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INDICE

EDITORIALE	2
<i>STUDI E RICERCHE</i>	
BRITISH DIPLOMATS IN THE KINGDOM OF SARDINIA ENRICO GENTA TERNAVASIO	5
IMMANENZA E TRASCENDENZA NELLA TEORIA DELLA LEGALITÀ SALVATORE AMATO	30
POLITICA E FILOSOFIA GIOVANNI GENTILE	61
FILOSOFIA E POLITICA: 1918-2018. (UN RINVIO DA GENTILE A DEL NOCE, A SEVERINO) LORENZO SCILLITANI	75
LA RIVOLUZIONE PERMANENTE STEFANO CAPRIO	80
STORIA E SOCIOLOGIA DELLE EMOZIONI. NOTE DI LETTURA PAOLO IAGULLI	101
<i>PAGINE LIBERE</i>	
VASILY GROSSMAN, A RUSSIAN WRITER IN THE WORLD: THE ACTIVITY OF THE «STUDY CENTER VASILIJ GROSSMAN» MICHELE ROSBOCH E ALEXANDER LINNIKOV	109

VASILY GROSSMAN, A RUSSIAN WRITER IN THE WORLD: THE ACTIVITY OF THE «STUDY CENTER VASILIJ GROSSMAN»

MICHELE ROSBOCH E ALEXANDER LINNIKOV*

It is a true honour being here and having the chance to talk about the activities of the «Study Center Vasilij Grossman» and the effort we put to spread the works of one of the greatest writers of the twentieth century. We would like to thank the collaborators of the Study Centre, the Scientific Directors professor Giovanni Maddalena and professor Anna Bonola, and of the Rector of the University of Turin professor Gianmaria Ajani, distinguished jurist and scholar of Russian law.

Vasily Grossman, more than 50 years after his death – in 1964 – is now a «classic» of modern literature, in particular because of his most important novel *Life and Fate*, published posthumously in 1980 in Lausanne and in 1988 in Moscow, and now translated into all the main languages in the world¹.

His is a positive and universal message, because it reminds men from every epoque or country about the priceless value of life and freedom. In addition to that, in his novels and short stories he makes us understand the everlasting danger of ideologies. The love for life and freedom consists of gestures of goodwill, gestures of «illogic kindness», apparently senseless, but able to narrow the evil and violence.

Our Study Centre was born in Turin in 2006 on the occasion of various initiatives to remember in Italy the birth centenary of Grossman. Many of us, professors, university students, professionals or simple enthusiasts, had already read *Life and Fate*, published in Italy in 1984 on the advice of an Italian priest, father Luigi Giussani (1922-2005), with a deep knowledge of Russian culture and oriental theology².

Consequently, we decided to promote – during the winter Olympics in Turin – an exhibition entitled *Life and Fate. The novel of freedom and the fight of Stalingrad*,

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¹ Cf. V. Grossman, *Life and Fate: L'Age d'Homme*, Lausanne, 1980; «Oktjabr», 1988- Kniznaja palata, Moscow, 1988; Adelphi, Milano, 2008; Collins Harvill, London, 1985-2006; Vintage, London, 2011; Robert Laffont, Paris, 2006.

² Cf. A. Savorana, *Vita di don Giussani*, Rizzoli, Milano, 2013, 629 (*The Life of Luigi Giussani*, Mc Gill-Queen's Press, Montreal & Kindsom-London-Chicago, 2018).

organized thanks to the help of the State Museum of Contemporary History in Moscow for supplying the war photos, and other Italian and Russian institutions³.

In addition to that, Turin also held an international conference with most important scholars, as well as some old friends of Grossman's. In the meanwhile, on the advice of professor Vittorio Strada, who recently passed away, the «Study Center Vasilij Grossman» was founded, with the specific purpose of gathering scholars of Grossman from different places in the world and spreading Grossman's works and their content⁴.

The same exhibition on *Life and Fate* was translated into many languages and displayed from 2007 on in many Italian cities, and afterwards in the world: in 2007 in Moscow, then Buenos Aires, New York City, Washington, Jerusalem, Paris, Oxford, and so forth. Today we would like to create a multimedia version of the exhibition for the benefit of a broader public.

After the first conference in 2006, entitled «The novel of freedom. Vasilij Grossman among the twentieth century classics», two more followed: the first in 2009 in Turin, entitled «The human in the man. Vasilij Grossman between ideologies and eternal questions», the second in 2014 in Moscow at the House of Russian Migration dedicated to Alexander Solzenicyn, entitled «The heritage of Vasilij Grossman: originality of a classic of the twentieth century»⁵.

A second field of activities deals with the publication of books and scientific articles about Grossman in different languages. For example, the records of the first two conferences have been published in Italian, while the 2014⁵ conference in Russian and English. Next September a collection of essays in English will be published by the prestigious publishing company Mc Gill University in Montreal⁶.

An important work about Grossman by John and Carol Garrard, first published in Russian in 1991, was then translated into Italian in 2009 and in Spanish in 2010, and being afterwards republished in English in 2012, thanks to the support of the Study Centre⁷.

The activity of the Study Centre also fostered new editions or new translations of Vasily Grossman's works (for example, in Italy, in Spain and in Great Britain) and promoted meetings, events and conferences in all over of the world. We recently started

³ *Life and Fate. The novel of freedom and the battle of Stalingrad*, Torino, Centro Culturale Pier Giorgio Frassati, 2005.

⁴ About Vittorio Strada (1929- 2018), cf. V. Strada, *Autoritratto critico. Archeologia della rivoluzione d'Ottobre*, Liberal, Roma, 2005.

⁵ *Il romanzo della libertà. Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo*, ed. G. Maddalena-P. Tosco, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2007; *L'umano nell'uomo. Vasilij Grossman tra ideologie e domande eterne*, ed. P. Tosco, Rubbettino, Soveria Mannelli, 2011; *Grossman Studie. The Legacy of a Contemporary Classic*, ed. M. Calusio-A. Krasnokova-P. Tosco, Educatt, Milano, 2017.

⁶ *Vasily Grossman. A Writer's Freedom*, ed. A. Bonola-G. Maddalena, McGill University Press, Montreal, 2018.

⁷ J. Garrard and C. Garrard, *The Bones of Berdichev. The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman*, The Free Press, New York, 1996 and *The Life and Fate of Vasily Grossman*, Pen&Sword, Barnsley, 2012; *La vida y el destino de Vasily Grossman*, Encuentro, Madrid, 2010; *Le ossa di Berdicev. La vita e il destino di Vasilij Grossman*, Marietti, Genova, 2009.

to collaborate with professor Yoon Youngsun, the Korean translator of the novel *Life and Fate*.

Thanks to all this we managed to create further collaborations with universities, research and cultural centres and libraries in different places of the world. In particular, with Jewish institutions (partners of our Study Centre from the very beginning) with the aim of promoting in Grossman's works themes of memory and resistance against Nazism.

Third, the Study Centre supported an activity of digitalisation of Grossman's sources and secondary literature, thus creating in 2014⁵ the «Digital Documentation Center Vasij Grossman», now being updated and improved. The portal, available in Russian, English and Italian, let every scholar easily consult the sources offered⁸.

It is an open project, which requires continuous updating and needs to be further developed, by starting a collection of unpublished sources, mainly preserved in Russian archives. The purpose is also to support new editions and publications for the benefit of research and collaborations among scholars.

A lot has been done already, but a lot more needs to be done. We are working on many ideas, but they are possible only with the support and cooperation of scholars, passionate, sponsors and institutions.

First of all, the edition of the numerous material about Vasily Grossman still unpublished, mainly regarding the Second world war's period.

Secondly, as already mentioned, the renewal of the exhibition about Life and Fate with the support of the new technologies.

Third, the realization of a documentary based on one of the most beautiful short stories by Grossman, *The Sistine Madonna*, dedicated to the homonymous painting by Raffaello Sanzio, now preserved in Dresda and a sought after destination of many visits and pilgrimages⁹.

«Live, live, live for ever...»¹⁰ – this sentence by Grossman perfectly sums up the ideal of the Study Centre: a love for life in all its aspects and the hope that, thanks to the message of Grossman's works, life may have a positive outcome even in its contradictions, thus contributing to friendship among peoples.

⁸ www.dc.grossmanweb.eu

⁹ V. Grossman, *The Sistine Madonna*, in *The Road*, ed. R. Chandler, New York Review of Books, New York, 2010, 163-174.

¹⁰ V. Grossman, *Life and Fate*, 2011, 77.