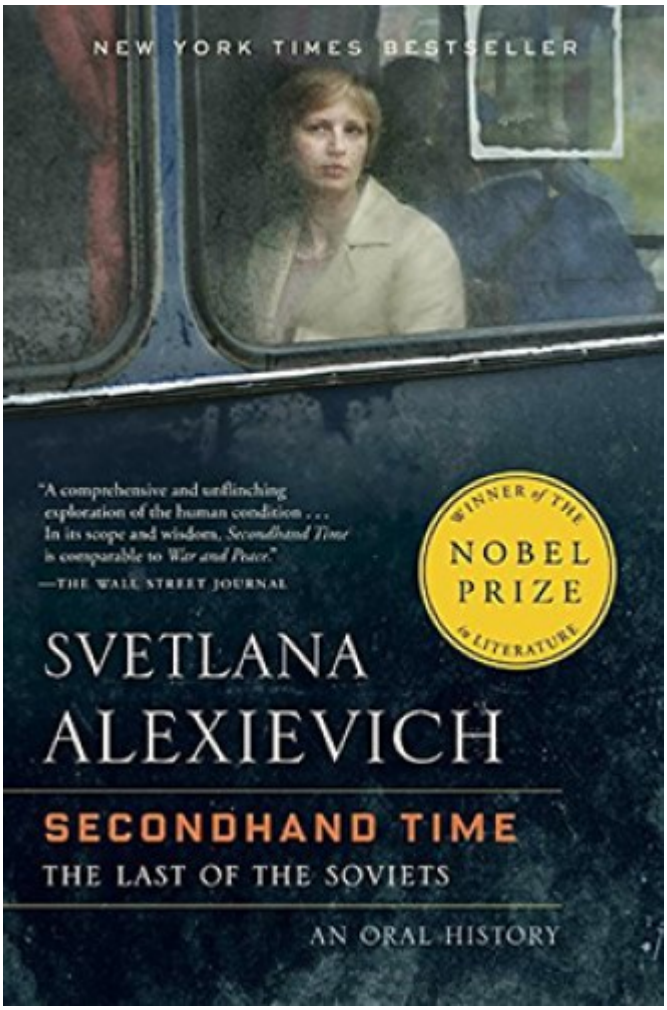
Robbed of victory in Russia

Svetlana Alexievich tells the stories behind Russia's wartime psychology.

by Chris Herlinger in the March 28, 2018 issue

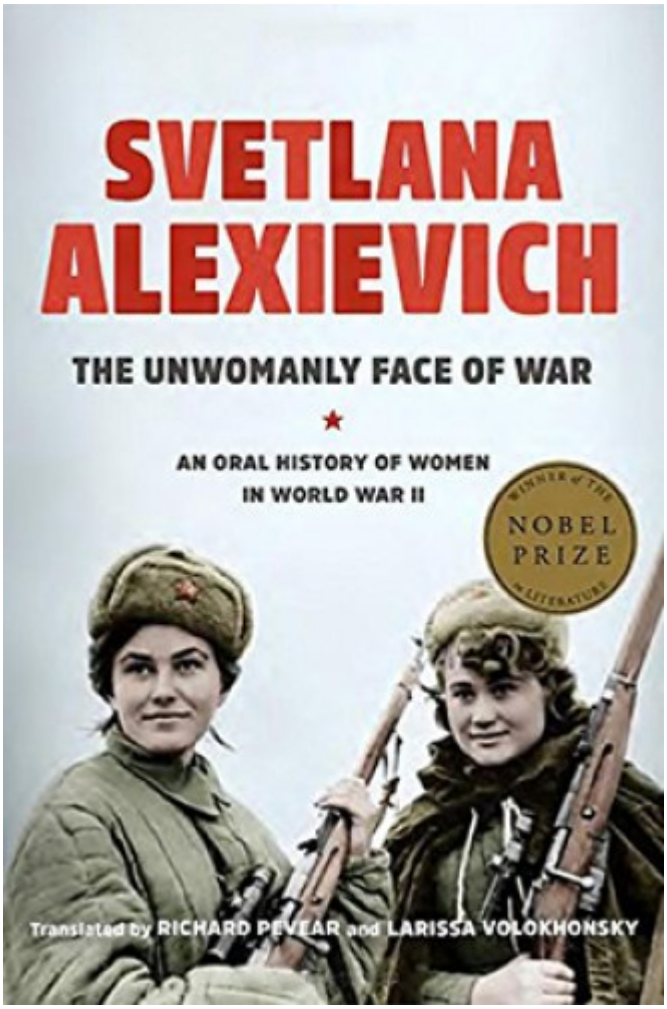
In Review



Secondhand Time

The Last of the Soviets

By Svetlana Alexievich
Random House



The Unwomanly Face of War

An Oral History of Women in World War II

By Svetlana Alexievich
Random House

How to make sense of Russia's strange, unsettled place in the world has become a critical question in the era of Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump. But if Svetlana Alexievich, born in Ukraine in 1948, had not won the 2015 Nobel Prize in Literature, the media might have overlooked her two magisterial oral histories of Russia—her expansive, epic examination of the Soviet Union and its dissolution in *Secondhand Time*, and the just-published English translation of her 1985 work *The Unwomanly Face of War*.

War frames both works, because war has defined Russia and its onetime satellites for at least a century. Beyond the surface of today there are unsettling truths, Alexievich argues. As she writes in the introduction to *Secondhand Time*, “today, people just want to live their lives, they don’t need some great Idea. This is entirely new for Russia; it’s unprecedented in Russian literature. At heart, we’re built for war. We were always either fighting or preparing to fight. We’ve never known anything else—hence our wartime psychology.”

Such psychology is mixed in with a wariness of the West that has always been characteristic of Russia. As one of Alexievich’s interviewees, an avowed “Soviet,” notes:

> Yes, we stood in line for discolored chicken and rotting potatoes, but it was our Motherland. I loved it. You lived in a third world country with missiles, but for me, it was a great nation. The West has always seen Russia as an enemy, a looming threat. It’s a thorn in their side. Nobody wants a strong Russia, with or without the communists. The world sees us as a storehouse that they can raid for oil, natural gas, timber, and base metals. We trade our oil for underpants. But we used to be a civilization without rags and junk. The Soviet civilization! Someone felt the need to put an end to it. The CIA . . . We’re already being controlled by the Americans.

In this telling, Mikhail Gorbachev is Judas. “They must have paid Gorbachev a tidy sum” says the interviewee, who declares that Gorbachev may yet “feel the brunt of his nation’s rage.” Also figuring in the narrative are Joseph Stalin (a mass murderer, but representative to many of the greatness of the past), Leonid Brezhnev (a symbol of bland stability), Boris Yeltsin (the man who ushered in a market economy, and so to many is something of an unwelcome figure), and—a bit haltingly—Putin.

In *Secondhand Time*, Putin remains a bit out of focus: he’s either a man overseeing a mafia state or a symbol of returning to national greatness. Although the jury may still be out as to how Putin is perceived by Russians today, Putin’s government has not taken kindly to Alexievich’s previous reporting, which focused on the human toll of the Soviet war in Afghanistan and the Chernobyl nuclear disaster.

Read together, Alexievich’s work suggests that Russia is a paradoxical inverse of the United States. Both are large countries of vast geographic space that still view 1945 as a defining moment. What is Trumpism, after all, but the belief that the

preeminence of the United States in the immediate aftermath of World War II was the norm, even though it was a historical anomaly? By the same token, Russians see their victory over fascist Germany as the supreme victory, and they are still offended by American claims about defeating Hitler. (Given that dynamic, Russians may take satisfaction in the way Americans are now feeling affirmed by Russian meddling in the last presidential elections.)

Valentina Pavlovna Chudaeva, a WWII sergeant and antiaircraft artillery commander, puts it this way: “Little is known about the price the Soviet people paid for the victory—twenty million lives in four years.” She calls Russian sufferings “immeasurable.” Chudaeva’s voice is among dozens in *The Unwomanly Face of War*, which demonstrates many of the familiar tropes of grim absurdity that characterize classic war literature. The memories come in vivid, well-rendered snapshots. Chudaeva recalls the spring ice beginning to break up on the Volga: “We saw a red-and-black ice block floating along, and on it were two or three Germans and one Russian soldier. . . . They had perished like that, clutching each other. They were frozen into this ice block, and the ice was all bloody. All our Mother Volga was bloody.”

Chudaeva recalls women soldiers riding in freight cars for two months—2,000 women on a single train. What happened when they arrived at their destination?

> I’ll never forget it: a broken-down train station and sailors hopping about the platform on their hands. They had no legs or crutches. They walked on their hands. . . . The platform was full of them. . . . They saw us and laughed. Joked. My heart went thump-thump. . . . Thump-thump. What are we getting into?

Chudaeva’s testimony is memorable not only for her keen sense of observation but also because her experiences encompassed so much about the war and the experiences of women fighting in it. As the daughter of a man who was killed in the war, she felt no shame in seeking revenge against German invaders: “Can it be understood now? I want you to understand my feelings. You can’t shoot unless you hate. It’s a war, not a hunt.” She carried with her throughout the war both her father’s obituary and a popular article inciting hatred against the Germans. “Shoot! Shoot!” she says. “I had to take revenge.”

Although women could be as courageous as men in battle, the adjustment to postwar life was difficult. Traditional gender roles, upended to an extent for the

duration of the war, reimposed themselves once the war ended.

“When I put on a dress for the first time, I flooded myself with tears,” Chudaeva recalls. “I didn’t recognize myself in the mirror. We had spent four years in trousers. There was no one I could tell that I had been wounded, that I had a concussion.” She and other women “were silent as fish” and that caused great resentment. Men were “victors, heroes, wooers, the war was theirs,” she recalls, “but we were looked at with quite different eyes. Quite different. . . . I’ll tell you, they robbed us of the victory. They quietly exchanged it for ordinary women’s happiness. Men didn’t share the victory with us. It was painful. . . . Incomprehensible.”

In the end, though, Chudaeva does not ask for pity. She met her husband in war, and her life in battle remained a point of great pride: “Let them rewrite history ten times. With Stalin or without Stalin. But this remains—we were victorious! And our sufferings. What we lived through. This isn’t junk and ashes. This is our life.”

Reading Alexievich isn’t easy. Voice after voice in her polyphonic writing becomes wearying after a while. This challenge is particularly acute in *Secondhand Time*, where a certain grimness and uniformity of voice sets in well before its 400-plus pages come to a close. Like some of the panoramic Russian novels it loosely resembles, *Secondhand Time* is probably best taken in small sips. Yet, it is indispensable for those seeking to understand the woundedness of post-Soviet Russia. It’s likely to become Alexievich’s magnum opus because it covers such an expansive era: Soviet life (gulags and all) up through its shockingly quick collapse, which still confounds and puzzles many.

The Unwomanly Face of War is more approachable, warmer, and more readable than *Secondhand Time*, and it is a treasure for those who admire good war histories. Olga Vasilyevna poignantly recalls a fellow veteran who received a medal for courage and was rewarded with permission to leave the front and return briefly to her home in Moscow. “When she came back we sniffed her. We literally lined up and sniffed her. We said she smelled like home. We missed home so much.”

Vasilyevna speaks for many veterans when she said she’d like to forget the war if she could. Speaking in a whisper, she tells Alexievich, “I want to live at least one day without the war. Without our memory of it. . . . At least one day.” Russians and Americans alike can understand that sentiment.