Neighbours in memory

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

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Svetlana Alexievich

Second-hand time

Translated by Bela Shayevich


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Chernobyl prayer

A chronicle of the future

Translated by Anna Gunn and Arch Tait


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How she shapes her interviews into stories. What is clear is that she selects and reordered fragments from hundreds of conversations with her interlocutors, transforming the “raw accounts” of her eyewitnesses into literary stories that aim to retain the evidentiary quality of the original sources. As such, her method has questions have been removed from the conversations, and the reader can only infer the inquiry that may have prompted the narrator’s response. Usually, she reserves prefaces and epilogues for spelling out her own views in her own words. At times, she inserts herself in the body of the text only to bracket herself out, in order to indicate (in the parentheses) the affective condition of her interlocutor: his or her smile, tear or pensiveness. Otherwise, her textual appearances are manifested only in the strangely baroque headings of the chapters: “Monologue on How Happy a Chicken Would Be to Find a Worm”. “And What Is Bubbling In the Pot Is Also Not Forever” or “On Life the Bitch and One Hundred Grams of Fine Powder in a Little White Vase” – which seem intended to offset the bareness of much of her interlocutors’ language.

If the classical Latin American testimonio—such as I, Rigoberta Menchu: An Indian Woman in Guatemala (1984) – tends to be assembled as the life-history of a single person, then the version created by Alexievich privileges a life-event. As she explained in 1994, “I have no time to paint a portrait. Things change too quickly [ . . . ] I just take simple pictures. Snapshots . . .”. This approach allows her both to condense personal stories to a few pages, or even to a few lines, and to increase the number of documented testimonies. Grouped thematically—by gender, age, or life-defining event—these stories produce a kaleidoscopic vibrancy of fragments of memory.
account of a particular war morphed into a polyphonic depiction of a universal human tragedy, its importance was not in its exact geographic or temporal location but in the affective power that it conveys.

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

Alexievich, as she has often acknowledged, was the work of her mentor, the Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich (1927–94). His collection *Out of the Fire* (1977, English translation 1980) presented the results of an oral history project conducted over many years that recorded the eyewitness accounts of rural Belarusians whose villages were incinerated during the Second World War. Interview excerpts were interspersed with photographs of the survivors, and comments by Adamovich and his colleagues. Quite unusually for the 1970s, the volume even included two small LPs with selected recordings of the interviews. This factographic montage of oral stories, documentary sources and other media provided Alexievich with a formal template. As she put it recently in an interview, “I was always tortured by the understanding that no single heart or single mind could contain the whole truth. Truth is always fractured; there is no way of distinguishing whether a story has been compiled from multiple narratives or from the accounts of single narrators. In contrast to the testimonio genre, there are no original tapes to go back to; or, at least, they are not publicly available (and, in the case of Zinky Boys, had been destroyed before the trial). *Chernobyl Prayer: A chronicle of the future* and *Second-Hand Time* are the final two instalments of the cycle. The first edition of the Chernobyl book came out in Russian in 1997 and quickly appeared in multiple translations in Europe and the US. This masterly new translation by Anna Gunin and Arch Tait retains the nerve and pulse of the Russian, conveying the angst and confusion of the narrators. *Second-Hand Time* appears in English for the first time, and while the translation by Bela Shayevich is highly competent, it often lacks the edginess of the original. Shayevich does, however, explain terms, names and events, providing useful historical context for the foreign reader. Unlike the three earlier books, the last two volumes are not centred on the cruelty of war. Yet there is a strong thematic connection aptly articulated by a survivor of the Chernobyl catastrophe: “they will always go together in history: the downfall of Socialism and the Chernobyl disaster. They coincided. Chernobyl hastened the collapse of the Soviet Union. It blew the empire apart”. In essence, the two books are dramatic accounts of the empire’s end and its aftermath. Their narratives of suffering demonstrate how a traumatic experience could result in the production of various communities of loss. Survivors of the nuclear meltdown of 1986 keep returning to the idea that Chernobyl is “sculpting something out of us. Creating. Now we have become a people. The people of Chernobyl”. Survivors of the collapse of the USSR similarly insist: “I lived there for half of my life... you can’t just erase that... Everything in my head is built around...”
Soviet structures” (Second-Hand Time). In both books, the narrators are puzzled, confused and enraged by their inability to compre- hend what has happened to them, and search for guilty parties: “To answer the question of how we should live here, we need to know who was to blame” (Chernobyl Prayer). They hold responsible various individuals, groups and institutions. Yet the issue of accountability is hardly their main concern. They all are searching for something more personal: for a way to reconcile their former lives with their current conditions.”I want to live after Chernobyl, not to die after it”, a male technology designer explains; “I want to know what I can cling to in my faith, what will give me strength”. He explains; “I want to know what I can cling to in my faith, what will give me strength”. 

Many decide to cling to their former lives, in some cases quite literally. Chernobyl Prayer has several stories by people who exchanged the safety for the familiarity of their homes, has several stories by people who exchanged their faith, what will give me strength”.

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

A large part of Second-Hand Time shows what happens to those who do try to sever these ties of dependency through suicide — attempted or completed. Death was always a central topic in Alexievich’s cycle, but in the accounts of the Second World War or the Afghan invasion, it seemed, at least at first, to be an aberration. The Chernobyl disaster, Alexievich sug- gests, was also war, in a new, still unknown form. But in Second-Hand Time, death and near-death experience are the outcome of something very different: a profound disillu- sionment with human beings, a whole country and an ideology and, ultimately, life itself. She describes the collection as the narratives of those “who had been permanently bound to the Soviet idea”, who could neither “just walk away from History” nor learn to live without it, who, in underlining the very premiss of her cycle — with its thousands of irreconcilably different memories — she uncharacteristically claims: “We share a com- munist collective [more precisely, “single”] memory. We’re neighbours in memory”.

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

Despite these technical flaws, Second-Hand Time is an important collection of testimonies that powerfully depicts the paradoxical and painful persistence of the memory of utopia. Rejecting a life without faith, Alexievich’s interlocutors assert, “We had a dream”. The role of these “Soviet dreams and ideas” becomes all the more salient against the back- drop of the alternates Alexievich traces. One of the most heart-wrenching narrative threads in the last two books of the cycle concerns po- sonous forms of post-Soviet nationalism or, to be more precise, their victims. A refugee from Tajikistan aptly summarizes the general senti- ment: “Instead of the freedom we had all been waiting for, civil war broke out” (Second-Hand Time), Multiple civil wars, in fact. Ethnic difference emerged as the key tool for creating new social hierarchies. Another refugee from Tajikistan explains, in Dushanbe. I worked as the deputy chief of the railway station, and there was another deputy who was Tajik. Our children grew up together . . . He used to call me "little sister, my Russian sister". And suddenly he walks over – we shared an office – stops in front of my desk and shouts: “When are you going back home to Russia? This is our land!” (Chernobyl Prayer).

Forcibly displaced, some, strange as it seems, found a safe haven in Chernobyl. The head of a family of refugees from Dushanbe explains: “Why did we come here? To the Chernobyl Zone. Because no one will kick us out. From this land. It’s nobody’s. God has taken it over. People have deserted it”. For others, Chernobyl’s abandoned land becomes a living metaphor for the disappeared Mother- land, as this mother with five children points away from History” nor learn to live without it, who, in underlining the very premiss of her cycle — with its thousands of irreconcilably different memories — she uncharacteristically claims: “We share a com- munist collective [more precisely, “single”] memory. We’re neighbours in memory”.

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