

A b s t r a c t s

Naked Souls

Svetlana Alexievich and the “Red Man”

Karla Hielscher

The scholar of human existence

The life and work of Svetlana Alexievich

Svetlana Alexievich has developed a new literary genre. Out of the voices of countless dialogue partners, she composes a choir which expresses the experiences of an entire epoch through language. In her cycle on the history of Soviet civilisation, which begins with the Second World War and ends amid the rubble of the Soviet empire, the focus is not on historical facts, but on the sentiments and feelings of the people involved. In her work, Alexievich tackles the basic issues of human life and the eternal enigma of life and death.

Anja Tippner

The great disappointment

Experiences of crisis and disillusionment in Svetlana Alexievich’s texts

One important theme in the final three volumes of Svetlana Alexievich’s cycle *Voices from Big Utopia* is disillusionment. The experience of crisis from the Afghanistan war, the atomic catastrophe of Chernobyl and the collapse of the Soviet Union triggered a great deal of insecurity. An increasing number of people felt that the promises that had been made by Soviet ideology were hollow and false. However, many of those questioned were also disillusioned by the post-Soviet era. This leads to a paradoxical result. The crisis of purpose is followed by a reversion to old thought patterns and nostalgia for the socialist past.

Christoph Bartmann

“Surrounded by voices”

Alexievich’s literary monuments and the Nobel Prize

When Svetlana Alexievich was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature, a debate was ignited regarding the status of her works, with critics doubting that they could be classed as literature. The extended concept of literature postulated by the Swedish Academy in making its decision was in general not new. In this way, it served the purpose of the sponsor of the prize, whose aim was above all to honour “idealistic” literature. Alexievich

also represents a trend towards the softening of genre boundaries, towards “autofiction” and “life writing”. Her methods are journalistic, while the effect of her texts is literary. She takes collected testimonies and uses them to create monuments to an epoch and its people.

Klaus Gestwa

Soviet man

The history and ambivalence surrounding a collective singular form

Cultural constructs such as that of the *homo sovieticus* have helped shape our understanding of the Soviet Union. Svetlana Alexievich’s literary anthropology and the sociograms of the staff at the Levada Center draw our historical view of the individuals and society in the Soviet Union more sharply into focus. However, this anthropological type suggests a general validity and homogeneity that fails to do justice to the diversity and openness of individual and social development in the USSR and in the post-Soviet states.

Clemens Günther

More than history

Svetlana Alexievich’s documentary prose

There are critics and readers who deny the literary nature of Svetlana Alexievich’s work. However, in doing so, they fail to recognise the fact that her prose goes far beyond a pure accumulation of voices. In Alexievich’s rendering, narrated testimony is consciously artistically reworked, allowing it to unfold its very own aesthetic power. Her concept of art has its precursors in the Soviet documentary prose of the 1920s and 1930s and in the dissident literature of writers such as Solzhenitsyn and Shalamov. Alexievich focuses her attention on historical topics that have to date been marginalised and supplements these with an emotional perspective and a sense of the suffering involved. Her artistic process consists of piecing together, achieving the power of suggestion in her prose through dialogicity and emotionalisation. However, this process is at odds with the factographic claim to validity postulated by the author which has to date dominated the perception of her oeuvre among literary critics.

Tine Roesen

Between the stools

Document and fiction in Svetlana Alexievich’s work

Svetlana Alexievich is an unusual Nobel Prize laureate. She does not fulfil many of the criteria implicitly specified by the Swedish Academy. Her works are also difficult to classify. It is indisputably eyewitness literature, while at the same time being a specific form of this genre. Her handling of the documents on which she bases her works has been the subject of criticism. However, this fails to acknowledge the fact that hers are works of literature. The truth that she produces is different to that of the historian. And yet there is no doubting the authenticity of the interviews which form the basis for Alexievich’s books.

Staffan Julén

Only love can save people infected by anger

An interview with Svetlana Alexievich

Svetlana Alexievich talks to film director Staffan Julén about life, writing and reality. After her major “red cycle”, dedicated to catastrophic historical events, she now turns to existential themes such as love and death. The theme of private forms of happiness is also connected to the search for a new language. Alexievich sees this as offering the only way out of the hatred that currently dominates society.

Julia Obertreis

Polyphonies on the ruins of socialism

Svetlana Alexievich’s work from the perspective of oral history

Svetlana Alexievich is sometimes linked to oral history. However, her work not only belongs to this discipline. It is as a writer that Alexievich processes and presents the interviews she has conducted. However, as is the case with oral history, she gives a voice to those individuals whose experiences are not included in the official historical narratives. Alexievich’s work offers numerous impulses for historical studies and the humanities to examine aspects of socialist and post-socialist society that have otherwise been neglected. These include the handling of the consequences of the Stalinist terror and how people experienced the radical changes in the late 1980s and early 1990s, which frequently led to losses on a material and psychological level.

Ulrich Schmid

An individual tone

Svetlana Alexievich and Belarusian and Russian culture

The relationship between national literature and world literature is difficult to pinpoint in Svetlana Alexievich’s work. She explicitly describes herself as a Belarusian author, although at the same time, she repeatedly emphasises her affiliation to the greater Russian culture, and even to a cosmopolitan project. More recently, this self-attribution has clashed with the “Russian World” initiative promoted by the Kremlin, which aims to bind Russian “compatriots” living outside the Russian Federation more closely to the Fatherland – culturally, in terms of their values and ultimately also politically. Such patriotic tones are alien to Svetlana Alexievich. At the same time, her cosmopolitan self-concept cannot be integrated into the current debates surrounding Belarusian national literature without conflict.

Ina Sdanevitsch

Prominently ignored

Svetlana Alexievich in Belarus

Svetlana Alexievich comes from Belarus. Her works are known all over the world. And yet precisely in Belarus, Alexievich is not well regarded. For the Lukashenko regime,

she was persona non grata, and a taboo subject in the media. Her books banned from being published in Belarus for fifteen years. Literary discussion of her works is marginal; today, not even a biography of her has been written. While Soviet nostalgists accuse her of defamation, Belarusian nationalists decry the fact that she writes in Russian. Alexievich falls between all stools. The Nobel Prize for Literature has had one effect: it has become harder to ignore her.

Nina Weller

Polyphonic counter-narratives

The experience and portrayal of war by Ales Adamovich, Daniil Granin and Svetlana Alexievich

Svetlana Alexievich's books, *The Unwomanly Face of War* and *The Last Witnesses* are among the most shattering literary accounts of the Second World War. They are the antithesis of the cult of victory that surrounds the "Great Patriotic War". With her documentary prose, Alexievich is following in the footsteps of Ales Adamovich and Daniil Granin, who also turned the memories of contemporary witnesses into works of literature and in so doing, forced apart the ideological representation of war. Alexievich's ethical-moral purpose is to tell the 'whole truth' about the war, with an orientation towards 'living testimony' and authenticity. The polyphonic documentary prose is a means to combat forgetting and suppression; the "chorus of testimony" is her poetological principle.

Johanna Lindbladh

Closer to the trauma

Svetlana Alexievich's evolving testimony

The editing process to which Svetlana Alexievich subjects her texts has repeatedly been cause for criticism. Her treatment of the documentary material does not stand up to a critical assessment of her sources. However, this approach is closely linked to the core of the message in her books: memories and feelings demand forms other than objective facts. Alexievich's successive re-workings reduce the documentary aspect and intensify the literary nature of her texts. As a result, the individual message also becomes a universal one, and is brought closer to the reader. While reading her work, the function of the "ethical subject" involved in the testimony is transferred from the author to the reader.

Andrea Zink

Catastrophe, pain and love

Svetlana Alexievich's approach to Chernobyl

In *Chernobyl* Svetlana Alexievich tells a chronicle of the future. In the manner of her poetological programme, she describes not events, but feelings: loneliness and pain, shame and love. The feelings of the individuals dominate the text. The explosion at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant and its immediate impact stays in the background. Alexievich uses the technical tools of prose, with monological, pointed narrative, to capture the emotional impact and the new perception of life among those affected that were triggered by the nuclear accident.

Elena Gapova
Suffering and the search for meaning
Svetlana Alexievich's moral revolutions

Svetlana Alexievich's work can be read in many different ways: as literature or as oral history, but also as a moral philosophical reflection on a large scale. The books in her "red cycle" centre around experiences of despair and disruption, and in connection with these, the issue of the purpose of suffering. The individual texts offer different answers to these questions. In the first book, about women in the Second World War, suffering is the result of conscious action, while in the volumes that follow, the protagonists experience suffering passively and often without any greater meaning. In the final volume, *Secondhand Time*, this loss of meaning itself becomes the focus: the end of the Soviet Union brings about a "moral revolution" which devalues lives lived and sacrifices made, and in so doing, engenders new suffering. At the same time, there is an intimation of a shift in the search for meaning from the collective to the personal.

Staffan Julén
Productive resistance
Filming with Svetlana Alexievich

After four years of work, the film *Lyubov – Love in Russian* is now complete. A small camera team accompanied Svetlana Alexievich while she was conducting interviews for her next book on the theme of love. *Lyubov* is not a conventional documentary film but an independent artistic treatment of the interview material. This open form may not fit into the film subsidy framework, but it is the appropriate cinematic response to Alexievich's literary and human sincerity.