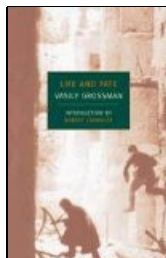


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**Book Review**  
**Life and Fate**  
by [Vasily Grossman](#)

Reviewer: [Geoff Wisner](#), Staff Reviewer  
Posted: April 4, 2007

In 1960, Vasily Grossman submitted his novel *Life and Fate* for publication. Khrushchev had introduced a "thaw," making it possible for artistic and political works to appear that would have meant deportation and death under Stalin. Grossman thought this was the right moment for his book.

He was too soon. A few months later the KGB arrived to confiscate his manuscripts, and his carbon paper and typewriter ribbons for good measure. Fortunately there were other copies, but the novel was not published for another twenty years, long after its author was dead.

*Life and Fate* is a huge work that deals frankly and directly with life in the Soviet Union during the Second World War, from the siege of Stalingrad to the Siberian labor camps. Russian novels are famous for having many characters, but *Life and Fate* may hold the all-time record. People of all kinds are introduced and named — not just at the beginning of the story but throughout the book.

"Just try and remember all Chekhov's different heroes!" one character exclaims to a friend. "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..." The list goes on, and Grossman sometimes seems to be trying to rival it.

Still, by keeping an eye on a few main characters one can make one's way without too much confusion through a story that is both epic and intimate. Much of the action revolves around Viktor Shaposhnikov, a nuclear scientist, and Colonel Novikov, a tank commander, though there are important subplots involving a transport of Russian Jews to a German gas chamber, a staunch Communist imprisoned in Moscow's Lubyanka prison, and the keeper of a power station near the front lines.

*Life and Fate* invites comparison with *War and Peace*, and in his lucid introduction the translator puts forward a plausible case that it is the greatest Russian novel of the twentieth century. Grossman, at least in this translation, comes close to achieving the clarity of Tolstoy, and he may even surpass him in his detailed knowledge of what life is like for people in a dizzying array of circumstances. When he tells you the smell of the front lines is like a morgue and an iron foundry, you believe him.

As others have pointed out, if the novels of Solzhenitsyn convey the experience of the outsider in Stalinist Russia, then Grossman's masterpiece shows you what it was like to be an insider — an ordinary citizen struggling to keep one's soul.

**About the Reviewer**

[Geoff Wisner](#) is a freelance writer and staff member of Indigocafe.com. He is the author of [A Basket of Leaves: 99 Books That Capture the Spirit of Africa](#). Visit his website at [www.geoffwisner.com](http://www.geoffwisner.com).



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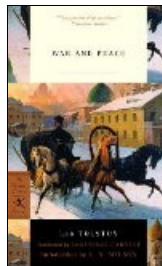
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