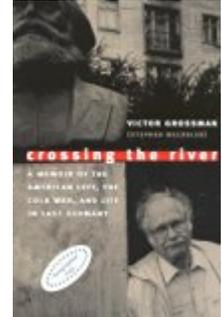


Victor Grossman. *Crossing the River: A Memoir of the American Left, the Cold War, and Life in East Germany.* Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003. 328 pp. \$80.00, cloth, ISBN 978-1-55849-385-8.



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Victor Grossman's autobiography is a partly critical, partly apologetic account of life in the German Democratic Republic (GDR). An American communist who fled the McCarthy witch-hunts in the 1950s and found a new life in the GDR, he was probably the only person to have ever studied at Harvard and Karl Marx University and labor as a steelworker in Buffalo and in a lumberyard in Bautzen. He married, raised a family, and developed into a relatively prominent writer and intellectual. He experienced the events of 1953 in East Berlin, saw the 1968 Prague Spring and numerous Cold War shenanigans, and worked hard to build a society which he was proud of, in spite of its many shortcomings. Although never a member of the Socialist Unity Party (SED) or a dissident, Grossman offers readers useful insights into everyday life in the GDR. He was one of the overwhelming majority of East Germans who accepted their fates while the Wall existed and conditions were reasonably stable. While he would have preferred to preserve the GDR, he recognizes why it was unable to establish the loyalty necessary for

survival once Soviet support was withdrawn and the SED leadership fell.

Crossing the River is divided into two parts. The first discusses Grossman's life in America, when he was still Stephen Wechsler, his name before he fled to East Germany. Born in 1928 to a Jewish family in New York City, he was raised during the Depression. Had it not been for his fear of McCarthyism, he might have lived his life in the United States. His formative years were strongly influenced by time spent in the mountainous New Jersey community of Free Acres. The family drove there every summer, mixing with an eclectic group of conformists and nonconformists, some of whom were communists. Grossman was exposed to a wide variety of literature, music, politics, cultural and ethnic groups. The Second World War was also significant, not only because Grossman was approaching draft age as the war ended. He honed his debating skills arguing the Soviet side in the war's early years (while his brother, in the merchant marine, sailed the Atlantic) and was horrified by the crimes of the Nazis. By 1945, when he was about to begin at Harvard, he was a

dedicated pacifist and anti-fascist, ready to change the world.

Grossman spent the late 1940s first at Harvard and then among the so-called working class while the United States experienced the "Red Scare," which eventually drove him from his homeland. He drew on his experiences from these years to criticize the alleged freedom of the United States. Political activism at Harvard and afterwards, e.g., at a 1949 Paul Robeson concert in Peekskill, frequently encountered violent suppression. Serious racism was common. Work in the steel mills of Buffalo was difficult; workers responded to layoffs, firings and pay cuts with strikes and struggled constantly for survival. Those who declined "optional" overtime found themselves unemployed. Such experiences convinced Grossman that life in the United States was sometimes less free than even in the GDR. The overall climate contributed to his eventual decision to flee in 1952, a year after he was drafted and stationed in Europe.

The transition was not easy, and he would always feel some homesickness, though several factors eased his adjustment. As an American communist and refugee from political persecution, Grossman was granted a special status. He developed into a self-described "court jester," able to speak his mind, but not too loudly. His expertise on American culture was also welcome and assisted him in making a living. He met and married a woman whom he loved deeply and with whom he raised a family. While there is no reason to question Grossman's integrity—in fact he often reflected on the choices and compromises he made—his status, relative comfort, and happy life should not be forgotten when evaluating his perspective on the GDR.

The second part of the book details Grossman's life in East Germany. As a worker he experienced rough conditions that were still comparatively better than in Buffalo. He became a student again, studying journalism. This career brought

him to East Berlin, where his family settled permanently. He worked first as a journalist, then as a freelancer; he and his wife made a reasonable living until 1990, when the currency reform consumed a chunk of their savings. Luckily they both reached pensioner status after the *Wende*, and, despite the loss of their savings, they suffered much less than their younger fellow-citizens from the sometimes harsh economic adjustment that reunification brought.

Grossman provides fascinating observations on GDR life. He claims that the experiences of the escapees were sensationalized by the West German press; many individuals embellished or invented tales of repression. The West allegedly orchestrated many such flights in order to maximize the political consequences to the GDR. Grossman feels there was much less genuine discontent in his former country than generally assumed. While approximately 10-15 percent of the population were dedicated to East Germany, and another 10-15 percent despised their state, the remaining had mixed views. On good days they felt more positive; on bad days, they blamed the GDR or socialism. Nonetheless, Grossman argues that many of his fellow citizens recognized that their state provided solid security, including free medical care, guaranteed jobs, and cheap vacations, all of which many were to miss after 1990. While western consumerism was alluring, most people accepted their lives in East Germany, and lived as best they could (pp. 167-168).

This section is one of several in which Grossman almost defends the repressive measures used by the GDR to maintain stability. For example, Grossman mostly disapproves of the Berlin Wall. Although its existence affected him much less than other East Germans, he supported the right to free travel. Still, he acknowledges that the GDR did not possess the magnetism of the west, and thus legitimately feared a mass exodus. He describes similar ambivalence to the 1953 workers' strikes in East Germany and the 1968 Prague

Spring. In each case Grossman criticizes the conditions that led to the respective movements, and condemns governments that lost touch with citizens. He found "socialism with a human face" a beautiful idea, one of urgent necessity in the GDR. However, he reluctantly supported the moves to suppress these movements. The overall danger to socialism in Eastern Europe was too great; what some called liberty, he saw as a return to capitalism. For Grossman, the end justified the means. Preserving socialism necessitated suppressing reform groups as long as the west sought to undermine the entire system.

The best way to understand Grossman's ambivalence is to examine his conception of freedom, of which he offers many examples. For instance, he saw more freedom in Warsaw than in the GDR, but it did not impress him. While Poles had the right to see more movies, read more western paperbacks, exercise more political independence and disobey traffic signals, he found their freedom as dispiriting as the restrictions in the GDR. While visiting the United States in 1994, he encountered a woman who commented on how he and his wife were able to travel freely, while she found it difficult to get away from New York. Although she lived in the freest country in the world, she was unable to move as freely as two citizens from the former GDR. Grossman defines freedom as more than a set of laws created by a government; he believed in "freedom from want," which he felt the GDR achieved reasonably well for its citizens. This kind of freedom fostered safe streets, low, stable rents, cheap public transportation, free health care, jobs for everyone and subsidized child care. These benefits have disappeared since 1990, in Grossman's view, a costly tradeoff for the right to travel unhindered to the west.

Grossman blames the fall of the GDR on the concerted effort by the west to undermine the Soviet bloc. Other factors contributed, of course, one of which he describes in some detail in a chapter focusing on the country's unraveling during the

1980s. The political, economic and social system was too rigid, the SED leadership ignored all critical opinions, open and engaging debate was limited, and the increasingly alienated youth were drawn towards the glamour of the west. While Grossman allowed his children to watch West German television and discussed it with them, he found other parents as well as the country's leadership unwilling to confront a cultural offensive that eventually overwhelmed the GDR. Grossman tried to combat it via countless lectures to professional groups and unending suggestions on how to enliven history classes, May Day parades and restaurant menus. Grossman suggests that East Germans never developed an identity strong enough to resist the attractions of the west, possibly because they were bored.

Crossing the River is more than an apologia for the GDR. It is also a story of those who lost the Cold War and feel themselves on the wrong side of German reunification. They believed in the higher purpose of the GDR and regret its passing. It is very easy and perfectly reasonable to remember the crimes of the GDR, the suppression of dissent and shootings of escapees. It would be a mistake, however, to allow our impression of these crimes to cloud and even eliminate the other stories of this state. Millions of people were associated with the former East Germany, which still forms an important part of their identity. Their stories should be told; in telling his, Grossman tries to tell theirs. Grossman's book is worthwhile despite his anomalous status because it shows why reunification has not been easy, and why work remains to reintegrate the former divided German states.

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