

Svetlana Alexievich: Fiction and the Nonfiction of Confessions

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Curriculum Vitae

Iryna Hniadzko (Ирина Гнедько) was born in the Belorussian SSR, present-day Belarus, and spent her childhood and teenage years in her hometown in the Minsk region. Later, she moved to Saint Petersburg, Russia, where she attended a joint higher education program of the Smolny College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. In 2006, she completed her undergraduate studies there and received two diplomas: a B.A. in linguistics in the Department of Philology at St. Petersburg State University, and a B.A. in Liberal Arts at Bard College. That same year, Irina continued with her education and entered the graduate program in the Department of Philology. In 2008, she obtained her M.A. in Russian linguistics in teaching Russian as a foreign language at St. Petersburg State University. After graduating, Irina worked as a teacher of Russian to foreign students and English to Russian students in St. Petersburg, before she was invited to teach Russian at the College of William and Mary in Virginia and moved into the U.S.A. in 2009. In 2011, Irina started her doctoral program at Brown University in Providence, RI in the Department of Slavic Studies. During the following seven years, she served as a Teaching Assistant in eight different intermediate and advanced Russian language courses.

Irina also read texts for the audio supplements of the new elementary Russian on-line textbook *Mezhdru Nami* written by L. deBenedette, W. Comer, A. Smyslova, and J. Perkins.

In July 2017, Irina received a certificate of completion of the Proficiency Based Pedagogy workshop for Teachers of Russian at the StarTalk Program at Middlebury College.

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Introduction

In October 2015, the whole world was reminded about the small post-Soviet country of Belarus. For the first time in several decades, it was not because of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and not because of the Belorussian president, but because of a much happier occasion – Belorussian writer, Svetlana Alexievich, received the Nobel Prize in literature. Nobody knew about her, except for some readers in the post-Soviet countries and those who were placing their bets on the Nobel Prize in literature at betting offices that year. But in early October 2015, her name became famous.

The Nobel Committee's official web-site told us some brief facts about Svetlana Alexievich. She was born in 1948 in Ivano-Frankivsk (then the Ukrainian SSR) and later moved to Minsk, Belorussian SSR. She was born to a Ukrainian mother and Belorussian father who were village school teachers. In 1972, she graduated from the Department of Journalism at the Belorussian State University and then worked as a journalist for the magazine *Neman*, the main literary journal in the Soviet Belorussia. She lived abroad between 2000 and 2013 (in Italy, France, Germany, and Sweden), but since then has been living in Minsk, Belarus.

The Nobel Prize was awarded to her for her cycle of five books that Alexievich called 'Voices of Utopia' or the 'Red Man' history. The cycle consists of the following books:

- *У войны не женское лицо* (*War's Unwomanly Face*), (written 1983, published 1985).

- *Последние свидетели: сто не детских историй*, (*Last Witnesses: One Hundred Unchild-like Stories*), 1985.
- *Цинковые мальчики*, (*Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War*), 1989.
- *Чернобыльская молитва: хроника будущего* (*Voices from Chernobyl*), 1997.
- *Время сэконд хэнд*, (*Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*), 2013.

In 1993, she published one more book titled *Зачарованные смертью* (*Enchanted by Death*), but it was not a part of the Red Man cycle and has never been translated into English.

The Nobel Committee's motivation for the prize was "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time".¹

The Committee also provided an explanation of her literary work: "Svetlana Alexievich depicts life during and after the Soviet Union through the experience of individuals. In her books she uses interviews to create a collage of a wide range of voices. With her "documentary novels", Svetlana Alexievich, who is a journalist, moves in the boundary between reporting and fiction".²

Interesting enough, the reception of her books by the Russian audience was ambiguous. Some expressed their gratitude to the writer for collecting and publishing heartfelt stories of hundreds of people who survived the most terrible events of the 20th century; others openly criticized Alexievich for dragging their history through dirt and falsifying the information. Their strongest argument was that such books could only be paid by the Western customers who deliberately want to humiliate Russian people.

¹ "Svetlana Alexievich - Facts". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Accessed 21 Apr 2018. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-facts.html

² "Svetlana Alexievich - Facts".

What do Svetlana Alexievich's books talk about?

У войны не женское лицо (*The War's Unwomanly Face*) was first published in 1985 in Minsk, Belarus and was preceded by seven years of collecting interviews and travelling through various Soviet republics. Alexievich talked to about 800 women to collect their stories for the book. While this text touches on many themes common to narratives of war, the female accounts also highlight many topics that would not warrant discussion in 'traditional' Soviet histories. For example, the book discusses the fear of being captured by the Nazis and tortured (Soviet soldier could not fear anything!), stories about executing deserters and those who did not want to fight (there were no deserters in the Soviet army!), witnesses' recollections of Soviet soldiers raping German women (Soviet soldiers were the friendliest and kindest!), and oddly among all of these, stories about true love.

Alexievich's next book was also about The Second World War (WWII), *Последние свидетели* (*Last Witnesses*), 1985. Like the first book, this text contains a wide array of interview excerpts that the writer collected many years after the war. After talking to women in their fifties and older for *The War's Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich goes on to collect stories of people who were children during the war and who managed to survive those horrors. The generation who fought in the war has almost entirely passed away. The only people left to tell their first-hand experiences are those whose stories made *The Last Witnesses*. As children who lived through WWII, they shared their testimonies about crimes, dead people, violence, torture, lots of blood, starvation, evacuation, orphanages. Those memories of their wartime childhoods are undoubtedly a source of terrible psychological trauma.

In 1989 Svetlana Alexievich published her third book – *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from A Forgotten War*, in its current English version. The translation of the title is confusing and inadequate, since in its Russian title it refers to zinc caskets which were used to ship dead bodies from the war in Afghanistan back to their families in the USSR. A more suitable translation would be *Boys in Zinc* or *Boys in Zinc Caskets*. In 1979, the USSR invaded Afghanistan with the aim to help the people of the country get more freedom and build socialism. During the next 10 years, around 500,000 Soviet soldiers, of a so-called ‘limited contingent’ («ограниченный контингент»), went to Afghanistan. Some of them made multiple tours to the country. Total losses from the Soviet side were more than 15,000.

Alexievich talked to hundreds of people; both those who came back from Afghanistan and the families of those who did not. The book tells us about inconceivable horrors of war and the feeling of betrayal and deception that people had in Afghanistan and/or after their return to the USSR.

Svetlana Alexievich asks again, and on a larger scale, about the real value of a human life in 1997, with her fourth book *Чернобыльская молитва* (*Voices from Chernobyl*). The book describes the nuclear disaster of Chernobyl in April of 1986. The writer started collecting the interviews immediately after the explosion. She was able to capture both the most emotional and spontaneous stories as well as the later, thought-through observations by fire fighters, nurses, doctors, soldiers, students, and others affected by the disaster in some way. *Voices from Chernobyl* raises a lot of controversial questions, such as why Chernobyl happened, why was there so little or no help offered to

those in need after the explosion, why the significance of the catastrophe was kept secret, and why the Soviet people put up with all of that.

The most recent book by Alexievich, *The Secondhand Time* (2013), is the most difficult to describe. It consists of two large chapters and covers a multitude of topics about the collapse of the Soviet Union and life after it. *The Secondhand Time* provides numerous interviews about life during the periods 1991 – 2012. These stories show how people of different ages and nationalities had different attitudes toward the collapse of the USSR in 1991. As Alexievich described the main theme of this book herself:

In seventy years, they created a separate human type in the laboratory of Marx-Lenin ideas – the type of Homo Sovieticus. [...] I think I know this person and I am familiar with them; I have lived next to them for many years. What this person is, it is what I am. This person is my acquaintances, friends, parents. [...] Soviet civilization... I am in a hurry to record its traces. I ask not about the socialism, but about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. [...] I ask about thousands of details of the lost lifestyle. [...] History is interested only in facts and emotions are left outside. But I observe the world with the eyes of a humanity scholar, not a historian.

Despite all the criticism, the books by Alexievich are very popular. Probably, one part of that popularity is her Nobel Prize. Before her award, the previous Russian writers who received this Prize were Ivan Bunin in 1933, Boris Pasternak in 1958, Mikhail Sholokhov in 1965, Alexandr Solzhenitsyn in 1970, and Joseph Brodsky in 1987. Such a list of outstanding world-renowned talents of Russian literature creates very high expectations and hopes toward the literature by Svetlana Alexievich.

The next part of her popularity could be our human tendency to gravitate to negative emotions. As Karol Janicki explained it in his study:

Our brains respond differently to positive and negative information; more neurons are involved when we experience negative emotions than with positive emotions, and the former get activated extremely fast. [...] We pay much more attention to and seem more interested in negative phenomena than in positive ones. [...] This fact is not lost on the media, which inundates us with negative events (murders, thefts, accidents, catastrophes).

[...] In this way, the media caters to our brains, which seem to favour [sic] the negative”. Negative words like “war”, “vomit”, “prison” affect us as deeply as negative pictures.³

Yet another reason for a wide popularity of her books could also be her specific literary style. We wanted to study each of the five books in great details and trace some artistic features that would define Alexievich’s style of writing. What techniques does she use to make her texts so emotionally charged? How does she create collages of different narratives under one unifying theme? We decided to take a close look and do a thorough study of her literary methods.

Another important question we want to answer in this dissertation is what place Svetlana Alexievich takes among other Russian writers working in a similar literary genre. How much did she borrow from them and what specific techniques did she adapt or reject?

The Russian tradition of documentary prose has not come to the literary stage just recently, instead it has been employed by Russian writers for over a hundred years. We could think back to A. Chekhov’s documentary travelogue *Остров Сахалин* (*Sakhalin Island*), 1883, that described the horrors of imprisonment of hard labor in exile with documentary precision seen through the writer’s eyes, during his trip to the Sakhalin Island.

In his radio talk, the writer and pundit Dmitry Bykov mentioned the importance of literary journalistic investigations by Vladimir Korolenko (1853 – 1921) for the further development of documentary prose in Russia⁴. Korolenko’s narratives about some of the most heinous crimes of the early 20th century artistically described criminal stories that

³ Karol Janicki, *Language and Conflict: Selected Issues* (Palgrave, 2015), 62.

⁴ Дмитрий Быков, *Один: сто ночей с читателем* (Москва: АСТ, 2017), 239-240.

led to the death sentences. «Мултанское жертвоприношение», «Сорочинская трагедия» (1906), «Дело Бэйлиса» (1911-1913) are prominent examples of his style of literary journalistic writing style.

We should mention Vasily Grossman and his literary work as a war-time journalist. The encyclopedia-like book by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman's *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry* is very important to us as a collection of evidence from Jews during WWII. Crucial to us would be books by another Belorussian writer, Ales Adamovich, particularly the companion publications of *Партизаны* (*The Partisans*, 1960 and 1963), *Хатынская повесть* (*The Khatyn Story*, 1971), and *Я из огненной деревни* (*Out of the Fire*, 1977) together with Y.Bryl and V.Kolesnik. These books combine personal memories of their writers with the testimonies of other people.

Irina Iroshnikova wrote a documentary description of Nazi concentration camps for children, *Здравствуйте, нани Катерина!*, 1968, and *Эльжуня*, 1974. *Эльжуня* tells a documentary about children camps during WWII in the Nazi occupied territories, and *Здравствуйте, нани Катерина!* shares the traumatic effect of the war that survivors carry through their post-war lives.

We should also mention Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin's *Блокадная книга* (*The Book of Blockade*, 1977-1981), Sergey Smirnov's *Брестская крепость* (*Brest Castle*, 1957/1965), Konstantin Simonov's *Штрихи эпопеи* (*Traits of the Epic*, 1961); and Abram Burov's *Блокада день за днём* (*The Blockade, Day After Day*, 1979).

There is also an important American tradition of non-fiction writing with which Alexievich could have been be familiar, and she possibly had an opportunity to benefit from its innovations. John Hersey's *Hiroshima* (1946) received the Pulitzer Prize –

stories of six eyewitnesses sharing their experience after nuclear bombing of Hiroshima in 1945. Also notable is Studs Terkel, who widely worked with the oral history of ‘average’ Americans, in order to better understand larger historic shifts.

For our study, we want to compare how some of the above-mentioned writers selected, edited, and grouped collected evidences for their books and how their findings have been adapted by Alexievich. For that purposed, we will thoroughly analyze her books *War’s Unwomanly Face*, *Last Witnesses*, *Zinky Boys*, and *Voices from Chernobyl*, in part by comparing them with Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman’s *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*; Adamovich, Bryl’, and Kolesnik’s *Я из огненной деревни (Out of the Fire)*, and A. Adamovich and D. Granin’s *Блокадная книга (The Blockade Book)*, S. Smirnov’s *Брестская крепость (Brest Castle)*, and J. Hersey’s *Hiroshima*.

Besides answering these questions, we would like to better study Svetlana Alexievich’s methods of selecting elements from the interviews’ transcripts, their editing and any possible adjustments. We cannot do such a study on her original courses, since the writer insists she always destroys or deletes the audio files with the recorded interviews. But we would like to make our analyses with the help of four different editions of one of the earliest books by Alexievich, *Last Witnesses* (1985).

For that purpose, we examine four different editions of this. The books are available, and do not call for any archival research. We will study following editions: 1) *Последние свидетели: книга детских рассказов*, Москва, Молодая гвардия, 1985. 2) *У войны не женское лицо. Последние свидетели*, Москва, Издательство Остожье, 1998. 3) *Последние свидетели: сто детских колыбельных*, Москва, Издательство

Пальмира, 2004. 4) *Последние свидетели: соло для детского голоса*, Москва, Время, 2016.

Through this analysis, we hope to better understand the literary genre of Svetlana Alexievich. The Nobel Prize Committee marked it as “a literary non-fiction genre that is entirely her own. She writes "novels of voices." She has developed this genre book after book, constantly honing the esthetic of her documentary prose, which is based on hundreds of interviews.”⁵

We would like to question this statement, and to parse the varied elements of non-fiction or fiction in the texts of the four editions of *The Last Witnesses*.

The research upon which the chapters of this dissertation are based will provide tentative answers to these questions.

Chapter 1 will compare the artistic style of Svetlana Alexievich with those of her mentors and literary predecessors, determining the extent of her indebtedness to them.

Chapter 2 will analyze in detail five books from the Red Man's cycle that was awarded the Nobel Prize in literature. We will see what techniques she utilizes to make her literature stand out from her more experienced colleagues and peers working in the same genre.

Chapter 3 will investigate on her methods of selecting, editing, and placing the fragments of her interviewees' testimonies into Alexievich's books with a specific study of the four editions of the *Last Witnesses* (1985, 1998, 2004, and 2016 texts). Such a close study will help us better understand her genre.

⁵ "Svetlana Alexievich - Biographical". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014. Accessed 20 Apr 2018. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-bio.html

Chapter 1. Alexievich's Literary Precursors

Svetlana Alexievich was born in 1948 in the city of Stanislav, the former Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic (Ukrainian SSR), to a Belorussian father and Ukrainian mother. The family moved to the Soviet Belarus, where Alexievich graduated from a high school in a small city in Gomel region. In 1972, she graduated from the Belorussian State University in Minsk with a major in journalism. After graduation, Alexievich worked as a journalist in many newspapers and magazines. She lived in Belarus until 2000, and then moved abroad. She lived in Europe until 2013, when she returned to Belarus, where she has lived since.

When Alexievich received the Nobel Prize for literature in 2015, she was the first professional journalist to ever receive the prize. She writes in Russian, and her books are non-fiction collections of interviews. In some books, another writer or editor may provide several preface paragraphs or introductory notes before chapters, but about 90%, or even more, of each book consist of text from interviews that Alexievich selects. We have seen different numbers in various interviews, but in general there are roughly 700 interviews, from which she picks about 100 that will form the body of her book.

In order to better understand the place Svetlana Alexievich takes in modern-day literature, especially in the 20th century Russian literature, it is important to study other writers who worked in the similar genre. We believe that Alexievich did not emerge on the literary stage from obscurity as a natural genius; rather, there were people who may be her artistic teachers and precursors, and who had already outlined the main features of the genre that Alexievich possibly follows.

We chose several authors whose writings remind us of Svetlana Alexievich's artistic style. Our main principles for this selection were as follows: their books should be published before Svetlana Alexievich wrote her first book (1983), the texts should be presented in a sort of a montage form combining different pieces of heterogeneous sources of information, there should be no main character in the texts, but rather a choir of characters, and it should have some journalistic input in the form of interviews or newspaper feature articles or both. We would compare how different writers selected, edited, and grouped collected evidence for their books and how their style could be compared to that of Alexievich. Therefore, our main sources for this part of the research will be Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman's *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, Adamovich, Bryl,' and Kolesnik and their book *Я из огненной деревни (Out of The Fire)*, also A. Adamovich and D. Granin's *Блокадная книга (The Blockade Book)*, and S. Smirnov's *Брестская крепость (The Brest Castle)*.

Large number of sources, multitude of characters, various points of view, and a diverse set of combined qualitative evidence became a special feature in the literature of the 20th century. As Ilya Kukulin argued in his *Машины зашумевшего времени* (2015)⁶, in the late 1910s and early 1920s, quite a new literary genre emerged among Russian publications – a genre of 'investigative-prosecuting set of documents,' as Kukulin called it. These texts described various investigations about the last years of Tsarist Russia. Павел Щёголев/ Pavel Schiogolev (1877 – 1931) who was a historian, political writer, and famous public figure of his time played an important role in shaping this new genre.

⁶ И.В. Кукулин, *Машины зашумевшего времени: Как советский монтаж стал методом неофициальной культуры* (Москва: Новое литературное обозрение, 2015). Глава 6: «Черная книга»: генезис жанра.

He worked on the documents about the last years of the Russian Empire; furthermore, in 1927 he published a book with different memories and evidence about the abdication of Russia's last Tsar.⁷

In the 1930s, the genre of such polymorphous books that combined actual historic documents, artistic adaptation of stories, and numerous people's evidence/ testimonies, became forgotten in the time of harsh political turmoil in Russia. At the same time, a similar literary approach began gaining its followers in the USA, where one of the most influential figures was John Dos Passos. His famous *The U.S.A.* trilogy with its three novels *The 42nd Parallel* (1930), *1919* (1932), and *The Big Money* (1936) had several stylistic modes of narration. Among them were the Camera Eye sections and the Newsreels. The Camera Eye provided the author's own, unrelated, incoherent, and stream-of-consciousness autobiographical fragments, telling about his growth from the young years to maturity. The Newsreels contained actual American newspaper headlines and fragments of articles on some politically charged issues of that time. The way in which Dos Passos applied his principle of dissociation and recombination allows for applying the term 'montage' to his writing⁸. Graham Barnfield argues that "Dos Passos' Camera Eye has more in common with the technique in the early Soviet cinema known as Kino-eye or Kino-pravda, about which Dos Passos may have learned during his Russian

⁷ П.Е. Щёголев, *Падение царского режима* (Ленинград: Государственное издательство, 1924 – 1927), and П.Е. Щёголев, *Отречение Николая II: воспоминания очевидцев* (Ленинград: «Красная газета, 1927).

⁸E.D. Lowry, "Manhattan Transfer: Dos Passos' Wasteland" in *Dos Passos: A Collection of Critical Essays*, ed. Andrew Hook (New Jersey: A Spectrum Book, 1974), 53-61.

sojourn of 1928-1929, where he met with montage-using film directors”⁹ and compares the writer to Dziga Vertov and his 1929 film *The Man With a Movie Camera*.

With the beginning of WWII, this experimental genre of montaging first-hand evidence became very useful for Russian writers, because it could operate with extensive quantity of sources and reflect on the events from the both individual and a more general point of view. This was the time when the need to describe something that was simultaneously difficult to capture and to talk about came to the fore. Following the 1941 initiative of Jewish writers, scientists, and artists in the USA, a Soviet partnership organization, called the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee (JAFC), was formed in 1942. On December 18th 1942, the allied countries published in the USSR a manifesto about the crimes against Jews by the Fascists.¹⁰ The Soviet JAFC was invited to prepare its own book of testimonies about the extermination of Jewish people during WWII; such a book was supposed to be a joint project between the American and Soviet Jewish committees. After a long time of silence from the Soviet government, the JAFC was granted a permission to create the so-called “Black Book.” On July 23rd, 1943, the JAFC’s Yiddish newspaper *Einikait (Unity)* published a request to all people to mail to the members of JAFC administration testimonies of instances when Jews were killed by the Fascists. The initial idea was to publish the collection of evidence in English, but one of the most famous essay writers of the time in the USSR, Ilya Ehrenburg, suggested creating a book

⁹ Graham Barnfield, “John Dos Passos, *The Camera Eye* and *The Question of Journalistic Objectivity*” in *John Dos Pasos: Biography and Critical Essays*, ed. Maria Zina Goncalves de Abrey and Bernardo Guido de Vasconcelos (Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 98.

¹⁰ *Черная книга*, под ред. Василия Гроссмана и Ильи Эренбурга (Москва: Corpus, 2015), 708.

on a similar topic in Russian, for the Soviet people. He started this project to collect information about Jews killed specifically on the territory of the USSR, and he invited many leading Soviet literary artists to help him in his mission. Thus, in the spring of 1944, the Literary Board was created as a part of the JAFC, with Ilya Ehrenburg as its head. Vassily Grossman became one of the proponents of the *Black Book* and later, one of the editors of the book's final version. Ehrenburg received numerous letters from different people and adjusted them to the essays that took up about a third of the entire body of the text. Many writers received a portion of the letters with a request to work them into essays, but not every one of them agreed to participate in this project. This fact later led to the final text being a true collage or montage of different sources, styles, and scope of narratives. Between 1942 and 1947, the JAFC collected 27 volumes of evidence of the Fascists' murders of Jews, a total of 6211 archival leaves.¹¹ Only a part of them was selected for the final edition of the *Black Book*. Most of the sources were letters or shorthand texts of interviews with witnesses. Besides essays by Ehrenburg and Grossman, many other military newspaper journalists submitted their stories to the JAFC, as well as some local newspaper journalists, *Einikait* journalists, officers and soldiers of the Red Army, former Ghetto prisoners, and relatives and friends of the killed Jews. Many of the articles were true literary essays, which their authors hoped to publish either in the *Black Book* or in the *Einikait*. For the purpose of this research, I have closely examined two recent editions of this project, published by Corpus Publishing House in Moscow in 2015– the *Black Book* and the *Unknown Black Book*. So far, this claims to be the most authentic edition of the original text that was reconstructed from the never

¹¹ «Чёрная книга», 707.

published 1947 version of the text and the 1980 publication in Israel. The *Unknown Black Book* includes the stories that were removed by the Soviet censorship – stories that mention any cases of the Soviet people refusing to help the Jews, as well as cases when they betrayed Jews and turned them in to the Fascists, or participated in killing them. After Romania left the War in 1944, the evidence describing the crimes by the Romanian soldiers was minimized in the text, and the stories about Romanian Jews on the Eastern front were completely removed. The *Unknown Black Book* restored them and maintained the chapters originally assigned by Ehrenburg and Grossman – the book follows a geographic principle where each chapter reveals evidence about a certain region of the USSR. Those were Ukraine, Belorussia, Russian RSFR, Lithuania, Latvia, a chapter on concentration camps, and a chapter about evidence from some of the Fascists.

The 2015 edition we worked with is a truly historic encyclopedia of the extermination of Jews by the Fascists in the USSR during WWII. Every story was compared to the original document from the Ehrenburg archive in Yad Vashem in Jerusalem or with the archives of the JAFIC in the State Archive of the Russian Federation. Almost every geographic location, name, number, or historic event has footnotes with explanations. There are lists of all the names mentioned in the stories at the end of the book, as well as lists of people who prepared the stories with some short facts about their biographies, and a list of all geographic names which appeared in the text of the book. The result reminds us of a videography where the writers' eyes serve as a camera eye: it creates an impressive panoramic view of a specific aspect of WWII history.

If a story was originally told in Yiddish or German, the name of its translator appears at the end of it. Texts of letters were published in their original version, preserving their original style and word choice. For the words or phrases in other languages, Ehrenburg and Grossman provided their translation into Russian in the footnotes. For example, phrases like «шестикутная звезда» (Ukrainian «шестиконечная звезда»), «киндер майне» (Yiddish «мой ребёнок»), or «вшистко едно» (Polish «всё равно», «без разницы») remained un-edited with their Russian equivalents provided at the bottom of pages.

Due to the nature of the stories' sources, we know only names of the people mentioned in them and those who wrote down the oral testimony, but we know very little or nothing about the date when the story was transcribed. Furthermore, there are almost no mentions of people's ages, which can only be guessed from the context.

The Black Book presents a true collage of evidence testifying to extermination of the Jewish people by the Fascists. The volume brings together all sorts of recollections, letters, diaries, and even texts of Nazi soldiers' testimonies. Undoubtedly, the book has its cinematic aesthetics – the collage utilizes tools of montage and multidimensional presentation that we could see in Dziga Vertov's *Man with a Movie Camera* (1929). We can read a letter from a woman addressed to a brother of a killed Jew, then a story with the evidence of the murder of all Jewish doctors in a certain hospital with a full list of people killed that day, then a letter addressed to Ilya Ehrenburg directly with horrifying details of a Jewish woman's life together with her requests to help her move back in to her former apartment, which had been illegally occupied by her neighbors. Next is a fully completed newspaper sketch artistically describing someone's story or some event, then

we read a diary of a person who died in a ghetto, then we see photographs of artifacts of the WWII in relation to the Jews and their executions. It is a narrative with many perspectives and voices with their own specifics, as well as different stylistic characteristics. It is not only a collage, but to some extent a montage as well. Every story represents a certain point of view and, followed one by another, creating a bigger picture of the event. So it is not only a montage of stories, but a montage of plot levels, too: the constant shift of focus from the front stage result in readers re-creating the plot line themselves. Some stories describe the same event but through the eyes of different people, some specific stories are a mixture of words of those who died, together with the words of a survivor. It is a kind of melting pot where time does not exist since the events are given with no linear sequence and the concepts of “then” and “now” are blurred. There is also a confluence of voices, because there is no ‘main’ character’ or ‘main plot line’: it is a multitude of plot lines and dimensions given at one time. We agree with Ilya Kukulín who argued that such a montage was lined up with the need to combine big historic events with ‘small’ lives of individuals.

If some letters do not make us question their authenticity or if there were any text reductions, it is because they were presented in what seemed to be full and logical paragraphs with unique details, then the stories edited by journalists remain unknown to us in terms of their authenticity. We do not know for sure what parts of the oral evidence the journalist/ writer decided to keep, and which details did not suit their authorial taste.

The Black Book is undoubtedly a voluminous source of various facts regarding the extermination of Jews in the USSR by the Fascist. All the facts that could be verified were given footnotes, with accurate historic data and sources for verification. All the

facts that were not proven true to the existing wartime documents were commented on accordingly. The authors are simultaneously present and absent in the text of the book. Some literary essays have their own distinct authors, and the same is true of some of the personal letters. But stories presented as second hand evidence from the witness to the transmitter to the reader have a hidden author – we read the result of their artistic adaptation of the original stories, and subconsciously we assume that the stories are completely authentic.

Such a technique of combining different sources and different viewpoints became widely practiced by many other writers working in the similar genre and with big historic topics. Both Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman often published their wartime essays describing various events. Their stories were accessible to many people in the Soviet Union during and after the war. In April 1944, Ilya Ehrenburg published 12 pages of his essays titled «Народоубийцы» (“Murderers of People”) in a newspaper supplement for «Знамя». Grossman’s “Treblinka” served as a documented evidence of the Nazis slaughter in Treblinka death camp. Several other stories selected for the book, or written specifically for this book, were available to many readers. It was natural that the book created a whole line of writers following the principle of the *Black Book*’s most prominent genre features.

At the same time as the *Black Book* was created, an American writer and journalist, John Hersey (1914 – 1993), was working on his article for the *New Yorker* about the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. He worked as a correspondent for *Life* and *Time* and often traveled abroad to collect evidence for his articles. In late spring of 1946, Hersey came to Hiroshima and met with some of the

survivors of the nuclear attacks year before. He was asked to write about his experiences in Hiroshima in any way he might choose. Hersey traveled around the entire affected area and interviewed many people, but only a few stories ended up in his final article. For the *New Yorker's* text, John Hersey decided to limit himself to the oral evidence told by six people: two doctors, a German priest, a Japanese Methodist minister, a housewife, and an office girl. As David Sanders put it in his analyses of Hersey's writing: "He decided to concentrate on six persons who were chosen only because they had been good interview subjects, and not for any more dramatic reasons such as their closeness to ground zero or the extent of their sufferings... [He] turned cold statistics into tangible evidence."¹²

The *New Yorker* decided to dedicate a full issue of their August 31st 1946 magazine just to Hersey's story. It was one of the most successful issues they have ever had – full circulation sold out within a few hours. Some sources say that just Albert Einstein alone ordered 1000 copies of that *New Yorker* issue. In his article, the author traced his six interviewees from the very beginning of August 6th in 1946 to the moment they met with John Hersey in person in spring the following year.

Hiroshima became very popular among readers and soon was translated into Russian. The magazine *Zvezda* (*The Star*) published several chapters of the original Hersey's article in their 1970 issue (#8), and the same magazine published another work by the same author in 1965 (issues 10 and 11, «Скупщик детей»/ *The Child Buyer*, 1960). *Zvezda* the magazine is one of the oldest literary magazines in the Soviet Union that has been publishing one issue every month since 1924 until present. It has published some of the most prominent writers of Russian prose and poetry such as Maksim Gorky,

¹² Sanders David, *John Hersey* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), 41.

Anna Akhmatova, Osip Mandelstam, Boris Pasternak and others, and it was especially valued by the Soviet people as a literary source to learn about new foreign writers. It is plausible that most, if not all, of the authors we researched, were reading *Zvezda* and were, thereby, familiar with John Hersey's work.

In some way, John Hersey reflected literary experiments of the 1950s-1970s in the USA in his books and newspaper sketches. He was one of the reporters who in some way helped to create a new style called the New Journalism. The events of WWII and, later, subsequent social and economic situation prompted the need for journalistic genre to acquire new features in order to adjust to the needs of the time. To move forward from the traditional What? /Who? /When? /Where?, magazine and newspaper articles wanted to captivate their audience with the texts and let them imagine the described events as if the readers were there. The scenes were recreated for the readers with great details, all the dialogues given in their full length, and the protagonists treated like those from a novel. We will talk about the New Journalism in the third chapter of this research, but we could mention the names of Tom Wolfe, Truman Capote, Robert Christgau, Hunter S. Thompson, as representing the most famous representatives of this genre. In some way, they all operated in a fashion of videography, almost like a modern day 'vlog' where the audience is presented with detailed, almost videographic, representation of events and/or people. John Hersey, as we believe, could also be considered a New journalist.

Even though it was published in 1946 as a book, at its core *Hiroshima* is a long journalistic sketch of an actual social problem. Every one of the six interviewees was described with great detail; John Hersey described them in the way a writer would

introduce a character in a text of a novel or a play. He described their faces, hairstyle, clothes, even the way they walked:

Mr. Tanimoto is a small man, quick to talk, laugh, and cry. He wears his black hair parted in the middle and rather long; the prominence of the frontal bones just above his eyebrows and the smallness of his mustache, mouth, and chin give him a strange, old-young look, boyish yet wise, weak and yet fiery. He moves nervously and fast, but with a restraint that suggests that he is a cautious, thoughtful man.¹³

John Hersey recreated every little detail of what his six interviewees were doing before, during, and for the next two or three days after the bombing . Every nuance of their mood, their schedules, and their thoughts was presented to the reader so that the audience could believe they themselves were witness to the bombing. He mentioned the light, the wind, the temperature, the surroundings, even passersby and neighbors that the six people had mentioned in their interviews. Here are a few examples:

Mrs. Nakamura went back to the kitchen, looked at the rice, and began watching the man next door. At first, she was annoyed with him for making so much noise, but then she was moved almost to tears by pity.¹⁴

There had been no breeze earlier in the morning when Dr. Fujii had walked to the railway station to see his friend off, but now brisk winds were blowing every which way; here on the bridge the wind was easterly.¹⁵

As readers, we can imagine and almost feel how that woman and that man were feeling in the described moments of the day. The rice is steaming in the pot, the neighbor is taking down his house and is working hard with an axe, the wind is blowing on the bridge, and it feels fresh. Facts as banal as these helped create a true 360-degree view of the day.

The factual data of the text are not given in footnotes; rather, they are woven into the paragraphs and follow the need of the information provided by the interviewees. Even though Hiroshima was a journalistic sketch intended to provide information to the

¹³ John Hersey, *Hiroshima* (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1946), 5.

¹⁴ Hersey, 12.

¹⁵ Hersey, 32.

readers, John Hersey included some of his own thoughts and generalizations into the text, providing a specific point of view or food for thought. Sometimes these comments shift the mood of the narrative, giving it a melodramatic tune:

Everything fell, and Miss Sasaki lost consciousness. The ceiling dropped suddenly and the wooden floor above collapsed in splinters and the people up there came down and the roof above them gave way; but principally and first of all, the bookcases right behind her swooped forward and the contents threw her down, with her left leg horribly twisted and breaking underneath her. There, in the tin factory, in the first moment of the atomic age, a human being was crushed by books.¹⁶

The next passage provides an example of what kind of generalizations John Hersey added to the text:

Under many houses, people screamed for help, but no one helped; in general, survivors that day assisted only their relatives or immediate neighbors, for they could not comprehend or tolerate a wider circle of misery.¹⁷

We do not think that any of his respondents in spring of 1946 were able to analyze their behavior on the day of the bombing to the extent of noticing their inability to comprehend other people's misery. The notion of their state of mind that day was undoubtedly added to the description by the writer himself.

John Hersey used the text of *Hiroshima* to express his own thoughts about the bombing and to make his readers question the event and its moral attributes. By showing tremendous suffering and numerous deaths, and how little average Japanese people knew about the atomic power and especially about the radioactive disease, the author made his audience question if the U.S. government had the right to act this way toward Japanese civilians.

[...] but even if [the bombing victims] had known the truth, most of them were too busy or too weary or too badly hurt to care that they were the objects of the first great experiment in the use of the of atomic power, which (as the voices on the short wave shouted) no country except the United States, with its industrial know-how, its

¹⁶ Hersey, 23.

¹⁷ Hersey, 40.

willingness to throw two billion gold dollars into an important wartime gamble, could possibly have developed.¹⁸

In Hersey's *Hiroshima*, we could see the same principle of montage as we could see in the *Black Book* and the later writers. The book by Ehrenburg and Grossman described events of several years which took place on vast territories, but the American journalist had the event of only a few days. He made it his core theme and described it from six different angles; the six interviewees provided their stories about the same 36 hours in their lives. There is no one main character – instead, the readers could feel as if now they were the main characters of the events of early August of 1945 in Hiroshima. John Hersey did not use other artifacts such as photographs, or belongings from the destroyed city, or quotes from official military or scientific reports. His text is homogenous in terms of the type of his sources – six survivors of the atomic bombing, but it is heterogeneous in the way how he delivers their stories. The narration constantly shifts from one mini-plot to another between all six storytellers. John Hersey himself decided where to stop one line of the story and create montage by inserting the next one. The author is not openly present in the text, but we can see his point of view and notice his presence indirectly. We do not know what part of the stories was left outside of the final edition: Hersey decided that himself, with his authorial power. We cannot imagine the actual words of the survivors, for they would require a translation from Japanese, so the writer adjusted their words for us in the form of a journalistic sketch. But we can see his intention to juxtapose evidence from different people in order to let us recreate the events the way we can, according to our own sense and comprehension. Later, in the 1970s,

¹⁸ Hersey, 66.

Daniil Granin and Ales Adamovich would use similar technique of a montage of a wide spectrum of stories, creating a sharp counterpoint within the text itself.

When thinking of other prominent writers working with a large number of documents and oral evidence, we should mention a person who was to some extent a precursor to Ales Adamovich and later to Svetlana Alexievich: Sergei Sergeevich Smirnov (1915 – 1976). He was well known in the 1950s and 1960s through his work as a second chief editor at a popular Soviet magazine *Новый мир* (*New World*), as a chief editor of *Литературная газета* (*Literary Newspaper*), and his numerous articles in various newspapers, radio shows, and TV shows. He worked within the area of the WWII related topics and did an incredible work researching specific historic events. *Брестская крепость* (*Brest Castle*) became one of his most influential works; for years, Smirnov was looking for historic documents about the castle and for people who took part in the extraordinary battle in June 1941. For a long time, this battle was little known and almost forgotten, mostly because nearly all of its survivors were captured by the Nazi soldiers and kept in camps for war prisoners in Nazi Germany. When the prisoners returned to the USSR after the war, they were all pronounced traitors of their motherland, which was an equivalent of being public enemies. Their lives were very difficult – some of them were sent to labor camps in Siberia, some lost their jobs, others could not restore their membership in the Communist party and, as a result, could not get an employment or a place to live. Sergei Smirnov was the first journalist who told about those people's heroic actions and their miserable fate after the war; his radio- and TV-shows were very popular in the Soviet Union in the decades after the war (his weekly «Рассказы о героизме» (*Heroic Stories*) and «В поисках героев Бреста» (*In search of Brest Heroes*) the radio-

show were well known to the Soviet people). In the afterword to the 2015 edition of the *Brest Castle*, one of Smirnov's sons wrote that his father received about one million letters from all over the USSR from people who thanked the writer for telling the story and who wanted to share their own memories about those terrible weeks in the small city of Brest (in present day Belarus).

The *Brest Castle* was originally published in 1957, and its expanded edition came out in 1965. The book tells stories of the events of June and July of 1941 – the first weeks of WWII in the Soviet Union. The *Brest Castle* was one of the first military fortresses that Nazis planned to seize immediately after their invasion. But the garrison fought back so tenaciously that the enemy was perplexed and noted that in their military reports as they were halted in their advance to Moscow. Soviet soldiers, women, and even children took part in the defense of the fortress. They lacked ammunition, had no medicine, no food, and most importantly, no source of water. Yet, they never surrendered. The *Brest Castle* collects evidence stories from various survivors - men, women, doctors, nurses, even the local people of Brest who were somehow involved in those events. Smirnov started collecting information about the castle resistance soon after the end of the War, and spent the next 10 years investigating those several weeks of 1941 summer in Brest. The text meticulously described every step that Smirnov took when looking for a document or for a person. It revealed his thoughts, doubts, logic, and arguments. The *Brest Castle* looks very much like a journalistic investigation by the style and type of the information provided in it. We can read about the trips Smirnov made while collecting evidence for this book, detailed description of places and their interior, as well as photographs and descriptions of his interviewees. Furthermore, he provided biographies

of the main battle activists. Step by step, we could follow Smirnov's research and investigation from the moment he decided to find out more about the Brest battle of summer 1941, to the moment when some survivors were officially rehabilitated and/or received honors from the Soviet government. Sergey Smirnov wrote in a journalistic-historical manner. He often used data from both Soviet and German archives and from various official historic documents, providing the reader with numerous facts, numbers, and names, and he also retold his conversations with the battle survivors. Smirnov did not use those words as quotations or marked them as dialogues – he told them as his own memories about those conversations. Smirnov later mentioned that he had a stenographer, who helped him type out those conversations, but we do not know if the stenographer was actually present during the meetings; we were not able to find any information about it.

The stories in the *Brest Castle* are heartfelt and plainspoken. Although the writer used his own words and style to bring oral evidence to his readers, we cannot perceive a real persona behind those stories because it is impossible not to sympathize with the immediate storytellers. The main principle of this approach is easy to distinguish. Sergey Smirnov wanted to let people recreate and, at the same time, to create that moment in history. By letting the survivors tell their own stories and their own emotional evaluation of the events, the writer set the main idea of this literary genre. No one could tell the truth about a certain event in history better than the people who lived through it. Just as later Adamovich and Granin, Sergei Smirnov wanted to use only accurate facts and only those stories that were recalled by several witnesses.

The book consists of three parts that follow Smirnov's progress in his investigation: Part One – «Легенда, ставшая былью» ("The Legend that Came True"), Part Two – «Герои известные и неизвестные» (*Well-known and Unknown Heroes*), Part Three – «Большая семья» (*Big Family*). Each part has short chapters with rather unassuming titles like «Письмо азербайджанской женщины» (*A letter from an Azerbaijani Woman*) or «На памятных развалинах» (*At the Memorable Ruins*). These short stories and their titles, gradually reveal to their readers the important elements of the testimonies, discovered by Sergei Smirnov during his work.

What was different about *The Brest Castle*, as compared to other books in the same genre, was its overall politically engaged manner of writing. Smirnov provided the dates when each one of his interviewees joined the Communist party and mentioned multiple times their loyalty to the Soviet Union and the ruling party. Here is an example of how Sergei Smirnov incorporated these words into his writing. His interviewee's last name was Филь/ Fil, and the soldier recalled how, when captured by the Nazis, his interpreter suggested that he say his last name was German and that he had German ancestors:

Филь понимал, что было бы бесполезно объяснять свои чувства переводчику, хотя тот искренне хотел помочь пленному. Для этого человека, воспитанного в панской капиталистической Польше, остались бы пустым звуком все слова о чести и достоинстве советских людей, советских воинов. [. . .] Разве мог он понять, что для Филья, коренного русского человека, воспитанного Коммунистической партией и Советской властью, выросшего в рядах комсомола, сама мысль о том, чтобы выдать себя за полунемца, служить врагу, а тем более надеть на плечи ненавистную фашистскую шинель, была нестерпимо унижительной, чудовищно невозможной!¹⁹

¹⁹ С.С. Смирнов, *Брестская крепость* (Москва: Издательство Терра, Книжный клуб Книгобек, 2015), 105. [Fil knew it did not make sense to explain his feelings to the translator, even though the latter genuinely wanted to help him. All words about honor and pride of Soviet people and Soviet soldiers would have been meaningless for that man who was raised in capitalist Poland. [. . .] The very thought of pretending to be half-German, to serve the enemy, and

No other writers of similar genre used this sort of political cliché phrases in their books. We believe that what prompted Smirnov to do so was the fact that, as his son explained later in his book, he truly believed in the future of the Soviet Union and their model of life. But another reason might be the fact that the *Brest Castle* was a journalistic investigation with the goal to justify and defend those who fought in the battle and were later wrongly accused. In the 1950s in the Soviet Union, this writing style was probably the best one to serve the author's goal to get an acquittal for the true heroes of the war.

Even though The *Brest Castle* talks about those who fought against the Fascists in the city of Brest in 1941, and we learn a lot of stories about various people, the style of the delivery of this information in the text made it very much of an “I” narrative/ first person narrative. Sergei Smirnov has interwoven his persona with the story as one of the characters in the book. He started and finished each chapter with his own thoughts before and after the interviews, his actions, and where and how he met his narrators. Although he used short first-person dialogues in the text, most of the stories were presented after his authorial adaptation, much like John Hersey did in *Hiroshima*. We could barely imagine the actual words of the narrators as they are hidden behind the writer's presentation of the oral testimonies as a story with a beginning, development, culmination, and closure. But we can see the same forming principle as we saw in the *Black Book* and the *Hiroshima* – a wide spectrum of stories tracing individual perception and points of view. It is a juxtaposition of angles of the same event, coming from diverse origins.

moreover, to put on the accursed Nazi uniform was painfully humiliating and horribly impossible for Fil, because Fil was a native Russian who was raised by the Communist Party and the Soviet government, and grew up among Komsomol members. – my trans.]

A similar panoramic view on the same event, told by different witnesses, is a forming principle for the book written by a group of well-known Belorussian writers – Ales Adamovich, Yanka Bryl, and Vladimir Kolesnik. In her first book, *The War's Unwomanly Face*, Svetlana Alexievich wrote that those three people were her main teachers. Ales Adamovich even loaned her money to buy a tape-recorder for her first collection of interviews. She knew these people and worked with them, and we believe it would be important for this research to see how and to what extent Svetlana Alexievich adapted their findings and where she stands among those writers' in terms of artistic legacy.

Я из огненной деревни (*Out of the Fire*, or literally, *I Am from a Burning Village*) was published in 1975 in Minsk, Belorussian SSR. Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik spent about four years, from 1970 to 1973, collecting interviews from the people who survived in WWII and who witnessed the terrors brought to the thousands of Belorussian villages by the Nazi troops. For the purposes of this discussion, we will use a 2001 edition published in Minsk, in Belorussian.

The text consists of dozens of chapters, and each one presents interviews with real people from the Belorussian lands. The writers announce themselves by putting their own questions in the body of interviews, also by describing how the interviewees were behaving during the meeting, including their emotional state. The storytellers provide their heartfelt stories filled with horror, suffering, and pain. They tell how they lost their families and how they themselves survived.

Out of the Fire has a unique, original language – a dialect which people of Belorussian villages have been using for many years. It is a mixture of Belorussian,

Russian, Ukrainian, and Polish. The three writers gave the interviews without any stylistic changes, so the text is not easy to read for someone who doesn't speak at least two of these languages. Moreover, the text preserved all the local words that the interviewees used in their stories. Instead of changing them, Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik gave a modern term, or a more popular term for the local word as a page footnote. Also, the interviews contain all little exclamations native to a spoken language – «тюк!», «др-др-др», «земля дух- дух-дух», and we can also see some obscene phrases although given as abbreviations, like «Ё.т.м!»²⁰

Admovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik deliver the interviews without any editing. It is a continuous text with all little details that a narrator can use in a spontaneous speech. For example:

Приехали к мосту, он забрал коня и как стал стрелять надо мной, так я не помнила, в какую сторону мне идти. Ну, я всё-таки шла, шла, шла и пошла сюда на кладбище. Пришла. Ну что ж, я тут? Заночевала. Я и не боялась. Я уже и не помню ничего: и холодно, и голодно. А я уже тут и была. Назавтра встали: нет нигде никого и ничего, всё уже. И так уже и остались горевать: и мучались – и по лесам, и по полям, и везде. И голые, и голодные, и босые, и всякие.²¹

The text is full of narratives given with numerous repetitions, abrupt sentences, and slow progression of the events in a story.

²⁰ Ё.т.м. – is an abbreviation for the Russian equivalent of 'Oh F..ck' or 'F..ck you!'

²¹ Алесь Адамович, Янка Брыль, Владимир Колесник, *Я з возгненнай вёски* (Минск, 2001), 306. [We came to the bridge, [the Nazi soldier] started shooting over my head, and I forgot what direction I had to go to. Anyways, I was walking, and walking, and came here, to the cemetery. So I came here. I settled for the night at the cemetery. I didn't remember anything; it was cold and it was hunger. So I was there at the cemetery. We woke up next morning and everybody and everything was gone. That was it. So we were left for lamenting, we kept suffering in fields, in forests, and everywhere. We were naked, we were hungry, and barefoot, and all that. – my trans. from Belorussian]

In addition to providing the texts of interviews without any stylistic changes, Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik mark their presence in the stories by asking questions of their narrators, and then using those questions in the book. We can see the word «*Bonpos*» /*Question* in Italic and then their question in quotes. It creates an atmosphere of originality and inclusiveness for a reader, almost placing them within the dialogue. It feels as though we as readers are studying a typed copy of an authentic conversation, and we ‘co-live’ it. Besides providing their questions, the three writers also often describe what the storytellers were doing during the interview, as in the following passage:

Хозяйка дома, тётка Репчик, которая сначала больше мешала, чем помогала своему медленному «деду» Миколу рассказывать про тот мартовский день, а потом и сама, уже одна, торопилась говорить, теперь молчит, полностью доверяя рассудительности более молодой соседки. Соседка говорит и время от времени плачет. Хозяйка сходилa тихонько за перегородку, в спальню, вернулась с чистеньким полотенцем и положила его соседке на подол.²²

Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik tried to place themselves together with their narrators. In between the quotations of interview texts, the writers provided some generalizations to what was just described, and try to bridge it with the next story by various summaries and historic facts. It is typical for this book to highlight their words of support for and understanding of the speaker, which has the additional dividend of underscoring just how this story relates to those previously given in the book.

The three writers attempted to create a book of documentary journalism, something that would reflect on the WWII events from both the word of actual documents and the word of survivors. They would quote actual archival materials to

²² Адамович, Брыль, Колесник, 32-33. [At the beginning, the hostess Mrs. Repchik, was more interrupting than helping her slow-paced husband Mikola tell about that one day in March. She kept rushing with her words, but now she is silent and trusts her younger neighbor to speak. The neighbor is talking and, from time to time, crying. The hostess quietly walked to the room behind a curtain and came back with a clean towel, and put it on the neighbor’s laps. – my trans.]

describe the events from a village in a certain year and the number of casualties. They would also tell more about the plan that the Nazis had for the Belorussian lands. The writers quote lines from Hitler, his top administrators, and various Nazi helpers from the Nuremberg Court trials of 1945-1946. *Out of the Fire* has a three-page long bibliography. Among those items we see such documents as 1) R. Manvell, H. Traenkel. Goebbels. Warszawa, 1972. 2) A. Bullock, Hitler. Studium tyranii. Т. III. 3) Нюрнбергский процесс, Т. II. 4) «Совершенно секретно! Только для командования!» Стратегия фашистской Германии в войне против СССР: Документы и материалы. М., 1967, etc. Twenty-five different sources are listed in Russian, Belorussian, German, and Polish.

After finishing the work on this book, Ales Adamovich saw that he would need to continue collecting testimonies from more people and other dramatic events from WWII. Burnt and killed Belorussian villages were not exceptional; they were a part of the big war where millions of people lost their lives. He was convinced that he had to prepare a similar book based on oral testimony, collected from the survivors of Leningrad siege or blockade. For that, he needed an artistic partner – somebody who would be a local and familiar to the survivors, because they did not want to talk about their blockade experiences, especially with a stranger from Belorussia. This is how Daniil Granin became involved in this project and, later, felt deeply about a book titled *Блокадная книга* (*The Blockade Book*). In the preface, Granin described his own memories about the blockade of Leningrad, because he served in the war and made a few trips to the city during the siege.

Originally, the book was published in 1977 in *Novyi Mir* (*New World*) magazine. It was forbidden from publishing in Leningrad because of censorship and sundry

bureaucratic issues. As Daniil Granin wrote in his preface, after the end of the Leningrad Siege many members of the city's political administration were executed after accusations of being Soviet "public enemies." This was the so-called "Leningrad case," which resulted in the 'disappearance' of several party leaders. The heroic city, which survived the siege and managed to resist the fascists, was cherished and respected among the Soviet people. But the Moscow party leaders did not want that fame to belong just to Leningrad; at that time, the stakes were high, since Stalin was going to name his successor. When the first secretary of the Leningrad region Party Committee, G.V. Romanov, said that such books as *The Blockade Book* were not needed, it was clear that at that point the text could not be published. It was finally printed in Leningrad in 1984, after Romanov had been promoted to Moscow as a Secretary of the Politburo of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. In some way, this book is similar to *Мы из огненной деревни (Out of the Fire)*. For the most part, however, it is different in tone and more varied, foregrounding a wider range of topics and age or social groups of interviewees. The special edition of *Блокадная книга (The Blockade Book)*, published in Minsk, in 2015, to commemorate the 40th anniversary Adamovich and Granin's work on this book, has valuable prefaces by Ales Adamovich and by Daniil Granin, who outline why, how, and when they were working on this project. The prefaces and notes published by Adamovich provided their readers with a deeper and better understanding of the book.

The Blockade Book tells hundreds of stories about the horrible 900 days of blockade in Leningrad, modern Saint Petersburg, which lasted from September 1941 to January 1944. The city was surrounded by the Nazi army and their allies and no food, or

medicine, or any other help could get into the cut off Leningrad. Starvation, diseases, and injuries took the lives of about 1.5 million people. As Adamovich and Granin explained, the movie «Блокада» (*Blockade*) based on the novel by Alexander Chakovsky²³, was understood to reflect how the siege was supposed to be depicted in the Soviet Union.²⁴ The two writers wanted to add more stories to that picture – they wanted people to tell about everything they remembered in connection with those 900 days in an isolated city. While some stories were horrifying, others demonstrated incredibly high spirit and camaraderie among the suffering people.

Adamovich and Granin set one main principle in *Блокадная книга* (*The Blockade Book*). Everything they decided to include in the book must be first-hand experience only - no anecdotes, or overheard stories, or any myths that the interviewees did not see or hear themselves.

[...] Тогда мы с Адамовичем взяли себе за правило, что пишем только достоверное – с фамилиями, именами, отчествами, адресами, - хотели избавляться от множества блокадных мифов, что накапливались у блокадников. Бессознательно они присваивали себе то, что видели в кино, по телевидению, что как-то напоминало или сходило за пережитое. Боюсь, что из этой нашей погони за достоверностью многое интересное пропало. Не доверяли. Не пропускали.²⁵

To support the veracity of their stories, Adamovich and Granin put every story in quotations and some long stories were in a format of a dialogue between the writers and

²³ A movie by Mikhail Yershov, consists of 4 episodes, released in 1973 – 1977 in the USSR.

²⁴ Алесь Адамович, Даниил Гранин, *Блокадная книга* (Минск: Мастацкая літаратура, 2015), 53.

²⁵ Адамович, Гранин, 573. [Adamovich and I set a rule that we would write only about facts using full names and addresses. We wanted to get rid of the Blockade anecdotes that got accumulated by the Blockade people. Unconsciously, they impropriated what they saw in movie theaters and on TV, and what looked similar to what they survived through. I am afraid that we lost a lot of interesting stories in our pursuit of authenticity. We did not believe and did not allow [such stories]. – my trans.]

their narrator(s). It is very easy to tell apart the words of storytellers and the words of the two writers. Each chapter has several first-person testimonies with some small ‘connectors’ of authorial thoughts. Often, Adamovich and Granin would make connections between a certain story and other stories in the text, or they would provide additional details about their narrators with or without relation to the interview. This technique already existed in the *Я из огненной деревни* (*Out of the Fire*) and was employed by Adamovich and Granin. The two writers were present in the stories they published in *Блокадная книга* (*The Blockade Book*). We believe that to some extent, this specific technique helped them achieve credibility of the stories they included in the text of the book. Furthermore, each story they provided had a first and last name of the narrator and often his/her address as well. A chapter had a unifying topic that stitched together memories of different people; there were chapters about little children in the siege, cats and dogs, everyday life, food rationing cards, etc.

Additionally, Adamovich, together with Granin, continued one more technique that Adamovich had already used in his previous books: they provided original documents, from an ever-widening range of genre categories. If in the earlier books Adamovich provided some original facts by using various books on history and real archives, in *Блокадная книга* the writers expanded their sources. Here we can see quotes not only from books like the documents of Nuremberg case various historic studies, but also from the 17th century chronicles (specifically, a chronicle about the great famine of 1602 by a Belorussian chronographer), from poetry of Olga Berggoltz (who lived in Leningrad during the siege), and from what seems to be a new element, from authentic diaries of people who documented their lives in the city in those dark years. «Блокадная

книга» has dozens of quotes from original diaries by Leningrad people during the blockade. There are also three large diaries in the book – one by Ales Adamovich himself where he described his notes about the book between 1975 and 1991. The next one is by a teenager Yura Riabinkin (Юра Рябинкин) He described his life in the besieged city with all its horror, starvation, despair, and his own moral degradation. Yura honestly shared all good and bad thoughts and actions in his diary, and the two writers used it as a historic document of the life in Leningrad. The third diary belonged to Georgiy Kniaziev (Георгий Алексеевич Князев), a leading scholar on the team working on the *History of the USSR Academy of Science*. Their work could not and did not stop during the siege, and made use of his diary as a distinct perspective onto the story of the starving and dying city. Both the schoolboy, Yura Riabinkin, and Professor Georgiy Kniaziev provided probing philosophical analyses of what they saw around them and what was happening to them.

Here is an example of one diary entry by Yura Riabinkin:

25 октября. Только отморозил себе ноги в очередях. Больше ничего не добился. [. . .] Эх, как хочется спать, спать, есть, есть, есть... Спать, есть, спать, есть... А что ещё человеку надо? А будет человек сыт и здоров – ему захочется ещё чего-нибудь, и так без конца... [. . .] Мама мне говорит, что дневник сейчас не время вести. А я вести его буду. [. . .] Вспомнилась почему-то фраза Горького из «Клима Самгина»: «А может, мальчика-то и не было?» Жил человек – нет человека. И народная загадка спрашивает: что самое короткое на свете? И ответ гласит: жизнь. [. . .]²⁶

²⁶ Адамович, Гранин, 398. [October 25th. I froze my feet off by standing in lines. I didn't achieve anything more than that. Ah, I want to sleep and sleep, to eat, and eat, and eat. To sleep and to eat, to sleep and to eat. What else does a man need? If a man were full and healthy, he would want something else, and it would be endless. [...] Mom tells me that now is not the best time to keep a diary. But I am going to keep it. [...] For some reason, I recalled a phrase from Gorky's *The Life of Klim Samgin* "What if the boy did not exist?" Now a man is alive and then there is no more man. A famous riddle asks, what is the shortest in the world? And the answer is "Life". – my trans.]

We can see the boy's everyday life and existential thoughts during the siege. Georgy Kniazev's diary entry reflected on similar topics, but as a prominent scholar, he delivered his thoughts with greater depth and self-analysis:

1942. II. 10 Двести тридцать четвёртый день войны. Февральский снежный день. Редкие оружейные залпы. Прохожие. Саночки. Покойники. Бурые пятна на снегу. [...] На днях должна состояться вторая эвакуация академических сотрудников. Уезжают все, кто может! «Петербургу быть пусту»... Неужели исполнится старое и страшное пророчество! Я тороплюсь жить. Мысли наполняют мой мозг: вот, например, вчера и сегодня я набрасывал мысли о Монелле – Мгновении. Есть такая поэма у Марселя Швоба, поразившая меня ещё 35 лет назад своей оригинальностью и изощрённостью самого изысканного упадничества. [. . .] Надо же как-то жить, подавать признаки жизни. Уж лучше сочинять поэму о Монелле, чем проклинать всех и вся и мучиться от бессилия что-либо исправить кругом, изменить в своей жизни. Умереть не трудно, умирать очень тяжело...²⁷

Another unique feature of this book is the chapters and their titles. We already mentioned that each chapter included several texts of interviews, or excerpts from various diaries, or thoughts by Adamovich and Granin, and the stories were united under one topic. In the book analyzed earlier, *Я из огненной деревни (Out of the Fire)*, Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik gave their chapters usual titles with no hidden meaning or implied dramatic content. In contrast, in *Блокадная книга (The Blockade Book)*, Adamovich and Granin began naming chapters in a way where the titles would reflect some grave episodes in their content. We can even trace an intensification of this compositional practice over time. The first part of the *Блокадная книга* had chapters titled «Братья меньшие»

²⁷ Адамович, Гранин, 504. [February 10th, 1942. The 234th day of war. A snowy day in February. Infrequent gunshots. Pedestrians. Sledges. Dead bodies. Reddish brown spots in the snow. In a few days, they will start a second evacuation of academic people. Everyone who can go they go away! "St. Petersburg will be void". Is this old and horrible prophecy going to come true? I am in a rush to live. Thoughts are filling up my mind. For example, last night and today, I have been outlining my ideas about Monella's *Moments*. Marcel Schwob wrote a poem that astounded me 35 years ago with its ingenuity and sophistication of the most refined decadence. [...] We still need to live somehow, need to show vital signs. It's better to be writing a poem about Monella than to curse everything and everyone and to suffer from the impossibility of changing something in the life around. It is not hard to die, but the process of dying is very difficult. – my trans.]

(‘Pets’), «Блокадный быт» (‘Every-day life under the siege’), «Ленинградские дети» (‘Children of Leningrad’), etc. but in the second part of the book the style changed. Now we can see titles like «Остаться человеком» (‘To stay a human’), «Лихорадочно тороплюсь жить...» (‘I am rushing to live’), «Зачем-то шапку снял» (‘He took his hat off for some reason’), etc. The titles become clear only after reading each chapter to its end. For example, in the chapter «Зачем-то шапку снял», we read about a woman, Lidia Okhapkina, and her children starving nearly to death in Leningrad and how they were all of a sudden scheduled for an evacuation in March. They managed to get out of the city on ice and a week later her husband met them at one of the railway stations. He did not recognize his wife and children, because they were in their last stages of dystrophy and some of them already could not walk. When he returned to the train car and understood that those people were his family, he started crying and took off his hat, as people do when someone dies. The title captured the most emotional event of the story – the moment when nearly dead people were recognized as ‘not dead,’ as their ‘pre-war selves.’

As we already mentioned, the edition of *Блокадная книга* we have been working with has two prefaces from the writers. These texts provide noteworthy information that seems crucial to identifying some of the borrowings and adaptations of the writers’ ideas by Svetlana Alexievich.

In their preface, Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin noted that they had recorded all their interviews and asked two stenographers to type hundreds of pages of those interviews later. The two writers wanted to have the exact words of the oral stories and to preserve all their individual nuances, together with what they call their ‘clumsiness’

(«корявость»). That adds to the text's authenticity and credibility and makes the voices sound more real over the period that is being documented.

Interestingly enough, Daniil Granin mentioned that only a small number of interviews would be useful for their future «Блокадная книга» and that women were the best story-tellers:

Многое решает талант рассказчика. Лучше всего рассказывали женщины. Женская память устроена несколько иначе, чем мужская. Ведь мужская память – она глобальна: мужчин общие ситуации больше интересуют. А подробности быта, бытия, что творилось на малом участке: очередь, булочная, квартира, соседи, лестница, кладбище, – это память... женская. Она была более красочная и крепкая. Примерно из десяти рассказов один, как правило, гениальный; два-три рассказа – талантливых, очень интересных. Но даже из невнятных, косноязычных рассказов всё равно всплывали детали и подробности впечатляющие.²⁸

This idea was later used by Svetlana Alexievich as she wrote a book dedicated specifically to women's stories of their life and survival during WWII, *The War's Unwomanly Face*, 1983 (published 1985).

Overall, Alexievich's writing shows some similarities to as well as differences from the writers we mentioned in this part of our analysis. Some of the features seem to be direct borrowings and adaptations, while other features were denied and deflected. We would like to provide some specific examples.

John Hersey showed hesitation about the legitimacy of the American government actions in Japan in 1945, and he expressed it in the lines of *Hiroshima*. We could think of

²⁸ Адамович, Гранин, 50. [Storyteller's talent is very important. Women were the best storytellers. Women's memory functions in a bit different way from the men's. Men's memory is global; men are more interested in general situations. Whereas women's memory keeps the details of everyday life, of existence in general – what was going on in a small area, a line, a bakery, an apartment, neighbors, building hallways and staircases, and cemetery. Women's memory is more colorful and strong. As usual, one out of ten stories was ingenious, and two or three were talented and very interesting. But some impressive details and nuances emerged even out of unclear, inarticulate stories. – my trans.]

the same technique in Svetlana Alexievich's books about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and about the Soviet war in Afghanistan, with the only difference being that in those cases it is her interviewees, rather than she, who are criticizing the government. Using her storyteller's narratives, Alexievich only implicitly delivers her attitude toward some the government's actions.

Having read *Out of the Fire* by Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik, we could see how Svetlana Alexievich adapted the techniques and patterns used by her fellow Belorussian writers. Each chapter had a title and contained several interviews with the villagers, who survived during WWII on the territory of the present-day Belarus, and shared their memories. The text carefully highlighted their emotional state and behavior during the meeting, while sharing their stories. Alexievich used this scheme as a basis and built upon it. Just like her colleagues, she dedicated each chapter to usually one and, rarely, two stories and strove to provide at least small details denoting her interlocutors' emotions and actions.

The three writers provided us with many questions which they asked their interviewees. In their book, the questions are typed in *Italics*. Svetlana Alexievich also tried to adopt this technique, but she never marked what kind of questions she asked her respondents; sometimes we are able to guess them from the context, but in most of the stories, it is impossible. Similarly, she refrains from providing any long descriptions of the interview context, whereas Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik would often dedicate a paragraph to describe, in detail, what people were doing at the time of an interview and what emotions they showed. In Alexievich's books, we can find rare short descriptions of her narrators or small parenthetical notes about what the interviewed person was doing,

for example «отвернулась, плачет» (turned away, crying). In some way, she prefers giving her readers an idea that each storyteller is talking to the reader, and not to her.

In *Out of the Fire*, the chapters have titles like «Больше десяти» ('More than Ten'), «Акция, операция, экспедиция» ('Mission, Operation, Expedition') or «Новые дети» ('New Children'). Each chapter contains not just one story, but rather several interview-driven narrativess. This is one more difference from Alexievich's approach: she names and re-names her chapters in a very dramatic way, trying to capture the most terrifying moment of every story. Likewise, in her books a story may constitute a chapter, even if it is only one paragraph long.

In the book by the three writers, every interviewee is marked with his or her full name and age at the moment of the meeting. Although Alexievich tries to do the same, several scholars have already noted that she changes the names and age among the editions.²⁹

Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik included local dialects with their diversity and complexity into the book's final body of text. They left several onomatopoeias and vulgarities. The writers did not polish their interviewees' recollections and did not try to make them more and literate for wider audiences. Alexievich does not do follow the same method here – her books are in modern Russian with just a few dialecticisms. From our study of four different editions of the *Last Witnesses*, we are able to assess the extent to which even those few dialectal expressions are replaced by their Russian equivalents. In terms of the liberty at showing various levels of the Russian language in her texts, only

²⁹ See "Witness Tampering," by Sophie Pinkham, and "Du bon et du mauvais usage du témoignage dans l'œuvre de Svetlana Alexievitch," by Galia Ackerman.

the *Secondhand Time* provided some rough and curse words; the earlier books had none of these elements.

One of the biggest differences is the fact that Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik use the words of their storytellers in quotes. It is easy to see which part of the text belongs to the three writers, and what is a transcript of the interview with another person. In the books by Alexievich, a story is given without any quotation marks, a chapter is perceived as a one long quotation. However, having studied four different editions of one of her books, we could see that at least some parts of those stories are not quotations; rather, they are Alexievich's authorial adjustments to the text of the interview.

The text of *Out of the Fire* provided quotations in full, with the writers giving the words verbatim. The text showed repetitions, abrupt sentences, and other signs of a real-time speech. In Alexievich's books, we cannot see any such examples. She removes all the minor details and leaves only the most emotional moments, altering the stories to the point that they fit a few pages of a highly condensed dramatic story. It seems that her goal is not to provide an interview as is, but to choose only those phrases and sentences that would have the most impact on her reader. This compositional practice comes with a price. The raw material gets cut and edited out by Alexievich, resulting in a highly concentrated and emotionally charged text.

In addition, Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik found two stenographers who later typed all the interviews that the three writers recorded on audiotapes during their travels. They wanted the texts to preserve the authentic phrasing, word choices, syntax, and all the unique imperfections of a real conversation. This is not the case in the books by Alexievich. In one of her interviews, she mentions that Ales Adamovich suggested that

she type-record the interviews and use them later for her book. It is believed that she recorded her interviews. Nonetheless, this assertion cannot be proven, given that she said she did not keep any recordings and had to erase them each time before working on a new book. Even in the early 1990s, when she was in court as a defendant, Alexievich did not bring any cassettes with recorded interviews to support her side of the story.

What would be the most significant technique avoided by Alexievich, is the fact that in *Out of the Fire* Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik used real historic documents. They tried to recreate the terrible years of the war by combining stories of the survivors with fixed facts of the war archives. The writers supported the events recalled by their interviewees with the help of the actual data from various historic sources. Perhaps their book is not as dramatic as those by Alexievich, but readers find themselves believing Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik succeeded in their project of telling about WWII with historic data and real people's testimonies. *Out of the Fire* feels authentic and the voices of those people ring authentic even in 2018. Svetlana Alexievich, however, did not support this approach. Rather than putting together facts and real people's stories, she preferred omitting documents, and letting the texts of narrators create their own history of the events. Rarely does she use some factual data in preface or afterword. Most often, it is not easy to understand to what times her interviewees are referring, and when exactly their stories took place. Instead, Alexievich's narrative segments feel like a diffuse choir of people, in which each voice sings a random part of an oratorio.

In *The Blockade Book*, the writers marked the texts of interviews with quotes and often provided large interviews in the form of a dialogue. We could see their presence and the progression of the conversation. While we have no doubts that this approach was

appealing to Svetlana Alexievich, it is quite evident that she also adjusts it to her own vision and preferred leaving only a few notes here and there throughout her books about her visits with the interviewees, their homes, sometimes their appearance, and only a very few questions that she asked them and then later decided to include in the text. In some way, Alexievich wants to achieve anonymity of her figure as the interviewer. She stays behind the curtain and claims to serve only as a faceless redactor, almost like a Biblical redactor who puts together different sources. Alexievich joins herself with the narratives and blends her voice together with theirs. All the same, upon scrutiny there is little that we are able to discern her presence within the narratives she selects.

With its words of Adamovich and Granin and numerous entries from Adamovich's artistic diary, *The Blockade Book's* preface throws into sharp relief the major differences between their writing and Svetlana Alexievich's. Adamovich and Granin agreed to not publish anything that was not a verifiable recollection. Often, people from wartime Leningrad would adjust their memories to what they later saw in the movies or what they heard from various city anecdotes. Some of the most dramatic and horrifying stories were often impossible to prove due to lack of witnesses or verifiable facts. Perhaps the most significant difference between the principle of *The Blockade Book* and Alexievich's books is that the former jettisons some of the most dramatic and graphic stories because of their dubious authenticity, whereas the latter writer seems to gravitate toward the shocking. In her recent books and edited new editions of her earlier publications, Alexievich makes a special effort to underscore the dramatically appalling character of the period she documents.

The Blockade Book provided excerpts from various diaries that survived the Leningrad siege. Two of them were given almost in full in the text of the book – one by a schoolboy and another one by a famous professor. Svetlana Alexievich has not used this technique in her books, even though authentic documents undoubtedly gave more credibility to Adamovich and Granin's book and deepened its reception by the readers. We believe her interviewees did offer her their diaries. In *Zinky Boys*, one of the last chapters in the most recent edition, published in Moscow in 2016, tells the story of court hearings accusing Alexievich of falsifying the text of the interviews. One of the prosecutors was a mother of a young Soviet soldier killed in Afghanistan. In court, she insisted that she gave her son's diaries to Svetlana Alexievich. Yet, there were no diary entries in the text of *Zinky Boys*.

Adamovich and Granin started a feature that Svetlana Alexievich later actively adapted and enhanced in her books. Adamovich and Granin progressed from giving their book chapters basic titles reflecting the unifying idea of the stories (like «На работе», «Ленинградские дети»), to giving more original titles meant to capture some of the most emotional lines of the interviews. Alexievich has actively utilized this technique and, with time, her chapter titles became more and more dramatic. If we compare her early books with her most recent book, *The Secondhand Time*, we can see the increase in the emotional intensity of the titles.

As Svetlana Alexievich mentioned in her books and in some interviews, she and Ales Adamovich were friends. She probably also called Daniil Granin her friend until his recent death in 2017. Alexievich's first book *У войны не женское лицо* (*War's*

Unwomanly Face) was completed in 1983 and published in the *Hëман/Neman* magazine in 1985.

In one of her interviews, Svetlana Alexievich told that she met Ales Adamovich for the first time in 1976 when she had a meeting with him for that year's conference on war-themed literature. Probably, both the book about Belorussian villages and the meeting with Adamovich were crucial in the formation of the young writer, because that same year she started collecting interviews for her future book *The War's Unwomanly Face* that she finished in 1981 and later published in 1985.³⁰ Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik's *Out of the Fire* was the benchmark for her as a writer: it gave her the idea of combining written texts with reality.

The fact the Adamovich was involved in her professional growth is undeniable. From the very beginning, the older writer was supportive of Alexievich in many ways. Adamovich, Bryl, and Vasil Bykov lent her 5000 Soviet rubles, making it possible for her to buy a cassette-recorder so that she could start collecting interviews with women for her future first book.³¹ Writing later about that book by his protégée, Ales Adamovich noted that people who did not take part in the war were able to create high-quality pieces of literature with their fresh and sharp perception of the war memories.

³⁰ Светлана Алексиевич, «Моя единственная жизнь» в *Вопросы литературы*, 1996, № 1. *Noblit.ru*. accessed 04.22.2018, <http://noblit.ru/node/3163>.

³¹ Игорь Свинаренко, *ВЛЗР: Великие писатели земли русской* (Москва: Время, 2016). Interview of Igor Svinarenko with Svetlana Alexievich «Даю сказать тем, кого не слушали».

А вот ещё один пример [...] в жанре наших книг «Я из огненной деревни...» и «Блокадная книга». Книги эти, как известно, делали участники войны, хотя это совсем не обязательно, чтобы участники. Во всяком случае после того как жанр найден и достаточно определен. Это и доказала Светлана Алексиевич, подготовившая к публикации работу, удивительную по силе правды и человечности, - книгу рассказов-воспоминаний бывших фронтовичек и партизанок-подпольщиц. Прочёл я её, и даже было мгновение, когда запоздавшая писательская скарденность в душе шевельнулась: почему отдал, почему сам не сделал? Но и понял сразу: *так* работу эту я не сделал бы. И не только потому, что я мужик и не сумел бы, как она, Светлана, разговаривать с женщинами обо всём, вплоть до их сугубо женских дел и бед, которые так усложняли жизнь в холоде, грязи и среди мужского фронтового народа. А Светлана со своими героинями и обед сварит, и повздыхает над их послевоенной судьбой, и поплачут они вместе...³²

A few years later, Ales Adamovich wrote an afterword in the first edition of Svetlana

Alexievich's book *Последние свидетели: книга не детских рассказов* (*Last*

Witnesses: The Book of Unchildlike Stories), 1985. In that short, nine-page essay, he

supported both *The War's Unwomanly Face* and the *Last Witnesses*, because they

followed his own literary concept of documentary prose. Adamovich highly praised

those two books by the young Belorussian writer, complimenting her skills in

selecting and montaging raw texts of hundreds of collected interviews into a

powerful literary product. In the same afterword, Adamovich described how the idea

of creating a collection of stories recorded from female war veterans came to him.

³² Алесь Адамович, «Человек может» в *Додумывать до конца* (Москва: Советский писатель, 1988), 320-321. (Ответы на анкету журнала «Дружба народов» (1982, №5)). [Here is one more example within the genre of our books *Out of The Fire* and *The Blockade Book*. As we know, these books were written by the war veterans. But it should not necessarily be war veterans, since the genre was already found and shaped. This was proven by Svetlana Alexievich who prepared an impressive and powerful book of stories/recollections told by the former war soldier women and female members of the underground partisan groups. I read it and for a moment a covetous writer in me thought "Why did I give it away? Why did I not write it myself?" But the same moment I understood that I would not be able to do that work in such a way. Not only because I am a man and I could not talk to women about everything like Svetlana did. She talked to them about everything up to their purely feminine problems and issues that were making the lives of women even more complicated during the war, in cold, dirt, and among men soldiers at the frontline. But Svetlana would make a dinner with those women, would sympathize to their post-war fate, and would cry together with them. – my trans.]

He remembered the name of a young nurse Tamara Umnyagina (Тамара Умнягина) who told a story of war-time to Adamovich in the mid-1950s and how her narrative planted the seed of the future book in his artistic mind. He offered the idea of such a book to Svetlana Alexievich in 1978 at the conference in Minsk. He recalled that she asked him if she would manage to do that, and how later he was cheering her up when she had already started interviewing women and was struggling with her work.³³ Now we can read the story told to Adamovich by Tamara Umnyagina in the last chapter of Alexievich's *The War's Unwomanly Face*, and the story is titled «Вдруг страшно захотелось жить» (“Suddenly, I Passionately Wanted to Live”).³⁴

In his preface to the *Blockade Book*, Adamovich published some notes from 1983, which sketch out the compositional principles of his writing. Among these notes are remarks that are dedicated to this new genre. Given its importance for our discussion, we will provide a longer extract from this notebook entry:

Жанр. Истоки жанра. В чём же жанровые признаки, «рамки», характеристики?...

1. Множественность «зеркал», сфокусированных на «главный предмет». (Голоса живые, дневники, документы и пр.).
2. Репортажность («это происходило с нами! Это происходит с нами всеми» Это – с вами происходит!»)...

Условия жанра:

А) Затронуло действительно глубину души человеческой.

Б) действительно касается многих, «всех», глобальность.

Определение жанра. [. . .] Моё: репортаж с места исторического события (в прошлом). Но ведь не только в прошлом.

[. . .] Как же назвать это возвращение от романа индивидуальностей через эпический роман к хоровому началу в литературном произведении?

³³ Алесь Адамович, «Послесловие» в Светлана Алексиевич, *Последние свидетели: книга не детских рассказов* (Москва: Молодая гвардия, 1985), 165-173.

³⁴ Светлана Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо* (Москва: «Время», 2016), 334 – 342.

Сформировать роль автора. Словесное отсутствие – идеал! Ибо жанр родился из признания самоценности народной памяти, правды живых рассказов. Их полемики с казённой псевдодокументальностью. В чём писательский профессионализм в такой работе? [. . .] Писатель – в прямом отсутствии. Но обязательно как внешнее проявление (пусть будет текст и от себя). Но обязательно как принцип: энергия вся на построение книги не по воле своей, а по силовым линиям, идущим изнутри, из самого материала. Самопостроение книги.

- Роман кругового обзора. Самопишущий роман.
- Жизнь, о себе повествующая.
- Жизнеописание (романное, документальное, художественно-документальное).
- [. . .] Жизнеголосие
- Репортаж с места исторического события.
- Роман-репортаж
- Документально-репортажная проза.
- Репортажно-документальная проза.
- Соборный роман.
- Собирательный роман.
- Документально-собирательная проза (роман).
- [. . .] Многоголосное самоисследование (документальный или художественный документ) блокады, палачества, разводов, экологической ситуации, женских судеб на войне и пр, и пр.
- Роман открытой формы. [. . .]»³⁵

[Genre. Origins of the genre. What are the genre attributes, 'borders', and characteristics?

1. Plentitude of 'mirrors' that are focused on the 'main topic' (live voices, diaries, documents).
2. Journalistic style (it happened to us!, it is happening to us all, it is happening to You!). [. . .]

Genre conditions:

- a) It really touched the bottom of a human soul.
- b) It really affects many people, 'all' people, it's global.

Definition of genre. [. . .] Mine: a journalistic story from the place of the events (happened in the past). But it is not only about the past, after all.

How should we call this return from the novel of personalities through the epic novel to the choral roots of a literary piece?

³⁵ Алесь Адамович, Даниил Гранин, *Блокадная книга* (Минск: Мастацкая літаратура, 2015), 37 – 40.

Need to shape the role of the writer. The ideal is the total absence of the writer! The genre grew out of the acknowledgement of the inherent value of people's memory and of the truth of the real stories, and out of their polemic with the official pseudo-documentation. What is the writer's professionalism with this approach? [. . .] The writer is the total absence of it. But it is mandatory to have some external manifestations (should be a text from his/her own voice). But the maxim is to use all energy to create a book not according to your will, but according to the main power lines coming from the inside, from the materials themselves. Book's self-composition.

- A panoramic novel. A self-writing novel.
- Life narrates itself.
- Life history (novel-like, documental, docudrama).
- [. . .] Life-choral
- A journalistic coverage from the place of the event.
- A journalistic novel.
- Docu-journalistic prose.
- Journalistic documental prose.
- Together-novel.
- Composite novel.
- Docu-composite prose (novel).
- [. . .] Polyphonic research (documental or artistic) of the siege, torture, divorces, ecological situation, women's fate at the war, and so on, and so forth.
- Open-form novel. - my trans.]

Even after a quick perusal of these notes, we readily recognized many of the features of Alexievich's work. She has followed almost all of these recommendations for narrative strategies. She writes her books in the manner of news coverage from a place with real historic events and real survivors/witnesses. She has not been using any original historical documents, except for a few quotes from newspapers or an encyclopedia in prefaces to her books. In some way, she has been following Adamovich's strive of avoiding pseudo-documentary. The portrayal of WWII in official and widely disseminated stories, essays, novels, and some films was not how Adamovich himself remember the war that he experienced first-hand as a partisan in Belorussian forests. He wanted people to tell their own, personal truth about wartime, because they would tell

what no other document possibly could. Alexievich fully adopted this principle of the genre.

Adamovich's understanding of the 'super-literary genre was a conceptual theoretical source for Svetlana Alexievich. Granin recently remarked in his interview with the Interfax newspaper that Alexievich makes of the *modus operandi* of *Блокадная книга* in her own books: interviewing people, then selecting the most interesting elements of the stories, and adjusting them with the goal of producing a single, and artistically coherent, text (October 8th, 2015).³⁶

From our observations, the influence of Adamovich's and Granin's artistic ideas on the Svetlana Alexievich's writing was extensive and seminal. Their friendship, it seems, and the exchange of ideas was life-changing for her and provided her with a future style and genre characteristics. At the same time, it is quite evident that Alexievich's other borrowings and adaptations of various literary findings, selected from the writers we described earlier in this research, are quite important to and noticeable in her artistic style

Like Hersey, Smirnov, Adamovich, Bryl, Kolesnik, and Granin, Alexievich has composed her books from oral statements of other people. Those were narrators of different age, education, and level of financial stability. They are women, men, children, and even the recently deceased. Their understanding of the process and method of creating a book was not important; only their individual recollections of the event mattered. Ehrenburg and Grossman used the same principle, but they did not interview

³⁶ «Светлана Алексиевич достойна Нобелевской премии по литературе, ее произведения будут жить долго – Гранин», *Interfax Россия*, опубликовано 08 октября 2015, <http://www.interfax-russia.ru/NorthWest/print.asp?id=660347&sec=1671&type=news>.

people; the process of collecting evidence was done by other journalists, by contacting first-hand witnesses themselves through letters. All these writers had to select certain stories for their books, so they had to decide on the value of the presented material and their contribution to the main goal of the books. Svetlana Alexievich followed the same idea. The best explanation of it, we believe, was provided by David Sanders in his understanding of the interviewee choice done by John Hersey: those people were the best subjects for a certain purpose. Each of the writers used their individual criteria for defining the ‘best subject,’ depending on their own literary vision. Sergei Smirnov needed stories with the most facts and names, Adamovich and Granin needed stories that would describe gradual degradation and slow death, and Alexievich, it seems, has been looking for the most dramatic stories rich with emotions. All the writers mentioned above adjusted the raw stories of their narrators, and curated those texts for the books. John Hersey and Sergei Smirnov did the most work for the adaptation, for their stories were presented to readers as second-hand evidence, something that was told to a transmitter, and then later to the reader. We cannot know what exactly the interviewees told the writers, but we can construct our own image of the narrators, based by the context of their stories. Ehrenburg, Grossman, Granin, Adamovich, Bryl, Kolesnik, and Alexievich seem to use more of the unedited material, but we do not know for sure. We cannot evaluate the authenticity of the stories provided for *The Black Book*, since they were mailed to the writers by people who wrote down words of other people. Granin, Adamovich, Bryl, Kolesnik and Alexievich seem to use more of the raw interviews, editing out only the parts of those that the writers decided as not informative or valuable. It is still a question how much editing those writers did, especially when talking about Svetlana Alexievich’s

texts, because in her case we have no records or notes that would help us trace the original words of the interviewees, and because the words are not the same between different editions. All these writers used some proven historical data to support or comment the narratives, although they did it in a different manner. In the *Hiroshima, Out of the Fire*, and *The Blockade Book*, the historically accurate facts were parts of the text. They were organically imbedded in the narration. *The Black Book* provided abundant factual data in the footnotes that added to the book's authenticity and accuracy. Svetlana Alexievich did not use this technique; rather, she limited herself only to the information provided directly in the interviews, but added some facts in her prefaces to her most recent books.

Yet while all of the writers we mentioned above described some historical events of the 20th century, but their approaches differ; to use Hayden White's terminology, they chose different types of 'historical emplotment'.³⁷ Each writer would have to choose what they think is important to notice about a certain historical event, and how those elements are connected to each other. Therefore, different people would describe the same period in history with different types of texts.

One of the main unifying features of these writers' works is the absence of a set of protagonists and lack of temporal progress in the described events. Each new chapter or sub-chapter presented a new protagonist with his or her individuality and point of view. The narratives were not published from the temporal aspect of "from the beginning to the end"; they showed different sides of the same event from various angles, be it the day before the event, during, two years into the event, or 10 years after the event. It

³⁷ Saul Fridlaender, *Probing The Limits of Representation* (Cambridge, 1992), 37-53.

creates some sort of a temporal continuum without a start and finish – the books all began with pictures of an average, everyday life with an unexpected terror coming literally and metaphorically from the clear blue sky. After turning the last page, the reader does not feel the story was over. The montage principle of the books' structure allows us to see some historical period as if from 300 video cameras at the same time. The writers made us shift our focus from one camera to the next, while each one was filming in its own specific geographic place and its own time: it is one day in a village, then two weeks in a ghetto, then three days in a forest, then one hour in a burning cabin, and so on.

Hiroshima, the Black Book, the Brest Castle, Out of the Fire, and the Blockade Book were intended to provide a journalistic literary encyclopedia of the certain traumatic historic events. As Sanders put it in his study of Hersey's work, "[t]he book is a memorial to the dead and a warning to the living".³⁸ They all are literary memorials, and most of the writers used numerous photographs to preserve the memory of those who died tragically or those who provided their oral memories to the living. All the above-mentioned books had many photographs of the contributors and/or scenes mentioned in their stories. Svetlana Alexievich initially used the same approach and provided multiple black and white photographs of her interviewees. We could see them, for example, in the early editions of the *War's Unwomanly Face*. With time, her intent to be more true to the original texts of the interviews and real people faded in the bright light of her urge to make stories more dramatic and to deliver as much of an emotional charge in one chapter as possible. For that, she had to limit her explicit presence in the text to a minimum, leaving only some of her journalistic features or providing pictorial information about the

³⁸ Sanders David, *John Hersey* (New York: Twayne Publishers, Inc., 1967), 43.

apartments or the streets, and to expand her implicit presence by eliminating actual storytellers and combining their oral reports into one ‘anonymous’ voice, a compound character’s voice. It is Alexievich herself who has been deciding which narratives go into that anonymous voice and how much they get altered. While her adaptation of the earlier discovered techniques developed by Ehrenburg, Grossman, Adamovich, Granin, Smirnov, Bryl, and Kolesnik, however, is indisputable, she departs from them in her practice of shaping individual testimonies into forms that will readily fit into the frame of a journalistic novel. In the following two chapters, we intend to analyze her books in greater depth, to see what particular literary techniques she employs to achieve what Alexievich called «эффект достоверности» (authenticity effect).³⁹

³⁹ Светлана Алексиевич, «Моя единственная жизнь» в *Вопросы литературы*, 1996, №1, 205-223,
https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gewcz_06cQuJ9RHcudikkIHPEpU9GM3P/view?usp=sharing.

Chapter 2. Literary Overview

To further this study of Alexievich's books and her specific genre, we will pay close attention to each collection of interviews, in the order that they were originally published. Some of the topics, like memories about the Second World War (WWII), or some of the techniques the writer uses appear in many stories throughout her oeuvre, but each sets of interviews is distinctive. Therefore, we will analyze each book separately.

So far, Svetlana Alexievich has published six books: *The War's Unwomanly Face*, *The Last Witnesses: The Book of Unchildlike Stories*, *Enchanted with Death* (which has not been translated into English), *the Zinky Boys*, *Voices from Chernobyl*, and *The Secondhand Time*. Five of these, excluding *Enchanted with Death*, amount to the so called "cycle of the Red man," a set of books about the most dramatic events in Soviet history in the last 60 years. Those events are WWII, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster in 1986, the Soviet war in Afghanistan from 1979 to 1989, and the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. Alexievich's stories are about a composite character, 'a red man', who represents millions of Soviet people and their lives.

У войны не женское лицо (The War's Unwomanly Face)

У войны не женское лицо (The War's Unwomanly Face) was first published in 1985 in Minsk, Belarus and was preceded by seven years of collecting interviews and travelling through various Soviet republics. Alexievich talked to about 800 women to collect their stories for the book. Some particular stories of violence by the Soviet people

and of pleasure of such violence were removed from the original version, by Soviet censorship. In 2002, she published its expanded edition with numerous interviews that both the censor and Alexievich herself did not include in the 1985 book. Alexievich has said that in the 1980s *The War's Unwomanly Face* received praise from Mikhail Gorbachev, who was the leader of the country at that time.

In the diary Alexievich kept while working on the book, she made an entry about her own family in relation to WWII, and how it affected them. Later, she included the entry in one of the editions. Her mother's father was Ukrainian and died during the war; his grave is somewhere in modern day Hungary. Her father's mother was Belorussian and died during the war from typhoid, while serving as a partisan against the Nazi soldiers. Out of the three sons her grandmother had, two went missing in action during the first months of the war and it was only the writer's father who came back home after the war. Eleven members of Alexievich's extended family were burnt alive by the Nazis.⁴⁰

«Деревня моего детства после войны была женская. Бабы. Мужских голосов не помню. Так это у меня и осталось: о войне рассказывают бабы».⁴¹

Alexievich was looking for a way to capture and express what she was hearing, so she needed a special literary genre to reflect her world perception the way she saw and heard. Once she found the book *Out of the Fire*, by Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik, she was impressed with its new method of presenting a story – the way it used a collection of different human stories, and their distinctive voices. She knew that this was her niche in

⁴⁰ Светлана Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо* (Москва: Время, 2016), 8.

⁴¹ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 8. [After the war, the village of my childhood was women's. Peasant women's. I don't remember men's voices. This is how it was left in my memory; peasant women talking about the war. – my trans.]

literature, and that this was the only way she could share all those voices from her childhood and the present-day life around her.

Even though there were countless books about WWII, Alexievich did not want to follow what she called ‘men’s voices’ and ‘men’s impressions.’ She argues that these books represent a history of men written by men, that women were silent and silenced, that nobody ever asked women about **their** war. She said, «Женские рассказы другие и о другом. У «женской» войны свои краски, свои запахи, своё освещение и своё пространство чувств. Свои слова. Там нет героев и невероятных подвигов, там есть просто люди, которые заняты нечеловеческим человеческим делом.»⁴²

Alexievich noticed that typical war time occupations, such as “sniper,” “commander of the anti-aircraft gun,” “minesweeper,” “tanker,” and “grunt,” did not have their female gender terminology, unlike more common types of jobs, teacher etc. Those terms were created in the Russian language only during WWII, and this alone shows how many women fought during that war and their importance during it. It becomes more evident why Alexievich wanted to write her first book on such a topic.

What makes *War’s Unwomanly Face* different from other books of hers is the quantity and importance of her comments and remarks. As we will examine later, she usually intermits the flow of the story with a few words like ‘starts crying’, ‘turns away’, or ‘stays silent for a long time,’ just to give her reader an idea about the emotional state of her interviewee. This book is different. Alexievich writes long paragraphs in her own

⁴² Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 10. [Women’s stories are different and about different topics. “Women’s” war has its own colors, smells, angle, and its own dimension of emotions, it has its own words. There are no heroes and unbelievable heroic actions, there are just people who are busy with their inhuman human job. – my trans.]

voice, punctuating each chapter, and these often serve as preface, epilogue, or marker of her thoughts during the interview.

Most of the times her own voice shows up at the beginning of a chapter and tells the reader how she learned about the interviewee, or how she traveled to that person's place, or how difficult it was for her to make the interviewee comfortable with a tape recorder and to convince them speak openly about everything they wanted. For example, she writes of one interview:

Он пулемётчик, она – связная. Мужчина сразу отправил женщину на кухню: «Ты нам что-нибудь приготовь». [. . .] После моей настойчивой просьбы неохотно уступил своё место со словами: «Рассказывай, как я тебя учил. Без слёз и женских мелочей: хотелось быть красивой, плакала, когда косу отрезали». Позже она мне шёпотом призналась: Всю ночь со мной штудировал том «Истории Великой Отечественной Войны». Боялся за меня. И сейчас переживает, что не то вспомню. Не так, как надо.

Так было не один раз, не в одном доме.⁴³

However, at other points her comments, like the following one, come in the middle of an interviewee's story. Such examples may take the reader a whole sentence or two to realize it is Alexievich's voice and that of the storyteller:

Магнитофон записывает слова, сохраняет интонацию. Паузы. Плач и растерянность. Я понимаю, что когда человек говорит, происходит нечто большее, чем остаётся потом на бумаге. Всё время жалею, что не могу «записать» глаза, руки. Их жизнь во время разговора, их собственную жизнь. Отдельную. Их «тексты».⁴⁴

⁴³ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 19. [He was a machine-gunner, and she was a communication agent. The men immediately sent the woman in to the kitchen: "Go cook something for us". After my persistent request he reluctantly gave up his seat to her with the words "Tell the way I was teaching you, tell without tears and female details like 'I wanted to be pretty and cried when they cut off my hair'. Later she confessed to me in whisper: "He was drilling with me with a volume of The Great Patriotic War (encyclopedia) all night. He was worried about me. He is still worrying that I would remember wrong things. Not the way I should remember".

This happened not just once and not in only one house. – my trans.]

⁴⁴ Алексиевич, 120. [A tape-recorder registers words, saves intonation, pauses, weeping and perplexity. I understand that when a person is speaking something bigger is happening than what is later left on paper. I always regret I cannot 'record' eyes, hands, their life during the talk, their own life, separate, their 'texts'. – my trans.]

Я возвращалась домой, везла четыре кассеты (два дня разговора) с «ещё одной войной», испытывая разные чувства: потрясение и страх, недоумение и восхищение. Любопытство и растерянность, нежность. [. . .] Я пытаюсь большую историю уменьшить до человека, чтобы что-то понять. Обрести слова.⁴⁵

Simply based on the volume and quality of Alexievich remarks, *The War's Unwomanly Face* is probably the most journalistic, and among all her works the one that is most like a travelogue. She provides her reader with all sorts of details about her new companions, about her trip to see that person, what food they eat while talking, what the interviewee is doing during the interview, how they say goodbye to each other, and what she was doing and asking during the interview. Almost all of the comments are in the present tense, and this helps create the feeling of interconnectedness between her and her reader. We get involved in the story like witnesses. To give a few examples:

This time I don't have to go far away. I am going to visit a hero of the Soviet Union. The street on which I live in Minsk is named after him. . . . I find the address I need; it's a massive and clumsy multistore building. Here is the third entrance door, I am pushing the seventh-floor button in the elevator. . . .

Or:

I met with one of the characters in the auditorium of Belorussian State University. Students were packing their notes with lots of noise. "How did we look back then? – she asked me back. - We were like these students. But we had different clothes and our jewelry was less expensive." I was still looking at the rushing students and the story has already begun.

The War's Unwomanly Face collects interviews with different topics under one common theme of war. For example, there are themes of the beginning of war and everyone's belief in a quick victory, enlisting in the army, willingness to sacrifice everything for victory, the number of deaths, and the terrifying amount of blood all around. There are

⁴⁵ Алексиевич, 164. [I was coming back home and was carrying four cassettes (two days of talk) with 'yet one more war' and was having mixed feelings; shock and fear, bewilderment and admiration, curiosity and perplexity, tenderness. [. . .][. . .] I am trying to reduce such a big history down to a human in order to understand something, to gain words. – my trans.]

also particular topics that one might never have expected in memoirs of men. For example, the book discusses the fear of being captured by the Nazis and tortured, stories about executing deserters and those who did not want to fight, memories of the Stalin's labor camps, witnesses' recollections of Soviet soldiers raping German women, and oddly among all of these, stories about true love. Yet, these are not the stories one might find in a WWII history book written in Russian. Even though they have various features common to many other memoirs about that time of the Soviet history, their treatment of them is often unorthodox and non-canonical.

Every story that Alexievich provides has lots of personal qualities of the storyteller, and each one gives the reader a sense of the speaker's unique voice. The text is loaded with each person's oral speech's syntax, each person's specific word choice, each person's emotions, and, sometimes even each person's facial expressions. Alexievich specifies what each person looks like, how he/she speaks, and what tone of voice her subject has. Often, little details about hands, or a look, or changes in the body position give the reader a very vivid picture of the person speaking in the interview.

For example, in the following it is quite easy to imagine a petite woman, maybe in her sixties, with long hair done in an old-fashioned style, with an emotionally heavy voice talking. One might even catch a glimpse of trauma coming through her words:

Маленькая женщина с девичьим венцом длинной косы вокруг головы
сидела в большом кресле, закрыв лицо руками:
-- Нет-нет, не буду. Опять возвращаться туда? Не могу... [. . .] Ты на самом
деле хочешь это знать? Как у дочки спрашиваю...⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Алексиевич, 38. [A little woman with a girlish wreath of a long braid around her head was sitting in a large armchair covering her face with her arms: - No, no, I will not do that. To go back there again? I cannot... [. . .]Do you really want to know that? I am asking you like a daughter... - my trans.]

Or, in another example, the following paragraph allows the reader to see a kitchen in a small apartment somewhere in Belarus with two younger women and an old woman in it. One can almost feel the atmosphere in that small group, what kind of love and support those women give to each other:

Дверь открыла младшая из сестёр – Зинаида Васильевна. Те же широкие тёмные брови и упрямо-открытый взгляд, как и у отца на фотографиях. [. . .] Обе сестры, Ольга Васильевна и Зинаида Васильевна Корж, были санинструкторами в кавалерийских эскадронах. Сели рядышком и посмотрели на мать – Феодосию Алексеевну. [. . .] Больше за всё время нашего разговора она не проронит ни слова. А дочери будут иногда тихонько гладить её руки, успокаивая.⁴⁷

The stories are heartfelt and unsophisticated, and they engage the reader to enter into the canvas of the narrative, as we were sitting in front of those women, not Svetlana Alexievich. This choice is one of the special features of Alexievich's works. Each book is almost a type of confession, where a reader is the one who accepts the confession.

While reading *The War's Unwomanly Face*, and other books by Alexievich, we could not but ask ourselves how difficult it was for her to be there in those small kitchens facing those physically and emotionally wounded women and listening to their deceptively simple stories. We, as readers, are truly second-hand recipients of that emotional baggage, and yet it is still barely possible sometimes to accept the information. Alexievich truly makes her readers symbolic priests at confession, or therapists behind curtains and also makes the reader an inseparable part of the event. She makes her readers

⁴⁷ Алексиевич, 166. [The youngest sister, Zinaida Vasilyavna, opened the door. She had the same thick dark eyebrows and stubborn and open look in her eyes as her father did in the photographs. [. . .][. . .] Both sisters, Olga Vasilyevna and Zinaida Vasilyevna Korzh, were medical instructors in cavalry squadrons. They sat down next to each other and looked at their mother, Feodosia Alekseevna. [. . .][. . .] She will not say even a word more during the entire conversation. The daughters will be quietly rubbing her hands from time to time, calming her down. – my trans.]

the ones who now need to carry that weight received from the interviewees. She is unpronounced in many of the interviews, but yet she is there, and in this book more than in any other.

Let us look closer at the topics that the interviewees discuss in the *War's Unwomanly Face*.

Many of the interviewees start their stories recalling the first days of WWII. They all believed that the war would be short, and that the Red Army (the Soviet Army) would be fighting abroad and not in their homeland. Many women were very young at the beginning of the war and desperately wanted to enlist. Some of them would lie about their age, saying they were older in order to pass the criteria. But at the same time, not all the women remember their families supporting the decision to enlist. Some families were pushing their daughter to the war, while others were trying to talk young women out of that.

И вдруг война! Взрослые плакали, а мы не испугались [. . .] Нам тоже казалось, что без нас война не война, мы тоже должны воевать. Тут же оружие нам давай! Побежали всем классом в военкомат. И десятого февраля я ушла на фронт. Мачеха очень плакала: «Валя, не уходи. Что ты делаешь? Ты такая слабая, такая худая, ну какой из тебя вояка?» Я была рахитичная, долго, очень долго. [. . .] Я до пяти лет не ходила...⁴⁸

During the war, many women did not dream about a new rifle or a chance to go to a battle. Instead, some were worried about the fact they could not wear their high heel shoes, could not use or buy perfume, and could not have access to feminine clothes and

⁴⁸ Алексиевич, 129. [Suddenly there came the war! The adults were crying, but we did not get scared. [. . .] We thought that the war would not be a war without us, that we needed/should to fight too. There we were asking for weapon! Our entire school group went to a military enlistment office. Then on February 10th I went to the front. My stepmother cried a lot “Valya, don’t leave. What are you doing? You are so weak, so skinny, what kind of a soldier would you make?” I had rickets for a long time, very long time. [. . .] I could not walk till I turned five. – my trans.]

underwear. Some of the interviewed women recall local people in different villages would not recognize them as women; they would see them as men, and when their gender was discovered, would feel sad for those women as though the women had befallen some most unfortunate fate. Here is how the narrators in the *War's Unwomanly Face* put it in their stories:

Я даже не задумывалась... У меня была специальность, нужная фронту. И я ни секунды не размышляла и не колебалась. Вообще я мало тогда встречала людей, которые хотели пересидеть это время. Переждать. Одну помню.. Молодую женщину, нашу соседку... Она мне често призналась: «Я люблю жизнь. Я хочу пудриться и краситься, я не хочу умирать». Больше таких я не видела. Может быть они молчали, таились... [...] ⁴⁹

Cosmetics, feminine clothes, and the lack of will to go to the front would have been badly interpreted by other Soviet people at that time. At wartime, there was supposed to be no women or men – the motherland required just soldiers.

However, the most common attitude among young Soviet women toward the war was that they felt it was a very sacred duty to protect their homeland:

Я просила маму... Я её умоляла: только не надо плакать... [. . .] Я же была маменькина дочка, меня дома баловали. А тут постригли под мальчика, только маленький чубчик оставили. Они с отцом меня не пускали, а я только одним жила: на фронт, на фронт! На фронт! Вот эти плакаты, которые сейчас висят в музее: «Родина-мать зовёт!», «Что ты сделал для фронта?» - на меня, например, очень действовали. Всё время были перед глазами. [. . .] ⁵⁰

⁴⁹ Алексиевич, 75. [I didn't even hesitate... I had a profession needed for the front. I didn't think for a second and didn't doubt it/what had to be done. Generally speaking, I rarely met people who wanted to sit out the time then. To wait out. I remember one woman. A young woman, our neighbor... She confessed to me honestly: "I love life. I want to powder and do makeup, I don't want to die". I didn't see more women like her. Maybe they kept silent, were hiding... - my trans.]

⁵⁰ Алексиевич, 57. [I was asking my mother... I was begging her – do not cry... [. . .][. . .] I was my mother's little girl, was spoilt at home. Then they gave me a boy's haircut and only left a little forelock. Mother and father didn't let me go (to the war), but I only lived with one thought – to go to the front, to the front! To the front! Those posters that are now in a museum – "Motherland Calls!", "What did you do for the front?" – they really affected me a lot. They were always in my sight. – my trans.]

Another quite unique theme that shows up in the interviews was the lack of clothes, bedlinens, or other scarcities. For example, often a simple piece of cloth was used to cover feet, instead of socks, because of a lack of socks. Women had a lot of memories connected with this sort of detail, and it is something that is not usually mentioned in more common and popular Russian memoirs. Women didn't have any clothes that would fit them; most of the times they were given men's uniform and boots. Women had to find a way to alter the clothes or to find other apparel suitable for the war time.

Many women recalled themselves going to the frontline in high-heel shoes and dressy clothes, because the women often would enlist secretly while 'going for a walk with girlfriends' or 'going to school.' They didn't know what to expect, and neither did their future commanders know what to do with female soldiers sent by the enlistment offices:

Как я собиралась на фронт.... Вы не поверите... Думала, что ненадолго. Скоро врага победим! Взяла одну юбку, притом любимую, две пары носков и одни туфли. Из Воронежа мы отступали, но я помню, как мы забежали в магазин, и я купила там себе еще одни туфли на высоких каблуках. [. . .] Как сейчас помню, такие изящные туфельки... И духи еще купила...⁵¹

It was difficult for young women to be accepted into the predominantly male life of war everyday:

[...] старшина привёз обмундирование: шинели, пилотки, гимнастёрки, юбки, вместо комбинации – из бязи пошитые по-мужски две рубахи с рукавами, вместо обмоток – чулки и американские тяжёлые ботинки с металлическими подковами во весь каблук и на носках. В роте по своему

⁵¹ Алексиевич, 83. [How I was getting ready to go to the front... You wouldn't believe... I was thinking it was not for too long. We will beat the enemy soon! I got one skirt, my favorite, two pairs of socks, and one pair of shoes. We were retreating from Voronezh, but I remember how we stopped by a store and I bought myself one more pair of shoes with high heels. [. . .]I remember it as if it was now, they were such elegant shoes... Also I bought perfume... - my trans.]

росту и комплекции я оказалась самой маленькой, рост сто пятьдесят три сантиметра, обувь тридцать пятого размера и, естественно, военной промышленностью такие мизерные размеры не шились... [. . .] Мне достались ботинки сорок второго размера [. . .], и такие они тяжёлые, что я ходила, волоча ноги по земле. [. . .] Жутко вспомнить, каким кошмарным был первый марш. (....) Я повернулась, чтобы идти, и упала. Выпала из ботинок... Ноги были в кровь стёрты... Тогда и выяснилось, что ходить я уже не могла. Ротному сапожнику Паршину дали приказ сшить мне сапоги из старой плащ-палатки, тридцать пятого размера...⁵²

For many women it was not so hard to accept the risk of being killed at any moment or to kill somebody as well, but it was hard for them to adjust to rough conditions of everyday life:

Ты меня спрашиваешь, что на войне самое страшное? [. . .] Думаешь, я отвечу: самое страшное на войне – смерть. Умереть. [. . .] А я другое скажу... Самое страшное для меня на войне – носить мужские трусы. Вот это было страшно. [. . .] Ну, во-первых, очень некрасиво... Ты на войне, собираешься умереть за Родину, а на тебе мужские трусы. В общем, ты выглядишь смешно. Нелепо. Мужские трусы тогда носили длинные. Широкие. Шили из сатина. Десять девочек в нашей землянке, и все они в мужских трусах. [. . .] Четыре года. [. . .] Перешли советскую границу. [. . .] Возле первой польской деревни нас переодели, выдали новое обмундирование и...И! И! И! Привезли в первый раз женские трусы и бюстгалтеры. За всю войну в первый раз. Ха-а-а... [. . .] Почему не смеёшься? Плачешь... Почему?⁵³

⁵² Алексиевич, 84. [A first the sergeant brought the military uniform; great-coats, field service caps, shirts, skirts, instead of slip under dresses there were two men's long sleeve shirts made from cheap cotton, instead of puttees – stockings and American heavy boots with metal plates around the entire heel and toes. In my squadron I happened to be the smallest one based on my height and shoe size; five feet tall, shoe size five, and of course military industry didn't make such miniscule sizes. [. . .]I received shoes size eleven [. . .][. . .], and they were so heavy that I walked dragging my feet on the ground. [. . .]It is terrifying to remember how horrible the first march was. [. . .]I turned to walk away and fell down. I fell out of the boots... My feet were raw and bleeding. Then we found out that I couldn't walk any more. The squadron shoe-maker Parshin received an order to make me shoes size five out of an old military cloak. – my trans.]

⁵³ Алексиевич, 94. [Are you asking me what is the scariest thing in the war? [. . .][. . .] You think I will say that the scariest thing in the war is death, the scariest thing is to die. [. . .][. . .] But I will say different... To me, the scariest at the war was to wear men's underwear. That was scary. [. . .][. . .] Well, first of all it was very ugly... You are at the war, you are planning to die for the motherland, but you are wearing men's underwear. So, you look ridiculous, foolish. They wore men's long underwear then. Baggy. Made from sateen. There were ten girls in our dugout and they all wore men's underwear. [. . .][. . .] They wore it for four years. [. . .][. . .] We crossed the Soviet border. [. . .][. . .] They let us change at the first Polish village, gave us new military uniform and ... And! And! And! They brought for the first time women's panties and bras. For

In some cases, a chance to get good shoes would play the key role in making the decision to go to war. For example, one woman said:

До войны я жила счастливо. С мамой, с папой. Папа у меня с финской вернулся. [. . .] А война скоро пришла, я ещё не подросла, как надо. Из Минска эвакуировались. Привезли нас в Саратов. Там в колхозе я работала. Вызывает меня председатель сельсовета:
 --Прислали бумагу, надо двоих на фронт, а мне некого послать. Сам бы пошёл, да эта проклятая деревяшка. А тебя нельзя: ты эвакуированная. А может, пойдёшь? [. . .]
 -- А мне обмотки дадут?
 Мы были оборванные: что мы там успели с собой взять!
 -- Ты такая хорошенькая, тебе ботиночки там дадут.
 И я согласилась.⁵⁴

Women took on the burden of many routine wartime professions; they were not only soldiers, they were snipers, battlefield medical assistants, cooks, laundry woman, surgeons, communication specialists, de-miners, etc. Many of Alexievich's interviewees didn't have any special occupation before the war and were only given a specialization when they enlisted. But, some of her interviewees went to intensive courses, in order to do something useful for the war.

Alexievich must have listened to hundreds of heartfelt stories from women in many different war time professions, but one of her talents is to pick the most graphic,

the first time in the whole war. Ha-ha-ha... [. . .][. . .] Why are you not laughing? You are crying... Why? – my trans.]

⁵⁴ Алексиевич, 183. [Before the war, I lived happily. With my mother and father. My father came back from the Finnish war. [. . .][. . .] But the war came soon, I hadn't grown up as I needed to. We evacuated from Minsk. They brought us to Saratov. There I worked at kolkhoz. The local council chairman summons me:

- They sent a document, they needed two people to the front, but I don't have anybody to send. I would go myself, but that piece wood, damn it. But you are not allowed to go; you were evacuated. But maybe you will go?
- Will they give me puttees?
- We were ragged; what did we have time to take with us?
- You are so good looking; they will give you shoes.

So I agreed. – my trans.]

most shocking and most emotional professions out. She has the skill to filter the hours of interviews and to select the most striking parts, parts that are sometimes only a few lines, or only a small number of sentences long, from the several hours long interview. Those carefully put together fragments give the reader an overwhelming impression. All these little moments, these fragments, like one from the life of a medical nurse collecting amputated limbs in a big basket all days long for several years, or a de-miner trying to have lunch in an abandoned village where everything, even a stove, was heavily mined, or a laundry woman who washed solid frozen uniforms soaked in gallons of blood and mud, all deserve attention. However, one could get a small sense of the effect of Alexievich's selection from the following quotations:

Работали очень тяжело. Никаких стиральных машин и в помине не было. Ручками... Всё женскими ручками... Вот мы приходим, дают нам одну какую-нибудь хату или землянку. Мы стираем там бельё, прежде чем сушить, пропитываем его специальным мылом «К», для того чтобы не было вшей. Был дуст, но дуст не помогал, пользовались мылом «К», очень вонючее, запах ужасный. Там, в этом помещении, где стираем, мы и сушим это бельё, и тут же мы спим. Давали нам двадцать-двадцать пять граммов мыла – на одного солдата постирать бельё. А оно чёрное, как земля. И у многих девушек от стирки, от тяжестей, от напряжения были грыжи, экземы рук от мыла «К», слезили ногти, думали, что никогда уже не смогут они расти. Но всё равно день-два отдохнут – и нужно было опять стирать...⁵⁵

⁵⁵ Алексиевич, 191. [We were working very hard. There were no laundry machines at all. All done by hands.... All by women's hands... We arrive, they give us a hut or a dugout. We do laundry in there, and before drying we soak it with special soap 'K' so that there will be no lice. There was insect powder, but the insect powder didn't work; we used the 'K' soap, very stinky, the smell was horrible. There, in that room where we do laundry, we dry it as well, and sleep there too. They gave us twenty-twenty five grams of soap for one soldier to do his laundry. But it was black as soil. Many girls had hernias from doing laundry, from heavy weights, from stress; they had hand eczema from the 'K' soap, their finger nails were falling off and we thought they would never grow again. But anyhow, they would rest for a day or two and we had to do laundry again. – my trans.]

The following story illustrates not only what kind of emotional shock those young women experienced at war, but also how that experience was seen as highly traumatizing also by men around:

Снаряд попал в склад с боеприпасами, вспыхнул огонь. Солдат стоял рядом со мной, его опалило. Это уже был чёрный кусок мяса... Он только прыгает... Подскакивает на одном месте... А все смотрят из окопчиков, и никто с места не сдвинется, все растерялись. Схватила я простыню, подбежала, накрыла этого солдата и сразу легла на него. Прижала к земле. Земля холодная... Вот так... Он кидался, пока не разорвалось сердце, и затих... Я в крови вся... Кто-то из старых солдат подошёл, обнял, слышу – говорит: «Кончится война, и если она останется жива, из неё человека всё равно уже не будет, ей теперь всё». Мол, что я среди такого ужаса, и пережить его, да ещё в таком молодом возрасте!⁵⁶

The book provides lots of stories from former military nurses, and each of those narratives deserves to be mention since they can describe the most terrifying reality of war:

О-ох! А раны... Обширные, глубокие, рваные... Можно было сойти с ума... Осколки от пуль, гранат, снарядов в голове, в кишках – во всём теле, вместе с металлом вынимаем из тела солдатские пуговицы, куски шинели, гимнастёрки, кожаных ремней. У одного солдата вся грудь разворочена, сердце видно... Ещё бьётся, но он умирает... Делаю последнюю перевязку и еле держусь, чтобы не заплакать. [. . .] К вечеру кровь в волосах, пробивается через халат к телу, она на шапочках и масках. Чёрная, тягучая, смешанная во всем, что есть в человеке. С мочой, с калом...⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 160. [A missile got into an ammunition depot, it caught fire. A soldier was standing next to me; he got scorched. It was already a black piece of meat... He is just jumping... Jumping at one spot... Everybody is watching from their little trenches and nobody moves, everybody got lost. I grabbed a bed sheet, ran and covered that soldier and instantly lay down on him. I pressed him to the ground. The ground was cold... Well... He was throwing himself up and down until his heart burst and then he went quiet... I was all in blood... Somebody from the older soldiers came over, hugged me, then I can hear him saying: "The war will be over and if she is alive she will not become a human, she is done". Meaning that I was in such horror, and to go through such an experience, and besides, in such a young age. – my trans.]

⁵⁷ Алексиевич, 146. [Oohh! How about wounds... Large, deep, lacerated... One could go crazy... Shrapnel from bullets, grenades, and shells in heads, in intestines, in a whole body; together with metal, we take out military buttons, pieces of coats, of shirts, of leather belts from a body. One soldier had his whole chest torn up, the heart was exposed... It was still beating, but he was dying.... I am applying the last dressing and barely stopping myself from crying. [. . .]By the evening, blood is in my hair, it comes through my medical coat to the body, it is on caps and

Women were supposed to do all possible military tasks, even those of them that were barely physically possible for a female body:

А труд наших девушек-оружейниц! Им надо было четыре бомбы – это четыре сотни килограммов – подвесить к машине вручную. И так всю ночь – один самолёт поднялся, второй – сел. Организм до такой степени перестраивался, что мы всю войну не были женщинами.... [. . .] Ну, вы сами понимаете... А после войны не все смогли родить.⁵⁸

In many stories that Alexievich selected for the book, one can see how Soviet women often had to make moral choices during the war. These choices were from all aspects of life – family, war time law, medical service, etc. People had to make very difficult moral decisions, and these choices were often not as bright and heroic as might have been described in other Soviet era war memoirs. For example, when a group of female soldiers captured three Nazi soldiers, and traveled with them through a forest for several days, they became close with the soldiers, even though they were enemies, they ate together and rested together. But, when the order was given to execute all Nazis, the women had to make a decision and they did what the law prescribed – they shot those soldiers dead. Or, when a military nurse found two wounded soldiers in a battlefield, and only one was a Soviet soldier and the other one is Nazi, she made a decision to take only the Soviet soldier off the field into a hospital cart. Or, when one partisan sacrificed her entire family in order to keep working with partisans. These were, undoubtedly, extraordinary situations in a terrible time, and Alexievich shows her readers these women's emotional

masks. It is black, viscous, mixed with everything found in a human body; with urine, feces... - my trans.]

⁵⁸ Алексиевич, 216. [How about the work of our girls-armorers! They had to hang up four bombs to a machine; it is four hundred kilograms. It would go on and on a whole night – one plane would take off, and the second one would land. The body adjusted itself so much that we were not women throughout the war... [. . .] Well, you understand [what I mean] ... After the war, not everybody could give birth. – my trans.]

torment and the pain they have been carrying for so many years after the war. She also provides other stories, heroic and inspiring stories, as well. The stories of women who collected many wounded Nazi soldiers in battle fields and saved their lives, women who were doctors and operated on any patient, no matter what army they belonged to. One woman who did not let a Soviet officer hit a wounded Nazi soldier, because she believed it was immoral, or a woman who remembered how their squadron were feeding captured Nazi soldiers and asking their army cooks to make them good porridge with some lard, which was so difficult to get during the war with millions of starving people all throughout the country.

Alexievich also touches on personal topics about the lives of women that had never been discussed in the Soviet era WWII memoirs before *The War's Unwomanly Face*. Women carefully told those stories, probably for the first time in their lives. Many girls went to the war so young they had not reached puberty by then. Some had their first menstruation at war, surrounded by dozens of soldiers, with no water, or even a piece of cloth, and most importantly, with no knowledge of what was happening to their bodies. In one of these stories, a woman remembers this happening to her and panic and fear she experienced that day; she thought she was wounded and could not find the spot until an old squadron doctor explain to her the nature of that 'wound.' Russian people do not openly discuss anything about their private body parts or functions related to their gender; it would be embarrassing for them to talk about that in an interview or any situation other than at a doctor's office or at their friend's house. The fact that those women were able to open up to Alexievich speaks to her skills as an interviewer and her

personality. Those interviewees must have found her very trustworthy and compassionate to share such personal details about their lives.

Lack of proper clothes and almost no access to female hygiene was another side of the unspoken reality of women during WWII. Since by the Soviet law, women were supposed to be completely equal to men, such a natural part of female nature as menstruation was completely discarded and overlooked. Not only women did not have proper underwear, they also had no sanitary napkins or anything that would serve as a substitute:

Идём... Человек двести девушек, а сзади человек двести мужчин. Жара стоит. Марш-бросок – тридцать километров. Тридцать! Мы идём, а после нас красные пятна на песке... Ну, дела эти... Наши... Как ты тут что спрячешь? Солдаты идут следом и делают вид, что ничего не замечают.. Брюки на нас засыхали, как из стекла становились. Резали. Там раны были, и всё время слышался запах крови. Нам же ничего не выдавали... Мы сторожили: когда солдаты повесят на кустах свои рубашки. Пару штук стащим... Ваты и бинтов для раненых не хватало... А не то что.... Женское бельё, может быть, только через два года появилось. В мужских трусах ходили и майках. [. . .] Добрались до переправы, и тут нас начали бомбить. Бомбёжка страшнейшая [. . .]. А мы бомбёжки не слышим, нам не до бомбёжки, мы скорее в речку. К воде... Вода! И сидели там, пока не отмокли... Под осколками... Стыд был страшнее смерти. И несколько девчонок в воде погибло...⁵⁹

⁵⁹ Алексиевич, 220-221. [We are walking two hundred girls and behind us are two hundred men. A very hot day. It is a long-distance foot march for 30 kilometers (about 18 miles). 30 kilometers! We are walking and there are red spots on the ground behind us. We were having.... You know what... Our female thing.... How could one hide anything in this situation? Soldiers are following us and pretending they do not notice anything. Our pants dry up on us and become like glass. They rub into our skin and wound us; we smelled like blood all the time. Our commanders did not give any special clothes to us. We would wait till soldiers put their shirts on bushes and then would steal a few. Cotton pads and bandage rolls were scarce even for the wounded soldiers, not even talking about us... We got female underwear maybe two years after the war had started. We were wearing men's boxers and tank-tops. Then we reached a stream crossing and the bombing started. It was a terrible bombing, but we did not hear it, we did not care about it. We went straight into the river. Water! We were staying there under shrapnel until we soaked off. Our shame was bigger than the fear of death. A few girls were killed in the water... - my trans.]

This little passage gives us better understanding of some unspoken realities of women's life during the war. The blood-soaked pants were compared to glass, like to a tool of torture. Some women preferred the risk of being killed for having that blood soaked out of their clothes to simply admitting the fact that they were women and they menstruated. In some way, it seems like those women wanted to be de-womanized, they would rather be gender neutral than have female bodily functions.

What is, perhaps, unexpected is Alexievich's choice to include the topic of rape during the WWII. Rape has been one of the tools of war for many centuries, and many writers from numerous countries have written about it. It was surely mentioned in Soviet-era literature too. For example, one can find mention of it in Leo Kopelev's *Хранить вечно* (1975) (*To Keep Forever*). Needless to say, such an ugly and shameful topic was mostly avoided in the Russian literature, especially in connection with WWII. It would probably require a long term psychological study to learn why Soviet women never spoke about raped Soviet or German women. However, that is not a part of our discussion. Suffice it to say that not one of Alexievich's interviewees said she was raped. We are not sure whether this is because none of them experienced rape themselves, or if it is because they did not want to even remember that, or if it is because Alexievich herself decided not to include those stories in the book. Nevertheless, one of the female interviewees recalled meeting a young Soviet woman during the war; the latter was heavily pregnant. The pregnant woman worked for a German and he raped her. The Nazi man had forced her to sleep with him regularly. She was found walking and beating herself in the belly crying that she would not come back home carrying a Nazi bastard. Other women were trying to talk to her. Later they learned the pregnant woman hanged herself.

There were a few horrifying memories about the rape of German women as well. The following is one of the stories the Soviet censorship did not let Alexievich publish in the original version, but which she added to a later edition of her book.⁶⁰ The story comes from an anonymous Soviet soldier who tells how they were raping German girls in German villages. Older women were retreating from the Soviet army, so there were only some very young girls left in the villages. The man recalled how the Russian soldiers captured a twelve or thirteen-year-old girl and ten Soviet soldiers raped her. He remembered that she was in a great pain, but that the soldiers were laughing. The men were worried about their reputation and did everything secretly so that Soviet medical nurses would not learn about that.

Another story which Alexievich was allowed to include in the original edition of the book, even though it is not too different from the one excluded by the Soviet censor, follows.

Я помню... Конечно, я помню изнасилованную немку. Она лежала голая, граната засунута между ног... Сейчас стыдно, а тогда я стыд не чувствовала. [. . .] К нам в батальон.... К нашему командиру пришли пять немецких девушек. Они плакали... Гинеколог осмотрел: у них там – раны. Раны рваные. Все трусы в крови... Их всю ночь насиловали. Солдаты стояли в очереди... Не записывайте... Выключите магнитофон... Правда! Всё правда! Построили наш батальон.. Этим немецким девушкам сказали: идите и ищите, если кого-нибудь узнаете – расстреляем на месте. [. . .] Но они сидели и плакали. [. . .] Они не хотели больше крови. Так и сказали... Тогда им каждой дали по буханке хлеба. Конечно, всё это война... [. . .] Думаете, легко было простить? Видеть целые...белые домики под черепичной крышей... [. . .] Я сама хотела, чтобы им было больно... [. . .] Хотела видеть их слёзы... Стать хорошей сразу нельзя. Правильной и доброй. [. . .] Жалеть их. Для этого мне нужно было, чтобы десятки лет прошло...⁶¹

⁶⁰ We are using the most recent edition of Alexievich works published by «Время» ('Vremya') in Moscow in 2016.

⁶¹ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 319. [I remember... Of course, I remember a raped German woman. She was lying naked, and a grenade was tucked in between her legs... It is shameful now, but I didn't feel shame back then. [...]] Five German women came to our squadron

The same interviewee recalled another story about a Soviet officer who fell in love with a German girl. She observed that if he had raped the German girl it would have not been a problem. Rapes were everywhere: «Это...Конечно, было... У нас мало пишут, но это закон войны. Мужчины столько лет без женщин обходились, и конечно, ненависть. Войдём в городок или деревню – первые три дня на грабёж и... Ну, негласно, разумеется...»⁶²

One of Alexievich's greatest skills is the ability to show the conflicted memories of those tormented women. On one side, the women feel sad and sympathetic to the Soviet officers, but on the other side they do not remember themselves feeling anything toward humiliated and abused German women. These intertwine with numerous interviews about love at war and how genuine those feelings were. Women recall true comradery between men and women at war, they cherish very heart-rending moments like kissing a dying soldier, or dancing with their companions-in-arms, or growing long hair and seeing how Soviet men were fascinated with those simple signs of womanly beauty. And yet, the same women did not feel anything toward German women and all of

to our commander. They were crying. A gynecologist examined them; they had wounds down there. Lacerated wounds. Their panties were all in blood... They were raped all night. Soldiers were waiting in line.... Don't record that... Turn off the recorder... It's true! It's all true! The squadron drew up in line. They told those German women – go and look for [those men], if you recognize someone we will shoot those on sight. [. . .] But they were sitting and crying. They didn't want [to go] ... They didn't want any more blood. They told us so. Then we gave them a loaf of bread each. Of course, it's all war... [. . .]Do you think it was easy to forgive? To see intact, white houses with tiled roof. [. . .]I myself wanted them to feel pain... [. . .]I wanted to see their tears... It's impossible to become nice right away. Impossible to become good and kind, to sympathize with them. For that, I needed decades to pass... – my trans.]

⁶² Алексиевич, 318. [‘[Rapes] happened... Of course, that happened... They don't write much about it, but it is a law of war. Men were without women for so many years, and there was hatred, of course. When we would enter a town or a village, the first three days were for robbery and for... Well, of course, it was unofficial... - my trans.]

the horror that those women were going through. Alexievich does not say this specifically, but her readers understand that even women as loving, caring, and life-giving as the women she interviews are, they are dehumanized by war. The war blinded them and ‘de-womanized’ them (our term). They lost what many might consider the traits and qualities of being a woman, such as kindness, sympathy, support, helpfulness, care, tenderness, love, and so on. Some of the interviewed women recall local people in different villages would not recognize them as women; they would see them as men, and when their gender was discovered, would feel sad for those women as though the women had befallen some most unfortunate fate. Interestingly enough, the interviewees often complained about men who would not want to continue relationships with them, after the war, or even openly avoided the war-time women. This fact of being unwanted or discarded became an unspoken truth about women in the war. Many of the women hid the fact that they were at the war, some of them even destroyed any evidence of their participation in war actions. Women who came from the war were often seen as easy, as though they went to ‘serve men’s needs’ voluntarily, or because they wanted to get married, or simply to simply please their own lust. Some women served as prostitutes, simply to survive the war.

One interviewee tells Alexievich, the victory was taken away from all Soviet women because of that unspoken belief about the women’s role at war.

Кому я могла сказать, что я раненая, контуженная. Попробуй скажи, а кто тебя потом на работу примет, кто замуж возьмёт? Мы молчали, как рыбы. Никому не признавались, что воевали на фронте. Так между собой связь держали, переписывались... Это потом чествовать нас стали, через тридцать лет... [. . .] А первое время мы таились, даже награды не носили. Мужчины носили, а женщины нет. Мужчины – победители, герои, женихи, у них была

война, а на нас смотрели совсем другими глазами. [. . .] У нас, скажу я вам, забрали победу....⁶³

Civilian women often did not hide their attitudes toward military women, even behind simple politeness or by turning a blind eye. Military women were bullied and humiliated on a regular basis:

Как нас встретила Родина? Без рыданий не могу... Сорок лет прошло, а до сих пор щёки горят. Мужчины молчали, а женщины... Они кричали нам: «Знаем, чем вы там занимались! Завлекали молодыми п...наших мужиков. Фронтовые б.... Сучки военные...». Оскорбляли по-всякому...⁶⁴

Some women told their stories about unfortunate relationships during and after the war. Companions-in-arms were caring and tender toward women at war. They would give their warm coats to women, would share even a last bit of food with their fellow female soldiers, and would show fascination just from a sound of woman voice. Of course, many of the women fell in love, and started what seemed to be serious relationships. Many of Alexievich's interviewees recall that those romantic stories would raise their spirits at war, would help both men and women to live through the hardships and to fight for victory even harder. Many pictured idyllic scenes of happy life together, after the war was over.

⁶³ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 135-136. [Who could I tell I was wounded, shell-shocked. If you try and tell that, who would then hire you, who would marry you? We were silent. We didn't tell anyone we fought at the frontline. We just stayed in touch with each other, wrote letters.... Later they would start to honor us, thirty years later... [...]] But at first, we were furtive, we didn't even wear the medals. Men would wear them, but women wouldn't. Men were winners, heroes, marriageable, they owned the war, but people looked at us very differently. [...]] I should say, they took the victory away from us. – my trans.]

⁶⁴ Алексиевич, 268. [How did the motherland meet us? I can't tell that without crying... It's been forty years, but I am still blushing. Men kept silent, but women... They were yelling to us "We know what you were doing there! You were luring our men with your young pussies. You frontline whores... Military bitches..." They were abusing us with many words... - my trans.]

Some stories prove it was a true love that lasted for decades. But, many others show the underlying attitude men had toward their female comrades. Alexievich provides one story of a woman who proudly put her military clothes back on after a dance event. The woman told of how she was mistreated by a Soviet officer who was disgusted when he understood she served in the army. She believed that he would expect a military woman to be rude, have a foul mouth, to be a heavy smoker, and to be pregnant. Many of the women interviewed recall their war time relationships ending because the men would go back to their wives and children. Despite all the respect and comradery of the war, the victory changed that friendly relations; men did not want to see their military companions as their life-time spouses, and did not treat them as “true” women:

После войны... Я жила в коммунальной квартире. Соседки все были с мужьями, обижали меня. Издевались: «Ха-а-а... расскажи, как ты там б....с мужиками...». [. . .] Демобилизовался из армии мой командир. Приехал ко мне, и мы поженились. Записались в загсе, и всё. Без свадьбы. А через год он ушёл к другой женщине, заведующей нашей фабричной столовой: «От неё духами пахнет, а от тебя тянет сапогами и портянками».⁶⁵

What is implied in those stories is the question about the Soviet soldiers. Although *The War's Unwomanly Face* is about women, and all the stories belong to women, they reflect Soviet men as well. Alexievich implicitly makes her reader ask who these male Soviet soldiers are. She uses the stories these women tell to imply this question, leaving it between the lines, leaving it to her readers to consider the level of moral values and values the men displayed. It is left to the reader to ask about what it means to be a good

⁶⁵ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 257. [After the war... I lived in a communal apartment. All the female neighbors there were with their husbands, and the women were abusing me. They were bullying me, saying “Ha-ha-ha... Tell us how you were whoring around there with men”. [...] My commander was demobilized. He came to me and we got married. Just a civil registration, that’s all. No wedding party. A year later, he left me for another woman; a head of our factory’s cafeteria: “She smells of perfume, while you stink of boots and puttees”. – my trans.]

human, and if these war “heroes” are what one might picture previously. One of the most important and widely spread questions implicitly present in every book by Alexievich is what it means to be a human, and how much of a human is in a human.

As the first book in Alexievich’s ‘The Red Man’⁶⁶ cycle, *The War’s Unwomanly Face* begins a technique she goes on to use in all her other books – she provides the most horrifying events together with the purest and romantic ones. She selects a wide range of memories and juxtaposes them to let her readers draw their own conclusions. Often, this dichotomy is reflected in the chapter names, sometimes in the last lines of a story, or at other times within the text body. She presents various opinions and memories; some inspiring and overwhelming, while others are unspeakably depressing and troubling. One story could tell of a Soviet medical nurse helping save lives of both Soviet and Nazi soldiers, and the next of a young woman who executed two of her own companions in arms who deserted before a battle and caused a lot of their soldiers to die. Soviet soldiers are depicted in some stories as helpful, brave, friendly, loyal, and very selfless, but yet other women would share memories of Soviet men breaking the arm of a child in a public bus, or cheating on their wives, or raping women. Some memories describe the war as the place of blood, lice, vomit, and vodka, while others would portray those five years as the most authentic and important years of people’s life where love, friendship, comradeship was the most genuine and therefore those years would be the happiest. It is down to the reader to decide what opinion to have, or to will form while accessing the reading.

Perhaps another reason for the juxtaposition Alexievich uses is her eagerness to show all the horror of war and death. Probably, reading hundreds of pages about

⁶⁶ The cycle consists of five books – *The War’s Unwomanly Face*, *The Last Witnesses*, *The Boys of Zinc*, *Voices from Chernobyl*, and *Secondhand Time*.

manslaughter, blood, diseases, and torture would slowly blur a reader's perceptions of those inhumane events and render readers unreceptive. Instead, she places these events next to simple and happy moments of everyday life, so as to elicit a strong emotional response from a reader. The contrast breaks the tension, thus creating a stronger effect. Consciously or not, here Alexievich employs the technique of 'defamiliarization' or, 'estrangement' developed by Viktor Shklovsky and explained in his essay «Искусство как приём» ('Art as Technique'). For example, Alexievich provides scenes of nature and animal life among destroyed villages and dead soldiers. One interviewee recalls a field of bodies, and the midst of it beautiful horses. The interviewee says that the horses did not run away, because they were loyal animals and could not understand war. Women were especially sensitive to those contrasts; they were stunned by how disgusting the war looked in an eternity-long life of nature.

А какие тяжёлые раненые зимой... Задубевшие гимнастёрки – от крови и снежной воды, кирзовые сапоги в крови со льдом – не разрезать. Все они холодные, как мертвецы. В окно посмотришь – зима и красота неопиcуемая. Волшебные белые ели. На секунду всё забудешь... И снова...⁶⁷

We can see the juxtaposition of the horrors of bleeding human bodies and the beauty of winter forest.

Another woman remembers how a simple dandelion next to the window of one of the Gestapo wards, provided horrifying contrast to the unspeakable violence happening inside the building:

Не помню первый допрос... Я сознание не теряла. [. . .] Били, подвешивали. Всегда абсолютно раздетую. Фотографировали. Руками можешь закрыть

⁶⁷ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 145. [Injured men are so heavy in winter... Service shirts are stiff frozen from blood and snow water, kersey boots are in blood with ice, they are impossible to cut. The men are all cold as the dead. When you look through the window, it is winter and unspeakable beauty there. Magical white spruces. You forget everything for a second... Then back again... – my trans.]

только груди... Я видела, как сходили с ума... [. . .] О, каких людей я там встретила! Они умирали в подвалах гестапо, и об их мужестве знали только стены. [. . .] У нас в камере было маленькое окошко, на нем решётка, надо было, чтобы кто-нибудь тебя посадил... [. . .] А мы все такие слабые, что посадить друг друга не могли. Но была у нас Аня, парашютистка. [. . .] И вот она, вся окровавленная, избитая, вдруг попросила: «Подтолкните меня, я выгляну на волю. Хочу туда!». Хочу – и всё. Мы все вместе её подняли, она вскрикнула: «Девочки, там цветочек...». И тогда каждая стала проситься: «И меня»... И откуда-то у нас взялись силы помочь друг другу. А то был одуванчик [. . .].⁶⁸

Imagining those badly beaten and tortured women helping each other to reach a window for a glimpse at a dandelion is striking.

Yet another woman could not forget the scenery of nature in the moment she learned about the war. In her memories, the news about the war and the beauty of green trees could not coexist, they did not belong to the same world:

... И тут война. [. . .] Я узнала эту страшную новость утром... Ещё роса на листьях деревьев не высохла, а уже сказали – война! И вот эта роса, которую я вдруг увидела на траве и деревьях, так ясно увидела – мне и на фронте вспоминалась. Природа находилась в контрасте с тем, что происходило с людьми. Яркое светило солнце... Расцвели ромашки, мои любимые, их было видимо-невидимо в лугах...⁶⁹

⁶⁸ Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, 293. [I don't remember the first interrogation. I didn't faint. [...] They would beat me, hang me up. Always completely naked. They were taking photographs. You can cover only your breasts with your arms... I saw people going crazy... [. . .] Oh, what a great people I met there! They were dying in Gestapo basements and only the walls knew about those people's bravery. [. . .] There was a little window in our cell, it had a wire, you would need somebody to give you a boost... [. . .] But we all were so weak that we could not give each other a boost. There was Ania, a paratrooper. [. . .] She was all in blood and beaten up. Suddenly she asked us "Give me a boost, I would look at free life. I want to go there!" She wants that, period. We all gave her a boost and all of the sudden she exclaimed "Girls, there is a little flower..." Then every girl started to ask "Give me a boost too... Me too..." [. . .] Somehow we found strength to help each other. It was a dandelion [. . .] – my trans.]

⁶⁹ Алексиевич, 76. [Suddenly, there came the war [. . .] I learned this terrible piece of news in the morning... Dew on the tree leaves had not dried up as they already said – the war! This dew that I saw so clearly on the grass and trees, I was recalling it on the front. Nature was in contrast to what was going on with people. The sun was shining brightly... Daisies have come into bloom, my favorite flowers; they were thick on the ground in meadows... - my trans.]

Even though *The War's Unwomanly Face* depicted a period of extreme historic transition, and aimed to preserve the memory of people who would soon pass away and would get lost for the future generations, and touched upon some topics relating to the quotidian experience of women, such as childbirth and menstruation, it is not really an example of *écriture féminine*. In this book Alexievich does not do anything different from other writers in the same field. Interviews collected by Adamovich, Granin, Ehrenburg, Grossman, and others followed a similar goal – to share the memories of hundreds of people and memories about people. Every narrator would reflect on something that he or she considered important and worthy remembering. We can find numerous stories about love, children, marriage, support, etc. in the books by those writers. The concept of *écriture féminine* is not applicable to the writing by Alexievich, because she is not interested in disengaging her narrative from male-centric stories, nor does this mode of writing take on a paradigmatic or global character in her books. She does not try, intentionally or unintentionally, to reject the diegetic paradigm of male authority in her writing. Her topics in the 1985 book were about women, but the *War's Unwomanly Face* is not an example of 'women writing' for the simple reason that it endeavors to unearth women's testimonies about a traumatic collective experience, rather seeking out a refuge from patriarchal modes of storytelling as such.

Although the mode of 'women's writing' is not applicable to this collection of stories prepared by Svetlana Alexievich, she did an important work in preserving women personal memories and reflecting on some hidden sides of lives of women in the Soviet Union. One of the most important aspects of *The War's Unwomanly Face* was that Alexievich made both the readers and the interviewees feel that those experiences were

noteworthy and, even though non-heroic by the military meaning, they were heroic for the people who lived through the war. In the course of her discussion about different privileges that WWII participants had in the USSR, Nina Tumarkin takes special note of this line of audience separation in accounts of the war. The women who struggled to survive, to feed their children, to save them from illnesses and starvation, were not considered the “war participants” and therefore were not eligible for any benefits like free public transportation or no-fee annual trips to resorts, etc.⁷⁰

Another important aspect reflected in *The War's Unwomanly Face* was the depiction of unspoken reality behind the exterior of Soviet gender equality. Equal rights for men and women were stipulated in the first Soviet constitution of 1918. Women were granted the same opportunities as men for voting, education, salary, labor, medical care, marriage, etc. The right of women to have maternity leave and social security benefits was also guaranteed by the Soviet laws. The system worked and Soviet women utilized their rights fully. But the collection of interviews by Svetlana Alexievich reflects a hidden side of this gender equality. The experience of the Great Patriotic War exposed the deep frustrations and fractures within women's perceptions of themselves, and even in their political consciousness. They were expected to be equal to men and equal to soldiers, there were not supposed to be any differences between men suffering and women suffering, and all the hardship of just being a woman during the war was not considered as anything noteworthy. The interviews of women who survived the war showed how difficult and humiliating it was to them, how de-womanizing it was, and how much it affected their future life choices. In the Soviet society, where women were

⁷⁰ Nina Tumarkin, *The Leaving & The Dead. The Rise and Fall of the Cult of World War II in Russia* (Basic Books, 1994), 195.

declared equal to men in their rights, post-war confessions from female survivors unveiled the deep gap between how society wanted to see them, and how they felt and lived in reality.

The War's Unwomanly Face unfolds unspoken reality of women's life in the Soviet society. Even though officially they were supposed to be treated in the same manner as men, the long-established tradition of male and female roles in that part of the world prevailed over the new rules of the Soviet era. Not only were women not ready to cross out their typical feminine traits like the need to look pretty, smell good, and have beautiful clothes, but men were not ready for these changes either. As the interviews revealed, Soviet men did not see those 'unfeminine' women as women; they were looking for traditional feminine images of a lady-like female who wears dresses, smells of perfume, is person who is more sensitive and fragile than men, needs protection, and who just cannot do absolutely everything by herself. The war distorted this image for a while, but as much as women were proud that they sacrificed everything for the victory, including their pride, health, and in some way their own female self-identification, Soviet society did not grant women the declared equality, and men did not see or need the sacrifices that the women made. The gap between the official narrative of women's status in the USSR and their actual status, reflected in the interviews in the *War's Unwomanly Face*, corresponds to Chandra Mohanty's concept of "Woman" as "a cultural and ideological composite other constructed through diverse representational discourses – scientific, literary, juridical, linguistic, cinematic, etc." and "women" as "real material

subjects of their collective histories”.⁷¹ Mohanty’s study on feminism helps us interpret Alexievich’s attempts to bring into large narrative the experiences of women that are otherwise occluded by patriarchy. Chandra Mohanty argues that “[t]he “unity” of the individual subject, as well as the unity of feminism, is situated and specified as the product of interpretation of personal histories; personal histories that are themselves situated in relation to the development within feminism of particular questions and critiques.”⁷²

Even though Soviet women had access to education, labor and wage, high ranked job positions, medical care, maternal rights, political and legal rights, and numerous studies on gender roles in the Soviet times would prove it, the narratives of women collected by Alexievich unveiled women’s dubious status. As they confessed in their interviews, they wanted to be seen as different from men and get proper treatment with regard to their gender. They wanted to look feminine during the war and yet they were ashamed of that, they needed feminine hygiene products and yet they were ashamed to ask for it, since the government did not see any need in such commodities. They were given opportunities by Soviet society to nearly eliminate their feminine side and receive equal treatment as Communist workers, but in reality, Soviet men did not want to marry such women and were looking for more traditional females. On the surface, all Soviet women could go fight to protect their motherland, but in reality, the after-war years revealed men’s unspoken attitude that ‘decent women should stay at home’. Many Soviet women used to hide the fact that they were anywhere near the front-line and used to hide

⁷¹ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism Without Borders* (Duke University Press, 2003), 19.

⁷² Mohanty, 86.

their medals if they received any. They felt betrayed and rightless. Here we see some paradox of Soviet women who were proud of their social, political, and economic freedoms, together with the freedom from any religious assigned role for women in the atheistic state, and who at the same time secretly and shamefully desired to still hold a special social status that would separate them as in some sort special gender.

Последние свидетели (Last Witnesses)

Alexievich continued the topic of WWII in her next book *Последние свидетели (Last Witnesses)*, 1985. As far as we know, there is no English translation of this book yet, but Random House is planning to publish Richard Pevear and Larissa Volkonsky's translation of it later in 2018.

Just as the first book, this one contains a wide array of interview excerpts that the writer collected many years after the war. After talking to women in their fifties, and older, for *War's Unwomanly Face* she goes on to collect stories of people who were little children during the war and who managed to survive those horrors. Both books provide full first and last names of the interviewees at the end of each story. Where *War's Unwomanly Face* records what profession the person had during the war time and often notes the honors received by the storytellers, *The Last Witnesses* only provides the age of the interviewee at the time of events described in the interview and what occupation the person has now.

This book also does not have any remarks by Alexievich herself, remarks like 'starts crying', or 'after a long silence', or 'turns away,' nor does it have the author's preface or afterword. This differs significantly from her previous book, which is packed

with notes and comments. Instead, *Last Witnesses* is a set of little excerpts from a hundred of interviews that presented in the way the interviewer recorded them.

Also unlike *War's Unwomanly Face*, this book does not have chapters. It consists of about one hundred little stories, some are just two pages long, and small summaries prepared by Alexievich out of hours of interviews. The people Alexievich interviewed for this book are indeed the last witnesses of WWII, in post-Soviet countries. The generation of people who fought in the war has almost all passed away. But the people interviewed for this book in the late 1970s and early 1980s were in their 40s and 50s. The generation after them did not experience the war at all, while the generation before them took part in the war and then was passing away due to their age and health issues. The only people left to tell their first-hand experience are those whose stories made *Last Witnesses*.

There are not any particular main themes or sub-topics in the book. It does not have any late editions and newly added chapters, as *War's Unwomanly Face* does. The memories include a variety of childhood experiences; they reflect of many possible events one could expect of war time: crimes, dead people, violence, tortures, lots of blood, starvation, evacuation, orphanages.

For the title of each story Alexievich picked the most striking phrase from an interview. She heavily employed her method of contrast for naming the stories. When reading through the list of contents, one can already get a good idea of what kind of memories one might find in the book. These titles provide incredible pain, suffering, and love in a child-like syntax. The titles are truly shocking and very illustrative examples of the 'contrasting mode' method, as are the stories they announce.

One example is «А они не тонули, как мячики...» (‘They were not drowning, just like balls...’):

... Побежали с сестрой к Двине, моста в том месте не было, в гетто людей перевозили на лодках. Берег оцепили немцы. На наших глазах загружали лодки стариками, детьми, на катере дотаскивали до середины реки и лодку опрокидывали. [. . .] Видела, как села в лодку семья – муж, жена и двое детей, когда лодку перевернули, взрослые сразу пошли ко дну, а дети всё время всплывали. Фашисты, смеясь, били их вёслами. Они ударят их в одном месте, те всплывают в другом, догоняют и снова бьют. А они не тонули, как мячики...⁷³

When one thinks of balls for games, one often thinks of something nice and joyful, of children playing in the backyard or of school students playing during a long break. Balls follow us throughout our childhood in probably every country of the world. They are something innocent and filled with good memories. Hence, the shocking comparison of drowning children with balls; something as fun-filled as toy balls and something as terribly wrong as people coming on the surface to grasp air while getting beaten by Nazis.

Another example comes from «Я их руками собирала, а они белые-белые...»

(‘I was collecting them with hands, and they were white, very white...’):

Ещё через несколько дней... Из деревни Кабаки прибежала мамина сестра – тётя Катя. Чёрная, страшная. Она рассказала, что в их деревню приехали немцы, собрали активистов и вывезли за околицу. Там расстреляли из пулемётов. Среди расстрелянных был и мамин брат, депутат сельского Совета. [. . .] До сих пор помню слова тёти Кати:
- Они ему разбили голову, и я руками мозги собирала. Они белые-белые.

⁷³ Светлана Алексиевич, *Последние свидетели* (Москва: Время, 2016), 227. [My sister and I ran to Dvina, there was no bridge at that place and they were taking (Jewish) people into Ghetto by boats. Germans sealed off the shore. We saw with our own eyes - they would load the boats with old people, children, then would take them by powerboat to the middle of the river and would flip the boats over. We saw a family getting on to the boat – a husband, wife, and two children; then the boat got flipped over the adults drowned immediately, but the children were emerging all the time. Nazis were beating them with oars. They would hit at one spot and the children would come on the surface at another spot, the Nazis would hurry after them and would beat again. They were not drowning, just like balls. – my trans.]

Она жила у нас два дня. [. . .] И за эти два дня у неё побелела голова. [. . .] Я боялся, что мама тоже станет белая...⁷⁴

White is symbolically associated with purity and perfection. But here, the storyteller combines this color white, with all of its implied meanings, with human brains. If a reader tries to imagine how it feels to collect human brains with bare hands, they would be able to fully understand the contrast of the dead man's brain and whiteness.

A final example comes from «...И стала качать, как куклу» ('She started to cradle it like a doll'):

После войны я боялся железа. Лежит осколок, а у меня страх, что он ещё раз взорвётся. Соседская девочка... [. . .] Мама её над гробом повторяла: «Три года и два месяца»... [. . .] Она нашла «лимонку». И стала качать, как куклу. В тряпки завернула и качает... Граната маленькая, как игрушка, только тяжёлая. Мать добежать не успела... [. . .] После войны в нашей деревне [. . .] ещё два года хоронили детей. Военное железо валялось всюду. [. . .] Куски мин, бомб.... А у нас же игрушек не было...⁷⁵

It is not difficult to imagine little girls cradling their dolls. Children always copy their parents, and little daughters cradle their dolls just like their mothers might cradle babies. Needless to say, picturing a child cradling a hand grenade like a doll is terrifying. People

⁷⁴ Алексиевич, *Последние свидетели*, 32. [A few days later, mother's sister, aunt Katia, came from the Kabaki village. She was dark, formidable. She said that Nazis came to their village, gathered all activists, and took them to the outskirts. There they shot them with a machine-gun. Mother's brother was among the dead shootees; he was a deputy of the village council. [...] Up until now, I remember aunt Katia's words:

- They crushed his head, and I was collecting his brains with hands. They were white, so very white.

She stayed with us for two days. [...] In two days her head turned white. [...] I was worried that my mother would turn white too. – my trans.]

⁷⁵ Алексиевич, *Последние свидетели*, 72. [I was afraid of the metal after the war. I see a metal scrap and I fear it would explode again. There was a neighbor's girl... [. . .] Her mother was repeating over her coffin: "Three years and two months"... [. . .] The girl found a hand grenade and started to rock it like a baby doll. She wrapped it in cloths and was rocking it... The hand grenade was small like a toy, but just heavy. The mother could not run to the girl on time... [. . .] After the war, we would bury children for the next two years. Military metal gears were everywhere; [. . .] pieces of land mines and bombs... We didn't have toys then... - my trans.]

cradle babies and pets to calm them down, to relax them, and to show love and caring. The image of a girl expressing her love to a deadly weapon is startling, and one of those mentally bothering contrasts seen in every book by Alexievich.

What makes *The Last Witnesses*, in some ways, similar to *The War's Unwomanly Face* is the focus by the interviewees on physical objects. Just like the women in the previous book, the storytellers recall animals, nature, colors, beautiful things, shoes, dresses, toys, smells, some random phrases that got fixed in the memories, and so on. These memories of their war time childhoods are undoubtedly a source of terrible psychological trauma. The stories are terrifying and all worth quoting. They are told with simple words, short sentences, and plain syntax. Such a way of storytelling accentuates the contrasting mode of positioning the stories, and has a disquieting effect upon the reader. The combination of bloodcurdling facts from the interviewees together with unsophisticated manner of telling about them, as well as placing those facts in the middle of average everyday events, results in this large emotional impact on the reader.

Погрузили и повезли. [. . .] От голода и страха я теряла сознание. [. . .] Жажда. Нас всех мучила жажда... [. . .] Я век буду помнить... [. . .] В углу у нас стояли ведра, куда мы ходили по малой нужде, пока ехали. И одна девочка.. Она доползла до этих вёдер, обхватила одно ведро руками, припала к нему и начала пить. Пила большими глотками... А потом её начало выворачивать... Она вырвет и опять ползёт к ведру... Её снова выворачивает... [. . .] Я не помню... Но это было уже в лагере... [. . .] Там мы разгружали машины с мёртвыми и укладывали их в штабеля, укладывали слоями – слой мёртвых, слой просмоленных шпал. [. . .] И так с утра до ночи мы готовили костры ...[. . .] из трупов. Среди мёртвых попадались ещё живые, и они хотели нам что-то сказать.. [. . .] А нам нельзя было возле них останавливаться... [. . .] Как я выжила, когда умирала сто раз? Не знаю... [. . .] А вам не страшно со мной? Меня слушать...⁷⁶

⁷⁶ Алексиевич, 131-134. [They loaded us and started the transportation. [. . .]I was fainting from starvation and fear. [. . .]Thirst. We all were suffering from thirst... [. . .]I will always remember... [. . .]There were buckets in the corner, we would go for a pee in them while we were on the road. There was one girl... She crawled up to those buckets, put her arms around one bucket, got closer to it and started drinking... She was drinking with big gulps. Then got sick

As children, the interviewees experienced a lot of deaths around them and these deaths were their normal life. They remember slipping in the blood of their own parents, and burying of their family members, of collecting limbs of Soviet soldiers to make a mass grave; they also remember Nazis collecting their blood and a lot of dead children as the result of total blood loss, remember tortures and life in camps. Yet all those memories are filled with love toward people; toward neighbors, strangers on trains and roads, toward partisans and locals who would help them during the war.

Some of those children saw unspeakable violence by the Nazis and still they recall feeding German children with the last food they had. Lots of those children became indifferent to death and suffering; some of them would lose the ability to cry up until the moment of the interview with Alexievich.

Меня разбудил мальчишка с нижнего этажа, он сказал: «Пойдём со мной на улицу, там лежат убитые. Поищем моего отца». Улицу замело лёгким снегом, [. . .] через пятнадцать-двадцать метров лежали растрелянные наши военнопленные. [. . .] Все они лежали лицом вниз. Мальчишка не мог дотронуться до убитых, он боялся, что где-то здесь его отец. И вот тогда я себя поймал на мысли, что у меня почему-то нет страха перед смертью. Мысленно с ней уже сжился. Я их переворачивал, а он смотрел каждому в лицо. Так мы прошли всю улицу... У меня с тех пор... больше нет слёз... Нет их даже тогда, когда, может быть, и надо.⁷⁷

to the stomach. She would vomit and would crawl to the bucket again. Then she would get sick to the stomach again... [. . .]I don't remember... But it was already in a camp. There, we were unloading cars with the dead and were stacking them; we were placing them in layers – one layer of the dead and another layer of resin cast railroad ties. [. . .]We were making those camp fires out of the dead...from dawn to sunset. Among those corpses, we would come across people who were still alive and they were trying to tell us something. But we were not allowed to stop next to them... [. . .]How did I survive if I have died a hundred times?... I don't know... Aren't you scared here next to me?... Listening to me? – my trans.]

⁷⁷ Алексиевич, *Последние свидетели*, 149. [A boy from the lower floor woke me up, he said “Let's go outside to the street with me, there are the murdered out there. Let's look for my father”. The street was covered up with light snow [...] In fifteen to twenty meters, there were our dead prisoners of war. [. . .]They were all facing the ground. The boy couldn't touch the killed people; he was afraid his father was somewhere there. That was when I caught myself thinking that I did not have fear of death. In my thoughts, I had already embraced it. I was turning them

Many interviewees recall that dead people and murdered family members became their everyday life and did not cause shock or grief; they treated death as something expected:

Офицер подошёл к столу, поднял скатерть и выстрелил. Оттуда – крик, он ещё раз выстрелил. [. . .] Смотрит на меня... [. . .] У него такие красивые карие глаза... Надо же, помню... Я так испугалась, что от страха спросила: «Дяденька, вы меня убивать будете?». [. . .] Помню, как горели у убитой мамы волосы.. А у маленького возле неё – пелёнки... Мы переползли через них со старшим братом, я держалась за его штанину. [. . .]⁷⁸

The memories of those now adult children are incredibly vivid and filled with details.

They read like a ready to film script due to their heightened emotional content, and the emblematic ways in which those feelings emotions are conveyed.

Дали отцу и брату лопаты копать яму. А нас с мамой под деревом поставили смотреть. [. . .] Мы с мамой смотрели, как их расстреливали. Нельзя было отвернуться и закрыть глаза. [. . .] На третий день приходят тот же немец и два полица: «Собирайтесь хоронить своих бандитов». Мы пришли на то место, они в яме плавают... [. . .] Лопаты мы свои взяли, прикапываем и плачем. А они говорят: «Кто будет плакать, того будем стрелять. Улыбайтесь». Они заставляли нас улыбаться... Я нагнусь, он подходит и в лицо заглядывает: улыбаюсь я или плачу?⁷⁹

and he was looking into each face. This way, we walked through the entire street... I don't have any more tears left since then. I don't have them even when I probably should do. – my trans.]

⁷⁷ Алексиевич, 192-193. [The officer came to the table, lifted the table cloth and shot. From under the table came a scream; he shot again. [. . .]He is looking at me... [. . .]He has beautiful brown eyes... Oh wow, I still remember... I got so scared that I asked "Sir, are you planning to kill me?" [. . .]I remember how my dead mother's hair was burning... and how the little baby's swaddling clothes were burning next to her... We crawled past them with my brother; I was holding his pant leg. [. . .]– my trans.]

⁷⁹ Алексиевич, *Последние свидетели*, 240-241. [They told my father and brother to dig a pit. They put me and my mother next to the tree to watch that. [. . .]My mother and I were watching how they were shooting [father and brother]. We were not allowed to look away and to close our eyes. [. . .]In three days the same German and two police goons came to us "Go bury your bandits". We came to that spot, and they were swimming in the pit. [. . .]We took shovels with us. We are digging them in and crying. They tell us "We will kill those who will cry. Smile!" They forced us to smile... I would bend over, [the German] would come to me and look into my face to check if I am smiling or crying. – my trans.]

Alexievich will look again at the families destroyed by war and at the people who had to face death too soon in their lives in her next book, *Zinky Boys*, that will talk about the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

Цинковые мальчики (Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from a Forgotten War)

In 1979, the USSR brought its army to Afghanistan with the stated aim to help the people of the country get more freedom and build socialism. During the next 10 years, around 500,000 Soviet soldiers, of a so called ‘limited contingent’ («ограниченный контингент»), went to Afghanistan. Some of them made multiple tours of the country. Total losses from the Soviet side were more than 15,000. In 1985, the USSR took a political shift called ‘Perestroika’ (‘restructuring’), and it became possible to ask previously forbidden questions. Some of these questions included the reasoning for the war, and generally questioning the war itself. In 1989, the USSR pulled out its army out of Afghanistan, and civilians soon noticed growing numbers of war veterans in the streets, war veterans who could not fit into society. The Soviet people began to question the perception of Soviet commanders, and the army in general, and to consider the life of the Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan, and the moral portrait of a Soviet soldier. The visible veterans aroused questions, and as a result the Soviet people wanted to understand the war and the actions of the Soviet Army.

Alexievich talked to hundreds of people; both those who came back from Afghanistan and the families of those who did not. It is not clear from the stories in the book if the writer was asking her subjects specific questions, as she would be doing more visibly in her next book, *Voices from Chernobyl*, but her interviewees, as always, made

some very emotional confessions about their Afghan experience or about the trauma of losing a son, husband, or daughter. The stories are very personal, sad, and to some extent therapeutic for the speakers themselves; the interviewees pour all of their pain, anger, disappointment and sorrow on the writer, almost making her both a defendant and a judge at the same time.

The storytellers in this book do not have names, but only titles in relation to the war; mother, staff employee, grenade bomber, private, ensign, captain, helicopter-pilot, etc. Some of those interviews were collected during the war, when Svetlana Alexievich traveled to Afghanistan. She kept a diary during her trip and used some of those entries as one separate chapter in the book. Alexievich also combined some stories together, and titled them with archetypal names such as the story of a soldier or of a mother. These are often collections where she selected the most emotional and defining fragments of several interviews and included them in the book under the collective name. Some subjects of the book sued Alexievich, in 1992, for defaming the Soviet army and slandering the soldiers. She dedicated a small chapter in the *Zinky Boys* to the court hearing, and the process of shaming her book in the early 1990s. One of the two prosecutors, a soldier who returned from the war, was ridiculed by other soldiers who recognized him in one of the stories and he filed a case against Alexievich for the falsification of information. As he said in his speech in court: «Мои друзья звонят мне и обещают набить морду, что я такой герой...».⁸⁰ The other case was initiated by a mother of the soldier killed during the war. The woman felt that Alexievich belittled her son and his heroic service in the Soviet

⁸⁰ Светлана Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики* (Москва: Время, 2016), 266. [My friends call me on the phone and tell me they will beat the hell out of me since I am that kind of a hero... - my trans.]

army. When asked by the judge why she did not sue the writer when the first publication appeared in a newspaper, but instead waited for three and a half years, the woman replied she did not know the book would later be published abroad. To her, this fact meant the propagation of slander about the country which she had served her entire life. After reading her court speech, it seems like the woman was more concerned about her harsh life during the Soviet Union and about the collapse of the country, its beliefs, and the hopes its people had than she was insulted by the publication itself. The court declined one of the cases and approved the other one. The USSR was over, and it was not yet clear what direction the country would take next, and the decision of the court was to some extent predictable. The court did not take any side, and instead stayed politically neutral. We will talk more about these court cases in Chapter 3 of this study.

The *Zinky Boys* is about ‘the feeling of betrayal and deception that people had in Afghanistan and/or after their return to the USSR’. Most of the interviewees mention something of this in their confessions. Some of them experienced these feeling of betrayal and deception immediately upon their arrival in Afghanistan, while others came to these conclusions several years after the war. The USSR did not allow the news to report about soldiers lost in the war, and newspapers and news programs could only report on new schools erected in Afghanistan and new hospitals for the Afghan people. Only photographs with happy and smiling local men and women would be accepted, and many soldiers confessed they believed those articles and volunteered to go to Afghanistan. Only later did they understand the reality. They would collect body parts of their killed brothers in arms after combat and would not be allowed to write actual cause of death. Soviet newspapers delivered in Afghanistan would never mention these deaths

and would publish photographs of Afghan people listening to the Party leader lecture about the world socialist revolution instead.

Уже там мы начали понимать, что нас обманули. Вопрос: почему же нас так легко обманывать? Потому что мы сами этого хотим. [. . .] Но вера была! Большая вера! Во что-то верить – это так красиво. Замечательно! Ощущение обмана... И вера... В нас как-то это уживалось...⁸¹

One of the interviewees Alexievich uses in the book shared his thoughts on the war, and how useless and absurd he thought it was because it was a Muslim country with its own time and understanding of the universe.

В нашей, может быть, наивной вере мы были девственно чисты. Нам казалось: новая власть даёт землю, и все должны с радостью брать её. И вдруг...крестьянин не берёт землю! Мол, кто ты такой, что можешь дать землю, когда она принадлежит Аллаху. Аллах отмеряет и даёт. Нам казалось: мы построим МТС (машинно-тракторные станции), дадим им тракторы, комбайны, косилки, и вся жизнь их изменится. Люди изменятся. И вдруг...они уничтожают МТС! Подрывают наши трактора [. . .] Нам казалось: в век космических полётов смешно думать о Боге. Нелепо! [. . .] И вдруг...непоколебимая цивилизацией исламская религия... Можно ли воевать с вечностью?⁸²

Other soldiers discussed how much they wanted to go to Afghanistan to test their personalities. They believed they would be useful there both by helping their country and by helping their fellow soldiers. But, they soon found that they were brought to Afghanistan through false pretenses:

⁸¹ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 226-227. [Already there [in Afghanistan] we started to understand we were deceived. A question: Why is it that it is so easy to deceive us? Because we want that ourselves. [. . .]But there was a belief! Major belief! To believe into something is so beautiful. Wonderful! The feeling of deception... and the belief. It was in agreement together inside of us. – my trans.]

⁸² Алексиевич, 212. [In our maybe naïve belief, we were pristine. We thought – the new power gives away land and everybody should accept it gladly. Suddenly, ... a peasant does not accept the land! It's like they say "Who do you think you are if you can give away land when the land belongs to Allah. Allah measures it and gives it away." We thought - we will build MTS (machine-tractor stations), will give them tractors, combine-harvesters, mowing-machines, and their whole life would change, the people would change. Suddenly, ... they destroy MTSs! They blow up our tractors. [. . .]We thought – it is silly to think about God in the century of space travels. Suddenly, ... there is Islamic religion unshakable by the civilization. Is it possible to make war with the eternity? – my trans.]

Вызывали к командиру части и спрашивали:

- Ребята, хотите работать на новеньких машинах?

Разумеется, в один голос:

- Да! Мечтаем.

- Но сначала вы должны поехать на целину и помочь убрать хлеб.

Все согласились.

[. . .] Подоспело время обеда, к нашей стоянке один за другим подтаскивают ящики с водкой. [. . .] Построили и тут же объявили, что, мол, через несколько часов за нами прилетит самолет – мы направляемся в республику Афганистан выполнять свой воинский долг. ... Что тут началось! [. . .] Кто-то плакал от обиды, кто-то впал в оцепенение, в транс от этого гнусного обмана. Вот для чего, оказывается, приготовили водку. Чтобы легче и проще с нами поладить. [. . .] Меня дважды обманули: отправили на войну и не сказали правду, какая это война, - правду я узнал через восемь лет.⁸³

Some of the interviewees who received honors after the war confessed that they did not feel worthy of any honors. They treated these medals as ones that should not have been given at all. They felt especially strongly opposed to comparing themselves to WWII veterans; those veterans had fought against the aggressor, but they felt as though they had fought as aggressors in their war.

It is important to note that this was the first time when ordinary people of the USSR felt comfortable speaking the truth. Many generations of Soviet people had only ever spoken up about doubts and disappointments in their kitchens and with close friends.

⁸³ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 47-48. [They summoned us to the commander and asked:

- Guys, do you want to work on new machines?

Naturally, all with one voice:

- Yes, we do. Dreaming about that.

- But first you need to go to the virgin soil and help collect wheat.

All agreed.

[. . .]It was lunch time and they were dragging boxes with vodka up to our camp. They lined us up and announced that in a few hours a helicopter would come to pick us up – we are going to the Republic of Afghanistan to perform our military duty... What a mess then started! [. . .]Somebody was crying because of the insult, somebody got into a stupor, into a trance because of this heinous deception. Turned out, this was why they prepared vodka - so that they would come to an understanding with us easier and smoother. [. . .]They deceived me twice: they sent me to the war and did not tell the truth about what kind of war it was; I learned the truth eight years later. – my trans.]

Alexievich attempted to make people speak openly for the first time in their lives. Some of them felt as though they had nothing to lose, and others felt like if there would be any punishment it would not be as bad as their Afghan experience. People became fearless in a certain way. As one of the interviewees told Alexievich, they had a “непривычно” (“unusual” or “not accustomed to”) feeling after their conversations with her.

Undoubtedly, these stories about the politically controversial and almost forbidden topic were one of the tools used by Alexievich to greatly influence her reader. Those men and women did not just talk about the hardship of death, of killing people in the war, or of something morally too sensitive – they talked about how the Soviet government mistreated them. Without this context, readers would not be able to emotionally contribute to the book as much as it is possible.

Just as in the *The War's Unwomanly Face*, the storytellers in *Zinky Boys* shared the hardship of war-time life. But, in *Zinky Boys*, the unbearable conditions were not due to the destructive invasion of an enemy, but provided by their own government. People told hundreds of stories about lack of ammunition, food, drinking water, and especially medicine. One medical nurse shared what he felt ashamed about when she was serving in Afghanistan. She talked about the outdated Soviet medical equipment and ammunition, about Soviet syringes packed in brown paper which degraded too quickly and made the tools non-sterile, about blood substitutes in glass 0.5 L bottles each, while Italians manufactured those substitutes in 1-liter plastic packets, about Soviet gauze and splints that were too bulky and poorly packed to be kept in long distance marches, about Soviet bulletproof vests that were too heavy, and made soldiers almost immobile, while American vests were lightweight like sport outfits, about Soviet helmets manufactured in

the 1930s design and not improved before the war in Afghanistan, and even about Soviet sleeping bags that were too heavy and weighed around seven kilograms (around 15 lbs).

У убитых наёмников мы забирали куртки, кепки с длинными козырьками, китайские брюки, в которых пах не натирает. Всё брали. Трусы брали, так как трусы – дефицит, носки, кроссовки тоже.⁸⁴

Another nurse talked about how she made sutures for surgical procedures, because there were not enough real sutures delivered from the USSR. She asked paratroopers for their parachute ropes, pulled threads from those, and then sterilized the threads to use them as sutures. When she went to the USSR for a short vacation, she brought her own suitcase full of needles, fasteners, and sutures back to Afghanistan.

Many soldiers suffered from a lack of suitable drinking water. They would be crossing mountains with almost no water on them. «Лизали росу, лизали собственный пот... [. . .] Поймал черепаху, острым камешком проткнул горло. Пил кровь черепахи. Другие не могли [. . .] Пили свою мочу».⁸⁵ Many soldiers and medical staff shared stories about starvation in Afghanistan. There were very limited amounts of food in the Soviet camps and most of it was vegetables and even canned meat stored in the USSR since 1940s.

...Наши мальчики всё продавали. Я их не осуждаю. Они умирали за 3 рубля⁸⁶ в месяц... Их кормили мясом с червями, ржавой рыбой... У нас у всех была цинга, у меня выпали все передние зубы. Они продавали одеяла и

⁸⁴ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 71. [From the killed mercenaries, we took off jackets, baseball caps, Chinese pants that did not chafe your groin. We took everything. We took underwear, because underwear was in deficit. We also took socks, sneakers too. – my trans.]

⁸⁵ Алексиевич, 107. [We were licking dew, were licking our own sweat. [. . .]I caught a tortoise, pierced its throat with a sharp stone. I was drinking the tortoise's blood. Others could not do that. [. . .]They were drinking their own urine. – my trans.]

⁸⁶ As of 1980, three Soviet rubles yield around \$5 USD in the official market and about \$0.3 USD in the black market.

покупали анашу. Что-нибудь сладкое. [. . .] Они продавали оружие, патроны, чтобы их потом этими же автоматами и патронами убивали. Покупали за это шоколад... Пирожки...⁸⁷

Such words demonstrate that some Soviet soldiers were indifferent to their fate and to the very mission; they prepared themselves to die either from the enemy's bullet or from malnutrition and diseases; they were consciously selling their ammunition to the enemy for food, because this way or another they felt unable to keep fighting.

One of the tools Alexievich uses to create a sharper experiential picture of the war she explores is to show women in the most unfortunate and repellent situations. She will later use the same technique in describing women in the years after the collapse of the USSR. Her method is to use the horrors of war to break the concept of a woman who protects, who heals and saves, who stays moral and untouched. Alexievich breaks the concept of an eternal woman as mother, wife, sister, as a Madonna of all people. Vasily Grossman describes this Madonna in his story «Сикстинская мадонна» ('Sistine Madonna'): her face and body are her soul. Her beauty is connected to the earthly existence, and she is present in all people, all races, hair color, body types. She is pan-humankind.

Она душа и зеркало человеческое, и все, кто глядят на Мадонну, видят в ней человеческое, - она образ материнской души, и потому красота ее навечно сплетена, слита с той красотой, что таится, неистребимо и глубоко, всюду, где рождается и существует жизнь, - в подвалах, на чердаках, в дворцах, в ямах.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 45. [Our guys were selling everything. I don't judge them. They were dying for three rubles per month... They were fed with meat with worms, rusty fish... We all had scurvy; all my front teeth fell out. They were selling blankets and buying marijuana, also something sweet. [. . .] They were selling weapons and bullets so that they would be killed with the same rifles and bullets later. With that money, they were buying chocolate and buns... - my trans.]

⁸⁸ Vasily Grossman. *The Road. Stories, Journalism, and Essays*, trans. Robert and Elizabeth Chandler with Olga Mukovnikova (New York: New York Review Books, 2010), 166.

Alexievich widely uses the interviews where her storytellers described how ugly and violent the life could be for women at war or at socially unstable times. The goal she has in mind is to show how people destroy all mothers and all future mothers by the humiliation, torture, and aggression toward any people in the world. There are women who will pay their share in the hardship of the events. The whole world becomes demothered by the soldiers who saw women offering their bodies for two cans of stewed meat, and by women who travel from one commander's bed to another in order to feel safe and not hungry, and yet again by women who were lying dead on the ground. They are not just women with their names and lives detailed – they are each a part and embodiment of the Eternal Woman.

However, Soviet women working at the camps had nothing to sell. Many women told Alexievich how their girlfriends would sell themselves as prostitutes for money, food, or souvenirs. Women were sexually harassed on a regular basis, and many of them gave up resisting these advances and instead chose high rank officer for themselves – such a choice would give them access to better food and more comfortable housing. Some women resisted, and were still treated as potential prostitutes.

Через две недели вызвал комбат: «Ты будешь со мной жить...» Два месяца отбивалась. Один раз чуть гранату не бросила, в другой – за нож схватилась. Наслушалась: «Выбираешь выше звёздами... Чай с маслом захочешь – сама придёшь...» [. . .] Не встречала, чтобы девчонки носили боевые награды... Потому что известно: медаль можно получить за ночь с комбатом... Почему сюда женщин берут? Без них нельзя обойтись.... Понимаете? Некоторые господа офицеры с ума бы сошли. А почему

[This Madonna is the soul and mirror of all human beings, and everyone who looks at her can see her humanity. She is the image of the maternal soul. That is why her beauty is forever interwoven and fused with the beauty that lies hidden, deep down, indestructible, wherever life is being born – be it in cellars, attics, pits, or palaces.]

женщины на войну рвутся? Деньги... Хорошие деньги. Купишь магнитофон, вещи. Вернёшься домой – продашь.⁸⁹

If Soviet women sold their bodies for food and goods, men sold their ammunition and household items in order to buy desirable items and scarce supplies. If Soviet soldiers could, they would sell their rifles or bullets to the Afghan people to buy food. Other soldiers in Afghanistan strove to buy porcelain, gemstones, jewelry, Eastern rugs, etc. These items could be procured from locals in Afghan villages. Those who did not have money tried to exchange items – a magazine of bullets would be traded for a little set of cosmetics. «Было три... три солдатских мечты: купить платок матери, подружке – косметический набор, а себе плавки, тогда плавков в Союзе не было. Вот такая это была война.»⁹⁰

Other men sold items scavenged from the dead:

Ночью кто-то стащил автомат убитого... Нашли. Наш солдат. Продал в дуكان⁹¹ за восемьдесят тысяч афгани. Покупки показал: два магнитофона, джинсовые тряпки. Мы сами его убили бы, растерзали, но он был под стражей. На суде сидел молчал. Плакал.⁹²

⁸⁹ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 60, 63. [Two weeks later, a battalion commander summoned me: “You will live with me...” I was biting back for two months. Once I almost threw a hand grenade, the other time I grabbed a knife. I heard enough of “You are choosing a higher rank.... If you want tea and butter, you will come [to me] by yourself...” [. . .]I did not see girls wearing their medals. ... Because it is well known – one can get a medal for a night with the battalion commander... Why do they bring women here? Because it is impossible without them... Do you understand? Some officers would go crazy. Why are women eager to come here? For money... Good money. You will buy a tape recorder, clothes. Then you will come back home and sell that. – my trans.]

⁹⁰ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 36. [A soldier had three dreams; to buy a shawl for mother, a set of cosmetics for a girlfriend, and swimming trunks for himself. There were no swimming trunks back then in the Soviet Union. It was that kind of war. – my trans.]

⁹¹ Dukan or dukhan is a common name for a little store or café in many Middle Eastern countries.

⁹² Алексиевич, 172. [At night, someone stole a dead’s man rifle... They found him. It was our soldier. He sold it to a dukan for 80,000 Afghani. He showed the purchases; two tape recorders and some jeans clothes. We would kill him by ourselves, would tear him to pieces, but he was in custody. In court, he was sitting silently, he was crying. – my trans.]

Alexievich implicitly makes her interviewees reflect on how much humanity is in a human, and this is what contributes to the effectiveness of the book. Blood-curling stories of scattered human flesh after combats and surviving soldiers gathering limbs and internal body organs into buckets, or terrifying stories of enchantment with war and how beautiful and grand it is make the reader contemplate the legitimacy of reasons behind any war, and wonder if there will ever be a time when humanity will not have wars. Passion for violence and some sort of a caveman feeling of superiority over dead people are frequent topics in many stories of the people who returned from Afghanistan. The experiences changed soldiers and medical staff forever and they started to doubt the future of humanity after the war. Many Soviet soldiers fell into emotional stupors during their service in Afghanistan, and some were ready to do anything in order to escape from the pointless slaughter.

Война не делает человека лучше. Только хуже. Это однозначно. Я никогда не вернусь в тот день, когда ушёл на войну. Не стану тем, кем был до войны. Как я могу стать лучше, если я видел...как за чеки покупают у медиков два стакана мочи желтушника. Выпил. Заболел. Комиссовали. Как отстреливают себе пальцы. Как уродуют себя затворами пулеметов. Как... Как... Как в одном самолёте возвращаются домой цинковые гробы и чемоданы с дублёнками, джинсами, женскими трусиками... Китайским чаем...⁹³

This is another tool that Alexievich uses widely in her books – together with the technique of providing a major dramatic event next to the most banal and everyday details, she chooses the stories where the value of something as important as a human life

⁹³ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 78. [War does not make a person better, but only worse. That's for sure. I can never return to the day when I left for the war. I will not become who I had been before the war. How could I become better if I saw how they buy two cups of a Hepatitis B sick person's urine. You drink that, you get sick, they invalid you out. I saw how they shoot off their own fingers. I saw how they disfigure themselves with a breech-block. I saw how...how... How zinc caskets were flying back home on the same plane together with sheepskin coats, jeans, womens panties, and Chinese tea. – my trans.]

would be eliminated and reduced to the value of trading goods or collectibles like porcelain monkeys on a mantelshelf. In some way, Alexievich uses the principle of «остранение» (estrangement) introduced by V. Shklovsky. This technique has a very powerful effect on a reader; it helps create a picture of the colossal pointlessness and uselessness of a single human life in the scale of mankind in general. When one thinks of human rights, the value of every human life, or the caring for people's wellbeing, Alexievich shakes us and shows there are people who live next to us and who can turn into monsters under certain circumstances. This implicit thought makes readers ask themselves if they ever might become like these people, if placed in the same circumstances. This is the great moral effect that *Zinky Boys* has on its readers.

Чернобыльская молитва (Voices from Chernobyl)

Alexievich again asks even more openly, and on a larger scale, about the real value of a human life in 1997, with her fourth book – *Чернобыльская молитва (Voices from Chernobyl)*. The book describes the nuclear disaster in April of 1986, in the Ukrainian city of Chernobyl, when a nuclear power plant caught fire and released millions of radioactive elements into the atmosphere. Alexievich started collecting the interviews immediately after the explosion. She was able to capture both the most emotional and spontaneous stories as well as the later, thought through observations by fire fighters, nurses, doctors, soldiers, students, local people from the area, and people who were affected by the disaster in some way.

On the 26th of April in 1986, four explosions destroyed the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Station reactor and created a huge radioactive cloud in the atmosphere. Even

though the nuclear plant is located in present day Ukraine, Chernobyl is only four miles away from the Ukraine – Belarus border, and its proximity to Belarus and Russia resulted in all three countries being affected by the radioactive pollution. Alexievich starts *Voices from Chernobyl* by providing an excerpt from the 1996 Belorussian Encyclopedia, noting that Belarus suffered more severely from the explosion than all other neighboring countries. Radioactive wind and rain was going into Belarus for days after the disaster, and it resulted in more than 70% of radionuclides falling on Belorussian soil and polluting 23% of Belorussian territories. In comparison, Ukraine got 4.8% of its territories polluted, and Russia got 0.5%. It is important to remember that more than 40% of Belarus is under forests; approximately 26% of the country's forests are now polluted with radiation, including everything that local people would traditionally pick for food, such as mushrooms, berries, and nuts. But the most tragic effect was on the people of Belarus. In the country with a population of 10 million, more than 2 million people live in the contaminated region, and 700,000 of them were children. Some scientists approximate the effect of the Chernobyl explosion was equivalent to 150 of the bombs used in Hiroshima and Nagasaki. The impact of the radiation on a human body could manifest in many different ways. One possibility is that the radiation will cause mutations in human DNA. The other, and the most delayed possibility is that the radiation can cause of cancer. Many people died right after the explosion, while many more developed cancer later and died ten or more years after the accident. This number cannot be measured objectively. The number is big, but there are not any statistics showing real percentage.

In the 1980s, when Gorbachev changed the political policy to one of 'Perestroika,' people started to read previously banned writers like Shalamov,

Solzhenitsyn, Bukharin, and they learned about the Gulags and Stalin's camps in Siberia. People of Minsk discovered a mass grave from 1937 in Kuropaty where The People's Commissariat for Internal Affairs (NKVD) executed tens of thousands of Belarussian, Lithuanian, Russian, and Polish people. The NKVD built a city park there, to cover the grave, but 50 years later the bones and skulls came to the surface. Minsk citizens started to dig out the skeletons, people were striving for the truth. They felt as if they lived through a new revolution, and the only difference was that nobody was shooting bullets. At the same time, the Chernobyl nuclear plant exploded, and people were waiting for the government to tell its people that everything was under control. People were looking for newspapers to tell how the USSR defeated the nuclear atom again and how the Soviet citizens showed their heroic personalities. That was what they believed, and what they had been brought to believe.

The total impact of this catastrophe has yet to be calculated, and will likely only fully be felt decades or centuries from now. But Svetlana Alexievich has already made a first step in this direction. *Voices from Chernobyl* provides an extensive database of voices of different ages, genders, education levels, and even modalities. Some of her interviewees speak with sorrow, some with anger, and some with what seems to be a developed indifference after years of being overlooked and silenced. Her interviewees are men, women, and children. Most of them lived in the contaminated zone right after the nuclear explosion, while a few other storytellers came to the restricted areas fleeing war or terror in their home countries.

Above all of the other books by Alexievich, this particular text was the most painful to read to the author of this research. While one is shocked to read about the

horrors of war, dead bodies, family members killed, torture, and unspeakable pain, there is an implicit understanding that war is always violent and very graphic. But in this book about the nuclear catastrophe, there is no actual war, there are no enemies, no traitors, no abuse, and so therefore all the deaths and terrifying torments of human bodies seem even more devastating, pointless, and psychologically unbearable.

In her interview with *The New Yorker*, Alexievich said that writing *Voices from Chernobyl* was the easiest, compared to her other books. She said, "...Nothing like those events had happened before, so people had no culture to protect them".⁹⁴ The writer notes that the Chernobyl disaster is almost a mystery. No one was prepared for it and so people did not have the vocabulary to discuss it. When people have to face something unknown to them, they either become afraid of it or they start to mythologize the event. In *Voices from Chernobyl*, Alexievich wanted to explore people's fears and personal thoughts about Chernobyl on a deeper level and to provide a more philosophical level of the events. In her interview to Deutsche Welle she said: "Мы должны прийти к осмыслению. И в этом - задача моей книги: толкнуть к осмыслению, чтобы факты стали мироощущением. Ведь после Чернобыля мы живем уже в другом мире."⁹⁵

Luxembourg director Pol Cruchten was greatly moved by *Voices from Chernobyl* and adapted it to a movie that he presented in 2016 Luxembourg City Film Festival.

⁹⁴ Masha Gessen. "The Memory Keeper, *The New Yorker*, published October 26, 2015, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/10/26/the-memory-keeper>.

⁹⁵ Ефим Шуман. «Чернобыльская молитва: Пророчество Светланы Алексиевич», *Deutsche Welle*, опубликовано 26 апреля 2016, <http://www.dw.com/ru>. [We need to get to understanding. The goal of my book is to provoke understanding so that the facts would become mental outlook. Since after Chernobyl we live in a different world. – my trans.]

Alexievich approved of this adaptation and noted that Pol Cruchten used her favorite passages for the movie.⁹⁶

Voices from Chernobyl raises a lot of controversial questions, discussed by the interviewees and presented through the selection by Alexievich. Questions such as why Chernobyl happened, why so many people were affected, why was there so little or no help offered to those in need after the explosion, why the USSR did nothing to protect people from the deadly impact of the radiation, why the significance of the catastrophe was kept secret, and why the Soviet people put up with all of that. Those topics are so problematic and politically charged that the book has been banned in Belarus since the year it was first published in *Дружба народов* (*Friendship of Nations*) magazine in 1997, in Russia.

Like in all of her books, in *Voices from Chernobyl* the stories come from a wide range of witnesses - elderly villagers, factory workers, teachers, doctors, the former Party workers, professors, and scientists. Additionally, the topics the people chose to discuss are vary widely from descriptions of orchards and livestock, to comparisons between life under Nazi occupation and life during the forced evacuation from the polluted zone after the nuclear explosion, from arguing about post-catastrophe religiousness of local people, to reasoning about how the world perception and the self-identification of Belarusians after 1986 has changing. For example, Alexievich presented her conversation with seven elderly people in a small village in the Belarusian Gomel region, a zone forbidden to live in due to dangerous levels of radiation. Those people refused to be relocated to other

⁹⁶ “Are we “peddlers of the apocalypse?”, *Luxembourger Wort*, published February 28, 2016, <https://luxtimes.lu/archives/7642-are-we-peddlers-of-the-apocalypse>.

regions and strongly believed that their lives had to be next to the graves of their ancestors and on the land they had been working on for centuries:

Гостейки к нам... Добрые люди.. Не ворожилось на встречу, никакого знака. Бывает, ладонь чешется – поздороваешься. А сегодня никак не ворожилось. Одно соловейка всю ночь пел – на солнечный день. Ой! Наши бабы в момент сбегутся.⁹⁷

One anonymous interviewee expressed his point of view in a heated manner, but he was not the only one who held this sort of opinion about the Chernobyl tragedy:

Что вы тут записываете? Кто вам разрешение дал? Фотографируете.. Уберите свою цапку... Схуйте. А то разобью. Понимаешь ты, приехали! Мы живём. страдаем, а вы писать будете... [. . .] Выпытываете не то, что надо. [. . .] Что вы мне тут доказываете?... Они Чернобыль взорвали... Цэрэушники и демократы... Я в газетах читал... Не взорвался бы Чернобыль, держава бы не рухнула. [. . .] Б...ь! (*Опять мат.*) [. . .] Я за коммунистов! Они вернутся и найдут виноватых... Б...ь!⁹⁸

Alongside these stories Alexievich shared interviews with historians and scientists whose language and arena of thought are quite different. One of these interviews is with a former engineer at a big chemical factory. The interviewee recalls having a group of German specialists installing and testing new equipment the moment they learned about the nuclear explosion. They demanded a doctor, radiation dosimeters, and wanted their food to be inspected. They listened to German radio and received pieces of advice on how to protect themselves from the radiation but were not given any of what they demanded from the chemical plant, so they started to pack and prepare to return to

⁹⁷ Светлана Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, (Москва: Время, 2016), 54. [It is difficult to translate this passage preserving all its colloquial and regional features.]

⁹⁸ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 254-255. [What are you recording here? Who gave you permission? [Why are you] taking photographs... Put away your toy. Hide it. Otherwise I will break it. Look at them! They came here! We live, suffer, but you are going to write... [. . .] Fishing out not what you are supposed to. [. . .] What are you convincing me into?... They blew up Chernobyl... The CIA people and democrats did it... I read about that in newspapers... If Chernobyl had not exploded the country would have not collapsed. [. . .] F..ck! (*Filthy language again.*) [. . .] I am pro Communists! They will come back and will find the guilty... F..ck! – my trans.]

Germany. They were living with their wives and children, so they did not agree to do nothing; they were ready to protect their families. The woman recalled that all Soviet staff at the factory hated those German specialists for such a behavior. It was considered a weakness, cowardice.

Ах, вот какие эти немцы – истерики!.. Труссы! Меряют радиацию в борще, в котлетах... На улицу лишний раз не выйдут... Потеха! Вот наши мужчины – это мужчины! ... Отчаянные! Сражаются с реактором!... Поднимаются на расплавленную крышу с голыми руками.... А наши дети с флажками идут на демонстрацию.... [. . .] Но это тоже вид варварства – отсутствие страха за себя. Мы всегда говорим «мы», а не «я»: «мы продемонстрируем советский героизм», «мы покажем советский характер». ... Но это – я! Я не хочу умирать... Я боюсь... [. . .] Мы стали учиться говорить «я».⁹⁹

Many people recall that right after the nuclear explosion people were agitated and excited. It was not only fear. They wanted to go to Chernobyl to help. There was even a newly married couple who went to the territory instead of going on their honeymoon. People had the value of being selfless instilled in them, and audacity was considered the only true way of being a Soviet citizen.

These people did not think about the value of their own lives; they were brought up not to reflect on that. Many of those who voluntarily went to help with the disaster clean-up did not ask for any payments or reimbursements. They were deeply moved and were looking to do anything possible to help their country. One of the Party committee in a small city recalls:

⁹⁹ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 273. [Oh, look at those Germans – they are in hysterics!.. Cowards! They check for radiation in borsch and in cutlets... They don't want to go outside longer that is necessary. ... It's a laugh! But our men are real men! [Our men are] Reckless! They fight with the reactor!... They go on to the roof of the reactor with bare hands... Our children go to the May 1st demonstration with little flags... [. . .] But lack of fear for yourself is also a type of barbarism. We always say 'we' and not 'I': "we will demonstrate Soviet heroism", 'we will show the Soviet personality'. ... But it is Me! I don't want to die... I am afraid... [. . .] We started learning how to say 'I'. – my trans.]

Я – человек, у которого отсутствует инстинкт самосохранения. Это нормально, потому что сильно развито чувство долга. Таких тогда было много, не я один... У меня на столе лежали десятки заявлений с просьбой: «Прошу направить в Чернобыль». [. . .] Что бы вы там ни писали, но был он, советский характер. И был он, советский человек.¹⁰⁰

One of the interviewees, a village school teacher, shared her insights on the importance of the Chernobyl disaster. In the days following the catastrophe, she suddenly realized that only a few people were responsible for everything that happened, and those people were not maniacs or psychopaths, but regular workers at the plant. She understood that Chernobyl was bigger than Kolyma or Auschwitz. It was greater than any other horror of the 20th century, because a man with a rifle or a gas chamber could kill that many people, but a man with nuclear radiation could kill the whole world. And yet, this insight did not make her change her Soviet beliefs. She recalls a conversation of her friends, teachers and doctors, in her apartment soon after the explosion. One of the doctors, a mother of young children, was advising her friends to take their families and to move away as soon as possible, because Chernobyl was more horrible than anything those people could even think of. Others did not agree with this attitude and they all had an argument. The storyteller says that they all hated that woman:

И у всех, кто там был... И моё, в частности, ощущение – она вносит тревогу. Лишает нас равновесия. Доверия ко всему тому, чему мы привыкли доверять. [. . .] Как мы её в те минуты презирали, даже ненавидели, она испортила нам вечер. [. . .] Не только власти обманывали нас, но мы сами не хотели знать правду. Где-то там... В глубине подсознания.... [. . .] Но я отвечаю на ваш вопрос: почему мы бессильны? Я бессильна... Есть

¹⁰⁰ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 252. [I am a person who does not have a self-preservation instinct. It was natural, because the sense of duty was very strong. There were many people like me back then, it was not only me... There were dozens of applications on my desk with the request 'I ask to be sent to Chernobyl'. [. . .] No matter what you write, but there was the phenomenon of the Soviet personality. Also there was a phenomenon of the Soviet man. – my trans.]

дочернобыльская культура, но нет послечернобыльской... Живём среди идей войны, краха социализма и неопределённого будущего.¹⁰¹

A former head of the testing laboratory at the Belarussian Academy of Science's Institute of Nuclear Energy Engineering had similar memories. He told Alexievich how much Soviet people trusted physics, and especially nuclear physics. Many of them believed that there was a 'bad atom' like in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and there was a 'good atom' like what they used in the USSR to produce electricity. Millions of people knew almost nothing about the power of radiation and the nature of those so called good and bad nuclear atoms. He remembered that when the Chernobyl reactor exploded all of his testing devices in his laboratory were showing borderline dangerous levels of radiation. But at the same time, no official information came to the Institute. Later in the afternoon, more than 12 hours after the explosion, they learned about the accident. His initial thought was to telephone his home and tell his wife what to do to protect herself from the radioactive effect. But he knew that all of the lines were tapped by the KGB. He knew that for just that one phone call he could be fired or demoted in rank. He told Alexievich that he wrestled between his role as an obedient Soviet citizen and that of a husband and father. In the end, the human of him won - he telephoned his wife. Later that day, he made an important decision to stop being afraid of any punishment. He valued other people's lives more than his paycheck and his job. He telephoned all of his friends, his

¹⁰¹ Алексиевич, 230-231. [The feeling of all people who were there and also my own was that she was bringing anxiety. She strips us of balance, of trust to everything what we were familiar to trust to. [. . .] Oh did we despise her at those minutes! We even hated her; she ruined the night for us. [. . .] Not only the government was deceiving us, but we did not want to know the truth ourselves. We did not want that somewhere deep in the unconsciousness. [. . .] But I am answering your question: why are we flaccid? I am flaccid... There is a pre-Chernobyl culture, but there is no post-Chernobyl culture... We live among the ideas of war, the collapse of socialism, and no certain future. – my trans.]

wife, and his daughter to tell people about the catastrophe and teach them how to protect themselves: «Реакция людей: спасибо. Ни расспросов, ни испуга... Я думаю, что они мне не верили или не в силах были охватить грандиозность события. Никто не испугался. Реакция удивительная!»¹⁰²

The same evening, his friend, a professor of nuclear physics, telephoned him to tell him that his family, with little children, was going on a long weekend to visit their parents, an area thirty miles from Chernobyl. That was the most explicit example of how Soviet physicists treated nuclear power. «Это о профессионализме. И о нашей вере. Я орал. Он, наверное, не помнит, что я спас его детей».¹⁰³

Many other of Alexievich's interviewees shared their thoughts on the significance of Chernobyl event for the Soviet people mentality. Some historians and professors would delve deeply into their training and would provide philosophical sides of the problem. Many agreed that Chernobyl liberated them, made them reestablish their value system, opened up a new world with many more questions of moral choices and of humanity than ever before. They would note that a Russian needs something to believe in, be it a railway, or a frog (like Turgenev's character Bazarov), or Byzantinism, or the nuclear atom, or even, finally, in the market. The nuclear disaster needed to be discussed in literature and in press, because people needed help understanding what happened to them and to their lives, to overcome the loss of former way of world perception. One of the storytellers said that the Soviet people learned about life from 19th century literature,

¹⁰² Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 225. [People reacted with a "Thank you". No questions, no fright. I think they either did not believe me or were unable to grasp the grandness of the event. Nobody got scared. Astonishing reaction! – my trans.]

¹⁰³ Алексиевич, 225. [That's in relation to our professionalism and to our belief. I was yelling [at him]. He probably does not remember that I saved his children. – my trans.]

and after Chernobyl this literature died to them, it became outdated. The catastrophe revealed many hidden topics disconcerting to Soviet society, topics which could not be answered within the old ideological picture. This cultural collapse formed some existential vacuums. Former heroes and old concepts of good and evil turned impotent in the new reality. Many people were looking to fill the vacuum with literature, religion, or the new system of role models. But as many of Alexievich's interviewees noted, the main mental process is yet to be done: "Что нам нужно? Ответить на вопрос: способна ли русская нация на такой глобальный пересмотр всей своей истории, как оказались на это способны после Второй Мировой войны японцы? Немцы... Хватит ли у нас интеллектуального мужества? Об этом молчат... [. . .] Мы в очередной раз выживаем, вся энергия уходит на это. А душа брошена... Человек опять одинок....»¹⁰⁴

If one had to choose only one story in *Voices from Chernobyl* to encapsulate the sentiment of the book, it would be an interview with a head of the "To the Children of Chernobyl" fund. It is titled 'The Monologue about Cartesian Philosophy and about Eating a Contaminated Sandwich So as Not to Feel Shameful'.¹⁰⁵ The man interviewed received a PhD in philosophy in the 1980s and in the same decade became a politician of what was later called the Belarussian Party of the Opposition. He recalled the moment of the nuclear catastrophe from the point of view of an average Soviet citizen. When the philosopher first arrived at the contaminated prohibited zone he saw farmers collecting their harvests and working in the fields, as if nothing had changed. The famous five-year

¹⁰⁴ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 218. [What we need is to answer the question whether Russian people are able to reconsider their entire history like the Japanese after the World War Two were able to do, or like the Germans. Will we have enough of intellectual courage? They don't talk about that... We are again surviving and all our energy goes to survival. But the soul is abandoned again... A human is all alone again... - my trans.]

¹⁰⁵ Алексиевич, 148-162.

government plan, with the required volume of wheat and meat, was still active in the territory, and nobody thought about not submitting radiation polluted grains or not slaughtering animals sick with radioactive disease. Everybody was worried more about meeting the plan's quota than thinking about people's health. They were afraid of losing their jobs, which would be inevitable if the five-year government plan was not met.

Another interviewee was a journalist, who traveled to the prohibited zone around Chernobyl many times. She told Alexievich that there were many people in those areas, even in the years after the nuclear plant explosion. People were not rushing to move out, because the Soviet radiation therapists told them there was anything dangerous to people's health. The only recommendations the Soviets made was to wash ones hands more often and to not air dry clothes in the yards. They did this because they still needed people to work on the contaminated lands and to collect crops. Every region had their government required quota of food produce – special minimal quotas for vegetables and fruits, for grains, for meat and milk. These quotas still were valid even after the catastrophe; the contaminated regions were obliged to meet the requested quotas, nobody cancelled them.

Инструкция по обработке заражённых куриных тушек... В цехе по их обработке требовалось быть одетым как на загрязнённой территории при контакте с радиоактивными элементами... Если там столько-то кюри, надо поварить в солёной воде, слить воду в канализацию, а мясо добавить в паштеты, колбасы. Если столько-то кюри – в костную муку, для корма скоту... Так выполнялись планы по мясу.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 258. [Instruction on contaminated dressed chicken handling... In the production facility, one had to be dressed like on a contaminated territory for the contact with radioactive elements... If there are that many curies then [the chickens] had to be boiled in salt water, the water had to be disposed to the sewer, and the meat had to be added into pates and sausages. If there are that many curies [the meat] had to be added to bone flower for the cattle fodder... That was how they met the quotas for meat. – my trans.]

When the philosopher and the other visitors explained to the city leader that everything was contaminated with radiation and was dangerous to people's health, the local Party government accused them of provocation and of spreading Western propaganda. Locals invited the visitors into their houses and offered them irradiated food. The storyteller was proud that he did not refuse the food, and that he joined the contaminated meal, so that he could share those people's fate. He understood that the meal was supposed to be eaten with the heart and not with the mind.

A widow of a deceased helicopter-pilot told the philosopher how her husband was dropping large sheets of lead on the destroyed reactor; the lead vaporized in the greater than 1,290 F temperature, and he was breathing in the gases that were produced in the chemical reaction along with dolomite dust. He and other pilots did not have any special protective gear, not even a mask; they would open windows in the helicopters to observe the reactor and drop their cargo. The pilot told his wife that they were not thinking about anything, they did not care about themselves and were not worried about their lives. Such thoughts would be considered cowardice among all of his friends and coworkers.

The philosopher recalled many people who passed away after the catastrophe, but the most difficult for him to see dying were children. He recalled little patients in a children cancer hospital, a seven-year-old boy who had late stage thyroid cancer. To everyone who attempted to make the boy smile or cheer him up, he asked simply that they not tell him he was not going to die; he knew he was dying and he was ready for it. Those children made the philosopher desperate to find any possible help. That was how he and his wife started the very first fund to help children affected by radiation. Various

countries provided humanitarian help, and the Fund distributed those packages to the contaminated regions.

Молодая семья... Они получили, как и все, баночки детского питания, пакеты с соками. Мужчина сел и заплакал. Эти баночки, эти пакеты не могли спасти его детей.... Но он плакал, потому что, оказывается, их не забыли. О них кто-то помнит. Значит, есть надежда.¹⁰⁷

Italy, France, and Germany welcomed Belarussian children to rehabilitation, invited them to their families. But by then the Belarussian children were afraid of the grass, soil, water, and even of walking outside. The interviewee remembered how he had to convince a group of children to swim in the sea, because that water was not dangerous to them. The children could not believe that. Yet there was a father of a little boy who ran into the office of the Fund's director and demanded his son to be removed from the group preparing to go to Germany. The father was screaming that the Germans would take blood from his little boy and would use him for terrible experiments. Memories of WWII, and decades of the Soviet propaganda behind the iron curtain, showed their results; even in the 1980s there were people who still held the world view from the 1950s USSR. The storyteller believed that modern Russian people could not change until they learned who they really were and what they really wanted. If they wanted freedom, he wondered what kind of freedom it should be. He wondered exactly what they were trying to achieve in the present day. He was convinced that without understanding of their past mistakes and lessons, modern Russians would not move in any positive direction. The nuclear plant explosion opened up a lot of metaphorical wounds in people's minds and the wounds

¹⁰⁷ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 159. [Young family... They received jars with baby formula and packets with juices, like other people did. The man sat down and started crying. Those jars and packets could not save his children... He was crying, because as turned out, the people were not forgotten. Somebody remembers about them. It means there's hope. – my trans.]

would not heal without thorough work on self-analysis and willingness to learn even the ugliest truth.

At the same time, together with stories about the heroic actions of helicopter-pilots, and soldiers sent to clean the debris after the explosion, there are stories of women discussing how much they hated people who were asking them not to go outside and not to participate in state holidays in parks and streets. There are heartfelt confessions of people evacuated to outside of the contaminated zone or who moved out themselves. They were not welcomed anywhere, the government did not provide any financial help, and many people barely had enough money to survive. A woman did not let her sister, and her sister's child, to move in because she was nursing her own baby and was too scared of radiation. She told her sister to walk away. Many other people were afraid to say they came from the radiation polluted area so that they would not be denied jobs or housing. One woman had to spend nights with her daughter at railway stations, because she had nowhere to go; people did not want to let her in, because she 'came from Chernobyl.' She confessed she thought about committing suicide, since the gossips about the effect of the radiation were too terrible:

Я смотрю на наших детей: куда бы они ни поехали, они чувствуют себя отверженными. Живыми страшилками... Мишенями для насмешек... В пионерском лагере, где моя дочь один год отдыхала, к ней боялись прикоснуться: «Чернобыльский светлячок. Она в темноте светится». Звали вечером во двор, чтобы проверить, светится или не светится? Нет ли у неё нимба над головой....¹⁰⁸

¹⁰⁸ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 237-238. [I am looking at our children: no matter where they go they feel like an outcast... Like living horror stories characters.... They are targets for mockery... In a summer camp where my daughter went on a vacation, children were afraid to touch her: 'Chernobyl firefly. She glows in the dark'. They called her outside in the evening to check if she was glowing or was not and if she had a nimbus over her head... - my trans.]

Not only adults had misconceptions about people from Chernobyl area, but little children followed the fears and concerns of their parents and humiliated their peers, which made the trauma even more unbearable for everyone who had to flee from the radioactive territories.

One of the most effective techniques Alexievich, uses in *Voices from Chernobyl*, is the use of stories by children or stories about children. The people most affected by Chernobyl were children. Many children would mention that their groupmates at school would be afraid to sit next to the children 'from Chernobyl', they would not play or talk to them either. There are many fragments with children's memories in the book. In addition, Alexievich interviewed seventeen children age nine to sixteen. Those memories are emotionally difficult and can make anyone tear up. Some of those children were very sick and were in hospice care. Almost all of them told the writer how much they were bullied at school for coming from the contaminated region. One girl spoke about how she became good friends with a boy and they played together all day. One day his friends told him that the girl came from the Chernobyl zone and the boy started ignoring the girl:

Теперь, когда я думаю о своём будущем, [. . .] я мечтаю, что кончу школу и уеду куда-нибудь далеко-далеко, где никто не будет знать, откуда я. Там меня кто-нибудь полюбит. И я всё забуду.¹⁰⁹

People discussed how the world 'Chernobyl' became their stigma; it was a reason to be outcast and isolated from the rest of the community. They got reminded of their trauma on a daily basis by living in rented housing, or being on disability, or by needing to show

¹⁰⁹ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 161. [Now when I think about my future, I dream that I graduate from high school and will go somewhere far, far away where nobody would know where I came from. There, somebody will love me and I will forget everything... - my trans.]

their ‘Chernobyl Suffered’ IDs at hospitals, schools, etc. One of the young interviewees said:

Я ездила в Австрию на лечение, там есть люди, которые могут повесить такую фотографию у себя дома. Мальчика с хоботом... Или вместо рук у него лапы... И каждый день на неё смотреть, чтобы не забывать о тех, кому плохо. Но когда живёшь тут, то это не фантастика и не искусство, а жизнь. Моя жизнь...¹¹⁰

When little boys and girls talk about their friends in hospitals who had all died by the moment when the writer came for an interview, and their unsophisticated stories about their cancer treatments and that they are not afraid to die and they know they are going to die very soon, as well as the games those children play – their toys just go to bed and close their eyes and the children scream that the toys are now dead and then they bring more toys ‘to die’. Also the parents’ confessions about lack of medical help and how much Belarussian Soviet Country was not medically prepared to offer any treatments, and the parents had to watch their children slowly die day after day. Those words of helplessness, fate, deep psychological reasoning on how to interact with a cancer sick child, and their stories how they buried their children feeling all the possible guilt starting from the guilt of bearing their children on Belarussian lands – all those phrases and unelaborated monologues cannot leave anyone unaffected and unmoved. Describing emotionally charged events of violence and death in simple, unartful words of the narratives is one of the most effective methods of psychological impact that Alexievich has chosen for her writing style. A reader could feel that pain and co-live the life of those

¹¹⁰ Алексиевич, 282. [I went to Austria for medical treatment. There are people who could hang this kind of a photograph on their wall; a photograph of a boy with a trunk.... or a boy with fins instead of arms. They can look at it every day in order to not forget about those who are in misfortune. But when you live here then it’s not fantastic fiction, nor it’s an art, but it’s life. It’s my life... - my trans.]

people. It is shocking, catastrophic, terrifying; it goes beyond a reader's ability to sustain emotional pain. Several times throughout the book, the reader would feel that it is impossible to continue reading, that the level of suffer and emotional disturbance is too high and unbearable.

In this book, in addition to heartfelt stories of children, Alexievich enhances the emotional impact, by adding stories about killing house pets. Cows, horses, donkeys and other animals are often topics of memory in her other books – they are in *The War's Unwomanly Face*, and *Zinky Boys*. But those animals were casualties of war, and people killed them either in combat or in order to use them for food and not to starve to death. But the stories in *Voices from Chernobyl* are different. Thousands of house cats and dogs were killed just because they were affected by radiation and posed potential threats.

...В зоне осталось много домашних животных – кошки, собаки, во избежание эпидемии их требуется отстрелять» ... Первый раз приехали – собаки бегают возле своих домов. Сторожат. Людей ждут. Обрадовались нам – бегут на человеческий голос. ...Стреляли в доме, в сарае, на огороде. Вытаскивали на улицу и грузили в самосвалы. Они не могли понять: почему мы их убиваем? Убивать было легко. ... Кошки заглядывали в глаза, собаки выли... [. . .] По сути дела, мы действовали как каратели, как в войну. [. . .] Сука лежит посреди комнаты и щенята кругом... Набросилась на меня – пулю сразу... Щенята лижут руки, лапаются... Стрелять приходилось в упор... Нагрузили их полный самосвал, с верхом. Везём к «могильнику»... Обыкновенная глубокая яма.... Они, если недобитые, а только раненые, пищат... Плачут... Высыпали их из самосвала в яму, а этот пуделёк карабкается. Вылезит. Ни у кого патрона не осталось. Нечем добить... Его назад в яму спихнули и так завалили...¹¹¹

¹¹¹ Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, 115-116. ['There are many pets left in the contaminated zone; cats, dogs, and in order to prevent epidemic they must be killed'. We came there for the first time and the dogs were next to their houses. They were guarding, waiting for people. They were glad to see us; they came for a human voice... We were shooting in a house, barn, in the gardens. We would drag them to the street and load on a dump-truck. They could not understand: why are we killing them? It was easy to kill [them]... Cats were looking into your eyes, dogs were howling... [. . .] In fact, we acted just like participants in a punitive expedition, like during the war. [. . .] A female dog was in the middle of the room and a lot of puppies were around her. She attacked me – I shot her in the forehead immediately... The puppies were licking my hands, snuggling up. I had to shoot them point-blank... We loaded a full, heaped dump-truck of the killed pets; were driving them to the 'burial ground'... Just a simple deep pit... If [the pets]

What might be the most controversial in *Voices from Chernobyl* is the image of the Soviet people that is represented in the book. All interviewees share their own experiences and one of the kind stories, and the reader can undoubtedly summarize those bits into one picture. From one side there are stories about amazing, honorable, selfless people who were ready to help each other without asking anything in return. They would go anywhere their country asked them to. They would give away their last meal or their last piece of clothes to those in need, after the catastrophe. They never asked for any protective gear or even for iodine to save their families. They believed in their country and did not doubt they would get help. On the other side, however, there is a totally different picture. People from the contaminated zone would sell their produce at local markets and other people would knowingly buy radiation polluted fruits for their “enemies,” bosses, mothers in law, disturbing neighbors. People would teach each other how to pick mushrooms or berries in local forests and then travel to Minsk to sell them, knowing that the mushrooms and berry picking was strictly forbidden. The forbidden nature of it did not stop them, because they only cared about getting extra money. They sold the highly dangerous mushrooms in Minsk markets and told their customers that the mushrooms were from the Minsk region. Party leaders travelling to the Chernobyl area for inspections would bring their own food and water, and would have iodine powder with them, while regular people in the area not only did not have access to that, they also were not informed properly about the effect of radioactive explosion and its threat to

are not finished off and only wounded, they are peeping... crying... We poured them from the dump-truck in to the pit, and that one poodle was climbing up, getting out. Nobody had a bullet left. There was nothing to finish it off with. We shoved it back to the pit and filled it up like that... - my trans.]

human health. One of the storytellers, a nuclear scientist, recalled that about 700 kilograms of iodine powder were untouched in the special storage, because the Party workers did not receive the command to deliver the iodine to the population. That iodine powder could have saved many lives, but the workers were afraid to be punished for taking the initiative.

Thousands of trucks with canned meat, ham, coffee beans, and oranges never reached the contaminated regions of Chernobyl, because store employees and low-ranking Party workers would steal them to re-sell elsewhere. A woman told a story about how she knew about the thefts, yet continued to sign off on all necessary papers because she felt helpless in that big country. She did not think she could change anything or that she should show interest. She said she now feels like an accomplice because she knew that they were committing a crime, but she was not conscious enough to stand up and object.

There is a story of a man who was the head of the «Щит Чернобыля» ('Chernobyl Shield') organization in the 1990s. He recalls having a visitor from the United Kingdom who wanted to take photographs of some of the 800 burial grounds in the contaminated region. It was difficult to get permission from the Ukrainian government to go to the zone to take those photographs. Those areas were supposed to have thousands of pieces of equipment, cars, helicopters, fire trucks, ambulances, etc. still on them. Only after dozens of excuses, the head of "Chernobyl Shield" understood that the equipment on those grounds had been embezzled, everything there was stolen. People knew those cars and equipment had enormous levels of radiation, but that did not stop

them. It is likely that even now, somebody is using one of those stolen/re-sold items, and has cancer or has already succumbed to cancer.

In the afterword to the book, Alexievich provides a summarized advertisement from a Belarussian newspaper from 2005 offering tourists a tour of Chernobyl and its areas. They invite people to take a tour through abandoned villages with wild animals running between the houses, go on a tour to the monument to the people who died while working at the exploded reactor, and they suggest a trip to the nuclear sarcophagus and then a lovely dinner with wine. The tour agents promise that the dose of radiation will be less than that from an X-ray.

In the end, the questions Alexievich seems to be implicitly asking her interviewees to speak about are one of identity; who are we, why are we the way we are, should we change, and if so, then how? The answers to those questions could make a lot of post-Soviet people upset or angry with her, and perhaps disagree with her book. However, hopefully, many readers will reflect on those questions without anger and possibly learn a lesson from the past.

Время сэконд хэнд (Secondhand Time)

The most difficult book to summarize or do any sort of analysis, of Alexievich's five, is her most recent book – *Время сэконд хэнд (Secondhand Time)*, published in 2013. This book has several stories from another book called *Зачарованные смертью (Enchanted by Death)* which the writer published in Minsk in 1993. However, the 1993 text did not become a part of the Nobel Prize awarded five-volume "Red Man's Story." *Enchanted by Death* had interviews with people who attempted suicide during the times

of Perestroika and the families of those who had already ended their own lives. Some of the stories Alexievich used in their entirety in *Secondhand Time*, while some of them are reduced to small abstracts.

Secondhand Time consists of numerous interviews about life during the periods 1991 – 2001 and 2002 – 2012. These stories show how people of different ages and nationalities had different attitudes toward the collapse of the USSR in 1991.

As Alexievich wrote in her preface titled 'Notes of an Accomplice' («Записки соучастника»):

За семьдесят с лишним лет в лаборатории марксизма-ленинизма вывели отдельный человеческий тип – homo soveticus. [. . .] Мне кажется, я знаю этого человека, он мне хорошо знаком, я рядом с ним, бок и бок прожила много лет. Он – это я. Это мои знакомые, друзья, родители. [. . .] Советская цивилизация... Тороплюсь запечатлеть её следы. Расспрашиваю не о социализме, а о любви, ревности, детстве, старости. [. . .] О тысячах подробностей исчезнувшей жизни. [. . .] Историю интересуют только факты, а эмоции остаются за бортом. Я же смотрю на мир глазами гуманитария, а не историка.¹¹²

The book is a collection of interviews on various topics, so segmented that the only common trait is the fact that the people interviewed lived/live in the post-Soviet countries, speak the Russian language, and are somehow related to the social changes after 1991.

¹¹² Светлана Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд* (Москва Время, 2016), 7, 11. [In seventy years, they created a separate human type in the laboratory of Marx-Lenin ideas – the type of Homo Sovieticus. [. . .] I think I know this person and I am familiar with them; I have lived next to them for many years. What this person is, it is what I am. This person is my acquaintances, friends, parents. [. . .] Soviet civilization... I am in a hurry to record its traces. I ask not about the socialism, but about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. [. . .] I ask about thousands of details of the lost lifestyle. [. . .] History is interested only in facts and emotions are left outside. But I observe the world with the eyes of a humanity scholar, not a historian. – my trans.]

Secondhand Time has a very powerful effect on its readers, and there is no surprise that the most common reaction among Russian speakers is anger toward the writer and her text. Many people deny the validity of the book, and accuse it of anti-Russian propaganda. Many also believe that it was requested and paid for by the US government. More than any of her other five books, this one has received the most significant public reaction. We came across quite a few negative reviews for her *Voices from Chernobyl*, where Russian speakers did not want to know that kind of information about their past and therefore disagreed with the interviews the writer included in the volume. But *Secondhand Time* is so far the most discussed and most criticized work by the writer. Some examples of the reviews the book received on the popular Russian shopping web site called ‘Лабиринт.ру’ (Labirint.ru), the most recent ones as of summer 2016, include¹¹³:

Харькова Наталья:



[Харькова Наталья](#) 
(рецензий 19 / оценок +27)

Понравилось? [Да](#) | Рейтинг: +13 

Купила эту книга, так как автора лауреата Нобелевской премии, читается легко, но не возможно читать-отрывки мыслей людей. И конечно поливание грязью коммунизм, советский союз. За такое давать премию, я считаю, недостойно. Очень разочарована

26.07.2016 11:57:28 | [ссылка на рецензию](#)

¹¹³ For the full list see - <http://www.labirint.ru/reviews/goods/405959/>

Купила эту книга [sic], так как автора лауреата Нобелевской премии, читается легко, но не возможно читать - отрывки мыслей людей. И конечно поливание грязью коммунизм, советский союз. За такое давать премию, я считаю, недостойно. Очень разочарована.¹¹⁴

Yaniko:



[yaniko](#)

(рецензий 18 / оценок +48)

Понравилось? [Да](#) | Рейтинг: **+24**

Скажу честно, я очень жалею, что приобрела книги данного автора. Если "У войны не женское лицо" я не смогла читать, потому что мне три ночи подряд снились кошмары, то это произведение вызывает у меня, мягко говоря, отторжение. Безобразие, что этот автор пишет - "у России нет ничего, кроме нефти и газа" - как вообще поворачивается язык говорить такое во всеуслышание и получать за это высшие награды?! Я пролистала всю книгу - все в таком стиле - хор неудовлетворенных и обиженных жизнью. Это не литература, а кошмар; публицистика, причем бездарная. Я прочла 50 страниц, и больше не хочу. Книга вызывает желание пойти и отмыться от грязи, которую на тебя вылили.

16.06.2016 23:25:04 | [ссылка на рецензию](#)

Скажу честно, я очень жалею, что приобрела книги данного автора. Если "У войны не женское лицо" я не смогла читать, потому что мне три ночи подряд снились кошмары, то это произведение вызывает у меня, мягко говоря, отторжение. Безобразие, что этот автор пишет - "у России нет ничего, кроме нефти и газа" - как вообще поворачивается язык говорить такое во всеуслышание и получать за это высшие награды?! Я пролистала всю книгу - все в таком стиле - хор неудовлетворенных и обиженных жизнью. Это не литература, а кошмар; публицистика, причем бездарная. Я прочла 50 страниц, и больше не хочу. Книга вызывает желание пойти и отмыться от грязи, которую на тебя вылили.¹¹⁵

¹¹⁴ [Kharkova Natalya wrote: I bought this book, because it is by the Nobel Prize winner. It is easy to read, but it's impossible, because these are fragments of people's thoughts. Of course, it drags Communism and the Soviet Union thought through the mud. I think, is it disgraceful to give the prize for that. I am very disappointed. – my trans.]

¹¹⁵ [Yaniko wrote: To be honest, I regret I purchased books by this writer. I could not read 'The War's Unwomanly Face', because I had nightmares for three nights in a row, but this piece of literature ['Secondhand Time'] provokes rejection, to say the least. It is scandalous what this author writes – "Russia has nothing but oil and gas". How dare she say something like this for all to hear and then receive high honors for this!? I glimpsed through the book – it is all in the same manner. It is a choir of the unsatisfied and the ill-starred. It is not literature but an atrocity;

Новожилова Алина:



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Книгу пытались читать всей семьей, разные поколения, но не дочитал никто. Чернуха, бытовуха, тоска. Кроме как анти-российской пропагандой это не назовешь. Теперь понятно, почему ее так восхваляют на западе: им же нравится смешивать Россию и нашу историю с грязью. Купила книгу, чтобы ознакомиться с творчеством лауреата Нобелевской премии, но разочарована. Потом только узнала, что она украинка, этим, наверно, и объясняется ее желание изобразить нас в столь черном свете.

25.12.2015 23:55:43 | [ссылка на рецензию](#)

Книгу пытались читать всей семьей, разные поколения, но не дочитал никто. Чернуха, бытовуха, тоска. Кроме как анти-российской пропагандой это не назовешь. Теперь понятно, почему ее так восхваляют на западе: им же нравится смешивать Россию и нашу историю с грязью. Купила книгу, чтобы ознакомиться с творчеством лауреата Нобелевской премии, но разочарована. Потом только узнала, что она украинка, этим, наверно, и объясняется ее желание изобразить нас в столь черном свете.¹¹⁶

Of course, there are some good reviews, but their number is insignificant when compared to the amount of negative opinions that one comes across on different Russian web sites. For example, out of 28 reviews for the *Secondhand Time* on Labirint.ru book

it is journalism, moreover, the untalented one. I have read 50 pages and I don't want to continue. The book makes me want to go and wash away the dirt that has been poured on me. – my trans.]

¹¹⁶ [Novozhilova Alina wrote: The whole family, different generations were trying to read the book, but nobody finished it. It is gore, domestic banality, and wearies. You can't call it anything but the anti-Russian propaganda. Now it is clear why they praise this book in the West; they love treating Russia and our history as mud. I bought the book to make myself familiar with the work of the Nobel Prize winner, but I am disappointed. Later I learned that [the writer] is Ukrainian; probably that explains her intent to demonize us. – my trans.]

sale web-site, only 8 reviews were positive, 2 reviews were just pictures of a few pages from the book, and the rest of the comments (18) were negative, starting with complaints about the overall sad mood of the book to some very expressive paragraphs of hatred and fury.

The style of the book is quite complex and unusual. It could be compared to the experience of attending a rally. Different people come to a microphone, some of them are nostalgic and calm, and others are angry and disappointed. Some speakers have their own strong opinion and introduce themselves to the crowd, others get to the microphone to scream, cry, accuse, and often do not want their names to become public. And, there are also hundreds of different voices from around – those voices come from strangers standing next to us and they only say just a phrase or two. *Secondhand Time* sounds like thousands of various rally attendees speaking almost at the same time.

The book is overwhelming, and it is not easy to disarticulate the tools Alexievich utilized to get this effect. It does not provide horrifying facts together with scenes of peaceful everyday life, it does not show blood-curling tortures and deaths followed by some pieces of beauty and love. Nor does it provide us with the deaths of children, or stories told by devastated mothers. Probably, the most appalling feature in *Secondhand Time* is the narration about horror and helplessness as a normal way of life in the post-Soviet era. There is no contrast between terrifying events and moments of peace; the entire book is like one large story of excruciating suffering.

Alexievich has often mentioned the importance of suffering in the Russian tradition. Her interviewees talked about it in different ways in each of her books. But,

Secondhand Time is about all sorts of suffering; physical and mental, minute and at the same time intricately woven into the people's whole existence.

Всё время говорим о страдании.... Это наш путь познания. Западные люди кажутся нам наивными, потому что они не страдают, как мы, у них есть лекарство от любого прыщика. Зато мы сидели в лагерях, в войну землю трупами завалили, голыми руками гребли ядерное топливо в Чернобыле... И теперь мы сидим на обломках социализма. Как после войны. Мы такие тёртые, мы такие битые. У нас свой язык... Язык страдания...¹¹⁷

All the stories of suffering are so diverse that it is surprising Alexievich placed them all in one book. They do not have a unifying topic, except for the fact that all the storytellers have experienced emotional pain at some point of their lives. One of the interviewees chose devotion and went to a monastery six months after her interview. Another interviewee committed suicide a year after the meeting with Alexievich. One man worried about his well-being, so he approved the publication only after he had immigrated to Canada with his family, ten years after he spoke with the writer.

In *Secondhand Time*, Alexievich uses interviews with people who witnessed the military conflict between Georgia and Abkhazia in 1992, and other who witnessed the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan after the collapse of the USSR. Those are stories about senseless violence and killing for the sake of killing, and they resonate with the memories of the women in *The War's Unwomanly Face* who spoke about WWII. Similarly, a large interview with the head of a Moscow-based charity for people from Tajikistan, discusses the social phenomenon of hatred for hatred's sake. He talked about the outrageous abuse Tajiks suffered at the hands of both Russian people and Russian

¹¹⁷ Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд*, 40. [We speak about suffer all the time... It is our way of knowing. Western people seem to us naïve, because they don't suffer like us, they have a medicine for every pimple. But we served time in the camps, we piled the earth with dead bodies in the war, we shoveled nuclear fuel with bare hands in Chernobyl... Now we are sitting at the rubbles of socialism, just like after war. We are so hard to crack and yet we are so chipped. We have our own language; the language of suffer. – my trans.]

police, all caused by racism. A person could be deemed the correct nationality or the incorrect nationality, with the criterion for ‘correct’ being subjective and different in every case:

За что их ненавидят? За карие глаза, за форму носа. Их ненавидят просто так. У нас каждый обязательно кого-то ненавидит: соседей, ментов, олигархов... глупых янки.. Да кого угодно! Много ненависти в воздухе.... до человека нельзя дотронуться...¹¹⁸

Alongside the stories about the misery of the Tajik people in Moscow, Alexievich put interviews about the terror attack in Moscow subway in February of 2004, followed by the memories of a mother whose daughter was killed in Chechnya. Just as if these stories were not disconnected enough, Alexievich shares a long interview with a woman who abandoned her husband for a convict sentenced to a life term in prison. The interviewee says that he is her only true love, even though she had never seen the man before leaving her husband; they had written each other letters. The book closes with the story of a young woman who got arrested in Minsk, Belarus when she attended a demonstration against the president elections in December 2010. She spent a month in a prison, while many other prisoners taken from the same demonstration, in accordance with the Belorussian government position toward the demonstrators, were expected to receive between four and fifteen years as a sentence for the ‘attempted coup.’

The first chapter of the book, dedicated to memories from 1991 to 2001, is more coherent and speaks more to the topic of “second-hand time.” This is the time when the people in a torn apart Soviet Union tried on non-socialist ideas and values; free trade, no

¹¹⁸ Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд*, 414. [What are they hated for? For brown eyes, for the shape of nose. They are hated without any reason. Everyone here hates someone – hates their neighbors, cops, oligarchs, stupid Yankees, just anybody! There’s a lot of hatred in the air; impossible to touch a person... - my trans.]

censorship, no limits to places to, or to possible salary, no limits and no quotas for anything, new music, new fashion, new dance styles, new hobbies, etc. But those ideas were not developed by the Soviet people, they were not planted and developed for generations – instead, the Soviet people were insatiably borrowing those new phenomena from other countries, mostly the West. So, it was not a time that came about naturally; it was a previously used phase in some other country's history, just like second-hand clothes.

The first chapter also contains some lengthy memories of regular people or unknown government officials in Soviet history and the stories are intended to tell the reader more about the reasons why those people committed suicides after the USSR collapsed. Some of the people the writer described, with the help of the interviews, were Marshal of the USSR, Sergey Akhromeyev and also one of the soldiers who were among the first ones defending the Soviet lands against the Nazi army in June 1941 in Brest, modern Belarus. Although the interviews are related to the initial topics of the post-collapse life in the former Soviet Union, they are not like other memories. The first chapter of *Second Hand Time* has numerous passages attempts to understand why people lived, behaved, and believed one way during the Soviet Union time, and not the in any other way.

From one side, Alexievich's interviewees shared lots of stories about their overall happy and secure lives in the USSR, the respect they were receiving from people around them, politeness and generally high culture of their coworkers and even strangers in the street. Lots of those storytellers shared their frustration with the collapse of the country and their strong will to preserve it, at least on a local level. Some of these people would

hide unused Communist Party member ID cards, while others would bring home portraits of the Communist Party former leaders.

But it is easy to understand that Alexievich also included numerous stories investigating seamier aspects of life in the Soviet era as well, including the existence in camps, prisons, executions, whistleblowing, torture techniques, etc. Her interviewees shared their opinion on why these things had existed in Soviet life and why so many people had participated. In the chapter titled «О маленьком красном флажке и улыбке топора» (“About a little red flag and a smile of an axe”) the reader is presented with a lengthy memory of an elderly man who used to work in the NKVD (НКВД – People’s Commissariat for Internal Affairs). He recalled the hardship of building the powerful Soviet country and how many efforts he himself had made in the name of it.

Я тебе рассказываю, чтобы ты понял: дорого нам стоила советская власть. Беречь её надо. Хранить! ... Ставишь человека на колени – выстрел из нагана почти в упор в левую затылочную часть головы ... в область левого уха... Рука к концу смены висела, как плеть. Особенно страдал указательный палец. У нас тоже был план, как и в любом другом месте. Как на заводе. С планом первое время не справлялись. Физически – не могли выполнить. Тогда созвали врачей. Консилиум. Решение было такое – два раза в неделю всем бойцам делать массаж. Массаж правой руки и указательного пальца. [. . .] У меня осталась только глухота на правое ухо, потому что стреляешь с правой руки. ... Вручали нам грамоты «за выполнение специального задания партии и правительства», «делу партии Ленина-Сталина – преданы. [. . .] Ты спросил... быстро ли кончается человек, насколько его хвататет? Я тебе отвечу: ножку венского стула в задний проход или шилом в мошонку – и нет человека.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд*, 293, 295. [I am telling you so that you would understand; we paid a high price for the Soviet power. We need to protect it, to preserve! ...

... You put a person on their knees and shoot from a revolver almost point-blank into back of the head, the area of left ear... Your arm would be hanging down like a lash by the end of your shift. Point finger suffered the most. We had a government ordered productivity quota too like any other place, like a factory. We didn’t catch up with the planned quota at first; just physically could not achieve it. Then they called for doctors and got a consultation. The decision was to give a massage to all [NKVD] soldiers twice a week. The massage of the right arm and the point finger. [. . .] I am now left with the deafness in the right ear, because I was shooting with the right arm. ... They gave us awards of excellence ‘for performing a special task of the Party and

Many stories speak to the idea that the “monsters” who were killing and torturing people were not big and scary, but rather average people with normal lives; they got married, had regular hobbies, and so on.

Сам Сталин... [. . .] учил сына: ты думаешь, что это я – Сталин. Нет! Сталин – это он! И показывал на свой портрет на стене. Не на себя, а на свой портрет! Машина смерти... Машина работала безостановочно... десятки лет... Логика была гениальная: жертва – палач, и в конце палач – тоже жертва.¹²⁰

In general, the first chapter of the book devotes a large amount of time examining special Russian, or rather Soviet, ideas about the nature of power and government, about suffering, and about human life and its value. Some stories reflect on Soviet friendship and love, about the ability of the Soviet people to live in poverty and yet to be helpful and selfless, and about the importance of compassion and pity for the Soviet culture. Some of the interviews are quite well thought through and may have served as a balanced meaningful confession.

Many interviewees shared their thoughts on the role of suffering and submission in Soviet life. Lots of people disappeared from their homes and work places, and people were silent. Some of the storytellers said that the Soviet people treated their suffering as the only possible way of living their lives and accepted it as a norm:

the government’, and for ‘loyalty to the work of the party of Lenin and Stalin’. [. . .]You asked if a man runs out quickly, for how long does a man last? I am going to answer; put a leg of a Viennese chair into his anus or pierce his scrotum with an awl and that’s it, a man is over. – my trans.]

¹²⁰ Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд*, 295. [Stalin himself was teaching his son: “You think that Stalin is me. No! Stalin is him!” He was pointing at his portrait on the wall. Not at himself, but at his portrait! It was a machine of death... The machine was working non-stop... for decades... The logic was genius; there are victim and executioner, and in the end the executioner is a victim too. – my trans.]

Он знал, кто на него донёс. Мальчик один...занимался с ним в кружке Дома пионеров. То ли он сам, то ли его заставили написать письмо: ругал товарища Сталина, оправдывал отца, «врага народа». Следовательно на допросе ему это письмо показал. Всю жизнь Глеб боялся... Боялся, что доносчик узнает, что он знает.... Когда ему передали, что у того родился неполноценный ребенок, он испугался – а вдруг это возмездие?¹²¹

Many narrators shared the concept that it was crucial for a Soviet person to quietly accept his/her suffering and to feel responsible for not only him/herself, but also those who put him/her in prison. Several stories described parallels or unspoken unions between the person who was sending people to camps, or signing death sentences, and the people who were the victims. Nobody would uncover the truth; neither about the executor nor about the accused. As a result, a multitude of stories examine the worth, or rather the lack of value, that a human life had in the USSR. A large number of interviewees shared that with Alexievich the idea that death was deeply woven into everyday life. Death was some unspoken reality in the Stalin's 1930s, then during WWII, for all those who were prisoners of war or lived in the Nazi occupied territories, and then even after the war. Countless generations of Soviet people were brought up with the system of values which placed the motherland atop the list of valued ideas, and life and its quality at the bottom, or most of the time, not on that list at all.

One of the interviewees recalled the words of his elderly father who had been a loyal Communist and before his retirement had served for many years in the USSR military. The father and his son were watching a TV documentary showing how a

¹²¹ Алексиевич, 232-233. [He knew who wrote him up. That was this one boy... [Gleb] was teaching him in a boy's club at the Pioneer House. Either the boy did it himself or they forced him to write a letter saying that he [the husband of the interviewee] was scolding comrade Stalin and was justifying his own father, who was a public enemy. The investigator showed [Gleb] that letter during the interrogation. His whole life Gleb was afraid... afraid that the informer would know that he knew... When [Gleb] was told that [the informer] had a child with mental disability he got afraid it might have been retaliation. – my trans.]

Japanese robot was excavating old land mines from sand. The father was a little bit upset that it was a Japanese robot and not a Soviet one.

Неожиданно к концу репортажа у нас на глазах робот делает ошибку и подрывается. [. . .] Папа в недоумении: «Гробить импортную технику? У нас что, личного состава не хватает?». У него свои отношения со смертью. Папа жил для того, чтобы выполнить любое задание партии и правительства. Жизнь стоила меньше железки.¹²²

In the first chapter of the book, there are numerous memories where people shared how much they wanted changes in their life in 1980s and how little they knew about what could have happened next. They could not describe what it was that they desired. They wanted more freedom in all aspects of their lives, but at the same time they were not ready for it. Many simply wanted better lives with more things and a wider variety of groceries at the stores. For example, good sausage, a VHS player, and an automobile were among most people typical dreams, in the 1980s. Soviet people were enchanted with the idea of new life, positive changes, freedom of speech and freedom of press. Everybody was expecting something mysterious, and yet better than what they had then.

A young mother recalled the time when her child was a small baby and she would keep the baby on one hand and would keep opened a book by Solzhenitsyn with the other hand. The books replaced outside world for her:

Потом что-то произошло... Мы опустились на землю. Ощущение счастья и эйфории вдруг переломилось. Целиком и полностью. Я поняла, что этот новый мир не мой, не для меня. [. . .] Книжные девочки и мальчики... комнатные растения... Мы оказались не приспособлены к новой жизни, которую ждали. Что-то другое мы ждали, а не это. Прочитали вагон

¹²² Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд*, 386. [Suddenly, at the end of the program, the robot makes a mistake and blows itself up. [. . .] Father is bewildered “Why would they ruin an imported (expensive) machine? Don’t we have enough soldiers as a replacement for this dangerous job!?” He had his own relationship with death. Dad has lived to execute any command of the party and the government. Human life cost less than a scrap metal. – my trans.]

романтических книг, а жизнь погнала пинками и подзатыльниками в другую сторону.¹²³

After the USSR collapsed, lots of people lived life below the poverty line. Several interviewees shared their stories about traumatic experiences of stealing or working in menial positions at that time. One of the storytellers shared his memories about former Soviet intelligentsia waiting for a free meal at a city park next to a Hare Krishna daytime kitchen.¹²⁴ People felt deceived and lost. They could not adjust to the new life that had befallen them. Quite a few of Alexievich's interviewees shared their deep regret about the collapse of the USSR:

Социализм меня устраивал: не было ни черзмерно богатых, ни бедных... бомжей и беспризорников... Старики могли прожить на свои пенсии, бутылки на улицах не собирали. Обьедки. В глаза не заглядывали, не стояли с протянутой рукой... Сколько людей убила перестройка – это ещё надо посчитать.¹²⁵

The new life of selling, making business, earning money, buying luxury items was foreign to many Soviet people and seemed repellent to them.

Several stories in *Secondhand Time* addressed frustration and desperation in the new circumstances. One elderly woman shared the following:

¹²³ Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд*, 164-165. [Then something happened... We came down to earth. The feeling of happiness and euphoria suddenly broke all of a piece. I understood that the new world is not mine, it's not for me. [. . .] We were bookish girls and boys, we were house plants... We were not fit in the new life we were waiting for. We were waiting for something else and not for that. We read a carload of romantic books, but the life kicked us and slapped us into different direction. – my trans.]

¹²⁴ Back in 1990s, visiting Hare Krishna kitchens and attending any of their events was a big social stigma. Hare Krishna was very exotic and foreign, and its members would be perceived by average Soviet people as weird, socially awkward, and even mentally challenged.

¹²⁵ Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд*, 139. [Socialism was fine with me; there were no overly rich or overly poor, no hobos and no street urchins... Old people could live off their pensions, they didn't collect empty bottles and leftovers in the streets. They didn't look into your eyes, they were not beggars.... We yet have to estimate how many people Perestroika killed. – my trans.]

...На улицу редко выхожу. Что я там увижу? Праздник Маммоны! Не осталось никаких ценностей, кроме мошны. А я? Я - нищая, мы все – нищие. Всё моё поколение... бывшие советские люди... Ни счетов, ни недвижимости. [. . .] Где наш капитал? Всё, что у нас есть, это – наши страдания, то, что мы пережили.¹²⁶

The book is full of misery, sorrow, unspoken and deeply hidden pain revealed by Alexievich's speakers. Some Russian speaking reviewers would write that the book is too difficult to read and the topics are quite repetitive. To some extent, we would agree with this critique. But one need not to forget that the time of the collapse of the Soviet Union was in fact gruesome, quite violent, filled with anger and disenchantment. Even those people who later managed to create successful businesses or progress in their careers remember the 1990s as the most chaotic, anarchic, and depressing years. It is unreasonable to expect those memories to be happy and bright, and this explains why all the stories in *Secondhand Time* are so full of lament and regret.

After thoroughly studying Alexievich's books, we managed to trace some specific features that she uses in every collection of stories. Some books would have more evidences of the certain techniques that the writer uses, whereas the next book would favor other methods, but they all are present in every book of the Belorussian writer.

1) Alexievich turns to the stories told by pregnant women, or about pregnant women. For example, it could be a story about a young pregnant woman during the nuclear explosion in Chernobyl, or a story about a pregnant Soviet woman who hanged herself during WWII due to the reason that she got pregnant by a Nazi officer.

¹²⁶ Алексиевич, 280. [I rarely go outside into the street. What would I see there? Celebration of Mammon! There are no values left except for a fat purse. And me? I am dog-poor, we all are dog-poor; my whole generation, former Soviet people... We have neither accounts, nor property. [. . .]Where is our fund? All we have is our suffering and all that we have survived through. – my trans.]

2) She often includes stories told by children. Besides a separate book that contains only the narratives of the people who were very little during WWII, she tends to use children's testimonies and memories in every collection of stories she has published. We could find a particularly wide selection of them in *Voices from Chernobyl*, where children would tell how they were dying from the radiation disease and how they asked their parent to not worry about that, or stories about children who were relocated from the contaminated region.

3) Alexievich tends to place a terrifying act of violence in the middle of neutral setting, like drinking water next to a well or cooking a meal. An example of this technique could be a story that took place during WWII. A group of Soviet civilians was drinking water next to a well. Everyone was enjoying a simple pleasure of cold and clear water and used those minutes to unwind and talk to each other for a little bit. A woman was breastfeeding her newborn baby during that temporary moment of silence and peace. Suddenly, a Nazi officer together with a group of soldiers came to the well. He noticed the woman, took the baby from her hands, and hit the child against the walls of the well. The baby's brains were splattered all around, and the mother immediately died from a heart attack. The stop for water continued.

4) The writer often puts stories about some horrible deaths in contrast with the beauty of nature around. Such, it could be a story of a Soviet hospital during WWII with dozens of badly wounded soldiers, amputated limbs, blood everywhere mixed with human urine and feces, and a bare open heart in the wound in a soldier's chest. These details would be followed by the depiction of beautiful winter nature, gorgeous pine trees covered with shiny snow, and quiet mesmerizing tranquility of Russian forest. Another

example could be from the Soviet war in Afghanistan where after telling about blood, death, and torn apart human bodies, there goes a description of the breathtaking beauty of Afghan mountains, their vastness and incredible color.

5) Svetlana Alexievich gives her chapters distinctive and seemingly enigmatic titles. Ehrenburg and Grosman used geographic names and often family names to title their chapters. Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik used average titles like, for example, «Пограничники» (Border Patrol). Granin and Adamovich used some unifying thematical titles, such as «Блокадный быт» (Everyday Life under Siege), «Братья меньшие» (Pets), «Трое из миллионов» (Three out of Millions). Alexievich prefers a phrase from the testimony as a title for the correspondent chapter. Usually, that specific sentence would express the most climatic episode in the chapter. For example, «Они не тонули, как мячики» (They Didn't Drown Just Like Balls), where the text tells a story of a girl who witnessed how the Fascists forced local people into the river and drown them, but two boys among those dropped in the middle of the river, kept swimming to the surface. The Nazi soldiers kept beating the boys' heads to make them go under water, but the boys would swim back again and again, just like balls.

These techniques employed by Svetlana Alexievich, help us better understand what makes her texts stand out among others in the similar fashion, as well as explain the reason why her books are so unbearably emotional and difficult to read. It is never easy to read about human suffer, pain, death, torture, desperation, and hopelessness, but Alexievich has the skills of making those topics even more dramatic for her readers by condensing her narratives, editing them out, and presenting them in the manner we summarized above.

Chapter 3. Problematics of Genre

The questions about Alexievich's literary genre have been raised many times since the day she was announced as the winner of the Nobel Prize in Literature in October 2015. The group of journalists bombarded the Nobel secretary with the request to clarify what the Belorussian writer's genre was. The Nobel Committee provided the following information:

Svetlana Alexievich depicts life during and after the Soviet Union through the experience of individuals. In her books she uses interviews to create a collage of a wide range of voices. With her "documentary novels", Svetlana Alexievich, who is a journalist, moves in the boundary between reporting and fiction¹²⁷. [. . .] Svetlana Alexievich has created a literary non-fiction genre that is entirely her own. She writes "novels of voices." She has developed this genre book after book, constantly honing the esthetic of her documentary prose, which is based on hundreds of interviews. Her skill at this allows her to intertwine the original voices of her subjects into an artful condensation of a panorama of souls.¹²⁸

In our research, we want to unpack the Nobel Prize Committee explanation and see how exactly she moves in the boundary between reporting and fiction, how much of non-fiction are her texts, and if her genre could be determined as entirely her own.

The first impression that Alexievich's books give to the reader is that these collections are a journalistic investigation, selected and published by an editor. The stories seem to be transcripts of interviews with real witnesses with different catastrophes of the 20th century. Alexievich appears to be merely a transcriber who collected the interviews and then selected the best fragments of those for us to read. It ultimately

¹²⁷ "Svetlana Alexievich - Facts". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014, accessed 21 Apr 2018, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-facts.html.

¹²⁸ "Svetlana Alexievich - Biographical". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014, accessed 22 Apr 2018, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-bio.html.

perceived as a journalistic work with typical journalistic tools to work with the collected material. We decided to look deeper into Alexievich's journalistic association, which inevitably brought us to the concept of New Journalism.

Many scholars agree that new journalism originated in the 1960s, in the US primarily, within a group of New York-based journalists. Writers such as Wolfe, Mailer, Breslin, Talese, Didion, and Sheehy are the most important figures in this new wave of non-fiction writing. 'Old' journalism presumed the idea of objectivity, providing facts without editing, following the long working formula of 'who-what-where-when,' while 'new' journalism deeply involves a reporter and requires subjectivity. The idea is to give a fuller picture of an event and fill it with emotions, sounds, colors, and sceneries. It requires imagination, but not distortion. New journalism's goal is to give its reader some new dimensions and depths that the former 'no-nonsense,' straight to the point, old journalism style did not.

Of course, the so called 'new' journalism is not that new – there are several examples when great American novelists would write some 'sketches' for various newspapers. For example, some parts of Mark Twain's *Roughing It* and *Life on the Mississippi* are difficult to distinguish in terms of where reporting ends and fiction starts. Sketches and newspaper articles written by Stephen Crane represent this 'new journalism' and blend "factual reporting and fictionalized storytelling," as John Hollowell puts it in his study on fact and fiction.¹²⁹ Svetlana Alexievich's published work emerges as a variant of samizdat literature – a kind of underground literature popular in

¹²⁹ John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction. The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 34.

the USSR in the years of harsh censorship. In that vein, her books could be understood as a rough equivalent to what we describe here as ‘new journalism’.

New journalism was needed in times when the difference between the words of official spokespeople and the information not welcomed in major publishing periodical sources became too large and evident. Literary critic Robert Scholes calls new journalists ‘hystorians,’ since it was needed to write and reflect on chaotic and hysterical modern life: “[The hystorian] asserts the importance of his impressions and his vision of the world. He embraces the fictional element inevitable in any reporting and tries to imagine his way toward the truth.”¹³⁰

One of the main subjects of new journalism writers is the extreme experiences; important or shocking events, often violent, such as wars and big criminal cases.

John Hollowell describes the most important techniques that new journalists employ in their writing. The first of these is the “dramatic scene.”¹³¹ Instead of merely providing a brief sentence, stating that a certain act took place, a writer now develops a whole scene, walking his/her reader along with the main character from scene to scene as the events unfolded in real time. Such a technique allows the reader to penetrate the storyteller’s consciousness and for the personality to develop fully within the space of a journalistic story.

Alexievich exploits this technique extensively in all of her books. A large number of stories provide detailed, step-by-step, almost cinematic sequence of little events before

¹³⁰ Robert Scholes, “Double Perspective on Hysteria”, *Saturday Review*, August 24, 1968, 37, quoted in John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction. The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 23.

¹³¹ Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction*, 26.

a bigger, major event. Her book *Voices from Chernobyl* («Чернобыльская молитва») contains large numbers of paragraphs with such ‘script-like’ depictions. Even though one can assume that the words belong to the interviewees themselves, it is nevertheless clear that Alexievich uses fragments of the interviews to dramatic effect. They bring a storyteller’s experience closer and make it more accessible for the reader.

Увидел и начал снимать цветущую яблоню... Гудят шмели, белый, свадебный цвет... Опять же – люди работают, сады цветут... Держу в руках камеру, но не могу понять... Что-то не так! Экспозиция нормальная, картинка красивая, а что-то не то. И вдруг пронзает: не слышу запаха. Сад цветёт, а нет запаха! Это только я потом узнал, что существует такая реакция организма при высокой радиации, блокируются некоторые органы.¹³²

The second technique Hallowell describes is “full dialogue.” Although some events require quoting a recorded dialog at length, space restrictions of a story often do not allow for the use of so many words from the recording. The new journalist is eager to provide a full dialogue with all of its possible features, such as the word choices of the speaker(s), any sort of obscene language, actions and gestures of the people in the dialogue itself and possible audience/spectators around. In a certain way, all the interviews that Alexievich has published in her books could work as examples of this technique, since her texts consist primarily of the dialogues and monologues of her subjects.

¹³² Светлана Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва*, (Москва: Время, 2016), 125. [I have noticed a blooming apple tree and started filming it. Bumble-bees are buzzing. White, wedding white color... Again, people are working, trees are blooming... I am holding a camera in my hands, but I something seems off... Something is wrong! Exposure is fine, the picture is lovely, but something is wrong. Then comes a striking thought – I cannot feel the smell! Only later I learned that with high dose of radiation the body responds like that – some senses stop working.] – my trans.]

Hallowell's third technique is the "status detail."¹³³ The new writer describes not only the events and the people related to the event, but also all of what previously had been considered 'unimportant' details, which mark the interviewee's social status. For example, the author includes gestures, manners, styles of furniture, clothing, decorations, etc. These details provide a more realistic portrait of the person and give the interview an almost three-dimensional level. One does not just imagine the face of the storyteller, but can now "see" and place that person in a real room/house with physical objects and space characteristics. Alexievich does not use this technique as fully as she could, but she certainly employs it to a certain extent in almost all of her books. For example,

Деревня Ратынцы Воложинского района Минской области. Час езды от столицы. Обычная белорусская деревня – деревянные дома, цветные палисадники, петухи и гуси на улицах. Дети в песке. Старые женщины на лавочках. Я приехала к одной из них, а собралась вся улица. Заговорили. Заголосили в один голос.¹³⁴

The description of the village and its people provides the reader with a vivid picture of a small place in the country side of Belarus, with slowly moving time, old fashioned rural lifestyle, simple clothes and food, and talkative people who are excited to see any guest in their small home place. Embedding almost video-like written descriptions of surroundings into the text is definitely one of the main principles of this particular form of 'new' journalism.

¹³³ John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction. The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 28.

¹³⁴ Светлана Алексиевич, *У войны не женское лицо*, (Москва: Время, 2016), 282. [The village of Ratyntsy in Volozhin suburbs of Minsk region. It is one-hour trip from the capital. It is an average Belorussian village; there are wooden cabins, flower beds, roosters and geese in the streets. There are children playing in the sand, and old women sitting on benches. I came to visit one of them, but the entire street came to the meeting. They have started talking and Wailing as one voice.] – my trans.]

The fourth technique of the New Journalism is “the point of view.”¹³⁵ This device serves to portray a character through the eyes of other significant people in that person’s life or in the way so that the reader can understand the character’s mental process. John Hollowell explains this technique by quoting Tom Wolfe’s description of it as “to present every scene to the reader through the eyes of a particular character, giving the reader the feeling of being inside the character’s mind.”¹³⁶

Svetlana Alexievich utilizes this technique in the interviews in some of her books. Most often, she turns to the special point of view when she wants her reader to understand those characters who had been already dead (or for example, imprisoned) by the time of the interview. The writer widely employs stories told by mothers about their dead children when the latest were killed or committed suicide, also narratives told by other family members and even neighbors and former co-workers about the late people. *Secondhand Time* and *The Zinky Boys* provide a lot of examples of the writer’s use of the Point of View. One of the most standout examples would be a story about the USSR Marshall Sergey Akhromeyev who took his own life in 1991 when the Soviet Union was falling apart. The narrative takes about 30 pages in the *Secondhand Time*; it is told by various people starting from just anonymous people from the crowd of the Red Square in Moscow, notes from the official investigation, paragraphs written about him by various political figures, and to the lengthy story told by an anonymous officer from Kremlin.

¹³⁵ John Hollowell, 1977, 28.

¹³⁶ *The New Journalism*, ed. T. Wolfe and E.W. Johnson (Pan, 1975), 32, quoted in John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction. The New Journalism and The Nonfiction Novel*, (The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 28.

The fifth technique is the ‘Interior monologue’¹³⁷. The new journalism brings thoughts and attitudes of a character as if he or she was thinking them instead of saying them; this helps not to interrupt the narrative with unnecessary direct quotations.

From our point of view, Svetlana Alexievich does not use this technique, and the reason is simply that she does not need to do so – she engages all thoughts and emotions of her characters by providing page-long monologues. The writer does not have to imagine what her interviewees were thinking about at the certain moment of their lives – Alexievich describes their thoughts and emotions in words to deliver the inner point of view of the characters.

The last technique mentioned by Hollowell is the ‘Composite Characterization’. One could argue that this is one of the most important tools for unpacking Alexievich’s writing. This literary technique allows an author to create a composite character who does not represent only his or her personal traits and actions, but rather functions as a common portrait of many people. In this case we do not talk about a real person, but we have a composite who represents a group with similar features based on their experience, location, occupation, lifestyle, language, behavior, etc. Svetlana Alexievich employs this technique widely throughout her books. We know that she changes names of her interviewees or presents some chapters as anonymous, and it clearly indicates to us that she creates a composite character. Those interviews stop functioning as interviews at this point – they turn into Alexievich’s own writing, and it is based on the writer’s own language as well as on the words and stories already produced by interviewees. It is truly a unique combination of real words coming from real people, words that Alexievich

¹³⁷ John Hollowell, *Fact & Fiction. The New Journalism and the Nonfiction Novel* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1977), 29.

assigned to them (to the extent that we do not know for sure), words coming from multiple unidentified sources presented as collections of replicas, and the writer's own words.

New journalists have been accused of fictionalizing their stories to the point of fabrication and misinformation. Here we deal with a very complex genre that lies in between the novel and conventional journalistic writing. The need to provide stories about important social issues with greater depth and more a vivid portrayal, probably played a very important role in the rise of new journalism and documentary writing in general. We cannot even grasp the number of books printed in the last 50 years that described important social, political, economic, and historical events – they all engage various sources, various levels of verification by actual historic data and documents and, hence, truthfulness, together with interviews and writer's personal attitude which makes all their writing inevitably subjective and to some extent fictional. In some way, we can compare this complex mix of sources and original genres to 'arabesques' used in early 19th century Germany and referring to a type of free-form literature that was popular among German idealistic philosophers, and which was later used by Gogol in his *Arabesques* 'to break free from prescribed forms, to mix fiction freely with art criticism, to employ it as a stylistic device'.¹³⁸

It does not come as a surprise that Svetlana Alexievich was accused of fictionalizing her testimonies. In 1993, in Minsk, in two separate cases, she was sued for slander and making false stories. In court, prosecutor Taras Ketzmur said that he felt uncomfortable and upset when his story was published. In his words, the book portrayed

¹³⁸ Alexander Levitsky, "Gogols' and Neruda's *Arabesques* (Preliminary Notes on Their Genre)," in *For Henry Kučera* (Michigan Slavic Publications, Ann Arbor, 1992), 239 – 242.

him as a senseless machine, a killer, and a mentally ill person. His main argument was the fact that Alexievich wrote about the Ketzmur's dog, named Charah (Чара), and how they served in Afghanistan together. However, in real life his dog had died on their way to the war. We do not know if there were more alterations, nor if they were significantly changing the facts or our perception as readers. But this episode can give us an idea about the overall artistic liberty Alexievich takes, and some of its boundaries.

Besides being sued by her interviewees whose testimonies Svetlana Alexievich used in her *Zinky Boys*, her most recent volume *Secondhand Time* received several negative reviews for editing the already published texts. For example, "Witness Tampering," by Sophie Pinkham, and "Du bon et du mauvais usage du témoignage dans l'œuvre de Svetlana Alexievitch," by Galia Ackerman, the French translator of Alexievich's books, both make this claim.

Sophie Pinkham published her article on Alexievich in the *New Republic* in August 2016. In her piece, she noticed discrepancies between certain facts mentioned about the same person in two different books; the 1993 book *Очарованные смертью* (*Enchanted by Death*) which has not been yet translated into English, and *Secondhand Time*. Pinkham found deviations in stories that appear in both books, and analyzed how those alterations changed the meaning. One story about an old man who set himself on fire is told by his neighbor, a woman named Maria Isaichik, or Marina Isaichik. Pinkham uses this story as the main focus of her analysis in the article. She noticed that Maria Isaichik is described as having different ages in these texts, and that there were certain changes to the description of the deceased man, Alexander Sharpilo. In the earlier book, Sharpilo is said to love seeing children die, while in the later book he likes to see people

die.¹³⁹ Also, in the first text his funeral was without music while in the second version his funeral was described as one with orchestra and people crying. As Pinkham sees it, these changes alter the understanding of social context. In *Enchanted by Death*, Sharpilo seemed like an outcast living in isolation and having no support from local community, but in *Secondhand Time* he is shown as a member of village life who was not left alone in his difficult times after divorce or his funeral too.

We traced those discrepancies that Pinkham mentions in her article. She is correct – all of these differences do exist when carefully comparing the two sources. It is clear that Alexievich, like any human, changes with time and it is not surprising that her attitude toward the words of her interviewees changes too. We can trace it not only by what words she has changed between the *Enchanted by Death* and by the *Secondhand Time*, but also how she reassigns value to the narratives and edits them out. One of those points was a different story mentioned in both books¹⁴⁰. In the earlier text it is an interview with a 36-year-old engineer Svetlana Butrameyeva that is a six-page long emotional confession of a woman who lost her purpose in life after the collapse of the USSR and attempted suicide by drinking a bottle of vinegar essence. It is a heartfelt monologue by a woman who has just been released from a hospital where doctors managed to resuscitate her. Butrameyeva tells of how she lost her job, her colleagues, and her social identity. She turned into a housewife whose duty was to cook, clean, do laundry, and watch soap operas. She did not feel that this new lifestyle was appropriate

¹³⁹ Both the books do not provide any details on the time of those events and so it was not clear if Sharpilo was watching children die during WWII or not and/or why he was doing that.

¹⁴⁰ The chapter titled «История про то, что в смерти есть что-то женское» ('A story about the fact that there is something feminine in death'. [– my trans.]).

for her, and started feeling useless and abandoned by everybody. Her girlfriends became distant, and had their own lives, which were suddenly private, unlike in Soviet times. Her son started dreaming of big money and told his mother that money meant freedom, and he accused her of having the mentality of a slave. Butrameyeva could not fit in this new reality with its foreign values. She did not want to live any more. As the only possible escape she chose suicide. In the *Secondhand Time* version of the story, Alexievich compresses this lengthy story to the size of two little paragraphs, less than a page. The only lines the author considered worthy of quoting were the words of Butrameyeva about the lack of girl talk with her colleagues from work, and how much she enjoyed those, how she felt lost and humiliated when her former life style collapsed.¹⁴¹ Something changed for Alexievich in the twenty years after the publication of the *Enchanted by Death*. In 1993, the story of Butrameyeva seemed important to her, and of a great value, otherwise she would not have selected it to be included in a collection of only seventeen interviews. But, by 2013, when re-arranging documents for *Secondhand Time*, Alexievich no longer saw Butrameyeva's monologue as a noteworthy, and this was her choice to make. Why she prefers certain interviews over other stories, the way she delivers them, and the order she arrange them in her books – all of that comprises her creative freedom.

The fact that Svetlana Alexievich tampers with the already published texts raised interest toward this problem among scholars. After *Witness Tampering* by Sophie Pinkham in 2016, we learned that another scholar, the Columbia University Ph.D. candidate Holly Myers, is devoting a part of her dissertation to Alexievich's *Zinky Boys*.

¹⁴¹ Светлана Алексиевич, *Время Сэконд Хэнд* (Москва: Время, 2016), 307.

Holly Myers looked at various editions of this book and found several discrepancies in their texts. Most discrepancies were due to phrases from the earlier editions being removed from the later ones. Specifically, phrases where interviewees stated that their stories described their own personal truth. It is important to study more editions of her books in order to better understand Alexievich's style and identify her possible genre.

We decided to make our own study and trace any possible differences between various editions of *Последние свидетели: книга не детских рассказов* (*Last Witnesses*), originally published in 1985. We used four texts: 1) *Последние свидетели: книга не детских рассказов*, Москва, Молодая гвардия, 1985. 2) *У войны не женское лицо. Последние свидетели*, Москва, Издательство Остожье, 1998. 3) *Последние свидетели: сто не детских колыбельных*, Москва, Издательство Пальмира, 2004. 4) *Последние свидетели: соло для детского голоса*, Москва, Время, 2016¹⁴². These books are available at U.S. libraries and are on open access for the general public. We did not request anything beyond officially published texts printed in Moscow at different times. Taking a closer look at some paragraphs that Alexievich could have added, removed, or altered among the editions can help us understand the difference between the intended messages of the earlier and later authorial editions of the same book through three decades.

The four texts have many alterations. Their prefaces are different and the content is different too. The oldest edition has stories that do not appear in later versions. Those are mostly stories about average Soviet children affected by the war and how they were

¹⁴² [1) *Last Witnesses: Book of Un-childlike Stories* (Moscow, 1985), 2) *The War's Unwomanly Face. Last Witnesses* (Moscow, 1998), 3) *Last Witnesses: One Hundred Un-childlike Lullabies* (Moscow, 2004), 4) *Last Witnesses: a Solo for Child Voice* (Moscow, 2016). – my trans.]

either helping their parents, doing something for a collective farm, or engaged in similar activities that were average and familiar to many children in the USSR. For example, the 1985 edition has a story titled «Мы с братом пионерами были» («My Brother and I Were Pioneers») told how the narrator and his brother, both little boys during WWII, praised and cherished their red pioneer neck scarves.

Between the four sources, there are many stories that have different details that were missing in the earlier editions or missing in the most recent ones. Also, some stories have different titles; we can posit that this comes from Alexievich's intention to draw the readers' attention to different aspects of the events.

Many interviewees have different ages between the books. Even though the difference is usually one year, the digits are not the same. For example, the story «Он оглянуться боялся» ('He Was Afraid to Look Behind') is narrated by Zhenia Belkevich. In both the 1985 and 1988 editions, she is 5 years old. However, in the 2004 and 2016 editions she is 6 years old. There are a few more stories with the same one-year age difference (like in the «Они лежали на углях розовые» ('They Were Pink and Were Laying on Coals'), «Только мамин крик слышала» ('I Heard Only My Mother's Scream'), etc). There is also a difference in the names of interviewees – for example, the story «Эти два мальчика стали лёгонькие, как воробьи» ('These Two Boys Became Light as Sparrows') belongs to Raya Ilyinkovskaya, the 1998, 2004, and 2016 editions provide this name, but in the 1985 text she is Ira Ilyinkovskaya.¹⁴³

The chapter «А я всё равно хочу маму» ('I Still Need my Mother'). The 2016 and 2004 editions have an extra paragraph: «[Мама и папа] пропали где-то под

¹⁴³*Last Witnesses*. 1985, 108. 1998, 390. 2004, 140. 2016, 174.

бомбёжкой. Соседи потом рассказывали – поехали вдвоём искать меня. Побежали на станцию».¹⁴⁴ The older editions do not have this paragraph. Instead, they only provide the information about the narrator who was waiting for her parents to come pick her up after the war, and who was 51 years old at the moment of interview and was still in great need of her mother. We as readers also know nothing about the parents. We are thrown into an informational vacuum by Alexievich, just like the narrator of this story in the later editions. We are free to think of any cause of death for them, and we can assume that the 1985 and 1998 editions would anticipate the readers to imagine some tragic death somewhere at the battlefield or fighting the Nazi soldiers in any possible way. The later edition's paragraph allows us to imagine the narrator's parents as regular people who did not meet a heroic death while protecting their motherland, and rather were normal loving parents who went to look for their child.

The story titled «Такие красивые немецкие игрушки» ('Such Beautiful German Toys') has a new paragraph in its later editions about a dead Nazi soldier.

Тогда же я увидела первого мёртвого в немецкой форме, он шёл-шёл в колонне и упал. Колонна стояла и двинулась дальше, а возле него поставили нашего солдата. Я подбежала... Меня тянуло посмотреть на смерть вблизи, побыть рядом. Когда по радио объявляли о потерях противника, мы всегда радовались... А тут... Я увидела... Человек как будто спал... Он даже не лежал, а сидел, полускрючившись, голова немного на плече. Я не знала: ненавидеть мне его или жалеть? Это был враг. Наш враг! Не помню: молодой он или старый? Очень усталый. Из-за этого мне было трудно его ненавидеть. Я тоже маме об этом рассказала. И она опять плакала».¹⁴⁵

¹⁴⁴ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 19. [Mom and dad] disappeared somewhere during the bombing. Our neighbors later told me that my parents went to look for me, they ran to the railway station. – my trans.]

¹⁴⁵ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 23. [It was then when I saw my first dead German in a German military uniform. He was walking in the line of people and then he fell. The people stopped for a little and then moved on, and they put a Soviet soldier next to him. I wanted to look closely at the death and to be next to it. When the radio was telling us about the enemy's casualties we would

The same paragraph appears in the 2004 edition, but there is absent from the earlier ones, along with any mention about the narrator's attitude toward death in the 1985 and 1998 texts. The later editions add more psychological depth to the story and depict the girl's perception of the Nazi soldier as just a human being, not a monster or an enemy. For some reason, Alexievich decided to add this part to show the girl's thoughts about the dead man, and her tormented perception of the witnessed event.

The added psychological layer to the narrative is easy to see in the next example. It is a fragment from a story that in the 1985 and 1998 editions was titled «Возьмите наших детей, а мы пойдём защищать город» ('Take Our Children and We Will Go to Protect the City') and in the later editions was titled «Через петельку для пуговицы» ('Through a Buttonhole'). It is important to notice that just the title shows the shift in the authorial attitude toward this interview – the early text implies the selflessness and self-sacrificing attitude of the Soviet people, whereas the later text stresses our attention on horrors seen through a button eyelet by an individual.

Let's trace these changes:

1985, 20: «Я росла сорванцом, и мне было интересно посмотреть: как это летят бомбы, как это они свистят и как они падают? И вот я ложилась на землю, накрывалась пальто и через петельку для пуговицы наблюдала, как бомбы летят... Так было, пока я не увидела первого убитого. Тогда я испугалась...» (Same text in the 1998, 303)¹⁴⁶

always rejoice. But now... I saw... The man looked as he was asleep. He wasn't even lying but rather sitting in a bent shape, with his head leaning toward one of his shoulders. I was not sure if I should hate him or feel sorry for him. It was our enemy! I don't remember if he was young or old. He looked very tired, and because of that it was difficult for me to hate him. I told about that to my mom. She cried again. – my trans.]

¹⁴⁶ [I was a tomboy in my childhood, and I was always curious to see how these bombs were flying, how they were whistling and falling. So I would lay down on the ground, would cover myself with a coat, and would peek through the button-hole to see the bombs... It ended when I saw the first dead body. I got scared then. – my trans.]

2004, 32: «Я всегда дружила с мальчишками. Росла сорванцом. Мне было интересно посмотреть: как это летят бомбы, как это они свистят и как они падают. И вот я ложилась на землю, накрывалась пальто и через петельку для пуговицы наблюдала... Бомбы летят... На дереве что-то висит... Когда я поняла, что это что-то от человека на дереве висит, я испугалась. Я закрыла глаза...»¹⁴⁷

2016, 35-36: «Возле убитых валялись чайники и кастрюли. Всё горело... Казалось, что мы бежим по горящим уголькам... Я всегда дружила с мальчишками. Росла сорванцом. Мне было интересно посмотреть: как это летят бомбы, как это они свистят и как они падают. Когда мама кричала: «Ложимся на землю!», я через петельку для пуговицы подглядывала... Что там на небе? И как люди бегут... На дереве что-то висит... Когда я поняла, что это что-то от человека на дереве висит, у меня был столбняк. Я закрыла глаза...»¹⁴⁸

It is easy to see the stronger emotional undercurrents, and the profusion of personal detail, that come with the new editions. The paragraph starts as a rather plain story about the experience of a little girl who was interested to see bombs and got scared after seeing the dead. It progresses to more details about the dead – it was not a corpse, but only remains of it. Finally, the story evolves into a more dramatic episode describing dead people after bombing, a mother figure, and the girl's emotions when she saw the remains of the dead. Undoubtedly, the last edition has more personal and very troubling elements that are going to affect its readers. It is difficult to say what the original text was and why Alexievich keeps changing this specific paragraph. But it clearly shows how much she edits the stories and works not merely as a shorthand typist, but as a full-scale writer.

¹⁴⁷ [I was always friends with boys, I was growing up as a tomboy. I was curious to see how these bombs were flying down, how they were whistling and falling. So I would lay down on the ground, would cover myself with a coat, and would peek through the button-hole... Bombs are falling... Something is hanging on the tree... When I realized that it was human remains hanging on the tree, I got scared. I closed my eyes. – my trans.]

¹⁴⁸ [Tea-kettles and pots were everywhere on the ground next to the dead bodies. Everything was on fire... It looked like we were running throw the burning charcoals. I was always friends with boys, I was growing up as a tomboy. I was curious to see how bombs were flying down, how they were whistling and falling. When mom yelled "Get down! On the ground!" I was peeking through the button hole. I was curious what that was in the sky. I saw people running. I saw something hanging on the tree. When I realized that it was human remains hanging on the tree, I froze. I closed my eyes. – my trans.]

Here is another example of an added paragraph that appeared only in the later editions. The story is titled «И стала качать, как куклу» ('She Started Rocking It as a Doll'). The narrator, Dima Sufrankov, tells about his fear of metal scraps after the war. A girl from his village found a hand grenade and started rocking it as her doll; the girl died right there while her mother was running to help her. The 1985 and 1998 editions provide just that; there are no extra details about the hand grenade, or the girl, or other metal scraps. The 2004 edition has an extra paragraph, and the 2016 text has two extra paragraphs. It gives more details about the deceased girl and has a new piece of information about metal scraps of ammunition.

1985: «После войны в нашей деревне Старые Головчицы Петриковского района ещё два года хоронили детей. Каждый день плакали матери».¹⁴⁹

2016: «После войны в нашей деревне Старые Головчицы Петриковского района ещё два года хоронили детей. Военное железо валялось повсюду. Подбитые чёрные танки, бронетранспортёры. Куски мин, бомб... А у нас же игрушек не было... Потом всё это начали собирать и отправлять куда-то на заводы. Мама объяснила, что из этого железа начнут отливать трактора. Станки и швейные машинки. Если я видел новый трактор, я не подходил к нему, ждал, что он взорвётся. И станет чёрным, как танк... Я знал, из какого он железа...»¹⁵⁰

From the latest edition, we can see how much the episode of the girl's death traumatized Dima Sufrankov as a little boy. He was told that the remnants of the war ammunition would later be sent to factories to produce new tractors, equipment, and even sewing

¹⁴⁹ *Last Witnesses*, 1985, 46. [In our village of Starie Golovchitz in Petrikov region, people kept burying children for two more years after the war. Mothers were crying every day. – my trans.]

¹⁵⁰ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 72. [In our village of Starie Golovchitz in Petrikov region, People kept burying children for two more years after the war. Military hardware was everywhere – damaged black tanks, armored troop-carriers, pieces of landmines and bombs... We didn't have toys, so... Then people started to collect all that and send to some factories. My mom explained to me that soon those metal pieces would be used to make new tractors, machine tools, and sewing machines. When I saw a new tractor, I would not come close to it, I was expecting it to explode and to become black as the damaged tank... I knew what metal it was made of... - my trans.]

machines. This made the boy fear those new objects, like tractors, as potentially destructive and lethal. As in other examples of added paragraphs, this one adds emotional load and creates a stronger impression upon the reader. This newly appeared paragraph makes us wonder if Dima Sufrankov did tell these words to Svetlana Alexievich in the 1970s when she was interviewing people for this book, but she could not publish them due to the political situation of that time. It was the time when the only officially accepted text about Soviet tractors could be that they were the best, the kolkhoz workers were enjoying working on them, and the entire Soviet country was happy, and that such machines were a wonderful apparition in the country. We can understand that a story where a boy's fear for his life when he sees a Soviet tractor might not be received well in the USSR. So perhaps this was the reason why Alexievich had to skip that part in the early editions. But another question is if the interviewee said these words at all. Sophie Pinkham was asking herself the same question in her article 'witness tampering'. If one specific part of an already published story was changed after years then it is logical to wonder if that particular part existed in the original in the first place.

The same question arises in the situations when narrators are assigned different quotations. We noticed several fragments in the book where characters would say different words. Here is an example. In the story «Их тянуло на человеческий запах» ('They Followed Human Scent'), the narrator, Nadya Savitskaya, recalls how her mother was hoping to find her only son, because he did not come back home from serving in the army before the war, and the mother was left with five daughters. When they learned there were prisoners of war in their village they would go to see them and bring some food. Once, they had no food to bring and therefore had to go to a local field for some

grains. Nazi soldiers caught them and were about to shoot the mother and her five little girls. The 1985 and 1998 editions then give the following words to the mother:

«Паночки! Пожалейте... Паночки, как я умру, когда не знаю, где мой сынок.

Паночки, а если он живой? Паночки, как я тогда умру?»¹⁵¹ Whereas the 2004 and 2016 editions provide a different quotation: «Паночки! Пожалейте... Паночки, это все мои дети. Вы видите, одни девочки».¹⁵²

There phrasing are quite different. Even though the meaning is still the same – the mother was begging the Nazi soldiers to not kill her and her children, but the gender and number of them is not the same. It makes us question which of these options was the original one used by the interviewee, and if she did indeed say that.

In addition to the aforementioned discrepancies in the four sources, it seems very important to pay close attention to the fragments of the texts that Svetlana Alexievich altered significantly, and which make us change our attitude toward the stories and interviewees.

We would like to provide a few examples.

Here is a fragment from a story that in the 1985 and 1998 editions was titled «Возьмите наших детей, а мы пойдём защищать город» ('Take Our Children and We Will Go to Protect the City') and in the later editions was titled «Через петельку для

¹⁵¹ *Last Witnesses*, 1985, 69. [Gentlemen, have mercy!.. Gentlemen, how could I die if I don't know where my son is. Gentlemen, what if he is alive? Gentlemen, how could I die then? – my trans.]

¹⁵² *Last Witnesses*, 2004, 92. [Gentlemen, have mercy!.. Gentlemen, these are all my children. You can see, it's only girls. – my trans.]

пуговицы» ('Through a Buttonhole').¹⁵³ The same story has another important discrepancy, besides the different titles. At the very beginning of the interview, the narrator recalls the first days of the war and how her family had to evacuate from Minsk. Her mother was asking the drivers in the passing cars to take her children with them so that she could go back to the city to protect it. The next passage is different in the most recent and the older editions. The 2016 and 2004 texts share this version:

«Возьмите наших детей, а мы пойдём защищать город». Не хотела поверить, что немцы уже в городе. Город сдали».¹⁵⁴

But the 1998 and 1985 editions provide a different context:

«Возьмите наших детей, а мы пойдём защищать город». Она не верила, что враг войдёт в город».¹⁵⁵

There is a difference between saying "the enemy would enter the city" (враг войдёт в город) and "the city surrendered" (город сдали). The enemy might enter a city without the city surrendering itself, it implies that citizens and local army might still fight to protect it. But the meaning of the "the city surrendered" implies that nobody fought for it, people just surrendered it and the army did not come to defend them. This difference provides a shift in understanding the context. The earlier editions depict those first days of war in Minsk as the time when people could not believe the enemy army could come

¹⁵³ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 35-37. 2004, 32-34. 1998, 303-305. 1985, 20-22.

¹⁵⁴ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 35. ["Take our children and we will go to protect the city." She did not want to believe that the Germans were already in the city. The city surrendered. – my trans.]

¹⁵⁵ *Last Witnesses*, 1998, 302. ["Take our children and we will go to protect the city." She couldn't believe that the enemy would enter the city. – my trans.]

into the city they loved and were ready to defend themselves, their city, and that their army was somewhere close to the location. The later editions create a scene where people were just escaping the city and their own army/commanders/government did not do anything to help them. It seems to us that in the later editions, Alexievich attempts to demythologize the heroism of the Soviet military and partisans during the war.

The following chapter of *The Last Witnesses* has a very significant difference between the four editions. In all four sources this story is titled «И поцеловала в учебнике все портреты» ('I Kissed All Portraits in a Textbook').¹⁵⁶ The interviewee, Zina Shimanskaya, who recalls the events of when she was an 11-year old girl, tells about the life in Minsk during Nazi occupation. Their school teacher started openly criticizing the Soviet government and Lenin. This act was not welcomed by the girl and after coming home from school she kissed all the portraits in her textbooks. The textbooks and the portraits are different between the editions:

Editions from 1985 and 1998: «Я встала и сказала: «Больше в такой школе учиться не буду». И ушла... Пришла домой и поцеловала в учебнике литературы все портреты... Я очень любила литературу.»¹⁵⁷

2004: «Я сказала себе: учиться в такой школе больше не буду. Не хочу. Пришла домой и поцеловала в учебнике все портреты.»¹⁵⁸

2016: «Я сказала себе: учиться в такой школе больше не буду. Не-е-е-ет... Не хочу! Пришла домой и поцеловала в учебнике все портреты... Все любимые портреты наших вождей.»¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ *Last Witnesses*. 2016, 29-30. 2004, 28-29. 1998, 302-303. 1985, 18-19.

¹⁵⁷ [I stood up and said, "I am not going to study in such a school anymore". Then I left. I came home and kissed all portraits in the literature textbook... I loved literature very much. – my trans.]

¹⁵⁸ [I said to myself, "I am not going to study in such a school. I don't want to". I came home and kissed all portraits in a textbook. – my trans.]

The differences between these three passages are obvious. The 1985 and 1998 texts provide us a picture of a little girl who was not afraid to stand up for her beliefs and to vocalize her protest about the defaming of the Soviet power. Also, she is a girl who likes Russian literature, knows the portraits of her favorite Russian writers, and kisses the portraits of those writers, as we might assume from the context. The 2004 version already switches the mode from the good citizen to the reflecting consciousness; the girl did not vocalize her concerns in public, but rather she thought them to herself. Also, the portraits and textbooks are not specified. This text has a new paragraph that was not present in the earlier sources. It tells about the girl's passion toward her pioneer neck scarf and how she was wearing it at night only, and how her girlfriend was doing the same. The 2016 edition goes even further; the girl kisses the portraits of her favorite (Soviet) leaders. These are not just portraits or, as an option, the portraits of some Russian writers. The writers were replaced with the Soviet leaders, and that is a very significant change. In addition, this text provides the same extra paragraph missing in the 1998 and 1985 editions, about the love toward the pioneer neck scarf. But now the finishing line of this chapter is new: «Мне и теперь нравится, что мы такие были...» (“I still like that we were this way...”).¹⁶⁰ It alters the reader's perception to the point that now the little girl is perceived as a true Soviet, who was almost religiously kissing the portraits of the Soviet leaders and she has not changed since that time; she likes her 11-year-old self even now.

¹⁵⁹ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 30. [I said to myself, “I am not going to study in such a school. No, no, no... I don't want to! I came home and kissed all portraits in a textbook. All the dearest portraits of our leaders. – my trans.]

¹⁶⁰ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 30.

The early editions' character seems maybe naïve, but not trivial. The later editions portray a person who was a product of her Soviet time, with unshaken beliefs and an idolizing attitude toward the Soviet leaders. That particular character is calculated to make present-day readers smile in pitying compassion. We can see that most likely Alexievich had this pity as her goal by altering the texts to such an extent. It seems to us that by that time, Alexievich stopped feeling that she was a part of the Soviet people; she now wants to distance herself from that past. It might explain why she would want to change how her readers perceive the narrator in this story.

The same chapter «И поцеловала в учебнике все портреты» ('I Kissed All Portraits in a Textbook') exhibits another divergence among the four editions. The narrator, Zina Shimanskaya, tells about their fascination with war as children; they wanted to join the Red Army at the front. The 1985 and the 2004 texts describe it this way: «Я даже вам расскажу, что, когда освобождали Западную Белоруссию, мы с подружкой, начитавшись в газетах о разных подвигах, решили идти помогать нашим. Мы удрали из дома. [. . .] А мальчишки из нашего класса, я знаю, удирали на финскую, на испанскую войну».¹⁶¹

The later editions do not mention the Western Belorussia¹⁶² at all, and Zina's memories about her fascination with war are now signaled by the newspaper portraits of

¹⁶¹ *Last Witnesses*, 1985, 19. [I am even going to tell you that my girlfriend and I after reading about different heroic actions in newspapers, decided to go help our army when they were liberating Soviet Belorussia. We ran away from home. [. . .] I know that boys from our school class were running away to the Finnish and Spanish wars. – my trans.]

¹⁶² Western Belorussia is a term that describes Western part of the present-day Belarus in 1921-1939 years when it belonged to Poland. In the Soviet times, the 1939 campaign was perceived as the liberation of Belorussian people who were oppressed by the Polish.

Voroshilov and Budenniy that she hangs up on the wall. Since the Western Belorussia campaign is omitted, the girl is assigned new lines: «Мы с подружкой удирали на финскую войну, а наши знакомые мальчишки – на испанскую». ¹⁶³

Now, the two girls are not fascinated by some real military action like how they were described in the earlier editions; Western Belorussia was not far away, the borderline between the West and East Belorussia was just a few dozen kilometers from Minsk. It was close and very real. Instead, the later editions make the girls never mention Belorussia at all; they are shown as some young, naïve, and rather romantic students who read about the wars in Finland and Spain and thought of them as of an adventure from a story book. Finland and especially Spain were too far away from Minsk, and therefore could not be accessible for two young children. This difference between the two earlier and two later editions has the effect of shifting the reader's perception of the narrator's beliefs and her civic position. Just like with the story about portraits in a Soviet textbook which Alexievich made to us more naïve and more 'typical Soviet', this example shows how the modern-day perception of those stories by the writer herself makes her change these narratives into something romantic and unrealistic, and to make us create a parallel between the romanticism of those children to the whole Soviet generation.

Conversely, there is another chapter where Svetlana Alexievich removed any notion about the Soviet campaign in Western Belorussia. In the 1985 and 1998 editions, it is titled «Боялся, что мама тоже станет белая» ('I Was Worried My Mother Would Turn White Too'), and in the 2004 and 2016 the title is «Я их руками собирала... Они белые-белые...» ('I Was Collecting Them with My Hands... It Was White, Very

¹⁶³ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 29. [My girlfriend and I ran away to the Finnish war, and boys from our school ran away to the Spanish war. – my trans.]

White...'). To avoid that part of the story, she altered the first paragraph in the later texts.

In this chapter, the boy Zhenia Selenia tells about the beginning of war. In the first two editions, the opening tells the following:

Был маленький, но приход Красной Армии в нашу Западную Белоруссию помню: во-первых, я изревелся из-за того, что родители не взяли меня с собой встречать красноармейцев; во-вторых, они принесли домой мороженое [. . .]. В небе стали появляться самолёты с красными звёздами на крыльях. Для нас, пацанов, это было целым событием. [. . .] В то воскресенье двадцать второго июня пошли с братом за грибами. Уже было время толстых боровиков-колосовиков [. . .].¹⁶⁴

But with all the rhetoric about the modern Belarus as an independent and unique country that was moving away from being as a Soviet republic, and with such narratives widely spread throughout Belorussian discourse in the 1990s, Svetlana Alexievich changed this story in her later editions. Instead of the emotions that little boy Zhenia remembered about the Western Belorussia and the time when the Soviet Army came to their lands, the most recent texts begin the story with the June 22nd memories and just combine the old first and second paragraphs together. This example illustrates how much Alexievich rewrites this book, depending on the political situation and the changes in her own political views.

The chapter we mentioned before, «И поцеловала в учебнике все портреты» ('I Kissed All Portraits in a Textbook'), made us question a difference in a story titled «Ещё пол-ложечки сахара...» ('Half a Spoon of Sugar More').¹⁶⁵ The narrator, Emma Levina,

¹⁶⁴ *Last Witnesses*, 1998, 355. [I was a little boy, but I remember how the Red Army came to our Western Belorussia. First of all, I cried my eyes out, because my parents didn't take me with them to welcome the Red Army soldiers. Secondly, they brought home some ice-cream. [. . .] Planes with red stars started to fly in the sky. For us boys it was a big event. My brother and I went mushroom-picking in the forest that day on June 22nd. It was already the time for porcini mushrooms. – my trans.]

¹⁶⁵ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 60. 2004, 51. 1998, 320. 1985, 38.

speaks about her father who became a member of the Communist Party very early in 1990s. There are two different dates in the texts; 1985 and 1998 editions say he became a communist in 1903, but later editions state he joined the Communist party in 1905. The event remains the same - the father became a communist early in the century, but that makes us wonder about the difference between the dates given. If Svetlana Alexievich had the date written in her notes, there was no reason to alter it between the editions. If she did not have the notes, then there is no reason to change the date, even though this change does not affect the meaning.

But what catches the reader's attention is the very end of the story. Emma's father died during the war when they were living as refugees in Kazakhstan, and the woman tells about her experience of trying to live through the war without her father. Here are some noticeable changes.

1985: «...Умер папа, и меня взяли в ремесленное училище. ... Когда получала комсомольский билет [. . .], боялась в карман положить, вдруг потеряю. [. . .] Дома мама приготовила настоящий чай с заваркой. Ещё бы, такой праздник!»¹⁶⁶
 2004: «Умер папа. Сердце его не выдержало. Меня взяли в ремесленное училище. ... Мне вручают комсомольский билет [. . .]. Такая драгоценность... Боялась в карман положить, вдруг потеряю. [. . .] Вот бы папа меня увидел такой сейчас, какой бы он был счастливый. Сейчас думаю: «Какое страшное время, но какие замечательные были люди». Удивляюсь, какие мы были тогда. Как верили! Дома мама приготовила настоящий чай, с заваркой. А как же, такой праздник!»¹⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶ *Last Witnesses*, 1985, 41. The same text in 1998, 322. [My dad died, and I got accepted into a vocational school. ... When I received my Komsomol Member ID [. . .][. . .][...], I was afraid to put it into my pocket – what if I lose it. [. . .]My mom made real black tea at home, with real tea leaves. Why wouldn't she, it was such a big holiday! – my trans.]

¹⁶⁷ *Last Witnesses*, 2004, 54. [My dad died. A heart attack. I got accepted into a vocational school. ... I am receiving my Komsomol Member ID. [. . .] Such a precious thing! I was afraid to put it into my pocket – what if I lose it. [. . .] I wish my dad saw me at that moment, he would have been so happy. Now I think, “What a terrible time it was, but what wonderful people we had back then.” I am amazed at what kind of people we were then. Oh how we believed! My mom made real black tea at h people we had back then.” I am amazed at what kind of people we were then. Oh did we believe! My mom made real black tea at home, with real tea leaves. Why wouldn't she, it was such a big holiday! – my trans.]

2016: «Умер папа. Наверное, у него разорвалось от жалости к нам сердце. Оно давно у него было больное. Меня взяли в ремесленное училище. [. . .] Мне вручают комсомольский билет. [. . .] Такая драгоценность... Боялась в карман положить, вдруг потеряю. [. . .] Вот бы папа меня увидел сейчас, какой бы он был счастливый. Сейчас думаю: «Какое страшное время, но какие замечательные были люди». Удивляюсь, какие мы были тогда! Как верили! Не хочется это забывать... Я давно не верю в Сталина, в коммунистические идеи. Эту часть своей жизни я хотела бы забыть, но я храню в сердце те переживания. Ту высоту. Я не хочу забывать свои чувства. Драгоценные... Дома в тот вечер мама приготовила настоящий чай, с заваркой. А как же, такой праздник!»¹⁶⁸

This alteration is similar to the changes of the portraits in the textbooks; from the portraits of Russian writers in literature textbooks, they later evolved into portraits of the Soviet leaders. In this abstract from «Ещё пол-ложечки сахара...» (‘Half a Spoon of Sugar More’), we see how the story escalates as more years pass since the collapse of the USSR. The 1985 and 1998 editions just provide the information that Emma’s father died and the girl became a member of the Komsomol, her mother made her real tea with an extra half-spoon of sugar. The 2004 text already adds details to father’s death and a more dramatic monologue about the difficult times and the beauty of people. The 2016 version adds even more drama; the father died because his heart was full of sorrow toward his family, and the terrible times now have an addition about the change in Emma’s mind about her Communist youth. Now she adds that Emma does not believe in Stalin and the communist ideas anymore and would like to forget this part of her life, although it gives

¹⁶⁸ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 63. [My dad died. Probably, his heart ruptured out of his sorrow toward us. His heart was not well for a long time. I got accepted into a vocational school. [. . .] I am receiving my Komsomol Member ID. [. . .] Such a precious thing! I was afraid to put it into my pocket – what if I lose it. I wish my dad saw me at that moment, he would have been so happy. Now I think, “What a terrible time it was, but what wonderful people we had back then.” I am amazed at what kind of people we were then. Oh did we believe! I don’t want to forget that... I haven’t believed in Stalin for a long time, I don’t believe in Communist ideas. I would like to forget this part of my life, but I keep those emotions in my heart. I keep their highness. I don’t want to forget my feelings. Those precious feelings... My mom made real black tea at home, with real tea leaves. Why wouldn’t she, it was such a big holiday! – my trans.]

her a lot of nostalgia about her ability to feel and to be compassionate. Yet her story ends with words about that day being a celebration, because to become a member of Komsomol was a big event in her family.

It is a significant change in the texts if we see how much it affects our perception. Originally, her father's death was mentioned almost like a footnote, and the stress went to the fact that Emma became a member of Komsomol. The story is about different happy and sad moments of a girl's life during the war. We see her as a happy person who shared something she was proud of as a teenager. But the latest edition depicts a lady, who shares her bittersweet memories; her family was starving and their situation was absolutely miserable, the father died, and the Komsomol ID is now perceived with some sadness. The woman does not seem happy to us; instead she seems disenchanted and disoriented about the life she had back in her young years. The half-spoon of sugar was originally pictured as something very little that could make people so very happy. The latest text makes this half-spoon of sugar look like a sign of self-pity and self-irony.

There are a few chapters in the books where Alexievich changes something about the way people die. These alterations still carry the same meaning – people die this or that way, but the circumstances differ. We would like to provide an example.

In the chapter «Ты просишь, чтобы я тебя пристрелил» ('You Are Asking Me to Shoot You'), there is an episode where the narrator, Vasya Boykachiov, gets captured by Nazi soldiers and brought into a special room for torture. Vasya did not tell anything the soldiers wanted to know about the partisans and ammunition so they put him into the basement. It was neck-high full of water, and the boy saw another person who was already dead, taken from the basement to make room for the boy. The first three editions

describe this dead man with the following passage: «Он не выдержал пыток и повесился, а сейчас лежал на улице под красным одеялом». ¹⁶⁹ But the 2016 edition changes that: «Он не выдержал пытку и... утонул... А сейчас лежал на улице...». ¹⁷⁰ The fact is the same – the man is dead. But to hang himself and to drown are not the same. We would expect Alexievich to keep the drowning version in the early editions of *Last Witnesses* – such a death would mean that the person was ready to fight for his motherland up till the last drop of his blood and was never going to give in. Yet something made Svetlana Alexievich keep the suicide option in the early editions and then change it to drowning in the 2016 text.

There are some changes in the texts that keep the same concept but use different objects to deliver the author's idea. In the chapter «Я видел» ('I Saw'), the narrator, Yura Karpovich, shares his memories of the horrors he saw in the war as an eight-year old boy. As far as we understand, Alexievich wanted to use a pet as one of the witnesses of horrors that Yura experienced in his childhood. But the passage is quite different. The 1985 and 1998 texts offer the following story told by the boy: «Я видел, как плакала кошка. Она сидела на головешках сожжённого дома, и только хвост у неё остался белый, а вся она была чёрная. Она хотела умыться и не могла, мне казалось, что шкурка на ней хрустела, как сухой лист». ¹⁷¹ The same chapter in the 2004 and 2016

¹⁶⁹ *Last Witnesses*, 1985, 77. 1998, 358. 2004, 99. [He didn't endure the torture and hung himself, and now he was lying in the street, under a red blanket. – my trans.]

¹⁷⁰ *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 123. [He didn't endure the torture and drowned. Now he was lying in the street. – my trans.]

¹⁷¹ *Last Witnesses*, 1998, 415. 1985, 127. [I saw the cat crying. It was sitting on top of the firebrand of a burnt house. It was completely black and only its tail was white. It wanted to wash itself, but it couldn't. It seemed like its skin was crunching like dry leaves. – my trans.]

editions offer another pet story told by Yura: «Я видел, как плакала соседская собака. Она сидела на золе соседской хаты. Одна. У неё были глаза старого человека....»¹⁷²

Seems like Alexievich's idea was to use a pet as a witness to the inhumane terror the boy experienced during the war. But we are not sure if these words belong to the boy himself. If they do, then the question arises: Which version is authentic?

Overall, there are significant differences between the four editions of the *Last Witnesses* we analyzed in this research. They exist in many levels, starting from the number of chapters, to the words and the meaning. Older editions, especially the 1985 edition, have chapters that are not present in the 2004 and 2016 texts, and the later editions have some new chapters that were missing in the early texts. The titles are different too – together with the changes happening with Svetlana Alexievich, she changed the accent of the stories, and therefore was re-titling them. The chapters in 2004 and 2016 sources are named in a more dramatic way and reflect on some traumatizing scenes from the narratives.

In addition, the later texts show more unified and standardized Russian language, whereas early editions of *The Last Witnesses* preserved a lot of local words specific for the Belorussian region. The most recent edition from 2016 is in general more dramatic than the previous texts of this book. More than 80% of chapters got an extra little paragraph in the beginning and / or the end of every story, and the added phrases did not exist in the previous editions. Those additions could signal of the writer's shift to increased dramatization of the texts – now they show emotions and philosophic questions. For example, the opening words might be about how difficult it is for a

¹⁷² *Last Witnesses*, 2016, 212. [I saw our neighbor's dog crying. It was sitting in the ash of the neighbor's ruined house. It was all alone. It had the eyes of an old man. – my trans.]

narrator to talk about such a wounded topic, or that he/she remembers everything no matter how many years had passed. The closing phrases might be something like “How did I survive if I had died so many times?”, or “We need to remember that, there is no one except us to tell about those years, we need to talk”.

Also, the latest version adds paragraphs to the texts of earlier editions. Mostly, these paragraphs are about something overly dramatic and emotional. For example, descriptions of the Nazi soldiers and their everyday life, or how a Nazi soldier dug up dozens of people buried alive and then happily pet a little puppy. Another example would be a previously absent paragraph describing young Soviet boys who were using dead bodies of Nazis as their sleds and were sliding down a hill on those corpses in winter. Undoubtedly, these are the fragments that are emotionally loaded and make the reader feel and co-live the text in a more acute way.

Some episodes are missing or added, depending on the political situation when each edition was published. For example, earlier mentions of the Western Belorussia liberation by the Soviet army are missing in the later texts, so are mentions about hungry Palestinian refugees – they were present in the early editions, but were replaced with just ‘hungry refugees’ in the later ones.¹⁷³ In addition, in the episode when Lenin was not mentioned at all, his name was included in the same chapter decades later.

Some specific paragraphs of the texts have significant alterations. In some cases, changes done by Alexievich affect the whole meaning of the chapter, like with the stories about kissing the portraits and treating acceptance to the Komsomol as a holiday. Many of these changes make the narrators look more naïve and lost. They are not perceived as

¹⁷³ See in *Last Witnesses*, 1985, 141. 1998, 430. 2004, 189. 2016, 238.

people of a big powerful country – quite the opposite, the impression their stories make in the later editions is more of disenchanted, perplexed, and in some way, orphaned people of the Soviet times.

Some other changes do not affect the general message of the story, but the wording is so different that they inevitably raise a suspicion that the narrator did not say those words at all and that Alexievich assigned them to this person. This, in turn, makes the entire body of texts look ambiguous – it is impossible to say which words do belong to the interviewee and which do not.

In addition to the complex style in Alexievich's works, she operates with the interviews in the mode of a New Historian. Unlike scientific history, that collects facts and provided data in the most unbiased and objective way as to exclude any personal imaginative influence, New History, through one of its representatives, Benedetto Croce,¹⁷⁴ state that every event from the past should be a vibrant emotional piece of history occupying a scholar's mind and soul. He says that "[t]he historian's own subjectivity was therefore the key to effective historical narration; the scientific method could produce only dead history, or 'chronicle', whereas the intuitive intervention of the historian produced "living" history, necessarily written from the standpoint of the present".¹⁷⁵ Alexievich selects certain interviews, from hundreds, for each book and does so based on her own imagination and subjective vision of the concrete events in the recent history of the USSR and post-Soviet countries. Of course, she is preoccupied with

¹⁷⁴ Benedetto Croce, *History: Its Theory and Practice*, trans. Douglas Ainslie (New York, 1960).

¹⁷⁵ Croce, 215.

her own sense of ‘truth’ and therefore filters the texts of interviews through her own parameters of what fits and what does not.

The concept of personal truth and depicting certain historic events from one a specific angle that seems right to the narrator, makes us compare such texts to a popular genre in Latin America called *testimonio*. Classical Latin American *testimonio* usually describes a life history of one person. The narrators answer some questions and are free to choose their own stories and associative digressions while the transcriber’s task is to collect this raw material and transform it into a written monologue. Professor Oushakine explains that “The goal is to preserve the stories that would otherwise remain marginalized or simply unheard, and the trick is to minimize the transcriber’s power.”¹⁷⁶ Unlike the traditional form, Svetlana Alexievich transcribes histories of numerous people to create a history of an *event*, rather than of one human life. As Oushakine notices, this approach allows her to reduce the interviews to a small set of paragraphs or even a few lines and to increase the number of testimonies selected for publishing.

This connection with the genre of *testimonio* and such an iconic example of *testimonio* as the book named *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1983), is very important for our study. Professor Oushakine pointed out a few similarities between this Latin American genre and the one by Alexievich. “In her collection of testimonies of WWII, Alexievich carefully remains in the shadows of her interlocutors. Most of her questions have been

¹⁷⁶ Serguei Oushakine, “Neighbours in Memory. Svetlana Alexievich: the first major postcolonial author of post-Communism” in *The Times Literary Supplement*, published November 18, 2016, 10.

removed from the conversations, and the reader can only infer the inquiry that may have prompted the narrator's response."¹⁷⁷

As Professor Oushakine rightfully argues, a traditional testimonio reflects of the life of one person, just like we see it in the *I, Rigoberta Menchu*. Whereas the story created by S. Alexievich combines multiple testimonies into one large narrative. "[I, Rigoberta Menchu] tends to be assembled as the life-*history* of a single person, then the version created by Alexievich privileges a life-*event*. As she explained in 1994, "I have no time to paint a portrait. Things change too quickly. [...] I just take simple pictures. Snapshots..."¹⁷⁸

The comparison with the book about a life of a poor Guatemalan woman, *I, Rigoberta Menchu* (1983) is useful for our study not only because as an example of testimonio, but for its conflicted history and acceptance by the audiences.

In the early 1980s, a poor Guatemalan woman, Rigoberta Menchu, met with an anthropologist, Elizabeth Burgos, in Paris and told about her life in her home country in a little Mayan village. While growing up, she witnessed the hardship of the civil war in Guatemala and how it affected her family. Rigoberta was talking to Elizabeth Burgos for a week, and those tape-recorded conversations later formed about 250 pages of English text, transcribed and put chronologically.

Rigoberta's memories tell about her childhood and the way she remembered her village as a little girl, also its people farming maize and living in peace with each other. Her parents were very poor, and to survive they would go to work on coffee and cotton

¹⁷⁷ Oushakine, 11.

¹⁷⁸ Oushakine, 11. [Emphases in original].

plantations for miserable wages on the South Coast every year. The living conditions there were so horrible that two of her brothers died at the plantations. But her father did not want to give up and he started a little settlement next to the forest back in their native highlands. His struggle for land was real. From one side, he had to resist to nearby plantation owners. They threw the Menchu family and their neighbors out of their houses several times. In addition, his father was thrown into prison twice, and he got severely beaten and had to spend a year in a hospital to recover. From another side, the government organization that had most of the control over land did not want peasants to own land; instead, it was mostly supportive of the interests of big landlords. To help her family, Rigoberta went to Guatemala City and worked for a wealthy family who did not treat her well. Her father later got involved in peasant unions and it resulted with the start of a special peasant organization that joined the guerilla movement. The Guatemalan army burned down villages of the people who supported or sympathized with the Marxist-led guerilla movement. Her younger brother was kidnapped and, after weeks of torture, was burned to death. Her father went to the capital to occupy the Spanish embassy in 1980 and was burnt to death by the local police together with dozens of other people around the embassy that day. But the horror did not stop for Rigoberta at that point. The Guatemalan army kidnapped, raped, and tortured to death her mother. Rigoberta got involved with promoting peasant unity among her fellow Guatemalan people, and she had to escape to Mexico to not be captured by the government security forces. This was the story of her life until her age of 23.

Almost ten years after this story was told to Elizabeth Burgos in Paris, Rigoberta Menchu won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1992. She became an international symbol for

human rights. People all over the world started talking about Guatemalan dictatorship, the massacres of thousands of indigenous peasants, and how a peasant woman had to join a revolutionary movement to bring freedom and peace to her home country.

At the same time, the book with Rigoberta's story started to be examined and studied closely by different people who found numerous discrepancies between the events depicted by the Guatemalan woman and the accounts of other witnesses as well as facts from the documents. It stirred a great controversy about the book and its credibility. One of the scholars who did a further research to prove Rigoberta's story right or wrong was David Stoll (1999). In the 1990s, he traveled to the Ixil Maya town of Chajul where most of the events depicted in the woman's memories took place and spoke to different people who witnessed and/or participated in the events mentioned by Rigoberta. In the story told by Menchu, the Guerilla Army of the Poor (EGP) was supported by peasants and gained wide popularity among them. As Mr. Stoll's research showed, it was not entirely true. People in the part of Guatemala that Rigoberta was from, did not sympathize with the EGP, nor did they support the government army. To them, both armies were violating their rights, bringing chaos, and posing threats to their lives. Mr. Stoll also looked at the case about the fire around the Spanish Embassy in January 1980 that took the life of Rigoberta's father and 35 more people. Closer investigation showed that the revolutionary movement preferred to pick an unfounded version of events and made it the official story that later got internationally accepted. It transpire that even details like the place where Rigoberta's younger brother was tortured and burned to death did not match other witnesses' accounts. When Mr. Stoll visited the town of Chajul, one of the elders, Domingo, took the scholar around the place:

Domingo and I were on the main street, looking toward the old colonial church that towers over the plaza. It was the plaza where, according to the book that made Rigoberta famous, soldiers lined up twenty-three prisoners including her younger brother Petrocinio. The captives were disfigured from weeks of torture, their bodies were swollen like bladders, and pus oozed from their wounds. Methodically, the soldiers scissored off the prisoners' clothes, to show their families how each injury had been inflicted by a different instrument of torture. Following an anticommunist harangue, the soldiers soaked the captives in gasoline and set them afire. With her own eyes, Rigoberta had watched her brother writhe to death. This was the climactic passage of her book, reprinted in magazines and read aloud at conferences, with the hall darkened except for a spotlight on the narrator. Yet the army had never burned prisoners alive in the town plaza, Domingo said, and he was the first of seven townsmen who told me the same.¹⁷⁹

Having done his research, Mr. Stoll came to conclusions that seem applicable and quite accurate to the writing by Svetlana Alexievich. One of the main arguments that Rigoberta Menchu used herself was the fact that she represented a larger group of people. She insisted that her story did not belong to her only, but rather to all poor Guatemalan peasants.

In some way, by telling the story of her life before the age of 23, she made herself a composite Mayan – a personal story of many Mayan people at the same time. It is similar to the approach that Alexievich has utilized in her books. The interviews she has published represent both the narrator and the editor/ transcriber. There is some unity between the message originally conveyed by the interviewee and the way how Alexievich shaped that transcript to deliver her own message, too. David Stoll wrote that “when a person becomes a symbol for a cause, the complexity of a particular life is concealed in order to turn it into a representative life.”¹⁸⁰ Alexievich makes the stories of her

¹⁷⁹ David Stoll, *Rigoberta Menchu and the Story of All Poor Guatemalans* (Westview Press, 1999), 2.

¹⁸⁰ Stoll, xi.

interviewees in some way impersonal and representative. A storyteller is both a specific person with his or her name and experience, but at the same time it represents all other people who were in that city, on that street, or in that location at that very same time too. We can suggest that Alexievich, by changing lines and adding new lines into the narratives of her storytellers, makes them less personal and more demonstrative – they are not just interviews anymore, they become semi-fictional stories which belong both to someone and to no one. Such stories in a way become representations of a collective memory. If we assume that this collective memory is correct and trustworthy, then the question about “which words do we trust” becomes irrelevant.

One of the David Stoll’ conclusions is particularly interesting for our discussion of Alexievich:

If Rigoberta is fundamentally right about what the army did, why dissect a personal account that is inevitably selective, like any human memory of anything? If her story expresses a larger truth, surely a sympathetic anthropologist should not challenge its credibility. As a colleague reasoned with me: “[. . .] Maybe the accuracy of her memory was impaired by trauma. [. . .] Maybe she was tired, maybe there were communications problems, maybe she was just doing what advocates always do – exaggerating a little.”¹⁸¹

In case with Svetlana Alexievich, the important question every reader should answer is if s/he believes that a larger picture of the events described in the writer’s book is true. In the situation with the memories presented by Rigoberta Menchu, people had no doubts about the atrocities and mass killings done by the army. In 1981-1982, about 35,000 people of Guatemalan highlands were killed or displaced due to the war.¹⁸² Many people live till present to confirm the story of the poor Mayan fate. The narrative by Rigoberta

¹⁸¹ Stoll, ix.

¹⁸² Stoll, 2.

was not very accurate about her personal details, but it was accurate in describing the lives of thousands of other Mayans.

Out of five books published by Svetlana Alexievich, the first two covered the events of WWII, and we do not have many living witnesses to create a resonance in case if her depiction was not entirely correct. But the last three books touch upon events that were witnessed and discussed by many. In this case, if the major picture of the book seems true to the reader, there are no questions about its credibility. But if the reader disagrees with the point of view provided by Alexievich, and s/he insists on a different angle those events should have been depicted, then any study about Alexievich's adaptation of interviews would only provide weapons to such critics.

Rigoberta Menchu's description was agreed to be looked at as true on a large scale, regardless of those not entirely factual elements that scholars later discovered. "Rigoberta was dramatizing her life like a Hollywood scriptwriter might, in order to have an impact."¹⁸³ She had a noble goal of liberating Guatemala and ending the civil war that took a half of her family, as well as dozens of thousands lives of her fellow Mayans.

Svetlana Alexievich uses dramatization as well. She meticulously changes 'her' interviews adding more elements that cause more emotional impact than in the previous editions of the same book. It seems like her goal is to show how much suffer and pain have the Soviet people gone through in the past 70 years. She shows how wars and an ecologic catastrophe could be devastating for all involved, be it a cat or a dog, a child, a woman, an older person, or military man. The rest is in the hands of the reader. If s/he agrees with the writer then the books seem credible, and no discrepancies and changes in

¹⁸³ Stoll, 273.

what is supposed to be a frozen text of interviews, can be challenged. If the reader does not approve of the point of view developed in the book, then any dramatization utilized by Alexievich works as a metaphorical bomb to throw at her.

There is no question that Svetlana Alexievich manifests a tendency toward dramatic re-enactment. She makes her narratives more salient by leveling their emotional charge to the maximum and beyond. From one side, the very nature of the events described in her books is extremely tragic and unspeakably sad, but from another side, her ultimate intention seems to be noticed and to attract attention to the historic cataclysms of the 20th century and their probable aftermaths. Such a tendency might be understandable if we take into our consideration her close connection to the literary fashion of Ales Adamovich and his «сверхлитература».

Alexievich's literary genre could be placed into the category created by her artistic teacher and colleague – the well-known Belorussian writer, literary scholar, and opinion journalist, Ales Adamovich, whom we discussed in Chapter 1 of this study. In the Soviet context, Adamovich was the first writer who argued for the need for a new genre for the 20th century literature that he termed «сверхлитература» ('super-literature' or 'pan-literature').

Ales (Aleksandr) Adamovich was born in 1927 in a small Belorussian village in Minsk region, but grew up and lived until after the war in the village of Glusha in Bobruysk region (посёлок Глуша Бобруйского района). He died in Moscow in 1994 and was buried in Glusha village in Belarus. When he was only 15, he joined Belorussian

anti-Fascist partisan group and fought in WWII till 1944.¹⁸⁴ Without doubts, his war-time experiences left a significant imprint on his personality – for many years, he would go back to the theme of war in his books and literary theory essays. After the war, he graduated from the Belorussian State University with a major in philology (1950). In 1963, he became a professor, and later moved to Moscow to teach Belorussian literature at Moscow State University. Unfortunately, a famous case of Sinyavsky and Daniel (процесс Синявского и Даниэля) ended Moscow career for Adamovich. The Belorussian writer refused to sign a letter against Sinyavsky and Daniel¹⁸⁵, and as a penalty, he was dismissed from his job as a professor. He had to move back to Minsk and continue his literary and academic publications, away from the main literary scene of Moscow and Leningrad.

While back in his home country, he delved into the theme of war and the preservation of lesson given to him by the war. Adamovich was the person who told the whole world about the blood-curling crime the Nazi soldiers committed in a small Belorussian village of Khatyn (Хатынь). In 1971, after 5 years of work, he published his famous short novel «Хатыньская повесть» (*The Khatyn Story*). The text received a lot of

¹⁸⁴ Алесь Адамович, «Додумывать до конца. Автобиография – 85» в *Додумывать до конца: литература и тревоги века* (Москва: Советский писатель, 1988), 235 – 245.

¹⁸⁵ The case against two Soviet writers – A. Sinyavsky and Y. Daniel – attracted a lot of attention among Soviet people in 1964-1965. The writers used pennames of Abram Terz and Nikolay Arzhak and secretly shipped their stories and essays abroad where the texts were published. Daniel was sentenced to 5 years at prison camps, and Sinyavsky was sentenced to 7 years. The official reason for such a punishment was the ‘anti-Soviet agitation and propaganda’. The main public persecutor was a famous Soviet writer, Mikhail Sholokhov. Writers, literary critics, professors of literature and philology, and artists were encouraged to sign the accusation letter against Sinyavsky and Daniel. It was a moral choice - to sign a letter would mean to keep a job and at the same time to say No to free speech and free literature in the USSR, while to refuse to sign the letter would mean to show your civic position with all the punishment it could bring from the government.

attention and was shocking to the readers. The main event of the story is described in the scene where Nazi soldiers put 149 people from the Khatyn village into one building and set it on fire.

Adamovich continued working with the war memory and decided to use a new method to let the readers better understand what he saw himself as a partisan in 1941-1945 and what millions of the Soviet people went through in those years – he wanted to give the voice to those who survived and who could describe their own experiences. To capture, share, and preserve those memories, Adamovich decided to use a tape-recorder. He traveled all throughout the country to record the stories and voices of the survivors. Together with Yanka Bryl and Vladimir Kolesnik in 1977, they published *Я из огненной деревни* (*Out of the Fire*), discussed in Chapter 1 of this study. The 1977 text presents the readers with a collection of interviews with different Belorussian people who shared their stories about the Nazi invasion and occupation of the Soviet Belorussia in 1941-1944. The emotional influence of the book was so significant that it was later used for the film by Elem Klimov, *Иди и смотри* (*Go and See*, 1985). Klimov was so shaken by the *Khatyn Story* and the *Out of the Fire* that he asked Adamovich to write a script for his future film. Many filmgoers both in the Soviet Union and abroad were struck by Klimov's unflinchingly direct portrayal of the barbarities of the German invasion. Russian film critic Pavel Orlov in his article about *Go and See* wrote:

Одна из ключевых составляющих фильма — шоковая эстетика, заключающаяся в подчеркнутом и программном натурализме, достоверности и безжалостной реалистичности происходящего на экране. [. . .] В дальнейшем в советском кино — за редким исключением вроде «Иванова детства» — сложилась норма изображения «бесполого», облегченного варианта войны, исключая акцент на тяжелом быте или демонстрацию насилия. Климов хотел перечеркнуть подобную традицию, поскольку она идеализировала войну, не давала зрителю понимания того, что это

такое на самом деле: «Чтобы бытовое сознание стряхнуть, поднять зрителя к высокому сознанию, то есть вернуть его к его сути, необходимо потрясение».¹⁸⁶

It is undoubtedly one of the most terrifying and the most significant films about WWII. The Russian writer and journalist Dmitriy Bykov recently characterized the psycho-emotional impact of Adamovich's texts in the following manner: «Адамович – садюга!». [. . .] Наверное, это не садизм, но какое-то мстительное чувство по отношению к читателю («Вот испытай то, что испытал я») в нём сидело. [. . .] Но читать «Я из огненной деревни» физически невозможно. [. . .] Там приводятся без малейших изменений такие детали, такие цитаты, с которыми не может жить человек.¹⁸⁷ Svetlana Alexievich's work show her affinity with the methods of both Klimov and Adamovich; she strives to recreate the trauma, shock, pain, and horror that her interviewees shared in their testimonies, and to make the reader co-feel these emotions while reading her books.

Adamovich went further in his search for the new genre and in 1977 – 1981, the Belorussian writer with Daniil Granin, prepared and published a collection of interviews

¹⁸⁶ Павел Орлов, «Как это снято: «Иди и смотри», TvKinoRadio.ru, опубликовано 28 июня 2015, <https://tvkinoradio.ru/article/article3566-kak-eto-snyato-idi-i-smotri>. [One of the film's key features is aesthetics of shock that is delivered through the highlighted, major photo realism, vividness, and merciless literalism of the depicted scenes. With time, Soviet cinema acquired norms for the featuring 'epicene', lighter version of the war (with some rare exceptions like *Ivan's Childhood*). Such a version excluded hardships of war-time daily life and demonstration of violence. Klimov wanted to stop that tradition, because it idealized the war and did not allow the viewers to understand what it was in real life: "To shake off banal consciousness of the viewer and to raise it back to the core of it, a shock is needed". – my trans.]

¹⁸⁷ Дмитрий Быков, *Один: сто ночей с читателем* (Москва: Издательство АСТ, 2017), 241. ["He is a sadist". [. . .] There was a revengeful emotion deep inside of him, like "go experience what I have experienced". [. . .] To read *Out of the Fire* is physically impossible. Without any changes, it provides such details, such quotes with which a person cannot live. – my trans.]

with the survivors of Leningrad siege during WWII. The book of interviews was titled *The Blockade Book* (*Блокадная книга*) and was later published in its whole in 1984.

The path for finding this genre started with the two volumes of *Партизаны* (*The Partisans*) where Adamovich combined autobiographic material, diaries, and some elements of confession-like stories. It was followed by *Хатынская повесть* (*The Khatyn Story*, 1971), and *Каратели* (*Chasteners*, 1980), where the writer used the technique of montage between some real historic documents and fictional story. The writer wanted to be as authentic in his books as it was possible for a written text, so his next *Я из огненной деревни* (*Out of the Fire*), 1980 and *Блокадная книга* (*The Blockade Book*) captured his understanding of the pure documental prose.

Dmitriy Bykov has rightfully placed Adamovich into a special category of the 20th century post-Holocaust literature. The modern day literary scholar has outlined three ways in which literature could overcome the famous Adorno question/problem about possibility of writing poetry (and overall literature) after the extermination of Jews in death camps by Nazis. One such way is a fiction literature in its traditional form as we know it, from before the 1940s. One example of a post-war novel that attempts to depict war accurately is Vasily Grossman's *Жизнь и судьба* (*Life and Fate*, 1950-59). The writer depicted the horrors of a death camp and gas chambers with outstanding mastery. Crucial here was Grossman's interest in Tolstoy's *War and Peace* in the way it could be written for WWII; the barbarity of war was exposed through an unsentimental and even clinical style. The second way is a documentary novel where a story is created out of hundreds of interviews with the witnesses of a tragic event of the 20th century. Each interview is a confession filled with first-hand experiences and emotions. Adamovich as a

founder and Svetlana Alexievich as his student both belong to this latter category. The third way to describe the terrible events of the mid-20th century is the literary works by Varlam Shalamov and Nadezhda Mandelstam. While reading, for example, Shalamov's *Колымские рассказы* (*The Kolyma Tales*, 1954-1962), especially its second volume, we can see how the author was in mental and physical decline during the process of writing, and how the transcription of memories of his fourteen years in the Kolyma labor camps helped him temporarily stave off his late-stage dementia, enabling him to think and express himself.¹⁸⁸

Ales Adamovich wanted to reach the highest level of truth in his literature, and saw it by creating the “super-literature” or “pan-literature” (сверхлитература). Such a genre was his response to the famous Adorno question if we could have poetry after understanding the barbarity of the Holocaust. Adamovich believed that the truest way to write anything after Auschwitz would be to give the voice to the people who survived it or any other dramatic event of the 20th century. One of the Belorussian scholars who studied Adamovich's literary genre noticed that the search for such a realistic literature was already present in what Thomas Mann described as ‘not a novel’ and Bertolt Brecht called ‘not plays’.¹⁸⁹

While working on the *Blockade Book*, Adamovich tried to outline the genre he was working in – a sort of journalistic literature that would make people, survivors, witnesses the main characters, rather than giving the leading voice to a writer. His newly

¹⁸⁸ Быков, 237-238.

¹⁸⁹ С.И.Ханеня, «Ці трэба баяцца «чужых класікаў»? в *Алесь Адамовіч і час: матэрыялы Адамовічыскіх чытанняў, 5 верасня 1997 г. : тэматычны зборнік* (Мінск, 1998), 78.

formed genre of 'super-literature' was essential for him both as a literary scholar and as a war survivor, in enabling him to create a productive sphere for the objectification and transcendence of his experiences. A rather large entry in his *Blockade Book* notes from 1983 was dedicated specifically to the explanation of the main principles of 'super-literature', and what makes it different from other similar literary fashions.

Taken together, Adamovich's experiences during the war and his attempt to grapple with the Chernobyl nuclear catastrophe in 1986, emerged as crucial catalysts in his shaping the new genre of 'super-literature'. «Звышзадачу літаратуры Адамовіч бачыў у раскрыцці прауды да канца. Новае мысленне, на яго думку, у тым, што «літаратура – не доктар, літаратура – боль. Калі боль гэты не самы востры, а тым самым не заклікае да тэрминовай рэакцыі – значыць, яна не адпавядае часу».¹⁹⁰ The Belorussian writer wanted the new literature to change people – he hoped that the 'super-literature' could make people understand the state of emergency within the world, and help them find a solution to threatening situations. As he himself put it in his essay:

... Хоронили молодую женщину, умершую за день-два до родов [. . .]. Могила приняла, поглотила не только жизнь матери, но и её продолжение. Подумалось: вот он, образ, лик Мадонны «термоядерного варианта» истории. От которого бежит человеческое сознание, но куда стаскивает человечество тяжкий груз сверхвооружения. Об этом думать, этим мучиться, себя не жалея, - кому, как не писателю, не литературе! [. . .] Если уж делать литературу в мире, где против жизни нацелено столько мегасмертей, где жизни угрожает сверхоружие, свехубийство, тогда и делать надо – сверхлитературу. То есть что-то адекватное, соответствующее всей мировой ситуации! Гадаем, спорим,

¹⁹⁰ В.И. Козіч, «Урок эстэтыкі Алесея Адамовіча» в *Алесь Адамовіч і час: матэрыялы Адамовічыскіх чытанняў*, 5 верасня 1997 г.: тэматычны зборнік (Мінск, 1998), 95. [To Adamovich, the main goal of literature was to show the truth to its maximum. He believed the new thought was that 'literature is not a doctor, literature is pain'. If the pain is not the most acute and, therefore, does not call for the immediate reaction then this literature does not parallel the time. – my translation from Belorussian]

думаем, какой станет литература будущего. Такой и станет – в смысле нравственного потенциала, - какова будет степень её участия в спасении этого будущего.¹⁹¹

Adamovich believed that social and political essays have a faster and stronger effect on the modern-day reader due to their condensation, specificity, and their style that promotes delivering some important information in the way of highest absorption. He noted that such essays already showed a very important shift – to talk to not only local readers, but the whole world. Ales Adamovich wanted to intensify this communication and was looking for the means to do that. When he was writing his 1969 companion volumes *Война под крышами* (*War under Roofs*) and *Сыновья уходят в бой* (*Sons Go into Battle*), he wanted to share his own war experience in the most realistic manner, without following any literary genre. Adamovich was searching for a method to following his own emotions, and to allowing them to speak out in a way that did not rely on earlier traditions of reportage or fiction writing about the experience of WWII. He described his personal story in great detail in the companion books, but still Adamovich was looking for a way to continue the theme of war. He felt like many people had a lot to say about those five years, and that their memories might be different in a way that they might accentuate different aspects or

¹⁹¹ Алесь Адамович, *Додумывать до конца* (Москва: Советский писатель, 1988), 204, 207. [It was a young woman's funeral, she died a day or two before the expected date of giving birth. [. . .]The grave accepted and swallowed not only the life of the woman, but her continuation too. I thought, 'Here is a shape, a face of Madonna of the thermonuclear scenario of history.' Human consciousness escapes this history, but the heavy weight of super-weapon is dragging humankind into the scenario. Who else but a writer and literature should think about it and agonize about it with no mercy to themselves!? If we do literature in the world where so many mega-deaths are aimed at humankind and where the life is threatened by super-weapon and super-killings then we are to do super-literature. This means the literature that is relevant and corresponding to the situation in the whole world. We are guessing, arguing, and thinking what the literature of the future could be. In its moral promise, it will be in dependence with its degree of participation in the saving of the future. – my trans.]

provide a new side to the story, which would then seem new to Adamovich. The writer noticed that people who did not participate in the war had a sharper and more distant perception of the war-time stories. When talking about Victor Astafyev's introduction to *Живи и помни* (*Live and Remember*, 1974) by Valentin Rasputin, he wrote:

Читая младшего своего товарища по перу, бывалый фронтовик внезапно понял: а ведь я, всего хлебнувший, о дезертире так раскованно рассказать, взвешивая все «за» и «против», не смог бы. Сразу включился бы ещё довоенного времени рефлекс: «Ах ты, сука, ты устал, захотелось домашнего, семейного тепла, а мы, мы не устали, нам не хотелось?!»¹⁹²

Writers who went through the war, could not remain just listeners without judgement; they could not avoid comparing oral testimonies of other people to their own experiences. It seems plausible that their personal reaction to the stories affected their authorial attitude.

While creating *Out of the Fire*, Adamovich talked to people in 35 different regions of Belarus. After completing collecting interviews, he realized that the narratives felt like his own and that it seemed to him as if he had interviewed himself. His most passionate intention was to preserve those memories, to avoid them being forgotten and dissuade future generations from taking a neutral position about the war. Adamovich worried that younger people might start another war in the future, because they never felt what Adamovich's generation did. Therefore, he needed the stories to be as striking, as emotional, as shocking and unbearable, as

¹⁹² Алесь Адамович, «Человек может» в *Додумывать до конца* (Москва: Советский писатель, 1988), 320. [While reading his younger colleague, this battle-seasoned soldier suddenly realized: me who have endured everything, would not be able to talk about a deserter in such a loose way and to describe all the pros and cons. The pre-war time reflex would make me think “You, you piece of shit, you got tired, you wanted some warmth of your family and home, but we, us, didn't we get tired!?” – my trans.]

were the experiences of actual war witnesses. He believed that only this type of literature would be able to affect reader's hearts and souls, and hopefully to prevent wars in the future.

Having used all his personal war-time memories and having realized that younger generations might not be as sensitive toward the subject of the war as he himself was, Adamovich became certain that only a large group of people with their own stories could truly explain what happened at war.

Читая дневники или записывая людей, переживших блокаду Ленинграда [. . .], мы с Даниилом Граниным открыли для себя (а я – когда ещё записывал хатынских свидетелей), что сегодня *человек в массе* знает о людях, о самом себе столько и так способен это осмыслить, так сказать о *пределах человеческих*, как не умела, не решалась литература наша ещё вчера. Послушаешь их – кажется, что и полесские женщины-колхозницы и работницы ленинградских заводов, домохозяйки – все начитались... Достоевского. Такая сложность и осмысленная острота переживаний, глубина и верность понимания человеческой природы. Но для большинства «Достоевским» была, конечно же, сама жизнь, собственная и близких судьба, работа души и совести, обожжённых болью на всю оставшуюся жизнь.¹⁹³

Svetlana Alexievich adapted this approach and has followed it through her literary career. In some way, her development as a writer was due to Adamovich's concept of the 'verbatim' literature, or 'super-literature', and inspired her after she read his *Out of the Fire*. In one of her interviews, Svetlana Alexievich stated that she met Adamovich for the first time in 1976, when she had a meeting with him for that

¹⁹³ Адамович, 1988, 327-328. [While reading diaries or recording the people who survive in Leningrad siege, Daniil Granin and I found out (and I had done it while recording the witnesses of Khatyn village execution) that nowadays, an average person knows so much about people and about themselves, and is capable of conceptualizing and talking about the limits of human life in the depths that our literature did not dare to do just yesterday. When you listen to them it seems as if Belorussian women, workers at Leningrad factories, and housewives, have all read a lot of ...Dostoyevsky. Their stories carry incredible complexity and meaningful freshness of emotions, and a deep and thorough understanding of human nature. But for most of them, their 'Dostoyevsky' was the lives of their own and of their relatives, as well as work of heart and mind marked with pain for ever. – my trans.]

year's conference on war-themed literature. That same year she started collecting interviews for her future book *The War's Unwomanly Face* that she finished in 1981 and later published in 1985.¹⁹⁴ Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik's *Out of the Fire* was the benchmark for her as a writer: it gave her the idea of bringing together a sobering reality with a serious of already extant texts.

As already mentioned in Chapter 1 of this study, Ales Adamovich gave his own idea about the book of interviews with WWII women veterans to Svetlana Alexievich in the last 1970s. They met at a conference in Minsk where she interviewed him, and the older writer shared his memories of the story told to him by a nurse, Tamara Umnyagina, in the mid-1950s. The nurse's testimony planted the idea of collecting more interviews with women into Adamovich's head, but he gave it to Alexievich. He was supporting her through her trips to the female veterans and her work on the book. In her 1985 edition of *The Last Witnesses*, Adamovich wrote a laudatory supporting commentary to both that book and her earlier one, *War's Unwomanly Face*. His part in Alexievich's turn from journalism to writing books is undeniable. We should not forget that in the 1970s, Svetlana Alexievich worked as a journalist for the journal *Neman* (Нёман), probably the main literary magazine in the Soviet Belorussia. She was writing panegyric articles about established—if clearly problematic—Soviet icons such as Felix Dzerzhinsky. Her very attitude toward the Soviet leaders and the Soviet country were quite different compared to what we could sense from her later books:

¹⁹⁴ Светлана Алексиевич, «Моя единственная жизнь» в *Вопросы литературы*, 1996, №1. Noblit.ru, (<http://noblit.ru/node/3163>).

Ловлю себя на мысли, что мне всё время хочется цитировать самого Дзержинского. Его дневники. Его письма. И делаю я это не из желания каким-либо образом облегчить свою журналистскую задачу, а из-за влюблённости в его личность, в слово, им сказанное, в мысли, им прочувствованные. [. . .] Когда у меня вырастет сын, мы обязательно приедем на эту землю вместе, чтобы поклониться неумирающему духу того, чьё имя – Феликс Дзержинский – «меч и пламя» пролетарской революции.¹⁹⁵

As we can see, the fashion of her 1970s journalistic writing was very different from the idea that Adamovich offered her. To follow his idea of ‘super-literature’ would mean to be brave and not be afraid to uncover and publish something that might not be looked upon favorably by the government. Adamovich was ready to do that and to be that nonconformist investigator. Whether Alexievich was ready to play that role in the 1970s and 1980s is far from clear. She would, however, move more demonstrably in the direction of a critically-minded journalist in her publications that appeared after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

We could trace another example of a story that was used both by Adamovich and Alexievich, but in this case, it is not clear who collected the story first. In 1987, Ales Adamovich wrote a script for a film that he titled *Имя сей звезде – Чернобыль* (*A Name to This Star is Chernobyl*). That short, 30-page story was about a young woman living in the little town next to Chernobyl nuclear plant in the Soviet Ukraine. She was pregnant with her first child, and she together with her husband, a young machine operator at the plant, were very happy to soon become parents. When the tragic accident happened at the plant and her husband did not come back home,

¹⁹⁵ Светлана Алексиевич, «Меч и пламя революции» в *Нёман*, Минск, 1977, №9, 135. [I catch myself thinking that I constantly want to quote Dzerzhinsky himself – his diaries and letters. I want to do that not to make my journalistic task easier, but out of my love for his personality, for the words he said and thoughts he felt deeply. [. . .] When I have a son, we will definitely come here together to give a bow to the spirit of Felix Dzerzhinsky who was a ‘sword and flame’ of the proletarian revolution. – my trans.]

she was soon evacuated from the city. She had nowhere else to go but to her husband's parents in neighboring Belorussia. On her way to her family-in-law, she met a young boy from an orphanage who had been already told that he had only a few more days to live because of the high dose of radiation he received. He ran away from his group of children and their teacher, hoping that people would find him and would look for his mother. The boy was very sick and was clearly dying. The young woman took the boy to her parents-in-law's house, but soon they all got evacuated from that area, too, since the radioactive zone was getting bigger every day. At the end of the story, the woman gave birth to a child who, as it seems, was either ill or deformed.¹⁹⁶

In Svetlana Alexievich's *Чернобыльская молитва* (*Voices from Chernobyl*) which she was writing for the next ten years after the nuclear disaster of 1986 and published in 1997 in *Дружба народов* magazine, we could find a similar narrative in the opening interview of the book, titled «Одинокий человеческий голос» ('Lonely Human Voice'). The interviewee, Lyudmila Ignatenko, told her story about the disaster in Chernobyl. Her husband, a young firefighter working at the nuclear plant, and she was looking forward to becoming parents, because Lyudmila was pregnant with their first child. They were extremely happy and very much in love with each other. The day when the explosion happened at the plant, he was summoned as the first-responder. He never came back home. Soon she learned that he was in a hospital and later transported to a special clinic in Moscow. She followed him to Moscow and begged a senior doctor to let her in. She stayed in the hospital all

¹⁹⁶ Алесь Адамович, «...Имя сей звезде Чернобыль» (Минск: «Ковчег», 2006), 272 – 307.

throughout the day, only coming back to her friends' apartment to spend the night. Fourteen days later, her husband died from the exposure to the radiation he received during the explosion. His death was horrible, because all parts of his body, from the skin, to the digestive system, to the bones, were dissolving from the radiation, but Lyudmila was still hoping he could be saved. One day, she felt dizzy in the hospital hallway, and the doctor saw her. Her pregnancy was revealed, and the doctor was both furious and terrified. When the time came, she came back to the same hospital to give birth. Her little baby managed to live only four hours. The newborn girl had liver cirrhosis and a structural heart defect. Her body organs were showing high numbers of radiation. The woman was told that the fetus absorbed most of the radionuclides that Lyudmila received while staying next to her late husband in those fourteen days after the disaster.¹⁹⁷

Even though these stories are not entirely identical, but there are some evident parallels. A woman is young, happily married, and pregnant. Her husband dies from the radiation after the nuclear plant explosion. The woman goes through incredible suffering and emotional torment and later gives birth to a sick child who cannot survive. As Adamovich stated later, his idea was to depict a woman who would be pregnant with the entire world and that her belly would describe the future of our planet. It is unclear if Svetlana Alexievich interviewed a real woman in 1986-1987 and shared the story with Adamovich, or if her older colleague developed the film script in 1987 and shared his idea when she was already collecting interviews for the future book about Chernobyl. But it seems possible that they shared the idea

¹⁹⁷ Светлана Алексиевич, *Чернобыльская молитва. Хроника будущего* (Москва, «Время», 2016), 11 – 29.

of using a story of a pregnant woman and the whole concept of pregnancy to reflect on the nuclear disaster and its aftermaths for humankind

Alexievich has been indebted to Adamovich in several respects, evident from his gift to her of a story about a WWII nurse to his suggestion that she write about women who survived WWII. She was also inspired by the very shape and principles of Adamovich's conception of 'super-literature'. Certainly, the genre that he started motivated her switch from journalism to literature. Throughout her career, she had followed the main principles of the 'super-literature' outlined by Adamovich in his 1983 notes. She has been working on some very tragic themes like women and children in WWII, ecologic disaster after the nuclear plant explosion in Chernobyl in 1986, the Soviet war in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the collapse of the USSR. The stories she has been selecting reflect on drama and tragedy applicable to every human being in the world. Her selected interviews speak both about the narrator and any other person who was, is—or might be—in the same situation. Therefore, the issues raised in the narratives appear to be universal. Just as Adamovich recommended, Alexievich has been interviewing hundreds if not thousands of people for every book to later select the best stories and compress the common experience of the narrators into one book. She has spent years on every collection of interviews she has published, because the research and later adaptation of the stories would take some time. Adamovich saw the main feature of 'super-literature' in the absence of a writer's figure and voice in the text, and in making the multitude of interviewees connect with the readers. His idea was to let the authorial voice be present in the absolute minimum, so that the voices of the narrators become the main priority; he

believed that such a technique would make a future reader feel like the storyteller speaks directly to him or her, and that the reader would eventually feel like he or she is becoming a narrator of the events described in the book. Alexievich has been following this rule up until her book about the war in Afghanistan, because in the most recent book *Secondhand Time* her presence in the text was palpably manifest.

Just like Adamovich together with his collaborators developed in the *Out of the Fire* and later in the *Blockade Book*, the concept of time frame in the texts gets shifted. Readers do not feel that the described events took place in the past. Due to the absence of a writer and the ‘verbatim’ style of selected narratives, the past becomes long-lasting and overlaps with the present. Alexievich has been actively using this principle in her own books which has undoubtedly invested in the strong response—both negative and positive—from her readers. That part of the audience who liked the texts, would feel emotionally co-present with the interviewees and thus, in some way responsible and co-dependent. Yet those readers who disliked Alexievich’s texts, would also feel co-present, but in disagreement with the described events. The ‘lasting past’ overlapping with the present creates the idea that “I can see it as a participant and I see it in a way that is different.” With such co-existence of an interviewee and a reader, the negative readers’ reaction is no less significant and valid than the positive.

Adamovich insisted that for ‘super-literature’, the narratives should be given verbatim, because even if there are local, colloquial, or even foreign words, a heart of the reader would be able to still understand the meaning. Texts in the books by Adamovich and his co-authors were typed ‘as is’, with all linguistic and stylistic

originality. *Out of the Fire* interviews contain lots of words from the Belorussian, Ukrainian, Polish, Yiddish, and even German languages. Some interviewees showed nearly primitive sentence structure, where if the same phrase would be re-written with proper syntax, it would be reduced from a couple of abrupt sentences to one short phrase in proper literary language. But Adamovich did not change anything; he insisted on full authenticity. He strongly believed that we as readers should be able to hear the voice of the narrators, as if were present in the same room. Their stories were authentic and, therefore should be delivered in a manner that seemed to approximate their original instantiation. Changing their words or stylistic nuances would mean taking the voice away from them. Adamovich vigorously argued that – the very need for ‘super-literature’ was prompted by the idea to fight against «псевдодокументальность» (pseudo-documentality). Films, plays, journalistic articles in the Soviet newspapers, as well as Soviet billboards and even songs provided their own documentary narrative. Adamovich insisted that those who witnessed the events should speak about their experiences in the manner that they decide for themselves, and in the language that is natural for them.

Alexievich followed this principle of Adamovich’s in her early publications. But her most recent books, just like the later editions of *The Last Witnesses*, manifest a neutral language, as if all the stories are told by the same person. The texts have become somewhat ‘polished’ to demonstrate proper Russian grammar and syntax. Her stories now sample the bare minimum of Belorussian or Ukrainian dialects. Our study of the four editions of *The Last Witnesses* found that even those local dialect words that we could see in the two earlier editions were later replaced with their

Russian equivalents in the later editions. Words such as «батька», «приховала», «лежали в картофлянике» became «отец» ('father'), «припрятала» ('stashed away') and «лежали в картошке» ('were in the potato field') respectively. Even her later book *Voices from Chernobyl*, which required Alexievich to speak to hundreds of people from the Belorussian and Ukrainian lands, preserve very little regional linguistic character. The chapter titled «Монолог одной деревни о том, как зовут души с неба, чтобы с ними поплакать и пообедать» ('Monologue of a Village about Calling for Souls from the Skies to Cry and Eat with Them') contains probably all the local specifications of the language spoken in Belorussian villages that we could find in that book. That specific village was in Gomel region, which has a strong influence of the Ukrainian language due to its proximity to the border and long cross-national connections.

Knowing how much Alexievich used to follow the ideas and genre characteristics developed by Adamovich, and at the same time being aware of her tendency to rewrite the text of interviews not only while preparing them for the initial publication but for new editions of previously published narratives as well, it is logical to ask how much Svetlana Alexievich alters the texts that she hears from her interviewees.

The answer is that, judging by the findings of the differences between the four editions of the same book and by what Alexievich herself has told in her interviews, she changes them quite a bit.

It seems to us noteworthy that in 1993, a vice-president of the Belorussian PEN International, Carlos Sherman, wrote a request to the Belorussian Academy of Science asking them to provide an official response on the following topics:

- 1) What exactly is a ‘documentary novel,’ and if it should combine such concepts as a real documents and fiction?
- 2) What is the difference between a documentary novel and a magazine article or interview?
- 3) Is a writer allowed to use his/her own artistic vision, their own selection of documents, literary alteration of oral sources, their own world outlook, and generalization of facts in order to gain literary truth?
- 4) Who owns the copyright of a story – a writer or interviewees?
- 5) How could one measure borders where a writer could be free from a mechanical typing and printing of the collected texts?
- 6) Does a writer have the right to change the names of their characters?¹⁹⁸

There were eight questions they addressed in their request, but we mentioned these six as the most important to Alexievich’s writing.

In January of 1994, the director of the Kupala Institute at the Belorussian Academy of Science, V. Kovalenko, and a professor from the Institute of Literature, M. Tychina, provided their official answers to the questions.

In their response, Kovalenko and Tychina relied on an entry from «Литературный энциклопедический словарь» (Literature Encyclopedic Dictionary)

¹⁹⁸ Светлана Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики* (Время: Москва, 2016), 302.

(Москва: Советская энциклопедия, 1987, с. 98-99)¹⁹⁹ for the definition of «документальная литература» (documental literature). The entry states that documental literature and documental prose, in particular, belongs to the genre of fiction based on its topics, methods of research, and narrative form. Documental prose analyses historic and social events through the study of documentary data that is presented as a whole, or partial, piece, or paraphrased. Documentary prose is not equivalent to journalistic documentary prose (such as essays, notes, chronicles, or news coverage), nor to historic prose, based on the documentary prose's style of fact selection and esthetic assessment. Minimizing its fictitious narrative, documentary literature uses artistic design by selecting real facts that have important social characteristics. Kovalenko and Tychina argue that absolute realism, as well as absolute truth, is not possible. Alexievich cannot publish hours of interviews verbatim, and instead must select the most important phrases – hardly anyone would read the raw material. A writer needs to choose the most significant information, analyze all the data, and provide it as a coherent meaningful piece. In this process, the presiding judge is the writer and his/her ethical viewpoint. The degree of truthfulness is, then, different when seen by the writer, or readers, or critics, or the interviewees themselves. Kovalenko and Tychina also argue that an author of a documentary prose piece could change his/her characters' names, if providing their real names could bring some risks to those people or pose any threat. The names could also be changed or altered if an author would like to present the story not as something that is true to only one person, but as a generalized story that brings together the responses of different people to the same experience.

¹⁹⁹ Алексиевич, *Цинковые мальчики*, 303-308.

As Alexievich states it herself, her books belong to the genre of what she calls a ‘novel in voices’. One not need forget that such a genre already brings two dimensions together. From one side, it is a dimension of factual, ‘real’ data of interviews. From another side, it is a dimension of the author’s artistic idea that she delivers through various tools, such as using the words of her interviewees, their sequence, selection of the interviews, and her own little remarks that help her reader understand the writer’s position. Alexievich uses other people’s words to tell her reader something that she would like to say herself, yet she does not provide all interviews typed verbatim. Instead, she treats the words of the interviewee as ingredients for something bigger and more artistic. This fact allows us to understand her books are not documentaries; they are novels with a strong documentary profile. As Professor Lewis MacLeod puts it: “The nonfiction novel aestheticizes facts and, as a consequence, undermines the solidity of nonfiction’s standard truth claims.”²⁰⁰ A writer re-constructs events for his/her readers – the very fact of such a reconstruction implies that it does not have status as absolute truth; it is a personal view on some fragments of the present of past developments. Historic events are represented the way the writer believes is the closest to be the truth. It is important to notice that facts do not play the key role in the authorial representation. Barbara Foley in her study about documentary fiction makes a very interesting comment: “The modernist documentary novel is as preoccupied with telling the truth as were its forebears, but it questions whether this truth has much to do with ‘the facts’”.²⁰¹ We need

²⁰⁰ MacLeod Lewis. “A Documentary-Style Film”: “Borat” and the Nonfiction/Fiction Question” in *Narrative* 19, no 1 (January 2011), (Ohio University Press), 113.

²⁰¹ Barbara Foley, *Telling The Truth. The Theory and Practice of Documentary Fiction* (Cornell University Press, 1986), 186.

to keep in mind that Alexievich is the main artist behind the interviews she selected for her books. Even though the reader implicitly treats those short stories as first person, authentic experience, it is Alexievich, herself, who is the center of consciousness and who approves “the existence of the narrative itself.”²⁰²

From one side, this point might seem unimportant to some readers. Their attitude could be rather neutral, since Alexievich does not change important historic facts (for example, she doesn't try to make her readers think that Nazi soldiers were friendly liberators of oppressed Soviet people, or that killings during the USSR war in Afghanistan were normal and reasonable). Enemies remain enemies, horrors and killings remain unchanged. In addition, the words presented in interviews were said if not by the declared narrator, but by some other people anyway, including Alexievich herself. That does not change the suffering and very unfortunate fates of the people whose lives were described in the books by the Belorussian author.

This point of view is understandable and has its logic. But for our study of Alexievich's style and literary genre, the fact that she alters the texts of interviews, rewrites them, and changes the emotional response from the readers, seems very important.

We need not to forget that she received the Nobel Prize in literature as a journalist who ‘has created a literary non-fiction genre that is entirely her own. She writes “novels of voices.” She has developed this genre book after book, constantly honing the esthetic of her documentary prose, which is based on hundreds of

²⁰¹ Foley, 189.

interviews. Her skill at this allows her to intertwine the original voices of her subjects into an artful condensation of a panorama of souls.²⁰³

We can instantly question the information about the original voices and the overall non-fiction genre. As we already saw in our case study of the four editions of *The Last Witnesses*, the voices have been altered – from adding new descriptive details, to changing factual meaning, to completely replacing certain words with totally new lines. Portraits in a literature textbook would turn into the portraits of the beloved Soviet leaders in a book, a Soviet city that was going to be protected from the Nazis by its people would turn into a surrendered city, and a badly burnt cat turns into a rather healthy neighbor's dog, to name a few examples.

Sergey Naumchik, a Belorussian commentator of the Russian radio station «Свобода» (Freedom) and at the same time the main editor of the recently published 700-page book with all Alexievich's interviews she has given after 2003, spoke to his Russian colleague Andrey Sharyi (Андрей Шарый), about the ontological ambiguities of Alexievich's work:

Когда мы недавно встречались в Праге, я задал Светлане вопрос [. . .]: текст Алексиевич – это художественная литература или это магнитофон, диктофон? «Вот вы поговорили с человеком, записали, потом, когда идёт работа над текстом, как вы работаете с расшифровками, вы не меняете фразы, начало, конец?» Она говорит: «Да, меняю». То есть она переписывает эти монологи. Мне действительно пришлось множество раз прочитать самые разные тексты Алексиевич, и я вижу: да, это монологи, по существу, созданные заново. [. . .] Как у любого писателя, как у Толстого, или у Достоевского, или у Довлатова, или у Василя Быкова – что-то подсмотрено, но что-то и своё. Поэтому книги Алексиевич – безусловно, художественная литература [. . .].²⁰⁴

²⁰³ "Svetlana Alexievich - Biographical". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014, accessed 24 Apr 2018, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-bio.html.

²⁰⁴ Андрей Шарый, «Человек-ухо», Радио «Свобода», Svoboda.org, опубликовано 04 ноября 2016, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28089028.html>. [When we met in Prague recently, I

What's important to us in this interview is that other people who are experts in her texts, could notice the fact that Svetlana Alexievich has been re-writing the texts of her stories, and that she openly admitted that fact, at least in her conversation with Sergey Naumchik. We need to remember that not only does she select specific parts of numerous interviews and edits them up to the standards of literary Russian spoken and written language, but she also chooses how to combine different parts of different narratives into a new story written by her and with her own point of view.

In her interview to *Вопросы литературы* magazine (*Voprosy literatury*, *Questions of Literature*) in 1996, Svetlana Alexievich explained to her conversation partner how she created her texts:

[. . .] «Я этого не говорил!» А он это говорил, но я извлекла другой смысл. У него своя версия (а воспоминание – это тоже всегда версия), а у меня своя. [. . .] Он действительно рассказывал, как убивал и женщин и детей, потому что уже стал частью огромной машины преступления. Я все понимала (учти, в какое время это писалось) и фамилию его изменила. Он — прототип. [. . .] И конечно, я подобные детали концентрирую, потому что в жизни такой концентрации нет. Но это не нарушает эффекта достоверности. И потом для истории совершенно неважно, Анна Мартыновна это сказала или Клара Семеновна. [. . .]²⁰⁵

asked Svetlana a question [...]: a text by Alexievich – is it fiction or a cassette-recorder/a tape-recorder? “So, you have talked to a person, recorded it, then later, when you are working with the text, how do you work with the verbatim transcripts? Do you change phrases, the beginning, and the ending?” She says, “Yes, I change them”. This means she re-writes those monologues. I had to read all sorts of texts by Alexievich many times, and I can see – yes, these are the monologues that were created anew. [. . .] Just like it is with any writer, be it Tolstoy, or Dostoyevsky, or Dovlatov, or Vasil Bykov – there is something that they borrowed as well as something of their own. Therefore, Alexievich's books are undoubtedly fiction literature. – my trans.]

²⁰⁵ Светлана Алексиевич, «Моя единственная жизнь» в *Вопросы литературы*, 1996, №1, 205-223.

(https://drive.google.com/file/d/1gewcz_06cQuJ9RHcudikkIHPEpU9GM3P/view?usp=sharing) [“I didn't say that”! But he said that, it's just that I extracted a different meaning from his words. He has his own side of the story (and recollection is always just a side of the story), while I have my own. [. . .]He did tell how he was killing both women and children, because he had already become a part of the colossal machine of crime. I understood everything and changed his name (keep in mind what time it was when I was writing that). He was a prototype. [. . .]Of course, I

What we can understand in these words is that Alexievich's texts are collages of different little stories told by several people which she would later montage into one coherent narrative. With time, all those collages stories would get into a bigger collage of a book under one unifying theme. We do not know for sure if the name of the interviewee was real or it was a random name for a composite character. We do not know how much of the story was told by actual people and what was later added to it by Svetlana Alexievich during the editing process, nor do we know how many different mini-stories are combined under one chapter of a book. It is very important that we understand that a name of the interviewee might be made-up, and one narrative itself might be a collective semi-fictional story of multiple interviewees put together under one title. We cannot say with certainty how many stories were combined into one chapter – maybe one, or two, or five, or even more, and what Alexievich entwined into it from herself.

It is clear and somewhat expected that Alexievich, like any other person working with oral testimonies, cannot just provide hours of interview sessions in writing verbatim. She has to and she does compress narratives by omitting unimportant details. By doing this, she makes the final texts more crystalized, condensed, and affecting. This is one of the reasons why her texts elicit strong reactions from readers. But we must also bear in mind that at least some of her stories under the name of specific individuals had been pre-selected and scrubbed of

condense such stories, because there is no such a high concentration of them in real life. But it doesn't disturb the authenticity effect. After all, it is unimportant for history if Anna Martynovna said that or Klara Semyonovna did. – my trans.] This part of the interview was about Alexievich's *Zinky Boys* («Цинковые мальчики»), 1989, depicting the Soviet war in Afghanistan.

minor details, and matched with other compressed interviews under one made-up name or possibly altered real name of an actual prototype. In the same interview to the magazine *Voprosy literatury* (*Вопросы литературы* [*The Questions of Literature*]), Svetlana Alexievich told that sometimes she would change the name of the narrator if the interviewee asked her to do so. That implies that some of the interviews might still belong to concrete people, and probably contain a story told only by one specific narrator rather than a collage of multiple storytellers.

This brings us to question her genre as non-fiction, as it was said on the official Nobel Prize website, and if this genre is “entirely her own.” As we could already see, the idea of this genre originally belonged to Adamovich. He was passionate about preserving and sharing collective trauma of the people who witnessed and survived WWII. Adamovich, as a war veteran, used his own experience for a couple of his books, and later came to the idea that his voice was not enough. He wanted as many voices as possible to share their memories, so that those people could feel that their suffering and pain were not in vain. Adamovich believed that only a multitude of voices, like a multitude of mirrors, would let those people who have no war experience, to truly feel it and to become equal to the subjects of the books. His main goal was, through intense stories presented verbatim, to prevent future generations from starting another war. The ecologic catastrophe in Chernobyl in 1986 only strengthened his confidence that the so-called ‘super-literature’ could be an instrument for saving humankind from self-destruction.

Adamovich introduced Alexievich to his genre of documentary novel and gave her the idea and guidance in the writing of her first two books. As we know, he

wrote an official afterword in her second book published in 1985, to show his approval of her work and his patronage. For years, Alexievich was following his idea of ‘super-literature’ and used the same techniques and principles as they were shaped by Adamovich. But as we could see from this study, Alexievich’s own approach had changed in the course of her writing during the post-Soviet era. In her interview to *Voprosy literatury* in 1996, she already explained how she worked with the texts of the interviews, and how she selected only certain phrases or a few sentences from the original text. As she said during the interview, sometimes she would keep only a half of a page out of 80 pages on the entire interview. That time, she was using her book *The Zinky Boys* for the examples of her authorial selecting and re-combination. Thus, we can know with certainty that she was using composite characters and composite interviews already in this 1989 book about the war in Afghanistan.

Our close reading of her 1985 *The Last Witnesses* clearly demonstrates how much Alexievich started to alter the original text after the 2000s. Every new edition would show a deeper and larger scale of alteration in the text, and manipulation with the reader’s perception. Stories that were originally sad would become extremely dramatic, interviews that were originally non-political would suddenly have words about the Soviet leaders or the Soviet mentality, even some quite specific events would get changed to be perceived completely differently (like in the case with a city that was to be fought for, which later turned into the same city that was surrendered to the Nazis).

While this literary approach bears a certain resemblance to Adamovich’s conception of ‘super-literature’, it became qualitatively different in Alexievich’s

hands. The collections of interviews published by Alexievich look like journalistic short-notes, and in this study we have demonstrated the ways in which her style looks very much like New Journalism. She uses a number of techniques that make the texts look undoubtedly authentic, just as if they were verbatim captions of a speech of a real person. In this research, we demonstrated how much Alexievich manipulates with the texts of interviews and, as a result, with her readers' attitude too. This cannot be called 'non-fiction'. We argue that her style is a fiction based on non-fictional events and to a certain degree on real oral histories.

As a writer, Alexievich has the right to work with the interview transcripts in any way she might want to. She could select only what she chooses to, then rewrite it with her own words, add some facts from herself, or add fragments of different interviews to create one story. She could make the result of such a process of editing and composition be a chapter of her book. This chapter could have a made-up name of a composite character that would reflect on Alexievich's own authorial idea of the book. She has the right to do all of that, as a writer. But this should be explained in every preface of her books, and her readers need to understand that the texts they read are a result of Alexievich's varied work as a journalist, editor, and a writer. It's a composite story of an event, seen more through the eyes of the writer than of the interviewees themselves.

With this in mind, the words of Sara Danius, a Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy, in her introductory speech of Svetlana Alexievich, seem not entirely correct:

She doesn't want photographs, diaries, letters, newspapers, places. She wants the speech of living people, which is why she goes back. Not only that: she removes

everything superfluous to the core. She adds nothing; she subtracts. We are told people's names, their ages and what they do, little apart from that.²⁰⁶ Alexievich started her literary career learning from Adamovich and later Granin. The genre they developed, required complete authenticity, so they used their interview transcripts, diaries, some historic information, and photographs of some of the interviewees. She used to do almost the same – her early books had photographs of the people she interviewed, fragments of a young soldier's diary were used in her *Zinky Boys*, also there is a special paragraph at the beginning in both the *Zinky Boys* and the *Voices from Chernobyl*, where she provides historic data and/or newspaper articles. We now also know that the names and ages might be changed, sometimes because the interviewee asked for that, and in other times because the story is a result of creating a composite narrator. But more importantly, the Belorussian writer not only subtracts – she adds to the selected fragments. We do not know how much of what she adds comes from herself and how much of the added material comes from stories told by other people. But the fact that she does add is quite certain.

It would be more honest to both the people who told their personal stories to Svetlana Alexievich and to her readers, if at the beginning of every book she would explain her editing process and her concept of composite narrative. It seems to us that it would be fair if people who shared their pain and suffering with the writer as well as the people who read about that suffering, knew that these words were artistically altered and reassembled, and were presented under new or altered names.

²⁰⁶ The Nobel Prize in Literature 2015, "Introductory speech on 7 December 2015, by Sara Danius, Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014, accessed 19 Apr 2018, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/introductory-speech.html.

Conclusion

The Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015 made Svetlana Alexievich a popular name all around the world. As the Nobel Committee wrote in its official announcement, she received the prize “for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.”²⁰⁷ The Committee based their decision on Alexievich’s cycle of books that she called *Voices of Utopia*. It consists of five books published between 1985 and 2013. These texts are: *У войны не женское лицо* (*The War’s Unwomanly Face*), written in 1983 and published as a book in 1985, *Последние свидетели: книга детских рассказов* (*Last Witnesses: A Book of Un-Childlike Stories*), 1985, followed by *Цинковые мальчики* (*Zinky Boys*), 1989, then *Чернобыльская молитва* (*Voices from Chernobyl*), 1997, and *Время секонд хэнд* (*The Secondhand Time*), 2013.

The Nobel Prize committee admitted that Alexievich texts were collages written in the style of her own, where she created a collection of oral stories montaged into one non-fictional narrative. In this study, we did a close study of the five books by the Belorussian writer, her style and literary genre. We traced the representative techniques applied by her in every text, as well as the main features of her style. We analyzed her artistic predecessors and teachers to see what she adapted from their compositional innovations and narrative strategies and if her genre was indeed of her own. In addition, we questioned the very genre she has been working in to see if we could define it as non-fiction. Because some commentaries—most notably the one by Sophie Pinkham—have

²⁰⁷ "Svetlana Alexievich - Facts". *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014, accessed 18 Apr 2018, http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-facts.html.

criticized Alexievich for tempering with the narratives of her witnesses, we looked at different editions of the writer's 1985 *Last Witnesses* to better understand the method she has used for montaging the interview transcripts into a book.

We believed that Svetlana Alexievich did not come to the literary stage from obscurity and started writing something in the style that nobody else had ever seen before. The literature of the twentieth century has seen a significant body of work produced by writers who worked with oral testimonies, in their search for practices that would hold up a mirror to the experiences of two world wars, the Holocaust, the Soviet Union and its labor camps, the gigantic ecologic catastrophe caused by the nuclear explosion in Chernobyl, and any number of civil wars around the globe.

To see what writers could have outlined the main features of Alexievich's artistic principles and literary genre, we followed certain criteria: the texts should be presented in a sort of montage from combining different pieces of heterogeneous sources of information, there should be no main character in the text, but rather a polyphony of characters, and there should be some journalistic input in the form of interviews or newspaper articles or both. Those texts should be published before Alexievich's first book (1983). With these requirements, we selected the following books: Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman's *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry*, 2) Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik's *Я из огненной деревни* (*Out of the Fire*), 3) Adamovich and Granin's *Блокадная книга* (*The Blockade Book*), and Sergey Smirnov's *Бресткая крепость* (*The Brest Castle*). In addition to these texts, we also looked at the story about Hiroshima by John Hersey written for a special issue of the *New Yorker* magazine in August of 1946.

The story was translated into Russian, and *Звезда* (*Zvezda, The Star*) magazine published some of its chapters in 1970 (issue 8).

The Black Book was a selection of testimonies sent to the Jewish Anti-Fascist Committee between 1942 and 1947, depicting instances when Jews were killed by the Fascists. Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasily Grossman chose the stories for the future book out of 27 volumes of collected evidences. Most of the sources were letters or shorthand transcripts of interviews with witnesses. It also included essays by Ehrenburg, Grossman, and many other military newspaper journalists. Texts of letters were published in their original version, preserving their original style and word choice, including words and phrases in other languages (Ukrainian, Yiddish, and Polish, to name a few). The book became a true collage of various evidence of extermination of the Jewish people by the Fascists. It contains all sorts of recollections, letters, diaries, newspaper essays, and even texts of Nazi soldiers' testimonies. All the facts that could be confirmed were given footnotes with accurate historic data and the sources for verification. The authors are simultaneously present and absent in the texts of the book – some essays have their writers' names, and so do some personal letters. But testimonies of some people written down by other people came to us in a form that was already adapted by their transcribers.

At the same time as the *Black Book* was created, an American writer and journalist, John Hersey (1914 – 1993), was working on his article for the *New Yorker* about the 1945 atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. In spring of 1946, he went to Hiroshima and met with some of the survivors of the nuclear attacks. He traveled around the entire affected area and interviewed many people, but for his final story he selected oral testimonies of six survivors. In his article, John Hersey traced his six

interviewees from the very beginning of August 6th in 1946 to the day they met with him for the interview. Since several chapters from this story were published in *Звезда* magazine (*Zvezda, The Star*) in 1970, it is plausible that most writers we selected for this chapter of our study were reading that magazine and were, therefore, familiar with John Hersey's work. In its core, Hiroshima is a long journalistic sketch on an actual social problem. Every one of the six interviewees was described in great details, like a character in a novel. John Hersey recreated every detail of what those six people were doing before, during, and for the next few days after the bombing. Every nuance of their mood, their schedules, and their thoughts were presented to the reader so that the audience could feel as if they witnessed the nuclear attack with their own eyes. The narration constantly shifts from one mini-plot to another between all six storytellers – this recreates the technique of video montage. The author is not openly present in his text, but he suggests his point of view and is quite palpable in the story.

Sergey Smirnov (1915-1976) was well known in the 1950s and 1960s through his work in magazine *Новый мир* (*New World*) and in *Литературная газета* (*Literary Newspaper*). His famous book *Брестская крепость* (*The Brest Castle*), 1957, was dedicated to the extraordinary battle in the Belorussian city of Brest in June 1941. The book provides bodies of evidence from various survivors who were in any way involved in the castle resistance to the Nazi soldiers – men, women, doctors, nurses, and local people of all age groups. The text also demonstrates every step that Smirnov took while looking for a document or a person – we can read about his thoughts, logic, and arguments. We can follow the writer in his research and investigation, as if we were engaged in those activities ourselves. In addition to the interview transcript excerpts,

Smirnov provides official data from both German and Soviet archives and various historic documents. He wanted to use only accurate facts, and only those stories that were recalled by several people.

Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik's *Я из огненной деревни (Out of the Fire)* was published in Minsk in 1975. For about four years, the three writers traveled around 35 different regions of the Soviet Belorussia collecting interviews from the people who survived WWII, and who witnessed the terrors brought to their villages by the Fascists. Each chapter of the book consists of several interviews where the writers make their presence known by putting their questions into the text, and providing details about the interviewees' behavior during the conversation. The interview transcripts were given verbatim, preserving their original syntax and a local Belorussian dialect. The three writers attempted to create a novel of documentary journalism combining the words of survivors, the words of actual official historic documents, and the words of their own thoughts and the questions they asked.

In 1977, Adamovich and Daniil Granin published their oral study of another devastating episode of the war – *Блокадная книга (The Blockade Book)*. The book tells hundreds of stories about the terrible 900 days of the Leningrad siege that lasted from September 1941 to January 1944 and took lives of 1.5 million people. Adamovich and Granin interviewed hundreds of the siege survivors to add their personal stories to the common picture of the historic event. The writers used verbatim transcripts of the interviews with real people and provided their full names and addresses. They only used facts from those stories that were supported by other narrators or by official documents. Each chapter has a unifying topic that allows putting together memories of different

people. Words of the interviewees are given in quotation marks and some lengthy transcripts are given as a dialogue between the two writers and their companions. Together with the interviews, Adamovich and Granin used texts from the documents of Nuremberg Case, 17th century chronicles, quotes from poetry, and real diaries of the besieged people.

As we have shown, Alexievich's books show significant similarities and differences with the texts of other writers. Just like John Hersey who in his text showed hesitation about the legitimacy of the American government military actions in Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Alexievich demonstrated her doubts in the Soviet government's actions through the words of her narrators in the *Voices from Chernobyl* and the *Zinky Boys*. Alexievich uses many of the techniques of Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik. Those writers provided not only the interview transcripts, but described the behavior of their narrators during the meeting. The only difference would be the length of such descriptions – the three writers would often dedicate a paragraph to tell the reader what each interviewee was doing, while Alexievich would use a few words or sometimes a sentence or two. But unlike the same three writers who provided their questions in the body of the narratives, Alexievich has not been providing her questions to her subjects in the texts of her books. Sometimes we are able to guess what the question was, but often we read only the texts that look like monologues with no certain thematic boundaries. Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik preserved the original language and syntax of the selected interviews. Alexievich only left a few local words, while the rest of her texts were re-written by her and brought to the standards of the modern literary Russian language.

Furthermore, another difference from her artistic predecessors would be the fact that she has never marked her narratives with the quotes. She has always provided them as monologues, where each narrative would form a chapter and would be titled. This is her way of separating one story from the next. Another important difference is that Alexievich has not used data from official historic documents in her texts. She created small opening chapters in both the *Voices from Chernobyl* and the *Zinky Boys*, where she cited some facts from an encyclopedia and different newspapers, providing some exact numbers. Besides these little insertions at the beginning of the books, the texts have no other official documents.

Alexievich prefers her narratives to create their own polyphonic version of the historic event and to be perceived by her readers through emotions rather than historic data. Yet there is another important difference we could see between her texts and the ones by Adamovich and Granin. While the two men were consciously avoiding the most graphic, inhumane, and macabre stories, Alexievich, on the contrary, has preferred such stories for her books. As Daniil Granin later would rightfully note, she selects the most dramatic elements of stories and adjusts them artistically.²⁰⁸ But all of Alexievich's books share one important feature – they combine different narratives just like video-streams from hundreds of different video-cameras filming the same historic event. The writers make us shift our focus from one camera to the next by montaging various written pieces into a larger story. It could be compared to sitting in a video control room and watching

²⁰⁸ «Светлана Алексиевич достойна "Нобеля" по литературе, ее произведения будут жить долго – Гранин», *Interfax Россия*, опубликовано 08 октября 2015, <http://www.interfax-russia.ru/NorthWest/print.asp?id=660347&sec=1671&type=news>.

dozens of video streams – our eyes would be switching from screen to screen making out own mental connection between the videos. It also marks another important feature of the texts we studied here – the narratives exist in some sort of atemporal continuum where events do not follow each other, but rather happen simultaneously in the time that is neither past, nor present. We can be certain that Alexievich adopted this technique of montage from hundreds of different sources from her artistic precursors, especially from Adamovich. As Alexievich said in one of her interviews, when she first read *Out of the Fire* she was impressed by its genre²⁰⁹. She wanted to work in the same literary manner too, and Adamovich gave her an idea to write her first book that later became her famous *War's Unwomanly Face*²¹⁰. Not only he provided her with the topic, but he supported her through her work on this and the next book, *The Last Witnesses*. Moreover, he shaped and finalized the main principles of the genre that Alexievich certainly adopted: the seeming absence of the writer (authorial commentaries should be minimal), a wide range of stories about the same historic event taken as mirrors to reflect one object, and the writer's hidden or recessive role as a skillful master of selection and collaging of the stories into one big narrative. Adamovich needed a genre of polyphonic collective memory, a self-constructing oratory that would marry journalism and historic truth. He was working on further development of this new genre of 'super-literature' as he called it, and he certainly shared his insights with Alexievich. He was already using all these techniques and text-creating principles in the *Blockade Book* in the 1970s, when in 1978

²⁰⁹ Светлана Алексиевич, «Моя единственная жизнь» в *Вопросы литературы*, 1996, № 1. *Noblit.ru*. accessed 04.22.2018, <http://noblit.ru/node/3163>.

²¹⁰ Алесь Адамович, «Послесловие» в Светлана Алексиевич, *Последние свидетели: книга детских рассказов* (Москва: Молодая гвардия, 1985), 165-173.

Alexievich received an idea from him to write a similar book about women's wartime testimonies.

As such, we have arrived at a conclusion that as much as Svetlana Alexievich adopted one artistic findings of her literary precursors and rejected others, she most certainly followed the literary tradition established by several other writers. That group was led by Ales Adamovich in his search for the new genre of 'super-literature' that would let many people voice their traumatic experiences and share them with the entire world. His main goal was to create the literature that would be able to stop humankind from new wars and, especially, from a nuclear war. There is no doubt that Alexievich has placed before herself the same goal of documentarian enlightenment, and has adopted similar literary tools in achieving it.

She has published six books so far, and five of them formed a so-called cycle of the "Red Man." The writer's cycle of stories that she also called "The voices of utopia." is about the Red Man, an archetypal representation of a Soviet man. *War's Unwomanly Face* tells us stories of the Soviet women who took part in WWII. Also published in 1985 (revised 2007), *Последние свидетели: сто недетских рассказов* (*Last Witnesses: a Hundred Un-Childlike Stories*) presents interviews with people who were between 6 and 12 years old during the war. It was followed by *Цинковые мальчики* (*Zinky Boys*) (1991) – a collection of memories from those who took part in the war in Afghanistan, and their family members, mostly mothers who received their dead sons back in Zinc coffins. Interviewees described the 10-year war framed by a great social and political shift in the USSR in the 1980s.

In 1997, the writer presented her book *Чернобыльская молитва* (*Voices from Chernobyl*) that had the subtitle *Хроника будущего* (*Chronicles of the Future*). It described memories of the people who suffered from the catastrophic nuclear plant explosion, and had to help bury their family members in an era when the entire Soviet country was on the verge of collapse. Alexievich's most recent book, *Время сэконд хэнд* (*Second Hand Time*) was published in 2013 and received both French and German book prizes; it is a set of interviews with different people who lived through the Soviet era, its collapse, and the post-Soviet present.

For each of her books, Svetlana Alexievich collects hundreds of stories (usually between 500 and 700), spending from four to seven years on each book. Her texts reflect the pain, suffering, and misery of people who are usually left outside the main stage of history. One of the features of Alexievich's works is the palette of interviewees; they came from different backgrounds and with different intellectual levels. Her narrators are very diverse and metaphorically represent colors in a large set of oil pigments; Alexievich works as an artist by choosing whose voice to use, how to mix it with others, and with what strength of brush strokes to bring in on canvas/paper. Those people would have been never interviewed for most newspapers or magazines, since their stories would have not been considered of any importance. Instead of following major historic events by looking at the decisions of political leaders at particular junctures of history, Alexievich turns to average people and how they lived through those times of turmoil.

Another feature of Alexievich is that she creates what could be regarded as an encyclopedia of life in 1940s – 2010s for the Soviet and post-Soviet people, by binding together their personal emotional stories. She collects the interviews together in a way

that suggests the principle of cinematic montage, transferred to the realm of spoken and juxtaposed texts. Instead of having a fixed plot and a set of characters, this technique of montage allows her to create a panoramic view of a certain historic event through the oral testimonies where the connection and change of fragments bring new—and possibly larger—meanings. The authorial message of each book is revealed through the number of elements: by the writer's voice, by the very selection of the interview excerpts, its further editing and adjustment, and by the cumulative emotional and factual story of the montaged fragments presented as a unified piece.

After studying her books, we determined the main features of Svetlana Alexievich's style. As much as she has been following most of the main principles of the genre developed by her artistic predecessors and mentors—most notably by AlexAdamovich—she has developed some specific principles that mark her literary individuality.

- 1) Alexievich turns to the stories told by pregnant women or about pregnant women.
- 2) She often includes stories told by children.
- 3) Svetlana Alexievich tends to place a terrifying act of violence in the middle of a neutral setting.
- 4) The writer often puts stories of terrible deaths in direct contrast with the beauty of nature around.
- 5) Alexievich gives her chapters unique titles.

The use of such techniques adds even more dramatic effect to the originally sad and terrifying stories. Alexievich knows what would affect her readers the most and how

to increase this reaction. Undoubtedly, narratives told by and about pregnant women and children would cause a very strong emotional response. The same can be said of the stories about juxtaposing unspeakable horrors in the middle of usual routine or at beautiful scenes of nature. The contrast between the ugliness of the killings, damaged human bodies and the beauty of the world around such atrocious human acts are especially striking. We could assume that it explains the reason why Svetlana Alexievich utilizes these techniques in her texts that reflect on some already enough tragic events of the 20th century history. She intensifies the emotional charge of her books and makes them highly dramatic.

Not only do the above-mentioned techniques allow her to achieve an impressive emotional impact on her audience. But as our close reading of one of her books also showed, Alexievich increases the dramatic grade of the selected narratives by editing them and further rewriting them into the text she wants to see.

Intrigued by the examination of two of Alexievich's books carried out by Sophie Pinkham, *Witness Tampering* (2016), we made our own study of one of the Belorussian writer's books in its four editions. Sophie Pinkham compared chapters from the yet untranslated into English book by the Belorussian writer, *Зачарованные смертью* (*Enchanted by Death*), 1993 and how the same chapters appeared in the most recent published book, the *Secondhand Time*, 2013. Pinkham found some discrepancies between those chapters, which she argues is tantamount to tampering with witnesses.

For our study, we decided to trace any possible differences between various editions of *Последние свидетели: книга детских рассказов* (*The Last Witnesses*) by Svetlana Alexievich. We used four texts: (1) *Последние свидетели: книга детских*

рассказов (Москва, Молодая гвардия, 198); (2) *У войны не женское лицо*.

Последние свидетели (Москва, Издательство Остожье, 1998); (3) *Последние*

свидетели: сто не детских колыбельных (Москва, Издательство Пальмира, 2004);

and (4) *Последние свидетели: соло для детского голоса* (Москва, Время, 2016).²¹¹

The *Last Witnesses* is a collection of testimonies of at that time adults who shared their memories about WWII when they were little children. They recalled a large variety of stories, starting from life in evacuation, to starvation and witnessing mass killings and hundreds of dead bodies, and to watching their parents being burnt alive, and then to killing Fascists by themselves.

Our study revealed a large number of differences. Some of them would be about the narrators' age and/or names. Some stories would have an added paragraph (usually, at the very beginning of chapters) in the later editions. Most of the added information that we saw in the editions of 2004 and 2016 were of psychological nature. For example, it would be details about a dead Nazi soldier, depicting beautiful Nazi boots, and describing dead bodies with detailed precision. But some specific chapters would be edited to such an extent that they would change the perception of the described events and the perception of the narrators. For example, the 1985 and 1998 editions have a chapter where a part of the narrative was a story about a woman who was asking the drivers of the cars passing by her to take care of her children while she would go back to protect the city from the Fascists. In the earlier two editions, it was said she did not believe that the Nazis would seize the city, while in the next two texts, she was said to be in denial that

²¹¹ [1) *Last Witnesses: Book of Un-Childlike Stories* (Moscow, 1985), 2) *The War's Unwomanly Face. Last Witnesses* (Moscow, 1998), 3) *Last Witnesses: One Hundred Un-Childlike Lullabies* (Moscow, 2004), 4) *Last Witnesses: a Solo for Child Voice* (Moscow, 2016). – my trans.]

the city had been already surrendered to the Nazi army. In some way, in the later editions, Alexievich was trying to de-mythologize and debunk the perception of WWII that had been previously constructed in the readers' minds. Some other examples would show how much Alexievich would change a personal narrative, in order to make the interviewee be perceived originally with sympathy for her difficult life conditions and loss of a family member, to then be perceived with pity for her naïve faith in the Soviet leaders and the Soviet mentality. Narrators who would appear just ordinary people in the 1985 and 1998 editions, later would be portrayed as people who were products of the Soviet time, with unshaken beliefs and idolizing attitude toward the Soviet leaders.

We also found one specific case when a whole paragraph would be replaced with a different text – the story about a badly burned cat would turn into a story of an abandoned neighbor's dog.

The discrepancies we found allowed us to make a conclusion that Alexievich changes the words in the transcripts of the interviews. She does not merely select the most dramatic parts of the testimonies, but she selects only some abstracts from them and then adjusts the selected passages to make them meet her artistic needs. As we know, the writer lived in Europe between 2000 and 2013, and it seems plausible that her own attitude toward the words of her former interviewees got changed together with the changes in herself. Among the four editions we studied within this research, the 2004 and 2016 texts showed the most significant alterations. It is unclear what motivated the writer to change older versions, but we could see how the later editions became more dramatic, more politically involved, and causing pity and condolences to the Soviet people. Such a change might be explained with that it was how Alexievich herself began to treat their

Soviet past, or the reason might be her intention to get her books a wider audience, especially a larger Western audience and to meet their needs.

In the future, we would like to expand our study and analyze various editions of Alexievich's *The War's Unwomanly Face*, the *Zinky Boys*, and the *Voices from Chernobyl*, to further comprehend how and in what capacity she changes her texts.

In her 1996 interview with the popular Soviet time magazine *Voprosy literatury*, Alexievich explained how she worked with the interview transcripts. She would select only the most striking fragments of the conversation, sometimes it would be only a paragraph or even a few sentences from the original 80-page long transcription. Then she would condense such stories into coherent narratives, editing, re-writing, and re-shaping them. Since the result would be a composite testimony with some parts of it being told by real witnesses and other parts added to it by Alexievich herself, she would change the name of the storyteller, because he or she would become a composite character. In the same interview, Alexievich explained that, for history, there was absolutely no difference if the narrative was told by Anna or by Klara.

In his interview with Radio Freedom («Радио Свобода») in 2016, the Belorussian journalist Sergey Naumchik told that he asked Alexievich if she was changing the texts of the interview transcripts and that her answer was “Yes, I do”.²¹² Even before asking that question, he had already noticed after reading numerous texts by Alexievich that she changes the beginning and the final parts of stories as well as some words. As Naumchik explained it, every fiction writer always combined something from other people and something that they want to say themselves.

²¹² Андрей Шарый, «Человек-ухо», Радио «Свобода», Svoboda.org, опубликовано 04 ноября 2016, <https://www.svoboda.org/a/28089028.html>.

We believe, it is important to understand this editing principle used by the Belorussian writer. She has her artistic right/license to change and re-write every text she has published, because it belongs to her as its author. But is it believed by her audience that her stories are verbatim transcripts of interviews with real people and that every story belongs to that one interviewee. The very genre, in which Svetlana Alexievich has supposedly been writing, is often considered to be non-fiction.

Based on the study we did, the texts of interviews seem to be a blended mixture of different words told by various people, edited, re-written, and re-assembled by Alexievich to meet her artistic plot. It would be ethically correct if the writer would explain her methods of writing her books to the readers. The words of the interview cannot and should not be manipulated, because they belong to the storyteller and reflect on him or her as a personality. If we understand that the texts we read in Alexievich's books are not exact interviews, but rather composite stories altered by the writer to produce a piece of literature, this ethical question would be resolved. It would be honest for all the storytellers who shared their testimonies, and for the readers of the books if Alexievich were to not only to mark her books as 'polyphonic novels', but openly explain her editing methods in the preface of every collection of her stories. Polyphonic novels are connected with Bahtin's theory of polyphony, where every character in a book does not merely represent a writer's thought, but is perceived as an autonomous voice with his or her set of mind, and where voices of different characters create a large polylogue, almost a world-large dialogue.²¹³

²¹³ Бахтин М.М. *Проблемы поэтики Достоевского*. Москва, Художественная литература, 1972. См. особенно главу 5.

Without such explanations, her tampering with the interview transcripts and with already published texts raise a serious question of the authenticity of her materials. If one of her books, *The Last Witnesses*, has already demonstrated Alexievich's manipulations with both the language used and the readers' perception of the narratives, we must assume the same has occurred with the other books she has written. One might ask themselves, "If the people in the testimonies say different words in different edition and if I change my opinion about what I am reading then what really happened back then? Was this historic event close to the way it is described in any of the editions or was it different?"

We find arguments about Alexievich's worthiness for the Nobel Prize, expressed by some scholars, very reasonable. Dmitry Bykov suggested that it would be Ales Adamovich who would have received the Nobel Prize in Literature if he had lived long enough, because he was the first writer in the genre of 'super-literature' developed and expanded by him and his colleagues and later followed by Alexievich²¹⁴. We could add that his method of complete authenticity, of giving the interview transcripts verbatim to preserve the voice of every individual, was more honest and noble in many ways. Vladimir Golstein has doubts about Svetlana Alexievich's Nobel merit too.²¹⁵

Despite all of the conflicting sides to Svetlana Alexievich's writing, her books are an integral part of a much larger group of 'eye-witness' literature, if we may call it so. In some way it combines books written by one author who witnessed and survived some

²¹⁴ Дмитрий Быков, *Один: сто ночей с читателем* (Москва: Издательство АСТ, 2017), 237.

²¹⁵ Vladimir Golstein, Svetlana Aleksijevitj – Sovjetintelligentians Röst (Stockholm, 2015), 5.

horrible events and later described his or her experiences in a literary text. We could name here V. Shalamov, N. Mandelshtam, and A. Solzhenitsyn, as well as books that combine multiple writers and genres, from personal letters to journalistic essays to official documents, like I. Ehrenburg and V. Grossman did in their *Black Book*. Books where writers include in the text both their own thoughts and attitude and interviews with other people, like Adamovich, Bryl, and Kolesnik in their *Out of the Fire*, like Granin and Adamovich in their *The Blockade Book*, and much later would be done by K. Dobrotvorskaya in the *Блокадные девочки (Blockade Girls)*, 2013. Then there are books by Alexievich dedicated to several wars, and one ecological catastrophe. After reading all her texts, there is no catharsis at the end of that path – on the contrary, the books gave an idea that with such a passion for weapons, killing, and humiliation of other people who are not ‘like us’, humankind is doomed to disappear. Perhaps, that was the main message that Ales Adamovich wanted to carry forward in his ‘super-literature’ – texts that would make us ashamed of who we are as humans, and how much we need to overpower our compulsion to indulge in violence while we still can. The topics of war, violence, and suffering would never be exhausted, since there is no year in the history of humankind when there were no wars in the world. The horrors of WWII are still alive in the memories of survivors. Some people tend not to be interested in these topics, while others are very passionate and fully involved in promoting such themes in all forms of art. It seems reasonable and justifiable in the light of the most recent survey held this February 2018 by the Conference on Jewish Material Claims Against Germany. They interviewed 1,350 American adults and came to the following conclusions. “Twenty-two percent of millennials in the poll said they haven’t heard of the Holocaust or are not sure whether

they've heard of it — twice the percentage of U.S. adults as a whole who said the same. [...] Asked to identify what Auschwitz is, 41 percent of respondents and 66 percent of millennials could not come up with a correct response identifying it as a concentration camp or extermination camp. [...] Perhaps because respondents feel that lack of knowledge is a real threat to the future: Fifty-eight percent said they believe something like the Holocaust could happen again.”²¹⁶

Even though our study did not include the topic of Holocaust, but the very nature of the survey above shows how quickly people forget about the ugliness of war, death, and suffer. Therefore, regardless of questions about fictional, semi-fictional, or non-fictional nature of Alexievich's texts, putting aside ethical questions of her editing methods, and omitting her worthiness of the Nobel Prize in literature, her books serve the purpose of educating new generations about the horrors and aftermaths of any violence, especially in the era of nuclear weapons that could bring the entire human race to an end.

Svetlana Alexievich's writing demonstrates a testimonial history of at least two or even three generations of people. Those sixty years of memory reflect on wars, country, identity, worldview, and self-identification of thousands – if not millions – of people in the former USSR. Her novelistic historical sweep undoubtedly cuts across conflicts of conscious, both from the side of storytellers and from the side of readers. Alexievich attempts to create a space for shared historical meditation. With that in mind, it seems like she strives not to repeat her interviewees, but rather to recreate the trauma of

²¹⁶ Julie Zauzmer, “Holocaust Study: Two-thirds of millennials don't know what Auschwitz is”, *Washington Post*, Washingtonpost.com, published April 12, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2018/04/12/two-thirds-of-millennials-dont-know-what-auschwitz-is-according-to-study-of-fading-holocaust-knowledge/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.ecf0ebb6c47d.

those people. If a reader could feel the trauma of the generation depicted in any of her books, then Alexievich's mission is in some way accomplished. The narrators and, later, the readers inevitably face self-reflection and self-analyses by evoking those past events and re-registering them long after they took place. As we may expect, some people accept the testimonies, while others reject them and strongly disagree with them. Alexievich's books cut open some of the hidden, rarely ever discussed, and often deeply suppressed painful issues of the Soviet and, to some extent, post-Soviet reality. Her metaphorical medical drainage of those issues within her texts brings about the bitter demythologization of those past historic periods. One might say that the idea of demythologization is a cornerstone concept for Svetlana Alexievich, and it comes as no surprise this notion does not sit easily in many people's minds.

We have already mentioned that her books often create a feeling of being at a rally, or sitting in a video control room, or listening to an oratorio, and even hearing polyphony of tones. It is rather impossible to read Alexievich's texts and remain focused on only one source, or voice. They are present in the body of her work all together as a whole; they are palpable and rather salient. By distancing ourselves from Alexievich's texts, we could immediately notice that what all her books have in common is their demand for an active role of the reader. Her reader is not merely a consumer; s/he is rather a participant, as well as a judge, companion, and even a confessor. No matter what role we as readers apply to ourselves, in the experience of reading Alexievich's books it takes on a significance that is equal to those of the interviewees and storytellers themselves. We are not on the other side of the page; we are on the page, and we co-live the history with the people who provide their testimonies. With every new chapter and a

new voice or video in that large stream of different paradigms, the trauma of that specific generation becomes recreated for us. Regardless of whether we agree to accept their truth value, Alexievich's texts do not allow anyone remain indifferent. That complies with the idea developed by Ales Adamovich: that literature is pain, and that it should make the reader feel deeply and act immediately. In at least some respects, there can be little doubt that Svetlana Alexievich has succeeded in achieving the goal of her literary teacher.

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