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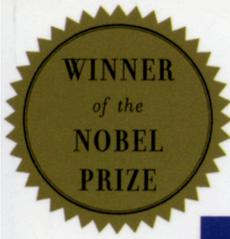
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## The Art of the Interview Svetlana Alexievich's *Zinky Boys*

“The corpses of Soviet soldiers were sent home in sealed zinc coffins, accompanied by military escorts with orders that the coffins not be opened.”  
—Larry Heinemann

In February of 2010, three feet of snow fell on Pittsburgh overnight. The city shut down. Attending graduate school at the time, I should probably have taken the two days I spent stuck in my apartment to catch up on work, but I watched three seasons of *Lost*, my first ever Netflix binge. It was entertaining, clearly, and I got wrapped up in the mystery of it, but the truth is, now, I remember very little about those episodes except that it led me to discover something I hadn't known about myself: I do not understand violence. Perhaps it's because I watched episode after episode in such rapid succession that the absurdity of the violence in the show struck me so profoundly. What stuck is this: You have all these idiots trapped on an island, and every now and then they get the few guns they have between them and start shooting at one another, as if shooting at one another is going to solve the real problem, which is that they are stuck on an island.

Seeing violence as an irrational, absurd reaction to just about any situation has been a recurring experience for me ever since, despite my efforts to understand it



# Zinky Boys

*Soviet Voices from  
the Afghanistan War*



**Svetlana Alexievich**

*Introduction by Larry Heinemann*

and despite the multitudinous examples I've had to examine it as an American citizen who follows the news. So when I read Svetlana Alexievich's *Zinky Boys*, I found myself wondering yet again how violence—whether it be the violence of a bar fight or, as in this case, the largescale violence that is war—ever seems like an appropriate, reasonable, or promising course of action.

I was led to *Zinky Boys* in 2015, the year Alexievich, a Belarusian woman born in 1948, received the Nobel Prize for Literature. This achievement broke ground, most notably because, as Masha Gessen put it in *The New Yorker*, it makes Alexievich “the first person to receive the Nobel for books that are based entirely on interviews.” However, Alexievich stresses that her writing does not classify as journalism, that she is not “a cool chronicler,” despite her early career as a journalist and the inclination of readers to interpret it as such. Yes, her books “deal with historical crises—the Second World War, the Soviet war in Afghanistan, the nuclear disaster at Chernobyl, and the collapse of the Soviet Union—through the voices of ordinary individuals,” but Alexievich sees her work as art, going so far as to call those she interviews her “characters.” She records her interviews, “has them transcribed, then writes from transcripts, longhand, often rehearsing the monologue out loud. A book takes between five and ten years and... contains about a hundred voices, of which ten to twenty are what she calls ‘pillars,’ subjects she’ll interview up to twenty times each.” As Gessen says, this immersion method presents “oral history stripped down to segments so raw that it can stretch both credulity and the reader’s tolerance for pain.” Explaining her approach in an interview with NobelPrize.org, Alexievich said: “Everything happens so fast and intensively in the modern world that neither one person nor the whole culture are able to conceive it... Every person, me too, can only try to grasp a small piece of reality, conjecture only... And all together these pieces are united in a novel of voices creating the image of our time and telling what is happening to us.”

*Zinky Boys* offers an intimate look at the Soviet War in Afghanistan. Spanning the years 1979-89, this war was part of the larger Cold War between the U.S. (who had just finished in Vietnam and who would invade Afghanistan twelve years after the Soviets left) and the U.S.S.R. I was taught in school that this war—the Cold one—thankfully never became a war of violence, death, and destruction, and the suggestion was that this lack of violence, death, and destruction was somehow representative of progress, a victory for Mankind. In the conflict at the heart of *Zinky Boys*, though, violence, death, and destruction abound; blood is everywhere. It is “red in hospital, grey on dry sand and bright blue on stone, in the evening when it’s all dried out.” It “spills as quickly from a seriously injured person as liquid from

a broken jar.” And in the “sea” of it, the people who have to deal with it, to look at it, who get covered in it, and have to try to stem the flow, are left with “a shortage of cotton wool.” Soldiers recount carrying friends back from raids in pieces, “in a plastic bag... all flayed—yes, skinned.” One explains that, “when a bullet hits a person you hear it... like a kind of wet slap.” And another offers the truly horrifying explanation that, “what actually happens if you get shot in the head is that your brains fly out and you run after them, up to half a kilometre, trying to catch them.”

“Never be the first to spill blood,” one Captain warns, “or you’ll forever be shooting yesterday’s old man and yesterday’s donkey.”

One voice mentions confusion at a grandfather’s silence about WWII, mentions the notion that we still hold today, I think, that anyone who fought in it (with the Allies, anyway) should feel pride, consciousness of heroism. We learn that, although we came to admonish war after WWI, WWII was a necessary and unavoidable tragedy, with each of those words—*necessary*, *unavoidable*, *tragedy*—deserving equal emphasis. But maybe it’s always impossible to get out of war—whether you’re in it or watching it from the outside—without wondering, as so many of Alexievich’s characters do, “What was the point?”

One by one the mothers of the dead recount tales of their sons, their “boys,” their “babies” going to Afghanistan, and although the sentiments they felt at the time of their children’s enlistment or deployment vary, they all present a swirling blend of grief, anger, and overwhelming confusion so profound that it is best represented by an image now stuck in my head from the frequency with which it appears in the book: lonely mothers haunting the cemetery like the forgotten, living dead.

Some of the soldiers interviewed do express confusion or even ignorance as to the cause of the war, but the overwhelming impression that comes from their voices is that they followed orders, possibly because they thought they’d be heroes, at least at first, or because they trusted the system, or believed the books and movies, wanted to prove themselves, or believed in a greater good. They had reasons which, however unreliable they later became, offered them grounds for understanding. They understood that, for them at least, “to kill or not to kill... is a postwar question,” that “in the army you obey orders first and then, if you like, discuss their merits—when it’s all over,” that “war is war and that means killing,” and that “you kill so you can get home safe.” But the mothers express confusion so extreme that it borders on disbelief. They cannot identify a reason. They cannot imagine the reality of violent death. They cannot picture their sons as dead or as killers, just as little boys. Time and again, they run from the people who come to tell them of their children’s deaths. They try to slam the door and refuse to hear the

words. The soldiers, on the other hand, watch someone die and, despite any initial shock, hear “a voice inside [them that] says “That’s what death is.”” As one Private explains: “There’s no mystery about death for people caught up in war,” perhaps because those people have a more accurate understanding of what war actually is, though even this knowledge is nebulous and, at times, contradictory.

Watching *Lost* made me realize I did not understand the “Why” of violence, but it has taken *Zinky Boys* for me to realize that I don’t understand the “What” of it either. What is violence? A destructive action? What is war then? A widescale destructive action? Even an accumulation of all of the stumbling efforts at defining it—a collection of all the statements in *Zinky Boys* of what “war is”—probably doesn’t do the trick. War is people killing each other. War is something distant. War is a matter of following orders, of effective training. War is statistics. War is trade. War is trauma. War is hatred. War is justice, is aiding the weak. War is serving others. War is ideology. War is protection. War is an enacted lie. War is death. War is trust. War is the single most life-altering and/or life-defining event. War is life. War is time. War is its own Creator. War is heroism. War is all a matter of perspective. War is bodies and psychology, but only sometimes together. War is a product of art. War is dirty. War is lack. War is blind. War is prison. War is damaging. War is senseless. War is love and self-sacrifice. War is anguish. War is change. War is the favorite game of a faceless They. War is the opportunity to test ourselves and our latest weapons. War is its own self and no more. War is absurd. War is holding a gun and carrying grenades, just like in the posters. War is the great corruptor. War is a nightmare. War is a justification. War is purgatory, a cesspit, a plague on both your houses. A sea of blood and a shortage of cotton wool. It is bureaucracy, a political maneuver, a crime. It is inexcusable, an absence of cross-cultural compassion. It is a hell of filth. War is perpetually killing yesterday’s donkey.

The first of those definitions is the most consistent and pervasive. As Alexievich puts it, at the root of “every war” is one truth: “in every war... people kill each other,” even when “we don’t like to think of it as such,” as is the case with the Cold War. So war is people killing each other, destroying one another’s cities and landscapes, on the orders of men, at the expense of women and boys?

Alexievich claims she has “great faith in life itself” and calls herself “an optimist by nature,” which astounds me, because reading *Zinky Boys* fills me with an empty sadness, with confusion, with anger, with frustration, and with a nihilistic sensibility that feels like truth. Our past is littered with dead soldiers, as is our present, and if the suggestion that we will forever be killing yesterday’s old man

and donkey is correct, if “this war” or the last war or the next war “will never be finished [because] our children will go on fighting it,” then what is the point of *anything*?

Several of Alexievich’s characters articulate their impressions of the beautiful landscape—the mountains, rivers, rainbows, the flowers, the “big camels gaz[ing] at everything like old men”—which suggests redemption and hope for Mankind. But of course, for these characters, these impressions seem to have been quickly replaced by the horror they soon witnessed and in which they participated. One goes so far as to state that “it’s unbearable to look at anything beautiful, like the mountains, or a lilac-covered canyon, straight after you’ve been in battle. You just want to blow it all up.” And so we’re left with this juxtaposition—beautiful world/horrific war—which feels impossible to reconcile. Beauty is so far outside war that it cannot act as a counterweight.

There are, of course, stories of love, devotion, compassion, nurturing, self-sacrifice, and literally death-defying bonds of friendship and family in *Zinky Boys*. In truth, I’m not sure that makes it worth it. If anything, it just seems to make it more heartbreaking. Why isn’t one mother—just *one* mother—sitting on the grave of her child, “greet[ing] every little flower, every tiny stem growing from his grave [with] ‘Are you from there? Are you from him? Are you from my son?’” enough to get us to call the whole thing off? I’ve heard that we experience tragedy in life to appreciate its glory, that we wouldn’t know pleasure without pain, but this argument is wanting. Some pain can be so extreme that seeing beauty afterwards becomes impossible.

I want to ask Alexievich how she can be an optimist after hearing all she has, but I suppose you’d have to be one to undertake such a venture. To “continually pick up what is black in man, rather than what is fine and noble” suggests a desire to examine, to understand, which we usually do when something seems incongruous with an otherwise self-evident truth, in this case that man is essentially “fine and noble.”

I have little trouble accepting the fineness and nobility—the humanity, that is—of the individuals who speak in *Zinky Boys*. On receiving the Nobel, Alexievich offered her belief that “a single individual... is where everything happens,” and especially when I couple this perspective with her suggestion that Truth resides in the individual conscience, I’m more able to accept her optimism, to accept the notion that, in Truth, human beings are innately good. Mr. Rogers encouraged children to “look for the helpers” when terrifying events unfold, and in *Zinky Boys*, those helpers are many, at least among those who are in the war.

Of course, Alexievich stresses the idea that there is no such thing, really, as being outside a war. She emphasizes that those of us who feel “outside the war” are, in fact, complicit in the violence and destruction that occurs “over there,” wherever “there” may be. “Accessories,” she calls us, which of course brings to mind the judicial, lovely and official—and extremely uncomfortable—impression that we are accessories to murder.

Take America’s own recent blunderings in the same, damned region. Whether we voted for politicians who voted “Yes, go get ’em, boys [and girls]!” or whether we wore T-shirts reading “No Blood for Oil” while sitting at an outdoor café sipping lattes with friends, we did that. We sat by while American boys and girls went to die and to watch their friends die, while they went to kill other humans who watched their friends die, and we lived in the comfortable detachment that a few thousand miles afford us. But we were not “outside.” We were not separate. Maybe we bought the line that the Iraqis had weapons of mass destruction, and bought the line that this entitled us to bomb their country and depose their leader out of all the countries and leaders who have weapons of mass destruction. Or maybe we bought the line that we were spreading democracy, and that this was undoubtedly a noble and admirable deed, without ever pausing to ponder the almost hysterical irony of forcing democracy on a people. To alter slightly the words of one of Alexievich’s characters: “why do we accompany our paeans to the glorious future of [democracy] with threats? In shelling those quiet little villages and bombing the ancient mountain-paths we were shelling and bombing our own ideals.”

So much of what Alexievich says in *Zinky Boys* could be applied to us, even though we are wont to perceive ourselves as unique, pillars of righteousness, and very different from those Evil Soviets. Over and over again, she explores how a people can “come to believe the message, drummed into [them] for so long, that [they] are superlative in every way, the finest, the most just, the most honest,” as well as how “nothing, not even human life, is more precious to us than our myths about ourselves” and how anyone that “dares express the slightest doubt is guilty of treachery.” We, like those Evil Soviets, “have been protected from seeing ourselves as we really are, and from the fear that such understanding would bring,” and as a result, we still have not realized that the whole world is not itchy to be American, that in fact many countries resent the bossy kid in this world’s playground, and that unwelcome interference in the affairs of others, coupled with the arrogance of believing ourselves invincible, puts us in a very dangerous position indeed. After all, “Man has finally achieved the evil ambition of being able to kill us all at a stroke.”

Alexievich articulates a belief that many of us may hold and which gives us hope: “Our whole life is spent in the search for truth, especially nowadays, whether at our desks, or in the streets, at demos, even at dinner parties.” Perhaps if we can find this truth, perhaps if we can come to see ourselves “as we really are,” if we can face “the fear that such understanding would bring,” perhaps we can stop killing each other in unending wars that seem to have us trapped. Perhaps then our humanity—our fineness and nobility, our attention to what is beautiful and how we love—can assert itself.

In the Introduction to *Zinky Boys*, Larry Heinemann explains that, “until recently, the publication of a book of stories about the Soviet war in Afghanistan would have been virtually impossible,” if for no other reason because, as one of her characters explains, “the farewell address from the political education officer to the departing *dembels*” might include “a list of what [soldiers] could and could not talk about back home.”

Of course, Alexievich doesn’t deny the notion that all writers construct “Fairy-tales.” In fact, she offers it unreservedly. She does not, however, see such construction as contrary to an effort to find truth, explaining that “nothing is more fantastic than reality.” By “describ[ing] feelings about the war, rather than the war itself,” Alexievich aims to “reflect the world as it really is” without being “bound by the laws of ordinary verisimilitude,” and it is this naked honesty that will perhaps show us the truth of ourselves and what it happening to us.

Alexievich’s early readers certainly identified the greater accuracy of her accounts than those presented as “the official line.” Gessen explains that “the state-controlled media in Russia greeted the Nobel with an outpouring of vitriol,” and Alexievich recounts conversations in which people admonished her effort, demanding to know, “Who needs your dreadful truth?” But, as one Lieutenant astutely recognizes, the “know-nothings” do, and so do the ones who went through it, who want to be heard, who want to record it “exactly as it was,” who “tried to explain what [they’d] been through,” but felt that “no one was interested,” who want to know that their “lives weren’t entirely wasted” as part of the insulting category: “victims of a political mistake.”

I feel guilt around the Iraq war, and not just because I got to stay home and watch *Lost*, waxing philosophical about violence, while people my age and younger were fighting and dying and irrevocably altering as people several thousand miles away across the sea, for no clear reason. My guilt is more personal. In the ten years I spent backpacking around Europe, getting a Bachelor’s degree, a Master’s degree, and a 9-5 job, my brother Robert spent over three years in the desert fighting for his life

and the lives of the friends he had around him. He lost more friends in that war, he says, than he had in high school or than he's had since.

For a while, I would wish him "Happy Memorial Day," because I felt I should acknowledge his experience, but in my profound ignorance, I didn't realize that for him there is no such thing as a happy Memorial Day. I asked him stupid questions, like "Is Iraq beautiful?" and "Would you ever go back as a tourist?" I think because I wanted to talk with him about it, but didn't know where or how to begin. I used to write him letters that I never mailed. I actually found one recently, and its content seems like such absurd drivel to have written down at such a time, which is perhaps why I never sent it or the others. In it, though, I say this: "It's funny to me, the things we remember. Mostly I just have images imprinted on my brain... you and me watching TV in our Murrysville living room... sitting in your room and playing your bass... things like that. Funny how those images become treasures when at the time you really don't realize how important they are." The same is true of the memories I have of being the little, beloved sister of a soldier who fought in Iraq. They are few and scattered, and no more notable, I'm sure, than the many things I've forgotten.

I remember the day he left for the Army, which was also a snowy, Pittsburgh day in February. I saw his Recruiter, who was friendly and kind, as a thief. I sat on the stairs while they gathered my brother's things, and I'm sure Robert hugged me, although I don't remember that part. I watched him walk down the path cut in the snow covering our front lawn, and then I went back to bed, and I distinctly remember thinking before I fell asleep again that my life was never going to be the same, even though I didn't know how it would be different or really why I felt that way.

I remember his eyes the first time he came home on leave and how terrifying they were to me. My brother was gone, and the person who had replaced him seemed inaccessible and unknown. I remember, while visiting him and his family a few years later, standing on their back porch at Fort Carson, smoking a cigarette and crying at Taps. I remember him not being allowed to tell me when he was coming home, that even he didn't know. I remember recommending a movie I found hilarious—*Little Miss Sunshine*—and him telling me, almost angrily, how much he had hated it because it was filled with horrible, selfish people and was therefore devoid of humor.

My most drawn out, visceral, and unsettling memory, though, is this: I kept my cell phone on my desk in class. I'm good about putting my cell phone away when it's inappropriate to have it out, but I kept it with me and on alert all the time. If I got

a phone call from my dad or from a number I didn't recognize or from the too-long number that began with 9 that meant Robert was calling, I left class to answer it. You see, I spent years waiting to hear that my brother was dead and years thinking that our every conversation would be the last. Nothing terrified me so much as news stories of captured soldiers being beheaded for the eyes of the Internet to see.

I've learned better than to say "Happy Memorial Day," though I still call him on that holiday so he knows neither he nor his lost loved ones have been forgotten, despite the barbecues. I don't ask stupid questions about the Iraqi countryside or which museums in Ramadi are worth a visit anymore, but the problem is I haven't figured out which questions *to* ask. I feel I owe him this incredible apology that I don't know how to give.

I think reading *Zinky Boys* will change my relationship with him, if for no other reason, because it inspired me finally to tell him that I am willing to hear about his experience in Iraq, if he's willing to tell it. I thought about giving the book to him, but I worry that it will just cause him more pain. He's doing very well—he has a lovely family, he's studying to be an engineer, and he refuses to be defined solely by this one part of his life. But I can also see the place in him where we're not allowed to go. I think it's this place that makes me apprehensive, even ashamed of myself for writing about all of this.

Alexievich tells us early on that "There's something immoral, voyeuristic, about peering too closely at a person's courage in the face of danger," and perhaps that is why it feels almost obscene to write about it, to voice my ignorant opinion and possibly unanswerable questions. As much as I feel that all the "know-nothings" should read *Zinky Boys*, I also feel that no one should. I think it important that these stories were heard and written and stored in a book that almost becomes a tomb by concluding with a series of summative epitaphs—"Ladutko Aleksandr Viktorovich (1964-1984) Died while fulfilling his international duty/ You died an honourable death; You did not spare yourself/ You died a hero's death on Afghan soil/ That we might live in peace./ To my dear son, from Mama;" "Bobkov Leonid Ivanovich (1964-1984) Died in the execution of his international duty/ Sun and moon are extinguished without you, dearest son./ Mama, Papa;" "Zilfigarov Oleg Nikolayevich (1964-1984) Died true to his military oath./ You did not fulfil your dreams and ambitions/ Your dear eyes were closed too soon/ Dear Oleg, dearest son and brother/ We cannot express the pain of your loss./ Mama, Papa, your brothers and sisters;" "Kozlov Andrei Ivanovich (1961-1982) Died in Afghanistan/ My only son./ Mama"—But reading it is like looking at a naked dead person. There's too much distance, too much room for detachment, too much incomprehensibility

and misunderstanding. There's too much space for opinion, judgment, and selfish response.

I told Robert about this project, about my inability to comprehend violence. I told him about watching *Lost*, about all the idiots shooting at each other, and about the fear I have that "there's not much humanity in a human being," that "if a man's hungry, or ill, he'll be cruel," to which he said, flatly: "They wouldn't. In crisis, people come together." He believes firmly that people are innately good, and he is able to reconcile this belief with an equally firm belief in the inevitability of war, maybe because, for him, the overwhelming Truth appeared in the "friendship and mutual support out there, and heroism too." I do not understand it, but maybe I will come to understand the more I talk with him about his experience. For now, I will choose to trust my brother.



**NICOLA BROOKE** was born in 1984 in Grahamstown, South Africa. She is the daughter of a Jungian Psychoanalyst and a French Literature Professor. Her family emigrated to the United States in 1994. She studied English Literature at Duquesne University, achieving a BA and MA, and currently teaches at the United States Air Force Academy.