

Life and Fate, by Vasily Grossman

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A meticulous, expansive, and moving account of Soviet life during World War II. Grossman's novel follows a sprawling cast of characters through the latter days of the German offensive on the Eastern Front. The book examines the simultaneously mundane and terrific reality of wearying warfare in the Machine Age, and it sets against sweeping geopolitical events the often petty personal politics of wartime life under Stalin's "Socialism in one country". In the midst of deprivations and disarray, individuals may wrestle with questions of ideology, but, generally, there is no room for philosophizing. There are always more pressing material concerns. What is always wanted, it seems, is automatic action toward physical ends – this is the bearing of Stalin and the state and Hitler and his war. The individual is subsumed, and questions of "the good" are always answered by the state on his behalf. In a strange and beautiful passage which appears suddenly near the middle of the book, Grossman describes great movements in oceanic terms,

[I]f the sea was able to think, then every storm would make its waters dream of happiness. Each wave breaking against the cliff would believe it was dying for the good of the sea; it would never occur to it that, like thousands of waves before and after, it had only been brought into being by the wind.

In the end, each of the many characters in *Life and Fate* finds herself "powerless before the furious state", fated to live in its service or perish, or to perish anyway. And in the midst of it all there exists the only good Grossman deems really worth believing in – the thing in people that makes them capable of inexplicable acts of kindness even in the direst of straits:

Good is to be found neither in the sermons of religious teachers and prophets, nor in the teachings of sociologists and popular leaders, nor in the ethical systems of philosophers. . . And yet ordinary people bear love in their hearts, are naturally full of love and pity for any living thing.

The war and Stalinism are meatgrinders into which Grossman tosses his creatures (as a sincere author must always do). Yet life goes on as always and everywhere, and it's likely there are few comparably masterful renderings of it.