

# Saving Private Ivanov

A British scholar looks at World War II from the point of view of the Soviet soldier.



FROM "IVAN'S WAR"

Soviet infantrymen in their trenches, winter 1941.

## IVAN'S WAR

*Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945.*

By Catherine Merridale.

Illustrated. 462 pp. Metropolitan Books/Henry Holt & Company. \$30.

By SHEILA FITZPATRICK

THE Great Patriotic War — as World War II is known in Russia — was the ultimate test of the resolve of the Soviet state and the heroism of its people. Victory in May 1945 was the Soviet Union's finest hour. Or so goes the story that the state's propaganda machine cherished and that generations of citizens believed.

But Catherine Merridale, an English scholar whose earlier book, "Night of Stone," examined death in the Soviet Union, is skeptical. Believing that the official version is sanitized and untrue, she set out in "Ivan's War" to show the underside of the conflict as it was experienced by ordinary soldiers. She draws on a rich body of memoirs and oral testi-

Sheila Fitzpatrick, who teaches history at the University of Chicago, is the author, most recently, of "Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth-Century Russia."

monies. And if her informants tend to have positive memories of comradeship in battle, the official archives she has consulted provide her with plentiful evidence of screw-ups and irresponsibility, not to mention callousness toward human life on the part of politicians and military leaders. Finally, and most touchingly, she finds immediate testimony of what the war was like in the letters and diaries of frontline soldiers (*frontoviki*), for many of whom the war never became a memory because they were among the more than eight million servicemen and women who died in it.

For Russians the war began horrifically, with a chaotic retreat before the German invasion of June 1941. It continued through a year of military disaster and plummeting morale, culminating in Stalin's notorious Order 227 of July 28, 1942, which forbade retreat under any circumstances and mandated the harshest of punishments for "laggards, cowards, defeatists and other miscreants."

The German advance was stopped at Stalingrad early in 1943, but it was not until the spring of 1944 that the front was pushed back beyond Soviet borders. The "march to Berlin" then began, with Soviet soldiers starting to feel like conquerors. This phase of the war was marked by looting, disorderly rampages and raping of civilians on a scale that shocked the populations of Eastern and Central Europe. Soviet authorities, Merridale argues, did little to hinder these activities, and may have encouraged them.

The story of the war has never been told before from the standpoint of the common Soviet soldier, though Russians already have an emblem of the ordinary infantryman. He is Vasily Tyorkin, the eponymous hero of Aleksandr Tvardovsky's immensely popular wartime poem. Merridale doesn't think much of the fictional Tyorkin, seeing him as an unrealistically optimistic figure drawn with exaggerated patriotism; she says Tvardovsky ignored the worst privations of army life and the stupidity of army command. But there is more of the Good Soldier Schweik in Tyorkin than Merridale recognizes, especially in Tvardovsky's later poem, "Tyorkin in the Other World," in which the hero dies and goes to heaven, only to find exactly the same idiotic bureaucrats he had known in the army. This Tyorkin, like Merridale's composite soldier, Ivan, is wily and resourceful but essentially innocent, a paradigmatic "little man" at the mercy of forces beyond his control.

Yet when the Soviet Army crossed the borders into Europe, it started on a drunken rampage. Lovable innocents should not rape, loot and wantonly destroy, so how is this appalling behavior to be explained? Merridale's interview subjects are of no help; they decline to share memories of atrocities. And Merridale herself is loath to blame the soldiers, taking issue with historians who have called Soviet *frontoviki* "bestial and crude, as if they acted from some instinct, like animals." Really, she suggests, it is the Communist Party that should be blamed. Having sown hatred for Germans through "deliberate and sophisticated flooding" of the soldiers' minds, the party now "gave them license" to take out their anger on the civilian populations, and offered indemnity by not publicizing the outrages. Yet Merridale seems a little uneasy with her own

argument, for she notes elsewhere that while "it would certainly be convenient, now, to lay the blame" for war crimes on Stalin and the leaders in the Kremlin, there must nevertheless come a time when, like the Germans, Russians will "have to grapple with the question of individual responsibility in conditions of totalitarian rule."

Merridale has done an admirable job of collecting testimony from war veterans (she and her assistants conducted about 200 interviews). One can see how difficult this was from her account of making her pitch to a sea of "closed" faces at a Kursk veterans' association; as a foreign, female, middle-aged academic she must have seemed as alien as Mary Poppins. Her sample was not, and could not be, comprehensive; like most other people doing oral history in Russia, she talked to whoever would talk to her, and then made other contacts through her initial interviewees.

The result, inevitably, is skewed. Merridale notes, for example, that her informants were disproportionately Jewish (as it happens, Jews are overrepresented in the Russian intelligentsia and that skewing toward informants from the intelligentsia is a perennial problem for foreigners doing oral history in Russia). But the distortions in her sampling give her "Ivan" a rather contradictory character: on the one hand, the oral testimonies and memoirs show him to be generally thoughtful and sensitive, likely to have a volume of poetry in his knapsack; on the other, material from the archives suggests an ignorant, fearful, undisciplined foot soldier, living a squalid life in subhuman conditions.

A bias toward the intelligentsia finds its way into Merridale's interpretation of postwar aspirations as well. Like many other historians of Russia, she assumes that the intellectuals' hope for more freedom of speech and for a more open government was shared by a majority of the population. But food and shelter were surely what was uppermost in most soldiers' minds when the war ended (with peasants hoping additionally for the disbanding of collective farms).

AS for the Soviet myth of a heroic and patriotic war, one of the ironies here is Merridale's discovery that while her evidence from Soviet archives often supports her debunking approach, her informants uniformly reject it. The veterans she interviewed were by no means as critical of the regime as their interviewer was, and even after the Soviet Union collapsed, they retained "a sense of pride so powerful that few could see how thoroughly it disinherited them."

The veterans clearly chose to remember the war in a heroic light. No matter how much the interviewers pushed for gory details of combat, "there were bodies, and there were tears, but there was no blood," Merridale says, "no nervous strain," let alone any rape, brutality or cowardice in the ranks. The myth, she concludes, "keyed into some basic human needs," and besides, she adds, it was "partly true, or true enough to make successive generations grateful." So much for debunking. Still, it is to Merridale's great credit that she lets us listen to what her veterans had to say, even when it wasn't what she herself wanted to hear. □

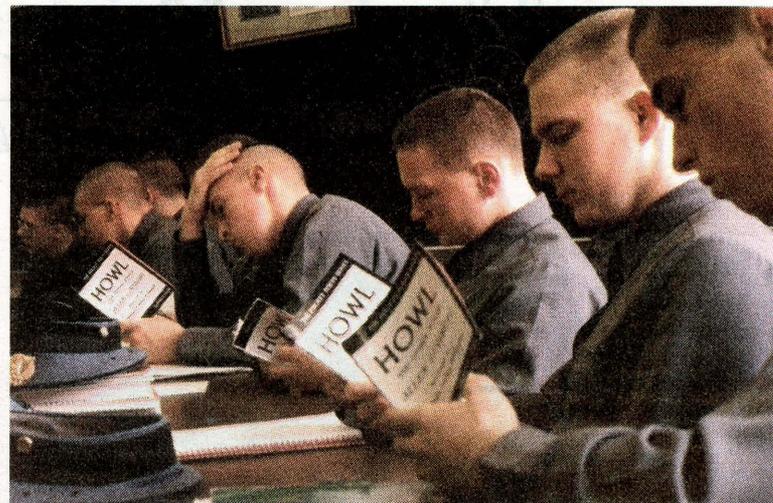
Russian veterans of World War II don't like to talk about the war. They certainly don't like to talk about the Red Army's atrocities.

time in Berkeley the next year. (A CD of that performance is included in this book.) All sorts of divisions, exclusions, restrictive manners and deferences that were second nature in the East were missing in the Bay Area. If the primary terrain of the poem is New York City, the freedom one could find in California in the 50's is crucial to the air that blows through the dank rooms of "Howl," blowing all the way back to New York — but you wouldn't know it from the Eastern writers Shinder has brought together, as if such Bay Area poets and critics as Ishmael Reed, Robert Hass, Rebecca Solnit, Joshua Clover or Richard Candida Smith would have less to say about where "Howl" came from and where it went than Jane Kramer and Eileen Myles, who have plenty to say. The America that gets changed in "The Poem That Changed America" is a Steinberg map, with San Francisco as far away as Tangier. "No one," Marjorie Perloff says off-handedly, but too revealingly, "New Yorker or foreigner...."

You can forget that when Luc Sante begins to tell his tale — from 437 East 12th Street, which is, as it happens, the same New York City building where Ginsberg lived. As if rising from the swamp of Eliot Katz on "Political Poetics" (right off, with Katz's invocation of a poet attempting "to envision and create a more humane world," you somehow know this is going to be the longest piece in the book), Sante changes the discussion as if throwing open a door: "Was 'Howl' the last poem to hit the world with the impact of news and grip it with the tenacity of a pop song?" The language is burning, the ideas are jumping and, finally, you are brought into the adventure of the poem, Ginsberg and his fellows turning New York City into their own frontier, then heading west, through Kansas, into Colorado, to the coast, then back again, discovering, you can

feel, more of America in the decade before Ginsberg wrote the poem in 1955 than de Soto, Daniel Boone or even Lewis and Clark did in the centuries before them.

"Reading 'Howl' aloud or reciting it," Sante writes, "you could feel the poem giving you supernatural powers, the ability to punch through brick walls and walk across cities from rooftop to rooftop" — faster than a speeding bullet, more powerful than a locomotive, able to leap tall buildings in a single bound, as George Reeves was doing on TV as Ginsberg wrote, just like Scotty Moore's second guitar break in Elvis Presley's "Hound Dog," on Ginsberg's hydrogen jukebox the year that "Howl" first made it into print. Why not? Sante lived for 11 years in Ginsberg's building. He was 36 when he moved out, and when he looks back to that moment, the self-regard of adolescent illumination, so common elsewhere in the pages Sante shares, is replaced by something that doesn't melt at the touch. "'Howl' probably meant more to me then than ever before," he says, "because finally I could reconcile it with my own experience. 'Poverty' and 'tatters' and 'hollow-eyed' and 'high' were more than poetic figures by then. I could compile my own list of the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness. The decade during which I lived two flights down from Allen was particularly notable for its body count in suicides and overdoses, and those cadavers really had contained some of the best minds I knew.... If 'Howl' is a catalog of flameouts and collapses, it is ecstatic in its lamentation. And that is the basic measure of its strength: it is a list of... leprous epiphanies as redoubtable as Homer's catalog of ships, but rather than stopping at that, it seizes the opportunity to realize all the botched dreams it enumerates. It envisions every broken vision, supplies the skeleton key that re-



GORDON BALL

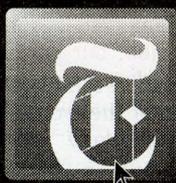
Cadets at the Virginia Military Institute in 1991.

veals the genius of every torrent of babble, reconstitutes every page of scribble that looks like gibberish the next morning."

Fixed in time in Gordon Ball's photograph, the cadets are still reading "Howl"; they're still fixed in irony. But the story the picture doesn't tell — that, in its way, it protects the viewer from imagining — doesn't end in irony. As Bob Rosenthal, for 20 years Ginsberg's secretary, writes in perhaps the plainest lines in "The Poem That Changed America," only a fool pretends to know what might happen when a poem finds a reader. "'Howl' still helps young people realize their actual ambitions," Rosenthal writes: "not to become a poor poet living in a dump but maybe to become a physical therapist when you are expected to become a lawyer, or maybe to become a lawyer when everybody expects you to fail at everything." □

**'It's a radically offensive poem, or used to be... and it needs offended readers whose fear and outrage bring it most fully to life.'**

**Do you get home delivery of The New York Times?**



**Your Upgrade to TimesSelect is free.**

TimesSelect lets you get more from The New York Times. More access to our Op-Ed and news columnists, Times articles going back 25 years and enhanced multimedia. Activate your free upgrade now at [nytimes.com/activate](http://nytimes.com/activate).

**TimesSelect**  
nytimes.com

**Go back in time.**

Upgrade to TimesSelect and get online access to 100 Archive articles per month. Go to [nytimes.com/upgrade](http://nytimes.com/upgrade).

**TimesSelect**  
nytimes.com



## FREE BOOKLETS ON "Four Steps to Absolute Peace" Project Now Available from JAPAN

(With 300 Nobel Prize winners and University Presidents)

"The Selected Works of Prof. Dr. Hisatoki Komaki – Four Steps to Absolute Peace" (With 300 Nobel Prize winners and University Presidents all over the world) may be summarized as follows:-

- Goal I: Global Disarmament under World Federal Government (by 2015)
- Goal II: Total Abolition of meat-diet, animal experiments, and insecticides (Right NOW, or by 2050)
- Goal III: Abolition of mutual killing of wild animals, fishes, or insects through their population control (by 2090)
- Goal IV: Complete Salvation (smooth spiritual growth) of all the spiritual beings of the Whole Universe, of all dimensions: Fulfillment of Ultimate Creator's purpose of "The Creation of the Universe".

(On Goal I, II, III, please refer to our International Bulletin)

On Goal IV, Prof. Dr. Hisatoki Komaki suggests:

None of us can deny the Ultimate Cause (Cosmic Will; Jehovah; Myôhō-Renge) of the Whole Universe; The omniscient, omnipotent, completely righteous and merciful Creator beyond the limitation of time and space. So all spiritual beings (with free wills) of the Whole Universe, of all dimensions, must be immortal. (The higher spiritual beings were created before the creation of the material Universe.) Mechanism of the immortality of the individualized souls is well explained by Prof. Dr. Hitoshi Amano's or Prof. Dr. Masaharu Takao's theory. (Please refer to our International Bulletin)

Prof. Dr. Hisatoki Komaki concludes: Goal IV is attained only

through "the vegetarian\* and ethically pure families of mankind\*\*", on this Earth, because Mankind is the Center-Being of the all spiritual beings of the Whole Universe, of all dimensions.

FREE BOOKLETS on Komaki Peace Foundation, International Earth Environment University, Hebrew-Japan Friendship Association, and on "Four Steps to Absolute Peace" Project, are available from KOMAKI PEACE FOUNDATION, 2-6-18 SAKAMOTO, OTSU, SHIGA-KEN, JAPAN (<http://www.libra.co.jp/KOMAKI>); Further details are available from International Biographical Centre, Cambridge CB2 3QP, England, too.

\* The Vegetarian, The Vegetarian Society, Parkdale, Dunham Road, Altrincham, Cheshire, WA14 4QG, England.  
\*\* Rev. and Mrs. Sun Myung MOON's Speeches, Interreligious and International Federation for World Peace (IIFWP) 155 White Plains Road, Suite 204 Tarrytown, N.Y. 10591 U.S.A.

## BOOKS OF THE TIMES

*Dispatches From the Hottest of Hot Zones*

By WILLIAM GRIMES

From August 1941 until May 1945, the novelist Vasily Grossman worked as a special correspondent for *Krasnaya Zvezda* (Red Star), the newspaper of the Red Army. From the bleak early days of the war, when the German advance across Ukraine seemed unstoppable, to the final push into Berlin, he spent more than a thousand days on the front lines. Interviewing generals and enlisted men alike, he filed white-hot reports read avidly by millions of Soviet readers eager not just for news of Stalingrad or Kursk, but for a picture of the lives that their sons and husbands were leading hundreds of miles away.

Much of the material that filled Grossman's notebooks never made it into print, because it was either politically sensitive or, in the view of the censors, too disturbing for Soviet citizens to read. In "A Writer at War," the British historian Antony Beevor and his research assistant, Luba Vinogradova, have mined this rich seam of gold, translating and editing generous excerpts from the notebooks (made available by Grossman's descendants) and stitching together a coherent narrative from Grossman's completed articles, his letters and the memoirs of contemporaries, notably his editor at *Krasnaya Zvezda*. The result is a first-rate volume of war reporting that belongs with the best work of writers like Ernie Pyle, A. J. Liebling and John Hersey.

Grossman spent the entire war in the hottest of the hot zones. On several occasions he was within a hair's breadth of being encircled by the German advance. Purely as a record of events, "A Writer at War" has value. Grossman's journals, for example, contradict the usual accounts of the fall of Orel in the first week of October 1941, which portray a city taken completely by surprise, with streetcars still running. Grossman, by contrast, describes a scene of mounting panic, with citizens already packing up and leaving, well aware that the enemy is at the gates.

Grossman was more than a mere note-taker, however. His dispatches, conveying the taste, the smell and the sounds of the front lines, made him one of the most read and admired writers of the war. He observed with a novelist's eye for the telling detail and a rich appreciation of the characters moving events along. He listened with a sharp and sympathetic ear. He even managed



Harvill Press

**A Writer at War**

Vasily Grossman With the Red Army, 1941-1945

Edited and translated by Antony Beevor and Luba Vinogradova

Illustrated. 378 pages. Pantheon Books. \$27.50.

to find a wild, absurd strain of humor as the bombs fell. "They chase vehicles, individual trucks, cars," an irate commissar complained to Grossman. "It's hooliganism, an outrage!"

"A Writer at War" does not present a sweeping account of battle. Grossman specialized in the vignette, the

*World War II as observed by a Russian novelist with an eye for the telling detail.*

quick snapshot that captured a few moments of a story moving at top speed. It is usually a few salty lines of dialogue or a strange, horrifying detail caught on the fly that make his journal entries and his newspaper articles spring to life.

"There is a flattened Romanian," he wrote, surveying the battlefield outside Stalingrad. "A tank has driven over him. His face has become a bas-relief." In Berlin, he noted, "ladies wearing fashionable hats, carrying bright handbags, are cutting pieces of meat off dead horses lying on the pavement."

Brief jottings suggest the magni-

tude of Russian suffering and the ferocity of combat waged against a technologically superior enemy. The seriously wounded, in the early days of rapid retreat, get a piece of herring and 50 grams of vodka to keep them going. During the fiercest fighting in Stalingrad, a tank driver, out of ammunition, jumps out of his tank and begins throwing bricks at the Germans and cursing. "This war in villages is a bandit war," one lieutenant tells Grossman, adding that his men sometimes strangle Germans with their bare hands. Even more shocking is the admission of a peasant soldier who tells Grossman, "As for hardships, life is harder in the village."

Grossman kept his own story out of the newspapers. As a good journalist, he let the soldiers do the talking (he had an uncanny gift for drawing them out) and, even in his private journals, complained only about ham-fisted editors who mauled his copy or, even worse, failed to get one of his articles into the newspaper. Mr. Beevor, however, deftly weaves in the personal drama behind many of Grossman's reports.

Grossman, a Jew, left his mother behind in his hometown of Berdichev, in Ukraine, where she and 30,000 other Jews were executed by the Nazis.

As Soviet forces regained lost territory in Ukraine and western Russia, Grossman quickly grasped the enormity of what had happened to the Jews. He filed a powerful article, "Ukraine Without Jews," which *Krasnaya Zvezda* refused to run. It is a spare, heart-rending account of Ukraine under occupation that makes a point of citing specific names and specific places while memory is fresh. He went on to write "The Hell of Treblinka," a superb piece of reporting, after entering that concentration camp with the Red Army in July 1944. He was also among the first journalists to enter the Warsaw ghetto.

Grossman was fortunate that the secret police did not read his notebooks. They contained frank criticisms of drunken officers, inept leadership and bureaucratic bungling, as well as shocked condemnations of Russian soldiers who raped not only German women, but Polish and Russian women freed from Nazi hands. "Horror in the eyes of women and girls," a laconic notebook entry reads.

Grossman always insisted to his editor that his articles had to depict "the ruthless truth of war." They did, and he did.