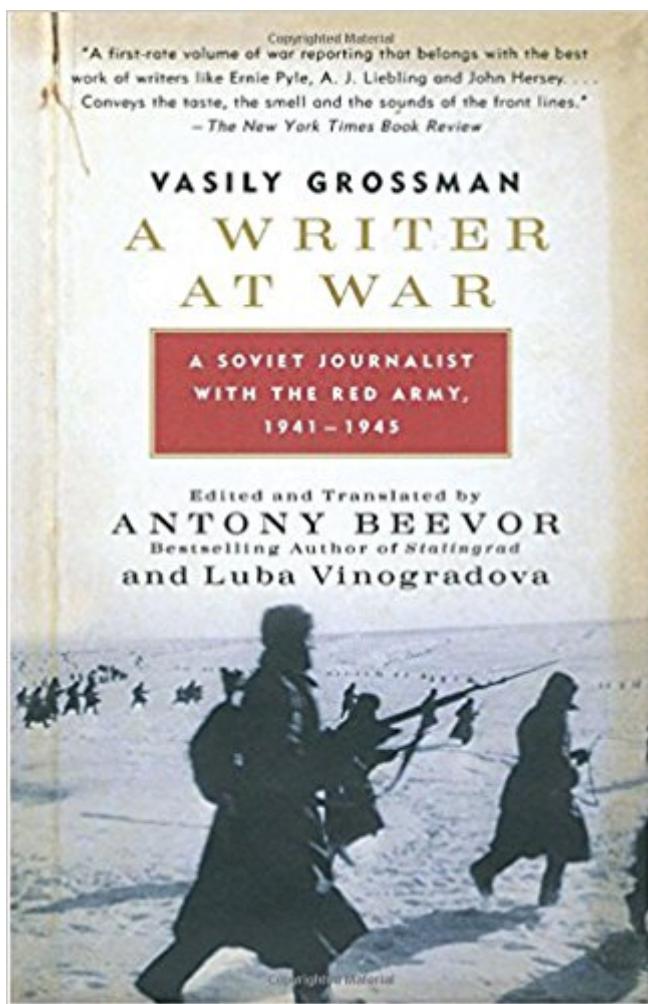


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# A Writer At War: A Soviet Journalist With The Red Army, 1941-1945



## Synopsis

When the Germans invaded Russia in 1941, Vasily Grossman became a special correspondent for the Red Star, the Soviet Army's newspaper, and reported from the frontlines of the war. A Writer at War depicts in vivid detail the crushing conditions on the Eastern Front, and the lives and deaths of soldiers and civilians alike. Witnessing some of the most savage fighting of the war, Grossman saw firsthand the repeated early defeats of the Red Army, the brutal street fighting in Stalingrad, the Battle of Kursk (the largest tank engagement in history), the defense of Moscow, the battles in Ukraine, the atrocities at Treblinka, and much more. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova have taken Grossman's raw notebooks, and fashioned them into a gripping narrative providing one of the most even-handed descriptions --at once unflinching and sensitive -- we have ever had of what Grossman called "the ruthless truth of war."

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

Soviet author Grossman volunteered for the army when the Germans invaded in 1941 and spent more than three years as a special correspondent at the front for the army newspaper Red Star. His wartime writing established him as a major "voice" of war—a status resembling in many ways that of Ernie Pyle in America. This volume, a perfect complement to the panoramic vision of Ivan's War, collects excerpts from Grossman's notebooks and published dispatches, few of them longer than a couple of paragraphs. And while the dispatches usually describe scenes fitting with Soviet orthodoxy, Grossman's notebooks also record the bloody-mindedness, the despair and the

disaffection that permeated Soviet ranks as the Red Army paid its dues of learning how to fight a modern war. That material, of course, was not published at the time. Grossman was a perceptive observer with an eye for essential detail. His vignettes of the fighting at Kursk and the battles that brought the Red Army into Berlin are models of combat reporting, and the elegiac realism of his description of Treblinka merits wide anthologizing in Holocaust literature. This volume stands among the finest eyewitness accounts of Soviet Russia's war on the Eastern Front. (Jan. 10) Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved. --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

Soviet-era Russian novelist Vasily Grossman (1905-64), whose major work, *Life and Fate* (1985), was suppressed in his lifetime, kept notebooks when he worked as a journalist during World War II. That was a forbidden and perilous practice in the Stalinist system, and Grossman's jottings about warfare he witnessed constitute a rare record of the attitudes and conditions experienced by the Red Army soldier. Beevor, whom readers will recognize from his battle histories, *Stalingrad* (1998) and *The Fall of Berlin, 1945* (2002), connects Grossman's terse sketches with commentary about the war's course and Grossman's movements at the battlefield. Grossman wrote for the Red Army's official newspaper, and his frank character observations of officers and men will affect those interested in the soul of the WWII Soviet army, and in the genocide its advance revealed. In its wake, Grossman discovered what happened to his mother, and his 1944 article about Treblinka was one of the first to describe a German murder factory. This compilation captures Grossman's great sensibility to his merciless times. Gilbert TaylorCopyright © American Library Association. All rights reserved --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

The victory of the first workers state in history over German imperialism was a world historic event, but at what a cost in lives, and political opportunities lost....I've never read the novels of Vasily Grossman, but they must be impressive. These writings are a mix of his published articles during the war, as well as those in a personal diary (which it was illegal to keep, but he did anyway). It was remarkable some of the things he got away with writing about in published articles. But the writings in the book vary from brilliant glimpses of what the war was like to dubious stories based on gossip and bragging soldiers. Sometimes in soldiers' remarks, it's hard to tell bravery from a cynical view that "I'm going to die anyway...." Most of the dubious stories he didn't put in his articles. You see in these writings the utter contempt many Stalinist officers had for rank-and-file soldiers. They had a whole line of soldiers to shoot those in front if they tried to retreat. Without the excellent editing and

notes, it would all be quite impossible to follow, although it doesn't always tell you what was published and what wasn't. The afterword is also quite good. Grossman interviewed everyone he could: officers; pilots; snipers; tank troops; infantrymen; prisoners. While quite critical of some of Stalin's policies, and becoming more so, Grossman didn't fully grasp the Thermidorean character of the Stalinist regime (see *The Revolution Betrayed*). Lenin insisted that the Soviet Union be a voluntary federation of nations and nationalities. The notion of fighting a war under the banner of defending "Mother Russia" or of the "Great Patriotic War" would have been anathema to him. To Lenin and Trotsky, the only way to defend the Soviet Union was under the banner of world revolution, the way the Russian Civil War was fought. Once in power, Stalin rejected Lenin's policies on the national question; despite the fact that he was Georgian, he implemented a policy of Russification. There were reasons behind the collaboration of some Ukrainians with the Nazis. In 1939 Trotsky responded to Hitler's noises about a "Greater Ukraine," by raising the slogan of "a united, free, and independent workers' and peasants' Soviet Ukraine," explaining that "...but for the rape of Soviet Ukraine by the Stalinist bureaucracy there would be no Hitlerite Ukrainian policy." (Writings of Leon Trotsky, 1938-39). Stalin dissolved the Communist International in 1943, as a favor to his imperialist allies, although in reality it had not been anything but an instrument of foreign policy of a privileged bureaucracy for two decades before that. The editor writes that the question of collaboration with the Nazi army has only been discussed in recent years, yet he previously talked about the repression of entire nationalities, Kalmyks (also known as Kalmucks, a Mongol people), Crimean Tatars, and Chechens. Stalin labeled the Crimean Tatars en masse as Nazi collaborators and deported them to Uzbekistan and Siberia. More than 40 percent perished in the journey. As the Soviet Union was disintegrating, many Tatars made it back to Crimea, and were doing well under Ukrainian rule, but with the Russian invasion by Putin, they are again being repressed. We all know what happened in Chechnya. Then there's the question of the Stalinist attitude toward the German people. Germany had the strongest and best organized working class in Western Europe before the war. If the Communist Party in Germany had still been revolutionary, Hitler would never have come to power (see *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*). While the Trotskyists in occupied Belgium and France were able to carry out propaganda among German soldiers (see *Swimming Against the Tide: Trotskyists in German Occupied France*), and one of their leaders, Ernest Mandel, a Jew and a communist escaped the death camps by appealing to the socialist sentiments of the soldiers who arrested him. Stalin made a pact with Hitler, which totally disoriented the world working class, and purged the Red Army of many of its best officers after that. Fidel Castro says in *My Life: A Spoken Autobiography* that this was "due to Nazi misinformation,"

which is quite likely true, but there's another factor; he undoubtedly saw the ghost of Trotsky, founding leader of the Red Army still haunting it. Then he refused to believe and rapidly respond to the inevitable German invasion. The result was a rout, and huge numbers of lives lost. In this book, you see Germans rather than Nazis being labeled as the enemy, and the disgraceful killings of soldiers who surrendered, many of whom had previously been members of the Social Democratic and Communist Parties, and who might have switched sides if given the opportunity. And at the end large scale rape and plunder. (The US soldiers were probably less guilty of this, but their political and military leaders ordered the horrible firebombing of Hamburg and Dresden, which had no possible purpose except to terrorize and demoralize the German working class. Then they carried out even worse crimes in Japan). The Soviet authorities played down the massacres of Jews at Babi Yar, Treblinka, and elsewhere. It probably wasn't until Yevtushenko's daring 1961 poem that most Soviet citizens knew that Babi Yar was not just a place of general killing. Even Grossman's impressive piece on Treblinka doesn't specifically mention Jews, although he does mention prayer shawls in the items the Nazis collected. But once in Warsaw he writes articles about Jews, whether because he got braver, or because the enormity of the crimes left nothing else of significance to talk about. He talks about the Warsaw Ghetto, about Jews hidden about Poles, about Jews who were collaborators with the Nazis. But I don't know which of them got published. You see Soviet women playing an important role in the war effort, but at the same time some women being forced to become concubines of officers. The Russian Revolution set out to liberate women, but it rapidly went from legal abortions under the Lenin regime, to their illegality and giving women awards for the number of children they had under the Stalin regime (see the chapter "Thermidor in the Family" in *The Revolution Betrayed*). At the end of the war there was massive rape of German women by the Soviet troops (Grossman talks about even Russian women who had been forced to work for the Germans being raped by Red Army soldiers). World War II was really not a single war. (1) You had the progressive defensive war by the Soviet Union. Despite the counterrevolutionary policies of Stalin, the Soviet Union was still identified with the 1917 revolution, and Soviet victories led to a working class upsurge in many countries that Stalin couldn't control. (2) Then there was the war of the colonial peoples against their oppressors (on both sides). (3) But the war for control of the world waged by US imperialism and British imperialism against German and Japanese imperialism with the full blessings of the Stalinists had no progressive content. A country that wouldn't pass an anti-lynching law fighting against fascism with a segregated army? Japanese-Americans put in concentration camps, extensive jailing of Puerto Rican Nationalists, Socialist Workers Party and Minneapolis Teamster leaders indicted, and 18 of them convicted. The attempt of the Post Office to

take away the second class mailing status of the Militant, and the issues they refused to mail. For a short summary of this see "Setting the Record Straight on Fascism and World War II" in A Revolution, Internationalism, and Socialism: The Last Year of Malcolm X (New International no. 14) (New International, Number 14). For more detail on a Marxist perspective of World War II, see A Fighting Racism in World War II, Teamster Bureaucracy, The Socialist Workers Party in World War II: Writings and Speeches, 1940-43 (James P. Cannon writings & speeches), Socialism on Trial: Testimony at Minneapolis Sedition Trial, and the article "1945: When U.S. Troops said 'No!'" in A New International no. 7: Opening Guns of World War III: Washington's Assault on Iraq.

This was a labor intensive read for me on several accounts. There were numerous characters with numerous names to each character. This required that I needed to refer often to the back of book of listed characters of who was who & who was where & related to whom. For those with better memory than I, this may not be a problem. The problem also had to deal with an introduction of character & then some numerous pages later the character was reintroduced which in between were "a cast of thousands". Again, for people with good memories this should not be a problem. Another difficulty besides the 900 pages or so, were the amount of monologues. These monologues could be thoughtful invoking processes or else take the form of histrionic & long wordy sermons that made my eyes hurt. Not knowing the Russian language, I assumed that Russian speakers have a far larger vocabulary of feeling words, for example for the word "joy" then what was provided. I experienced a sense of "choppiness" at times with regards to transitions between paragraphs. (Those little words like "the", "a" & "to" for example can be important.) For all my complaints & for all the time it took me to read this book, I was sorry when the book ended. (which was on a realistic note) The author kept close to the historical facts. This allowed me to get new perspectives on that time & period of history. As I am learning, many people are not familiar with Stalin & his intense paranoia, the millions of people that were murdered by him (mostly his own people), the incredible sufferings of the Russian (Soviet) peoples & the huge burden that the Soviet government took on with regards to stopping Hitler. As an aside, Georg Grossjohann a former German officer credited the Soviet Government with being the main reason that Hitler lost the War.. This book took on a vastness of stories, events, peoples & imaginations as large as the Russian Steppes. (An aside, the photograph book "Operation Barbarossa 1941" by Michael Olive, provided visual images of the foreverness & challenges of the steppes) What was enlarged for myself were new understandings & perceptions of human motivations, rationales, fears & so on that were provided. Perhaps the greatest harm that we do to ourselves & others is not knowing

ourselves as the hero of the book, the alter ego for the author himself learns. So as I think, there were stories & processes within the multi levels of all the events. The author was able to manifest time events simultaneously . For example, while the fighting was going on in Stalingrad, this group of people were being brought to the extinction camps while in Moscow these decisions were occurring. Grossman got into peoples thought processes, their feelings & those shadow sides that all humans posses. I could say much more on why I am glad that I read this book. For me, this is one book that I will never forget to have read. I rank this book as an upgrade to Tolstoy's War & Peace. I recommend this book for persons who are not only interested in history but are interested in exploring their own inner workings.

Very good account of the Eastern Front. Grossman's commentary, aided by Beevor's context, gives the reader a first-hand account of the Russian/German conflict. The chapter on Treblinka is reason enough to read this. The only negative is the repetition of Grossman's description of the horrors of war.

I read Vasily Grossman's book with great interest, but I am not fully satisfied, because it did not meet my expectations. The book offers new and difficult to find anywhere else point of view (mostly, not politically correct for Soviet era), real and gripping emotions of actual "regular people" and their cruel fate during the II WW. It offers a greatly contrasting approach as compared to many other war history books that focus on "big picture", i.e. politics, armies, battles etc. However, unfortunately, the language of translation is stiff and wooden, very far away from spoken Russian. Even with my limited familiarity with Russian, I am sure I would have been more impressed with the original.

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