Neighbours in memory

Svetlana Alexievich: the first major postcolonial author of post-Communism

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Svetlana Alexievich

SECOND-HAND TIME
Translated by Bela Shayevich
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CHERNOBYL PRAYER
A chronicle of the future
Translated by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait
240pp. Penguin. Paperback, £9.99.
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There was always something incongruous about the Communist leaders' fascination with the past, something strange about the utopia that gave up its promise of the radiant future. Leonid Brezhnev's memoirs came out in 1978 in three issues of *Novyi Mir* (The New World), the symbol since the early 1960s of the oppositionally minded intelligentsia. The appearance of Brezhnev's trilogy in the same journal that had once published Alexander Solzhenitsyn's *One Day in the Life of Ivan Denisovich* signified a move towards a conservative politics of memory that reframed the painful complexity of Soviet history as a combination of stoic perseverance and heroic victories. Presenting a panoramic view of the Soviet past, the memoirs narrated the events of the Second World War and post-war reconstruction as a part of Brezhnev's own personal biography, implicitly equating the history of the USSR with the life of the party's Secretary General. Printed in millions of copies, the trilogy flooded the Soviet Union and became mandatory high-school reading. It looked as if the personality cult was back.

Unlike Nikita Khrushchev, Brezhnev did not really narrate his recollections: they were ghostwritten by a group of journalists from prominent Moscow newspapers. He may have corrected some of the galleys and even contributed a few stories, but by and large the trilogy was a full-blown attempt by the Soviet propaganda machine to simulate the documentary genre. The formal features of the eyewitness account were preserved, but its essence had been hollowed out. Jokes about the memoirs abounded. In one of them, Brezhnev kept asking his fellow Politburo members what they thought of the trilogy. They all told him it was fascinating, captivating. In the end, Brezhnev concluded: "Sounds like a good book. Maybe I should read it, too!"

Without this cultural backdrop, it is easy to overlook the full significance and profound radicalism of Svetlana Alexievich's documentary prose. No doubt the content of her books, which began to appear in 1985, shocked many. But it was her method of generating, collecting and compiling personal stories that really shook up the late-Soviet industry of fabricated memoirs. Born in 1948, Alexievich grew up in Belarus and studied journalism at the University of Minsk. In the late 1970s, she began her life's work of eliciting personal accounts: from female participants and child survivors of the Second World War; from veterans of the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan and mothers who lost their sons there; from victims of the Chernobyl disaster; and from people who had attempted suicide. Told as first-person narratives, these accounts provided a sobering jolt that helped to dispel the historical fog created by the quasi-documentary chimeras of ghostwritten memoirs.

Of course, the accounts compiled by Alexievich are far from being unprocessed historical memories; nor are they the verbatim transcripts of her interviews. In fact, nowhere in her books does Alexievich explain exactly *how* she shapes her interviews into stories. What is clear is that she selects and reorders fragments from hundreds of conversations with her interlocutors, transforming the "raw accounts" of her eyewitnesses into literary stories that aim to retain the evidentiary quality of the original sources. As such, her method has much in common with the Latin American genre of the *testimonio*. Prompted by questions, the narrators tell their own stories, following their own associative paths. The interviewer/transcriber then transforms this oral conversation into a written monologue. The goal is to preserve the stories that would otherwise remain marginalized or simply unheard, and the trick is to minimize the transcriber's authorial power.

In her collections of testimonies of the Second World, Alexievich carefully remains in the shadow of her interlocutors. Most of her questions have been removed from the conversations, and the reader can only infer the inquiry that may have prompted the narrator's response. Usually, she reserves prefaces and epilogues for spelling out her own views in her own words. At times, she inserts herself in the body of the text only to bracket herself out, in order to indicate (in the parentheses) the affective condition of her interlocutor: his or her smile, tear or pensiveness. Otherwise, her textual appearances are manifested only in the strangely baroque headings of the chapters – "Monologue on How Happy a Chicken Would Be to Find a Worm". "And What Is Bubbling In the Pot Is Also Not Forever" or "On Life the Bitch and One Hundred Grams of Fine Powder in a Little White Vase" – which seem intended to offset the bareness of much of her interlocutors' language.

If the classical Latin American *testimonio* – such as *I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian woman in Guatemala* (1984) – tends to be assembled as the life-*history* of a single person, then the version created by Alexievich privileges a life-*event*. As she explained in 1994, "I have no time to paint a portrait. Things change too quickly [. . . .] I just take simple pictures. Snapshots . . .". This approach allows her both to condense personal stories to a few pages, or even to a few lines, and to increase the number of documented testimonies. Grouped thematically – by gender, age, or life-defining event – these stories produce a kaleidoscope of vibrant shards of memory.

Limited in her own forms of expression, Alexievich focuses her efforts on the deep structure of her compilations. She meticulously orchestrates the sequencing of her narrators, and her books bear a certain resemblance to plays, with characters appearing on stage one after the other to deliver their monologues; their parts remain separate, but together they all contribute to a powerful chorus. Comparisons might also be drawn with the montage of Sergei Eisenstein or Dziga Vertov; like those pioneering directors, Alexievich creates meaningful sparks by placing narrative shots in contrapuntal formations. Erased during the process of its textualization, the dialogical structure of the *testimonio* comes back, but now as a dialogue *between* different testimonies. The monologue of a successful businessman might be followed by that of a die-hard Communist, and their textual coexistence forces the reader to negotiate the instability of meaning caused by radically incompatible narratives competing with each other to dismantle the monolithic history of Soviet socialism into personalized stories. "In reality, none of us lived in the USSR", observes one of Alexievich's interlocutors in *Second-Hand Time*; "we each lived in our own social circle. The hikers' clique, the climbers' group . . . ". Purposefully fragmented, Alexievich's collections of testimonies demonstrate the contested ownership of the contradictory past as successfully as they model an ideal of plural authorship.

This "polyphony" of experience and remembrance, or (to evoke another Bakhtinian term) the inherent "unfinalizability" of the dialogic exchange that Alexievich generates between testimonies, also affected the biographies of the books themselves. Their method of composition invited frequent revisions and additions, and almost every book was altered after first publication. Some later editions included excerpts initially excluded because of censorship; other projects expanded massively with time. Thus, a slim collection of stories about attempted suicides, *Enchanted by Death* (1994, untranslated) re-emerged nearly twenty years later as the voluminous *Second-Hand Time*, published in Russia in 2013. Other books evolved less drastically but no less significantly. The gradual transformation of *The Last Witnesses* (1985, untranslated) is emblematic in this respect. The first edition of this collection of monologues by child survivors was fully representative of a general trend to document unknown facets of the Second World War. Together with the stories, it included photographs of Alexievich's interlocutors, adding an extra layer of historical authenticity. In later editions, the number of stories grew but the photos disappeared, and fewer details about the interlocutors were supplied. This decontextualization, however, was more helpful than harmful: it transformed the work from an oral history project into a literary composition. The change of subtitle was also indicative: originally presented as "A book of unchildlike stories", *The Last Witnesses* eventually reappeared with the subtitle "Children's solo voices". An overlooked

account of a particular war morphed into a polyphonic depiction of a universal human tragedy, its importance rooted not in its exact geographic or temporal location but in the affective power that it conveys.

The fragmentary nature of the testimonies, amplified by their contextual minimalism, can make for disorientating reading. There should be no mistake, though: this disorientation is essential to the overall project. As Alexievich clarified in *Enchanted by Death*, "We all are witnesses and participants, executioners and victims united in a single body; we have been scattered among the fragments of what, until recently, was a gigantic socialist empire . . . We have forgotten how to distinguish war and peace, day-to-day routine and Being, life and death. Pain and screams. Freedom and slavery" (all translations mine, except those from the books under review). Alexievich's montages neither rescue these distinctions nor consolidate the fragments she finds. Rather, they map discursive dislocations and chronicle existential confusions. "We were building socialism", one of her interlocutors recalls in *Second-Hand Time*, "and now on the radio they say that socialism is over. But we're . . . we're still here . . .". It is precisely this insistence on "still being here" after wars, disasters, political terror or national pogroms that endows the testimonies with unforgettable narrative force.

An inspiration for Alexievich, as she has often acknowledged, was the work of her mentor, the Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich (1927–94). His collection *Out of the Fire* (1977, English translation 1980) presented the results of an oral history project conducted over many years that recorded the eyewitness accounts of rural Belarusians whose villages were incinerated during the Second World War. Interview excerpts were interspersed with photos of the survivors, and comments by Adamovich and his colleagues. Quite unusually for the 1970s, the volume even included two small LPs with selected recordings of the interviews. This factographic montage of oral stories, documentary sources and other media provided Alexievich with a formal template. As she put it recently in an interview, "I was always tortured by the understanding that no single heart or single mind could contain the whole truth. Truth is always fractured; there is a lot of it, and it is scattered all over the world. How could one possibly collect it? Suddenly, [in *Out of the Fire*] I saw how it could be done. That's how my [first] book, *War's Unwomanly Face*, was born". This collection of women's narratives about the Second World War (1985, trans. 1988) was initially suppressed by censorship, only to become, in due course, a cultural phenomenon that paved the way for a boom in post-Soviet theatre, cinema and literature.

Alexievich's later projects retained her fundamental commitment to finding, preserving and "organizing lumps of truth", as Dziga Vertov wrote in the 1930s. Yet after *The Last Witnesses*, she began moving away from the strictly documentary nature of oral history. From here on, it becomes clear that her interview material could be used by her as the foundation for creating what she herself called "composite characters". A pivotal stage in this development was Alexievich's third and perhaps most controversial book, *Zinky Boys* (1989, trans. 1992), devoted to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. It provoked vociferous criticism from those who preferred to hide the traumatic consequences of the "Afghan war" behind the façade of military heroism. For the first time, Alexievich informed her readers in the preface to the book that she had deliberately concealed the real names of her interlocutors – to protect their privacy, as she explained, but also (as would become clear) to preserve some artistic freedom. Nevertheless, Alexievich was sued in Minsk in 1992 by several of her interviewees, who accused her of misrepresenting their views and distorting their stories. Most of the accusations were dismissed by the court, but the trial pushed Alexievich to refine in public the genre of her work. In her speeches at the trial, she appealed "as a writer" to the distinction between "truth and verisimilitude" (*pravda i pravdopodobie*). "I am not thinking things up", she insisted; "I am not inventing anything. I am organizing the material with the help of reality itself." The details and feelings that finally ended up in her "artistic prose of a kind" were taken not only from the single life of a single individual but also from the lives, spaces and voices that surrounded her: "My books . . . are both a document and my representation of our times". It is this two-part solution – a document and a representation – that would finally help Alexievich reframe her five-book project as a unified cycle, *Voices of Utopia*. At the same time, this method leaves a certain ambiguity around her genre of plural authorship. Not only can readers not tell how representative are the quotes that she selects from her interviews; they also have no way of distinguishing whether a story has been compiled from multiple narratives or from the accounts of single narrators. In contrast to the *testimonio* genre, there are no original tapes to go back to; or, at least, they are not publicly available (and, in the case of *Zinky Boys*, had been destroyed before the trial).

Chernobyl Prayer: A chronicle of the future and *Second-Hand Time* are the final two instalments of the cycle. The first edition of the Chernobyl book came out in Russian in 1997 and quickly appeared in multiple translations in Europe and the US. This masterly new translation by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait retains the nerve and pulse of the Russian, conveying the angst and confusion of the narrators. *Second-Hand Time* appears in English for the first time, and while the translation by Bela Shayevich is highly competent, it often lacks the edginess of the original. Shayevich does, however, explain terms, names and events, providing useful historical context for the foreign reader.

Unlike the three earlier books, the last two volumes are not centred on the cruelty of war. Yet there is a strong thematic connection aptly articulated by a survivor of the Chernobyl catastrophe: "they will always go together in history: the downfall of Socialism and the Chernobyl disaster. They coincided. Chernobyl hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union. It blew the empire apart". In essence, the two books are dramatic accounts of the empire's end and its aftermath. Their narratives of suffering demonstrate how a traumatic experience could result in the production of various communities of loss. Survivors of the nuclear meltdown of 1986 keep returning to the idea that Chernobyl is "sculpting something out of us. Creating. Now we have become a people. The people of Chernobyl". Survivors of the collapse of the USSR similarly insist: "I lived there for half of my life . . . you can't just erase that . . . . Everything in my head is built around

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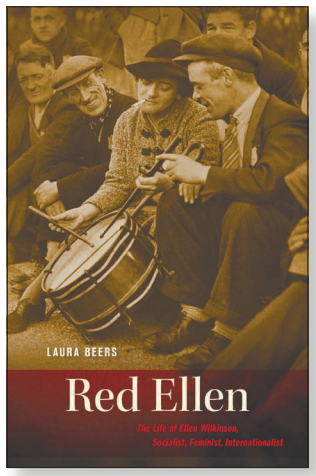

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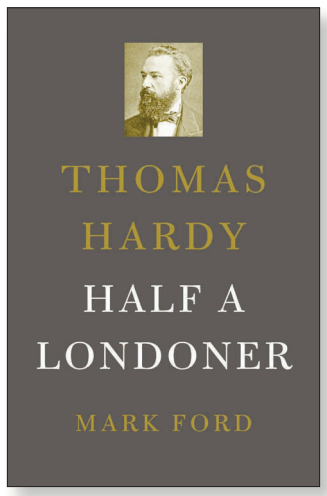

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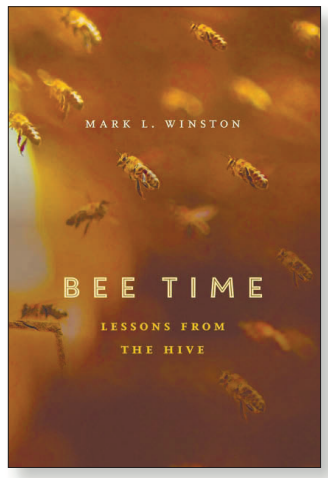

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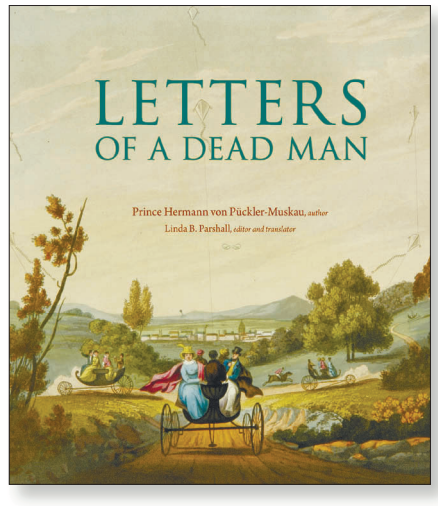

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Soviet structures" (*Second-Hand Time*). In both books, the narrators are puzzled, confused and enraged by their inability to comprehend what has happened to them, and search for guilty parties: "To answer the question of how we should live here, we need to know who was to blame" (*Chernobyl Prayer*). They hold responsible various individuals, groups and institutions. Yet the issue of accountability is hardly their main concern. They all are searching for something more personal: for a way to reconcile their former lives with their current conditions. "I want to live after Chernobyl, not to die after it", a male technology designer explains; "I want to know what I can cling to in my faith, what will give me strength".

Many decide to cling to their former lives, in some cases quite literally. *Chernobyl Prayer* has several stories by people who exchanged safety for the familiarity of their homes, located within the radioactive zone:

> We returned with our cats. And dogs. We came back together. The soldiers and riot police wouldn't let us in, so we came by night. Took the forest paths. The partisan paths . . .
>
> We've got two sacks of salt. We'll be alright without the state [. . .] There is land and grass to your heart's content. Water in the well. Freedom! We like it. What we have here is no collective farm, it's a commune. Communism! We'll buy another horse. And then we won't need anyone.

Others "resettled" figuratively, relying on their Communist past as a refuge from post-Communist change:

> I grew up in a deeply Soviet time. Totally Soviet. Born in the USSR. But the new Russia . . . I do not understand it yet, I can't say what's worse, what we have today or the history of the Communist Party. My mind still functions according to the Soviet system, the Soviet mould; after all, I spent half of my life under socialism. All of that is ingrained in me. You couldn't beat it out. And I don't think that I'd want to. Life used to be bad, now, it's outright frightening (*Second-Hand Time*)

Both books are full of similar justifications and complaints, and it would be easy to dismiss them as acts of nostalgic withdrawal or as escapist fantasies. Except they are not. The narrators are neither self-delusional fools, uninformed by the danger of radiation, nor unrepentant apologists for Communist terror. They know what they've survived: "We survived Stalin, survived the [Second World] war", a woman from Chernobyl explains. "If we hadn't laughed and had fun, we'd have hanged ourselves ages ago." They use the authority of their testimonial voice to resist attempts to consign them to the dustbin of history and to claim their right to a meaningful life – even if that life might seem wrong to others. In their different ways, they reiterate one simple idea, succinctly expressed by a female narrator: "I can do without a lot of things. The only thing I can't do without is the past" (*Second-Hand Time*).

A large part of *Second-Hand Time* shows what happens to those who do try to sever these ties of dependency through suicide – attempted or completed. Death was always a central topic in Alexievich's cycle, but in the accounts of the Second World War or the Afghan invasion, it seemed, if not natural, then at least inescapable. The Chernobyl disaster, Alexievich suggests, was also war, in a new, still unknown form. But in *Second-Hand Time*, death and near-death experience are the outcome of something very different: a profound disillusionment with human beings, a whole country, an ideology and, ultimately, life itself. She describes the collection as the narratives of those "who had been permanently bound to the Soviet idea", who could neither "just walk away from History" nor learn to live without "some great idea". As if undermining the very premiss of her cycle – with its thousands of irreconcilably different memories – she uncharacteristically claims: "We share a communist collective [more precisely, "single"] memory. We're neighbours in memory".

I hope that this desire to homogenize memory is just a momentary sign of the genre exhaustion that *Second-Hand Time* as a whole indicates. Produced mostly during Alexievich's years abroad in Western Europe, this last book is curiously unscrupulous in its selection of material. Its montage frequently dissolves into a patchwork of unattributed newspaper clippings or rumours, into "peddling the apocalypse", in the words of a cameraman in *Chernobyl Prayer*. Pages of "overheard" statements are printed without any names, even fictionalized ones, or dates. Some stories are indistinguishable from urban legends. One chapter even offers a set of narratives distilled from a documentary film and accompanied by the director's comments. This is a collection of heavily remediated materials which demonstrates that Alexievich's two-part strategy – a document *and* an artistic vision of the time – is breaking down. The "document" has not quite gone, but its status is rather blurred. Perhaps later editions of *Second-Hand Time* will rectify these shortcomings, or perhaps they will stimulate a search for new narrative tools and forms of organization.

Despite these technical flaws, *Second-Hand Time* is an important collection of testimonies that powerfully depicts the paradoxical and painful persistence of the memory of utopia. Rejecting a life without faith, Alexievich's interlocutors assert, "We had a dream". The role of these "Soviet dreams and ideas" becomes all the more salient against the backdrop of the alternatives Alexievich traces. One of the most heart-wrenching narrative threads in the last two books of the cycle concerns poisonous forms of post-Soviet nationalism or, to be more precise, their victims. A refugee from Tajikistan aptly summarizes the general sentiment: "Instead of the freedom we had all been waiting for, civil war broke out" (*Second-Hand Time*). Multiple civil wars, in fact. Ethnic difference emerged as the key tool for creating new social hierarchies. Another refugee from Tajikistan explains,

> In Dushanbe, I worked as the deputy chief of the railway station, and there was another deputy who was Tajik. Our children grew up together . . . He used to call me "little sister, my Russian sister". And suddenly he walks over – we shared an office – stops in front of my desk and shouts: "When are you going back home to Russia? This is our land!" (*Chernobyl Prayer*).

Forcibly displaced, some, strange as it seems, found a safe haven in Chernobyl. The head of a family of refugees from Dushanbe explains: "Why did we come here? To the Chernobyl Zone? Because no one will kick us out. From this land. It's nobody's. God has taken it over. People have deserted it". For others, Chernobyl's abandoned land becomes a living metaphor for the disappeared Motherland, as this mother with five children points out:

> We used to have a Motherland. It's gone now. Who am I? Got a Ukrainian mother, my dad's Russian. I was born and raised in Kirghizia, then married a Tatar. Who are my children? What's their ethnicity? . . . In our passports, for me and my children it says "Russian," but we are not Russians. We're Soviet! But the country I was born in does not exist. . . . We've become as homeless as bats. . . . Our country does not exist, but we still exist (*Chernobyl Prayer*).

Surviving an empire is never easy, and Alexievich's books are saturated with horrifying details about humiliation, torture and killing. However, there is a crucial difference that distinguishes these post-imperial testimonies from the Second World from similar stories, say, about the partitioning of India. If we are to believe Alexievich's narrators, the Soviet system did manage to produce large-scale communities, in which ethnic differences and national affiliations were overshadowed by other, more inclusive and cosmopolitan, forms of collective belonging. In both books, almost every story about national conflicts starts with a variation of the same observation: "Everyone lived together like one big family [. . . .] The world was divided up differently: is someone a good or bad person, are they greedy or kind? [. . .] everyone had the same nationality – we were all Soviet". They do not forget to add, though, that "everyone spoke Russian" (*Second-Hand Time*).

This memory of a recent life without ethnic boundaries or, at least, with boundaries that seemed to be transparent, adds a special angst to stories of ethnic animosity among former neighbours and friends. Moreover, imaginary as this past "friendship of people" may have been, it continues to reverberate in the present with its failed promise of universalism and ethnic non-distinction. Two decades after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a Tajik refugee explains to Alexievich why her "brothers" come to live and work in Moscow:

> they do not feel like they've come to live with strangers, their parents lived in the USSR; Moscow used to be everyone's capital . . . When they're at school, all Tajik boys dream of going to Russia to make money . . . . At the border, Russian customs officers ask them, "Who are you going to visit?" And they all answer "Nina." . . . For them, all Russian women are Nina . . . They don't teach Russian in school any more. All of them bring their prayer rugs (*Second-Hand Time*).

These voices of utopia, inseparable from the experience of dislocation, are a unique contribution to the literature of testimony. With her cycle Svetlana Alexievich has established herself as the first major postcolonial author of post-Communism: the daughter of a Ukrainian and Belarusian who uses the Russian language – the only language in which she is completely fluent – to collect and present, from her own subaltern perspective, subaltern accounts of the traumas inflicted by empire. Shaped by the language of the empire, she fractures and fragments it from within, testifying to the fragility of its power.