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'Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century'

Alexandra Popoff's biography of Grossman is essential reading

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Alexandra Popoff, Vasily Grossman **pushkinhouse.org / Wikicommons / MT**

The world is just beginning to come to terms with the scale of the previous century's cruelty and carnage. Indeed, it is almost impossible to grasp the macabre tally of two devastating world wars, famine – both natural and manufactured — the disturbing rise of nationalism and fascism, the specter of atomic and nuclear weapons, and the forced incarceration and extermination of millions of innocents in the GULAG and Nazi concentration camps.

Vasily Grossman's life spanned the first seven decades of the century, and his own arc mirrored that of the century's dark march. Grossman was an unflinching eyewitness to many of the century's darker hours, and he poured these experiences into fiction and non-fiction.

Grossman was embedded with the Soviet Army for much of World War II as a war correspondent for the Red Banner newspaper. He witnessed first-hand the bloody battles for Moscow and Kursk and the house-by-house struggle for Stalingrad, which ultimately turned

the tide of the war in the Eastern Front to the Allies' advantage. Grossman then documented the Soviet Army's march to hard-won victory in Berlin. His dispatches were read by an enthralled nation for their clarity and ability to place the reader at the heart of the action. Grossman's success as a journalist was also rooted in his bold rejection of the accepted Soviet style of lauding the collective struggle and broad sweep of history, choosing instead to place the individual and his struggle at the center of each narrative. It is thus that Grossman created memorable character sketches and an immediacy and intimacy of his settings.

But it was at Treblinka that Grossman garnered a wider audience. One of the first correspondents to discover and document the horrors of the Nazi concentration camp, Grossman's article "The Hell of Treblinka" was published in 1944 and translated into several languages. Grossman's ability to create evocative detail while also illustrating the heartbreaking struggle of the camp's ghostly prisoners to cling to their humanity in that most inhumane of settings made for mesmerizing reading. The article was later distributed at the Nuremberg trials, where it was persuasive evidence of the extent of Nazi Germany's crimes against humanity.

For Grossman, the fate of Europe's Jews was personal. He was born into a family of assimilated Jews in 1905 in Berdichev, in present-day Ukraine, which the Nazis occupied in 1941, carrying out a mass execution of Jews including Grossman's mother. The guilt he felt about his mother's death haunted Grossman until his end, and her ghost finds its way into his magisterial war epic, "Life and Fate."

A passion for writing came early and led to initial success for Grossman during the relatively liberal creative churn of the 1920s. Though Grossman was close to many of the victims of Stalin's Terror, he somehow managed to escape imprisonment. But, like that other titan of Russian literature, Lev Tolstoy, with whom Grossman felt a lifelong affinity, Grossman was never entirely free of government censure, even after the death of Stalin.

Grossman's wartime experiences provided the setting, plot lines, and characters for his two epic war novels, "For a Just Cause," (recently released in a new English translation by Robert and Elizabeth Chandler as "Stalingrad") and "Life and Fate." Though the same cast of characters inhabits both, the two novels differ in their tone and mood. "Stalingrad," published to critical acclaim, has all the hallmarks of a prudent Soviet writer who is conscious of the need to conform to state-mandated guidelines. "Life and Fate," often likened to Tolstoy's "War and Peace," dares to tell unsanctioned and unvarnished truths about the camps, the war, and similarities Grossman finds between Hitlerism and Stalinism.

"Life and Fate" was deemed "unpublishable for the next 250 years," by the Soviet publishing industry. The KGB confiscated Grossman's manuscript his voluminous notes, even his used typewriter ribbon. Grossman's passionate letter to Nikita Khrushchev "requesting freedom for my book," went unanswered. The novel was only published ten years after Grossman's death. Sadly, despite its depth and insight, the "Soviet War and Peace" is still afforded little attention in Russia today, and its author receives little of the merit he so richly deserves.

Alexandra Popoff's masterful new biography, "Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century" brings the writer's life and work into brilliant focus. Popoff, well known for her previous books, "The Wives, The Women Behind Russia's Literary Giants," "Tolstoy's False Disciple,"

and “Sophia Tolstoy” turns her attention to the twentieth century with ease and grace. She marshals Grossman’s considerable output into a logical arc, leaning lightly on original texts, but using them with great advantage.

“Vasily Grossman and the Soviet Century” is a timely and important book, whose significance reaches beyond simply literary or historical study. Through the prism of Grossman’s life, and his burning need to tell the truth about the horrors he witnessed and to celebrate the dignity of the individual, we are better able to parse the previous century’s wanton disregard for truth and humanity, and, hopefully, to learn from these mistakes.

First published in Znamya in November 1944, “The Hell of Treblinka” transcends its epoch and a single genre, being at once a work of investigative journalism, a historical and philosophical essay, and a requiem to the victims. His writing has the everlasting quality of genuine art, inviting comparison to Picasso’s Guernica. Grossman is presenting evidence of unprecedented crimes “before the eyes of humanity, before the conscience of the whole world.” [...]

Grossman explains how it was possible for a few SS and auxiliaries to lead hundreds of thousands to slaughter. “The SS psychiatrists of death” used deception to minimize attempts to resist or escape. Treblinka’s new commandant, SS Captain Franz Stangl, previously in charge of Sobibor, turned it into the most “perfected” death camp. He had the arrival area rebuilt to make it look like a regular railway station. Fake doors and windows were installed on what appeared to be a station building with a ticket office. False signs were posted: “Ticket Counter,” “Waiting Room,” “Information,” and so on. There were even fake arrival and departure schedules to provide an illusion that trains were running to and from Treblinka in different directions, while in fact the single railway line ended there. (Captured in 1967 in Brazil, Stangl stood trial in Germany in 1970. He said that to him the Jewish deportees were “cargo” that must be destroyed. “I rarely saw them as individuals. It was always a huge mass.”) This deception helped the SS to minimize instances of escape and resistance. When the deportees were told they had arrived in a transit camp and had to proceed to the showers, they had hope for survival.

Grossman portrays Jewish deportees from Polish ghettos, packed tightly into freight cars, realizing “that the end is near,” and unsuspecting Jewish travelers from Western Europe who paid to be transported to a neutral country but were instead brought to Treblinka. “It is hard to say which is more terrible: to go to your death in agony . . . or to be glancing unsuspectingly out of the window of a comfortable coach just as someone from Treblinka village is phoning the camp with details of your recently arrived train.”

He imagines the psychological condition of the new arrivals, whose thoughts and feelings alternate between hope and despair. As they stand in the reception area, they notice the camp’s six-meter wall masked with yellowing pine branches, but dismiss the inner voice telling them they have fallen into a trap. Abrupt commands issued by the SS cloud their reason: the arrivals are instructed to leave their things in the square and proceed to the bathhouse with identification, valuables, and towels. People want to ask questions but “some strange force makes them hurry on in silence. . . . And everyone is overwhelmed by a sense of

helplessness, a sense of doom." They walk through the gate, "an opening in a barbed-wire wall," from where "there is no escape, no way to turn back." All around them are the SS guards and Wachmänner (watchmen) armed with submachine guns, and heavy machine guns are directed at the deportees from the watchtowers. The Nazis use simple rules for operating a slaughterhouse, issuing a "never-ending sequence of abrupt commands" to break the arrivals' will. Grossman again contrasts the humanity and individuality of the victims with the inhumanity of the perpetrators whom he describes simply as "beasts." The SS men who prey on human beings are similar in their behavior and psychology. He speaks on behalf of the Jewish victims who begin to sense their imminent fate: "And all these thousands, all these tens and hundreds of thousands of people, of frightened, questioning eyes, all these young and old faces, all these dark- and fair-haired beauties, these bald and hunchbacked old men, and these timid adolescents—all were caught up in a single flood, a flood that swallowed up reason, and splendid human science, and maidenly love, and childish wonder, and the coughing of the old, and the human heart."

Nazi ideology excludes Jews from the realm of humanity. Belongings of the living dead, left behind, are being sorted and appraised: "Everything of value is to be sent to Germany." Letters, photographs, children's drawings, and "the thousands of little things that were so infinitely precious to their owners yet the merest trash to the masters of Treblinka" are gathered in heaps to be destroyed.

The order to undress reduces the deportees to helplessness. "We know from the cruel reality of recent years that a naked man immediately loses his powers of resistance. He ceases to struggle." Grossman was told that when families were separated and marched to different barracks, desperate scenes took place. "Love—maternal, conjugal, or filial love—told people that they were seeing one another for the last time." Deception was maintained almost to the end: the SS continued to pass "the regulations of death . . . as the regulations of life." When women's hair was cut, their hope was revived, says Grossman. Barbers told him that the "haircut of death did more than anything to convince the women that they really were going to the bathhouse." (But we know today that few believed this was being done for hygienic purposes. During the haircut the women often asked agonized questions about whether they were going to die. The Jewish barbers were either silent or tried to comfort them.) Women's hair, along with valuables and everything else that could be used, was sent to Germany as raw material. Hitler's regime, Grossman writes, "harnessed" certain qualities of the German character, such as efficiency, to institute "a crime against humanity." The "brute beasts" of the SS make use of gold and valuables but discard "the most precious valuable in the world—human life."

The deportees are finally marched onto "the Road of No Return," a sandy path, 120 meters long, leading to the gas chambers. Now, forced to run to the execution place, people are beaten along the way, reduced to "a state of complete psychicparalysis." (Treblinka's commandant Stangl said that he sometimes "stood on the wall and saw them in the 'tube'—they were naked, packed together, running, being driven with whips.")

The Nazis have condemned the Jewish nation to "the abyss of nonbeing," Grossman writes. Treblinka's inmates leave behind a "fresh imprint of bare feet: the small footprints of women, the tiny footprints of children, the heavy footprints of the old. This faint trace in the sand was all that remained of the thousands of people who had not long passed this way." Inside the

gas chambers the plunder of human beings is complete: they were "robbed of the sky, the stars, the wind, and the sun." A few seconds is enough "to destroy what nature and the world had slowly shaped in life's vast and tortuous creative process." Grossman's biblical evocation is meant to elevate the doomed above their suffering and death: "The beasts and the beasts' philosophy seemed to portend the sunset of Europe, the sunset of the world, but the red was not the red of the sunset, it was the red blood of humanity—a humanity that was dying yet achieving victory through its death. People remained people. They did not accept the morality and laws of Fascism." (Grossman refers to Jews as "people" and "human beings" to refute their dehumanization by the Nazis.)

Note: For ease of reading, the footnotes have been removed from this section.

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