

Grossman, Vasily Semyonovich

b. November 29, 1905, Berdichev, Russia (Ukraine)
d. September 14, 1967, Moscow, Russia

Iosif Solomonovich Grossman, known by his pen name Vasily Semenovich Grossman, was born in a middle-class Russian-Jewish family (his father was a chemical engineer, his mother taught high school French) in the town of Berdichev, which was known for its old and vibrant traditional Jewish community, then one of the largest in Europe. Grossman's family were sympathetic to the revolution and pursued a secular, culturally Russian lifestyle, not uncommon among educated Russian Jews at the time. Grossman grew up speaking Russian (he did not speak Yiddish). As a young writer, he once admitted in a personal letter to wishing he were born Russian and lived somewhere other than "this horrid town." Grossman's parents separated early. In 1910-12, his mother took him to Switzerland where he attended an elementary school. After they returned to Russia, he was enrolled in a Realschule in Kiev (1914) but his studies there were interrupted by the civil war, when he and his mother moved to Berdichev. He resumed his studies in 1921 at a preparatory college in Kiev. In 1923 he enrolled at the Physical-Mathematical Faculty of the Moscow State University. He graduated in 1929 and soon after began working in the chemical labs that served the coal mines of the Donbass region. In 1933, he moved to Moscow where he worked as a chemist at a pencil factory.



His career as a writer began with the *Literary Gazette* publication in of his 1934 novella, "In the Town of Berdichev" (it became the basis for the 1967 film *Komissar*). The story was noticed by Maxim Gorky who warmly welcomed Grossman's debut and included his other 1934 novella, "Gliukauf," in his *Almanach Year XVI*. This established Grossman as a promising young author. In 1937-1940, he debuted as a novelist with *Stepan Kolchugin*, a story of a young working-class youth and his life in the revolution of 1917. Grossman's plan was to continue this life story beyond 1917, but the novel remained unfinished, interrupted by WWII.

Drafted at the outset of the war, Grossman serves as a special correspondent of the army newspaper *Red Star*. His long novellas, *Nation Is Immortal* (*Narod bessmertn*) and *The Direction of the Main Thrust* (*Napravlenie glavnogo udara*), both published in 1942, became the war-time classics, along with his later pieces, a documentary novel *Stalingrad* (1943) and *The Hell of Treblinka* (1944), a description of the Nazi extermination camp in Poland and one of the first works about the Holocaust. Grossman's mother, trapped in Berdichev at the outset of the war, was one of its victims. As a project of the Soviet Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee, Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg put together *The Black Book*, a documentary indictment of the Nazi war-time atrocities against the Jews in the USSR. Completed in 1946, *The Black Book*, was to be published simultaneously in the U.S.S.R. and U.S.A., but the commencement of the Cold War and Stalin's anti-Semitic campaign led to the suppression of the project. It finally appeared in Israel in 1980 and in Russia, in 1993.

In 1952, the journal *Novy mir* begins serialization of Grossman's 1952 novel, *For the Right Cause*. Dealing with WWII, it presented a refreshingly honest picture of life in the trenches and the implicit hope, held by many during the war, that the victory in WWII would lead to a liberalization of the regime in the Soviet Union. Because of the attack against it in *Pravda* (early in 1953), the complete text of the novel was not published until 1956. Grossman was far less sanguine about the Soviet regime in its far larger sequel, *Life and Fate*. Completed in 1960, it was not only rejected by the State Publishing House, but was pronounced extremely dangerous. On February 14, 1962, the KGB requisitioned its entire manuscript, along with carbon copies and typewriter ribbons. In response to his complaints, the member of the Politburo in charge of propaganda, Mikhail Suslov, assured Grossman that his book would not be published for another 200 years. Grossman became a Soviet non-person. Fortunately, one typescript copy of the novel survived and was published in Switzerland in 1980. In Russia *Life and Fate* came out at the height of perestroika in 1988 but in a truncated version. Only in 1990 was it published in Russia in its entirety.

In his magnum opus aspiring to the sweep and philosophical depth of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, Grossman traces the life and thought of several characters during their war-time exploits—among them, a Red Army officer, a commissar, a Party functionary, an old Bolshevik, and a nuclear physicist (in part, modeled on Andrey Sakharov as well as the author himself). The epic is infused with the idea that the heroism displayed by individuals during the war and the *people's* eventual victory had a lot to do, paradoxically and ironically, with their new sense of freedom—a concession to society made by the Stalinist party-state when facing the prospect of complete annihilation at the hands of the Nazi aggressor. The uniquely harsh treatment of the novel by the authorities was probably due to the suggestion, strongly implied by the novel's many stories, of an essential similarity between the two contesting totalitarian regimes, Hitler's and Stalin's. This thesis undermined the Soviet regime's most powerful claim to legitimacy—its victory in WWII.

An even more radical view of Soviet history is contained in Grossman's short "Gulag novel," *Forever Flowing* (*Vse techet*). Here, the focus is not the war but the rehabilitation of million of political prisoners that commenced with Stalin's death in 1953. Ostensibly a story of a Russian *intelligent*, freed in the Khrushchev *Thaw* after a thirty-year stint in the Gulag, the work is a novelistic meditation on the sources and causes of authoritarianism and totalitarianism in Russia before and after 1917. It is also a snapshot of the Soviet post-Stalin world in which returning prisoners could run into their former family, friends, and colleagues—among them those instrumental in their incarceration who now enjoyed the privileges accorded the loyal servants of the Soviet state. In its stories, some to be read as parables, one can hear clearly the echoes of the *intelligentsia* conversations of the late 1950s and early 1960s, their attempts to assimilate and understand the magnitude of the Stalinist terror after it was denounced by Nikita Khrushchev in his "Secret Speech" at the 20th Party Congress in 1956 and its follow-up at the 22nd Party Congress in 1962. Written over a period of ten years (1953-1963), *Forever Flowing* was published in Russian in West Germany in 1970. In 1989, at the height of *perestroika*, it finally came out in Russia, eliciting a storm of controversy and accusations of Russophobia because of suggestion, voiced by its protagonist, that a tendency to authoritarianism was a deeply rooted Russian cultural trait, the result of centuries of arbitrary rule and repression.

Having fallen into disfavor after his attempts to publish *Life and Fate*, Grossman was for years ostracized by his colleagues in the Writers Union. Shortly before his death, however, he began to recover his former status and with it, access to state's printing press. Unfortunately, he did not live long enough to see the new collection of his stories *Best Wishes! (Dobro Vam!)*. It was published in Moscow in 1967, two months after the author's death.

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