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Making space for a new picture of the world: Boys in Zinc and Chernobyl Prayer by Svetlana Alexievich.

Abstract

Based on a study of *Boys in Zinc* and *Chernobyl Prayer*, two books by the Nobel Laureate Svetlana Alexievich, this paper's core argument is that Alexievich's writing represents an approach designed to capture that which eludes more conventional journalism. The paper seeks first to situate the subjects of Alexievich's work in the wider media historical context of the end of the USSR, and also to argue that her writing is part of a uniquely Russian concept of journalism as literature--a concept that has its historical roots in the autocratic Russia of the 19th century. The paper further proposes that conflicts between the preternatural and the material, and between elite and non-elite voices--key themes of the works studied -- are vital to understanding the age of change which Alexievich, through her use of extensive interviews, was seeking to record. It emphasizes the significance of the Soviet experience in World War II as an influence on the USSR for the remainder of its existence. It posits that Alexievich's work also casts valuable light on the nature of journalism in the last years of the Soviet era -- and concludes, while acknowledging certain criticisms and questioning of her presentation of her material, by arguing that it represents a way to understand new and bewildering times.

Introduction

“They’ve confiscated the past. I don’t have any past. Or any belief...How can I live?” the former civilian employee of the Soviet armed forces in Afghanistan asks in Svetlana Alexievich’s *Boys in Zinc*¹. The shattering Soviet experience of the campaign of “internationalist duty” in Afghanistan coincided with a time when the mighty monolith of Marxism-Leninism was itself creaking under the pressures of change. The Soviet Union would only last two years after the withdrawal of its forces from Afghanistan. On their return, the troops found themselves misunderstood, and occasionally even mocked. One artilleryman complains of a young cousin who “sneers” at his medals, while “at his age, my heart used to skip a beat when my granddad put on his red-letter-day jacket with his ribbons and medals. While we were fighting out there, the world changed.”²

The world which Alexievich describes is one in which everything was changing. That which was valued before, that which was trusted, was disappearing. A sense of insecurity, of having been deceived, runs through the stories of all those she interviews. Svetlana Alexievich’s contributors (the literary nature of her work might make the case for the word “characters” here, but Alexievich’s literary approach has its roots in reporting) witness the end of a country, the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, which they had always been told – and, in many cases, believed – was the greatest on earth. In the case of the nuclear disaster which is the subject of *Chernobyl Prayer* (translated as *Voices from Chernobyl* in English), the second of Alexievich’s works which is studied in this paper, the USSR not only ceases to exist politically, part of it does physically, too: the nuclear power station itself, and the villages in the area closest to it. Alexievich took on the task of telling these stories, and those of the military and other personnel who joined, or were forced into, the Soviet Union’s military adventure in Afghanistan and the

Chernobyl debacle, all this at a time when the Soviet/ Russian media environment was changing with bewildering speed, too.

This paper's core argument is that Alexievich's work represents an approach designed to capture that which may elude more conventional journalism. It seeks first to situate the subjects of Alexievich's work in the wider media historical context of the end of the USSR. It argues that her writing is part of a particularly Russian concept of journalism as literature – a concept that has its historical roots in the autocratic Russia of the 19th century. While acknowledging certain criticisms and questioning of Alexievich's presentation of her material, the paper also argues that Alexievich is establishing new foundations for public debate in order to make sense, it must be emphasized, of a new and strange world in Russia at the time. The approach she takes includes writing about and acknowledging the growing influence of renascent religion, and even superstition. It draws on the Soviet mythology of the Great Patriotic (Second World) War as a means of describing and understanding the disasters of the age. The technique is to employ old, familiar stories, and journalistic methods, in new ways. "Content ruptures form,"³ as the author herself put it. The purpose is to understand new and bewildering times.

Russian media systems in transition

After becoming General Secretary of the Soviet Communist Party in 1985, Mikhail Gorbachev embarked on his programme of *perestroika* (reconstruction). A central plank of this was *glasnost*' (openness), in effect, unprecedented licence to speak frankly in public about failings of the Soviet system. Yet the next few years led not to the reinvigoration of the Marxist-

Leninist system--as Gorbachev had intended--but to its demise. The USSR collapsed in 1991. At the outset, though, *perestroika* was intended as “a return to a modernised version of several major strands in the Soviet past,” as R. W. Davies has described it. “On this basis, Gorbachev argued, the ‘socialist choice made in 1917’ would be reaffirmed and renewed.”⁴ To help him get his message across, Gorbachev enlisted the help of the news media. In one sense, this was also a Leninist approach. The first Soviet leader had himself identified “propaganda, agitation, and organization”⁵ as the key functions of political media. Here, Gorbachev adapted Leninist use of the media not to dissuade people from questioning the system, but instead to allow journalists to criticize. This led to a curious age in which, “with the sanction of the general secretary, journalists also attacked the party establishment.”⁶ As the reform period progressed, and “the well-being of Soviet citizens continued to deteriorate”⁷, the relationship began to sour.

At the same time--and this is key for an understanding of the environment of change which Alexievich’s sources experienced, and in which she was talking to them--the power of print was declining. Television had since its inception been an important medium in a country the size of the Soviet Union, but the citizens of the USSR had also been great consumers of newspapers. This began to change as the transformation from the strict planned economy gave way to cautious liberalization, and eventually to the chaotic and brutal capitalism of the 1990s. As Terhi Rantanen put it, “In the Soviet period, the joint circulation of the central newspapers amounted to 100 million copies daily, but in 1991-1992, the circulation of the most popular dailies reached only twenty to twenty-four million copies.”⁸ Elena Vartanova has pointed out that “the ruination of the postal distribution system”⁹ was a significant factor in this drastic decline. Anyone who stood in the queue in a Russian post office in the early 1990s, on the day when newspaper subscriptions could be taken out or renewed, would easily recognize that a system

which was inefficient at the best of times could hardly work at all without the postal system functioning properly. In fact, the lines themselves were telling about the way the system had ceased to function. Time-rich, and cash-poor, pensioners might find their own subscriptions paid for by people who could afford the roubles, but who were in too much of a rush to wait in the queue (a few extra roubles to smooth over any unforeseen minor difficulties in the process would not hurt, either--bribes could sometimes buy a way through the chaos).

While the print media and the postal system struggled with inefficiency, television was growing ever more important--and was, from the mid-1990s, “the most important mass medium”¹⁰. This age of the end of a superpower was a fascinating time for journalists, whether those let off the Leninist leash to look at the seamier side of Soviet society, or the foreign correspondents given greater permission than ever before to see the USSR. For those living through that period--Alexievich’s sources--the appeal was less clear cut, not least in the sphere of their own media consumption. The previously forbidden fruit of foreign soap operas--“The Rich also Cry” from Mexico was a particular favourite¹¹--proved an irresistible draw. Add to that the new distractions of advertising based on techniques developed in the capitalist world--and, most importantly, the challenge of putting food on the table in times of massive inflation--and it is less surprising that the circulation figures of the exciting early years of reform fell away.

As will be discussed later, during the times of the crises recorded in the books studied in this paper there were also failures of Soviet/Russian journalism itself. Brian McNair, in the USSR researching his own book *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media*, found himself experiencing the sensation of being kept in the dark in a way that only a totalitarian regime might accomplish. “Like the great majority of people living in the USSR, I first heard the name “Chernobyl” on the night of Monday April 28th, nearly three full days after the explosion

occurred.”¹² In any disaster, not making public what has happened may prevent mass panic, initially at least. The longer-term effects of the disaster are no less deadly, of course. In consequence of that explosion, not only was the nuclear power plant destroyed, but the whole of the surrounding area became the “Prohibited Zone”, where villages were evacuated, and farms left without labourers or livestock. In *Chernobyl Prayer*, the absences in these dead villages and fields are the most chilling. Faced with this post-apocalyptic scene, Alexievich’s employs her characteristic particular technique--carefully selecting extracts from an interview--to have the interviewee describe what the reader has almost certainly never seen, and will struggle to imagine. For example, one member of a military unit sent to help with the clean-up operation after the disaster described a day in the evacuation zone. “The village street, not a soul...At first there were lights still on in the houses, but then they switched off the electricity.” Even here, the symbols of the Soviet system, abandoned, endure. The soldier saw “red flags in the collective-farm offices, all these brand-new pennants, piles of certificates embossed with the profiles of Marx, Engels, and Lenin.” The overall impression left by the abandoned village is, “Like some warrior tribe had moved on from its makeshift camp.” This is what struck him hardest of all. “Chernobyl blew my mind. It got me thinking.”¹³

The Russian Journalist as Writer and Thinker

Getting people to think and see the world in a new light is indeed what Alexievich’s work is designed to do, and in this we can detect the literary intentions of her journalism. In Russia, the link between literature and journalism is especially strong, and Alexievich’s writing is part of a much longer literary and journalistic tradition. As Hartsock has persuasively put it, “Alexievich

firmly plants herself in the tradition of Russian literature,”¹⁴. While this is a move which might seem unusual, even presumptuous, in the English-speaking world, Russia has tended to see its writers differently. “In a country lacking free institutions, literature--hampered though it was by censorship--yet offered some scope for airing political and social opinions. Hence the Russian tradition of looking on the writer as a sage who might perhaps solve the riddle of existence,” As Ronald Hingley has observed.¹⁵ Moreover, Russia has tended often to identify its journalists as literary writers. As Vartanova has argued of Russia in the nineteenth century, “The Russian vision of literature presupposed a much broader social and cultural role for it than in other countries, thus often merging it with journalistic activity.”¹⁶ For the military failure and nuclear disaster of the late twentieth century, Alexievich has reversed the process, but retained the wider social significance. Her journalism merges into literature, and, in book form rather than in newspapers, redevelops for new times the role of her nineteenth century Russian counterparts, laying “down foundations for public debates.”¹⁷ So even if her method is to draw on the “hundreds of voices”¹⁸ which she described in her Nobel lecture as having surrounded her since childhood, her own is still heard--even if rarely directly.

To read her work is to wonder sometimes where the reporter is in this journalistic work. For long periods, it feels like one of the many absences felt so keenly in *Chernobyl Prayer*. Yet occasionally, she appears, offering words of reflection on journalistic practice, and insight into the way her own voice frames those who, while talking for themselves, speak at great length about her own purpose as an author and journalist. “I didn’t want to write about war any more. But here I am in a genuine war,”¹⁹ she wearily tells her reader after she has arrived in Kabul. Alexievich seems to know, though, that her role as a journalist/author demands that she take on the writer’s task all the same. In the pages which follow, as she reflects on the task which lies

before her on her assignment in Afghanistan, she makes multiple references to the writers who have given Russian literature its worldwide reputation. “To write to tell the whole truth about yourself is, as Pushkin remarked, a physical impossibility.”²⁰ Many reporters, even when writing long-form journalism, resist such reflexive references. For Alexievich’s kind of journalism, for the journalistic culture to which she belongs, this is not an option. Her voice must be heard. Her audience expects her to “lay down foundations for public debates,” as Vartanova described it.

Alexievich draws richly from Russian literature in this reflective section to evoke history: not only literary history, but military and cultural history. Discussing “the cruelty with which the mujahedeen treat Russian prisoners,”²¹ Alexievich refers to “the actions of the mountain tribesmen” in Lermontov’s *A Hero of Our Time*. The reference cannot be chosen only for its literary quality. Citing a work set during Russian wars of conquest in the Caucasus in the nineteenth century also has the effect of commenting on the campaign in Afghanistan. The implication is surely that here, too, as in the Caucasus in the previous century, Russian troops are facing an enemy whose culture they do not understand in a hostile mountain environment to which they are not accustomed. Nor does Alexievich confine herself to drawing on Russian literature, even if those references dominate. In this same section, which follows her arrival in Kabul, as she tries to convey “the prosy mundaneness of war” she cites Apollinaire, “Que la guerre est jolie.”²² The whole effect is to emphasize Russian culture’s great attachment to literature, especially its own. It comes almost to be something expected of journalists. In *Chernobyl Prayer*, even a cameraman, working in a purely visual medium, talks of his literary influences. “I went out there, my head filled with what they’d taught us: you only become a real author in war, and all that. My favourite author was Hemingway, my favourite book *A Farewell to Arms*.”²³

In this book, as in *Boys in Zinc*, the author's voice is largely absent--save for a section towards the beginning where she sets out the challenges she feels she faces, and how she will meet them. In *Boys in Zinc*, it is the discussion of her feelings on arrival in Kabul. In *Chernobyl Prayer*, it is the chapter in which, "*The author interviews herself on missing history and why Chernobyl calls our view of the world into question*"²⁴ (italics in original). On both occasions when the author permits herself to reflect publicly on her work, the chapters in which she does so follow shocking accounts of suffering. In *Chernobyl Prayer*, it is the story of a woman whose husband, a firefighter, has died in agony from exposure to massive amounts of radiation. In *Boys in Zinc*, it is the story of a mother whose son, a veteran of the war in Afghanistan, has committed murder after his return to the Soviet Union. Alexievich gives the sources their voices, then--as her readers, shaken by what they have just read, try to collect themselves-- addresses the readers herself. As she does so, she seems to step down from the pedestal of writer/philosopher/prophet upon which Russian literary and journalistic culture has sometimes placed reporters. Suddenly, she is much closer to the people. In the case of *Chernobyl Prayer*, geography also has placed her physically close to disaster. Alexievich is from Belarus--which, bordering Ukraine, suffered dreadful consequences from the accident--a fact not lost on her interlocutor in this passage. Stepping down from the lofty viewpoint of "writer as sage" does not remove the obligation to fulfil the role. In this case, proximity brings a greater expectation from readers

A year after the disaster, someone asked me, "Everybody is writing. But you live here and write nothing. Why?" The truth was that I had no idea how to write about it, what method to use, what approach to take. If earlier, when I wrote my books, I would pore over the suffering of others, now my life and I have become part of the event. Fused together, leaving me unable to get any distance.²⁵

Perhaps she does not need to be directly engaged. Having placed these reflective passages after the grim episodes which, as examined earlier, are the openings to both books, Alexievich's work draws its strength from its proximity to the ordinary people to whom she gives voice. Her entire technique is to amplify non-elite voices. Perhaps there is also an element here of a trait Hugh Kenner identified in Orwell's *Homage to Catalonia*. "Political discourse being feverish with newspeak, he concocted his plain style to reduce its temperature."²⁶ In a Soviet society where instruction and interpretation were handed down from on high, elite voices--and non-elite voices which served to confirm elite statements--shoved everything else out of public discourse. Now, as the Soviet Communist Party's decades of power came to an end, the non-elite voices shoved back. Alexievich's selection of sources enables this process. Elite voices--whether those of military commanders in Afghanistan, or of politicians in Moscow--are only heard at a distance, and readily contradicted. "It was only after the May Day celebrations were over that Gorbachev appeared," on television, observed a member of a folk choir (the disaster happened in the early hours of 26th April, so the official silence lasted for days), before concluding, of the glib assurances that "there was nothing to worry about", "And we believed him."²⁷ One detects a strong sense of betrayal, which has in turn led to bitterness.

There are some elite voices in *Chernobyl Prayer*, such as former senior members of the Institute of Atomic Energy, Belarus Academy of Sciences²⁸, but generally Alexievich's sources describe the catastrophic events they have experienced from a more modest--and therefore more dangerous--level. There are far more private soldiers than senior officers among the military sources; far more firefighters and cleaners than Professors of Nuclear Physics. Those who are in more senior positions are characterized by the scale of their disillusionment being proportionately greater. In *Boys in Zinc*, a major, the commander of a battalion, was shouted at

on a visit to a cemetery by the mother of a soldier. Her rage was prompted by the fact that he had survived, even if he did “have grey hair.” Her son, by contrast, was so young that he “had never even shaved.”²⁹ The major has lost his faith in the dying system. “I just can’t stand there with my boys any longer and feed them propaganda,”³⁰ he concluded. Vladimir Matveyevich Ivanov, former First Secretary of a Communist Party District committee, called himself “a committed Communist”³¹, yet he concluded his account of his experiences with a confession that he was reading the work of Alexander Solzhenitsyn, one of the regime’s most determined critics, and had himself--despite having obeyed instructions from on high to convey the message that all was well--personally experienced as a result of the disaster consequences far more devastating than the major’s loss of faith. “Now we’ve been written off by history, as if we don’t exist. I’m reading Solzhenitsyn now...I think...*(Silence.)* My granddaughter has leukaemia...I’ve paid for everything. A high price...”³² Ivanov’s age is not given, but if he is a grandfather, it seems reasonable to assume that he is in his late forties at the very least--just the generation suffering the most from the transition to what he terms, “Wild West capitalism”.³³ It is as if, in its death throes, the Marxist-Leninist system was finally, and unintentionally, achieving one of its aims: taking away the privileges of elites. “Wild West capitalism” is no respecter of status in the Party. Vladimir Matveyevich is suffering along with everyone else.

Faith, magic, and materialism

Alexievich’s work is built on the ruins of Soviet propaganda. It is a new start, albeit with a debt to older traditions: a journalism for a world where this propaganda, as the major cited above bleakly concludes, has lost its meaning. The distant voices of General Secretaries and Generals are questioned in a way which would once have been impossible: the materialism of Marxism-Leninism, orthodoxy for most of the century, is challenged by resurgent, older faiths

such as religion, folk-wisdom, even magic, as Alexievich's sources seek to make sense of the disaster and dizzying social change at the centre of which they find themselves. Decades of official atheism--this was a country after all, where, in the first years after the Bolshevik Revolution, a group calling itself the "League of the Militant Godless" had received state funding³⁴--were being challenged. Now the system which had propagated this godlessness was cracking. The system being weak, the older influences' contradiction of Soviet doctrines becomes an attack, and the voices of Alexievich's contributors are the means by which the attack is delivered. In the early section of *Boys in Zinc*, Alexievich tells her reader, "There are no atheists here. And everyone is superstitious."³⁵ This apparently simple observation is in fact a bold challenge to the entire Soviet military campaign in Afghanistan, and to the system itself. For what are the troops doing in Afghanistan, if not their international duty to spread Marxism-Leninism, both in theory and practice, with the ideological atheism that entails? While *Chernobyl Prayer* has also been given the title *Voices from Chernobyl* in translation, the Russian original is *Chernobyl Prayer*. The very choice of that title seems to serve the same purpose: its defiance of official godlessness even more blatant.

For the voices from the "Prohibited Zone" embrace and share a collective prayer: a faith reascent as a response to the materialist system which has failed them so badly. One resident of the village of Bely Bereg (the whole of this section of the book is a collection of observations, many of them no more than a few lines) summarized the sense of isolation – and the state of an entire failing superpower – with revealing desperation:

They've started coming here. Making movies about us, though we never get to see the films. We've got no TV or electricity. All we've got is the window to look through. And

prayer, of course. We used to have Communists instead of God, but now there's just God left.³⁶

A fellow villager believes that the Book of Revelation has been written with them in mind.

What's written in the Bible is all coming true. In the Bible it says about our collective farm. And about Gorbachev. It says there'll be a big leader with a mark on his forehead, and a great power will crumble to dust. And then the Day of Judgement will come.³⁷

Yet another resident of the "Prohibited Zone" refers to the fact that, in Ukrainian, "Chernobyl" means "wormwood"³⁸ – the name given in the Book of Revelation to a star which poisons the waters of the earth³⁹. Much older creeds return to explain the collapse of the system which sought to vanquish them. The official pronouncements are exposed as empty.

If religion can help to explain the catastrophes which are visited upon the late Soviet Union, then other preternatural forces can help to mitigate them. If "everyone is superstitious" when serving in Afghanistan, the same is true of people left back in the USSR. One major--and therefore one of the more senior officers of the elite whose contribution appears in *Boys in Zinc*--related that, on his return, his mother "confessed" that he had returned unharmed because she had "put a spell" on him.⁴⁰ Perhaps less surprisingly, the people affected by the Chernobyl disaster also turned to magic, whether to the "sorcerers" who "performed in stadiums"⁴¹ or the "wise women" and "whisperers, witches"⁴² whom one desperate mother sought out in her search for a cure for her son's radiation sickness. Those who tried to remain above and apart from the superstition were troubled by its ubiquity. As the TV psychics offered to "energize" water--and thus supposedly make it safe to use--Slava Konstantinova Firsakova, doctor of agricultural sciences, despaired of her "colleagues, people with degrees in the sciences" who put three-litre

jars close to the screen to give them healing properties.⁴³ It was not just the Marxist-Leninist system which was coming to its end. There was, Dr Firsakova concluded when she looked back a few years later to the time of the accident, a “Total eclipse of common sense. General hysteria.”⁴⁴ Some of the folk wisdom and superstition seems to take on an especially Russian nature. There are numerous references to vodka’s supposed effectiveness as a prevention against radiation. It is praised variously as “a first-rate method for restoring the immune system”⁴⁵, and, with the unlikely and unexpected addition of goose excrement, promoted as a means of protecting male fertility⁴⁶. If in *Boys in Zinc* Alexievich prepares her reader for this assault on materialism which her contributors are going to launch (the section mentioned above about the fact that there are no atheists, and everyone is superstitious) then the section in *Chernobyl Prayer* where she “interviews herself” is even more explicit.

The churches filled up again with people – with believers and former atheists. They were searching for answers which could not be found in physics or mathematics. The three-dimensional world came apart, and I have not since met anyone brave enough to swear again on the bible of materialism.⁴⁷

The overall effect is to create a record--through the medium of ordinary people’s voices--of a moment of colossal change. Like the villager, cited above, who reflected that the Communists’ departure left only God, many of Alexievich’s sources know that they are living the end of an era. As they do so, they are not witnessing the birth of a new age so much as a Gramscian interregnum--accompanied by the “morbid symptoms”⁴⁸ (in this case, disastrous military adventures and nuclear catastrophe) which Gramsci saw as part of any such era.

Understanding history through war, and through disaster as warfare

To try to make sense of their era, Alexievich's contributors have, furthermore, frequent recourse to more recent history. Their own faith in Soviet mythology may have been shaken so that it is shattered, yet they still evoke the relatively recent past to try to understand the horrors of the present. The Second World War is an especially powerful point of reference. Victory in the war, known usually in Russian as "The Great Patriotic War" (Вели́кая Оте́чественная война́) was an endless source of heroic pride to those generations who contributed to it. In today's Russia, the numbers of those who lived through the war, especially those old enough to fight, are greatly diminished. The sense of heroic pride is not. President Vladimir Putin's address on Victory Day (May 9th, which is a public holiday in Russia) in 2017 exemplified the way this chapter in Russian history has become a sacred national memory. "But there was not, there is not and there will never be a power that could defeat our people," Mr Putin said in his speech on Red Square. "They fought to the bitter end defending the homeland, and achieved the seemingly impossible."⁴⁹

The rescue workers at Chernobyl are asked to do the impossible, although they do not at first realize the nature and scale of the task they face; many of them are not even told where they are going until they are underway.⁵⁰ Villagers living inside the "Prohibited Zone" are in the dark, too – at least to begin with. Seeing the sky "buzzing" with aircraft, one concluded, "we must be at war."⁵¹ The soldiers drafted to fight this war were baffled too, but in a different way. For one of them, it "was a war that was a mystery to us; where there was no telling what was dangerous and what wasn't"⁵². The Second World War is part of Soviet history with which all the interviewees are familiar. It is part of their nation's story. In the areas closest to Chernobyl, many of which were occupied by the Nazis, it is part of personal history, too. In both these senses, national and personal, it provides some kind of means of understanding that which is bewildering, terrifying,

potentially deadly. It provides ways both of interpreting, and responding. Pursued by police officers acting on orders to evacuate the disaster zone, some villagers “hide in the forest. Like hiding from the Germans.”⁵³ Even years after the accident, those who experienced it still use the Soviet experience in the Second World War as a point of reference. Gennady Grushevoy, a member of the Belarusian Parliament, and chairman of the Children of Chernobyl Foundation, talked of children being taken to military museums in order to understand past wars. “But actually, nowadays, it’s completely different. On 26 April 1986, we faced war again; and that war is not over”⁵⁴ Again, that was the date when the Chernobyl disaster began. Sergei Sobolev of the Chernobyl Shield Association, concluded, “They call it an ‘accident’, a ‘disaster’, but it was a war. Our Chernobyl monuments resemble war memorials.”⁵⁵ Inevitably, given the time of the catastrophe, some of the soldiers ordered to the clean-up operation have served in Afghanistan, too. At least one volunteered for both⁵⁶. Those who experienced both--as volunteers or as conscripts--have a rare perspective on the two disasters that helped to bring down a superpower. The two experiences provided contrasting emotions of relief and despair. “When I got back from Afghanistan, I knew I’d live! After Chernobyl, the opposite was true: it was when you were back home that it would kill you.”⁵⁷ Yet another member of the SoldiersChoir felt that his understanding would only come with time. “And we’ll understand at least something, I reckon, in another twenty or thirty years. I was in Afghanistan (for two years) and in Chernobyl (for three months) – the most vivid moments of my life.”⁵⁸ The reader is left to wonder what this soldier would make of it now – now that his “twenty or thirty years” since the disaster have passed. Of course, given the levels of radiation to which he was exposed, it is very possible that these “most vivid moments of his life” in fact hastened his death.

For the contributors to *Boys in Zinc*, the Second World War--and the subsequent Soviet portrayal of the heroism of that war--act as a great source of inspiration; so great, in fact, that it makes the disillusionment which follows all the more crushing. "I wanted to be at war. Only not this war, but the Great Patriotic War,"⁵⁹ says one civilian employee. One private finds the heroism turned on its head. "We played the part of the Germans. That's what one guy told me,"⁶⁰ he reflected of the way the Afghans they had supposedly come to help actually saw them: as occupiers. The heroic Soviet martial image of the Second World War serves only to disillusion those who have been inspired by it when they crash into the reality of Afghanistan. "Maybe I couldn't imagine a different kind of war, one that wasn't like the Great Patriotic War. I loved watching war films ever since I was little,"⁶¹ a civilian employee reflected, apparently still shocked at the memory of "Men lying there, scorched all over. Mutilated."⁶² There are echoes elsewhere of other, journalistic, accounts of that conflict which, as President Putin's words, above, attest, still stand as the heroic highpoint of Russia's twentieth century. Other soldiers whom Alexievich encounters have undergone different transformations. Schooled in Soviet mythology, they look to tales of the "Great Patriotic War" to understand their experience. In these changed times, the effect of those stories is actually to promote self-doubt; even self-loathing. "We played the Germans" seems to sum it up. Alexievich's technique here is a new one for new times. She draws on older, familiar, narratives, to assist audiences trying to understand that which they struggle to comprehend. The propaganda of the Soviet journalism which went before is no longer credible.

The end of Soviet journalism

Part of that “We played the Germans” disenchantment stemmed from the fact that the only journalism known to many of Alexievich’s contributors was propagandistic Soviet journalism: its purpose often to conceal by omission rather than to reveal. When revelations of reality eventually came, readers were disillusioned. As they became more numerous, Soviet journalism’s days were numbered. Reflecting on his own experience--referred to above--as a resident of Moscow kept in ignorance at the time of the Chernobyl disaster, and of the conclusions he was therefore able to draw on the state of Soviet journalism, McNair has written, “For Soviet journalists, those ten days of enforced silence turned out with hindsight to be the final, desperate gesture of a party hierarchy whose rigid control of the mass communications system was by early 1986 already breaking down.”⁶³ Alexievich seems to sense this very strongly. The first reference to journalism the reader of *Boys in Zinc* encounters is, “Here they call the journalists ‘storytellers’”⁶⁴ – the inverted commas indicating that the term “storytellers” is referred to with a derogatory sneer. Such journalists are not seekers after truth in Afghanistan but the inventors of fantasy. As Roderic Braithwaite has pointed out of the political decision which lay behind this kind of reporting, “To maintain the fiction that it was not a real war, Soviet journalists were forbidden to report the fighting or the casualties.”⁶⁵ Most of the official Soviet journalism depicted in the two books studied seems to be perceived in this way. The soldiers in Afghanistan, all of those affected by the Chernobyl disaster, the author herself, all seem to have reached the same conclusion as McNair: the rigid control of mass communication was breaking down. It might continue to try to function. It was not to be believed.

Simply, Soviet Journalism--facing unprecedented political challenges in this period--is not equal to the task. “I met some cameramen from Moscow,” Alexievich writes soon after her arrival in Afghanistan:

They were filming the loading of a “black tulip” – an A12 plane that takes coffins back home. Without raising their eyes they tell me that the dead are dressed in old army uniforms from the 1940s, still with breeches instead of trousers; sometimes even these uniforms are in short supply, and they’re put in the coffin without being dressed. Old wooden boards, rusty nails.

The reader knows that none of these details will ever be seen on air. So does Alexievich, who is led to ask, “Who will believe me if I write about this?”⁶⁶ Perhaps one of the most striking episodes is the experiences of the cameraman Sergey Gurin (he whose favourite writer was Hemingway). His is an account of filming that which is illusion, while ignoring that which really told the story: like an old woman who had been told to clear away the contaminated earth, but, as she did so, kept as fertilizer the manure that lay on top of it. “Pity I didn’t film that,”⁶⁷ Gurin admitted. Regarding illusion, he goes on location where livestock which have been contaminated are being buried in a pit. “I stood with my back to the trench and shot an episode in the finest Soviet documentary tradition: bulldozer drivers reading their copy of *Pravda*.”⁶⁸ Sobolev, of the Chernobyl Shield Association, later involved in trying to protect for posterity the memory of what happened, saw the other side of this. “We have no documentary material about how people were evacuated or livestock was moved out. There must be no filming of a disaster, only of heroism!”⁶⁹ The disaffection among soldiers serving in Afghanistan is as severe. “They wrote in the newspapers that our soldiers were building bridges and planting avenues of friendship and our doctors were treating Afghan women and children,”⁷⁰ remembered one private of the time when he was training. With the benefit of experience, another gave a grimmer, more realistic, assessment of what the Soviet presence in Afghanistan was really doing. “I saw so many ruined

*kishlaks*¹. But not a single kindergarten, not a single school that had been built, or tree that had been planted – the ones they wrote about in our newspapers.”⁷¹ The same soldier related how those rosy accounts had especially infuriated him personally, as he recalled his comrade, with whom he used to mock what they read as they sat in the common toilet, who had since been killed. “Not a word about us, fuck it...But only yesterday forty of our boys were torn to shreds. Two days earlier I was sitting here in the latrine with one of them and reading these papers, hooting with laughter”⁷² because such accounts were so out of touch with the reality they were confronting.

The overall impression is not one of journalism at the end of the twentieth century, but much closer to its beginning in the British perspective. The anger of the soldiers in *Boys in Zinc* echoes the cynical voices of troops encountering journalists in the poems of the First World War, a conflict, in which, as Philip Knightley argued, “More deliberate lies were told than in any other period of history, and the whole apparatus of the state went into action to suppress the truth.”⁷³ The laughter of the Soviet infantryman in the toilet is a reaction which Siegfried Sassoon’s characters might readily recognize. As the wounded soldier at the end of his poem “Editorial Impressions” snidely suggests – having been regaled with a reporter’s facile observations about “that splendour shine/ Which makes us win” – “Ah yes, but it’s the press that leads the way.”⁷⁴ The First World War was seen by those who fought in it – and, subsequently, by some of those who reported it, as a shameful episode in the history of British journalism. As Sir Philip Gibbs, one of the war correspondents later wrote, “There was no need for censorship of our despatches.

¹ A small village or settlement

We were our own censors.”⁷⁵ This kind of reporting led to the kind of cynicism which Sassoon’s wounded soldier sneered at the correspondent in the poem.

Now we see the same some sixty-five to seventy years later in the Soviet Union. In *Boys in Zinc*, the reporting of Afghanistan does the same for Soviet journalism. One civilian began their account, “How did I end up here? It’s very simple. I believed everything they wrote in the newspapers.”⁷⁶ For another private, it was the end of belief. “Afghanistan set me free. It cured me of the belief that everything is right, that they write the truth in the newspapers, and show the truth on the television.”⁷⁷ For this young soldier, it was a liberation. Afghanistan and Chernobyl were two national traumas which, even as they played a role in ending a social and political system, put Soviet journalism to the test. It failed and, in consequence, lost the trust of its audiences to such an extent that it could never recover.

Foreign journalists appear only as minor characters, but their presence is, for all that, highly significant. They are absent from *Boys in Zinc*, the presence of western reporters hardly welcome in the Cold War-era Soviet armed forces (although as the time for withdrawal in 1989 approached, there were opportunities for international correspondents to go to report from the Soviet side). In *Chernobyl Prayer*, foreign reporters appear as harbingers of change: their ability to stake out the graveside of a Chernobyl firefighter a sign of the new freedom of movement they enjoyed under *perestroika*. “The cemetery is besieged by foreign journalists. Continue to wait,”⁷⁸ is the message the hapless widow of the firefighter hears over the walkie-talkie of a colonel who has been assigned to accompany her. Here the foreign journalists are an unsettling, yet unseen, force. They are to be avoided so that they cannot see the reality of what the widow must suffer. At other points, they materialize to ask questions unlike those posed by the more obedient Soviet

reporters and cameramen. “Would you take your children somewhere where there was plague or cholera?”⁷⁹ asks a German reporter of a mother who has fled post-Soviet bloodletting in Kirghizia, only to end up in the disaster area. An “English journalist” tried and failed to learn from helicopter pilots, who had flown over the reactor, whether exposure to radiation had affected their sex lives. “Not one of them would speak frankly,”⁸⁰ said Sobolev, who had accompanied the reporter. Undeterred, the reporter gets the full story from the waitresses in the café where the meeting with the pilots had taken place. “Slavs do not talk about these things. It’s unacceptable,” Sobolev protested, in his remarks to Alexievich. The arrival of the foreign journalists is an intrusion, their questions a breach of established cultural mores, and, as such a sign of change.

Then there is Alexievich’s place as journalist in her narratives. Aside from locating herself in a wider Russian literature-journalism tradition, and noting the personal challenges of writing about the war in Afghanistan and about the Chernobyl disaster, Alexievich’s voice rarely intrudes directly. On occasion, one of her sources will address her. For example, one explainshow she should describe him – “‘director of the apocalypse zone’. (*He laughs*). You can write that.”⁸¹ Other than moments like that we are rarely aware of her presence. Yet she is there, of course – an omnipresent and omniscient author, at least in the sense that she has gathered, selected, and structured the material which goes into her work. They may be others’ words, but ultimately what emerges is her account. One of her interviewees is the journalist Anatoly Shimansky. He too addresses Alexievich directly – although he could be speaking her words. “I’ll give you my notebook. It’ll just end up lying among my papers. Well, maybe I’ll show it to my children when they grow up. It is history, after all.”⁸²

Conclusion: a new picture of the world

“What’s really lacking in all these theatres is sufficient people who are deep experts on the language and the region to actually produce the options to ministers,” complained Rory Stewart, then Chair of the British House of Commons Defence Select Committee, in a 2014 interview. He described the situation in the British Foreign Office where, after the Russian invasion of Crimea, “The Crimea desk officer had to be moved across from the South Caucasus—and the Russian analysis section had been closed in 2010.”⁸³ Stewart was referring to the way in which Western policy makers had failed to keep an eye on what was happening in the former Soviet Union, and arguing that, as a result, dramatic developments which redrew the map of Europe had not been foreseen. There is a lesson in his words for journalism too. Like intelligence gathering and diplomacy, its effectiveness relies upon the quality of the information sources it has at its disposal. If Western diplomacy failed to anticipate the invasion of Crimea, then Western journalism, in the shape of the results of the 2016 British decision to leave the European Union, and the election later that year of Donald Trump as President of the United States, has had its blind spots, too. While there were rare voices who predicted these outcomes, the majority did not. They had probably been talking to the wrong people. It is true that Alexievich is looking at the recent past, rather than trying to predict the future – but this approach of gathering countless testimonies from mainly non-elite sources might have a wider application, too.

Svetlana Alexievich talked to the people she needed to -- those “hundreds of voices” she had heard – in order to tell the story of her changing times. Her methods have attracted criticism. In a 2016 article for *The New Republic*, Sophie Pinkham charged that Alexievich’s “work opts for

subjective recollection over hard evidence; she does not attempt to confirm any of her witnesses” accounts, and she chooses her stories for their narrative power, not as representative samples.”⁸⁴ Pinkham went on, “by seeking to straddle both literature and history, Alexievich ultimately succeeds at neither.”⁸⁵ Alexievich referred to such criticism in her Nobel lecture. “I work with missing history,” she explained. “I am often told, even now, that what I write isn’t literature, it’s a document. What is literature today? Who can answer that question? We live faster than ever before. Content ruptures form.” These are all reasonable points, although her later statement, in the same passage, that, “There are no borders between fact and fabrication, one flows into the other,” seems ambiguous. Is this a lament in the era of fake news, or a defence of subjective interpretation? Her next sentence suggested the latter. “Witnesses are not impartial. In telling a story, humans create, they wrestle time like a sculptor does marble. They are actors and creators.”⁸⁶ The creative element of Alexievich’s own work has raised questions from other commentators. “L’écritain qui a défini son genre comme un ‘roman des voix’ est donc à l’écoute de personnages dont elle réécrit les propos pour forger des images à forte charge émotionnelle,”² conclude Ackerman and Lemarchand. Still, this is a new era requiring a new kind of explanation. There is perhaps an echo here of Michael Herr’s verdict on the reporting of the Vietnam War: “Conventional journalism could no more reveal this war than conventional firepower could win it.”⁸⁷

For all her obvious admiration of, and inspiration from, the great works of Russian literature, Alexievich is also frank about the simpler interpretations of existence from which her sources draw strength.

² “The writer who has defined her genre as a ‘novel of voices’ is therefore listening to characters whose remarks she rewrites to form images with a strong emotional charge.” (Translation by the author)

What was most interesting of all in those early days was not talking with the scientists, not with the officials or the high-ranking military men, but with the old peasants. They lived without Tolstoy and Dostoevsky, without the Internet, yet their minds somehow made space for the new picture of the world. Their consciousness did not crumble.⁸⁸

“Their minds somehow made space for the new picture of the world.” This was the key to survival not only through the Chernobyl and Afghanistan disasters, but through the whole collapse of the USSR. Alexievich’s work may depart from the straight lines of conventional reporting, but it surely has huge value as a form of journalism, and a form of history: not necessarily history as written by the victors, but history as understood by those who fought against the confiscation of their past, and all the while made space for the new picture of the world.

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- ¹ Svetlana Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, trans. Andrew Bromfield (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2017), 217
- ² Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 201
- ³ Svetlana Alexievich, "Nobel Lecture: On the Battle Lost", 7 December 2015.
https://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/alexievich-lecture_en.html
- ⁴ R.W. Davies, *Soviet History in the Yeltsin Era* (London: Macmillan, 1997), 6
- ⁵ Elena Vartanova, "The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics," in *Comparing Media Systems Beyond the Western World*, ed. Daniel C. Hallin and Paolo Mancini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 128
- ⁶ Ivan Zassoursky, *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia* (M. E. Sharpe: Armonk, New York and London, 2004), 11
- ⁷ Zassoursky, *Media and Power in Post-Soviet Russia*, 10
- ⁸ Terhi Rantanen, *The Global and the National: Media and Communications in Post-Communist Russia* (Oxford: Rowman and Littlefield, 2002), 30
- ⁹ Vartanova, "The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics," 124
- ¹⁰ Vartanova, "The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics," 125
- ¹¹ Rantanen, *The Global and the National: Media and Communications in Post-Communist Russia*, 29-30
- ¹² Brian McNair, *Glasnost, Perestroika and the Soviet Media* (London: Routledge, 1991), 2
- ¹³ Svetlana Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, trans. Anna Gunin and Arch Tait (London: Penguin Modern Classics, 2016), 78
- ¹⁴ John Hartsock, "The Literature in the Journalism of Nobel Prize Winner Svetlana Alexievich" *Literary Journalism Studies* 7, no.2 (Fall 2015): 45
- ¹⁵ Ronald Hingley, *Russian Writers and Society in the Nineteenth Century* (Second Edition) (London, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1977), 24
- ¹⁶ Vartanova, "The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics," 136
- ¹⁷ Vartanova, "The Russian Media Model in the Context of Post-Soviet Dynamics," 134
- ¹⁸ Svetlana Alexievich, "Nobel Lecture: On the Battle Lost"
- ¹⁹ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 13
- ²⁰ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 15
- ²¹ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 15
- ²² Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 14
- ²³ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 118
- ²⁴ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 24-33
- ²⁵ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 25
- ²⁶ Hugh Kenner, "The Politics of the Plain" *New York Times*, September 15 1985, BR1.
- ²⁷ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 183
- ²⁸ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 203 and 222
- ²⁹ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 199
- ³⁰ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 199
- ³¹ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 243
- ³² Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 248
- ³³ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 245
- ³⁴ Robert Service, *A History of Modern Russia: From Nicholas II to Putin* (London: Penguin, 2003), 136
- ³⁵ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 18
- ³⁶ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 57
- ³⁷ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 54. This is presumably a slightly confused reference to the Biblical book of Revelation, Chapter 13, in which a seven-headed beast rises up from the sea, and causes all "to receive a mark in

their right hand, or in their foreheads” (13:16). The then Soviet leader, Mikhail Gorbachev, has a birth mark on his head.

³⁸ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 74

³⁹ The Bible, Book of Revelation, 8:11

⁴⁰ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 118

⁴¹ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 159

⁴² Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 187

⁴³ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 159

⁴⁴ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 159

⁴⁵ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 84

⁴⁶ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 106

⁴⁷ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 26

⁴⁸ Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971), 276

⁴⁹ “Military parade on Red Square”. President of Russia website. 9 May 2017; accessed 15 September 2017, <http://en.kremlin.ru/events/president/news/54467>

⁵⁰ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 76

⁵¹ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 47

⁵² Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 84

⁵³ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 53

⁵⁴ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 156

⁵⁵ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 177

⁵⁶ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 91

⁵⁷ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 83

⁵⁸ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 81

⁵⁹ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 53

⁶⁰ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 30

⁶¹ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 215

⁶² Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 215

⁶³ McNair, p3

⁶⁴ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 14

⁶⁵ Roderic Braithwaite, “Svetlana Alexievich, U voiny—ne zhenskoe litso: Poslednie svideteli [War Does Not Have a Woman’s Face: The Latest Witnesses]. Minsk: Mastatskaya literatura, 1985. Svetlana Alexievich, *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War*, trans. by Julia Whitby and Robin Whitby.” *The Journal of Cold War Studies* 18, no. 3 (Summer 2016): 232-3

⁶⁶ Alexievich, *Boys in Zinc*, 17

⁶⁷ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 119

⁶⁸ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 119

⁶⁹ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 175

⁷⁰ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 26

⁷¹ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 89

⁷² Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 81

⁷³ Philip Knightley, *The First Casualty* (London: Pan, 1989), 80

⁷⁴ Siegfried Sassoon, “Editorial Impressions” in *Collected Poems 1908-1956* (London: Faber and Faber, 1984), 77.

⁷⁵ Cited in Knightley, *The First Casualty*, 109

⁷⁶ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 51

⁷⁷ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 32

⁷⁸ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 19

⁷⁹ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 73

⁸⁰ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 177

⁸¹ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 87

⁸² Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 137

⁸³ Jay Elwes, "Rory Stewart interview: Britain's strategic gap" *Prospect* website. First posted 18 September 2014. Accessed 10 October 2017. <https://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/politics/rory-stewart-interview-britains-strategic-gap>

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⁸⁸ Alexievich, *Chernobyl Prayer*, 26

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