



The authority of the text in Svetlana Aleksievich's *Secondhand Time*

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Accepted: 12 October 2021

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Abstract

Amongst the most treated questions in Western research on the works of Svetlana Aleksievich is the question of the genre of Aleksievich's prose works, followed closely by the question of the historical authenticity of her method of collecting oral information about the Soviet period of history from witnesses of that history. The questions treated, such as the problem of genre, aesthetic authenticity and the relationship of history and fiction, can be distilled into the question of the authority of the literary text. If the Nobel Prize for literature is awarded on the assumption that Aleksievich's work is literature—and no one, including the author, has questioned that assumption—then it is justifiable to pose the question of the authority of the literary text as an aesthetic message—as literary truth—using the tools of literary analysis, not of historiography or sociology. In this essay, the claim that *Secondhand Time* [*Vremia second hend*] is a novel will be examined in the context of the narratological model of the literary text of Russian Formalism and Prague Structuralism and by applying the test of “artistic quality” (*khudozhestvennost'*), which validates the aesthetic value of texts of the literary canon. This examination will allow us to answer the question about what kind of text has been created using oral testimonies as material for a work of fiction.

Keywords Implied author/reader · “Artistic quality” (*khudozhestvennost'*) · *Homo sovieticus* · View of history · Socialist realism

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Introduction

The 8 October 2015 press release by the Swedish Academy stated that “the Nobel Prize in Literature for 2015 is awarded to the Belarusian author Svetlana Aleksievich ‘for her polyphonic writings, a monument to suffering and courage in our time.’”¹

Until she became the recipient of the Nobel Prize, academic commentaries on Svetlana Aleksievich’s published works were not numerous. However, since the Nobel Committee selected her works on “Soviet man”² for the most prestigious literary award in the Western world, two highly reputable academic journals, *Osteuropa* and *Canadian Slavonic Paper*,³ have published special issues dedicated to Aleksievich’s life and work, with contributions by prominent Slavists and interdisciplinary scholars. Amongst the most treated questions in these two publications is the question of the genre of Aleksievich’s prose works, followed closely by the question of the historical authenticity of the witness statements incorporated into Aleksievich’s fiction.

The intersection of history as memory and memory as fiction⁴ raises not only the question of the genre of Aleksievich’s text but above all of the authority of the literary text produced and the reader which it constructs. In this essay, the authority of Aleksievich’s 2015 work *Secondhand Time* will be discussed in two contexts. The first is the narratological context, grounding Bakhtin’s theory of monologic and polyphonic texts. The second is the aesthetic context, grounded in the concept of “*khudozhestvennost*” (artistic or literary quality), which is an extension of the first context. The question of genre will be subsumed in both contexts.

The question of genre as the problem of truth

The genres attributed by various scholars to Aleksievich’s prose range from “creative non-fiction,” “documentary prose,” “epic-choral prose,” the “novel in voices” (Aleksievich’s own term) and “novel-witness” (“*roman svidetel’stvo*” or “*Zeugnissroman*”), a term used by her mentor, Ales’ Adamovich (Roesen 2018, p. 103). There is some agreement that the problem of genre hinges on the question of the authority or authenticity of the “documentary material.” This material, as one of the scholars admits, can change over time because Aleksievich regards her interviewees as

¹ “The Nobel Prize in Literature 2015.” *Nobelprize.org*. Nobel Media AB 2014, Web, 11 August 2018. http://www.nobelprize.org/nobel_prizes/literature/laureates/2015/. She was awarded the Prize for the cycle of works on “Soviet man,” not specifically for a single work.

² “Soviet man” is the major protagonist of all of Aleksievich’s literary works. The subtitle of *Secondhand Time* indicates that this is a historical type who is leaving the historical stage. Compare: Svetlana Aleksievich, *Second Hand Time: The Last of the Soviets. An Oral History*, trans. Bela Shayevich (Melbourne: The Text Publishing Company, 2016).

³ *Osteuropa*, 68, Nos. 1–2 (2018) and *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 59, nos. 3–4 (2017) are two publications in which Aleksievich’s prose is examined in the context of history, culture and literature.

⁴ Heather Coleman points out that there is the problem in Aleksievich’s writing of “distinguishing the lines of history and fiction.” H. J. Coleman, ‘Svetlana Aleksievich: the writer and her times,’ *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, vol. 59, nos. 3–4 (2017), p. 193.

“living documents” who can change their views about the events which they have witnessed. Holly Myers, for example, shows how Aleksievich re-arranges her “documentary material” on the Soviet–Afghan War between subsequent editions of *Zinky Boys* [*Tsinkovyje mal'chiki*] (1990–2016), with the result that the book’s evaluation of that war becomes “less open-ended and more ideological” (Coleman 2017, p. 193).

There is also consensus amongst commentators that Aleksievich’s *modus operandi* is journalistic. She interviews people who are witnesses to late Soviet and contemporary post-Soviet life and history and records the interviews on tapes. She does not archive the tapes but over-writes them with new interviews (Roesen 2018, p. 107), albeit preserving the transcripts. According to Tine Roesen, Aleksievich does not organise these transcripts chronologically or thematically but uses them “as raw material” (Roesen 2018, p. 107) for her “artistic creativity.” Thus, according to Roesen, who has interviewed Aleksievich, the Belarus author is focused on “literary truth” rather than on “documentary truth” (Roesen 2018, p. 107).

Roesen’s judgement about the “truth” message of Aleksievich’s literary work being grounded in the author’s “artistic creativity” overlaps with the judgement of the historian Clemens Gunther, who identifies the genre of Aleksievich’s texts as belonging to the “tradition of documentary prose,” which Aleksievich “infuses” with her emotions in order to make the documentary material “come to life”:

The sensibility of the author, her emotions, flow into the document and supplement it. The document by itself is deficient, it becomes historical evidence only through the author.⁵

Gunther does not provide an analysis of how this creative process takes place: how is the emotion of Aleksievich injected into a witness’s narrative? The claim that documents “become witnessed history” *only* through the author’s emotional input is also a curious inference, coming from a historian. The fact that “documents” are in need of an infusion of the author’s feelings in order to become “authenticated” is an inversion of the criteria of truth in history and fiction: according to Gunther, we infer, history becomes more “authentic” if it is more like fiction, expressed through emotions. Yet this assertion applies more to art than to history and is recognisable as a faint echo of Tolstoy’s aesthetic theory about what is art: art acquires its unity (truth) through the unified point of view of “the author” or, as the Russian Formalist critic V. V. Vinogradov would say, through the “image of the author” (“*obraz avtora*”)⁶ which is encoded in the text.

⁵ “Das Empfinden der Autorin, ihre Emotionen, fliessen in das Dokument ein und ergänzen es. Das blosse Dokument ist defizitär, zum geschichtlichen Zeugnis wird es erst durch die Autorin” (Clemens 2018, p. 84).

⁶ V.V.Vinogradov was the first critic of the Russian Formalist School who raised the category of “*obraz avtora*”: “Voobsche, voprosy o rechevoj strukture ‘obraza avtora’, ‘rasskazchika’, liricheskogo geroia v stiche, personazhej v drame, a takzhe v romane, novelle i povesti zanimajut ochen’ vazhnoe mesto v nauke o jazyke khudozhestvennoj literatury. Inogda imenno v etom krugu stilisticheskikh javlenij otyskivaetsia razgadka kompozitsionnoj struktury khudozhestvennogo prozvedenia, ego vnutrennego stilisticheskogo edinstva.” V. V. Vinogradov, “Nauka o jazyke khudozhestvennoj literatury i ee zadachi: na materiale russkoj literatury,” in *Issledovania po slavjanskomu literaturovedeniju i stilistike: Doklady sov-*

This is precisely the key question with regard to the structure of Aleksievich's novel *Secondhand Time*: who underwrites the message of the text in Aleksievich's novel? Is there textual evidence of the existence of the “*obraz avtora*” or, as narratology would put it, the Abstract Author? Does Aleksievich's novel offer a view of Russian-Soviet history which can be attributed to an “author” through representation of history in personal interviews, in the same way as one might credit Tolstoy with a view of history through the representation of characters in *War and Peace*? [*Voïna i mir*]. If there is no Abstract Author, then what is the aesthetic—and ethical—value of Aleksievich's “chronicle material” which is subject to arbitrary change over time?

Documentary writing

According to the editor of the special issue of *Canadian Slavonic Papers*, Heather Coleman, the chief theoretical question about the genre of Aleksievich's prose hinges on the complex relation of the invented or imagined and the historical. But is that really so? Presumably, nothing in the witness statements, the interviews, is invented. The interviews—the material of Aleksievich's novel—are based on experienced history. The question is, rather, do these interviews constitute documentary writing? How are they framed? Of what kind of novelistic structure are they a constituent part?

A kind of model of documentary prose is given by A. A. Teslia:

Documentary prose is secondary to artistic prose which presupposes a certain structural constitutiveness. The author of documentary prose consciously creates a text which is anti-artistic and finds himself in a relationship of attraction and repulsion with regard to artistic prose. The focus on documenting is a gesture of a break at the outset, the text asserts that it is not literature, in the sense of an invention (a lie), and in a paradoxical manner, on the face of it, relinquishes the claim to *vraisemblance* (*pravdopodobie*). The text has to be truthful, not resemble the truth (have verisimilitude), even if the truth is unbelievable. (Teslia 2012, p. 8)⁷

According to this model, “documentary prose” is not constituted in the same way as artistic prose; it deliberately sets out to be “un”-literary. It does not have to satisfy the criterion of “literariness” or *khudozhestvennost*. It is not subject to the laws of

Footnote 6 (continued)

etskikh uchënykh na IV Mezhdunarodnom s"ezde slavistov, ed. F. F. Kuz'min and A. N. Robinson (M.: AN SSSR, Sovetskij Komitet Slavistov, 1960, p. 25).

⁷ “Dokumentalnia proza vtovichna po otnosheniyu k 'khudozhestvennoï', predpologaia (otnositel' nuiu) konstiturovannost' poslednei. Avtor dokumental'noï prozy soznatel'no sozdaët tekst, pretenduiushchiï na nekhudozhestvennost' – i nakhoditsa po otnosheniyu k khudozhestvennoï v polozenii odovremennogo ottalkivania i sblizhenia. Sobstvenno, ustanovka na dokumen'talnost' – iznachal'nyi zhest razryva, tekst utverzhaet, chto on ne literatura,—v smysle vymysla (lzhi)—i tem samym vneshe paradoksal'nym obrazom otkazyvaetsa ot pravdopodobia – on dolzhen byt' pravid, a ne pravdopodoben, dazhe esli pravda neveroiatna” (Teslia 2012, p. 8).

“*vraisemblance*,” but it does have to be “truthful” (*pravdiv*), “even if the truth is unbelievable.” Here the distinction between “true to life” or mimetic—as in fiction or representation—and “truthful”—as in documents, creates a genre, which is neither mimetic (as in representation) nor historical (as in a memoir or chronicle). This non-genre is what results from Teslia’s model.

The historian Gunther also proposes a genre for Aleksievich’s works which he calls “documentary writing,” in which the question of “truth” is subsumed under a tension he finds in Aleksievich’s work between a “documentary style obligated to be authentic” and a “metaphysical program” of the author, who wishes to render “the spirit of her times” in her prose. According to Gunther, this “tension” is ignored by investigators; Aleksievich does not write “chronicles of her time,” her prose works are anti-chronicles:

The chronicle is a representation of history in a First Person narrative form, driven by the ideal of a simple recording and dating, in which the persona of the writer is invisible. This is problematic in view of Aleksievich’s self-characterisation as a ‘historian of the lost traces’. If historical science is unable to make assertions about the times of which the ‘traces’ are ‘lost’, Aleksievich concentrates presumably on just these moments of which there is no trace left. At the core of her aesthetics is a tendency, which is diametrically opposed to the narrative form of the chronicle.⁸

Thus far, Gunther’s thesis may be accepted: Aleksievich writes anti-chronicles. The historical content of her novel is not at issue. What is at issue is her “metaphysical program” or the point of view on that history. If her “new” literary genre is an anti-chronicle, then one would expect to locate the author’s own view of history on some level of the text, just as one looks for Tolstoy’s view of history in *War and Peace* or Dostoevsky’s view of history in *Demons*. The task is to find that view of history constructed by Aleksievich’s literary text.

Documentary prose is described by Leona Toker in a well-developed critical model, derived from the Prague Structuralism (Jan Mukařovský) and based on an analysis of Varlam Shalamov’s concentration camp prose (Toker 1997, pp. 187–222). Toker produces a (sliding-scale) typology of “documentary prose,” grounded precisely in the concept of “*vraisemblance*” (*pravdopodobie*). Amongst the diverse elements of Toker’s model, what stands out as a general principle is the consideration that the “truth” of the narrated “facts” can only be judged through the reader’s evaluation of the artistry of the work and the ethical perspective of the author:

⁸ “Die Chronik gilt gemeinhin als ich-narrative Form der Geschichtsdarstellung, die vom Ideal eines blossen Aufschreibens und Datierens geleitet ist, in dem die Person des Verfassers nicht bemerkbar ist. Dies ist angesichts der Selbstcharakterisierung Aleksievičs als “Historikerin des Spurlosen” problematisch. Können über historische Zeiten, aus denen keine Spuren überliefert sind, in der Geschichtswissenschaft gerade keine Aussagen getroffen werden, konzentriert sich Aleksievič auf dies angeblich spurlosen Momente. Im Kern ihrer Ästhetik liegt somit ein Anspruch, der dem berichtenden Charakter der Chronik entgegenläuft.” Clemens Gunther, ‘Mehr als Geschichte: Svetlana Aleksievičs dokumentarische Prosa,’ *Osteuropa*, 68, Nos. 1–2 (2018, p. 84).

Every sort of internal evidence for the authenticity and truthfulness of an autobiography or a memoir can be fabricated. Ultimately, in documentary prose, as in realistic fiction, the “truth” of the narrative is a matter of an individual reader’s estimation of the artistic achievement of the work and of the ethical stance of the author. (Toker 1997, p. 194)

An analysis of *Secondhand Time* also affirms that the evaluation of Aleksievich’s prose does not hinge on the “truth” of the “narrated fact” in the interviews. The reader does not doubt that the witnesses who Aleksievich interviews are telling the truth as they saw it. What is crucial is, as Toker rightly points out, the perspective of the narrating, organising consciousness, without which a narrated story, no matter how truthful as “raw life” or “raw material,” does not become a literary genre. Without referencing Tolstoy’s view of art, Toker is speaking like Tolstoy, who also claimed that what constitutes a work of art or literature—expressed as a genre—is the unifying point of view in the construction of the novel. This unifying point of view, which emerges on the level of meaning of the text called the Abstract Author, is the “cement” which binds the work into a living, aesthetic whole, into a representation:

the cement which binds a work of art into an artistic whole through which it produces the illusion of reflecting life, is not the unity of characters and situations but the unity of the author’s authentic moral attitude to his object (of representation). (Tolstoy 1958, p. 232)⁹

A novel, which for Tolstoy is synonymous with a work of art, is thus a representation of life (“illusion of the reflection of life”). It is a representation not because of the “historical” truth of its component parts but because of the “cement” which binds them all together: the unifying point of view, constituted by the inalienable and authentic ethical stance—meaning commitment to an evaluative position which is the actually historical component—of the “author” to his or her subject matter.

Aleksievich herself has a clear view to what genre she attributes her writings. According to an autobiographical piece posted on her own website, Aleksievich easily distinguishes herself from other writers who have experienced wars to describe the essence of her own writing on history as follows:

I am not writing a dry, forgotten history of facts, events, I am writing a history of feelings.¹⁰

While Aleksievich’s informants do express emotions, it is a stretch to call her novel a “history of feelings” or *histoire de mœurs* along the lines of the French seventeenth-century moralist Jean de La Bruyère’s *Les Caractères* (1687). Aleksievich’s

⁹ “...тseмент, котopый cвязывает художественное произведение в одно тselое и оттого производит иллюзии отразнения жизни, est не единство литс, и положений, а единство samобытного нравственного отношения автора к предмету” (Tolstoy 1958, p. 232).

¹⁰ “Ja не пишу cухиу, голую историю факта, события, я пишу историю чувств” В поисках вечного человека <http://alexievich.info/>. Compare also <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/2015/prize-announcement/>

literary antecedents are much closer to home: they take us back to the literature of Belarus of the 1950s and 1960s, and notably *The Komarovsky Chronicle* [*Komarovskaia khronika*] of Maksim Goretiskii.

Aleksievich's mentor, Ales Adamovich, who read Goretiskii's opus attentively, developed a kind of modern "chronicle" genre, producing co-authored books, entitled *I am from the Fiery Village* [*Ya iz ognennoï drevni*] and *Blockade Book* [*Blokadnaia kniga*]. These were the single most important literary influences on Aleksievich's work (Basova & Sin'kova 2009, pp. 94–95).

Aleksievich worked as an educationist and special correspondent for various local organs of the Soviet press (the newspaper *Mayak kommunizma*, the journal *Neman*). She made her literary debut in 1976 with the book *I've Left My Village* [*Ya uekhala iz derevni*], consisting of monologues of village inhabitants of Belarus. This interview method of writing generated a further five voluminous books: *The Unwomanly Face of War* [*U voynï ne zhenskoe litso*], *Last Witnesses* [*Poslednie svideteli*], *Zinky Boys*, *Chernobyl Prayer* [*Chernobylskaia molitva*] and *Secondhand Time*. All of these books were created by means of the same method of random interviewing of informants, selection by an invisible hand, whose intervention in the text also remained non-committal.

Aleksievich's literary heritage was documented on the official site of the Nobel Prize:

She tried her voice in various genres, such as the short story, essay, and reportage. The famous Belarusian writer Ales Adamovich had decisive influence on Svetlana's choice, particularly his books *I'm from the Fiery Village* and *The Book of the Siege*. He wrote them jointly with other authors but the idea behind them and its development were entirely his own, and it was a new genre for both Belarusian and Russian literature. Adamovich was looking for the right definition of the genre, calling it a "collective novel," "novel-oratorio," "novel-evidence," "people talking about themselves" and "epic chorus," to name a few of his appellations. Aleksievich has always named Adamovich as her main teacher. He helped her to find a path of her own.

Oral testimony is here given a series of names belonging to literary forms. But does a series of personal testimonies, or utterances, collected by a person who takes up a position half-way between editorship and authorship of the collection of such utterances, make a "new" literary genre?

Narratological critique: the structure of the literary text

To answer these questions, we shall turn to the narratological model of the literary text. This model can be traced back to Russian Formalism and to Bakhtin's conception of the polyphonic novel.

The literary text became the focus of intense questioning at the beginning of the twentieth century, in the Moscow Linguistic Circle, which gave birth to the so-called Russian Formalist School. Although Mikhail Bakhtin was not a member of the Circle, his work on the novel belongs to the same period and the same theoretical

impulses—literary Structuralism. It is this theoretical orientation in literary studies which has produced a lasting hermeneutic methodology for the interpretation of all literary and artistic texts.¹¹ The starting point of the Russian Formalists for theorising about literature was the separation of art and life. The principal Formalist claim was that a work of literature is a clearly delineated discourse, subject to its own immanent laws and not to be analysed through the author's life or as an illustration of the social life of the times. Although life is the “material” of literature, once “absorbed” into the work of art, it is transformed and comes under the laws of the work and its structure. This structure was theoretically described in a systematic manner by Bakhtin, whose early work on the novel of Dostoevsky *Problems of Dostoevsky's Creative Works* [*Problemy tvorchestva Dostoevskogo*] set the stage for his development of discourse in the novel as a model of the most important Western literary genre in its epistemological—world-modelling and world-documenting or archaeological—context.¹² Bakhtin's model of “monologic” and “polyphonic” discourse defined the difference between the structure of a literary work with an ideological message (which is two-dimensional and expressed in binaries which are self-sufficient, normative and not subject to interpretation) as opposed to an aesthetic message (which is three-dimensional and polysemous or interpretable). The structure of the novel is polyphonic if it is built across three hierarchically superimposed levels of meaning,¹³ with the highest level being that of the Abstract Author/Abstract Reader.¹⁴ The entire structure corresponds to the basic communications

¹¹ In the West, Russian Formalism left a lasting imprint on New Criticism and F. R. Leavis' critical methodology, relying on the “close reading of texts,” which fed into the interdisciplinary field of comparative literature. This methodology modulated into a new phase with post-Structuralism, in which the Structuralist methodology of analysing the semiotics of meaning became the method of reading texts through other texts (called ‘deconstruction’). In Russia after the 1920s, all literary trends which did not conform to the “artistic method” of Socialist Realism went underground, until they resurfaced in the Soviet Structuralism of the Tartu School. The rehabilitation of Russian Formalism was also evident in the relaxation of censorship on Mikhail Bakhtin's old and new writings in the 1960s, which while not directly associated with the Formalist Group, shared the phenomenological ground of the Group's approach to literature and discourse.

¹² Compare Bakhtin's 1934–1935 essay “Discourse in the Novel,” which invokes “heteroglossia,” defined as an “understanding of the dialogue of languages as it exists in a given era,” grounded in the profound knowledge of “each language's socio-ideological meaning and an exact knowledge of the social distribution or ordering of all the other ideological voices of the era.” M. M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*. Ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson & M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990, p. 417). In other words, what Bakhtin requires of the novel as a testament of its age is to have intertextuality (“many voices” as heteroglossia) as its structural dominant and to be an “archaeology” (in Foucault's sense) of its age.

¹³ The structural model of the literary text received an extended and explicit exposition in the work of the Hamburg University Slavist, Wolf Schmid, in the first instance in his *Der Textaufbau in den Erzählungen Dostoevskijs*. Beiheft zu Poetica, ed. Karl Maurer, Heft 10 (München: Fink, 1973). I have translated and adapted Schmid's model in my monograph, Slobodanka B. Vladiv, *Narrative Principles in Dostoevsky's Besy: A Structural Analysis* (Berne: Peter Lang Verlag, 1979). Schmid has updated and anglicised his model in Wolf Schmid, *Narratology: An Introduction* (De Gruyter, 2010).

¹⁴ The terminology covering these third-level categories of meaning are alternatively “Abstract” or “Implied” Author/Reader. I have chosen to go with the term “Abstract Author.”

model of language,¹⁵ and communication takes place on each of the three levels of the work's structure. However, the nature of this communication is not the same on all three levels. On the lowest level—that of the Fictional Characters—communication is literal: it is dialogue amongst characters who speak to each other. On the next superimposed level—that of the Fictional Narrator and Fictional Reader—the communication is a metaphor: it implies that the Fictional Narrator “addresses” himself to a Fictional Reader whom he, the Fictional Narrator, constructs through his text. Thus, for example, the Fictional Narrator in Dostoevsky's *Demons* [*Besy*] is a Russian liberal of the 1860s who constructs a reader in his own image—a somewhat naïve, aestheticised and epigonal member of the educated classes, who cannot decipher the “signs of the times” and the machinations of the new radical movement. Communication on the top level of the structural hierarchy—that of the Abstract Author and Abstract Reader—is symbolic: there is no dialogue here, there are no voices and there are no figures on this level. This is the level of an ideal reception of the work as a totality. On this level are situated the temporality, the themes and motifs—the mythemes in Dostoevsky's novels—which are beyond the scope of the Fictional Narrator. This is the level of organisation of the possible meaning or interpretation of the possible meaning of the text. This is the level which guarantees the authority of the text as an “open” or polyphonic text—that is, as an interpretable text, which requires an active Abstract Reader. The concrete categories—the Concrete Author and the Concrete Reader—are outside the text structure of the narrative. Although they exist, they cannot change the autonomy of the text in any way: once the Concrete Author has produced his text, the text lives on by its own laws, just like a chicken lives without its parents once it is hatched.

Bakhtin does not speak of three levels of the narrative text; instead, he has an added chapter on “The Word/Discourse in Dostoevsky's Novel” in *Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, (2nd rev. enl. ed., Moskva, 1963), in which he describes the “dialogic word” as being “a word looking over its shoulder at another word” [*slovo s ogladkoi na drugoe slovo*], which is Bakhtin's metaphoric expression for intertextuality. Hence, dialogic discourse is intertextual discourse, it reverberates or pulsates with the texts of “others.” This is the actual meaning of “polyphony” or “many voices,” not the reified version in which it is assumed to refer to many utterances by many different characters in the text. However, Bakhtin left behind considerable terminological confusion about the fictional categories, which define the different levels of meaning of the literary text by using the word “author” indiscriminately with reference to at least two different fictional categories: that of the Fictional Narrator and that of the Implied Author. However, like his Formalist colleagues, he rigorously separated the Concrete Author from the fictional categories of the text.

¹⁵ The communication model of language received its earliest theoretical exposition in Karl Bühler's theory of the “organon model” of language. See Karl Bühler, *Sprachtheorie: Die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*. Jena, 1934. Compare the version by Slobodanka B. Vladiv, *Narrative Principles in Dostoevsky's Besy*, p. 175 and Schmid's modification in Wolf Schmid, *Der Textaufbau in den Erzählungen Dostoevskijs*, p. 30, n. 1.

The Abstract Author category was theorised even before Bakhtin by the Soviet Formalist critic, V. V. Vinogradov. He called the Abstract Author “the image of the author” (“*obraz avtora*”); one could also translate it as the “model of the author.” He assigned to this instance in the structure of the literary text the same function as Bakhtin, who called it the “ultimate level of meaning” [“*posledniaia smyslovaia instantsiia*”]. Vinogradov identified it as the level on which the meaning of the work is synthesised into a total aesthetic message. Vinogradov saw the “model of the author” in the text as the internal pivot point around which the entire stylistic system of the work is grouped. It is the level of the literary work from which the different “positions of meaning” of the work may be illuminated in their total interaction. According to this model of the literary text which is extrapolated by Bakhtin and Vinogradov on the basis of the classical Russian and European literary canon of the eighteenth and nineteenth century, this “ultimate level of meaning” is always present in a literary work and is the guarantee of its unity. Without this embedded structure of three levels of meaning—which, incidentally, models the structure of metaphor in language—there is no literary work as a total, meaningful aesthetic message. The level of the Abstract Author and Abstract Reader is typically absent from mass culture texts, such as blockbuster detective novels and movies, as well as works conforming to a Socialist Realist poetics. These are typically monologic texts.

“The image of the author” in Vinogradov’s stylistics is “embodied” on both the level of content and the level of expression. However, the “content” is not represented by the “themes” and the “plot” but by an evaluative standpoint. This evaluative standpoint or position of value (meaning) of the Abstract Author can be inferred from the means of stylistic expression—the stylistic devices and the construction of speech. Vinogradov’s “image of the author,” like all the other manifestations of the literary structure (such as the narrator, the characters in a novel or a drama, the lyrical hero in a poem), depends on the “structure of speech.” The stylistic structure (of the literary utterance) is the key to the “compositional structure” of the work of art and its “inner stylistic unity.”¹⁶ That is why the Formalists produced many studies on the stylistic structure and language peculiarities of works of the Russian canon using their hallmark method of close reading of texts.

The key to the unity of a work of art, what makes a literary work into a total structure which can be interpreted, is the evaluative position of the Abstract Author which is encoded in the total concatenation of all three levels of meaning. This evaluative position is not something stated *ex cathedra*, given as an utterance of the Narrator or the Fictional Characters, but is embedded in the very structure of the work, in its expressivity and its language. An evaluative position which can be distilled

¹⁶ “Voobsche, voprosy o recevoi strukture ‘obraza avtora’, ‘rasskazchika’, liricheskogo geroia v stikhe, personazheĭ v drame, a takzhe v romane, novelle i povesti zanimaiut ochen’ vazhnoe mesto v nauke o iazyke khudozhestvennoi literatury. Inogda imenno v etom krugu stilisticheskikh iavleniiŭ otyskivaetsia razgadka kompozitsionnoi struktury khudozhestvennogo prozvedeniia, ego vnutrennego stilisticheskogo edinstva.” V. V. Vinogradov, “Nauka o iazyke khudozhestvennoj literatury i ee zadachi: na materiale russkoĭ literatury,” in *Issledovanija po slavjanskomu literaturovedeniiu i stilistike: Doklady sovetskikh uchënykh na IV Mezhdunarodnom s’ezde slavistov*, ed. F. F. Kuz’min and A. N. Robinson (M.: AN SSSR, Sovetskiiĭ Komitet Slavistov, 1960, p. 25).

from the total structure of the work of art constitutes the poetics of the work of art. Therein resides its *truth* value. The factual, positivistic truth of “reality” can never be fully established because it is not possible to arrive at a full representation of “reality”; to do so would require mapping and recording instruments which even modern computers do not offer. Any portrayal of reality of necessity implies the selection of fragments of reality to be portrayed. Schmid, who appropriated Bakhtin’s model of the narrative text for narratology, formulates this point as follows:

Through the act of selection of particular segments of ontologically autonomous reality and ontologically autonomous views, as well as through its linguistic physiognomy, every literary work, which represents reality in any way, reveals some kind of position of meaning.¹⁷

The poetics of *Secondhand Time* or the question of artistry (*Khudozhestvennost'*)

In view of this model of selection, Aleksievich’s claim that she also selects “segments of reality” in order to construct a picture of her time may imply that she does produce a literary genre. But does her literary genre have an Abstract Author? To answer this question, we shall examine the structure of *Secondhand Time* and its poetics, which will ultimately lead to the consideration of the literary quality or *khudozhestvennost'* of this novel.

Despite its subtitle “an oral history” in the English translation, Aleksievich herself describes *Secondhand Time: The Last of the Soviets. An Oral History* as a “novel.” Aleksievich sees herself as a “writer” in traditional terms. In *Secondhand Time*, in the introductory chapter entitled “Remarks from an Accomplice” [*Zapiski souchastnika*], Aleksievich offers an explanation of her method of inquiry into Russian history as well as her aim as a writer. The “Remarks” thus serve as a kind of “literary manifesto” from which it is possible to construct Aleksievich’s poetics, which would be a kind of “history of emotions” (perhaps with a nod to Marx’s theory of human nature and alienation)¹⁸:

The Soviet civilization...I am rushing to make impressions of its traces, its familiar faces. I don’t ask people about socialism, I want to know about love, jealousy, childhood, old age. Music, dances, hairdos. The myriad sundry details of a vanished way of life. It’s the only way to chase the catastrophe into the contours of the ordinary and try to tell a story. Make some small discovery. It never ceases to amaze me how interesting everyday life really is. There is an endless number of human truths. History is concerned solely with the facts; emotions are outside its realm of interest. In fact, it’s considered improper to

¹⁷ Schmid, *Der Textaufbau...*, p. 31. Translated from German by SVG.

¹⁸ Compare L. Frank Weyher, “Re-Reading Sociology via the Emotions: Karl Marx’s Theory of Human Nature and Estrangement,” *Sociological Perspectives*, Vol. 55, Issue 2, (2012), read on 31/1/2021 <https://doi.org/10.1525/sop.2012.55.2.341>.

admit feelings into history. But I look at the world as a writer and not a historian. I am fascinated by people. (Alexievich 2016, p. 7)

Despite these remarks by the author, Aleksievich's book does not give account, in the first instance, of "love, jealousy, childhood, old age" or "music, dances, hairdos." Rather than explore these as themes, her novel concentrates on the former USSR as a state of socialism, whose ideology is the air breathed by her informants, most of whom were and some still are "true believers." Her novel thus offers personalised accounts of a past order represented mostly by one side of the "endless number of human truths"—the side of the Soviet apparatchiks. *Secondhand Time* is thus not a "history of emotions" or a history of the age, but an account of how former Soviet apparatchiks and party members feel about the demise of the Soviet order and the post-Soviet Russian life.

The structure of *Secondhand Time* consists of serial interviews, some identified by name, location and occupation of the informant, some anonymous. At the beginning, the entries are separated only by a dash, which makes the identity of the speaker unclear: is it the same person giving multiple testimonies or are they different people? Or is this the voice of the compiler and interviewer, because the utterances do appear to be arranged into a narrative with a kind of chronology of events of Soviet history? It cannot be decoded until a "stage instruction" appears in square brackets on page 21: "[Slams his fist down on the table.]" (Alexievich 2016, p. 21). The reader realises that this segment, which is marked off only with a dash and starts off with the words "Gorbachev is an American secret agent..." is a testimony by an interviewee. These types of "stage instructions" are the most frequently used interventions by the organising narrator. A more extended explanatory interpolation occurs in italics on page 25, when the organising narrator states her own location but not the time: "I am in my friends' kitchen in Moscow. There are a lot of people here: friends and relatives visiting from the country. We remembered that tomorrow is the anniversary of the August putsch" (Alexievich 2016, p. 25). The next interpolation by the organising narrator appears immediately after the entry in the Moscow kitchen, but locates the organising narrator in time (10 years after the August putsch) and place (at the other end of the former Soviet Union): "August 19, 2001, the tenth anniversary of the August putsch. I am in Irkutsk, the capital of Siberia, where I do brief interviews with people on the street" (Alexievich 2016, p. 26). This kind of disorientation in time between two successive entries makes it hard to fix a point of view on the events being represented. It does not blur the borders between fact and fiction; it simply is outside both categories. According to the narrative structure of a literary work, the lowest level of the hierarchy is the utterance by a character. The transmission of that utterance by a fictional narrator locates that utterance in time and space, which confers unity on the point of view organising the narrative. Without this unified point of view, there can be no narrative. Aleksievich's organisation of the interviewees' segments of memory does not constitute a "plot" or "fabula" because it is impossible to situate the narrated memory in any temporality—in linear time or in the timelessness of the unconscious. Thus, the temporal structure of the "novel" is blurred because the relationship of narrating time (the time when the interviewees spoke to the organising narrator and the time when

the organising narrator has taken down their testimonies) and the narrated time (the time in which the interviewees situate their stories) remains vague. The connection to “reality” is interrupted, made difficult, if not broken. What remains is the nightmare of personal experience in a chaotic concatenation of personal narratives, strung along an “anti-semiotic” chain. Gunther’s term “anti-chronicle” comes to mind here, as a negative synonym for “anti-structure.”

In view of this ambivalent relationship between narrating and narrated time, it is not possible to view this “novel” as an embedded structure, in which each level is in a relation of meaning with the other levels. Unlike the Nobel Committee’s understanding of “polyphony” in the literal and theoretically unfounded sense of “many voices,” such an embedded structure is a prerequisite of the “polyphonic novel” in Bakhtin’s sense of the term. Without the embedding, there is only an endless semi-otic chain—story after story, monologic, self-enclosed testimony after testimony, personal point of view after personal point of view on events whose location in time and space remains largely dislocated. These individual points of view are not part of a totality because there is no overarching organising and interpretive point of view encoded in the total structure of the literary text on the level of the Abstract Author and Abstract Reader.

The effect of the accumulation of discrete, monologic points of view of Aleksievich’s informants—monologic in that they are not interpretable and hence are incontestable (like religious utterances of believers)—does not produce a historical portrait of the age, even if the individual texts are replete with all manner of personal details loosely connected to historical events. What these monologic texts offer is a personalised view about and individual emotional reactions to the events of Russian-Soviet history, which the informants are relating through their personal perspective. All the interviewees express these views in the form of value judgements, which can be emotional but are most often matter-of-fact. This would seem to make each one of Aleksievich’s informants into a mini-historian, making up a conglomeration of around 50 or so oral “testimonies” or “mini-histories” of Soviet and post-Soviet Russia. However, these “histories” are not of equal quality. Some of the personal evaluations of narrated historical events have a degree of objectivity, which a historian would envy. Others are naïve, misguided and coloured by the informant’s limited experience of capitalism, democracy and philosophical Marxism (not the version propagated by Marxism–Leninism in Soviet schools). One thing is remarkable about the majority of Aleksievich’s selected group of informants: the degree to which the Soviet system of Communism and Marxism–Leninism formed a deep-seated system of beliefs and values, which accompany Aleksievich’s informants right into the post-Soviet era, despite all the new evidence about the failure of that system to deliver the promised utopia of Communism. Most of these “old believers” have a Soviet tertiary education, either technical or pedagogic, which qualified them for Party-related jobs. This Soviet education would have provided the only value system for those who had no exposure to outside influences. Aleksievich’s informants, the reader infers from the language and themes, are not members of the Russian intelligentsia; they are the countless rank and file *apparatchiks* of the provinces who benefitted from the Soviet mass education and the Party’s upward mobility. This group can lay claim to the title

of *Homo sovieticus*¹⁹; for this group, the demise of the Soviet system led to a complete loss of identity. This much emerges from the testimonies, but it is an inference made by the reader alone; it does not issue from the organising narrator or appear on some other level of meaning of the text. In fact, it is the absence of this third level of meaning—the level of the Abstract Author and Abstract Reader—which makes it impossible to infer any kind of unifying pathos which organises the given testimonies into a unifying view of history. The view of history, which should be located on the Abstract Author’s level in a polyphonic novel, is absent. The reader is thus left wondering what kind of conclusion to draw from all the pathos of the informants—the nostalgia for a by-gone Soviet Golden Age intertwined with a lament about the time of Stalinist terror or cold-blooded recounting of participation in that terror.

In her manifesto-like preface, Aleksievich defines her task as a writer of fiction which goes beyond the scope of her aim of “making impressions” of the “traces” of Soviet civilisation. She is interested, she says, in exploring suicide and love. Although some of the stories mention suicide, Aleksievich in no way makes these events the subject of her inquiry in this book. *Secondhand Time* contains one story of Igor Poglazov, a 14-year-old suicide, told by his mother.²⁰ The story of Tamara Sukhovei, 29, waitress (Alexievich 2016, p. 413) also ends in suicide which is not further explored. Love is the theme in the story of Aksia A., advertising manager, 35 years old. Although narrated with a confessional thrust, which appears to let the informant “bare all,” it has the tone of a daytime TV soap or the “true confessions” in popular magazines. The banality of the style is unintended—one might say, it is “authentic”; but is it good literary style to render such banality without embedding it in some kind of stylistic distancing, as, for example, Dostoevsky does, even when he sympathises fully with the character’s banality? Such naïve narration is somewhat removed from Dostoevsky’s concept of a well-written *artistic text*²¹ which is a prerequisite of a work of literature.

¹⁹ It has been remarked in the critical literature how “unrepresentative” Aleksievich’s *Homo sovieticus* is and how selective the historical memory of Aleksievich’s interviewees appears to be. Compare Galia Ackerman and Frederick Lemarchand, “Du bon et du mauvais usage du témoignage dans l’œuvre de Svetlana Aleksievich,” *Tumultes*, 1/2009, pp. 29–55, quoted by Tine Roesen, “Zwischen den Stühlen: Dokument und Fiktion bei Svetlana Aleksievich,” *Osteuropa*, 68, Nos. 1–2 (2018), p. 106, where Roesen reports that the joint authors find that Aleksievich never alludes to oral history projects to which her witnessing prose might be methodologically aligned while at the same time selecting informants who leave out important historical details, such as the murdering of Jews in Belarus during WWII.

²⁰ See *Secondhand Time*, in which the section has the telling subtitle: “On the Mercy of Memories and the Lust for Meaning,” pp. 142 ff. One might ask whether historical meaning can be achieved by selective memory.

²¹ In an article, published in his own journal *Vremia* in 1861, Dostoevsky extolled the virtue of great art as more “useful” to humanity than any utilitarian art with a social message. Taking a minor nationalist Ukrainian female writer, whose *nom de plume* was Marko Vovchok, as an illustration of bad art, Dostoevsky argued that Vovchok’s representation of “Little Russia” (as Ukraine was known in the nineteenth century) lacked the expressive means and “artistry” (*khudozhestvennost*), which might “persuade” a reader of its “truth.” F. M. Dostoevsky, ‘G-n –bov i vorpos ob iskusstve,’ in: F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, Tom 18, *Stat’i i zametki 1845–1861*. (Leningrad: “Nauka,” 1978, pp. 70–103).

Another aspect of Aleksievich's poetics proclaimed in "Remarks from an Accomplice" is that of language or the languages she is seeking to represent in her novel:

I am searching for a language. People speak many languages: there's the one they use with children, another one for love. There is the language we use to talk to ourselves, for our internal monologues. On the street, at work, while travelling—everywhere you go, you'll hear something different, and it's not just the words, there's something else, too. There's even a difference in the way people speak in the morning and how they speak at night. What happens between two people at night vanishes from history without a trace. We're accustomed to looking at the history of people by day, while suicide is a night-time state, when a person wavers on the edge between being and non-being. Waking and sleep. I want to understand suicide with the rigour of a person in daytime. Someone once asked me: Are you worried that you are going to like it? (Alexievich 2016, p. 9).

The language Aleksievich is searching for does not materialise in the Russian version: all her informants speak the same language—the language of the *Homo sovieticus* or, towards the end, of the "new Russians" of the post-Soviet era. This is perhaps the start of heteroglossia in Bakhtin's sense, but it is at a very nascent stage of representation. The organising narrator's own language in these prefatory remarks is replete with Marxist or populist clichés: "Freedom turned out to mean the rehabilitation of bourgeois existence...The freedom of Her Highness Consumption." When the organising narrator attempts a socio-cultural analysis, she comes up with more clichés:

Darkness exalted. The darkness of desire and instinct—the mysterious human life, of which we only ever had approximate notions.

This statement alludes to one of the major themes which emerges from the testimonies of Aleksievich's informants: this is the theme of the innocence (and, we infer, purity) of the common people under Soviet rule. All her informants portray themselves as people who were not interested in material possessions, who were happy with what they earned and what they had even if they could see that those at the top had more. The majority of her informants justify the old Soviet order as a Golden Age of patriotism, sacrifice for the community and for a better future. It is impossible to test these statements because there is no way to analyse the document, the background or the context in which they are made.²² Aleksievich does not offer any help. In her novel *Secondhand Time*, Aleksievich does not offer a view of history as the ultimate message of her novel. She allows her informants to have the last word, with their myth of the Golden Age of the Soviet Era.

Since the level of the Abstract Author is missing, *Secondhand Time* cannot be called a polyphonic novel which must be an embedded aesthetic structure,

²² Julia Obertreis is categorical in her evaluation of Aleksievich's novel *not* being oral history. See Julia Obertreis, "Polyphonie auf den Trümmern des Sozialismus: Svetlana Aleksievič's Werk aus sicht der Oral History," *Osteuropa*, 68, Nos. 1–2 (2018, p. 133).

which includes an Abstract Reader—the structural level open to interpretation. One can critique *Secondhand Time*, but one cannot fall back on the only structural category—the Abstract Author—that is a guarantor of the authority of the text. Thus, the aesthetic message does not materialise as a product of aesthetic truth, and in a novel there can be no other “truth”; everything else is journalism. The truth value of Aleksievich’s “impressions” of the “traces” of Soviet civilisation, her avowed “Soviet testament,” is the same as the truth value of a human-interest story about a brain tumour, or a suicide, or a murder in a popular magazine. It is not an “interpretable truth” since the “reader” has no access to the level of the Abstract Author/Reader, which is absent from the two-dimensional text. The level of meaning, on which the Abstract Reader is constructed as an abstract “addressee” of the Abstract Author, is missing. The only addressee of *Secondhand Time* is situated on the level of the “narrator”; this “narrator” is, however, not the category of Fictional Narrator of the narratological model, but is fused with the Concrete Author (Aleksievich herself as a kind of puppeteer and *souf-fleur* prompting with the stage instructions) and her concrete, anonymous informants. If this is the hallmark of a new genre—in which the Concrete Author “steps into” the metaphysical structure of the narrative text—then it is up to scholars to find a new theoretical model for such a mixture of the “real” (mimetic) and the “represented” (fictional, virtual). For the present, such a mixed metaphysical–positivistic model of art does not exist.

In terms of the traditional model of an artistic work, which has evolved with the European literary canons of the past 2000 years and which has been theorised from Aristotle’s *Poetics* to Russian Formalism, Structuralism and post-structuralism, the structure of *Secondhand Time* is monologic in Bakhtin’s sense of the term. It is true that even such a two-dimensional text can evoke strong emotions. These are mainly horror and revulsion at the traumas exposed in the narratives of the informants and in their stories about relatives and friends. However, traumatic detail, which lingers in the reader’s memory, such as that of the torture of purged Soviet Party members from whom “confessions” had to be elicited, is not cathartic, just as violence in horror movies and *film noir* is not cathartic but a means of titillating a popular sensibility. There is no “tragic mistake” emerging on the Abstract Author’s level—say, in a fatalistic view of history. There is only the banality of horror: mass murders, torture, exile and starvation. This sits uncomfortably with the criterion of *khudozhestvennost’* (artistry or literariness) which Dostoevsky demanded for a work of art if that work of art was to be considered of universal value and significant or meaningful for all humanity. Such a universal work of art would nevertheless be historically grounded, in its own national canon and in the European literary canon of which it is an integral part. The literary heritage of one nation becomes a universal literary heritage because of the continuity of beauty and artistry which binds all the authentic works of art into a library of culture. Thus, Dostoevsky writes:

we are connected with our historical life as well as our inner spiritual life with the historical past and with universal humanity (*obshchechelovechnost’*). [...] The literatures of the European nations were like our family (*rodnye*), they

were our own (*nashi sobstvennye*), they were fully reflected in Russian life, as if they were at home there.²³

In Aleksievich's novel, despite frequent mention of Dostoevsky, there is no intertextual allusion to his or any other works of Russian or world literature in the sense of borrowing and transformation of form. There is no literary context in which Aleksievich's novels can be situated. This places her works outside the mainstream of the aesthetic tradition of European and Russian literature and situates her novels within the populist stream of Belarus authors who are on a continuum with the Socialist Realist poetics in its post-Soviet expression.

The ideal of the times according to Aleksievich's novel: a nostalgic "Narodnost"

A second criterion of artistic value (*khudozhestvennost'*), proposed by Dostoevsky in his 1861 article, is that a literary work must reflect the historical ideal of its time. This was also a major demand of the Realists who set the foundations for the nineteenth- and even twentieth-century European literary canons.²⁴ Is there a historical ideal of the age embodied in Aleksievich's novel? Does her novel embody "the spirit of the age" as the Belarus author envisaged? One can discern a nascent critique of the post-Soviet Russia and Belarus in the juxtaposition of testimonies in the second half of the novel. However, instead of an ideal of the age, the pathos which emerges from this juxtaposition is one of pessimism and lack of hope.

The informants who Aleksievich selects for her "novel" fall into two groups: the first is her own generation of "sovoks," who tell their story of 1991 but also reminisce about the stories of their parents and grandparents. The second group belongs to the younger, post-1991 generation, who has "not known fear," and who takes part in street protests against the corruption of the post-Soviet oligarchs. Aleksievich admits that she does not know how to explain this younger generation. What the reader infers from the organising narrator's interpolating comments and the first chapter with the "Remarks from an Accomplice" is that her own generation could be said to fit into the Soviet category of "narod," extrapolated by the Soviet education system from the Russian nineteenth-century cultural category of "soil" (*pochva*), which was one of the main ideological platforms of the Russian intellectuals, from the Slavophiles through to the *raznochintsy* of the 1860s. The ideology of *pochva*, morphed into *narodnost'* of Soviet aesthetics, was built on the myth of the authenticity of Russian national life, emanating from the Russian peasants, who would bring salvation to the failing Western European civilisation. This idealisation of the common people is also the ideological platform on which Aleksievich's "sovok" informants, with whom she

²³ F. M. Dostoevsky, 'G-n –bov i vopros ob iskusstve,' in: F. M. Dostoevsky, *Polnoe sobranie sochinenii v tridsati tomakh*, Tom 18, *Stat'i i zametki 1845–1861*. (Leningrad: "Nauka," 1978, p. 99, translation by Vladiv-Glover).

²⁴ On Dostoevsky's view of history, compare Slobodanka Vladiv-Glover, *Dostoevsky and the Realists: Dickens, Flaubert, Tolstoy*. (New York: Lan, 2019, p. 47).

appears to be in solidarity, have been nurtured in the Soviet era, which has shaped the mythical identity of the authentic *Homo sovieticus* who, unlike the “new Russian,” presumably loved the Motherland and was ethical. Most (but not all) of Aleksievich’s older-generation informants are inactive and ineffectual in the “new Russia.” Very few of her informants (one or two at most in the entire novel *Secondhand Time*) have managed to re-invent themselves and to profit from the new order of Russian capitalism.²⁵ That is why “capitalism” and “democracy” are used by most of the novel’s informants as pejorative terms or as targets of ridicule. Aleksievich does not appear to dissent from this view in her “Remarks from an Accomplice.” For example, she reports selectively, “from a conversation with a university professor”: “At the end of the nineties, my students would laugh when I told them stories about the Soviet Union. They were sure that a new future awaited them. Now, it’s a different story... Today’s students have truly seen and felt capitalism: the inequality, the poverty, the shameless wealth” (Alexievich 2016, p. 10).

Another theme which emerges from the testimonies is the plundering of the country by the post-Soviet leadership, starting with Yeltsin. Witnessing of this form of “new Russian” capitalism by the younger generation of the twenty-first century has bred its own form of radical utopianism, the reader infers from some of the testimonies. From the same conversation with a university professor in “Remarks from an Accomplice,” Aleksievich quotes:

They [today’s students] have witnessed the lives of their parents, who never got anything out of the plundering of our country. And they are oriented towards radicalism. They dream of their own revolution, they wear red T-shirts with pictures of Lenin and Che Guevara. (Alexievich 2016, p. 10)

Aleksievich omits to mention the phenomenon of post-Soviet punk rock, represented by the group “Pussy Riot,” which created an anti-Putin and pro-Human Rights and free speech “revolution” around the time Aleksievich was producing her novel.²⁶ However, she interviews young informants in her native Minsk, who in December 2010 engaged in protests against the rigged elections which brought

²⁵ It has been noted that Aleksievich concentrates on catastrophes in the “new” post-Soviet Russia, ignoring the positive developments in the lives of people who have managed to transition into successful commercial enterprises and freelance professions. Compare the critique of Aleksievich’s representation of the post-Soviet transition time by the Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg historian Julia Obertreis: “Ein annähernd vollständiges Bild der Umbruchzeit entsteht aus ihrer Themenwahl nicht. Da sie sich auf die Geschichte der Katastrophen konzentriert, lässt sie positive Aspekte aus, zum Beispiel erfolgreiche berufliche Umorientierungen hin zu kommerzieller oder freiberuflicher Tätigkeit, neue Freiheiten zur Selbstverwirklichung, lebendige Kontakte ins Ausland, die in der sowjetischen Zeit nicht möglich waren, oder ein erfüllendes religiöses Erleben. Ob sich diese Schwerpunktsetzung in *Secondhand-Zeit* aus dem Interesse und der Erwartungshaltung des westlichen Publikums speist oder zumindest durch sie verstärkt wird, ist durchaus eine Frage wert. Immerhin findet Svetlana Aleksievič mit ihren Büchern seit den frühen 1990er Jahren im Westen immer mehr, in Russland immer weniger Anklang. “Julia Obertreis, “Polyphonie auf den Trümmern des Sozialismus: Svetlana Aleksievič’s Werk aus Sicht der Oral History,” *Osteuropa*, 68, Nos. 1–2 (2018, p. 132).

²⁶ The reference is to the Pussy Riot performance at the Moscow Cathedral of Christ the Saviour in 2012, followed by the arrest and very public trial of two of the three girls, aged between 20 and 30, and their subsequent release in December 2013.

President Lukashenko back into power. These young demonstrators—called the “Decembrists”—were subjected to mass arrests by Belarusian government forces.²⁷ Chicanery and even torture are now part of post-Soviet life in Russia and Belarus, according to Aleksievich’s informants.

In her own voice in “Remarks from an Accomplice,” Aleksievich observes the resurgence of recycled Soviet symbols among the millennials and directs her sardonic barb at the commercial enterprise of the “new Russians” who have made the Stalin era into a tourist attraction, thereby drawing a veil of historical amnesia over the Stalinist period:

There’s a new demand for everything Soviet. For the cult of Stalin. Half of the people between the ages of 19 and 30 consider Stalin and “unrivalled political figure.” A new cult of Stalin, in a country where he murdered at least as many people as Hitler?! [...] You can visit Stalin’s camps—Solovki, Magadan—as a tourist. [...] for the full effect, they’ll give you a camp uniform and a pickaxe. (Alexievich 2016, pp. 10–11)

However, despite her criticism of this populist and post-modern exploitation of history, Aleksievich’s remarks are not deconstructive. She offers no analysis of the demise of the icons of the ideology of the past, or of history itself, except as a form of reproach or nostalgia. The fact that the younger generation of post-Soviets, with their deconstruction of Soviet icons, has just fallen into line with the cultural practices of Western youth which started with Andy Warhol’s pop art generation (the multiple portraits of Mao) is not within Aleksievich’s horizon. Her pathos as organising narrator does not advance a critique of Stalinism as an era in which everyone was complicit. The question of collective guilt is thus left largely in the air, except for Aleksievich’s own self-portrayal as a *souchastnik* (accomplice or witness) in her prefatory remarks. Thus, the question of whether the old “*sovoks*” were “accomplices” or “witnesses” remains a moot point, falling short of an explicit apologia for Marxism–Leninism, or for Stalinism, or for the *Homo sovieticus*. For, unlike Bernhard Schlink’s post-Nazi apologia in the novel *Reader (Die Leserin)*, which attempts to exempt the German “small man” and woman (the equivalent of Aleksievich’s *obyvatel’* in the closing segment of the testimony) from guilt about and responsibility for the Holocaust, Aleksievich’s text lacks a unifying point of view of the framing narrator and thus has no clear message about who was guilty (or not guilty) for the millions of lives lost during the building of Communism, in which many of her informants still believe fervently and unapologetically.

Briefly, at the beginning, in “Remarks from an Accomplice,” Aleksievich tries to portray her generation of *sovoks* in a positive light by distancing herself from Stalinism and affiliating herself with the “kitchen dissidents”—those who carried on subversive conversations in the Soviet communal kitchens in the 1960s. With these Soviet “kitchens,” Aleksievich constructs her own myth about the Soviet times, or rather, she appears to “borrow” *samizdat*-type material which has been in existence for a long time, in order to propagate her own “dissident” myth which cannot be verified in her biographical sources. This is why her novel cannot be said to perform

²⁷ See *Second Hand Time*, the story of Tanya Kuleshova, 21, p. 454 ff.

the task which Aleksievich assigns to it, namely “the recovery of experience form myth.” On the contrary, her novel constitutes a new myth or several new myths. By means of the selection of her informants from a closed group (ex-Party members) and by her own scant interpretation of the post-Soviet historical period, Aleksievich manages to let a new myth²⁸ propagate itself. Or rather, she recycles nineteenth-century Russian cultural myths, like that of Dostoevsky’s *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* [*Legenda o velikom inkvizitore*] (taken out of context) as an illustration of how the post-Soviet people do not know what to do with their newly won freedom:

In *The Legend of the Grand Inquisitor*, Dostoevsky stages a debate about freedom. Namely, about the struggle, torment, and tragedy of freedom: “What’s the point of delving into that damn good and evil when the cost is so high?” [This is an anonymous voice, in quotation marks, but Aleksievich is in solidarity with it and interprets it as the voice of the *Legend*]*—*People are constantly forced to choose between having freedom and having success and stability; freedom with suffering or happiness without freedom. The majority choose the latter.

Aleksievich misreads Dostoevsky’s text, which is not about a choice between material happiness and abstract freedom but about the problem of how to find an anchor for moral value in a world after God; God is beyond the horizon of Aleksievich and her informants. In the passage of the *Legend of the Grand Inquisitor* she quotes, the real question posed by Dostoevsky’s narrator is the question of ideals and idealism:

There is no more pressing or torturous task for man, having found himself free, than to seek out someone to bow down to as soon as he can...someone on whom to bestow that gift of freedom with which this unhappy creature was born... (Dostoyevsky 1985, p. 294)

Thanks to this misappropriation of Dostoevsky’s text, Aleksievich does not bring into focus the real moral and existential problem of the Soviet or, for that matter, the post-Soviet era, namely that the Soviet era, illuminated through a limited angle of vision of informants who remain ardent believers in Communism, is testimony to the inability of *Homo sovieticus* to deal with existential freedom and that this inability, fostered by a repressive regime with an excellent propaganda machinery, led to millions bowing to the authority of the Soviet Grand Inquisitor (Stalin and the Soviet apparatus), true to the apocalyptic vision of Dostoevsky’s literary myth. The reader of Aleksievich’s own testimony who is offered a glimpse into her own system of beliefs can conclude that, despite all the historical evidence that Aleksievich has at her disposal, what eludes her is the inference (which a Western reader finds obvious) that *Homo sovieticus* won his freedom the first time in 1917 (*not* in 1991) but then progressively ceded it to a totalitarian apparatus which propagated its own utopian myth. Her “recovery” of the “traces of Soviet civilization” is thus invested with a certain duality. On the one hand, there is a strand of testimony, with

²⁸ This point is also made strongly by Sophie Punkham, by way of a critique of Aleksievich’s use of documentary material, in “Witness Tampering. Nobel laureate Svetlana Aleksievich crafts myths, not histories.” *New Republic*, 29.8.2016. Quoted in: Tine Roesen, “Zwischen den Stühlen: Dokument und Fiktion bei Svetlana Aleksievic,” *Osteuropa*, 68, Nos. 1–2 (2018, p. 106).

which Aleksievich is in solidarity, which reveals the Soviet system as a repressive regime. Hence the need for kitchen dissidents. On the other hand, there is a strand of testimony from the “true believers,” who remember the old Soviet days as a positive experience and everything after 1991 as disorienting, alienating and as a national disaster. The “true believers” see the “new Russia” and its leaders as thieves, who are robbing the people. They have a blind spot about the old Soviet leaders, who appear to have acted ethically even if repression and inequality reigned. Thus, the reminiscences of the “true believers” also display a certain duality: at times they appear to be riddled with self-contradictions. To wit, the testimony of Elena Yurievna, third secretary of the district party committee, 49 years old, who proclaims: “I recant nothing!” (Alexievich 2016, p. 43) “I am a Communist, part of the *nomenklatura*” (Alexievich 2016, p. 41); she still believes in Lenin and Stalin as great leaders. Her view of Soviet history and analysis of the post-Soviet political and social situation is summed up in the following statements:

There is no way our people are going to trade in their faded foreign currency and passports with Schengen visas for Soviet socialism. Towards justice. There is no other way. Look at Germany, France...There's the Swedish model. What values does Russian capitalism espouse? Hating the underdogs, the people who haven't made millions and don't drive Mercedes. Instead of the red flag, it's Christ is risen! And the cult of consumerism...Do you think that this country fell apart because people learnt the truth about the gulags? That's what people who write books think. People...regular people don't care about history, they're concerned with simpler things: falling in love, getting married, having kids. Building a house. Our country fell apart from the deficit of women's boots and toilet paper, because of the fact that there were no oranges. It was those goddam blue jeans! Today, the shops resemble museums. Theatres. And people want me to believe the rags from Versace and Armani are all that a person needs. [...] That freedom is money and money is freedom. While our lives aren't worth a kopeck. Well, and...well, andyou know...I can't even find the words. I feel sorry for my little granddaughters. I pity them. That's what gets beaten into their heads every day on TV. I don't agree with it. I was and remain a communist. (Alexievich 2016, p. 52)

The fact that Elena Yurievna S. believes that “regular people don't care about history” implies that she does not analyse from the enlightened positions of a civil society. In fact, the denial of the significance of history in Soviet life is the blind spot of this informant, and accounts for her naive interpretation of the fall of the Soviet system—the absence of consumer goods in the old Soviet Union. Her equally naive interpretation of consumerism in post-Soviet society ends in a stammer—she is unable to find words to sum up the new historical phenomenon of capitalism except by negating it. If we situate this informant on the structural level of a Fictional Character in the model of the narrative text, then we can say that her contradictory analysis cannot be criticised because the “truth” of a novel does not reside on the level of the Fictional Characters. However, this analysis is nowhere corrected on any other level of the narrative text. We can therefore assume that this is the novel's ultimate message about Russian history. What kind of value system does it construct? What

kind of a Fictional Reader does it presuppose? The only kind of reader demanded by a two-dimensional text such as *Secondhand Time* is a reader who will accept the message delivered on the level of the Fictional Characters—the interviewees who are the equivalents of Fictional Characters in the text’s structure—uncritically, as information to be taken at face value. The value system of the old Soviet Communist believer is not challenged through any other perspective—the framing narrator’s (Aleksievich’s) or the Abstract Author’s (which is absent in the text structure of *Secondhand Time*.) This “old Communist’s” value system is accepted as the “ideal” held up to the “new” age of post-Soviet Russia, through which the new capitalist values of that new Russia are openly criticised. Capitalism is seen not as consumer choice but as an evil consumerism which has destroyed all other human values. Although the word is never mentioned, one could say that Aleksievich’s *Homo sovieticus* is a nascent critic of Neoliberalism.

It is true to say that, even without a unifying message on the level of the Abstract Author, the revelations of the effects of the Soviet regime on the lives of those who built the Soviet system (though not entirely new to the Western reader) give *Secondhand Time* a unity of horror, if the reader has the patience to wade through all the redundant personal minutiae which would not be there in a proper novel. However, this horror is not a sufficient condition of the formal unity of the whole text, from which the Implied Author’s evaluative level is missing. The impression that the non-Soviet reader takes away without any help from the Abstract Author is of a story of mass hypnosis and self-delusion, and of a total absence of critical opposition among the Soviet *apparatchiks* and Soviet masses (“the people”) in the face of oppression. Because of the isolationism, the closed borders and closed communication channels during the Soviet era, the Soviet people emerging from the book’s personal testimonies appear like a population living in a kind of “underground”—*podpol’e*—similar to the characters in Emir Kusturica’s 1991 movie *Underground* about Titoism, who are kept in permanent ignorance. This is verbalised by the informant called Everywoman in the postscript (which is entitled “Notes from a petty bourgeois”—*Primechanie obyvatel’ya*), who remains anonymous:

My whole life, I’ve done honest work. I toiled and toiled, got used to back-breaking labour. And only ever earned kopecks. All I had to eat was macaroni and potatoes, and that’s all I eat today. [...] Out here, we live the same way we’ve always lived. Whether it’s socialism or capitalism. (Alexievich 2016, p. 469)

The divide between the common people in the country and the people in the city, one infers, remains as great as the divide between the Russian peasants (“the people”) and the Russian nobility (the gentry) in Tsarist times, noted repeatedly in Russian literature, from Griboedov’s *Woe from Wit* [*Gore ot uma*], to Dostoevsky’s *Diary of a Writer* [*Dnevnik pisatel’ia*] and other writings. Between the testimony of the former *apparatchiks*, such as Elena Yurievna (who elevates herself into the *nomenklatura* in her testimony), and the army officer whose job was to execute political prisoners during the purges (Alexievich 2016, p. 278), Everywoman’s testimony can be read as a *cris de cœur* of the Russian common people, who have seen great suffering for the sake of an idea, sold to them by a repressive state, which had deceived

them into believing in and working for a utopia which never came. For the Western reader, much of the testimony has been aired before through concentration camp literature, news coverage and historical research, published before and after 1991.

However, judging by the reception of Aleksievich's works, the Western reader is still captivated by Russia and the former Soviet Union as its "Other" and is eager to learn about whatever new elements of that by-gone era can be disseminated. Texts of Aleksievich's informants, if not revelatory and entirely new, are not easy reading. Even if chaotic and personal, they contain myriads of details about personal hardships of an entire people during a certain historical period. Even if they were presented as "hearsay" or "tit-bits," such stories would invoke horror in the reader. And although it has been observed that Aleksievich's "novels" are directed at the new Western readership whose political agendas she has sensed,²⁹ it is undeniable that her texts enlarge the reading field not by a new genre but by bringing High Literature down to a popular level—the level of mass culture, in an era of globalism when popular culture is the dominant mode of cultural production.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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²⁹ Compare the comment by Julia Obertreis in footnote 25 above.

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