

From the Front Line, 1941-45

Vasily Grossman's reporting on the Nazi-Soviet war

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Vasily Grossman, *From the Front Line. Stalingrad-Treblinka-Berlin, 1941—45*, translated by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, with introduction and notes by Robert Chandler and Julia Volohova, New York Review of Books, 2026.

The Soviet writer Vasily Grossman is best-known for his fiction—His novels *Life and Fate* and its newly translated prequel, *Stalingrad*, are correctly seen as among the greatest works of world literature. But the powerful social realism of these novels was rooted in Vasily Grossman's direct involvement in the Red Army's efforts to fight off the Nazi invasion during World War. For almost the entirety of the war, Grossman stood at the front lines as a war reporter for *Red Star* (*Krasnaia zvezda*) and bore witness to every major battle and the liberation of Eastern Europe and Germany from fascism. Along with his colleague Ilya Ehrenburg, he was among the first to report on the Nazi death camps in occupied Poland, most notably Treblinka, where millions of Jews had been murdered. His essay *The Hell of Treblinka* was used as evidence in the Nuremberg Trials.

Now, the most complete edition to date of his wartime writings has been issued in the English language. In contrast to an earlier book with excerpts from his wartime diaries and articles—*Writer at War*—Grossman's English translators, Robert and Elizabeth Chandler, largely focused on presenting full translations of at times long articles and essays. They are grouped and introduced chronologically, beginning with the initial Soviet retreat after the invasion on June 22, 1941 and ending with the Red Army's liberation of Berlin. The book also includes some of Grossman's post-war writings on the war. With the assistance of the Russian Grossman scholar Julia Volohova, Robert Chandler also developed a comprehensive apparatus of notes, explaining at times the complex editorial history of particular passages.

The book does not make for easy reading. This is owing both to the subject matter and the complicated history of the writing itself. Grossman's reports, written in the heat of battle, are at once a powerful testimony to both the greatest war crimes committed in history and a reflection of the impact of Stalinist censorship and policies on Soviet perceptions and reporting of the war.

When the Nazis invaded in 1941, it took the Soviet population and the Red Army entirely by surprise. Although German imperialism had prepared for this war for years and Nazi propaganda was replete with threats to annihilate communism, official Soviet propaganda lulled the population into false security after the 1939 Stalin-Hitler pact. On the eve of the war, during the Great Terror, the Stalinist bureaucracy murdered large portions of the Red Army leadership and the political leadership of the Bolshevik Party, as well as its intransigent socialist opponents in the Left Opposition.

Nevertheless, the Soviet population rose up to defend the gains of the

1917 October Revolution. The war acquired, to a significant extent, the elements of a civil war. Yet unlike two decades prior, the Red Army was no longer headed by Leon Trotsky, who had been murdered by a Stalinist agent in 1940, but by Stalin. His policies were determined by the interests not of the international working class, but of a bureaucracy that felt compelled both to defend the gains of the Revolution which formed the basis of its privileges, but at the same time, feared a revolutionary mobilization of the working class across Europe which would extend the revolution and, ultimately, undermine those privileges. As a result, the official propaganda acquired a heavily nationalist connotation. More so than ever before, the Stalinist bureaucracy resorted to the promotion of Great Russian chauvinism. Instead of openly speaking of a revolutionary civil war against fascism and capitalist counter-revolution, it spoke of the "Great Patriotic War."

All of these contradictory impulses found a reflection in Grossman's writings. It may be baffling to the reader how often Grossman writes of the "national character" of the Russian people, language that he barely used in his fiction. While some of these formulations were no doubt inserted as a result of pressure from the censors, in other cases, they may also reflect the prevailing political climate at the time. Nevertheless, at his best, Grossman's reporting offers a powerful and devastating account of what, to this date, remains the most brutal war in human history; the impressive heroism of the Red Army soldiers; and the staggering violence and ruthlessness with which fascism sought to destroy the Soviet Union and the Jewish population of Europe.

Only a few works can be highlighted in this review.

Many of the most powerful reports and articles by Grossman are dedicated to the Battle of Stalingrad, which raged from summer 1942 to the capitulation of the Sixth German Army in early February 1943. In their notes, Robert Chandler and Julia Volohova emphasize that Grossman was fully conscious of the historic significance of the events he witnessed and participated in. A man of extraordinary conviction and courage, he repeatedly put his life in danger to speak and be with Red Army soldiers even under heavy fire. At the same time, he was engaged in a near-constant battle with his editor over what he could write and publish. In a letter to his wife from October 1943, Grossman wrote, "What I see here deserves to be wondered at by the entire world. Never has the world seen such courage and steadfastness. I bow to the ground before these men who give up their lives so straightforwardly; in ferocious fighting that continues day and night, without letup. As long as I live, I will never forget these stern and magnificent days."

In contrast to the official line, Grossman did not just want to convey the heroism but also the immense sacrifices that had been made and the duty of those who had survived to remember the date. In one article, "In the Path of the Main Thrust," the Chandlers restored several of Grossman's

original formulations to this effect, which had been removed or changed by his editors.

In one particularly moving passage, Grossman recalls how Soviet soldiers listened to a song by Beethoven, with the lines, “My Lady Death, we ask you/To wait behind the door.” He writes, “And here, as never before, I rejoiced in the power of true art, in the way these soldiers who had confronted death for three months in the ruins of a devastated building—a building that stood firm against the Fascists—were now listening to a Beethoven song as solemnly as if they were attending a church service.”

One of by far the most powerful pieces in the book is Grossman’s story *Life*. Although largely unknown today, it was very popular at the time and not only among Red Army soldiers. It was published in Hungarian and Romanian as early as 1943; in French and Polish in 1944 and in English and Serbo-Croatian in 1946. Informed by Grossman’s own experience of working in mines prior to the war, the story is an extraordinary example of his keen understanding of the way Soviet workers felt, thought and spoke.

The story centers on a group of Red Army soldiers in the Donbass—now East Ukraine—who were buried in a mine. German soldiers, who have occupied the building and area above, seek to force them to surrender. In order to lure them out, they send two women and an old miner, Kozlov, down to the men, to try to convince them to come out. The two women return but Kozlov, who had helped build this mine when he was just a young teenage boy, chooses to stay with the Red Army soldiers who refuse to surrender. Kozlov, it turns out, is an Old Bolshevik worker. He tells the young soldiers how he had been taken prisoner by the Germans during World War I but managed to escape.

“German workers helped me. I was getting to speak their lingo. I never spent the night in a village. I tried to keep to the workers’ settlements. I walked and walked. ... I fought in the Civil War, I volunteered. I’d always hated the old regime. Even as a youngster I’d distributed handbills—yes, that’s what we used to call leaflets.”

“Well, there’s no taming you!” said the soldier sitting beside Kozlov.

“You can say that again!” said Kozlov, with childlike pride. “I’m a worker, a revolutionary. I’d lay down my life for justice and truth. So I come home in April, after getting demobbed. It’s nearly evening. And so...” He fell silent, reliving a distant memory. “And so, here I am. Back home. But to tell you the truth, I don’t go to the settlement. I come straight here, to look at the pithead. I stand by the building with tears rolling down me face—not that I’m drunk, mind you, just crying. That’s the truth of it, the long and the short of it. I stand here looking at the pit and the slag heap, and all I can do is cry.” ... Kozlov fell silent for a moment and then said, “Believe it or not, comrade soldier—and I can tell you’re a working lad too—my hope, in my heart of hearts, has always been to work all my life in this pit and then breathe my last here.”

As the story continues, Kozlov, who knows the pit like no other, manages to lead the group of completely exhausted and starving soldiers out of the pit. Several of them die, but a few do make it out. Kozlov himself dies in the last moments before reaching the ground. The conclusion reads:

The dead Don steppe looks majestic and melancholy ... Everything here testifies to a grim obduracy. ... The sight of the dead Donbas fills one’s heart not only with grief but also with great pride. This dreadful picture of destruction is not death. It is a

testimony to life, a celebration of life, love, and freedom, which scorn death and conquer it.

After the defeat of the Wehrmacht in Stalingrad, the first defeat of the Nazis during the war, the Red Army began its advance westward. As it beat back the fascist armies, it also uncovered the enormous war crimes committed by the Wehrmacht and the SS. Military commissions by the Red Army systematically gathered evidence of these crimes, interviewing local residents, taking pictures and drafting reports. Grossman closely worked with these commissions, especially during the liberation of Poland, where the Nazis had constructed six death camps, several of which were almost entirely devoted to the gassing of the Jewish people.

Some of Grossman’s best-known essays from this period, “Ukraine without Jews” and “The Hell of Treblinka,” are included in new, full translations in this volume. Even 80 years later, they count among the most devastating reports on the Holocaust. Writing them proved to take a heavy toll on Grossman. He himself came from Berdichev, a town in Ukraine with a large Jewish population, which was murdered in its entirety by the Nazis. Grossman’s mother was among those shot. After the discovery and report of Treblinka, Grossman suffered a nervous breakdown. Yet, emotionally devastating as it was for Grossman to write them, the pieces are remarkably objective. They appeal, first and foremost, to the reason of the reader and seek to draw out the historical lessons of the crimes of fascism.

In one particularly incisive passage, Grossman ponders the underlying causes of the seemingly senseless brutality of one particularly notorious SS guard in Treblinka, Sepp, who gleefully murdered children with his bare hands as people were sent into the gas chambers. Grossman writes,

Sepp’s actions were necessary. They helped to reduce people to a state of psychic shock. They were an expression of the senseless cruelty that crushed both will and consciousness. He was a useful, necessary screw in the vast machine of the Fascist State.

What should appall us is not that nature gives birth to such monsters—there are, after all, any number of monsters in the physical world. ... It is not they that should appall us but the state that summoned them out of their holes, out of their underground darkness—the state that found them useful, necessary, and even irreplaceable in Treblinka near Warsaw, in Majdanek near Lublin, in Belzec, Sobibor, and Auschwitz, in Babi Yar, in Domanevka and in Bogdanovka near Odessa, in Trostianets near Minsk, in Ponary in Lithuania and in hundreds of other prisons, labor camps, penal camps, and camps for the destruction of life.

A particular kind of state does not appear out of nowhere. What engenders a particular regime is the material and ideological relations existing among a country’s citizens. It is the nature of these relations that we need to think about; this is what should appall us.

There are also incisive reflections on key characteristics of fascism and the origins of the Soviet victory in the war in his article, “Ukraine without Jews.”

Fascism was mistaken in everything. Its mentality was that of a wild boar. It understood nothing of the great laws of war and life. Its gamble was a disaster. All its calculations have been proven wrong.

Fascism failed to understand—how *could* it understand?—the

strength of our people's resistance, their greatness of spirit, and undying sense of human worth.

Fascism did not understand the strength and stability of the Soviet system. This had been tried and tested during the Revolution, the Civil War, and during our great years of construction.

One of the most important elements of historical reality that was distorted through censorship in these—and other—reports on the Holocaust, was the extensive collaboration especially of Ukrainian nationalists in the murder of the Jews. As Chandler and Volohova point out, “Grossman was well aware how many people had collaborated with the Germans, but the official narrative was that all Ukrainians had resisted heroically.” As a result, several of the articles contain factually misleading passages, directly denying collaboration of the nationalists. In others, such as “The Hell of Treblinka,” the national origin of guards—many of whom were Ukrainian Trawniki—is deliberately obscured. It speaks to the political bankruptcy of the Stalinist bureaucracy that, having created economic and social disasters in Soviet Ukraine throughout the 1930s, it was incapable of denouncing and confronting honestly the crimes of the Ukrainian nationalists and fascists, whose crimes are now well documented and played a critical role in the Nazi occupation of Ukraine.

The last section with Grossman's wartime writing includes some of his essays on the liberation of Germany. In an article simply entitled “Germany,” Grossman ponders the immense contradiction between the principles of fascism and those of the Enlightenment. Observing that everywhere in Berlin he saw signs warning “Light is your death!” (because of air raids by the Allies), he writes,

... seeing how Hitlerism's vicious principles were applied in every sphere of public and private life, I couldn't help but think that the sentence—*Licht ist dein Tod!* (*Light is your death!*)—was the perfect slogan for Adolf Hitler himself, that it epitomized everything most important about his theories and practice. It was with this slogan that Hitler approached the German people. It was under this creed, under this banner, that the German nation lived for twelve years.

How times change.

There was a time in this country of darkness when a great poet and thinker, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, said on his deathbed, “*Licht, mehr Licht!* [*Light, more light!*] ... The time will come when the German nation will be able to look the nations of the world in the eye, honestly and straightforwardly; the time will come when in this realm of gloom and evil, in this land that has been governed by the laws of darkness, where walls bore the words, “Light is your death!”—the time will come when people will once again remember the words spoken on his deathbed by the great Goethe: “Light, more light!”

The book's final part includes a short essay by Grossman on the fifth anniversary of the 1943 Warsaw Ghetto Uprising. As Chandler and Volohova note, writing this piece took immense courage. In 1948, the Soviet Union was in the midst of a new wave of purges, this time with an overtly antisemitic undertone. The Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, which had been founded during the war and included figures such as Solomon Mikhoels, the writer Ilya Ehrenburg and the violinist David Oistrakh, was disbanded. Grossman's essay was never published in the Soviet Union. Indeed, it was published in Russian only in 2020. It concludes with a powerful appeal to the “battle for human freedom”—a theme that perhaps

became the dominant one in Grossman's writings after the war.

In the years to come, Grossman would face ever more censorship. His novel *Stalingrad* was only published in a heavily censored version. The sequel *Life and Fate* was never published during his lifetime. Yet despite being increasingly disillusioned by Stalinism, until the end of his life, Grossman retained an intense commitment to the cause of socialism and the liberation of all mankind, and remained immensely proud of his own contribution to the victory of the Red Army over fascism.

One cannot read his articles on the war today without a sense of the tragedies that have since occurred. With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the Stalinist bureaucracy accomplished what German imperialism had failed to achieve in World War II: the destruction of the first workers' state in history. The restoration of capitalism, the vile promotion of nationalism and the rise of criminal oligarchies in all the successor countries of the USSR, have opened up the entire region to a renewed onslaught by imperialism. Unlike during World War II, the destructive impact of decades of Stalinism and the promotion of nationalism have created a situation where, instead of fighting side by side against imperialism and the rule of the oligarchy, Ukrainian and Russian workers are shooting at each other on the battlefields. The Ukrainian Trotskyist, Bogdan Syrotiuk, was imprisoned for “high treason” in Ukraine for opposing this disastrous policy and calling for a return to the unified struggle of the Ukrainian and Russian working class.

But Grossman's writings on the war also give a very concrete sense that a very different historical path, one of joint struggle against fascism and reaction on a class basis, is possible. The principal challenge today lies in overcoming the disastrous impact of Stalinism on the political consciousness of the working class through a fight for the historical truth about the October Revolution, the nature of Stalinism and the struggle of the internationalist Left Opposition against it. Only on this basis can the international unity of the working class and its Marxist consciousness be reestablished.



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