

A Soviet War and Peace: Tolstoy's Theory of History in Stalingrad

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It seems impossible to speak or read about Vasily Grossman without a near-immediate invocation of Leo Tolstoy. In popular memory, it is similarly difficult to find an article—from *The New York Times* to *The Nation*—which does not draw a comparison between the two or even go so far as to call Grossman a “Soviet Tolstoy” or “Red Tolstoy.”¹ Typically this comparison is made between *War and Peace* and Grossman’s *Life and Fate*. Less often do these writers draw parallels to Grossman’s precursor work, *Stalingrad*, although it is perhaps the more obvious comparison. As noted in *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, Grossman’s explicitly drew from *War and Peace*’s structure and characters when planning the novel, intending to show “how life changed over 100 years.”² This personal drive was matched by social pressures following World War II, with literary magazines eager to publish a *War and Peace* for this new Soviet era.³ Grossman makes the inspiration itself apparent by repeatedly evoking the novel, along with Tolstoy’s themes and ideas—inviting his readers to compare the two.

Early on in *Stalingrad*, one of Grossman’s characters stops at a fictionalized version of Leo Tolstoy’s estate, Yasnaya Polyana. The Red Army is still marching its long retreat at this point in the war, being beaten back by the German Wehrmacht time and time again. Amid the frenzied excitement of a war still being lost, Commissar Krymov takes the time to visit Yasnaya Polyana. As he watches the staff making hurried preparations to leave, Krymov’s mind overlays scenes from *War and Peace* onto the estate. Yasnaya Polyana merges with the Bolkonsky family home, Bald Hills. The Great Patriotic War seems to become one with the Patriotic War of 1812 which

¹ Love, “The Great Man in *War and Peace*,” 2019; Fitzpatrick, “A Complex Fate: Vasily Grossman in war and peace,” 2019; Thornhill, “Soviet writer Vasily Grosman and the ‘ruthless truth’ of war,” 2019; Epstein, “The Achievement of Vasily Grossman,” 2019; Sacks, “Vasily Grossman: Loser, Saint,” 2013; Taubman, “The Soviet Union’s Jewish Tolstoy,” 2019; Jones, “Vasily Grossman’s *Life and Fate*,” 2022

² Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 200

³ Popoff, 200

“Tolstoy described with such truth and power that it had become the supreme reality of the war.”⁴
 Tolstoy’s voice speaks for not only the events of 1812; an echo of it is meant to be heard here.

A major through line of *War and Peace* is Tolstoy’s theory of history, emphasizing the contributions of massed individuals rather than the decisions of the great few on high. Grossman borrows argumentation to explain history in *Stalingrad*, putting the individual stories of the people who make history front and center. However, the critical divergence point lies in what drives masses of people. In *War and Peace*, Tolstoy puts forth foundations to use to understand history; he remains agnostic on its exact drivers, only noting the difficulty in proving a factor’s material connection with an outcome. Grossman then borrows that fundamental and develops it to explain the rise of fascism in his own era. By doing so, he effectively operationalizes Tolstoy’s theory as a broad philosophical justification for how an ideal — also called intellectual activity — pushes human history onward.

Before investigating how Grossman develops *War and Peace*, we should first understand its theory of history. Tolstoy challenges the idea that great people—the Napoleons and Tsar Alexanders as well as lesser leaders like General Kutuzov or Count Rostopchin—drive history according to their own whims. Instead, it is dozens or hundreds or thousands of individual decisions which either push those leaders onward or which they must then react to. In *War and Peace*, long before Napoleon enters the Russian Empire, Tolstoy’s narrator likens this process to a clock: “the complex action of humanity in those 160,000 Russians and Frenchmen – all their passions, longings, regrets, humiliation and suffering, their rushes of pride, fear and enthusiasm – only only worked its way out in defeat at the battle of Austerlitz ... the slow tick-tock of the age-old hands on the clock face of human history.”⁵ These leaders may be a catalyst for the

⁴ Grossman, *Stalingrad*, 292

⁵ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 258

mechanism, but it is still the work of innumerable cogs (and their many emotions and drives) which produces the outcome. Tolstoy primarily demonstrates this through the battles of both the Napoleonic Wars and, later, the Patriotic War. The chaos of warfare is meant to show how little control commanders really have.

In the battle of Borodino, for example, Tolstoy's narrator uses Napoleon and his command cadre to demonstrate that point. Even in the hours before the battle begins, Napoleon accidentally reveals his lack of control in conversation. When speaking with a duty adjutant about how medicine is doing nothing for his cold, he compares the human body to a watch and declares that it's best to let the machine run itself: "The watchmaker has no power to get inside, he can only fumble for it blindfolded."⁶ This admission, according to the text, is actually a strength of Napoleon's. While his forces fail to win a decisive victory at Borodino, the narrator defends the commander against the criticism that his orders led to that outcome. They were, the narrator argues, no worse than orders given during winning battles, and only gained the air of inferiority in light of his loss; and Napoleon, the watchmaker, played the "representative of authority" as well as he usually did.⁷ His best quality, the narrator remarks, is that his good sense and calm did nothing to impede the progress of the battle. Napoleon the commander does his best, but that has little relation to the dozens of thousands of soldiers truly deciding the outcome of this battle.

In that same conversation, Napoleon's adjutant repeats an adage back to his commander: "When the wine is uncorked it has to be drunk."⁸ On one level, this is a callback to the narrator's argumentation in the previous chapter. The narrator uses that exact phrase to describe why hungry and weary men kept fighting: not for the emperor, as much as they might declare it, but

⁶ Tolstoy, 1058

⁷ Tolstoy, 1083

⁸ Tolstoy, 1084

because they wanted to find food and rest in victory.⁹ The text makes this point repeatedly in the ensuing battle, with generals' orders having little to no relationship to how each soldier actually acts. And it is their myriad actions, retreats and charges both fueled by self preservation alone, which make the history of Borodino.¹⁰

These above examples are not meant to entirely deprive history's leadership of its agency. *War and Peace* does divest its so-called great men of their special control on the world, but it is not arguing that they have no power. Rather, they make their decisions under the historical laws, as the narrator terms it, that all people do. Earlier in the novel, the narrator asserts that every person lives for themselves, choosing whether or not to carry out an action based on whether it pleases them. And once that deed indeed becomes action, it joins with millions of other deeds to create what the narrator terms "historical significance"¹¹. It may seem to this person that they carried out that action by their own will, but the narrator argues it is actually the case that they are reacting to this great mass of deeds known as historical significance. It is a law applied to all humanity. And the more important a person, "the more obvious are the inevitability and the element of predestination in everything he does"¹². While these great few may seem to stand at the helm of history, the narrator posits they are instead the most obvious instruments of "historical significance." They make decisions and they unstopper the wine bottles, but their decisions are driven by this force of history; and what comes next happens not at their will but is instead a nexus of every decision made by every person involved. Their decisions, too, are driven by a combination of personal desire and "historical significance." Why does an apple fall from a

⁹ Tolstoy, 1082

¹⁰ Tolstoy 1103-1104

¹¹ Tolstoy, 837

¹² Tolstoy, 837

tree, the narrator asks? Then it answers: there are innumerable reasons. None are more right or more wrong. They all play their part. Such is the manner in which human history happens.¹³

So leaders, the argument goes, are driven by the force of history rather than driving it. This draws to attention a corollary point here: that there is an immaterial force, historical significance, which drives all humans. As noted above, this is created by the mass of human decisions, each taken according to their interests; unconsciously, this historical force also affects their decision-making. It is through this apparent paradox that history actually gains continuity. Every era, every place where humans exist they pursue their own desires and they react to the decisions of everyone both around and before them. Those actions then remain significant until human decision-making shifts enough that those deeds become marginal. A key point here is that this argument posits the force as one entirely without its own agency, with an overpowering will drawn incoherently from every deed contained within. And though it affects all humans, it influences them rather than creating fundamental change.

It is also essential that Tolstoy's historical laws are driven by this seeming paradox, where all actions derive from both free will and "historical significance." This concept of historical force, created by dozens or thousands or millions of human inputs, is rendered an actual paradox if those inputs are fully determined by the force itself. From where, then, does it derive? This would suggest the historical laws all humans obey merely replicate themselves in perpetuity.

There are some authors who interpret Tolstoy's theory as completely negating free will. In the article "Tolstoy the International Relations Theorist," Welch argues *War and Peace* depicts a wholly deterministic world; pointing to the second epilogue, Welch posits that it suggests free will is an illusion and that understanding history necessitates letting go of the concept entirely.¹⁴ I

¹³ Tolstoy, 838

¹⁴ Welch, "Tolstoy the International Relations Theorist," 180

contend this is a mis-reading of the epilogue. It's true that the narrator's final words of the novel call free will a "false sensation of freedom," but the epilogue as a whole does not argue for its non-existence.¹⁵ In fact, it is mostly concerned with reconciling these two opposite but necessary forces. The narrator gives the example of raising one's arm: this seems to be a free action, but one may then notice they chose to raise their arm in the direction of least resistance.¹⁶ While *War and Peace* does negate the idea of complete free will, it does not argue against the idea in its entirety. Without such will, what could drive a person to raise their arm?

Tolstoy, ultimately, makes no decision on what drives humanity. *War and Peace* criticizes then-contemporary historiography, but it is not an attempt to create wholly new methods. Rather, it is an attempt to ground future historiography in appropriate first principles. Tolstoy examines the great few and finds them lacking in import. If not leaders, then the narrator posits it is perhaps ideas which drive humans—but it then asks why one should single out intellectual activity more than trade or craft or horticulture.¹⁷ This is not an outright dismissal of the notion, but rather an invitation to meaningfully prove the relationship. And it is that invitation Grossman will take in *Stalingrad*.

Whereas Tolstoy's theory has no inherent outcome for humanity's masses, Grossman is writing for a new age and a Soviet people. His history of the Great Patriotic War in *Stalingrad* similarly focuses on people and argues against history-making being the purview of the great few, but it is also an attempt to explain *how* ideas specifically caused this era. While Tolstoy is in no hurry to attribute Napoleon's invasion to any particular cause — much like the reason an apple falls from a tree, he argues there is no one catalyst but rather a confluence of many events

¹⁵ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1694

¹⁶ Tolstoy, 1683

¹⁷ Tolstoy 1648

— Grossman does attribute World War II to particular causes, which he builds on Tolstoy's theory to prove to the reader.¹⁸

By the time *Stalingrad* was published for a Soviet audience in 1952, Eastern Europe and Central Asia had long lived in a new epoch. The Imperial Russian Empire had been overtaken by the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics; the region's economy was transformed by industrialization and collectivization; and the German Reich had initiated one of the bloodiest wars in human history. In "The Sistine Madonna," Grossman termed his own age a "wolfish time ... when people lived wolfish lives and wolves lived like people."¹⁹ Those lines are primarily directed at fascism's most infamous crime, the Holocaust. The piece as a whole, though, is aimed at exploring how humanity endures through such wolfishness. Written around a decade after the war's end, it should be said the short story is an examination with a retrospective advantage. But a similar question is apparent in *Stalingrad*, which Grossman began drafting mid-war, at the start of 1943.²⁰ Instead of asking how humanity endures, the novel asks a much less certain question: how does anyone live through such an era?

Grossman answers that question with the scope of his novel; despite taking its name from the siege, actual depictions of battle are few and far between. Instead, he focuses on the stories of the civilians and soldiers within. It is through their stories that Grossman will adopt, and eventually adapt, Tolstoy's theory of history.

At several points in *Stalingrad*, Grossman's writing all but demands the reader draw comparisons between the novel and Tolstoy's work. The most apparent, as noted above, is Commissar Krymov's visit to Yasnaya Polyana. Shortly before his time on Tolstoy's property, Krymov is waiting for new orders along the Don River. Standing outside of his car, he watches

¹⁸ Tolstoy, 1929

¹⁹ Grossman, "The Sistine Madonna," 170

²⁰ Popoff, 170

the flow of soldiers heading east and notices the wounded who are falling by the wayside. He wonders if their stories will ever be recorded, then recalls a night spent conversing with an elderly soldier in a gully. He decides: “The writers of future books had better avoid listening to conversations like that. It was all very well for Tolstoy—he wrote his great and splendid book decades after 1812, when the pain felt in every heart had faded and only what was wise and bright remained.”²¹ We are not told what the pair spoke about; in fact, the darkness shrouds even the elderly soldier’s face from Krymov. He could be any soldier telling any story. So when Krymov thinks that writers should avoid listening to conversations “like that,” he points not at a particular sentiment but at any potential life lived during the war. All of their experiences are still fresh enough to be painful. That pain, in this formulation, is an obscuring one. So Tolstoy’s truths about Napoleon’s invasion — powerful enough to become Grossman’s “supreme reality of the war” — cannot be adequately conveyed in a work written so close to the war.²²

Despite this, Grossman evokes Tolstoy not only by name and home, but also by how he structures *Stalingrad*: by tracking the story of a family and their assorted relations through the war, depicting the war years on both the frontlines and the homefront, and even bounding back and forth between the global and the personal. From the text to the plotting, the reader is invited to keep drawing those connections.

When Commissar Krymov gives his opinions on what the writers of the future should not focus on, the reader may well ask: what, then, should a writer of this war focus on? Perhaps only those in the future, removed from obscuring pain, can tell bright truths like Tolstoy. But this is not what the text *Stalingrad* suggests to its readers. In *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, Popoff gives this anecdote about the writer: asked to write an article for a newspaper toward the

²¹ Grossman, *Stalingrad*, 267

²² Grossman, 292

end of the war, Grossman shared the story of speaking with a division commander while watching a battle; after some silence, the commander turns to him and says, “Well, I’m sweating now, but after the war it will be the writers’ turn to sweat and describe it all.”²³ Grossman would then impress upon the reader that writers had a responsibility to depict the war truthfully, asking if it will have to be future writers who bear the honor of telling the story.²⁴ Despite Krymov opining that the quiet and painful human moments are best subsumed by bright but fictional truths, the text continually reminds us of how painfully human every second of war is.

As he and his driver take to the road, the text refuses to let those outside the car simply be. Soldiers are not simply unknown people trying to unstuck their trucks from the mud—the narrator pauses to reflect on their thoughts in such a moment.²⁵ When Krymov and his driver come to a bridge blocked by a young commandant, the narrator describes his fatigue as the kind “of a man who understands that any kind of rest is out of the question. . . . Duty was duty, though it would be easier if a bomb put an end to his life there and then.”²⁶ In these moments, Grossman takes Tolstoy’s assertions of what drives humanity and narrows in on those individual stories to show it. We can see here his own will, his desire to finally rest; but we can also see how historical force—here termed “duty”—restricts that decision-making. By doing so, Grossman humanizes the war.

Such descriptions carry on for many of those Krymov encounters. The same is true for much of the book, with the text imbuing them with some aspect of humanity even if they only exist for a single paragraph or even a single sentence. In an article written in the year after the war’s end, Popoff writes, Grossman would pen an article titled “To The Memory of the Fallen,” in which he

²³ Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 185

²⁴ Popoff, 185

²⁵ Grossman, *Stalingrad*, 268

²⁶ Grossman, 271

opines that “[t]here is nothing more precious than human life; its loss is final and irreplaceable,” adding that the fascism’s defeat at the USSR’s hands asserts every person’s “right to live, to think, and to be free.”²⁷ In many respects, *Stalingrad* can be understood as a project of memorializing the forgotten dead and wounded. So what should a writer of the war focus on? Grossman’s answer is a rebuttal to his so-called age of wolfishness: he tells the stories of how people lived in those years. While Tolstoy explicitly asserts the importance of the masses to creating historical significance, Grossman indirectly demonstrates this point by showing that the conflict is nothing but those multitudinous individuals who are the war. Hitler and Stalin are not on the frontlines; the Wehrmacht, the SS, and Red Army soldiers are.²⁸

As mentioned earlier in this paper, Tolstoy does not entirely reject that ideas can influence enough people with enough consistency to create historical significance; instead he asks how one can prove it does more so than commerce, gardening, or other activity.²⁹ In *Stalingrad*, Grossman makes this leap and uses fascism to demonstrate the outsized effect of an idea on a people. He does that by placing it firmly within Tolstoy’s theory of history before demonstrating its power to change people such that it shifts the historical significance of their massed deeds.

At the opening of *Stalingrad* we find Hitler, planning the invasion of the USSR, at his most mythically Napoleonic with years of victory at his back. Through his will were the agreements of Versailles smashed; through his boldness did Germany remilitarize; through his bludgeon did the Reich begin to claw Europe into its maw. But this is 1941. Despite the invasion of the USSR proving to be a burden, “it was impossible for Hitler not to advance; far from being a strength, this is what doomed him. He began to tire of the war, to feel afraid of it, yet it went on growing

²⁷ Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 185

²⁸ Although Grossman explicitly depicts Hitler’s inability to drive human history using Tolstoyan language, *Stalingrad* carefully avoids its logical corollary: that the same would be true of Soviet leadership.

²⁹ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1648

and growing.”³⁰ His actions quickly prove to be an unstoppered wine bottle. Much as Tolstoy argued Napoleon could not have stopped his march on Moscow, even if he had wanted to, Grossman shows us a Hitler equally unable to materialize his will once the die is cast. The great few remain the puppets of history, that remains much the same. But there is a lesson to be learned in his ascension.

Grossman makes this point in a conversation between the Soviet physicist Viktor Strum and his old mentor Chepyzhin. They meet when Strum visits Moscow for work and talk soon turns to the war. Chepyzhin muses on how Hitler and his ilk could have so deceived the German people. Strum pushes back on the core of this idea, telling his old teacher, “‘Deutschland, Deutschland über alles’ was sung long before Hitler. . . . in the epoch of imperialism these same forces have spawned Hitler—a monster of monsters—and 13 million Germans have voted for him in elections.”³¹ Here the power of Nazi leadership is further undermined while also placed within Tolstoy’s formulation of history. Hitler is a unique outcropping of his age, but his is not the origin of fascism in German society. He is the product of long extant nationalist sentiment. We can also see that fascism, like Hitler, emerges from the interaction of massed deeds (in this case, votes for the Nazi party) and historical significance (those being enough votes to win the election).

Let us reintroduce the idea as a driver of human behavior. We could make the assumption that the later advent of elections in European politics proves *prima facie* the tie between ideas and human behavior. But let us introduce some Tolstoyan doubt: without knowing each individual mindset, how can we say it was intellectual activity — the ideas of fascism — that truly caused each vote? Of course, we cannot do this precisely. But Grossman suggests we can

³⁰ Grossman, *Stalingrad*, 43

³¹ Grossman, 255, 257

see it in how individuals choose to engage with fascism's tools when Strum asks: "Who do you think mans the regiments of the SS? ... Who has forced tens of thousands of people into mobile gas chambers?"³² In effect, *Stalingrad* has taken Tolstoy's assertion that French soldiers went to fight in Russia due to infinite, varied reasons and flips it on its head to pose a question: can there really be myriad personal reasons for soldiers to operate a gas chamber?³³ It's a more emotional line of argumentation than Tolstoy's attempts at comprehensive and clearly-articulated logic, but that does not mean it is not worth engaging with just as seriously. While a reader may find it more or less convincing, it is nonetheless apparent what conclusion Grossman is inviting them to draw.

As a more concrete example of how an idea can, in fact, drive people Grossman explores the citizenry under fascism. We later enter the perspective of a Wehrmacht commander, Lieutenant Pieter Bach, who recollects meeting a friend, Lunz, while taking leave in Berlin. Lunz complains to him about the new necessities of behavior in Germany, remarking: "All art, science and philosophy now begin and end with the Reich. There is no place in Germany for bold minds and free spirits. Either they have been neutered ... or they have fallen silent. The most powerful of all ... have simply soared into the air and flown away."³⁴ Prior to and immediately after Hitler's election, we can still say the relationship between idea and action (in this case, between fascism and voting for it) is nebulous. But here we can see a more direct tie. The German state, driven by its idea, tangibly changes its creative and scientific output to serve its own end. Returning to Tolstoy's concept of free will, we can clearly see how this idea materially shifts the actual possible range of free will. Bold minds either self-censor, are forcibly silenced, or leave the society altogether. So if it is massed deeds which create historical significance and a state

³² Grossman, 255

³³ Tolstoy, *War and Peace*, 1925

³⁴ Grossman, 557

systematically prevents certain types of deeds from ever occurring, we can plainly see how that will change the equation's outcome.

So one might ask: what is the point of creating this evolution of Tolstoy's formulation of history, of concretely showing how an idea can change free will (affecting massed deeds which affects historical significance which affects free will which affects massed deeds, and so on.) On one hand, we could return to Popoff's point that Grossman's then-contemporary literary magazines were looking for a war novel to fill the same role as *War and Peace*.³⁵ And while I think that context should still be considered, I would instead point to the fact that Grossman's argumentation operationalizes the theory. Instead of being a tool of pure analytics, it becomes a calculus which can be used to push a society forward.

We can see this again in Strum's conversation with Chepyzhin in Moscow, especially in how the physicist takes issue with his mentor's belief that the German people are simply deceived and will return to a former baseline after fascism falls.³⁶ Strum notes Chepyzhin's belief "limits fascism's ability to change the social structure, to cripple humanity. But what happens if you apply your theory ... to revolutions that bring liberation."³⁷ Grossman's characterizations of how fascism inflicts itself on a people (and thereby history) is actually not a specific condemnation of it, but rather an example of how such a calculus can be used deleteriously. In the hands of a superior idea, it could instead change a country for the better. It is, all the same, a broad justification for using an idea to restrict the range of free will to affect resulting deeds.

War and Peace finds its contemporary historiography lacking, especially in regard to its study and explanations of the Patriotic War of 1812. As a result, it seeks to undermine confidence in its theories and return the study to the correct first principles. Tolstoy asserts to the

³⁵ Popoff, *Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century*, 200

³⁶ Grossman, *Stalingrad*, 257

³⁷ Grossman, 260

reader this can be found in the paradoxical relationship between free will and historical significance. Grossman, too, finds explanations for his own era lacking. What could have caused this age of fascism ascendent, of wolfishness, of unparalleled mass murder? So in *Stalingrad*, he returns to Tolstoy's formulation of history, he places the symptoms of fascism within it, and he asserts that only an ideal, intellectual activity, could have led to such an end. In doing so, he also opens the door for his readers to have some hope: although ideas have led us to this end, we can use the same calculus to permanently better our peoples and our societies.

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