

THE GREAT RETURN” IN THE NOVEL *EVERYTHING FLOWS*

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”Yes, yes, the tale of a thousand and one arctic nights.”
(Grossman, 1972, p. 43).

Abstract: *The present paper focuses on an important moment in the history of the Soviet Union – 1956 – the year of the great return of a large number of prisoners who have survived the Gulag. This event, a consequence of the Khrushchev Thaw, is filtered through Vasily Grossman’s eyes and presented in his novel Everything flows. It is a picture of exceptional vividness and truthfulness about human nature, about its ability to adapt to unimaginable circumstances, about its faith in the triumph of good over evil.*

Keywords: *Gulag, the great return, time, history, freedom.*

I. Introduction

Much has been written and much is still to be written about the Gulag¹ – the vast system of labour camps that housed millions of prisoners (*zeks*)². The Soviet writer Vasily Grossman (1905-1964) wasn’t a direct victim of the Stalinist repressive system, in his novel *Everything flows* he didn’t depict what he saw or experienced, but what he knew. He undertook this task because he was convinced that it was his duty to talk on behalf of those who had suffered and died in the Gulag. The present study focuses on an important moment in the history of the Soviet Union – 1956 – the year of *the great return* of a large number of prisoners who have miraculously survived the Stalinist camps. Vasily Grossman went carefully into all its aspects, into all its great implications on the Soviet Society, that historical period was filtered through his eyes and the result of his observations and clear, accurate thinking became a literary masterpiece. His novel fills the reader’s heart with bitterness and pain at the fate of those people who come to life before his eyes. The author draws a parallel between life ”inside” and ”outside” the Gulag, between the two Russias situated on both sides of the barbed wire. The conclusion he reaches is that people are victims of a totalitarian regime, actors on a stage set called The Soviet Union –prison – camp univers – in which their main goal is to survive.

II. The rise and fall of the Gulag

”What was ”the gulag?” It was hundreds upon hundreds of prison camps specializing in hard labor. They dotted the vast arctic landscape. How big is Siberia? Its landmass is greater than all of Europe. But unlike Europe, it is cold, dark, bleak and very empty. Before Josef Stalin forced his citizens into the region, almost no one lived there.” (Apud Solzhenityn, 2009, p. 170). In Solzhenityn’s words, the Gulag is known as an „archipelago”, a vast network of labour camps situated in the remote regions of the country with difficult climates, far from civilization and any means of transport which reduced, of course, the possibility of escape. But the history of the Gulag begins in Tsarist Russia when the ”enemies of the state” were exiled to Siberia with their families, housing and even an allowance. In 1918, soon after the Russian Revolution, people were confronted with a new ”face” of the Gulag. The Bolsheviks declared that the ”horrors” of the Tsarist prisons³ had

¹The word *Gulag* is an acronym from Главное Управление Лагере́й – Chief Administration of Corrective Labour Camps.

²*Zek* – prison slang for prisoner, derived from *заключённый каналармеец*, Russian word for "prisoner."

³A good example is that of the great Russian poet - Alexander Sergeyevich Pushkin who was exiled to the South Russia in 1820. Pushkin’s ideas of freedom and political rationalism reflected in his poems made the Tsar Nicholas I consider him a real threat. So, the poet was sent away, but that period of time spent in exile

come to an end, the Soviet propaganda praised the penal role of the Gulag, its potential to rehabilitate anti-Soviet elements through honest labour. "Through honest labour lies the road to release" – is written at the entrance of a punitive camp, so all those "unreliable elements" as Lenin called them, had no place in the new Soviet society, they had to be isolated, so the right location was behind bars. It had become clear that the Bolshevik regime couldn't do without prisons, they came to be an integral part of the repressive system. The use of the coerced labour was turned into a brutal instrument of political persecution, its main goal was to repress all the opponents of the regime.

From 1930s on the camps took on a different significance, they ceased to have only a punitive role. During the Stalinist age, terror reached its peak. The Soviet concentration system continued to grow as Stalin became obsessed with the idea of grand projects that would transform U.S.S.R. into a great power of the world. A system of intensive slave labour was adopted and used in order to excavate the natural resources in the most inaccessible parts of the taiga. Millions of innocent men and women were imprisoned as a consequence of the political and economic decisions, of the mass arrests during The Great Terror or of any other harsh laws. They were sent away without knowing where they were going to or what was going to happen to them. Fortunate enough to reach the destination⁴, the prisoners were forced to work under unimaginable conditions: they had to endure short food ration, little water, poor outerwear while working for long hours with rudimentary tools at temperatures down to -55C in winter. The Gulag was a world of hunger and oppression, a world in which "death was caused by unbearable toil, by cold and starvation, by unheard of degradation and humiliation, by a life that could not have been endured by any other animal." (Conquest, 2001, p. 8). It was a Golgotha⁵, a place of suffering for that huge stream of people who came, worked and died there. This terrible "human machinery" could become a "magic wand" (Gregory, 2003, p. 39) in Stalin's hands ready to use it in order to put into practice his projects. But in the early 1950s the Soviet penal system began to show its flaws. Lavrenty Beria, the head of the Secret Police, was the one who understood that, from a strict economic point of view, the system was unprofitable. As Paul Gregory states in his book *The Economics of Forced Labor. The Soviet Gulag – "its revenues were not sufficient to cover the cost of its active labor force and the maintenance of the nonworking part of the Gulag population."* (Ibidem, p. 197). Beria argued in favour of shutting it down which demonstrates that a cynical logic brought the Gulag into being and a very pragmatic one put it to an end. Unfortunately, it took three more decades until its real end.

On March 26, 1953, soon after Stalin's death, a decree "On Amnesty" stipulated for the release of about 1.5 million prisoners (about 60 percent of the entire Gulag population), the same decree cut in half the terms of those prisoners left behind the bars. It was Nikita Khrushchev's first important move. The Khrushchev Thaw⁶ began and "the return of so many of Stalin's victims to Soviet society made the Stalinist horrors visible to all." (Kenez, 2006, p. 193). Those people who had survived the camp provided information about the terrible truth behind the barbed wire, a truth about the official propaganda maintained a total silence. However, the year 1956 "was a pivotal one." (Ibidem, p. 224), Khrushchev's "secret" speech against Stalin's crimes given during the Twentieth Party Congress brought hope to a lot of people, but his reforms and the denunciation of Stalin's personality cult didn't change the system. Throughout the 1970s and early 1980s the Soviet society remained a repressive one. The moral voice of a new generation of dissidents started penetrating the "walls" of the authoritative State. In response, the Soviet State, through Leonid Brezhnev's voice, tried to persuade them that its will was stronger than their subversive activity. One of the methods was to declare the dissidents mentally ill and lock them up in mental hospitals. The gates of the camps were opened again for those whose voice refused to remain silent⁷. Due to their courageous activity, information about the post-Stalinist camps passed through the Iron Curtain and became known in the West. The dissident movement demonstrated that people wanted "to live in truth" as the Czech dissident Vaclav Havel stated. (Ibidem, p. 223). The history of the Gulag reached its end in the late 1980s. 1987 was the year of the fall of the Gulag, the year when Mikhail Gorbachev began to dissolve

represented a prolific stage in his literary career: he was allowed to read, travel and write. As Pushkin confessed himself, Mikhailovskoye was the place where he had changed his creative methods and his writing manner, the place became Pushkin's poetical mother land.

⁴The prisoners were transported in unheated crowded cattle-cars, they had to endure short food ration or even thirst-inducing salt fish, little water and no proper clothes. Many of them died before reaching the destination.

⁵*Magadan Hills (Golgotha)* – is one of the few allegorical works in *The Gulag Collection. Paintings of the Soviet penal system by former prisoner Nikolai Getman*. The symbolisms in the painting are direct and powerful. A Russian Orthodox Cross hovers over an endless landscape of human skulls. The Cross represents the enormous burdens the prisoners had to bear. It also symbolizes Christ's trek up the hill of Golgotha, which the artist likens to the prisoners' journey. (Apud Getman, 2001, p. 28).

⁶The Khrushchev Thaw – the expression "thaw" comes from the title of Ilya Ehrenburg's short story written in 1954, *The Thaw (Оттепель)*.

⁷The dissident movement occurred in 1965 with the arrests of two writers – Iulii Daniel and Andrei Siniavskii.

the Soviet Union's political concentration camps. The Gulag lasted as long as the Soviet Union itself, when the great Soviet Empire collapsed, its whole repressive system collapsed as well.

III. 1956 – "The great return"

As we have mentioned above, 1956 remains an important moment in the history of the Soviet Union. Some of the "corrective camps" were closed down, a great number of prisoners were released, some of them were rehabilitated as a consequence of Khrushchev Thaw, but leaving the prison camps didn't mean the end of the problems. The stigma of being in the Gulag hung over those many innocent people for the rest of their lives, it left its mark upon all those who passed through it, they were easily recognized "on the street simply from the look in their eyes." (Applebaum, 2003, p. XVii). Freedom after the Gulag was not an easy task to deal with and literature played an important part in revealing those tragic stories – both behind and beyond the barbed wire of the unknown Out There. A crucial moment in understanding the Gulag phenomenon, that "meat-grinder" (Ibidem, p. 11) of the Soviet repressive system, was generated by the publication of Solzhenitsyn's literary masterpiece *One day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* (1962), its publication being authorized by Khrushchev himself. Indeed, it was a first step, but it took decades for the whole tragedy to become available. As Galina Vishevakaya⁸ put it "(...) they had let the genie out of the bottle and were not able to put it back." (Apud Conquest, 2001, p. 6).

A broad literary coverage of that period was possible due to the detailed and vivid writings of survivors such as Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn (*The Gulag Archipelago*), Varlam Shalamov (*Kolyma stories*), Evghenya Ghinzburg (*Journey into the Whirlwind*) or Nikolai Getman's collection of paintings on the Soviet penal system. Vasily Grossman started writing his short novel *Everything flows* in 1955, soon after Stalin's death, as a response to a historical event, he wanted to mark an important moment in the post-Stalinist era – the great return of hundreds of thousands of prisoners from the Gulag. "Stalin is dead! Tens of thousands of prisoners marching under guard passed the news along in whispers: <He's croaked, he's croaked.> And this whisper of the thousands upon thousands roared like the wind. Black night hung over the arctic earth. But the ice in the Arctic Ocean had begun to break up and the ocean rumbled." (Grossman, 1972, p. 29). Ivan Grygorievich, the protagonist of the novel, steps into the free world after nearly 30 years spent in different camps. He returns home bearing the terrible truth about that place, a burden too heavy for a human being to carry. What he really longs for is someone to lift that burden from his shoulders, and that person could be his cousin Nikolai Andreyevici. Both cousins are full of hope, their meeting could represent a key-moment in their existence. On one hand, Ivan thinks that if he shares his experience he will be able to release himself from what he has seen and suffered in the camp, on the other hand Nikolai hopes to make peace with a past full of compromises. But their meeting proves to be a total failure. Ivan, returned from that man-made hell "(...) in a padded jacket, in soldier's shoes, his face eaten away by the cold of Siberia and the foul air of overcrowded camp barracks (...)" makes Nikolai feel the threat of a past he is ashamed of. (Ibidem, p. 45). He is weak, he doesn't have the moral strength to confess and repent, he just wants to justify the past and himself: "My dear friend, my dear friend, we, too, had a hard time in our life – it wasn't just you out there in the camps." (Ibidem, p. 51). There is no real communication between the two men. The outcome of the meeting that has brought together not only two people, but also two different worlds – the present one and past one – has not been the expected one. Ivan finds it difficult to talk about those people of the past who have gone "into eternal darkness", (Ibidem, p. 43). Even the most tender words could have hurt their memory, so, he leaves his cousin's place realizing that his visit has brought no relief to him.

The rest of the novel can be read in a different key – facing the world "outside" the camp, Ivan understands that the concentration camp system created by Stalin was, in fact, part of the daily life of all Soviet citizens. He now realizes that on both sides of the fence it was the same story: fear, frustration, terror. In his attempt to figure out what has wrong in his life or in the life of the people who once loved and trusted, he doesn't judge anyone. Not even the man who has informed on him, Vitaly Antonovich Pinegin, a former university friend. Their meeting is explored by Grossman in order to confront the two Russias, the same people situated on both sides of the barbed wire. The poet Anna Akhmatova famously said: "Now those who have been arrested will return, and two Russias will look each other in the eye – the Russia that sent people to the camps, and the Russia that was sent to the camps." (Apud Applebaum, 2003, p. 109). Grossman is aware of the fragility of human existence, in order to preserve his life with all its benefits, man has always chosen to make compromises. It's the essence of the human nature and this is the reason why Grossman doesn't transform his hero into a judge. Even in suffering, Ivan proves his nobility of spirit. He has accepted his fate, his failure is not a result of external circumstances, the roots of his bitter fate were within himself. As a student, in a lector hall, he spoke out against dictatorship, "he proclaimed freedom a boon as important as life itself" (Grossman, 1972, p. 38). The consequence of his speech was the expel from the university followed by his exile for three years to

⁸Galina Vishevakaya – a great Russian singer.

Semipalatinsk Province. This was his first contact with the Gulag, but the Gulag machine couldn't extinguish his ardent desire for freedom "(...) *there is no higher happiness than (...) to die in freedom, even if only ten yards from the cursed barbed wire.*" (Ibidem, p. 89). This episode is followed by an imaginary trial of four different informers, the four "Judases". The readers become part of the trial, as members of the jury we must deliver our verdict. "*Who was guilty and who is going to answer for it?*" (Ibidem, p. 68). Before answering this question, the reader is asked not to be too hasty with the answer. Our task is a very difficult one, we need to think things over, to take into consideration all the arguments presented by the characters – the counsels of both the prosecution and the defence – "*For it is an awful thing to put to death even an awful human being.*" (Ibidem, p. 75). And this precaution comes from the way Vasily Grossman has succeeded in understanding „his century”⁹. He was one of the few great humanists who resisted the temptation to describe the 20th century in black and white, as Tzvetan Todorov states in his book *Hope and memory: lessons from the twentieth century*. Grossman leads us towards the end of the trial and the reached verdict proves to be a painful one: no one is innocent, all are guilty, the living, with no exception, have compromised themselves. Only the dead have "the right" to pass judgment, but this, of course, remains just a matter of conscience.

Once the trial has finished, the reader turns back to his part as a witness. Grossman offers us a view into the world of terror Anna Sergeevna experienced first hand. She was a young Party activist during the Terror Famine in Ukraine in 1932-33 – an act of genocide which decimated the peasant population of Ukraine as a result of the implementation of the collectivization policy. She is the one who tries to establish balance in Ivan's life, she is his landlady and, eventually, lover, a woman with a terrible story. The power of her story affects our emotions as we put together the information she provides. All those monstrous crimes are revealed before our eyes in a very lucid way, Anna is not afraid to talk about her past, she cannot remain silent. Five million peasants died as a result of one of the harshest repressive acts in the Soviet Union. Anna and Ivan have seen human beings in the most critical moments of their fragile existence, the victims of the inhuman Soviet mentality. This suffering unites people, makes them understand the real value of life, of truth. Anna's story "releases" Ivan's memories. He turns back in time, into the past, he starts meditating on his own experience in the Gulag or on the cruel fate of those men and women, those prisoners who "*were from that powerful tribe of zeks, unique on the face of the earth...*" (Solzhenitsyn, 1997, p. 64). He tries to capture the meaning of time, of the way all those events fit into the arc of Russian history, he tries to understand his destiny. Ivan Grygorievich realizes that life has gone on without him, his long absence has wiped his memory from people consciousness, even from those hot hearts. Still, there is a human virtue called strength or will which makes people go on. Or, it is just that sense of hope and optimism, a feeling like this becomes a way to gather your strength and survive.

IV. Time, history, freedom

Panta rhei, panta kineitai kai ouden menei (Всё течёт, всё движётся и ничего не остаётся неизменным) – this is the essence of Heraclitus' philosophy. Everything flows, everything is constantly changing, nothing remains unchanged by the touch of Time. Only change is real, like the continuous flow of a river – you step into it, but the river is not the same, other waters keep flowing on. In Grossman's novel, time flows back into the past. Ivan's recollections illuminate that dark chapter in Russian history, sheds a harsh light on the past. Those prisoner trains, those carriers of human misery to an unfamiliar, unknown world, were not the same. Just like a river "(...) *every prisoner train was and will be different from the one before and the one coming after. One can never enter the same train twice.*" (Grossman, 1972, p. 112). But even human despair is carried away by time, it is forever changing, forever flowing. Time becomes a key-word in Grossman's novel, according to Frolova Olga Evghenyevna, professor at State University in Moscow, throughout the text words related to time are frequently used, no less than 98 times. But time is not the only aspect Grossman concentrates on. History and freedom are also fundamental paradigms the text is built on. Grossman's sublimation of freedom as a supreme goal of our existence is fascinating, especially if we take into consideration the historic frame of the text. "*The history of humanity is the history of human freedom.*" (Ibidem, p. 212). Yet, despite this sublimation of freedom, the reader discovers a pessimistic discourse when it comes for Russia's freedom: "*When will Russia ever be free? Perhaps never.*" (Ibidem, p. 219). As long as the tie between its progress and its slavery gets stronger, there is no hope for Russia.

Ivan meditates on the fate of Russia as a whole, the protagonist makes known Grossman's critical point of view on Russian history. The last chapters of the novel can be considered "*the greatest passage of historical-political writing in the Russian language*" as Robert Chandler remarks in an article¹⁰ on Vasily Grossman's novel *Everything flows*. Each attempt to modernize Russia by Peter the Great, Catherine the Great, Lenin or

⁹*Vasily Grossman's century* is the title of a chapter in Tzvetan Todorov's book *Hope and memory: lessons from the twentieth century*.

¹⁰The article *Everything flows: Robert Chandler on Vasily Grossman* was posted on May 14, 2010 on Vulpes Libris. <http://wp.me/p7orS-2Us> (accessed 22. 02. 2017).

Stalin has failed. Its growth of freedom has been based on the intensification of slavery. Lenin – the leader of the Russian Revolution – the one "who transformed her most" is directly indicted as the main destroyer of Russia's freedom. (Ibidem, p. 219). To Lenin, according to Grossman's opinion, the Revolution did not mean freedom for Russia, his main goal was to seize power and in order to achieve it, he sacrificed "what was most sacred in Russia: Russia's freedom." (Ibidem, p. 203). The last chapters of the book represent a "systematic annihilation of the Lenin cult" which makes Grossman's novel the most subversive piece of literature that has ever been written by a Soviet writer. (Ellis, 1994, p. 1).

V. Conclusion

People may say that the Gulag belongs to the past, it is a forgotten part of the history and it should remain forgotten. But if we want to avoid repeating the mistakes of the past we might need a different approach. It is not too late to talk about the source of those endless human sufferings inside and outside the barbed wire of the concentration camps – the totalitarian regime. It is a history lesson people should be reminded of as part of their education. It is also a tribute to the memory of the millions of its victims. Vasily Grossman is a great writer, a great humanist, a lucid mind who avoids harsh judgement, who praises values such as liberty and kindness, a human being who manifests tremendous affection towards all human beings. His novel is a highly instructive book about the resilience of the human spirit forced to bear enormous burdens. In fact, his literary legacy represents a testimony to the fate of the victims of those terrible years, whether we refer to the victims of the Famine in Ukraine (1932-1933) or to the millions of prisoners who died in the Soviet and Nazi camps. And we cannot help remembering another powerful message to humanity – Charlie Chaplin's famous speech delivered in *The Great Dictator* (1940), a harsh indictment of the plague of the 20th century – the totalitarian system. "The hate of men will pass, and dictators die, and the power they took from the people will return to the people. And so long as men die, liberty will never perish."

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