Holocaust Resistance in Europe and America:

New Aspects and Dilemmas

Edited by
Victoria Khiterer with Abigail S Gruber
In this overview and analysis of Vasily Grossman's career from the 1920s to the 1960s, Maxim D. Shrayer focuses on the role World War II and the Shoah played in Grossman's transformation into a major Jewish literary figure, a principal witness to the Shoah, and an important political philosopher. Shrayer demonstrates how calamities of 20th-century history put the Russian—Soviet—Jew Vasily Grossman on a collision course with the Soviet system, paving the way for his literary immortality.

“And once again, a feeling of superstitious terror [chuvstvo suevernogo strakha] took hold of the enemy: Were the ones attacking them human beings, could they mortal?” In a slightly modified form, these and other words from Vasily Grossman’s famous essay “The Direction of the Main Strike” are engraved on the Mamaev Kurgan memorial complex in


I have discussed aspects of Vasily Grossman’s career and legacy as a witness to the Shoah in several papers presented in 2010-2014 at the Millersville University Conference on the Holocaust and Genocide. I wish to express my gratitude to Professor Victoria Khiterer, the conference director and editor of the present volume.

Volgograd, formerly Stalingrad. Grossman’s words refer to the shock of Nazi troops as they faced the unimaginable heroism of Soviet soldiers fighting at Stalingrad under Stalin’s sacrificial order, “not a step back.” In dealing the Nazis a blow from which they never recovered, the Stalingrad battle turned the tide of World War II. But the Soviet victory in early 1943 could not stop the Shoah. When the Soviet forces, Grossman embedded with them, came to the death camps in Eastern Poland in the summer of 1944, most European Jews had been annihilated.

The Jewish-Russian writer and political philosopher Vasily Grossman (1905-1964) is not identified as the source of his seething words carved out on the Stalingrad memorial. Grossman deletion—the author “unknown,” the words “popular”: (avtor neizvesten, slova narodnye)—constitutes much more than a double twist of black Soviet humor. In the words of John and Carol Garrard, Grossman’s principal biographers, the absence of Grossman’s name on the Stalingrad memorial constitutes an “open wound” to the writer’s legacy, the other being the Soviet silencing of the truth about the Shoah. When the fifty-nine-year-old Vasily Grossman died in Moscow of stomach cancer, his health had been devastated by the efforts of the Soviet ideological machine to erase him from history. Grossman passed away just one month shy of Brezhnev’s coup and the removal of Khrushchev from power. The manuscript of the novel Life and Fate (Zhizn’ i sud’ba), which Shimon Markish calls Grossman’s “Main Book,” had been “arrested” by the KGB, while the author himself was left free to die of illness and grief during the headiest years of the Thaw. It was on Khrushchev’s de-Stalinization that Grossman had pinned many false hopes, and it was Khrushchev’s years that resulted in Grossman’s greatest professional disaster. Brezhnev’s regime skillfully co-opted both the war veterans and the shorn memory of the Great Patriotic War into its ruling mythology, but there was hardly room for Grossman in this multiply-redacted version of the glorious story he had helped immortalize with his wartime reportage and fiction.

One of the most famous voices of World War II and anti-Nazi resistance, a legendary reporter who spent 1000 days at the war front, Grossman had a difficult time making a living during the last few years of his life. He enjoyed the patronage of several loyal friends and the care and support of his last love Ekaterina Zabolotskaya, widow of the great poet Nikolay Zabolotsky. While Grossman’s sexuality remains an unexplored subject, he appears to have had a penchant for Slavic women, as both his first and second wife were Ukrainian. (In Life and Fate, the Russian wife of the physicist Viktor Shtrum loves him but does not comprehend his Jewish anxieties.) Close friends adored and appreciated Grossman; the
poet Semyon Lipkin called him a “saint,” despite Grossman’s judgmental behavior and inability to compromise. “They strangled me in the back alley,” Grossman had said to Boris Yampolsky, author of the fabulous *Country Fair (Iarmarka*, 1940), a lament for the destroyed Jewish life in Ukraine.4 “They” refers to the regime and a host of accomplices and informers, including those from Grossman’s inner circle, and also, probably, to the silent majority of his literary brethren, the unprotesting—unresisting—witnesses to his strangulation. Ironically, some of Grossman’s official supporters were the aging generals he had interviewed and praised at Stalingrad, the military men who knew how much Grossman’s ardent love for the Red Army and its soldiers had meant to the war effort. In “arresting” and confiscating *Life and Fate* and urging on Grossman’s literary and physical death, the regime was symbolically murdering the legacy of the people’s just war against Hitler while also pogromizing the Soviet memory of the Shoah—the very memory Grossman fought so hard to preserve.

Let us briefly consider the spiral of Grossman’s destiny, from his periods of luck and fame to the Promethean agony of his last years. “They say there are people who are born under a lucky star. Pablo Neruda may be deemed such a darling of destiny. But the star, under which Grossman was born, was a star of misfortune,” Ilya Ehrenburg wrote, already after Grossman’s death, in Book Five of his epochal memoir *People, Years, Life*.5 In May 1944, in a celebratory article, Grossman had called Ehrenburg, arguably the principal Soviet voice of anti-Nazi resistance, a “herald of those modest, simple people in soldier’s shirts and forage caps discolored by wind and rain.”6 Incidentally, this was also one of the very few instances where Grossman praised Stalin, albeit indirectly, by paraphrasing in the text the title of Stalin’s famous article “Vertigo from Success” (“Golovokruzhenie ot uspeka”). Dithyramb did not come easily to Grossman, and the absence of extolment of the Soviet leaders did not earn Grossman the love of Stalin and his henchmen. Ehrenburg and Grossman knew each other well enough, especially through their work on *The Black Book*, although they were very different as writers and as personalities, and could not enjoy seamless intellectual or artistic commerce.7 Was Ehrenburg correct about Grossman’s unlucky “star”?

Berdichev, Grossman’s home town, was once known as the “Jerusalem of Volyn.” Grossman came from the milieu of the Russianized Jewish intelligentsia. Growing up, Grossman was not exposed either to Yiddish or Hebrew at home but heard French at the dinner table. Hardly a provincial, Grossman harbored some condescension toward “small-town Jews” (in Grossman’s wartime notebooks, the term *mestechkovyi evrei* applies to his
editorial boss at the army’s main newspaper, *Red Star*, Major-General David Ortenberg). Even though a measure of discomfort with devout Jews would stay with Grossman for the rest of his life, the notion of a secularized Soviet Jew does not describe the state of his Jewishness, riddled as it was with layers of Judaic memory. In the faces of refugees fleeing to the Russian hinterland in 1941, Grossman gleaned “biblical beards of Jewish elders.”

Grossman graduated from Moscow University in chemical engineering in 1929 and worked in the Donbas mining region. He entered professional literature at the boundary of 1930, publishing under the pen name “Vasily Grossman,” often contracted to “Vas. Grossman.” Born Iosif Grossman but accustomed to being called Vasya (diminutive of Vasily), courtesy of a non-Jewish nanny, Grossman did not want to be a Joseph at the literary court of a Pharaoh with the same Jewish name. Grossman’s hybrid penname betokened the duality of his Jewish-Russian identity in a less patterned way than the common Russification or obliteration of a Jewish last name (e.g. “D. Vadimov” in print instead of David Ortenberg). When Grossman’s “In the Town of Berdichev” (“V gorode Berdicheve”) appeared in 1934 Moscow’s *Literary Gazette*, this civil war story of a Jewish family harboring a pregnant Russian commissar earned the praise of both Maxim Gorky and Isaac Babel. Gorky suggested revisions for *Glück Auf!*, Grossman’s novel about mining also published in 1934, although his enthusiasm for Grossman was weaker than the praise he had had famously offered young Babel. “In the Town of Berdichev” may well be Grossman’s best prewar work of fiction, but this does not say very much. His fiction and nonfiction of the 1930s may be described as searching for a voice of his own. Voices and signature devices of other Soviet writers, both Jewish and non-Jewish, came to Grossman’s rescue. In addition to Babel and Andrey Platonov (whom Grossman admired), Grossman’s influences included Mikhail Zoshchenko, Yuri Olesha, Boris Pilnyak, Ilya Ilf and Evgeny Petrov, but also such Soviet novelists of the Civil War and the reconstruction as Aleksandr Fadeev, Fyodor Gladkov, and Yuri Libedinsky. The various osmotic powers of his senior Soviet contemporaries distracted Grossman, and his second, much longer novel, *Stepan Kolchugin* (1937-1940), a story of a working-class lad’s path to Bolshevism, is formulaic, weaker than Grossman’s knowledge-infused first novel, itself a five-year-plan Soviet *Germinal* without desire or violence. Yet, as “A Young Woman and an Old Woman” (“Molodaia i staraia”) amply demonstrates, Chekhov was Grossman’s aesthetic beacon (compare the story’s title to that of Chekhov’s “The Fat Man and the Thin Man” (“Tolstyi i tonkii’’)). Not without a double-
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entendre, Grossman later titled one of his Stalingrad essays “Through Chekhov’s Eyes” (“Glazami Chekhova’”); the essay zoomed in on the experience of the famous sniper, Anatoly Chekhov. Writing succinctly in a Chekhovian manner, both dispassionate and resistant of overwrought heroics, pathos, and narrative closure, remained one of Grossman’s aspirations, even as a Tolstoyan novelistic ambition pulsed in his temples. Two additional parameters help define Grossman’s early literary quest. One is revolutionary romanticism and an idealization of Lenin and the “old Bolsheviks.” (Deeming Stepan Kolchugin a “Menshevik novel,” Stalin crossed it out from the nomination for the 1941 Stalin Prize.) While Grossman himself never joined the Party, even during the war and even when, in 1955, Soviet Marshal Kliment Voroshilov apparently tried to cajole him into it; it took him longer than some of his Jewish-Russian contemporaries to cleanse himself of the belief that Jews were beholden to the Russian revolution. The other significant factor was Grossman’s imperative not to deny his prototypes their historical and ethnic Jewishness. A gallery of Jewish characters, both central (the Magazaniks of “In the Town of Berdichev”) and secondary, both cardboard and palpable, pass through the pages of Grossman’s longer and shorter prewar prose.

How did Grossman’s voice reach such an intensity and clarity in 1941-1942? The obvious explanation is that he heard the call. The war against Nazism was not only a time of both Soviet and Jewish national woe and of personal trauma; Grossman’s mother was murdered in Berdichev in September 1941 along with almost 20,000 Jews. The war was also Grossman’s time of glory—literary, civic, and military. For Grossman and many other Jewish soldiers and officers, including poets and novelists serving as military journalists, the war meant doubly the just cause and doubly 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”\textsuperscript{11}). Grossman reported from the trenches, insisting on gathering all the materials in battle and from the combatants. He survived the war physically unscathed, earning the nickname “lucky Grossman.” Out of the first months at the front grew his novel The People Are Immortal (Narod bessmerten), which today still reads breathlessly. Set in August of 1941 and describing a break of a Soviet unit out of enemy encirclement, it is tight and dynamic and relatively unharnessed by proscribed official rhetoric; the length of a short novel was probably best suited for Grossman’s natural belletristic talents. (His last novel, Vse techet (Forever Flowing), is of similar length, while the long novels of
Grossman Stalingrad diology are both “looser” and “baggier,” to lean on Henry James’s well-known comment about 19th-century, specifically Russian, novels.) Eventually Grossman would learn that in The People Are Immortal, which he had based on the journalistic materials gathered in 1941, he erroneously killed one of the characters, Amazasp Babadzhanyan, an ethnic Armenian. Babadzhanyan actually survived and became a general and Hero of the Soviet Union; in 1945, Red Star ran a series of Grossman’s articles about him, collected in book form in 1946. Babadzhanyan would go on to crush the Hungarian uprising of 1956 and then to become Chief Marshal of the Soviet armored troops. The second twist of fate was the nomination of The People Are Immortal for the Stalin Prize in 1942, which Stalin apparently blocked—now for the second time. Ehrenburg was awarded the Stalin Prize for The Fall of Paris; Ehrenburg would win it again, for The Storm, in 1948.

Grossman’s articles in Red Star were devoured by millions of Soviet fighters and civilians. Grossman wrote with adoration about Soviet soldiers, officers, and generals, but he notably failed to include Stalinist panegyrics or garner specific praise for the role of Khrushchev, who had been Stalin’s party representative at Stalingrad. Several of Grossman’s articles about the Stalingrad Battle were reprinted in Pravda, with the title Stalingrad: September 1942–January 1943, and appeared in book form. Only a fraction of the material from Grossman’s interviews with soldiers and commanding officers made it to print. Were he living today, Grossman would have been an incessant blogger followed by thousands of readers. His notebooks offer many glimpses of his humanism and nobleness. Following the capture of Schwerin in the spring of 1945, Grossman records: “Horrifying 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.”

In Grossman’s newspaper articles about Stalingrad, such as the celebrated “The Direction of the Main Strike” (“Napravlenie glavnogo udara”) or “The Brain of Defense” (“Mozg oborony”), there is courage and sacrifice, but there is also humor and heartbreak. And there are precious, subtle indications in the published, censored texts that already in 1942 Grossman was contemplating a panoramic work about the war and...
Stalinism. Grossman describes a reunion of his hero, Colonel Gurtiev, with two old friends, whom Gurtiev had not seen in over twenty years:

Having parted as young, although married men, they now met as gray-haired people with wrinkles [on their faces]. Two of them commanded divisions, the third was in charge of tank brigade. They embraced and everyone around them: chiefs of their headquarters and adjutants, and majors from the operative sections saw tears in the eyes of these gray-haired men. ‘What destiny! What destiny!’ they were saying.13

One possibility lurking in the background is that these career military men had been brought back from the Gulag as the Panzers stood at Russia’s gates.

In reading Grossman’s wartime fiction and reportage, one continues to come across his resistance to what, by the summer of 1943, had become an unspoken, top-down directive: not to discuss Jewish victimhood apart from the unspecified losses of Soviet lives and to downplay—and literally downgrade—Jewish military valor. In the post-Stalingrad climate of this double silencing, of the Shoah and of Jewish heroism, Grossman used any opportunity to mention Jews in his articles, be it a markedly Jewish name of a serviceman, or simply a selective list of Soviet nationalities fighting Hitler, as in this 1944 article about Ehrenburg: “This is why Ehrenburg’s work is so dear to Soviet people participating in the Great Patriotic war, this is why it speaks to officers and privates alike—Russians, Ukrainians, Belorussians, Georgians, Jews, Armenians, Kazakhs, Uzbeks, Tartars.”14

That at the very peak of his wartime fame, at Stalingrad, Grossman may have already become a thorn in the side of the Soviet ideological machine, can serve as an explanation for his removal from the coverage of the final stages of the Stalingrad battle, and his replacement with another stellar wartime correspondent, Konstantin Simonov, who was not Jewish and who stuck much closer to the official Stalinist song sheets. In connection with Grossman’s resistance to the growing official antisemitism in the party and army leadership, we should take stock of the growing pressure, under which Grossman’s commanding officer, Major-General David Ortenberg (D. Vadimov), found himself as the editor-in-chief of Red Star. In a memoir published in 1991, Ortenberg recorded a conversation with the then powerful Aleksandr Shcherbakov, secretary of the Central Committee, First Secretary of the Moscow City Party Committee, and head of the Main Political Department (PUR) of the Soviet Army—and thereby chief of all the political officers and military journalists:
[Shcherbakov] summoned me and said virtually this: ‘You have too many Jews in your editorial office…You need to let go of them [nado sokratit’ in the Russian].’ These words of a Secretary of the Central Committee astonished me. I was literally dumbfounded. And then I replied: ‘Already…’—‘Already what?’—‘Already let go of…Special correspondents Lapin, Khatsrevin, Rozenfeld, Shuer, Vilkomir, Slutskii, Ish, Bernshtein. Killed at the front. Jews all of them. I can let go of one more—myself. I said this and left without even saying goodbye.\textsuperscript{15}

Several months later, Ortenberg was dismissed as editor of \textit{Red Star} and sent to the front as a senior political officer.

During the final weeks of Stalingrad, the military journalist Grossman found himself in the recently liberated region of Kalmykia south of Stalingrad. There in Kalmykia, in a prelude to what he would come to witness, first during the liberation of Ukraine, and later in what remained of the Aktion Reinhardt death camps in Poland, Grossman encountered evidence of Nazi atrocities, including those committed in the autumn of 1942 by the SS Sonderkommando Astrachan. “Death of ninety-three Jewish families. They’d smeared the children’s lips with poison,” Grossman recorded in his notebooks.\textsuperscript{16} As the Soviet troops retook the occupied Soviet territories in 1943-44, as Grossman traveled with the troops and gathered further and further evidence of the Shoah by bullet, his historical vision became more stereoscopic, while the Jewish perspective began to rival the internationalist perspective of a Jewish Soviet \textit{intelligent} formed in the 1920s. Grossman’s view of the war as a war of both Soviet and Jewish liberation had resulted in a ruthless imperative to tell the world about the Shoah and the Nazi atrocities. As a fictionist, Grossman first articulated this double perspective in the story “The Old Teacher” (“Staryi uchitel’”), which was printed in a leading Moscow magazine \textit{Banner} in the summer of 1943, was included in a slim wartime volume, and was reprinted in two postwar editions of Grossman’s prose (in 1958 and 1962).\textsuperscript{17}

Grossman was not the first Soviet author to publish about the Nazi atrocities against Jews in the occupied territories. In fact, as early as January 1942, the poet-soldier Ilya Selvinsky had depicted the aftermath of the mass execution in December 1941 of thousands of Jews at the so-called Bagerovo antitank ditch, located west of the Crimean city of Kerch.\textsuperscript{18} Selvinsky’s poem “I Saw It” (“Ia eto videl!”), based on his eyewitness account of the open ditch filled with the bodies of the victims, ran in \textit{Red Star} in February 1942 and was printed a number of times during 1942-43. Incidentally, Grossman mentions the Bagerovo massacre in his notebooks for 1942, as he travels with the tank brigade of Colonel Abram
Khasin, subsequently Major-General 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 [documented by Soviet photographers and documentary filmmakers in early January 1942] and recognized his wife and children. I was thinking, what does he feel when he leads his tanks into the fighting?” Yet Grossman probably holds the record as the first Jewish-Russian writer to present to the mass Soviet reader, in the Russian language, a fictionalized account of the Shoah by bullet. Grossman’s story offered a detailed description of the murder of the Jewish population of an occupied small town, presumably in eastern Ukraine, by a Sonderkommando assisted by regular Wehrmacht troops. Grossman composed “The Old Teacher” prior to the liberation of Ukraine, before he actually saw with his own eyes the aftermath of the atrocities and interviewed survivors and witnesses, before he knew the details of Babi Yar, before he joined Ehrenburg as a leader of The Black Book project, and before he got 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 mainly drawn from the local Ukrainian population.

Along with The Hell of Treblinka (Treblinskii ad) and the essay “Ukraine without Jews” (“Ukraina bez evreev”), “The Old Teacher” forms a triple crown of Grossman’s wartime writings about the Shoah. As a student of Jewish-Russian authors-witnesses to the Shoah, I find “The Old Teacher” especially striking because Grossman constructed it in anticipation of becoming a witness to the aftermath of the Shoah in the occupied Ukraine. The poetics of the story takes one back to Grossman’s prewar writings about the Civil War. Some of the story’s phrases and descriptions had not shed the influence of Soviet revolutionary romanticism. In fact, the image of the blacksmith Naum Kulish, who attacks a Nazi soldier with bare hands as he and fellow Jews are being marched to their death, leaps into the story from the pages of Nikolay Ostrovsky’s iconic novel How the Steel Was Tempered (1932), where a mighty Jewish blacksmith defends himself and his wife from pogromshchiks and then kills her and himself. At the heart of the story are the destinies of two Jewish professionals, the teacher Rozental and the doctor Vaintraub, as they face the impending death of the town’s Jewish community. The execution scene contains moments of heart-rending artistry and anticipates both The Hell of Treblinka the Shoah pages of Life and Fate. As the column of Jews approaches the edge of the ravine where their bodies will be piled up, the little daughter of a Jewish lieutenant
killed at the front turns toward 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.”

“The Old Teacher” laid bare the choices Grossman and other Jewish-Russian writers seeking to depict the Shoah would face in steering their works to print. Jewish writers rarely coin official rhetoric in a non-Jewish state, but they sometimes coach emerging (if unwritten) official policy in a rhetoric that sears the popular imagination. This was the case with the Shoah writings by Selvinsky, Grossman, and Ehrenburg, published in 1942-1944. This is a Gordian knot of many issues: silence versus palliative truth; the rhetoric of the Soviet people united versus a perspective of Jewish suffering and Jewish valor; not dividing the dead versus giving the Jewish victims a Jewish burial in language and memory. In Grossman’s case, the price for writing about the Shoah in the occupied territories was probably an obfuscation of the collaboration of the local Ukrainian population with the Nazi forces. Grossman did his best to hint at such a collaboration by giving the traitors and collaborators suggestive Ukrainian names: the agronomist Koryako (in The People Are Immortal a traitor is called Kotenko); the Mikhailyuk family. But the prevalent sentiment is that the collaborators are singular, whereas the Soviet people of all nationalities enjoy unity, and the local populations in the occupied territories display inherent empathy for the Jewish victims. The truth was much more complicated, but Grossman voiced this compromistic rhetoric through the words of none other than the old Jewish teacher Rozental himself:

“I’ve seen that the Ukrainians and Russians [note that rhetorically, Grossman makes no distinction among ethnic Ukrainians and ethnic Russians], having suffered under the weight of the German terror, are ready to help the Jews in any way they can ….I have seen much compassion. I have, of course, also seen indifference. But I have not often seen malicious joy at our destruction—only three or four times. The Germans got it wrong. They miscalculated. My optimism is triumphing. And I never had any illusions—I’ve always know that life is cruel.”

This position would continue to define the rhetoric on the Shoah in the occupied Soviet territories when Jewish-Soviet writers managed to get their work into print in the 1960s-1980s, from Boris Slutsky’s poems to Anatoly Rybakov’s novel Heavy Sand.
Grossman himself went much further, and “Ukraine without Jews” already showed that, the closer he got to the position of a witnessing Jewish-Russian writer and soldier, the more painful it would be for him to silence the whole truth. The powerful essay, “Ukraine without Jews,” was published in Yiddish in the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC) newspaper Einikait (Unity) in 1943, but was not published in Russian. Teetering on the low brink of the forbidden even during the war, this essay, as well as “The Old Teacher,” sought to open the public’s eyes onto the Soviet population’s collaboration with the Nazis in occupied territories. Still, in the published writings about the Shoah, Grossman’s price was not to be explicit about the scale of the collaboration and complicity of the local population in the occupied Soviet territories, and also about the role Soviet citizens, specifically ex-POWs, had played in the Shoah by bullets and in the industrialized murder of Jews in the death camps.

Comparing Vasily Grossman to Isaac Babel is something of a leitmotif in the Grossman scholarship. In the case of Grossman’s wartime writings about the Shoah in Ukraine, differences should probably not be perceived as similarities. Indeed, as Babel traveled with the troops during the Polish campaign of 1919-1920, he both witnessed and lamented the destruction of tradition Jewish life in Ukraine. “There are no bees left in Volyn,” Babel wrote in the short story “The Way to Brody” (“Put’ v Brody”). In the poetics of Babel’s Red Cavalry, such an allegorical mourning, with bees substituted for the Jews of Volyn, was central to his artistic method and vision. In “Ukraine without Jews,” composed almost twenty years after Red Cavalry, Grossman disavowed artistry in the name of bearing witness. “There are no Jews in Ukraine,” read a sentence in the opening section of “Ukraine without Jews.” Grossman, who did not possess what the Russians might call a G-d-given golden pen but who came to Ukraine in 1943 with a perfectly-pitched memory, an aching Jewish conscience, and immeasurable guilt over not having saved his mother, temporarily gave up metaphors, rejected tropes altogether. However, Grossman rediscovered a heretofore untapped inner source of artistry, yes artistry, when, in the summer of 1944, he came to the death camps in Poland, first Majdanek, then the Aktion Reinhardt camps (Trebnlinka, Belżec, Sobibor).

Red Star assigned the Majdanek report to Konstatin Simonov, who, in a three-part series titled “Death Camp” (“Lager’ unichtozheniia”) and printed in August 1944, did his best not to deny Jewish victimhood, while also paying lip service to the “do not divide the dead” Soviet doctrine.\(^{24}\)
Grossman was with the Soviet troops in August 1944 when they came upon the fields of powdered bones on the site of the Treblinka death camp. His lengthy report, titled *The Hell of Treblinka*, a work which defies conventional generic forms and stylistic categories, ran in the November 1944 issue of *Banner* to reach a wide Soviet audience.25 Grossman stood at the peak of his wartime artistic powers during the writing of *The Hell of Treblinka*. It was as though a Jewish muse of suffering and witnessed truth read into Grossman’s ear as he typed his report. (In “Muse,” Anna Akhmatova’s poem of 1924, the poet addresses the Muse: “I say to her: ‘Was it you who dictated/ the pages of Hell to Dant e?’ She answers: ‘Yes.’”) Twice in *The Hell of Treblinka*, Grossman emphatically draws a line between Dante’s *Inferno* and Treblinka. First comes this authorial comment by Grossman: “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.”26 Later, in reconstructing the last minutes of the murdered Jews, Grossman dismisses the easy parallel: “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.” Grossman’s guides are the survivors and eyewitnesses; in sight of the ashes and bones of the murdered Jews, he does not need a Virgil to lead him through the circles of Treblinka.

*The Hell of Treblinka* was, arguably, the first literary treatment of the legacy of the Nazi death camps, partially based on eyewitness accounts. Printed as a pamphlet in 1945, it was distributed at the 1945-1946 Nuremberg Trial27 and included in Grossman’s extensive volume, *Years of War (Gody voiny)*, published in 1945 and reprinted in 1946. As I prepared to write this essay, I read *The Hell of Treblinka*, not in the original Russian but in Robert Chandler’s English translation, as though I were not myself but an imaginary Anglo-American reader without either a Jewish-Russian background or research interests in the subject. I was reading *The Hell of Treblinka* at night, my wife reviewing her medical journals, our daughters asleep in their bedroom next door. This was, perhaps, the hardest passage to endure:

That, according to the accounts of eyewitnesses, marked the start of heartrending scenes. 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. The psychiatrists of death knew the simple laws that operate in slaughterhouses all over the world, laws which, in Treblinka, were exploited by brute beasts in order to deal with human beings. This was a critical moment: the moment when daughters were separated from fathers, mothers from sons, grandmothers from grandsons, husbands from wives.²⁸

Overcome by panic, I prayed that we be spared another Treblinka.

Reading *The Hell of Treblinka* alongside “The Old Teacher” facilitates the recognition of the most terrifying parallels between the anticipatory fiction and the witness report. The following passage in *The Hell of Treblinka* calls on the ending of Grossman’s 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!’” But details of Grossman’s reportage also anticipate and inform the Shoah pages of *Life and Fate*. In the novel, Grossman does not name the camp where Sofia Levinton and David are murdered, but many details connect it with the essay. (One minor exception, as John and Carol Garrard have pointed out, is that Sofia Levinton and David are said to die by Zyklon-B gas, whereas Treblinka killed its victims with carbon monoxide.)

*The Hell of Treblinka* showcased some of Grossman’s finest artistic pages while also augmenting his self-awareness as both a writer about 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.²⁹

There is no room here for extolling Stalin; yet Grossman continues to worship the Red Army.

Grossman’s commentators have detailed some of the errors he made in reporting about Treblinka. Grossman estimated that “2.5 to 3 million” Jews were murdered there, whereas the death toll was at about 800,000. Grossman had to do his own calculations based on what he believed to be the number of transports. His error amounts to a moving testament to how little support Grossman could count on in the enterprise of documenting
the Shoah in its immediate aftermath. In this connection, one should also be mindful of the fact that from late 1943 to 1945, Grossman worked with Ehrenburg on *The Black Book: 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*. In April 1944, Grossman was elected a member of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAC). Toward the end of the war, Ehrenburg had a falling-out with the JAC (several interpretations of his conduct have been advanced), resigning as head of *The Black Book* project, and Vasily Grossman took over after Ehrenburg’s resignation. *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 was not credited but apparently contributed to the Minsk Ghetto section.) Grossman and Ehrenburg were listed as coeditors of *The Black Book*. Set in type in 1946, *The Black Book* was derailed: a partial copy appeared in Bucharest in 1947; it was published in Israel in 1980; and a complete text was discovered in Lithuania and printed there in 1993. A new edition appeared in Moscow in 2014.

In 1945, Grossman was at the height of his Soviet fame. The postwar years put Grossman in confrontation with the regime. His luck began to change, first with the official steamrolling of *The Black Book*. His prewar play, *If You Believe the Pythagoreans* (*Esli verit’ pifagoreitsam*), not published until 1946, was attacked for its non-Marxist interpretation of history. The play was something of a literary disaster, but the reason for the attack was the outbreak of *zhdanovshchina*. The anti-cosmopolitan campaign was under way, and the darkest years for Soviet Jewry would follow suit. Still, in the late 1940s Grossman continued to publish books, and he was spared the fate of the leaders of the Anti-Fascist Committee. (In January 1948, he saw Solomon Mikhoels off to Minsk, where Mikhoels was murdered by the Soviet secret police). Grossman’s luck changed again in 1952. Back in 1943, Grossman had started a novel epic under the working title *Stalingrad*. Accepted for publication as *For a Just Cause* (*Za pravoe delo*), it first ran into difficulties in 1949. Parts 1–3 of the novel went through twelve versions of proofs until finally appearing in the flagship Moscow monthly magazine, *Novy Mir*, in 1952. On 13 February 1953, Mikhail Bubennov, author of the Stalinist potboiler *White Birch*, ravaged Grossman’s novel in *Pravda*, unleashing a campaign of antisemitic ostracism directed against Grossman. To put Grossman’s vilification in the context of Soviet Stalingrad literature, both Konstantin 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 pilloried for its literary qualities. In those days of heady Great Russian cultural chauvinism of Stalin’s postwar years, Grossman cut a particularly attractive target for official disparagement—as a Jew, writer about Jewish victimhood, and internationalist. Stalin’s death in March 1953 eased the situation; For a Just Cause appeared in an expurgated form in 1954, and the full text came out in 1956. In both book editions the subtitle was Book 1; what became Life and Fate would form book two of Grossman’s Stalingrad dilogy.

World War II and the Shoah, followed by the postwar collective Soviet satanization of Jews, had transformed Grossman. By 1952, he had completed a significant portion of Life and Fate, an antitotalitarian novel. By drawing parallels between Stalinism and Hitlerism—and by questioning the trajectory of Soviet history—Grossman went much farther than did Vladimir Dudintsev, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, and other Soviet authors of the principal anti-Stalinist works that were published in the Soviet Union during the Thaw. One of the main paradoxes of Life and Fate—and there are many—concerns Grossman’s belief that it could be published in the Soviet Union, which in 1960 led to the last turn of his Soviet luck.

As we reflect on Grossman’s life and career in 1950s, we might ask ourselves how Grossman’s growing clarity of historical vision continued to coexist with the remains of his compromistic Soviet rhetoric. Grossman’s essay “The Sistine Madonna” (“Sikstinskaia Madonna”), penned in 1955, but not published in the Soviet Union until 1989, offers many precious insights. While thematically “The Sistine Madonna” is sometimes grouped with the stories and essays about the War and Shoah, stylistically and rhetorically it belongs with his postwar stories and essays. Grossman explains the occasion for writing about Raphael’s painting:

The victorious Soviet forces, after annihilating the army of Fascist Germany, removed paintings from the collection of the Dresden Art Gallery and took them to Moscow. These paintings were then locked away for ten years. In the spring of 1955 the Soviet government decided to return these paintings to Dresden[‘s Gemäldegalerie]. First, though, they were exhibited in Moscow for three months.32

The Russian verb vyvezli, which may be rendered as both “removed” and “took,” is a half-hearted euphemism, suggesting that Grossman was hoping to place the essay in a Soviet publication; the Grossman of The Hell of Treblinka might have said “looted” and “stolen.”
Were “The Sistine Madonna” published during the Thaw, it would have seared the minds of the Soviet readers with its ruthless assessment: Grossman calls Raphael’s Madonna a “contemporary” of the crimes of both Nazism and Stalinism. His decision to put the Madonna and child through three cycles of suffering is absolutely incomparable for anything in Soviet writing. Grossman imagines the Madonna and child as Jews annihilated at Treblinka; as Russians killed in the Gulag; as Ukrainians murdered in the Holodomor (Great Famine). At the same time, Grossman cannot shake off the Marxist-Leninist dialectic of history, and even the enumeration of classes and strata of population in “The Sistine Madonna” is reminiscent of *The Communist Manifesto*. Grossman: “Old beggar women have looked at this painting—as have European emperors and student, American millionaires, popes, Russian princes.” Marx: “All the powers of old Europe have entered into a holy alliance to hunt down and exorcise this specter [i.e. of communism]: Pope and Tsar, Metternich and Guizot, French Radicals and the German police-spies.”

Historical parallelism is one of Grossman’s strongest tools in “The Sistine Madonna”:

There are bitter and painful moments when it is children who amaze adults with their good sense, their composure, and their acceptance of fate. Peasant children dying in years of famine have shown these qualities—as did the children of Jewish craftsmen and shopkeepers during the Kishinev pogrom, as have the children of coal miners when a wailing siren proclaims to a panic-stricken settlement that there has been an explosion in the mine.\(^{33}\)

Coming to life in these pages is not only a history of czarist-era anti-Jewish violence and pogroms, but also that of Soviet mass violence committed against various groups of civilians. But there are also self-references pointing to “The Old Teacher” and especially to *The Hell of Treblinka*, from which Grossman goes on to quote a haunting and magisterial passage describing the approach to the site of Treblinka, *la diritta via* to Jewish death amid *una selva oscura* “east of Warsaw, along the Western Bug.”\(^{34}\) Is this the Grossman of the 1950s reminding himself and his readers of the Grossman of the 1940s? These are two examples of Grossman’s pangs of Soviet self-strangulation: “I believe that this Madonna is a purely atheistic expression of life and humanity, without divine participation”; “The Madonna’s beauty is closely tied to earthly life. It is a democratic, human, and humane beauty.”\(^{35}\) I can appreciate that Grossman might have even been or become a Soviet anti-Soviet atheist (although I suspect he was not, too Jewish was his inner core). I can further suppose that he felt, as did many post-Shoah thinkers and artists,
that there was no place for metaphysical divinity after Treblinka. Perhaps
it is my inner ex-Soviet kid having grown up in the Brezhnevite 1970s, but
I have a hard time reading some passages of Grossman’s “The Sistine
Madonna,” especially in translation, which removes from the original
publication the habitual garb of Soviet-speak.

The final Soviet change of Grossman’s fortune comes in 1960, when
he submitted Life and Fate to Banner. The journal’s editor, Vadim
Kozhevnikov, dutifully forwarded it to the KGB. In February 1961, the
KGB searched Grossman’s apartment and “arrested” manuscripts of Life
and Fate. Grossman appealed to Khrushchev but was received by Mikhail
Suslov, the party ideology secretary, who called Life and Fate more “anti-
Soviet” than Pasternak’s Doctor Zhivago. (Incidentally, Pasternak’s novel
disappointed Grossman greatly, in no small measure because of what
Pasternak, writing after the Shoah, had to say about Jewish history,
spirituality, and identity.) Grossman was devastated by the Soviet fate of
his novel. His troubles over Life and Fate coincided with the publication
of Solzhenitsyn’s One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich, sanctioned by
Khrushchev and printed in Novy mir in 1962. As previously noted by
Grossman’s students, Solzhenitsyn restricted his critique of Stalinism to
the Gulag. Furthermore, as a Russian nationalist, Solzhenitsyn made for a
much more attractive official choice of a de-Stalinizer than the Jew
Grossman. Two copies of Life and Fate survived, and the novel appeared
in the West in Russian in 1980 and subsequently in Robert Chandler’s
English translation. Its publication in reform-era Moscow in 1989 created
a sensation.

It is hard to think of another writer in the Soviet Union, including
Solzhenitsyn, capable of Grossman’s premortem clarity of vision and
abandonment of youthful illusions. From 1955-56 until his death,
Grossman worked on Everything Flows; alternative title Forever Flowing
(Vse techet), an essayistic novel written for the desk drawer and
uncompromising in its assessment of Stalinism and Soviet history. A key
text predating fictional and discursive works by the 1960s–1970s Soviet
and East European political dissidents, Forever Flowing appeared in
Germany in 1970. Of Forever Flowing and Life and Fate, Grossman’s
preeminent American scholar John Garrard wrote in 1994: “Grossman’s
two major works constitute a thorough-going indictment of the Soviet
Union and at the same a challenge to Russian readers to face their own
responsibility for what happened . . . the indictment and challenge were
issued by a man enmeshed within the very system he autopsied, a man
who in his youth believed in the promise of revolutionary change.”36
The “example” of Vasily Grossman, to paraphrase Shimon Markish’s expression, is one of a gradual shedding of Soviet ideals (albeit with a dose of Jewish partisanship) and of embracing a view of the Soviet system which is nearly as unforgiving of its crimes as is Grossman’s condemnation of Nazi racism and totalitarianism. There is indeed hardly another trajectory as fascinating, another Soviet writer’s transformation as radical and as profound. Against the backdrop of Life and Fate (which Grossman hoped to publish at home) and of Forever Flowing (which he did not), Grossman’s later short stories, completed in 1960-1962, represent an intriguing facet of his literary career. While the artistic quality of the latter stories varies, they are especially fascinating as the texts to have emerged from under Grossman’s scalpel after he had completed, in Life and Fate, a comparative indictment of Hitlerism and Stalinism, and was expanding and revising, in Forever Flowing, an anamnesis of Soviet history. Two of them, “The Elk” (“Los’”) and “The Road” (“Doroga”), appeared in Grossman’s lifetime in Moscow’s leading “thick” journals. “The Dog” (“Sobaka”) and “In Kislovodsk” (“V Kislovodsk”) were published in the USSR not long after Grossman’s death, the latter in a severely censored form. The other late stories had to wait until perestroika before they reached the mass Soviet audience.

Tolstoy’s shadow hangs over Grossman’s latter stories, but are they Grossman’s best work? “The Road,” a tale of Giu, a mule in the Italian army who ends up traversing Europe to find himself in Russia, is compelling:

Through their warm breath and their weary eyes, Giu the mule and the mare from Vologda spoke clearly to each other of their life and fate, and there was something charming and wonderful about these trustful, affectionate beings standing beside each other on the wartime plain, under the gray winter sky. ‘The donkey, I mean the mule, seems to have turned quite Russian,’ one of the drivers said with a laugh. ‘No, look—they are both of them weeping,’ said another driver. And it was true; they were weeping.

Here the embedded reference to Life and Fate clues us to a reading of “The Road” as an allegory of Grossman’s own Jewish-Russian identity. There he is, writing the story in the 1960s and remembering himself during the war, an overweight bespectacled lieutenant-colonel walking with a cane, a brainchild of Russian and Soviet literature and an heir to indelible Judaic memory, furrowing the Russian steppe with his tired hooves.

“Living Space” (“Zhilitsa”), a short sketch about an old woman’s return from the Gulag and death in her newly-allotted room in a communal
Grossman's Resistance

apartment, was perfectly publishable by the standards of the Thaw, thus inviting a comparison with other published fictions of the time that sought to exonerate old Bolsheviks purged by Stalin. Specifically, “Living Space” brings to mind a story by Grossman’s junior contemporary Emmanuil Kazakevich, a leading figure of the Thaw’s sanctioned (and palliative) liberalization. In “Enemies” (“Vragi,” 1962), a story about Lenin, Yuli Martov, and a Jewish female revolutionary from the ranks of the former Mensheviks, Kazakevich collectively sought a rehabilitation of the victims of Stalinism. 38 Maurice Friedberg characterized “The Enemies” as a “thinly disguised appeal for tolerance,”39 and Grossman’s “Living Space” falls under the same special rubric.

The story ““In Kislovodsk” stands out among Grossman’s later short fiction. Set in 1942 in Kislovodsk, a resort in the foothills of North Caucasus (and, coincidentally, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn’s home town), this story is in many ways a commentary on—and also a creative revision of—“The Old Teacher.” “The Old Teacher” might have been titled “The Old Doctor.” In Grossman’s story of 1943, 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 small town. Compositionally speaking, Dr. Vaintraub is the principal interlocutor of the teacher Rozental who refuses the poison offered by the Jewish doctor and dies of a Nazi bullet alongside his fellow members of the town’s Jewish community. 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 called upon to administer medical assistance to the town’s commandant Werner, an ethnic German from Latvia who speaks Russian. Werner is having an attack of angina, and Vaintraub “save[s] him.” Chandler is correct to point out that one of Grossman’s sources for “In Kislovodsk” was the material about the murder of the Jews in Kislovodsk, prepared by Viktor Shklovsky for The Black Book. Coupled with Shklovsky’s own literary legacy, the evidence he prepared must have urged Grossman to write “In Kislovodsk” with the kind of artistry that would meet the high standards of Shklovsky’s “Hamburg reckoning.”

Both “The Old Teacher” and “In Kislovodsk” explore physicians’ 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 the protagonist of “In Kislovodsk,” the Russian physician Nikolay Viktorovich, and his wife Yelena Petrovna. 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 placed in charge of a hospital for wounded Red Army soldiers. The knowledge that he was being asked to be complicit with the murder of his patients, his “children,” pushes the childless Russian physician and his wife to suicide. Consider the conclusion of the story:

They [the doctor and his wife] behaved very vulgarly [poshlo]. They put on the clothes she had got ready for their evening at the theater and she doused herself with French perfume. Then they had supper. 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 Vertinsky, and wept because they worshipped Vertinsky. Then they said goodbye to their dear children—and this was more vulgar still. They kissed their porcelain cups goodbye; they kissed their paintings goodbye. They stroked their carpets and their mahogany furniture. He opened her wardrobe and kissed her underwear and her slippers.

Then, in a harsh voice, she said, ‘And now poison me [travi menia], like a mad dog—and yourself too [i sam travis’]!”

Grossman’s choice of the verb travit’ is highly deliberate. In Russian travit’ is commonly used in reference to exterminating bedbugs, cockroaches, and rats. The subterranean meaning of suicide as self-extermination at the time when the Nazis were exterminating an entire nation renders Grossman’s verb especially significant. Furthermore, as the cognates of the loaded Russian word poshlost’ punctuate the suicide scene, one wonders if Grossman is not using vulgarity as an antidote to beauty, perhaps resisting an emerging tendency to aestheticize the memory of the war and the Shoah.

The story “Tiergarten,” based on Grossman’s experiences in the conquered Berlin and written in 1953-1955, is among his most underappreciated works about the war and Shoah. Set during the battle of Berlin, the story zooms in on Rahm, keeper of the apes in the Berlin Zoo, a place celebrated in Russian literature, from Viktor Shklovsky to Vladimir Nabokov. Rahm survives the bombardment and lives to see the Allied victory, whereas his beloved gorilla, Frizzi (note the name), is killed. In a characteristic narrative move, Grossman inscribes himself in the finale of the story as a witness, a Soviet “officer of the auxiliary services, a stooped, bespectacled man, with an exhausted, anxious face,” who inspects the damage to the Zoo. The story voices an audible sympathy with homosexual men as victims of Nazism, a sympathy so rarely seen in Soviet letters. The reader learns that three of Rahm’s sons were killed at war, while the fourth died in Dachau; Grossman subtly suggests that he was gay. Furthermore, the narrative voice of this story communicates an
androgynous sensibility, as though a Jewish Platon Karataev were whispering in Grossman’s ear. Thinking of how the narrative voice of “Tiergarten” might sound in English translation conjures up the diction of the Austrian Prince Von Berg’s from Arthur Miller’s play Incident at Vichy (1964). “I have no great facility with women,” the Prince says to the rounded-up Jews waiting in the antechamber of death. Regarding “Tiergarten,” I cannot agree with Chandler’s judgment that the story is “labored,” even though I share his critical view of “Abel” (“Sixth of August”) (‘Avel’ [“Shestoe avgusta”]), another Grossman story from the 1950s.

Chandler identifies overarching themes of Grossman’s late stories—and of his entire career. One of them is the theme of failure, of being a loser (neudachnik), as Grossman called himself in the nonfictional work Goodness Be to You! (Dobro vam!), set in Soviet Armenia. In Goodness Be to You!, but also in such later stories as “Phosphorus” (“Fosfor,” 1958-1962), and previously in “The Old Teacher,” one’s failure simultaneously encompasses not having achieved recognition and not having lived out one’s ambitions. Even more prominent is the mother theme, omnipresent as it is in Grossman’s fiction and nonfiction. In the story “Abel” (“The Sixth of August”), a young American pilot writes a letter to his mother on the eve of carrying out a nuclear attack on Japan. Did Grossman know that the bomb dropped on Hiroshima on 6 August 1945 was called “Little Boy”? In the story “The Elk,” the paralyzed Dmitri Petrovich, alone in the room and helpless without his wife, gleans tears in the “maternal” eyes of the elk’s head mounted on the wall: “Still gazing down from above, still turned toward him, were the kind and compassionate eyes.” But “The Elk” also captures the pain of losing one’s mother, a pain Grossman lived with for the last two decades of his life: “Even after the shot, even after his mother had fallen to the ground, the calf had gone on trying to persuade her not to abandon him—and she had not abandoned him.”

In Life and Fate, as the childless Sofia Levinton presses young David to her body in a gas chamber, she thinks to herself that she “became a mother.” Commenting on the scene, Shimon Markish wrote that in “recognizing himself,” Grossman’s regards Jews, his people, in a way that is more akin to the way a mother regards a child than a father does. Grossman elevates the act of a son’s addressing a mother—not a man addressing a female lover or beloved woman—to the level of sacred music. As John and Carol Garrard were the first to show, the two letters Grossman wrote to his mother on the 9th and 20th anniversary of her murder in Berdichev bear out immense filial guilt. They share an intimate connection to the fictional experience of Viktor Shtrum in Life and Fate,
who loses his mother in the Shoah. On 15 September 1961, during a horrible time in his life, Grossman wrote these words to his mother:

All my life I have believed that everything that is good, kind, and honorable in me—everything that is love—comes from you. Everything bad in me—and there’s more than enough of this—is not you. But you love me, Mama; you love me even with all that is bad in me….I cry over these letters, because you are present in them. Your kindness is there in them, and your purity, and your bitter, bitter life, and your nobility, your sense of justice, your love for me, your concern for others, and your wonderful mind. There is nothing I fear, because your love is with me and because my love is eternally with you.\textsuperscript{45}

The hiatus in Soviet publications of Grossman ended in 1988. A number of volumes have since appeared in the former USSR, including one of shorter prose, \textit{A Few Sorrowful Days}, 1989 (\textit{Neskol’ko pechal’nykh dnei}), and a four-volume \textit{Collected Works} (1994), overseen by Grossman’s longtime friend, the late poet and translator Semyon Lipkin. In the words of Markish, who edited \textit{On Jewish Themes} (1985), an anthology of Grossman’s writings published in Russian in Israel and wrote the first monograph about Grossman, “no one had written about [the Shoah and Stalinist antisemitism] with as much poignancy as emotion.”\textsuperscript{46} Boris Lanin, Grossman’s post-Soviet student, remarked that “Grossman’s main philosophical contribution to Soviet literature is the rehabilitation of the concept of freedom.”\textsuperscript{47}

Vasily Grossman has emerged as one of the best-known and frequently taught Russian writers outside Russia. The power of Grossman’s greatest works came from their intellectual honesty of their authorial voice and from their author’s commitment to the overwhelming questions. Grossman’s reception by Western readers is a story of love and admiration tinged with occasional oddities. Consider the comment Martin Amis made in the acknowledgments to \textit{House of Meetings} (2006): “And by other ghosts—by Fyodor Dostoevsky, by Joseph Conrad, by Eugenia Ginzburg, and by the Tolstoy of the USSR, Vasily Grossman.”\textsuperscript{48} To call Grossman “the Tolstoy of the USSR” is wildly inaccurate. There was, of course, a Tolstoy of the USSR, a Tolstoy who became a Soviet writer, Count Aleksey N. Tolstoy, whose novelistic gifts were ampler than Grossman’s, but who was also a reprehensible person and a venal Stalinist (Osip Mandelstam slaps him on the face in the opening of Nadezhda Mandelstam’s \textit{Hope against Hope}). Even Robert Chandler, who is hard-pressed to say anything irreverent about Grossman, offers this disclaimer in connection with the Grossman-Lev Tolstoy comparison: “Only in one
respect, perhaps, is Grossman overshadowed by [Lev] Tolstoy: he lacks Tolstoy’s ability to evoke the richness, the fullness of life...Grossman, however, is writing about one of the darkest periods of European history... Indeed, Grossman frequently represents desire, not through narrative tension or rupture, but voyeuristically (as in both “In the Town of Berdichev” and “The Old Teacher”). Moreover, maternal (and filial) love often ousts other types of love in Grossman’s narratives. A dearth of desire, love, and pleasure is not only Grossman’s way of capturing the gruesomeness of history, but also a fundamental structural problem of much of his fiction, especially the longer novels. Which is why, as a reader, I find much artistic significance in Grossman’s control of love and desire in Forever Flowing or in his best stories, notably “In Kislovodsk.” But more importantly, this invites a consideration of Grossman as a writer-witness. Grossman becomes Grossman after he has witnessed and reported, first in Stalingrad, then in liberated Ukraine and the death camps in Poland. For Grossman “to witness” means to have seen the aftermath, the bones and ashes, to have interviewed the survivors and eyewitnesses, to have gathered the sources so as to pour this information into literary form, however incommensurate the Russian verbal means may be with the gravity of his Jewish after-knowledge.

In advance of writing this essay, I reread virtually everything by Vasily Grossman. I was especially interested in measuring three things: the texture of Jewishness; the experience of reading in Russian versus in translation; and the artistic endurance of Grossman’s prose in a world now further and further removed from Stalinism, World War II, and the Shoah. In my judgment, Grossman’s greatest works and pages are those where the intensity of his moral indictment is buttressed by a gut-wrenching power of literary witnessing. While Grossman’s wartime reportages have not lost their fortitude and wholesomeness, The Hell of Treblinka remains both his finest and his greatest work. Many pages of Life and Fate are immortal, and both Anna Shtrum’s letter to her son and the death of Sofia Levinton and David in a gas chamber exemplify the most moving Holocaust writing. (As John and Carol Garrard demonstrated, Anna Shtrum is a portrait of Grossman’s own mother.) Finally, Forever Flowing, especially the episodes devoted to Holodomor, the Great Famine during the collectivization of Ukraine, show Grossman capable of the kind of all-encompassing empathy with another’s suffering than none of Grossman’s non-Jewish Soviet contemporaries displayed toward the Jewish losses. At the same time and in all fairness, Grossman’s talent was not organically novelistic. The shortcomings of Grossman’s Tolstoyan aspirations are
most explicitly felt in the Stalingrad dilogy. Reading *For a Just Cause* today is a challenge, not just because of its rhetorical tensions, but because of its structural infelicities. And even *Life and Fate* is best read in excerpts, but not in the way Soviet schoolchildren used to breathe through *War and Peace*, boys skimming the peace parts, girls disregarding the battlefield sections. And yet, Grossman’s authorial digressions on antisemitism and totalitarianism rival many pages of Hannah Arendt.

The formula of John and Carol Garrard, “art from agony,” is fundamentally true of Grossman. But Grossman’s life was also agony from art—or agony of art. This agony of a Soviet Jew come of age in the 1920s and surviving Stalinism erupts with the greatest, quixotic force in *Life and Fate*. In *Forever Flowing*, which Markish called a “deepened commentary” (uglublennyi kommentarii) to *Life and Fate*, the agony transforms itself into the quiet fury of a tired seer. It is a testament to Grossman’s incredible strength of character that he managed to infuse so much kramola, as the Russians would call this purely anti-Soviet sound and fury, into his last novel. Ounce per ounce, seizure of terror per seizure of terror, *Forever Flowing* is more powerful than *The Gulag Archipelago*. Perhaps the agony of Grossman’s art and vision can be best understood in *The Hell of Treblinka*, but also in the short story “In Kislovodsk.” His stories and essays of the 1960s are punctuated with near-death moments of political and existential despair, be it the quick passing of a Gulag survivor in “Living Space” (the original Russian title, “Zhilitsa,” ruefully suggests both a “she-resident” and “she-survivor”) or the writer’s subtle, anticipatory fear of a non-Jewish burial, in the essay “Eternal Rest” (“Na vechnom pokoe”).

It is fair to say that today Grossman is more popular in translation than he is in Russian—or in Russia. This is also a time of Vasily Grossman’s posthumous international fame. John and Carol Garrard received the Giovanni Comisso Prize for the Italian translation of *The Bones of Berdichev*, their splendid biography. *A Writer at War*, Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova’s reconstruction of Grossman’s wartime years based on his detailed notebooks, has gained a broad readership. And Robert Chandler’s translations of Grossman’s fiction and nonfiction have firmly ensconced Grossman in the curricula of university courses in Soviet studies and Holocaust studies. Much of Grossman’s literary legacy has been made available in English translation. Finally, under the loving guise of the late Shimon Markish, Vasily Grossman has found devotees among European, North American and Israeli scholars.

In closing, I would like to turn for a moment to *Goodness to You!* (1962-1963), Grossman’s tortured travelogue turned meditation on his fate.
as a Jewish, Russian, and Soviet writer, framed by the histories of the Armenian genocide and the Shoah. In the final pages of *Goodness to You!*, Grossman bitterly reflected: “But if one considers that a person is dispensed a particular amount of luck and happiness, then I must have spent it all in a pitiful fashion, since as of today, my happiness, my fortune have resulted not in world fame, nor in glamour and wealth.”\(^{51}\) Brutalities of 20th-century history, coupled with Iosif Grossman’s personal Jewish-Russian luck, put him on a collision course with the Soviet system, paving the way for the literary immortality of Vasily Grossman.

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Notes

4 Quoted in Markish, “Primer Vasiliia Grossmana,” 488.
8 Beevor and Vinogradova, 56.
9 Beevor and Vinogreadova, 48.
This was not Grossman’s first literary exploration of his home town. See his early documentary essay (ocherk) “Berdichev ne v shutku, a vser’ez,” *Ogonek* 51-52 (1929): 12-13.

Beevor and Vinogradova, 96.

Grossman, “Napравлене главного удара.”


Beevor and Vinogradova, 208-209.


On Ilya Selvinsky’s career as a witness to the Shoah, and for details of the Shoah in Crimea and on the Kerch peninsula, see Maxim D. Shrayer, _I SAW IT: Ilya Selvinsky and the Legacy of Bearing Witness to the Shoah_ (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2013).

Beevor and Vinogradova, 105; see also 96.

I discussed this point with Professor Katerina Clark during my lecture at Yale University on 5 February 2013.


Here and hereafter I am quoting from Robert Chandler’s English translation of _The Hell of Treblinka_ as published in _The Road_, 116-162.

Grossman, _Treblinski ad_ (Moscow: Voenizdat, 1945).

Grossman, _The Road_, 131.

Grossman, _The Road_, 150.


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Maxim D. Shrayer


