Fighting a War: Svetlana Alexievich's Prose between History and Literature

By
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Fighting a War: Svetlana Alexievich's Prose between History and Literature

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ABSTRACT

In this dissertation, I analyze three books from Svetlana Alexievich's Nobel Prize-winning cycle, *Voices of Utopia*, in their initial and later heavily revised editions and demonstrate how Alexievich turns oral history into literature. The first three narratives of the cycle, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1983), *Last Witnesses* (1985), and *Boys in Zinc* (1990) examine individual experience of two Soviet wars: World War II and the Soviet-Afghan War. I argue that Alexievich stylizes oral testimonies in these books according to the conventions of specific performative genres: requiem in *The Unwomanly Face of War*, magic tale in *Last Witnesses*, and confession in *Boys in Zinc*. I demonstrate how the use of these performative genres as narrative frames allows Alexievich to engage both her interviewees and her readers in ritualized reenactments of individual and collective war traumas. Through these reenactments, interviewees relive their war traumas in the form of a solemn commemoration, a brutal maturation rite, or the agony of the last confession, while readers bear witness to these painful processes. I maintain that with these performative collaborations between interviewees and readers Alexievich honors individual and collective traumas of war and presents them as verbal monuments to human suffering during Soviet-era wars. Her texts strive to demolish foundational Soviet mythologemes of World War II and to force readers to reassess their vision of the Soviet past and its impact on the post-Soviet present.

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Notes on Transliteration and Translations

This dissertation conforms to the U.S. Library of Congress transliteration system with the exception of last names of famous individuals (e.g., Dostoevsky). The following rules are respected throughout the text:

1. Titles of Russian works and specialized Russian terms and concepts are presented in transliteration followed by the English translation in parentheses.
2. The soft sign is represented by the '-sign in transliterating Russian titles.
3. The characters “э” and “ё” are transliterated as “e.” The character “й” is transliterated as “i” (not “ĭ”).
4. I use the form of the author’s name “Alexievich” instead of “Aleksievich” because this form is used in her publications in English.
5. I refer to Alexievich’s works by the titles of the most recent American translations:
    - *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso = The Unwomanly Face of War* (shortened to *Unwomanly Face*)
    - *Poslednie svideteli: Solo dlia detskogo golosa = Last Witnesses: An Oral History of the Children of World War II* (Random House) or *Unchildlike Stories* (Penguin) (shortened to *Last Witnesses*)
    - *Tsynkovye mal'chiki = Boys in Zinc.*
    - *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: Khroniki budushchego = Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (shortened to *Voices from Chernobyl*)
    - *Vremia sekond khend = Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets* (shortened to *Secondhand Time*)

6. I provide my own translations for examples from the first editions of *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*, as no English translations of the earliest editions currently exist. I use Julia and Robin Whitby's 1992 translation of *Tsynkovye mal'chiki,* titled as *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War,* to cite examples from the first 1990 edition of this book (although I continue to refer to the work as *Boys in Zinc* as a more accurate translation of the original. All examples from the 2016 editions are cited from most recent English translations. In passages where I disagree with the published translation, I have provided my own; these instances are marked.

For Elena and Maria

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From the Travel Journal (Prologue)

I see the river Svisloch. On its opposite bank, I see the Avenue of the Victors lined with renovated but still very boxy-looking Soviet apartment blocks. On their roofs I see glowing neon signs in Belarusian: "All Glory to Victors," "Minsk—the Hero City," "Minsk—the City of Heroes." There are a couple of Soviet sports facilities. I look to the right, and I see the imposing stele of the Belarus State Museum of World War II. I look to the left, and down below, there is a man-made island on the Svisloch river. In the middle of the island, there is something that looks like a chapel surrounded by statues of mourning women with funeral wreaths at their feet. This is the Island of Tears, a monument dedicated to the Belarusian soldiers who perished in the Soviet-Afghanistan war. All of this is disconcerting, especially when I look across the river again and see two tall buildings in this Soviet cityscape: a shiny business center and a black glassy high-rise. The sign on the second building says, "Doubletree by Hilton." In this cityscape, they look like a joke to me. All of a sudden I understand. It is 2020, I am not even in Russia, but the Soviet Myth surrounds me—the myth of Soviet victories, Soviet heroes, and Soviet might. I hear a female voice behind me: "How do you like the view?" "It is very Soviet," I answer, "as if the Soviet myth is still alive and is staring right at me." "Oh, you also think so?" says the same female voice. And the voice continues: "I do not like myths. That island of tears… I used to live in another apartment in this building and its windows faced that island. I had to move! I could not stand looking at it first thing in the morning. No, I do not like myths." The voice belongs to Svetlana Alexievich, Belarusian journalist and writer, the author of the Nobel Prize-winning *Voices of Utopia,* and the subject of my dissertation. It is her window through which I am looking, and now I am about to interview her.

INTRODUCTION

In 2015, a relatively unknown Belarusian journalist and writer, Svetlana Alexievich (b. 1948), received the Nobel Prize in Literature for her book cycle, *Golosa utopii (Voices of Utopia),* which includes five texts: *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (*The Unwomanly Face of War* 1985), *Posledinie svideteli* (*Last Witnesses* 1985), *Tsinkovye mal'chiki (Boys in Zinc* 1990), *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* (*Voices from Chernobyl* 1997), and *Vremia sekondhend* (*Secondhand Time* 2013). The award came with an appraisal: "for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time." Relying on the method of oral history, Alexievich's work weaved together the many voices of real people into powerful, emotionally charged narratives about the most tragic events in Soviet history: World War II, the Soviet-Afghan War, the Chernobyl catastrophe, and the collapse of the Soviet Union. The historical credibility of her books, her method of collecting testimonies, and her aesthetic approach to the testimonies resulted in the controversial reception of Alexievich as an author and a Nobel laureate in the West, in Russia, and in her home country, Belarus.

With its long tradition of oral history, the West rushed to embrace and even overpraise the historicity of Alexievich's texts while overlooking their literariness. Western translators unanimously subtitled her works "oral histories." For example, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky in 2017 as *The Unwomanly Face of War*, received a subtitle, *An Oral History of Women in World War II.* In a similar fashion, Keith Gessen translated *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: Khroniki budushchego* as *Voices from Chernobyl: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster* (2006). Viewing Alexievich's texts as oral history projects influenced the nuances of translation and structure of English editions and minimized the literary quality that serves a crucial purpose in the Russian originals—a purpose which this dissertation will scrutinize.

Confronting an unconventional and unflattering presentation of their Soviet past in Alexievich's texts, many Russian and Belarusian intellectuals and officials rejected their historical credibility and denied their literary quality, degrading her work to the level of "mere" creative fiction or even worse—pulp journalism. For example, Russian writer, journalist, and political activist Zakhar Prilepin considers Alexievich's writing style primitive and the content of her books russophobic.[1] According to Tatiana Tolstaia, Alexievich's work is, on the one hand, not literary because it arguably does not positively impact the reader's understanding of the world, and on the other hand, it is not historical, as it purportedly distorts the factual side of historical events and portrays them in exclusively negative terms.[2] Yurii Poliakov, chief editor of *Literaturnaia gazeta* (The literary gazette), claims that Alexievich's Nobel award is a political move by the West to besmirch Russia's image internationally.[3] This bifurcated reception of Alexievich's works by her Western and Russian colleagues offers little insight into or a reliable interpretation of her oeuvre; it does, however, demonstrate that her texts are political. The controversial opinions around her texts reflect continuing tensions between the West and Russia as the heir of the Soviet legacy. By giving a platform to the average citizens who participated in the events of Soviet history and allowing them to speak for and about themselves, Alexievich's works do indeed produce an ideological view that runs counter to that of the Soviet state, which did not encourage the common person speak his or her mind. Her texts dissect the key Soviet myth—that of the New Soviet Man—and expose what has been known in post-Soviet studies as Claude Lefort's paradox. Alexei Yurchak defines this paradox in the Soviet context as the

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[1] "Писатель Захар Прилепин — о решении Нобелевского комитета вручить премию по литературе Светлане Алексиевич,"*Izvestiia*, 2015, https://iz.ru/news/592832 Accessed 10 May 2020.
[2] Татьяна Толстая про Нобелевскую премию С.Алексиевич: "...это плевок в литературу," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oBuiveB8Jic Accessed 10 May 2020.
[3] Общественность проходит испытание премией Светланы Алексиевич. *Novaia gazeta*, 2015, https://novayagazeta.ru/articles/2015/10/10/65944-plach-o-nobelevskom-parmezane Accessed 10 May 2020.

incongruity between what the state says (its ideological enunciation of the Soviet myth) and what the state does (its ideological rule, the actual methods of governance by the Soviet state) (10). In this sense, Alexievich's texts are, indeed, political.

In 2015, I found these two opposing interpretations of Alexievich's Nobel Prize-winning cycle in the West and Russia fascinating. In this dissertation, I analyze three books from *Voices of Utopia* in their initial and later heavily revised editions to demonstrate how Alexievich turns oral history into literature. The first three narratives of the cycle, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (1983), *Last Witnesses* (1985), and *Boys in Zinc* (1990), examine the individual's experience of two Soviet wars: World War II and the Soviet-Afghan War. My overall argument is that Alexievich stylizes oral testimonies in these books according to the conventions of specific performative genres: requiem in *The Unwomanly Face of War*, magic tale in *Last Witnesses*, and confession in *Boys in Zinc*. In so doing, Alexievich engages both her interviewees and her readers in ritualized reenactments of individual and collective war traumas. Through these reenactments, interviewees relive their war traumas in the form of a solemn commemoration, or a brutal maturation rite, or the agony of the last confession, while readers bear witness to these painful processes. Such performative collaborations of interviewees and readers honor individual and collective traumas of war and effectively become verbal monuments. Furthermore, they demolish foundational Soviet mythologems of World War II and force the readers to reassess their vision of the Soviet past and its impact on the post-Soviet present.

I focus only on the first three books of the cycle because these three works are united by the theme of Soviet-era wars. Taken together, these three narratives illuminate how the myth of World War II was created, how it persisted in Soviet society, and how it led to the offensive and devastating Soviet-Afghan War. Moreover, because these books were originally published in the

Soviet period and then underwent the most drastic narrative transformations, they allow one to trace the development of Alexievich's signature writing style, as well as of her social and political stance. I dealt extensively with Alexievich's fourth book in the cycle, *Voices from Chernobyl*, in a journal article that appeared in a special Alexievich-themed volume of *Canadian Slavonic Papers*. *Secondhand Time* is an all-encompassing volume that differs considerably from any other book in *Voices of Utopia* and merits its own special inquiry. As such, it falls beyond the scope of this dissertation. However, my plan is to include a detailed analysis of this text, and of *Voices from Chernobyl*, when I rework this dissertation into a monograph.

The Problem of Genre

Svetlana Alexievich's five-book cycle, *Voices of Utopia*, belongs to late-Soviet and post-Soviet documentary prose, one important goal of which is to document, process, and give nuance to the Soviet experience. Although the documentary genre in which Alexievich works is not new, it is yet to be named and properly described in literary scholarship. Thus far, the genre has gathered various names of an associative and inconsistent nature. Alexievich's mentor, the Belarusian writer and critic Ales' Adamovich (1927–1994), for example, proposes several names for the genre: "epic-choir prose," "oratorio-novel," "collective novel," "documentary self-investigation," "tape-recorder literature" (4); Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn calls it "the experience of fictional research" (1); Alexievich insists on the "novel of voices" (Stankevich, 116). In contemporary literary scholarship, Il'ia Kukulin labels this genre "the genre of a montage book" (237-271); and Elena Mestergazi refers to it as "the genre of a documentary novel" (9). This diversity of names attempts to capture the main principle of this genre, which combines history and literature. The historical component of the genre consists in the use of various types of evidence—documents, interviews, letters, notes, observations, diaries, correspondence, etc.—

that come from a variety of people regarding a certain aspect of history. The literary component of the genre is determined by the role of the author who compiles and stylizes the collected evidence and organizes it into a meaningful narrative. Different writers perform this authorial function in different ways, which determines the genre's diversity and inconsistency.

Under the circumstances of Soviet censorship, this genre walked a fine line between unofficial and official taboos in its dealings with history and appeared in both *podtsenzurnaia* (censored) and *nepodtsenzurnaia* (uncensored) works by Soviet writers. The most prominent works of censored literature in this genre include *Brest Fortress* (1957) by Sergei Smirnov, *The Nuremberg Trial: Basic Legal Issues* (1966) by Arkadii Poltorak, *To Find a Person* (1968) by Agniia Barto, *The Blockade Book* (1977) by Ales' Adamovich and Daniil Granin, and *Out of the Fire* (1979) by Ales' Adamovich, Yanka Bryl', and Vladimir Kolesnik. Uncensored literature (mostly samizdat and tamizdat) includes *The Black Book of Soviet Jewry* (1945) by Ilya Ehrenburg and Vasilii Grossman and *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973) by Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn. Some topics, including the Holocaust of Polish and Soviet Jews, mass purges, or life in Stalinist GULags were banned from official Soviet discourse. On the other hand, collaboration of Soviet citizens with the Nazis in the extermination of Soviet civilians on the territories occupied by the Nazis or the brutal details of the Leningrad siege were topics that Soviet rhetoric recognized but avoided and never emphasized (Kukulin 254). Regardless of the taboos with which the literature of this documentary genre deals, it approaches the collected evidence as a set of facts deliberately excluded from Soviet discourse. Its primary goal is to restore the missing evidence and write these facts into the chronicle of Soviet experience (Bush 217).

When Alexievich talks about her growth as a writer in this particular genre, she traces its beginnings back to her childhood experiences. She was born in Western Ukraine in 1948. Her

father was Belarusian and served in World War II as a Red Army officer. Her mother was Ukrainian. Alexievich recollects spending summers at her maternal grandmother's home in Ukraine. Among other things, she recalls the villagers' evening conversations. They reminisced about their youth, the Bolshevik revolution followed by the Red Terror and the Civil War, dekulakization and collectivization, the Holodomor, the Stalinist purges, and World War II. Alexievich compares listening to them with turning into "a big ear," absorbing the sound of human voices and uniting them into a single litany. This knack for listening, processing, and working with the voices of the common people determined Alexievich's career choice.

In 1967, Alexievich became a student in the Department of Journalism at the Belarusian State University and met Ales' Adamovich, her professor, mentor, and life-long friend. His approach to literature as a product of co-creation between a writer and ordinary people became pivotal for her vocation as it provided her with a form for combining her childhood passion for listening with her acquired journalistic skills.

Upon graduation, Alexievich worked for *Maiak kommunizma* (Beacon of communism), where instead of reflecting the voices of ordinary people, her job was to reflect the one dominant voice of Soviet ideology. The discrepancy between what she had to do and what she wanted to do grew. In the late 1970s she attempted to implement her first project in the genre of the novel of voices and wrote the book *Ya uekhal iz derevni* (I left the village), which illuminated the experiences of Soviet people who moved from their villages to the big city (Stankevich 116). The Minsk Department of Soviet Propaganda banned the book as anti-Soviet, and so it remained in Alexievich's drawer to this day. Yet instead of giving up and returning to the "factory" of Soviet myth and propaganda, Alexievich abandoned her career as a journalist to follow her passion of becoming a writer who works with the individual voices of regular people. In 1980

she began her work on *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Last Witnesses*—the two books that would begin her book cycle *Voices of Utopia.*

Voices of Utopia: **General Characteristics**

Alexievich's *Voices of Utopia* does not examine any events of Soviet history that were taboo. On the contrary, her works deal with large-scale and much discussed events. *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Last Witnesses* examine World War II, *Boys in Zinc* deals with the Soviet-Afghan war, *Voices from Chernobyl* mourns the Chernobyl catastrophe, and *Secondhand Time* chronicles the collapse of the Soviet Union. Dealing with well-known and ideologically shaped Soviet historical narratives, Alexievich's prose does not focus on the factual aspects of Soviet history; instead, it deals with the "voices" (or rather perspectives) that were either absent or misrepresented in the mainstream discourse regarding these major historical events. In Bakhtinian terms, Alexievich revives perspectives that had been "killed" or excluded from the monologic Soviet discourse (that is to say, in the terms of Bakhtin scholars, they had experienced a "discursive death") (Bakhtin 124). In so doing, she gives the popular narrative plots of the most prominent dramatic events of Soviet history a new interpretation. She does this by injecting human feelings and emotions—unexpressed, repressed, and long-ignored by Soviet and post-Soviet rhetoric—into the gaps between the known historical facts. She writes: "Destiny is the life of one person, history is the life of all of us. I want to tell the history without losing the destiny… The destiny of one person…" (*Chernobyl'skaia molitva* 1997, 40). In her first book, *The Unwomanly Face of War,* Alexievich clearly defines her narrative role and goals: "I do not write about war, but about human beings in war. I write not the history of a war, but the history of feelings. I am a historian of the soul" (2017, xxi).

For Alexievich the discursively dead perspective is not simply the viewpoint of a particular social group about a certain historical event; it is a very focused vision that goes beyond the Soviet myth in a specific way. For Alexievich it is a person's view of themselves through themselves in the context of a particular historical event. She implements this approach by modeling a special narrative focalization that regulates the narrative lens and the narrative center in her texts (Bal, Friedman, Genette). The narrative lens is a cognitive interpretative base available to the narrator at the time of narration; it depends on numerous factors, such as the narrator's age, gender, experience, knowledge, intelligence, profession, psychological state, the audience he/she is narrating for, etc. The narrative center is the focus of the narrator's attention—the subject of his or her narrative (Bal 100, 101). In her texts, Alexievich manages the narrative lens in two stages: first, when selecting her interviewees and second when selecting excerpts from their interviews. For example, for *The Unwomanly Face of War*, Alexievich chose women who participated in World War II but were not publicly venerated as heroes and did not achieve a higher social status in their post-war careers. The gender, experience, and social status of her interviewees allowed Alexievich to disrupt the uniform, mythic representation of key events in Soviet history. Alexievich also had to break through the narrative distortions that the Soviet myth imposed on individual perception. In her introduction to *The Unwomanly Face of War*, she notices that she often had to patiently wait for a moment when her interviewees, women-veterans, would start trusting her enough to depart from the language of a history book on World War II and speak from their own memories, from their own experience (2017, xvii). In other words, Alexievich adjusts the narrative lens and the narrative center of her texts and directs them at each other, so that the woman veteran is talking about her experience of World War II

through her own experience as a woman—not from the point of view of the Soviet Man, Soviet citizen, or Soviet soldier.

Cataloging multiple individual experiences, Alexievich does not stay within the realm of the individual. The sheer concentration of the emotionally charged, traumatic individual narratives that she has amassed allows her to break through into the realm of the collective, to fill in the missing emotional elements that underlie and are part of all historical events, and thus to provide an alternative interpretative frame for the major ruptures of Soviet history. Such an approach puts Alexievich's narratives into the category of Soviet *nepodtsenzurnaia* literature; however, since Alexievich appeared as an author in the 1980s, Soviet censorship did not have much influence on her work with the exception of *The Unwomanly Face of War,* which was banned by the censors between 1983 and 1985 (Kukulin 270). Gorbachev's perestroika with its policy of maximal transparency of Party actions lifted the ban on many literary works, including *The Unwomanly Face of War.* Unlike the latter, the rest of Alexievich's works were published right after their completion.

Another distinctive feature of Alexievich's prose is its temporal "fluidity"—the fact that she revises her works with each subsequent edition. This fluidity is again connected with Alexievich's attempt to readjust the narrative point of view of her texts. Such readjustments in part stem from her own liberation from the Soviet myth. Having worked in mainstream Soviet periodicals, Alexievich was aware of the mechanics of the Soviet myth and was able to identify them in others but not always in herself as a narrator. After living through the enormous social and political transformations that began after 1985 and continued into the new century, Alexievich became increasingly sensitive to the slightest manifestations of the Soviet myth, especially in her own writing. This prompted her to repeatedly edit her texts. Additionally, more

and more people, who, like her, were reconsidering their Soviet experience reached out to her to share their stories and have their voices included in her books.[4]

With every new edition of her texts, Alexievich has attuned her own voice and the voices of her interviewees to her evolving understanding of the workings and implications of the Soviet myth. Her realizations manifest themselves to one degree or another in each book of her pentalogy. The earlier books, *Unwomanly Face of War*, *Last Witnesses,* and *Boys in Zinc,* published in the Soviet period, undergo more transformation than the later *Voices from Chernobyl* and *Secondhand Time*. Changes to form and ideological message in *Unwomanly Face, Last Witnesses,* and, to a lesser extent, in *Boys in Zinc* are so considerable that their first editions read in significantly different ways from their most recent ones.

In 2004, Alexievich undertook a major revision of her texts. She gives three reasons for this. First, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, more and more people wanted to contribute to her books. Second, the transition from Soviet to post-Soviet time and space required adjustments in literary aesthetics. Third, in her view, documents (testimonies) are an organic entity that reveals increasingly more facets over the course of time and naturally shifts ideological paradigms.[5] One of the major narrative transformations concerns Alexievich's explicit presence within her texts, which since 2004 has become less and less imposing. She leaves her reader alone with her interviewee more often and allows the reader to enter into and share the experience of her interviewees. *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses,* more so than *Boys in Zinc,* include stylistic changes and move from a style reminiscent of socialist realism to a trauma text—that is, a text that communicates traumatic experience to the readers via specific

[4] From personal interview, 20 February 2020.
[5] From personal interview, 20 February 2020.

sensibilities and structural devices and offers a unique kind of access to the past (Vickroy 3, 20, 21). *Boys in Zinc* and *Voices from Chernobyl* include new parts that contain materials that became available only after the initial publications. These include transcripts of court trials between 1992 and 1993, in which Alexievich was accused of slander and factual falsification. Stylistically, Alexievich works to disturb the polished surface of her texts in order to make personal and social traumas more prominent and to cast the reader as witness.

The temporal fluidity of Alexievich's prose makes it unique even among similar works of documentary prose; at the same time, it has earned Alexievich a contradictory reputation. It made her more vulnerable to the storm of criticism that came after she received the Nobel Prize for Literature. On the one hand, many perceive her as a spokeswoman for the common people whose opinions and life stories the dominant narrative ignores; on the other hand, some see her as a purveyor of Western liberal ideas with an anti-Soviet and/or anti-Russian bias (Schmid, Sdanevitsch).

Literariness, Performativity, and Trauma Text in *Voices of Utopia*: Existing Scholarship

Scholarship on Alexievich and her oeuvre can be divided into two categories: works written before and after the award of the Nobel Prize. The pre-Nobel scholarship on Alexievich is rather scarce and consists of a single master's thesis, some isolated articles, and a handful of essays. Among the most insightful secondary materials on Alexievich's work before 2015 is Serguei A. Oushakine's 2007 essay on *Last Witnesses*—"Oskolki voennoi pamiati: Vse chto ostalos' ot takogo uzhasa" (Fragments of war memory: all that was left from that horror). This essay was the first to argue that *Last Witnesses* provides an alternative portrayal of Soviet childhood in World War II—an argument that I also make and develop further in Chapter Two. Doris Scribner's close reading of *Voices from Chernobyl* in her 2008 master's thesis, "Recreation

of Chernobyl Trauma in Svetlana Aleksiyevich's *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*," provided me with a valuable insight into Alexievich's poetics of traumatic memory, on which I built in my own article on *Voices from Chernobyl*. Her analysis of Alexievich's chorus technique—the construction of collective testimonies out of short excerpts from different interviews—is also valuable for my analysis of *The Unwomanly Face of War* in Chapter One.

Galya Ackerman and Frédérick Lemarchand's 2009 article "Du bon et du mauvais usage du témoignage dans l'œuvre de Svetlana Alexievitch" was the first analysis that shaped my vision of how Alexievich stylized the testimonies. The authors of the article show how in each subsequent edition Alexievich treats her interviewees more like literary characters and employs various linguistic and literary techniques to increase their dramatism (use of epithets, introducing/reinforcing features of trauma texts, etc.). Lev Anninskii's 2014 review of *Secondhand Time*, "Slepiashchaia t´ma Svetlany Aleksievich" (Svetlana Alexievich's blinding darkness) ignited my own thinking about the ethics and aesthetics of Alexievich's work by pointing to the purposes for which Alexievich relies on individual experience. Finally, Elena Gapova's 2015 article, "Stradanie i poisk smysla: 'moral'nye revolutsii' Svetlany Aleksievich," (Suffering and the search for meaning: Svetlana Alexievich's 'moral revolutions'), published before the award, influenced my understanding of the impact of Alexievich's texts on the reader. Gapova analyzes Alexievich's prose through Kwame Appiah's concept of moral revolutions and argues that in portraying the traumas of the Soviet Man, the author inspires her readers to reconsider their Soviet past for the sake of positive social transformations in the post-Soviet present. In my dissertation, I demonstrate what narrative techniques Alexievich uses to make such transformations in her readers possible.

Since 2015, a growing number of scholars, journalists, and literary critics have been trying to understand the aesthetics and politics of Alexievich's writing. The genre in which she works remains enigmatic and places her writings between history, journalism, and literature. Her political views may easily be interpreted as either liberal or conformist. All sorts of interviews with Alexievich, from the scholarly to the scandalous, have appeared in the press and media. There have also been at least two collaborative attempts by two academic journals, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* and *Osteuropa,* to provide a fuller scholarly overview of Alexievich's oeuvre.

In 2017, *Canadian Slavonic Papers* published a special volume, titled "Svetlana Alexievich: The Writer and Her Times," which included eight articles. Angela Brintlinger's "Mothers, Father(s), and Daughter: Svetlana Alexievich and *The Unwomanly Face of War*" examined how Alexievich not only built on the works of her male colleagues (Adamovich, Kolesnik, and Bryl') but also entered into a specific type of communicative dynamics with her interviewees. According to Brintlinger, Alexievich positions herself as a daughter vis-a-vis her interviewees in *The Unwomanly Face of War.* In Chapter One, I approach these communicative dynamics through the genre of requiem with its theme of complete sincerity. Daniel Bush's "'No Other Proof:' Svetlana Alexievich in the Tradition of Soviet War Writing" sees Alexievich's focus not on factual but on emotional reconstruction of war as a distinctive feature that makes her writings stand out in the tradition of Soviet World War II writing (217). In Chapter One, I build on this argument and show how Alexievich permits the reader to acquire the experience of "feeling" the event.

In my chapter on *Boys in Zinc*, I make use of Jeffrey Jones's argument from "Mothers, Prostitutes, and the Collapse of the USSR: The Representation of Women in Svetlana Alexievich's *Zinky Boys*" about the place of women interviewees in *Boys in Zinc*. Following

Jones, I treat them as spokeswomen for the Afghan experience of those who perished in the war. I also build on Holly Myers's comparison of the first 1990 and the most recent 2016 editions of this book in her article "Svetlana Alexievich's Changing Narrative of the Soviet-Afghan War in *Zinky Boys.*" Myers argues that Alexievich's presentation of the "truth"' about the Soviet-Afghan War goes from literariness to documentariness (346) between the two editions. I expand her argument and suggest that this transformation is connected with Alexievich's evolution from Soviet journalist to professional writer with her own voice and style. Johanna Lindbladh's "The Polyphonic Performance of Testimony in Svetlana Alexievich's *Voices of Utopia*" argues that Alexievich's control over the textual polyphony and literary aesthetics of voices is, in fact, ethical, as opposed to the opinion supported by many Russian intellectuals, who have been trying to prove otherwise. In this dissertation, I concur with her view that Alexievich's arrangement of individual experience helps her interviewees overcome their traumatic ambivalence while at the same time engaging the reader in a more empathetic mode of reading.

A special issue of *Osteuropa*, titled "Nackte Seelen: Svetlana Aleksievič und der 'Rote Mensch,'" appeared in 2018. It also influenced my approach to and understanding of *Voices of Utopia.* The most insightful discussion about the origins of Alexievich's signature genre is provided in Clemens Günther's "Mehr als Geschichte: Svetlana Aleksievičs dokumentarische Prosa." Günther argues that the literariness of Alexievich's texts lies in the fact that she endows marginalized historical topics with "narrative dialogism [with the reader]" and "emotionalization" (83-97). My dissertation examines what Günther sees as narrative dialogism and emotionalization from the point of view of Alexievich's strategies to engage her interviewee and the reader in a ritualized narrative performance structured around conventions of specific performative genres. In Chapter Two of this dissertation, I incorporate Johanna Lindbladh's

findings on narrative changes in the most recent 2016 edition of *Last Witnesses*, which she presents in "Näher am Trauma: Aleksievičs 'Letzte Zeugen' im Vergleich"—another article in the special issue of *Osteuropa*. Articles in the two special issues of *Canadian Slavonic Papers* and *Osteuropa* have impacted my thinking about the main characteristics of Alexievich's signature writing style.

Signature Writing Style

Key elements of Alexievich's writing style manifest themselves on two levels: the collection of material and the arrangement of this material. In collecting the testimonies, Alexievich uses the methodology of oral history, which is similar in many ways to journalism in that both collect interviews with participants and witnesses of events. However, journalism investigates current events whereas oral history investigates historical events. The witness testimonies that are the focus of *Voices of Utopia* illuminate specific events of Soviet history through the prism of individual experience. To prevent Soviet myth from creeping into the individual testimonies, Alexievich relies on two strategies. She does *not* interview high-ranking military or state officials but rather ordinary people who participated in or witnessed the events. Moreover, she chooses her interviewees from social categories that have been excised from the mainstream discourse. In Bakhtinian terms, their perspectives experienced a "discursive death" within the culture in that their experiences were either misrepresented by or completely absent from the mainstream Soviet and/or post-Soviet discourses.

For *The Unwomanly Face of War,* Alexievich interviewed World War II women veterans, while *Last Witnesses* features the testimonies of ordinary people who had experienced World War II as children. Oddly enough, the more World War II recedes into the past, the less value is assigned to the experience of ordinary participants of historical events by the mainstream

discourse. In *Boys in Zinc,* Alexievich captures that historical moment (the mid- and late 1980s) when the real experience of Soviet-Afghan veterans was of little interest to Soviet mainstream or general public discourse and before it became subsumed by the discourse of veterans' clubs and unions.[6] In the case of *Voices from Chernobyl,* Alexievich interviewed Chernobyl refugees, those who carried out the emergency clean-up in Chernobyl, and those who came back to live in the Exclusion Zone despite authorities' prohibition—all those whose experience had been pushed to the margins of the official discourse or ignored. For *Secondhand Time,* Alexievich engaged the perspectives of ordinary people from various walks of life—the proverbial Russian *malen'kii chelovek* (the "little man") who remained outside the big-picture representation of the Soviet era.

After reading Alexievich's texts very closely, I discovered that in weaving her narratives out of the voices of her interviewees, the author structured the relationship among herself, her interviewees, and her readers in a certain way. The structure is always dictated by the nature of the historical event, the genres that the official discourse used or uses to convey the experience of this particular social group in the context of this event, and the type of discursive oblivion into which this official discourse had forced Alexievich's interviewees. Being sensitive to all of these subtle aspects, Alexievich uses individual testimonies to reenact traumatic personal experiences by placing them into the narrative frames of familiar genres, utilized by the official discourse. For example, Soviet mainstream discourse often employed the genre of the magic tale to narratively present war experience of and for children. The author also embeds the features of this genre into her *Last Witnesses*—the text that illuminates children's experience of World War II. However, by featuring traumatic testimonies of real people, she undermines all the mythic

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[6] Organizations formed by Afghan veterans and mothers of those who perished in the Soviet-Afghan War. For more on this, see Serguei Oushakine, *Patriotism of Despair: Nation, War, and Loss in Russia,* Cornell University Press, 2009.

messages that Soviet mainstream discourse sought to convey by means of this genre. The presence of these genres' framework in Alexievich's texts endows the reenactment of individual and collective traumas with these genres' aesthetics. At the same time, the trauma texts embedded in the framework of these genres undermine the mythologized, heroic message that the official discourse traditionally expressed through them. In so doing, Alexievich creates powerful narratives that counteract the official discourse's mythic representations of the Soviet past by using the chosen narrative strategies of the official discourse to dismantle them. In this dissertation, using the examples of *The Unwomanly Face of War*, *Last Witnesses*, and *Boys in Zinc*, I show how, with the help of specific performative genres, Alexievich liberates her interviewees from their discursive isolation and gives them an opportunity to reclaim their actual, lived experiences. At the same time, she endows these experiences with value by casting the reader into the often painful role of an empathetic witness.

Theoretical Approaches

In arguing that Alexievich's texts are literature (rather than oral history or journalism), I rely on Derek Attridge's understanding of literature as articulated in his book, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004). Attridge maintains that literature is endowed with a specific kind of performativity. While history and literature are both performative, each is performative in its own way. I find that history is performative in a sense that resembles J. L. Austin's theory of performative speech acts, in which meaning is assigned to reality by naming facts. In other words, historical narratives lay out facts for the readers. By *naming* or designating what is to be considered historical truth, history providing readers with a ready-made framework for interpreting reality. Literature's primary role is not to designate "truth;" rather, it "stages the activity of witnessing" for the readers, and from that performative act they derive their own

understanding of the truth (Attridge 95-99). This "activity of witnessing" can nuance, expand, shift, or completely transform readers' understanding of a certain part of reality. According to Attridge, literature is not tied to the notions of fiction or nonfiction. Both fiction and nonfiction can be literature as long as they make the reader a participant through the act of transformative witnessing.

Another point that Attridge makes is that it is the reader who completes the literariness of any literary text because the reader is the one who chooses to engage with the text on the level of experiencing the event staged by it. He also adds, however, that texts "may or may not impose this choice" on the reader (95). Alexievich relies on her readers' cultural familiarity with the official discursive strategies to present Soviet-era wars; by setting the process of trauma recollection against the background of these discursive strategies, Alexievich does impose this choice on the reader to make him or her a participant in her text; the reader becomes a trauma witness. In doing this, she ensures the literariness of her texts, at least to the extent that it depends on her as the author.

In my analysis of how Alexievich breaks through the silence of individual psychological trauma, I rely on works of such trauma theorists as Richard McNally and Joshua Pederson, who argue that traumatic experience is available to the traumatized as a memory. However, in order for these memories to turn into shared narratives, a certain communicative dynamic between the traumatized and the interlocutor is required. I use Dori Laub's theorization of several levels of trauma witnessing to analyze how Alexievich arranges narrative interaction between her interviewees and her readers in each of the three texts. To describe how the author leads both her interviewees and her readers through the process of individual and collective trauma processing,

I employ Dominick LaCapra's ideas about the therapeutic movement from "acting out" to "working through" the traumatic experiences.

To analyze strategies of textual performativity in Alexievich's texts, I use genre theories from various fields, including music, folklore, and literary studies. In Chapter One, I utilize theorizations about the genre of requiem by Alec Robertson, Robert Chase, Svetlana Studennikova, A.L. Petrova, and others. In Chapter Two, I describe features of the magic tale in *Last Witnesses* using Alexander Propp's formalist approach from his *Morphology of the Magic Tale.* To discern particular narrative strategies and character types that appear in *Last Witnesses,* I employ theorizations of such folklorists and literary scholars as Max Lüthi, Axel Olrik, Jack Zipes, Tat'iana Zueva, and Natalia Pomerantseva. In Chapter Three, I combine literary theory on the genre of confession with folklore studies on death and funerary rites to demonstrate how Alexievich stages the act of last confession in her *Boys in Zinc.* I rely on works by Cristopher Grobe, Terrance Doody, Donald Gene Pace, Dennis A. Foster, Dmitrii Zelenin, Ludmila Vinogradova, and M. Andriunina to accomplish this.

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My dissertation includes an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. In Chapter One, "*The Unwomanly Face of War*: Requiem for a Lost Voice," I explore how Alexievich's first book on World War II utilizes the genre of requiem as a narrative frame that unites women veterans' voices in a collective commemoration of their soldierly past. My analysis of the differences between the 1985 and 2016 editions shows that Alexievich employs features of the genre of requiem to "conduct" performances of different kinds—one Soviet, and the other non-Soviet. To demonstrate how the ideological tone of the performance changes, I first compare the 1985 edition of *The Unwomanly Face of War* to the most representative Soviet requiem of World War II, Robert Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" (1962), and then I compare the 2016 edition to

Anna Akhmatova's poetic cycle "Requiem." These comparative analyses show how each edition urges the reader to see the war in a different light than that promoted in the Soviet and post-Soviet mainstream cultures.

In Chapter Two, "*Last Witnesses*: The Magic Tale of Childhood," I examine how Alexievich's second book on World War II uses the genre of the Slavic magic tale. I discuss how the magic tale was used in Soviet World War II discourse to describe war experience of and for children. Then I analyze narrative transformations between the first 1985 edition and the most recent 2016 edition and demonstrate how features of the magic tale become more prominent in the 2016 *Last Witnesses.* Finally, I show how Alexievich manipulates the generic conventions of the magic tale in her narrative to emphasize the traumatic rather than heroic aspects of the child's war experience and thereby to subvert the dominant war discourse.

In Chapter Three, "*Boys in Zinc*: Confessions of the Unclean Dead" I discuss Alexievich's conscious use of the confession genre in her third book*,* which examines the topic of the Soviet-Afghan War. I analyze both the individual testimonies and the work's unusual structure. I then apply literary theory on the genre of confession to the analysis of the character and communicative dynamics of individual testimonies of Afghan veterans (*afgantsy*) and trace how Alexievich adjusts these features between the first 1990 and the most recent 2016 edition of the book. I explore how she uses the folk imagery of the unclean dead to reflect the uneasy, unnatural, and liminal place of the *afgantsy,* the soldiers who fought in the Soviet-Afghan War, within Soviet society. Further, I analyze how, through the narrative reenactment of the funerary ritual, Alexievich engages her interviewees and her readers in a powerful narrative performance that allows both parties to process the Soviet-Afghan experience. Finally, I demonstrate how the

performative effect of *Boys in Zinc* consolidates the pacifist position Alexievich took in *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*.

The detailed, interdisciplinary analysis conducted in this dissertation demonstrates that Svetlana Alexievich's prose is a work of literature rather than oral history or journalism. The dissertation shows that Alexievich's texts may be seen as artistic archives of individual and collective traumatic experience, as well as narratives that explore Soviet history from a different angle and attempt to liberate Russian society from the mythologemes of Soviet ideology. It also demonstrates what important cultural work Alexievich's writings perform regarding the historical traumas of Soviet wars and those who fought them.

CHAPTER I: *The Unwomanly Face of War*: Requiem for a Lost Voice

In her work, Alexievich develops the ideas and beliefs of her college professor and life-long mentor Ales' Adamovich about the preservation of memory. Not accidentally, with the first book in her cycle *Voices of Utopia*, she establishes a symbolic connection with Adamovich's first novel, *Voina pod kryshami* (War under the roofs, 1967). She pays tribute to Adamovich by borrowing the book's title—*The Unwomanly Face of War* —from the epigraph to *War Under the Roofs:* "War does not have a woman's face. But there is nothing in this war that would imprint itself into memory more powerfully, acutely, more terribly and beautifully than the faces of our mothers" [7] (translation mine. Adamovich 1). Such borrowing does not signal a continuity of the oratorio novel genre, as Adamovich turned to it only after the publication of his first novel. Instead, Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War* (hereafter referred to as *Unwomanly Face*) establishes a connection with the central figure of *War Under the Roofs*—Anna Korzun, a village pharmacist, who at the beginning of war finds herself a point woman for local partisans. Placing Anna Korzun in the narrative center, Adamovich chooses to explore war through women's experience, unlike many socialist realist novels that feature the heroism of Soviet men and allot to women only supporting roles—the waiting wife, mourning mother, or, at most, a military nurse. Alexievich continues and develops her mentor's attempt to put women in the center of the narrative reconstruction of war.

Instead of focusing on a fictional character, who is depicted at the break of war—the time when the Wehrmacht's genocide of the population on the controlled territories had not yet gained

[7] The English translation of the title, *The Unwomanly Face of War,* does not fully convey the meaning of the Russian *У войны не женское лицо.* Its literal translation is "The war does not have a woman's face," in the sense of feminine or even female face."

its momentum—Alexievich brings together testimonies of more than a hundred real women. These women experienced war at the front, in the rear, in the occupied territories, in labor and death camps, and they continued to experience it long after the war's end through the patriarchal stigmas of Soviet post-war society. Such a concentration of diverse memories depicts a war experience that is more complicated than the portrait of Anna Korzun as the coordinator of local partisan resistance. The figure of Korzun only anticipates the drastic transformation that participation in war demanded from Soviet women. Her partisan activism at the beginning of war is deeply rooted in traditional motherly and womanly duties to provide care and negotiate peace. Acting as a devoted wife, mother, and worker, the heroine quickly earns the trust of the Germans and the punitive forces. She uses this trust to provide partisans with provision, medicine, and information, to protect her sons, and to negotiate less violence in her home village. The novel ends when this status quo becomes impossible: she is about to be exposed and punished by the Germans. Under the protection of partisans, Korzun and her two sons flee into the forest to save their lives and ultimately experience the war in all of its fierceness.

Unwomanly Face picks up the war narrative at the moment when *War Under the Roofs* ends. It reveals its heroines in conditions that have no space for motherly and womanly behaviors but demand only brutal fighting from them. The women participate in combat, kill Germans, persecute traitors, adapt to military regimens and the hardships of war. Thus, borrowing the title from Adamovich's first novel, Alexievich does more than express her respect and her debt to her mentor; she also establishes conceptual continuity as she furthers and complicates the theme of women in war that began in *War Under the Roofs*.

By omitting the second sentence of Adamovich's epigraph, Alexievich consciously departs from the traditional stereotype that there is no role for women in war. Recorded

testimonies of hundreds of women-combatants serve as a proof of the opposite. In her preface to the first edition of *Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich lists the various roles which her interviewees assumed at the front: "medical assistants, field radio operators, sappers, pilots, snipers, antiaircraft gunners, machine gunners, political workers, troopers, tankers, paratroopers, sailors, pointswomen, drivers, washerwomen, cooks, bakers, partisans" (1985, 57). What remains unchanged from the original epigraph to *War Under the Roofs* is the opposition between the first and the second sentences. The statement, "The war does not have a woman's face," is set against the next sentence of Adamovich's novel and against the entire narrative of Alexievich's text. Alexievich shapes the main narrative lines of her work by opposing the mainstream representation of war, which indeed has an "unwomanly face," to the marginalized reality of Soviet women's participation in the war as soldiers. In this Alexievich, who has not identified with feminism or called her work feminist in her interviews, reveals that her approach to the marginalization of certain social groups resembles western feminism in some ways.

Alexievich's exploration of key issues can be summarized by four questions:

1. If the war has an unwomanly face, how does one account for 800,000 women fighting in World War II?

2. Why does the war have an unwomanly face and whose perception is this?

3. If the war has an unwomanly face, should a woman participate in war?

In the eyes of Soviet censors and critics, Alexievich's answers to these questions and her focus on the female perspective on World War II were a serious deviation from the state-promoted discourse on the "mythology" of World War II. This was enough to prevent the book's publication in 1983. Only two years later, with the advent of Gorbachev's *perestroika,* did the publication of *Unwomanly Face* become possible.

Since its first appearance in 1985, *Unwomanly Face* underwent several revisions, was translated into multiple languages, and inspired both film and theater producers. Even before *Unwomanly Face* became a book and reached its readers in 1985, seven interviews from it appeared as a documentary series under the same title, *The Unwomanly Face of War.* Alexievich wrote the script for this documentary; Viktor Dashuk, a Belarusian documentary film director, directed it. Episodes of this documentary were aired on Soviet television between 1981 and 1984, proving that *Unwomanly Face* had entered Soviet popular culture. In the year of its first publication, the Russian playwright Alexander Remez turned *Unwomanly Face* into a play called *Случайный вальс* (an accidental waltz), which was staged in Moscow Estrade Theater. Since then and to this day, *Unwomanly Face* has been frequently staged in professional and amateur theaters across Russia and the former Soviet republics. One of its staged performances, produced and filmed by Arkhangel'sk media-center "Solombal'nost'," was entitled *Requiem*.[8] Although the film is presented as a tribute by the younger generation to the generation that survived or perished in World War II and as a site of memory for future generations, I maintain that the genre of requiem is not merely an interpretive frame introduced by the producers of the performance. On the contrary, it is a textual feature of *Unwomanly Face* that the producers immediately recognized and used.

In this chapter, I explore how *Unwomanly Face* utilizes the genre of requiem as a narrative frame that unites women veterans' voices in a collective commemoration of their soldierly past. This frame enables textual performativity and offers an extralinguistic source of additional narrative meaning, which turns the text into an act of commemoration rather than a

[8] Фильм-реквием: У войны не женское лицо, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WC6oOgrkIX8 Accessed 28 September 2019.

simple recollection of the past. My analysis of the 1985 and 2016 editions will show how Alexievich employs features of the genre of requiem to "conduct" performances of different characters—Soviet and non-Soviet. It will demonstrate how the Soviet requiem of the 1985 edition aims to fit the marginalized perspective of women veterans into the dominant Soviet discourse of the victorious war, while the 2016 non-Soviet requiem uses this marginalized perspective to undermine that same discourse, which had successfully migrated into many post-Soviet societies, including Russian society. Finally, I demonstrate how the sociopolitical statements that result from these collective requiem performances resemble different treatments of war in liberal and radical feminism and determine the book's topicality in both Soviet and post-Soviet contexts.

Unwomanly Face fits the parameters of the genre of requiem both in general and in the context of Soviet and post-Soviet societies in particular. Narrative transformations permit Alexievich to empower female veterans' voices in the 1985 edition of *Unwomanly Face* to perform a *Soviet* requiem and in the 2016 edition—a *non-Soviet* one. I will compare the 1985 edition of *Unwomanly Face* to one of the best-known and most representative Soviet requiems of World War II, Robert Rozhdestvenskii's long poem "Requiem" (1962), and then I will compare the 2016 edition to Anna Akhmatova's poetic cycle "Requiem," which challenges and undermines Soviet ideology. These comparative analyses will reveal sociopolitical feminist statements, by means of which each edition urges the reader to see the war in a different light than that promoted in the Soviet and post-Soviet cultures. They will also illuminate how, through the use of the genre of requiem, both editions employ textual performativity, which makes them literary works instead of works of fiction or history. In distinguishing between literature and fiction, I rely on works of Derek Attridge and will explain this distinction later.

The Genre of Requiem and *Unwomanly Face*: Conceptual Similarities

Originating in Catholic rites for the dead, the genre of requiem revolves around the occasion of death, often one of social or historical significance, and serves as the social commemorative ritual.[9] In general, this genre is associated with music. However, the desire to artistically interpret and preserve the memory of a person's life after their death has brought this genre into other arts. This genre may be found in literature (Aleksei Apukhtin's 1868-69 poem, "Requiem"), film (the American filmmaker Darren Aranofsky's 2000 psychological drama, *Requiem for a Dream*), painting (Solomon Gershov's 1979 cycle of paintings, "Requiem"), and even sculpture (Dmitrii Mitlianskii's 1971 monument, "Requiem").

Although not obvious at first glance, *Unwomanly Face* also revolves around a death. This death, however, is not physical but discursive. In Bakhtinian terms, the Soviet state imposed a top-down, monologic discourse for its citizens. It constructed "truth" from the dominant perspective dictated by Soviet ideology. Such Soviet monologism kept all "other" perspectives socially and culturally unheard and unrecognized, dooming them to the state of non-being—or discursive death. Examining the dominant discourse on World War II in her book *Soviet Women in Combat,* historian Anna Krylova argues that Stalinist paramilitary propaganda for the masses operated an inconsistent gender policy. Before and during World War II, this policy encouraged the celebration of women soldiers while never eradicating conventional patriarchal stereotypes circulating in the society (13). After the war, the devastated state returned men to leading positions in the country's economy and forced women back into the domestic sphere, allowing them to work only to help cover their family and household needs (Pushkareva). One of

[9] See the insightful work of Svetlana Studennikova (2010), Bob Snyder (2000), Robert Chase (2003), A. L. Petrova (1982), and Alec Robertson (1867).

Alexievich's interviewees says: "The men were victors, heroes, suitors, the war was theirs, but they looked at us [women] with completely different eyes…" (1985, 144). Indeed, this immediate return to traditional patriarchal mores devalued women's war experience and contribution to victory; moreover, it made them vulnerable to patriarchal stigmas deeply rooted in the public mind.

Without state support, women veterans, who had spent years among unattended men, found themselves in an atmosphere of public hostility, condemnation, and alienation as their war experience was diminished to female frivolity and dissolute behaviors or was completely dismissed and ignored (Krylova, Pushkareva, Tumarkin, Pennington, Stites, Murmantseva). No wonder that Brezhnev's revival of the war discourse in 1965 through the official celebration of Victory Day was, in Bakhtinian terms, "monologic." World War II had become a cult that glorified the heroism of the male Soviet Soldier, emphasized the unity of Soviet Peoples, and promoted the masterful leadership and triumph of the Soviet State. At the same time, the cult avoided any direct reference to the woman soldier, ignored mistakes made by Party leadership that resulted in tremendous human losses, and disregarded the war's psychological damage to the Soviet population.

In response to this monologism, women veterans developed the habit of keeping their military past to themselves. At the same time, this unreleased, unrecognized military past created a psychological conflict for women veterans, a conflict in which they had to disassociate their post-war identity from their identity as soldiers by "burying" the latter deep inside. Not coincidentally, in the fourth edition of her book, Alexievich points out the bifurcation in her interviewees' identity, a bifurcation made whole during the interview in which the present female identity and the "buried" identity of the woman soldier unite: "At least three persons

participate in the conversation: the one who is talking now, the one she was then, at the moment of the event, and myself" (2017, xx).[10]

Following the principles of the genre of requiem, *Unwomanly Face* resurrects—for the duration of its performance—the "buried" identities of women veterans through the ritualized process of remembrance and commemoration; it simultaneously revives the discursively dead perspective of Soviet women veterans on World War II. Thus, the themes of death, commemoration, and recognition of the deceased saturate both editions of *Unwomanly Face,* although they are not the only features that *Unwomanly Face* shares with the genre of requiem. Such characteristics of requiems as **polyphony, dramatism, didacticism,** and **historicity** described by music scholars Svetlana Studennikova, Bob Snyder, A. L. Petrova, G. E. Koliar, Alec Robertson, and Robert Chase also manifest themselves in *Unwomanly Face*.

Polyphony in requiems is based on the principle of counterpoint, the art of adding one or more independent melodic lines on or under a pre-existing musical sequence (Robertson 78). In other words, it is a general principle of musical development that helps create new compositions on the basis of old ones. In requiem, the plainsong, an unaccompanied monophonic melody for singing, is usually enriched through polyphony (Robertson 11 and Fitzgibbon 36). Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face* is organized similarly. The mainstream discourse about Soviet victory in World War II was intended to boost national pride, maintain national unity, and support the state's authority; it serves as the pre-existing musical sequence. By 1985 the dominant war discourse in the Soviet Union had been boiled down to a generic plotline that may be viewed as a symbolic plainsong: the sudden and brutal invasion of the USSR by the Nazis; their blazing advance

[10] I rely on the 2017 translation of *The Unwomanly Face of War* made by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky when quoting Alexievich's 2016 edition. All translations from the 1985 edition are mine.

across Soviet territory; fierce battles of the Red Army against Nazi troops, a turn in the tide of battle, and expulsion of the enemy beyond Soviet borders, ending in a great victory costing millions of heroic lives of Soviet soldiers (by default male). To this Alexievich adds the counterpoint of oral history. She adds new melodic lines of individual experiences to the dominant discourse to create a polyphony that transforms the familiar plainsong and creates a new, intricate performance challenging the old dominant. As I will explain below, Alexievich manages polyphony to modify this "plainsong" in the 1985 and 2016 editions differently.

Dramatism in the requiem manifests itself as both musical and textual components. Most requiems rely on Biblical texts about the Judgment Day that awaits the soul of the deceased (Chase 41). The soul's ordeals—reevaluation of the past, confession, repentance, redemption—require from the soul ultimate sincerity and become the source of textual dramatism. Such sincerity often causes the soul pain as it has to admit and expose facts about itself that it hid or justified in its earthly life. At the same time, this sincerity allows the soul to throw off the burden of its earthly baggage, receive purification, and find peace and place in the sacred realm. In *Unwomanly Face,* the war experiences of women soldiers are the source of the book's dramatism. However, like religious requiems that reject any habitual excuses and demands ultimate sincerity from the soul, *Unwomanly Face* attempts to strip away the social stigmas that often censored women veterans' war memory. Such stripping away becomes emotionally painful for Alexievich's interviewees: first, because their military experience was psychologically traumatic; second, because they had to hide this traumatic experience and even learn to be ashamed of it, and, third, because they were not used to talking about the war outside Soviet clichés of victory and heroic sacrifice. At the same time, the sincere narrative about who they once were, what they lived through, and what they suffered allows them to ease the burden of

long-term psychological trauma and experience at least a small portion of supportive solidarity that stems from Alexievich's interest in their experience. Recalling her meetings with women veterans, Alexievich writes: "Yes, they cry a lot. They shout. Swallow heart pills after I am gone. Call an ambulance. But even so they beg me: Come. Be sure to come. We've been silent for so long. Forty years…" (2017, xxiv).

Alexievich points out that this moment of sincerity is not easy to achieve. The dominance of the male-oriented victorious discourse is so powerful that women veterans find it difficult to depart from it and tell their own story. Alexievich observes:

> More than once afterward I met with these two truths that live in the same human being: one's own truth driven underground, and the common one, filled with the spirit of the time. … If, for instance, besides the storyteller, there was some family member or friend in the apartment, or a neighbor (especially a man), she would be less candid and confiding than if it was just two of us. … I would immediately discover strong inner defenses. Self-control. Constant correction. And a pattern even emerged: the more listeners, the more passionless and sterile the account (2017, 88).

Alexievich emphasizes that it takes her and the women veterans time and effort to get rid of the ideological and social limitations engrained in their psychology:

> I sit for a long time, sometimes a whole day, in an unknown house or apartment. We drink tea, try on the recently bought blouses, discuss hairstyles and recipes. Look at photos of grandchildren together. And then… After a certain time, you never know when or why, suddenly comes this long-waited moment, when the person departs from the canon—plaster and reinforced concrete, like our monuments—and goes on to herself.

> Into herself. Begins to remember not the war but her youth. A piece of her life… (2017, xvii)

Much as the theme of sincerity is a foundation of the Catholic requiem, sincerity between Alexievich and her interviewees underlies their conversations and becomes a mandatory narrative condition. Alexievich does not settle for less and counts only the moment of truth as a point of entry into the narrative:

> I must seize that moment. Not miss it! But often, after a long day, filled with words, facts, tears, only one phrase remains in my memory (but what a phrase!): "I was so young when I left for the front, I even grew during the war." I keep it in my notebook, although I have dozens of yards of tape in my tape recorder. Four or five cassettes... (2017, 18)

Such an intimate connection between Alexievich and her interviewees allows her to separate out the dominant war discourse and to hear the counterpoint, to depict the "war from the trenches"[11] through the eyes of women soldiers, and to create a profound dramatic effect.

In discussing secular requiems, L. A. Petrova makes the important point that their dramatism often stems from dialogism between canonical texts and a new composition. Music expresses emotions, which may evoke a variety of images in the listener's mind. These emotion-based images (counterpoint) may contradict the dogmatic, "official" (canonical) images that the texts convey to the mind of the listener (Petrova 1982, 292). *Unwomanly Face* evokes this response within the reader. Both the 1985 and the 2016 editions evoke images and provoke feelings that clash with the victorious pride that Soviet war rhetoric has always aimed to elicit. In

[11] Viktor Nekrasov's novel *In the Trenches of Stalingrad* (1946) gave rise to the term "the truth of the trenches" («окопная правда») that referred to front-line soldiers' perspective on war as opposed to the generals' perspective on war, and accented the experience of the participant of war rather than of its observer.

the 2016 edition, Alexievich openly protests: "…the history of the war had been replaced by the history of the victory" (2017, 28). She attempts to avoid dry narration and to make the image of war haptic: "I write not about war, but about human beings in war. I write not the history of a war but the history of feelings. I am a historian of the soul" (2017, 21).

The clash between the conventional and the unconventional, the collective and the individual, the mainstream and the marginalized is the source of **didacticism** in both requiem and *Unwomanly Face*. If requiems shed light on the emotional side of the human experience of life at its collision point with death, *Unwomanly Face* illuminates the human experience of life at its collision point with war. Like requiems, *Unwomanly Face* targets the reader's emotions rather than the reader's reason and heightens their personal emotional awareness of the essence of war. *Unwomanly Face* not only helps readers encounter ideologically "buried" perspectives but also shapes their perception of the state's strategies for manipulating its history and people.

The genre of requiem manifests **historicity** through its commemorative function. Commemorating the deceased, requiem (especially secular requiems that use poetic lyrics rather than Biblical texts) paradoxically resurrects the deceased: the composition not only recaptures the circumstances of an individual death but also presents the achievements of an individual life, creating a holistic image of the deceased. With every retrospective performance, requiems bring the dead back from oblivion and recreate the historic period that both shaped them and was shaped by them by intertwining the historical, the collective, the individual, the personal, and the emotional. Analyzing the genre of requiem, Evdokimova calls it the only musical form with a limitless historical memory, which puts natural and social catastrophes into the human context of suffering, hope, despair, purification, humility, and forgiveness and which includes the

individual experience in a bank of collective experience (Evdokimova, cited in Studennikova 41).

Unwomanly Face integrates historicity in a similar manner. Bringing together the memories of women veterans, the text reconstructs their soldierly identities and experiences and commemorates their discursive death by describing the veterans' painful and unfair transition back into Soviet civilian life. Daniel Bush, in his article "'No Other Proof: Svetlana Alexievich in the Tradition of Soviet War Writing," sees Alexievich's focus not on "What happened at war?" but on "What did it feel like?" as a distinctive feature that makes her writings stand out among her predecessors, including Adamovich (217). Accounts included in *Unwomanly Face* contain reminiscences that infuse familiar factual information about World War II with new emotional content and a new level of understanding about the war.

In his book *The Singularity of Literature,* Derek Attridge proposes that literature is different from history because of its performative capacity to stage an event, permitting the reader to experience it in its unfolding. This experience deepens the reader's existing perspective on the event or provides a different perspective on a familiar cultural phenomenon (97). The features of the genre of requiem in *Unwomanly Face* endow the text with the performativity necessary for a work to be called a work of literature. They set a narrative frame that arranges traumatic memories of women veterans in a collective performance of a counter-narrative about World War II. This performance engages the reader in a process that Dori Laub calls the process of trauma witnessing (61, 62). Such engagement triggers empathy in the reader so that they can experience war without actually participating in it and at the same time reconsider their current perception of war as it has been shaped by the dominant victorious narrative.

Unwomanly Face and Two Types of Soviet Requiems

Unwomanly Face is the most heavily-revised work in *Voices of Utopia*. First published in the Soviet period, Alexievich revised it in the post-Soviet period to adjust to different sociopolitical contexts. The two editions, 1985 and 2016, use the features of the genre of requiem differently. A comparison between the two editions and the types of Soviet literary requiems makes this clear.

The requiem as a literary genre established itself in the two domains of Soviet culture: mainstream and underground (counterculture). Mainstream or official Soviet requiems were mostly concert-type musical compositions and poems that borrowed themes of public recognition, commemoration, and the preservation of memory from the European tradition of secular requiems (Studennikova 62). Instead of religious doctrine or individual interpretations, Soviet requiems reinforced the Communist Party's positive public image, translated its ideology, and commemorated the physical (as opposed to discursive) death of historically significant figures (Lenin, Kirov, the heroic deaths of male soldiers in the Civil War or World War II, etc.). Such commemorations reinforced the State's interpretation of historical events and were broadly collective. Musical requiems dedicated to World War II by such Soviet composers as Pauls Dambis, Dmitrii Kabalevskii, and Andrei Pashchenko use poetic lyrics to honor war heroes, educate future generations about state-approved social behavior of citizens, and construct a collective memory based on positive images of the Soviet state.

Underground or non-Soviet requiems are mainly represented by works of literature that did not fit the Soviet cultural paradigm and either ignored or undermined Soviet ideology. They were often dedicated to people's experiences of historical events or facts that the Communist Party preferred to conceal, as some of them gave evidence of the Party's crimes against Soviet

people, while others were damaging to the reputation of the Soviet state. Anna Akhmatova's long poem "Requiem" (1934-1963), dedicated to the social tragedy induced by the Stalinist purges, is an example of such non-Soviet requiems. It captures the heart-wrenching experience of women who suffered separation from their parents, sons, daughters, and husbands who were falsely accused of treason. The term "requiem" in the title of Akhmatova's work emphasizes how participants of events described in the text will never be able to speak for themselves because they died an untimely death or were silenced by the Soviet regime. Such requiems deal with the discursive death or suppression of world views of people whose experiences undermined the reputation of the Soviet state. Akhmatova did not even try to publish this long poem in the USSR in her lifetime. Her work remained hidden in the dissident "drawer" until 1987.

The transformation that *Unwomanly Face* undergoes between its 1985 and 2016 editions is precisely the one from a Soviet to a non-Soviet requiem, from official culture to counterculture; both editions are shaped by the sociopolitical context of the times in which they were published. Alexievich wrote the first edition under the heavy-handed censorship of the Soviet cultural establishment. The fact that Alexievich chose the female perspective on war as a narrative lens had already jeopardized the publication of her book in 1983. Thus, to make her book publishable, Alexievich wrote the stories of female veterans into the official "victory narrative" about war, that is, she wrote the plainsong mentioned above: "Each one [of the women] had her own path to the front. But they all were motivated by the same thing—to save the Motherland. Let us not think, guess, or write for them. Let them speak for themselves" (1985, 78). In this statement, the author diversifies the accepted image of Soviet heroism while maintaining its boundaries.

Alexievich also follows the prescriptive tone, didactic instruction to future generations, and glorification of war heroes that characterize the Soviet model. Such faithfulness to the party rhetoric, combined with a new voice that had been formally silenced, married well with Gorbachev's policy of *glasnost* as it looked towards some degree of freedom of speech. Together with other quasi-dissident literature, Alexievich's book came out in an enormous print run that was unheard of for an author's first publication. In the 2016 edition, Alexievich reminisces about this event: "Gorbachev's Perestroika began…My book was published at once; in an astonishing printing – two million copies. This was a time when startling things were happening, we again furiously tore off somewhere" (2017, 29).

Alexievich carried out the major conceptual revision of the book in 2004. Almost 60 years after the war and nearly 15 years after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the time was ripe for rethinking the Soviet past and examining its legacy of social injustice. She added only minor stylistic touches to the latest, 2016 edition; this edition served as the original for the most recent 2017 translation of *Unwomanly Face* by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky.[12]

In the post-Soviet era, Alexievich was able to introduce more controversial facts about the war than just women's combatant roles and could express her own opinion more freely: "Time is also the Motherland…But I love [interviewees] as before. I don't love their time, but I do love them" (2017, xxx). The author has openly shared her anti-Soviet political views in numerous interviews. These views are apparent in her latest editions and have resulted in significant changes in the tone, the ideological message, and the performative effect of

[12] For reader accessibility, my analysis compares the first, 1985 edition (translation mine) as well as the most recent, 2016 edition and its 2017 translation.

Unwomanly Face. To examine this textual and conceptual transformation of *Unwomanly Face*, I will analyze its first edition by comparing it to Robert Rozhdestvenskii's long-poem "Requiem," the most famous Soviet World War II requiem. I will also use Anna Akhmatova's long-poem "Requiem" to trace the transformation of the 2016 edition into a non-Soviet requiem. In my analysis, I will focus on the roles of two mandatory participants of the commemorative ritual of requiem: the conductor and the object of commemoration.

Conducting Requiems, Managing Polyphony

Traditionally, the genre of requiem features a figure, akin to a priest, who is authorized to conduct rites for the dead. Organizing the performance, this individual arranges each of its components: music and voice. He coordinates the organist and singers, varies the order of prayers traditionally used in requiems, and chooses hymns to be performed as either solo or choir parts. In secular requiems, the composer performs this function. The composer introduces polyphony into musical arrangements for instruments, the soloist, and the choir. He also determines the lyrics' nature – either religious texts (in Latin or the composer's native language) or secular poetry (Studennikova, Chase, Robertson). Thus, both the priest and the composer perform a special role in requiems: they add the polyphony and fulfill the genre's aesthetic requirements.

But there are two important differences between priest and composer. The first lies in their personal engagement in the live requiem performance. While the priest is present in the performance not only though its organization but also through his own participation in it,[13] the composer is present in the performance of his musical piece only through his authorship, unless he merges it with the function of orchestra and choir conductor. The second difference is

[13] The priest usually chants all prayers aimed for the solo performance (Chase 34).

determined by the perspectives that the priest and the composer transmit. The priest translates God's will and law regarding human life and death to the "audience"; the composer, by contrast, is free to interpret death through a religious tradition, ideological canon, or his own vision (Petrova 291). Both Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" and Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face* feature a similar composer/conductor figure, who manages the narrative polyphony and provides a certain interpretation of the death (be it physical or discursive), its cause (in this case, World War II), and the state-sanctioned perspective on the war. In both cases, the function of the composer is parallel to that of an author and the function of the conductor is parallel to that of the narrator.

In Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem," the use of the lyrical I, the first-person omniscient narrator, creates the effect that the author and narrator are one. This narrator introduces other voices and allows them to speak through the "I," "we," and "you" subjective narrations. For example, We-narration of soldiers: "Вырастем. / Стерпим любые смешки. / И станем / больше / богов!.." (Our souls will mature. / We will endure all the jeers / And we will become / greater / than gods. ll. 335-8);[14] We-narration for future generations: "Мы — / рожденные песней победы — / начинаем / жить и мечтать!" (We, / born of the song of victory, / start / to live and dream! ll. 365-8); You-narration for the future: "Ты видишь: / самые гордые / вышли на встречу / с тобой." (You see: / the proudest / have come out to meet / you. ll. 321-4); I-narration for a mourning mother: Белый свет / не мил. / Изболелась я." (The wide world / is not kind. / I am in torment. ll. 304-10); I-narration for the soldier: "Я / не смогу. / Я / не умру..." (I / shall not be able to. / I / shall not die . . . ll. 492-5). In this manner, the reader has the opportunity to hear the voices of the narrator, the war survivors, the fallen soldiers, a mourning mother, and children. Each voice engages with the reader through rhetorical questions (Разве

[14] Translation of Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" is mine.

камни / виноваты / в том, / что где–то / под землею / слишком долго / спят солдаты?" [Are the stones / guilty / because / somewhere / under the ground, soldiers are sleeping / for too long? ll. 216-22]), imperatives ("Распахните глаза. / Слушайте до конца." [Open your eyes. / Listen / to the end, ll. 414-5]), ardent claims or appeals: ("Горе твое — / это наше / горе, / Родина." [Your sorrow / is our sorrow, / Motherland. ll. 119-20] or "Есть / великое право: / забывать / о себе!" [There is / a great right: / to forget / about oneself!" ll. 74-7]). Some voices even act out a whole scene for the reader: a mourning mother performs a lamentation for her perished son. Using this narrative structure, Rozhdestvenskii stages a public recital that consists of diverse voices. However, this imitated diversity of voices does not mean that there is also a diversity of perspectives. All the voices support a stereotypical and even idealistic portrayal of war and maintain the ideological unanimity common in mainstream World War II rhetoric of the Soviet period.

The poetic forms that Rozhdestvenskii chooses also shape images of his narrative performers along with their stereotypical public presentation and create the atmosphere of an on-going performance with a particular official character and unity of perspective. Using accentual verse with short lines and varying rhythm and rhyming endings, Rozhdestvenskii keeps the text within the traditions of Russian poetry and adds literary appeal to "Requiem's" official statements. Together, the imitation of polyphony and poetic figures of speech create the effect of an on-going stage recital, a solemn commemoration of a generalized, even clichéd nature.

In the two editions of *Unwomanly Face,* Alexievich becomes both a symbolic composer and a symbolic conductor, combining her role of author with that of narrator. She arranges the traumatic war memories of women veterans and presents them to the reader in a certain way. This arrangement invites a specific mode of trauma witnessing, which directs the reader's

perception of the war as a historic event. Her performance differs in the two editions. In the first edition, Alexievich's narrative presence manifests itself in her introductions of her interviewees and her commentaries to their testimonies. Alexievich acts as a concertmaster who, before seeing his actors take the stage, sets an often exaggerated, theatrical, and poetic tone for the testimony that follows:

> (1) From the memories of Marina Nikolaevna Shchelokova, sergeant, commander of a liaison office… (1985, 205).
>
> (2) Bella Isakovna Epstein works as a typist in one of Belarus's republican newspapers and in the war she was a sniper. She is telling her story as if [it is] something funny, but her eyes are full of tears (1985, 209).

Alexievich's commentaries add to the theatrical dramatism of her introductions and fall into three main categories: (1) zealous ideological comments about female heroism, (2) musings, and (3) aestheticized memories about the interview process:

> (1) Can one defeat a people whose women, in the moment of the hardest crisis, when the scale of History was swinging terrifyingly, were pulling both our wounded and enemy soldiers in from the battlefield? Can one believe that a people whose women would give birth to girls because they believed the children would have a different destiny than theirs—can one believe that they would want a war? Was it in the name of this that women saved lives, saved the world, were mothers, daughters, wives, sisters, and soldiers? Let us bow down to the very ground she walks upon. To Her Mercy (1985, 316).
>
> (2) Their memory preserves scores of episodes, details, particulars of what they perceived; these cannot be invented, made up… To remember, to select details – that is its

own kind of talent. Now [today] I would say that this is a feature of the female memory. (1985,116)

(3) Right after I get out of the metro, I find myself in a regular Moscow neighborhood. In the winter, they [neighborhoods] are less similar than in the summer. As if in each of them an invisible painter has moved in and painted all trees, benches, playgrounds, and swings white (1985, 119).

Through these commentaries, Alexievich reshapes the ideological canon about World War II and constantly inserts testimonies—traumatic in content—into the official narrative of victorious war that is so familiar to the reader. Her insertions create a specific narrative movement, which oscillates between the excruciating personal memories of war and its post-war victorious interpretations. Persistent shifting in narrative tonality and content creates a perceptive dissociation in readers, as it constantly disrupts their process of trauma witnessing. This dissonance is enhanced by the stylistic polishing of testimonies, as Alexievich removes imperfections of oral speech and dialect and makes the flow of testimonies cohesive, moving from the logical beginning of the story (usually the beginning of war) to its end. The "officialese" of Alexievich's introductions and commentaries, together with stylized testimonial narratives, camouflage war trauma with what the reader perceives as rehearsed dramatic pieces. Women veterans appear as actors, who recite a text about traumatic events but psychologically are free from them. For additional impact, Alexievich supplements accounts of women soldiers with pictures of them in their youth. Featuring images of happy, carefree, pre-war young ladies, serious yet excited women conscripts, or mature, confident, and socially integrated women, the pictures evoke admiration in viewers, yet offer little authenticity of the psychological scars that the war would leave on those careworn women.

Thus, the verbal, visual, and stylistic techniques of the 1985 edition set an artificially prescriptive and formally commemorative tone that resembles the tone of Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" and places the memories of female veterans into the mainstream victory narrative of World War II. This tone allows Alexievich to draw the reader's attention to victory and to glorify the Soviet state's patriotism and heroism in general and Soviet women's in particular. The traumatic content of testimonies becomes a tool to emphasize the legitimacy and scale of the Soviet victory in World War II. In this way, the 1985 edition of *Unwomanly Face* adapts women's traumatic war experiences to the triumphant Soviet narrative of war and manages to stay within the genre expectations of a Soviet requiem.

In the 2000s, after the necessity to live up to the demands of Soviet victorious war discourse had receded, Alexievich turns *Unwomanly Face* into a different kind of requiem. The 2016 edition condemns the Soviet victory myth of World War II as a strategy that was used by the Soviet Union (and is still used by some post-Soviet states, including Russia) to maintain a militaristic culture, in which war is perceived as an extreme yet legitimate means of solving a political conflict and justifying suffering, sacrifice, and loss of life (Krylova, Nelson). Alexievich sets a new narrative priority: "I would like to write a book about war that would make war sickening, and the very thought of it repulsive. Insane. So that even the generals would be sickened…" (2017, xxii). With this agenda, Alexievich turns against the state-propagated rhetoric about World War II, which most post-Soviet societies inherited from the Soviet Union. Her narrative now rejects the Soviet narrative, which brings her 2016 edition close to the non-Soviet requiem type. In this respect, the second version of *Unwomanly Face* resembles Anna Akhmatova's elegiac poetic cycle "Requiem."

Although referencing different social upheavals, Stalinist purges and World War II, Akhmatova's "Requiem" and Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face* both chronicle the "discursively dead" experiences of Soviet female citizens. Both works aim to expose the atrocities of Soviet reality, to dispel the illusion imposed on the Soviet people by the Soviet propaganda machine, to recognize and grieve for those who perished, to reveal the unhealed trauma of living victims, and, finally, textually to reenact suffering in such a way that with every reading, readers would become witnesses to the tragedy and allies against its future repetition. Akhmatova and Alexievich feel empowered to perform these tasks for different reasons. For Akhmatova, this empowerment comes through the personal experience of having her son undeservedly imprisoned and husband executed:

<…>	<…>
Желтый месяц входит в дом.	And the yellow moon enters my house.
Входит в шапке набекрень,	He enters wearing his hat askew and
Видит желтый месяц тень.	Meets a shadow, the yellow moon.
Эта женщина больна,	This woman is not well,
Эта женщина одна.	This woman is all alone.
Муж в могиле, сын в тюрьме,	Husband in the grave, son jailed,
Помолитесь обо мне.	Please offer a prayer for me (ll. 50-6).[15]

Alexievich's empowerment comes from her sense of personal responsibility to those who shared their stories with her in the hope that they would be heard by a larger community. In the post-Soviet version of *Unwomanly Face,* she makes it up to those women whose voices she

[15] Anna Akhmatova, "Requiem" (1935-1940), translated by Alex Cigale https://hopkinsreview.jhu.edu/archive/requiem/ .

misrepresented or excluded because they clashed with the demands of the Soviet requiem genre that she made use of in the first edition. One such voice says:

> 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 is good that you came along. I've been waiting all the while for somebody. I knew somebody would come. Had to come (2017, 20).

Featuring the marginalized perspectives of Soviet women, Akhmatova's "Requiem" and Alexievich's 2016 *Unwomanly Face* reveal how the Stalinist purges and World War II were the source of much individual and collective trauma and how the state's official narrative left this trauma socially denied and unhealed. Both Akhmatova and Alexievich construct profound trauma narratives that clash with the traditional historical narrative.

In transforming *Unwomanly Face* into a trauma text, Alexievich uses narrative strategies that are similar to those Akhmatova uses. Just as Akhmatova exposed the unflattering truth about Soviet reality during the Stalinist purges, Alexievich includes all the taboo topics connected with World War II that she had to avoid in the first edition. To do so, she rewrites her introductory portion and includes two new sections, titled "From a Conversation with a Historian" and "A Human Being is Greater than War: From the Journal of this Book." While the first section enlightens the reader on women's participation in military conflicts going back to the fifth century B.C.E., the second section presents testimonies of female veterans and of a few male ones, which Soviet censorship and Alexievich herself edited out at the first publication to fit the ideological demands of the time. It also includes Alexievich's memories of negotiations with Soviet censors regarding the process of publication of the first edition and her reflections on the

process of the book's transformation. The second section expands the content of the 2016 edition beyond familiar war scenes (battles, deaths, sacrifices, physical tortures, wounds, and recoveries) and introduces less noble but equally traumatic aspects of war, such as harassment, rape, crime, betrayal, and vandalism within the Red Army. By introducing these topics, Alexievich dispels the myth of the "Sacred War," popularized in much Soviet propagandistic art, such as the famous World War II song of that name (1941) by Soviet composer Aleksandr Aleksandrov and Soviet lyricist Vasilii Lebedev-Kumach.

Neither Akhmatova nor Alexievich approach trauma as an unclaimed and unspeakable experience over which the traumatized have no control—a definition of trauma popular among first-wave Western literary trauma theorists Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub, and Dominick LaCapra. On the contrary, works of both authors emphasize the idea that the traumatic experience is available to the traumatized at any moment and can receive not only verbal but also literary, aestheticized expression. Akhmatova's poetic cycle "Requiem" shows how the author experienced trauma at the time it occurred (1934-1940), while Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face,* a compilation of testimonies collected mainly between 1978 and 1985, proves that emotional and psychological trauma continues to live in women veterans and can be vividly shared even forty years after the war's end. In their approaches to trauma, Akhmatova's and Alexievich's texts anticipate recent conceptualizations of trauma by Richard McNally and Joshua Pederson, who see it as a memory accessible to the traumatized at any time yet suppressed by their unwillingness to share it for various reasons. Public condemnation, the listener's judgmental attitude, or the fear of shocking the listener are among such reasons. Both Akhmatova and Alexievich are able to break through all psychological suppressions, demonstrate how traumatic memories differ from regular ones, and textually convey peritraumatic dissociations of the

person's psyche that disrupt his or her temporal, ontological, and physical perception (Pederson 338, 339). In their own ways, both texts convey such distorted perception through features characteristic of most trauma texts—namely: **immediacy**, **surrealism**, **fragmentation**, and **repetitiveness** (Vickroy xi).

In Akhmatova's poetic cycle, **immediacy** manifests itself through her bearing witness to herself, which Dori Laub calls "the first level of witnessing" in relation to traumatic experience (61). Akhmatova's autobiographic narrative becomes self-analysis and emotional outpouring, which intertwine with facts about Stalinist crimes. Saturated with traumatic memories and reflections, her text becomes a testimony of trauma, turning the reader into a witness to this traumatic account—according to Laub, a "second-level witness" (Laub, 62). In other words, Akhmatova makes her text performative—she provides readers with an opportunity to participate in her own reliving and reexperiencing of the event and expanding their cultural notion of it. For example, the poet describes her son's arrest through funerary imagery:

Уводили тебя на рассвете,	They led you away before sunrise.
За тобой, как на выносе, шла,	After you, as at a bearing out, I trudged,
В темной горнице плакали дети,	In the dim chamber children whimpered,
У божницы свеча оплыла.	And Mary's candle was snuffed out.
На губах твоих холод иконки,	Upon your lips was an icon's iciness,
Смертный пот на челе… Не забыть!	And death's sweat was on your brow.
Буду я, как стрелецкие женки,	Don't forget! I will, like the mutineers'
Под кремлевскими башнями выть.	Wives under Kremlin's crenels, weep
	(ll. 41-8).

In this way Akhmatova allows the reader to relate to her unjust, forceful separation from her son through grief felt for the deceased—an experience familiar to most human beings. Thus, finding themselves immersed in the most intimate sufferings of those who lost their loved ones in the Stalinist purges, readers bear witness to the historical tragedy and acquire emotional knowledge of this tragedy without actually living through it, but by relating it to their own personal experience of losing someone close to them.

Like Akhmatova, Alexievich experiments with levels of trauma witnessing for the sake of narrative immediacy and performativity. She transforms her narrative from a formal, public recital into a private, personal conversation which features intimate and emotional outpourings. To create the narrative's private atmosphere, Alexievich removes herself from the formal position of the concertmaster and assumes the position of the second-level witness—the same position that the readers occupy in Akhmatova's "Requiem." Like Akhmatova's reader, Alexievich becomes the interviewee's companion; she relives and reexperiences the interviewee's war traumas and thereby acquires their own emotional understanding of the war. Unlike Akhmatova's anonymous witness, however, Alexievich as both author and second-level witness is able to share her own emotional understanding of the war with yet other readers—an understanding, moreover, that she herself first came to in 1985 and had to suppress until 2016.

> I listen, and I try to imagine… No, not myself in their shoes. What right do I have to talk about myself here at all? If I compare my "I" with their "they," it is not with the purpose of just recording it but also living through how it was (1985, 98).

By 2004, when she started making major revisions to *Unwomanly Face,* she was in a post-Soviet time and space. Her suppressed emotional knowledge had turned into a psychological trauma of

its own and ousted the zealous commentary of 1985 about female heroism and aestheticized memories of the interview process, replacing them with bitter, philosophical musings:

> Voices…Dozens of Voices…They descended upon me, revealing the unaccustomed truth, and that truth did not fit into the brief formula familiar from childhood—we won (2017, 19).
>
> I do not see the end of this road. The evil seems infinite to me. I can no longer treat it as history. Who will answer me: what am I dealing with—time or human beings? Times change, but human beings? I think about the dull repetitiveness of life (2017, 281).

With such reflexive framing of some testimonies, Alexievich supplements first-level witnessing—which comes from women veterans when they tell their stories—with second-level witnessing, her own perception of their stories. As a second-level witness to trauma, Alexievich shifts the emphasis from the heroic *identity* of her interviewee to her *story*, and she thereby aligns her reflections with the traumatic content of testimonies in tone and mood.

This is why the 2016 edition no longer contains detailed identifications of the women interviewed, with visual arrangements of photos and formal introductions. Instead, Alexievich reduces identification to a minimum—name-rank-military occupation—and often places it at the end of the testimony: "Elena Antonovna Kudina, private, driver*"* (2017, 21). Introductions so brief that the reader can easily skip over them, or the absence of introductions altogether, removes the atmosphere of official recognition of women-soldiers and other women who participated in war and allows them to speak for themselves in an atmosphere of private, immediate interaction with the reader. In some parts of the book, Alexievich completely removes any identification from her interviewees and creates a patchwork of excerpts, leaving the reader alone with a throng of alternating, anonymous voices.

Presenting first-level witnessing through the reminiscences of women veterans and sometimes interrupting it with second-level witnessing through her own reflections and musings, Alexievich allows the reader to experience two types of witnessing. On the one hand, like Alexievich, the reader accompanies women veterans as they recover their traumatic memories. Leaving the reader and women veterans to each other, Alexievich creates a particular narrative immediacy that allows the voices of her interviewees to "invade" readers' minds and trigger a deep emotional response in them, so that they have a chance to acquire their own emotional understanding of the war. On the other hand, reading through Alexievich's reflections, which focus on the trauma of war rather than on heroic victory, the reader becomes a witness to witnessing, which Laub calls a "third-level witnessing" (62). This level of witnessing allows readers to compare their understanding and emotional responses with those of Alexievich. The emotional awareness acquired by readers during second-level witnessing is thus further deepened.

Surreal effects manifest themselves in both Akhmatova's and Alexievich's narratives through the distortion of regular temporality. Depicting trauma, they both deprive time of its traditional physical properties, such as transformation, change, passage, sequence, and movement; instead, they tie it to an immobile, stagnant psychological state haunted by traumatic memories (Storolow 160). The order of rising memories is guided by emotions which overpower and devalue factual chronology. For example, parts of Akhmatova's long poem do not reflect the chronology of her misfortunes: her preface is dated 1957, the dedication—1940, her 1935 prelude is followed by a series of poems written in 1939 and the whole is organized in an order that lacks chronology. Passages titled "Crucifixion" are dated 1940-43, while the epilogue is written in March of 1940. Such aberrant "ordering" of "Requiem" creates a tension among at

least three temporal realities, each with its own truth: the chronology of the experience itself; the chronology of psychologically assimilating the experience; and the chronology of the act of writing it down. This tension allows the reader to explore the world of Akhmatova's sufferings and approach the fact of the Stalinist purges through the acute traumatic states of their witness.

In the 2016 edition, Alexievich also distorts narrative time by breaking apart the narrative cohesiveness of the first edition. She writes: "Remembering is not a passionate or dispassionate retelling of a reality that is no more, but a new birth of the past, when time goes in reverse" (2017, xvii). For example, to resurrect the narrative past in the testimony of Lyudmila Mikhailovna Kashechkina, who fought with the underground, Alexievich replaces series of subordinate clauses with simple sentence structure: "The commanding officer saw that scene in which everyone left her alone" (1985, 290) changes to "The commanding officer saw that scene…He rushed up to at her"[16] (2017, 292). She also deletes introductions or rationalizations that emphasize the interviewee's awareness of the temporal gap between her present and her past. Thus sentences like "You, of course, read about all this in books, but we saw it. Lived through it. Even now I do not understand why don't people go crazy from everything they saw?" (1985, 207) disappear from the 2016 edition. By removing such retelling from the testimonies, Alexievich creates an uninterrupted chain of various traumatic memories that are connected with each other not through logic or chronology of events but through their emotional acuteness. Such a concentration of emotionally charged scenes—tortures, executions, murders, post-victory prosecutions and humiliations—creates a surreal effect in which the trauma of the past fills up the present moment—be it the moment when the interviewee recollects the war or the moment

[16] Translation mine.

when the reader reads her recollection. Similarly to interviewees, readers find themselves immobilized by the emotional trauma caused by war.

According to many trauma theorists (LaCapra, Laub, Carruth, Vickroy, Balaev), a fragmented narrative reflects a fragmented identity, shattered by trauma. This is a feature of both Akhmatova's and Alexievich's narratives, but it takes different forms. Akhmatova achieves fragmentation through the emotional patchwork of cycles of shorter poems, which change their subject and narrative perspective. She addresses her son, describes scenes of long lines in front of the notorious St. Petersburg prison known as Kresty, and converses with her present or past self. She switches her voice between individual and collective perception and even uses the technique of defamiliarization (*ostranenie*) to describe herself through the "eyes" of the moon. Such narrative reconstruction of a fragmented, traumatized psyche creates an effect of zooming in on the trauma and out again. The constant change in both narrative subject and narrative perspective does not shield the reader from the trauma; on the contrary, it allows them to "see" it in detail and from multiple perspectives.

In the 2016 edition, Alexievich brings together a multitude of voices that convey various viewpoints, emotions, and memories to create a fragmented, multi-layered narrative edifice. Such narrative structure is based on the collision of multiple images evoked by memories of women veterans rather than on the creation of one coherent mosaic image. For example, "chorus" parts in *Unwomanly Face* consist of short excerpts from different interviews, which feature different subjects, themes, and tonalities: "The field and forest were burning... The meadow was smoky. … I realized then that anything can burn. Even blood burns." "During a bombardment, a goat latched on to us. She lay down with us. Simply lay down nearby and screamed." (2017, 126, 127). This patchwork of scattered but poignant reminiscences of war is

akin to the delirium of a traumatized mind that jumps from one traumatic memory to another, guided not by reason but by uncontrolled emotion. These memories come together with personal and often emotional musings. For example, a veteran recalls how her group returned to a village and found partisans, who had been tortured and killed: "They lay there… and horses were grazing not far away. … I thought: how could those people [the Nazis] do such things in front of horses? In front of animals? The horses had watched them…" (2017, 126). This combination of memories of war atrocities with irrational or illogical psychological reflections on these atrocities relocates the war from the world outside of the speaker into her inner world and contributes to the narrative's sense of delirium and dramatism. Such fragmented narration in no way impedes the reader's ability to comprehend the war and the war's impact on its participants. On the contrary, it creates an emotional tension in the text that allows the reader to closely examine the scale and depth of the collective trauma of World War II that still haunts women veterans.

Repetition is another device that foregrounds the traumatic nature of the two texts. In Akhmatova's "Requiem," repetition is mostly thematic. Akhmatova uses recurring funerary imagery, metaphors of death, and biblical scenes of Jesus's crucifixion to reinforce her themes of separation and persecution. "Requiem's" thematic repetition emphasizes how trapped Akhmatova's lyrical heroine is in her traumatic memories. In 2016's *Unwomanly Face,* Alexievich also makes prominent use of repetition, once she has removed the conductor's "officialism" of the first edition. Repetition allows her to emphasize trauma at both collective and individual levels. But while Akhmatova's single poetic voice tells of an individual tragedy (although many others experienced the same tragedy), Alexievich's multiple narrative voices convey the magnitude of collective trauma. The snipers' impressions of their first lethal shot, the experience of being under bombardment, the physical and psychological hardships of rescuing

wounded soldiers, etc., augment and detail the traumatic impact of war on women's psyche. Repetition of the most important facts or memories allows the reader to grasp the depth of trauma, individual and collective. For example, partisan fighter Liudmila Aleksandrovna Kashechkina repeats, "Then I did not cry" (2016, 305-308), five times when she remembers performing dangerous tasks, seeing her friends and other partisans hanged, being tortured by the Nazis, holding her daughter for the last time before being taken to a German concentration camp, and rescuing her husband from the NKVD's false accusations.

By modifying the conductor's functions and changing to an introspective mode, Alexievich shifts the emphasis from heroism to trauma. This shift allows her to view and interpret the mainstream narrative of the collective—the victorious war for the fatherland—through the lenses of individual traumas that, when combined, expose the larger, collective trauma that reveals the atrocities and injustices hidden behind hypocritically idealistic Soviet propaganda. The unembellished presentation of this previously marginalized perspective of women fighters makes the 2016 edition of *Unwomanly Face* akin to Akhmatova's "Requiem" by transforming the Soviet requiem of the first edition into a non-Soviet one, or at the very least, into a more realistic and truthful narrative. Thus, the 2016 version of *Unwomanly Face* subverts the structure of the grandiose formal commemoration, found both in Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" and in Alexievich's 1985 version, and departs completely from the obligatory Soviet stance.

The Image of the Soviet Soldier as an Object of Commemoration and a Source of Dramatism and Didacticism

The object of commemoration, the deceased, lies at the narrative center of the genre of requiem and serves as the source of its dramatism and didacticism. The details and circumstances

of the deceased's life and death create an uplifting narrative that can be passed on to future generations as an example of certain virtues. In Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" and Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face*, the object of commemoration is the Soviet soldier, albeit in "Requiem" the soldier is male and in *Unwomanly Face*, female.

In Soviet mass culture, the image of the World War II soldier is inseparable from the image of the New Soviet Man (*novyi sovetskii chelovek*), the central product of High Stalinism. Examining visual and literary representations of the Soviet man in *How the Soviet Man Was Unmade: Cultural Fantasy and Male Subjectivity,* Lilya Kaganovsky arrives at the conceptual incongruity of Soviet masculinity. Socialist art—posters, monuments, and paintings—features a virile, handsome, courageous, physically strong Soviet man, a true Soviet hero. However, in Socialist Realist literature, to demonstrate his ultimate loyalty to the State, the Soviet hero must sacrifice his body and become emasculated, mutilated, maimed, or completely deprived of his physical body. Thus, the hero's ultimate proof of loyalty to Soviet ideology and the regime is to die for them (4-7). Kaganovsky connects the Soviet man's corporeal limitation or, in many cases, the deprivation of his corporeality, with the Stalinist psychic economy of debt, in which the Soviet State was the benefactor of the citizen and consequently the citizen owed the state not only his gratitude and his participation, but also his body and his life in repayment (11).

The New Soviet Man was not a gender-specific term. In fact, the English expression "New Soviet Man" is not entirely accurate; the literal translation of the Russian term is "New Soviet person" (*novyi sovetskii chelovek*)—a notion that includes both men and women, as women were also expected to live up to this standard. Examining gender expectations of women during High Stalinism, Krylova calls the Soviet concept of gender "non-oppositional though still binary," meaning that, while still embracing patriarchal gender norms, the Soviet state provided a

paramilitary educational system for both genders of the post-revolutionary generation and encouraged females to gain skills and expertise in traditionally male occupations and activities (2010, 12-15). In other words, the new Soviet woman was also supposed to become the New Soviet Man. The pun that stems from the previous sentence reflects the absurd reality in which Soviet women of the post-revolutionary generation lived. To pass her loyalty test to the State, a woman faced two incongruent tasks: she was supposed to perform her maternal, domestic, and conjugal duties, but on top of that, she was thrown into the role of combatant without consistent state support. This confusing trespass into a traditionally masculine space required, conceptually, that a woman first become a man; only then could she sacrifice her body and her life for the Motherland. No wonder that Alexievich's interviewee Klavdia Georgievna Krokhina, who served as first sergeant and sniper, recalls her mother's lament: "It's all the same now – to give birth to boys or girls" (2017, 11). Thus, in the confusing circumstances of Stalinist gender policies, the heroic Soviet man was supposed to sacrifice his physical body or its needs (his masculinity), while the heroic Soviet woman was expected to remain a mother and a wife while becoming masculinized in order to perform the required sacrifice.

The experience of World War II proved that women were capable of stepping into the traditionally masculine role of a soldier. This marked the success of the non-oppositional gender model, but threatened the binary gender model. In his book *War and Gender,* Joshua Goldstein analyses women's military experience as well as its outcomes in societies that have fought wars and arrives at the conclusion that the number of women present in the military corresponds to the social and political power they possess (2001, 11). The unprecedented participation of Soviet woman soldiers in World War II (~800, 000), many of whom fought in combat units, equaled 8% of overall forces (with 12,000,000 men). This number was not enough to threaten the Soviet

social order, which had always been profoundly patriarchal (Goldstein 65). Redistribution of work roles favored surviving male veterans to the detriment of women veterans. This happened organically, as the extensive use of child and women's labor could be minimized. So to the extent possible, the men who returned from the war resumed their per-war social positions. Taking into consideration the enormous loss of male Soviet soldiers, those who survived were greeted and treated as exceptional. Women veterans received a much colder greeting. Returning to a society dominated by a female population, a woman soldier was almost immediately viewed pejoratively, especially by those women who had not participated in the fighting (Krylova 17). Without active state support for female veterans, this pejorative view of their status became rooted in the popular mind. When Victory Day became an official holiday in 1965, the image of the Soviet hero had acquired an exclusively "masculine face." In such circumstances, the experiences of women soldiers were pushed to the periphery of the dominant war discourse, which recognized and glorified only men's sacrifices.

Rozhdestveskii's "Requiem" and Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face* both use the above-mentioned rhetoric regarding World War II Soviet heroes but apply it to different genders and, thus, present the war from different gender perspectives. Both the 1985 and 2016 editions of *Unwomanly Face* claim that women's perception of war is more profound, detailed, and precise than that of men. Alexievich compares women's perception to light-gathering power (*svetosila*)—the ability of a photographic lens to capture an object with greater or lesser clarity—claiming that women's memory (in general and of war in particular) is the most "light-gathering" (having the greatest aperture ratio) and thus more capable of capturing the finer details of reality (1985, 61; 2017, xxiii). Alexievich connects the "light-gathering power" of female memory with women's historical unfamiliarity with the combat environment. She insists that when women

found themselves in the midst of an unfamiliar and traditionally male domain, women experienced the cognitive disorientation of any novice and observed war with a particularly acute clarity that men were unable to experience because men have been long familiar with the commonplaces of war. While I do not entirely agree with Alexievich's reasoning on this perceptive difference between the genders, I do support her claim that a difference exists. Being ousted from the battlefield by the traditional gender discourse, female veterans do not feel any psychological pressure to see their soldier role as a factor that shapes their gender identity. In other words, military experience does not boost women's femininity; on the contrary, it maims or destroys it. By contrast, the role of a soldier was traditionally ascribed exclusively to men as an integral part of their masculinity. Speaking about war as trauma causes men to experience internal psychological conflict.

Gender is not the only variable in the narrative representation of the war in the texts. The difference in the sacrifices ideologically expected from men and women by the state is also a factor. Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" features an unambiguous hero, exploring the final stage of his male sacrifice for the state—his physical death. *Unwomanly Face,* by contrast, examines the first stage of the female sacrifice—the woman's adaptation to the masculine role of a soldier. Physical death has relatively minor significance and appears in two forms in the narratives: (1) as heroism, or (2) as a shocking, always incomprehensible phenomenon, deprived of higher ideological meaning.

> (1) Shura Kiseleva…She was the prettiest of us. Like an actress. She hid the badly wounded among the hayricks, shelling began, the hay caught fire. Shura could have saved herself, but she would have had to abandon the wounded… She burned up with them…
>
> … [Tonya Bobkova] shielded the man she loved from a mine fragment. The fragments

take a fraction of a second to reach you… How did she have time? She saved Lieutenant Petya Boichevsky, she loved him. And he survived (2017, 86).

(2) There was a dead girl lying by the road…She had a long braid, and she was all covered with mud (2017, 74).

Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" and Alexievich's 2016 *Unwomanly Face* feature completely opposing images of Soviet soldiers: a bodiless male spirit vs. a living, embodied woman. This opposition defines the radical difference between the images of war in the two narratives and locates these images in opposing categories: idealism vs. realism, tradition vs. innovation, heroism vs. trauma.

The first edition of *Unwomanly Face* represented Alexievich's limited attempt to break with the dominant war discourse. While she was able to depict war in realistic, gruesome detail, due to the official character of the chief narrator, her narrative is unable to move beyond the heroic image of the Soviet warrior and consequently fails to underscore the long-lasting, traumatizing impact of war on women soldiers. The 2016 edition is much more successful in this endeavor. Gone is the chief narrator's officialism; the narrator now limits her presence only to passages that reflect her own understanding of the plight of the woman soldier during and after the war, and the narrative now includes testimonies that earlier did not pass Soviet censorship. In making these revisions, Alexievich completely dissociates from the mainstream Soviet tradition of war narratives and exposes not only war's heart-wrenching brutality but also its psychology.

Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" and both editions of *Unwomanly Face* rely on the collective and individual representation of the "Soviet soldier" as a mythologem in Soviet culture. Rozhdestveskii switches between individual and collective presentation interchanging I- and We- narrations: "I shall not die!" and "We are speaking." In so doing, he erases all

difference between male collective and individual experience of war and narrows his message to simple, idealized, monumental male heroism. In *Unwomanly Face,* Alexievich also uses I-/We-narrations in her arrangement of testimonies. I- narrations appear in testimonies presented as separate, lengthy monologues—solos, which form independent chapters: "Two Wars Live in Our House" [by] Olga Vasil'evna Podvyshenskaia, sergeant major first class (2017, 91), or "Telephones Don't Shoot" [by] Valentina Pavlovna Chudaeva, sergeant, commander of antiaircraft artillery (2017, 99). We-narrations appear in the form of chorus parts—collective testimonies that include excerpts from different interviews. The use of these two techniques suggests that Alexievich does not equate individual and collective experiences and uses individual experience as a building block for constructing a realistic representation of the collective experience in contrast to its state-propagated representation. While Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" is marked by monologic unification and simplification, Alexievich's *Unwomanly Face* emphasizes polylogic diversity and complexity.

Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" and *Unwomanly Face* conceptually transform the Soviet soldier in their own ways. "Requiem" focuses on the physical death of the male soldier and presents his transition from the living to the dead, emphasizing the final phase of this transformation—becoming a spirit in a cenotaph. Both editions of *Unwomanly Face* explore the Soviet woman's transformation into a Soviet soldier, that is, into the New Soviet Man (person). Alexievich explores the process of "female masculinization" in the war context and focuses on the psychological and physical struggles that arise from it. The radical difference between the two editions lies in the presentation of this struggle. The first edition presents it as heroism through the narrative frame of a traditional Soviet requiem, while the 2016 edition presents it as a trauma through the narrative frame of a non-Soviet requiem.

One of the aspects of the male soldier's transformation in "Requiem" is the loss of his identity: "Умирал солдат —/ известным. / Умер — / Неизвестным." (Dying, the soldier/ was known— / dead, / [he] became unknown. ll. 264-7). The soldiers become "Безымянные / солдаты. / Неизвестные /солдаты..." (Nameless / soldiers. / Unknown / soldiers… ll. 223-6). Realia such as birthplace, age, appearance, ethnicity, social and family backgrounds lose their importance, and the fallen merge into one collective identity—a national identity, a Soviet identity. This deprivation of individual identity has its parallel in the loss of the soldier's ego—all his personal wishes, desires, and hopes—and is presented as a voluntary act: Есть / великое право: / забывать /о себе! / Есть / высокое право: / пожелать / и посметь!.." (There is / a great right: / to forget / about one's self, / There is /a higher right: / to desire / and to dare! ll. 74-81). The soldier's spirit becomes invincible and manifests even before his physical death, ensuring victory. The act of physical death not only completes the Soviet soldier's transformation into the eternal spirit in "Requiem" but also acclaims his heroism.

Subsuming the individual Soviet soldier's identity into the larger Soviet identity, Rozhdestvenskii creates a perfect void that he fills with various ideological constructs that constitute this imagined Soviet identity (Anderson, 9). Stylistically, he relies on descriptive strategies and figures of speech common to Slavic *byliny*—epic songs that featured folk heroes called *bogatyri.*[17] The *bogatyr*' represented the highest standard of Slavic masculinity. To describe the soldier's incredible physical and spiritual strength, Rozhdestvenskii portrays him as a natural force by using epithets, repetitions, and rhythms comparable to those of the *byliny*: "…

[17] Byliny are epic songs about the physical prowess and military campaigns of ancient Slavic bogatyrs (knights). Byliny provided only general description of incredible physical prowess and spiritual strength of the bogatyrs. These general tendencies of Slavic knights served as a model for the masculinity of the Slavic male, and the press often called soldiers and air aces "*bogatyri*" in both world wars.

и слышалась / поступь / дивизий, / великая поступь / дивизий, / железная поступь / дивизий, / точная / поступь / солдат!" (And the steps / of divisions / were heard, / the great steps / of divisions, / the steel steps / of divisions, / the precise / steps / of soldiers! ll. 139-48). This strategy equates the Soviet soldier with the folk hero and locates the soldier within a socially-approved and socially-venerated Soviet masculinity grounded in invincibility, determination, and heroism.

Conceptually, Rozhdestvenskii fills the construct of the Soviet identity by juxtaposing the ideas of surviving and living: "…ведь кроме / желания выжить / есть еще / мужество / жить!" (In addition / to the desire to survive / there is also / the courage / to live! ll. 170-4). Survival is negative, connoting egoism, the evasion of responsibility for the collective good, and fear for one's own life; conversely, living is positive, implying unity of the collective, acceptance of personal responsibility, ultimate selflessness, and fearlessness. Survival is associated with the life of the body; living is associated with the soul or spirit. Every fallen male Soviet soldier becomes an unquestioned hero, regardless of the circumstances of his life and death: "Стала / вечною славой / мгновенная / смерть!" (Instantaneous / death / became / eternal glory! ll. 82-5). Such generalization makes the victory a collective achievement, one which unites various ethnicities and social groups and provides a reason for them all to identify with the Soviet Union as the Motherland that their "fathers" saved. The Soviet soldier's unquestioned heroism makes him the most cherished example of the New Soviet Man and endows him with unprecedented authority in relation to all living Soviet men and future Soviet generations:

Не плачьте!	Do not weep!
В горле	Suppress the tears
сдержите стоны,	and bitter moans

горькие стоны.	in your throat.
Памяти	Be
павших	worthy
будьте	of the memory
достойны!	of the fallen!
Вечно	Eternally
достойны!	worthy!
Хлебом и песней,	With bread and song,
Мечтой и стихами,	with dream and poetry,
жизнью	with spacious
просторной,	living,
каждой секундой,	with every second,
каждым дыханьем	with every breath,
будьте	be
достойны!	worthy! (ll. 567-74)

Thus, the figure of the Soviet soldier in "Requiem" does not convey a realistic image of war. Instead, it offers a mythologized image of the heroic, militaristic masculinity of the New Soviet Man and glorifies his victory. The war becomes a positive space in which all Soviet men have the opportunity to confront almost inhuman challenges, manifest their virtue and courage, and thereby comply with the official standard of Soviet masculinity.[18] In this paradigm, which

[18] Cowardice, fear, desertion, mutiny, and other negative behaviors of war have no role in the creation of the image of the Soviet (male) war hero.

maintains the legitimacy of war as a traditional male domain in which men prove their manhood and loyalty to the Soviet state, no space exists for the female soldier.

Women in *Unwomanly Face* undergo two kinds of transformation in response to the dominant male paradigm: external (appearance, physiology, profession) and internal (emotion, psychology). Women necessarily transform their external appearance. Such transformations include getting a male haircut: "In the recruiting office we were given crew cuts" (2017, 237); aging prematurely from stress: "The platoon commander brought me to the edge of the cemetery … I was twenty-two, I was standing guard for the first time. In those hours my hair turned gray" (2017, 64); and wearing unfamiliar and oversized male uniforms and footwear:

> You ask me what's the most frightening thing in war? … You think the most frightening thing in war is death. To die. But I'll say something else… For me the most terrible thing in war was – wearing men's underpants… Well, first of all, it's very ugly… You're at war, you're preparing to die for the Motherland, and you're wearing men's underpants. Generally, you look ridiculous. Absurd. Men's underpants were long then. Wide. Made of sateen (2017, 65).

While experiencing the masculinization of their appearance, female soldiers still find ways to resist and feminize their new look even in the circumstances of wartime shortage: "All the same…All the same, as soon as the girls' hair grew a little, I'd curl it during the night. We had cones instead of curlers…Dry pine cones…We would at least curl the forelock..." (2017, 164); "They gave us footwraps. We made panties and bras out of them." (2017, 199) or "They gave us kit bags and we made skirts out of them." (2017, xxiii)

Finding themselves in the midst of war and trapped in what is known in feminist theory as the "docile body"—the body most heavily regulated by social and cultural norms (Bordo

91)—the women experience extreme anxiety about their forced external transformation. Their anxiety stems from the fear of completely abandoning their femininity and is accompanied by the wish to get rid of their bodies because of their vulnerability in war. Such vulnerability relates to social expectations imposed on the female body, which include ingrained codes of beauty and morality. Thus women are forced to fear not only for their lives but also for their looks and their virtue. Testimonies include reports of menstrual cessation, the discomfort of having a period on the battlefield, mutilation, rape, and disfigurement in death. Female veterans report various behaviors caused by the fear of appearing unattractive. For example, the motive for covering the face, head, or feet during shelling was not necessarily a survival reflex but the desire to preserve their feminine beauty. One veteran reminisces about a friend who could predict her death and chose its approximate time based on fatalistic folk beliefs, thus aestheticizing it: [19]

> You know I'll be killed in this battle. I have some sort of premonition. I went to the sergeant major, asked to be issued new underwear, and he turned stingy: "You got some just recently." "Let's go in the morning and ask together." … So there she was in this new undershirt. Snow white, with laces. It was all soaked in blood. The white and red together, with crimson blood – I remember it to this day. That's how she had imagined it (2017, 85).

The occupational transformation of women into soldiers derives from the tasks that must be fulfilled in war. The hardships that female soldiers experienced stemmed from various sources: many of the women were young; they had physical limitations (they were shorter in

[19] Among the various funerary rituals among the Slavs is one in which the deceased is dressed in special clean, often white clothing (Nosova 1999).

height, lighter in weight than men); and they often had to combine masculine and feminine roles at the front. A woman might simultaneously be a mother and a partisan:

> I didn't come alone, I came with my daughter. When I went on a mission … I took my child with me. And we got caught in the blockade… … [The Germans] bombed us from the sky and shot us from the ground… The men went around carrying rifles, but I carried a rifle, the typewriter, and Ellochka. As we walked, I tripped, she fell over me to the swamp. We went on, she fell again… And so on, for two months! (2017, 284)

The inner transformation of women originates in their adaptation to violence in war. Its initial point is an almost symbolic initiation into violence: it may be the first time a woman killed a German, punished traitors, shot down a German airplane, etc. While men also experience this initiation, they tend to suppress their emotional reactions in an attempt to live up to the socially approved standards of militaristic masculinity. Women's recollections of their initiatory experience, on the other hand, often feature extremely emotional and philosophical realizations:

> The first time is frightening… very frightening… … And then I noticed a German poking up a little from a trench. I clicked, and he fell. And then, you know, I started shaking all over, I heard my bones knocking. I cried. When I shot at targets it was nothing, but now: I – killed! I killed some unknown mam. I knew nothing about him, but I killed him (2016, 10).

With time women adjust to violence as part of the soldier's job: "I was a machine gunner. I killed so much…" (2017, xi). Adhering to the traditional understanding of Russian womanhood, the epitome of which is the all-accepting, forgiving mother, women veterans often report their inability to adapt to all the atrocities they were forced to see and commit: "And not right away … We did not manage right away. It's not a woman's task – to hate and to kill. Not for us… We

had to persuade ourselves. To talk ourselves into it…" (2017, 10). For many women, killing also turned into an act of vengeance:

> You can't shoot unless you hate. It's war, not a hunt. I remember at political classes they read us the article "Kill Him!" By Ilya Ehrenburg. As many times you meet a German, so many times you kill him. A famous article, everybody read it then, learned it by heart. It made a strong impression on me. I carried it all through the war, that article and papa's death notice…Shoot! Shoot! I had to take revenge… (2017, 105).

Often, vengeance became a factor that drove women to abandon all motherly sentiments and to choose fighting over maternal duties:

> At the end of 1941 I received a death notice: my husband had been killed near Moscow. He was a flight commander. I loved my daughter, but I left her with his family. And I started requesting to be sent to the front… The last night… I spent it kneeling by my daughter's little bed… (2017, 29).

As opposed to Rozhdestvenskii's stylized "Requiem," which commemorates the male warrior, *Unwomanly Face* commemorates the woman, with a body and emotions, who strives to survive and struggles between transformation and preservation of her feminine face. Unlike the male soldier in "Requiem," whose war experience is unquestionably glorified, the female soldier embodies the reality of her war experience through her physical and, most importantly, psychological trauma. The traumatic war experience of women serves different purposes in the 1985 and 2016 editions. The first edition represents an attempt to recognize and to do justice to this experience. The war appears as an unprecedented challenge with which the Soviet woman copes as admirably as the Soviet man. Her physical and psychological wounds become her legacy; they prove and reclaim her soldier identity. Thus, the first edition reconstructs women

veterans' war experience to shape their social identities, bringing them closer to the identity of the Soviet male soldier glorified in Rozhdestvenskii's requiem. It also seeks the same public recognition and veneration for women's contribution to the victory as that received by men.

In the 2016 edition, Alexievich removes the first edition's admiration and desire for official approval of women's unprecedented participation in World War II. Instead, she opens *Unwomanly Face* with an essay titled "From a Conversation with a Historian," which dispels the myth of the historical novelty of women in war by tracing women's military involvement back to the fourth century B.C.E. Alexievich also removes any valorization of the Soviet victory—by the 2016 edition, victory is a fact rather than an overt manifestation of Soviet heroism. In that the 2016 edition the woman soldier receives few if any benefits from her military experience and sacrifice; instead, she experiences long-lasting trauma and is traumatized a second time by becoming a forgotten victim of the Soviet regime, by dying a "discursive death." Her traumatic war experience underscores the scale of Soviet social injustice.

The War and Historicity

The principal narrator and the object of commemoration in Rozhdestvenskii's Soviet "Requiem" and the narrative structures and object of commemoration in the two editions of *Unwomanly Face* (one Soviet and the other non-Soviet) present time, space, and social interaction in war in different ways that constitute the distinctive features of their historicity. Rozhdestvenskii's 1961 narrative poem reconstructs the war from a historical viewpoint characterized by post-war euphoria and the valorization of victory. He reduces the war itself, a colossal event that lasted for six years, to a one-page description that can be further reduced to a single, concise, poetic image:

Плескалось	The crimson banner

багровое знамя,	fluttered,
горели	crimson stars
багровые звезды,	shone,
слепая пурга	a blind blizzard
накрывала	covered
багровый от крови	a sunset
закат <…>	crimson with blood <…> (ll.131-8).

The inflated style of Soviet poetry that Rozhdestvenskii recreates in his long poem presents war as a combination of generalized elemental symbols. The fluttering crimson banner stands for the Red Army's alert and active defense. Blood and crimson symbolize the fierceness of the war as well as the Red Army's tremendous effort and dramatic losses in the defense of the Motherland. The blizzard, the sunset, and the stars represent the war as a cosmic, elemental event. Since the work was written in the post-victory period, victory is the only possible outcome: "На наших знаменах / начертано / слово: / Победа! / Победа!!" (On our banners, / a word / is inscribed: / Victory! / Victory!! ll. 153-7). "Requiem" connects victory in World War II to the death of each and every soldier. Each death is an act of heroism—a victory of the indomitable spirit over mere matter, a victory that anticipated, expedited, and ensured the country's victory in war.

The pre-war period recedes to insignificance. Whoever the soldier may have been in his ordinary life before the war is overshadowed by his heroism in war: Ведь еще / до самой смерти / он имел друзей / немало. / … / А еще была / невеста. / Где она теперь — / невеста?.. (Before the moment of death, / he [the soldier] must have had quite / a few friends. /… / And he had /a betrothed, too. / Where is she now, / that fiancée?" ll. 253-6, 261-4). The image of the betrothed poses more questions than provides answers: is she still alive? has she

kept the home fires burning? or did she perish too? does she remember the soldier? is she grieving? or did she move on? was she ever able to marry? Her image remains ambiguous and insignificant on its own; however, it makes manifest an important characteristic of the Soviet soldier's masculinity—his heterosexuality.

The post-war present and the future merge into one cyclical present through the scenes of harmonious life that is the harmonious destiny of the Soviet people:

Продолжается жизнь.	Life goes on
И опять	And the day
начинается день.	begins anew.
Продолжается жизнь.	Life goes on.
Приближается	The rainy season
время дождей.	approaches.
Нарастающий ветер	The rising wind
колышет	Ruffles
большие хлеба.	the ripening grain.
Это —	This
ваша судьба.	is your destiny.
Это —	This
общая наша	is our common
судьба...	destiny (ll. 469-81).

This harmonious portrayal of post-war time and space relies on a constructed memory of war, which is based not on its real horrors, atrocities, and deaths, but on a retrospective evocation of victory, heroism, and sacrifice. For present and future generations, war in the form of

commemoration (memory infused with veneration) motivates the survivors to work actively for the sake of the Motherland:

Детям своим	Tell your children
расскажите о них,	about them,
чтоб	so they
запомнили!	commit it to memory!
…	…
К мерцающим звездам	As you navigate your ships
ведя корабли,—	to the shining stars,
о погибших	Remember
помните!	the fallen!"
	(ll. 591-3, 604-7).

Children's voices appear in "Requiem" to reinforce the theme of commemoration and continuity of the memory of their fathers' patriotism and heroism:

Мы —	We—
рожденные песней победы —	born of the song of victory—
начинаем	begin
жить и мечтать!	to live and to dream!
…	…
Именем солнца,	In the name of the sun,
именем Родины	in the name of Motherland,
клятву даем.	We swear this oath.
Именем жизни	In the name of life

клянемся	We swear this to the fallen heroes:
павшим героям:	The song that our fathers did not
то, что отцы не допели,—	finish—
мы	We
допоем!	will sing to its end!
То, что отцы не построили,—	That which our fathers have not
мы	built—
построим!	We
	will build! (ll. 365-9, 670-9).

Any interactions that the soldier has in war are limited to those with the adversary—the Germans. In the line, “Войну / мы должны сокрушить.” (We must vanquish / war. ll. 164-5), “war” serves as a metonymy for the enemy. The invincible spirit of the Soviet soldier leaves the Nazis no chance of victory, and this is one reason why the image of the Nazis is relatively insignificant and is nowhere described in detail in Rozhdestvenskii’s poem. Instead, the Nazis are described as a storm, a rolling thunder, and lightning—natural phenomena that disrupt peaceful existence but eventually pass.

After his sacrifice, the soldier’s only remaining tie of value is to his mother. The image of the mother exists in the absolute present: she was, is, and will be there for her son throughout the deep psychological trauma of losing him:

Если выплаканы	If their dear eyes
глазыньки —	are cried out—
сердцем	mothers weep
плачут матери.	with their hearts.

Белый свет	The wide world
не мил.	is not kind.
Изболелась я.	I am in torment (ll. 304-10).

The mother's lamentations become a verbal manifestation of her individual trauma and function as a means of preserving the memory of the soldier's heroism.

Rozdestveskii's Soviet "Requiem" conveys the key ideological staples of the Soviet state's rhetoric about the war. It hides the physical and emotional reality of war behind a romanticized, simplistic view of victory. His description of war is filled with lofty symbolism, which creates a semantic whole that equates the war and the soldier's death in war with heroism, eternal life, and eternal glory. The image of the dead male fighter in "Requiem" achieves two things: first, it banishes women from any role as Soviet soldiers, assigning to them instead the traditional female roles of the distant betrothed or the mother, waiting for her boy in the rear. Second, it questions the validity of the war experience of those veterans and war survivors who did *not* make the ultimate sacrifice.

As opposed to Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem," which looks at the war from a post-war, victorious time frame, *Unwomanly Face* reconstructs World War II more broadly, in ordinary temporal succession: the time before the war, wartime, and the post-war period. Of these three periods, wartime occupies most of the narrative space. Since *Unwomanly Face* consists mostly of separate testimonies, this temporal chain is repeated with every subsequent testimony, providing the reader with more and more details about the war as it unfolds for each interviewee. Since the soldier in *Unwomanly Face* is an actual, living (rather than fictional) person, these details are realistic and striking. In both editions, the war appears vividly both as a tremendous physical strain and as an inner emotional and moral struggle experienced by every narrative

participant. Alexievich calls this shift from an abstract, ideological narrative position to a concrete, individual-centered one "the humanization of history:" "Before my eyes the history "humanizes" itself, becomes like ordinary life. Acquires a different lighting" (2017, xvii). In both editions, the image of the war appears as a "detailed world of existence" with its own smells (1), colors (2), sounds (3), textures and sensations (4):

> (1) I remember to this day the smell of the corpses, mingled with the smell of cheap tobacco" (2017, 14)
>
> (2) If you ask me what color war is, I'll tell you—the color of the earth. For a sapper… Black, yellow, clayey color of earth (2017, 213);
>
> (3) I was drawn on logs … then some kind of machine is turned on… And you hear how your bones crunch, get dislocated (2017, 291).
>
> (4) Tank soldiers have canvas trousers with thick pads on the knees, but we got thin cotton overalls. The ground is half mixed with metal, stones were sticking up everywhere – so again we went around ragged, because … we crawled outside on the ground" (2017, 81).

While both the 1985 and the 2016 editions rely on the physical and emotional representation of war, they nevertheless differ from each other significantly in content and style.

The two editions present the three time periods—pre-war, war, and post-war—differently due to existing censorship restrictions regarding the inclusion of certain historical facts and graphic descriptions. The difference in presentation increases the subversive power of the 2016 edition, undermining the dominant, victory-centered discourse on the war. **The pre-war period** in the 1985 edition is most often portrayed as a happy, carefree time, which contained no hint of imminent danger. In the 2016 edition, by contrast, pre-war happiness is marred by the harshness

of Soviet reality: the Stalinist repressions, suppression of rumors about the war, unforgivable lack of preparation for the war, the Holodomor in Ukraine, etc.

Wartime in the 1985 and the 2016 editions is portrayed with different degrees of physicality and visual impact:

> (1) The forest was burning. Wheat was burning… Such suffocating, choking smoke…Steel was burning. To this smell one had to get used. (1985, 156)
>
> (2) The field and forest were burning... The meadow was smoky. Smoke. I saw burnt cows and dogs… An unusual smell. Unfamiliar. I saw… Burnt barrels of tomatoes, of cabbage… Birds were burned. Horses…Many… Many completely charred ones lay on the road. We also had to get used to that smell… I realized then that anything can burn. Even blood burns… (2017, 126-127).

As the juxtaposition of the passages demonstrates, the 1985 edition features summary-like testimonies that restrict the emotionality of memories and spare the reader the pain of envisioning war atrocities in graphic detail; meanwhile, the 2016 edition gives detailed, graphic descriptions, which plunge the reader into a haptic (and repellent) experience of war. It is difficult to say which version is more faithful to the original testimony, as Alexievich does not allow access to her archives.[20] However, the only archival data that is available today—Dashuk and Alexievich's collaborative documentary film project (1981-1984)—suggests that the 2016 edition is significantly revised to more accurately reflect Alexievich's original material. In the documentary film, the interviewees display an emotional detachment from their excruciating war memories and construct their narration in a cohesive, logical manner. Such behavior for the camera parallels the emotional restrictiveness of the 1985 edition supported by Alexievich's

[20] From personal interview, 20 February 2020.

narrative function as a "concert-master." Just as Alexievich's text had to meet the expectations of Soviet censorship, the interviewees in the documentary had to assume the roles of heroes to meet the demands of the dominant, male-oriented, heroic war discourse. Joshua Pederson connects such behavior with fear of the results of sharing trauma—one of which is public condemnation (343). Indeed, women veterans are afraid to appear as victims on camera and, therefore, play the part of a hero who emotionally does not give in to past war traumas. However, most interviewees reach a point where they have to subdue overwhelming emotions stirred up by traumatic memories and hide their tears behind an awkward smile (e.g., Valentina Chadaeva [second episode], Liudmila Kashechkina [sixth episode]). In the 1985 edition of *Unwomanly Face,* the artificial heroic uplift is not only present but also reinforced by Alexievich in her role of concert-master; in the 2016 edition, this disappears. Becoming a second-level witness and observing the interviewees' attempt to conceal their emotions, Alexievich takes the liberty of expressing these emotions by adding more graphic details.

When it comes to personal relationships during the war, both editions attest to a friendly, supportive environment among female soldiers. The two editions differ most strongly, however, in their depiction of the women's relationships with male soldiers, women's acceptance of and by the Motherland, and their interaction with the enemy. The early edition presents a positive image of the male soldier as the embodiment of chivalry:

> At the front, the men treated us wonderfully, they protected us. I never came across such special treatment of women in peacetime. When we were retreating, we would lie down to rest – on bare ground, they would lie down in their uniforms and give their overcoats to us … If they found a piece of cotton wadding or a bandage, it was "Here, take it. It

might be useful." They shared their last piece of dry bread. We received only kindness and warmth from them (1985, 144).

Men of higher rank treated women soldiers less chivalrously to help them adjust to the war environment:

> I was dragging my first wounded soldier from the battlefield, and my own legs were giving way. As I'm dragging him, I'm whispering: "If only he doesn't die, … If only he doesn't die." I'm bandaging him and crying and saying something to him and feeling pity for him. Then our commander passed by. He yelled at me, even said something mean. … I wasn't supposed to pity the wounded soldier, to cry as I did. I would run out of energy and there were many wounded soldiers" (1985, 113).

Cases of romance are rare, but those that arise mainly describe happy stories that ended in a lifelong marriage.

The 2016 edition expands the portrayal of relationships between men and women in the military environment, often exploring taboo topics. One such topic is the unofficial "military marriage," or a sexual relationship between an unmarried female soldier and a married officer. The account by Sofia K-vich, medical assistant, whose name Alexievich deliberately conceals to emphasize that such a story would evoke public censure, shares her experience of being a target of sexual harassment in a male battalion. Tired of defending her dignity, she resorts to becoming a "field campaign wife" to the first commander of the battalion in exchange for his protection. When the commander is killed, she becomes a "wife" to the second commander of the battalion. This time she falls in love with him and has a daughter by him. After the war, he leaves her and the baby and returns to his lawful wife. Sofia recalls:

> You ask about love? I'm not afraid of telling the truth… I was what's called a "field campaign wife." A war wife. A second one. An unlawful wife. The first commander of the battalion…I did not love him. … When there is shooting, they call out, "Nurse! Dear nurse!" But after the battle each of them lies in wait for you…You can't get out of the dugout at night… Did other girls tell you about that or did they not confess? (2017, 236).

Another example that could never have appeared in either "Requiem" or in the first edition of *Unwomanly Face* is the case of sacrificial prostitution. Alexievich includes a testimony by an anonymous male soldier in the section "From What the Censors Threw Out." The former soldier remembers how his formation was trying to get out of a German encirclement. The chances of escape were so slim that the soldiers did not expect to survive until next morning. Three female soldiers "came during the night to each of us, who could… Of course, not everyone was able to. Nerves, you understand. … Each of us was preparing to die. I remember those girls with gratitude" (2017, xxxiii).

Describing female soldiers' encounters with adversaries, both editions of *Unwomanly Face* portray the Nazis as obsessive maniacs, arsonists, rapists, torturers, sadists, murderers, and wild beasts:

> And they walked along young, cheerful, smiling. And wherever they stopped, wherever they see a water pump or well, they washed themselves. They always had their sleeves rolled up. They wash and wash. Blood all around, screaming, and they wash and wash. (2017, 42)

Despite this monstrous portrayal of the Germans, the image of the enemy becomes less definite and more humanized when the Soviet army manages to stop the Nazi advance and reverse the course of the war. In multiple accounts, women veterans talk about their acts of mercy toward

German captives and German civilians: feeding German children, promising a dying German soldier to pass on photographs to his family, helping wounded German soldiers, and hiding German captives during an air raid.

The 2016 edition introduces two other types of malefactors who could never appear in the "Requiem" or in the first edition of *Unwomanly Face*, since they cast a shadow on the heroic reputation of the Soviet people. The first consisted of traitors who served in punitive squads, that is, former Soviet soldiers or civilians in territories occupied by the Germans who defected to the German side: "In the morning the punitive forces set fire to our village… Only those people who fled to the forest survived. They fled with nothing, empty-handed, they didn't take even bread with them" (2017, xxxvii).

The second malefactor who could not be mentioned was the Soviet soldier whose vengefulness led him to commit acts of gratuitous violence similar to those committed by the Nazis. Some women veterans testify to the fact that when advancing through the German territories, many Soviet soldiers, both male and female, engaged in the most horrific violence as an act of vengeance:

> We took prisoners, brought them to our detachment... We didn't shoot them, that was too easy a death for them; we stuck them like pigs, we cut them to pieces. I went to look at it… I waited! I waited a long time for the moment when their eyes would begin to burst from pain… The pupils (2017, xxxiv).

Both editions of *Unwomanly Face* follow Rozhdestvenskii's "Requiem" in their portrayal of the Motherland as a helpless mother-figure, whom the soldier must rescue:

> (1) Each of us had a different path to the frontline. But the intention was similar – to defend the Motherland (1985, 78).

(2) My papa was a longtime Communist, he had been a political prisoner before the revolution. He had instilled in us from childhood that the Motherland was everything, the Motherland must be defended. I didn't hesitate: if I don't go to war, who will? I must…I've got to… (2017, 30).

The general tenor of the 2016 edition, however, is to portray the Motherland as a tyrant who betrays and unjustly punishes its own citizens:

(1) This major spoke terrible words: "I want to defend the Motherland, but I don't want to defend that traitor of the revolution—Stalin" (2017, xxvi).

(2) It was from her that I first heard of the horrible hunger in Ukraine. Golodomor. … I said, "Oksana, Comrade Stalin is fighting. He destroys the saboteurs, but there are many." "No," she said, "you're stupid. My father was a history teacher, he said to me, "Someday Comrade Stalin will answer for his crimes" (2017, xxvii).

(3) My husband, a chevalier of the Order of Glory, got ten years of the labor camps after the war. That is how the Motherland met her heroes. The victors! (2017, 113).

Alexievich's depiction of **post-war reality** in both editions is more or less identical and features the interaction of female veterans with their Motherland or home environment. Both editions document the painful process of their adjustment to life in peace time. But the war continues to haunt women and forces them to relive their traumatic experience: in nightmares, at the grocery store at the sight of fresh meat, at markets displaying red satin, and on the streets where boys play war games.

Another challenge for female veterans was reversing the once-urgent process of forced masculinization and once again reasserting their femininity:

> I hadn't seen a single dress in five years. I'd even forgotten how a dress is made. That there are all sorts of tucks, slits… … Incomprehensible to me. I bought a pair of high-heeled shoes, walked up and down the room, and took them off. I put them in the corner thinking, "I'll never learn to walk in them…" (2017, 240).

As this example shows, the reverse process of feminization is hardly less frustrating than the process of masculinization had been. While some women interviewees go through post-war feminization willingly, in an attempt to put their horrifying war experience behind them, others experience social pressure to return to the pre-war status quo. The fact that women had spent four years among unmarried men or men married to other women was enough for the patriarchal Soviet society to label them as prostitutes and to ostracize or even bully them: "We'd had enough, we frontline girls. And after the war we got another war. Also terrible" (2017, 329). The 1985 edition does not assign blame to anyone for this social ostracism: "For some reason, we ended up abandoned. No one protected us. It had been different at the front" (1985, 312). In the 2016 edition, however, this same interviewee openly accuses men of withdrawing their support from their female comrades-in-arms: "For some reason, the men abandoned us. They didn't shield us. At the front line it was different" (2017, 329). Without due support from the state and in the circumstances of social ostracism, female veterans stopped sharing their military experiences and even deliberately hid them, thereby succumbing to a discursive death for decades:

> 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…" (2017, 20).

The image of war differs considerably in the two editions. Adopting the Soviet requiem as a narrative frame, 1985's *Unwomanly Face* presents women veterans' memories as a drama that occurs within the Soviet mainstream narrative of victory: the dastardly Nazi attack, the Soviet Union's heroic defense of the Motherland, and final victory. If we return to the metaphor in the book's title, "the unwomanly face of war," then the first edition, in fact, preserves that unwomanly face—the heroic, masculine image of war. Alexievich's "unwomanliness," however, leans toward a more truthful depiction of the realia of war. Her depiction breaks the association between romanticism and war even as it preserves and emphasizes the association between war and victory. The horrors that women veterans recall in their testimonies prove their heroism and assert their right to be written into the victorious history of World War II, just like the men.

The 2016 edition, by contrast, completely departs from any need to live up to any expectations demanded by Soviet rhetoric. In switching its narrative frame to the non-Soviet requiem, the later edition treats women veterans' memory as an unhealed, deep psychological trauma that vitiates victory as the ultimate end of war and instead emphasizes the scale of the social isolation of women veterans and the disregard of their real war experience, brought about by the dominant war discourse. In this context, the title captures and supports the horrifying portrait of war that the 2016 edition finally shows in fine detail: The war is merciless to all its participants, be it men or women. It is not romantic. There are no happy endings.

***

In recent interviews on various television and radio programs, Alexievich has mentioned more than once that the greater document—that is, the many accounts that she collected—is an organic entity that reveals more and more with time. Being the most heavily revised work in *Voices of Utopia*, *Unwomanly Face*, indeed, demonstrates the particular flexibility of "the

document" to convey different messages not only in different epochs but also to different readerships. For example, for the Soviet reader who lived through the 1980s, the first edition of *Unwomanly Face* was a literary work that in its treatment of the Soviet experience of World War II fully implemented the liberal tasks of the Soviet policy of glasnost. It portrayed the collective experience not as a monolithic ideological construct, but as a fragmented composite of individual experiences. It acknowledged and included the marginalized perspective of Soviet women veterans by inserting their experiences into a narrative frame of a traditional Soviet requiem. Thus, the 1985 *Unwomanly Face* engaged its Soviet reader in the context of the traditional heroic war narrative, but now with the inclusion of previously excluded participants—the women who fought in the war. Its achievement was to expand the definition of the Soviet Hero beyond the iconic Soviet male soldier to include the reality of women's active participation and contribution while retaining the accepted frame of reference based on the conventional narrative of victorious war and the traditional genre of requiem that conveys it.

In the 2000s, post-Soviet readers, especially Russian readers, found themselves in a curious situation when Russia, under Putin's leadership, positioned itself as the principal heir of the Soviet Union's historical, cultural, and political legacy. Shaping its official discourse on the model of its controversial Soviet heritage, the Russian state embarked on the process of remythologizing structures that underwent some degree of demythologization after the collapse. Thus, the reader of the 2016 edition lives in a period when public discourse re-emphasizes Soviet achievements, underplays the state's crimes against its own people, and uses victory in World War II to re-establish the Russian state's parity in current foreign affairs in order to maintain its national identity and to justify its growing military might (Hill, Khlevnyuk). The 2016 edition of

Unwomanly Face offers those readers narrative content and tone powerful enough to pull them out of this process of re-mythologizing the Soviet past.

In her 2016 edition of *Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich uses the narrative frame of a non-Soviet requiem to separate the 1985 edition's pervasive theme of Soviet heroism from the actual and personal war experiences of women veterans. Without Soviet heroic sentiments but with the emotionality and pain of the non-Soviet requiem, veterans' accounts turn into narratives of unhealed trauma, the intensity of which provides the Russian reader (especially the younger reader who has limited or no experience of living in Soviet reality) with deliberately shocking haptic knowledge of the war and its aftermath. Without actually experiencing the war or necessarily living under the Soviet regime, the reader comprehends the manipulative nature and propagandistic purpose of Soviet discourse as well as reality of its current reestablishment in Russia.

For a non-Soviet or non-Russian readership, the two editions of *Unwomanly Face* not only shed light on the nature of the Soviet regime and the revival of its strategies in post-collapse Russia but also exemplify tendencies in war discourse worldwide. Examining the heroism of Soviet women soldiers and carving out a rightful place for them in the male-dominated Soviet discourse of war, the 1985 edition exemplifies for its wider readership standpoints that are close to those of *liberal* feminism; it calls for justice and equality in recognizing both men's and women's participation and contribution in military conflicts (Brown, Eisenstein). The 2016 edition, however, offers a no less powerful statement. Emphasizing the scale of the psychological trauma that women veterans experienced, the 2016 version of *Unwomanly Face* expresses ideas similar to those of *radical* feminism (Atkinson, Koedt). The high concentration of war's gruesome details and the heart-wrenching injustices of the war- and post-war period urges all

readers to see the war's tremendous cost in human lives and traumatic loss and its ultimate failure to serve as an adequate means of conflict resolution.

CHAPTER II: *Last Witnesses*: The Magic Tale of Childhood

Last Witnesses, the second book of *Voices of Utopia,* continues the cycle's exploration of the Soviet experience of World War II. If *Unwomanly Face* examined the experiences of one set of nontraditional war participants, women fighters, then *Last Witnesses* turns to the testimonies of another such set—children. The volume includes 101 similar testimonies, each with a simple narrative structure, that force the reader to confront the disparity between the harrowing realia of war and the innocence of childhood.

The year in which *Last Witnesses* was completed, 1985, was the year in which the censors lifted the ban on *Unwomanly Face*, with the result that two emotionally demanding books on World War II by a single author appeared at the same time. Soviet readers and publishers had to choose between focusing on the experiences of either women or children in war. So in 1985 "Molodaia Gvardiia" published a limited press run of *Last Witnesses;* thereafter, between 1985 and 2004, *Last Witnesses* was "hidden" behind *Unwomanly Face* in a joint publication, and its title never appeared on the book cover.[21] For this reason, *Last Witnesses* has had less exposure than *Unwomanly Face* in the Soviet Union and Russia. In the West, *Last Witnesses* remained the least known text of *Voices of Utopia*, both before and after Alexievich received the Nobel Prize. Its English translation appeared only in July 2019.[22]

Existing scholarship on Alexievich also tends to treat *Last Witnesses* as a "bonus" supplement to *Unwomanly Face* instead of an independent work deserving separate attention. For example, Daniel Bush devotes his article, "No Other Proof: Svetlana Alexievich in the

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[21] See the 1987 and the 1989 editions.

[22] Svetlana Alexievich, *Last Witnesses: An Oral History of the Children of World War II,* translated by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky, New York: Random House, 2019.

Tradition of Soviet War Writing," to the topic of World War II in *Voices of Utopia*, but he builds his arguments solely around *Unwomanly Face* and mentions *Last Witnesses* only in passing (215). The only substantial pieces of academic writing on *Last Witnesses* are two book reviews by Serguei Oushakine (2008) and by Tim Adams (2019) and one article in German by Johanna Lindbladh, in which she compares textual changes in the 1985 and 2016 editions of *Last Witnesses* (2019).

Neither has *Last Witnesses* been as successful on stage or screen as Alexievich's other books in the *Voices of Utopia* cycle. Only three theatrical productions of *Last Witnesses* appeared during the 2000s, and they came not from central (metropolitan) theaters, but from amateur children's drama studios in Perm and Pushchino and the professional Saratov Theater of Opera and Ballet. [23] Two documentaries, both titled *Last Witnesses,* achieved broader visibility when they appeared on the central television channels Rossiia 1 (Russia) and Pervyi Pridnestrovskii (the main channel of Transnistria [the Pridnestrovian Moldavian Republic]). [24] Both documentaries ignore, to varying degrees, the actual content of *Last Witnesses* and refer to the concept of Alexievich's project rather than its content. Because of its particular publication, reception, and performance history, *Last Witnesses* stands apart from the rest of *Voices of Utopia* and poses questions about its value to the cycle.

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[23] Последние свидетели, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=SoxtRyIudXw Accessed 16 September 2019.
Последние свидетели. Спектакль студии "Дети до 16..." 2015 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MLz31YAHeto Accessed 16 September 2019.
В Магдалиц. "Последние свидетели", симфония-реквием, Саратов, театр оперы и балета, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=igjo7DzGjVc Accessed 16 September 2019.
[24] Дети войны. Последние свидетели. Россия, 2009, https://russia.tv/brand/show/brand_id/4957/ Accessed 16 September 2019. Документальный фильм "Последние свидетели войны," 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xch2sR-UUt4 Accessed 16 September 2019.

This chapter explains the value and significance of *Last Witnesses* to *Voices of Utopia* and demonstrates that the book's unusual fate is actually a result of the author's successful narrative strategy, which is to challenge the "heroic" mainstream discourse of World War II by providing a realistic portrayal of the collision of war and childhood. I claim that, in *Last Witnesses,* Alexievich uses the genre of the Slavic folk tale as her narrative frame, transforming it to suit her own purposes. She is aware of her reader's familiarity with the magic tale and its many emotional, psychological, and cultural implications. In addition to accessing the unconscious power of the archetypes upon which folk tales are built, her use of the folk tale framework allows her to effectively combine narrative simplicity with compelling emotionality, to create a powerful performative effect, and to organize trauma witnessing for the reader; last, but by no means least, her strategy serves to undermine the dominant victorious discourse of World War II.

The following discussion defines the genre of the folk tale, discusses the ways it was used in Soviet World War II discourse, and analyzes literary and cinematographic attempts to resist the official mythologization of childhood in wartime. It describes the narrative adjustments that Alexievich introduced between the 1985 and the 2016 editions in order to make *Last Witnesses* correspond more nearly to the conventions of the genre of the magic tale. It then analyzes how Alexievich uses the performative potential of the magic tale—interaction between the tale-teller and the audience—to turn her readers into trauma witnesses. Finally, it shows how Alexievich manipulates the generic conventions of the magic tale to emphasize the traumatic rather than heroic aspects of the child's war experience and thereby to subvert the dominant war discourse.

The Genre of the Magic Tale and Its Use in Soviet Narratives about War

In *Last Witnesses,* as in the other books of *Voices of Utopia,* Alexievich creates a counter-narrative to Soviet mainstream discourse, in this case the prevailing Soviet war discourse for and about children. This particular Soviet discourse extensively used the genre of the magic tale to mythologize the war and present it as an adventure that tests and prepares the youngest Soviet citizens for a wonderful life as Soviet heroes. Indeed, the genre of the magic tale possessed all necessary tools for such a presentation of World War II.

According to folklorists of the anthropological-historical school, the genre of the magic tale often depicts initiation rites—ancient social practices in which an individual undergoes a rite of passage from one societal status to another. In the process the individual is transformed from incapable to capable, from unempowered to empowered, from immature to mature member of a social group (van Gennep, Propp, Pomerantseva). In a successful rite of passage, the protagonist begins his/her quest as a poor, dependent child or adolescent and finishes it as a rewarded, independent adult ready to marry, be in charge of property, and rule over a kingdom (or at least run a farmstead).

Occasionally, rites of passage fail: sometimes characters (usually the hero's rivals or siblings) do not succeed in achieving a new societal status at the end of the quest and may be punished by death, absence of a potential spouse, or a lesser reward. In depicting successful and unsuccessful initiation rites, magic tales perform three functions: they entertain; they educate by instilling basic moral understanding of good and bad, useful and harmful, kind and unkind, acceptable and unacceptable behavioral patterns in their listeners—often children; and they prepare their young audience for their own initiations.

Although having didactic value, magic tales make no claim to realism. The world of the magic tale is liminal: it occupies the symbolic time and space between start and end of the initiation. In the liminal space of the magic tale (and the initiation rite) anything is possible—including that which would be considered abnormal, paranormal, or strange in normative space. Scenes of torture, punishment, murder, dismemberment, and death lack gruesome details, since their sole purpose is to reinforce the moral of the tale and move the plot forward (Lüthi 7-10). Time and space are unspecific in the magic tale and can easily shrink or stretch, while all actions are concrete and extreme.[25] The plot of the magic tale is linear (it moves from beginning to end without flashbacks or digressions); it features repetition, which folklorists term "triplicity" (Olrik 41-61). Triplicity signifies, among other things, three challenges or quests that test the main character's readiness to enter adulthood (triplicity may also include characters, such as three maidens, three brothers, three dragons, etc.). For example, Prince Ivan must fight three dragons, each more powerful than the one before; Vasilisa the Beautiful must perform three impossible tasks to satisfy Baba Yaga. Each successive task is progressively harder than the one before (intensification). The language of the tale privileges simple sentence structures of one, two, or maximum three clauses, which include sequential actions that characterize the archetypal behavior and character of the personae (Ó Ov Cathasaigh).

None of the characters in magic tales, including the main hero, are individuals. Instead, they are archetypes, the most common of which are the hero, the villain, the magic helper or agent, the talisman, and the love or quest object (Propp 77). The hero is the character who undergoes the transformation, the other characters assist or impede his transformation by

[25] This in the sense that every action or emotion manifests itself in its most extreme form: anger provokes murder, jealousy provokes murder, etc.

performing plot functions (31 in number, as famously demonstrated by Propp in his *Morphology of the Folktale,* 1928). The tale's narrator never merges with any of the tale's characters and never participates in the events, although he or she may parenthetically claim to have witnessed them (Pomerantseva 128-153). Remaining (to this day) a very old and tenacious genre of Slavic folk culture, the magic tale provided Soviet propaganda discourse with archetypes and tropes that appealed powerfully not only to the collective human mind but also to the collective unconscious of Russians.

The products of Soviet discourse that used the genre of the magic tale to shape the narrative of World War II include literature and films for and about children. Perhaps the most representative Soviet literary example of the use of the magic tale, which interprets World War II for children, is Konstantin Paustovskii's literary tale (*Kunstmärchen*), "Pokhozhdenie zhuka-nosoroga" (The adventures of the rhinoceros beetle, 1945). This literary tale features a regular Soviet soldier, Petr Terent'ev, who goes off to war with a personal "magic" helper—a rhinoceros beetle which his son gave him as a farewell gift. The beetle helps Petr in critical situations (the beetle attacks a Nazi who was trying to shoot Petr; the beetle leads Petr's fellow soldiers to his rescue). After Petr recovers from his wounds, he and the beetle become fighting allies and advance quickly with the Red Army, pushing the enemy out the homeland. Time and distance shrink, so that in no time at all the victorious beetle and Petr return to their home village and to a peaceful, pre-war existence. Although the context of war poses danger to the hero, it is portrayed as an adventure with a happy ending, one in which the hero successfully passes his "initiation" test and returns home in his new capacity—that of mature and experienced war hero, a "*bogatyr'*"—and to a world in which order and tranquility are once again restored, just as in the folk tale.

Soviet cinema and literary narratives about children in wartime fall into two categories. The first, "socialist realist" category models the child-hero in the image of the archetypal Soviet soldier. The child-hero is always male and navigates the military environment equally as well as, or even better than, many adults. He is instantly able to overcome natural age limitations and can understand and consciously operate within war's black and white dichotomies, such as bad vs. good, enemy vs. friend, cowardice vs. courage, reflex/impulse vs. strategy, death vs. life. Such narratives often modify the traditional happy ending of the magic tale to fit the mainstream narrative of the Soviet soldier: instead of a long happy life as an adult, the child dies the death of a Soviet hero—the ultimate manifestation of Soviet masculinity (in accord with the dominant narrative; see discussion in the previous chapter). The harmony of the pre-war motherland is restored, the heroic child has given his life to make it so. He is symbolically restored to life in his posthumous celebration as a hero. This is the common didactic ending of the mainstream "tale" about victory in World War II.

Examples of such narratives in children's literature and film are Lev Kassil's short prose on World War II for children; Kassil' and Max Polianovskii's collaborative novel, *Ulitsa mladshego syna* (Street of the younger son*;* 1949), and its film adaptation, directed by Lev Golub in 1962; Iosif Dik's novel, *Mal'chik i tank* (A boy and a tank, 1970), and its film adaptation, *Mishka prinimaet boi* (Mishka accepts the fight, 1970), by Oleg Nikolaevskii. Literature and film for adults that belong to this category include Valentin Kataev's novel *Syn polka* (*Son of the Regiment,* 1945), its 1946 film adaptations by Vasilii Pronin and its 1981 remake by Georgii Kuznetsov; and Vladimir Bogomolov's novel *Ivan* (1957) and its 1962 film adaptation by Andrei Tarkovskii, *Ivanovo detstvo* (*Ivan's Childhood).*

The second category of Soviet works about children in wartime includes literary and cinematic narratives that push war heroism to the background and focus instead on recuperative strategies for both children and adults traumatized by war. The ability of the magic tale to manipulate archetypes of the human psyche and bring them into equilibrium, first proposed by the Swiss depth psychologist Carl Jung (1875–1961) and then developed by his disciple Marie Louise von Franz, manifests itself in narratives of this category (Jung, Franz). Various plot complications allow the child hero to neutralize different kinds of self-destructive psychodynamics and to recover from the trauma of losing parents in war. Literary narratives that follow this psychoanalytical stream of the magic tale genre most closely are Konstantin Paustovskii's literary tales: "Teplyi khleb" (Warm bread, 1945), "Stal'noe kol'tso" (The steel ring, 1946), and "Dremuchii medved'' (The old, shaggy bear, 1948). They offer the possibility of regaining inner equilibrium through building various ties: friendship among peers, community service, and living in harmony with nature and animals.

Literature and films for adults in this category usually depict adult and child characters who have lost their families in war uniting to form a new, surrogate family in order to regain a semblance of traditional parent-child social roles and to recuperate from war traumas. The most common examples here are Mikhail Sholokhov's short story, "Sud'ba cheloveka" ("Fate of a Man,"1956), its 1959 film adaptation by Sergei Bondarchuk and Max Polianovskii, and the film *Dva Fedora* (*The Two Fedors,* 1958), directed by Marlen Hutsiev. The happy ending of these narratives, however, does not look forward to the child's successfully completed maturation; instead, it looks backward in an effort to restore a pre-war, positive childhood experience, which would then serve as a base for the future healthy maturation of the Soviet children who lived through the war.

Following the genre of the magic tale in their own ways and modeling its happy ending, narratives in these two categories reinforce the Soviet mythologem. The war experience of the child, as much as the war experience of the Soviet soldier, becomes a constructed, subconsciously manipulated concept rather than a depiction of reality as it was. Thus, the true perspective of a child in war undergoes a "discursive death"; the child's actual war experience is not depicted in Soviet mainstream culture.

Counternarrative

Alexievich is not the first to "resurrect" the discursively dead perspective of children in *Last Witnesses* and build a counternarrative to the mainstream Soviet war "tale." In 1971, Alexievich's mentor, Ales' Adamovich, wrote *Khatynskaia povest'* (The story of Khatyn', 1971), which Elem Klimov adapted to the screen in 1985 under the title *Idi i smotri* (*Come and See*). Nikolai Gubenko's film *Podranki* came out in 1976 (*Wounded Game,* 1977). All of these narratives contradicted the mainstream Soviet war "tale," approximating it more closely to the reality of war. Allowing their child protagonist to be simultaneously the narrative center (the object of narration) and the narrative lens (the narrative subject), these narratives recovered the discursively dead perspective of the child in wartime. Left alone amid the war, their child protagonist fails to automatically develop behavioral or recuperative strategies necessary to navigate or cope with the war's consequences. In these works, the war appears as a particularly brutal and unpredictable rite of passage into adulthood where just survival, albeit in a traumatized state, becomes the only possible "happy ending."

Describing the brutal reality of World War II that distorts the traditional process of the Soviet child's maturation rite, *Khatynskaia povest', Podranki,* and *Idi i smotri* anticipate the recent return in East European, notably in Polish, literature to the coming-of-age novel.

Examining this Polish literary trend in her book *Coming of Age Under Martial Law*, Svetlana Vassileva-Karagyozova finds its origins in the late eighteenth-century German *Bildungsroman*, an "initiation" novel that focuses on the character's moral and psychological evolution from youth into adulthood (whether failed or successful). The roots of the *Bildungsroman* lie in the oral genre of the magic tale, but the modern *Bildungsroman* locates the initiation process in the time and space of the real world (not in the liminal time and space of the magic tale) and focuses on the hero's actions and inner transformations that lead to the desired maturity (Vassilieva-Karagyozova 9). In form and purpose, the most recent versions of the coming-of-age novel diverge even further from the genre of the magic tale than the traditional *Bildungsroman* by specifically intertwining the individual coming-of-age experience with prominent historical and sociopolitical upheavals. The maturation process itself appears to be more complex and often fails to reach the desired outcomes of the protagonist's quest for self-realization. Thus, the pre-*Last Witnesses* counter-narratives mentioned above break away from the Soviet mainstream discourse by shaping their narrative frame in a manner similar to that of the coming-of-age novel.

Last Witnesses joins these counter-narratives, but only conceptually. Personal testimonies use the same narrative lens and narrative center as the coming-of-age novel, and World War II was certainly an historical and socio-political upheaval; however, Alexievich is not content with simply compiling recollections about individuals' brutal childhood experiences in war, which is what her volume appears to be at first glance. Contradicting the mainstream dominant "tale" about the Soviet child in wartime with series of tragic facts is not enough. To make her point, Alexievich also exploits the form by dovetailing together the archetypal (psychological) space of the magic tale and the illusory heroic space of the Soviet mainstream narrative, but then she adds

the counterpoint of lived reality and individual experience of war. The result is a more nuanced and, at the same time, emotionally overwhelming narrative that forces readers to reevaluate their assumptions and to recognize the trauma that lies beneath the recollections of the children of war.

Transformations into a Magic Tale

The 1985 edition of *Last Witnesses* differs considerably from its 2016 version both quantitatively and qualitatively; it is the 2016 version that is the subject of this study. In his review of *Last Witnesses,* Serguei Oushakine claims that Alexievich's changes cause a shift in narrative tonality as she transfers her authorial emphasis from biographical facts to the affective power of her testimonies (12). Johanna Lindbladh, in her article "Näher am Trauma: Aleksievičs 'Letzte Zuegen' im Vergliech," argues that since its first publication *Last Witnesses* has undergone a transformation into a trauma text. While I agree with both Oushakine and Lindbladh, I see these transformations as a part of a larger conceptual restructuring of the text which leads to a change in the narrative frame that subtly evokes the genre of the magic tale. Evocations of the magic tale manifest themselves in the book in the following elements: the book's various titles and basic structure; the introduction of interviewees; presentation, structure, and length of testimonies; the narrator's types and functions.

In my interview with Alexievich in February 2020, the writer mentioned that it was harder to choose a title for *Last Witnesses* than for the other books in *Voices of Utopia.*[26] To this day, the writer considers the title "last witnesses" the most unsuccessful in the cycle and the most unrepresentative of the book's content. Unsurprisingly, since the book's first 1985 edition,

[26] From personal interview, 20 February 2020.

Alexievich had been searching for a better metaphor to capture what her narrative does and is about. This search resulted in the change of three subtitles for the main title. Thus, the first edition of *Last Witnesses* is subtitled *Kniga nedetskikh rasskazov* (A book of stories not for children), the 2004 edition—*Sto nedetskikh kolybel'nykh* (A hundred lullabies not meant for children), and the 2016—*Solo dlia detskogo golosa* (Solo for a child's voice). During the interview, Alexievich mentioned that she might go back to the first subtitle in the next reprint of *Last Witnesses*.[27]

While none of the subtitles points at the genre of the magic tale directly, together they capture major conceptual trajectories of Alexievich's revised narrative frame. The first two subtitles, *A book of stories not for children* and *A hundred lullabies not meant for children,* imply that the testimonies that make up the book are a collection of pieces in those two genres. Like magic tales, stories [*rasskazy*] and lullabies are traditionally children's genres. Stories may be associated with both the written and oral literary tradition of children's literature and represent relatively stable narratives, while lullabies are often products of oral tradition that allow great spontaneity and improvisation. These characteristics emphasize the ability of the narrative to use a familiar, traditional genre in a new, creative, and unpredictable way. This idea is reinforced by the attribute "nedetskii" (not for children) in both subtitles, which creates an oxymoronic discrepancy between the genres' traditional purpose and its actual implementation. Moreover, both combinations, "stories not for children" and "lullabies not meant for children," reflect the book's dramatism, in which war turns childhood into an experience never meant for children and which haunts adult life in the form of deep psychological trauma.

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[27] From personal interview, 20 February 2020.

The 2016 edition's subtitle, *Solo for a child's voice,* is neither a value judgment regarding the underlying genre of testimonies nor a labeling of them as "unchildlike" or "childish." Instead, the subtitle shifts attention to the child herself, the youngest participant of the war, and treats the textual space of the book as a stage on which adults "perform" their disturbed, devastated, inner childhood selves—selves whose maturation was prematurely forced, maimed, or distorted by war. This allows Alexievich to turn recurring memories into an on-going re-enactment of them. It emphasizes the connection between interviewees' war-devastated childhood and their present-day identities; it allows the reader to witness the traumatic consequences of a failed rite of maturation.

The 2019 English translation of *Last Witnesses,* prepared by Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky for Random House, is based on the 2016 edition; its subtitle, however, is not the subtitle of the Russian original. Instead, the translators or the publishing house chose to give Alexievich's text a more academic tone by subtitling it *An Oral History of the Children of World War II.* This choice removes associative clues for understanding the narrative and the book's central concepts. It reduces the dramatic contrast that the author has consciously constructed between the book's title and its content and instead prompts the reader to perceive the book as a historical narrative with a documentary focus.

Alexievich's changes over time have transformed the basic structure of the book. The 1985 edition included a four-page foreword by Alexievich, which continued the heroic rhetoric of the 1985 version of *Unwomanly Face* and treated children's war experiences as events worthy of public veneration. In that foreword, she also established continuity between the present life of her interviewees and their past war experience, as if it had been severed:

> An entire lifetime has passed between my narrator of today and that boy or girl of whom they speak, … Time has altered them, it has fine-tuned or, more to the point, it has complicated their relationship with their own past. It is as though their memory's form of transmission has changed, but what happened to them has not (1985, 6, 7).

The 1985 edition also included an afterword by Ales' Adamovich, in which he pondered the depth and significance of this new documentary genre, contributing to the official tone of the book.

In the 2016 edition, the 1985 foreword and Adamovich's afterword have disappeared. Instead of a foreword, Alexievich includes two new passages. The first is an excerpt from an article in the journal *Druzhba narodov (Friendship of Peoples)*, which describes the tragic loss of millions of Soviet children of various ethnicities, and the second is a reference to an ethical question that Dostoevskii poses in *The Brothers Karamazov* considering the worth of the world's harmony if it is achieved at the expense of a child's sufferings.[28] Minimizing external voices in the narrative itself, Alexievich successfully moves from the official tone of the 1985 edition to the intimacy of story-telling in the 2016 edition.

The table of contents of the 2016 *Last Witnesses* also changed slightly. Both editions include testimonies that are equally important; both mimic an anthology of tales, with all titles appearing in a straight column, one after another. Alexievich chooses the most powerful reference or utterance from each testimony as its title. Some titles are reminiscent of magic tale titles: "…An Extra Half-Spoon of Sugar," "Dear House, Don't Burn! Dear House, Don't Burn!," "Golden Words…" The 2016 edition renames some testimonies so their titles are more

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[28] *Druzhba narodov*, Issue 5, 1985; and Fedor Dostoevskii, 1879-1880, *The Brothers Karamazov,* Part II, book 5, chapter 4.

reminiscent of magic tale titles, for example: 1985's "Take our Children and We Will Go Defend the City" turns into "Through a Buttonhole" in the 2016 version. In this edition, Alexievich also complicates some of the tale-like titles by bringing in details that destroy any possibility of the miraculous. For example, "A Handful of Salt" on its own could be a title for a magic tale, but in a combination with "…All That was Left of our House," it loses all association with the magical and instead becomes a concise yet extremely traumatic memory of the reality of war. Thus, some of Alexievich's titles in the table of contents reflect her strategy of demythologizing the mainstream "magic tale" of the Soviet child in war.

In 1985, Alexievich treated *Last Witnesses* as a sequel to *Unwomanly Face* and infused the children's memories with a commemorative tone and function. To maintain an official tone similar to that of the Soviet requiem in *Unwomanly Face,* Alexievich had made the **introduction of her interviewees** visual by including their childhood pictures in the text. To emphasize the even greater vulnerability of her interviewees in *Last Witnesses* (as opposed to that of women-soldiers in *Unwomanly Face*), the author introduced them by their childhood names (diminutive and affectionate) and specified their age at the beginning of the war. To bridge the distance between the childhood memories and the post-war reality of her interviewees, Alexievich also identified their current occupation and place of residence: "Zina Shimanskaia, 11 years old. Now a cashier. Lives in Minsk" (1985, 18). In the 2016 edition, the picture album and place of residence disappear from the testimonies: "Zina Shimanskaia, 11 years old. Now a cashier" (2019, 27). The absence of a photograph and precise geographic location turns the interviewees into more abstract, more "archetypal" characters within the narrative space of their own testimonies. Lindbladh claims that this strategy for introducing interviewees in the 2016 edition puts more emphasis on the contrast between the interviewee's past and present (186). I maintain,

however, that by removing the photograph and the current place of residence, Alexievich not only emphasizes the continuity between the speaker's past and present, but also highlights the universal rather than individual dimension of each testimony. She also exposes the unsevered, unhealthy, and perturbing connection between her interviewees' childhood and adulthood identities. The temporal element is more important than the spatial or visual elements.

The length of the testimonies in the 1985 edition of *Last Witnesses* was uneven and varied from one short paragraph (1985, 19) to seven pages (1985, 46-53). Shorter testimonies tended to appear in clusters, replicating the chorus technique in *Unwomanly Face* and creating a similar effect of rapid movement from one memory to another. In the 2016 edition, Alexievich edits out the very brief testimonies that created the chorus effect. Instead, she turns these one or two paragraph testimonies into tale-length narratives of one to seven pages—a common tale length. In expanding testimonies, Alexievich sometimes merges testimonies from the 1985 edition at the expense of losing the voices of individual interviewees. Zina Shimanskaia's testimony in the 2016 edition absorbs the 1985 one-paragraph testimony of Zhenia Triputina, with the result that Zhenia disappears completely from the book as an interviewee; her story, however, becomes a detail of Zina's experience (2019, 28, 29). This strategy signifies that the author removes her earlier emphasis on the biographical accuracy of her narrative and sacrifices the historical accuracy of her documents in order to achieve a different goal—the affective presentation of shared memories and the emotional impact of communal trauma.

Other expansion strategies include the addition of new information, the sources of which are unclear. Perhaps these new inclusions come from the material that Alexievich had to exclude from the first edition because of censorship (whether external or internal), or they might be inspired by interviewees whose memories Alexievich collected but did not include in the original

1985 edition. Such free presentation and interpretation of personal accounts places Alexievich closer to "unreliable tale-collectors" such as the Brothers Grimm, than to academic oral historians. [29]

In the 1985 edition, Alexievich kept the **sentence structure** of testimonies coherent, complex, and finished, disallowing the fragmentation of natural speech. In the 2016 edition, she breaks complex sentences into a chain of simple ones often followed by ellipses (Lindbladh 189). Seven-year-old Lilia Mel'nikova remembers that "Mama wanted to leave the doll, the doll was big, my sister started screaming: 'I won't leave her!'" in a single complex sentence in the 1985 edition (47). In the 2016 edition, this memory is split into three simple sentences: Mama wanted to leave the doll. It was too big… My sister cried: "I won't leave her!" (2019, 73). When connected, the clauses represent a rapid succession of facts; when divided, the sentences turn into heavy, emotional memories that intensify the narrative's traumatic character. Representing segments of the traumatic childhood memories of war, simple sentences turn into what is known in the theory of trauma narratives as fragmentation (Vickroy xi).

As in the magic tale, the simple sentences in 2016's *Last Witnesses* present single events that move the plot line and set a rhythm characteristic of an oral narrative. However, this simplicity offers the reader an abyss of meanings and feelings that the child hero could not process at the time of their occurrence due to age, peculiarities of perception, shock, and psychological stress; an adult reader, however, is capable of reading between the child's lines.

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[29] The Brothers Grimm, Jacob (1785–1863) and Wilhelm (1786–1859), are known for editing and revising their collected oral date, so the tales in their famous collection, Children's and Household Tales, are not entirely original folklore.

The perspective of women soldiers in *Unwomanly Face* is based not only on the experience of a front-line soldier but also on the experience of an adult woman, albeit a novice in the military environment. In the case of *Last Witnesses*, the perspective of the child displays even greater vulnerability as the child's psyche is a novice not only in the military environment but also in the physical world in general. This perspective turns the world of war into a chain of disasters that are retold nonchalantly in a simplistic narrative:

> I sat in a corner and put a broom in front of me. There was a long tablecloth on the table. Our neighbor's son hid under the table. Under the tablecloth. My brother got under the bed… The officer went to the table, lifted up the tablecloth, and fired. A cry came from there… He fired five times…He looked at me…I was so frightened that I asked: "Are you going to kill me, mister?" He didn't say anything. I remember my dead mama's hair burning… And next to her, our little brother's swaddling clothes…My older brother and I and four kittens stayed alive. Our grandmother, who lived across the river, came and took us all… (2019, 193, 194)

The testimonies in *Last Witnesses* reconstruct war through the interviewees' memories of traumatic war experiences. However, only the 2016 edition features a specific **structure** of testimonies corresponding to a compositional principle common in the magic tale: the law of triplicity. In magic tales, triplicity reflects the progression of three tests in the maturation rite. Each successive test is harder than the previous one and requires more strength, courage, and wit of the hero. If the hero passes all three tests, his maturation is considered successful and he becomes a full-fledged member of the adult community. Alexievich either embeds the triplicity principle in some already existing testimonies (as in the testimony of Misha Maerov [2019, 23]) or inserts a number of new testimonies that feature a tripartite structure (as in the testimony of

Leonid Sivakov [2019, 189]). The three memories appear in a given testimony in an order determined by the chronology of events or their intensity. Leonid Sivakov's testimony features triplicity motivated by both chronology and by the intensity of the memories that he retained about his family being shot by a German soldier. Each memory is a scene that the boy observes after losing and regaining his consciousness three times. Each scene starts with a new paragraph and is introduced by respective phrases: "First time," "Second time," "Third time." Each scene is more overwhelming and traumatic than the previous one: his entire family is shot and the boy is soaked with his mother's blood; the boy realizes the house is on fire and feels excruciating pain in his wounded arm and leg when he crawls outside the burning house; he discovers the inspection pit full of people who had been shot and falls into it. The third scene presents a climax of traumatizing experience, which, like the third task in the magic tale, is intended to transform the hero. However, unlike the transformation of the magic-tale hero, Leonid's "real life" transformation is symptomatic of a profound physical and psychological trauma rather than initiation into adulthood. This trauma damages the child's psyche: in the case of 6-year-old Leonid, the traumatic experience impeded his speech development for the next seven years.

While narrative elements of the magic tale are undoubtedly present in the 2016 edition of *Last Witnesses*, the book's **narrator** at first seems to be uncharacteristic of the magic tale. Indeed, the narrator in the testimony is one with its main character—the child hero who lives through the war (goes through the rite of passage). This deviates from the genre of the magic tale, in which the traditional tale teller is never the hero or any other character in the tale, but a "bystander" who claims to have heard the tale or to have witnessed the successful outcome of the maturation rites featured in the tale: "I was at their wedding and drank beer. The beer ran along my moustache but did not go into my mouth" (Afanas'ev, 53).

In the 1985 edition, Alexievich allowed the hero of the Soviet war tale—the Soviet child—to speak for him- or herself. This endowed the war experience of children with greater authenticity than the mainstream Soviet narratives, but it allowed only limited insight into the psychological impact of the war on the post-war life of interviewees. To overcome this deficiency in the 2016 edition, Alexievich complicates the narrator's voice and endows the hero of the "tale" in *Last Witnesses* with two distinct voices: the voice of the interviewee's childhood identity and the voice of his or her adulthood identity. Lindbladh calls such inclusions of the adult's voice "meta-comments," as they guide and deepen the reader's perception of the excruciating childhood trauma of interviewees (192), but the two voices are something more. The child's voice is now narratively responsible for the plot of the testimony, while the adult voice, like that of the tale-teller in the magic tale, frames the plot of the testimony and maintains its structure, logical progression, and clarity. In the testimony of five-year-old Valia Matiushkova, the child recalls "plot" events: shopping for a little brother before the war, losing her dad at the beginning of war, living in an orphanage, staying at a Nazi hospital, and wanting a toy—a red ball. Through her adult voice, Valia Matiushkova expresses her astonishment at how many details she remembers: "It's astonishing, but I remember all of this… in detail" (2019, 102). Her adult self is able to explain why she was kept in the Nazi hospital: German doctors thought that the blood of children under five years old contributed to speedy recovery of the wounded. "That it had a rejuvenating effect. I found this out later… of course, later…" (2019, 103); she also comments on her inability to understand clearly the scale of the danger she was exposed to: "And then. . . I wanted to get a pretty toy. A red ball…" (2019, 103).

In the 2016 *Last Witnesses*, Alexievich's explicit voice disappears from the book almost completely. However, Alexievich is implicitly present in the narrative through her active editing

of the raw material and her occasional neglect of the norms associated with the method of oral history when dealing with human subjects as she manipulates the material into a more literary text. These structural and organizational changes endow the 2016 edition with a narrative frame that turns *Last Witnesses* into a performative presentation in a manner that approximates the magic tale. This performative presentation actualizes the particulars of a child's perception in memories produced by adults. It exposes and undermines the pseudo-tale-like narratives used by Soviet and post-Soviet mainstream discourses to mythologize World War II and to justify and nourish the militaristic character of Soviet and post-Soviet cultures. Finally, the performative character of the 2016 edition allows the reader to engage in active trauma witnessing while simultaneously occupying the role of the listener of the tale.

The Characters of the Magic Tale

The Hero:

While the testimonies in *Last Witnesses* come from different people, they feature reoccurring sets of juxtaposed values that are similar to those that appear in the magic tale—mature vs. immature, experienced vs. naïve, good vs. bad, generous vs. selfish, innocent vs. predatory. These values play out as the rite of passage evolves. The testimonies also include characters that traditionally interact with the hero in the magic tale, such as the villain, the magic helper and/or donor, and the talisman (Propp 72-77).

As in magic tales, the "hero" in *Last Witnesses* is actually generic, even if provided with a specific name. As much as the magic tale hero is an archetype that represents a young person who faces life challenges in the process of his or her maturation (Zueva 44, 87, 88), the collective image of the "child-hero" in *Last Witnesses* constitutes the archetype of a normal Soviet child whose maturation occurs amid the brutalities of war. However, unlike the archetypal

hero of the magic tale, who serves as an example of productive agency in dealing with and overcoming life challenges, the archetypal hero of *Last Witnesses* serves as a vessel for memories of victimization and the psychological cost of surviving the challenge of war. Zueva distinguishes two types of the hero in magic tales, according to the degree to which the hero reveals agency as he proceeds on his quest: the "low" and "high" hero (88, 89). The "low" hero is a lazy, silly, but lucky simpleton who moves obliviously through the tale and relies heavily on magic helpers for the success of his quest (Iemelia, Ivan the Simpleton, etc.). The "high" hero is the noble knight (*bogatyr'*), prince, or princess who reveals individual initiative and relies on his/her physical prowess, dexterity, or natural wit as much as on the assistance of magic helpers. *Last Witnesses* features both "low" and "high" heroes but distinguishes between them on the basis of their agency in remembering and understanding past events. The younger the hero is at the first encounter with war, the fuzzier, less specific the memories are. Four-year-old Sasha Suetin has vague memories of becoming an orphan and staying in a German concentration camp:

> We wind up in some sort of long house or barn, on a bunk. We're hungry all the time, and I suck on my shirt buttons, they're like the fruit drops father used to bring home from his business trips. I'm waiting for mama. . . . I don't remember anything after that: who saved us in the German concentration camp and how?. . . How did my brother and I wind up in an orphanage? And how, at the end of the war, did we receive notice that our parents were dead? Something happened to my memory. I don't remember faces, I don't remember the words. . . (2019, 67, 68).

The "low" heroes of *Last Witnesses* display a low degree of psychological and mental readiness to interpret their experience from an adult point of view. Liuda Andreeva recollects the scene of

her grandmother's rape by simply describing what she, as a five-year-old girl, observed and felt, without construing the event in any specific way:

> In the morning, when the Germans left, we went into the house… Our grandma lay on the bed … tried to it with ropes … Naked! Grandma … My grandma! Horrified…Frightened, I began to scream. Mama pushed me outside. . . I screamed and screamed … I couldn't stop (2019, 184).

"High" heroes in *Last Witnesses* are old enough to retain and interpret more details. Eleven-year-old Nadia Gorbacheva displays more control of her memories and understanding of the war environment:

> That day my sister was responsible for our brother, and I weeded the garden. When I bent down among the potatoes, I couldn't be seen. You know how it is in the childhood—everything seems big and tall. When I noticed the plane, it was already circling over me. I saw the pilot quite distinctly. His young face. A brief submachine gun volley—*bang-bang*! The airplane circles for a second round… He wasn't seeking to kill me, he was having fun. I already understood it then, with my child's mind. And I didn't have even a scarf on to cover my head… (2019, 125, 126)

Unlike the heroes of the magic tale, who remain psychologically unchanged throughout the narrative, the child-heroes in *Last Witnesses* experience turbulent psychological transformations as they evolve from happy, carefree children into perturbed, traumatized adults. The transformation occurs over the same three traditional stages of the rite of passage that are found in the magic tale: separation, liminality, and incorporation (Turner). Each stage reveals the initiate's evolving psychological states. The pre-war (pre-separation) child-hero is a normal child: naïve, energetic, adventurous, sometimes vulnerable, perhaps fearful of thunder, darkness,

etc., according to age. At the same time, the child-hero approaching the separation stage is also a Soviet child, raised in a militarized Soviet culture and conditioned to look forward to an opportunity to prove loyalty to the Motherland and reveal heroism in war. Zina Shimanskaia recollects:

> The children all shouted: "Hurrah!" We were glad. We pictured war as people in *budenovki* on horseback. Now we'll show ourselves, we'll help our fighters. Become heroes. I loved war books most of all. About battles, about feats of courage. . . All sorts of dreams… Myself bending over a wounded soldier, carrying him out of the smoke. Out of the fire… At home the whole wall over my desk was covered with newspaper photographs of war scenes. Here was Voroshilov, there Budenny… (2019, 27).

In the 1985 edition of *Last Witnesses*, the image of the Soviet child-hero had served as an example of Soviet patriotism; by the 2016 edition, the Soviet child-hero has evolved into a personality shaped by the ideology of Soviet propaganda, and that had consequences.

The coming of war to the child-hero marks the first stage of the initiation process: separation. The war rudely severs the protagonist's connections to normal life, parents, relatives, friends, home. In the second stage, the child-hero finds himself in the non-normative, liminal space that is the war. The child-hero, separated from the world and people he knows, can no longer remain a child, but neither is he yet an adult. The war has deprived the child-hero of his age-appropriate physical, psychological, and cognitive abilities and forced him to develop an entirely different set of values and behaviors in a context that challenges even adults. The child-hero is neither what he was nor what he will yet become. Vasia Saul'chenko analyzes the contradictory nature of his fears in wartime:

> No, I wasn't a child. I don't remember myself as a child. Although… I wasn't afraid of the dead, but I was afraid of walking through a graveyard at night. The dead on the ground didn't frighten me, but those under the ground did. A child's fear… It stayed with me (2019, 279).

Andrei Tolstik reflects upon an internal struggle between his emerging adult responsibility and the remnants of childhood's simplistic belief system:

> With all sorts of thoughts in my head. What will I tell father? How am I to tell him that mama was killed? And also a child's thinking—if I see mama dead, she'll never be alive again. But if I don't see her dead, I'll come home and she'll be there (2019,184).

The final stage of initiation, incorporation, should occur naturally in the postwar period, when the emergent adult returns to the community and takes his place in it. In the case of the child-heroes of *Last Witnesses*, however, the newly emerged "adult" is mired in psychological trauma that impedes return. The interviewees are unable to move past their traumatic wartime childhood. The memories of childhood trauma can be activated every time the adult sees a certain color, hears a certain sound, smells a certain smell. The smell of freshly-cut wood immediately takes Yakov Kolodinskii back to age seven and causes a physical response to traumatic memories of seeing many people from his village shot, run down by motorcycles, and then buried in wooden coffins that the survivors of the slaughter were forced to build:

> The boards were trimmed, the smell of freshly planed wood was in every yard, because in almost every yard there was a coffin. Even now I get a lump in my throat from that smell. To this day… (2019, 235).

As the interviewees age, past events acquire new meanings and interpretations that overwhelm the child-hero's psyche even more. Recollecting her war experience as a fifteen-year-old girl, Faina Liutsko begins her narrative thus:

> Every day I remember, but I still live… How do I live? Explain to me…; [she finishes with] "I'm surprised that I can live after all that? I survived as a child. . . But how do I live as a grown-up? I've been a grown-up for a long time now…" (2019, 270-1).

Such opening and closing meta-comments demonstrate that the childhood experience of war is under constant conceptual re-evaluation, that every single day the adult speaker reexperiences both the traumatic event and its traumatic memory, but without resolution. Thus, the adult hero dwells in the liminal space of unresolved childhood trauma that not only lingers through the years but often penetrates even deeper into the psyche when the adult begins to interpret what it means.

The child-hero in *Last Witnesses* also differs from the hero in the magic tale in terms of physical transformation. The folklore hero may experience physical transformation in preparation for the rite of passage, such as gaining physical prowess, as in the tale "Alesha Popovich," where the child hero "was given meat and drink, and in one day grew as much as other babes in a week; in one week he was as others at the end of the year" (Afanas'ev, 67). In other instances, an unspecified transformation marks the successful end of the rite of passage, as in "The Golden-Bristled Pig, the Golden-Feathered Duck, and the Golden-Maned Mare," where Ivan the Simpleton becomes "such a hero as no mind can conceive and no pen can describe" and marries a princess (Afanas'ev, 541). The hero's emotional or cognitive growth is not a feature of the magic tale; in the magic tale, physical enhancement serves as a simple metaphor for all forms of growth.

The child-hero in *Last Witnesses* is never prepared for the onset of the rite of passage. The war inevitably catches him off guard—physically, emotionally, and cognitively. Neither does the child-hero emerge unscathed at the end, like the magic tale hero. Both the magic tale and the testimonies describe the hero's transformation at the end of the maturation rite; in the testimonies, however, this transformation is never positive. Taken together, the testimonies create a collective image of a child who is thrust unexpectedly into a catastrophic situation and is physically exhausted and emotionally devastated by the war experience. Severe stress, outbreaks of disease, and starvation, among other traumatic moments, turn the child's hair grey (1), make the child unable to walk (2), speak, or cry (3), render her emaciated (4), or result in serious physical wounds (5).

> (1) I saw my sister's hair turn white. She had very long black hair, and it turned white. In one night… (2019, 290)
>
> (2) After the typhus I couldn't walk for a long time. If the road is level, I could, but if it was slightly uphill my legs gave way (2019, 186).
>
> (3) Children obviously grew up quickly then, she was three years old, but I could see she understood everything, kept quiet and didn't cry (2019, 227).
>
> (4) Aunt Arina gasped when she saw us. We were skinny as sticks. It was the end of June, the most difficult time: the old harvest was eaten, and the new one wasn't ripe yet. We ate the still green ears: we'd rub a bit in our hands and swallow it, even without chewing, we were so hungry (2019, 78).
>
> (5) After I was treated, mama and I counted: I had nine bullet wounds. I learned to count: in one shoulder—two bullets and in the other—two bullets. That made four. In one leg—two bullets, and in the other—two bullets. That made eight. And on the neck—a wound.

That would made it nine. The war ended. . . My mother carried me to first grade in her arms (2019, 265).

The Villain:

The Nazis perform the function of the villain in *Last Witnesses*; they are the evil force that has disturbed the peace of the kingdom (that is, they invaded the Soviet Union). Evil villains in magic tales intend to harm the hero. The villain often possesses an otherworldly appearance: Kashchei the Deathless is old, emaciated, with a beard and fangs, dragons are endowed with multiple heads, and Baba Yaga looks like a corpse. No discrepancy exists between appearance and behavior. The image of the villain in *Last Witnesses* is also cliched, but he is not otherworldly, although propaganda posters depict him as a monster. In real life, however, the German soldier, the German doctor, or the representative of punitive forces appear human, but their inhumane acts of violence contradict their humanity. This causes a traumatizing dissonance in the mind of the child hero, whose perception of a villain's nature is highly influenced by magic tales heard in childhood:

(1) I wanted to see what kinds of heads they had. For some reason I had this idea that they had inhuman heads. Rumors were already going that they killed people. Burned them. But they rode about laughing. Pleased, suntanned (2019, 54).

(2) [The Germans] [l]aughed. Before the war we had a favorite game… We drew them with big teeth. Fangs. And now they are walking around… Young, handsome…With handsome grenades tucked into tops of their sturdy boots. Play harmonicas. Even joke with our pretty girls (2019, 7).

Other "villainous" features in *Last Witnesses* include metonymic transfer, in which a thing possessed or used stands for the person who possesses or uses it, such as German planes, tanks, bombs, machine guns, bullets:

> (1) Planes flew over the city… Dozens of unfamiliar planes. With crosses. They covered the sky, covered the sun. Terrible! Bombs rained down… There were sounds of ceaseless explosions. Rattling (2019, 6).
>
> (2) When the machine guns rattle away from an airplane, it feels as if all the bullets are aimed at you. In your direction (2019, 100).

The villain in *Last Witnesses* does not assume the role he is meant to play in magic tales —the role of a tester. Nazis do not oversee the process of the Soviet child's maturation and it is not their mission to test him. In the reality of war, the Nazis are there to control, exploit, and exterminate the local population, including children. Leonida Belaia (three years old at the beginning of war) recollects how German soldiers treated children from her village to long, pencil-like candies but then burned the village to the ground together with its inhabitants, including those same children (2019, 219, 220). Thus, kindly acts on the part of the Nazis are random and last only until the order came to destroy the village.

Donor, Magic Agent, Talisman:

As he begins his quest in the magic tale, the hero meets by chance a mysterious old man, old woman (Baba Yaga, the devil's grandmother), or some other persona who tests his values and finds him worthy of assistance. This donor may lead the hero to a magic agent (person or animal), who accompanies him, helps him, and often provides him with a talisman (an inanimate magic object). Thus magic tale heroes depend on mysterious old men, Baba Yagas, gray wolves, grateful ravens, golden fishes, talking trees, helpful dolls (gifts from a dead mother), or self-

propelling cudgels to guide them through their trials. This sequence is key to the hero's successful maturation in the magic tale (Propp).

The functions of donor, magic agent, and talisman, present in most magic tales, play an essential role in *Last Witnesses*, since the child hero does not possess enough agency to navigate the space of war sufficiently to ensure his survival. Magic helpers manifest in *Last Witnesses* as parents (most often mothers), relatives (usually aunts, grandmothers, grandfathers), older adults (fellow villagers, doctors, nurses, teachers), Red Army soldiers, complete strangers (partisans, adult refugees), or animals. A stray dog becomes a magic agent of sorts for ten-year-old Galina Firsova during the famine in besieged Leningrad. Despite her tears of pity, she decoys it to her home with small pieces of bread and thereby saves herself and her family from a hungry death (2019, 269).

Many testimonies mention a talisman, an inanimate object the possession of which either saved the child's life or helped it carry on through the brutality of the war. Two testimonies mention dolls: in the first instance a girl shields herself with the doll from a bullet (1), while in the second, the doll is an object of care, a coping strategy against fear and uncertainty (2):

> (1) It was a big doll… My sister cried, "I won't leave her!"… the planes came flying and began to bomb us with machine guns. Our doll was all bullet-riddled, but my sister was perfectly unharmed, without a scratch. She wept: "I still won't leave her" (2019, 73,74).
>
> (2) I hide my head and my doll from the bombs. My doll already has no arms or legs. I weep and ask mama to bandage her… (2019, 127).

The presence of magic helpers and talismans emphasize the chaotic, spontaneous, and merciless character of war, presenting the child's survival as a matter of pure luck akin to magic.

Plot Functions of the Magic Tale in *Last Witnesses*

The interactions among hero, villain, magic agent, and talisman in *Last Witnesses* follow the magic tale's functions—a limited set of plot elements that manifest in different combinations to generate actions and motivations (Propp 21, 22). The most common Proppian morphological functions featured in *Last Witnesses* include **absentation, flight, pursuit, rescue, task, struggle, victory, punishment,** and **transfiguration.** However, these elements do not function in *Last Witnesses* quite in the same way as they do in the magic tale, which has a linear narrative structure. Instead, they are interwoven into the narrator's memory, which is influenced not only by the peculiarities characteristic of human perception at different ages but additionally burdened by the traumatic character of the events. Thus these functions appear in a sequence guided by their importance or vividness of memory. Moreover, the functions in *Last Witnesses* are often filled with actions that do not necessarily correspond to actions that are traditionally associated with these elements in magic tales.

The function of **absentation** separates the hero from his family. In the magic tale the hero might be abducted by the villain, sent to look for missing siblings, or forced by an evil stepmother to seek out Baba Yaga on an impossible quest that would ordinarily result in death; in some tales, the hero leaves voluntarily to seek his fortune. The absentation function appears in *Last Witnesses* in its description of the child-hero's memories of separation from the family. In the context of war, such separation is always unexpected, brutal, and irreversible: the father leaves for the front, never to return; one or both parents die or are killed; other caregivers perish. Six-year-old Nina Shunto and her younger brother lose their mother to disease before the war. Their father leaves for the front and entrusts them to his sister, their aunt, who dies in an accident, leaving the girl and her little brother alone and responsible for their own survival

(2019, 92). In another testimony, seven-year-old Lena Kravchenko is separated from her mother when the Nazis select people for labor in Germany. She recollects a brutal scene in which a German soldier tried to loosen her grasp on her mother's skirt, first pushing her off with his machine-gun and then kicking her off with his boot. This was the last time she ever saw her mother (2019, 100). Such extreme separations mark the child-hero's inability to stay in the role of a child any further and thus become the turning point that begins the maturation rite, often prematurely.

The functions of **flight, pursuit,** and **rescue** are often connected with memories of how children had to flee their homes to escape German occupation or German persecution. Those memories include retreating eastward by foot, cart, or train, pursued by advancing Germans. The villain aggressively shoots machine guns, bombards planes, or breaks into houses in order to kill. Like magic tales, many testimonies feature flights and pursuits that result in the hero's rescue; however, the rescue in *Last Witnesses* consists only the hero's physical survival and not his physical and psychological safety. The experience of flight, pursuit, and rescue traumatizes the hero, causing profound psychological and physical wounds. In this he may resemble the magic tale hero who is killed and dismembered, but no water of life and death magically appears to bring the child of war back to wholeness. Ten-year-old Volodia Ampilogov barely survives his pursuit and rescue. Serving as a partisan, the Nazis capture Volodia when he is sent on a mission (the task). During interrogation, SS officers beat him with "ramrods," "iron-shod boots…hard as stone." After torturing him, they drag him outside into the cold and pour water on him, covering him in a "bloody crust of ice" before hanging him on the gallows. By sheer luck, partisans who had planned a raid in the area save him (2019, 110).

Some testimonies tragically do not provide a rescue after flight and pursuit. The child hero might be left alone without a magic agent or talisman for assistance. For example, ten-year-old Valia Kozhanovskaia escaped with another girl and two boys from an estate where Nazis had forced them into slave labor. However, their escape was not successful; they were only children and did not know in which direction to run. When they saw a forest, they thought it was their "salvation." But then a German truck drove out of the forest and their "flight" ended with no rescue. The Germans killed the boys and sent Valia and her girlfriend to a concentration camp, where they endured even more suffering (2019, 204).

A number of testimonies violate the genre expectations of the magic tale when the magic agent does not bring about the anticipated result. The mother of two-year-old Ania Gurevich left her two-year-old daughter in an orphanage in the hope that the orphanage would be evacuated and her daughter would escape the hardships of war. But the orphanage was not evacuated in time and remained in Nazi-occupied territory. Ania experienced starvation, forced child labor, and strict discipline; she was deprived of love and empathy. Not until 1946 was she reunited with her family (2019, 158-160).

Like the magic-tale hero, the child-hero in *Last Witnesses* also has to fulfill **a task;** however, unlike the hero of the magic tale, he or she often fails to complete it. The task is given to the hero by an authority figure, often a parent. Ten-year-old Inna Levkevich's mother sent her to buy bread at the market. Lacking an adult's understanding of the dire wartime situation, Nina buys a goat kid instead of bread. She walks home proudly, thinking about how the goat would grow up eventually and supply them with milk. The entire family went hungry for days. Just as there was no food for people, there was no food for the kid, and it died. Inna was left with a tremendous sense of guilt and failure (2019, 35).

Tasks may also arise from unexpected circumstances. Eleven-year-old Eduard Voroshilov failed to help a girl when the need arose. He had gotten lost and was trying to find his parents. So as not to wander alone, he followed a woman and her little daughter. One day, they were shelled and the woman was killed. Overcome by fear, Eduard ran away, leaving the little girl behind (2019, 146). In cases of failed tasks, child heroes often inflict more sufferings on those whom they failed to help, and in Volodia's case, his childish cowardice, most likely, cost the girl her life and left him with an overwhelming sense of guilt for the rest of his life.

The function of **struggle** appears in only one testimony by eight-year-old Vasia Saul'chenko. Vasia performed the most heroic deed a Soviet child could perform—he killed a German soldier. Remembering the situation, the interviewer recollects having no feelings of vengeance, hatred, or patriotism that he might be expected to feel after seeing his grandfather, grandmother, and mother brutally killed by the Nazis. Instead he recalls acting on instinct and impulse:

> I had no time to think of it…I ran up to the German and saw a gun dancing before my eyes. The German seized it with both hands and was aiming at my face. But he didn't manage to shoot first. I did… I wasn't frightened that I killed him…And I didn't think about him during the war…I was surprised when, many years later, that dream about the dead German appeared…(2019, 278, 279).

The heroism that the child hero manifests in the time of trial is more reflexive than conscious. Moreover, neither the struggle nor its seemingly successful outcome (when it is successful) build the child hero's confidence; instead, this incident sinks into the interviewee's psyche and haunts him long after the war is over.

In the magic tale, the function of **punishment** of the villain occurs at the end, when the evil stepmother is sent to sea in a barrel, the false bride is banished from the kingdom, or the slanderous servants are imprisoned. In *Last Witnesses* punishment occurs when the villain—the German soldier—is defeated and killed or captured. Unlike the magic-tale hero, however, the child hero in *Last Witnesses* has nothing to do with this defeat; he is mainly an observer:

> Belarus was liberated… Dead Germans lay everywhere. We picked up our own people and buried them in mass graves, but those lay there for a long time, especially in winter. Children ran to the field to look at the dead…(2019, 279).

Magic tales do not document any moral transformation in the villain figure, for there is none. In *Last Witnesses*, however, the child hero's attitude begins to shift toward a more humane approach to the defeated enemy. Seven-year-old Taisa Nasvetnikova began to reconsider the notion of "enemy" when she watched people from her village feed German prisoners with bread or when she saw a captured German soldier drop dead. She was unsure how to react; more importantly, she did not remember feeling animosity toward German prisoners: "He was very tired. Because of that it was very hard to hate him" (2019, 21). Volodia Barsuk recollects his mother's kindness to a German prisoner when he asked her for a potato. Although the Nazis had killed her older son, she nevertheless gave the prisoner a potato. Her charitable act made seven-year-old Volodia rethink his attitude to the enemy and even to feel uncomfortable about his postwar pastimes of kicking German corpses or using them as sleds in winter (2019, 21).

The magic tale function of **victory** is represented in *Last Witnesses* by the interviewees' memories of the victory in World War II. Those who were younger or who did not witness excessive war atrocities, perceive the victory as a holiday, a magical event. Ania Korzun, aged two when victory was announced, remembers that the children could not understand the words

that were coming from the loudspeaker, but they could tell that they were joyful. Children took turns lifting each other up to reach and kiss the speaker cone (2019, 280). Interviewees who had been older during the war and had experienced its brutality, had difficulties accepting and adjusting to peaceful life. When victory fireworks went off for the first time, Liuda Andreeva recollects how she and her mother hid in a pit, afraid that it was another shelling (2019, 184).

In the magic tale, the hero's victory over the villain usually marks his transfiguration and the change of his status in the community. After his victory, the hero can marry the princess, be awarded half the kingdom, or receive enormous rewards. In *Last Witnesses*, the child hero, depending on age, has only two choices: either to return to childhood or finish becoming an adult—but neither process is natural. Six-year-old Vasia Sigalev-Kniazev recalls how he had to readjust to living the life of a child and not a soldier after the victory. After the war, Vasia received three medals and stayed with his regiment to de-mine farm fields. After five years of frontline scarcity and discipline, he could not accept the maternal care of his adoptive mother. When he went to school, he carried a weapon; he could not respect teachers who had not fought. During breaks he "taught [the other] students to march and sing soldiers' songs" (2019, 157). The child hero who had learned to survive as an adult soldier during wartime experienced the same issues readjusting to peaceful life that adult soldiers experienced.

Twelve-year-old Zoia Vasil'eva, on the contrary, longed to return to her childhood pastimes, school, and dreams, but her postwar reality demanded more sacrifices from her. Her mother could not provide for the two of them, so Zoia was forced to grow up early. She gave up school, her French lessons, and ballet classes to work in a factory. She did not finish high school until her own daughter was in the seventh grade (2019, 260, 261). Unlike the magic tale hero,

who after victory lives an adult's happily-ever-after, the child hero matures into a psychologically traumatized adult, who can never be fully happy. Zoia admits:

> But I can never be completely happy. Totally happy. It somehow doesn't come out. I'm afraid of happiness. It always seems that it's just about to end. This "just about" always lives in me. That childhood fear (2019, 57).

Reshaping the familiar functions of the genre of the magic tale with the purpose of describing actual reality rather than propagandistic fantasy, Alexievich depicts the real-life tragedy that results when childhood and war collide. In doing so, she debunks the romanticized Soviet myth of World War II, which was structured around the same paradigms, in which not only the Soviet Soldier but also the Soviet child overcomes adversity and achieves heroic deeds worthy of adulation. Last, but by no means least, Alexievich forces the reader to witness the reality of the war and to assess its psychological cost to its youngest participants—the generation of Soviet children who cannot live life without being haunted by the war, for it was embedded into their psyche at an early age and has remained there, clouding their adult lives—an entire generation living in the grip of deep psychological trauma.

The World of the Magic Tale in *Last Witnesses*

The world of the magic tale is divided into "this" world—the world of the humans—and the "other" world—a liminal space occupied by the dead and by supernatural forces. The magic tale does not explicitly state that its liminal world is the kingdom of the dead, although the regular inhabitants of the world of the magic tale neither age nor grow nor experience emotion. Time and space are generic. Distances are unspecific. Subterranean elements (metals, minerals, rocks, gems) abound. Supernatural forces are the norm and not an aberration. In this liminal world of the magic tale the transformation of the child into an adult takes place. The means of

this transformation is an ultimate test of worthiness, one which results in the hero's death if he fails, but which rewards him mightily if he succeeds.

The world of war in *Last Witnesses* corresponds to the liminal world of the magic tale in several ways. The world of war is, in a sense, the world of the dead, as scenes of death and killing occur on a regular basis. Taisa Nasvetnikova, seven years old when the war came to her, recollects seeing hundreds of dead Soviet soldiers, dead German soldiers, dead horses, sheep, cows, with swarms of flies buzzing over all of them (2019, 22). Tonia Rudakova, five years old at the beginning of war, matter-of-factly relates how German soldiers shot people in all of their village households:

> They didn't shoot people outside, but came into the cottages. We all stood by the window. "Now they're going to shoot Aniska…" "They've finished at Aniska's. They are going to Aunt Anfisa's…" We stood there, we waited. They were coming to shoot us (2019, 193).

The world of war in *Last Witnesses* turns into an alternative reality, one which is ultimately hostile to the child hero. The borders of this alternative reality changed between the 1985 and the 2016 editions. They stretch between the war's beginning and its end in the 1985 edition, in which the narrative centered around the childhood identity of the speaker. By introducing reflections by the adulthood identity of the speaker into the 2016 edition, Alexievich demonstrates how the psychological trauma experienced during the war spills into everyday life of her interviewees long after the war has ended. The adult Sasha Sivakov considers how to this day he is unable to convey verbally his entire traumatic experience, even after recounting all the tragic events that happened to him. But the experience stays with him, unexpressed, haunting

him throughout his life: “So I’ve told you…Is that all? All that’s left of such horror? A few dozen words…” (2019, 191).

In the world of war, as in the magic tale, anything is possible: sudden loss of home, sudden loss of parents, sudden persecution, or sudden death. However, unlike the magic tale, which is a work of fantasy, the testimonies of *Last* Witnesses feature interviewees’ memories of real-life events and occur in the child’s immediate environment. As war explodes their childhood, the children continue eating, sleeping, playing, helping adults, learning, and exploring the world through their senses. As much as these activities affect the traditional image of war, the war affects, or rather distorts, the traditional course of childhood’s activities. The war caused food shortages, so ten-year-old Galina Firsova shares a memory that bizarrely echoes “Hansel and Gretel,” in which children eat the witch’s house to survive: “Our breakfast … was a piece of wallpaper, old wallpaper, but it still had thick paste on it. Flour paste. So there was this wallpaper…and boiled water… Nine hundred days…” (2019, 269)

In wartime, sleeping itself becomes a nightmare. Sleeping on the ground on straw or pine branches in a dugout turns into a privilege compared to sleeping in the labor camp barracks. Seven-year-old Lilia Mel'nikova slept on a floor overlaid with wooden planks covered with straw. Strangers slept next to her; she did not even attempt to remember their names. Too often they died and rats ate their eyes and cheeks as Lilia lay next to them (2019, 77). Children’s play is either distorted or interrupted by the war. Twelve-year-old Volodia Barsuk remembered using German soldiers’ corpses as sleds in winter, while five-year-old Vania Titov recalled how playing “war” took place in an authentic setting: “We played in real dugouts and trenches” (2019, 44).

Children helping adults occurs in extreme situations and turns into a desperate assumption of adult social roles by children unready to assume them. Dunia Golubeva, 11 years old, recalls how she failed to become a mother to her new-born nephew after Germans killed the mother and older sister. The baby starved to death because Dunia was unable to lactate. The only role that she could successfully fulfill was that of undertaker. She found an old chest and used it as a coffin for the baby (2019, 221, 222). Less extreme cases of helping adults include working as nurses, factory hands, and farm laborers.

The world of war offers children horrifying objects for sensory exploration and learning. Four-year-old Volodia Krivoshei recalls learning how to count by counting bombs: "I counted the bombs. One fell, two… seven… That's how I learned to count…" (2019, 247). Returning to her village after the Germans had burned it down, thirteen-year-old Katia Korotaeva learned to differentiate corpses of adults from those of children by color: children's corpses were pink (2016, 12). The war gives nine-year-old Nina Iaroshevich a brutal lesson of objects' behavior in cold temperatures:

> In the park in Slutsk two partisan families were hanged. It was freezing cold, and the hanged people were so frozen that, when wind swung them, they tinkled. Tinkled like frozen trees in the forest… That tinkling…(2019, 55).

As in magic tales, temporal characteristics of events are vague in *Last Witnesses;* however, unlike magic tales, the testimonies reflect the work of hazy memories about the most traumatic events, such as loss of or separation from parents, relatives, friends, or siblings, departure to a labor or concentration camp, tortures, shelling, hunger, evacuation, the first encounter with the Nazis, etc: "A year later… I think it was a year later… They began selecting

children to be taken to Germany" (2019, 202), or "…we were going to the rear. Where there was no war" (2019, 14).

Narrative space is distinct before the beginning of war: "We lived in Minsk, I was born in Minsk" (2019, 10), or "The war found my sister, my father, and me at home in Bereza (2019, 257)." After the outbreak of war, narrative space becomes chaotic and vague. The child's mind identifies space by geographical markers ("grandpa's house") rather than by specific location: "We arrived at grandpa's farm in the morning" (2019, 256) or "… how they brought me to the orphanage I don't remember. Blank pages in my memory… All I remember is that there were many of us, and we slept two to a bed" (2019, 56).

The unspecificity of time and space, characteristic of the magic tale, is also determined by the interviewees' ages at the time, which they remember. The younger the speaker is at the recollected moment, the less specific the time and space become. Four-year-old Polia Pashkevich recollects: "Later we went somewhere on a sledge, all three of us, and in a village women took us to their cottages one by one" (2019, 142). Narrative time and space in *Last Witnesses* shrink and stretch at the same time. Five-year-old Lenia Khosenevich relates how he lost his grandparents:

> In the afternoon, I go to play with the boys. I come back in the evening and don't find either grandpa or grandma at home…It is frightening to live alone in the house. At night the house is unfamiliar. Even at the day time it is frightening. Grandpa's brother takes me to live with him. I have a new grandpa (2019, 46, 47).

The chain of imperfective verbs in sentences (simple present tense in English) create an effect of immediacy and of a lengthy, heavy process at the same time. The immediacy comes from the fact that the child is passively trapped in the situation of war, unlike the women fighters in

Unwomanly Face who are able to act in an unfamiliar military context and to a degree influence it, thus having some degree of agency in the war. The child, however, does not engage the war; the war engages her. The child's only function is that of *witness*: the child is present and observes. However, a child's perception is limited; it does not possess the tools necessary to process and comprehend everything that happens to her. Thus, she is unwillingly placed in a position similar to that of the teller of magic tales: the child registers all important events, does not participate in them actively, and can provide only a basic—bad vs. good—interpretation of these events.

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Exposed to such magic-tale-like narratives, the readers of *Last Witnesses* cannot but see the war through the child's perceptive lens, although they come into the narrative with the interpretative base of an adult. The sequence of "scary" misfortunes experienced by the child heroes evokes in the readers a profound psychological response and forces them to bear witness to the childhood trauma of interviewees and its consequences for the adults they have become. Such witnessing urges readers to connect the world of war with the reality of a traumatized Soviet generation rather than with the glorified myth of Soviet victory.

Structuring the testimonies of the 2016 *Last Witnesses* around the archetypal and compositional elements of the magic tale (characters and functions, simple-sentence narrative, triplicity, and other features), Alexievich successfully creates a collection of alternative "magic tales" about World War II. In folklore, each magic tale exists as a total sum of its oral performances, the comparison of which allows the folklorist to speculate about its original or prototype. Each of the tale-like testimonies in *Last Witnesses* turns into a recorded, personalized, oral performance by two tale-tellers who are one and the same person—the child who

experienced and adult who remembers. The two tale-tellers tell the same tale of World War II. Their "performances" engage the reader in actively processing and witnessing their first-hand experiences of war; at the same time, they force the reader to confront the reality, not the myth, of war. On the level of the entire collection, the reader is able to derive a new understanding of what World War II was and to participate in what Attridge calls "the event of referring"—acquiring a new vision of a familiar object (97). This process triggers the comparison of old cognitive frames of reference—the Soviet mainstream myth of victory in war—to a newly acquired vision of war that is far less mythical or magical.

The 2016 edition of *Last Witnesses* compels Russian-speaking readers who were born and raised in the Soviet Union or even in post-Soviet Russia to question the validity of the heroic Soviet myth of World War II deeply embedded in the collective psyche over decades and to realize that facts and experiences tell a very different story from official mythology. Ironically, the 2016 version of *Last Witnesses* fulfills the promise made at the famous Soviet March of Aviators in 1923, at the dawn of the Soviet era: "My rozhdeny, chtob skazku sdelat' byl'iu" (we are born to make the magic tale reality). The aviators, of course, meant this transformation to be an entirely positive one, to fulfill the utopian promise of the Soviet project. Alexievich, however, reveals the most frightening, real consequences of this project for the most innocent of its participants—children.

Last Witnesses sheds light on more than the child's experience of World War II. It also illuminates the destiny of an entire Soviet generation who lived their entire lives haunted by war trauma. Their real-life experiences and perspectives, like the perspective of World War II women fighters, was silenced, "buried" under the heavy myths of Soviet discourse, which insistently

promoted the idea of "a heroic past, a happy present, and a radiant future."[30] Just as *Unwomanly Face* questions the victorious war discourse by exploring the psychological trauma of women fighters through the genre of requiem, *Last Witnesses* questions the victorious war discourse by exploring the psychological trauma of the youngest wartime generation through the genre of the magic tale. Alexievich, using one mythologem to fight another, thereby exposes the cynical construction of the Soviet myth of the victorious war, explodes the optimistic myth of a happy Soviet childhood, and undermines the artificial ideological construct of the New Soviet Man. Perhaps she also offers the "last witnesses" an opportunity to reassess their experiences and find closure.

[30] Ironically, this was a toast given in a highly optimistic, futuristic fantasy piece, "Moskva 1945," written by P. I. Lopatin and I. S. Romanovskii and published in the journal *Smena* in March 1939—only months before the Nazis invaded Poland and World War II began. See: : http://smena-online.ru/node/37052/print/page/5 Accessed 5 February 2020.

CHAPTER III: *Boys in Zinc*: Confessions of the Unclean Dead

"The Afghan Ant" (~1983)
A Russian lad lies on Afghan soil.
A Muslim ant crawls over his cheekbone.
It's very hard to crawl… The lifeless body is quite unshaven,
and the ant quietly says to it:
"You don't know exactly where you died from your wounds.
You only know one thing: that Iran is somewhere nearby.
Why did you come to us with weapons?
having heard the word 'Islam' here for the first time?
What can you give our homeland – destitute and barefoot,
when in your own homeland people stand in line for sausages?
Were there not enough killed for you – must you
add still more to the twenty million dead?"[31]

Evgeny Evtushenko (1932-2017)

From: "A Response to Evgeny Evtushenko's poem 'The Afghan Ant'"
(January 1989)
<. . .>
Go ahead – torture the dead bodies
That have departed forever into death's embrace,
Write about the Afghan ants –
Everything is permitted now – and the paper can tolerate it…[32]

Leonid Molchanov (1962 – 2015)

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[31] Русский парень лежит на афганской земле.
Муравей-мусульманин ползёт по скуле.
Очень трудно ползти... Мёртвый слишком небрит,
и тихонько ему муравей говорит:
«Ты не знаешь, где точно скончался от ран.
Знаешь только одно — где-то рядом Иран.
Почему ты явился с оружием к нам,
здесь впервые услышавший слово «ислам»?
Что ты дашь нашей родине — нищей, босой,
если в собственной — очередь за колбасой?
Разве мало убитых вам, — чтобы опять
к двадцати миллионам ещё прибавлять?» (Евгений Евтушенко)

[32] Дерзайте же—пытайте мертвецов,
Ушедших навсегда в объятья смерти,
Пишите про афганских муравьев –
Теперь все можно, а бумага стерпит. (Леонид Молчанов)

Both translations are mine.

This poetic "duel" between famous Soviet poet Evtushenko and Soviet-Afghan veteran Molchanov reflects tensions between Soviet-Afghan veterans and Soviet citizens who never fought or even knew about the Soviet-Afghan War enough to be able to provide a value judgement.

The zinc coffin—a secure method of shipping the dead bodies of Soviet soldiers back to their homeland for last rites—became a symbol of the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989). This war, which could not be won, was the most contradictory and misrepresented military conflict in Soviet history. According to the Party's official version, Soviet troops were sent to Afghanistan to ensure the safety of its own southern borders and to support the new Afghan communist regime in its attempt to establish a USSR-friendly republic. The "friendly" mission was originally planned to last no more than six months but instead resulted in an unsuccessful offensive war that lasted for almost ten years. To maintain its image as a peacemaker, Soviet leadership controlled mass media coverage of events in Afghanistan, allowing only positive news of Soviet influence to be disseminated, such as Soviet assistance in the construction of bridges, schools, and hospitals. However, the outcomes of that "peaceful" presence were not that peaceful. Of the 700,000 or so Soviet men and women who served in "The Limited Contingent of Soviet Troops in Afghanistan" over the duration of the war, more than 15,000 were killed, more than 400 went missing, and more than 53,000 were wounded (Jukes 83, Kalinovsky 1). The "friendly" mission turned into a stream of zinc coffins being sent back to Soviet families in place of their victorious sons.

Rodric Braithwaite, British Ambassador to the Soviet Union (1988–1991) and to Russia (1991–1992), notes in his book *Afgantsy* (2011) that the zinc coffins were delivered to soldiers' families late at night to avoid immediate public attention and questions to the military personnel in charge of the delivery. The coffin lids were securely soldered down and marked "Not to Be Opened." This was done not only to protect the living relatives from diseases that decomposition could cause, but also to "censor" the circumstances of the soldiers' deaths that would be immediately evident from the condition of the soldiers' bodies—often torn into pieces as a result

of shelling, decapitated, or mutilated. Vaguely filled-in death certificates did not help families learn the truth, as they merely confirmed the soldier's identity and provided only formulaic statements regarding causes or circumstances of death (Braithwaite 254-256). Thus, the zinc coffin, as much as the Soviet mainstream discourse about the victorious Red Army of this period, concealed the reality of the Soviet soldier's mission and experience in Afghanistan.

The Soviet-Afghan War created rifts between the Soviet Union and other countries, between the Communist Party and the military establishment, between the Soviet government and Soviet citizens, and between those who had fought in Afghanistan and those who had not. It was a costly war at a time when scarce resources were needed at home. It raised doubts about the Red Army's victorious image at a time when its invincibility was key to maintaining the mainstream narrative about Soviet power (and the Soviet Union's posture abroad). These tensions were serious. Many have speculated that the Soviet-Afghan War was a principal factor in the collapse of the Soviet Union, which occurred within three years of the war's end (Reuveny and Prakash).

On the home front, the war tore apart the social fabric of the Soviet Union. There were public protests against the war, demonstrations by grieving mothers, tensions among pro- and anti-war veterans, and general resentment against the Party. The Soviet-Afghan War was not a popular war. Today, however, Putin's regime continues to justify and celebrate the Soviet-Afghan War, with the result that long-existing social wounds remain unhealed. Against this historical and social background, Alexievich wrote her first edition of *Boys in Zinc* in 1990 and then released heavily revised subsequent editions, each responding more insistently to the changing political environment in Russia than the previous one.

Boys in Zinc is the third book of *Voices of Utopia* to deal with war.[33] In it Alexievich brings together the testimonies of returned *afgantsy* (veterans of the war in Afghanistan) and of the mothers and wives of the Soviet soldiers who perished in the war. I argue that in *Boys in Zinc* Alexievich creates a performative text around stark symbolism of the zinc coffin on two levels: the level of individual testimonies and the level of the book's structure. I maintain that on the first level the author uses features and communicative dynamics of the genre of confession to "exhume" the real experience of Afghan veterans from the discursive isolation into which Soviet and post-Soviet official and public discourses pushed it. Drawing on reiterative imagery that appears in individual testimonies, Alexievich presents the psychological trauma and discursive drama of the *afganets* by echoing a dramatic motif from Slavic folk culture—the post-mortem "life" of those who have died an "unclean death." I further argue that on the level of the book's structure, Alexievich inserts individual confessional testimonies into a traditional sequence of Slavic funerary ritual to aesthetically augment the drama of Afghan veterans and engage readers in an unusual burial, in which the about-to-be-buried dead pours his trauma out. Participation in the narratively reenacted funeral encourages readers to see the reality of the Soviet-Afghan experience as a catalyst for resolving the social injustice perpetuated by tenacious Soviet mythology. It also inspires readers to evaluate and reconsider their own contribution to the persistence of this mythology. While *Boys in Zinc* reveals no significant changes between its first and last editions as far as the content of individual confessions is concerned, on the book's

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[33] In this work I analyze the first 1990 and the recent 2016 Russian editions of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki.* I refer to the book as *Boys in Zinc* (rather than as *Zinky Boys*) as it more accurately reflects the symbolism of the Russian title. I use Julia and Robin Whitby's 1992 translation, titled *Zinky Boys,* to cite textual examples from the first Russian edition in English and Andrew Bromfield's 2017 translation, titled *Boys in Zinc,* to cite textual examples from the most recent Russian edition (unless specified otherwise).

structural level—the level that enacts Alexievich's proposed funerary rites—the 2016 edition is significantly different.

After briefly contextualizing the writing of *Boys in Zinc*, I define the genre of the confession and discuss Alexievich's intended use of it as well as the consequences of her intent. I identify the role of the confessional genre in the Soviet people's, and especially the soldiers', experience of the Soviet-Afghan War. I analyze the structural changes Alexievich introduced between the first and the latest editions of *Boys in Zinc* and how they changed the tenor of the work. Further, I explore the term "unclean dead" in East Slavic folklore and indicate how Alexievich uses the concept in her work, to what purpose, and how her choices strengthen her message on an intuitive and emotional level. Then, on the basis of the 2016 edition, I explain how Alexievich's use of confession, in conjunction with the motif of the unclean dead and the structure of funerary ritual, results in a powerful narrative performance that engages readers in a process of recognition and reevaluation of the reality and complexity of the Soviet-Afghan experience. Finally, I describe how this narrative performance in *Boys in Zinc* consolidates the pacifist position Alexievich first took in *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses:* no war is heroic and the label of "hero" (as applied in the official discourse) does not heal but only disguises and represses the psychological trauma of war.

Boys in Zinc continues Alexievich's exploration of the collective war experience through individual testimonies, just as *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses* did. Alexievich began her work on *Boys in Zinc* in Belarus in the mid-1980s (the first entry from her notebooks is dated June 1986). In 1988 she traveled to Afghanistan to observe the on-going war. Once again, Alexievich chose to use individual experience to dissect the ideological constructs featured in *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*—those of the brave, self-sacrificing Soviet soldier, the

victorious war, and the caring Motherland—and their endorsements in post-Soviet societies, especially in Russia and Belarus. However, in the context of a different and more recent military conflict—the long offensive war in Afghanistan—the reality of these constructs and their implications for the national psyche is more immediate and poignant than the long backward look at World War II. As opposed to *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*, which dealt with decades-old memories of an aging generation, *Boys in Zinc* relies on the hands-on, raw experience of a younger generation, most of whom were born in the 1960s and too many of whom died in the 1980s. The psyches of her interviewees were still struggling to process their war trauma at the time of interviews. One of Alexievich's interlocutors warns her about the rawness of the topic that she studied in her project: "Right now it's an open wound. It's only just started healing over, growing a skin…" (2017, 227).

Working during *perestroika*, when the liberal wave of *glasnost'* was gaining momentum, Alexievich did not write *Boys in Zinc* with the demands of Soviet censorship in mind. As opposed to the more patriotic tone of the first editions of *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*, the first edition of *Boys in Zinc* was already unflattering to the Soviet regime and openly spoke of injustices perpetrated by the Soviet government in Afghanistan against both its own troops and the Afghan people. In his article, "Mothers, Prostitutes, and the Collapse of the USSR: The Representation of Women in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Zinky Boys*," historian Jeffrey W. Jones argues that from its first publication in 1990 the book was powerful enough to influence the changing discourse in Soviet society that led to the collapse of the Soviet Union (234). As already stated, the majority of testimonies in *Boys in Zinc* did not change in the book's subsequent editions, but in all cases they shed light on the Soviet-Afghan experience by

replacing rumor and anecdote with evidence based on the actual, lived experiences of Alexievich's interviewees.

Contemporary scholarship on Alexievich's *Boys in Zinc* remains rather scarce. The book inspired a few reviews, the most insightful of which was by the British ambassador of the period, Rodric Braithwaite (1992). Nicola Brooke, a specialist in English literature, contributed a philosophical essay (2016), and four additional academic articles were written by Jeffrey W. Jones, Holly Myers, N.A. Sivakova, and Johanna Lindbladh. Three of these are devoted solely to *Boys in Zinc* and one mentions it in passing but provides an insight about the role of the frequent ellipses in the narrative. In their attempt to characterize succinctly the testimonies in *Boys in Zinc,* scholars have called them "powerful sketches" (Braithwaite 231), "freestanding monologues" (Myers 346), "interior monologues" (Lindbladh 296), "stories," and even "tales" (Brooke 4, 6). These terms reveal some facets of the testimonies by identifying their impact on the reader, their narrative status, or their character. Meanwhile, unlike in any other book of *Voices of Utopia,* Alexievich is explicit about the genre she chose for *Boys in Zinc.* In the 1990 edition she wrote:

> Once again my path leads from person to person, from document to image. Every confession is like a painted portrait: if no one speaks of it, it remains a document; if they speak of it, it becomes an image. They speak of the fantastic nature of reality. The creation of a world not according to the laws of everyday verisimilitude, but "in one's own image and temperament" (translation mine, Russian ed. 1991, 263).[34]

Alexievich uses the genre of confession to present not the document but the image (and spirit) of her main participants, the *afgantsy*.

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[34] Translation by Julia and Robin Whitby does not fully correspond to the Russian original (1992, 8).

The Genre of Confession and *Boys in Zinc*

The genre of confession is central both to religious rites and to judicial procedures; both traditionally revolve around the concepts of conflict (whether sin or crime), redemption, penance, and atonement. Existing theories on confessional narratives maintain that this genre involves a communicative situation in which at least one confessant (or penitent) confesses to at least one confessor (or interlocutor) (Pace 11). The confessant's motivation for this interaction lies in a deep psychological crisis that usually manifests as a conflict between the confessant's inner world and the outside world represented by the confessor (Levin 244). When confession is used as a literary strategy, the role of the confessor can be performed either by another character in the work or by the audience of the work, be it readers, listeners, or viewers.

Confession is a performative genre, since it allows the confessant to construct his confessional self—that is, he can build his own interpretation of himself, his sin or crime, and his actions and motivations, which he then presents to the confessor. The actions and motivations may differ from actual biographic facts, since confession, while it may reflect external reality, is really about the confessant's inner journey (Pace 12). The interaction between the confessant and the confessor may take various forms of expression, which can range from true repentance, to humorous self-criticism, to an act of aggression against the confessor. The confessant's goal in confessing is not necessarily the confessor's approval, acceptance, or even forgiveness. It is the process of reintegrating the confessant's redefined self into the community from which the confessant has been separated by his sin, crime, or behavior, which the community (represented by the confessor) considers unacceptable. Thus, confession is transformative for both the confessant and confessor and can be regarded as an act of individual activism capable of bringing about social change (Grobe 11, 12). The change can be positive or negative.

While the confession as a genre could never become a standard feature of an official Soviet literature that celebrated the almost flawless "New Soviet Man" (who had no need to confess anything beyond his patriotism), it did appear in Russian literature of the 19th and early 20th centuries. In multiple interviews, Alexievich mentioned Ales' Adamovich and Fedor Dostoevsky as the two writers who influenced her oeuvre the most. From Adamovich she takes the basis for her genre—she makes the ordinary person the main character of her books; from Dostoevsky she borrows the psychological audacity that allows the main character to express and often confront his/her own self by "confessing" to others. In *Boys in Zinc,* Alexievich uses confession much in the same way as Dostoevsky does. Dostoevsky is a master at transforming confession from an act of humility into an act of aggression against the confessor or the community at large (*Crime and Punishment, Notes from the Underground, The Brothers Karamazov*). For Dostoevsky this mode of confession takes place between a fictional confessant and a fictional confessor, but for Alexievich and her *Boys in Zinc,* it plays out as part of an unfortunate Soviet reality.

For *Boys in Zinc,* Alexievich conducted 69 interviews, which qualitatively differ from her two previous works on war—*Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*. While one may argue that the genre of confession is also applicable to these two latter texts as they strive for a more truthful presentation of World War II, one should note that confession in *Boys in Zinc* is more than just a means of revealing what happened: here confession reflects various communicative dynamics and tensions at the moment of a serious sociopolitical crisis. Unlike in any other book from the *Voices of Utopia* cycle*,* in *Boys in Zinc* Alexievich does not need to (and indeed cannot, for various reasons) find common ground on which to hold intimate and confiding conversations with all of her interviewees. First, her interviewees are a remarkably diverse group. She talks not

only with participants of the Soviet-Afghan conflict but also with mothers and wives of those who perished there. Second, when dealing with the fundamental misunderstandings between those who fought the war and those who did not, Alexievich cannot connect with her interviewees as she by default belongs to those on whose life the war had relatively little impact. Her age and gender, as well as her trip to Afghanistan, might have given Alexievich more credibility when talking to mothers, widows, and women who served in Afghanistan as civilian or medical personnel, but it lost her credibility with male veterans. Her occupation as a journalist and writer endowed her with some status, but it did not help build friendly relationships with her interviewees. During the nine years of the war, Soviet journalists had maintained the Party line in reporting the Soviet Union's friendly mission in the fraternal country of Afghanistan; neither veterans nor relatives of those who died felt they could trust a journalist or writer. The communication between Alexievich and veterans happened not because she was able to forge a personal connection but because she was willing to allow the veterans to confront her aggressively as a representative of the society at large.

For the duration of the war, the Soviet government tried to control public discourse regarding the Soviet military presence in Afghanistan (Kalinovsky 45-51, Timofeev). Returning veterans were instructed not to share the circumstances and details of their war experience. Mothers and widows were not allowed to learn under what circumstances their loved ones died, or to conduct proper funerary rites, or to bury their children and spouses in special places in cemeteries that could be later used as memorials. Instead, the graves of those who were killed in Afghanistan were scattered among cemeteries to make the scale of Soviet losses less obvious. In the late 1980s, when Mikhail Gorbachev finally lifted reporting restrictions, prominent figures, including Andrei Sakharov, the Soviet scientist and civil rights activist, publicly condemned the

Soviet mission in Afghanistan. Afghan veterans became the target of public critique; they were now "scapegoats," as they were the ones who implemented the failed and now denounced Soviet policies in Afghanistan.

In this atmosphere, first of discursive isolation and then of discursive hostility, those who fought, served, or lost loved ones had no outlet for sharing and resolving their traumatic experience. They felt forgotten, betrayed, and infuriated: even with the change of discourse, they were not allowed to speak for themselves. Alexievich appeared to them as a representative of the world with which her interviewees were in conflict. But she was ready to listen and not argue, and they were ready to speak—not out of friendship, like the interviewees in *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *Last Witnesses,* but out of fury and despair.

Were Alexievich's interviewees fully aware of how she would present their testimonies at the time of their interviews? Did they care? It was unlikely. When in 1985-1986 Alexievich began the interviews for *Boys in Zinc,* her *Unwomanly Face of War* and *Last Witnesses* had just appeared. As the Soviet-Afghan conflict was still in progress, none of her interviewees could even think of reading a book about war, as they were either in the heat of battle, just getting over their role in the war, or grieving their losses brought on by the war. After the publication of *Boys in Zinc* in 1990, veterans and mothers of those who perished were not ready to engage in public outpourings of intimate traumatic experience. A storm of condemnations and threats rained down on Alexievich via mail and anonymous telephone calls.[35] In 1992, this wave of criticism took the shape of a formal lawsuit in which Alexievich's interviewees (veterans and the mothers of soldiers who perished), sued the author for slander, distortion and falsification of their

[35] From personal interview, 20 February 2020.

testimonies. Alexievich was able to defend herself and few of the litigants' charges were deemed valid. Independent literary experts found no instances of distortion of documentation in the literary arrangement of the text. In one of her recent interviews with the Russian independent online newspaper *Meduza* (Medusa), Alexievich shared details about reasons for the court trials:

> Veterans' boards began to work with the boys I interviewed, to convince them that that was not what they said. They issued threats, particularly against those who were still in the army. The mothers were also very much against it. There were very few brave people who were able to move beyond the limitations of the times.[36]

This court trial demonstrated another attempt by representatives of the official discourse to seal up the real experience of *afgantsy*, and sadly enough, again, the same was true of the former Soviet-Afghan soldiers themselves.

The Confessant

While *Boys in Zinc* features testimonies by veterans, mothers, and widows, its primary confessant is the Afghan veteran who returned home, regardless of whether he returned physically unharmed, wounded or maimed, or in a zinc coffin. Those who returned in coffins are represented by the testimonies of relatives, who talk about them through the trauma of their loss. As Jones's article, "Mothers, Prostitutes, and the Collapse of the USSR," shows, mothers' and widows' testimonies also contribute to the story of the confusion and disillusionment of the Soviet *afganets*.

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[36] «Нас учат только тому, как умереть за Родину» Большое интервью Светланы Алексиевич — о сложных отношениях с героями и культуре без любви https://meduza.io/feature/2020/02/18/ya-vsyu-zhizn-prozhila-v-strane-politsaev Accessed 19 May 2020.

As an interesting narrative strategy, Alexievich consciously introduces a special character, an anonymous *afganets* who randomly calls her three times and to whom she refers as "my main character" (2017, 167). His random telephone calls become symbolic openings for the three parts of the book that consist of individual testimonies. In her article "Svetlana Alexievich's Changing Narrative of the Soviet-Afghan War in *Zinky Boys,*" Holly Myers compared the stylization of these calls in the first and the most recent editions of *Boys in Zinc* and discovered that the image was emotionally intensified in the 2016 edition (331-354). This suggests that Alexievich either created this image herself or built it up out of numerous angry calls that she started receiving from Afghan veterans after *Boys in Zinc* first appeared as excerpts in the journal *Druzhba narodov* (Friendship of Peoples) and then as a book in 1990. These brief, random interactions between the "anonymous caller" and the author sketch an image of the main "confessant" and reflect the basic communicative dynamics between him and the "confessor" (Alexievich) that underlie the rest of the book.

Alexievich's confessants are trapped in what Dominick LaCapra, a well-known trauma theorist, calls "acting-out"—a mode of remembering and dealing with trauma (48). This mode of processing trauma is manifested in the following features: the traumatized individuals have no control over their past traumatic experience and relive it over and over again when they think about it. In the case of the Soviet-Afghan soldier, these memories are triggered not only internally, by the individual psyche, but also externally, by the on-going dissension in Soviet society about the war. Given that the interviewees see Alexievich as not "one of them" and as someone who is unable, in their opinion, to relate to their experience of the Afghan conflict, her interaction with them serves as an external trigger that immediately revives an entire array of traumatic, overwhelming memories and turns on their psychic defense mechanisms. These

confessants-*afgantsy* direct acts of acute anger, fury, aggression, frustration, and despair at the confessor-Alexievich and the world she represents, not unlike the confessants we find in Dostoevsky's prose. Not by accident Alexievich writes: "No need to invent anything. Fragments of great books exist everywhere. In everyone" (translation mine, Russian ed. 2016, 23).[37]

The excerpts from *Boys in Zinc* that were published in *Druzhba narodov* trigger the need of Alexievich's "main character" to defend himself and his past. In his first phone call to her, he threatens to make Alexievich stop writing what she, as a woman, could not possibly understand: "I read your grubby libel. If you print one more line…keep your hands off! What do you need this for? You're a woman: have children!" (2017, 23). When addressing her, he uses not the polite *Vy*-pronoun but the familiar *ty*-pronoun, which underscores his condescending manner as well as his intention to insult her. However, threats to Alexievich aside, the "main character's" story, his trauma, and his drama show through. Sharing the pain of his experience in a confrontational manner is an attempt not only to justify his actions and his very presence in Afghanistan but also to understand and defend his suffering self:

> (1) We were soldiers, we were sent there. We were following orders. I swore the oath of loyalty. I kissed the banner, down on my knees" (2017, 23)
>
> (2) Have you climbed a mountain in a full combat gear, ridden in an armored personnel carrier when it's fifty degrees Celsius? … My best friend, he was my brother, I brought him back from a raid in a plastic sack… The head separate, the arms and legs all separate…The skin ripped off… (2017, 23, 24).

[37] In his translation, the translator misinterprets Alexievich's reference. He translates the Russian original: "Ничего не надо придумывать. Отрывки великих книг всюду. В каждом" into English as: "No need to invent anything. There are passages everywhere in the great books. In every one" (2017, 17).

(3) I don't give a rotten damn for your New Testaments! I carried my own truth in a plastic sack. The head separate, the arms separate. There isn't any other truth…(2017, 24)

Alexievich does not step away from the confrontation but accepts the terms of communication between herself and the confessant which the latter implicitly demands. The confessant shares the feelings of anger, frustration, aggression, loneliness, and otherness, and the confessor accepts them for what they are. She does not censor out the pain, or the gore, or the raw emotionality. She preserves the traumatic character of the testimonies and even augments it in the 2016 edition.

Unlike *Unwomanly Face* or *Last Witnesses*, which were both transformed into trauma texts in their later revisions, the first edition of *Boys in Zinc* already displayed all the features of the trauma text: immediacy, surrealism, fragmentation, and repetitiveness (Vickroy xi). Immediacy appears in confessions naturally as confessants do not have to search their memory to reach their traumatic experience. Still fresh and overwhelming, it pours out of them. A visual comparison of the text of *Boys in Zinc* with that of *Unwomanly Face* or *Last Witnesses* reveals that the number of ellipses is significantly smaller. The soldier-confessants do not need time to recollect what came next or how to put it into words. Their narration consists of fragmented cascades of memories interspersed randomly with observations, realizations, and insights. All of these are readily available to the speaker and press on him:

So in nine years a regular army of a hundred thousand men can't defeat scattered little groups of bandits? An army with latest equipment... God help you if you get caught in one of our artillery bombardments when the Grad or Uragan rocket launchers are pounding a target. The telegraph poles are sent flying. You want to crawl into the ground, like an earthworm ... And the bandits had Maxim machine guns that we'd only seen in

> the movies. The Stinger missiles and Japanese recoilless shoulder-launched weapons—they got hold of those later… When prisoners were brought in they were thin, haggard men with work-worn peasants' hands. What sort of bandits were these? This was a people! (2017, 117).

The ellipses in the testimonies included in *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses* reveal the speaker thinking about or dwelling on a traumatic experience, pausing, perhaps, to activate a particular memory or find the right word. But in *Boys in Zinc*, the speaker is rushing, pouring out savage memories. The ellipses are there to show the speaker gasping for air as he attempts to cope with the traumatic memories that are convulsing his mind. The narration is fast-paced but the details of the memories are conveyed in slow-motion; the result is surreal. Remembering how their column was shelled, a veteran relives it in just this surreal way:

> I stood up and another man moved into the spot where I had been. A grenade hit him full on. I felt myself flying away from the vehicle, face down. I landed slowly, like in a cartoon film. But the pieces of another man's body fell faster than I did. For some reason I flew more slowly… (2017, 150).

Traumatic repetitions are also common in confessants' monologues and are connected with moments of epiphany. For example, a veteran recollects how he was trying to save a little girl whose arm was smashed as a result of shelling. He acted as a savior and a friend, but she acted as if he was a perpetrator, a beast. As the girl was struggling to get free of his grasp, he suddenly realized that he and the entire Soviet army were not saviors in the eyes of those people. This realization overlapped with his impression of the girl's eyes, "her black-olive eyes," and throughout his testimonies he keeps referring to "her black-olive eyes" (2017, 115-17).

When her "main character" calls Alexievich the second time, he gives as his reason for the call the conflict between the confessant and the world that the confessor represents. The emotional intensity in which the confessant delivers his perspective on this conflict begins to dissipate as he directs his aggression and hostility not at the confessor but at the confessor's world. In the mind of the confessant, this world consists of various groups: Soviet citizens who know nothing about the war in Afghanistan and do not care; Soviet citizens who know nothing about it but condemn it together with its participants and initiators; the Soviet government who deceitfully sends soldiers into a meatgrinder and abandons them there; and the Soviet government that calls the war a "mistake," thereby disparaging and stigmatizing the soldiers' experiences, sacrifices, and even patriotism. In this second call, the "main character" briefly retells a conversation he overheard, two women on a tram talking, that pushed all his buttons: "What kind of heroes are they?... Killed women and children… [sick] in the head… [visit and] talk to our children [in schools] … get social benefits" (2017, 95). Instead of responding to those women, he is drawn to talk to Alexievich, share his experience, and confess his "sins:"

> Yes, I killed. I'm soaked in blood. But he [his best friend] was lying there: he was my brother. His head over here, his arms over there…His skin…I asked to go on a raid immediately…I saw a funeral in kishlak [Afghan village]. There were a lot of people. They were carrying the body in something white…And I gave the order: 'Fire!'" (2017, 95)

Anonymity becomes another condition of the communication between the confessant and the confessor. While the "main character" is able to keep his identity secret because of the mode of their communication (telephone), other of Alexievich's confessants remind her: "Don't forget about the secrecy of confession," or they directly ask her not to mention their names. One of her

confessants compares his interaction with Alexievich to a talk among fellow-travelers on the train: “People who don’t know each other come together, talk for a while and get out at different stations. …If you write about it don’t mention my name” (2017, 98).

The “main character’s” third and final call represents the confessant’s need for others to recognize opposing interpretations of the war: “It was all stupid then? Right? Is that it? Do you understand what it meant for me? For us?” (2017, 167). He finally acknowledges rather than resists or denies the two antithetical ideological views of the Soviet-Afghan War dominant in Soviet society: one in which the Soviet soldier is a victorious hero and the other in which he is a murderous beast. He went off thinking to become a hero but tragically returned home a beast. This is his psychological quandary, since the two views cannot both be true at the same time. His acknowledgement, aggressively stated as it is, represents his desire to escape this irreconcilable dichotomy that potentially deprives him of his humanity. Alexievich’s “main character” declares to her:

> This story’s over for me. I’m getting out of it. I’m not going to shoot myself. I won’t fling myself headfirst off the balcony. I want to live! I’ve survived for a second time …
>
> The first time was out there, at the war, and the second time was here. (2017, 168).

Despite the challenge implicit in the soldier’s address to Alexievich, his acknowledgement becomes the conceptual basis on which the confessant and the confessor can bond. However, for this bond to manifest, it requires a change of roles between the confessant and the confessor. The confessant initiated interaction with the confessor three times. Now it should be the confessor’s turn to speak. But is it? Would Alexievich’s accepting and repenting voice be enough? Through her, the confessant spoke to the entire society: the government and people—those unreachable, abstract entities. The confessant understands the vanity of his confession, so he hangs up: “That’s

enough, no more. I won't call again… … That's all! Goodbye!" (2017, 168). However, Alexievich understands this too. She says: "He hung up. But I've carried on talking to him for a long time… Listening to him…" (2017, 168). In her own willingness to speak with her "main character," Alexievich sees the necessity of continuing communication not only between her confessant and herself, but between him and society at large. By presenting confessions in the three parts of her book, Alexievich sets a vector of psychological movement for her interviewees and her reader. This vector aims to bring these two parties together through mutual recognition and acceptance of mistakes rather than through a collision of prides.

The "main character" still remains too vulnerable to introduce himself. For him, this confession remains on the level of a secret confession shared with the confessor and does not amount to an act of individual activism. He is not yet capable of influencing the society by sharing his experience openly, but Alexievich is. In this, she becomes an "unreliable" confessor who brings the rest of the community into the confession through the text of her book.

The Confessor

Having completed two books on World War II in 1985, Alexievich as a writer had come to understand many things by the time she decided to write a book on the Soviet-Afghan War. First, everything morally or ethically impossible in peacetime becomes possible in wartime. Second, war haunts the lives of its participants in the form of traumatic memories long after it is over. Third, the individual experience of war differs significantly both from the official version of what happened and from its subsequent historical presentation. Born not long after World War II, Alexievich was 31 when the Soviet-Afghan war began. Her personal experience provided an opportunity to deepen her understanding of these realities significantly.

Alexievich traveled to Afghanistan as part of a journalists' group in 1988, while the war was still going on. One of the entries from her travel journal, included in *Boys in Zinc,* says: "I shall return from here a free human being. I wasn't one until I saw what we are doing here. It was terrifying and lonely. I shall return and never go into a single war museum again" (2017, 20). And she never did. In one of our casual conversations in between interview sessions, Alexievich asked me whether I had already visited the Belarus State Museum of World War II—one of the main tourist attractions in Minsk. Having heard that I had, she added that she had never been able to compose herself enough to go there and asked me to share my impressions. After hearing a few observations about my visit, she interrupted me to say: "No, I won't go." Alexievich's experience of witnessing the Afghan war directly became pivotal for her vision as a writer. One could speculate that it influenced her decision to revise *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses* and determined her narrative approach in *Boys in Zinc.*

In *Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich's narrative evolved and changed with every new revision of the text as she reshaped it to reveal her own evolving understanding; in *Boys in Zinc*, the truth about the Soviet-Afghan War shared by Alexievich's interviewees does not change. In the 1990 edition, Alexievich had already defined what kind of truth she was going to convey: "My aim is simply to reflect the world of the human being as it is" (translation mine, Russian ed. 1991, 264). [38] This goal remained unchanged in the 2016 edition and the confession-like format of testimonies remained almost identical. Because individual testimonies between editions do not differ significantly, the following analysis will be based on the text of the 2016 edition.

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[38] For my analysis, I used a 1991 reprint of the first edition of *Boys in Zinc,* the only version available to me during the coronavirus pandemic. This 1991 reprint of *Boys in Zinc* appeared as a joint publication with *Unwomanly Face.* It does not deviate from the first edition.

The main body of *Boys in Zinc* consists of three parts, each of which contains 17 testimonies. To emphasize their confessional nature, Alexievich changes her usual strategies of narrative presentation of testimonies. For example, she avoids her common naming strategy—titling testimonies with what, in her opinion, was the most excruciating memory or the most revealing quote. In *Boys in Zinc* such strategy could add semantic or conceptual suggestions that her confessants did not mean or make; therefore, Alexievich leaves testimonies untitled.

As opposed to her other books, *Boys in Zinc* does not mix testimonies together or unite them in clusters that illuminate certain topics. This allows Alexievich to present the testimonies as undistorted, independent narratives that convey the experience of her confessants in the most holistic way. For the same reason, she removes the question-answer format of the interview and seamlessly aggregates the most revealing parts of conversations with her interviewees into uninterrupted monologues. In so doing, Alexievich herself withdraws into the narrative background and appears only when the confessant admits her presence via rhetorical questions or direct addressing:

> (1) Pardon me, madam writer. … Write, madam. Write…But why are you broads writing about the war? (translation mine, Russian ed. 170).[39]
>
> (2) What about you, the famous writer? What were you doing when we were out there? (2017, 163).

Alexievich imitates the secrecy of confession by leaving testimonies in the main body of the book anonymous. She specifies only the military rank and assignment of veterans or the relevant kinship: “A senior lieutenant, sapper” (2017, 129), “A wife” (2017, 136), or “A mother”

[39] Translator translated “бабы” as “women” without conveying the derogatory attitude that the Russian original emphasized (2017).

(2017, 140). To provide sufficient proof for her reader that these anonymous testimonies are not fictional and that confessions in them did take place and came from real people, she lists the names of her interviewees in alphabetical order in the diaries to the book that precede the main body of the testimonies, but she does not connect those names to specific testimonies. This strategic move maintains the right of her interviewees to own and claim their confessions, should they wish to: "Perhaps someday my characters will want to be known" (2017, 21).

To help the reader understand the flow of the conversation and imagine the emotional state and motivation of the confessant, Alexievich occasionally inserts a rare observation. For example, her interview with a private, a member of a tank crew, starts off well: he is one of those confessants who seems to have acquired some psychological distance from his traumatic war experience and is able to talk about it calmly. Suddenly the flow of the conversation changes. Alexievich notes: "(I was already getting ready to leave. Suddenly he opens the fridge, takes out a bottle of vodka, pours half a glass and gulps it down)." Likely struck by the parallel between the flood of traumatic memories and the confessant's physical reenactment of it, when he pours himself more alcohol, she remarks: "(He pours himself more vodka) … (He pours more vodka) … (He tries to put the glass down on the table and it falls over)" (2017, 159, 160). Alexievich's unintrusive presence as a confessor allows readers to step into her "shoes" and try on the role of confessor for themselves. In so doing, she engages her readers in second-level trauma witnessing and allows them an insight into the acuteness of the confessant's trauma by experiencing the confessant's hostility and defiance (Laub 62).

While the testimonies and their confessional format remain (more or less) the same throughout the revisions, Alexievich modifies the work's introductory and concluding parts significantly. Analyzing changes between the first 1990 and the most recent 2016 editions of

Boys in Zinc, Myers confirms that the introductory and concluding parts, in which Alexievich is explicitly present, undergo a noticeable transformation. The scholar argues that Alexievich's quest for *the* truth had focused more on features of overt textual literariness in the first edition, but in the most recent one she "elevates the sense of documentariness" (346). She explains that with the passing of time and the experience of facing legal charges, Alexievich changes the tone of her argument for the truth from ardent and emotional to more nuanced and fact-based (347). While I agree with this argument, I do not connect emotionality or lack of thereof with Alexievich's movement from literary to documentary prose. I see this change as a result of Alexievich's "coming of age" as a writer in her own right. It may appear that Alexievich has written only five books in her literary career, but the reality is that she has written dozens, as the revision of every subsequent edition of each title reflects the evolution of her own, signature writing style. Each subsequent edition reflects new things she has learned and new and more sophisticated understanding and conclusions she has come to.

In her introduction to *Boys in Zinc,* which appears under the title "Notes from my Diary" in the 1990 edition and "From the Notebooks" in the 2016 edition and consists of her diary entries from the Afghanistan trip, Alexievich assumes her narrative role of confessor. The manner in which she does this generates significant narrative transformations, which move less from literary to documentary and more from openly emotional to performative. In the first edition, her voice was still influenced by her Soviet journalistic training and experience.

In the first edition, Alexievich openly stated her role as confessor by saying: "…I am not here to judge what I've seen and heard" (1992, 10). However, this ostensibly non-judgmental position vis-à-vis her confessant was at times contradicted by the "Soviet journalese" style of her introduction. In the first edition, Alexievich used impersonal verbal constructions that evaded

narrative precision and hid the agent. Her intention may have been neutrality, but her style, characteristic of Soviet newspaper writing, is one behind which usually stands a value judgment. Alexievich's decision to assume the detached narrative presence of an observer in the 1990 text created, perhaps unintentionally, a sense of condescending unwillingness to engage with the world of the confessant and thereby diminished her ability to relate to him on non-judgmental terms. Alexievich modifies this style in the 2016 edition, more readily assigning agency and redefining the terms of the interactions she had with soldiers. Alexievich still cannot completely remove the distance that separates her confessant from herself because she can never become one of his own kind, but in the 2016 edition she is not distanced but engaged and present via active yet unintrusive listening.

Alexievich applied a similar strategy when she introduced the excerpts from soldiers' and veterans' stories in the introduction of the 1990 edition called "Notes From my Diary." She calls the section of these stories generically "Iz rasskazov" (From the stories) 1991, 264). In the 2016 edition, "From the Stories" now includes her personal experiences: "I ask and listen everywhere: in the soldiers' barracks, in the mess, on the football pitch, at the dances in the evening." (2017, 14). Thus, in the 1990 edition Alexievich's confessor occupied a position of observer in an attempt to self-distance herself from her confessant in order to avoid the appearance of judgment; in the 2016 edition, her confessor actively engages the world of her confessant and thereby lessens the distance between them.

In the last part of the 1990 version of the introductory "Notes From my Diary," Alexievich allowed herself to become didactic. She included an entry that read like a moralistic reprimand, in which she covertly delivered her verdict to every Soviet citizen and at the same time stayed above the "guilty Soviet crowd." I cite the most representative excerpt:

> All we know about this war, which has already lasted twice as long as World War II, is what "they" consider safe for us to know. We have been protected from seeing ourselves as we really are, and from the fear that such understanding would bring. "Russian writers have always been more interested in truth than beauty," wrote Nikolai Berdyaev. Our whole life is spent in the search for truth, especially nowadays, whether at our desks, or on the streets, at demos, even at dinner parties. And what is it we literary people cogitate upon so interminably? And it dawns on us that nothing, not even human life, is more precious for us than our myths about ourselves. We've come to believe the message, drummed into us for so long, that we are superlative in every way, the finest, the most honest. And whoever dares express the slightest doubt is guilty of treachery, the one unforgivable sin (1992, 8).

By the 2016 edition, Alexievich has removed all explicit sermonizing. Instead, she leads her readers to arrive at conclusions similar to hers on their own. She starts her introduction with a short recapitulation of the events that by then had become mundane: years of a far-away war, soldered zinc coffins, the farewell rifle volley salute, but then—unexpectedly—she drops in passing: "Our mythological mindset is unshakable—we are righteous and great. And always just." What is the reader to make of that? Here Alexievich suddenly shifts the ground, forcing the reader to confront the mythology of the mainstream narrative by presenting him not with a speech but a moving example. Toward the end of the entry, she recollects attending a funeral. She describes an army general giving an *in memoriam* speech; women, dressed in black, weeping. She focuses on a little girl, who is the only one acting naturally in this situation as she sobs and screams to her dad to rise from the coffin. But an officer picks her up and takes her away to a black Volga limousine (2017, 11). After describing this scene, Alexievich writes an

observation in which she includes herself: “We don’t say anything. Why don’t we say anything? I don’t want to remain silent…” (2017, 11). Then toward the end of the introduction, she adds: “I want to be honest” (2017, 20). This narrative transition from ardent emotional preaching to the unemotional sharing of a structured experience to which her reader can relate demonstrates Alexievich’s growth as a writer.

While still holding the ground she first laid out in the 1990 edition about mythological thinking in Soviet society as a convenient means to avoid personal responsibility for social injustice, Alexievich presses her point in a more subtle way in the 2016 edition. Instead of throwing the truth in the reader’s face, she engages him/her by presenting unimposing, succinct musings or representative scenes drawn from life, ostensibly leaving the reader to draw his own conclusions. In so doing, Alexievich creates that performative effect that makes her work a piece of literature rather than that of history or journalism (Attridge).

To support and reinforce her arguments in the first edition, Alexievich appealed to various literary authorities of the past and present: the Soviet writer Iurii Kariakin, Franz Kafka, Leo Tolstoy, Nikolai Berdyaev, Vladimir Soloviev, Aleksandr Pushkin, Mikhail Lermontov, and Fedor Dostoevsky. She pointed out that Iurii Kariakin once wrote that “‘We should not judge a man’s life by his perception of himself. Such perception may be tragically inadequate.’ And I read something in Kafka to the effect that man was irretrievably lost within himself” (1992, 3). By appealing to so many culturally important names in the 1990 edition, Alexievich was trying so hard to prove her point that she inadvertently undermined her own claim not to be a judge. This particular narrative strategy is also characteristic of Soviet journalistic reportage, which often sought to “guide” readers to the “truth” by citing cultural icons (Ellis).

In the 2016 edition, Alexievich limits her appeals to three prominent figures: Lermontov, Pushkin, and Dostoevsky. She uses them not as authorities who support and strengthen her own argument but as partners in dialogue who help her understand herself and her confessant better. For example, her references to Dostoevsky reveal her strategies in the interviews. Ivan Karamazov's statement that "An animal can never be as cruel as a human being, as artfully, artistically cruel" prepares her not to be disillusioned, appalled, or intimidated by the shocking stories that her confessants share with her or by their aggressiveness (2017, 16). She also includes a quotation from Dostoevsky's *Demons,* spoken by Ivan Shatov, who has rejected revolutionary materialism: "Convictions and the human being – these, it seems, are two things that differ in many respects. It could be that I am much to blame here, too! . . Everyone is guilty, everyone and . . . if only everyone could be convinced of that! (translation mine, Russian ed. 2016, 24). This allows her to engage with confession as a process that removes all opinions from both the confessor and the confessant and allows them to face the truth about themselves when they are ready. Not accidentally, Alexievich says: "If I hadn't read Dostoevsky, I would be in even greater despair" (2019, 19). This understanding allows Alexievich to avoid taking a defensive position in the telephone conversation with her "main character." Her cautious inquiries, such as "Who are you?... Why won't you say who you are?... We could meet…And talk. I wonder how you live with that. How badly does it bother you?" are not a defense but a sign of her readiness to admit her confessor into her world (the world from which he is isolated), to listen to him, and to learn who and what he and she are and how they feel (2017, 167). Even though her "main character" talks in a condescending and insulting way, she is willing to listen to him: "He called again. Fortunately I was home" (2017, 95).

Alexievich knows that her confessants, like Dostoevsky's characters, confess to her to challenge, manipulate, and confuse her, to make her feel guilty for assuming the position of confessor. In confessing, their goal is not to repent and seek absolution but to hurt the confessor and the world she represents. Thus, the goal that she sets for herself in the 2016 edition is more demanding than the one she had set in 1990; it is "to induce them [the *afgantsy*] to engage in a dialogue of a human being with the human being within himself" (translation mine, Russian ed. 2016, 23). This "dialogue" is not the explicit one contained in the interview between confessor and confessant, but the implicit one in the narrative of each individual testimony, when her former confessant reads it and assumes both the role of confessant and confessor for him/herself. This is Alexievich's hope, and this is also why the figure of the "main character" who makes the three calls is so important. Having read her book, he has a painful encounter with himself or someone like himself, but eventually he takes the first step to reconcile with his own self. He tells Alexievich that he wants to move on. He compares this decision with a second survival after the war, which makes it clear that surviving the public accusations is no less painful than surviving the war (2017, 168).

In adjusting the approach of her confessor from condescending to patient listener in the 2016 edition, Alexievich also reveals how her signature writing style has evolved. She rejects any overt attempt to persuade her interviewee or reader to accept her point of view. She rejects preaching altogether. Instead, she engages her confessants and readers in the act of confession that would allow them to recognize on their own terms the many ways in which they engage with the mainstream Soviet myth and how it influences their perception of their experiences, of themselves, and of their fellow citizens.

The Confessional Disclosure in *Boys in Zinc*

The literary genre of confession always involves a disclosure of individual experience that not only illuminates "sins" but also interprets some cultural context (Foster 7). In *Boys in Zinc,* as in her two previous books, *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*, Alexievich exposes the cultural background behind the official mythologized discourse of the Sacred War and the heroic Soviet soldier. *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses* show how the traumatic individual experiences of war were with time displaced by these mythical discursive constructs. *Boys in Zinc*, on the other hand, demonstrates how this long-established and powerful Soviet myth of victorious war persisted in Soviet culture and even led to a war that not even the authorities could successfully disguise as a Soviet mission of friendship. In offering the reader the real, traumatic experiences of individual veterans, Alexievich writes an alternative history of the Soviet-Afghan war—a history of an offensive war that devastated not only at the people of the "fraternal" state of Afghanistan but also its own Soviet people. The cognitive dissonance of the testimonies exposes the ideological dissonance inherent in the mythologized mainstream discourse.

In his 2011 study, *A Long Goodbye: The Soviet Withdrawal from Afghanistan*, historian Artemy Kalinovsky writes that "more and more soldiers completed tours of duty and returned home sometimes as wounded veterans, sometimes as bodies for burial but almost always marked by experience" (46). Indeed, one of Alexievich's interviewees recollects: "I came back. My mother undressed me like a little child and felt me all over: 'Safe and unharmed, my little darling.' Unharmed on the surface, but burning inside" (2017, 163). In *Boys in Zinc,* Alexievich underscores the reality that this invisible but no less traumatic marking is the single, most trustworthy source of truth regarding the Soviet-Afghan War.

By presenting the testimonies of the *afgantsy* as acts of confession, Alexievich reenacts what literary scholar Peter Axthelm calls a confessant's quest for "reconstructed order" in a "disintegrated [inner] world" (54-59). In trauma theory, it would be called moving from the "acting-out" phase of remembering trauma to the "working-through" one—moving from reliving the trauma to remembering it as past experience (LaCapra 40-2). In the evolution from psychological disintegration to psychological reconstruction (from reliving to remembering the trauma), Alexievich's confessant is still stuck in the first phase. However, the discordant world of Alexievich's confessants is caused not only by their traumatic war experience but also by the violent disintegration of their previously-held ideological paradigms. They could not help but recognize the cognitive discrepancies among the ways in which official Soviet discourse presented the war, public discourse spoke of the war, and they, its participants, actually experienced it. Voicing confessants' raw traumatic experiences reveals a major discordance among the government, the people, and the veterans.

To set her confessants' traumatic experiences against the background of the mainstream official narrative, Alexievich uses the same technique in both the 1990 and the 2016 editions. She prefaces the three sections containing the confessional interviews with an excerpt from an official news report reflecting the current mainstream discourse on the Soviet-Afghan War. In the 1990 *Boys in Zinc*, Alexievich included an excerpt from *Moskovskaia pravda* of 7 February 1989. Published a week before the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan ended, the excerpt cheerfully greeted Soviet troops returning to the Motherland. It described the achievements of the Soviet army in "fulfilling their international obligations in Afghanistan." Over the decade soldiers "repaired… rebuilt… constructed…hospitals, … nursery schools, … 400 blocks of flats…35 mosques, …engaged in guarding military and civilian installations…" It called Soviet

soldiers “our boys” and expressed delight at their homecoming: “An orchestra played as the Nation welcomed the return of her sons” (1991, 9).

The 2016 edition includes an excerpt from the internet news resource, Polit.ru, dated 19 November 2003. The excerpt coldly assigns responsibility for the war: “Soviet leadership made the decision to send [troops to Afghanistan];” it goes on to lay out the bare facts: the precise duration of the war was “nine years, one month and nineteen days,” the number of troops who passed through Afghanistan was over half a million, the number of casualties was 15,051, the number of soldiers missing in action was 417, the number who still remain in captivity is 287 (2017, prefatory material). Unrepresentative of real-life experience as these two news excerpts are, together they concisely show the transformation of the official rhetoric around the Soviet-Afghan War: what started as a righteous mission had become a sad mistake and a list of statistics. However, both remain mythologized. The first denies war completely; the second recognizes that it was a war, but it hides the war’s character. There is no mention of what happened to Afghanistan and the Afghan people during these years. In contrast, the three confessional sections in *Boys in Zinc* reveal the paucity of the myth of Russia’s “friendly mission” and leave no doubt regarding about which kind of mistake it was—an offensive and destructive war.

The Myth of Mission:

The myth of the Soviet Union’s friendly mission in Afghanistan rested on two stated goals: to help the “fraternal” people of Afghanistan and to insure the safety of the USSR’s southern borders. The testimonies in *Boys in Zinc* reveal that the mechanics of the myth of the mission of friendship relied heavily on the Soviet mythology of World War II and that the generation of Soviet soldiers sent to fight in Afghanistan was the product of the patriotic

education and culture rooted in that mythology. In the popular imagination of a young Soviet generation who never witnessed the reality of war, war was the duty of every self-respecting Soviet citizen, and especially of men, to protect their Motherland.

War offered an opportunity to prove one's loyalty to the state, to reveal courage, to become a real man, and to be venerated as a national hero. It also created an ideological triad that united the Soviet government, Soviet soldiers, and Soviet people in a common effort to defend their national interests, help allies, and fight "the enemy" (often unspecified). A civilian employee recollects how she wanted to follow in the footsteps of previous Soviet generations and take part in some patriotic adventure: "On the way here I thought: 'I missed the BAM and virgin lands projects. I'm lucky there's still Afghanistan' (2017, 99)." Some male veterans who volunteered wanted to experience the "romanticism" of war: "We imagined something romantic in store for us" (2017, 26), or "I asked to be sent. I dreamt of getting into the war. I thought it was interesting… (2017, 70)." Others wanted to test themselves: "It was interesting from a psychological point to view to see the war. First and foremost, to study yourself. I was attracted by that (2017, 57)." In all of these instances, individual motivations were rooted in a Soviet mythology that presented wartime sacrifices and suffering as spiritual achievement, heroism, and the measure of human worth.

The mothers of those who perished seek reasons for why their sons died in Afghanistan. They find these reasons in a mindset infused with Soviet mythology of the war, whether through literary characters (1), in the example of family members (2), or in the military toys children played with (3):

(1) I really can say I was with him all his life. I brought him up just with books, on ideal images: Pavel Korchagin, Oleg Koshevoi, Zoia Kosmodemianskaia.[40] In the first year at school he didn't know any fairy tales or children's poems off by heart, but he knew whole pages of *How the Steel Was Tempered* by Nikolai Ostrovskii (2017, 41)

(2) My father was a career officer who was killed defending Leningrad. My Grandfather was an officer too. And nature herself made my son to be a soldier, with his height and strength, and his manners. He should have been a hussar! White gloves... games of cards ... 'Every inch a military man,' I used to laugh (2017, 220).

(3) He liked military toys. I gave him a tank, an automatic rifle, a pistol. He used to hang the rifle over his shoulder and march around the apartment. 'I'm a soldier, I'm a soldier' (2017, 65).

Now, after the fact, the mothers begin to suspect that such an upbringing, based on indoctrination into the mythology of Soviet heroism and militarism, may have been the root cause of the tragic destiny of their sons.

The same heroic mythology allowed the Soviet military to advertise "service" in Afghanistan as a high honor and privilege: "At the training camp they chose the very best for Afghanistan. It was frightening to end up in Tula, Pskov or Kirovabad—it was filthy and stifling there, so men asked to go to Afghanistan; they worked hard to get there" (2017, 57). Soviet recruiters could also shame and force young conscripts into doing their filial duty to the Motherland by relying on the same mythology of World War II: "They took us away from our

[40] Heroes of high socialist realism and World War II martyrology: Pavel Korchagin is the hero of Nikolai Ostrovskii's autobiographical novel *How the Steel was Tempered* (1932–1934); a real-life teen partisan killed in 1943, Koshevoi became the hero of of Aleksandr Fadeev's novel *The Young Guard* (1946, 1951); Zoia Kosmodemianskaia was a woman soldier whose brutal execution by the Nazis received considerable press.

mamas and said: 'Forward, guys, it's your sacred duty—you're obliged to do it, you're eighteen'" (2017, 81). To refuse to go to Afghanistan often meant the end of career aspirations: a nurse recollects her talk with a recruiter who told her, "I advise you to think about it. If not, we'll call the university and tell them what kind of Komsomol member you are. The Homeland requires it…'" (2017, 170). Such cases demonstrate how the mythologized World War II paradigm of obligation, duty, adventure, and rite of passage commonly shared by both recruiters and recruits determined the behavior of both: it entitled the former to demand and inspired or forced the latter to agree.

Confessants' memories also reveal how the myth-making persisted during the war among the soldiers, Soviet society, the Afghan military, and even the Afghan people. For soldiers it took the form of "political awareness sessions twice a week" (2017, 196) and occasional speeches by political officers before military operations: "Before the first action they played the Hymn of the Soviet Union. The political officer spoke. I remember he said that global imperialism remained constantly vigilant and they [our fellow Soviet citizens] would welcome us home as heroes" (2017, 210). Some of Alexievich's interviewees confess that they did believe the propaganda, others just took it as an order from an authority that knew better than they did and should be obeyed.

Confessants recollect that as far as the troops of the Democratic Republic of Afghanistan and Afghan civilians were concerned, the friendship mission consisted of erecting Soviet symbols around their cities and towns: red banners, ideological slogans of friendship, posters, monuments, and busts of key communist figures (notably Vladimir Lenin and Karl Marx), film screenings of Soviet films, and politicized public meetings (2017, 99).

One of the veterans who served as an interpreter in Afghanistan provides an insight of why the Afghans tolerated the Soviet mission of "friendship." He recollects that by the time he was deployed to Afghanistan, the local population had already lost interest in the ideological side of peaceful engagement and attended public meetings to take advantage of the distribution of food and goods or to receive medical aid (2017, 180). In describing the ideological interaction between the Afghan and Soviet military, this same veteran points to difference in their manner of giving speeches. While Afghan officers spoke extemporaneously and used beautiful, figurative language (1), Soviet political workers read prepared, cliché-ridden texts from a piece of paper (2):

> (1) After the mullah, Comrade Laghman speaks. He gives a very long speech. That's one of the Afghans' distinguishing qualities. They all know how to talk and they like doing it. Linguistics has a term, emotional coloration. Well, Afghan speech is more than simply colored, it's brightly daubed with metaphors, similes and epithets (2017, 180).
>
> (2) Our political workers conducted via sessions using pieces of papers, all with the same words and phrases: "in the vanguard of the broad communist movement," "to serve as a constant example," "work tirelessly to realize in reality," "alongside the successes are a few shortcomings," and even "some comrades fail to understand" (translation mine, Russian ed. 2016, 99).[41]

This veteran had intuitively noticed the linguistic issues inherent in Soviet discourse, which anthropologist Alexei Yurchak described in his important work on late socialism in the USSR, *Everything was Forever, Until it Was no More: The Last Soviet Generation* (2006). Soviet rhetoric was so obsessed with uttering its own universal truths that its clichés had become

[41] Part of the sentence is omitted from the English translation (2017, 180).

devoid of meaning (Yurchak, 10). Another veteran summarizes the issue: "Political officers sought to convince us of something they themselves did not believe" (translation mine, Russian ed. 2016, 38). [42] From the confessions, the reader understands that not even the Afghan people believed in or supported a Soviet presence in their country.

Confessants also recollect observing how this myth of friendship was created for consumption by Soviet society, to the detriment of the Russian soldiers:

> We took one little hill. Lost seven of our boys... The Moscow journalists arrived and they were given some 'greens' (the Afghan National Army), who were supposed to have taken the hill. The Afghans posed while our boys were lying in the morgue (2017, 56, 57).

Others refer to staple images seen in Soviet news reports: the construction of schools, kindergartens, bridges, etc.; they replace them with images from their own experience: "I saw so many ruined *kishlaks* [Afghan villages]. But not a single kindergarten, not a single school that had been built, or tree that had been planted—the ones they wrote about in our newspapers" (2017, 89).

Another official strategy intended to maintain the appearance that the war was no more than a mission of friendship was the order of secrecy. Both veterans and the mothers of those who perished confess to being told by the Soviet military to keep their experiences secret:

> The political officer's parting words before I came back home: what we could talk about and what we couldn't. We couldn't talk about fatalities, because we were a large and powerful army. We couldn't talk about harassment, because we were a large, powerful and morally sound army. Photographs should be torn up. Films should be destroyed. We

[42] Omitted from the English translation (2017, 63).

didn't shoot, bomb, poison blow up anyone. We were a large and powerful army, the best army in the world ... (2017, 63, 64).

The dead themselves were supposed to keep their secret and remain unobserved:

> There were already "Afghani" graves on the main avenue [at the cemetery]. "Put my son here too, with his own boys, he'll feel more cheerful." I don't remember who was with us, some boss or other, but he shook his head. "It's not allowed to bury them together. We scatter them over the cemetery" (2017, 114).

To demonstrate the effectiveness of this Soviet mythological structure, Alexievich includes a testimony in which a veteran recollects how upon his return from Afghanistan he could not believe how uninformed and oblivious Soviet society was about the on-going war:

> Here they were living and acting as if we didn't exist out there. As if there wasn't any war. In the Metro people were laughing and kissing, the same as always. They were reading books. I walked along Arbat Street and stopped people.
>
> "How long has the war in Afghanistan been going?"
>
> "I don't know…" …
>
> "How many years?"
>
> "You mean there's a war going on? Really?" (2017, 46).

The tragedy for Afghan veterans was this: although the Soviet leadership and propaganda created the entire mythology of the war by "tuning" the familiar Soviet myth of World War II to a frequency suitable for the Soviet-Afghan conflict, the veterans themselves, albeit unconsciously, took an active part in the myth-making. In the introduction to the first edition of *Boys in Zinc*, Alexievich asked a rhetorical question which she did not include in the revisions of the 2016 edition: "Why can 'they' make us do whatever 'they' want?" (translation mine, Russian

ed. 1991, 264; “Почему с нами можно делать всё, что кому-то нужно?”). The impersonal structure of the original Russian sentence emphasizes the opposition between the powerful, all-controlling “them” and the lamblike, oblivious “us.” At the end of the first part of the 2016 edition, Alexievich introduces two entirely new testimonies from Afghan veterans that enter into dialogue with each other and echo the implications of that rhetorical question. The first veteran remembers how forcefully and deceitfully he and his friends were deployed to Afghanistan and then adds: (91) “What the shit! We are being driven like sheep.” (translation mine, Russian ed. 2016, 48). Then he adds:

> “Bloody hell…I couldn’t give a shit any longer. Why didn’t they give us any special training? Holy shit! They’re taking us to real war … They didn’t even teach us to shoot. How much shooting did I do on exercises? Three single shots and a burst of six… Bloody fantastic!” (2017, 82).

In other testimony, a veteran recollects how their group ran into a stray flock of sheep. After a two-day march, the soldiers were tired and hungry. They decided to kill and eat one sheep. The veteran shares some observations of these animals’ behavior. If scattered for any reason, the flock quickly reassembles around their leader. If the leader is caught, the entire flock is too. Unlike any other domestic animal, a sheep accepts death when it is about to be killed: “… meekly…it just walks along without making a sound. With its eyes open. Following the man with the knife. It was never like a murder; it always resembled a ritual. A sacrificial ritual” (2017, 94).

Together these two testimonies powerfully describe a cynical ritual in which people are treated and behave like sacrificial animals. While one would wish to endow the ritual with higher meaning, it offers no meaning other than the complete control of the weak by the strong and the

docile acceptance of their fate by the weak, both literally and figuratively. By bringing together confessions that feature the confessant's psychological dissociation from the difference between what he was told and what he experienced, Alexievich lays out powerful evidence of the strategies of the Soviet myth and the tragic consequences of its application.

The Myth of "The Mistake": The War behind the Myth

Instead of participating in a "mission of friendship" and returning as heroes, Soviet soldiers found themselves fighting a real war for which they received little or no credit, a war which even before its completion was officially acknowledged to have been a "mistake" by the country that sent them to Afghanistan. Having returned home, Afghan veterans found themselves surrounded by another, newer myth—the myth of "the mistake." Unlike the myth of mission, the myth of the mistake was more subtle. It provided no details about *what* exactly the mistake was or *who* made it. The aggressive character of the Soviet-Afghan war was never admitted. Afghan people were never called victims. The Soviet government that allegedly accepted the blame could conveniently toss it around among the four Party leaders: Brezhnev, Andropov, Chernenko, and Gorbachev, and their cabinets. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the new Russian government could blame the mistake on the old Soviet government. The myth of the mistake, technically, never admitted the war was a mistake; rather, it admitted the mission of friendship a mistake. This made it possible to revive later the image of the righteous Soviet soldier of World War II, whose friendly intentions had been misunderstood.

Secondary literature has examined the historical details of the Soviet-Afghan War at length.[43] Alexievich, however, is interested not in demanding historical justice for the soldiers

[43] See: Lester W. Grau, "The Soviet–Afghan War: A Superpower Mired in the Mountains," *Journal of Slavic Military Studies* 17.1 (2004): 129-151; Geraint Hughes, "The Soviet–Afghan War, 1978–1989: An Overview," *Defense Studies* 8.3 (2008): 326-350; Mark Galeotti, *Afghanistan: The Soviet Union's Last War* (London: Frank

but in depicting the psychological transformations of her interviewees. These transformations undermine another dimension of the mythology, the mythology of the mistake, on which Soviet and then Russian supremacy was built.

Their war experience in Afghanistan shifted all possible paradigms for Soviet soldiers. Brought up on the mythology of World War II and the noble mission of the Red Army, the actual experience of the *afgantsy* was a source of profound psychological and cognitive dissociation. Their encounter with war itself was very different, the war's character was far more unpredictable, and thus their experience was psychologically more shocking than that experienced by soldiers in World War II, and the soldiers sent to Afghanistan realized it:

> We were being killed, and we killed too. We killed where we could. We killed where we wanted. But this wasn't the war that we knew from books and films, with battlefront, no-man's-land, front lines. It was *kirgiz* war. The *kirgizes* [sic] were underground channels that had been built at some time for irrigation. Men appeared out of them day and night, like ghosts. With automatic rifles, with rocks in their hands. It's quite possible that not long ago you were haggling with this ghost in a *dukan* [Afghan storefront], but here he's beyond the bounds of your fellow-feeling (2017, 142).

The manner in which the soldiers died and the tortures they experienced in captivity did not fit the mythology either. Advances in military technology since World War II increased the use of mines and bombs in the Afghan war. The war turned into a butcher shop of human flesh, for which the Soviet soldier's psyche was unprepared:

Cass, 1995), and subsequent editions; Leonid Borisovich Teplinskiĭ, *Istoriia sovetsko-afganskikh otnoshenii*, *1919-1987* (Mysl', 1988), and many others.

> Here I learned that the most terrible mine is "the Italian." After it goes off they gather a man up in a bucket. A young man came to me and kept telling me and telling me about it. . . I thought he would never stop. But that's normal. . . . Right in front of his eyes, all that was left of the boys . . . Half a boot of the whole. . . He knew those boys (translation mine, Russian ed. 2016, 81).

In World War II, captives might be executed by firing squad, but more often they were sent to a detention camp for prisoners of war. In the Soviet-Afghan war, the *mujahideen* were far more brutal: they used "didactic" mutilation—a person survived but was turned into a living example of why one would not like to wage war: "They brought a lieutenant back from 'the bush,' without any arms or legs. Without any male parts" (2017, 48).

The code of war that all sides observed in World War II was not observed in Afghanistan. In the 1990 edition, Alexievich asks rhetorically: "I am looking for an answer: how does the killing of courage occur in each of us? . . . How does one of our ordinary boys turn into a killer?" (translation mine, Russian ed. 1991, 264). In the 2016 edition, she emphasizes the same question, but now it is asked by the veterans: "I can't even imagine going to a school and telling them about the war, and how an immature, unformed individual like me was molded into a killer, and other stuff like that. That all we wanted to do was eat and sleep" (2017, 152). At the heart of the veterans' confessions is their acknowledgement of killing other human beings. Alexievich's "main character" throws at her: "Yes, I killed, I am soaked in blood" (2017, 95).

Understanding how killing occurred in Afghanistan is key to understanding the particulars of the traumas that Alexievich's Afghan veterans describe in their testimonies. As long as the myth of the mission of friendship dominated the minds of Russian soldiers in Afghanistan, fighting the *mujahideen* could be subsumed under the familiar World War II

concept of fighting the enemy. However, in the context of civil war in Afghanistan, the image of the adversary became fuzzy and potentially included the entire Afghan population. A veteran recollects:

> Our military life was entirely separate from the Afghans; they were forbidden to show their faces on the base. All we knew was that they killed us. But we all wanted to live. ... Everything was all very neat and tidy. It was them and us. Friend and enemy. I've only started thinking about it now when the stereotypes have crumbled. And I'm the one who could never read Turgenev's story about Mumu the dog without shedding tears! (2017 149)

Such lack of clear focus resulted in the criminal treatment of Afghan civilians by the Soviet soldiers and had already become a serious source of moral conflict for some Afghan veterans during the war (1); for others it became a problem only after the war, when more facts became available (2). Various reasons for killing were perceived as ethically appropriate during the war, justifying violence because of the soldierly duty to obey military orders (1), the need to survive (2), and a desire for revenge (3).

> (1) That's the law of war. "You have to know how to do two things here: walk quickly and shoot accurately. I'll do the thinking," the commander said. We shot at whatever we were told to shoot at. I was taught to shoot at whatever I was told to shoot at. I shot without feeling any pity for anyone. I could have killed a child. After all, everyone there was fighting against us: young men, women, old women, children. (2017, 27).
>
> (2) There, everyone was busy saving himself, you had to save yourself! (2017, 110). The most important thing in that war was to survive. Not to get blown up by a mine, not to get burned up in an armored personal carrier, not to become a target for a sniper (2017, 118).

(3) We are combing through a *kishlak*. Me and this young guy [are] walking beside each other. He opens the door into a *duval*—a compound—with his foot and they fire at him point-blank with a machine gun. Nine bullets... My mind is flooded with hate. We shot them all, right down to the animals, although shooting an animal is more disturbing (2017, 102).

Such reasons for killing the natives become feeble justifications when compared with the reasons that the Afghan *mujahideen* have for killing the Russians. Another veteran contemplates this in his testimony:

> And you, *shuravi*, Soviet man, you're beyond the bounds of his fellow-feeling too. Your artillery raked his *kishlak* and he could hardly find anything left of his mother or his wife or his children. And if you fall into his hands he'll make mincemeat cutlets out of you. Modern weapons increase the gravity of our crimes. With a knife I could kill one man, or two. With a bomb it's dozens (2017, 142).

Another concept that broke down completely for Afghan veterans is the concept of *svoi* (one's own), which is also rooted in World War II mythology. World War II was a war of defense of what is "one's own" against an aggressive intruder. Since the Soviet-Afghan War was not a defensive war, in *Boys in Zinc,* the concept of *svoi* was shifted to refer to relationships within the military fraternity and relationships with Soviet (civil) society. Compared to the Red Army of World War II, which valorized memories of loyal friendship and high morals (and repressed other features), the confessions in *Boys in Zinc* openly report cases of drug and alcohol abuse, illegal trade with adversaries, and humiliating cases of military hazing. Remembering their experience as newly arrived conscripts, veterans recollect going through not only the shock

of war, but also their psychological and mental abuse by those soldiers who had already served in Afghanistan:

> I suffered more from our own side. The spirits made a man of you—our guys make shit out of you. It was only in the army that I realized any man can be broken; the only difference is the means and how much time it takes. A "granddad"—he's served all of six months—he's just lying there belly-up in his boots and he calls me over: "Lick the boots, lick them clean with your tongue. You've got five minutes." I just stand there. He calls out: "Come here, Red"—Red is the young guy I went there with, we're friends. And then two assholes come over and start laying into Red, given it all they've got. I can see they're going to break his back. He looks at me... So I start licking the boots, so he can survive and not get crippled (2017, 83, 84).

At the same time, many veterans attest to cases of loyal friendship and acceptance among soldiers in Afghanistan, which they did not find upon their return to the Soviet Union.

> Out there [in Afghanistan] a friend's a friend and an enemy's an enemy. But here [in the Soviet Union] there is always the question: 'What did my friends die for?' For the gorged black market dealers? For the bureaucrats? Or the young jerks who couldn't give a shit about anything, just as long as they have a can of beer in the morning? Everything's wrong here. I feel like an outsider. A stranger (2017, 72).

The above-quoted example also demonstrates the character of relationships between the *afganets* and Soviet society. In the mid-1980s, during the Brezhnev period of stagnation, an already disillusioned Soviet society was overloaded with unflattering revelations and facts that started coming out during *perestroika* and *glasnost'.* Among such revelations was the sudden shift in public discourse concerning the war: the mission of friendship was now a policy mistake. Not

surprisingly, the truth about Soviet adventure in Afghanistan increased distrust between the people and the government. *Boys in Zinc* shows Afghan veterans caught between two attitudes on the part of the Soviet population: complete ignorance of the facts about the war and open condemnation of the war. One of the veterans mentions this:

> At least understand that. Try to ... We've been left alone, face to face with this war: sort out the mess for yourselves. We feel guilty all the time; we have to make excuses all the time. Or keep quiet. Who do we have to make our excuses to? They stuck us out there; we trusted them. And guys died with that belief out there. (2017, 116)

In such circumstances, Afghan veterans found themselves fighting again, this time not for physical but for psychological survival under conditions of discursive isolation.

The Confessional Self

In the theory on confessional literature, the performative nature of confession subtly manifests itself in the product of an interaction between the confessant and the confessor whom the confessant keeps in mind—be it one person or a group. The confessant's search for himself within the act of confession to a particular confessor is never complete and neither is the confessor's understanding of him. In a single performance, the confessional self, unlike the autobiographical self, can never attain full reference or meaning (Grobe, 23-25). A series of confessions between the same confessant and confessor, however, can create a confessional self that is more or less tangible for both. For example, one confessional poem by a poet cannot be regarded as his full self-identification, but a cycle of confessional poetry creates a "feeling of fullness, a satiety of experience which can be taken as reality" (Grobe, 25). Reiterating the experience of the Soviet-Afghan War in more than fifty anonymous individual confessions,

Alexievich captures the otherwise nebulous collective confessional self of her abstract confessant—the Soviet soldier in Afghanistan (*afganets*).

I argue that the composite image of the *afganets* that emerges from the testimonies of *Boys in Zinc* evokes the image of the unclean dead in Slavic folk belief. Individual confessions share repetitive imagery, identical patterns of psychological and cognitive distortion, and similar strategies in their interaction with the confessor and the world she represents that are reminiscent of this folk belief. Alexievich, as the confessor who listens to and then arranges the confessions into a book, touches on the various implications of the imagery of the unclean dead and the dramatism inherent in the motif to metaphorize the traumatic individual experience of the *afgantsy* who returned "home," only to find themselves in a liminal space somewhere between their dead comrades and Russian society at large, belonging neither to the one nor the other.

In Slavic folklore, the unclean dead are social outcasts. They are those who have died but who cannot move on to the world of the dead because of the nature of their life and/or death; neither can they return to the world of the living. They are trapped in the liminal space between these two worlds, being neither living nor dead. An individual could become an unclean dead in various ways, the most important being these: if the death is violent or premature due to unnatural causes, particularly suicide, accident, murder, alcoholism, or epidemic; if the individual's lifestyle violates community norms (engaging in sorcery, heresy, crime, other taboos); if the individual did not receive proper burial or died far away from his homeland or outside of his community; if the individual died before critical personal issues could be resolved (debt, acknowledgement, apology); and if the individual dies having been cursed by his mother or father (and the curse not taken off) (Andriunina 103, 104; Ivanits 120,121; Sedakova; Iasinskaia; Vinogradova 32, 33; Zelenin 39-70).

By dying before their fated time (that is, before their natural life span has run its course), the unclean dead violate the natural flow of life and become resentful, malevolent, and dangerous. Being neither alive nor dead, they are unable to engage with normal life, find neither peace nor comfort, and are resentful of the "living." The presence of the unclean dead among the living is believed to cause various troubles: catastrophes, droughts, illness in people and animals, sapping of energy, loss of life, or other harm to the living and their households. The community and families of those who died unclean deaths watched for signs of their "return" and employed a number of rituals to prevent the unclean dead from walking until their natural life span had elapsed and they were finally gone [such, for example, as prone burial, staking, decapitation, cremation, filling the mouth with thorns or stones, filling the coffin with small seeds, etc.] (Zelenin 39-70; Carlson).

The discursive position of the *afganets* in *Boys in Zinc* dramatically coincides with the extreme liminal status of the unclean dead. Like the unclean dead, who by dying leave the world of the living, Afghan veterans treat their traumatic war experience as a symbolic death that completely and irreversibly changes who they are. Many confessants experience this transformation as the death of their former, pre-war identity. One of the women veterans whose confession is included in *Boys in Zinc* moans:

> I used to be a bookish, Moscow girl. I thought that real life was somewhere far away. And the men there were all strong, the women were all beautiful. There were lots of adventures. I wanted to break out of the ordinary world ... … And I cry all the time I cry for the bookish little Moscow girl (2017, 99, 102).

Having seen death in its ugliest and most brutal forms, having killed people who in reality were no threat to the Soviet Union, and having partaken, albeit unwillingly and unconsciously, in the

creation of the myth of righteous Soviet supremacy, the Afghan veterans are overwhelmed with unshared guilt, pain, anger, and the shock of new revelations about themselves and their country. Their transformed selves reject all of their pre-war Soviet experience and prevent them from returning to their pre-war selves and to things and people once associated with this former self:

> When I got back from the war I couldn't wear any of my old jeans and shirts. Those clothes belonged to a stranger, someone I didn't know, even though they still had my smell on them, or so my mother told me. That person is gone, he doesn't exist anymore. This other person, who I am now, only has the same name. Before the army I was dating a girl, I was in love. When I came back I didn't call her. She found out by chance that I was in town and she found me. She shouldn't have looked for me. We shouldn't have met ... "that man you loved, and who used to love you, is gone," I told her. I'm a different person. Look, I'm not the same! (2017, 51).

While the role of the horrific on-the-ground experience of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan is certainly a principal reason for their disassociation from their pre-war selves and from their community, another, equally valid reason for their transformation and the loss of the pre-war self is without question the age of the *afgantsy.* Alexievich titles her work *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (*Boys in Zinc*). These two words—the noun "little boys" (which is what *mal'chiki* means) and the adjective defining it, "zinc"—are two words that would never occur together in natural speech. The combination is *unnatural*. The very commonly used "little boys" speaks to youth, inexperience, immaturity, and vulnerability at the beginning of one's life. The rarely-used word "zinc" refers to the zinc coffins in which the "little boys" returned home from the war. The title's odd juxtaposition of these two words urges the reader to stop and think about why these two words should occur together here.

Most of the *afgantsy* were new recruits, 18-19 years of age; they were adolescents whose hormones, intellect, social skills had not yet been fully shaped. In ordinary circumstances they would be conscripted, complete their obligatory military service, then go to a university or technical school, get a job, get married, get on with their lives. They would have fulfilled the duty of every proud Soviet son to his Motherland. But in the case of the Soviet-Afghan War, the Motherland sent its immature sons to fight in an untenable war in a distant land, to see and engage in devastatingly destructive actions. The experience left them traumatized and deformed in both body and mind. Upon their return the Motherland that had sent them there was unable to accept the kind of men they have become, men shaped by that particularly violent war, and so the Motherland rejected them, even "cursed" them, by casting their experience into discursive oblivion and them into limbo (a liminal space). In this particular case, the situation of the *afgantsy* echoes what happens to a child who has been cursed by a parent and who dies with a curse unlifted. That son or daughter becomes unclean dead and must "walk" until the parent lifts the curse. Only then can the child be freed from its status as unclean dead be properly buried (Sedakova 294-96).

In *Boys in Zinc*, Alexievich unpacks the circumstances of such "curse." She shows how their traumatic war experiences endow Afghan veterans with a perspective on war that, like the perspective of women veterans in *Unwomanly Face* and wartime children in *Last Witnesses*, cannot find a place in their society's discourse about the war. However, the discursive death of the *afgantsy* in *Boys in Zinc* is more extreme and violent than in the previous two books. In *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses,* the perspectives of women fighters and children of war were mainly overridden by the mainstream official discourse and its myth of the Soviet victorious war. While women veterans mention cases of social ostracism, the issue never

achieved a massive scale or turned into a public discourse that would continuously disturb their war trauma. Moreover, all of Soviet society suffered from World War II, not just Soviet soldiers; thus, on the level of day-to-day communication there was still considerable ground for connection. Finally, the Soviet Union under Stalin could not possibly have had any kind of well-shaped public discourse that would compete or oppose the mainstream official one. Discursive tendencies changed, however, in the 1980s and onward.

Upon their return, Afghan veterans found themselves in a situation where official Soviet discourse imposed silence on them about their experience. Like the unclean dead who were disabled (prevented from walking) by their communities, the *afgantsy* were discursively disabled by official Soviet discourse (not to mention that many were literally disabled). Their war experience presented a threat to Soviet ideology and policy since they knew too much about how official policy had been carried out. What they experienced changed them. As one of the women veterans says: "After everything out there I saw my country with different eyes. My pupils even changed; they got wider" (2017, 37).

The discursive disabling strategy used by Soviet propaganda in the early 1980s evokes the image of filling the mouth of the unclean dead with stones or sharp objects. The military order "… not to divulge…" (2017, 110) forced Afghan veterans to struggle with their trauma on their own, depriving them of the therapeutic opportunity to talk. When in the late 1980s the Party was forced to change its rhetoric and call the entire war a mistake, it shrewdly avoided specific accusations. One consequence was that society began to apply the label "criminal" to Afghan veterans, thus excluding them from social discourse and isolating them with painful memories of bringing deaths to the Afghans they interacted with:

> We went into a *kishlak* and asked for something to eat. According to their laws, if a man's in your home and he's hungry you can't refuse to give him a hot, round bread cake. The women set us down at the table and fed us. When we left, those women and their children were stoned and beaten to death with sticks by their own kind. They knew that they'd be killed, but even so they didn't turn us away. And we go to them with our laws... We used to walk into the mosque in our caps … It's all very intimate; the first man I killed, the first sight of my blood on the light sand, and the tall chimney of a camel's head swaying over me before I passed out. At the same time I was like everyone else there (2017, 50).

During the ten years that the war lasted, Soviet society's understanding of the Soviet-Afghan War in Soviet society shifted from a general awareness of Soviet success to a gradual awareness that something dramatic had occurred. Unfortunately, Soviet doctors knew nothing about PTSD: "'You're in good shape,' the doctor told me. What kind of good shape are we all in? We brought so much back inside us ..." (2017, 116). Doctors were unprepared to help veterans with their psychological wounds. The entire social system, let alone the average person, was unprepared to deal with handicapped veterans who came back in the thousands; mutilation, blast wounds, and PTSD were the most common wounds of the Afghan war. One veteran shares his experience of being confined at home because of his wounds:

> Even better would be if all the men from Afghanistan with artificial limbs marched through Red Square. I'd go ... Look! Both my legs are amputated above the knee. If only it had been below the knee. ... Four walls, and the one you want is the one with the window (2017, 71).

This image evokes the imagery of the unclean dead whose bodies have been mutilated and sealed in the grave so that they would not "walk" (certainly not across Red Square). It also evokes more general imagery of death. Like the veteran trapped within four walls and a window, Russian peasant coffins and grave huts (*domoviny*) sometimes had a small window in the side so that the deceased could look out and see friends and family who visited the grave, even if he was never able to join them (Arukask, Nosova).

In their testimonies, veterans also share their disturbed dreams, which echo the imagery of forced or premature burial in varying degrees. One woman veteran recollects a recurring dream in which mines explode around her and she is covered by a thick, heavy layer of Afghan soil. She wants to dig herself out, she tries to scream, but she is utterly helpless and wakes up gasping for air (2017, 101). Another veteran's dream reflects the entire discursive situation in which *afgantsy* were immobilized. In his dream, he sees himself lying in a coffin and surrounded by a crowd of mourners. He sits up in the coffin and tries to tell them that he is not dead but the mourners pay no attention. They close the coffin lid over him and nail it down, piercing his finger. He yells with pain but no one reacts. Only then does he decide that those around him might know better, and he must be dead (2017, 164-5).

Alexievich engages with this symbolic imagery in various ways. In the section "From the Notebooks," she includes her own dream, in which she meets a young soldier. He is transported home. She tries to talk to him, but he cannot say anything because he was made mute while in *mujahideen* captivity. He only writes his name on a piece of paper for her. She takes this piece and reads his name. This dream captures Alexievich's intentions in writing *Boys in Zinc*. In the book her goal is not to present the *afganets* as either a hero or a beast but to communicate the full diversity of his experience and to give him a voice. In so doing, she recognizes his story, his

trauma, his sins, his repentance, and his drama. One might say that she seeks a strategy for dealing with the unclean dead, one which would help the *afganets* come to understand and deal with his condition and at the same time to help the community confront the many issues that caused the "unclean dead" to walk in the first place. By listening to his story and passing it on, Alexievich provides an opportunity for society to recognize and learn from its own culpability.

The Burial

To make readers reflect on their own engagement in perpetuating the liminal position of the *afganets* in the society, Alexievich uses the book's structure to shape a sort of burial ritual. This burial is in contrast to the official burial that the author describes in her "From the Notebooks" section. Instead of focusing on the ritual gathering (a funeral eulogy, a soldered zinc coffin, women in black silently weeping), Alexievich focuses on the coffin's "content"—the experience of war that placed the young *afganets* into the zinc coffin. While features of the funerary rite are traceable in *Boys in Zinc* regardless of its edition, the rite's structure and the imagery of the unclean dead are most vivid in the 2016 edition.

Alexievich begins the 2016 edition with two epigraphs that exemplify the work of official discourse. The first epigraph refers to the secretive plan of Tsar Paul I to challenge British influence on the world's political arena and seize dominance over India, then a British colony.[44] The short excerpt reports that 30,000 Cossack troops headed to the Indus River in 1801, yet it omits the fact that the campaign ended with the assassination of Paul I. The fact that such a campaign had occurred at all remained mostly hidden from history for decades. In referring to

[44] See for example: "Индийский поход 1801," https://w.histrf.ru/articles/article/show/indiiskii_pokhod_1801 Accessed 20 May 2020. Suspected of being a mystification, the plan was real and is described in a number of historical works, including Sytin's *Voennaia entsiklopediia* (1911—1915) and other sources thereafter.

that unknown historical fact, Alexievich traces back in history Russia's first intention to fight a war for control of south-central Asia.

The second epigraph echoes Paul's initial imperial endeavor but in a different historical time and in a different political context. It includes a 2003 news report about the outcomes of the Soviet-Afghan War, providing statistical data about it: sobering numbers of participants, survivors, those wounded and missing in action, the dead—but only on the part of the Soviet Union. Putting these two excerpts together, Alexievich emphasizes the disturbing repetitiveness of history, political motivations, and discursive deception that hides misdeeds behind a narrative of courage, achievement, and heroic sacrifice. In the narrative burial that Alexievich structurally reenacts in the 2016 *Boys in Zinc,* these two examples of the mainstream discourse serve as a symbolic coffin lid that obscures the reality of the Soviet-Afghan experience. With the reader's next flip of the page, this "lid" is going to fling open. Indeed, on the next few pages of the 2016 edition, the author reenacts the reader's first encounter with the unclean dead or the "little boy in zinc."

Alexievich adds one particular testimony, which she calls "Prologue," to the 2016 *Boys in Zinc.* It is the only testimony in the book that comes from a mother whose son survived and returned to her from the Afghan war. Contrary to expectations of joy at the family reunion, her recollection of her son's return is saturated with imagery associated with the unclean dead. From the first line, readers find themselves in a horror film. The testimony starts with the mother declaring that her son killed a person with a kitchen cleaver which she used to chop up rabbit meat for his dinner that very same day. Then she embarks on memories of how he returned from Afghanistan a completely different person (the radical personality change characteristic of the

unclean dead). He resembled his pre-war self only in the mornings; by the end of each day would have turned into a zombie-like creature:

> When he got up in the morning he was still normal: "Mama! Mama!" By evening his face had turned dark, his eyes were heavy with pain. I can't describe it to you ... He didn't drink at first, not a drop, just sat there looking at the wall. He would spring up off the sofa and grab his jacket. I used to stand in the doorway. … He just looked straight through me. And went out (2017, 2).

She recollects how he could not sleep, had no appetite, started drinking, could not communicate, and was unable to express any positive emotions—most behaviors typical of the unclean dead (Zelenin 45). When she tried to speak to him about Afghanistan, he got angry: 'Shut up, Mama!' (2017, 3). He could bond only with other Afghan veterans, which is another feature common to the unclean dead, who associate with their kind (Andriunina 103). Eventually, he violently killed a person who lied about having served in Afghanistan— an individual's encounter with the unclean dead often leads to his death (Zelenin 45).

The stark imagery of this testimony draws the reader's attention to the three aspects of the discourse around Soviet soldiers' experience in Afghanistan that evoke the circumstances and imagery of the unclean dead. These are the official discourse around the war, the public discourse about the war, and the nature of personal trauma. These three aspects are manifest in the mother's recollection of the words of the lawyer who defended the *afganets* (1) at his trial for murder and in the mother's confused desperation (2):

> (1) At the trial it was only the lawyer who said we were trying a sick man. He said the accused wasn't a criminal, he was unwell. He needed treatment. But back then, that's seven years ago, there wasn't any truth about Afghanistan yet (2017, 6).

(2) They called them all “heroes.” “Internationalist soldiers.” But my son was a murderer ... Because he did here what they did out there. What did they give them all medals and decorations for out there? Why did they only judge him and not the ones who sent them there? Who taught him to kill? I didn’t teach him that ... (2017, 7).

Official discourse takes either the form of the rhetoric of praise for the heroism of the *afgantsy* or imposes strict control over the psychological outcomes of their experience, which often resulted in violent, anti-social behavior. Public discourse reveals either complete ignorance of what happened in the war and an inability to learn about the war experiences of *afgantsy,* or it refuses to accept them into society, whether as hero, murderer, or victim. The third aspect—that of personal trauma—can never become an independent discourse because the *afgantsy* and their trauma are ultimately dissociated from the representatives of both the official and the public discourses.

After this “Prologue,” Alexievich includes the section “From the Notebooks,” in which, as described above, she assumes her narrative role as confessor. However, in creating of the structure of the burial ritual in the work, Alexievich becomes a mediating figure between the unclean dead—the confessional self of the *afganets*—and the living community—Soviet and post-Soviet society. By bringing the reader into the narrative through the act of her unintrusive listening, Alexievich makes her reader not only a second-level trauma witness but also a participant of a symbolic burial ritual for the Afghan soldier in which the coffin lid is not soldered down, but open—the stigmas of the mainstream official and public discourses are removed—and that he who was considered dead has a chance to speak and be heard.

The *afganets*’s confessions occur over the three parts of the book, which in the structure of the narrative burial represent the traditional Slavic funerary sequence of three days (Arukask,

Carlson, Nosova, Sedakova, Vinogradova, Zelenin). For this reason, Alexievich names the three parts "Day One", "Day Two," and "Day Three" respectively. Being exposed to the reiteration of raw traumatic memories for three "days" in a row, the reader processes their acute emotional intensity, moving from initial shock to bitter understanding of what it meant to be manipulated into fighting an aggressive war and then to be betrayed and rejected by one's own government and countrymen.

Alexievich provides each "Day" with a subtitle form the Bible: "Day One. 'For many shall come in my name…,'" "Day Two. 'And another dieth in the bitterness of his soul…,'" and "Day Three: 'Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards…'" These reference the following texts: "For many shall come in my name, saying, I am Christ; and shall deceive many" (Mathew 24:5 KJV), "Another dieth in the bitterness of soul and never eateth with pleasure" (Job 21:25 KJV), "Regard not them that have familiar spirits, neither seek after wizards, to be defiled by them: I am the Lord your God" (Leviticus 19:31 KJV), Alexievich, in a parabolic way, emphasizes the bitterness of the plight of the *afgantsy*, who became victims of the Soviet myth and who continue to "walk." With time, the myth does not perish to give place to the truth; instead, it persists, undergoes modification, and leaves tensions between the society and Afghan veterans unresolved. The society continues to stigmatize the veterans and the veterans, being stigmatized and discursively "dead," remain socially dangerous.

To narratively reflect that the reality of Soviet-Afghan experience was again mythologized—its problems swiped under the rug, Alexievich brings the funerary rite to a logical end. She takes the reader to a symbolic graveyard in the penultimate section of the book. This section is called "Postmortem" and includes inscriptions from actual tombstones of Soviet Afghan soldiers:

TATARCHENKO
IGOR LEONIDOVICH
(1961-1981)

In carrying out a combat mission, faithful to his military oath and demonstrating fortitude and courage, he lost his life in Afghanistan.
Beloved Igoryok,
You left this life before you knew it.
Mama and Papa

LADUTKO
ALEXANDER VICTOROVICH
(1961-1984)

Killed in performance of international duty. You carried out your duty as a soldier with honor. You could not save yourself, my son. You lost your life as a hero in the land of Afghanistan, so that the country would have peaceful skies.
To my dear son from Mama

BARTASHEVICH YURI
FRANTSEVICH
(1967-1986)

Died heroically in the performance of his international duty.
We recall, love and mourn.
Your family remembers

BOBKOV LEONID
IVANOVICH
(1964-1984)

Killed in the performance of his international duty. The moon has set, the sun has gone out without you, dear son.
Mama and Papa

(2017, 229-30)

These gravestones demonstrate the persistence of the Soviet mythologization of war and how its cliched discourse is used to justify the tragic loss of a son, a brother, a husband in a costly and misguided war that achieved little if anything and doomed those who survived to a liminal existence between the living and the dead.

The 2016 edition of *Boys in Zinc* includes one last part, which appeared for the first time in the 2001 edition. It includes court records from the 1992-1993 lawsuit against Alexievich, in which some of her interviewees sued her for slander and distortion of their words. In pointing out the incongruities in the judiciary proceedings and the accusers' inability to explain their accusations, Alexievich hints that this lawsuit was initiated, not by the veterans and their relatives, but by government officials in an attempt to maintain control of the discourse about the Soviet-Afghan War. The appended court materials, like all of *Boys in Zinc*, stand as a warning about the power of ideological myths that are accepted without thought or discretion.

In 2019, President Putin officially congratulated Afghan veterans on the 30th anniversary of the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan. He confirmed the legitimacy and necessity of the Soviet campaign there and thanked the veterans for their heroism. The consequence of this is that there has been no resolution for the *afgantsy*. They, the unclean dead, remain "unlaid" and continue to haunt Russian society and its conscience. Alexievich's powerful text represents her attempt to honor truth and to urge readers to recognize and acknowledge their own collaboration with the Soviet myth in the fate of the *afgantsy*.

Closing her texts with gravestone inscriptions and materials from the court trial, Alexievich makes it clear that one more confession has yet to be made. *Boys in Zinc* invites that confession. The nation, both as authority and society, must come to understand that the *afgantsy* are neither make-believe heroes nor beastly criminals but human beings whose pointless suffering has paid for their, the nation's, "mistake." Then the disturbed and disturbing confessional self of the *afgantsy* can receive proper burial, like the child from whom the parent's curse has been lifted.

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In 1990, in the atmosphere of the pre-collapse Soviet Union, both Soviet official and public discourses were rather distinct and swung back and forth between praise and condemnation of the Soviet mission in Afghanistan. On the one hand, this discursive oscillation stemmed from the attempt of the Soviet state to defend itself and control the masses; on the other, it resulted from Soviet society's growing discontent with the actions of the Soviet government. However, in this confrontation of discourses, the Afghan veterans remained ignored, unheard, and stigmatized. They faced one of two choices: either fight publicly for their heroic status or shamefully hide their past in Afghanistan. The latter option was often impossible,

given the psychological and often physical scars that that war experience left on veterans. The former option took root and flourished under the protection of veterans' organizations that sprang up across Russia in the 1990s. With time the Soviet-Afghan War became harder and harder to retain in public memory. By 2016 public discourse has lost its momentum; the official discourse, however, regained not only its power but also stability. Every year on the 15th of February, President Putin congratulates Afghan veterans on anniversary that marks completion of Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, confirms the legitimacy and necessity of the Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan, recognizes that Soviet leadership did not always have the backs of its soldiers, and thanks veterans for their heroism. In both timeframes—the 1990s and the 2000s, *Boys in Zinc* remains one of the few accounts that illuminates the reality of Soviet-Afghan experience and shows the need for a productive national conversation on the subject; it even provides a pathway for such an interaction.

By inserting the confessions of the *afgantsy* into a narrative frame that recreates a funerary rite, Alexievich completes two tasks: she exposes the traumatic experience of *afgantsy* and makes the reader confront the dead young man in the zinc coffin—the most familiar cultural image associated with the Soviet-Afghan War. Allowing the "dead" to come out of the coffin and speak, Alexievich breaks the ritual solemnity and imposed silence around the soldered zinc coffin that helped to perpetuate the Soviet myth of the time. She removes stigmas and biases, allowing readers to reconsider both their own ideas about the Soviet-Afghan War and the role that the discursive tendencies within the culture played in shaping them: state discourse vs. public discourse vs. the suppressed discourse of veterans. The aggressive nature of the confessions made by the Afghan veterans demands a response from the reader as representative of the larger community. They call for a complementary confession from the community that has

never being forthcoming. For those Afghan veterans who chose to support the heroic narrative of the official discourse, the book serves as a reminder of the unsettled confessional self that they hide behind the mask of the hero.

In comparing Alexievich's other two books on the topic of Soviet wars, *Unwomanly Face* and *Last Witnesses*, I find that *Boys in Zinc* make an interesting connection with the former. In constructing its image of the female Soviet soldier, *Unwomanly Face* is forced to confront the mythologized image of the male Soviet soldier-hero that characterizes the official discourse. The ever-venerated spirit of a righteous warrior who sacrificed his life for the Motherland stands in stark contrast to the living woman who had to sacrifice her femininity and youth and to endure pain and suffering, only to be forced to hide her soldierly past in shame and fear of social ostracism. For her, war was not a natural rite of passage into masculinity but a horror, a psychological wound that even forty years after the war still caused profound pain. She was excluded from the myth.

In *Boys in Zinc,* Alexievich captures the psychology of recently returned male Soviet soldiers in a series of confessions that even more powerfully undermine the mythologized image of the Soviet soldier. Like the latter, the collective image of the Soviet soldier in *Boys in Zinc* is a male spirit. However, unlike the mythologized Soviet soldier who after his death received a status similar to secular sainthood, a martyr for his nation, whose sacrifice made him a venerated male role model, the spirit of the Soviet soldier in *Boys in Zinc* is far from sainted. He is a restless unclean dead, whose sacrifice turned out to be either a sin or a mistake; it brought him no true social veneration. Thus, the experience of war can no longer be viewed as the soldier's apotheosis but as his nadir, his transformation into a demon that cannot adjust to peaceful life and make positive connections with the living.

Voices of Utopia, as a cycle, explores the psychological reality of Soviet people. In the context of the cycle, *Boys in Zinc* "increases the volume" in its effort to make Soviet society more aware and vocal about the mythologized character and manipulative force of Soviet official discourse. It also represents a curious case in which Soviet myth (to mix metaphors) "ate" itself; for the first time, people faced a dramatic choice of who and what to believe and how to move forward. By documenting the psychological trauma and cognitive dissonance of Afghan veterans, Alexievich exposes the dissonance between politics and society, between government and message in the Soviet Union, which led to its demise. Given the situation in Russia today, as manipulative techniques are more and more often borrowed from Soviet discourse, *Boys in Zinc* acquires the tenor of an omen.

CONCLUSION

In its examination of Unwomanly Face, Last Witnesses, and Boys in Zinc, the three books from Svetlana Alexievich's cycle Voices of Utopia that deal with war, this dissertation has provided a better understanding of the literariness of Svetlana Alexievich's prose and her signature style. Ironically, Alexievich selects the very voices excluded from "Utopia" (the Soviet Project) and allows them to speak about what had not been allowed to be said for much of Soviet history. By organizing the individual traumatic experiences related by her "voices" into narratives that rely on performative genres, Alexievich engages her interviewees and readers in ritualized confrontations with the trauma of war as experienced in the Soviet Union. In so doing, Alexievich puts her readers into the position of witnesses who live through this painful reenactment of trauma together with Alexievich's interviewees.

Alexievich's particular strategy ensures that her books resemble neither works of history, nor journalism, nor fiction. Instead of presenting readers with bare facts or interpretations delivered in hindsight (journalism, history) or imaginatively recreating a familiar reality (fiction), Alexievich prompts the readers to reconsider their understanding of the nature of Soviet discourse and the Soviet project itself from a new point of view. She allows her readers to hear, perhaps for the first time, the voices of those whose experiences had been relegated to "discursive death" by the mainstream discourse and its particular mythologization of war, and she encourages readers to respond emotionally to the reenacted traumas of her interviewees.

My dissertation was prompted by a series of research questions that began with the question of genre: How do we define the unusual genre in which Alexievich writes? This generated a series of sub-questions: Is the genre oral history? Journalism? Literature? Is it documentary or fictional? Can we call it performative? Is it a neutral or a polemical genre? I then proceeded to query the "narrator": How do we categorize Alexievich's narrative voice and what

is the relationship between her voice and the chorus of individual voices who provide the "testimonies" in her books? How does it differ from other authors who once worked or now work in similar genres? From genre and narrator, I moved on to meaning and message: What is Alexievich's purpose or goal in constructing and using this genre? What is her message to her readers? What kind of self-reflection does Alexievich urge upon her interviewees and her readers, and why? Many of my questions were answered in the course of my work on the dissertation.

Chapter One showed how Alexievich introduces the performative genre of requiem in *Unwomanly Face* and begins to dismantle the mythologized image of the male Soviet soldier as a glorified, heroic warrior to be emulated to the point of self-sacrifice. Sharing their war trauma and the lessons learned from their traumatic experience in their testimonies, World War II women veterans communicated not only the brutal reality of war and the complexities of soldierly life and heroism but also the very real fact that women, not only men, played an important role. By comparing the two editions of *Unwomanly Face*, the chapter demonstrated how the first 1985 edition began the process of separating women's actual contributions to World War II from the patriarchal stereotypes that dominated post-war Soviet discourse by valuing the sacrifice for which the average woman soldier had never received due credit. The chapter's analysis of narrative changes in the 2016 edition of *Unwomanly Face* showed how this later version of the book exposed the real price of Soviet heroism and managed to convey a strong pacifist statement that questioned both the impact of the mythology of World War II on Soviet identity and the legitimacy of war as a means of resolving sociopolitical conflicts.

Chapter Two demonstrated how Alexievich's use of the magic tale genre in *Last Witnesses* allows her to diminish the mythic glory of the Soviet portrayal of World War II. The

chapter described how the application of this genre to the real-life experiences of children in wartime reveals the drama and trauma of an unsuccessful maturation rite undergone by an entire generation of Soviet children who lived through the war. Their actual war experiences went unrecognized and were replaced in the mainstream discourse with magic tale-like narratives glorifying the heroism and sacrifice of children, only on a slightly lesser scale than the heroism and sacrifice of the Soviet soldier. Such fictional portrayals of children in war, created to enhance the myth, resulted in real lives lived after the war with subconscious shame and guilt for somehow having failed to live up to the model. As in *Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich does little more than present the testimonies of average people and put them into context. The readers may come to their own conclusions about both the public story of war and the private reality of war.

Chapter Three focused on *Boys in Zinc,* a work that starkly reveals the reality of war experience of Soviet soldiers in a different war—the Soviet-Afghan War. Continuing the war thematics of the two previous two books, *Boys in Zinc* exposes the tragic outcomes of the tenacious presence of the heroic myth of the World War II myth in Soviet society. The chapter argued that Alexievich uses the genre of confession to present the experience of Soviet soldiers who fought in Afghanistan in the hope of resolving the deep antagonisms that continue to exist among Afghan veterans, the Soviet government, and Soviet society into the present day. To emphasize the vulnerable, liminal, and exclusionary position of Afghan veterans in this relationship, Alexievich relies on the motif of the Slavic unclean dead, the imagery of which persistently reappears in different individual testimonies. The chapter explains that by modeling the book's structure after a funerary ritual, Alexievich immerses the reader in the traumatic details of the Soviet-Afghan experience, but she also implicitly suggests a symbolic resolution to the trauma of the Afghan veteran. The space of her book becomes a common ground between

her interviewees and her readers for sharing pain and understanding guilt, exclusion, and betrayal. The chapter also emphasized that, while all three books are united by the theme of Soviet-era wars, *Boys in Zinc* continues the thematics of *Unwomanly Face* by once again entering into a polemic with the official mainstream discourse regarding the mythologization of the image of the Soviet soldier. While *Unwomanly Face* challenges the image of the Soviet soldier as a righteous, heroic spirit who bravely sacrificed his life for the Motherland, *Boys in Zinc* offers an alternative representation of the Soviet soldier as the restless, walking dead who are relegated to a liminal space by their own community. The tormented Afghan veterans keep reliving their experience of war, are unable to adjust to peaceful life, and are ultimately rejected by their Motherland. Alexievich's narrative presentation subverts the myth of the righteous Motherland and the self-sacrificing, heroic Soviet soldier and exposes it as an effective strategy used by the Soviet state to manipulate its citizens into an offensive war.

My findings also illuminate the reasons why Alexievich is misunderstood or misinterpreted in both the West and in Russia and Belarus in a post-Cold War world. Western readership emphasizes the historicity of Alexievich's texts, which is unflattering to the Soviet Union, and disregards their literariness. In addition, the particular mythologized Soviet constructs that the author tackles and dismantles in her books and the performative genres that she used to do so are culture-specific and do not always speak to representatives of other cultures. While Alexievich's prose produces a profound emotional effect on Western readers, it does not trigger the same kind of inner transformation or revision of world view in them as it does in readers in post-Soviet societies. Consequently, Western readers conceptualize her prose along the lines of the tradition of oral history, with which they are well acquainted. However, this interpretation of Alexievich's texts is misleading, as it fails to account for the liberties the

author takes in stylizing the testimonies. These become evident only when one undertakes the comparative analysis of her original texts and their subsequent revisions.

Russian and Belarusian readership, on the contrary, often rejects both the historicity and literariness of Alexievich's prose. This occurs because her books call for readers to reject the assumptions, the discourse, and the idols of the Soviet past, a painful process for many. Not everyone is able to take this path. For Russian officials and many intellectuals, it is impossible, since their power, influence, and public image depend on this discourse. For ordinary readers, including her interviewees (for example, in *Unwomanly Face* and *Boys in Zinc*), Alexievich's books may even appear as slander or distortion because not many are ready to admit that their suffering had been for nothing (that they were manipulated by their leaders), to stand up publicly for the validity of their own experience, and to use it actively as a tool for social transformation. Alexievich dares to defend individual experience as it actually was, not as it was mythologized. Thus, condemning her works and refusing to acknowledge her presentation of Soviet experience in reality means condemning the individual's experience. This issue was relevant to Soviet society and remains relevant to the societies of many post-Soviet countries. Sadly, this condemnation comes from both officials and ordinary people—the bearers of individual experience. In other words, the tendency of the state to dominate over its people and the tendency of people to subject themselves to the power of the state continues to characterize the post-Soviet societies that reject Alexievich's work.

This project was challenging in a number of ways. First, working with real-life individual experiences in Alexievich's texts was both a motivation and a roadblock on my research path. On the one hand, I felt honored to have a chance through my research to support and contribute to the author's mission of defending the individual as an important catalyst of social justice—a

struggle that is still ongoing in many post-Soviet societies. On the other hand, I often felt overwhelmed by the emotional weight of the material with which I was working. Second, I started my research when scholarship on Alexievich was rather scarce. It was exciting to be a part of opening this field, but I often felt like a novice who had to search for words and concepts that would allow me to describe the subtle mechanics of Alexievich's untraditional texts. Third, at the beginning of my research I had little idea of what kind of textual analysis Alexievich's books might require. My initial plan had been to analyze all five books of the cycle, but the numerous and important variations among different editions of the same book—variations which turned out to be critical to this project and which doubled the amount of text with which I had to work—forced me to modify the project. I decided to devote my full attention to the three books that addressed the topic of Soviet wars. The topic of war provided thematic coherence and kept me focused.

The study of Alexievich's contribution, particularly to post-Soviet Russian literature, is only in its beginning stages. Many directions for further research suggest themselves, such as Alexievich and Dostoevsky, Solzhenitsyn, or other writers, the "translation" of her work into other formats (theatre, film), her role in the attempt to "dismantle" the Soviet Project, the evolution of her writing style, and her mission as a humanist.

I see my own findings from this project, as well as conclusions reached in my article on *Voices from Chernobyl*, as forming the core of a book project that would either cover all five books or possibly explore Alexievich's moral and historical message across the *Utopia* cycle. Alexievich's work continues to fascinate me and provide me with a research trajectory that taps into my other professional interests (performativity in literature, the nature of genre, the use of

folklore in literature, and other topics). I look forward to observing the further evolution of Alexievich's unusual style and her reception in her homeland and abroad.

Over the course of my research I also developed an interest in issues of translation as I compared how various translators rendered the challenging, emotional prose of the testimonies and Alexievich's own aloof, distanced voice. What should be captured? What could be lost? I would like to pursue translation issues further. Another project arising from this research would be further investigation of the genre of the magic tale in Soviet narratives for and about children.

A high point during my work on this dissertation was the opportunity to meet and interview Svetlana Alexievich in Minsk in February 2020. This opportunity pushed me far beyond my comfort zone. I had no prior experience of interviewing people, let alone a person who herself is a professional interviewer and who has put this skill to such powerful use in *Voices of Utopia*. I had to develop my interviewing skills very quickly, which was challenging but also exciting.

Meeting Svetlana Alexievich was an experience in and of itself. She appeared to me as a person who was as attentive to large implications as to tiny detail. During the interview, we had to pause periodically because she had to answer phone calls. Each time I was worried that the interruption would distract her from her line of thought, divert her from answering, but each time I was surprised that she instantly regained her engagement with our conversation and on her own, without my reminding her, returned to the exact point where she stopped and continued to develop it to a profound philosophical depth.

My questions were mainly focused on the author's creative process, genre, writing style, and narrative strategies. One of my questions was about how she saw her own role in the texts. She did not address the question directly but started from a distance and circled into the question:

> These voices *are*, they exist, these women exist, the survivors of Chernobyl exist, but they might have disappeared mutely into darkness. Of course the newshounds dig out some things, but those are just crumbs. My books unite the voices into a human symphony. And this symphony continues to live and to influence today's listener, today's reader. Without these books, these voices would have disappeared into darkness.
>
> Who am I? I am neither a collector nor a writer. I create and build. Think of a church. We rarely know who built this or that temple (there are exceptions). But in whose head was the design conceived? Without this design, the temple would be nothing more than a pile of bricks. And that's the way it is with my books. So many of them [the voices] have disappeared into darkness. And this is very sad. Now I would be very interested to know what it was like to live in the times of r*es publica*.[45]

I sip on my tea to regain myself. Once again the voice of Svetlana Alexievich, first encountered in her books and now encountered in person, has shown me the humanity, the yearning for truth, and the power of human memory that exists despite the eternally fading face of passing time. In my work on this dissertation, I became part of something bigger than myself. This is the power of the humanities.

[45] From personal interview, 20 February 2020.

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