

**Vasily Grossman: Ruthless Truth in the Totalitarian
Century**

An Interdisciplinary Symposium

Saturday 10 September 2011, 9.00 am – 6.30 pm

St Peter's College, University of Oxford



“A wolfish time had come, the time of Fascism. It was a time when people led wolfish lives and wolves lived like people.”

This symposium will explore the life and work of the Soviet writer, dissident and war correspondent, Vasily Grossman (1905–1964). Grossman has lately emerged from relative obscurity thanks to new translations of his key works, including the epic novel *Life and Fate*, the unfinished *Everything Flows*, the short story collection *The Road*, his wartime notebooks, and his collaborative documentary history of the Holocaust in the Soviet Union. The aim of the symposium is to showcase advanced specialist research on Grossman, and to forge links between those working in the diverse disciplines of History, Politics, Literature, Slavic Studies and Holocaust Studies.

The symposium is being held to coincide with the broadcast on BBC Radio 4 of a major new dramatisation of Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, in the week beginning 18 September 2011. The BBC is organising a day of public talks and recordings at St Peter’s College on 9 September, to introduce a wide audience to the novel and its dramatisation. This symposium offers a more specialist academic perspective on Grossman’s life and oeuvre.

Grossman’s work shows him to be a witness of unparalleled acuity and sensitivity to some of the central horrors of the totalitarian century, especially the Stalinist terror of the 1930s, the Second World War on the eastern front, and the Holocaust. He is increasingly recognised as an important source by scholars working on these subjects, and on the wider themes of literary responses to trauma; witnessing and testimony; the collective memory of the Second World War and political dictatorship; and collaboration and resistance under totalitarianism.

“No, whatever life holds in store – hard-won glory, poverty and despair, or death in a labour camp – they will live as human beings and die as human beings, the same as those who have already perished; and in this alone lies man’s eternal and bitter victory over all the grandiose and inhuman forces that ever have been or will be ...”

8.30 – 9.00 am	Registration
9.00 – 10.30 am	Welcome and Introduction <i>Patrick Finney</i> <i>Philip Bullock</i>
	Panel One: The Author and His Audiences
	<i>Robert Chandler</i> On Translating Vasily Grossman
	<i>Yury Bit-Yunan</i> Vasily Grossman's <i>Stepan Kol'chugin</i> in the Historical and Literary Contexts of the Stalin Era
10.30 – 11.00 am	Coffee
11.00 – 12.30 pm	Panel Two: History, Humanity, Judgement
	<i>Polly Zavadviker</i> Truth is Never without Joy: Vasily Grossman's Historical Worldview and the Second World War
	<i>Laura Guillaume</i> It is a Terrible Thing to Condemn Even a Terrible Man: Vasily Grossman on Judging Perpetrators
12.30 – 1.30 pm	Lunch
1.30 – 3.00 pm	Panel Three: Representing Trauma
	<i>Sarah J. Young</i> Testimony on the Margins: Silence, Innocence and the Other in Vasily Grossman's Late Fiction
	<i>Jekaterina Shulga</i> The Freedom Within: Time, Temporality and Trauma in <i>For a Just Cause</i> and <i>Life and Fate</i>
3.00 – 3.30 pm	Coffee
3.30 – 5.00 pm	Panel Four: Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust
	<i>Wendy Lower</i> Vasily Grossman's Berdychiv and Soviet Knowledge of the Holocaust in Ukraine
	<i>Joshua Rubenstein</i> Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg: the Second World War, the Holocaust and Responses to German and Soviet Anti-Semitism
5.00 – 6.30 pm	Panel Five: Ethics, Politics, Philosophy
	<i>Alex Danchev</i> Vasily Grossman's Ethics
	<i>Giovanni Maddalena</i> Vasily Grossman and Hannah Arendt: Three Paradoxes of Existential Liberalism

Panel One: The Author and His Audiences

Robert Chandler

On Translating Vasily Grossman

This paper presents some broad reflections on Vasily Grossman as an author and his reception by various audiences, drawing on extensive experience of translating his work into English. It explores the extent to which the epic, Tolstoyan, scope of Grossman's writing initially obscured, for many readers, its Chekhovian subtlety. In order to exemplify how both Grossman's narrative and his philosophising are often more complex, and more unexpected, than they initially appear, the paper discusses a number of key passages that I initially mistranslated.

Yury Bit-Yunan

Vasily Grossman's *Stepan Kol'chugin* in the Historical and Literary Contexts of the Stalin Era

This paper analyses the critical reception of Vasily Grossman's novel *Stepan Kol'chugin*, published between 1937 and 1940. It locates the book in the contexts of publishing and literary culture in the 1930s Soviet Union and sheds new light on the story of Grossman's nomination for the Stalin Prize in 1941. It questions the reliability of some literary memoirs on Grossman, thus enabling a clearer and more precise assessment of his literary biography.

Panel Two: History, Humanity, Judgement

Polly Zavadviker

Truth is Never without Joy: Vasily Grossman's Historical Worldview and the Second World War

This paper discusses the influences that shaped Vasily Grossman's ideas about history, literature and national identity during the 1930s and 1940s. These wide-ranging influences, which included German Enlightenment-era intellectuals Herder, Lessing, Hegel and Ranke, as well as classical Greek and Buddhist thought, are then examined in the context of Grossman's depictions of the Second World War and the Holocaust. Although the unprecedented, traumatic events of the war formed the content of all of Grossman's wartime writing, this paper argues that the principles underlying his approach to the representation of catastrophe and atrocity - principles of humanism, plurality *and* a sense of distinct Jewish fate - can be traced back to the 1930s.

Laura Guillaume

It is a Terrible Thing to Condemn Even a Terrible Man: Vasily Grossman on Judging Perpetrators

This paper considers Vasily Grossman's approach to the judgement of perpetrators. It considers the complexity of the task of evaluating perpetrator guilt in the totalitarian context, and critiques Tzvetan Todorov's contention that Grossman's approach is flawed because it attaches all responsibility to the state and exonerates individuals. Contrary to this reading, the paper argues that Grossman is concerned above all to rescue the diversity of human life and experience from the simplifying ideology of the totalitarian state. To this end, he develops the idea of humanity as the ethical core of his work, and this understanding of humanity is resistant to the judgements of the state. In addition, however, Grossman's humanity precludes the facile determination of guilt or innocence, and instead leads the reader to an encounter with the agony of judgement.

Panel Three: Representing Trauma

Sarah J. Young

Testimony on the Margins: Silence, Innocence and the Other in Vasily Grossman's Late Fiction

Vasily Grossman is well known for his fictional and non-fictional depictions of some of the most terrible events of the twentieth century, from the Ukrainian famine in the early 1930s to the Eastern front battles of the Second World War. At times he directly addresses the trauma of these events for those caught up in them, in a manner so unflinching as to be bordering on the taboo, as, most shockingly and movingly, in the gas chamber scene in *Life and Fate*. But particularly in his late, shorter works, Grossman addresses the same historical framework in a different key. Deflecting attention from his main subject, and focusing frequently on peripheral figures and unusual viewpoints, Grossman explores the possibilities and limitations of representation, and questions of how those involved in events – passively and actively – can understand and testify to their experience. Focusing on the novella *Everything Flows*, in particular the encounter between Ivan, the Gulag returnee, and Anna, the former activist, that leads to her testimony of the famine, and comparing its approach to the adoption of marginal focalisers in the stories 'Mama' and 'The Road', this paper examines recurring themes such as the absent mother figure, and the embodiment of testimony through reference to the senses. These are central to the construction of two modes of witnessing, the relational and the pure, which make testimony possible, but also define the difficulty of attaining it.

Jekaterina Shulga

The Freedom Within: Time, Temporality and Trauma in *For a Just Cause* and *Life and Fate*

Vasily Grossman's *For a Just Cause* and *Life and Fate* both deal with the traumatic events of the Second World War. Despite this, the novels demonstrate the ability of human kindness to survive, and sometimes even thrive, in inhuman circumstances. Freedom – both individual and national – is shown to triumph over slavery. This paper will explore the tensions created by the co-existence of trauma and freedom at the heart of these works by tracing Grossman's use of time in depicting them. Time is a prominent subject in both novels. Grossman's characters are shown to be highly sensitive to the specificity of the times in which they live, and the paper will analyse their perceptions and understandings of themselves in this respect. It will also consider the use of narrative temporality to depict the psychological effects of trauma, whereby inner experience of time becomes fragmented and repetitive. The use of time on the one hand, and temporality on the other, creates a narrative separation between subject matter and style allowing for trauma and freedom to exist side by side.

Panel Four: Anti-Semitism and the Holocaust

Wendy Lower

Vasily Grossman's Berdychiv and Soviet Knowledge of the Holocaust in Ukraine

This paper focuses on the history of the Holocaust in Vasily Grossman's hometown of Berdychiv, Ukraine, and Soviet knowledge of the fate of the Jews. How did Grossman and other Jewish Red Army soldiers discover what happened to their relatives in German-occupied Ukraine? As an official Soviet journalist, Grossman publicised information about the Holocaust including the mass graves in Babi Yar. By the time that Grossman reached Kiev and Berdychiv in autumn 1943, he was well informed, but most ordinary Red Army soldiers were not. The paper compares testimonies of Jewish soldiers who returned home to destroyed families and communities with Grossman's accounts of liberation and his discovery of the Holocaust.

Joshua Rubenstein

Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg: the Second World War, the Holocaust and Responses to German and Soviet Anti-Semitism

Vasily Grossman and Ilya Ehrenburg assumed unique roles for themselves during the Second World War: to give a face to Jewish suffering and Jewish resistance and to assure that the Jews would not be portrayed solely as victims. Their unique prestige, earned through their reporting on the war, made it possible to broaden the limits of what could be conveyed in the Soviet press. It was this same determination that led them to organise the *Black Book* project. No other figures in the Soviet Union at that time enjoyed the combined courage and stature to initiate such a challenge to the Kremlin's official version of German atrocities. This paper compares and contrasts the two writers' treatments of Jewish suffering and resistance through their pre-war, wartime and post-war careers.

Panel Five: Ethics, Politics, Philosophy

Alex Danchev

Vasily Grossman's Ethics

This paper explores Vasily Grossman as moral witness, or moralist, or moraliser (as opposed to demoraliser), and in particular the ethical position embedded in *Life and Fate* and embodied in the 'holy fool', Ikonnikov. In this connection, it attends to some of his expositors, notably Emmanuel Levinas and Tzvetan Todorov.

Giovanni Maddalena

Vasily Grossman and Hannah Arendt: Three Paradoxes of Existential Liberalism

Vasily Grossman and Hannah Arendt share a peculiar kind of liberalism. They are not liberals according to the classic meaning of the term, but both reject totalitarianism in the name of individual life and freedom, and in both of them life and freedom coincide. This paper clarifies exactly what their form of 'existential liberalism' involves by approaching their conception of freedom at political, ontological, and epistemic levels. This illuminates three paradoxes that existential liberalism entails and the possible remedies that Grossman and Arendt propose.

Biographies

Yury Gevargisovich Bit-Yunan was born in 1986 in Bryansk, a city some 360 kilometres south-west of Moscow. In 2008 he graduated from the Faculty of Journalism of the Russian State University for the Humanities (RSUH) in Moscow, where he now lectures in the history of Russian classical and Soviet literature, the history of Russian literary criticism and journalism. He will defend his candidate's thesis on Vasily Grossman in 2011.

Philip Ross Bullock is University Lecturer in Russian and Fellow and Tutor in Russian at Wadham College, Oxford. In 2007 he was Edward T. Cone Member in Music Studies at the Institute for Advanced Studies, Princeton, and in 2009 he was awarded a Philip Leverhulme Prize for Modern Languages. Recent publications include *Rosa Newmarch and Russian Music in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth-Century England* (Ashgate, 2009). He is currently working on the relationship between words and music in Russian culture from the late eighteenth century to the present day.

Robert Chandler's translations of Sappho and Guillaume Apollinaire are published in the series 'Everyman's Poetry'. His translations from Russian include Vasily Grossman's *Life and Fate* (Vintage, 2006, revised edition), *Everything Flows* (Harvill Secker, 2010) and *The Road* (Maclehose, 2010), Nikolai Leskov's *Lady Macbeth of Mtsensk* (Hesperus, 2003) and Aleksander Pushkin's *Dubrovsky* (Hesperus, 2003) and *The Captain's Daughter* (Hesperus, 2007). His translation of Hamid Ismailov's *The Railway* (Vintage, 2007) and his co-translations of works by Andrey Platonov have won prizes both in the UK and in the US. He is the editor of *Russian Short Stories from Pushkin to Buida* (Penguin, 2005) and the author of *Alexander Pushkin* (Hesperus, 2009). For the last six years he has taught part-time at Queen Mary, University of London. He is currently translating a collection of Russian 'Magic Tales' for Penguin, and more works by Vasily Grossman and Andrey Platonov.

Alex Danchev is Professor of International Relations at the University of Nottingham. He is the author of a number of widely acclaimed biographies, most recently *Georges Braque* (Penguin, 2007). His most recent books are a collection of essays, *On Art and War and Terror* (Edinburgh University Press, 2009) and *100 Artists' Manifestos* (Penguin, 2011). He is currently working on a biography of Cézanne.

Patrick Finney is a Senior Lecturer in International History in the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University. From 2011, he is also serving as Director of Research and Deputy Head of Department. He has published widely on international history between the two world wars, historical method and theory, and the collective memory of the Second World War. Recent works include a monograph, *Remembering the Road to World War Two* (Routledge, 2010). His next book is a transnational and global history of Second World War collective memory since the end of the Cold War, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

Laura Guillaume received her PhD from the Department of International Politics, Aberystwyth University in 2009 for a thesis entitled 'War on the Body: Dramatising the Space of the Unknown'. She has co-edited (with Joe Hughes) a book entitled *Deleuze and the Body* (Edinburgh University Press, 2011) and (with Brad Evans) a theme issue on 'Deleuze and War' in *Theory and Event*, vol. 13, no. 3, 2010. A revised and expanded version of her thesis will appear in the Routledge 'Interventions' book series in 2012. She is an Associate Lecturer with the Open University.

Wendy Lower is a Research Fellow and Lecturer in the Department of Modern History at the Ludwig Maximilian University, Munich. Prior to her relocation to Germany, Lower was Director of Visiting Scholars' Programs at the US Holocaust Memorial Museum's Center for Advanced Holocaust Studies, taught courses in modern European history, Soviet history, and Holocaust history at American University and Georgetown University, and was assistant professor of history at Towson University. She has authored *Nazi Empire Building and the Holocaust in Ukraine* (University of North Carolina Press, 2005; Ukrainian edition, 2010) and co-edited (with Ray Brandon) *The Shoah in Ukraine: History, Testimony and Memorialization* (Indiana University Press, 2008; Ukrainian edition, 2011). She has recently completed *Samuel Golfard's Diary and the Holocaust in Galicia* (Altamira Press, forthcoming) and is currently preparing a book manuscript on German women and the Holocaust in Ukraine, Poland and Belarus.

Giovanni Maddalena is Assistant Professor at the University of Molise. He works on American philosophy, with particular reference to Charles S. Peirce and classic pragmatists. He has published two monographs, *Istinto razionale* [Rational Instinct] (Trauben, 2003) and *Metafisica per assurdo* [Metaphysics Per Absurdum] (Rubbettino, 2009), and numerous journal articles in which he has explored the possibility of a philosophy of language based on signs and open to metaphysics. He edited, translated and introduced a large Italian anthology of Peirce's work, Charles S. Peirce, *Scritti scelti* [Selected Writings] (UTET, 2005), and is Executive Editor of the European *Journal of Pragmatism and American Philosophy*. In 2006 he co-founded the Centro Studi Grossman (Turin) of which he is the scientific head. With the Centro Studi Grossman he organised two international conferences on Grossman (in 2006 and 2009), and has co-edited (with Pietro Tosco) *Il romanzo della libertà. Vasilij Grossman tra i classici del XX secolo* [The Novel of Freedom: Vasily Grossman among the Classics of the 20th Century] (Rubbettino, 2007). He also created the exhibition of *Life and Fate* which will be on display at the symposium.

Joshua Rubenstein is the Northeast Regional Director of Amnesty International USA and a long-time Associate of the Davis Center for Russian and Eurasian Studies at Harvard University. He has been a staff member of Amnesty International since 1975. His current responsibilities include organising Amnesty's grassroots membership in New England, New York and New Jersey. He is the author of *Soviet Dissidents: their Struggle for Human Rights* (Beacon Press, 1980) and *Tangled Loyalties: the Life and Times of Ilya Ehrenburg* (Basic Books, 1996) and the co-editor (with V. P. Naumov) of *Stalin's Secret Pogrom: the Postwar Inquisition of the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee* (Yale University Press, 2001). He received a National Jewish Book Award in the category of East European Studies for *Stalin's Secret Pogrom*. He is the co-editor (with Alexander Gribanov) of *The KGB File of Andrei Sakharov* (Yale University Press, 2005). He co-edited (with Ilya Altman), and helped to translate, *The Unknown Black Book: the Holocaust in the German-Occupied Soviet Territories* (Indiana University Press, 2008; paperback edition 2010). His latest book is a concise biography of Leon Trotsky for the 'Jewish Lives' series at Yale University Press, which is scheduled for publication later in 2011.

Jekaterina Shulga is a third year doctoral candidate at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London, working on a thesis entitled ‘Memory, History, Testimony: The Representation of Trauma in Vasily Grossman’s and Yury Dombrovsky’s Writing’ under the supervision of Dr Sarah Young and Dr Polly Jones. The thesis focuses on the representation of the traumatic experiences of the Second World War, the Gulag, the Holodomor and the Great Terror in the works of the two writers, and offers an innovative exploration of the viability of applying trauma theory to Soviet fiction.

Sarah J. Young lectures on nineteenth- and twentieth-century Russian literature and culture at the UCL School of Slavonic and East European Studies, London. She previously held posts at the University of Toronto and the University of Nottingham. She has written extensively on Dostoevsky, and the Gulag writer Varlam Shalamov, and is currently working on a larger study of Gulag narratives, and digital visualisations of Russian literature. She blogs at www.sarahjyoung.com.

Polly Zavadvker is a doctoral candidate in the Department of History at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and is currently a research fellow at the YIVO Institute for Jewish Research in New York. Her dissertation compares the representation of war in the writings of S. An-sky, Isaac Babel and Vasily Grossman during the First World War, Russian Civil War and Second World War, respectively. Her translation of Grossman's 1943 essay ‘Ukraine without Jews’ appeared in the spring 2011 edition of *Jewish Quarterly*.

Acknowledgments

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The exhibition accompanying the symposium has kindly been provided by the Centro Studi Grossman, Turin. For further details, see <http://www.grossmanweb.eu/en/descrizione.asp>.

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Statue of Mother Russia, Volgograd



Treblinka Memorial