I am a human being as well as a physicist." After this speech he thinks of his mother joyfully at the thought of doing good (584).

identity, consciously and unconsciously and even make friendly jokes to others that celebrate his Jewishness.⁶⁷

After the phone call from Stalin, Shtrum's mother once again fades into the background along with his Jewish identity. Shtrum's coworkers identify him as "as much a patriot as any of us. He's a Russian. A true Soviet citizen! [*U nego serdtse russkogo sovetskogo patriota*]" (Grossman 834). After Shtrum's initiation into Soviet elite society, he has become, in the eyes of others, a complete Soviet citizen, stamping out the Jewishness and replacing it distinctly with ethnic *Russianness*. As the reader sees, a marginal figure cannot be both marginal and a positive hero (or true Soviet citizen) at the same time. In order to fulfill consciousness and acceptance as a Soviet patriot, one must relinquish the identity that marginalizes him and move away from the periphery of society into the central majority. It is a longing to remain a part of the heroic Soviet "collective" rather than "go back to his former solitude (*odinochestvo*)" or loneliness on the margins of society that causes Shtrum to sign the letter denouncing the Jewish doctors and this choice is ultimately the one that leads him to crushing guilt (Grossman 837).

Two Batons

Shtrum's mother's love of her son, her embrace of her Jewishness, and her faith in humanity serves as a foil to the rationality and blind ambition associated with Shtrum's public task. Many positive heroes from the Stalinist era were fatherless in order to promote the myth of Stalin and other political role models as father figures that would help shape a child's Soviet identity (Clark, *Soviet Novel* 134).⁶⁸ It is probably not accidental that Shtrum the hero is also fatherless, leaving Stalin to take the traditional mythical role of passing on a metaphorical

⁶⁷ Soon after this conversation, Shtrum teases his sister-in-law and says "That's what's called a Jewish compliment" (694).

⁶⁸ For more information on Stalin and other political figures as father-substitutes in the Socialist Realist myth, see Chapter 5 of *The Soviet Novel*.

"baton" of wisdom and consciousness to his son. Indeed, Stalin gives Shtrum the instruments and pride he needs to succeed as a hero in the public realm and complete his task. But unlike in thirties fiction, Shtrum receives another baton, one from his mother. Judaism is matrilineal, meaning a mother's status as Jewish determines her child's status. Anna Shtrum has passed on a baton of her own Jewishness through her motherly love, one that embodies all of the "spontaneous" traits, such as faith, love, and nurturing that even Vavilova received from a Jewish mother in *In the Town of Berdichev*, Grossman's very first published story. While Shtrum struggles with initiation into his Jewish identity, his maternal Jewish baton is the one that he ultimately chooses. Unlike Vavilova, whose status as a High Stalinist positive hero prevented her from embracing this initiation and instead led her to cast off her spontaneous and maternal Jewishness, Shtrum, as a sixties-era hero, a product of the thaw, chooses it over the traditional and rational Soviet alternative. While Shtrum makes a decision he regrets, he is allowed to remain his mother's son and cherish the life she has passed on to him to "live, live, live forever" as a human (Grossman 93). Instead of "striv[ing] to be a hero" and being proud of perfection (the Russian actually emphasizes heroism in the traditional sense by using the phrase "*ne k podvigu nado stremit'sia*"), Shtrum must use his mistakes as "reproach" and motivation to live his life as a better person. By embracing his imperfections and striving for kindness, Shtrum is able to defend his humility and humanity and "remain a man" (Grossman 841).

It is via the positive hero, one of the most crucial and traditional tropes of Socialist Realism, and not the "Chekhovian democracy" of minor characters, that Grossman finally creates a Chekhovian ideal in *Life and Fate*. Through the traditional use of the master plot, Shtrum proves his ability to succeed as a Soviet citizen, but ultimately he chooses the alternate plot that his mother offers him: a plot of spontaneity and imperfection that is associated with being a kind,

loving human being. As soon as Shtrum lets go of the need to be a part of the public collective, he transforms into the type of character traditionally associated with Chekhov: not a person striving for greatness and defined by labels and types, but a sympathetic, human character complete with vices and flaws along with his virtues. Jewishness is not Shtrum's quintessential identifier, but a catalyst. By embracing his innate Otherness, he can more easily step from the path of a Soviet citizen, a model and ideal of reality, to become in Madyarov's words "first and foremost human" (Grossman 283). By subverting the model of the positive hero, Grossman has finally managed to overcome his Soviet worldview that each man should be a hero.

Epilogue

Return to "Berdichev"

In 1967, three years after Vasily Grossman's death, the young director Alexander Askol'ov attempted to release a film adaptation of "In the Town of Berdichev" which he called *Commissar* (Kenez 89). *Commissar* expands upon the plot of "Berdichev," in that it follows Commissar Vavilova through the master plot of being initiated as a Jewish mother and giving birth under the threat of a white army invasion. The film adds quite a bit of dialogue about what it is to be Jewish in the Russian empire, as well as many visual flashbacks to Vavilova's time fighting for the Communist ideal in the Red Army. Despite the fact that it was based on "In the Town of Berdichev", however, the life and fate of the film *Commissar* has far more in common with *Life and Fate*. Like *Life and Fate*, *Commissar* was deemed too scandalous for release in the mid-sixties era Soviet Union due to its positive depiction of Jews (while the Soviet Union had sided with the Arabs in the Six-day War with Israel) and its negative depiction of the Bolsheviks during the Civil War (Roberts 90-1). Like *Life and Fate*, *Commissar* couldn't be released to a wide audience until the perestroika era.

As a young director, Askol'dov was initiated into official culture after Grossman had already passed from it. However, his reading of "Berdichev" appears heavily influenced by the aftermath of World War II, the Holocaust, and the anti-Jewish measures such as the Doctor's Plot that infected Soviet political structure and mood in the late Stalin years. *Commissar* reads far more like *Life and Fate*, its generational peer, than "In the Town of Berdichev", which was written (and officially published) over thirty years before, during High Stalinism. Like Viktor Shtrum, *Commissar*'s Yefim Magazinnik becomes a Jewish voice of conscience for the film.

Though he still possesses the highly domestic qualities of Jewishness that are present in "Berdichev", the film's Magazinnov questions the original agenda of the Red Army. Though at the beginning of the film he says to Vavilova that he and his family supported the Red Army over the White, right away he asks her, as a representative of the Bolsheviks, to take responsibility for the agenda the Communists promote: "you should be taking care of us", he claims, rather than billeting soldiers in the houses of civilians. Like Shtrum, Magazinnik also must ask the challenging political questions of the story. In an exchange with Vavilova, Magazinnik says he is in favor of the agenda of (in very official language) international kindness (*ia za dobryi internatsional!*) but then asks when it will arrive and why, no matter what new powers promise, there are always scapegoats to cover up their faults in the end. Like Shtrum and Grossman's other later Jewish characters, Askol'ov's Magazinnik is a cosmopolitan thinker in favor of kindness first and foremost. While he at first is willing to support the agenda of the Reds over the whites because of a promise of this ideal, he is unwilling to fully trust them because the questionable moral systems of power structures inherently search for a scapegoat. There can be no equality for living as long as governments and ideologies call for people to die for them (as Vavilova heroically states that she will).

The film closes with Jewishness. Magazinnik and his family, hiding in fear in their cellar from the Whites, begin to dance and hum a Jewish tune softly in the dark. Magazinnik's mother says a prayer in Yiddish and looks on. Suddenly Vavilova flashes into the future and sees the Magazinnik family with yellow holocaust stars stitched to their clothing and marching towards a grotesque death camp in the city square, probably a reference to the mass shootings of Jews that happened in the town of Berdichev itself. Vavilova holds her child close and must determine whether to join these people, for whom international kindness is an ideal and motherly love is

celebrated, and march to a sure death, or to abandon her child, as she does in the story, and march onward towards the Bolshevik ideal that, prior to her life with the Magazinniks, was an ideal, or choose the more complicated but rewarding force of motherly love and kindness that she embodied as a temporary Jewish mother. Ultimately, as in the story, Vavilova chooses the simple, Soviet line, hoping to fight for the international cause of communism despite the doubts Magazinnik has planted in her. However, as a sixties film, rather than a thirties story, the connotations of this choice are much more ambiguous. No longer is Vavilova's choice to rejoin the revolution an obvious one. Instead, she cries as she kisses her child goodbye. Vavilova gives up motherly love and the honesty that drives the experience of being a Jew and alienated from governing forces in order to become a Communist hero. However, like Shtrum's choice to sacrifice the things he loves for fame under a Stalinist government, her choice is not celebrated, but looked upon with a sort of sadness or mourning. Unlike Shtrum, who, despite its status as Other and Alien, chooses Jewishness and human kindness over the official doctrine, Vavilova's choice is unclear. However, *Commissar*, like *Life and Fate* makes one thing clear: those people such as Shtrum or Magazinnik who choose to (in Yefim Magazinnik's words) "live life" honestly and according to their own identities given to them by loving mothers are the true heroes. And while Vavilova looks on in indecision as Magazinnik and his family march to the death camps with bitter resolve. While they must die, they have not sacrificed themselves to the mainstream. Marginal *heroes* they stay, and even death can't undermine this.

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