

## On the Use and Abuse of Crossing Borders

1. Motivations: I must begin with a disclaimer: as a scholar of political thought, I have not hitherto reflected in a systematic way on the history of borders, or their effects on human flourishing. Doing so in the company of eminent colleagues is a wonderful opportunity, and I look forward to learning from the deliberations. Though not a specialist on borders, I have some Tocqueville-informed intuitions about the dilemmas that borders present for modern, i.e., democratic society; and why democracies both need borders and loathe them at the same time.<sup>i</sup> This ambivalent relationship to borders as an aspect of the larger ambivalence that hovers over modern life is what I seek to explore in my reflections.

Intellectual curiosity aside, the other reason to accept the workshop invitation is a sense of urgency. As I wrote in my initial pitch, the Russian army's crossing into the territory of Ukraine is an illustration of the vital need for protective borders. By making a violent claim to Ukraine's people and land, Russia's so called "special military operation" shows how murderous border-crossing can become. It calls into question not only this particular border, but the meaning of borders in the contemporary world. As Ivan Krastev recently argued, "[c]hanging the nature of the border, and not simply the place of the border, between Russia and the West is the major objective of Putin's war."<sup>ii</sup> In this view, the Russian invasion not only weaponizes the difference between East and West but aims to make this civilizational divide as impenetrable as the "Iron curtain" that once divided the European continent and the world. Seeing this war effort must be resisted not only by arms, I take the opportunity to push beyond my hitherto West-centered research, thus cross some borders of my own.

2. Questions and Approach: Among the questions I'd like us to consider as part of the workshop are: Why we need borders, and of what kind? How are borders determined? And what are the conditions that make borders, and their crossing, supportive rather than destructive of human flourishing? More than the (geo)politics or history of borders, I am fascinated by their transhistorical – let's call it, existential – meaning, and their historically conditioned variety. Needless to say, these are vast questions, and all I can hope to do in my limited space is trying to imagine how one could begin to approach them so as to do justice to their analytical and historical complexity. And since as a textual scholar, I think best in relation to texts, in what follows I attempt to shed light on these questions by staging a textual conversation across the East-West divide and conventional disciplinary borders.

I begin by reflecting on Marx' take "On the Jewish Question." Though not directly about borders, this early essay offers a penetrating account of modern society and its constitutive ambivalences. A landmark in Marx's development as a radical critic of constitutional democracy, this robust critique informed the twentieth century's two most resolute attempts – the Nazi and the Soviet - to work out final solutions to modernity's dilemmas.<sup>iii</sup> With Marx's analysis in mind, I then approach Vasily Grossman, a Soviet writer often extolled as the Tolstoy of the twentieth century. If invoking Marx seems more or less self-evident in a Western academic context, Grossman requires introduction.

Born in 1905 to a secular Jewish family in the small Ukrainian town of Berdichev, Vasily [Josif] Semyonovich Grossman was trained and worked as a chemical engineer before turning full time to literature and journalism. His early writings were promoted by Maxim Gorki (the great old man of Soviet letters) while also criticized for their "naturalism" – a code-word for too much ambivalence, a quality Grossman's prose never gave up on.<sup>iv</sup> As a

correspondent attached to the Soviet army, Grossman was present at the siege of Stalingrad, the liberation of Treblinka, and the capture of Berlin. Drawing on his own experiences and those he learned about from survivors, his work carries (in the words of his English translator) a “burden of history so overwhelming that most novels would sink under its weight.”<sup>v</sup> Along with shouldering history’s burden, Grossman’s ambition as a novelist was to get to the nature of things and grapple with the largest questions of human existence: What is justice? Are human beings individually responsible? What governs our fate? After the war, Grossman traveled the road from a well published, Stalin-prize-winning author to a dissident whose opus magnum, the novel *Life and Fate*, was irrevocably suppressed.<sup>vi</sup> His life, then, could be seen as tracing a fateful arc from an amenable supporter of the Soviet experiment to one of its most feared critics. In a decisive respect, what guided this trajectory and prompted Grossman’s change of orientation was the Jewish question, and all it implied about borders between persons, peoples, fates.<sup>vii</sup>

A man of vast learning and ideological formation, Grossman was likely familiar with Marx’ “On the Jewish question” and may have intended his work as a response. Even if not so intended, “In the Town of Berdichev,” the short story that first made Grossman’s fame, speaks directly to Marx’ essay. Though written in different contexts and genres, these two texts are strikingly akin and lend themselves to being put into a probing conversation about the nature and meaning of borders, and the possibility of their overcoming.

3. “On the Jewish Question” explores the tension or contradiction between the universal dimension of our humanity and particular - individual and group - interests. Observing this tension long predates Marx and grappling with it can be said to be coeval with social and political thought. What Marx contributes to the tradition is a radical thesis about why this primordial tension comes to a head in modern society, and how it can be resolved. Occasioned by “a heated debate whether German Jews needed to convert to Christianity in order to be emancipated from their legal disabilities and become citizens,” Marx’s essay pushed beyond the particular scope of this debate, to expose the paradigmatic status of the Jewish Question as *the* modern question: i.e., the question of equality.<sup>viii</sup>

Marx argues that the Jews’ problematic status in a majority Christian modern societies is not primarily that of a religious minority. In fact, the fully achieved modern state is an “atheistic state” (36): by guaranteeing the freedom of conscience as a constitutional right, it has made religion into a private matter, thus no longer privileging (or suppressing) any faith. And yet, as Marx labors to show, political emancipation - that is, the emancipation of the political sphere from religious or other differences - entails the preservation of these differences as an aspect of civil society.<sup>ix</sup> As a result, while enjoying the same rights and equal standing before the law, citizens remain socially divided by a host of categories: social status, religion, race (with Judaism exemplifying all three). Political equality is thus pitted against social inequalities, the universalist state against the pluralism of civil society.

Marx presents the conflict between the modern state’s professed universality and its social particularisms in a theological language: as a tension between the celestial realm of human equality and the terrestrial one of inequality and difference. The Jews are the epitome of this irreconcilable contradiction and its fundamental presupposition: private property. The intensity with which Marx feels this contradiction can be gathered from his graphically antisemitic rhetoric – all the more perplexing given his own Jewish ancestry. Judaism for Marx, with its insistence on God-given distinctness, is the theological elaboration of self-interest. An “anti-social element,” it is the embodiment of “egoistic need and

huckstering” or, as Stedman Jones glosses, of “the possessive individualism of civil society.”<sup>x</sup> By protecting property as a fundamental right, and all other rights as kinds of property, the modern liberal state promotes the estrangement of egoistic man from the citizen. Far from assimilating Jews into Christian society, political emancipation turns Christians into Jews (52), a motif the ideologues of National Socialism would make their own.

Having exposed the incomplete and ambivalent character of political emancipation, Marx calls for full human emancipation: the Manichean tension between the celestial and the terrestrial can only be resolved, and inequality overcome, if the very nature of (modern) society is overcome. And the way to achieve this is by abolishing private property. For Marx, the institution of private property – the “mine and thine distinct” as Hobbes called it (in ch. 13 of *Leviathan*) – is at the root of all human distinctions. It marks the border between man and man, and between the members of a family, class, faith, or nation. Constitutive of bourgeois society, private property is the base to which all other differences are a superstructure. Abolish that right, and not only class antagonisms and the exploitation of man by man will cease, but borders too will disappear. Private property gone, there will no longer be any special interest, material or cultural, economic or confessional (for the confessional is at root economic). No limit, no separation, no claim to a particular good (or god); no language or cultural barriers, no special values or affections will stand in the way. At last human beings will be as one, and at one with their nature – what Marx, following Feuerbach, terms ‘species being.’<sup>xi</sup> Marx concludes: “The *social* emancipation of the Jew is *the emancipation of society from Judaism*” (52, emphasis in the original).

4: Set during the Russian Civil War (1918-22), “In the Town of Berdichev” tells the story of a female commissar of the Red Army who, finding herself pregnant and nearing term, is forced to request a leave of absence from duties of war. Logistical problems aside, this poses a moral dilemma. As a leader, Vavilova sets a bad example for her comrades in arms. Her womanhood, hitherto hid behind a manly demeanor and military uniform, stands suddenly exposed in its vulnerability and need. The story opens with her blushing as she submits her request. Behind her back, her superior comments “loudly and angrily” (16), in a spirit of disbelief: “Heard about Vavilova? Who’d have thought it.”

Despite his irritation, the army commander finds a congenial way to deal with the situation. After some reconnaissance Vavilova is assigned lodgings near the town’s market in a small house sheltering a Jewish family of ten. To make space for Vavilova, the family is squeezed into one of the houses’ two rooms. Naturally this causes another “uproar” (16), this time by the paterfamilias Haim Magazanik who shouts and curses in Yiddish or Russian as the spirit moves him.

Yet, as soon as Vavilova’s condition becomes known, the family’s attitude changes dramatically. First to realize it is Beila, the mother of Haim’s seven children (“seven curly-headed angels in ragged clothes”) who undertakes to initiate the ignorant Vavilova into the “joys and sorrows” of motherhood.<sup>xii</sup> After being shamed by the revolutionary advanced guard, Vavilova’s femininity becomes a source of joy and fellow-feeling. Even Haim, as soon as he finds out, mellows and laughs, his eyes shining: “Have no fear, comrade Commissar. You’re joining a thriving business.” (21)

‘Business’ is hardly a casual word in this context. Nor is the house’s location near the marketplace an idle detail. Magazanik’s circumstances and his very name (*magazin* in Russian means store) conveys his expertise in life’s give and take. Vavilova’s name, in turn, calls to mind Vavilon (the Russian for Babylon or Babel) and the Biblical story of an ill-fated effort to

unite all mankind. While Vavilova incarnates the struggle for universal justice and the soaring spirit of the revolution, the Magazaniks embody all that is earthly and particular. If Vavilova stands for heroic self-abnegation and sacrifice for the collective good, her hosts seem to stand for loving one's own – family, children, the home – an attachment unconcerned with lofty abstractions.<sup>xiii</sup> Alongside domesticity, they epitomize life itself in its smells and rugged concreteness, as well as the original law on which this “ever-victorious life” is patterned.<sup>xiv</sup>

In the wake of a dramatic delivery and the rush to witness the birth's “great miracle” (25), the border between Jew and Russian, merchant and communist – in Marx's terms, the terrestrial and the celestial – is overcome in the jubilant welcoming of a new life. The newborn boy effects another transformation:

“You wouldn't believe it,” Beila said to her husband. “That Russian woman's gone off her head. She's already rushed to the doctor with him three times. I can't so much as open a door in the house: he might catch a cold, or he's got a fever, or we might wake him up. In a word, she's turned into a good Jewish mother.” “What do you expect?” replied Magazanik. “Is a woman going to turn into a man just because she wears a pair of leather breeches?”

The reconciliation, however, proves unsustainable. As Vavilova learns of the army's evacuation and hears soldiers marching down the street to the tune of a revolutionary song, she is haunted by the memory of a Red Square demonstration and “a bold man gesticulating with his cloth cap” (31). Torn between her duty to the workers' cause, and her son who needs her complete devotion; between the revolution's fratricidal struggle and the fostering of new life - between the celestial and the terrestrial - Vavilova dons her leather uniform and rejoins the army, leaving her newborn behind.

5. In conclusion: Marx and Grossman speak to the question of borders, and to each other, in a particular way. Recognizing that borders represent human differences, they both ponder the source of these differences and how to navigate them. While agreeing on the signal importance of the Jewish experience for shedding light on these questions, they interpret this experience differently, and disagree about the answers it points to. For Marx, human emancipation could be achieved when all particularisms, and their fundamental source – material need – lose their grip. Only by transcending earthly necessities can we recognize our common humanity and reunite in the celestial realm of equality and freedom. In light of Grossman's story, what makes our shared humanity is precisely the realm of particularity and need: our equal vulnerability as mortal beings, and the common desire to enhance our way of life and its distinctive features. Thinking across many divides (sexual, political, ethnic, religious) the story seems to suggest that we need borders to protect the home, and we need home to protect life. While life and home coalesce in the figure of Haim, Vavilova's character and her Roman name – Klavdia – intimates the imperialist nature of the aspiration to overcome human differences. However heroic, the effort to transcend the realm of need and its native particularities is likely to lead to great inhumanity. For one would sooner kill life (and the Soviet regime, likely more than any other in recorded history, excelled in killing) than succeed in forcing it to obey principles repugnant to it.<sup>xv</sup>

And yet, Haim and Klavdia – home and empire – are not simple opposites. Not only do Klavdia and her newborn stand in need of Haim's opening his hearth and heart to them, despite their many differences. The physical home, and the principles on which it functions, likewise stand in need of protection. To be able to flourish, Haim's family needs Klavdia, or a Klavdia of some sort. But which sort? Can we be distinct and separate, yet, nevertheless,

equal; or equal and yet legitimately different? How to imagine a political order - and a border regime - that would sustain rather than stunt human flourishing in all its rich variety?

---

<sup>i</sup> Ewa Atanassow, *Tocqueville's Dilemmas and Ours: Sovereignty, Nationalism, Globalization* (Princeton University Press, 2022).

<sup>ii</sup> <https://www.ft.com/content/f9bcb5ac-ab05-4630-b641-ca3dbdbe4666>, last accessed on July 5, 2022. "Before the war, Moscow's middle class and Putin's oligarchs thought and acted as if they belonged to both the Russian and the western world. Such an "amphibious" life is no longer possible. Barricaded identities are replacing multiple affiliations."

<sup>iii</sup> "On the Jewish Question." In Marx and Engels, *Marx-Engels Reader*, 26–52. I echo here Konstanty Gebert's *Final Solutions: Genocide Perpetrators and Their Work* published by Agora SA in Polish earlier this year.

<sup>iv</sup> Vasily Grossman, *The Road*, (NYRB Classics, 2010), p. 10.

<sup>v</sup> It is hard to believe," Chandler notes, "that a single man could possess the strength to write with such clarity about so many of the most terrible pages of twentieth-century history – the siege of Stalingrad, the Shoah, the Terror famine" (intro, pp. x-xi to *Everything Flows*).

<sup>vi</sup> Not only the manuscript but the type-writer and even the ribbons were "arrested." As Chandler comments, "no other book apart from [Solzhenitsyn's] *The Gulag Archipelago* was ever considered to be so dangerous" (*The Road*, pp. 180-1).

<sup>vii</sup> Clearing up myths about Grossman, Chandler and Bit-Yunan suggest that during Stalin's last months Grossman found himself in danger "because he was a Jew, not because he had incurred Stalin's personal enmity." (Yury Bit-Yunan Robert Chandler, "Vasily Grossman: Myths and Counter-Myths," *New York Review of Books*, November 13, 2019), p. xx. Together with Ilya Ehrenburg, Grossman helped compile the *Black Book of Soviet Jewry*. Though commissioned and supported by Stalin, this pioneering effort to document the crimes of the Holocaust and the Jewish resistance to the Nazis was eventually suppressed, and many of the Jewish Anti-Fascist committee members involved in it were persecuted and killed on charges of spying and collaboration.

<sup>viii</sup> David Nirenberg, *Anti-Judaism: The Western Tradition*, (Norton & co., 2014), p. 3. In Nirenberg's words, exploiting "old ideas and fears about Jewishness," Marx put these to a new, revolutionary purpose (4).

<sup>ix</sup> As Stedman Jones puts the matter, the political state is not a 'totality,' but a 'dualism' in which 'each individual 'must effect a fundamental division within himself between the citizen of the state and the member of civil society,' *Karl Marx: Greatness and Illusion* (Harvard University Press, 2016), 129.

<sup>x</sup> OJQ, 52; Stedman Jones, *Karl Marx*, 150.

<sup>xi</sup> "Human emancipation will only be complete when the real, individual man has absorbed into himself the abstract citizen; when as an individual man, in his everyday life, in his work, and in his relationships, he has become a species-being." (46)

<sup>xii</sup> 17, 20. "Children – do you have an idea what mystery they bring with them?" ... "You think [childbirth] is child's play, like war. Bang, bang, and over. No, I'm sorry, that's not how it is at all." (20-21)

<sup>xiii</sup> "It was as though he were bathing in the sunlit pillars of dust, in all the smells and sounds—the cries of the children, the mewling of the cat, the muttering of the samovar. He had no wish to go off to the workshop. He loved his wife, his children, and his old mother; he loved his home." (18)

<sup>xiv</sup> 25, Gen 1:28. Haim's name invokes both life (*hayyim* in Hebrew) and home (*heyim* in Yiddish).

<sup>xv</sup> "Could that really be socialism" – ponders a character in *Everything Flows* – with the labor camps of Kolyma, with the horrors of collectivization, with the cannibalism and millions of deaths during the famine?," Grossman, *Everything Flows*, tr. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler (Vintage Books, 2011), p. 31. Also, Stephane Courtois, *The Black Book of Communism: Crimes, Terror, Repression* (Harvard University Press, 1999), ch. 1.