

Deconstructing Patriarchal War Narratives: State Mythmaking and Documentary  
Prose of Svetlana Alexievich

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## Introduction

The main focus of my thesis is Svetlana Alexievich's role in shaping new forms of emplotment and a sense of post-Soviet authenticity. I focus on her two oral histories examining war experiences under socialism—*War's Unwomanly Face* (*U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*), about World War II, and *Zinky Boys* (*Tsinkovye mal'chiki*), about the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Alexievich articulated her method in quite adversarial dialogue with the state, which in the USSR claimed a monopoly on collective memory and under Putin, tries to regain such a monopoly. In Soviet times, the key tool for shaping collective memory was cinema (Norris 19). Under Putin, the government has renewed state support of patriotic war films. Hence, I compare Alexievich's books with major films about World War II and the Afghan war either fully funded or supported by the Soviet or Russian state.

In Chapter 1, I discuss the historical development of the cult of the Great Patriotic War in the Soviet Union, in order to better understand how *War's Unwomanly Face* fits into this evolving remembrance of the war. In Chapter 2, I discuss Iurii Ozerov's *Liberation* as a representation of the state-sponsored war cult, and compare this to Alexievich's female-centric oral history in *War's Unwomanly Face*. In Chapter 3, I discuss the Soviet Afghan war and compare *Zinky Boys* with the film *9th Company*, which, with state support, revives a kind of war cult through imperial nostalgia. The two films I examine were not created at the same time as Alexievich's books about the respective wars—*Liberation* was released in 1970-71, and *9th Company* in 2005—but the two films still provide useful bookends for Alexievich's prose. They illustrate the type of narratives Alexievich argued against in her writing, and the type of narratives that argued against her. While not the only sources that serve this function, these two

films provide a clear articulation of state-sponsored war myths using film as a mass medium<sup>1</sup>. In my understanding of the cultural myth I draw on Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, in which he characterizes mythology as a type of speech, including written and representational modes of discourse, that must have a historical foundation and a "signifying consciousness" (Barthes 108). It presents a set of values as a natural condition of the world, when in fact it is a social construct.

As primary sources I use Russian editions of *War's Unwomanly Face* and *Zinky Boys*, the 1988 English translation of the original Russian edition of *War's Unwomanly Face* published in 1985 by Mastatskaia Literatura in Minsk, and the 1992 English translation of the 1990 edition of *Zinky Boys*<sup>2</sup>. I examine several versions of each book, as there are significant differences between editions.

In order to better understand the significance of Alexievich's writing in the context of the historical era in which it was produced, I draw on Serguei Oushakine's discussion of "objectalism" as a new discourse of authenticity. In his article "Totality Decomposed: Objectalizing Late Socialism in Post-Soviet Biochronicles" he provides a framework for understanding late- and post-Soviet forms of documentary narratives. Oushakine cites the television series *Lately* (*Namedni dir. Dzhaniq Faiziev*<sup>3</sup>) and documentary film *Private*

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<sup>1</sup> I am aware that there were films made during the late Soviet era that also tried to rethink the established war myths and are closer to Alexievich's approach. One notable example is the 1985 film *Come and See (Idi i Smotri)*, directed by Elem Klimov and written along with Ales Adamovich, based on Adamovich's book *I am From the Fiery Village*. I chose instead to examine *Liberation* as a film narrative of the Great Patriotic War because it provides a representation of the state-sponsored myth as it developed in the late Soviet era, which is what Alexievich was reacting to in her prose. Moreover, Alexievich's documentary prose anticipates screen versions of war narratives that would come out during perestroika.

<sup>2</sup> Whereas *Liberation* was produced in the central state film studio Mosfilm, *War's Unwomanly Face* first appeared on the fringes of the USSR. The full book version was first published by the Belarusian publishing house Мастацкая літаратура, then in English by Moscow Progress Publishers. The publishers of an English translation were targeting not a mainstream Russian speaking audience, but an international audience who would pick up editions published by the Soviet publishing house.

<sup>3</sup> Though Faiziev was the director of *Lately*, the series is also commonly associated with the creator, Leonid Parfenov.

*Chronicles* (dir. Vitalii Manskii 1999) as examples of a tendency that emerged during perestroika and after the fall of the USSR, in which artists refused to provide a unified narrative in their work. They avoided both the existing Soviet narratives, such as the socialist realist master plot<sup>4</sup>, as well as any alternative unifying master-narrative. The television series *Lately*, for example, “was neither an ‘alternative’ version of late Soviet history nor ‘a search for truth in its multiplicity.’ Instead, it was a search for multiplicity itself; an effective attempt to document the polyphonic texture of a society that had been routinely reduced to its most authoritarian genres” (Oushakine 653-54). The series presented to the viewer a collection of Soviet-era documentary footage, clips from films, and other “kino-things,” interspersed with commentary from public figures, without attempts to provide any coherent arrangement or narrative.

Alexievich’s oral histories, also referred to as “documentary prose,” “super-literature,” or “novels in voices” (Myers 331), are part of this same late- and post-Soviet narrative trend of letting multiplicity speak for itself. The books are edited to some degree, but ostensibly present the authentic voices of various people who lived through historical events rather than the unifying vision of the author. This creates a new sense of authenticity distinct from that of narratives that aim to be the objective authority on historical events. Alexievich’s books could be considered the literary equivalents—moreover, antecedents—of television shows such as *Lately* and *Private Chronicles*<sup>5</sup>. Alexievich provides no hierarchy among her interviewees, unusual in the context of Soviet tradition of discourse about war and the army, which is hierarchical by

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<sup>4</sup> For a detailed discussion see Katerina Clark, *The Soviet Novel: History as Ritual*. 2000.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, in 1981 Alexievich wrote the script for a seven-part documentary film series, also called *War’s Unwomanly Face* (*U voiny ne zhenskoye litso*), directed by Viktor Dashuk and produced in the Belarusian documentary film studio Letopis’ (Belarusfilm). The 10-25 minute episodes feature interviews with women who were involved in World War II. At least some of these interviews were also included in the book version of *War’s Unwomanly Face*; one episode title became a chapter title in the book.

design. All voices are presented as equal. Accounts from mothers and civilian employees are not given any less prominence or weight than those from people with military experience, who in other accounts are often seen as more authoritative in matters of war. She does not include any accounts from high-ranking generals<sup>6</sup>. Moreover, there is no obvious arrangement or categorizing of the voices, suggesting a deliberate lack not only of hierarchy, but also any unifying narrative. While Alexievich does have her own ideology—she is a pacifist and also, according to literary scholar Ilya Kukulín, “does not want to declare history absurd” (2017)<sup>7</sup>—this idea is not openly formulated in her works, so the conclusions to be made are more or less up to the reader.

Svetlana Alexievich was born in 1948, three years after the end of World War II, in Ivano-Frankivsk, a town in western Ukraine. Her mother was Ukrainian, and her father Belarusian. Her father fought in the Red Army, and after he was discharged, her family moved to Belarus, where both her parents taught in a village school. After finishing school, Alexievich worked as a reporter for a local newspaper, and two years later, in 1967, enrolled in the State Belarusian University in Minsk to study journalism—she wanted to attend a writing school, and this seemed to her the closest she could get.<sup>8</sup> After graduation, she worked in Beresa as a reporter for another local newspaper, at the same time working as a schoolteacher. After several years, she became a correspondent for the literary magazine *Neman*. She says during Soviet times,

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<sup>6</sup> This rejection of the “generals” point of view originates in the so-called “lieutenant” prose of the Thaw-era, which privileged the point of view of the protagonists from the trenches—junior officers and soldiers—and questioned the veracity of the point of view of the headquarters, the narrative model inherited from the Stalin era.

<sup>7</sup> This refers to a personal interview conducted with Ilya Kukulín in 2017. The full transcript can be found in the appendix.

<sup>8</sup> Her father had once attended the same journalism department, but dropped out to serve in the Red Army, and later abandoned his career in journalism after a relative was arrested.

“journalism wasn’t that free or interesting of a space. There was a lot of censorship; it was difficult.” Alexievich also expressed frustration with the profession itself, which, in her view, was “very constraining. It focuses on the surface, banalities, events,” while she wanted to be able to talk to people in depth and explore issues such as “love, death, and war.” In this early stage of her career she tried other forms of writing as well—poetry, plays, essays, investigative reports—but these often left her dissatisfied, as she had the desire to “create a new text.” Although she was tempted by writing fiction, working as a journalist ultimately convinced her that people’s individual stories were “more powerful than anything you would read in fiction” (Palattella).

The turning point in her career came when she discovered the book *Out of Fire* by Ales Adamovich, Yanka Bryl, and Vladimir Kolesnyk, which records testimonies of Belarusian villagers who survived brutal German attacks during World War II. Alexievich writes that she was “shaken by the book,” which affected her more strongly than almost anything else she had read. A pioneering author in the genre of oral history, Adamovich soon became Alexievich’s teacher and mentor. However, while Adamovich interspersed first-person narratives with his own commentary, Alexievich preferred limiting such authorial intrusions. She “wanted to dispense with the author’s voice and with the usual chronologies and contexts” (Gessen 4) and focus on the stories themselves. In the introduction to *War’s Unwomanly Face* Alexievich writes that she does include sections of her diary in the book, which documents the geography of her search and her own emotions and experiences throughout the journey. In the process of collecting material, she came to believe that “a document was fully valid only when its author made his or her presence felt along with its contents” (Alexievich 1988, 9). At the same time, she

expresses doubt that she has the right to use words that describe her own feelings, especially when the subject of her book is the harrowing experiences of others. She writes: “Will anybody be interested in a diary concerned with *my* emotions?” (Alexievich 1988, 9). Kukulin makes the point that at times, the author’s voice functions as that of a playwright, providing descriptions similar to stage directions that let the reader visualize the speaker’s movements, tone, and pauses (2017). Alexievich preserves the conversational feel of her speakers’ stories, often using ellipses at the end of sentences rather than editing the accounts into a more typically literary style.

In his book *Machines of Noisy Time: How Soviet Montage Became a Method of Unofficial Culture*, Kukulin characterizes Alexievich’s writing as part of the tradition of montage as an alternative style in literature and art. He writes that montage emerged in the 1920s as a “dynamic representation of contemporaneity, and was later “reinterpreted and adapted for critical analysis of utopian consciousness in unofficial literature and art of the 1960s and 1970s.” Indeed, works of this time period, such as those of Adamovich’s, were highly influential for Alexievich. In addition, “the aesthetics of montage was based on the experience of psychological trauma” (Kukulin 2015, 527). While the style evolved over time, montage combines different styles and fragments which, in their juxtaposition, “acquire new importance or new meaning” (Kukulin 2017). At the same time, he notes that the influence of the Soviet school of journalism can be seen in Alexievich’s writing, in the sense that she regroups these voices, edits them, and “smooths them into one style.” Even so, the differences and unique experiences of her heroines come through clearly. Kukulin states that Alexievich’s work “underscores the impossibility of the monologous voice about the contemporary world, the world of catastrophes.” While she considers herself first and foremost a writer, Alexievich acknowledges the influence of her

journalistic background in her writing, saying that she “collected her data as a journalist, but worked with them as a writer” (Kukulin 2017).

## **Chapter 1: Evolution of the Cult of the Great Patriotic War Under Late Socialism**

It is difficult to overestimate the significance of World War II, or Great Patriotic War, in Soviet and Russian history. Between 20 and 30 million Soviet people lost their lives, about 15% of the population, and the USSR bore the brunt of most of the fighting on its own territory, large areas of which endured a brutal Nazi occupation. The memory of the war has remained central in various forms of cultural production in the past seventy years. The state played a large role in keeping the memory of the war alive with an “official” history that emphasized the Soviet Union’s heroic victory over fascism. Film scholar Denise Youngblood notes that “Although other nations have their own myths (“the Good War” for Americans; the war as yet another victimization for Poles), none has made sacrifice and suffering Virtue to nearly the extent as did the Soviets” (1994, 1). However, the official stance on the war and acceptable public discourse evolved during the postwar years, which I will overview briefly here.

The day victory was announced in the Soviet Union—May 9, 1945—was a day of mass celebrations and emotional, spontaneous gatherings. The Supreme Soviet declared May 9<sup>th</sup> a national holiday. The press was full of articles about the victory, although, as Nina Tumarkin notes, there was little focus on the enormous losses in the war, and no casualty figures were published. In the first postwar days, the war was already being presented as “a vindication of the Communist Party, Red Army, and the socialist system” (Tumarkin 91).

After the initial euphoria, however, the country began the difficult process of reconstruction from the devastation of the war. Stalin understood that millions of his people expected to be rewarded with better and freer lives after all they had sacrificed for their country.

Knowing that historically, soldiers returning from war often coincided with demands for internal reform, Stalin intensified repressions of ethnic minorities, writers, and intellectuals after the end of World War II. Soviet veterans who had been prisoners of war were accused of collaboration with the enemy and sent to forced labor camps. Entire minority groups, such as Crimean Tatars, Chechens, Ingush, and Kalmyks, were also accused of collaboration and deported to remote areas of the country. Stalin purged or demoted many military, cracked down on writers and intellectuals, and carried out an “anticosmopolitan” campaign against Jews.

In addition, part of the strategy to retain control of the country was to rewrite the war narrative. Downplaying the status of war veterans, Stalin took credit himself for the victory and used it to justify the mass terror of the 1930s. In a February 1946 speech, Stalin asserted that “the material foundations for triumph had been laid by the pre-war programmes of collectivization and industrialization, and by the purges that had accompanied them” (Finney 314).

As part of Stalin’s effort to leave the war behind, in 1947, Victory Day was made a regular working day, rather than a state holiday. Memoirs about the war were not permitted to be published, and historians were denied access to archives of war documents. Especially with the Cold War beginning, this was the time for economic reconstruction, not dwelling on the war, and this view was reflected in the state press. “Military heroism per se faded [from the war narrative], which moved its focus from feats of valour to the practical business of economic and social reconstruction” (Tumarkin 100). The goal of this movement was not to suppress the memory of the war completely, as was done with the purges of the 1930s, but rather to promote a memory of the war as a “stirring, but safely distant, reminder of the success of the socialist system and its Supreme Leader” (101). This period was also the height of Stalin’s cult of personality, and many

of the war memorials that went up in the Soviet Union were monuments to Stalin. A notable film about the Great Patriotic War from the Stalin era is *The Fall of Berlin*, made in 1949 by Mikheil Chiaureli, in which Stalin “appears to have won the war almost singlehandedly” (Youngblood 1994, 413).

When Nikita Khrushchev came to power after Stalin’s death in 1953, Soviet society experienced de-Stalinization, a limited opening of society, looser censorship of literature and the arts, and greater freedom to discuss of the war, which under Stalin, had been “squelched as a topic of inquiry and public celebration” (Tumarkin 110). During this period was also the beginning stage of the formation of a cult of the Great Patriotic War, which Tumarkin defines as “an organized system of symbols and rituals driven by political imperatives determined by its managers” (110). Some aspects of the war cult were established by this time—for example, the basic plot of the war and the Victory Banner, the flag hoisted over the Reichstag during the Battle of Berlin, as a major symbol.

Other aspects, such as how to regard Stalin’s role, were still evolving. In his denunciation of Stalin in his Secret Speech at the 20<sup>th</sup> Party Congress, Khrushchev included a discussion of Stalin’s role in the Great Patriotic War. First of all, he challenged the idea that Stalin was the mastermind of the Soviet victory, calling it “utterly improbable” that Stalin’s foresight and strategy had won the war. Khrushchev then accused Stalin of numerous wartime crimes and concluded: “Not Stalin, but the Party as a whole, the Soviet government, our heroic Army, its talented leaders and brave soldiers, the whole Soviet nation – these are the ones who assured the victory in the Great Patriotic War.” At the same time, Khrushchev stressed the Party’s importance in the war in his speech. In a line that resulted in “thunderous and prolonged”

applause, Khrushchev stated: “The main role and the main credit for the victorious ending of the war belongs to our Communist Party, to the armed forces of the Soviet Union, and to the tens of millions of Soviet people raised by the party” (Tumarkin 109).

Despite Khrushchev’s emphasis on the Communist Party’s role in the victory, the Thaw was marked by the appearance of memoirs, novels, films, and music that focused on the wartime experiences of ordinary people. Authors of this period include Ales Adamovich (who later became Svetlana Alexievich’s mentor), Grigorii Baklanov, Iurii Bondarev, Bulat Okudzhava, and others. The critic Lazar Lazarev notes that despite their literary differences, all these authors “shared the conviction that the war was won by the *people*, that it was the people who had borne on their shoulders the whole burden, all the terrible consequences of Stalin’s policies” (Tumarkin 111). Films of this period similarly depicted the war by focusing on the individual and private life. Examples are Mikhail Kalatozov’s *The Cranes are Flying* (*Letiat zhuravli* 1957), and Andrei Tarkovskii’s *Ivan’s Childhood* (*Ivanovo detstvo* 1962). Such films would have been impermissible under Stalin for both their subject matter and departure from socialist realism, and therefore mark a clear shift from films of the Stalin era like *The Fall of Berlin*.

At the same time, there were limits to permissible discourse about the war. Some uncomfortable truths about the war could be confronted during the Thaw, but only if they could be blamed mainly on Stalin, not the Soviet system itself (Finney 316). Works that went too far in criticizing the state were censored. For instance, Vasilii Grossman’s *Life and Fate*, an epic novel centered around the Battle of Stalingrad that, among other things, drew parallels between Communist and Fascist regimes, was declared “anti-Soviet” when Grossman submitted it for publication in 1960. A year later, KGB officers raided his apartment and confiscated every copy

of the manuscript they could find. In a meeting with the Party's chief guardian of ideology, Grossman was told that the novel would not be able to be published for another two or three hundred years (Tumarkin 113).<sup>9</sup>

Under Brezhnev (1964-82), the cult of war, now fully developed, became the central myth of the official history of the Soviet state. This era was the most stable in Soviet history, but also characterized by tighter domestic controls and censorship, the end of de-Stalinization, huge military buildup, aging and corrupt Party leadership, and increasing cynicism among the population. Promises that the country would soon reach full Communism seemed increasingly empty to many. The authorities began searching for other sources of legitimacy, and found it in the Great Patriotic war. After all, “no matter how far the Eastern Bloc would lag behind the West economically and technologically, the ultimate ideological competition was won in 1945 and sealed by blood” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 45). World War II was still a relevant recent memory, unlike the 1917 revolution, and, as Tumarkin points out, “in its idealized form, the war had everything: violence, drama, martyrdom, success, and a chic global status” (132). The memory of the war—at least, a centralized, unproblematic “master narrative” of it—was revived with the hope of energizing and mobilizing the populace. Tumarkin describes the basic plot of the master narrative thus:

Collectivization and rapid industrialization under the First and Second Five-Year Plans prepared our country for war, and despite an overpowering surprise attack by the fascist beast and its inhuman wartime practices, despite the loss of twenty million valiant martyrs to the cause, our country, under the leadership of the Communist Party headed by

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, *Life and Fate* was smuggled out of the country and published in 1988, nearly 25 years after Grossman died.

Comrade Stalin, arose as one united front and expelled the enemy from our own territory and that of Eastern Europe, thus saving Europe—and the world—from fascist enslavement (134).

Soviet authorities censored any published works that diverged from this script. Taboo topics included the defeats of 1941, reasons for these defeats, the Nazi-Soviet pact, and purges of military officers prior to the war. Ironically, the cult of war was exemplified by the phrase “no one is forgotten, nothing is forgotten” and claimed to remember every person and event of the war, often in the greatest possible detail (Tumarkin 51). At the same time, there were significant distortions and omissions in the official myth of the Great Patriotic War.

In 1965, on the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the victory, Victory Day was again declared an official holiday, marked by a day off from work. This “sacred day” was an integral part of the growing war cult, along with objects that took on huge symbolic importance, such as the Victory Banner. There were also a number of war memorials built under Brezhnev, many of them massive structures—for example, the Volgograd memorial, which is considered to be the largest statue in the world.



*Figure 1: Volgograd war memorial (The Motherland Calls) at Mamayev Kurgan*

Despite the celebration and symbolic importance of the Great Patriotic War, Tumarkin notes that “the emphasis vacillated between past and present, war and peace, depending on the politics of the movement” (153). While the war was glorified as a series of heroic feats that the next generation should emulate if the need arose, the Soviet Union also aligned itself with the anti-nuclear movement in Europe and tried to portray itself as the leader, given the fact that the USSR lost 20 million people during the war and therefore understood the price of violence. There were other contradictions in the messages Soviet people received, and despite the increased attention paid to the war, the process of glorification also involved the suppression of real, individual memories of people who lived through that period.

In the late 1980s, under Gorbachev’s policy of glasnost, the existing cult of the Great Patriotic War crumbled. Gorbachev’s reforms set into motion a process of uncovering and publicizing long-suppressed truths that “within a year or two called into question the very legitimacy of the government and Party that had produced Stalin’s system and continued its legacy” (Tumarkin 165). Many of the revelations that came out during glasnost had to do with Stalin’s brutal collectivization, industrialization, and repressions in the 1930s. This de-Stalinization also challenged the established history of the Great Patriotic War. As Tumarkin puts it, glasnost “demolished that sonorous combination of self-pity and self-congratulation that for so long had characterized the official memorialization of the war” (188). With Stalin’s wartime actions brought to light, critics asserted that he was as responsible for the destruction of the Soviet Union and its army as was Hitler. Adamovich wrote: "How to distinguish between those Hitler killed and those Stalin killed, if they killed our people the same way—one entering the country from the outside, the other—from within?"(qtd. in Tumarkin 207). Although

American and Western observers celebrated the glasnost revelations, for many Soviet citizens, the sudden reveal of information about the country's brutal past and shattering of national myths was a divisive, traumatizing experience. During the frenzy of new information and challenges to official historiography, the idealized history of the Great Patriotic War was replaced with "raw human memory" (Tumarkin 188). Svetlana Alexievich's oral history collections, though the first was published just before the start of glasnost, reflect this evolution of historical memory in Soviet society.

## **Chapter 2: Comparison of Narratives of the Great Patriotic War**

In this section, I analyze narratives that exemplify different versions of the Great Patriotic War cult and the extent to which they accept or challenge the official mythmaking. I first look at the film *Liberation* as a cinematic representation of the state-sponsored war cult, then compare this to Alexievich's oral history of the war in *War's Unwomanly Face*.

### **State-Sponsored Realism 1.0 - *Liberation***

*Liberation (Osvobozhdenie)*, directed by Iurii Ozerov, exemplifies the cult of war under Brezhnev as well as developments in the film industry during this period. It is an eight-hour, five-part epic film that was commissioned by the state for the twenty-fifth anniversary of Victory Day in 1970. It was released from 1968-1971 and was a co-production between the Soviet Union, Italy, East Germany, and Poland. Nearly all Eastern Bloc countries also contributed actors, location shooting, and financing (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 44). The consolidation of the war narrative under Brezhnev was reflected in *Liberation*, which “was conceived as the ultimate screen epic of the Great Patriotic War, a film that would embody an authoritative cinematic discourse about the war and finalize and ‘own’ the meaning of that historical event” (47).

The film is massive in nearly every way—in length, cast size, production, soundtrack, and dramatic, drawn out battle scenes. It aims to show every level of the war, from Stalin's deliberations with top generals and Allied counterparts to the efforts of ordinary soldiers at the front. These dramatized scenes of military strategy are interspersed with scenes of various battles, shown in color and with aerial shots to convey the huge scale of the geographical area,

size of the army, and technological capacity. The sights and sounds of war are often complemented by striking landscapes, which adds to the visual spectacle.

The film “provides an excellent overview of the prevailing official interpretation of the Great Patriotic War. It adds detail to what Nina Tumarkin calls the war cult’s ‘master plot’ as it developed in the Brezhnev era” (Youngblood 2010, 158). In part, the film is a rejection of Thaw-era war movies which were, according to a review in *The Art of Cinema*, “guilty of subjectivism and de-heroization in representing the war” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 44). Indeed, during the late 1960s and early 1970s, a number of film scripts dealing with the war were rejected by the Main Scripts and Editing Commission of Goskino, sending the message that “Thaw liberal politics was out, together with stories of individuals and their physical and moral suffering and dilemmas” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 24). *Liberation*, in contrast, is a film of “heroic and epic character,” according to its main editor (“Osvobozhdenie Evropy” 1), and draws on earlier film depictions of the war. Ozerov was a student of Igor Savchenko, the director of the 1948 war film *The Third Blow*, and the influence of this epic-style cinema is clear in *Liberation*. The film represents a “return to a monumental portrayal of World War II, reminiscent of the late Stalin era” (Youngblood 2010, 146).

As Prokhorov and Prokhorova point out, the production had several goals. Firstly, it was meant to counter Western films about the Second World War and “restore historical justice” (“Osvobozhdenie Evropy” 6) by countering Anglo-American films such as *The Longest Day* (dir. Ken Annakin, 1962), *Battle of the Bulge* (dir. Ken Annakin, 1965), and *Battle of Britain* (dir. Guy Hamilton, 1968). Such films ignore “the enormous role of our country and other socialist countries in the defeat of fascist Germany” (37). *Liberation*, then, intended to correct

this factual injustice and depict the final years of the war, in which “the Soviet army fulfilled its great liberating mission and brought freedom to the peoples of Eastern Europe” (6).

In addition to this ideological competition over the meaning of World War II, the making of *Liberation* reflects Cold War competition in the entertainment industry. The film aimed to impress viewers with the epic scale and visual spectacle. Prokhorov and Prokhorova contend that “the driving force behind *Liberation*’s epic scale was the desire to create a film spectacle capable of competing with Western productions internationally and of showcasing the Soviet film industry’s—and thus the Soviet state’s— power” (46). Finally, *Liberation* was meant to serve as an educational resource for younger generations and help them “connect with the heroic Soviet past” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 44). Letters in the film’s production file emphasize its value not only in countering Western propaganda and paying tribute to the courage of the Soviet army, but also “to bring up new generations in the spirit of communism and internationalism” (“Osvobozhdenie Evropy” 27). Notably, the original title of the epic was *The Liberation of Europe*.

*Liberation* is characterized as a “historical chronicle” dedicated to the final, victorious years of the war. The film begins on April 12, 1943—two years after the Soviet Union entered the war and after the victory at Stalingrad, which was the turning point in the war for the Red Army. Omitting the first half of the war “allowed Ozerov to avoid the disagreeable subject of the encirclement and subsequent annihilation of the Red Army” (Youngblood 2010, 159).

*Liberation*, then, is the story of a nearly unbroken string of Soviet triumphs leading up to the final victory. At the same time, the filmmakers had to balance historical truthfulness with entertainment value. The result is a film that is “eclectic and opportunistic,” lacking a uniform

style (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 49). The massive battle scenes are all in color, while historical events, such as meetings of world leaders and army marshals, are shown in black and white—though these are dramatized reenactments of historical events, the framing suggests that the viewer is meant to perceive them as objective fact. When marshals move to the battlefield, however, they, too, are shown in color; in these scenes, visual spectacle takes precedence. Documentary war footage is used sporadically, aiming to create a feeling of historical authenticity, and images of maps are featured prominently. Also adding to *Liberation*'s partial documentary-like style are the captions introducing historical figures and the voiceover at the beginning and end of each episode, which summarize the major events portrayed and state their significance for the viewer. Official studio correspondence in the film's production file acknowledge the challenge of balancing the conflicting goals of impressive spectacle and historical accuracy: "The difficulty of creating these feature films is, on the one hand, to create with artistic methods historically accurate cinematic works, which truthfully and objectively reflect the events of the last years, and on the other hand—to create entertaining films that are interesting to audiences not only in the Soviet Union, but the whole world" ("Osvobozhdenie Evropy" 37).

As a "historical chronicle," *Liberation* aims to tell the single truth of the war as constructed by the state; the documentary-like elements, such as the "omniscient, authoritative, and solemn voice-over" attempt to both legitimize the accuracy of the chronicle and to unify the plot into a cohesive narrative with a single "authorial consciousness" (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 52). Prokhorov and Prokhorova note, however, that the historical context provided by the voice-over is too infrequent and broad to effectively achieve this, and "the resulting product is a

loose compilation of episodes where spectacle remains the only constant” (52). One editor, commenting on a draft of the script, underscored the importance of such spectacle: “I am convinced that such a picture is impossible without some kind of single, giant-scale battle. It should be a spectacle that the viewer will go to see” (“Osvobozhdenie Evropy” 102).

### **Militarized Masculinity**

In *Liberation*, war is a masculine endeavor. The film contains only one notable female character: Zoya, a nurse who is also the lover of officer Tsvetaev, one of the lead characters. Zoya, “in accordance with gender conventions, nurses her wounded beloved back to health; later the two accidentally meet after the Red Army liberates Kiev” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 54). The most notable scene involving Zoya occurs in the third film, *The Direction of the Main Blow*, when she is ordered not to tend to the wounded in the middle of a battle. She disobeys this, rushing onto the battlefield, and the soldiers are forced to attack to save her. Afterwards, Tsvetaev slaps her, and she stares at him silently. In contrast to the stoic male soldiers, Zoya is portrayed as overly sensitive, emotional, and naïve about military strategy; her inability to bear seeing wounded soldiers suffer puts the rest of the battalion in danger. Throughout the film, she frequently appears mournful and fearful of danger, while Tsvetaev and other men reassure her that everything will be all right. They are completely confident in the inevitable victory and their own survival. One of them tells her, “Tsvetaev and I will live forever... the bullets bounce off us” (*Liberation*).

In *Liberation*, soldiers appear mainly in masses; there is little room for individual identity in the portrayal of war on such a huge scale. There are some recurring characters, however, whose representation “largely adheres to the iconography familiar from Stalin-era epics: they are

infallible, ready to sacrifice themselves for their country, and are almost never occupied with everyday things or conversations. In a five-part film viewers learn very little about them, beyond their military valor” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 53). Indeed, acknowledgement of everyday or personal things could be considered a sign of weakness. For example, one scene shows a conversation between two soldiers; one has a toothache, and complains, “It’s like a bad soldier getting diarrhea before a fight.” The implication of this is that only bad soldiers are weak enough to experience physical suffering. It was important for the soldiers to appear in a heroic light, as letters from the production file show: one editor praised the film’s images of Soviet people as “very vivid, human—they show indomitable firmness, patriotism, faith in the truth of their work, the real Soviet character” (“Osvobozhdenie Evropy” 92). Another, however, considered the portrayal of army officers unnecessarily negative in one version of the script, writing that “people’s sacred feelings and the unforgettable rules of military conduct of officers, which were one of the foundations of the strength and strength of our army, somehow are not visible.” The writers were urged to adjust this portrayal—otherwise, viewers would not understand how the USSR was able to win with “officers with such vices” (“Osvobozhdenie Evropy” 65).

In *Liberation* the violence is sanitized, and the epic battle scenes are too large-scale and distant for the viewer to react emotionally. When the deaths of individual people are shown, the focus is on their sacrifice to the collective cause. For example, a soldier who was earlier shown singing and joking with his comrades, is shot during the Battle of Berlin. As he is dying, he sees the Soviet flag being hoisted over the Reich—an iconic image in the cult of the Great Patriotic war—and this, presumably, allows him to die with a feeling of honor and fulfillment. In another scene, at the end of the final film, Soviet soldiers in Berlin celebrate the surrender of Nazi

Germany. Everyone is shooting into the air, but one soldier instead is mourning his friend, whose body lies next to him. This gives the viewer a small taste of the tragedy of an individual life lost and the cost at which the war was won, but the camera soon pans away to show the continuing celebrations of victory.

*Liberation* is also notable for the major role played by Stalin, who had been nearly absent from war films throughout Khrushchev's de-Stalinization. During the film's revision process, Stalin's role increased dramatically, and the Party and KGB pushed the filmmakers to eliminate scenes that showed Stalin as a controversial figure (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 48). Kukulin notes that the Stalin's partial restoration in the film "formed a point of compromise between the ideologues of the total return of the cult of Stalin as architect of the victory, and the norms of late Soviet censorship based on very important consensus of the Soviet allies" (2017).

In the final version, Stalin appears calm and thoughtful, especially in comparison with the other leaders—Hitler is unhinged and hysterical, Churchill is conniving, and Roosevelt is weak-willed and naively influenced by both Churchill and his wife. When discussing military strategy with his generals, Stalin seems to always know best; he accepts their input, but ultimately is the mastermind of the Soviet victory. This portrayal was heavily influenced by Stalin-era films such as *The Fall of Berlin* (Youngblood 2010, 158). Prokhorov and Prokhorova note, however, that Stalin plays the role of a movie star; his return to the screen was motivated largely by the goal of making the film commercially successful, not rehabilitating his cult of personality. Stalin "both legitimates the powers-that-be as heirs of the great leader and serves as a visual spectacle, an attraction on a par with aerial shots, massive battle scenes, symphonic

music, sophisticated sound mixing, and other devices designed to sell the epic film to domestic and international audiences” (55).



*Figure 2: A scene from Liberation.*

### **Ethnicity as a Brotherhood of Nations**

Tensions between universalist narratives of worldwide communism and nationalist narratives remained central to public debates throughout the Soviet era. In this context, it is also important to examine the treatment of nationality and ethnicity in late Soviet narratives of the war. In *Liberation*, there is no mention of ethnic minorities within the Soviet Union or Red Army. This reflects the era in which it was made—whereas in earlier Soviet history, the “brotherhood of nations” and ethnic diversity were celebrated, “in the late-Soviet culture “Russian” stood for the new, supranational community of “Soviet people” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 54). Prokhorov and Prokhorova also point out that a typical feature of Soviet prestige films is “a Russian male protagonist serving the state” (16). Nearly all individualized characters in *Liberation* are ethnic Russians. While the country for which they are fighting is, of

course, the Soviet Union, their Russian identity is also emphasized. For example, in a scene where a Soviet officer is taken prisoner by the Germans, he is given the chance to escape, but instead tells the German soldiers: “Shoot, and you will see how Russian major Maksimov dies.”

In contrast, national diversity was represented in the film, mainly “as a collaboration between friendly socialist nations, such as Soviets and Poles, fighting together against the common enemy” (Prokhorov and Prokhorova 54). A Soviet officer, proposing the main blow to go through Belarus toward Poland, tells Stalin: “When our troops step onto Polish land, they’ll be welcomed by our friendly Polish people, who have been struggling with the fascist occupants for five years.” Nations’ shared Slavic roots are also invoked. For instance, one scene in the third part (*The Direction of the Main Blow*) depicts a Soviet general, Nikolai Vatutin, asking a soldier to look up Polish words in a dictionary—“butter”, “meat”, “bread”. Upon learning the Polish word for “life”, he concludes: “See what a close language? No need to learn it!” Shortly after this scene, they encounter an unidentified enemy and Vatutin is shot and dies. In reality, Vatutin was killed in an ambush by the Ukrainian Insurgent Army. This fact is obscured in the film, a narrative choice that illustrates the filmmaker’s desire, in adherence with Soviet ideology, to portray all Slavic peoples as fighting on the same side. Finally, the Holocaust is entirely omitted from *Liberation*. The film ends with a count of those from each country killed in the war, but Jews are not included as a category. Part of the Holocaust death count is included in the number of Poles killed in the war, which the film lists as six million.

### **Objectalism 1.0 - War's Unwomanly Face**

In her first book, *War's Unwomanly Face (U Voiny ne Zhenskoye Litso)*, Alexievich wanted to approximate the voices she remembered from her childhood, when she would listen to the old women in her village tell stories about their lives, especially the war. Narratives of war traditionally focus nearly exclusively on male experiences, but about a million Soviet women participated in World War II (Alexievich 2017, xii), and Alexievich believed their stories deserved to be heard as well. For her, the memory that has remained with her since childhood is women telling stories of the war. She writes: "The village of my postwar childhood was a village of women... I don't remember any male voices. That is how it has remained for me: stories of the war are told by women" (Alexievich 2017, xiv). This was a stark contrast to traditional, published history of the war, in which, Alexievich states, "We are held captive by 'masculine' impressions and 'masculine' experiences of war. 'Masculine' words. And women are silent" (Alexievich 2006). Women, when asked about the war, adjust their stories to the "male canon." Alexievich wanted to move beyond this canon and present an image of the war through the eyes of women who lived through it.

Despite the fact that the official state historians, writers, and filmmakers claimed to remember every aspect of the war, for Alexievich, the fact that in nearly all cases only men's stories were represented was "an acknowledgement of our inadequate knowledge of the war" (Alexievich 1988, 9). Interviewees also express the feeling that the existing war narrative was incomplete in some ways, since glorifying the victory overlooked the horrors of the war itself.

One woman states, “films, books—all the same, they don’t contain what we saw. I have never read anywhere how terrible it is to be in a war” (Alexievich 1988, 246).

In the process of collecting material for *War’s Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich interviewed about 200 people. Her decisions regarding who to interview reflect a desire to tell the stories of ordinary people, those who were not represented or glorified in the centralized war myth. She “deliberately avoided famous snipers or renowned pilots or partisans, as quite a lot had already been written about them” (Alexievich 1988, 10).<sup>10</sup> Describing her methodology in choosing women to interview and sorting through the material, Alexievich groups them by the women’s wartime occupation, “for each of us sees life through the activity he is engaged in.” By collecting narratives of women in various occupations, each with “her own scope of vision of the war”, she hopes that the stories will add up to a more complete image of the Great Patriotic War.

Dates are barely mentioned in the book, and in most interviews, the only measure of time provided is the interviewee’s age during the war. Specific battles are occasionally cited, such as the Stalingrad or Kursk, and some interviewees refer to specific years or parts of the war—for example, “This was 1942, you see – the hardest, most difficult period” (Alexievich 1988, 241). More often, though, the women speak about their experiences without specifying during which part of the war they occurred. There are occasional editor’s notes that provide brief historical context, but these are also rare. This is consistent with Alexievich’s own description of her purpose in writing this book. In the introduction she writes: “I’m not interested in the events themselves, but in feelings during those events. The soul of the event, you could say. For me

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<sup>10</sup> The Russian film industry recently revived several films about World War II heroes, notably the film *Battle for Sevastopol’* (2015), about the female sniper Lyudmila Pavlichenko.

feelings are reality” (Alexievich 2006). Concrete events are of less importance than individual human experiences.

As Alexievich said in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech: “It always troubled me that the truth doesn’t fit into one heart, into one mind that truth is somehow splintered. There’s a lot of it, it is varied, and it is strewn about the world.” By listening to individual stories, each of which contain a little slice of truth, she believes that she can get closer to understanding and conveying the reality of life during wartime. At the same time, she believes that “there is nothing in the world about which we know anything for sure” (Palattella). For a state like the Soviet Union that sought to create one acceptable, cohesive, and ideologically unproblematic version of historical events, this was inherently a subversive idea. Alexievich’s impulse towards polyphony reflects the culture of the glasnost years, when “the Soviet people’s devotion to—even obsession with—real memory was at the heart of their spiritual turmoil” (Tumarkin 166). Alexievich published the full version of *War’s Unwomanly Face* in 1985, just after Gorbachev came to power.<sup>11</sup> This was a couple years before the peak of glasnost, but her focus on oral histories of war is an example of this desire to uncover the truths of tragic periods in Soviet history through genuine, unedited memories. In an interview with John Palattella, Alexievich describes how it was often difficult to get people to tell their own lived experiences: “There was the subjective experience—what was happening to people—and then there was the canon, the script that their lives supposedly adhered to. When I would first begin talking to people, what they would tell me would be according to the script—saying what they were supposed to say” (Palattella). She says that she would wait for the moment when her interviewees would suddenly depart from the

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<sup>11</sup> An abridged version was published the previous year in the journal *Oktiabr’*, and the full version was first translated into English in 1988.

canon and begin telling their own stories and impressions. *War's Unwomanly Face* sold two million copies after the full version was published, suggesting a real hunger for first-person narratives that went beyond the prevailing myths.

### **Gynocentric Perspective**

*War's Unwomanly Face* is an oral history of women's experiences of the Great Patriotic War, and this alone sets it apart from most war narratives. Ilya Kukulin notes that in context of the Soviet Union, where there was a "full absence of public feminist discussion," focusing on women's stories was a brave idea. Alexievich portrays the war as "violence created by men", which women could not adjust to or agree with (Kukulin 2017). The introduction to *War's Unwomanly Face* includes a quote from one of her interviewees which Alexievich says expresses the book's central idea: "If you look at the war with our eyes, women's eyes, it would seem the most dreadful thing imaginable" (Alexievich 1988, 10).<sup>12</sup> This made the book "close to pacifism" and therefore "non-Soviet" (Kukulin 2017). Indeed, Alexievich was accused of pacifism and naturalism when she first submitted *War's Unwomanly Face* for publishing. As Kukulin states, an underlying idea of the book is that "if female experience is important, thus the war is evil. The war is evil and it's incompatible with human nature." However, the realities of censorship made it necessary to compromise in some ways in order for the book to be published in the Soviet Union. Thus, Alexievich does, in part, acknowledge "the heroic idea of the Great Patriotic War... in order to place on the emergence her feminist and pacifist counter-voice" (Kukulin 2017).

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<sup>12</sup> She mentions repeatedly how women's memories of the war are more vivid and emotionally charged; men "hide behind history, behind facts...while women rise from feelings" (Alexievich 2006).

In the introduction, Alexievich opens with the idea that compassion is in a woman's nature; women are fundamentally life-givers, not life-takers, and therefore at odds with the very idea of war. A woman, "because of her different psychological and physiological make-up, felt more keenly both the physical and moral hardships of the war" (Alexievich 1988, 1). In her commentary, Alexievich often essentializes women, making broad statements about women's fundamental nature, in contrast to men's: women are more caring, giving, and react more emotionally to the experience of war. Angela Brintlinger argues that "she highlights women's unique role and relationship to life in ways that not all of her women veterans would endorse" by viewing women primarily as mothers (204). In other instances, she equates women with children, with remarks such as "How could these seventeen and eighteen-year-olds overcome the female in themselves and switch immediately from childish or adolescent impressions to a high, purely masculine understanding of duty?" (Alexievich 1988, 149). On the whole, violence and womanliness are presented as incompatible opposites. According to Alexievich, this is even reflected biologically. For example, one woman recounts that "The body re-organized itself to the extent that we ceased to be women throughout the war... We had no female functions at all" (Alexievich 1988, 54). Another describes her extensive health problems after the war, which a doctor told her the only way to recover from was to have as many children as possible—this would, in a sense, purge her of the unfeminine experience of war. Alexievich considers, then, what it was that made women go off to fight. Some interview subjects concluded that it was a uniquely Soviet phenomenon, as women there were emancipated and fully equal with men. Others felt that it was simply a human urge, unrelated to gender.

Despite Alexievich's essentializing thesis about women, she includes accounts that complicate and contradict these generalizations. Many stories in *War's Unwomanly Face* "offer different interpretations of war service, including pride not just in patriotism or bravery, but also in skill and achievements" (Brintlinger 204). For example, an anti-aircraft gunner who says, "Before the war I loved everything military and wrote to flying school to find out how to be accepted. Military uniform suited me and I loved discipline, order, the curt words of command" (Alexievich 1988, 157).

Alexievich includes a chapter about love in *War's Unwomanly Face*, since, as she says, the book would be "incomplete, not fully truthful, if there were not a chapter about love in it. For this is a book about Woman" (Alexievich 1988, 177). As with her comments on women's nature in general, Alexievich asserts that love is a uniquely feminine feeling, but the stories she includes on this topic defy such easy categorization. Many have stories of falling in love and staying faithful despite the trials of war, injury, or death, but others had a more disdainful or uninterested attitude towards romantic relations during war. One woman describes her feeling that "it was not the time for personal matters" (185). Another felt that romance was simply incompatible with the horrors of war: "All around there were wounded, people were groaning... The dead had such yellow-green faces... I didn't want to mix that with love" (186). One interviewee mentions that love was forbidden, and "if command found out, one of the lovers was, as a rule, transferred to another unit" (184). Some describe love as somewhat childish, perhaps a way to cope with all the suffering they witness: "As soon as more wounded arrived we would inevitably fall in love with them" (187). Others have a view of love during the war as "sacred, elevated"—in a way, more

pure than relationships during peacetime: “There was no room for insincerity, for very often our love ended with a plywood star over a grave” (189).

Besides this, stories of love at the front in *War's Unwomanly Face* tell of a complicated reality for women during the war. One male veteran Alexievich speaks with on a train says that he and the other soldiers “did not look on [women at the front] as women... we looked on them as friends” (Alexievich 1988, 65). His wife, however, has a negative opinion of girls who took part in the war—she thinks they went to find husbands and all had affairs there. Another woman describes difficulty women faced returning home from the war. “A man returned and there he was, a hero. An eligible young man! But if it was a girl, then immediately people looked askance: ‘we know what you did there!’” (189). There were special insults for women who fought in the war, such as “campaign wife” or “spotter.”<sup>13</sup>

Women also recount the difficulties of reintegrating into civilian life after the war ended. Alexievich describes women’s postwar fate as “much more tragic” than men’s (Alexievich 1988, 12). While male veterans were generally respected and praised for their military service, many women encountered hostility instead. One interviewee recalls being publicly told off for wearing her military decorations by a woman who said she must be wearing them “just to show off.” Others tell of similar experiences: One woman, explaining why she and many others did not wear their decorations, says: “Men did wear them: they were victors, heroes and eligible young men who had fought at the front, whereas we were looked upon with altogether different eyes” (89).

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<sup>13</sup> “Spotter” (*rama*) referred to German reconnaissance planes but was also a derogatory term, similar to “whore”, for women who volunteered for the army.

At the height of the cult of war, veterans played a prominent role in rituals to keep the population connected to the memory of the war and victory. However, Alexievich's narratives suggest that female veterans were frequently hidden from view and left out of these rituals. Another recurring theme is the view that women, especially, were neglected by the state after returning from war and often lacked social protection. One interviewee says that many women "remained single, insecure and without flats of their own" and that no one paid any attention to them until an article was written in the newspaper *Pravda* (Alexievich 1988, 80). Another woman asks, "was there anyone to take pity on them or to defend them?" (90). This could be read as an implicit criticism of the Soviet system, which was supposed to provide an adequate standard of living to all its citizens.

### **Ethnicity as a Supranational Group**

Especially when considering only the first edition of *War's Unwomanly Face*, discussion of nationality is an area where Alexievich does not depart significantly from the official myths. The nationalities of Alexievich's interviewees are almost never explicitly stated. Alexievich does include interviewees' full names, which in some cases would serve as a clear signal of nationality to a Soviet reader. However, nationality of interviewees generally does not play a major role in the stories they tell. The few explicit mentions of nationality are either apolitical—for example, "The Uzbeks and Tajiks especially feared the cold" (Alexievich 1988, 127)—or do not undermine the narrative of the "brotherhood of nations" fighting a common enemy. For example: "You cannot imagine the roads of Victory! Poles, Frenchmen, Czechs and Bulgarians were moving along them... Everyone was mixed together, each going his own way. Everyone embraced us..." (236).

Kukulin describes Alexievich as unusual among Russian-speaking writers in her attitude toward nationality, as she is in between those who break from the Soviet tradition and those who continue the Soviet rhetoric of internationalism. In all her works, she writes about the Soviet experience; together, they make up the “Voices of the Utopia” or “Red Man Cycle” about the Soviet Socialist experiment. At the same time, her Belarusian nationality is significant, since Belarus arguably suffered more than any other country in World War II—a quarter of the population was killed in the fighting and the brutal three-year Nazi occupation. According to Kukulin, Alexievich, like Ales Adamovich, writes about the war from the perspective of Belarus’s unique suffering. He also states that Alexievich “mixes the traces of Soviet and post-colonial/post imperial critique of the Soviet” (2017). This can be seen more clearly in the 2006 edition, published after the breakup of the Soviet Union. In this version, Alexievich includes accounts and sections of interviews that were either censored or left out of the 1985 edition, as well as an extended introduction with sections of her diary from when she was writing the original book. In this, she shares her own thoughts on nationality, affirming both Soviet and ethnic identities: “Who are they? Russian or Soviet? No, they were Soviet... and Russian, and Belarusian, and Ukrainian, and Tajik... All the same there was this Soviet person” (Alexievich 2006). There are more overt mentions of nationality in her speakers’ narratives as well. Another section of her diary included in the introduction records an account from an unnamed interviewee, who recalls the following:

You can’t speak freely anywhere... I’ll tell you a secret... I had a friend Oksana, who was from Ukraine. From her I first heard about the terrible famine in Ukraine. The Holodomor. In her village half the population died. All her younger brothers died, along

with her mother and father, and she survived by stealing horse dung from the collective farm stables at night and eating it. (2006)

From the 1930s until the late 1980s, just before the breakup of the Soviet Union, mentions of the Holodomor were forbidden. “Authorities remained steadfastly silent on the famine, allowing only veiled references to reach the Soviet public” (Reisenauer 1). Even without considering the debate over whether the famine was a deliberate genocide of Ukrainians, mentions of any particular ethnic group suffering at the hands of the state were problematic: “Martyrdom, after all, is a powerful stimulus to a group's sense of its own identity” (Gitelman 25). Besides indicting the Soviet state in the starvation of millions of people, mentions of the Holodomor would have also been taboo in relation to the war myth. Acknowledging its existence would undermine the narrative that collectivization helped prepare the country for war.

The treatment of Jews and the Holocaust in narratives of war deserves special attention, since the Holocaust was a taboo subject in discussions of World War II for much of postwar Soviet history. Tumarkin offers an explanation for this:

Anti-Semitism had long been a deeply ingrained feature of Soviet life, especially in the Slavic republics. But I believe that in this case the main explanatory factor had to do with the psychological economy of suffering: from the point of view of official Soviet historiography, the Germans had meted out to all the Soviet peoples a most horrible fate; to have granted to the Jewish people an equal or even (in terms of this logic) higher status on the pecking order of martyred nationalities would have vitiated somewhat the Soviet claims on behalf of their own victimization, and was therefore impermissible (50).

Zvi Gitelman adds the following:

The basis of legitimation of the Soviet regime, the legitimating myth, has moved from the Revolution to World War Two... To emphasize the Jewish role and fate might diminish from the all-union effort and experience. It's bad enough, some would argue, that the Revolution was identified with the Jews. To 'give the war to the Jews' would not only be a gross distortion of history but would erode the legitimating power of the experience and would arouse great resentment by other nationalities (32).

In a survey of Soviet literature, Gitelman notes that there is variation in Soviet historiography of the Holocaust. Despite Western assumptions, there did not seem to be a consistent Party line on repressing the Holocaust. This is especially evident when comparing sources from different Soviet republics. Estonia, for example, devotes much more attention to the Holocaust in literature than does Ukraine, despite the fact that Ukraine has a much larger Jewish population and lost a greater proportion of that population in the Holocaust. Nevertheless, in the official narrative of the Great Patriotic War, "the overall thrust of the Soviet literature is to assign the Holocaust far less significance than it has been given in the West" (Gitelman 26). Most Soviet writers did not deny the Holocaust outright, but rather ignored or universalized it, treating it as a symptom of fascist occupation rather than a systematic targeting of Jews. "The Holocaust, in other words, is but one of several reflexes of fascism, which is, in turn, the ultimate expression of capitalism" (26).

The Holocaust is not mentioned by name in either edition of *War's Unwomanly Face*. While the original also does not mention Jews specifically, the later version includes several accounts of horrors that interviewees experienced because they were Jewish. Anna Iosifovna

Strumilina describes how, after the Germans captured her city, she “found out [she] was a Jew.” She and her family “became lepers, we were chased away everywhere. People feared us. Even a few of our acquaintances wouldn’t greet us.” She says: “There were orders hanging everywhere in the city: Jews aren’t allowed – to walk on the sidewalk, get a haircut in the barbershop, buy something in the store... It wasn’t allowed to laugh or sing...” (Alexievich 2006). They were forced to move to a Jewish ghetto. Both her parents were soon killed (it is unclear by who), and a family friend helped her escape and join a partisan detachment. Given the Soviet emphasis on the “friendship of nations” joined together in the fight against fascism, this account of Soviet anti-Semitism, perhaps even collaboration, was evidently too problematic to be included in the earlier edition. It is noteworthy, however, that Alexievich ultimately does include in her oral history an account of a Jewish resistance fighter. As Gitelman points out, even when Jewish victimization was written about in Soviet literature, some authors (or their censors) seemed to make a deliberate effort to pass over stories of Jewish heroism or resistance.

*War’s Unwomanly Face* presents a complex look at how Soviets regarded German soldiers and civilians. In the introduction to *War’s Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich affirms the brutality of the Nazis, saying that during the war, women “killed the enemy who, with unprecedented cruelty, was attacking her land, her home, her children” (Alexievich 1988, 6). Interviewees frequently describe a visceral reaction to seeing German soldiers on their native Russian land, which moved them to fight: “How could we let such monsters walk upon our land?” (41). There are stories of German atrocities: burning entire villages, shooting innocent civilians, throwing a child down a well. One woman, recounting such stories, states: “After that,

when you went on a mission your whole spirit urged you to do only one thing: to kill them as soon as possible and as many as possible, destroy them in the cruelest way” (194).

At the same time, many narratives in *War's Unwomanly Face* reveal a more ambivalent attitude toward the enemy and violence itself. A repeated theme in the book is the difficulty of killing, and many women vividly remember their “first” – their first wounded soldier, the first time they had to kill. When it came time to shoot a German soldier, one woman remembers: “I was full of resolve and then it occurred to me that he was after all a human being, even though he was an enemy, he was still a human being” (Alexievich 1988, 16). Another woman recalls: “And one day we saw an ice-floe drifting downstream and on it two or three Germans and one Russian soldier... They had died gripping one another, got frozen into that floe, and the whole floe was splashed with blood. Can you picture it? All the water in Mother Volga was mixed with blood...” (86). There are also stories of acts of kindness toward the enemy. For instance, one woman describes crossing the border into Germany, feeling that she would never forgive the Germans for what they had done to her country, then seeing “hungry and unhappy” children: “And I, who had sworn that I hated them all, collected everything the lads had, everything left from their rations, every piece of sugar, and gave it to the German children... I couldn't look into the eyes of hungry children with indifference” (Alexievich 1988, 235). In another account, a medical orderly tells of mistakenly dragging a wounded German soldier out of battle in Stalingrad. “I knew that, if I left him, he would be dead in a few hours... And I crawled back for him. I went on dragging them both...” She explained that despite feeling glad at the sight of dead Nazis, “I am a doctor, I am a woman... And I was saving life. Human life was very precious to

us. I was saving the world” (248). Such narratives complicate the simpler myth of the war as good versus evil, and portray the war as a tragedy for everyone involved.

Some of the accounts also display a sense of moral superiority regarding the Soviet treatment of civilians and prisoners of war compared to the Germans. A telegraph operator recounts how Germans knew how destructive the war had been in the Soviet Union and expected the same treatment in Germany after the war’s end, but the Soviet “refusal to take revenge amazed them.” Alexievich writes that “people did not want to forget the human element in themselves. This moral victory was our greatest triumph in that terrible war, which seemed to have left no other feelings than hatred for those who wore Nazi uniform” (Alexievich 1988, 236). Compared to the war cult’s emphasis on heroic acts in battle and victory of communism over fascism, it is interesting that Alexievich instead sees the Soviets’ supposed higher morality as the war’s greatest legacy.

Nonetheless, the revised version of *War’s Unwomanly Face*, which adds sections that were censored in the original, includes stories that complicate this narrative. For instance, an anonymous account describes killing German prisoners in the most painful way possible: “They weren’t shot; that would be too easy of a death for them. They were stabbed, like pigs, with ramrods, cut in pieces. I went to see this... Waited for it! I waited a long time for the moment when their eyes would start to bulge with pain...” Another recalls, “We caught German girls and... Ten men raped one girl... There weren’t enough women, the people had run from the Soviet army and taken the youth with them. The girls... Twelve or thirteen years old... If she cried, she was beaten, something stuffed in her mouth. It was painful for her, and funny for us. Today I don’t understand how I could have done this... A boy from an educated family... But

that was me...” Such accounts may not have been the norm, but they reveal some of the darkest aspects of war and atrocities committed by participants on both sides. This was unacceptable to the censor, who told Alexievich: “This is a lie! This is slander of our soldiers, who liberated half of Europe. Slander of our partisans. Our heroic people” (Alexievich 2006).

### **Military and the Economy of War**

Alexievich focuses on ordinary people rather than high-ranking generals and challenges the official myth of Red Army soldiers as epic heroes. Reading *War's Unwomanly Face*, one gets the sense that the war was fought, in large part, by scared teenagers. Their youth is emphasized, making their untimely deaths even more tragic. As one woman puts it, “What was frightening was not that you might be killed but that you would die without knowing life, without experiencing anything. That was the most frightening thing” (Alexievich 1988, 72). As Kukulin points out, Alexievich does not shatter the myth of the heroic soldier. Her work instead is based on the premise that every person, no matter how ordinary his or her role, was heroic in some way. However, her portrayal of Soviet soldiers is distinctly less celebratory and male-centered than the official war narrative.

Related to the exclusion of accounts of generals, Stalin is not mentioned by name in the 1985 edition of *War's Unwomanly Face*. In the 2006 edition, however, Alexievich includes sections that were censored or self-censored, some of which include references to Stalin. In her commentary, she writes about her love and amazement for the wartime generation: “They had Stalin and the Gulag, but also Victory,” and are still coming to terms with this mixed legacy (Alexievich 2006). Some people she interviews recall their faith in Stalin during the war. One interviewee recalls how she considered denouncing a friend for critical comments about the

the leader. Recalling their youthful ideas years later, though, a common theme is a feeling of profound betrayal, such as the woman who says, “We thought that after the war everything would change. Stalin would believe his people. But the war hadn’t even ended when trains started to go to Magadan. Trains full of victors...” Many others, however, were hesitant or unwilling to talk about such fraught issues. Alexievich writes that people of that generation, who lived through the war and the Stalin era, “are still paralyzed not only by Stalin’s hypnosis and terror, but also by their own previous belief. By its flame, which has not been fully extinguished” (Alexievich 2006).

In the first edition of *War’s Unwomanly Face*, the testimony of the scout Albina Alexandrovna Gantimurova includes only this line: “Then Order No. 227—‘Not a Step Back!’—was issued. It was that order that at once made an adult out of me” (Alexievich 1988, 35). In the later version, however, Alexievich includes Gantimurova’s more complete wording and places it in the context of a larger story, one that conveys a very different message:

And there was Stalin’s famous order number 227— “Not a step back!” You take a step back and you’re shot! Shot on the spot. Or under a tribunal and in specially created penalty battalions. Those who ended up there were called “smertniki.”<sup>14</sup> And those who escaped from encirclement or were prisoners of war were sent to filtration camps.

Detachments walked behind them... Shot their own people...

These images are in my memory...

An ordinary field... Wet and dirty after a rain. A young soldier kneels. He wears glasses, which for some reason keep falling off, and he picks them up. After rain... A

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<sup>14</sup> *Smertniki*: “those who are doomed to death.”

cultured boy from Leningrad. His gun has already been taken from him. They lined us all up. There are puddles everywhere... We hear how he begs... He swears... Begs them not to shoot him—at home his mother lives alone. He starts to cry. And right there he is shot—right in the forehead. From a pistol. It was a demonstrative shooting—this can happen to anyone who falters. Even for one minute! Just one... This order immediately made me into an adult. About this it wasn't permitted to... For a long time we didn't bring it up... Yes, we were victorious, but at what price! What terrible price?! (2006)

Alexievich also demystifies the economy of war by including stories of everyday labor such as laundry, cooking, and caring for the wounded—highly gendered tasks usually performed by women. While not often included in narratives of war, these everyday chores made up the nuts and bolts of the economy of war, allowing the army to function, and were a huge part of the wartime experience for many. In a section consisting mainly of stories from the “second front”—women who were laundresses, bakers, and cooks—Alexievich rejects the idea that some occupations were more important than others, or that only military feats are worthy of respect. She writes: “Unconscious of their exploits, they are firmly convinced that theirs were ‘not heroic’ jobs... But without them, those great war-time toilers, there would have been no Victory” (Alexievich 1988, 129). This is a stark contrast to the economy of war as portrayed in *Liberation*, which mystifies the mechanisms of the centrally planned economy and military production. The film showcases the Soviet Union’s seemingly limitless supply of military hardware, but none of the less impressive aspects of the allocation of resources that sustain the ongoing violence.

The focus on women and their labor is also significant because it projects women's "double burden" onto war narratives. Soviet women were generally expected both to work outside the home and to shoulder most of the burden of domestic tasks like cooking, cleaning, and childrearing. Similarly, in Alexievich's accounts, women fight, but are also responsible for the unheroic tasks necessary to sustain community's survival amidst ongoing violence. This invisible aspect of the economy of war is not a central aspect of *War's Unwomanly Face*, but would become much more of a focus in Alexievich's later works and underscore her claim to authenticity.

### **Different Editions of *War's Unwomanly Face***

Alexievich continually rewrites and updates her books and releases new editions. For her, both writing and commemoration constitute an ongoing and open-ended dialogue. She keeps in touch with many of her interviewees, sometimes goes back to interview them again, and changes the testimonies that appear in the books. Her justification for this is that her books are "living documents" and should occasionally be updated to reflect her interviewees' changing perspectives on their experiences (Myers 334). The later edition of *War's Unwomanly Face* published in 2006 contains many changes from the original. Some of this can probably be attributed to the end of state censorship after 1991 and changing patterns of author's self-censorship after the demise of the USSR. Interviewees may have been more willing to speak about sensitive topics, or Alexievich may have been more likely to include them (as previously discussed in the book's treatment of taboo topics like Stalin's treatment of prisoners of war or the Holodomor).

One common criticism of Alexievich's work is that she mixes elements of both journalism and literature but does not adhere to the conventions of either; rewriting her books is one example of this. Though she presents her work as the truthful testimonies of real people, the narratives are clearly selected and edited, as they all share a similar style and tone. They lack the historical context or fact checking that would be required in conventional journalism, but nonetheless are presented as factually accurate. Factual accuracy may not be a valid assumption, however, since it is unclear to what extent Alexievich changes the content of the testimonies. She does not describe her methodology in detail in her books. A 2016 article in the *New Republic* accuses her of “witness tampering”—reshaping the stories not to make them clearer for the reader, but to tell her own version of the truth. Her books are full of profound-sounding assertions—for example, “I collect, I track down the human spirit” (Alexievich 2017, xxviii); “I am a historian of the soul” (xxi); “I turn into one big ear, turned toward another person. I ‘read’ voices...” (2006)—but perhaps the reader should take these with a grain of salt. The more recent editions sometimes contain discrepancies that cannot simply be attributed to new insights from re-interviewing her subjects. In fact, Galia Ackerman, a French translator of Alexievich's work, found that between editions, phrases had moved from one interview to another, or from Alexievich's comments to the account of an interview subject. Interviews were frequently used “to support one message in one work and another in a second, either through editing or by removing context” (Pinkham).

For example, the 1988 English edition of *War's Unwomanly Face* concludes with a long section consisting of the testimony of Tamara Stepanova Umnyagina, a medical orderly during

the war, who Alexievich calls “a storyteller in a thousand” (240). In the 2005 French edition translated by Galia Ackerman, however, Alexievich writes:

I had a friend: Tamara Stepanovna Oumniaguina. But we had never talked about the war, she refused to talk about the subject ... And then, one day, I get a phone call: ‘Come, I’m afraid of dying soon. My heart plays tricks on me. And I’m afraid I do not have the time.’ What happened. A few days after our conversation ... Cerebral hemorrhage. Her last words, reported by the doctors to his daughter: "I did not have time ..." What had she not had time? ... We'll never know. That's why I did not cut a word out of [her] story. I have everything preserved. (Ackerman)

Umnyagina’s story is essentially the same, though shortened in the first edition. The inconsistency lies in Alexievich’s presentation of when the interview was conducted. The original edition suggests that Alexievich has already known Umnyagina for some time, and must have spoken to her about her wartime experiences prior to the book’s publication in 1985. In the later edition, however, Alexievich dramatizes the context of Umnyagina’s account by suggesting that it consists of revelations only expressed on her deathbed.<sup>15</sup>

Besides this, sections attributed to Umnyagina also contain examples of Alexievich’s tendency to move quotes from one section to another. In the 1988 edition, after an interview with Vera Berestova, lieutenant of the medical service, Alexievich reflects, “Can a person really have one heart for hatred and another for love? The woman had only one heart” (240). In the 2017 English translation, however, a similar line appears Umnyagina’s testimony: “There can’t be one

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<sup>15</sup> For other examples of changes between editions, see Galia Ackerman’s article “Du bon et du mauvais usage du témoignage dans l’œuvre de Svetlana Alexievitch,” 2009.

heart for hatred and another for love. We only have one, and I always thought about how to save my heart” (Alexievich 2017, 331).

While Alexievich claims that her interest is the “little person,” her tendency to move around quotes shows that in some cases, people are not individualized. It is not important who actually said what, and people become simply anonymous voices in the chorus, or symbols of universal human experiences. Perhaps Alexievich changes her message to fit changing political realities, or maybe her focus is primarily aesthetic, with less of an emphasis on the truthfulness of the stories presented. While her work presents a unique alternative to official Soviet literature and films, one should also be aware of the author’s role in curating the supposedly democratic, pluralistic “chorus of voices.”

### **Chapter 3: Narratives of the Soviet War in Afghanistan**

The Soviet war in Afghanistan began in 1979 when the Soviet Union sent troops to assist the Afghan Communist government in its conflict with the mujahideen, anti-Communist Muslim guerilla fighters. This was intended to be a focused military operation that would last no more than six months, yet “grew into a nearly 10-year occupation to prop up the minority side of a civil war” (Myers 332). About 620,000 Soviet men and women served in Afghanistan during that time; about 15,000 died, according to official figures, while many more were wounded or suffered post-traumatic stress disorder. Estimates of Afghan casualties range from 600,000 to 1.5 million, and millions more fled the country as refugees (Braithwaite 2011, 359-362). The Soviet Afghan war has often been compared to the American war in Vietnam, in that both “were fought without the full support or involvement of their country’s citizens” and “are now clearly understood to be foreign policy disasters” (Heinemann x).

During the first few years, the war was presented to the Soviet public as an effort to help Afghanistan build socialism. Information about violent conflict, casualties, and Afghan opposition to the Soviet presence was strictly censored, while the media provided “stories about Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan building schools or planting trees—certainly not fighting or dying” (Myers 332). At the same time, however, the corpses Soviet soldiers were being delivered home in sealed zinc coffins, often with no explanation for their deaths and military orders that the coffins should not be opened (Heinemann x). With Gorbachev’s rise to power in 1985 and notable public comment on Afghanistan as a “bleeding wound,” public discourse began to shift and the war began to be talked about more openly (Myers 332). The following year, casualty statistics were released. Meanwhile, Gorbachev was “was publicly insisting that there must be

‘no forgotten names [or] blank spots’ in Soviet history or literature” (332). It was in this context that Alexievich’s oral history about the Afghan war, *Zinky Boys* (*Tsinkovye mal’chiki*), was written.

The Soviet government went further in criticizing the war in Afghanistan in 1989, immediately after the withdrawal of troops, when the Congress of People’s Deputies of the Soviet Union passed a resolution declaring that the decision to invade Afghanistan was “deserving of moral and political condemnation” (qtd. in Braithwaite 2011, 359). Until recently, this has been the most common view of the Soviet Afghan war in Russian society, reflected in scholarship, literature, cinema, and mass media. Since the end of the war, “the dominant story of the Afghan invasion had been that of an army sent on disastrous mission that helped precipitate the breakup of the Soviet Union” (Carleton 329).

However, the narrative of the war in Afghanistan has shifted somewhat in recent years and especially since 2014, as Russia under Putin attempts to regain its status as a global power in part through military actions abroad. If the Afghan war is still seen as a disaster and deserving of condemnation, then Russia’s foreign policy is perhaps also similarly implicated. As such, in state-supported media, the war in Afghanistan has begun to be defended and its narrative rewritten. A commonly expressed view is that while the politicians of the time may have been corrupt, the war itself was justified. However, the diverse landscape of narratives about the war that exist today suggests that there is no societal consensus on the war’s legacy.

In this section I examine first Alexievich’s work, *Zinky Boys*, which provides a way to understand early reactions to the Soviet Afghan War in the midst of perestroika and glasnost, then the film *9th Company* as a Putin-era reaction and attempt to reshape the narrative of the

Afghan war from that of a disastrous colonial attempt into a tough but glorious imperial expedition.

### **Objectalism 2.0: *Zinky Boys***

The first published excerpts of *Zinky Boys* appeared in 1989, the same year that the Afghan war ended; a full edition was published the next year. *Zinky Boys* “may have been the first book-length treatment of the war since the withdrawal of troops” (Myers 335). The title refers to the zinc coffins in which corpses were sent back to the Soviet Union<sup>16</sup>. The book gives a platform for soldiers, returned veterans, and those who lost loved ones to counter the false information about the war with “an alternative narrative of the war, one with shocking tales of brutality, violence, and atrocities, as well as deeply personal confessions of emotional and psychological suffering” (Myers 333). Soldiers and others impacted by the war discuss their trauma, and many express a profound sense of betrayal by the state that sent them off to war. The book was published several years into the glasnost reforms and reflects the opening of society in its willingness to touch on taboo topics, many of which Alexievich avoided in *War’s Unwomanly Face*. This also represents her shift from an “unofficial” to “uncensored” writer. As Ilya Kukulin explains, “unofficial” literature was intended to be published within the Soviet Union, and therefore by necessity had to accept some limitations of censorship—the writer had to be “controlled in order to be published. If he or she rejected the very idea of control, he or she agreed by default that this work will not be published in the USSR” (Kukulin 2017). This is why, for example, Alexievich in *War’s Unwomanly Face* accepted some elements of the war myth in order to provide an alternate view of the war through women’s experiences. Uncensored

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<sup>16</sup> The title has also been translated as *Boys in Zinc*.

literature, on the other hand, is devoid of both censorship from above and perhaps self-censorship. Alexievich could be seen as moving into this category with the publication of *Zinky Boys*, which transgresses more of the boundaries set by Soviet literary censorship and norms.

Unlike *War's Unwomanly Face*, this book was written during the events it describes; some interviews were collected during Alexievich's visit to Afghanistan in 1986. Her interviewees recount the trauma of fresh experiences rather than 40-year-old memories. However, her methodology was largely the same as with her other books: conducting numerous interviews, editing and ordering the transcribed texts, and presenting the voices of her subjects with little authorial commentary. One significant difference, though, is that Alexievich does not include names or any identifying information about where the interviews were held, and instead identifies her interviewees only by their wartime role. This suggests that for veterans of the Afghan war, there is an element of shame associated with the experience and desire for anonymity that was not present for Great Patriotic War veterans.

### **Multiplicity of Voices**

There is a wide range of tones expressed in the oral histories of *Zinky Boys*. Some interviewees speak very seriously about their traumatic experiences, while others make light of them. Humor about the war experience is a recurring theme of the book. This is a stark contrast to *War's Unwomanly Face*, which contained some lighthearted stories but no outright jokes about World War II; this would have been a taboo, even as many aspects of the sacred war myth were questioned in the midst of glasnost. Clearly this is not the case for the Soviet Afghan war, which lacked a clear sense of purpose and legitimacy, and many of the jokes told by

Alexievich's interviewees express their cynicism about the Soviet colonial expedition to Afghanistan. In particular, the jokes target Soviet ideological and military institutions and the war as a macabre carnival of peacetime life. Notably, the narrators do not spare themselves. Many of the jokes ironize narrators' families and the army's ideological mission of building communism in Afghanistan.

For example, a woman who served in Afghanistan as a civilian employee recounts a joke that was popular among Soviet employees stationed there:

Teacher: "Tell me, children, what do your fathers do?"

Hands go up. "My Daddy's a doctor."

"My Daddy's a plumber."

"My Daddy's in the circus..."

Little Vova stays quiet. "Vova, don't you know what your Daddy does?"

"He used to be a pilot, but now he's got a job as a fascist in Afghanistan" (Alexievich 1992, 75).

This joke summarizes the confusion of values for the Soviets who served in the Afghan war, since it no longer adhered to the basic binaries defined in the context of the Great Patriotic War. In the Great Patriotic War, fascists were foreign invaders of the socialist Motherland, while Soviets could not be fascists by definition. In the joke the naive child narrator dethrones several iconic characters and blurs key divides of the Great Patriotic War myth. First, the major character of the joke is the family patriarch, who has to be unambiguously benign because he is not only the protagonist of Soviet ideological narratives but also of the bigger ideological framework, such as the heteronormative family. Second, in the joke, the father is a pilot—an

iconic character of Soviet narratives dedicated to military exploits and peacetime conquests of nature. In the joke cited by Alexievich, the father figure crosses all ideological divides by participating in an unpopular war. That is, the line separating Nazi and Soviet ideologies is blurred. He is a Soviet pilot and at the same time an agent of genocide—a role hardly ever possible in officially sanctioned Soviet novels and films.

The narrator of this anecdote says that she and her fellow employees preferred to tell jokes to avoid traumatic conversations, such as acknowledging the constant loss of life, the “terribly upsetting” things that happened daily, and also how they, as women, would be treated when they returned home from Afghanistan. She says, “I’m longing to go home, but where *is* home?” (Alexievich 1990, 75). Many interviewees note that women were humiliated with derogatory comments about their promiscuity after they returned from the war zone. For instance, when the same narrator’s mother, unaware of these stereotypes, proudly tells friends that her daughter is in Afghanistan, the narrator wants to tell her: “Keep quiet, Mum, unless you want someone to tell you your daughter’s a tart” (74).

Another joke plays on this idea, using characters from Russian folklore:

Zmei Gorynych, Kashei Bessmertny and Baba Yaga meet at a transportation centre here. They’re all off to defend the revolution. Two years later they meet on the way home. Zmei Gorynych has only one head left (the others have been shot off), Kashei Bessmertny is alive only because he’s immortal, but Baba Yaga is looking marvelous in the latest French fashions. She’s in a wonderful mood and says she’s signing on for another year. “You must be mad, Baba Yaga!” say the others, but she replies, “Back

home I'm Baba Yaga, but over here I'm Vasilisa Prekrasnaya [the beautiful].”

(Alexievich 1992, 42).

The joke is told by a woman, illustrating how jokes can be used in a self-reflexive and self-protective manner. Women who are accused of promiscuity make jokes about themselves that are based on the premise of such stereotypes. On some level, even if not in life, making jokes like these serves to let women retake power to shape the narrative about themselves.

It is also significant that women are the ones making the jokes, since this has traditionally been a male-dominated genre. Sigmund Freud believed that jokes were a release of repressed sexual energy and aggression towards women (Smythe 19), so it was inconceivable that women could even be the ones telling the jokes. In this book women turn this idea on its head, as they take the role of narrator and deflect aggression aimed at them. The joke about Baba Yaga is particularly telling in this sense, since she is a powerful female figure who acts because she chooses to do so, not to please a male character. She is not at all sexualized, unlike many female heroines. Her role in the joke is that of a woman in Afghanistan, so perhaps those telling the anecdote identify with her in some way.

According to N.A. Sivakova, jokes in *Zinky Boys* have several functions: a joke “wedges into the text, disrupts the rhythm, forces actualization of internal reserves of ideas, brings revival;” they “introduce a new, in opposition to the official canonizing, point of view.” Jokes also contain both “locality and significance” that conveys “tendency through detail” (Sivakova). Jokes can be understood as perhaps the most pointed way to convey an idea, stripping away the usual conventions that govern discourse about the war. Moreover, unlike more straightforward

discourse, they allow for parallel interpretations, leaving the ultimate conclusion more or less up to the reader.

*Zinky Boys* also includes several belief systems without giving privilege to either one, which adds to its eclectic tone. First, references to Christian texts play a significant role in the book. At the moment of *Zinky Boys*' publication, sacred scriptures were a recent addition to the authoritative texts that Gorbachev's glasnost brought back into Russia's cultural life. Alexievich divides the main section of the book, the one containing interviews (as opposed to notes from her diary) into three sections: The First Day, The Second Day, and The Third Day, each of which begins with a quote from the Bible. Considering Kukulin's claim that Alexievich's position is that she "does not want to declare history absurd," the framing of her oral histories with religious quotes could be a way to bring in greater meaning. It suggests that despite the fragmented and open-ended nature of her narrative, there is some moral lesson to be gained from all these traumatic experiences. Additionally, the anonymity of the interviewees, which gives them the opportunity to speak freely even about shameful experiences, could be seen as analogous to religious confession. At the same time, Alexievich expresses doubt that religion has all the answers. After the Bible excerpt at the beginning of the third section, about how God created the world, she writes: "What am I looking for in the scriptures? Questions, or answers? Which questions and and which answers? How much humanity is there in man? A great deal, according to some; very little, say others" (Alexievich 1992, 131).

Along with Christianity, Alexievich makes space for alternative belief systems as well. Dreams, superstitions, and folk beliefs<sup>17</sup> frequently appear in various narratives. Some

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<sup>17</sup> For further discussion see Linda Ivanits, *Russian Folk Beliefs*. Armonk, M.E. Sharpe, Inc., 1992 (pp 83, 102).

interviewees suggest that dreams have the power to convey the truth when reality cannot. A mother recalls that after seeing her daughter in a dream, “no one took me seriously, but I had a sign that she was alive” (Alexievich 1992, 151). Others recount seeing their loved ones in dreams, whether that brings comfort or torment—or, on the contrary, wishing they would appear in dreams (140).

In addition, former soldiers frequently describe the superstitions they believed while in the army. These form a set of rules that supposedly protect soldiers from death. Soldiers would refuse to say the word “last,” for example (91), and would not shake hands before going into action (99). One of the war veterans notes: “All of us soldiers had amulets round our necks, charms our mothers had given us. When I got home my mother confessed, ‘I didn’t tell you, Kolya, but I had a spell cast over you, that’s why you’ve come home safe and sound.’ She’d actually taken a lump of earth from our garden to the local witch” (91). The prevalence of these superstitions could reflect how in the absence of both “official” ideology, which had lost its resonance with people, and religion, which was no longer a dominant belief system, people turned to superstitions or pagan folk beliefs to create a coherent understanding of the rules of the world. This discussion of the various kinds of belief systems is also part of the way Alexievich’s oral histories dissolve the myth of Soviet unity, suggesting that it is impossible that one way of framing events (for instance, through a religious lens) can explain the full range of human experiences.

Linguistic diversity is also present, as there is not one unified Russian language used in the book. Alexievich writes in literary Russian, but the interviews in general are more conversational and use colloquial language. “Official” state language appears in the book,

including Soviet slogans—phrases like “sacred international duty” (44), “Afghanistan makes brothers of us all” (49), and “solemn duty to defend the southern borders of our Socialist Motherland” (73). Against this backdrop of official language, soldiers also use their own dialect and slang that distances them from the standard state language. Many of the words were invented during the Afghan War—for example, *bort* (airplane), *bronik* (bulletproof vest), *zelenka* (forest), *dukh* (member of the mujahedin) and *zamenshchik* (replacement soldier). Besides this, foreign words and phrases are also frequently used, adding to the heteroglossia. The use of words from the languages of Afghanistan underscores that the war experience is no longer presented as simply a Soviet experience, but a two-sided one.

Finally, a central characteristic of the multivoiced tone in *Zinky Boys* is the fragmentation of the narratives, which form a mosaic structure. According to Kukulin, Alexievich’s works became progressively more fragmented and edited as she developed as a writer. *Zinky Boys* is more fragmented than *War’s Unwomanly Face*, as it includes excerpts from Alexievich’s diary, fragments of narratives that have no names attached, and outside excerpts, such as quotes from the Bible or Muslim prayers. In the process of writing *Zinky Boys*, Alexievich came to believe that the old ways of narration were insufficient to capture traumatic events like those described in the book. She describes how, during her trip to Afghanistan, she took a helicopter flight and from above saw “hundreds... of zinc coffins, beautifully and terribly glistening in the sun” (2006)

<sup>18</sup>. Upon seeing this, she had the sudden thought that “literature suffocates within its borders...

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<sup>18</sup> “Поднялась на вертолете... Сверху увидела сотни заготовленных впрок цинковых гробов, красиво и страшно блестящих на солнце... Столкнешься с чем-нибудь подобным и сразу мысль: литература задыхается в своих границах... Копированием и фактом можно выразить только видимое глазом, а кому нужен тщательный отчет о происходящем? Нужно что-то другое... Запечатленные мгновения, вырванные из жизни...” (Alexievich 2006).

Who needs a careful account of events? Something else is necessary” (2006). In other words, Alexievich came to realize that “traditional literature cannot solve this problem. It cannot reproduce the aesthetic effect of this site, the very possibility to perceive this row of coffins as a sublime aesthetic. The aesthetic sight... transcends the borders of literature, of traditional literature” (Kukuljin 2017).

## **Gender**

As in *War's Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich does not restrict her narrative of the war to men's voices. Out of 65 total interviews in the book, 27 are women. They represent a diverse range of occupations, such as nurses and civilian employees, as well as non-military people, such as mothers whose children went to Afghanistan. Of these women, “10 served in the war in some capacity (most as nurses or civilian employees), 14 are the mothers of slain soldiers, and 3 are widows” (Jones 235).

As Alexievich splinters the myth of unity among Soviets during the war effort, she also challenges the idea that there was unity even within a particular demographic group. Women interviewees expressed diverse motivations for going to Afghanistan. One woman decided to go after both her husband and child had both died—“everything just reminded me horribly of the past” (Alexievich 1992, 22), and going to Afghanistan was a chance to escape. Another was studying to be a teacher and was recruited as a nurse with some coercion: the recruitment officer told her, “If you don't, we'll give the university a call and tell them what kind of Komsomolka you really are. The Motherland demands...” (134). A third woman went because she “simply believed what [she] read in the newspapers” and wanted to be like those heroic young people of the past, who sacrificed themselves for a greater cause (39). Another had romantic, somewhat

orientalist notions of what Afghanistan would be like: “I thought I’d find real life only somewhere far away, where the men were strong and the women beautiful. I wanted adventure and escape from everyday life...” (73). However, when speaking not about themselves but about other women, many interviewees attribute their motivations to the desire to make money by any means, including selling themselves as sex workers. One woman poses the question to Alexievich—“Why are women so desperate to get here? The short answer’s money” (42).

Alexievich’s account of the war in Afghanistan examines at length sex work as an integral part of Afghan war experience. According to the official ideology, sex work existed as an occupation only under capitalism and could not exist under socialism.<sup>19</sup> During glasnost, journalists addressed many formerly taboo topics, sex work in the USSR among them. Thus, Alexievich’s discussion of sex work as part of Afghan war experience fits the formerly taboo topics that became central in glasnost-era publications. Bringing up sex work in the context of the war and the Soviet army, one of the most important ideological institutions of Soviet society, made Alexievich’s book highly controversial. She discussed not just a taboo topic but critiqued one of the major institutions of Soviet society. Moreover, she does not describe sex work simply as happening in a far-away, capitalist, war-torn place, but makes it clear that sex work was a reality within the borders of the Soviet Union as well. One private, for instance, recounts arriving in Tashkent, where he was asked, “Back from Afghan? Want a girl? I’ve got one for you as soft as a peach, dear...” (Alexievich 1992, 81). In their scale, brothels went far beyond everyday *blat*,

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<sup>19</sup> According to an authoritative *Tolkovyĭ slovar’ Ushakova* (*The Explanatory Dictionary of the Russian Language* by Dmitrii Ushakov 1935-1940), prostitution is “a phenomenon created by exploitative social formations” (“Явление, порожденное эксплуататорским строем”), apparently non-existent under socialism. <https://ushakovdictionary.ru/word.php?wordid=60837>

the use of informal connections. They were full-scale enterprises existing alongside the official Soviet economy during the period of the Afghan war.

One can see how unsettling Alexievich's treatment of the theme of sex work was for interviewees by the way they relate to this aspect of the Afghan War. Many women make sure to separate themselves from those women who engaged in sex work, whom they saw as degrading themselves and occupying the lowest position of the wartime hierarchy. No interviewee directly admitted to being one of these women (though those who were involved in sex work might have been unlikely to agree to be interviewed). A nurse recalls, "There was the eternal question... of why so many women were drafted into Afghanistan for the duration? To begin with we were just a bit puzzled when dozens of 'cleaners', 'librarians', and 'hotel workers' started arriving... Well, why do you think? We professionals kept away from such women, although they didn't bother us personally" (Alexievich 1992, 138). They did recount stories of sexual harassment, or being assumed to be a prostitute by soldiers or people back at home. They specify, however, that such perceptions were not true of them, only of other women. A civilian employee recounts how little boys would run after her shouting, "'Khanum! [woman] Show us your...' They even offer me money, so presumably some of the girls take it" (Alexievich 1992, 75). Jeffrey Jones identifies three categories of women's representation in *Zinky Boys*. One of these, elements of which are visible in most accounts of women who went to Afghanistan, is the "morally loose woman-at-war" construct:

This is a common image of women at war, including in the Soviet Union during World War II, rooted in the predatory behaviour of men, usually officers abusing their position of power. Given this situation, many (not all) women who served faced a very difficult

situation with limited options: either agree to sleep with men in positions of power or choose a partner of one's own accord for "protection" from such predators. This set up a lose-lose scenario because either option led women to be labelled "loose"(without men being subject to a comparable judgment)... Women's role in the war, in short, was reduced to their alleged sexual activity, regardless of their actions. (245-246).

The other main group of women who appear in *Zinky Boys* is mothers whose children participated in the war. (Jones refers to the "mother/prostitute dichotomy" in the way women are represented in the book). In contrast, only one father is included. Fathers presumably also suffered the loss of children in the war, but this imbalance may reflect Alexievich's view that women, and mothers in particular, possess a kind of higher moral compass and can better convey the inhumanity of violence. The inclusion of mothers' accounts in *Zinky Boys* continues a major theme of *War's Unwomanly Face*—that war is simply incompatible with a woman's nature, which is life-giving rather than life-taking. Therefore, adding women's voices to the war canon can demonstrate that violence is immoral, and serve as a reminder of the suffering it causes.

According to Jones, the "Motherland-mother (*rodina-mat'*)" construct of women's role in war was a central part of the memory of World War II. However, this patriotic linking of motherhood and a feminine representation of the nation was no longer fitting in the context of the Afghan war, which was characterized by increasing disillusionment and loss of belief in what the country was fighting for. This shift was even reflected in the language that those in Afghanistan used to refer to the USSR. Rather than the term "*rodina*" (motherland), with its patriotic and emotional connotations, they talked instead about returning home to the "*soiuz*" (union), a term that is affectionate but "does *not* imply the same kind of unquestioning love one

has for one's mother or, by extension, one's Motherland." Rather than "motherland-mothers," then, the majority of women's voices in *Zinky Boys* represent what Jones calls the "mournful mother" construct. These mothers "do not accept the sacrifice of their sons for a cause they neither comprehend nor support" (Jones 241). Jones contends: "The Motherland-mother... is expected to endure suffering with stoic silence and somehow trudge onward for the sake of the 'patriotic' cause at hand," the mothers in *Zinky Boys* simultaneously grieve and question why their children were sent off to die (240). Furthermore, it was specifically this shift among mothers and their image in the collective imagination that contributed to the widespread loss of trust in both the war and the Soviet state: "in the case of the Soviet-Afghan War the break in the Motherland-mother construct, so much a part of World War II and the cult of the war the last Soviet generation grew up with, as well as the strong sense of disillusionment that break entailed for those who returned (or the mothers and wives of those who did not), spelled doom for the Soviet system" (236).

The prominence given to mothers' voices in *Zinky Boys* is also reflected in societal transitions of the time. During perestroika, Soviet society saw the emergence of nongovernmental and citizens' groups, notably including groups of soldiers' mothers. Serguei Oushakine explains the significance of these groups based on his study of one such organization, the Altai Committee of Soldiers Mothers (CSM):

The absence of an authoritative interpretation of the consequences of state military politics produced an uncommon cultural and political situation. The task of cultural "enframing" and "emplotment," which could render soldiers' deaths socially and personally meaningful, was actively taken up by the mothers themselves. Their striving

for public recognition of their losses and their own identities often resulted in a complicated ethical situation: attempts at assigning a wider social meaning to their traumas became fundamentally entangled with a public rationalization of the state's military politics. (Oushakine 2009, 207)

In this context, the role of soldiers' mothers in Alexievich's oral history reflects the fact that mothers had taken on a political role and significance during this time, by assuming responsibility for how their children would be remembered. In their creation of social organizations based on personal trauma, they often appealed to the "symbolism of family ties"—Oushakine describes how members of CSM "routinely addressed soldiers and conscripts as 'little sons' (synki)," while mothers were often referred to as "mamochki or mamashi" instead of their names (207). The organizations attempted to find information about missing soldiers, protested abuse within the army, and also created new memorializing rituals and symbols such as "monuments, eternal flames, and elaborate mourning rituals" (Oushakine 2009, 212). Even though many offices of the CSM took an active antiwar position during the invasion of Chechnya in 1994, "by and large the mothers expressed a strong resistance toward the changing framing of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan," still preferring to view it as a fulfillment of international duty (210-211).

This context also helps explain the lawsuit against Alexievich in 1992, in which some of the subjects interviewed for *Zinky Boys*, along with an organization representing mothers of soldiers killed in the war, sued Svetlana Alexievich for libel against the Soviet military (Gessen). One mother objected to the book, saying, "My only son was killed there.... The only comfort I had was that I had raised a hero, but according to you he wasn't a hero at all, but a murderer and

aggressor.” Others wrote, “You wanted to demonstrate the futility and wickedness of war, but you don’t realize that in doing so you insult those who took part in it, including a lot of innocent boys. How could you? How dare you cover our boys’ graves with such dirt?... They were heroes, heroes, heroes!” (Braithwaite 2016). Since one of the unifying goals of organizations of soldiers’ mothers was to prescribe meaning to their sons’ deaths in a time when the war had become seen as “grave error,” Alexievich’s perceived denigration of the cause for which their sons fought was taken as “a personal insult” (Oushakine 2009, 211). Jones, however, distinguishes between the women’s offense at their sons’ portrayal and justification for the entire war: “The women did not defend the validity of the war, the cause for which their sons died; they objected to the portrayal of their sons as killers. Their sons behaved well, even if the war itself was unjust” (Jones 245).

### **Ethnicity and the Enemy**

In *Zinky Boys*, ethnic and religious diversity within the Soviet Union and Soviet army is not really dealt with; this is perhaps a function of not including interviewees’ names, which often serve as a marker of ethnicity. Ethnic differences between Soviets and Afghans, though, are addressed. The book affirms the common humanity of Afghan people, though at times emphasizing cultural differences in an orientalizing way. For example, Alexievich writes that “It is, literally, a different era here - the fourteenth century, according to their calendars” (Alexievich 1992, 6). A military adviser recounts how he “personally, truly, believed that their nomadic tents, their *yurts*, were inferior to our five-storey blocks of flats, and that there was no true culture without a flush toilet” (34). At the same time, he says, “I had the greatest respect for the Afghan people, even while I was shooting and killing them. I still do. You could even say that I love them” (34). Afghans are also allowed to speak for themselves in the book. One private

recalls talking to a local shopkeeper and telling him Afghans had been living wrong; now the Soviets would teach them how to build socialism. The shopkeeper smiled and told him, “I did business before the revolution and I do business now. Go home. These mountains belong to us. Let us sort out our own problems in our own way” (54-55). Though passages like this are relatively rare, *Zinky Boys* creates space for inclusion of Afghan opinions about the Soviet invasion, adding to the multiplicity of voices. For example, the book calls attention to the suffering Afghans experienced at the hands of the Soviet occupiers, often recounting stories of such brutality that it would be nearly impossible for the reader to sympathize with the soldiers over civilians or defend the stated causes of the war. One soldier tells Alexievich: “They killed my friend. Later I saw some of them laughing and having a good time. Whenever I see a lot of them together, now, I start shooting. I shot up an Afghan wedding, I got the happy couple, the bride and groom. I’m not sorry for them - I’ve lost my friend” (6). On the other hand, many of those interviewed could look past their own personal losses to see the tragedy of deaths on both sides. A mother who lost her son in Afghanistan recalls how she would imagine shooting Afghan people she saw on TV, “until, one day, it showed one of their old women, an Afghan mother, I suppose. ‘She’s probably lost a son, too,’ I thought. After that I stopped ‘shooting’” (87).

The contrast between portrayal of the enemy in Alexievich’s work about the Afghan war versus the Great Patriotic War is also significant. In *War’s Unwomanly Face* the divide between the Soviets, heroic defenders of the homeland, and the Germans, brutal fascist invaders, was clear. In contrast, in *Zinky Boys* the line between “us” and “them” is blurred. One interviewee recounts, “He was lying there, wounded, our soldier... Dying... and calling for his mother... His girlfriend... Next to him lay a wounded “duk” [slang for Afghan]... dying... And calling for his

mother... His girlfriend... First an Afghan name, then a Russian one..." (142). The parallel structure of this quote, placing a Russian and Afghan literally beside each other, emphasizes the common humanity, and the way the war brutalized people of both nations.

### **Economy of War and the Myth of Soviet Unity**

In her analysis of Soviet and Russian economic practices during and after socialism, Alena Ledeneva notes that the Soviet system was by no means a fully planned and centralized economy: "those living within its borders found that they had to counteract its over-centralization and its ideological limitations through intricate schemes of informal exchange" (1). A major shift between *War's Unwomanly Face* and *Zinky Boys* is the explicit acknowledgement that informal exchange occurred during war as well, which was therefore an economic endeavor as well as a military one. And most importantly, in *Zinky Boys*, the state is only one actor, who hardly has a monopoly and full control over the war's course, especially its economy. In other words, when Alexievich starts examining the economy of the Afghan War, she starts dismantling the myth of Soviet unity—including the unity of state-run economy. In *Zinky Boys* depicts a world where obtaining goods and services in short supply through so-called *blat* and full scale business enterprises, such as brothels and cross-border drug trade, overshadows the practices of the centralized state economy. As one of the former soldiers notes in his interview: "We talked a lot about money—more than about death" (Alexievich 1992, 17).

The informal economic practices was part of the unofficial Soviet culture of the Great Patriotic War as well. The Thaw era writers, such as Viktor Nekrasov, Iurii Bondarev, and Grigorii Baklanov, started describing them in their so called "trench prose" narratives.<sup>20</sup> These

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<sup>20</sup> The trench prose is also referred to as *leitenantskaia proza*. Viktor Nekrasov's "In the Trenches of Stalingrad" (1946) is usually cited as the work that inaugurated this body of non-heroic narratives about the Great Patriotic War. During Stalin era, the trench prose was overshadowed by epic, usually cinematic, depictions of Stalin's military

were timid references that avoided the most problematic aspects of those informal economic practices. The writers hardly ever mentioned the fact that while the Soviet state was running a war against the Nazis, Red Army soldiers and officers engaged in plundering the occupied countries for private gain.<sup>21</sup> Acknowledging these material endeavors would have undermined the myth of Soviet unity and moral superiority. Following this tradition, in her first book about the Great Patriotic War, Alexievich is unwilling to touch the highly problematic topic. In fact, she accepts the myth of the sacred war but tests the limits of permissible discourse by adding new voices—those of women—to commemorate that unity.

In *Zinky Boys*, the economics of the war, including its informal and often illegal practices, becomes one of the central themes of the book. This theme allows Alexievich to present her military and civilian interviewees as individuals with a variety of motives: idealistic and base, reasonable and irrational. The unity of the fighting nation is not at the center of this story of war. Within the first few pages of the book, Alexievich describes the conversations of officers at the Tashkent airport waiting to fly to Afghanistan. On their way to and from the military mission they ruminate about what consumer electronics items they can get while fulfilling their service obligations. Their discussion even invokes specific brand names: “who’s taking what home: who’s got a video-recorder, and whether it’s a Sharp or a Sony” (Alexievich 1992, 3).

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victories. The lieutenant prose became popular again during Khrushchev’s Thaw and became part of literature of destalinization.

<sup>21</sup> For example, Red Army officers brought back German cars, furniture, art objects that appeared en masse on the streets of Soviet cities in veteran’s apartments. The invisible aspects of these informal economic activities included secret caches of Western art taken as reparations for Soviet losses by the state as well as individuals. Late Soviet art bureaucrats reluctantly admitted of the existence of such caches only during Mikhail Gorbachev’s glasnost. For further discussion see Kathleen E. Smith *Mythmaking in New Russia*. Cornell UP 2002, especially the chapter “Disposing of the Spoils of World War Two” (57-77).

The Soviet economy splinters into at least two, if not more, economic systems: the state-run one and the so-called “second economy” of personal connections to obtain goods and services in short supply. Another passage involves a detailed description of the second economy between Soviet soldiers and locals in Afghanistan. As a civilian employee recounts:

You ‘fulfil your international duty’ and make money on the side. Everyone does it. You buy sweets, biscuits or canned food at the army store and sell it to the local shops.

There’s a tariff: a tin of dried milk goes for 50 afoshki, a service cap 400; a car-mirror fetches 1000, a wheel from a Kamaz truck 20,000. You can get up to 18,000-20,000 for a Makarov pistol; 100,000 for a Kalashnikov; and the going-rate for a truck-load of rubbish from the garrison is 70,000-200,000 (depending on the number of cans). The women who do best here are those who sleep with the quartermasters, who live it up while the boys up at the front go down with scurvy and have to eat rotten cabbage. (Alexievich 1992, 115)

This list provides a comprehensive breakdown of the informal economy of the colonial war, progressing from the least to most taboo forms of *blat*—from food, to automobile parts, to weapons, to sex work. Criticisms of Alexievich’s literature as slandering the Soviet army can likely be traced back to sections like this one, which express a very sober and cynical view of the war. Many would object to the idea that instead of discussing the patriotic mission of people defending the Motherland, Alexievich focuses on financial transactions and monetary values assigned to every action in the war.

Besides being socially taboo, such activities in Soviet times were simply illegal. Notably, dealing in foreign currency was considered a crime against the state, and more serious than crimes against individuals. It is also significant that slang is used when discussing types of

currency (for example, *afoshki* is slang for *Afgani*, units of local currency). Just like the dealing in Afghan currency was an activity separate from the state economy, the use of slang among soldiers represents a mode of discourse separate from the language of the state. The translators provide a short glossary of similar slang terms defined at the start of the book, in which two out of the eight words defined are units of currency (Alexievich 1992, xix). Similarly, monetary themes permeate other slang terms that appeared in the war, including those about women. For example, one man recalls a woman who would sleep with soldiers for money; he refers to her by the made-up name “Svetka Afoshka” (Alexievich 1992, 51). The term *chekistka* was also used to refer to women, linking their behavior with money and therefore prostitution<sup>22</sup> (Jones 247).

Material incentives are among the many various motivations given by interviewees for joining the war effort. Some were attracted by the salary, others by the opportunity to obtain goods that were inaccessible back in the USSR. However, these hopes were not always realized. An artillery captain expresses displeasure with the pay:

We were incredibly badly paid for fighting that war: we got twice basic pay (basic pay being worth 270 foreign currency vouchers), less all kinds of stoppages, compulsory membership-fees, subscriptions, and tax. At that time an ordinary volunteer worker in the north was getting 1,500. ‘Military advisers’ earned five to ten times more than us. The difference was particularly obvious going through customs at the border: we’d have a tape-recorder and a couple of pairs of jeans, they’d have half a dozen trunks, so heavy the squaddies could hardly carry them. (Alexievich 1992, 81)

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<sup>22</sup> This term is a play both on the word *chekist*, a member of the first Soviet secret police, and *cheki*, the foreign currency vouchers earned by Soviet citizens working abroad which could be used at the *Beriozka* specialty stores.

The discussion of pay disparities is another way Alexievich splinters the myth of unity during the war, in this case by acknowledging class differences. Even within the army, a group of people on a patriotic mission, some earned more and others earned less. Moreover, everyone was aware of this social stratification despite the rhetoric of equality under the socialist system. This interviewee expresses envy and resentment at class differences, feelings that cannot completely coexist with the idea that everyone was unified in the face of war. In addition, those who received low pay were evidently unable to function on what the state provided, underscoring the necessity of the second economy to compensate for the shortcomings of centralized state planning.

Many soldiers interviewed also discuss drug use during the war, which naturally was not part of the official state economy. A nurse recalls, “There was a lot of opium and marijuana smoked, and whatever else they could get ahold of” (Alexievich 1992, 25). A soldier explains that everyone smoked, because “it was the only way to keep going” (171). A lieutenant also provides insight into how the illicit drug trade was conducted: “Did you know that drugs and fur coats were smuggled in coffins? Yes, right in there with the bodies!” (110)

The transition Alexievich makes in bringing unofficial economic relations to the forefront of her literature both reflects and parallels the transition of the Soviet Union during Gorbachev’s reforms of perestroika and glasnost. For those who went to Afghanistan, the experience was likely their first exposure to participation in a full-fledged market economy. It perhaps acted as a trial run for capitalism on the fringes of the Soviet empire, as has been the case for many types of reforms in Russian history. The type of economic activity described in *Zinky Boys* encompasses the full range of market relations, from obtaining food to large-scale drug trade. It therefore

represents a shift from the common unofficial economic practice of *blat*, which, as Ledeneva describes, was concerned primarily with everyday survival using the help of personal connections. Alexievich's shift in discussing greater scale practices of the second economy parallels their coming to the surface in society—both as Soviet citizens returned from Afghanistan and as the Soviet economy transitioned to market capitalism.

### **Later Editions of *Zinky Boys***

The analysis above is based on the the original 1990 edition of *Zinky Boys* and its 1992 English translation.. However, as with *War's Unwomanly Face*, Alexievich has continued to edit and release new editions of the book. According to Holly Myers, in the case of *Zinky Boys* this editing was done in a way that went against Alexievich's central thesis in the original book—that she was writing a history of emotions, not the war, and that every person has their own version of the truth. Alexievich asserts that her goal is to present a multiplicity of voices without claiming that the book is an authoritative historical narrative or contains the absolute truth. In fact, she includes several quotes that question the trustworthiness of all historical accounts and seems to caution the reader against complete trust in both the interviewees' accounts and Alexievich's own representation of events. This is likely a reflection of the times, when “suspicion of written histories reigned supreme” (Myers 336).

In a later edition published in 2016, in contrast, that “distrust of history has all but evaporated” (Myers 337). Alexievich replaces the epigraphs, such as the one stating, “history will lie,” with excerpts of Russian history books and statistics of the Soviet-Afghan war. This seems to “encourage her readers to equate not only history but also numbers and statistics with authoritative truth,” which she warned against in the earlier edition (338). She also includes a

chapter of newspaper excerpts, and sections of court documents from the lawsuit against her. This serves to present her rebuttal to those who brought her to trial over the accuracy of her writing, and also “further underscores Alexievich’s new position on the authority of documents to tell the truth” (344). Finally, despite asserting in the original version that multiple, competing versions of the truth can exist simultaneously, in later editions Alexievich edits or downplays narratives that express either an ambivalent or a positive view of the war.

While Alexievich’s antiwar position is relatively clear in the original as well, she still includes interviews with subjects who oppose her views—in some cases quite combatively, such as the man who she labels her “leading character”<sup>23</sup> (Alexievich 1992, 69). This character’s sections are shortened in the later version, with some key repeating imagery removed. More generally, in later editions of *Zinky Boys*, Alexievich “has subdued or undercut voices that suggest a positive or even merely ambivalent assessment of the war, and she has more overtly asserted her own message—the inhumanity and absolute ‘irredeemability’ of the war—as the only Truth” (Myers 334).

### **“Close to Life” - Realism 2.0**

After watching Fedor Bondarchuk’s 2005 film *9th Company* in his presidential residence Novo-Ogarevo, Vladimir Putin noted: “Perhaps like any work of art this is not a piece of life but a creative work. But I think it is very close to life, at least judging from what I know and heard” (“Putin”). The president’s praise of Bondarchuk’s work is quite symptomatic: the war film

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<sup>23</sup> This unnamed interviewee tells Alexievich, “God! How I hate pacifists! Have you ever tried climbing a mountain in full battle-dress, or sweltered inside an APC in 70 degrees Celsius? Have you had the stench of desert thorn-bushes in your nostrils all night? If you haven’t, then shut up and leave us alone! This was our affair, and nothing to do with you” (Alexievich 1992, 13).

exemplifies a counternarrative to complex multi-voiced discussions of Soviet militarism, Alexievich's books being the prime example. In this thesis I use Bondarchuk's film as a case study to analyze Putin-era reactions to cultural changes of perestroika era, specifically the treatment of war as the story of a male rite of passage and heroic exploit legitimating Russia's state power. The film was even screened on state television on May 9th, 2006, an attempt to integrate the war in Afghanistan into the unquestionable moral legitimacy of the Great Patriotic War myth (Carleton 326). The film illustrates a response to the uncomfortable truths exposed in narratives such as Alexievich's: it emphasizes a return to a more unproblematic version of the Afghan war that revives some Soviet myths about imperial unity and power.

### **Unity of Voices and Unity of Military Conquest**

In contrast to the multiplicity of voices in *Zinky Boys*, *9th Company* aligns itself firmly with the state and its official justification at the time for invading Afghanistan. Along with this, it glorifies both war and military culture. One soldier, the artist who carries nickname Gioconda<sup>24</sup>, tells the others that "in the history of man, weapons are the most beautiful thing ever created," and invokes Michelangelo while admiring a tank. Like Michelangelo's sculptures, he argues, there is "nothing extra" in war, only life and death. This makes it beautiful and serves to justify the war for viewers; even if the occupation of Afghanistan may not have been politically or ideologically justifiable, war for war's sake is a noble endeavor.

In addition to aestheticizing the war, the film challenges the claim that the Afghan War contributed to the dissolution of the Soviet Empire. The film suggests that the reason for the USSR's disintegration was democratization; the war in Afghanistan, on the other hand, enhanced

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<sup>24</sup> This is reference to the Mona Lisa, which depicts Lisa del Giocondo.

national unity, represented as male bonding during the war. According to the filmmaker, everyone who went to Afghanistan volunteered for this noble experience. The film includes a notable scene in which a commanding officer addresses the soldiers headed for Afghanistan. He tells them, “Each of you, on your own, has volunteered to serve our motherland in Afghanistan,” before asking if anyone has changed their mind. No one steps forward. In this version of the Afghan war narrative, all those who fought in Afghanistan volunteered to do so and again chose to fight after being given the option to leave.

Unlike in *Liberation*, the violence of the Afghan War in *9th Company* is not sanitized or viewed from a distance, but is often very graphic. This reflects the need to create a commercially successful film, as well as perhaps changes in viewer tastes and increased normalization or desensitization to violence on screen. While in *Liberation* large-scale battle scenes were included to showcase Soviet filmmaking abilities and attract viewers, in *9th Company* the gratuitous violence and computer-generated special effects serve this purpose.

## **Gender**

War in *9th Company* is depicted as a male rite of passage—a way for the characters to mature into real men and prove their masculinity. During the scenes in training camp in the first half of the film, the drill sergeant constantly berates the new recruits by calling them girls; this insulting comparison apparently provides the motivation they need to overcome the weakness in themselves. They are also encouraged (sometimes forced) to fight each other in training, which is portrayed as a healthy and necessary expression of a man’s natural aggressive instincts. The drill sergeant Dygalo presents a counterexample of a man who does not have such an outlet. Because of a health condition, he is not allowed to return to Afghanistan to fight. Instead, he must stay in

the Soviet Union and train new recruits. This torments him, as he is deprived of the violence that gives purpose to his life. At the end of the film, it is revealed that Dygalo has a stroke from the psychological suffering of this violence deprivation. In Bondarchuk's film, it is not war that causes trauma for those who experience it; instead, it is the lack of war, a supposedly natural outlet for normalized male violence, that is traumatic for men.

Women hardly have any role in Bondarchuk's film. According to the film, humanity is a mono-gendered species as women exist only as an inferior form, hardly a viable alternative to militarized masculinity. In this narrow version of heteronormative masculinity, war is invigorating for men and a way to prove their patriarchal power.

Finally, the film reinforces important patrimonial continuities in Russian filmmakers' community. For the filmmaker Fedor Bondarchuk, the celebration of this masculine ideal of war is personal affair as well. He is the son Sergei Bondarchuk, a famous Soviet filmmaker who directed the World War II films *They Fought for the Motherland* (1975) and film *Fate of a Man* (1959), as well as the monumental film version of *War and Peace* (1965-67).<sup>25</sup> Distinguished by their epic scale, Sergei Bondarchuk's films occupy in Russian cinema a place similar to the epics of Cecil D. DeMille's in Hollywood. Fedor himself is a male heir of just one of several prominent Russian cinematic dynasties where, unsurprisingly, father-son relations play a very important role. The younger Bondarchuk was inspired in particular by *Fate of a Man* and, "at

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<sup>25</sup> Among the important Russian cinematic dynasties are the Chukhrays, the Rostotskys, and of course the Mikhalkovs. Grigorii Chukhrai was a prominent Thaw-era director and his son, Pavel Chukhrai, is a prominent director as well. Stanislav Rostotskii was a prominent Soviet filmmaker and film industry functionary. His son, Andrei Rostotskii, became a major film actor specializing in macho characters fighting enemies of Russia and USSR--from Napoleon's cavalry to American special forces operatives. Finally, the Mikhalkov brothers--Nikita Mikhalkov and Andrei Konchalovskii--and their numerous male and female offsprings continue to play a major role in Russian film industry. For example, Nikita Mikhalkov has been the president of the Moscow International Film Festival since 2000.

least initially, hoped aesthetically to evoke his father’s great 1959 war movie” and create a contemporary sequel to the film (Seckler). Moreover, the younger Bondarchuk dedicated the film to his father in the final credits. Though the two films were created in different social and historical contexts, the continuity remains masculine fascination with war and its depiction on-screen. Besides this, early on in his acting career, Fedor Bondarchuk played a role in Iurii Ozerov’s epic film *Stalingrad* (1990), a prequel to the *Liberation* epic.

### **Ethnicity**

In *9th Company*, which focuses primarily on young male soldiers, the only type of diversity represented is ethnicity. Ethnic Russians are the largest group, but some soldiers represent various other republics of the Soviet Union. The film follows an established model for representations of the fifteen Soviet republics, where brotherhood of nations is emphasized. The theme can be clearly seen in the “Song of the Motherland” in the 1936 musical comedy film *Circus*, as well as the Friendship of Nations Fountain in Moscow.



*Figure 3: Friendship of Nations Fountain (Druzhba narodov).*

Considering the recent war in Chechnya, a friendly Chechen soldier is included in the group, and Bondarchuk himself plays a minor role as a patriotic Ukrainian officer<sup>26</sup>. These ethnic differences are not explicitly acknowledged in the film. The male wartime bonding, aided by heavy drinking and fighting the faceless foreign enemy, is apparently enough to overcome any potential ethnic or religious tensions.

The first introduction to Afghans in *9th Company* comes with a military intelligence officer briefing the new recruits about their Muslim enemies. Afghans are characterized as exotic, and not quite human. The intelligence officer tells them, “Islam’s not just another religion. It’s another world which has its own laws, another approach to life and death”—in particular, that Muslims are rewarded in heaven for killing infidels such as the Soviets. By reminding the soldiers and viewers alike that the Afghans will show no mercy to the Soviet soldiers, the film implicitly justifies its depiction of Afghans as faceless savages and the glorification of the violence against them. The differences between the two cultures are framed as a war of civilizations that can never be resolved.

### **Ode to State Power**

*9th Company* differs from *Liberation*-type war epics in that the focus is a group of soldiers who have no real power over the course of events. However, the state as the center of power still plays an important, though less visible, role in the film. One example of this is the colonel who gives a speech to the soldiers about to depart for Afghanistan<sup>27</sup>. He reminds them

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<sup>26</sup> It is important that a Ukrainian be included as an integral part of the Soviet military system because the *9th Company* was made in the aftermath of the 2004 Orange Revolution in Ukraine.

<sup>27</sup> This character is played by the actor and renowned filmmaker Stanislav Govorukhin, who was also a member of the Russian State Duma and head of Vladimir Putin’s campaign office. Govorukhin is more than just a filmmaker who serves Putin. Putin uses lines from Govorukhin’s films to justify his legitimacy. When in 2010 asked to justify the controversial incarceration of a Russian oppositional oligarch Mikhail Khodorkovsky, Putin cited a character from Govorukhin’s film *Meeting Place Cannot Be Changed*--Gleb Zheglov. The police detective Zheglov favors

that they all volunteered for the war in order to serve their motherland. After he asks whether anyone has changed their mind about making this commitment, the camera cuts to a shot of the Soviet flag blowing in the wind. None of the men are able to dishonor themselves by refusing, and the colonel thanks them for their service. The subtext here is that the soldiers' lives have meaning because they are serving the empire. For Alexievich, however, it is taken as given that people's lives are more significant than any common cause. It is not service to the state that makes them worth writing about. For her, documenting the range of human experience, especially in extreme environments such as war, is a worthwhile goal in itself.

This is connected with the idea of the economy of war as well. Whereas Alexievich provides analytical descriptions of the everyday ways people got by, *9th Company* portrays the entire war effort as one of mystical unity. There is no struggle to obtain the necessary material products to survive, there is only the bromance of the Soviet army that produces both economic and military power. These two types of power are inseparable in the view of the film—the Soviet Union is a military power because of its strong centralized economy, and vice versa.

The state as the center of power is visible as well at the very end of the film, just after the final battle when nearly all the soldiers from the ninth company have been killed. A military helicopter descends suddenly from above, and a commander emerges to inform the remaining soldiers that the Soviet army is pulling out of Afghanistan. In some ways, the commander appears to be a benevolent source of authority. He embraces the soldier who reports to him about the 9th company's victory in battle and ultimately does rescue the soldiers, even if help comes

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vigilante justice over the rule of law and says "The thief should be in jail and no matter how I deliver him there." Putin cited Zheglov at a press-conference to justify his arbitrary application of law. See Ivan Anoshin, "Kto dolzhen sidet' v tiur'me." *Interfax* 16 December, 2010. <https://www.interfax.ru/business/169514>

too late. However, this military authority is at odds with the invisible power center of the country as a whole—understood to be Gorbachev, though he is not explicitly named. A rare scene of private life during wartime shows the soldiers celebrating New Years and toasting their fallen comrades. Gorbachev's New Years address can be heard intermittently on the radio, in which he is touting the achievements of perestroika and glasnost. His celebratory tone seems inappropriate for the solemn scene in the Soviet military camp in Afghanistan. It appears that the soldiers are concerned with life and death matters, sacrificing themselves and their friends to protect the motherland, while Gorbachev, far away from the realities of his government's actions, is talking about nonsense.

The final scene of the film shows Soviet tanks rolling through the mountains, with a caption showing the date February 9, 1989. A voice-over states, "We were leaving Afghanistan... Back then, we still didn't know everything. We didn't know that in two years, the country in whose name we fought would vanish, and that wearing the medals of that extinct state would go out of fashion... and that our new lives would be as random and as cruel. Some would rise up, others sank to the bottom. We didn't know it back then. We didn't even know that in the frenzy of retreating our huge army, they simply forgot about us, from those faraway heights." In this view, Gorbachev and other former Soviet leaders are traitors for undermining Soviet military greatness. He is to blame for the catastrophe that befalls the ninth company. More unforgivable than that, he is responsible for the collapse of the Soviet state, which constitutes the ultimate betrayal of those men who fought for it.

### **Conclusion: Politics of Memory in the Post-Soviet Era**

In November 2018, the Russian State Duma approved a draft statement to reassess the 1989 resolution of the Congress of People's Deputies, which expressed "moral and political condemnation" of the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. The 2018 draft statement declares this condemnation historically unfair. It asserts that the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was a "just and necessary move" (Luxmoore) and that military actions were conducted "in full accordance with the norms of international law" (Kara-Murza). The resolution was intended to be voted on by the 30th anniversary of the withdrawal of Soviet troops from Afghanistan in February 2019; despite expectations that it would pass, the resolution was in fact postponed (Luxmoore). Nevertheless, the urge within the Duma as well as state-funded mass media and cinema, as with productions like *9th Company*, to defend and glorify the legacy of the Afghan invasion reflects the "resurgent nationalism and imperial nostalgia" gaining traction in Russia today (Anemone 87).

It is also important to note, however, that despite the release of films like *9th Company*, this is not the only existing narrative. The landscape of Russian cinema is much less uniform than in Soviet times, with prominent dissenting voices that could not have appeared in the Soviet Union. Even in cinema, which is subject to greater control by the state than literature, the government today is not the sole voice. For example, alongside state-backed nostalgia for imperial and military strength and its reflection in films like *9th Company*, there are also films such as *Cargo 200* (2007) that provide a counterpoint to such narratives. *Cargo 200*, directed by Alexei Balabanov, appeared soon after *9th Company* and was created in response to attempts to whitewash the Soviet past. The title refers to the military code word for corpses to be transported

home (very similar to the title of *Zinky Boys*). It also takes place during the Afghan war, in 1984, but its setting is several small cities in Russian provinces. This is a continuation of the tradition in Russian cinema to focus on the home front, including women and children, in order to critique war. Since the Afghan war itself is not shown, the focus cannot be on heroic feats. Instead, the film depicts the consequences of the war as it relates to, in Balabanov's view, the decomposition of late Soviet society—utopia turned dystopian. Hence, two geographical locations mentioned are real Leningrad, which we see at film's end, and fictional Leninsk, the epitome of dystopia. The war in this case is just one symptom of greater social illness—the “social squalor, criminality, and sexual and psychological torture of everyday life in the Soviet Union” (Anemone 74). Through its use of the genre of social horror, the film resists nostalgia for the imperial past. State power and impotence (represented by police captain Zhurov) morph into violence in the film, and characters are seemingly blind to the horror that surrounds them. Zhurov's mother, for example, watches television all day, oblivious to the fly-covered corpses piling up in the next room, where teenage Anzhelika is handcuffed to the bed. Through this kind of graphic imagery, Balabanov suggests that there is nothing from that period to be nostalgic for; glorifying the Soviet past is comparable to necrophilia. The film's soundtrack also provides a jarring juxtaposition of familiar, nostalgic sounds and disturbing events. In one scene, a sentimental ballad plays about a soldier returning home, yet the camera shows only corpses coming back from the war. Coffins are unloaded from a plane, and a batch of new recruits headed to Afghanistan boards immediately after.



*Figure 3: Scene from Cargo 200*

The still-changing politics of memory of each war can be seen also in Svetlana Alexievich's process of editing and publishing subsequent editions of her works. While her editing of *War's Unwomanly Face* can be considered primarily a post-Soviet phenomenon, reflecting the possibility and even need for society to address formerly taboo topics, perhaps her editing of *Zinky Boys* can be understood as a reaction to the revival of state nationalism in Russia, especially after 2014. If she has become more one-sided in her treatment of the war in Afghanistan and explicit in her anti-war views, it is a reflection of the changing views of war related to changing views of the USSR, or today Russia, as an resurgent power with imperial ambitions. In her first edition, when the Soviet Union had just dissolved and the Afghan war was widely considered a disaster, she could afford to be more ambiguous in her treatment of the war. In later editions, her vision of *Zinky Boys* as a text is very different, likely because she believes that society has not learned from the mistakes of the Soviet invasion and continues to

engage in imperialistic exploits—whether in Ukraine, Georgia, Syria, Libya, or most recently Sudan<sup>28</sup>. She explicitly draws this comparison in her Nobel Prize acceptance speech, saying:

I will take the liberty of saying that we missed the chance we had in the 1990s. The question was posed: what kind of country should we have? A strong country, or a worthy one where people can live decently? We chose the former—a strong country. Once again we are living in an era of power. Russians are fighting Ukrainians. Their brothers. My father is Belarusian, my mother, Ukrainian. That's the way it is for many people. Russian planes are bombing Syria ... (Alexievich 2015).

Though the Soviet war in Afghanistan ended thirty years ago, and World War II has been over for nearly seventy five years, it is clear that memory battles are not confined to the past. The war in Afghanistan has parallels to Russia's current military involvement abroad, which perhaps explains the government's renewed concern with the war's legacy in the collective memory. The changing treatment of the Afghan war is related to changing perceptions of the USSR and Russia as an empire. Whereas in the early years after the end of the USSR there was an attempt to change this pattern and create a democratic state that would distance itself from colonialism and imperialism, these things are now celebrated to a greater extent. The Great Patriotic War continues to have great resonance in the collective consciousness and is the frame of reference for how all wars are regarded, including Afghanistan. While the Great Patriotic War narrative was also shaped by the state and evolved along with the political climate, it gained a level of acceptance and consensus in the collective memory in a way that the Afghan war has not.

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<sup>28</sup> See "Sudan Coup: What's Next with Russian 'Advisers'?" *Warsaw Institute*, 12 April 2019, <https://warsawinstitute.org/sudan-coup-whats-next-russian-advisers/>.

Despite these significant differences in these two narratives, the ongoing process of mythmaking and alternative visions of those myths implies that Alexievich's writings are especially topical as Russia and the former Soviet republics continue to define national identities and make sense of the past in the midst of their economic and political transition.

## Appendix: Interview with Ilya Kukulín

MC: First of all, I'm curious about your book *Machines of Noisy Time*. You describe Svetlana Alexievich's work as a form of montage. Can you explain what you mean by that?

IK: I mean the combination of fragments, of different styles and montage as a combination of different voices, which aesthetic effect is used by the superposition of different voices.

Alexievich is often blamed for the regroup and thoughtful editing of these voices, smoothing them into one style. Partially, I think that's right, and maybe we could see the heritage of the Soviet school of journalism here. But on the other hand, for me, the very important feature of Alexievich's work is the very idea of this juxtaposition, of the combination of different fragments. One fragment combines only sentences or short utterances used by different voices, as in the beginning chapters of *Secondhand Time*, or whole chapters used by one voice. But the very whole of the text—from the microlevel, this combination of different voices, or vocabulary of catastrophe of *Chernobyl Prayer*, to the whole of her anthology, the voices of the utopia—are the result of the combinations of different fragments that acquire new importance or new meanings just in their juxtaposition, in their combination and interrelation. Thus I dared to call it montage.

MC: What role do you think the author's voice plays in that montage?

IK: We could discern the author's voice, for example, in commentaries, in paratextual commentaries. For example, in *Secondhand Time*, when she makes her remarks as a playwright. "She begins to smoke," for example, or "she makes a long pause." But also short explanations. Very important invasions of author's voice I see in *Zinky Boys*. When, for example, she says, when seeing from a military plane a long row of coffins, she understood that, or she was understanding just in that moment, that traditional literature cannot solve this problem. It cannot reproduce the aesthetic effect of this site, the very possibility to perceive this row of coffins as a sublime aesthetic. The aesthetic sight, work, or something like this, transcends the borders of literature, of traditional literature. These declarations are rare, but they are important for me.

MC: The Swedish academy, when awarding her the Nobel Prize, said that she created "a new literary genre." Do you think that's true, that her writing is very distinct from other literary forms?

IK: Yes and no. Because on the one hand, this genre could be compared with some well-known samples. I compare this genre, for example, with the *Black Book of Soviet Jewry* and with literature-fact of the twenties. We could also compare this with journalists who wrote nonfiction books, some contemporary American writers, for example. With literature of journalist investigations, for example. But I think that Alexievich shifts a bit, at a very important moment, this precedent of genres. And most strange in it for me is that she, so to say, grows up this genre from Soviet journalism. And I think that she underscores the impossibility of the monologous voice about the contemporary world, the world of catastrophes. The world of very strong

tensions. The world of very quick development. I think that maybe that's not a new type of literature, but I think that it is partially a new genre. I could, partially as a joke and partially seriously, I could dub this genre aesthetic journalism. In her Berlin news conference in 2015 Alexievich told that she collected her data as a journalist, but then she worked with it as a writer.

MC: You also wrote in your book that Alexievich represents "unofficial culture." Could you explain what you mean by that?

IK: In a very strange way, very strange and unpredictable for me. Because she, so to say, became unofficial for herself, and by herself. Because she was not connected with any unofficial writers. She was a disciple of Ales Adamovich. Just a moment. It's important to distinguish between two kinds of literature: uncensored and unofficial. Unofficial literature was intended to be published in the Soviet Union. But to deviate a little bit from the norms of Soviet censorship and of Soviet cultural conventions. It was regarded in the West as the literature of Soviet liberals. But the very fact of the publication of such literature was the result of a particular compromise between the writer and censorship. Censorship allowed for this writer to extend the borders of what was allowed, but this was a highly controlled transgression of the borders. And the writer was agreeing to be controlled in this transgression, to be controlled in his language, to be controlled his or her expanding of the list of possible issues discussed in this journal or book. Unofficial literature was literature that was located between the hard norms of Soviet literature and the border established by censorship. The writer who belonged to the unofficial literature, he or she wanted to tell the truth, to be a witness of suffering or something like this, to describe the

tensions in Soviet society. But he or she agreed to be controlled in such an enterprise. To be controlled in order to be published. If he or she rejected the very idea of control, he or she agreed by default that this work will not be published in the USSR. It was a work not intended for publication. Thus, I call it—it's not my term, but that of contemporary Russian literary scholars—call this text non-censored literature. *Neoffitsialnaya* [unofficial] and *nepodtsenzurnaya* [non-censored]— for me, and for some of my colleagues, these words are not synonyms.

MC: So you would say Alexievich is unofficial but not uncensored.

IK: Alexievich kept in mind, in Soviet times, the norms of unofficial, not non-censored, literature. But unwillingly, partially but unwillingly, she turned out to be a descendent also of non-censored literature, not only unofficial. Non-censored that violates the norms of self-censorship. That's very important, that unofficial literature presumed, despite its unofficiality, the idea of self-censorship. But the distinctive feature of uncensored literature is the absence or very low level of self-censorship. For example, when we take the short stories by Varlam Shalamov, they are devoid of self-censorship. Alexievich is partially a descendent not only of Vasil Bykov or Ales Adamovich, but she also tries to be a descendent of [Varlam] Shalamov. Or writers like this, witnesses who represented the catastrophic essence of the Soviet social experience.

MC: Do you think her writing evolved based on things like glasnost, or the end of the Soviet Union? Has it changed in any way?

IK: Yes, I think that she was gradually going from the more or less Soviet and more or less journalistic genres, like the book *War's Unwomanly Face*, through *Zinky Boys*—I think *Zinky Boys* is the work of rupture, of breaking of Soviet literary conventions, when she decided that she cannot describe the experience of the Soviet Afghan war with the truths of Soviet journalism. Partially, she preserves them. But she had to elaborate the tools—stylistic, aesthetic—in order to give an impression about this experience of “sublime catastrophic” and something radically violating the Soviet conventions of perception. Soviet culture presumed that it was one of its most important features—the conventions of perception and conventions of reaction. And she tries to break these conventions and express this breaking in her prose.

MC: Which tools of journalism are you referring to, especially in *War's Unwomanly Face*?

IK: She presents herself as somebody who records the witnesses of these women. The witnesses, the life stories—she was, you see, almost non-Soviet in her ideas in *War's Unwomanly Face*. Because this book is close to pacifism. And pacifism engendered with the ideas of females. If female experience is important, then thus the war is evil. The war is evil and it's incompatible with human nature. And we can demonstrate this with the material of female imagination and female witnesses. But this very brave idea, brave in the Soviet context, in the situation of the full absence of public feminist discussions and so on, it was expressed with the truths of Soviet

journalism and with acknowledgement of the heroic idea of the Great Patriotic War. She confirms the main points of the war myth in order to place on the emergence her feminist, so to say, and pacifist counter-voice.

MC: Which aspects of the war myth are you referring to?

IK: She describes war not as a world of total violence, but as violence created by men, masculine violence. But this world is highly organized, and women, with their experience, didn't coincide, and couldn't coincide, with the order of this world of violence. Partially, they had to coincide in order to be good soldiers. But they couldn't coincide psychologically, they couldn't totally agree with this order of ordinary violence. And Alexievich demonstrated this in combining the narratives of her heroines.

MC: Would you say nationality is important in her writing? Is it significant that she is Belarusian, with Ukrainian heritage, and writes in Russian? Or does her work try to transcend national divisions?

IK: First of all, when speaking about the word nationality, it means something radically different in Russian and in English. Nationality in English is something close to citizenship. The word *natsional'nost'* in Russian means ethnic and even racial origin. In the Soviet Union, maybe you know, each passport contained a special section, nationality, and this section was marked not with citizenship, but with ethnic and racial origin. The Soviet state had very internationalist

rhetoric, but on the one hand, it was almost as racist as South Africa in apartheid times. Because some ethnic groups—for example, Jews or Crimean Tatars, were daily violated in their rights. This section was removed from Russian passports only in 1997. When you ask a Russian about nationality, they could understand you as a question about ethnic origin. But it's important to notice that in Soviet discourse, starting approximately in the late 1950s, there were two mutually interdependent discourses. They were used according to the situation. The first discourse is the discourse of Soviet unity. We are all the Soviet people, the Soviet nation—*sovetskii narod* [Soviet people]. And thus it was the rhetoric of unity over the borders of nation. In another class of situation, it was important to use the language of national particularity, national culture in a very essentialist way. These discourses were mutually reinforcing. Alexievich, in my opinion, is partially Soviet, partially non-Soviet. In her Soviet half, she represents the Soviet nation, the idea of the blurring of the borders between the cultures, the nations. Presenting them as not only equal, but as similar and equally resembling. Different cultures in the Soviet Union should be perceived as one mannequin in different dresses. But in the other half, Alexievich is a writer of the contemporary globalized world, and of the post-colonial world. She is a Russian-speaking writer, but not in the post-Soviet and Russian sense. She writes in Russian like, for example, the Indian writer Arundhati Roy writes in English. Like writers from India, New Zealand. She is not a writer of metropolis. She is not a writer of empire; she is a writer of the on and off emerging of empire. And she maintains the traces of empire, the Soviet traces, but she also overcomes them in her prose and her interviews. Both her written and oral speech, for me, mixes the traces of Soviet and post-colonial/post imperial critique of the Soviet. For me that's unusual. Alexievich in this in-between state doesn't resemble any other writers I know in Russian, because I know

either writers who break with the Soviet heritage and continue the aesthetic of modernist and post modernist, who are European in their style. Or totally post-Soviet writers who take for granted the Soviet rhetoric of internationalism. Alexievich is principally between them, and it seems to me that she even insists on this circumstance.

MC: What was the significance of her winning the Nobel Prize?

IK: That's very significant, but this significance—it's also a very long story, because on the one hand, it was the first time 1987 that a Russian speaking writer was awarded the Nobel Prize. That's very important for me. But this Nobel prize problematizes the borders of literature. The ideas of Soviet and post-Soviet. And, if it's possible to say, this Nobel Prize was very provocative, especially for the Russian reading audience.

MC: Do you think it was deliberately provocative?

IK: I think no, I think it was unwillingly provocative. But some Russian journalists, experts, critics, regarded this prize as "too Soviet," because they supposed that the Nobel Prize should be awarded for highly aesthetic prose, very sophisticated; or more traumatic, less edited, less presenting the voices of its participants, its choir, as one voice. I agree with the last claim. I think that there could be found some samples of Russian literature—poetry, not prose—which deal with the idea of different voices of trauma. And Alexievich is the most edited version of such traumatic literature. But I think this is a lifelong strategy of the Nobel Prize committee, because

they usually find and award the people who adapt the discomfort and shocking achievements of modernist and postmodernist literature to something easily consumable by a more or less wide audience. On the one hand, I think that it was very good to try the borders of literature. I think that two consecutive awards, first to Alexievich and then to Bob Dylan, were very interesting experiments in transgression of the borders of literature. And it's very interesting to me who will be the Nobel Prize winner this year.

MC: At least in the American media, after she won the Nobel Prize, many articles focused a lot of attention on her political views—her opposition to Putin, Lukashenko, the war in Ukraine, etc. Do you think that's an accurate representation of her, or does this focus on politics overlook the main idea of her work?

IK: I think that her political views were important for her laureacy, for her win. But I think that first of all, we need to understand the aesthetic specific of her prose. As in Solzhenitsyn's case, Solzhenitsyn was obviously awarded for his political views and first of all, for his political message. But I think the main features of Alexievich are not her anti-Putin attitudes, or her combination of Russian and Ukrainian views. First of all, her main message which was awarded, is the message of—you may call this new humanism. Or post-romantic pacifism, or something like this. But the idea of the restoration of human dignity in the period of catastrophes.

Restoration with the full understanding that this dignity is already damaged. This is, so to say, post-damage restoration. Restoration bearing the trauma in mind. Bearing in mind the trauma, the wounds of human souls. I think that just for this message of Alexievich was awarded the

Nobel Prize. It's highly political, because in contemporary Russia such a message acquires a strictly oppositional political view. But she was not awarded, and she didn't intend to be awarded, for her anti-Putin attitudes. Such commentaries in the American or English-speaking media, for me, simplify the situation of her Nobel Prize. But also in the Russian media, just from the other side. She is considered an anti-Russian, or somebody who blasphemes the Soviet past, heroes from the past, and so on. But I think that this award is a very complicated thing.

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*Cargo 200 (Gruz 200)*. Directed by Alexei Balabanov. STV Film Company, 2009.

*Come and See (Idi I smotri)*. Directed by Elem Klimov. Script by Ales' Adamovich and Elem Klimov. Mosfilm and Belarusfilm, 1985.

*Fate of a Man*. Directed by Sergei Bondarchuk. Mosfilm, 1959.

*Liberation (Osvobozhdenie)*. Directed by Iurii Ozerov. Mosfilm, DEFA, Zespoly Filmowe, and Dino de Laurentiis, 1968-72.

*9th Company (9-aia rota)*. Directed by Fedor Bondarchuk. Slovo, Art Pictures, STS, Ukrainian Mediinaia Group, 1+1, and Matila Rohr Productions, 2005.

*Stalingrad*. Directed by Iurii Ozerov. Mosfilm, DEFA, Barrandov Studios, and Warner Bros., 1990.

*The Longest Day*. Directed by Ken Annakin, Andrew Marton, and Bernhard Wicki. Darryl F. Zanuck Productions, Inc., 1962.

*War and Peace*. Directed by Sergei Bondarchuk. Mosfilm, 1966-67.

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