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## "The Raw Material of Talk:" Svetlana Alexievich's Literary and Humanistic Response to Suffering

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“The Raw Material of Talk:”

Svetlana Alexievich’s Literary and Humanistic Response to Suffering

Senior Project submitted to  
The Division of Social Studies  
of Bard College

by

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This is also dedicated to all writers who write despite censorship, to show us what we could not  
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*I don't always visit memory  
And it always surprises me.*

Anna Akhmatova

*I want to be understood by my country, but if I fail to be understood - what then?  
I shall pass through my native land to one side, like a shower of slanting rain.*

Vladimir Mayakovsky





## Introduction

This project constructed itself in small, fragmented moments. As most writing happens, I had not immediately decided to write on Svetlana Alexievich, and thought I would write more generally on trauma narratives of Soviet women. A friend from Smolny College, told me that much of Soviet history was still not openly talked about in classrooms. That the Gulag and the wars are brushed aside and “great Soviet heroicism” are written about in textbooks in lieu of other perspectives. I was surprised that this was still the case. I had read Svetlana Alexievich’s book *Voices from Chernobyl* in a class the previous spring, and then bought her book *The Unwomanly Face of War* the summer before my senior year. Voices from those books reminded me of this conversation. I was struck by the rawness and immediacy of the text. I felt it was without a doubt a narrative that lent itself to a Human Rights project, and the one I needed to write about. It reminded me that writing was often an urgency, a necessity. Writing is observing and describing people, feelings, and surroundings; but it is also an act of documenting and witnessing one’s own pain or that of others. It is a way of re-creating forgotten stories, and to take down the stories that might disappear, the ones that only live in the minds of individuals who perhaps have not had a chance to speak openly about them.

As a Human Rights major, I am interested in such aspects of authorship as listening, editing, and transforming a personal confessional account into a more objective documentary work. In Human Rights, many of these aspects of writer’s work get turned into forms of historical evidence, to the point of stories becoming witness-accounts.<sup>1</sup> The author who collects oral histories perceives and records the voice of the interviewee, but she also has a goal of

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<sup>1</sup> Wendy S. Hesford, “Human Rights Rhetoric of Recognition,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, vol. 41, no. 3 (2011): 285.

sharing her own perspective to the reader through the text. She also accepts a perspective of someone who has directly experienced their own trauma as a truth different from the “bigger” facts of history.<sup>2</sup> In documentary prose, voices of survivors often are cited as documents, because they describe what happened or respond to past events in their own words, from their own experience. History within us is memory, but when we write about it, it gets tinted with various parts of ourselves. Those who write the past, however hard it may be, use words that are not directly generated by their experiences as either survivors or witnesses. They may not even be their own words.

In my project, I address the problem of authorship as a way of endowing survivors with language that is not part of a totalitarian state’s historical vocabulary. Soviet totalitarianism is my case study, while the question of author’s relationship with the past selves of those who lived through it and her strategies in documenting history and its human rights violations are my chief subjects. In studying three works by Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: And Oral History of Women in World War Two* (1985), *Voices from Chernobyl: An Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (1997), and *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (2013), I engage in a literary analysis based on the study of the narrative structure, polyphony, and linguistic complexity of her texts. To explain how Alexievich achieved her goals as an author and public intellectual, I also investigate the literary institutions that participated in the construction of Soviet ideology and identity, such as censorship, scholarship, and mass media, as well as private discourses unmediated by the state. Additionally, I study Post-Soviet authorship as a phenomenon that has developed after some of the restrictions on free speech ended. My goal is to explain Alexievich’s

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<sup>2</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, “In Search of the Free Individual: The History of the Russian-Soviet Soul,” Trans. Jamey Gambrell. *Cornell Global Perspectives, Distinguished Speaker Series*. (Cornell University Press, 2018).

unique type of authorship that evolved through her accumulation of statements by survivors who were not – and would never be – authors. In my opinion, her authorial techniques are somewhat similar to the investigative work and advocacy of some human rights activists, specifically because they endow the previously silent populations with a powerful, often accusatory, voice.

Alexievich is the author of six documentary volumes about Soviet people's experiences in the time of crisis. In addition to the volumes already mentioned, there are *Last Witnesses: An Oral History of the Children of World War II* (1985), *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* (1989), and *Enchanted with Death* (1993). Trained as a journalist, she is an essayist and non-fiction writer from Belarus who writes in Russian and who used to live in Paris and Berlin (in 2011, she moved back to Minsk). An oral historian in her own right, Alexievich once described herself as a “human ear,”<sup>3</sup> in response to novelist Gustave Flaubert who called himself a human pen. The “ear” metaphor is apt: Alexievich is a listener and recorder. Her writing draws from her own conversations with individuals, which can last hours or days, taking place in kitchens or living rooms. She often emphasizes that these are not interviews, but, rather, conversations between friends.<sup>4</sup> After selecting segments from her recordings, she creates a prose-like narrative, a flow of text uninterrupted by any critical or fictional narration. In fact, she often titles her chapters “monologues” or “choruses,” emphasizing the primacy of writing within the oral history mode. Thinking that journalism does not allow for the exploration of human emotions that she is searching for, she wants to capture the conversational side that is rarely represented on its own in any other literary form.

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<sup>3</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, Nobel Lecture. NobelPrize.org. (2015). <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/lecture> (Accessed October 15, 2018).

<sup>4</sup> “Our Own Memory: A Q&A with Svetlana Alexievich”, *Sampsonia Way Magazine*, March 13, 2017. (Accessed March 2019).

Since Alexievich hardly includes her own voice in her narratives, or lists the questions that she asks, the impression of her books make is that of her interlocutors speaking for themselves. Nevertheless, her authorial presence is almost stronger in this lack of narrative presence. In her role as a conversationalist, she makes others relate their most intimate experiences to her. Because of this she should also be considered a humanist, or a human rights observer on a mission to get the unspoken truths out. Alexievich in my mind bridges the gap between history and memory. She makes individual historical experiences matter. The documentary accounts of traumatic events that she gathers for other people to read are based neither on the sweeping, generalized, and heavily ideologized representation of history by a nation or a state nor on her own perception, but rather, it encompasses the perspectives of those who had first-hand interactions with such tragic events as wars, political and environmental crises, and state violence.

Alexievich was awarded the Nobel prize in Literature in 2015, and her speech at the award ceremony may be studied as an indication of what motivates her to listen and to write:

They say to me: well, memories are neither history nor literature. They're simply life, full of rubbish and not tidied up by the hand of an artist. The raw material of talk, every day is filled with it. These bricks lie about everywhere. But bricks don't make temple! But for me it is all different... It is precisely there, in the warm human voice, in the living reflection of the past, that the primordial joy is concealed and the insurmountable tragedy of life is laid bare. Its chaos and passion. Its uniqueness and inscrutability. Not yet subjected to any treatment. The originals. I build temples out of our feelings... Out of our desires, our disappointments. Dreams. Out of that which was, but might slip away.<sup>5</sup>

The “raw” and “warm human voice” is what draws Alexievich to distill memories from conversations and give value to them by emphasizing the survivors’ direct words and feelings.

The specific genre that categorizes her work can be called testimonial literature, but it is also

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

something beyond that. Historian Maria Tumarkin reflects on the perplexity contemporary scholars experience when studying Alexievich's method. "No term is quite right in fact," Tumarkin writes. "People's history? Collective history? Collective novel? Documentary prose? Novel-oratorio? Novel-evidence? Living document?"<sup>6</sup> To me, Alexievich's achievement is a hybrid form. The author acts as a witness to human suffering as well as a bridge between the human voices she hears and the text she produces. Since she is capable of translating human experiences of suffering into a readable form, she is also the one who makes readers feel they are themselves listening to these conversations, "not yet subjected to any treatment." I am interested in Alexievich because I find this new genre that explores and includes the "raw material of talk" to be artistically original but also important from the perspective of the author's civic duty – she is not an activist by profession, but her ability to point out human rights violations is uncanny. Alexievich fights against injustice and suffering by means of words delivered by victims, as if she is silently advocating for them.<sup>7</sup>

Since many voices are speaking at once in the oral histories compiled by Alexievich, her writing is often described as "polyphonic,"<sup>8</sup> which means dialogical, with several opinions, visions, or reflections on the past intermingling and complementing one another. Subhash Jaireth further analyzes this polyphony by suggesting that, "like an expert conductor, Alexievich creates the ambience essential for these voices to be heard on their own terms."<sup>9</sup> This conception was also used by the Nobel Prize committee, which gave the award to Alexievich "for her polyphonic

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<sup>6</sup> Maria Tumarkin, "The Alexievich Method," TEXT Special Issue 42: *Writing and Trauma* (October 2017): 2.

<sup>7</sup> Stephen Hopgood, "Telling The Truth About Suffering." In *Keepers of the Flame: Understanding Amnesty International*, 1st ed. (Cornell University Press, 2006): 90.

<sup>8</sup> Polyphony is a style conceptualized by Russian author and theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, but the term exists in music analyses. Bakhtin wrote about it in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Translated by Caryl Emerson. In *Theory and History of Literature*, Volume 8. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).

<sup>9</sup> Subhash Jaireth, "Through The Eyes of A Humanist: The Polyphonic Realities of Svetlana Alexievich," *Overland*, Volume 226 (Autumn 2017).

writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.” It is interesting to note the clash of two notions in this nomination statement – polyphony, which is fluid and ever-evolving, is mentioned together with monumentality, which is usually monological and set in stone. And yet, there is no contradiction here. Alexievich shares her dialogues with others with such gravity and embeds her conversations with survivors with such humanistic sensibility that they do acquire a timeless quality, like a memorial created on a book page.

Toni Morrison once said, “There is no time for despair, no place for self-pity, no need for silence, no room for fear. We speak, we write, we do language. That is how civilizations heal.”<sup>10</sup> When writers express their pain or that of others, they save lives. Authors “do language” but they also provide others with a language of their own. In the case of war, disaster, and government violence, it is important to examine first-hand stories by survivors, because the attention survivors receive may help them feel alive, pitied, and recognized as important human beings. The examination also brings a personalized aspect of disastrous events to the surface of historical analysis. As a listener, Alexievich gives her interviewees the space to remember what the grand history narrative may have preferred to forget. They speak to her on the subjects they had not before been able to make public. I am looking deeper into Alexievich’s ability to write history using the voices of others as her primary source. How does she make it appear as though the survivor is speaking directly to the reader? Why does she “disappear” from the text, fully efface herself from the narrative? What are the roles of authors in communication with survivors as co-witnesses, judges, sympathetic healers?

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<sup>10</sup> Toni Morrison, “No Place for Self-Pity, No Room for Fear,” *The Nation* (2015).

Alexievich herself admitted<sup>11</sup> that she was partly inspired by the Belarusian author Ales Adamovich whose *Out of the Fire* (1977) and *Leningrad Under Siege: First-Hand Accounts of the Ordeal* (1979) are similar testimony-based narratives, which included voices of survivors as “first-hand accounts.” A contemporary novel that is similar to Alexievich’s books in its method of using first-hand storytellers is *Lost Children Archive* by Valeria Luiselli. It is a fictional tale of a woman collecting oral histories of minors left without parents’ care at the Mexican-American border.<sup>12</sup> The characters in Luiselli’s book are attempting to create an archive of sounds of lost children – the task which parallels Alexievich’s attempts at capturing lost and forgotten voices of survivors of Soviet traumas. What distinguishes Alexievich from other authors, however, is that she leaves out many descriptions, interpretations, or observations, that Adamovich or Luiselli do not include, allowing the personal accounts to be leading the text. This is why we can say that her books reveal an in-depth grasp of human attachment, not modified by constraints of ideology. “My wish is to humanize history,” she explains.<sup>13</sup> “I collect the everyday life of feelings, thoughts, and words. I collect the life of my time. I’m interested in the history of the soul.”<sup>14</sup>

Cathy Caruth wrote that, “if Freud turns to literature to describe traumatic experience, it is because literature, like psychoanalysis, is interested in the complex relation between knowing and not knowing. And it is, indeed at the specific point at which knowing and not knowing intersect that the language of literature and the psychoanalytic theory of traumatic experience

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<sup>11</sup> Mieke Chew, “Suitcase Full of Candy: An Interview with Svetlana Alexievich” *The Paris Review* (October 16, 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Gaiutra Bahadur, “Valeria Luiselli Traces the Youngest Casualties of the Border Crisis,” *The New York Times Review of Books* (March 6, 2019).

<sup>13</sup> Elizabeth Kuruvilla, “Svetlana Alexievich: A History of the Soul,” *Mint* (12 November 2016).

<sup>14</sup> Alexievich, Svetlana. Nobel Lecture (2015).



precisely meet.”<sup>15</sup> In historical non-fiction, writers attempt to make sense of the past. This past has already disappeared from their view, but they are still exploring it in the reality of their time. The ambiguity of their task is the absence of the immediate object of their research. They need to go to survivors, archives, literary and historical accounts of the events that they personally did not participate in. Writing about war and political terror is even more ambiguous. An author has to write about such momentous, painful, but also repressed by the totalitarian state experiences. To do so, she needs sources and witnesses to make sure that the stories she uncovers remain uncensored. As I stated before, Alexievich wants to bring the conversational side to literature, a more humanistic approach to journalism. Because of the nature of historical events Alexievich explores, her witness accounts possess a certain brutality. They are stories full of gory details: babies smothered to death by their own mothers; husbands whose bodies disintegrate under the hands of their wives; sons returning home to their mothers in Zink coffins; suicidal heads of state. Due to the nature of these tragic experiences, the stories that survivors tell may seem too difficult to some authors to confront. Writers of documentary prose may attempt to mollify their own experiences or those of others, to make them less dramatic. Alexievich never does that. “I’m interested in little people. The little, great people, is how I would put it, because suffering expands people. In my books these people tell their own, little histories, and big history is told along the way. We haven’t had time to comprehend what already has and is still happening to us, we just need to say it. To begin with, we must at least articulate what happened.”<sup>16</sup> Alexievich’s listening is a form of witnessing. She is grasping at a language, searching for how first-hand

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<sup>15</sup> Cathy Caruth, “The Wound and the Voice,” *Unclaimed Experience: Trauma, Narrative, and History*. (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996), 3.

<sup>16</sup> Alexievich, Nobel Lecture.

experiencers tell their own “little histories,” and as Caruth puts it “the complex relation between knowing and not knowing.”

My Chapter One offers an analysis of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, which I investigate as a polyphonic oral history of World War Two. I explore in it how an author makes the experience of little-known individuals heard, by allowing women soldiers and war survivors to speak aloud about their trauma. Women, and especially Soviet women, have been an under-represented and often ignored voice in Soviet and, broader, international cultural memory. Women such as those interviewed by Alexievich are important to the creation and re-visiting of cultural memories because the “collective narrative templates”<sup>17</sup> that the Soviet state imposed on its authors and readers were mostly masculine representations of trauma in Socialist Realist literature. By listening to stories of women soldiers, snipers, and nurses, Alexievich rewrites the history of the war that once portrayed self-sacrificing heroicism, and instead puts onto paper the “little histories” so that they can be heard.

In Chapter Two, I explore *Voices from Chernobyl*, a collection of narratives by individuals who either lost loved ones to the nuclear accident or who were evacuated from their homes in its aftermath. Since the USSR collapsed five years later, many felt a loss of identity in terms of citizenship. Chernobyl was cut off from the rest of the Soviet Empire, because of the threat of real contamination, but also because the Soviet government was afraid of the information about its failure to prevent or respond to the disaster spreading around the world. The voices that speak to Alexievich are those of liquidators, workers in the plant, and survivors who had seen loved ones die from radiation. They feel objectified in the aftermath of an

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<sup>17</sup> James V. Wertsch, “Blank Spots in Collective Memory: A Case Study of Russia,” *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. Vol. 617 (2008), 58.

incomprehensible disaster, but the book written by Alexievich removes that solipsistic aspect of their existence by making thousands of readers relate to their narratives of pain.

Lastly, I investigate *Secondhand Time* as showing how sometimes speaking about trauma does not necessarily help to heal. This book fluctuates between past and present since survivors have even less of a language to understand their present history, and reveals a more fragmented narrative. The voices speaking to Alexievich are both nostalgic and resentful, confused by the state they are in while longing for ways to describe it. This book is also a difficult task for Alexievich to write, as it is closest to her own life in its timeframe and I will analyze it as partly autobiographical story.

Methodologically, I want to explore works on oral histories in literature, trauma and memory theories, works on the Soviet mind, Human Rights texts, and works about authorship and narrative voice. Authors like Roland Barthes and Michel Foucault have written their own definitions of what an author is. Jacques Rancière has reflected on the idea of the “subject” in human rights, and authors such as Cathy Caruth and Shoshana Felman have looked into trauma and identity. Sheila Fitzpatrick, Alexander Etkind, and Svetlana Boym are writers who have written more specifically about Russia and whose theories I rely on to understand the mentalities of Alexievich’s interviewees. Through these and other texts, I explore works by Svetlana Alexievich through an analysis of her writing method. She gives value to the small, “raw” human voice. I provide both the historical and the narratological perspective on her act of telling a story from painful memories.

The editions that I am working on are Alexievich’s translated works which were re-published in the 2000s, since most of her first editions, written in Russian, had been modified by Soviet censors. Works by Svetlana Alexievich are rarely analyzed in the academic sphere or

literary criticisms. Though this project is centered on these books about Soviet individuals, its themes are universal. There are common threads in all Alexievich's works, and her method for writing is similar in all of them. That said, *The Unwomanly Face of War*, *Voices from Chernobyl*, and *Secondhand Time* offer a different thematic approach to a similar way of recording and documenting that are necessary to write through the lens of literature – a medium that gives the “raw material of talk” the ability to be valued as an important document for a better understanding of the past. Alexievich's work is an example of a broader scope of universal experiences, and these theoretical texts can also be applied to many more events and forms of documenting a past, of listening to survivors, and processing historical events through various “smaller” histories.

## Chapter One

### Living Pain, Narrating Trauma

*The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War Two*, published in 1985, tells an important story of war as national sacrifice, documenting an especially traumatic, but mostly overlooked, experience that affected the country's female population. For many women who recall their time during the war, those Alexievich calls "the young girls of 1941," being a soldier often meant giving up one's sense of self in order to survive. Surrounded by death and fear, they had to surrender to the most inhumane situations, and yet they somehow remained alive and capable of a productive life in later years. Soviet ideology encouraged everyone to sacrifice oneself for the sake of the nation, giving up everything so that the country could win. That said, in spite of schematic, almost propagandistic Soviet texts from the 1930-80s, there still exist narratives about that period that explore its pain and deal directly with victims and their individual tragedies. Soviet war literature includes memoirs, such as Nikolai Nikulin's *Memories of War*, novels, such as Konstantin Simonov's *The Living and the Dead*, diaries, such as *A Writer at War* by Vassily Grossman, and autobiographies and oral histories as well. Literature about Great Terror now incorporates such works as *The Gulag Archipelago* by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, or *The Dawns Here are Quiet* by Boris Vassilyev. Those works, both fictional and non-fictional, adjust the schematic narrative templates for depicting about life in the Soviet Union in the 1930-40s, provided by Soviet historians, documentary authors, and writers of fiction. However, I also find it important to address Alexievich's work on the subject, because it incorporates narratives created by women, helping the reader find out how women survivors' human rights were violated during the war. My goal is to compare women storytellers' attempts to express themselves in the post-traumatic situation of reminiscing about the war and the

authors' desire to supplement the Soviet documentary prose written after the war with a more precise account of the historical events.

The women Alexievich featured in her book survived mostly for themselves, and, when they were interviewed, they didn't see their survival as heroic. Instead, they spoke about their feeling dirty, lost, and hopeless - the opposite of a resourceful, neat, emotionally stable Soviet heroines of novels and films about the "Great Patriotic War."<sup>18</sup> For instance, Zinaida Vasilyevna, a woman interviewed for the book, said "I realized that if I told the truth they would send me to some children's home."<sup>19</sup> Other women, too, confessed that no one would listen to their stories, because they did not wish to associate themselves with this ideal portrayal of women's self-sacrifice for the Soviet cause.

In the Soviet Union, the number of World War Two casualties fluctuates between 20 million and 40 million<sup>20</sup>. Soviet historians and documentary writers recognized the impact of the war on the nation and mourned its casualties, but they did not always consider individual accounts of the war, and especially stories of civilians' or the army men's suffering, as important as the facts of epic proportion: the outcome of battles, for example, or the overall heroic behavior of the Soviet population.<sup>21</sup> In Anne Applebaum's essay "Gulag: A History," she explains why lives of women and children in the labor camps were mostly forgotten: "among many ex-male prisoners the opposite point of view prevails: that women deteriorated, morally, more rapidly than men."<sup>22</sup> Their war stories did not make it to the reader, either, the reason for it being the

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<sup>18</sup> The Soviet Union called World War Two the "Great Patriotic War."

<sup>19</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, Transl. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (Random House, 1985), 143.

<sup>20</sup> Nove, Alec "Victims of Stalinism: How Many?", in Getty, J. Arch; Manning, Roberta T., in *Stalinist Terror: New Perspectives*, Cambridge University Press. (1993)

<sup>21</sup> Kathleen E. Smith, "Patriotic Divisions," *Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory in the Yeltsin Era*. (Cornell University Press 2002), 173.

<sup>22</sup> Anna Applebaum, "Gulag: A History," (Anchor Books, 2004), 312.

Soviet state's desire to present the war mostly in a heroic light. In telling the story of WWII, Soviet historians and writers of fiction followed a narrative template created by the state, which, according to James Wertsch, focuses on the ideologically acceptable version of historic events: it ignores individual experiences and, therefore, contains many omissions. In his "Blank Spots in Collective Memory: A Case Study of Russia" Wertsch states that "the narrative in this case is schematic in the sense that it exists at an abstract level involving few details about specific actors, times, places, and so forth."<sup>23</sup> To the critic, it seems that post-war Russian textbooks, historical accounts, and novels often avoided delving deeper into the actual details of war experience – women's stories included. Instead, their authors emphasized the only one kind of historical reality – the nation's victory in war at all costs. The cultural memory they created was, in the words of another intellectual historian, Alexander Etkind, "warped"<sup>24</sup>; "the very nature of the Soviet terror makes it difficult to comprehend, remember, and memorialize."

The Soviet government tried to create a polished, heroicized history of its existence that contradicted many individual memories. Some of them were not heroic, which is why stories of victims of war and state terror were often excluded from the official historical narrative. Many histories, textbooks, and critical works published in the Soviet Union after the Great Terror and World War II do not extensively cite individual accounts of survivors. Soviet ideology saw representations of the war as needing to be positive and nationalistic. In Soviet literature, descriptions of World War Two are often leaning towards the purely schematic, such as an outline of a battle scene or a story of an individual's giving up his or her life for the motherland, while depictions of state violence, rampant on the battlefield and the home front alike, are fully

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<sup>23</sup> Wertsch, "Blank Spots," 10.

<sup>24</sup> Alexander Etkind, *Warped Mourning: Stories of the Undead in the Land of the Unburied*. (Stanford University Press, 2013), 11.

omitted.<sup>25</sup> For decades, Russian readers knew only the official representation of war; they knew very little about political terror. Soviet literature did not recognize every aspect of the brutal historical experience of the nation, including the dehumanizing details of fighting against the powerful enemy, serving a term in a labor camp, or dealing with consequences of these past experiences. Soviet people were all survivors, but they were especially conditioned to discuss their past either as glorious or as part of one big truth, the official narrative constructed by the state that had a specific ideological agenda. Women's histories, especially, were often written out of history.<sup>26</sup>

In this chapter, I will explore the role Alexievich played in helping her subjects construct their own trauma narratives about the war. Her book, in my opinion, questions the existing paradigm of war history and contributes to the formation of a new, more attuned to individual experiences and reflections, collective memory of the tragic event. I am first going to analyze women's war stories about the war as it was, without any heroic embellishments, relying on James Wertsch's analysis of Russian cultural memory politics and the rhetorical templates the state constructed for the representation of its past. Secondly, I will look at the ways in which the individuals combatted the Soviet idea of nearly obligatory self-sacrifice by trying to survive against all odds; I am especially interested in how women tried to preserve their humanity and save their lives. Lastly, I am going to investigate how Alexievich's interviewees struggled with the challenge of narrating trauma. I am going to study the role of the author in helping them find words to tell the story.

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<sup>25</sup> Yuliya Minkova, *Making Martyrs: The Language of Sacrifice in Russian Culture from Stalin to Putin*. (University of Rochester Press, 2018).

<sup>26</sup> Scott, Joan W. "Women and War: A Focus for Rewriting History." In *Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1984), 3.



### 1.1. A Survivor's Tale: The War as an Individual Experience

In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich has collected stories from women who served in the Soviet Army between 1941 and 1945. The author is interested in women at war, perhaps because she grew up in Belorussia, where every female of her parents' generation was a survivor and stories about the war were being shared in familial conversations. In her Nobel Prize Acceptance Speech, the author made this dimension of her personal involvement with women's war experience apparent:

I grew up in the countryside. As children, we loved to play outdoors, but come evening, the voices of tired village women who gathered on benches near their cottages drew us like magnets. None of them had husbands, fathers or brothers. I don't remember men in our village after World War II: during the war, one out of four Belarussians perished, either fighting at the front or with the partisans. After the war, we children lived in a world of women. What I remember most, is that women talked about love, not death. They would tell stories about saying goodbye to the men they loved the day before they went to war, they would talk about waiting for them, and how they were still waiting. Years had passed, but they continued to wait [...] I lived in a country where dying was taught to us from childhood. We were taught death. We were told that human beings exist in order to give everything they have, to burn out, to sacrifice themselves.<sup>27</sup>

Judging from this statement, there is a clear distinction, for Alexievich, between the history of the war that was taught, and the memories that existed in family stories, shared mostly in private settings. History is factual, it usually consists of reciting numbers of war fatalities or dates on which certain events took place ("we were taught death"). Memory, however, is personal and emotional. Not everyone experiences the same war or remembers the same events. Pierre Nora wrote that memory is a part of life, that it is constantly changing among societies that reflect on them.<sup>28</sup> Nora is different in his approach to memory, however, in that he focuses less on the individual. In his "Lieux de Memoire" essay, he explains that sites of history are what create

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<sup>27</sup> Alexievich, Nobel Lecture.

<sup>28</sup> Pierre Nora, "Between Memory and History: Les Lieux De Mémoire." *Representations*, no. 26 (1989), 8.

memories, and that symbols and monuments remind the public of their shared past and create a collective memory, that is living and evolving.

Alexievich is interested in the individual, and specifically in the way women speak about emotional details rather than in their perspective on battle stories, which are most of what collective historical memories represent. Soviet Women being taught how to be heroic at war has been studied by many historians. Anna Krylova, for instance, wrote an essay titled “Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front”<sup>29</sup> in which she wrote the history of women as women as soldiers. Alexievich refers to document their grieving over their lost love rather than having them describe the scenes of killing, which Krylova does as well - attempting to understand the complex gender roles at stake during a war when everyone is involved. This is why Alexievich also describes the absence that women in her familial circle felt during the days of combat (“They would tell stories about saying goodbye to the men they loved the day before they went to war”) and continued to feel after the country won its victory (“years had passed, but they continued to wait”). Their memories are combined with their feelings, and she is writing their history through how they remember love, instead of the historical “death” that was taught.

Alexievich in particular interests me as a writer capable of informing her readers truthfully about what has happened.<sup>30</sup> She does not feel the need to represent heroic voices, such as those of decorated war officers,<sup>31</sup> but rather, she is aiming for an insight into an individual’s own experience of the war, depicting it as it was for them instead of the heroic historical

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<sup>29</sup> Anna Krylova, “Soviet Women in Combat: A History of Violence on the Eastern Front,” (Cambridge University Press 2011).

<sup>30</sup> I use the word “truthfully” here to indicate that she did not exclude seemingly important mundane details, nor did she censor the work of others. I also want to find out how she creates a cathartic moment for the people she interviews, those who lived through the trauma and “truthful” seems to be the only word to describe an honest retelling.

<sup>31</sup> Elizabeth Wein, *A Thousand Sisters: The Heroic Airwomen of the Soviet Union in World War II* (New York: Harper Collins, 2019).

tradition. When she says, in her Nobel speech, that she does not remember men survivors in her village after WWII, she is pointing out the absence of storytellers who could narrate the history of combat. She reports on what she heard, and those “marginal” stories by women are just as important for her as they are rich in details and emotions. During the war, there were more than two thousand Soviet female snipers, and only about five-hundred of those survived.<sup>32</sup>

Alexievich’s introductions to the women she spoke to over the course of several years are clear and simple. In the beginning of every narrative segment, she includes their name and the position they held during the war. The rest of the words are their own. One particular passage that struck me was of Liubov Ivanovna Liubchik – the woman whose first name and surname literally mean “love.” During the war, she was a commander of a machine-gun platoon. In one passage, Liubchik describes to Alexievich the feelings of de-humanization that came with her war experiences.

A machine gun is heavy; you have to drag it with you. You feel like a horse. It’s night. You stand watch and listen to every sound. Like a lynx. Wary of every rustle... In war they say you’re half man and half beast. It’s true. There’s no other way to survive. If you’re just a human being- you won’t stay whole. You’ll get bashed in the belfry! In war you have to remember something about yourself. Something...Remember something from when a man was not quite a man yet... I’m not very educated. I’m a simple accountant, but that I know. I got as far as Warsaw...And all on foot...The infantry, as they say, is the wartime proletariat. We crawled on our stomachs...Don’t ask me anymore...I don’t like books about war. About heroes... We went sick, coughing, sleepy, dirty, poorly dressed. Often hungry...But we won!<sup>33</sup>

Liubchik describes the struggle of realizing that she is losing a part of her humanity to the mentality of war, which presupposes women’s complete surrender to the brutality of the military action and the inevitability of physical and mental violence. She emphasizes the necessity to remember a part of oneself in the time of crisis (“In war you have to remember something about

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<sup>32</sup> Henry Sakaïda, *Heroines of the Soviet Union 1941–45* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2012).

<sup>33</sup> Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 47.

yourself. Something...Remember something from when a man was not quite a man yet”).

According to Liubchik, however, one survives not only because of becoming a “half-beast”, that is, giving in to the most basic instincts and urges, which may often be violent. There is obviously a struggle between one’s trying to remain civilized and the dire need to function on the physical level (“We crawled on our stomachs [...] We went sick, coughing, sleepy, dirty, poorly dressed”). When Alexievich brings Liubchik to share her war story, it appears not at all the women marching on or helping male soldiers that works of war fiction or media reports have given in to the war’s demands. Instead, we as readers are facing a vulnerable individual who is combatting an inner conflict: the desire to remain human and the dire need to survive by means of acquiring an uncivilized, non-human, “beastly,” personae.

Remembering is not a simple, passive act, but it involves a very active and sensory re-experiencing of the past – it is a dramatic, unpleasant, even violent or even possible to do.<sup>34</sup> Oftentimes, it requires being put in that past mindset again, which is often painful.<sup>35</sup> In this particular example, Liubchik is both a character in her story and its narrator. She lived through the war, but she also described her experience to Alexievich who listened to her and recorded her story and, in turn, made us, readers, face her experience through her words. Thanks to the narratives like Liubchik’s, the dramatic history of Russian and Belorussian women soldiers comes alive on the pages of *The Unwomanly Face of War*. As a collection of individual voices, Alexievich’s volume reveals how survivors deal with pain when they reflect on their traumatic past and their conflicted self-perception then and now. Liubchik’s pain and inner conflict are reflective of how women are described as heroic in WWII narratives.

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<sup>34</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, Transl. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (The University of Chicago Press, 2004).

<sup>35</sup> Susan J. Brison, “Trauma Narratives and the Remaking of the Self,” *Acts of Memory, Cultural Recall in the Present*. Edited by Mieke Bal, Jonathan Crewe, and Leo Spritzer. (Dartmouth College, 1999).

Wertsch said that “collective memory tends to reflect a single, subjective, committed perspective of a group from the present, whereas formal history strives to be objective and to distance itself from the present and any particular perspective currently in favor. In addition, collective memory leaves little room for doubt or ambiguity about events and the motivations of actors, whereas formal history strives to take into account multiple, complex factors and motives that shape events.”<sup>36</sup> In my opinion, however, individual accounts offer a singular perspective that is in-between past and present. In the aftermath of a traumatic event, there is more ambiguity and doubt about a person’s identity. In Liubchik’s story, women are miserable, uncouth, and unwell: in her words, they fought while being “sick, coughing, sleepy, dirty, poorly dressed. Often hungry.” The survivor finds it hard to tell her own story. “Don’t ask me anymore...I don’t like books about war. About heroes,” she begs to Alexievich. The author includes this plea in her narrative to show how hard it is for her interlocutor to move on, making explicit the pain she experiences in remembering her unheroic and unwomanly story of survival. When Liubchik says “don’t ask me,” she is stating that she cannot speak about her memories anymore because they are too difficult to confront. Nevertheless, Alexievich prompts Liubchik to probe the difficult past deeper, thus helping her overcome the reluctance to deal with trauma.

Alexievich as the author questions her subjects, often against their will. She both perceives and confirms the survivors’ truth. When Alexievich cites Liubchik’s words, “I don’t like books about war. About heroes...,” she implies that her own volume will be different. The “heroes” from the constructed Soviet narrative template will not exist in it. When Alexievich interviews people who, possibly, are her former neighbors, acquaintances, as well as women with whom she grew up, she is playing the role of a gatherer of facts – collaging the bits of what

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<sup>36</sup> Wertsch, “Blank Spots,” 60.

the others were saying and displaying their narratives in such a way that their pain in revealing those truths becomes apparent. This is why, Alexievich's role as a gatherer and recorder of truth is not at all passive. Her interjections sometimes remind us that she is not the one writing, but rather the one who listens actively. We understand that she is there to invite the interviewee to re-experience the past fully, without avoiding the painful details. Alexievich, who, for the most part, does not even include her own questions in the text, does record responses of the interviewed people in such a way that they testify to her continuous presence in the text. For example, when Liubchik tells her story while addressing another person (“[...] you have to drag it with you. You feel like a horse. It's night. You stand watch and listen to every sound.”), it is clear that the storytelling is part of a real conversation. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, individual narratives stand alone in their significance, as if created without an interlocutor, but an insightful reader knows that without questions and prompts from the author, the narrators would have not stated the facts with such precision and bravery.

## 1.2. Warped Identities: Women Confronting Violence

The Soviet mentality generally included an idea of self-sacrifice as heroic and anticipated behavior for citizens. However, when the war ended, the government wanted women to be portrayed as feminine and ideal for the role of a mother, no longer remembered as soldiers. In an essay on militarization of women, Cynthia Enloe tells us that “thousands of women who had fought as gunners and snipers retroactively would be listed officially as medics and nurses - as if this historical reassigning could preserve an orthodox version of Soviet femininity for the next

generation.”<sup>37</sup> Soviet women were caught between both identities, having to deal with the trauma they faced during the war and the conflicting repression and ignoring of their role during the war.

I am going to analyze women’s identities from the perspective of Alexievich, differing from other writers of World War Two. Her method is different, since we discover their own personal accounts, which is not the case for many other books about women at war. Chapters in *The Unwomanly Face of War* are based on details that Alexievich’s war survivors gave to her. There is no chronological structure; the narrative is separated into themes with unusual titles, such as “Of the Smell of Fear and a Suitcase of Candy” or “Of Dolls and Rifles”. The author offsets the harshness of war conditions with a human detail. Something funny or sweet may make an appearance, reminding us that amidst all this horror there was still a human thinking, feeling and remembering. Some women contribute long descriptive paragraphs, others, smaller stories. Some state their first and last names, while others have had their names changed or introduce themselves only by their first name, for the sake of their privacy. The stories Alexievich collected are from soldiers, nurses, underground fighters, and telegraphers, and we definitely see that they all had individualized perspectives on the war. As Angela Brintlinger says on Alexievich, “[in] her conversations with women veterans Alexievich sought unknown veterans, those who could offer her the kind of “people’s memory” she wanted to chronicle, what she saw as the unknown story, the ‘women’s story.’”<sup>38</sup>

Liubchik’s story is in the second chapter, which carries the title: “Grow up girls...you’re still green!” Although Alexievich’s chapter themes are not restrictive (other chapters may have

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<sup>37</sup> Cynthia Enloe, *Maneuvers: The International Politics of Militarizing Women's Lives*, (Berkeley: University of California, 2000), 218.

<sup>38</sup> Angela Brintlinger, “Eyewitnesses to Heroism: Emmanuil Kazakevich and Vera Panova,” *Chapaev and His Comrades: War and the Russian Literary Hero across the Twentieth Century*, (Brighton, MA: Academic Studies, 2012).

stories that share the same theme), this one seems to be on departing and returning, on what the women took with them to war and what they came back with – both psychologically as well as in terms of the objects they brought. The chapter is also the first of many others emphasizing emotions that come with confronting death (in battle and afterwards), including the constant fear of being at war, as well as the horror that remained, in flashbacks, in their memories even decades after. Nina Vladimirovna Kovelonova, who was a sergeant major and medical assistant in an infantry company, and who Alexievich introduces in the same chapter as Liubchik, recalls her own confrontation with death and violence.

I remember crunching...Once hand-to-hand combat begins, there's immediately this crunching noise: the breaking of cartilage, of human bones. Animal cries...When there was an attack, I'd walk along with the fighters, well, just slightly behind, virtually next to them. It all happened before my eyes...Men stabbing each other. Finishing each other off. Breaking bones. Sticking a bayonet in the mouth, in the eye...In the heart, in the stomach...And this...How to describe it...In short, women don't know such men, they don't see such men at home. Neither women nor children. It's frightful to think of. After the war I went home to Tula. I used to scream during the night. Mama and my sister sat with me at night. I'd wake up from my own screaming.<sup>39</sup>

This memory is particularly disturbing, since Kovelonova both visualizes her past observations (“It all happened before my eyes...Men stabbing each other. Finishing each other off”) and gives us auditory perceptions. Through her narrative, we now know what death looked and sounded like at close proximity, as she did. The description of breaking bones is a particularly gruesome detail. It is difficult for us readers to digest, because in real life, just like the narrator herself, we “don't see such men at home.” Through Kovelonova's account we manage to step right into the midst of battle and feel it as if we were there. We do not need an explanation from Alexievich of how telling about this experience would be nearly impossible. The density of pain Kovelonova

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<sup>39</sup> Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 66.



reveals is an explanation in itself: “Sticking a bayonet in the mouth, in the eye...In the heart, in the stomach...And this...How to describe it...”

It is understandable why Kovelonova never fully recovered from these events, but Alexievich still wants to remind us how much of the past trauma remains with the survivors, marring their identities. Kovelonova tells Alexievich that she was screaming at night, meaning that she was still unable to fully comprehend the past when the war was over. The trauma remained with her, unhealed, even when she was safe in her own bed, surrounded by her family. In this particular passage, Alexievich shows the reader that she gives her heroine space to address these flashbacks by describing what exactly her fear was about. This is something Kovelonova might have been holding back from doing, because what she observed during the war not many others – and obviously not her mother and sisters – were able to see. She spent many years repressing the memories to protect others from the same horror, but also to remain true to the more “sublime” version of the war propagated in literature and film. Her screaming in her sleep instead of speaking about the harsh and terrifying experiences she faced testifies to that repression. The trauma that Kovelonova endured long after the war may be, according to Alexievich, a universal experience of Soviet war survivors, but it has not come to the surface for decades, ruining many women’s lives. According to Jeffrey Alexander, “the goal of the speaker is persuasively to project the trauma claim to the audience-public. In doing so, the carrier group makes use of the particularities of the historical situation, the symbolic resources at hand, and the constraints and the opportunities provided by institutional structures.”<sup>40</sup> Soviet women who fought at the front, as Kovelonova did, were witnesses to all kinds of violence that they never

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<sup>40</sup> Jeffrey C. Alexander, "Toward a Theory of Cultural Trauma," *Cultural Trauma and Collective Identity*, edited by Ron Eyerman Jeffrey C. Alexander, Bernard Giessen, Neil J. Smelser, and Piotr Sztompka. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 12.

thought they'd encounter at the front. When recalling those moments from their past, they found them not only difficult to narrate, but also intolerable to mentally revisit ("it's frightful to think of"). Helping Kovelonova imagine these violent details as real, Alexievich was making her cross the distance between the reality that she knew then, including the men who brutally exterminated one another in battle, and the reality of her being in the land of the oblivious, unsuspecting living.

Another chapter of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, dedicated to two sisters, Olga Vasilyevna and Zinaida Vasilyevna Korzh, achieves a similar effect of placing the reader in the midst of a survivor's struggle with the traumatic past. The Korzh sisters were medical assistants during the war and, like many other women whose stories we hear in the book, they took care of wounded men. Their experience was traumatic because, just like Liubchik, they tried to remain human in inhumane conditions. They had to be compassionate, and yet numb themselves for the pain of others, since being numb is what allowed them to persist throughout their hardships. Many years later, however, the fact that they had lost their sensitivity to pain – and their ability to perceive themselves as wholesome selves – keeps haunting the survivors. "I was bandaging a tankman...The battle goes on, the pounding. He asked, 'what's your name, girl?' He even paid me some compliment. It felt so strange to pronounce my name, Olya, amid this pounding, this horror. I always tried to look neat, trim."<sup>41</sup>

For Olga Korzh, it is surprising that even in the midst of this awful trauma that is the war, a soldier asks, while being bandaged, the name of the medical assistant. She sees that even as "the battle goes on" the people who are in pain and facing death are able to retain their sense of shared humanity.<sup>42</sup> For her, however, the return to that sense is jolting. Korzh, for a moment, feels

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<sup>41</sup> Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 152.

<sup>42</sup> Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford University Press, 1985).

disconnected from her own anesthetized self and the situation that she is in. While performing the task of war (nursing the sick and bandaging their wounds), she made herself less sensitive, which, in turn, didn't allow her to think of who she was, which is why it was difficult for her to pronounce her own name. For Alexievich, this moment of self-forgetfulness is very important, because it is a clear marker of trauma. Alexievich is alerting the reader of the traumas, showing her power as a narrator. Alexander suggests that “for the wider audience to become persuaded that they, too, have become traumatized by an experience or an event, the carrier group needs to engage in successful meaning work.”<sup>43</sup>

Being disconnected from one's own self is a sign of suffering and distress.<sup>44</sup> According to Susan Brison “such loss of control over oneself – one's memories, one's desires – can explain, to a large extent, what a survivor means in saying ‘I am no longer myself.’ Trauma survivors long for their former selves not only because they were more familiar and less damaged, but also because they were controllable, more predictable.”<sup>45</sup> Trauma survivors face a disconnect between who they were in the past and who they feel that they are in their present moment of speaking. The trauma is a pivotal moment in-between the past and present, that affects and changes the identity of the survivor presently attempting to speak. The words that Olga Korzh repeats (“the pounding”, “the horror”) imply this particular inability to articulate self during a time of fear. The trauma replaces the past identity and creates a loss of coherence between the self that exists now and the one that experienced the traumatic past. Korzh's attempts at feeling comfortable in this situation is limited by the fact that she is physically incapable of separating herself from her war personae – numb to the suffering and, therefore, nameless. So even when the soldier gives

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<sup>43</sup> Alexander, “Cultural Trauma,” 12.

<sup>44</sup> Lawrence L. Langer, “Gendered Suffering?” *The Holocaust: Problems and Perspectives of Interpretation*. Edited by Donald L. Niewyk. (Houghton Mifflin Company, 1992).

<sup>45</sup> Brison, “Trauma Narratives,” 45.

her a compliment and articulates her name, she is faced with the inability to connect to his act of kindness. Judith Butler points out that “one is, as it were, brought into social location and time through being named. And one is dependant upon another for one’s name, for the designation that is supposed to confer singularity.”<sup>46</sup> Korzh is named by another, which puts her into a social position that she had not felt before while being a soldier. To have to articulate her name places her back into humanity, as she and other soldiers are numbed by the lack of singularity that exists in a war, by the lack of conversation.

Another aspect of Olga Korzh’s war personality is her femininity. The survivor reflects on vanity, as a marker of femininity, and an important aspect of women’s selfhood before and during the war. For a woman, feeling attractive means seeing herself through the eyes of the other. The loss of one’s femininity means not only the loss of attractiveness, but also a warp in one’s humanity, and, therefore, an identity crisis. Alexievich includes in her *Unwomanly Face of War* narratives of women for whom feeling unattractive was connected to the idea of a numbed self, changed by the war. Since women soldiers during the war were made to look masculine, their hair forcefully cut short and the skirts they once wore replaced by pants, the gap between their former self, the self before the war, and the war identity, was greatly predicated on appearances alone. With the loss of hair, with every ugly item of clothing worn soiled and covered in vermin, the past self of Alexievich’s interviewees was receding into the distance. Korzh explains the difficulty in pronouncing her name, but for the author, that is not the only loss the women soldiers endure at the front. Attached to the self by psychological, physiological, aesthetic means, it can be much more painful to shed than a name – a social construct.

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<sup>46</sup> Judith Butler, “On Linguistic Vulnerability,” *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (New York/London: Routledge, 1997), 29.

I was afraid that if I was killed, I'd lie there looking unattractive. I saw many girls killed... In mud, in water... Well... How shall I... I didn't want to die like that. Sometimes I hid from shelling, not so much thinking they won't kill me this way, but just to hide my face. My hands. I think all our girls thought about it. And the men laughed at us, they thought it was funny. Meaning, it's not death they think about, but devil knows what, something stupid. Women's nonsense.<sup>47</sup>

Korzh, as well as many other women who first-handedly experienced war combat, lived in constant fear of the possibility of death. Perhaps, as men thought, the only way to retain their humanity was to care for their physical appearance. And that is partially true. Looking “neat and trim” is also Korzh's way of remaining human. In the passage above, she is giving us a perspective on women's feelings. In comparison to the men (“men laughed at us, they thought it was funny”), they were not thinking of their own death or the killing of others, but rather something they did not want to get spoiled – their beauty. However, women's desire to protect their faces from the shelling may indicate a more basic instinct than a need to stay beautiful. Shoshana Felman remarks that “the act, an enigmatic and problematic production of the speaking body, destroys from its inception the metaphysical dichotomy between the domain of the “mental” and the domain of the “physical,” breaks down the opposition between body and spirit, between matter and language.”<sup>48</sup> The war erases a part of Korzh's desire to be seen as pretty, but not fully, since in the moment of confronting death the first instinct that she has is to preserve her femininity- holding her face so as to not be seen as well as not know that she died ugly. She expresses that men were laughing at this “women's nonsense” as if the act of her hiding her face is the same as her speaking “nonsense.” Her mind reacts to the violence in a physical manifestation of her thoughts, in which she is shielding her view from her own self.

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<sup>47</sup> Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 152.

<sup>48</sup> Shoshana Felman, *The Literary Speech Act: Don Juan With J. L. Austin, Or Seduction in Two Languages* (Cornell University Press, 1983), 5.

### 1.3. On Looking, Seeing, and Feeling: Women's Bodies, Women's War

In this segment, I seek to understand what the sound, look, and feel of a woman's war was, and how it differed from the state-imposed one. Alexievich's role as an interrogator is to force her subjects to compare their identities then and now. The chapter that the Korzh sisters's stories are in, "I Remember Those Eyes Even Now," has a title that is a quote from Zinaida Korzh. This citation is coming from a passage, in which Korzh describes her bandaging a wounded man. At first, she thinks this man is Russian, but soon she realizes that he is, in fact, German. When Korzh gets closer and he understands that the nurse is taking care of him, he drops his weapon and his big eyes stare attentively at her. She does not hesitate to provide him with medical help, even knowing that he is German and, therefore, the "enemy". What strikes her, though, is that the soldier begins to appear more relaxed when he realizes that she is a woman nurse and not a soldier. Her remembering the German's eyes in the context of this short episode is what Alexievich reveals to us, the readers. Eyes are symbolic of recognition, sharing of emotion, they help even those who cannot speak communicate. Both the Russian nurse and the German soldier know that they are against each other in the war, yet he does not kill her, and she continues to bandage his wound. Here, in Korzh's story, eyes are a way of representing the act of looking outwards, but also inwards. Korzh sees beyond the fact that he is German – she sees his humanity. She cares for the fact that she is injured, and she does not ignore him or leave him to die. He uses his eyes to show that he, in turn, sees her. He does not need words to express his thanks, the looking alone is enough. By including this episode in Korzh's narrative – and in her book as a whole – Alexievich reveals yet another nuance of brutal war experience. War is not

only about combat. Women who fought it looked and saw, using their eyes as a way of making someone feel human and committing acts of looking as those of respect and gratitude.

Both Korzh sisters reflect on the perception they had of themselves, as well as their selves perceived through the eyes of others, mostly men. The encounter with the German soldier – his eyes, which Zinaida could not forget – is emblematic of women’s thinking of others’ responses to their actions. Olga Korzh, despite the gruesome, deadly conflict, is afraid that she will die looking unattractive. This, in turn, is seen by men around her as “women’s nonsense”, but, to her, beauty is of greater importance than death or guns. For Zinaida, another type of gaze acquires significance. When the German soldier is looking at her, he is trying to understand whether she would help him or kill him. A woman is to be merciful – will she retain that part of herself or turn into a combatant? The identity of Alexievich’s interviewees was not simply defined by their physical appearance, as they tell us. It was important for them to hold on to the entire spectrum of their femininity, to remain womanly, but also feeling human. Most women interviewed for this book remember details about not fitting in the war setting so vividly, even in the present moment of recalling the past and revealing their suffering to Alexievich. The psychological, physiological, and merely mundane aspects of women dealing with the homelessness, vagrancy, lack of water and medical supplies, rape and harassment. Many of them would have not been able to talk about it in public. They are either embarrassed of their experience or feel that they will not receive accepting ears, because of the patriarchic ideal of femininity that Soviet men predominantly embraced,<sup>49</sup> but also the saccharine representation of women’s role at war. It is Alexievich who lets women speak their truth. She opens doors both for them to remember what many of them couldn’t go back to after the end of the war – but also for

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<sup>49</sup> Barbara Alpern Engel, “Women in Russia and the Soviet Union,” *Signs*, Volume 12, Issue 4 (1987).

the unwitting readers who had been idealizing war all their lives. Many of the stories and representations created about women in the aftermath of war were not ones that they would have told. Since it was difficult for them to speak, other narratives were placed instead of theirs as the told experience of war.

So, the question arises as we read the book, what it really means to be a woman at war – and how the up close and personal perception of combat by a woman soldier changes our understanding of that historic event. Is there a special kind of femininity – that of a war survivor who happened to be a woman? Alexievich demonstrates that femininity is instinctual, but it is also rooted in social expectations (mercy, charity, faithfulness). Until Alexievich, no other Russian author had spoken about the physiology of women at war. The subject of their body and physical appearance was seldom mentioned. Their suffering was ignored and replaced by redacted portrayals that erased their suffering bodies and the painful memories of female physicality from the Soviet war narrative.<sup>50</sup> Many passages that Alexievich includes in *The Unwomanly Face of War* enable her female subjects to re-inhabit their former bodies. She allows women to speak about feeling unwomanly once they no longer get their periods, or having to give birth in the midst of conflict. When a former woman soldier confesses that she had to drown her baby so that German troops would not discover other partisans hiding in a swamp, this confession resonates with all Alexievich's readers. Its horror is unsurmountable and makes us probe the idea of human sacrifice even further.

Since the book was originally published in Russian, it went through the process of being censored. In this English version, Alexievich is able to preface with giving us parts of texts that the censors “threw out.”

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.



I'm alone...among men. I was wearing trousers, but now I march in a summer dress. Suddenly I begin to have my...woman's thing...It started early, probably from the agitation. From being nervous, upset. There was nowhere to find what I needed. I was embarrassed! So embarrassed! People slept under bushes, in ditches, on stumps in the forest. There were so many of us, there was no room in the forest for everybody. We went on bewildered, deceived, trusting nobody anymore...I'm sorry for those who will read this book, and for those who won't...

The narrator in this passage is both wanting to express her complete experience for an audience to listen, but she is simultaneously embarrassed and forgiving towards the reader who has to hear about these difficult parts of her existence at war. The censor removed the passage, possibly thinking that it was too physiologically explicit. However, in the complete “womanly” experience of war, these descriptions are necessary. The parts seldom mentioned in history textbooks and collective sharing of memory are in fact these small details that are a part of women’s experiences, but ignored due to their supposed explicitness. Censoring of this type of detail creates even more of a narrative gap, as well as more difficulty to find words for both those experiencing and those understanding the whole history, with all included. When historicizing the war, there was hardly any mention or recognition of women’s physicality. Alexievich was one of the first writers to recognize the existence of the female body, in its real form, not a body created by men or romanticized as a “sacred creature”.

#### 1.4. The Author Who Listens: Alexievich’s Impact on Women’s Trauma Narratives

In the beginning of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich published notes from her censors, one telling her that she should not write about “filth” but of victory. Another censor told her, “This is a lie! This is slander against our soldiers, who liberated half of Europe. Against our partisans. Against our heroic people. We don’t need your little history, we need the big history.

The history of the Victory. You don't love heroes! You don't love our great ideas." The inclusion of these responses underlines Alexievich's role in making the stories of women survivors of the war come to life. She is the one listening to this "little history." Not the grand, heroic ideologies, but the smaller unnoticed voices that encompass the grand historical narrative. Beth Holmgren describes how women were and are perceived when they attempted to take on roles that were defined as only for men. "Even when the government balked at the idea of Soviet women in combat during World War II, the female students it had trained as potential soldiers lobbied vociferously and successfully to be admitted into the fighting ranks."<sup>51</sup> Even if women were highly trained and skilled, their male counterparts would not take them seriously as soldiers. This, and the comments by censors, are the reasons Alexievich is writing this book, and the reason she was recognized by the Nobel committee, in spite of the censoring and her critics' blaming her work for the "besmirching" of Soviet glory. As an author, she puts an emphasis of the constant erasing of the little histories that happen around us.

The collection of interviews became possible because Alexievich knew the little histories existed. She wanted them to appear alongside the other, familiar, state-sponsored narrative about WWII. Most importantly, it became possible because this author was able to make her subjects feel safe as they were recalling their past. She listened and recorded but did not make her interviewees necessarily reveal their names; she also allowed them to say as much or little as they wanted to. By doing this, Alexievich gave her storytellers a new perspective on their own past and their conflicted memory: before making her readers realize that the individual historical perspective had value, she conveyed the same idea to her subjects.

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<sup>51</sup> Beth Holmgren, "Toward an Understanding of Gendered Agency in Contemporary Russia," *Signs*, vol. 38, no. 3 (2013).

Anastasia Ivanovna Medvedkina, who was a machine gunner during the war, told

Alexievich:

Can I find the right words? I can tell about how I shot. But about how I wept, I can't. That will be left untold. I know one thing: in a war a human being becomes frightening and incomprehensible. How can one understand him? You're a writer. Think up something yourself. Something beautiful. Without lice and filth, without vomit... Without the smell of vodka and blood... Not so frightening as life... (*UFW* 207)

Medvedkina's account is emblematic of Alexievich's role as an oral historian. The author excluded herself as a speaking, reflecting entity from the text. It is in this way that she permitted her subjects to fully reveal who they were and are now. Her goal was to have the readers perceive the (un)womanly face of war, but that face was not her own. To indicate distance between herself and her subject, Alexievich used a number of devices, ranging from structural (chapter titles, editorial trimming of narratives) to rhetorical (parenthesis syntactic signs). It is these little authorial interferences that mark Alexievich's presence in the text without making her personality loom big over those of her subjects.

Alexievich collected detailed accounts of women's war experiences and then used ellipsis to explain the gaps in the narration of war. "In war a human being becomes frightening and incomprehensible. How can one understand him?" The pauses in speech evoke the gaps in storytelling, and the difficulties that exist in trying to articulate a trauma. "Not so frightening as life..." Through their struggle to speak coherently, she makes them appear as trauma survivors – and not just celebrated war "veterans". They are humans who have lived through the war and experienced many difficult things that cannot always be put to words. The lack of words, and the silence that exists through the pauses, can often be more of an indicator of the traumas faced by these women. Alexievich is aware that the voices she recorded would have otherwise been lost, forgotten, or not regarded as important. Perhaps, women would have never even attempted to

speak of their past or write about it as they did not think someone would want to listen to their reiterations of war horrors. Medvedkina, to continue the earlier example, begs Alexievich to write something that does not have the “smell” or “filth” as her own memories. However, what truly happened during the war had to be narrated with all these details by female soldiers and women survivors, because the vulnerability of a female combatant could be exposed only in first-hand accounts directly translated into a readable form. Alexievich accomplished her task by transforming these reluctant, hesitating, constricted human voices into literature and by allowing everything, not simply the fully articulated understandings, to fit into the narrative.

Alexievich created psychological release for women who lived through the trauma, by granting them anonymity and authorizing them to go back in time without fear and speak of, as Shoshana Felman calls, “a totalizable account of event”.<sup>52</sup> This is why women in *The Unwomanly Face of War* often state their gratitude towards her. They say that they had wanted to speak for long, having lived with most of their stories kept for decades to themselves, but they could not. For instance, this is how Natalya Ivanovna Sergeeva articulates her pain of being silent:

I want to speak...to speak! To speak it all out! Finally somebody wants to hear us. For so many years we said nothing, even at home we said nothing. For decades. The first year, when I came back from the war, I talked and talked. Nobody listened. So I shut up...It's good that you've come along. I've been waiting all the while for somebody, I knew somebody would come. Had to come.<sup>53</sup>

Alexievich wants to deal with other survivors' past because she knows that traumatized people often can't do it themselves, but her mission is especially urgent in this particular case. She records Sergeeva's repetition of the word “speak” three times and “talked” two times. The

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<sup>52</sup> Shoshana Felman, *The Juridical Unconscious: Trials and Traumas in the Twentieth Century*. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 5.

<sup>53</sup> Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face*, 20.

passage also contains verbs “to hear” and “to listen.” All these verbal markers of Sergeeva’s desperate need to be heard out are present in the text with the author’s consent. They make the passage sound raw and distressed, but they also add real nervous energy to the survivor’s plea for attention.

Women who do not speak about their pain end up succumbing to living without feeling deeply due to repressing their own history and memories. This is why, in her introduction to *The Unwomanly Face of War* Alexievich states “I write not about war, but about human beings in war. I write not the history of war, but the history of feelings. I am a historian of the soul.” The author reminds us that remembering is an emotional act, grounded in “feelings”. Through her interviewees, she documents unfiltered human experiences and captures a history that feeling made remarkable, and thus an object of remembrance, and as the Nobel Prize Committee suggested a “monument to suffering.” Experiences beyond description gave light to real human pain – and that is what women survivors retained in their memories. This is why Alexievich does not need to tell us if her interviewees are crying or laughing: we feel it through their own words. Her approach to documentary prose is definitely different than the traditional historian’s. By reminding us that a survivor is not just one who lived through a trauma, but also had feelings that lasted long after the experience of war ended, she gives us a three-dimensional image of women survivors that stays truthful to the emotionality that they experienced.

The perspective of women is often neglected in the realm of war narratives. Women are not always included or even acknowledged as having participated in war, or they are only remembered as nurses, typists, wives – non-heroic positions associated with marginal experiences. As Alexievich points out, World War II was, in fact, a war in which women fought alongside men, but possibly suffered more. “No feminine gender had existed till then for the

words ‘tank driver,’ ‘infantryman,’ “machine gunner,”” she writes. They do not exist now, either. But thanks to *The Unwomanly Face of War*, readers can imagine women performing those roles and can understand their suffering. After the war, women returned from combat feeling unwomanly, and were often categorized by society as unmarriageable or prostitutes. The routine of war had become the only thing they knew, an experience that grew into a habit, a routine, a new life. The absence of the war routine became a harsh shock and a readjustment. For example, skirts didn’t make sense anymore, as they had been molded to be soldiers for so long, forced to wear pants and act a certain masculine way, to fit in to the uniformity of a soldier’s appearance. The harshness of combat had taken over their life and minds as they were trying to reintegrate into a society that didn’t accept women’s memories of the war.

Nobody believes that I was in the war. I myself can’t believe it anymore. At this very moment, as we sit and talk, I don’t believe it. But in that box lies the Order of the Red Star...The most elegant medal...Isn’t it pretty? They gave it to me on purpose. Ha, ha, ha... To be serious...For history, right? This thing of yours is recording...So it’s for history...I’ll say this: If you’re not a woman, you can’t survive war. I never envied men. Not in my childhood, not in my youth. Not during the war. I was always glad to be a woman. People say that weapons-submachine guns, pistols- are beautiful, that they conceal many human thoughts, passions, but I never found them beautiful. I’ve seen the admiration of men looking at a fine pistol; I find it incomprehensible. I’m a woman.<sup>54</sup>

Elena Borisovna Zvyagintseva, who was a private armorer during the war, recognizes how differently she felt in comparison to her male counterparts, who as Zvyagintseva believes, instead of fear, found beauty in the war. She has difficulty confronting her past life (“I myself can’t believe it anymore”) and even coming to terms with the fact that it happened, yet she recognizes that being a woman was the only way she could have survived the war. She also knows that most of history excludes women narratives, such as her own. This is why she sees Alexievich as a historian, rather than merely a recorder of forgotten memories. (“For history,

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid, 319.

right? This thing of yours recording...So it's for history"). In the reshaping of cultural memories, it is important for Zvyagintseva and the likes of her that Alexievich records their truths and personal memories that they don't often share in their everyday lives. Every voice that she includes in her book represents one perspective, a story which contributes to the larger history and the shaping of collective memory. It may be said, then, that Alexievich recreates and rewrites the national history using the voices of individuals who previously had been silenced or remained unheard. Because she does not tie herself to just one source, the voices of many women who share their stories become intertwined, creating a polyphony of experiences, memories, and emotional reactions.

In her introduction, Alexievich describes her role as an interlocutor and memory keeper.

I listen to the pain...Pain as the proof of past life. There are no other proofs, I don't trust other proofs. Words have more than once led us away from the truth. I think of suffering as the highest form of information, having a direct connection with misery. With the misery of life. All of Russian literature is about that. It has written more about suffering than about love. All these women tell me more about it...

Alexievich is clearly the author of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, yet the words that encompass most of the book are not entirely her own, but the ones of these women that she listens to. She uses her role as an author to put their voices into words. The question of her authorship of women's war narratives may be seen as part of a bigger discussion of the role of the author in constructing any kind of story. In "What is an Author?" Michel Foucault tells us: "the 'author-function' is not universal or constant in all discourse. Even within our civilization, the same types of texts have not always required authors; there was a time when those texts which we now call 'literary' (stories, folk tales, epics, and tragedies) were accepted, circulated, and valorized without any question about the identity of their author."<sup>55</sup> The literary examples that Foucault

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<sup>55</sup> Michel Foucault, "What is an author?" in *Authorship: From Plato to the Postmodern*, Edited by Sean Burke (Edinburgh University Press, 1995), 236.

gives us, such as folk tales, were also transmitted orally through time - without a known author, but with an audience who longed for more stories. To Foucault, a story is, in fact, more important than the identity of the author, – and Alexievich seems to share that view, too. Her war narratives function this way as well. They are “transmitted by themselves” or narrated by individuals who do not claim their authorship. That said, however, the voices of Alexievich’s interviewees do get ascribed to a particular individual, a specific life story. Women confirm each other’s stories without often knowing that the other exists. Alexievich’s stories seem to “not require authors,” and yet, it is their individual and collective identities that give them meaning and value. Foucault also writes that “the author of a novel may be responsible for more than his own text; if he acquires some ‘importance’ in the literary world, his influence can have significant ramifications.”<sup>56</sup> This is the case for Alexievich who, since hearing these stories told by women in her childhood, has found it important to document them into a readable form.

The identity of those who speak to Alexievich in *The Unwomanly Face of War* are more important than her identity as an author. The value of the stories is not in the written form, but rather in what is first spoken, and then recorded. She pulls out memories from the subconscious of women survivors that they would have never been able to extract themselves. She gives them the space to reflect on their past in a productive manner. The traumas that numbed them are not forgotten, they are accepted by the author and written out as true experiences of the war. Being a woman at war means feeling unheroic, unfeminine, and not listened to. Alexievich rewrites the story of women at war and helps create a narrative from memories that could have easily been lost in history. Women remember more about love than death, and through this perspective we understand a war story that has never been told before. Since it is difficult to write from one’s

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.



own experience, her role as an author is to write for those who feel themselves an impossibility to do so. Their struggle to articulate is revealed in literary tools (such as ellipses) and her role as an author is important in her willingness to listen and share these stories.

## Chapter Two

### Alexievich's Anti-Alienation Rhetoric in *Voices from Chernobyl*

More than forty years after the end of the Second World War, another catastrophe devastated Ukraine and Belarus, part of the former Soviet Union. An explosion on the fourth reactor of the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant which led to the radioactive contamination of most of the area, making the land uninhabitable. The formerly fertile soils could no longer be used for agriculture, and those living in the area were made to evacuate. This was an unprecedented disaster because of the scope of contamination and the population's unpreparedness for it. In the Soviet Union, nuclear technologies were still new. Hailed as an excellent solution to the nation's energy needs, they were being developed on a major scale around the country. This tragic event, however, revealed the darker side of nuclear power and the Soviet's government's lack of will to provide information about its dangers to those who had to operate the reactors or live nearby. At Chernobyl, people who worked at the power plant and their families had little knowledge of the nuclear energy's impact on human biology. Although they had been settled in Pripyat<sup>57</sup> and other towns near the reactors, they hadn't been properly taught about their working environment, its hazards, and the possibility of the disaster. Not only were the dangers were never articulated, safety measures were not put in place, either. This is why, in the aftermath of Chernobyl, people suffered both from the physical consequences of the radioactive exposure, and the inability to explain and reconcile what happened to them and their land. As Alexievich remarked in an interview, "Chernobyl showed us how dangerous is modern civilization's "cult of force." How glaring are the imperfections of this reliance on power and coercion above all else. How

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<sup>57</sup> Pripyat was a town neighboring Chernobyl.

dangerous our modern worldviews are to us ourselves. How humanitarian man is lagging behind technological man.”<sup>58</sup>

In this chapter, I examine people’s lack of knowledge of Chernobyl and their inability to fully articulate their trauma despite their being first-hand witnesses of the disaster. In my opinion, Alexievich’s book about Chernobyl was an important and timely study of the scope of this humanitarian catastrophe because it demonstrated how survivors became immediately otherized and objectified. In *Voices from Chernobyl*, Alexievich showed how, while facing the ambiguities of biological harm, people also became conflicted about their national identities as well as about their bodies- both individual and collective. Like survivors of WWII trauma, Chernobylites did not get a chance to immediately process their pain and speak exploratively about their survival. The aftermath of Chernobyl was nevertheless even more ambiguous than that of WWII, since the nuclear event did not have a historical precedent and thus, contained no clearly marked end like the one the war did have.

*Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* is Alexievich’s fifth book; it was published in 1997, more than 10 years after the April 26 event. From the narratives gathered in the book, it is obvious that Alexievich did not begin to collect survivor’s stories immediately, that is in 1986 or soon thereafter. Alexievich wrote *Voices from Chernobyl* in the same polyphonic style as her other books. Although some of them, especially the old women in the chapter called “Monologues about Lies and Truths,”<sup>59</sup> continued living their everyday lives either directly in Chernobyl and Pripjat, or away from it, others had to think back on the disaster from a faraway place. However, as Alexievich demonstrates, all of them constantly return to

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<sup>58</sup> Ana Lucic, “A Conversation with Svetlana Alexievich” *Dalkey Archive Press*. <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/a-conversation-with-svetlana-alexievich-by-ana-lucic/> (Accessed April 2019).

<sup>59</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 133.

Chernobyl in their memory. As the author who interviewed them, she is a witness to their remembering as she is also herself attempting to formulate a better understanding of the event that was suppressed emotionally, as well as censored politically. Like others, she had to find the facts about radiation and start investigating the subject from scratch. “In the first days after the accident, all the books at the library about radiation, about Hiroshima and Nagasaki, even about X-Rays, disappeared” says Yevgeniy Aleksandrovich Brovkin in the chapter “Monologue About a Moonlit Landscape” and continues: “There were no medical bulletins, no information.” (89) Because of this, Alexievich has a goal of recording the absence of information. By writing and listening, she is attempting at creating an archive for what has disappeared. There are obstacles in narrating, which is why she relies on the voices of those who have experienced the disaster. Despite the lack of language, she is encouraging their stories and making a trace for what is absent.

*Voices from Chernobyl* is comparable to *The Unwomanly Face of War*. In both books, it is common folk who suffer from the governments mistakes, having to sacrifice their lives for the Motherland’s ultimate victory. Women soldiers who fought on the fronts of World War Two, followed the government’s appeal to defend the Motherland. Liquidators who went to the nuclear power plant to extinguish the flames of the burning reactor did not respond to a nation-wide draft. They were blackmailed, cursed, bribed to go to the danger zone. In other words, both groups suffered and bore un-erasable wounds, but the two books Alexievich wrote about the historical traumas are rather different. Whereas women in *The Unwomanly Face of War* had more than forty years to process their trauma, individuals Alexievich interviewed for the Chernobyl volume only had about five years or more to deal with their pain. This is why those who speak in *Voices from Chernobyl* also find it difficult, but nearly impossible to find words for

what happened. Their reflection on the traumatic past is shorter; they are still grieving, smarting, some of them may still be sick or are dying. More importantly, they are relying on the war narrative to tell their story on the suffering, since they find its vocabulary comparable to their own loss and pain. “You can’t compare it to a war, not exactly, but everyone compares it anyway.”<sup>60</sup>

As in *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich pays attention to the difficulty in articulating trauma. In her usual manner, she captures the rawness and immediacy of the Chernobylite’s responses. Despite the survivors’ professed lack of words, they speak to her often doing it eloquently, with a lot of expression. Anatoly Shimanski, a journalist whose story is part of the chapter “Monologue About a New Nation,” summarizes this paradox of failed discourse in a documentary book that grows out of it. Speaking to Alexievich, he suggests a way to approach her new book: “[Instead] of writing, you should record. Document,” he says. Shimanski suggests that Alexievich’s book is going to subvert our expectations. “Show me a fantasy novel about Chernobyl – there isn’t one! Because reality is more fantastic.”<sup>61</sup> Through her writing, she is indeed documenting and recording. She does it in opposition to the late Soviet politicians’ approach of suppressing and ignoring Chernobyl. In the Soviet media, Chernobyl was silenced. The radio played days of classical music instead of announcing information.<sup>62</sup> *Voices from Chernobyl* is definitely a “document,” a “record” as Shimanski suggests, that is reflective of the reality faced by many, but ignored by a score of others. Much of what she is recording, however, is absent. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, the absence of proper documentation stemmed from

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<sup>60</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl: An Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*. Translated by Keith Gessen. (Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), 123.

<sup>61</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 127.

<sup>62</sup> “Timeline: A chronology of events surrounding the Chernobyl nuclear disaster,” The Chernobyl Gallery, <http://www.chernobylgallery.com/chernobyl-disaster/timeline/> (Accessed January 4, 2019).

the heroic narrative that was put in place, and for Chernobyl there is a necessity to record because of government cover up and the fact that it was unprecedented. What are other mechanisms for making things go missing? How does she document the story and how Chernobylites tell their own story? How does her witnessing in narrative form replace the absent documents and rely on individual voice as evidence?

The Chernobyl disaster was as violent as the war, but not as widespread. It was also “contained” by the government so that the majority of the Soviet population did not know they were affected by Chernobyl. Secondly, the story of war had a personal feel for Alexievich because she grew up among its survivors. This was not the case for Chernobyl. Her writing about Chernobyl was not motivated by the stories that she had listened to as a child. She was not physically impacted by the catastrophe, having no experience with radiation previous to her conversations with survivors. Because of this, she was not simply revisiting the foundational narrative of a tragic event, which had grave consequences for hundreds of thousands of people, as well as for her as an author. Instead, she is approaching this enormous body of recollections and reflections from a position of a stranger who set a goal to herself to walk through the unfamiliar dangers and mind-boggling territory. Her goal was to shed light on the event silenced by the media, unarticulated by survivors, and yet in dire need of public exposure. In my opinion, she was also interested in experimenting with documentary rhetoric which relied on the survivors borrowing of other languages of suffering, including the narratives of World War Two.

## 2.1. The Moral Responsibility of Story-Telling: Alexeivich as a Witness

Historian Michel Trouillot wrote that “[history] is always produced in a specific historical context. Historical actors are also narrators, and vice versa.”<sup>63</sup> Because of survivors’ role in creating history, they may also be seen as “historical actors” and narrator of their own history. Societies may embrace survivors of historical and natural calamities or reject them. If people are narrating a stigmatized event, such as state violence or encounter with sexual abuse, a specific stigma may be attached to their experiences, especially if they are narrating a stigmatized historical event. In *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich looks at the stigma female combatants had to deal with after World War Two and explains the ostracism from their perspective. In *Voices from Chernobyl*, she also looks at stigma – but now it’s the one that affected everyone: men, women, and children. From the perspective of the people who had not endured Chernobyl, the Chernobylites were radioactively contaminated. Those who rejected them believed that they could spread the radioactivity further: “But the atom is everywhere. In the bread, in the salt. We breathe radiation, we eat it”<sup>64</sup> There was also a fear that they contained possible genetic mutations that made their marriages with non-affected people or even co-habitation with them undesirable. Alexievich makes the survivor’s predicament very obvious, by letting ostracized people speak in first person while citing the words of others. For example, a woman, Katya P. who tells Alexievich how she had been told by her mother-in-law that “it’s a sin to love,”<sup>65</sup> “a sin to give birth.”<sup>66</sup> She is further stigmatized for her radioactive exposure and its potential effects on her life and the lives of those around her. By showing how she is otherized

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<sup>63</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (Beacon Press Books, 1995).

<sup>64</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 124.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid*, 108.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 109.

even by those close to her, these love stories can be compared to those of the “Hibakusha” people of Hiroshima who are forced by society to only marry each other. In the book, we read about men who had lost their sexual virility; women who lost their reproductive ability; and children who were transformed into sufferers of mysterious illnesses; and the old people had to find a new home. All of these individuals, as Alexievich shows us, could testify both to the tragedy of their being physically and emotionally affected by Chernobyl and by the post-traumatic response to them of those who had had no direct experience with the disaster. Stigma, according to Alexievich, is something that does not disappear in modern times. It has its own language and rituals, and it is just as hard to endure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

In *Hiroshima Notes* by Kenzaburo Oe, he refers to a language used to describe certain types of survivors – those who could live on past the event and those who became immensely affected, so much so that they are beyond human “what happened in Hiroshima twenty years ago was an absurdly horrendous massacre; but it may be the first harbinger of the world’s real end, in which the human race as we know it will be succeeded by beings with blood and cells so ruined that they cannot be called human.”<sup>67</sup> The stigma of Chernobylites is similar to that of the Hiroshima survivors in Oe’s book, since they are silenced by their governments. They could not speak about their own truths, and more importantly they did not feel well-represented as humans and survivors because of their erasure as such by governmental forces.

In Hiroshima as well as in the Soviet Union, the biological change survivors had to undergo went hand-in-hand with the change in their social status. Because of the politics of non-exposure, individuals who have suffered trauma could not necessarily perform the role of a witness for others, such as state officials, journalists on the mission to mollify the event’s scope

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<sup>67</sup> Kenzaburo Oe, *Hiroshima Notes*, Translated by David L. Swain, (New York: Grove Press, 1981), 182.



and danger, and their unaffected neighbors. Soviet media relied on repeating official party reports rather than giving a true account of the post-Chernobyl suffering. “If anyone did manage to record any of it, the authorities immediately took the film and returned it ruined. We don’t have a chronicle of how they evacuated people, how they moved out the livestock. They didn’t allow anyone to film the tragedy, only the heroics.”<sup>68</sup> “In the papers – on the radio and television they were yelling, Truth! Truth! At all the meetings they demanded: truth! Well, it’s bad, it’s very bad. We’re all going to die! But who needs that kind of truth?”<sup>69</sup>

Stigmatized and silenced, Chernobylites could nevertheless report on their experience. They were the first survivors of a nuclear disaster of non-military nature, unlike Hiroshima and Nagasaki survivors, most of them dealt with lesser amounts of exposure and had an author who wanted to speak to them. Alexievich’s involvement in their storytelling was instrumental in bringing the truth out. It has to do with the Totalitarian state refusal to accept survivor’s stories as facts, which is what happened in the Soviet Union. In theoretic works on survivors of major traumas, there are limits to the conception of the survivor as witness. There can be different types of survivors based on how much they have witnessed or experienced. This is better said in the words of Primo Levi, who wrote on his survival from Auschwitz: “We, the survivors are not the true witnesses...we survivors are not only an exiguous but also anomalous minority. We...did not touch bottom.”<sup>70</sup> This is further analyzed by Giorgio Agamben in *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Agamben asks whether the true witnesses would instead be those who did not survive, whose voices cannot be heard, as those who returned have not borne witness to

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<sup>68</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 138.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, 202.

<sup>70</sup> Primo Levi, *The Drowned and the Saved*, transl. R. Rosenthal (London: Abacus, 1988).

the same events.<sup>71</sup> This presents a particular paradox in testimony, in which the survived are the exception, and those who did not are misrepresented and the “true witnesses” that we aren’t able to hear. They are only a fraction of the disaster, representative of the experience. This is also further questioned by Gayatri Spivak “Are those who act and struggle mute, as opposed to those who act and speak?”<sup>72</sup>

Nonetheless, it is these witnesses that remain important to hear. Not only because that kind of witnessing is the only kind we have – without them we would have no truth, no story, but also because their survivor guilt adds depth and dimension to their narratives. When survivors are the narrators of their own history, they elaborate on their own truths and reject the state narratives. Svetlana Alexievich is an author capable of making survivors reject their guilt and accept their story as it happened.

Those survived Chernobyl are the opposite of this. They could be categorized as true witnesses more than those who died immediately after the explosion, because they have seen the effects and the horrors of the radioactivity. Alexievich’s interviewees in *Voices from Chernobyl* are faced with extreme dilemmas and conflicting emotions after their survival. One of the first voices in the book is of Lyudmilla Ignatenko, who asks “I don’t know what I should talk about – about death or about love? Or are they the same? Which one should I talk about?” The difference between love and death to Ignatenko is indistinguishable, as she has seen her husband who had been a liquidator die by circumstances that to her are incomprehensible. Her monologue is full of love for her husband, but also guilt for the fact that she survived instead of him. Her self-identity

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<sup>71</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*, transl. Daniel Heller-Roazen (New York: Zone Books, 1999).

<sup>72</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” *Colonial Discourse and Post-Colonial Theory: A Reader*, Edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (New York: Columbia University Press: 1993), 70.

is linked to the body— of her husband but also hers. This guilt is a part of her own past self, having survived, but also of her future self since she is pregnant with his child.

The nurse is looking at me in horror. And me? I'm ready to do whatever it takes so that he doesn't think about death. And about the fact that his death is horrible, that I'm afraid of him. There's a fragment of some conversation, I'm remembering it. Someone is saying: "You have to understand: This is not your husband anymore, not a beloved person, but a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning. You're not suicidal. Get ahold of yourself." And I'm like someone who's lost her mind: "But I love him! I love him!" He's sleeping, and I'm whispering: "I love you!" Walking in the hospital courtyard, "I love you." Carrying his sanitary tray, "I love you."<sup>73</sup>

Ignatenko sees her husband turn into something less than human ("a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning"), and she cannot face the fact that she is losing him, the person he was before the "poisoning" took over his identity. Her monologue continues to describe how doctors were photographing and observing the man she adored. In the hospital, his body became indeed a "radioactive object", monitored and watched as if something unhuman, and yet Ignatenko was irrationally and even to her own detriment attached to it. Her husband's body represented, for her, his past self that she loved, which meant that she could not accept his objectification. Ignatenko's response to her beloved's slow death that amounted to his body's full decomposition encapsulates, for Alexievich, the Chernobylite's refusal to accept their suffering as something objective. It is always about them, their loves, their losses. This is why, in her Nobel speech she says: "What I remember most, is that women talked about love, not death. They would tell stories about saying goodbye to the men they loved the day before they went to war, they would talk about waiting for them, and how they were still waiting." When faced with such a disaster, their vocabulary goes beyond trauma, which is what we see in Ignatenko's case – where her words, her body, her trauma are all wrapped in one, impossible to be separate. Words

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<sup>73</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 16.

have remained, but if detached they no longer form comprehensible phrases. The way Ignatenko expresses the lingering love of her husband is reflective of the many unable to face death, unable to mourn, and therefore unable to move on past the event. Moreover, her language parallels the state that her husband is in. Her language is falling apart, just as she is seeing his body decompose. Her language also begins to decompose – begins to have shreds – and Alexievich includes because she wants language to replicate state of mind and body. In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry makes the point that violence can often happen to language when it happens to the body.<sup>74</sup> The death that Ignatenko witnesses destroys her, not physically but mentally, where language is.

## 2.2. Otherized and Objectified: Alexievich's Method of Characterization

Since Chernobyl was an unprecedented event for the Soviet people, there was a rift between the disaster itself and the people's suffering. *Voices from Chernobyl* articulates alienation between the people who experienced the disaster and the people who did not. It also makes it clear that Chernobyl, in the mind of those who experienced it, was very similar to World War Two. By the time it happened, World War Two had been accepted as the primary social trauma the Soviet people had to deal with collectively. Chernobylites, who needed prior historical experience to compare their pain to, chose it as a moment in history to rely on. They borrowed terms of suffering from it “we were oriented toward blocking and liquidating a nuclear attack.”<sup>75</sup> The war also provided mnemonic, often vividly visual flashbacks, to offset the hardship they faced at present.

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<sup>74</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, 134.

<sup>75</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 123.

There's something unnatural about getting together and remembering the war. People who've been through that kind of humiliation together, or who've seen what people can be like, at the bottom, run from one another. There's something I felt in Chernobyl, something I understood that I don't really want to talk about. About the fact, for example, that all our humanistic ideas are relative. In an extreme situation, people don't behave the way you read about in books. Sooner the other way around. People aren't heroes.<sup>76</sup>

These are the words of Sergei Gurin, a cameraman who was tasked to film a “heroic” perspective of the disaster, but instead became interested and also shocked by what he saw. He compares filming Chernobyl to the time he filmed people who had been in concentration camps, who avoided meeting each other because collective remembering seems, in his words, “unnatural.”

That said, the war had been monumentalized in the 1980's, while the experience of Chernobyl happened to be raw and unprocessed. James Wertsch mentions a “schematic narrative template”<sup>77</sup> that shape the recollections of individuals subject to this regime. The critic emphasizes the need for “narrative repair” in post-Soviet Russian collective memory. In the aftermath of this imposed cultural memory, Wertsch suggests, a society emerges that recognizes the need to acknowledge events of the past that had been denied or kept secret. This society, however, is in a state of confusion as there had been no agreement on a basic narrative – or collective practice in telling war stories. There was nothing in Soviet collective memory that could give the tragic experience of the nuclear disaster visual and verbal form. When beginning her book, Alexievich was fully aware of this predicament. This is why, the Chernobylites' individual stories are foundational stones in the history of the disaster. In allowing them to speak on their own terms, she ignores the need for a collective narrative “template” and instead lets each individual voice remain its own.

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid, 115.

<sup>77</sup> Wertsch, “Blank Spots,” 65.

Alexievich notices that when people talk about Chernobyl, they talk about the war from their memory, because to create these stones they activate other memories in their mind. In her book, Chernobyl is explained through war terms, because of the scope of pain, the number of losses, and Belorussia being the site of a war rampage – as those are the more known and the most commonly used vocabulary for disaster. Her survivors also understand that war terms are not enough, people don't like resorting to this military vocabulary. "Information in newspapers concerning Chernobyl consists entirely of military terms: atom, explosion, heroes... This hinders our ability to comprehend that we are now living in a new era."<sup>78</sup> *Voices from Chernobyl* thus becomes a journey in space and time, but also in language. She travels back in time through words in order to get a clearer understanding of what it is that they don't have words for. Being Belorussian, she understands the suffering that had already been narrated, such as Isaac Babel and Boris Vasilyev. Her chapter titles reflect what she sees as valuable in the language of the everyday, "About Lies and Truths," "About Answers," "About Memories," "About War Movies."

An anonymous voice in her book tells her "we don't talk about it with each other, it's a conversation we have when someone comes here: foreigners, journalists, relatives who don't live here."<sup>79</sup> Besides hardly speaking about it among themselves, Chernobylites also share a misunderstood notion that their shared silence is somewhat natural – it is an extension of their being "contaminated." Radioactivity is a form of technological pollution, but people both within the Chernobyl community and outside treat it as a disease, a plague – ignoring its technological nature. Alexievich refuses to accept the silence as natural. She shows us, for example, how they respond to suffering when it becomes physiological, and those aware of radioactive

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<sup>78</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 34.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid*, 125.

contamination as an illness create misdirected attempts of treating it. “You’ve decided to write about this? About this? But I wouldn’t want people to know this about me, what I went through there. On the one hand, there’s this desire to open up, to say everything, and on the other – I feel like I’m exposing myself, and I wouldn’t want to do that,” Pyotr S., a psychologist says in the first part of the book in the “Monologue on Why We Remember.”<sup>80</sup> Like many other Chernobylites, Pyotr S. felt that the emotional charge that came with Chernobyl had left many people vulnerable and, consequently, silent. He desperately needed words to explain something so unexplainable, as the explosion had felt like. “Chernobyl presents itself first of all as a problem of self-understanding. That seemed right. I keep waiting for someone intelligent to explain it to me [...] But we- we who were raised in a world without Chernobyl, now live with Chernobyl,” another survivor stated, also perplexed by the failure of language to provide a foundation for his/her experience.<sup>81</sup> When Alexievich let those people articulate their inability to speak or think about the disaster, she provided the first impetus for them to get closer to the understanding or explaining the disaster. Instead of waiting for another person to explain their predicament to them the Chernobylites Alexievich interviewed started to realize that the task was theirs to perform. Speaking allows for a coping that does not exist in the oral history or on paper, and the mentioning of pain is also a way of recognizing it.

In the world of Chernobyl, information did have great value, but it was not because information could help people deal with their suffering. It was simply needed to avoid further exposure to the sources of harmful radiation. The government did not want to address Chernobyl’s consequences other than by saying that there was contamination and the residents were in danger. Its withholding facts about the disaster – the water was undrinkable, plants could

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid, 25.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, 133.

not be eaten, children and animals had to be kept indoors, and no one was supposed to touch the radioactive debris, etc. – is what caused so much damage. More people were killed by misinformation than by the explosion or its immediate liquidation.<sup>82</sup> People were also dislocated, they lost their homes and families because the government did not want to point out specific dangers to him at the right time. While the Soviet media stated that only 31 people died because of Chernobyl, it is now estimated that over thousands endured radioactive-related illnesses, including cancers, with many of them dying a year, two years, or even decades later.<sup>83</sup> As a journalist, Alexievich wanted to keep this record straight. As a writer, she wanted memories from survivors to burst through the mere “when,” “where,” “how,” and “who,” thus shaping the narrative of this event. In dealing with these aspects of the disaster, she focuses on particular stories that re-write the government story of Chernobyl.

Alexievich’s book is also important in helping the collective healing from the trauma of the disaster, because it dismantles the government’s cover up of it. Much like in the *Unwomanly Face of War*, the author disregards the traditional heroic Soviet narrative and listens to the human struggling to make sense of an unprecedented crisis, a personal loss, a heads-on collision with violence, the pain which would not go away. “But haven’t you noticed that we don’t even talk about it among ourselves? In a few decades, in a hundred years, these will be mythic years.”<sup>84</sup> The survivors are processing the event, all while the government is suppressing their stories, but Alexievich deals with the material and the facts they tell her as honest evidence. The idea that these will become “mythic years” is also reflective of the lack of immediacy in dealing with the disaster. It took more than two weeks for Gorbachev to make a formal speech, and even then, his

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<sup>82</sup> Serhii Ploky, “The Chernobyl Cover-Up: How Officials Botched Evacuating an Irradiated City,” *History Reads*, History Channel, May 2018, <https://www.history.com/news/chernobyl-disaster-coverup> (Accessed Jan 2019).

<sup>83</sup> Serhii Ploky, “The True Cost of Chernobyl Has Been Greater Than It Seems,” *Time Magazine*, April 26, 2018.

<sup>84</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 174.



speech did not contain the amount of information necessary for survivors to comprehend the situation. He described the event, “a misfortune has befallen us” and that the disaster “caused the anxiety of the international public,” language avoiding any guilt to be put on himself or his government. “I must say that people have acted and are continuing to act heroically, selflessly. I think we will yet have an opportunity to name these courageous people and assess their exploit worthily.”<sup>85</sup> Gorbachev did not acknowledge the deaths of many who were affected without any heroic gestures.

In terms of the narrative template, Chernobyl does not seem to fit inside the heroic self-sacrificing one and is in this way reversed. Unlike the war, there was no voluntary gesture of bravery in serving the country. Chernobyl happened, and men were immediately forced by the government to serve and control the explosion. Alexievich collects their responses to that order, and they are very different from the responses that war veterans, men and women, would’ve produced if asked about their requirement to serve. For example, a liquidator tells her: “I told you. There’s nothing heroic here, nothing for the writer’s pen.”<sup>86</sup> “We buried houses, wells, trees. We buried the earth. We’d cut things down, roll them up into big plastic sheets...I told you, nothing heroic here.”<sup>87</sup> Radioactivity was an invisible and confusing enemy, and fighting it was not an obvious battle. It does not appear in material form, but it affects bodies and nature. Since most Chernobylites and liquidators lacked understanding of what radiation meant rather quickly, they also could not come up with words or willingness to speak about it. Men especially, now called on to be liquidators, had an idea that they had served their nation heroically and it was now part of their identity, connecting them to the heroes of WWII, and they were not ready to

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<sup>85</sup> *The New York Times*, “Excerpts from Gorbachev’s Speech on Chernobyl Accident.” May 15, 1986. <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/05/15/world/excerpts-from-gorbachev-s-speech-on-chernobyl-accident.html>

<sup>86</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 91.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid*, 93.

shed it. Nor were they ready to accept the consequences of exposure (loss of virility, for example), which were emasculating. Talking about them makes the heroic effort nonexistent, almost immediately, turned into non-men by the radiation. For Alexievich, their silence or inarticulateness were markers of an unprecedented crisis – both in terms of its scope and its existential importance.

Roberta Culbertson writes on how silence is often the only outcome of a traumatic event, that it is rare for survivors to speak.<sup>88</sup> Sometimes there simply aren't enough words so new words get created. This is why a survivor in Alexievich's book writes about a term that differentiates the people of Chernobyl from the rest of humanity:

We're often silent. We don't yell and we don't complain. We're patient, as always. Because we don't have the words yet. We're afraid to talk about it. We don't know how. It's not an ordinary experience, and the questions it raises are not ordinary. The world has been split in two: there's us, the Chernobylites, and then there's you, the others. Have you noticed? No one here points out that they're Russian or Belarussian or Ukrainian. We all call ourselves Chernobylites. "We're from Chernobyl." "I'm a Chernobylite." As if this is a separate people. A new nation.<sup>89</sup>

The identity of those who survived the disaster is now altered by the disaster itself, and its perception. Their citizenship is replaced by a new identity of belonging to the city where it happened ("a new nation.") They were turned into people of Chernobyl, instead of maintaining a personal identity. In a way, this is similar to the ways in which a trauma can invade someone's life and take over their sense of self. As Jeffrey Alexander suggests, trauma is constructed by the event, but also by the society.<sup>90</sup> Since the language being used ("Chernobylites") alters how the Chernobyl survivors would normally be viewed, it affects their self-perception as well.

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<sup>88</sup> Robert Culbertson, "Embodied Memory, Transcendence, and Telling: Recounting Trauma, Re-Establishing the Self," *New Literary History* Vol. 26, no. 1 (Winter 1995), 174.

<sup>89</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 126.

<sup>90</sup> Alexander, "Cultural Trauma," 2.

Alexievich uses this silence and embraces it, just as she took on the Chernobylites and made them state their name, embrace it, articulate the fact that they have been estranged and perceived as a different species for almost ten years. *Voices from Chernobyl* is not simply about their voice, and her giving them a platform to speak about their pain. It is also about group identity formation, about language that begins to frame experience for those who have not been able to place the experience within a structural framework yet, which Culbertson calls a “memory-event.”<sup>91</sup> This is why it affects both the reader and the speaker, since both Alexievich and the Chernobylites are witnesses each in their own way, and participants in language formations.

### 2.3. A Journey in Space and Time: The Languages of Isolation

Though silenced, the Chernobyl disaster was also very much rooted in its language and the way it was spoken about. The language is either from the Chernobylites themselves and how they see their otherness, or from outsiders of the experience. Among many scholars trying to comprehend the Chernobyl disaster, anthropologist Adriana Petryna wrote an essay titled “Biological Citizenship”<sup>92</sup> in which she describes a term for how the disaster created new political beings, alienated from regular society. “The Chernobyl aftermath exemplifies a process wherein scientific understanding collapses and new categories of entitlement emerge. Ambiguities related to categorizing suffering create a political field in which a state, forms of citizenship, and informal economies of health care and entitlement are remade.” Petryna sees the aftermath of

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<sup>91</sup> Culbertson, “Embodied Memory,” 187.

<sup>92</sup> Adriana Petryna, “Biological Citizenship: The Science and Politics of Chernobyl Exposed Populations,” *Osiris*, 2nd Series, Vol. 19, *Landscapes of Exposure: Knowledge and Illness in Modern Environments* (The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 251.

such a disaster as a remaking of citizenship for those who were once left with “ambiguities.” Jacques Rancière sees this moment of loss in citizenship as the pivotal moment in which human rights were created,<sup>93</sup> along with Hannah Arendt and Michel Foucault, which he quotes in his essay as writers on “biopolitics.” Much like Petryna, Rancière identifies this moment in which an individual affected by a disaster becomes political, and a “power of control over biological life.”<sup>94</sup> The association of bodies affected by nuclear radiation and defined by the State is representative of biopolitics and biological citizenship.

Petryna sees the work of being a liquidator as being an exploitation of their biologies: “Many of these volunteers called themselves ‘bio-robots’; their biologies were exploited ‘and then thrown out.’ Based on extensive interviews, some laborers felt trapped and unable to leave the disaster area; this sentiment was particularly felt by unpaid military recruits and local collective farmworkers recruited to do the most menial and dangerous of tasks.”<sup>95</sup> The work is re-making their citizenship, because they are being transformed physiologically into new beings. Their self-perception is now skewed, altered by the identities imposed on them by language and by the disaster.

From the survivors themselves, languages used were often new languages, or semi-languages, showing that the Chernobylites often grasped for new words to articulate unknown feelings and evidence of their alienation. “And then one day you’re suddenly turned into a Chernobyl person. Into an animal, something that everyone’s interested in, and that no one knows anything about.”<sup>96</sup> “I think you look at me the same way he did. Just observing me and

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<sup>93</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Who is the Subject of the Rights of Man?” *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, (Spring/Summer, 2004), 300.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid*, 300.

<sup>95</sup> Petryna, “Biological Citizenship,” 251.

<sup>96</sup> Alexievich, *Voices from Chernobyl*, 34.

remembering. Like there's an experiment going on. I can't rid myself of that feeling. I'll never rid myself of it."<sup>97</sup> There is a language of observation, of exploitation through eyes of scientists who crave information, that the Chernobylites are used to and are affected by. They feel their rights being taken from them. Their self-perception is no longer theirs, and now the one of others who are seemingly objectifying them, conducting "experiments." In an interview with author Philip Gourevitch, Alexievich said: "Unfortunately, we bow before information, but these forces of information, these waves of it are not enough. When I went around Belarus and talked to people as a journalist, I often felt touched. In what was once a huge country and what has now become very small pieces of that old country, people are still connected by that memory of suffering, that history of suffering, that ability to experience suffering."<sup>98</sup>

Alexievich presents herself as this interpreter who does not necessarily make sense of the narrations, but objectively tells and gives us a human perspective. She offers both the personal and collective memory of the Chernobyl disaster. It is important for her to narrate in the way she does. She is an active contributor to the shaping of collective memory and to our understanding of events which we did not experience. Most of the voices are angry or sad and questioning. None are answers, they are simply stories and observations. "However, in spite of survivors' efforts to translate their memories, there is a distance between the way testimonies demand to voice their truth, and the expectations readers or listeners have regarding what truth means and how it should be voiced."<sup>99</sup> As an interviewer, she questions them, but they question in return on their uncertainties as to what happened. The fact that they are testimonies does not necessarily mean that they are answers. Alexievich is not telling us that their witnessing is the only truth we

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid, 109.

<sup>98</sup> "Our Own Memory: A Q&A with Svetlana Alexievich." *Sampsonia Way Magazine*, March 13, 2017. (Accessed March 2019).

<sup>99</sup> Nora Strejilevich, "Testimony: Beyond the Language of Truth," *Human Rights Quarterly* 28 (2006), 703.

should listen to or accept, just as they are uncertain of what happened and how to describe memories. Many recall their struggle to understand their memories, since authorities were not being communicative or not telling the truth in the aftermath of the disaster.

Their memories of the disaster are both individual and shaped by the created history, the imposed narrative that ignored the many faults that might have resulted in the accident. This is why Alexievich's text can be compared to Dostoevsky's *Notes From a Dead House*, or Chekhov's *Sakhalin Island*, which are documentary prose narratives that record and describe the authors' experiences in a terrible, inhumanly isolated place that the authors traveled to on their own will. Chekhov went to the Far East, where a Russian penal colony was located on an island, and Dostoevsky spent years in a prison in Siberia, locked up for his political beliefs. Like these authors, Alexievich voluntarily goes to Chernobyl survivors to ask questions and break the silence about their existence. In a way, just like Sakhalin inmates' responses to Chekhov's questions, "voices" from Chernobyl for her are a form of "ethnographic reportage"<sup>100</sup> or "ethnographic encounter."<sup>101</sup> The experience of the survivor is seen from an outsider's perspective, and the act of going somewhere to be immersed in the life of the other becomes the main focus of the text. This, in turn, is recorded. What Alexievich refused to do, while other authors willingly accepted, was fictionalizing the painful experiences of Chernobylites. Dostoevsky turned his prison diary into a work of fiction – it was close to truth in its recording of human suffering, but fiction nonetheless.

Other examples of documentary writing in which the testimonial narrative became more or less fictionalized, even while remaining a truthful first-hand narrative, may be Lydia

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<sup>100</sup> Holmgren, "Gendered Agency," 535.

<sup>101</sup> Micaela Di Leonardo, "Oral History as Ethnographic Encounter," *The Oral History Review*, vol. 15, no. 1 (1987), 2.

Ginzburg's *Notes from the Blockade*. It is an account of the siege of Leningrad during World War Two, told from a perspective of a male character and in a manner that demonstrated the author's detachment from her traumatized self. Alexievich, who went out of her way to record conversations, foregoes any attempt to create fiction out of a document. Her narrative is different from Ginzburg's and Dostoevsky's in that instead of recording her past or her response to the experience of others (which, in the case of Chernobyl, may be one and the same), she chooses to ask directly affected individuals to report their memories to her precisely. A smaller example of this type of testimonial literature is the diary of a young girl during the Siege of Leningrad. Tanya Savicheva wrote in a diary that became an important document for remembering the Siege. She simply kept note of the date and the family member that died in a notebook, and lastly wrote: "Everyone is dead. Only Tanya is left."<sup>102</sup> Tanya's account is important in its poignant simplicity of her recording deaths, especially as a child.

Trouillot asks "[if] memories as individual history are constructed, even in this minimal sense, how can the past they retrieve be fixed?" He then describes the past as a position, more than it holds content. "The past is only past because there is a present, just as I can point to something over there only because I am here."<sup>103</sup> The positioning of Chernobyl as "pastness makes this "information" hard to retrieve. Since survivors have their own language of understanding, but hardly speak to each other how then can the experience be placed into a collective understanding for others – such as Alexievich or us readers – as well? How can it be separated from this silenced and stigmatized narrative? For the story of Chernobyl, Alexievich is trying to understand a society that is split by silence, in which suffering gets replaced by

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<sup>102</sup> Patricia Heberer, *Children during the Holocaust* (Alta Mira Press, 2011), 53.

<sup>103</sup> Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and Production of History* (Beacon Press Books, 1995), 15.

historical “information.” In terms of place, Chernobyl is close to her, while still remaining distant. It is broken apart like her country, but while she remembers communities speaking about war openly and collectively, survivors of Chernobyl hardly speak to each other or others about the disaster, they keep to themselves. By entering their private worlds and making sure they open up for conversations, Alexievich makes individual suffering part of the collective experience of the nuclear disaster. Her writing relies on her role as also being a witness – a witness to words and expressions that are specific to the survivors of Chernobyl.



## Chapter Three

### The Author at the Time of Crisis

Hannah Arendt said that “all sorrows can be borne if you put them into a story or tell a story about them. The story reveals the meaning of what otherwise would remain an unbearable sequence of sheer happenings.”<sup>104</sup> In the earlier years of her writing career, Alexievich appeared to be overwhelmed by the sorrows of others, the people whom she sought out to interview and profile in her books. In Chapter one, I investigated her addressing the experience of women survivors during World War Two in *The Unwomanly Face of War*. I studied Alexievich’s approach to recording the women combatants’ individual experiences as direct, but not fully connected to her own personal past. I looked at it through the lens of theories of cultural trauma, memory, and female identity. My second chapter on *Voices From Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* summarized Alexievich’s work as a collection of narratives that documented both the trauma of Chernobyl and its survivors’ inability to be re-integrated in the society they used to call their own. I have shown how Alexievich’s focus on the narrators’ lack of language demonstrated the difficulty in their articulating that experience. In the case of Chernobyl, the author was not part of the experience of survivors; again, she only channeled their stories and their pain to the reader. In summary, my previous chapters explore traumas as a psychic phenomenon as well as a literary element of the narrative that affects the reader and may sometimes help the narrators to heal. This chapter is different, because, while acknowledging the traumatic dimension of post-Soviet existence, it investigates the divergences in remembering the painful past by those who no longer expect the past to return.

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<sup>104</sup> Hannah Arendt, “Isak Dinesen: 1885-1963,” *The New Yorker* (Nov. 9, 1968), 223.

In my analysis of what may be Alexievich's most unusual book, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, I focus on not as much on the narratives of those who survived the collapse of the Soviet Union the volume encompasses, but on the author's own story. For Alexievich as well as for her subjects, the 1990s was a dire time because their entire universe – with its historical, economic, social, and political structures – was torn apart and reduced to ashes. For the first time ever, Alexievich chose to write about the historical event that was not only brutal for the society as a whole, but also affected her directly. As many of her interviewees, she was experiencing the collapse first-hand, in its immediacy, and so the book can also be understood as a segment in her, possibly yet unwritten in its entirety, autobiography. That said, while I do zoom in on Alexievich's own identity crisis and methods of self-exploration when reading *Secondhand Time*, I also approach as a study in collective identity formation. The book contains stories of people who existed on the cusp of the country's transition from being a state that denied the value of individual experience while aggrandizing collective existentialism to the new society ready to embrace individualism, proclaim civil liberties and liberal collective values, and encourage personal quest for self-enrichment. As such, it discloses the tragic fate of the first Post-Soviet generation.

Originally published in 2013, *Secondhand Time*, like the rest of Alexievich's oeuvre, may be seen as a collection of long interviews loosely brought together under thematic rubrics. However, the way I see the book, its structure is more systemic than that of the *Unwomanly Face of War* and the *Voices from Chernobyl*. I find it to be a concentrated and multifaceted exploration of individuals' identity shifts. My analysis, therefore, is theoretically centered in texts on the function of collective memory in totalitarian mentality. Svetlana Boym applies the term nostalgia to refer to the Russian people's response to the past and future. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, she

describes nostalgia as a psychological phenomenon, experienced during modernity as an “incurable disease.” This text travels through etymological and poetic chronology of the word nostalgia, but she also has an essay titled “From the Russian Soul to Post-Communist Nostalgia” in which she identifies and defines this Russian every day, the *byt*, that came about in post-Soviet Russia. Another author preoccupied with the history and memory is Michel-Rolph Trouillot, who provides an allusion to silences in historical narratives, which was often the case in Soviet history. Finally, I rely on Sheila Fitzpatrick’s study of post-Soviet mentality, because I find that she explores the conflicting mind of the new-Soviet person attempting at affirming a new, uncertain identity, with clarity and sympathy. The book by Fitzpatrick that I am especially indebted to is *Tear Off the Masks! Identity and Imposture in Twentieth Century Russia*, and the chapter “Becoming Post Soviet.”

*Secondhand Time* begins with a timeline: “Russia After Stalin.” Alexeivich was born in 1948, and the first date appearing in her chronology is 1953, which is the year of Stalin’s death. The years that follow comprise significant historical events that happened while she was growing up, and until the moment she published the book. Characteristically, *Secondhand Time* ends when the civil war between Russia and Ukraine was just beginning, in 2014. Thus, the book documents the author’s own experience as well as that of others in a more precise, chronological fashion. The oral history aspect of Alexievich’s work and its new, semi-autobiographical structure blend into one. She now collects stories told by people of her contemporaries, as if making sure that her individual experience finds its match in the narratives by others. Moreover, she is no longer separate from her interviewees. Unlike her other books, where Alexievich is aloof and self-effacing, she is right here in the midst of the voices of others. Most importantly, she starts her book with a passage that she explores her response to the collapse of the Soviet

Union as well as to the stories told by the people who experienced it. She calls that introduction “Remarks from an Accomplice,” thus marking herself as her subjects’ closest ally. Though we know that the words are her own, they also seem ambiguous. She speaks as a “we.” “We share a communist collective memory. We’re neighbors in memory.”<sup>105</sup>

The book is divided into two parts, encapsulating the twenty years of Alexievich’s interviews. Each part is divided into ten sub-chapters. The first chapter is “The Consolation of the Apocalypse: Snatches of Street Noise and Kitchen Conversations (1991-2001),” and the second “The Charms of Emptiness: Snatches of Street Noise and Kitchen Conversations (2002-2012).” In the first she writes “Ten Stories in a Red Interior,” and in the second “Ten Stories in the Absence of an Interior.” The first part are interviews immediately after the collapse, and the “red interior” is metaphorical of the lingering presence of the Soviet era still not fully erased from the minds of those affected. In the second part, the “emptiness” and “absence of an interior” showcase this lack of foundation. Now that the structures have collapsed, there is this uncertainty that exists while facing the new time. Like in Alexievich’s other books, smaller narrative segments bear titles that are riddle-like and reminiscent of sing-song folkloric phrases which sound as if they were borrowed from fairytales. For example, the chapter on a love story is titled “On the Sweetness of Suffering and the Trick of the Russian Soul,” and the chapter that deals with the difficulty in remembering a past Soviet self is titled “On the Little Red Flag and the Smile of the Axe.” These fairytale-like titles reveal that Alexievich is historicizing heard narratives using a structure of mythologies and epics, making folktales applicable to the “little histories” she is listening to and composing. The voices from individuals that she collects begin to sound like long gone chronicles of the past. Folktales were told orally, and the author is

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<sup>105</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets*, transl. Bela Shayevich (Penguin Random House, 2013), 5.

reminding us that her duty as a writer is to capture the voice that might never otherwise be turned into text.

In *Secondhand Time*, Alexievich is intently interested in the Post-Soviet generation's resilience to the major social, economic, and cultural shifts the Soviet Empire's collapse had caused. During the 1990s, people lost their jobs and had to acquire new skills to fit into a capitalist-style economy; families were broken; veterans who believed in the glory of their service to the state became condemned for upholding its totalitarian values, etc.<sup>106</sup> The voices in her book are those of people who did not have to face extraordinary violence of war combat or a techno-genic catastrophe. And yet, the post-Soviet generation or, as she calls them, "the last of the Soviets," felt anger and pain, loss and bewilderment. They, too, lacked words to describe what happened, but they were also the first group Alexievich interacted with who had no language to talk about their past, present, or future. Each chapter contains both stories on suicide, but also on survivors, to show that every individual has a different version of one history. She is also including suicides to show that healing is not always possible, and that many traumas remain unresolved.

I feel enticed by this book because of its representation of the cognitive disconnect between Russian people's self-perception and their seeing the newly defined Soviet state through the lens of their prior expectations of what a "good," "powerful" state should be.

Methodologically, however, I find this book more difficult to analyze than the previous two.

*Secondhand Time* is not as direct a representation of trauma as *The Unwomanly Face of War* is.

There are characters who die in the book (one of the most striking examples of late Soviet

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<sup>106</sup> Fitzpatrick, "Becoming Post Soviet," 303.

casualties is Igor Poglazov who committed suicide when he was fourteen years old), but we see fewer instances of physical violence, and we encounter almost no war narratives in it. However, the political and economic disadvantages of living in a post-totalitarian state emerge in Alexievich's book as an unexpected commentary on the life of the people who have been "liberated" from the oppressive social environment. Finding out that all of your previous work was harmful for the society as a whole, that your accomplishments now don't matter, or that your parents and grandparents were moral criminals gain the urgency and importance of other major Soviet traumas under Alexievich's pen. In a review of *Secondhand Time*, Adam Hochschild admired that "it's more surprising that Alexievich finds similar true believers among those who suffered the very worst Soviet fury."<sup>107</sup> In this book, the author that listens to the memories of others faces her own conceptualization of a past still being written. In her preface, Alexievich writes "I want to learn how to enjoy life. To get back to my normal vision. But today, tens of thousands of people are once again taking to the streets," and continues "the future is, once again, not where it ought to be."<sup>108</sup>

In *Secondhand Time*, people's reaction to the transformation of their self-perception into the image of self that is altered by pain, loss, or violence, is far from comparable to the identity crises of women survivors of World War Two, or the shifts in how they see themselves of those who had lived through the Chernobyl disaster, or even the lives of veterans after the Afghan War, the book closest temporarily to *Secondhand Time*. There is an obvious explanation for this difference: "When confronting the stories told by people affected by a catastrophe, the reader is actually brought to live them, experiencing an unprecedented closeness to the victims of

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<sup>107</sup> Adam Hochschild, "Review: *Secondhand Time* by Svetlana Alexievich" *The New York Times* (May 27, 2016).

<sup>108</sup> Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 11.

disastrous events. These monologues are all-encompassingly present, personal, and real,”<sup>109</sup> Irina Marchesini writes. But what I am looking for is a rhetorical and mnemonic quality that brings these narratives together, rather than apart. Why did the last Soviet generation perceive their country’s transition from totalitarianism as a tragedy? Why were there so many suicides? Why does Alexievich have to encourage her subjects to speak the way she encouraged victims of deadly events, those who could not find words to describe real-life horrors? This chapter focuses less on the style of Alexievich’s recording and writing, and more on her personal involvement in the material that is given. In *Secondhand Time*, the details that she captures are a part of the complicated post-Soviet generation’s experience as well as her own evolution as a writer and a citizen.

### 3.1. Distorted Nostalgia: Alexievich’s Understanding of a Fragmented Self

Alexievich’s subjects claim to have had Soviet identity; in conversations with her they confess of experiencing a new Russia as a rift in what they were before and what they have become in the new post-Soviet state. Alexievich, herself a Soviet person by birth if not mentality, converses with them as citizens, (“I’m a patriot,”<sup>110</sup> “I’m one of those idiots who defended Yeltsin”<sup>111</sup>) but also as her family members, creative artists, utopian visionaries, and “lost souls” – people on the brink of suicide or mental collapse (“I’m simply a person who lives in fear.”)<sup>112</sup> She manages to organize her material in such a way that in spite of its immediacy, (“It all happened

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<sup>109</sup> Irina Marchesini, “A New Literary Genre. Trauma and the Individual Perspective in Svetlana Alexievich’s Chernobyl’skaia Molitva,” *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Vol 59 (2017).

<sup>110</sup> Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 111.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid*, 135.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid*, 106.

so fast,”<sup>113</sup> “hit us like an atom bomb,”<sup>114</sup> “it felt like catastrophe was at hand,”<sup>115</sup>) her narrative adds distance to the historical experience of the Soviet era. In her interviews, stories of the Soviet past nest in the stories of now, objectifying both types of existence of her subjects. This is possible due to her involvement and engagement, since she is part of the same present as her subjects. Additionally, the author is someone who needs the same kind of consolation and listening – because she is one of them.

That said, Alexievich is not detached from those she speaks to. Because of her awareness of the Soviet self’s endurance, she skillfully contrasts the individuals who don’t want to shed their Soviet identity or carry it with them to the new reality, with those who are happy not to be Soviets anymore, and yet avoid it and carve themselves out of nothing. Soviet identity clings and it is hard for them to shed it. For example, one of her interviewees Marina Tikhonovna Isaichik says: “We spent our whole lives believing that one day, we would all live well. It was a lie! A great big lie! And our lives... better not to remember what they were like... We endured, worked, and suffered. Now we’re not even living anymore, we’re just waiting out our final days.”<sup>116</sup> Accepting that lie is difficult because people’s entire lives were dedicated to an entire cause, that is now claimed to be nonsense. They lost their purpose in life, years in the making, of working, and being. What the Soviet people once believed in has a meaning now, and Alexievich documents their transitions of un-learning what was once thought to be truth, as Fitzpatrick calls the period of “western and modern post-Soviet reimagination.”<sup>117</sup> In the case of Isaichik, what the

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid, 107.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid, 20.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid, 73.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 81.

<sup>117</sup> Fitzpatrick, “Becoming Post Soviet,” 303.



former Soviet person needs to re-imagine is her purpose in life, the meaning that is associated with decades of productive labor which no longer seems useful or important.

Fitzpatrick makes note of the difference between those who have adapted and those who haven't, which she finds to be perceptible through language. For instance, the word "comrade" in comparison to "ladies and gentlemen," according to her, shows the differences between the habitual and the newly learned mentality.<sup>118</sup> Alexievich wrote *Secondhand Time*, she says, because she was "searching for a language"<sup>119</sup> – the very language Fitzpatrick finds crucial for the identity transformation to take place. She writes in her preface that she wanted to capture the many different ways in which people spoke to each other. "Why does this book contain so many stories of suicides instead of more typical Soviets with typically Soviet life stories?"<sup>120</sup> she asks herself, in a self-interviewing manner. It is possible that the people who have not survived Perestroika have not been able to find the language that explains and mollifies their transition to a new self.<sup>121</sup>

To create a narrative of difficult stories is to depict the harsh realities of the totalitarian state. The "typically Soviet life stories" that Alexievich alludes to are not necessarily the truthful experiences that individuals had during those times. Individual experiences were overshadowed by experiences that was more language in media, literature, and history. "We share a communist collective memory. We're neighbors in memory,"<sup>122</sup> she says in her introduction. Alexievich's perception of the unseparatedness of Soviet collective selves and Post-Soviet selves individualized identities is something that makes the stories she collects convincing and

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, 3.

<sup>119</sup> Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 9.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid, 4.

<sup>121</sup> Polly Jones, "Between Myth and Memory: War, Terror, and Stalin in Soviet Popular Memory," *Myth, Memory, Trauma: Rethinking the Stalinist Past in the Soviet Union, 1953-70* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013), 175.

<sup>122</sup> Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 5.

revelatory. Her subjects' experiences are both personal and universal; they attest to the rift that everyone in the country had to endure in the early 1990s.

Alexievich exists within each of those oral testimonies. She is both present in them as a conversation partner and leaves her mark on the narrative as the implied author. Susan Lanser writes, "If we forego the need for coherence that has dominated our discussions of implied authorship, if we read textual surfaces instead of attempting to resolve them into a non-contradictory deep structure, we might figure the implied author not as a body but as the clothes the body wears – clothes that can be altered, discarded, tried on, changed before or behind our eyes."<sup>123</sup> Alexievich is, in this way, putting on the different "clothes" of an author, narrator, witness, while remaining on the same existential plane as her subjects. It is a unique blend of an almost anthropological "field work" that implies gathering of facts pertaining to human experience in the area affected by a crisis and the author's personal past that lead Alexievich towards the creation of this documentary and possibly autobiographical narrative.

In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym argues that "the birth of nostalgic ailment was linked to war. In the twentieth century, with its world wars and catastrophes, outbursts of mass nostalgia often occurred following such disasters. At the same time, the experience of mass destruction precludes a rosy reconstruction of the past, making reflective minds suspicious of the reflective gaze."<sup>124</sup> Alexievich is the reflective gaze, according to Boym, but in her case, people are usually not suspicious. She is one of them, and when she chooses to include passages from those who see both the "rosy" and the destructive past, she summarizes her own response to the end-of-the Soviet-era trauma. "I feel like I know this person; we're very familiar, we've lived side by side for a long time. I am this person. And so are my acquaintances, my closest friends,

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<sup>123</sup> Susan S Lanser, "(Im)Plying the Author," *Narrative*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2001), 158.

<sup>124</sup> Svetlana Boym, *The Future of Nostalgia*. (Basic Books, 2001), 24.

my parents.”<sup>125</sup> Later in this preface she says, “today, tens of thousands of people are once again talking to the streets. They’re taking each other by the hand and tying white ribbons onto their jackets – a symbol of rebirth and light. I’m with them.”<sup>126</sup> Not only is Alexievich the reflective gaze, but she is a part of what she is looking at. She is listening and hearing her own voice in the “Snatches of Street Noise Conversations and Kitchen Conversations.” She is using the voices of others to tell her own story.

Despite that, even for Alexievich, the language of nostalgia is difficult to find. The people she questions are perfectly capable of explaining who they were before the collapse and who they became after the country transformed. “I spent years scrubbing away my Soviet mentality, dredging it out of myself by the bucketful.”<sup>127</sup> “We exist, but we don’t exist...Even the streets I used to live on are gone.”<sup>128</sup> Nevertheless, they do not know what language is theirs: that of the Soviet past, or of their new reality. Their predicament is exasperated by the fact that many “typically Soviet” terms have been recycled for the new ways of thinking, making the shift to the new remain stuck in old ideas, ones that are “secondhand.” It is a language of borrowing, which is performed to make sense of what has disappeared, to compensate for the lack of documentation and the fact that the past was remembered incorrectly – possibly because of promises that the previous era had betrayed. Those affected suffered from identity shifts, yet when no longer living in the former totalitarian state they still mourned its loss. “The Party was at a loss...I remember what it was like to be at a loss...People sat in their offices with their

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<sup>125</sup> Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 3.

<sup>126</sup> *Ibid*, 11.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid*, 61.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid*, 265.

blinds shut.”<sup>129</sup>

The continuity of Alexievich’s oral history project is an important factor in the forcefulness of *Secondhand Time* – the impact it makes on the reader. It is a book about a generation’s coming to terms with their entire lives, and what the author actually means is a life that has a beginning and an end. While interviewing a young soldier over the course of several years, Alexievich notes, “life had handed us a development in the narrative”<sup>130</sup> (He had given her variations of the same story during several interviews). Aleksander Laskovich, whom she meets several times between his ages of 21-30, describes his story of leaving Russia but still remaining partly attached to it in mentality. Another interviewee first forbade Alexievich to publish his story, and then allowed her to do so after ten years. These mental shifts affect her decision to include the phenomenon of uncertainty in the narrative, as if the former Soviet citizens’ processing and re-processing of who they were and what they were is now an essential part of their lives as a whole. This can be seen in the first part of the book, the “On the Beauty of Dictatorship and the Mystery of Butterflies Crushed Against the Pavement” chapter, in which two women, Elena Yurievna and Anna Ilinchina M., testify and make politically charged statements. They say, for example, “I’m a Communist,”<sup>131</sup> or “I will never throw out my Party membership card.”<sup>132</sup> However, a few paragraphs down they completely negate what they had said. “The Party isn’t an army squadron, it’s an apparatus. A machine. A bureaucratic machine,” one of the women suggests, thus undermining her desire to remain a communist forever.<sup>133</sup> Alexievich includes both statements in her book, thus exploring the fragmented, incoherent

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<sup>129</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid, 377.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid, 53.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid, 55.

nature of identity in transition.

Elena Yurievna continues to tell Alexievich about her unaffected beliefs despite the changes in many around her.

People performed incredible transformations: Yesterday they were communists, today they're ultra-democrats. Before my very eyes, "honest" communists turned into religious liberals. But I love the word "comrade," and I'll never stop loving it. It's a good word. *Sovok?* Bite your tongue! The Soviet was a very good person, capable of traveling beyond the Urals, into the furthest deserts, all for the sake of ideals, not dollars. We weren't after somebody else's green bills. The Dnieper Hydroelectric Station, the Siege of Stalingrad, the first man in space – that was all us. The mighty *sovok!* I still take pleasure in writing "USSR." That was my country; the country I live in today is not. I feel like I'm living on foreign soil.<sup>134</sup>

As Elena Yurievna suggests, the new post-Soviet State was difficult to accept for those who had been living as Soviets and attached their identities to everything surrounding their state of mind in their former country. They were attached to the past, nostalgic about the smallest details that represented that era "the first man in space," "[the] Dnieper Hydroelectric Station," and more. Alexievich often returns to the themes of love and death, and when Elena Yurievna says "I love the word 'comrade', and I'll never stop loving it," she is alluding to the fact that despite enormous amounts of deaths, she is emotionally attached to a system that is crumbling. She sees beyond the many deaths, which makes her capable of declaring love to past ideologies. In *The Future of Nostalgia*, Svetlana Boym defines a "romantic nostalgic" that "insisted on the otherness of his object of nostalgia from his present life and kept it at a safe distance." (ST 9) Elena Yurievna is in this sense a "romantic nostalgic." She insists on the "pleasure," the beauty of the former Soviet state and can't let go in order to accept the new reality, in which this old system is not seen through the same romantic light.

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid, 43.

The difficulties in representing the past in a light that isn't "rosy", is similar to how difficult it is to get a clear understanding of one's own past. Kathleen E. Smith calls the post-communist political language "messy," "unpleasant," and "remote."<sup>135</sup> The historical mentalities that were imposed by the government did not reflect the memories that individuals had. For Alexievich, being part of that experience helps her understand the fragmented selves of those she speaks to. She understands the difficulties in remembering, especially when there were multiple versions and multiple methods of processing and re-telling. Since the book is reflective of an autobiography, Alexievich is alluding to her own fragmented memory through the voices of others; who stutter, pause, question.<sup>136</sup>

### 3.2. Rephrased Histories: An Author's Perspective

The conflicted state of the people with whom Alexievich talks in this book matches the chaotic politics of the country transitioning from a totalitarian state to a new, yet undefined, political system. It is still not fully clear what Russia has become after the collapse of the Soviet Union, although such critics as Masha Gessen, journalist and activist, connect the uncertainty of our placing it into any kind of category to the country's violent past and its narcissistic grandstanding self-perception.<sup>137</sup> According to Gessen, "Russia missed an opportunity to build a post-imperial identity for itself after the fall of the Soviet Union. Instead, it held on to its

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<sup>135</sup> Kathleen E. Smith, "Mythmaking in the New Russia: Politics and Memory in the Yeltsin Era" *Memory and Post-Communist Politics*. (Cornell University Press, 2002): 5.

<sup>136</sup> Paul John Eakin, "Self-Invention in Autobiography: The Moment of Language," *Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985): 187.

<sup>137</sup> Masha Gessen, *The Future is History: How Totalitarianism Reclaimed Russia* (New York: Riverhead Books, 2017).

previous identity as a great empire, now severely diminished.”<sup>138</sup> Alexievich steps in and explores the citizen’s reaction to the “great empire’s” loss of status and prestige. She manages to demonstrate how and why the transition to the post-Soviet state became, in Gessen’s words, “a source of resentment which Putin was able to use to his advantage.” But while Gessen describes the fluid state of the late 1990’s, or in her words “budushchego net”, which translates to “there is no future,”<sup>139</sup> Alexievich applies the word “Secondhand” in her title. For her, it connotes the pessimism Gessen has pointed out, but also the understanding that old Soviet ideas may be recycled in the new society. Instead of progress, *Secondhand Time* tells us there is a difficulty in moving on from the past. The book’s strength and its extraordinary capacity for stirring emotional reaction from the audience, lies in its exploration of the fluid in-between states of the current Russian’s existence. In this transition, both Alexievich and those speaking to her were un-learning and re-learning the past.

The story of Igor Poglazov, who committed suicide at the age of 14, is told in the chapter “On the Mercy of Memories and the Lust for Meaning.” There are two parts to the narrative: one contributed to by his mother and the other, by Igor’s friends. His mother is lamenting the death of the bright, sensitive, talented boy, a budding poet, to Alexievich, who listens sympathetically. She even provides an interjection of the monologue to tell us that “her voice suddenly drops to a whisper. But to me, it feels like she’s screaming.”<sup>140</sup> The mother who, years later, is still processing the untimely demise of her child, asks: “Why did he decide that death was a beautiful thing?”<sup>141</sup>. She almost immediately answers that question herself, however, by suggesting that in

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<sup>138</sup> Leslie Potter, “Masha Gessen on Putin’s Reign and Russia’s Political Future,” *Kentucky Educational Television*, February 6, 2018. <https://www.ket.org/public-affairs/masha-gessen-russias-political-future/> (Accessed March 2019).

<sup>139</sup> Ibid.

<sup>140</sup> Alexievich, *Secondhand Time*, 144.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 144.

Soviet history “we were taught that death is more beautiful than life.” (ST 145) The silent screaming that Alexievich recognizes in her whisper is suggestive of the violence this woman experiences in re-processing her past, in telling the story of her son’s death but also of the ideological violence – of being taught to value heroic self-sacrifice. For her, the transition to learning new ideas is difficult. Igor’s mother claims “I don’t know this new person yet, the new ‘me’” who survived. I’m afraid...”<sup>142</sup> For Alexievich, the juxtaposition of the survivor’s guilt and the victim’s inability to endure the social upheaval is the crux of the emotional and civic crisis her book depicts.

The boy’s friends, who Alexievich also interviewed, speak as a chorus in this chapter, but, like an author of a Greek tragedy, she does not include their names.

...During perestroika...Those same teachers told us to forget everything they’d ever taught us and start reading the papers. We started studying newspapers in class. The graduation test for history was canceled, we didn’t have to memorize all those Party Congresses after all. For the last October demonstration, they still handed out posters and portraits of the leaders, but for us, it just felt like Carnival in Brazil.<sup>143</sup>

The un-learning process that these young people went through at school and on their own is also an important pivot around which other narratives in *Secondhand Time* spin. The citation above provides ample support for Masha Gessen’s analysis. History is replaced by the present of reading current news and discarding everything that had been taught. Instead of re-building narratives and history, there was simply cancelations of tests and demonstrations, reflecting both the rejection of the old but also the inability to move on to a better future. The stories of suicides that Alexievich includes are also reflective of this inability to move on, to heal, by those whose traumas remain unresolved.

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid, 153.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid, 162.



As Michel-Rolph Trouillot wrote, human beings participate in history both as actors and as narrators.<sup>144</sup> This “division of labor” can be applied both to Alexievich as an actor and narrator of history, but also to her interviewees who participate in her narration of their own histories, of which they were actors in and they are now narrating to her. Alexievich once said about her work, “I follow the times, and the human being.”<sup>145</sup> She presents the stories of Igor and other suicides as a way to give the full story of what happened, uncensored but also unpolished. Additionally, being an author does not only mean being a writer. Alexievich facilitates conversations and allows them to be written out. She is the recorder of conversations, of oral histories; she writes them down because she wants them to be preserved. Her listening to the human voice is not rejecting history entirely, but simply allowing one truth to be included with many. In her speech after having received the Nobel Prize, she told the audience that “I don’t ask people about socialism, I ask about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. Music, dances, hairdos. The myriad sundry details of a vanished way of life. It’s the only way to chase the catastrophe into the contours of the ordinary and attempt to tell a story. Make some small discovery. It never ceases to amaze me how interesting everyday life is. There are an endless number of human truths. History is concerned solely with the facts; emotions are outside of its realm of interest. In fact, it’s considered improper to admit feelings into history. I look at the world as a writer, not strictly a historian. I am fascinated by people...”<sup>146</sup> This claim reveals her fascination with documenting smaller mundane details, the particulars that reveal even more than “grand” historical facts.

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<sup>144</sup> Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 1995.

<sup>145</sup> Alexievich, “In Search of the Free Individual,” 2018.

<sup>146</sup> Alexievich, Nobel Lecture, 2015.

Similar to her reason for interviewing women soldiers in *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich in *Secondhand Time*, selected voices of individuals who were aware of emotions, and who didn't base their understanding of what had happened only on the facts they were taught. These individuals also lacked a language to describe their fluid in-between state, which appeals to Alexievich's shaping of text. In documenting their speech, she remained predominantly voiceless, but also aware of the fact that the voices of others reflected her own. When people from the first Post-Soviet generation were speaking to her, they were trying to understand what exactly it was that they had gone through and were continuing to experience. The exchange between the author and her subjects, between an attentive listener and eager speakers undergoing and emotional turmoil is what gives *Secondhand Time* its fluidity and dramatic power. The conversational form between the two becomes clearer as the book progresses. Despite of the lack of Alexievich's voice, we notice a never-ending back and forth that parallels both narrators' struggle with grasping at a story, an explanation, at finding the right words – and the writer's desire to capture that precise moment of the “raw material of talk.”

## Conclusion

In writing this project, I have attempted to show how Svetlana Alexievich has created her own genre and thus contributed to the empowerment of those who did not necessarily have a language, or a platform to convey their own experiences of suffering. I have demonstrated how, in giving full attention to traumatized individuals' manner of speaking, silences, emotional outbursts, and difficulties of remembering, she was able to capture both a story and history. The stories she recorded are conversational, raw and vivid, full of specific details that do not fall into the traditional historical narrative, but instead resemble the stories that proliferate on its margins, for example, those that the women around the author would tell when she was younger. In my opinion, Alexievich continues the oral history tradition by making us listen to testimonies we might never have access to, and also by writing down survivor and witness accounts that might have been spoken once and never again. Her approach is important because her own voice and perspective never seem to infiltrate the text. She is attentive and careful, not taking anything away from the conversations – even when the narrative is very close to her own biography, her own life. Thus, Alexievich allows her reader to observe and take in the voices speaking. Just as she listens, we become the listeners as well.

For survivors, Alexievich's writing may act as a reinvention of their selves through her documentary genre. Her act of inscribing as survivors speak helps resolve many complexities of self, since the trauma gets channeled felt through thoughts, memories, and dreams. To have traumatic experiences listened to, creates an articulation of them that both mourns and monumentalizes.<sup>147</sup> In speaking, survivors can separate their past and present, working towards a

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<sup>147</sup> Mark Sanders, *Ambiguities of Witnessing: Law and Literature in the Time of a Truth Commission*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007.

future. Alexievich's work is instrumental in this process. Many of the books I have analyzed are centered around love in various ways: being in love during the war, remaining in love with a "radioactive object," loving and longing for Soviet times. The universality that exists thematically in most of her books comes from this fact that she does not ask questions specific to the events themselves, such as Chernobyl or the Second World War, but rather relies on emotions felt by many survivors of traumatic events to describe them beyond fact.

However, as noted in my last chapter, writing and speaking aloud does not necessarily heal traumas. Alexievich's books will continue to remain important, both in genre and content, but might not help resolve the traumas survivors have endured. She conducts interviews over long periods of time, and revisits events that have happened sometimes longer than ten years prior to her interviews. She writes the past and in doing so creates a significant body of works that turn survivors into authors – and thanks to her, they now own their own history. She is not putting herself in danger since she is interviewing survivors in the aftermath of their experiences, instead of facing the events in their present moment, and yet she remains a hero. Due to the political urgency of Alexievich's work, and especially the implicit accusations of totalitarian regimes it contains, her books are scrutinized by censors and politicians, such as the president of Belarus Alexander Lukashenko.<sup>148</sup> In remaining politically active and determined to write down other individuals' stories, she resembles author/journalists, such as Anna Politkovskaya,<sup>149</sup> and others who commit to telling the truth. Alexievich, in fact, wrote an opinion piece in *The Washington Post* about Politkovskaya. She wrote "freedom is a long road: This is what we've learned since you left. We really need you, Anna! We've learned from you that there can be no

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<sup>148</sup> Shaun Walker, "After Communism We Thought Everything Would Be Fine, But People Don't Understand Freedom," *The Guardian*, July 2017.

<sup>149</sup> Anna Politkovskaya was a human rights activist and journalist unfortunately murdered in her apartment elevator on the day of Putin's birthday in 2006 (which may or may not have been a coincidence).

compromises in a war; even the smallest compromise makes one an accomplice. It would be much harder for all of us without everything you had managed to say and do – without your belief that it is not hatred, but love for humanity that will save us.”<sup>150</sup>

This project has been my attempt at honoring Alexievich, for her similar “love for humanity” and the humanitarian willingness to capture individuals’ efforts to articulate the unspeakable. Her transcriptions of recorded conversations are also an effort at capturing the spoken in writing. She makes her process tangible, visible, and emotionally impactful by revealing full transcriptions to be truthful to the words of others, not interpreting or filling in what might alter what someone was trying to say. There is power in listening, capturing, and sharing, Alexievich shows us. It makes evident what has disappeared. It also makes the human trying to speak an acknowledged being. We really need you too, Svetlana.

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<sup>150</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, “Remembering Anna Politkovskaya, who was killed for telling the truth.” *The Washington Post*. October 8, 2018.

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