e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 1 – June 2023

The Volga, Mother of All Russian Rivers, Silent Protagonist of Vasilij Grossman's Novel *Stalingrad*

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Abstract In Russian history and culture, the Volga River represents not only a fundamental element of the landscape, but also an important cultural motif, celebrated in numerous folkloric expressions from the very beginnings of the civilisations that arose along its banks and in the territories it crossed. Starting from the end of the eighteenth century, the image of the river also became a literary motif and its presence connotes the poetic and prose writings in the following centuries. The Volga River also flows through Vasilij Grossman's novels and short stories and in particular in the novel *Stalingrad*, its presence is substantial and, above all, is marked by a semantic stratification of remarkable interest. The Volga is here a silent interlocutor of the novel's protagonists and its changing appearance reflects individual and collective instances, against the backdrop of the dramatic Battle of Stalingrad.

Keywords Vasilij Grossman. Stalingrad. Volga. Russian literature. Russian rivers.

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Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-03-01
Accepted 2023-05-10
Published 2023-06-28

Citation Baselica, G. (2023). "The Volga, Mother of all Russian Rivers, Silent Protagonist of Vasilij Grossman's Novel *Stalingrad*". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(1), [1-14].

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/010

1 Introduction. Rivers in Russian Culture

In Russian literature, as in other national humanistic cultures,[1] riverways are connected with various historical, social and political contexts, and represent, in their variety and multiplicity, powerful symbols; at the same time, they reveal the omnipresent intersection between poetics and ecocriticism.

Whereas the element of water is an archetypal motif in numerous civilisations, in Russian cultural perception it is fully embodied in the image of the river which, over the centuries, has given rise to recurrent, as well as varied, literary representations (Ziolkowski 2020). The cultural semantics of the river is determined by specific features, such as its flow speed, its mobility, its extension, its sinuosity. It thus symbolizes movement, the pathway leading to the Other World and connecting the living to the dead. In folkloric narratives the purifying and life-giving force is attributed to the river water (Agankina et al. 2008).

The five major Russian rivers – Dnepr, Volga, Neva, Don and Angara – thus flow through space, time and cultures, finding expression in the most varied folk-literary, popular and elitist genres, and inspiring devotion and respect in the peoples who inhabit the areas washed by their waters. Over the centuries, literature and art have borne witness to the intense, not infrequently emotional and subjective feeling Russians have for their rivers (Ziolkowski 2020), an object of study in cultural environmental history, which aims at identifying the interdependence between human identities and the forces of nature (Costlow, Rosenholm 2016).

The forerunner of this scientific approach was probably the historian Vasilij Ključevskij, who, in his public lectures in the 1880s, emphasized the close connection between history and the relationship that Russians, over time, established with the rivers of their land. His learned and impassioned, as much as lococentric theses, suggested interesting and complex interrelationships between geography, hydrology and the history of settlements, noting the essential importance of seasonality and climate with their consequences on agricultural productivity and the manifestations of popular religiosity, and finally formulating general deductions derived from psycho-social conjectures (Ključevskij 1987). The river, says Ključevskij, educates the people in order to spread a community spirit, since rivers love order and regularity. Over the centuries, it has taught the Russian population corporate action, passed on to them the habit of reflection and resourcefulness as well as the disposition to welcome foreign peoples to

1 See, in this regard, Matthewman, Mullen, Patuway 2015; Escobedo De Tapia, Mena Gonzáles 2016; Murphy, Rivero 2018.

observe their customs and interests, and thus exchange experiences and goods. It finally gathered the dispersed peoples, instilling in them the feeling of belonging to the same land and the same community (Ključevskij 1987). Its majestic floods, which occur at punctual intervals, the scholar points out, are unparalleled in the Western European hydrographic system. The Russian river knows how to temporarily transform itself from a modest torrent into a broad and abundant current, how to mark territories unsuitable for human settlements, thus making navigation trade possible and favouring agriculture. The rare floods of Russia's low-flow rivers, the historian concludes, are in no way comparable to the sudden and devastating floods of Western European mountain torrents (Ključevskij 1987).

1.1 The Volga River in the Russian Folk-Literary Tradition

Of all the great Russian rivers, perhaps the most celebrated in folkloric and literary production is the Volga, which represents an important cultural element, marked by the centuries-long layering of elements generated by mythological, poetic and religious production, as well as economic activity (Kusmidinova 2015). While the etymological origin of its name is uncertain,[2] its identification in the folkloric tradition with a maternal entity, *Volga-matuška* (Mother Volga),[3] celebrated in some specific folkloric genres, such as the historical song and the legend, is undoubted.[4] The attribution of a gender and sometimes a patronymic – a recurring tradition in many cultures – determines the link between nature and *socium*. The most accomplished semantic realisation of the Mother Volga motif is observed in contexts in which it designates the border of one's land, acquires the value of amorous theme, or refers to psychological parallelism with the hero or heroine protagonist of adventures (Stroganov 2017). In such songs, the image of the *Volga-matuška* is varied. In some songs composed in the nineteenth century, at the same time as this motif appears in the *častuški*, non-ritual songs, romances and paremias,

2 The current name of the river could be of Slavic origin and derive from the terms *vlag*, *volg* (with the meaning of 'wet'), or of Finno-Ugric origin, thus connected with the name Vologda (with the semantic meaning of 'white', 'bright'). The ancient name of the river, Ra, derives from the Iranian languages and etymologically refers to the term 'dew' (Vasmer 1987, 336-7; Ageeva 1985).

3 An essential bibliographic source for an extensive and comprehensive survey of the subject is Dvoreckova 1937.

4 The Mother Volga motif appears in narrative contexts characterised by the presence of the ataman, leader of the fugitive Cossacks, the usual expression of vigorous social protest. Examples of this are the legends inspired by the figures of Stepan Razin and Ermak Timofeevič.

it hinders the union of the two lovers, while in others it makes their rapprochement possible, or constitutes for one of the protagonists, the extreme border of life (Stroganov 2017).

Precisely in the course of the nineteenth century, in the context of the vast and complex phenomenon of nationalism, the valorisation and, at the same time, idealisation of the Volga River and the surrounding lands began to inspire the emerging Russian narrative production,[5] giving the traditional symbolism of the Mother Volga a new national identity, exalted in artistic and, in particular, pictorial production.[6] Around the end of the nineteenth century, the national cultural reception of the Volga image changed again. Active economic development led to the need to perfect the complex system of canals, including the outstanding Mariinskij Canal, which began in the city of Rybinsk, at the confluence of the Volga and Šeksna Rivers and ended in Lake Onega, and which in the twentieth century would be extended to form the White Sea-Baltic Sea Canal. The waters of the Volga were thus already contaminated by the fuel of the ships and boats that travelled along it, and in the poetic inspiration is shown to be offended and wrathful.[7]

The representation of the Mother Volga in Soviet culture, therefore, in that period was functional to the campaign of electrification and industrialisation of the country, the tangible outcome of the Bolshevik victory against the wild and untamed force of nature. At the same time, Soviet culture tended to crystallise the iconic status of the Volga River and its denotative peculiarities – vastness, depth, strength, and freedom – as a symbol of the nation. The twentieth century witnessed the mighty work of transformation undergone by the *Volga-matuška* diverted, exploited, imprisoned by mighty dams in order to obtain huge supplies of hydroelectric energy to modernise the country and finally overcome its backwardness, a legacy of the imperial past. However, Soviet poets continued to celebrate the gran-

5 In the eighteenth century, the Volga motif also became a literary motif. Indeed, Nikolaj Karamzin composed the lyric *Volga* in 1793, in which the river is defined with the superlative *svjašennejšaja*, 'holy', 'queen of crystal-clear waters' and 'mother' (Karamzin 1966, 118-20).

6 In the 1860s, the Peredvižniki painters (The Wanderers) in an attempt to achieve an effective interrelationship between their art and the motherland made the Volga River a favoured subject at the turn of the century. Isaak Levitan, Il'ja Repin and Aleksej Savrasov portrayed the Volga as a backdrop to scenes of everyday life, but in one painting in particular *Večer. Zolotoj Plës* (Evening. Golden Plyos) the river is the leading actor, conveying to the viewer an impression of boundlessness and spatial immensity (Zeister-Vralsted 2014).

7 One example is the poem *Volge* (To the Volga) by Aleksandr Širjavec, published in 1924, in which the poet explicitly refers to the oil slicks on the surface of the river. Širjavec dedicated several lyrical compositions to the *burlaki*, the Volga boatmen, immortalised in Repin's paintings.

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deur, solemnity and symbolic significance of the Volga River: Aleksandr Tvardovskij in the poem *Za dal'ju-dal'* (Beyond the Distance), composed between 1950 and 1960, celebrates the physical grandeur of the river, its immanence in the flow of Russian history, while Velimir Chlebnikov, between 1913 and 1922 and, later, Konstantin Fedin, between the 1920s and the 1970s, inspired by the Volga River, composed several poems and numerous short stories, respectively, to which is added Boris Pil'njak's well-known novel *Volga padaet v Kaspijskoe more* (The Volga Flows into the Caspian Sea). Thus, nature myths persisted in Russian collective memory despite their changing role and the Volga River continued to contribute to the historical ideal of tamed and celebrated nature in the art of Socialist Realism, maintaining its centrality in the dialogue between memory and identity (Zeister-Vralsted 2014). In the history of Russian civilisation, the Volga thus constitutes a multifaceted plurisemantic symbol and reflects all the archetypal cultural paradigms (birth, death, love and freedom) as well as the forms in which they find expression (Kusmidinova 2015) – the word, *slovo*, as poetry, narration and song –, thus assuming in the broad context of collective and individual reception the spatio-temporal connotations of an axial phenomenon.

2 The Volga River in Vasilij Grossman's Novel *Stalingrad*

In Vasilij Grossman's literary and non-fiction production, the Volga River also represents a recurring reference and literary motif.[8] In the novel *Za pravole delo* (Stalingrad), in particular, the Volga River identifies an entity precisely characterised and marked by a symbolic and semantic bearing of considerable relevance. Firstly, it is interesting to observe in the long and complex history of the paratext,[9] that one of the titles proposed by Grossman himself and rejected by Aleksandr Fadeev – General Secretary of the Writers' Union from 1946 to 1954 – was precisely *Na Volge* (On the Volga),[10] clear proof of the

8 It appears frequently in the novels *Vsë tečët* (Everything Flows), *Žizn' i sud'ba* (Life and Fate) and in the collection *Iz zapisnych knižek voennyh let* (A Writer at War).

9 In the writer's archive, a sort of chronodiary of the path taken by the manuscript of the novel, *Dnevnik prochoždenija rukopisi romana Za pravoe delo*, has been preserved. It begins with the first entry, 2 August 1949, the day Grossman delivered the manuscript to the editorial office of the journal *Novyj mir*, and ends with the note of 26 October 1954, when the author received official news of the book's publication (Bočarov 1990).

10 In 1949, having completed the first draft of the novel, the author had published under this title a selection of eleven chapters, ten of which would go into the final version of *Za pravoe delo*, and the eleventh into that of the novel *Žizn' i sud'ba*. The editorial board of the magazine *Novyj mir* rejected the proposal *Na rodnoj vojne* (In the People's War) and on 3 June 1952, Fadeev himself informed the author that the editorial board had accepted the title *Za pravoe delo* (For a Just Cause).

centrality, in the novel, of the role that the river assumes, designating, with an intensely metonymic valence, the place and circumstances of the famous, as atrocious as decisive, Battle of Stalingrad.[11]

It is, first and foremost, a constituent and therefore denotative element of the Russian landscape, it is its substance and immanent presence even when not visible. Almost at the beginning of the narration, this is the scenario that welcomes the silent dialogue between Mostovskoj and Andreev, two elderly guests at the last animated and convivial dinner, organised by Aleksandra Šapošnikova:

> It was a beautiful summer evening. The Volga was barely visible in the twilight, but it made its presence felt everywhere: every street, every little lane, lived and breathed the Volga. All the hills and scope, the orientation of the streets – everything was determined by the river's curves and the steep cliffs of the west bank. And the monuments, the squares and parks, the giant factories, the little old houses on the outskirts, the tall new apartment blocks with blurred reflections of the summer moon in their windows – all had their eyes on the Volga, all were turned toward it. (Grossman 2019, 54; 1954, 40)[12]

At the end of the novel, when Krymov is nearing Stalingrad, where the Nazi air raid is raging, the river reappears, reassuringly bright and placid:

> In a narrow gap between dense willow thickets and the far end of the earth wall lay the Volga, bright in the moonlight. (Grossman 2019, 883; 1954, 558)

11 The novel, which constitutes the first part of the dilogy dedicated to the Battle of Stalingrad, evokes the last, dramatic phase of the Great Patriotic War: from the second, mighty German offensive, in June 1942, with the occupation of the Caucasus oil fields and Stalingrad itself, to the Soviet counter-offensive, with the reunification of the two columns, west of the city and the consequent encirclement of the Nazi troops. In Stalingrad lives Aleksandra Šapošnikova – widow and mother of Dmitrij, arrested and deported to Siberia in 1937 together with his wife Ida – with her grandson Serëža, left alone, who later enlists as a volunteer. Aleksandra also has four daughters: Ljudmila, mother of Tolja, a fighter at the front; Nadja, daughter of her second husband, the physicist Viktor Šturm; Marusja, wife of Stepan Spiridonov, director of the Stalingrad power station and mother of Vera, a nurse; and, finally, Ženja, devoted to art, whose ex-husband, Nikolaj Krymov, political commissioner of the Red Army and a volunteer enlisted man, will lead the exodus of two hundred people from Kiev, eastwards. To the worlds orbiting the Šapošnikov family at various distances – the power station, the hospital and orphanage in Stalingrad, military circles, the Moscow Institute of Physics and the mines of the Donbass – is added the universe of Pëtr Vavilov, a Kolkhotian peasant called up to arms.

12 Here and hereafter the two sources Grossman 2019 and Grossman 1954 indicate the English translation and the Russian original published in volumes respectively.

The Volga, in Grossman's vision, is marked by precise connotations that partly derive from its manifestation, and partly from the cultural imagery of the peoples settled along its banks and in the lands it crosses. Its colour and sensory characteristics correspond, in the perception of the observer, to a composite range of sensations. The old carpenter Poljakov, a volunteer soldier and comrade-in-arms of the young Serëža, likes to fish in his small boat, in the waters of the Volga,

> Enjoying the silent excitement of fishing and the magical richness of the water – water that could be cool and sad in the misty silence of dawn, soft and golden as sunflower oil on a moonlight night, or sparkling and boisterous on a day of sun and wind. (Grossman 2019, 469; 1954, 286)

Tolja is struck by the vision of the river that "sparkled like mercury, alive and resilient" (Grossman 2019, 646; 1954, 403). And shortly afterwards, before an enemy air raid,

> [The Volga] was full of colour. It turned deep blue, then pink, and then shone like grey silk, as if covered by light, pearly dust. The water gave off a cool evening peace, while the steppe still breathed out heat. (Grossman 2019, 656; 1954, 409)

The river is thus a constant reference even in the stereotypical depictions we find in conventional paintings and yet, at that tragic moment, an essential component of a unity of light and darkness, and horror and wonder. Above all, however, it is the comforting presence for those who have always lived near it, such as Regimental Commissar Koluškin, who at dawn on the day when the 13th Division will face the enemy army, recalls in his speech to the soldiers a moving moment in his past life when his ailing mother had asked him to bring her bed close to the window, so that she could see the Volga. Finally, for the Russian people, it is an historical *topos*, an indelible cornerstone of cultural memory, connected in particular with popular uprisings: the legendary story of Stepan Razin is linked to the Volga. Academician Postoev, crossing the bridge over the Volga by train, hears the notes of a popular song dedicated to the Cossack rebel and, in Krymov's reflections at the end of the novel, to the Great Revolution: the heroes of an era not yet forgotten had marched towards the Volga. But in the novel *Stalingrad*, the Volga River substantiates, above all, the central theme of the war in the dual and conflicting German and Soviet perspective.[13] The

13 Janet M. Hartley observes on this subject: "The river Volga took a symbolic as well as a logistical importance and come to be seen by both sides as a dividing line between

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Volga, along with the city of Stalingrad, whose original name was Caricyn,[14] is for the Nazi government and army a goal of conquest. Grossman imagines the thoughts and feelings of exaltation that may have animated General von Paulus as he flew over the burning city on the evening of 21 August. His "slave heart, heart of stone" must have felt all the power of the man who had given him the torch with which the German air force had set fire to the border between east and west, showing the army the way to the Volga and the giant factories of Stalingrad. Then, pointing towards the Volga, the Nazi armoured troops breached the Soviet defences and on 13 September the bloodiest phase of the battle began, with the massive strike by the Luftwaffe and the subsequent occupation of the city, symbolically sealed by the Third Reich flag planted in the Red Square of Stalingrad. And it is, in any case, the Volga River that for the Nazis identifies victory:

> The Germans had seen the Volga on maps – an incorporal pale blue vein. And now here it was – the Volga itself, full of life and movement, splashing against the stone embankment, docking lags, rafts, boats and pontoons on her broad breast. And there could be no doubt what this meant: the Volga meant victory. (Grossman 2019, 54; 1954, 40)

The longed-for achievement is then celebrated with a kind of individual baptismal rite performed by the character of Peter Bach:[15]

> During the night, Bach crept down to the Volga and scooped up some water with his helmet. At dawn when the battalion had consolidated its position and the shooting had quietened, he took the water to the command post and offered it to Preifi (Grossman 2019, 784; 1954, 493)

The ritual then becomes collective: the members of the battalion command and the commander Prejfi himself observe five minutes of silence and then drink Volga water mixed with Stalingrad vodka, transforming the symbolic baptismal rite into a true rite of incorpo-

two peoples, two regimes – even two civilizations. To the Grmans, the river was the extreme edge of the Third Reich" (Hartley 2021, 273).

14 It is interesting to note that the toponym Caricyn is actually a hydronym of Turkish origin (from the name Sarysu: *sari*, 'yellow', and *su*, 'water'. The element of water is thus a sort of identity symbol that marks the biography of the city, which in 1961, in the context of Chruščev's destalinisation, will be renamed Volgograd, the city on the Volga River (Pospelov 2002).

15 His surname, Bach, has an interesting semantic meaning, referring to the water motif: Bach, in German, means 'stream'.

ration. This ceremonial act arouses in the emotional Peter Bach the need to express a new thought:

> For a long time […] I thought that Germany and National Socialism were incompatibile. […] To be honest, I too felt sceptical about Nazi ideas […]. But now I have reached the Volga! There is more logic in this long march than in books. (Grossman 2019, 789; 1954, 495)

A mirror image of the Volga motif in the Nazi imagination is, in the Russian cultural response, the suffering inflicted on the great river, conquered and desecrated by the enemy's motifs. For the despondent Russians,

> The future lay behind a curtain of dust and smoke, hidden by the din of the battle above the Volga. (Grossman 2019, 591; 1954, 368)

For the party secretary of the mine, Motorin, the image of the Soviet soldiers forced onto the bank opposite the one occupied by the Nazis inspires him a simple but heartfelt speech that he addresses to the audience of miners, a living synecdoche encompassing the millions of hard-working Soviets, to instil in them the confidence in the invincibility gained through labour: nothing would prevent the working class from defending their home (Grossman 2019, 639-40; 1954, 399-40). And the poignant beauty of the river takes on the expressive intensity of a tragic hero through Krymov's gaze:

> Breathing and shimmering on the Volga lay a field of silver, gently tapering towards the south. The small waves of the boat's wake stream behind the stern, like magic pale blue mirrors. An immense sky, bright and weightless dusted with stars, spread over the river and the broad lands stretching both east and west.
>
> Such a picture – a night sky, the solemn splendour of a great river, mighty hills and plains lit by moon and stars – is usually associated with silence, majestic calm and either stillness or slow smooth movement. But this Russian night over the Volga was far from quiet.
>
> Over the hills of Stalingrad, above the white, moonlit buildings stretching along the Volga tremule the incandescent light of artillery fire. (Grossman 2019, 889; 1954, 562)

The suffering of the great river is rendered in the implicit reference to the asphyxiation and blindness inflicted already by the first bombs dropped by Nazi planes: dense, high clouds of plaster and brick dust rise along the Volga and, as the bombing intensifies, the darkness turns into a sinister light, a harbinger of death:

> Black dust swirled over the road. High in the sky hung a shimmering glow – a glow that had now hung over Stalingrad, over the Volga and the surrounding steppe, for several nights. (Grossman 2019, 688; 1954, 429)

If the Volga River identified for the Nazi enemy the extreme border with an elsewhere to be subjugated and incorporated into their territorial and ideological domain, for the Soviets it was different:

> The river may have looked like a dividing line, but in reality, it marked a perfect joint, welding together the two halves of the Soviet forces, uniting the firepower of the east bank with the west bank's unflagging courage. The Volga enabled gunners and foot soldiers to cooperate with unusual effectiveness. (Grossman 2019, 862; 1954, 543)

The end of the Red Army's strenuous resistance finds dramatic expression in the words that General Andrej Erëmenko, commander of the Stalingrad front, addresses to the secretary of the regional party committee of the same city, Ivan Prjachin:

> What we are defending here, on the Volga, is not an industry. What we are defending here is Russia herself! (Grossman 2019, 439; 1954, 271)

For the inhabitants of the besieged city, the great river becomes the way to salvation, and its crossing a sort of re-edition of the passage of the chosen people – with the relocation of the power station, the hospital, the citizens with the little they manage to take with them, the reinforcements themselves – under the secular and human protection dispensed by the determination and desperate resistance of the Soviet people.

Before and after the war, every war in the history of Russia, the Volga is an immanent and living presence, and consubstantial to the existence of its people, and from its waters comes the saving breath that would seem to herald a fortunate future:

> At first there was only the smell of petrol and hot oil, but that soon yielded to a calm, fresh breath of the night. (Grossman 2019, 888; 1954, 561)

In the solemn moment of the already mentioned rite of incorporation performed by Lieutenant Bach, the "Volga's moist breath was the breath of history" (Grossman 2019, 784; 1954, 493).

It is a welcoming riverbed in various moments of the novel: the coolness of its waters restores the tired limbs of the soldiers who, rid

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of dust and mud, rediscover a kind of primordial purity; it is silent witness to thoughts, sensations, discoveries, intuitions that for centuries have recognised in it a silent and trusted interlocutor. The fresh wind of the river seems to bring Colonel Pëtr Novikov the thought of Evgenija, which is for him a motive of expectation and hope of future happiness. To Lieutenant Bach, the Volga River conveys the certainty of a simple and definitive solution: the reconciliation of opposites – good and evil, freedom and slavery, morality and immorality – in a pan-Germanic impulse. On the riverbank, Krymov catches himself thinking, at the height of anguish, "Keep going, Nikolay. These may be the last steps fated to take on this earth" (Grossman 2019, 887; 1954, 561). But this tragic thought dissolves into a powerful and superior feeling:

> The quiet and exalted world of the Volga night seemed, in some impossibile way, to be one with the war. All that was most incompatibile come together: wild audacity and martial passion had merged with a sense of peace and resigned sadness. (Grossman 2019, 891; 1954, 564)

Finally, the great Russian river is a metaphor for the flow of individual life. As the Germans head towards the Volga, the director of the Stalingrad hydroelectric power station, Stepan Spiridonov, catches himself thinking "about the course of his life, who he had been and who he had become" (Grossman 2019, 41; 1954, 33). In the character of Čepyžin, an academic, it embodies the strong and simple sentiment that animates and guides an entire existence:

> Nikolay Nekrasov evokes just such a feeling in his poem *On the Volga* about the vows he made as a boy, when he first saw a group of barge haulers. (Grossman 2019, 172; 1954, 114)

In commenting on the instant of emotion that the notes of a long-forgotten song arouse in Krymov, the narrator observes:

> Only rarely, as if suddenly able to look down from above and glimpse the whole length of the Volga, from the hidden springs of Lake Seliger to the salty delta where it enters the Caspian Sea – only very rarely is a human being able to bring together in their heart all the different parts of their life, the sweet years of childhood, the years of labour, hopes, passions and heartbreak, and the years of old age. (Grossman 2019, 301; 1954, 223)

The numerous occurrences of the Volga hydronym (more than three hundred) make it possible to consider it not merely a motif, but a true

eco-literary theme.[16] Vasilij Grossman seems to anticipate the eco-critical perspective of our time by several decades, emphasising the value of the river's naturalness, manifested in its majesty and its implicit moral teaching. The Volga cannot escape the desecration inflicted on its people by the traitor, but it offers itself as a path to salvation and liberation. It is interesting to note the change in the river's appearance in scenes dominated by the Germanic presence – the Volga is then enveloped in suffocating black smoke, or oppressed by a leaden sky. To the Soviets, instead, it almost always offers itself in its traditional version, as a glittering pathway illuminated by the light of the sun and the moon, because it protects its children, whom it nourishes with its waters, allowing them to draw energy. The hydroelectric power station is not a means of exploiting the river then, but a feeder of activity and life and whom it welcomes into its ideal embrace, allowing them to move between the two banks.

Grossman's Volga is thus an integral part of an ideal, perhaps fairy-tale Anthropocene, in which the giant Soviet factories do not pollute the environment and where the great river seems to take on the appearance of a benevolent creature, a sort of Proppian helper of the hero, called, despite himself, to perform a great feat.

Here, in the fictional reality of *Stalingrad*, the Volga is first of all an element acquired by the consciousness of each individual, to then become a symbol shared by a collectivity before returning to be a single interior experience. The flow of the waters of the great river thus delineates the path of History through the existences of individuals, in a threefold motion that, from the one, flows into the multiple, to return to the one.

16 The occurrences of the Volga hydronym in the novel *Stalingrad* are, to be precise, three hundred and fifty-four. They were recorded by means of the corpus manager and text analysis software Sketch Engine.

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