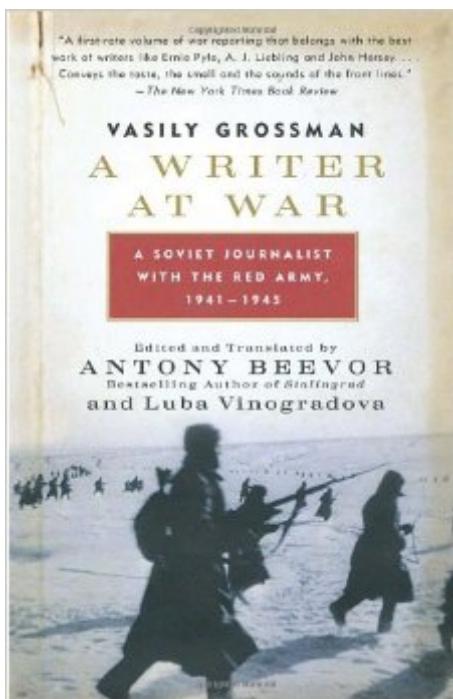


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A Writer At War: A Soviet Journalist With The Red Army, 1941-1945



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." •

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Customer Reviews

I walk mid shamble smear and stench, The dead I mourn." John Finley. The Soviet journalist and author Vasily Grossman did more than kneel behind the soldier's trench. He lived with the Red Army from the catastrophic summer of 1941, through the defense of Moscow, the apocalyptic carnage of Stalingrad, the hard-won liberation of Soviet territory, the horrible discoveries of Nazi genocide in Madjanek and Treblinka, and the final bloody, triumphant march into Berlin. Anthony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova's "A Writer at War: Vasily Grossman with the Red Army 1941-1945" is a marvelous examination of both "Grossman's war" and the war itself. Vasily Grossman is something of a forgotten, unsung giant of Soviet literature. Born in Berdichev, Ukraine in 1905, Grossman rose

to prominence and received national acclaim as a war reporter for Red Star, the official newspaper of the Red Army. Although never a member of the Communist Party, Grossman was, for most of his life, a strong supporter of the Soviet Union. Grossman's reporting was realistic (despite editing by Party censors) and was enormously popular among both high ranking officers and foot soldiers. After the war, Grossman returned to writing. His magnum opus, *Life and Fate* was not published in the USSR until 1988. When it was originally submitted for publication the Soviet authorities 'arrested' the book and told Grossman that it would not be published for 200 years. Fortunately, a copy of the manuscript survived, was smuggled to Switzerland and published in Europe in 1980, fifteen years after Grossman's death. *Life and Fate* was based, in good part, on Grossman's wartime experiences. Consequently, Beevor's work provides both an historical, ground-level examination of the war generally and a great deal of insight into the life experiences that formed the moral foundation of Grossman's novels. Beevor (and his translator and collaborator Vinogradova) have taken Grossman's notebooks, war diaries, personal correspondence and his Red Star articles and set them out as part of their narrative. The transition from Grossman's text to the commentary is well thought out and seamless. Beevor is no stranger to the Eastern Front, (he has written two well received books "Stalingrad" and "The Fall of Berlin") and he does an excellent job of putting Grossman's writings into the context of his times. Grossman is swept into the war as a reporter for Red Star immediately after the German invasion in June, 1941. Grossman's writing (and Beevor's commentary) takes us through that first disastrous summer of defeat, despair, death, and retreat. The magnificent and bloody defense of Stalingrad follows and the success of Operation Uranus in November, 1942 that resulted in the encirclement and destruction of General Paulus' Sixth Army follows. The next portion of the book has Grossman writing about the Red Army on the offensive, from the Battle of Kursk through the liberation of the Ukraine and then Poland. It is here that Grossman first learns of the horror that was the holocaust. Grossman's reports from Treblinka were the first, first-hand accounts of the Nazi death camps and what Grossman saw changed his life. Although Jewish, Grossman had always considered himself a secular citizen of the USSR. The death camps and the murder of his mother at the hands of Nazis and Ukrainian collaborators reawakened his sense of a Jewish identity even though he remained totally secular. Grossman's experience of the camps and the evidence he saw there of man's innate inhumanity to man stunned him even after almost 4 years of living with brutality on an unfathomable scale. In ending one of his reports Grossman writes: "It is infinitely hard even to read this. The reader must believe me, it is as hard to write it. Someone might ask: "Why write about all this, why remember all that?" It is the writer's duty to tell this terrible truth, and it is the civilian duty of the reader to learn it." It is clear from

reading A Writer at War and two of Grossman's novels, "Life and Fate" and "Forever Flowing" that Grossman took his duty to tell his terrible truth seriously. Beevor has done Grossman a good service by letting Grossman's voice be heard again. I hope this book creates renewed interest in Grossman's life and writing.

I have done a fair amount of reading on the "Russian War" and have read Grossman's "Life and Fate." Of all these books "A Writer at War" stands out. Anthony Beevor has done a fine job of creating the narrative, filling in the gaps and explaining the situation the Russian Army and Vasily Grossman found from 1941 to 1945. This book brings the overall arc of the war, the great battles and the agony of officers, soldiers and civilians into full view. Most memorable are his up close descriptions of Stalingrad and his searching interviews in his Ukrainian hometown where his mother was executed along with twenty thousand Jews. His description of the heroism of young women at Stalingrad is extremely moving. The section on the Treblinka concentration camp, where nearly a million people were exterminated, was used at the Nuremberg Trials and has an immediacy that is profoundly affecting even after all these years and all we know about the Holocaust. I cannot recommend this book too highly, particularly in conjunction with "Life and Fate" and other histories of the Russian-German cataclysm.

I started this book with misgivings. The introduction informed me it was the unpublished notes of Grossman's war correspondence, rather than the stories themselves. I've been a reporter, and let's just say my unpublished notes will never win a National Book Award. I also gathered that "Life and Fate", rather than this, was Grossman's masterwork, so perhaps I should have gone directly to it. I was completely and thankfully wrong. Edited by noted historian Anthony Beevor, an expert on Stalingrad, and collaborator Luba Vinogradova, the book expertly sets vignettes from Grossman's notes into ample background material putting it all in context. Grossman's reportage sweeps from the stunning fall of the western Soviet Union following Germany's invasion in June 1941, to the epic battle of Stalingrad in 1942 and early 1943, to the reconquest of Soviet lands, the taking of Berlin, and war's end. Grossman distinguishes himself both by his willingness to expose himself to combat and his ability to get everyone to open up to him, from peasant soldiers to tight-lipped generals. This was no mean feat for a Jewish intellectual whom many Russians despised just for who he was. You see an entire nation shell-shocked by war. They've fought so long they can't remember what peace is like. They've lived so long in the mud they can't remember what it's like to be clean or warm or dry. They don't care about getting paid because there's nothing to buy at the front. They have seen

so much death; millions of people take it for granted they won't survive the war, and many are right. They die fighting with a uniquely Slavic romanticism otherwise vanished from the modern world, and despite the violence behind them - just at Stalingrad, thousands of Red Army soldiers were executed by their own commissars. We see the heroism of countless soldiers thrown into the meatgrinder of Stalingrad, on the banks of the Volga, where Stalin finally realizes he's got no more ground to give and must stop the Nazis now. Powerful too, and more unique, are later chapters where Grossman covers the Red Army's rollback to the west, where he learns what actually happened to more than a million Jews living there - including his hometown of Berdichev, where his mother was murdered. He writes the first take on the Holocaust wherever he goes from 1943 to 1945. He was the first reporter into much of the annihilated Jewish Pale in the Ukraine and Byelorussia; the first into Treblinka and Majdanek. But the Communists stunningly censored any reference to the Holocaust's victims as Jews. Stalin wanted them seen merely as Soviets, and the Ukrainian complicity covered up to ease the Ukraine's postwar reabsorption. At Treblinka, the Nazis, having spent almost two years mass murdering the Jews of Poland and neighboring areas, then spent more than six months disinterring 800,000 bodies from mass graves to destroy the evidence - starting, Grossman learns, precisely when Stalingrad fell to the Russians and the Germans realized the war was lost. They burned those corpses in bonfires that, day and night, could be seen 25 miles away. Grossman describes this in grisly detail. Inmates rebelled and destroyed the camp in the summer of 1943 and the Germans subsequently destroyed it, trying to disguise the site as a farm - one where, however, countless bits of human bone and scraps of clothing and documents and household goods were littered throughout the soil. These attested to the truth of what Grossman was told by a handful of survivors who emerge at liberation from nearby forests. Grossman's retelling of what happened to victims from the moment they emerged from the trains to their walk naked down a sandy path to the gas chambers, shocks even those of us now familiar with the subject. Think how much stronger this would have read when the world was first hearing about it. History and time have added detail, but not essence, to what Grossman, first on the scene, has to say about it.

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