

## ELOQUENT SILENCES

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Throughout his career, Grossman was battling against censorship. But, rather than compromising with the authorities' demands, he proved remarkably adept at turning censorship to his own advantage. This article examined how – in *The People Immortal* and *Stalingrad* – Grossman learned to create silences more eloquent than words.

*Keywords:* Shoah, Antisemitism, Censorship, Marx, Lenin, Hitler-Stalin Pact, Soviet Collectivization

Grossman is often seen as a plain, straightforward writer, someone who knew how to address a mass readership and who had little sympathy with the hermeticism of most modernists. This view is not without foundation; in his late memoir *An Armenian Sketchbook*, Grossman wrote:

Sometimes I think that the poetry of the twentieth century, for all its brilliance, has less of the universal humanity and passion that imbues the great poetry of the nineteenth century. As if poetry had moved from a bakery to a jeweller's shop and great bakers had been replaced by great jewellers. (Grossman 2013, 31)

Nevertheless, much in Grossman's work is far from transparent. Like Isaak Babel and Andrey Platonov, he knew how to exploit coded language and subtle hints. And when it was clear that a subject was absolutely taboo, he adopted a different strategy. Rather than simply keeping silent, he went out of his way to draw attention to his silence, thus prompting readers to think for themselves, to employ what Andrey Platonov, in his story *Among Animals and Plants* – called their “supplementary imagination” (Platonov 2008, 172).

*The People Immortal*, the first of Grossman's three war novels, was published in 1942. It includes cogent criticisms of the conduct of the war but, all in all, it is optimistic and morale-boosting – Grossman's contribution to the Soviet war effort. Even here, however, Grossman transgresses the borders of Soviet orthodoxy.

It is evident from the original manuscript that one of the novel's heroes, Commissar Bogariov, was a free-thinking and intellectual Marxist – by no means a loyal Stalinist. Bogariov worked in the Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels Institute, an independent institution

dedicated to serious archival research. Viktor Serge, one of Stalin's fiercest critics, greatly admired the institute's director, David Riazanov. Until Riazanov's first arrest in 1931, the institute was a bastion of free thinking. Riazanov's name and the name of his institute had to be deleted from the published version of *The People Immortal*. Nevertheless, Grossman found ways to make it clear that Bogariov was a man who thought for himself.

In the course of the novel, Bogariov takes part in three long conversations. The first – about Lenin's policies in 1917 – is with an old lawyer, who admits to having been critical of Lenin at the time; this conversation was omitted from the published version.

The second conversation is with the usually taciturn Divisional Commander Cherednichenko:

In the company of Bogariov, Cherednichenko was a changed man, anything but taciturn; once he had sat in his office with Bogariov and talked almost the whole night through. Orlovsky had hardly been able to believe it; he had never heard Cherednichenko speak so loudly and animatedly, asking questions, listening and then speaking again. When he went in, they were both looking flushed; it seemed, though, that the two men were not arguing but simply talking about something that really mattered to them. (Grossman 2022, 44–45)

Reading between the lines, we can be sure that Bogariov and Cherednichenko were discussing history and politics and that they were criticizing Stalin. This understanding is confirmed by two of the passages we have reinstated from the manuscript: the account of Bogariov's work at the institute and his exhortation to his men before going into battle. Instead of the customary invocation of Stalin, he concludes, "Within you beats the heart of Lenin!" (Grossman 2022, 193). This is unexpected – and the absence of any mention of Stalin in any version of the novel is truly astonishing. Cherednichenko's mother also has a portrait of Lenin – rather than Stalin – on the wall of her hut.

Grossman tells us equally little about Bogariov's night-time conversation with the collective-farm worker Ignatiev, though he emphasizes its length and importance: "It was Bogariov who spoke and Ignatiev who listened. And Bogariov's words would stay in his memory" (Grossman 2022, 195). Here again, though, a reader can infer that the two men have been speaking about the hardships of peasant life and, above all, about collectivisation and the subsequent famine. This is clear from Ignatiev's last words in this conversation, "We've been through a great deal. There are times we've gone without food. But this is our life. And it's the only life I have" (Grossman 2022, 196).

In *Stalingrad* Grossman employs these eloquent silences to still greater and bolder effect. There are several substantial texts that Grossman tells the reader about but never allows us to see. Among these are Colonel Novikov's wartime notes (present in the manuscript but deleted by Grossman himself, no doubt because they are highly critical of the military leadership); Ivannikov's treatise on "senseless kindness," (which Grossman eventually moved to *Life and Fate*, also changing Ivannikov's name to Ikonnikov); and a long article about Fascism by Maximov, a colleague of Viktor Shtrum who visited German-occupied Czechoslovakia at the time of the Hitler-Stalin pact. In the early typescripts, Viktor not

only encourages Maximov to write this article but he also hopes, audaciously, to publish it in the institute bulletin. Maximov writes no less than eighty pages, but Viktor is twice prevented from reading them. One Sunday, his wife interrupts and takes Maximov away to look at dahlias in her dacha garden. Viktor and Maximov agree to meet to discuss the article a week later. But then Hitler invades – and neither Viktor nor Grossman’s readers ever glimpse so much as a word of the article. The irony is many-layered.

The most important of the documents that Grossman never shows us is the letter Viktor Shtrum receives from his mother Anna Semionovna. This letter is as powerful a presence in *Stalingrad* as in *Life and Fate*. We never – in *Stalingrad* – read what Anna has written, but Grossman tells us in detail about the letter’s journey from the Berdichev ghetto to Viktor’s dacha. First, Anna Semionovna hands it through the ghetto fence to an unknown old woman. This woman passes it on to the holy fool Ivannikov. He, in turn, gives it to Gagarov the elderly historian, who gives it to the Old Bolshevik Mostovskoy. The letter then passes through the hands of Tamara Berozkina and Colonel Novikov and into Viktor’s briefcase, where it lies forgotten for several days.

The letter is a sacred object; seven is a sacred number and it is fitting that there are seven stages to the letter’s journey. But the sacred is often experienced as alien and terrifying; the letter is repeatedly seen as an alien object – for one reason or another, everyone concerned seems to wish to have nothing to do with it. Mostovskoy, for example, suggests to Gagarov that it might be better if Ivannikov were to take the letter to the Shaposhnikovs himself; he points out that they are sure to want to ask questions. Gagarov replies:

Yes, of course there will be questions. But Ivannikov says he knows nothing about this envelope. It’s pure chance that it ended up in his hands. He was given it by some woman in Ukraine. He has no idea how it reached her, and he doesn’t know her name or address. And he’d rather not have to go to the Shaposhnikovs. (Grossman 2019, 335)

The letter has been smuggled through a ghetto fence and across the front line. It has come from another world; it has come from beyond the grave. Mostovskoy takes the letter to the Shaposhnikovs’ apartment. When he hands it to Tamara, the young woman who opens the door to him, “she takes the envelope between her thumb and index finger and says in horror, ‘Heavens, what filthy paper – anyone would think it’s been lying in a cellar for the last two years’” (Grossman 2019, 338).

Her reaction is more appropriate than she realizes; it is as if she unconsciously understands that this package contains something terrible. As if to protect herself, she then wraps this threatening package “in a sheet of the thick pink paper people use to make decorations for Christmas trees” (Grossman 2019, 338). Here, her reaction could hardly be more ‘inappropriate’; no wrapping could be less fitting.

Tamara gives the package to Colonel Novikov, who is about to fly to Moscow. Novikov goes to Viktor’s apartment, where he happens to interrupt a romantic tête-à-tête between Viktor and a pretty young neighbour by the name of Nina. Novikov hands over the pack-

age and passes on greetings from Viktor's family. As he does so, "he seemed like an ordinary Red Army soldier, passing on messages to the families of those with whom he had been sharing a dugout" (Grossman 2019, 351). This mention of a dugout is reminiscent of Tamar's remark about the letter looking as if it had been lying in a cellar. It is as if it has come from some underground realm.

Viktor drops the package into his briefcase, then forgets it. Twenty-four hours later, at his dacha, he mistakes it for a bar of chocolate – intended, at least in the early typescripts, as a present for this same Nina. Late in the evening, he opens the package and recognizes his mother's handwriting. It is as if "a calm, clearly audible voice had called to him out of the dark" (Grossman 2019, 358). Viktor at last reads the letter. The morning afterwards, he looks at himself in the mirror, expecting "to see a haggard face with trembling lips" (Grossman 2019, 339). To his surprise, he finds that he looks much the same as he did the day before.

From then on Viktor carries the letter about with him wherever he goes, but he is unable to talk about it even to his own family. He can hardly even talk about it to himself. During the following weeks:

Viktor re-read the letter again and again. Each time he felt the same shock as at the dacha, as if he were reading it for the first time. Perhaps his memory was instinctively resisting, unwilling and unable fully to take in something whose constant presence would make life unbearable. [...] Once, when the pain seemed unbearable, he thought, "If I hide it away somewhere, I might slowly start to calm down. As things are, this letter's like an open grave." But he knew that he would sooner destroy himself than part with this letter that had, by some miracle, managed to find its way to him. (Grossman 2019, 651)

From 1943 to 1946 Grossman had worked for the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee on *The Black Book*, a collection of eyewitness accounts of the Shoah on Soviet and Polish soil; from spring 1945, after the resignation of his colleague Ilya Ehrenburg, he had been head of the editorial board. A Soviet edition of *The Black Book* had been ready for production in 1946 but was never published; the final cancellation of the project was announced on 20 August, 1947. Admitting that Jews constituted the overwhelming majority of those shot at Babi Yar, Berdichev and the many other execution sites might have led people to realize that members of other Soviet nationalities had been accomplices in the genocide. In any case, Stalin had no wish to emphasize Jewish suffering; antisemitism was a force he could exploit in order to bolster support for his regime. What Grossman must have felt when *The Black Book* was aborted after so many years of laborious and agonizing work is hard to imagine.

After the suppression of *The Black Book* – if not long before – Grossman must have been well aware that it was impossible for him to write freely about Viktor's mother's last days. Rather than toning the letter down in an attempt to make it acceptable, he evidently made up his mind to leave a blank space, to replace her letter by an audible silence. He

appears to have taken this decision at an early stage in his work on the novel; there are no notes or drafts for the letter in any of the typescripts.

Anna Semionovna's letter is a gaping hole at the centre of *Stalingrad*. The absence of her own words testifies not only to the severity of late-Stalinist censorship; it testifies, above all, to the difficulty everyone experiences in facing up to so vast a tragedy as the Shoah. It is even possible that Grossman himself – like Viktor – may have needed more time before feeling emotionally strong enough to imagine his mother's last days – as he eventually does with such power in *Life and Fate*.

Grossman not only wrote some of the first accounts of the Shoah to reach a wide audience but he also anticipated people's resistance to such accounts. Primo Levi first published his memoir *If This Be a Man* in 1947, in an edition of 2000 copies; it became well known only in the 1980s. Other first-hand accounts of the Shoah have waited far longer for publication. Anna Semionovna's letter's long and faltering journey to Viktor's dacha anticipates *Life and Fate*'s still longer journey to the reader. It might be no surprise to Grossman that *Life and Fate* only began to win real international recognition nearly fifty years after its completion.

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