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The Alexievich method

Abstract:

Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich is undoubtedly a giant of testimonial literature, except 'testimonial literature' is not quite the right term to account for what Alexievich does. No term is quite right in fact. People's history? Collective history? Collective novel? Documentary prose? Novel-oratorio? Novel-evidence? Living document? In this paper I will explore Alexievich's method with a particular focus on the way she writes about individual and collective trauma. What are some of the ramifications of her singular, unclassifiable approach to the ongoing conversations about writing trauma?

Biographical Note:

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Belarusian writer Svetlana Alexievich is undoubtedly a giant of testimonial literature, except 'testimonial literature' is not quite the right term to try to account for what she does in her books. No term is quite right in fact. Oral history? People's history? Collective novel? Documentary prose? Novel-oratorio? Novel-evidence? Living document? She has been chronicling lived experiences of trauma – of women and children in the Second World War, of Soviet soldiers in Afghanistan between 1979 and 1989, of people whose lives were turned upside down by the 1986 explosion of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor or the collapse of the Soviet Union five years later – in ways that seem to simultaneously encompass and exceed these possibilities.

Alexievich writes her books in Russian, is of a Belarusian-Ukrainian descent and lives permanently in Belarus although she spent over a decade in Western Europe. She is, as historian Timothy Snyder points out, 'a writer of all three nations' (2015), which is an increasingly complicated identity to maintain especially in public. There have been times when Alexievich rightly feared for her life. Belarusian President Alexander Lukashenko loathes her politics—Alexievich is a vocal opponent of all forms of totalitarianism—and her Nobel Prize for Literature in 2015 seems to have only amplified the president's hostility towards his nation's most lauded author. Prior to 2015, Alexievich was relatively unknown in the West. She dresses unfashionably, wears no make-up and doesn't appear to be relishing the limelight.

The Alexievich Method

Journalist Philip Gourevitch, a distinguished chronicler of recent catastrophic histories in his own right, describes Alexievich's method this way:

> She spends years finding and interviewing her subjects, then weaves their testimonies into a polyphonic narrative that immerses the reader with relentless particularity in the individual and the collective experience of existence in the grinding jaws of history. (2017)

History's *grinding jaws* may sound like a hyperbolic turn of phrase, but people in Alexievich books—ordinary people through and through—live through wars, nuclear explosions, through seemingly indestructible empires collapsing, through their world and moral universe being repeatedly upended. They survive and tell Alexievich what they saw and felt *then* and what they see and feel now.

As is well-known by now, Alexievich picks a hundred or so voices out of sometimes three to five hundred people whose testimony she collects for each book over the course of many years. Of the chosen hundred, ten to twenty will emerge in time as the 'pillars'. She might go back and speak to her 'pillars' up to twenty times each. The gradual deepening of conversations with primary witnesses is an integral part of her method. So is the gathering of stories and lived experiences that do not make it into her books but serve as the soil from which these books grow. I am using the word 'conversation' deliberately. While Russian-American journalist Masha Gessen notes that Alexievich is 'the first person to receive the Nobel for books that are based entirely on interviews' (2015), Alexievich describes what she does not as 'interviews' but as conversations about life. 'If the person is older', she explains, 'they are like an older sister or brother to me and if they are younger, they are like a younger sister or brother to me' (2015a).

For Alexievich, today's world is characterised by such intensity and volatility that 'neither one person nor the whole culture are able to conceive it' (2015d). A person

can only attempt 'to grasp a small piece of reality' (2015d). She sees her task as bringing these small pieces of grasped reality together 'in a novel of voices' (2015d). *Polyphonic* is the word frequently used to describe the distinctive nature of Alexievich's prose (the Nobel Prize Committee used it too). In her review of *Secondhand Time* (2016), Catherine Merridale, a highly sensitive historian of Russia, writes,

> … her work is multi-vocal, like a chorus, pierced in places by the solo of an anguished voice. Readers are swept on by a cadence that can ebb and swell with tidal force. The tone induces something close to a trance, demanding a complete surrender to its message of despair. (2016)

Multi-vocal or polyphonic testimonial texts are hardly unique to Alexievich and, in some sense at least, polyphony can be seen as constitutive of the testimonial literature as a genre. Beate Müller, for example, defines polyphony in relation to testimonies of child survivors of the Holocaust as 'the discursive consequences of the assuming and staging of the survivor's voice in a testimonial text authored not by this survivor but by his or her interviewer' (2012: 159). Collections of survivor and witness accounts testifying both singularly and collectively to shared historical traumas are by no means rare. The defining quality of Alexievich's books is not the multiplicity of testifying voices she assembles, but the singular quality of these voices – piercing, profound, small *and* epic in one breath – and the affective power of their convergence.

This singular quality has a lot to do with the time Alexievich takes with her books. Not rushing conversations. Not trying to get anywhere, to extract anything. Coming back again and again. All the way through she is listening for moments when people in front of her are able to go into the deepest parts of their lives and selves, when sheafs of ideology and borrowed language drop off. 'Human being speaks beautifully only in two situations', she observes,

> Beautifully not in terms of eloquence or aesthetics but in being able to reach the depth of their being. This happens either in love or near death, when people rise beyond themselves. And all my books about Chernobyl, war in Afghanistan, the WWII – a human being in all of them is on the very edge of what they are capable of. (2016b)

The quality of the author's voice itself is also remarkable – Alexievich's voice holds everything together yet manages to remain as weightless and transparent as air.

Love and death are the only two themes of all Alexievich's books. Often they arrive bound together. In the prologue to *Voices from Chernobyl* (also translated as *Chernobyl Prayer*), a pregnant wife of a firefighter speaks of the love for her husband who is dying a torturous, monstrous death from radiation poisoning (Alexievich, 2006). When the fire breaks, Vasily Ignatenko is called to the Chernobyl nuclear reactor and he goes to the reactor in a short-sleeved shirt, without any protective gear, and so do all the first responders to the fire. In the weeks to come, as Vasily gets sicker and sicker, Lyudmilla, his wife, is forbidden to touch him. In fact, she is forbidden to come anywhere near him, only she cannot stay away:

> Someone is saying: "You have to understand: This is not your husband anymore, not a beloved person, but a radioactive object with a strong density of poisoning. You're not suicidal. Get a hold of yourself.' And I'm like someone who's lost her mind: 'But I love him! I love him!' He's sleeping, and I'm whispering: "I love you!" Walking in the hospital courtyard, "I love you." Carrying his sanitary tray, "I love you." (16)

The questions Alexievich asks in all of her books remain essentially the same – what do people, caught out by winds of history, whirled around, lifted in the air, carried for

miles as easily as a feather, plonked here or there at random, look and sound like? Who do they become? What gets them through? Also: how to capture their experience in language so as to transmit it, so it is remembered and kept alive?

Pyotr Vail, a prominent Russian writer and critic, suggests that Alexievich's books belong to the genre of 'last hope' (2008). 'Last hope' is not merely a reference to the enormity of historical catastrophes they seek to chronicle. Alexievich writes *out of* and *about* the world where the devaluation of human life has, in the last hundred years, been rendered absolute. And it is to this world, where a single human life is seen as anything but intrinsically sacred or valuable, that Alexievich brings her conviction that the truth of history can only be found in looking closely, compassionately at the contours of a single human soul.

Expansive oral history projects grappling with the aftermath of shared trauma are common in the Western world. Not so among the post-Soviet nations. Vail notes that Alexievich is the only one to have written in this genre in Russian language 'with such unwavering consistency and power' (2008). Alexievich, for her part, cites Belarusian historian Ales Adamovich as her precursor, particularly his *A Book of the Blockade* (1984), co-written with Daniil Granin. The book—a people's history of the 900-day siege of Leningrad between 1941 and 1944—was completed in 1970s, but published only in 1980s when the political climate in the Soviet Union was sufficiently lenient to tolerate a collective narrative of suffering and survival as opposed to that of wall-to-wall heroism. As Alexievich was coming into her own as a writer, *A Book of the Blockade* emerged for her as an unrivalled historical record both of the siege and the human soul in extremis. The book embodied not only a different mode of history-making, but also the power of capturing an event unprecedented in its nature and impact through the living voices of its survivors and witnesses.

Alexievich's 'conversations about life' borrow from, and deepen, an approach taken by Adamovich and Granin. Both men fought in the war —Adamovich with partisans in the Belarusian forests and Granin on the Leningrad front—and in their conversations with survivors of the siege (blockadniks) the war was talked about as a world-changing experience everyone in the room had in common. Often dictaphones wouldn't get switched on in those initial conversations. The instantly established commonality was entirely unforced: for decades after its end, the Second World War remained at the centre of every Soviet family's history. War is everywhere in Alexievich's work. In *Secondhand Time,* a middle-aged woman tells Alexievich, 'At every single gathering, without fail … Within five minutes, we'll be remembering the war. We're constantly singing war songs. Is there anyone else in the world like us?' (144). 'At heart we're built for war', Alexievich writes, 'We were always either fighting or preparing to fight. We've never known anything else …' (2016a: 4) The common ground Alexievich has with her subjects, however, is broader: it is seventy years of Soviet existence imprinted on a human soul.

'In an indefinitely large part of the Soviet experience', writes Alexander Etkind in *Warped Mourning*, 'death could not be recognised as death, and survival could not be relied upon as life.' (2013: 18). The militarisation of everyday life in conjunction with the devaluation of an individual produced a new kind of person. In *Secondhand Time,* Alexievich names and describes this person,

> Seventy-plus years in the Marxist-Leninist laboratory gave rise to a new man: *Homo sovieticus*. Some see him as a tragic figure, others call him a *sovok*. I feel like I know

> this person; we're very familiar, we've lived side by side for a long time. I am this person. And so are my acquaintances, my closest friends, my parents. (2016a: 3)

Sovok is a pejorative term for the product of the Soviet upbringing and existence. Alexievich calls herself a *sovok*. Most writers and public intellectuals in the post-Soviet nations are at pains to distance themselves from this State-created creature, who is either blindly naïve or cynical in the extreme. Not Alexievich. She doesn't see Homo Sovieticus as a grotesque, shameful figure. Tragic – yes. Embarrassing – no. She is a *sovok* and she is also an 'accomplice' (3). Not a reporter, not an historian, not a storyteller, not even a writer. Feeling like an 'accomplice' doesn't mean she has a privileged insight into the experiences of people she writes about. For Alexievich and Adamovich alike, the feeling of common destiny with their subjects is underpinned by the empathy of the kind characterised by Dominick LaCapra: 'one puts oneself in the other's position without taking the other's place' (2004: 503). This empathy presupposes the recognition of the irreducible distance between the writer and her subject's experiences and 'the active acknowledgement of otherness' (LaCapra 2004: 503). It is not, and can never be, akin to identification.

Adamovich and Granin started their siege project with the recognition that survivors of the siege had a unique (and heterogeneous) experience of the Second World War. They note in the book that despite fighting in the war and knowing a great deal about it, they were utterly unprepared for the stories survivors told them. In piecing their book together, the two men came to see that, for long decades after the war's end, many of the siege survivors kept inside themselves 'the scalding truth about what it was they had survived' (Adamovich and Granin 1984). Kept it inside owing not only to the external pressures to stay silent, but also so as not to inflict burns on those around them – 'to spare us all' (Adamovich and Granin 1984). For Adamovich and Granin, the work of talking to survivors was not just about creating a necessary and humanising historical record of the siege—the official historical narrative was shamefully indifferent to the suffering of those inside the city—but also about producing necessary conditions for the transfer of that *scalding truth* into a shared civic ownership. Civic society needed to take responsibility for the remembering and the wrestling with the tragedies in its past. The burden of knowledge and memory couldn't remain on survivors' shoulders indefinitely.

Gessen writes that Alexievich's method represents 'oral history stripped down to segments so raw that it can stretch both credulity and the reader's tolerance for pain' (2015). Yet Alexievich's books have a problematic relationship with the genre of oral history. It's not just the manner in which she talks to survivors. Other oral historians have, in various contexts, used unconventional, unformalisable methodologies. Taylor Krauss's oral histories of the aftermath of Rwandan genocide, for example, rely on long 'sittings' of up to ten hours and an open-ended interview process where special attention is paid to nonverbal communication: 'a brief pause, a prolonged silence, a broken phrase, a tear, or a tremble' (2014: 97) and where interpreters, if deployed, speak only after survivors finish talking. The issue is with what happens after conversations are over. Alexievich does more than curate and arrange people's accounts. She weaves, carves, distils, 'wrestles' (Harding 2016) so that stories of lives lived under extreme pressure, 'on the very edge of what they are capable of' (Alexievich, 2016b), begin to sound like poems, incantations, confessions, parables.

Sophie Pinkham's critique (2016) of Alexievich's interventions into her subjects' words is fair insofar as those interventions are undoubtedly there. Pinkham cites instances of Alexievich taking liberties with her subjects' testimonies. 'Alexievich

treats her interviews not as fixed historical documents', Pinkham writes, 'but as raw material for her own artistic and political project' (2016). Pinkham further argues that Alexievich's editorial interventions—considerable yet never flagged—reshape meaning of testimonies and disqualify the author's work from being a form of history or nonfiction. 'Without the imprimatur of nonfiction', Pinkham concludes, 'it is unlikely that Alexievich's work would have won so much praise around the world' (2016). In 1993, Alexievich was sued by some of the narrators/interlocutors of *Zinky Boys* (1992), her book about the Soviet involvement in Afghanistan, for allegedly distorting their words and intended meaning. As part of court proceedings, independent literary expertise was sought to determine what form of intervention was permissible in documentary prose. The lawsuit had a clear political dimension —the war in Afghanistan was and remains a highly divisive topic—but the independent expert cleared Alexievich of any wrongdoing (Vukas 2014: 28). Lawsuits aside, Pinkham's conclusion that Alexievich's fame in the West, which is a special category of fame for a writer from elsewhere, rests on the widely shared and constantly reinforced belief that her work is factual, untampered non-fiction doesn't strike me as either warranted or particularly insightful. Alexievich has repeatedly made it clear that she is *not* a journalist and what she does is *not* reporting. She describes herself as 'a human ear'. I suspect that her work can sometimes be experienced as a revelation, particularly by its Western readers, not because it is seen as being word-for-word factual, but because of the way it handles the relationship between language, testimony and lived experiences of violence and loss.

Trauma and the Soviet / post-Soviet experience

In 2009, *A Book of the Blockade* became the basis for a documentary directed by prominent Russian film-maker Alexander Sokurov. In *Reading a Book of the Blockade*, contemporary residents of St Petersburg of all ages and professions, including some blockadniks, were invited into a small radio station and left alone with the book. They'd leaf through it, find a passage they wanted to read and read it to camera. Ninety minutes of it. Nothing else. The act of reading – voice, volume, pacing, pauses, occasional looks to camera, fluctuations in tone, flashes of emotion, the choice of the passage itself as well as the sheer heterogeneity of readers – was sufficient for the documentary to hold you in its spell. For ninety minutes, I was a witness to other people (young, old, famous, unknown) as they put words of survivors *through* themselves. The sheer charge of these words entering a human body, a human consciousness, was such that other documentary evidence or possible cinematic flourishes felt redundant.

Since my return to teaching last year, I've been getting students to read Alexievich. They are shattered, electrified. The affective power of her work is what they talk about the most: how they could feel it in their body and how sometimes that physical feeling was so overpowering they needed to lie down after reading her; how they couldn't leave the room to check on whatever was in the oven or on Facebook while Alexievich people were in the middle of saying something. If students did walk away from her work half-way through a monologue, they felt guilty – as if abandoning an important, intimate conversation for no good reason.

People in Alexievich's books do not see themselves or others in their orbit as traumatised subjects. The way they speak – and the way Alexievich carries their speech onto the page – about suffering, death, memory and survival is largely free

from any recognisable tropes of trauma. To some extent, this is so because extreme human suffering was normalised for most of their lives through the enforced ethos of sacrifice and the requisite subjugation of individual needs to the collective will. 'The self-inflicted nature of the Soviet terror', writes Alexander Etkind,

> has complicated the circulation of three energies that structure the postcatastrophic world: a cognitive striving to learn about the catastrophe; an emotional desire to mourn for its victims; and an active drive to find justice and take revenge on the perpetrators. (2013: 8–9)

The Soviet century was autogenocidal, the lines between victims and perpetrators have always been virtually impossible to draw and maintain, and the totalitarian period, followed by a brief and troubled post-totalitarian era, has been arguably succeeded in Russia and Belarus by a form of neo-totalitarianism, characterised by the systematic rehabilitation of the Soviet era or at least the idea of it. The postcatastrophic world, to borrow Etkind's term, doesn't feel particularly *post* to many people in Alexievich's books. In *Secondhand Time*, a man tells her of his Uncle Vanya who survived ten years in a camp and 'came back with a withered hand, toothless, his liver enlarged':

> He went back to work at the same factory, at the same job, in the same office, same desk … He sat across from the guy who'd informed on him… Everyone knew it … and Uncle Vanya knew it too … On holidays, they sat at the same table drinking vodka … That's us! Our life! Imagine a victim and an executioner from Auschwitz sitting side by side in the same office, getting their wages out of the same window down in accounting. With identical war decorations … (272–273)

It is so obvious that perhaps it *does* need to be restated from time to time that trauma theories and the way they have inflected thinking about representation, identity, memory and history are part of the Western intellectual history. The psychoanalytic tradition, the evolution of trauma theory (articulated by the likes of Cathy Caruth, Shoshana Felman, Dori Laub and others), the rise of neurobiological models of trauma's interaction with the human mind are Western developments, which have not been significantly replicated in the Soviet or post-Soviet contexts. In the Soviet period, to give you an obvious point of comparison, psychiatry and psychoanalysis were banned as anti-Soviet activities. Today the concept of trauma is not commonly used in the increasingly thwarted attempts at reckoning with the legacy of the Soviet past. It is deployed primarily in highly specialised medical literature and doesn't have a strong discursive presence in culture. Still, the absence of the traumatic as a key concept to *think with* and *talk with* about the past should not be seen as merely a refusal, or a failure, of reckoning and mourning. In fact, when it comes to the Soviet and post-Soviet experiences, the standard trauma staple – testimony, witnessing, transmission, healing, mourning, working through the loss – is on a shaky ground. Could it be, asks Merridale, 'that notions of psychological trauma are genuinely irrelevant to Russian minds, as foreign as the imported machinery that seizes up and fails in a Siberian winter' (2000: 21). Historian Irina Paperno urges us to 'suspend as far as possible, explanatory categories that have been readily available in the Western academia' (2002: 577), as they are insufficient to make sense of the Soviet experience.

To what extent Western ideas around trauma, which are in themselves immensely complex and by no means settled even within nominal disciplinary bounds, can be meaningfully applied across cultures remains a big, open question. A corollary question is this: what may be lost when lived experiences are understood and chronicled exclusively in a trauma-centric manner and how, say, historical realities,

power relations or, for that matter, divergent ontologies might be mischaracterised or erased in doing so? In many parts of the world, victims and perpetrators live side by side with no clear boundary between them, people may have composite victim-perpetrator identities, physical sites and objects directly linked to loss and death could be omnipresent. In Rwanda, for instance, 'the same machetes used to *cut* the Tutsi might be among those today used to *slaughter* cows for meat' (Krauss 2014: 100). In many parts of the world, there is no end to suffering, and no possibility of *working through* them or of *coming to terms* with them from some imagined post-traumatic location in time.

The central notion Alexievich uses to talk about other people's pain is that of suffering, not trauma. 'Our main capital is suffering', she said in an interview.

> It's the only thing that we are constantly producing. Not oil, not gas, but suffering. I suspect it's this very quality that draws and repulses and surprises the Western reader. This courage to keep living, no matter what. (2015b)

I would add further that what 'draws and repulses and surprises the Western reader' is an encounter with language, and a corresponding worldview, that doesn't immediately translate suffering into trauma and thus allows the possibility of different cultural and psychic modes of living with pain and loss. In reading Alexievich, Western readers come across experiences their mind recognises as being on the extreme of the traumatic scale, but which are not filtered through the by now instantly recognisable language and framework of trauma. In Alexievich's books, mourning looks differently to the kind of mourning that is graspable through the concept(s) of trauma. So does witnessing. The deadening effect inadvertently produced by the dominance of trauma tropes in testimonial literature is quietly undone.

Testimonies gathered by Alexievich in her books straddle the inside and outside of language, the sayable and the unsayable. Her subjects occupy the 'disjunction between a possibility and an impossibility of speech' (Agamben, 1999: 145). So far, so familiar. She works with language on the verge of breakdown, numbed by pain, swollen by ideology, worn out, overwhelmed, simply incapable of saying what certain things *felt like* or continue to *feel like*, but she does so in a space not circumscribed by current debates about whether trauma can be remembered both individually and collectively, represented in language, reintegrated into one's conception of self, written about comparatively or lyrically. Alexievich does not position her projects in relation to any of the ongoing trauma debates, while this kind of painstaking work of positioning has become something of an obligatory hurdle in doing most testimonial work in the Western context.

Here is a woman whose son, a week shy of turning fourteen, killed himself. The woman tells Alexievich of a moment after her son's death when she finds herself screaming uncontrollably at her own mother she reveres:

> "You monster, you Tolstoyan monster! And you raised us to be freaks like you! What did we hear from you our whole lives? You have to live for others … for a higher purpose … throw yourself under a tank, go down in an airplane for your Motherland. The rumble of the Revolution … Heroic death … We were taught that death is more beautiful than life. That's why we grew up to be monsters and freaks. And that was how I raised Igor. It's all your fault. Your fault!!!" (2016a: 145)

So much is at stake in this moment; so much is being wrestled with. Seven decades of Soviet history, the intergenerational legacy of the cult of war, the destruction of family as a central institution in a society, the ongoing catastrophe of moral values being

substituted so that violence is seen as beautiful and a death wish is the highest form of human nobility. It would be a form of wilful blindness to reduce this encounter to the grieving mother's trauma being worked through or acted out. I am not suggesting here that a binary should be created distinguishing between the Alexievich method and a more familiar approach informed by particular theories of trauma. History is always in the room whenever trauma manifests itself. Still looking at this moment primarily through the lens of trauma can easily empty it out of its historical and political depth and particularity. It can silence or obscure the woman's scream.

Testimonies Alexievich brings together do the work of moral reckoning and of a deep historical reassessment that is not done systematically elsewhere. The stakes could not be higher. A man tells Alexievich of discovering that his father's brother was informed on by a close relative, Aunt Olga – a 'beautiful woman, full of joy … a good singer' (2016a: 33). The man's uncle never returned, his family doesn't know where or how he died. It takes him a very long time to ask her about 1937. Finally he's ready. 'That was the happiest year of my life. I was in love,' Aunt Olga readily replies. The man is taken aback.

> It was hard for me, but I asked her the questions that had been tormenting me, "Aunt Olga, why did you do it?"
>
> "Show me an honest person who survived Stalin's time."' (2016a: 33)

As he concludes his story, the man says to Alexievich, 'When it comes down to it, there is no such thing as chemically pure evil.' Evil is not Stalin or Hitler, it is also our 'beautiful Aunt Olga' (2016a: 33). While she has been documenting human suffering for decades, Alexievich is deeply uncertain about its meaning. Why so much suffering? Is it meant to teach us anything? Why does it keep repeating? 'I ask myself about it all the time', she says (2015a). 'For many people suffering is the value in itself. It's their main work. But no freedom comes out of it. I have no answer. I must admit to it honestly' (2015a).

I have been reading Alexievich in Russian for over fifteen years. She is my guide to this world. I want to know what she wants to know. How can we endure so much? How can we keep loving? Shouldn't we be scared? What makes us go on regardless – and not just go on, but go on being delighted, being moved, giving ourselves to people, living with all our might? Alexievich's testimonial work is further distinguished by the place she has found for herself in the cross-currents of history and metaphysics. LaCapra argues that the only way we can do justice to the specificity of experience is 'by not reducing it to either universality or particularity but instead understanding it in terms of the intricate interaction between the transhistorical and the historical or the singular.' (2004: 500) 'I have two backlights when I write', Alexievich says, 'a human being in time and a human being in eternity' (2015b).

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