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Above: Lillian Broca Queen Esther (detail)
BEARING WITNESS
The War, the Shoah and the Legacy of Vasily Grossman

By Maxim D. Shrayer

'And once again, a feeling of superstitious terror took hold of the enemy: Were the ones attacking them people, could they be mortal?' In a slightly modified form, these and other words from Vasily Grossman's essay 'The Direction of the Main Strike' (1942) are engraved on Mamaev Kurgan memorial on a hill overlooking Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad. Grossman's words refer to the shock of Nazi forces as they faced the heroism of Soviet soldiers fighting under Stalin's order: 'Not a step back.' The Soviet victory at Stalingrad turned the tide of World War II, but it could not stop the Shoah. When the Soviet troops, Grossman embedded with them, came to the death camps in Poland in the summer of 1944, most of the Jews of Europe had been annihilated.

The Jewish-Russian writer and political thinker Vasily Grossman (1905-1964) is not identified as the source of the seething words carved out on the Stalingrad memorial. Grossman's deletion—words 'popular' author 'unknown',—constitutes much more than a double twist of black Soviet humour. According to John and Carol Garrard, Grossman's dedicated biographers, the absence of Grossman's name on the Stalingrad memorial is an 'open wound' on the writer's legacy. Fifty-nine year old Vasily Grossman died in Moscow of stomach cancer, devastated by the Soviet efforts to erase him from history. His novel Life and Fate, a comparative indictment of Stalinism and Hitlerism, had been 'arrested' by the KGB in 1961, leaving him free to die of illness and grief during the headiest years of the Thaw. 'They strangled me in the back alley', Grossman had said to Boris Yampolsky, author of the novel Country Fair (1940), a lament for Jewish life in the former Pale. Ironically, some of Grossman's loyal official supporters were the ageing generals he had interviewed at Stalingrad, who understood his love for the 'holy Red Army' and the extent to which it had bolstered the war effort. In orchestrating Grossman's literary death, the regime was symbolically murdering the legacy of the people's war against Hitler while also pogromising the Soviet memory of the Shoah.

Born Iosif Grossman but accustomed to being called Vasya (diminutive of Vasily), Grossman adopted the emblematic Jewish-Russian pen name 'Vasily Grossman'. His first novel, Glück Auf!, a Soviet Germinal devoid of desire or violence, is stronger and less formulaic than his next novel Stepan Kolchugin (1937-1940), a story of a workingclass youth's
path to Bolshevism. His early prose of the 1930s is a search for his own voice, via the styles and artistic devices of other Soviet writers, both Jewish and non-Jewish. Perhaps Grossman's greatest inspiration was Chekhov (he would title one of his Stalingrad essays 'Through Chekhov's Eyes'; the essay zoomed in on the experience of the famous sniper Anatoly Chekhov). To write in a form that resisted pathos and narrative closure would remain a lifelong aim, even as a Tolstoyan novelist ambition pulsed in his temples. These early works gave little indication of the authorial voice Grossman would acquire in 1941 at the war front reporting from the trenches, gathering his material directly from the fighting soldiers. There is courage and sacrifice in his wartime articles, but there is also humour and tenderness; despite being a time of personal trauma the war against Nazism was also, for Grossman, a time of glory—literary, civic, and military. For him and many other Jewish soldiers, including poets and novelists serving as military journalists, this was a war with double the cause and double the commitment. (In the notebooks, Grossman recorded a comment by a Jewish commanding officer that 'in a war like this Jews should be fighting like fanatics').

Grossman became a legendary military journalist. He wrote with adoration about Soviet soldiers, officers and generals yet failed to extol Stalin, Krushchev and other party leaders. Out of his first months at the front came his short novel *The People Are Immortal*, which describes the breakout of a Soviet unit from enemy encirclement in August 1941. Tight and dynamic, it was relatively unhampered by the proscribed rhetoric, while the length was ideally suited to his talents. *The People Are Immortal* was nominated for the Stalin Prize in 1942, but Stalin blocked the nomination and Ilya Ehrenburg received the prize for *The Fall of Paris*.

Millions devoured Grossman's articles in *Red Star*, the main newspaper of the army. Several of his articles about Stalingrad were reprinted in *Pravda*, under the title *Stalingrad: September 1942–January 1943*, and appeared in book form, although only a fraction of the material from his interviews with soldiers and commanding officers was ever published. His notebooks offer glimpses of his own humanism; following the capture of Schwerin in the spring of 1945, Grossman records: 'Horribly things are happening to German women....Women's screams are heard from open windows. A Jewish officer, whose whole family was killed by Germans, is billeted in the apartment of a Gestapo man who has escaped. The women and girls [left behind] are safe while he is there.'

The experience of visiting Germany in 1945 had a further influence on Grossman's writing. Consider the story 'Tiergarten', written between 1953 and 1955 and still awaiting its translator. Set during the Battle of Berlin, 'Tiergarten' focuses on Rahm, keeper of the apes in the Berlin Zoo, a place richly celebrated in the Russian literature of Grossman's youth, from Viktor Shklovsky to Vladimir Nabokov. Rahm survives the bombardment and lives to see the Allied victory, whereas his beloved gorilla, Fritzi (note the name), is killed. Grossman inscribes himself in the finale of the story as an eyewitness, a Soviet 'officer of the auxiliary services, a stooped, bespectacled man, with an exhausted, anxious face', who inspects the damage in the Zoo. The reader learns that three of Rahm's sons were killed at war, while the fourth died in Dachau. Delicately, Grossman hints at the fourth son's homosexuality, evincing an empathy with gay men as victims of Nazism rarely heard in Soviet writing. Grossman's compassion for the victim—no matter their identity, nationality or creed—runs through his prewar prose to his fiction and nonfiction about the war and Shoah and all the way to his last works, such as *Forever Flowing* and *Goodness Be to You!*, a tortured travelogue framed by the histories of the Armenian genocide and the Shoah.

Even prior to 1943, when the tide had turned and the Soviet Army went on the offensive, Grossman's fiction and reportage had resisted the Soviet tendency not to discuss Jewish victimhood as distinct from unspecified Soviet losses. In the post-Stalingrad climate of a double silencing—of the Shoah and of Jewish military valour—Grossman used every opportunity to mention Jews in his articles. At the peak of his wartime fame, at Stalingrad, as the unspoken official directive became unwritten policy, Grossman may have already become a thorn in the side of the Soviet ideological machine. He was recalled from covering the final stages of the Stalingrad battle and was replaced by Konstantin Simonov, a stellar non-Jewish correspondent who always slept on crisp, official song sheet.

During the final days of Stalingrad, Grossman found himself in an exile of sorts to the recently liberated region of Kalmykia. There, in a prelude to what he would encounter during the liberation of Ukraine, Grossman witnessed firsthand evidence of Nazi atrocities, including

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Grossman in a just-liberated village, January 1942
those committed in the autumn of 1942 by the SS Sonderkommando Astrachan. 'Death of ninety-three Jewish families. They had smeared the children's lips with poison,' Grossman recorded in his notebooks. As the Soviet troops retook the occupied Soviet territories in 1943-44, Grossman travelled with them and gathered evidence about what is now called 'Shoah by bullet'. His internationalist perspective of a Soviet intelligent broadened into a more stereoscopic vision as he developed a self-consciously Jewish response to events. He first articulated this emerging dual perspective in the story 'The Old Teacher', which was printed in the Moscow magazine Banner in the summer of 1943. It was written before he joined Ehrenburg as a leader of the project titled The Black Book (subtitled The Ruthless Murder of Jews by German-Fascist Invaders Throughout the Temporarily Occupied Regions of the Soviet Union and in the Death Camps of Poland During the War of 1941–45) and before he returned to his home town of Berdichev in the winter of 1944 and was able to confirm the murder of his mother by forces of Einsatzgruppe C and the Polizei, the latter mainly drawn from the Ukrainian population.

Along with 'The Hell of Treblinka' and 'Ukraine Without Jews', 'The Old Teacher' occupies a place of honour among Grossman's wartime writings about the Shoah. Written in anticipation of bearing witness, it looks back to Grossman's prewar writings about the Civil War, and is tinged with Soviet revolutionary romanticism. The image of the blacksmith Naum Kulish, who attacks a Nazi soldier with bare hands as the Jews are being marched to their death, leaps into the story from the pages of Nikolay Ostrovsky's novel How the Steel Was Tempered (1932), in which a mighty Jewish blacksmith, also called Naum, defends himself and his wife from pogroms before killing her and throwing himself at their attackers. The execution scene contains moments of agonising beauty, anticipating both 'The Hell of Treblinka' and the Holocaust pages of Life and Fate; as the column of Jews approach the edge of the ravine where their bodies will be piled up, the young daughter of a Jewish lieutenant killed at the front turns to 'the old teacher' Rozental, who carries her in his trembling arms: 'Her face was calm; it was the pale face of an adult, a face full of tolerant compassion. And in a sudden silence he heard her voice. "Teacher", she said, "don't look that way. It will frighten you". And, like a mother, she covered his eyes with the palms of her hand' (tr. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler).

Grossman places at the heart of the story the choices of two professionals, the teacher Rozental and the doctor Vaintraub, as they face the impending death of the town's Jewish community. In 'The Old Teacher', Dr Vaintraub administers poison to himself and his family and dies in his home, not long before the murder of all the Jews in his town. The teacher, Rozental, refuses the Jewish doctor's poison, choosing to die with his fellow Jews by Nazi bullet. For Dr Vaintraub, who initially seems unable to fathom how 'a cultured European people' could commit mass

murder of Jews, the crisis occurs when he is asked to treat the town's commandant Werner, an ethnic German from Latvia who speaks Russian. Grossman continued to wrestle with this moral predicament in his postwar prose, notably in the story 'In Kislovodsk', which was published in the USSR, not long after his death, in heavily censored form. Set in 1942 in a resort in the foothills of North Caucasus (and, coincidentally or not, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's home town), this story is in many ways a commentary on 'The Old Teacher.' Both explore ethical choices in the face of apparent evil. The suicide of Dr Vaintraub and his family, noted but not detailed in 'The Old Teacher', anticipates the suicide of the Russian physician in 'In Kislovodsk'. A highly placed doctor in the resort of Kislovodsk, Nikolay Viktorovich stays behind after the German troops occupy parts of North Caucasus in 1942. Described as an aristocratic-looking and cultured individual, he initially collaborates with the occupants and is put in charge of a hospital for wounded Red Army soldiers. Consider the conclusion of 'In Kislovodsk': 'They [the doctor and his wife] behaved very vulgarly. They put on the clothes she had got ready for their evening at the theater and she doused herself with French perfume. [...] They ate pressed caviar and drank
wine; he clinked with her and kissed her fingers as if they were young lovers in a restaurant. Then they wound up the gramophone, danced to vulgar songs by [Aleksandr] Vertinsky, and wept because they worshipped Vertinsky. [...] They kissed their porcelain cups goodbye; they kissed their paintings goodbye. [...] He opened her wardrobe and kissed her underwear and her slippers. Then, in a harsh voice, she said, "And now poison me, like a mad dog—and yourself too!" (tr. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler). Robert Chandler has noted that Grossman drew on Viktor Shklovsky's material for *The Black Book* for this story. As cognates of the loaded Russian word poshost’ (vulgarity; vapidness) punctuate the suicide scene, one wonders if Grossman is not employing vulgarity as an antidote to beauty, as though refusing to aestheticise the memory of the war and the Shoah.

Grossman was not the first Soviet author to write about Nazi atrocities against Jews in the occupied territories. As early as January 1942 Ilya Selvinsky had depicted the aftermath of the mass execution in November-December 1941 of about 7,000 Jews in the Crimean village of Bagerovo near the city of Kerch; Selvinsky’s poem, based on his eye-witness account of the open ditch filled with the bodies of the victims, was printed a number of times in 1942. Grossman mentioned the Bagerovo massacre in his 1942 notebooks as he travelled with the tank brigade of then Colonel Abram Khasin: ‘I was told back at the front headquarters that Khasin’s family had all been killed in Kerch by Germans caring out a mass execution of civilians. Purely by chance, Khasin saw photographs of the dead people in a ditch and recognised his wife and children. I was thinking, what does he feel when he leads his tanks into the fighting?’ However, Grossman was probably the first Jewish-Russian writer to present to the mass Soviet reader, in the Russian language, a fictionalised yet detailed account of the murder of the entire Jewish population of a small town, presumably in eastern Ukraine, by a Sonderkommando.

Grossman, Selvinsky, Ehrenburg and other Jewish-Russian writers wishing to depict the Shoah had to make compromises in order to get their work into print: palliative truth versus partial silence; the rhetoric of a united Soviet people versus a Jewish perspective; not dividing the dead versus giving the victims a Jewish burial in language and memory. In the case of Grossman’s *The Old Teacher*, the price was probably an obfuscation of the extent of Ukrainian collaboration, although he hints at it by giving the traitors and collaborators Ukrainian names. But the prevailing sense is that the collaborators were singular, while the local populations displayed inherent empathy for the Jewish victims, as voiced by the old teacher Rozental himself: ‘I’ve seen that the Ukrainians and Russians, having suffered under the weight of the German terror, are ready to help the Jews in any way they can’ [Note that rhetorically, Grossman makes no distinction among the ethnic Ukrainians and Russians]. ‘...I have seen much compassion, position of Jewish-Russian writer-soldier-witness, the more painful it would be for him not to tell the world about the Shoah,”Ukraine without Jews” was published in Yiddish in the Jewish Antifascist Committee’s newspaper *Einhheit* (Unity) in 1943, but not in the original Russian. Verging on the taboo, it sought to open Soviet eyes to the annihilation of Jewish populations in the occupied territories. Twenty years earlier, Isaac Babel had travelled with the Red Army troops during the Polish campaign of 1920. Babel both witnessed and mourned the destruction of traditional Jewish life in Ukraine. Opting for allegory rather than documentary, Babel substituted bees for Jews in a sentence Grossman would echo two decades later: ‘There are no bees left in Volyn’, Babel wrote in his short story ‘The Way to Brody’ from *Red Cavalry*. ‘There are no Jews in Ukraine’ is more howl than dirge, in Grossman’s later ‘Ukraine without Jews’.

Grossman did not possess Babel’s golden pen but came to Ukraine in 1943 with a perfectly pitched memory, an aching Jewish conscience, and immeasurable guilt over not having saved his mother, who had been murdered in his native Berdichev, the ‘Jerusalem of Volyn’, along with 20,000 other Jews in September 1941. In his writing, he had temporarily eschewed metaphor or even rejected trope altogether, but this changed in August 1944 when, with the Soviet troops, he came upon the fields of powdered bones on the site of the Treblinka death camp. A new poetics was required to articulate horror on this scale, and he found some of his sources in Dante. His lengthy report, ‘The Hell of Treblinka’, ran in the December 1944 issue of *Banner* reaching a wide Soviet readership, and shows Grossman at the peak of his wartime writing. In a magisterial passage he would later quote in his essay ‘The Sistine Madonna’ (1955), Grossman describes the approach to the site of Treblinka, *la divitta via* to Jewish death amid una selva oscura ‘east of Warsaw, along the Western Bug [River]’ Grossman’s guides through the circles of hell are the survivors and eyewitnesses. Twice he draws a line between Dante’s *Inferno* and Treblinka: ‘Today the witnesses have spoken; the stones and the earth have cried out aloud. And today, before the eyes of humanity, before the conscience of the whole world, we can walk step by step around each circle of the Hell of Treblinka, in comparison with which Dante’s Hell seems no more than
an innocent game on the part of Satan'. Later, in reconstructing the last minutes of the murdered Jews, Grossman dismisses the easy parallel yet again: 'The children clung to their mothers and shrieked, "Mama, what are they going to do to us? Are they going to burn us?" Not even Dante, in his Hell, saw scenes like this one [...]'; 'Love—maternal, conjugal, or filial love—told people that they were seeing one another for the last time. Handshakes, kisses, blessings, tears, brief hurried words into which people put all their love, all their pain, all their tenderness, all their despair... The SS psychiatrists of death knew that all this must be cut short, that these feelings must be stifled at once. [...] This was a critical moment: the moment when daughters were separated from fathers, mothers from sons, grandmothers from grandsons, husbands from wives.' (tr. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler). Printed as a pamphlet in 1945, 'The Hell of Treblinka' was distributed at the Nuremberg Trials and included in Grossman's extensive volume *Years of War*, published in 1945 and reprinted in 1946.

Reading 'The Hell of Treblinka' alongside 'The Old Teacher' underscores parallels between the anticipatory fiction and the eyewitness report. The following passage recalls the ending of the short story, where the young girl shields the eyes of the old teacher: "We heard of ten-year-old girls comforting their sobbing parents with divine wisdom; we heard of a young boy shouting out by the entrance to the gas chamber, 'Don't cry, Mama—the Russians will avenge us!' 'The Hell of Treblinka' marks not just Grossman's literary prowess but also his growing sense of responsibility as both writer of and witness to the Shoah: 'It is infinitely painful to read this. The reader must believe me when I say that it is equally hard to write it. "Why write about it then?" someone may well ask. "Why recall such things? It is the writer's duty to tell the terrible truth, and it is a reader's civic duty to learn this truth. To turn away, to close one's eyes and walk past is to insult the memory of those who have perished. Only those who have learned the whole truth can ever understand against what kind of monster our great and holy Red Army has entered into mortal combat' (tr. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler).

At a time of grand Russian cultural chauvinism, Grossman was an attractive target as a Jew, Holocaust writer, and internationalist.

Critics have noted some of Grossman's factual errors in his reports on Treblinka. Grossman had to make his own calculations based upon what he believed to be the number of transports and estimated that '2.5 to 3 million' Jews were murdered there, whereas the death toll was actually about 800,000. His error is poignant testimony to the lack of resources available to anyone wishing to document the Shoah in its immediate aftermath. From late 1943 to 1945, Grossman worked with Ilya Ehrenburg on *The Black Book* and in April 1944 he was elected member of the Jewish Antifascist Committee (JAC). Toward the end of the war, Ehrenburg had a falling-out with the JAC, resigning as head of *The Black Book* project, and Grossman took over Ehrenburg's task. *The Black Book* was scheduled to appear in the USSR in 1947. Grossman wrote the preface, sections on 'The Murder of Jews in Berdichev' and 'Treblinka', and prepared 'The History of the Minsk Ghetto' and other sections. (Andrey Platonov, whose talent Grossman admired greatly, was not credited but apparently also contributed the materials to the Minsk Ghetto section). Grossman and Ehrenburg were listed as co-editors. Set in type in 1946, *The Black Book* was suppressed by the regime and never appeared in the USSR. It was published in Israel in 1980.

In 1945 Grossman was at the height of his national fame but his fortune began to change in 1946 with the introduction of the post-war anti-Cosmopolitan campaign and the official steamrolling of *The Black Book*. Still in the late 1940s Grossman continued to publish books. In 1943 he had started writing an epic with the working title *Stalingrad*. Accepted for publication as *For a Just Cause*, it first ran into difficulties in 1949. Parts 1–3 of the novel went through twelve versions of proofs until finally appearing in the leading Moscow monthly *Novy Mir* in 1952. On 13 February 1953 Mikhail Bulgakov, author of the Stalinist potboiler *White Birch*, savaged Grossman in *Pravda*, unleashing a campaign of antisemitic vilification against him. To put this in the context of Soviet Stalingrad literature, both Simonov's *Days and Nights* (1942–43) and Viktor Nekrasov's *In the Trenches of Stalingrad* (1946) were probably better novels, but *For a Just Cause* was not slated for its literary quality; at a time of grand–Russian cultural chauvinism, Grossman cut an attractive target as a Jew, Holocaust writer, and internationalist. Stalin's death in March 1953 eased the situation; *For a Just Cause* appeared in expurgated form in 1954, and the full text appeared in 1956. In both book editions the subtitle was Book 1. *Life and Fate*, which Shimon Markish called Grossman's *Main Book*, would form Book 2 of Grossman's trilogy.

World War II and the Shoah, followed by the postwar campaign of Soviet satanising of Jews, transformed Grossman. By drawing parallels between Stalinism and Hitlerism—and by questioning the trajectory of Soviet history—in *Life and Fate*, Grossman went much further than Vladimir Dudintsev, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and other Soviet authors of the key anti-Stalinist works to appear during the Thaw. One of the main paradoxes of
who in his youth believed in the promise of revolutionary change. It was not until 1988 that the Soviet ban on publication of Grossman’s work was lifted. In the words of Boris Lanin, Grossman’s post-Soviet student, ‘Grossman’s main philosophical contribution to Soviet literature is the rehabilitation of the concept of freedom.’

Outside Russia, Vasily Grossman remains one of the best known and frequently taught Russian-language authors. John and Carol Garrard recently received the Giovanni Comisso Prize for the Italian translation of The Bones of Berdichev, their splendid biography. Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova’s A Writer at War has gained a broad readership. And Robert Chandler’s translations of Grossman’s novels have firmly ensconced Grossman in the curricula of university courses in Soviet culture and Holocaust studies. Combined with the translations of Grossman’s fiction and nonfiction published in the 1940s, much of his legacy has been made available in English.

A contemporary appraisal of his oeuvre probes the artistic endurance of his prose in a world now further removed from Stalinism, World War II and the Shoah. While Grossman’s wartime reportage has not lost its force ‘The Hell of Treblinka’ remains, for this reader, his greatest work. Many pages of Life and Fate belong to the treasury of Holocaust literature. The episodes of Forever Flowing devoted to Holodomor, the Great Famine during the collectivisation of Ukraine, show Grossman capable of the kind of all-encompassing empathy with another’s suffering that none of his non-Jewish Soviet contemporaries displayed toward the Jewish losses. The shortcomings of Grossman’s Tolstoyan aspirations are most explicitly felt in both books of the Stalingrad diology. A novelistic dearth of desire, love, and pleasure is not only Grossman’s way of capturing the grimness of history, but is also a fundamental structural dilemma of his long fiction which, is best read in excerpts, but not in the way Soviet schoolchildren used to breathe through War and Peace (toys skimming the peace parts, girls disregarding the battlefield sections). And yet, while Grossman’s talent may not have been novelistic, his novels’ discursive digressions on antisemitism and totalitarianism rival many pages of Hannah Arendt.

The story of Vasily Grossman is that of a Jewish-Russian writer who came to embrace a view of the Soviet system nearly as bitter as his condemnation of Nazism. In Grossman’s greatest writing, the Promethean thrust of the authorial voice fuses an imperative to bear witness with a commitment to posit the overwhelming questions.