

# One Heart for Love: The Anti-War Message of Svetlana Alexievich's *The Unwomanly Face of War*

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**N**obel laureate Svetlana Alexievich's work has generated controversy since she first attempted to publish *The Unwomanly Face of War* (*U voiny ne zhenskoe litsa*), her collection of interviews of female veterans of the Second World War, in the 1980s. While much of the more recent controversy has centered around her politics and the factual versus fictional nature of her documentary prose, the initial resistance to the publication of *The Unwomanly Face of War* was over something much simpler: After reading such a book, she claims, the censor told her, "Who will go to fight?"<sup>1</sup>

At first glance, such an objection might seem absurd. While the censor expressed dismay over the messy biological realities Alexievich depicts—dealing with menstruation without proper sanitary supplies is a recurring theme in the book—war literature in many languages abounds with blood, sweat, and dirt. In fact, that is part of what readers of multiple cultures seem to demand from the genre, whether it is Achilles defeating Hector and defiling his body in *The Iliad*; the explicit violence and illicit sexuality in Mikhail Sholokhov's *And Quiet Flows the Don*, for which he received both the Stalin Prize and the Nobel Prize for literature; or "the intimate secrets of the taking of a human life"<sup>2</sup> in the recent crop of what American veteran-author Brian Van

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<sup>1</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War: An Oral History of Women in World War II*, trans. Richard Pevear and Larissa Volokhonsky (New York: Random House, 2018), xxxiii.

<sup>2</sup> Brian Van Reet, "A Problematic Genre, the 'Kill Memoir,'" *The New York Times*, July 16, 2013, <https://archive.nytimes.com/atwar.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/07/16/a-problematic-genre-the-war-on-terror-kill-memoir/>.

Reet has termed “kill memoirs” coming out of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq. So what is Alexievich doing differently, and why would it have dismayed the Soviet censor so much?

In an attempt to answer that question, this article will perform a close reading of *The Unwomanly Face of War*. By examining how Alexievich organizes her work of polyphonic documentary prose about a war that is normally considered to be an example of superhuman collective heroism and one of the greatest military victories of the twentieth century, I will show how she makes war not only a matter of dirt, murder, and heavy manual labor—which is how she characterizes it explicitly—but something that is unnatural and unheroic. As she depicts it, war, even when it is as ostensibly moral and valiant as in the Soviet effort in WWII, is not only the exploitation, violation, and destruction of the forces of life, but cuts its participants off from the natural world and the natural order of things. It is this, I argue, that makes *The Unwomanly Face of War* unusual amongst (anti)-war writing.

As part of my analysis, I will compare Alexievich’s collection with other ostensibly anti-war works, especially those written by other contemporary Russian-language authors who also oppose the current Russian government, to demonstrate how author and her interviewees depart radically from the usual depiction of combat and war by combatants. As I argue, Alexievich denies the typical description of combat as a glorious flow state and war as the most natural form of human behavior. Instead, she upholds love, rather than war, as what is truly natural and heroic, and centers soldiers who commit acts of love rather than violence as the true heroes of her narrative. Of all the subversive, controversial aspects of her writing, this little-studied aspect of her work may be the most subversive and controversial of all.

## Alexievich's Documentary Prose

One of the many controversial features of Alexievich's writing is the very nature of her work. Namely, does she write fiction or non-fiction?

The reason for this lack of clarity is that Alexievich borrows from both approaches when she creates what she calls her "novels in voices."<sup>3</sup> She undergoes an extensive research period for each book, interviewing 500-700 subjects over the course of several years and returning to her main interviewees several times. She then extracts the most significant sections from the interviews, sometimes using just one or two sentences from a hundred pages of interview material<sup>4</sup> and combines them in the books.

Depending on the circumstances, she sometimes attributes the interviewees by name, and sometimes quotes them anonymously. She is deliberately informal during the interview sessions, holding what she calls "neighborly conversations"<sup>5</sup> with her interviewees. According to her, she is writing, not journalism, but an "individual attempt at an epic" and the "literature of the document," one that expresses the "mass consciousness" of the "mass individual."<sup>6</sup> This has involved a search for a new form, one that has the factual aspects of the document or documentary but is not constrained by the rules of non-fiction and can instead obey the rules of art.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, "The History of the Russian-Soviet Soul," Elliot Lecture at St. Antony College, May 30, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2Y7M8XRVe0s>.

<sup>4</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, "Brooklyn by the Book," Television interview, June 12, 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-728m7I3\\_Ko](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-728m7I3_Ko).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Alexievich, "The History of the Russian-Soviet Soul."

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

This approach has allowed Alexievich to create works of striking resonance but has also generated controversy and backlash. Most notably, she was sued in Belarus over *Zinky Boys* (*Zinkovye mal'chiki*), her book about the Soviet war in Afghanistan. Several of her interviewees claimed she had misquoted their words and misrepresented them. She, in turn, argued that she had changed their names and minor facts about them only for their protection, and that the suit was brought by the instigation of the Belarusian government.<sup>8</sup>

The suit highlighted both the political repression that Alexievich faces at home, and the slippery nature of her work. It seems very likely that the suit was at least in part politically motivated, and that the Belarusian and Russian governments would like to silence Alexievich, a long-time and vocal critic. At the same time, it is true that Alexievich's writing is *not* purely non-fiction, and that her books are highly curated and crafted, with frequent changes between editions. She herself has said that a document is a "living creature," subject to changes as its subjects change, and that she deliberately rewrites her books between editions as her subjects come forward and modify their stories, adding to the truth as they now understand it as a result of *perestroika* or their own process of aging.<sup>9</sup>

This has engendered criticism from some circles. Holly Myers, for example, contends that the 2016 edition of *Zinky Boys* leaves no room for counterarguments:

there is no longer much patience for middle ground, nuance, ambivalence, individual memory processing, or competing versions of the truth. In the 1990 edition of *Zinky Boys*, Aleksievich preached kindness and understanding for those

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<sup>8</sup> Svetlana Alexievich, "Sud nad *Zinkovymi mal'chikami*," *Zinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vremya, 2013), Ebook.

<sup>9</sup> Alexievich, "Brooklyn by the Book."

who had paid such a high price for their own truth of the Soviet-Afghan War. In the 2016 edition, however, Aleksievich seems to be saying that we, as a society, can no longer afford to do that.<sup>10</sup>

Myers criticizes what she sees as the flattening and blunting of Alexievich's message as she re-edits her books for the later editions. Meanwhile, writing for *The New Republic*, Sophie Pinkham gives a blistering condemnation of Alexievich's approach. Pinkham conducted close side-by-side readings of the various editions of Alexievich's works and discovered that not only did the message of the different editions vary from version to version, but that passages in *Secondhand Time*, her fifth book, had originally appeared in *Enchanted by Death*, a 1993 book that has not yet been translated into English.<sup>11</sup> Pinkham concludes by saying that:

Without the imprimatur of nonfiction, it is unlikely that Alexievich's work would have won so much praise around the world. Rather than being taken as objective confirmation of the awfulness of the Soviet Union and Russia, the book might have been interpreted as an expression of the views of one particular writer. Readers would have been more skeptical about Alexievich's shocking stories and less tolerant of her lack of nuance. Under scrutiny, *Secondhand Time* falls short as both fact and art.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Holly Myers, "Svetlana Aleksievich's changing narrative of the Soviet-Afghan War in *Zinky Boys*," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59, nos. 3-4 (2017): 347.

<sup>11</sup> Sophie Pinkham, "Witness Tampering," *The New Republic*, August 29, 2016, <https://newrepublic.com/article/135719/witness-tampering>.

<sup>12</sup> Pinkham, "Witness Tampering."

While critics such as Pinkham consider Alexievich's use of her material to be both ethically and aesthetically suspect, other scholars accept her approach as a legitimate part of the field of creative non-fiction. John C. Hartsock defines her work as "narrative literary journalism, or the semantic variants of literary reportage and reportage literature,"<sup>13</sup> and celebrates her achievement as the first journalist to win a Nobel prize for literature.

Building on that idea, Irina Marchesini argues that "Following from her work as a journalist, Aleksievich has created a new literary genre where non-fiction and fiction meet. In the attempt to represent traumatic realities, the author interrogates the dramatic destinies of ordinary people, writing a living history of our times."<sup>14</sup> In a more ambivalent but ultimately positive reading of Alexievich's work, Helga Lenart-Cheng discusses both the suspect truth-value of supposedly "objective" archival and official materials in highly propagandistic states such as the USSR, and the problematic nature of an approach like Alexievich's, where a writer uses the voices of people whose speech has historically been distorted and silenced under an authoritarian regime.<sup>15</sup> Lenart-Cheng argues that Alexievich is presenting collective, and what she terms "con-tested" memories, which describes "Alexievich's polyphonic understanding of how we co-witness life."<sup>16</sup> Lenart-Cheng also reminds us that "we need to remember that while Alexievich did record her storytellers' voices on tape recorder, the voices we 'hear' on the pages

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<sup>13</sup> John C Hartsock, "The Literature in the Journalism of Nobel Prize Winner Svetlana Alexievich," *Literary Journalism Studies*, 7, no. 2 (Fall 2015): 38.

<sup>14</sup> Irina Marchesini, "A new literary genre. Trauma and the individual perspective in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*," *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, 59, nos. 3-4 (2017): 323.

<sup>15</sup> Helga Lenart-Cheng, "Personal and Collective Memories in the Works of Svetlana Alexievich," *History & Memory*, 32, no. 2 (Fall/Winter 2020): 78-109.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 96.

of her books were created by Alexievich, the writer."<sup>17</sup> Alexievich is, therefore, operating on the border between fiction and non-fiction, creating highly curated literary works based upon factual or biographical material.

Most of the debate around the ethics and aesthetics of Alexievich's work has centered around her use of her material. Whichever side of the debate a reader finds themselves, it seems clear that Alexievich's unique technique engenders strong emotional responses to her literary project. Much of the criticism leveled against her has been provoked by her critiques of the Soviet Union and her condemnations of the current political regimes in Russia and Belarus. However, as I will argue in this article, Alexievich's highly curated and conscious approach to the construction of her books does not just support a particular position in contemporary politics. Instead, it is what allows Alexievich to achieve something war writers have long struggled to obtain: creating a work about war that is genuinely anti-war.

### **Alexievich's Depiction of War**

So how does Alexievich make war unattractive? In this section I will discuss some of the unique thematic and structural techniques she uses to write a new and unusual kind of war story: one that, rather than showing war as something inherently natural and heroic, shows it as something inherently unnatural and unheroic. Instead, as we will see at the end of this section, she depicts true heroism as what she sees as the opposite of war: love.

War as a place where her interviewees are unwelcome and unnatural is something that Alexievich stresses repeatedly throughout *The Unwomanly Face of War*. In "A Human Being is

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 97.

Greater than War," an originally unpublished chapter containing excerpts from Alexievich's journal that were added to a later edition of the book, she says, "Men...They reluctantly let women into their world, onto their territory."<sup>18</sup> On the one hand, Alexievich implies that women deserved to be allowed into the territory of war: the book is full of stories of female valor and the essential part that women played in the Soviet war effort. On the other hand, Alexievich also takes pains to stress that war is, in fact, an unnatural place for women. In the same section, she describes how women, unlike men, are not prepared from an early age to fight,<sup>19</sup> and that she understood from speaking with female veterans that, "because a woman gives life...it is much more difficult for women to kill."<sup>20</sup>

At the same time, she argues that women's stories about war are not only valid, but extremely important. While she says she had been warned that "Women are going to invent a pile of things for you. All sorts of fiction,"<sup>21</sup> she insists that, on the contrary, the women's stories were so fantastical that they could not have been invented. Furthermore, she says, women "are capable of seeing what is closed to men."<sup>22</sup> Because of women's sensitivity to feelings, "women's memory of war is the most 'light-gathering' in terms of strength of feelings, in terms of pain."<sup>23</sup>

The experiences of war that Alexievich depicts are thus from the outset fundamentally different from those that most war writing features. It is this difference in experience that, I contend, is a significant part of why Alexievich's depiction of war makes it so much less

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<sup>18</sup> Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face*, xxiii.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.



attractive than it is in the stories by most war writers, even those who are explicitly attempting to write anti-war stories showcasing the brutality and horror of combat.<sup>24</sup> Alongside that brutality, however, combatants frequently describe moments of incredible joy and communion, with war as the most natural state of being. Alexievich, though, says that the war stories she gathered show it as “first of all murder, and then hard work.”<sup>25</sup> For her interviewees, war was not a great communal striving towards a shared victory, but something “terrible,”<sup>26</sup> not only leaving them destroyed after the war (a commonplace of war writing), but making them feel maimed and dead inside while the war was actually taking place.

This “terribleness” is key to how Alexievich makes war unattractive. Her interviewees, while being genuinely heroic, find war to be savagely destructive to their minds, bodies, and morals. By showcasing war’s destructiveness while leaving out descriptions of the intense pleasure many fighters feel during combat, Alexievich makes it seem, not glorious, but dirty and degrading.

Part of this is the contrast she creates between the basic biological experiences of the fighters she interviews and the situation in which they find themselves on the front. One of the clearest examples of this appears in the introductory section “From a Conversation with a Censor.” In it, the censor says to her: “Who will go to fight after such books? You humiliate

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<sup>24</sup> Creating works that depict war without glorifying it is a deeply vexing issue for creators. As Francis Ford Coppola says of his classic war film *Apocalypse Now*, “No one wants to make a pro-war film, everyone wants to make an anti-war film. But [an anti-war film] shouldn’t have sequences of violence that inspire a lust for violence. *Apocalypse Now* has stirring scenes of helicopters attacking innocent people. That’s not anti-war” (Francis Ford Coppola, quoted in “Francis Ford Coppola: ‘*Apocalypse Now* is not an anti-war film,’” Kevin EG Perry, *The Guardian*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/aug/09/francis-ford-coppola-apocalypse-now-is-not-an-anti-war-film>).

<sup>25</sup> Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face*, xxiii.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

women with a primitive naturalism. Heroic women. You dethrone them. You make them into ordinary women, females. But our women are saints."<sup>27</sup> The implication is that ordinary women, with all that messy female biology that Alexievich repeatedly depicts throughout the book, could not be either heroic or saintly, and they had no business in war. War was the business of heroic, presumably male or sexless, saints.

Alexievich responds by saying, "*Our heroism is sterile, it leaves no room for physiology or biology. It's not believable. War tested not only the spirit but the body, too. The material shell.*"<sup>28</sup> Alexievich's defense of the material reality here is not just, I argue, a journalist's defense of the concrete detail of the situation she is describing, but central to her main argument in this book. Her conception of war is of something that destroys the body and therefore the spirit. She juxtaposes the unnatural and destructive nature of war and machines with the creativity and life-giving abilities of the animal, natural world, and suggests through the organization of the book that it is the latter that offers the only hope of salvation for humanity.

A careful look at the organization of the (at times) seemingly disconnected passages that make up much of the book show this theme of destruction and then regeneration. The next passage after the one quoted above tells the story of a mother in a partisan unit who drowns her infant to prevent its crying from alerting the approaching German forces of their location. In the passage after that, the narrator recounts how her unit would subject prisoners to an agonizing death by "[sticking] them with ramrods like pigs"<sup>29</sup> and how she enjoyed watching their agony. This is followed by a passage about the rats that would ravage the dugouts and

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., xxxiii.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., italics in the Pevear and Volokhonsky English translation quoted here.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., xxxiv.

then flee before a bombing.<sup>30</sup> In the next and final passage from that section, the narrator describes how “there were so many people killed at Stalingrad that horses stopped being afraid. Usually they’re afraid of the dead. A horse will never step on a dead man.”<sup>31</sup> The narrator concludes by describing how she would hear the skulls of dead Germans crack under the wheels of her cart, and because of that, “I was happy.”<sup>32</sup>

Each of these passages thus shows the physical and psychological destruction and perversion of the animal and natural worlds to which the narrators should belong. There is the literal murder of the infant by its own mother for the sake of the war effort, followed by the brutal murder of prisoners of war in a way that mimics the brutal slaughter of pigs for meat. Next comes the “sinister spectacle”<sup>33</sup> of swarming rats, who gnaw on the hands of wounded soldiers but also know when a bombing is about to begin—a signal that the humans do not seem to be able to heed. Finally, we hear about the horses who have grown so inured to death that they walk over the dead, and the driver who rejoices at the sound of her enemies’ skulls cracking under her cart wheels.

All of these scenes are shocking, but their purpose is not to give the reader a cheap *frisson* of disgust, but rather to show the world of war as one that is in some way against the natural order. War as Alexievich depicts it destroys the connections between the human and natural worlds, taking the very worst aspects of human behavior (killing other sentient beings, torturing prisoners, murdering infants, rejoicing in death), and renaming it as “saintly” and

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., xxxv.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

“heroic” because it is being done in the name of victory. Here Alexievich shows these things not as brave, but as horrifying and unnatural.

Her depiction of these things as unnatural is in contrast to the depiction of war by other contemporary Russian-language war writers. For example, veteran-authors about the recent Chechen wars have by and large been critical of the wars themselves, depicting them as traumatic, destructive, and pointless. They often contrast them directly with the gloriousness of the Soviet effort in WWII that Alexievich is chronicling in *The Unwomanly Face of War*. Even so, they emphasize the connection with nature that combat gives them. Arkady Babchenko, for instance, says in *One Soldier's War*, his memoir of his two tours of Chechnya fighting for the Russian federal forces:

It's not true what the song says, that birds don't sing and trees don't grow in war. In fact, people get killed in the midst of such vivid color, among the green foliage of the trees, under the clear blue sky. And life hums on all around. The birds brim with song, the grass blooms with brightly colored flowers. Dead people lie in the grass, and they are not a bit scary in appearance as part of this multicolored world.<sup>34</sup>

Later he describes developing extra senses to feel the war,<sup>35</sup> a sentiment echoed by Mikail Eldin, a combatant on the Chechen side, in his memoir *The Sky Wept Fire: My Life as a Chechen Freedom Fighter*. Eldin also says explicitly:

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<sup>34</sup> Arkady Babchenko, *One Soldier's War*, Trans. Nick Allen (New York: Grove Press, 2007), 135.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

You must melt away, merge with the forest. Particularly if there is a war on and you are a participant in that war. You must move without snapping one dry twig underfoot, without rustling last year's leaf fall, without disturbing the branches or grass. You need to be able to become any tree, bush, hollow or hill, you need to know how to stop smelling like a human if you are to trick the enemy.<sup>36</sup>

Both Eldin and Babchenko emphasize the "return to nature" that combat brings. War, in their depiction, causes people to peel back the artificial upper layers of civilizations, while also experiencing a close communion with nature. War, they both affirm, is the most natural state of being. War is "real life," unlike the civilian world. As Eldin says:

Real life existed only on this patch of the planet, because here you were vividly aware of each second of life granted to you by fate. Here, each breath might be your last and for that reason each breath was bursting with life. Here, each moment lived was filled with the most profound sense of purpose. Life here was real.<sup>37</sup>

This sentiment—that war is real life, and everything else is bland, fake, and unimportant—is a commonplace in war writing, and is something that I have frequently encountered in interviews and personal conversations with combat veterans. It ties in with

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<sup>36</sup> Mikail Eldin, *The Sky Wept Fire: My Life as a Chechen Freedom Fighter*, trans. Anna Gunin, (London: Portobello Books, 2013): 75.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

another commonplace of war writing, that war reveals your true self. This is also something that Eldin, Babchenko, and numerous other veteran-authors describe in their writing and have repeated in interviews with me and others. For instance, Eldin told me, "In war, a person can only be what they are. In war, a person's essence is revealed in five minutes."<sup>38</sup>

It should be noted that both Eldin and Babchenko, who served on opposing sides during the Chechen wars but are now both political refugees from their homelands and outspoken critics of the current Russian government, have insisted repeatedly in their memoirs, their interviews, and their personal conversations with me, that war is a brutal, tragic, ugly business, with little heroism or glory to it. However, in their depictions of actual combat, they often turn to the sort of lyricism seen in the passages quoted above, and Babchenko in particular has openly discussed his war addiction,<sup>39</sup> saying that "war is the strongest narcotic in the world."<sup>40</sup> Despite all their pains to do the opposite, they, like many ostensibly anti-hero writers, artists, and filmmakers before them,<sup>41</sup> found themselves showing war as an experience of intense

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<sup>38</sup> Mikail Eldin, Skype interview with the author, July 29, 2017.

<sup>39</sup> Although war addiction is a commonplace in writing by combat veterans, it remains surprisingly understudied by researchers. This may be because what clinician Lionel Paul Solursh calls "our own difficulty as clinicians in accepting that aggression and violence might be (commonly) pleasurable" (Lionel Paul Solursh, "Combat Addiction: Overview of Implications in Symptom Maintenance and Treatment Planning," *Journal of Traumatic Stress*, Vol. 2, No. 4, 1989, 455). He goes on to say that "Collective experience in observing audiences at wrestling and boxing matches, war movies and/or body contact team sports supports the presumption that violence is often exciting, pleasurable, and sought after. The political success of the NRA makes it clear that the enjoyment of stalking and killing is not an unusual experience. Yet somehow we clinicians find it difficult to accept the frequency with which bored, withdrawn excombat veterans who feel powerless might find relief, excitement, and pleasure in activities such as risk-taking, reenacting combat, recalling firefights, hunting, arguing and brawling, or getting 'high' with a variety of substances" (ibid.).

<sup>40</sup> Babchenko, *One Soldier's War*, x.

<sup>41</sup> As a particularly famous example, *Apocalypse Now* is largely considered to be an anti-war movie, and the movie team refused to work with the US Department of Defense in order to avoid any requirements to depict the US military in a more flattering light (Steve Rose, "Top Gun for hire: Why Hollywood is the US military's best wingman," *The Guardian*, May 26, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2022/may/26/top-gun-for-hire-why-hollywood-is-the-us-militarys->

camaraderie and life, where they gained ties with the human and natural world that were impossible in ordinary civilian life.

Alexievich and her subjects, however, describe war very differently. Rather than being something that reveals their true selves and gives them closer ties with the natural world, for them, war is something that hides or perverts their true selves and cuts them off from the natural world. This is on both figurative and literal levels. A recurring theme in *The Unwomanly Face of War* is the lack of properly fitting clothing. As Lola Akhmetova, a foot soldier, is quoted as saying, "For me the most terrible thing in the war was—wearing men's underpants. That was frightening. And for me it was somehow...I can't find the..."<sup>42</sup> The horror many of the interviewees felt at cutting their hair and wearing men's clothing is stressed repeatedly, as are their attempts to feminize their appearance.

Another recurring theme is dealing with menstruation while fighting. The trauma of this was exacerbated by the fact that many of the interviewees were so young they experienced menarche only after arriving at the front, and had no older women to explain to them what was happening. Even those who understood it had difficulty obtaining the necessary sanitary supplies, since their kits and uniforms were all designed for men. The overall theme is one of people yanked out of their natural sphere and shoved into an alien realm where they are unable to cope with even the most basic of biological functions. Rather than being a place where "life

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[best-wingman](#)). However, scenes from the movie were supposedly used to prepare US troops to go into combat, and, as discussed above, Francis Ford Coppola himself has said that the movie glorifies war (Kevin EG Perry, "Francis Ford Coppola: 'Apocalypse Now' is not an anti-war film," *The Guardian*, August 9, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2019/aug/09/francis-ford-coppola-apocalypse-now-is-not-an-anti-war-film>).

<sup>42</sup> Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face*, 65.

was real"<sup>43</sup> and "life hums on all around,"<sup>44</sup> for the interviewees in Alexievich's book, war was something where their lifegiving reproductive abilities were not so much unwelcome as completely denied and non-existent.

War is also depicted as perverting or destroying their spiritual or inner natures as well. Perhaps the most poignant example of that is the story of Klavdia Grigoryevna Krokhnina, a sniper. She begins her story by recounting how she quickly lost her aversion to killing on the front, and then says that her mother prayed while she was gone that "if they disfigure you, better let them kill you."<sup>45</sup> Both she and her mother were horrified at the idea of being physically disfigured by war wounds.

However, Klavdia's main disfigurement turns out to be spiritual, and her spiritual wounding is demonstrated by her loss of feeling and her destruction of the natural and animal world around her. She says that "there was no real time to think. To dwell on our feelings..."<sup>46</sup> and then tells the story of shooting a foal who had wandered into no-man's land. Klavdia's comrades want to eat the foal and encourage her to shoot him. "I had no time to think," she says, "out of habit I took aim and fired," killing him instantly.<sup>47</sup> She is stricken with remorse but initially tries to hide it. Later, though, she finds herself sobbing uncontrollably over the killing, saying, "I had loved all living creatures since childhood [...]. And here—bang!—I shot a defenseless colt."<sup>48</sup> The war has perverted Klavdia's essential nature, changing her from a lover

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<sup>43</sup> Eldin, *The Sky Wept Fire*, 48.

<sup>44</sup> Babchenko, *One Soldier's War*, 135.

<sup>45</sup> Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.



of nature and “all living things,” to someone who kills a helpless and innocent foal without a second thought, only realizing what she has done afterwards.

Klavdia’s estrangement from the natural world is further emphasized when she says, “How long was the war? Four years. Very long...I don’t remember any birds or flowers. They were there, of course, but I don’t remember them. [...] Can they make a color film about war? Everything was black.”<sup>49</sup> Klavdia’s war is colorless, natureless, and feelingless—in essence, lifeless.

This is in direct contrast to Arkady Babchenko’s war, which, as in the passage quoted above, was in brilliant, living color. Babchenko also describes killing innocent animals, but his depiction of it is completely different from Klavdia’s. In the chapter “Sharik,” he describes how his platoon killed a pet dog for food. In Babchenko’s telling, however, this was part of the natural order of things, and Babchenko resists any self-recrimination over the act, saying:

We warned him. We talked to him like a person and he understood everything. Here, at war, everyone and everything seems to be at one with their surroundings, be it a person, a dog, a tree, a stone, a river. It seems everything has a spirit. [...] Everyone and everything understands and knows what their fate will be. And they are entitled to make their own decisions—where to grow, where to flow, where to die.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>50</sup> Babchenko, *One Soldier’s War*, 23.

Although Babchenko and other contemporary war authors describe the emotional and spiritual damage they have undergone from the war, they are often accepting of the act of killing as something normal, natural, and necessary, and depict war and killing as bringing about the kind of ecstatic, flow-state unity described here.<sup>51</sup> Klavdia, however, as Alexievich presents her, is cut off from other humans and the natural world by the war, and agonizes over her guilt in the killing of the foal. It is only when the other snipers comfort Klavdia after she flees the dugout in tears that she is able to find some connection with others again.

Even that is short-lived, though. Klavdia recounts how the girls in her unit were mocked for wanting to get married after the war, since “after the war men will be afraid to marry you.”<sup>52</sup> This is a recurring theme throughout the book: female veterans had a hard time finding husbands and were often shunned by their own friends and families. The common sensation of being an outcast that many combat veterans feel<sup>53</sup> was exacerbated by the perceived unnaturalness of these women’s actions and experiences, which took them out of the traditional female sphere and made them foreign and frightening to others.

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<sup>51</sup> “Flow” is a concept popularized by Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, in which people experience a state of ecstasy while completing difficult tasks. Csikszentmihaly notes that flow can be “addictive, ‘like taking heroin’” (Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience* (New York: HarperCollins, 1990, eBook), 62, that “it is sometimes accompanied by a feeling of union with the environment” (ibid.), and that combat often brings about a state of flow, such that “Even if one hates war, the experience can be more exhilarating than anything encountered in civilian life” (Ibid., 69).

<sup>52</sup> Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face*, 14.

<sup>53</sup> As Judith Herman says in *Trauma and Recovery*, her landmark work on PTSD, “The veteran is isolated not only by the images of horror he has witnessed and perpetrated but also by his special status as an initiate in the cult of war. He imagines that no civilian, certainly no woman or child, can comprehend his confrontation with evil and death. He views the civilian with a mixture of idealization and contempt: she is at once innocent and ignorant” (Judith Herman, *Trauma and Recovery: The Aftermath of Violence—From Domestic Abuse to Political Terror* (New York: Basic Books, 1992, 1997, eBook), 66. Note her emphasis on combat veterans as male and civilians as female, a social norm that Alexievich’s veterans here have broken.

Some veterans chose to conceal their service afterwards, while others tried to disappear from their previous social networks entirely. Klavdia tells the story of a comrade, Mashenka Alkhimova, whose legs were seriously wounded while she was attempting to save their division commander from artillery shelling. Mashenka begs her comrades to shoot her, but they refuse. Later the rest of the survivors go looking for her and discover that she has been in hiding from her family for years, afraid to show herself even to her mother because of her wounds. Mashenka is thus completely separated from her community, herself, and her natural state by the war and her shame over being physically disfigured by it.

Klavdia, however, says that physical wounds may not be the worst damage from the war. In the final paragraph of her monologue, she says, "I really didn't want to die. Even if you come home alive, your soul will hurt. Now I think: it would be better to be wounded in an arm or a leg. Then my body would hurt, not my soul...It's very painful."<sup>54</sup> Her final words, addressed to Alexievich, are "Forgive me..."<sup>55</sup>

Klavdia comes away from the war emotionally scarred, just as her comrade Mashenka was physically scarred. Rather than a mark of pride, however, for both of them the scars are a mark of shame. Klavdia's moment of realization, as depicted by Alexievich, is when she kills the foal without thinking. She has destroyed her previous self, the one that loved all living things, and is so cut off from nature that she cannot remember any birds or flowers or colors from the entire war. This separation from nature is emblematic of her spiritual damage, emotional pain, and war guilt. And unlike combatants such as Babchenko, in Alexievich's telling, combatants such as Klavdia, no matter how bravely they served (Klavdia had 75 kills to her name), had no

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<sup>54</sup> Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face*, 17.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

experiences of euphoria and union with the natural world to counterbalance the horrors of war. The war for them was an entirely negative experience, one that destroyed them in every way that mattered.

Another example of how war destroyed people was through sexual violation. There are surprisingly few stories of sexual assault in the book, but the ones that are included are key to understanding Alexievich's theme.

The first description of sexual assault is in the opening section "From What the Censors Threw Out." There, in one of the only passages in a male voice is a brief account of how Red Army soldiers would attack German women and girls. The narrator recounts how "we found very young ones. Twelve or thirteen years old...If she cried, we'd beat her, stuff something into her mouth. It was painful for her, but funny for us. Now I don't understand how I could...A boy from a cultivated family...But I did it..."<sup>56</sup>

Here Alexievich once again shows soldiers as being fundamentally changed by the war, becoming not heroes, but monsters. The Red Army that "liberated half of Europe"<sup>57</sup> was composed largely of those who may have once been decent people, but after four years of war they were able to find amusement in the horrific sexual violation of children. The only thing that concerned them, according to the narrator, was the fear that "our own girls would find out about it."<sup>58</sup> However, at least some of the Soviet women were inured to sexual violence against German women almost as much as the men. Near the end of the book, A. Ratkina, a junior sergeant, recalls how "I remember a German woman who had been raped. She was lying naked,

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., xxxvi.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., xxxvii.

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

with a grenade stuck between her legs...Now I feel ashamed, but then I didn't. Feelings change, of course."<sup>59</sup>

Ratkina then goes on to describe more gang rapes of German women by Soviet soldiers. She concludes by saying of the German people, "I myself wanted to hurt them...Of course...I wanted to see their tears...It was impossible to become good all at once. Fair and kind. As good as you are now. To pity them. That would take me dozens of years..."<sup>60</sup>

These two depictions of brutal gang rapes, the only significant descriptions of sexual assault, come at the beginning and end of the book. They show in stark terms the desensitization to violence that is a common theme of war stories. However, in Alexievich's telling, soldiers are not shown as becoming braver and more heroic, but rather as losing their original moral code and basic feelings of human decency. The war makes them, not stronger, but weaker, lacking in some fundamental way.

Depictions of sexual assault, like depictions of war, are often charged with glorifying the very thing they attempt to speak out against. The controversies around, for example, sexual assault in *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo*<sup>61</sup> and *A Game of Thrones*,<sup>62</sup> often center on the issue of (largely male) writers and directors creating scenes of horrifying sexualized violence against women. Although they frequently defend their choice as being a way to show how terrible and yet how ubiquitous sexual assault is,<sup>63</sup> the fact remains that they are using depictions of sexual assault as a way to entertain others while making money for themselves. Furthermore, as Sophie

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 307.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>61</sup> See for example Patrello, "The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo and the Problem of the 'Rape Scene.'"

<sup>62</sup> See for example Gilbert, "What the Sexual Violence of *Game of Thrones* Begot."

<sup>63</sup> See for example George R.R. Martin's interview by Dave Izkoff in *The New York Times*.

Gilbert points out in the *Atlantic* article cited above, sexual violence against men is rarely featured in these stories, despite being common in the “real world” the writers and directors are claiming to depict, while the sexual assault committed against women is often shown as a prelude to “true love” growing between the survivor and perpetrator.

So from one perspective, Alexievich’s decision to include relatively few stories of sexual assault is a refreshing change. One way she avoids glorifying it is by not talking about it. When she does include it, though, she focuses on the guilt, shame, and horror of the perpetrators at their own deeds (in the story at the beginning by the unnamed male soldier who participated in the gang rape of 12- and 13-year-old girls) and those complicit in their behavior (A. Ratkina’s story at the end). While this could be seen as unfairly focusing on the perpetrators rather than the victims, their own negative evaluation of their feelings and behavior makes these passages particularly powerful. Rather than denying or justifying the sexual assault, they admit both its reality and its cruelty.

This is in direct contrast to the attitude towards sexual assault in writing by many other well-known and well-regarded Russian-language war writers. In *The Sky Wept Fire*, Chechen combatant Eldin dismisses the claims of widespread sexual violation of male Chechen prisoners by Russian forces, saying that only a few men, those for whom their captors felt particular “contempt” rather than hatred,<sup>64</sup> were targeted for sexual assault. Meanwhile, Russian veteran Babchenko claims in *One Soldier’s War* to have successfully fought off an attempted gang rape by his fellow soldiers, despite being unable to defend himself against the other forms of hazing inflicted on him. And in *Pathologies (Patologii)*, Zakhar Prilepin’s bestselling semi-

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<sup>64</sup> Eldin, *The Sky Wept Fire*, 123.

autobiographical novel about a Russian soldier in Chechnya, the main character decides that a woman he encounters on a sweep is only "pretending to be frightened" and casts doubt on her account of her sister's rape and grandfather's murder by Russian troops.<sup>65</sup> In the case of all three of these works, all award-winning, critically acclaimed books based on first-person experiences of combat, the author or narrator expresses doubt about the veracity of claims of sexual assault and denies that it could have anything to do with them, as either victim or perpetrator.

Alexievich's narrators, however, fully accept the truth of sexual assault, the damage it causes its victims, and the guilt felt by the perpetrators. Furthermore, the willingness to overlook or even commit sexual assault is directly attributed to the destructive effects of war.

Alexievich also shows her interviewees as being profoundly stunted by the war, emotionally and socially. Rather than being a rite of passage that initiates them into adulthood, the war stops many of the people Alexievich features from achieving the normal markers of adulthood, leaving them trapped in a sterile no-woman's-land where they are no longer little children, but cannot become fully fledged adults and members of society. A common theme running throughout the book is the difficulty the interviewees had in reintegrating back into the community, and specifically in being accepted as potential wives. A number of the veterans talk about being ostracized by their families after they returned from the front. This taint could affect not just them, but others in their family, including those who had never fought; as one unnamed interviewee recounts, her mother sent her away after three days back home, saying, "Go away...You have two younger sisters growing up. Who will marry them? Everybody knows you spent four years at the front, with men..."<sup>66</sup> The veterans have been contaminated by their

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<sup>65</sup> Zakhar Prilepin, *Patologii: Roman* (Moscow: Ad Marginem Press, 2009), 85-6. Translation my own.

<sup>66</sup> Alexievich, *Unwomanly Face*, xl.

contact with the world of war, which has left them considered to be sexually impure, regardless of whether or not they had any sexual liaisons on the front. This sexual impurity could be extended to include not just virginity but their very status as women at all.

Perhaps even more damaging to the interviewees than sexual assault is the toll war takes on parents. Another repeated theme throughout the book, but especially in the beginning, is of people who kill their children, either to aid the war effort or out of frustration over the intolerable situation in which they find themselves. One of the early stories, already mentioned above, is of a partisan who drowns her newborn infant in order to prevent it from giving away their position with its cries.<sup>67</sup> By her actions, she saves the lives of the thirty people in their unit, but afterwards none of them can bring themselves to look at her or each other. Like Klavdia the sniper when she kills the foal, the unnamed partisan does what the rest of the unit wants her to do, but in doing so, she makes herself an outcast, not a hero. In both cases, these people kill an innocent young creature for the benefit of the fighting unit, only to face ostracism and horror afterwards, even though everyone agrees that it was necessary for the good of the others. These acts of supreme heroism are also acts of supreme transgression that leave the person who commits them as much a monster as a hero in the eyes of those around her. This is in contrast, again, to other works by other contemporary Russian-language authors. In *One Soldier's War*, for example, killing animals is one of the ways that the soldiers bond over difficult moments, and when the narrator believes he has caused the death of a child, the only person who condemns him is himself.

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., xxxiv.



The effects of killing are much more tragic for Alexievich's narrators, however. Two pages after the story of the partisan who drowns her crying infant is the story of someone who flees German forces into the woods with her five children. When her only daughter begs for something to eat, her mother beats her. The daughter is then heard saying, "Mama, don't drown me. I won't...I won't ask to eat anymore. I won't..."<sup>68</sup> The next morning there is no sign of the daughter. Upon her return to the now burned-out village, the woman hangs herself. Her contact with the war has driven her insane, so that she kills first her daughter, and then herself, leaving her sons to fend for themselves. War has thus destroyed the family through infanticide and suicide.

The negative effects of the war for the people in Alexievich's book continue long after it is over, in ways that specifically damage their abilities to bear new life. A number of the interviewees say that they had a hard time, physically and emotionally, having children after the war. Another unnamed soldier in the opening section describes how "I killed so many...For a long time after the war I was afraid to have children."<sup>69</sup> Her war guilt left her struggling to find the courage to bear a child, something other people also echo in the book. Between the social stigma surrounding the veterans, and their own very mixed or negative feelings about their service, many of them seem unable to engage in the basic sexual functions of marriage and childbirth.

Although the focus on *The Unwomanly Face of War* is on the interviewees' stories of the war and the damage it did to them, Alexievich does hint at an opposing force to war: love. There are several instances of love, whether romantic or platonic, breaking out in the middle of war.

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., xxxvii.

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

Despite the warnings of those around her that she will never be able to find a man, Klavdia the sniper met her husband during the war. This shared bond between them enabled them to live with each other and their war trauma afterwards; as she says, "Was there any need for me to explain to him what war was? Where I had come back from? How I was? Whenever I raise my voice, he either pays no attention or holds his peace. And I forgive him, too."<sup>70</sup> They go on to have two children.

More difficult for the interviewees to contend with is the need to forgive the Germans. A. Ratkina begins her passage with the story of a Red Army officer who was demoted and sent to the rear for falling in love with a German girl. Ratkina implies that if he had raped her, that would have been forgiven, but love was treason. As for herself, learning to pity the Germans, she says, took her "dozens of years."<sup>71</sup>

The last section in the book, however, strikes a very different tone. Titled "Suddenly We Desperately Wanted to Live," it is the story of Tamara Stepanovna Umnyagina, a medical assistant who served at Stalingrad. In the final paragraphs, she describes carrying two men, both burned and bleeding heavily, out of a battle. Once she gets out of the smoke, she realizes that one of the men is a German. She debates leaving him, knowing he would soon bleed out if she did, but in the end "I crawled back for him. I went on carrying both of them."<sup>72</sup>

This is not the only account in the book of someone saving an enemy soldier, but I contend that it is highly significant that it is the final passage. Having filled 300+ pages with

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 308.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 331.

stories of hatred and destruction, Alexievich ends *The Unwomanly Face of War* with Tamara Stepanovna's words of forgiveness, love, and the healing power of nature:

It was Stalingrad...The most terrible battles. The most, most terrible. My precious one...There can't be one heart for hatred and another for love. We only have one, and I always thought about how to save my heart.

For a long time after the war I was afraid of the sky, even of raising my head toward the sky. I was afraid of seeing plowed-up earth. But the rooks already walked calmly over it. The birds quickly forgot the war...<sup>73</sup>

While the book is full of descriptions of war as unnatural and separating humans from nature, this final passage, in which Tamara Stepanovna describes "saving her heart for love," shows the beginnings of a return to nature. Tamara Stepanovna says she was afraid to look at the sky or the plowed-up earth for a long time after the war, implying a separation from nature and the natural world. This is in line with the repeated depictions of war as unnatural and alienating throughout the book, cutting people off from the natural world rather than bringing them closer to it, as it is more commonly depicted as doing. It is only long after the war is over that many of the people interviewed are able to return to a harmony with themselves and the natural world, and some never manage that at all.

The natural world, though, points at a path towards healing. The rooks, Tamara Stepanovna says, are no longer afraid of plowed-up earth, because they have already forgotten

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

the war. Nature has healed itself and shed its war guilt and war memories; perhaps people who follow Tamara Stepanovna's example and keep only one heart for love can heal themselves as well.

## Conclusion

*The Unwomanly Face of War*, and Alexievich's writing in general, has been controversial since before it was first published in 1985. While much of the recent controversy in English-language scholarship has been about Alexievich's genre and whether her works should be considered fiction or non-fiction, journalism or literary prose, the initial controversy in the former USSR has focused on what is perhaps the most subversive aspect of Alexievich's writing: her ability to organize her texts in such a way as to cast doubt on long-accepted social values. In particular, in her war writing she manages something that few other artists have achieved, even if it is their conscious intent to do so: she makes war unattractive and unheroic.

As I show in this article, Alexievich does so by centering human connections to the natural world, and by depicting war, even a supposedly glorious victory over a deadly enemy, as inimical to these connections. While the war writing of many other contemporary authors has ostensibly been anti-war, it often contains passages showing war as the one place of true real life, full of close friendships, a sense of purpose, and glorious moments of a flow-state ecstasy in which combatants are able to merge with the natural world.

Alexievich's carefully chosen narrators and stories, which give the impression of artless non-fiction while in fact being deliberately curated and organized to create a particular effect, however, describe war as something that cuts the interviewees off from nature and the natural world and separates them from their friends and families, stunting their moral, spiritual, and

social growth. The end result is a generation of people unable to relate to both other humans and the natural world in a healthy and life-giving fashion.

Alexievich contrasts this with the power of love, which she makes the true hero of her book. The final word of *The Unwomanly Face of War* is given to a narrator who chooses love over death, deliberately saving the life of an enemy soldier during the siege of Stalingrad. In Alexievich's telling, love during war is not a luxury or a dangerous distraction, but the only thing that will save all combatants, foe and friend alike. By elevating love over war, Alexievich has created one of the few truly anti-war stories of our times.

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