

Poetics of Authenticity: Svetlana Aleksievich's Politics and Aesthetics

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Abstract

Based on tape-recorded interviews with a multitude of historical eyewitnesses, Svetlana Aleksievich's five-volume literary project *Golosa utopii* depicts some of the most calamitous events of Soviet history – the Second World War, the Soviet-Afghan war, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. This thesis seeks to provide the first systematic study of the different social, historical and cultural factors which have shaped Aleksievich's genre-transgressive writing, which is marked by both historiographical and literary aspirations.

This thesis examines the development of Aleksievich's complex aesthetics in the context of the documentary tradition in Russian and Soviet culture, including her engagement with such prominent predecessors in the literary canon as Fedor Dostoevskii, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Varlam Shalamov, and Ales' Adamovich. I argue that Aleksievich's continuous insistence on the 'truth' and 'authenticity' of her work is central to her thinking and writing. This thesis demonstrates that these key concepts emerge during her work as a journalist for the Soviet press – an apprenticeship which would also leave clear traces in her practice as a writer. This historical, cultural and social context is crucial to understanding Aleksievich's

construction of a particular public persona in the later stages of her career. I therefore examine Aleksievich's strategies of positioning herself as a non-conformist writer exposing the untruths of the official Soviet discourse, including Soviet newspapers, which are foregrounded as the negative other of her own discourse. Analysing her employment of counter-narratives using a Bordieuan framework, I examine the truth-claims underpinning her public persona as a dissident writer 'giving a voice' to the repressed. The interplay between authorial voice and the many witnesses in her books underpins both this self-portrayal and the claim to the authenticity and truth of her work. This thesis examines the multi-voiced structure of Aleksievich's works against the backdrop of Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of literary polyphony and analyses the authorial interventions in her texts. Focusing on the historical, cultural and literary context of the production and reception of Aleksievich's work, this thesis presents the first systemic study of the complex strategies by which Aleksievich authenticates and legitimizes her claims to present a higher form of truth in her literary-historiographical project *Golosa utopii*.

Note on Transliteration and Citations

For transliterations of Russian texts, I adhere to the Library of Congress system without diacritical marks, unless the name in question is that of an author who writes and publishes in English in a particular format (eg. Brodsky, Yurchak). Belarusian terminology is transliterated from its Russian translation if Aleksievich engages with the translation rather than the original in her texts (eg. *la iz ognennoi derevni...* instead of *la z vozgnennai veski...*; 'Chernobyl' instead of 'Chornobyl'). Unless otherwise indicated, the abbreviated titles in brackets refer to the following editions of Aleksievich's works:

- CM** Svetlana Aleksievich, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: kronika budushchego* (Moscow: Vremia, 2016).
- PS** Aleksievich, *Poslednie svideteli: solo dlia detskogo golosa* (Moscow: Vremia, 2016).
- TS** Aleksievich, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vremia, 2016).
- UV** Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (Moscow: Vremia, 2016).
- VS** Aleksievich, *Vremia sekond-khend* (Moscow: Vremia, 2016).
- ZS** Aleksievich, *Zacharovannye smert'iu* (Moscow: Slovo/Slovo, 1994).

Introduction

When Svetlana Aleksievich visited Gothenburg in May 2016, the Permanent Secretary of the Swedish Academy Sara Danius, who had announced Aleksievich as the 2015 laureate of the Nobel Prize in Literature seven months earlier, noted in a lecture:

In a sense, Aleksievich's documentary-based project is anti-fiction. Nothing can be invented or otherwise be a product of the imagination. Everything has to be true – true to the human experience that is being depicted in one testimony after the other. But the attentive reader of her works soon discovers an astonishing wealth of literary references in her writing. *Zinky Boys* is a good example. I amused myself by making a list of literary allusions – and it became a long one: the Gospel of Luke ('Father, forgive them, because they don't know what they're doing'), the Gospel of Matthew (on the false Messiah), great 19th century Russian writers such as Mikhail Lermontov, Alexander Pushkin, Leo Tolstoi, Fedor Dostoevskii, as well as William Shakespeare, Alexandre Dumas, Erich Maria Remarque, Ernest Hemingway...¹

Danius addresses a fundamental ambiguity of Aleksievich's genre, which has been probed by commentators ever since the publication of her debut work. Introducing *U voiny ne zhenskoe*

¹ Sara Danius, *Sidenkatedralen och andra texter* (Stockholm, Albert Bonniers Förlag, 2020), p. 40. Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

litso to Soviet readers in 1985, Aleksievich's mentor and friend Ales' Adamovich (1927-1994) tentatively suggested a number of possible definitions for this book: 'магнитофонная литература; устная история; эпически-хоровая проза; документальное самоисследование; соборный роман; роман-оратория'.² As Adamovich concluded his discussion, however, the novelty of Aleksievich's form of writing was yet to be precisely determined: 'Раз столько вариантов, значит, все еще не прояснилось, не возникло, не найдено слово'.³

This ambivalence has persisted over the years as Aleksievich's writing has been presented and perceived as both 'zhanr golosov', 'roman-ispoved'' (VS), 'non-fikshn' and 'publitsistika'.⁴ The various genre definitions indicate the complex problems in categorising her work as fiction or non-fiction. The issue of Aleksievich's genre, in other words, raises the question of whether her books should be read as reliable historical accounts of the communist and post-communist periods or as works of literature or both. When noting the

² Ales' Adamovich, 'Poiski, prodolzhenie zhanra', foreword to Svetlana Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (Minsk: Mastatskaia literatura, 1985), pp. 49-54, p. 52.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Svetlana Aleksievich, 'Svetlana Aleksievich – Golosa strany Utopii' [the author's official website], <http://alexievich.info/>, [accessed 12 December 2022]; Altereos, 'Non-fiction: tri knigi Svetlany Aleksievich', Livejournal (20 October 2016), <https://altereos.livejournal.com/163998.html?ysclid=lbnz5skqg7698948895> [accessed 14 December 2022]; Aliaksandr Dubrouski, 'Kontseptual'naia publitsistika Svetlany Aleksievich', *Zhurnalistyka-2014: stan, prablemy i perspektyvy: materyialy 16-i Mizhnarodnai navukova-praktychnai kanferentsyi* (2014), pp. 288-291.

allusion in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* to Dostoevskii in her lecture, Danius is referring to the first monologue of this book, in which the mother of a Soviet soldier returning from Afghanistan tells the interviewer about the declining mental health of her son and his murder of an unknown man using a kitchen axe (TS, 7-13). The position of this scene at the beginning of the book seems a deliberate choice, evoking Raskolnikov's murder of the old pawnbroker in Russia's most famous crime novel, *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* (1866). Aleksievich's editorial choice raises questions about the relationship of historiography and literature and different readers' expectations associated with fictional and non-fictional texts. Is the reader intended to discern a symbolic meaning here and interpret the axe within the wider thematic context of moral transgression that *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* explores? Does the specificity of the murder weapon encourage the reader to look for a meaning beyond the historical information that the monologue presents and thus apply to it the kind of analytic procedures that are appropriate to fiction?

Consisting of first-person narratives based on interviews with historical eyewitnesses interspersed with authorial comments, Aleksievich's works reflect her documentary aspirations. In her Nobel lecture delivered in December 2015, she stated that the over-arching purpose of *Golosa utopii* was

the ambition to let the witnesses speak for themselves: 'Правду нужно давать, как она есть [...] Говорить должен свидетель'.⁵ Generally speaking, these claims to authenticity and truth have been uncritically accepted in the reception of Aleksievich's work outside the post-Soviet sphere. For example, Vanora Bennett states that Aleksievich's writing harks back to a 'serious tradition of truth-tellers and defenders of the powerless' and describes her narratives as the 'extraordinary retellings of true Soviet stories'.⁶ Similarly, Timothy Snyder claims that 'the central attainment of Svetlana Alexievich [...] is the recovery of Soviet experience from myth' and notes that this has made her 'an acute critic of the nostalgic dictatorships in Belarus and Russia'.⁷ The following comment on *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* made by Danius in her lecture is also instructive in this regard:

What did we know about these women? In the Soviet Union, too, very little was known about them. The book sold two million copies. The official version of the Second World War showed the Soviet man as

⁵ Aleksievich, 'O proigrannoi bitve' [Nobel Prize Lecture, 7 December 2015], *Nobelprize.org*, <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/25414-svetlana-aleksievitch-nobel-lecture-in-russian/> [accessed 12 December 2022], p. 5.

⁶ Vanora Bennett, 'Svetlana Alexievich: Seeking the Truth about Soviet Life', *Financial Review* (08 July 2016).

⁷ Timothy Snyder, 'Svetlana Alexievich: The Truth in Many Voices', *The New York Review* (12 October 2015).

he wanted to appear. What Aleksievich has shown is what things were really like.⁸

Aleksievich's reliance on direct quotation further underscores the documentary dimension of her work, which seems to present an unmediated, documentary reality through verbatim personal testimonies. The multiple voices which are audible in her work have led critics, publishers, and scholars to describe and present Aleksievich's work as 'polyphonic'.⁹ The notion of 'polyphony' can, of course, be traced back to Mikhail Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel, in which 'the character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of [the author]'.¹⁰

The ultimately liberal claim underlying the idea of polyphony,

⁸ Danius, *Sidenkatedralen*, p. 33.

⁹ See, for instance, Johanna Lindbladh, 'The Polyphonic Performance of Testimony in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Voices from Utopia*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 281-312; Konstantin Milchin, 'Chronicling a Catastrophe: The Nobel Prize and Svetlana Alexievich', *Carnegie: Endowment for International Peace* (13 October 2015), <https://carnegiemoscow.org/commentary/61589> [accessed 14 December 2022]; Melissa Nurczynski, 'Svetlana Alexievich and the Difficulty of Telling the Stories of Those Who Cannot Tell the Stories Themselves', *The Postscript* (23 September 2021), <https://www.thepostscript.org/p/svetlana-alexievich-teaching-journalism> [accessed 01 December 2022]; Angelos Theocharis, 'Polyphonic Memory and Narratives of Resilience in Svetlana Alexievich's *Secondhand Time*', *Journal of Languages, Texts and Society*, vol. 3 (2019), pp. 185-206; Hannah Weber, 'Svetlana Alexievich: Where to Start with Her Literature', *The Calvert Journal* (25 August 2021).

¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 5. The original Russian reads: 'Герой идеологически авторитетен и самостоятелен, он воспринимается как автор собственной полновесной идеологической концепции, а не как объект завершающего художественного видения Достоевского' (Bakhtin, *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo* (Moscow, Khudozhestvennaia literatura, 1972), p. 6.

the notion of the independence of the liberal subject with diverse opinions has, however, been questioned in the context of Aleksievich's work. For instance, Vladimir Golstein has argued that Aleksievich's claim to act as a spokesperson for a multitude of speakers in her writing is wholly untenable. According to Golstein, what we are presented with in Aleksievich's works is by no means a diverse and multifaceted representation of the Soviet system and how people experienced it; instead, he suggests, we see a subjective image shaped by Aleksievich's own ideological assumptions.¹¹

In other words, Golstein raises the question of the extent to which Aleksievich has shaped the text through her deliberate choices as an editor. Lev Anninskii likewise notes what he sees as an irreconcilable contradiction in the dual authorship of Aleksievich's genre: 'Так подкошен жанр, так дерзко обновлено само понятие об авторстве: от повести к повести всесветная слава писательницы растет, меж тем как тексты ее на девяносто девять процентов принадлежат другим людям!'¹² The authorial control behind the text, which these critics detect, throws doubts not only on the liberal

¹¹ Vladimir Golstein, *Svetlana Aleksijevitj – Sovjetintelligentians röst* (Stockholm: Karneval förlag, 2015). This pamphlet was intended for a Swedish audience and has not been published in English.

¹² Lev Anninskii, 'Oglianut'sia v zlesakh: Bozh'e i chelovech'e v apokalipsisakh Svetlany Aleksievich', <http://alexievich.info/wp-content/uploads/Anninsky.pdf> [accessed 06 February 2022].

principles which her works seem to rely on but also on her adopted stance of neutral observer or mere vessel for voices of silenced witnesses.

The documentary claim of her work has been further undermined in the Russian-speaking sphere where representations of Soviet history are more controversial. In 2008, Afghanistan veteran Alla Smolina started a blog alleging that Aleksievich's depiction of the armed conflict in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* had been unfair and inaccurate, especially with regard to her portrayal of female military staff.¹³ As Jeffrey Jones points out, such criticism 'illustrates again that what constitutes "truth" is contested terrain'.¹⁴ Despite Aleksievich's various claims to present authentic historical accounts filling in gaps which have been deliberately left empty in official Soviet historiography, the 'truth' of Aleksievich's (or any work) is difficult to assess. As a relative concept, 'truth' is therefore contingent on the context which Aleksievich creates in her work.

The notion of truth in Aleksievich's work is constructed vis-à-vis the idea of Soviet distortions of truth. Spanning the

¹³ Alla Smolina, 'Gimn sovetskim "Afganushkam" ili otvet "chekistki"', *The Art of War* (1 February 2011), http://artofwar.ru/s/smolina_a/text_0680.shtml [accessed 13 December 2022].

¹⁴ Jeffrey W. Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes, and the Collapse of the USSR: the Representation of Women in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Zinky Boys*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 234-258, p. 248.

period of late Soviet Socialism, perestroika and the post-Soviet period, the five compilations of interview-based monologues constituting Aleksievich's large-scale literary project *Golosa utopii* were published between 1984 and 2013. While *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (1985) and *Poslednie svideteli* (1985) had concentrated on the experiences of Soviet women and children during the Second World War from an ideologically conformist position, the exploration of the Soviet-Afghan War in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1990) was intended to subvert official representations of the conflict in Soviet media. As Hartssock notes, 'subversion is at the heart of Alexievich's "new reality" in *Zinky Boys*, confronting what the Soviet authorities did not want to acknowledge'.¹⁵ From the publication of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* onwards, Aleksievich positions her narratives in opposition to a perceived official Soviet discourse. Her depiction of the Chernobyl' nuclear disaster *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* (1997) and the revised editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (2004) and *Poslednie svideteli* (2007) are presented as counter-narratives to a Soviet master narrative, repudiating the supposed untruths contained in contemporary Soviet newspaper reports on the Soviet-Afghan war, in radio and television announcements about the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and in state-sponsored

¹⁵ John C. Hartssock, *Literary Journalism and the Aesthetics of Experience* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), p. 46.

commemorations of the Second World War. In the tradition of Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag Gulag* (1973), then, *Golosa utopii* is implicitly presented as an 'authentic Soviet history', a 'real chronicle of the *res gestae* of the Soviet people', intended to 'substitute the true record of the past for the lies of the regime'.¹⁶ To understand Aleksievich's views on truth-value, it is important to understand the assumptions about Soviet culture, history, and society which underpin her strategies of authenticity. Analysing Aleksievich's constructions of counter-narratives and her claim to represent other people in her writing, her concept of art and her journalistic background, this thesis presents the first in-depth examination of the most essential features of her poetics.

Svetlana Aleksievich – Cultural and Literary Identity

Like her work, Aleksievich's national, cultural, and artistic identity defies straightforward categorization. Born in 1948 in Ivano-Frankivsk (then Stanislav) in what is today south-eastern Ukraine to a Belarusian father and a Ukrainian mother, Aleksievich has spent most of her adult life in Belarus, where the family moved after the father's discharge from the Red

¹⁶ Martin Malia, 'Review: A War on Two Fronts: Solzhenitsyn and the *Gulag Archipelago*', *The Russian Review*, vol. 36, no. 1 (1977), pp. 46-63, p. 52.

Army.¹⁷ Although a Belarusian national, Aleksievich does not identify as a Belarusian writer. Nor does she identify as a Russian or a Soviet writer, although Russian is the language in which she is most proficient and the language in which she writes. When the five works comprising *Golosa utopii* were retranslated into Belarusian and published in Minsk in 2018, Aleksievich was asked about her choice of language:

Трудно мне было объяснить, что русский мой язык – это язык, на котором говорит империя и я должна была написать на этом языке. Даже когда я была в Таджикистане – там говорили на русском, в Украине – тоже. То есть где бы я ни была, встречала людей из того времени. Если бы я написала на белоруском языке, не схватила бы правду времени, правду чувств.¹⁸

Aleksievich thus explains her choice of language with the fact that Russian was official language and lingua franca in the USSR, making Russian more fitting than Belarusian for the exploration of Soviet history in her works. When Aleksievich’s family moved from Ukraine to Belarus in the early 1950s, the republic was

¹⁷ 'Premiia mira Soiuza izdatelei i knigotorgovtsev 2013: Svetlana Aleksievich – Biografiia' [biography by Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels], 2013.

¹⁸ ""Esli by ia napisala na belarusskom, ne khvatila by pravdy vremeni": V Minske prezentovali knigi Svetlany Aleksievich na move' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Kyky.org* (26 June 2018), <https://kyky.org/news/esli-by-ya-napisala-na-belarusskom-ne-shvatila-by-pravdu-vremeni-v-minske-prezentovali-knigi-svetlany-aleksievich-na-move?ysclid=lbzpguytd197112707> [accessed 13 August 2022].

considerably Russified and Russian dominant in the educational system.¹⁹ With the exception of Belarusian language and literature, every subject was taught in Russian in most Belarusian schools in the mid-1950s, as Stankevich notes.²⁰ Russian was thus the medium of instruction when Aleksievich attended school as well as when she took her degree in journalism at the State University of Minsk between 1967 and 1972.²¹ Moreover, when working as a journalist for the Belarusian daily newspaper *Sel'skaia gazeta* between 1973 and 1976 and for the Belarusian thick journal *Neman* between 1976 and 1984, Aleksievich wrote in Russian. In other words, Aleksievich is profoundly shaped by an educational, professional, and literary context that privileged Russian over Belarusian. Therefore, even though writing in Russian may indeed be a conscious choice considering the topics that she explores in her books, it is also, at least to a degree, involuntary – a consequence of the russification of the Soviet republics.

¹⁹ For the russification of the Soviet republics and the language policies in the USSR, see Craig Brandist and Katya Chown, eds., *Politics and the Theory of Language in the USSR 1917-1938: The Birth of Sociological Linguistics* (London: Anthem Press, 2011); George Liber, *Soviet Nationality Policy, Urban Growth, and Identity Change in the Ukrainian SSR, 1923-1934* (Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1992); Brian Silver, 'Social Mobilization and the Russification of Soviet Nationalities', *The American Political Science Review*, vol. 68, no. 1 (1974), pp. 45-66; S. Stankevich, 'Rusifikatsiia belaruskogo iazyka v BSSR', in T.A. Efimovich, ed., *Istoriia imperskikh otnoshenii: belarusy i russkie* (Minsk: Fuainform, 2010).

²⁰ Stankevich, 'Rusifikatsiia belaruskogo iazyka', p. 111.

²¹ 'Premiia mira Soiuza'.

Aleksievich's artistic and regional belonging is as complex as the circumstances of her preferred language as an author. When asked by journalist Ana Lucic whether she felt as though she belonged to a particular country or literary scene, Aleksievich replied that she saw herself as 'an independent writer':

I can't call myself a Soviet writer, or even a Russian writer. By "Soviet" I mean the territory of the former Soviet empire, naturally, the realm of the Soviet utopia. Neither do I consider myself a Belorussian writer. I would say I'm a writer of that epoch, the Soviet utopia, writing the history of that utopia in each of my books.²²

Written in Russian and exploring topics of historical and social importance for the post-Soviet sphere, Aleksievich's books contain little indication of her Belarusian background. The only recurrent textual element pointing towards her nationality is the relatively high frequency among her interviewees of people who lived or have lived in the territory of Belarus. For example, in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, seventeen interviewees have an

²² Ana Lucic, 'A Conversation with Svetlana Alexievich', *Dalkey Archive Press* (2 August 2013), <https://www.dalkeyarchive.com/2013/08/02/a-conversation-with-svetlana-alexievich-by-ana-lucic/> [accessed 06 December 2022].

explicitly stated connection to Minsk. In *Vremia sekond-khend*, that number is eleven, and five in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*.

With the exception of these geographical rather than cultural or linguistic markers, *Golosa utopii* has all the hallmarks of the work of a Russian writer as Aleksievich is firmly rooted in the Russian literary tradition, citing Dostoevskii as one of her major influences and frequently including references in her works to the Russian literary canon. For example, the 2007 edition of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* contains direct references to Chekhov, Dostoevskii, Tolstoi, and Pushkin, while *Vremia sekond-khend* invokes the same four canonical writers. Aleksievich can thus be described a Russophone writer who, while geographically oriented toward the territory of Belarus, is firmly anchored in Russian literary culture and tradition.

The Russian cultural tradition also extends to her political engagement. In the tradition of the 19th-century intelligentsia and the Soviet literary dissident movement, Aleksievich identifies literature with political engagement. Ever since the trial following the publication of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* in 1990, her relationship with the Belarusian authorities has been characterized by considerable tension. Based on interviews with nurses, soldiers, and mourning mothers, this book caused great controversy, in particular among war veterans and their

family members, who received Aleksievich's book as slanderous, criticizing her heavily and leading to the cancellation of a stage adaptation performed in the Kupala Theatre in Minsk.²³ In 1992 – two years after the publication – four interviewees participated in a lawsuit against Aleksievich in Belarus, claiming that she had falsified and distorted their statements and suing her for libelling their honour.²⁴ The court ruled in favour of one of the plaintiffs and fined Aleksievich in a trial that Russian PEN and Belarusian human rights defenders deemed illegitimate and politically motivated by (TS, 276).

This trial was the first incident indicating considerable friction between Aleksievich and the Belarusian authorities, making her an overtly political figure. Aleksievich reports that she has been subjected to different forms of harassment by the Belarusian government, including threats and surveillance. Moreover, until 2018, her books were taken out of circulation in her native country.²⁵ Since the 1992-1993 trial, furthermore,

²³ Holly Myers, 'Svetlana Aleksievich's Changing Narrative of the Soviet-Afghan War in *Zinky Boys*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 330-354, p. 341.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ 'Svetlana Alexievich' [biography by PEN Zentrum Deutschland], Pen-deutschland.de, <https://www.pen-deutschland.de/en/themen/writers-in-exile/ehemalige-stipendiaten/swetlana-alexijewitsch/> [accessed 17 December 2022]. Aleksievich mentions instances of harassment in interviews (see, for instance, Marie Tetzlaff, 'A Human is a Scary Creature' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich for Louisiana Channel], *Youtube* (August 2017), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EJ5bOFwpz1s> [accessed 06 December 2022]).

Aleksievich has become a vocal critic not only of Aliaksandr Lukashenka but also of Vladimir Putin, thus emerging as a dissident figure in the broader post-Soviet sphere. A widely noted and illustrative example of her political activity is an essay published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine* in 2014, shortly after the Russian occupation of Crimea.²⁶ Aleksievich condemned the Russian invasion and accused Putin of stirring up aggressive, nationalistic sentiments among the Russian population, causing widespread hostility and violence, and characterized the Russian government as authoritarian, irresponsible, and callous: 'Как номенклатура советского времени, они думали, что власти позволено все, и она неответственна перед обществом'.²⁷

Six years later, when accusations of electoral fraud were levelled at Lukashenka during the 2020 Belarusian presidential elections, Aleksievich assumed a vocal role in the opposition against the government by joining the board of the Coordination Council, a non-governmental body created to facilitate a democratic transfer of power.²⁸ Aleksievich was

²⁶ This article was originally published in German in *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (Aleksievich, 'Etwas Schreckliches, etwas Blutiges zieht heran', *Frankfurter Allgemeine* (11 March 2014)). It was subsequently disseminated in Russian on several websites with the title 'Kollektivnyi Putin', *Express.by* (13 March 2014), <https://express.by/rubrics/obshhestvo/2014/03/13/svetlana-aleksievich-kollektivnyj-putin> [accessed 14 December 2022].

²⁷ Aleksievich, 'Kollektivnyi Putin'.

²⁸ Andrei Makhovskii and Matthias Williams, 'Nobel laureate author emerges as powerful voice backing Belarus protests', *Reuters* (28 August 2020),

interrogated by the police and subsequently left the country escorted by foreign diplomats, relocating to Germany where she currently resides.²⁹ Most recently, in 2022, Aleksievich spoke out against the Russian invasion of Ukraine, signing an appeal urging Russian-speakers living abroad to contact Russian citizens directly in order to pass on information about the war disseminated in Western European news channels.³⁰ She also condemned the authorities in her native country for allowing Russia to use Belarusian territory to launch operations.³¹

In parallel to her writing career, then, Aleksievich occupies a prominent position on the political scene in the post-Soviet sphere. Taking a stand on contemporary politics is a moral choice that Aleksievich makes, insisting on this as the obligation of a writer. When asked in an interview whether she believed that writers should publicly express their views on

<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-belarus-election-alexievich-idUSKBN25019H> [accessed 14 December 2022]; Koordinatsionnyi soviet, 'Prezidium', <https://rada.vision/prezidium> [accessed 13 December 2022].

²⁹ Elisabet Andersson and Jan Majlard, 'Aleksijevitj om regimen: Terror mot folket', *Svenska Dagbladet* (09 September 2020); Vera Nerusch, 'It's a Shame the Road to Freedom is So Long' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Deutsche Welle* (24 January 2022), <https://www.dw.com/en/alexievich-its-a-shame-the-road-to-freedom-is-so-long/a-60503124> [accessed 01 December 2022]; 'Belarus' Nobel laureate answers summons over opposition Coordination Council case', *Belsat: journalists behind bars*, <https://belsat.eu/en/news/belarus-nobel-laureate-answers-summons-over-opposition-coordination-council-case> [accessed 1 June 2022].

³⁰ Luke Harding, 'Eminent writers urge Russian speakers to tell truth of war in Ukraine', *The Guardian* (5 March 2022).

³¹ 'U nas uzhe net nezavisimosti, i my strana-agressor. Eto stydno i strashno' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Express.by* (7 March 2022), <https://express.by/rubrics/obshhestvo/2022/03/07/svetlana-aleksievich-u-nas-uzhe-net-nezavisimosti-i-my-strana-agressor-eto-stydno-i-strashno> [accessed 14 December 2022].

political issues, she replied: ‘Я думаю, что да. Во всяком случае, я из тех людей, которые принимают позицию’.³² The public perception of Aleksievich as a dissident writer informs the reception of her writing in the post-Soviet sphere as well as in Western European countries and in North America. In other words, her public persona is integral in establishing the readers’ expectations of her works. Aleksievich’s political engagement, then, is inseparable from her writing, as it enters into a complex interplay with her depictions of Soviet reality and the creation of an artistic persona in *Golosa utopii*.

***Golosa utopii*: a Chronicle of Soviet Communism**

Golosa utopii is the title of Aleksievich’s large-scale literary project, a five-book cycle completed in 2013 that chronicles the history of Soviet communism and its disintegration. Although published over a period spanning nearly three decades (1985-2013), the books constituting *Golosa utopii* share key formal properties and are thematically linked. With the exception of later editions of *Poslednie svideteli* – the only book that lacks an authorial preface in some revisions – each book consists of a succession of thematically ordered monologues with individual

³² Tetzlaff, ‘A Human’.

titles and a minimum of external commentary, framed by an authorial preface. Aleksievich's works are also marked by a thematic consistency as they all depict collective traumas at key moments in Soviet history: the Second World War, the Soviet-Afghan War, the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, and the dissolution of the Soviet Union. As Aleksievich stated in her 2015 Nobel lecture: 'Я написала пять книг, но мне кажется, что все это одна книга. Книга об истории одной утопии'.³³ Elsewhere she further clarifies her project as an examination of the historical development of the Soviet condition, reflecting the experiences of several generations:

Моя хроника охватывает десятки поколений. Она начинается с рассказов людей, которые помнили революции, прошли войны, сталинские лагеря, и идет к нашим дням – почти 100 лет. История души – русской души. Или точнее, русско-советской души. История великой и страшной Утопии – коммунизма, идея которого не умерла окончательно не только в России, но и во всем мире.³⁴

When Aleksievich published her first books in 1985 at the age of 37, she was already an accomplished writer using a well-

³³ Aleksievich, 'O proigrannoi bitve', p. 4.

³⁴ Aleksievich, 'Svetlana Aleksievich – Golosa strany Utopii'.

defined literary method, which has essentially remained unaltered during the entirety of her writing career. Aleksievich spends many years researching each book, speaking to hundreds of people and often conducting several interviews with the same person.³⁵ The documentary material that she gathers then undergoes a rigorous selection process, with about one in five of the collected interviews making it into the final version of the book.³⁶ The interviews that Aleksievich chooses to include in the book are in turn subjected to a careful selection and editing process. Discussing the writing of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, Aleksievich explained that a transcribed conversation with a witness typically comprised between 100 and 150 pages, around ten of which went into the finished book, in other words approximately twelve percent.³⁷

Golosa utopii can thus be described as a cycle of compilations of interview-based monologues. Reducing her own authorial commentary to a minimum in the monologues, Aleksievich sometimes inserts a short question directed to the witness or a brief, bracketed remark on the interviewee's tone

³⁵ Lajos Pálfalvi, 'Life Itself Is So Shocking, It's Difficult to Put into Words' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Hungarian Literature Online* (5 June 2022), <https://hlo.hu/interview/svetlana-alexievich-life-itself-is-so-shocking-its-difficult-to-put-into-words> [accessed 06 December 2022]; 'Moi knigi – ne kolleksiia uzhasov' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Lustrum* (2017). It should be noted that Aleksievich's interviewees have not spoken publicly about the interview process, meaning that the information available about these meetings comes from Aleksievich.

³⁶ Lucic, 'A Conversation'.

³⁷ Ibid.

or demeanour during the conversation. Overall, however, the interviewer remains essentially transparent, as Natal'ia Sivakova notes: 'С. Алексиевич стремится к максимальному внешнему самоустранению, удаляя «излишние» подробности и характеристики своих героинь'.³⁸ Instead, the authorial commentary is given in an extensive preface, in which Aleksievich provides her own reflections on the topic explored in the book and on her own writing process. The monologues are typically given individual titles – often a direct quotation from the conversation with the witness: '«Бабушка молилась... Она просила, чтобы моя душа вернулась...»' (PS, 12) On other occasions, the monologue title is a summary of the main topics discussed by Aleksievich and the witness: 'Монолог о том, зачем люди вспоминают' (СМ, 43).

It is difficult to establish at which point Aleksievich started to conceive of her initially discrete projects as integral parts of a large-scale literary project, which maps and establishes a network of thematic and formal concerns linking individual books. In a brief note preceding an interview with Aleksievich included in the appendix to her most recent work *Vremia sekund-khend*, she identifies the mid-1980s as the

³⁸ Natal'ia Sivakova, 'Funktsii avtora v povestvovatel'noi strukture «novoï dokumental'noi literatury', *Izvestiia Gomel'skogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, vol. 34, no. 1 (2006), pp. 76-83, p. 79.

period when she started to plan *Golosa utopii* as a larger project of interrelated texts (VS, 495). However, Adamovich's foreword and afterword to the first editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli* do not mention that they are parts of a wider literary project.³⁹ It is therefore also entirely possible that the conception of a cycle of several thematically interrelated books appeared gradually as Aleksievich's writing career progressed and a set of themes shared between individual works emerged. In an interview in 2004, Aleksievich stated that the intended title for her five-book cycle was 'Malen'kii chelovek i velikaia Utopiia', which indicates that her vision of the project has undergone some changes over time.⁴⁰ Moreover, the set of topics covered in *Golosa utopii* has been shaped by contemporary historical developments as Aleksievich started writing in 1978, that is, long before the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and the dissolution of the Soviet Union.⁴¹ In her writing, she has continuously responded to contemporary issues, proceeding as a journalist in this regard. Nevertheless, the formal and thematic consistency characterizing her works makes it viable to approach *Golosa*

³⁹ Adamovich, 'Poiski'; 'Posleslovie'.

⁴⁰ See Natal'ia Igrunova, 'My uzhe ne mozhem, kak geroi Chekhova, skazat': cherez 100 let chelovek budet prekrasen' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Izvestiia* (14 May 2004).

⁴¹ Adamovich mentions in his afterword to the 1985 edition of *Poslednie svideteli* that Aleksievich started researching *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* in this year. Adamovich, 'Posleslovie', p. 171.

utopii as a coherent whole in some respects.⁴² For example, her aspiration to formal polyphony and the concept of art underpinning her writing are continuities in her poetics which shape all of her constantly evolving work.

The texts themselves, however, are less stable, repeatedly undergoing extensive revisions and rewritings over many years in different editions. *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, which chronicles the Soviet female experience of the Second World War, consists of monologues narrated by women who held a wide variety of professions during the war – snipers, drivers, surgeons, nurses, cooks, laundresses, mechanics, engineers, pilots, foot soldiers, telephone operators, anti-aircraft gunners, radio operators, platoon commanders, etc. – and occupied different military ranks: privates, corporals, sergeants, lieutenants, captains, and majors. An abridged version of this work was published in the February issue of *Oktiabr'* in 1984 as well as in the September issue of *Neman* in the same year.⁴³ The following year, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* was published in book form by Mastatskaia literatura in Minsk.⁴⁴ Just a few years later – in 1988 and 1989 – it was

⁴² Lindbladh has successfully attempted this thematic approach before, investigating the polyphonic performance of testimony in Aleksievich's writing while citing freely from a multitude of her books. See Lindbladh, 'The Polyphonic Performance'.

⁴³ Aleksievich, 'U voiny – ne zhenskoe litso, *Okt'iabr*, no. 2 (February 1984), pp. 22-107. 'U voiny – ne zhenskoe litso: Glavy iz dokumental'noi knigi', *Neman* (September 1984), pp. 89-139.

⁴⁴ Aleksievich, *U voiny – ne zhenskoe litso...* (Minsk: Mastatskaia literatura, 1985).

republished by Sovetskii pisatel', and in 2004, a sixth edition was published by Pal'mira.⁴⁵ This edition is heavily revised, especially in terms of Aleksievich's own authorial rhetoric, which changes radically, re-positioning the narrative in relation to the official Soviet discourse and reflecting a political transition in her writing. In 2007, *Vremia* published a second revised version, which contains slight alterations to the authorial preface as well as additions to the individual monologues.⁴⁶

Poslednie svideteli, which consists of one hundred monologues narrated by Soviet citizens who were children at the time of the German invasion of the USSR in 1942, has undergone similar revisions. Originally published in 1985 by *Molodaia gvardiia* in Moscow, this book was reprinted in 1988, 1989 and 1998 in the same volume as *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, which emphasises the close thematic connection between these books.⁴⁷ Subsequently republished in 2004 and 2007, *Poslednie svideteli* has undergone revisions from edition to

⁴⁵ Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso – Poslednie svideteli: Povesti* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1988). *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso – Poslednie svideteli: Povesti* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1989). *U voiny – ne zhenskoe litso* (Moscow: Pal'mira, 2004).

⁴⁶ Aleksievich, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (Moscow: Vremia, 2007).

⁴⁷ Aleksievich, *Poslednie svideteli: kniga nedetskikh rasskazov* (Moscow: Molodaia gvardiia, 1985). *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso – Poslednie svideteli: Povesti* (Moscow: Ostozh'e, 1998).

edition, with changes made both to the monologues and to the authorial preface.⁴⁸

Tsinkovye mal'chiki consists of interviews with men and women who participated in the Soviet-Afghan war as well as with mothers to soldiers who were killed in action. Before its publication in book-form in 1990, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* started to appear serially in the Belarusian newspaper *Literatura i mastatstva* on 6 October 1989.⁴⁹ In February 1990, the Russian journal *Druzhba narodov* and the newspaper *Komsomol'skaia pravda* published additional fragments.⁵⁰ These fragments caused the Afghan veteran community to react and resulted in the aforementioned lawsuit against Aleksievich.⁵¹ *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* has since been reprinted a number of times and revised by Aleksievich.⁵² Holly Myers has compared and contrasted the 1990 and 2016 editions of the work, noting that '[v]ariations between editions exist from the level of words and phrases to that of entire monologues and chapters'.⁵³ Doris Scribner has made similar observations in her exploration of

⁴⁸ Aleksievich, *Poslednie svideteli: sto nedetskikh kolybel'nykh* (Moscow: Pal'mira, 2004); *Poslednie svideteli: solo dlia detskogo golosa* (Moscow: Vremia, 2007).

⁴⁹ Aleksievich, 'My viartaemsia adtul'... Staroini z knigi "Tsynekavyia khlopchyki" – manalogi tykh, khto praishol Afganistan', *Literatura i mastatstva* (6 October 1989).

⁵⁰ 'Tsinkovye mal'chiki: Monologi tekhn, kto proshel Afganistan', *Komsomol'skaia pravda*, no. 39 (15 February 1990). 'Tsinkovye mal'chiki', *Druzhba narodov*, no. 7 (1990), pp. 5–88.

⁵¹ See Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes', p. 250.

⁵² *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vigarius, 1996); *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Eksmo-Press, 2001); *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vremia, 2007); *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vremia, 2017); *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (Moscow: Vremia, 2022).

⁵³ Myers, 'Svetlana Aleksievich's Changing Narrative', p. 334.

Chernobyl'skaia molitva, Aleksievich's compilation of interviews with people directly affected by the Chernobyl nuclear disaster, finding significant alterations in the revised 2007 edition compared to the original edition published in 1997.⁵⁴ Finally, *Zacharovannye smert'iu* is the most radical instance of rewriting in Aleksievich's oeuvre. Focusing on suicides committed and attempted by Soviet citizens during the disintegration of the USSR, it consists of seventeen monologues.⁵⁵ After its publication in book form in 1994, Aleksievich significantly revised and expanded the book, republishing it in 2013 with the title *Vremia sekond-khend* – a thematically broader exploration of the disintegration of the Soviet Union.⁵⁶

Sivakova has suggested that Aleksievich's books should be seen as constituting a 'dynamic system', which changes with the historical circumstances of every new edition: 'Необходимо отметить, что документальное творчество Алексиевич – динамическая система, претерпевающая постоянные изменения: каждое переиздание книги

⁵⁴ Aleksievich, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika budushchego* (Moscow: Ostozh'e, 1997); *Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika budushchego* (Moscow: Vremia, 2007). See Doris Scribner, 'Recreation of Chernobyl Trauma in Svetlana Aleksiyevich's *Chernobyl'skaya molitva*', unpublished MA dissertation, the University of Missouri-Columbia, 2008, p. 111.

⁵⁵ Aleksievich, 'Zacharovannye smert'iu', *Narodnaia gazeta* (3 October 1992), pp. 15-74; *Zacharovannye smert'iu* (Moscow: Slovo/Slovo, 1994).

⁵⁶ Aleksievich, *Vremia sekond khend* (Moscow: Vremia, 2013).

сопровождается модификациями в структурном и содержательном плане'.⁵⁷ Most revisions were made in the early 2000s when Aleksievich was living abroad. At the time, she explained that because of planned publications of new editions, she had reread her books finding important omissions made by Soviet censors:

Мне стали поступать предложения от издателей – сначала во Франции, потом в Германии, Японии, Италии захотели выпустить "военные" книги. Я перечитала их, пролистала дневники, посмотрела, что выбрасывала цензура, и поняла: в таком виде публиковать их невозможно, нужно восполнять вынужденные пробелы.⁵⁸

Even though censorial deletions and a desire to restore passages that were removed from the original publication may partially explain the decision to revise her works, Aleksievich may also have had other reasons for doing so, as both Scribner and Myers note. Scribner states that the 'revisions document changes in her witnesses' stories and the wide range of public reaction to her writings [as well as] document Aleksiyevich's

⁵⁷ Sivakova, 'Funktsii zaglavii v povestvovatel'noi strukture dokumental'nykh proizvedenii S. Aleksievich', *Izvestiia Gomel'evskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, vol. 62, no. 2 (2011), pp. 179-181, p. 179.

⁵⁸ Igrunova, 'My uzhe ne mozhem'.

changing perspectives and her struggle to come to grips with the responsibilities in documenting “reality”.⁵⁹ Myers argues that over-arching shifts in thematic focus and selection criteria underpin the revisions and attributes the instances of rewriting to Aleksievich’s changing ideological orientation.⁶⁰ The constant revisions in Aleksievich’s work, in particular those in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli*, are illuminating indicators of the difference in her political outlook before and after perestroika, which has important implications for the truth-values inherent in her writing.

Reception

Aleksievich’s controversial status in her native country is reflected in the politicised reception of her as a writer and public figure outside of Belarus. Noting that the award of the Nobel Prize has overly politicised the reception of her work in the English-speaking world, Jacques Testard states that the prize ‘has placed Alexievich firmly in the pantheon of great Soviet dissidents and fellow laureates — Ivan Bunin, Boris Pasternak, Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, Joseph Brodsky’.⁶¹ This

⁵⁹ Scribner, ‘Recreation of Chernobyl’, p. 10.

⁶⁰ Myers, ‘Svetlana Aleksievich’s changing narrative’, p. 346.

⁶¹ Jacques Testard, ‘Bearing Witness: Why You Should Read Svetlana Alexievich’, *The Calvert Journal* (18 May 2016).

statement is illustrative of Aleksievich's reception in Western Europe as she is perceived not only as a Belarusian but also a Soviet dissident. Julian Evans describes her as 'a dissident of the Soviet and post-Soviet era' and a biographical note published on the Nobel Prize website states that Aleksievich prior to 1985 'already had a reputation of being a dissident journalist with anti-Soviet sentiments'.⁶²

The reception of Aleksievich internationally is in part determined by the political climates in different countries and their ties to Russia, Belarus, and the EU. For example, in Serbia, which retains traditionally strong ties to Russia, the major newspaper *Politika* stressed the political reasons for awarding the Nobel Prize to Aleksievich, implicitly dismissing the artistic qualities of her writing and portraying her as a person with misinformed and exaggerated notions of the degree of violence and repression in Serbia.⁶³ By contrast, in Romania, which has been a member of the EU since 2007, the newspaper *Observatorul Cultural* praised Aleksievich for describing 'a world completely different to that accepted by the Lukashenka and

⁶² Julian Evans, 'Svetlana Alexievich's Nobel Win Sends a Stern Message to Putin', *The Telegraph* (9 October 2015); 'Svetlana Alexievich – Biographical', *NobelPrize.org* (8 October 2015), <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/biographical/> [accessed 13 December 2022].

⁶³ 'Svetlana Aleksijevič dobila Nobelovu nagradu za književnost', *Politika* (8 October 2015).

Putin regimes' and for 'recording the voices of the victims of communism and post-communism'.⁶⁴

Such regional differences reflect a wider international pattern in how critics, journalists, publishing houses, prize committees, and cultural institutions respond to and present Aleksievich and her works. In Germany, France, the United Kingdom, and Sweden, Aleksievich is generally perceived and presented as a heroic champion of democratic and pacifistic values and human rights in the face of Soviet, Russian, and Belarusian totalitarianism, and she is frequently compared to such writers as Andrei Siniavskii, Solzhenitsyn, and Brodsky.⁶⁵ This perception, which can conditionally be termed 'Western', forms a stark contrast to how Aleksievich is perceived in Russia, where she is often criticized for her 'anti-Russian' and 'anti-Soviet' sentiments. Russian cultural journalist Oleg Pukhnavtsev stated in connection to the 2015 Nobel Prize in literature: 'Светлана Алексиевич – классический антисоветчик [...] там, где торжествует антикоммунизм, обязательно найдётся место и русофобии'.⁶⁶ Writer Vladimir Lichutin similarly asserted: 'Светлана Алексиевич – литературный работник

⁶⁴ Șimonca, Ovidiu, 'Rînduri „la cald” despre premiul Svetlanei Aleksievici', *Observatorul Cultural* (8 August 2015).

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Peter Cornell, 'Svetlana Aleksijevitjs radikala föregångare', *Expressen* (10 October 2015).

⁶⁶ Oleg Pukhnavtsev, 'Literator nuzhnogo kalibra', *Literaturnaia gazeta* (14 October 2015).

средней руки [...] И премию ей дали прежде всего за критическое отношение к России'.⁶⁷

These different receptions of Aleksievich are likely to have a mutually polarizing and reinforcing effect. The more Aleksievich is praised in Western Europe as a heroic figure of resistance against Putin's and Lukashenka's authoritarian regimes, the more controversial she becomes in Belarus and Russia. The more controversial she becomes in these countries, the more is she perceived as a dissident figure in Western Europe. This dynamic is complicated by Aleksievich's constant revisions, which tend to adapt the works' political and ideological orientation to the expectations of the public outside of Belarus and Russia, which is much more receptive to the notion of artistic and political resistance that Aleksievich represents. As Julia Obertreis has noted, Aleksievich seems to be writing increasingly for a 'Western' audience, following in the footsteps of Solzhenitsyn, Siniavskii and Brodsky as Russian-speaking authors writing for a non-Russian readership.⁶⁸

Research Context

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Julia Obertreis, 'Polyphonie auf den Trümmern des Sozialismus: Svetlana Aleksievič's Werk aus sicht der Oral History', *Osteuropa*, vol. 68, no. 1-2 (2018), pp. 117-134, p. 132.

Until Aleksievich received the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, scholarly research on her work was relatively scarce.⁶⁹ However, over the past seven years, two academic journals have dedicated special issues to her life and work – *Canadian Slavonic Papers* in 2017 and the German journal *Osteuropa* in 2018 – attesting to her growing significance in Slavic Studies.⁷⁰ Given the ambiguity of Aleksievich’s form of writing, it is unsurprising that her genre is the most extensively discussed question in existing research on her work. Scholars emphasise a variety of formal and thematic features of her writing in their conceptualisations, comparing and contrasting her work to literary, documentary, and cinematographic works in Russian and Soviet culture. For example, Serguei Oushakine draws parallels between Aleksievich’s compilations of monologues and the tradition of montage in Soviet culture, comparing her fragmented style of writing to the works of Sergei Eisenstein and Dziga Vertov and defines her genre as a ‘factographic montage of oral stories, documentary sources and other media’.⁷¹ Lindbladh goes further in her emphasis on the orality and performativity inherent in Aleksievich’s writing and relates

⁶⁹ In the Russophone academic context, Sivakova stands out as the foremost expert on Aleksievich, publishing prolifically on her works since 2003.

⁷⁰ Manfred Sapper, et al, eds., ‘Nackte Seelen: Svetlana Aleksievič und der „Rote Mensch“’, *Osteuropa*, vol. 68, no. 1-2 (2018); Heather J. Coleman, ed., ‘Svetlana Aleksievich: the writer and her times’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017).

⁷¹ Serguei Oushakine, ‘Neighbours in Memory’, *The Times Literary Supplement* (18 November 2016), pp. 10-12, p. 12.

her aesthetics to the post-Soviet phenomenon defined as New Drama, stressing the fact that her works have frequently been adapted for the stage.⁷² Anna Karpusheva likewise underscores the importance of the oral stories in her discussion of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*; however, instead of relating this work to Soviet or post-Soviet cultural phenomena, Karpusheva notes its resemblance to a continuous, collective mourning, and argues that this work is comparable in genre to the Slavic death lament.⁷³

While Oushakine, Lindbladh, and Karpusheva base their conceptualisations of Aleksievich's genre on her intermedial use of fragmented oral stories, Orçun Alpay and Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover focus on the tension between the literary and historiographic features in her work. Measuring the novelistic qualities of *Vremia sekund-khend* according to the concept of the 'abstract author', Alpay and Vladiv-Glover claim that the absence of an evaluative standpoint attributable to an abstract

⁷² Lindbladh, 'The Polyphonic Performance', p. 295. Aleksievich's monologues have been performed on stage on multiple occasions. *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* was adapted for the stage as early as 1985 by director Gennadii Trostianetskii at the Omsk State Theatre. Most recently, *Vremia sekund-khend* was staged at the Maksim Gorkii Theatre in Minsk in 2018 by Valerii Anisenko. For a list of the stage adaptations, see 'Svetlana Aleksievich – Golosa strany Utopii'. For a discussion of New Russian Drama, see Birgit Beumers and Mark Lipovetsky, *Performing violence: Literary and Theatrical Experiments of New Russian Drama* (Bristol: Intellect, 2009).

⁷³ Anna Karpusheva, 'Svetlana Aleksievich's Voices from Chernobyl: Between an Oral History and a Death Lament', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 259-280. Similarly to Karpusheva, Sonu Saini attributes *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* to the genre of prayer. See Sonu Saini, 'Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika budushego S. Aleksievich. Problema zhanra', *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta. Kul'turologiia i iskusstvovedenie*, vol. 10, no. 2 (2013), pp. 19-22.

author undermines any classifications of this book as a work of literature and thus argue that it is a factual text.⁷⁴ Discussing the same work, Sophie Pinkham compares different revisions of *Vremia sekond-khend* and finds conspicuous discrepancies between them.⁷⁵ Pinkham claims that Aleksievich's editorial choices brings *Vremia sekond-khend* 'out of the realm of strictly factual writing' and that she, 'by seeking to straddle both literature and history [...] ultimately succeeds at neither'.⁷⁶ While both Pinkham and Alpay and Vladiv-Glover approach history and literature, fact and fiction as mutually exclusive opposites, A.I. Basova and L.D. Sin'kova treat Aleksievich's genre from a less purist standpoint, defining it as 'dokumental'no-khudozhestvennyi zhanr' and comparing her work to that of Adamovich and Mikhail Goretskii (1893-1938):

на пограничье журналистики и художественной прозы; на пересечении интервью, записанных на магнитную ленту, и собственно рассказов-новелл. Подобные тексты, где факт функционирует как художественный образ (С. Алексиевич, а также М. Горецкий, А. Адамович), занимают особую и

⁷⁴ O. Alpay and S. Vladiv-Glover, 'The Authority of the Text in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Secondhand Time*', *Studies in East European Thought* (2022).

⁷⁵ Sophie Pinkham, 'Witness Tampering: Nobel laureate Svetlana Alexievich Crafts Myths, Not Histories', *The New Republic* (29 August 2016).

⁷⁶ Ibid.

перспективную нишу среди современных документально-художественных жанров.⁷⁷

All these conceptualisations of Aleksievich's writing are characterized by an understanding of genre as a 'class of texts'.⁷⁸ That is, the aforementioned authors approach her genre by singling out some prominent features that it shares with other texts and put these in the same class (for example 'dokumental'no-khudozhestvennaia proza' and 'prayer'). By contrast, the conceptualisation of *Golosa utopii* presented in this thesis takes its point of departure in Tzvetan Todorov's notion of genre, which does not focus on the categorization of texts according to their common features, but instead addresses the expectations raised by these features within the context of institutionalized genres. Addressing Maurice Blanchot's claim that genres 'no longer have any genuine significance' as their limits are constantly being transgressed and blurred in modernist and postmodernist literature, Todorov agrees with Blanchot that genres have become both anachronistic and arbitrary as descriptive categories: 'it is

⁷⁷ A.I. Basova and L.D. Sin'kova, 'Stanovlenie dokumental'no-khudozhestvennogo zhanra v zhurnalistike Svetlany Aleksievich', *Vesnik Belaruskaga dziarzhunaga universiteta*, no. 3 (2009), pp. 93-96, p. 93.

⁷⁸ Tzvetan Todorov, *Genres in Discourse* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 17.

always possible to discover a property common to two texts, and thus put them together in a class. Is there any virtue in calling the result of such a combination a “genre”?’⁷⁹ However, even though they have little validity as analytical tools, genres constitute an important element of the act of writing and reading because of their historical institutionalisation. In other words, ‘it is because genres exist as an institution that they function as “horizons of expectation” for readers and as “models of writing” for authors’.⁸⁰

Instead of asking how Aleksievich’s writing should be classified based on a set of stylistic and narrative features, I will discuss the expectations that her work raises through its discursive properties. Analysing how Aleksievich establishes a ‘horizon of expectation’ for her readers, my thesis explores her concept of art and document, her creation of an artistic persona, and her use of a multitude of speakers. ‘Genre’ should thus be understood in the widest possible sense of the word. The strategies used by Aleksievich to silently instruct her audience in their reading of *Golosa utopii* go beyond her positioning of her work in relation to fiction and non-fiction, art

⁷⁹ Ibid. Todorov cites *The Space of Literature* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982), p. 220. For a discussion of Blanchot’s philosophy of literature, see Ulrich Haase and William Large, *Maurice Blanchot* (London and New York: Routledge, 2001) and Carolyn Bailey Gill ed., *Maurice Blanchot: the demand of writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996).

⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

and journalism, literature and history. The readers' expectations are also formed by Aleksievich's public image, which leads them to approach her as a dissident writer and to read her work as a 'dissident text'.⁸¹ Likewise, the multitude of voices represented in her works encourages the reader to see them as 'polyphonic' texts with the underlying claim of her speakers as independent subjects with diverse opinions.

Underpinning Aleksievich's strategies in establishing the expectations that direct the reading of her work is the idea of authenticity. The claim to authenticity and truth characterizing her works has been noted in scholarly writing but its central role in her poetics has not been appreciated. For example, Angela Brintlinger observes that 'books such as Aleksievich's *Unwomanly Face* share with [...] other important works of the post-war period an "orientation toward authenticity" and the use of testimony as "structural material" that are characteristic of the autobiographical mode'.⁸² Likewise, Myers notes that the inclusion of court documents in some editions of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* serves to establish the authenticity of this work by providing 'outside texts', which, as Myers claims, 'encourage[s]

⁸¹ Ann Komaromi, 'Samizdat and Soviet Dissident Publics', *Slavic Review*, vol. 71, no. 1 (2012), p. 90. Komaromi uses this term to describe texts circulated in samizdat. However, this notion can be understood more broadly as texts which are positioned in opposition to official Soviet discourse.

⁸² Angela Brintlinger, 'Mothers, Father(s), Daughter: Svetlana Aleksievich and *The Unwomanly Face of War*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 196-213, p. 198.

readers to trust in the reliability and authenticity of the book, and *Zinky Boys* thus becomes a “self-sufficient” source of truth, a reliable authority of past events’.⁸³

Building on these observations, my thesis explores the claims to authenticity underlying Aleksievich’s positioning as a dissident author writing experimental literary and historiographic works representing a multitude of eyewitnesses. ‘Authenticity’ seems to be the most appropriate umbrella term for the strategies that Aleksievich employs to grant authority, evidential force and a sense of superior truthfulness to her writing, as this notion is predicated on binary notions of truth. In existing research, scholars tend to use interchangeably notions such as ‘truth’, ‘truthfulness’, ‘reliability’ and ‘authority’ when discussing Aleksievich’s strategies to legitimize and authenticate her writing.⁸⁴ Whereas these notions can conceivably be understood without reference to a perceived opposite, authenticity cannot be constructed without reference to *inauthenticity*. As Theo van Leeuwen notes, ‘[w]e might for instance call something ‘authentic’ because it is ‘genuine’, because its origin or authorship are *not*

⁸³ Myers, ‘Svetlana Aleksievich’s Changing Narrative’, p. 345.

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Myers and Daniel Bush, “‘No Other Proof’: Svetlana Aleksievich in the Tradition of Soviet War Writing’, *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 214-233.

in question, and it is *not* an imitation or a copy'.⁸⁵ The 'original' is unthinkable without the 'copy', the 'real self' impossible to imagine without the corresponding notion of a mask, of dissimulation. Aleksievich's rhetoric of truth relies explicitly on the supposed *untruths* of some other discourse, such as the official Soviet discourse on the Soviet-Afghan war and the Soviet canon of commemoration of the Second World War. In this regard, her poetics of authenticity draws not only on the metaliterary discourse of the early Thaw-era, during which 'sincerity' was constructed in opposition to the 'insincerity' of Socialist Realism, but also on the ideals of sincerity flourishing during the perestroika.⁸⁶

Exploring the claims to authenticity underpinning Aleksievich's genre (in Todorov's meaning of the word), this thesis examines the apparent polyphony of her writing, her artistic persona, her journalistic background, and her claims to historical and artistic truth. Analysing Aleksievich's complex attitudes to the notions of 'art' and 'document', the thesis investigates how she positions her work in relation to literary and documentary writing. Asking how these attitudes affect Aleksievich's view on her artistic liberties, I situate her work in

⁸⁵ Theo van Leeuwen, 'What is Authenticity?', *Discourse Studies*, vol. 3, no. 4 (November 2001), pp. 392-397, p. 392.

⁸⁶ Ellen Rutten, *Sincerity after Communism* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. 75, 83.

the Russian literary canon by comparing her to four writers that have influenced her profoundly: Dostoevskii, Solzhenitsyn, Varlam Shalamov, and Adamovich. This examination builds in part on Pinkham's and Lindbladh's discussion of Aleksievich's literary and historiographic aspirations. Whereas Pinkham sees Aleksievich's ambitions to present both a historical truth and artistic truth as a contradiction in terms, Lindbladh defines the historical value of *Golosa utopii* as inseparable from its artistic values.⁸⁷

If the tension between the literary and historiographical features in Aleksievich's work has been discussed extensively in scholarly research, her journalistic background has received virtually no academic attention.⁸⁸ Yet, her career as a journalist spans more than a decade and is a significant part of her writing career and essential for her development as an author. Closely examining 44 articles that she wrote for *Sel'skaia gazeta* between 1973 and 1976 and 14 pieces that she produced for *Neman* between 1977 and 1984, this thesis explores her development as a writer in the context of Soviet journalism,

⁸⁷ Pinkham, 'Witness Tampering'. Lindbladh, 'The Polyphonic Performance'.

⁸⁸ In scholarly articles, Aleksievich's career as a journalist is commonly reduced to a single sentence, a clause or footnote. For instance, Jones states that Alekievich 'studied journalism at the University of Minsk' and Irina Marchesini that she wrote for 'several newspapers, starting from the town of Beresa (Brest Region), to the *Rural Newspaper*, and the literary magazine *Neman*'. See Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes', p. 252; Irina Marchesini, 'A new literary genre. Trauma and the individual perspective in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 313-329, p. 315.

asking in what ways this context shaped her poetics. While Aleksievich's emphatically identifies as a writer rather than a journalist, I argue that the Soviet journalistic practices of the 1970s and 1980s have greatly contributed to forming her method of writing.

Even though Aleksievich's works can be seen as a direct continuation of her journalistic methodology, her later works also present a conscious effort to break with the Soviet journalistic context. In *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* and *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, Aleksievich presents Soviet newspaper reports as distorted and falsified, using these sources to define the authenticity of her own representations. In other words, the construction of authenticity in *Golosa utopii* is achieved through use of counter-narratives, which can be broadly defined as 'the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives'.⁸⁹ Aleksievich's creation of counter-narratives has received little attention in existing research. The only scholar to address this question in depth is Daniel Bush, who emphasizes the importance of the dichotomy of 'truth' and 'mythologization' in Aleksievich's work – a binary structure in which oral testimonies given by 'ordinary' people are seen as providing an image of

⁸⁹ Molly Andrews and Michael Bamberg, eds., *Considering Counter Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 2004), p. 1.

Soviet reality that is more authentic and truthful than the mythic images disseminated by state authorities.⁹⁰

Positioned against perceived Soviet master narratives about the Second World War and the Soviet-Afghan War, Aleksievich's depictions of Soviet reality are underpinned by such binaries as truth vs. untruth, conformism vs. resistance, the state vs. the people and good vs. evil. These binaries have long been implicitly and explicitly reproduced in academic and journalistic writing about late Soviet socialism, as Alexei Yurchak observes.⁹¹ In his study of late Soviet socialism, Yurchak proposes an analytical method based on the split between what he calls the performative and constative sides of Soviet authoritarian discourse. Whereas the constative aspect of authoritarian discourse signifies the meaning of an ideologised statement of act, the performative aspect denotes the significance that participation in such an act had in a social context. According to Yurchak, Soviet citizens of late socialism actively participated in ideologised acts without necessarily subscribing to the constative meaning of the act:

⁹⁰ Bush, "No Other Proof".

⁹¹ Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, N.J.; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006), p. 4.

One voted in favour, passed Lenin examinations, filed reports, repeated precise textual forms, and went on the parades, but without necessarily or usually having to pay close attention to the constative meanings of these ritualized acts and speech acts. At the same time, this routine replication of the authoritative symbolic system did not limit the realm of available meanings; on the contrary, it enabled new, unpredictable meanings that went beyond those that were literally communicated.⁹²

From this point of view, oppositional categories such as truth and lie, sincerity and dissimulation, lose their validity, and it makes little sense to categorise late Soviet subjects as being either conformist or non-conformist. Yurchak sees the internal displacement of authoritative discourse as a far more widespread and significant phenomenon than dissident opposition, which he depicts as a small, self-styled subculture largely irrelevant to the majority of Soviet citizens. Oushakine similarly argues that the aforementioned binaries are simplified and significantly mythologized as they are predicated on the assumption of an absolute separation between official and unofficial Soviet culture. In his analysis of political samizdat materials, Oushakine points to the ideological and rhetorical similarities between the official and the unofficial and argues

⁹² Ibid.

that political samizdat discourse was largely framed and heavily influenced by official Soviet discourse. Contrary to ‘the tradition of locating resistance outside of the field of power – be these “hidden” areas in the underground, background, or foreground of the dominant’, Oushakine argues that ‘[t]he oppositional discourse [...] shared the symbolic field with the dominant discourse: it echoed and amplified the rhetoric of the regime, rather than positioning itself outside of or underneath it’.⁹³

In a wider research context, this study should be read as a development of Yurchak’s and Oushakine’s explorations and critiques of the binaries traditionally used to describe late Soviet socialism. Examining Aleksievich’s use of binary categories in establishing her public persona, the thesis analyses the reception Aleksievich has outside the post-Soviet sphere and addresses a political transition in her writing during perestroika, which is when her construction of a dissident persona begins. Drawing on Ann Komaromi’s research on dissident social activity in the post-Stalin period and using a Bordieuan framework, the thesis conceptualizes Aleksievich’s attempts to establish her own autonomy from the official Soviet discourse.⁹⁴ Asking how we should make sense of her writing

⁹³ Oushakine, ‘The Terrifying Mimicry of Samizdat’, *Public Culture*, vol. 13, no. 2 (2001), pp. 191-214, p. 192.

⁹⁴ See Komaromi, ‘The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 63, no. 3 (2004), pp. 597-618; ‘Samizdat and Soviet Dissident Publics’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 71, no. 1 (2012), pp. 70-90; *Uncensored: Samizdat Novels and the Quest for Autonomy in*

career in the light of the political transition in her books during perestroika, my thesis discusses Aleksievich's counter-narratives using Bourdieu's notions of position-taking, symbolic and economic capital, and doxa.⁹⁵

Finally, the considerations of authenticity underpinning Aleksievich's poetics are also inherent in the apparent polyphony in her writing. Whereas Lindblad and Angelos Theocharis approach Aleksievich's works as polyphonic, Golstein, Scribner, and Jones observe that the supposedly independent speakers tend to confirm and repeat each other's viewpoints, ultimately supporting the interpretations presented by Aleksievich in her authorial prefaces, which undermines the implicit claim to literary polyphony in her works.⁹⁶ This study examines how Aleksievich's apparent polyphony seems to grant her books additional evidential force as the reader is apparently presented with the pluralistic representation of different voices, rather than the subjective interpretations of a single author. However, whereas the claims made by Golstein, Scribner, and Jones are not supported by a rigorous analysis of textual evidence to prove the absence of a

Soviet Dissidence (Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2015); 'The Unofficial Field of Late Soviet Culture', *Slavic Review*, vol. 66, no 4 (2007), pp. 605-29.

⁹⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993); *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

⁹⁶ Lindblad, 2017; Angelos Theocharis, 'Polyphonic Memory'; Golstein, *Svetlana Aleksijevitj*; Scribner, 'Recreation of Chernobyl'; Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes'.

polyphonic dimension in *Golosa utopii*, my thesis investigates how precisely the recurrent motifs in Aleksievich's writing cause her overarching viewpoints to override the individual interviewees as independent speakers. I thus identify Aleksievich's criteria for inclusion of documentary material in the completed works, measuring these criteria against Bakhtin's concept of the polyphonic novel. In connection to this, I likewise address the question of authorial intervention in the individual monologues – a question that scholars are generally reluctant to discuss because of the lack of access to Aleksievich's interview transcripts, which makes comparisons of the completed works and the documentary material impossible. This study examines the degree of external editing in the documentary material against the backdrop of Aleksievich's claim to act as a spokesperson for a multitude of people with its concomitant associations of pluralistic truth.

Transitions in Time and Space: the Evolution of *Golosa utopii* and its Author

Aleksievich's writing and public persona are subject to constant change. As new revisions of her works appear, our understanding of her writing changes with them. Political developments in the post-Soviet sphere likewise affect the

ways in which she is perceived and received. When Aleksievich was awarded the Nobel Prize in Literature in 2015, Lukashenka publicly congratulated her and the previous ban on her books was lifted.⁹⁷ However, with her active participation in the protests during the 2020 Belarusian parliamentary elections and her condemnation of the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, tensions between the author and the Belarusian authorities are growing again. According to a statement made in August 2022 by Aleksievich's literary agent Galina Dursthoff to the Swedish press, the Belarusian Ministry of Culture is set to review the political 'extremism' of Aleksievich's works, potentially banning her books in her native country.⁹⁸ If her books were indeed to be removed from libraries and bookstore shelves in Belarus, the relative relaxation of Aleksievich's relation to the Belarusian authorities would have proved short-lived.

In the Western European cultural context, Dursthoff's statement contributes to solidifying Aleksievich's position as a dissident writer. In Bourdieu's terms, Western media reporting on these recent developments place Aleksievich in the *field* of autonomous culture and assign *symbolic capital* to her. What

⁹⁷ 'Aleksandr Lukashenko prokommentiroval prisuzhdenie Nobelevskoi premii Svetlane Aleksievich', ONT TV Channel, *Youtube* (9 October 2015).

⁹⁸ Hannah Lindgren, 'Nobelpristagaren Svetlana Aleksijevitjs böcker kan förbjudas i Belarus – utreds för extremism', *SVT Nyheter/Kultur SVT* (30 August 2022).

the Belarusian Ministry of Culture considers a potential case of 'extremism' becomes in Western press coverage an instance of heroic resistance against a totalitarian regime, which attributes additional moral, political and artistic legitimacy to Aleksievich's public persona and to her works.

Authenticated in the Western sphere by its misrecognition in Belarus, *Golosa utopii* acquires its political and aesthetic legitimacy according to a set of presuppositions based on such dichotomies as official culture and unofficial culture, obedience and dissidence, totalitarianism and democracy, good and evil, truth and untruth. Beginning with the publication of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* towards the end of perestroika in 1990, *Golosa utopii* has been written and read according to the expectations of a binary system based on the absolute separation of these dichotomies. Accordingly, in biographical narratives produced in countries such as the United Kingdom, France, Germany, and Sweden, Aleksievich's dissident status in contemporary Belarus and Russia is extended retrospectively, frequently presenting her as a 'Soviet' dissident and interpreting the publication of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* in 1985 as the direct result of Gorbachev's liberal reforms.

However, Aleksievich's writing career is more complex than this simplified image suggests. Her first two works *U voiny*

ne zhenskoe litso and *Poslednie svideteli* were published in 1985, the former book appearing serially in Soviet journals one year earlier. Before the significant revisions to these works in the early 2000s, they were characterized by a patriotic rhetoric compatible with official Soviet representations of the Second World War and in line with official censorship. Moreover, Aleksievich's journalistic writings in the 1970s and 1980s show that she matured as an author within the Soviet cultural establishment.

Aleksievich's writing career thus cannot be accurately conceptualised or understood within the binary framework traditionally used to approach late Soviet socialism. Instead, her writing career reflects the cultural and political complexity and ambiguity characterising this era and points to the fluid boundaries between official and unofficial Soviet culture. An examination of her writing career shows us that these categories are not stable or absolute; instead, invoking Bourdieu's terms, they function as structuring elements used by cultural agents to define themselves in relation to other positions in the field.

While her writing career cannot be accurately described by the binary categories which have been challenged by Yurchak and others, it is significant that Aleksievich relies on

these exact binaries in her representations of Soviet reality and in the construction of an artistic persona. In the more recent editions and public statements made by Aleksievich, she presents her work and writing career as something that it is not, namely an unambiguous struggle between the dissident and the regime, between truth and untruth, official and unofficial culture, excluding any overlaps between these supposedly absolute opposites. The development of Aleksievich's authorial rhetoric and public persona must be seen in the light of perestroika as well as her increasingly 'Western' readership. Consistent with wider tendencies in Soviet culture following the collapse of official ideology during glasnost and perestroika, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, *Zacharovannye smert'iu*, and *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* are products of their time, critically re-evaluating Soviet history, society, and ideology.

This thesis shows that the notions of truth and authenticity underpinning Aleksievich's writing are based on a number of culturally conditioned, tacit agreements between text and reader, agreements about the nature of late Soviet socialism, about repression and resistance, censorship and freedom of speech, East and West, counterculture and mainstream culture. This set of shared presuppositions about what constitutes relevant and good literature, changes over time and underlies Aleksievich's writing career. It is not until the

publication of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* in 1990 that the notion of a counternarrative enters her prose, adding an important dimension to the insistence on authenticity in her writing. By contrast, other aspects of Aleksievich's poetics of authenticity remain unaltered throughout her writing career. The ambition to allow historical eyewitnesses to 'speak' in her work, thus creating a writing that 'goes beyond' pure literature and provides an antidote to its perceived artifice, has occupied Aleksievich throughout her career.

Aleksievich's rejection of traditional literary forms as well as her desire to 'transcend' these forms have clear precedents in Russian literature. Combining principal aesthetic elements from the works of Dostoevskii, Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, and Adamovich, Aleksievich's poetics synthesise a set of ideas from pre-revolutionary and Soviet Russophone writing, which is based on a sense of the inadequacy of literature and the superior authenticity of the document. In terms of its simultaneously literary and historical character, Aleksievich's writing is a hybrid form, mixing historiographic and artistic intentions, interests, practices, claims, and textual strategies. Integral to this form is the use of oral history with the concomitant claim to represent a multitude of people, which serves as important source of authenticity and legitimacy in *Golosa utopii*. Even though the interviewees often present a

markedly subjective image of their experiences, the collective narrative that emerges makes an implicit claim to objective truth by virtue of its insistence on plurality and diversity.

This notion of objective truth raises the question of the extent to which Aleksievich processes the documentary material. What principles guide her in her selection? Even though Aleksievich is very open about her writing process in interviews and in the books, her statements contain a potential contradiction in regard to her own agency and the agency of the witness. On the one hand, Aleksievich insists on the importance to 'let the witness speak' in a time when distinctly literary forms of writing such as fiction and poetry have become an ethical and aesthetic impossibility; on the other hand, she invokes her right to depict the historical events according to her own worldview. This thesis asks how her claim to act as a spokesperson for a multitude of individuals tallies with her simultaneous appeal to her own *licentia poetica*.

A critical scrutiny of the strategies used by Aleksievich to authenticate and legitimize her writing, this study presents an examination of the interplay between text and paratext, between public persona and biographical reality, as well as an analysis of the binaries underpinning the Aleksievich's claims to possess and present a higher form of truth.

Chapter Summary

This study is divided into four chapters that examine different facets of the construction of the concepts of authenticity and truth in Aleksievich's writing. Chapter One analyses the literary and documentary dimensions of *Golosa utopii* by examining the programmatic statements that Aleksievich makes in regard to her own writing practice. Demonstrating how Aleksievich authenticates her writing by placing it in opposition to the notions of 'art' and 'literature', this chapter shows that, for all her suspicions of these concepts, she identifies as a literary writer and reproduces in her poetics an essentially Aristotelian understanding of literature. Comparing Aleksievich's ideas to the poetics of Dostoevskii, Solzhenitsyn, Shalamov, and Adamovich, the chapter examines these writers' influence on her work and situates *Golosa utopii* in the Russian literary tradition.

Chapter Two examines Aleksievich's journalistic background. Exploring the articles that she produced for the Soviet Belarusian newspaper *Sel'skaia gazeta* (1973-1976) and the Soviet Belarusian journal *Neman* (1977-1984), this chapter compares this material to Aleksievich's creative writing, identifying formal and thematic continuities between the two.

The chapter assesses to what extent the journalistic context has shaped her poetics and her preoccupation with questions of truth and authenticity.

Chapter Three examines the construction of counter-narratives in *Golosa utopii*. Drawing on Ann Komaromi's research on unofficial culture and dissident social activity in the post-Stalin period, I conceptualize Aleksievich's asserted artistic and ideological autonomy from the official Soviet discourse using Pierre Bourdieu's notions of cultural autonomy, position-taking, symbolic and economic capital, coincidence, consecration, doxa, and trajectory. Examining the textual strategies underpinning Aleksievich's construction of autonomy and accumulation of symbolic capital, this chapter analyses three principal rhetorical and structural devices in her works: firstly, I discuss the references in *Golosa utopii* to different forms of political persecution and repression suffered by the author as a result of her non-conformist depictions of Soviet reality; secondly, I analyze how Aleksievich reproduces the notion of continuity of artistic resistance in the Soviet context by way of implicit and explicit allusion; thirdly, I address the ways in which she pits her monologues against official Soviet discourse, framing her narratives in a binary structure of myth and reality. Comparing these strategies to the rhetoric in the first editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (1984) and *Poslednie*

svideteli (1985), I trace the emergence of dissident rhetoric in Aleksievich's works.

The final chapter of this thesis analyses Aleksievich's artistic license in relation to her explicitly stated aim to 'give a voice' to a multitude of historical eyewitnesses. Here I examine the emphasis on the multi-voiced structure of the material presented in *Golosa utopii*, which suggests a strong commitment to a plurality of views and perspectives on Soviet reality. This in turn produces an effect of authenticity and authority, suggesting an empirical (rather than merely subjective) validity in both individual monologues and the overall books. Analysing this apparent formal polyphony in relation to the thematic emphasis permeating the monologues, this chapter poses the question of authorial agency in *Golosa utopii* and explores the degree of Aleksievich's interventions in the documentary material. Advancing previous research as well as asking questions that have hitherto been overlooked in scholarly work on Aleksievich's writing, the examination outlined here presents the first systematic conceptualisation and contextualisation of her work.

Chapter One: Aleksievich's Concept of Art

When Aleksievich made her debut in 1985, the question of how *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli* should be read immediately arose. Were these documentary works, works of literature or something in between? In an extensive foreword to Aleksievich's book about the female frontline experience, Adamovich proposed a number of possible definitions for her writing. However, he concluded his discussion with the following statement:

Раз столько вариантов, значит, все еще не прояснилось, не возникло, не найдено слово. А может быть, и не стоит поторапливать, спешить? Пусть жанр еще потрудится, наработает побольше, присмотрится к самому себе. А там найдется кто-нибудь, окрестит. Был бы младенец жив-здоров.⁹⁹

With this uncertainty persisting since 1985, the ambiguity of Aleksievich's form is rooted the tension between its literary and historical dimensions. Most notably, this question has been discussed by Johanna Lindbladh and Sophie Pinkham, who

⁹⁹ Adamovich, 'Poiski', p. 52.

approach the issue from diametrically opposed points of view. Pinkham sees a deeply problematic conflict between Aleksievich's literary intentions and her implicit insistence on fidelity to factual truth. Observing an apparent confusion in public discourse about Aleksievich's genre, Pinkham notes that while Aleksievich rejects the title of 'reporter' and stresses 'the literary nature of her method and intentions', the Anglophone press tends to describe her as an 'investigative journalist' and 'contemporary historian' and accept 'her work as accurate documentation of Soviet and post-Soviet reality'.¹⁰⁰ Comparing different revisions of monologues published most recently in *Vremia sekond-khend*, Pinkham finds significant discrepancies between the different versions, which leads her to believe that Aleksievich 'treats her interviews not as fixed historical documents, but as raw material for her own artistic and political project', which points to 'the danger of understanding Alexievich's "voices" as historical testimony' and 'reduces the historical value of her work'.¹⁰¹ Without access to Aleksievich's interview-transcripts, it is difficult to prove this idea. For Pinkham, however, the main problem is Aleksievich's ambition to simultaneously present a historical and an artistic truth, which she sees as a contradiction in terms. According to

¹⁰⁰ Pinkham, 'Witness Tampering'.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

Pinkham, then, the implicit insistence in *Vremia sekond-khend* on presenting factual truths cannot be squared with its artistic intentions.

Lindbladh interprets the monologues in *Golosa utopii* very differently, namely as the creation of an implied author, and thus agrees with Pinkham that they are most likely the result of extensive editing and selection.¹⁰² However, approaching Aleksievich's work from a post-structuralist perspective, Lindbladh disregards the question of fidelity to the documentary material and argues that Aleksievich's work can be read as testimony with different criteria on truth and on historical value. In contrast to Pinkham's epistemological approach which, according to Lindbladh, postulates 'a contradiction between fact and fiction', Lindbladh defines the historical value of *Golosa utopii* as 'inseparable from its artistic values' and argues that Aleksievich's books can be read as testimony from this standpoint.¹⁰³ In Aleksievich's technique of representing the voices of her monologues 'as if they were performed by first-hand witnesses', Lindbladh does not see an attempt to '*imitate* the recorded interviews but to *relive* the witnesses' testimonies', and demonstrates how the

¹⁰² Lindbladh, 'The Polyphonic Performance'.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 288.

monologues 'perform the interviews again, inviting the implied reader to become, in turn, a witness to these testimonies'.¹⁰⁴

Even though Lindbladh's complete dismissal of the question of fidelity to the documentary material seems extreme in that it disregards an important source of legitimacy in Aleksievich's writing, namely the claim to accurately represent the viewpoints and experiences of actual people, her reading of *Golosa utopii* moves the genre discussion forward in that it takes into account the dual purpose of Aleksievich's form. Lindbladh's approach has important theoretical precedents in scholarly writing on testimonial literature, as Hayden White reads Primo Levi's canonical *Se questo e` un uomo* (1947) in a similar fashion.¹⁰⁵ Discussing the truth-values of history and fiction, White distinguishes between the 'true' and the 'real'. The 'true' denotes the event as historical fact, that which can be established on the basis of evidence to have taken place, whereas the 'real' signifies all that the event could possibly be imagined to be in terms of human experience. According to White, a testimonial work such as Levi's fulfils its obligation both to the true and to the real. It is important to point out that White does not mean that Levi's account is 'fictional' in the

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., pp. 286, 302.

¹⁰⁵ Hayden White, 'Introduction: Historical Fiction, Fictional History, and Historical Reality', *Rethinking History*, vol. 9, no 2-3 (2005), pp. 147-57.

sense that it is an invention. Instead, in White's view, Levi employs 'the kinds of literary devices employed by writers of fiction' such as 'topoi, tropes and figures, schemata of thought, characterization, personification, emplotment, and so on'.¹⁰⁶ White proposes a concept which accommodates the complex reality of Levi's account:

Primo Levi's book is true in a fictional sense, in the sense that the image of Auschwitz conjured up by Levi's poetic prose is 'faithful' as well as being 'true' to the range of feelings induced by the experience of an extraordinary historical condition of subjection and humiliation. There is no conflict between the 'truth-content' of what Levi has to say about the experience of the Lager and the 'realism' of the representation (or, as I would prefer, 'presentation'). There is no conflict between the referential function of Levi's discourse and the expressive, affective and poetic functions.¹⁰⁷

The present chapter explores Aleksievich's relation to the 'true' and the 'real' and her views on historical and poetic truth. Analysing how Aleksievich positions her writing in terms of its relation to 'art' and to the 'document', this chapter will examine

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., p. 149.

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.

her assumptions about truth and authenticity which underpin her choice of form. To understand the specific notion of truth which Aleksievich has developed throughout her work, I will trace the origin of her aesthetics back to such iconic predecessors in the Russian literary tradition as Dostoevskii, Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, and Adamovich, whose works transgress the boundaries of conventional literary genres to establish historical and transcendental truths.

Ales' Adamovich: a Preface and an Afterword

In his foreword to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Adamovich presents Aleksievich's work as a significant development of his own writing method. Referring back to his interview-based books *Ia iz ognennoi derevni* (1977, co-authored with Ianka Bryl' and Uladzimir Kalesnik) and *Blokadnaia kniga* (1981, co-authored with Daniil Granin), Adamovich situates *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* as a direct continuation of his own literary method, suggesting that Aleksievich's book has cemented this way of writing as a genre in its own right:

Когда-то М. Кузнецов в «Новом мире», а позже Г. Белая в «Вопросах литературы», А. Эльяшевич в «Звезде»,

обращаясь к книгам «Я из огненной деревни...» и «Блокадной книге», называли их по-разному, но все – новым жанром. Но что он такое, если это жанр, а не что-то единично-уникальное (как вначале многим казалось)?¹⁰⁸

Pointing to its novelty, Adamovich asks how this genre should be defined and makes a number of suggestions, using terms that stress both the literary and the documentary aspects of Aleksievich's writing. Whereas 'epicheski-khorovaia proza', 'roman-oratoriia', 'sobornyi roman', and 'magnitofonnaia literatura' indicate the perceived presence of a literary dimension, 'reportazh s mesta istoricheskogo sobytiia', 'dokumental'noe samoissledovanie', and 'ustnaia istoriia' seem to locate the genre in a historiographical or documentary context.¹⁰⁹ It is interesting to note that two of the designations proposed by Adamovich contain reflexive pronouns, underscoring the agency of the historical eyewitnesses in the creation of the interview-based works: '[д]окументальное самоисследование' [...] '[ж]изнь, о себе повествующая'.¹¹⁰ In other words, these two terms emphasize the immediacy supposedly inherent in the practice of collecting oral

¹⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 50.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 52.

¹¹⁰ Adamovich, 'Poiski', p. 52.

testimonies, which plays an important part in Aleksievich's own thinking about art, literature, and historical documents.

In his afterword to the 1985 edition of *Poslednie svideteli*, Adamovich further addresses the literary aspects of Aleksievich's writing.¹¹¹ Praising the masterfully written monologues with their precise insights into each interviewee's inner life, Adamovich suggests that even though *Poslednie svideteli* has all the apparent characteristics of a documentary work, the author's aesthetic judgment is of paramount importance to its successful accomplishment: 'Ну и третье условие – это по-настоящему сильное, развитое чувство эстетической оценки, столь необходимое для отбора и монтажа сырого материала в произведение литературное'.¹¹² The implied emphasis on the adjective 'literaturnoe' finishing the sentence is significant. According to Adamovich, the process of selection and arrangement of the documentary material, guided by the author's sensitivity to the varying aesthetic value of the recorded interviews, makes *Poslednie svideteli* a work of literature. Developing this thought in greater depth, Adamovich cites Daniil Granin's foreword to the Russian translation of French-Jewish-Russian writer Vladimir Pozner's *Descente aux enfers: Récits de déportés et de*

¹¹¹ Adamovich, 'Posleslovie'.

¹¹² Ibid., p. 165.

S.S. d'Auschwitz (1980, translated as *Niskhozhdenie v ad*), an account of the Holocaust containing interviews with Auschwitz survivors and excerpts from diaries kept by SS staff.¹¹³ Adamovich thus situates this literary-documentary genre in the context of Holocaust writing, a point that Aleksievich reiterates in her Nobel lecture. In his foreword to Pozner's work cited by Adamovich, Granin emphatically claims that this book is only ostensibly a journalistic work:

«Документальная проза типа книги «Нисхождение в ад» – это искусство и отбора монтажа материала. Я не случайно говорю «проза». Это не репортаж, не сборник свидетельств. Это именно проза. Писатель соединяет голоса в хор, создает ораторию. В ней звучат и арии, и речитативы, и хоры, все соединено оркестром, авторской речью, интонацией, его, писателя, замыслом...»¹¹⁴

Granin opposes the terms 'iskusstvo' and 'proza' to genre definitions from a journalistic context such as 'reportazh' and 'sbornik svidetel'stv', arguing that Pozner's book is a work of art

¹¹³ Vladimir Pozner, *Descente aux enfers: Récits de déportés et de SS d'Auschwitz* (Paris: Julliard, 1980). See also Kseniia Shamakina and Irina Udler, 'Poetika zhurnalistskikh zhanrov v dokumental'noi literature ob Osventsime (na primere knigi V. Poznera "Niskhozhdenie v ad")', *Mirovaia literatura v kontekste kul'tury*, no. 4 (2009), pp. 162-163.

¹¹⁴ Danil' Granin, foreword to Vladimir Pozner 'Niskhozhdenie v ad', *Inostrannaia literatura*, vol. 2 (1985), pp. 199-202, cited in Adamovich, 'Posleslovie', p. 167.

rather than a journalistic account. By drawing on Granin's foreword, Adamovich suggests that, just as in Pozner's work, there is a markedly 'literary' dimension to Aleksievich's writing that is first and foremost grounded in the selection process and in the assemblage of the individual monologues into a coherent work. Granin's invocation of musical terms such as aria, recitative and chorus to illustrate the authorial arrangement of the documentary material is, of course, directly relevant to Aleksievich's work, which is marked by the integration of explicitly musical structures into her texts.

Aleksievich's Concept of Art

Art vs. Document

Aleksievich's concept of art is best explained through a careful analysis of the programmatic statements that she makes on her writing practice. These statements provide a comprehensive insight into her complex views on the purpose and nature of historical documents and of art. In order to avoid confusion, it should be pointed out from the beginning that Aleksievich uses the terms 'art' and 'literature' synonymously. These terms are linked to a number of key notions that Aleksievich uses frequently and with great consistency, such as 'document' ('документ'), 'processing' ('обработка') and 'eternal man'

(‘вечный человек’). I will analyze these notions in relation to the binaries that Aleksievich uses to frame them, beginning with the binary of literature vs. document, which finds its later analogy in the binary of art vs. history. This order of exposition reflects a defining development in Aleksievich’s thinking, a movement that starts with a relatively uncomplicated advocacy of the document at the expense of art and ends with the emphasis on the literary and artistic dimensions of her writing. Thus, during her Nobel lecture in 2015, Aleksievich stated:

Сразу после войны Теодор Адорно был потрясен: «Писать стихи после Освенцима – это варварство». Мой учитель Алесь Адамович ... тоже считал, что писать прозу о кошмарах XX века кощунственно. Тут нельзя выдумывать. Правду нужно давать, как она есть. Требуется «сверхлитература». Говорить должен свидетель.¹¹⁵

Aleksievich locates her poetics in a broad context of testimonial writing, subsuming a number of collective traumas under the same metaphor. ‘Koshmary XX veka’ evidently refers to the violent historic events treated in *Golosa utopii*, in other words the Second World War, the Soviet-Afghan war, the Chernobyl

¹¹⁵ Aleksievich, ‘O proigrannoi bitve’, p. 5.

nuclear disaster, and the disintegration of the USSR, which are implicitly categorized as human catastrophes of the same order as the Holocaust, which is made clear by the reference to Auschwitz. 'Proza' here designates fiction as is evident in the close connection between this term and the notion of literary invention ('выдумывать'). Framing these terms in both a European and Russian context, Aleksievich relates Adamovich's idea on the moral responsibilities of testimonial writing to the notions of the German philosopher and cultural critic Theodor Adorno on the problematic aspects writing of poetry after the Holocaust. Their respective views on writing and history, however, emerge in entirely different historical contexts from which both draw different conclusions.

The reference to Adorno's words that it is 'barbaric to write poetry after Auschwitz' alludes to a passage in the essay 'Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft'.¹¹⁶ Frequently distorted and taken out of context, this passage by Adorno is generally misinterpreted in public discourse as a simplistic assertion that it is 'not only impossible but perhaps even immoral to write poetry after [the Holocaust]', as Antony Rowland notes.¹¹⁷ In fact, however, this now famous quotation cannot be properly

¹¹⁶ Originally published in Karl Gustav Specht, ed., *Soziologische Forschung in unserer Zeit: Ein Sammelwerk* (Köln: Westdeutscher Verlag, 1951), later reprinted in Adorno, *Prismen* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1955).

¹¹⁷ Rowland, 'Re-reading "Impossibility" and "Barbarism": Adorno and Post-Holocaust Poetics', *Critical Survey*, vol. 9, no. 1 (1997), pp. 57-69, p. 57.

understood outside of the context of the essay and of Adorno's wider culture critique. As Klaus Hofmann has argued, 'the self-assured pronouncement of poetry's impossibility [...] Adorno relegates to the stock of a conservative culture critique, which is all too prone to lament the reduced and miserable state of culture today'.¹¹⁸ Adorno therefore does not propose a ban on poetry but calls for a qualitatively radically different poetry which acknowledges its own failure to comprehend or communicate the unimaginable horror of the Holocaust. Thus reproducing a common misreading of Adorno's dictum, Aleksievich does not realise that her own poetics of truth, witnessing and her notions of the writer's responsibility to communicate historical truths diverge from Adorno's idea of the impossibility to comprehend and describe the historical trauma(s) of the twentieth century.

The crucial point to grasp in order to understand Aleksievich's concept of literature is the connection made between ethical and epistemological imperatives in her (mis)interpretation of Adorno's dictum. As Aleksievich states, writing artistic prose about the collective traumas of twentieth century European and Russian history is barbaric ('варварство') and blasphemous ('кощунственно'). Fictional and poetic

¹¹⁸ Hofmann, 'Poetry after Auschwitz – Adorno's Dictum', *German Life and Letters*, vol. 58, no. 2 (April 2005), pp. 182-194, p. 183.

depictions of these events are ethically compromised precisely because they obscure the 'truth' about the events that they depict – a view that invokes the notion of unspeakable trauma.¹¹⁹ The writer must therefore refrain from invention and poetic embellishment and, in Aleksievich's view, provide 'unmediated' access to the truth by presenting first-hand account of historical eyewitnesses. This epistemological mistrust of fiction and of the wider notion of 'art' can be seen in a number of statements made by Aleksievich. For example, a passage on her website displays an uncritical, almost naïve assumption about the inherent reliability of 'documents':

Сегодня [...] документ в искусстве становится все более интересен, без него уже невозможно представить полную картину нашего мира. Он приближает нас к реальности, он схватывает и оставляет подлинники прошлого и происходящего. Более 20 лет работая с документальным материалом, написав пять книг, я все время убеждаюсь и повторяю: искусство о многом в человеке не подозревает, не догадывается [...] Искусство может солгать, а документ не обманывает...¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ See Danijela Lugarić Vukas, 'Witnessing the Unspeakable: On Testimony and Trauma in Svetlana Alexievich's *The War's Unwomanly Face* and *Zinky Boys*', *Kul'tura i tekst*, vol. 18, no. 3 (2014), pp. 19-39.

¹²⁰ Aleksievich, 'Svetlana Aleksievich – Golosa strany Utopii'.

Here, Aleksievich introduces the notion of art into a binary structure where art stands in opposition to the notion of the 'document'. This word has a number of meanings in Russian.¹²¹ Aleksievich uses the term in the sense of recorded historical evidence, in other words referring to the documentary material used in her writing, not to the documentary representation itself.¹²² The notion of the document is consistent with Aleksievich's references to the 'witnesses' ('свидетели') of her books, stressing the historical importance of their accounts as well as the factual truthfulness of the monologues.¹²³ Similarly to the passage cited from Aleksievich's Nobel lecture, the binary of art vs. document presented on her website is both ethical and epistemological in nature. As opposed to the document, Aleksievich states, art can be deceptive ('может солгать') and is thus compromised both morally and in terms of its truth-value. Viewed as a medium for expressing and depicting human

¹²¹ Ozhegov's dictionary provides the following three meanings: 1. Деловая бумага, подтверждающая какой-н. факт или право на что-н. 2. То, что удостоверяет личность предъявителя (паспорт и т. п.) 3. Письменное свидетельство о чем-то. S.I. Ozhegov, *Slovar' russkogo iazyka*, 8th edition (Moscow: Sovetskaia entsiklopediia, 1970), p. 167.

¹²² Aleksievich's usage of the word refers to third meaning provided in Ozhegov's dictionary, then, but does not necessarily mean written sources as 'dokument' can also denote audio and video recordings. The most accurate English translation would thus be 'documentary material' or 'documentary source'. However, I will translate this term with formal rather than dynamic equivalence as 'document', emphasizing the transmission from Russian to English and reminding the reader of the original wording.

¹²³ The term 'svidetel'' is most prominently used in *Poslednie svideteli* but recurs throughout *Golosa utopii*.

experience, furthermore, art is qualitatively different from the document in terms of its scope and depth: 'искусство о многом в человеке не подозревает'.¹²⁴ Crucially, Aleksievich suggests that the document captures and preserves the immediate event in its 'original' form ('схватывает и оставляет подлинники прошлого и происходящего') which art is incapable of doing. The explicitly stated consequence of this is that the document 'brings us closer to reality' ('приближает нас к реальности') with the implication that art, on the other hand, removes us from it.

In the preface to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, Aleksievich provides an example of the incapability of literature to capture reality convincingly and authentically. While in a helicopter during her time in Afghanistan, Aleksievich observes a large number of zinc coffins on the ground, apparently prepared in advanced for the soldiers anticipated to be killed over the next weeks or months, and notes that the coffins glitter in the sun with an appalling beauty: 'Сверху увидела сотни заготовленных впрок цинковых гробов, красиво и страшно блестящих на солнце...' (TS, 25). She describes her aesthetic perception as ultimately irreconcilable with the bureaucratic planning of numerous and imminent deaths: 'Столкнешься с

¹²⁴ See quote above.

чем-нибудь подобным и сразу мысль: литература задыхается в своих границах...' (TS, 25) In the preface to *Uvoiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Aleksievich delineates further her idea of the inherent limits of literature in capturing the terror and suffering of the human experience: 'Понимаю, что плач и крик нельзя подвергать обработке, иначе главным будет не плач и крик, а обработка. Вместо жизни останется литература' (UV, 19).

The inadequacy and inauthenticity of literature (or art) is thus conditioned by its inherent artifice; if too obviously marked by the operation of aesthetic processing, the human experience depicted in the book will be obscured by the artifice of literature. In other words, if too 'literary', the representation is not a credible expression of the experience that it seeks to portray. Hence the dichotomy in this passage of 'life' ('жизнь') and 'literature' ('литература'), where the former is obliterated by the latter. Literature is equated with 'processing' ('обработка'), a potentially distortive operation that should ideally be kept to a minimum. This is the reason, then, why a more 'immediate' form of expression is required to truthfully convey the human experience. For Aleksievich, this immediate form of expression is the human voice:

Именно там, в теплом человеческом голосе, в живом отражении прошлого скрыта первозданная радость, и обнажен неустранимый трагизм жизни ... Там они еще не подвергнуты никакой обработке. Подлинники. (UV, 15)

According to Aleksievich, then, the 'primordial joy' ('первозданная радость') and the 'insurmountable tragedy of life' ('неустранимый трагизм жизни'), in other words the human experience, is to be found in the intimacy of the 'warm' ('теплый') human voice. Framed in a dichotomy of revelation and concealment, presence and absence, this human experience is hidden, inaccessible in art, but 'laid bare' ('обнажен') in the discourse of the interviewees, where it has not yet been processed: 'Там они еще не подвергнуты никакой обработке'.¹²⁵ According to Aleksievich, human experience is accessible here in unmediated, 'original' form ('подлинники'). The truth-claim inherent in Aleksievich's literary/non-literary-binary is thus predicated on her concept of oral recordings as a true record and primary source, which allows unmediated access to the human experience.

¹²⁵ See quote above.

History vs. Art

Thus far, Aleksievich's distinctions between the document on the one hand, and art and literature on the other, are uncomplicated, predicated on relatively simplistic notions of truth. Art represents untruth, inauthenticity, moral corruptibility, and artifice, whereas the document stands for truth, authenticity, power, moral superiority, and immediacy. However, Aleksievich's concept of literature is more complex than this relatively uncomplicated insistence on the epistemological and ethical superiority of the document over art might suggest. Interestingly, her rhetoric involves a second level that emphasizes precisely the literary and artistic dimension of her writing while contrasting these to a perceived inferiority of history and journalism – two disciplines that deal precisely with recorded documentary evidence.

Emphatically identifying as a writer as opposed to a journalist, Aleksievich tends to downplay the importance of her work for *Sel'skaia gazeta* and *Neman* in her development as an author. Analogously, in the statements made in prefaces, speeches and interviews on her writing practice, she insists that her books should not be read as works of history or journalism and instead stresses their literary properties. This rhetorical insistence distancing her work from history and positioning it in

close proximity to art comprises three different claims. Firstly, Aleksievich points to the importance assigned to 'feelings' in her works. Secondly, she stresses a perceived universality in the monologues. Finally, she highlights the 'literary' design of the monologues, claiming that they are written according to the 'laws of the novella'. Expressing her reluctance to be seen as a writer of historical works, Aleksievich states in the preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*:

Но я бы не хотела, чтобы о моей книге сказали: ее герои реальные, и не более того. Это, мол, история. Всего лишь история [...] Пишу не о войне, а о человеке на войне. Пишу не историю войны, а историю чувств. Я – историк души. (UV, 15)

Aleksievich defines her over-arching thematic focus as inextricably linked to human experience, to the emotions felt by the people who were present at the historic event. Elaborating this point in her prefaces, Aleksievich refers to her writing project as the recording of a 'lost history', thus suggesting that her subject matter is under the constant threat of historical oblivion:

Эта книга не о Чернобыле, а о мире Чернобыля. О самом событии написаны уже тысячи страниц и сняты сотни тысяч метров киноплёнки. Я же занимаюсь тем, что назвала бы пропущенной историей, бесследными следами нашего пребывания на земле и во времени. Пишу и собираю повседневность чувств, мыслей, слов. (СМ, 30)

This lost history is opposed to a generalised notion of an ordinary historiography, which, in Aleksievich's view, is exclusively concerned with factual data and ignores the human experience:

Историю интересуют только факты, а эмоции остаются за бортом. Их не принято впускать в историю. Я же смотрю на мир глазами гуманитария, а не историка. Удивлена человеком... (VS, 11)

These examples taken from three different works illustrate the constant emphasis underlying Aleksievich's claim to be a 'historian of the soul'. It is evident that 'history' occupies a low rank in her hierarchy as it is represented as being 'dry' ('сухая') and 'naked' ('голая'), and frequently described in dismissive terms. Underpinning this low estimation of history is an

understanding of the historical discipline as concerned exclusively with 'facts'. Furthermore, 'facts' are understood in a somewhat simplistic sense of the word, as information about, for instance, troop movements, as in the preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*: 'как отступали, наступали, на каком участке фронта...' (UV, 11) In the preface to *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, facts are viewed as the basic particulars of a certain chain of events:

[...] что случилось в ту ночь на станции, кто виноват, как скрывали аварию от мира и от собственного народа, сколько тонн песка и бетона понадобилось, чтобы соорудить саркофаг над дышащим смертью реактором (CM, 31)

The perceived contrast to conventional historiography constitutes an important element in Aleksievich's identity as a writer of literature rather than a historian. A second crucial claim underpinning her definition of *Golosy utopii* as a cycle of literary works is Aleksievich's explicitly stated concern with 'universal' human topics. Closely linked to the representation of human emotions is the trope of the 'eternal man' ('вечный

человек'), which Aleksievich frequently invokes in publications and interviews.¹²⁶

In the preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* cited above, the notion of universality is introduced in the sentence following Aleksievich's claim to explore the human soul in her works. Aleksievich writes that, on the one hand, she seeks to depict the historically particular in her writing: 'Я – историк души. С одной стороны, исследую *конкретного* человека, живущего в *конкретное* время и участвовавшего в *конкретных* событиях' (UV, 15, my emphasis). On the other hand, the passage continues, the author strives to discern the eternally human in her interviewees: 'мне надо разглядеть в нем *вечного* человека. Дрожание *вечности*. То, что есть в человеке *всегда*' (UV, 15, my emphasis). This distinction between the particular and the eternal clearly echoes Aristotle's definition of poetry and history. As opposed to Plato who sees poetry as futile because it fails to provide rational knowledge of the depicted object's transcendental form, Aristotle's conception of mimesis allows for artistic representations of events that do not need to be actual.¹²⁷

¹²⁶ See Aleksievich, 'Svetlana Aleksievich – Golosa strany Utopii'; 'Vechnyi chelovek s ruzhem', author's preface to unidentified edition of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, <https://litresp.ru/chitat/ru/%D0%90/aleksievich-svetlana-aleksandrovna/cinkovie-maljchiki/1> [accessed 15 December 2022]; 'V poiskakh vechnogo cheloveka' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Druzba narodov*, no. 5 (1998).

¹²⁷ Stephen Halliwell, *Aristotle's Poetics* (London: Duckworth, 1986), pp. 109-139.

According to Aristotle's *Poetics*, the purpose of poetry is not to relate factual but universal truths: 'it is not the poet's function to relate actual events, but the kinds of things that might occur and are possible in terms of probability and necessity'.¹²⁸ Aristotle thus defines poetry in a binary structure where it occupies a diametrical position to history:

The difference between the historian and the poet is not that between using verse or prose; Herodotus' work could be versified and would be just as much a kind of history in verse as in prose. No, the difference is this: that the one relates actual events, the other the kinds of things that might occur. Consequently, poetry is more philosophical and more elevated than history, since poetry relates more the universal, while history relates the particulars.¹²⁹

According to Aleksievich, history and journalism are concerned with 'facts' whereas art and literature explore universal human experience. Her view on art and history, in other words, is essentially Aristotelian – history maps the particular, art explores the universal. This view has

¹²⁸ Aristotle, *Poetics*, edited and translated by Stephen Halliwell (Cambridge, Mass.; London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 59.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*

important implications for her responsibility to remain faithful to the documentary material and affords her a great deal of artistic license. Distinguishing between ‘truth’ (‘правда’) and ‘verisimilitude’ (‘правдоподобие’), Aleksievich reproduces the Aristotelian binary of factual and universal truth in the appendix to *Tsinkovye mal’chiki*:

Или я должна доказывать, что есть правда и правдоподобие, что документ в искусстве – это не справка из военкомата и не трамвайный билет ... Я не выдумываю, не домысливаю, а организовываю материал в самой действительности. Документ – это и то, что мне рассказывают, документ, часть его – это и я, как художник со своим мировоззрением, ощущением. (TS, 294)

Pointing to the co-existence of art and document in her writing, Aleksievich here manages to reconcile the previously opposed notions of documentary truth and art. Her allegiance to factual truth (‘правда’) is combined with her work as an artist, an extensive process of selection and organization, which together produce a synthesis, a higher universal truth. Apart from this notion of universality in her work and the focus on human experience, there is, according to Aleksievich, an additional

dimension of her work that justifies placing it in the category of art, namely its formal literary properties. In a 1996 interview with *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, she stated:

Жанр возникал из жизни и менялся вместе с книгами, как вероятно, менялась с ними я сама [...] для меня важно было превратить исповеди, которые я слышала, не в документ, но в искусство. Чтобы каждый рассказ был как новелла. Он и строится по законам новеллы, тут есть своя музыка, свой ритм, свой контрапункт». ¹³⁰

Here the binary of document and art has now been reversed; Aleksievich states that her works are *not* documents but works of art, understanding the latter notion as intimately connected to structure. Echoing the musical terminology invoked by Granin in his description of *Descente aux enfers*, Aleksievich clearly sees her monologues as the result of careful aesthetic operations, as short novellas based on a set of structural principles. With this emphasis on the literary structure of her monologues, the movement from history to literature in her rhetoric is complete. Even though defining her writing

¹³⁰ N. Azhgikhina, 'Moia sleduiushchaia kniga budet o liubvi' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Nezavizimaia gazeta* (8 August 1996), p. 6.

negatively to literature in the first binary (literature vs. document), Aleksievich locates herself in a tradition of literature through the emphasis on the literary structure of her monologues and through the claim to depict universal human experiences, a claim that evidently echoes Aristotle's definitions of poetry and history. Aleksievich's mistrust of 'art' and 'literature' when used synonymously with 'fiction' does not mean that she rejects these notions in favour of a 'pure' documentary writing. On the contrary, she rarely uses the term 'document' in isolation but rather speaks of 'the document in art' ('документ в искусстве').¹³¹ Furthermore, her own preferred genre definition for her works is 'novel of voices' ('роман голосов').¹³² Thus, her poetics should be viewed as an attempt to reinvent literature in order to overcome its perceived limitations. Her poetics then are on some level a direct response to her misreading of Adorno's dictum, trying to renew literature by focusing on the universal human experience while relying on and retaining the truth of the document.

Characterized by a profound ambivalence in regard to the concepts of literature and art, Aleksievich's poetics is thus predicated on two separate binaries. In the first binary,

¹³¹ Aleksievich, 'Svetlana Aleksievich – Golosa strany Utopii'; TS, p. 294.

¹³² 'Nobelevskuiu premiu po literature poluchila Svetlana Aleksievich', *BBC Russian* (8 October 2015), https://www.bbc.com/russian/news/2015/10/151008_nobel_literature_aleksievich [accessed 15 December 2022].

Aleksievich defines her work as documentary rather than literary with its supposedly superior truthfulness. In the second binary, she sees her writing as literature, which occupies a more prestigious position in Aleksievich's hierarchy than history, which is exclusively concerned with the historically particular and with 'facts'. For Aleksievich, then, *Golosa utopii* should be viewed as a cycle of works that are *both* documentary *and* literary in character, both acts of testimony and works of art which record the universal human experience of history.

Aleksievich's Concept of Art in the Russian Tradition

The ambivalence towards the notions of art and literature underpinning Aleksievich's writing has clear precedents in classic Russian and Soviet literature. In this section, I will examine to what extent her work has developed from the Russophone literary tradition and which unique features her own work contributed to it. Discussing Aleksievich's major influences as well as demonstrating a continuity of certain themes and ideas in genre-transgressive Russian writing, I will focus on four writers – Dostoevskii, Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, and Adamovich. This will by no means be an exhaustive discussion of boundary-crossing works in Russian literature as *Golosa utopii* could also be set in relation to the work of

prominent female Soviet writers, such as Lidiia Ginzburg's practice and understanding of 'inbetween-genres', a literary method that draws on human documents, memoirs, essays, and autobiographies, as well as to Nadezhda Mandel'shtam's autobiographical project *Vospominaniia* and *Vtoraia kniga*, which combine documentary and literary aspirations.¹³³ However, an extensive study of this tradition exceeds the scope of this thesis and I have chosen to focus on the writers that Aleksievich deliberately invokes in her own work.

Fedor Dostoevskii: Threshold art

Aleksievich frequently cites Dostoevskii as a major influence, equating his works with those of Adamovich in terms of their importance for her own writing. In the preface to *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Aleksievich relates her impressions of reading *la iz ognennoi derevni...*: 'Такое потрясение испытала лишь однажды, читая Достоевского' (UV, 9). Every single authorial preface in *Golosa utopii* contains at least one reference to Dostoevskii. For example, in her diary excerpts introducing *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, Aleksievich addresses the violence

¹³³ Emily van Buskirk, *Lydia Ginzburg's Prose: reality in search of literature* (Princeton, NJ; Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2016), p. 1; Judith Robey, 'Gender and the Autobiographical Project in Nadezhda Mandelstam's Hope against Hope and Hope Abandoned', *The Slavic and East European Journal*, vol. 42, no. 2 (summer, 1998), pp. 231-253.

committed by Soviet soldiers by citing Ivan Karamazov: ‘У Достоевского Иван Карамазов замечает: "Зверь никогда не может быть так жесток, как человек, так артистически, так художественно жесток"' (TS, 21).

Aleksievich’s interviewees also use Dostoevskii as a point of reference. For instance, camera operator Sergei Gurin, reflecting on the suffering of animals in the contaminated zone around the Chernobyl nuclear reactor, invokes the famous scene from *Prestuplenie i nakazanie* in which Raskolnikov recalls a childhood memory of a man whipping a horse: ‘Помните... У Достоевского... Как человек хлестал лошадь по кротким глазам. Безумный человек! Не по крупу, а по кротким глазам...’ (CM, 132) In *Vremia sekond-khend*, Aleksievich speaks to Vasili N. who – remaining a devoted communist after the disintegration of the USSR – highlights the industrial and technological progress achieved in the USSR as well as the victory over Nazi Germany, and recites by heart a few lines from Chernyshevskii’s *Chto delat’?* (1863) Replying with a quotation from *Zapiski iz podpol’ia* (1864), Aleksievich cites the Underground man’s critique of positivism and materialism, implicitly equating these philosophical concepts to the tenets underlying Soviet ideology:

У Достоевского есть ответ Чернышевскому: «Стройте, стройте свой хрустальный дворец, а я вот возьму и швырну в него камень... И не потому, что голоден и живу в подвале, а просто так – от своеволия...» (VS, 191)

Both the author and her respondents thus tend to invoke Dostoevskii when discussing topics such as violence and the Soviet system, which indicates that his work has had a fundamental impact on Aleksievich's worldview and poetics. In terms of her concept of art, *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* (1873-1881) is the most important reference point as this work represents Dostoevskii's most radical attempt to overcome the perceived obsolescence of the classical Russian novel. The title of the authorial introduction to *Zacharovannye smert'iu* can be read as an allusion to this particular work as it echoes the wordy style of *Dnevnik pisatel'ia*: 'От автора, или О бессилии слова и о той прежней жизни, которая называлась социализмом' (ZS, 223). Likewise, Aleksievich's habit of subtitling her prefaces and epilogues 'Vmesto predisloviia' and 'Vmesto epiloga' seems to point to *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* as this is precisely how Dostoevskii introduced it in the first chapter: 'Глава первая: Вместо предисловия. О большой и малой медведицах, о молитве

великого Гете и вообще о дурных привычках' (СМ, 229, PS, 5).¹³⁴

Dostoevskii's *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* consists of a series of fictional and non-fictional pieces printed in the journal *Grazhdanin* between 1873 and 1874 and subsequently disseminated as a serialised independent publication from 1876 to 1881, with a two-year hiatus during which Dostoevskii worked on *Brat'ia Karamazovy*.¹³⁵ Dostoevskii draws a significant part of his material from the daily press and addresses a wide variety of seemingly disjointed political, social, philosophical and literary questions. Combined with 'sketches' ('очерки'), polemical articles and other forms of non-fiction are fictional stories, for instance *Bobok* (1873), *Krotkaia* (1876) and *Son smeshnogo cheloveka* (1877). Even though these texts form a heterogeneous body which at first glance appears to be 'an amorphous collection of unrelated pieces', *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* can very well be read as an integral literary work.¹³⁶ Discussing Dostoevskii's poetics in the contexts of early modernist thought and the destabilization of Russian society in the mid-1870s, Morson argues that

¹³⁴ Fedor Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsai tomakh: tom 22* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo «Nauka», 1981), p. 5.

¹³⁵ Gary Paul Morson, *The Boundaries of Genre: Dostoevsky's Diary of a Writer and the Traditions of Literary Utopia* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), p. 5.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. ix.

Dostoevsky increasingly came to view the concept of “realistic art” as bordering on self-contradiction. For art, he reasoned, strives for coherence and order, but reality, as the principal narrator of *House of the Dead* observes, “strives toward fragmentation”. What art represents, it misrepresents. Moreover, by the mid-1870s Dostoevsky had come to believe that social “disintegration”, “fragmentation” and “dissociation” [...] were, in all probability, literally apocalyptic in extent and, therefore, the divergence between art and reality was particularly extreme, perhaps absolute.¹³⁷

According to the view of art underpinning *Dnevnik pisatel'ia*, there is thus a fundamental contradiction between the structure of a literary work and the social fragmentation of Russian society. The realist mimetic concept according to which reality is transferred into the fictional universe is thus distortive as it fails to express the chaotic nature of reality. Positioning himself in relation to such writers as Goncharov and Tolstoi who, in Dostoevskii's view, depicted the anachronistic world of the Russian nobility using outdated forms, he saw artistic structure as fundamentally distortive and incapable of truthfully delineating the social fragmentation of contemporary

¹³⁷ Ibid., p. 8.

Russian society. As Morson notes, Dostoevskii took pride in the derogatory descriptions of his prose as raw and unrefined as these precise qualities represented a superior truthful depiction of reality for him: '*poet of the underground*, our feuilletonists have been repeating this as if this were somehow derogatory to me. Fools, this is my glory, for that's where the truth lies'.¹³⁸

Morson observes that Dostoevskii tried to depict the modern state of fragmentation in a number of literary experiments, for instance by 'tell[ing] the story of the failure to write a coherent story, a failure that is itself the best index to a world beyond the reach of ordered vision'.¹³⁹ *Zapiski iz podpol'ia*, *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma*, *Podrostok* and *Krotkaia* are all examples of texts in which the act of narration is problematized and deliberately undermined. However, *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* is Dostoevskii's most radical and complex attempt to 'delineate chaos' – a chaos that is reflected in the heterogeneous composition of this work which combines fiction and non-fiction.¹⁴⁰ Drawing on the frequently used metaphor of the threshold in Dostoevskii's writing, Morson conceptualizes *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* as 'threshold literature'.¹⁴¹

¹³⁸ I. I. Anisimov et al, eds., *F. M. Dostoevskii v rabote nad romanom "Podrostok": Tvorcheskie rukopisi* (Moscow: Nauka, 1965), p. 342-343, cited in Morson, *The Boundaries*, p. 9.

¹³⁹ Morson, *The Boundaries*, p. 9.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 9, 15.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 49.

This concept denotes a work characterized by a deliberate generic ambiguity where it is 'it is uncertain which of the two mutually exclusive sets of conventions governs [it]'.¹⁴²

Distinguished by the same generic uncertainty, Aleksievich's writing can also be seen as an attempt to delineate the social fragmentation of disintegrating Soviet society. In her distinction between 'art' and 'life' as well as in her views on artistic structures as potentially distortive, Aleksievich echoes Dostoevskii's aspiration to reflect social disorder and overcoming the perceived inadequacies of traditional literary forms. Aleksievich's literary mosaics in which a multitude of interviewees provide snippets of historical events can be read as a modern implementation of Dostoevskii's objections to the perceived stability of the classical realist novel with its aspiration to wholeness and harmony, as can her habit of rewriting her books. Aleksievich tends to explain the revisions by referring to the changes which her interviewees' memories and interpretations of the past, including her own, have undergone.¹⁴³ According to Aleksievich, then, reality is subject to continuous change and can thus never be fully understood or adequately expressed but only delineated in provisional and

¹⁴² Ibid., p. 48.

¹⁴³ Sophie Pinkham, 'Brooklyn by the Book: Svetlana Alexievich' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Youtube* (12 June 2016), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-728m7I3_Ko [accessed 06 December 2022].

subjective interpretations. Depicting collective, transformative experiences, Aleksievich's books present statements made by interviewees who often 'express their perception of hazy reality, disappointment and despair, as their world has disappeared'.¹⁴⁴ Influenced by Dostoevskii and translating his ideas of literature and societal transformation into a late Soviet and post-Soviet context, Aleksievich creates in her writing a similar form of threshold literature.

Varlam Shalamov: Veridical Prose

Even though she is more frequently compared to Solzhenitsyn in public discourse and in scholarly writing, Aleksievich identifies Shalamov as a much more important influence. A Gulag writer combining factual and fictionalized elements in his writing, Shalamov is famous for his *Kolymskie rasskazy* (1978), a cycle of short stories based on his experiences in Soviet prison camps. Aleksievich has expressed her admiration for Shalamov on a number of occasions and acknowledged an affinity between his writing and her own: 'Шаламова я считаю самым большим писателем XX века [...] Он очень близок мне по духу. Вот этот его поиск, когда и документ, и жизнь тесно

¹⁴⁴ Elena Gapova, "'Things Fall Apart": The Moral Revolutions of Svetlana Alexievich', *Slavic Eurasian Studies*, vol. 30 (2016), pp. 103-116, p. 110.

смыкаются'.¹⁴⁵ Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov are often conceived of as opposites, both in terms of their poetics and perspectives on the Gulag experience, as Bogdanova notes.¹⁴⁶ For Aleksievich, these writers stand for two diametrically opposed views on suffering, Solzhenitsyn representing a kind of optimistic stoicism and Shalamov a pessimistic view on suffering as futile and purposeless:

Великий спор русской литературы: Солженицын утверждал, что страдание делает человека лучше, из лагеря человек выходит как из чистилища, а Шаламов был уверен, что лагерный опыт развращает человека, лагерный опыт нужен только в лагере. Время показало, что Шаламов был прав. Человек, который остался после социализма, знал только, как жить в лагере.¹⁴⁷

Aleksievich is referring to Shalamov's autobiographical essay 'Neskol'ko let moei zhizni', written in 1964, fourteen years after his release from the Kolyma labour camps: '«Подземный»

¹⁴⁵ 'Interv'iu so Svetlanoi Aleksievich v Shalamovskom dome' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Youtube* (April 2009), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qKRg1e9dfDI&t=250s> [accessed 06 December 2022].

¹⁴⁶ O. V. Bogdanova, "'Iskat' izbitykh pravotu": Mesto A. Solzhenitsyna i V. Shalamova v russkoi literature XX veka', *Izvestiia Iuzhnogo federal'nogo universiteta*, no. 4 (2018), pp. 12-20.

¹⁴⁷ Aleksievich, 'Vystuplenie na vruchenii Premii mira Soiuzna nemetskoj knigotorgovli', speech (13 October 2013).

опыт не увеличивает общий опыт «жизни» – «там» все масштабы смещены, и знания, приобретенные «там», для «вольной жизни» не годятся'.¹⁴⁸ This remark on the futility of the Gulag experience can also be found in *Zacharovannye smert'iu*: '[y] Варлама Шаламова вдруг встречаю такую мысль, что лагерный опыт никому не нужен. Лагерный опыт нужен только в лагере' (ZS, 224). In *Vremia sekond-khend*, the reference to Shalamov recurs; however, here Aleksievich cites a different text: 'из «Записных книжек» Шаламова: «Я был участником великой проигранной битвы за действительное обновление жизни»' (VS, 10). Moreover, Shalamov's idea of the importance of the direct participation of the author in the events that he or she depicts is echoed throughout Aleksievich's oeuvre. Taking his cue from Danish physicist Niels Bohr, Shalamov insists that for the sake of credibility and legitimacy, an author must not only be a witness to – but a participant in – the depicted events:

автор, которому верят, должен быть «не только свидетелем, но и участником великой драмы жизни», пользуясь выражением Нильса Бора. Нильс Бор сказал эту

¹⁴⁸ Shalamov, 'Neskol'ko let moei zhiznii', in L. Bykov, ed., *Kolymskie rasskazy* (Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriia, 2004), pp. 3-10, p. 3.

фразу в отношении ученых, но она принята справедливо во отношении художников.¹⁴⁹

Shalamov is referring to Bohr's famous statement that 'in the drama of existence we ourselves are both actors and spectators'.¹⁵⁰ This comment captures a key point in quantum theory about the relationship between the observer and the observed object, namely the fact that 'on the level of individual atomic processes the scientist [...] has a role in the creation of the world that he is describing [...] his act of observation participates in forming the natural world'.¹⁵¹ Reinterpreting Bohr's ideas in a literary context, Shalamov stresses the significance of the author's own involvement in the events depicted, emphasising the simultaneous authorial act of observation and participation in autobiographical works. This idea likewise shapes the authorial rhetoric in the 1985 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, in which Aleksievich stresses that even though she was not alive at the time of the German occupation, the war has had a direct and crucial impact on her life as a number of her family members perished in the war: 'Я

¹⁴⁹ Shalamov, 'O proze' in L. Bykov, ed., *Kolymskie rasskazy* (Ekaterinburg: U-Faktoriia, 2004), pp. 11-26, p. 12.

¹⁵⁰ Niels Bohr, *Essays 1958-1962 on Atomic Physics and Human Knowledge* (New York: Interscience Publishers, 1963), p. 15.

¹⁵¹ Richard Schlegel, 'The Impossible Spectator in Physics', *The Centennial Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (1975), pp. 217-231, p. 218.

тоже родилась после войны [...] Но разве своим смертным дыханием она не коснулась и моей жизни?' (UV 1985, 59)

Similarly, the preface to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* underscores the author's presence in the conflict zone as it consists of diary excerpts from Afghanistan, apparently written in the summer and early autumn of 1986 (TS, 14-28). Insisting on the same kind of authorial presence, the preface to *Vremia sekond-khend* has the subtitle 'Zapiski souchastnika', emphasizing Aleksievich's status as a Soviet subject and making her, too, a participant in the Soviet system and a witness to its disintegration, which implicitly assigns additional legitimacy to her representation (VS, 7).

The references and allusions to Shalamov contained in *Golosa utopii* indicate the importance of his work for Aleksievich's writing, yet the affinity between these two writers is established on a deeper level when considering their approaches to art, truth, and documentary. Shalamov's essay 'O proze' (1965) crystallizes his poetics, which Aleksievich would draw on for her own work. Discussing his relation to fiction as well as to factual genres such as the memoir and the 'ocherk', Shalamov takes his point of departure in the perceived obsolescence of the novel as a literary form by alluding to Osip Mandel'shtam's essay on the death of the novel: 'Роман умер. И никакая сила в мире не воскресит эту литературную

форму'.¹⁵² Against this background, Shalamov points to the popularity in contemporary Soviet society of non-fictional genres such as the memoir, advocating the superiority of the document over fiction in terms of truth-value: 'Сегодняшний читатель спорит только с документом и убеждается только документом ... Читатель не чувствует, что его обманули, как при чтении романа'.¹⁵³ Moreover, Shalamov expresses his aversion to what he calls 'literaturshchina', that is, the markedly 'literary' structural and morphological features which, in his view, are inherent in novels and short stories. While framing these features within a dichotomous structure distinguishing between 'life' and 'literature', Shalamov formulates his own literary principles vis-à-vis a set of perceived stylistic conventions:

Автор отказался от короткой фразы, как литературщины, отказался от физиологической меры Флобера – «фраза диктуется дыханием человека». Отказался от толстовских «что» и «который», от хемингвеевских находок – рваного диалога, сочетающегося с затянутой до нравоучения, до

¹⁵² Shalamov, 'O proze', p. 11. See Osip Mandel'shtam, *Slovo i kul'tura: O poezii, razgovor o Dante, stat'i i retsenzii* (Moscow: Sovetskii pisatel', 1987).

¹⁵³ Ibid. p. 12.

педагогического примера фразой. Автор хотел получить только живую жизнь.¹⁵⁴

As Sarah Young has noted, Shalamov's rejection of traditional literary genres and his emphasis on the document contains significant similarities to the concept of 'literatura fakta', adopted primarily by Osip Brik, Nikolai Chuzhak and Sergei Tret'iakov within the Novyi LEF (Levyi front iskusstv) in the late 1920s.¹⁵⁵ This movement 'stressed the importance of documentary modes (biographies, memoirs, documents), and rejected previous literary models, such as the historical novel, in favour of factual forms such as travel notes'.¹⁵⁶ Shalamov's relationship with LEF was ambivalent, though, and for the author of *Kolymskie rasskazy*, 'authenticity [...] does not exclude the imagined, but draws together the typical, the actual, and the projected, in order to narrate as fact a story that history otherwise cannot provide'.¹⁵⁷ Shalamov does not definitively reject traditional fictional forms for purely factual genres such as the memoir, then. Accordingly, he is careful to emphasize that *Kolymskie rasskazy* is not a collection of sketches: 'K

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., p. 17.

¹⁵⁵ Sarah J. Young, 'Mapping Spaces as Factography: Human Traces and Negated Genres in Varlam Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy*', *Slavonica*, vol. 19, no. 1 (2013), pp. 1-17, p. 4.

¹⁵⁶ Ibid.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., p. 6.

очерку никакого отношения проза «Колымских рассказов» не имеет'.¹⁵⁸ The central question for Shalamov is whether contemporary literature can transcend traditionally journalistic and historical forms at a time when the novel is no longer a viable form of expression. Rather than outright rejecting literature, Shalamov asks if it can be reinvented in a way that overcomes its perceived obsolescence: 'Вопрос: должна ли быть новая проза документом? Или она может быть больше чем документ?'¹⁵⁹

Whereas Adamovich's and Aleksievich's solution to this problem is the introduction of oral history in their writings, Shalamov's answer is autobiographically based fiction providing his own testimony in the process, a form that Leona Toker has conceptualized as 'veridical fiction'.¹⁶⁰ According to Toker, Shalamov assumed that his own experiences gave him the right and ability to imagine and artistically depict the experiences of other deportees with credibility and legitimacy, thus making it possible for him to imagine Mandel'shtam's death in a transit camp in his fictional story 'Sherri-brendi': 'The author of such veridical fiction implicitly claims the ability to imagine certain situations, such as the death of a poet in the camp, perhaps as

¹⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 14.

¹⁶⁰ Leona Toker, *Return from the Archipelago: Narratives of Gulag Survivors* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

not impossible extensions of his own experience'.¹⁶¹ Toker thus notes the 'collocation of clearly fictionalized and clearly factographic material in Shalamov's *Kolymskie rasskazy*', and argues that this unsettles the pact between the text and the reader who is 'called upon to accept the stories as factual testimony yet apply to them the kind of analytic procedures that are appropriate to fiction'.¹⁶² Toker further conceptualizes this dual purpose as a case of 'bi-functionality' and states that *Kolymskie rasskazy* functions both 'as acts of witness-bearing and as works of art'.¹⁶³

Shalamov insists on the artistic dimension of his form of documentary literature and points to the possibility and necessity of blending one and the other: 'Нужно и можно написать рассказ, который неотличим от документа'.¹⁶⁴ The result is a form of writing in which the claims to literal, artistic and universal truth co-exist. As Shalamov emphasizes, the central concern in *Kolymskie rasskazy* is the artistic depiction of the psychological universalities of the human experience of Stalin's labour camps, not the presentation of facts: 'В «Колымских рассказах» дело в изображении новых психологических закономерностей, в художественном

¹⁶¹ Ibid., p. 151.

¹⁶² Ibid., p. 152.

¹⁶³ Ibid., p. 74.

¹⁶⁴ Shalamov, 'O proze', p. 16.

исследовании страшной темы, а не в [...] сборе фактов'.¹⁶⁵ At the same time, however, Shalamov insists that everything he wrote in his stories is literally true: 'Хотя, конечно, любой факт в «Колымских рассказах» неопровержим'.¹⁶⁶ This attitude to factual and artistic truth anticipates Aleksievich's distinction between 'pravda' and 'pravdopodobie', a dichotomy that reflects the dual commitment in her poetics, the aspiration to historical truth and to a perceived universality.

Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Literature as Surrogate Politics

The intermingling of documentary and artistic elements characterising Solzhenitsyn's *Arkhipelag Gulag* contains obvious similarities to the ambivalence underpinning *Golosa utopii*. Yet, Aleksievich does not cite Solzhenitsyn as an influence and is reluctant to be compared to him. When asked whether she saw any commonalities between Solzhenitsyn's work and her own, Aleksievich replied: 'Нет, нет, у меня нет такого мессианского отношения. Нет такого ощущения, что литература может изменить мир'.¹⁶⁷ Nevertheless, comparisons between Aleksievich and Solzhenitsyn abound in both scholarly writing and public discourse. For instance,

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., p. 15.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Tetzlaff, 'A Human'.

pointing to the structural similarities between *U voiny nezheniskoe litso* and *Arhipelag Gulag*, Brintlinger observes that '[l]ike Solzhenitsyn, Aleksievich weaves her own experiences, reactions, and interpretations throughout her text', and notes the presence in both these works of a 'central, interpretative thesis' as well as the insistence on authenticity.¹⁶⁸

Arhipelag Gulag is a crucial point of reference for Aleksievich's writing as this work combines artistic and documentary elements in a way that eludes classic genre definitions. Christopher Moody sees this work as 'a pastiche of autobiographical passages, tabular entries, short biographies, lyrical digressions and philosophical notes'.¹⁶⁹ Andrej Kodjak, George F. Kennan and Francis Barker regard it as 'an essentially heterogeneous composition'.¹⁷⁰ Matt Oja has attempted to pinpoint the qualities inherent in Solzhenitsyn's work that create 'the subjective confusion' as to its genre, 'the difficulty in determining whether a given work is history or fiction'.¹⁷¹ Oja suggests five different criteria for the genre-transgressive

¹⁶⁸ Brintlinger, 'Mothers, Father(s), Daughter', pp. 199-200.

¹⁶⁹ Christopher Moody, *Solzhenitsyn* (Edinburgh: Oliver & Boyd, 1973), pp. 185-186.

¹⁷⁰ Andrej Kodjak, *Alexander Solzhenitsyn* (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978); George F. Kennan, 'Between Earth and Hell', John B. Dunlop et al, eds., *Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn: Critical Essays and Documentary Materials* (New York: Collier Books, 1975), pp. 501-511; Francis Barker, *Solzhenitsyn: Politics and Form* (New York: Harper & Row, 1977), Cited in Roland Vroon, 'Literature as Litigation: Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn's *The Gulag Archipelago*', *Russian History*, vol. 7, no. 1-2 (1980), pp. 213-238, p. 214.

¹⁷¹ Matt F. Oja, 'Fictional History and Historical Fiction: Solzhenitsyn and Kiš as Exemplars', *History and Theory*, vol. 27, no. 2 (May 1988), pp. 111-124, p. 112.

quality of Solzhenitsyn's work: the claim to literal or non-literal historical truth in the work; the degree of precise referentiality; the co-existence of a macro- and a microhistorical level; the writer's desire to focus on the logical cause of events; the effort on the author's part to involve the reader in the story on an emotional or even a moral level.¹⁷² Of course, these criteria determining what in fact constitutes the defining qualities of fiction and history are just as arbitrary as any other, as Oja readily admits: 'this [...] slipperiness of our subject matter dictates that the five broad criteria outlined be presented as nothing more than suggestions, each admittedly vulnerable to rebuttal'.¹⁷³ However, it is undisputable that while *Arkhipelag Gulag* contains the *claim* to a literal historical truth characteristic of documentary works, Solzhenitsyn introduced ambiguity by titling his book 'an experiment in literary investigation' ('опыт художественного исследования').¹⁷⁴ Thus emphasizing an artistic dimension of *Arkhipelag Gulag*, Solzhenitsyn insists that his work cannot be limited to a factual history, anticipating Aleksievich's later reluctance to be categorized exclusively as a journalist or historian.

¹⁷² Ibid.

¹⁷³ Ibid., p. 113.

¹⁷⁴ Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie sochinenii: tom 5* (Vermont; Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1980), p. 1; *The Gulag Archipelago: 1918-1956* (London: The Harvill Press, 1995), p. iii.

Martin Malia has presented a thorough analysis of the co-existence of the artistic and the historiographical in *Arkhipelag Gulag*. Noting that it 'cannot be approached *just* as a work of literature' but neither as 'essentially a testimonial to unparalleled human suffering', Malia locates Solzhenitsyn's work in 'the Russian tradition of humane letters as surrogate politics'.¹⁷⁵ Malia refers to the tendency originating in 19th century Russian society where works of literature provided covert social commentary circumventing tsarist censorship, thus assuming 'the social function of Russian literature, originally the expression of the conscience of society against state'.¹⁷⁶ Turgenev's *Zapiski okhotnika* (1852), Dostoevskii's *Zapiski iz mertvogo doma* (1860-62) and Nikolai Chernyshevskii's *Chto delat'?* are all examples of works of literature performing this function, and, according to Malia, Solzhenitsyn

updates this tradition in terms of new and unprecedented twentieth-century conditions [...] The task of the true Russian writer, then, was the staggering and unprecedented one of setting a whole world right-side up again. And for this, no mere *Sportsman's Sketches*, no mere *House of the Dead*, no mere

¹⁷⁵ Malia, 'Review', p. 50.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Resurrection, and no mere fictional *Zhivago* would do. For such a Herculean task, a new genre, a new tone were required, and not fiction, but hard historical truth was necessary. Yet at the same time this historical truth, in the traditional Russian manner, must be raised to the level of moral consciousness. Hence historical investigation must be supplemented by the power of art, as the only free ethical force that exists in Russia.¹⁷⁷

Aleksievich's form of writing, combining documentary elements, social commentary, and artistic elements can undoubtedly be seen as another contribution to this intelligentsia tradition. Since the appearance of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* in 1990, she has emerged as a controversial political figure in the late Soviet and post-Soviet spheres. A vocal critic of Lukashenka and Putin, Aleksievich insists that it is the obligation of the writer to take a position on contemporary political issues. Thus, even though Aleksievich does not cite Solzhenitsyn as an influence and even expresses a degree of reluctance at being compared to him, the notion of the Writer as national conscience and scrutinizer of state power manifest in *Arkhipelag Gulag* informs her concept of art.

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

Ales' Adamovich: 'Sverkh-literatura'

Adamovich's notion of 'sverkh-literatura' has influenced Aleksievich's concept of art most directly. As we recall from the previous section, Aleksievich referred in her Nobel lecture to this idea as an integral part of her understanding of the limitations and possibilities of writing about 20th century Russian history. Adamovich articulated the notion in an article with the title 'Delaite sverkh-literaturu!..' published in the November issue of *Oktiabr'* in 1984, that is, nine months after the publication of Aleksievich's debut in the same journal and only two months after its publication in *Neman*.¹⁷⁸ This notion contains some of the defining features of Aleksievich's concept of art: firstly, the sense that writing fiction has become impossible or at least unviable; secondly, the ethical imperative underlying the choice of a documentary form; thirdly, the insistence on the artistic dimension of documentary writing.

The starting point for Adamovich's argument is a perceived polarization of contemporary writing caused by the increasing prominence of the documentary genre in film and literature. Similarly to how the invention of photography in the

¹⁷⁸ Adamovich, 'Delaite sverkh-literaturu!..', *Oktiabr'*, no. 11 (November 1984), pp. 188-194.

19th century forced painters to search for new ways of expression and concede the claim to visually accurate depictions of reality to technology, contemporary Soviet literature responded to the emergence of documentaries in two ways, according to Adamovich. Some authors reacted by focusing more than ever on literary invention and on 'phantasmagoria' (Gogol, Bulgakov, and Marquez are Adamovich's paradigmatic figures of this mode of writing), whereas other writers incorporated documentary elements in their works.¹⁷⁹ Discussing the latter writing practice, which he refers to as 'novaia dokumentalistika', Adamovich expresses an aversion to fiction and to conventionally realist forms of literature: 'Не могу читать «литературу»'.¹⁸⁰ For Adamovich, these conventional forms have become obsolete as vehicles for expression, thus hindering rather than facilitating the communication of the content of a work of art. Adamovich relates his impressions from Anatolii Efros's 1982 adaptation of Tolstoi's play *Zhivoi trup* (1900):

Смотрел эфросовский спектакль по «Живому трупу» [...] и ловил себя на ощущении, что «литературная форма» (не спектакль даже, а сама пьеса) для меня помеха прямому

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., p. 188.

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., p. 189.

общению с мыслью и личностью великого Толстого. Вот бы «Исповедь» или «Дневник», да чтобы Толстой говорил о самом главном, когда уже не нужна никакая опосредованность!¹⁸¹

Adamovich thus perceives the dramatic form as a hindrance, a futile obstruction standing between the viewer and Tolstoi's philosophical and moral universe. Like Shalamov, he rejects literary realism and asks for more 'direct' forms of expression, calling for writers to turn either to 'phantasmagoria' or to documentary prose: 'Или если уж литература, если «сочинять», то не замыкаясь в привычных формах [...] Если [...] писать [...], то неотразимо бьющий в цель «документ», а если не его, то «Маркеса»!¹⁸² Of course, it is significant that Adamovich discusses a work by Tolstoi, who rejected the entire Western canon of literature, music, and fine art in *Chto takoe iskusstvo?* (1897) and instead presented a view according to which 'aesthetic merit lies in the success with which a work of art fulfils its role as a communicative sign', thus calling for a simple, universally intelligible art.¹⁸³ However, Adamovich's aesthetic considerations are also underpinned by a political

¹⁸¹ Ibid. The play premiered 14 December 1982 in Moscow at Moskovskii khudozhestvennyi teatr imeni M. Gor'kogo.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Charles B. Daniels, 'Tolstoy and Corrupt Art', *The Journal of Aesthetic Education*, vol. 8, no. 4 (October 1974), pp. 41-49, p. 47.

agenda that is very specific to his own historical and cultural context. Firstly, quoting an interview with French writer and critic François Mauriac, Adamovich frames the novel as an inherently bourgeois art which is no longer relevant:

Франсуа Мориак, когда его спросили, отчего он уже пятнадцать лет не пишет романы, объяснил это так: «Тому, кто хоть сколько-нибудь внимательно следил за трагической историей нашего века, роман кажется пресным; похождения буржуа, владельцев ланд, их погрешения, похоть и скупость не заслуживают того, чтобы о них говорили».¹⁸⁴

Secondly, Adamovich cites a passage from André Maurois' memoirs in which the French author describes a meeting with Winston Churchill not long before the outbreak of the Second World War. In the passage cited, Churchill urges Maurois to temporarily abandon the writing of novels to make the general public aware of the German rearmament instead: 'Вместо этого каждый день пишите по статье и в каждой об одном: германская авиация с каждым днем становится сильнее

¹⁸⁴ Adamovich, 'Delaite'. Adamovich does not specify the context of the interview with Mauriac.

французкой!’¹⁸⁵ Drawing a parallel between the Second World War and the Cold War, Adamovich thus presents his central motivation for discarding the novel and writing more ‘directly’, namely the ethical obligation to raise awareness of the imminent nuclear war with the USA. It is in the context of anticipated apocalypse that Adamovich coins the term ‘sverkh-literatura’, translating into Russian and paraphrasing an English word denoting nuclear mass destruction: ‘почему не «сверх» (кино, музыка, театр, живопись, литература – все «сверх»). Коли есть и всему [...] уничтожением грозит именно сверхоружие, overkill (сверхубийство)?’¹⁸⁶ For Adamovich, realist fiction is an inefficient tool for making the Soviet audience aware of the danger, hence the need for ‘sverkh-literatura’:

не может [...] реалистическая литература [...] писать о том, чего не было. А этого – третьей мировой войны – действительно и, слава богу, не было. Но ведь были уже Хиросима, Нагасаки... И что значит: литература не может? Ну так сделайте с в е р х л и т е р а т у р у!¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁵ Ibid.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁸⁷ Ibid., p. 188.

‘Sverkh-literatura’ can thus be defined as literature incorporating documentary elements, intended to raise awareness of the threat of nuclear war by describing historical events that are comparable to the total destruction that Adamovich envisages, events such as the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Adamovich’s suspicion of contemporary realist fiction is deeply rooted in Cold War tensions, and the motivation to abandon old forms in favour of new and more suitable ones is ethical in nature. In *Ia iz ognennoi derevni...*, Adamovich seems to implement his principles when referring to the recorded collective memory as an ongoing trial against Nazism, a trial that has implications both for the past and for the future in as much as it functions as a cautionary tale: ‘Суд этот необходим не только во имя исторической справедливости. Он живым нужен. Тем, кому угрожают будущие «фюреры»’.¹⁸⁸ Importantly, in the 1985 edition of *Poslednie svideteli*, Aleksievich frames her monologues within the same context of fear of a third world war:

Должны рассказать! [...] Потому что и сегодня кому-то хочется большой войны, вселенской Хиросимы, в атомном

¹⁸⁸ Adamovich, Ianka Bryl’ and Uladzimir Kalesnik, *Ia iz ognennoi derevni...* (Moscow: Izdatel’stvo «Izvestiia», 1979), p. 5.

огне которой дети испарялись бы, как капли воды, засыхали бы, как страшные цветы. (PS 1985, 3)

As the Soviet Union disintegrated and the Cold War came to an end, this sense of an imminent nuclear apocalypse disappeared from Aleksievich's rhetoric, and in her 2015 Nobel lecture, the imperative underlying the denouncement of fiction is no longer related to an imagined future catastrophe but to ethical considerations regarding the representation of the historical past. In the post-Soviet editions, vestiges of Adamovich's rhetoric only appear in one work – *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. Framed as a cautionary tale with the subtitle 'khronika budushchego', this book reproduces Adamovich's ethical imperative to raise awareness about impending disasters by representations of historical examples, only the threat of nuclear apocalypse related to the arms race during the Cold War has now been translated into the potential dangers of nuclear energy. This ethically informed agenda is also apparent in Aleksievich's public statements. In a lecture held at the University of Tokyo five years after the Fukushima nuclear disaster, Aleksievich warned against the 'hubris that humans have the power to conquer nature', thus reiterating a central

thesis of the book in a wider international context of nuclear power.¹⁸⁹

Finally, Adamovich emphasizes the artistic dimensions of documentary writing in the article, thus prefiguring a central element of Aleksievich's poetics. Even while rejecting fiction and advocating the incorporation of documentary material in contemporary writing, Adamovich does not encourage Soviet authors to replace the writing of literature with essays or 'publitsistika': 'Но мысль наша вовсе не та [...] что следует вместо художественной литературы заниматься публицистикой и эссеистикой'.¹⁹⁰ Similarly to Aleksievich, then, Adamovich does not reject literature altogether in favour of a form of 'pure' documentary writing; instead, he calls for a reinvention of literature that will accommodate both his aesthetic considerations (the need to renew obsolete artistic forms) and his political agenda of raising awareness of the nuclear apocalypse: 'Проблема как раз в том, как вернуться к художественной литературе – а точнее, к какой литературе?'¹⁹¹ Adamovich takes for granted that it is the obligation of literature – not journalism – to instil a sense of urgency with regard to the nuclear threat. This position is

¹⁸⁹ Tai Kawabata, 'Nobel-winning Belarusian Writer Alexievich Speaks on Nuclear Disasters and the Future of Human Hubris', *The Japan Times* (27 November 2016).

¹⁹⁰ Adamovich, 'Delaite', p. 189.

¹⁹¹ Ibid.

predicated on the assumption that literature can fulfil the necessary task of making people *feel* the threat, rather than being aware of it in a more intellectual and abstract sense: 'угрозу мы еще должны ощутить, впустить в себя. И мы, писавшие, пишущие о войне, обязаны делать это в числе первых'.¹⁹² Linked to this view is Adamovich's insistence on the artistic element inherent in documentary writing, which, as he argues, belongs to the sphere of art rather than the field of journalism. Referring to an interview given by Vasil' Bykov on 22 June 1984 in *Literaturnaia Rossiia* in which Bykov states that documentary writing is not a form of art ('«не искусство»') but a 'craft' ('«ремесло»'), Adamovich emphatically disagrees:

писательская документалистика [...] немыслима без участия интуиции, без чувства эстетической оценки документальных материалов, эстетического отбора, без психологического, эмоционального заострения произведения через монтаж, выстраивание сцен, рассказов, документов и тому подобное. Исследователи давно уже пишут о том, что у современной документальной литературы есть, выработалась своя образность, специфическая, но именно художественная.¹⁹³

¹⁹² Ibid., p. 193.

¹⁹³ Ibid., p. 188.

We can thus see that Aleksievich's understanding of art and documentary has been significantly influenced by the concept of 'sverkh-literatura'. The connection made between ethical considerations and the choice of form, as well as the insistence on the artistic dimension of documentary writing are ideas that Aleksievich has adopted directly from Adamovich, whose interview-based works lay the foundation for Aleksievich's writing project.

It is noteworthy that despite Aleksievich's explicitly feminist historiography in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, which is presented as an attempt to remedy the marginalisation of women in the official Soviet history of the Second World War, she situates herself in a distinctively male literary canon. Although alluding to Akhmatova in her works, Aleksievich cites Adamovich and Dostoevskii as her two major influences and makes frequent references to Shalamov, never mentioning female writers such as Ginzburg and Mandel'shtam whose genre-transgressive works have evident aesthetic affinities with her own. Her reluctance to being compared to Solzhenitsyn, whose *Arhipelag Gulag* is underpinned by a concept of literature as surrogate politics similar to Aleksievich's political agendas in

Golosa utopii, can perhaps be explained by an unwillingness on Aleksievich's part to be associated with the reactionary and nationalist views that Solzhenitsyn expressed in his writings after his expulsion from the USSR in 1974.¹⁹⁴ Alternatively, her unwillingness to be compared to such a towering literary figure may also be rooted in the fear of being perceived as an epigone and received as a 'second Solzhenitsyn', as there are striking similarities between these writers' careers – their interest in genre-transgressive documentary prose, their opposition to authoritarian regimes, their exile abroad and, not least, their receipt of the Nobel Prize in Literature.

Drawing on a wealth of ideas from the Russian literary tradition, Aleksievich's concept of art and documentary presents a synthesis of the aesthetic views of her most crucial influences. Blending Shalamov's simultaneous claims to literal and universal truth with Adamovich's insistence on the artistic element inherent in documentary writing, Aleksievich also combines Solzhenitsyn's strategy of literature as surrogate politics with Dostoevskii's attempt in *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* to reflect the tumultuous uncertainty of a society undergoing radical transformations. This synthesis is evident in Aleksievich's narrative strategies such as the fragmented mosaics formed by

¹⁹⁴ David G. Rowley, 'Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn and Russian Nationalism', *Journal of Contemporary History*, vol. 32, no. 3 (July 1997), pp. 321-337.

her monologues, as well as in her aesthetic terminology. Like Shalamov, she states that she is not interested in ‘facts’ but in universal human experience. Similarly to Adamovich, she grapples with the perceived artifice of conventional literary forms, using the term ‘obrabotka’ for what Adamovich names ‘oposredovannost’.

Even though Aleksievich chooses to focus on the human experience in her writing, searches for ‘universal’ topics and writes her monologues according to what she calls the ‘laws of the novella’, thereby introducing a formal ambiguity and a literary element to her writing, her monologues consist of credible statements by historical eyewitnesses. Even though these witnesses testify to their own subjective, ‘human’ experience of the historic event and do not present purely factual accounts, the historical value of their accounts cannot be dismissed. Aleksievich’s books can thus be read in accordance with her dual purpose of producing both historical testimony and works of art. The logic underpinning White’s reading of *Se questo e` un uomo* – a reading that does not see a conflict ‘between the referential function of Levi’s discourse and the expressive, affective and poetic functions’ – can likewise be applied to Aleksievich’s writing. As can Toker’s concept of ‘bi-functionality’, denoting the dual purpose in *Kolymskie rasskazy* to present accounts functioning both as acts

of witness-bearing and as works of art. While Aleksievich invites her reader to search for the artistic and universal truth in her monologues, thus encouraging the reader to interpret them as works of art, the monologues also relate actual people's experiences of real events, fulfilling, in White's terminology, an obligation both to the 'true' and to the 'real'.

Chapter Two: Aleksievich's Journalistic

Background: *Sel'skaia gazeta* and *Neman*

Next to the Russian literary tradition, journalism has had an equally formative influence on Aleksievich's writing. When *Uvoiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli* were first published in 1985, she had been working as a journalist for twelve years, writing for the newspaper *Sel'skaia gazeta* between 1973 and 1976 and for the journal *Neman* between 1977 and 1984. These years shaped her set of principal themes while also providing an important conceptual influence framing the key notions of truth and authenticity in her work. In the critical reception of her writing, the journalistic dimension of her oeuvre is routinely highlighted, although this emphasis tends to be greater in the Anglophone sphere compared to the Russophone world. Whereas *The Guardian* described Aleksievich as an 'investigative journalist and writer' and *The New Yorker* presented her as a 'journalist and prose writer', both *Argumenty i fakty* and *Vechernaia Moskva* used the less specific term 'pisatel'nitsa' in their coverage of the announcement of the 2015 Nobel Prize laureate in literature.¹⁹⁵

¹⁹⁵ Alexandra Alter, 'Svetlana Aleksievich, Belarussian Voice of Survivors, Wins the Nobel Prize', *The New York Times* (8 October 2015). Claire Armitstead et al, 'Nobel prize in Literature: Svetlana Alexievich Wins "for her Polyphonic Writings" – As It Happened', *The Guardian* (8 October 2015), <https://www.theguardian.com/books/live/2015/oct/08/nobel-prize-in-literature-follow-it->

Scholarly research likewise underscores but does not discuss in detail the journalistic element in Aleksievich's writing, with, for instance, Basova and Sin'kova placing her works at the intersection of literature and journalism.¹⁹⁶

Aleksievich's literary project is in some respect a direct continuation of her journalism. For example, the Second World War, the relationship between humans and nature, the focus on 'ordinary' people and on societal issues in the USSR are topics that characterize both her journalistic and her creative writing. Moreover, both her books and her articles make use of such formal devices as the interview-based monologue, authorial commentaries and conclusion, stage-directions and the 'chance meeting'. Beyond this formal and thematic continuity, Aleksievich's work for *Sel'skaia gazeta* and *Neman* has also been a conceptual influence for her creative writing as the commitment in her works to literal truth has been shaped by her journalistic practice. In this chapter, I will compare and contrast her books with individual articles which she produced for *Sel'skaia gazeta* and *Neman*. I will attempt to identify the formal and thematic affinities between them, devoting particular attention to questions regarding notions of truth and

live [accessed 13 December 2022]; Dar'ia Buravchikova, '«Nobelevku» po literature poluchila Svetlana Aleksievich iz Belarussii', *Argumenty i fakty* (8 October 2015); Irma Zueva, 'Nobelevskuiu premiiu 2015 goda v oblasti literatury poluchila Svetlana Aleksievich', *Vecherniaia Moskva* (8 October 2015).

¹⁹⁶ Basova and Sin'kova, 'Stanovlenie dokumental'no-khudozhestvennogo zhanra', p. 93.

authenticity. As Kovach and Rosenstiel note, notions of truth are fundamental to journalistic practices:

Over the last three hundred years, news professionals have developed a largely unwritten code of principles and values to fulfil the function of providing news – the indirect knowledge by which people come to form their opinions about the world. Foremost among these principles is this: **Journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.** (37)¹⁹⁷

Marcus O’Donnell similarly states that there are ‘widely held views of journalism [...] as [a] truth-seeking and fact-based institution’ (283).¹⁹⁸ Fernandez suggests that ‘many a journalist would profess [...] that theirs is a vocation to bear witness to the truth’, and Patterson and Wilkins observe that journalism ‘has a lofty ideal – the communication of truth’.¹⁹⁹ Of course, these authors are not discussing the journalistic context of the USSR in the 1970s and 1980s. In the era of late Soviet socialism, journalists pursued different ideals than to serve the public

¹⁹⁷ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), p. 37.

¹⁹⁸ Marcus O’Donnell, ‘Preposterous Trickster: Myth, News, the Law and John Marsden’, *Media and Arts Law Review*, vol. 8, no. 4 (2003), pp. 282–305, p. 283.

¹⁹⁹ Joseph M. Fernandez, ‘Truth in Journalism: Oxymoron or Lofty Ideal?’, *University of Notre Dame Australia Law Review*, vol.12 (2010), pp.171-208, p. 173; Philip Patterson and Lee Wilkins, eds., *Media Ethics: Issues and Cases*. (Boston, Mass.: McGraw Hill, 2002), p. 29.

interest by objectively reporting current events. Jekaterina Young states that 'Soviet journalists were urged to foster Soviet patriotism, loyalty, and confidence in ultimate victory'.²⁰⁰ Arguing that Berger's and Luckmann's understanding of the press as a 'construction of social reality' is particularly (but not exclusively) applicable to the Soviet context, Young observes:

The most important "qualities" that Soviet journalists had to have were the standard trinity of "ideological correctness, party commitment, and accessibility to ordinary people" (*ideinost', partiinost', narodnost'*) [...] The Soviet press did not even pretend to be a "value-free" presentation of facts.²⁰¹

However, this common assumption that journalistic practices in the era of late Soviet socialism were not underpinned by considerations of truth but by the ambition to promote communist values is somewhat simplistic. As Simon Huxtable has argued, the viewpoint that 'news' in the Western sense was not the primary concern of Soviet journalists is 'influenced by the Cold War desire to split the world into "us" and "them"'

²⁰⁰ Jekaterina Young, *Sergei Dovlatov and his Narrative Masks* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 2009), p. 96.

²⁰¹ Ibid. pp. 90, 96, 107. For a discussion of the notion of the press as a construction of social reality, see Roger Fowler, *Language in the News: Discourse and Ideology in the Press* (London: Routledge, 1991).

(59).²⁰² Huxtable offers a much more heterogeneous picture of post-Stalin Soviet journalism, stating that ‘even though Soviet authorities exerted close control, the news appearing in the Soviet press – whether by accident or by design – was never entirely congruent with the views of the party’.²⁰³ In particular, between 1953 and 1968, Soviet journalists enjoyed a high degree of leeway and discussions about journalistic professionalism and ethics was diverse. Khrushchev’s Secret Speech in 1956 had led to a general reconsideration of journalistic concerns and the notion of truth became central to journalists’ discussions.²⁰⁴ Moreover, the Cold War rivalry caused Soviet journalists to adopt foreign techniques with the consequence that ‘Anglo-American notions of journalistic professionalism [...] penetrated the Soviet journalistic mindset’.²⁰⁵

These democratic tendencies faded in the increasingly repressive climate following the occupation of Czechoslovakia in 1968, but they did not disappear entirely.²⁰⁶ In the 1970s, journalists ‘sought to demonstrate their professionalism not through reporting but through daring social critiques and

²⁰² Simon Huxtable, ‘Making News Soviet: Rethinking Journalistic Professionalism after Stalin, 1953–1970’, *Contemporary European History*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2018), pp. 59–84, p. 59.

²⁰³ *Ibid.*, p. 65.

²⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 80.

²⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

dispatches in defence of the individual'.²⁰⁷ Furthermore, even though the ideal of Soviet journalism after 1968 was centred on a 'deliberate, purposeful selection of [...] facts and events which inculcate a feeling of patriotism, vigilance, courage and selflessness', the authority and credibility of such journalistic texts still rested on the assumptions that they accurately reflected reality'.²⁰⁸ To some extent, then, the preoccupation with truth in Aleksievich's literary work is clearly related to the journalistic principles of fact-finding, though they would become modified to suit the aims of her later works.

Aleksievich herself has been ambiguous about her journalistic work, presenting it at one point as a form of self-fulfilment and later distancing herself completely from the Soviet press and its establishment. In an interview given the year after the publication of her debut work, she states that it was a sense of intellectual alienation from everyday life that caused her to start working for *Sel'skaia gazeta*:

Помнится, однажды в командировке утром вышла на балкон и увидела — во дворе стирает женщина. В ней было столько радости: от чистого белья, от хорошо выполненной работы, и поразила тому, что я-то радости от такого

²⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 82.

²⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 63.

обыкновенного, будничного дела не испытала. Испытывала счастье от встречи с искусством, хорошей книгой, с умным человеком, а вот так — нет. В эти мгновения очень зримо, осязаемо поняла, как многослойна, многолика жизнь. Такое «прозрение» привело меня в «Сельскую газету».²⁰⁹

Aleksievich thus presents her joining *Sel'skaia gazeta* as the result of an epiphanic moment of sudden realization of the fascinating diversity of human life, a richness embodied in the figure of an 'ordinary' woman engaged in housework. Ten years later, however, when asked about her work for *Sel'skaia gazeta* in an interview in 1996, Aleksievich answered more evasively:

– Светлана, ты начинала как журналистка. Расскажи, пожалуйста, о переходе из журналистики в прозу.

– Это было так давно... И раньше я бы на этот вопрос ответила по-другому. А еще через какое-то время будет новый ответ.

– Но кроме версий существуют некие факты. Училась на таком-то факультете...

– Я – типичная филологическая девочка. Диплом у меня был по Писареву. Меня привлекало его мышление «не как

²⁰⁹ Т. Abakumovskaia, 'Svetlana Aleksievich. U voiny ne zhenskoe litso. Interv'iu' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Sovetskaia kul'tura* (20 March 1986).

у всех». Кончила я университет в 72-м году. Белорусский государственный университет. Факультет журналистики. Поскольку вела себя слишком независимо – наказали и сослали в районную газету. Я там год проработала, а потом меня взяли сначала в республиканскую газету, а дальше в журнал «Неман». Я писала очерки, публицистику, и мне было интересно. Но все же тесновато в этих рамках.

– Ну, и как ты перепрыгнула?

– Хорошо помню, как к прыжку готовилась, а как перепрыгнула – не помню. [...] Точкой отсчета назвала бы книгу «Я из огненной деревни» (авторы А. Адамович, Я. Брыль, В. Колесник).²¹⁰

Aleksievich thus presents her appointment to the local paper as a punitive measure imposed because of her refusal to conform to the spoken and unspoken rules of the university environment, and likewise frames her work for the two newspapers as imposed rather than willingly chosen. Furthermore, giving any further explanations, she emphasises her own feeling of being restricted in the Soviet journalistic context ('тесновато в этих рамках'). Downplaying the importance of this period for her development as a writer,

²¹⁰ Tat'iana Bek, 'Moia edinstvennaia zhizn'' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], *Voprosy literatury*, no. 1 (2006), pp. 205-223.

Aleksievich instead identifies *la iz ognennoi derevni* as her chief influence, thus insisting that her work has developed in a literary rather than a journalistic context. Whereas Aleksievich in 1996 seems to suggest that she led a double life as a journalist in the Soviet Union, privately and silently dissenting while publicly conforming, Vladimir Golstein presents a very different interpretation of Aleksievich's journalistic career:

It appears that Aleksievich always follows the dominant ideology, formulated for her by the ruling authorities of the time, and then shapes her documentary material in order to suit this ideology. In the 1970s, she thus happily wrote about iconic Soviet figures, including such obviously cruel and manic personalities as the founder of the Soviet secret police, Feliks Dzerzhinskii, whereas, during perestroika, she jumped on the bandwagon with those who started debunking the sacred images of Soviet ideology, and eventually graduated in those anti-Russian sentiments that seem to characterize the cultural elite of today.²¹¹

Golstein is referring to an article by Aleksievich written on the occasion of the centenary of Dzerzhinskii's birth and published

²¹¹ Golstein, *Svetlana Aleksijevitj*, p. 17.

in *Neman* in September 1977.²¹² Assuming that Aleksievich 'happily' wrote about problematic Soviet figures such as Dzerzhinskii, Golstein portrays her as a cynical and calculating author adapting to the spirit of the time and to the expectations of particular audiences, conforming under Brezhnev and criticising Soviet ideology during perestroika for equally opportunistic reasons. It is difficult to make an ethical judgement about Aleksievich's supposed opportunism during her time as a journalist, especially as so little is known about the exact circumstances under which she wrote. Demanding a consistent and constant opposition and even open resistance to the Soviet regime does not take into account the complex ethical choices Soviet journalists and writers had to make on a daily basis, balancing their own beliefs against the demands of their editors and the very real risk of persecution and prosecution. The ethical question of Aleksievich's journalistic writings is in any case beyond the scope of this chapter, which will focus on the degree to which her work as a journalist shaped the poetics defining *Golosa utopii*.

Sel'skaia gazeta: 1973-1976

²¹² Aleksievich, 'Mech i plamia'.

Sel'skaia gazeta was the Russian-language periodical of the Central Committee of the Belarusian Communist Party, the Supreme Council and the Council of Ministers of the Belarusian Soviet Republic: 'Орган Центрального Комитета Коммунистической Партии Беларуси, Верховного Совета и Совета Министров Белорусской ССР'.²¹³ Published daily in Minsk, it combined information on foreign and domestic events, interviews, editorials, and opinion pieces with announcements and speeches by government representatives and recently issued laws and decrees. Aleksievich wrote more than forty articles for *Sel'skaia gazeta*, the first published on 9 September 1973 and the last on 8 November 1976, one year before she started working for *Neman*.²¹⁴ The articles usually cover one page and are signed 'S. Aleksievich', which is sometimes followed by her official title: 'Спец. корр. Сельской газеты'.²¹⁵ They include five reviews of films, books, and art exhibitions, three interviews and three digests of letters from readers. Furthermore, two pieces consist of conversations that Aleksievich recorded but did not participate in.

²¹³ See, for instance, *Sel'skaia gazeta* 14 March 1976, p. 1.

²¹⁴ Aleksievich, 'Vsego odna zhizn': Iz bloknota zhurnalista', *Selskaia gazeta* (9 September 1973), p. 4; 'Kak solnechnye luchi', *Selskaia gazeta* (8 November 1976), p. 4. The Library of Congress keeps microfilm records of *Sel'skaia gazeta* covering the years during which Aleksievich worked for the paper. This footage is largely complete, with an issue occasionally missing as well as two larger lacunas (April and June 1973). Researching this material, I have found 44 pieces written by Aleksievich.

²¹⁵ See, for instance, Aleksievich, 'Telekhanskii devchata', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (13 October 1974), p. 3.

The majority of the pieces are best described by the Russian term 'ocherk'. Three pieces are explicitly defined as such, and a large number of articles which share the defining features of this genre are presented in slightly different terms: 'Заметки журналиста'; 'Из блокнота журналиста'; 'Размышление над фактом'; 'Корреспондент выехал на место'; 'репортаж'.²¹⁶ Maksim Gor'kii described 'ocherk' as 'lying somewhere between research and story'.²¹⁷ Ozhegov's dictionary defines the genre similarly: 'Небольшое литературное произведение, краткое описание жизненных фактов'.²¹⁸ There is no precise English translation of the word but the most commonly used rendition in scholarly writing is 'sketch', emphasizing the etymology of the term, which is derived from the verb 'ochertit', meaning 'to outline'.²¹⁹ Dostoevskii frequently used the sketch in *Dnevnik pisatel'ia*, and

²¹⁶ Aleksievich, 'Delo, kotoroe bol'she zhizni: ocherk', *Selskaia gazeta* (5 February 1974), p. 4. '«Doch' moia, Mariia...»: ocherk', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (15 May 1975), p. 4; 'Nasledniki: ocherk', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (24 December 1975), p. 4; 'Sled dushi: Zametki zhurnalista', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (29 September 1974), p. 4; 'Gorit serdtse Danko: zametki zhurnalista', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (23 April 1976), p. 4; 'Vsego odna zhizn': iz bloknota zhurnalista', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (9 September 1973), p. 4; 'Mat': iz bloknota zhurnalista', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (13 November 1974), p. 4; 'Pamiat' serdtsa: iz bloknota zhurnalista', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (15 January 1975), p. 4; 'Delai svoiu sud'bu sam: razmyshlenie nad faktom', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (27 September 1973), p. 4; 'Vsegda i kazhdyi den': razmyshlenie nad faktom', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (26 March 1976), p. 4; 'Schastlivyi direktor: korrespondent vyekhal na mesto', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (11 October 1973), p. 4; 'Pered tvoim imenem: korrespondent vyekhal na mesto', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (14 December 1973), p. 4; 'Trudnaia beseda: korrespondent vyekhal na mesto', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (1 March 1974), p. 4; 'Skazka pro solnyshko: subbotnyi reportazh', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (15 May 1976), p. 4; 'Vernost' kliatve Gippokrata: fotoreportazh', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (19 June 1976), p. 4;

²¹⁷ Morson, *The Boundaries*, p. 15.

²¹⁸ Ozhegov, *Slovar'*, p. 476.

²¹⁹ Toker, *Return*, p. 151.

Aleksievich would thus have encountered this genre in both a literary and a journalistic context. Her sketches in *Sel'skaia gazeta* consist of interviews, authorial reflections, impressions, and conclusions, and frequently involve the narration of a journey undertaken by the author. An endnote often states which collective farm, village, town, area or region she visited when researching the piece, showing that she travelled to all parts of the BSSR as a journalist between 1973 and 1976.

Stylistically, the articles are never purely informational, nor do they strive to give an impression of objectivity. Instead, they are personal and polemical, written from a defined ethical perspective and with highlighted authorial presence, often beginning with a personal impression, memory, or thought.²²⁰ In terms of style, then, Aleksievich's journalistic writing is wholly consistent with the Soviet journalistic ideal of the time, favouring agitation over objectivity as discussed by Young and Huxtable.

²²⁰ For example, an article from 21 November 1974 begins thus: 'Приехала из командировки. И стоит у меня перед глазами Анна Михайловна Петушок, сухонкая, быстрая'. Similarly, a piece published on 23 April 1976 commences thus: 'На центральной усадьбе колхоза «1 Мая» Шучинского района [...] стоит памятник. Я долго вглядываюсь в каменные черты задумчивого юношеского лица'. See Aleksievich, 'Teplo osennei zemli: V chem dushi krasota', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (21 November 1974), p. 2; 'Gorit serdtse Danko: zametki zhurnalista', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (23 April 1976), p. 4.

The Second World War is perhaps the most conspicuous thematic commonality between Aleksievich's books and her journalistic writing. It is the central topic of six articles, which pay tribute to the veterans and encourage readers to show due respect and veneration for them. For example, in an article published on 26 March 1976, Aleksievich urges her readers to remember the sacrifices made by those who fought in the war, telling her readership about former frontline soldier Ivan Vasil'evich Petrunin, who was denied a free bus journey despite being entitled to this because of his status as an invalid of war. Aleksievich insists on the importance to honour the memory of the veterans' sacrifices:

Но мы-то с вами *не имеем никакого права забыть*, что шел солдат от Москвы до Берлина большей частью пешком, отступал и наступал, мерз в осенних затопленных землянках и горел в танке, поднимался в штыковую атаку и хоронил товарищей...²²¹

This ethical perspective anticipates the agenda underlying the 1985 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* in which Aleksievich states in very similar wording:

²²¹ Aleksievich, 'Vsegda i kazhdyi den'', p. 4. My emphasis.

И то, что она запомнила, вынесла из смертного ада, сегодня стало уникальным духовным опытом, опытом беспредельных человеческих возможностей, *который мы не вправе предать забвению*. (UV 1985, 62, my emphasis)

Both the aforementioned article and Aleksievich's first book thus invoke the same central notions of duty and forgetting, a common theme in Soviet narratives (and in most national narratives about war). Moreover, an article published on Victory Day in 1975 encompasses interview-statements by three veterans. In terms of imagery, this particular article makes use of a metaphor that is later employed in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, namely the image of overgrown trenches as a symbol of the time that has elapsed since the war: 'Я тоже родилась после войны, когда позарастали уже окопы' (UV 1985, 59). This imagery is likewise used in the article: 'Годы прошли с тех пор. В песнях молодежь уже поет о том, как окопы травой заросли'.²²² On this level of lexical and syntactical affinities between Aleksievich's journalism and literature, it is also interesting to note the concluding sentence in the 1985 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, which pays tribute to the female

²²² Aleksievich, 'Nevidimyi front', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (9 May 1974), p. 2.

combatants: 'Поклонимся низко ей, до самой земли' (UV 1985, 316). This sentence echoes a phrase uttered by an interviewee in *Sel'skaia gazeta* in 1975, also paying tribute to the veterans: 'Перед ними в земном поклоне стоять надо'.²²³ The distinct tone of veneration that characterizes nearly every reference to veterans in *Sel'skaia gazeta* is thus consistent with the patriotic rhetoric in the 1985 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*.

Aleksievich also engaged with the theme of war in an article discussing the notions of authenticity and truthfulness, revealing the aesthetic principles which would come to inform her depictions of war in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, *Poslednie svideteli*, and *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*. This piece, published one month after Victory Day with the title 'Mera podviga', is especially important as it records not only her personal contact with the writer she would describe as her most important influence, but also her engagement with his concept of 'documentary literature', which would come to shape her entire work.²²⁴ The article thus touches upon issues that have defined Aleksievich's thinking about the depiction of war in Soviet culture, in particular the focus on 'ordinary' people and the perceived opposition between the embellishments of

²²³ Aleksievich, '«Doch' moia', p. 4.

²²⁴ Aleksievich, 'Mera podviga', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (8 June 1976), p. 4.

fiction and the heightened truthfulness of non-fiction. The article in question is a conversation between Adamovich and former partisan Feodosii Iudanov, which Aleksievich recorded.²²⁵ Adamovich and Iudanov discuss the possibilities and limitations of documentary literature ('документальная литература') and fictional literature ('художественная литература') about the war, both arguing for the superiority of the former.²²⁶ Speaking in favour of documentary literature, Iudanov describes the victory as a heroic war effort that does not need aesthetic embellishment: 'величайший подвиг, который не нуждается ни в каких приукрашиваниях'.²²⁷ This advocacy of documentary literature is linked to a particular reinterpretation of heroism as a collective rather than individual phenomenon, as is clear from Adamovich's statement:

Видимо, чем больше проходит времени, тем яснее мы понимаем, что подвиг совершали не единицы, а миллионы людей. Сразу после войны литература героем считала лишь того, кто, к примеру, подорвал эшелон или закрыл собой амбразуру дзота. А сейчас, через годы, все больше

²²⁵ A note at the end of the conversation states: 'Записала С. АЛЕКСИЕВИЧ'.

²²⁶ Ibid.

²²⁷ Ibid.

выступают моральные мотивы поведения не сотен, а сотен тысяч людей.²²⁸

Adamovich thus highlights the significance of the heroic deeds performed by 'ordinary' people whose efforts have supposedly been forgotten in a culture of commemoration that favours more obviously notable feats (such as blowing up an enemy troop transport). As an example of the kind of literary work that he values, Iudanov mentions Adamovich's *la iz ognennoi derevni*: 'Это объективная книга. В ней все увидено, прочувствовано, рассказано глазами народа, сердцем народа, языком народа'.²²⁹ Iudanov's suggestion that this book is 'objective' because it is based on the stories, feelings, and language of the 'people', clearly prefigures the connection made by Aleksievich in her Nobel lecture between truth-value and witness-accounts, her insistence that the truth must be given 'as it is' and that the witness 'must speak'.²³⁰ The notion of the truthfulness of this documentary and interview-based genre is likewise based on its opposition to fiction, as Iudanov furthermore states: 'выше жизненной правды ничего нельзя придумать'.²³¹ Both Iudanov and Adamovich emphasise that

²²⁸ Ibid.

²²⁹ Ibid.

²³⁰ See p. 71 in the present thesis.

²³¹ Ibid.

there is a lack in contemporary war writing of stories of 'ordinary' people whose right-minded modesty prevents them from coming forward in the public space: 'скромные люди [...] сами не рассказывают [...] Есть у нас такая недоработка.'²³² Adamovich concludes the conversation by recapitulating this importance of focusing on 'ordinary' people in writing: 'как нелепо представление о том, что для литературы надо искать каких-то особенных людей, особенных героев'.²³³ Even though Aleksievich is apparently only a passive listener in this conversation, the attitudes to war writing outlined here anticipate the poetics underpinning her books. Adamovich and Iudanov's statements clearly set out the binaries of embellishment, fictionalisation and exceptionality vs. truth and ordinariness that characterize Aleksievich's works. It thus appears that this meeting with Adamovich, as well her reflection on his ideas in the piece she wrote for *Sel'skaia gazeta*, was a crucial step for her towards becoming a writer of documentary literature herself.

The focus on 'ordinary' people outlined by Adamovich as an important element in depictions of the war characterizes several articles by Aleksievich, which frequently emphasise the interviewees' modesty and low social standing, reminiscent of

²³² Ibid.

²³³ Ibid.

the 'malen'kii chelovek' of Russian literature. Praskov'ia Fedorovna, for instance, is surprised by the attention she receives from Aleksievich: 'Узнав о цели моего приезда, Прасковья Феодоровна растерянно всплеснула руками: – Обо мне писать? Что вы!..' ²³⁴ Praskov'ia Fedorovna is the head of a village club and leader of an amateur choir whose diligent and enthusiastic work has earned her widespread popularity in the community and a number of awards from the Ministry of Culture. Even though Praskov'ia Fedorovna is presented as being remarkable because of her extraordinary commitment to the prosperity of the village, she is still depicted as an essentially 'ordinary' person, which is underscored by Aleksievich's setting of the scene before the interview.

The same is true of Stanislav Zhalikhovskii, a worker at a fish farm who is the central character in a piece with the title 'Pamiat' serdtsa'. ²³⁵ As the article recounts, Zhalikhovskii was killed one night when attempting to apprehend a poacher, an incident that Aleksievich depicts in a sentimental light while emphasizing Zhalikhovskii's willingness to sacrifice himself for the greater good of the community. At the beginning of the piece, he is described thus: 'обыкновенным сельским

²³⁴ Aleksievich, 'Nel'zia ne poliubit': Entuziasty kul'tury', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (18 March 1976), p. 4.

²³⁵ Aleksievich, 'Pamiat' serdtsa', p. 4.

парнишкой. Веселым и простым. Любил ходить с друзьями в ночное [...] Любил спорт и школу'.²³⁶ This emphasis on Zhalikhovskii's humble personality in the context of his heroic deed seems to suggest that heroism is a widespread and perhaps integral quality in Soviet people, which is consistent with Adamovich's views expressed in the conversation with Iudanov.

In connection to the theme of the Second World War, it is important to point out that the female perspective that defines *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* is also tentatively explored in Aleksievich's articles for *Sel'skaia gazeta*. In four articles, Aleksievich tells of female war participants, some of them frontline soldiers. These female combatants appear in articles from 5 February 1974, 8 March 1974, 9 May 1974, and 15 May 1975: Anna Karpiuk, a liaison officer; Ul'iana Krishtalevich, member of a sapper company; Mariia Novikova, a nurse; and Alesia, secretary in a Komsomol underground resistance group.²³⁷ Alesia's and Kristalevich's narratives are particularly interesting as they anticipate two important aspects of Aleksievich's approach to the female war experience in *U voiny*

²³⁶ Ibid. 'Ночное' refers to nocturnal horse pasturage: 'Пастьба лошадей ночью в летнее время'. See Ozhegov, *Slovar'*, p. 409.

²³⁷ Aleksievich, 'Delo, kotoroe bol'she', p. 4; 'Zhit' vo ves' rost: Interv'iu po pros'be chitatelia', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (8 March 1974), p. 3; 'Nevidimyi front', p. 2; '«Doch' moia', p. 4. Aleksievich does not give Alesia's patronymic or family name. It should also be noted that none of these four veterans appears in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*.

ne zhenskoe litso, Kristalevich's story prefiguring the gradual acceptance of female leaders by male collectives and Alesia's the cultural invisibility of female veterans. In the latter story, pupils of a local school are trying to locate a former partisan fighter for the purpose of completing a history project. After a long and difficult search, it turns out that she lives just across the road from the school. Aleksievich underscores the cultural invisibility of these women, anticipating the view on female veterans as culturally marginalised in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*: 'А они – действительно рядом, и на самом деле скромно и незаметно живут среди нас'.²³⁸

The experience of women working in predominantly male professional and military contexts is addressed in Kristalevich's narrative, which is structured around her gradual acceptance as a leader and chairperson by male resistance fighters and kolkhoz workers, a structure which is frequently employed in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*. Kristalevich describes a masculine mindset reluctant to accept women in positions of authority: 'В какой-то степени мешала и старая психология, которая до сих пор крепка в сознании некоторых: не женское это дело быть председателем'.²³⁹ Here, again, the affinities between Aleksievich's journalistic and

²³⁸ Ibid.

²³⁹ Aleksievich, 'Zhit' vo ves' rost', p. 3.

creative writing can be observed on a syntactical level. In the 1985 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Aleksievich uses the same turn of phrase when describing the predominant male attitude towards female combatants holding traditionally male positions:

С тем же недоверием встретили и женщин-командиров саперных взводов, моряков, танкисток. Медики, связистки – это еще укладывалось в какие-то прежние представления, в остальных же профессиях женщинам приходилось преодолевать психологический барьер: дескать, *не женское это дело*. (UV 1985, 220, emphasis mine)

Another important thematic commonality between Aleksievich's journalistic and creative writing is the tendency to highlight problems within Soviet society. Of course, as Aleksievich is restricted by the ideological requirements of Soviet journalism in the articles, the evaluation of societal issues in *Sel'skaia gazeta* is nowhere near as critical as in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, and *Zacharovannye smert'iu*. Whereas these works represent the Soviet system as inherently flawed and expose serious instances of mistreatment of individuals by the state, the

articles address mere shortcomings, which, moreover, are often the result of individual failure to act in accordance with communist ideals. In her creative writing, then, Aleksievich exposes systemic flaws of Soviet society whereas the articles point to imperfections and defects, problems yet to be overcome on the path to communist utopia. However, the very tendency to highlight societal issues is significant for the purpose of this analysis as Aleksievich has carried this rhetoric across from the journalistic to the literary context.

The most commonly discussed issue in the articles is the lack in many villages of a 'klub', a leisure centre intended to further popular education. Three articles are devoted entirely to this topic.²⁴⁰ Aleksievich also addresses problems arising due to the exodus of the rural population to urban areas, such as the shortage of schoolteachers.²⁴¹ Another issue discussed is the practice of obligatory work placement for university graduates. It is not the practice of obligatory work placements that is criticised here but merely logistical flaws in the organisation of the placements: 'У нас вообще не разработана система мер, заставляющая выпускников вузов отработать хотя бы положенный срок в том месте, куда их

²⁴⁰ Aleksievich, 'V piati kilometrakh ot kul'tury: aktual'naia tema', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (25 February 1975), p. 4; 'Klub dolzhen radovat': gorizonty kul'tury', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (11 January 1976), p. 3; 'Ne ravnodushnyi nabliudatel': obzor pisem', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (15 August 1976), p. 2.

²⁴¹ Aleksievich, 'Edut vypuskniki mimo...', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (23 November 1975), p. 3.

направили'.²⁴² Medical negligence is also a widespread problem that Aleksievich draws attention to, providing numerous examples: a doctor who refused to examine a child who was seriously ill; a man who waited several hours for the ambulance to arrive; a doctor who released a woman prematurely from the maternity ward, forcing her to seek medical attention at a different hospital.²⁴³ The focus on societal issues in Aleksievich's creative writing is thus anticipated in her journalistic work, even though she articulates her critique from two very different standpoints. As a journalist, confined by the ideological requirements of her work, she limits herself to permissible criticism of the Soviet system, focusing on lamentable shortcomings of an imperfect yet ultimately righteous and desirable system. In her later writings, Aleksievich would seek to formulate a fundamental critique of the inherent moral corruption of the Soviet system and history in its entirety, and its violent and harmful impact on the human condition.

An article published on 1 January 1974 highlights the dangers inherent in the overexploitation of natural resources in the Soviet Union, thus introducing the theme of nature in

²⁴² Ibid.

²⁴³ Aleksievich, 'Posle kliatvy Gippokrata: podskazano pochttoi', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (25 October 1973), p. 4.

Aleksievich's journalistic writing and anticipating the eco-critical perspective that is central to *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*.²⁴⁴ 'Chetyre tsveta polia' consists of edited excerpts from the diary of an agronomist, one for each season of the year. The interviewee's main concern is people's consumerist attitude to agriculture: 'меня начинает пугать сугубо потребительское отношение многих к земле'.²⁴⁵ The article cautions the readers of the grave consequences that this irresponsible approach to the exploitation of nature may have as the agronomist states:

Главный принцип такого отношения – взять как можно больше и быстрее. Мы таким образом можем выхолостить почву за несколько десятков лет и оставить ее совсем детям пустой. А надо на земле, на поле своем быть разумными хозяевами.²⁴⁶

This cautionary statement is echoed in the central didactic message in Aleksievich's book on the Chernobyl disaster, which represents the relationship between humans and nature in

²⁴⁴ Aleksievich, 'Chetyre tsveta polia', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (1 January 1974), p. 3. See Juri Seppialiainen, 'Ekokriticheskii analiz knigi S.A. Aleksievich "Chernobyl'skaia molitva: khronika budushchego"', unpublished Mres dissertation, University of Tampere, 2016.

²⁴⁵ Ibid.

²⁴⁶ Ibid.

apocalyptic terms, as Seppialiainen has noted: 'Апокалиптическая риторика и упоминания понятия «конец света» присутствуют на протяжении всей книги'.²⁴⁷ The interest in nature and the concern with the consequences of its overexploitation are thus present in *Sel'skaia gazeta* in embryonic form. As we shall see, this topic is explored in more depth in Aleksievich's articles in *Neman*.

Aleksievich's journalistic writing thus clearly anticipates her books on a thematic level. The Second World War, the notion of 'ordinary' people, the female war experience, the topic of nature, and the concern with societal issues are thematic features which she would develop and transform into a full-blown critique of the Soviet system in her later works. A comparison between her books and journalistic work also demonstrates that there are a number of formal commonalities, which I will discuss in the present section, especially highlighting formal devices that are related to questions of truth. In particular, I will discuss the interview-based monologues, the multi-authored form, authorial commentaries and conclusion, dialectic truth, the didactic

²⁴⁷ Seppialiainen, 'Ekokriticheskii analiz', p. 27.

aspect, stage-directions and the structural device of the 'chance meeting'.

Typically, Aleksievich's articles include interview statements made by several people combined with authorial comments and an explicit message, often presented at the end of the article. Sometimes Aleksievich inserts remarks in parenthesis in the monologues, commenting on the witness's demeanour during the interview and providing the reader with an image of his or her emotional state, not unlike the stage-directions in a play. The lighting of a cigarette, for example, is a recurrent element both in Aleksievich's books and articles. In an article published on Labour Day, Aleksievich interviews Vitalii Ivanovich, a kolkhoz worker in the Brest region in southwest Belarus. Asking him about his relation to an admired superior in the kolkhoz, Aleksievich observes: 'Виталий Иванович закуривает. Чувствую – волнуется. Разговор зашел о сокровенном'.²⁴⁸ In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, Arkadii Filin does the same thing when telling Aleksievich about his wife who recently divorced him: 'Мы ходили в один детский сад, учились в одной школе... В одном институте... (*Закуривает сигарету и молчит.*)' (CM, 107). Filin's monologue is one of many narratives in which Aleksievich uses this device to

²⁴⁸ Aleksievich, 'Goriachaia pashnia', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (1 May 1974), p. 2.

underline the presence of the listener and, at the same time, emphasize her own transparency as an interviewer. As Lindbladh notes, 'these comments represent an ambiguous presence and absence, used in order to mark an exterior perspective in relation to the interior monologue while at the same time avoiding introducing a superior level of narration'.²⁴⁹

In most of Aleksievich's pieces, the interview-statements are presented in a conventionally journalistic fashion with questions and answers clearly separated. However, some interview-statements are rewritten into monologues with a degree of artistic liberty. For example, an article published in connection to Victory Day with the title 'Svidanie s drugom' features an interview-based monologue narrated by Ivan Zaitsev, a war veteran who goes to the city of Grodno to visit the grave of a friend who died the year before.²⁵⁰ In the cemetery, Zaitsev reminisces about the war and ruminates on the technical and industrial progress of Soviet society in the post-war years, addressing his discourse to the deceased friend. His interior monologue is presented 'directly' to the readers, as if they were hearing Zaitsev's thoughts:

²⁴⁹ Lindbladh, 'The Polyphonic Performance', p. 299.

²⁵⁰ Aleksievich, 'Svidanie s drugom: Liudi belorusskoi derevni', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (29 May 1975), p. 4.

«Дружище ты мой, – думал Иван Савельевич, – вот и пришел большой праздник, которого ты так ждал. И солнце как будто угадало: его столько, что наши старые ордена и медали сверкают, как новые. И нам, и нашим детям, и внукам нашим не забыть этого дня. Я все еще говорю «наши», а не «мои», ведь ты по-прежнему для меня живой, Иван.²⁵¹

While Aleksievich does not use interior monologues in her books (the interview-statements are always presented as being spoken), this representation of Zaitsev's thoughts constitutes an early example of the strategy to rewrite interviews into monologues. In the piece mentioned earlier featuring excerpts from the diary of an agronomist, we can see another example that is even more reminiscent of Aleksievich's creative monologues. This piece is introduced with the following statement, narrated by the interview subject:

Я – агроном. И воспринимаю землю, смены времен года на ней не так, как другие. Снежное, неприступное поле радует меня не хорошей лыжней, а надеждой на добрый урожай: больше снега – больше хлеба; весенние, нежные краски

²⁵¹ Ibid.

озими, которая поднимается прямо на глаза, о том, что надо спешить с севом; на фоне желто-спелого поля я всегда представляю работающий комбайн, а пейзаж осенней земли для меня немыслим без тракторов, что старательно ворочает густые пласты...²⁵²

The speaker presents himself by stating his profession, like one of the anonymous speakers in the 'Soldiers' choir' in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*: '«Я – военный человек, мне прикажут – я должен...» (СМ, 84) Furthermore, underneath the agronomist's monologue follows this bracketed remark: 'Из разговора с главным агрономом племзавода «Реконструктор» Толочинского района Константином Васильевичем КОРУНЦОМ'.²⁵³ The phrase 'Iz razgovora' frames individual passages and chapters in most of Aleksievich's books. For example, both parts in *Vremia sekond-khend* begin with the following subheading: 'Из уличного шума и разговоров' (VS, 19). Likewise, a subsection in the appendix to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* begins thus: 'Из разговоров в зале суда' (TS 1994, 205). Aleksievich's journalistic writing, then, allows us to see her early explorations of the montage technique that

²⁵² Aleksievich, 'Chetyre tsveta', p. 3.

²⁵³ Ibid.

would come to define her literary works, which are all structured as compilations of interview fragments.

Intimately linked to the interview-based monologue as well as to the notion of 'ordinary' people is the multi-authored form of Aleksievich's creative and journalistic writing. In 'Chetyre tsveta polia' which contains the introductory statement by the agronomist, the soliloquy is implicitly presented as being the product of two authors: on the one hand, the agronomist-narrator whose interview-statements have formed the monologue and, on the other, Aleksievich who edited his words. This dual authorship is central to Aleksievich's creative writing and is tentatively explored in her journalistic work. However, the people portrayed in *Sel'skaia gazeta* are elevated to the status of co-authors not only through the authorial tension of the interview-based monologue, but also through their position as letter writers. Aleksievich often cites letter writers directly, thus establishing the newspaper article as a space of public expression. The publication of readers' letters was an integral feature of Soviet journalism as the public was encouraged to write to newspapers and magazines throughout Soviet times.²⁵⁴ As Sue Bridger and Jim Riordan note, '[t]his channel [...] was to be the highest expression of

²⁵⁴ Sue Bridger and Jim Riordan, eds., *Dear Comrade Editor: Readers' Letters to the Soviet Press under Perestroika* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), p. 1.

democracy in a free proletarian society, and a safeguard against bureaucracy, entrenched privilege, and ossified thinking'.²⁵⁵ The vast amount of letters sent to the major Soviet newspapers in the 1970s is indicative of the prominence of this element in the Soviet press:

In the late 1970s the total number of letters to all Soviet central newspapers taken together amounted to between 60 and 70 million a year. In 1975, the three top circulation dailies *Pravda*, *Izvestiya*, and *Trud* alone received an aggregate 1.472 million (456,000, 468,000 and 580,000 respectively).²⁵⁶

Sel'skaia gazeta featured regular letters to the editor. An article by S. Mel'nikov and Ia. Misko published on 27 April 1974 contains letters from 20 readers, all of them named and with their profession stated, for instance: 'A. V. Gavrilova, svinarka; V. G. Ivanov, traktorist'.²⁵⁷ The piece is published in connection to the upcoming Supreme Council election, and the letter writers address the changes and improvements made since the last election in the collective farms where they work. Aleksievich thus follows a contemporary journalistic convention

²⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 2.

²⁵⁶ Ibid.

²⁵⁷ S. Mel'nikov and Ia. Misko, 'Rastsvetai, zemlia kolkhoznaia!', *Sel'skaia gazeta* (27 April 1974), p. 2.

when citing and engaging with letter writers. Frequently, her articles are written in response to a letter sent to the newspaper, containing either a complaint or an appeal to pay due attention to an individual with admirable qualities or an interesting story to tell. For instance, one of the articles highlighting the problem of the village clubs includes a collectively written letter from the village of Malyshevichi: '«Дорогая редакция! Собрались рассказать о нашей давней обиде'.²⁵⁸ Aleksievich takes her point of departure in the villagers' complaints about the absence of a club in the community and proceeds to discuss this societal issue in more general terms. The aforementioned piece addressing the situation of war veterans is also produced as a direct response to a letter she has received: 'Письмо Ивана Васильевича Петрунина из Кировского района напомнило мне не столь далекую встречу с другим фронтовиком'.²⁵⁹ Later on, Petrunin's letter is cited directly by Aleksievich:

«...Поверьте, трудно мне писать. Никогда никуда не жаловался. Считал – не мужское это дело. Сейчас пишу,

²⁵⁸ Aleksievich, 'V piati kilometrakh', p. 4.

²⁵⁹ Aleksievich, 'Vsegda i kazhdyi den'', p. 4.

чтобы не только обиду высказать, а и понять, отчего она так иногда получается.²⁶⁰

The article is presented as a space allowing Petrunin – an ‘ordinary’ person – to make himself heard and express his feelings (‘обиду высказать’). The inclusion of his discourse in the article thus underscores its function as a mouthpiece of the ‘people’. Likewise, in the piece on the flaws of the public health service discussed previously, a number of letter writers are named and quoted directly.²⁶¹ These co-authors tell of their personal experiences of medical negligence, together forming a thematically consistent multitude of voices, reminiscent of the ‘choirs’ in *Chernobyl’skaia molitva*. This device also recurs in ‘Telekhanskie devchata’, an article on the working conditions on a pig farm.²⁶² Here, five women take turns in answering the interviewer’s questions, telling Aleksievich about the daily life on the farm and about their dreams and hopes for the future, each presenting an individual ‘voice’ in the mosaic structure underpinning the depiction. Thus, the combination of multiple voices employed in several articles in *Sel’skaia gazeta* provides a blueprint which she would come to rely on in her later books.

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ Aleksievich, ‘Posle kliatvy’, p. 4.

²⁶² Aleksievich, ‘Telekhanskie devchata’, p. 3.

The chance meeting between the author and an interview subject presents a variation of this direct interaction with the reader. In a piece on family relationships from 1974, an unnamed woman approaches Aleksievich at a train station and later confides in her, telling her about the difficult relationship with her son: 'Не помню, как мы с ней разговорились. Кажется, она попросила меня посторожить ее старенький чемодан'.²⁶³ The same structure is employed in *Vremia sekond-khend*, when the author travels to St Petersburg and unexpectedly starts talking to a woman in the same train compartment: 'Ездила в Питербург за другой историей, а вернулась с этой. Разговорились в поезде с попутницей...' (VS, 351) This monologue introduction emphasizes that the interviewee was not intentionally sought out but happened to cross Aleksievich's path, thus implying that the monologue came about without the artifice and contrivance inherent in a planned literary project.

The emphasis on a multitude of voices in Aleksievich's journalistic writing is also implicit in the different points of view presented in the articles. A number of pieces are structured around conflicting truths, prefiguring the formal aspiration to polyphony in Aleksievich's creative works. In the article

²⁶³ Aleksievich, 'Mat', p. 4.

‘Nasledniki’, a father and his son have widely differing opinions on village life and social responsibility, similarly to how two interviewees in *Vremia sekond-khend* express radically different views on perestroika and the disintegration of the USSR: ‘Ничего в их рассказах не совпадало, кроме знакомых имен: Горбачев, Ельцин... Но у каждой был свой Горбачев, и свой Ельцин. И свои 90-е’ (VS, 41). Even though Aleksievich steers her reader towards a certain evaluation of the conflict in ‘Nasledniki’, which discusses the exodus from rural areas, her authorial point of view is gradually revealed as each participant presents his or her side of the story, commenting on each other’s ‘truths’ like Dostoevskian characters: ‘Мой папаша романтик [...] Ему подавай геройство, будто здесь фронт, а не нормальная человеческая жизнь’.²⁶⁴ Similarly, in ‘Schastlivyi direktor’, which explores a conflict among the staff in a local school, each participant presents his or her perspective on the matter:

– Выговоры за что мне давал? За *правду*...

²⁶⁴ Aleksievich, ‘Nasledniki’, p. 4.

– Знаем мы твою *правду*, – не выдерживает кто-то, – для тебя главное было Толкачева уколоть, а не за дело ты болел.²⁶⁵

Coupled with these dialogues is the commentary provided by the author, which guides the reader to a certain conclusion. In both ‘Schastlivyi direktor’ and ‘Nasledniki’, Aleksievich presents a final evaluation of the situation discussed which overrides the various standpoints expressed by the interviewees. Toward the end of the former article, Aleksievich comments on Tolkachev’s conduct thus: ‘Нет, не всегда был прав директор, не всегда доставало у него такта и умения вести людей к общей цели’.²⁶⁶ The significance of this specific case is then extrapolated and articulated in general terms, underscoring the importance of the Soviet collective: ‘человек тем и силен, что идет не один, даже если он впереди остальных’.²⁶⁷ Likewise, ‘Nasledniki’ is concluded by Aleksievich’s remark which undermines the son’s position on social responsibility, refuting his view and reducing it to a link in the dialectical presentation of the main authorial argument. In Aleksievich’s books, the conclusions are usually given in the authorial preface,

²⁶⁵ Aleksievich, ‘Schastlivyi direktor’, p. 4. My emphasis.

²⁶⁶ Ibid.

²⁶⁷ Ibid.

presenting interpretations and observations that are later echoed and confirmed in the thematic coherence of the monologues. This strategy can clearly be traced back to *Sel'skaia gazeta* in which the conversations with real people are framed and interpreted within explicit authorial messages.

Aleksievich's evaluations and conclusions are almost always ethical in nature, presenting specific cases that illustrate general notions of right and wrong. This didactic aspect of her journalistic writing prefigures her creative writing which is concerned with profound moral problems and questions. However, the ethical values underpinning the depictions of Soviet reality in *Sel'skaia gazeta* and *Golosa utopii* respectively, are, of course, entirely different. Whereas Aleksievich's perestroika and post-Soviet works are characterized by the universally humanistic values typically associated with the dissident standpoint, her ethical perspective in *Sel'skaia gazeta* is entirely in line with Socialist ideals.

Neman: 1977-1984

Aleksievich left her position as special correspondent at *Sel'skaia gazeta* in 1976 (publishing her last article on 8 November of that year) and started writing for *Neman*. Her first article in *Neman* appeared in March 1977 and the last one in

September 1984. During these eight years, Aleksievich wrote no more than fourteen articles for the journal, her productivity varying from year to year. After producing five articles in 1977 and three in 1978, she only published one article per year between 1979 and 1980. In 1981, no articles in her name appeared in the journal. Aleksievich has stated that she was the head of the department of socio-political journalism at *Neman* ('руководила отделом публицистики') and would thus have had administrative and editorial duties in addition to her writing.²⁶⁸ According to an endnote in the later editions of *Poslednie svideteli*, she began working on this book in 1978 (PS, 296). Around two years later, she started researching *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, which was published in *Neman* in abridged form in 1984.²⁶⁹ Possibly, the hiatus in her journalistic work in 1981 can be explained by a particularly intense period of research on her first two books. Whether the research for her books was part of her journalistic work with *Neman* or whether the journal granted her a form of sabbatical to produce an extensive piece for serialized publication, remains unknown, but it is noteworthy that Adamovich was a member of the

²⁶⁸ Tetzlaff, 'A Human'. Like 'ocherk', 'publitsistika' does not have a direct English equivalent. The Oxford Russian Dictionary suggests 'sociopolitical journalism' which reflects Ozhegov's definition: 'Литература по общественно-политическим вопросам современности'. See Ozhegov, *Slovar'*, p. 622, and Marcus Wheeler et. al., eds., *Oxford Russian Dictionary*, 3rd edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 414.

²⁶⁹ Basova and Sin'kova, 'Stanovlenie dokumental'no-khudozhestvennogo zhanra', pp. 94-95.

editorial board of *Neman* from February 1979 onwards.²⁷⁰ As her mentor, he would have surely used his influence on the Board to support her research and the publication of her work. Adamovich was, as Basova and Sin'kova note, a defining presence for Aleksievich in the beginning of her career as a writer:

В те уже далекие восьмидесятые А. Адамович дал С. Алексиевич, как она вспоминала, первые адреса женщин-фронтовичек и даже небольшие деньги на поездку к ним и началась работа писательницы над ее книгой «У войны не женское лицо», которая была закончена в 1983 г.²⁷¹

A Russian-language 'literary-artistic and societal-political' journal issued monthly in Minsk ('Ежемесячный литературно-художественный и общественно-политический журнал'), *Neman* was a 'thick journal' comparable to *Novyi mir*, *Oktiabr'*, *Znamia*, and *Zvezda* but more regionally oriented than these nationwide publications.²⁷² Denis Kozlov has noted the importance of the thick journal for the cultural life in the Soviet Union in the post-war period, noting that they 'became

²⁷⁰ The names of the editors appear on page 2 in each issue.

²⁷¹ Basova and Sin'kova, 'Stanovlenie dokumental'no-khudozhestvennogo zhanra', p. 94.

²⁷² The citations from *Neman* in this passage appear on the front page.

household names for any educated family, framing the landscape of Soviet literary and intellectual life for the next several decades'.²⁷³ As shortages were gradually resolved, the post-war years saw a slow increase in the circulation of journals and, in the years following Stalin's death, a number of new periodicals were launched, such as *Druzhba narodov*, *Iunost'*, *Inostrannaia literatura*, and *Neva*.²⁷⁴ Published by Polymia, *Neman* was founded in 1952. It was the periodical of the Union of Writers of the Belarusian Republic ('Орган союза писателей БССР') and combined poetry and literary prose with literary criticism, opinion pieces, and reports on current events.

Each issue of *Neman* is between 160 and 200 pages long and begins with a section of poetry and literary prose, typically a story, novella or a serialized novel. A significant number of these literary texts were originally written in Belarusian and translated into Russian. For example, in the April issue of 1976, three of six authors had their contributions translated from Belarusian: Genadii Buravskin, Ianka Bryl', and Pavel Martinovich.²⁷⁵ There are also some texts by authors from other Soviet republics as well as from communist and socialist states, with translations from Ukrainian appearing in May 1976, from

²⁷³ Denis Kozlov, *The Readers of Novyi Mir: Coming to Terms with the Stalinist Past* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013), p. 58.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 27-37.

²⁷⁵ *Neman* (April 1976).

German in July, from Serbo-Croatian in October and from Armenian in November of the same year. Occasionally, the journal featured literature from abroad, for example serializing *Maigret et la Grande Perche* (1951) by the French novelist Georges Simenon and *El otoño del patriarca* (1975) by Gabriel García Márquez.²⁷⁶

The opening part containing literary prose and poetry was usually followed by a section dedicated to writing introduced under the subheading 'ocherki' or 'publitsistika'. The articles presented here were usually around ten pages long and touched upon a variety of topics, for example: the importance of children's literature; the nature and character of the Soviet man; industrial development in Siberia; life on a collective farm in the city of Gomel'; the distortions of Nazism in Western historiography of the Second World War.²⁷⁷ This would be followed by a review section, subdivided into 'Kritika', 'Iskusstvo' and 'Literaturnoe obozrenie'. A short section, 'Vchera, segodnia, zavtra', concluded each issue. This final section contained much shorter pieces than the previous parts of the journal, texts that were typically between two and three

²⁷⁶ *Neman* (July-August 1976); *Neman* (May-June 1977).

²⁷⁷ Vasil' Bitka, 'Azbuca dushi', *Neman* (January 1981), p. 132; 'My – sovetskie', co-authored, *Neman* (March 1981), p. 137; Aleksei Manets, 'Po zimniku', *Neman* (April 1981), p. 96; Nikolai Serdiukov, 'Budni i prazdniki Gomsel'masha', *Neman* (June 1981), p. 129; Ivan Sachenko, 'Fashizm... tridtsat' shest' let spustia posle porazheniia', *Neman* (August 1981), p. 134.

pages long and addressed a wide range of topics, similarly to the longer section with pieces categorised as 'publitsistika', for example: the importance of Lenin's writings for educational purposes; Aleksandr Blok's relation to his uncle Adam Kublitskii-Piottukha; an art exhibition featuring a carved wooden figure depicting the notion of motherhood; the history of Belarusian ceramics; the life and work of poet Anna Petrovna Bunina, an ancestor of Ivan Bunin; the history of churches erected on the banks of the river Daugava.²⁷⁸

The majority of the literary and essayistic texts were explicitly written in support of the communist project, promoting the notion of fraternity of peoples, focusing on technological progress in the Soviet Union, praising mythological figures of Soviet history such as Lenin and Maiakovskii, as well as glorifying the victory in the Second World War. The issues frequently began with an ideologically charged poem or image, prominently placed on the first page (before the list of contents), framing the subsequent stories, poems, and articles in a propagandistic structure. For example, the March issue of 1976 begins with a laudatory poem by Bronislav Sprinchak, dedicated to the 15th Plenum of the

²⁷⁸ I. Marash, 'Znamia i oruzhie', *Neman* (January 1981), p. 186; Anatolii Shustov, 'Blok v otnosheniiakh s diadei', *Neman* (February 1981), p. 188; V. Kalai, 'Otkrytie dereva', *Neman* (February 1981), p. 190; Evgenii Sakhuta, 'Iskusstvo gliny i ognia', *Neman* (March 1981), p. 189; L. Vankovich, 'Iz roda Buninykh', *Neman* (March 1981), p. 189; Viacheslav Telesh, 'U davnikh prichal', *Neman* (March 1981), p. 191.

Communist Party: 'На просторах солнечной весны, /
Вдохновенные программой съезда, / С молодым задором
/ Повсеместно, / От Владивостока / И до Бреста, / Трудятся
сыны / Большой страны'.²⁷⁹ Similarly to *Sel'skaia gazeta*, then,
Neman was highly propagandistic and edifying in its style and
thematic focus, one of its primary functions being the
promotion of socialist ideology.

Aleksievich published in two different sections of
Neman: 'Ocherki i publitsistika' (nine articles) and 'Vchera,
segodnia, zavtra' (five articles). The articles located under the
latter subheading are significantly shorter – about two pages
long – whereas the 'sketches' placed under the former
subheading are usually around seven pages. There are three
travelogues among Aleksievich's articles, one describing a trip
on the river Volga, the second a journey to Tajikistan and the
third a visit to a settlement in the Soviet Arctic Archipelago.²⁸⁰
Three articles portray individuals who either possess exemplary
qualities or performed some heroic feat of self-sacrifice.²⁸¹
Three articles account for a journey that Aleksievich made to
the countryside, conducting interviews with the rural

²⁷⁹ *Neman* (March 1976), p. i.

²⁸⁰ Aleksievich, 'Po Volge', *Neman* (February 1979), pp. 126-134; 'Vostochnyi uzor: K 60-letiiu Soiuzu SSR', *Neman* (March 1982), pp. 112-118; 'U beregov «Belogo bezmolviia»', *Neman* (April 1983), pp. 169-173.

²⁸¹ Aleksievich, 'Pochta Marii', *Neman* (November 1977), pp. 189-190; '«Vash starvyi tovarishch...»', *Neman* (May 1978), pp. 119-122; 'Zhila devochka Galia', *Neman* (June 1977), pp. 190-192.

population and discussing their concerns and views.²⁸² Two articles address problematic aspects of the exploitation of nature, the first discussing the production of natural medicine in the USSR and the second exploring the potential dangers of land development in Belarusian Polesia.²⁸³ A very short article which does not naturally fall into any of the aforementioned categories, accounts for Aleksievich's encounters with a number of innovative professionals.²⁸⁴ Finally, there are two articles on topical subjects which are given special subheadings: 'Chelovek i priroda' and 'K 100-letiu so dnia rozhdeniia Feliksa Edmundovicha Dzerzhinskogo' – the latter subheading featuring in the September issue of 1977, dedicated to the memory of the Bolshevik revolutionary and founder of the Cheka Feliks Dzerzhinskii.²⁸⁵ The article on Dzerzhinskii is one of two compositions that focus on a historical figure occupying a position of significance in the (Belarusian) Soviet mythology, the other being Iakub Kolas, a Belarusian poet.²⁸⁶

These articles allow us to see Aleksievich's continued development of themes that she started exploring in *Sel'skaia*

²⁸² Aleksievich, 'Efimov dom', *Neman* (July 1977), pp. 135-145; 'Pro to, kak Katerina v gorod ezдила', *Neman* (January 1978), pp. 142-153; 'Baby', *Neman* (March 1980), pp. 122-137.

²⁸³ Aleksievich, 'Romashki spriatalis'...', *Neman* (March 1977), pp. 178-184; 'Izmenit', ne razrushaia', *Neman* (October 1983), pp. 122-127.

²⁸⁴ Aleksievich, 'Est' takaia molodost'', *Neman* (March 1978), pp. 179-180.

²⁸⁵ Aleksievich, 'Mech i plamia revoliutsii', *Neman* (September 1977), pp. 130-135.

²⁸⁶ Aleksievich, 'Poema zhizni', *Neman* (October 1982), pp. 111-117.

gazeta – themes which would become central to her creative work. Her writings for *Neman* provide insights into her transition from journalist to creative writer as she further developed formal elements in the articles, which became increasingly similar to the books she would later write. Preceding the publication of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* in *Neman* in 1984, Aleksievich's articles reveal the deep links between her journalistic and literary work.

The Village and the City

As the brief overview above suggests, there are a number of thematic consistencies throughout Aleksievich's journalistic career, as the topics of nature, war and the countryside in her work for *Sel'skaia gazeta* overlap with her writing for *Neman*. The societal issues addressed in *Sel'skaia gazeta* such as the lack of village clubs and the exodus from rural to urban areas are further elaborated in three extensive articles in *Neman*: 'Efimov dom', 'Pro to, kak Katerina v gorod ezдила' and 'Baby'.²⁸⁷ In these articles, Aleksievich highlights problems such as excessive workloads at collective farms leading to physical and mental exhaustion, the lack of modern well-functioning equipment, food deficit and alcohol abuse, material inequalities

²⁸⁷ Aleksievich, 'Efimov dom'; 'Pro to, kak Katerina'; 'Baby'.

and cramped housing accommodation, as well as the widespread indifference of kolkhoz chairpersons to the workers' needs. These depictions are structured according to a city/village-binary that is a direct continuation of her writing *Sel'skaia gazeta*. However, in her pieces for *Neman*, the dichotomy is much more pronounced: the city stands for comfort, affluence and technological progress but also denotes loneliness, anonymity and individualism. The village, on the other hand, represents shortage, underdevelopment and neglect, but also signifies tradition, community, beauty and spirituality. Her work clearly draws on Village Prose – 'derevenskaia proza' – a widely popular genre in post-Stalinist Soviet literary life which Kathleen Parthé defines thus:

The basic characterization of Village Prose could be expanded from one theme (*tema*) to a collective thematics (*tematika*) that encompassed the rural/urban split, criticism of government policy in the countryside, the revival of Russian national and religious sentiment, a search for national values, a concern for the environment, and a nostalgia generated by the loss of traditional rural life that was elevated to what Geoffrey Hosking has called "an elegiac intensity".²⁸⁸

²⁸⁸ Kathleen F. Parthé, *Russian Village Prose: The Radiant Past* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 3. See also Geoffrey Hosking, 'The Russian Peasant

Replicating a central Village Prose narrative – that of the ‘inhabitants’ abandoning the peasant home to move to a modern consolidated settlement or to the city’ – Aleksievich’s depictions typically revolve around the decision to leave or remain in the village.²⁸⁹ In ‘Pro to, kak Katerina v gorod ezдила’, 62-year old Katerina is persuaded by her son Pavel to leave her native village of Mlyny. Moving in with Pavel and his wife Nina in their three-room apartment in a nearby city (perhaps Brest), Katerina feels increasingly alienated and depressed in the loneliness and idleness of the new environment and returns to the village after six months.²⁹⁰ In ‘Baby’, an old woman that Aleksievich only refers to by the diminutive Pavliuchikha, leaves her native village of Krichevka to live in the city with her son, who is also named Pavel.²⁹¹ In ‘Efimov dom’, a distant relative to Aleksievich decides to build his own house, turning down a two-room apartment in a block of flats in the village centre.²⁹² While Aleksievich presents the rural population and village life romantically as fostering desirable personal qualities of

Rediscovered: “Village Prose” of the 1960s’, *Slavic Review*, vol. 32, no. 4 (1973), pp. 705-724.

²⁸⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁹⁰ Aleksievich, ‘Pro to, kak Katerina’.

²⁹¹ Aleksievich, ‘Baby’.

²⁹² Aleksievich, ‘Efimov dom’.

kindness, modesty, and spirituality, she characterizes the city environment through shallow materialism.

These romanticized sentiments are most clearly manifest in Katerina's story. Depicted as a virtuous, hardworking, modest, kind and unselfish person, Katerina is implicitly contrasted to her daughter-in-law Nina, a beautiful but hopelessly materialistic and shallow character, a typical 'city girl'.²⁹³ Having moved to the city, Katerina misses daily work in the village, planting and sowing, which is not only a habitual necessity but a meaningful ritual: 'И все это было для нее [...] не просто работой, привычным действием, а неким священным обрядом, некой вышей мудростью жизни, которой движется весь человеческий мир'.²⁹⁴ Even more difficult for Katerina is the absence of a sense of community. Shop attendants and passersby appear to be indifferent and unkind, and people living in the same block of flats do not know each other. This anonymity is brought to its most intense and poignant expression when Katerina witnesses the corpse of a lonely old man being carried out of his apartment: 'Ни на одном лице нельзя было прочесть искренней боли, потому что никто не знал умершего'.²⁹⁵ Moreover, urban isolation is

²⁹³ Aleksievich, 'Pro to, как Katerina', p. 150.

²⁹⁴ Ibid., p. 152.

²⁹⁵ Ibid., p. 151.

contrasted to the close-knit community of Katerina's village, which thus becomes justified in a political sense, as it seems to favour the communal over the individualistic as well as to promote a ritualized work ethic, according to Soviet socialist ideology. This romanticisation of village life is also a prominent feature in Aleksievich's later creative work, where it is developed into a logic that assigns a higher degree of directness and authenticity to the discourse of village people, for instance in this passage in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*:

Интереснее всего в те первые дни было разговаривать не с учеными, не с чиновниками и военными с большими погонами, а со старыми крестьянами. Живут они без Толстого и Достоевского, без интернета, но их сознание каким-то образом вместило в себя новую картину мира.
(СМ, 33)

Aleksievich has elaborated this dichotomy of peasants and urban intellectuals in an interview:

В деревне жизнь не завернута в культуру [...] Она подлинная, люди говорят, что они действительно пережили, а не то, что они прочли [...] Хуже всего говорили

интеллигентные люди. Там все торчало: Шолохов, Бакланов... Это было не свое [...] А мне надо было, чтобы человек рассказывал свое.²⁹⁶

The discourse of the rural population is thus ‘uncontaminated’ by secondary knowledge and therefore more ‘authentic’ (‘подлинная’). Thus legitimizing one kind of interviewee by pitting him or her against a negative other, Aleksievich elevates villagers to a position of heightened truthfulness in *Chernobyl’skaia molitva*. Similarly to the three aforementioned articles in *Sel’skaia gazeta*, this book relies heavily on the city/village-binary for its structure and composition. In the beginning of Chapter One, representatives of these two social strata take turns in speaking. The first witness to speak is a psychologist who early on in his monologue makes a reference to Tolstoi (CM, 43-45). In the second monologue, the speaker is an old woman who has remained alone in the polluted area after the evacuation (CM, 45-51). In the third monologue, an inhabitant of Pripiat’ tells his story (CM, 51-53). The fourth monologue is titled ‘Monolog odnoi derevni o tom, kak zovut dushi s neba, chtoby s nimi poplakat’ i poobedat’ and consists

²⁹⁶ Gordon, Dmitrii, ‘Aleksievich. Zhivotnoe Lukashensko, Putin, Nobelevskaia premiia, Chernobyl’, Afganistan’ [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich], Youtube (2016), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CfOljJPIbS0> [accessed 06 December 2022].

of the indistinguishable voices of seven interviewees, making the village speak as a single subject which submerges the individual voices (CM, 54-65). These monologues are full of references to rural culture such as proverbs, superstitions, omens, and legends. For example, a witness in the collective village monologue tells Aleksievich of a domestic ritual ensuring the safe return home of the householder: 'Возьми иконку и переверни ее, и чтобы она так три дня повисела' (CM, 58). Another speaker suggests a different method for the same purpose: 'Надо оставить хлеб на столе и соль, миску и три ложки' (CM, 58). Such references to rural beliefs are echoed in Aleksievich's writing for *Neman*, particularly in Pavliuchikha's monologue in 'Baby', which displays conspicuous commonalities with Aleksievich's depiction of the rural population in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. Pavliuchikha tells Aleksievich about the 'leshii', a tutelary deity of the forests in Slavic mythology. According to Pavliuchikha, her mother saw this mythological creature leading a procession of wolves through the woods:

Видят, волки, что телята, в одной чередке идут, там их тысячи были... А пастырь – в зеленом капелюше и как человек, и как мужчина, за ним волк кривой. Только чохнул пастырь своей пугой, ни один в бок не глянул. С болота и снова в

болота пересунулись. Леший волков вел, бач, и людей не
зачапили...²⁹⁷

In the same vein, an anonymous witness in the village monologue in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* relates how the dead wife of his neighbour came to him during the night to dry and fold his wet laundry. The witness finishes the story by asking: 'Не верите? А тогда отвечайте, откуда сказки взялись? Это же, может, когда-то правда было?' (СМ, 64) In the 1980 monologue in *Neman*, Pavliuchikha concludes her own story in almost identical wording: 'А откуда сказки взялись? Это же, может, когда-то правда было, кто его знает?'²⁹⁸ By a kind of circular logic, both interviewees thus validate the factuality of these fantastic events by reference to the very existence of the accounts describing them. Furthermore, the peasant interviewees' worldview is characterized by a sense of affinity with the natural world, with plants, animals, and insects. One witness in the collective village monologue in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* expresses a feeling of reconciliation with the thought of their own death, apparently seeing him- or herself as indistinguishable from non-human forms of life: 'А я помирать не боюсь. Никто два раза не живет. И лист отлетает, и

²⁹⁷ Aleksievich, 'Baby', p. 128.

²⁹⁸ Ibid.

дерево падает' (СМ, 58). Similarly, Zinaida Kovalenko, an elderly returnee to the contaminated zone, suggests that she possesses the ability to communicate with cats:

Кот человеческого языка не понимает, а как он меня тогда уразумел? Я иду впереди, а он бежит сзади. Мяу... «Отрежу тебе сала.» Мяу... «Будем жить вдвоем.» Мяу... «Назову тебя Васькой.» Мяу... (СМ, 50)

This experience of kinship with all life can be observed in Pavliuchikha's monologue as well. Pavliuchikha tells the interviewer of her grandfather's profound knowledge of the natural world, a deeply valuable, nearly mystic understanding that was accessible to him alone: 'Я хотела, чтоб он меня научил. А не каждому это дается. Сколько зверья на земле бегучего и ползучего, а он всех по именьям, по поколениям назовет'.²⁹⁹ The witness then articulates a holistic worldview with mystical overtones, based on the notion of the sameness and connectedness of all beings: 'Оно ж как-то все на этом свете связано: и человек, и зверь, и то, что ползает. Может, и комара грех убить'.³⁰⁰ We can thus see that the central

²⁹⁹ Aleksievich, 'Baby', p. 127.

³⁰⁰ Ibid.

features of Aleksievich's depictions of the rural population are already present in her journalistic work as the city/village-binary is an important structuring element both in the three *Neman* articles and in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. Aleksievich's romanticisation of village life in general and old legends in particular translates in her creative work into a logic elevating 'old peasants' to a position of superior authenticity as speakers. Additionally, in Aleksievich's representation, a mystical feeling of kinship with the natural world is central to the peasant mindset. This brings us to yet another important thematic commonality between Aleksievich's journalistic and creative work: the relationship between human beings and nature.

Nature

As we have seen, the eco-critical perspective characterizing *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is prepared in her work for *Sel'skaia gazeta*, in which Aleksievich cautions her readers of the grave consequences that an irresponsible approach to the exploitation of nature may have. In *Neman*, two articles are devoted to the topics of nature and environmental protection: 'Izmenit', ne razrushaia' which explores the potential dangers of land development in Belarusian Polesia, and 'Romashki spriatalis'...', a polemical piece on the benefits and problems of

production of natural remedies in the USSR.³⁰¹ The latter article is mainly concerned with technical and administrative problems of large-scale production of natural medicine, discussing, for example, the flaws in the workings of the 'raionnaia zagotkontora', the local procurement agency, stressing the need for educated specialists in this organization.³⁰² However, underpinning this discussion of purely practical matters is an agenda favouring natural medicine over chemically produced medicine, positing the latter as the more 'unnatural' alternative as its widespread usage leads to undesirable side effects.³⁰³ Extrapolating this argument to a more universal discussion of the relationship between humans and nature, Aleksievich states that the extraction of herbs in the USSR is marked by recklessness and lack of consideration for long term environmental consequences, and predicts the disappearance of the Camomile (ромашка).³⁰⁴ The heart of the matter is thus the delicate balance between exploitation and preservation, between using natural resources while not disrupting the ecosystem: 'Сегодня остро стоит вопрос: как научиться широко использовать возможности растительного мира и в то же время сохранить его в первозданной красоте?'³⁰⁵ In other

³⁰¹ Aleksievich, 'Izmenit''; 'Romashki spriatalis'...'.
³⁰² Aleksievich, 'Romashki spriatalis'...'.
³⁰³ Ibid., pp. 183-184.
³⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 182.
³⁰⁵ Ibid.

words, the discussion of the processing of herbs fits into in the binary system of preservation vs. exploitation, equilibrium vs. disruption, and harmony vs. discord, which likewise underlies the eco-critical dimension in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*.

This concern with the simultaneous preservation and exploitation of nature is likewise explored in 'Izmenit', ne razrushaia', published in 1983, six years after 'Romashki spriatalis'...' ³⁰⁶ Examining the implementation of recent land development reforms in Belarusian Polesia – a forest region covering parts of Poland, Ukraine, Russia, and Belarus – this article consists of an interview with senior project engineer Leonid Butkevich. ³⁰⁷ Quite technical in character, the interview delves into the intricacies of the establishment of protective constructions against flooding (such as dams) and discusses the inter-disciplinary cooperation of scientists of different fields. Butkevich also discusses the often far-reaching and unpredictable ramifications of human intervention in the natural world, stressing the importance of balanced and moderate policies in the exploitation of natural resources: 'мы следуем многолетнему человеческому опыту, который говорит [...] что всегда необходимо отстерегаться слишком

³⁰⁶ Aleksievich, 'Izmenit'.

³⁰⁷ Ibid., p. 22. 'Главный инженер проекта инженерных мероприятий по защите от затопления сельхозугодий и по мелорации поймы реки Припять'.

полного, тотального преобразования природы'.³⁰⁸ The article thus addresses the same defining environmental questions as *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, and it is noteworthy that Aleksievich and Butkevich discuss the areas around the river Pripiat', which today passes through the exclusion zone established around the site of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. Even though it is not Aleksievich, but Butkevich who makes the observations cited above, his statements clearly reflect Aleksievich's own sentiments on the need for a careful approach to the exploitation of nature. Of course, a decisive difference between the discussion of environmental issues in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* and in 'Izmenit', ne razrushaia' is the political stances informing the conversations. As Aleksievich underscores in one of her questions in the *Neman* article, environmental protection is a key question in the recently issued state decree on land developments:

В решениях XXVI съезда КПСС [...] защита окружающей среды, рациональное отношение к природным ресурсам и экологическая обоснованность принимаемых решений рассматривались как важнейшие государственные задачи.³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Ibid., p. 126.

³⁰⁹ Ibid., p. 125.

The eco-critical agenda is thus articulated from a position of agreement with the Soviet state. In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, by contrast, the notion of the Soviet project to 'conquer nature' is presented as being the underlying ideological reason for the environmental disaster, which, in turn, is presented as a symbol for the inevitable collapse of the entire Soviet system.

The War

The Second World War continues to be a defining topic in Aleksievich's writing for *Neman* as she treated the war in four articles for the journal. Relating a trip to Tajikistan in the sketch 'Vostochnyi uzor', Aleksievich describes her meeting with Khikmat Rizo, a local 'gurgulikhon' (a poet and performer of Tajik folk songs).³¹⁰ Upon learning that Aleksievich is from the Belarusian republic, this old man tells her about his extended family's fate during the war: 'узнав, что из Белоруссии, положил на колени дутар и сказал, что на войне из его рода погибло тридцать человек, двое из них лежат где-то под Минском'.³¹¹ In this article written to mark the 60th anniversary of the USSR, the war effort is presented in the

³¹⁰ Aleksievich, 'Vostochnyi uzor'.

³¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

context of the idea of the fraternity of peoples, suggesting that the peoples of all Soviet republics have made an equal sacrifice for the victory over fascism and by extension for the realization of communist utopia, thereby uniting them ideologically and politically. Further highlighting this Soviet unity encompassing both Tajikistan and Belarus, the poet tells the interviewer about his enthusiasm at the rise of the Soviet power in the region in the 1930s: 'Когда пришла Советская власть, одним из первых вступил в колхоз. Двадцать лет был бригадиром'.³¹²

Pavliuchikha, one of the interviewees in the aforementioned article 'Baby', tells Aleksievich at length about her experience of the war, describing air raids, famine, executions, the burning of villages, and flight, drawing a picture of violence, occupation, and displacement which would later recur in the memories of the witnesses in *Poslednie svideteli*. *Poslednie svideteli* is the most important point of reference for a discussion of Aleksievich's depiction of the war in *Neman* as there are several overlaps between this work and the journal articles. A short piece with the title "'Baikalu" bylo 10 let' tells the story of Mariia Iasiukevich, a woman who was ten years old at the time of the German occupation and served in a partisan squad as a scout with the code name 'Baikal'.³¹³ Mariia's

³¹² Ibid., p. 114.

³¹³ Aleksievich, "'Baikalu" bylo 10 let'', *Neman* (May 1977), 188-189.

account displays conspicuous similarities to a multitude of speakers in *Poslednie svideteli* as seven chapters in this book tell of children who consciously and actively fought the German troops, either as soldiers in the Red Army, participants of the underground resistance or as members of a partisan squad (PS, 108, 120, 135, 153, 200, 231, 258). As the article about Mariia was published in Mayu 1977 – one year before Aleksievich began working on *Poslednie svideteli* – this indicates that Aleksievich first developed her interest in children’s war experiences in a journalistic context.

Aleksievich’s travelogue titled ‘Po Volge’ continues the war theme but adds a more personal dimension to it.³¹⁴ Covering a journey on the river Volga, this article contains an episode accounting for a visit to Mamaev Kurgan, the memorial complex in Volgograd commemorating the Battle of Stalingrad. In this section of this article, which has the subtitle ‘Otets’, Aleksievich addresses her father in the second person, ruminating on his experience of war and the differences between their respective generations. As is to be expected given the ideological nature of *Neman*, Aleksievich’s description of her visit to the war memorial is highly patriotic, celebrating the heroic self-sacrifice of the fallen soldiers. Just like several

³¹⁴ Aleksievich, ‘Po Volge’.

female veterans in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Aleksievich's father apparently volunteered for military service because of a sense of duty:

Никак не могу представить, что я старше тебя. Старше того девятнадцатилетнего паренька, который сам пришел в военкомат и ему выдали военное обмундирование, винтовку и сумку с патронами...³¹⁵

Such reflections on the author's family history recurs in the authorial preface of the 1985 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, in which Aleksievich addresses the ramifications of the German invasion on her own life:

Я тоже родилась после войны ... но разве своим смертным дыханием она не коснулась и моей жизни? ... Одиннадцати человек недосчитался мой род: украинский дед Петро, отец матери, лежит где-то под Будапештом, белорусская бабушка Евдокия, мать отца, умерла в партизанскую блокаду от голода и тифы, две семьи дальних родственников вместе с детьми фашисты сожгли в сарае в моей родной деревне Комаровичи Петриковского района

³¹⁵ Ibid., p. 127.

Гомельской области, брат отца Иван, доброволец, пропал без вести в сорок первом. (UV 1985, 59)

The Second World War is thus a central thematic feature throughout Aleksievich's journalistic work, defining several articles in both *Neman* and Aleksievich's creative work. In particular, we can see several thematic overlaps in the latter journal with *Poslednie svideteli*, which Aleksievich started to research around the time that she wrote these articles. Marked by a conspicuous propagandistic agenda, these articles either serve to validate the notion of the fraternity of peoples in the USSR (as in 'Vostochnyi uzor') or to highlight the heinous crimes of Nazi Germany (as in 'Baby') or to underscore the heroism of the Soviet people during the war effort (as in "'Baikalu" bylo 10 let' and 'Po Volge'). The patriotic images of the war presented in *Neman* are congenial with those in the first edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, promoting a fundamentally Soviet agenda.

Formal Features: Choirs and Witnesses

The previously discussed formal features in *Sel'skaia gazeta* that overlap with Aleksievich's creative work are present in her articles for *Neman* as well, such as the interview-based monologue (in 'Baby') and the formal polyphony in which a

multitude of interviewees' statements are accompanied by authorial commentary (in 'Efimov dom'). The didactic aspect, which is very pronounced in *Sel'skaia gazeta* in which the interview subjects are evaluated according to their contribution to the socialist project and depicted as either positive or negative characters in the ethical sense, is less distinct in *Neman*, even though several characters serve as 'good' or 'bad' foils for the articles' protagonists (for example Katerina and her daughter-in-law in 'Pro to, kak Katerina v gorod ezдила').

We can thus see both stylistic consistency and development between the two journals. Significantly, the *Neman* articles, which cover on average six pages, are considerably longer than the pieces that Aleksievich produced for *Sel'skaia gazeta* (which are never more than two pages), allowing her to further elaborate her style of writing. 'Baby' is the article that most conspicuously resembles Aleksievich's creative writing in terms of form. The three interviewees, Pavliuchikha, Tet'ia Stefa and Ianichka, tell their individual stories of love, death, and village life, compiling a succession of monologues with thematic coherence, which is interspersed with authorial commentary. This compilation of interview-based monologues is not presented in isolation but framed within the narrative of a journey undertaken by Aleksievich. Aleksievich accounts for the circumstances of the meetings with

the three women and describes their everyday surroundings: 'Снова еду в Кричевку. Бежит, теряется за лесными поворотами знакомая дорога: за Куковым бором скоро кончится лес, встанет серебряный шлем заброшенной сенажной башни'.³¹⁶ This narrative framework is a common device in *Golosa utopii*. For example, in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Aleksievich begins the first chapter by briefly relating her visits to different cities in the Soviet Union as well as describing the home of one of the female veterans: 'Старый трехэтажный дом на окраине Минска, из тех, что наспех и, как тогда казалось, ненадолго, строились сразу после войны, давно и уютно обросший кустами жасмина' (UV, 37). Furthermore, in terms of style, it is noteworthy that Pavliuchikha's and Tet'ia Stefa's monologues are full of dialectal markers. Pavliuchikha uses the Belarusian 'veska' and 'tata' instead of the Russian 'derevnia' and 'papa': 'В той вёске родилась, куда и замуж пошла. Шесть годков было, когда тата помер...'³¹⁷ These markers indicating the speaker's dialect points to Adamovich's influence as they are common in *Ia iz ognennoi derevni*. The first interviewee in this book, Barbara Slesarchuk, speaks a combination of Russian, Belarusian, Ukrainian, and Polish, which Adamovich renders by occasionally using non-standard

³¹⁶ Aleksievich, 'Baby', p. 124.

³¹⁷ Ibid., p. 124.

vocabulary, like Aleksievich in 'Baby': 'Я не думала жить, а думала, куб он не гладел, куб нам от так черепа поснимала, куб мы свою смерть не видали'.³¹⁸

Formal commonalities can be observed on a syntactical level, too. In two *Neman* articles, an interview starts with the repetition of a question by the interviewee, which is a common device in Aleksievich's creative writing. In the travelogues describing Aleksievich's visit to Tajikistan, a female Tajik poet begins her discourse thus: '– Что самое красивое в Таджикистане? – переспрашивает Гулрухсор'³¹⁹ Similarly, in 'U beregov zemli "Belogo bezmolviia"', which relates Aleksievich's journey to a settlement in the Soviet Arctic Archipelago, a woman by the name of Tamara begins her monologue thus: '– Что держит здесь? – переспросит Тамара'.³²⁰ This device silently recognizes the presence of the interviewer and relegates her to the background at the same time, granting maximal space to the speaking interviewee. In Aleksievich's creative work, this is a very common introductory device in the monologues. In *Poslednie svideteli*, Leonida Belaia's monologue starts with the following sentence: 'Запоминает ли что-нибудь ребенок в три года? Я вам

³¹⁸ Adamovich, *Ia iz*, p. 11. As Adamovich explains in a footnote, 'kub' is local dialect for 'chtoby'.

³¹⁹ Aleksievich, 'Vostochnyi uzor', p. 112.

³²⁰ Aleksievich, 'U beregov', p. 172.

ответчу...’ (PS, 219) An unnamed private in *Tsinkovye mal’chiki* similarly repeats Aleksievich’s question: ‘Что я там понял?’ (TS, 112) In the same fashion, a female private in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* says: ‘Ты спрашиваешь, что на войне самое страшное? Ждешь от меня...’ (UV, 93)

Finally, it is in *Neman* that Aleksievich starts referring to her interviewees as ‘witnesses’. This notion appears in a sketch about the Belarusian poet Iakub Kolas (1882-1956), in which Aleksievich speaks to people who remember him, including Katerina, a ninety-seven-year-old woman who was once Kolas’ pupil. The author’s rhetoric in this interview anticipates Aleksievich’s later notions of the immediacy and truth-value of witness-accounts:

Что мы ищем в словах живых свидетелей? Новые факты или подтверждение того, что уже знаем? Видно, мы уже ищем не в словах, слова уже были перед нами сказаны кому-то и не раз, нас влечет другая тайна. Тайна человеческого соседства: «он его видел», «он с ним говорил», «она его слышала». У нас к ним доверие чувства, рядом с ним то далекое кажется близким, раз расстояние от него

измеряется длиной одного поколения. Ни один самый богатый музей в мире этих ощущений не дает.³²¹

Some of the defining formal concepts of Aleksievich's creative writing are present here. Apart from the notion of the witness, there is the frequently recurring idea of the 'secret' ('тайна') as well as the dichotomies of fact vs. feeling and distance vs. proximity. In *Golosa utopii*, 'secret' signifies the intimacy of the conversation between interviewer and interviewee and is thus implicitly linked to the idea of truth in that it, by extension, denotes the revelation of a previously unrecorded first-hand experience. In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, cameraman Sergei Gurin begins his monologue thus: 'Это – моя тайна. Об этом никто больше не знает. Я говорил об этом только со своим другом...' (CM, 124) Invoking the same sense of privacy, an anonymous military advisor in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* finishes his monologue by reminding Aleksievich of the seal of confession: 'Не забудьте о тайне исповеди...' (TS, 57) On a more overarching structural level, the 'secret' also denotes the mystery of a central topic, as in, again, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. In the authorial preface to this book, Aleksievich states that she felt compelled to work slowly and patiently on her book in order

³²¹ Ibid., p. 113.

to probe deeply into the nature of the accident, instead of quickly producing a book like the ones already written on the nuclear disaster:

Конечно, можно было быстро написать книгу, какие потом появлялись одна за другой [...] но что-то меня останавливало. Держало за руку. Что? Ощущение тайны [...] У всех появилось высказанное или не высказанное чувство, что мы прикоснулись к неведомому. Чернобыль – это тайна, которую нам ещё предстоит разгадать. (СМ, 31)

Published in October 1982, the article on Kolas appeared almost exactly two years before *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* in the journal and outlines the major elements of Aleksievich's writing which would come to shape her work on the female experience of war, namely the fact/feeling-dichotomy as well as the privileged access of the witness to a secret that is waiting to be uncovered.

'Iconic Soviet Figures': Kolas and Dzerzhinskii

Two articles in *Neman* focus on what Golstein refers to as 'iconic Soviet figures' – figures of historical importance to Belarusian Soviet society – Feliks Dzerzhinskii (1877-1926) and the less

ethically controversial poet Iakub Kolas.³²² Iakub Kolas is a pen name used by the Belarusian poet and folklore collector Konstantin Mitskevich (1882-1956).³²³ Educated at the teacher seminar in Nesvizh ('Несвижская учительская семинария'), Kolas worked as a schoolteacher in the villages Liusino and Pinkovichi before the publication of 'Nash rodnoi krai' in 1906, a poem celebrating the natural beauty of Belarus and lamenting its widespread poverty, which marked the beginning of Kolas' career as an author.³²⁴ In the article titled 'Poema zhizni', Aleksievich depicts the period Kolas spent as a village teacher, framing this narrative with an account of her traveling to Liusino, where she visits the local museum and speaks to a number of villagers.³²⁵ Hagiographic in character, the article presents Kolas as a paragon of virtue and provides a number of anecdotal accounts of his remarkable modesty and unparalleled generosity. Depicting Kolas' socialist radicalization during his period as a village teacher, which eventually led to his imprisonment in 1908, Aleksievich frames his virtues within an ideological structure, implicitly linking his high moral

³²² Golstein, *Svetlana Aleksijevitj*, p. 17.

³²³ 'Iakub Kolas – Biografiia', *Tsentralnaia nauchnaia biblioteka inemi Iakuba Kolasa Natsional'noi akademii Belarusi*, <https://csl.bas-net.by/personalii/66048/mickevich-konstantin-mihailovich/> [accessed 15 December 2022].

³²⁴ Ibid.

³²⁵ Aleksievich, 'Poema zhizni'.

integrity to his political persuasions and awareness of the exploitation of peasants under autocracy:

«Газеты радикального характера, японская война, беседы учителей, знакомых, с которыми встречался летом, направили меня на революционный путь. В 1905 году я уже был завзятым врагом самодержавия и в этом направлении вел работу». И тут же: «Надо не отрываться от народа, жить его интересами и помогать ему освободиться от того зла и несправедливости, которые окружают его».³²⁶

The depiction of Dzerzhinskii displays the same defining features and is likewise hagiographic in character.³²⁷ Born close to the town of Ivenets in Western Belarus, Dzerzhinskii was a Polish Bolshevik revolutionary and a close associate of Lenin who led the creation of the Cheka in December 1917.³²⁸ Linked in popular memory with Stalin's purges and treated as a symbol of commendable revolutionary fervour in official discourse, Dzerzhinskii turned into an emblem of terror, violence and

³²⁶ Ibid., 115. Aleksievich cites an unspecified publication by Kolas.

³²⁷ Aleksievich, 'Mech i plamia'.

³²⁸ Liliana Riga, 'The Ethnic Roots of Class Universalism: Rethinking the "Russian" Revolutionary Elite', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 114, no. 3 (2008), pp. 649-705, p. 669; R.W. Pethybridge, 'The Bolsheviks and Technical Disorder, 1917-1918', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 49, no. 116 (1971), pp. 410-424, p. 418.

repression during perestroika.³²⁹ Aleksievich's article has the title 'Mech i plamia revoliutsii' and was published in the September issue of 1977, in connection with the centenary of Dzerzhinskii's birth on 11 September 1877.³³⁰ It details Aleksievich's journey to Dzerzhinskii's native village where she visits the local museum dedicated to him.

Aleksievich praises Dzerzhinskii's exceptional qualities, his unbending will and bravery, his modesty and selflessness, his love for children and for nature, while describing his period in Tsarist prison and exile as a time of meaningful and dignified suffering, preparing him for the revolutionary struggle. Similarly to the rhetoric in her piece on Kolas, she links Dzerzhinskii's moral integrity to his socialist persuasions and to his intensely felt concern with material inequalities in pre-Revolutionary society: 'он [...] не раз возвращался из школы в стареньком чужом костюме, отдав свой новый с ежедневным завтраком бедному товарищу'.³³¹ Sharing the distinct tone of veneration, the presentation of anecdotes testifying to Kolas' and Dzerzhinskii's selflessness as well as the link made between moral qualities and socialist persuasions, both articles are

³²⁹ N. Beskhebniaia, 'Russian History Through the Eyes of Three Moscow Monuments', *Russianlife* (1 January 2017), pp. 38-45, <https://russianlife.com/magazine/jan-feb-2017/history-through-the-eyes-of-three-monuments/> [accessed 02 December 2022], p. 44.

³³⁰ Aleksievich, 'Mech i plamia'.

³³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

governed by the ideological requirements and the journalistic conventions of their time. Given Aleksievich's later uncompromising opposition to the authoritarian Soviet regime, this unquestioning laudatory piece on Dzerzhinskii is a surprising but isolated incident, indicative of the compromises she had to make during her time working for *Neman* and of the limits of individual responsibility and choice in the context of Soviet journalism.

Aleksievich's journalism is a crucial factor which has profoundly shaped her practice as a writer. An analysis of her journalistic writings shows that she developed her literary style and her distinct set of thematic concerns in this context, building on her experiences as a journalist in the writing of her books. The chief topics defining *Golosa utopii* thematically can all be found in the articles that she produced for *Sel'skaia gazeta* and *Neman*: the Second World War and the female experience in a traditionally male context; the relationship between humans and nature; the societal issues of the USSR; the notion of 'ordinary' people. Such similarities suggest that the experience of working as a journalist fundamentally shaped Aleksievich as a writer.

We can also see that the preoccupation with questions of authenticity and truth-value in *Golosa utopii* constitutes a

continuation of Aleksievich's journalistic methodology. Even though her articles clearly express a certain viewpoint, shaping the documentary material according to the conventions of Soviet journalism between the Prague Spring and perestroika, the basic obligation to factual accuracy is an integral part of both her journalistic and creative writing. Moreover, the conversation between Adamovich and Iudanov that Aleksievich recorded in 1976 shows that Aleksievich was already aware of the questions of truth and untruth that would later shape her works. The perceived opposition between the embellishments of fiction and the heightened truthfulness of non-fiction profoundly informs her works. During her time as a journalist, she also developed the strategy of legitimizing one kind of interviewee by pitting him or her against a negative other, a logic that is clearly manifest in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* which opposes male to female. This rhetoric of assigning a superior truth-value to a certain type of interviewee is also grounded in the idealization of village life, which in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* translates into a logic ascribing a higher degree of directness and authenticity to the discourse of village people. Lastly, the notions of dialectic truth and formal polyphony form the defining structural device in several articles in *Sel'skaia gazeta*, in which a number of conflicting truths are presented, later to be resolved in Aleksievich's authorial commentary.

Beyond the stylistic and thematic traces which her journalism has left in her later work, her career as a Soviet journalist also allows us to assess the complex strategies by which Aleksievich fashions and controls her public image. Since the interview with Aleksievich recorded in 1996, she has frequently insisted on the necessity to divide herself into a public and a private self to explain the discrepancy, which Golstein has correctly noted, between publicly conforming as a journalist while privately dissenting. Today, Aleksievich emphatically identifies as a writer rather than a journalist. As Masha Gessen notes in 2015, Aleksievich finds the term reporter 'almost insulting' and states that she has known 'since I was five that I wanted to be a writer, not a journalist'.³³² Furthermore, when asked in 2017 what her experience of working as a Soviet journalist had taught her, Aleksievich, again replying evasively, understated the political and ideological nature of her journalistic writing: 'Я никогда не занималась политической журналистикой'.³³³

Aleksievich's attempts to distance herself from her journalistic background may be explained by the ideological orientation of her journalism which was generally in line with

³³² Masha Gessen, 'The Memory Keeper: The Oral Histories of Belarus's New Nobel Laureate', *The New Yorker* (19 October 2015).

³³³ Tetzlaff, 'A Human'.

official Soviet ideals. Whether this ideological agreement means, as Golstein asserts, that she 'happily' conformed to the ideological requirements of the official discourse and to Soviet journalistic conventions is, of course, impossible to ascertain in a writer as intensely private as Aleksievich. In this respect it is interesting to note that the current perception in Western public discourse of Aleksievich as a Soviet dissident is a retrospective projection, as it were, of her current activism as a vocal critic of Aleksandr Lukashenka, the increasing authoritarianism of Putin's regime and the Russian invasion of Ukraine. The following chapter will examine the strategies by which Aleksievich encourages exactly this view of her dissident stance.

Chapter Three: Aleksievich's Cultural Autonomy: Counter-narrative and Symbolic Capital in *Golosa utopii*

While Aleksievich commenced her career as a journalist, developing her writing thematically, formally, and conceptually in this context, the works that she produced during and after perestroika are frequently positioned against Soviet journalism, foregrounding articles in Soviet newspapers as the negative other of her own discourse. In other words, Aleksievich's later works are presented as counter-narratives. Counter-narratives can be broadly defined as 'the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives'.³³⁴ Importantly, counter-narratives are not defined by their inherent narrative properties but by the position that they occupy in relation to another narrative. Counter-narratives thus define themselves in relation to master narratives, that is, by offering a view of reality that deliberately conflicts with the 'dominant cultural storylines'.³³⁵ From this point of view, *Golosa utopii* is comparable to *Arkhipelag Gulag*,

³³⁴ Molly Andrews and Michael Bamberg, eds., *Considering Counter Narratives: Narrating, Resisting, Making Sense* (Amsterdam: J. Benjamins, 2004), p. 1.

³³⁵ Ibid.

which can be read as a counter-narrative to the master narrative of official Soviet historiography, as Malia notes:

Solzhenitsyn's anti-epic constantly reaches out for some Absolute through all the horrors of Soviet existence. It does this first on the level of historical reconstruction: since all existing Soviet history is a monstrous falsification, the first step toward national regeneration must be to substitute the true record of the past for the lies of the regime. The *Gulag* thus is the first authentic Soviet history, the first real chronicle of the *res gestae* of the Soviet people. Only once this Truth has been told will it be possible to break the spell of the Lie which holds the nation in thrall.³³⁶

From 1990 onwards, Aleksievich has undoubtedly adopted Solzhenitsyn's stance as a truth-teller, a collector and preserver of witness-accounts exposing the 'lies of the regime'. The monologues in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* are positioned in opposition to reports on the Soviet-Afghan war in Soviet newspapers and the later edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (2004) contains eyewitnesses' accounts which are pitted against the perceived male official canon of commemoration of the Second World War. The narratives in *Golosa utopii* thus define themselves as authentic through their negative relation to an inauthentic

³³⁶ Malia, 'Review', p. 52.

Other. Ultimately, this insistence on authenticity can be understood as a claim to *autonomy* from the official Soviet discourse. I take this term from the works of Pierre Bourdieu, whose notions of position-taking, symbol and economic capital, and doxa constitute the theoretical framework of my analysis of Aleksievich's counter-narratives and her public persona as a dissident writer in the following chapter. This conceptualisation further draws on Komaromi's research on dissident social activity in the post-Stalin period, applying her ideas to a more extensive historical period, including the post-Stalin period, perestroika and the post-Soviet era.

Bourdieu's Concept of Cultural Autonomy: Applicability to the Soviet Context and to Aleksievich

In Pierre Bourdieu's theoretical framework, the dissident stance defining Aleksievich's work of the perestroika and post-Soviet periods can be conceptualised as a form of 'cultural autonomy'. Bourdieu developed his ideas of autonomy in two major works – *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (*Les règles de l'art*, 1992) which traces the genesis of an autonomous cultural field in nineteenth-century France and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), in which Bourdieu

elaborates his concepts of field, capital, and habitus.³³⁷ Bourdieu sees the production and perception of literary works as a process of position-taking within a space of objective relationships. In other words, authors construct their identities by differentiating themselves from one another, occupying positions defined by a set of assumptions about artistic value. In particular, Bourdieu distinguishes between two subfields – the heteronomous and the autonomous fields – with the former depending on commercial success for validation and the latter on peer judgement. According to Bourdieu, the cultural field of nineteenth-century France is thus structured around the binaries of commercial art vs. ‘pure’ art as well as bourgeois art vs. avant-garde art. The field of cultural autonomy representing *l’art pour l’art* and the avant-garde is informed by an anti-economy, which recognises its own symbolic capital, distinct from material gain or power. Furthermore, cultural agents occupy positions in the respective fields depending on their habitus and their dispositions, which are usually shared by people with similar backgrounds (social class, religion, nationality, ethnicity, education, profession). Thus,

³³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1993). *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1996).

an artistic field is a structure of relations between positions which, with the help of several forms of capital, on the one hand, and based on a joint *illusio* and their own doxa, on the other, struggle for specific symbolic capital (prestige). The positions are occupied by agents, who take these positions on the basis of their habitus.³³⁸

Komaromi uses Bourdieu's terms to conceptualise unofficial culture and dissident social activity in the post-Stalin period, focusing on Andrei Siniavskii's writings as official critic and uncensored writer and on mathematician Aleksandr Esenin-Vol'pin's public demands for judicial transparency in the Siniavskii-Daniel' trial.³³⁹ Analogously to Bourdieu's distinction between the autonomous and the heteronomous subfields, Komaromi posits a field of unofficial culture within the larger grid of political and economic forces in Soviet society, whose 'principal feature [is] the autonomy from official discourses and institutions assumed by all who act on the field'.³⁴⁰ Komaromi describes the genesis of the autonomous field as a gradual process beginning in the mid-1950s, which, following a period of increased political repression in the early 1960s, culminates in the Siniavskii-Daniel' trial in 1966. Komaromi sees Siniavskii as an exceptionally influential individual whose illegal

³³⁸ Hans van Maanen, *How to Study Art Worlds: On the Societal Functioning of Aesthetic Values* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2009), p. 55.

³³⁹ Komaromi, 'The Unofficial Field', p. 608.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 607.

publications under the pseudonym Abram Terts marked the emergence of the Soviet autonomous field, similarly to how Émile Zola's *J'accuse* – according to Bourdieu – represented a culmination in the shift of the French cultural field.³⁴¹

Komaromi makes a significant contribution to our understanding of dissident culture by translating the Bourdieuan notion of the autonomous field into Soviet terms. Where Bourdieu contrasted commercial art with *l'art pour l'art*, Komaromi pits official culture against unofficial culture. Whereas official culture accords with state ideology and is distributed by state-sponsored channels, unofficial culture dissents from state ideology and is chiefly distributed and expressed outside the state-sponsored channels. In establishing this distinction, Komaromi does not suggest that the dividing line between these poles is fixed or stable. On the contrary, following recent critiques of the binary categories traditionally used to describe late Soviet socialism, Komaromi recognises that binary oppositions such as unofficial vs. official, repression vs. freedom, the state vs. the people, are today considered to be ideologically implicated and critically outmoded. As Komaromi rightly points out, however, '[t]he boundaries of the field [...] are important not because they neatly divide people or

³⁴¹ Ibid., p. 609.

groups; rather, such boundaries represent important structuring elements'.³⁴² The official/unofficial-binary is not a transcendental category, then, imposing an absolute identity on agents of the late Soviet field as being either conformist or non-conformist, free or repressed, pro-Soviet or anti-Soviet, liberal or conservative; instead, it is a structure according to which agents define themselves in relation to other positions of the field, through their writing, their social activity, and their ways of distributing and publishing literary works (samizdat, tamizdat). It is interesting to note that Komaromi's discussion of writers of the late Soviet period such as Siniavskii, Andrei Bitov, Vasilii Aksenov, and Venedikt Erofeev, remains relevant to Aleksievich's works from the post-Soviet period.

While the first editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* (1985) and *Poslednie svideteli* (1985) reproduce defining ideological features of official Soviet discourse on the war, their revised editions from the post-Soviet period set themselves up in opposition to that very same official discourse. In the 2004 revision of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, for instance, the added 'Conversation With the Censor' suggests a fundamental disagreement between the author and official Soviet ideology with Aleksievich positioning herself according to the same

³⁴² Ibid., p. 627.

antithetical logic as Siniavskii and Solzhenitsyn. As we shall see, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* is also structured according to these binaries and relies heavily on the repeatedly emphasised autonomy from official Soviet discourse for their sense of heightened truthfulness. As Aleksievich thus draws on the rhetoric of Soviet dissidence retrospectively – after the collapse of the Soviet Union – there is a temporal dimension in her autonomy that Bourdieu's terminology does not account for. Negotiating the gap between Soviet and post-Soviet reality, this strategy can be termed *retrospective position-taking*.

Aleksievich's positioning within the autonomous field can be understood in terms of her accumulation of *symbolic capital*. Symbolic capital is defined as 'economic or political capital that is disavowed, misrecognized and thereby recognized, hence legitimate, a "credit" which, under certain conditions, and always in the long run, guarantees "economic" profit'.³⁴³ A defining feature of symbolic capital is its surreptitious character. As sociologist Loïc Wacquant states, 'symbolic capital [...] designates the effects of any form of capital when people do not perceive [it] as such'.³⁴⁴ In Bourdieu's own words, practices of symbolic capital 'can only

³⁴³ Bourdieu, *The Field*, p. 75.

³⁴⁴ Loïc Wacquant, 'Pierre Bourdieu', in Rob Stones, ed., *Key Sociological Thinkers* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), pp. 261-277, p. 268.

work by pretending not to be doing what they are doing' as symbolic capital can be converted into economic capital when a (mis)recognized author is *consecrated* – for instance when receiving a prestigious literary prize.³⁴⁵ In the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century France, symbolic capital is defined by the supposed economic disinterestedness of producers of pure and avant-garde art as opposed to the economic profits made by commercial and bourgeois authors. The conversion of symbolic capital into economic capital takes place with the gradually growing popularity of a (mis)recognized avant-garde writer, for example Alain Robbe-Grillet, whose *La Jalousie* sold a mere 746 copies when it was first published in 1957 but had attained a total of 29 462 copies sold by 1968.³⁴⁶

In the Soviet context, symbolic capital is defined by its autonomy from official culture. For instance, Viktor Krivulin's suggestion that only Leningrad could boast unofficial culture, because in Moscow, 'there was no rigorous separation between official and unofficial worlds', is, in Komaromi's terms, a 'bid for symbolic capital'.³⁴⁷ The conversion of symbolic into economic capital occurs when a (mis)recognized autonomous work

³⁴⁵ Bourdieu, *The Field*, pp. 74-74.

³⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

³⁴⁷ Komaromi, 'The Unofficial Field', p. 627.

reaches a space that grants validity to its cultural autonomy. For example, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* was translated shortly after its publication in Russian – into French as *Les cercueils de zinc* in 1991, into English as *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* in 1992 and into German as *Zinkjungen* in the same year.³⁴⁸ The book was particularly commercially successful in France as Christian Bourgois Éditeur issued a paperback version in 1991. Its marginalization in 1992-1993 and subsequent censorship in Belarus constituted a significant amount of symbolic capital in the autonomous field, which was, once transferred to a different literary field, converted into economic capital.

Symbolic capital is accumulated according to a certain *doxa*. Bourdieu understands *doxa* as a set of presuppositions that determine the production and reception of works of literature and art: 'Every position has corresponding *presuppositions*, a *doxa*, and the homology between the positions occupied by producers and those of their clients is the condition of [...] complicity'.³⁴⁹ In other words, literature is produced and received according to a set of underlying assumptions about artistic value. These assumptions shape the

³⁴⁸ Aleksievich, *Les Cercueils de zinc* (Paris: Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1991); *Zinky Boys: Soviet Voices from the Afghanistan War* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992); *Zinkjungen* (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1992).

³⁴⁹ Bourdieu, *The Rules*, p. 165.

tacit agreement between author and reader, or, in Bourdieu's words, 'the *coincidence* that is established between the different categories of works offered and the expectations of different categories of the public'.³⁵⁰ In nineteenth-century France, these assumptions were first and foremost connected to notions of commercial and pure art, the bourgeoisie and the avant-garde, as we have seen. The *doxa* of Soviet autonomous culture could easily be mapped onto Bourdieu's concepts of the workings of the literary field, as Uvarova and Rogov's description of the mythologised binary categories structuring Soviet culture suggests:

Сформировавшаяся в последние годы общая модель, в которой подлинной художественной жизни "андерграунда", "независимой" культуры противопоставлена "косная", "безжизненная", "ненастоящая" "официальная", представляется упрощенной и мифологизированной, воспроизводящей отчасти идеологические установки 1970-х годов ("в советском журнале в принципе не может быть напечатано ничего хорошего, настоящий текст может быть только в сам- или тамиздате"), а отчасти – типическую риторику "нового" стиля (например,

³⁵⁰ Ibid., p. 162.

"романтиков" по отношению к "классикам" или "авангарда" по отношению к "реализму").³⁵¹

Aleksandr Daniel' offers a similar analysis, assigning the doxa of unofficial cultural the status of 'myths':

Миф о героической и бескомпромиссной истине, политической, художественной, научной, которая заведомо не живет в подцензурном пространстве. Это мировоззрение априори полагает, что официальная культура вся, по определению, не может не быть конформистской и репильной, и что настоящие культурные события совершаются лишь за ее пределами.³⁵²

The 'mythology' of autonomous Soviet culture, then, is based to some extent on positional presuppositions about certain ways of distributing and publishing texts. Yet, beyond samizdat and tamizdat as significant gestures of the doxa of unofficial culture, there are further markers of artistic autonomy in the Soviet context, which constitute and highlight the autonomy of an author or text from the official discourse, namely the

³⁵¹ K. Rogov and I. P. Uvarova, 'Semidesiatye: khronika kul'turnoi zhizni', in K. Rogov, ed., *Semidesiatye kak predmet istorii russkoi kul'tury* (Venice: Rossia/Russia, 1998), pp. 29-74.

³⁵² Aleksandr Daniel', 'Istoriia samizdata', in T.V. Gromova and E.V. Shukshina, eds., *Gosbezopasnost' i literatura: na opyte Rossii i Germanii (SSSR i GDR)* (Moscow: Rudomino, 1994), pp. 289-409. Daniel's use of "myth" should not be understood as invention or fantasy but as cultural construct.

presentation of counter-narratives as well as references to legal prosecution and exile. I will examine the textual strategies by which Aleksievich insists on her autonomy from official Soviet discourse in her works, accumulating symbolic capital according to the doxa of autonomous Soviet culture. In particular, I will examine three different rhetorical and structural devices that Aleksievich employs in order to construct her autonomy. Firstly, I will address the ways in which she pits her monologues against the official Soviet discourse, framing her counter-narratives reality and truth against official myth and untruth. Secondly, I will discuss how Aleksievich constructs an authorial persona in her work by drawing on markers of Soviet dissidence, such as different forms of political persecution and repression suffered by the author as a result of her non-conformist depictions of the Soviet system, including the 1992-1993 trial and references to rejection from publication. Thirdly, I will analyze how she anchors herself firmly in a Soviet tradition of artistic resistance by way of implicit and explicit allusion to important non-conformist figures such as Akhmatova and Shalamov.

Artistic and political Autonomy in *Golosa utopii*: a

Textual Analysis

Myth vs. Reality

Aleksievich's construction of counter-narratives can be understood as a recurrent juxtaposition of official Soviet discourse on the one hand and witness-accounts on the other, where the former represents myth and untruth and the latter reality and truth. Soviet newspaper and television accounts of current events, war commemorations and the official literary canon are frequently contrasted with the gritty stories told by Aleksievich's interviewees. This juxtaposition is integral to the insistence on authenticity in her prose and draws on the set of binaries, recognisable and widely used to describe late Soviet socialism, which Yurchak and others have challenged.³⁵³ Invoking what in Pierre Bourdieu's terms can be called a *doxa* of autonomous culture, Aleksievich reproduces the idea of the epistemological, aesthetic and moral superiority of 'unofficial' Soviet culture by structuring her narratives according to the dichotomies of lie vs. truth, sincerity vs. insincerity, obedience vs. resistance, private vs. public.

In *Golosa utopii*, these binaries are manifest for the first time in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, published five years after Mikhail Gorbachev was appointed Secretary General of the Communist Party and, at the very plenary session of the appointment, called for further democratisation of society and increased

³⁵³ See pp. 46-48 in the present thesis.

openness. Focusing on the Soviet-Afghan war which had ended one year earlier, in 1989, this book depicts this military conflict through monologues based on interviews with a total of 65 people: male and female war veterans, widows, and mothers of soldiers who were killed in action. The monologues in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* are framed by excerpts from the author's diary, apparently written between June 14 1986 and May 15 1989, as well as by fragments from Soviet newspapers (TS, 5-11). The book begins with a personal reflection by the author, declaring her repulsion to all forms of violence, which is followed by an anecdotal observation made in a bus station when Aleksievich notices two soldiers, an officer and a younger private, who is severely traumatised by his time in Afghanistan:

Офицер сопровождал домой солдата, сошедшего с ума: «С Кабула копает, что попадает в руки, тем и копает: вилкой, палкой, авторучкой». Мальчишка поднял голову: «Прятаться надо... Я вырою щель... У меня быстро получается... (TS, 6)

This observation is immediately followed by a reflection about the official discourse on the war:

О чем говорят вокруг меня? О чем пишут? Об интернациональном долге, о геополитике, о наших державных интересах, о южных границах... Матери, недавно в отчаянии бившиеся над слепыми железными ящиками, выступают в коллективах, в школах, призывая других мальчиков «выполнить долг перед родиной». Цензура внимательно следит, чтобы в военных очерках не упоминалось о гибели наших солдат, нас заставляют верить, что «ограниченный контингент советских войск» помогает братскому народу строить дороги, развозить удобрения по кишлакам, а советские военврачи принимают роды у афганских женщин. И многие верят. (ТС, 6)

The phrases from Soviet newspapers cited by Aleksievich are consistent with depictions of the war in Soviet media until the second half of the 1980s. As Sheikh has observed, Soviet forces 'were portrayed as performing non-combat, humanitarian tasks at the request of the Afghan revolutionaries'.³⁵⁴ Before the autumn of 1986, 'reports on combat activities focused almost exclusively on praising the courage and valour of selfless "internationalist" soldiers who were heroically carrying out their military tasks'.³⁵⁵ Patriotically charged and historically referential notions in Soviet propaganda, cited by Aleksievich, such as 'international duty' and 'duty to the motherland', link

³⁵⁴ Ali T. Sheikh, 'Soviet and Western Media Coverage of the Afghan Conflict', *Strategic Studies*, vol. 13, no. 3 (1990), pp. 35-63, p. 42.

³⁵⁵ Ibid.

the Afghanistan campaign to the Second World War, thus justifying it ethically and ideologically. By juxtaposing such phrases to the young soldier's individual trauma, Aleksievich suggests the moral vacuousness of the official ideology that these slogans represent. Furthermore, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* makes the initial promise to expose the truth about the war that censorship has withheld from the general public. Shortly after the paragraph cited above, Aleksievich cites an official account of the war published on the 7 February 1989 in *Moskovskaia pravda*:

Из сегодняшних газет:

«В Термезе зацвел миндаль, но если бы природа и не приподнесла такого подарка, эти февральские дни все равно бы остались в памяти жителей старинного города как самые торжественные и радостные...

Грянул оркестр. Страна приветствовала возвращение родных сыновей. Наши парни возвращаются, выполнив свой интернациональный долг... За эти годы советские солдаты в Афганистане отремонтировали, восстановили и построили сотни школ, лицеев, училищ, три десятка больниц и столько же детских домов, около четырехсот жилых домов, тридцать пять мечетей, многие десятки колодцев, около ста пятидесяти километров арыков и каналов... Они занимались охраной

военных и мирных объектов в Кабуле» (Московская правда, 1989,
7 февр.) (TS, 12)

In the discourse that Aleksievich cites, the return of the conscripts to the Motherland is depicted as an unproblematic and joyful event, and their service in Afghanistan is summarized in terms of the number of schools, hospitals, and residential buildings that they built for the benefit of the local Afghan population. Immediately after this follows a section containing fragments from conversations with soldiers, whose subheading – ‘Из разговоров’ – directly mirrors the heading framing the newspaper excerpts – ‘Из сегодняшних газет’ (TS, 13). This section begins thus: ‘Я даже по ночам крови боюсь... Боюсь своих снов...’ (TS, 13) Cited here is an anonymous Soviet soldier who is severely traumatized by his involvement in combat, which directly contradicts the pompous depiction of the conscripts’ triumphant return home and of the non-violent nature of their service in Afghanistan presented in the official version. The soldier reflects on the narrative act itself, expressing his experience of speaking from a position of enforced silence and cultural marginalization: ‘Кому я могу это все рассказать? Кто будет слушать?’ (TS, 13) Contrasting such witness-statements with the ‘distorted’ image of the war in Soviet newspapers, Aleksievich states that she wishes to depict

reality from a truthful and objective perspective: 'Я [...] хочу отразить мир человека таким, каким он есть' (TS, 13)

Pitting her own narrative against the official depictions of the war, Aleksievich thus reproduces the positional presuppositions inherent in the 'mythology' of unofficial Soviet culture, as outlined by Rogov and Uvarova and Daniel'.³⁵⁶ It is instructive to compare Aleksievich's textual strategies to the works of other Soviet authors who claimed some degree of autonomy from the official discourse, such as Sergei Dovlatov, notably in his collection *Kompromiss* (1981). Even though Dovlatov formulated his position of autonomy in the genre of satire – a far cry from Aleksievich's documentary prose – both Dovlatov and Aleksievich employ the same strategy in their writings, juxtaposing mendacious Soviet news reports with subversive accounts of Soviet reality. Reflecting Dovlatov's experience as a journalist working for a number of newspapers in the Estonian Soviet republic in the 1970s, *Kompromiss* consists of twelve stories, numbering the successive compromises the narrator is forced to make. Each story begins with an article from *Sovetskaia Estoniia*, *Vechernyi Tallinn*, or *Molodezh' Estonii*, apparently written by the narrator 'Sergei Dovlatov' who is thus identified with the author of the novel.

³⁵⁶ Daniel', 'Istoriia samizdata'. Rogov and Uvarova, 'Semidesiatye.

The cited article is followed by a story relating the circumstances of its writing, often relying on stark contrasts for its comical effect. For instance, the third ‘compromise’ tells the story of Alla, the lover of Dovlatov’s colleague Klenskii. Suddenly abandoned by Klenskii, Alla is penniless and unable to return home to her fiancé in Saratov. At the same time, Dovlatov’s editor Turonok requests an article on ‘moral subject’ (‘моральная тема’).³⁵⁷ In order to help her out with the money, Dovlatov chooses Alla as his interview subject, portraying her as an exemplary virtuous young woman who visits Tallinn for its proximity to the sea and its local artists and designers.

The discrepancies between the newspaper excerpts and the stories thus constitute a central structural device in *Kompromiss*, which contrasts factual lie with fictional truth.³⁵⁸ In a short preface to this book, Dovlatov refers to his years as a journalist as ‘[d]esiat’ let vran’ia i pritvorstva’ and states that ‘[t]rudna doroga ot pravdy k istine’, positing two oppositional kinds of ‘truth’.³⁵⁹ Firstly, there is the truth of the newspapers, which is really a lie (‘вранье’). Secondly, there is the other truth, ‘istina’, glinting behind the ‘pompous theatrical scenery’ (‘за

³⁵⁷ Sergei Dovlatov, *Sobranie prozy v trekh tomakh: tom 1* (Saint-Petersburg: Limbuspress, 1995), p. 190.

³⁵⁸ In fact, only two real articles from *Sovetskaia Estoniia* are reproduced word by word. For the relationship between fact and fiction in *Kompromiss*. See Young, *Sergei Dovlatov*, p. 87.

³⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 176.

пышными театральными декорациями'), which is Dvlatov's metaphor for the pristine and politically correct depictions of reality in the official press.³⁶⁰ This hidden truth is far more 'dirty' than official 'Pravda', and, in the preface, Dvlatov compares this truth to the littered bottom of a lake or stream: 'Но можно сквозь толщу воды различить усеянное консервными банками дно'.³⁶¹

Where Dvlatov juxtaposes the politically correct depictions of Soviet reality in *Sovetskaia Estoniia* to the 'grit' of the stories in *Kompromiss*, which extensively depict alcoholism, promiscuity, disillusion, and cynicism, Aleksievich juxtaposes the glorifying and beautifying language of *Moskovskaia pravda* with the pain of mourning mothers and the alienation of returning soldiers. Dvlatov and Aleksievich thus employ similar textual strategies and binaries of truth/untruth and official/unofficial to claim autonomy from the official Soviet discourse. The monologues in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* debunk the propagandistic images represented in *Moskovskaia pravda*, not only by focusing on the soldiers' nightmarish memories of death and violence, on their alienation upon return home, on alcohol and drug abuse among combatants, on brutal acts of violence committed against the local Afghan population, and on

³⁶⁰ Ibid.

³⁶¹ Ibid.

systematic sexual exploitation of female military staff, but also by presenting the invasion as an unjustified and utterly meaningless endeavor and the combatants as disillusioned with the Soviet state and with Soviet ideology.

A principal theme in Aleksievich's post-Soviet works, the disillusionment with Soviet ideology is further developed in *Zacharovannye smert'iu*. This work was published in *Narodnaia gazeta* in abridged form in 1992 and appeared as a book in 1994 – four years after *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* – and employs a similar binary structure.³⁶² Focusing on suicides committed and attempted by Soviet citizens around the time of the disintegration of the USSR, it consists of seventeen monologues framed by an authorial preface as well as a concluding section entitled 'Vmesto epiloga'. After its publication in book form in 1994, Aleksievich significantly revised and expanded the book, republishing it in 2013 with the title *Vremia sekond-khend*.³⁶³ This work is a much more nuanced depiction of Soviet reality than *Zacharovannye smert'iu*, which is Aleksievich's most tendentious work. In the polemical preface, Aleksievich describes Soviet ideology as intrinsically linked to violence and death: 'долго, слишком долго нами владела идея, которую

³⁶² Aleksievich, 'Zacharovannye smert'iu', *Narodnaia gazeta* (3 October 1992), pp. 15-74; *Zacharovannye smert'iu* (Moscow: Slovo/Slovo, 1994).

³⁶³ Aleksievich, *Vremia sekond khend* (Moscow: Vremia, 2013).

иначе, как танатологией, наукой о смерти, не назовешь' (ZS, 227). The socialist project is presented as a form of violent madness and the Soviet citizen as the victim of forcefully imposed ideological experimentations:

У коммунизма был безумный план – переделать нас. Переделать человеческую природу, изменить «старого» человека, ветхого Адама. «Гомо советикус» – человек, которого вывели в лаборатории марксизма-ленинизма [...] Кто же мы [...] ? Дети великой иллюзии или жертвой массового психического заболевания? (ZS, 224)

Some of the suicides which form the thematic focus of the book are ascribed to Soviet military culture with its underlying ideas of heroism and death, as in the monologue narrated by the mother of Igor Poglazov, a fourteen-year-old boy who hanged himself as an indirect consequence of his fascination with death (ZS, 239). Other instances of suicide are attributed to an inability to adapt to post-Soviet reality. Aleksievich describes these people thus: 'люди идеи, выросшие в этом воздухе, в этой культуре, и не перенесшие ее крушения' (ZS, 266). In Aleksievich's depiction of this politically tumultuous time, which implies that a suicide wave swept across the republics following the social upheaval of perestroika, the many instances of

suicide are either caused by the societal change of perestroika or by the Soviet military culture.³⁶⁴ Both of these types of suicides are portrayed by Aleksievich as ultimately caused by the ideas of Soviet socialism, which she at one point in the authorial preface to *Zacharovannye smert'iu* describes thus: 'Черная непостижимая магия великих обманов...' (ZS, 225) In accordance with this narrative framework, the interviewees serve to reveal the violent reality of the socialist project and debunk the Soviet myths underpinning it, which Aleksievich makes explicit in the preface: 'Мифы боятся одного – живых человеческих голосов. Свидетельств' (ZS, 226). In other words, *Zacharovannye smert'iu* is structured according to a binary of myth vs. reality, Soviet ideology representing the former and the testimonies gathered by Aleksievich representing the latter.

Zacharovannye smert'iu thus provides an important example of the continuous use of the structural principle of binaries in Aleksievich's writing, despite changing political contexts. Similarly to *Zacharovannye smert'iu*, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is part of wider perestroika tendencies of reassessing the past. As Nancy Ries notes, in the late years of perestroika,

³⁶⁴ For a contemporary account of suicides towards the end of perestroika, see Eleanor Rolph, 'Rising Suicide Rate in Soviet Union Among World's Highest', *The Washington Post* (5 July 1991).

'conversations overflowed with bitter examinations of the sacrifices made in the name of Communism and apocalyptic projections of the future', sentiments which were also reflected in the production of documentary works of that time.³⁶⁵ Whereas before Gorbachev's implementation of democratic reforms, notions such as the 'conquering of Siberia' had been a part of a 'state Epos' and treated as heroic tales of the New Man's struggle against nature in the name of the Revolution, during the glasnost era, documentary filmmakers were keen to expose the catastrophic ecological consequences of technological projects undertaken by the state, for instance in films such as *Bester* (1987), *Komp'iuternye igry* (1987) and *Mirazh* (1987).³⁶⁶ This meant a radical change of the aesthetics and ideological assumptions of the documentary medium itself. If documentaries had formerly been an important element in the construction of a collective Soviet consciousness, a medium used by the state to 'produce and consume "facts" that would contribute and attest to the realization of the [Five Year Plan]', the decline of official censorship in the 1980s and 1990s utterly redefined Soviet documentary and it was now possible to use

³⁶⁵ Nancy Ries, *Russian Talk: Culture and Conversation during Perestroika* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1997), p. 15.

³⁶⁶ Sergei Mouratov, 'The Unknown Cinema: Documentary Screen, Glasnost Era', *Journal of Film and Video*, vol. 44, no. 1-2 (1992), pp. 9-18, p. 10.

the medium to critique the state.³⁶⁷ In this vein, in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the understanding of the disaster as being symbolical of the failings of Soviet utopian visions is part of a wider emphasis that amounts to a harsh criticism of the Soviet system in general. This perspective is presented in a binary structure that contrasts the eyewitness accounts with contemporary television and newspaper accounts of the accident, as well as with official forms of commemoration of fire-fighters and clean-up workers. In the authorial preface, Aleksievich repeatedly alludes to this official discourse: 'Чернобыльская информация в газетах сплошь из военных слов: атом, взрыв, герои [...] Даже памятники героям Чернобыля похожи на военные...' (CM, 34) Such introductory remarks position the ensuing monologues in a dichotomous relation to the cited discourse, opposing the personal and private experiences of the interviewees to the glorification of the 'heroes of Chernobyl'. This structure is maintained throughout the book as a number of interviewees make references to contemporary official representations of the accident. For example, former university professor Gennadii Grushevoi recalls a conversation with the grieving wife of a helicopter pilot who died as a result of the radiation exposure

³⁶⁷ Elizabeth Papazian, *Manufacturing Truth* (DeKalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2009), p. 6.

he sustained during the first few days after the accident. In the following sentence, her loss is contrasted with a glorifying newspaper report on the 'heroic effort' of the pilots: 'Помню названия статей: «Герои в небе», «Чернобыльские соколы». Вот эта женщина...' (CM, 154) Furthermore, camera operator Sergei Gurin's testimony consists of scenes and details that he did *not* record while covering the accident for the state television, which implicitly assigns a degree of authenticity to his account. Gurin tells Aleksievich about his own self-censorship and internalisation of the tenets of official representations, which governed his selection process at the time of the accident:

После съёмки зоотехник завёл меня к гигантской траншее, там бульдозером этих коров закапывали. Но в голову не пришло это снять. Я стал спиной к траншее и снял эпизод в лучших традициях отечественной кинодокументалистики: бульдозеристы читают газету «Правда», заголовок – аршинными буквами: «Страна в беде не бросит». Да ещё повезло: гляжу – аист на поле садится. Символ! Какая бы беда не пришла, – мы победим! Жизнь продолжается... (CM, 124)

Even though Aleksievich's book about the nuclear disaster appeared twelve years after her debut work, the significantly

revised 2004 and 2007 editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* can be considered more recent works than *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. These later editions begin with a lengthy authorial preface, mainly consisting of Aleksievich's reflections on her book and its conception, presented as diary excerpts written between 1978 and 1985 and in 2003 (UV 2004, 7-23). The preface also features three short sections containing conversations between Aleksievich and a censor ('Из разговора с цензором') as well as a section with censorial deletions ('Из того, что выбросила цензура') and a section with interview material deleted in 1985 by Aleksievich herself, supposedly because of her self-censorship ('Из того, что выбросила я сама') (UV 2004, 17-23). Aleksievich's continuous insistence on the absolute separation between official and unofficial culture is nowhere clearer than in the first of these sections. Here, Aleksievich further emphasizes her autonomy by explicitly juxtaposing the tenets of a perceived war canon to her own principles of representation. The censor accuses her of 'primitive naturalism' ('примитивный натурализм'), for 'degrading and debunking the women-heroes' ('унижаете [...] развенчиваете [...] женщину-героиню') who are 'holy' ('святые'), to which the author simply replies that she is trying to show the 'truth' ('правда') (UV 2004, 17, 19). In the dialogue that follows, the two modes of representation are framed as a set of binary

oppositions, where 'grand ideas' ('великие идеи') are set off against 'the ordinary person' ('маленький человек'), 'instances of heroism' ('героические примеры') against 'dirt' ('грязь'), 'grand history' ('большая история') against 'little history' ('маленькая история') (UV 2004, 19-20). Thus, if *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* is defined in opposition to newspaper reports and *Zacharovannye smert'iu* to generalised notions of Soviet ideology, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* receives its distinctive value from its negative relationship with the perceived official canon of war writing.

In accordance with these oppositional categories, the authenticity of the monologues is based on their perceived autonomy from official representations, on a crucial moment when the interviewee starts to relate his or her experience of the war independently of the canonical depictions that he or she has internalized. Aleksievich describes this moment thus: 'долгожданный момент, когда человек отходит от канона – гипсового и железобетонного, как наши памятники – и идет к себе' (UV 2004, 10). The witness' personal experience is thus contrasted with interiorized representations promulgated in newspapers and books: 'из себя достают слова, а не из газет и прочитанных книг – не из чужого' (UV 2004, 9).

Intimately linked to this official/unofficial-binary – a continuation from *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* – is the binary of male and female. Aleksievich defines the official Soviet war canon as being distinctively male, with male authors writing about the male frontline experience: 'Но все, что мы знаем о войне, рассказали нам мужчины' (UV 2004, 8). These depictions reproduce male assumptions about the war: 'Мы все в плену «мужских» представлений и «мужских» ощущений войны' (UV 2004, 8) The culturally dominant position of these male narratives is contrasted to the female war experience, which has been relegated to a position of periphery: 'Женщины всегда отмалчиваются' (UV 2004, 8) Moreover, if women occasionally *do* voice their experience, they adapt their stories to the existing canon: 'а если вдруг начинают говорить, то рассказывают не свою войну, а чужую. Подстраиваются под чужой для них язык. Под мужской незыблемый канон' (UV 2004, 8) It is only in an intimate, private setting that women speak openly about their own authentic experience, distinct from the canonical perspective, which belongs to the public sphere: 'И только дома или, всплакнув в кругу фронтовых подруг, они вспоминают войну [...] от которой замирает сердце' (UV 2004, 8) According to Aleksievich, the stories narrated in this particular context are uncontaminated by the male canon:

Когда женщины говорят, у них нет или почти нет того, о чем мы без конца слышим [...] : как одни люди героически убивали других и победили ... там нет героев и невероятных подвигов. (UV 2004, 10)

Aleksievich thus identifies the 'male' perspective on the war as canonical while the female perspective is mapped onto notions of 'unofficial' culture as anti-canonical and truthful. As Bush notes, 'Aleksievich's understanding of myth and truth cannot be divorced from her understanding of gender. Female means anterior to myth, whereas male means "canonical"'.³⁶⁸

The relation to mainstream Soviet representations of the war changes throughout the editions of *Poslednie svideteli* as well. Revised several times during Aleksievich's writing career, the preface was somewhat expanded in 1988 with the inclusion of quotations from Konstantin Simonov and Anna Akhmatova. In 2004, the preface was completely rewritten as a brief account of the conception of the book replaced the original pacifistic rhetoric. However, the 2007 revision is the most significant in terms of narrative framework as the preface introduced here has remained unaltered throughout the more

³⁶⁸ Bush, "No Other Proof", p. 269.

recent editions, replacing the 2004 preface, which was used in that edition only. The introductory section of the 2007 edition is the first to contain two short passages, the first entitled ‘...odna tsitata’ and the second ‘...i odin vopros russkogo klassika’ (PS 2007, 5). The former passage – a quotation from a 1985 article of the Soviet periodical *Druzhba narodov* – is purely factual, stating that millions of Soviet children died during the Second World War. The latter passage is an interpretative authorial remark that defines the subsequent monologues in relation to official Soviet historiography:

Когда-то великий Достоевский поставил вопрос: а найдется ли оправдание миру, нашему счастью и даже вечной гармонии, если во имя этого, для прочности фундамента, будет пролита хотя бы одна слезинка невинного ребенка? И сам ответил – слезинка эта не оправдает ни один прогресс, ни одну революцию. Ни одну войну. Она всегда перевесит.

Всего одна слезинка... (PS 2007, 5)

This reference to Ivan’s and Alesha’s conversation in *Brat’ia Karamazovy* (1879-1880) about the cost of collective and individual suffering, responsibility and guilt, sets the universal truth of Russian literature against Soviet moral corruption. Arguing for the impermissibility of individual suffering for

higher purposes, Ivan tells Alesha a number of gruesome anecdotes detailing brutal murders:

Слушай: если все должны страдать, чтобы страданием купить вечную гармонию, то при чем тут дети, скажи мне, пожалуйста? Совсем непонятно, для чего должны были страдать и они, и зачем им покупать страданиями гармонию? Для чего они-то тоже попали в материал и унавозили собою для кого-то будущую гармонию?³⁶⁹

A principal theme in Dostoevskii's writing, the problem of moral transgression and individual suffering is central to Aleksievich's works as well, which frequently highlight people's suffering under Soviet rule. Translating this Dostoevskian motif into the context of the Second World War, Aleksievich challenges the view of individual suffering during the occupation as metaphysically justified. Importantly, the passage from *Poslednie svideteli* cited above contains some of the keywords of the discourse of Soviet post-war ideology: 'прогресс', 'революция', 'война'. Aleksievich thus alludes to the notion of the war as a necessary step in the achieving of communist utopia, which was an important notion of post-war Soviet

³⁶⁹ Dostoevskii, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridtsai tomakh: tom 14* (Leningrad: Izdatel'stvo «Nauka», 1976), p. 222.

mythology. As Amir Weiner has noted, the war had quickly been integrated as a central feature into the socialist eschatological narrative and was interpreted as an important link in historical progress:

Within the pantheon of myths that endowed the permanent revolution with legitimacy and historical relevance, the Great Patriotic War loomed large [...] The war [...] had its own singular input into the shaping of the New Man, but it derived its meaning from the revolutionary eschatology. It was [...] a weighty link in the revolutionary chain.³⁷⁰

In official ideology, then, the war was seen as meaningful in light of the socialist project and the transformation of society from a divided entity into a conflict-free, harmonious body. Thus historically and existentially justified, the war was interpreted in terms of its significance for the achievement of communist utopia and for the New Soviet Man, demonstrating his inherent superiority. In the aforementioned passage, Aleksievich defines her own narrative negatively in relation to this interpretation, citing Dostoevskii, an important figure in the

³⁷⁰ Amir Weiner, *Making Sense of the War: The Second World War and the Fate of the Bolshevik Revolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), pp. 8, 19.

mythology of late Soviet autonomous culture.³⁷¹ In *Poslednie svideteli*, then, Aleksievich claims autonomy from official Soviet historiography by framing the monologues in a dichotomous structure that involves the binaries of justified vs. unjustified suffering, society vs. the individual, as well as meaningful sacrifice vs. meaningless death. Thus relying on binary structures in her later works and editions to position her writing as ‘unofficial’, Aleksievich claims autonomy from official Soviet discourse by pitting her narratives against newspaper accounts as well as to perceived canons of war commemoration.

Aleksievich’s Authorial Persona: Victim of Political Repression

Aleksievich’s claims to autonomy are not only based on the binaries discussed above, however; she also accumulates symbolic capital by making references to different forms of political repression, thereby positioning herself in a Soviet canon of non-conformism in which victimhood is a central element of the author’s persona. *Golosa utopii* contains references to two forms of political repression that Aleksievich has suffered: firstly, the trial following the publication of

³⁷¹ For example, young authors writing prose and poetry in the spirit of ‘sincerity in literature’ during the Thaw saw Dostoevskii as their most influential writer in Russian classical literature and ‘valued especially his long-suppressed work *The Writer’s Diary*’, as Vladislav Zubok notes. See Vladislav Zubok, *Zhivago’s Children: The Last Russian Intelligentsia* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2009), p. 241.

Tsinkovye mal'chiki; secondly, the rejection from publication of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* as a direct result of the politically sensitive nature of this work. These references are crucial in mapping Aleksievich's construction of a 'biographical legend', that is, 'a literary conception of the poet's life [which is] necessary as a perceptible background for the poet's literary works'.³⁷² As Svetlana Boym comments on this notion introduced by Boris Tomashevskii, the biographical legend is essentially a 'fiction co-authored by the writer and the literary period'.³⁷³

The trial depicted in later editions of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* is integral in establishing Aleksievich's persona as a dissident writer. Jones has argued that this book reflects a changing discourse in Soviet society on the war in Afghanistan as it appeared at the time when Soviet troops had withdrawn from Afghanistan and the invasion had been declared a political mistake, Gorbachev publicly referring to the conflict as a 'bleeding wound' at the 27th Party Congress in February

³⁷² Boris Tomashevskii, 'Literature and Biography', in Ladislav Matejka and Krystyna Pomorska (eds.), *Readings in Russian Poetics: Formalist and Structuralist Views* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1971), pp. 56-65, p. 52.

³⁷³ Svetlana Boym, *Death in Quotation Marks: Cultural Myths of the Modern Poet* (Harvard University Press: London, 1991), p. 23. Alexandra Harrington has explored Akhmatova's construction of biographical legend. See Alexandra K. Harrington, 'Anna Akhmatova's Biographical Myth-Making: Tragedy and Melodrama', *The Slavonic and East European Review*, vol. 89, no. 3 (2011), pp. 455-493, p. 457.

1986.³⁷⁴ Aleksievich's depiction thus coincides with Gorbachev's agenda of reform and corresponds to the official Party line during perestroika. However, as Jones notes, the book was nevertheless controversial when it first appeared: 'although criticisms of the war had by then appeared in the Soviet media, the book stands out as the first such open, far-reaching public critique of the war's impact and aftermath'.³⁷⁵ Even though the standpoint on the war had changed in terms of Party policy, then, culturally and socially, the 'official' view on the war as a justified and heroic effort still had some validity for a part of the Soviet general public, as the strong reaction to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* demonstrates. War veterans and mourning mothers received Aleksievich's book as slanderous, criticizing her heavily and causing a stage adaptation performed in the Ianka Kupala Theatre in Minsk to be cancelled.³⁷⁶ In 1992, two years after the book's publication, two female interviewees, Ekaterina Nikitichna Platitsina and Inna Sergeevna Galovneva, who had both lost their sons in the war, participated in a lawsuit against Aleksievich in Belarus, claiming that she had falsified and distorted their statements. Additionally, two male

³⁷⁴ Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes', p. 235. Artemy Kalinovsky, 'Decision-Making and the Soviet War in Afghanistan', *Journal of Cold War Studies*, vol. 11, no. 4 (2009), pp. 46-73, p. 62.

³⁷⁵ Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes', p. 238.

³⁷⁶ Myers, 'Svetlana Aleksievich's Changing Narrative', p. 341.

veterans, Oleg Sergeevich Liashenko and Taras Ketsmur, sued Aleksievich for libeling their honour.³⁷⁷

In the 1994 edition to the book, Aleksievich included an appendix with the title ‘Sud nad “tsinkovymi mal’chikami” (Istoriia v dokumentakh)’ (TS 1994, 162-214). It consists of articles and letters to the editor published in Russian and Belarusian newspapers which covered the trial, courtroom transcripts, fragments of conversations in the court room, and a six-page long ‘independent literary analysis’ (‘независимая литературная экспертиза’) delivered by Viktor Kovalenko and Mikhail Tychina – two Belarusian writers and critics – as well as an authorial monologue with the title ‘Iz vystupleniia S. Aleksievich, avtora «Tsinkovykh mal’chikov» (iz togo, chto bylo skazano i chto ne dali skazat’)’ (TS 1994, 162-214). Unfortunately, the courtroom documents have not been made publicly available and can only be accessed by the individuals directly involved in the lawsuit.³⁷⁸ The extent to which Aleksievich’s selection influences the representation of the documentary material is therefore impossible to establish. Nevertheless, examining the appendix on its own terms allows

³⁷⁷ Myers, ‘Telling and Retelling a War Story: Svetlana Alexievich and Alexander Prokhanov on the Soviet-Afghan War’, unpublished PhD thesis, Columbia University (2018), p. 11.

³⁷⁸ When contacted, Aleksievich was not prepared to make the relevant documents available. ‘Uvazhaemaia Svetlana’, author’s correspondence with Svetlana Aleksievich (14 October 2019). ‘Dear Vasil’, author’s correspondence with Vasil Evdokimov (3-14 February 2020).

us to determine what textual strategies Aleksievich employs in order to establish her autonomy from official Soviet discourse.

The trial took place in the People's Court of the Central District of Minsk (Народный суд Центрального района города Минска). According to the appendix in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, the four individuals who filed lawsuits against Aleksievich all accused her of some form of deliberate distortion ('искажение') of historical facts in her book. Specifically, the accusations fall into three different categories. Firstly, all four plaintiffs claim that Aleksievich freely 'invented' parts of entire interviews – 'дописала то, что я не говорил' (TS 1994, 171); 'некоторые факты добавила от себя' (TS 1994, 174); 'явная ложь, вымыслы' (TS 1994, 177); 'цитата выдуманная (т.е. не соответствует изложенному)' (TS 1994, 178). Secondly, Liashenko and Golovneva claim that Aleksievich 'interpreted freely' statements by her interviewees – 'сделала самостоятельные выводы, которые я не делал' (TS 1994, 171); 'вольная интерпретация' (TS 1994, 177). Thirdly, Platitsina claims that Aleksievich 'omitted' important parts of the interviewee's statements – 'многое из моих рассказов опустила' (TS 1994, 174).

Throughout the appendix, Aleksievich downplays the individual agency of Golovneva, Platitsina, Liashenko and

Ketsmur and suggests that they are merely acting as front figures. During the court hearings, as they are conveyed in the appendix, the plaintiffs' statements are incoherent and confused and they do not seem to know the exact content of their own complaints, implying that they have not written the complaints themselves. Ketsmur changes his version of events in a conspicuous way, first claiming that he never met Aleksievich and later speaking about the person who introduced them to one another (TS 1994, 184). Aleksievich repeatedly suggests that the plaintiffs are not acting on their own initiative but are being used as pawns by some obscure political power, as when addressing Liashenko: 'Тебя опять обманывают и используют... Во второй раз... [...] Олег, я не верю, что это твои слова' (TS 1994, 172, 173). She makes a similar suggestion when speaking to Ketsmur: 'Значит, ты не сам писал свое исковое заявление?' (TS 1994, 184). Furthermore, the judge is clearly biased against Aleksievich, ignoring threats of physical violence made by the courtroom spectators (TS 1994, 186). There are a number of other irregularities; for example, the complaints were filed without date and signature and the lawsuit was not correctly processed by the court (TS 1994, 176). Aleksievich makes her understanding of the trial explicit when stating: 'не [матери] со мной судятся, а судится со мной бывший режим' (TS 1994,

200). This point is reiterated towards the end of the appendix: 'За спинами матерей я вижу генеральские погоны' (TS 1994, 202). Moreover, in later editions, Aleksievich includes an excerpt from the journal *Prava cheloveka* which supports this interpretation and locates Aleksievich in a history of non-conformist Soviet writers being harassed by the state:

По кондовому советскому сценарию, Светлана Алексиевич организовано проклиняется как агент ЦРУ, прислужница мирового империализма, клеветущая на свою великую Родину за два «мерседеса» и долларовые подачки... (TS 2017, 175)

Aleksievich thus frames the trial as a continuation of well-known political trials against Soviet writers, including the 1966 trial against Siniavskii and Daniel'. In later editions of the appendix to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, she includes a letter to the editor published on 1 December 1993 in the newspaper *Dobryi vecher*, written by Ia. Basin, a medical doctor: 'Нам, конечно, не привыкать. Судили уже Синявского с Даниэлем, подвергали анафеме Бориса Пастернака, смешивали с грязью Солженицына и Дудинцева' (TS, 288). Similarly to Aleksievich, Siniavskii and Daniel' were formally put on trial

because of the contents of their literary works.³⁷⁹ Both writers were accused of 'sacrilege' under Article 70 of the Criminal Code, which read:

Agitation or propaganda carried out with the purpose of subverting or weakening the Soviet regime or in order to commit particularly dangerous crimes against the State, the dissemination for said purposes of slanderous inventions defamatory to the Soviet political and social system, as well as the dissemination or production or harbouring for the said purposes of literature of similar content.³⁸⁰

Three works figured in Siniavskii's indictment: *Sud idet* (1960), a 'phantasmagoric' story set in the final years of Stalin's life, *Chto takoe sotsialisticheskii realism* (1959), a critical study of the official Soviet literary doctrine, and *Liubimov* (1963), a satirical depiction of a Russian backwater that derided political demagogy.³⁸¹ The accusations brought against Daniel' cited four stories: 'Govorit Moskva' (1962), a macabre fable opening with an announcement over Moscow Radio that August 10 1960 will be declared 'Public Murder Day', a day when all Soviet citizens have the legal right to kill any other citizen, with the

³⁷⁹ Max Hayward and Leopold Labedz, eds., *On Trial: the Case of Sinyavsky (Tertz) and Daniel (Arzhak)* (London, Collins and Harvill Press, 1967), p. 36.

³⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

³⁸¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 22-27.

exception of certain categories, such as members of the police and armed forces; 'Ruki' (1961), a story about a man whose hands shake uncontrollably after having participated in the mass execution of priests as a member of the Cheka; 'Chelovek iz MINAPa' (1962), telling of a man who is able to predetermine the gender of his children, by thinking during intercourse of Karl Marx if he wishes the child to be a boy or, if he wants a girl, of Klara Zetkin, one of the founders of the German Communist Party; 'Iskuplenie' (1963), a tale about a man who is wrongly suspected of having denounced people under Stalin and becomes a social outcast.³⁸²

The prosecution labeled these books 'slanderous anti-Soviet works [...] passed off as truthful accounts of life in the Soviet Union [...] in order to discredit the Soviet people'.³⁸³ According to the prosecution, *Idet sud* 'ridicules the Soviet system and the principles of Marxism-Leninism [...], maliciously slandering Marxist theory and the future of human society'.³⁸⁴ Furthermore, 'Chelovek iz MINAPa' '[depicts] Soviet people [...] as idiots and monsters' and 'Iskuplenie' represents 'Soviet society as being in a state of moral decay'.³⁸⁵ The accusations thus amounted to a fundamental disagreement between, on

³⁸² Ibid., pp. 27-31.

³⁸³ Ibid., p. 152.

³⁸⁴ Ibid.

³⁸⁵ Ibid., p. 154.

the one hand, the depiction of Soviet reality and the artistic principles that Siniavskii and Daniel' expressed in their works, and, on the other hand, the official literary doctrine and the accepted view on Soviet reality in official discourse. In other words, the trial was a measure of Siniavskii's and Daniel's' autonomy from official Soviet discourse and ideology.

Apart from the direct reference to the trial against Siniavskii and Daniel' included in later editions of the appendix, it is the fragmentary, incomplete report from Aleksievich's own trial which implicitly points to the famous transcript of the 1966 court hearings, which circulated in samizdat during and after the trial before it was smuggled out of the Soviet Union and published in tamizdat.³⁸⁶ As the trial constitutes an iconic event in the development of the dissident movement, this intertextual dimension inherent in Aleksievich's appendix defines her own trial as a direct link to the dissident tradition in the Soviet Union as well as pointing to the continuation of authoritarianism in post-Soviet society and politics. Aleksievich establishes this link by attributing the legal proceedings to the politically sensitive, anti-canonical dimension of her representation of the Soviet-Afghan war – not to the formal accusations of distortion and falsification. In that sense, her

³⁸⁶ Ibid., p. 17. See Aleksandr Ginzburg, *Belaia kniga o dele Siniavskogo i Danieli* (Frankfurt am Main: Possev-Verlag 1967).

depiction of the legal proceedings also invokes the 1964 trial against Brodsky, who was formally accused of social parasitism ('тунеядство') – a pretext for the underlying political motives behind his trial, making him an icon of the dissident movement.³⁸⁷ This rhetoric is reinforced over time as in later revisions of the appendix, Aleksievich includes a number of people in the courtroom making statements criticizing precisely the anti-canonical dimension of her depiction of the war. For example, two unidentified women cited under the subheading 'Voices from the courtroom' ('Голоса из зала') say:

Как вы могли! Как смели облить грязью могилы наших мальчиков. Они до конца выполнили свой долг перед Родиной. [...] Они – герои! О советских героях красивые книги надо писать, а не делать из них пушечное мясо. Мы лишаем молодежь нашей героической истории... (TS 2017, 264)

Я – учитель русской литературы. Много лет повторяла своим ученикам слова Карла Маркса: «Смерть героев подобна закату солнца, а не смерти лягушки, лопнувшей от натуги». Чему учит ваша книга? (TS 2017, 265)

³⁸⁷ David M. Bethea, *Joseph Brodsky and the Creation of Exile* (Princeton, N.J: Princeton University Press, 1994), p. 6. For a first-hand account of Brodsky's trial, see Efim Etkind, *Protsess Iosifa Brodskogo* (London: Overseas Publications Interchange Ltd, 1988).

Unacceptable to the mythologized image of Soviet military culture, Aleksievich's representation is defined by its autonomy from official Soviet discourse. In Bourdieu's terms, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* is 'misrecognized' because it caused an outrage among a part of the general public in Belarus and precipitated the apparently politically motivated trial. On the other hand, it is 'thereby recognized' because this instance of political persecution made Aleksievich into a symbol of heroic resistance to political oppression and violence. As Aleksievich makes clear in the appendix, a number of influential individuals and politically powerful organisations protested against the trial as illegitimate, praising Aleksievich for her talent and courage and upholding her as a symbol for political oppression against writers in the post-Soviet sphere. A statement issued by Soiuz Rossiiskikh pisatelei cited in the book reads:

Узнав подробности судебного дела, затеянного в Минске против Светланы Алексиевич, расцениваем его как преследование писательницы за демократические убеждения и покушение на свободу творчества. Светлана Алексиевич завоевала своими подлинно гуманистическими произведениями, своим талантом, своим мужеством широкую популярность, уважение в России и других странах мира. (TS 1994, 185)

Aleksievich also includes a statement by Russian PEN in the appendix:

Книга «Цинковые мальчики», посвященная афганской трагедии, обошла весь мир и заслужила всеобщее признание. Имя Светлана Алексиевич, ее мужественный и честный талант вызывают наше уважение. Нет никакого сомнения в том, что, манипулируя так называемым «общественным мнением», реваншистские силы пытаются лишить писателей их важнейшего право, закрепленного Хартией народного ПЭНа: права на свободное самовыражение. (TS 1994, 190)

If the construction of cultural autonomy in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* relies on the representation of the 1992-1993 trial, the 2004 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* makes references to a different form of repression that is also part and parcel of the non-conformist Soviet literary canon, namely rejection from publication due to the political sensitivity of a text. The conditions of publication are as important as the contents of a literary text for the determination of its cultural status as autonomous. As we have seen, both Rogov and Uvarova and Daniel' point to the significance of the uncensored space for the doxa of Soviet autonomous culture.³⁸⁸ Evgeniia Ginzburg's

³⁸⁸ Daniel', 'Istoriia samizdata'. Rogov and Uvarova, 'Semidesiatye.

Krutoi marshrut (1967) may serve as an illustrative example of the cultural value assigned to a text depending on its conditions of publication. Written in response to Khrushchev's denunciation of Stalin's cult of personality at the 22nd Party Congress, *Krutoi marshrut* recounts the author's experiences of gradual ostracization, arrest, and imprisonment during the 1937 purges. In the preface, Ginzburg presents an interpretation of the Great Purges that is in complete agreement with the official narrative under Khrushchev, namely that the 1937 repressions were a result of Stalin's personality cult, not a historic necessity following from the October Revolution:

Всё это кончилось. Мне и тысячам, как я, выпало счастье дожить до 20 и 22 съездов партии. [...] Я старалась все запомнить в надежде рассказать тем хорошим людям, тем настоящим коммунистам, которые будут же, обязательно будут меня слушать. Я писала эти записки как письмо к внуку. Мне казалось, что только примерно к восьмидесятому году, когда моему внуку будет двадцать лет, все это станет настолько старым, чтобы дойти до людей. Как хорошо, что я ошиблась! Что в нашей партии, в нашей стране снова царит великая ленинская правда. Что уже сегодня можно рассказать людям правду о том, что было, что

больше никогда не будет. И вот они – записки рядовой коммунистки. Хроника культа личности.³⁸⁹

With this interpretation, *Krutoi marshrut* could have been published officially. If published by *Novyi mir* or *Iunost'* (to which Ginzburg submitted the first volume of the work), the dimension of counter-culture and marginalisation of *Krutoi marshrut* would have been much less pronounced. However, after having considered the manuscript, Tvardovskii and the editor of *Iunost'* Boris Polevoi rejected it as being too politically sensitive; it circulated in samizdat for some time and was printed in Frankfurt by *Posev* in 1967.³⁹⁰ Published under these circumstances, *Krutoi marshrut* was not only a historical account but also a part of a counter-narrative written against the master narrative of Soviet history, a narrative that passed over the Purges in silence or at least diminished their scope and significance. What produces the status of autonomy of the text, then, is not only the facts and perspectives contained in it, but also the circumstances under which it is published. Published in tamizdat, *Krutoi marshrut* points to the falsity of official Soviet historical narratives, authenticating itself in that process. The

³⁸⁹ Lidia Ginzburg, *Krutoi marshrut* (Frankfurt: Posev, 1967), p. 7.

³⁹⁰ Dariusz Tolczyk, 'The Uses of Vulnerability: Literature and Ideology in Evgeniia Ginzburg's Memoir of the Gulag', *Literature & History*, vol. 14, no. 1 (2005), pp. 56-74, p. 61.

marginalised position of the autonomous writer and the notion of unveiled truth thus constitute a circular movement: on the one hand, the text is rejected from publication because of the contentious truth that it contains; on the other hand, the contentious truth contained in the work is retrospectively authenticated by the fact of rejection. This is the logic that Aleksievich's references to rejection from publication in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* reproduces, defining this book as an autonomous work. One of the diary excerpts in the authorial preface to the 2007 edition makes references to the 'silence of journals' and rejections from publishers:

Рукопись давно лежит на столе... Уже два года я получаю отказы из издательств. Молчат журналы. Приговор всегда одинаков: слишком страшная война. Много ужаса. Натурализма. Нет ведущей и направляющей роли коммунистической партии. Одним словом, не та война... (UV 2007, 24)

This passage invokes a long tradition consisting of well-known non-conformist writers repressed by Soviet censorship: Bulgakov, Akhmatova, Pasternak, Shalamov, Siniavskii, Solzhenitsyn, Evgeniia and Lidiia Ginzburg, Joseph Brodsky, Lidiia Chukovskaia, and Vasili Grossman, and Anatolii Rybakov, to name only a few. Rewritten in 2004 and 2007, it is presented

as a work distorted by censorship in Soviet time and later restored by the author. From this point of view, it can be compared to Solzhenitsyn's *V krughe pervom*. An introductory note to a 1978 Paris edition states that this work was

написан – 1955-1958

искажён – 1964

восстановлен – 1968 ³⁹¹

The restored version corresponds to the written version, which has gone through the stage of distortion. Both the restored and the written versions are placed in a position of diametrical polarity vis-à-vis the distortion. The work is created by the author in his or her isolated and inimitable subjectivity, then distorted by the censor and later recovered by the author, who restores the originality of his work. This structure precludes any overlapping or interaction between the subjectivity of the author and the agency of censorship, reproducing the traditional binaries describing late Soviet socialism.

³⁹¹ Solzhenitsyn, *Sobranie sochinenii: tom 1* (Vermont; Paris: YMCA-PRESS, 1978), p. 7.

The Notion of Continuity of Artistic Resistance in Soviet Writing

As we have seen, the mention in *Golosa utopii* of the political repression suffered by the author situates Aleksievich and her work in an intertextuality of non-conformism where names like Siniavskii, Solzhenitsyn, Brodsky, and Akhmatova loom large. This intertextuality is likewise established by allusions and overt references to a number of writers associated with the non-conformist canon – a textual strategy that is first employed in *Zacharovannye smert'iu*. Aleksievich's previously implicit positioning within a specific Russian and Soviet tradition of dissidence in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* becomes explicit in this book via the references to Shalamov and Akhmatova. The concluding part of this book echoes not only Dostoevskii's *Dnevnik pisatel'ia* but also Akhmatova's *Rekviem*, an elegy over the suffering of Soviet people during the Purges, which was suppressed in the Soviet Union until 1987.³⁹² Analogously to Akmatova's work which is introduced with the heading 'Vmesto predisloviia', the concluding part of *Zacharovannye smert'iu* is subtitled 'Vmesto epiloga' (ZS 1992, 72). Such references to Akhmatova and Shalamov, whose remarks on the futility of the Gulag experience is cited by Aleksievich for the first time in

³⁹² A.V Blium, *Kak eto delalos' v Leningrade: tsenzura v gody ottepeli, zastoia i perestroiki, 1953-1991* (Saint Petersburg: Akademicheskii proekt, 2005), p. 234.

Zacharovannye smert'iu, suggest an affinity between Aleksievich and these writers in terms of their resistance to Soviet oppression.

Importantly, Aleksievich invokes the notion of a continuity in non-conformist Soviet writing here. Of course, there is a vast difference between non-conformist writers such as Akhmatova, Pasternak, and Mandel'shtam on the one hand, and Shalamov, Siniavskii, and Solzhenitsyn on the other. Akhmatova, Pasternak, and Mandel'shtam came from a pre-revolutionary ethical and aesthetic tradition, whereas Siniavskii articulated his literary non-conformism from the position of corroded revolutionary optimism. Identifying as a dissident, Siniavskii emphasised the difference between himself and what he called the 'pre-revolutionary heretics': 'диссидентами их назвать нельзя по той простой причине, что своими корнями они связаны с прошлым, с дореволюционными традициями русской культуры'.³⁹³ However, even though the origin of their politics and aesthetics vastly differed from that of a disillusioned socialist like Siniavskii, Pasternak, Akhmatova, and Mandel'shtam have been incorporated into the notion of a broader tradition of artistic resistance and dissidence based on retrospective identification. Vladislav Zubok has explored the

³⁹³ Andrei Siniavskii, 'Dissidenstvo kak lichnyi opyt', *Sintaksis: publitsistika, kritika, polemika*, no. 15 (1985), pp. 131-147, p. 134.

history of the Soviet intelligentsia from this point of view, arguing that, even though the non-conformist intellectual community of the post-Stalin era had a worldview that was vastly different to that of Pasternak, its members still identified as the spiritual heirs of Pasternak as they strove for a similar cultural autonomy:

The young people who identified with that community had a vastly different social background and life experience than Pasternak had, and many of them did not share or even understand his spiritual world. At the same time, they too were striving for intellectual and artistic emancipation, as the dead poet had. They viewed themselves as the descendants of the great cultural and moral tradition that Pasternak, his protagonist Yuri Zhivago, and his cultural milieu embodied. Thus, they were Zhivago's children, in a spiritual sense.³⁹⁴

The notion of the continuity of non-conformism is also inherent in the idealized characterization of Soviet dissidents by international audiences.³⁹⁵ For example, in a preface to Joshua Rubenstein's *Soviet Dissidents* (1981), American journalist and

³⁹⁴ Zubok, *Zhivago's Children*, p. 20.

³⁹⁵ The foreign idealization of Soviet dissidence has been discussed by Komaromi and others. Komaromi states that 'international audiences most often thought of samizdat in terms of political opposition and heroic dissidence: samizdat was a free channel for communicating the truth that would bring down the Soviet empire. This idealized characterization made a compelling Cold War political narrative, but it has little current relevance' ('The Material Existence of Soviet Samizdat', p. 597).

writer Harrison Salisbury expresses the idea of a continuity across 'generations' of non-conformist Soviet and Russian intellectuals and artists, seeing universal democratic and humanist values as being 'carried' from one historical context to the other in a way that establishes a cultural tradition:

It was the poets, the old surviving poets like Pasternak and Ehrenburg and Berggolts, who prefigured the post-Stalin thaw. And it was the glorious new poets, the Yevtushenkos, the Bella Akhmadulinas, the Andrei Voznesenskys, and the Joseph Brodskys, who picked up the call and carried it to the new generations.³⁹⁶

Thus, in suggesting an affinity between her own work and that of Akhmatova and Shalamov in terms of political and artistic autonomy, Aleksievich reproduces the notion of a continuity of Soviet non-conformism, which is present both in the worldview of late Soviet intellectuals claiming artistic or political autonomy from official Soviet discourse (as Zubok argues) as well as in the writing of non-Soviet observers during the Cold War period (as Salisbury's preface demonstrates). The allusion to Akhmatova's *Rekviem* recurs in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, which also features a short concluding section with the subtitle 'Vmesto epiloga'

³⁹⁶ Joshua Rubenstein, *Soviet Dissidents: Their Struggle for Human Rights* (London: Wildwood House, 1981), p. vii.

(CM 1997, 223). The 2004 edition of *Poslednie svideteli* is introduced with almost identical wording: 'Вместо эпиграфа' (PS 2004, 5). In the 2007 of the same book, the following phrase introduces the work: 'Послесловия вместо предисловия' (PS 2007, 5). Finally, the introduction to the 2013 edition mirrors *Rekviem* literally: 'Вместо предисловия' (PS 2013, 5). We can thus see how Aleksievich elaborates the allusion to Akhmatova throughout the editions, citing *Rekviem* directly in 2013 by using the exact same wording as Akhmatova does in the beginning of her elegy over the Purges.

If *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* and the later editions of *Poslednie svideteli* establish a connection to the perceived non-conformist tradition by reference to Akhmatova, the 2007 revision of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* alludes to Mandel'shtam. This edition begins with the following epigraph, a quotation from Mandel'shtam's 'Stikhi o neizvestnom soldate': 'Миллионы убитых задешево / Протоптали тропу в темноте...' (CM 2007, 6) Aside from the added ellipsis (which Aleksievich uses frequently in her prose) she misquotes Mandel'shtam's poem on one occasion, exchanging the original 'v pustote' for 'v temnote', perhaps unintentionally. In terms of emphasis on cultural autonomy, this epigraph functions in the same way as the references to Shalamov and Akhmatova in *Zacharovannye smert'iu* and *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*,

suggesting an affinity between Aleksievich and Mandel'shtam in terms of their relation to authoritarian power. Significantly, Mandel'shtam wrote these poems in 1937, at the height of the Great Purges and only one year before his own death in 1938 in a transition camp in Vladivostok. Today, these poems are generally perceived in the Russian-speaking sphere as communicating an anti-totalitarian message.³⁹⁷ Aleksievich's positioning within the official/unofficial-binary is thus reinforced not only by references to the repression that the author has suffered as a consequence of her writing, but also by means of allusion and overt reference to prominent writers in a perceived historical continuity of political and aesthetic resistance against Soviet power.

Aleksievich's Trajectory: Revisions of *Poslednie svideteli* and *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*

Aleksievich thus highlights her autonomy and accumulates symbolic capital through a number of rhetorical devices. While opposing her monologues to various facets of official Soviet discourse such as newspaper fragments and political clichés,

³⁹⁷ Eidel'man, David [@davidaidelman], 'Milliony ubitykh zadeshevo', *Livejournal* (9 May 2011), <https://davidaidelman.livejournal.com/1009486.html?ysclid=lbl0lhkr3f812509972> [accessed 12 December 2022].

she also makes references to different form of political repression suffered by her as a result of her non-conformist depictions of Soviet reality, in particular legal prosecution and rejection from publication. At the same time, Aleksievich reproduces the notion of continuity of artistic resistance in the Soviet context by way of allusion to writers such as Shalamov, Akhmatova, and Mandel'shtam. These textual strategies are first employed in 1990 in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* and lastly in the heavily revised 2004 and 2007 editions of *Poslednie svideteli* and *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*. Importantly, Aleksievich positions her works in the field of Soviet autonomous culture retrospectively, insisting on their autonomy from an official Soviet discourse that – at the time of the publication of her works – does not occupy the position of power and omnipresence that it did before perestroika. Before 1990, however, she occupies an entirely different position in the cultural field. *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli* first appeared in book form in 1985 and are very different to the later revisions in terms of cultural autonomy and symbolic capital.

A comparison of the revisions will illustrate Aleksievich's trajectory – a concept developed by Bourdieu that describes the career of an author and provides an alternative to traditional biography. Bourdieu defines trajectory as 'the series of

positions successively occupied by the same agent or group of agents in successive spaces'.³⁹⁸ For Bourdieu, a writing career cannot be understood as a unique series of events linked by a self-sufficient subject, because the author emerges as subject through the position that he or she occupies relative to other agents in the field of cultural production. For instance, a trajectory may be constituted by the movement of a Symbolist poet who turns towards the psychological novel '[or by] a move from poetry to the novel of manners or to the theatre, or, still more sharply, to cabaret or the serial'.³⁹⁹ As I will demonstrate, Aleksievich's trajectory describes a movement from the position of ideologically uncontroversial journalist and war writer to that of the non-conformist writer, a change that occurs with the perestroika. Analysing how Aleksievich positions herself relatively to official Soviet discourse in 1985 compared to the mid-2000s when the heavily revised versions of these books appeared will shed some light on the movement towards autonomy in her writing career. In particular, I will compare the patriotic rhetoric characterising the early editions to the anti-canonical emphasis and the references to oppression in the Soviet Union in the later ones.

³⁹⁸ Bourdieu, *The Rules*, p. 258.

³⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 259.

If the 2004 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* emphasizes Aleksievich's autonomy by pitting the monologues narrated by women against the perceived male canon of official representations of the war, epitomized in the figure of the censor, then the 1985 edition is characterized by an entirely different relationship with official Soviet culture. In this earlier edition, female combat participation is interpreted by Aleksievich within a markedly patriotic framework with traditionally male assumptions about femininity. Brintlinger has pointed out the patriarchal views that underpin Aleksievich's gender rhetoric in this edition:

Although Aleksievich defines her task as a woman's task, her thesis, which equates women with life and peace, is adopted from the rhetoric of male veterans. Furthermore, distanced from war participants themselves by a generation, Aleksievich generalizes the stories she hears into binary, oppositional ways of thinking about gender, identity, and violence.⁴⁰⁰

Early on in the book, Aleksievich presents a conventional view on women, posing the 'Mother' as the female essence:

⁴⁰⁰ Brintlinger, 'Mothers, Father(s), Daughter', p. 200.

Все, что мы знаем о женщине, лучше всего вмещается в слово «милосердие». Есть и другие слова – сестра, жена, друг и самое высокое – мать. Но разве не присутствует в их содержании и милосердие как суть, как назначение, как конечный смысл? Женщина дает жизнь, женщина оберегает жизнь, женщина и жизнь – синонимы. (UV 1985, 5)

Reaffirming this image is a statement by an interviewee who states that it is not a women's task to kill: '«Не женская это доля – убивать», – скажет одна из героинь этой книги, вместив сюда весь ужас и всю жестокую необходимость случившегося' (UV 1985, 5). Female as opposed to male battle participation is thus regarded as a tragic abnormality. In the 1985 edition, this makes the fighting woman the supreme victim of the German invasion as well as the supreme sacrifice made for the sake of victory: 'То была величайшая жертва, принесенная ими на алтарь Победы' (UV 1985, 56-57). This interpretation of the female frontline experience is fully congruent with the understanding of the war effort in official discourse as a painful but necessary sacrifice.

In contrast to the 2004 edition, in the 1985 edition, the superior truthfulness of female accounts of the war is not grounded in the 'anti-canonical' nature of women's narratives and recollections, but in a supposedly inherently feminine

quality of perception. In the authorial preface, Aleksievich reproduces a patriarchal assumption about female emotional and visual awareness as being more sensuous and 'passionate' than male perception, which in Aleksievich's rhetoric guarantees the authenticity of the female accounts. Thus, in the 1985 edition, the male/female-binary is just as present as in the 2004 edition, but it is separated from the canonical/anti-canonical-binary and does not constitute an integral part of a rhetoric insisting on the artistic and political autonomy of the text:

В оптике есть понятие «светосила» – способность объектива хуже-лучше зафиксировать уловленное изображение. Так вот, женская память о войне самая «светосильная» по напряжению чувств, по боли. Она эмоциональна, она страстна, насыщена подробностями, а именно в подробностях и обретает свою неподкупную силу документ. (UV 1985, 61)

Moreover, the 1985 edition is infused with patriotic rhetoric that is largely absent in the 2004 edition and corresponds to the official view on the war. In a passage presenting numbers on women fighting at the front-line, it is significant that Aleksievich mentions that many of them belonged to the Komsomol – the communist youth organisation – as this seems to point to the

superior bravery of devoted communists: 'было направлено около 500 тысяч девушек, из них 200 тысяч комсомолок' (UV 1985, 57). In the same vein, a central and explicitly stated thesis of the 1985 edition is that the majority of female volunteers were motivated by a sense of spontaneous patriotism. Alekseivich cites a female veteran: 'Они пошли, потому что «мы и родина – для нас это было одно и то же» (Тихонович К.С... зенитчица)' (UV 1985, 60). Later in the book, Aleksievich reiterates this point, granting it additional prominence: 'У каждой из них была своя дорога на фронт. Но побуждение одно – Родина. И желание одно – спасти Родину' (UV 1985, 78). Finally, the 1985 edition ends with a political passage in which the female war experience is put forward as evidence for the invincibility and inherently peaceful intentions of the Soviet people, implying that a people whose women volunteered for combat cannot be defeated, neither can it be suspected of harbouring violent and imperialist intentions. Considering that *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* was published in 1985, six years into the Soviet-Afghan war, this could be read as part of the official Party Line of the time, which represented the invasion of Afghanistan as a peacekeeping mission for the benefit of the Afghan people:

Можно ли было победить народ, женщина которого в самый тяжелый час [...] тащила с поля боя и своего раненого, и чужого раненого солдата? Можно ли поверить, что народ, женщина которого хотела родить девочку и верила, что у той будет другая, не ее судьба, что этот народ хочет войны? (UV 1985, 316.)

Apart from the authorial rhetoric framing the monologues in the respective editions, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* displays significant revisions on the level of individual monologues in terms of its implicitly stated degree of autonomy from the official discourse. In the revised 2004 version, Aleksievich has expanded some monologues, including references to aspects of Soviet reality that were politically sensitive in the late Socialist era, such as the 1937 purges, the imprisonment of war veterans, and the brutality of Stalin's order no. 227, which was intended to reinforce military morale by severely punishing any form of retreat. In addition to the authorial rhetoric of the 2004 edition, which I discussed in the previous section of this chapter, these references further contribute to emphasising Aleksievich's autonomy from the official discourse in 2004. If in 1985 *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* is presented as an indictment of the crimes committed by the fascists, then, in 2004, Aleksievich includes testimonies which implicate the Soviet rather than

German state, thereby presenting the book as a testimony of acts of violence and repression committed by the Soviet authorities – an autonomous position that Aleksievich articulates retrospectively. One example is the interviewee Elena Antonovna Kudina, a private and driver who does not appear in the 1985 edition. In the 2004 edition, she makes the following statement:

До войны ходили слухи, что Гитлер готовится напасть на Советский Союз, но эти разговоры строго пресекались. Пресекались соответствующими органами... Вам ясно, какие это органы? НКВД... Если люди шептались, то дома, на кухне, а в коммуналках – только в своей комнате, за закрытыми дверями. [...] У нас дядя сидел в лагере на Колыме, мамин брат, он был железнодорожник, старый коммунист. Его арестовали на работе... Вам ясно – кто? НКВД... Нашего любимого дядю. Он имел награды еще с гражданской войны... (UV 2004, 45-46)

The reference to the undeserved arrest of the interviewee's uncle by the NKVD undermines the idealisation of the war effort in official narratives and retrospectively legitimises Aleksievich as an autonomous author who exposes awkward truths about Soviet reality that were being passed over in silence in official discourse. Similarly, in the 2004 edition, the witness Valentina

Pavlovna Chudaeva, a sergeant and anti-aircraft artillery commander, states that her father was denounced in 1937: 'На него донос был в тридцать седьмом году, его хотели оклеветать. Сделать из него врага народа. Ну, эти страшные сталинские чистки...' (UV 2004, 110) In the 2007 edition, the interviewee adds: 'Ежовщина... Как сказал товарищ Сталин, лес рубят, щепки летят' (UV 2007, 128). Her father is a Civil War veteran, and the juxtaposition of his military record and the denunciation highlights the arbitrary nature of repression under Stalin, recalling well-known autonomous works by writers such as Ginzburg, Solzhenitsyn, and Shalamov.

In the following chapter, Aleksievich discusses the letters that she has received from female veterans around the country. In the 2004 edition, one particular letter catches her attention, a letter that the 1985 edition does not mention: "'Мой муж, кавалер орденов Славы, после войны получил десять лет лагерей. Так родина встречала победителей' (UV 2004, 121). In 2007, this letter writer is more emphatic in her rhetoric, sounding angrier and more embittered: "'Мой муж, кавалер орденов Славы, после войны получил десять лет лагерей... Так родина встречала своих героев. Победителей!' (UV 2007, 139). This ironic and embittered remark undercuts the propagandistic rhetoric in official representations of the war

and reminds the reader of the period of heightened political terror following the victory over Nazi Germany.

Albina Aleksandrovna Gantimurova, a sergeant major and scout, recalls Stalin's order no. 227, which was issued in 1942 and decreed that any retreat was to be treated as an act of treason and a capital offence. In 1985, Gantimurova soberly states: 'Этот приказ сразу сделал из меня взрослую' (UV 1985, 87). Gantimurova here implicitly justifies the decree and testifies to its edifying effect on herself personally. In 2004, by contrast, she explicitly mentions the executions of Red Army soldiers carried out in the battlefield, implicitly criticizing Stalin's decree for its disregard for human life: 'И был приказ за номером двести двадцать семь – ни шагу назад! Ступишь этот шаг – расстрел! Сзади за нами шли заградотряды. Они стреляли...' (UV 2004, 57) In 2007, this criticism is more overt as Gantimurova graphically describes the execution of a young soldier sentenced to death in accordance with Stalin's order: 'Стоит на коленях молодой солдат. [...] Умоляет, чтобы его не расстреливали, дома у него одна мама. Начинает плакать. И тут же его – прямо в лоб' (UV 2007, 80). Gantimurova then offers an explicit interpretation of this event, connecting it to the ruthlessness of Soviet military policies: 'Да, мы победили, но какой ценой! Какой страшной ценой!' (UV 2007, 80)

Furthermore, on her way to Moscow to interview another female combatant, Aleksievich starts talking to two male veterans who are seated in the same train compartment. One of them recalls a young girl whose family was repressed during the Purges and who joined the partisans during the war: 'Хотела доказать... Всех награждали, а ее ни разу. Медали не дали, потому что родители – враги народа' (UV 2004, 81). Born into a family branded 'enemies of the people', the anonymous girl volunteers because of a desire to redeem her family history, which clearly contrasts with the patriotic impulse motivating many female combatants and is all the more tragic as her efforts to restore herself as an accepted member of Soviet society are unsuccessful. Three pages later, the author gives a sweeping summary of the ensuing conversation:

Тема разговора поворачивает в другую сторону – говорят о Сталине, уничтожившем перед войной лучшие командирские кадры, военную элиту. О жестокой коллективизации и тридцать седьмом годе. Лагерях и ссылках. О том, что без тридцать седьмого, может быть, не было бы и сорок первого. Не отступали бы до Москвы. Но после войны забыли об этом. Все заслонила победа. (UV 2004, 84)

Between 1985 and 2004, the conversation has been significantly rewritten and, in the earlier edition, the passage

cited above does not appear. In 2004, Aleksievich thus makes a connection between the 1937 purges and the catastrophic defeats suffered by the Red Army at the beginning of the war, suggesting that if it was not for the decimation of the military elite in 1937, the country would have been able to repel the attack, thus blaming Stalin for the initial military defeats.

A comparative analysis of the 1985 and the 2004 and 2007 editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* thus shows that these editions are positioned very differently in terms of their relationship with official Soviet discourse. The later editions are retrospectively located in the field of autonomous Soviet culture; firstly, by virtue of the authorial preface pitting the monologues against the 'male' canon (as discussed in the previous section); secondly, through its references to politically sensitive aspects of Soviet reality, presenting an indictment of Soviet violence which recalls autonomous works such as *Arhipelag Gulag*, *Kolymskie rasskazy*, and *Krutoi marshrut*. Even though the 1985 edition is characterised by an ambition to remedy the cultural marginalisation of the female frontline experience (similarly to the 2004 and 2007 editions), it does not display any objection to the Soviet war canon or to official Soviet discourse in general. It does not assert any significant degree of autonomy and does not rely on symbolic capital for its legitimacy and authenticity, employing instead a patriotic

rhetoric congruent with official representations of the war. The changed political emphasis in the 2004 and 2007 versions thus enables Aleksievich to reposition herself against the Soviet regime and construct the public image of a Soviet dissident.

While the 2007 edition of *Poslednie svideteli* is framed by an epigraph defining the monologues negatively in relation to official Soviet historiography of the Second World War, thereby insisting on the autonomy of Aleksievich's representation, the 1985 edition is presented as an ideologically conformist indictment of the crimes of German fascism. A commemoration of the victims of war, the 1985 edition of *Poslednie svideteli* is mainly concerned with showing the 'horrors of war', a war that appears even more gruesome in the light of the death and suffering of children. Interestingly, the 1985 edition is subtitled 'sto nedetskikh rasskazov', mirroring the negation in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*. Just as women are presented as the supreme victims of the war (as well as the supreme sacrifice placed on the altar of Victory), children are elevated to this position in *Poslednie svideteli*. In the five page long authorial preface in the 1985 edition of the book, Aleksievich rhetorically asks:

Что есть у нас дороже наших детей?

Что есть дороже у любого народа?

У любой матери?

У любого отца? (PS 1985, 3)

The contemporary relevance of the witness-accounts collected from children is then explicitly impressed. Clearly referring to the Cold War, Aleksievich continues:

Должны рассказать! Потому что и сейчас где-то тоже рвутся бомбы, свистят пули, рассыпаются от снаряда на крошки, на пыль и дома горят детские кроватки. Потому что сегодня кому-то хочется уже большей войны, вселенской Хиросимы, об атомном огне которой дети испарялись бы, как капли воды, засыхали бы, как страшные цветы. (PS 1985, 3)

Aleksievich does not specify the military threat in geopolitical terms, but it is significant that the bombing of Hiroshima – her historical paradigm of all-encompassing military destruction – was executed by the Americans. This seems to point to USA and not the Soviet Union as the aggressor in the nuclear arms race of the Cold War. Likewise, both the witness-accounts and the authorial preface carry patriotic overtones in the 1985 edition, in which the author states: ‘Можно спросить, что

героического в том, чтобы в пять – десять лет пройти через войну?» (PS 1985, 3) Aleksievich answers her own question with an emphatic exclamation: 'Многое!' (PS 1985, 4) Several monologues testify to the children's unbending will to resist the German invaders and their wish to participate in the frontline fighting, instances that correspond to the patriotic rhetoric in official interpretations. Citing a number of interviewees in the authorial remarks, Aleksievich singles these out, emphasising their importance for the overall understanding of the war and establishing an important thematic concern:

«...Боялся, что война без меня кончится. А она была такая длинная: началась – я вступил в пионеры, кончилась – уже комсомолец» (Костя Илькевич – 10 лет). (PS 1985, 4)

«Жалела только об одном: что я не успела вырасти и стать летчицей» (Клара Гончарова – 14 лет). (PS 1988, 231)⁴⁰¹

An illustrative example of this attitude of naïve but admirable resistance is a monologue titled '1 potselovala v uchebnike vse portrety' narrated by Zina Shimanskaia. This monologue is entirely centred on juvenile patriotism. Zina tells the interviewer about her and her peers' enthusiasm at the news of

⁴⁰¹ The 1988 edition contains very slight alterations to the 1985 edition and is characterized by the same patriotic perspective.

the outbreak of the war and about her unsuccessful attempt to run away from home to join the fighting at the frontline. The adult Zina clearly recognises the childlike naivety of this attempt and of her enthusiasm about the war, adding to the recollection a remark to this effect, which is followed by ellipsis indicating both emotional distance and pensiveness: 'все говорят: «Война!» Мы: «Ура!» Дети...' (PS, 1985, 19) But the patriotic impulse is not presented in a negative light in 1985. From an ideological point of view, Zina's bravery is exemplary, and it is essentially left unchallenged by the witness some forty years later.

In the 2004 version of the same monologue, Aleksievich renders this childlike heroism in a much more ambiguous way. In this version, to use Spitzer's term, there is a greater rift between 'narrating I' and 'narrated I', that is, between Zina the child (who is eleven at the time of the narrated events) and Zina the narrator (who must be in her forties at the time of the interview).⁴⁰² As Genette notes, these two instances of the act of narration are 'separated [...] by a difference in age and experience that authorizes the former to treat the latter with [...] superiority'.⁴⁰³ To the 'narrated I' belongs the 'voice of error

⁴⁰² Gerard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1980), p. 252.

⁴⁰³ Ibid.

and tribulation'; to the 'narrating I' belongs the 'voice of understanding and wisdom'.⁴⁰⁴ In the 2004 edition, this dynamic is established from the outset as Aleksievich uses an extended version of the interview in which Zina states: 'Я оглядываюсь назад с улыбкой... С удивлением. Неужели это было с мной?' (PS 2004, 28) The narrated I's romantic and patriotic enthusiasm at the outbreak of the war remains the same as in the 1985 edition: "'Война!" Все дети: "Ур-ра!!"' (PS 2004, 28) But the irrationality and naivety of this military ardour is emphasised further in 2004. In 1985, the narrating I simply states: 'Дети...' (PS 1985, 19). In 2004, recalling the attempt to run away from home to join the front-line fighting, the narrating I now assesses this as an absurdity: 'Мы о [войне] мечтали, мы были дети своего времени. Хорошие дети' (PS 2004, 28). In 2007, Aleksievich adds an exclamation mark to Zina's statement: 'мы были дети своего времени. Хорошие дети!' (PS 2007, 31) The irony of the exclamation mark accentuates the absurdity of an ethical perspective according to which children who feel enthusiasm at the news of war are 'good'. The narrated I's patriotism is thus moderated and made ambiguous by the narrating I's retrospective evaluation, which, as a result of Aleksievich's selection, is absent in the 1985 version.

⁴⁰⁴ Ibid., p. 253.

The 1985 and the 2004/2007 versions also differ in terms of content. The final scene of Zina's monologue depicts an episode in her school. It is the first class held after the invasion. The teacher is the same one who taught Zina and her and her classmates before the occupation. Now the teacher's rhetoric has changed radically as she criticises the Soviet state, something that Aleksievich includes in all editions: '[она] стала говорить против Советской власти' (PS 1985, 19, PS 2004, 29, PS 2007, 31). In the 1985 version, however, Zina openly protests against the schoolteacher's anti-Soviet rhetoric: 'Я встала и сказала: «Больше в такой школе учиться не буду»' (PS 1985, 19). This spontaneous, ideologically motivated defiance clearly qualifies as an edifying, patriotic act. In the 2004 and 2007 editions, by contrast, Zina only says this quietly to herself: 'Я сказала себе: учиться в такой школе больше не буду' (PS 2004, 29, PS 2007, 31). While in the 1985 edition Zina defiantly leaves the class room – 'И ушла...' –, in the later editions, she merely goes back home, presumably after sitting the class out: 'Пришла домой и поцеловала в учебнике все портреты...' (PS 1985, 19, PS 2004, 29, PS 2007, 31). If in 1985 Zina's feelings are acted out in a way that is exemplary from the point of view of official Soviet ideology, a commendable act of patriotic defiance, then, in 2004 and 2007, her feelings are quiet and toned down. In the context of the narrating I's retrospective

evaluation of her now near-incomprehensible enthusiasm about the war, the kissing of the portraits in the textbook, too, becomes questionable and ambiguous.

Whereas the 2004 and 2007 editions of *Poslednie svideteli* insist on their autonomy from official culture by pitting the monologues against the socialist narrative of the war, the 1985 version is an ideologically conformist indictment of fascism, located outside the field of Soviet cultural autonomy. On the level of individual monologues, the earlier edition reproduces patriotic rhetoric in official commemoration of the war, providing in Zina's monologue an edifying example of admirable resistance against the invading forces. The differences between the versions can be observed both on the level of retrospective evaluation and content. In the 2004 and 2007 editions, the gap between narrating and narrated I is much more accentuated, rendering Zina's patriotic feelings ambiguous, and the act of ideologically motivated defiance has been transformed into silent contemplation.

Aleksievich's Trajectory

The comparisons of the Soviet and post-Soviet editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli* allow us to draw some conclusions about Aleksievich's trajectory. As we have

seen, the 1985 editions of these books do not display any noteworthy objection to the Soviet war canon or to Soviet historiography, reproducing instead a rhetoric that is compatible with the official discourse on the Second World War. *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* (1990) is thus the first work that Aleksievich locates in the field of autonomous Soviet culture, presenting it as a counter-narrative to the official discourse on the war. This insistence on cultural autonomy and accumulation of symbolic capital continues in Aleksievich's writing career through the 1990s with *Zacharovannye smert'iu* (1994), *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* (1997) and the significantly rewritten version of *Poslednie svideteli* (2004), culminating in the same year with the publication of the heavily revised version of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*. Importantly, Aleksievich positions herself as an autonomous Soviet writer retrospectively, firstly by constructing counter-narratives to the official discourse after the breakdown of this discourse (*Tsinkovye mal'chiki* and *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*), and, secondly, by presenting the 2004 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* as a work distorted by censorship in Soviet time and later restored by the author. While Aleksievich relies on a broad intertextuality including such authors as Mandel'shtam, Akhmatova, Shalamov, Solzhenitsyn, Siniavskii, and Dovlatov, she also draws on the

notion of continuity in non-conformist Soviet culture as well as on a *doxa* of Soviet autonomous culture.

Aleksievich's trajectory can thus be described as a movement from the field of power to the field of autonomy, from the position of mainstream war writer to the position of an autonomous author who discloses the awkward truths ignored by the Soviet regime, employing a poetics diametrically opposed to that of official culture. This opposition is most explicitly articulated in the 'Conversation with the censor' in the 2004 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, which presents Aleksievich's aesthetics as utterly separate from and fundamentally disagreeing with that of the censor. In other words, Aleksievich reproduces the dichotomies describing late Soviet socialism, framing her representations in terms of repression vs. resistance, lie vs. truth, public vs. private, totalitarian language vs. counter-language, official vs. unofficial. Whereas she insists on the absolute stability of these binary oppositions in her works, her trajectory demonstrates the very opposite – that the boundaries between them are in fact fluid and unstable.

This interpretation of her trajectory is supported by the fact that Aleksievich developed her form and themes as a Soviet journalist. Criticism of the Soviet system was not necessarily

incompatible with the official press, which allowed for certain leeway as Aleksievich highlighted societal issues such as medical negligence in her pieces for *Sel'skaia gazeta*. Likewise, the notion of the 'ordinary person', which Aleksievich's opposes to the censor's 'grand ideas' in *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, was an integral part of the thematic focus in this newspaper. Moreover, in the mid-1980s, Aleksievich received a number of domestic literary awards, which further testifies to her deep involvement with the official Soviet literary establishment: Литературная премия им. Николая Островского, СССР (1984); Литературная премия им. Константина Федина, СССР (1985); Всесоюзная премия Ленинского комсомола, СССР (1986).⁴⁰⁵ Additionally, even though there is no documentary proof, a number of sources suggest that Aleksievich was granted membership of the Union of Soviet Writers in 1983, which would be consistent with her integration into the official Soviet cultural establishment otherwise.⁴⁰⁶

⁴⁰⁵ 'Premiia mira Soiuza'.

⁴⁰⁶ 'Memoriia. Svetlana Aleksievich', *Dzen* (31 May 2019), <https://dzen.ru/media/politru/memoriia-svetlana-aleksievich-5cf0e7eff1195f24c5d69292> [accessed 13 December 2022]; Natal'ia Mikhailova, 'Ispytanie Nobelem: Svetlana Aleksievich i ee «mnogogolosoe tvorchestvo»', *Ulpressa* (19 October 2015), <https://ulpressa.ru/2015/10/19/svetlana-zamlelova-ispytanie-nobelem-svetlana-aleksievich-i-ee-mnogogolosnoe-tvorchestvo/> [accessed 13 December 2022]. These online biographies are generally accurate, correctly listing details of Aleksievich's education, places of work, and literary prizes. Moreover, an employee of the Russian State Archive of Literature and Art (RGALI) stated to me that (s)he knew that Aleksievich was admitted to the Union of Writers in 1983. However, the RGALI archives only hold records of Union members who died or were excluded between 1934 and 1992, meaning that there is no documentary proof.

Paratext and Epitext

When examining the construction of autonomy in Aleksievich's works, paratexts and epitexts are particularly relevant. The efficiency of Aleksievich's retrospective positioning as an author in the Soviet dissident tradition is reflected in and reinforced by her recognition within a particular sphere, which is in turn defined by the shared *doxa*. In other words, the measure of her successful positioning is defined by her attempts to shape and control the reception of her work. When examining Aleksievich's ideological and artistic autonomy, therefore, sources such as reviews and biographical pieces on the author are important to take into account. These texts, external to her works, not only reflect the symbolic capital accumulated by Aleksievich but also ascribe additional symbolic capital to her by reproducing the image of her as a symbol of resistance and dissidence. Inviting audiences outside of Belarus and Russia to approach *Golosa utopii* as the work of a dissident writer, these paratexts are crucial in establishing expectations for Aleksievich's readers.

Genette defines the paratext as 'those liminal devices and conventions that [...] that mediate the book to the reader', including titles and subtitles, dedications, epigraphs, forewords,

afterwords, and notes.⁴⁰⁷ For Genette, these sources have crucial importance for the significance of a work of literature as they do not only present it ‘in the usual sense of this verb but also in the strongest sense: to make present, to ensure the text’s presence in the world, its “reception” and consumption [...] in the form of a book’.⁴⁰⁸ An epitext is a subcategory of the paratext and denotes ‘any paratextual element not materially appended to the text within the same volume’, for example an interview with the author.⁴⁰⁹ Biographical information about the author presented on the cover of a book would be a paratext, then, whereas the same information would be considered a part of the epitext if presented on a website.

For example, BBC journalist Alexander Kan describes Aleksievich as ‘[a] political dissident and opponent of the regime’.⁴¹⁰ Writing in *The Telegraph*, Evans describes Aleksievich as ‘a dissident of the Soviet and post-Soviet era’ and a biographical note published on the Nobel Prize website states that Aleksievich prior to 1985 ‘already had a reputation of being a dissident journalist with anti-Soviet sentiments’.⁴¹¹ In the

⁴⁰⁷ Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. xviii.

⁴⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 1.

⁴⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 344.

⁴¹⁰ Alexander Kan, ‘Svetlana Alexievich: Exposing stark Soviet realities’, *BBC* (8 October 2015), <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-34478536> [accessed 13 December 2022].

⁴¹¹ Evans, ‘Svetlana Alexievich’s Nobel Win’; ‘Svetlana Alexievich – Biographical’, *NobelPrize.org* (8 October 2015),

English translation of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* published by Penguin Books in 2018, an introductory presentation of the author states: 'Svetlana Alexievich was born in Ivano-Frankivsk in 1948 and has spent most of her life in the Soviet Union and present-day Belarus, with prolonged periods of exile in Western Europe'.⁴¹² This statement is representative of how the period Aleksievich spent in France, Germany, Italy, and Sweden between 2000 and 2011 is interpreted in Anglophone public discourse, as a number of other sources likewise present this period as an 'exile'.⁴¹³ In the context of Soviet literature, the use of this term brings to mind Brodsky (deported from the USSR in 1972) and Solzhenitsyn (deported in 1974) and implicitly aligns Aleksievich with these writers in terms of their relationship with authoritarian power. This rhetoric which implicitly places Aleksievich side by side with famous figures of Soviet autonomous culture, grants her additional symbolic capital according to the doxa of autonomous Soviet culture and draws on familiar tropes of cold war rhetoric which are easy to decode for Western audiences. Interestingly, however, although Aleksievich does not describe this period of her life in the same

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/alexievich/biographical/> [accessed 13 December 2022].

⁴¹² Aleksievich, *The Unwomanly Face of War* (London: Penguin Books, 2018), p. iii.

⁴¹³ See, for instance, 'Svetlana Alexievich on the Condition for Writers and Artists in Exile' [interview with Svetlana Aleksievich for International Cities of Refuge Network], *Icorn.org* (14 December 2015), <https://www.icorn.org/article/svetlana-alexievich-condition-writers-and-artists-exile> [accessed 06 December 2022].

terms, refraining from using such loaded words as 'izgnanie' or 'deportatsiia', her experience during this time resonates again with the Cold War rhetoric which is still prevalent in the Western publishing industry.

Aleksievich's publishing history is interpreted according to a similar logic as her 'exile'. According to the aforementioned Nobel Prize biography as well as a brief biography produced in connection to the 2013 Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels, *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* remained unpublished under Andropov and Chernenko for political reasons and was passed by censorship only with Gorbachev's liberal reforms. The biography which was published on the occasion of the award of the Friedenspreis des Deutschen Buchhandels states:

В ходе последовавших двухлетних разбирательств с цензурным аппаратом относительно публикации книги писательницу упрекали в том, что она «марает честь героев Великой Отечественной войны», а обвинения в «антикоммунистических взглядах» привели к увольнению с работы. Издание книги стало возможным лишь с началом перестройки. В 1985 году ... она выходит одновременно в Москве и Минске.⁴¹⁴

⁴¹⁴ 'Premiia mira Soiuzu'.

The Nobel Prize biography presents an identical narrative:

In 1983 she completed her book *The Unwomanly Face of War*. For two years it was sitting at a publishing house but was not published. Alexievich was accused of pacifism, naturalism and de-glorification of the heroic Soviet woman ... But new times came with Mikhail Gorbachev's ascent to power and the start of perestroika. In 1985 *The Unwomanly Face of War* came out simultaneously in Minsk and in Moscow.⁴¹⁵

This presentation of Aleksievich's first two books places them in a position similar to that of samizdat works repressed until perestroika and implicitly aligns Aleksievich with iconic figures of Soviet autonomous culture, for example Akhmatova (whose *Rekviem* was not published in the Soviet Union until 1987) and Solzhenitsyn (whose *Arkhipelag Gulag* was published in the Soviet Union only in 1989). Drawing on the references to rejection from publication in the authorial preface to the later editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, these biographical sources present Aleksievich's debut as the direct result of Gorbachev's liberal reforms, even though her first work was published in Soviet journals the year before and despite the fact that 1985

⁴¹⁵ 'Svetlana Alexievich – Biographical'.

did not see any significant changes in official policies on censorship, as Blium and Ermolaev have noted.⁴¹⁶

In Bourdieu's terminology, there is a *coincidence* between the rhetoric in Aleksievich's later works and the expectations of the reading audience in the non-Russophone space, which is much more receptive to the notion of artistic and political autonomy that Aleksievich represents. This gives us an idea of Aleksievich's intended audience after 1990. Biographical sources originating outside the post-Soviet sphere in countries such as the UK, France, Germany, and Sweden tend to locate Aleksievich definitively in the field of Soviet autonomy without taking chronological and historical nuances into account, thereby maintaining and reproducing the notion of a stable binary of official and unofficial Soviet culture. Although Aleksievich does not refer to herself explicitly as a 'dissident' or to her eleven years in Western Europe as an 'exile', the authorial rhetoric in her later works clearly invites and encourages these readings of her public image.

There is an important ethical aspect to deconstructive studies scrutinizing unofficial Soviet culture. To see the attempts by

⁴¹⁶ Blium, p. 230. Herman Ermolaev, *Censorship in Soviet Literature 1917-1991* (Lanham, Md: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers INC, 1997), p. 223-260.

writers and artists to conquer a space of cultural autonomy in a totalitarian or authoritarian society purely in terms of rhetoric and textual strategies runs the risk of diminishing the horrors of the reality in which they lived and worked. Komaromi addresses this issue in her analysis of the unofficial field of late Soviet culture, stating that her aim is 'not simply to expose particular unofficial ideologies as somehow false'.⁴¹⁷ Similarly, when Alexandra Harrington examines Akhmatova's proclivity for theatricality and conscious creation of a biographical legend, she emphasises that her study is

in no way intended to diminish or deny the horrors of twentieth-century Russian history or, indeed, the disasters and privations that Akhmatova personally witnessed and experienced. The position in which she found herself for much of her career as poet — faced with a choice between silence and spiritual betrayal — is a genuinely tragic dilemma [...] However, as Robert Heilman remarks in his classic study of tragedy and melodrama, even 'the most determined partisan of tragedy could not deny that melodrama is inevitable'.⁴¹⁸

Harrington thus balances ethical and intellectual imperatives, stressing that the conscious authorial construction of a

⁴¹⁷ Komaromi, 'The Unofficial Field', p. 606.

⁴¹⁸ Harrington, 'Anna Akhmatova's', p. 460.

melodramatic public image does not diminish the privations suffered by the author. Similarly, we cannot deny the difficulties Aleksievich must have faced during her writing career, negotiating the political restrictions inherent in late Soviet socialism with her own creativity. However, neither can we accept her dissident persona at face value. In order to arrive at an understanding of her cultural autonomy that reflects the complexity of her writing career, we must analyse the rhetoric characterizing this persona and the unspoken assumptions underpinning it.

From the publication of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* in 1990, Aleksievich's representations suggest an absolute separation between official and unofficial in Soviet culture, although the reality of her writing career points to the opposite, namely the instability of such binaries. Particularly illuminating in this regard is Aleksievich's rhetoric in the later editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, positing the 'grand ideas' of Soviet ideology to the experiences of the 'ordinary person', thus insisting on the opposition between official propagandistic representations of the war and the stories told by typical Soviet citizens – supposedly an inherently subversive element. However, as the previous chapter exploring Aleksievich's journalistic writings demonstrates, the insistence on the importance to depict 'ordinary' people was an integral part of official Soviet

discourse. Originally developed in an official journalistic context, then, Aleksievich's has transferred the notion of the ordinary person into her own work, rhetorically locating it in the field of autonomy after 1990.

Successfully and consciously positioning herself in the Western European sphere as a non-conformist writer, Aleksievich has created a persona that excludes important aspects of her writing career, such as her journalistic background and the ideological conformism of the first editions of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* and *Poslednie svideteli*. Especially illuminating in terms of her conscious construction of an authorial persona is the reference to rejection from publication in the 2004 edition of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, claiming that Soviet literary journals showed no interest in publishing this work, which, in fact, appeared in the February issue of *Okt'iabr* and the September issue of *Neman* in 1984. At the same time, as my analysis of the paratexts and epitexts has shown, cultural agents in the non-Russian sphere reproduce the simplified binaries in their reception of Aleksievich in even more extreme form than Aleksievich does herself, labelling her a 'Soviet' dissident and interpreting her stay in Germany, France, Italy and Sweden between 2000 and 2011 as an 'exile'. We can therefore conclude that even though Aleksievich's self-presentation lends itself to such interpretations, there is a degree of appropriation

in the reception of her as a public figure and of her translated works.

It is in the light of the increasing authoritarianism in the post-Soviet sphere that Aleksievich's retrospective positioning must be understood. Repeatedly pointing to a 'return' of Soviet authoritarianism in Russia and Belarus of today, equating Putin with Stalin and Sergei Shoigu, the Russian Minister of Defence, with Lavrentii Beria, Aleksievich frames her writing and her public persona in a way that renders it relevant to contemporary politics.⁴¹⁹ Revising her work in accordance with growing authoritarian tendencies in the post-Soviet sphere, Aleksievich is pointing to the continuities between the Soviet Union and the Putin regime. Her insistence on her own victimhood as a non-conformist writer occupying a position of irreconcilable disagreement vis-à-vis Soviet power can be read as an ongoing indictment of Russia's authoritarian regimes past and present. Her later works are thus deeply informed by political imperatives – writing as an act of resistance.

⁴¹⁹ See, for instance, 'Belarus's Svetlana Alexievich On Receiving Nobel Prize' [interview with Aleksievich for Radio Free Europe], *Youtube*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vm1GLOklTyA> [accessed 26 January 2022].

Chapter Four: Representing Other People – Authorial Agency in *Golosa utopii*

The claim to represent other people is an integral part of the implicit truth-claims in *Golosa utopii*. As Aleksievich has made clear on numerous occasions, it is her ambition to represent a variety of personal ‘truths’ in her writing with a multitude of people expressing their own points of view on Soviet reality. For instance, in an interview with Belarusian journalist Dmitrii Gordon, Aleksievich stated: ‘Никогда я не выступаю элитистским судьей. Это как у Достоевского – каждый кричит свою правду. Я просто собираю время. Оно разное’.⁴²⁰ Coupled with her frequently recurring allusions to Dostoevskii, this desire to reflect a diversity of opinions in her books has caused publishers and reviewers to refer to her works as ‘polyphonic’ – a description that was cemented with the Nobel Committee’s citation, which read: ‘for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time’.⁴²¹

Accordingly, *Golosa utopii* is frequently received as a body of works which allows historical eyewitnesses to ‘speak for themselves’. In a review of Julia and Robin Whitby’s translation

⁴²⁰ Gordon, ‘Aleksievich. Zhivotnoe Lukashensko’.

⁴²¹ ‘The Nobel Prize in Literature 2015’, *NobelPrize.org* (8 October 2015). <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/summary/> [accessed 15 December 2022].

of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* in the *Los Angeles Times*, author and critic David Ulin presented Aleksievich as a writer who 'gives voice to the voiceless'.⁴²² Similarly, essayist and reviewer John Palattella sees Aleksievich as a figure who addresses the cultural marginalization of the narratives of socially disadvantaged people: 'at a time when populism is in vogue, and populist politicians claim to speak for "the people", Alexievich goes in the opposite direction: People should be allowed to speak freely for themselves. We need to read her, and listen to them, in all their variety'.⁴²³

In the Russian-speaking sphere, however, female veterans have reacted to the depiction of women at war in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, claiming that Aleksievich's representation is tendentious and subjective. Responding to this book in 2008, Alla Smolina, who served three years in Afghanistan, started a blog expressing that Aleksievich's representation of female military staff was inaccurate and offending. Although never interviewed by her, Smolina feels compelled to refute what she sees as Aleksievich's deceitful depiction of the war and titled her blog 'гневный ответ-монолог белоруске Светлане

⁴²² David L. Ulin, 'Review: Svetlana Alexievich's Zinky Boys Gives Voice to the Voiceless', *Los Angeles Times* (3 Dec 2015).

⁴²³ John Palattella, 'Svetlana Alexievich's Voices', *The Nation* (6 July 2016).

Алексиевич, лживо описавшей события афганской войны'.⁴²⁴

In previous research on *Golosa utopii*, several scholars have pointed out that Aleksievich's authorial absence is primarily a rhetorical device. Sivakova, for instance, notes: 'впечатление, связанное с ощущением его [автора] отсутствия, совершенно обманчиво'.⁴²⁵ On the one hand, Sivakova maintains, the author absents herself in order to give way for the interviewees and the facts: 'уступа[ет] место героям и фактам'.⁴²⁶ On the other hand, the author organises the text, selecting and arranging the material and putting her stamp on it: 'Документ не убивает творческое «я»'.⁴²⁷ Therefore, Sivakova suggests:

каждый образ, каждую деталь в книгах Алексиевич необходимо рассматривать в двух ценностных аспектах: в аспекте жизни героя, для которого пережитые события определили всю его дальнейшую судьбу, и в аспекте

⁴²⁴ Smolina, 'Gimn sovetskim "Afganushkam"'.
⁴²⁵ Sivakova, 'Tsikl Svetlany Aleksievich «Golosa utopii»: osobennosti zhanrovoy modeli', *Izvestiia Gomel'evskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, vol. 82, no. 1 (2014), pp. 148-151. P. 149.

⁴²⁶ Sivakova, 'Predislovie v tvorcheskoi sisteme S. Aleksievich: sostav, funktsii, vnutrennaia organizatsiia', *Khristianskii gumanizm i ego traditsii v slavianskoi kul'ture*, vol. 2 (2010), pp. 71-77, p. 76.

⁴²⁷ Ibid.

замысла всей книги: все её содержание подчинено авторским задачам.⁴²⁸

The multi-voiced structure seems to grant her books additional evidential force as the reader is apparently presented with the pluralistic representation of different voices – not only with the subjective interpretations of a single author. In this chapter, I will discuss the strategies and structural devices that Aleksievich employs to shape the impression of a multi-voiced narrative, the apparent polyphony in her works as well as the authorial intentions behind them. This chapter therefore problematizes the claims to authenticity and truth inherent in the supposedly polyphonic structure of her books. While discussing the question of authorial intervention in the individual monologues, I will also explore the thematic consistency of the monologues in the example of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, identifying the ideological assumptions underlying Aleksievich's selection of interviews and her interpretation of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster and of the Soviet system. Furthermore, I will outline Aleksievich's authorial imprint on the documentary material by analysing her structuring of the material into chapters and sub-sections at the

⁴²⁸ Sivakova, 'Zhanrovye istoki dokumental'noi prozy S. Aleksievich', *Vesnik brestskaga universiteta*, no. 2 (2016), pp. 36-41, p. 38.

example of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*. Throughout, I will draw on Bakhtin's concept of literary polyphony and ask to what extent it is applicable to Aleksievich's work.

Polyphonic Truth

Aleksievich's books consist of the narratives of a multitude of speakers whose voices are presented in monologues or as snippets from conversations. The interviewees are sometimes named, sometimes anonymous, and we cannot exclude the possibility that the voices of the unidentified speakers 'overlap', that is, that a single unnamed interviewee appears more than once. *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* features 173 identified speakers as well as 76 unidentified ones, making a total of 249 speakers in this book. *Poslednie svideteli* consists of 101 monologues where all the witnesses are named. *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* consists of 65 monologues by anonymous witnesses. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* includes 51 speakers whose narratives are presented as 'monologues' as well as 51 witnesses who are collectively named at the beginning of different 'choirs'. Additionally, there are 22 anonymous speakers in this book, making a total of 124 interviewees. As for Aleksievich's most recent and most extensive work, *Vremia sekond-khend*, the number of speakers is more difficult to determine. This work includes 27 extensive

monologues, narrated by interviewees who are named, unless they asked Aleksievich to remain anonymous. Additionally, there are 39 shorter monologues by unnamed speakers, resembling the 'choirs' in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. A significant part of the material in *Vremia sekond-khend* is represented as brief excerpts from interviews and private conversations, some of them no longer than a single sentence. Aleksievich seems to have reproduced some of these snippets from memory. For example, she begins a section with the title 'V moskovskikh kvartirakh' thus: 'я вспоминаю о том, что слышала в московских квартирах' (VS, 412). Other fragments are the result of interviews with passersby. For instance, one such section with interview fragments is collected on a state holiday commemorating the victims of terrorism in Russia, during which Aleksievich depicts herself as a listener in the crowd: 'Я тоже в этой толпе. Спрашиваю – слушаю' (VS, 379). The total number of these interview fragments and conversation snippets is 314. Again, we cannot exclude the possibility that Aleksievich cites the same interviewee on more than one occasion, which makes it impossible to definitively determine the number of speakers in this book. However, it is equally possible that *Vremia sekond-khend* includes material from conversations with as many as 381 people.

The individuality of each account is underscored by the interviewees themselves, explaining that they are sharing their own personal truth, as, for example, Nikolai Kalugin in the 2007 edition of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*: 'Я расскажу только своё... Свою правду...' (CM 2007, 52) Similarly, an anonymous caller in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* makes the following statement when speaking to Aleksievich in the beginning of Chapter One: 'Я свою правду в целлофановом мешке нес... Отдельно голова, отдельно руки... Другой правды нет...' (TS, 32) Other interviewees insist on the relativity of subjective truths, as for instance an anonymous female combatant in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*: 'Нет одной правды, она разная, эта правда' (TS, 63). The awareness of their own subjectivity is present in almost all monologues and while rhetorically weakening individual accounts, taken together, the accounts seem to provide a universal and objective truth. The interviewees thus seem to be elevated to a position of power and legitimacy in *Golosa utopii*, as their presentation in individual monologues with quotation marks implies that Aleksievich cites the respondents directly. As Brintlinger points out, the witnesses' apparent empowerment as authors in their own right is further highlighted through the chapter titles, which often consist of a direct quotation from the monologue:

In organizing the interviews, Aleksievich quoted her interview subjects. Each chapter or section title takes its name from a quotation in the text, thus elevating the women's voices to a position of power and authority and implying that the women themselves are in control of the book's contents.⁴²⁹

This insistence on polyphony is rooted in Aleksievich's understanding of Dostoevskii's work. In the aforementioned interview with Gordon, Aleksievich compared her narrative strategy with Dostoevskii's, possibly alluding to Bakhtin's notion of literary polyphony when stating that her interviewees 'call out their own truth'.⁴³⁰ In her authorial prefaces, Aleksievich underscores the variety of perspectives on Soviet reality which she seeks to represent in her books. For example, in *Vremia sekund-khend*, she states that her ambition is to approach the various interpretations of the dissolution of the USSR objectively and impartially: 'Я пытаюсь честно выслушать всех участников социалистической драмы' (VS, 7). Moreover, discussing the letters that she received from female veterans when working on *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Aleksievich states that the vast number of women expressing a wish to talk to her made it necessary to work out a principle of selection. Focusing

⁴²⁹ Brintlinger, 'Mothers, Father(s), Daughter', p. 201.

⁴³⁰ Gordon, 'Aleksievich. Zhivotnoe Lukashensko': 'Это как у Достоевского – каждый кричит свою правду'.

precisely on variety and trying to capture the diversity of the collective war experience, she decided to interview women who held different professions during the war:

Скоро я поняла: невозможно записать всех, нужен какой-то другой принцип отбора и поиска. Какой? Рассортировав имеющиеся адреса, сформулировала его для себя так: стараться записывать женщин разных военных профессий. Ведь каждый из нас видит жизнь через свое дело, через свое место в жизни или в событии, в котором участвует. (UV, 98)

The truth effect inherent in the multi-voiced structure can be conceptualized as an *aspiration to polyphonic truth*, a concept that I derive from Bakhtin's work on Dostoevskii's fiction. Bakhtin introduced the notion of literary polyphony in *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*, originally published in 1929 and republished in 1963 with significant additions and a new title – *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*.⁴³¹ Bakhtin saw the polyphonic element as a defining and unique trait of Dostoevskii's writing, singling him out in the Russian realist tradition and setting him apart from writers such as Tolstoi, Goncharov, and Turgenev on

⁴³¹ Bakhtin, *Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo* (Leningrad: Priboi, 1929); *Problemy*, 1972.

purely aesthetic grounds. In the polyphonic novel, as Bakhtin understands it, 'the character is treated as ideologically authoritative and independent; he is perceived as the author of a fully weighted ideological conception of his own, and not as the object of Dostoevsky'.⁴³² Bakhtin opposes this narrative strategy to that of the 'monologic' novel, in Russian literature paradigmatically represented by the works of Tolstoi. The monologic novel '[squeezes] the artist's demonstrated plurality of consciousnesses into the systemically monologic framework of a single worldview'.⁴³³ In other words, the polyphonic novel approaches its characters as independent subjects, 'capable of standing alongside their creator, capable of not agreeing with him or even rebelling against him', whereas the monologic novel subordinates them to the design of the author and makes them 'serve as a mouthpiece for the author's voice'.⁴³⁴

The binary of polyphonic and monologic can be thus be understood as a dichotomy of plural and single truth. In the

⁴³² Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, edited and translated by Caryl Emerson (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 5. The Russian original reads: 'Герой идеологически авторитетен и самостоятелен, он воспринимается как автор собственной полновесной идеологической концепции, а не как объект завершающего художественного видения Достоевского' (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 6).

⁴³³ Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 11. 'Пытаясь втиснуть показанную художником множественность сознаний в системно-монологические рамки единого мировоззрения' (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 12).

⁴³⁴ Bakhtin, *Problems*, pp. 6-7. 'Достоевский [...] создает не безгласных рабов [...], а свободных людей, способных стать рядом со своим творцом, не соглашаться с ним и даже восставать на него [...] Слово героя о себе самом и о мире [...] не служит рупором авторского голоса' (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, pp. 7-8).

monologic novel, when a character voices a thought or idea, it is either affirmed or repudiated, either correct or false within the ideological framework underlying the entire work. Some ('true') thoughts 'gravitate toward the author's consciousness, and strive to shape themselves in the [...] unity of a worldview'.⁴³⁵ Other ('untrue') thoughts 'are either polemically repudiated, or else they lose their power to signify directly and become simple elements of characterization'.⁴³⁶ Literary polyphony, by contrast, allows for a plurality of equally valid truths. The idea voiced by a character is independently valid and not subordinated to the ideological agenda of the work as a whole:

Слово героя о себе самом и о мире так же полновесно, как обычное авторское слово; оно не подчинено объектному образу героя как одна из его характеристик, но и не служит рупором авторского голоса. Ему принадлежит исключительная самостоятельность в структуре произведения, оно звучит как бы рядом с авторским

⁴³⁵ Bakhtin, 1984, p. 79. 'Одни мысли – верные, значащие мысли – довлеют авторскому сознанию, стремятся сложиться в чисто смысловое единство мировоззрения', (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 132).

⁴³⁶ Bakhtin, 1984, p. 80. 'Другие мысли и идеи – неверные или безразличные с точки зрения автора, не укладывающиеся в его мировоззрении, – не утверждаются, а или полемически отрицаются, или утрачивают свою прямую значимость и становятся простыми элементами характеристики', (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 133).

словом и особым образом сочетается с ним и с полноценными же голосами других героев.⁴³⁷

For Bakhtin, a crucial component of literary polyphony is what he refers to as the 'unmerged voices' of the characters ('неслиянные голоса').⁴³⁸ Comparing Tolstoi and Dostoevskii, he sees a major compositional difference between the two in that Tolstoi shows his characters in isolation from each other (as in for instance 'Tri smerti') whereas Dostoevskii makes them clash and intersect. Dostoevskii's characters meet, both in the external fictional reality and in their 'dialogised' inner monologues. They are aware of the 'truths' of the others and relate to them in one way or another:

Иван Карамазов, например, знает и понимает и правду Зосимы, и правду Дмитрия, и правду Алеши, и "правду" сладострастника -- своего отца Федора Павловича. Все эти правды понимает и Дмитрий, отлично понимает их и Алеша. В "Бесах" нет ни одной идеи, которая не находила бы диалогического отклика в сознании Ставрогина.⁴³⁹

⁴³⁷ Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 8.

⁴³⁸ Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 7. 'Множественность самостоятельных и неслиянных голосов и сознаний, подлинная полифония полноценных голосов действительно является основной особенностью романов Достоевского' (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 7).

⁴³⁹ Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 125.

Partially, this dialogic composition is based on the many conversations between Dostoevskii's characters. However, unlike the Socratic dialogue, the Dostoevskian dialogue never reaches any form of conclusion, according to Bakhtin. No one voice is given predominance over the others, nor does any singular message emerge implicitly *from* the many contradictory voices. The text does not 'side' with anyone; nothing is affirmed or repudiated with finality. The nature of the dialogic relationships in Dostoevskii is not marked by 'evolution' ('становление') but by 'coexistence' ('сосуществование') and 'interaction' ('взаимодействие').⁴⁴⁰ In this sense, polyphony is the very opposite of Hegelian dialectics. The antithetical ideas represented by two characters are never resolved by means of a synthesis. They clash but are never merged or reconciled. Dostoevskian dialogue never 'leads to a *merging* of voices and truths in a single *impersonal* truth'.⁴⁴¹ Thus, there is no 'merging of the author's and the other person's voice'.⁴⁴² In *Besy*, for instance, there is not 'one truth' that could be said to belong to

⁴⁴⁰ Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 28. 'Основной категорией художественного видения Достоевского было не становление, а сосуществование и взаимодействие', (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 47).

⁴⁴¹ Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 95. 'Нужно подчеркнуть, что в мире Достоевского и *согласие* сохраняет свой *диалогический* характер, то есть никогда не приводит к *слиянию* голосов и правд в единую *безличную* правду, как это происходит в *монологическом* мире' (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 161).

⁴⁴² Bakhtin, *Problems*, p. 198. 'По мере понижения объектности чужого слова [...] происходит слияние авторского и чужого голоса', (Bakhtin, *Problemy*, 1972, p. 338).

the author, Dostoevskii, but only the truths of Stavrogin, Kirillov, Shatov, Stepan Trofimovich, and Petr Verkhovenski. Bakhtin thus presents Dostoevskii's works as texts that exist outside any kind of ideological bias. This neutrality is supposedly based on the perfect equality between the various views expressed by different characters. According to Bakhtin, no character in Dostoevskii's fictional universe is more 'wrong' or 'right' than any other; the work as a whole does not favour any one view but allows for a plurality of equally valid truths.

There is an evident problem with this argument as it seems difficult to sustain when looking at Dostoevskii's works. For instance, in *Prestuplenie i nakazanie*, Raskolnikov's psychological breakdown and eventual confession seem to insist on the impermissibility of his transgression and repudiate his nihilistic views, and the novel clearly 'sides' more with Sonia's orthodoxy than Luzhin's rational egoism. Qian Zhongwen makes the following comment on Raskolnikov's psychological development:

it was the natural result of the logical development of the hero's character, yet how can you say it is not the embodiment

of the author's original intent? To be sure, it was precisely with this point of view that Dostoevsky expected social renewal.⁴⁴³

However, even if one disagrees with Bakhtin that Dostoevskii's novels are in fact polyphonic in the way he describes them, it is possible to conceive of literary polyphony as an ideal notion. Granting that no absolute 'polyphonic' text can ever be written (as all texts interact with specific ideological and political contexts), we can still use Bakhtin's concept as a terminology to indicate the degree of ideological equality between speakers in a text. In other words, using the concept of unmerged voices allows measuring the *aspiration* of polyphony in a literary work. We can therefore ask whether Aleksievich's voices 'merge' in the Bakhtinian sense of the word or if the witnesses all contribute to the same overall thesis, creating a thematic uniformity, which resembles Bakhtin's notion of monologic truth.

Golstein has argued that Aleksievich's work cannot be described as being polyphonic. While Aleksievich's writing *formally* gravitates towards polyphony by implicitly claiming to represent a multitude of different points of view, this

⁴⁴³ Qian Zhongwen, 'Problems of Bakhtin's Theory about "Polyphony"', *New Literary History*, vol. 28, no. 4 (1997), pp. 779-90, p. 788.

impression of diverse opinions is, according to Golstein, an illusion:

Despite [the formal] polyphony of the voices, they all sound like testimonies in a trial, where they time and again prove to us that wars are evil and transform people in a way that we cannot imagine, just as nuclear accidents are tragic and devastating, as were the efforts of the Soviet government to handle their consequences.⁴⁴⁴

Golstein suggests that this turns Aleksievich into precisely what she claims not to be, namely a judge. Contrary to what her authorial rhetoric suggests, *Golosa utopii* does not present us with a diverse and multifaceted representation of the Soviet system and how people experienced it; instead, Golstein suggests, we see a subjective image shaped by Aleksievich's own ideology. This ideology is informed by what Golstein refers to as 'the liberal Soviet intelligentsia' or the 'pro-west Russian intelligentsia'.⁴⁴⁵ An axiomatic truth for these intellectuals, he continues, is that 'Russia is not a fully Western country and therefore backward and inferior', an opinion which according

⁴⁴⁴ Golstein, *Svetlana Aleksijevitj*, p. 19.

⁴⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 20. 26.

to Golstein underpins Aleksievich's agenda: 'to convince us that the Soviet experiment was a failure in every way'.⁴⁴⁶

Golstein admits that it is the prerogative of any writer to depict reality in a subjective way, but he considers it ethically problematic to do so and at the same time claim to be a mouthpiece for other people. As he comments, 'one moment Aleksievich appeals to her *licentia poetica* and to her right to present the documentary material in whatever form she sees fit, the next she claims to [...] give a voice to other people'.⁴⁴⁷ Golstein thus objects to the fact that Aleksievich presents a monologic message in a dialogic form. In Bakhtin's terminology, what Golstein points to here is the absence in Aleksievich's work of the 'unmerged voices'. As opposed to Dostoevskii's characters whose voices – according to Bakhtin's reading – remain independent and equal, the voices of Aleksievich's books merge with each other and with that of the author. According to Golstein, the dialogic composition in Aleksievich *does* arrive at a synthesis because the multitude of voices – in Bakhtin's words – merge in a single impersonal truth.

In this chapter, I will discuss whether these claims are supported by textual evidence. Is Aleksievich's writing in fact characterised by an aspiration toward polyphony or are her

⁴⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁴⁷ Ibid., p. 17.

criteria for inclusion of documentary material based on a pronounced 'monologic' outlook? I will focus on one representative example which illustrates Aleksievich's strategies – *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. Although Aleksievich employs similar narrative strategies in each book, this work is particularly appropriate in analyzing her supposed polyphony. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* does not only make unusually explicit use of contrasting voices and musical references with its divisions into different 'choirs' but also combines key themes and concerns in Aleksievich's wider work such as Soviet military culture, eco-critical concerns, disillusionment with Soviet ideology, and the Soviet state's systemic abuse of its citizens.

Revisions: *Zacharovannye smert'iu* and *Vremia sekond-khend*

Aleksievich's intervention on the level of the individual monologue is an obviously relevant question when discussing her poetic license in the selection, editing and structuring of the witness-statements in *Golosa utopii*. Her selection of interviews to be included in her books raises a number of questions. What degree of 'independence' do the witnesses have as authors of the individual monologues? How closely do the monologues resemble the interview transcripts? On what level does

Aleksievich's editing manifest itself? Does she alter the interview statements syntactically, say, or on the level of vocabulary? Does she not change the interview statements at all, which would make the monologues the result of pure selection?

Undoubtedly, this aspect of Aleksievich's authorial interventions is the most difficult to analyze. Apart from a short fragment of an interview published in *Canadian Slavonic Papers* in 2017, Aleksievich's tape recordings have not been made publicly available.⁴⁴⁸ Therefore, no comparisons can be made between the interview transcripts and the completed monologues, and, at present, it is impossible to establish the extent of Aleksievich's editing. However, there are a number of indirect factors that indicate the degree of Aleksievich's artistic license in the writing of individual monologues. For example, Aleksievich admits that she subjects each individual interview transcripts to a significant selection process. Discussing the writing of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, she stated that a transcribed conversation with a witness typically comprised between 100 and 150 pages, around ten of which went into the finished book, in other words somewhere between six and ten

⁴⁴⁸ Volha Isakava, 'Between the Public and the Private: Svetlana Aleksievich Interviews Ales' Adamovich. Translator's Preface', *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 57, no. 3-4 (2017), pp. 355-375.

percent.⁴⁴⁹ Speaking more generally about her writing process, she has explained that she records ‘hundreds of people, process[es] tens of thousands of pages of text, and that becomes the book’.⁴⁵⁰ This operation marks the processing of individual monologues as they vary in length according to Aleksievich’s selection, which is guided by her own aesthetic sensitivity and authorial intentions. The following statement by Aleksievich suggests that she sees the interviews as raw material for the writing process rather than directly publishable text:

For some [interviewees] this means five pages. For others it’s a single sentence ... When the extensive material begins to gather somehow the lies are squeezed out of it. The stronger pieces of course force out the weaker ones, the false ones. Intuition, here, is important of course. This is how a picture of the [historical] period is created. That’s the work. And these little pieces, these bricks can be used to build something.⁴⁵¹

Because Aleksievich’s tape recordings are not publicly available, scholars are generally reluctant to discuss the question of

⁴⁴⁹ Ana Lucic, ‘A Conversation’.

⁴⁵⁰ Lajos Pálfalvi, ‘Life Itself Is So Shocking’.

⁴⁵¹ Ibid.

authorial intervention in the individual monologues. Instead, studies of Aleksievich are often marked by an implicit recognition of her monologues as the creations of a skilled author. For example, in her discussion of testimony and polyphony, Lindbladh argues that the genre of *Golosa utopii* is so difficult to define because of the fact that 'the voices are represented solely in the first person, and that it is possible to confuse these monologues and choirs of all the I-narrators with the words once uttered by the witnesses interviewed by Aleksievich'.⁴⁵² Lindbladh further states that '[a]t first glance, these I-narrations could be taken for edited transcriptions of the interviews that Aleksievich conducted during her extensive research before each book', implying that the monologues are in fact the result of thorough artistic processing of the documentary material.⁴⁵³ Lindbladh thus seems to take for granted that the monologues have been significantly edited, at the same time as she avoids asking this awkward question explicitly:

The question addressed to *Voices from Utopia* in this study is not: How do the voices in the text correlate to the original voices uttered during the interviews? Instead, the questions

⁴⁵² Lindbladh, 'The Polyphonic Performance', p. 282.

⁴⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 287.

relevant to ask in this study are: Why does the implied author choose to represent these voices *as if* they were being performed by first-hand witnesses?⁴⁵⁴

Lindbladh thus dismisses the question of authorial intervention only to take it for granted in the very next sentence. Underlying her feeling that the monologues do not reflect the interview transcripts directly seems to be their remarkable artistic and psychological quality, which Lindbladh at one point refers to as ‘the extraordinary density of [Aleksievich’s] texts’.⁴⁵⁵ Indeed, the monologues in *Golosa utopii* are so aesthetically effectual, perfectly rhythmical and psychologically dense that they resemble monologues written for the stage, and Lindbladh insightfully compares them to Evgenii Grishkovets’s autobiographical one-person play *How I Ate a Dog (Kak ia s’el sobaku, 1999)*.⁴⁵⁶ Lindbladh’s impression that the interviews have undergone significant processing is therefore quite understandable, as are her efforts to sidestep this very question as it cannot be answered without access to Aleksievich’s interview-recordings.

⁴⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵⁵ Ibid., p. 285.

⁴⁵⁶ Ibid., p. 295.

The only tape recording that has been made publicly available is a fragment of an interview conducted by Aleksievich with a man and a woman about their experiences in the Kolyma labour camp. This interview fragment was transcribed, translated and published in 2017 by Volha Isakava, with permission by Aleksievich and by the proprietors of Ales' Adamovich's personal archives.⁴⁵⁷ It covers a little more than two pages and seems to have been recorded when Aleksievich researched *Zacharovannye smert'iu* since the conversation is centred on faith in and subsequent disillusionment with the Soviet system, as well as on suicide. While the male interviewee's name is never mentioned, the female interview subject is named Iuliia Pavlovna. In all likelihood, Aleksievich never used this particular interview in any finished work, as neither *Zacharovannye smert'iu* nor *Vremia sekond-khend* contains any references to Kolyma or to a witness by the name of Iuliia Pavlovna. In other words, the interview fragment cannot be matched with a particular monologue and used for a comparative analysis. Generally speaking, however, the interview fragment demonstrates clear differences to the monologues in *Golosa utopii*. Aleksievich asks leading, elaborate questions, steering the conversation in the direction

⁴⁵⁷ Isakava, 'Between the public and the private', p. 374.

she needs. For example, inquiring about the suicides among the staff of Soviet labour camps, Aleksievich asks the male interviewee to comment on suicides in the camps, suggesting the following question:

Tell me please if it is true that many people who were in positions of power in the camps [Gulag], those who were in management, that many of them committed suicide. They were afraid that they would be sought out, and they would be interrogated.⁴⁵⁸

Furthermore, the interviewees' answers display none of the psychological density or aesthetically pleasing rhythm of the sentences in Aleksievich's monologues. Isakava does not dwell on these obvious discrepancies but notes them in passing, apparently taking Aleksievich's authorial interventions in the monologues for granted, similarly to Lindbladh: 'Unlike the painstakingly selected and edited testimonies that shape her books, in this interview we witness the early form or the raw material she works with'.⁴⁵⁹

⁴⁵⁸ Ibid., p. 370.

⁴⁵⁹ Ibid., p. 360.

Another indirect factor pointing to a degree of artistic license in the individual monologues are Aleksievich's revisions. Myers has compared and contrasted the 1990 edition of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* with the 2016 edition of the same book, observing that '[v]ariations between editions exist from the level of words and phrases to that of entire monologues and chapters. These changes to the text involve additions and deletions, as well as rewording and rephrasing'.⁴⁶⁰ Myers observes that Aleksievich tends to explain these textual alterations by the fact that 'her interviewees are "living documents", and that therefore she occasionally makes changes that reflect the interviewees' evolving perspectives of the war'.⁴⁶¹ However, Myers convincingly argues that overarching shifts in thematic focus and selection criteria underpin the revisions. Attributing the changes to Aleksievich's own ideology, Myers notes that

[Aleksievich's] artistic manipulation results in a subtle uniformity throughout the freestanding monologues, which reinforces her message to the reader on an almost subconscious level. As a result of the literary licence she takes with the documents of her interview transcripts, what could

⁴⁶⁰ Myers, 'Svetlana Aleksievich's Changing Narrative', p. 334.

⁴⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 330.

have been a polyphony of raw voices and competing perspectives in Aleksievich's works instead takes on a more monochromatic tone. Voices begin to sound like echoes of one another.⁴⁶²

Even though Myers' method cannot determine the exact degree of artistic liberty in the monologues, a comparative reading of two editions of the same monologue does give an indication as to how Aleksievich's authorial intentions change over the years and, in turn, to what degree these changes inform the witnesses' individual utterances. *Zacharovannye smert'iu* and *Vremia sekond-khend* will be the focus of my own comparative analysis of Aleksievich's revisions, as these books are instructive in presenting examples of the most radical instance of rewriting in Aleksievich's oeuvre.

A significant number of the monologues contained in *Zacharovannye smert'iu* are featured in *Vremia sekond-khend* which, published nineteen years later – in 2013 – paints a broader picture of Soviet citizens' experiences of the dissolution of the Union and can thus be regarded as an expanded and revised version of *Zacharovannye smert'iu*. *Zacharovannye smert'iu* contains seventeen monologues, eight of which are

⁴⁶² Ibid., p. 346.

included in *Vremia sekond-khend*. Some minor changes such as the corrected age of interviewees have no impact on the work as such.⁴⁶³ Other changes, however, are more significant, including the expansions of the monologues in *Vremia sekond-khend*. Often, Aleksievich introduces an additional opening passage, as in the monologue of Tamara Sukhovei, who, in the later revision, curses life before beginning her tragic narrative of childhood abuse and alcoholism, which starts without such an introduction in *Zacharovannye smert'iu*. The earlier version of the monologue begins thus: '«... Маленькая, я пришла со школы, легла, а утром не поднялась с кровати' (ZS, 280). In *Vremia sekond-khend*, Sukhovei's narrative begins with the following words:

– Жизнь – сука! Вот что я тебе скажу... Не приносит она подарков. Ничего хорошего, красивого я в жизни не видела. Не вспомню... Убей меня – не вспомню! И травилась, и вешалась. У меня было три попытки самоубийства... Сейчас я вены себе порезала... (*Показывает забинтованную руку.*) Вот тут... в этом месте... Спасли меня, и я неделю спала. Просто сплю и сплю. Такой у меня организм... Психиатр пришла... Вот как ты сейчас, она меня просила:

⁴⁶³ For instance, witness Anna M-aia is 55 years old in *Zacharovannye smert'iu* and 59 in *Vremia sekond-khend* (ZS, 350; VS, 261). Likewise, Ol'ga V's age changes from 23 in the former work to 24 in the latter (ZS, 340; VS, 247).

говори, говори... Что рассказывать? Смерть мне не страшна... Зря ты пришла и сидишь. Зря! (*Отвернулась к стенке и молчит. Я хочу уйти, но она останавливает.*) Ладно, послушай... Все правда...

... Еще я маленькая была... Пришла из школы, легла, а утром не поднялась с кровати. (VS, 422)

Such expansions are sometimes very extensive, enlarging the text by as much as ten pages. For example, former Party member Vasilii Petrovich N.'s monologue is eleven pages long in *Zacharovannye smert'iu* and twenty-one pages long in *Vremia sekond-khend* (ZS 1994, 228; VS 2016, 172). The narrative remains essentially the same throughout the revisions as Vasilii N. recalls the period of War Communism and the Civil War, after which he tells the interviewer about his combat participation during the Second World War, the arrest of himself and his wife, her death and his eventual restoration as a Party member after the end of the German invasion. However, the latter version includes more generally held digressions about Soviet ideology and history as Vasilii N. ruminates on the Civil War and on Stalin as well as on the perestroika period and on the introduction of a market economy. Such revisions may be explained by Aleksievich's selection criteria, which seem to have been slightly different in

1994 and 2013 respectively. The over-arching thematic concern of *Zacharovannye smert'iu* is more specific as it deals with suicides and suicide attempts caused by the confusion and perceived loss of meaning felt after perestroika, whereas *Vremia sekond-khend* is a more ambitious attempt to represent a variety of experiences and views on the USSR and its disintegration. Thus, Vasilii N.'s digressions from his own personal story and reflections on Soviet history in general are consistent with the broader thematic concern in *Vremia sekond-khend*. In other words, we can see that Vasilii N.'s discourse changes in accordance with Aleksievich's authorial intentions.

Furthermore, Vasilii N.'s descriptions have become increasingly detailed between 1994 and 2013. To use a distinction discussed by Booth and others, in the first version, Vasilii N. 'tells' us his story – in the second edition he 'shows' it to us.⁴⁶⁴ For example, in *Zacharovannye smert'iu*, he hurries through his arrest in a single sentence, then stating that he spent three months in solitary confinement: 'Через несколько дней арестовали меня. Три месяца просидел в одиночке' (ZS, 236). By contrast, in *Vremia sekond-khend*, he spends half a page describing his arrest in more detail, recalling verbatim

⁴⁶⁴ Wayne Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1983), p. 211.

quotations from different participants in the event. Thereafter, he spends another passage remembering the abrupt parting from his son and recalls his own forgiving attitude to the Party despite being persecuted. Not until after these descriptions and digressions does he move on to his time in solitary confinement. A comparative reading of these passages illustrates the nature of Aleksievich's revisions well. Below, the text from the 1994 and the 2016 editions of Vasilii N.'s monologue have been combined. The crossed-out text indicates words and passages in *Zacharovannye smert'iu* that have been removed in *Vremia sekond-khend*. The text in bold indicates added new words and passages in the latter work that did not appear in the former:

~~Через несколько дней арестовали меня~~ **три дня пришли за мной...** ~~Первым делом понюхали в печке: не пахнет ли дымом, не сжег ли я что-нибудь. Их было трое. Один ходил и выбирал себе вещи: «Это вам уже не надо».~~ **Настенные часы снял. Меня поразило... я не ожидал... И в то же время что-то в этом было человеческое, внушало надежду. Вот эти человеческие гадости... Да-а-а... Значит, у этих людей есть чувства... Обыск продолжался с двух часов ночи до утра. В доме было очень много книг, каждую книгу пролистали. Прощупали одежду. Распороли подушки... Времени подумать у меня было**

достаточно. Вспоминал... лихорадочно... Посадки уже шли массовые. Каждый день кого-то брали. Обстановка страшноватая. Человека взяли, все вокруг молчат. Спрашивать бесполезно. Следователь на первом допросе мне объяснил: «Вы виноваты уже в том, что не донесли на свою жену». Но это уже в тюрьме... А тогда все в памяти перебрал. Все... Одно только вспомнил... Вспомнил последнюю городскую партконференцию... Зачитали приветствие товарищу Сталину, и весь зал встал. Шквал оваций: «Слава товарищу Сталину – организатору и вдохновителю наших побед!», «Сталину – слава!», «Слава вождю!» Пятнадцать минут... полчаса... Все оборачиваются друг на друга, но никто первый не садится. Все стоят. Я почему-то сел. Машинально. Подходят ко мне двое в штатском: «Товарищ, почему сидите?». Я вскочил! Вскочил как ошпаренный. Во время перерыва все время оглядывался. Ждал, что сейчас подойдут и арестуют... (Пауза.)

К утру обыск кончился. Команда: «Собирайтесь». Няня разбудила сына... Перед уходом я успел шепнуть ему: «Никому не рассказывай про папу и маму». Так он выжил. (Придвигает диктофон поближе к себе.) Записывайте, пока жив... «П. ж.»... «пока жив»... пишу на поздравительных открытках. Некому уже, правда, посылать... Меня часто спрашивают: «Почему вы

все молчали?» – «Время такое было». Я считал, что виноваты предатели – Ягода, Ежов, – но не партия. Через пятьдесят лет легко судить. Хихикать... над старыми дураками... В то время я шагал вместе со всеми, а теперь их никого нет...

~~Три~~ ~~месяца~~ **Месяц** просидел в одиночке—. Такой каменный ~~мешок~~ **гроб** – ~~два шага в длину и полтора в ширину~~ к голове **шире**, к ногам **поуже**. Ворона к своему окну приручил, **кормил** перловкой из похлебки ~~кормил~~. С тех пор ворон – моя любимая птица. На войне... ~~помню~~, Бой окончен. **Тишина. Раненых подобрали, одни мертвые лежат.** Другой птицы нет, а ворон летает... (ZS, 236, VS, 183-184.)

Apart from the extensive additions to the first two paragraphs, we can see that Aleksievich alters small but significant details throughout. In the revised version, Vasilii N. does not spend three months in solitary confinement – only one. Furthermore, he compares his cell to a tomb – not to a sack as in *Zacharovannye smert'iu* – and the proportions of the cell are described differently. Whereas in the older version, the cell is described in mathematical terms, the newer edition emphasizes the human experience by making reference to the body of the prisoner. Moreover, the word order in the first

version signals a colloquial register with the verb 'kormit'' at the end of the clause, while the same sentence follows conventional word order in *Vremia sekond-khend* with the verb placed in the beginning. Finally, Vasilii N. recalls the silence after battle, a detail that is missing in *Zacharovannye smert'iu*.

Several of these alterations seem to be motivated by aesthetic considerations. With its connotations of death, darkness, silence, and being buried alive, 'tomb' evidently evokes a more chilling image than 'sack'. The spatial description of the cell in *Vremia sekond-khend* evokes a concrete image, whereas in *Zacharovannye smert'iu*, it is more mathematical. Finally, the reference to the silence and the corpses of soldiers still lying on the battlefield makes the image of the ravens more visually poignant, evoking the image of an entire landscape rather than of the bird in isolation, suggesting the notion of shared fates rather than individual death. Thus because of their visual and associative efficaciousness, these changes can be considered aesthetic improvements. It is important to emphasize that this does *not* prove that Aleksievich invents anything, as it is entirely possible that Vasilii N. likened his cell *both* to a tomb *and* a sack during the conversation with Aleksievich. The three months of solitary confinement changed to one month could simply be the correction of an inaccuracy. However, it is clear that Aleksievich includes and excludes

details and phrases for aesthetic considerations and sometimes rearranges the word order. While this might suggest some degree of artistic intervention in her processing of the documentary material, it does not prove that she has significantly manipulated individual monologues. The extent of her authorial control over the documentary material must therefore be established at the structural level of the narrative, the deliberate selection of material and its subsequent arrangement.

Thematic uniformity: *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*

Despite the large number of individual testimonies, Aleksievich's works are marked by a distinct sense of thematic uniformity linking the freestanding monologues. Originally used by Myers in her analysis of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, 'uniformity' appropriately describes the consistent and subtle recurrence of certain themes in Aleksievich's writing, themes that amount to a cumulative emphasis in each book and reflect Aleksievich's criteria for inclusion of material in it.⁴⁶⁵ Examining the thematic uniformity characterizing *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, I will seek to determine whether the voices in this book 'co-exist' or 'merge' in Bakhtin's sense of these words, asking whether Aleksievich's

⁴⁶⁵ Myers, 'Svetlana Aleksievich's Changing Narrative', p. 220.

work qualify as 'polyphonic'. I will discuss three of the recurring themes which structure *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*: the relationship between humans and nature, the theme of Soviet mentality, and the notion of the inexpressible.

Humans and Nature

A key point made by Aleksievich in the authorial preface to *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* concerns the suffering of animals caused by the meltdown of reactor four at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant on 26 April 1986. Aleksievich elevates animals to a status equal to that of human beings and stresses their victimhood: 'На чернобыльской земле жалко человека. Но ещё больше жалко зверя...' (CM, 37) The abandonment and killing of animals after the accident is seen as a betrayal and moral transgression by Aleksievich: 'Человек спасал только самого себя, всех остальных он предал, после его отъезда в деревни входили отряды солдат или охотников и расстреливали животных' (CM, 37) The Chernobyl disaster has caused a fundamental revision of Aleksievich's views of nature and her relationship with animals:

Другими глазами оглядываю мир вокруг... Ползёт по земле маленький муравей, и он теперь мне ближе. Птица в небе

летит, и она ближе. Между мной и ими расстояние сокращается. Нет прежней пропасти. Все – жизнь. (СМ, 38)

This reconsideration of the distinction between human beings and animals is echoed in the monologues of the book, which contain frequent references to the violence committed against animals in the area around the nuclear reactor. As they are being deserted and killed, the suffering of the animals is equated to that of human beings. In one of the more extensive monologues, three hunters recall killing animals in the polluted zone, having been ordered to do so by local authorities in order to prevent the spreading of diseases. One speaker contrasts the dogs' joy at human contact with the brutality of the killings: 'Обрадовались нам, бегут на человеческий голос... Встречают... Стреляли в доме, в сарае, на огороде. Вытаскивали на улицу и грузили в самосвалы' (СМ, 113).

The theme of the relationship between humans and nature is reiterated throughout the work and can be considered one of its leitmotifs. A very common reflection made by the witnesses concerns the discrepancy between the scenic beauty of the horror of the disaster caused by humans, as in clean-up worker Arkadii Filin's monologue: 'А места такие красивые! Такое великолепие! Ужас был ещё ужаснее, потому что

красиво. И человеку надо отсюда уходить. Бежать, как злодею. Как преступнику' (СМ, 110). This juxtaposition of the beauty and the horror of the contaminated zone – two notions that seem incompatible but nevertheless co-exist – forms a part of the cumulative insistence which time and again emphasises the value of that which has been destroyed. An anonymous interviewee in the soldiers' choir describes the perceived absurdity of the evacuation process and the surrounding beauty: 'И красота вокруг. Золотая осень' (СМ, 84). Belarusian Member of Parliament Gennadii Grushevoi has similar recollections from the polluted area:

Я ехал и думал, что все там покрыто серым пеплом. Чёрной сажой. Картина Брюллова «Последний день Помпеи». А там... Приезжаешь, а там – красота. Красотища! Цветущие луга, мягкая весенняя зелень лесов. Я как раз люблю эту пору... Все оживает... Растёт и поёт... Больше всего это меня поразило – сочетание красоты и страха.. (СМ, 151)

Through this juxtaposition as well as through the shared concerns about animal welfare, the interviewees address deeper ideological and environmental concerns which have arisen from the Chernobyl disaster. These concerns are first and

foremost related to the perception in Soviet culture of technological progress and to the notion of Soviet man's ability to control nature and use it for his own ends – a notion which is seriously undermined by the disaster. The witnesses' collective focus on nature amounts to a symbolic significance of the accident for the failure of Soviet technological progress and colonization of nature, which ultimately leads to the understanding of the disaster as a metaphor for the failure of the communist utopian endeavour.

In her discussion of the colonization of nature in the Soviet Union, Alla Bolotova notes the importance of the notion of technological superiority of the USSR over capitalist countries: 'Борьба СССР с природой осуществлялась как бы в продолжение борьбы с капиталистическим миром и классовой борьбы и должна была способствовать формированию нового типа человека и общества'.⁴⁶⁶ Similarly to *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* and *Vremia sekond-khend*, there are several former devotees of Soviet ideas among the witnesses in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. Sergei Sobolev, the vice-chairman of the Chernobyl Shield Association of Belarus, makes the following statement: 'Даёшь Арктику! Даёшь целину!

⁴⁶⁶ Alla Bolotova, 'Gosudarstvo, geologi i kolonizatsiia prirody v SSSR', *Neprikosnovennyi zapas*, vol. 46, no. 2 (2006), <https://magazines.gorky.media/nz/2006/2> [accessed 04 December 2022], p. 2.

Даёшь космос! Вместе с Гагариным весь советский мир полетел в космос, оторвался от земли... Все мы!' (СМ, 176)

Following the accident, these ideas were replaced by a sense of disillusionment in Soviet technology as well as in Soviet utopian ideas in general, as several witnesses emphasise. One of them is former chief engineer of the Institute of Atomic Energy Marat Kokhanov:

И вдруг там, на этой станции происходит катастрофа... Что это – совпадение? Мистика? Если бы я был верующим... Когда хочешь найти смысл, чувствуешь себя религиозным человеком. А я – инженер. Я – человек другой веры. (СМ, 209)

The same message is conveyed in the monologue narrated by 'Larisa Z', whose daughter was born with congenital abnormalities as a result of the accident:

В медицинской карточке записано: «девочка, рождённая с множественной комплексной патологией: аплазия ануса, аплазия влагалища, аплазия левой почки»... Так это звучит на научном языке, а на обыкновенном: ни писи, ни попки, одна почка... (СМ, 101)

The description of the everyday reality of this mother and her daughter is both tragic and absurd. Doctors refuse to admit the causal link between the accident and the child's birth defects, and someone secretly advises Larisa to seek help abroad: 'Пишите в зарубежные клиники' (СМ, 102). The implication is that the suffering of the innocent child and the inadequacy of the medical assistance offered in Soviet society is the result of the Soviet technological ambitions and the idea to subdue nature to humanity. Underlying the concern with nature in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is also a broader eco-critical perspective, which Iurii Seppialiainen has explored using Greg Garrard's concepts of 'pollution', 'apocalypse', 'animals', 'dwelling', and 'pastoral'.⁴⁶⁷ Examining the representation of the relationship between humans and nature, Seppialiainen notes that its apocalyptic rhetoric cautions the reader of the potentially catastrophic consequences that an irresponsible attitude to ecological questions may have.⁴⁶⁸ Seppialiainen succinctly summarises the ultimately eco-critical message of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, namely that human beings have occupied an unsustainable position with regard to nature that must be reconsidered:

⁴⁶⁷ Seppialiainen, 'Ekokriticheskii analiz'.

⁴⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 3.

Ключевым для экокритики является убеждение о том, что мы живём во время экологического кризиса. Ответственность за глобальные экологические проблемы лежит на человеке [...] Чтобы приостановить разрушительную силу кризиса, людям надо переосмыслить то, как они живут на Земле.⁴⁶⁹

Throughout *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the grave consequences of the accident are juxtaposed with the general perception of nuclear power as a safe source of energy. Called up as a clean-up worker and sent to the polluted zone, Filin recalls fragments from Soviet newspapers: 'наши атомные станции абсолютно безопасны, можно строить на Красной площади' (CM, 107). Grushevoi makes a similar observation:

В наших представлениях картина мира выглядела следующим образом: военный атом – зловещий гриб до неба, как в Хиросиме и Нагасаки, люди, в одну секунду ставшие пеплом, а мирный атом – безобидная электрическая лампочка. (CM, 150)

⁴⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 19.

What was perceived as safe and unproblematic has caused an apocalypse. Apocalyptic references abound in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, especially in statements made by older individuals from the rural population. A group of senior female members of the local population tell Filin: '«Солдатики, это что – конец света?»' (CM, 108). Likewise, a child in one of Aleksievich's choirs states that after the accident, her grandmother taught her to pray to God for forgiveness for the sins of humanity: '«Молитесь! Это – конец света. Наказание божье за наши грехи»' (CM, 278). A number of interviewees mention biblical prophecies of the Apocalypse, and an unnamed witness calls the interviewer's attention to the meaning of the word 'Chernobyl' in Ukrainian – wormwood – which is also the name of the falling star described in the Book of Revelation:

Откровение Иоанна Богослова: «...и упала с неба большая звезда, горящая подобно факелу, и пала на третью часть рек и на источник вод ... Имя сей звезде „полынь“ ... Все уже предсказано, написано в святых книгах, но мы читать не умеем. Не понятливы. Полынь по-украински «чернобыль».

(CM, 79)

The underlying views structuring the book thus suggest that the Chernobyl accident should be seen as symbolic of the failure of the communist utopian endeavour, and in particular the failure of Soviet technological progress and colonization of nature. *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* then becomes a cautionary tale with Christian overtones, which creates an analogy between the Soviet system and the apocalypse.

The State and the Citizen

A second leitmotif underpinning the selection of monologues in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is the relationship between the Soviet state and the Soviet citizen. Relying on a frequently used structural device, Aleksievich makes observations in the authorial preface, which are later confirmed by the witnesses' cumulative insistence. Aleksievich thus notes the near-suicidal behaviour of the firemen extinguishing the reactor fire: 'Я слышала мнение, что поведение пожарников, тушивших в первую ночь пожар на атомной станции, и ликвидаторов напоминает самоубийство' (СМ, 34). Further discussing the effort made by the firemen and clean-up workers, she describes them as the victims of the wrongful acts committed by the Soviet state, emphasising the fact that they worked without

proper protective equipment and remained misinformed about the hazards of the tasks that they fulfilled:

Ликвидаторы часто работали без защитной спецодежды, беспрекословно отправлялись туда, где «умирали» роботы, от них скрывали правду о полученных высоких дозах, и они с этим мирились, а потом ещё радовались полученным правительственным грамотами и медалям, которые им вручали перед смертью... (СМ, 35)

These statements anticipate a prominent thematic concern running throughout the monologues, as a multitude of interviewees ruminate on the wider significance of people's behaviour after the accident as well as the authorities' damage control. Such reflections add up to the question of a Soviet character and mentality as three different interviewees explicitly ask: 'кто мы?' (СМ, 84, 162, 271) Through the totality of judgements made by the witnesses as well as instances of what is implicitly and explicitly seen as 'typical' behaviour, the image of a quintessential Soviet citizen emerges in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. This image is reminiscent of Aleksandr Zinov'iev's notion of the 'Homo Soveticus', a satirical

generalization of Soviet character traits.⁴⁷⁰ In particular, Zinov'iev insists on the importance of the collective and the insignificance of the individual in the Soviet mentality:

Our involvement in the life of the collective in almost all the important and unimportant areas of our life: that is the foundation of our psychology. The soul of the Homosos lies in his participation in collective life.⁴⁷¹

For Aleksievich, the importance of the collective translates into the concept of fatalism as a defining trait in the quintessential Soviet male. This quality is alluded and referred to by four witnesses who point to the Soviet man's disregard for his own well-being, which is supposedly the consequence of the systematic subordination of the individual to the collective in the Soviet Union. A former first secretary of a District Party Committee by the name of Vladimir Ivanov describes himself in these terms:

⁴⁷⁰ Aleksandr Zinov'ev, *Homo Sovieticus* (London: Victor Gollancz Ltd, 1985).

⁴⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p. 84.

Я – человек, у которого отсутствует инстинкт самосохранения. Это нормально, потому что сильно развито чувство долга. Таких тогда было много, не я один... У меня на столе лежали десятки заявлений с просьбой: «Прошу направить в Чернобыль.» По зову сердца! Люди готовы были пожертвовать собой, не задумываясь и не требуя ничего взамен. Что бы вы там ни писали, но был он, советский характер. (СМ, 252)

Sergei Sobolev, who is discussed above, refers to the same quality in slightly different terms: 'Наша готовность к самопожертвованию... В этом нам нет равных...' (СМ, 179) Providing evidence for the interpretation of the Soviet character as defined by this self-destructive patriotism, clean-up workers in the soldiers' choir talk about their reasons for travelling to the polluted zone, stating that they were motivated by a sense of duty and the wish to commit a heroic deed: 'Я – военный человек, мне прикажут – я должен... Я дал присягу... Но это не все... Героический порыв, он тоже был. Его воспитывали... Он нам внушался ещё со школы' (СМ, 84). Another witness exclaims: 'Надо Родине служить! Родине служить – святое дело' (СМ, 88). Psychologically, then, the clean-up workers readiness for self-sacrifice is attributed to obedience, ideals of heroism, a decidedly male

militaristic mind set, and a strong belief in communist ideals. These psychological traits are attributed to ideological indoctrination, as in the case of the interviewee cited above, who claims that the heroic impulse was nurtured in school. As it were, the Soviet men are the victims of their own mentality. This representation reinforces the suggestion in the preface in which Aleksievich rhetorically asks: 'Так кто они все-таки: герои или самоубийцы? Жертвы советских идей и воспитания?' (CM, 36)

Abused and manipulated by the state, the Soviet male citizen is not fully disillusioned with the ideals that prompted the near-suicidal acts. Soviet ideology is internalized to such an extent that, despite the injuries he sustained and the meagre compensation granted to him by the state, he still retains a sense of pride in his act of heroism: 'Роботы не выдерживали, техника сходила с ума. А мы работали ... хорошо работали. И очень этим гордились...' (CM, 82) Similarly, the widow of a helicopter pilot makes the following statement: 'В Кремле ему вручили награду ... Приехал домой счастливый... С орденом...' (CM, 154) At the same time, the clean-up workers' monologues are characterised by a sense of bitterness as their retrospective evaluation of their work at the reactor is highly ambivalent. On the one hand, they express feeling of bitterness, anger and disillusion: 'Да, пошли вы все...' (CM, 93); 'Ничего

героического' (CM, 107). On the other hand, they display a sense of pride and a great reluctance to abandon 'Soviet' ideals. This statement by a interviewee in the choir is particularly illustrative:

он не смог, а я пойду. *Теперь я думаю иначе...* После девяти операций и двух инфарктов... Теперь я никого не сужу, я их понимаю. Молодые ребята. *Но сам все равно бы полетел...*
(CM, 97, my emphasis)

However, this is not the case with Aleksievich's female witnesses, who are unequivocally hostile to the state authorities. An emphasis on a distinctive male and female psychology thus underlies the whole book. Patriotism, the sense of duty and the wish to commit a heroic deed is presented to be an exclusively male psychological phenomenon. The same medals that give the men a sense of pride cause their widows nothing but grief and indignation. In the first monologue, Liudmila Ignatenko tells the interviewer about her husband's slow and painful death at a Moscow hospital after having been exposed to heavy doses of radiation at the reactor: 'Принесли мне Васин орден... Красного цвета... Я смотреть на него долго не могла. Слезы катятся...' (CM, 28) Likewise, Sobolev

tells Aleksievich about a woman who refuses to accept ceremonial tokens of recognition of her husband's 'sacrifice':

Сегодня утром не успел пальто снять, открывается дверь, женщина с порога рыдает, не рыдает, а кричит: «Заберите его медаль и все грамоты! Заберите все льготы! Отдайте мужа!» (СМ, 177)

A second aspect of the depiction of Soviet fatalism is described by the witness Natal'ia Roslova and confirmed by a large number of interviewees. Roslova refers to as a more general indifference to one's own well-being, a form of fatalism that is only indirectly self-destructive. It is not manifested as a disposition to perform 'suicidal' heroic deeds but as a kind of indifference and indolence. The implied message is that the Soviet people have come to depend on the state to such a degree that they have lost the ability to independent thought and action:

С одной стороны – нигилизм, отрицание, а с другой – фатализм. Властям не верят, учёным и врачам не верят, но и сами ничего не предпринимают. Невинные и безучастные. ... Вдоль полей – таблички «Высокая

радиация»... Поля пашутся... Тридцать кюри... Пятьдесят...
Трактористы сидят в открытых кабинах. (СМ, 274)

Chernobyl'skaia molitva contains several instances of this kind of indifference. The local population refuses to take warnings about the lethal radiation levels seriously and remains in the polluted zone. Many witnesses consume food containing high doses of radiation, apparently unconcerned about how it may affect their health, as, for instance, a clean-up worker in the soldiers' choir: 'Объясняли нам, что нельзя. А мы ругались и ели' (СМ, 86). This indifference is often the subject of self-reflection and generalised judgements, as in Kokhanov's monologue:

Я верил... Инженер с двадцатилетним стажем, хорошо знакомый с законами физики. Знал же я, что из этих мест надо уйти всему живому. Хотя бы на время. Но мы добросовестно проводили замеры и смотрели телевизор. Мы привыкли верить. Я – из послевоенного поколения, которое выросло в этой вере. Откуда вера? Мы победили в такой страшной войне. Перед нами тогда весь мир преклонялся. Это же было! (СМ, 208)

If the Soviet citizen displays a readiness to sacrifice himself, obedience, and helpless dependence in relation to the state, the Soviet state shows nothing but disregard for the well-being of its citizens. The most common case of systemic maltreatment of individuals mentioned in the book may be the failure of the authorities to provide the clean-up workers with protective equipment. As Grushevoi states: 'Нужен был хороший защитный костюм, специальные очки, маска. У нас ни первого, ни второго, ни третьего' (СМ, 154). Another common complaint concerns the meagre compensation given to the clean-up workers. Having returned home from the polluted zone, they receive little or no financial aid from the authorities, as Sobolev emphasises: 'А потом их увольняли из армии, давали грамоту и премию – сто рублей' (СМ, 178). Using a patriotic turn of phrase that in this context becomes bitterly ironic, Sobolev adds: 'И они исчезали на бескрайних просторах нашей родины' (СМ, 178). Through its insistence on and repetition of instances of systemic abuse, then, *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* presents a fierce indictment of a totalitarian regime that shows utter disregard for its citizens. Coupled with the notion of 'fatalism', this interpretation shows the Soviet male citizen as a victim of his own convictions. The indoctrinated ideals are so deeply rooted in him that he, despite the sustained injuries and meagre compensation granted to him

by the state, retains a sense of pride in what he regards as his act of heroism. This ties in with the underlying assumptions about gender in the text, as the Soviet patriotic mind-set is seen as a strictly male phenomenon. Whereas the men, although ambivalently embittered, are not fully disillusioned with the Soviet system, the women feel only grief and indignation.

The Limits of Expression

The theme of the inability to articulate the experience of the Chernobyl disaster is the third leitmotif in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*. Aleksievich points out in her preface: 'Я не слышала в те дни: «таких слов не подберу, чтобы передать то, что я видела и пережила» ... «ни в одной книжке об этом не читал и в кино не видел»' (CM, 32). Aleksievich explains the witnesses' wordlessness by referring to the extraordinary novelty of the nuclear accident: 'Прошлое вдруг оказалось беспомощным, в нем не на что было опереться, в вездесущем (как мы верили) архиве человечества не нашлось ключей, чтобы открыть эту дверь' (CM, 32) In other words, the unprecedented disaster is so far removed from normality that contemporary culture cannot accommodate it in a meaningful way. This point is continuously insisted on

throughout the book, both performatively and by way of conscious reflection.

Performatively, the text draws the reader's attention to its own failure to address the disaster in proper terms. For instance, there is the frequent comparison between the accident and war. Zinaida Kovalenko, a returnee to the polluted zone, describes the days of the evacuation thus: 'Как в войну' (CM, 47). This motif is reiterated a few pages later, in an interview in which a number of villagers take turns speaking: 'Ну, думаю, началась война. С китайцами или американцами' (CM, 54). However, as Aleksievich and several witnesses make clear, the comparison with war is an imprecise approximation:

Все, что нам известно об ужасах и страхах, больше всего связано с войной [...] Поэтому люди смешивают понятия войны и катастрофы... Чернобыльская информация в газетах сплошь из военных слов: атом, взрыв, герои... И это затрудняет понимание того, что мы находимся в новой истории... (CM, 32)

Echoing this argument presented by Aleksievich in the preface, the soldiers' choir concludes with the following prominently

placed sentence, uttered by one of the clean-up workers: 'Я думал, что расскажу сыну... А приехал: «Папа, что там?» – «Война.» Я не нашёл других слов...' (CM, 98) Eight pages later, Evgenii Brovkin, a teacher at the University of Gomel, elaborates this unnamed clean-up worker's sense of inadequate vocabulary: 'Я задумался: почему о Чернобыле мало пишут? ... Думаете, случайность? Событие до сих пор ещё вне культуры. Травма культуры. И единственный наш ответ – молчание' (CM, 106). Teacher Nikolai Prokhorovich makes a similar observation in the same chapter: 'С войной сравнивать нельзя, не точно, а все сравнивают' (CM, 133). The repetition of this particular comparison and its frequently stated inaccuracy points to the inadequacy of language to express the reality of the disaster. This inability is further emphasized when the witnesses state that they lack the words to properly describe what they saw and experienced in connection to the accident, as in Ignatenko's monologue: 'Все не те слова вам говорю... Не такие...' (CM, 26) Valentina Aranasevich, the wife of a clean-up worker, questions whether the Chernobyl experience is at all possible to put into words: 'Можно ли об этом говорить? Называть словами... Я до сих пор не понимаю, что это было' (CM, 293).

As concerns the interviewees' conscious reflection on this problem of language, two monologues are particularly relevant.

In the first, Nina Zharkova, a schoolteacher, tells the interviewer about everyday life after the accident, mentioning a number of unsettling events: a pregnant young woman who died suddenly and for unclear reasons; children who faint if they remain standing for more than fifteen minutes; the suicide by hanging of a little girl; the prevailing atmosphere of fatigue and gloominess in the school. Zharkova then suggests that existing literature does not provide a framework for understanding this reality: 'Все с тем же Пушкиным, который казался мне вечным. Иногда появляется кощунственная мысль: а вдруг вся наша культура – сундук со старыми рукописями' (СМ, 137). Too alien to be grasped within the realm of traditional Russian high culture, the accident has in some sense caused this culture to lose its validity. In a second monologue, Katia P, the daughter of a schoolteacher, makes a statement to this effect:

Вот вы пишете, но ни одна книга не помогла мне, не объяснила. Ни театр, ни кино. Я разбираюсь в этом без них. Сама. Мы все переживаем сами, мы не знаем, что с этим делать. Умом я это понять не могу. Особенно растерялась моя мама, она преподаёт в школе русский язык и литературу, всегда учила меня жить по книжкам. И вдруг таких книжек нет... Мама растерялась... (СМ, 119)

The witness then tells the interviewer about her recollections of the accident: the helicopters hovering over the rooftops; a neighbour watching the fire from his balcony with binoculars; the blue smoke hanging over the power plant; the silence in the bus taking her away from Pripjat'; the experience of being ostracized in Minsk; the fear of infertility. According to Katia P., these experiences are ignored in literature as well as in public discourse: 'У нас об этом не пишут, об этом не говорят. А мы есть...' (СМ, 122) *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* is thus implicitly presented as a first attempt to grapple with the wordlessness surrounding the accident. The interviewees' cumulative insistence implies that the experience of the Chernobyl disaster is difficult if not impossible to communicate because the accident is so far removed from normality that the present culture cannot describe it in a meaningful way. The theme of wordlessness is arranged and highlighted by Aleksievich to underscore the sense of the uniqueness of the event, hinting at the caesura in Soviet history in particular and human civilisation in general.

Chapter titles: *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* and *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*

We can thus see that the voices in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* add up to a thematic uniformity presenting over-arching messages, which confirm the observations outlined by Aleksievich in her preface. Insisting on a few crucial points, the voices merge in a single impersonal truth and are thus 'monologic' in Bakhtin's sense of the word. Apart from the selection and composition of the book in which the leitmotifs are reiterated and developed throughout, Aleksievich reinforces her messages by structuring the material in chapters with individual titles. In *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the first chapter is titled 'Zemlia mertvykh', a metaphor for the area around the reactor and for the shattered reality of its inhabitants (CM, 43). Developing the theme of death, the title of the second chapter 'Venets tvoreniia' alludes to the Book of Genesis, emphasising the guilt of humans – supposedly God's final and most dignified creation, which has now brought unimaginable destruction to His earth and creatures (CM, 101). In the context of science and technology in the Soviet Union, however, this chapter title can also be read as an ironic metaphor of the Chernobyl nuclear power plant as the crowning achievement of the Soviet technological and scientific project. Therefore, the reference to the crown of creation stresses not only Aleksievich's over-arching eco-critical agenda, alerting readers to the disastrous consequences of the over-exploitation of nature, but also

points to the disaster as a direct result of the shortcomings of the Soviet system, a consequence of its inherent flaws, thus reinforcing the interpretation of the accident as symbolic of a wider Soviet failure.

Whereas the first and second title stress the pain suffered by the Chernobyl victims as well as the eco-critical and ideological impact of the disaster, the third and final chapter 'Voskhishchenie pechal'iu' points beyond the horror of the catastrophe and its underlying causes. The mention of a sense of admiration for (or amazement at) the sadness experienced by the Chernobyl victims introduces an ambiguity to their suffering, implying a beauty inherent in it and suggesting a degree of reconciliation with the loss of their loved ones.⁴⁷² Anna Karpusheva has analysed the compositional structure of *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* through the lens of the Slavic death lament, arguing that this work resembles a continuous, collective mourning reflecting the 'verbalization of grief as well as the transformation that helps the mourner come to terms with her trauma and continue with her life'.⁴⁷³ Tracing an emotional progression in the narrative structure of the work,

⁴⁷² English translations render this third chapter title differently. Whereas Keith Gessen translates it as 'Amazed by sadness', Anna Gunin's and Arch Tait's translation is 'Admiring disaster'. See Aleksievich, *Chernobyl Prayer: The Oral History of a Nuclear Disaster*, translated by Keith Gessen (Illinois: Dalkey Archive Press, 2005), p. ii. *Chernobyl Prayer: A Chronicle of the Future*, translated by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait (London: Penguin Books, 2016), p. i.

⁴⁷³ Karpusheva, 'Svetlana Aleksievich's *Voices*', p. 271.

Karpusheva demonstrates that the voices in Aleksievich's choruses reflect three stages in the processing of traumatic experience: rupture, transition, and incorporation.⁴⁷⁴ While the speakers in the first choir confront the fact of death and the speakers in the second choir address the disruption of the cycle of human life, the witnesses in the third and final choir – 'Detskii khor' – 'offer some kind of resolution for its mourners and represents the "working-through" stage of overcoming trauma'.⁴⁷⁵

This emotional progression is likewise implicit in the titles of the first and final monologues in the work – both titled 'Odnokii chelovecheskii golos' (CM, 11, 287). Mirroring each other with their identical titles, these monologues are narrated by widows who are struggling with grief and questions of meaning – Liudmila Ignatenko and Valentina Apanasevich. Severely traumatized by the loss of her husband, a firefighter, Ignatenko describes towards the end of her monologue a sense of unreality in her everyday existence, a dream-like state of alienation: 'Так я и живу... Живу одновременно в реальном и нереальном мире. Не знаю, где мне лучше...' (CM, 28).

Even though Apanasevich is no less traumatized by her loss, her monologue ends on a more hopeful note as she tells

⁴⁷⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁷⁵ Ibid., p. 274.

the interviewer about her son, who retains what Apanasevich describes as a childishly naïve perspective on the world, a degree of innocence, despite his horrific injuries. The two final sentences of her monologue, which are given additional significance as they conclude the whole work and provide its title, hint at reconciliation and hope: 'Я буду читать свою чернобыльскую молитву... Он – смотреть на мир детскими глазами...' (СМ, 298).

Through the repetition of the 'solitary human voice' towards the end of the work, which now introduces a monologue suggesting a degree of reconciliation, Aleksievich steers her reader towards a sense of tentative acceptance of grief and to hopes of a continuation of life in the future. Thus via chapter titles and the positioning of individual monologues to organize the voices of her witnesses in a narrative structure, Aleksievich leads the reader from the utter devastation of her first witness – the inconsolable Ignatenko – to the hope inherent in Apanasevich's prayer.

Aleksievich employs similar narrative strategies in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, which is structured in three individually titled chapters, underlining the central aspects of the thematic uniformity of this book. Exploring the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*

consists of monologues based on interviews with male and female veterans as well as with the mourning mothers of fallen soldiers. As Jones has observed, the central interpretative thesis of this work is that the Soviet-Afghan conflict contributed to undermining Soviet military ideology and ultimately led to widespread disillusionment with communist ideas in the USSR, paving the way for its disintegration. Jones notes that the majority of the monologues in the book are constructed in the same way: 'the initial innocence and often naïve patriotic acceptance of the official line of those sent to fight the war contrasts sharply with their bitter disillusionment upon returning from it'.⁴⁷⁶ Discussing Aleksievich's representations in relation to the concept of the Motherland (родина), Jones argues that *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* presents the Soviet-Afghan war as a crucial point in the disintegration of the cult of the Second World War in Soviet culture:

The conflict in Afghanistan [...] is clearly not at all like World War II. In that conflict the "Motherland" – if we can accept such a construct – was invaded and occupied and was in fact in danger of being defeated. In the Afghan War, on the other hand, the Soviets were the aggressors [...] Thus the

⁴⁷⁶ Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes', p. 240.

“Motherland-mother” construct at the heart of World War II, wherein individual mothers [...] stand in for the Motherland itself, splinters in the case of the Soviet–Afghan War [...] Most mothers whose words are sprinkled throughout *Zinky Boys* and who symbolically, collectively represent the Motherland, do *not* accept the sacrifice of their sons for a cause they neither comprehend nor support.⁴⁷⁷

A key theme of this work, the disillusionment with Soviet ideology caused by the perceived unjust nature of the military campaign is expressed by both mothers and veterans, who state that their trust in the Soviet state has been irrevocably shattered. A male private tells the interviewer about his attitude to the armed conflict and to the government at the time when he was drafted: ‘В нашей семье считалось: раз правительство послало туда войска, значит, надо’ (TS, 33). Towards the end of the monologue, this witness expresses that he has fundamentally reconsidered his viewpoint on the war and on Soviet society in general:

Не пишите только о нашем афганском братстве. Его нет. Я в него не верю. На войне всех объединял страх: нас

⁴⁷⁷ Ibid., p. 241.

одинаково обманули, мы одинаково хотели жить и одинаково хотели домой. Здесь нас объединяет то, что у нас ничего нет, а блага в нашей стране раздают по блату и привилегиям. (TS, 37)

The sense of disillusionment recurring throughout the freestanding monologues is further stressed by Aleksievich in the chapter titles, which are all quotations from the Bible. While prefiguring the death lament in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* in its Christian framework, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* does not offer a narrative of reconciliation. Aleksievich introduces an ambiguity in the incorporation of religious references as she states that she is not certain what she seeks in the Scripture: 'Что ищу в Священном писании? Вопросы или ответы? Какие вопросы и какие ответы?' (TS, 177) The recurrent references to the Bible point both towards the innocence of the victims of the war in Afghanistan and to the perceived emptiness of official ideology by repeatedly invoking the notion of false prophets, implying by extension that the Soviet Union has lost its real Orthodox faith and substituted it with a destructive political doctrine.

The title of Chapter One 'Ibo mnogie pridut moim imenem...' refers to the Gospel of Mark, which tells of the ministry of Jesus from his baptism to his death and burial,

ending with the discovery of his empty tomb (TS, 29). In particular, the quotation used by Aleksievich is taken from Jesus's eschatological discourse in chapter 13, immediately preceding the passion narrative: 'Jesus said to them: "Watch out that no one deceives you. Many will come in my name, claiming, 'I am he', and will deceive many"''.⁴⁷⁸ This reference to Jesus' cautioning his disciples of false prophets clearly points to the false promises made by the Soviet regime. However, the position of the sentence in the Holy Scripture is also significant as it comes directly after Jesus' prediction of the destruction of the temple. Clearly referring to the dissolution of the USSR, the allusion to the imminent destruction of the temple reinforces the over-arching thesis in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* that the Soviet-Afghan war brought about or at least sped up this process of disintegration:

As Jesus was leaving the temple, one of his disciples said to him, 'Look, Teacher! What massive stones! What magnificent buildings!' 'Do you see all these great buildings?', replied Jesus. 'Not one stone here will be left on another; every one will be thrown down'.⁴⁷⁹

⁴⁷⁸ *Holy Bible: New International Version* (Hodder & Stoughton, 2011), p. 766. See Mary Healy, *The Gospel of Mark* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Academic, 2008), p. 256.

⁴⁷⁹ *Ibid.*

If the first chapter title equates Soviet ideology with the false prophets represented in the Gospel of Mark, suggesting the danger and destructive potential inherent in Soviet military culture, the title of Chapter Two addresses the suffering of the blameless victims of the Soviet system: 'А другой умирает с душою огорченною' (TS, 103). This quotation is taken from The Book of Job, which tells about the sufferings of the eponymous hero, a virtuous, God-fearing man leading an exemplary life.⁴⁸⁰ When Satan challenges Job's faith, God grants permission for Job to be tested by permitting every possible disaster to befall him, making The Book of Job a story of 'a life where suffering and injustice prevail for no apparent reason'.⁴⁸¹ The quotation used by Aleksievich is to be found in Job's second reply to Zophar (Job 21) in which Job addresses the fate of the wicked. The doctrine represented in Zophar's discourse teaches that the wicked bring about their own downfall and that their actions are punished by God.⁴⁸² From his own position of suffering, however, Job contradicts this idea of divine justice:

⁴⁸⁰ Norman C. Habel, *The Book of Job* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 1.

⁴⁸¹ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸² *Ibid.*, 110.

One person dies in full vigour, completely secure and at ease, well nourished in body, bones rich with marrow. Another dies in bitterness of soul, never having enjoyed anything good.⁴⁸³

There are numerous interpretations of the themes of faith, suffering and morality in The Book of Job.⁴⁸⁴ However, in the context of eroding belief in Soviet ideology in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, what is most relevant about this allusion is Job's insistence on the injustice of suffering in a world where evil deeds go unpunished and suffering is brought upon the virtuous. Implicitly equating Job's despair to that of the soldiers and their mothers, Aleksievich emphasizes their victimhood, their status as victims of the injustices caused by the Soviet state. Just as Job cannot reconcile with the unjust and apparently meaningless suffering that befalls him, the mothers of the Soviet soldiers cannot justify the deaths of their sons as a meaningful sacrifice for the Motherland as the Soviet cult of the Second World War is beginning to disintegrate.

Bringing the narrative framework to full circle by reiterating the point made in the title of Chapter One, the third

⁴⁸³ *Holy Bible*, p. 389.

⁴⁸⁴ See, for instance, Michael V. Fox, 'The Meanings of the Book of Job', *Journal of Biblical Literature*, vol. 137, no. 1 (Spring 2018), pp. 7-18; Andrew E. Steinmann, 'The Structure and Message of the Book of Job', *Vetus Testamentum*, vol. 46, fasc. 1 (Jan., 1996), pp. 85-100.

and final chapter is titled 'Ne obrashchaites' k vyzyvaiushchim mertvykh. I k volshebnikom ne khodite...' (TS, 175) The source of this chapter title is The Book of Leviticus, the third book of the Old Testament, which mainly consists of God's speeches to Moses, which he commands him to repeat to the Israelites.⁴⁸⁵ Specifically, Aleksievich cites Leviticus 19:31, in which God says to Moses: 'Do not turn to mediums or seek out spiritists, for you will be defiled by them. I am the Lord your God'.⁴⁸⁶ Repeating the initial emphasis on Soviet ideology as a false system of ideals with detrimental consequences for its followers, this quotation stresses both the illusory nature of its ideals and the violence that such a system brings about.

In contrast to *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, in which the chapter titles reflect a process of grieving as the witnesses collectively contribute to shaping a narrative of mourning and acceptance, the structure of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* is more static. In addition to the individual titles, the chapters are termed almost identically, reflecting a slow progression of days: 'День первый' (TS, 29); 'День второй' (TS, 103); 'День третий; (TS, 175). Evoking a sense of ceaseless monotony, these chapter titles seem to frame the monologues in a suffocating, enclosed structure, while also indicating that the act of killing has turned

⁴⁸⁵ J. R. Porter, *Leviticus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), pp. 1-12.

⁴⁸⁶ *Holy Bible*, p. 90.

into a matter of routine. Reflecting the lack of emotional progression in the soldiers' and mothers' monologues, this structure precludes both narrative development and any possibilities for reconciliation.

As opposed to the witnesses of the Chernobyl' nuclear disaster, the speakers in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* do not collectively process their trauma. While Apanasevich expresses a degree of hope and reconciliation in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva*, the final witness in *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* concludes his narrative with a highly unsettling and discouraging image. This interviewee, an anonymous sergeant, tells the interviewer that he has been receiving treatment for periodontal disease developed in Afghanistan. During an appointment with the dentist, the shock from the pain of pulling out a tooth suddenly made him start talking, his mouth still full of blood: 'Не могу остановиться... А женщина-врач смотрит на меня почти с отвращением, у нее на лице все ее чувства. Мол, полный рот крови, а он еще говорит' (TS, 239). Recalling the look of disgust on the dentist's face, the witness draws a parallel to the public perception of the Afghan veterans: 'Я понял, что все о нас вот так и думают: полный рот крови, а они еще говорят...' (TS, 239) In its final monologue then, *Tsinkovye mal'chiki* emphasises the alienation felt by the veterans in Soviet society, making this work a first

attempt to break their enforced silence rather than a narrative which seeks to process trauma.

The claim to represent other people is an important source of authenticity and legitimacy in *Golosa utopii*. The multi-voiced structure of Aleksievich's works seems to grant the books additional evidential force, as the reader is apparently presented with the pluralistic representation of different voices – not only with the subjective interpretations of a single author. Even though the interviewees often present a markedly subjective image of their experiences, the collective narrative that emerges makes an implicit claim to objective truth by virtue of its insistence on plurality and diversity. With her books often referred to as 'polyphonic', Aleksievich has been received in the Western European and northern American spheres as an author who 'gives a voice to the voiceless'.

This ambition to allow historical eyewitnesses to 'speak' in her works cannot be dismissed as pure rhetoric. Even though Aleksievich introduces conspicuous changes in individual monologues from edition to edition, altering thematic emphasis and poetic effects between revisions, there is no evidence that she makes fictional additions to the content of the monologues. Thus processing and structuring the

statements of actual people, Aleksievich gives her readers access to genuine accounts which contribute to our understanding of Soviet history.

The term 'polyphonic', however, does not seem appropriate to describe the compositional nature of her works. Selecting and structuring the material in a way that creates a thematic uniformity, Aleksievich employs a form of writing that is a far cry from Bakhtin's understanding of 'unmerged voices' but rather gravitates towards his concept of the monologic novel. Instead of aspiring to present the variety of co-existing truths characteristic of Bakhtin's notion of literary polyphony, Aleksievich's structure is heavily marked by a central interpretative thesis. As Jones suggests, 'symphonic' is a much more appropriate term to describe the compositional character of Aleksievich's books.⁴⁸⁷ Similarly to the musical themes in a symphony, the 'voices' represented in her writing are structured according to the principle of recurring and hierarchically ordered leitmotifs – not as simultaneous lines of independent melody as in a fugue. The over-arching and subtly communicated arguments that inform the selection underpinning *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* clearly steers the reader to an understanding of the Chernobyl disaster as directly caused

⁴⁸⁷ Jones, 'Mothers, Prostitutes', p. 235.

by the inherent flaws of the Soviet system, and the compositional structure of the work presents the trauma suffered by the witnesses as something that is possible to overcome. The composition of *Tsinkovye mal'chiki*, by contrast, presents the veterans' trauma as irredeemable, an open wound in the Soviet collective consciousness.

Conclusion

Blanchot's claim that 'genres no longer have any real significance – that, for example, it would be absurd to ask whether *Finnegan's Wake* is a prose work or not, or whether it can be called a novel' – must be seen against the background of his own philosophy of literature as well as in the context of the modernist writing that he discusses.⁴⁸⁸ A singular entity that eludes conceptual generalisations, a literary work has no essence, according to Blanchot, but 'exists as this absence of itself, as the question of its possibility'.⁴⁸⁹ This 'impetuous pressure of literature that no longer recognizes the distinction between genres and seeks to destroy their limits' is most clearly visible in overtly genre-transgressive works such as *Finnegan's Wake*, which undermines the narrative and stylistic conventions traditionally associated with the novel.⁴⁹⁰ Blanchot's notion of the limits of generalised definitions of literary forms are clearly applicable to Aleksievich's work, which defines itself precisely through the transgression of institutionalized forms of writing.

⁴⁸⁸ Blanchot, *The Space*, p. 220.

⁴⁸⁹ Rodolphe Gasché, 'The Felicities of Paradox: Blanchot on the Null-Space in Literature', in Carolyn Baily Gill ed., *Maurice Blanchot: The Demand of Writing* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), pp. 34-69, p. 36. See also Haase and Large, *Maurice Blanchot*, p. 57.

⁴⁹⁰ Blanchot, *Le Livre à venir* (Paris: Gallimard, 1959), p. 136. Quoted in Todorov, *Genres*, p. 13.

However, even though genre definitions might be obsolete concepts to describe and classify literary works, historically established genres are crucial in shaping our writing and reading of texts. As Todorov has compellingly argued, an author's awareness of institutionalized genres guides their writing. Analogously, the same awareness governs readers' approach to a work of literature. Therefore, rather than proposing another label to categorize the genre of *Golosa utopii*, this thesis has focused on the specific ways in which Aleksievich presents her work and the specific expectations this presentation raises.

Aleksievich establishes 'horizons of expectation' for her readers in several different ways. Insisting on the obligation to factual truth by referring to the interviewees as 'witnesses' and presenting their stories in monologues, in which the individual voice seems to be elevated to a position of power and authority, Aleksievich's writing creates the impression that the interview statements have undergone minimal authorial editing and that the reader is given 'unmediated' access to the witnesses' accounts. At the same time, however, Aleksievich emphasises the presence of artistic and universal truths in her texts, thus

encouraging her reader to look both for the 'real' and the 'true' in *Golosa utopii*.⁴⁹¹

Synthesising ideas on literary and documentary writing of her most crucial influences in the Russian literary tradition, Aleksievich emphatically identifies as an author rather than as a journalist, even though her career as a journalist in the 1970s and 1980s significantly contributed to shaping her writing practice. Her creative works can be seen as a direct continuation of her writings for *Sel'skaia gazeta* and *Neman*. Yet, her books also embody a conscious effort to distance herself from the Soviet journalistic context. In her later works, the official Soviet discourse is foregrounded as the negative other of Aleksievich's own discourse, prompting her reader to approach *Golosa utopii* as a dissident text – that is, a cycle of works occupying a position of diametrical opposition to official Soviet ideology. This retrospective positioning includes the construction of a dissident persona, framing Aleksievich's writing career in binary terms.

The dichotomies of state vs. individual and resistance vs. repression underpinning Aleksievich's public persona are not accurate reflections of her trajectory, though. On the contrary, her writing career points to the instability of such binaries and

⁴⁹¹ White, 'Introduction: Historical Fiction', p. 149.

the fluid boundaries between official and unofficial Soviet culture. It is only in the more recent, revised version of *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso* that Aleksievich makes the connection between masculinity and ideological and aesthetic conformity. In the original version of this book, the superior authenticity assigned to female interviewees is attributed to the supposedly superior sensory perception and memory of women. A similar discrepancy between the presentation and reality of Aleksievich's works can be observed in their apparent polyphony. While the sheer number of seemingly independent authors has led readers and critics to perceive Aleksievich's works as 'polyphonic', the narrative structures and the thematic uniformity governing individual monologues are incompatible with Bakhtin's notion of literary polyphony.

The aesthetic effects and political messages inherent in Aleksievich's writing are predicated on a set of tacit agreements between author and reader. Aleksievich's claim to let the witness 'speak' in her writing assumes that an author can accurately represent the experiences, feelings, and thoughts of a wider group of people. While drawing on the strategies of dissident writers of the 1960s and 1970s to 'write history through the voice of the repressed', this assumption also recalls the notion of the 'people' inherent in the thinking of the Russian idealists of the 1840 and the positivists of the 1860s as well as

Lenin's view that the Marxist intelligentsia represented the proletariat.⁴⁹² In Aleksievich's later works, the construction of an artistic persona assumes an absolute separation between official and unofficial Soviet culture, with the concomitant assumption 'that Socialism was "bad" and "immoral" or had been experienced as such by Soviet people before the changes of perestroika, and, further, the collapse of Soviet socialism was predicated on this badness and immorality'.⁴⁹³

When author and reader enter into these agreements, *Golosa utopii* is met with approval by critics and readers and Aleksievich is accepted as a credible representative for the people whose stories she collects – a 'voice of the voiceless' who has stood up to the repressive Belarusian and Russian regimes and, as several paratexts suggest, waged the same fight against the Soviet regime before perestroika. By contrast, when readers refuse to enter into the agreements that *Golosa utopii* silently proposes, they tend to be more critical of Aleksievich's work. Soviet-Afghan War veteran Alla Smolina is a case in point.⁴⁹⁴ Smolina calls Aleksievich an 'immoral, dishonest upstart' ('для меня навсегда осталась непорядочной лживой

⁴⁹² Barbara Martin, *Dissident Histories in the Soviet Union: From De-Stalinization to Perestroika* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019), pp. 83-108; Morson, 'The Intelligentsia and its Critics', in Abbott Gleason, ed., *A Companion to Russian History* (Hoboken: John Wiley & Sons, 2009), pp. 261-278, p. 272; Malia, 'What Is the Intelligentsia?', *Daedalus*, vol. 89, no. 3 (1960), pp. 441-458, p. 446.

⁴⁹³ Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, p. 5.

⁴⁹⁴ Smolina, 'Gimn sovetskim "Afganushkam"'.

выскачкой’) and dismisses her receipt of the Nobel Prize as ‘pure politics’:

Дорогие ветераны, ничего удивительного – это чистая политика [...] Алексиевич много лет живёт на Западе, а два года после аннексии Крыма (2014-2015) вылились в серьёзное политическое противостояние Запада с Кремлём. И Алексиевич [...] сумела подсуетиться, в нужное время критикуя Путина с нужных трибун.⁴⁹⁵

Framing Aleksievich and her work within the dichotomy of East vs. West, Smolina’s presentation is, of course, no less predicated on simplified binaries than the depictions of Soviet reality in *Golosa utopii*. For Smolina, however, the value of these binaries is reversed – it is the West that represents evil and untruth. Claiming to speak for ‘thousands’ of veterans in her scathing criticism, Smolina reverses the roles and claims to represent a wider collective of veterans: ‘она [Алексиевич] оскорбила [...] тысячи советских ветеранов, включая погибших и умерших [...] ведь она так и не извинилась и ни перед кем из нас не покаялась...’⁴⁹⁶

⁴⁹⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁹⁶ Ibid.

Whether Smolina's indignation is in fact shared by a significant number of veterans remains unknown. Likewise, it is difficult to determine how Aleksievich's interviewees retrospectively view their participation in her literary project. In *U voiny ne zhenskoe litso*, Aleksievich reports receiving an indignant letter from veteran Nina Vishnevskaiia, who objects to Aleksievich's written rendition of the interview: 'Возвращен и посланный мной материал, от него мало что осталось – весь исчерканный [...] выброшены веселые строки о поварах, которые в котлах моются [...] А на страницах с историей про лейтенанта Мишу Т. стояли возмущенные вопросительные знаки' (UV, 116). However, Aleksievich dismisses these objections as motivated by Vishnevskaiia's superficial desire to be presented in a heroic light and, by extension, her internalisation of the Soviet masculine war canon: 'Потом я не раз сталкивалась с этими двумя правдами, живущими в одном человеке: собственной правдой, загнанной в подполье, и чужой, вернее нынешней, пропитанной духом времени. Запахом газет' (UV, 116).

It would be illuminating to interview Aleksievich's witnesses, to ask them whether they recognise themselves in their monologues, whether they feel that Aleksievich accurately represented or distorted their experiences and whether the act of sharing their trauma with her and her readers redeemed

their suffering in any way (as the narrative structure in *Chernobyl'skaia molitva* seems to suggest). Unfortunately, many Second World War veterans, veterans of the Soviet-Afghan War and Chernobyl survivors have passed away. Moreover, those who are alive today would be difficult to identify and locate as Aleksievich does not provide extensive information about her interviewees in her books.

Irrespective of whether the interviewees feel that they have been accurately represented in Aleksievich's writing, however, her works are based on the assumption that such representation is possible. Relying on her reader's ability to decode the signals by which she places her texts in the canon of Soviet dissident literature, Aleksievich expects that the reader accepts her as a voice of the repressed which exposes the untruths of the Soviet regime. The varying responses to her writing demonstrate the underlying complexity of these claims. If Aleksievich's representations in *Golosa utopii* often seem to suggest that truth and authenticity are straightforward and simple categories, this thesis had attempted to show that they are not. In Aleksievich's texts, 'authenticity' should be understood as a textual property, an artistic and rhetorical effect, based on various unspoken assumptions about Soviet history and literature, rather than a universal given. If Aleksievich's works and biographical accounts apparently point

to a perceived simplicity of Soviet reality, then, under critical scrutiny, they reveal its complexity.

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